

THE POETRY OF THOM GUNN.

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SYNOPSIS

This thesis is concerned with investigating the poetry of Thom Gunn in greater detail than has been done before, and with relating it to its full literary and historical context. In doing this, the thesis refers to many uncollected poems and reviews by Gunn that are here listed and discussed for the first time, as are many critical reviews of Gunn's work. The Introduction attempts to put Gunn's poetry in perspective, section one consisting of a short biography, while the second and third sections analyse, in turn, the major philosophical and literary influences on his work. Section four contains a brief account of the most important critical views on Gunn's work. The rest of the thesis consists of six chapters that examine Gunn's work in detail, discussing every poem he has so far published, and tracing the development his work has shown. Each chapter begins with a discussion of the reviews that the book under discussion attracted when it first appeared. The thesis, as a whole, attempts to show that Gunn's poetry has been subject to constant development, and that it is this capacity for change that makes Gunn's work so valuable.

Number of words = c 78,000

To my parents.

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Note on the text

The following abbreviations are used in the notes at the end of each chapter.

FT (54)	-	Fighting Terms (Fantasy Press) 1954
FT (62)	-	Fighting Terms (Faber and Faber) 1962
SM	-	The Sense of Movement
MSC	-	My Sad Captains
P	-	Positives
T	-	Touch
M	-	Moly

INTRODUCTION

Thom Gunn is a difficult poet to assess, both because of the tortuous and involved nature of some of his verse, and because of the widespread, sometimes conflicting, influences on his style and subject matter. No other modern English poet has encompassed such a wide range, although a similar progression can be traced in the work of Charles Tomlinson and Donald Davie, who have both modified their careful and rigid technique with a new freedom of form and exactness of description while resident in the United States. Gunn, however, has gone much further with his experiments, and it is this openness to new poetic forms and subject matter that makes his work so valuable. It also, unfortunately, makes it difficult to precisely differentiate the various influences on Gunn's poetry, for the qualities of his early verse are transformed rather than ~~abandoned~~^{abandoned} in his more experimental work. The only constant factor in Gunn's work is his scrupulous intelligence and it is merely in the clear expression of this intelligence that Gunn has sometimes failed. Gunn's openness to such a wide range of experience has always been one of his most endearing characteristics, but it needs to be seen in the context of his career as a whole, and the specific influences that have been at work on it.

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Gunn was born in Gravesend on 29 August 1929, the son of Herbert Gunn (later a controversial editor of the Daily Sketch) and 'lived in London for most of an unhaphazard middle-class youth, while my family stealthily crept up from middle-middle class to upper-middle class'¹. He attended University College School in Hampstead until 1948 when he spent two years in the army on National Service 'without firing a shot in anger'. This was to provide the material for some of the poems in Fighting Terms, including 'Lofty in

the Palais de Danse' and 'Captain in time of peace', although at this time Gunn was writing fiction, not poetry. The effects perhaps went deeper, for Gunn later wrote that 'I do not deliberately belong to any school, but I suppose I am part of the National Service generation, and have some of its characteristics: lack of concern with religion, lack of class, a rather undirected impatience'². Gunn then spent six months in Paris, working on the Metro, before going up to Trinity College Cambridge, where he read English, in 1950. He had a brilliant career, taking a double first, becoming President of the University English Club, and working for a time on Granta. Gunn was a contemporary of John Mander and Frederick Grubb - both of whom were later to write about his work - and of Ted Hughes, although he did not know him closely, and was also a friend of the American poet Donald Hall, then a postgraduate at Oxford, where Gunn also had many contacts. More importantly, Gunn later wrote that it was at Cambridge 'that I started writing seriously for the first time. It was here that I wrote my first book'³. It was also at Cambridge that 'I quickly grew up after hearing that Edith Sitwell was a bad poet. It struck me that one poem was perhaps better than another, huge possibilities became apparent, and I stopped wanting to imitate a lot of famous but mediocre writers'⁴. The first result of this new interest in poetry was an anthology edited by Gunn, Poetry from Cambridge 1951-2⁵, published in 1953, and his reputation was consolidated by the publication of a Fantasy Press pamphlet⁶ of his poetry later in the same year. In 1954, just after Gunn had completed his studies, the same press published his first collection, Fighting Terms⁷, and Gunn's reputation was assured. In some ways, the rest of his career can be seen as an attempt to escape the precocity of this early verse, both in technique and subject matter.

During this time, Gunn was contributing some poetry and criticism to the newly founded London Magazine, including an interesting account of life at Cambridge⁸. He had applied for a scholarship to Yale, but was unsuccess-

ful, and spent some time in Rome, on a studentship, working on his second book. Donald Hall had advised Gunn to apply to Stanford University, situated across the Bay from San Francisco, and in the autumn of 1954 he was awarded a scholarship there to study under Yvor Winters. Apart from occasional visits to England and a three month stay in Berlin, Gunn has lived in America ever since. The influence of Winters has been crucial, although Gunn did not know anything about him when he applied to Stanford - 'It was an interesting confrontation. I found him a very impressive man and I spent about the first three months arguing with him all the time. I think he has been good for me in many ways'⁹. Gunn was to acknowledge this debt in the poem 'To Yvor Winters 1956', and it was in ~~Winters's~~^{Winters'} seminar class that Donald Hall began his experiments with syllabics, a form in which he, Gunn, and Alan Stephens, all pupils of Winters, were later to write ~~in~~ extensively. Winters describes these experiments in Forms of Discovery¹⁰, although, paradoxically, he is sceptical about the results.

Gunn remained at Stanford until 1958, studying and lecturing on English literature, although he spent some time teaching in San Antonio in Texas. During this time he wrote the rest of the poems that were to form The Sense of Movement, and seven of these were previewed in New Lines¹¹, which appeared in 1956. Through this Gunn was unwittingly associated with 'The Movement', although he was geographically and temperamentally remote from this controversy, and later denied his membership of any such group. 'The big joke about the Movement was that none of the people had ever met each other and certainly never subscribed to anything like a programme. There were a few chance resemblances, but they were pretty chance'¹². It is nevertheless true that this anthology brought Gunn's poetry to a wider audience, although at the price of distorting his aims and affinities (as had earlier happened with his inclusion as a 'neo-Empsonian' in the Springtime¹³ anthology in 1953). Gunn was, in fact, becoming more involved in the American than the English literary scene, writing for the Yale Review

and Poetry Chicago, although he also continued to contribute to the London Magazine and the Spectator. His reputation was further enhanced by the publication of The Sense of Movement¹⁴ in 1957, which was awarded the Somerset Maugham award, and made a recommendation of the Poetry Book Society.

In 1958, Gunn moved to Oakland, and took up a teaching post at Berkeley University, where he was appointed as Assistant Professor of English, a position he held until 1966. In the same year, Gunn revised Fighting Terms extensively for an American paperback edition¹⁵, and began to experiment extensively with syllabics. In 1959 Gunn spent three months in Berlin with the proceeds of his Maugham award. Two years later he published his third collection, My Sad Captains¹⁶, the division of which into two sections clearly indicated that it was intended as a watershed in Gunn's poetry. In keeping with this, the five years between the publication of My Sad Captains and Positives were used as a time of consolidation and reappraisal. In 1962 Gunn published a second revision of Fighting Terms¹⁷, this time for Faber and Faber, obviously intended as the definitive edition. The same year also saw the release of the ~~gramophone~~^{gramophone} record On the Move, on which Gunn read poems from all three of his books as well as the uncollected 'Interrogated to Interrogator', and a paperback selection¹⁸ of poems by Gunn and Ted Hughes, chosen by the poets themselves. Hughes had also lived and taught in America for a while, and in 1963 he and Gunn edited the anthology 5 American Poets¹⁹, which itself drew on Gunn's selection of 'Young American Poets' for the London Magazine²⁰. Four of the poets, Edgar Bowers, Howard Nemerov, Louis Simpson and William Stafford, had also been included in Donald Hall's anthology Contemporary American Poetry²¹, published the previous year, and Louis Simpson was, like Gunn, an Assistant Professor at Berkeley. During the next few years, Gunn, who was becoming more involved with the literary culture of San Francisco, met and became a friend of other local poets, notably Gary Snyder and Robert Duncan. He also came to have a new admiration for the work of William Carlos Williams, on whom he

wrote a long article for Encounter²² in 1965, and his influence was very apparent in Positives²³, published in 1966.

Positives was a new departure for Gunn, as it marked a collaboration between him and his brother Ander, who took the photographs. Gunn spent some time in London in 1965, gathering material for the book, and the poems were firmly based on English city life which Gunn evoked with great care despite, or perhaps because of, his residence in America for the previous eleven years. It was also in 1966 that Gunn decided to leave Berkeley, and become a freelance writer. He later explained that 'I learned a lot from the students, but I found I had less and less time for writing....I do not find that writing poetry conflicts with teaching any more than it does with any other kind of job, but I do think that it is best for me to be without a job as long as possible'²⁴. Gunn's new breadth of interest can be seen in articles on the poetry of Gary Snyder²⁵ and the 'New Music'²⁶ that he wrote at this time, and in 1967 he published his first real collection of verse since My Sad Captains (which had appeared six years before), Touch²⁷.

Most of the poems in Touch had already been in print for some time. 'Misanthropos', which Gunn had begun writing in 1964 (and which grew out of conversations with Tony Tanner, the Cambridge critic, who was spending a year in Berkeley, and the American Don Doody) had been performed on the B.B.C. Third Programme in March 1965, and published in Encounter²⁸ five months later. The majority of the other poems had appeared either in A Geography²⁹, a pamphlet published by the Stone Wall Press of Iowa in 1966, or in Poetry Chicago³⁰ in November of the same year, along with 'Old Man in the Britania', a poem which seems originally to have been intended for Positives. In fact, it seems likely that most of Touch was written before the verse in Positives, despite the actual dates of publication. Touch was made the Poetry Book Society choice for Autumn 1967, although Gunn himself wrote in the Society's bulletin that 'my main feeling by now is that, after six years, it doesn't really add up to very much'³¹, and Gunn turned

his attention to the writing of Moly. Three short pamphlets that he published at this time, The Garden of the Gods³² which appeared in 1968, and The Fair in the Woods³³ and Sunlight³⁴, which both appeared in the following year, were all to be incorporated into that book. Gunn also published Poems 1950-66. A Selection³⁵ in 1969, again chosen by Gunn, and including four poems from Positives, with new titles, printed as entities in their own right. He had also published a selection of the poetry of Fulke Greville³⁶, including the whole of Caelica, in 1968, with a long critical introduction based partly on the ideas of Yvor Winters, in which he compared Greville with the notorious Police Chief Parker of Los Angeles. This indicated a new involvement with radical politics, and in the same year Gunn condemned the American war effort in Vietnam in a symposium in the Review³⁷, and took part in a demonstration on behalf of dissatisfied divinity students at Berkeley³⁸. This involvement with 'alternative' politics in California was even more apparent in Moly³⁹, published in 1971.

Moly, made a Poetry Book Society Choice for Spring 1971, was seen by many reviewers as part of a more general return in English poetry to the use of myth, in such books as Crow by Ted Hughes, Circe by Stuart Montgomery, and Christopher Logue's translation of parts of Homer. Gunn's friend, the American poet Robert Duncan, himself wrote a reply to many of the poems in Moly, in his book Poems from the margin of Thom Gunn's Moly⁴⁰ published the following year, a project that greatly pleased Gunn. He himself has continued to write both poetry and criticism, although Moly remains his most recent full collection. In Christmas 1971, Gunn published Poem After Chaucer⁴¹ as a limited edition for his friends, and he has recently (in August of this year) published a short pamphlet, To the Air⁴². Gunn has also published in 1974 a selection of the poetry of Ben Jonson in the Penguin 'Poet to Poet' series⁴³. One of Gunn's most notable critical work since he decided in 1964 to abandon writing short reviews (in favour of longer articles over which he could take more time) was a long essay on the

poetry of Thomas Hardy, delivered as a lecture to Princeton University in 1970, and published in Agenda⁴⁴ in 1972. In both poetry and criticism, Gunn continues to produce work of a very high level of attainment, and it is possible that his best work is yet to come.

Gunn himself continues to work freelance, refusing to sell himself to 'the poetry-reading-lecturing circuits, which would mean that I was aiming at becoming a public figure - something I have not the slightest wish to be (private life is too interesting to give up)',⁴⁵. He wishes to avoid the 'running civil war of cliques and trends',⁴⁶ of literary politics because 'Writing is usually an occupation carried on, distinctly, by yourself, and the less the poet is With it, the better for his writing',⁴⁷. He does, however, give occasional readings in England, notably at the 'Poetry International' in Edinburgh in 1971, and at the Mermaid Theatre in June 1974. He continues to live 'by various jobs, sometimes teaching for a term, sometimes doing other things, none regular',⁴⁸. The profile of Gunn in the Observer in 1961⁴⁹ remains generally applicable. Under the 'improbable disguise' of the 'Marlon Brando ethos, Gunn

'retains the manner of the Cambridge intellectual: diffident, sensitive and passionately involved in the traditions of English literature. His...American exterior, in fact, has helped him to remain English without submitting to grinding English conventionality',⁵⁰

The major influences on Gunn's work are easily recognised, although difficult to precisely pin down, and it is necessary here only to present a very simple account of the forces that lie behind his work.

The philosophical impulses that shape Gunn's poetry derive from two

major movements, existentialism and the 'love generation' in California in the late 1960's. Existentialism, although now unfashionable, was the most important philosophy of the immediate post-war years of the late 1940's and early 1950's, and it was natural that Gunn, who was then at Cambridge, should become interested in it. The extent of his involvement, however, goes well beyond the merely fashionable, and its influence lies behind almost all of his work. The philosophy is crucial, both because it is at the centre of Gunn's view of experience, and because he uses much of its terminology in his poetry; words like 'choice', 'will', 'freedom', 'anguish', 'nothingness' and 'absurd' have a more specialised meaning than is first apparent. 'The Annihilation of Nothing', for example cannot be understood without knowledge of the philosophical argument that lies behind it. Gunn's skill lies in turning this abstract problem into a dramatic and important statement, that affects the poet himself. Although existentialism derives from the German philosophers Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Heidegger, it is from its adoption by Sartre, and other French writers, that Gunn derives most of his tenets. This is not completely true; Martin Dodsworth has shown⁵¹ how the basic conflict in Gunn's work between 'inertia' and 'projection' derives from a similar dichotomy in Heidegger, while the 'risk' involved in crossing from one state to the other was first described by Kierkegaard. It is from Sartre however, that Gunn takes most of his ideas.

Sartre put forward his theory of atheistic existentialism in most detail in L'Être et le néant⁵² in 1943 (although he has since modified it in books like Critique de la raison dialectique⁵³, published in 1960, in the light of neo-Marxist ideas). The work is almost impenetrably complex - the most lucid account describes it as dividing the world 'between an unstable consciousness struggling to attain self-coincidence and the dense solidity of external objects'⁵⁴, although even this is a gross simplification. Some of Gunn's poems can be traced back directly to 'L'Être et le néant' - Dodsworth connects 'The Corridor' with the section on 'le regard'⁵⁵ - but

existentialism is more a way of life than a rigid system, at least in the way that Gunn uses it. Its premises are relatively simple, and often come over more clearly in novels and plays by Camus, Genet, and even Sartre himself, than in purely philosophical works. (Camus, with his interest in the absurd, as well as nihilism and the act of rebellion, and Genet, with his interest in role-playing and the implications of perversion, are both important influences on Gunn's early work). I will leave the consideration of individual poems until later, and give here a generalised account of the major tenets of the philosophy, linking these with specific poems by Gunn.

In basic terms, an existential hero is a man who becomes aware of himself as a centre of consciousness, differing from matter, which merely exists, as in 'The Annihilation of Nothing', and the natural world, where animals act only as their instincts and environment compel them, as seen in 'the deliberate progress' in 'Considering the Snail'. He is also set apart from those men who live, as do the animals, motivated by mere stimuli, and thus lack consciousness, as does the soldier in 'Innocence'. The truly conscious man finds that he is the sole thinking being in a mass of purposeless matter, as does the man in 'The Unsettled motorcyclist's Vision of his Death', whose 'richness' is overcome by the 'ignorance' of Nature. The existential hero attains this consciousness by choice, and this is achieved through some sort of action, even if, as in 'Vox Humana', this involves purely mental effort. This choice is made with little help from existing philosophies, involves anguish, and is taken (metaphorically-speaking) in the dark. 'In Santa Maria del Populo' describes this in terms of the conversion of Saint Paul, 'the large gesture of solitary man', (and here the transition from dark to light is also, in terms of the painting, literal). The solution to this lies in heroic commitment, as set out in 'Incident on a Journey', where 'my action made me wise'. Some men attain this freedom of action partially, as do the motorcyclists in 'On the Move'. To attain

it fully, one must, like Claus Stauffenberg, choose 'the unknown.....as a corrective' and overcome fear through decisive action. Even with this knowledge, the existentialist must learn to accept that the universe is absurd (in the specialised meaning of the word) and that communication with others is, at best, difficult, as in 'The Corridor'. The only solution to the absurdity of existence lies in 'being oneself', and Gunn expresses this in terms of violent action - especially fighting and making love - in his poetry.

It can be seen that existentialism is a pessimistic and, ultimately, self-centred philosophy, although it does provide a coherent view of experience. 'Confessions of the Life Artist' in Touch shows Gunn becoming wary of its rationale - it describes a very similar process to that just set out, but Gunn now sees this attempt at mastering experience as ultimately self-defeating. Both 'Misanthropos' and Moly show the increasing dominance in Gunn's thought of a very different philosophy, closely allied to the hippy 'love generation', although this name is not a satisfactory one. This philosophy, celebrating the ideals of perfect community between all men, and a fully achieved involvement with the processes of Nature, draws largely on books like Gary Snyder's Earth House Hold⁵⁶. To understand this nexus of ideas, and how they developed, in California at least, from existentialism it is necessary to examine the two major social movements with which Gunn has been connected, and which themselves have helped shape his thought.

California in the late 1950's and early 1960's was unique in several important ways, and Moly is very closely tied to this specific ~~milieu~~^{milieu}. The 'Beats', whom Gunn had at one time so despised, had always been closely associated with San Francisco, and it was a poetry reading there in 1955, given by Allen ~~Ginsburg~~^{Ginsberg}, Philip Whalen, Kenneth Rexroth, Michael McClure and Gary Snyder that launched the Beat Movement. Gunn's friends Gary Snyder and Robert Duncan developed away from the gross simplifications of the original movement, but retained its interest in anarchic individualism,

itself based on existentialist ideas, and a new sort of communal life. While respecting these ideals, they expressed them in a more subtle and literary way, and Gunn himself did the same in Moly. Ken Kesey, whose novels bear a similar relation to the simple polemic of Jack Kerouac, was important in another way, for his experiments with newly developed hallucinogenics, including L.S.D., helped bring into being the hippy culture on which Gunn's later work is so closely based. California had always been the centre for experiments of this kind - Aldous Huxley wrote on the effects of mescaline while resident there (in Doors of Perception⁵⁷), and the Beats had often used similar drugs - but the use of L.S.D. was both more widespread and more influential. Equally important, California was also a centre for the Zen-Buddhist mysticism which permeated both the Beat and Hippy movements. Gary Snyder, whose poetry Gunn so admired, was one of the chief proponents of this, spending some time in a Zen monastery in Japan, and studying in Kyoto. Snyder's book Earth House Hold, in fact, is a useful introduction to the whole Hippy philosophy, with its reaffirmation of tribal values (also seen in his long poem Myths and Texts⁵⁸) and of a new unity with the primitive processes of Nature, partly achieved through L.S.D.

Gunn's attitude to these two movements has been that of an interested onlooker, and this sense of detachment has given his work more value than most of the literary products of the movements themselves. Of course, Gunn has deep connections with both Beat and Hippy cults. His public persona, as seen on the cover of the On the Move L.P., where Gunn stands on a street corner dressed in a black leather jacket, is mirrored in his early poetry, and both draw heavily on the impact of such films as The Wild One and Rebel without a Cause. This is also seen in Gunn's admiration for the motorcycle gangs in 'On the Move' (who are early prototypes for the California gangs described in Hunter Thompson's book Hell's Angels⁵⁹), as well as in his fascination with young hoodlums, as in 'Market at Turk' and 'Black Jackets'. These peripheral aspects of Gunn's work can be seen as

being part of the general feeling of rebellion and social revolt of the middle 1950's, and, in this, has affinities with similar movements in England. Gunn has described this atmosphere of revolt as being a universal sentiment at the time - 'Elvis Presley' could, equally well have been written 'from England, or France or Finland'⁶⁰, as in America. In England, this sense of revolt against established values was expressed in novels such as Hurry on Down and Lucky Jim and plays such as Look Back in Anger, first produced in May 1956. New Lines, published a month later, itself contained poems that expressed a light, and curiously respectful, mockery of established conventions, although this was only part of their intention. Gunn was more aggressive and extreme in his attitudes, but he shared this sense of revolt (itself part of the whole phenomenon of the 'Angry Young Men', which was just as much a publicity exercise as 'The Movement'). He was, however, far more specific, describing examples of a very localised refusal to conform in poems such as 'A Village Edmund', 'Market at Turk' and 'Black Jackets'. Gunn's early poetry reflected, and in some ways predates, the general atmosphere of the period, and, as already shown, he also shared the Beats' fascination with existentialism, although he used it as a complex system with which to structure his view of experience, rather than as a simple excuse for self gratification, as they had usually done.

As with the Beats, Gunn connected with hippy culture both on a superficial and on a philosophical level. In Moly, he described the movement's surface manifestations, such as light machines, ~~hallucinogenic~~ ^{hallucinogenic} drugs, rock music and open air festivals, but also examined its deeper concerns, including political dissent, the formation of a new tribal community, and full union with Nature. This was a far less self-centred philosophy than that of the Beats, and the evolution of one cult from the other is a counterpart of the development explored so carefully in 'Misanthropos'. It is from the tension between these two philosophical impulses that much of Gunn's best work has been derived.

The literary influences on Gunn's poetry are both varied and pervasive, and can be seen both in his work itself and indirectly, in his own literary criticism. Martin Dodsworth, for one, has found Gunn's early work far too derivative, and sees all of his poetry as being 'mediated through a style' in order to achieve a lack of immediacy, and 'submissiveness before other people and indeed the world of things'⁶¹. It is certainly true that Gunn is very aware of the genres in which he is writing, and of the literary traditions that lie behind his work, and this makes his own work more satisfying.

Gunn's debts to English Literature are particularly extensive. The major influence on his early work was that of Yeats. Martin Dodsworth has traced three specific borrowings⁶² - the 'awful bombastic frankness' of tone in 'Incident on a ~~Journey~~^{Journey}', the use of the refrain in the same poem, and the sudden introduction of a Yeatsian saint in 'On the Move'. Gunn's debts to Yeats go further, for poems like 'A Mirror for Poets' derive their mixture of vividly recounted history and general philosophical conclusions from poems like 'The Statues', and Gunn aims for the same tightly organised complexity. Auden is another major influence on Gunn's early work. 'The Right Possessor' and 'The Court Revolt' are openly imitative of Auden's use of political subjects as an allegory for more general themes, while 'Without a Counterpart' reproduces his use of riddles (itself derived from Anglo-Saxon verse). The balance and abrupt clarity of Auden's work is clearly seen in Gunn's early poetry, 'Lines for a Book' being particularly close to Auden's style, showing the same economy and wit. These attributes are also drawn by Gunn from the third main influence on his early work - the poetry of Donne. 'Wind in the Street' imitates his method of using images in a detached, intellectualised way, while 'Captain in time of peace' uses his device of making the poem a direct address to a lover, rather than a

simple dramatic monologue. The uncollected poem 'A Crab' is very close to Donne's 'The Flea' in its wit, tenderness, and use of an apparently trivial, or grotesque, subject - an insect parasitic on man - as the basis for a gentle love poem. All three poets - Donne, Yeats and Auden - share the qualities of wit, directness, clarity of expression and great technical ability that Gunn obviously admires, and wishes to attain in his own work. The influence of these poets is pervasive, but Gunn's debts to other English writers are more specific.

Gunn has been especially attracted to the 16th Century, as he makes clear in 'A Mirror for Poets', and draws widely on the literature of that period. Shakespeare has been a seminal influence, and Gunn uses characters from his plays as archetypes, - Edmund in 'A Village Edmund', Coriolanus in 'A Plan of Self Subjection', and Romeo in 'During an Absence'. Section IX of 'Misanthropos' is a reworking of a speech by Edgar in King Lear, and, among other verbal parallels, the title of 'My Sad Captains' is taken from Antony and Cleopatra, as is an early epigraph to 'The Kiss at Bayreuth'. 'Street Song' in Moly is modelled on Autolycus' song in The Winters Tale, and the genre it itself belongs to. The most important debt, however, is Gunn's use of Troilus and Cressida. 'The Wound' draws on this play (rather than directly on the Iliad) as does the whole of the first section of My Sad Captains, which takes as its basis a quotation from the play, 'The will is infinite and the execution confined'. This theme is central both to Shakespeare's play and to Gunn's early poetry. Gunn also owes much to the Elizabethan lyric, both in form (he experiments with the sonnet, in 'The Seperation', the echo poem, in 'Misanthropos' II, and the double quatrain, in 'Misanthropos' VIII) and content. Gunn also imitates the terminology, using archaic words like 'dryads', and the taut balance of such poets as Sidney and Fulke Greville. He shares their concern with the intellect and their sense of control, although his early poetry also shares some of their faults - a lack of particularly, imperviousness to the external world, and

occasional aridity. Gunn's debts to later English poets are less extensive.

With the later metaphysical poets (besides Donne), Gunn shares some of the delicacy of Marvell, although 'To his cynical mistress' is a deliberate abnegation of his best known poem, and the technical ingenuity of Herbert. 'Round and Round', for example, is circular both in content and in form. Gunn's exploration of unredeemed lust in such poems in the two 'Modes of Pleasure' owes much to Rochester, expressing the same frankness, with a similarly cool stance. (Dodsworth has linked Gunn with both Rochester and Byron through his attaining the same sort of notoriety)⁶³. Gunn's use of couplets in such poems as 'Elegy on the Dust' and 'Moly' owes much to the Augustans, using the form both for narrative and description, and Gunn attains their mastery of balance and antithesis. Donald Davie's praise for the late Augustans, with their insistence on an uncluttered syntax and diction, has been particularly important here, and Gunn's style is certainly closer to Goldsmith than Pope. His use of classical myth, however, does seem to derive from the earlier poet, and Robert Duncan has compared his own emendations to Moly to Pope's use of other writers to help him translate the Odyssey⁶⁴. Gunn's debts to the Romantics, however, were practically non-existent until Moly, where the Sand Man is a figure close to the innocents described by Wordsworth in 'Resolution and Independence' and 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'. There are wider resemblances, for both 'Sunlight' and 'The Fair in the Woods' celebrate a union of man with the natural processes. This new pantheism does provide for an increased sensitivity to the external world, first seen in 'Lights among Redwood', where the whole point of the poem lies in its close observation of the natural world. Gunn differs from the early Romantics in that the nature of this encounter is social rather than solitary, but their influence is crucial in extending the range of his poetry.

The influence of modern English poets (besides Yeats and Auden) on Gunn's work is less far reaching. He certainly makes use of the pararhymes

developed by Wilfred Owen to give a greater flexibility to his work, and this device works well in such poems as 'The Vigil of Corpus Christi'. Gunn also adopts the tone of Robert Graves in some of his gentler poems, and draws on his dependence on the traditional ballads. (John Press has noted verbal similarities between Graves' 'The Terraced Valley' and Gunn's 'Without a Counterpart')⁶⁵. Eliot's early poetry is another influence, again mostly of tone rather than subject matter, although Gunn's 'In Praise of Cities' explores the same area of urban squalor as 'Preludes' or 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night'. (Gunn may, of course, taken this from Baudelaire or Laforgue direct). Some of Gunn's later poems adopt the conversational style and spread out, jerky structure of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' - 'Back to Life' is the best example - while the same poem's precision of imagery is also much imitated by Gunn, as in 'cosmetic light a fool could penetrate' in 'In Praise of Cities'. Both poets are concerned with decay - Eliot in 'Gerontion' and Gunn in the final poems of Positives - in their early work, and later resolve this in religious terms, expressed in remarkably similar imagery - the rose garden in Four Quartets and the Garden of the Gods in Moly - although the two poets differ fundamentally in their concerns. Unlike Ted Hughes, Gunn is more interested in the Second World War than the First, and he has certain similarities with poets like Keith Douglas in his tone and sense of restraint, but he has no fundamental affinity with them, and this is also true of his relation to his contemporaries.

Among modern English writers, in fact, Gunn owes most to novelists rather than to other poets. George Orwell, with his belief in clarity at the expense of rhetoric, and his interest in the relationship between torturer and tortured (in 1984) - echoed by Gunn in 'The Beaters', 'Innocence' and the uncollected 'Interrogated to Interrogator' - is clearly influential. Christopher Isherwood is also important, again mainly for his poise and clarity of prose, which Gunn emulates in his later verse.

Gunn's debts to modern poets are less pervasive. He owes little to the other poets in New Lines, deriving nothing, for example, from Larkin's tone or suburban subject matter. Gunn is closer to Donald Davie, sharing his eclectic use of cultural reference and his sense of detachment. He also has certain affinities with Charles Tomlinson, whose work was much praised by Davie, and the careful and exact description of Tomlinson's verse certainly influenced the poetry of Touch. As mentioned earlier, both Davie and Tomlinson have widened the scope and subject matter of their work following their residence in America, but Gunn has taken this far further, and has become immersed in American culture in a way not attempted by the other two poets. The basic idea of 'Misanthropos' owes something to the way Robert Conquest and Kingsley Amis have used themes drawn from science - fiction in their work, while, in the same way, Moly seems partly to derive from Stuart Montgomery's poem Circe. The modern poet closest to Gunn, however, is Ted Hughes. Some of the work of the two poets share the same basic themes - both 'The Byrnies' and 'Woodwo' draw on Anglo-Saxon culture, while 'The Secret Sharer' and Hughes' short story 'The Suitor' are concerned with the doppelganger - but there seems to be little direct influence. Gunn's later work draws more clearly on Hughes' deep involvement with Nature - 'Moly' shows the same sharp particularity as in poems like 'Bull Moses' - and his broken blank verse. Both poets are fascinated, for different reasons, by the nature of violence, and both Moly and Crow also mark a return to myth as the structure for a long sequence of linked poems. Even more important than Gunn's various stylistic borrowings from English literature is the way he constantly refers back to it. One of his most recent poems, for example, 'Poem after Chaucer', provides a variation on Chaucer's treatment of the coming of spring at the start of the Canterbury Tales. This relation with earlier poets, reflecting back on their work and forming a living interaction with it, is Gunn's most important link with the literary tradition.

This is also seen in Gunn's debts to American literature especially in

his more recent work. Moly, for example, owes much to the ideal freedom sought for by Whitman (whose influence, in fact, lies behind the whole tradition of which Gunn is part). This is especially apparent in 'Three' and 'The Discovery of the Pacific'. Another aspect of the nineteenth century American obsession with the outdoors is referred to in 'To Natty Bumppo', where Gunn recreates the ethos of Fenimore Cooper's 'Leatherstocking' novels. This tradition extends through the work of William Carlos Williams, which has had a crucial influence on Gunn's later poetry. In the American Grain, with its description of the pioneering ideals of the 19th century America, has left its mark on Moly, but it is Williams' poetry which has most affected Gunn's work, representing an escape from the academic tradition of Eliot and Stevens to a new concern with the external world. The verse of Positives and parts of Touch is a very direct borrowing from the style of 'Spring and All', and this is still apparent in Moly. Poems as early as 'Lights among Redwood' clearly draw on Williams' own diction in such lines as

'One by one objects are defined -
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf.
But now the stark dignity of
entrance - Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted they
grip down and begin to awaken'.⁶⁶

Gunn copies the way that Williams fuses delicate description of the natural world with an intellectual appraisal of these processes, and in fact bases Moly on this dichotomy. The influence of Williams has enabled Gunn to describe the external world - both the city, in Positives, and Nature in 'Misanthropos' - with greater ease and in a more convincing way, and, because of this, remains the most potent force at work on his poetry. Williams' own followers have also influenced Gunn. Robert Duncan has written a sequel to Moly, but this influence has worked both ways, and Gunn's work has become far looser, although he has not yet adopted Duncan's

abandonment of any kind of conventional syntax or punctuation. Gary Snyder has also been an important influence, both for his poetry, with its insistence on the 'Great Outdoors' - taken over by Gunn in 'Flying above California' - and his prose, especially Earth House Hold.

In contrast to this, Gunn has also been influenced by the work of Poe, with his insistence on what has been called 'The Great Indoors', compared with the expansiveness of the tradition of Whitman. Gunn explores the doppelgänger motif of Poe's short story 'William Wilson' in poems such as 'The Secret Sharer', 'The Monster' and 'Bravery', and much of his early work has the same haunting atmosphere, and sense of claustrophobia, as Poe at his best. He also uses Henry James' ghost story 'The Turn of the Screw' in the same way, making it the basis of his poem 'The ^{Separation} Seperation'. Gunn also draws on Hemingway in poems like 'The Produce District', with its emphasis on the power of man over nature, and in the whole cult of toughness in his early work. In contrast, poems like 'The Discovery of the Pacific' share the preoccupation with freedom and ~~Movement~~ ^{movement} of Jack Kerouac. The second half of My Sad Captains is prefaced by a quotation from another modern American novelist, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the purity of 'uncomplicated air' described in The Last Tycoon is celebrated in the section as a whole.

Gunn also has affinities with poets who are not part of the tradition of Whitman. Pound is a seminal figure in American poetry, and Gunn's 'Confessions of the Life Artist' derives some of its effects from 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley'. Marianne Moore, another of the original Imagists (as of course, was Williams), is another major influence, and her use of syllabics, drawn from the work of Robert Bridges and Elizabeth Daryush, along with parallel experiments by Auden, led to Gunn's use of this form. Yvor Winters, who had helped make the work of these poets more well known, was himself an influence on Gunn, both through his critical ideas and the erudition and economy of his verse.

Among Gunn's contemporaries, the style of Richard Wilbur lies behind 'Autumn Chapter in a Novel', and Donald Hall has also been ^{influential} ~~influenced~~, especially in the way he encouraged Gunn to experiment with syllabics. Gunn, however, has drawn nothing from such recent movements as that of 'Confessional' poetry. The only major area of influence not so far discussed is, in fact, that of French literature.

Apart from specific borrowings, the major influence here is that of Baudelaire, and Gunn himself has traced the impatience of the hoodlums in his work back to Baudelaire's stating of the Romantic dilemma⁶⁷. Poems like 'In Praise of Cities', 'Berlin in Ruins', and most of Positives draw on Baudelaire's fascination with city life, while Gunn's admiration for the work of Poe stems from Baudelaire's interest in him. (This is obliquely referred to in section II of 'Readings in French' which itself is further evidence of Gunn's interest in French literature). The prose-poem in Moly,

The Colour Machine, derives both from Baudelaire's use of this form, while perhaps also owing something to Rimbaud's 'dereglement de tous les sens'. In both poets' work, this experiencing of extreme situations (achieved by Gunn through the use of L.S.D.) is seen as bringing some sort of new insight into everyday experience. Gunn also owes much to French novelists - referring to the work of Balzac, in 'Rastignac at 45', Constant, in 'Birthday Poem', and Stendhal, in 'Autumn Chapter in a Novel' - but it is the work of Camus and Sartre that has been crucial. The subject of Gunn's uncollected poem 'The Paraphlegic lying on his back' bears a remarkable similarity to the crippled Charles in Sartre's Le Sursis, but the influence goes far deeper, and Gunn's whole mode of thought owes much to Sartre. This can be seen in the description of La Nausée in 'Readings in French', which is itself a parody on Gunn's own early style. The same is true of Camus, who Gunn has praised for determining to 'fully live with this sickness with which we are born', and 'No speech from the Scaffold' owes much to the end of L'Étranger, and, in fact, could well serve as a postscript to that novel.

The width of Gunn's interests can be seen in the range of allusions he employs. He can refer to both Opera - in 'Das Liebesleben' and 'The Kiss at Bayreuth' - and pop music - in 'Elvis Presley' and 'Listening to Jefferson Airplane' - with equal conviction. The same applies to painting, for Gunn can write about both Renaissance art, in 'In Santa Maria del Populo', and the avante-garde, in 'Bravery' and 'The Colour Machine'. In Who's Who, Gunn lists one of his recreations as film-going, and he clearly draws on such Hollywood archetypes as the cowboy - in 'Tending Bar' and 'Words in Action' - and the motorcycle gang of The Wild One - in 'On the Move'. Conversely, Gunn's other chief sources of reference are Classical literature and the Bible. He is fascinated by such heroic figures as Alexander, in 'Vox Humana' and ~~Coriolanus~~ ^{Coriolanus}, in 'Palinode', while poems like 'The Silver Age' and 'Julian the Apostate' explore a similar heroism enduring even when faced with failure. Gunn uses classical myth in the same way, basing 'The Wound' and 'Helen's Rape' on the Iliad, and 'The Book of the Dead' and Moly on the Odyssey, in order to make a general point about the human condition. This is also true of 'Phædra in the Farm House' and 'The Goddess', and this device has the further advantage of locating Gunn's work firmly in the English poetic tradition of using classical myth as a readily understood sphere of reference. The same applies to Gunn's use of Christian subject matter in 'Lazarus not raised', 'Jesus and his Mother' and 'St. Martin and the Beggar' to make a general existential point. Gunn's debt to the whole literary tradition is, therefore, profound, and this can be further seen in his own literary criticism, which is both important in its own right, and a reflection of Gunn's changing views on the nature of his art.

Gunn's criticism falls neatly into three main periods - his early reviews for the London Magazine and the Spectator, his more general surveys of current verse for Poetry Chicago and the Yale Review, and his recent concentration on longer and more detailed essays for Agenda and Encounter. Gunn's reviews for the London Magazine between 1954 and 1960, some of which

were written while he was still at Cambridge, show his early interests, praising Isherwood and Stevens, but denigrating Empson and Dylan Thomas for turning their eccentricities into a style. Gunn also praises the criticism of Yvor Winters as the only adequate account of modern literature. Gunn's reviews for the Spectator, mainly written between 1957 and 1959, share the same concerns, praising Graves, Conquest and Heath-Stubbs for the restraint and learning of their poetry, but attacking George Barker and Jon Silkin for their insensitivity to language, and the lack of logical meaning in their verse. He admires the way that ~~Louis~~ ^{Louise} Bogan avoids the 'naked sensitive' tradition of much modern verse, while the 'earnestness' of Edgar Bowers contrasts with the general tone of English poetry, where 'everyone still follows the irony of Auden and Graves'. This turning towards American verse is also seen in Gunn's review of the New Poets of England and America anthology⁶⁸, although he is scathing about the 'Beats' who are not 'true poets'. Gunn believes that the best modern poets are modest, but have the 'proper equipment', and this certainly applies in a review he wrote for Listen in 1958⁶⁹, in which he praises Donald Davie for showing a combination of 'disciplined concentration, poise, seriousness, and connotative richness'. At this time, Gunn clearly valued restraint above emotion, and his early criticism is both dogmatic and a little forced.

The second phase in Gunn's critical career is represented in the reviews he wrote for Poetry Chicago (from 1957 to 1961) and the Yale Review (from 1958 to 1964), which show the modification of this hard line attitude to a more inclusive tolerance, mirroring a similar movement in his poetry. Gunn is careful to see each poet he discusses as part of a wider tradition, and he begins to make wider critical assertions than before. He still admires restraint, but attacks the 'calm style' of Roy Fuller and Anthony Thwaite because it lacks the commitment necessary for good poetry. Gunn desires instead 'a robustness that could both abet and be abetted by orderliness'. In his final review for Poetry Chicago⁷⁰, Gunn praises this

synthesis of observation and thought in the work of Donald Davie and Ted Hughes, who has a 'staggering accuracy of observation' but also 'keeps himself in the background'. (Gunn wryly admits that 'any writer of around Mr. Hughes' age....must be....deeply envious'). These ideas are developed in Gunn's articles for the Yale Review.

Gunn's basic attitude is that poetry must always be at least as well written as prose, and avoid both sentimentality, which E.E.Cummings shows to excess, and the sort of pointless experiment that has made Pound develop 'from the most vigorous and positive force in modern writing to a poet whose sole audience is academic specialists'. Gunn is already concerned with the organisation of poems into a unified whole, which he thinks is achieved by Donald Hall in The Dark Houses, but not by Williams in the final book of Paterson. He attacks poets who wish solely to establish a tone, just as he dislikes the 'verbose rubbish' of Delmore Schwartz, and finds that the best contemporary American poetry reacts against this, adopting an rhetorical, richly textured language. American verse is in a state of 'feudal war' between these poets and the followers of late Pound, especially Charles Olson, who 'writes the worst prose since ~~Democratic~~ ^{Democratic} Vistas'. However, the review 'Things, Voices, Minds', written in 1962⁷¹, shows a development away from this rigid critical viewpoint, the main reason for which is Gunn's new interest in the work of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, who are seen as the two masters of free verse, and Gunn takes up a more central position - both Olson and John Hollander (extreme proponents of the rival traditions) are 'men of obvious intelligence writing bad poetry, not from stupidity but from principle'. This new tolerance extends to English poetry, for although Gunn still thinks that Davie, Larkin and Hughes are the best three poets of their generation, he also admires Thomas Kinsella and Christopher Middleton, though he still dislikes the 'High Church snobbery' of Betjeman and late Auden, and the surrealist poetry of Durrell and Vernon Watkins. In 1964, Gunn told Ian Hamilton⁷² that he had decided to stop writing

reviews, as 'I don't like the feeling of sitting in judgement on other poets' and that he would now concentrate on longer, more ambitious, articles on the work of poets he admired.

These articles show the range of Gunn's new interests. Writing in Encounter in 1965, on the work of William Carlos Williams⁷³, Gunn saw Williams and T.S. Eliot sharing a 'common meeting place in Pound' and his introduction of Modernism, but developing in different directions. He admires Williams' 'love for the external world' as well as his rejection of the 'rituals of the past', and prefers this to Eliot's abandonment of the American idiom. Another poet to explore this idiom is Gary Snyder, and Gunn has written two valuable essays on his work. In Agenda in 1966⁷⁴, Gunn praised Snyder's use of the phrase as a structural unit, and his openness to textures, as well as a sense of things 'caught in motion'. He elaborated on this in the Listener in 1968⁷⁵, describing Snyder's work as an 'art of discovery' in itself, although as 'deceptively simple' as Williams' verse, and as a 'poetry of feeling exquisitely defined by its objects'. In the same year, Gunn published his edition of the poetry of Fulke Greville⁷⁶, an indication of the diversity of his interests. The Critical Introduction pays tribute to the influence on Gunn of the ideas of Yvor Winters, especially that of the 'plain style' in Elizabethan poetry, and Greville is praised for the way he is 'too honest to disregard what his feelings tell him'. Gunn analyses some of the poems in Caelica with great sensitivity, and it is typical of him that the same care and seriousness is seen at work in his article on 'The New Music', published in the Listener in the previous year⁷⁷. Gunn describes how pop music has developed from the 'fag end of the Petrarchan tradition' to describing real life subjects, including the use of drugs to give 'an excursion into pure experience'. (As Moly was also to do). He also admires pop songs for their achievement of 'that ordering and power that a rhythmic norm can give to a poem', and which is also found in the ballad tradition. Gunn further explores this in his essay on the relation

of Hardy's poetry to the ballads, published in Agenda⁷⁸ in 1972. He sees Hardy as adopting both the structure and techniques of the ballads to express his feeling for the past and serve as a form of reticence, for this tradition is the 'chief nature source of our literature', and has been constantly drawn on as a 'means of renewal'. Gunn finds Hardy's awkwardness sometimes deliberate, but admires his sincerity, valuing 'this feeling of contact with a man who will never lie to me'. Gunn's most recent critical article, the Introduction to his selection of Jonson's verse⁷⁹, published in 1974, also praises its subject's truth to experience. Gunn praises Jonson for fusing his 'wild anarchic vigour' with the restraint of 'classical' writing, and analyses his verse with great sensitivity. This constant sense of the traditions that lie behind his poetry makes Gunn's own work achieve an added depth. The best critics to have written on Gunn have themselves perceived this, and much of the debate on Gunn's work has been concerned with placing it in its true literary context.

IV

A relatively large body of criticism on Gunn's work already exists, although, as yet, no full length study has appeared. The first general description of his work (reviews of individual books will be discussed later) comes in G.S. Fraser's introduction to the anthology Springtime⁸⁰, published in 1953, where he was classed along with Wain, Amis and Alvarez, as a neo-Empsonian who also employed the 'Drydenic line' to good effect. Five years later Geoffrey Moore, in his pamphlet Poetry Today⁸¹, described Gunn as being 'more violent, more metaphorical, and less purely cerebral' than the other poets in New Lines, a point taken up by Al Alvarez in Commentary⁸², who saw Gunn and Hughes as reconciling the classical and romantic traditions in modern poetry. In the same year as Alvarez's article, 1961, the first two full accounts of Gunn's work appeared. John Mander

devoted a chapter in The Writer and Commitment⁸³ to Gunn, praising him as 'the only English writer to re-examine the basis of commitment', although he finds that Gunn's later work has a 'disturbing air of literariness' and an 'over naive activism'. G.S. Fraser, writing in the Critical Quarterly⁸⁴, saw Gunn as a poet of 'the firm assertion of the romantic will'. His verse is about 'snatching at occasion, whatever the risks', and his two major themes are attempting to make 'tragic sense' of suffering, and showing how sexual love can rarely 'merge the essential ~~separateness~~^{separateness} of two people'. Fraser also praises Gunn's 'deep authenticity', although his verse is sometimes marred by 'failures of tone'. In the same year, Elizabeth Jennings in Poetry Today⁸⁵, saw the influence of Yvor Winters enabling Gunn to build 'a moral world' of his own, and praised his ability to see 'abstract problems in concrete terms'. Some of the later articles on Gunn were similarly unequivocal.

By 1963, critics were most interested in evaluating the new directions that Gunn's work was taking. In this year, John Press included a section on Gunn in his book Rule and Energy⁸⁶, describing him as a poet fascinated by the nature of the aggressive will. Press finds Gunn's early work cold and unpleasant, although written with 'verve and insolent wit', and prefers his later style, with its 'tentative delicacy'. Gunn's faults are the lack of a satisfactory framework for his verse, and of any interest in the external world, but Press praises his lucidity and honesty, and finds him a 'deeply serious poet'. A similar point of view is expressed by Frederick Grubb in his book A Vision of Reality⁸⁷. Grubb detects a 'new sensual precision' in Gunn's later verse, although it sometimes shows 'emotional arrest', and lacks the qualities of his early verse, when he was 'a peacetime conscript in search of genuineness'. Gunn, however, remains a 'forceful humanist'. Most later accounts agreed with this viewpoint. In his introduction to the anthology Poetry 1900-65⁸⁸, George Macbeth described Gunn's work as forming 'a bridge between the poetry of Larkin and Hughes',

writing with the 'formal precision and elegance' of a fifties' poet, but the 'interest in energy and violence' of a sixties' one. Macbeth saw Gunn's poetry as deriving its special quality from this tension between 'the grace of his style and the bite of his subject matter'. In the same year, 1967, M.L. Rosenthal discussed Gunn's work in his book The New Poets⁸⁹, noting how he was 'attracted to the life of action, as a theme and as a way of meeting the world'. His early work showed Gunn's ability 'brutally to suppress self indulgence and sentimentality in the interest of testing forbidden sympathies'. Gunn's later work fulfils his early potential, and continues to explore the conflict between existential emptiness and the 'assertion of meaning through sheer will', even though his lesser poems seem to be mere exercises on set themes. John Press returned to the debate in 1969 in his book A Map of Modern English Verse⁹⁰. He described how in Gunn's poetry 'energy is generated by the sheer force and intricate exactitude of the argument', although the details of the real world are 'often reduced to mere bloodless counters in a metaphysical game'. In one of the most interesting recent articles on Gunn, Dannie Abse elaborated on this viewpoint. Writing in Corgi Modern Poets 5⁹¹, published in 1973, Abse still found some of Gunn's early work so 'awkward and....clumsy that I wanted to laugh out loud', but now recognised the 'genuine feeling' that these poems expressed. Gunn's later work is concerned with 'trust and self-preserving concern', the opposite of his early fascination with violence, and his poetry remains 'hesitant.....often illuminating, sometimes provocative, always worth listening to'. This seems a fair appraisal of Gunn's work.

Some of the best articles on Gunn have shown a more partisan approach to his work. Some critics have expressed a preference for his early style, the best of these being Neil Powell and John Fuller. Fuller, writing in the Review in 1962⁹², sees Fighting Terms as being essentially a collection of love poems, written in an original style, 'a mixture of the Jacobean and the colloquial which took flatness in its stride'. Gunn's later work

is a movement from 'emotional particularities of love to philosophical generalities of behaviour and action', and Fuller sees this as a decline, later hastened by a growing 'indistinction of language'. Neil Powell, writing in the Critical Quarterly in 1971⁹³, draws a similar distinction between the 'undergraduate brashness' of Fighting Terms and the 'mannerism into which it develops'. He compares the best of Gunn's work with that of Fulke Greville, and sees his later work as lacking this 'careful manipulation of ideas and patterns'.

One of the major complaints about Gunn's work is its (supposed) leaning towards fascism. Kenneth Allott first made this charge, in the 1962 revision of The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse⁹⁴, attacking Gunn's 'T.E. Hulme-ish flavour of action-worship as the badge of an elite', although these same attitudes are 'wholly admirable' when confined to discussing the poetic act. Allott also considers that Gunn is 'too unsure of his style as yet to develop a distinctive voice'. These points were taken up in the following year by Alan Brownjohn, writing in the London Magazine⁹⁵. Brownjohn discerned 'a lack of resolute control over subject matter' in Gunn's early work, while his later style merely revealed 'the barrenness of diction which Gunn has before managed to conceal in elaborate metrical devices'. Gunn's work has been a 'bad influence' on others, who have found in it 'a somewhat displeasing cult of romantic toughness, showing a preference at heart for the brutal, the irrational and the wilful'. The same point was put more specifically by Edward Lucie-Smith in the Critical Quarterly⁹⁶, where he argued that physical cruelty played a large part in Gunn's work, and that the inflicting of pain was seen as a means of achieving self identity. This charge was a serious one, but was conclusively answered by Martin Dodsworth in the London Magazine in 1964⁹⁷. Dodsworth showed how Gunn's strength was related to his ability to handle the subject of atrocity, and that he set out to shock the reader out of his complacency. A.E. Dyson made a similar point in his book This Crazy Fabric⁹⁸, and

expressed admiration for Gunn's 'distancing power'.

Gunn's work has been attacked for more general reasons. Charles Tomlinson, in a widely read survey of modern verse in The Pelican Guide to English Literature 7⁹⁹, doubted if Gunn would 'develop a moral sensitivity equal to his concerns', and found him often 'committed to a kind of nihilistic glamour for which he cannot always apologise'. A more extreme attack was made by the American poet James Dickey in the Sewanee Review¹⁰⁰. Dickey saw Gunn as a 'fashionable rote versifier', who performed 'endless labours' to make simple ideas complex. This view, although extreme, is typical of most American reviews of Gunn's work, and even Yvor Winters attacked the 'dead prose' of his syllabics (in Forms of Discovery¹⁰¹). This lack of appreciation of Gunn's work in America extends to Touch and Moly, and is the more surprising considering Gunn's interest in specifically American themes, and his long residence in the United States. The most valuable account of the deficiencies of Gunn's work, however, is by an English critic, Sydney Bolt, in Delta in 1968¹⁰², because it is both fair and closely argued. Bolt considers that few poets can have had such disregard for all aspects of versification. In his early work 'there is no interplay between live speech rhythm and metre', but Gunn, realizing this, adopted syllabics, in which 'this very flatness is used for purposes of expression'. Although Gunn cannot play on words, he plays at them, and his later work is shaped by 'a strong current of syntax'. This preference for Gunn's later work is also expressed by Martin Dodsworth and Patrick Swinden.

Swinden, writing in the Critical Quarterly¹⁰³, investigates in what ways Gunn's work has developed since New Lines, where he was 'more of a distinctive voice than a distinctive personality'. His work has always transformed the relation between the human will and the material world into something 'more literary, philosophical, gesturing and portentous' than a poet like Larkin could. Gunn has also been able, by using a 'dryly

epistemological' approach, to deal with such subjects as 'the otherness of nature and of things'. Like Davie, Gunn has 'outgrown or transformed whatever was provincial and limiting' in his work. The most important critical account of Gunn's work so far, however, is that by Martin Dodsworth.

In his first evaluation of Gunn's work, writing in the Review in 1968¹⁰⁴, Dodsworth describes the poet's development away from the 'hermetically sealed' verse of Fighting Terms. These early poems were torn between the desire for impersonality (achieved through the use of a mask, as in Yeats' poetry), and the desire to break down these barriers, and to speak directly. Gunn's following two books use the idea of this role-playing as a means of escaping the confines of the mind and exploring the outside world. Positives indicates an important change, for the 'flatness' and 'tepid' quality of the verse matches the book's concern with 'the wearing down of energies', itself 'a blurring of the limitations that the world imposes'. The poems celebrate a 'vision of human spontaneity', but this is much more fully achieved in Touch. Much of Touch is about 'variousness', and 'Misanthropos' celebrates a looking outward to other people. Dodsworth finds that this new style sometimes involves a 'simplification of argument and feeling', but it does show his willingness to experiment. Gunn is a very fine poet because he knows (as does Robert Lowell) the difference between 'the occasional and the thematic, between the making of a few fine poems and the conversion of a whole body of work'.

Dodsworth elaborated this view of Gunn's work in an essay in The Survival of Poetry¹⁰⁵, published two years later. He compares Gunn with Byron, for both see poetry as a form of action, although Gunn always mediates his thought through a style, rather than directly, in his early verse. This 'submissiveness' is responsible for the 'irritative value' of poems like 'Lines for a book'. Gunn's later verse is less negative using an 'unostentatious language' and exploring the 'domain of others'. This change from 'aggressive' to 'seductive' verse makes Gunn's work less

forced, and more persuasive. Dodsworth also investigates some of the basic themes that Gunn has explored. The major tension in his work is that between 'limit' and 'freedom', which corresponds to the existential distinction between 'inertia' and 'projection'. Gunn's later work leaves behind the early emphasis on the will, and 'simply calls the reader into the experience of the beauty of action'. This poetry really calls for an 'act of faith' on the reader's part, and suggests 'inexhaustible vitality'.

This is the most satisfactory view of Gunn's work put forward so far, but it needs to be investigated more fully, and this will be done in the following chapters. Some of the most valuable insights into Gunn's work come from his own comments on his poetry, but these will be dealt with in connection with the poems to which they allude. It is now necessary to deal with Gunn's poetry in detail (although also seeing it in the context of the contemporary reaction it inspired). In order to show Gunn's full development, this account of his work must be a chronological one.

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CHAPTER 1.

FIGHTING TERMS

Fighting Terms, first published in 1954, received generally enthusiastic reviews when it appeared, but Gunn's reputation was already established. The Times Literary Supplement had praised Gunn's contributions to Poets from Cambridge 1951-2¹ as the product of a poet who could write using 'the experience of life, acted upon by the sense of order inherent in the soul of the artist, which guides the writer in the process of creation', and saw Gunn as a 'maker' who wrote 'eschewing the cult of sacred madness in poetry'. The T.L.S. also reviewed Gunn's Poems² pamphlet noting his 'gift for imagining legend or for using narrative patterns, and not merely isolated images, symbolically'. The review of Fighting Terms³ was less enthusiastic, still seeing Gunn's work as 'outstanding', and 'irritatingly clever and inbred, but bold and very well constructed', but also showing a 'good deal of clumsy naivety and adolescent unpleasantness'. The reviewer already noted, at this early stage, that Gunn 'had developed away from the density of the early poems towards a simpler and more direct idiom, rather at the expense of concentration'. He saw Gunn as aiming at 'something between colloquial and formal speech, a kind of tough "dialogue" speech' in the mode of Hemingway. G.S. Fraser, writing in the New Statesman⁴ was wary of Gunn's 'boyish admiration for toughness' but praised his range and sincerity and 'plain blunt style', and saw in the poet 'a rare independence'. A similarly mixed review was given by George Hartley, in the Spectator⁵ who placed Gunn firmly in the tradition of William Empson and noted his 'curiously unsensual passion'. Writing in Listen⁶, Bernard Bergonzi also saw Gunn as one of the new 'neo-academics' and being 'colloquial in an almost brutal way' as well as showing an original attitude to love, demonstrating 'vigorous masculinity' similar to that of Roy Cambell. ~~Bergonzi~~^{Bergonzi} also saw Gunn as a 'poet of the animus' and found

this refreshing, although he found the 'dumb-ox persona' Gunn adopted as a 'limiting factor'. Equally enthusiastic was James Michie's review in the London Magazine⁷. Michie saw Gunn's method as to 'work out the human situation in terms of a set of related images; it is allegory in little, though the situation is often more personal than universal'. This sometimes made it difficult to see 'if an image has a secondary meaning or is merely ornamental, but it also makes Gunn's poetry 'neat and clear without lacking suggestiveness'. Gunn uses all the 'ghastly apparatus' of the modern world, but this poetic landscape is, according to Michie, even less real than that of Auden, and uses 'images of war as if they were part of a Buchan romance', while 'Tamer and Hawk' is a 'deplorable example of New Elizabethanism'. Despite this, Gunn has a 'tamer's touch' with words, and his assurance, which is one of his best virtues, 'only deserts him when he deals with love' which he approaches with 'supersophistication'. Finally, writing in the Birmingham Post⁸, Charles Causley praised the poems in Fighting Terms as those of 'a man tough yet vulnerable, who exhibits the wounds life inflicts on him with a kind of terrible surprise'. Reviews of later editions of Fighting Terms attempted to see it more in historical perspective.

Reviewing the American edition of Fighting Terms in 1958, Al Alvarez, writing in the Partrian Review⁹ sees Gunn as a traditional poet because 'it is a tradition in English poetry to be intelligent', and calls Fighting Terms the most impressive first book of poems since that of Robert Lowell. Gunn predates the 'angry young men', but in some ways shares their concerns, and, although he can be crude and too aggressive, even that 'in a way adds to his power'. Alvarez compares Gunn with Donne, as both have the same 'tough and peculiarly open liveliness of mind', the same 'rhythmical arrogance', and 'the same ability to present the shock of experience in an image that works as a kind of complex dramatic situation'. In addition, Gunn uses his 'full quizzical poetic intelligence in order

that the complexities may play themselves out in their own terms'. This review remains one of the most eloquent accounts of Gunn's early verse. The final revision of Fighting Terms, which appeared in 1962, was more extensively reviewed, and again, enabled Gunn's early work to be seen in perspective.

The Times¹⁰ welcomed the edition as again presenting Gunn's well known poetic hero, all 'lust and irony'. Other reviews went deeper. Many agreed with Fuller's article in the Review¹¹, which saw the collection as still being Gunn's best. Al Alvarez, in the Observer¹² agreed with this, while John Press, in the Cambridge Review¹³, praised its 'peculiar freshness and tang' which often is seen in 'the early verse of an enormously gifted writer', and which is never recaptured, although he saw the book as being 'of interest also in that it foreshadows the themes of his subsequent poetry'. Robin Skelton, writing in the Critical Quarterly¹⁴ thought it easier to see now a 'dandyism which is much more basic than the much remarked toughness', and attributes to this tendency of the crude force of Gunn's early poems giving way to the urbanity of the later. Fighting Terms is exciting for its 'admission of commonplace locations and vernacular stridencies 'into' poetry that was at once extroverted in tone and metaphysical in content; the tension between the ostensible and the implied.' Unfortunately the dandyism which made this tension successful has led Gunn's later work into 'a somewhat precious asceticism, the sensuous delights of rich imagery and forceful rhythms are now to be avoided as is the sentimental enjoyment to be derived from the use of vulgarity'. Skelton is not too upset by this as Gunn will always 'find something vital and disturbing to say', but he regrets the loss of this 'toughness' from Gunn's work. Some reviewers were more hostile. Michael Fried, in the London Magazine¹⁵ finds 'allowances hard to make' for these poems, as they lack any psychological realism and are expressed in the rhetoric of 'specious easy anguishing and cheap rationalisation'. Fried finds Gunn incapable of

'presenting other than an abstract and mechanical parody of human behaviour' yet 'seems not to have felt the need to go beyond these means'. Fried still thinks Fighting Terms one of the most exciting books of English poetry of the last decade, but sees this merely as 'emphasising the general dreariness of recent achievement'. An even more extreme attack is made by Peter Dale in Agenda¹⁶, who thinks that Gunn's reputation is magnified beyond measure, as his work is 'allegorically unconvincing on modern life'. There is no tension or resolution for his verse is mere sloganising and Gunn attempts a 'quasi-dramatic presentation' that he cannot keep up. Dale sees Gunn's dictions as a cross between the eighteenth century and modern cliché. This attack, like most of the more extreme on Gunn, is unlocalised and therefore not very valuable. The critical comments on Fighting Terms make clear the impact it created, and I intend to explore, firstly, the special characteristics of this collection.

The title Fighting Terms describe the book well; it is about aggression and provides an articulation of this aggression in various forms to construct a philosophy of action. This theme, however, is explored in a very intellectualised way, and many of the poems are equally concerned with the nature of identity or reality. The book has been much attacked for its glorification of violence, but this violence is presented as an attitude rather than a physical state. In this respect it differs from the early poetry of Ted Hughes, and a comparison of this book with Hughes' The Hawk in the Rain¹⁷, published three years later, defines Gunn's concerns more closely. His poetry lacks Hughes' direct evocation of the brutality of war, as in 'Bayonet Charge', and the violence of Nature, as in 'The Jaguar'. Neither poet describes violence merely for its own sake, but whereas Hughes evokes it to make a specific point or make a description more real, Gunn is content with describing its motivation or consequences. The brawl in 'Incident on a Journey', for example, is not directly described, and it is interesting to compare 'Innocence' (in MSC) and 'The Martyrdom of Bishop

Farrar'. The latter is far more specific, and less controlled, and therefore lacks the genuine horror of the last line of 'Innocence', which contrasts so with what has gone before. Another interesting contrast is that between Hughes 'The Dove Breeder' and Gunn's 'Tamer and Hawk' which use the same basic image, and the same underlying antithesis. Hughes presents love as a violent intrusion that destroys the 'mild mannered' dove breeder's careful routine and gives him a new sense of power; the poem is exultant, and sees this acceptance of violence as a liberating force. Gunn on the other hand, presents love as an enslavement of natural forces, and hints that it will not be long before this inherent violence will refuse any more to be mastered and will 'choose tamer as prey'. The poem is more menacing than exultant and violence is not so much glorified as shown to be a dangerous force, destroying love rather than expressing it. In comparison with Hughes then, Gunn can be seen as a poet investigating, rather than celebrating violence. His is not so much a poetry that, like that of Hughes, is intended to liberate emotion as a poetry that controls and investigates it instead.

Gunn's use of technique in this collection is as traditional as his philosophical approach is original. All of the poems are rhymed and almost all have a regular rhythmical structure as well (usually with either four or five stresses to the line). Of the twenty five poems in the first edition, one is in couplets and another is a sonnet; the others are in stanzas, mostly of five or six lines, and even these are varied, for Gunn rarely uses the same stanza pattern twice. Three of the poems have some sort of refrain, and Gunn uses other linking devices, such as the last line of a stanza repeating the first, in 'Wind in the Street' and 'Round and Round'. Gunn already shows mastery in the use of complex stanzaic forms to convey a complicated argument, as in 'A Mirror for Poets', and this ability even stood out in New Lines¹⁸ where all the contributors used traditional metrics partly as a reaction against the uncontrolled verse of the neo-romantics,

and partly as an indication of their determination to master and shape experience. Gunn's early poetry was unique in the way it combines this technical mastery with unusual but effective diction, rather than the usual, stereo-typed, pastiche of the Augustans and Empson of most of the poets in New Lines.

The best description of the character of Fighting Terms is that by John Fuller, already referred to,¹⁹ who praised its 'mixture of the Jacobian and the colloquial which took flatness in its stride'. This is true, but a full evaluation must also include abstraction of 'Contemplative and Active' and the direct personal tone of 'Captain in time of place'. It is necessary, again, to trace this back to Gunn's influences, as Fighting Terms draws from earlier poets in such a (usually) deliberate way. The Elizabethan love of conceits and involved diction, as seen in Donne or Fulke Greville, is imitated in 'Wind in the Street', but the poem also draws on some of the verbal characteristics of Yeats' late style - 'talking shop', 'the old handles'. Also Yeatsian is the use of the refrain by Gunn notably in 'Incident on a journey' and 'Lazarus not raised', although Gunn develops the form by slightly altering the refrain each time it is used. This is taken to its logical conclusion in 'Carnal Knowledge' where the refrain both echoes the interaction of the two consciousnesses of the poem and playfully alternates in each successive stanza. This draws on the delight in quibbles and verbal balance of the metaphysical poets, as does the tone of 'To his cynical mistress'. Yeats is again imitated to give 'Here come the Saints' its mixture of solemnity - 'they gravely cross the field' - and mystery - 'into the terrible dark wood they go'. On the other hand, the cryptic, allegorical politics of 'The Court Revolt' and 'The Right Possessor' - 'bandit to prince was his advance one night'-are very dependent on early Auden. Thus Gunn's diction is original partly because it is so traditional, as by absorbing the styles of such diverse poets as Donne, Yeats and Auden, Gunn creates something new. This can be

seen in a poem like 'Carnal Knowledge' with its mixture of slang and archaic language in the same phrase - 'a mere tear-jerker void of honesty' - its use of antithesis - 'the same comical act inside the tragic game' - its brutal directions - 'even in bed I pose' - and its use of hidden metaphor - 'cackle you hen and answer when I crow'. The persona in this poem is equally original, and Gunn's use of diction is tied up with his subject matter, which it is also necessary to examine to explain the unique tone of Fighting Terms.

Gunn's first collection is set apart from his later books by its lack of modernity. The only poems which deal with contemporary life are the poems about National Service - 'Lofty in the Palais de Danse' and 'Captain in Time of Peace' - and even these are oddly timeless. Gunn does make references to modern life - 'Welfare State', 'cinema endearments', and the lighthouse keeper - but these seem deliberately anachronistic. Characters are seen in terms of the past, as when a young tough becomes a 'Village Edmund', and the most realistic poem about war is 'The Wound' which describes the Trojan War. In a similar way, Gunn describes love in terms of military strategy - beach heads, signing an 'impermanent treaty' - but even this seems strangely outmoded. Many of the poems deal with situations that are patently unrealistic. The action in 'Wind in the Street' for example is plainly symbolic as the events, in their own right, make little sense, and this also applies to poems like 'Round and Round', 'Looking Glass', and 'The Secret Sharer', while the political manoeuvring of 'The Court Revolt' and 'The Right Possessor' refer more to a fairy tale than real life in their dreamlike atmosphere - 'the loyal rescued him one night'. This deliberate uncertainty comes to the surface in 'Without a Counterpart'. In a perverse way, Gunn is at his most realistic when he describes history or myth rather than the present (and this ties in with his use of outmoded diction), as he does in 'A Mirror for Poets', 'Lerici', 'Helen's Rape' and 'The Wound'. This assured use of myth and history for taking over well

known people or events for his own purposes, and therefore describing them in a new way-Lazarus, for example,refuses to be raised from the dead-is one of the most striking things about Fighting Terms, as is Gunn's technical ability, and the originality of his poetic stance. Gunn, however, has felt it is necessary 'to twice thoroughly revise this collection, and it is necessary' to consider this before attempting a deeper analysis of individual poems.

John Fuller has listed the major differences between the two English editions of Fighting Terms as an appendix to his article on Gunn in The Review (although it is not reprinted in The Modern Poet²⁰),and notes that 'of the twenty five poems of the 1954 edition, two have been omitted,...and twelve have received some verbal emmendation'. Three other poems have had their punctuation changed,and, most important, '~~Cerna~~^{Carnal} Knowledge' which opens the 1954 edition, is placed near the end of the 1962 revision,which puts 'The Wound' first. Fuller thinks that Gunn's style has become 'more abstract, less forceful', but, on the contrary, most of the revisions make the sense clearer. In 'Carnal Knowledge' for example, the original refrain is replaced, in three stanzas, by a more explanatory last line. The three poems which are substantially rewritten - 'Carnal Knowledge', 'Round and Round' and 'Wind in the Street' - all make more sense, although the whole point of 'Wind in the Street' is changed. In the Fantasy Press edition, the protagonist says - 'I may return, meanwhile I'll look elsewhere' - 'but the revised edition presents him as less hopeful of escaping' 'To which I still return to look elsewhere'. More important are the omissions. The first stanza of 'Captain in time of peace' is left out in the Faber revision, as it adds little to the total sense of the poem, and is clumsy in the way it repeats 'hard' and 'risks'. 'A Village Edmund' is similarly clumsy, and slightly ludicrous both in the figure of the protagonist and in its whole ethos. 'Contemplative and Active', the other poem omitted in 1962, is a more complex poem, but Gunn probably considered it too abstract. As for the changed order, although 'Carnal Knowledge' sums up the tone and stance of the whole book more effectively than 'The Wound',

it lost its ability to shock when Gunn's work became better known, while 'The Wound' had been generally acknowledged as the best poem in the collection, and makes an impressive opening. However, while these revisions were justified, they do obscure Gunn's general purpose in writing Fighting Terms, and it is best, when making a serious evaluation of the book, to discuss it in its original form, although referring to later emendations when they occur.

Reference should also be made here to the revised edition of Fighting Terms that Gunn prepared for the Hawks Well Press in 1958. This edition is difficult to obtain in this country, but it is worthwhile recording here the emendations it incorporates. Gunn now feels that this edition was over-revised, and restored some of the original lines in the 1962 Faber edition. However, the Hawks Well Press edition is still far closer to this edition than the original. It too omits both 'A Village Edmund' and 'Contemplative and Active', although it has 'Carnal Knowledge' as its opening poem, as was the case in 1954. In terms of the actual text, apart from American spelling of such words as 'glamor' and 'center', only six poems differ from the 1962 edition. 'Carnal Knowledge' leaves out the dashes in lines 10 and 32, while the fourth line of the last stanza reads 'You romp through protests which I find a bore'. Four other poems are partially rewritten. 'The Wound' has as its fifth line 'that reason might again be joined to will', while the final stanza of 'The Secret Sharer' has as its second and third lines

'Crouched on the bed, watching the fireglow slide
Redly across the bindings. Then outside.'

In 'Helen's Rape', line 12 reads 'such an event, once taken place' and line 19 reads 'her limits tightening in the mesh', while 'Looking Glass' has as its final two lines

'Forgetting the bare present, where I pass
Among the rows, damp-booted, unemployed.'

Finally, 'Wind in the Street' transposes lines 14 and 17. These changes

are of little significance, and Gunn's 'Note on the Text' in the 1962 edition seems over-emphatic. The most interesting thing about the Hawk's Well Press edition is how close this version is to the final revision, for it already includes almost all of the major alterations from the original text. 'Round and Round', for example, is already entirely rewritten. Because of the rarity of this edition - it was printed in a limited paperback printing of 1500 copies - I shall confine my remarks to the Faber revision, which is still in print.

John Fuller has described Fighting Terms as being essentially a book of love poems, seeing 'Wind in the Street', 'Looking Glass' and even 'Lerici' as metaphors for love - 'one has learnt to make the sexual application'. This view has attracted many supporters, but it seems a little far-fetched; it is best to take Gunn's verse as being firstly about its ostensible subject. When looked at in this way, there are many poems in Fighting Terms which have only a tenuous connection with love, if they have one at all. I prefer to see the book, as its title indicates, as being primarily about action and the need for asserting the human will, together with a knowledge of in which ways the attitude is inadequate, for almost all of the poems deal with these themes in some way. The aggressive nature of love is, of course, dealt with in detail, although other aspects of the theme are also considered. The poem that originally opened the book, 'Carnal Knowledge',²¹ sets the tone for the whole book. The poem opens with an abrupt statement - 'Even in bed I pose' - followed by an abstraction - desire grows 'more circumstantial and less circumspect' - and the action consists of the direct address to a lover so typical of a poet like, say, Donne. It is the attitude of the protagonist that is so novel; instead of declaring his love, he aggressively states his lack of any such emotion. The 'Carnal Knowledge' of the title is a pun, and its first meaning of sexual conquest has led to its second of the disillusionment that comes from the experience

this brings. This disillusion comes from the fact that the speaker cannot reconcile the 'space between the thighs and head', or his physical needs and his awareness, intellectually, of the futility of the sexual act. It is this intellect that causes him to 'pose', but he is made better by the fact that this falsehood is mutually understood. The images (later toned down) are brutal - 'I will stow your greedy mouth', - 'cackle you hen' - and the persona created is strikingly original. He is dissatisfied, intellectually complex, aware of other people's consciousnesses in relation to his own, and aggressive in a way suggested, in fact, by the book's title. This persona, and the corresponding view of love as either a fraud or a battle, is present in many of the poems in Fighting Terms.

'Lofty in the Palais de Danse'²² presents the same basic situation as 'Carnal Knowledge', but with one important difference. Again the speaker explains to his girl that the relation between them is false when divorced from its purely physical nature. The relationship is not, however, in itself false; it is this particular manifestation that is restricted, for it reminds the soldier of a genuine love he had for a girl now dead, and whose double he seeks, but, although 'passed in the street, they seem identical/to her original', they are 'understood/exhaustively as soon as slept with'. The poem is really about the impossibility of finding an exact counterpart for any human being. Having lost the girl with whom he 'lay calm wanting nothing but what I had', the soldier now feels 'restlessness', and, in response to the world which kills 'once I like', and which has embittered him, he seeks revenge.

'..... and so in me
I kill the easy things that others like
To teach them that no liking can be lasting!

The situation is, again, presented in a dramatic way, following the action from the dance hall to the 'shadowed street', and indicating the girl's reactions and conversation, all expressed in the present tense which makes

it more convincing and real. The soldier is well defined, and there is an almost sinister edge to the sense of repetition - 'I stand each night outside the Mills' - and the unspoken compliance in this ritual by the girl - 'That's why you come/with me and when I go you follow suit'.

'Captain in Time of Peace'²³ deals with a similar relationship, but, again, with a difference. The protagonist is 'a clumsy brute in uniform', who understands this strategy necessary for love, describing it in military terms -

'Tactics commit me falsely, what I want
Is not the raising of a siege but this:
Honour in the town at peace!

However, he sees this not as a gesture but as 'inadequacy', and the final stanza gives the impression that he will return, in time, to be 'fit for peaceful loving' again, although his present impulse is to 'loot'. This conflict between love as mere conquest and love as a genuine relation is at the centre of the three poems so far discussed (although the second is only present by implication in 'Carnal Knowledge') and it relates to Gunn's preoccupation with the will. Both are examples of the use of the will, to dominate in the first case, and to interact with another's in the second. Although Gunn admits the possibility of the second (and this prefigures his later poetry) he is here most concerned with the first, the aggressive will subjugating others. This conflict, again expressed in a military metaphor (and soldiers are a perfect example of the will at its most aggressive), is further explored in 'The Beach Head'²⁴. Here, the former course of action is seen as 'spectacular' and without danger - the soldiers are 'unharm'd' - but finally inadequate, for 'achievement would at once be history' and 'Living is blind and does not brave mystery'. The second course of action, that of seeking 'a pathway to the country's heart' is more fulfilling, but is much more of a risk, as it might have the result that 'your mild liking turn to loathing'. This view of love is seen best

in the poem 'For a Birthday', where Gunn rejects 'agnostic irony' for the 'right meanings' of love, and this poem will be discussed later. However, poems seeing love in terms of lust and aggression predominate in Fighting Terms. A typical example is 'To his cynical mistress'²⁵. This poem is again based on a military metaphor and treats love cynically, although the poem is phrased as a question, suggesting lack of confidence in the attitudes it expresses. Love is compared to an 'impermanent treaty', and the dichotomy between the body - the 'ignorant animal nation' - and the intellect - the leaders who 'calmly plot assassination' - is again stressed. The ironic reference to Marvell's poem contrasts this attitude to the traditional one, while the reference to Cupid reminds the reader of the ambiguous nature of love - 'impartial and blind'. The relations between love and war is explored in a different way, in 'Helen's Rape'.

In 'Helen's Rape'²⁶, Paris' rape of Helen is seen as the last example of fulfilled love, but even this is not perfect, for while Zeus had brought the 'violent dreamed escape' in the non-human shape, Paris is neither a god or an animal, refuses to accept the full implications of his lust, and has to pretend it is due to politics. Helen is not able to escape her body entirely, unlike 'Europe, Danae, Leda', because she has not been totally satisfied by Paris' love, and cannot escape either her mortality or the Trojan war, which is a result of her rape, and somehow inextricably tied in with it. (G.S. ~~Fraser's~~ ^{Fraser's} suggestion that the last stanza deals with a simalcrum of Helen left in Troy while she herself goes to Egypt is surely absurd). This connection between love and primitive violence has been vulgarised by later generations, but also multiplied, and 'Helen's Rape' marks the first example of this, although done 'with grace'. Love is now inextricably bound up with violence and dissatisfaction. This view of love's incompleteness is also dealt with in 'La Prisonniere' and 'Tamer and Hawk'. In the latter²⁷, love is seen as a battle for mastery. The speaker has been 'gentled' by his love, and this suggests both the beneficial aspect of

human affection and , in a more sinister way, the forceful taming of a hawk. The ambiguities inherent in the image are also seen in the way the speaker is 'seeled' with love; this acts both as a conventional aspect of the figure of Cupid, and a real blinding of the bird - 'the habit of your words/ has hooded me'. Nevertheless he too is 'possessive', his lover can but 'half civilize' him, and he intends to reverse the subjection, 'tamer' will become 'prey' by the action of his aggressive will. The idea of love as slavery is again dealt with in 'La Prisonniere', but this time from the viewpoint of the possessor. 'La Prisonniere'²⁸ deals with the same situation as John Fowles' novel The Collector, that of total possessiveness on the lover's part. He wants to make his girl 'mine and mine secure', even if this kills her (or robs her of her own identity) and reduces her to 'a heap of bones'. The poem is ironic, especially in the deliberate glibness of both diction and rhymes, but it makes a serious point, that love can turn into one person striving to reduce another to complete subservience, and losing both her separate consciousness and her will. A similar situation but one that develops entirely differently, is explored in 'Contemplative and Active'²⁹.

This poem, omitted in the 1962 edition of Fighting Terms, is more subtle and more complicated as well. The speaker begins by acknowledging his lack of any real knowledge of his lover

'Most plainly, you are not what you are
As plain, you do not do what you do.'

She appears to be a product of his imagination - 'the small inhabitant of a cerebral world' - and the speaker reveals that she is a 'perfect idol' invented by him in a 'platonic trance'. There is a similar relationship between the two lovers to that in 'La Prisonniere', where there is no real communication between the girl and her captor with his need 'to wonder and spy', although here the speaker is also cut off from reality - 'outside in the mist/unknowable human fragments move'. However, it is

the realisation of this that saves him, for he sees 'I must know the imperfect human too'. The protagonist goes into 'the thirsty desert' of life outside his own consciousness and finds 'what I wanted found', for he still sees his 'perfect idol' everywhere, and can now trust it although it is a 'mirage'. The 'unpredicted attitudes' of his lover has brought him into the outside world. Love is still an illusion, but it has brought him into touch with reality - 'it may be that I only wanted air'. Nothing is solved, except that the speaker has left his purely 'contemplative' existence for an 'active' interest in reality. It can be seen that Gunn's love poetry is also concerned with other issues - the nature of reality, love's connections with war, domination of others, and the conflict between the body and the intellect. What unites these poems is their interest in the aggression that has behind them. In some poems this is evoked directly by the attitude of the speaker, as happens in 'Carnal Knowledge' and 'La Prisonniere', in others, such as 'Helen's Rape', it is inherent in the theme, while in 'The Beach Head' or 'To his Cynical Mistress' it is found mainly in the imagery. This is not true of 'Contemplative and Active' however, which is less concerned with aggression than with the nature of reality, and this is equally true of some of the other poems in Fighting Terms. This concern is also an existential one, although Gunn had not yet formulated any precise expression for this. This concern about human identity is closely allied to the theme of the aggressive human will. In both cases Gunn is setting about stating his philosophical beliefs, his 'fighting terms'.

'Looking Glass'³⁰ is based on the same situation as 'Contemplative and Active', although viewed in a different way. It is certainly about more than John Fuller's interpretation of it as presenting 'a past affair as an image of a garden', although it contains this idea. The poem is really about selfinvolvement, and the way this has made the speaker lose touch with reality. He imagines himself in the world of the garden

'Forgetting in my pleasure how I pass
From town to town, damp-booted, unemployed'.

Unlike 'Contemplative and Active', there is no indication that the speaker will eventually manage to accept reality while still drawing comfort from his 'mirage'. The 'garden' seems to be the speaker's own view of reality, fixed safely 'at one stage of growing' and beyond the 'callous fickleness of mutability'. He now plays the role of God in this 'Eden', 'responsible for order', but preferring the leisure made possible by the lack of danger. This love of inaction - 'How well it goes to seed' (1954 reading) - corresponds to the speaker's real position in life, 'unemployed', as well as being its cause. Whatever the garden is seen to represent - youth, a love affair, the process of artistic creation, or even the man's consciousness of his own identity - it directs the man's attention away from reality. 'Looking Glass' is marred by the improbability of the events it describes - a man gazing at a pocket replica of a garden (!) - which work only on a symbolic level. Presumably this garden is an image for the poet's face, reflected in the 'looking glass' he holds. Tied in with this is the image of a 'looking glass' which clashes uncomfortably with the mastering image of the garden in its 'tiny glass', although this does function as a pun - by looking at the glass garden, the man sees his own personality reflected. More impressive is 'The Secret Sharer', which deals with the nature of identity rather than of reality.

'The Secret Sharer'³¹ is based on the idea of the doppelgänger, a device which Gunn has used often to convey doubt about the nature of consciousness. The poem begins with the speaker standing in a 'white street unconcerned as a dead eye' calling to his other self in a room above the street. He feels 'two equal fears', that of the inability to communicate with this other self, and that of the implications if this other self replies.



'What, I asked, if I never hear my call?
And what if it reaches my insensitive ears?'

At this moment 'the wind turned in its groove', and the other self of the speaker is described. Unlike the first speaker, who was 'over the ankles in snow and numb past pain', this second self lies in bed, 'the snow and street outside', and in comfort

'Fire-glow still reassuring; dark defied!'

The wind again 'turns in its groove' and the poem concludes on an ambiguity. If 'I am still there' means the same as 'I am here', the poem ends with the self in the room; if not, it ends with the self on the street again looking up at the room. Whichever applies, the poem is unsettling, as it brings into question what the consciousness of 'being oneself' means.

The dreamlike atmosphere of 'The Secret Sharer' and its feeling of genuine horror tie it closely to 'Without a Counterpart'³², which deals with a closely allied subject - the impossibility of ever knowing, not oneself, but another person. It deals with a nightmare, but one that follows, rather than precedes, waking up. The speaker is isolated in a terrifying landscape, having 'woke in fright', and knows the terrain well

'Taught it maybe by some forgotten dream
And somehow guessed that it was right to fear',

He is 'chained', and waits for death, but, by speaking his lover's name, he finds he has 'undone the spell'. He now realises that the 'reed-lined ponds' are his lover's eyes, while the 'long volcano' he so feared is her mouth, and the landscape he so feared is her face. The poem however, ends on an ambiguous note. The girls' arms still 'chained me as you fell asleep', and his guess that 'it was right to fear' is neither explained or resolved. Gunn is fond of using a dream as a symbolic description of a reality the dreamer does not recognise in waking life - he does this notably in the uncollected poems 'Light Sleeping' and 'Ralph's Dream'. The waking dream here has some justification, for it indicates both the separateness of the

two lovers, and the sense of danger the speaker feels, presumably from the sort of commitment described in 'Tamer and Hawk'. This fear of commitment is also dealt with in 'Wind in the Street'.

'Wind in the Street'³³ combines form and content well, for the circularity of each stanza mirrors the circularity of the processes the speaker is trying to escape. It is not just a poem about 'a possible lover to be looked over like a shop' as Fuller suggests, although it contains this idea, but it also deals with the wider issue of the need to escape the confines of habit (which is a complete antithesis of Philip Larkin's philosophy, for example). The speaker begins in the situation towards which he has become accustomed, with the 'same faces, and then the same scandals'. He climbs to an attic, and thinks he has discovered 'something new', but finds that this is illusory. The new experience only leads to his old view of reality - 'the same clouds through the skylight! Realizing this, he leaves the 'talking-shop' without making any commitment, and returns to the freedom of the street - 'I only came, I explain, to look around'. In the 1954 version at least, the last stanza expresses his uncertainty - 'I turn, and wave, I am not sure what I mean' - but the street obviously represents some sort of release from habit. In the first edition 'a purposeful gust of wind tugs at my hair' while in the Faber edition

I regain
The struggle with an uncommitted air
Struggle with fluency, the state between
To which I still return who look elsewhere.'

If nothing is resolved, at least no fake commitment has been made. This poem, as well as 'Looking Glass' and, indeed, much of Gunn's early work, is characterised by its heavy use of symbolism. As in 'Looking Glass', the actual events of the poem are unreal; it is certainly not a believable account of entering a shop or talking to an assistant, and such props as 'the attic' or 'the sky' are patently unreal, and intended only to work as

symbols. It is this that, in some ways, make one line interpretations of these poems, as John Fuller provides, justified, for the poems have no resources, for they are not drawn from real life and serve merely as pegs on which Gunn can hang his philosophy. It is not until books like Touch that Gunn becomes able to fuse an event with its significance in a totally satisfying way. Nevertheless, the meanings of these poems is interesting in itself. In a poem like 'Round and Round', which explores basically the same subject as 'Wind in the Street' the details of the poem are more believable, although still heavily symbolic.

'Round and Round'³⁴ is also about the need to escape, and the circularity of the situation the lighthouse keeper wants to break away from is cleverly evoked. As in 'Wind in the Street', each stanza ends with the same line with which it started, but the poem itself is also full of words suggesting circularity - the title itself, 'skipping in a ring', 'spinning waves', 'winding up the stairs', and 'thoughts dance round' all do, and the effect is almost one of vertigo. The opening stanza shows that, although the keeper seemingly has 'all that a man may want', his 'straining hope' is attracted to the waves, and the freedom they represent. The man has learnt 'from table-loads of books' that things are more uncertain in 'shore-worlds' and contain 'faces of fear and doubt' (In the 1962 revision, he is more hopeful, seeing them as 'confronting what they doubt'.) The final stanza returns to the 'totem' of the lighthouse, which contains the man's 'silent inarticulate grief', and he comes to realize that the waves he tried to master are themselves 'beam-caught' and 'wry salt', so they offer no solution. [Gunn's revision changes this conclusion to one slightly more hopeful. The keeper realizes that his lighthouse is a 'stony skeleton of himself' and represents an ordered whole set against the chaos of the sea - 'all is jointed, all is neat'.] As it stands, 'Round and Round' is pessimistic but not totally so. The lighthouse keeper has escaped 'shore worlds' and is at least making an attempt to encounter the sea. This

desire to escape normal reality, expressed through an admiration of violence or a desire for action, is the basis for most of the remaining poems in Fighting Terms, and it is here that the book's general concern with the human will is most evident. This is dealt with most directly in 'Lerici'.

In 'Lerici'³⁵, Shelley, who represents the type of the 'submissive' man, and died without resistance, 'arms at his side', is compared unfavourably with men like Byron, who die with 'arms open wide', and accept death as a bride - something to be encountered joyfully - rather than as a nurse - something to be surrendered to without resistance. This second group of 'strong swimmers, fishermen, explorers', men of action who follow their own will, are marked by 'thrifless violence', and this becomes noble, for they squander 'all their little left to spend'. Byron is a type of these men of action; his physical ~~power~~^{power} at swimming is implicitly compared to his mastery of verse, as water too is an 'audience/to which he could react until an end'. (Gunn himself has been described by Martin Dodworth as a similar poet, and figure, to Byron, as both share a belief in poetry as action, and a certain amount of notoriety.) The argument of 'Lerici' falls down in the fact that, to make effective sense, the poem is a condemnation of Shelley because he could not swim, and sees his death by drowning as a sign of his weakness. This is distasteful, and would lead to the contempt for the weak inherent in Fascism. However, the poem should really be judged in existential terms, showing how Byron's assertion of his will is the sort of action in the face of the absurdity of death that makes a man 'conscious'. This poem is echoed by the later 'My Sad Captains', and should be interpreted in the same way. The poem also shows Gunn's habit of regarding well known historical personalities or events in an unconventional way; Shelley and Byron are traditionally seen as ~~complementary~~^{complementary} rather than opposed figures. This process is also seen, performed with even greater panache, in 'A Mirror for Poets'³⁶. In this poem, the calmness of Elizabethan literature is seen as deriving not from an age of high culture, but from

one of violence and terror. It is the capacity of these poets to absorb and surmount this 'violent time' that is attractive to Gunn. In a society where 'the boundaries met/of life and life, at danger' all that was left was the world of imagination, where 'time and place could not exist', and where writers could create 'Arcadia', 'a fruitful permanent land'. This was not escapism, for the 'Forms, or the platonic ideals, established in the imagination could make thought perceive its error,' and so 'calm real life's hustling details', and 'Here mankind might behold its whole extent through art'. This is shown in the figure of the Paphlogenian King in Sidney's 'Arcadia', who himself prefigured Shakespeare's Lear

'Who one remove from likelihood may seem
But several nearer to the human heart'.

This is also true of humour, for Jonson's 'flail of comedy' showed 'coherence in society 'and found' reconciliation well worth telling.' Through the ordering of artistic creation, the Elizabethans could establish meaning and their humanity, despite the indifference of the 'faint and stumbling crowds' to art (the 'pity' and 'terror' of Aristotelian tragedy). This last stanza puts this more directly, seeing the poet's business as that of making tragic sense of reality (or happening) and to see it as 'something greater' and, like Byron, to seek this openly and deliberately, for the poet must be committed to reality - 'You cannot smile at me and make an end'. This belief in intellectual toughness is a counterpart to Gunn's admiration for physical toughness as a sign of the aggressive human will. This aspect of Gunn's work is seen at its worst in 'A Village Edmund'³⁷.

This poem, omitted by Gunn in the Faber edition, nears self parody, but, because of this, shows Gunn's concerns in a very direct way. Edmund is presented as being set apart even from the natural world by his cruelty, which corresponds to that of Gloucester's bastard son.

'A fox not eating the chickens that he killed
A bastard creature they'd overlooked to drown'.

He is also violent, leading a gang of 'a few tough boys', 'randy, and rowdy and rough', and 'elbowed others out of his way in the street'. What makes the poem so typical of early Gunn is that, far from deprecating all this, the poet wholeheartedly admires it, for it shows the unbridled effect of the aggressive human will. Edmund's callousness in love is similarly praised, and it is even admired by the girl who 'obeyed his every whim',

'Why should heaven' she asked 'be for the dead?'

And she stared at the pale, intolerable moon'.

The poem fails because of the basic implausibility of Edmund, whose actions have been compared by G.S. Fraser with these of Tony Hancock (!), in such banalities as

'When it was over he pulled his trousers on

"Demon lovers must go" he coldly said'.

The recurrent image of the fox mangling chickens is overdone, and itself ludicrous, while the evident seriousness of the final two lines rules out the possibility that the poem is deliberately banal. Far more disturbing, however, is the admiration for the tough and heartless which pervades Gunn's early poetry, however well it can be justified on philosophical grounds. In defence, all that can be said is that this poem is by far the most blatant example of this, and it was an obvious over-reaction against the palely liberal verse of poets like Spender and Day Lewis which Gunn so disliked. Gunn was also aware of the dangers of this reliance on aggression, and this is the subject of one of the best poems in Fighting Terms, 'The Wound'³⁸.

Gunn has described this poem as being about 'the breakdown of control over oneself'³⁹, but it is a more complex poem than that. The speaker rests 'as prescription said' waiting for 'the huge wound in my head' to be healed by time's 'patient skill', and spends his time reliving the Trojan War. An over passionate involvement with this, rage at Patroclus's 'noble pain', makes the wound 'break open wide', and the speaker has to undergo the

healing process all over again. It is not made clear what the wound is, although the imagery associated with it - villages and 'storm-lit valleys'- suggests something of importance. A later comment by Gunn (in 'Let the poet choose') which describes the poem as dealing with an unsuccessful attempt to assimilate primitive experience is more illuminating. Read in this way, the poem deals with the speaker's attempts to evoke and master the basic emotions crystallised in Homer's (and Shakespeare's) account of the Trojan War - Helen's 'joy of place', Neoptolemus' 'growing up', fighting for both sides, and, finally, Achilles' self determination 'subject to no man's breath', his quarrel with the Greek leaders - 'my own commander was my enemy'-and his rage at Patroclus's 'noble pain'. This last emotion is too strong for the speaker to take; although he 'rose, and did not reel', rage 'flew to my head', and breaks the wound open again, and therapy has become self destructive. The wound could represent conscience, self-involvement, or even love, but its precise meaning does not matter. The poem is impressive because of its circularity, which includes the sense of the process being endlessly repeated, and the tragic inevitability this involves. The poem is also essentially mysterious, both in imagery and meaning, but not confused, a balance very difficult to maintain. It is easy to read it as a sense of dishonour breaking open the poet's conscience, but this is not a complete interpretation.

Similarly complex are the companion poems 'The Court Revolt' and 'The Right Possessor', which deal with banishment both in a political and allegorical sense. 'The Court Revolt'⁴⁰ deals with the banishment and exile of a 'doomed king' by those in which 'sick boredom had succeeded leisure drunk'. The king is oblivious of this plotting and is overthrown 'by individual jealousy and fear', but also by his 'natural magnanimity', for in his position

'.....flesh and bone are far too much for it:
There needs a something inhuman to fit'.

His generosity becomes 'insulting charity', but those who despise him create a 'real subjection', for

'Coming from justice without face or shape
Was self subjection which has no escape',

While his subjects come to face the result of their desire that 'King storkreplace a log', replacing boredom with self destruction, the old king escapes, but he too is worse off than before 'His links were boredom; but were scarcely proved', for he refuses to find a new role by writing memoirs or fighting his country. This represents 'a problem which is problem of us all', for 'his human flames of energy had no place' to operate, and

'The grate that they were lit for would not hold,
The vacant grates were destined to be cold'.

This idea of wasted opportunities is extended in 'The Right Possessor',⁴¹ in which another exiled prince returns, later, to his old kingdom. When exiled, he had left, 'no longer child', through the 'devastated country', helped only by 'some orphaned boys' and hating 'everyone born in this fickle land'. During his years abroad, this 'habit of memory.....was hardening to fixed ideal', when he is recalled from banishment, and finds his country no longer 'devastated' but 'calm, neutral, waiting'. Unnoticed and hardened into 'indifference', the prince realizes how alienated he is, 'forward or backward now make equal sense'. As he paces 'in perfect round', a boy runs forward and shoots him dead. It is only now that the nation realize what it has lost-'indecision and delay have lost for ever what I always wanted most'. Both poems could be interpreted as allegories for a broken love affair, but, despite their Ruritanian setting, they have wider significance.

A poem which is similarly difficult to unravel is 'Lazarus not raised',⁴² which, of course, reverses the incident in the New Testament, for in this poem Lazarus refuses to come back to life. This ~~appears~~^{appears} to be due to a failure of the will. During his life, Lazarus lived without taking undue

risks, and without real awareness of his condition

'He chose to amble at his normal pace
In childhood fields imaginary and safe -
Much like the trivial territory of death'.

This apparent safety was 'imaginary' and 'trivial', but Lazarus refused 'the nag of offered grace', or a true existential commitment, and he 'chose to spend the rest of them (his thoughts) in rest'. There is not real difference between this lack of awareness in life, and the emotion of death, as both are states of rest or 'vacancy', of which death is merely the 'deepest bed', and Lazarus chooses in death, as in life, to refuse the 'terrified awakening glare', of full commitment. The repeated refrain, which changes slightly each time, and the emphasis on the lack of change (especially in the opening lines of the first and last stanza) give this poem a sense of inaction, which with its strange imagery - as in 'glittering without weight on death's surface' - and the basic improbability of the situation, give the poem resonances which cannot, as in 'The Wound', be fully explained, and 'Lazarus not raised' is made more impressive by their presence. It is difficult to say how greatly Gunn was influenced by existentialism at this time, but the poem does provide a very good illustration of the lack of consciousness involved in not making a choice. An even more direct treatment of existential themes is seen in 'Incident on a Journey'⁴³.

This poem, which closes and provides a suitable statement of intent for Fighting Terms is a direct espousal of the cult of action. The speaker is on a journey when (almost in an Old Testament way) he receives a dream, or vision, in which he is taught how to conduct his life. He wakes, determined to follow this course of action. The dream is of a 'red-coat soldier' who, although in hell, can 'regret nothing', and who represents the speaker's 'deepest thoughts translated' (and in the 1962 version, the 'bloody wound' which illuminates his face recalls that of the opening poem). Humanity has always needed to stretch 'beyond its span', as in the makers of

primitive wall paintings, and the soldier has acted in the same way, without 'nostalgia' or 'shame', and following every 'living impulse' so that 'my action made me wise.' Even his death, due to others' jealousy of the soldier's 'unnatural strength', and which took away 'passion, strength and life' and which left him 'will-less', is not a cause for regret. He is unable to satisfy either his love or hate, and, because human, retains both instincts and regrets, but it is this humanity which made his life valuable, and which is communicated to the traveller. He wakes in the early morning, having learnt this need for, and enjoyment in, a life of action, whatever the consequences

'I was alive and felt my body sweet
 Uncaked blood in all its channels flowing
 I would regret nothing'.

The poem resolves the uncertainty of many of the preceding poems, and prepares a way for the more direct championing of the will in The Sense of Movement.

There are three poems in Fighting Terms which do not seem, at first, to fit into its general plan, but which also comment on this need for action in other ways. The first, 'Here Come the Saints'⁴⁴, appears to be a pastiche of Yeats, presenting heroes as set apart from, and almost anti-selves of common humanity, or 'We Villagers'. However, when this poem appeared in Delta in 1953, it was dedicated 'to John Whiting', and it seems reasonable to suppose that it thus referred to Whiting's play Saints Day⁴⁵, which had been first produced in Cambridge the previous year (directed by Peter Hall). This play ends with its heroes, two poets and a painter, walking out with their executioners to meet death, and is presented in a very naturalistic, almost sleazy, way. Gunn's poem can be seen to become much more ironic than at first appears, using allegory and a mystical setting- 'the field of moonlit snow', the 'terrible dark wood' - to describe a basically squalid situation. Whichever way it is read, the poem

contrasts the saints 'so innocent', who are both grave and mysterious - 'no act or gesture can suggest intent' - and who sacrifice themselves, with the villagers who are themselves unable either to comprehend or to help and only 'gape humbly at the show'. The indications of self sacrifice, the biblical 'cock crow' and the very terminology of the poem suggest a religious context, and this is also true of the two other poems.

'A Kind of Ethics'⁴⁶ deals with the 'simple religion' of Nature, which is implicitly contrasted throughout with human worship. Old trees hold their services 'all day without a minister', and receive only partial power from the soil, for 'only on their branches/where leaves start from the black extremity' do they show any signs of life. Like men they sin, because of the 'past they have led', but this sin is 'unapproachable' and deep in 'foul confusion', and is seen in the dead 'dry tangled twigs' at the heart of the thicket. So far, the comparison has been fanciful and unreal - trees obviously have neither any sense of sin or of worship. The final stanza reveals the poem's meaning, and, shows how the basic image of the poem is in fact organised as an internal contrast. This dead wood helps breed 'unregenerate' and 'sharp toothed' young animals, who have 'no time for worship'. The moral of the poem is that

'Careless, out of a possibly bad may come
An undeniable good'.

The young animals, which can be compared to the men of action Gunn admires, pay no attention to the restricting and dead religion of inanimate Nature, but derive sustenance from it. The poem is rather laboured, but it does get its point across.

'For a Birthday'⁴⁷, the only poem in Fighting Terms not so far referred to, is more complex, and is the one poem in the whole collection to present a full relationship between two lovers and, in this respect, looks forward to poems like Touch. It begins with by describing the speaker's uncertainty, for 'words no longer help'. Where once they had provided 'landmarks' and

'wisdom', they now simply annoy, and 'description and analysis degrade, limit, delay'. He has grown suspicious of 'the intellectual habit of our eyes', for when it considered professions of love

'.....either the experience would fade
Or our approximations would be lies'.

The speaker renounces this 'agnostic irony', and seeks truth in a love which contains 'springs of speech' and 'the dark before of truth', and which is experienced as a humanist version of the Mass.

'The sweet moist wafer of your tongue I taste,
And find right meanings in your silent mouth'.

This is radically different, in terminology, and in intent, from any other poem in the collection, and its praise of communication, and rejection of the intellect, run contrary to the rest of Fighting Terms. The use of religious imagery, as in 'A Kind of Ethics' is rather strained, and the poem's title suggests that it is about a coming of age, and rejection of 'irony'. However the poem begins with the same dissatisfactions about the false way 'we groan My Darling' as in 'Carnal Knowledge', and expresses a desire to experience love fully in the same way as 'Incident on a Journey'. It differs in the image of completeness with which it ends, and this, in turn, suggests a basic inadequacy in the other poems in Fighting Terms. The uncertainty that these show - about the nature of love, of individual identity and of action - is seen more clearly in poems written at the time but which were uncollected, and were printed only in magazines. These also indicate the way in which Gunn became increasingly involved with the idea of the necessity for action set out in 'Incident on a Journey', and explained more fully in The Sense of Movement. The first poem to be published by Gunn that has never been collected is 'The Furies',⁴⁸ published in the Cambridge magazine Chequer in 1953. This poem was intended to be the introduction to a longer poem of the same name, and another fragment from this projected epic was printed as 'Ralph's Dream' in 1955. The poem

printed in Chequer is subtitled 'introductory paragraph to a novel in verse' and sets the scene for this, using the verse-letter style of Byron's Don Juan and Auden's Letter to Lord Byron. It stresses the modernity of the subject - 'Furies pursue obliquely in the steam of railway trains' - and its continuing relevance. Action still

'.....crudely jeers and capers round
The infinite majesty of the parent want
Knocking his reverence flat upon the ground'

and this brings doubt that 'comes between the thought and deed'. The hero of the poem, Ralph, has 'a modern bloodstream and a modern heart' and is the counterpart of both Orestes and 'Byron's Childe'. Gunn explains that Ralph will 'shortly start a journey not soon done', pursued by a 'kindly' Fury, until he comes again to 'the path that he has gone', when the Fury can

'Be one at last with hard and clumsy flesh:
The double man will be the single man',

This idea of merging with 'the calm of his ideal' is a strange one, but connects with Gunn's constant interest in ideas of duality and merging. Ralph himself is embarrassingly close to Gunn at the time, and is obviously a, perhaps unintended, self portrait. In spite of 'twenty years and an unusual intelligence', Ralph has 'a public school virginity' and 'drifts between societies and fears'. He resembles both Alexander and ~~Coriolanus~~ ^{Coriolanus} (two of Gunn's early heroes) and his greatest quality is 'magnanimity', which makes even his 'meanest act.....more worth recording than a light rejection'. Ralph is heroic because, 'discriminate in discontents', he seeks a 'self sufficient confidence' that is 'held out of aim but still worth trying for'. Although the reader will 'cross continents in hope', the action will start 'near home, in Cambridge, the Blue Boar'. It is as well that Gunn abandoned this projected epic, but it does show him becoming more ambitious in his aims as a poet.

'Elizabeth Barrett Barrett',⁴⁹ printed in Granta in 1953, explores

the same ideas of uncertainty about commitment as 'Lazarus not raised', although the commitment is that of love. Elizabeth is seen as an invalid who 'wanted regular things to be her need', but who is visited by Browning 'the energetic man', who decides to free her from an isolation where 'paper was stuck all over the window panes'. He wants them to 'enter a full relationship/committed together', and, although Elizabeth first shows 'reticence' she eventually decides to

'Completely resign, so change, and when I change
Risk finding my only value was being strange'.

Elizabeth makes this choice, but remains uncertain if she has not entered a false commitment. As for Browning 'there would be no insistence in his embrace', and this

'.....could be worse to endure
Than these blind window panes, where she was sure'

The poem is left deliberately indecisive; Elizabeth has, like the subject in 'Contemplative and Active', escaped from self involvement, but the escape might be false. The basic movement of the poem is seen, in miniature, in the image of Browning's need to work.

'.....a look of breezy movement imposing
With his tail, but needing the horsefly's unkind sting
To goad him on through this country of content'.

A more hopeful poem on basically the same theme is 'Earthborn'⁵⁰, published in the London Magazine in 1954. The poem begins as a 'meditation'. The speaker studies a globe where he sees 'all action and all art', and thinks of these who 'talent set apart', the 'handsome, brave and wise'. He is grateful that this richness of experience comes 'from seeds that friends have sown', and extends this analogy.

'I know the surface fruits would have no worth
Were there no value given by
The vital middle of the earth',

He tries to encounter this 'plutonic darkness' like Persephone, an image which implaces the sense of the hidden activity of Nature in Winter preparing for the new life of Spring (an image he returns to in 'The Goddess'). The speaker explores 'the hopeless cavern land' and finds 'a warm familiar hand', that of his lover,

'The hand that still to my right rule has led
And gives the earthborn unequivocal hope'.

Love frees him from darkness, but, unlike in 'Elizabeth Barrett Barrett', the release it brings is 'unequivocal'. The imagery of this poem is confusing, leading from a globe to the real earth to a 'hopeless cavern' taken straight from 'Kubla Khan', and the shape of the stanzas, which copies that of George Herberts 'The Altar', has no relevance to the poem's meaning. Despite this 'Earthborn' does have a strange coherence, and is one of the first references to the cult of the hero Gunn was to elaborate in later books, as well as an exploration of the release offered by love. The first of these themes is treated definitively in 'Palinode', also published in the London Magazine in 1954.

'Palinode'⁵¹ deals with energy, but not that of 'the jumble sale organiser' or 'even, quite, the energy of the saint', but that of a true hero. This is necessarily 'egotistical', although not 'priggish', for heroes 'see that life is tragical'. Alcibiades exemplifies this, for he acts without 'fussing what would happen when he was dead', and he is contrasted with Heracles, 'obsessed with burial', just as in 'Lerici' Byron was compared with Shelley. The truly heroic are determined, treating 'the seemed best/defiantly as if it were the best', concerned with poise, 'with care they cultivate a carelessness', and solitary - 'the noblest course is still to lie alone'. Gunn is at first wholly attracted to this heroic ideal

'I thought in ruthless attitudes was shown
All that this creature man can hope to be'

but he gradually realizes the flaws it contains. Heroes travel 'with self

love alone', or so they pretend, 'not knowing how to love', and in this

'Admirable like stubborn crippled men
The heroes use with energy what they have
As though it were not partial'

Even Coriolanus, ^{whom}~~who~~ Gunn has often expressed his admiration for, was 'most grand' when he 'threw his hoarded constancy to the winds' and allowed his love for his mother to overcome his sense of humour. This poem is obviously crucial to Gunn's later work, as it shows he has already overcome his unquestioning worship of the purely heroic, which so mars 'A Village Edmund' and sees the limitations of this attitude while still admiring it as a demonstration of energy. This earlier attitude is seen in 'Words in Action',⁵² published in the Spectator two months earlier.

In this poem the young toughs are seen in terms of the words they use, for both 'stand...thoughtfully trampling superfluity', and are therefore incapable of being 'sadistic in their ambiguity' or of 'twisting flesh they gloat upon alone'. Their speech is direct 'like fist on jaw'. The poet desires this simplicity of action and utterance to rid him of misery, which (in a remarkably inept analogy) is seen as a horse which must be broken in, and he envies their ease of action.

'They loll, still tough, but shy now in the sun'.

The poem is needlessly obscure in places, but it does present a more convincing defence for young toughs who enter 'love like heavy hitting fights'. Their directness is seen as preferable to the 'ingrown' nature of sadism, and as antidote for the misery of ^{eunuch}~~eunuch~~ self involvement. Despite this the unqualified praise of 'these who live for acting' is juvenile, and already superceded by an appreciation of the necessity for real human relationships in 'Palinode'. This process of change is seen in 'Hungry',⁵³ printed in the London Magazine in the same month as 'Palinode'. 'Hungry' begins in the same tone, and describing the same situation as 'Carnal Knowledge'. The speaker is surprised that his girl is so hungry for love,

'who did not bargain cheaply'. The second stanza is impenetrable - the 'golden merchant' could be a rival, the speaker himself or even a phallic emblem (!) - but the poem ends hopefully. After the 'storm' of physical love the lovers will enjoy a calm

'Where our timbers may be mended
And our voyaging be ended',

'Hungry' is one of Gunn's worst poems - the attempt at nursery-rhyme rhythms is nowhere near as effective as in 'Puss in Boots to the Giant', and the imagery is either unclear or, as in that of the sea voyage, clichéd. Despite this, the poem takes a more hopeful view of love than his two remaining uncollected poems of this period, and therefore looks forward to his later work. On the other hand, these two are far better poems, and it is difficult to see why they were not included in Fighting Terms, especially as the title of the second - 'Terms' - seems to refer to the collection, just as its subject sums up the ideas inherent in that volume.

'Terms'⁵⁴, published in the Spectator in 1954, opens with the speaker agreeing with his girl that he is 'cold' and 'conceited', but blaming her for telling him this, because the 'underflends of pride....are given access to the loving self', and he is put in a situation similar to that of Prometheus -

'You throw me to a shelf
Perched on the cliff between our land and hell'

He feels 'resentful and alone', and refuses to change his attitude, forced into this by his lover, and suffering 'at pretending to pretend', but rejecting 'that same traitor's rope'. His lover cannot 'quit safety', or leave her false reality 'where gorgeous flowers are in bundles tied' until she climbs down to the speaker and

'You either push me from this iron boulder
Or spend the helpless aeons at my side',

She must make a conscious decision either to destroy his love, or join him

trapped in his pride. The poem ends with this choice, and it corresponds to Fighting Terms which is largely about the need to escape self-involvement to face reality and the choices this entails, whatever the consequences may be. It is better, as in 'Carnal Knowledge', to reject someone than continue in a pretence of love, and this belief in some sort of action is central to all Gunn's early poetry. 'Hide and Seek'⁵⁵, published the previous year in Delta is a suitable poem to discuss here, as it is about a child growing into maturity, and, despite its patently ~~Audensque~~ ^{Audenesque} style, it is a very effective statement of this theme. Childhood is seen as a succession of ages in a palace, and civilisation as a whole. After 'autocracy ended', the child's parents establish 'a time of universal peace', but this is broken when the boy hears a cuckoo 'calling out as is usual', and discovers with joy 'the dark was mad'. This awakening of sexual instincts is made even clearer (if that is possible) in the child's cry to a girl

'Neither you nor I are any longer the same
Hark to the bird become loud and urgent',

A new age begins, 'gleaming savages' hover around the lawn, and the boy is engaged in 'hiding and seeking an ape's delighted rite', while the old order is 'burned to the ground'. (This corresponds to the much later 'Rites of Passage' where an adolescent poses a threat to his parents.) 'No age succeeds this age', and the antithesis between 'hide' and 'seek' which has run throughout the poem is finally resolved - 'I seek, not hide'. The 'barbarous order' brings mastery.

'.....I am my own dominion
And recognise no greater prince'.

As in many of Gunn's early poems, 'Hide and Seek' is over contrived and provides too simple a picture of reality, but it has the corresponding virtues of clarity and complex imagery which avoids being self-contradictory.

Two other early poems, 'Matter and Spirit' and 'Cameleon' deal with a more mysterious kind of subject matter. 'Matter and Spirit'⁵⁶ is

ostensibly about ghosts, but the spirit here seems to be a döppleganger of the man being haunted. It is 'cornered with its impotence and shame' and is seen '~~fusily~~ ^{busily} emulating human pain', for it makes a 'clumsy search for something not to be found'. This grief, however, is 'ludicrous' because not human; the ghost sobs 'emptiness' instead of tears. The haunted man must be careful, for neither he or the ghost 'must be resigned to envying what he thinks the other's got', and he lacks comfort much as the ghost does -

'You gaze on mirrors and wish nothing there
And when all opportunity is past
You groan 'I might', and live on fire and air'.

The man, if he is to escape this inaction, must shape his 'might into a lesson time' for the ghost can give him 'a chance of strength which might not be repeated'. If 'mastered by its pupil', the ghost can 'perform you notable services', and both will 'together learn that soul is blood', achieving this by some form of merging, which further suggests that the 'ghost' represents the man's experience of suffering, which he has tried to ignore.

'The ghost possessed by flesh will stay, but stay
With formidable haunting grace'.

'Spirit' will be tied to 'matter' in a more satisfying way.

'Cameleon'⁵⁷ (an alternative spelling for 'chameleon', the lizard that can change colour according to its surroundings) deals with the changeable nature of a lover. The girl addressed can, 'like a stone in a plum', fill out the poet's embrace, but at other times swings 'rattling and loose'. The would-be mystery of this is increased by Gunn's choice of imagery. The girl changes from woman to snake 'like a witch', and can turn into a wall, a waterfall, or even a 'dry fallen leaf'. The banality of all this reaches its nadir when Gunn describes how he will catch this leaf drifting 'and kiss your broken grief'. If nothing else, 'Cameleon' does indicate how far Gunn has to progress to reach the genuine lyricism and cold beauty

of poems like 'My Sad Captains' and 'Touch'.

The poems that appeared between the publication of Fighting Terms and The Sense of Movement show a growing maturity although they sacrifice some of this early precocity. 'Ralph's Dream'⁵⁸, published in the London Magazine in 1955, is an unusual poem, again part of 'The Furies', and obviously describing a simple incident which is taken from a longer narrative. Even so, it is one of Gunn's longest poems. It deals with Ralph, in bed with Marie, dreaming, first about a battle with a monster, and then about waiting for a girl called Lee, and suddenly waking, watching the dawn, and returning, in 'sadness', to Marie. It is not explained who these characters are, and the poem is written in a heroic style unusual for Gunn. Images like the comparison of the dream with 'candy floss' and 'fairy gold' are both inappropriate and uncharacteristic, and it is obvious that Gunn is deliberately experimenting, and trying to expand his stylistic range. The description of the fight is well visualised, if too gory, with such details as the contrast between his leather belt and the beast's skin

'This brown and glossy man - turned strip of skin
Or these gray craning bristles tipped with white'

The poem is most confusing when it reveals the true nature of this encounter. the beast assumes 'every feature' of Marie, and Ralph sees himself as having fed on this, 'he in the beast, the beast in him entombed', and this reflected the 'understanding's slow digestive juices'. The poem seems to be about Ralph's failure in love

'.....for there is one way only
Of fighting if the challenge you accept
Is violence to forget that you are lonely'

It is difficult to understand the poem without knowing its context, and it seems, anyway, both confused and, in places, badly written, but it does show Gunn widening his concerns. The details of the monster point forward to parts of Moly, while the use of a dream to reveal a hidden meaning -

already used in 'Incident on a journey' and 'Without a Counterpart' - is explored further in 'Light Sleeping'⁵⁹. This poem, published by G.S.Fraser in Poetry Now in 1956, and discussed by him in his article on Gunn in the Critical Quarterly, has other similarities with 'Ralph's Dream' as it too contains named but unexplained characters who come to realize the inadequacy of their love. The poem opens with John unable to sleep watching the moonlight wake up his lover, who tells 'clear and unfamiliar voiced' about a dream he has had - the poem seems to be about homosexual love, although this does not really affect its meaning. This dream is of a 'hell of love' found 'inside the moon', where 'love is all and no-one is alone', so there is no chance of individuality. Even the landscape is smothered by 'two giant forms of mist', and the lovers 'cursed with content' lack any sort of development -

'Committed centuries to lie in calms
They stayed to rot into that used up air',

In this atmosphere of fulfilled love 'all energy is lost', and the dreamer falls back, when again in darkness, and 'then he turned upon the pillow', either to go back to sleep or away from his lover. This poem is, again, unusual, and far from the precepts of New Lines. It seems to be about the horrors of commitment in love, and this would explain the final line of the poem, but, as in 'Ralph's dream', it seems to need some sort of fuller context, although it is more controlled and genuinely mysterious than the earlier poem. On the other hand, the central image of the moon landscape is still unconvincing. Gunn's growing interest in the physical world is shown to more effect in the two other uncollected poems which appeared during this period, both published in 1955 in the London Magazine.

'The Paraphlegic lying on his back'⁶⁰ is an unusual poem, with the basic premise that the paraphlegic, by reviewing his past actions as pointless, can come to an increased consciousness of what these actions entailed. The poem begins by stating what he has 'left behind' - turning from his true

direction to 'conciliate an angry friend', 'idling dutifully' in the 'Galleries of Art ' instead of real life, and wasting time. This 'discipline of trivia', enforced by 'a decent mind', is now, of necessity, abandoned. The paraphlegic shows petulance, but abandons 'the fraudulent workings of the heart' for 'finished emblems', and a 'new found will'. If he were able to return to his old life, he would not behave any differently, but would be aware 'that action only is action's end'. The penultimate stanza is a key to many of the poems in The Sense of Movement

'For a mind is paralysed to stone
Without a ready consciousness
That value does not drop like manna
But is wrenched from what is valueless'.

Man must derive meaning from what seems, at first, without value. The paraphlegic has become conscious through his 'useless legs' leading him away from 'deepened habit', even though his power is now 'less than there has ever been'. The poem contains too many Yeatsian echoes, especially in the stanza just quoted, and the subject matter is a little tasteless - one feels that the paraphlegic is being used as an object and part of an argument rather than as a real person - but the poem does mark a crucial development in Gunn's work, his new interest in the nature of consciousness and the human will, and a new concreteness of detail. This is also seen in 'A District in Rome'⁶¹. This poem begins with a fine concrete description, and uses this to make a specific point about the nature of age. The first five lines of the sonnet describe the linking of apparently disparate things - a washing line connects 'elementary school to church', pigeons 'lurch across' a medieval tower, and their 'cooing' competes with a sawmill. The rest of the poem, consisting really of an extended sestet, discusses this. 'All that is old is used' in this district, unlike the 'scraps' condemned to 'a permanent death' in museums where gaps they left are long since filled'. The inhabitants of this district can understand the continuing function of

old things if not their history - 'the why of you....though not the when'. Objects which cannot retain their function are 'ghosts', and should content themselves with 'mediums from new lands', for they 'have no chance of being used again'. This poem is far removed with the hermetic, self questioning, nature of Fighting Terms, and this process is seen, to greater effect, in The Sense of Movement.

Gunn's early poetry has, I think, been over praised. Its novelty of persona, individual tone and metrical skill are counteracted by a lack of contact with the real world and a narcissistic regard with the self. In retrospect it is interesting but immature. Gunn's growing use of existentialism as a framework for this poetry and his wider interest in problems of action in the real world, not an allegorical one, can be seen in his later verse. The clumsiness and tough posturing of parts of Fighting Terms was something that Gunn quickly outgrew, and these critics who nostalgically view his early style as superior to his later poetry do so mistakenly, as I hope to show.

NOTES (On Chapter One - Fighting Terms)

1. Anon, in Times Literary Supplement, 18 December 1953 p.814
2. Anon, in Times Literary Supplement, 2 April 1954 p.218
3. Anon, in Times Literary Supplement, 19 November 1954 p.741
4. G.S. Fraser, in New Statesman, 31 July 1954 p.137-8
5. George Hartley, in Spectator, 8 January 1954 pp.260-1
6. Bernard Bergonzi, in Listen 1 (Winter 1954) pp.21-3
7. James Michie, in London Magazine 11 (January 1955) pp.96-100
8. Charles Causley, in Birmingham Post, quoted on dust cover of Faber edition
9. Al Alvarez, in Partisan Review 25 (1958) p.603
10. Anon, in Times, 5 July 1962 p.17
11. John Fuller, in Review 1 (April/May 1962) pp.29-34
12. Al Alvarez, in Observer, 11 March 1963 p.29
13. John Press, in Cambridge Review quoted on dust cover of Moly
14. Robin Skelton, in Critical Quarterly 1V (Autumn 1962) p.274
15. Michael Fried, in London Magazine 11 (June 1962) p.85
16. Peter Dale, in Agenda 2 (May - June 1962) pp.21-5
17. Ted Hughes, The Hawk in the Rain 1957
18. Robert Conquest (ed), New Lines 1956
19. John Fuller, Review 1 (April/May 1962) pp.29-34
20. Ibid
21. FT (54) pp.9-10 (62)pp.20-21
22. FT (54) pp.18-19 (62)pp.14-15
23. FT (54) pp.39-40 (62) p.34
24. FT (54) pp.33-34 (62)pp.30-31
25. FT (54) p. 13 (62) p.10
26. FT (54) p. 21 (62) p.17
27. FT (54) p. 38 (62) p.33
28. FT (54) p. 23 (62) p.19

29. FT (54) pp.35-36
30. FT (54) pp.28-29 (62)pp.25-26
31. FT (54) p. 22 (62) p.18
32. FT (54) p. 41 (62) p.35
33. FT (54) p. 14 (62) p.11
34. FT (54) p. 20 (62) p.16
35. FT (54) p. 30 (62) p.27
36. FT (54) pp.31-32 (62)pp.28-29
37. FT (54) p. 17
38. FT (54) p. 11 (62) p.9
39. Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations'
40. FT (54) pp.24-25 (62) p.22
41. FT (54) pp.26-27 (62)pp.23-24
42. FT (54) pp.15-16 (62)pp.12-13
43. FT (54) pp.43-44 (62)pp.37-38
44. FT (54) p. 12 (62) p.10
45. John Whiting, Saints Day 1949
46. FT (54) p. 37 (62) p.32
47. FT (54) p. 42 (62) p.36
48. 'The Furies', in Chequer 2 (May 1973) pp.14-15
49. 'Elizabeth Barrett Barrett', in The Best of Granta 1967 pp.127-128
50. 'Earthborn', in London Magazine I (February 1954) p.64
51. 'Palinode', in London Magazine I (May 1954) pp.25-6
52. 'Words in Action', in Spectator, 12 March 1954 p.288
53. 'Hungry', in London Magazine I (May 1954) p.26
54. 'Terms', in Spectator, 2April 1954 p.398
55. 'Hide and Seek', in Delta 1 (1953)
56. 'Matter and Spirit', in Poetry from Cambridge 1952-54 1955 pp.22-23
57. 'Cameleon', *ibid* p.26
58. 'Ralph's Dream', in London Magazine II (January 1955) pp.48-51

59. 'Light Sleeping', in Poetry Now 1956 pp.80-81
60. 'The Paraphlegic lying on his back', in London Magazine 11(July 1955)
pp.13-14
61. 'A District in Rome', ibid p.14

CHAPTER 2THE SENSE OF MOVEMENT

The Sense of Movement, published in 1957, received, at least in England, even more enthusiastic reviews than Fighting Terms. The Times¹ praised Gunn's 'sombre felicities', while the Times Literary Supplement² saw the volume as establishing Gunn as 'one of the few really interesting poets of his generation'. John Press, in the Sunday Times³ saw in Gunn 'a determination, a serious ambition and a verbal power that equip him to write very fine and searching poems', while Al Alvarez, in the Observer⁴, praised his 'assurance and purpose'. Longer reviews were more specific in their praise. In the New Statesman⁵, Edwin Muir noted Gunn's 'unusual honesty', and saw his main theme as the need for action combined with a fear of the consequences this would bring. Gunn was 'troubled by impermanence', and 'the problem that occupies him is agonizing, but his poetry is an achievement'. He states 'with great force questions which have troubled poets and thinkers in all ages' and 'contributes something new to the old debate', reaching certainty in 'exactitude of statement image and verification'. Robert Conquest, writing in the Spectator⁶ was equally impressed, describing Gunn as 'potentially a major poet', good at 'plain statement' and the 'abstract word'. Gunn 'masters the malaise of the present young', but neither identifies with it or describes it from the outside, and has Yeats' power and technique, although also his 'arrogance and shamelessness', and shows 'passion without illusion'. In the London Magazine⁷, John Holloway found the book 'topical and disturbing' and saw its main theme as 'order and disorder, habit and choice or will, and above all the isolated individual and what can justify him', expressed in Gunn's characteristic 'cool tone'. The poems often 'firmly subordinate concreteness to a probing, more general interest in character, value and tendency'. The verse reaches a level where 'it becomes less a question of the critic's testing the poem than of

a decisively self-authenticated poem's testing what he has to bring to bear upon it'. (This seems a little extreme; no poem is beyond critical investigation). Holloway finds that Gunn's style recalls Larkin's, but 'his coolness is disquieting, even half concealing a kind of ferocity'. He describes 'a harsh modernistic world with its motor cyclists, streets, corridors, landings, artificial light', but this also has a 'reverberative dimension' missing from poets like Norman Cameron. The one lack in the book is 'our difficulty in locating anything that he cares for or can dwell on with pleasure', and readers who feel kinship with them 'will be daunted at the deprivations which they reject and impose'. This is a large criticism to introduce suddenly at the end of an otherwise favourable review, and it is one which is in some ways irrefutable, but Holloway also states clearly the virtues of the collection. Other critics were equally enthusiastic.

Graham Hough, writing in Encounter⁸, sees Gunn as being attracted, even at this stage of his career, to the idea of America, and resembling, in some ways, Hemingway. He 'constantly aspires to philosophical general statements', although this is hard to bring off, and his content is less striking than his 'energy and accuracy of phrasing', and the way he has formulated a 'valid natural modern poetic idiom'. Gunn is not quite sure what to do with these talents, and is at present too occupied with toughness, but his best poems are on 'objective, outward themes.....where the burden of forming an attitude by an act of the will is laid aside'. In Listen⁹, Frank Kermode sees the book as 'a serious and important collection', and describes Gunn as a 'metaphysical'. His main concern is how intellectual activities correspond to real action, as in 'On the Move'. Poems like 'A Plan of Self Subjection' evoke brilliantly the stanzaic argument and 'centre-petal logic chopping' of Donne, while 'During an Absence' has an astonishingly correct disposition of detail and novelty of thought. Gunn has reconciled 'image and discourse' and is, as Conquest has also said, 'potentially a major poet'. Christopher Levenson, writing in Delta¹⁰, sees Gunn as having

modified 'his earlier pre-possession with a rather adolescent toughness' into 'a concern for human order versus the awareness of continual change and uncertainty' which necessitates 'the presence of the human will as an impulse to action'. The will becomes an 'absolute human value', although this has its dangers, and, coupled with 'an assured technical skill that is no longer so intent on show' gives new unity to Gunn's work. The idea of 'vigour with the discipline of shape' is seen throughout the book, and Gunn writes best when describing 'order and discipline in face of an ultimately inevitable defeat'. In some poems, particularly 'On the Move', Gunn sees nature 'less as an opponent than as the instinctive forces working themselves out'. In contrast, the poems on human relationships can relapse into 'involved and unconvincing conceit' because no vital 'will to belief is involved'. This review by Levenson is perceptive and well balanced, and it is a pity that it is so little known. There is a remarkable unanimity, then, in the reactions of English critics to the collection.

The reaction of American critics to The Sense of Movement was more varied. Louis Simpson, writing in the Hudson Review¹¹, thought Gunn 'one of the best poets now writing in English', showing 'great intelligence and knowledge of the world combined with music and wit'. He disliked Gunn's admiration of discipline and toughness, preferring his 'capacity to suppose a world more interesting and enduring than his own experience'. Gunn is 'most arguable when he reports what he sees', and when his imagination flags he becomes didactic. He is best writing lyrics where 'his combining of song and idea in an ominous pastoral recalls the high spirits of Auden' and to this he adds 'dramatic and narrative qualities that are beyond the reach of most of his contemporaries'. The split in American attitudes to Gunn's work is seen perfectly in the two reviews of the collection in Poetry Chicago. Samuel Morse¹² praises Gunn as the very best of the younger English poets, showing character and resilience, 'not guilty of self deception in the feigned stance', and with a far greater range than 'that

of the Angry Young Men with whom he has been casually identified'. The impulse that controls his poems is a far cry from the loose and uncritical cult of experience of the 'Beat Generation', for he combines this 'zest for experience with a firm grip of form'. On the other hand, John Thompson¹³, attacks the collection for this restraint; most of the poems are 'manufactured things that pass for poetry' and Gunn is 'dull and priggish in the worst contemporary manner'. If writing poems were like writing examinationsGunn would get good marks'. Thompson also attacks Gunn's 'tone of righteous judgement', especially as 'the pulpit is not really congenial to him'. Thompson concedes Gunn's earlier poems had 'a certain fluid intelligence and a fresh cleverness that gave them charm', although this is now dissipated. Like most similar attacks on Gunn this is eminently quotable but both unfair and unsubstantiated. As with James Dickey's review of The Sense of Movement in the Sewanee Review¹⁴, this is basically an attack on intelligence and restraint in verse, preferring inspiration and spontaneity. Both traditions have their own merits and faults, and it is unfair to dismiss Gunn because he has always been most concerned with the first of these, and is suspicious of the 'great simplicities' Dickey advocates, even in his latter work. Thompson's charge that Gunn writes not about real things but about 'little allegories' is more serious, although this charge would apply for more to Fighting Terms. Apart from these isolated criticisms, the general reaction to The Sense of Movement was very favourable, and it is advisable to investigate, first in what ways the collection is an improvement on Fighting Terms.

Gunn discussed the relevance of the title The Sense of Movement (which like Fighting Terms, refers to the whole book, but is not the title of any specific poem) in the sleeve-notes to the On the Move L.P.¹⁵. It is a deliberate pun, describing both the physical and intellectual pleasures derived from motion, which itself can be interpreted both in a literal and metaphorical way, and this duality is important in the collection as a whole.

Also illuminating is the volume's epigraph - 'Je le suis, je veux l'être' from Corneille's Cinna (I am one thing and I want to be it), with its sense of self determination. The Sense of Movement is concerned with analysing this restlessness, and viewing it as a sort of action. The whole book is heavily influenced by existentialism, especially in its search for the nature of identity, its awareness of absurdity, and its idea of the will overcoming this through some form of commitment. These themes are expressed more clearly than in Fighting Terms, and there is a more direct championing of the aggressive human will. Correspondingly, less use is made in this volume of the persona, which led in early poems like 'Lofty in the Palais de Danse', to a sense of strain, in that the speaker of the monologue was not localised enough, yet was clearly not the poet. The poems in The Sense of Movement use either a well known figure drawn from myth or history, as in 'Merlin in the Cave' or 'Jesus and his mother', or are impersonal. The 'I' of 'A Plan of self subjection' or 'Thoughts on unpacking' may well be Gunn, but it functions as a cipher rather than pointing to a poet in a 'confessional' way. As actually happens in the later poem 'Confessions of the Life Artist', the poem can be taken as if in quotation marks. The result of this distancing is to make the poems more general in significance and philosophical meaning, and less personal or localised, and this gives the book a greater sense of detachment. Another improvement in this volume is its mastery of sheer technique.

This is seen, firstly, in Gunn's use of diction, which is more assured and mature than Fighting Terms, and lacks much of that book's clumsiness. Gunn has learnt how to fuse everyday and abstruse diction, so that where a poem like 'Contemplative and Active' had seemed too abstract and 'A Village Edmund' too direct, 'On the Move' could combine the two modes in a balanced way. Early poems like 'Carnal Knowledge' had attempted this mixture of abrupt realism and distanced philosophy, but it is attained far more smoothly in, say, 'Elvis Presley'. This poem integrates the physical reality of

Presley's pose - 'gangling finery and crawling sideburns' - and modern slang - 'no cat bothers to say', 'a mere dime' - with its philosophical implications, expressed in more abstruse language- 'our idiosyncrasy', 'prolongs the impulse to a habit of the time'. Apart from these modern references, the diction of 'The Sense of Movement' is close to that advocated by Davie in Purity of Diction in English Verse¹⁶, close to the ideals of the late Augustans, ~~latinate~~^{scrupulous}, even when dealing with subjects like 'The Beaters', solemn and full of terms steeped in philosophical meaning. Existentialism is especially relevant here, giving a wider relevance to apparently unphilosophical statements such as 'choosing limitation', 'finitude', 'ambiguous liberty' and 'it was no end, merely extremity' in 'The Beaters'. Gunn uses this specialised diction for varied purposes, and these encompass a wider range than in Fighting Terms. His diction is most purely philosophical in the long meditation poems such as 'Merlin in the cave' and 'The Inherited Estate', where the argument is presented in complex stanzas. Poems like 'On the Move' and 'The Unsettled motorcyclist's vision of death', modulate from straight description to this tone, while others, (like 'Elvis Presley' as already mentioned) mix the everyday and the philosophical more integrally, and contrast often sleazy or dubious subject matter, as in 'The Beaters' and 'In Praise of Cities', with the abstract diction which serves both to place and restrain the subject matter. Some poems use a more conversational tone. 'Thoughts on unpacking' is typical of this, with its long, involved sentences giving the impression of the imprecisions and circumlocution of speech while retaining the balance and order of verse. This is also seen in 'Vox Humana', with its 'Aha, sooner or later you will have to name me', which derives its originality from the way a complex existential property is imagined to speak. Other poems adopt a comic tone. 'St. Martin and the Beggar' uses an almost jaunty tone, helped by the rhymed short lines and the slightly absurd imagery - 'like a fowl plucked to be sold/his flesh was grey'. There is a more harsh sort of

humour in 'Lines for a book', - 'to sit irresolute all day at stool/inside the heart', and this is accompanied by balanced, aphoristic language, drawing on both Dryden and Auden and suited to the couplets in which the poem is written. Gunn's most uncharacteristic use of diction is found in 'Puss in Boots to the Giant', which draws on nursery rhyme diction combined, again with Auden's ironic use of allegory, although the poem is one of Gunn's least impressive, and such stylistic devices as 'I cry On either side' add little to the sense. With this one exception, the style and diction of The Sense of Movement is remarkably homogeneous and yet flexible. It is reinforced by the wide range of verse forms used by Gunn, which themselves demand a varied use of language.

Gunn's use of technique is, again, both more varied and more assured than in Fighting Terms. There is almost a virtuoso element in Gunn's experimentation, and he is skilled at using complex stanzas to fit the difficulty and balance of his arguments, just as he uses the iambic line to give weight and poise to his diction. As in Fighting Terms, Gunn also uses couplets, sonnets, shaped poems and refrains, but all of these are performed more skilfully. The couplet poems - 'The Nature of Action', 'The Unsettled motorcyclist', 'Lines for a book', and 'To Yvor Winters 1955' - are far more assured than 'La Prisonniere', and, especially in 'To Yvor Winters', attain a metaphysical intensity (very similar to Marvell's couplets) and equate their own poise with that called for in the poem.

'Our words, with slow defining influence,
Stay to mark out our chosen lineaments'

both describe this process and demonstrate Gunn's skilful use of rhyme and the placing of words in an iambic line. His use of more complex stanzas is equally able - 'Merlin in the Cave' and 'The Inherited Estate' present a difficult argument clearly and without any sense of strain, as there had been in 'A Mirror for Poets', where lines like 'which they could fleece' and 'in your pia mater' seemed present more for the sake of rhyme

than sense. There is also a wider range of stanza forms than in Fighting Terms. 'The Beaters' rhymes the corresponding lines of each stanza, rather than the stanzas rhyming internally, so that the whole poem is tied together. 'St. Martin and the Beggar' depends on the rhyming of the second, fourth and last lines of each stanza, the others remaining unrhymed, and this, combined with the alternation of four and three stresses in each line puts great emphasis on the rhyming words, and gives the poem great vitality. In contrast, the complex a b a c c d d b rhyme scheme of 'On the Move' gives the poem weight and a suitable gravity for philosophical investigation, while the delayed rhyme of the second and last lines creates a feeling of surprise when the rhyme is finally heard. Gunn's use of refrains is again developed from Fighting Terms. 'Jesus and his Mother' uses the same technique as 'Incident on a Journey' or 'Lazarus not raised', slightly altering the refrain each time to suit the sense of the stanza it follows, while retaining its basic pattern and use as a linking device, and also crystallising the sense of the poem. Jesus is seen as 'One all his own and not his own'. This device is also used in 'The Wheel of Fortune', where Simmel's fall from stirring the 'King's porridge' to that of the 'under footman' represents the changes brought about by mutability. 'The Silver Age' and 'At the back of the North Wind' use this device in a pared down form, repeating merely the last word in each stanza, 'Moonlight' and 'hay' respectively, which serves as important images in the poem as a whole.

Gunn, finally, uses the sonnet form to more effect in this book. Whereas 'Lerici' in Fighting Terms was perhaps too artificially divided into thesis, antithesis and resolution, corresponding to the two halves of the octave and the sestet (and the resolution was, anyway, a restatement of the antithesis to Shelley, rather than a balancing of it, so that the poem became an argument rather than a discovery), this danger is avoided in The Sense of Movement. The sonnets here, 'The Separation', 'High Fidelity', and 'First Meeting with a possible mother-in-law' are less rigid, although

still controlled. 'High Fidelity', for example derives its effect from its division into two long sentences, which cut across the normal division between the octave and sestet, and where complex organisation helps give the sonnet a feeling of great compression, but without any sense of strain.

'First meeting with a possible mother-in-law' uses the octave to present the situation in terms of the image of the 'piece of stuff', while the two halves of the sestet, both described in stark terms, draw together the apparent opponents and show their similarity, so that an interesting tension is set up between the two halves of the sonnet, and this is a great improvement on 'Lerici'. As well as improving on his use of forms first attempted in Fighting Terms, Gunn also experimented with new techniques here for the first time, and these indicate the direction of his future poetry. The most significant of these for the development of Gunn's later poetry is his use of syllabics in 'Market at Turk' and 'Vex Humana'. 'In Praise of Cities' approaches Gunn's later free verse in its loose texture and lack of rhymes, although it is written basically in iambic pentameters. It also, like 'The Nature of an Action', and 'The Beaters' shows Gunn's new interest in dividing poems into sections, which led to 'Confessions of the Life Artist' and 'Misanthropos', although, here, only 'In Praise of Cities' uses this technique well, giving each section its own tone and approach, and creating a genuine synthesis for the poem as a whole. Just as this use of technique represents a widening out of the methods of Fighting Terms, the subject matter and sphere of reference of The Sense of Movement is correspondingly more inclusive, and it depends more on the real world.

The subject matter of The Sense of Movement is a strange mixture of contemporary detail and abstract ^{allegory}~~allegory~~, which is itself often based on historical or mythical themes. There is little reference to the world of Nature except, as in 'The Unsettled motorcyclist' when it is presented in a cerebral rather than a direct way, but there is a great dependence, unlike in Fighting Terms, on the modern city and its inhabitants. This is seen

most clearly in Gunn's portrayal of young hoodlums. 'Market at Turk' is, as Gunn disclosed in the sleeve notes to On the Move, about the junction of two streets in San Francisco, and the hoodlum 'at the street corner', who, like the Village Edmund 'presides in apartness', is well evoked, dressed in 'boots, jeans and a curious cap' and buckled in with 'bootstraps and Marine belt'. The motorcyclists of 'On the Move' are very similar, for they 'strap in doubt' with 'gleaming jackets trophied with the dust' and adopt the 'donned impersonality' of goggles, the 'unsettled motorist' of a later poem also corresponds to this pattern just as in their own way the subjects of 'The Beaters' with 'chains that press beneath a shirt' and 'Elvis Presley' in his 'gangling finery and crawling sideburns', and combine this insistence on modern city dress and an awareness of the way it expresses their own aggression and assertive will. In 'In Praise of Cities' Gunn transfers this interest in external appearance to the city itself with its 'darkness hunching in an alley', 'cosmetic light' and the 'hard ornaments' of 'aracdes, late movie shows, the piled lit windows/of surplus stores'. These attributes of hardness and adornment are common terms of praise in 'The Sense of Movement', as are things which are 'the work of man'. Other poems in the collection draw on related aspects of modern life. 'The Nature of an action' 'The Corridor' and 'First Meeting with a possible mother-in-law' use images drawn from the interiors of houses to express their allegories, although 'The Nature of an action' deals with an excessively solid, presumably Victorian, room to express the 'cluttered square of fact' it represents.

'Here is a room with heavy-footed chairs,
A glass bell leaded with wax grapes and pears'

Other modern paraphernalia used by Gunn include the gramophone record in 'High Fidelity', the jukebox and bar in 'Elvis Presley' and the 'grotesques' in 'Thoughts on Unpacking'. The effect of this is, however, far removed from that of, say, Larkin's poetry, for Gunn's world is also remarkably timeless. His poetry also refers to such historical themes as the end of

the Roman Empire in 'The Silver Age' and 'Julian the Apostate', and the sixteenth century in 'The Wheel of Fortune'. It also, as in Fighting Terms, uses apparently concrete situations as an image for a philosophical state, and this is best seen in 'Legal Reform' where the poet is 'condemned to life'. This is also true of his poems drawn from Christianity and Myth - 'Jesus and his Mother', 'Saint Martin and the Beggar' and 'Merlin in the cave; he speculates without a book!- which really explore existential themes. As in Fighting Terms, Gunn draws on the horror story, though in a more complicated way. 'The Allegory of the Wolf boy', as its title suggests, draws on boy/wolf duality, while 'The ^{Separation} ~~Seperation~~', a direct comment on Henry James' The Turn of the Screw, uses the traditions of the ghost story, and recreates its atmosphere, although the poem's meaning is quite different. In a similar way 'Puss in Boots to the Giant' refers both to nursery rhyme - Jack and Jill - and pantomime - 'Puss in Boots' - but imagines these in an adult context of power and sexuality. This also illustrates the wide sphere of reference of The Sense of Movement, and this is especially important when Gunn takes art or literature as his ostensible subject matter.

The use of references in this collection is just as erudite and extensive as in Fighting Terms, but there is less sense of strain between this and the real point Gunn is making. 'Before the Carnival' is the purest example of this as it both evokes and comments on Carl Timmer's painting, and draws wider conclusions, and, in this, is very close to Keats 'Ode on a Grecian urn'. Gunn also uses literature in a more complex way. 'Birthday Poem' draws a similar comparison to that in 'Lerici' between 'the speculative man or passionate', represented by Adolphe, from Constant's novel of the same name, and Fabrice, from Stendhal's La Chartreuse de ^{Parma} ~~Parma~~, but here both are seen as equally incomplete. The subject of the poem is also compared with Jason, seeking the 'Golden Fleece', but, despite understanding all three characters he is still 'prisoned in perplexity', which suggests that even a thorough knowledge of literature is no counter against

'bewilderment'. 'During an absence' draws in a similar way on Romeo and Juliet, suggesting both the similarities and differences between literature and real life. An even more direct reference comes in 'Lines for a book', which mocks Spender's poem 'My parents kept me from children who were rough' in the line which praises 'those who would not play with Stephen Spender'. 'To Yvor Winters 1955' draws in a more general way, on Winters' critical dictates and links them with his whole stance and his 'empire over thought and speech'. Even less localised is 'Autumn Chapter in a novel' which makes obvious reference to the plot of Stendhals' novel Le Rouge et le Noir, in the early chapters of which Madame de Renal and ~~Julien~~ ^{Julien} have a brief affair, although the figure of the poacher is invented by Gunn. The title 'Mme Une Telle', however, suggests the representative nature of the poem. This extent of literary, historical and mythical reference indicates that The Sense of Movement is, like Gunn's first book, cerebral and intellectualised, and shows a corresponding lack of interest in the real world except, as in the case of city life, where it is used for thematic reasons. The exploration of these themes is more satisfying, though, than in Fighting Terms because here Gunn has found a satisfying philosophical framework, that of existentialism, in which to express them.

The difference between the two books is most striking in the poems dealing with love. Only 'High Fidelity'¹⁷ recalls in a direct way the use Gunn made in Fighting Terms of an extended metaphor which is both striking in its originality and slightly off-putting in its seeming, and deliberate, inappropriateness. This device works here because Gunn exposes the selfishness and guilt not of his lover but of himself. He remembers his lover's 'furies' at night just as if he were playing a ~~gramophone~~ ^{gramophone} record, and compares these to love

'For fury is passion like love, and fury's bite
These grooves, no sooner than a love mark fade'

The analogy is given more point in that the record's grooves correspond to

the way the lover has hurt the poet. All, however, becomes 'nightmare', for this proves 'the guilt I don't admit at day', and the poet realizes that 'I duck love as a witch to sink or swim'. The second half of the sonnet elaborates on this image. The needle reaches the middle of the gramophone record and runs in 'tuneless circles' between the label - the 'soloist's merely printed name' - and the grooves it has played. The poet makes an analogy between himself and the soloist, who turns from 'impetus not choice', and who is

'Surrounded in that played-out pose of age
By notes he was, but cannot be again'

This corresponds to the poet's own 'pose', limited by a love he felt in the past but cannot now. Even the title of the poem continues this image, with its ironic pun on the 'high fidelity' of ~~gramophones~~ ^{gramophones} and the lack of faith the poet feels towards his girl. This poem is, like these in Fighting Terms, a little forced but it is saved by the novelty and complexity of its linking image. This poem, however, is not typical of The Sense of Movement. The other love poems are far less hermetic, and show far more awareness of the other person's emotions, for Gunn is more concerned with the difficulties of love than its more brutal aspects, (as he had been in the previous collection). He also gives it an existential setting. Here, the lover follows 'impetus', the mindless course of events, rather than 'choice', which would bring him to consciousness, and this explains his sense of 'guilt' - he has neglected to follow his true direction. This theme is further explored in 'Jesus and his Mother'.

'Jesus and his Mother'¹⁸ deals with the relationship between the two in an existential rather than religious way, and describes Mary's bewilderment at not being able to control or understand her son who, in the terms of 'High Fidelity', is following 'choice' rather than 'impetus'. Jesus' dilemma of being both master and slave of his actions is expressed in the refrain 'I am my own and not my own', as is Mary's in the opening line

'My only son, more God's than mine'. The poem is set in a garden, 'ripe with pears', and Jesus is preparing to lead his disciples - the 'twelve labouring men' - and to begin his teaching in 'the place of crowds'. The result of this, the crucifixion, is hinted at in Mary's premonition

'I hear an outcry in the town;
Who carried that dark instrument?'

- just as the garden of pears reminds the reader of Gethsemane. The poem is set at the point where ~~Jesus~~^{Jesus} has to make an existential choice to reject safety and his 'measured' life for danger and, finally, death, and it is this that Mary fails to understand. She thinks of Jesus in terms of his childhood, 'I taught you speech', and wants him to continue his life of impetus, where his life

'Is measured here in week and week
Planed as the furniture you make'

Eventually, however, she comes to realize that, as predicted by the 'silent foreigner' Gabriel, Jesus throws a 'strange shadow' and is far removed from 'the boy I bore alone', but she cannot come to terms with this.

'I cannot reach to call you Lord
Answer me as my only son'

The refrain suggests that this is now impossible, and is almost chilling in its rejection of these ties

'I am my own and not my own'

This poem shows Gunn's ability to fully enter a historical situation and give it modern relevance without distorting its original significance, as well as demonstrating his skilful use of the dramatic monologue, marked by clever use of detail - the garden, Jesus' tools and Mary's precise recollections. The same situation - a mother losing her child, this time in marriage - is explored in 'First meeting with a possible mother-in-law'¹⁹, and its opening lines sum up both poems

'She thought, without the benefit of knowing
 You, who had been hers, were not any more'

This poem also describes the lover who takes the girl, and who narrates the poem, showing his own 'terms of banishment'. The octave expresses this supplanting in terms of the girl's room seen as full of clothing material, which the mother's 'handwork had crammed before', and which is now filled by the lovers'. Unfortunately 'a piece of stuff hung out, caught in the door', and this leads narrator and mother-in-law to mutual suspicion, for this represents the girl's love, still apart from both of them - 'Who could not tell what whole the part stood for?' It is not made clear if this is meant to function as a real event or a symbol, although it works on both levels, and can be explained as due to the girl having left 'for a prudent while', so that the narrator can tell the mother he intends to marry her daughter. The sestet explores the relationship between these two. There is 'small likeness' between these 'two strangers left upon a bare top landing', but the 'bright material hint' (where 'material' refers both to the cloth it is made of, and the way it physically expresses an intangible idea) results in each 'learning the other's terms of banishment', for both are standing outside the room. The poem is not fully satisfactory, as the basic situation is rather confused between description and image, but its basic pattern is clear enough and believable in a way the love poems in Fighting Terms were not. This new awareness of other people's feelings is also seen in the three poems in which Gunn deals with the ~~seperation~~^{separation} of lovers.

The first of these, 'During an absence'²⁰ is based on a comparison between the lovers and Romeo and Juliet, though without any of the crassness to which this could easily lead. The obstacles which confronted the earlier lovers seem at first 'out of date', but they reappear in new ways, for 'each love defines its proper obstacles', and it is distance, or 'air' for these lovers, just as it was the opposition of 'Montague and Capulet' for their predecessors. Whereas Romeo's 'passion rose to fire.....within a brace of

days', they

'Smoulder without a chance to blaze
Upon the unities of a paper scene'

The penultimate stanza is obscure but its basic meaning is that the 'violence' of Romeo's death has become, in modern times a multiplicity of petty details, which are similarly effective in ending love, but do not have the same romantic overtones of 'golden hairs' or 'bleeding count'. The real similarity to the play is that the poet realizes 'any bad end has possibility' under the 'self generated glare' of his consciousness, and he understands the conclusion of Romeo and Juliet's love

'.....I declare
I know how hard upon the ground it shone.'

The poem is tangled in places, and over compressed, just as it is hard to see why the two short lines in each stanza should be indented, but 'During an absence' does make a very interesting use of Shakespeare's play, by contrast rather than comparison. The same theme is explored in the poem 'The ^{Separation} ~~Seperation~~',²¹ which also draws on a literary parallel - The Turn of the Screw. The poet is ^{separated} ~~seperated~~ from his love just as Peter Quint is divided from 'that strange governess'. They 'eye through space' and 'move apart in shadow'. Gunn returns to an earlier theme, that of words replacing the physical actions of love, and the difficulty of moving from one to the other

'.....Must the breath swim between
The trampled meadow of words yet intervene
To part desire from the tall muscle of love?'

The poet imagines himself as Quint, divided from the governess by 'the children or the hour'. The poem ends on a similarly macabre note to James' story. The 'governess' prowls in the garden while the poet feels similarly ghostlike

'What dead charge do I pull upon my breast?'

A similar atmosphere of inaction and thwarted desire is evoked in the third poem on ~~seperation~~^{separation}, 'Autumn Chapter in a novel'²². Here the situation is further externalised. Mme Une Telle and the tutor have overcome the difficulties inherent in 'The ~~Séparation~~^{separation}', for words which 'in their time held off the natural heat' are now 'slurred to a fine complaint'. There is still, however, a dominating sense of inaction -

'The leaves he scatters thus will settle back
In much the same position as they rose'

The lovers enact 'the brief excitements that disturb them nightly', but they have to leave this 'chosen element' and return to 'the motions of their discontent', the pointless nature of which is emphasised

'She takes her sewing up, and he again
Names to her son the deserts of the globe'

This sense of inaction - the lady's 'idleness' and the tutor's 'indignation' which 'works on air, altering nothing', - is contrasted with the poacher who Mme Une Telle's husband is powerless to prevent, just as he is unaware of his wife's infidelity, caught in 'the tender trap of doubt'. The poacher, 'a dead mouse gripped between his sensitive fingers' represents the natural force of Nature, and it is because the lovers do not fully commit themselves that this force is thwarted, and the lovers remain ~~seperate~~^{separate}. The main image of the poem demonstrates this. The leaves which settle back to where the tutor had disturbed them, and which are compared to the 'growing, weightless mound' of 'the words they uttered' finally 'thrust violently upon the pane'. The poem is as detached as its title suggests - the lovers 'fill out space/sweatless as watercolour under glass' - and this increases the sense of inaction which the poem conveys so well. It is interesting that all three of these poems about ~~seperation~~^{separation} draw either on literary parallels or on this sense of artistic detachment. The rest of the poems in this volume which deal directly with love are both more positive and more direct.

The most extreme of these is 'The Beaters'²³, which remains the most startling of Gunn's poems, although it has not attracted the notoriety of 'Lines for a Book'. It shows his ability to use apparently suspect material to present a general philosophical conclusion. The quotation which begins the poem, 'None but my foe to be my guide', with its reversal of normal procedure, suggests the theme of the poem itself, that one can find love through its apparent antithesis. 'The Beaters' deals with various types of sexual perversion, and sees these as capable of both the full exercise of the human will and of a sort of 'ultimate gentleness'. The 'beaters' are 'careful' and choose 'limitation', selecting only those who are 'perfect counterpart' to their 'perversity'. This love represents a balance between those who use 'whip, cords and strap' and those on whom they operate, and who relish 'sweet, tranquil' pain. Other types of fetish - 'the swastika-draped bed' or 'links that press....beneath a shirt' - are 'emblems to recall identity' rather than mere 'affectation', and, as in the first stanza, express this through limitation, or 'finitude'. This use of gesture 'both limits and implies their liberty' as it is found between intent and act, 'the raised arm and the fallen thud'. The fourth stanza investigates the first of these possibilities. Genuine love is found when the sadists 'loose the object of their devastation' and abandon their cruelty for 'a candid touch where formerly they hurt'. This however is 'no end', for the beaters will later 'resume pursuit, elsewhere' and they do not want resolution, or love which 'they would not hold to if they could'. The poem ends on this note; this show of affection can 'justify nothing' but it does indicate an 'ultimate gentleness' made more real by what has gone before,

'Tender upon the shoulders ripe with blood'

I must confess to still finding the poem distasteful in its justification of cruelty as leading to (occasional) gestures of tenderness, but its conclusions are important. Through the disciplining of their desires, the

beaters achieve a sense of their own identity and 'ambiguous liberty'. Love is seen as attaining this, because it is so rigidly controlled. The same point is made, in a less controversial way, in 'Thoughts on Unpacking', which leads to the same conclusion that 'love is an arranging'.

'Thoughts on Unpacking'²⁴ deals primarily with an attempt to abandon the impedimenta of the past. These are both physical - 'Bent keys, Italian grammars, Mickey Mouse caps' - and mental -

'The urgencies we did not share, the spite
Of such and such a night
Poses, mistakes - an unclean residue.'

Despite the poet's attempts to destroy these 'grotesques', he can do so only with his lover's help. They 'plot a changing/to grey confusion of the space between' and both lovers must co-operate to prevent this, 'love is an arranging'. In this way they can attain the state of 'ease' and 'amplitude' hoped for in the first stanza (which curiously prefigures the sense of space in the second half of My Sad Captains). The poem is most successful in the way it evokes the 'unclean residue' of past failures, especially in the use, widespread in this collection, of details drawn from common experience to express a psychological state. The memories survive, for example,

'As balls of hair and dust
Made buoyant with a kind of fictive lack'

The poem is both aware of the difficulties inherent in love and presents a method of overcoming them, and this represents an advance over Fighting Terms. A similar conclusion, that love involves a mutual understanding and some sort of sacrifice is made in a different context in 'St. Martin and the Beggar' where Gunn again indulges in his penchant for using incidents drawn from Christianity to put forward existential themes, although there is greater integration of the two here than in, say 'Lazarus not raised'.

'St. Martin and the Beggar'²⁵ deals with the nature this self sacrifice, as seen in 'The Beaters', should take, and it is more serious than its jaunty tone at first suggests. Martin, a 'budding cenobite' tires of the inaction of monastery life, and determines to test his 'principles' out in the real world.

'I cannot grow from them alone,
I must go out to fight'

(This progression from self absorption to encountering others was a common theme in Fighting Terms, and represents the first stage of existential commitment). Martin begins to grow despondent - in a pun on this and the coming of evening and the storm, 'the light began to fail' - and thinks he may have committed a 'cowardly betrayal' by not committing himself to principles.

'Should I not peg my nature down
With a religious nail?'

This indecision is mirrored by the wind and hail that forces Martin to continue riding, 'a ship that moves on darkness', which again describes his physical condition in terms of an image that also suggests his mental state. The appearance of the 'brawny beggar', with 'eyes more wild than bold' and skin 'like a fowl plucked to be sold' is a sudden interruption to Martin's self ~~questioning~~^{questioning}, and he acts almost without thought in cutting his cloak in 'two equal parts'. The poem proceeds in the same leisurely way, describing Martin's arrival at the squalid inn, until the reappearance of the beggar, 'his eyes now wild with love', who reveals himself as Jesus. He praises Martin for recognizing that 'the human need/included yours', unlike those who would have given nothing or 'holy toadies' who would have given all 'conscious that they were good'. Saint Martin is above this, he did not 'regret the loss', but gave only what he could. This suggests that love is neither total self sacrifice or complete disregard but, again, an 'arranging', sharing all that one is capable of. The poem ends on an

almost comic note. Food, like cloaks, are 'needless weight', and Martin is sufficiently self controlled to accept this calmly.

'Pondering on the matter
St. Martin bent and ate'

'St. Martin and the Beggar' shows a curious mixture of styles, and it is one of the few poems outside Fighting Terms that Gunn has revised. These amendments - when originally printed in The Paris Review²⁶ line 14 read 'and, clanking at his side', while line 26 read 'with eyes rather than bold' - are minor but they do show some dissatisfaction about the tone of the poem on Gunn's part. Despite this, the poem is both original and represents an advance on Fighting Terms. This also applies to the poem in The Sense of Movement which deal with questions of identity.

'The Allegory of the Wolf Boy'²⁷ explores the duality between man and Nature, and uses the motif of the wolf boy to express this. This is a reference to the famous story of the "wolf boy" brought up by an 18th century French nobleman who had found him in the forest, and educated him to speak and read. Gunn indicates that this process is not fully realized, and that the boy's true feelings remain those of the wolves that reared him when a baby. The boy hides within himself 'seeds of division', and belongs fully to neither world. In the genteel world of tennis and tea, the 'gentle lawn' and 'moulded garden arms' he 'plays us in a sad duplicity'. 'Plays' here refers both to the way in which he is acting a part, and the way that he deceives the others. When night comes, the boy escapes, leaving behind his human 'understanding', and enters the fields with their 'whirring enmity of insect lust'. He cannot understand the stirrings of this same energy in himself, the 'desires hoarded against his will' in human society, which the moon awakens with 'a touch of its infertile light'. He faces it as it rises, and becomes fully animal, feeling in addition to the 'spikes' of his claws, the 'familiar itch of close dark hair'. He is now

'.....clean exception to the natural laws,
Only to instinct and the moon being bound'

However, despite being so bound to Nature, he cannot fully enter it, and it is here that the poem assumes wider significance. The boy has 'bleeding paws', and remains human and incomplete, for this indicates the transition between wolf and human is not fully achieved. This tension between man and beast, the ordered world of the country house and the 'sharp stubble' of the fields, is common to all humanity, and the result is that neither state can be fully entered. This is integral to being human, and, as in the case of the wolf boy,

'The causes are in Time: only their issue
Is bodied in the flesh, the finite powers'

As the title indicates, this is an allegory for all men. It is interesting that Gunn was to return to this problem in Moly, which is based on the same antithesis between man and beast. In the rest of The Sense of Movement, Gunn deals with questions of identity in a more abstract way, as in 'Human Condition'.

'Human Condition'²⁸ deals with a different but related problem; that of the attempt to be 'an individual'. The poet is cut off, like a castle by its moat, in fog, although whether this fog is literal or metaphorical is left uncertain. The street lamps shine but 'drop no light', and the poet feels a corresponding lack of illumination, balanced on 'a mere pin-point of consciousness'. He must 'stay, or start from, here', and use this consciousness to discover the limitations both of himself and the external world, 'of mind and universe', and turn his own impure emotions, 'disordered hate or lust', to his own use. (This was where the wolf boy failed). Only by discovering his limitations can the poet go beyond them, and he can base this only on his own experience, not that of others

'I seek, to break, my span
I am my one touchstone'

This is a difficult undertaking, and he must keep under control 'that which makes me man'. Although 'much is unknowable' he will only face problems when they actually arise, rather than considering them in an abstract way. He realizes that he is 'born to fog, to waste', but he ignores 'hypothesis' by the assertion of this individuality. This poem follows a movement common in Gunn's early poetry, describing a situation which allegorises some philosophical problem, and then showing how this is resolved by a desire for action. Didacticism is heavily present, but subordinated into the structure of the poem. Here, knowledge of the hopeless nature of his situation makes the poet a true individual, and this, in turn, is a means of identity which gives him a rationale for existence. A more advanced study of this theme is found in 'Vox Humana'²⁹ which closes the collection, and represents the most direct statement in the book about the nature of commitment. The 'Vox Humana' is that of full consciousness, and Gunn imagines that this consciousness relates the poem to a man who as yet lacks full commitment in a Sartrean sense. It is first indefinite, 'almost nothing', but perceived faintly at the edges of the mind, especially when the man has 'least resistance'. When 'named', however, and thus acknowledged and taken up, this 'vox humana' becomes both 'more precise' and an instrument at the man's disposal. This commitment is shown in various historical contexts. It meant certainty of victory for Alexander, a deliberate choice of suicide rather than execution for Socrates, but for Brutus, because he rejected it, it meant the loss of the battle of Philippi. Brutus had remembered his guilt at Caesar's death in the form of a dream, and this prevented him following his own destiny. Similarly, anyone who rejects this consciousness will remain 'blurred', undefined in any true role, for the future depends on how one lives in the present, and this is at the centre of Gunn's philosophy

'.....For you bring
To what you define now, all
there is, ever, of future'

This poem, and the book as a whole, presents identity as something to be deliberately sought after and defined, and this brings true consciousness. A similar point is made in 'The Nature of an action'.

'The Nature of an action'³⁰ is about a similar coming to knowledge. The poet begins in the 'cluttered square of fact', and this is represented by the heavily solid nature of the room with its Victorian furniture and contents - 'wax grapes and pears' and 'marbled book'. This stands for both the 'otherness' of the material world and the lack of consciousness of the poet. He decides, however, to escape this 'clumsy fond contact', and steps into the corridor, this representing an existential choice for action. In this journey, which takes 'twenty years', he is directed by 'the compass' of his heart, but is inhibited by old habits which he must overcome to attain freedom; consciousness of the self, lack of commitment, incomprehension, 'passive illness', and doubt, both of himself and his mission.

'Doubted myself, what final evidence
Lay in perceptions or in common sense?'

The solution lies in his will, and this enables him finally to reach his goal, for this 'simple handle' opens a door into a new consciousness, again represented by a cluttered room, described in exactly the same terms as the first. This is much the same as his old self, but the fact he has made the journey is what gives him a new purpose - 'only my being there is different'. Gunn is fond of poems where movement is symmetrical - 'The Wound' makes a similar return to its opening lines at the end- but the purpose here is different, the return is not a disappointment because of what has been learnt on the way. The poem also develops the use of apparently solid interiors as symbolic counters first seen in 'Wind in the street', although with less of a sense of hollowness, and this also applies to 'The Corridor'.

'The Corridor'³¹ also deals with an existential theme, that of the relation of the self with others. The corridor itself represents a plane separate from 'the thought and felt' (itself one of the major contrasts in

Gunn's work) and the poem is based on the implications of voyeurism which, as in the 'Beaters', is shorn of its potential tastelessness by Gunn and used to explore wider issues. The voyeur bends to look through a keyhole, in which he watches an act of love 'frank as air' he himself is incapable of. 'Pleasure was simple thus; he mastered it', for he is watcher and not participant. However, Gunn extends the situation to go beyond this simple resolution. There is a pierglass at the end of the corridor which shows 'dark, door and man, hooped by a single band', and the voyeur suddenly sees reflected in this

'Two strange eyes in a fascinated face
That watched him like a picture in a book'

This 'drove simplicity away', for the voyeur is himself watched, and perhaps 'the watcher of the watcher.....should be watched too', so just as nobody can be sure of mastery, non-one 'can look around and say he is alone'. Similarly, it is possible this view may be 'distorted', as in the pierglass. The watcher's eyes are linked, through the voyeur's, to the lovers, who themselves alter 'in the camera's bend'. The only solution is for the voyeur to abandon his non-participation and go out, 'one hand held out', to meet his watcher as a friend. (Or in the terminology of the existentialist theologian Martin Buber change from an I-it to an I-thou relation). This poem is less concerned with the self than most of Gunn's other existential poems, and of more general implication. The choice of imagery is remarkably apt, and is made more real by Gunn's own fascination with this sort of material - the second 'Tom-Dobbin' poem in Moly has similar liveliness. In addition, the image of the pierglass has more resonance than is usual in Gunn's use of symbolism, and the flatness of the scene has affinities, as does the room in 'The Nature of an action', with certain surrealist paintings which also juxtapose flat reality with the bizarre, and create a similar tension between the two. (This is particularly true of Margritte). In a wider context, there are poems about the nature of identity

have affinities with an even more important aspect of The Sense of Movement, the nature of the existential will, which is defined more clearly than in Fighting Terms. Both elements are present in the two most important poems in the book, 'Merlin in the cave; he speculates without a book' and 'On the Move'.

'On the Move'³², which opens the book, has been widely acknowledged as the best poem to be produced by the 'Movement'. It sums up Gunn's main preoccupations remarkably clearly, and is his most direct espousal of action for its own sake. The blue jay and 'gust of birds' in the first stanza act instinctively, following 'some hidden purpose', and humans seek this poise although 'uncertain' and held back by 'baffled sense' and the imperfect nature of language. This last image, with its dust and 'dull thunder', is taken up by the description of the Hells Angels, or 'the Boys', who attempt to overcome this imprecision by a 'donned impersonality' and by strapping in doubt, just as they strap in their 'gleaming jackets'. They master their environment and their humanity - thunder is now 'held by calf and thigh' just as dust becomes a trophy on their jackets - and therefore give reality to their actions, and 'almost hear a meaning in their noise'. Gunn evokes the way 'distance throws them forth' in the way his descriptions in the stanza become correspondingly more detailed. The following two stanzas investigate their stance, and broaden it to include all humanity. The motorcyclists are not sure of the 'exact conclusion of their hardness', but they are riding 'from known whereabouts' to 'dare a future from the chosen routes', the choice here being their own. They scare a 'flight of birds', perhaps the same as these so admired in the first stanza, for the natural world 'to the will must yield', and this will causes men to 'manufacture both machine and soul'. This is at least a 'part solution'. Man is not damned because he lacks the 'direct instinct' of Nature, for he is able to choose his own future. In a 'valueless world' (meaning one without values, rather than worthless), where man is born to 'movement that

divides and breaks', he must join this movement, just as the motorcyclists do, by choice, for then one acts with natural instincts, and has a real direction, 'always toward, toward'. In the final stanza, the motorcyclists who have 'come to go' burst away, 'the self defined, astride the created will'. The towns they pass through, which represent the antithesis of this sort of movement, are 'home for neither bird or holiness', for both Nature and full humanity 'complete their purposes', and this sort of completion is what the motorcyclists seek. Even if this is not attained, it represents a worthwhile goal.

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

The poem sees the deliberate aimlessness of the cyclists as a metaphor for the intellectual restlessness of humanity, and shows how both are valuable. It brings in Gunn's habitual interests in a very clear and formal way; the motorcyclists represent his admiration for the young tough, just as he is fascinated by the way they don uniforms, while the use of this to portray the will in action, the comparison with Nature, the existential conclusion and the central position given to Man, are basic to his poetry. The ease of transition between concrete and abstract, the careful use of language, and the skilfully used stanzas also represent Gunn at his best. However, it is now apparent that 'On the Move' is not the central poem it once seemed. The poem which is most important for a full understanding of The Sense of Movement is 'Merlin in the cave; He speculates without a book', which lacks the rather forced obviousness of parts of 'On the Move' - the over simple equation between the cyclists and the human will, or the incongruous appearance of the saints in the last stanza - while retaining its belief in movement and choosing one's own direction.

'Merlin in the cave'³³ deals with Merlin's imprisonment by Vivien, with whom he had fallen in love in old age, and his meditations on this, which

result in his decision to rely on movement. The poem is based on the contrast between the rook and the bee, and they are brought together at the end in a kind of Yeatsian synthesis. Merlin's imprisonment is 'the end and yet, another start'. He is held by lust, and the 'dim fulfilment of my art', and considers how he could once escaped, 'a form of life my tool', by changing himself into 'rank convolvulus' and creeping across the rock. As it is, pressed between 'two slopes of stone' he watches the free movement of the rooks, whose natural instincts he has lost, and who he can now only intellectualise. 'The bird is only meat for ~~augury~~^{augury}'. He is also set apart from the real convolvulus, 'fat and rich in sap', which recalls his youth. Instead, he ignored this vigour when he was young, and then attempted to recapture it when he was too old. This is made pathetic; Merlin had to resort to unnatural remedies - aphrodisiacs, reducing his 'huge obesity' and 'unguent' on his chest - and become 'distinguished now by scent, not book'. Despite this, he was a failure in love, for he retained his 'philosophic appetite' and would let 'no fault intrude'. He 'calculated' each 'fond attitude', and could not attain the sense of movement, 'the quick illogical motions', that indicates how lovers 'move and live'. Thus Merlin's failures stem from this inability to comprehend movement, and the sixth stanza returns to his present meditations, watching 'the flux I never guessed', and realizing that he must break away from 'the very absolute I challenged', that of love, for the knowledge that 'possession means the risk of loss'. The rest of the poem deals with this decision to join the world of flux and movement (like the less conscious resolve of the motor-cyclists in 'On the Move'). Merlin decides that he must 'grow back through knowledge', abandoning all he has learnt, and return to the direct contact with experience he should have had when young, when he was instead studying 'great mausoleums over ancient wit'. This involves a return to

'.....being glad to understand
The touched, the seen, and only those, to where
I find the earth is suddenly black and near'

Having become free of old 'habits' (this parallels the theme of 'Thoughts on Unpacking'), and achieving a 'great emptiness in my brain' which 'remembered syllables' once filled, Merlin will regain his youth in a real way, not in the false attempt described earlier, and will achieve harmony, 'my wants agree', in the 'sweet promiscuity' of the bee. This is not as simple as it appears. Merlin's intellectual awareness 'hovers complete', for it contains no suggestion of movement or flux - the rose 'drops no petal' and emblems are 'perfect and quiet as if engraved in books' - contrasting with the images already used to indicate motion; the wrestlers and the 'wind torn rooks'. These have their own disadvantages. 'The bee's world and the rook's world are the same' in that real love and movement both are uncertain, and depend on natural forces - 'clouds do, or do not, let through the light' - as well as being 'unsimple', 'belligerent' and arbitrary. Those who attempt analysis, or 'alchemists', achieve little. They 'boil away the pain' and are left with 'one small dry grain' of supposed value. The final two stanzas show Merlin deciding to live for action, despite these disadvantages. When he has returned to the 'flooding relative' of regained freedom, he must start the quest again towards the 'absolute prison' he now inhabits, where 'chance thrust me' before he constructed it himself, and seek again the 'synthesis' of his true nature. Merlin knows the probable end to such movement, but he cannot 'act and think without an end', so he will follow flux and attempt to derive meaning from it, for he now realizes it is the only possible solution

'.....But I must act, and make
 The meaning in each movement that I take
 Rook, bee, you are the whole and not a part'

Merlin remains imprisoned in the cave throughout this meditation, but it marks an important reshaping of his life, and this is shown by the way the closing line differs from the first. 'End' now means 'purpose' rather than 'conclusion', while 'yet another' suggests 'one more' rather than 'however,

another'. This minor point indicates the complex nature of the poem, which operates by cross reference and a careful use of language. Its theme is central to The Sense of Movement, and expressed in a more satisfying and complete way than 'On the Move', good as that poem is. Other poems on this theme can be discussed in less detail, for they investigate the same problems of asserting the human will to attain consciousness of the self.

The best of these is 'Birthday Poem'³⁴, which is again about an attempt to find one's direction, but deals with an attempt that fails. The man towards whom the poem is addressed seems at first to know his own direction. He can understand both the speculative and ~~passionate~~ ^{passionate} modes, which Merlin could not, and seeks after self knowledge in a remarkably casual way, 'so sure, you even risk arriving late'. He also can convey this sense of balance to others, teaching Constant's Adolphe to escape over-involvement in love by turning to action, and showing Stendhal's Fabrice how 'to sit and analyse', while he himself is successful in love-

'You leave the mermaid, having formed no ties
You get the Golden Fleece, you are so wise'

Despite this apparent self confidence, 'the disconcerting smile omniscient', this man is just as 'prisoned in perplexity' as Fabrice or Adolphe, for he is 'an ailing parasite' on his own discontent. Rather than accepting or ignoring it, he investigates this lack of full self knowledge, and this obsession prevents him acting as he should

'.....to enemies
Ponces and whores, concede, because intent
On groping round your own bewilderment'

The poem is unsatisfactory in two ways, however. This dissatisfaction is not prepared for in the first two stanzas, and remains unexplained at the end, while the title 'Birthday Poem' seems unconnected with the poem itself. It could refer back to the earlier 'For a Birthday', in which Gunn puts forward his own position, which would indicate that this poem is addressed

to the poet himself, or it could, in a more general way, suggest that age will bring a solution to this quandary. A similar sense of puzzlement is explored in 'Legal Reform'³⁵, but in a more satisfying way.

In this poem, the image of a condemned man spared from capital punishment and given a life sentence instead is given more general significance. As in 'Merlin in the cave', the poem uses the idea of imprisonment as an existential image of the human condition, and, as in the later 'In the Tank', this sense of limit is perversely satisfying. The image of imprisonment is linked with the constraint of love, but Gunn's attitude here represents a development on that in Fighting Terms. This apparent 'condemnation' is in fact a triumph, for the previous '~~paradox~~^{paradox}' of love is now an 'absolute' experience because of this restraint,

'.....a simple law

Passed by ourselves, which holds me in its power'

The 'theft of all I saw/just for the having's sake' of casual lust is now replaced by 'a steady precedent', just as his past isolation, 'painful and lonely in the walks of death', is replaced by 'the cage of breath'. This second transformation also emphasises the way the granting of life to the condemned man symbolises an increased perception of experience in the lover, and this echoes the conclusion of 'For a Birthday'. Even desire 'has no use for his whip', for this love is totally unforced. The restraints of love - 'condemned to shift in your enclosing eyes' - are seen as only restrictive to 'the innocent, or fetter-maimed'. The final line is grammatically unclear, but its most likely meaning is that the apparent slavery of love should itself be rejected as a wrong interpretation

'The sentence is, condemned to be condemned'

'Legal Reform' is a good example of Gunn's penchant for using a complex and fully logical statement of one situation as an analogy for another, and the way he can achieve this without an undue sense of strain. It also represents an advance on the whole ethos of Fighting Terms, rejecting the rather

immature activism of that volume for a less selfish, more thought out, use of the will. This is also examined in 'The Inherited Estate'³⁶ which deals with another successful attempt at fulfilling the human will, this time by resisting the effects of time and of Nature.

The estate in this poem functions as a concrete image of its owner's state of mind, and the poem deals with the relation between the human will and the upkeep of this property. The previous owners have neglected 'brute purpose' for the uncommitted intelligence indicated by the 'Follies and facades' they built, and which now crumble 'with their own rich weight'. These are products of 'the reckless dead', and have now been taken over by

'the fat dark drift
Where the weed's impulse couples with decay'

of Nature. These 'droppings of fashion' seem to indicate the impermanence of all human achievement - 'does the crash/of falling stonework sound for all desires?' - and it is this that Kitay is determined to disprove. He himself is an outsider, 'an American in Europe', and the poem is based on the contrast of his fresh determination and the tired decadence he encounters and which he despises. 'A calm discrimination marks your hate', although he inherits both the Follies and the land, for he can reject the former, which 'distance has flattered', and develop the latter. Kitay's own attempt to resist the ravages of time is more successful than these ornaments which 'fall in trash', because more closely tied to the natural world. It is symbolised by the seed brought by chance by the 'feckless wind', which, after a precarious start in which it 'drew the means of living undeterred' is now firmly entrenched on the estate. Both Kitay and the growing plant keep 'vigour within the discipline of shape' and lift 'above failures', for their art 'is merely holding to the earth'. Kitay's virtues are more fruitful than those of the 'reckless dead', for they 'swell with time and tree', and serve as 'tallies for your work'. The whole poem is consciously neo-classical, both in its formal praise for Kitay, and its use of balance

and antithesis, and this reinforces the gravity of its theme. In this, as well as in the central idea of 'vigour within the discipline of shape', 'The Inherited Estate is closely allied to 'To Yvor Winters 1955', for both are formal poems written to close friends - Fighting Terms was dedicated to Kitay, while Winters taught Gunn at Stanford - and both give direct praise to mastery of the will.

'To Yvor Winters 1955'³⁷ presents the poet and critic in terms of the restraint he himself urged in both these art forms. This is also seen in the way he trains the dogs he has reared 'with boxer's vigilance and poet's 'rigour', and controls with 'the deliberate human will'. The same applies to his writings, which 'compose the self', and which, by indicating his course of action helps to intensify it, for

'Our words, with slow defining influence
Stay to mark out our chosen lineaments'

The second section of the poem acts as an antithesis to this, pointing out how precarious this control is,

'Continual temptation waits on each
To renounce his empire over thought and speech'

and this is also hinted at in the gradual approach of night, for 'implicit in the grey is total black'. Denial of the power of 'the discriminating brain' brings anarchy, and the only way to avoid this is to accept that one lives in 'a half-world, not ours nor history's', but to still maintain one's stance, and 'learn the false from half-true premises'. The final section returns to Winters, showing how he attains this. Evening has fallen, 'vague mass replacing edge and flickering line', and this is clearly both actual and metaphorical but still

'You keep both Rule and Energy in view
Much power in each, most in the balanced two:'

just as the 'ferocity' of the dogs was contained within a 'fence/built by an exercised intelligence'. Winters is aware of the closeness of 'complete

negation' and 'the force of death', but these help, rather than prevent, him in his endeavour, 'tough in will', to strive for perfection, and 'raise from the excellent the better still'. This cult of the will, again expressed in terms of a particular hero of Gunn, this time drawn from history, is seen in 'Julian the Apostate'³⁸.

In this poem, Julian finds it impossible to fulfil the role of 'uncapricious Emperor', which a less complicated man could carry out knowing that 'rule lay in gathered fold, not them'. Julian cannot accept this view that power resides in the office rather than the man who fills it, and 'bursts the doubly sacred hem' of this 'robe'. (Gunn indicates the superficiality of this role by using imagery drawn from the clothes it demands). Julian is obsessed by the way 'the absolute is hard to formulate', and is aware of the 'sudden wrong' in the laws he enacts. Failure or desire can both master and destroy men but Julian remains aloof and cerebral', 'his concern is more/with a spirit self-created', even when watching what appears to be a slaughter of pagans whose red flowers are no match for the monks' axes. This could equally well be an incident from earlier history that Julian recalls, but in either case it is clear where his sympathies lie. He is still resolved to

'To fix a question that, eluding name,
To make corporeal would be to solve'

As in 'Vox Humana', the recognition of one's course of action, or true direction, is analogous to carrying this out, and Julian realizes that the answer to his problem lies in the very 'hypothetical frame' of his questioning of absolutes. He therefore turns this questioning into 'the pure will of exclamation mark' - an extraordinary image drawn from punctuation - and, from his earlier passivity, 'strains to lift his bones erect'. Julian welcomes the 'completeness' of his own assassination and, in death, ends his dissatisfaction by greeting 'an outrage of the simpler dark'. He has overcome the doubt that made him 'apostate' by relying on his will in, one

presumes, his hostility to Christianity. The whole poem is almost gratuitously difficult, but it must be this to reflect the complexity of Julian's self-questioning. A similar problem is faced in 'A Plan of Self Subjection', which also deals with a man's coming to terms with his own stance, but which, because written in the first person, is more immediately accessible.

'A Plan of Self Subjection'³⁹ is based, like 'Round and Round' on the idea of circularity. The poet circles, like the medieval view of the earth, between the sky and hell, and this refers both to his avoidance of extremes, and his position on the moving world. He also traces circles in metaphysical terms, as 'a useful spell against contentment', although he does not progress - 'I end my circle where I had begun'. Writing poetry is another form of circularity, for, although it 'imposes form upon my fault described', this only increases the fault itself, because it now seems, falsely, to be subjugated. The poet soon leaves behind this sense of order when 'from poem back to original I twist'. The poet's view of the self is also circular, for, while masking 'self flattery', he stays himself, and these two

'Each tainted with the other
Becomes diseased, both self and self's ideal'

However, the final stanza finds that this circularity is itself a sort of direction. In love, as well as 'verse or pose', the poet is equally quick

'In changing sides according to the hints
That hopes give out, or action seems to breathe'

and this at least gives 'most shade my longing' from the extremes of sun and 'hell beneath' described in the first stanza. The last line echoes the one that concludes that stanza, but it is now seen as a willed and useful action - 'My circle's end is where I have begun'.

Another poem to assert the human will, and one that has been much criticised for doing so, is 'Lines for a Book'⁴⁰. It praises directly 'all the toughs through history' for knowing that intellect has no place for 'marvelling at its mirrored face/and evident sensibility'. Gunn therefore

praises such 'overdogs' as Alexander (whom he also praised in 'A Plan for Self Subjection') and the subjects of Spender's poem 'My parents kept me from children who were rough', as well as all those 'for whom mere thought could be no satisfaction'. The poem celebrates images of action; it is better 'to be insensitive, to steel the will' than to 'sit irresolute'. The extremity of this attitude is distasteful, as is the image here - 'at stool inside the heart' - but this is so unusual a tone for Gunn to adopt that the reader should immediately be alerted to its satiric intent. A practising writer can hardly seriously believe that it is better 'to go and see your friend then write a letter', especially as the two things are not mutually exclusive. The tone, and Gunn's attitude, become more serious towards the end of the poem, where its real intent becomes clear. Gunn is arguing that one should not ignore this aspect of humanity as did the 'pale curators' of antiquity who 'gelded' those statues that called up 'disturbing images'. The poem is in places juvenile, as is shown by its audenesque tone, but it does make an important point about the necessity to assert the will, and its own brutality of expression is part of its relevance.

'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death'⁴¹ deals with the same theme, but this time in relation to the natural world, and explores the tragic discontinuity between the two. The motorcyclist follows his will - 'I am being what I please' - and this results in war with the natural world, which has none of this sense of purpose, for

'My human will cannot submit
To nature, though brought out of it'

He urges forward his 'chosen instrument', crashes into 'two shrubs of glazed insensate green', but continues his stance into death, for his heel 'pressing deep/accelerates the waiting sleep'. The rest of the poem explores his supposed thoughts in death, and this is still in the present tense, (it is this that makes the whole poem so immediate). The dead man continues his movement, but it is now through the marsh, and without any

decision on his part, and he reaches a place where 'death and life in one combine'. He replaces noise and action with 'knowledge of still or creeping fact', and moves past plants that 'slow without patience' grow 'with a quiet grasping toward their end'. They are 'invulnerable' because they lack consciousness, and this makes the final section even more horrific, for the motorcyclist's body is refleshed with 'pallid knot', as plants swell out his clothes and 'feign this dummy is a man again'. This horror comes not only from the image of the rotting man but from the implications this has, for this gross simalcrum of the man lacks entirely the sense of will that made him human. The plants move 'without volition', and naturally conform to a sense of habit 'by men laboriously acquired' if at all. The plants convert the man's 'special richness in the dirt', and lack his sense of choice.

'All that they get, they get by chance.
And multiply in ignorance'

This poem is one of Gunn's purest existential statements in the horror it expresses at the meaninglessness of the processes of Nature, but this attitude is to be greatly modified in his later work, until, in Moly. Gunn celebrates a real, not parodic, merging with the natural world. In many ways this poem is very closely allied to 'On the Move', for both celebrate willed movement in a 'valueless world', but 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death', as indicated by its punning title, with, in addition, its fascinated regard for the processes of decay, is really closer to being a metaphysical poem. As a modern equivalent to, say, Donne's work it is more successful than anything in Fighting Terms, because less directly imitative, and it remains one of Gunn's best poems.

Three other poems in The Sense of Movement are also concerned with the human will, but these can be discussed more briefly. 'Market at Turk'⁴² deals with a similar figure to the 'Village Edmund' in Fighting Terms, but one both more believable and even less attractive. The title refers to the

junction of two streets in San Francisco, and the young tough stands at this street corner and, even in repose, 'gestates action' and awaits 'some unique combat'. As in 'On the Move', the clothes he chooses to wear become a uniform, and reveal his intentions; even the peak of his cap 'jammed forward, indicates resolution'. Just as the motorcyclists in 'On the Move' could 'strap in doubt', he 'buckles himself in' with a neo-military uniform, the tight bootstraps and belt of which serve, by their constriction, as 'reminders of the will' in case, even with his tough pose, 'the hardness should not be felt'. The final stanza leaves him in a state of readiness for the release of this tension in fighting or love - the 'unbuckling in the close/commotion of bar or bed' - and, until then, he 'presides in apartness'. Again like the cyclists in 'On the Move' in 'not yet knowing his purpose fully', he prepares for action 'and fingers the blade' of his knife. This poem is more distancing and less involved than 'A Village Edmund', but even more admiring of its subject. Here, the tough's stance indicates a state of existential pre-commitment, for he is ready to define himself by some action, but does not yet know what form this will take. Both poems, however, are marred by the way that they equate physical and philosophical stances, for while they indicate the latter, the former is still present, and often carries implications that are either inhuman or immoral. In this way, 'Market at Turk' is a far more potentially fascist poem than 'Lines for a Book', although this should not be taken too far. A better treatment of the same theme is seen in 'Elvis Presley', however, which is less openly admiring of violence, and indicates the real meaning behind 'Market at Turk'.

'Elvis Presley',⁴³ begins with Gunn listening to a record by Presley playing on a jukebox - 'two minutes long it pitches through some bar'. Like the tough in 'Market at Turk', Presley wears a self imposed uniform, 'gangling finery and crawling sideburns', and even the 'wielding' of his guitar suggests that it is being used like a weapon. The 'limitations' of

the form Presley chose, which again compare to the 'hard discipline' of the tough, are more fruitful because made part of an (admittedly minor) art form and he can use them to express, 'promiscuously', his own pose, and in this pose Gunn sees 'our idiosyncrasy and our likeness'. Presley, by 'distorting hackneyed words in hackneyed songs' can make this stance more lasting than the tough in 'Market at Turk', for he communicates it to those who keep themselves 'in touch with a mere dime', and in this way

'He turns revolt into a style, prolongs
The impulse to a habit of the time'

His pose, whether or not it is real, becomes a stance that can be identified with, and, as in 'Market at Turk' again, can be 'posture for combat'. This pose 'wars on' chance, but it also generates it, for as in 'On the Move', meaningless movement or violence serves to help define one's direction. The use of (then) contemporary slang - 'cat' and 'dime' - as well as the poem's setting, combine oddly but effectively with the intellectual vigour of the poem's argument, and 'Elvis Presley' has become justly famous for the accuracy of its insights into the youth culture of the 1950's. It is significant that one of the best books written about this period, George Melly's Revolt into Style⁴⁴, takes its title from Gunn's poem.

The triumph of the will is also dealt with, in a more generalised way, in 'Puss in Boots to the Giant'⁴⁵. This is a more oblique treatment than the previous poems discussed, using nursery rhyme characters in a sinister way to describe the cult of power. Puss in Boots is speaking to the Giant whose land he intends to usurp for his master, but, in this poem, the master takes on the attributes of the fulfilled human will, while the giant becomes 'Itching Palms' frustrated and condemned 'to Thought'. (One presumes this refers to the giant, especially as each word starts with a capital letter). In this landscape of the will, 'Jack has his Jill' and failures, such as the 'lean highway beggars' are banished. The lovers are 'pitiless' and, because of their own success 'like the defeated less'.

Despite its obvious satirical intent, this poem means little, and is surprisingly crude both in technique and argument for Gunn, reading more like juvenilia. It does show, however, Gunn's cult of the will in a very direct way, and this attitude lies behind all of the poems from The Sense of Movement so far discussed. The other major preoccupation of the collection is the nature of chance and mutability, which has already been discussed in relation to such poems as 'The Inherited Estate' and 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death', but other poems deal with it even more directly.

The clearest example of this is 'the Wheel of Fortune',⁴⁶ where the Renaissance idea of mutability is combined with the medieval idea of tragedy as the fall of a great man, and all men are seen as being tied to the dictates of chance. Even when at the height of their fortune they are aware of the perilous nature of their safety - the bishop dreams of ruin, and the lover that 'his secrets were exposed' - and this comes true in the last stanza. 'Disorder comes', the wheel breaks apart, and 'bishop and lover sprawl on the ground'. Even Lambert Simnel, the pretender to Henry VII's throne, ends his life as a kitchen scullion. The poem is, however, more relevant than at first appears. The first stanza, written in the past tense, refers to the old conception of the circularity of fortune, which itself is a sort of order. The second stanza, set in the present, shows that now even this view of change is outdated, for the conception, like the wheel itself, breaks apart - they peel from off the Felloe (the rim) of that even round - and the sort of social order it represented disappears too. Simnel now stirs the 'under footman's porridge', not the king's. This is a very Yeatsian poem, not so much in style as in its idea of all order being destroyed; as in 'The Second Coming', 'things fall apart', the centre cannot hold, and is thus unusually apocalyptic for Gunn. A more characteristic poem is 'The Silver Age', which deals with the similar ending of a specific culture, in this case not the Renaissance, but the

Roman Empire.

'The Silver Age'⁴⁷ suggests this sense of the end of a civilization both in the figure of the centurion, and in the motif of 'moonlight' which closes each stanza. The centurion represents the old militaristic qualities which are dying away, but he cannot explain what is happening in words; 'all he can do is guide you through the moonlight'. 'Even of Livy there are volumes lost', and if even this historian's work is incomplete, one cannot expect the centurion to provide an answer, unless, as here, it is seen through his actions, which mirror the state of the Empire. At the beginning of the poem he is almost asleep, and vulnerably human, 'his head gentle over the swelling breastplate'. When he does move, his 'eager striding' through the darkness, which is seen as a river 'sullen with mud', shows his determination to oppose these forces of decay and disorder.

'We know it is a river never crossed
By any but some few who hate the moonlight'

The centurion's speech is similarly decisive, 'hard with the indignation of a lover's and he is scornful of the new Emperor who rejects the old military traditions and 'consorts with Christians', and is thus a representative of the 'moonlight'. He himself can still grip 'like a cold strap of leather' and, although 'earthpale', stands out against the new decadence. He is a reminder of the strength of the ^{Roman}~~Romas~~ Empire at its height, from which it has declined to this 'Silver Age', and will later lapse into barbarism.

'What made this one fragment of a sunken coast
Remain, far out, to be beaten by the moonlight'

The centurion is aware of change - as represented by the 'moonlight' which marks a transition between total light and total darkness - but he unconsciously resists it. Another poem to deal with resistance to mutability is 'Before the Carnival', but the attempt here is more successful because achieved in terms of art, in which time is frozen.

'Before the Carnival'⁴⁸ is based on a painting of the same name by Carl Timmer, that is to be found in Rome. Like Keat's 'Ode on a Grecian urn', the poem describes the subject matter of the work of art in terms of its stillness and the permanent incompleteness of the actions depicted. The poem contrasts, as does the painting, the two brothers and the miser. The elder brother, an acrobat, 'finds comfort farthest from complacencies' and combats the 'lava flow of chance' for his

'.....turning muscle's nonchalance
Transforms to clockwork their prepared advance'

The miser is more experienced but far less attractive a figure. He plays a guitar 'abusing all others who play music of their choosing' and is 'a smocked pretender', performing 'with borrowed merriment' and conscious that 'he is fragment of a dream'. Timmer's painting emphasises this by showing him 'through circling half-light' and 'lit by a sudden artificial beam'. This show cannot affect the brothers who are 'the objects of his stare', for they do not share the jealousy which makes him 'a sexual gossip with a doll-like pout', but they too must eventually become performers, and adopt a role. The acrobat 'too must pick an instrument', and must decide between the tightrope and the guitar.

'Shall it be then a simple rung of strength
Or these with many strings where well-trained skill
May touch one while it keeps the others still?'

This decision is left unresolved by the painting, just as the two brothers delay putting on the 'cloak or fur of heavy thought'. Their innocence is left intact, for their attic room is 'unentered' by the miser hurrying along outside, and they remain free from the role-playing of the carnival, for which 'the man is yet too active and the boy too young'. The painter, even more than the acrobat, has discovered how to prevent change or decay, and his subjects 'scan the pace of silence' in their permanently caught pose. This, with the boy leaning confidentially on the 'outspread knees of

his tall brother' is more real and satisfying than the roles they are preparing to enact in the carnival. In a similar way, the painter can, by suspending time, show the 'sexual gossip' in his true light. The poem celebrates the suspension of time and the damage it could have done—'horns that were never blown' - rather than the immortality of the 'cold pastoral' in Keats' ode, where the pipes play 'songs forever new'. A more elaborate poem is 'At the Back of the North Wind'⁴⁹, which deals with two effects of time, and the relation between them, and which presents a more balanced view of the process of mutability than in those poems so far discussed.

These two processes are symbolised in this poem by the North and East Winds. The former, as in George Macdonald's novel from which the poem's title is taken⁵⁰, represents the beneficial aspects of change, bringing 'horses, leather, manure, fresh sweat and sweet mortality'. The latter, only briefly alluded to by Macdonald, conveys the destructive aspects, 'scalding away the castle of winter and the smell of hay'. It is this motif of hay that unifies the poem, symbolising, as in the book, the boy Diamond's pleasant memories, and acting as the concluding word in each stanza. The boy spends the summer of his childhood in the presence of horses and hay, and this retains 'all summer's warmth' even in winter. As he grows, however, Diamond breaks 'into an air that kept no season: denying change', presumably a reference to the back of the North Wind that he visits in the book when near death, and which represents eternity. The ostlers can only suggest that 'hay is what we turn to'. The poem ends with a contrast between two views of death, the 'sweet mortality' of the North Wind, and the East Wind that 'swept the mews dead clean from wisps of hay', and is a negation of the human contact and comfort the hay comes to symbolise. It is however a 'sister' of the North Wind, and the poem really demonstrates how both processes are part of a more complex pattern of change.

The only poem not so far discussed, 'In Praise of Cities'⁵¹, shows most clearly the direction Gunn was to take after The Sense of Movement.

It is concerned, in a more abstract way than usual, with the modern city, which is compared to a jealous but entrancing lover. The city is 'indifferent to the indifference that conceived her', and this sense of disorder and incompleteness

'Compels a passion without understanding
For all you cannot be'

The only time this presence is not ~~discernable~~ ^{discernible} is at dawn, when the city is 'desolate in the dim dry air', but by evening the interaction of city and inhabitant is again close; 'your blood gains pace even as her blood does'. Having asserted her independence by exhibiting 'moist pale walls' which correspond to 'your own designs, peeling and unachieved', the city becomes most desirable at night with 'cosmetic light' and the 'hard ornaments' of 'arcades, late movie shows, the piled lit windows'. Gunn explains this attraction in terms of human society rather than the natural world he so deliberately disregards throughout the volume, except for use as symbols.

'.....Here she is loveliest
Extreme, material, and the work of man'

This poem shows the virtues most apparent in The Sense of Movement, with its careful sense of order, adventurous use of a linking metaphor, conciseness of language and freshness of approach. It also demonstrates a new abstraction, and an approach to the actual texture of modern city life which are more clearly seen in Gunn's next book My Sad Captains.

NOTES (On Chapter Two - The Sense of Movement)

1. Anon, in Times, 15 August 1957 p.11
2. Anon, in Times Literary Supplement, 14 June 1957 p.360
3. John Press, in Sunday Times, quoted on dust cover of Fighting Terms (1962)
4. Al Alvarez, in Observer, quoted on dust cover of Fighting Terms (1962)
5. Edwin Muir, in New Statesman, 13 July 1957 pp.59-60
6. Robert Conquest, in Spectator, 14 June 1957 pp.786-7
7. John Holloway, in London Magazine 1V (September 1957) pp.69-73
8. Graham Hough, in Encounter 9 (November 1957) pp.84-7
9. Frank Kermode, in Listen 2 (Spring 1968) pp.14-9
10. Christopher Levenson, in Delta 13 (Autumn 1957) pp.27-30
11. Louis Simpson, in Hudson Review XI1 (Summer 1959) pp.308-14
12. Samuel Morse, in Poetry Chicago 92 (August 1958) pp.327-9
13. John Thompson, Poetry Chicago 95 (October 1959) pp.110-1
14. James Dickey, in Sewanee Review 68 (1960) pp.660-74
15. Thomas Gunn, 'On the Move' L.P. 1962
16. Donald Davie, Purity of diction in English Verse 1952
17. SM p.50
18. SM pp.39-40
19. SM p.23
20. SM p.48
21. SM p.49
22. SM pp.24-25
23. SM pp.36-37
24. SM pp.54-55
25. SM pp.41-43
26. 'Saint Martin and the Beggar', Paris Review 9 (Summer 1955) pp.66-7
27. SM p.35
28. SM pp.18-19

29. SM pp.61-62
30. SM pp.13-14
31. SM pp.59-60
32. SM pp.11-12
33. SM pp.56-58
34. SM p.22
35. SM p.51
36. SM pp.46-47
37. SM pp.44-45
38. SM p.38
39. SM pp.20-21
40. SM p.30
41. SM pp.28-29
42. SM p.32
43. SM p.31
44. George Melly, Revolt into Style 1970
45. SM pp.52-53
46. SM p.26
47. SM p.27
48. SM pp.16-17
49. SM p.15
50. George Macdonald, At the back of the North Wind 1871
51. SM pp.33-34

CHAPTER 3.

MY SAD CAPTAINS

My Sad Captains, published in 1961, received a less enthusiastic reception than The Sense of Movement. The Times Literary Supplement¹ ~~praised~~ ^{praised} it as showing 'a very notable talent' while The Times² was even more impressed, seeing Gunn as an Amis with his 'thumbscrews turned a dozen times tighter' but showing a similar comic self-torturing self appraisal. Whereas 'Amis runs away from his ghastly views of himself, Gunn looks firm at his colder and harsher portraits and by doing this reconciles himself to them'. He is also gratified by 'sheer existence' because 'it is clearly apprehended' and 'he feels it with an unfailing intensity'. The anonymous reviewer also praises the way Gunn presents 'fearful but awed portraits of old lechers and young, and vivid moments of delightful insight into the almost empty wonder of teddy boys' minds, looters and snails'. The reviewer concludes that 'this kind of candour is the first and hardest of all' and sees the book as containing 'some of the most important poems to have been written since the end of the war'. This is the most commendatory review of the collection, although the dust cover of later editions of My Sad Captains also refers to Richard Mayne's comment in the radio programme 'The Critics'³ that the collection 'reinforces the conviction that he's the best English poet of his generation'. Other reviews were more hostile, and most of them differentiated between the two halves of the book. Antony Thwaite, writing in the Spectator⁴, saw the collection in terms of Gunn's work as a whole. Gunn had become known in Oxbridge in the early fifties for his 'poems of self discovery and inquiry' which dealt with 'the will's limits and rules of conduct', and drew on such 'intellectual toughs' as Hemingway, Stendhal and ~~Coriolanus~~ ^{Coriolanus}. The Sense of Movement marked the maturing of this talent, and its 'restless empiricism' made him 'a convenient Movement conscript'. The first half of My Sad Captains develops these

earlier themes of disenchantment, uncertainty and lonely courage, but the second half is 'a great disappointment'. The themes are the same as before, but this only 'shows up the flatness of the new manner'. Thwaite blames this, as did John Fuller in The Review⁵, on Gunn's stay in America and the effect this had on his poetry. Thwaite rather invalidates his argument by generalising this attack into a criticism of the whole tradition in which Gunn is writing. He describes Whitman and Williams as having had a destructive effect on American poetry, and cites Donald Allen's anthology, The New American Poetry⁶ as an example of this, calling it 'ignorant' and containing only one poet, Gregory Corso, of any talent. (It is interesting that Fuller had described Gunn's later work as 'as good as good Corso'). It is difficult to take over-seriously a review so initially hostile to the new models Gunn was following. More surprisingly, the same point is taken up by an American critic, John Simon in the Hudson Review⁷, who also sees Gunn as getting worse as he becomes more sucked into America. He has written 'a brilliant first book of verse, a fair second, and a poor third', and most of these poems are 'dreary' or 'explorations of an introverted, leather jacketed underworld'. Even 'In Santa Maria del Populo' has overtones of 'the sort of tourist poem mass produced by Adrienne Rich'. Similarly, Carol Johnson in the Sewanee Review⁸ finds that Gunn's syllabics tend to obliterate his linear values, although 'he uses them as well as anyone'. Despite this, his best work has a 'visual foreshortened directness' and 'candid efficiency' as well as an ability to use 'local reference'. The most hostile review of the book was by F.N. ~~Furnbank~~^{Furbank} in The Listener⁹ who described it as 'black leather poetry', which cultivates emptiness, takes nothingness as its subject, and whose 'characters are only surfaces'. In this it is in the tradition of the anti-novel, Brando and Camus, and its attitudes are too self-dramatising, as in the way 'it dismisses Mallarmé, Flaubert and Sartre, all explorers of negation, in offhand epigrams'. This criticism is patently unfair; Gunn explores negation, not purely for its own sake, but as a means

to an end, and, rather than dismissing Sartre, he openly evokes his tenets as a basis for his work. The most valuable reviews of My Sad Captains are those that come somewhere between unqualified praise and unsubstantiated criticism.

Writing in the New Statesman¹⁰, Frank Kermode regards Gunn as having become trapped in his own metaphysics, his 'old myths and fictive lacks have imprisoned him', and the first half of My Sad Captains ends this first period of his work. The second half shows an 'advance towards transparency' and the collection will 'grow in interest as time passes'. The first half is 'on the same plan' as The Sense of Movement, with the poet as a consciousness in relation to the random world, and using myth to express this, but the second half abandons this technique of 'ideogram' full rhymes and iambics, and 'moves out into real space', while the use of myths is transformed. The book shows how 'a chaste and powerful modern poet goes about his possible and proper business of arranging words to reveal a world'.

Writing in The Observer¹¹, Al Alvarez also notes that one of the most impressive features of Gunn's poetry is its 'constant sense of change and renewal', although he still thinks Fighting Terms is his best work, with its 'extraordinary baffled vigour, the force of a man of considerable literary talent and imagination trying to make sense of emotions he couldn't quite understand'. The Sense of Movement was firmer although less exciting than Gunn's first collection, containing a 'poetry of decision, concerned with choosing an identity, and at the same time imposing a certain deliberate restriction on the verse itself'. My Sad Captains itself is another step forward into 'a new clarity of theme and style' and shows that Gunn has 'made peace with the role he has chosen' and is able to explore these things that really concern him; rejection, loss and annihilation. The first half poses these more or less abstractly. Gunn 'would like to be the Baudelaire of our time but he lacks the sensuality.....his flowers are rooted not in evil but in shock', and his verse often seems 'imprisoned

in that over correctness of rhythm which debilitates so much American verse'. Alvarez agrees with Kermode that the second half is better, and praises the 'lucidity concentration, and hardness of line which will at once contain the shock and pain behind his work, and place them apart as something out there'. Gunn can still recreate a sense of horror and it is no longer 'diminished by his beautifully clear, firm language, but at last unobstructed by personal heroics'. Alvarez is very fair here, not allowing his personal preference for the freshness of Gunn's early work to obscure his critical judgements on his more mature verse. John Press is equally impressed, although he prefers the first half of the collection. Writing in the Sunday Times¹², Press praises My Sad Captains for showing Gunn's old virtues, 'precision, assurance, sinewy vigour' and 'a new compassionate understanding of human needs' as well, and compares 'The Annihilation of Nothing' with Donne's 'I am rebegot/of absence, darkness, death; things which are not' in 'A Nocturnall upon St. Lucies Day'. The first half of the volume lies 'beyond the compass of any of his coevals', while the second half 'deliberately abandons the richness and the formal intricacy of the earlier poems'. Press understands Gunn's need to write so barely and drily, but prefers the 'elaborate complexity' of the first half, and thinks that 'we may confidently expect from him poems of an ever increasing authority and power'. Still enthusiastic, but less cogently argued, is the review by A.E. Dyson. Dyson writing in the Critical Quarterly¹³ describes Gunn's world as 'that of the leather jacket, the juke box, the wayside cafe: of tough young men on motor-bikes, the nomads and aliens of our mid-century culture'. Gunn matches these 'tough and troubled themes' with metres that are 'elegant, even classical in their praise'. Dyson praises the first part of My Sad Captains as equal to any of his previous work with their evocation of lust 'as a fact of mature experience' and in a style that 'appears to offer a direct access to emotional truth'. The second part marks 'a new and exciting development', showing 'an even tighter compression of an even

wider imaginative range'. The title poem 'seems consciously to celebrate the end of a period, while itself being a promise of still better things to come'.

It is best, for the purposes of this investigation, to consider the two sections of My Sad Captains separately before attempting a synthesis of the two. The first section deals with the same basic themes as The Sense of Movement although it seems to me to be a falling off from the high level of that collection. The epigraph from Troilus and Cressida reflects both Shakespeare's basic concern in that play, 'the will is infinite and the execution confined', and the similar sense of limit and dissatisfaction to that shown in the poems in the first section of My Sad Captains. This contrasts markedly with the second section, with its celebrations of the lack of limits, as its epigraph from The Last Tycoon suggests. The book explores this dichotomy between complexity and simplicity in a way to suggest the merits of each, although the calmness of the latter makes it ultimately more attractive. To achieve this Gunn differentiates between the two sections not just in their themes, but in verse structure, diction and subject matter, and this should be analysed first.

Part One owes much, in style as well as content, to 'The Sense of Movement'. It deals with the same themes; as the epigraph from Troilus and Cressida indicates, the poems deal with the nature of the human will, just as Shakespeare's play does, and the impossibility of fully attaining this - 'The will is infinite.....and the act a slave to limit'. Gunn uses the same stylistic devices as before to explore these themes, and this is best seen in his use of diction, which is both a sophistication of, and falling away from, that used in The Sense of Movement. The language is even more latinate and intellectualized - 'The Annihilation of Nothing' is based on the use of the term 'nothing' in a specialised philosophical sense - and there is the same shift between references to modern city life and its existential relevance, as in 'Black Jackets'. The clarity of this style is

seen at its best in poems like 'Claus von Stauffenberg', where the language is taut and complex, but beautifully balanced -

'What made the place a landscape of despair,
History stunned beneath, the emblems cracked?'

As in the previous volume, the word 'I' is generally used as a framing device, and is essentially impersonal, as in 'The Monster' or 'A Map of the City', although the second 'Modes of Pleasure' returns to the tough persona of Fighting Terms, while 'The Value of Gold' points the way forward to Gunn's later use of 'I' as a more direct approximation to himself. The other striking departure is Gunn's use of epigrams in 'Readings in French' and 'Baudelaire among the heroes' which show the wit and compression of his language well, but rather lack substance. In most poems however, Gunn is building on previous experiments, and there is little sense of an adventurous use of form. 'In Santa Maria del Populo' is the best example of the way Gunn can structure his diction into a complex whole, from straight description to art criticism to an almost jaunty account of the painter's death, and closing with philosophical detachment. There are also hints of new abstraction, however. The last line of 'Claus von Stauffenberg' - 'falling toward history, and under snow' - links abstract and concrete ideas, while 'The Value of Gold' shows a new interest in texture, but these are exceptions to the general method of approach. This technical unadventurousness is also seen in Gunn's use of metrics.

Here too, Gunn is content, having developed a style, to use it without further experiment. The one exception, as already mentioned, is his use of the epigram, although he also experiments with terza rima in 'The Annihilation of Nothing'. The other metres used are ones in which Gunn has written before, the most common being a stanza of four lines, as this can express his subject matter directly and simply, and the reader is not distracted by the virtuosity of the form used, as he sometimes is in Fighting Terms. The shape of the stanza takes various forms, both in line

lengths and rhyme schemes, to prevent the book becoming monotonous, and this, as always in Gunn, corresponds to the effect he wishes to evoke.

'A Map of the City' has an a a b b rhyme scheme, which gives the poem the flow of couplets, but with a more extreme break at the end of every four lines than simple couplets would give, and this is further emphasised by the syntax of the poem to fit its sense of quiet, philosophical detachment. On the other hand, both 'Modes of Pleasure' rhyme a b b a, giving a delayed rhyme at the end of each stanza, and further emphasising the separateness of each statement, as well as the control of the poet over potentially difficult material. 'The Monster' rhymes a b c b, and this lack of the expected first rhyme gives the poem a sense of unease. Even in those poems which rhyme a b a b, Gunn experiments with the rhythmical pattern. 'Black Jackets' alternates lines of four and five stresses, as does 'The Byrnies', to give a contrast between the (comparative) tenseness and loquacity of successive statements. Most of the others in this form use conventional iambic ~~pentameters~~ ^{pentameters} to make them more slow moving and complex than the rest of those already mentioned, which are in lines of four stresses, and this is seen at its best in 'The Book of the Dead', which runs some of its quatrains together for similar reasons. Gunn uses more complicated forms when the subject matter requires this. 'The Value of Gold' uses the a b c a b c rhyme scheme he is later to write most of his syllabics in, while 'The Middle of the Night', also in six-line stanzas, delays the rhyme of the second line to slow down the poem (and this sets up a tension with the directness of the short lines). None of this, however, approaches the complexity of the verse forms in Gunn's previous two books, and even the most ambitious poem in the volume - 'In Santa Maria del Populo' - is in fact in double quatrains. The only exception is 'From the Highest Camp', which is a sonnet, and divides the octave and sestet in a less obviously contrived way than before in Gunn's use of this form. The use of metre in these poems, as in the choice of diction, is competent but lacking in any

major innovation.

The range of subject matter is similarly unsurprising, in the light of Gunn's earlier poetry, with poems about city life in 'A Map of the City', young hoodlums in 'Black Jackets', casual lust in the two 'Modes of Pleasure', and the occult or supernatural in 'The Monster' and 'From the Highest Camp'. Gunn also deals with related subjects, such as the Second World War in 'Innocence' and 'Claus von Stauffenberg' and Old English history in 'The Byrnies'. These three poems are further examples of Gunn making reference to a historical event from which he derives an existential meaning, and, as he explains in the 'Acknowledgements', the latter even uses two Anglo Saxon terms, 'byrnies' and the 'nicker'. He also draws, again, on literature and the arts. 'In Santa Maria del Populo' is based on Carravaggio's life and paintings, while 'Readings in French' and 'Baudelaire among the Heroes' depend on a close knowledge of French Literature, and 'The Book of the Dead' is based on an incident in the Odyssey. Two poems, however, do adopt new subject matter; 'The Annihilation of Nothing' is based on an existentialist problem and adopts its terminology, while 'The Value of Gold' prefigures Gunn's later interest in the power of the sun as a life giving agent. These two poems are exceptions, for Gunn is mainly concerned with extending his treatment of themes and subjects he has already investigated.

As the epigraph from Troilus and Cressida indicates, this first section of My Sad Captains is concerned with the nature of the human will, and this is dealt with, in various ways, in all the poems. It is seen most clearly in the opening poem 'In Santa Maria del Populo'¹⁴, which describes three manifestations of this - the contrasting gestures of Saint Paul and the old women at prayer, and the attitude and life of Caravaggio - and examines the relationship between them. Paul is a true existentialist hero, at the moment of his choice - 'Saul becoming Paul' - and his gesture, representative of 'solitary man', asserts his own humanity, 'resisting, by embracing, nothingness'. This is beyond the scope of the old women, who reach out for

comfort rather than to make a heroic gesture, for 'their poor arms are too tired for more than this'. The first three stanzas are more concerned with the stance of the painter. The poem opens with Gunn waiting in Santa Maria (a church in Rome) for the sun to light up the painting, which is in shadow, heightening the effect of its use of chiaroscuro, a favourite device of Caravaggio, and one that reveals his method of drawing attention to the emotional centre of his paintings. However, the subject itself is unclear, and this increases Gunn's interest in its meaning, for

'I see how shadow in the painting brims
With a real shadow, drowning all shapes out'

Evening makes the painting visible, and Gunn admires the way in which the painter has focused attention on the 'wide gesture' of Paul, by 'limiting the scene.....to the one convulsion'. Paul's face is hidden, and the groom who watches is 'indifferent', so that the full meaning of the scene is still in doubt - Gunn turns away 'hardly enlightened' and does not fully appreciate Paul's gesture until he compares it with those at prayer who want only comfort. Just as interesting is the position of Caravaggio, who 'saw what was', and expressed the essential ambivalence in Paul's position, not yet able to explain his pain in terms of sin, and showing 'an alternate/candour and secrecy inside the skin'. There is also a suggestion that Paul, like the old women, will seek a false comfort, in which 'Ananias croons a mystery'. Caravaggio himself is unconvinced by this, and can also paint a 'firm insolent/young whore in Venus' clothes', and meets a violent death at the hands of such a figure. [This is historically inaccurate, but this does not really detract from the general point Gunn is making.] He is attracted to this subject, as is Gunn, not for any religious reason, but because Paul's gesture holds true for any man who challenges the unknown, and, by welcoming it, robs it of its terror. Another poem to deal with the triumph of the human will, again in a context drawn from the arts, is 'The Book of the Dead'¹⁵, which is based on Book 11 of the Odyssey.

This poem is based on Odysseus' visit to Hades after Circe has told him to consult the spirit of the dead Tiresias about how to get back to Ithaca. 'The Book of the Dead' describes the summoning of the ghost of Tiresias by filling a pit with blood, and keeping other spirits away at sword point, however much they 'clamoured....by friendship'. Tiresias' body slowly materializes as he drinks the sacrifice, and the soldiers watch the

'Blood flow down the diaphanous throat, slow, stay
Clot, till the neck became opaque.....'

until he stands as 'heavy as they'. Tiresias' prophecy, however, brings little hope, for he is 'poor, drained of cunning' just as the sailors would be in death. The 'last action of which he spoke', presumably Tiresias' prophecy that Odysseus will return home safely, is itself partially comforting, but 'winnowing is one action out of many'. The culmination of his long journey is seen in terms of harvesting a crop; Odysseus will still have to ensure his position in Ithica, and then set off for another journey (presumably, as in Tennyson's poem, that of death), just as wheat must be prepared - 'you must grind, bake eat' - and the whole process of planting and harvesting repeated, and there is no guarantee, in either case,

'That it will be, this time, either easier work
Or more successful. Even, perhaps, more hard'

Despite this inherent uncertainty, the living are still superior to the dead who 'desire what they can never bring about', for

'The living bring discriminate gifts of blood
Clumsily, wasting far more than they give,
But able still to bring.....'

Odysseus was glad when ~~Tiresias~~^{Tiresias} returned to the dead, having delivered his message, for he realized that 'he was alive because he had no comfort'. The uncertainty of life is the thing that separates it from death, and Odysseus turns back towards the living. This poem has links both with 'Incident on a Journey', which contains a similar meeting between the dead

and the living, and 'Lazarus not Raised', which also compares the ease of the 'trivial territory of death' with the difficulty and uncertainty of life. 'The Book of the Dead' is really, as are all the poems in this section of My Sad Captains, about the power of the human will. The bravery and self-sufficiency that Gunn so admires in Odysseus are also celebrated, in an even more direct way, in 'Claus von Stauffenberg'¹⁶.

This poem describes the unsuccessful 'Colonels' Plot' on Hitler's life in 1944, which Stauffenberg helped instigate, and is a further example of Gunn's interest in, and abhorrence of, the Nazis. Stauffenberg is praised as the 'rational man' who sets himself against the 'illogic' of Hitler and all he represents. The surroundings in which the assassination attempt takes place, a 'landscape of despair', echo the political atmosphere, 'history stunned beneath, the emblems cracked', and the weather mirrors 'a cold time when honour cannot grow'. For the time being, 'the frost..... can be the only fact'. The plotters chose 'the unknown, and the bounded terror' as a 'corrective' to the 'bounding error' of Fascism, and this freedom was both dangerous and, in some ways, regressive, for 'an unsanctioned present must be primitive'. Their motives were not 'of doctrinaire, of turncoat, nor of spy', but 'lucidity of thought' and a refusal to believe 'fear is a natural state', and this justifies the violence of their methods. Stauffenberg exemplifies this philosophical spirit, calculating 'on two remaining fingers and a will', and using his knowledge of history to take

'.....lessons from the past, to detonate

A bomb that Brutus rendered possible'

Julius Caesar, like Hitler, had appropriated too much power, and Brutus represented, for Stauffenberg, an honourable man who considered assassination to be the only remedy. Unlike Brutus, Stauffenberg is unsuccessful, but he too comes to be 'honour personified', and, as he dies

'He stiffens, like a statue, in mid-stride

- Falling toward history, and under snow'

'Claus Von Stauffenberg' describes the triumph of the human will, when it is exercised with honour and full knowledge. The opposite of this, the will used without the restraints of morality or a sense of guilt, is depicted in 'Innocence'.

'Innocence',¹⁷ deals with the 'illogic' of Nazism which Stauffenberg tried to destroy, and describes a typical adherent. The soldier depicted is innocent because he has never developed a consciousness, and therefore has no sense of morality. The title is also bitterly ironic, as this 'innocence' causes him to commit atrocities. The soldier is trained for physical, not intellectual, awareness, and learns, at best, the 'egotism of a healthy body'. Unlike Stauffenberg he is 'ignorant of the past' or of 'self pity and the soul', which are the 'vague heritage of a guilt he never feels'. In place of this, he is hardened by his training into an unthinking instrument, developing

'Courage, endurance, loyalty and skill
To a morale firm as morality'

This 'finitude of virtues (Stauffenberg also had them, but he combined them with self knowledge) becomes a 'compact innocence' that 'no doubt could penetrate, no act could harm'. Therefore, when watching a Russian partisan being burnt alive he feels abhorrence only on the physical plane he has been taught to understand. Just as once he 'smelt his fragrance in the field', the soldier now sickens at the cold, and the smell of the man burning, but derives an almost aesthetic satisfaction from the way 'the ribs wear gently through the darkening skin' and the 'violet flame' of the flesh on fire. He can appreciate neither the agony of the partisan, or the immorality of his manner of death, judging merely that 'all pain finishes the same'. The horrors of the scene described are kept in check, and this increases the poem's effectiveness, for it is polemic not just against the Nazis, but against any form of indoctrination that can lead to a disregard for human life. Some of the other poems in My Sad Captains investigate a

state of self knowledge between the two extremes of the last two poems discussed, similar to that of the motorcyclists in 'On the Move', who are not fully conscious, but find a direction by following the dictates of the will.

This is seen in 'The Byrnies'¹⁸, which deals with the Saxon invasion of England, and shows how the uniform of the men helps them feel solidarity, and thus overcome the terrors of the new environment. Whenever they move, the sound of the 'byrnie's knitted chain' reminds them of the 'constant Thing' that unites them. The invaders, who have presumably just landed, see beyond a 'salty hill' the 'barbaric forest' of the interior, 'darkening the land in quietness absolute'. The men fear this dark, and cannot proceed until they find a way to 'stay the essence of the broad light that they adventured in 'which became 'elusive' in the forest where it 'lay thin and shrunk among the bristling grass'. The warriors have, however, 'fashioned a defence' against other weapons in the 'byrnies', or coats of chain mail, they wear, and it is these that suddenly function in an unexpected way. The sun is reflected 'between the man-made joints', and is 'reduced and steadied to a thousand points' by the shining armour. The warriors are 'blunt-faced ignorant' but already sophisticated enough both to make 'loss their only fear', and to feel a sense of unity through their wearing of armour.

'The great grey rigid uniform combined
Safety with virtue of the sun.
Thus concepts linked like chainmail in the mind'

The warriors now have enough courage to enter the 'foreign wood', for the sound of the byrnies remind them of the sense of community 'they sought and partly understood'. Both this and the use of sunlight as a reminder of the unity of the natural world point forward to Moly, but they are seen here specifically as helping men overcome a hostile environment. Another way in which a common uniform can give men a sense of identity is explored in

'Black Jackets',¹⁹.

In this poem this uniform consists of the leather jacket and the tattoos that the 'red-haired boy' wears, and he is united with his friends by a common sense of fatalism. Although he drives a van 'in weekday overalls', in this 'Sunday hangout' the boy wears 'cycle boots and jacket' as a true sign of his identity, and revels in the sense of freedom it brings him. During the pauses between records on the bar's jukebox he listens to the 'leather creak softly round his neck and chin', and studies the cracks in this leather where past actions have left their mark, and

'Remote exertion had lined, scratched and burned
Insignia that could not revive
The heroic fall or climb where they were earned'

Like the others in the bar, 'concocting selves for their impervious kit', he models his own personality on the toughness of the leather jacket he wears, although he feels no direct affinity with the others. Instead he feels a more abstract kind of fellowship, linked to them, as were the warriors in 'The Byrnies', by the 'sudden and anonymous hints of light' their jackets reflect. The boy here also resembles the adolescents in Positives, for he too has no sense of the past; 'the present was the things he stayed among', (although this is also true of the soldier in 'Innocence'). He wears his jacket for 'complicity and nothing more', and recalls the initiation rites for the community he is part of, and the sense of fatalism it inevitably contains. His shoulders have been tattooed,

'The group's name on the left, The Knights,
And on the right the slogan Born to Lose'

This idea of learning from others is also seen in 'The Middle of the Night',²⁰, where man is seen as mastering others by recording their role-playing, and this is represented by the image of a child playing with his dolls. The child wakes in the night, and lifts out 'impudent and self-willed dolls from the living heap', all of which are seen as playing roles,

from the 'soldier in pose of fight' to the ruined burghers whose 'cargoes have been sunk'. As in 'The Corridor' this observation becomes a form of mastery, and the child comes to recognize

'In each doll, passive, faded
Some man who is at once
Transfigured and degraded'

When this process is complete, the child writes down these histories, recording each 'jerk, posture, giggle, prance', until 'the dark is gone'. However, this method of mastering the uncertainty of 'ther middle of the night' (which represents the opaqueness of external reality) carries its own dangers, for this knowledge of others includes an awareness of the faults inherent in human nature, and this in turn makes reality more terrifying.

'Children who know by heart
The vices of their dolls
Will stay awake at night'

The same idea of mastery over both other people and one's environment is expressed in 'A Map of the City'²¹, although the risk inherent in this is now recognised, and therefore less of a danger.

This poem describes the city at night in terms of the poet's 'love of chance'. Gunn watches the city as if it were 'a luminous country', and sees it both a maze through which 'the drunk must weave', and a haven, 'the transient's pause, the sailor's leave', through which move 'the potential, the grey shapes'. The poet finds he can 'hold the city here, complete' and that there is a correspondence between each 'flickering or.....steady shine' and his own feelings. The contours of the distant city are 'ground of my delight', and 'between the limits' Gunn can express his 'love of chance'. This sense of limit, as in the recurrent lights' brings into being what the poet most admires -

'Endless potentiality
The crowded, broken and unfinished'

It is this lack of certainty that Gunn finds so stimulating, and this is why he 'would not have the risk diminished'. The whole poem can be compared with the earlier 'In Praise of Cities', which expressed the same idea that 'what is strange and incomplete compels a passion.....for all you cannot be'. This idea of the sense of chance inherent in any satisfying action is treated, more subtly, in 'The Value of Gold'²².

This poem provides a bridge between Gunn's early poems in praise of the will and his later interest in a sense of harmony with the processes of Nature, and unites them with the image of the sun present both in 'The Byrnies' and 'Sunlight'. The poem is in fact ostensibly about sun-bathing. The poet lies in the sun as 'the hairs turn gold upon my thigh', and becomes one with 'all that has, like me, turned gold', being able, for an instant, to 'turn blind to features'. He then transfers his attention to the plants that flower above him, and admires the way that their stage of growth is indicated by their leaves

'Which colour into colour pass
Toward the last state they shall become'

Gunn speculates on the problems that this 'quiet growth' calls into being, for it appears to be 'a full form without a lack', but it also contains the potential of further development, the 'still-to-grow'. If both states are present at the same time, then it is possible that this also applies to men - 'and if so, can I too be both?'. This problem is not directly resolved, but the final stanza indicates that this fruition is part of the flux of Nature. The poet continues his walk, finding that

'I darken where perpetual
Action withdraws me from the sun'

and, as he passes, a 'high precocious stalk', which has already reached 'fulness', showers its petals on the ground. These represent the sheer

physicality of existence, the 'features' that for an instant he turned blind to, but they too are part of the totality of Nature, and, like Gunn himself, imitate the sun 'shrivelling to gold across my walk'. The poem suggests a harmony, derived from the power of the sun, that connects all living things through the principle of growth, a process made visible by the changing colour of the leaves. The poet sets himself against this background as being 'of insect size', and thus emphasises the power of natural processes over the strength of the human will. This negation of the existential will is, however, exceptional at this stage of Gunn's development. The other poems in this section of My Sad Captains are far closer to both the style and concerns of Gunn's earlier work, and this is nowhere more true than in the two poems which are both called 'Modes of Pleasure',²³ where the will is seen in action in terms of love.

In the first of these, Gunn gives an externalised picture of an ageing lover, who has always lived 'by habit of the will', while the second is narrated by a similar, although presumably younger man who sees love as a callous game. Both poems deal with love solely in terms of lust, and, through sharing the same title, can be taken as two alternatives out of many. The first poem²⁴ is the more distanced, presenting a man who still acts 'fiercely', and can provoke terror by the way he behaves 'as if each whim...were passion, whose passion is a whim'. This is despite the fact that he is now 'fallen....to middle age' and now has few choices of sexual conquest. The transitory nature of his past affairs gave them their 'very beauty', for he knew that these triumphs 'would all be lost some time in time'. They also, however, seem to have been rather barren, recurring 'in different rooms without a word', and these 'sensual skills' were learnt 'by rote', but they did help to reduce 'the wild unknown'. Even now the 'Fallen Rake' rejects any form of restraint, especially that of love, for 'He knows that nothing....can hold him, still'. He continues to live 'by habit of the will', and in the present, for 'he cannot contemplate the

past'. (This makes an interesting comparison with the 'last man' of the later poem 'Misanthropos', who, initially, refuses to consider his past life). The Rake is 'condemned to the sharpest passion of them all', and sits 'rigid' as he experiences the ravages of age and the approach of death, but refuses to be moved from his dependence on the will that now 'awaits its gradual end'.

If this poem celebrates the bravery of following the dictates of the will, the second 'Modes of Pleasure'²⁵ describes the brutal honesty of this approach to life. It originally was given the title 'With Good Humour', and this describes well the tone of the speaker. He is a similar figure to the cynical realists of 'Carnal Knowledge' and 'Lofty in the Palais de Danse', 'preparing once more for the test' of love, and his future partner in lust is similarly hardened,

'Apart, contained, you wait on chance,
Or seem to, till your callous glance
Meets mine, as callous and reserved'

Love is seen as a 'collaboration - a warm game for a warmer prize', but it is not likely to last long, for one night is 'plenty for every magnanimous device'. There is no reason to pretend that 'love must accompany erection', for this planned relationship is entirely physical, a 'momentary affection' in which 'good-humoured muscle may.....try its strength'. (This is reminiscent of the fifth stanza of 'Lofty in the Palais de Danse'). The type of love depicted in both of these poems, which are remarkable for their cool directness, is best seen as another aspect of the dominance of the human will over chance and uncertainty.

The opposite of this is seen in 'The Monster'²⁶, in which the uncertainty inherent in any lasting relationship is brought to the surface. This poem also recalls earlier attempts by Gunn to deal with the same theme, notably 'The Secret Sharer'. In this poem the speaker, who has just been rejected by his lover, returns to see her, but finds another man

waiting 'unmoved' in front of her house. He wonders if this is another of his girlfriend's lovers - 'did she dismiss one every night?' However, when he looks at the man more closely, and notes 'that wide mouth ugly with despair', he realizes that 'it was myself I recognized' and represents

'A grief defined and realized
And living only for its sake'

This doppelganger is a 'constant one' created by the rejected lover 'lest the pure feeling should decline', and the poet considers the relation between this simalcrum of thwarted desire and his own more changeable, emotions. If he had not been rejected, would this 'man who never can get in' be still standing outside, and would this doppelganger then haunt him 'demanding still some bitterness?' The poem is a successful attempt to convey a psychological state, in this case rejection, in an externalised form, and this is helped by the strange atmosphere of 'The Monster'. The events take place in 'that decaying town' where the 'carved cherub crumbled down', while the monster's eyes are 'glazed like her windowpane'. It is significant that this is the only poem by Gunn to be included by George Macbeth in his anthology The Penguin Book of Sick Verse²⁷. The sort of negation expressed in this poem is also explored in 'From the Highest Camp',²⁸

This poem is also about rejection, and describes another figure who is outside normal human contact, in this case the Yeti, whose more common name is punned on in the line 'the abominable endures'. The poem is set in the Himalayas, where even 'the local names are concepts' which convey 'the dazzling abstract drifts'

'To which particular names adhere by chance,
From custom lightly, not from character'

Words help little more than they did in 'For a Birthday', and this 'last camp of experience' represents the limits of human comprehension. The 'sudden yelp' and 'malformed purposeless tracks' of the Yeti are beyond such understanding, and exist 'where nothing else can'. The Yeti is 'born of

rejection, of the boundless snow' and is as unknowable as the Monster in the previous poem. Again the landscape is inhospitable - here the snow forms a 'bright region' in which only that which is 'unfed, unwarmed' can survive.

An even more disquieting poem is 'The Annihilation of Nothing'²⁹, in which the poet comes to realize that negation is not the welcome comfort it once seemed, because it does not exist. The poem is complex philosophically, and its very title is based on terms common in Sartre's L'Etre et le neant³⁰, but it can be understood in more general terms. The poet begins by trusting in 'nothing', a 'wanton name that nightly I rehearsed', and this is seen in his dream in which

'.....a huge contagious absence lay,
More space than space, over the cloud and shine,
Defined but by the enchantments of its way'

He learns to welcome 'zero as a paradigm', waking 'without desire' and 'stripped to indifference at the turns of time'. The poem now abruptly changes direction. Gunn opens his eyes, and

'.....now it breaks - images burst with fire
Into the quiet sphere where I have bided
Showing the landscape holding yet entire'

Despite his longing for absolute nothingness, Gunn is forcibly reminded that the world is both stable and contingent ('Yet' here means 'still' rather than 'but'). This power of negation is in fact not a unique force but merely part of flux, and 'the atoms it divided complete, in ignorance new combinations'. There is no nothingness, but merely an 'infinite finitude' in these 'peculiar lovely variations'. This 'despair that nothing cannot be' produces dread, for 'neither firm nor free, purposeless matter hovers in the dark'. The horror here is similar to that in 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death'. The poem is based on the paradox that nothingness, itself often a subject of terror, is seen first as comforting

and then as illusory. This fusing of philosophical inquiry and genuine passion is typical of Gunn at his best, and gives the poem great force.

The poems concerned with French literature, 'Readings in French'³¹ and 'Baudelaire among the Heroes'³², also deals with similar subject matter to the three last poems discussed. Both poems were originally part of 'Notes on the French', published in the Critical Quarterly³³, which also contained sections on Saint Beuve, who 'when all is said, was sometimes right about the dead', and Stendhal, who showed 'it is the writing's coachman that succeeds' and 'less failed than stopped short between his thought and deeds'. This aphoristic style is also used in the two poems published in My Sad Captains. 'Baudelaire among the Heroes' shows the poet's awareness that the conceptualisation dealt with in 'The Annihilation of Nothing' is dangerous, because the 'human heart associates with not the whole but part', and these 'invariable particularities' can 'furnish hell'. In 'Readings in French', Mallarmé attempts to solve this by destroying all aspects of human emotions and 'their consequent confusions', but he ends up by dealing with 'a void where only furniture could have illusions' - the process also excludes all humanity. Flaubert is more sensible, emphasising in L'Education Sentimentale the connection between 'the fineness, the despair', and the arbitrary nature of suffering that this reveals. Finally, Sartre demonstrates how nausea is a starting point, allowing a man to feel his 'tangible illegal presence', but Gunn shows how this attitude is logically inconsistent - 'but where then did I learn the terms that pose the choices I discern'. Apart from the two, rather feeble, taunts at the tortuous nature of Poe's prose and the inviability of the hero of A La Recherche du Temps Perdu, all of these sections, as are all the poems in the first part of My Sad Captains, are concerned with the problems of the human will.

The second section of My Sad Captains differs from the first both in style and subject matter, although not as radically as at first it seems. The most noticeable development is Gunn's adoption of a more relaxed

diction and a less ~~strenuous~~^{strenuous} use of metre, and this suits his new subject matter, which itself seems less contrived. As the epigram from The Last Tycoon indicates, the poems deal with a new openness to experience - the ability to appreciate the clarity of 'just air, unobstructed, uncomplicated air' - and this is an important development on the sense of limit in the first section. It also indicates the clarity and directness which Gunn wishes to evoke in the use itself. Gunn does not completely abandon his earlier subject matter, but he treats it in a new way, and this is equally true of his use of language, and of new types of metre.

The diction of these poems is looser than it was in the first section, and more conversational, although it continues to be precise and intellectualised. This corresponds to the precision of imagery in 'Blackie the Electric Rembrandt', while 'Lights among Redwood' shows a new clarity of description. The language is stately, and contrives to be mannered, although in a satisfying way, and this is seen at its best in 'My Sad Captains' itself. The diction here is quiet and allusive - 'the past lapping them like a/cloak of chaos' - using words carefully and with economy - 'They remind me, distant now'. The use of syllabics makes the line endings less abrupt, as does the absence of capitals at the beginning of each line, and this draws attention to the structure of the sentences themselves, which really shape the poem. This is done by careful use of repetition - 'a few friends/and a few with historical/names' - and of the insertion of interjections at key points - 'I thought' in the second stanza - which help bind the poem together. This is also helped by the adoption of a conversational tone which remains well controlled - 'how late they start to shine!', 'true, they are not at rest yet' - and which addresses the reader directly, but is held in check by the distancing power of the imagery, drawn mainly from the solar system, and with a cold beauty

'they withdraw to an orbit
and turn with disinterested
hard energy, like the stars'

The language of these poems lacks the complexity of the earlier stanza poems, but has, in its place, a tautness, and new sort of distancing power of its own. It also differs from Gunn's earlier verse in its use of rhyme. Gunn experiments with assonance instead of full rhymes where this is relevant to the subject matter, and this makes the language itself less rigidly controlled. This is done, for example, in the couplets of 'Adolescence', which derives a sense of unease from this device -

'when the lean creatures crawl out of
camps and in silence try to live'

Metre is also employed for direct, rather than virtuoso effect. although it is as varied as before. Gunn uses couplets in 'Flying above California', quatrains in 'Loot' and 'The Feel of Hands', and, with an a b b a rhyme scheme, in 'Waking in a newly built House'. 'L'Epreuve' uses an a b a a b rhyme scheme, which puts emphasis onto the last line. The most common verse form, however, is a six line stanza, rhyming a b c a b c, and written in short lines, which creates the right balance between freedom and restraint to suit the looseness of the verse.

The most important innovation however, and one crucial to the development of Gunn's poetry, is his use of syllabics, rather than conventional iambics, as a rhythmical basis for his verse. Gunn used this in two poems in The Sense of Movement, but it is here explored in a more systematic way. The history of this form was briefly set out in the introduction, and Gunn was consciously following the example of Donald Hall and Alan Stephens. His use of syllabics is most distinctive in the way that lines of an odd number of syllables, are used to create a sense of incompleteness, and this is contrasted with the skilful use of rhyme. Gunn writes mainly in seven syllable lines, as in 'My Sad Captains' itself, but he also uses eight per line in 'Adolescence', and nine in the less compressed 'Rastignac at 45'. At its best, the use of syllabics can give poetry the freedom of prose combined with the restraint of metre, but, at its worst,

it can also combine the lack of any pattern of the former and the gratuitous ~~artificiality~~ ^{artificiality} of the latter. Gunn is aware of the pitfalls of this form becoming a mathematical enterprise rather than a source of hidden order, and the ways in which he counteracts this can be seen in a poem like 'Considering the Snail'. Here the determined progress of the snail is echoed by the slow movement of the first stanza, where the sentence structure runs against the line divisions. The restraint of regular line length gives the language a precision more difficult to attain in, say, free verse - 'the slow passion/to that deliberate progress' - and a certain ponderous solemnity, as, again, in the description of this progress.

'.....for the grass is heavy
with water and meets over
the bright path he makes, where rain
has darkened the earth's dark.....'

This works by piling up descriptive statements, made more momentous by the way they run over line divisions, into a complex whole. This new use of technique is matched by a similar sense of experiment in the subject matter of these poems.

Gunn explores a wider range of subject matter than before, although examining the same basic dichotomy between modern city life and its philosophical implications, as in 'Blackie the electric Rembrandt' which is ostensibly about a tattooist, and 'A Trucker', which is about a truck driver, but which deal with these subjects in an existential way. 'Hotblood on Friday' deals with a young hoodlum similar to the one described in 'Market at Turk', although in a less simplistic way, while 'My Sad Captains' is a distillation of Gunn's earlier cult of the hero. These are dealt with, however, in a new, more abstract way, as in the horror poem in 'The Feel of Hands', and the poem of sexual conquest in 'Loot'. Gunn also explores new subjects, which are more general in application, and despite the prevalent feeling of abstraction, his description of physical details is

sharper, and he shows more interest in the external world. This can be seen in both 'Lights among redwood' and 'Considering the snail', which are both drawn from Nature, although they are still subjected to philosophical inquiry. Gunn is also now interested in landscape, as in 'Flying above California', and the idea of texture, both in the natural world, in 'Waking in a newly-built house', and in the city, in 'L'Epreuve'. It is interesting that, in the latter case at least, this increased perceptiveness is connected with the taking of drugs (it was originally subtitled 'effects of mescaline') as this prefigures the L.S.D. poems in Moly, which explore similar concerns. These poems also show the new use that Gunn makes of literary reference, which he treats in a far more circumspect way than before. The title poem, for example, is based on a line spoken by Antony in Antony and Cleopatra, but its real relationship with Shakespeare's play is its theme of reckless heroism, just as the whole of the first section was based on the idea of the human will, and its limits, explored in Troilus and Cressida. Correspondingly, this section draws on concepts of freedom and the vastness of Nature central to the main tradition of American literature, as illustrated in the passage from The Last Tycoon. A more specific reference is that to Balzac's Rastignac, but even this is more hypothetical - imagining him in middle age - than a comment on a specific incident from La Comedie Humaine. The only direct historical reference is to the execution of Wallace in Adolescence, although this poem also alludes more obliquely, and in a more generalised way, to other historical incidents. The most interesting use of reference, however, is based on Gunn's increased outwardness, for he draws into the poems such places as Crescent City and San Bernardino in 'Flying above California', Market Street in 'L'Epreuve', and Muir Woods in 'Lights among redwood' (itself a tree usually associated with California). In a similar way, 'Blackie the Electric Rembrandt' is clearly, as the quotation marks suggest, a real person. This new actuality can be understood better in relation to the new themes that Gunn is exploring in this

section. As with his choice of technique and subject matter, it reflects a new subtlety, and this prepares the way for his later work.

The second section of My Sad Captains deals, as did the first, with problems of identity and the human will, but judges these in a less purely existential and more open way. The dominant note of these poems is a new openness, corresponding to the delight in 'unobstructed, uncomplicated air' of the quotation from The Last Tycoon³⁴ that begins the section. The most important poem in terms of Gunn's development is 'My Sad Captains',³⁵ itself (which is the first poem that Gunn names a whole collection after, as he is also to do with 'Touch' and 'Moly'). This poem redefines Gunn's relationship with the heroes he presented in earlier poems, and praised for their existential bravery. It is both a tribute to men like Yvor Winters and Claus von Stauffenberg, and a leave-taking of them. These men, 'a few friends and a few with historical names', appear like stars in the darkness, standing

'perfectly embodied, all
the past lapping them like a
cloak of chaos.....'

Their strength of purpose sets them apart from the 'chaos' of the past, and helps them retain their identity, even in death. When alive they existed only to

'renew the wasteful force they
spent with each hot convulsion'

and thus express themselves fully in action (which carries a sexual implication here). Although still not 'at rest', these heroes are now apart from other men, 'winnowed from failures', and

'they withdraw to an orbit
and turn with disinterested
hard energy, like the stars'

Although these men still serve Gunn as providing an example of how to live

by conscious action, they can be of no direct assistance - 'they remind me, distant now'. They are both 'distant' and 'disinterested' and, like the soldier in 'Incident on a Journey', are now incapable of performing action themselves. 'Sad' here can mean 'melancholy' as well as its Shakespearian sense of 'steadfast', and these heroes, whether through death or their very remoteness from most men, seem remarkably isolated, withdrawing to a solitary 'orbit'. Gunn realizes that while these heroes are still worth admiration for their energy and espousal of the will, they bring little direct comfort.

'Rastignac at 45'³⁶ describes one of these heroes, and the way he survives his encounter with life, but is scarred by it (both symbolically and literally). Balzac's character is imagined by Gunn in middle age, and he appears from the shadows, 'his best trick always', looking 'lean and bored'. Although 'denounced' so often, Rastignac still expects to be brought a drink, 'indicating the empty glass as if we were waiters', and in return his companions submit

'to his marvellous air of knowing
all the ropes debonnair weariness
could care to handle.....'

Rastignac asserts that 'everything I know I know from having done..... and I survive', and his audience demand to know 'about life and what men of your stamp endure'. The price Rastignac has paid for this knowledge, gained through 'exploration among the oversexed and titled' is as 'terrible' as his companions imagine, and is revealed by the scar on Rastignac's face. This 'attractive scarlike line', however, was not caused by 'time unhelped' or by a 'dweller's lucky thrust', but is the mark of a 'momentary convulsion'. This is caused by the 'platitudes of Romance', which have 'drawn his mouth up....in a half-maddened wince' at their 'fetid taste'. This distaste at the falseness of the conventions of love to which Rastignac has had to adhere gives the lie to his air of 'debonnaire weariness', but it is not without its own virtues, for

'the mere custom of living with it
has, for him, diminished the horror'

This 'horror' refers both to the convulsion itself and, more generally, to the difficulties involved in fully facing life. A different sort of hero is described in 'Hotblood on Friday'³⁷, but he too confronts experience, and is aware of its dangers.

The poem describes a young hoodlum similar to those in 'A Village Edmund' and 'Market at Turk', but he is more fully realized as a character, and less ambivalent. The opening stanza describes how he prepares for action, 'expectant yet relaxed', and, basking within 'the body's tight reaches' (this corresponds to the way the youth in 'Market at Turk' tries to buckle himself in), he

'.....acquires by street-light the
details which accumulate
to a sense of crude richness'

This is willed, but 'almost unseats reason', and he walks along the street 'like a voice of appetite'. It is the end of the working week, and 'the town is gradually opening up...stone petals bright in the warm evening'. However, 'no hand can grasp' the sense of liberation this gives, and it is left to 'Hotblood' to find 'some term' in this 'boisterous community' to express this freedom. He needs to find a solution to this problem that is 'precarious and accurate' and which 'assumes it without loss'. Although he has been praised for his 'crude richness', it is now apparent that it is Hotblood's sense of limit that is his most important quality, and that gives him his sense of identity.

This idea of acquiring one's identity through a conscious effort is also explored in "Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt"³⁸ (the double quotation marks indicate that this is the title Blackie gives himself) in which this sense of identity is given by being tattooed. Blackie's hand is 'steady and accurate', as was Hotblood's sense of purpose, but the boy being

tattooed watches instead as the point touches 'a virginal arm beneath his rolled sleeve' with a 'quick, dark movement'. He leaves with 'ten stars, hanging in a blue thick cluster' on his arm, and, like the heroes in 'My Sad Captains', 'now he is starlike'. Gunn has also used the idea of tattoos expressing one's true feelings in 'Black Jackets', where the 'red-haired boy' is 'Born to Lose'. Here the design of stars indicates the boy's aspirations and the new sense of fulfilment that this gives him. A similar sense of purpose is described in 'A Trucker'³⁹.

The 'trucker' in this poem is simply a man who drives a truck for his living, and Gunn here describes both the power and control that this involves. The truck is sometimes 'like a beast' which is 'barely controlled by a man', but it also exhibits human characteristics; the cabin is 'lofty as a skull', while the rest of the vehicle resembles an 'enormous throbbing body'. This power 'extends' from the trucker's foot, and he is fully aware of what would happen if he left anything to chance. His own body is seen in mechanical terms as it is imagined disintegrating,

'.....see his great frame capsize
and his rubber limbs explode
whirling.....'

The poem ends with a strange image that continues this idea of disintegration and appears to refer to the trucker's death, for a 'bright fountain of red eyes' tinkles 'sightless' to the road. The poem is, in part, unclear rather than obscure, and a better description of a living object's sense of purpose is given in 'Considering the Snail'⁴⁰.

In this poem, the living thing is animal, and therefore essentially unknowable, but its intentions are discernable from its habitual actions. The snail is seen as moving through the 'green night' of the grass, which 'meets over the bright path' that the snail leaves behind it. This trail contrasts with the rest of the ground for 'rain has darkened the earth's dark' still further. The snail moves 'in a wood of desire', but its

motivation is hidden from the poet, who cannot tell

'what power is at work, drenched there
with purpose, knowing nothing'

as the creature is so alien to man - 'what is a snail's fury?' The one thing that Gunn has learnt is the 'slow passion to that deliberate progress' which he could never have guessed from the 'thin trail of broken white' which is all that the snail leaves. The poem shows Gunn's concern with the workings of the human will transferred to its presence in the instinctual processes of the animal world, and this both widens and diminishes its importance, for the mere following of instinct is clearly not enough to justify a rationale of human existence. This begins a development in Gunn's work which comes to fruition in 'Misanthropos'. The rest of the poems in My Sad Captains also indicate that Gunn's work is taking a new direction, for they explore the poet's own involvement with the world in a radically new way.

Most of these poems are concerned with the nature of the self, and typical of this is 'Loot'⁴¹. This poem deals with an attempt to 'raid the earth', and this is seen in terms of making love (although it is deliberately made unclear which is the event described and which is the image used to express this, so that each is seen in terms of the other). The narrator of the poem approaches, past trees that are 'dry towers softly seeding from mere delicacy of age', until 'the smell of the earth, raw and black' mingles with the 'green quickness of grass', and he prepares to enter 'those low chambers that wary fathers stand guard in'. This refers to the earth that contains the bodies of his ancestors, but it also has a sexual significance. This is brought out further in section 11, where the looter wonders 'what shall I take?', and wants his 'hidden and agile' powers to 'yield now value.....uniquely yours'. He is poised 'on hot walls', waiting to attack those 'caught beneath in the village', but these expectant powers only

'Move in time with my pulse, and
 observe without passion the
 veer of my impassioned mind'

Preparation to storm the village is seen in terms of projected rape, but in both cases the body is held in check. Section 111 resolves this inaction with an abrupt change of image. The looter, 'hands numb from sifting soil,' is now described as digging in the earth, and he finds 'a trinket carved whole from some mineral' which, although 'nameless and useless' is his 'to name and use'. As he feels its 'cool surface', the looter realizes that he is 'herald to tawny warriors' who

'ride precipitantly down
 with the blood toward my hands, through
 me to retain possession'

He is reminded of his ancestors, the 'wary fathers' of section I, and of his inheritance of strength and control. The looting, a result of the aggressive will praised in earlier poems, brings an increased awareness of the past, and of the man's indebtedness to it. This sense of the continuity of experience is also dealt with in 'Adolescence'⁴².

This poem begins with three parallel situations, taken from widely separate historical eras, all of which involve the end of a great ordeal, after 'the history has been made'. Wallace's 'shaggy head glares on London from a spike' after his insurrection had ended at the battle of Falkirk (in 1298), an exiled general glides into Athens harbour as an 'embittered foreigner', and the 'lean creatures' crawl out of the Nazi concentration camps. The narrator of the poem feels similar emotions. He walks through the 'wet spring', and is

'drenched from high grass charned with water,
 and am part, still, of the done war'

The title, 'Adolescence', refers to the period between childhood and manhood which describes these four situations. The three historical events

mark the end of innocence and a coming to maturity, and this, more obliquely, describes the narrator's condition. This is remarkably similar to that of the 'last man' at the beginning of 'Misanthropos', although here the 'done war' could also refer to the traumas of childhood, if the poem's title is taken literally. The 'wet spring' certainly suggests a period of rebirth, which the narrator does not feel himself to be part of.

A similarly oblique poem is 'The Feel of Hands'⁴³, which describes the mystery and terror of encountering 'The Other', but deals with this subject in a less rigid way than in earlier poems. The poet is 'in the dark', both literally and metaphorically, with a girl whose hands explore him 'tentatively', and are 'two small live entities whose shapes I have to guess at'. Her fingertips test 'each surface of each thing found', and are 'as timid as kittens'. (This makes an interesting parallel with the later 'Touch', which deals with the same situation, but where the 'cat in sleep' on the bed emphasises the safety of the relationship). The poet tries to associate these 'live entities' with 'amusing hands I have shaken by daylight', but there is a 'sudden transition' which robs them of this sense of comfort. The hands 'plunge together in a full formed single fury' and 'are grown to cats, hunting without scuple', for they are now 'expert but desperate'. The poet realizes how essentially alien they are.

'I am in the dark. I wonder
when they grew up. It strikes me that
I do not know whose hands they are'

The hands have changed from timid kittens to grown cats, and although this comparison is both banal and strained, the end of the poem does contain a genuine feeling of horror at the essential unknowableness of other people. This reveals an impasse that Gunn's early poetry had reached, and the poem that directly follows 'The Feel of Hands', 'L'Epreuve', indicates the solution to this lack of contact both with other people and with the external world.

'L'Epreuve'⁴⁴ deals with an attempt to directly encounter other states of being, and thus leave the poet's old involvement with self behind, along with the purely existential view that inspired it. It is therefore a crucial poem in Gunn's development and its title, the French word for 'the experiment', suggests the exploratory nature of this poem. Its original title, 'Bonheur - effects of mescaline', indicates that this new awareness of the external world is achieved through drugs, and this itself forms the subject of the later volume, Moly. The effects of mescaline are discussed by Simone de Beauvoir in The Prime of Life⁴⁵, describing Sartre's experiments with the drug a year before writing La Nausée, and by Aldous Huxley in Doors of Perception⁴⁶. There is also an account by Colin Wilson in Beyond the Outsider⁴⁷. However, this knowledge is not essential to the understanding of the poem, and 'L'Epreuve' would be a bad poem if it were, for its main concern is to describe the poet's ~~separateness~~^{separateness} from, but his connection with, the external world. His body 'trots' semblably on Market Street' (the street in San Francisco referred to in 'Market at Turk'), but it is seen as a 'thick and singular spy', controlled by the 'hovering planet' of the brain and the poet's real attention is directed to 'contemplate new laws'. This new way of seeing regards the street not as 'a thoroughfare below but a sweet compact', or an agreement between the external world and Gunn's imagination, which the poet can choose as 'the world I'll come back to'. The second section, however, describes the poet's sense of ~~separate-~~^{separate-}ness from this world; he is 'distinct', and 'afflicted with thirst heat and cold.....harried by shapes, cramped' by the sensations he feels. 'The worst is, I am still on my own', and Gunn longs for the comfort that external reality brings, for

'The street's total is less near
 during my long ordeal than
 the turbanned legends within
 my world of serried colour'

The same quest to encounter other states of being is described in 'Lights among Redwood'⁴⁸, but here the same sensations of 'serried colour' and 'rockets that explode greenly' come directly from Nature, and are successfully assimilated. The poem begins with a search for light, which only escapes to brighten

'the pale green ribs of young ferns
tangling above the creek's edge'

in 'quick diffusing patterns' and elsewhere in the forest only exists as 'tone, pure and rarified'. It is now 'calm shadow', and Gunn describes this tone, with unusual accuracy, as

'a muted dimness coloured
with moss-green, charred grey, leaf-brown'

The watchers gaze up from the stream, which 'take care of light', to the redwood trees themselves, the 'thick forms' of which hold 'to laws of size and age', and 'at once tone is forgotten'. The watchers now stare 'mindless, diminished' at the 'rosy immanence' of the redwoods, and their inherent containment of the light that is dispersed elsewhere. Martin Dodsworth has connected this 'immanence' with Kant's idea of the way Nature exists in, and for, itself⁴⁹. The watchers' attitude to 'immanence' is ambiguous, for the redwoods' retention of light leaves them 'mindless, diminished', and this could mean either that they feel part of this 'immanence', or that they can admire it, but remain as ~~separate~~^{separate} as they were before, and thus feel even less part of Nature. 'Lights among Redwood' is one of Gunn's first poems to directly celebrate the Californian landscape; Muir woods are near San Francisco, while the redwood tree is largely endemic to California, and the ones described here are actually 'gashed through with Indian fires'. The remaining two poems to be discussed also draw closely on the Californian landscape, and show a similarly exact use of description.

The more specific of these is 'Flying above California'⁵⁰, which

celebrates the clarity of the Californian landscape in the same way as the passage from The Last Tycoon, and which describes how richness is enhanced by the sense of limit. The poet is in an aeroplane flying over California, and describes the landscape he sees 'spread beneath' him - hills 'sinewed and tawny in the sun', and valleys 'sweet with loquat' (a kind of fruit tree). This leads Gunn to 'repeat under' his breath the names of these places, predominately 'Mediterranean and Northern', but 'such richness can make you drunk'. Gunn describes another, less overwhelming, characteristic feature of the Californian landscape, a 'cold hard light without break that reveals merely what it is' which is seen 'on fogless days by the Pacific'. It is the combination of these two extremes, richness and limit, that makes California so fascinating.

'.....That limiting candour,
that accuracy of the beaches,
is part of the ultimate richness'

This same contrast of limit and fullness is again dealt with in 'Waking in a Newly -Built House'. (The original publication⁵¹ of this poem described the house as being in Oakland, a small town across the Bay from San Francisco)

'Waking in a Newly-Built House'⁵² describes the 'tangible remoteness' of the house, a quality similar to the 'cold hard light' praised in the last poem, and the waking here applies, as often in Gunn's work, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense - it is significant that this poem opens the second part of My Sad Captains. It begins with a description of the way the window is crossed by 'colourless peeling trunks' of eucalyptus set against the 'raw sky-colour'. Gunn studies this scene closely,

'sharpening, and seeking merely all
of what can be seen, the substantial
where the things themselves are adequate'

He appreciates the way that these 'neutral sections of trunk' lack both 'disconnectedness and unity', and this quality is also discernible in the

air, its 'clean chill' both 'ordering every room' and 'convoking absences'.
 Gunn's 'perception' can rest on these things without any sense of strain,
 enjoying

'their precise definition, their fine
 lack of even potential meanings'

This marks a great advance on Gunn's early verse, where objects were used as images for mental states and relationships, but were not valued for themselves, and it indicates a new openness in Gunn's work. My Sad Captains as a whole is an interesting book, even if it does not contain Gunn's best poetry, for it is important both as a transition between his two most fruitful periods (as represented in The Sense of Movement and Touch) and as providing a useful contrast within itself. Its two sections have much in common, both in terms of attitude and subject matter, but benefit from exploring this material in different ways. In this it serves as a micro-cosm of Gunn's work as a whole. The new sense of openness evoked in the second section is taken a step further in Gunn's next collection, Positives.

NOTES (On Chapter Three - My Sad Captains)

1. Anon, in Times Literary Supplement, 29 September 1961 p.646
2. Anon, in Times, 28 September 1961 p.15
3. Richard Mayne in 'The Critics', quoted on dust jacket of Touch
4. Antony Thwaite, in Spectator, 1 September 1961 p.298
5. John Fuller, in Review 1 (April/May 1962) pp.29-34
6. Donald Allen, The New American Poetry New York 1960
7. John Simon, in Hudson Review XV (Autumn 1962) pp.455-69
8. Carol Johnson, in Sewanee Review 70 (1962) pp.517-22
9. F.N. ~~Furnbank~~ ^{Furbank}, in Listener, 12 October 1961 p.575
10. Frank Kermode, in New Statesman, 6 October 1961 pp.479-80
11. Al Alvarez, in Observer, 10 September 1961 p.24
12. John Press, in Sunday Times, 3 September 1961 p.25
13. A.E. Dyson, in Critical Quarterly 111 (Winter 1961) p.379
14. MSC pp.13-14
15. MSC p.26
16. MSC p.33
17. MSC p.22
18. MSC p.27
19. MSC pp.29-30
20. MSC pp.18-19
21. MSC p.25
22. MSC p.32
23. MSC pp.23-24
24. MSC p.23
25. MSC p.24
26. MSC pp.16-17
27. George Macbeth (ed) The Penguin Book of Sick Verse 1963
28. MSC p.21

29. MSC p.15
30. Jean Paul Sartre, L'Être et le néant Paris 1943
31. MSC p.20
32. MSC p.31
33. 'Notes on the French' in Critical Quarterly I (Autumn 1959) p.207
34. F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Last Tycoon 1951
35. MSC p.51
36. MSC pp.44-45
37. MSC p.41
38. MSC p.40
39. MSC p.48
40. MSC p.39
41. MSC p.49-50
42. MSC p.47
43. MSC p.42
44. MSC p.43
45. Simone de Beauvoir, The Prime of Life 1960
46. Aldous Huxley, The Doors of Perception 1954
47. Colin Wilson, Beyond the Outsider 1965 pp.206-227
48. MSC p.46
49. Martin Dodsworth, The Survival of Poetry 1970
50. MSC p.38
51. 'Waking in a newly built house, Oakland' in Poetry Chicago 90 (April 1937)
p.34
52. MSC p.37

CHAPTER 4

POSITIVES

Positives, published in 1966, met with a varied critical reaction, mainly due to its highly original use of form, combining photographs and poems so that one reflected on the other. Discussion also concentrated on evaluating Gunn's experiments with free verse and a more flexible sort of language than he had used in his earlier work. The Times Literary Supplement¹ saw this language as being essentially 'tepid'. The poetry shows 'some wit and delicacy', but is undermined by 'vagueness and abstraction'. Gunn's 'captions' merely 'lay bare the parodiable elements in his style' while the photographs are a 'drab metropolitan vision', and the whole is 'an oddly over-praised concoction'. The Times² was more enthusiastic, seeing the work of the two brothers as complimentary, each photograph having a matching poem which 'draws out some sensation or physical rhythm from the picture'. The reviewer concedes that 'the poems do not easily detach from the photographs or stay in the mind', but the book as a whole is 'a moving expression of tender pleasure in life common to all mankind'. In the Sunday Times³ Cyril Connolly saw the book as the 'seven ages of man and woman.....in the urban ~~proletariate~~^{proletariat}'. He attached more value to the poems themselves than had the reviewer in the Times, describing how 'the poems take off from the photos in brief flight and develop along their own lines'. The book as a whole 'passionately clings to the present ignoring poetic artifice'. In contrast, C.B. Cox, writing in the Spectator⁴ praises Ander Gunn's photographs for their 'rich expressiveness', but sees his brother's poems as 'adjuncts not to be judged in their own right', and some of the other reviewers agree that Gunn's poetry here cannot function without the accompanying photographs.

Peter Marsh, writing in the Observer⁵ puts this point of view most succinctly. He sees the poems as little more than captions, although

modestly effective. Even though they take second place, the poems are 'adroit and wise and often genuinely moving' - the voice over the shoulder sharpening into an independent grief - but the main sense is of an almost throttling constraint'. Gunn's young toughs were 'always too cerebrally idealised, but here they are not even animated by the vigour of true envy'. Marsh sees this constraint as even affecting the texture of the verse. Some of the detail gets 'too ingeniously loaded' because the camera got there first, while images that 'could have lived mysteriously in language are here offered in merely serviceable roles'. Gunn is 'far too anxious not to say more than his commentary duly requires of him'. There is some truth in this attack although it could be argued that the constraint and 'throttling' back of the verse is intentional, and fits in with the general bareness of language, and the same quality in Ander Gunn's photographs. The same arguments are put forward by American reviewers of Positives. In the Southern Review⁶, William Heger finds the photographs 'delightful, even profound', but the poetry 'half realized' as well as 'fragmentary and shallow'. Similarly, in Poetry Chicago⁷, William Hunt detects a 'perverse bleakness' in the poetry, which defers to the photographs so that it becomes 'very nearly mute'. In a book which draws so much on public scenes, the poems should not be so 'sparing of imagination'. Gunn is at his best when describing 'the most vulnerable and most dependent' and the poems on old age suggest 'a great expense of love underlying the whole work'. Despite this, Positives is underdeveloped in 'its crucial details of the inner life'. It is difficult to see how Hunt can differentiate between these last two points, for the sense of humanity shown throughout Positives express itself best when evoking the thoughts and feelings of those photographed. Hunt is certainly correct in describing Gunn's interest in the vulnerable and pathetic (most notably in 'Confessions of the Life Artist' in Touch), and is one of the few critics to have noticed this. It is also described by John Carey, who is one of the most appreciative reviewers of

this collection.

Carey, writing in the New Statesman⁸, praises Positives' firm understanding of people's lives, and its description of youth and age in the modern city. He sees no tension between the poetry and photographs, - the 'forms reciprocate' - and he finds the poet's personality healthy and gentle, as are the people watched. Alan Ross, in the London Magazine⁹, also praises the collection. He traces the history of poems written about pictures, a difficult form attempted by Dylan Thomas in Lilliput and various poets in Gala Day London, and thinks it reasonable to think that the poems would not have been written without the photographs, although this does not invalidate them. They act as 'fairly arbitrarily related studies', and as 'neat decoration' to the photographs, and their 'overall effect is low toned, a shade muzzy' but it is real. Another critic to stress this is Graham Martin in the Listener¹⁰. Martin sees the book, as had Connolly, as the seven ages of man in modern dress. He considers the 'portraits' as better described than the 'environments', and sees the poetry and photographs as combining least well when Gunn gets 'bogged down in abstract humanism', and best when his ironic point of view crystallises the point of view of the camera. The best review of Positives was that by Martin Dodsworth in the Review¹¹, already discussed, which analyses precisely the 'tepid' quality of the verse. The collection can be seen in a far better perspective now, and as essentially as transitional a volume as My Sad Captains. It also represents a special project on Gunn's part, and is worth analysing for its own sake, as Gunn employs a diction and style he does not use elsewhere, but it is necessary to first consider what the general aims of the collection are.

Positives deals with the relation between poetry and photography, as the pun indicates, with its less negative aspects, ('negative' also being the term for an unprocessed photograph of course). The book has close resemblances to Street Children, a similar combination of poems and photo-

graphs by B.S. Johnson and Julia Trevelyan Oman,¹² published in 1964, although the coincidence could be accidental. Both books combine grainy black and white photographs of the back streets of a large city, taking human figures as their main subject, with a loose improvising poetry which discusses them on the facing page. Street Children confines itself to pictures of children, and is more adventurous in its experiments with form, but both books have roughly the same aim, and Johnson's preface to Street Children¹³ could apply to both, and serves as a surprisingly apt description of Positives.

'This book is about children growing up.....learning about the feel and appearance of physical textures....and then, having accepted their surroundings, learning that relationships with other children, with other people, are what matter most.....improvising occupation from anything. The photographs and text attempt a penetration of the enclosed world of the child, revealing the solemnity of young children who are puzzling out why people do things.....and.....their enormous confidence about living. The text attempts to complement the visual, adding the dimension of time to the static moment fixed by the camera'.

Street Children is in many ways a better book than Positives, which is generally less innovative, and a comparison between the two helps place the later book in sharper focus. Street Children is more limited in scope, but more unified in tone. Its poetry is more experimental, for, although mainly in free verse, it includes prose, placing speeches on the page corresponding to the position of their subjects in the corresponding picture, and other unorthodox types of layout. Both books contain direct speech and local references, but Johnson has a more systematic method of conveying thought and speech, dividing it into subconscious, conscious and spoken thought by typographic means. Positives, however, has strengths of its own.

Positives is essentially a special project, and its style is correspondingly unique in Gunn's work, although the result of these experiments is

crucial to Touch. The verse depends heavily on that of William Carlos Williams, with its lack of metrical constraint, use of free association, and concentration on the concrete details of reality (connected in some ways with the Imagist movement). This is far removed from Gunn's early, intellectualised, verse, and represents a further loosening up of his technique, although he retains control over his material in other, more subtle, ways. This change is most evident in the kind of diction that Gunn uses, also taken largely from Williams, and relying on understatement rather than rhetoric. It also owes something to the direct tone of much of Gary Snyder's poetry. Gunn's diction here works mainly through description, both of objects, such as the bicycle wheels in 'He rides up and down and around', and of emotions, as with the bride's happiness in 'She trembles slightly, her flesh'. This builds on the concrete details of the corresponding photograph, and description is always made subservient to the poet's viewpoint - the pictures can be taken as a mirror of external reality, and the poems as Gunn's interpretation of this data. In the 'two mirrors' poem, therefore, Gunn describes the subject of the photograph - the 'battery of headlights' and leopard skin seat of the scooter - but this all points toward what he is really concerned with, the nature of the rider himself. Gunn concentrates on the rider's sense of power, and his narcissistic self regard (he even names the scooter after himself), and brings the two together at the end of the poem.

'he catches sight of his new face
and does not
know it against the new landscape'

The diction echoes this, describing objects in concrete terms, but combining this with a philosophical, almost abstract terminology which conveys Gunn's dapper interests. This second use of diction is seen in 'It is a lament', which uses such terms as 'opaque level', 'transparent knot' and 'ridged with strength', whose complexity is far removed from the apparent simplicity of

the volume. As in much of Gunn's later poetry, the language in Positives is direct rather than simple, and this allows a great flexibility. The diction is at times conversational. 'We didn't do up this pub', 'You have no idea' and 'Money is a form of dirt' evoke precisely three distinct social groups - East End working class, the shabby-genteel, and City business men. On the other hand, 'No music in this boozer' and 'Lebensraum' use more conventional speech patterns to convey a particular emotion as well as class dialects - disillusion, and a sense of horror. Most of the poems, however, are narrated in Gunn's own voice, and this can be, in turn, descriptive in 'He feels a breeze rise', intellectualised in 'An impetus', and even violent in 'At times, at the edge of smoke'. This last poem, for example, uses broken syntax, insistent statement, and typographical devices - such as the capitals in 'I want to get you out of the WAY' - to achieve its effect. The poems about childhood and old age use a more gentle and restrained diction, and this is particularly effective in 'Something approaches', with its sense of quiet balance.

'Let it come, it is
the terror of full repose
and so no terror'

This feeling of sympathetic but unaligned directness is helped by the sort of verse that Gunn uses throughout Positives, and which makes such an important turning point in his work.

Apart from the quatrain on tea, which is a deliberate pastiche, almost all of Positives is in free verse. Gunn, however, keeps control over his verse by his use of syntax, and his mastery of repetition and balance. This is seen, for example, in 'It is stone', which uses the motifs of stone wind and the tramp's bundle to bind the poem together. The diction contributes to this by being careful, and repetitive, and relies on the slight emphasis given by the verse to the final word of each line.

'It is not a symbolic
bridge, but a real bridge;
nor is the bundle
a symbol.....'

The restriction of capital letters to the start of a new sentence also helps the flow of the verse, and reduces the pause between successive lines. Gunn also derives poetic effect from using lines of radically different lengths. This is seen most clearly in 'Two mirrors', which derives its rhythm from the alternation of lines of three and eight syllables, but this is done unobtrusively, and the reader only notices the change in pace from quickly read long lines to the emphatic short ones. As already noted, 'At times, on the edge of smoke' is even more broken, mirroring the lines that best explain the poem,

'the music has come back
but distorted, uncontrolled'.

Another interesting device is seen in 'The music starts, tentative', which is punctuated as if it were a musical score, and this, again ties in with its subject matter. More important is the way Gunn shifts from one to another. This is seen most clearly in 'I have closed my briefcase', which is divided into three distinct sections; an objective statement, in prose, about the tasks abandoned for the tea break, a quatrain, in the style of Pope, on the delights of tea, and a section, in free verse, supposedly spoken by one of the workmen in the photograph. This device is used, more subtly, in other poems, and, like the previous devices mentioned, serves as a sort of structure on the verse. This is seen in the preceding poem, 'The liver and the onions is off', where the waitress's dissatisfaction merges into a feeling of universal ennui. The final type of patterning device is that of metaphor. This is seen best in a poem like 'She rests on and in', which describes the girl's joy in terms of, first, a swimmer and, second, the ripples spreading from the middle of a pool. This change

from one metaphor to another that can logically develop from it attains the sense of time passing Gunn wishes to evoke, and the poem itself is at ease, and extends itself, in a similar way. By these methods, then, the verse of Positives is less formal but just as controlled as Gunn's earlier work.

This also applies to his use of reference and subject matter in this book.

The old complex allusiveness of, say, Fighting Terms has disappeared, to be replaced by a new interest in the external world, particularly that of the modern city. The only literary echoes are in 'Drink me', which compares the cruel haughtiness of the young girl with that of Lewis Carroll's Alice, and the stanza on tea which uses Pope's style, and perhaps echoes the line in The Rape of the Lock, 'dost sometimes counsel take - and sometimes tea', illustrating a similar incongruity, between the solemn and the mundane. In both cases the literary references are obvious, and used in a simple way. The real sphere of reference in these poems is the modern city, in this case London, and the people who live there. There are many local references, including the Thames in 'He feels the breeze', Harrods in 'You have no idea' and the demolished Marble Arch Odeon in 'Like a Cliff'. More widespread phenomena include Tesco, Woolworth and Archie's in 'The responsibilities' and the Salvation Army in 'It is stone'. The evocation of modern city life is even more widespread than these direct references suggest, taking in such settings as a warehouse, a bar, a fairground and building site, and the people described are all seen against the background of this environment. However, it is with these people themselves, rather than the city in which they live, that both Ander and Thom Gunn are primarily concerned, and Positives traces human life from extreme youth to extreme age, as can be seen by a close investigation of the poems themselves.

Positives opens with a photograph of a child that has just been born, and ends with one of a landscape covered with snow (presumably symbolising death), but neither of these pictures is accompanied by a poem, for they are self explanatory. All of the remaining photographs are accompanied by

poems that attempt to draw out their inherent meaning, and some of these seem both flimsy and precious when divorced from their context, especially when analysed in depth, but they are perfectly adequate when their function in Positives as a whole is understood. The photographs and poems, taken together, form a satisfying and coherent whole, and are organised into sections on childhood, adolescence, marriage, work, relaxation, and old age, with an interlude on the arrival of full experience in the middle. The first fifteen poems form a sequence that describe the process of growing up, from childhood to the end of adolescence, the final poem of which, 'she can't help it, can't' (I shall refer to the first lines of those poems that have no set title) describes the fruition of this process, just as the first describes its start.

This poem, 'She has been a germ, a fish'¹⁴, deals with a baby who has reached some sort of awareness of the external world, but, like the baby in the first photograph, is still immersed in water, which forms a sort of substitute for the safety of the womb. The poem traces the baby's development so far - 'she has been a germ, a fish, and an animal' - and her tenuous hold on humanity - 'she is almost without hair or sex' - but also suggests the beginning of human perceptions. Her body is 'feeling its way', just as her feet 'press out in the strange element'. The poem ends with a reminder of the natural flux against which the whole of Positives is set.

'there is a perception of
warm water, warm, but cooling'

(The absence of a full stop here suggests the continuity of this process, a device used in ten other poems here for the same reason). The following poem, 'The body blunders forward'¹⁵, continues this idea of discovery, describing a slightly older girl, now a toddler, who blunders 'into the next second' in her 'awkward bold half-aware fashion'. This process is still new, 'doing things for the first time', and Gunn elaborates this with a detailed metaphor, as he did in 'Book of the Dead', which examines

this idea of exploration on a different plane. The girl's 'uncertain progress' is compared with the opening up of a new country 'from coast to interior' to make a 'workable route' for later development, for both explore a new range of possibilities. Gunn conveys well the sheer joy of this exploration.

'Meanwhile, before the next push,
a triumph, a triumph!

The next poem, 'But childhood takes a long time'¹⁶, contains the first indication of the difficulties involved in this endeavour, and, in this, sets off a chain of comparisons and contrasts that runs through the whole sequence. The process of growing up is seen as also sapping a child's strength, although this itself leads to growth.

'Something is feeding on you,
and it is what you feed on.
The source of your strength guts you'.

This 'pleasurable pain' is quintessentially human, and is caught accurately in the accompanying photograph, in which a girl cradles a doll to his cheek, for it can reach

'a painful conclusion
with a tooth or with a thought'.

This is typical of Gunn's verse in Positives and later books, combining physical and mental processes, and therefore indicating the connection between them, and works well here. 'Drink me'¹⁷, the following poem, continues this development, for the girl has grown more assured, and her thoughts are better defined. She expresses impatience, mixed with a new cruelty, at the realization that 'childhood takes a long time' achieved in the previous poem. Whereas in Alice in Wonderland 'you grew or shrank' at will, in real life 'here you have to wait', and this breeds a certain petulance

'In a bus it is nice to ride on top because
it looks like running people over'.

This sentence, with its rapid list of monosyllabic words, captures the breathless speech of young children, just as the whole poem captures the arrogance of the girl in the photograph, sprawled regally on a high chair.

'In watchful community'¹⁸, the next poem, describes a group of small boys who have now reached school age, and shows the development of a new spirit of comradeship - the poems so far have dealt with a single girl as she grows from a baby to about the age of five. It is also the first poem to be spoken in full by the subject, or subjects, of the photograph. The boys here gather in 'watchful community', playing truant from school and enjoying the security of friendship.

'while we stand
our bodies are increasing
in secret society'

The poem is also the most atmospheric so far, indicating the growing child's increased awareness of the external world. Here they stand by a warehouse, sheltering from the rain, and smell 'the musty rot of wood from floorboards where sacks have lain'. (Gunn returns to a similar scene in 'The Produce District'). This evocativeness is new in Gunn's work, and is seen even more clearly in the next poem. 'He rides up and down, and around:'¹⁹, with the sense of circularity it conveys.

'All things radiate from the spokes under
that hard structure of bars crossing
precisely and usefully.....'

The poem describes the onset of adolescence, for in this world where 'all things are means to wheely ends', an older boy 'leans against an iron fence....and dreams of cars'.

The next nine poems explore the gradual coming to full adulthood prepared for here. The first, 'and they start to cross the road'²⁰,

describes this in terms of the awakening of sexual awareness, and, as in 'the body blunders forward', describes this in terms of an extended metaphor. The girls in the photograph are seen by Gunn as combining limit and fullness in a way similar to that praised in the second part of My Sad Captains, for they have 'life swelling in them', but are also aware of 'cherishing their containment'. Unfortunately, the metaphor used to convey this is almost as inept as the image in the fourth stanza of 'Misanthropos' Vll, comparing the act of love with the pollinating of flowers by bees. It is the detail of this that is so misjudged,

'and pollen will encrust
will weigh the treading of
these black hairy legs,'

but the image itself does convey the rich potential, the 'compact segmented buds', of these adolescent girls. A similar quality is praised in the next poem 'Youth is power. He knows it',²¹.

This poem describes the subject of the photograph as 'a rough young animal' who reaches

'into the world beyond
at ease in his power. For
can there be limits?'

The youth's pose is one of full potential, and rejects even the 'containment' of the previous poem, and the rest of Positives can be seen as an answer to this question, just as it resolves the way

'He makes now
a fine gesture, inviting
experience to try him'.

The next poem, 'She rests on and in',²², describes a similar confidence, this time in a girl. Just as the youth was 'an animal that can smile', the girl's sense of mastery over her surroundings is expressed in the way she laughs, 'like an expert swimmer', and is fully relaxed, playfully using

'her full uncrippled strength
in a sort of hearty surprise'.

The way that this joy spreads, and continues 'to be born at the centre' is compared to ripples going 'outward over cool water', and thus refer back to the first poem, showing how the 'strange element' is now mastered. This idea of control over one's environment is continued in the next six poems.

Three of these deal with the photographs of a pop group who sing 'about life by the Mersey'. In the first, 'The music starts tentative'²³, sets the scene, as the audience gradually realize

'at the edges of themselves how
something is encroaching.....'

The second poem, 'Pete'²⁴, describes the delicacy of this music, set against the rough background of the musicians, and hints that this music, like the laughter in the previous poem, is a sign of their humanity. Pete Mackie returns from work 'covered with mud', his

'fingers feeling like things
in their casts of yellow clay'.

However, in the evening these hands that were 'clamps for a spade' turn into 'delicate and precise instruments'. This is even more remarkable where even the flowers are plastic ones. The third poem on this theme, the next but one in the sequence, accompanies a close up of this musician, and investigates more deeply the source of this music. The poem, 'It is a lament, and then'²⁵, describes how the singer has discovered 'the bubbling source of both joy and lamentation', and is able to turn emotion into

'the ripples which course out from that
centre, ridged with strength'.

This is similar to the way that the girl's laughter in 'She rests on and in' spread out, and, in both, emotion is the motivation for, as well as the expression of, their humanity -

'feeling is the thrust in
the transparent knot, and is
the knot itself.....'

The poems that, respectively, precede and follow 'it is a lament, and then' are both concerned with the pleasure of extreme speed. The first, 'two mirrors',²⁶, examines the narcissism of the boy on the scooter shown in the photograph. He is 'self-regarding', his scooter is 'named after himself' and examines the world 'by a battery of headlights', although he is also a learner, 'tentative but with increasing momentum'. However, this self regard is transferred in this new environment

'he catches sight of his own face
and does not
know it against the new landscape'

The companion poem, 'An impetus: its roar, its music',²⁷, describes an older and more assured rider, this time on a motorcycle. The machine is seen as both mastering and being mastered by its rider, and the external world becomes a blur, 'a wind on water', and its resistance 'defines the impetus' of the rider. Just as in 'Pete', where humanity is seen to exist in the middle of the roughly physical, here it is the 'hard centre' of this impetus, 'a gentleness projected at great speed'.

The final poem to deal with adolescence, 'She can't help it, can't',²⁸, also describes this sense of mastery over one's environment. The girl, running through the fairground, feels 'an overflowing like tears, uncontrollable', and, as in 'It is a lament, and then',

'Something pulses in her, warm
rapid, and regular, with a
music she can almost hear'

This poem is also connected with 'and they start to cross the road', for it describes a similar delight in one's sensuality, and the girl is fully aware of the suddenness of this happiness - 'to this music she dances the

dance of her luck'. The poem marks the culmination of the first movement of Positives, which describes the gradual arrival at self awareness, and at adulthood.

The next four poems deal with marriage. The first of these, 'She trembles slightly: her flesh'²⁹, contrasts strongly with the previous poem, but expresses a similar happiness at one's fullness. Here, however, it is even more attractive because of its vulnerability, and 'You catch your breath at the risk'. As with the girl in the previous poem,

'choice meets delight
which is fair and fragile,'

and the bride 'bears the lace like her own handmaiden'. The following poem, 'The responsibilities'³⁰, is an abrupt contrast to this, but expresses a similar happiness, although in terms of the mundane - 'Tesco, Woolworth and Archie's' - and celebrates the same sense of new experience,

'you will get home
and I will give you a big
tea on our own table',

By the time of 'In a family, there is'³¹ this excitement has gone, and is replaced by the closeness, but also the tedium, of family life. There is a sense of 'Many doing many things' and all the children with 'different personalities', but this proves illusory;

'and all the Rostov children
come out together, doing
the same thing in the same way'.

Both poems have rather tenuous links with the photographs they describe, and this is particularly true of 'The responsibilities', where Gunn makes no reference to the bizarre picture of a woman who walks with a shopping basket perched on her head. The final poem on marriage is far closer to the actual photograph it describes. This poem, 'No music in this boozier'³², (titled 'Canning Town' in Poems 1950-66) describes the disintegration of a

marriage as the husband sits alone in a pub, 'a dry foul taste in his mouth', and dozes 'into a twilight', describing how his wife has left him,

'She says she's with her
Mother, though my
theory is it's a fellow'.

The next two poems continue this sense of oppression, and provide an interval for reflection at the problems of existence that are becoming apparent after the easy optimism of the opening poems. The first, 'Syon House',³³, is also the first poem to make reference to the world of Nature. It opens with a straight forward description of the garden of Syon House, 'dew on blackberry bushes', but the poet soon realizes that

'.....there is a mystery: strange
forms push in from outside
I am oppressed by a sense of columns'.

The 'pressure' of these columns is continual because they are not human, and therefore 'have no mind or feeling to vacillate', or to exhibit the change shown by the subjects of Positives, who grow from childhood to old age. The sense of claustrophobia here given by stone columns is caused by other people in 'Lebensraum',³⁴, where the victim finds

'that in my every move
I prevent someone
from stepping where I step',

('Lebensraum' itself refers to the 'living space' that imperialist Germany wished to have, which is a counterpart of the man's desire for free space in which to move). Life should be a 'humane undertaking', but the man feels he must 'run into the open, alone' until

'the bacillus of despair is
rendered harmless:
isolated and frozen over'.

This despair is alleviated in the following seven poems by the mechanics of

work, and the texture of city life, although the image of disease reoccurs towards the end of Positives. As it is, this poem shows how an adult has to face a despair unknown to the growing adolescents, and this despair is not fully dissipated until the 'full repose' of the final poem.

The next four poems deal directly with various kinds of employment. The first 'Like a cliff, Marble'³⁵ describes work on a building site, where an old cinema has been demolished, and is now 'a hollow where the encrusted cliff was'. Instead of commissionaires, a donkey jacket keeps watch on the scene, and the workers move 'below the mixer's belly', their 'own bulk submerged in sunlight'. The poem is almost pure description, although it does contain the sense of time passing in the destruction of the old cinema, and the hidden order of the 'distant men in caps' who 'move about the uneven space'. The next poem, 'We didn't do up this pub'³⁶, is a much closer study of human effort, this time of a barmaid in the East End, and again deals also with the passing of time. The pub has been modernised, its pipes painted gold, but it is not 'like them redecorated pubs down Chelsea', and it still has 'snob-screens in a twinkling row', and even 'big glass mirrors' until the 'protection boys.....broke them, for a warning'. The barmaid moves 'about her routine' among 'smells of hops or malt' that

'haunt the polished wood,
each in its place'.

Just as satisfying is the manual labour described in 'He raises the pick, point against'³⁷ (which was called 'The Left Handed Irishman' in Poems 1950-66). This poem describes the workman's sense of balance, 'his own weight divided fairly between his legs', and the way he guides his pick down on 'the inanimate rubble'. There is 'skill in getting the proper stance', and the point falls 'through an arc',

'.....the human
behind it in control
tiring, but tiring slowly'.

Human skill is relevant even here, achieving perfect control over one's own physical effort. The last of these four poems is more satirical, but exhibits a similar sense of mastery. This poem, 'Money is a form of dirt'³⁸, deals with City businessmen, in contrast with the workman in the previous poem, and Gunn makes fun of their pose of weightiness. Money is 'a form of dirt', but 'dirt has weight', and 'your expression must appear weighty'. Even subordinates and clients imitate this, and the resemblance is increased by the 'crowning weight of our bowlers', from

'which weight seeps so potently that
sometimes we have to take them off'.

The next two poems mark an abrupt change of both place and atmosphere, for they are set in a street in which action is obscured by a thick pall of black smoke. The first of these, 'The rubble rises in smoke'³⁹, makes this smoke resemble city life itself, for it is 'everywhere.....unescapable.... an inhabited confusion'. People 'fumble towards each other' in this 'greasy obscurity', and this, although unsatisfactory, is better than the 'pure and open air' of the countryside, for 'on the downs one would be merely alone'. The bias in Gunn's poetry towards city life, as seen in 'In Praise of Cities' and 'A Map of the City', is apparent again in this poem, and for the same reason - a city, whatever its faults, is both 'the work of man' and full of men themselves. This encounter with other men, however, is not always friendly, and is 'At times, on the edge of smoke'⁴⁰, takes the form of a fight. The obscurity of the syntax matches the obscurity of the action, and, although men 'fumble towards each other' as in the previous poem, they want the other 'out of the WAY', and 'words will not do' for this impulse 'has to be got from the blood'. Music, which expressed harmony in earlier poems such as 'It is a lament, and then' and 'She can't help it, can't', has returned 'distorted, uncontrolled', just as the impulses that prompted the motorcyclist and the girl in the fairground are now 'excreta', leading to the same feeling of negation as in 'Lebensraum' - 'I want to get myself

out of the WAY'. The same emotion, in a less extreme form, is dealt with in 'The liver and onions is off'⁴¹, which captures well the mood of boredom shown by the waitress in the photograph. The 'golden sponge pud' is off, and 'so it appears, are the customers'. It is possible to grow tired of city life for

'.....the variety of the pavements
being endless, itself may need
varying. But with what?'

This question remains unanswered in Positives, although it is significant that the two remaining sections deal with, in turn, relaxation and old age. This poem represents the impasse reached when the fresh experience sought after in most of the earlier poems becomes itself in need of variation.

The next two poems deal with two disparate groups of people taking tea, workers on a building site, and women in a cafe. The first of these, 'I have closed my briefcase, dropped my'⁴², shows how all the activities so far described stop for 'the teabreak'. The businessmen in 'Money is a form of dirt', the workman in 'He raises his pick, point against', the barmaid in 'We didn't do up this pub', the road sweeper in 'The rubble rises in smoke' and even the men fighting in 'At times, on the edge of smoke' all stop work for this, and Gunn satirises it in a quatrain in the style of Pope.

'When God bade labour for our burden, He
Relented slightly at the end,
And granted respite twice a day, for tea'.

The tone of this contrasts greatly with the conversation that Gunn imagines the men in the photograph having -

'Make it strong Jonesy
that's how I like it, strong
with plenty of sugar'.

The next poem, 'you have no idea what a'⁴³, describes the life of the women

in the photograph, who express exasperation at the rich lives they lead - 'what with servants and jewels' - and feel relief at being able to sit down with 'an espresso and a tiny slice of expensive cake'. Of course, this is all pretence, but it is just as difficult to maintain this facade as to actually live the life that they pretend to.

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

The remaining poems in Positives deal with old age, and in these poems experiences exist as memories rather than things to be freshly encountered. This change is seen in the first of these poems, 'the pigeon lifts, a few feet'⁴⁴. The road-sweeper, 'leavings of other men his takings', watches the girl across the street 'not with hope or even much desire', but carefully

'cataloguing an authentic
treasure in the quiet
collection of his mind'.

This is compared, in a rather obvious way, with a young pigeon

'its pink claws clutched on themselves
like a baby's featured hands:'

whose female 'cowers in fear and delight'. The old man is 'no young pigeon', he has ceased fluttering', and replaces action with contemplation. The image of the pigeon is made even more gratuitous by the absence of any such bird in the photograph, but the poem does convey an important contrast between youth and age. The roadsweeper has a face 'like some gnarled shiny section of black wood', and the process of ageing this reveals is explored further in the next poem, 'The memoirs of the body'⁴⁵. Here, the photograph itself is of an old man's face, wrinkled and careworn, and Gunn makes this a symbol for the results of the passing of time. The lines themselves represent 'the memoirs of the body', but make an 'ambiguous story' because

they can be seen either as

'the ability to resist
annihilation, or as the small
but constant losses endured'.

However, the flesh represents 'life itself', and, expanding the metaphor of these creases as lines in a book, one can read this 'while its sentences cross and recross'. The final two lines counteract the first meaning of this 'ambiguous story', for this poem becomes, inoperative 'in the event of death', for this destroys the life 'between the lines'. This is the first direct reference to death, and prepares for the final poem, 'Something approaches, about', as, in fact, do all of the remaining poems.

The first of these, 'He feels a breeze rise from'⁴⁶, (given the title 'The Conversation of Old Men' in Poems 1950-66) describes two old men talking in a London park, and feeling a breeze that comes from the Thames, in

'intimate contact with
water, slimy hulls,
dark wood greenish
at waterline.....'

The wind leaves 'what it lightly touches' and suggests, in a more subtle way than the image used so far, the transitory nature of youth, or even life itself, 'touching then leaving', and the final line, 'the life of wind on water', echoes the poem on the motorcyclist, where this wind is mastered and made to express energy. Here, the old man merely 'goes on talking' as the wind passes by. In the next poem, 'It is stone: and if ripples'⁴⁷, this wind has become 'cold, stone hard', and the tramp in the picture cannot

'feel more than the flat
stone of the bridge, and his bundle'.

The 'ripples' of the river below 'touch the base of its arches', but the

tramp cannot feel them, just as he has lost the impetus of the girl laughing or the singer in the pop group, whose youthful vitality put forth similar ripples. This sort of allegory has disappeared -

'It is not a symbolic
bridge but a real bridge
nor is the bundle
a symbol.....'

The old man's discomfort is not metaphysical, as it was in 'Lebensraum' or 'The liver and onions is off', but actual. Salvation Army tea is 'not sweet enough'. Positives ends with a similar figure, an old female tramp who sleeps outside an abandoned house on 'old papers', and she, like the man here, represents the plight of the very old in an extreme form, but one of general relevance.

The first⁴⁸ of the three poems to deal with this old woman describes the processes of decay, and return to the image of disease first used in 'Lebensraum'. This 'infected compost' of mould, damp sticks, netting, bones leaves, and 'slabs of rust, felt, feathers', with the mingling of the remains of animals, plants and refuse that this indicates, has affinities with the later 'Elegy on the Dust', and even 'The Garden of the Gods', for all three contain both remnants of the past and indications of the future. Here, the 'infection' in this rubbish is 'slow, slight, deep, and..... responds to warmth'. In a similar way, the old woman 'stirs in the sun', and she too has 'certain needs'. In the next poem, 'Poking around the rubbish',⁴⁹ the woman searches, but 'can't find what she wants'. She remembers the past, 'near Maidstone once, hop picking', working in 'the dim leafy light of the overhanging vines', with her husband and children, but her memory is patchy, and these memories are

'All in the rubbish heap now
some rotting, most clean vanished'.

Just as Positives has built up a structure of experiences, it now suggests

their dissolution with the process of time (in the same way as the end of 'Confessions of the Life Artist'). All that remains is the coming of death, and this is described in the final poem 'Something approaches, about',⁵⁰ which comments on a close up of the previous photograph. (This poem is called 'The Old Woman' in Poems 1950-66). The old woman looks up, with an expression of terror, for

'Her deaf ears have caught it, like
silence in the wainscot
by her head.....'

and she watches the approach of death 'like moonlight on the frayed wood' that is 'stealing toward her floorboard by floorboard'. The poem ends by dispelling her fears.

'Let it come, it is
the terror of full repose
and so no terror',

Death represents 'full repose' after the rigours of life, and marks a return to the first photograph of all. The final photograph, of a snow scene, indicates both the end and the beginning of the whole process. The poem 'Snowfall' in Touch, which seems to allude to this photograph, describes how 'people look circumspect against the white', but indicates that life continues, 'hoarded under layers of wool', and 'unseen below' in the frozen brooks that 'still work a secret network through the land'. The next logical step is a return to spring, and the beginning again of the whole process, and, in this way, Positives is circular, as are the events it describes. The linear organisation is satisfying in the way that the passing of time provides a structure for the whole sequence.

Positives is important both in its own right and as a sign of Gunn's increasing interest in the external world, and of his moving away from existentialist dogma. Gunn's poems match the insight of his brother's photographs, and, as John Carey noted, 'the forms dancingly reciprocate:

words authenticated by the camera, photographs loosed from rigidity by poems'. The presence of the photographs stimulate Gunn's powers of description, and his experiments with describing Nature, as in 'Syon House', or emotion, as in 'She rests on and in', lead to the more assured verse of Touch and Moly. The looseness of the verse itself also leads to the less taut, more relaxed of Gunn's later poetry. This process can also be seen in the other poems that Gunn was writing at this time, but which have not yet been collected. It can be traced back to the poems that appeared soon after the publication of The Sense of Movement, and follows a similar course to the development already described in My Sad Captains and Positives.

The earliest of these poems to appear, 'Interrogated to Interrogator'⁵¹, is, understandably, the closest to Gunn's early, existential, verse. The poem deals with torture, or rather the relationship between the prisoner and his torturer, and it is with this relationship that Gunn is most concerned, and the way that, through it, these roles become reversed. The poem is narrated by the 'interrogated', who takes active pleasure in this situation, and looks forward to it 'as eagerly as if the time were spent in chosen dalliance'. He reconstructs the 'Event' about which he is being questioned, although

'I know I do not see it as it was,
But only as I say it was, unable
To know that it took place behind my words',

The interrogator is also 'at...ease', because the prisoner is 'a player equal to all your ingenuity', and he analyses him 'like a biographer'. The two are 'committed to each other thus' and will 'never be other than accomplices' in this struggle, for it seems that neither can achieve dominance over the other. However, the prisoner's sense of mastery over this situation leads to a reversal of these roles, whether actual or imagined;

'I cleave to this alone: to the light bunched
 On the holster where the gun lies loose, unused,
 To you, my prisoner, my interrogated'

This is an extraordinary poem, turning this situation of terror into one that is close to that of love (It is in fact the most direct love poem, apart from 'For a Birthday', that Gunn had then written).

A similar transference of roles is described in 'Knowledge'⁵², which is a far more serious poem, but expresses the same sort of love reached through extremity, as was also shown in 'The Beaters'. The poem deals directly with torture, and is another example of Gunn's refusal to avoid difficult or even distasteful subject matter, and is a good example of how he can remain detached without becoming callous. The worst aspect of the torturers is 'the yearning look with which they gazed into their victim's faces', for, in these 'geometric places', it is more honest

'Than the frown of one pretending that he took
 Payment for disobedience, or the lines
 Of ingenuity edging another's grin'.

In this way the guards and prisoners are drawn together in a strange new relationship, for 'the tortured yearned as well', wishing for 'the disguise, active and whole, of these brisk torturers', at the same time as each clenches 'his courage when the pain got worse', and the torturers tear 'at sinews as if they were vines'. Even in this extreme situation,

'.....at times the pain of searching eyes
 Met, wavered, fixed, and for an incredible slow
 Moment of moments seemed to understand',

the nature of the question facing both torturers and victims - 'have you yet learned how much you want to know?'

Other poems deal with this same problem of how far human experience should extend, but take as their setting life in a modern city, as did most of the poems in My Sad Captains and, of course, Positives. 'All Night

Burlesque'⁵³ describes the inhabitants of a city, and the way that their obsessions are magnified and given life on the cinema screen. The poem starts 'from Skid Row' where 'gaunt wonderers are its only flux', and describes these outcasts, as

'Their eyes lit with an untenable glow, they stray
- Vaguely, but not with drink - from here to there',

Gunn, 'as stiff as they', walks until he is halted by 'a compact diadem', the screen of, presumably, a pornographic movie house,

'Beneath which sit the dreaming, faces white:
Marine and hunchback without ruling them
Gaze at the fluent vehicles of light'.

The objects of their desire are both vast - 'nipples like hubcaps tilt across the screen' - and unreachable, 'forms that make it only to our eyes'. They are not even perfect, for the model's 'chin is sharp and her eyes beady', but these images of sexuality both fulfil certain needs and avoid contact with reality.

'We sit here hour by hour, with mouths gone dry,
Greyly remote from the complex and less heavy
Commitment of the flesh, yet transfixed by
Her curved and tense versimilitude',

In this 'burlesque', the watchers are removed from real life, but imagine themselves to be part of it, and this is true of their whole existence. These 'shaped intangibles' represent the 'familiar matter of obsession, crude, contrived', and these outcasts 'have always to sit out'. The poem combines the basic situation of 'The Corridor', that of a man obtaining vicarious satisfaction from watching others, and deriving a false sense of mastery over experience, with Gunn's sympathy for the outcast. The tension between these two concerns gives the poem additional resonance, without confusing its basic issues.

A more direct encounter with a city dweller is described in 'An

Inhabitant'⁵⁴, where this takes the form of a mental battle. Gunn watches the inhabitant trying 'to size me up', and admires 'the candour in your assessal of the market' and the sense of style with which 'you loaf there planning to break laws'. This nonchalence, 'carried like a conviction', comes from the natural refusal of the man to see

'That a good act repeated should be made
Either a mystique or an affliction'.

Gunn far prefers this direct chicanery to the motives of 'blind vanity, domination or self pity' that enter 'with the face of love to rule the brain and branch into the tissue'. The inhabitant tilts back 'with a silent gap-toothed laugh', deciding that Gunn is equal to his guile, and resumes 'the appraisal of more profitable men'. Gunn admires the way he lives by his wits, acting neither like 'obsessive turk' or 'protagonist of the play Malaise', but 'for pleasure and gain'. This cunning self aggrandisement is nothing more than 'gain of a healthy body at its work'. The very lack of complexity of this poem, inconsequential as it is, indicates a new interest in the lives of ordinary people. This is also true of 'Signs of an Undertaking'⁵⁵ where an old woman in a bus, 'twisting a wink from her soiled worn face', and taunting the driver 'with cough and cackle', reveals in this signs of her commitment to life. These indications are without

'the drama of fall or spring:
they are small but explicit'

and, in these, Gunn realizes that 'mine are at once revealed', for he too has this commitment, as have all those who are alive.

This idea is extended in two later poems, 'Telegraph Avenue' and 'Kunfurstendamm'. 'Telegraph Avenue'⁵⁶ describes children on their way back home from school, passing along a street in San Francisco. Their 'loud tomfoolery' is no longer 'that of juniors', for, as happened with the children in Positives,

'....uninvited, awareness
without knowledge gently enters
their young bodies in the sunlight'.

This can be seen in the 'absurd pose of ^{nonchalance}~~nonchalence~~' a young girl practises,
but the process is not yet complete, and it is this that makes the children
so attractive - 'awkward in their play and bright in their incompleteness'.

They do not yet have the full ^{nonchalance}~~nonchalence~~ of the man in 'An inhabitant',
but are in the process of growth, as indicated by the sunlight in which
they move. This sense of being at ease, also seen in 'Back to Life', is
further explored in 'Kurfurstendamm'⁵⁷, (which presumably was written
during Gunn's stay in Berlin). Once such 'Sunday ambitions' as 'getting
blind drunk' or 'a visit to the Zoo' are accomplished, the citizens begin
their promenade, extending themselves at ease, 'as if they had just woken
from long sleep'. They move, 'alert and rested',

'in a great warm peace
and recover the visible',

In this new receptiveness to the external world, they can distinguish 'a
thing from a wish', and 'the world gains on them, detail by detail' until,
fully at their ease, they tread 'between recognitions'. This new acceptance
of, and participation in, the minutiae of existence, with a corresponding
clarity of detail, points forward to the more assured verse of Touch.

This is also true of poems on more abstract or generalised themes.
'Das Liebesleben'⁵⁸ deals, as does the later 'The Kiss at Bayreuth', with
Wagnerian opera, but in this poem Gunn shows how incomplete a view of love
this provides, while his own attitude is conveyed by the light, almost
jovial, tone he employs. When Tristan and Isolde are rewarded with 'the
ultimate in orgasms (death)', the whole audience, including even 'the
programme sellers', weeps, for

'this, we know, was Love: high toned
sexual play, bound for death or
disaster.....'

However, 'off stage....matters are a bit different, for sex is not the whole of love, but merely a

'pink member, like a friendly
dog, nuzzling and raising hell',

This sort of poetic whimsy is fortunately rare for Gunn, but the poem becomes still more embarrassing -

'love involves things neither Tris-
tran nor you could ever do:
such as washing the dishes',

The banality of the last line, and even the splitting of the word 'Tristran' between two lines, is uncharacteristic of Gunn, but the meaning of the poem remains valid. Love involves neither merely the heroic or the sexual, but as in 'Thoughts on Unpacking', it is 'an arranging', and 'Das Liebesleben' indicates Gunn's development away from the narrow sexuality of Fighting Terms to the more inclusive view of Touch, however bad a poem it is itself.

More impressive an achievement is 'From an Asian Tent (Alexander thinks of his Father)',⁵⁹, which deals with the relationship between the two. This in some ways resembles that described in 'Interrogated to Interrogator' and 'Knowledge', for mutual hatred brings, eventually, a kind of extreme love. Alexander remembers his dead father, and his barbarism, even though he tries to forget him, just as he replaced

'The pelts, fur trophies and hacked skulls that you
Drunkenly hooked up while the bone still bled'

with 'emblems of an airy Helleric blue'. Alexander has derived his love of military life from his father, for he remembers, (or perhaps has invented in order to fulfil this wished-for relationship) an incident in which 'you held me once before the army's eyes'. He has tried to expunge the memory of his father by the simple expedient of outdoing his exploits

'Remembering that you never reached the East,
 I have made it mine to the obscurest temple;
 Yet each year look more like the man I least
 Choose to resemble.....'

Alexander cannot rid himself of this decision, however hard he tries, and still cannot determine 'are you a warning, Father, or an example'. The poem both reveals Gunn's ability to describe a historical character in an original and complex way (as in 'Helen's Rape') and makes a more general statement about the difficulty of a civilised man when confronted with the barbarism from which he has developed. It is interesting that this situation is the corollary of the problem faced by ^{Coriolanus}~~Coriolanus~~, another of Gunn's heroes, who fought, with similar lack of success, to escape the influence of his mother.

One of the most important poems for Gunn's future development to be published at this time was 'A School of Resistance'⁶⁰, which stresses the essential tenet that 'to endure is to grow', and shows a similar interest to the later 'Aqueduct' in the sheer tenacity of Nature. The poem describes the 'ice plant', that is not yet in flower, but 'extends, a springy floor over the rocks and sand' and forms a vantage point for 'whoever rests here and watches the sea's explosion'. Gunn admires the sea's

'Cold hard light, from this I must
 always begin, to see clear,
 the look of mid-December'.

This corresponds to the clarity of air celebrated in the second half of My Sad Captains, and here the scene is unified by a similar 'chilly blown dryness'. When spring comes, the ice plant will 'break into mild stars', but it must first endure the cold, and it is this that Gunn admires. Each of the leaves seems like a stem, 'bulging and greenish grey', but they contain life inside them, and this enables them to survive the winter. 'Snap them, they are moist inside', and this moisture keeps them alive,

as well as contrasting with the apparent deadness of their exterior. This increased interest in the ~~processed~~^{process} of Nature, even though still tied to a human moral, leads on to the more assured nature poems of Moly.

The four poems published between My Sad Captains and Touch extend this process. 'Out of Breath'⁶¹ deals with the need for action to express one's humanity to the full, but treats this in a more sensitive way than in the past. The poem begins, as did 'Das Liebesleben', by expressing caution at too much intensity. Gunn has tried to summon up a great sense of emotion, but finds himself unable to do so.

'I am out of breath because
I've been trying to match deep
sighs, groans, and gasps, when I was
really more inclined to sleep',

He doubts his fitness 'for such intensity, and would far rather 'feel nothing much', for 'nothing' is exact (a statement, in fact, argued against in 'The Annihilation of Nothing'). Gunn, however, conjures up a life of ease, in which

'I'll sit beside a drunk friend
staring through the open door
and play cards all the weekend',

In this way, he can live, working in 'the same dull job', without 'appearing to breathe at all'. In reply, Gunn's questioner reminds him that this is to reject the burden of being fully alive, for 'the dead are out of breath' too. In existential terms, by refusing to fully commit himself to a course of action, and accepting the choices that this involves, a man becomes a mere agent of chance. Gunn realizes his folly in wishing to escape the disadvantages of being a free agent, and decides to renew his search for intensity, for it enables him to remain fully human.

'I'll get mine back in secret
and breathe low. For how else could
I draw on a cigarette?'

The final line is almost as banal as that of 'Das Liebesleben', but the poem does show Gunn's constant concern with the rationale of action.

This is also explored in 'Tending Bar'⁶², which describes the 'menace in lack of fear' that the barman shows. He acts 'with the impartial firm grace of good humour', fully at ease in his duties, and watches his customers as if they were 'dependents'. Gunn wonders if this represents true mastery of one's environment, or if it is just a pose.

'I wonder, does being shut
behind the bar constitute
strength, or just its appearance?'

This question is soon answered, for when 'Cowboy Hat' is about 'to slug his small queer neighbour' the barman arrives 'cool as Jesus', his style 'a power you need not prove with smashed seating', and asserts 'what might be, and then....what is'. It is this assurance that Gunn so admires, and that shows a more modern heroism than, say, that of Alexander, for it takes more account of reality.

The same is true with Gunn's poems about love, and 'A Crab' shows a similar awareness of the minutiae of everyday existence rather than the grandiose emotions discounted in 'Das Liebesleben'. The poem has similarities with Donne's 'The Flea', for both turn the inherently distasteful image of a parasitic insect into a witty conceit for the love relationship. Gunn admits that he felt 'positively Swiftean revulsion' when first troubled with this pest, but now experiences

'neither disgust nor indifference,
but a fondness, as for a pet'.

As if this were not enough, Gunn actually welcomes the insect, for its transference was

'.....unfelt because
the skin was alive with so much
else. It was a part of our touch'.

The insect is connected with the world 'where we walk with everyone' in 'Touch' itself, for this 'continuous creation' embraces all living things. The poem's very daring and lightness of touch protect it, despite the reactions of disgust from some critics⁶⁴.

The final poem to appear before the publication of Touch is, paradoxically, closest to the style of Positives, and could well be a reject from that collection. 'Old Man in the Britannia'⁶⁵ describes an old man in a pub, as he recalls 'seeing three horsemen, today, amongst the traffic' and the 'leisurely dignity' with which they moved through the crowd. He realizes that he himself is a similar anachronism, 'old and drunk',

'and people bear with me
like wheeled traffic that
make way for horsemen'.

The sympathy for others shown both in this poem and in those just discussed is an important new element in Gunn's work, and, just as it made the poems in Positives so effective, it contributes greatly to the success of his next book, Touch, in which this is one of the major themes.

NOTES (On Chapter Four - Positives)

1. Anon, in Times Literary Supplement, 19 January 1967 p.48
2. Anon, in Times, 29 December 1966 p.12
3. Cyril Connolly, in Sunday Times, 27 November 1966 p.53
4. C.B. Cox, in Spectator, 17 February 1967 p.200
5. Peter Marsh, in Observer, 1 January 1967 p.25
6. William Heger, in Southern Review Ns6 (1970) pp.539-50
7. William Hunt, in Poetry Review 111 (March 1968) pp.405-7
8. John Carey, in New Statesman, 23 December 1966 pp.941-2
9. Alan Ross, in London Magazine VI (March 1967) pp.113-4
10. Graham Martin, in Listener, 26 January 1967 p.141
11. Martin Dodsworth, in Review, 18 (April 1968) pp.46-61
12. B.S. Johnson and Julia Oman, Street Children 1964
13. Ibid
14. P. p.6
15. P. p.8
16. P. p.10
17. P. p.12
18. P. p.14
19. P. p.16
20. P. p.18
21. P. p.20
22. P. p.22
23. P. p.24
24. P. p.26
25. P. p.28
26. P. p.30
27. P. p.32

28. P. p.34
29. P. p.36
30. P. p.38
31. P. p.40
32. P. p.42
33. P. p.44
34. P. p.46
35. P. p.48
36. P. p.50
37. P. p.52
38. P. p.54
39. P. p.56
40. P. p.58
41. P. p.60
42. P. p.62
43. P. p.64
44. P. p.66
45. P. p.68
46. P. p.70
47. P. p.72
48. P. p.74
49. P. p.76
50. P. p.78
51. 'Interrogated to Interrogator', in London Magazine VI (March 1958) p.11
52. 'Knowledge', in Observer, 24 September 1961 p.28
53. 'All Night Burlesque', in Guiness Book of Poetry 3 1960 p.65
54. 'An inhabitant', in London Magazine VII (May 1960) pp.14-5
55. 'Signs of an undertaking', in Spectator 16 September 1960 p.409
56. 'Telegraph Avenue', in Encounter XVI (March 1961) p.3
57. 'Kurfurstendamm', in Observer 24 September 1961 p.28

58. 'Das Liebesleben', in Encounter XVI (March 1961) p.5
59. 'From an Asian Tent', in Observer, 24 September 1961 p.28
60. 'A School of Resistance', in Paris Review 25 (Summer 1961) p.52
61. 'Out of Breath', in Encounter XVII (January 1962) p.96
62. 'Tending Bar', in Critical Quarterly VI (Spring 1964) pp.33-4
63. 'A Crab', in London Magazine NSI (February 1962) pp.6-7
64. Jon Silkin and Antony Thwaite, 'Conversation' in Stand 6 (1962) p.7-9
65. 'Old Man in the Britannia', in Poetry Chicago 109 (November 1966) p.70

CHAPTER 5

TOUCH

Touch, published in 1967, received as mixed a reception as had Positives, and critical discussion was centred on evaluating Gunn's new experiments with language and texture. The Times Literary Supplement¹ reviewer was enthusiastic, and saw the volume as a continuation of themes dealt with in earlier books. Gunn is 'an unsettled and unsettling poet: nervous, bleak, tense, edgy, committed to a brute masculine energy because...he distrusts something softer and more whimsical in himself'. This tension 'makes him a more interesting and problematical poet than almost any of his contemporaries' and gives him his 'characteristic fine-drawn voice'. The battle images of his early work put directly his continuing stance, 'a vulnerable isolation', and Touch also deals with this, although also containing 'a note of tenderness, sometimes close to sentimentality'. The reviewer prefers Gunn's metrical work in Touch to his syllabics, for 'the more powerful the emotion the more clearly it shows itself in the steady tread of Gunn's iambics', while his use of syllabics can be 'arbitrary, half achieved, drifting into prosiness'. Gunn no longer strikes 'exaggerated poses' and the book shows 'a new openness and generosity of spirit' in his 'essentially grave, even melancholy, nature'. In the Times², ~~Derwent~~ ^{Derwent} May sees the book as more of a break with the past, for, these 'quiet voiced almost awed poems' are far removed from Gunn's earlier preoccupation with toughness, being concerned instead with 'delicate strivings and movements in the mind and feelings'. Gunn also deals with 'the struggle to see the outside world and other people', and this is seen in 'Misanthropos' which is a poem without high points, but its intelligence and 'unobtrusive control' are arresting. Julian Jebb, in the Financial Times³, gives the book even higher praise. It contains 'several domestic poems with strong philosophical overtones, each of them marked with Gunn's peculiar, rigorous talent for relating his

own experience to that of each isolated member of the human race'. In addition, 'the complexity of his thoughts is lightened by the concreteness of his imagery and the hard won battle for simplicity of language'.

The reaction of other reviewers is almost equally divided between praise and hostility, the latter stemming both from a genuine failure of sympathy and from a less excuseable misunderstanding of Gunn's poetic aims. Brian Jones in the London Magazine⁴ puts this most cogently. He finds Touch a 'curiously lightweight' book, for Gunn's world has grown smaller and more remote, while the old vigour flags and the new effects are 'flabby'. Gunn has lost his earlier mastery of the short imposed stanza, and now, the 'form is there, but the content is chained to fill it'. While Gunn's early poems depended on 'a magnificently judged winnowing of sensory appeal' and 'a search for a language that is reserved,unpretentious', (Pasternak), this is overdone in Touch, and the reader emerges 'with respect, but with the pulses steady'. Jones concentrates his attack on 'Misanthropos', which he sees as 'a reworking of themes he has handled more convincingly..... elsewhere', and which degenerates into a 'rather dogged earnestness'. He also feels that there is 'a calculated handling of experience', and wishes Gunn would abandon this new abstract verse, and return to the directness of his early poetry. This is the charge made most often about Gunn's later verse, and it is only answerable by an analysis of the qualities of this more abstract poetry, as will be done later in this chapter. The same point is made by Ian Hamilton in the Observer⁵. Hamilton considers that My Sad Captains marked a dead end in Gunn's development, for he 'had run out of subject matter' and abandoned the 'masks and sharp dramatic situations' of his early work. Gunn's arguments seemed thin, and the use of syllabics eliminated awkwardness but looked 'fiddling and gratuitous'. Touch is not the fresh start one hoped for; it has far too much barren discourse, with Gunn's familiar nations 'limply appearing', while there is a loose improvising feel to the verse. 'Misanthropos' gives the impression of 'lead

allegorical deliberateness' and deals with perceptions Gunn has worked to death, while the 'flurry of good companionship' at the end fools nobody, least of all Gunn. This seems to me to be a gratuitous misreading of the poem, and the final point is merely rhetorical; Gunn surely believes in the point to which the whole of 'Misanthropos' carefully leads. A similar viewpoint to Hamilton's is put by Ronald Hayman, writing in Encounter⁶. Hayman finds that Touch 'succumbs to a disappointingly muddy impressionism' and fails to crystallize its subject matter to the same 'hard clarity' of Fighting Terms. The 'old toughness is more likeable than the new tenderness', and these new poems read like 'early drafts'. Both reviewers single out 'Confessions of the Life Artist' as the best poem in the book; Hayman praises it because it is expressed through a persona like Gunn's early poetry, while Hamilton finds it 'direct and moving' although 'irritatingly mannered'. The main complaint of English reviewers, then, is that Gunn has lost the compression and incisiveness of his early work. American reviewers were also concerned with the abstraction in Gunn's work. Typical of this is the view of Lawrence Lieberman in the Yale Review⁷ that Touch fails to assimilate the influence of Williams, and 'lapses' into abstract language. A more detailed attack is made by ~~Henry~~ ^{Hayden} Carruth in the Hudson Review⁸. He finds the book mainly mannered, forced, motiveless, contrived, unnecessary and written in 'unexplainable, unexplained ethic prosody', although it does contain a few poems in 'tough reasonable language'. 'Misanthropos' proves the worthlessness 'of commissions and prizes', lacks real impetus or structure, and Carruth finds it impossible to 'imagine a radio audience attending all the way through'. Some of these hostile reviews appear to be more a venting of spleen than closely argued and felt criticism, although some of the points they make are valid; Touch certainly lacks the qualities of Gunn's early verse. More favourable reviewers argue, however, that this verse has new qualities to replace these, and that Gunn's new humanism is a positive development.

This point is made by Martin Dodsworth in the Listener⁹. Dodsworth sees the title poem as being about 'comprehending', and compares it favourably with 'Carnal Knowledge'. The verse has a new 'freedom and sureness', and shows a mastery of the medium beyond that of Fighting Terms. Gunn is still a thinking poet, but his thought is more humane, and he has a more harmonious relationship with his senses, and 'preserves his natural spareness'. A similar view is put by Julian Symons in the New Statesman¹⁰. For the first time, Gunn suggests 'the possibility of tenderness', but achieves this without losing his 'hard assurance'. This 'unsentimental humanism' is seen at full stretch in 'Misanthropos', which is 'an imaginative achievement beyond the reach of any other living poet' and is 'vividly dramatic'. Another critic to praise Gunn's new poetry is Robin Skelton in the Kenyon Review¹¹. Skelton finds that, in Touch, toughness has been replaced by taut melancholy. The speakers of the poems 'are all observers trapped by self regard into commentary on life as if it might illuminate their uncertainties'. The new abstract language enables these speakers to describe concrete reality as an inner landscape of their own. Gunn finds rhetoric impossible, and the title poem refers back to 'the old, pre-conscious, condition where one feels the rhythms of the universe'. Skelton praises the way this self concern is abrasive, not narcissistic, and finds the 'last man' in 'Misanthropos' as similar to the personae of the other poems. In 'Back to Life' this same 'sense of fundamental unity is all that can support us in our separate solitudes'. Skelton's approach is an original one, and by seeing Touch in terms of the linking of personae in individual poems he illuminates an aspect of the book otherwise ignored. Touch is also praised by Tom Blackburn in the Poetry Review¹². 'Only W.H. Auden has a comparable technical brilliance', and Gunn's 'elegant and steely verses' seem to prefigure a new 'type of poetry'. The 'subtle novelty' of Gunn's style 'may well express a new dimension of awareness'. Richard Kell in the Critical Survey¹³ finds Gunn's poetry 'coldly fascinating rather than congen-

ial' and sees the new turning outwards towards the world in Touch as the 'chilly, self imposed duty of a man who besides being fascinated, is impelled by a will to truth that might be an ingrown will to power'. From these 'austere investigations' Gunn makes something that is compelling in its 'verbal energy' as well as 'confronting a possibility which haunts modern man more and more insistently.....the possibility that humanity is neither more or less important in the scheme of things than 'dead' matter'. He uses the method of 'juxtaposition of concrete description and abstract statement', and poems like 'Elegy on the dust' 'rely on the benefits of metre and rhyme to save them from prosiness'. Stephen Spender, in the Observer¹⁴, finds that Gunn 'has advanced towards greater lucidity and purity of diction' in poems which 'have the elegance of a Grecian vase'. Not all American critics were as hostile as Carruth or Lieberman. Daryl Hine, in Poetry (Chicago)¹⁵, differentiates between Gunn's two manners, those poems written in lower case lines, which describe 'rather drab still lifes....with too restricted a verbal palette' and those in upper case, which are written 'with assurance and impact'. (This division in fact corresponds to that between free verse or syllabics and regular metrics). Hine finds Gunn a difficult poet, who strives to avoid glibness. His 'Goldingesque precise impressions and artful fumbings cannot occlude the power and authority, that has much in common with Rilke's as with Genet's'. This great division in critical attitudes can only be explained by a closer analysis of the style and aims of the book.

Touch is a very assured volume, incorporating the results of earlier successful experiments, notably in Gunn's two previous books. It is more delicate and probing than the poet's earlier work, while retaining his original qualities of rigorous intellectual probing and truthfulness. As the title indicates, the book is about 'touching' other people, and this applies in both a literal and metaphorical way, just as the book also deals with attempts to experience and incorporate the natural world, a theme

previously largely ignored by Gunn. These concerns need to be expressed in abstract as well as concrete terms, and it is that some critics so disliked. To evoke these new thoughts and experiences fully Gunn also has to use a new kind of diction, verse forms and subject matter, and these should be investigated before a study is made of the individual poems' meaning. This new style has been called 'seductive' by Dodsworth¹⁶, and it is concerned with textures and feelings as well as with physical reality and intellectual probing. There is a wide range of stylistic devices however, and Gunn is prepared to use his earlier voice when necessary, just as he parodies older poetic styles. Gunn explains the impulses behind the volume, and his own doubts about it, in the 'Poetry Book Society Bulletin' for September 1967¹⁷. Gunn admits he finds it difficult to speak about Touch, for 'by the time I got the proofs a certain revulsion had set in, and my main feeling by now is that, after six years, it doesn't really add up to very much.' Gunn is in many ways the most hostile critic of the volume, although his statement must be seen in terms of an artist's natural disillusionment with his earlier work as compared to the new techniques he has begun to use since. He now detects 'On the one hand, an indirection so delicate that subject matter seems to have been left behind with the crudities of earlier drafts', which disposes of Ian Hamilton's charge that these poems themselves read like rough drafts, for Gunn has obviously taken care to shape them, and 'on the other, the strands of a sequence not braiding, as they were meant to do, but ending in a bulky and rather desperate knot of didacticism', which obviously refers to 'Misanthropos'. Gunn however also points out his intentions in the volume which 'at least I can be fairly sure about'. Touch shows 'a development in attitudes'. Its title is 'directly relevant to most of the poems in the book: the touch is not physical only, it is meant to be an allegory for the touch of sympathy that should be the aim of human intercourse'. The subject of 'Misanthropos' has substituted 'the predatory bite of the animal' for it

in the past, but finally attains it, while, conversely, the subject of 'Confessions of the Life Artist' is a man who 'achieves a fair amount of control over his consciousness and his circumstances, but in doing so comes to realize that for this fullness of control he has to pay by certain lacks of feeling and of spontaneity'. These two poems represent, in turn, the dream and the nightmare of civilised man, for 'one has to seek the fullness of control if one wants to avoid sloth; but it seems that the more controlled one is the more unfit one becomes for the spontaneity of 'touch'. which is the only real proof, in a human anyway, of unslothfulness'. The celebration of pure animal instinct, as in 'The Goddess' is 'ultimately self protective and predatory, and it defeats the exercise of sympathy just as much as the over-self consciousness of the Life Artist'. The only way to escape this dilemma is for one to 'deliberately and consciously attempt to create in oneself a field that will be spontaneously fertile for the tests of sympathy', so that 'one can form habits that are so readily available that they can seem like instincts'. This is not as simple as it seems; 'I do not mean that one can simply love everybody because one wants to, but that one can try to avoid all the situations which love is impossible'. This has been the theme of most of Gunn's poetry since Touch, and it is essential to an understanding of Moly, for example. As Gunn says, this 'could be a proper exploration for several lifetimes of books'.

Equally important to the success of Touch is the use Gunn makes of language and technique, which provides near perfect expression of the volume's subject matter. In fact, Touch is the most adventurous of Gunn's books, both in style and content, and this is especially apparent in the quality of the verse. The book shows a continuation of the experiments with language and metre seen in the second part of My Sad Captains and in Positives, but handles them in a more complex way. The verse is very assured, and far more delicately modulated than in Gunn's early work, although it retains his old qualities of restraint and decorum. It is

striking both for its 'seductive' qualities (as pointed out by Martin Dodsworth), and its concern with textures and states of mind, which are achieved by the almost transparent nature of some of the language. Gunn also continues to rely on a wide range of poetic devices, and is able both to draw on, and sometimes parody, these styles, and this is worth investigating in some detail.

This is most easily recognised in Gunn's use of diction. He can present accurate descriptions, as of that of the park in 'Back to Life', but can also investigate this process itself, in the form of self evaluation, in 'The Kiss at Bayreuth', with a correspondingly more abstract language -

'The inhuman eye contemplates
its own calm inclusive fulness'.

Gunn's use of language ranges from the taut style of 'In the Tank' to the looser, less compressed, narrative of 'Touch', from 'a man sat in the felon's tank, alone' with its direct statement to the quieter movement of 'You are already/asleep. I lower/myself in next to/you'. Many of the poems carry out an exploration of textures both in their language and as their subject matter, as in 'Pierce Street', where the colours of the friezes are paralleled by the carefulness of the language - 'their colours are muted, square thick presences'. This is most successfully achieved in the description of the dust in 'Elegy on the Dust', in such phrases as 'swathes folded on themselves in sleep'. This owes something to the verse of Positives, and poems like 'Taylor Street' are even closer, using the same careful, pared down language with long, involved sentences, and deriving a similar tension between the two. Others, such as 'The Girl of Live Marble' use precise description and formal language to attain a more distanced view. This range is seen at its best in 'Misanthropos', which derives much of its power from the way varying styles are brought together. These range from the richly allusive style of IX to the flat description of 'Epitaph for Anton Schmidt'. Similarly the verse can include both the calm, dis-

tanced quality of

'If he washed there, he might,
Skin tautened from the chill, emerge above,
Inhuman as a star, as cold, as white'

to the close, almost gross, detail of 'the dirt would dry back, hardening in the heat' in successive stanzas of the same poem, section XIV. The verse also can take in horror, as in the 'inhuman merging' of X, and the munching of human flesh in IX, and joy at the processes of Nature

'.....It is cool, and
he breathes the barbarous smell
of the wet earth.....'

Despite this, the poems do share a common style, which can include both the directness of I, and the mock antiquity of the 'dryads' in VIII, and this is best investigated in a poem like V which, because not particularly distinguished, can serve as a typical example of Gunn's style in the whole volume. It is written in syllabics, which makes it less heavily accented than his earlier poetry, and the first two stanzas comprise one very long sentence, balanced by a very short one, which further takes away emphasis from the line endings, just as the triple rhymes are unobtrusive and unaccented. The final stanza slows down this flowing movement by the use of five short sentences, which act as isolated statements, and give a sense of conclusiveness. The language itself is less mannered or allusive than before, and more pared down even than in My Sad Captains. It consists of direct statements, which are piled up to evoke a scene, as in the first stanza, or are interwoven with similarly pithy generalisations - 'the trick/is to stay free within them'. There is greater emphasis on careful description - 'drops are isolate on leaves, big and clear', although this still lacks the exactness of a poet like Ted Hughes, for Gunn is content to imply rather than fully evoke the presence of external objects. The diction is similarly direct, consisting mainly of common words chosen care-

fully, but a latinate element is also present, and used when dealing with philosophical meaning, as in such phrases as 'process made visible' or 'a discovering system', and this combination gives the verse a cool, detached atmosphere. Gunn's diction is less involved than in Fighting Terms, but more diverse than in Positives, and this also applies to his use of form.

As with his diction, Gunn experiments with a wide variety of verse forms in Touch. This ranges from the free verse of 'Bravery' to the complex stanzas of 'Misanthropos' XLV, and also experiments with such devices as syllabics and assonance that come half way between free verse and metrics, drawing on the advantages of both. Gunn continues his experiments with meter as well. The echo poems on which 'Misanthropos' VI is based, and the use of a melodic refrain, whose accentuation runs contrary to the rest of the poem, are both taken from Elizabethan poetry, which has always attracted Gunn, and he also uses such classical forms as terza rima in Misanthropos IV, double quatrains in 'The Girl of Live Marble', and a six line stanza in 'Misanthropos' XLV. This last poem offsets iambics with short lines, while 'Pierce Street', in fact in five line iambic pentameter stanzas, divides its fourth line in two, rhyming the first half with the final line. Gunn also uses less involved forms, mainly couplets and 7 syllable lines in his customary a b c a b c six line stanzas, the first for a slow measured movement, the second to give pace and vitality to the verse. Gunn also experiments with rhyme and assonance, the latter most notably in the triple off rhymes of 'The Vigil of Corpus Christi' and 'Misanthropos' I, which give the poetry a sense of distance and hidden order. Gunn even experiments with his free verse - 'Taylor Street' and 'The Produce District' are both unrhymed, but the former consists of uniformly short lines, while the latter is more varied, and has a far more complex sense of rhythm, using short lines for emphasis and long lines to convey more complex ideas, and deriving tension between the two -

'Birds wheeling back, with a low threshing sound.

He aimed.'

This device is seen at its best in 'Back to Life', where the rhythms of the poem echo the rhythm of Gunn's walk and the process of his thought, moving from the casual but direct description of the opening, divided into short clauses echoed by the line endings

'I saunter towards them on the grass

That suddenly rustles from the dew'

to the more involved and complex movement of the last section

'A small full trembling through it now

As if each leaf were so, better prepared

For falling sooner or later ^{separate} ~~seperate~~'.

When Gunn does use rhyme, this is done less obtrusively than before - the fourth line in 'Pierce Street' is broken in two to make the poem look less formal - and, while basically in iambics, the verse does not have the sense of strain of some of Gunn's earlier work. Whereas they were rigidly divided in 'My Sad Captains', Gunn here mixes together iambic and syllabic poems, together with free verse, and 'Misanthropos', in particular, benefits from this juxtaposition. Gunn's control of syllabics is itself firmer, and this helps make this integration more successful. 'Confessions of the Life Artist' is a tour-de-force, for although unrhymed and apparently in free verse, it gains from the hidden control of using a seven syllable line throughout, and this matches the control inherent in the choice of language. Here, as in the whole of Touch, diction and form are closely integrated in a way not attempted by Gunn before, and, although less prominent, both are more subtly used than before. This also applies to Gunn's use of subject matter and references.

Gunn's range of subject matter in Touch is wider than in earlier volumes, including such diverse topics as the atmosphere of crumbling buildings in 'Berlin in Ruins' and 'The Produce District' (which convey

this aspect of city life better than anything in 'Positives'), the world of Nature away from human interference in 'Misanthropos' and the nature of imprisonment in 'In the Tank'. Gunn also deals with his old, more inward looking, preoccupations; the idea of self determination in 'Confessions of the Life Artist', his usual obsession with the doppelganger in 'Bravery', and the view of the existential self in the first two sections of 'Misanthropos'. It is Gunn's new outwardness, however, that is most interesting and refreshing, although prepared for in his previous two books. Because of this, Gunn's use of reference, literary and otherwise, is less obtrusive, although still in evidence and it is less recondite than before. Greek myth is referred to in 'The Goddess', where Proserpina is used to symbolise the life force in Nature, while 'The Vigil of Corpus Christi' relies on an incident in the New Testament, but neither use their source in more than a cursory way. Poems which draw on the arts are more specific. The unnamed painting in 'Pierce Street' is described in some detail, while 'Bravery' is based closely on a painting by Chuck Arnett. 'The Kiss at Bayreuth' deals with Wagner's music directly, rather than merely in a referential way, while section IX of 'Misanthropos' is solidly based on a passage from King Lear, and extends its sense and imagery. Similarly, 'Epitath for Anton Schmidt' centres on the historically accurate deeds of Schmidt, and others who helped Jews escape. This is more valid than Gunn's earlier method of using references through a desire to show the range of his intellect, for here he fully integrates them into the poem in which they are used. In all three ways, in the utilisation of reference, style and form, Touch represents an advance for Gunn, and this is also true of the themes which he explores in this book, and the conclusions that he draws from them. To investigate this last point, it is necessary to make a close analysis of the individual poems.

The most striking development in Touch is Gunn's move away from existentialism, seen most clearly in 'Misanthropos'. Even 'Confessions of

the Life Artist'¹⁸, which represents Gunn's most direct treatment of this philosophy, contains an implicit criticism of its rationale. The poem is enclosed in quotation marks, and Gunn has written that the Life Artist (who owes much to Thomas Mann's Joseph und seine Brüder) attains self control at the expense of 'certain lacks of feeling and of spontaneity'. The poem opens with the Life Artist considering how he should define his direction. Everything is 'material for my art', and confronted with the 'disordered rhythms of the sea' he feels a 'summoning on the air'. The 'sea's impulse', or the world of flux, needs to be countered with a firmness similar to the rock which can 'inhibit' the sea, but one's stance must still take account of this, for it is

'once accepted, like air: air
haunted by the taste of salt'.

Section 11 compares this consciousness with that of animals or plants, which as in 'Considering the Snail' or 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death ', lack 'thought of the morrow' and 'have lost themselves in action.' (This refers, in an oblique way, to Saint Matthew's Gospel Chapter VI vv.25-34, which deals with the self sufficiency of the animal world, a quality that is here seen as an escape from consciousness). The Life Artist is aware both of their inaction and his own knowledge of time, 'the morrow pending', and determines not to 'lose myself in thought'. His own philosophy, which governs the rest of the poem, is set out in section 111;

'You control what you can, and
use what you cannot'.

This transition seems rather abrupt, and this can be explained by the fact that the original version of this poem, as printed in A Geography, contained two extra sections, omitted here, which make the poem's structure clearer. The first of these, which follows section 11, deals with various actions, comically ^{juxtaposed} ~~juxtaposed~~, which form 'improvisations on a central theme', for all show consciously one's direction. They are

'To enter Jerusalem
 on an ass, talk with Ammon
 deflect to the East, or wear
 a rosette for Arsenal',

All these form a theme that could support others 'as long as I was conscious of its being there', and the man's whole life represents an attempt 'to extend and name', this 'inaudible theme'. Section lII now becomes clearer for it shows the choosing of this action, and the exclusiveness it demands, 'to reject the thousand and to select the one', as well as the need to 'live between extremities'. Section lV considers the state of those who do not choose a real direction. (As in 'Vox Humana', this choosing is put in the passive tense; one is chosen by self determination, and the only conscious decision is whether to accept this). The 'unchosen' here are 'as if dead' and merely serve to 'validate the chosen', for what

'could be more fortifying
 to one's own identity
 than another's suicide?'

Here Gunn makes clear the inherent selfishness of existentialism, for it depends on a small elite of the chosen set against a large mass of people who have not attained consciousness (and in this is surprisingly close to Pauline Christianity), and Gunn himself finds this increasingly unacceptable. The rest of the poem examines other aspects of existential thought in a similarly cold light.

The following four sections investigate more closely the Life Artist's relation to other people. Section V deals with a love affair in which the girl becomes 'indefinite' compared with the existentialist who is 'starkly redefined at each moment' in the terms of this relationship, and can control it,

'aware of her need, and trained
 to have few needs of my own'.

However, he is still unsure of himself, for, despite his 'magnificent control', he suddenly wonders 'What if she has the edge over me?' Love is seen as a battle rather than the mutual 'touch' of other poems in this volume.

Section Vl investigates this further. Giving way to all passions is 'merely whoring', but to be in total control is 'to be a whore-master', and it is to this that the Life Artist aspires. He can load his girls with chocolates, but these gifts do not bring possession of his lover's red hair or 'bee-stung lips', let alone her 'wasteful heart', and, because he wants this dominance, he can never fully experience love. Section Vll describes another encounter with, in Sartre's term, 'the other'. The Life Artist values 'not what I have, but what I wish to have', and therefore studies these virtues in others. The girl he sees on the train is vulnerable, not for her own sake, but because she evokes similar characteristics in the artist himself. The way she emulates the bee-hive hair style of 'the magazine stars of four years ago' calls forth 'jibes that grow inside me' and this embarrasses the artist, especially as it indicates a lack of self control. The sentiments he feels reveal a real sensitivity,

'Why was something evolved so
tender, so open to pain?'

but this is really because the Life Artist is aware the same jibes could be directed, in other circumstances, at himself. This new sympathy with others, whatever its real motives, is a welcome development, and is used to better effect in other poems in the volume, but this does not diminish its importance here. Section Vlll describes another person with whom the Life Artist shows innate sympathy, and these two sections represent the best aspects of his increased self control. Here he studies a photograph of a young Jew 'being hustled somewhere' by the Nazis, and made even more pathetic by the way he is warmly dressed in 'cap and cloth hat'. His experiences are not described, but he can 'see now no appeal in the wide world'. The implications of the human suffering shown here are examined

in the second section omitted from the final version. The Life Artist grows old, but can discover the meaning of existence

'no more by living through
than if there were no design',

However, he has attempted to improve things, to 'lift weight off the earth's crust', and sought strength not from selfish motives but to

'bring strength into existence
so that the world could bear it',

This is an attempt to end the atrocities represented by the picture of the Jewish child, and the final two sections do provide some sort of resolution. In section lX, 'prophecies become fulfilled' although in a accidental way far removed from the control attained by the Life Artist, and almost 'as if to conform to some alien order'. He still seeks a rational pattern, and his search nears its end now that 'circles start to close, lines to balance'. Section X investigates the whole stance of the Life Artist in the face of death, and the limits of viewpoint this contains. The Artist realizes that

'The art of designing life
is no excuse for that life'

and sees existence as meaningless; even the creature artist's work will be lost, and Shakespeare will be no more remembered than the Life Artist, whose efforts have gone into perfecting his own life. Both will be forgotten 'here where the swine root', and the very solar system will eventually be 'irretrievably lost'. The same problem is faced in 'Misanthropos', but whereas the sense of flux is in a way welcomed, there the Life Artist finds

'For the loss, as for the life,
there will be no excuse, there
is no justification',

This attitude is inherently criticised by Gunn. The 'Life Artist' puts

all his creative energy into a narcissistic ordering of his own existence, and this leaves him with innate sympathy for, but no contact with, other people. The other poems in Touch are divided between those that, in a similar way, show the insufficiency of this fullness of control, and those that develop the sympathy for others shown here into the 'touch of sympathy that should be the aim of human intercourse'. The poems in the first group are concerned, in the man, with the existential questioning of Gunn's earlier books, but even here a new maturity is evident.

This is most clearly seen in a poem such as 'Breakfast'¹⁹, which deals with a similar type of self control to that defined in 'Confessions of the Life Artist'. In A Geography it too was enclosed in quotation marks, and it is obvious that it should be taken as a dramatic monologue rather than self revelation by Gunn, who is always careful to not allow biographical material to intrude into his work. The speaker here has used the daily routine of breakfast to structure his life in the absence of anything more substantial. He was 'without future', and nothing else was real; even night 'was tempered by hotel signs opposite'. However he always woke to 'loaf and cup', and this 'unsour pungency' was, although neither a 'remedy' nor a 'ritual', the basis 'for a tenacity' which could spur him to action,

' - without love, without hope, but
without renunciation',

The poem is in the past tense, and the reader is led to presume by this that the uncertainty described in the poem has now passed. The poem that follows 'Breakfast' in Touch, 'Taylor Street' reaches the same conclusion that a sense of limit can give meaning to unstructured experience, and is almost a gloss on that poem, especially in the decision that the old man makes to live 'morning by morning'.

'Taylor Street'²⁰, is in the style of most of Positives, both in its simple, almost banal, language and in its investigation of what lies behind external appearances. It describes an old man who sits in his front porch,

not to catch the sun but to watch 'what he is not living' and from this indirect participation he draws the will to continue living. This vicarious enjoyment entails 'a certain strain', and he 'watches without a smile..... cupped by himself in himself', but he is 'carefully getting a little strength' from those who pass by. It is this sense of ritual that enables him to live 'what he can'.

'.....He has it
all planned: he will live
here morning by morning'.

In earlier poems such as 'The Corridor' this watching of others was seen as a voyeuristic intrusion, but here it is a sign of innate sympathy, and an example of 'touch'. Another poem which deals with the mastering of one's environment is 'The Produce District', where this is expressed in a coming to terms with the natural world.

'The Produce District'²¹ is set in 'an interim' between the moving out of 'the businesses' that used to deal with such 'produce' as 'oranges or celery', and the demolition of 'warehouse and worn ramp' to make way for 'high-rise blocks'. During this period of transition, the natural world regains dominance through the work of 'spiders, rats, and rain', and the return of the pigeons, which take over these remnants of human effort,

'Perched on the roofs and walls
Or wheeled between the faded signs
And broken ornamental scrolls',

The subject of the poem is a man who resists this encroachment of the natural world, and who stands 'unmoving on the littered ground' shooting at pigeons. His own explanation of this - 'What's there to do on Sundays? Sooner do this than booze' - is seen as only a partial answer. His real motivation is to give an

'.....accurate answer to the wilderness
Echoing it and making it complete'.

The old man functions in the poem as a representative of humanity who fights against 'the place losing itself, lost now, unnamed' by imposing his will, and this, conversely, makes Nature complete. After these images of death, the poem ends with one of rebirth, which itself echoes the energy of the old man - 'and maple shoots pushed upward through the ground'. A similar celebration of energy, again linking humans and the rhythms of Nature, is seen in 'The Goddess'²², which opens the volume.

The goddess celebrated here is Proserpina, and the poem describes her annual return from the underworld as symbolic of the coming of spring, and the sexual reawakening this is itself part of. The journey of Proserpina from Hades is seen in terms of an unstoppable natural force, 'naked and searching', which is unimpeded by 'fire, rock, water or clay', and finally reaches the 'soft abundant soil'. Even this 'does not dissipate her force', for although ignoring the 'eyeless fish' at the start of the poem, she brings new vitality to the 'sinewy thyme reeking in the sunlight' and to rats 'breeding, breeding, in their nests'. The repetition here helps convey the strength of this process, just as its unstoppable nature is conveyed by the continuance of sense over the divisions between stanzas, but there is something unhealthy in a force that affects 'reeking' thyme and rats, and Gunn makes the application of this process to men similarly ambiguous. Its power is seen at work on a soldier 'by a park bench with his greatcoat collar up', as if to preserve his anonymity, and he seeks 'a woman, any woman', who herself can be seen both in terms of Nature and of mythology, for she has 'her dress tight across her ass as bark in moonlight'. As in many other poems in Touch, it is the human sense of limit that defines the wholeness of the physical world and helps celebrate this totality. Here,

'.....it is we
vulnerable, quivering
who stay you to abundance'.

However, Gunn was later wary about this poem, seeing its celebration of instinct as 'ultimately self-protective and predatory and it defeats the exercise of sympathy just as much as the over self-consciousness of the Life Artist', and this cautiousness is seen in the poem itself, for the force ignores the fish that 'gently turn together', but is attracted to the soldier waiting for 'any woman'. The sense of limit celebrated in this poem and in 'Breakfast' is seen in a different light in 'In the Tank', where it becomes meaningless ritual rather than a control that brings a sense of fullness.

'In the Tank',²³ refers to a type of cell found in American prisons, and the feelings of a man imprisoned in it. He sits alone, 'fearful, ungrateful', and studies his cell, the cold functionalism of which is perfectly conveyed by the verse -

'A mattress lumpy and not over-stained,
Also a toilet, for the felon's bowels',

This is made even clearer when the lights are 'flicked off at nine', and he still discerns 'an order without colour, bulk or line'. The prisoner comes to understand that fullness contains limit (just as in 'Flying above California', the 'limiting candour.....is part of the ultimate richness'). Though the 'total riches could not fail', they can contain the 'silence of a jail', which itself contains 'a box, a mere suspension, at the centre', which does lack the complexity or fulfillment of normal life, and

'Where there was nothing left to understand
And where he must re-enter and re-enter',

The prisoner has lost the power of self determination, and this state is examined further in 'No Speech from the Scaffold', where a man is faced, not with imprisonment, but with public execution. Neither of these poems has the witty levity of 'Legal Reform', treating their subject, instead, in a more direct and sympathetic way, and with a less obtrusive use of metaphor.

'No Speech from the Scaffold'²⁴ emphasises the tragic ordinariness of the scene; the block is like 'something for kitchen use', while the executioner 'works in a warehouse nearby'. This is in itself dreamlike, as the subject is clearly historical, with such detail as 'the masked man with his chopper', while the setting is not, and the fanciful nature of this contrast rather spoils the poem's effect. The prisoner, however, is palpably real, pale, 'nodding a goodbye to acquaintances', and making no speech, for 'the scene must be its own commentary'. Even his offence is now 'immaterial', for all that matters is the fact of his approaching death, and his conduct 'while he is still a human'. The poem emphasises both the absurdity of the execution itself - especially in its relation to normal experience - and the horror of the transformation from being a conscious human to losing this consciousness in death, which is why the last line is so chilling. It also emphasises the importance, even in this situation, of stance; what matters is the condemned man's 'conduct as he rests there'. This existential courage is similar to that praised in earlier poems such as 'Rastignac at 45' or 'To Yvor Winters 1955'. A similar heroism is celebrated in 'Bravery', which also deals with a motif common in Gunn's work, that of the doppelganger.

'Bravery'²⁵ is based on an obscure painting by Chuck Arnett, the subject matter of which is described and commented on in the poem. It depicts a man whose 'back is toward us' and is 'practically a silhouette' and, like many of Gunn's heroes, is 'brave with ^{separation}~~separation~~'. In this he is set apart both from other men and from the 'indeterminate pale grey-and-yellow country' he lives in. His 'bravery' manifests itself in a desire for exploration, in both a literal and symbolic way, although the precise details of this are made unclear by the painter. The man is about 'to step on or into' a 'fog-trough or river'. This exploration becomes more sinister than is customary, however, Gunn visualizes the man's 'first step' as 'a glint of spray on the toe' that turns

'to mud, and the first step will
suck the country dry'.

The subject of this 'romantic picture' is seen as a 'Giant Vampire' who
has lost his humanity, and becomes his own

'outline, and holds no
warm clutter of detail',

The poet now realizes, as he should have before, that this man is his
double, and a representation of himself. He is

'my monstrous lover, whom
I gaze at
every time I shave'.

The painting therefore describes his own condition, for he too is just
about to commit himself to a new direction, but is frightened by the
possible outcome of this, and this is made evident in his visualisation of
the subject of the painting becoming an emotional vampire. 'Bravery'
therefore describes a failure of confidence on the poet's part when faced
with a particular challenge, and can be compared, in this, with 'The Wound',
for both poems are brave in their honesty, if nothing else. 'The Girl of
Live Marble'²⁶ deals with an allied existential problem, that of the
impossibility of fully knowing another person, or simply 'the other'.

In this poem, the girl is being watched by a man who is unable to
know her fully, despite all his efforts. The girl's 'candour' and 'round-
ing compact at the lips' rise' are not a sign of self-searching - 'she
looks to see, and not to seek' - but the watcher 'comes to his own rest'
through them, and thinks he has at last found an 'essence', or truth,

'Through merging surfaces expressed
And her unformulable presence'.

The girl herself is unaware of the extent or difficulty of her self
possession - 'how far, on each side, is the fall' - and her speech does
not reveal 'anything but inanities'. The watcher realizes this, but it

does not concern him, for he 'longs to share' nothing beyond 'the adequacy she is'. He wants only to possess this 'image he has watched appear' in her eyes, and the 'Otherness' it represents. However, as he moves closer, he sees only his own reflection 'on the bright convex' of her eyes, 'clear in feature, little and caught by darkneses', and realizes the impossibility of this desire. By treating the girl as a work of art rather than a real human being with a thoughts and feelings of her own, he has turned her into a goddess of 'live marble', whom he can admire but not communicate with and who is really only a reflection of his own desires. In contrast with Donne's 'The Good-morrow', where the same phenomenon is alluded to - 'My face in thine eye, thine in mine appearances' - the watcher's reflection in the girl's eyes is a sign of a lack, rather than a fulfillment, of true love. The watcher fails to merge with 'the other', not because this is inherently impossible, but because he does not give anything of himself to the relationship. The opposite of this, a successful relationship based on mutual trust, is celebrated in the title poem of the volume.

'Touch'²⁷ describes 'the touch of sympathy that should be the aim of human intercourse' in terms of the poet climbing into bed, where his lover is asleep. At first his skin is 'slightly numb with the restraint of habits', and 'self' has formed a 'patina' (which in its literal sense refers to the incrustation on antiques) which is both protective and hard to remove. The poet is still wary about giving himself in love, and retains his 'outsideness' and 'a resilient chilly hardness'. In contrast, his lover is 'a mound of bedclothes' which the cat 'braces its paws against', and thus fully at ease. This feeling of contentment communicates itself to the poet, and with his 'own warmth surfacing', helps 'bit by bit to break down that chill'. His lover turns in her sleep to hold him, not from desire but for protection, as if he is

'the nearest human being to
hold on to in a
dreamed pogrom'.

The poet, now himself fully at ease, sinks into 'an old big place' which is 'there already' although 'hard to locate', and which represents the instinctual safety of love, and which is more than, although it includes, the merely sensual. It 'seeps from our touch', and connects the lovers with the whole of humanity, for, through this mutual sympathy, they are united in a primitive, almost archetypal, way.

'.....dark
 enclosing cocoon round
 ourselves alone, dark
 wide realm where we
 walk with everyone',

The poem is carefully controlled, especially in its description of the poet's gradual loosening of restraint, and this makes the expansiveness of the conclusion all the more impressive. The idea of love as a shared experience rather than a battle of sexual conquest is new in Gunn's work, as is his idea of this linking the lovers to the whole human race through the 'touch' of sympathy. How far Gunn has progressed can be seen if 'Touch' is compared with 'Carnal Knowledge'. Both poems deal with two lovers in bed, but where, in the earlier poem, this is an intellectual sham - 'you know I know you know I know you know' - in 'Touch' both are at peace. The same sense of love as a grateful surrender to 'fulness' is celebrated in 'The Vigil of Corpus Christi' where, just as in 'Touch' the cat was part of the 'old big place' too, it is the man's dog that provokes this feeling of 'unsoldierly joy'.

'The Vigil of Corpus Christi'²⁸ is a difficult poem to interpret - the title suggests that the man may be the risen Jesus or, more likely, the soldier placed in watch over Jesus's tomb, which would make his own 'quest' and coming to 'fulness' an echo of Christ's. More simply, the poem could be about an acolyte commemorating the crucifixion, but in either case it is the man's search for self discipline which is important, and which is

developed one step further than, say, 'Market at Turk'. The man is at first a 'sentinel at limits' - his clothes touch him at 'unrelated edges' and he stands all night in the cold - for his vigil makes him face the 'limits' of his self control, and try to extend them, and become 'as steadfast as the dark'. As morning comes, he is 'relinquished' by night, for he has safely overcome its dangers, like a man who has been safely cast up 'whole through foam' from the sea. The man is now 'sharp from abeyance' as a result of his vigil, and this successful attempt to be 'steadfast' appears to be the logical end of his quest, although it is anti-climactic, 'the invasion of himself at last merely by himself'. This would be a satisfactory conclusion to one of Gunn's early poems, and he straightens 'like a soldier', which recalls the soldier-heroes of poems like 'Incident on a Journey'. Here, however, this is seen as only a partial answer. The man feels his dog's tongue 'working round his ankles', and grins 'with an unsoldierly joy' at this

'soft sweet power awake in his own mass
balanced on his two feet, this fulness'.

His quest reveals the need for an intuitive sense of sympathy, which brings full awareness, rather than stoical self restraint, with its lack of contact with the outside world. This contrast between vigilance and openness is further explored by Gunn in 'Pierce Street'²⁹.

In this poem, Gunn describes his exploration of a deserted house full of paintings, and his thoughts on studying a picture of soldiers on guard (which provides a further link with 'The Vigil of Corpus Christi'). The house is dark, and the 'long threads of sunlight' can only 'pierce where they end small areas of the gloom'. Even the canvases, 'their colours muted', become 'square thick presences', and the furniture, as in 'In the Tank', is 'inferred much more than seen'. Finally the poet reaches a room, where 'a bluefly circles, irregular and faint', that contains a series of friezes 'in charcoal or in paint', in which 'the flesh-tint starts

to dawn'. As with 'In Santa Maria del Populo', these paintings become visible through the shadows, and become oddly real because of their contrast with the darkness and silence that surrounds them. As in the previous poem some of the men depicted stand 'as if muffled from the cold', although others disregard it, but all are armed, 'their holsters as if tipped in gold', and twice life-size, staring at Gunn with 'large abstracted eyes'. Whether they are actually soldiers is not made clear, for it is their stance that matters. Just as, in the picture, they form a 'silent garrison, and always there', they represent, for Gunn, the existential pose of self-restraint and the aggressive will.

'They are the soldiers of the imagination
Produced by it to guard it everywhere'.

They are 'bodied within the limits of their station' just as Gunn is 'bodied in my skin', and this repeats the central contrast between Gunn's early heroes, whose efforts are directed towards perfecting the role they have chosen, and his new idea of fulfillment through one's own personality and relationships. This is emphasised in the final stanza. The men in the painting 'preserve as they prevent', and, through the permanence of art, have become 'the thing they guard'. Gunn himself, however, is still part of a transitory existence - 'the floorboards creak' (presumably indicating someone's approach) - which has contacts with the natural world - 'the house smells of its wood'. This is superior because 'those who are transitory can move and speak' and therefore show a capacity for development. A more complex statement of this theme is contained in 'The Kiss at Bayreuth'³⁰ where the lovers are able, for a short time, to 'both move and be still'.

The title of this poem refers to the opera house built for the performance of Wagner's work, and therefore it can be assumed that the lovers referred to are Tristan and Isolde. However, when the poem was first published in magazine form³¹, it had as its epigraph a quotation from Antony and Cleopatra, 'kingdoms and provinces', which suggests that these

lovers are also referred to, as well as indicating the source of the poem's images of dissolution in Shakespeare's play. The poem itself deals with the way these lovers resist both change and time, and their precise identity does not really matter, as they are representative rather than unique. Their love takes place in a world that is in a state of flux where 'colours drain, shapes blur' and the 'mass of the external wobbles, sways, disintegrating'. This merging (which becomes a major theme in Gunn's next book, Moly) is retarded for a while before 'it is sucked into the eye of the cyclone', and it is this situation that the lovers contemplate. Human perception can reduce this flux to an order; it 'bares and discolours the world' in its 'wash of time'. This sort of disembodied viewpoint can contain fulness, as in 'The Vigil of Corpus Christi', even when aware of its own mortality.

'The inhuman eye contemplates
its own calm inclusive fulness,
its tendency, even, toward death'.

The lovers can combine the stillness of this view with the flux of the nature world, at least for a short while. Their kiss both contains 'turbulence' and annuls it, so that they can both 'move in awareness and be still to.....not think of themselves'. This loss of one's own consciousness in love, which was once so feared by Gunn, as in 'Light Sleeping', is here celebrated as a temporary solution. Both pairs of lovers referred to are, however, tragic, for they can attain this union 'for one moment and only for that moment', and then must again surrender to flux. This war against flux is further explored in two other poems in Touch, 'Berlin in Ruins' and 'Snowfall'. Both of these poems are especially concerned with the texture of this resistance, and are as successful at abstract description as 'The Kiss at Bayreuth', the first stanza of which, is masterly in this respect.

'Berlin in Ruins',³² emphasises the sharpness of surfaces in Berlin,

both literally and metaphorically, and shows how this will help the city to survive. Berlin has 'an edge, or many edges', and 'totters beneath associations'. The Anhalter Bahnhof brings to mind 'bronze Imperial fantasies', for, although about to be demolished, it retains 'plump hauteur' and this 'resistance' to the watcher makes him, in turn, resist these associations with Nazi rule. Memories of these 'tarnished blades of laurel' bring a 'revived fear of the dark hysteria conqueror'. Gunn expresses this in terms of a wound made by these sharp associations; the mind 'may cut on them, it may fester', for they are 'unyielding in texture' although also 'fertile'. The Nazis' conquest of France was unnaturally swift - 'the hectic that overtakes process' - and therefore sinister. There are now two possibilities for the future. The German spirit can either decline under this weight of its own history, or survive because of the hardness it has acquired. Fever may descend on the brow' because the 'high circlet' of German imperialism is 'bathed in poison now', but, conversely, still

'supporting the insupportable
it may survive its own stiff laurel'

for this crown is now 'harder and sharper than bronze'. 'Berlin in Ruins' is carefully written, if a little fanciful, and shows Gunn's interest in the twin processes of resistance and decay, already dealt with in such poems as section 22 of Positives, which considers the demolition of Marble Arch Odeon and 'The Produce District'. In contrast is 'Snowfall', which conveys 'an edgelessness', although this poem also deals with resistance, in this case to winter.

'Snowfall',³³ reads very much as if it was originally the accompanying poem to the final photograph in Positives, which shows a snow covered landscape on which children are playing, although it is a more complex (and longer) poem than anything in that volume. Both humans and Nature, in this poem, attempt to overcome the deadening effects of winter, but the latter, because unseen, is more successful. People 'look circumspect against the

white' of snow because it forms a landscape, 'dazzling and complete', whose very coldness is alien (as it is in 'The Vigil of Corpus Christi'). Their own heat is 'closely hoarded under layers of wool', and in contrast to the bright surface of the snow, they are 'sharp-edged, darkly filled in'. The snow is not in such dominance over other aspects of Nature. 'Unseen below' the brooks continue to flow, although 'under hard panes withdrawn deep', and they

'Still work a secret network through the land
With iced and darkened flow'

Like the humans on its surface, the earth hoards life within itself, and these apparently frozen rivers 'honeycomb' the country with 'galleries of their sleep'. The course of this river can still be seen following 'subterranean bay and fall' by the shape of the snow, 'like them in each contour'. However this similarity is deceptive, for the 'ice packed heel' encounters a substance that is 'not quite resistant, not quite palpable'. Compared with the 'sharp-edged' shapes of the people walking on it, and the streams beneath 'joining, dividing, through black earth', the snow conveys 'an edgelessness'. It is hard to ascertain how far this poem is simply descriptive and how far it is a philosophical inquiry, but the poem can be seen as an allegory, with the snow representing flux, and the control of humans and of natural forces as a battle against it. However overtly, this meaning is certainly present. An equally symbolic poem is 'Back to Life', which closes the volume, and which deals with the relation between an individual and the community to which he belongs.

'Back to Life'³⁴ describes a walk, at dusk, through a public park, and the contrast between this and the nearby street. The poet, walking 'between the kerb and bench', observes both worlds, and links them with the image of 'the branch that we grow on'. The first section describes the park itself as 'the lamps blink on, and make the dusk seem dimmer'. Gunn is alone 'like a patrolling keeper', and his closeness to the natural

world is shown by the clarity of his senses. He walks on grass 'that suddenly rustles with the dew' and catches 'the smell of limes coming and going faintly on the dark'. Gunn approaches these lime trees, and notices how, where they touch the 'lighted glass' of the lamps

'Their leaves are soft green on the night,
The closest losing even their mass,
Edged but transparent as if they too gave light',

The second section conveys a similar sense of harmony and order, not in Nature but in man. By now 'the street is full, the quiet is broken', and Gunn describes how people

'Extend themselves, at ease
As if just woken
To a world they have not yet recovered....'

Like the poet, their new awareness makes them devour 'each detail' in the new 'measured mildness of the air'. The actions of these people are determined by their age, although even this is part of a natural order. The boys and girls walk 'cocky with surplus strength', while the old are 'weakening with every move' and sit 'cushioned with papers or with rugs', their flesh

'Being sensible of the gravity
Which tugs
And longs to bring it down'.

This concern with both youth and age mirrors that in Positives, and Gunn expresses a similar acceptance of the inevitability of this, as well as the sense of community that links all men

'As if the light revealed us all
Sustained in delicate difference
Yet firmly growing from a single branch'.

Gunn also accepts the difficulty of sustaining this view. The branch is not 'remembered easily in the dark', and must be 'held to by mere conviction'.

The final section refers both to the actual lime trees Gunn watches in the park, and the metaphor he has made from this for human community, and thus stresses their final unity. Gunn notices a 'small full trembling' through the bough as it moves in the wind

'As if each leaf were, so, better prepared
For falling sooner or later sepearate'.

It is this feeling of belonging to an interconnected whole that enables one to express one's individuality, even in death. This is also the theme of the most important poem in Touch, 'Misanthropos', which deals with the theme in a more externalised way.

'Misanthropos'³⁵ is a poem for two voices, a narrator and the subject of the poem, the 'last man', who is the survivor of some cataclysmic war. He is, as the poem's title indicates, a man who hates others, but during the course of 'Misanthropos' he regains his humanity through close contact with the world of Nature. 'Misanthropos' is a long and complex work, carefully structured by Gunn. It is, as has already been shown, a technical tour-de-force, but its greatest importance is as a point of transition in Gunn's work, forming a bridge between the existential posturing of his early work and the mystical (though sometimes vapid) unifications of Moly. It is best to first examine the poem itself in some detail.

The first section of 'Misanthropos', 'The Last Man' shows the survivor gradually finding a pattern by merging his existence with the rhythms of Nature. The opening poem³⁶ is organised as a series of simple descriptive sentences that state the man's situation as directly as possible.

'He is clothes in dirt. He lacks motive.
He is wholly representative'.

The poem introduces certain important images and associations later to be examined more fully, as well as settling the tone and scale of the whole work. Dirt, which is later identified with both humanity, in XIV, and the dust, in XII, is first alluded to here, as is the 'last man's' memory of

'monstrous battle' which haunts him in the 'Memories of the World' section. Less obvious, but of equal importance, is the seemingly irrelevant first sentence.

'He avoids the momentous rhythm
of the sea, one hill suffices him',

In fact the sea, with its mirror image of the sea of dust, is the most important motif in the whole poem, and Gunn stresses this by emphasising it at the very beginning. This could also be a covert reference to Timon of Athens, for Shakespeare portrays Timon as a misanthrope who similarly lives apart from men, but Timon is unredeemed, and is buried on the sea shore near the rhythm of the ocean. In this poem, the 'last man' learns how to 'keep movement on the undipped wing of the present', and thus free himself from his memories by adopting the rhythms of Nature. He lives 'self-contained' like the birds, but is troubled by a 'relentless memory' of the past, which he overcomes, and returns 'without thought or feeling' to a preserving animality. 'Misanthropos' as a whole follows the same pattern, but finally goes beyond it, and demonstrates how thought and feeling can both be restored by a regard for other men, and one's links with the community. The representative nature both of this poem, and the whole work, is indicated by the way that the 'last man' is never named, but remains the 'misanthropos' of the title, a solitary who shuns the company of other men, until near the end of the sequence, when he becomes 'the first man', and rejoins the community. The man himself is not individualised, and the poem is closer to myth or fable than simple narrative. It is also carefully organised. The opening poem is tightly controlled, as is the whole work, using triple off-rhymes without unduly poeticising the syntax. The simple construction of beginning almost every sentence with the pronoun 'he' gives directness and, again, an air of impersonality to the actual narration of the poem. This narration is itself used as a rhythmical device, culminating in the three abrupt sentences of the final

two lines. Thus the opening poem fulfils its structural role, while remaining satisfying in its own right, and sets the pattern for the whole work.

The rest of the first section deals directly with the position of the last man as he enters the natural world, and views this in an existential light. Poem 11³⁷ is, as has been mentioned, in the form of the Renaissance echo-poem, and interestingly contrasts the reader's expectations from this classical form and the modern sense of disgust it in fact expresses. (It is closer here to the use of the genre in Jacobean tragedy, as in Act V of Webster's The Duchess of Malfi, than to its more normal expression of Elizabethan pastoral, as in some of the poems of Sidney). The figure of the 'last man' has affinities with the figure of Robinson Crusoe, and he too shouts in order to hear the echo of his own voice. The 'last man' finds that the war has denuded him of his humanity, and left only his capacity for self determination

'What have I left, who stood among mankind
When the firm base is undermined?

A mind'.

It is this existential idea of consciousness that sets apart men from those who are either dead or lack real awareness, and from the rest of the natural world. This self knowledge is at best partial, but even if directed to the wrong ends, it is its very existence that is important.

'Yet with a vacant landscape as its mirror
What can it choose, to ease the terror?

Error'.

Man cannot exist in full knowledge either of himself or of the world, so he must play a role to free himself (as, for example, do the visitors to the brothel in Genet's Le Balcon). As it turns out, this role-playing is essential at first, but it is not a total solution. The 'last man' has later to rejoin a community, albeit of a new kind, and face his mortality

directly in order to fully free himself, and this entails a stepping beyond existentialism. It is significant that the first two sections of 'Misanthropos', which the terms of Gunn's old philosophy, are written in a style close to that of his first two books, while the rest of the poem adopts a style closer to the rest of Touch. The final three poems in the opening section further examine the 'last man's' search for a pattern to his existence in these new circumstances.

Poem lII³⁸ describes the making of a 'clumsy frock' from animal skins. The 'last man' has already 'sloughed....bit by bit' his old uniform, and started to walk barefoot, in making his way to the hill he has decided to inhabit, and he abandons as well his previous role as a messenger, for one cannot 'bear dispatches between elm and oak'. He now makes new clothes from 'skins of mole and rabbit' hoping in this way to be 'without a role', but this is impossible. This poverty is 'a sort of uniform', and Nature seems to imitate his old surroundings - the wind 'utters ambiguous orders' while 'nodding foxgloves' replace his old girlfriends. (This uniform has affinities with that of the motorcyclists and soldiers in Gunn's earlier work, where it was admired for its own sake, although here it is seen as a sign of role playing). The 'last man' realizes this, and works to create a new role. 'With a bone needle he pursues himself', and by this conscious resolve becomes

'A courier after identity, and sees
A pattern grow among the disarray'.

Poem IV³⁹ describes the 'last man' watching the 'slow bright mild recurrence' of the moon, and deriving comfort from the pattern it too suggests. This 'ancient rhythm almost comforts', but, because the moon is inanimate, it represents only 'the youth of things', where 'relics of emergent matter.freeze'. Man has 'life, consciousness, like linked catastrophes', and this sequence 'cannot be reversed', until the 'features set' in death. (This is reminiscent of 'My Sad Captains' where the constancy of

death is compared to that of the stars). While still alive, the 'last man' must accept this inheritance of 'consciousness that plots its own ends', just as he accepted 'drafting for that war'. Just as he can see 'the heaviness, the flaw' of being alive, the 'last man' also realizes that the moon is 'imperfect' because, 'steady in the orbit it must go', it lacks man's freedom of choice. The final two lines constitute a deliberate ambiguity, for the last line could refer either to the moon or to the 'last man'.

'Yet, bathed by shade now, he imagines more -
the clearest light in the whole universe'.

This means either that man's imagination can make the imperfect into a symbol of perfection, or that man himself, because conscious, is greater than the inanimate aspects of Nature. Both meanings are present, and the poem praises a sort of freedom, which is itself replaced by a new sense of community as 'Misanthropos' progresses.

Poem V⁴⁰ deals with another kind of pattern, that described at the end of Poem III, which is mirrored by the path that the 'last man' makes in the grass by his 'repeated tread'. This path serves as an image of the intellectual progress, or, as Gunn puts it succinctly, 'process made visible' of the 'last man', and shown how he has learnt this new freedom.

'Bare within limits. The trick
Is to stay free within them'.

The poem, and the first section of 'Misanthropos', ends not with philosophical speculation but with rain; 'drops are isolate on leaves, big and clear'. This image, like that of the moon in the preceding poem, already sets up resonances, in this case of peace and renewal, and these associations help make 'Misanthropos' more than the sum of its constituent parts. Here the 'last man' is shown as being integrated into the security of Nature.

'He breathes the barbarous smell
of the wet earth. Nothing moves
at the edges of the mind'.

The image used here suggests this by combining abstract and concrete terms together - 'the edges of the mind'- although this trait spoils some of Gunn's later poetry, where it is overdone. The combination is here used with care, and gives the verse of 'Misanthropos' much of its distinctive cool quality. The exposition of the poem is now completed, and the second section shows the 'last man's' resolve hardening in the light of his continued search for a direction.

This section, 'Memoirs of the World', shows how the 'last man' is now able to recall his previous role-playing, and realizes the falsity it involved. The first poem, VI⁴¹, opens with simple narration - 'it has turned cold. I have been gathering wood' - as had I, but modulates into a recollection of the 'last man's' role before the war. This is developed in the poems that follow, into an investigation, narrated by the misanthropos himself, of how to achieve the 'distinct direction' he wishes for. He is jolted into these memories of the past, in VI, by the sound of birdsong, 'two falling notes - a sweet disconsolate tune', and by the 'cold red setting sun' which reminds him of 'old sunsets' during the war; 'most poignant and weakening, that recall'. These memories at first weaken the resolve of the 'last man' to live in Nature, for 'warmth and light' then were 'diminished less than now'. The poem however, suddenly changes direction.

'The bird stops. Hardening in the single present
I know, hearing wind rattle in a bough
I have always harked thus after an incessant
Not now, not now, not now'.

The misanthropos comes to realize that he has always longed to escape action. His memories of the past were a false reflection of what he had actually felt then, and Nature has now taught him to live in the 'single present'. The 'tune' of inaction, which is used as the refrain, both echoes the birdsong, and mirrors the movement of the poem itself with its

falling intonation. The poem's use of imagery is indicative of the general quality of language in 'Misanthropos', relying on generalised rather than precise description - 'the white grey, blackened iron and slabbed concrete of a sentry post'. This type of allusive, but not actualised, description is apt here, for the poem is intended to show how the misanthropos's notions of the past are simplified in a false way, but it is a device that can detract from the poetry if used too often. Fortunately Gunn only uses it - both here and in Moly - when it is essential to his purpose.

The next poem, Vll⁴², explores the past of the 'last man' more closely, and shows how he erected his own cult of mystery

'Who was it in dark glasses?
Nobody in the street could
see if my eyes were open'.

In this way he thinks that he can perceive 'an exact structure.....of the world', but begins to find this unsatisfactory, noticing a 'hunger of the senses' when he abandons himself to a close investigation of the physical world, exploring a doorjamb,

'Cramming my nail with its grime,
stroking humps where colourless
paint had filled faults to substance'.

This is Gunn at his worst; the image is too arbitrary (and indeed ludicrous) to carry the importance given to it, and is a poor symbol for absorption in the smallest visible details of reality. However, it does convey the point Gunn intends, and the 'last man' rejects his old self, for he finds that he is gaining a new identity by the 'mere fact of movement', although he is unsure about what he is becoming now he is no longer 'an armed angel among men'.

'Was I entering the role
of spy or spied on, master
or the world's abject servant?'

The misanthropos was aware that he was acting out a role, but this was better than having no direction at all. The poem itself carefully echoes and moulds its material through its use of form. Each stanza describes a development of the man's self awareness, so that the reader is conscious that experience is being both made coherent and carefully controlled. As an example of the hidden order of 'Misanthropos' already mentioned, this poem is in syllabics and pararhymes, fitting its conversational tone and lack of sudden emphasis, while poems Vl and Vlll are written in full rhymes and iambic meter, and, in turn, poems V and lX are in syllabics. In contrast with the comparative looseness of this poem, Vlll⁴³, which follows next, is almost perversely artificial, but this, again, is relevant to its meaning.

In this poem, the last man watches the fire that he built in Vl, expresses envy at the way it is 'exact in being, absolute in balance', and hopes that it will 'instruct me how to find here my desire'. He is attracted to the fire because, unlike the moon, it is in a state of flux, and its matter 'Each into other constantly is turning'. The 'last man' therefore tries to discover the meaning of 'what the world was and meant' in a 'dying ember'. He almost manages this, constructing a metaphysical explanation in which evil 'shows like a spark', and the fire represents his past, but these thoughts lead nowhere.

'The neighbouring cinders redden now together
Like earlier worlds to search, where I am shown
Only myself, although I seek another',

The fire, despite its state of flux, is as unsatisfactory as the moon in providing a rationale of action. The 'last man' must imitate (and become) 'a man who burnt from sympathy alone', and 'Memoirs of the World' does in fact culminate with the beginning of this process. This poem is, in terms of form, an intentional failure, for Gunn writes a perfectly structured metaphysical work, which even contains its own mythology - 'dryads reposing

in the bark's hard silence' - and a careful analogy between fire and his past, only to reject the whole structure as an inadequate answer to the 'last man's' search for truth. The next poem also draws on an earlier literary style, this time specifically drawn from King Lear.

This poem, lX⁴⁴, explores the past of the misanthropos even more fully than in Vll, and describes the role of a 'serving man' he played in his relationships with other people. It is based on Edgar's speech - made in the guise of Poor Tom - to the mad Lear about a man 'who slept in the contriving of lust and waked to do it'. Gunn draws on the atmosphere of the heath, implicitly comparing it with the situation after the war at the start of 'Misanthropos'. He also intensifies both the vitality and perverted lechery described by Edgar to show the extent of the 'last man's' previous false relationship with other men, which he has now left behind.

'Even as I served them sweets
I served myself a trencher
of human flesh in some dark
sour pantry, and munched from it',

Gunn contrasts this picture of gross sexual appetite with the privations and solitude the misanthropos now experiences.

'My diet, now, is berries,
water, and the gristle of
rodents.....'

The poem also reintroduces the figure of the 'curled darling' of lll, and shows the true nature of this persona. The serving man 'gave readily', but for purely selfish reasons, and is therefore the antithesis of the man who gives 'from sympathy alone' and who eventually provides the key to the misanthropos's salvation. Nevertheless, the serving man represents, in however debased a form, the communal aspects of humanity, and indicates that something is lacking in the 'last man's' present solitary life.

'.....I brought myself here
widening the solitude
till it was absolute. But
at times I am ravenous',

The final two poems of this section develop these thoughts in solitude, and prepare the misanthropos for a return to the community in a new and purer way. Poem X⁴⁵ is based on the contrast, already integral to the images of the moon and the fire, between inanimate matter and the rhythms of Nature, although, as in the previous poem, this is seen in a perverted form. The poem is set in winter, and the man, looking out at the snow, has a sort of deranged vision. His mind 'enters the heart of fever as its captive, unable to stir' and, through illness, becomes 'servant to an unhinged body'. His vision seems to reflect this fever, for the 'last man' first sees

'.....the cells swimming in concert
like nebulae, calm, without effort',

but an 'intruder' appears with 'tendrils like an anemone's', and where

'it touches it holds, in an act of
enfolding, possessing, merging love'.

As with the attentions of the 'serving man', there is something malignant about this act of love, and this 'parody' leaves behind 'gorgeous mutations only, then night'. The poem presents, in one sense, an image of the misanthropos's earlier perversion of life by his selfish (if attractive) lust, and the dream represents its expiation. The poem, however, is more ambiguous than this suggests. The vision ends and leaves the man free - 'I can sleep now' - for it has taught him the value of human consciousness. The image in the vision is of a 'devil....life's parody' because it achieves nothing, but this also shows, by default, that human love can leave something other than 'gorgeous mutations'. This is one of the most crucial poems in 'Misanthropos', for it teaches the 'last man' how he should

approach experience.

'I must keep to the world's bare surface
I must perceive, and perceive what is:'

Even though this 'hold of perception' will not always remain, it will
'harden but diminish, like the frost', and ensure that the fact of death is
at least stood up to, so that

'.....still there may be something retained
against the inevitable end'.

The misanthropos is taught by the 'snow vision' (as this poem is entitled by Gunn in Poems 1950-66) to directly investigate his own experiences, and to live in contact with reality rather than spend his life in role-playing. This honesty is superior to the effortless calm of the 'cells swimming in concert' for it can both observe and learn from them, and also represent the manifestation of the conscious will. This poem is a good example of the use Gunn makes of his technical abilities to help express his thoughts in the most effective way possible. It is divided into three sections, the first and last linked by the images of snow and frost to give continuity, while the use of rhyming couplets gives Gunn's verse the balance and poise of Augustan poetry, but his habit of flowing the sense over couplet endings helps avoid the inherent artificiality of this style. The diction itself is latinate and intellectualised - 'nebulae', 'a negative of matter' etc. - but every word is made to count towards the total effect. The one repetition, that of 'perceive' in the third section, is used to express a further precision of meaning. The careful use of technique is essential if this philosophical, almost abstract, language of 'Misanthropos' is to succeed, and the poem's hidden order helps achieve this.

The final poem in the 'Memoirs of the World' section (and the only one in the whole work to have a title to itself), 'Epitaph for Anton Schmidt',⁴⁶ describes the type of man that the ~~misanthropos~~^{misanthropos} has learned to emulate, who fulfils his conscious will not through self regard but, as

Poem Vlll predicted, through 'sympathy alone'. Schmidt, like Claus von Stauffenberg, shows bravery when there is most pressure to conform, and the two poems are so similar - both heroes are German officers in the Second World War who, in different ways, go against the Nazi regime, and both die because of this - that a deliberate comparison must have been intended by Gunn. In this poem, Schmidt does not 'mistake the men he saw.....for gods or vermin' but treats them as his equals, even although the men he helps escape are 'another race at that, and strangers', for he realizes that he is united with them by common humanity. Schmidt therefore refuses to play his given role as a Nazi persecutor, for he will not 'submit to the blackmail of his circumstances'. The poem is linked to earlier parts of 'Misanthropos' by the motif of snow, and, thematically, by its portrayal of a truly free man, who is seen

'Breathing the cold air of his freedom
And treading a distinct direction',

This evocation of Schmidt's heroism is helped by the poem's use of understatement. His actions are merely called 'uncommon things, not safe', his execution is mentioned almost in passing, and it is emphasised that Schmidt is unglamorous and 'of slow and undisclosing feature'. 'However, it is this sense of full humanity arising from genuine compassion rather than acts of selfish bravery that characterises Schmidt, and this emphasis on caring for others, and the value of human community, takes 'Misanthropos' beyond existentialism to a philosophy that is both more inclusive and less dominated by ideas of the self. Schmidt comes to know himself as had, say, Rastignac, but he attains this through helping others. It is the second aspect of this new philosophy, that of 'perfect community' that Gunn explores in the rest of 'Misanthropos'. Just as the first two sections develop ideas inherent in his earlier poetry, the last two sections of 'Misanthropos' mark a new range of subject matter that Gunn is to explore further in his later poetry, especially in Moly.

The third section of 'Misanthropos' consists of one poem, 'Elegy on the Dust',⁴⁷. This marks the culmination of Gunn's investigations into the contrast between human consciousness and the mindless flux of Nature, as already examined in 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death' and 'On the Move'. The poem charts a descent from the 'upper slopes' of the hill on which the 'last man' lives, and which are 'busy with the cricket', through the lower regions with its colony of small animals 'interdependent in the shade' to the 'expanse of dust....acres calm and deep' that lies beneath. This descent is both a literal journey and representative of evolution in reverse. The dust of the poem is seen a sinister mirror-image of the sea (which begins the work as a whole), hanging in waves 'as if frozen in mid-roll' that cannot fall but instead 'imperceptibly..... shift'. It is also seen as a death force, gradually choking plant life until 'dock and fern are fathoms deep'. However, this dust is itself subject to flux, for 'farther from the hill' it is blown by the wind.

'And vexed with constant loss and gain,
It seems, of the world's refuse and debris'.

The comparison with the sea is now explicitly alluded to, but Gunn stresses their essential difference, for dust chokes rather than protects life, and Gunn extends this analogy.

'But seas contain a graveyard: here
The graveyard is the sea, material things.....
Are all reduced to one form and size'.

The dust is therefore both an image of mortality or the absence of life, and an actual collection of lifeless objects, all of which are reduced to their essence. So far, the poem is a brutally realized variation of the commonplace that, for example, Hamlet's speech 'Alexander died.....Alexander returneth to dust' refers to. The poem, however, contains more than a simple 'ashes to ashes' moral.

'And here the human race, too, lies
 An imperfection endlessly refined
 By the imperfection of the mind'.

It is man's 'imperfection' that renders him mortal, and he is therefore broken down in 'this universal knacker's yard' into a purer form, repeating the 'motion of life' in reverse. This process is a healing one, 'ultimately without pain', for men find that

'The remnants of their guilt mix as they must
 And average out in grains of dust
 Too light to act, too small to harm.....'

Death is therefore an improvement on consciousness - which was the only reality apprehended in Gunn's earlier work - in that it replaces human 'guilt' (the original sin of Christianity) with 'perfect community'. This is a more total view of experience than Gunn has expressed before, although of course it provides no structure of salvation or conscious life after death. The dust, drifting at the mercy of the wind, 'yields to what it sought, a saviour' and becomes part of the flux of Nature, thrown 'in endless hurry round the world'. This indicates a further development of the ideal community that Schmidt prefigured, and it is this, joined with Schmidt's ideals of true involvement with others, that is described in the fourth, and final, section of 'Misanthropos'.

This last section describes how the 'last man' realizes that he is not the only man to have survived the war, and shows how he joins a band of other 'last men', which is itself both an imitation and a prefigurement of the perfect community of death that all men will eventually be part of. The very title of this section - 'The First Man' - indicates that the survivor of the holocaust has now entered a new phase of humanity. Poem XlII⁴⁸ prepares for this by showing how the 'first man' has been taught by Nature to live in the present, and thus escape the chains of the past,

'The present is a secure place to inhabit,
The past being fallen from the mind, the future
A repetition, only with variations'.

His adoption of these natural rhythms is, however, potentially dangerous, for he is now merely a 'nose' or a 'mouth', and at most an 'unreflecting organ of perception'. He has, however, at least escaped his old self.

'Echo is in the past, the snow long past.
The year has recovered and put forth many times'.

He is now 'the first man lurking in a thicket of time', and fully part of the natural processes, 'darkening in the heavy shade of trunks that thicken in the ivy's grip'.

The following poem, XIV⁴⁹, brings an important development. The 'first man' sees a 'smudge' of men approaching, and this reactivates his powers of speech, although at first 'mouth struggles with the words that mind forgot', and his desire for communication with others. This is not yet enough. The 'first man' wants to remain on the 'green slopes of his isolation', and is tempted to reject community with men, and even with the dust, by escaping from the flux of Nature. He dreams of a 'shadowed pool' from which he might emerge, after bathing,

'Inhuman as a star, as cold, as white,
Freed from all dust. And yet he does not move',

However, he no longer needs to escape, for since becoming a 'Misanthropos' he has come to understand the rhythms of life, and 'in picturing man almost becomes man too'. He still needs to perform an action, like Schmidt's motivated by 'sympathy alone' in order to join this new community, and this happens, almost by accident, in the next poem.

Poem XV⁵⁰ begins with a contrast that emphasises the gulf that still lies between the misanthropos and the 'first men'. The former is 'as stony as a lizard poised on a stone', while the group of 'forty men and women, twos and threes' mirror the flux of Nature.

'Below, the indeterminate shape flows steady
From plain to wood, from wood to slope'.

This reverses the movement of 'Elegy on the Dust', which moves from the hill to the plain (and from life to death). The reintegration of the misanthropos is achieved by his showing, for the first time in the poem, a genuine human emotion (other than hatred of the past). At first he watches the group of men 'unmoving and unmoved', but one of them comes closer, and the 'first man' sees, and is disturbed by, his wounds, which suggest his fragility.

'And on the thin chest two long parallel
Clear curving scratches are discernable'.

Although these injuries are 'trivial', they make the misanthropos feel sympathy (as did Schmidt), and perform an 'unconsidered' action. He leaves his hiding place, walks round to where the 'creature leans', and, when the wounded man falls back in surprise,

'He stops, bewildered by his force, and then
Lifts the other to his feet again'.

The 'creature' is now the 'other' (here indicating companionship and not distance, as it would do in Sartre's terminology), and the 'first man' is aware that this impulse, or 'act of growth' has shown a 'clarity he cannot well escape' - the fact that he has acted from compassion, and proved himself closer to the 'other' than to the forces of Nature. Although unconsidered, and almost trivial, this action redeems the misanthropos and makes this name no longer applicable.

The last two poems of 'Misanthropos' provide a double view of the effects of this action, as seen by both the 'first man' and the narrator. Both start from the premise 'others approach'. Poem XVI⁵¹ is the final statement by the 'first man', and opens with the mingling of the abstract and the particular, normally so dangerous, which Gunn uses successfully throughout the work.

'.....For it seems to me
 they file past my mind, my mind
 perched on this bare rock, watching'.

This emphasises the interior vision that the whole of 'Misanthropos' is seen through, a combination of a straightforward narrative - men walking past a rock - and the implications of this narrative arrived at through intellectual reasoning - the mind studying this procession. This use of different levels reappears later in the poem when the 'first man's' rediscovery of language also forms an image for his rejoining the community, and leaving the world of Nature. (Gunn is fond of making an action which forms an essential part of the narrative also carry some sort of symbolism). In this case, the band of survivors study the 'first man' closely,

'and as they pass they name me.
 What is the name Adam speaks
 after the schedule of beasts?'

As it is, rejoining the community still proves precarious. The 'first man' continues to feel some of his old disgust, or 'bitter dizziness', at other men, and 'I almost fall'. The 'fall' here is both physical and intellectual, but certainly not spiritual. (It would be easy, but ~~misguided~~^{misguided}, to deduce from this, and other terms derived from Christianity such as 'expiation' and 'saviour', that a religious element is present in the closing poems of 'Misanthropos'. What is new is the idea of an improved sense of human community, and this is as far as Gunn goes). Unlike the images of fulfilled men in such poems as 'On the Move', this man is 'no hero or saint'. In these new circumstances

'It is a bare world, and lacks
 history; I am neither
 his lord nor his servant'.

These old divisions, as seen in poem LX, have now gone, as have the memories, particularly of the war, which so tormented the misanthropos. The poem ends

with the 'first man' rejoining the community, through an act of the conscious will, by using the one 'act of memory' that is still useful, that of speech.

'I stretch out the word to him
from which conversations start,
naming him, also, by name'.

Poem XVII⁵² is the final poem of the sequence, and sets the action described in the previous poem in a philosophical framework, as well as drawing together the main themes of the whole work. This meeting is seen to prefigure the final community of the dead, as already described in 'Elegy on the Dust'.

'The touched arm feels of dust, mixing with dust
On the hand that touches it'.

Even this, as in poem V, makes some sort of pattern; 'and yet a path is dust or it is none'. The war, which made the misanthropos become separated from other men, has been 'fought and yet survived', and the 'first man's' flesh 'which he hardly feels, feels dust' raised by this war. He now abandons the role-playing, which made him hide behind 'dark glasses', just as he hid from the 'first men', for a new relationship where he must

'Turn out toward others, meeting their look at full,
Until you have completely stared
On all there is to see.....'

The poem, as well as 'Misanthropos' as a whole, ends with full acceptance of mortality, because it, too, is a shared human experience; 'immeasurable, the dust yet to be shared'.

'Misanthropos' ^{supersedes} ~~supercedes~~ Gunn's earlier poetry, where the emphasis is either on the aggressive human will triumphing over mere matter, as in 'On the Move', or the nature of the self, as in 'Human Condition'. Both of these themes are by now developed and, to some extent, solved. The 'last man' deliberately exiles himself in Nature and absorbs its rhythms

rather than opposing them. Similarly, he comes to lose interest in the nature of his own identity, and submerges it by joining the community of the 'first men' through his act of caring for another. An interesting comparison can be made with the earlier poem 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death' where the dead man's body is blown out by marsh plants to a parody of his former self, but one lacking the consciousness of the living man, for his cells now 'multiply in ignorance'. Here, death is seen as a wasteful process which is hostile to humanity. 'Misanthropos' ends with a similar situation, as visualised in 'Elegy on the Dust', but death is seen as being shared by all men, and as a triumph rather than a negation. Matter is not static, but 'hurled in endless hurry round the world'. The theme, and style, of the 'Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision' is presented in 'A Snow Vision', but this is only part of the development of the poem rather than a final view, as it appears to be in The Sense of Movement. As well as referring back to his earlier work, 'Misanthropos' also looks forward to Moly, which opens with the metamorphoses of 'Rites of Passage' and 'Tom Dobbin', and leads to the fulfilled vision of 'The Fair in the Woods' and 'The Garden of the Gods' where the poet is fully aware of the interpenetration of life and death, and feels himself 'rooted in the death-rich earth'. The poem is also marked by its fluid use of imagery, and is itself based on a seasonal parallel, providing an extended example of this. The first section of 'Misanthropos' takes place in autumn with 'green overtaking green', the second in winter, with 'A Snow Vision' reflecting this, and the fourth in spring when 'the year has recovered and put forth many times'. As well as providing a believable chronology, this is organised so that the season chosen fits the mood of each part of the poem in turn. This device is a traditional one, especially in the way that the poem ends with an intellectual rebirth of the 'last man' which is set, conventionally enough, in springtime, but this device is never overstated. The same applied, of course, to Positives, with its

loose patterning of youth, growing up, love and work, and old age. It also applies to Moly, although the pattern there is more complex. This sense of 'Misanthropos' as being a poem of transition is also true technically, as has already been shown. In particular, Gunn develops here a combination of abstract and particularised imagery which is surprisingly effective, although in Moly, it has become something of a mannerism, and is used too much, robbing Gunn's verse of much of its earlier precision. As well as all this, 'Misanthropos' is satisfying in its own right, and holds in balance some elements which elsewhere lessen Gunn's work. Ultimately it is a poem about redemption, although not in any religious sense, both of the misanthropos, who is re-integrated into the new community, and of all men, in the unity of the 'dust'. It remains one of Gunn's finest achievements, as does Touch as a whole, of which it forms such an integral part, representing the 'dream' of civilized man, just as 'Confessions of the Life Artist' represents his nightmare, and describing in its final section, 'the touch of sympathy that should be the aim of human intercourse' which the 'last man' has previously replaced with 'the predatory bite of the animal'.

In the same discussion of his work⁵³, Gunn alludes to his poetry since Touch as attempting to 'create in oneself a field which will be spontaneously fertile for the tests of sympathy', and sees this as 'a subject that could be a proper exploration for several lifetimes of books'. The first results of these new experiments with subject matter can be seen in two poems which have not been collected into book form, 'North Kent' and 'Aqueduct', and both of which are descriptive in a way not seen before in Gunn's work. 'North Kent'⁵⁴ describes chemical works in that area (perhaps remembered from the poet's childhood) and the dust - which fulfils a similar role here to its one in 'Misanthropos' - which coats the whole factory. The poem begins by describing the chalk pits behind the factory, 'blurred with pocks', and the way the unmined chalk provides a 'bright porous clutch

an inch below the thyme.' The factory imitates Nature, for its 'cylinders and blocks'

'Are of a whiteness in the same way smudged,
Or realized, by shadow, grease, and grime'.

The 'Works' are 'grey with cement dust', and even the workmen are 'clotted with the impurities they cause'. The end result of this process is seen in the 'puffs of blanched smoke' which escape from the factory's chimneys, 'pure and useless, as they appear.' The poem is largely descriptive for its own sake, but it does describe the way that men alter the processes of Nature for their own advantage, converting the chalk into grey cement. Gunn does not criticize this - the whiteness of chalk is 'realized' by a contrast with grime - but he does find the process unrewarding, as in the way it makes the workmen 'bulk shaped against the pallor'. This sense of the incompleteness of human attempts to dominate Nature (for the 'blanched smoke' escapes), is even more marked in 'Aqueduct'⁵⁵.

This poem describes the 'shelf' of an aqueduct that is gradually reclaimed by Nature, and draws wider conclusions from this. Water has seeped from the aqueduct onto the 'shelf that throats it', and formed a 'glaze of salt', where green 'seeks itself',

'A moss-film that has sucked
From seepings of the fault',

In time, a crop (presumably of wheat) grows on this shelf, ripening from 'shoots that sunlight pulls' to 'feathery seeded ears' that 'ripen towards their gold' and 'invest the inch of stone'. These unnoticed crops are 'seasonally resown' by the wind, and gradually 'extend the small tight hold'. (This compares with the 'clutch of the chalk in 'North Kent'). Nature therefore exploits 'the smallest crack by which the construct yields', and robs it of the capacity to resist decay by drawing it 'into time'.

These two poems show a new interest in the close description of Nature, and an awareness of its power, that lead on to Moly. Touch itself

represents the culmination of the second major phase of Gunn's work (just as The Sense of Movement did the first), and 'Misanthropos' remains his most successful poem. The new 'seductiveness' which Martin Dodsworth has praised in this collection makes the poetry more flexible and expressive, without it losing its old qualities of clarity and intelligence. This new responsiveness to the external world is even more marked in Gunn's next collection, Moly.

Notes (On Chapter Five - Touch)

1. Anon, in Times Literary Supplement, 5 October 1967 p.937
2. Derwent May, in Times, 5 October 1967 p.8
3. Julian Jebb, 'Touch' in Financial Times (quoted on dust cover of Positives)
4. Brian Jones, in London Magazine VII (December 1970) pp.89-90
5. Ian Hamilton, in Observer, 12 November 1967 p.28
6. Ronald Hayman, in Encounter 31 (July 1968) p.72
7. Laurence Lieberman, in Yale Review 58 (October 1968) pp.139-40
8. ^{Hayden} ~~Henry~~ Carruth, in Hudson Review XXI (Summer 1968) pp.399-412
9. Martin Dodsworth, in Listener, 19 October 1967 pp.506-7
10. Julian Symons, in New Statesman, 13 October 1967 p.476
11. Robin Skelton, in Kenyon Review 30 (1968) pp.689-98
12. Tom Blackburn, in Poetry Review LIX (Spring 1968) pp.57-8
13. Richard Kell, in Critical Survey 3 (Winter 1967) pp.178-9
14. Stephen Spender, in Observer (quoted on dust cover of Positives)
15. Daryl Hine, in Poetry Chicago 113 (October 1968) pp.55-6
16. Martin Dodsworth, Review 18 (April 1968) pp.46-61
17. Thom Gunn, Poetry Book Society Bulletin 54
18. T pp.18-22
19. T p.24
20. T p.25
21. T p.55-56
22. T p.13
23. T p.52
24. T p.23
25. T pp.16-17
26. T p.51
27. T pp.26-27

28. T p.28
29. T pp.53-54
30. T p.14
31. 'The Kiss at Bayreuth', in A Review of English Literature, 5
(October 1964) p.47
32. T p.15
33. T p.50
34. T pp.57-58
35. T pp.29-49
36. T p.29
37. T p.30
38. T p.31
39. T p.32
40. T p.33
41. T p.34
42. T p.35
43. T p.36
44. T p.37
45. T pp.38-39
46. T p.40
47. T pp.41-42
48. T p.43
49. T pp.44-45
50. T pp.46-47
51. T p.48
52. T p.49
53. Thom Gunn, Poetry Book Society Bulletin 54 (September 1967)
54. 'North Kent' in Listener, 22 February 1968, p.231
55. 'Aqueduct' in Critical Quarterly X (Spring/Summer 1968) p.56

CHAPTER 6

MOLY

Moly, published in 1971, received as mixed a reception as Touch, and discussion centred on the same major issues, Gunn's use of abstraction, his interest in texture, and his experiments with language, as well as the way he used the 'Moly' myth to unify the poem, and what overall meaning the poem has. The most interesting review was in the Times Literary Supplement¹, which traced the new trends in Gunn's later work. Gunn has always been concerned with discovering a form of poise which would preserve the self's intactness from the invasion of a gloomy Sartrean neant. This involves a capacity 'to live experience through in detail', as Gunn himself wrote, and this quest for an achieved balance - where the poet is both subjected to and in control of his subject matter - has reflected itself continually in a problem a technique. Gunn's earlier oscillation between rigorous iambics and tentative syllabics expressed this moral dilemma as a simple dichotomy between the poet as a ~~separate~~^{separate} perceiver, controlling the object to a structure where most of life is squeezed out, and a submission to the rhythms of experience which tends to limit the complex moral statement of Gunn at his best. Touch was a development on this, and saw this impulse towards the hardening of the self undergoing some sardonic questioning as images of melting and merging began to creep in. In Moly these tendencies have become more affirmative, because Gunn's sense of sustaining poise has been modified. The earlier distinction between the controlling mind and chaotic matter is now ~~superceded~~^{superseded}, for man now masters natural forces by rooting himself in them, not fending them off (as in 'From the Wave'). The man-beast metamorphosis in Moly also expresses a more generous rapport between man and the forces among which he moves than Gunn's earlier use of this theme to suggest a potentially tragic discontinuity between them. The Circe myth stresses the need for self awareness so that man can trans-

cend the bestial, but the centaur poems see this division between man and beast as a merger, and the moly plant is an image of this division - within - unity. Human consciousness sinks roots into the earth, and at its most intensified, as when under L.S.D., these sharpened perceptions depend on mindless natural merging. This relationship between man and nature has always been an ambivalent moral issue for Gunn, defining a way of writing as well as an ethic - the moral values of My Sad Captains, for example, are underpinned by the rigorous epistemological doctrine of poems like 'Waking in a newly built House'. A similar interaction occurs in 'Moly'; art and perception preserve ~~seperateness~~ ^{separateness}, but within an organic interchange between perceiver and perceived, a mutual nourishing that images the relation between an animal and its young as exactly as that between poet and object. This ~~seperateness~~ ^{separateness} is only lost, temporarily, in sexuality (as in the poem 'Touch'). The reviewer concludes by showing how these new developments in Gunn's poetry have made Moly such an important stage in his work. At both moral and aesthetic levels, Gunn has broken beyond his former implication that the only alternative to existential alienation was a dangerous undermining empathy. ~~Seperateness~~ ^{Separateness} and responsiveness are now joined within a single outline on both technical and thematic levels. Gunn's language imitates the fusion of ~~seperateness~~ ^{separateness} and thematic levels it describes, and shows a spare economy combined with a complex sensuousness, so that objects are both placed and expressed as an emotional unity. The reviewer, finally, sees Moly as lacking the metaphysical drama of early Gunn, but represents a mature distillation of some of the major issues he has pursued so ambitiously through his work. I have reproduced this review so fully because it seems both the most sympathetic treatment of Gunn's later work, and the best criticism yet written on his work. Despite this, it does fail to explain away some of the major faults of Gunn's most recent poetry. It is not enough to attribute the vacuous nature of some of the verse to the fusion of abstract concepts it represents,

just as Gunn's lack of contact with the external world, which runs through all of his work as well, is still a serious deficiency in his work.

Other reviews were less wide ranging, although no less enthusiastic. Michael Wood in the Times² also views the collections in terms of Gunn's earlier work. My Sad Captains saw Gunn abandoning previous images of action and adventure, and marked an acceptance of passivity, Touch was a groping for new themes and forms, and Moly is a safe arrival. The poetry is frankly meditative and calm, a Californian contemplation of 'limiting candour', although there is also a possibility of horror as well. The steady, almost stately verse is a counterpart to some of the subjects it describes, which deal with extreme experience, but Gunn speaks with the voice of tradition where it seemed burned out. He shows a capacity for wonder that never degenerates to amazement or shock. In the Financial Times³, Julian Jebb sees the book as 'a journey into light', and this light 'in all its manifestations and with all its literal and metaphorical powers' is the central theme of the collection. 'The manner of these poems varies between the meditative and the celebrative' and the creatures described are 'all plunged into a state of change in which perception is widened and the everyday restrictions of vision are subject to the invasion of great floods of incandescent light'. Less convinced is Lyman ^{Andrews} ~~Andrews~~, writing in the Sunday Times⁴. He finds the book a disappointment, 'studded with cliches', and annoying in its 'new carelessness with language', and its use of Gunn's conventional poses. Sincerity by itself does not make a poem, and 'neither does sex, no matter how strong the urge to convey this verbally'. There are however a few excellent poems, such as 'Phaedra in the Farm House' which show 'tenderness conveyed without sentimentality, an absolute exactness of phrasing.....and his old ability to render the commonplaces of existence as though they were epiphanies.'

This uncertainty about the verse and method of Moly is put more strongly

by other critics. Alan Brownjohn in the New Statesman⁵ finds the poetry assured, but thinks that the experiments are not genuine ones; the freak-out of familiar Gunn moments are sometimes awful. Most of the book is the same as before, but the three poems which celebrate the power of the sun - 'Three', 'The Discovery of the Pacific' and 'Sunlight' - represent a turning outwards, and this is a possible answer to the impasse in which Gunn's work now lies. Neil Rennie, in the London Magazine⁶ also finds the collection a disappointment, marking a failure of Gunn's 'intellect to discover and of his imagination to invent'. His theme is that of escape, from ~~separation~~^{separation} to distinctiveness, and from the analytical mind that distinguishes and divides to a more unified view, by means of mystical wisdom. The man-beast motif, however, is circular and uninspiring, and the writing itself is below standard, 'the perception is there but the insight is not'. Rennie asks if this apparent retreat from reason is the famous 'blowing of the mind'. Ian Hamilton, writing in the Observer⁷, is equally hostile, finding the poems unconvincing in their theme of brutishness being dispelled by magic. Gunn cannot push his theory (as set out in the Poetry Book Society supplement) through into poetry, and instead intellectualises it, making its terrors 'drab and cosy'. The poetry ~~lack~~^{lacks} any 'vital imagistic centre', and depends on 'approximate vocabulary, an obediently trotting metric, some murderous line breaks', and this gives it a sense of effort. Douglas Dunn, in Encounter⁸, also finds Gunn's verse banal, 'his rhymes are dull, the rhythm limiting'. The poet is torn between an 'insistence.....on the intellectual enterprise of poems' and 'a poetry that is rooted in concrete actualities'. The poems in Moly begin with exact description but dissolve into 'a gaseous metaphysicality', and this may be related to the metamorphosis recurrent in the book. This shows a genuine search for human perfection, but the poems have 'dramatic fade outs' that leaves him open to a charge of 'negative feedback'. Dunn also notes Gunn's method of writing about modern subjects in 'antique' settings,

and his use here of Homer and Ovid to establish his subject of the search by men to escape from their bodies into a more elevated state of being.

~~Anne~~ Anne Cluysenaar in Stand⁹ also takes up this point. The book is about duality and metamorphosis, but consists of statements rather than discoveries. The poems are 'forced in the wrong sense', just as their outcomes are 'too text-book clear', while the L.S.D. poems 'amount to an admission that the excitements of mere reality are not enough'.

Maria Peel in Books and Bookmen¹⁰ finds that Gunn's poems lack a 'springing centre of power', but the best of Moly has 'an idealism and vulnerability that may herald some new wholeness'. C.B. Cox in the Critical Quarterly¹¹ sees the book as showing 'man's subjection to the rhythms of bestiality, and his dreams of the magic flower that would bestow on him a redeeming humanity'. Gunn's own moly is L.S.D., and the result is that he is concerned with 'a new sense of unity with Nature'. The best poems probe towards subtle definition of the minds touching the outside world! Cox, however, is dissatisfied with 'such definitions of being'. The sense of unity with nature 'often seems only a mental contrivance', and 'the loneliness of the mind is overcome by rhetorical flourishes.....which do not convince'. The new simplicity of this new verse is 'at odds with the tentative, uncertain delicate movements of thought' in Touch. Michael Fried, in the Review¹² similarly finds the poetry dead, possessing merely mechanical unity and showing 'slipshod technique' as well as Gunn's 'poor ear', although Fried concedes the poet is honest to his experiences.

Other critics were more impressed. John Fuller, in the Listener¹³, thought the book a welcome return to the traditional prosody of Gunn's early work, and found that the poems established a personal concern and particular locality in which to investigate the chosen subject, that of escape from the body. The 'old calculated abstractions' (which Fuller had so disliked) are now rare, and meaningful when they occur. This marks a return to the particularity Fuller had so praised in Fighting Terms, and

is seen best in the well observed Californian scenery. The book is based on the Circe myth, with L.S.D. and not, as is traditional, moral philosophy being represented by moly, and these acid visions lead to other forms of metaphysical argument. In 'The Garden of the Gods', for example, 'Gunn amusingly embodies a mystical polymorhon in the stanzas of In Memoriam'. The duality of man is explored, in sexual terms, in the centaur poems, and this represents a version of the liberation the poet seeks. Moly is 'an alert and well unified collection, with new freshness of feeling'. This is also the view of Clive Wilmer in the Spectator¹⁴. Wilmer sees 'From the Wave' as being a central to the book as 'On the Move' was to The Sense of Movement, and developing on that poem, showing that man must act with change rather than resisting it. Many of the poems are, in fact, visions of this flux, and there is an emphasis on sunlight, as an antithesis of the moonlight in which many of Gunn's earlier poems were set. Gunn remains however, a poet of the intellect who wants to make sense of his material, and shows a skilful use of metrics. His only fault is an occasional 'hippy sentimentalism'. Equally impressed was Richard Kell¹⁵, writing in the Critical Survey. Kell thought that 'the use of drugs to recover Eden is unfortunate', but finds that 'the emergence of obviously romantic and even apocalyptic themes.....is not altogether surprising, since his openness to unconventional experience has been evident from the start'. The actual verse has 'the evocative plainness of Crabbe, and is 'a shapely music that gives.....cohesion' to the subject matter.

One can understand the mixed critical response. Moly abandons, or appears to, many of Gunn's supposed strengths, and deals with subject matter that at first seems either inappropriate to, or outside the scope of, modern poetry. The use Gunn makes of classical myth to express hallucogenic visions is unique, and remarkably successful. It also represents his continued attempt to include all aspects of modern experience in his poetry. On the other hand, there is something lacking in the book,

and its structure, while ambitious, is confused in places. The poetry itself is less sensitive and subtle than Touch while lacking the intellectual compactness of Gunn's early work, and is content to aim at clarity and directness. The use of verse forms is similarly less ambitious. The reasons for this lie in Gunn's desire to subordinate stylistic innovation to the overall structure of the book. Moly is based, as its title suggests, on the Circe episode in the Odyssey (as well as Ovid's account of the same episode in the Metamorphoses). Gunn explains this in the Spring 1971 Bulletin of the Poetry Book Society¹⁶, as mentioned earlier, and it is worth quoting at length, as it sets out very clearly the basic situation.

'Picture Odysseus, deep in thought, walking through a dense green wood on a lonely island. He walks slowly but directly toward the house of the witch Circe, whom he has never seen. Yet he knows that she has turned his sailors into pigs, and he has no idea how he is going to rescue them or even save himself from the same transformation. Suddenly Hermes appears before him, in the guise of a boy -for a boy here helps the man. He tells Odysseus of the full difficulties before him and then shows him a herb growing at his feet, which he calls Moly. By eating this herb, Odysseus will be proof against Circe's power'.

Gunn also explains what significance he derives from this myth, and explores in his poem. It deals with magic, but 'if magic transforms us or keeps us proof against transformation, then it enters everybody's life'. Magic is therefore 'not completely separate from ordinary processes: it works by strengthening or inhibiting an impulse in us, even if that impulse is something we didn't recognise as being there'. All human beings have the potential to be 'brutal, greedy and dull' like Circe's pigs, but we can avoid this 'though to do so we must be wily and self aware'. This magic, or 'Moly', can 'help us to know our own potential for change' for 'even though we are in the power of Circe, or of time.....we are as free to make and unmake ourselves as we were at the age of ten'. Gunn extends

this to the role of the poet himself. Many poets since Pound have imagined themselves as Odysseus 'an explorer and adventurer who lives experience through, in detail, and yet can always extract himself from it'. He is 'aware of blood-powers and earth-powers that he does not fully understand, but they are sometimes very kind to him because he has recognised them and respected them. Their kindness most often takes the form of showing him the full range of possibilities when in a time of danger or despair there has seemed only one, and that a destructive one, available'. Gunn admits that there are other ways of interpreting the book. It can be seen as 'a debate between the passion for definition and the passion for flow' or as 'a history of San Francisco from 1965-9' or even as 'a personal memoir of myself during those years'. Gunn himself prefers to see it in terms of the myth however, and he describes the book as simply being about 'Odysseus's meeting with Hermes, his eating of that herb, and his reflections on metamorphosis in the remaining walk he has before he reaches the thick stone-built house'. All four of Gunn's explanations provide an insight into Moly, and will be considered later. It is first necessary to characterise the style and verse forms of the volume.

The style of Moly is far less experimental than that of Touch. Gunn has explained this as being due to his desire to contain the unstructured subject matter within the restraint of meter and rhythm. In some ways the volume shows a return to the poetry of Fighting Terms, although the verse has lost the old tautness and economy, replacing these with a new directness of statement and simplicity. This shows itself most in Gunn's use of diction in Moly, for it is formal, almost grave, showing great care for exact description (a quality which was developed in Touch). The poems are mostly quiet and under-stated, as in 'The Discovery of the Pacific' with such phrases as 'the full caught pause of their embrace', although Gunn has a corresponding new awareness of grossness, particularly when associated with animals. This is seen in 'Moly' itself,

'Leathery toad that ruts for days on end,
Or cringing dribbling dog, man's servile friend'.

Gunn can also be curiously jaunty, as in the second section of 'Tom-Dobbin', and occasionally uses slang, not for mere shock-effect, but to give a sense of vitality - as in 'Street Song' with its drug terms - to the verse. Also present is a new sense of poeticism, as in the description of the 'slight figure in a wide black hat' in 'For Signs', and, in 'Rites of Passage',

'My blood, it is like light.
Behind an almond bough,
Horns gaudy with its snow',

Gunn also retains his sense of horror, as when Justin sees 'his live flesh flake like onion skin', and in the hints of future catastrophe in 'Phaedra in the Farm House'. There is also an element of near mysticism - the third section of 'Tom Dobbin' has a strange distanced tone which contributes to the sense of mystery it evokes. On the whole, however, the direction of Moly is restrained and almost transparent. It is very exact, as in the description of Nature in '^{Grasses}~~Grasses~~' - 'bright tendrils, round which that sharp outline faded' - but is not usually as insistent as this, and indeed sometimes appears to be lazy. However, 'Three' and 'The Sand Man' show Gunn's power of apparently artless evocation of people or scenes, and the way he can derive a philosophic point from this, and the fusion between the two is most perfectly attained in 'From the Wave'. Other poems are more complicated, but retain this directness. 'The Garden of the Gods', for example, presents a complex idea in a simple way, which can still be allusive and descriptive at the same time.

'Through breast and calf I feel it vined,
And rooted in the death-rich earth'.

This continues the same combination in Touch, but it is here used less adventurously. The two collections also differ in the range of verse forms they employ.

Moly, like Gunn's early poetry, takes delight in using a wide range of conventional verse forms, but it abandons almost entirely his experiments with syllabics and free verse in Positives and Touch. There is far less free verse, and Gunn is more adept at integrating it with metrical verse, as in the 'Tom Dobbin' sequence, although, conversely. Gunn goes further than ever before in 'The Colour Machine' which is a prose poem, and is completely unstructured except by the restraint shown in its diction. Apart from this, the return to regular metre - there are no syllabics, and the great majority of poems are in conventional iambics - might explain why reviewers such as John Fuller welcomed an apparent return to the qualities of Gunn's early verse, but this view is mistaken. Moly lacks the sense of experiment and intellectual daring of, say, Fighting Terms, and this is seen in its use of technique. Gunn uses couplets to give compressions to poems like 'Moly', and 'Sunlight', which needs to be direct and simply expressed, is in quatrains, while 'Three' and 'From the Wave' also use four line stanzas, but shorten alternate lines. ('From the Wave' uses a short second line to give emphasis to the ending of each stanza while 'Three' uses a long second line to slow the poem down). Gunn also returns to more complex stanzaic forms. 'For Signs' and 'At the Centre' use this device to give the verse the gravity it needs, while 'Phaedra in the Farm House' is exceptional in using the short six line stanza so prevalent in Touch and uses it for (ostensibly at least) a more serious subject. Gunn abandons the use of the refrain, except in the first and last stanza of 'Street Song', which capitalizes well on the energy of the ballad form it uses. The only innovatory verse form is the a b a rhyme scheme of 'The Messenger', which adds little to the poem. Gunn's early pleasure in difficult stanzaic forms, and his experiments with various meters, has been replaced by an interest in technique, not for its own sake, but to make difficult subject matter easier to understand, and this also applies to his use of literary echoes and references.

In Fighting Terms these were used almost for their own sake, but in Moly this close pastiche of earlier styles is absent, as is the sense of a wide sphere of intellectual activity to which the poems refer, and which they draw on. Instead, these considerations are subordinated to the need for clarity and directness. The Circe myth is used, at times, in a per-
~~functionary~~ ^{functionary} way, and lacks the freshness of, say, 'The Book of the Dead' in My Sad Captains, but, in recompense, it is used more maturely as a shaping device. The only other literary references are to Phaedra, seen in a modern setting, and Natty Bumppo, who represents the sense of exploring a new land, so that both are used to explore wider themes than is at first apparent. The only pastiche is similarly consciously used to give modern relevance to an older ethos. This is seen in 'Street Song', which transforms the Elizabethan ballad which offers wares for sale into the song of a drug pedlar. This also relates to a more important sphere of reference in Moly, the culture of the Californian hippies already discussed in the Introduction. The volume corresponds to a specific milieu far more than any other by Gunn, with the possible exception of Positives. Thus Moly is not primarily experimental, for it makes use of forms and techniques Gunn had developed elsewhere. Its main importance lies in its subject matter.

As already noted, Moly deals primarily with the Circe myth, and the discovery of the plant that will, in effect, turn beasts back into men, but it also deals with Gunn's own life, events in California in the mid-sixties (these two are closely tied together), and ideas of merging and community. The poems form a sequence, although its structure is not totally clear, and it is essential, as with 'Misanthropos', to discuss them in the order in which they appear. Gunn's usual themes cut across this, however, and it is also essential to remember that the poems deal with such topics as the merging of man with the natural world, the ideal of the perfect community, and the close analysis of human perceptions (sometimes assisted by the use of L.S.D.), all of which were also dealt with in Touch. The specific San

Franciscan culture commemorated in this book has already been described (in the introduction), but it is necessary to say something about the drug L.S.D. This is a ~~hallucinogenic~~^{hallucinogen}, artificially produced but with a similar effect to peyote, which was first manufactured in California in the early 1960's, and was legal until 1966, and formed the basis for many of the festivals and life style then current, and its effect is similar to that described in 'The Colour Machine'. It is also worth remembering that it is not solely the idyllic drug ~~portrayal~~^{portrayed} by Gunn, as it can have very harmful effects. It can also, however, lead to an increased perceptiveness, and it is this that Gunn utilises. John Fuller sees L.S.D. as being the 'moly' of the title, but the book is more complex than this, and Gunn uses the drug as an aid to, rather than as a representation of, his perceptions of merging and flux. It is best to consider the volume as a whole, as it deals with far more than the 'hippy sentimentalism' Clive Wilmer, for one, isolates.

Moly deals, on one level, with Hermes' gift of moly to Odysseus and his thoughts as he walks towards ~~Grice's~~^{Circe's} house where he will resist her enchantments, and release his men from the animal shapes in which they have been confined. The meeting with Hermes is set out at the beginning of the book in a prose passage that is a loose translation of part of Book X of the Odyssey, and the rest of Moly elaborates on this, using the gift of moly as a symbol for the achievement of freedom through a close identification with the processes of Nature. The book falls into three sections, the first five poems dealing with man's imperfections, and his fall from innocence, the next fifteen dealing with man's attempt to rediscover this sense of unity with the natural world, and the last five poems showing how this new sense of community is finally achieved. This is a very bare outline, but it does show how close the basic structure is to that of 'Misanthropos', although Moly is a far more complex work. In order to understand Gunn's philosophical development since the earlier poem, it is necessary to consider Moly in detail.

The first two poems describe the transformation of man into beast that Circe wrought on Ulysses' sailors. The first, 'Rites of Passage'¹⁷, deals with this as a symptom of adolescence - the boy challenges his parents in an Oedipal way - and as a coming to adulthood that sets the scene for the whole work. The boy leaves his childhood innocence behind (although later poems attempt to recapture this), for his 'play is earnest now'. He is being transformed into a horned animal -

'Horns bud bright in my hair.
My feet are turning hoof'. -

and the significance of this, if not already apparent, is emphasised by the way all this was 'planned before my birth', and

'I stamp upon the earth
A message to my mother.
And then I lower my horns',

The son now asserts his independence, hardening 'towards a completion, mine', and his new dominance, 'adventuring through your garden'. This knowledge of experience is, however, essential for the gaining of true innocence, and the adolescent's new awareness is connected with the sunlight that is seen throughout Moly as a sign of unity with Nature - his blood is 'like light behind an almond bough', just as 'horns bud bright' in his hair. There is a further element in this transformation, for the boy seems to be turning into a tree as well as into an animal, although the two are inextricably united. Just as the 'horns bud bright', his skin becomes 'bark-like and, feel, rough', and his blood is like light shining from an almond tree, 'horns gaudy with its snow'. Unlike earlier poems by Gunn on this theme, such as 'The Allegory of the Wolf Boy', or even 'The Goddess' with the woman's dress tight 'as bark in moonlight', 'Rites of Passage' deals with this transformation as both a natural and an essential part of growing up. The poem's very title suggests that these 'rites' are necessary before one can commence 'passage', just as, in Positives, the adolescents' dis-

covery of new experience was an essential part of the life-cycle described in the book, and 'Rites of Passage' sets the scene for the whole collection.

The second poem to deal with this transformation of man into beast, 'Moly'¹⁸, describes one of Ulysses's sailors waking up to discover that Circe has turned him into a pig, and beginning the search for a way out of this animality by finding the moly that can restore his humanity. This search is the keynote of the whole book, although it does not strictly adhere to the original myth (in which moly protects Ulysses from Circe's spells rather than directly freeing those trapped by her enchantments). The sailor wakes from his 'nightmare of beasthood' wondering 'what beasthood skin' Circe had made him take, and if he has become a 'leathery toad', a 'cringing dribbling dog' or a 'cat that prettily pounces on its meat'. He finds that the answer is even more repulsive, for he has become 'the snouted creature'

'That bites through anything, root, wire, or can.

If I was not afraid I'd eat a man'

and it is into this 'bulk' that 'method' has disappeared. However, the sailor is still aware of his humanity -

'Oh a man's flesh already is in mine.

Hand and foot poised for risk. Buried in swine',

He searches for the moly that can save him, but it is obvious that he has learnt nothing from his ordeal, for his ambition is that

'From this fat dungeon I could rise to skin

and human title, putting pig within'.

and he sees no need to change his fundamental nature, merely sublimating his animal instincts by 'putting pig within'. Until a genuine change of nature comes about, the sailor will have to continue 'dreaming the flower I have never seen'.

The next three poems show the imperfections in man that this basic animality brings (whether it is overt or hidden), and the obstacles to full humanity that must be surmounted before the discovery of moly. The

first of these, 'For Signs'¹⁹, deals with the same basic situation as Misanthropos 1V, for in both a man watches the moon, and realizes his own imperfections in relation to this changeless rhythm. The poet is searching for 'signs' to reach full humanity, and to do this attempts to understand the 'cycle that I in part am governed by'. The poem begins with Gunn studying the external appearance of his surroundings in a very direct way, and noting how 'the cracked enamel of a chicken bowl gleams like another moon' and 'each clump of reeds is split with darkness and yet bristles whole'. The second of these details shows how Nature can resolve the conflict between individuality and unity inherent in man, and which prevents him from achieving full control over himself, while the first leads directly to the dream described in part 2 of the poem. This corresponds to the 'snow vision' in Misanthropos X, (just as both poems have the same basic structure), and reveals to Gunn his own situation with the same clarity of detail as his description of the natural world that 'survives, but with a difference'. Gunn falls asleep, and his mind 'sinks into vacancy but cannot rest', and, while moonlight 'floods' his sleeping body (as in 'Light Sleeping'), it spends the night walking

'among the past, weeping, obsessed,
Trying to master it and learn escape,'

just as it is accustomed to learn 'its freedom every day'. In this dream, 'the real is shattered and combined', and the moon returns to the sign of Scorpio which 'it stood in at my birth-hour'. Gunn comes across a figure who represents his earlier self, gazing upward 'as if toward vaults that honeycomb the mind', and

'Watching not things, but lunar orgy, chase,
Trap, and cool fantasy of violence'.

He recognizes this 'pale long inward stare', for, 'I too have used those cindered passages' and 'have been inside that skull'. Beneath his 'tight young flesh' is an 'answering moon, at full, pitted with craters and with

empty seas'. This 'dream mentor' is something that Gunn must come to terms with, for it is only by seeing his earlier self from the outside that he can create in himself a more complete relationship with Nature. Section 3 shows what he has learnt so far. The moon is 'not inconstant', for it is always 'waiting there' whether 'swollen again above the air' or 'reduced to an invisible seed' for 'it goes, and in its going it returns'. This waxing and waning of the moon forms a 'cycle that I in part am governed by', and which can 'rake the oubliettes (i.e. small prisons) of pain and greed'. This moonlight is another form of the light which, throughout Moly, represents man's unity with Nature, and Gunn turns his attention to the night sky, and studies

'How light fills blinded socket and chafed mark.
It soars, hard, full and edged, it coldly burns',

This poem is the most hopeful so far, but this process of adjusting to Nature is by no means complete, and man's continuing imperfections are explored in the next two poems.

The first of these, 'Justin',²⁰, contains a metamorphosis that is even more horrific than in 'Moly' itself, for Justin, waiting for his lover in a small park finds

'His live flesh flake like onion-skin
From finger-bones where it had held,
And saw the muscle fray within,
Peeling from joints that bunched and swelled'.

As in 'Back to Life', the 'lamplight's little world' of the park is 'clasped round by sweet rot and the autumn dark', and this dissolution of flesh could well be imaginary, but it represents Justin's mood, 'transparent with dissatisfaction'. This sense of waiting that 'wears as hard as action' continues in the next poem, 'Phaedra in the Farm House',²¹, which conveys an atmosphere of impending doom. The poem has a modern setting, but it deals with the Greek myth of Phaedra's love for her stepson

Hippolytus, and the bloodshed with which this concludes. This is described in the poem, by Phaedra herself, and the action is seen as taking place on a farm. She wakes during 'the cold dead end of night', and considers 'what trust I live between' in the 'kin-warmth' of her husband and his son, but how this is also unsatisfactory -

'I cook the food two eat,
But oh, I sleep with one'.

In the evening, she studies the son in his 'moleskin waistcoat' for 'hints from those scrubbed boy-cheeks', because, in the real game that they are playing, 'I deal a grown man's fate'. The poem ends with a prediction of the approaching disaster, when

'The chimney will be split,
And that waistcoat be blood'.

This situation is a development of that first described in 'Rites of Passage', where the boy felt the arrival of manhood combined with a desire to ~~supersede~~ ^{supersede} his father, although here Hippolytus is unaware of Phaedra's love for him. This description of sexual jealousy closes the first section of Moly, which describes man's descent into animality. The next three poems offer examples of innocence that can counteract this, and begin the progress towards a full apprehension of Nature symbolised by the finding of moly, and connected with the power of sunlight.

The first of these, 'The Sand Man'²², deals with a man with a 'damaged consciousness' who is happy because, through this childlike innocence, he becomes an unthinking part of Nature, and reaches a unity with the natural world that many others try to attain. He is in some ways similar to the 'last man' in 'Misanthropos', but he acts unconsciously rather than by choice, and this lack of consciousness, which would have been derided in Gunn's early verse, is seen as a positive virtue. He works and eats 'without a thought or much desire', and the beating that caused this has ensured that his consciousness

'Reduced itself to that mere innocence
Many have tried to repossess'.

His body is 'sun-stained', and moves in 'patient reperformed routine'. The sand 'keeps him from the dust' that in 'Misanthropos' represented the meaningless flux of the material world, and he 'has entered that old trust', which again, corresponds to that shown by 'the first men' in the earlier poem. The Sand Man is simply 'pleased to be', and, in the sand,

'He feels a dry cool multiplicity
Gilding his body, feet and hands'.

His unity with Nature is emphasised by the way he is gilded by the sand and 'sun-stained', and this is explored further in the next fourteen poems, culminating with 'Grasses'.

The second poem to deal with genuine innocence is 'Apartment Cats',²³, which shows how animals at play, unlike men, know when to stop. They 're-enact Ben Hur along the corridor', and as their bodies grow tense, 'their usual prudence seemingly withdraws'. However, when they engage in a mock fight,

'If either.....feel claws,
She abruptly rises, knowing well
How to stalk off in wise indifference'.

This contrasts with the potential tragedy of 'Phaedra in the Farm House', where the protagonists did not realize when they should desist in their actions, and do not have the trust of the cat that lies 'white bib exposed, and stomach of soft fur'.

This innocence is further explored in the next poem, 'Three',²⁴, which shows how the child is truly innocent, while the adults have to learn how to imitate this, as symbolised by his nakedness. The family in the poem, again father mother and child (as in 'Rites of Passage'), have been swimming and are all naked. The father is haunted by 'the pull and risk of the Pacific's touch', and as a result

'Struck helpless with the chill,
His cock hangs tiny and withdrawn there now'.

The mother lies in the sun, resting on the 'hot round stones' of the beach

'Her weight to theirs opposed
And pressing them as if they were earth's bones'.

In contrast, she holds her body up 'to the heat that sponsors all heat, from the sky', and this welcoming of the sun is, again, a sign of attempted union with Nature. However, only the son is 'brown all over', for 'his three year nakedness is everyday'. Like the Sand Man, or even the cats in the previous poem, he is 'rapt in endless play, in which all games make one', and accepts everything that 'his play turns up'. He greets the poet and then returns to his parents, but while his actions and thoughts are spontaneous, they 'had to learn their nakedness'. This poem suggests a new attempt at achieving harmony with Nature, and this is continued in the rest of Moly.

The next four poems show men consciously attempting this by entering Nature in ^{a more}~~more~~ direct way. 'Words'²⁵ deals with an attempt to do this merely by identification with natural objects, and achieving this by very precise perceptions in the same way as in 'Lights among Redwood'. This is also an attempt to directly enter the world of sunlight. The poet stands watching 'the shadow of a pine-branch' as it lies across a 'sunlit bank of pale unflowering weed', and studies 'the dark exactitude that light delivered'. Gunn is 'more solid' than this, because human, but 'from obsession, or from greed, laboured to make it mine'. He does this by means of words, by actually turning this natural scene into the poem itself, and, as with his earlier work, the act of writing a poem is a sort of self-definition. Gunn finds, as in the first section of 'For Signs', that the plants consist of 'bright tendrils, round which the sharp outline faltered', in which there is 'no bloom disclosed'. The poet can accept the way that, in this situation, he was

'.....still seperate on the shadow's ground
 But, charged with growth, was being altered,
 Composing uncomposed',

The process of writing about, and coming to understand, this ~~seperateness~~ ^{separateness} is itself a form of growth, and brings the poet closer to the natural world.

The next poem, 'From the Wave'²⁶, shows men moving with natural forces rather than against them, as happened in 'On the Move'. As the wave 'mounts at sea', and moved forward 'building tall its steep incline', the surfers 'from their hiding rise to sight' and join the wave 'with a learn'd skill', for

'It is the wave they imitate
 Keeps them so still',

The surfers become 'half wave, half men' for a few seconds, and then 'late as they can', they leave the crest of the wave in 'timed procession', for

'Balance is triumph in this place,
 Triumph possession',

It is their actions that are relevant, rather than the 'mindless heave on which they rode' which now breaks up and 'loses itself', for through them the force of nature and the willed balance of men are made to work in unison. The surfers return to shallow water, and act playfully, like the child in 'Three', - 'two splash each other' - but they then attempt the whole process again, waiting 'until the right waves gather', for them to once more show their mastery.

The next poem, 'Tom-Dobbin'²⁷, subtitled 'centuar poems', takes this process of merging with Nature further, and describes a metamorphosis similar to that in the two opening poems, but one that is more successful, because the resulting centaur balances the characteristics of animal and man. This division between Tom and Dobbin also represents that between the mind and the body, a subject that assumes great importance in Gunn's later

work, but is also present in such poems as 'Carnal Knowledge' or even 'To his Cynical Mistress'. The poem is divided into five sections, which greatly vary both in style and concerns. Section 1, 'light is in the pupil', deals with this merging of man and animal, and again connects it with sunlight. This passes from the eye to the mind with an 'imperceptible transition', just as the centaur's skin changes from being 'fair, freckled..... the blond down on it' to 'the glossy chestnut brown' at the waist. Both Tom's and Dobbin's skin also contain the 'beginning' of the other. Section 2, 'Hot in his mind', continues this merging in terms of sexual intercourse, and Tom studies Dobbin just as the mind studies the actions of the body. Dobbin 'rears above the mare' and plunges 'beneath Tom's interested stare', while Tom is correspondingly 'hot in his mind', but is also aware of the background of this scene - 'red cows, harsh green of grass, and pink-fired chestnut boughs'. The two join as one in ~~the moment~~ ^{the moment} of ecstasy, and this is again expressed in terms of light -

'A shock of whiteness, shooting like a star,
In which all colours of the spectrum are.'

Section 3, 'He grins, he plunges into orgy', describes the same scene, again in terms of light, but in a far more evocative way. The subject 'plunges into orgy' and, like the adolescents in Positives, these sensations move 'in easy eddies', which he enters and 'spreads with them.....veined with sunshine'. Such perceptions are 'extensions of self', because the single human consciousness stretches out to encounter similar states in Nature, such as 'the cobalt gleam of a peacock's neck'. This abandonment of the senses leads to 'something.....close and brilliant', a new state of being that 'lights the debris and brings it all together' in its 'concentrating passion'. This is a genuinely new act of creation, and is symbolised by the finding of 'dark shining tables of rock that rise, inch by inch, out of the turning waters'. This is of central importance to the whole of Moly, and prefigures later poems in the collection. The way that

'he enters.....mingling and branching', for example, can be compared with the 'unending alteration' in 'The Colour Machine' that Gunn tries to encounter in a similarly direct way. More direct parallels include 'the course of wind through grasses' with 'Grasses' itself, and 'distant smoke frozen in the sky' with the central image of 'Being Born'. The final two sections of 'Tom-Dobbin' return to questions of duality. Section 4, 'The mammal is with her young', takes an animal that is half way between mammal and bird, the Australian duck-billed Platypus, and shows how 'mixed habits gave that crisp perfected outline, webs, fur, beak'. Her 'brown fur oozes milk' for her newly hatched son that 'beaks his fill'. There is, however, another sort of merging even more important than this of animal and bird, for although the young platypus is 'hatched into seperation', he is still closely tied to his mother, for

'If you could see through darkness you could see
One breaking outline that includes the two'.

This merging of two seperate entities through mutual dependence is more closely defined later, but it provides a more fulfilled picture of the relation between mother and son than in, say, 'Phaedra in the Farm House'. The final section, 'Ruthlessly gentle, gently ruthless we move', describes a complete merging, in which the two protagonists, Tom and Dobbin, 'circle clasping round an unmarked centre', and enter

'The haze together - which is me, which him?
Selves floating in the one flesh we are of'.

This is a more complete form of the sense of community at the end of 'Misanthropos', and prefigures the 'passionless love, impartial but intense' described in 'Sunlight'.

The last of these four poems that deal with entering Nature, 'The Rooftop',²⁸ describes how the poet watches the natural world and gradually becomes part of it, and this is, as before, attained with the help of sunlight. The process is, however, less complete than in 'Words'. Gunn

sits facing where 'white houses bank the hill' and at first feels dissatisfaction for, although it 'should be adequate to watch the gardens fill with sunlight', and to sit 'becoming what I see', he finds that he at present can only understand 'bits not an ediface'.

'Perception gave me this:
A whole world, bit by bit.
Yet I can not grasp it'.

The rest of the poem describes the obstacles yet to be surmounted before the poet can fully appreciate unity with Nature. Gunn watches the way that spider's webs 'float on the air' and 'glistening, they fall and lift' but turns down this 'gift' of natural beauty, because 'such fragile lights can tear'. Gunn cannot yet deal with such delicate perceptions, and his mood changes drastically. In the midday sun, 'the heat frets earth', while 'petals turn brown', and

'Seeds whitening dry and swell
Which light fills from decay'.

Sunlight saves these seeds from the decay of the rest of the plant, and 'ruthless in clean unknowing', the seed bursts 'bare as bone in going', and again enters the soil - already described as 'harrowed by furious root' and looted by the wireworm. It is seen as

'Bouncing from rot toward earth,
Compound of rot, to wait,
An armoured concentrate
Containing its own birth'.

The 'edifice' that the poet could not grasp is seem embodied in the plant whose visible 'tangles' lead 'from seed to death to seed' through the 'green closed passages' of the plant's stems. This process is cyclic, and when 'the light drains from the hill', the gardens 'hold, waiting for when they fill'. This could either be with sunlight, or, as the poem is set in late summer with 'the year's last flowers', it could refer to the reawakening

of life in springtime. 'The Rooftop' shows a new sophistication of Gunn's view of the natural world. Plant life is still as unconsciously ruthless as it was in 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death', but it is now seen as acting in a hidden cycle 'from seed to death to seed' (the basic pattern for both the action and seasonal background of 'Misanthropos'). Life does not lead to the 'dust' but corresponds to the 'state of unending alteration' of 'The Colour Machine', just as it is based on the 'death-rich earth' of 'The Garden of the Gods'. This view of the processes of Nature, although recounted with a certain distaste here, marks the real breakthrough achieved in Moly.

The next four poems show how the vision of final unity is best attained in extreme states of awareness, and these states can themselves be achieved through the use of hallucinogenic drugs, or things, such as the colour machine or pop music, that approximate to them. 'The Colour Machine',²⁹ describes this state of heightened awareness, and the perception it gives of the state of flux, through which men are able to lose their limiting consciousness. The poem is similar in both subject matter and style, to section 3 of 'Tom-Dobbin', for both describe a process of merging to which the watcher gives himself completely. When originally printed in the pamphlet Sunlight, the poem contained a passage that actually described the colour machine as being 'like a T.V. set' and 'full of coloured lights', inside which 'from an unseen hook, dangles a bunch of scraps-string, chain and foil - which turns smoothly but on an irregular axis'. It is as well that Gunn omitted this from the final version, as it reduces the poem to banality, but it does indicate that the colour machine is some sort of psychedelic artefact. Someone at the controls turns the lights to green and red, and the shape inside moves 'through a dark red-green sea' and resembles 'matter approaching and retreating from the brink of form'. It is 'in a state of unending alteration', and resists description - 'we can name it only afterwards'. The second section describes two possible reactions

to this vision of flux. The first is that of a man who gives himself completely to the machine, and becomes 'invisible'. He therefore abandons his individual consciousness and 'can no longer make an impression'; this lack of contact with external reality is described indirectly as 'plants grew into the bridge of his foot, cars drove through him, he entered movies for free'. Gunn himself gives himself less fully - 'I too am a lover, but I am cowardly, selfish and calculating' - and when he most wants to give himself 'heart body and mind' to the machine, he pretends to 'make love to the curtains' for through such mock 'promiscuity', he keeps himself intact. However, Gunn is 'uneasy, and hanker for courage and impulsiveness', for he envies the other man his surrendering to this state of flux. This was a form of giving similar to that of Anton Schmidt, even though the machine 'does not need gifts, and anyway who wants something that becomes invisible as soon as given'. Because of this, the disintegration of 'our vanished friend' becomes 'something of negligible importance', for his consciousness may still live on 'in the intensity of that moment'. 'The Colour Machine' is verbose, even for a prose poem, but it does describe the abandonment of the senses, and the risk of self negation, involved in the taking of hallucugenic drugs, for this corresponds very closely to the poems in Moly written under L.S.D. The innocence gained from this can be compared with that of the Sand Man and the merging at the end of 'Tom-Dobbin', while the state of 'unending alteration' is taken up in later poems in Moly.

The next poem, 'Street Song'³⁰, alludes more directly to the new states of mind reached through the use of drugs. It is spoken by a street seller, advertising his wares, and describing their powers. Although 'too young to grow a beard', he looks 'through everyone who passes', and offers 'keys lids acid and speed' for sale, with the use of which

'Your head will cut out from your hair
Into whichever self you choose'.

Just as his cannabis is pure and not substituted with oregano, Midday Mick's

methedrine (or speed) will 'give you two lives in your one', and his L.S.D. (or acid) will 'scrape your brain and make it something else again'. Mick is himself part of this -

'join me and see the world I sell'.

The results of taking these drugs is explored more fully in the next poem, 'The Fair in the Woods'³¹, which is written under the influence of L.S.D., and describes the annual Renaissance Fair held in San Rafael Woods near San Francisco, in which all those participating dressed in medieval costume (which explains the references to buckskins and 'tawny jerkins'). The poem shows men merging successfully into Nature, and indicates that Hermes is near to finding the moly that will free men from animality. It opens with a description of how the buckskins merge 'with ground's russet and with tree-trunk's grey', just as these clothes contain 'borrowings out of nearby brick and clay'. A 'mounted angel' moved through the crowd, 'dark-haired, dark browed', and corresponds to Hermes in much the same way as the boy 'too young to grow a beard' in the previous poem did (just as Hermes had 'the down just showing on his face'), for he 'supervised a god's experiment' in his search. Again this is connected with sunlight, for 'points glowed among his hair', while the people in the crowd are 'children of light.....pulsing among the pulsing trunks', and those who watch from the overhanging trees are 'ripened in the brilliant air'. On a platform 'dappled by the sun', a 'speed family' watched the dancing and

'.....raced toward stillness till they overlapped,
Ten energies working inward through the one'

Unlike the families described in the opening poems, this one (whether actually connected by kin or not) joins in a unified response that makes individual efforts more rewarding. In this 'landscape of acid', on the ground covered with 'fern and mould',

'The lights fragmented by the roofing bough
Throbbled outward, joining over broken ground
To one long dazzling burst.....'

and this corresponds to the noise of the horns blown by woodsmen that also closed 'into one sound'. This unity of light, sound, and the 'speed-family' indicates a new departure, for, even when dispersed, it is capable of renewal. When 'knuckle takes back its colour, nail its line', and the jerkins 'seperate from bark and earth' at the end of the L.S.D. trip. Gunn knows they will, in a more natural way, 'recombine in the autumnal dusk', for 'there is little left to shine'. Unlike in 'The Rooftop', the coming of night is not a diminishment, but merely a respite, and the horns still call.

The next poem, 'Listening to Jefferson Airplane'³², the shortest ever written by Gunn, and one of the most maligned, represents the culmination of 'The Fair in the Woods'. It shows how, through music, the physical world can be directly connected with the mental one, for the music of the pop group Jefferson Airplane, performed at an open air festival, 'comes and goes on the wind, comes and goes on the brain'. This shows that the process of encountering the outside world described in Moly is nearly complete. This is seen even more clearly in the next four poems, which bring increased hopes for the success of this new sense of unity.

The first of these, 'To Natty Bumppo'³³, describes the opening up of a new country as an allegory for the exploration of this new range of experience. This can be compared with the sense of triumph at her own potential of the small girl in the second poem in Positives, which used a similar image of exploration. Natty Bumppo, the hero of J. Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels, was a white hunter who lived among the Indians, and therefore represents a man caught in transition between the two. Gunn follows Gary Snyder's admiration for the tribal communities of the Indians, and their deep rooted connections with the American landscape (as expounded, in particular, in Earth House Hold) and this more instinctual life style is celebrated in this poem, as in the whole of Moly. The explorer, his 'grey eyes watchful', notes how 'the ruder territory opening

up fills with discovery'. There is 'a feeling forward, or a being aware', and, as in 'The Byrnies', beyond the 'elm topped rise',

'There is, not yet but forming now, a there
To be completed by the opened eyes'.

As in 'The Fair in the Woods', this new land contains a 'field full of folk' (perhaps a reference to the opening of Piers Plowman) who walk on 'sun-shot turf beneath the trees', and this land 'is held in common'. The poem describes a new, ideal, community, for this is 'the first field in a glistening continent' that is the result of 'trusting Eden in the human', and which is again tied to the power of sunlight. The two characteristics the trust inherent in man and the enlivening power of Nature, combine in the figure of the explorer, 'the guiding hand, the bright grey eyes intent'.

The next poem, 'The Garden of the Gods'³⁴, is the central poem of Moly in some respects, for it shows the poet's full awareness of how he is part of the processes of Nature, and the sense of reassurance that this brings. The poem ostensibly describes the garden in which moly is found, and fulfils the request in 'Moly' to

'Direct me gods, whose changes are all holy.
To where it flickers deep in grass, the moly'.

The garden here serves as an idealized picture of Nature, for 'all plants grow here; the most minute.....is in its place', and this represents 'the constant vision of the race'. It is so perfect that some 'think there is lapis on the stems', and the garden is set in 'intense undazzling light', while even the moly is even more striking in its duality, as expressed by its contrasting colours.

'Nowhere does blossom flare so white!
Nowhere so black is earthmould under!'

This vision, like that in 'The Fair in the Woods', fades away, 'though it may come again', and those who saw it can offer no satisfying explanation, however much 'they search for trope or parallel'. What is important is that

'meaning, thus, was ^{superseded}~~supereeded~~', and, however much it is 'distant and difficult to see', this vision is of constant importance in evaluating the human condition. The rest of the poem establishes this ^{relevance}~~revelancee~~. Gunn stands in a real garden, and realizes that

'Where my foot rests, I hear the creak
From generations of my kin,
Layer on layer, pressed leaf-thin'.

Like all the objects encased in the debris of 'Elegy on the Dust' and the first poem on the old woman in Positives, the dead 'merely are' and 'cannot speak', because they have lost human consciousness, but the image is more hopeful. Instead of being 'dust' or 'rubbish', the dead here are part of living Nature, pressed 'leaf-thin', and are still part of the whole cycle of existence. The imagined Garden of the Gods, which represents human aspirations and perfection, is based on this awareness of one's ancestors, and man's deep connections with the earth.

'This was the garden's place of birth:
I trace it downward from my mind,
Through breast and calf I feel it vined,
And rooted in the death-rich earth'.

This poem marks the culmination of a carefully thought out process in Gunn's work that treats the cyclical activity of Nature, the sheer physicality of the body, and abstract intellectual activity not as three separate states but as one complex whole. The remaining poems examine the implications of this, and tie the whole process together with the metaphor of sunlight.

In 'Flooded Meadows'³⁵, sunlight is celebrated as bringing 'the unity of unabsorbed excess'. It has raised for weeks, and the water 'has mapped irregular shapes that follow between no banks', and has come 'to rise and brim from every hollow'. The only sign of life is the presence of 'tangles of long bright grass' that float on the water

'Distinct as islands from their valleys freed
And sharp as reefs dividing inland seas'.

'Definition is suspended', however, for 'light answers only light before the breeze'. Although it cancels the 'rutted, weedy, slow brown floor' and replaces it with a real sense of unity, the lack of real life on which the light can act makes this unity only one of 'unabsorbed excess', which lacks the harmony celebrated in the previous poem.

The second major section of Moly ends with 'Grasses'³⁶, which sums up much that has gone before, and marks the culmination of this movement towards a new unity with Nature, showing how the 'scattered details' gradually come together. The poem is set in 'the dust of summer' with its 'dry sharp smells', but Gunn and his friends are set apart from this, 'high on a fort', and watch 'the restless grasses lapping it'. Gunn describes how 'each dulling-green, keen, streaky blade of grass' leans 'to one body' in the wind (just as in 'For Signs', the reeds are 'split with darkness and yet bristles whole'). This signifies a form of life, 'rising from below', that appears to be striving to reach the fort;

'They round off all the lower steps, and blow
Like lights on bended water as they climb'.

This is paralleled by life in the fort, for just as the grass forms a 'spiky body rising from the ground', so a harmonica from 'some dark passage in the abandoned fort' makes a 'withdrawn sound, a long whine drawling after several short', that is an aural equivalent of the motion of the grass. This 'wail uneven all the afternoon' is not the sound 'of tramping nor of dance' celebrated in 'The Fair in the Woods', but

'It is the sound, half tuneless and half tune,
With which the scattered details make advance'.

In tying together human activity and the processes of Nature to complement each other in a satisfying way, 'Grasses' marks the completion of the second movement of Moly.

The remaining five poems describe the final fruition of these hopes for unity, and the interdependence of man and Nature, as set out in 'The Garden of the Gods'. The first of these, 'The Messenger'³⁷, describes the discovery of moly by Hermes, and makes this a symbol of this new unity. Hermes turns into an angel, or messenger, as he stares at the flower 'whose name he does not yet know', for it 'completes him through his sight'. His body 'makes to imitate the flower', while he kneels on the source of this plant, 'crude, granular and sour' soil (which corresponds to the 'death-rich earth' in 'The Garden of the Gods'). Hermes imitates the 'stillness' of the moly as if in 'a looking glass' (although the relationship is more positive than in the earlier poem of that name), and the way it combines this with the power of sunlight - 'it is repose of unblown flame that nests within the glow of grass'. He himself becomes 'quiet and reaching as a flame' for it is only later that news of this flower, and its power to release men from animality, will 'branch from sense and sense' to reach 'outward into intelligence'. Meanwhile, Hermes is content to gaze 'not at but into' this plant 'without a name'. The real breakthrough occurs in the next poem.

'Being Born'³⁸ describes Gunn's vision of a new sort of perception that can realize this unification. He looks out to sea, as a tanker 'ships behind a distant ridge', leaving behind 'a formal S of smoke'. Meanwhile Gunn becomes aware of a less tangible presence, 'just beyond.....vision', of 'margins' that 'stretch from top to bottom, sky to beach'. This memory of 'man and boundary blended' (this stress in limit recalls My Sad Captains) gradually crystallises into a vision of a gigantic birth, with 'midwife and doctor faintly apprehended', which is set against the real world of 'bright crinkling foam, headland and level sky'. Gunn visualises this phantom birth as his own,

'I think of being grabbed from the warm sand,
Shiny red bawling newborn with clenched eyes'.

He wonders if he must now rewrite his childhood, and, if this is the case, what 'mergings of authority and pain' and 'jagg'd growth' he must relive, just as he is uncertain if they are 'the past or yet to come or both'. The last answer is the correct one, for all things are part of flux.

'.....Between moving air and moving ocean
The tanker pushes, squat and purposeful,
But elsewhere.....'

All things are in motion; even the smoke is sucked into the 'air's pull'. It is this, and the energy it conveys, that links all processes, both natural and man made.

'The metal, guided, cuts through fall and lift,
While the coils from it widen, spread and drift
To feed the open currents of the air'.

This 'furnace that connects them', which has analogies with the sunlight used as a motif for pure energy throughout Moly, is the sense of growth and future achievement inherent both in birth and in the passage of the tanker. The poem connects the real situation of watching out to sea with the abstract image of birth in a rather unsatisfactory way, but the meaning of the poem is of crucial importance to the development of the general argument of Moly.

The next poem, 'At the Centre'³⁹, extends this unity, both with other people and with the natural world, and this is again achieved (as in 'The Fair in the Woods') through the use of L.S.D. The poem is very close to 'For Signs' - both poems have the same setting, in front of 'the palings of a fence', are divided into three sections, and are written in similar stanzas, but, more importantly, they also adhere to the same basic pattern, moving from reality to abstraction to a more complete knowledge of the real world. 'At the Centre' begins by describing a place approached by 'cracked wood steps' where 'the gravelled roof is fenced in', but open to the sky. This is a 'pearly damp grey', and impinges on a 'lighted sign', above a

brewery, that consists of 'a huge blond glass filling as its component lights are lit'. These colours 'brim beyond the scaffold they replace', and Gunn's reactions to this light are explored in the second section of the poem. The 'steady pouring' of light into the glass becomes, to the poet, a perfect mingling of motion and light (as celebrated in the last two poems).

'Currents of image widen, braid, and blend
 - Pouring in cascade over me and under -
 To one all-river. Fleet it does not pause,
 The sinewy flux pours without start or end'.

The connection between this flux and the world of appearances is explored in some of the most complicated verse ever written by Gunn, (reading in places like an unconscious parody of Hopkins). The poet attempts to analyse the real world, that exists

'Barely beyond its own creation's course
 And not abstracted from it, not the word'.

It is tangible, but also serves as the 'unstopped source' of image and symbol, its own mystery unnoticed just as the roar of water is 'unheard from being always heard'. Flux is seen as a river, from which Gunn can 'abstract fence, word and motion', on whose surface 'the mind rides ~~separ-~~^{separ-}ate'. (This is a development of the imagery in certain poems in Positives, which used motion on water to symbolise the strength of human emotion and also refers to the surf-riders in 'From the Wave'). Even this 'bright cresting' of thought is part, however, of the total flux that lies behind the cycle of Nature, for it

'Is fluid too, is open to the pull
 And on the underside twined deep in it'.

The mind is therefore ~~separate~~^{separate} from Nature, and 'sharpened and exact', but its patterns of thought are inextricably connected with it. The third section shows the result of this new perception of harmony. Gunn studies part of the wooden fence with a new exactitude, and sees 'terror and beauty

in a single board', for the fence consists of 'a tracery fronded and ferned, of woods inside the wood'. (The detail here is similar to that of the 'doorjamb' in 'Misanthropos Vll'). This detail of 'splinter and scar' is 'poured', just as was the light in the 'huge blond glass', and in the 'overhanging sky', and in all three are 'the flow-lines faintly traced or understood'. This state of flux, symbolised by light, is also seen by Gunn as he looks at his friends - 'through light we move like foam' - and they form a real community, aware of their position in Nature, and able to make a completely free choice about which direction to take (in a way Gunn's earlier heroes were not).

'.....We started choosing long ago
 - Clearly and capably as we were able -
 Hostages from the pouring we are of,
 The faces are as bright now as fresh snow'.

'At the Centre' is so titled because it shows how flux, or unrestricted motion, is the central constituent of all life, and this, in fact, represents nothing but a more sophisticated and subtle statement of the thought lying behind the most important of Gunn's early poems, in particular 'On the Move' and 'Merlin in the Cave: He speculates Without a Book'. The poem itself is 'at the centre' of Gunn's philosophy in Moly.

The penultimate poem of the book, 'The Discovery of the Pacific'⁴⁰, marks the end of a journey, both that described in the poem itself, and that of the holder of moly into full experience. The lovers have followed the sun, and its light, west until they reach the Pacific, and, in the course of this journey across the 'dusts of a brown continent', have 'travelled emptier of the things they knew'. On the way 'they improvised new habits', but gradually 'lost the occasions, and lost them too' until they reached an untutored and more direct relationship with Nature, fully entered into the night that they slept among fir trees, which

'Only his lean quiet body cupping hers
Kept her from it, the extreme chill. By degrees
She fell asleep.....'

This new trust is now established, and, although 'their skin is caked with road' the grime is seen as 'merely reflecting sunlight'. They wash this grime of imperfect humanity off in the sea (as the 'last man' in 'Misanthropos' was unable to do), and, like the bathers in 'Three', they 'leave their clothes among the rocks they climb'. The poem ends with the lovers standing 'chin-deep in the sway of ocean', still facing west into the departing sunlight. Their love is connected with the natural motion of the water, for both are part of flux, as the lovers

'.....come, together, in the water's motion,
The full caught pause of their embrace'.

Their love is a fully innocent one, free from the guilt and incompleteness seen in the opening poems of Moly, and is fully in tune with the processes of Nature.

The final poem, 'Sunlight'⁴¹, connects up the images of light used throughout Moly, and uses this light as an image of the innocence and wholeness of the ideal community of men, escaping animality for a true integration into Nature. The poem stresses the connections between the sun and all living things. Sunlight illuminates objects that therefore become 'more than shown', especially when in motion, just as

'Small glinting scoops, after a wave has broken,
Dimple the water in its draining back'.

As in 'The Byrnies', reflecting objects 'match light in their raptures, flashing their many answers to the one', and this is both a mastery of, and subjection to sunlight, for 'what captures light belongs to what it captures'. This seems at first to mark a return to 'the original perfection' at least in that 'whole side of a world facing the sun', in which the natural world is seen as

'Giving itself to what created it,
And wearing green as sign of its subjection.
It is as if the sun were infinite'.

This, however, is not the case, for the sun too is part of flux, and even if its 'angry flaws are swallowed by the distance', it is gradually losing its store of energy - 'it varies, moves, its concentrated fires are slowly dying'. This 'image of persistence' is only 'an image....of our own desires', for it too is bound to decay. All men know of this inherent deterioration in all things, but 'desire and knowledge touch without relating'. There is, in fact, some justification for this, for

'The system of which sun and we are part
Is both imperfect and deteriorating.
And yet the sun outlasts us at the heart'.

The sun is itself a refinement of the moly, for it gives life to the whole of Nature.

'Great seedbed, yellow centre of the flower,
Flower on its own, without a root or stem,
Giving all colour and all shape their power,
Still recreating in defining them'.

The sun is master of both colour and shape, fullness and limit, and it is its unselfishness (a higher form of that displayed by Anton Schmidt and Claus von Stauffenberg) that most impresses Gunn, who sees, ideally, all men 'altering like you, to enter your passionless love, impartial but intense'. This new community must adopt the perfection of sunlight, and become part of the total unity of Nature before they can finally

'.....kindle in acceptance round your centre,
Petals of light lost in your innocence'.

~~Misanthropos~~
Whereas ~~'Misanthropos'~~ ended with a vision of the community of the dead - 'immeasurable, the dust yet to be shared' - Moly goes beyond this to establish a community built on the life giving powers of sunlight, and all

that they entail.

Moly is a difficult book to evaluate. It combines a very bold and ambitious use of subject matter with a carefully thought out philosophy, but both can be reduced to a rather primitive pantheism, and a blind admiration of the sun similar to that described in 'The Byrnies'. Some of the poems are stilted, both in language and in their structure, while the imagery used is often stilted and obvious. Despite this, the whole collection is structured in a careful and satisfying way, and its conception is both bold and original. This is especially true of the way that the book is permeated with sunlight (even the book's cover is bright yellow, whether by accident or design!), and, as Julian Jebb has pointed out, 'it may be taken as a journey into light ending with what is perhaps the finest poem he has yet written'. The mythical elements of the collection are integrated into the structure without any sense of strain or incongruity, a notable achievement in itself. All in all, Moly contains Gunn's most inclusive philosophical viewpoint so far, even if some of the actual verse leaves much to be desired, and it will be interesting to see if Gunn's next collection integrates the two more successfully, in the same way that The Sense of Movement crystallised the best aspects of Fighting Terms, and Touch took to their logical conclusion experiments made in My Sad Captains and Positives.

This process can already be seen in the poems published by Gunn since the appearance of Moly, for they show a further development of his interest both in the external world and in man's part in the unity of Nature. The privately printed 'Poem after Chaucer'⁴² deals with the arrival of spring (as, of course, at the beginning of the Canterbury Tales) and its effect on Gunn's own body and on the gardens outside. Gunn spends the night shifting around 'inside myself, from breast to crotch to head', and pin-points 'the minutest sound'. Outside, 'the soil of gardens breaks and dries a bit' after 'weeks of rain', and in 'the trough between two San

Franciscan hills', these granules of earth 'hold warmth round them as they drain'. Gunn is reminded of his 'teens in spring' when he felt the same way;

'Not sexual really, it's a plant's unrest
Or bird's expectancy, that enters full
On its conditions.....'

Later in the night Gunn is 'caught in mid-turn by sleep' which 'in stealth I fill and fill it out'. By dawn,

'Like loosened soil that packs a grassy hill
I fill it wholly, here, hungry for leaf'.

The poem makes this connection between human response and the processes of Nature in the same way as the later poems of Moly, but here they are brought together in a far less forced way. A similar delicacy of touch is seen in 'Stepping out',⁴³ the first published result of Gunn's decision, as announced in Agenda, to experiment with completely free verse. Here it is the connection between art and real life that is explored. An unnamed man watches 'the mural above him', and discerns 'minute stirrings' and 'colour lifting to the point like blood in a cheek'. This was obviously planned, for

'He was ready
Petal nodded almost
imperceptibly.....'

and the mural 'breathed, waiting' while 'the figures stepped down from the wall'. Both poems deal with a coming to life, although this is much more obviously symbolic in 'Stepping out', the very title of which indicates this new departure. Both poems also show a new interest in texture and, in 'Poem after Chaucer', in natural landscape.

This interest in the external world, a process which started in My Sad Captains, is further developed in three poems published in the Listener in 1973. The first of these, 'Diagrams',⁴⁴ describes a construction site

in terms of the potentiality of the half completed building and the sense of balance (in both a literal and metaphorical sense) of the men who are working on it. (It is therefore the opposite of the poem in Positives about Marble Arch Odeon, for it deals with the future rather than the past, and construction, not destruction). From the 'mesa of unfinished top' of this office tower,

'Big cranes jut, spectral points of stiffened net:
Angled top-heavy artefacts, and yet
Diagrams from the sky, as if its air
Could drop lines, snip them off, and leave them there'.

These solid 'artefacts', constructed by men, take on the form of natural objects, as if 'diagrams' from the sky. A similar naturalness is observed in the workmen, who 'pad like cats' and are 'balanced where air ends and where steel begins'. Both represent adequate human responses to Nature, for 'giving to the air is sign of strength'. Another type of man made artefact is described in 'Metal Landscape (and the Statue of Liberty)',⁴⁵, which, although published slightly later, seems to be a companion poem. Gunn describes the cool functionalism of city architecture as similar in intent to the gesture of the Statue of Liberty, for both express the sense of purpose that he so admires. In this 'metal landscape', a fire escape 'repeats a bare black Z from tier to tier', and the scene is embellished by 'hard flower, tin scroll'. Gunn walks towards a pier 'between iron columns' (similar to those in 'Syon House'), and stares across the river at 'iron on the New Jersey side'. The 'turbulent brown-grey waters that intervene' bring 'the cool seething incompleteness that I love', and Gunn feels at peace both with the river and the 'iron landscape', for one is reflected in the other, and both are permanent.

'The zigzags come and go, sheen tracking sheen;
And water wrestles with the air above'

The buildings 'must be hard to last', and form 'a dream of righteous

permanence, from the past', just as, 'in Nixon's era',

'The copper embodiment of the pieties
Seems hard, but hard like a revolutionary
With indignation, constant as she is'.

This, of course, refers to the Statue of Liberty, whose 'far charm' can be glimpsed in the distance, and who, through the mist, is seen to be 'raising her arm.....as if saluting with her fist'. This gesture of self determination mirrors that seen in the purposeful nature of the 'iron landscape'.

In contrast to these two poems, 'The Geyser'⁴⁶ describes a source of natural energy unaffected by man, to which Gunn feels tied in a more profound way - 'force calls to force' in an almost mythical way. The poem describes how he approaches the geyser by 'a climb through moonland. tortured, pocked and grey'. The landscape is almost alien, combining 'heat from the sky, and from the rubble of stones', out of which 'small puffs of steam bloom out at intervals', and the higher Gunn climbs, 'the more close picked are Earth's bones'. However, when he reaches the geyser he finds that it is 'merely a searing column of steam from ash'. Gunn comes to realize that this 'cinder field' has 'no complication, no detail' while its force is 'too simple and big to understand'. His own sophistication is useless - 'no customs I have learned can make me wise to deal with such'. He comes to understand, whatever '~~such~~^{such} recognition may be worth', that (like the man who gazes at the moon in 'For Signs') the presence of

'Fire at my centre, burning since my birth
Under the pleasant flesh. Force calls to force.
Up here a man might shrivel in his source'.

As in Moly, this is recognised as being dangerous if not controlled but it does indicate a basic connection between man and the forces of Nature. All three poems show a new sureness of touch, and represent a fruitful direction for Gunn's work.

Less fortunate was a tendency of some of the poems in Moly to reduce

issues to an oversimplified version of the truth, and this is seen at its worst in a poem like 'Sparrow'⁴⁷, which describes the plight of an alcoholic. As an attempt to speak through a persona, the poem is drastically overstated, although it does have a certain directness. Sparrow stands 'here in the cold in an old suit bruised and dirty' while 'the wine's gone sour and stale in my pores'. He asks a passer-by for money for drink, through which

'I'll be a daredevil then
millionaire stud in my right mind
a jewel among men',

However, the man ignores this plea, and the drunk is left cursing him, and hoping that 'I'll see you cry like sparrow some day'. The poem is almost distressingly bad, especially considering Gunn's usual care to avoid this sort of sentimentality, and the moving way with which he deals with the same subject in Positives. It does, however, show his continuing concern with the fate of the outcast, shown in earlier poems like 'Looking Glass', 'The Sand Man' and even 'From the Highest Camp'.

The latest poem by Gunn to be published, 'The Bed'⁴⁸, also marks his return to the subject of an early poem, for it deals with the same situation as 'Carnal Knowledge', which opened his first collection. Even more surprising is the similarity of approach, for both poems deal with the gap between body and mind, although the later poem, following the unifications of Moly, finds this less unsatisfactory than Gunn's early work did. The poem is set after coitus, when 'the pulsing stops whose time has been', and, just as the garden outside is snowbound and motionless - 'drifts hush the ground' - so the lovers inside are

'.....soft caught, tired now it's done,
Loose twined across the bed
Like wrestling statues.....'

However, the action, although now in the past, 'still goes on inside my

head'. Gunn's latest poem, because, fortuitously, it is so similar to his first, indicates the ways in which his work has both changed and remained the same. He is still concerned with duality, the intellect, and possibilities of freedom, but these themes are now set in terms of a wider background, that of flux and the processes of Nature. Gunn's increasing interest in the external world has made his poetry both more accessible and of more general significance, and it is to be hoped that this development will be continued in his future work.

This tendency towards a more open type of poetry, as well as a return to the directness of his early verse, is apparent in Gunn's latest pamphlet, To the Air⁴⁹. The reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement⁵⁰ noted that this was part of a 'continuing craftsmanlike tradition' in American poetry, for he classes Gunn as now being an American poet, 'whatever his passport may say', and sees the six poems here as continuing 'what was evident in Moly', namely 'a return to the "hard edged" structure of Gunn's earlier poems, infused with a nervous and lyrical energy that makes a much more striking impression than the inert play with syllabics that seemed at one time to have claimed him'. This is evident in the passage the reviewer quotes, which marks a return to the style and subject matter of Fighting Terms.

'Half of my youth I watched the soldiers
And saw mechanic clerk and cook
Subsumed beneath a uniform
Grey black and khaki was their look
Whose tool and instrument was death'.⁵¹

The variety of Gunn's new work was evident in the reading at the Mermaid in June 1974 where the long poem 'The Bath House' (printed in To the Air), and 'The Idea of Trust' continued the interest shown in Moly in the life style of California, but other poems dealt with widely different themes. 'Faustus Rampant' marked a return to myth, 'An Amorous Debate' was the most extreme

parody of Elizabethan poetic forms attempted so far by Gunn, while 'The Sponge' dealt with Nature. Finally, both 'Autobiography' and 'Last Days at Teddington' showed a return to more personal, and retrospective, subject matter. Gunn's next full collection will show if he is able to integrate all of these concerns.

Even when judged by the poetry he has written so far, Gunn is clearly a major poet. He has always dealt with experience through his intellect as well as through his senses, and has always carefully formulated his responses, even to very abstract or extreme states of being. Gunn has never been afraid to experiment with new subject matter, just as he has constantly altered his stylistic approach, rather than keeping to already proven techniques. Because of this freshness of response, and continuing openness, Gunn's work deals with a very wide spectrum of human experience, from the close interest in people in Positives to the philosophical abstraction, in different ways, of The Sense of Movement and Moly. His poetry is, it must be admitted, sometimes badly flawed, but this is rarely due to self parody or staleness of approach, and is usually due to the fact that Gunn has attempted too much rather than too little. Gunn has always exercised great care in his use of language, and has established, at his best, a kind of cold beauty of both style and form, seen in such poems as 'My Sad Captains' and 'Back to Life'. However, it is for his poetic honesty, both in terms of his own emotions and his response to the external world, that Gunn is most likely to be remembered.

Notes (On Chapter Six - Moly)

1. Anon, in Times Literary Supplement, 16 April 1971 p.439
2. Michael Woods, in Times, 29 March 1971 p.9
3. Julian Jebb, in Financial Times (quoted on dust cover of Positives)
4. Lyman Andrews, in Sunday Times, 25 April 1971 p.33
5. Alan Brownjohn, in New Statesman 19 March 1971 p.393-4
6. Neil Rennie, in London Magazine XI (June 1971) p.129-30
7. Ian Hamilton, in Observer, 4 April 1971 p.36
8. Douglas Dunn, in Encounter 37 (August 1971) pp.70-1
9. Anne Cluysenaar, in Stand 12 (1971) pp.73-4
10. Maria Peel, in Books and Bookmen, May 1971 pp.22-3
11. C.B. Cox, in Critical Quarterly XIII (1971) pp.3-4
12. Michael Fried, in Review 25 (Spring 1971) p.59-60
13. John Fuller, in Listener 25 March 1971 p.381-2
14. Clive Wilmer, in Spectator, 29 May 1971 pp.742-4
15. Richard Kell, in Critical Survey 5 (Summer 1972) p.266-7
16. Thom Gunn, Poetry Book Society Bulletin 68 (Spring 1971)
17. M p.13
18. M pp.14-15
19. M pp.16-17
20. M p.18
21. M pp.19-20
22. M p.21
23. M p.22
24. M pp.23-24
25. M p.25
26. M pp.26-27
27. M pp.28-32

28. M pp.33-34
29. M pp.35-36
30. M pp.37-38
31. M pp.39-40
32. M p.41
33. M p.42
34. M pp.43-44
35. M p.45
36. M p.46
37. M p.47
38. M pp.48-49
39. M pp.50-51
40. M p.52
41. M pp.53-54
42. Poem after Chaucer, New York 1971
43. 'Stepping out', in Listener, 12 July 1973 p.539
44. 'Diagrams', ibid
45. 'Metal Landscape (and the Statue of Liberty)', in Listener,
13 September 1973 p.350
46. 'The Geyser', in Listener, 12 July 1973 p.539
47. 'Sparrow', in Workshop Poets 13 (1971) p.18
48. 'The Bed', in Antaeus 12 (Winter 1973) p.50
49. To the Air Boston 1974
50. Anon, 'Reserves of Energy' in Times Literary Supplement, 30 August 1974
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51. 'The Corporal' in To the Air

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