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Published Version

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(2024) Thom Gunn's variants. *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 53
(4). pp. 273-293. ISSN 1471-6836 doi:
10.1093/camqtly/bfae033 Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/117978/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfae033>

Publisher: Oxford Journals

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Thom Gunn's Variants

Steven Matthews

THE RECENT PUBLICATION OF THE CORRESPONDENCE of the Anglo-American poet Thom Gunn revealed much about his particular curation of his work. This is a rich resource for consideration of the editing and publication of Gunn's poetry from the 1950s to the new century. It encompasses everything from the nature of decisions made around inclusion and exclusion of poems in various collections and editions to the limits and judgements which he considered necessary to work within when revising his poetry towards publication. Gunn's letters also record the variety of contexts in which he chose to publish his work, from the initial appearance of single poems in journals and magazines, through to individual collections, a *Selected Poems 1950–1975*, and then, late in his career, the decisions towards the *Collected Poems* issued by Faber in the UK in 1993. The *Collected Poems* was followed by only one further collection from Gunn, *Boss Cupid* of 2000.

This article will focus upon the insights to be gained when reading Gunn through the isolation of one phase or moment of judgement in this revision process. He adopted a pattern of publication whereby the full poetry collections were often interspersed with interim pamphlets from small presses. These were pamphlets published in both the UK and America. The poems in the pamphlets were often grouped differently to the order subsequently adopted in the full collections, or were grouped alongside other poems which Gunn decided to exclude from his Faber and Farrar, Straus and Giroux editions. Under Gunn's complex way of considering his work across time, those excluded poems might, however, be resurrected under the 'Poems from ...' banners of the *Collected Poems*. In all, there are twenty-six of these interim pamphlets, showing that Gunn across his writing career demonstrated a considered and patient approach when moving his poetry towards its final form, but that he also was interested in seeing the poems in

<https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfae033>

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various arrangements along the way.¹ By reviewing a broad selection of these pamphlets, this article will see Gunn taking editorial decisions from the level of word choice through to excision of lines and whole stanzas. We will also see something of the original contexts in which the now much-admired poems of Gunn's mid- to late career appeared – contexts which, through his excision of poems from his full collections, largely disappeared.

The published correspondence reflects the care with which Gunn approached each aspect of publication, and the time he was prepared to allow to pass between collections, time in which to reflect upon the form and nature of each new book. This sense of necessary hiatus seems especially to have been pressing towards the latter part of Gunn's career. In a June 1987 letter to Douglas Chambers, for instance, Gunn announced his intention to complete the manuscript of *The Man With Night Sweats* by the end of that year; a subsequent letter to Chambers of September 1988 suggests that he must more or less have met his target.² But it was four years before Gunn released the full collection in 1992 – ten years after the previous full book, *The Passages of Joy*. Gunn, in other words, was intensely aware of the pacing and crafting of his publications, and of the need to let them settle into their final form, even when he had completed, as it were, the poems which were to constitute a book.

For reasons of space, I will focus here on the rich range of ur-texts behind two notable collections, primarily on *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) and, as a way of comparing Gunn's practice in this area through time, more briefly on *The Man With Night Sweats*. *Jack Straw's Castle* is pivotal in Gunn's career, since it marks the moment when he first gave full scope to a more open formal style, breaking decisively with the tight stanza shapes and rhyme-schemes which had characterised his poetry to this point. In *The Man With Night Sweats*, we can see that the slow incubation of the final version allowed for a particularly telling set of editorial choices in terms of the nature of the collection and the grouping of the poems, choices which emerge from what initially seemed to be a book of a very different style and tenor.

In this process towards the production of each new iteration of his work, whether it be a single collection or the *Collected Poems*, exclusion or suppression of various kinds play an important role with Gunn. This excision or suppression notably suggest that Gunn thought intently about the ordering and shape of his book collections, a feature that, as we shall see, is strongly

¹ Barry Magid, 'Building Sandcastles with Thom Gunn', *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context*, 18/1 (2023) pp. 142–6; 143.

² The chronology to the *Letters* gives 24 August 1988 as completion date. *The Letters of Thom Gunn*, selected and edited by Michael Nott, August Klienztahler and Clive Wilmer (London 2021) pp. lvii, 436, 453; hereafter *Letters*.

evident in the way he reconsiders his pamphlets' ordering of poems when gathering them into the books. One instance of this emphasis upon the order and shape of the full collections is illustrated by Gunn's treatment of his 1967 collection *Touch*. In the *Collected Poems*, *Touch* does not appear as a sub-section as the other books do. Its extensive sequence *Misanthropos* is separated off and given a date of 1965 (the date of its appearance in *Encounter* magazine and first radio broadcast – not that of *Touch*). Five poems from the original collection do not appear in *Collected Poems*, and those that do are grouped under the heading 'Poems from the 1960s'. Gunn's decision, presumably governed by a mixture of quality-control around single poems, and a sense of growing distaste for the patterning of the original full collection, leads here to an active forgetting within his publication history, or a willed rewriting of his readers' sense of that history. In fact, the *Collected Poems* only removes a small proportion of the original book through its practice of redistribution. It is as though for Gunn it is the ordering and context of the book, and perhaps the original lodging of *Misanthropos* in the middle of the book rather than considering it a separate work for contemplation, that became increasingly troubling – not the quality of the majority of the poems per se.

Gunn's reasoning for the suppression and redistribution of *Touch* remains opaque, but might be partly illuminated by his treatment of some of these pamphlet publications. This process of altering the order and context for the poems in the full books by deleting 'complete' poems from the interim pamphlets would be one characteristic of Gunn's practice in this regard.³ Interestingly, for instance, the *Letters* describe there being 'something wrong' with poems in the 1976 pamphlet *The Missing Beat*, and Gunn then did not ever reprint four of the seven poems which constituted it.⁴ It is as though, in other words, the appearance of the work in some kind of formal and achieved format – even as a short pamphlet – allowed Gunn to judge the poems when he came to organise the fuller collections.

It is now possible, across the *Letters* and Gunn's previously published critical prose and interviews, to establish the limits and principles which he developed towards this often long-considered process of choice and

³ This issue of selection and arrangement was clearly integral to Gunn's approach to poetry. He told James Campbell in interview that Robert Duncan was the poet, alongside Yvor Winters, who 'meant most' to him amongst the contemporaries, but 'You have to select, because he published everything he wrote.' *Thom Gunn in Conversation with James Campbell* (London 2000) p. 37.

⁴ Thom Gunn, *The Missed Beat*, with a wood engraving by Simon Brett (Sidcot 1976); *Letters*, p. 506. In the only mention of *Touch* beyond the book's initial preparation and publication, the *Letters* glancingly call it 'poor' (p. 514). There are no significant variants between the individual poems from *Touch* and their reappearance in the *Collected Poems*.

revision. From the earlier part of the career, when most influenced by the teaching of his Stanford mentor Yvor Winters, Gunn favoured a firm rationality of construction and design in poetry. Responding negatively to Clive Wilmer in February 1965 about the poems of Sylvia Plath, for instance, Gunn acknowledged their 'beautiful' imagery, but thought that 'each poem is a series of exclamations and images loosely connected'. That 'connection' was, in his view, often 'very loose'. As a result of his re-reading of Plath, Gunn then mounts a dismissal of a particular kind of art: Plath is 'fine for people who believe in art as Organic but less satisfactory for those who demand more'. That 'more' is presumably the clear delineation of those 'connections' between images and ideas which coalesce into a poem; the unarticulated, perhaps subconscious, placing of images side by side is not sufficient in itself, and it is that lack of articulation which Gunn laments in Plath.⁵

The anti-Coleridgean approach of this poetic then seems to extend into Gunn's own work through to the late collections. In a letter of June 1989, Gunn thanks Robert Pinsky for the suggestions he had made about the ordering of the poems in what became *The Man With Night Sweats*. Gunn had clearly sent Pinsky a typescript in which the poems were grouped according to their metrical and formal structure ('you have certainly got rid of one of my assumptions that all the free verse poems HAVE to go together'). But Gunn's mulling of this is accompanied by a side-swipe at John Ashbery's poetic as exemplified by *April Galleons*, which does not display, apparently, even those 'loose' connections felt to be made by Plath ('even passages within poems could be changed around'). Ashbery, in other words, has none of that 'difficulty in placing his poems in an order' so keenly felt by Gunn as he sought advice, since the individual poems themselves have no necessary or definable order to them.⁶ That 'order' is principally an integration of content, argument, and image, within a decisive and pertinent rhythm and poetic structure. To put an unconnected series of images 'loosely' into a poetic form is to fail to establish that (for Gunn) essential concatenation.

These issues and their implications for the shaping of poems are rendered most eloquently by Gunn in a letter of March 1971 which he wrote

⁵ *Letters*, p. 180. Amongst the myriad instances from Winters's work that might be adduced to underpin Gunn's dismissal of Plath here, one of the most pertinent, temporally and in sentiment, might be 'poets ... endeavour to communicate not only by concepts, arranged, presumably, either in rational order or in an order apprehensible by the rational mind'. Yvor Winters, *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (London 1962) p. 81. Gunn's introduction to his edition of *Yvor Winters: Selected Poems* (New York 2003; p. xxvii) makes clear that this expression of morality and rationality is something that Winters strove towards across his own creative work.

⁶ *Letters*, pp. 466–7.

to an English poet he admired, Donald Davie. Gunn is measured in his anger, but objects to the fact that Davie had clearly included, in a letter to Gunn to which this is a response, a rewriting of one of Gunn's poems, 'Last Days in Teddington' (Davie had previously done something similar to a poem of Ezra Pound's). The poem as printed in *Jack Straw's Castle* is in ballad metre and quatrains with alternately rhyming lines. Davie's version was evidently an attempt to 'loosen' the metre, presumably the better to mediate some of the slight awkwardness with which Gunn renders the sense of the way the outside world seems in summer to invade interior domestic space:

How green it was indoors. The thin
Pale creepers climbed up brick until
We saw their rolled tongues flicker in
Across the cracked paint of the sill.⁷

Davie might have felt licence to expand Gunn's lines because he felt that Gunn's strict form forced him at such moments to pile adjectives or create awkward enjambments and rhymes (thin/flicker in) in order to convey his characteristic and paradoxical feeling for permeability, the interchangeability of inner and outer states of mind or world.⁸

Whilst thanking Davie for his effort of revision, Gunn dismisses the new version as 'sloppy' for striking reasons:

I don't think one can do such a thing at so late a stage of composition – one can make minor changes of rhythm, one can make such large changes as adding a stanza or deleting half the poem, or one can throw the whole poem out, but I think it is too late to change the entire rhythmic intention, which has to be decided upon very early.⁹

Whilst the letter goes on to acknowledge that he felt a temperamental aversion to 'loosened metre', and that only Pound sometimes and Wallace Stevens 'miraculously' had achieved anything with it, Gunn's objection to Davie's tinkering is important for his own practice. As we have seen, Gunn was capable of 'throwing out' whole poems of his own, but often only after seeing them into print in some context, ephemeral or otherwise.¹⁰

⁷ Thom Gunn, *Collected Poems* (London 1993) p. 237.

⁸ Adam Scheffler has interesting comment on Gunn and enclosure in 'Thom Gunn's Humane Prisons', *Essays in Criticism*, 68/1 (Jan. 2018) pp. 108–25: 109.

⁹ *Letters*, p. 275.

¹⁰ Gunn was also capable of publishing earlier and later versions of a poem for others to think through its development. See Joshua Weiner, 'Gunn's

As we shall see, Gunn was more inclined to ‘deleting half’ a poem between its various printings than to adding a stanza. But the addition and deletion *within* the poem that he otherwise envisages here are predicated on the fact that rhythm itself is non-negotiable. You could rework the content of a poem according to a different metric (and presumably therefore different formal shape), but then it would be a different poem with different meaning and resonance.¹¹ The rhythm is the first essential; the rhythmic lines are then built into stanzas that act like blocks that might be added to or subtracted from – but their character is essentially unalterable. It is clear as well that the choice between patterned metre and free verse was for Gunn a dichotomised one. Davie’s sense that there might be compromise here violates precisely for Gunn that need for ‘articulation’ within the poem which he so valued.

Gunn is not averse in longer poems or sequences to the metre switching back and forth between patterns, or to metrical contrasts between one poem and a subsequent one – in the letter he admires the switch of rhythm between Pound’s Cantos I and II, and praises the way that Davie’s own poem ‘Lady Cochrane’ moves back and forth between traditional stanzas and free verse for the Lady’s own voice. But this does not mean that the rhythm of each phase, once set, is negotiable. Within the quatrains of ‘Last Days at Teddington’ the rhythm is iambic tetrameter with some trochaic substitution. This is presumably apt to the seasonal characteristics of the poem as a ‘summer song’ which holds across time. The temporary erosion of barriers between indoors and garden encourages a sociability between adults and children, animals and nature, which acts as a model for living. The rhymes and compact end-stopped stanzas bring the two worlds of inner and outer rhythmically and formally together, however much the sentiment is overshadowed and imperilled by the ‘Last Days’ of the poem’s title, or completes its performance in the final stanza, when ‘The garden falls back on itself.’¹²

“Meat”: Notations on Craft’, in Joshua Weiner (ed.), *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn* (Chicago 2009) pp. 129–32.

¹¹ Winters again: ‘a rhythm which is not controlled by a definite measure will be relatively ... lacking in subtlety’ (*The Function of Criticism*, p. 81). In his letter to Davie, Gunn notably misreads an earlier instance where Davie had recast a poem in a different metre. Davie’s resetting of Pound’s ‘Provincia Deserta’ as blank verse in his *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (New York 1964; pp. 62–3) is clearly meant to show how Pound’s rhythm is innovative but right for the subject and meaning, whereas blank verse would weaken both – not the opposite, as Gunn takes him to mean. Further evidence of Gunn’s sensitivity on this question.

¹² Gunn’s 1972 essay ‘Hardy and the Ballads’ suggests the formal characteristics which he perceived in this major tradition in English writing. Focusing on the narrative ‘omissions’ in old ballads and replicated by Hardy, Gunn relishes the ballad form’s ‘paring-down to essentials’. ‘Last Days at Teddington’ is presumably most in a

The mention of Pound, for Gunn, and by Gunn in the dialogue of his correspondence with Davie about 'tight' as opposed to 'loose' rhythm and form, is of course telling.¹³ Gunn's views on rhythm are close to Pound's sense of 'absolute rhythm', although more often than not displaced in his own work, as in the instance of 'Last Days at Teddington', through more traditional English formal shapes than Pound's later poetry took. 'Absolute rhythm', as Pound defined it, is rhythm 'which corresponds exactly with the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed.'¹⁴ Pound's emphasis, however, and his slight inexactness in definition (what is the 'shade of emotion' if not emotion?), point towards what Gunn variously considered a limitation within the history of twentieth-century poetics. When describing the inheritance from Pound's poetics in the introduction to his brief selection from Pound's work, for instance, Gunn celebrates Imagism as 'the most influential poetic movement of the century', 'emphasizing clarity and compression' in style, and making the radical choice of free verse implicitly 'necessary' – but 'in subject matter confining itself to the sensory at the expense of the conceptual'. Pound's 1913 'In a Station of the Metro' becomes in Gunn's eyes the iconic work for this 'sensory' aspect of poetry, 'consisting of two images that through juxtaposition constitute a visual comparison'. Gunn was presumably aware of the revision and cutting of earlier, much longer, drafts by Pound which left this juxtaposition, and permanently altered the relation between the text of a poem and its readership. 'In a Station of the Metro' no longer seeks to 'tell' its reader 'how to react', as Victorian poems in this view had.¹⁵ However, as with his negative comment on Plath's images, whilst Gunn remained admiring of the emotional and sensory impact of such work, he also remained wary of the under-articulation this brought into poetry, and of the consequent uncertainty of that poem–reader relation. His revisions often work in the area of tightening the rationale and clarity of the poems around this issue.

line from Hardy poems such as 'During Wind and Rain' – this poem is discussed at length in Gunn's essay. Thom Gunn, *The Occasions of Poetry: Essays in Criticism and Autobiography* (London 1982) pp. 85, 87 ff.

¹³ Hannah Sullivan has placed Pound's early poetics as central to her claim that 'the association of revision and literary value is the legacy of high modernism': *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge, Mass. 2013) pp. 2, 103 ff.

¹⁴ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London 1954) p. 9. Barry S. Edwards places Pound's concept within his wider technical ideas in "'The Subtler Music': Ezra Pound's Prosody", *Paideuma*, 27/1 (Spring 1998) pp. 31–53: 40.

¹⁵ *Ezra Pound: Poems Selected by Thom Gunn* (London 2000) pp. ix–x. Gunn established this dichotomy between the 'sensory' and the 'conceptual' as a basis for judgement of earlier poets across his career. It underpins his 1965 essay on William Carlos Williams (*The Occasions of Poetry*, p. 24), and later his views on sixteenth-century English poetry and on his contemporary Janet Lewis. Thom Gunn, *Shelf Life: Essays, Memoirs and an Interview* (London 1993) pp. 9, 70.

For, as we shall see with Gunn's own practice of revision and editing between his various publications in pamphlet and book form, 'clarity and compression' are often the goals. He practises an art of excision not dissimilar at times to Pound's Imagist ambition. But Gunn's variants also work to establish 'the conceptual' and 'connective' aspect of a poem more forcefully – the 'conceptual' which Gunn otherwise described in relation to sixteenth-century poetry as 'a need to withdraw from experience into a formulation about it so as not to be overwhelmed by it'.¹⁶ It is precisely around this issue of rhythmic patterning and coincident formal choice that Gunn's practice of excision as a means to clarify the articulation of his poetry inheres. His attempts to synthesise a Poundian attitude to rhythm and image with a non-organic, more ordering and rational approach to experience through poetry drives his judgement when editing his work. But it also drives some of the hesitation and doubt evident in the move from pamphlet publication to full collection of his poetry.

Early in his career, Gunn pointed to this 'withdrawal' through emphasis upon the dramatic and performative qualities of the lyric, what he called 'pose'. 'Everyone plays a part' in life, Gunn felt, but poetry and plays and novels such as Stendhal's demonstrate how 'the bare undefined and undirected self' emerges into the 'chosen part'. Art is that place of tension between 'the achieved and the unachieved'. In many ways this characterises the movement, as we shall see, towards the title sequence of *Jack Straw's Castle*, which predicates, more hesitatingly in the earlier versions than in the final collection, that shift from 'undefined' self to the skittish character of Jack.¹⁷

Towards the end of his career, and around the time he had completed *The Man With Night Sweats*, Gunn would cast the idea of 'withdrawal' from experience as a matter of tension between imagination and will. Particularly in his several reflections upon the work of his friend Robert Duncan, Gunn finds a mythic and religious analogy for what he claimed was the dubious nature of the poetic act:

the poet writes spontaneously out of his own imagination but under Permission ... improvised adventures are part of a quest – the law, the permission, and the quest each defining a parallel undertaking freely moved within which yet comes from outside. Like free will for a

¹⁶ *Shelf Life*, p. 9. Later in his career, Gunn was notably more relaxed about this idea of the poem as simply a bringing together of unfamiliar elements, and found classical antecedent for the practice in Horace's odes, 'putting together two brilliant, unfinished poems ... [and] not quite resolving [them]' (*ibid.*, p. 224).

¹⁷ Gunn, *The Occasions of Poetry*, p. 162.

Calvinist, spontaneity within the law is the ultimate duplicit condition.¹⁸

This touches again upon the inside/outside dichotomy, and might be translated into a way to think about what Gunn seeks to practise as he revises and reorders his work. The more he literally moves 'outside' and away from that initially more spontaneous version of a poem, the more he exerts that judgement and 'Permission' which might rescue a poem from its various 'duplicities' of sentiment or characterisation. Or, in some cases, not. This becomes a standard by which we find Gunn in his correspondence judging his own work. For instance, in a letter to Chambers of October 1976, we see Gunn reflecting upon the poem 'Fever' from *Jack Straw's Castle*. 'I wish I could have got under the boy's skin more, let him exist for his own sake', he muses, saying that the problem was about 'bringing myself in'. His efforts to clarify this poem between pamphlet version and collection we will return to. Interestingly, he concludes to Chambers that the problem with 'Fever' might be that the 'boy' involved is imaginary rather than someone Gunn had met and knew, as were so many of the characters in the later collections.¹⁹ The collapsing of the distance between the figure in the poem and the poet, or between the inside and the law or Permission, diminishes the achievement of the poem for Gunn. His various revisions, suppressions, and editorial interventions seem particularly aimed to sustain that distance. Gunn tells Chambers in this letter that, unlike Yeats, he agrees with Owen that 'pity' is a valid approach for a poet, given the 'vulnerability of people'. But like Yeats, presumably, Gunn strove to 'cast a cold eye' on these matters, and to avoid through revision any whiff of interference into a poem from the poet's own sensibility.

This is immediately evident once we scrutinise the variants between the pamphlet versions which went towards the making of the finished ones of *Jack Straw's Castle*. *Songbook*, with illustrations by Bill Schuessler, and *Mandrakes*, with illustrations by Leonard Baskin, both appeared in 1973, from New York and London respectively. The former notably displays several aspects within individual poems, and in the nature of the poems selected, that derive from the editorial principles and decisions otherwise indicated in Gunn's *Letters* and occasional prose. In the version of 'The Night-Piece' in *Songbook*, for example, we see that Gunn literally 'deleted half' of the work before it appeared, without a hyphen in its title, in the opening section of *Jack Straw's Castle*. The two quatrain stanzas in rhyming

¹⁸ Gunn, 'Adventurous Song: Robert Duncan as Romantic Modernist', *Shelf Life*, p. 167.

¹⁹ *Letters*, p. 335.

couplets of that final version, which are then transported unaltered into *Collected Poems*, had originally been prefaced by two quatrains in the same form in the original *Songbook* rehearsal. In *Jack Straw's Castle*, the two stanzas render an eerie experience of climbing a hill through city streets whereby the speaker's interior condition is increasingly subsumed within the fog which is progressively coming in. There is something here of the tenor of the interchanges in 'Last Days at Teddington'; through a simile, the fog takes on domestic qualities:

[It] Closes me in, makes me its own
Like bedclothes on the paving stone.²⁰

As with 'Last Days', which is printed directly after 'The Night Piece' in *Jack Straw's Castle*, the timelessness of the experience is emphasised – the city streets are 'galleries' such as those in mines, presumably, galleries which are said to 'run through veins of time'. When, in the neat turn of the poem's final line, then, the fog seems to have become interiorised as the sleep that the speaker so desperately seeks through these nocturnal meanderings (he has become creaturely, 'creeping' along), the whole takes on a continuing and timeless existential realisation, despite the setting presumably in the 'now' of the modern city. By the end of the *Jack Straw's Castle* version of 'The Night Piece', the speaker has given themselves up to the external world, to sleep as a death in the early modern sense.

The additional opening two stanzas of the poem as it appeared in *Songbook*, however, had given this move towards conclusion a different inflection. Beginning adamantly on 'Now', this earlier version locates the experience of isolation in a much more recognisable and modern urban setting, and in a kind of rapping rhythm:

Now all I hear is my two feet
Hitting in turn upon the street.²¹

There is also a modern song idiom appropriate to the pamphlet's title, an idiom which retains a musical possibility that only shimmers briefly in the full book. The 'I' in *Songbook* also hears foghorns in the Bay (presumably San Francisco, where Gunn had been living for a while), and shows disorientation as the sounds of the nearby wind are usurped by the – actually more distant – sounds from the lapping waters. Out of this more immediate and realistic setting, the 'I' of the poem in the second *Songbook* stanza is

²⁰ Gunn, *Collected Poems*, p. 236.

²¹ Gunn, *Songbook* (New York 1973) p. 7.

made aware of a different 'vulnerability' to that wondered-at subsuming in the *Jack Straw's Castle* version. A police patrol car hums by, adding to the cacophony of sounds which are totally absent from the poem in the final collection. The 'I' speaker seems cowed by this new intervention, fearing that the squad car might stop and the officers question him, were he merely to 'falter' in his striding forward, or even simply to 'look up'.

By the end of this original second stanza, then, the poem is about the ways in which anonymous forces of power terrorise seemingly innocent citizens in the city. This is strikingly figured in terms which carry wider meta-poetic implications around rhythm, pacing, faltering. The final two stanzas, all that remains after Gunn's brutal deletions from the earlier version in the full collection, then emerge as a revelation out of quotidian fear, as epiphany. The excision, however, allows the final version to achieve a more representative, abstract, rendering of the experience, independent of origins which at least sound more experiential and 'real'. Ironically, Gunn, advocate for *The Occasions of Poetry* (as the title of his first essay collection has it), and for seeing all poems as occasions in a life, here, and many times elsewhere, as we shall see, strips away the 'occasion' which might have prompted the more metaphysical remaining two stanzas of 'The Night Piece' in final form. The shift between pamphlet and final version literally enacts that withdrawal from experience to formulation which Gunn had established as the basis of his love and admiration for English sixteenth-century poetry.

'The Night-Piece' forms the opening poem in Gunn's organisation of this ur-text towards *Jack Straw's Castle*, *Songbook*. Those later-suppressed initial stanzas strike a note which then characterises this pamphlet in ways that will re-emerge in the emphases and subjects of all of Gunn's later work. The brief text of *Songbook* includes, in slightly scattered fashion, 'Baby Song', 'Hitching into Frisco', and 'Sparrow Song' in versions that are later placed together as the 'Three Songs' which conclude the opening section of *Jack Straw's Castle*. But *Songbook* had inserted four other poems between 'Hitching into Frisco' and 'Sparrow' – 'The Spell', 'New York Billy', 'Encolpius', and 'Rita'. The first is a brief paradoxical lyric about the achievement of 'the mind's reward' as a fact of good fortune in life. 'Encolpius' is more substantial, recasting the narrator of Petronius's *Satyricon* wittily as a cat who changes gender 'between lives', but asserts that selfhood which is such an aspect of Gunn's idea of 'pose'; the speaker ends as 'My own cat, in my own backyard'.²² 'Encolpius' in fact forms a counterpart to the doggy voice of 'Yoko', which does get included in *Jack Straw's Castle* – that sense of the animal aspects of humanity (the 'creeping' self in

²² Ibid., p. 14.

‘The Night-Piece’) which was to remain key in Gunn’s later consideration of illness in *The Man With Night Sweats*.

‘New York Billy’ (which has something of the travelling-man character of the retained ‘Hitching into Frisco’) and ‘Rita’ are more interesting amongst this suppressed group. This is so both for what they suggest Gunn’s original intention towards a collection in the mid-1970s was, and for the seeds they sow of later attitudes towards ‘vulnerability’ in his poetry. The former speaker, Billy, perhaps too crudely juxtaposes two situations, as a pacer of Times Square in New York, and as a cowpoke in New Mexico who eventually ‘vanishes’ in the hard sunlight. The poem offers an iridescent rendition of the metamorphic sense of self moving from role to role which Gunn will later perhaps most consummately explore in ‘Selves’ from *The Passages of Joy* (1982). ‘Rita’, unacceptably to our ears now, voices a black prostitute who is routinely harassed by the police:

I’m in the precinct station now
and that is where it mostly hurts
When Sergeant Honk beats up on me
he smells of sweat and undershirts
Sure wonder what I do it for²³

‘New York Billy’ and ‘Rita’ are character sketches in line with earlier ‘posed’ characters in Gunn’s output, such as ‘Hotblood on Friday’ from *My Sad Captains* (1961), or the druggie in ‘Street Song’ from *Moby* (1971). But we also see Gunn’s social urgency emerging in these two poems in ways that underwrite the character sketches in his later work, such as the figures in ‘New York’ and ‘Sweet Things’ from *The Passages of Joy* and the group from *The Man With Night Sweats* consisting of ‘Skateboard’, ‘Well Dennis O’Grady’, ‘Outside the Diner’, and ‘Old Meg’.²⁴

These are all poems of the street, often based on socially deprived people caught in the turmoils of modern capitalism, but more vivid in Gunn’s rendition than the anonymous city-dwellers around them. The voice of the poems is the voice of these otherwise marginalised figures. ‘Rita’ is also significant formally for the more open poetic that Gunn was to adopt in parts of the full collection, *Jack Straw’s Castle*. Although it retains a tight stanza-shape and alternate rhymes, the poem operates without punctuation to allow Rita’s voice to stream through, indicating new sentences only by the use of capitals at the start of some of the lines. This method of avoiding full

²³ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁴ ‘Old Meg’ would in fact feature in the pamphlet characteristically called *Undesirables* from Pig Press, Durham, in 1988.

stops to enable the flow of the poem on the page would then be variously adopted in the full collection, from 'The Plunge', through 'The Bath House' and the opening section of the title sequence, 'Jack Straw's Castle', and thence through to the collection's final poems, 'Kent' and 'Monterey', which together make up 'Breaking Ground'.

In the original pamphlet *Songbook*, in other words, we can see Gunn seeking tentatively to move away from the more staged and formally grand poetry which had characterised his career down to *Moly*. As with the deleted opening stanzas from 'The Night-Piece' through to 'Rita', this shift is partly achieved by the adoption of a realism, a sense of daily city life, which Gunn clearly felt tentative about, but which would emerge more confidently in his collections from the early 1980s on. The issue of police threat in the original 'The Night-Piece' and 'Rita', particularly, will re-emerge in some of these later lyrics, down for instance to 'An Operation' from *Boss Cupid*. The lyricism, the move towards a speech that is also song, and the kinds of formal openness in *Songbook*, together with the turn towards a more socially conscious perspective, all have resonances across Gunn's later work, but are not ready to come forward at this point. In a letter to Tony Tanner of January 1971, in which he had clearly enclosed versions of 'New York Billy' or 'Hitching to Frisco' and 'Encolpius', Gunn described what he was doing as 'odd little experiments' and 'Country [and] Western'.²⁵ The excision of 50 per cent of *Songbook* from Gunn's later more formally collected oeuvre is also the suppression of those signs of the new method that his poetry would work through from the mid-1970s, whereby more traditional formal shapes would intersperse with freer, what some might call more American, ones.²⁶

Mandrakes, illustrated by Leonard Baskin, which appeared, like *Songbook*, in 1973 but from Olwyn Hughes's Rainbow Press, did not suppress poems in this way; nor, notably, does it show many variants in the poems from those eventually constituting much of Part 2 of *Jack Straw's Castle*. But the pamphlet did contain a full poem which was later to be heavily excerpted, and which seems emblematic again in suggesting the ways that Gunn's poetry was to develop. 'Solus Ipse', meaning himself alone, is the poem's title and the Latin phrase behind 'solipsism'. It seems an enticing concept and possibility for a poet like Gunn, who was so preoccupied, as we have seen, with versions of selfhood. But it is a poem which he tellingly wrestled with across several years, before including an untitled ghost version in the title sequence of *Jack Straw's Castle* – in *Mandrakes*, 'Solus Ipse' is about twice as long as the much-reduced version of it that appears as section '8' of 'Jack Straw's Castle'.

²⁵ *Letters*, p. 273.

²⁶ Keith Tuma discusses this in 'Thom Gunn and Anglo-American Modernism', in Weiner (ed.), *At the Barriers*, pp. 95–8.

The poem in its later-suppressed opening phase literally takes on a sense of mirroring and self-mirroring – but through an imagined dramatic scenario:

the characters in the film
like a mute audience
 faces with tumbled hair
 talking sideways
 but staring before them
a frieze, a bereft time

attentive eyes fixed
as if listening for
 an approach
as if listening for

they have got thin
from waiting ...²⁷

There is that eerie sensing of replication or doubling here which Gunn had been exploring as early as ‘The Corridor’ from *The Sense of Movement* (1957), and which would reappear in ‘Behind the Mirror’, in the last part of *Jack Straw’s Castle*. But these characters do not speak; they form a frieze staring out from the screen. Gunn’s writing displays aspects of T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ here as elsewhere in the full sequence – ‘And I have known the eyes already, known them all – || The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase’.²⁸ There is also the woman envisaged in section 5 of Gunn’s sequence, ‘gazing’ at the speaker with blue but blank eyes, as though she has ‘beheld | the source of everything | and found it the same as nothing’.²⁹ But, in ‘Solus Ipse’, it is unclear what the film characters are expecting or ‘listening for’; rather than moving towards some question or revelation, they begin to fade in the light of the film projector,

²⁷ Thom Gunn, *Mandrakes* (London 1973) p. 21. The poem ‘Mandrakes’ itself, though, does have one interesting variant which demonstrates Gunn’s urge towards clarity. In the full collection, the poem ends with the plants’ ‘mouths open to the wind | sigh entering sough | from the distant branches | like a rumour at your fireside’ (*Collected Poems*, p. 298). The pamphlet version ends, however, ‘mouths open to the wind | sough entering sigh || into fireside tale and rumour’ (p. 25). The addition of the provenance of the ‘wind’ in the final version gives completeness to the natural phenomenon as it moves typically via simile into the human realm; the original version remains vaguer, more suggestive, the several states floating together rather than actively finding each other.

²⁸ *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, vol. i, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London 2015) p. 7.

²⁹ Gunn, *Collected Poems*, pp. 273–4.

'their | bodies start to | overlap'. Through that process the solipsistic notion behind the poem emerges the more clearly to the speaker, as 'the characters move | closer to my need'.³⁰

Then, after a further circumstantial line where we seem to hear something 'flapping around' – which points towards the end of 'Solus Ipse', as we shall see – the poem launches into the lines which, with only one change, appear as the complete section 8 of 'Jack Straw's Castle'. That change is significant, though. Where the final poem has 'and I see only | this pearl-white chamber', the *Mandrakes* version inserts a further telling line: 'and I see only | a bone inner wall | this pearl white chamber'. This anguished speaker, perhaps exacting from himself a confession, as we later learn in both versions that he is tortured in a 'Little Ease' prison, in the early version of the poem is much more explicitly also trapped inside his own skull. The final version of the sequence has him describing himself in this situation as rather literally 'petrified at my centre'; in *Mandrakes*, 'Solus Ipse' returns in its last line to the initial scenario, and ends with 'the film having broken'.

The deletion of the first half of the poem by Gunn as he edges it into the 'Jack Straw's Castle' sequence, then, dislocates it severely, and strips it of that original sense of replicating and self-scrutinising selves. By opening as '8' does with the rhetorical question 'might it not all be | a thought-up film', the poem is shorn of that sense of recession, whereby 'Solus Ipse' had initially begun with 'the characters in the film'. 'Jack Straw's Castle', in other words, having lost this extensive poem from its centre, loses also something of that sense of self as other which 'Solus Ipse' had had. This is the self-othering in a dramatic scenario which will recur in the self distributed in that mixture of Baez and the Beatles which forms the eventual final poem of *Jack Straw's Castle* (and the final poem included in *Mandrakes* too), 'Monterey'.

The *Mandrakes* poems, as mentioned above, otherwise establish a significant and unaltered portion of the middle section of *Jack Straw's Castle*. Poems in the pamphlet and that eventual section, such as the sinister 'Mandrakes' itself and 'Thomas Bewick', had exploited the idea of finding the self's likeness in otherness. The poem dedicated to Duncan, 'Wrestling' ('Wrestling with Angels' in *Mandrakes*), 'Saturnalia', and 'Faustus Triumphant' suggest that this issue of lapsing from self into self has pagan religious potential. The original version of 'Solus Ipse', before it was largely excised, centred all of these themes in the pamphlet; but it is emblematic of the unease Gunn was experiencing around these issues both at the time and across his career, one which centres on questions of technique.

³⁰ Gunn, *Mandrakes*, pp. 21–2.

Gunn, in fact, did not stop slightly altering '8' even after *Jack Straw's Castle* had been published. In 1975, he reprinted the sequence in a further pamphlet edition as a run of separate poems, each section beginning on a new page. But instead of 'the thought-up film' 'which suddenly ceases' that we are taken into in the seeming final version, we hear in the pamphlet 'Jack Straw's Castle' of 1975 of a thought-up film which 'now suddenly ceases'. It is as though in this key poem of selving, Gunn is still attached to some narrative from which the prelude has been cut off.³¹ As with the poems in *Songbook*, then, we can see Gunn's editing of his poems, and particularly his excisions from *Mandrakes* to full book, as creating a 'withdrawal' from an originary experience, however imagined or posed that was, in order to render the conceptual experience of the poem more absolutely. It is this more conceptual and generalised experience which then becomes available to readers who remain unguided by words such as 'sympathy' or by judgements within the poem itself.³²

It is telling, then, to see Gunn, in moving between pamphlet publication and full collections, seemingly repeating a pattern whereby the eventual final versions of poems are dislocated from whatever context they originally find themselves in. As with his sense of Poundian Imagism, any indication of how the poems might be received is shorn away. This is a pattern repeated in the final significant pamphlet publication towards *Jack Straw's Castle*, this pivotal collection in Gunn's career. In *To the Air* from 1974, much of what would become in 1976 the first section of the full book appears. As indicated, however, 'Fever' as it appears in the pamphlet has significant additions not included in the final version. Printed in two stanzas rather than the eventual three, the poem offers a more discursive sense of what this restless night-cruising boy might be taken to mean. Where, in the final version he is 'Too skittish to be capable of repose | Or of deciding what is worth pursuit', in the earlier one he is 'Too skittish'

Like an allegorical figure of pursuit
Which can't reach the end toward which it points its nose
And remain itself, you're unable to engage.³³

³¹ Thom Gunn, *Jack Straw's Castle* (New York 1975), unnumbered pages. There is another small variant in section 11 of the poem, at the end of the first verse paragraph. The final version's 'and hold that that held me' in the Hallmann is 'I hold that that held me', underlining the trans-temporal solipsism of the sequence's original ambition.

³² Merle E. Brown finds a similar 'turn' in his reading of Gunn's 'Misanthropos'. See *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry* (London 1980) p. 143.

³³ Thom Gunn, *To the Air* (Boston, Mass. 1974) p. 9; *Collected Poems*, p. 235.

The initial pamphlet version seeks to cast the feverish boy almost as a classical character, human but beagle-like; the final version is much more direct in this instance. Gunn's feeling about the allegorical is perhaps most clearly rendered late on, in 'An Operation' from *Boss Cupid*, where the laconic speaker notes that the 'couple of policemen' who are mounting the 'operation', a sting to catch petty thieves, would 'view themselves as allegorical, | Unaltered by what they had done'.³⁴ The *To the Air* version of 'Fever' is perhaps similarly too anxious to define for the reader what the character represents, the 'why' behind his restlessness and what it implies. This urge to over-explain in the earlier version also figures in the expansion of the sense that the druggie boy's mother is somehow to blame ('Oh how she dandled her pet and watched his sleep'). This first version also seeks to tell why he becomes 'less beautiful' as the evening progresses – the boy has 'joints and amyl' his pocket. As the evening ends in the early version, 'We seem to you a glittering audience | Tier above tier viewing without sympathy'. This all becomes rhetorical question in the final version, 'What glittering audience | Tier above tier notices finally | Your ragged defeat?' The perspective shifts again, the speaker moves from being part of the audience to relocating inside his subject's disoriented mind, and does not prejudice the 'pity' element of the poem in response to the boy's 'vulnerability'.

We can see Gunn variously, as he edits between the versions of his poem, seeking to address that primary issue he wrote about to Chambers – the insertion or otherwise of the speaker's self into the poem. As he removes the circumstance once more, the realism of the drugs, and also the sense that the incident must be read allegorically as something else, he also takes away as it were the sense of motivation and uniqueness from the figure of the boy. The poem presents itself as representative of a wider dissatisfaction by removing those elements of understanding that had initially scaffolded the piece. Gunn's revision here attests to an awareness that narrative connection or the need for conscious articulation between the events of a poem can sometimes provide a barrier for the audience seeking themselves to connect various features of a poem, and so to respond empathetically to them.

There is a similar drive, presumably, behind the other most noticeable change between the version of the poetry in *To the Air* and that in *Jack Straw's Castle*. The sequence 'The Geysers' has lost a whole long section by the final version. An original section in *To the Air* had appeared in the pamphlet between the final section 3, 'The Geyser', and 4, 'The Bath House'. Called 'Discourse from the Dark' this section was predicated upon its epigraph of Margaret Fuller's famous (and allegedly absurd) saying 'I accept the Universe', and Thomas Carlyle's rude repost, 'She'd better!' To

³⁴ Thom Gunn, *Boss Cupid* (London 2000) p. 21.

this end, 'Discourse from the Dark' is framed by a universal and starry perspective, as the speaker looks to the skies from 'Outside a bath house falling into wreck'. But this physical setting of the description here is perhaps, we might say, itself allegorical. 'Discourse' makes clear that 'The Geysers' sequence is in fact about 'America at war' – this is a Vietnam poem, in other words. The country itself is on the brink of revolution or civil war at this moment, 'dry hills and the buildings' might burn, 'predators and punks' might 'take over'.³⁵

Whereas the final version of 'The Geysers' sequence suggests the opening of self to others and to the natural environment, in other words, this earlier version is much more politically motivated, a deliberate counter-cultural statement which redirects all other aspects of the sequence. The nudity of the men with the poem's speaker outside the bath house in 'Discourse' makes him acknowledge the physical individuality of everyone: 'Fragile and rarely poised and vulnerable | Of course' – that word 'vulnerable' again. The speaker enters a Whitmanian plea at this time for acceptance, recognition, and understanding of difference – 'I hold all of this land | Latent inside myself, including punks. | I'd better accept them'. The removal of this 'Discourse' from *Jack Straw's Castle* emphasises in the final version the communal, sexual, but also metaphysical elements of the experience in its moment, the sense of being both 'raw meat' and of the elect, 'I am a god' as the sequence ends.³⁶ But, in the original version, this ending is predicated on its being an assumption into full selfhood out of the divisions which threaten when the foreign war pulls apart the interior of the country. Gunn's editorial decision again to unmoor the final sequence from the circumstance and time of its creation (although retaining the date of '1973–4' in the later versions, a shadowy implication) renders perhaps the emergence of a version of self as newly powerful. But the excision of a whole poem here takes away the countering sense of a poetry which derives from historical occasion and speaks back to it.

Both excision and reordering of his work seem notable features of Gunn's later practice too. These questions also involve him with questions of patterning and formal unity alongside those around dispersal. In most senses, looking at the pamphlets towards Gunn's later collections, and *The Man With Night Sweats* in particular, Gunn's editorial decisions are fewer than those involved in and around *Jack Straw's Castle*. Both *The Hurtless Trees* (1986), and *Undesirables* (1988) print large selections towards the final book without variants. The only notable feature around these two pamphlets, perhaps, was the decision to suppress the first pamphlet's title from his later

³⁵ Gunn, *To the Air*, pp. 17–18.

³⁶ Gunn, *Collected Poems*, p. 246.

collection, and its epigraph from Sir Philip Sidney's one-act drama *The Lady of May*, 'O sweet contemplation to see the long life of the hurtless trees'. This casts the poems of age and ageing contained in that pamphlet with a sense of endurance, but also a late sense of harmlessness, contented acquiescence after a life of activity.³⁷ The chief decision in moving from these pamphlets to the collection in 1992 seems to have been about which poems to select for inclusion – but those poems in the pamphlets which did not make it, such as 'Fennel' and 'Venetian Blind' from *The Hurtless Trees* or 'Punch Rubicundus' from *Undesirables*, are then included under the 'Poems from the 1980s' section of *Collected Poems*.

Where there is evidence of a slight mis-start towards *The Man With Night Sweats*, it comes at the initial moment of the pamphlet *Sidewalks* of 1985, from which more than 50 per cent of poems do not then get reprinted or collected. After the three street-life poems 'Outside the Diner', 'Skateboard', and 'Well Dennis O'Grady', already in their final form, *Sidewalks* included 'The Best Secret', about the sighting of a girl absorbed in her 'internal' music and oblivious to the world compared to the sound through her headphones; 'The City', an odd listing of sounds and activities which suddenly veers into sensing the unreality or 'dream' of place; and 'Those Minute Designs', about the poet as a graffiti artist responding to the 'aboriginal' nature of pattern and design to be found in the wooden boards of North Beach houses.³⁸ What is most striking here, though, are the five sections of 'Bow Down', a sequence which rehearses the fantastical dreams of a 'boy' in a suburban neighbourhood infiltrated (again) by coastal fog and the sound of foghorns. Gunn took 'Bow Down' quite a way towards full publication. The *Letters* variously show him having recorded the sequence for broadcast on the BBC; describing it to Clive Wilmer as 'my piece of melodramatic modernism'; and giving Chambers the provenance of the sequence's title in a folk-song Gunn had known since school. The refrain 'Bow down' 'obviously indicated a dance performed while the song was sung'. Gunn also agreed to the sequence being printed in Jon Silkin's *Stand* magazine.³⁹

'Bow Down' is most directly 'modernist' in its freedom of form,. Sections 4 and 5, for example, drop full-stops and layer the verse around repetitions:

Bow down Bow down
calling an end to the energy
that turns and turns

³⁷ Thom Gunn, *The Hurtless Trees* (New York 1986).

³⁸ Thom Gunn, *Sidewalks* (New York 1985) pp. 12, 18–19.

³⁹ *Letters*, pp. 380, 391, 393, 399.

in a dance so wild
it starts to totter off-balance⁴⁰

Where ‘melodrama’ enters is via the banality of the boy’s dream; he thinks of himself as a cop, then as a cop raiding a sex club, until the external sounds of the foghorns break through the nightclub music, and the dream collapses back into itself. The ‘modernism’ returns as the boy dreams that ‘He shoots the famous boy | he has always wanted to be’, and then ‘Divided against himself | he loses it, loses | all memory of his purpose | The world drains through his wounds’.⁴¹ Whilst the sequence is to a large extent ludicrous, then, Gunn’s persistence with it for several years is telling. The young boy’s fantasies are clearly out of place amongst the preoccupations with ageing, dejection, and cruelty in poems like ‘Lines for my 55th Birthday’ or ‘Yellow Pitcher Plant’, or the sense of living ‘In Time of Plague’ from *The Man With Night Sweats*. And yet the description in ‘Bow Down’ of a world where words and actions, the dance tottering off-balance, and of selves divided against selves resonates with the drift of the later collection. In terms of losing ‘all memory of ... purpose’, ‘Bow Down’, although gauche awkward, pre-scripts something of the later book. Whilst the sequence seems apt in its place amidst the street poems of *Sidewalks*, it also seeds, as previously suppressed work like ‘Rita’ had, those more poised and achieved laments and explorations of vulnerability which were to emerge later in the decade.

Thom Gunn’s persistent concern was to gather versions of his poems in pamphlets as he built towards the full collections. This was a concern which lasted from the late 1960s, with *A Geography* and *Sunlight*, through to the end of his career.⁴² In the process he tried out different orderings of the work, considered possible inclusions and exclusions, but also established a practice of excision whereby lines or even whole parts of poems included in the pamphlets were later removed. Yet, as with ‘Bow Down’ or the street poems of *Songbook*, we can see themes already present in excised poems that would form keynotes of full collections often struck many years after the suppressed essays in interim work.

The recently published *Letters* maps this consideration and editorial practice on specific principles. Something of this is about that ‘withdrawal’ from the realistic fragments of experience Gunn felt to underlie the shift from the sensory to the conceptual which formed the true achievement of sixteenth-century poetry, the shift which the experimentation of Pound and

⁴⁰ Gunn, *Sidewalks*, p. 16.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴² Thom Gunn, *A Geography* (Iowa City 1966); *Sunlight* (New York 1969).

others in the early part of the twentieth century ultimately failed to make. As Gunn posed it, in the awkward rendition of these matters in a later-suppressed section from the early sequence 'Confessions of the Life Artist':

... these are improvisations
on a central theme. The theme
could have supported others,
so long as I was conscious
of its being there.⁴³

The process of becoming 'conscious' of what truly underlay his poetry, and so of establishing its proper relation to its readers, is evident in Gunn's movement from the pamphlet versions and orderings of his poems to their final renditions. The complex technical choices made between more contained and more open forms was part of this process, but Gunn's considerable attention to how his poetry might be shaped and ordered shows his continuing care towards issues of articulation and balance within and between poems which guarantees the effectiveness of his signature work.

⁴³ Gunn, *A Geography*, p. 16.

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The Cambridge Quarterly, 2024, 53, 273–293
<https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtl/bfae033>
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