

“Sweet Secrets”: Two Poets Looking at a Picture

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This is an essay in comparison, and will examine two poems for their similarities and differences. In both the poems, one by a British poet and the other by a Japanese one, the author takes his subject from a painting. In both cases, as it happens, the subject of the painting is virtually the same. So an examination of these two poems necessarily becomes an exercise in comparative literature.

Comparative literature, as it has been defined, is constituted by “the combined study of similar literary works written in different languages”. Moreover, according to the same definition, it “stresses the points of connection between literary products of two or more cultures”,¹ all of which seems to fit the present case quite well. It is to be noted that this definition does not include the influence of one literary culture on another, though in practice much effort seems to be given to discussion of that kind, especially in Japan. Perhaps the most interesting comparisons can be made between literary works that have been produced in disparate cultures that were wholly unaffected by one another, though nowadays such instances are difficult to find. A good example of such comparison is the one that can be made between the English poet William Blake’s short poem “The Fly”, and the Japanese haiku poet Kobayashi Issa’s verse “*Yare utsu na ...*” (“Do not kill the fly ...”). Not only is the subject of the poems (a fly) the same, but the authors were almost exact contemporaries. Furthermore, both poems were composed before the Meiji Restoration and Japan’s opening to the West, so that there can be no question of an influence having been received in either direction. But such

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perfect experimental conditions are almost never possible today.

Like Blake and Issa, the two poets with whom this essay is concerned are near contemporaries; and they have had roughly parallel experiences of life in the modern age, though their paths would appear never to have crossed directly. The English poet, Thom Gunn, was born in 1929 at Gravesend in Kent, and educated in London and later on at Cambridge, though he afterwards settled in California. The Japanese poet, Yoshino Hiroshi, was born in Sakai City in Yamagata Prefecture, in 1926. Both poets are too young to have seen active service in the war, and primarily belong to a generation of writers who came to prominence in the 1950s. Yoshino was excluded from the forces on grounds of poor eyesight, though he might have been conscripted had the Pacific war continued any longer than it did. Gunn, though clearly too young to be recruited before the end of World War II, in fact did National Service after the war had ended, serving in the army from 1948 to 1950. Since his period of service ended before the outbreak of the Korean War, he was spared from that conflict too. Not surprisingly, both poets have brought to their work an awareness of the war, even if they did not experience it directly as combatants, and this awareness undoubtedly informs the humanistic tenor and focus of their writing. A preliminary examination of a selection from the work of either poet soon makes it clear that much of what they write about is drawn from the small events of daily life. The term ‘humanistic’ can perhaps be applied more confidently to Yoshino in general². than it can to Gunn, a number of whose early poems take their starting points from existentialist philosophy, which was being widely discussed in Europe in the 1950s.

A detailed comparison of the entire *oeuvre* of each poet is beyond the scope of this investigation, and might finally become an exercise in fruitless contrast, but it is still necessary to add some background to the poems that we will compare. Thus, although labelling is inimical to many writers, we may note that both Gunn and Yoshino were initially identified as members of a group. Yoshino became a member of the *Kai* (Oar) group of poets formed in 1953. This group included

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Ibaragi Noriko (b. 1926), Kawasaki Hiroshi (b. 1930), Ôoka Makoto (b. 1931) and Tanikawa Shuntarô (b. 1931), all of whom achieved substantial reputations later. Somewhat in contrast to other groups, like the *Arechi* (Wasteland) poets, whose work was overshadowed by the experience of war, the members of *Kai* “showed a sense of tradition and locality” and “were above all lyric poets with an intellectual tendency”.³ They represented a return to normalcy, and a reaffirmation of the values of ordinary life. Though the work of the poets in this group naturally developed in a variety of different ways, Yoshino Hiroshi’s writing has noticeably maintained the warm humanistic tenor of the group, with less of the intellectual concerns of the other members. Yoshino’s introduction to poetry came fortuitously, when he made the acquaintance of another poet during a long period of convalescence at a hospital in Tokyo in 1949. He had been working for a labour union prior to this, until he was stricken with tuberculosis. When he had recovered, he returned to work as a company employee, but resigned and became a copywriter in 1963.

The group with which Thom Gunn’s name is sometimes associated is the so-called ‘Movement’ group of poets, who were brought to notice in the 1950s by the writer Robert Conquest. The poets associated with this group, however, had no formal allegiance, though some of them were friends. Placing them together was a journalistic convenience, fostered to a large extent by Conquest, who as editor had assembled their work in an anthology. Nonetheless, although there was no specific manifesto, there were observable tendencies among the poets, that made it possible for the editor to bring their work together and make general observations on it. There was, for instance, a significant rejection of the political preoccupations of the leading British poets of the 1930s. There was also a reaction against the verbal and imaginative excesses, as they saw it, of the so-called ‘Apocalyptic’ poets of the late 1940s. A marked preference was revealed for traditional forms, for lucidity and calm. This too marked a return to a certain idea of normalcy in postwar Britain, and though some of the poets, like Philip Larkin (1922-1985) and Kingsley

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Amis (1922-1995) were notably disabused, there was a good deal of quiet celebration. Amis reached greater distinction as a novelist, and several of the poets in the loosely assembled group wrote prose works of different kinds. Thom Gunn's connection with the 'Movement' differs in one other important way from that of Yoshino Hiroshi with the *Kai* group, since not only was there no formal agreement about membership or goals, but Gunn, like several of the others, had also made his debut as a poet before he was included in Conquest's first anthology. For the very reason that several of the poets were already published, their joint appearance in an anthology was sometimes criticised as a collective exercise in self-promotion, rather than an expression of shared literary values.

Though younger than Yoshino, Gunn had come to poetry a little sooner than his Japanese counterpart. As remarked before, Yoshino's interest in composition developed as a result of a chance meeting with another poet while both were patients in a hospital. Gunn, on the other hand, owed the discovery of his literary abilities largely to his education, though his parents had encouraged him to write as well.⁴ While Yoshino's first poems were evidently accepted by a literary magazine at the end of 1952, Gunn had appeared in literary magazines before this, despite being three years younger, and a small collection of his poetry was issued by the Fantasy Press in 1954. Most of the poems in his first book were written while he was an undergraduate. The book's title, *Fighting Terms*, announced something more insistent than the titles used by most of his contemporaries. With this early volume he established a ground of his own that was distinctive beyond his association with the so-called 'Movement' poets, though the clarity of his language fitted well with their general concerns. The first anthology of these poets appeared, edited by Conquest, in 1956 and was called *New Lines*.⁵ It was followed by an expanded second volume in 1963, by which time Gunn himself had settled in California. His education enabled him to obtain work as a university teacher, and his residence in America became permanent.

Besides existentialism, Gunn absorbed a number of other influences into

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his early work. These included Shakespeare and the Metaphysical Poets (particularly Donne), in all of whose work some of the conceits of his early poems find their literary forbears. The occasional abstruseness in these poems probably results from circumspectness, a need for the poet to conceal his homosexuality, which was still against the law in Britain then. In his later work, after contact with American literature, though his concentrated thought remains, together with a desire for clarity and definition, there is much less obfuscation in terms of subject matter, and the sexual references are no longer coded for the knowing reader. But his poetry is, nonetheless, moral in intent, in its humanistic concern, and seldom humorous, though it displays a certain literary wit. In all of this he and Yoshino considerably resemble one another, though Gunn is less emphatically didactic than the other poet. While in general terms there is a clear convergence in the two poets' backgrounds, in the general historical circumstances in which their first poetry was born, later there is naturally some divergence, between Yoshino the celebrant of birth and family and marriage, and Gunn's experiments with sex and drugs, leading him to become finally the elegist of the Aids crisis. But there is a moment of reconvergence in the two poems that are the topic of this investigation, and of which the subject is virtually identical.

Thom Gunn's poem "Expression" first appeared in *The Listener* in 1979, and was reprinted the following year in an anthology edited by D.J. Enright,⁶ one of the other Movement poets, before it appeared in Gunn's next collection. It was collected in *The Passages of Joy* (1982),⁷ and is a free-verse poem that reflects, as well as reflects upon, his exposure to the more informal means of poetry in the United States. Yoshino's poem, "*Ichimai no e*",⁸ translated as "A Single Picture", appeared in his 1979 collection *Jokei*, a word which means 'scenery' or 'description', and might be translated as View. The poem's provenance before this is not clear, but it seems likely that it was written around the same time as time as Gunn's poem, in the late 1970s. It is also composed in free verse, which is fairly typical of Yoshino's work, though he sometimes favours prose poetry as well. The

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subject of both poems is a painting of a mother and child, and the poems are almost the same length, about thirty lines. The shape inscribed by each poem is similar as well, since both form an enclosing loop or circle, in the sense that each returns at the end to the wording of its title. In Yoshino’s poem, the same phrase is repeated three times, once in the title, again at the opening of the poem, and once more at its close. In Gunn’s poem, the one-word title is the same as the last word of the poem, though by then the word has altered somewhat in its meaning. It might be argued that this self-referential shape is not an unusual one for poetry to take, but it is not by any means a standard procedure for exactly the same wording to be repeated. In Yoshino’s poem, the repetition creates a kind of ‘frame’ around the picture-subject, whereas in Gunn’s it performs a more subversive function.

Despite the apparent similarities, there are some important differences if we examine the poems closely. On the one hand, Gunn gives a clear indication of the circumstances in which the poem was written. We know what he had been doing previously:

For several weeks I have been reading
the poetry of my juniors.
Mother doesn’t understand,
and they hate Daddy, the noted alcoholic.
They write with black irony
of breakdown, mental institution,
and suicide attempt ...

The approach to the subject is thus prepared in a manner fairly typical of a ruminative Western poem. He also observes of the poems he has been reading that what they describe “does not always seem first-hand”, and even more disdainfully that it is “very poetic poetry”. This is the background described in the first portion of the poem, and from which in the second part he is trying to escape:

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I go to the Art Museum
and find myself looking for something,
though I’m not sure what it is.

By the time that the picture itself appears (“I reach it, I recognise it...”), we are already halfway through the poem. Yoshino, on the other hand, gives us no clues to the location of the picture in his poem, or to the circumstances in which he viewed it, but goes directly to the painting:

A single picture

Lying face up
across its lower part
an infant two or three years old ...

Though we know what shape the picture is (an upright rectangle), and what it contains, we are given no indication of its age, or who might have painted it, or even in what style, though from the general context it would seem to be a painting in the Western style, even though the artist may be Japanese. Gunn, by contrast, is more specific:

An ‘early Italian altarpiece’.
The outlined Virgin, her lips
a strangely modern bow of red,
holds a doll-sized Child in her lap.

Where Yoshino enters at once into the picture and evokes it in a feeling way that not only describes it but interprets its significance (“the mother’s gentle smile / is like a ray of sunshine ...”), Gunn stands back from it and offers more objective

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observation. Gunn’s technique indeed deliberately defamiliarises the image for us (“strangely modern” and “doll-sized”), though he introduces the only colour mentioned in either poem (“bow of red”). The figures are described in more objective detail than in Yoshino’s cursory description, while at the same time the language inescapably reminds us of the viewer viewing what he sees:

He has the knowing face of an adult,
and a precocious forelock curling
over the smooth baby forehead. She
is massive and almost symmetrical.

The baby is quite different in both poems. Where Yoshino’s infant is clearly agitated and upset (“flailing its arms and legs about / screaming and in tears”), the child that Gunn describes is much more composed:

He does not wriggle, nor is he solemn.

The adult-looking homuncule that this suggests is a typical enough figure in certain early Italian paintings. The genre of representation is easily recognisable, if not the specific artwork.

The positioning of the figures differs slightly in the two pictures, though in both cases the mother is apparently seated. The Child (an abbreviation for ‘Holy Child’) in Gunn’s poem is probably sitting, or even standing, on his mother’s lap, while the infant in Yoshino’s poem is probably lying across its mother’s lap. A key difference in the way that the figures are disposed is that in the picture in Yoshino’s poem the mother and child are looking at each other, and in the other they are not. This clearly affects the different comments and responses that the poets make. While Yoshino concentrates on the look exchanged between the nursing mother and her infant, or rather the look that she bestows upon it, and

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makes from this the whole subject of his poem, Gunn more distantly observes the physical presence of the Virgin and Child in the painting. There is a coolness to Gunn’s description, and a kind of wit, that is entirely absent from the almost indescribable moment of felt exchange that Yoshino evokes, but the full import of the description does not become apparent until the closing lines:

Solidly there, mother and child
stare outward, two pairs of matching eyes
void of expression.

Then it is clear that the figures appear as in an ordinary portrait, with their eyes turned in the direction of the viewer.

The subject of the painting, though closely similar, is only ostensibly religious in the poem by Thom Gunn, who does not himself have any religious convictions. Neither apparently does Yoshino Hiroshi, whose subject is not necessarily religious though it might be thought to be so from the long interpretive second section of the poem. What is more interesting, however, is the direction in which the poems move. Both poets clearly make a didactic use of the picture they are invoking, but to different effect. For Gunn, the religious picture is certainly a model of some kind, but not of religious enlightenment. Rather it is offered as a model of secular relationships, a template, in its simplicity and calm, of the unremarkable and ordinary, and a means of escape from the exceptional and strange. Whereas for Gunn the religious subject seems, as it were, to restore his faith in secular existence, for Yoshino it is almost as if the secular subject points towards a religious understanding. This is intimated in the middle section of Yoshino’s poem, when the title of the painting has actually been named, and the unknown painter’s hand becomes “the hand of fate”, or “some overseeing presence”. The notion that mankind might “forgive or be forgiven” is decidedly religious in its overtones and implications, and we are finally told that “the mother

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/ almost without knowing / acts the part of God.” The general tenor of the poem might fit either Christianity or Buddhism, and there is no specifically Christian attribution, though the Western reader will probably tend to see the ‘God /god’ in residually Christian terms. Like Gunn, Yoshino reads the picture as a general image, but unlike Gunn he extrapolates a religious meaning from it, or at least gestures towards a meaning of that kind, where the English poet is calmed by the classic and impersonal nature of the image.

This brings us to the crux of the poems, the messages of the final lines. For Yoshino, the “sweet secret” that exists “between the separate bodies / of the mother and child”, is a supremely valuable thing, resonant and overarching. This accords deeply with his other poems, many of which concern parent-child relations.⁹ For Gunn, however, this sweetness is a sickly thing, and he draws back from the self-aggrandisement and self-indulgence of his “juniors”. The image in the picture is not in any sense a rejection of human warmth, or human relations, but an escape from the excessively subjective, as is clear from the penultimate comment: “The sight quenches, like water / after too much birthday cake.” Rather than looking at each other, as in Yoshino’s representation of them, Gunn’s mother and child “stare outward” with eyes that are “void of expression”. An objective calm is clearly what is sought, and what is recommended. The sense of balance and strength that will bring recovery is indicated by the use of words like “symmetrical” and “solid[ly]”. To “stare outward”, it is implied, is preferable to too much gazing inward.

The circumstances in which both of these writers came to poetry, the shared historical occasion of the immediate postwar period, with its emphasis on the recovery of normal life after the exigencies of wartime, has already been noted. The markedly humanist outlook that they shared because of this has also been remarked upon. But there are more specific reasons for their turning to the particular subject of the poems under examination. One of Yoshino’s earliest successes and best-known poems, “I Was Born”, a prose poem with an English

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title even in Japanese, refers to the loss of his mother when he was very young. It is written as a dramatic monologue, in the first-person, using the persona of a child. Taking an objective scientific example, the child’s father explains to him how his mother sacrificed her life so that he might have his. The circumstances in the poem may not exactly fit the author’s life,¹⁰ but his preoccupation with a mother’s love for her child emerges very early as a theme in his work. He has since written many other poems about parents and children that are replete with tender feeling. Gunn’s poetry may seem, by contrast with Yoshino’s, to be rather cold and distant, and no doubt it is intentionally so. Gunn has of course no children of his own, and has written very little about his family in any case. However, there is one coolly stated, and perhaps because of that extremely moving, poem about his mother in his last collection, *Boss Cupid* (2000). It is called “The Gas-poker”,¹¹ and describes his mother’s death by her own hand.¹² The poem begins precisely “[f]orty-eight years ago”, and once again the only colour mentioned in it is red. The repeated reference to red, which was the colour of his mother’s dressing-gown on the night of the event, itself connects this later poem with “Expression”, and suggests that the subject of the later one has been concealed within the earlier, like a hidden wound. Gunn’s mother committed suicide when he was fifteen, though he did not write about it for nearly fifty years.¹³ In the context of modern confessional poetry and prose, this reticence is quite exceptional.

Both the poets under discussion wrote or published their respective poems around the age of fifty, which is perhaps an age at which the sense one’s own of mortality starts becoming more immediate. But there are wider social circumstances to be considered. On the one hand, in Yoshino’s case, there is the high value given to *amae* or ‘sweetness’ in human relationships in Japan. The “sweet secret” that exists between the mother and child in the picture that Yoshino describes is a good example of the sweetness of dependency as Doi Takeo describes it in his famous book.¹⁴ This is something that can be appreciated by his readers without much explanation. Gunn, on the other hand, makes much more of a

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point of the kind of self-expression he is effectively rejecting. In this way, Gunn fashions his contemplation of the picture into a statement of intent. In doing so, he also reverts to or invokes the values of his English background, in which coolness and restraint are highly valued, and dramatisation of the self is thought to be unseemly. At this moment we are able to see a certain tension, in this self-described “Anglo-American” poet, between the “Anglo” and “American” sides of his poetic nature. Self-exploration is modestly embraced, while self-aggrandisement is consistently rejected. Though he has his own American poetic mentors, Gunn eschews the generous, all-encompassing and unkempt poetry of a Whitman or a Ginsberg. The keywords are clarity and control, perhaps, and his poetry is the result of deliberate and thoughtful action.

Two other poems, both by poets of the same group and generation as the poets we have been considering, might help to cast a little further light on the poems we have been examining. One, by Ôoka Makoto, is about pictures, or rather visiting a gallery. It too is a later poem, published in a 1984 collection, and has the title “*Bijutsukan e*”. It has been translated as “To Art Museums”, and has exactly the same shape as Yoshino Hiroshi’s poem, though it is a little shorter.¹⁵ It is not concerned with one picture only, but with many, and the realisation that, for a poet in a gallery, “To see is / to be seen”. Both Gunn and Yoshino are affected, and provoked into expression, by the images that they encounter. The results of those encounters are the two poems that we have examined. In neither case is such a poem unique in the poet’s work in general, though both may be unusual. One of Thom Gunn’s more popular anthology pieces, “In Santa Maria del Popolo”, is about a painting, or rather a mural by Caravaggio that decorates the wall of a church in Rome.¹⁶ Here too the artist is Italian, and the subject is religious, though it is not so much the religious as the human content that seems to interest the poet. Yoshino, in one of his more popular selections, has a poem called “*Ichimai no shashin*”, which typically takes up a family subject. Gunn is on the whole much more given to classical reference and allusion than his more plain-spoken Japanese

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contemporary, besides which there is a long tradition of poetry based on or evoking works of art in Western literature.

The other supplementary poem that it seems appropriate to add to this consideration is by Philip Larkin, and is called “An Arundel Tomb”. It too describes a work of art, though the artwork is a sculpture that adorns a medieval tomb inside a church. The “earl and countess” whose figures decorate the tomb were a married couple, and the earl in the stone image has removed one of his gloves, so that

One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

Their mutual affection is permanently preserved in the stone image that represents them:

Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace
Thrown off in helping to prolong
The Latin names around the base.

One is tempted to think that Yoshino Hiroshi might have read this poem somewhere in translation, because of the similarity in wording, although ‘sweet’ in English is a difficult word to define precisely. In this case we have the word used to describe the gesture permanently inscribed in a work of art. Moreover, the sculptor’s work, itself a “sweet commissioned grace” has been “[t]hrown off” in a way that neatly anticipates the painting “almost done for casual diversion” that Yoshino describes. Larkin’s poem ends, after some equivocation, with the line “What will survive of us is love.” Yet the image that conveys this sentiment for him is stone-cold and unmoving, and that is what makes it typical of the poet’s cold

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observing eye. The gesture and the sentiment transcend the ages, but the temperature of the proceedings in the poem, and their method of expression, as with the two poems we have studied, bespeak the time and place and generation that produced them.

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6. It appears, unaltered, in his *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), 321.
7. See his collected poems, *Yoshino Hiroshi zenshishû* 吉野弘全詩集 (Tokyo: Seidosha, 1994), 476.
8. See, for example, the poems in his popular selection *Okuru-uta* 贈るうた (Tokyo: Kashinsha, 1992), which includes the poem “Ichimai no shashin”, 50.
9. It seems that the poet’s mother died in the later part of his childhood, not when he was born.
10. Gunn, Thom, *Boss Cupid* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 10.
11. See *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry* edited by Edna Longley (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), 228.
12. He does not allude to the reason for her death in the autobiographical essay above.
13. See Doi Takeo, 土居健郎, translated by John Bester, *The anatomy of dependence* 「甘え」の構造 (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1973; first published 1971).
14. See “To Art Museums / Bijutsukan e” in Ooka Makoto, translated by Janine Beichman, *Beneath the Sleepless Tossing of the Planets* (Santa Fe: Katydid Books, 1995), 81.
15. *Collected Poems*, 93. This poem appears, together with the painting, in *Voices in the Gallery: Poems and Pictures* chosen by Dannie & Joan Abse (London: Tate Publications, 1986), 48-9.

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Note: A version of this paper was delivered at the 65th General Conference of the Japan Comparative Literature Association held at Nihon University's Mishima Campus on 14th June 2003. The subject derives from some translations of the work of Yoshino Hiroshi that the author was asked to assist Okada Hideo, Professor Emeritus of Waseda University, with by XYLO Co. Ltd. A small collection entitled *Life* has been completed but remains unpublished. However, the publisher who commissioned the translations has given permission for the English version of the poem discussed in the paper to be printed here.

一枚の絵

A Single Picture

A single picture

Lying face up

across its lower part

an infant two or three years old

flailing its arms and legs about

screaming and in tears

From above

the young mother's smiling face

gazes down upon the crying child

Though the child is crying

the mother's gentle smile

is like a ray of sunshine

it feels with its whole body

'Mother and Child'

From whosoever hand it comes

the picture seems almost done for casual diversion

as if by the hand of fate or some overseeing presence

in its calmest moment

Man seems on the whole a hapless creature

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whose very existence
is not worthy
either to forgive or be forgiven
while the infant in this picture
is accepted as it is
by the one who is its mother
and just as the mother
almost without knowing
acts the part of God
This uncommon moment
is a sweet secret
held between the separate bodies
of the mother and child

That is what it makes you think
this single picture