

"The Pains that will go through me": Writing Pain in Thom Gunn's *The Man with Night Sweats*

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Abstract

If one regards the pen as a phallic symbol, and therefore, an objective correlative of phallogocentricity, then does that mean that all that the pen issues forth upholds patriarchy? Is the only alternative to that the exclusive *écriture féminine*? Does gay male writing also uphold patriarchy? If male homosexuality is "*inter Christianos non nominandum*" (that which cannot be named among Christians) then how does "the love that dare not speak its name" consolidate patriarchy and phallogocentricity?¹ Further, while there are fulsome literary expressions of pain felt by heterosexual men, how does one explain the relative scarcity of literary expressions of pain felt by men who sexually desire other men? Is the admission of and/or fear of pain a mark of effeminacy? In the literary map of pain where does one situate the pain of the gay man, and indeed the pain of the gay man with AIDS? These are some of the questions that this paper wishes to engage with, through a reading of Thom Gunn's 1992 poem "The Man with Night Sweats" from his anthology of the same name.² Gunn (1929-2004) was born in England but lived mostly in the United States; he was heavily influenced by F.R. Leavis, and later by Yvor Winters, in matters of poetic rigor and form, but wrote about subjects that would horrify those two men. These biographical details are mentioned to resist any attempt at situating Thom Gunn and his poetry either within the discourse of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy completely, or to situate him and his poetry absolutely outside it. My reading of the poem would seek to trace only some of the ways in which it moves in and out of identitarian force fields.

Keywords: Pain, Writing, Body, Masculinity, Patriarchy

I wake up cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat, and a clinging sheet.³

¹ Douglas, Alfred. *"Two Loves" & Other Poems: A Selection* (Michigan: Bennett and Kitchel, 1990), 25.

² Gunn, Thom. *The Man with Night Sweats* (United Kingdom: Faber and Faber, 1992). It can be noted here: Gunn had deep admiration for high literary art but he also loved "loud music, bars, and boisterous men". He was in a relationship with a man for over fifty years, and lived with him in a house with other gay men for forty four years; he also accommodated his lover's lover in that household.

³ Gunn, Thom. *The Man with Night Sweats* (United Kingdom: Faber and Faber, 1992).

Véronique Mottier points out, "Following Galen, the 2nd-century AD Roman author of medical treatises, gender was ... understood as a fluid state. Men were seen as active, hot, and strong; women as passive, weak, damp, and cold..."⁴ This binary leads to the patriarchal conflation of the male body with completeness and health, and the female body with lack and illness. The first line of the poem, however, clearly goes against this patriarchal conception of the male body being hot and healthy, because Thom Gunn is writing about a cold, ill male body. The second line contrasts the present sick coldness with the heat of the body's past. Gunn uses "heat" in at least three ways in the line: "heat" denoting masculinity in general, "heat" denoting sexual heat, and "heat" denoting ill-health, i.e., fever. In this one word we have an *aporia*: a co-existence of two irreconcilable meanings: heat as health, heat as illness. Heat produces sweat. Just as energetic sexual intercourse produces sweat, deep physical suffering or discomfort also produces sweat. The person waking up having broken out in a cold sweat, is experiencing the latter: the sweat of unease, discomfort. This same body once used to sweat pleasurably: during sex.

My flesh was its own shield:
Where it was gashed, it healed.⁵

The next two lines recall a past where virility was unassailable. The body as the shield represents a structure marked by resilience and quick mending. Gunn is playing with the masculinist vanity of the "hard-bodied" man who sees his body as a weapon in his battle against the world. The body is described as very low-maintenance. So, even though in patriarchy the mind is gendered male, and the body is gendered female, in this poem the male body is being celebrated not because it is physically formidable but because of its resilience, courage, bravery and nonchalance. So, the body is being celebrated but as a means to an end; it is being shown, with sad irony, as an exemplar of the "manly" virtues listed above.

I grew as I explored
The body I could trust
Even while I adored
The risk that made robust,
A world of wonders in
Each challenge to the skin.⁶

Sexual promiscuity among gay men in the West, especially during the pre-AIDS decade of the 1970s, can be seen as an adaptation and practice of the feminist slogan "The Personal is Political." In this case the sexual is treated in political terms. In the face of hetero-patriarchal disapproval of homosexuality, being a sexually active gay member of the society was seen as an open challenge to patriarchy. While on the one hand, they got the patriarchal license to "sow their wild oats", on the other hand, as *gay* men, they found that the same license was revoked. They felt empowered as men, but simultaneously disempowered as gay men. They decided to empower themselves anyway by claiming sexual liberty and ignoring the prohibition on their sex lives as gay men. Each sexual encounter became a heady exploration of another man's body. The body still remained a weapon, a weapon to attack patriarchy with. But that attack was

⁴ Mottier, Veronique. *Sexuality: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵ Gunn, Thom. *The Man with Night Sweats*.

⁶ Gunn, Thom. *The Man with Night Sweats*.

being carried out not through violence but through the deeply democratic act of making love. The freedom to love the body across physical and social boundaries challenged the patriarchal politics of segregation, turning love into war. Each act of random sex with a new body rendered the body more robust, more 'masculine' even; certainly more anti-patriarchal, if not entirely anti-patriarchal. This is defiance. Partly conforming to the patriarchal stereotype of the male, partly not. Thus the patriarchal stereotype of the 'male' could be broken only from within itself, by partly conforming to its dictates to gain its trust and thereby defying its very base.

I cannot but be sorry
The given shield was cracked,
My mind reduced to hurry,
My flesh reduced and wrecked.⁷

With these lines the poem returns to the present and takes stock of what the body has become: weak, cold, thin, decrepit. The shield has cracked, letting in disease. Of particular interest to the reader may be the line "My mind reduced to hurry", because of what it implies: hurry is a sign of losing control, of anxiety, of panic, of being scared, of being insecure. Masculinity is characterized in the patriarchal mind by its ability to control: to control one's beloved, one's spouse, one's children, one's subordinates, one's own country and the countries one colonizes! But here the mind is shown to be losing control. It is "reduced" to a state of confusion and hurry. The word "reduced" denotes the diminished state of the mind which is again reflected in the body.

I have to change the bed,
But catch myself instead
Stopped upright where I am
Hugging my body to me
As if to shield it from
The pains that will go through me,⁸

I have written elsewhere about how homosocial tactility is an area of great anxiety for patriarchy in some cultures, among which Britain and America can certainly be included. It is as if, two men touching each other for any reason whatsoever, carries within it the dreaded specter of homosexuality. Touching between men, therefore, is strictly codified, managed, invigilated and monitored in many cultures. Hence the performative politics of Western gay men holding hands or embracing each other or kissing each other in public spaces, especially during Pride marches, work against this patriarchy supervision. Embracing happens in this poem too. The only difference being that, here, a man is embracing himself. It is unlike the many sexually charged embraces that he has enjoyed in the past. This embrace is one of desperation; a futile attempt to reassure the body before a surge of pain is about to wreck the body. The mere acknowledgement of pain may be seen as an anti-masculinist act because patriarchy would have us believe that men are immune to pain. Here is a man scared and helpless at the prospect of imminent physical pain, and who is also vocal about it. The word "shield" functions as a motif in the poem: earlier used as a noun, it was used in the sense of an active barrier that protected

⁷ Gunn, Thom. *The Man with Night Sweats*.

⁸ Gunn, Thom. *The Man with Night Sweats*.

the body; used here as a verb, the shield is now no longer effective. The changing of the colour of “shield” in the course of the poem is probably meant to draw our attention to the way the male body changes from a fit, hot, sexually active organism to an unwell, cold, lonely entity.

As if hands were enough
To hold an avalanche off.⁹

Those parts of the human body (the hands), which, with their numerous nerve endings, are capable of receiving and giving pleasure, comfort and pain, are now being used as shields. The hope is that touching oneself, holding one’s own body in a self-embrace, will somehow manage to stave off an avalanche of pain that is about to hit it. The poet and the reader are aware that that is impossible. But this act of holding oneself in a desperate embrace is also an act of self-care which feminism has been advocating for women. Gunn here suggests something similar to be practiced by men too. Since men are traditionally encouraged to commit acts of violence either on others – through fights, for example – or on one’s own self – through the damaging of lungs (smoking) and damaging of liver (drinking) – the act of caring for one’s body becomes a feminist, anti-patriarchal act. Acknowledging, recording and salving of pain then become feminist acts which in this case are being performed by a male body – a body that has been culturally feminized through illness and sexuality.

Thom Gunn’s “The Man with Night Sweats” bears testimony to the pain experienced by a male body, and in doing so, challenges patriarchal notions about hegemonic masculinity, and its toxic myth of masculine immunity to pain.

⁹ Gunn, Thom. *The Man with Night Sweats*.