From Achilles's Tent to a San Francisco Restaurant: Imaginations of the Closet in Thom Gunn's Poetry

Imre Olivér Horváth

HJEAS

Thom Gunn's poetry went through a gradual transformation in terms of how he addressed topics related to his homosexuality. Whereas in his early work, his sexual orientation was discussed in a highly encoded way as in "The Wound" (1954), it became increasingly visible and in "Talbot Road" (1982) he unambiguously referred to himself as "queer." Identifying and analyzing some key poems on the basis of this encodedness from across Gunn's collections in chronological order thus yields a narrative that more or less convincingly documents his coming out process and his welcoming the progressive changes in gay men's lives in the USA in the second half of the twentieth century. In Gunn's poetry, however, this slow transformation is not only a biographical matter but one of the fundamental forces that organizes his work. After all, he took great care not only to order poems within individual collections but also made sure that poems from different collections spoke to one another. Gunn's coming out of the closet is a recurring poetic device that was deliberately developed throughout his oeuvre and also stands as witness to his artistic growth.

The poetic device in question is the leitmotif of the split self, which is always accompanied by spatial division. The poems that make use of this leitmotif form a corpus characterized by a gradual change in terms of the rigidity of the division. Such poems include, among others, "The Secret Sharer" (1954), "The Corridor" (1957), "The Monster" (1961), "Bravery" (1967), and "Behind the Mirror" (1976). In these works, creating and negotiating space is probably the most important source of meaning. In what follows, I identify spatial division as the closet and the split self as the closeted subject. I use the term "coming out of the closet" as a spatial metaphor that refers to (the renegotiation of) one's identity. The closet is typically understood as the private sphere to which homosexuals withdraw from the public sphere, the outside of the closet. The act of coming out, therefore, involves dynamism and the liberation of homosexuality from the confines of the private sphere.

In addition to identifying and interpreting the closet poems from across Gunn's collections, I also regard them as possible sources to understand Ruth E. Fassinger's model of gay and lesbian identity development. There appears to be a strong correlation between the phases Fassinger identifies in the process—awareness, exploration,

Uncorrected proof

 Copyright © 2019 by *HJEAS*. All rights to reproduction in any form are reserved.

deepening/commitment, internalization/synthesis (McCarn and Fassinger)—and the poem's subjects. To avoid confusion, I will make a distinction between subjectivity and identity. I use the term subjectivity in the Foucauldian sense, as something caught up in power relations: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (*Discipline* 202-03). The subjects of the poems and their spatial arrangements are products of heteronormative power. The operation of power in Foucault's and De Certeau's writings (as in *Discipline and Punish* and *The Practice of Everyday Life*) typically connect to the division, organization, surveillance, and visibility of spaces, as well as to the identities created in those spaces. Power, spaces and the identities that operate in relation to them are thus inseparable, as in the closet. Identity refers to a selfhood the individual himself develops and freely chooses. In my analysis, thus, the word "subject" refers to the speakers of the individual closet poems, whereas identity refers to the poet's overarching design of them. In my narrative of Thom Gunn's closet poems I suggest a process through which the subjects, by emerging as gay, gradually deconstruct the closet.

Mental spaces: "The Wound," "The Secret Sharer," and "The Corridor"

Gunn's poem "The Wound," from his debut volume *Fighting Terms* (1954), describes a conflict between private self and public self. The poem draws on Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, as Neil Powell claims, rather than on the *Iliad*, since both the poem and the play refer to a psychological "injury that afflicts both [Achilles's] public reputation and his self-esteem, resulting from a dislocation between inner and outer man that prevents either from functioning properly" (22). Moreover, as Clive Wilmer claims, "Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida*, it will be recalled, is refusing to participate in the war and devotes his languorously vacant days to play with his friend Patroclus. It is in the presence of Patroclus that Ulysses strikes a blow at Achilles' pride. He reminds him of how a heroic reputation, if not renewed in action, can evaporate" (58). This situation is based on a set of dichotomies. Instead of being *active*, Achilles is *inactive*. Instead of being a *proper* hero, a man with proper behavior, he behaves *improperly*. Instead of being *masculine*, he is *effeminate*, while instead of being *visible*, he is *hidden*. These dichotomies are organized by the division of space in the soldier's camp: the private space of the tent and the public space outside. There are hints that Achilles and Patroclus are lovers

Uncorrected proof

(Powell 22). Although Ulysses scorns Achilles for his inaction and not for loving a man, the hero's improper behavior seems to stem from his homosexual relationship: Achilles should be outside, not inside: he should be taking up the public responsibilities of a soldier; he should be killing a man instead of loving one.[1] Achilles's homosexual behavior seems to threaten his public status in an almost modern manner: he risks effeminacy. His being a hero is questioned as a result of his relationship.

The speaker in Gunn's poem is difficult to identify. There is no reference to Achilles in the first stanza:

> The huge wound in my head began to heal
> About the beginning of the seventh week.
> In valleys darkened, its villages became still:
> For joy I did not move and dared not speak;
> Not doctors would cure it, but time, its patient skill.
> ("The Wound" 1-5)

At this point, the nameless speaker's wound is introduced. The third line describes his location, but since the wound is in the head, it is unclear whether the "valleys" and "villages" are literal places or parts of a mental landscape. The placement of this line certainly opens up an allegorical reading of the speaker's location. The wound itself seems allegorical in this situation, especially since "[n]o doctors would cure it." In other words, the "wound" that renders the speaker immobile might be a mental or emotional condition. In the second stanza, the speaker is associated with Achilles: "And constantly my mind returned to Troy. / After I sailed the seas I fought in turn / On both sides." This prosopopoeia seems to result from the head wound: it appears to be a dissociative psychological event. In stanza three, the duality of the speaker/Achilles is articulated more clearly: "Finally my bed / Became Achilles' tent." The speaker, who is himself divided into possibly the poet and the hero, is situated in the tent that divides space into an inside and an outside. In the poem, there is no reference to Patroclus being inside the tent. He is outside, or at least his corpse is, and reaching him is impossible: according to the last stanza, the wound opens up when Achilles rises. Patroclus is an object of desire in both Shakespeare and Gunn. Powell refers to the play's Achilles and Patroclus as "the most solidly realized gay relationship in Shakespeare," and he claims that it "is clearly to Gunn's purpose" (22). Before the nineteenth century, however, the idea of men loving men was generally conceptualized as behavior, not as identity. As Michel Foucault argues:

Uncorrected proof

> We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized—Westphal's famous article of 1870 on "contrary sexual sensations" can stand as its date of birth—less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (*History* 43)

However, in Gunn's time, the word "homosexuality" already existed, and being gay was understood as a marker of one's identity. As R. W. Connell contends, "Patriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity. . . . The interpretation is obviously linked to the assumption our culture generally makes about the mystery of sexuality, that opposites attract. If someone is attracted to the masculine, then that person must be feminine—if not in the body, then somehow in the mind" (143). Gunn's Achilles is not inactive by choice: he *lacks* the strength to leave his tent. His inaction is not a deliberate display of behavior but a part of what he is like. Taking Gunn's own homosexuality into account, the allegorical entrapment in "The Wound" can easily be identified as a state of being closeted.

Similar to "The Wound," "The Secret Sharer," also in Gunn's debut volume, is set in mental space:

> Over the ankles in snow and numb past pain
> I stared up at my window three stories high:
> From a white street unconcerned as a dead eye,
> I patiently called my name again and again.
>
> The curtains were lit, through glass were lit by doubt.
> And there was I, within the room alone.
> In the empty wind I stood and shouted on:
> But O, what if the strange head should peer out?
>
> Suspended taut between two equal fears
> I was like to be torn apart by their strong pull:
> What, I asked, if I never hear my call?
> And what if it reaches my insensitive ears?
>
> Fixed in my socket of thought I saw them move
> Aside, I saw that some uncertain hand
> Had touched the curtains. Mine, I wondered? And,

Uncorrected proof

At this instant, the wind turned in its groove.

The wind turns in its groove and I am here
Lying in bed, the snow and street outside;
Fire-glow still reassuring; dark defied.
The wind turns in its groove: I am still there.

The first line, "Over the ankles in snow and numb past pain," implies that the terrain is an emotional one: the speaker comes into contact with both "snow" and "pain." Either an adjective or a preposition, "past" could suggest several things: the "pain" could be beyond in time, beyond in position or beyond measure. Nevertheless, there is a certain numbness that characterizes the speaker in the poem. This enables him to transcend consciousness: he is calling to himself below his window. He is both outside on the street and in the room. The syntax and the vocabulary of the fourth line ("I patiently called my name again and again") makes the phenomenon sound rather matter-of-fact. The speaker is patient, likely because of his numbness. He does not panic, although "past pain" could suggest that perhaps he had previously done so. In other words, the disconnectedness of the two selves may have been a lasting condition.

Although it is made clear that they belong to the same speaker (both are referred to by "I"), there are noticeable differences between the inside self and the outside self. The outside self is encompassed by numbness and darkness, but there is light inside. The curtains are "lit by doubt," which suggests that the room is a mental space like the street, but is also a higher level of consciousness. Whereas the outside self is shouting in the dark, the inside self is "uncertain" and becomes more certain later on in the "reassuring" light of the fire. The more unconscious outside self seems to be haunting the more conscious inside self. Although the street is a public place, it is "unconcerned as a dead eye": no interpersonal exchange can happen in the mental space of the poem. Thus the outside self belongs to the public sphere, but it is not an actualized public self. It is elusive and disappears when "the wind turns in its groove," which also introduces a change of perspective. The two selves prompt not two voices but two perspectives. The poem gains considerable tension because these perspectives cannot meet. The outside self is fixed in his "socket of thought," and is being synecdochically reduced to an eye. He is afraid that the "strange head" will "peer out" and see him. The two selves are basically two (sets of) eyes. They are both afraid to meet and to not meet, yet there is no explanation of the dangers of either scenario. The danger is visibility itself.

Uncorrected Proof

Visibility is the main concern of another poem in Gunn's second volume, *The Sense of Movement* (1957), titled "The Corridor."

> A separate place between the thought and felt
> The empty hotel corridor was dark.
> But here the keyhole shone, a meaning spark.
> What fires were latent in it! So he knelt.
>
> Now, at the corridor's much lighter end,
> A pierglass hung upon the wall and showed,
> As by an easily deciphered code,
> Dark, door, and man, hooped by a single band.
>
> He squinted through the keyhole, and within
> Surveyed an act of love that frank as air
> He was too ugly for, or could not dare,
> Or at a crucial moment thought a sin.
>
> Pleasure was simple thus: he mastered it.
> If once he acted as participant
> He would be mastered, the inhabitant
> Of someone else's world, mere shred to fit.
>
> He moved himself to get a better look
> And then it was he noticed in the glass
> Two strange eyes in a fascinated face
> That watched him like a picture in a book.
>
> The instant drove simplicity away–
> The scene was altered, it depended on
> His kneeling, when he rose they were clean gone
> The couple in the keyhole; this would stay.
>
> For if the watcher of the watcher shown
> There in the distant glass, should be watched too,
> Who can master, free of others; who
> Can look around and say he is alone?
>
> Moreover, who can know that what he sees
> Is not distorted, that he is not seen
> Distorted by a pierglass, curved and lean?
> Those curious eyes, through him, were linked to these–

Uncorrected proof

> These lovers altered in the cornea's bend.
> What could he do but leave the keyhole, rise,
> Holding those eyes as equal as his eyes,
> And go, one hand held out, to meet a friend?

The first line, "A separate place between the thought and felt," sets the poem in a mental space, similarly to "The Secret Sharer." The corridor is the place between emotion and intellect, which implies that it connects the two: whatever happens here is both emotional and intellectual. For example, the man who kneels in front of a keyhole watching a couple make love is interested in more than voyeuristic pleasure: the keyhole is a "meaning spark." Stanza three explains why the man does not participate, why he rejects visibility. He is concerned about his looks (he is too "ugly"), and thinks that whatever happens beyond the door could be a "sin." Stanza four gives a rather intellectual explanation: "If once he acted as participant / he would be mastered." Since "sin" is connected to subjectivity and the couple is not gendered, furthermore, given Gunn's sexual orientation, gay sex may well be performed beyond the door (although this is not apparent from the poem itself).

As the man moves to "get a better look," he notices his mirror image reflected in a pier glass at the corridor's "much lighter end." What strikes me is that he does not seem to realize that he is watching himself. According to Jacques Lacan, "We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (442). I believe that Gunn's poem is aligned with Lacan's concept, although the man's voyeuristic act precedes this apperception: he does not seem to be a subject yet. Locking eyes with his mirror image induces peripeteia: the change of the perspective is a turning point, a change of circumstances. The master is being mastered; as a consequence, he loses his mastery and becomes a subject. In the seventh stanza, the situation is raised to an existential level: "Who can master, free of others; who / Can look around and say he is alone?" Everyone must be a subject, as we are all *seen*. In this poem, the danger of being seen and becoming a subject is misrecognition and misunderstanding: "who can know that what he sees / Is not distorted, that he is not seen / Distorted by a pierglass, curved and lean?" The last stanza suggests that the only way of dealing with this problem is to attempt to meet the other as "equal," as a "friend." Since this other here is the man himself, the poem ends with the image of the man holding a hand out towards himself, as a gesture of self-acceptance. What connects the man with his mirror image is the couple:

Uncorrected proof

"Those curious eyes, through him, were linked to these– // These lovers in the cornea's bend." This implies that the subjectivity suggested by the poem is sexualized. Becoming a subject in this poem thus equals to assuming a gay subjectivity.

Although both poems make use of the double as a central motif, they differ in terms of how it is addressed. Whereas in "The Corridor," for example, sex is both present and plays a significant role, it is absent from "The Secret Sharer." The only connection to sex might be the intimate space of the bedroom, which is being haunted from the outside, similar to how the man in "The Corridor" peeps in through the keyhole. Secondly, in "The Secret Sharer," the outside self is not visible to his inside self. Seeing him would be like looking in the *mirror*, therefore the speaker of the poem is describing a time prior to the development of a gay subjectivity: "The wind turns its groove: I am *still* there." Both poems express a desire to reconnect the split self, but in "The Secret Sharer," the possibility of visibility fills the speaker with fear. In comparison, the man in "The Corridor" watches his mirror image with "a fascinated face," and, moreover, he makes an attempt to assume his gay subjectivity. It is important to emphasize, however, that neither of these conflicts are interpersonal but take place in the mind.

Compared to "The Secret Sharer," "The Corridor" seems like a step forward in more than one sense of the word.[2] In terms of the emerging gay subjectivity, it certainly represents progress. The power relations that surround, and, in a way, create, these two poems are clearly different. Gunn grew up in England, where homosexuality was a crime punishable by imprisonment. After publishing *Fighting Terms*, which included "The Secret Sharer," Gunn relocated to California. In legal terms, homosexuality was just as much a criminal act there, yet he must have been fascinated by the existence and visibility of the San Francisco gay culture. The second poem was published in *The Sense of Movement*, a volume that addressed American topics. Living in a place with different power relations left its mark on Gunn's poetry. As for the creative aspect of power, the two poems are different imaginations of the closet. "The Secret Sharer" is ultimately prohibitive, as the spatial boundary between the two selves cannot be crossed, and the speaker cannot see himself. His coming out is not possible even on the psychological level. In contrast, "The Corridor" is more permissive and although the object of desire remains unreachable, the self makes an attempt at identification with himself. That is to say, "The Secret Sharer" and "The Corridor" present the first two steps in a coming-out narrative. These two closet constructions bear upon two stages of McCarn and Fassinger's individual sexual identity development, namely, Awareness and Exploration:

Uncorrected proof

> The dawning of a minority sexuality is likely to begin with awareness of a difference, a general feeling of being different or awareness of feelings or desires that are different from the heterosexual norm and therefore from the predicted self. Nonconscious ideologies become conscious; the previously held assumption that all persons, including the self, are heterosexual is called into question. Same-sex thoughts and feelings, however, do not imply self-labeling. . . . The second phase involves active examination of questions arising in the first phase. For women,[3] it is explicitly hypothesized that this phase involves strong relationships with or feelings about other women or another woman in particular. This phase will involve exploration of sexual feelings but will not necessarily involve exploration of sexual behaviors or a variety of partners. (522)

"The Secret Sharer" obviously describes an "awareness of a difference" from the norm, as the situation of the speaker is described as pathological. It could easily be identified as an out-of-body experience or at least a disturbance of body ownership, as is the case in certain mental illnesses.[4] In contrast, the man's double in "The Corridor" is precisely identified as his mirror image, and, although not recognizing it as a reflection of the self is somewhat infantile, it certainly does not sound like illness or mental disorder. The poem, furthermore, involves an "exploration of sexual feelings" (although not an "exploration of sexual behaviors"), which suggests that the stigma of homosexuality as represented in "The Secret Sharer" is done away with, at least to a degree, in "The Corridor."

City spaces: "The Monster" in *My Sad Captains* (1961)

Thom Gunn's third volume, *My Sad Captains*, marks a change in his poetry. To emphasize this change, the collection is split into two parts. The first section is written in meter, just like his first two volumes, and consists of witty poems in Gunn's rigorous, reserved, "literary" style, with a quote from *Troilus and Cressida* as a motto. In comparison, the second section opens with a quote from the American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, and it is written entirely in syllabics. The second section is remarkable for both its looser style and that these poems seem to rely more on experience than imagination, with titles such as "Waking in a Newly-Built House," "Flying Above California," and "The Feel of Hands." I believe that the divide is not only unnecessary but counterproductive. Arranging his poems as such, Gunn gave up some of the tension that could have been achieved by juxtaposing poems that address similar concerns with different form and sensibility. For example, "Baudelaire Among the Heroes," an epigram about the nature of fetishes, could have been

Uncorrected proof

paired with "A Trucker," a poem in syllabics that troubles the boundaries between man and machine. The epigram's placement is rather dull, as it comes after "The Byrnies," a poem that fetishizes chainmail shirts, and "Black Jackets," a poem that fetishizes leather jackets. That is to say, the way the volume is divided feels artificial and deliberate. It is a construct similar to the closet: the personal experience and intimacy of the second section are separated from the "public-oriented" first section with a focus on the existential ("The Annihilation of Nothing"), the ecclesiastical ("In Santa Maria del Popolo"), and the historical ("Claus von Stauffenberg"). Yet, the two sections are not as distinct as they first seem. "The Value of Gold," for example, has an intimate feeling ("The hairs turn gold upon my thigh / And I am gold beneath the sun") that is similar to the poems in the second section. And vice versa: "Rastignac at 45," a poem about Balzac's fictional character, seems out of place next to "Lights Among Redwood." The two sections of the volume permeate each other due to the dynamism between the public and the private.

City life is a major concern of Gunn's poetry in the '70s and '80s, but his engagement with the city and its locations starts earlier. The first two lines of Gunn's "A Map of the City" (from *My Sad Captains*), "I stand upon a hill and see / A luminous country under me" (25), clearly sets the perspective from which the city is viewed. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau differentiates between two ways of looking at the city. Watching Manhattan from the top of the Empire State Building gives us a map of the city. In contrast to the bird's eye view, which feels like the gaze of the outsider (91-93), when we walk around the city, we participate in creating the space. Although the poem describes an unnamed city that is in the distance, away from the viewer, it is made clear that whatever meanings are inscribed onto urban space are significant for the speaker: "I hold the city there, complete; / And every shape defined by light / Is mine." The speaker is fascinated by the "[e]ndless potentiality" of the city. A city is always "unfinished," it is constantly being built and is in constant decay. Since the city is connected to the speaker in such a way, the poem also addresses endless potentials and creative freedom for the speaker. The blurred lines of the city hold the promise of experimentation with himself, and, as the first line of the fourth stanza states, "The map is ground to my delight": it promises new sexual experience. He is not engaging the city yet, however, he merely views it from a distance, as the city clearly poses a "risk" for him. Engaging the city would make him a subject of the city, in the sense that it would deprive him of mastery: the city would not be under him, but over him. Still, this "risk" is not

Uncorrected proof

only something dangerous but something to be celebrated: "The crowded, broken and unfinished! / I would not have the risk diminished."

A similar poem, "In Praise of Cities" (from *The Sense of Movement*), addresses the city in a different way: "You welcome in her what remains of you; / And what is strange and what is incomplete / Compels a passion without understanding, / For all you cannot be" (23-24). This poem is more skeptical than "A Map of the City" in that the urban space described does not fascinate him but "compels a passion" for the impossibility of experimentation with identity, "for all you cannot be." The first line, "Indifferent to the indifference that conceived her," sets the tone for the rather ironic praise. Instead of being "luminous" and interesting, the city is indifferent, it is born of indifference. It is no surprise, then, that the city is gendered as female: for Gunn, she is not an object of desire. And later on, "Casual yet urgent in her love making, / She constantly asserts her independence: / Suddenly turning moist pale walls upon you / – Your own designs, peeling and unachieved – / Or her whole darkness hunching in an alley." The risk Gunn mentions in "A Map of the City" is emphasized even more here. By walking in the city, in an alley, walls turn on the subject. This section of the poem is rather uncanny in the way it relates to the female body; it is a source of fear: the "pale moist walls" are ready to swallow and unmake the male subject. Being unborn would result in the unmaking of the self. The subject would cease to be one, it would cease to be distinct and in control.

In "Waking in a Newly-Built House," like in "A Map of the City," the poet is an observer. Even his position is similar, he is on top of a hill, but inside, in a house. A major difference is that in "A Map of the City," Gunn celebrates the blurred lines of the unfinished city, whereas in "Waking in a Newly-Built House," he praises the room's tangibility: "Calmly, perception rests on the things, / and is aware of them only in / their precise definition, their fine / lack of even potential meanings" (20-24). In other words, the two poems differ in terms of the speakers' pleasure. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes differentiates between two types of texts, and more fundamentally, two types of pleasure:

> Text of pleasure [*plaisir*]: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss [*jouissance*]: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts . . . , unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (14)

Uncorrected proof

In other words, *plaisir* keeps our identity intact, while *jouissance* shatters it. The promise of *jouissance* in "A Map of the City" connects to the public domain, the outside world. Orgasmic pleasure, like the catharsis we feel at the end of a tragedy, is interpersonal. It relates to the loss of mastery: the subject's lack of control over himself, his surrender in front of the other. On the other hand, the *plaisir* in "Waking in a Newly Built House" connects to the private domain. Reading the cheap paperback is pleasurable in the same way as self-fashioning. The subject is in control, the lines are definite and clear. Waking in a newly built house is pleasurable because the clear shapes of the objects reassure us—reassure us of our identity. Yet there is some degree of freedom here as well. The objects lack potential meanings and we are free to assign them meaning. For example, the poem can be read as an allegory of literary experimentation, the joy of writing in a new form.

The closet motif returns in *My Sad Captains* with "The Monster":

> I left my room at last, I walked
> The streets of that decaying town,
> I took the turn I had renounced
> Where the carved cherub crumbled down.
>
> Eager as to a granted wish
> I hurried to the cul de sac,
> Forestalled by whom? Before the house
> I saw an unmoved waiting back.
>
> How had she never vainly mentioned
> This lover, too, unsatisfied?
> Did she dismiss one every night?
> I walked up slowly to his side.
>
> Those eyes glazed like her windowpane,
> That wide mouth ugly with despair,
> Those arms held tight against the haunches,
> Poised, but heavily staying there:
>
> At once I knew him, gloating over
> A grief defined and realized,
> And living only for its sake.
> It was myself I recognized.
>
> I could not watch her window now,
> Standing before this man of mine,

Uncorrected proof

The constant one I had created
Lest the pure feeling should decline.

What if I were within the house,
Happier than the fact had been
—Would he, then, still be gazing here,
The man who never can get in?

Or would I, leaving at the dawn
A suppler love than he could guess,
Find him awake on my small bed,
Demanding some bitterness?

The seventh stanza refers back to "The Secret Sharer"; the "divided consciousness of the closet," as Brian Teare calls it (198), returns here; yet, the setting of the poem differs greatly, as the urban neighbourhood becomes the dominant space in the first two lines: "I left my room at last, I walked / The streets of that decaying town." Even the first line seems to refer back to earlier poems: "at last" presupposes a narrative in which the speaker has been staying in his room for a long time. The space opens up in "The Monster," although this does not necessarily mean that the speaker turns towards reality. The "decaying" town and the "carved cherub" in the fourth line imply that the poem "takes place in a foreboding Gothic landscape of ruin" (Teare 198), and, as Sarah Parker claims, "the Gothic genre has been associated with the unconscious mind and the compulsion to articulate what is 'unspeakable' or repressed" (7). Urban space is thus introduced to the closet as a playing field of repressed desire.

Likewise, the title of the poem makes allusions to Gothic horror and to the monster that stands for the speaker's double. When the speaker describes him, he confesses his own sexual dissatisfaction ("How had she never mentioned / This lover, too, unsatisfied?") reflected in the double. In the fourth stanza, they lock eyes, in a way that is reminiscent of the mirror stage in "The Corridor": "Those eyes glazed like her windowpane / That wide mouth ugly with despair / Those arms held tight against the haunches." In contrast to the earlier poem, in which the man in the corridor does not recognize himself in the mirror, the mirror stage is completed here: "It was myself I recognized." He becomes a subject, and as a result he becomes more mature than the character in "The Corridor."

Furthermore, the speaker recognizes his double as fantasy: "Standing before this man of mine / The constant one I had created." The source of this fantasy is also given: "At once I knew him, gloating over / A grief defined

Uncorrected proof

and realized / And living only for its sake," yet it is unclear what "grief" refers to. It could be connected to the female lover, another addition to the motif of divided consciousness. The three form a love triangle, although her role is considerably downplayed: she does not even appear in the poem. As Brian Teare contends,

> Gunn's early critics assume his and his speakers' identities to be heterosexual, there do exist early poems of Gunn's in which an oddly uncanny, almost gothic power derives from a meeting between the homosocial and the homoerotic, usually in a doppelgänger figure, as in "The Monster" from his third book, *My Sad Captains*. Even though at first it appears to be a textbook rendering of a Sedgwickian erotic triangle in which a woman is exchanged between two men—two men meet by chance outside the window of a female lover—it's notable for the powerful way in which its narrative situation turns away from this trope to become instead possible code for one man's negotiation between his heterosexual and homosexual identities. (198)

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick considers the erotic charge in the rivalry of the men in love triangles while analyzing some of Shakespeare's sonnets. The word "grief" appears in Sonnet 42 describing the love triangle between the poet, the fair youth, and the dark lady: "That thou hast her, it is not all my grief, / And yet it may be said I loved her dearly; / That she hath thee, is of my wailing chief, / A loss in love that touches me more nearly." Although the nature of love shared between these agents is up for debate, I would emphasize that Gunn's poetry is considerably informed by Shakespeare. Sonnet 42 could easily have been an inspiration for writing "The Monster," especially since the "grief" is treated similarly in the two poems. In the sonnet, the main reason for the speaker's grief is jealousy: the dark lady might deprive him of the love of the fair youth. The couplet at the end puts a surprising twist on the love triangle:[5] "But here's the joy; my friend and I are one; / Sweet flattery! then she loves but me alone." Similarly, Gunn's speaker and his double are one, but after the speaker realizes this, the perspective shifts from Gunn's "dark lady": "I could not watch her window now / Standing before this man of mine." Although he is not jealous of her, she is a reminder that the speaker might lose himself in the love of a woman, in a heterosexual setting.

"The Monster" conforms to the phase of deepening/commitment in Fassinger's model of homosexual identity formation:

Uncorrected Proof

> Exploration leads to a deepening of self-knowledge and to the crystallization of some choices about sexuality. Some may see relationships with women as only one possibility and identify as bisexual, and others may decide in favor of men as sexual partners. It is here that the emerging lesbian is likely to recognize her desire for other women as within herself and, with deepening self-awareness, will develop sexual clarity and commitment to her self-fulfillment as a sexual being. Intimacy and identity become meshed as the woman recognizes that her forms of intimacy imply certain things about her identity and then moves toward accepting and further examining those aspects of herself. (McCarn and Fassinger 522-23)

The speaker of the poem is characterized by "a deepening self-knowledge" as well as a "crystallization of some choices about sexuality" because of his clear understanding of his narrative situation and his treatment of his double. The last stanza, like the preceding one, does away with the female lover, replacing her with the self. Here, the double appears as a lover, which implies bisexuality. The speaker's higher "sexual clarity and commitment to [his] self-fulfillment" is evident from the way the emerging closet narrative expands the limits of the mental corridor and bedroom. By involving the city, the speaker has a better grasp on himself and his closeted situation.

Gay spaces: "Bravery" and "Behind the Mirror"

Gunn included "Bravery" in *Touch*, a volume published in 1976, a year after private homosexual acts between consenting adults were decriminalized in California. The poem is dedicated to "a painting by Chuck Arnett," a ballet dancer and artist of considerable importance for the then contemporary San Francisco gay scene. He painted, among others, murals on the walls of gay bars, notably The Tool Box on Pierce Street (Fritscher 356), a bar that Gunn must have frequented. In *Touch*, the poem "Pierce Street" makes note of the murals in a building that might likely be The Tool Box. The picture described in "Bravery" can be easily identified as Arnett's painting *V-Jacket* (1964), in which a black silhouette of a man is looking at "an indeterminate pale / grey-and-yellow country." It is not the first time Gunn wrote a poem about a painting ("Santa Maria del Popolo" from *My Sad Captains*, for example, is about Caravaggio's *The Conversion of Saint Paul*), but "Bravery" is a tribute to a work by an openly gay artist. I doubt that Gunn took a great risk by dedicating a poem to Arnett's painting, as most straight readers were probably oblivious to Arnett's existence, yet the gesture remains significant. It is proof of Gunn's engagement with the San Francisco gay scene, as well as his commitment to it. The poem thus correlates with the fourth phase of Fassinger's group membership identity development termed as deepening/commitment, a

Uncorrected proof

phase that involves "a deepening awareness of both the unique value and oppression of the lesbian/gay community. It involves a commitment to create a personal relationship to the reference group, with awareness of the possible consequences entailed" (McCarn and Fassinger 525).

> What a romantic picture!
> his back is toward us, yet
> he is practically
> a silhouette, black, he
> is brave with separation–
>
> and he is set against
> an indeterminate pale
> grey-and-yellow country, he is
> about to step on
> or into the smoky
> swirl of a fog-
> trough or river.
>
> I visualize his
> first step: as his heroic
> foot presses down
> on the spongy district,
> a curl of mist that lapped
> the heel curdles, a
> glint of spray on
> the toe dulls
> to mud, and the first step will
> suck the country dry.
>
> For he has become his
> outline, and holds no
> warm clutter of detail.
>
> Giant vampire! if your
> back were not turned, I
> should have known you
> before, you are
> my monstrous lover, whom
> I gaze at
> every time I shave.

Uncorrected proof

The first line, "What a romantic picture!" exhibits Gunn's expertise about art and his skills of interpretation: the painting is indeed romantic (Romantic) in both the everyday and literary senses of the word. *V-Jacket* is similar to Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), a masterpiece of German Romanticism. Both portray Rückenfiguren (figures seen from behind) that invite the viewers to identify with them and see the landscape through their eyes. Friedrich's painting is frequently used as textbook illustrations for the sublime and Romanticism in general. Joseph Leo Koerner's *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* emphasizes the introspective aspect of the picture: "The Rückenfigur is so prominent in the composition that the world appears to be an emanation from his gaze, or more precisely, from his heart" (213). The painter himself wrote that "when a landscape is covered in fog, it appears larger, more sublime, and heightens the strength of the imagination and excites expectation, rather like a veiled woman. The eye and fantasy feel themselves more attracted to the hazy distance than to that which lies near and distinct before us" (Hinz 123). Koerner is quick to dismiss "the artist's controlling erotic metaphor" (212) especially since he establishes that "at the horizontal of [the figure's] waist, made visible by the gathering of his green coat and occurring at the canvas's midline, the picture divides into symmetrical upper and lower halves" (210). In Arnett's painting, the figure's waistline is similarly emphasized by the white dots of the studded belt. The colorful stripe that Gunn identifies as the "grey-and-yellow country" is at the level of his loins. The stance of the figure is suggestive, perhaps masturbatory, and the picture is thus, if ironically, romantic.

The relationship of the Rückenfigur and his surroundings are, however, different in the two paintings. In *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, he is relatively small, or at least the environment appears considerably larger than he is. The foggy landscape that emanates from him is sublime: "*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* aspires to invoke the sublime of a thoroughly subjectivized aesthetic, in which the painted world turns inward on the beholder" (Kroener 212-13). In contrast, Arnett's figure takes up most of the canvas, and seems to be feeding off the landscape. Gunn prophesizes that his "first step will / suck the country dry" and calls him a "[g]iant vampire." He is hostile, being "set against" the landscape. He acts as the embodiment of aggressive male sexuality: he drains, eats, and violates the country. This painting might reflect the way heterosexist society might have viewed gays as dangerous alien creatures hidden from the public eye and without human details. At the same time, it is a celebration of male sexuality, emphasizing not only its power (this explains the title "Bravery"), but its enticing nature. The 'V' on the figure's

Uncorrected proof

leather jacket could stand for "vampire," "victory," or "violence," but it also acts like a downturned arrowhead that, along with the belt, directs the viewer's attention to the figure's backside. If one can believe San Francisco artist Mark I. Chester's claim on his website, the jacket belonged to the poet himself, and given Gunn's obsession with leather jackets, this is very likely.

Like the speaker of "The Monster," the speaker of "Bravery" identifies himself with his "monstrous lover." The categories of same-sex desire and narcissism overlap, as in Gunn's several other poems (Powell 29, Wilmer 51), to mask their homoeroticism. "Behind the Mirror" from *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) addresses the myth of Narcissus, with a split consciousness similar to that of "The Wound":

> 1.
> Once in a dark restaurant I caught the eyes of another,
> they stared me back at mine with unflagging interest.
> Another! no it was my own eyes from a recessed mirror.
>
> I and the reflected self seemed identical twins,
> alike yet separate, two flowers from the same plant.
>
> 2.
> Narcissus glares into the pool: someone glares back.
> As he leans over the surface, absorbed, he sees
> only the other—he sees the rounded arms,
> a hunk of auburn hair tumbled forward, lips parted
> in awe, in craving, he stares him
> straight in the ravenous eyes
>   and reaches down toward him.
>
> He escapes, he does not escape, he is the same, he is other.
> If he drowned himself he would be one with himself.
> If he drowned himself he would wash free into the world,
> placid and circular, from which he has been withdrawn.
> He would at least be of it, deep behind the mirror,
> white limbs braided with a current
> where both water and earth are part of it,
> and would come to rest on a soft dark wave of soil
> to root there and stand again
>   one flower,
> one waxy star, giving perfume, unreflecting.

Uncorrected proof

The poem is divided into two sections. In the first, the speaker looks into a mirror in a "dark restaurant" and recognizes himself in the mirror. The self and his reflection are described as "two flowers from the same plant," which suggests some kind of kinship, a serene one compared to the "monstrous lover." This metaphor makes way in the second section for the myth of Narcissus, the story of a man turning into a plant. In the first stanza of the second section, Narcissus does not seem to know that he is looking at himself: "Narcissus glares into the pool: someone glares back." His gaze, and in his reflection, his sexual arousal is thus best understood as that of homosexual desire: "he sees the rounded arms, / a hunk of auburn hair tumbled forward, lips parted / in awe, in craving, he stares him / straight in the ravenous eyes." The death of Gunn's Narcissus makes more sense in this context. It is not due to sorrow and hunger as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* but is a deliberate act of will to unite parts of his split personality: "If he drowned himself he would be one with himself." Furthermore: "If he drowned himself he would wash free into the world, / placid and circular, from which he has been withdrawn." Strangely, going behind the mirror is not an act of escapism, but a way of joining the world by an act of self-purification. Considering his "withdrawn" state, Narcissus's suicide resembles coming out. He transforms himself by crossing the boundary between the private and the public with his multidirectional desire (partly sexual desire, partly a desire of oneness, and perhaps the desire to die). As a result, he becomes an "unreflecting" flower, he becomes whole. Gunn solves the issue of the divided consciousness by transformation, but in terms of grammar, the events are recounted in conditional clauses. That is to say, transformation has both fantasy and ambiguity: it might suggest the hardships of coming out, even its impossibility, or it could be a fantasy that comes from the poet's experience. After all, "Jack Straw's Castle," the title poem of the volume, does away with the fantasy of the double in its last section and discusses sexual relations between men openly. The titular Jack reassures himself that the man who visited his bed is not imaginary and concludes, "[t]he beauty's in what is, not what may seem" (verse 11). The man is real indeed, not a doppelgänger, and so Jack is, even more so than Narcissus, out:

> What if this is the man I gave my key
> Who got in while I slept? Or what if he,
> Still, is a dream of that same man?
>   No, real.
> Comes from outside the castle, I can feel.
> The beauty's in what is, not what may seem.

Uncorrected proof

I turn. And even if he were a dream
—Thick sweating flesh against which I lie curled-
With dreams like this, Jack's ready for the world. (verse 11)

Synthesis: "Talbot Road"

"Behind the Mirror," like "Jack Straw's Castle," reflects Fassinger's last phase of individual sexual identity development termed internalization/synthesis: "Women at this phase of lesbian identity development are likely to have completed many years of emotional and sexual self-exploration and to have resolved difficult decisions about their desires and practices. This internal process of clarification will involve the synthesis of role identity into ego identity" (523). The poem indeed achieves a synthesis of selves, and does it with an ease that presupposes "many years of emotional and sexual self-exploration." The poems previously discussed render legible the entire process of an individual sexual identity development. They form a narrative in which the closet and the divided consciousness within are being reimagined and transformed in each poem, until, eventually, the closet is dismantled and the two selves become one. In his introduction to Gunn's 2018 *New Selected Poems*, Clive Wilmer identifies "'Jack Straw's Castle' as the poem in which Gunn 'came out' as a gay poet, having masked his orientation in earlier books" (xxxvii). If that is the case, why does the poem make use of a persona? "Jack Straw's Castle," furthermore, still drags with itself the old motifs: the Gothic setting (castle) and the unconscious or split mind. Although they are undone at the end of the poem, they are still present. That is why I suggest that Gunn identifies himself openly as gay for the first time in "Talbot Road" (1982). In this poem, no allusions are made to the closet or the divided consciousness, nor is there any mask. The speaker recalls telling his friend Tony about his "adventures" and so "He wondered aloud if he would be happier / if he were queer like me. / How could he want, I wondered, / to be anything but himself?" (86). This idea of unity between what one is and what one wants to be is in sharp contrast with Gunn's early work that made regular use of masks and poses to disguise homosexuality. The titles of the books are also significant: five years after the publication of *Jack Straw's Castle*, Gunn has shifted away from the Gothic interiors of the castle to the more explicitly sexual and celebratory "Passages of Joy." In "Talbot Road," the word "queer" comes easy, without any judgment, and in the context of a friendship with a straight man. This, I believe, is an achievement of considerable personal, political, and poetic development.

University of Debrecen

Uncorrected proof

Notes

[1] I use the term homosexual here to describe Achilles's behavior and not his sexual orientation or identity. Doing so would be, perhaps, anachronistic, as the term was coined in the nineteenth century.

[2] I do not claim that it is better written, as aesthetic judgment is not the aim of this paper.

[3] I would emphasize that Fassinger developed the model for lesbians in 1996 and validated it for gay men a year later.

[4] Alfred Corn argues that the head injury of "The Wound" is a metaphor for homosexuality. See "Existentialism and Homosexuality in Gunn's Early Poetry."

[5] Sedgwick skips on analyzing the couplet: she leaves it out from the block quote.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. Print.

Connel, R. W. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005. Print.

Corn, Alfred. "Existentialism and Homosexuality in Gunn's Early Poetry." Weiner 39. Print.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977. Print.

---. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random House. 1978. Print.

Fritscher, Jack. *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*. Vol. 1. San Francisco: Palm Drive, 2008. Print.

Gunn, Thom. "A Map of the City." *My Sad Captains* 25. Print.

---. "Behind the Mirror." *Jack Straw's Castle* 68. Print.

---. "Bravery." *Touch*. London: Faber and Faber, 1967. 16-17. Print.

---. "The Corridor." *The Sense of Movement* 52-53. Print.

---. *Fighting Terms*. 1954. London: Faber and Faber, 1962. Print.

---. "Homosexuality in Robert Duncan's Poetry." *The Occasions of Poetry*. Ed. Clive Wilmer. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982. 118-34. Print.

---. "In Praise of Cities." *The Sense of Movement* 23-24. Print.

---. *Jack Straw's Castle*. London: Faber and Faber, 1976. Print.

---. "Jack Straw's Castle." *Jack Straw's Castle* 56. Print.

---. "The Monster." *My Sad Captains* 16-17. Print.

---. *My Sad Captains*. London: Faber and Faber, 1961. Print.

Uncorrected proof

---. *New Selected Poems*. Ed. Clive Wilmer. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. Print.
---. "The Secret Sharer." *Fighting Terms* 18. Print.
---. *The Sense of Movement*. 1957. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. Print.
---. "Talbot Road." *The Passages of Joy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1982. 80-86. Print.
---. "Waking in a Newly-Built House." *My Sad Captains* 37. Print.
---. "The Wound." *Fighting Terms* 9. Print.
Hinz, Sigrid. *Caspar David Friedrich in Briefen und Bekenntnissen*. Munich: Henschelverlag, 1968. Print.
Koerner, Joseph Leo. *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*. London: Reaktion, 2009. Print.
Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell, 1998. 441-46. Print.
Mark I. Chester Website. Web. 1 Feb. 2018.
McCarn, Susan R., and Ruth E. Fassinger. "Revisioning Sexual Minority Formation: A New Model of Lesbian Identity and Its Implications for Counseling and Research." *The Counseling Psychologist* 24 (1996): 508-34. Print.
Parker, Sarah. "'The Darkness is the Closet in Which Your Lover Roosts Her Heart': Lesbians, Desire and the Gothic Genre." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 9.2 (2006): 4-19. Print.
Powell, Neil. "Young Gunn: Coming Out Fighting." Weiner 11-18. Print.
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. Print.
Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Ed. Stephen Booth. New Haven: Yale UP, 1977. Print.
Teare, Brian. "Our Dionysian Experiment: Three Theses on the Poetry of Thom Gunn." Weiner 181-238. Print.
Weiner, Joshua, ed. *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*. London: The U of Chicago P, 2009. Print.
Wilmer, Clive. "Gunn, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethans." Weiner 45-67. Print.

Uncorrected proof