

“He / looks into / his own eyes”: Thom Gunn’s Ekphrastic Poems

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ABSTRACT

Thom Gunn’s oeuvre spanned more than four decades, during which he kept writing ekphrastic poems. The way words and images relate to each other in them, however, changed gradually and considerably. While his early work is characterized by the dominance of the verbal over the visual, his later poems from the 1970s and 80s question the dominance of language and attribute destructive power to the image. Word and image become reconciled in Gunn’s last two collections from the 1990s and 2000s, respectively. The gradual change in Gunn’s ekphrastic work corresponds to the development of his identity as a gay man; this identity, full-blown at the end of his career, is reflected in his mature treatment of images. (IOH)

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Thom Gunn (1926–2004) appreciated the visual arts: in the ten volumes of poetry he published, eight include ekphrastic poems, in which he wrote about paintings, cinema, photography, and sculpture, indiscriminately. Some of Gunn’s “verbal representation[s] of visual representation[s],” to use James A. W. Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis (3), like “In Santa Maria del Popolo,” have become widely popular, but all of them are significant in relation to his oeuvre. In the span of over forty years, the poet’s attitude towards art changed substantially, which, to a great extent, was induced by paradigm shifts, most importantly that from Modernism towards Postmodernism, and changes in the public understanding of art. Gunn, who

started out as a post-war English antimodernist (categorized as a member of the Movement) was considerably influenced by contemporary American poetry, and by the end of his career, his ekphrastic work became thoroughly postmodern in character.¹ It could be argued, however, that already his early poetry exhibited a social constructivist conception of culture and art, not differentiating between high art and mass culture or various art forms; Gunn, like W. H. Auden before him, always discussed art embedded in its context.

This context also includes the viewer, whose own visibility informs the way Gunn describes art throughout his career. He addressed homosexual topics only indirectly for decades before the publication of *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976), the collection in which he publicly “came out” (*New Selected Poems* xxxvii). While most of the artworks discussed in Gunn’s ekphrastic works have little to do with homosexuality, they are gazed at by a gay man. Being gay, of course, is being defined by the object of desire. As we know from the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the act of looking and being looked at carries sexual pleasure (Freud 156), and recognizing one’s own image is a key moment in one’s psychological development (Lacan 442). W. J. T. Mitchell’s work on images shows that in Western thought, notably in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s influential *Laocoon*, art is not genderless but exists in a heterosexual binary between a male viewer and a female object, even in a battle between the sexes (109–10). In his book *The Wallflower Avant-Garde* (2016), Brian Glavey explores how queer poets have moved beyond playing (superior) words against (inferior) images in their ekphrastic writing. In his view, “[q]ueer ekphrasis in particular is dedicated to the proliferation of an unpredictable spectrum of relationality, multiplying ways of desiring, identifying with, attaching to, loving, imitating, envying, and sometimes ignoring works of art” (6). My contention is that Gunn’s ekphrastic poetry documents a process in which the power relations of words and images are renegotiated from volume to volume; he gradually abandons the masculinist desire to dominate images with words and aims for a more sympathetic and

characteristically queer relationship between them.

The earliest examples of Gunn's ekphrastic poems set the dynamism of language against the static image. The painted figures in "Before the Carnival" (*The Sense of Movement*, 1957) and "In Santa Maria del Popolo" (*My Sad Captains*, 1961) are in the process of putting on a new identity, but this process is halted by the static medium. The speakers of "On the Move" and "Merlin in the Cave" (*The Sense of Movement*) desire to be part of the moving image but their objectifying gaze renders legible a desire to penetrate into and verbally master the image.² "Thomas Bewick" (*Jack Straw's Castle*, 1976), on the other hand, integrates a human figure into the natural imagery surrounding him, even though the speaker remains distinct. The ekphrastic poems from *The Passages of Joy* (1982), "Expression," "Selves," and "Song of a Camera," highlight images and visual techniques that fragment and erase the speaker/viewer's individuality, and thereby dominate language.

The ekphrastic poems from Gunn's last two books, "Her Pet" (*The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992), "Painting by Vuillard," and "The Artist as an Old Man" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000), resolve the long power struggle between word and image in Gunn's ekphrastic poetry in a queer way. While several of Gunn's ekphrastic poems have an element of queer sociability in the sense that they affirm connections between gay artists and foster a sense of belonging together ("Song of a Camera," for example, was addressed to Robert Mapplethorpe), these late poems are also queer in their attitude towards art. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,

Most moderately well-educated Western people in this century seem to share a similar understanding of homosexual definition . . . organized around a radical and irreducible *incoherence*. It holds the minoritizing view that there is a distinct population of persons who "really are" gay; at the same time, it holds the universalizing views that sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities. (85, emphasis added)

Gunn's ekphrastic poems in his last two volumes are organized by oscillations that are analogous to the oscillation between the universalizing and minoritizing views of queerness as described by Sedgwick.³ They conceive of the self—and the artwork that represents it—in radically and irreducibly incoherent terms. The Renaissance sculptures discussed in "Her Pet" depict both the genderless universality of death and the particularities of life, and become associated with the universal(ized) deaths (due to the particular cause of AIDS) of particular people (who in turn become universalized by Gunn's art). In a similar manner, "Painting by Vuillard" discusses a picture the style of which the speaker as a young man associated with the assumed simplicity of old age. The poem thus initially sets up a dichotomy between simplicity/old age and complexity/youth only to deconstruct it by pointing out the complexity and vividness of all age groups among museumgoers, and linking them all with art. A synesthesia at the end then completely muddles the identities of the museumgoers, young and old: they are differentiated from the homogenous painting as they are a heterogenous crowd, yet they become indirectly associated with the painting as they evoke the taste of the coffee represented in the painting. "The Artist as an Old Man" goes a step further by deploying the trope of turning into an image in a light-hearted manner and completely doing away with the idea of the original self. None of the three poems features a hierarchy between art and viewer/speaker as these, after a long power struggle, become reconciled and sympathetic to each other. I consider this to be a sign of mature self-acceptance. As Brian Glavey contends, "ekphrasis is in many ways the queer art par excellence, in part because it explicitly pursues its examination of errors and eros in relation to the question of art itself" (8). Following in Judith Butler's footsteps, Glavey conceives of sexuality as ekphrastic, as it is the product of reiterated imitative acts between itself and its "phantasmatic idealization of itself" (Butler 21), and verbal and visual arts are involved in a similar manner in ekphrastic poetry. Gunn's ekphrastic work

evolves in tandem with his gay identity development: by the end of his career, his struggles with himself are over as the power struggle of words and images is resolved in his ekphrastic poetry.⁴

Pictorial stasis as halted identification: “Before the Carnival” (1957) and “In Santa Maria del Popolo” (1961)

It is perhaps ironic that Gunn’s first ekphrastic poem is included in *The Sense of Movement* (1957), considering the static nature of painting and the volume’s obsession with dynamism. The poems from this collection celebrate the human will, action, and being in motion as means of an existentialist quest for authenticity. Some meditative poems, however, linger on static moments that merely suggest future movement. “Before the Carnival,” for example, clearly celebrates the stasis of the image, not unlike John Keats’s paradigmatic “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Musical instruments and their “unheard melodies” are crucial elements of the composition on Keats’s urn, but in Carl Timmer’s painting *Four Dancers* (1954) as described in Gunn’s poem, they are the central motif. Both poems call attention to the irony of music represented in visual art; after all, music is fundamentally temporal and cannot exist in a single moment. Furthermore, Timmer’s painting suggests that music is played by way of pretense.

Gunn’s speaker contrasts the characters that pretend to play music and those that do not—the former are deceitful adults, while the latter are innocent and young. One of the adult characters is described as disingenuous on various levels:

And lit by a sudden artificial beam

A smocked pretender with his instrument

Knowing that he is fragment of a dream

Smirks none the less with borrowed merriment (*Collected Poems* 44)

Although he appears to be smiling, he merely imitates emotion, just like he imitates playing music. He is aware of the illusoriness of his presence, which is emphasized by the “artificial” light that illuminates him. He is already “smocked” for the carnival, whereas the little boy is still naked and free of theatricality. He and his brother, moreover, are described as idle: “A naked boy leans on the outspread knees / Of his tall brother lolling in costume” (44). Although “He too must pick an instrument at length / For this is painted during carnival” (45), the stasis of the painting preserves his inaction: his static innocence is opposed to the temporal movement of music and carnival theatrics that corrupt the self with experience. It is important to note that the last line contradicts the title of the poem. The painting was made “during” carnival, that is, the painter was aware of what a carnival entails. The carnival, which serves as the context of the painting, would allow for free expression of socially non-sanctioned behavior (including non-normative sexual behavior), but this is deliberately put on halt in the depicted reality of the painting; the partakers in the carnival are condemned, while innocence (including sexual innocence) is preserved and celebrated.

“In Santa Maria del Popolo” (*My Sad Captains*, 1961) discusses a painting about personal transformation not prevented by, but caught in stasis: Caravaggio’s *The Conversion of St. Paul* (1601). On the road to Damascus, the Pharisee Saul, a persecutor of Christians up until then, has a vision that changes his mind about Christianity. He eventually becomes an Apostle of Christ under the name of Paul, but the poem’s speaker does not put the static painting in a dynamic narrative. On the contrary, he in effect secularizes the painting by treating it as static. The rhetorical question focuses on the painting as an image:

O wily painter, limiting the scene
From a cacophony of dusty forms

To the one convulsion, what is it you mean

In that wide gesture of the lifting arms? (*Collected Poems* 93)

The V-shape of Saul's arms has a destabilizing effect that defines the painting: "Caravaggio, ignoring the celestial vision, prefers to anchor the scene in the material reality of a horse-riding accident which symbolizes the shock experienced by the apostle" (Witting and Patrizi 64). The speaker recognizes this authorial intent for realism by comparing the painting with other paintings by Caravaggio:

The painter saw what was, an alternate

Candour and secrecy inside the skin.

He painted, elsewhere, that firm insolent

Young whore in Venus' clothes, those pudgy cheats (93)

Although the image remains silent, the church building itself is verbally available for the speaker. The title of the poem refers to the chapel in Rome in which the encounter with the painting takes place, but the title of the painting is not identified. Ironically, the speaker's attempt to offer a secularized interpretation of the painting is made possible not only by his knowledge of Caravaggio, but the lighting of the church:

I see how shadow in the painting brims

With real shadow, drowning all shapes out

But a dim horse's haunch and various limbs,

Until the very subject is in doubt. (93)

Light and shadow in the building are treated in the same manner as the chiaroscuro of the painting, and the context is just as important as the painting itself. Discussing Auden, William Carlos Williams, and John Ashbery, James A. W. Heffernan contends that modernist and postmodernist ekphrastic poems differ from previous efforts as they “typically evoke actual museums of art along with the words they offer us, the whole complex of titles, curatorial notes, and art historical commentary that surround the works of art we now see on museum walls” (8). The first three stanzas treat the church building as a museum, and it does not even occur to the speaker that the paintings here might also have religious uses.⁵ As he moves to the “dim interior of the church” (94) in the fourth stanza, however, he sees praying figures, “[m]ostly old women: each head closeted / In tiny fists holds comfort as it can” (94). By showing sympathy to and understanding of their plight, he proposes an existentialist reading of both the praying figures and the painting: “Their poor arms are too tired for more than this / —For the large gesture of solitary man, / Resisting, by embracing, nothingness” (94).

While the speaker sheds light on the painting and its context, his identity remains elusive but significant. As he observes the shadows, both painted and real, “[u]ntil the very subject is in doubt” (93), he exploits the ambiguity of the word “subject.” Whatever the painting represents becomes uncertain due to the altered visibility of the canvas, but it is clear that the speaking subject (the poet’s representative) is also “in doubt” as he tries to decipher the painting. When he fails to do so, and stops looking at it, he is “hardly enlightened” (94): by making this pun, he draws attention to his own visibility. Even though he speaks in a disinterested manner and does not assume an identity, his thought process to an extent defines him. He sees Saul’s gesture both as the “defeat of a yearning for the Absolute which is inevitably denied to man” (Michelucci 83) and as the assumption of a new identity: “I see him sprawl, / Foreshortened from the head, with hidden face, / Where he has fallen, Saul becoming Paul” (93). Identification and self-defeat are recurring topics in *The Sense of Movement*. As Brian Teare points out, “its

subjects might be said to be a man's capacity to define himself on his own terms and the ways in which he's best able to do so—ironic, given the context in which it was written" (222). This irony comes from the fact that Gunn himself was unable to publicly identify as gay without complete self-defeat. In this context, coming out is self-defeat not only because of the psychological torment involved in getting rid of internalized homophobia, but also because it would have been a terrible choice at a time homosexuality was not yet decriminalized and was held in considerable contempt. "In Santa Maria del Popolo" explores this contradiction further, so the situation in the shadowy chapel with the painting, "an alternate / Candour and secrecy inside the skin" (93), and the old women, "each head closeted / In tiny fists" (94) can be seen as his objective correlatives for his own opaque visibility, silence, and halted identification.

Even though the speaker is implied as an object of somebody else's gaze, he and the painted man are not equals. Saul is not only conveniently silent but conveniently blind: he cannot see the one who deciphers and fixes the meaning of his mysterious gesture and has no way of doing the same. Fallen from his horse, legs spread apart, and intimately close to the viewer, he is helpless and vulnerable. In "Before the Carnival," the naked boy and musicians (referred to as "miser" and "pretender," respectively) are similarly mastered by the speaking subject. The boy and his brother "must dress for trooping" (45) eventually, for they are to assume an identity by becoming a spectacle, just like Saul in the poem "In Santa Maria del Popolo" as Saul becomes a spectacle by assuming a new identity. During his time in Rome, Gunn saw both Timmer's *Four Dancers* and Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St. Paul*, and he even had his own portrait painted by Timmer. It is only fitting that the painter's biography on his website announces the existence of the portrait, but the portrait itself does not appear there; like the implied author of the poems discussed in this section, the painted young Gunn avoids the risk of becoming an object of our gaze.

Mastery, identification, and motion picture: “On the Move” (1957), “Merlin in the Cave: He Speculates without a Book” (1957)

Even though “On the Move” (*The Sense of Movement*, 1957) was inspired by László Benedek’s 1953 film *The Wild One* (Campbell 29), the poem is rarely considered to be ekphrastic. This is probably because Gunn has taken considerable liberties with the source material. The epigraph “Man, you gotta Go,” for example, is a quote from the film, albeit an incorrect one (perhaps this was why it was omitted from the *Collected Poems*). When Kathie the barmaid (Mary Murphy) asks Johnny (Marlon Brando) where he and his biker gang are headed, he says “Man, we’re just gonna go” (00:21:35). The motorcyclists in the poem also lack a clear goal: “They ride, direction where the tyres press” (*Collected Poems* 39). The baffling last lines of the poem “Reaching no absolute, in which to rest / One is always nearer by not keeping still” (40) is similar in meaning to Johnny’s explanation of their directionlessness:

Listen, you don’t go any one special place. That’s cornball style. You just go. A bunch gets together after all week, it builds up. The idea is to have a ball. If you’re gonna stay cool, you’ve got to wail. You’ve got to put something down. You got to make some jive. Know what I’m talking about? (00:21:57).

The diction, however, is so radically different that the film is barely recognizable as source material. Yet the iconic opening scene of the film, in which the bikers are arriving from a great distance towards the camera is accurately captured in the second stanza: “On motorcycles, up the road, they come / Small, black, as flies hanging in the heat, the Boys, / Until the distance throws them forth” (39).

The poem also greatly differs from the film in the way the speaker’s gaze objectifies the

bikers⁶:

their hum

Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.

In goggles, donned impersonality,

In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,

They strap in doubt (39)

The boys in the poem are indistinguishable in their “donned impersonality,” but those in the film all look different; only some of them wear goggles, and Johnny’s sunglasses definitely make him stand out. They all wear similar black jackets with their logo on them, but these jackets are visibly clean, while the second-place trophy they steal from the Carbonville race is reworked into the dust metaphor in the poem. This is where the similarities end. The poem ignores the rest of the film; there is no narrative, no characters are mentioned, and the small town where most of the film takes place is completely absent. It might seem unjust to even consider fidelity in an ekphrastic poem, after all, it is impossible to completely translate visual art into text. Exploring the fidelity of the poem to the film, however, sheds light on the original visual elements in the poem. István Rácz contends that Gunn’s “early poems (such as ‘On the Move,’ to mention the most famous) are based on the detailed descriptions of familiar situations. Such texts are not unlike snapshots” (199). He sees the poem’s sexualized descriptions, such as “their hum / Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh” as photographic or cinematic: “The imagery of the poem shows characteristically macho men wearing leather jackets, riding their motorcycles, and the ‘close-ups’ reveal sexual symbols” (201).⁷ Although the speaker of the poem dominates the image as he recreates the source material, he adopts a visual technique to do so.

The speaker's impartial and objective tone effectively muddles the way he relates to the image: he desires and identifies with the bikers only indirectly. When he "zooms in" on the boys' crotch and clothes, he probes deeper and reveals a feeling a viewer would not have access to: "In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust, / They strap in doubt." Since the boys all wear goggles and are moving at great speed, he cannot possibly know this by simply looking at them. Like in the poem about Caravaggio's painting, "the subject is in doubt," and it is still unclear whose doubt it is. As the poem takes this doubt to an existential level, it completely effaces the subject by repeatedly using the indefinite pronoun "one":

One is not necessarily discord
On Earth; or damned because, half animal,
One lacks direct instinct, because one wakes
Afloat on movement that divides and breaks.
One joins the movement in a valueless world,
Crossing it, till, both hurler and the hurled,
One moves as well, always toward, toward. (40)

This rhetorical awkwardness has to be intentional: the pronoun refers to both the bikers and the speaker. Yet the speaker remains more or less invisible, spying on the image.

He is also spying on the natural imagery, especially the birds at the beginning of the poem, with similar interest. The blue jay and the swallows in the poem are completely missing from *The Wild One*. While the film contrasts the disrespectful and violent biker gang with the dull and petty townsfolk, the poem contrasts them with nature: the bikers have no goal, but "The blue jay scuffling in the bushes follows / Some hidden purpose" (39), and birds, as opposed to the bikers, "complete their purposes" (40). This is to establish the poem's

existentialist interpretation of the motorcyclists and their ride, whereas the film is much more concerned with social order and the motorcyclist as a potential threat to it. To save Kathie from the drunk bikers wrecking the town, Johnny takes her on his bike to a wooded area. The sexual tension generated between the two characters is expected to be released here after the exhilarating ride. But Kathie is too exhausted and Johnny is too insensitive, and the nature scene ends up in a chase that is mistaken for attempted rape, which results in violence and the death of an old man. Sexual violence is also an important element in the poem. Nature is to succumb to the phallic riders: "They scare a flight of birds across the field / Much that is natural, to the will must yield" (39). Yet before the bikers arrive, the birds are engaged in an erotic play by "scuffling in the bushes," as they "spurt" and so forth (Rácz 252), which effectively makes the speaker a voyeur.

One of the last poems from the same collection, "Merlin in the Cave: He Speculates without a Book," is similar to "On the Move" in the sense that he is peeping at natural imagery, but the violence of the gaze is toned down in favor of trying to be part of the spectacle. The speaker is situated within a cave from which he is viewing the world outside: "Pressing my head between two slopes of stone / I peer at what I do not understand, / clouds, and separate rocks" (*Collected Poems* 81). He is clearly alienated from what he sees, for he has replaced his animal impulse with the intellectual endeavors of the wizard: "I lost their instinct. It was late. To me / The bird is only meat for augury" (81). Merlin has painstakingly tried to recover this instinct by reclaiming both his sexual appetite and his sex appeal:

With aphrodisiac

I brought back vigour; oiled and curled my hair;

Reduced my huge obesity, to wear

The green as tightly girdled at my waist
As any boy who leapt about in court. (81–82)

Nature is also excessively sexualized. The convolvulus (also called morning glory, which is a slang term for the erection following sleep) is “as fat and rich in sap” as the speaker “was rich in lusting” (81). Birds, widely featured in poetry for their spectacular mating habits, are suggestively mentioned together with bees to stress the sexual idiom “birds and bees.”

While “Merlin in the Cave” is not an ekphrastic poem in the strict sense, the speaker’s method of attempting to overcome his isolation is evocative of ekphrasis; he is to verbally recreate what he sees in order to become part of it.⁸ Unlike “In Santa Maria del Popolo,” in which the speaker moves around the chapel and looks at the static painting, the passive Merlin finds the image(ry) to be in motion:

I watch the flux I never guessed: the grass;
The watchful animal that gnaws a root
Knowing possession means the risk of loss
Ripeness that rests an hour in the fruit. (82)

He is compelled to action regardless of the risk of transience that comes with it. He revisits the problem in the last stanza: “How can a man live, and not act or think / Without an end? But I must act, and make / The meaning in each movement that I take” (84). Movement here is meaningful, therefore verbal. As Stefania Michelucci argues, “while the self suffers exile from the world in the existence of others who become testimony of his alienation from nature, through language, in the naming of the universe, the Self (à la Heidegger) finds itself and becomes part of the universe” (80). This is indeed the conclusion that the speaker comes to at

the end of the poem, but it is merely speculation: he does not act. He is doomed to failure not only because “possession means the risk of loss,” but because he is out to possess. He wants to make the spectacle (nature) his own in the sexual sense: he seeks not to identify with, but to penetrate into it, and verbally master it.

Losing the self in the image: “Thomas Bewick,” “Expression,” “Selves” and “Song of a Camera”

“Thomas Bewick” from *Jack Straw’s Castle* (1976) is an ekphrastic poem that integrates the self into the natural imagery surrounding him. It tries to reconstruct the eponymous natural historian’s way of seeing and his relationship to the natural world:

I think of a man on foot
going through thick woods,
a buckle on his brimmed hat,
a stick in his hand. (258)

The man’s movements in the setting are imagined, but his closeness to nature is evidenced by Bewick’s carefully detailed engravings. The environment he is imagined in is ekphrastic, as its descriptions show the same detail:

I think of a man fording
a pebbly stream. A rock
is covered in places with
minute crops of moss
—frail stalks of yellow rising

from the green, each
bloom of it distinct, as
he notices. (258)

The personal pronoun “he” is deliberately left unspecified. He is, of course, Bewick, who “notices” the details in the reconstructed scenery, but he is also the speaker noting down the details of the engravings and thereby reconstructing their origins. This instigates one of the rare occasions of representational friction in Gunn’s ekphrastic work: “He notices . . . the rise of a frog’s back / into double peaks, and this morning / by a stile he noticed ferns / afloat on air” (258). This could be interpreted at least in two ways. On the one hand, the man (Bewick) could be hallucinating, as he sees the plants in the air right after examining the (possibly toxic) frog. Considering the many references to hallucinogenics in Gunn’s work, this is a possibility. On the other hand, the man (the speaker) is looking at botanical illustrations, which typically show plants, ferns included, out of the context of the environment, as if they were “afloat” on the page.

The speaker thus assumes the illustrator’s closeness to nature by way of ekphrasis, but the interpretation proposed in the last two stanzas distances him. “Drinking from / clear stream and resting / on the rock [the man (Bewick)] loses himself / in detail” (259): he literally becomes one with his surroundings, like Alice drinking the potion or Persephone eating the pomegranate seeds. His transformation, however, is not enacted but told: “he reverts / to an earlier self, not yet / separate from what it sees, // a selfless self” (259). Michelucci interprets this as a return to the womb and points out that the “return to infantile innocence and a state of intellectual virginity” (138) is a recurring topic in Gunn’s poetry. The man (Bewick) indeed gains an inner perspective by regressing into this state, but the man (the speaker) cannot. He cannot give himself completely to the experience by becoming one with the image. He is to interpret

(verbalize) its meaning. The ending thus separates the two men with strong enjambments, deictically identifying the object of Bewick's gaze by citing the source: "a burly bluetit grips / its branch (leaning forward) / over this rock / and in / *The History of British Birds*" (259).

In contrast, "Expression" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982) celebrates an image that overpowers words. The poem begins with a critical remark on the "confessional" mode of writing (as in Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath), especially young poets who try to imitate their confessional predecessors:

For several weeks I have been reading
the poetry of my juniors.
Mother doesn't understand,
and they hate daddy, the noted alcoholic.
They write with black irony
of breakdown, mental institution,
and suicide attempt, of which the experience
does not always seem first-hand.
It is very poetic poetry. (321)

The speaker's problem is not that they address personal trauma and mental extremities, but that this has turned into a style. The epigonal "juniors" fail to construct convincing representations of themselves. As life provides insufficient material for poetry, they try to create narratives that are similar to the ones they know; the word "daddy" is clearly a reference to Sylvia Plath's eponymous poem. She and Anne Sexton both went through "breakdown, mental institution, / and suicide attempt," with the latter affecting Gunn as well: his mother committed suicide when he was a teenager. Some of the biting sarcasm of the line "It is very poetic poetry" may come

from this experience.

In the second stanza, the speaker proposes an alternative to the confessional mode of speaking, an impersonal voice that is engaged with the description of a particularly alluring image. His approach is Romantic in the sense that it is poetry as searching:

I go to the Art Museum
and find myself looking for something,
though I'm not sure what it is.
I reach it, I recognize it,
seeing it for the first time.
An 'early Italian altarpiece'. (321)

This is evocative of John Keats's term *negative capability*—a poet's ability to pursue beauty regardless of “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (277). By sidestepping fact and reason (*logos*), the speaker reclaims something instinctual and primal, as opposed to the stylistic experiments of the epigones. Like their fashion and style, his aims are also traditional, even conservative, but his diction is halfway between old and new, like the Virgin Mary's lips in the painting:

The outlined Virgin, her lips
a strangely modern bow of red,
holds a doll-sized Child in her lap.
He has the knowing face of an adult,
and a precocious forelock curling
over the smooth baby forehead. She

is massive and almost symmetrical.

He does not wriggle, nor is he solemn. (321)

The disinterested and descriptive mode of speaking is probably the opposite of the obsessive voice of the traumatized self in confessional poetry. The altarpiece is neutrally described as an image, bits of information about its size, proportions, color, geometry, and figurativism are given. The speaker deliberately ignores the spiritual meaning of the work, that is, the narrative considerations behind it, nor does he try to give it an interpretation of his own. The figures depicted have no individuality, and no interest in the viewer: “Solidly there, mother and child / stare outward, two pairs of matching eyes / void of expression” (321). The eerie “void” swallows up the viewer’s individuality and, submitting to it, the speaker celebrates the power of the unsaid.

“Selves” (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982) discusses a self-portrait by Gunn’s friend and housemate Bill Schuessler (Nott et al. 694), which, while giving the illusion of a new unified self, splits its painter into several fragments.⁹ The painting shows the identity the painter fashioned for himself over time, yet it seems to be spreading to the household objects that resemble him, foreshadowing his fragmentation:

I look round the cluttered

icons of your room:

quilt, photo, stuffed bird.

On one wall, the self portrait

you laboured at these two years

since you broke with your lover.

The new self. (*Collected Poems* 322)

The old self the painter has left behind was characterized by innocence: “I do miss / what you formerly were, / the vulnerable and tender man” (322), whereas the new, hardened self is that of a man who has the agency to do productive work. His painting work and self-work are closely related; as he was doing exercise, his “body kept pace / with the body in the self-portrait” (322). The new self, therefore, was not painted and then imitated in real life, but fashioned in a laborious process of mutual imitation. In this process of lifting weights and painting the results, the painter was “learning / to carry the other, / the constant weight,” which refers to both muscles and the invisible weight of manhood.¹⁰ Although the painter and his self-portrait look the same, and their particularities have developed in tandem, they are clearly distinguished from each other, meaning that two new selves have been created. The speaker, furthermore, is attracted not to the self-portrait, or the painter now, but to the self that the painter has already shed. This old self has been transformed into a piece of memory: “I suppose / it was an imaginary son / that I held onto” (322), which suggests another fragment with a life of its own.

Having fragmented the painter, the self-portrait brings about a proliferation of images: “Completing it / freed you, apparently, / to other subjects, for / a dozen new sketches are tacked / on another wall” (322). The representations overpower the self-portrait, which receives almost no attention from the speaker (the painter himself is barely described at all). This suggests that the self-portrait is already an old self, even though it is still more recent than the memory the speaker has of him. A landscape sketch, however, is described in detail, and serves as a more profound representation of the painter’s present self:

You got used to the feel
like a hitchhiker
shifting his knapsack

as he improvises his route
along roads already adjusted
to the terrain. Here in your sketch
the roadway pushes forward
like a glittering unsheathed serpent
that tests with the flicker
of his tongue from
side to side as he advances. (323)

The improvisational quality of the painter's life is suggested by the speaker's referential interpretation of the landscape. The curving line of the road (the serpent, personified as "he") implies bravery and experimental freedom, but at the end of the poem, it is unclear whether these apply to both the painting and the painter's life. They are both in progress, which is described as playful but also menacing in its ambiguity: the road "narrows into the distance where / it steals at last / right off the top of the paper" (324). The verb "steal" is suggestive of loss, the image seems to liberate itself, but the painter also leaves behind his earlier selves.

In "Song of a Camera" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982) ekphrasis proves to be an impossible attempt to tame the violent and disturbing power of the image to fragment the self. The poem differs from Gunn's previous work with photographs, poems that treated them as "macrocosmically complete sample[s] of the world" (Kennedy 147), such as those in *Positives* (1966). Instead, "Song of a Camera" emphasizes the fragmentation that photography imposes on its subject by making the camera frame visible as an integral part of the image:

I cut the sentence
out of a life

out of a story

with my little knife (*Collected Poems* 347).

It is unclear who exactly is speaking here. It could be a personified camera that figuratively cuts up (with its phallic “little knife”) the sitter’s dynamic life narrative into static fragments, thus exercising power over him. But if we interpret “cut” and “sentence” literally, the speaker could be someone who does the cutting with a pen (the poet), metaphorically foregrounding the frame by typographically cutting a sentence, thereby suggesting an analogy between pen and camera, both cutting like a knife:

Look at the bits

He eats he cries

Look at the way

he stands he dies (347).

This works in two ways: the speaker deictically points to individual photographs by ordering the addressee (who is perhaps the reader) to look in the imperative, thus subjugating both sitter and addressee. The sitter of the photographs “eats,” “cries,” and so forth in the simple present tense, which emphasizes his static state of being. The speaker, moreover, points to the “bits,” not the man they represent, making it clear that the photographs are representations, not real life.

In the next stanza, the speaker envisions a hypothetical viewer (who is very likely identical with the addressee in the previous stanza):

so that another

seeing the bits
and seeing how
none of them fits

wants to add
adverbs to verbs
A bit on its own
simply disturbs

Wants to say
as well as see (347)

Looking at the photographs, the viewer (“another”) is upset by the lack of continuity between them. He wants to interpret the images because “none of them fits,” and tries to construct a meaningful narrative from them; in other words, he makes an attempt at ekphrasis. The first lines of the poem (“I cut the sentence / out of a life”) presumes that life is fundamentally verbal, not visual, and that images also harbor meanings at their core, which can be interpreted, that is, translated into words. Ekphrasis, in this logocentric line of thought, is simply adding “adverbs to verbs” (347). But this is proven false, for the ekphrastic attempt is a failure. The speaker then insists that the photographs have no meaning:

look again
for cowardice
boredom pain

Find what you seek
find what you fear
and be assured
nothing is here. (348)

The viewer tries to look “for cowardice / boredom pain,” that is, to interpret the pictures, but he is unsuccessful—meaning is in the eye of the beholder. This is debilitating for the viewer (“another”) for two related reasons. First, if life is indeed a narrative, then the static image must be death: “Look at the way / he stands he dies.” (In this regard, the word “sentence” in the first line of the poem could refer to confinement or punishment by death.) Photographs resist ekphrasis like death resists language. Second, since there is no verbal essence, dynamism, narrative, or continuity to be found in these photographs (like the eyes of Mary and Jesus in the altarpiece, they are “void of expression”), they may serve as evidence against the idea of an afterlife. The poem thus constructs the viewer as someone with a logocentric view of the world, who experiences existential horror when confronted by images that resist this view.

The poem’s potential splitting up of the speaker in the opening lines is repeated in the eighth stanza, with a slight modification:

I cut this sentence
look again
for cowardice
boredom pain

...

I am the eye
that cut the life
you stand you lie
I am the knife. (348)

Poet and camera are engaged in imitating each other as they perform each other's art: the poet imitates the camera frame by keeping the lines short, and the camera imitates the poet by singing. But while the poet merely takes photography as his subject and imitates the camera frame without becoming visual (like calligraphy or decorative initials), the camera goes further: it usurps the role of the poet and appropriates the verbal domain. The poem ends with the camera menacingly asserting itself. The sitter ("he stands he dies") is replaced by the addressee ("you stand you lie"), who, in turn, is threatened by the knife. It can be argued, furthermore, that the speaker, the sitter, the viewer, and the addressee are all aspects of the same persona. As Gunn writes in a letter to Douglas Chambers, "I had the idea for [the poem] when [Robert Mapplethorpe] was photographing me" (Nott et al. 399). If they are indeed the same persona, the sitter is speaking to himself as the camera that cuts him into "bits." By doing so, he himself is doing the cutting as he engages with the image-making process. All in all, it is an act of self-defeat; the image takes over the self and multiplies into several images.

Queer ekphrasis: "Her Pet," "Painting by Vuillard," and "The Artist as an Old Man"

Instead of vying for mastery, "Her Pet" (*The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992) allows for a sympathetic relationship between art and viewer by relying on the technique of doubling. The poem, like Gunn's early ekphrastic efforts, addresses artwork integrated into its context. Unlike "In Santa Maria del Popolo," however, the context is not a live exhibition but a book (a note says *High Renaissance* by Michael Levey) read in the comfort of the poet's home:

I walk the floor, read, watch a cop-show, drink,
Hear buses heave uphill through drizzling fog.
Then turn back to the pictured book to think
Of Valentine Balbiani and her dog:
She is reclining, reading, on her tomb;
But pounced, it tries to intercept her look,
In front paws on her lap, as in this room
The cat attempts to nose beneath my book. (*Collected Poems* 475)

As is typical in Gunn's poetry, the context deliberately eschews class distinctions; television and buses are treated the same way as the book on art history. In a postmodernist fashion, art is not discussed as possessing the sacred quality Walter Benjamin calls "the aura of the work of art" (221); the speaker is looking at photographic reproductions, not original artwork, representations of representations embedded in art commentary. There are two related pictures on the page the speaker is reading; one is of a statue of Valentine Balbiani on her tomb, depicting her as if she were alive, accompanied by her small dog, and reading a prayer book, while the other one is that of a side-relief that shows her corpse.¹¹ The statue mirrors the speaker—he is also reading a book (the one she is in), and his cat is with him. While nothing correlates with the side-relief in the speaker's environment, he is mortal, so his death is implied. Doubled like this, the illustration serves as memento mori for the speaker; he is very much in danger of being turned into a statue any day.

The ekphrastic mode in "Her Pet" also gains significance in the context of the poem within the collection. The poems in the fourth section of *The Man with Night Sweats* are elegies written for Gunn's dead friends, dealing with dying rather than personal loss, and thus reveal a

close acquaintance with the material realities of the dying body, often depicted as statuesque, as for example, in “Still Life”:

I shall not soon forget
The greyish-yellow skin
To which the face had set:
Lids tight: nothing of his,
No tremor from within,
Played on the surfaces. (*Collected Poems* 470)

Real-life bodies and their representations rely on each other’s signifiers: the dying bodies in *The Man with Night Sweats* are still lives “set” in their “surfaces,” cold as marble, while the sculptures in “Her Pet” are defined by both verisimilitude and plasticity. They are still lives also in a temporal sense, that is, most of them are depicted as dying but still alive. The sculpture representing the living Balbiani is characterized by neatness, which stands for her vitality, intellect, dignity, and femininity:

Her curls tight, breasts held by her bodice high,
Ruff crisp, mouth calm, hands long and delicate,
All in the pause of marble signify
A strength so lavish she can limit it. (475)

The corpse on the side-relief, on the other hand, is “loose,” “unbound,” and “genderless.” The plainness of the corpse is in sharp contrast with the richly decorative garment the “live” Balbiani is wearing. The poet’s preoccupation with death renders legible the laborious process of dying:

“In the worked features I can read the pain / She went through to get here” (475).

But death also sharpens his eyes to life. Balbiani’s vitality is not only represented by her elegance, but is also embodied by the dog that accompanies her. It is also reminiscent of the animals in love poetry that serve as an obstacle between lovers onto which desire is displaced (Gray 116), as in Catullus’s poem to the sparrow: “Sparrow, precious darling of my sweetheart, / always her plaything, held fast in her bosom, . . . how I wish I could sport with you as she does” (Catullus 45). While this tradition is not a purely heterosexual one, the absence of its sexual implications in “Her Pet” are significant. Death is, after all, genderless: everyone is equally affected. The poems in *The Man with Night Sweats* make use of this universality to legitimize AIDS victims as objects of public grief.¹² While representation and real life are connected by the poet’s gaze, this gaze is not sexual but one expressing sympathy; Balbiani and the poet have life, love for pets and books, sexuality, and mortality in common. He can sympathize with the pain she went through, “Thinking at first that her full nimble strength / Hid like a little dog within recall, / Till to think so, she knew, was to pretend” (475). The word “pretend” adds a subtle irony to this. Even though it refers to the subject matter of the statue and not to its aesthetic qualities, it brings to mind the constructedness of the speaker’s identity. By the same token, Balbiani’s dog and the speaker’s cat, by being obstacles between self and representation, playfully suggest both the similarity between man and statue, and the impossibility of ekphrasis.

“Painting by Vuillard” (*Boss Cupid*, 2000) also suggests both continuity and discontinuity between viewer/speaker and painting. While it is not specified in the poem, the painting corresponds to Édouard Vuillard’s *Two Women Drinking Coffee* (c. 1893), on display in the National Gallery, London. It depicts figures blended into their environment in the style of Les Nabis, a group of French artists active in fin-de-siècle Paris, whose paintings featured “pure colors and no more than casual resemblance to nature” (Preston 18). That is to say, even

though they were precursors of modernist abstract painting, their paintings still retained some degree of figurativity. The speaker of the poem has a hard time distinguishing between objects on the canvas:

Two dumpy women with buns were drinking coffee
In a narrow kitchen—at least I think a kitchen
And I think it was whitewashed, in spite of all the shade.
They were flat brown, they were as brown as coffee.
Wearing brown muslin? I really could not tell.
How I loved this painting, they had grown so old
That everything had got less complicated,
Brown clothes and shade in a sunken whitewashed kitchen. (*Boss Cupid* 49)

The painting is recollected from memory by someone who has some experience in savoring artworks. Right from the beginning, he makes it clear that the painting is semi-representational by tentative phrasing (“I think”); “I think” can refer both to cognition and imagination. In his youth, the speaker noticed the simplistic color scheme of the picture and associated it with old age. The second stanza, however, contrasts this interpretation with the speaker’s current reality: “But it’s not like that for me: age is not simpler / Or less enjoyable, not dark, not whitewashed” (49). Now that he is actually old, his experience differs from early expectations.

Ironically, the speaker insists on the contrast between the monochrome simplicity of the painting and the colorful life outside while subtly creating numerous continuities between them:

The people sitting on the marble steps
Of the national gallery, people in the sunlight,

A party of handsome children eating lunch
And drinking chocolate milk, and a young woman
Whose t-shirt bears the defiant word WHATEVER,
And wrinkled folk with visored hats and cameras
Are vivid, they are not browned, not in the least (49)

The visitors of the museums are all associated with art. The steps leading into the museum, on which they sit, are made of marble, a material typically used in sculpture. The first thing the speaker remarks about them is how they are lit, which suggests the gaze of a painter or a lighting designer. The chocolate milk the children are drinking has the same color as Vuillard's painting, the young woman wears a T-shirt with decorative calligraphy, and the elderly visitors carry cameras, which are potential instruments for making art. Cataloguing the museumgoers leads to a change of perspective:

But if they do not look like coffee they look
As pungent and startling as good strong coffee tastes,
Possibly mixed with chicory. And no cream. (49)

Even though the catalogue technique is to emphasize that the museumgoers are varied (that is, they are unlike Vuillard's monochrome painting), the synesthesia/simile at the end homogenizes them and connects them to the painting. In other words, they are unlike the coffee-colored painting as they are not homogenous or brown, yet they become indirectly associated with the coffee in the painting as they are as "pungent and startling" as it is. There is no ideal or essence to which the painting can be true to or deviate from: the painting and the visitors both borrow signifiers from each other.

“The Artist as an Old Man” (*Boss Cupid*, 2000) continues along this line of thought, by depicting a painter looking at his self-portrait without any hierarchy between them. As he engages in ekphrasis, he also describes his own body, completely blurring the line between representation and reality:

Muscled and veined, not
a bad old body
for an old man.
The face vulnerable too,
its loosened folds
huddled against
the earlier outline (*Boss Cupid* 63)

This suggests that the self *is* the Other. The word “outline” is significant in that it can refer to both the sketch on the canvas before the paint, and the tight face contours the artist had in his youth.¹³ The artist’s description indicates not only self-reflexivity, but also self-knowledge:

the earlier outline: beneath
the assertion of nose
still riding the ruins
you observe the down-
turned mouth: and
above it,
the asserting glare
which might be read as

I've got the goods on you
asshole and I'll expose you. (63)

The artist reflects on himself by describing the portrait; what he sees is not the nose but “the assertion of nose,” and his look is an “asserting glare.” He also makes the portrait speak by way of prosopopoeia, but what he says is rather ridiculous, sounding like a cheesy one-liner of an action hero. The light-hearted manner in which the poem treats the trope of turning into an image is in stark contrast with Gunn’s earlier ekphrastic work, notably the poems from *The Passages of Joy*, in which becoming an image was a source of anxiety. The attack playfully threatens the self, but it is a chiding comment rather than a real threat. The word “goods” suggests that the artist is somehow guilty, a keeper of some shameful secret the self-portrait knows. In other words, the illusion paradoxically criticizes his referent for being deceptive.

The poem’s attitude towards the “original” self is, therefore, a postmodern one, with rich intertextual references that work against notions of originality. Even the title of the poem is an allusion to James Joyce’s 1916 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The posture of the artist evokes earlier examples of ekphrastic poetry:

The flat palette knife
in his right hand, and
the square palette itself
held low in the other
like a shield,
he faces off
the only appearance
reality has and makes it

doubly his. (63)

The shield echoes the very first example of ekphrasis in literary history that has survived: the shield of Achilles in Book 18 of the *Iliad*.¹⁴ Together with the palette knife, the shield-like palette is reminiscent of the equipment of an ancient Greek infantryman, of the short sword and the round shield. (Not discriminating between action hero and ancient soldier is characteristically Gunn.) Like a soldier, the artist assumes an attacking stance:

his attack on the goods

repeats the riddle

or it might be

answers it:

Out of the eater

came forth meat

and out of the strong

came forth sweetness. (64, emphasis in the original)

The shield image also echoes another poem that alludes to the *Iliad*, John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," in which the speaker compares a painter's—the Italian late Renaissance artist Parmigianino's—hand to a shield. He extends it "to protect / What it advertises"; the shy gesture is both self-disclosure and self-protection (Glavey 133). The artist's riddle in Gunn's poem (borrowed from the Biblical Samson in Judges 14:14) is a similar gesture; it is a riddle that only its inventor (Samson) and his wife know the answer to.

The unsolvable riddle suggests a complicity between artist and portrait. It is unsolvable because it is based on Samson's personal experience of finding honey in the carcass of the lion

he killed. Therefore, it implies self-disclosure for the self and for those in the know only. Similarly, in his analysis of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, Brian Glavey suggests that O'Hara's posturing as a statue and Ashbery's shyness are forms of queer sociability (20–21). Some of Gunn's earlier ekphrastic poems, notably "Song of a Camera," addressed to Robert Mapplethorpe, and "Bravery," addressed to Chuck Arnett, serve the same function: both artists were known to be gay, and thus the dedications are also dedications of complicity or solidarity. ("Bravery" was included in the 1967 volume *Touch*, when homosexuality was still illegal in California.) Yet "The Artist as an Old Man" is also suggestive of a complicity between words and image. Like Ashbery's "Self-Portrait," which depicts an "artist who is also an alter ego, a man whose virtuosity in representing himself 'naturally' distorted by a convex mirror could well serve as a model for any postmodern poet" (Heffernan 174), Gunn's poem erases the boundaries between poet and his subject matter, replaces hierarchy with interdependence, and thereby reveals the constructedness (the natural distortedness) of the self. What makes "Her Pet," "Painting by Vuillard," and "The Artist as an Old Man" queer is precisely the idea that the self is a radically and irreducibly incoherent construct, which implies that there can be no real hierarchy between self and image because both are imperfect imitations.

Conclusion

Thom Gunn's ekphrastic poetry develops together with his gay identity. In most of the poems discussed in this article, the relationship between words and images is framed by dominance and submission in a masculinist way. In Gunn's early work, words dominate the image. Power is transferred to the image in his later work, with the image gaining the ability to fragment and erase the speaker. The power struggle ends in Gunn's last two collections, in which the ekphrastic poems conceive of the self and the artwork that represents it in radically and irreducibly incoherent terms. The boundary between the speaker and the work of art

becomes blurred, the question of originality is eliminated, and so is the hierarchy between language and image. Thus, his late ekphrastic poetry becomes queer in an aesthetic sense.

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Notes

¹ As Stefania Michelucci has observed, “[d]espite its canonization in literary history, the critical foundations of the Movement remain problematic today.” Although the publication of anthologies dedicated to the Movement seems to confirm and legitimize its existence, it is denied by some of the poets recognized as belonging to the group. The term “Movement” made its first appearance in an anonymous article in the *Spectator* (1 Oct. 1954), later attributed to the editor J. D. Scott, which proclaimed in its title, “In the Movement,” the presence of a dominant trend in English poetry in the post–World War II years” (13). The Movement included Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, Thom Gunn, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin, and John Wain.

² My analysis excludes *Positives* (1966), a book of collaboration between Gunn and his brother, Ander, as it is discussed in a separate article soon to be published. In the volume, Thom’s verse captions/commentaries reinforce, complement, counterpoint, and extend Ander’s photographs instead of dominating them.

³ This radical and irreducible incoherence is what I take as the narrow definition of “queer,” the wide being a synonym for not heterosexual.

⁴ I have discussed Gunn’s poetry in the context of gay identity development in another article, in which I argue that reading key poems from Gunn’s oeuvre as a single text yields a narrative in which the closet is gradually deconstructed (Horváth 86).

⁵ The origins of this secularized perspective are to be found in the museum culture of

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in Romanticism. Museum visitors experience a sense of physical presence during contemplating artworks, which is reflected in Keats's quoted poem. Works of art on display have a purely aesthetic effect because museums remove artworks from their original places and change their functions (Phinney 212).

⁶ In her influential 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey describes how the male gaze is activated in films not only by directors, but also in spectators as an inner urge (17). Although Mulvey discusses the female spectacle gazed at by men, the scopophilic pleasure and objectifying gaze of the speaker in "On the Move" is also present.

⁷ The queerness of macho men wearing leather jackets and riding motorbikes is now a cliché in popular culture, but the connection between bikers and queerness was not so obvious for the mainstream in the 50s, the time when the icon of the outlaw motorcyclist made its appearance in popular films such as *The Wild One* (1953). Still, in some of Gunn's early poems including "On the Move," "the combined erotic charge of man, machine, and leather . . . is inextricably linked to a pursuit of freedom that is both sexual and existential" (Powell 20).

⁸ According to Brian Glavey, "the queerness of ekphrasis has in part to do with a definitional incoherence that vacillates between a minoritizing and a universalizing logic: on the one hand, it is considered a limited and specific sort of lyric; on the other, it is taken to be emblematic of the lyric in general" (8). I discuss "Merlin in the Cave" as ekphrastic in the latter sense, meaning descriptive.

⁹ The radical and irreducible splitting of the self is in itself a queer trope; for a closer look at the split self as the closeted gay subject, divided between the private and public spheres of life, see my article "From Achilles's Tent to a San Francisco Restaurant: Imaginations of the Closet in Thom Gunn's Poetry."

¹⁰ Not much is said about the nature of the weight except that "it is necessary to carry" (323). In the context of body building, one might associate it with normative masculinity

affecting gay men.

¹¹ Renaissance tomb effigies depicted the corpse of the deceased up until the sixteenth century when “live effigies” became popular (Zirpolo 138). Balabiani’s tomb is special because of the double representation: the vivid sculpture of the reading woman is in stark contrast with the representation of the decomposing body on the side of the tomb.

¹² For example, as Tyler B. Hoffmann contends, the refusal to name AIDS in *The Man with Night Sweats* can be interpreted as a gesture “to allow anyone (regardless of sexual orientation) to feel the pain they record” (36). The use of traditional forms, furthermore, integrates the AIDS elegies into (heteronormative) tradition (17–18).

¹³ It is also self-reflexive because the poems in the *Gossip* section of *Boss Cupid* are all raw and deliberately sketchy free verse poems that mostly address trivial and everyday topics.

¹⁴ The allusion to the *Iliad* can in itself be read as a queer subtext considering the undoubtedly homosexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. Gunn’s early poem “The Wound” depicts Achilles with a head injury, which can be interpreted as the psychological state of closetedness (Horváth 86).

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