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THE POETRY OF THOM GUNN : AN OVERVIEW



Iram Siddiqui

Research Scholar V.B.S. Purvanchal University, Jaunpur

Abs tract:-*Thom Gunn, who has been a long time resident of California, dominated English poetry in 1960s and 1970s. He combines a respect for traditional poetic forms with an interest in popular topics, such as the Hell's Angels, LSD and homosexuality. His poetry was associated with the Movement and also with the works of Ted Hughes. Gunn's poetry, together with that of Philip Larkin, Donald Davie and other members of the Movement, has been described as 'emphasizing purity of diction and neutral tone..... encouraging a more spare language and a desire to represent a seeing of the world with fresh eyes'.*

Keyw ords:Poetry , homosexuality , diction and neutral , techniques.

INTRODUCTION

Gunn's career has been marked by constant evolution. His poetic output is considerable and though initially regarded as an aimless wandering youth, he has acquired remarkable depth in his themes and techniques over the years. His early poetry exhibited formal control of style to address modern subjects and caused him to be lumped together with the poets of the Movement, a label Gunn has always despised as a convenient way for critics and journalists to classify poets. Gunn is largely identified by critics as adherent to oddities, unconventionality and toughness in style and theme. None other than inclined towards contemporary American themes- the black-jacketed modern biking heroes, vast expanse of unpolluted landscapes, prostitutes flourishing in New York streets, homosexuality, drug addiction and Elvis Presley like stage singers who were very popular than any national hero.

Gunn in his practice shows classic temperament added with anarchic vigor sufficient enough to break the fence of style wherever necessary. In selection of material of poetry Gunn does not confine himself to a particular limit. His creative efficiency can be witnessed in choosing the matter and expressing it through appropriate vehicle. In the beginning of his career he is classicist, middle phase is marked with experimentation in free verse, and finally he returns to stanza form. He is one of the few contemporary poets who have written serious poetry in heroic couplets- a form whose use in the twentieth century is generally restricted to light verses and epigrammatic wit. Gunn was poet who used rhyme and metre in a completely different manner, but his work disturbed many because of his fascination with the anti-social, the rebellious and the unnatural, and above all with violence.

Gunn arrived on the scene with *Fighting Terms* (1954) and *The Sense of Movement* (1957). The verses collected in these collections were formal in their loftiness, their removal from the world, their utilization of forms half a millennium old. While the poet has said that he considers *Fighting Terms* and *The Sense of Movement* to be apprentice

pieces, according to Blake Morrison, his 1961 collection *My Sad Captains and Others Poems* "undoubtedly marks a turning point" in his poetry. The first part of *My Sad Captains* reflects Gunn's earlier, metrical style while the second part transitions into "the new phase of syllabics and tenderness"², comments Morrison.

Thom Gunn explores still deeper corners of human life in the next collection *Positives* (1966) for which newer and conducive poetic skills were developed along with philosophical depth. *Positives* is a result of collaboration of Ander Gunn, the photographer brother and it has a lot of freshness to share with the readers. Life as depicted in this collection is amalgamation of sweet and sour, tears and laughter but most strikingly an endless journey to and indefinite destination. Gunn had experimented with LSD and the hippie counterculture during the 1960s as can be seen in his collections *Touch and Moly*. There are a number of poems in *Moly* that describe Gunn's LSD experiences, but the work is also notable for marking the poet's full transition into free verse. The Collection *Touch* can be taken as the poetic record of perceptual hindrances in dealing with the problems of life. In addition to moving from a classic, metrical style of poetry to free verse, Gunn moved from addressing love poems to women to frankly homosexual verses in *Jack Straw's Castle* (1970). The poems mainly deal with contemporary subjects. *Jack Straw's Castle* though written largely on *Moly* pattern is radically different as P.R. King notes in his comparative evaluation "In this book (*Jack Straw's Castle*) a new freedom has been required. The divided self (*Moly*) may not be entirely heated up but at least the part of the self which is conscious, detached and willed as if something beyond its own boundaries"³. By the time the 1982 publication of *Passage of Joy*, his poetry was unabashedly homoerotic, but was also tinged with a melancholy air. As an explorer Gunn has undertaken extrovert and introvert Journey so that his findings about human life can be more reliable than any other poet of the age.

The Man with Night Sweats (1992), the magnum opus of Thom Gunn's poetic career, addresses the complex

and harsh realities of lives affected by AIDS. It is one of the few works of literature that have fully met both the aesthetic and the moral challenges that the AIDS epidemic poses. While some critics had complained that Gunn had been 'squandering his talent' by writing about his drug and gay experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, they were 'obliged to reconsider' that assessment with the release of *The Man with Night Sweats*. Poems like 'lament' and 'Still Life' which appear consecutively in this collection, are able to find the universal humanity in death 'the tedious, difficult, painful enterprise'.

Boss Cupid (2000) retains some of the old, militaristic metaphors, but there are more often metaphors of settlement, negotiation, community, even democracy. In some respect a sequel to *The Man with Night Sweats*, *Boss Cupid* is a memorializing of friends who have died, an anatomy of survival, and a self portrait of the poet in that age. However in contrast to *The Man with Night Sweats* which bleakly elegized the AIDS epidemic, *Boss Cupid* usually manages a laugh in the face of adversity. In *Boss Cupid*, Gunn takes erotic life as his principal subject- at the age of seventy-one - and offers poems which are at once emotionally profound and exuberant. A significant number of poems in the volume are concerned with the cycle of desire whether instanced in an evening or a lifetime. The Poems are written under the sign of Cupid 'the devious master of our bodies', but their intimacies are always heard against the sociable human hum of an entire community which Gunn depicts in the poems of fluent grace, as formal as they are relaxed.

Gunn is largely identified by critics as adherent to oddities, unconventionality and toughness in style and theme. These eccentric demerits of Gunn are scarcely available in other contemporaries. C.B. Cox and A.E. Dayson offer a comparative estimate between the societies of the World Wars, "The Waste Land, the Cantos and much of the poetry between the wars recorded the chaos of the post 1918 world. Since 1950, we live in a more dangerous world, threatened by nuclear bomb..... Ted Hughes suggests the violence of modern society in his images of animals like pre-atomic warfare. Thom Gunn is his complex and sympathetic response to the teddy boys and tone up boys of our age".⁴ Clive Wilmer in the Preface of the *Occasions of Poetry* remarks, "He has made his name after all, the master of rigorously traditional verse form, and he continues to excel in them, but he has since become hardly less accomplished in variety of 'open' form and the verse is no less shapely".

One would hardly be tempted to describe Gunn's poetry in the superlatives often applied to poets who engage traditional prosody, such as 'impeccable' or 'elegant', he never exhibits the formal brilliance of James Merrill or Geoffrey Hill, say and is capable of writing a forced rhyme or awkward rhythm. Yet the rough-and-ready quality of Gunn's verse often proves an asset: he is never aesthete, and his forms- whether open or closed- prove eminently functional. His writing is both topical and substantive- and thus feels very much of the world.

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