Thom Gunn once wrote a letter of reference for Edgar Bowers, and he evidently said afterward that the experience made him feel like Philip Sidney recommending Fulke Greville. The story got back to Bowers, who was much amused by it. Those who knew Gunn will recognize the comparison as typical of his charming way of connecting him and his contemporaries with earlier writers or with characters in his favorite novels and plays. In an autobiographical essay from 1979, “My Life Up to Now,” he reports that when his mother was pregnant with him she read all of Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. “From her,” he says, “I got the complete implicit idea, from as far back as I can remember, of books as not just a commentary on life but a part of its continuing activity.” His earliest published poem, which appeared in a school magazine when he was ten, had as its title and refrain, “A Thousand Cheers for Authors.” (Alexandre Dumas was his favorite at the time: “he’s the best I know!” Gunn says in the poem’s final non-refrain line.) By his mid-teens, he had formed a determination to join the ranks of authors himself, and after realizing this ambition as an adult, he gauged his and his fellow poets’
development and traits in light of those of the great writers who
had preceded them.

Readers of Gunn and Bowers will appreciate the aptness of the
analogy between them and Sidney and Greville. Like Sidney and
Greville, they were poet-friends whose works exhibit a similarly
high degree of accomplishment yet appeal to us in different ways.
Gunn’s poems engage us immediately, as Sidney’s do, with their
colloquial energy and lively accessibility. Like the author of *The
Arcadia* and *Astrophel and Stella*, Gunn restlessly and enter-
tainingly ranges through a variety of literary forms and tones. At
once romantic and realistic, his poems often concern human con-
duct, especially as it entails our struggle to integrate desire and
reason and to reconcile the values of community with those of
individual will. Bowers inclines, like Greville, more to metaphys-
ical topics and to philosophical and scientific matters involving
being and consciousness. He also resembles Greville in that his
poems can be difficult. They have impressive weight, feature
memorable turns of phrase and thought, and offer startling flashes
of insight into the human condition; but they sometimes present
syntactical complexities that require careful parsing and obscur-
ities that only patient rereading or special knowledge can clarify.

Gunn’s analogy also reminds us that his poetry is, like Sidney’s,
tragic-comic – especially in its sensitivity to the inextricable con-
nections between the corrupting and redemptive elements in our
loves and obsessions – whereas Bowers’s work expresses a steady,
somber awareness of human tragedy. Paradoxically, Bowers com-
municates, particularly in his later poems, a more deeply informed
hope for our fate than almost any other poet of recent times. But
he shares with Greville a Calvinist background and a Calvinist
appreciation that human knowledge is limited and that human
character is imperfect. In this respect, he resembles the Greville
who, in his biography of Sidney, described himself as someone
who “chose not to write to them on whose foot the black ox had
not already trod, as the proverb is, but to those only, that are
weather-beaten in the sea of this world.”

The Sidney-Greville analogy points as well to the different arcs
of Gunn’s and Bowers’s careers and the different degrees of public
success they enjoyed. Just as the young Sidney was the literary star
of Queen Elizabeth’s court, so Gunn began publishing poems in
leading journals and attracting favorable attention on both sides of the Atlantic while he was still an undergraduate at the University of Cambridge. In 1954, shortly before his twenty-fifth birthday, his first book, *Fighting Terms*, appeared to warm praise. *The Sense of Movement* (1957) and *My Sad Captains* (1961) consolidated his reputation. In 1962, his English publisher, Faber and Faber, issued a volume featuring his work along with that of another young poet on their list. This volume, *Selected Poems*, by Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes, was reprinted six times over the next eleven years, totaling 81,500 copies, according to Jack W. C. Hagstrom and George Bixby’s *Thom Gunn: A Bibliography, 1940–1978*. Though the books of Gunn’s middle years were reviewed less enthusiastically than his early work, critics never doubted his significance, and they responded with renewed admiration to his moving elegies, collected in 1992 in *The Man with Night Sweats*, about friends who had died in the AIDS epidemic. Throughout his writing life, he received awards, fellowships, and invitations to read his work and to teach, and he was a fixture in anthologies. Indeed, he sometimes balked at the laurels he received. He appreciated the support but felt that literary honors were too often bestowed in a predictable manner and on the usual suspects. “I just had word that I have received the Shelley Award,” he wrote to me when the Poetry Society of America announced he was the winner of that venerable prize. “The establishment giving to the establishment, I guess. Not that I am ungrateful for it. Just cynical.”

In contrast, Bowers was, to use a phrase with which Gunn describes Janet Lewis in an essay on her, “a poet almost unanthologized.” Like Greville, Bowers has never been accorded the notice his admirers believe he deserves. His first two collections, *The Form of Loss* (1956) and *The Astronomers* (1965), contain haunting poems that skillfully employ a variety of meters and stanzas. However, these books appeared when American poetry was growing increasingly confessional and expressive and was reviving and extending the experimental verse modes of early-twentieth-century poetry. *New Poets of England and America*, one of the principal anthologies of contemporary verse of the era, included Bowers in its First Series in 1957 but dropped him from its Second Series five years later. He no longer fit in. His isolation deepened after the publication of his 1973 volume, *Living Together: New
and Selected Poems, which reprints the first two books, along with a handful of later poems. Partly due to this isolation, he virtually gave up writing from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, and this silence exacerbated the neglect his work suffered. Perhaps the lowest point occurred in 1980, when he was obliged to buy up the majority of copies of a small English edition of Living Together; published three years earlier, that had been remaindered. Addressing this situation, he wrote to me, “I’ve bought about 2/3’s of my English edition, and Godine [the American publisher of the book] sold 30 copies in the last two years. Felt discouraged by those developments, though I shouldn’t. Partly my fault, certainly. You have to publish.” In one of his last poems, “The Poet Orders His Tomb,” he says simply, “I am not read.”

Even in the personal impressions they produced, Gunn and Bowers differed in ways that Sidney and Greville did. Just as Sidney was the cynosure of his era, Gunn was a rock star in the poetry world of the second half of the twentieth century. Tall and handsome, he combined courtly good manners – he was in person very thoughtful and considerate of others – with an appealingly piratical air. He wore an earring long before it was a common fashion accessory for men. On his right arm, he had a tattoo of a panther that he got in 1962 from Lyle Tuttle, the San Francisco artist who later did Janis Joplin’s tattoos and who tattooed the Allman Brothers with the mushroom design that has remained the band’s logo to this day. If Paolo Veronese painted Sidney, artists like Don Bachardy and Robert Mapplethorpe drew or photographed Gunn. The dust jackets of some of his books carry their portraits of him. Seeing these, many of us feel that, yes, this is the way a poet should look.

Bowers was just the opposite. Reluctant to call attention to himself, he dressed in a quietly tasteful Brooks Brothers manner, and with his understated charm could have passed for the kind of cultivated civil servant that Greville became for Elizabeth and James I. Though a wonderfully intelligent and lively conversationalist, he had no artistic airs. As devoted as he was to poetry, he sometimes said, as Dick Davis recalled in a memorial essay on Bowers in Poets & Writers (2000), that one is a poet only when one is writing a poem. Further, he thought that the poet’s main responsibility was to write well and to produce the best individual
poems he or she could, and he believed that it was ruinous to poets to imagine that they were more special than other people or had creative spirits that automatically conferred value on whatever they wrote. He worried that his contemporaries judged poets more by their appearance than by their work, and on one occasion during a literary dinner in Florence, his suspicion received ironic confirmation. One of the other guests, not realizing that Bowers had good Italian, remarked within his hearing that he obviously was not a real poet, in view of how well groomed he was. Such thoughtlessness irritated Bowers, but he recognized that it reflected the zeitgeist and resigned himself to the situation as best he could.

While on the subject of the folly of judging merely on appearances, I should add that Gunn, despite his outlaw image and his genuinely wild side, conducted his writing life with extraordinary meticulousness. Those who visited him at his house on Cole Street in San Francisco have noted how neatly he kept his room and library. As is shown by his notebooks and diaries archived at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, he was also an inveterate maker of to-do lists and was continually mapping out writing projects, quite a few of which he relinquished simply because there was not time enough in one life to do them all. Moreover, he maintained careful and extensive records of his publications and public appearances. In an essay in *The Threepenny Review* (2005), Wendy Lesser conveys the powerful impression produced by the thoroughness of this documentation. After Gunn’s death the previous year, and at the request of his longtime partner Mike Kitay, she and August Kleinzahler inspected Gunn’s study: “We found drawers of file folders containing every draft of every poem he had ever published, all sorted into book-manuscript order and each clipped to the finished, printed version of the poem; and we found schedules of every reading he had given for the past four decades, each with the list of poems to be read that night.”

In contrast, Bowers possessed, in spite of his conventionally tasteful wardrobe and exquisitely poised intellect, the kinds of quirks and crochets we tend to associate with the artistic temperament. As he confessed in a 1999 radio interview with Troy Teegarden’s *Society of Underground Poets*, he was “very disorderly.”
To know Bowers was to know why dry cleaners insist they are not responsible for items left for more than ninety days at their establishments. Digressive by nature, he might leave his house in the morning on an errand, only to get distracted en route by half a dozen side trips, with the result that when he returned home hours later, he had forgotten or abandoned his original mission.

A similarly haphazard or improvisational quality informed Bowers’s management of his literary life and papers. For instance, on 24 February 1946, shortly before his discharge from the army, he wrote a hurried note to his mother from his post in Berchtesgaden, Germany, telling her to be on the lookout for some boxes that he had just shipped home to Georgia. In his instructions, he asked her not to throw away the packing material because it included poems and notes for a novel he had been working on: “I mailed a couple of boxes to Decatur. When they finally arrive, do not disturb any of the loose paper in them. Better yet, leave them as they are for I tossed much of my writings in as packing and just loosely – the long box is a rifle and a sight for Daddy; that can be opened. There are binoculars in the other two. If Daddy is in a hurry for them, open ’em up – but careful of any paper that has my scrawl on it!” In later years, his chief method of filing his drafts and correspondence was to tuck them into the nearest book. Joshua Odell, a good friend of Bowers and his literary executor, once was helping him prepare linguine and clams in his kitchen from a recipe in John Sineno’s Firefighter’s Cookbook and was startled when a letter from Robert Lowell fluttered from its pages. Lowell had written to say how much he had enjoyed Bowers’s “Autumn Shade” and to invite him to dinner the next time he was in Boston. When Odell later related this incident to a mutual friend of his and Bowers’s, the friend responded, “Next time you visit, check out Marcella Hazan’s Classic Italian Cooking.” Odell followed this advice, and, sure enough, inserted toward the back of that volume was some correspondence from Yvor Winters.

Mentioning Winters reminds me that both Gunn and Bowers studied with him (though at different times) at Stanford University. Additionally, Winters suggested in his final book of criticism, Forms of Discovery (1967), that Greville’s poems are superior to Sidney’s and that Bowers’s are superior to Gunn’s. Winters does not explicitly link Gunn with Sidney or Bowers with Greville, but
he speaks of Gunn in terms like those with which he describes Sidney and speaks of Bowers in terms like those he uses for Greville. Winters applies the adjective *skillful* to both Sidney and Gunn but says they lack the concentration of such poets as Greville and Bowers, whose writing he characterizes as having “density of intellectual content” (Greville) or as being “dense” with meaning (Bowers). Lauing Greville, Winters says that his “later poems are written with a polish equal in its way to that of Sidney’s best songs and superior to that of his sonnets. They are replete with thought.” On related grounds, Winters qualifies his high esteem for Gunn’s “In Santa Maria del Popolo” by stating that, as outstanding as it is, it has not the power of the best work of several of his contemporaries, including Bowers: “There is something which Gunn lacks – lacks here and in all of his poems. It is an intensity of vision, monomaniac, if you wish, for the moment, which renders the subject – total and in all its details – a living thing, moving on the page. I am driven to metaphor, but the quality is real. Bowers has it in a number of poems; [Scott] Momaday in a few; [J. V.] Cunningham renders his abstractions in this fashion. . . . Like many of Gunn’s poems, it exists on the narrow line between great writing and skillful journalism.”

With characteristic grace, Gunn took Winters’s assessment in stride and never let it affect his feelings about Bowers. He praised Bowers whenever the opportunity presented itself and provided him with particularly critical assistance in the mid- and late 1980s. Bowers had resumed writing after his nearly ten years of silence, and when he started sending poems out to magazines again, he found himself receiving rejections from editors who did not know his work or had forgotten about it. At this juncture, Gunn came to the rescue and helped him break back into print. Gunn was a close friend of Lesser, who in 1980 had founded *The Threepenny Review* and who had at the time recruited him to be a consulting editor. Though Gunn resigned the position once the magazine established itself, he continued to contribute to it and to advise Lesser on an informal basis; and he acted as an intermediary for Bowers in placing “Thirteen Views of Santa Barbara” in the magazine’s spring 1987 issue. This at least is the inference one draws from the postcard Gunn wrote to Bowers on 1 August 1986 informing him that the magazine was taking the whole “Thirteen Views”
sequence and would use its tabloid format to feature it prominently: “Wendy Lesser is delighted to accept all the poems to print as a group in the 3P Review – she is enthusiastic about them . . . Wants to print them on 2 full facing pages.” Three years later, in 1989, Bowers won his one major literary award, the Bollingen Prize: Gunn was one of the three members of the selection committee, the other two being Alice Quinn and John Hollander. (Earlier, in 1963, Bowers’s poetry had received its first significant attention in the United Kingdom when a selection of it was included in an anthology, Five American Poets, that Gunn and Hughes edited and Faber and Faber published in London.)

With similar generosity, Gunn always spoke highly of Winters. In “On a Drying Hill,” his bittersweet essay reminiscence about Winters, Gunn describes a man whose literary judgments could be brutal yet who possessed singular independence of mind, plus extraordinary generosity as a teacher and friend. At the end of his essay, Gunn remembers Winters’s speaking of poetry “with a peculiar intimacy and dedication for the art about which he had more to tell than anyone else I have known”; the essay remains one of the best – and most accurate, according to those who knew Winters – evocations of the formidable poet-critic. Further, Gunn’s handsomely compact edition of Winters’s Selected Poems for the Library of America’s American Poets Project has helped broaden the awareness and appreciation of Winters’s verse. Issued in 2003, the year before Gunn’s death, this was the last book Gunn published.

Gunn was an equally steady advocate of Greville, whom he first seriously read when studying with Winters and whose commitment to intelligence he associated with similar convictions he found in Winters. Gunn’s verse tribute “To Yvor Winters” – drafted in 1955, published in The London Magazine the following year, and collected the year after that in The Sense of Movement – adopts imagery from one of Winters’s favorite poems by Greville, “In night when colors all to black are cast.” Like Greville’s poem, Gunn’s treats the obscurities of nighttime as symbolic of the psychic darkness that can invade the human intellect if it renounces its capacity to distinguish reality from illusion. In 1968 Gunn edited a volume of Greville’s short poems (citing in full, in his introduction, the Greville poem just mentioned), and in the ac-
knowledgments, he thanked Winters, “who some years ago first encouraged me to read Greville.”

As passionately as Gunn and Winters cared about poetry, both had a sense of humor and poked fun at each other’s opinions. One instance of this involved Elizabeth Daryush. In “On a Drying Hill,” Gunn tells of the evening when he first arrived in California in September 1954, having traveled by train across the continent. Winters met him at the Palo Alto station and took him to his and his wife’s house for dinner. After they had eaten, Winters gave him a literary pop quiz, showing him, among other poems, Daryush’s sonnet “Still Life,” and asking him what he thought of it. Gunn had never heard of Daryush. Relatively few readers had. (For that matter, relatively few know her work today.) Exhausted by his long trip and fuzzy-headed from the wine Winters had served at dinner, Gunn could make little sense of the poem or of Winters’s admiration for it. Rest and sobriety did not improve Gunn’s opinion of Daryush – a poet with a fine intelligence and gift for rhythm but whose style, with its archaisms and inversions of normal word order, is not to everyone’s taste – and once he and Winters had become friends, Gunn teased Winters about his enthusiasm for her work. In response, Winters remarked of Daryush in *Forms of Discovery*: “I have been ridiculed for praising her by various people . . . , among them Mr. Thom Gunn, who has never learned to spell her name.” When the book appeared, Gunn wrote a letter to Winters, informing him that he had enjoyed reading Winters’s analyses of various poets, including Daryush; and he reported to me some years afterward that he had purposely misspelled her name a couple of times and showily crossed it out before writing it correctly.

This episode has a poignant sequel, and it involves Bowers. *Forms of Discovery* appeared in the autumn of 1967. Winters had been suffering from cancer of the tongue. (For many years, he was a pipe smoker.) He had had surgery for the cancer in 1964, but it came back, and he finished his book only with great difficulty. When he received Gunn’s letter, he was physically depleted and nearly blind and could not answer it. However, Bowers visited Winters on the final weekend of December and wrote to Gunn the following Friday, 5 January 1968, after returning home to Santa Barbara: “I was in Palo Alto for a few days this past week-end. I
had hoped to get to the city to see you, but got involved in local affairs and gave up. I did see Arthur, of course. [Winters's full name was Arthur Yvor Winters.] He was much pleased by the letter you had written him about his book, and he asked me to write you a note, first, to apologize for his not answering you himself, and then to tell you that another biopsy has been performed and that the result is unfavorable: he will have radium treatments for three weeks, at which time the doctors will say whether or not the cancer has been arrested. He is pessimistic, which seems reasonable. I will add to the report that he asked me to make to you that I am very pessimistic indeed and will be surprised if he lives through the spring. Alas.'' Winters died twenty days later, on 25 January.

Bowers responded to Winters’s assessment of him with a grace similar to Gunn’s. Though thankful for Winters’s praise, Bowers once said he thought it might have resulted from his never having been, while at Stanford, Winters’s favorite student. He felt that students who initially impressed Winters (among them Gunn) inevitably suffered a downward revision at some later point, whereas those whose stock been lower had room to rise. Bowers and Winters respected each other from the first. In “My First Encounter with Arthur Yvor Winters,” an essay Bowers published in 1984 in *Sequoia,* he reports that when he arrived at Stanford in 1947, he made an impromptu visit to Winters’s office and asked whether he could attend Winters’s graduate poetry-writing seminar. The two chatted for a bit, after which Winters said, “All right. You look intelligent,” and admitted him to the class without so much as asking for a writing sample. However, despite his maturity of mind, Bowers was a relative late bloomer as a poet. Almost three years after meeting Bowers, Winters offered, in a letter to Harry Duncan of 1 June 1950, a judgment of Bowers’s progress, expressing an appreciation of the young man’s intellect but a certain reservation about his writing: “He is a slow developer in some ways but he has a mind which is both comprehensive and brilliant.” When Bowers left Stanford for good — after returning from a temporary teaching post at Duke University to receive his doctorate in the spring of 1953 — he had drafted some of his best early work but had published only eight poems. His “Two Poems on the Catholic Bavarians” appeared in *Factotum* in 1948. The
Hudson Review published “Palm Sunday” and “The Virgin Considered as a Picture” in 1949, and the same journal published the first three parts of “To Accompany an Italian Guidebook,” plus “Grove and Building” in 1951. By comparison, when Gunn arrived at Stanford in 1954, he already had a book to his credit, and by the time he left the university in 1958, he had published his second collection and had written many of the poems that would appear in his third book.

Gunn’s Sidney-Greville analogy also reminds us of the importance to him and Bowers of English Renaissance verse. To be sure, Bowers and Gunn read widely and deeply. Both studied Latin in school and acquired a working knowledge of several modern European languages; by their early twenties, they possessed a sound general grasp of European literature from Homer on. More specifically, both had excellent French and were as young writers much impressed by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French literature. Gunn was most taken by the great novelists – Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Marcel Proust – whereas Bowers was most engaged by Parnassian poets like Leconte de Lisle and José-Maria Heredia and by Paul Valéry; Gunn and Bowers alike admired Charles Baudelaire. In his early and mid-twenties, Gunn drew as well on the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, and both he and Bowers were arrested by Albert Camus’s struggle to find a basis for ethical conduct in a world that appeared to lack divine sanction or supervision. (When drafting “Autumn Shade,” Bowers prefaced it with an epigraph, later dropped, from the “Prometheus in the Underworld” chapter of Camus’s Summer; an epigraph that suggests the poem’s Camus-like longing for light and warmth in a world which is growing darker and colder: “Est-ce que je cède au temps avare, aux arbres nus, à l’hiver du monde?” [Is it that I surrender to the miserly times, to naked trees, to the winter of the world?].) Yet no body of work nourished Gunn and Bowers more than that of the great Elizabethan and Jacobean poets and dramatists. Shakespeare, John Donne, and Ben Jonson were the most important to them. But they also loved Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, Walter Ralegh (Gunn remarked, in conversation in 1973, that his favorite poem in English was “As you came from the Holy Land,” the wonderful ballad associated with
Ralegh), Christopher Marlowe, George Herbert, John Dowland, Thomas Campion – and Sidney and Greville.

More to my point, specific connections exist between Sidney’s work and Gunn’s and between Greville’s and Bowers’s. Gunn alludes to Sidney’s *Arcadia* on several occasions, including in “A Mirror for Poets” in his first book. As did Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Arcadia* fascinated Gunn in its presentation of a fantastical realm that nevertheless reflects the socially and politically turbulent world of Elizabethan England and that illuminates, in its very fantasy, serious issues of life and the human heart. Further, Sidney’s lyric practice shaped one of the finest of Gunn’s AIDS elegies, “Words for Some Ash.” Gunn models this poem on those song sections of *Astrophel and Stella* in which Sidney employs the seven-syllable tetrameter. Sometimes called trochaic tetrameter catalectic, sometimes headless iambic tetrameter, the measure appears now and again in Chaucer’s tetrametric verse, but it was Sidney who introduced it into Modern English. Gunn had long been intrigued by Sidney’s innovation, and in 1988, introducing “Words for Some Ash” at a reading at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, he remarked, “This is written in the seven-syllable line that Sidney introduced into the English language, and I always wanted to write a poem in this form.”

Greville appears to have influenced Bowers in a comparably particular way. This involves the distinction between “presence” and “absence” that figures in a number of Bowers’s poems. These terms have a complicated history, and Bowers’s treatment of the distinction between them changes over time. It is sufficient here to note that he generally associates presence with light, God, or some form of self-realization that transcends human weakness and mortality. He identifies absence, in contrast, with deprivation, incompletion, and death. Several of his poems, including “The Mirror” and “Autumn Shade,” involve a longing for a presence that is or has become absent from his experience or human experience overall. Other poems feature protagonists who, exploring absence in the hope of finding presence, end up embracing false gods or making absence itself a god. For instance, in “Cain,” Bowers presents the title character as a proto-scientist who kills his brother in a fevered attempt to grasp God. Attempting to break
through to ultimate reality, Cain in essence invents death. (His murder of Abel is the first instance in the Bible of someone dying.) Cain says – the poem is a dramatic monologue – “It is as if / That absence, where the generations seek / A presence, were the first science!”

Though such other recent poets as Cunningham and Philip Larkin speak of presence and absence, the terms appear most notably in Renaissance poems (such as Wyatt’s “Absence! Absenting causeth me to complain” and the lyric “Present in Absence,” sometimes attributed Donne); for any poetry reader seriously interested in the distinction between presence and absence, Greville is The Man. He squeezes every drop of thematic juice from the distinction, discussing it in relation to the presence or absence of God, of a mistress, of a monarch, or of Dame Fortune. Greville’s frequently anthologized Caelica XLV (“Absence, the noble truce”) treats the distinction in an erotic and sophistical context. His great and somber Caelica LXIX (“When all this All doth pass from age to age”) contemplates the issue – as Robert Pinsky has noted – with respect to metaphysical disorder, political corruption, and personal disappointment in love. In the third and final stanza, Greville ties everything together, lamenting, “Absence my presence is, strangeness my grace.” This statement alludes to a mistress whose gracious presence has been withdrawn and who behaves toward the poet with “strangeness” in the sense of “coldness” or “aloofness.” But the statement also suggests the loss of Christ’s presence and grace in the Eucharist and the loss of the grace and royal presence of a monarch. As Gunn did, Bowers studied Greville at Stanford with Winters, who lists, in Forms of Discovery, “Absence, the noble truce” as one of his favorites among Greville’s early poems. In addition, Bowers taught a class on Renaissance poetry for many years at the University of California, Santa Barbara, giving Greville a prominent place on the syllabus and using as a basic text for the course John Williams's anthology English Renaissance Poetry, which includes both “Absence, the noble truce” and “When all this All doth pass from age to age.” Greville is probably Bowers’s ultimate source on presence and absence.

It was plainly in a humorous spirit that Gunn compared Sidney and Greville to himself and Bowers, and it would be a mistake to
press the comparison too far. For one thing, if Gunn saw himself as Sidney-like compared to the Grevillesque Bowers, he considered himself a Greville compared to more freewheeling poets like those of the Black Mountain school and the Beats. In “My Life Up to Now,” he comments, discussing his friendship with Robert Duncan and noting that Duncan’s approach to poetry is more purely intuitive than his own, “If a certain amount of mutual influence has taken place, it may sound rather as if Fulke Greville and Shelley had been contemporaries capable of learning from each other.” What is more, Gunn edited, as has been noted, a volume of Greville’s verse. And when that volume was published, he humorously identified himself with Greville, inscribing, with a touch of archaic orthography, a copy of the book to Kitay: “To Mike – / I thought you might like to / read some of my early poems, / so here they are wth love / Thulke Gunville / xx / Oct 68.”

Another reason for not pressing the Gunn-is-to-Sidney-as-Bowers-is-to-Greville analogy is simply that the two twentieth-century poets did not have the deep personal connections that the two Renaissance poets did. Few writers were as close, intellectually and emotionally, as Sidney and Greville were. Coeval – both born in 1554 – they were fast friends from the age of ten, when they met at Shrewsbury School. As young men, they went together to court. They shared their passion for literature and politics. They even got into trouble together when they tried to sneak away from England, without the queen’s permission, on Francis Drake’s 1585 expedition to Cape Verde and the Spanish West Indies. Sidney’s death in 1586 at the battle of Zutphen was, as Gunn notes in the “Life and Works” section of his edition of Greville, “the most deeply affecting event in Greville’s life.” Shortly before his own death in 1628, Greville composed an epitaph for himself, in which he listed the three defining relationships of his life. They make a crescendo, with the most important relationship coming last: “Servant to Queen Elizabeth, Councillor to King James, Friend to Sir Philip Sidney.”

Such kindredness of spirit was not possible for Bowers and Gunn. They were five years apart in age, Bowers being born 1924 and Gunn in 1929. They grew up in different countries, and their professional lives, aesthetic tastes, and temperaments led them to divergent paths and places. Still, if they were not as close as Sidney
and Greville, they knew and admired each other and followed each other’s work for upward of half a century. Both took the art of poetry seriously and each found it cheering that the other was alive and trying to write good poems. Typical of this fellow feeling is a note Gunn wrote to Bowers when the latter published “Living Together” in *The Denver Quarterly*’s summer 1967 issue. “How lovely,” Gunn says in quick note to Bowers, “to read a poem like ‘Living Together.’ You really do it, time after time, and it is worth it, waiting between the poems, for something like this. This is simply a fan letter, which you certainly should not answer, to say how happy your poem has made me.”

A photograph, reproduced here, of the two together, captures the physical contrast and mutual sympathy between Gunn and Bowers. Charles Gullans, their friend and fellow poet, took it at
Bowers’s house on Miramar Beach in Santa Barbara on 22 February 1968, on the occasion of Gunn’s visiting the University of California, Santa Barbara to give a poetry reading.

No less than Gunn did, Bowers appreciated that they shared certain fundamental beliefs but embodied different outlooks on writing and life. As has been mentioned, he was amused by, and recognized the appropriateness of, Gunn’s Sidney-Greville remark when it was reported to him. He in turn offered his own take on Gunn on two occasions.

The first occurred in 1989 when Bowers was asked for a statement about Gunn for *A Few Friends*, a festschrift that Douglas Chambers edited in honor of Gunn’s sixtieth birthday. (The title is a phrase from Gunn’s “My Sad Captains.”) Bowers responded with a single sentence: “I think of Thom as our Montaigne.” Like certain lines and passages in Bowers’s poetry, this statement is condensed to the point of being cryptic, but Bowers is probably implying that Gunn resembles the great French essayist in his wide-ranging curiosity and his willingness to take up almost any subject – from Saint Martin of Tours to bikers and leather bars – and observe it with respectful interest. Bowers is probably indicating as well that Gunn is, like Montaigne, wary of authority and opinions, even his own authority and opinions.

This is not to say that Gunn is a skeptic. He might sympathize with the famous motto, *Que sçais-je* (What do I know?), that Montaigne had struck on his personal medal, but he would not consider it an adequate guide for conduct. Gunn’s spirit is more in keeping with one of the other mottoes we associate with Montaigne – the one he inscribed on a beam of his library in Périgord: *Iudicio alternante* (Judgment shifts). Gunn, that is, often moves back and forth on topics that arrest him, looking at them from various angles and modifying his thoughts about them in light of different situations and changing contexts. For instance, Gunn’s “The Idea of Trust” explores that concept doubtfully, noting that it can involve gullibility and a denial of personal privacy, whereas “His Rooms at College” examines positive ways in which trust can open us to the minds of others and engage us in experiences beyond those centered on the self. Similarly, such poems as “The
Discovery of the Pacific” explore the virtues of improvisation — of responding on the fly to evolving situations — while “Improvisation” finds him criticizing his own facile (as he sees it) advocacy of the quality and noting that a completely improvised life, such as that of the desperate homeless man he describes in the poem, is not fresh and surprising but brutish and chaotic.

Subsequently, in a poem titled “Someone in San Francisco,” Bowers offered a deeper and richer impression of Gunn and suggested some of his feelings about their relationship as poets. Bowers first published the poem in 1996 in *Zyzzyva*, a San Francisco arts journal, and he included the poem the following year in his *Collected Poems*:

The city is himself, the one and many,
Familiar, unpredictable, and sovereign,
The brief forever visited a lifetime,
Given, claimed, tried, enjoyed, and then resigned.

What Orpheus would bring back from the busy
Solitude that he charms the one undaring
Self that is loyal simply to its past?
Novelty’s treason excites the truer quest.

Wonderful, in North Beach or Chinatown,
A fragment, pure of history, will reflect
The possible — his, a summer consciousness
Eager as time abroad in wind and rain —

Another fiery piece of all the pieces
Scattered and shining, presences that he
Would gather as a new kaleidoscope
To be a one other than what he was.

Because the protagonist that Bowers creates is not merely an individual but also a comprehensive figure whose traits are or could be characteristic of a number of people, it would be wrong to urge that this poem concerns Gunn alone. Nevertheless, he is in the poem, even if the precise extent of his presence is subject to debate or interpretation. He resembles the comprehensive figure in too many respects, and too many of the poem’s details remind us of his work, for the correspondences to be a coincidence.
To begin with, Gunn is, like the poem’s protagonist, an adventurous poet, an Orpheus who avidly explores the particulars around him and assembles from them a unique and shifting vision of the world and his place in it. Gunn himself refers, in “On a Drying Hill,” to his “promiscuous love of experience,” and he adds, “I am still a romantic, thinking with Keats that ‘nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced – Even a Proverb is no proverb till your Life has illustrated it.’”

Gunn is, moreover, a poet of urban life. When Bowers begins his poem by identifying his protagonist with his environment, “The city is himself,” we remember how richly Gunn relishes cities. “I love streets,” Gunn commented in 1995 in an interview with Clive Wilmer in The Paris Review. “I could stand on the street and look at people all day, in the same way that Wordsworth could walk around the lakes and look at those things all day.” Indeed, when Bowers, in the second line of his poem, characterizes San Francisco as “Familiar, unpredictable, and sovereign,” he echoes Gunn’s early poem “In Praise of Cities,” in which Gunn personifies them as “Familiar and inexplicable.” Bowers seems also to echo Gunn when he speaks of his protagonist’s appetite for “The possible” – for the potentials of life – and of his “Eager” openness to “all the pieces / Scattered and shining” of his city. Such observations recall passages in Gunn’s poems like these in “A Map of the City”:

I hold the city here, complete:
And every shape defined by light
Is mine, or corresponds to mine,
Some flickering or some steady shine.

By the recurrent lights I see
Endless potentiality,
The crowded, broken, and unfinished!
I would not have the risk diminished.

More specifically, Gunn literally is (or was while living) “Someone in San Francisco.” He was a resident of the city for more than four decades, having settled there permanently in 1961, and he consecrated much of his Orphic power to describing it in all its wonder and energy. In “My Life Up to Now,” he tells us that he fell in love with the city shortly after arriving at Stanford: “I went
several times into San Francisco. . . . And I remember walking
along Columbus Avenue [a main thoroughfare in North Beach,
one of the two neighborhoods Bowers mentions in his poem] . . .
thinking that the ultimate happiness would be for Mike [Kitay]
and me to settle in this city.”

In this respect, Bowers’s mention of particular places in the
city – North Beach and Chinatown – reminds us that Gunn not
only wrote many poems about San Francisco, he also often spec-
ified their settings by giving them titles with the names of the
city’s streets: “Market at Turk,” “Taylor Street,” “Pierce Street,”
and “Coffee on Cole.” In other poems, such as “San Francisco
Streets” and “Night Taxi,” Gunn presents the city’s districts as
living entities that define the people who work within them. In
*The Paris Review* interview, Gunn himself speaks of the pleasure
he took, in writing “Night Taxi,” in sweeping verbally back and
forth across San Francisco, naming places at all points of the
compass: “China Basin to Twin Peaks, / Harrison Street to the
Ocean.”

We are also reminded of Gunn, and hear additional echoes of
his poetry, when Bowers characterizes his protagonist as compris-
ing “the one and many” and as loving “fragment[s]” that “reflect”
the sunlight, and as being enchanted with “all the pieces / Scat-
tered and shining” that he observes around him. Such words and
phrases recall especially Gunn’s “Sunlight.” This is a hymn to the
sun that Gunn wrote after attending the landmark Human Be-In
in Golden Gate Park on 14 January 1967, an event also attended by
Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, Timothy Leary, Gary Snyder, and
other figures of the counterculture of the time. Here are the
poem’s first two stanzas:

Some things, by their affinity light’s token,
Are more than shown: steel glitters from a track;
Small glinting scoops, after a wave has broken,
Dimple the water in its draining back;

Water, glass, metal, match light in their raptures,
Flashing their many answers to the one.
What captures light belongs to what it captures:
The whole side of a world facing the sun . . .
And when Bowers says that his protagonist ranges “abroad in wind and rain,” we may remember that Gunn’s poems often celebrate those who revel in the elements. In this regard, we think of the biker roaring happily through “the walls of rain” in “The Unsettled Motorcyclist’s Vision of His Death” or of Gunn’s remembrance, in “The Exercise,” of himself in adolescence, returning from the little lake near his home: “The wind blew against me till / I tingled with knowledge.” We think, too, of the eponymous heroine of “Yoko,” a Newfoundland dog who, out for a walk in New York City with her human, “plunge[s]” here and there, “investigating it all” until they reach the Hudson River piers and stand “braced against the wind.”

As well as echoing phrases and passages in Gunn’s work, “Someone in San Francisco” also alludes to concepts or topics that preoccupy him. For instance, when Bowers suggests that his protagonist regards pleasure as transitory – as “Given, claimed, tried, enjoyed, and then resigned” – and seeks novelty, he may be hinting at Gunn’s reputation for romantic or sexual freewheeling. Since his death, critics have exaggerated this side of Gunn, but it was real, and he writes about it in early poems like “Modes of Pleasure” (“New face, strange face, for my unrest”), as well as in such later poems as “Sweet Things.”

So, too, we may be reminded of Gunn when Bowers implies that his protagonist is dismissive of being or entertaining “one undaring / Self.” (Because Bowers’s Orpheus is returning from “busy / Solitude” rather than a sorrowful Underworld, I take it that “the one undaring / Self” refers not to a Eurydice the protagonist might “bring back” from his adventures but to a hypothetical version of himself that he rejects. Either way, Bowers’s basic point is the same: his protagonist will not be tied to a single safety-loving self.) Gunn frequently speaks of daring and risk, seeing those qualities as necessary to our experiencing life fully. To cite The Paris Review interview once more, he notes, “Children take risks in their games, which ultimately strengthen their bodies. . . . Active behavior is sometimes a bit physically risky. You know, when you go swimming, you could get drowned.” This idea appears in poetic form in “Three,” in a passage in which Gunn describes a man toweling off after an invigorating swim in the ocean:
The pull and risk
Of the Pacific's touch is yet with him:
He kicked and felt it brisk,
Its cold live sinews tugging at each limb.

Gunn also develops this idea in “A Map of the City” (“I would not have the risk diminished”) and “On the Move” (where the motorcyclists “dare a future from the taken routes”). Even addressing disturbing and ambiguous situations, Gunn posits that risk is necessary to human development. For example, in “In Time of Plague,” Gunn writes of meeting two attractive strangers during the AIDS epidemic who offer to share a needle and get high with him. Gunn remarks, “I love their daring, their looks, their jargon / and what they have in mind”; and while he ultimately declines their invitation, he entertains the possibility that they are, however reckless, “properly / testing themselves against risk, / as a human must, and does.”

Bowers’s delightful characterization of his protagonist’s experience as “busy / Solitude” could also apply to Gunn. In speaking of “solitude,” Bowers is in part indicating that everybody encounters loneliness at some time or other. In his essay “Hawthorne and the Extremes of Character,” in The Sewanee Review (1994), Bowers remarks, “Solitude cannot itself ever be overcome completely, since it is a condition of being alive.” One trick of survival, as Bowers suggests in “Someone in San Francisco,” is to charm solitude – to beguile it – so as not to be diminished by it. One way of doing this is to stay busy and active, and Gunn often emphasizes the virtue of living actively, even when we feel or are “solitary,” to cite the adjective with which he characterizes his existential St. Paul in “In Santa Maria del Popolo.”

Gunn’s emphasis on action is especially notable in his early poems. We see it in the titles of his first two books, Fighting Terms and The Sense of Movement, and in many of the poems in the latter volume. For example, “On the Move” – the first poem in the book and one of Gunn’s signature works – concludes with the line “One is always nearer by not keeping still.” The book’s second poem is titled “The Nature of an Action.” And in “Merlin in the Cave: He Speculates with a Book,” the protagonist Merlin asserts, “But I must act, and make / The meaning in each movement that I take.”
To act can mean not only to take initiative but also to assume a role, and Bowers may, in speaking of his protagonist’s active, self-transformative qualities, be remembering that the young Gunn was much interested in role-playing. “Even in bed I pose,” begins “Carnal Knowledge,” the first poem in the original 1954 edition of his first book, *Fighting Terms*. And as Gunn relates in his essay “Cambridge in the Fifties,” he developed during his college years, “a rather crude theory of what I called ‘pose.’ . . . The theory of pose was this: everyone plays a part, whether he knows it or not, so he might as well deliberately design a part, or a series of parts, for himself.” This theory was reinforced by his love of the theater and by his friendship, at Cambridge and afterward, with the actor Tony White. In “Talbot Road,” a poem first published in 1981 in *London Magazine* and collected the next year in *The Passages of Joy*, Gunn remembers White — who by this time had died — and their days together at school:

As students
enwrapt by our own romanticism,
innocent poet and actor we had posed
we had played out parts to each other.

Gunn’s concern with role-playing ties in with another element of Bowers’s protagonist and with the protagonist’s not being content with one undaring self. This additional element is protagonist’s desire “To be a one other than what he was.” Many of Gunn’s poems urge that we must elect the self or selves we are and that that self or those selves are capable of transformation. In Gunn’s early poems, such as “Vox Humana,” this idea is worked out with reference to the existentialist principle that there is no abstract human nature: we become who we are by will and choice. In *Moly*, the masterpiece of his middle years, he explores the idea with reference to the metamorphoses that the self may experience under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs. In “Street Song,” one of the book’s central poems, a young drug dealer peddles his wares by promising the purchaser that they will enable him or her to transform “Into whichever self you choose.” And in the book’s title poem, the speaker is a member of Odysseus’s crew who has been transformed into a pig by Circe and who seeks the Moly, the magically potent herb, in hopes of transforming himself into, or
back into, his proper humanity: “From this fat dungeon I could rise to skin / And human title, putting pig within.” (Gunn once mentioned in conversation that he adopted the key phrase for this couplet from the passage in John Fletcher and Shakespeare’s *Two Noble Kinsmen* [1.1.231–32] where Theseus reflects that men cease to be men when they sacrifice their loyalties and responsibilities to their sexual desires: “Being sensually subdued, / We lose our human title.”)

As a footnote to these observations, we might speculate that the Gunn of the *Moly* poems could be in Bowers’s mind when he refers to his protagonist’s assembling “a new kaleidoscope” from the fiery fragments he encounters in his sunlit city. During San Francisco’s psychedelic heyday in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the kaleidoscope served as a symbol for the changes in perception that occur during an LSD trip.

Gunn’s concern with role-playing, self-definition, and self-transformation was not simply an intellectual-literary matter or a product of artistic inquiry. A deeper source of the concern existed, one that Clive Wilmer explores in a remarkable essay that appeared in the *TLS* in 2008 and that takes its title, “The Self You Choose: Thom Gunn in Retrospect,” from “Street Song.” As Wilmer reports, he discovered after Gunn’s death that the name Gunn received at birth in 1929 was William Guinneach Gunn. Only in 1949, toward the end of his two years of national service in the army, did he change his name by deed-poll to Thomson William Gunn. Though he had been nicknamed “Tom” or “Tommy” as a boy, Wilmer persuasively argues that Gunn officially altered his name — and chose the unusual spelling of his first name — in response to difficult circumstances within his family when he was growing up. His parents divorced when he was ten, and his mother, with whom he lived after the divorce and who encouraged his interest in reading and writing, took her life when he was fifteen. These events left him with a deep distrust of his father. Though Gunn’s brother settled, following their mother’s death, with the father — by then remarried and with a second family — Gunn went to live with two of his mother’s sisters. His original middle name is the Gaelic form of “Gunn” and evidently signified for his father the family’s Scottish origin. In shedding this part of his name, Gunn was evidently distantly himself from his father
and his father’s lineage. Most important, Gunn’s mother’s maiden name was Thomson, and his adopting it represented not only an assertion of independence but also an expression of gratitude for her love and an affirmation of allegiance to her memory. In an interview with James Campbell in January 1999, Gunn recalled going to Cambridge after his army service and adopting the unusual spelling of his first name. Without discussing the personal circumstances behind the change — he was always reluctant to speak publicly about such matters — he said, “I can now see that this was an attempt to become a new person; it was my announcement that I was going to be somebody new.”

To return to “Someone in San Francisco,” Bowers’s description of his protagonist’s interest in self-transformation and in being different selves is also relevant to Gunn’s stylistic restlessness. Gunn is an outstanding crafter of verse, and he manages traditional meter with sensitive, conscientious accuracy. In The Paris Review interview he commented, “I do think . . . that a meter should be correct. I don’t like a sloppy meter, which is what most people write nowadays.” However, Gunn also was drawn to forms that seemed to him to be genuine alternatives to traditional English accentual-syllabic measures. Gunn began to experiment with purely syllabic verse in the late 1950s. By the mid-1960s, he had transferred this experimental impulse to free verse. (He later described his syllabic work as a transitional stage on the way to free verse.) In “My Life Up to Now,” Gunn explains he adopted different types of poetry in hopes of developing new material and expressing new attitudes: “Writing in a new form almost necessarily invite[s] new subject-matter. . . . Free verse invites a different style of experience, improvisation.” This is surely true, yet writing in a variety of prosodic modes also suited his interest in assuming different roles.

In starting out with metered forms and in subsequently exploring free verse, Gunn followed a course like that of a number of other poets who emerged after World War II. However, unlike most of these other poets, he never set meter aside but continued to turn his hand to it more or less regularly, even during those periods when open forms most attracted him. And during several critical phases of his middle and later years, including the time when he composed the poems for Moly (roughly 1967–70) and
when he wrote the AIDS elegies (roughly 1984–89), meter was again the primary and absorbing instrument it had been for him as a young poet. This is not say that his preferences in these matters were purely stylistic. In “My Life Up to Now,” he speculates that one reason he used meter for the Moly poems is that his experiences with LSD were unstructured, and meter helped him focus his material. Nor would it be right to suggest that his work in open forms is less significant than his work in meter. The sinuous free verse of “Touch” and “The Cherry Tree” has its own beauties. Appealing, too, is the more relaxed and conversational—but still sharply observant—free verse of such poems of social observation or satire as “Adultery,” “Sweet Things,” “As Expected,” and “The Dump.” However, Gunn’s metered work more profoundly engages its material, a situation of which he took note at a reading he gave for the Lannan Foundation in 1994: “I find I can probably reach deeper into the subject with metrical poetry . . . than I can in free verse.”

A second Orpheus figures in “Someone in San Francisco.” This is the poet writing the poem, Bowers himself. If he is not explicitly in the poem, his is the observing intelligence behind it. And just as Bowers the Poet resembles and differs from Gunn the Poet, so he resembles and differs from the poet he describes in his poem.

One of the key differences is that Bowers is as a poet a single self who is loyal to his past. This self is hardly “undaring.” Bowers believed, no less than Gunn did, that life presents risks and that if we are to engage it fully, we must take at least some of them. Indeed, in “Dark Earth and Summer,” one of his most memorable early poems, Bowers characterizes life as “The warm variety of risk” in contrast to the “unbodied cold” of death. And in “Spaces,” one of his final poems, he suggests that our human adventure consists of “hazard[s] in uncertainty” and that uncertainty itself, stimulating our curiosity and desire for knowledge, is “The discipline of wonder.” Nevertheless, even as Bowers explores chance and risk and the instabilities of experience, his work features a high degree of intellectual and stylistic continuity and coherence.

These are most obviously evident in Bowers’s prosody. Throughout his career, he sticks to traditional metrics rather than exhibiting the prosodic restlessness we see in Gunn (or, presumably, in the
poet protagonist of “Someone in San Francisco”). This is not to say that Bowers does not develop as a writer. He does. He grows from decade to decade, and his formal preferences change in the process. His earlier work mostly comprises individual lyrics in rhymed stanzas (“The Stoic,” “The Astronomers of Mont Blanc,” “Afternoon at the Beach”), whereas his middle and later work consists chiefly of blank verse poems grouped into sequences (“Autumn Shade,” “Witnesses,” “Thirteen Views of Santa Barbara,” “Mazes”). Likewise, as Bowers matures, his formal dexterity does, too. To demonstrate such development, we need only compare Bowers's “The Prince,” composed in 1955, with “For Louis Pasteur,” which he wrote in 1987. Both depict efforts of the human mind to oppose barbarity and ignorance. However, “The Prince,” though admirably thoughtful, is a somewhat stiff dramatic monologue in the manner of Robert Browning or Edwin Arlington Robinson, while “For Louis Pasteur” is one of the great poems of the twentieth century – a moving tour de force in which the poet, in his own intelligent voice, ranges back and forth across different epochs, seamlessly integrating personal and generational history with the history of humanity. Yet Bowers composes both poems in the same blank verse medium. The difference is that, over the course of thirty-two years of thought and practice, he has learned to manage the iambic pentameter line with greater fluency. He has learned how to suit it to a far wider range of rhythm, observation, and insight.

Bowers's loyalty to a single self does not deny the contradictions or conflicts that may occur within it. Many poems of Bowers's middle period, including “A Song for Rising,” “Autumn Shade,” and “Living Together,” concern what might be called the divided self. In such poems, Bowers explores the distinction and conflict between the actual self he is and a more ideal self he wishes to become. As Bowers describes the problem, the actual self is afflicted and frustrated by limitations and flaws. In contrast, the ideal self possesses “fullness of being” – to cite a phrase Bowers applied to this issue during his interview with The Society of Underground Poets – toward which the actual self struggles with intermittent and imperfect success. Yet unlike the kaleidoscopic and ever-changing selves sought or experienced by the protagonist of “Someone in San Francisco,” the actual and ideal selves are not
poses or roles to be tried on and then discarded for other poses or roles. They are integrally joined in the human psyche. Even as the ideal self is distinguishable from the actual self, it exists, Bowers notes, as a potential within the actual self; and it is possible at times for the actual self to attract or access the ideal self. As Bowers said after a reading in 1995 at the University of Provence Aix-Marseille, one reason a poet employs formal devices—meter, rhymes, stanzas, and the like—is that doing so “attracts the better self that wants to write the poem.” He added that when he reads a successful poem he has written, it is as if the poem has been composed by someone more talented and resourceful than he: “Wow, I wrote that! So there’s somebody better than I am in me.”

Nor does Bowers’s loyalty to a single self deny the flux of our world and our experience. Rather, he acknowledges change, and our frequent desire for it. But he also urges that change is simply one side of a coin, the other side of which is constancy or continuity. In his view, an individual existence is, to cite the lovely oxymoron from “Someone in San Francisco,” a “brief forever.” Time involves not just a linear succession of moments but also a depth of being, in which all moments co-endure in their wonder and reality. In “On Edmund Wrobleski’s Concern for His Patient,” Bowers makes these points when he describes how a young doctor, listening to the weak heart of the elderly man he examines, can perceive “rising from the flow and ebb of time / Old youth and beauty.” And the poem concludes by observing that the doctor, in consulting with his patient, participates in the long, ongoing effort of our species to fight the diseases that afflict us. Punning on “still” (in the senses of “remaining,” “always,” and “quietly attentive”), Bowers describes the doctor’s “faithful meditation” as “still present / At Epidaurus for the festival / Of Aesculapius and the tragic muse.” Likewise, in “On Clive Wilmer’s Visit to the Wildfowl Refuge,” the poem that follows “On Edmund Wrobleski’s Concern for His Patient” in For Louis Pasteur, Bowers speaks of a boy who

Imagines life just like the Roman tales
He reads at school, where change is spirit’s art
And rituals of change its permanence,
His vita brevis long as they are long.

With these points in mind, we can recognize that, as warmly as Bowers portrays the protagonist of “Someone in San Francisco,” he
introduces cautionary notes into his description of him. A number of lines and words cut both ways at once. A case in point is “Novelty’s treason excites the truer quest.” This line reminds us that novelty can be refreshing and stimulating, but it also reminds us that the desire for novelty can tempt us to “treason” against others and our past.

“Busy,” too, is ambiguous, in the context of Bowers’s poem and work. Bowers regards activity and change as normal parts of life, but he repeatedly observes that they can be destructive if they are driven merely by thoughtless passion or appetite. In “On Dick Davis’ Reading, California State University, Los Angeles,” Bowers says of the audience listening to Davis’s poems, particularly the ones that concern mythology, “they can see / The gods again, immortal in the error / Disfiguring and busying the world.” And Bowers suggests that the world of ancient gods and heroes is akin, in its chaotic violence, to “the choleric tense freeway” – the Hollywood Freeway through downtown Los Angeles – by which he and Davis have traveled to the reading. Busy-ness and change become meaningful and constructive only when we shape and guide them purposively, as Davis does in his poetry.

Readers of Bowers will also recognize as ambiguous his statement about his protagonist’s delight in a fragment or fragments “pure of history.” Though the primary meaning of pure is “free from contamination,” the word can also signify disconnection from normal human life or reasonable feeling. And this latter meaning is the one that the word often carries in Bowers’s poetry. “Purest effect and cause” is, for example, how Bowers describes the icy, remote deity in “Adam’s Song to Heaven.” By the same token, history is critically important to Bowers. One of the formative experiences of his life was serving in the army’s Counterintelligence Corps in Europe in War World II, and being assigned to the denazification program, after Germany’s surrender, in Hitler’s Bavarian retreat in Berchtesgaden. Certainly, no poet of his time wrote more insightfully about politics and the abstract fury of governments to sacrifice their citizens to warfare and slaughter. These were subjects that occupied him from his earliest poems (“Aix-la-Chapelle, 1945,” “The Prince,” “The Stoic: For Laura von Corten”) to his late work (“For Louis Pasteur,” “Clear-seeing,” “Clothes”).
Despite these reservations, Bowers is not attempting to score points against the protagonist of “Someone in San Francisco,” much less against Gunn, to the extent that the latter is in the poem. As has been observed, Bowers renders not merely an individual but a comprehensive human type. Further, Gunn differs from Bowers’s protagonist in some of the ways in which Bowers does himself. For instance, Gunn is not ahistorical. As did Bowers, he responded early and often to the suicidal and homicidal frenzy of World War II. Cases in point are such poems as “Claus von Stauffenberg” from My Sad Captains and “Epitaph for Anton Schmidt” and “Berlin in Ruins” from Touch. Gunn responded as well to public crises in the American scene during his life in the United States. In “Iron Landscapes” from Jack Straw’s Castle, he depicts the republic’s “dream of righteous permanence” as having been degraded by the Nixon administration. In “An Invitation,” first published in 1985 in The Threepenny Review and collected in The Man with Night Sweats, he describes, among other things, the growing unemployment and homelessness that, in the Reagan years of the 1980s, disfigured and destroyed the street life of many of the country’s urban centers. (Gunn found particularly disturbing the cutting back on and closing of medical facilities for the mentally ill, on the dubious grounds that the patients would benefit from being, in the cant of that time, “returned to the community.”) As has been noted, Gunn also wrote movingly about the AIDS crisis. And in “Eastern Europe (February 1990),” part of Boss Cupid’s sequence of epigrams titled “Jokes, etc.,” he mordantly speaks of conditions in the Warsaw Pact nations after the fall of the Soviet Union:

“The iron doors of history” give at last,
And we walk through them from a rigid past.
Free! free! we can do anything we choose
– Eat at MacDonald’s, persecute the Jews.

Nor is Gunn any more a purist than Bowers is. If Bowers has mixed emotions about the “pure,” Gunn treats with similar ambivalence “innocence.” The quality can be bracing and radiant, as it is in “Sunlight,” yet it can also involve calamity, as it does in “The Sand Man,” which describes a former labor organizer whom thugs hired by the bosses beat so badly that his brain was perma-
nently injured. As Gunn says of him, his “damaged consciousness / Reduced itself to that mere innocence / Many have tried to repossess.” And in “Innocence,” the quality is downright evil, embodied as it is in a Nazi storm trooper. The storm trooper possesses strength and confidence — “The egotism of a healthy body” — but he is “ignorant of the past” and of the destructive elements in German culture that have produced the Third Reich. Though he has “Courage, endurance, loyalty, and skill,” these virtues have been distorted from their proper ethical ends and express “a morale” rather than “morality.” As Gunn writes at the end of the poem:

When he stood near the Russian partisan
Being burned alive, he therefore could behold
The ribs wear gently through the darkening skin
And sicken only at the Northern cold,
Could watch the fat burn with a violet flame
And feel disgusted only at the smell,
And judge that all pain finishes the same
As melting quietly by his boots it fell.

It is also the case that Bowers shares several key qualities with the protagonist of “Someone from San Francisco” and with Gunn — again, so far as Gunn figures in the portrait Bowers draws. For one thing, Bowers loved San Francisco with a joy like his protagonist’s and Gunn’s. Soon after arriving at Stanford, Bowers began exploring the city, and he expresses his enchantment with it in a letter to his Aunt Jennie (the real-life model for his poem, “Mary”) on 22 December 1947: “Concerning San Francisco, I must go ahead and rather bluntly admit that, as far as I am concerned, it is probably the best city in the country”; and he goes on to praise the city’s situation (“beautifully located . . . surrounded by water”); its hills (“fantastically steep”); its “cosmopolitan” character (he particularly mentions, as he does in “Someone in San Francisco,” its “large China Town, almost in the heart of the city”); its lovely shops and department stores; its theaters and symphony; and, of course, “the cable cars [which] give the dangerous and quixotic spirit that Parisian traffic gives.” Further, Bowers moved to San Francisco permanently after his retirement from U.C. Santa Bar-
bara in 1991, and in his own Orphic capacity, he writes about the city not only in “Someone in San Francisco” but also in “Illusions” and “Breakages,” the latter involving that quintessential San Francisco experience, an earthquake.

Bowers also resembles Gunn and the protagonist of “Someone in San Francisco” in his love of the world — its warmth and sunlight, its wind and rain. This love appears touchingly in “An Afternoon at the Beach,” a poem in which he casts himself as an Orpheus going to the Underworld to visit a deceased friend. Here the setting is not urban but pastoral. It is the beach in Santa Barbara on which the cottage in which Bowers lived for three decades was located. But he expresses the same affinity for warmth, wind, and sunlight — and for life — that we find in Gunn and in the protagonist of “Someone in San Francisco”:

I'll go among the dead to see my friend.
The place I leave is beautiful: the sea
Repeats the winds’ far swell in its long sound
And, there beside it, houses solemnly
Shine with the modest courage of the land . . .

Finally, the very allusion to Orpheus that Bowers makes in “Someone in San Francisco” suggests another important affinity that he felt with Gunn. Ovid tells us (Metamorphoses, 10.78–85) that Orpheus, after his tragic relationship with Eurydice, had no further relations with women but centered his affections on young men. Bowers and Gunn were both gay, and in addition to their both writing at times about younger lovers (Bowers in such poems as “Chaco Canyon” and Gunn in poems like “San Francisco Streets” and “Front Door Man”), they followed much the same course in their development as gay poets.

When Bowers and Gunn began to publish, the social and literary climate discouraged openly gay writing. It will be remembered that England did not decriminalize homosexuality until the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, and passage of the act occurred only after a decade of struggle. When in 1957, the Wolfenden Committee had issued its Report on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution and urged that “homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence,” its recommendation encountered bitter opposition from many quarters. And
though the decriminalization of homosexuality in the United States started earlier than in England, it occurred only fitfully and on a state-by-state basis, beginning with Illinois in 1961. Comprehensive legal reform waited until 2003, when the Supreme Court, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, ruled that sodomy laws violated the Fourteenth Amendment.

Hence when, in the 1950s and into the 1960s, Bowers and Gunn wrote about gay experience, especially gay sexual experience, they were circumspect, adopting a strategy that had been employed by Auden and other gay poets of earlier generations. In his essay “Homosexuality in Robert Duncan’s Poetry,” Gunn explains the strategy thus: “[The] method was for a poet to address his work to an unspecified ‘you,’ giving an occasional ambiguous hint about what was really going on to those in the know only.” We see this strategy in such early love poems by Gunn as “The Beach Head” and “Thoughts on Unpacking,” and we see it as well in Bowers’s early love poems, such as “Amor Vincit Omnia.” The beloved is “you.” The pronoun is, to use Gunn’s word, unspecified. It can read as referring to either sex.

As men and poets, Gunn and Bowers welcomed the Gay Liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the increasing sympathy for gay rights allowed them to deal explicitly with gay subject matter. Gunn felt that a watershed moment for him occurred in his writing of the title poem of *Jack Straw’s Castle*, a poem after which he placed the date “1973–4.” (Of the several hundred poems Gunn collected, he dates in this manner only one other poem: “To Isherwood Dying,” below which appears the note “Christmas week, 1985.”) The final section of “Jack Straw’s Castle” portrays two men in bed, and their living, tangible intimacy represents a positive antidote to the nightmarish visions in the earlier parts of the poem. So, too, Bowers begins in the 1970s to grow more explicit in his love poetry. In “Wandering,” first published in *The Southern Review* in 1971, he refers to a lover-antagonist as “he.” And after emerging from his silence between 1977 to 1986 Bowers introduces explicitly gay contexts in such poems as “Chaco Canyon,” the “Mazes” sequence, and “John.” The assessment of Gunn as a gay poet that Gregory Woods offered in 1987, in *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-Eroticism and Modern Poetry*, remains apposite today – and not only for Gunn but also, *mutatis mutandis*,
for Bowers: “I . . . take Gunn as a model of the contemporary gay poet in transition. As one who has progressed from pre-Wolfenden Cambridge to post-‘Liberation’ San Francisco, he has built a career in parallel with modern gay history.”

In “My Life Up to Now,” Gunn comments, “My poetry is an attempt to grasp, with grasp meaning both to take hold of in a first bid at possession, and also to understand.” One of the most appealing qualities of Gunn’s and Bowers’s poems is that they aim at understanding rather than at mere expression. (Gunn’s “Expression” and Bowers’s “To the Contemporary Muse” both offer cautionary notes about the vogue of confessional poetry of their time.) They are both loyal to the idea that poetry is an art—a technique involving a thoughtful making of something—and not just an activity. More important, their work expresses a desire for the highest degree of intellectual freedom and a love of beauty, whether that beauty is humble, as it is in the “golden runaway” of Gunn’s “Nasturtium,” or lofty and transporting, as it is in the “grave airy enthusiasm” of Tiepolo’s paintings that Bowers describes in “On Robert Wells’ Moving from Tour to Blois.”

I could continue this line of praise with reference to other matters. I could mention, for example, Gunn’s sympathy for underdogs and outsiders. I could speak, too, of Bowers’s articulation of loneliness and mortality, an articulation made all the more moving by his modest rejection of alienation and anxiety and his patient assertion of a durably cheerful intelligence. It is comforting, in any case, to think about how two remarkable talents found their way in the world. Each achieved a poetry that shares much with the other’s poetry and with that of outstanding poets of the past, yet each expressed a unique psyche that was, to use a phrase from Bowers’s “How We Came from Paris to Blois,” “Like none before, never to be again.” Or, as Gunn writes in “Coffee Shop,” “We are the same in different ways, / We are different in the same way.”