birth of the tourist industry, and more generally, in the American context, as we saw in the first chapter, with the emergence of corporate capitalism in the late nineteenth century); fourth, Romantic poetry is duplicitous seduction, or rather, these poets whore themselves. What results in Palmer's work is *non sequitur* and/or disjunctions of voice, so that the narrative of no one lyric subject can be gleaned from any poem. The devices used by other Language poets are various.

Whatever the merits of this group of writers in critiquing hegemony (and they are disputed), it has been the signal failing of much academic criticism of poetry over the last few decades that it has not attended to American poets who, unlike the Language writers, have extended the tradition of the Romantic sublime. (Indubitably, the leftist politics of Language writers is attractive to most academics, but the failure cannot be reduced to ideological difference alone. One factor might be the decreased cultural prestige of poetry in general from the time of the 1940s, with a resultant decrease in critics' ability to attend to those rhetorical resources of poetry which distinguish it from discursive prose.) And when I say 'sublime', I mean the non-naïve version which we saw in Ginsberg's poetry, one that is aware of Foucauldian narratives of political complicity, as well as of the constructed nature of the social and familial self. Time and time again, poststructuralist criticism was satisfied to alert readers to the constructedness of a particular social or cultural phenomena, and failed to realise that this does not reduce the ontological ballast of those phenomena. In other words, one can admit that the bourgeois self is jerry-built and 300 years old, but still admit its reality as a basis for moving lyric poetry.

This is the achievement of Ginsberg. That his poetry was one of the important factors that made Aquarians out of Americans; and that his views were distorted and debased by disciples, does not mean that he is not one of the most important poets of the American twentieth century. Ideologically fly, joyous in the celebration of the self, and that self's friends and family, his poetry acknowledges the ways in which America has erred but wants to bring it back from its heresy. 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' provides one of the most accurate descriptions of the nexes between the phenomenological space of the individual and the imaginary of democratic ideology. Similarly, there has never been a prophetic sublime that relies so much on accurate descriptions of people (in the work of the late 1950s) and landscape (in the work of the 1960s). I have argued that Ginsberg developed such a dependence in his poetry in order to counter the objections of Antinomianism, voiced so well by Podhoretz. Yes, this poetry is reductive in its treatment of historical causality, as Breslin and von Hallberg hold, but to leave the argument there is to remain blind to Ginsberg's new sublime, which turns from the naïveté of Emerson's, and comprehends how the filaments of personality, geography and political guilt are interwoven in an ecstatic survey of his historical moment.

Chapter 5

Thom Gunn's American Dispersals

I

Drug-induced experiences are integral to the poetry of Thom Gunn. Several of his poems from the 1960s and 1970s end with a curt note such as 'LSD, Folsom Street', leaving the reader in no doubt that the events the poems narrate are not just the result of a rich imagination. The openness of Gunn's admission owes much to Allen Ginsberg, and one wonders if it is in compensation for his reticence at the time about his own homosexuality (he was not 'out' in his poetry until later in the 1970s). Gunn lived and worked in California for exactly a half century to his death in 2004, and the poems with their notes also indicate Gunn's participation in the kind of lifestyle for which that state is renowned. In an interview, Gunn once joked that 'The English think of California as being a good deal more exotic than it really is', and continued by remarking that they 'don't seem to think that people lead regular, normal lives in California' (*Shelf* 223). (It is only fair to remark that if Gunn's poetry from the 1960s and 1970s was all they had to go on then, then the English would be justified in such impressions.) Concentrating on Gunn's drug poems allows us to trace not just the use of this device, but also, as I hope to show, to trace his profound, critical engagement with the American Romantic tradition.

II

One of the most influential books of the hippie era was Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968). Perhaps the sobriquet is uncharitable, as Don Juan's use of mescaline, psilocybin and yerba was connected with a rigorous intellectual and spiritual discipline which took years to master (which Castaneda, his apprentice, ultimately failed to do). The lack of charity stems rather from the way that such books were digested by the wider American culture, hungry at the time for ecstatic states of consciousness and reckless of their consequences in the everyday world. By the 1970s even a

guru such as Ginsberg was reconsidering his earlier unqualified advocacy of hallucinogenics (Miles 433, 439). Castaneda's book makes clear that to use hallucinogenics without the guidance of what is called a 'Man of Knowledge' who possessed the learning of an ancient tradition is dangerous in the extreme. Much of the instruction the apprentice received was devoted to what Castaneda called 'guiding special consensus' (221), that is, although the states of ecstasy experienced when under the influence of the drug were often specific to the individual, there were certain transpersonal structural similarities which Don Juan dwelt upon at length after the apprentice came down from the trip (220). It is not hard to see why this should be: the establishment of such a consensus ensures the maintenance of tradition from one generation to the next; it guards against Antinomian tendencies and anchors the visions of the apprentice within a body of knowledge, so that such ecstasies do not delude him into self-aggrandisement. Don Juan insists that the apprentice should be spiritually strong so that he is not destroyed by the use of these drugs. Of the states of ecstasy themselves, Castaneda remarks that 'one always possesse[s] the capacity to come to a halt in order to examine any of the component elements for what appeared to be an indefinite length of time' (209). In the Yaqui teaching which Castaneda apprenticed himself to, these are privileged moments in which one's awareness is 'expanded' (225), and, in Don Juan's own words, subject to 'a power capable of transporting a man beyond the boundaries of himself' (199). He continues:

> Its progressive expansion consisted of a seemingly sensorial appraisal I made of the component elements of non-ordinary reality which fell within a certain range. I evaluated and analysed these component elements, it seemed, with my senses, and to all appearances I perceived the range in which they occurred as being more extensive, more encompassing, in each successive state. (225–6)

These descriptions of states of ecstasy coincide with William James's definition of mystical experience in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) (366–8). First, they are ineffable: Castaneda says little about their content – their structural features are more important. Second, they have what James calls a noetic quality: 'they are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect' (James 367). Third, they are transient, since the effect of the drug wears off. The only discrepancy is with James's fourth criterion of 'passivity', as the Man of Knowledge can learn eventually to fly over great distances. By learning how to interpret these states correctly and corroborate them with the Yaqui tradition, one achieves even the ability to bring about changes in ordinary states of affairs.

In the same book, James writes about the connections between a different drug and mystical states:

> The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by

> the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the Yes function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth. Not through mere perversity do men run after it. [. . .] it is part of the deeper mystery and tragedy of life that whiffs and gleams of something that we immediately recognize as excellent should be vouchsafed to so many of us only in the fleeting earlier phases of what in its totality is so degrading a poisoning. The drunken consciousness is one bit of mystic consciousness, and our total opinion of it must find its place in our opinion of that larger whole. (373)

These 'whiffs and gleams', as James points out, can be adapted to various religious typologies, and, as works like Rob Wilson's *American Sublime* show us, to nationalism also. It is not hard to see why Castaneda's work, which presents an indigenous American religion for which mystical states are central, cathected the tradition of American Romantic nationalism in the 1960s, suggesting new ways to recuperate radical innocence. Drugs become important since they connected with the Antinomian tendency of American thinking: states of grace are revealed to an individual, much as LSD visions are, and such privileged ecstatic moments have consequences in the everyday world. More particularly, such spiritual states have been connected with political states since at least the emergence of Romantic nationalism. As many critics have shown, generations of American writers have fantasised ecstatically about the possibilities of America, thus linking what could have remained a purely private sacred revelation to a national grand narrative. These moments when the self is dispersed exert a fascination for Thom Gunn, and many of his poems are generated out of the differences between them and the New World ideology.

III

Gunn occupied a peculiar position in the poetry of his time. On the one hand he published in high-profile outlets, and reviewers generally recognised him as a central figure. Yet when it comes to extended criticism he has not drawn the same amount of attention as his peers. The British edition of his *Collected Poems* is garlanded with a blurb from Sean O'Brien which says that it is impossible to grasp most of what has happened in poetry in the last 40 years without taking Gunn's work into consideration. One would then presume that O'Brien would have found room for a chapter on Gunn in his critical study, *The Deregulated Muse* (1998), which covers the work of 35 contemporary British poets, but he only receives a few passing mentions in discussions of other poets' work. The omission is symptomatic of a more general alignment of assumptions about

British poetry. Clearly, it is of the moment to talk about poetic deregulation – the influx of themes from the social and ethnic margins, not to mention from women – but that is for the most part still contained within the bounds of Britishness, and ghosting it is the narrative of the fall of empire. Gunn's poetry is concerned with none of this: he was not preoccupied with the English class system like Tony Harrison, he didn't try to plumb the depths of ancient England like Geoffrey Hill and Ted Hughes. Compounding this was Gunn's advocacy of certain poets who have never gone down well in Britain, such as Robert Duncan and Basil Bunting, and his consequent experiments with form which moved beyond the conventions that still hold strong in British poetry. He was eccentric to American poetry also. While he was an assiduous student of open-field writing, the Language writers are not germane to him, nor he to them. Similarly, when approached to contribute to a New Formalist magazine, he replied: 'No, I'm not interested in reading the people you suggest printing (he'd given me a list); I've just written an article praising Ginsberg and I think you should be reading him instead' (*Shelf* 228). Such baffling of the stylistic categories that have plagued American poetry in the last three decades is rare.

The danger for such an amphibious craft is that an important body of work will resist contexture in most of the critical narratives that govern our understanding of poetry in the second half of the twentieth century. James Longenbach has written of how the 'breakthrough' of Lowell and *Life Studies* (pre-1959 American poetry as strait-laced; post-1959 wild and free) has served to marginalise many important talents in American poetry, as the patterns of their poetic careers do not coincide with Lowell's. With the publication of *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992), Gunn enjoyed widespread acclaim, but most commentary could see little more in the poems than the topical issue of AIDS. To set Gunn up as the bard of this disease is a reduction of his whole career. As David Kennedy suggests, the collection would not have won such acclaim if it had been concerned with cancer or Alzheimer's (246). This is no bad reflection on Gunn's book but rather on British prize-givers. Just as Gunn's comment above challenges the stylistic divisions within American poetry, so too does his poetry challenge the polarisation of British and American poetry.

One of the achievements of Gunn's poetry is the orchestration of these contrary forces into torsions both on the level of form and on the level of theme. He does not play the exile card; rather, deeper ideas of discovery, recognition, division and transformation animate his poems on subjects as diverse as sex, drugs, serial killers, and even building sites. For instance, in 'Diagrams' he observes construction workers on a skyscraper's 'mesa of unfinished top':

> Indians pad like cats,
> With wrenches in their pockets and hard hats.

> They wear their yellow boots like moccasins,
> Balanced where air ends and where steel begins,
> Sky men, and through the sole's flesh, chewed and pliant,
> They feel the studded bone-edge of the giant.
> It grunts and sways through its whole metal length.
> And giving to the air is sign of strength. (*Collected* 230)

Whereas poets of multiculturalism would be more interested in imposing a narrative of loss on the scene (i.e., the Indians are alienated from the earth by white technology), Gunn instead sees the subtle ways in which they have transformed themselves in their new world. They can only do that through clear recognition of where they are, and adjusting accordingly. They are like the surfers in 'From the Wave' whose 'marbling bodies have become / Half wave, half men, / Grafted it seems by feet of foam' (*Collected* 198). What is important here is to *give* to one's element, and the polyvalency of the word is helpful: Gunn's poetry at once gives onto America, in that he writes about life there, and it also gives, in that it is changed by it.

Transformation is the guiding principle of perhaps Gunn's finest single collection, *Moly* (1971). The book opens with the Ovidian metamorphosis of 'Rites of Passage':

> Something is taking place.
> Horns bud bright in my hair.
> My feet are turning hoof.
> And Father, see my face
> – Skin that was damp and fair
> Is barklike and, feel, rough. (*Collected* 185)

This resonates on several levels. As the opening lines of a book which in many ways is retrospective of the 1960s, it is a fitting figure for much of the social and cultural change of that decade, with all its suggestions of a return to nature and rejection of reason in favour of immersion in physicality, or rather animality. The metamorphosis also enacts the transformation of human beings in the act of sex. Later in the book there are several poems about drug-induced experiences, and 'Rites of Passage' marks out the transformation from normal to heightened states of awareness, as the drug takes purchase on the human organism. It also suggests a homosexual orientation, and this is hinted at more strongly in the title poem of the collection which follows immediately:

> Nightmare of beasthood, snorting, how to wake.
> I woke. What beasthood skin she made me take?
>
> [. . . . . .]

If I was not afraid I'd eat a man.

Oh a man's flesh already is in mine.
Hand and foot poised for risk. Buried in swine. (*Collected* 186)

The sex, the excess, the drugs – these are all the things Gunn is supposed to revel in and celebrate in this period, and much of the pleasure of reading the book comes from accounts of the author's own generous hedonism. But the title offers a surprising counterweight: in Homer, moly is the plant given to Odysseus by Hermes to protect him against Circe's magic. Moly then is not something that will turn you into a hog or a vampire, but rather the agent which prevents those transformations. In this light the poems appear to be indulging in all the above pleasures of change while simultaneously looking for escape from them. The speaker of 'Moly' implores: 'Direct me gods, whose changes are all holy, / To where it flickers deep in grass, the moly' (*Collected* 187).

Colin Falck points out that Gunn's moly was his apprenticeship in the English lyric mode prior to the transformations of the 1960s (42). His use of regular rhyme and metre in LSD poems provides the astringent necessary for focusing on the experience more clearly. Bucking expectations, Gunn chooses to be most disciplined and controlled on a formal level at the moment when his material is most flaky, and this choice goes against the grain of most post-Second World War American poetry. For instance, the thematic transgressions of Beat poets against the reigning New Critical style (e.g., Wilbur, Hecht, et al.) was part and parcel of a return to Whitmanian lineation and tone. But Gunn, determined to explore other kinds of contrast, also attempts to mix regular forms with free verse, as in 'Tom-Dobbin'. The movements in and out of rhyme and metre enact on a formal level the metamorphoses that Circe's magic and moly play out elsewhere in the book. The first part is in free verse:

light is in the pupil
luminous seed
and light is in the mind
crossing
in an instant
passage between the two
seamless
imperceptible transition
skin melting downward into hide
at the centaur's waist (*Collected* 200)

As free verse this is undistinguished: the stepped lines bring no surprising turns of image or idea, but are for the most part predictable qualifications. The word 'crossing' should bring some dynamism to the preceding static line, but it is

torpid. Struggling against the overwhelming burden, Gunn again tries to give some momentum to the poem, but the line 'in an instant' is a clichéd way of doing so. When Gunn shifts to mock heroic couplets in the next lines, the change is startling:

Hot in his mind, Tom watches Dobbin fuck,
Watches, and smiles with pleasure, oh what luck.
He sees beyond, and knows he sees, red cows,
Harsh green of grass, and pink-fired chestnut boughs.
The great brown body rears above the mare,
Plunging beneath Tom's interested stare. (*Collected* 200)

The mixing of vision and desire – exactly what the first section fails to achieve – is figured briefly and forcefully in the first line. And then the poem takes off from there, playing off Tom's languid posture with the storm of sexual gymnastics going on around him. A psychedelic landscape comes out of nowhere into the stage of the poem and is sucked into the animal maelstrom. Gunn has said he has 'always hoped that my experiences with free verse would enrich my metrical verse as well. And vice versa, of course' (*Shelf* 220). He goes on to admit that most of his experiments in mixing styles were failures. They are valuable if only for the way they mark the distance between the two traditions Gunn values. Most of Gunn's other poems, written entirely in free verse, are affable but undistinguished in the same fashion as the first section of 'Tom-Dobbin': admiration for the achievements of Robert Duncan and others has not transformed itself in his case into the ability to emulate them. Their value is mainly in the contexts of single collections where they provide necessary background for the better performances in rhyme and metre. 'Street Song' is the chant of a pusher rendered in Marvellian couplets:

My methedrine, my double-sun,
Will give you two lives in your one,
Five days of power before you crash.
At which time use these lumps of hash
– They burn so sweet, they smoke so smooth,
They make you sharper while they soothe. (*Collected* 207)

The wit and tough demotic texture of this would be enough in itself, but it is enriched incalculably by the undulating, disjointed Brautigan-esque prose poem about an acid trip which precedes it. The speaker of 'The Colour Machine' is high on some hallucinogenic and narrates the bizarre events he experiences in a calm factual tone:

> Giving himself completely to the colour machine, one of us became invisible. Being a thing, it does not need gifts, and anyway what wants something that becomes invisible as soon as given? It let him go, and he drifted from the room into a world where he could no longer make an impression: plants grew into the bridge of his foot, cars drove through him, he entered movies for free. And of course, we never saw him again. (*Collected* 205)

The person is dispersed unto death, as far as we can make out, but the speaker is also moving in what Castaneda calls 'non-ordinary reality'. There is no expression of grief for the person that is lost, and the events are narrated as though they are natural and unsurprising. The speaker goes on to contrast himself unfavourably with the lost man, and says that because of his own selfishness and cowardice, he 'can keep [him]self intact' (*Collected* 205). There is a hint of some kind of virginity here, but more suggestive is the idea that the speaker, although he experiences the drug-induced ecstasy, does not lose himself completely to it, and maintains an integrity of the self. The poem agrees in all points with James's criteria for mystical experience, and it does appear that the everyday world has stopped. But Gunn is not propagandising for LSD in the way that Ginsberg did in his poetry of the 1950s and 1960s: his approach is more sceptical and dialectic. As I remarked, 'Street Song' follows immediately after 'The Colour Machine', and thus real life comes flooding back as Gunn shows the contrast between the consumer's experience and the supplier's real world. Midday Mick, the pusher who narrates the later poem, knows what the junkie wants, but speaks with a very different intonation:

> Join me, and I will take you there,
> Your head will cut out from your hair
> Into whatever self you choose.
> With Midday Mick man you can't lose [. . .] (*Collected* 208)

Midday Mick promises that the drug will take the junkie beyond his own physical boundaries, and disperse him through other selves. But just as the Emersonian sublime was commodified towards the end of the nineteenth century, so too is Mick's ecstasy parcelled up as an element in a commercial transaction. Like the obliging salesman that he is, he ends his poem with the promise, 'I'll get you anything you need. / *Keys lids acid and speed*' (*Collected* 208).

The next poem is a kind of synthesis of 'The Colour Machine' and 'Street Song' in that it combines acid trip and controlled form. 'The Fair in the Woods' is followed by the note, 'LSD, San Rafael Woods: "Renaissance Fair"'. As the colours of the landscape pour one into the other, the re-enactors of the Fair become real to the eye of the poet, as though it were the most natural thing in the world that Renaissance woodsmen are in the San Rafael woods. Such fairs would provoke ironic remarks in most other poets, but the speaker's viewpoint

has been metamorphosed by the drug to such an extent that he becomes a true believer:

> The woodsmen blow their horns, and close the day,
> Grouped by some logs. The buckskins they are in
> Merge with ground's russet and with tree-trunk's grey,
> And through the colour of the body's skin
> Shift borrowings out of nearby birch and clay.
>
> All day a mounted angel came and went
> Sturdily pacing through the trees and crowd,
> His brown horse glossy and obedient.
> Points glowed among his hair: dark-haired, dark-browed.
> He supervised a god's experiment. (*Collected* 209)

The speaker is not the least interested in coming down from the trip, and most likely would fend off any offer of moly. When the poem, and the trip, eventually end the tone is melancholy: '[. . .] for it is late. / The horns call. There is little left to shine' (*Collected* 210). But another more interesting possibility offers itself at this point: the LSD, rather than being Circe's delusional magic, might itself be the moly which releases us from the lie of everyday reality into the unironic vision of 'The Colour Machine' and 'The Fair in the Woods'. This radical ambiguity is carried through two poems later in 'To Natty Bumppo', which at once brings a stop to the druggy poems and pushes their implications further:

> The grey eyes watchful and a lightened hand.
> The ruder territory opening up
> Fills with discovery: unoutlined land
> With which familiar places overlap.
> [. . . . . .]
> Open on all sides, it is held in common,
> The first field of a glistening continent
> Each found by trusting Eden in the human:
> The guiding hand, the bright grey eyes intent. (*Collected* 212)

Gunn touches on one of the American novelist's lyrical *topoi* – that of the process of civilisation growing in the wilderness. These enlargements in the field of the character's eye are part of the discovery and cultivation of the New World which Cooper occasionally criticised and lamented but always finally celebrated. For instance, in *The Pioneers* (1823), Cooper remarks 'so rapid were the changes, and so persevering the labours of those who had cast their fortunes on the success of the enterprise, that it was not difficult for the imagination of Elizabeth to conceive they were enlarging under her eye, while she was gazing, in mute wonder, at the

alterations that a few short years had made in the aspect of the country' (40). The landscape and figures in 'To Natty Bumppo' are clearly related in detailing to the Renaissance woodsmen in 'The Fair in the Park'. Bumppo's watchful grey eyes are very different from the stoned acid eyes of the previous poems, yet Gunn's suggestion is that drug experiences two centuries on from the time of Bumppo recuperate something of the excitement of the discovery of the New World, and thus are a kind of reclaiming of the possibilities of America, a 'trusting [of] Eden in the human'. The dialectic of magic and moly is fully at work here, as the Bumppo figure who would lead us back into a clear vision of reality is Cooper's romanticised portrait of the frontiersman, and thus as much an imaginative figment as the preceding acid visions – or not.

This ambiguity plays through further poems in *Moly*. 'The Garden of the Gods' is named after an area west of Colorado Springs which has unusual rock formations, but Gunn connects it in the first stanza with utopian dreaming: 'The constant vision of the race: / Lawned orchard deep with flower and fruit' (*Collected* 213). The experiences in this garden resemble the previous ecstatic visions insofar as they are ineffable: 'But if at last they try to tell, / They search for trope or parallel, / And cannot after all explain' (*Collected* 213). The landscapes which follow in the poems 'Flooded Meadows' and 'Grasses' are also paradisal: the first ends with 'the unity of unabsorbed excess' (*Collected* 215); the only event in the halcyon place of the second is a 'sound, half tuneless and half tune, / With which the scattered details make advance' (*Collected* 216). 'At the Center' is a disjointed account of another LSD trip and the question it asks is like that of the conquistador standing before an unknown continent. It is the discovery of a New World fused with drug-induced ecstasy, but Gunn is careful to freight it with religious significance also:

> What place is this
> And what is it that broods
> Barely beyond its own creation's course,
> And not abstracted from it, not the Word,
> But overlapping like the wet low clouds
> The rivering images – their unstopped source,
> Its roar unheard from being always heard. (*Collected* 221)

This is what James calls the noetic quality of mystical experience: depths of truth unavailable to everyday awareness are opened up, as the speaker hears the 'roar' in mundane experience that we have become deaf to through habit. Mention of 'creation' and 'the Word' gives this experience a primordial religious aspect. Gunn is careful to locate the poem in a particular urban environment (one presumes that of San Francisco) through the note at the end ('LSD, Folsom Street') and other buildings such as 'Hamm's Brewery'. The next poem is even more suggestive of conquistadors and national expansion, as it is entitled 'The

Discovery of the Pacific'. However, the text of the poem qualifies this as it turns out to be about a couple that drive from Kansas to California:

> They lean against the cooling car, backs pressed
> Upon the dust of a brown continent,
> And watch the sun, now Westward of their West,
> Fall to the ocean. Where it led they went. (*Collected* 222)

The last sentence here could be a eulogy to the pioneers of nineteenth-century America, and compounding the impression is a later remark: 'They travelled emptier of the things they knew. / They improvised new habits on the way' (*Collected* 222). But of course the couple are rather followers of Kerouac who are learning again to 'trust Eden in the human'. They are viewed in a wholly affirmative light: at the end of the poem they come together in the water and Gunn lingers on 'The full caught pause of their embrace' (*Collected* 222). But to grasp the dialectic nature of Gunn's take on this kind of thing, we should return to an earlier poem in the book which depicts another Pacific swimmer:

> After the beating, thirty-five years since,
> A damaged consciousness
> Reduced itself to that mere innocence
> Many have tried to repossess.
> [. . . . . .]
> He rocks, a blur on ridges, pleased to be.
> Dispersing with the sands
> He feels a cool dry multiplicity
> Gilding his body, feet and hands. (*Collected* 193)

Here 'innocence' is accidental, the result of a violent beating the man has received. This is hardly an enviable state, and Gunn notes ironically that many people aspire to such an Edenic vision of the world. The description of the man in the second verse above prefigures the drug experiences that will follow in *Moly*: and rather than maintaining an integrity of the self, he dissolves into the multiplicity of immediate sense perception. The crux that animates Gunn's poetry throughout his whole career is that he too desires such dispersal, but wants his moly too.

IV

Discovery and recognition take on a different cast in Gunn's poems of sex and AIDS. He was always a superlative portraitist, as though consciously compensating for his tendency towards the solipsism of poems as various as 'The

Wound' and 'The Geysers'. With the AIDS epidemic, which claimed so many of his friends and acquaintances, this portraiture is employed for elegies. The moral imperative behind most of these poems is to *recognise* fully the individual essence of the person who has been lost. In execution and tone, the poems are similar to Edgar Bowers's portrait poems: they possess the same perspicacity, tact and pathos. All these elements were apparent in earlier poems, a good example being 'The Victim', an elegy for Nancy Spungen, Sid Vicious's girlfriend, whom he stabbed to death:

> Oh dead punk lady with the knack
> Of looking fierce in pins and black [. . .]
> [. . . . . .]
> He pushed it through your shirt
> Deep in your belly, where it hurt.
> You turned, and ate the carpet's dirt.
>
> And then not understanding why
> He watched out with a heavy eye
> The several hours you took to die.
>
> The news was full of his fresh fame.
> He O.D.'d, ending up the same.
> Poor girl, poor girl, what was your name? (*Collected* 358)

There is pity here but also the faintest lacing of grim satisfaction on the speaker's part. For instance, the addressee would hardly need to be reminded, as she is in the fourth line here, that the knife hurt her. The following line, with its eating of dirt, is very close to the instruction to 'eat shit', and also 'bite the dust'. On the face of it, the last line is compassionate, but there is also condescension in the vocative. (As example of this cultural amnesia one can adduce Gunn's own note to the poem in the *Collected Poems* where he gives her name erroneously [*Collected* 491].) This is the other side of all the acts of remembrance and poetic recuperation in *The Man with Night Sweats*, the awfulness of disappearing without a trace, and nothing of oneself left in the world, all used up in the whirlwind of another's fame. In 'Lament', Gunn mourns his friend Allan Noseworthy who lies dying in a hospital room:

> It had been chance
> Always till now that had filled up the moment
> With live specifics your hilarious comment
> Discovered as it went along; and fed,
> Laconic, quick, wherever it was led.
> You improvised upon your own delight.

> I think back to the scented summer night
> We talked between our sleeping bags, below
> A molten field of stars five years ago:
> I was so tickled by your mind's light touch
> I couldn't sleep, you made me laugh too much,
> Though I was tired and begged you to leave off. (*Collected* 466–7)

Here, to put it somewhat dryly, one person's mind comprehends another's; there is recognition and fellowship. Compare Gunn's perception of Noseworthy with Vicious's of Spungen as she dies: in 'The Victim' there was only bovine stupidity and incomprehension. To die in the world of such a gaze is a chilling idea. What fascinates Gunn is antithetical corollary: the AIDS poems stretch out in such a fashion from the thesis of 'The Victim'.

Nancy Spungen's was something of a glamour death, at least for her boyfriend. Gunn is somewhat dismissive of the newspaper fame he achieves, but he is himself repeatedly drawn to such glamorous violence. There was the Manson passage in the earlier title poem of *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976), and then his later poem dealing with the theme, 'Troubadour', written for Jeffrey Dahmer, in *Boss Cupid*, first published in the Fall 1993 issue of the *Threepenny Review*, where it caused something of a stir. The sequence is a further twist to the portraits of *The Man with Night Sweats*, just as those poems twist 'The Victim'. Dahmer, described in Gunn's note as 'serial murderer, cannibal, and necrophile' (*Boss* 115), is a portraitist describing each of his different victims. In a poem like 'Lament' the agent of death and the elegist were separate; here they hauntingly conjoin. What is perhaps most disturbing in Gunn's rendition of Dahmer's voice is the mixture of imperious command and languid eroticism. 'Hitch-hiker' is the first poem:

> Oh do not leave me now.
> All that I ever wanted is compressed
> In your sole body. As you turn to go
> I know that I must keep you, and know how,
> For I must hold the ribbed arch of your chest
> And taste your boyish glow. (*Boss* 87)

If the first line is supplication, the fourth is murderous intent. 'Tast[ing] the boyish glow' is something that we can imagine Gunn doing in a different way to a casual partner. The line has a light and tender aspect, but of course it is double-edged as we know that Dahmer sometimes ate parts of his victims. In an earlier section of the collection, 'Gossip', Gunn is lasciviously considering a barman who is also a porn star, and remarks: 'I could have killed / for a chance to chew / on those jumbo tits' (*Boss* 66). What is erotic good humour in the bar modulates into full-blown cannibalism in 'Troubadour'. As with the relation between 'The Colour Machine' and 'Street Song', so these poems cross-fertilise one another,

posing the question of how lust grades into murderous obsession. The third verse of 'Hitch-hiker' is again languid and forgetful: 'I thought that you were gone, / But you are here and will remain with me./I trust your mute consent in which I'm free/To strip your body bare' (*Boss* 87). After Dahmer's having murdered his victim, the line 'I thought that you were gone' combines a terrible knowledge and naiveté about the results of his actions. Here I wish to bring this discussion of 'Troubadour' back to a consideration of Gunn's relationship with the American Romantic tradition. Edward Ingebretsen has recently argued for an understanding of such killers as Dahmer as quintessential Americans in that they reject authority and shared moral codes in an Antinomian move that enables what one reviewer called 'the anarchic explosion of unfettered self' (Robin 36). 'A Borrowed Man' from the 'Troubadour' sequence makes this connection with the Emersonian tradition fully apparent:

> Yet I can count on the revival
> Of such heat as will concentrate
> My *scattered force* into a self
> Defined by both the circumstances
> And the accompanying fancies
> To all of my orgasms past,
> Long-dried, or wiped-off, but now massed
> Steeply through memory's survival.
> (Iron Man, Only Love.)
> They mount, and break, and in recapture
> Flood me with rightness of my rapture. (*Boss* 92; italics mine)

The passage is, like the whole sequence, remarkable for its ability combine lyric sweetness with murderousness. The speaker's homicidal instinct maintains the integrity of his own self. The syntax of the last two lines seems to mimic the approach and achievement of orgasm; this sexual rapture is the greatest assertion of his self. William James glosses 'rapture' thus: 'In the condition called *raptus* or ravishment by theologians, breathing and circulation are so depressed that it is a question among doctors whether the soul be or be not temporarily dis-severed from the body' (398). It as though Dahmer in his rapture is pure soul which has left a corpse behind it.

Also, Gunn makes Dahmer become an exponent of Emersonianism by alluding to the following passage in 'Self-Reliance':

> The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you is that it *scatters your force*. It loses time and blurs the impression of your character. If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-society, vote with a great party either for the government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers – under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the

> precise man you are: and of course so much force is withdrawn from your proper life. But do your work and I shall know you. (Emerson, *Selected* 134; italics mine)

The version of the journal entry on which this passage is based substitutes 'thing' for 'work' in the last sentence and thus sounds almost Kerouacian: 'Do your thing & I shall know you' (Emerson, *Journals* 221). One might protest against such a cut-&-paste by saying that Emerson could never have foreseen Dahmer as an exponent of his ideas, but this would be to deny the radical aspect of the Concord thinker. Earlier in the same essay, Emerson reports his dialogue with a 'valued adviser' which I quoted already in the first chapter, but it bears repetition here:

> On my saying, 'What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?' my friend suggested – 'But these impulses be from below, not from above'. I replied, 'They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil'. (*Selected* 132)

I referred earlier to the alarming ethical implications of Antinomianism; Gunn's 'Troubadour' is an object lesson in this. Dahmer is convinced of the 'rightness of [his] rapture', and here it is worth noting that rapture is a pun: its common meaning is ecstasy, its first and now obsolete meaning is, as the *OED* has it, 'the act of seizing and carrying off as prey or plunder', cognate with 'raptor'. Gunn's Dahmer insists that 'rightness' is something he can decide himself through force of his own ecstasy, and thus he denies the idea that a public context might impose meaning on it. Geoffrey Hill approvingly quotes John Dryden's description of a 'disagreeable young person expressing its hædinus egotism' (Hill, *Lords* 65), 'hædinus' being the Latin for a young goat (there is no etymological connection with hedonism). 'The rightness of my rapture' in Dahmer's case is the self-justification of a monster, but is the logical end of Emersonian individualism. His rapture lets him delude himself in a phrase like 'the mattress we lie quietly on': the first-person plural elides the importance difference in the quietness of the two figures, one alive, one dead. It is a willed failure of recognition, of discernment. Gunn's Dahmer is Emerson *in extremis*.

Geoffrey Hill, as I showed in chapter 3, confronts rapture with history, and questions the irresponsibility of Antinomian thinking. Although he shares next to nothing with Hill in terms of content and form, Gunn also brings a historical awareness to the ideology of the New World. Their common point is that one must be able, *discern* movements and causes within history, or at least be even aware of the difficulties involved, before one sounds one's 'yawp'. Their poetry stages such lessons in history, and challenges the reader to begin *discerning* in just this way. They do not dispense with ecstasy, but rather insist on the difficulty of its public expression, and this, especially for Hill, entails respect for history and

tradition. This thematics of *recognition* places Gunn, at least, in an American tradition that finds its first expression in Hawthorne, especially in a tale like 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835). The drama there is not about the existence of evil but rather the difficulty of perceiving it. The protagonist goes into the wood at twilight and meets a man who might be the devil or one of his agents, and might just be another goodman:

> the only thing about him, that could be fixed upon as remarkable, was his staff, which bore the likeness of a great black snake, so curiously wrought, that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle, like a living serpent. This, of course, must have been an ocular deception, assisted by the uncertain light. (316)

But the uncertainties of that light increase as the tale progresses, leaving Brown finally insane with uncertainty. The question this tale asks, as indeed does *The Scarlet Letter*, is how we can encode religious truths in practical life. The Puritans are held up as a negative example of this, but Hawthorne never suggests what might replace their typology. Similarly, Gunn is content to describe the extremes of American Romanticism in the figure of Dahmer without offering a moral comment or prospectus.

We have moved here well beyond a consideration of the drug poems of the 1960s, but it is clear that in *Boss Cupid* Gunn is still exploring their consequences, and this is part of a deeper exploration of the consequences of the American Romantic tradition. Stephen Burt has remarked how Gunn's poetry almost totally omits the visual aspect of experience in favour of touch, and that this 'debars him from the visionary, fantastic power of, say, Hart Crane. Gunn offers instead the modest virtues of clarity and reliability' (398). This perception seems to me accurate in its distinction between the different senses in the poetry, but its characterisation of Gunn's attitude to the visionary strain in American poetry requires an important qualification. For Gunn does not exclude romance in this sense, but rather is preoccupied by it: by times strongly attracted to it, by times repulsed by its consequences; and the course of his career might profitably be seen as the ebb and flow of this attraction and repulsion. By living in America, Gunn never became an American poet, but concerned himself with America's 'Petals of light lost in your innocence' (Gunn, *Collected* 224).

Chapter 6

A. R. Ammons's Cold War Sublime

I

It is a critical commonplace that A. R. Ammons shows disrespect for programs and politics in his poetry. Looking over the landscape early in his career, he remarks 'no use any philosophies here' (*Collected* 56), and his disdain is obvious elsewhere when he says, 'no book of laws, short of unattainable reality itself, / can anticipate every event' (*Collected* 138). Policy, precept, edge, distinction: these are adduced in his poetry only to be overwhelmed by the exuberant forces of nature and the imagination. This line has been followed by readers as various as Harold Bloom, Helen Vendler and Bonnie Costello. And while other readers such as Cary Wolfe, Alan Holder and Willard Spiegelman have remarked on passages in the poetry that are like Fourth of July proclamations, they don't quite know what to do with them.

In this chapter I wish to read A. R. Ammons's poetry against the grain of both these sets of critics, and indeed against the grain of the poet's own characterisation of his work: that is, I wish to read it as the central poetic expression of US Cold War democratic ideology. I argue that Ammons's poetry, especially in the long poem, *Sphere*, works to render this ideology 'self-evident', to *naturalise* it; that his Fourth of July proclamations are an integral part of his nature poetry, and not merely unfortunate lapses of taste; and that he effects this by a subtle reworking of the Romantic sublime.

Sphere: The Form of a Motion, published in 1974, was Ammons's second long poem (the first being *Tape for the Turn of the Year* [1965]). Bonnie Costello identified the three stages of his career as 'Pilgrim, Sage, Ordinary Man', with *Sphere* belonging to the second phase: 'Where the medium of the pilgrim poet is ritual gesture, the medium of the sage is abstract proposition and example. The revelation of pattern dominates here over the articulation of self' ('Ammons' 138), and in this it differs greatly from early and late Ammons who is much less sure that he can contain multitudes within his gaze. It is a dense capacious work that includes elements of the diary, political declaration and cosmic comment. What has impressed readers from the very first reviews is the remarkable way the poem moves between these outlooks, as well as its astonishing rhetorical momentum.