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**FACTICITY VERSUS FACTITIOUSNESS:
THOM GUNN'S POEMS ON ANDER GUNN'S
UNTITLED PHOTOGRAPHS**

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Abstract: This essay ponders on the dichotomy “facticity versus factitiousness” on a sequence of Thom Gunn’s 1966 ekphrastic poems *Positives*, a book that develops a dialogue with his brother Ander Gunn’s black and white pictures. Anchored in those concepts – facticity and factitiousness – the essay deals with the social dimension of photography and Thom Gunn’s capacity to develop subjective insights that somehow expand the visual report of a time that only remains in the photographer’s eye.

Keywords: Thom Gunn; ekphrasis; facticity and factitiousness; photography.

Resumo: O ensaio reflete sobre a dicotomia entre facticidade e ficcionalidade na sequência de poemas de Thom Gunn, publicada em 1966 e intitulada *Positives*, obra que estabelece um diálogo com as fotografias a preto e branco do irmão, Ander Gunn. Ancorado nestes conceitos – facticidade e ficcionalidade – o ensaio explora a dimensão social da fotografia e a

capacidade de Thom Gunn de criar sentidos que de algum modo se expandem para além do relato visual de um momento que ficou apenas no olhar do fotógrafo.

Palavras-chave: Thom Gunn; écfrase; facticidade e ficcionalidade; fotografia.

This essay ponders on the dichotomy “facticity versus factitiousness” on a sequence of Thom Gunn’s 1966 ekphrastic poems *Positives*, a book that develops a dialogue with his brother Ander Gunn’s black and white pictures.

Although Thom Gunn chose to remain a resident alien in the U.S., he spent more than 40 years there, offering an excellent example of the ongoing dialogue between English and American poetry. As Langdon Hammer shows in “The American Poetry of Thom Gunn and Geoffrey Hill” (118-136), Gunn owes much of his poetic idiom to his teacher, the influent academic poet-critic Yvor Winters: “Gunn’s sense of poetic form as an epistemological tool for dealing with experience comes directly from Winter’s teaching and criticism” (Hammer 122). Does this mean that Gunn should be placed within an American poetic tradition? This actually is a debatable question.

Hammer concedes “the Americans suggested them [Gunn and Hill] ways of placing themselves in literary history from which their careers have continued to unfold” (118). This statement means that the virtual influence of an American insight didn’t lead those poets into an expatriate idiom and sensibility. Donald Davie, with whom Gunn and Larkin still share the *Movement* label, emphasizes “the real gulf between British English in poetry and American English whenever traffic between British poets and American poetry is in question, we encounter this notion that British English is more “experienced”, more *knowing* (for good

and ill) than American English is, whether in poetry or politics or anything else” (Davie: 89).

One common trait is, however, shared by both: the sustained tradition of a dialogue with the visual arts, which leads us back to Gunn’s 1966 book, *Positives*. In his autobiographic memoir “My Life up to Now”, Gunn unveils the personal context the book emerged from:

Looking through some of Ander’s photographs I found interesting possibilities in collaboration. I had always wanted to work with pictures, and he was taking just the kind that made a good starting point for my imagination. That was the beginning of the book called *Positives* (the title being Tony White’s suggestion, as was much else in it). I was never very sure whether what I was writing opposite the photographs were poems or captions – they were somewhere between the two, I suspect – but that didn’t matter, because what I was looking for was a form of fragmentary inclusiveness that could embody the detail and history of that good year [1964] I enjoyed working on the book, the only collaboration I have yet tried. (Gunn 1982: 181)

Before approaching the book’s structure, one must bear in mind the importance of its title. Although Gunn had admitted that the title was Tony White’s suggestion, it became the poet’s final choice. *Positives* calls up a specific technical topic endogenous to the photographic process, a mechanical process of encapsulating a certain sign. The positive is a visual image, true to the original in light, shade and color. It is developed from a photographic negative, where colors and luminance are reversed. The positive reminds us of the other (bright) side from whose darkness the sign comes to life. When Gunn chose to emphasize the mechanical dimension of this art, when he decided to make it evident, he meant to put forward a

point of view, a specific way of capturing reality, which would also determine the tone of his poems.

The book starts with a picture of a newborn infant and a poem on the opposite page. Several pictures of children follow, the focus on this early stage of life (and of writing) anticipating the core of the book, pictures and poems about adulthood. The (diachronic) sequence culminates in “[t]he last three images of a wretched, old”, and (either as the poems would have it, or indeed in fact) homeless woman make up the book’s only sub-sequence. The final two of these images are uniquely paired, in that the second is an enlarged detail of the first, zooming in on the old woman’s face, hands, and upper body, as if to pick up a previously unnoticed detail, and/or to remove by cropping what a deeper perception would want to rule out as inessential distraction, or even a falsification of something” (Hollander: 295).

Human chronology somehow provides a structural unity and a diachronicity to *Positives*. Yet the social settings here depicted are widely different, thus creating a surprising and stirring effect on the reader. Most pictures actually deal with middle-class women either in ordinary, daily life rituals – crossing a street, working in a pub, having tea – or exceptionally, in special ones – before a wedding ceremony. Among these signs of social stability eccentric signs emerge. These are the signs of a working class submerged by its daily routines that challenge the beholder’s perception of an idealized postwar baby-boom society. Reading and looking become instants of uncertainty. This uncertainty culminates in a topic sub-sequence, the pictures of the homeless old woman and the three final poems that promote the dialogue between them (Gunn 1966: 74, 76, 78).

In *Un art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, Pierre Bourdieu claims that ordinary opinions (criticism?) about photography carry with them the burden of an *ethos* (2003: 166). This

burden is connected with another, which Miles Orvell designates as the “burden of truth” (2003: 61). Both burdens have, as it were, been a recurrent presence in photographic aesthetics since its emergence in the mid-19th century. Facticity, the supposedly direct and truthful relation between referent and visual sign, has been an inevitable trait of this artistic discourse, stressing its relevance as a historical document. Later visual touchstones such as Jaboc Riis’ 1890 *How the Other Half Lives* and Walker Evans’ 1941 *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* testify to photography’s impact as a social and political document, and as record and narrative about the Other.

This dimension emerged in the 1860s with the American Civil War, the first great historical event to be systematically documented by photography. Among its more relevant documents stands Alexander Gardner’s *Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War*, published in 1866. Despite the impact this book had in a society ravaged by war, some questions concerning its factual record of the Real, its facticity, must be raised.

In his historical study of American Photography, Miles Orvell points out that in *The Harvest of Death*, there is a picture which, according to legend, was supposed to depict dead Rebel soldiers: “. . . these were Union soldiers but. . . that fact would have been too painful for Northern readers. . . In another photograph, a corpse is identified as a Union sharpshooter; in the next image the same body, moved to another position on the battlefield, is identified as a ‘Rebel’ sharpshooter.” Besides “. . . an image purporting to be the ‘Field Where General Reynolds Fell’, depicts a scene that couldn’t possibly be that particular field where the famous general was slain” (Orvell: 67).

Composition, the building of an aesthetic aura (not in the sense put forward by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*) through the means of perspective, of nuances of color (even in black and white, of course), of tensions

between foreground and background, emerges insinuating what the American poet and critic John Hollander considers to be *factitiousness*, fictionality: “Among the special problems attendant upon the ekphrastic reading of photographs are those of a certain kind of facticity (as opposed to the factitiousness – the fictionality) of the drawn or painted image” (293). Yet, in the above-mentioned example, fictionality doesn’t delete the referent’s shadow, the phantasmagorical presence of the real. And this is a problematic issue.

Roland Barthes reminds, “in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. What I intentionalise in a photograph is neither Art nor Communication, it is Reference, which is the founding order of Photography” (58). We are dealing here with a new aesthetics that challenges conventional attitude vis-à-vis the visual sign, thus demanding a new relationship with the object, towards a new artistic paradigm, which eventually means a new hermeneutics. I keep on quoting Barthes’ superlative essay since it helps to clarify my point:

In Photography, the presence of the thing is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their life as well, except in the case of photographing corpses; and even so: if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph’s immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive. (Barthes: 59)

Michael Fried’s recent and polemic study *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008) shows how late aesthetic developments have emphasized theatricality both as sign (the theatre and the stage

in Hiroshi Sugimoto), as dramatic narrative (the carefully studied and prepared narrative simulations by Jeff Wall), and as debt to avant-garde painters (Mark Rothko summoned by Jean-Marc Bustamante); but Thom Gunn's book, and consequently Ander Gunn's pictures, precede them. So I will keep these fascinating aesthetic dialogues for another occasion.

We should perhaps remember at this point Roland Barthes' words: "Reference, the founding order of Photography". In Gunn's above-mentioned sub-sequence – the final poems on the homeless old woman – this aspect is crucial. We have to bear in mind that in this sub-sequence the photos depict the most shameful Other of developed, rich societies – the homeless. The homeless are a mirror of deception, of our own failure, both as individuals and citizens, and collectively as a society. The homeless remind us that our wealth is not universal; that our cozy neighborhoods reveal, in their gardens, hidden shadowy corners and benches, those whose existence our shame tries to deny. When the homeless is a woman, especially an old woman (a grand-mother?), our subconscious is confronted with our deepest shame.

The sub-sequence of the homeless woman is thematically and visually foreshadowed by the picture and the previous poem that depict a homeless man crossing a bridge. The excessive visual weight of the stone bridge, and the diagonal line it delineates towards a vanishing point that culminates in the homeless figure, provide a symbolic anticipation of this artistic (both poetic and visual) diachronicity. This is in fact a voyage that the artists (photographer and poet) have undertaken, hand in hand with the reader; a journey through the streets of London, through its sublime, ordinary beauty; a voyage that would soon become a log of the past, eventually a reminder of nostalgia. Thom Gunn admits, ". . . it [*Positives*] contains a London I found hard to recognize only eight years after" (1982: 181).

The sign, the picture, aesthetically composed as it may be, with its play with perspective, with its balance between spatial (vertical and horizontal) lines, with its nuances of shades, still reminds the reader of its referential dimension, as Barthes wisely noticed; the sign is a social document that conditions and challenges the poet's ability to create a verbal insight, hopefully a meta-narrative. Photography is thus both objective and subjective at the same time; it's up to the poet to articulate these poles.

Positives is anchored in two diachronicities: a thematic narrative of macro-progression from childhood to old age, and a visual micro-progression. The sub-sequence delineates the latest. It starts with an overall plan of the old woman in what we may describe as a state of absorption. She is looking at her own hands; she is centered on some activity of her own. Her eyes focus on her hands. The old woman thus ignores the gaze of the camera, which voyeuristically captures her gesture, her meditation. Visually she is a line vertically crossing the picture, forming a parallel with the other vertical line, the tree. But since her body draws a curve, it touches another curve, the one drawn by the branches of the tree. Both lines in the foreground draw a gothic shape framing the door in the background; the visual vanishing point coincides with the door – her refuge's door?

This was the critic's eye. Now here is how Gunn, the poet, *saw* his brother's picture:

The mould from baked beans that
even she can't eat edges
onto the damp sticks, netting,
bones, leaves, slabs
of rust, felt, feathers,

all disintegrating to
an infected compost.

The infection in it is slow,
slight, deep, and it has certain needs,
for see, it responds to warmth.

Outside the abandoned house
where she slept on old papers
she stirs in the sun. (Gunn 1966: 74)

The poet's voice keeps a decorous distance from his referent as if he wasn't able or didn't want to merge deeply into it. We can rigorously assert that the poem keeps an ekphrastic tone in its more literal sense, as a description of the visual sign. In the first two stanzas the poet provides a catalogue of the several signs that build this microcosm. The third stanza somehow comments on the social disphoria here represented. Eventually the fourth stanza confirms the social context. We conclude that poem and picture share a decorous tone, a respectful distance from the Other.

Then the reader turns the page and unveils the same character in a different posture. The eye of the camera changed its perspective, its point of view. Nevertheless, it reiterated its focus on the same sign as if it was looking for something it had not found before. The eye of the camera assumes a status, the status of a voyeur. Meanwhile, a noise, a sound, maybe the mechanical sound of the camera, disturbed the old woman, and removed her from her state of absorption. Her eyes search for a place, for the entity (human or mechanic, or both) that made this sound. The trees now visually frame her; she is under their (visual) protection.

This is my point of view, the critic's eye. Now this is how Gunn, the poet, saw his brother's picture in the next poem/sequence:

Poking around the rubbish,
she can't find what she wants.

Near Maidstone once, hop-picking
with the four babies and Tom, she
worked all day along the green alleys,
among the bins,
in the dim leafy light of
the overhanging vines.
In the village, shopkeepers
put cages on their counters
to prevent snatching. But Tom
took something! What was it?

All in the rubbish heap now,
some rotting, most clean vanished. (Gunn 1966: 76)

The tone in this poem is radically different. Instead of the ekphrastic tone of the previous poem, Gunn chose to build a narrative. Through this narrative he fills the sign with humanity. While facticity was dominant in Ander Gunn's picture, in Gunn's poem factitiousness prevails. Thom Gunn somehow shares the burden that Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in *Un art moyen*, not in the sense of carrying the burden of the ethos, but in the sense that his point of view carries the burden of the ethos' subconscious, of our collective shame when we try to find out answers about someone's history, about a personal decline and fall into the radical solitude of the homeless. When we try to find out the answers, the causes, the justifications, we, both reader and poet, become confined to fiction, to fictions.

Then, one more time, we turn the page and we face a close-up. This is not formally a new picture, since Ander Gunn chose to select a fragment of the previous one, a fragment he enlarged in order to bring center stage his character's face, the woman's humanity. I won't insist on the exhausted and most debated topic of the aesthetic and psychological function of the close-up. Suffice

it to say that it frames and enhances the main signs of someone's expression, virtually of someone's identity. However, in this case, the mechanical dimension of photography – the material constraints of photographic development – also betrays a psychological revelation. Notice how the inevitable graininess (we are still far away from digital cameras, of course) builds a distance from the referent. John Hollander points out the irony. After having asserted that “[s]uch graininess is, of course, an eventual necessary consequence of the process of enlargement itself”, he reminds that

[t]he epistemological puzzle about the limits of photographic knowledge emerging from the fact that repeated enlargement, in its quest for finer detail, will only result in that very detail being obliterated by increasingly coarse grain was given sensational treatment in Antonioni's film *Blowup*, which was made the same year that Gunn's *Positives* was published. (Hollander: 296)

After having signaled the critics' analysis, one must turn our attention to the way Gunn, the poet, saw his brother's picture in his last poem about the old woman:

Something approaches, about
which she has heard a good deal.
Her deaf ears have caught it, like a
silence in the wainscot
by her head. Her flesh has felt
a chill in her feet, a draught
in her groin. She has watched it
like moonlight on the frayed wood
stealing toward her
floorboard by floorboard. Will it hurt?
Let it come, it is
the terror of full repose,
and so no terror. (Gunn 1966: 78)

This last poem on the old woman synthesizes the tones of the previous poems. The first line follows the ekphrastic dimension that prevailed in the first poem devoted to her. Then in the second line the poem summons the atmosphere of the following poem and keeps on building a fiction with the referent as his main character. A slight difference must be pointed out: the inner focus, which allows us to dive deep into the woman's humanity.

The last stanza introduces a new shift in the tone. John Hollander remarks that “[t]he last three lines . . . [compose], after what have been most seven-syllable ones, a perfect haiku” (296). This formal deception means that the wheel has come round full circle. The haiku introduces decorum, a dramatic turning away from the inner fictions. It also means a formal turning away from colloquial speech, thus inserting a distance from the referent. Only a poet, who is able to manipulate the different tones and moods of language, can operate these prosodic shifts and build these approaches to visual encapsulations of the real.

As we have seen above, Gunn confessed that he wasn't sure if “opposite the photographs were poems or captions” (1982: 181). Yet while reading them one is led to recognize the singularity of their verbal approach to a specific time and place; their ability to apostrophize the visual sign, since, as I have mentioned above, the positive reminds us of the other (bright) side from whose darkness the sign comes to life. Their ekphrastic dimension clearly answers to this question and clarifies the poet's doubts. In his journey through space and time in the streets of London postwar baby-boom society, Gunn confronts the signs of a working class submerged by its daily routines, and help to challenge an idealized fiction about those years. His poems debunk the visual facticity, the supposedly direct and truthful relation between referent and visual sign, thus unveiling the ethos' factitiousness. The final sequence of poems about the homeless woman, and eventually the one on her close-up, culminates

the revelation of the social subconscious, since it verbalizes a “terror of full repose” that still remains today in our major metropolis’ routines.

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