

# Postgraduate English

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ISSN 1756-9761

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Issue 42

Autumn 2021

Editors: Vicky Penn and Hannah Voss

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**‘I manage my mere voice on postcards best.’:  
Review of *The Letters of Thom Gunn*, edited by  
Michael Nott, August Kleinzahler, and Clive  
Wilmer (London: Faber & Faber, 2021).**

**796pp, hb. £40.00. ISBN: 9780-571-36255-4**

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Thom Gunn (1929–2004), probably the most important gay poet of the later 20th century, initially built his reputation as a ‘movement’ poet, and for a time was seen as a central figure in post-war British poetry — part of ‘a triple headed creature called the “Larkin-Hughes-Gunn”’.<sup>1</sup> Yet while Larkin and Hughes have earned their spots in Poets’ Corner, Gunn has been marginalised by a literary establishment that has been unable or unwilling to deal fully with his explicit and evocative poetry. The publication of Gunn’s letters represents the start of what the poet Andrew McMillan has called ‘a welcome rebalancing’.<sup>2</sup> But as well as providing an intimate portrait of Gunn, the letters also give an insight into the origins of this imbalance. In short, Gunn’s reputation has been held back by the legacy of homophobia, and an unmistakable thread which runs through this collection is the extent to which Gunn, as a poet and a gay man, was forced to negotiate with a hostile culture.

Some of the most touching moments in the book are found in Gunn’s love letters to his life partner, Mike Kitay, whom he met at Cambridge in 1952, and then lived with in the US just two years later. Even taken by themselves, these letters serve as an important record of how gay men constructed relationships in the pre-decriminalisation, pre-Stonewall era: ‘I love you wholly, so much with all of myself, that I don’t know what to do or say when there

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, ed., *British Poetry since 1945* (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew McMillan, ‘Confessions of a New Elizabethan’, *Literary Review*, 494 (2021), 26–27 (p. 26).

are other people by'.<sup>3</sup> Yet between these tender moments there are glimpses of the intense difficulties which they both faced. In an early letter to his mentor Yvor Winters, Gunn is forced to invent an imaginary fiancée, as Winters 'would have been *appalled* at the idea I was queer'(p. 67). More worryingly, in 1956, when Mike was completing two years of compulsory service in the Air Force, Gunn writes in panic to a friend: 'Mike is being "investigated" for homosexuality.' (p. 70) He recounts how they were outed by another man who had 'seen us in some queer bars around here' (p. 70), and how their apartment had been searched by the military police. Mike was threatened with a court-martial, and in the letter Gunn asks — in near desperation — that a female friend from Cambridge pretend to have been Mike's girlfriend in order to throw off the investigation.

Quite apart from these frightening legal threats, the letters reveal how Gunn's development as a poet was shaped by his need to censor himself. Gunn did not publicly 'come out' until 1975, yet as early as 1961, in a letter to Kitay, he expressed his 'strong desire to write openly queer poems' (p. 138). Nonetheless, he qualified that these were 'not for publication — or else for publication under a pseudonym' (p. 138). Evidence from Gunn's archives shows that he wrote a number of 'openly queer poems' throughout the '60s and early '70s, but had to either edit out their directly gay content, delay their publication, or leave them unpublished. One such poem is 'Nice Thing', a candidly gay and erotic work, which Gunn hoped to include in his 1971 collection *Moly*. However, enclosing the poem in a letter, he acknowledged that he would be 'quite surprised if Faber consent to print it' (p. 269). Referring to his editor at Faber, Charles Monteith, Gunn wrote: 'I can just picture poor Uncle Charles trying to write the letter in which

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<sup>3</sup> Gunn to Mike Kitay, 21 May 1953, in *The Letters of Thom Gunn*, ed. Michael Nott, August Kleinzahler, and Clive Wilmer (London: Faber, 2021), p. 25. All further references to Gunn's letters will be taken from this edition.

he tells me that though he thinks it's all right the others don't want to print it' (p. 269). The poem remained unpublished for over a decade, eventually making it into print in 1982.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Gunn's difficulties with the literary establishment did not end once he began to publish openly. In 1981 he complained to the editor of a well-known poetry magazine about what he perceived as its 'antigay stance' (p. 360) (it had published an article defending the use of the terms 'fag' and 'faggotry').<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Gunn was clearly hurt by the 'bitchy' (p. 374) attitude of English reviewers to his 1982 collection *The Passages of Joy*, which was 'dismissed so contemptuously by Peter Porter and Ian Hamilton and all the other powers' (p. 439). By today's standards, the tone of these reviews seems decidedly homophobic: Hamilton wrote that Gunn's poems dealing with queer experience 'simply make one want to look the other way',<sup>6</sup> while as distinguished a critic as Terry Eagleton stated that the collection 'has little to recount beyond casual encounters and homosexual gossip'.<sup>7</sup>

Gunn had far more to offer than 'homosexual gossip'. The 1980s would prove to be the most difficult decade of his life, as he bore witness to the AIDS crisis sweeping through San Francisco, but it was also the decade that produced his finest work. The first of Gunn's close friends died in 1984, and it seems particularly striking that this was the same year that both Larkin and Hughes were offered the position of Poet Laureate. Gunn considered Hughes 'an idiot to have accepted the job [...] condemned the rest of his life to write about the weather of royal funerals births, marriages etc.' (p. 412). As Hughes began writing his first poems as laureate, Gunn was embarking on the most important work of his life — caring for his friends who were dying of AIDS and writing the powerful, unsparing elegies that would

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<sup>4</sup> Gunn, 'Nice Thing', *Massachusetts Review*, 23 (Spring 1982), 132.

<sup>5</sup> The article in question is Dudley Young's 'Still Life Inside the Whale', *PN Review*, 18 (March–April 1981), 39–49.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Hamilton, 'The Call of the Cool', *TLS*, 23 July 1982, 782.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'New Poetry', *Stand*, 24:3 (1983), 77–80 (p. 79).

become his most famous collection, *The Man with Night Sweats*. Once again, the letters prove an invaluable record, shedding light on the extraordinary lived experience behind Gunn's poems. For instance, he recalls nursing Jim Lay, a member of his 'queer household' who died in their home on Christmas Day, 1986: 'poor Jim, who shrank and shrank till he was about three stone, all bone, poor baby, couldn't eat and the last three days couldn't even swallow liquids. We squeezed wet sponges on the roof of his mouth to moisten it' (p. 431).

The opening lines of Gunn's elegy for Lay, 'Words for Some Ash', recall the same details:

Poor parched man, we had to squeeze  
 Dental sponge against your teeth,  
 So that moisture by degrees  
 Dribbled to the mouth beneath.<sup>8</sup>

*The Letters of Thom Gunn* is a far more wide-ranging work than this review has suggested thus far. The letters illuminate the rich and varied life that informed Gunn's poems: his struggle to come to terms with his mother's suicide; his life changing experiences with LSD in the 1960s; as well as touching letters to his family in England detailing his more domestic pursuits like cooking and gardening. Gunn often described himself as an 'impersonal' poet, and this book undoubtedly offers a more profound insight into his life and work than has been seen before. The editors provide a timeline of significant life events, a glossary of names, and detailed yet unobtrusive annotations of the letters. The collection opens with a letter Gunn sent to his father as a ten-year-old, and closes with one to his brother from February 2004, just two months before Thom's death. Quite poignantly, in this final letter he reports on the fact that the new mayor of San Francisco 'decided as his first act to authorize the issuance of marriage licenses to people of the same sex, and so far there have been about 3000 gay marriages' (p. 678). Such moments remind us how Gunn's life ran parallel to the struggle for gay rights. Even as this collection deepens our understanding of his

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<sup>8</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Words for Some Ash', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 472, ll. 1–4.

work, it is important to reflect on how his reputation has been held back — by publishers unwilling or unable to publish queer poems, and critics who were dismissive of this work. For much of Gunn’s career, he was simply unable to publish openly — a fact which makes this encounter with his private voice all the more valuable.

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