

Thom Gunn: Britain's Expatriate Poet

Thom Gunn, the distinguished author of such books of verse as Moly, The Passages of Joy, My Sad Captains and Jack Straw's Castle and Other Poems, was born in Gravesend, England, in 1929. He has lived in the United States for many years now, however, and supplements his writing income with teaching duties at Cal-Berkeley and other universities. The following interview is actually two interviews: one conducted in a Reno, Nevada, seafood restaurant, and the other at Gunn's comfortable San Francisco digs. Gunn comes across as a delightful cross between an intellectual and a buccaneer. The poet is revered in his native England, but he is too often shamefully ignored by American reviewers.

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NUWER: When you were young, were there deaths in your family—of people close to you?

GUNN: My mother [Charlotte] died when I was fourteen, in 1944, which was practically at the end of the war. But I had a very happy childhood. I don't want to make it sound as though it wasn't. The teens were difficult, but the teens were difficult for a lot of people, I think, maybe for most people, maybe for all people. I don't want to convey that I was unhappy.

NUWER: It's my impression that a writer or poet knows what image he wants an audience to have.

GUNN: I was thinking about this interview earlier. I thought, "What do I want Hank to think of me?" I don't want to play games. Nobody wants to play games. As far as I can I want to be honest about myself. I'm sure there are certain areas of reticence, but I'll let you know when we reach them.

NUWER: Right.

GUNN: Maybe it would help if I told you now that I'm gay, but I don't have any clear image of myself. Maybe that's a weakness of some sort. I wrote a letter to a friend who showed it to another friend in the same city. The second friend said, "Why don't you ever write me any interesting letters like that?" And then I realized that I write to people the

way they write to me. This was an amusing Jamesian kind of letter—the same way he writes letters to me. The other one was writing very clipped letters, like lists, one-two-three-four, of things that had happened to him. So, I wrote back to him the same way. And to some extent I think I'm a bit anonymous. It's so hard to get outside oneself. But I think I borrow so many characteristics from my friends. For example, my room-mates have such good taste. I have some good taste in putting things up on the wall, but I can always tell where it comes from.

NUWER: Does this extend to your poetry? Do you find that your books change considerably from book to book?

GUNN: Well, two things come into play there. First, when you're young you start writing. Obviously you're very susceptible to whatever the current fashions are. But you don't realize this; you don't work like this deliberately. When I started writing poetry seriously in my early twenties—which was back in the early Fifties, all my contemporaries were a bit older than me and were writing rhyming, metrical poetry. This was not only the British, but also many of the Americans, especially the East Coast Americans—Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Donald Hall—those people. You know, you think you're unique when you start writing. You wouldn't write, otherwise. You don't realize how derivative you are. But I was very much a part of it, without meaning to be, you know. But book to book, there is a kind of unity to my books, which is not a deliberate one. I mean, it may be in the last few poems of a book I realize I have a subject, and I write poems to fill out that subject. Like with *Moly*, I realized three-quarters of the way through the writing that the subject was largely LSD. It wasn't my deliberate intention when I started to write the poems that eventually became that book. *Moly* came out of my life. It came out of what I was doing.

NUWER: That didn't come from what [Gary] Snyder was doing, or [Allen] Ginsberg was doing, or other poets that you admire?

GUNN: Hardly—although I do admire them—because I was adopting such a different strategy for dealing with the question of drugs. It was first unconsciously and then consciously that I wrote about drugs in very tight forms, and then in my book, *Touch*, I started abandoning them. I have free verse and more open forms in that book. At some stage or another I found I was using these tight metrical forms—stanza forms and rhyme usually—and I wondered why. Then I realized I was dealing with something so large; there were hankerings for the infinite after all involved in taking LSD. I was taking a structure, a predefined structure, to deal with it. Otherwise, there was a danger of it all floating away. The freeness of the experience expressed through free verse might just dissipate it for me. These are disciplines I must adopt sometimes to tie my subject down.

NUWER: Why do you stick to very structured forms at a time when you're practically an innovator, let's say, in doing it? Philip Larkin is the only other British name that comes to mind who is still using them.

GUNN: It's a tune. Structure, meter and rhyme are like a tune. And you can be just as free writing to a tune as you can be not writing to one. Larkin is very deliberately conservative, very deliberately provincial. He doesn't even like the idea of coming to America, apparently, although I've never met him personally. I admire him to an extent. One cannot *but* admire him. But it's not only his forms; it's also his attitudes. They're virtually the ones of somebody who could have been writing thirty or forty years ago, except for some contemporary references. The attitude behind it is obviously very old fashioned, deliberately so. I want to be able to go on writing in both forms, with a tune and without a tune.

NUWER: I'm curious to know why your books aren't reviewed very much by such publications as *The New York Times*.

GUNN: I don't know. Maybe American critics feel I'm too English to be interesting still. I don't completely understand, even now, about poetry reviewing in America. For example, a book of mine in 1961 called *My Sad Captains* did very well for a book of poetry, but it got very little review. And a friend of mine, Robert Duncan, who is an internationally known poet, says that his last couple of books were barely reviewed anywhere, except in the quarterly reviews. And, of course, you have to wait a year or more to get into there.

NUWER: I wonder in your case if it's because you live in the West? You're outside the New York intellectual circles.

GUNN: Both English and known on the West Coast, so I don't fit anywhere at all. I don't very much mind the situation. I don't think I'm cut out to be a star. It's kind of nice to be doing so well in England, but to be so unknown here. It has its conveniences.

NUWER: It doesn't affect how you write, either? In your choice of themes?

GUNN: No, no. I have, in my time and in various places, been reviewed a lot. And I've learned extremely little from reviews. Very occasionally, someone really good will get on my case and say something that is very helpful to me. It's funny with reviewers. Very often people will like me for what I consider are all the wrong reasons, and sometimes people dislike me for the wrong reasons. It's so good to be liked, or even disliked, for all the right reasons. One of the most useful adverse reviews that was ever written about me was by James Dickey. He said some things about me that made sense, I must say. I learned from him, but mostly, somehow, reviewers tend to get the emphasis wrong. I wish I was really strong like Wallace Stevens who, apparently, never read any of his

reviews. (*Chuckles*) I don't have *that* small an ego. One can't help having a certain amount of vanity. Also, it's interesting to know how people react.

NUWER: How did you get your start as a poet?

GUNN: I came from a very literate household. There were always lots of books around. I think a lot of children from literary households do play around writing short stories and poems intermittently. Partly to please their parents maybe, and partly because if they like reading, they're imitating what they like which is natural enough. Sometime in my teens I thought that I'd like to be a writer, although it was then rather generalized. I thought of myself as being a novelist more than anything else. I went through various spurts of writing around the age of seventeen or eighteen, not doing any of it very well; it was all so pathetically derivative, as probably most people's work is at that age. Then I went to college and something happened right around the end of my first year. Some certain things must have come together, emotionally maybe. I was suddenly able to write decently and got published first of all in undergraduate magazines—of which there weren't a great deal there. There were usually three literary magazines at Cambridge. So you can say in a sense that I didn't get seriously started until I was twenty-one, although I had been playing around with writing for quite a long time before that.

NUWER: Did you come from a wealthy family?

GUNN: When I was born, my parents were lower middle class. By the time I was in my teens, they were upper middle class. My father died quite a rich man. He was a journalist. He went from being a small time journalist to a big editor; he was editor of *The Daily Sketch*. He worked for Lord Beaverbrook at the *Daily Standard* for a long time until he had an argument with him, apparently to my father's credit, so people have told me. Then he was given an ailing paper on Fleet Street called *The Daily Sketch* which he managed, with few scruples, to elevate into a paper that sold over a million copies. It was a lot of religion, sex and royalty—the three things he knew would attract people, and they sure did.

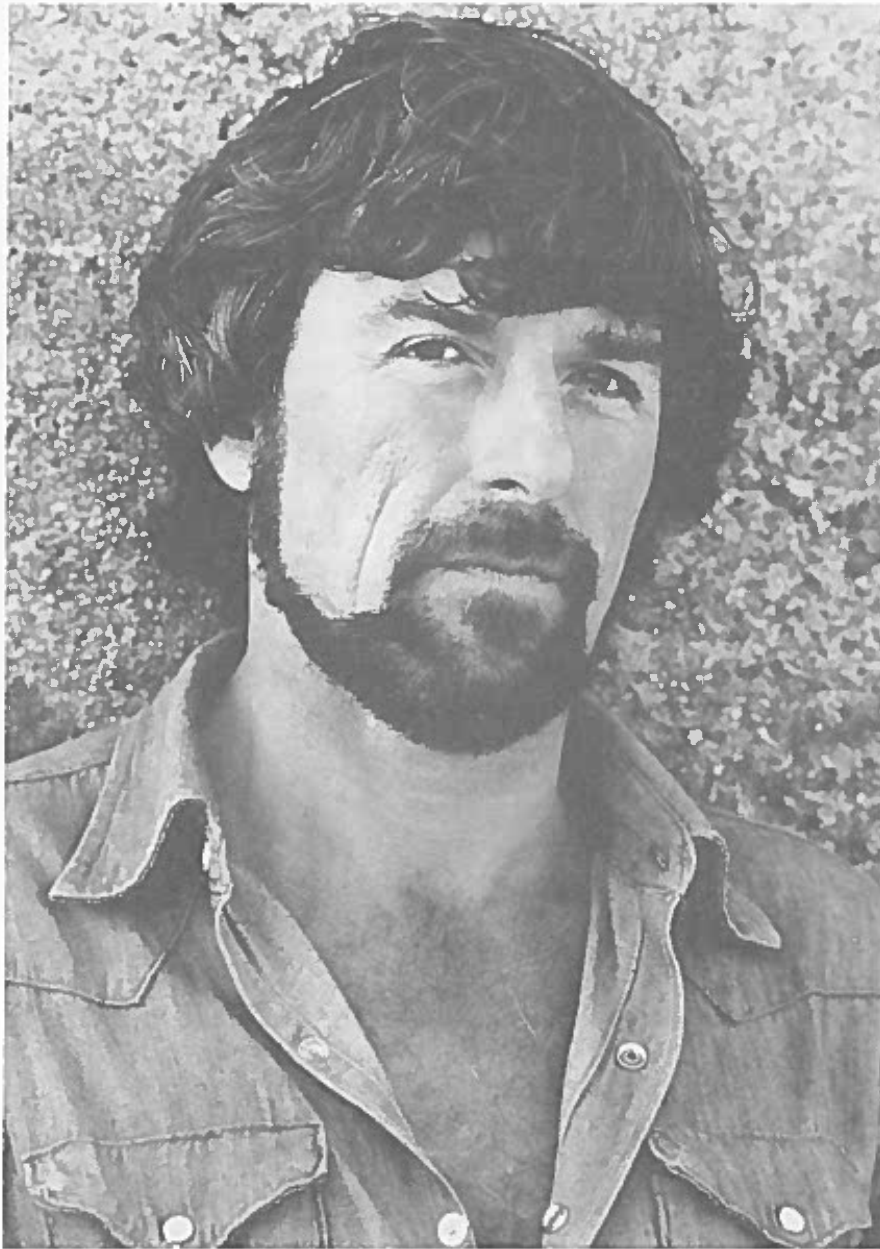
NUWER: Rupert Murdoch's formula.

GUNN: Oh, very much. Very much.

NUWER: What was his name?

GUNN: Herbert Gunn, or H.S. Gunn, as he once was referred to by *Time* magazine. He's been dead since 1961.

NUWER: Did he encourage you?



GUNN: He wasn't much of a reader. It was my mother who was a reader. I don't think he ever read any of my poetry, although he was very proud that I published those books. My parents were divorced when I was about eight. He was appreciative, but in a general way.

NUWER: Did you live with your father then?

GUNN: No, I never lived with my father, although I saw him frequently. My brother Ander went to live with my father who had remarried and

started another family of his own. I lived with friends of the family and with relatives.

NUWER: Did you feel you were being shifted about? Did you resent this treatment?

GUNN: No. I didn't like my father too much. I was happy not to be with him. We got on better when I was in my twenties.

NUWER: I wonder if you left England to get away from the family?

GUNN: No. Maybe unconsciously, but I don't know. Yes. Maybe unconsciously. First I say "no" and now I say "yes." This was not my intention. Originally I came over for just a year as a student to Stanford. It's very funny going back home. I think a lot of expatriates feel this way about their country. I go back to England and I either feel absolute depression or I feel very elated, never something in between the two. I'm never sure what the cause is. As I say, I had a very happy childhood, but your sixteen-year-old self comes at you from every corner, and maybe your sixteen-year-old self is not easy to deal with.

NUWER: What kind of visual images come to you about sixteen? Maybe something that prompted later poetic images?

GUNN: There's one poem called "Autobiography," which is, more or less, autobiographical. You can see St. Paul's in the distance, standing like a stone thimble. I also stayed with two maiden aunts who had a milk run in the country. It was very beautiful countryside, in Snodland, a town as ugly as any small industrial town in England, but with these very beautiful blue hills rising in the distance. It seems amazingly old-fashioned now, but we had a pushcart and carried a huge churn around. I would help them. You'd get a bucket of milk from the churn—with a top on it and a scoop inside it—and you'd go around to people's outside back doors. They usually left a pitcher with a saucer on top, and you'd put the right amount in. It was a village in Kent, and if they forgot [to leave the saucers], you'd go right into their kitchens and find a suitable pitcher yourself to put it in. These were all very poor houses. My aunts were not well off either, so it was not strictly a middle class life. In fact, for much of my teens, it was schizophrenic in a way—this contrast between my upper middle class life in London and my life with my aunts which was lower middle class and countryish. My aunts' customers were very poor people and worked in factories. But I was very attached to my aunts.

NUWER: Were you sent away to schools?

GUNN: I was only sent away to schools during the Blitz. The adults around me were really very good about the war. I and my brother found it, at times exciting, and at times, inconvenient. We really didn't like going

away to boarding school for a year-and-a-half, although it was a very nice boarding school. It was in the country, safe from bombs, but we thought the bombings were quite exciting. We saw one of the first V-2's, those pilotless planes. I remember that we were just about to go to school; this would have been in 1944. My brother and I stood on the lawn in front of the house. My brother noticed it and he pointed it out to me. The plane was making a strange, loud noise, such as no noise we'd ever heard a plane make before, although we had experience with planes—American, British and German. We didn't know what it was until later that day.

NUWER: Were you a loner?

GUNN: I had schoolmates, but I was something of a loner, although that's maybe romanticizing myself. The life of an English schoolboy in the mid-Forties was very different from the life of American people in school at the same time. I went to what would be called a private school here. I liked it very much; I had a lot of friends there. I remember very little bullying and very few fights. The teaching was very good.

NUWER: When did you get into the biker kind of life?

GUNN: Not until I came here. It's very romantic. When I came here it was the beginning of the myth about the biker. *The Wild One* came out about 1954. I came here in the middle of 1954. It was a new myth like the myth of the cowboy. I mean it seems so old right now, and there've been so many lousy movies made of it that maybe it's difficult to recapture that kind of excitement. Also, I managed to mix all this in with the existential hero—the kind of hero in Sartre's plays—which was again kind of new. In fact, there was a poem I wrote called "On the Move," where I was eulogizing a band of bikers, saying they were not going to any destination. They were always moving *toward*.

NUWER: Ever have a bike?

GUNN: I had one for one month—which I rode rather badly and smashed. (*Laughter*) It would be nice to say that I had one several years. It was a Harley Davidson; I had a suicide bar. (*Laughter*)

NUWER: What happened to the bike?

GUNN: Well, I didn't ever smash it. It kind of broke up on its own accord. One day it became unridable. I figured by then that I was being rather phony with all this, so I retired it.

NUWER: Did you hang out with bikers?

GUNN: With people who owned bikes. But not with anyone so glamorous as outlaw bikers. But I have a built-in sympathy toward outlaws. This is again romantic, but the very fact that they're defying is

interesting and attractive. To be honest, I try to live my own life the way I want to live it. I've gotten beyond making gestures, and even when I did make gestures, they were more rhetorical than anything else.

NUWER: Can you give examples?

GUNN: (*Groans*) I knew you were going to ask that! Oh, my best gesture was when I was about nine years old. At the very beginning of the term I was evacuated to a very ghastly school in the north. It was a boarding school called Riley's. My brother and I found it very oppressive. The headmaster's wife was something of an ogress as I remember. At night we all had to kneel beside our beds. Now I wasn't brought up in any religion. I did this a couple of nights, but I thought it was just silly. On the third night, around ten, I went up to the headmaster's wife, who was acting as a kind of matron in the dormitory, and said. "I don't want to do this. Could I just sit on my bed while they're doing this because I don't believe in God." She looked at me in horror, but she had no choice but to punish me because of my beliefs. Then, I remember the talk in the dormitory after lights out. Before I had gotten along bloody well with all of them [students], but this set me apart from them, that evening anyway. I heard one say, "I wonder what's wrong with Gunn. Do you think he's a Jew?" And then somebody who was a bit better informed said, "Oh, no. The Jews pray even more than we do." (*Laughter*)

NUWER: My son is having a bit of similar trouble in school. His teacher became upset when he demanded to know, "Is God anything like King Kong?" (*Laughter*)

GUNN: That's a great question. (*Laughter*) I remember an aunt of mine, one of the two aunts, who had a daughter. One day the daughter who was six or something came in and said, "What do we think of God?" And her mother said, "We think God is silly."

NUWER: Another time my son, a fan of *Sesame Street*, visited my mother in Buffalo who is very Catholic. He toddled into her bedroom and was amazed to find a gigantic crucifix on the wall. "Wow!" he shouted. "Look at the big T."

GUNN: (*Laughter*) I love that! That's delightful.

NUWER: I take it that you never have religious symbols in your poetry?

GUNN: I once wrote a secular poem about Jesus and his mother. I was just trying to treat them as human beings. It wasn't insulting, or at least I don't think so.

NUWER: Can you maybe talk about youthful poetic influences? Auden for instance?

GUNN: In my teens I was very excited by [Christopher] Marlowe and all those good, rhetorical poets. I was very excited by the rhetoric. I was influenced very much by Auden when I was at Cambridge. My early work, my first book, really shows that influence.

NUWER: Did you have a mentor or did you spur yourself to go on through individual effort?

GUNN: Individual.

NUWER: Do you have friends today that you try to impress, as opposed to impressing reviewers?

GUNN: Since I've left Cambridge I always send my new poems to a few friends to bounce off of them for reactions, because I'm not *that* good at self-criticism. There's always a chance of total obscurity, of just not getting my point across at all. They will tell me. I find this very necessary to me.

NUWER: Ever look at a published poem later and feel a sense of embarrassment?

GUNN: It's a funny thing that happens when you finish a poem. When you finish a poem and it's what you wanted to do, or, hopefully, better than you wanted to do, it's really a part of you. But after several months or several years, it looks like somebody else's work with your own name beneath it. It's a past self. And sometimes, although I can't think of anything specific, it's so bad that it really is embarrassing. Yeah. Yeah.

NUWER: Do you have any sort of time period—the old nine years or whatever—that you put a poem away before sending it off?

GUNN: No. No. I don't have the strength to do that. I might publish things that later seem awful, but when I feel pleased with a poem, I'll send it off somewhere.

NUWER: Do you have any particular revision patterns?

GUNN: Varies incredibly. I vary so much I can make no generalizations. Occasionally something will come out so right that it's virtually done in a single draft. This is unusual. Usually, it's about ten drafts. I've never counted them, but it's something like that.

NUWER: Thurber used to say that his original drafts were like the work of a sixth grader. How about yours?

GUNN: Very often the tenth version will look incredibly different from the first version. The original version may just be notations. With each revision I'll try to get it out better. Sometimes all that will survive from

the original version will just be a few phrases in the general scheme of the thing. One of the exciting things about writing for me is the process of exploration. And often for me the exploration takes place in successive drafts, with surprises along the way. Often the poem you end with is going to be different from, and better than, the first draft or your first notion of the poem. Sometimes I'll write a poem and realize that a quarter of it near the end is the real poem; the rest of it was just preliminaries. How I tell I don't know. It just seems genuine, although genuine is a very ambiguous word. Any writer, any artist—well, you know, you're a writer—you know what you really were getting at, even though it may surprise you.

NUWER: How do you work? I mean do you write three, four poems in a short time span?

GUNN: No, no. I work very slowly. But I might get the ideas for several poems in a single day. In fact I came across a piece of paper the other day where I was sketching out ideas for what would certainly have been a very pompous prose book called "The Acid Garden"—I say it apologetically—which was written in 1968 or so. And what astonished me was that about ten of these ideas, which I had jotted down presumably in a day, later became poems. But I'm very lucky if I ever write two poems in two weeks. It doesn't happen very often to me.

NUWER: So you don't have a set work pattern then?

GUNN: No. I'd like to but I'm afraid I don't. I write just when I can.

NUWER: I see.

GUNN: I'd hate to bullshit about inspiration or anything, and certainly when you're young you just have to get as much written as possible. But I just can't make myself write; I go sometimes six months without writing anything. I used to think, "Oh God, maybe I'll just be [Arthur] Rimbaud without the talent," and think they'll say, "He stopped writing at nineteen." Now I don't worry and I can see these sterile periods are really good for me. It's like a pregnancy. It's rather like there are ideas working themselves out, becoming less abstract, and finding embodiment. I say "ideas"—that covers a lot of ground. Themes, passions, concepts, actual ideas as well—all of these things mixing up together.

NUWER: Do you keep extensive notebooks?

GUNN: Yeah, I guess many writers do. It's my way of keeping things there. I can't trust just to memory. I get very dependent on them really. You note down something that you might not think about for a couple months at the time when you weren't sure why it struck you. But maybe a few months later, you can see how there's some potential in it in some way.

NUWER: Do you ever just take a particular image out of context to use in a poem, unrelated to your original thought, and drop the rest of it?

GUNN: Oh, yes, yeah. I don't keep notebooks like a diary. I mean I just write down something when I have a thought that needs writing down. It will be very informal. It might be an image, or an idea, and it might not even be in sentences. I keep notebooks for their very practical use to myself.

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