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The Hunter and the Circle: Neil Gunn's Fiction of Violence

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The Hunter and the Circle;  
Neil Gunn's Fiction of Violence

As a contemporary British novelist, to be a regionalist, we are told, is to be unread. "Regionalism is dead," pronounced V. S. Pritchett, optimistically some years ago. Thus, the connoisseur of cosmopolitan letters may be regaled with any number of assertions that Neil Gunn is "by far the most considerable novelist who has ever worked beyond the Highland line," that he has "a strong sense of the organic rhythms of the old Highland life," that in fact his work is the highest peak of achievement in modern Scottish fiction—he may hear all of these and still confess his complete ignorance without shame, with resolve.

Such assertions, though true, are unfair. To see only the Highland novelist is to miss the essential Neil Gunn, whose characteristic fictive manoeuvre has been to rescue pastoral from the regionalist, just as it has been to rescue what is valid primitive experience from misguided primitivism. Indeed, in his latest book, Gunn is ironic at the expense of both:

There are those beyond the urban walls who live in the depths of the country. From their dark dens they stalk, inarticulate, across the sombre landscape of the regional novel. The old barbarian is the new moron, and the new moron is the peasant, the archetype of the brutal before the brutal got brains. His hunger is in his prowl, his covetous-

ness in his eye, his greed in the dark impenetrable intricacies of his bowels where all that matters is digested until the plot requires indigestion.  

For Gunn, as for comparable pastoralists such as Wordsworth and Frost, the regional landscape is setting for the discovery of the "primordial," the "given," in human nature and experience. For him, every fictional event awakens the sense he attributes to far-flung Highland families: the "sense of the ends of the earth and of human beings inhabiting the earth, one with another."  

Every event comes to full realization only as myth or apocalyptic parable: "All stories...meet in one story," states the narrator of the latest novel; and elsewhere, "Of all the stories man has made only two were immortal: the story of Cain and the story of Christ."  

But how do such stories find their way out of the crofting communities of Sutherland and Caithness, and in doing so, how do they justify the claims made for Gunn as a serious artist in modern fiction?  

To begin an answer I have chosen three of the eight novels he has published since World War II. The choice is variously motivated. For one thing it has proved too easy to praise Gunn as recounter of Highland boyhood—as in Morning Tide (1931), Highland River (1937), Young Art and Old Hector (1942)—and prejudge as failures his later experiments with adult experience and sophisticated points of view. For another, it can be argued that the latest of Gunn's twenty novels (in twenty-nine years) are in many ways the best—most universal, most timely, most mature philosophically and artistically. If this has any truth, then we can achieve an initial appreciation of his work without confronting the special problems raised by the earlier books. We can, for the moment, sidestep those in which the "Highland question" bulks large: Butcher's Broom (1934), The Silver Darlings (1941); or those which evoke, with a sometimes burdensome poetic pathos, the doomed Celtic soul, and which led the disappointed Angus MacDonald in 1933 to cite "Fiona MacLeod" as the damaging inspiration:  

Grey Coast (1928), The Lost Glen (1932),

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2 Atom of Delight (London, 1950), p. 218; cf. p. 298: "As experts, the old primitives would not have been impressed by the new."


4 The Other Landscape (London, 1954), pp. 294-295; Bloodbath, p. 233. Cf. Atom, p. 184: "what was told was the story of someone at some time, and the eye saw destiny last year, or last century, or any time beyond. A thousand years made no difference."

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Sun Circle (1933). Not that these problematical strains have vanished in the later books; rather, they have been adapted to more fundamental concerns, to popular plot motifs and contemporary themes. We shall see how in The Key of the Chest (1945), The Shadow (1948), and Bloodhunt (1952).

At the end of his elusive apologia, Atom of Delight (1936), Gunn defines the quest which evidently informs the three novels: "an examination of those destructive or disintegrating forces that seem so wantonly to destroy delight in living; and... means for countering them." Earlier in the same book, in a passage which catalogues the major symbols of all his fiction, he draws in sharp outline the myth by which the examination could proceed. At its center is a kind of seeing, a wholeness and immediacy of vision grounded in a wholeness of being which for Gunn is always the primary given need of the essential human self.

When he encountered the birches on Hampstead Heath he saw them all in a moment, from within the circle around the second self. That kind of seeing is never lost. It may seem to be lost, then instantly it is there. Where all is food for life, this is food of the living tree. The tap root of the tree is watered by the well, with the circle around it that the serpent made. In our most modern moment we are back in the Garden where the Devil entered into the serpent and broke the circle (pp. 304, 222).

In our three novels we are not quite back in the Garden, though all three have their political and symbolic source in Gunn's magnificent Edenic anti-utopia, The Green Isle of the Great Deep (1944). We are, however, in a world stalked by the figure of Cain.

The novels share a central event: a murder. Each proceeds, sketching the interplay of a community touched by this act of personal violence, to explore the given event as a symptom of the murderonness of the modern world. Each relates external violence to the inward violence of personality that has lost its wholeness and turned through deprivation or perversion to destructiveness. Each envisions the possibility of recovery through a variety of means. There is the temporary "escape" of Frost's "Directive," back to the restorative confrontation of an unsentimentalized pastoral ideal, a vision of individual and social wholeness. There is self-renewal through mythic self-discovery, a vision of one's nature and destiny in archaic or archetypal terms. "Man must for ever move," says Gunn, "like a liberator, through his own unconsciousness" (KC, p.196). He does so by the gesture
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Gunn has likened to the fisherman's backward cast, by assuming what Thomas Mann calls the "archaizing attitude." Archaic man, says Mann, "searched the past for a pattern into which he might slip as into a diving-bell," in order to find reanimation in "life in the myth, life as a sacred repetition" or "eternal return." This, the function of myth as defined by Joseph Campbell, is the reanimating experience of Gunn's people. There is, finally, a willed ceremony of affirmation, a rite of passage to recovered innocence and delight. As one puts it, in The Lost Chart (1949), "The darkness creates drama ready-made for man; but man has to create his own drama of the light" (p.178).

The drama begins, however, with particulars. The regional landscape is real enough before the "other landscape" begins, by a variety of means, to declare itself.

II

Gunn as narrator reminds one of the Marlow of Heart of Darkness: "to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out." The "episode" of The Key of the Chest is the death by strangulation of a Swedish seaman during his rescue from a freighter sinking in a storm off the Highland coast. The rescuer, Charlie, suspected of his murder, and his brutish shepherd of a brother, Dougald, suspected of stealing money from the dead man's chest (to which the key cannot be found), live geographically and morally on the outskirts of their community. Their position is the more debatable for a long standing conflict with the minister, the local spiritual overlord, a paternalist perverted to destructive, a repressive will against whom life has taken its revenge by awakening a love for his daughter that is both incestuous and idealizing — a curious variant of Aschenbach's love for Tadzio.

6 "Freud and the Future," Essays of Three Decades, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (N.Y., 1947), p. 424; cf. Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History [The Myth of the Eternal Return], trans. W. R. Trask, Torchbooks (N.Y., 1959), p. 5; Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, (Meridian N.Y., 1956), pp. 17, 385-91. Mann recalls Ortega's figure of the bullfighter's gesture for archaic man's backward step, with which cf. Gunn, Atom, p. 6: "though the general direction, as in any sport, is forward, clues can be picked up by a cast back. But the backward cast becomes entirely nostalgic unless the clues are used in an actual hunt to-day and to-morrow"; and p. 289: "Rester pour mieux sauter is a normal procedure for the athlete about to take a jump or put the shot."

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in *Death in Venice*. Charlie is his rival. During an ill-fated period at Edinburgh University, Charlie has entangled his own academic disgrace with an imprudent love affair with the minister’s daughter Flora. When, home again, they begin meeting once more at the time of the mysterious death, the minister sacrifices his whole position to pursue a deathhunt to drive Charlie to destruction. Charlie and Flora attempt to flee, are rescued by a community that favors them over the minister; the minister is chastened. The novel ends with the hint that the lovers will emigrate together, “leaving the shadow on the land. The shadow from the passing of the bright ones” (p.26). The Shadow’s title refers to the shadow of violence cast upon another Highland village by the robbery and murder of an old hermit. The episode occurs early in the convalescence from nervous collapse of a young woman who has been almost destroyed spiritually by the London “blitz” and has come to her Aunt Pheemie’s Highland farm to rest, only to have “the living figure of destruction . . . come away from the city where he has been impersonal and many-shaped, shapes flying across the sky, come at last to the country, to the quiet countryside, to prowl around on two feet and smell out a poor old man and murder him for his money” (p.26). The result of her new and personal encounter with destructiveness is given in the title of the second of three parts: “Relapse.” Her “Recovery,” Part Three, is the outcome of a complex inner war of light and health against darkness and disorder, and of an equally complex parallel outer war among friends, lovers, relatives who would all claim her spirit on behalf of their conflicting visions of the nature of her illness and the world’s illness it embodies. Her recovery, a pastoral ceremony of reanimation, allows her to return to London transformed.

*Bloodhunt*, the latest of the three, is as narrative simplest and perhaps most perfect. Here, too, the aftermath of the murder is what matters. The bloodhunt is for the murderer, a likeable young man who has killed the rival who got his girl pregnant; the bloodhunter, a policeman, is the murdered man’s brother. Once again, an obscurely defined, powerful brother-bond is at the center of the “kernel.” But the story is mainly of an old man, a retired seaman living in peaceful isolation on the edge of the community, and of how, for all his determination not to become involved, he becomes “secret sharer” of his young friend’s guilt: “it was not Allan himself, not the old friendliness between them, that moved him now, though they were in him, but the thought
of the lad being tried and hanged. Somehow that he could not stomach. It tied life's tap-root in a knot. It was an obstacle in front of him, between him and death” (p.160). Sandy tragically intrigues to hide and feed the fugitive, has his own absurd accidents, nearly dies, resists the invasions of a "well meaning" widow from the next farm, and finally accepts and protects the pregnant girl. Meanwhile, the hunt goes on; the hunter is brutalized; the fugitive, weak and ill, is caught and killed. Sandy, knowing all, remains silent and thus calls an end to violence, and finds new life in Liz and her new baby, born suddenly in Sandy's barn. As Sandy sees them in their mythic aspect, the events are a "sacred repetition": “The manger and the hay and life's new cry; beyond it, that hunt. Of all the stories man had made only two were immortal: the story of Cain and the story of Christ” (p.235). Sandy chooses his story, as it were, and thus enacts his own "drama of the light."

Conrad wrote, “All my concern has been with the ideal value of things, events, and people.” Gunn's interest in the three murders is, likewise, ideal — is in what they epitomize of a destructiveness that is timeless in nature and man, and of the growing murderousness of the modern world. Old Sandy contemplates the hunted Allan's plight and sees a symptom:

More and more . . . nearer and nearer . . . violence upon violence, increasing violence . . . until the teeth champed and the juices ran about the gums . . . Then satisfaction, the satisfaction after the orgy . . . until the hunt did not need a murderer, could substitute something else, an ism or ology that stood for the murderer, providing a wider hunt, a greater kill, more blood (p.99).

The urbane onlookers speculate broadly, in The Key, on the desire to destroy in a world that is a "desert," a "dark wood," of nihilism. Aunt Phemie, in The Shadow, watches Nan struggle against her own absorption in the world's violence, and comes to this remarkable vision:

The child, wandering up through the daylight fields, trying to clean the shadow from its world. . . . The thistledown, the soft eager balls, seeds on the wing — changing into the grey steady eyes, the searching eyes of the policeman. Changing, in his turn, into the youth with the Tommygun on his knees and the cigarette in his mouth, while love in its naked family waited in the trench; he mowed them down as a pernicious corn (p.207).

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But his interest is "ideal" in another way, too. The destructiveness he portrays is "ideal" — of the mind. For Gunn, even a natural violence has, like Conrad's typhoon, a personifying malice: "they all listened to the wind outside and heard the whine and snarl in its throat, but also they heard, streaming away into the moor, the cry of anguish, of the utterly lost that was at its heart, that is always at the heart of great violence." And like Conrad's typhoon, it is essentially a "disintegrating power," an anguished self-destructive agency seeking to destroy man's wholeness, or murder by dissection his essential nature. The Gunn protagonist facing the threat of violence has a sense of imminent personal disintegration; the hero of *Wild Geese Overhead* (1939) "felt himself disintegrating, and fought to keep the strands of his body together" (p.115). Gunn's archetypal murderer is one who seeks, by intellectual disintegration, to destroy his victim spiritually. The boy-hero of *Morning Tide* (1931) fights to defend the essential privacy of his brother and his brother's girl friend against intellectual violation: "For he knew there were minds that could think any thing. But not the brave fine minds that were secretive and strong and kind" (p.113). Here are the lines of the psychological warfare of which Gunn's fiction is made. The minds "that could think anything" assume their most menacing form as the police-state utopians of *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, who seek to "find out everything" in the "brave fine minds," who enjoy "teasing the human mind into its strands, of combing the strands, and leaving them knotless and gleaming and smooth over one's arm or the back of a chair" (p.78).

These are the intellectual murderers of Gunn's fiction, those who "entered into the serpent and broke the circle." In *The Lost Chant* the hero's antagonist's mouth has "a disintegrating effect" (p.95) — and we anticipate at once that Basil is to be one with "a very considerable analytical power — when it comes to things touching the mind. He's got a certain watching cuteness. He's like a weasel. He knows the holes in the dyke" (p.86). Geoffrey of *Second Sight* (1940) is the same: "It's something in Geoffrey's spirit — I don't know what it is — something that disintegrates." Geoffrey's "may be the advanced sort of analytic mind that we're not ready for. He disintegrates — without integrating" (p.171). In *Wild Geese Overhead*, the hero's newspaper friend Mac has a "satiric face, now openly sneering and..."

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7*Morning Tide* (Edinburgh, 1921), p. 66. [71]
disintegrating . . . the face of a man, thwarted himself, warped and thwarted in his spirit, pursuing him, Will, slowly, remorselessly, until he would break his resistance, bit by bit, get him down to his own level and then dominate him with a devil's satisfaction" (p.44). His "destructive annihilating mind" makes him one of those "who took life's central purpose of delight and smothered it, out of fear and self-importance and egotism, and the devil's thrill of power over others. . . . Even his animosity felt like a snake-bite" (pp.68, 75).

Such are the "sly destructive ones," the diabolical analyzers of The Shadow. Nan's lover Ranald, with his logical utopian rigidity a descendant of the Green Isle "managers," can easily qualify. In argument he "gets pale . . . and logical in a remorseless way." On one occasion, Nan recalls, he tore his opponent's "mind into small bits — and showed him the bits" (p.192). Pheemie, pondering Nan's illness, visualizes her own analytic interest as a "remorseless white face, like Ranald's face. . . . This white taut face watched until sympathy was slain, until emotion withered. It's the slayer's face, thought told her in silence, and she was aware of being between the thought and the face, like a soul in an experiment" (p.127).

The soul in experiment of The Key of the Chest is the energetic, wealthy young game lord, Michael Sandeman: he, too, has a capacity for destructiveness: "When the ego gets going like that, one feels in it — something destructive — a sort of tearing out that cares nothing for another's feelings — a tearing down to the root, a tearing out" (p.205). He is saved by his impulsive creativity, and by the faculty we perceive on first meeting him: "an intuitive apprehension of the nature of wild life" (p.97), an intuition that carries him far toward a creative awareness of the "mystery of the individual personality," "the one whole being," before his soul's experiment ends. The truly "destructive one" of The Key is the minister, and of Bloodhunt, the policeman: but their destructiveness is of a different sort from those mentioned above, and before speaking of them, it may be well to clarify the general attitude these characterizations imply — that is, what appears to be Gunn's primitivistic anti-rationalism.

His intellectual destroyers murder spontaneity, murder to dissect. A facile classification would place him with earlier deplorers of the "false secondary power" and "Newton's sleep" — Wordsworth and Blake: with Lawrence, who, he said,
"endeavoured to give back its own delight to the body made disgusting or impotent by intellect." (Atom of Delight, p.301); and with Eugen Herrigel's Zen master in archery, another defender of the body's wisdom against the pretensions of analytic reason (Atom, chap. 18). But any such classification should be reviewed in the light of Nan's cry: "We have to rescue the intellect from the destroyers. They have turned it into death rays, and it should be the sun." (p.42). "Reason"—culture more geometrico, in Ortega's terms—is his destroyer: "Reason's noise. One who makes too much noise will never see a fawn in a glen. But there are fawns in glens" (Atom, p.210). "Reason," he says, "has tended to collar intellect in our time"—intellect, that is, as the "Old schoolmen" used it to denote the action or apprehension of the "second self," which "reason calls non-rational" (Atom, p.291). But to try to save Reason from itself, or to save Vernunft from Verstand, is "not to disparage reason or intellect and opt wholly for the dark gods, the irrational flesh" (p.289). Gunn, like Thomas Mann, moves only experimentally among the anti-intellectuals. He must have shared the concern of, for instance, Mann and Ortega, over the miserable effects on modern Europe of an anti-intellectualism that saw Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele, divorced culture—Geist—and spontaneity—Leben, and opened the way to a bloodhunt for the primitive.8

The end, to which Gunn's seemingly extravagant primitivism is only the means, is most fully articulated by Michael in The Key:

Back into the primitive? . . . no, back into themselves. That was the search. For oneness. Searching, with paint, for the primitive where wholeness began, but finally here, on the sea, in the leap, with death as life's shadow, under the sun, against the gale, the body whole and singular, with warmth in it, for one other, for others, for all. Man's strangely tragic story, so full of wonder and light (p.238).

The dark gods belong at last to the destroyers. The destroyers may be more than intellectual in their violence.

The minister's destructiveness, in The Key, is a peculiarly Scottish conception, but one easily comprehensible to readers of

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8 While the analogy with Mann is offered merely as opening speculation, the chapter on "Meth and Psychology" in Henry Hatfield's Thomas Mann (N.Y., 1931) and F. C. S. Schloss's essay, "The Problem of Anti-Intellectualism," in The Stature of Thomas Mann, ed. C. Neider (N.Y., 1947), are interesting glosses on Gunn's fictional manoeuvres vis-à-vis primitivism. For Ortega on the divorce, see The Modern Theme, trans. J. Cleugh (N.Y., 1933), p. 35 and elsewhere.
Hawthorne. He is the destroyer in whom life has been thwarted and perverted into sadistic violence. His daughter recognizes "something dark in her father, full of flesh and blood, ... that went beyond religion and all things of the mind" (p.90). Others "had seen the minister's face as he walked restlessly and softly, like a caged animal" (p.101), but for Flora, "she inhabited the back regions of her mind, an imminent deadly menace" (p.114), and "she knew only the awful menace of her father and of his anger. It was of the spirit, not of the flesh. The anger of the unknowable god that destroys" (p.118). He belongs to the same devil-ridden tradition that fostered the diabolism of Burns and Byron, and produced Hogg's Justified Sinner and Muriel Spark's Calvinist monomaniac Miss Jean Brodie in her prime. But he recalls Lawrence in a curious way. The connection of his "menace" with a "deep incestuous motive" is perhaps incidental, but it does have a suggestive parallelism with the relationship of Nan and Ranald. In both, the menace of disintegration is associated with illicit sexuality. In both, sexuality is literally incidental; what is not incidental is the way all of Gunn's destroyers wear an aura of sexual menace, are potential ravishers, violators, dividers of spiritual wholeness. "To feel whole," postulates Gunn (Atom, p.264), "is a primary need of the self." In evoking moments of felt wholeness, he makes frequent use of the word intact, and speaks of the primitive fear of touching as a violation of individual safety. For the boy or adult seeking to preserve himself whole, "to withdraw intact was the great thing" (p.84). The object, then, in resisting the disintegrative effects of the destroyer is to preserve intact the curious kind of spiritual virginity that characterizes Gunn's triumphant heroes and heroines: to prevent the devil-perverted serpent of life from breaking one's circle. Here, Gunn is a kind of anti-Lawrence.

The main metaphor for the relation of destroyer to victim in most of Gunn's fiction is not, however, sexual, though traditionally associated with sexual pursuit. It is the Hunt. The relation of Hunter to Hunted is, for Gunn, more "primordial" than any other. The dominance in the relationships and motivations of which his novels are made of the hunter-hunted motif makes this metaphor the key to the formal and symbolic integrity of his fiction. Bloodhunt alone gives it titular prominence, and the full and starkly simple articulation, within the limits of old Sandy's consciousness, of the titular symbol has much to do with the arguable superiority of this, the latest of the three novels. And as
we trace this organizing motif it will be useful to experiment with comparative evaluation and thus single out Gunn's characteristic achievement.

III

The destroyer in Bloodhunt, Nicol Menzies the policeman, like Spenser's Malbecco and Milton's Satan, becomes the embodiment of his own obsession. He who begins as avenger of his brother's death carries at last the mark of violence against his brother, the mark of Cain. At the beginning he has "a good-looking face but without something, without light" (p.90). Later, "his face seemed not only thinner but darker in a disturbing way. He had taken the night in with him; and then Sandy realized that it was not the dark night outside, but the dark inner world in which the fellow now lived" (p.214). But the story is Sandy's, and fittingly, it is his inner world, the "secret country of his mind" (p.22), that sees the war between darkness — analytic withdrawal — and light — the self-commitment to the law older than crime and punishment, the law that is "the warm feeling at life's real core" (p.126). An alien being inside, with ironic eye, drives him toward disengagement, peace, nothingness; but life is Sandy's bloodhunter and it keeps breaking in upon him, trapping him. The old man's complex flight from this hunter gives the tragicomedy its symbolic unity and significance. On the level of character and situation Sandy's battle is to preserve Allan and the unwed mother from the laws of the tribe, and to preserve his own privacy. But in "the other landscape" the war is between "Nothingness . . . participation. The twins" (p.140), and between two visions of the law of the tribe. At last Sandy accepts that law as a law of love, and rejects the law behind it, the law of Cain and the bloodhunt. It is remarkable how wide a vision of human alternatives is embodied in this concrete parable, and how much is implied in the shift of Sandy's deepest allegiance from the fugitive murderer to the guilty girl and her bastard, the girl who has sought him out, trapped him in his home, in his self and life, while outside, in ritual circles, the older hunt, the death hunt, draws to its own destruction. The novel is remarkable for the coherence and economy with which it develops its titular symbol.

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In Gunn’s world, every relationship has, in a sense, its basic element of hunter-hunted. Every individual constitutes something of a threat to the autonomy, the “delight,” of every other; hence every encounter has an element of menace, and every conversation, as Dr. Wittig has noted, is a subtle manoeuvring, a stalking exercise, a game of self-preservation against the threat of penetration, against the hunter that seeks out the self in the thick of its secretive circle. In The Shadow, all hunts are potentially destructive, except for the last (Nan’s search for the “true Ranald”); but by ironic inversion, some transcend their own destructiveness. Such is the source of this book’s coherence.

Part of its economy is a peculiar structure. The first section is made up of Nan’s letters to Ranald concerning her convalescence. She is seeking to rediscover an instinct for life, and ironically, her account is addressed to one for whom her quest is simply an escape, a regression to infantilism. Actually, she is the hunted animal, escaping not just from the image of violence, but also from the disintegrative rationalism of those who label her neurotic. And her flight from this destructive hunter is the more difficult because she has been part of his murderousness, has known his desire to destroy: “We have murdered spontaneity. That’s what we have done. The faces of analysts, everywhere, with bits of matter on slides, saying: That’s all it is. And we wonder about war and horror! About murderers . . . !” (p.28). Her flight carries her too far, just as Sandy’s withdrawal from the “tribe” carries him temporarily too far, and Nan, too, gives an instinctive, self-menacing allegiance to one she thinks a murderer — the strange young man in the woods, appropriately named Adam. Her allegiance is Gunn’s symbol, clearly, for the attraction of awakened anti-intellectuality to the “primitive,” the “dark gods.” Nan knows that her fascination may appear to derive from a “dark sex-unconscious.” But she also knows that she is not that “far gone.” “All this talk about escapism, . . . Not to mention the smile, the murderer’s sneer, that Nan is going all D. H. Lawrence, . . . Blood and myth and stuff. But I’m not! We have to rescue the intellect from the destroyers” (p.42).

— Wittig, p. 334: “there is much ‘searching immersed,’ much stealthy manoeuvring, as each of the speakers in turn probes the other’s mind, and tries first to draw him on and ultimately drive him into a blind corner. Doubtless this reflects an essential feature of Scots conversation, . . .”
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As a hunter, Adam belongs to the world of the bloodhunt. He philosophizes brutally on a hawk’s hovering and flushing a blackbird (Nan has just witnessed this), scoffs at her sentimentality, and “Presently he was telling me about a stoat and hare. . . . He was in the wood, moving quietly, searching with his eyes for wild life, when he sees the stoat and the hare going round in a circle, not a very big circle, just a few yards across. They are at opposite points of the circle so that, if you didn’t know wild life, you might hardly tell whether the stoat was following the hare or the hare the stoat” (p.63). Adam “has the wild in him, a wild-animal freshness,” (p.64) and Nan is hypnotized like the hare, stalked like the blackbird, by one who, though not the actual murderer, is one of Gunn’s destroyers, one with an infernal curiosity, a love of “Destruction, the death throe” (p.65), who is “capable of using anything and everything that will help him to get what he wants, like a wild beast stalking its prey” (p.77).

But the circle makes it hard to tell hunted from hunter. Nan turns the tables, becomes herself the hunter of the atrophied part of herself that is in him—“Not to go is to escape. I want to go through him, to separate him and understand . . . in a dream sense to tear his chest open and separate the dark” (p.79)—just as Sandy must work through his allegiance to the murderer to win his new allegiance to life in Liz and her child.

Nan’s decision carries her to a primeval country and a vision of death, and she undergoes a relapse. Gunn makes use of her temporary incapacity as central consciousness to enlarge the scene, establish a complementary point of view in Aunt Pheemie, and develop the several subordinate hunts that go on outside Nan’s mind. Only at the end does Nan reassert her position; meanwhile, Pheemie’s stalking of the two men, the opposed politico-erotic forces in Nan’s life, gives structure and meaning. Pheemie’s own experience is deeply involved, much as Sandy’s is: Sandy, however, the old sailor come home to die, derives his detached view of alternative lives only from a certain breadth of experience. Pheemie has known the world of intellect as teacher and is more abstractly attached to the instinctual, pastoral life. Too, she looks at the modern world of male destructiveness as an older woman, with sufficient intellectuality to comprehend Nan’s struggle, and sufficient humane instinct and instinctual wisdom to help—to help a ewe through a difficult birth on a snowy night, or to help Nan through an analogous psychic process. She has the hunter’s
instinct, too, for ferreting out the secrets of personalities, and the
mythic consciousness necessary for seeing Ranald and Adam in
their archetypal forms. Throughout the middle of the book, her
quest is to find out what happened with Adam to cause the
relapse, and her purpose is to assess and manipulate Nan's
relations with the two men, in spite of her own instinctive hatred
of the destroyer Ranald and liking for the instinctual artist Adam.

With the reawakening of Nan's love for the "real Ranald,"
Pheemie's influence wanes, even as her narrative centrality
diminishes. This point, at the end of the second part, coincides
with what is—almost literally—the second murder in the book:
Ranald's fight with Adam. Their struggle, the book's external
climax, is the clash of instinctual man, the defiantly antisocial,
primitive artist, with the logical utopian, the white-faced analytic
destroyer. Adam is the "fighting wild thing," "his eyes wary
as a stoat's"; Ranald is "one who would kill at his leisure, who
knew he would kill at his leisure, but needed first to dominate
the mind in front of him, to frighten it into gibbering bits"
(pp.157-8). It is profoundly significant that no one wins. Adam
steps by accident over a ledge and into the river, but miraculously
survives. Ranald goes back to the women surprisingly exhilarated
by this rare surrender to instinct. Nan sees "the real Ranald":
realizing the cause, our reaction, like Pheemie's, is one of horror.
But we too must learn with Pheemie, during the final part, why
no one can win this fight, why Nan cannot choose Adam but
must go back to Ranald to work for his redemption, to save
intellect from its destructive self, perhaps to free the serpent from
the invading devil.

For relevance to a world of urban violence and restlessness,
and for psychological sophistication, The Shadow might be
preferred to the other two novels. The fact that it is in many ways
untypical would have no bearing on such a judgment, nor would
its lack of connection with the Scots Renaissance. But such facts
may well imply causes of what I consider its relative inferiority.
The special archetypal psychology, the implausible epistolism of
the first part, are productive of schematic, abstract characters, terms
in a dialectical psychomachia. But is this a flaw? If we follow
Frye's terminology and classify the book as romance-anatomy, we
can excuse such abstractness and speak of effective personae
vividly embodying ideas as operative parts of an intellectual
structure. But such a process, it seems to me, ends in either total
formalism or total philosophism and robs fiction of its essentials:
concreteness of texture, dramatic authenticity of experience. Hence, I don’t believe The Shadow can be preferred by licentious reclassification. However, impressive, it is inferior to Bloodhunt.

As for the choice between Bloodhunt and The Key of the Chest, it would be again easy to decide on Bloodhunt and comforting to find the latest the best. One could argue that in this latest depiction of the Highland community, all simple black-white moral distinctions are gone, and no tendency remains to idealize. Bloodhunt’s picture of rural life is the ballad picture: unwed mother, homicidal rejected lover, amoral accomplice, brutal pursuer, a levelling of phariseism and pettiness. By contrast, one could say, the townsmen of The Key have the sternly heroic, moral grandeur of Wordsworth’s shepherds or Scott’s Highlanders. Why not choose Bloodhunt on grounds of accuracy? Is the more brutal picture necessarily truer because metropolitan civilization demands a King’s Row-Peyton Place myth of Hobbesian Nature in degenerate small town life? And were the brutality demonstrable, would this argue the inferiority of idealizing? Hardly. But if the reader is apt to be unconvinced by what purports to be an authentic picture of a way of life, then this does matter. And here Bloodhunt is the safer method, for it focuses sharply on the central figure’s experience and does not try to sketch a community.

The Key does. Its community is varied, peopled with distinct characters and no mere village chorus. As its social scope is wider, so its structure risks diffuseness and generality. Moreover, there is a radical split between rural characters and sophisticated alien observers, who observe and comment. The reader finds himself at home with the urbanites, participates in their commentary, and this makes for a degree of abstractness: the reader participates through one of two general “sides.” The doctor serves as a bridge; but his almost purely generic identity—only his mother calls him anything but “the doctor”—again suggests generality. Sandy would seem a much more adequate bridge. But as a matter of fact, the doctor’s generality is fully functional, and he is part of an ambitious narrative and symbolic anatomy of human destructiveness at war with human brotherhood which is, for me, more impressive. The Key, the first Gunn novel I read, serves well as an introduction to his distinctive achievement in fiction.

Let me begin with its counterpart to Pheemie and Sandy, its involved yet detached mediator between pastoral-instinctual and
urban-intellectual ways of life and modes of vision. The doctor is ideally placed as pivotal consciousness. His profession makes him a focal figure in the community; his professional affairs endow him with sad scepticism and deep compassion; he is intellectual, yet urgently practical; he is bound to his people by deep, instinctual ties. But his intellectualty draws him to the two sophisticated outsiders, Michael and his foppish, pedantic, yet wise and kindly guest Gwynn, whose own hunt for the key to modern primitive art has brought him to this traditional community and made him the most articulate mouthpiece for notions and values Gunn takes most seriously. Michael, though less intellectual, is close to Gwynn. The doctor, who would ordinarily use their rather academic premises to defend his people’s way of life and of seeing, finds himself inclined to retreat into silence and scepticism from their rush of words and aggressive curiosity. In this perfect mechanism for dialogue Gunn has given himself an ideal means for sifting the pastoral and primitivistic attitudes or values of which his themes are often made, and at the same time given himself, in the doctor, an ironic device for backing away from any tendency to immerse narrative concreteness in such discussion. The ideas are perfectly relevant—they are usually that; but here, their excessive exposition is an integral part of narrative structure and meaning. Words, abstract formulations, cannot supply the key to any chest; the crucial facts must be seen, visualized personally and archetypally, to be properly interpreted. Such is the doctor’s lesson, and his reticence is a sign of his wisdom and an effective comment on Gwynn’s intellectual primitivism.

Michael is distinguished from both by his strongly creative or destructive impulses. Hence, he is associated with images rather than with ideas. His photographic hobby commits him to a central faith in the book: that the individual as concretely visualized is ultimate. Michael is a hunter. He hunts odd birds, though only as a photographer; and he hunts individual solitary human birds as well—not as the destroyer would, but in the creative way of the artist—“the one man who sees a thing whole” (p.175)—seeking the full dynamic essence of each. This is his way of hunting the key of the chest, of the mystery of the seaman’s death, which is the mystery of life and death, in this traditional community.

Michael’s camera is just one of many visual aids in the book; the terrain demands telescopes and binoculars. The book
is, as Charlie describes his impression of people, "Eyes, many eyes, looking around corners" (p.251). From the beginning, when the Procurator Fiscal tries to get a "picture of the whole thing" (p.43), when Michael is sent to take photographs, and Gwynn admits he has come "to spy out the land" (p.56), the hunt unfolds as a rich texture of contrasting and complimentary modes of perception. As, for example, the doctor analyzes the photographs in the seventh chapter, he is made "aware of that border line beyond which analysis is blind, and, being blind, destructive" (p.63). The entire chapter is a scene constructed for the expounding of contrasting ways of seeing the murder—and ways of not seeing. The mythic way of seeing prevails in the minister’s sermon of the following chapter—a parabolic vision of life as a sea, ending as the minister "opened his eyes and looked upon the world, and the men were delivered from their visions" (p.70). The next chapter ends with an almost identical gesture, as the patriarch Smearach "lifted his eyes to the blind window, and it seemed to him that life was all shadows" (p.78). The main characters are identifiable in terms of wholeness and intensity of vision. Michael is credited "with a precision so vivid that it gathered attributes of the mythical" (p.97); Flora is like him, the would-be primitive artist for whom reasoning is carried on through visualization: "Reason produced its own profound logic in the form of images" (p.82). The minister has a mind as sensitive and hidden as "one of Michael’s plates"; the horrible vividness of the doctor’s dream has "the kind of clarity which Michael sometimes got in his photographs" (pp.101, 169). Michael and Gwynn, though they come (says the doctor) "with the outsider’s eye" (p.122), bring from theatrical experience a strong sense of spectacle; the species aeternitatis under which they view the unfolding tragedy of Charlie and Flora is congenial with the community’s timeless vision. Thus, the book evolves its contrast of modes of seeing as its structure moves in circles about the central figures with many eyes.

To what end? The end is a remarkable fusion of thematic resolution and technical articulation. The novel is a hunt for a key, the key is to be found only in the mystery of individual personality, and the finding awaits the proper mode of vision. When "the concept is all but lost in the thing itself," when "the personal, the dangerous personal, touched the universal," when words are useless and images are primary, then vision can
recognize "the individual human being, the one whole being" (pp.198, 238). Those who would be whole can achieve wholeness only by achieving the capacity for seeing it.

But the problem is not just personal; it is social. The key to the mystery of the dead seaman is also to be found in the mysterious bond of the two brothers, which in turn reflects the larger brotherhood of men of the sea which Charlie, in accidentally causing the seaman’s death, has violated. Brotherhood is given its widest significance by the several allusions to Cain and Abel. Both brothers are accused of wearing Cain’s mark. The whole novel explores Cain’s answer and poses the dependent query: how can one be one’s brother’s keeper? It is, ironically, the Cain-like figure of Dougal, the seemingly brutal shepherd, who supplies the answer—by being the answer, by being one who has instinctively known how to be his brother’s keeper and who has been willing to stand and defy the destructive forces, external and internal, that threaten his brother. The doctor tries; the doctor is anxious to “fix things up.” But even the doctor must learn the lesson embodied in Dugald’s brotherhood and in the instinctive, unobtrusive, practical helpfulness of the other men of the community. Charlie’s plight cannot be fixed up any more than Nan’s illness can, any more than Allan can be hidden from moral law. Brotherhood is a matter of the most delicate tact or instinct, which acts as its brother’s keeper without violating the individual wholeness of its brother. It can do this only when possessed of the most precise and operative vision of individuality.

Thus the intellectual and social imperatives are intertwined, and thus the key of the chest is recovered. It is an excellent key to what is most characteristic and impressive about Neil Gunn’s remarkable achievement in fiction.

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