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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “where the dead watch the living on black-and-white TV.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

REFINING FORM

William Logan reviews Thom Gunn’s *Selected Poems*.

By William Logan

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Selected Poems, by Thom Gunn, edited by August Kleinzahler. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$14.00.

In the 1940s and 1950s, it was almost an act of rebellion to compose tidy stanzas and tidier rhymes, as if the modernists had never existed. The influence of Auden and Yeats (those most seditious of seditious poets) was so overpowering on both sides of the Atlantic that an ideological mustiness soon pervaded the poetry magazines, as young poets wrote endless allegorical stanzas on Orpheus, or Achilles, or just about any Greek god or hero you could name. A few of these poems were brilliant; many were good; but the mass proved just period sludge, the sort any age produces—most of it to be washed away on the next tide of fashion. Thom Gunn could write in this headmaster’s manner with the best of them.

The huge wound in my head began to heal
About the beginning of the seventh week.
Its 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.

And constantly my mind returned to Troy.

Gunn’s early books, *Fighting Terms* (1954) and *The Sense of Movement* (1957), announced a talent for emotion controlled in muscular, labyrinthine forms. His elegance

had a brutish edge, and his brutality concealed a few civilities (his cachet as a young poet came from writing formal poems on bikers and Elvis). It should have been no great surprise when shortly after his first book he moved to California and took up study with Yvor Winters.

Selected Poems reveals how long Gunn labored to overcome the limitations of his virtues. If his early poems seem fussy now, polished into artificial antiquity, the over-heated poems on surfers and LSD are simply embarrassing. (The whole of “Listening to Jefferson Airplane” reads “The music comes and goes on the wind,/ Comes and goes on the brain.”) Gunn’s best work had to fend off Winters in his smugness and rectitude on one hand and San Francisco’s beatniks and hippies on the other, but he never stopped trying to treat the incompatible realms of his experience as if they formed a whole.

August Kleinzahler, who edited this volume, has made a judicious and surprisingly conservative selection of Gunn’s poems. Though he might have been more generous to the early books—only half a dozen poems survive—the most motheaten poems are gone, but so are later poems using the scatty lines of the Beats. I don’t miss the loose-limbed verse of Gunn’s middle period, or the poems that mentioned Ding Dongs or Charles Manson—or the one from the point of view of a dog. This selection stresses the reasoned continuity of Gunn’s work, evident in his formal poetry until the end. (Even late, he could make a lot of metaphysical hay out of a nasturtium found in a vacant lot.) What remain are, for the most part, the poems that take serious things seriously, culminating in the elegies he wrote during the AIDS outbreak of the 1980s. Gunn’s late poems were often bleak, haunted by losses to time and disease, by the slow recession of pleasure. After the completion of *Boss Cupid* (2000), he seems to have published nothing new before his death in 2004.

You’d hardly know from his poems that Gunn ever worked a day—he took as his gravitating theme a hedonism never wholly gratified. He loved the tightly knit stanzas and clockwork rhymes of the late Elizabethans. “I want to be an Elizabethan poet,” he once said, but there’s a great difference between being and imitation. In some ways, he was the thinking man’s Stephen Spender, his rude couplet about Spender notwithstanding. Gunn was a poet for whom feeling blossomed through form (his motto might have been Eliot’s remark that a “thought to Donne was an experience”); but he needed the resistance of pattern, the refined difficulty in the made thing. If the cost was too many early poems that began with lines like “Do not enquire from the centurion nodding” or “Lictor or heavy slave would wear it best,” and too many gassy stretches of couplet writing, the benefit was the stately movement he could give the passing of passing fancies:

Why should that matter? Why pretend
Love must accompany erection?
This is a momentary affection,
A curiosity bound to end,

Which as good-humored muscle may

Against the muscle try its strength
—Exhausted into sleep at length—
And will not last long into day.

Shakespeare and Donne would have recognized that cool detachment, and Dante approved Gunn's vision of the afterlife, where the dead watch the living on black-and-white TV.

William Logan's most recent book of criticism is *Our Savage Art: Poetry and the Civil Tongue*. His new poetry collection, *Strange Flesh*, appeared last fall. This review first appeared in *The New Criterion*. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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