

THOM GUNN

Your death, Thorn Gunn, is mourned.

The experts lay their wreaths

and call you great They say your work

was fed by Donne and Herbert - though

the pioneering furrow that you ploughed

has buried deep the God-based ground

of those old Jacobean priests.

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Your clearest and most poignant work,

provoked by Aids, came late.

Despite shared needles and promiscuous

bath-house couplings, you beat the plague.

But, scarred and haunted by irrational guilt,

you mourned a decimated generation

and wept at the demise of friends.

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Artistic merit never hung on life-style,

but on talent: the deeds of Caravaggio

are eclipsed by his great canvasses

and from his dubious depths, sublime

Sinatra is still singing. So Thom,

posterity will judge, not your incontinent

inconstancy, but your poetic worth.

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Once, pitmen, ploughmen, artisans

imbibed immortal lines from Shakespeare  
to Sassoon and used them as a leaven  
in their daily speech. You write in cipher  
for the acolytes of a new exclusive gnosticism  
and leave a mass of poetry-lovers cold.  
Who in tomorrow's street will quote Thorn Gunn?  
Bryan Harbottle.