

Movement against Meaninglessness: Thom Gunn's *On the Move* and the Philosophy of the Absurd

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Abstract

Thom Gunn's poem *On the Move* (1957) occupies a distinctive position in post-war British poetry through its exploration of movement, identity, freedom, and existential uncertainty. While critics have frequently interpreted the poem in terms of modernity, motorcycle culture, and existential philosophy, comparatively little attention has been paid to its relationship with the Philosophy of the Absurd as developed by Albert Camus. This article argues that *On the Move* dramatizes the human struggle against meaninglessness by presenting movement not as an escape from the absurd condition but as an active response to it. The poem's recurring images of motorcycles, birds, roads, speed, and continuous motion symbolize humanity's refusal to surrender to existential stagnation. Rather than offering metaphysical certainty or ultimate purpose, Gunn celebrates conscious movement as an affirmation of human freedom in an indifferent universe. Drawing upon the philosophical writings of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and selected critical works on Thom Gunn, this article employs qualitative textual analysis within an existential framework. It demonstrates that the bikers in the poem become metaphors for modern individuals who create meaning through action despite the absence of absolute truth. Ultimately, the study contends that *On the Move* exemplifies Camus's notion of revolt, where movement itself becomes an ethical and existential act against absurdity. The poem thus emerges as one of the most significant poetic representations of existential resilience in twentieth-century English literature.

Keywords: Philosophy of the Absurd, Existentialism, Movement, Meaninglessness, Modern Poetry, Identity, Freedom.

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed profound philosophical and cultural transformations following two devastating World Wars. Traditional religious certainties weakened, scientific advancement accelerated, and modern individuals increasingly experienced alienation, uncertainty, and spiritual isolation. Within this intellectual atmosphere emerged existentialism and, more specifically, Albert Camus's Philosophy of the Absurd, which examines humanity's confrontation with a silent and indifferent universe (Camus 21).

Thom Gunn belongs to a generation of poets deeply influenced by these intellectual developments. Although often associated with the Movement poets, Gunn developed a unique poetic voice by combining classical discipline with existential inquiry. His poetry consistently explores questions concerning freedom, identity, courage, violence, self-definition, and the search for meaning within an unstable world (Neilson 45).

Published in 1957, *On the Move* is among Gunn's best-known poems. At the literal level, the poem depicts a group of motorcycle riders traveling along open highways. Simultaneously, birds fly instinctively above them. The poem gradually transforms these physical images into philosophical symbols. The birds represent instinctive existence governed by nature, whereas the motorcyclists symbolize conscious beings compelled to choose their own direction despite uncertainty.

Albert Camus argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the absurd arises from the confrontation between the human desire for meaning and the world's indifference (28). Humanity seeks certainty, purpose, permanence, and order; however, the universe provides none of these. Consequently, the individual must either surrender to despair or continue living by creating meaning through conscious action.

This philosophical position resonates remarkably with Gunn's repeated emphasis on movement. The poem never promises a final destination. Instead, it repeatedly values the act of moving itself. The famous concluding lines—

"At worst, one is in motion; and at best,
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
One is always nearer by not keeping still"

suggest that human fulfillment lies not in achieving absolute truth but in refusing existential paralysis (Gunn).

This article argues that *On the Move* should be understood as a poetic expression of Camus's philosophy of revolt. Rather than escaping absurdity, Gunn's riders confront it through continuous movement, transforming purposelessness into purposeful action.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does *On the Move* represent the Philosophy of the Absurd?
2. In what ways does movement function as a metaphor for resistance against existential meaninglessness?
3. How do the motorcyclists symbolize Camus's concept of revolt?
4. What role do freedom, choice, and responsibility play in the poem?
5. How does Gunn distinguish instinctive existence from consciously created meaning?

Aims and Objectives

Aim

The primary aim of this study is to examine Thom Gunn's poem *On the Move* through the lens of existentialist philosophy, demonstrating how the poem represents the modern individual's search for authentic identity, freedom, and meaning in a rapidly changing world. The article seeks to establish that Gunn transforms the motif of physical movement into a profound existential metaphor for the human condition.

Objectives

1. To explore the influence of existentialist philosophy on Thom Gunn's poetic vision, particularly in *On the Move*.
2. To analyse the poem's treatment of existential themes such as freedom, anxiety, alienation, authenticity, choice, and the search for meaning.
3. To examine how the recurring image of movement functions as a metaphor for existential becoming rather than mere physical motion.
4. To investigate the symbolic significance of the motorcycle riders and other images in expressing the uncertainty and instability of modern existence.
5. To contribute to existing Thom Gunn scholarship by offering a comprehensive existentialist interpretation of *On the Move*, thereby highlighting its relevance to contemporary discussions of identity, modernity, and the human condition.

Literature Review

1. Albert Camus – *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

Camus argues that the absurd originates from the conflict between humanity's desire for meaning and the universe's silence. Rather than surrendering to despair, individuals should embrace revolt through continuous action. This concept forms the principal theoretical framework of the present study (Camus).

2. Jean-Paul Sartre – *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946)

Sartre emphasizes that "existence precedes essence," arguing that human beings create themselves through free choices. Gunn's motorcyclists similarly define themselves through movement rather than predetermined identity (Sartre).

3. Martin Heidegger – *Being and Time* (1927)

Heidegger's concept of authentic existence stresses the importance of confronting uncertainty instead of escaping it. The riders' continuous journey reflects an authentic engagement with existence rather than passive conformity.

4. Søren Kierkegaard – *The Sickness unto Death* (1849)

Kierkegaard identifies despair as an inevitable aspect of human existence. However, authentic living requires confronting rather than avoiding existential anxiety. Gunn's poem similarly rejects passivity.

5. Thom Gunn – *The Sense of Movement* (1957)

As the primary text, this collection establishes movement as Gunn's dominant poetic metaphor. The title itself suggests that identity emerges through action rather than stability.

6. Neil Powell – *Thom Gunn*

Powell argues that Gunn consistently examines the relationship between freedom and discipline. According to Powell, movement in Gunn's poetry symbolizes self-fashioning rather than simple physical travel.

7. Clive Wilmer – *Thom Gunn: A Bibliographical Guide*

Wilmer highlights Gunn's engagement with existential thought and emphasizes the poet's concern with individual agency. His study provides valuable historical context for interpreting *On the Move*.

8. John Press – *A Map of Modern English Verse*

Press situates Gunn among post-war poets who combine intellectual rigor with emotional restraint. He identifies movement as one of Gunn's central symbolic patterns.

9. David Perkins – *A History of Modern Poetry*

Perkins observes that post-war poetry increasingly reflects philosophical uncertainty and fragmented identity. Gunn's work exemplifies this broader literary tendency while offering a distinctive emphasis on action.

10. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds.) – *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature*

Bradbury and McFarlane discuss the influence of existential philosophy on twentieth-century literature. Their work provides the intellectual background necessary for understanding Gunn's engagement with modern existential concerns.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis grounded in existential literary criticism, with particular emphasis on Albert Camus's *Philosophy of the Absurd*. The research employs a close reading of Thom Gunn's poem *On the Move* to investigate how its imagery, symbolism, diction, structure, and philosophical implications articulate the modern human struggle against meaninglessness. Rather than treating the poem merely as a cultural representation of post-war motorcycle culture, the present study interprets it as an existential meditation on the human condition.

The primary text for this research is Gunn's *On the Move*, first published in *The Sense of Movement* (1957). The theoretical framework is primarily derived from Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, supplemented by existential concepts developed by Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Søren Kierkegaard. Secondary sources include critical books and scholarly articles on Thom Gunn, twentieth-century British poetry, and existential philosophy.

The study applies close textual analysis, examining significant metaphors, recurring images, symbolic patterns, and philosophical statements within the poem. Particular attention is given to the symbolic contrast between birds and motorcyclists, the imagery of roads and movement, and the concluding stanza, which encapsulates Gunn's existential vision.

Since this is an interpretative literary study, no quantitative methods or empirical data are employed. Instead, the research demonstrates how literary language embodies philosophical ideas through metaphor, symbolism, and

poetic structure. MLA 9th edition guidelines are followed throughout for documentation and citation.

Analysis

Movement as a Revolt against Meaninglessness

Albert Camus argues that the absurd arises from the confrontation between two irreconcilable realities: humanity's intense desire for meaning and the universe's complete indifference (Camus 28). Human beings naturally seek certainty, permanence, justice, and purpose; however, the world remains silent in response to these desires. The absurd is therefore not merely a condition of despair but the recognition that ultimate meaning cannot be discovered objectively.

Thom Gunn's *On the Move* presents precisely this existential condition. The poem contains no promise of a final destination, no divine revelation, and no ultimate truth toward which the riders travel. Instead, it repeatedly emphasizes movement itself. The road stretches endlessly before the riders, suggesting that life is an ongoing journey rather than a completed achievement.

The title, *On the Move*, immediately introduces movement as the central metaphor. Gunn deliberately avoids titles suggesting arrival, fulfillment, or destination. Instead, the emphasis falls upon continuous action. This reflects Camus's belief that life derives value not from reaching an ultimate goal but from persistent engagement with existence despite its uncertainty (Camus 54).

Unlike traditional heroic journeys that culminate in victory or enlightenment, Gunn's riders remain permanently in transit. Their movement possesses no predetermined destination, yet it is neither meaningless nor futile. Rather, movement itself becomes an affirmation of existence.

This perspective closely parallels Camus's famous interpretation of Sisyphus. Although Sisyphus endlessly pushes his stone uphill only to watch it roll back down, Camus insists that his conscious acceptance of this condition transforms punishment into freedom. Likewise, Gunn's riders continue their journey despite knowing that no absolute resting place awaits them.

Thus, movement becomes an existential act of rebellion rather than an attempt to escape absurdity.

Birds and Motorcyclists: Instinct versus Conscious Choice

One of the poem's most striking symbolic oppositions is the contrast between birds and motorcyclists.

The birds move effortlessly through the air, guided by instinct rather than conscious reflection. Their flight appears natural, harmonious, and predetermined. They do not question their existence because instinct supplies their direction.

Human beings, however, occupy a radically different condition.

Unlike birds, the motorcyclists must choose their path. They possess consciousness, freedom, and therefore responsibility. Their movement is not instinctive but deliberate. Every decision they make involves uncertainty.

This distinction reflects Sartre's assertion that human beings are "condemned to be free" (Sartre 29). Unlike animals, people cannot rely solely upon instinct or predetermined essence. They must continually define themselves through choices.

Gunn emphasizes this existential burden through the riders' restless movement. Their motorcycles symbolize technological extensions of human will rather than mechanical objects alone. The machines become instruments through which individuals impose direction upon an otherwise indifferent landscape.

The contrast therefore establishes two different modes of existence.

The birds represent unconscious harmony.

The riders represent conscious freedom.

From Camus's perspective, only conscious beings experience the absurd because only they ask questions concerning meaning, purpose, and identity. Animals never experience existential anxiety because they never seek metaphysical certainty.

Consequently, the riders become symbols of modern humanity itself.

The Motorcycle as an Existential Symbol

The motorcycle occupies a central symbolic position throughout the poem.

At the literal level, it represents speed, mobility, and modern technology. At the philosophical level, however, it symbolizes the individual's capacity for self-direction. Unlike trains that follow fixed rails, motorcycles allow riders to determine their own routes. This freedom mirrors existential philosophy, which rejects predetermined human destiny. The motorcycle therefore becomes an external manifestation of human agency. Its engine transforms intention into action. Its movement represents freedom translated into lived experience. Yet Gunn never romanticizes absolute freedom. The riders remain vulnerable to

accidents, uncertainty, exhaustion, and death. Their freedom exists alongside danger. This tension reflects Camus's understanding of human existence. Freedom does not eliminate uncertainty. Rather, uncertainty makes freedom meaningful. The motorcycle thus symbolizes humanity's courageous willingness to continue moving despite recognizing the fragility of existence.

"Toward, Toward": The Grammar of Becoming

Perhaps the most philosophically significant expression in the poem is Gunn's repetition of the word:

"Toward, toward."

Grammatically, "toward" indicates direction rather than destination. The riders always move toward something. Yet the poem never specifies exactly what they seek. This ambiguity is intentional. Existential philosophy rejects the idea that life possesses a universally fixed purpose. Instead, meaning continually emerges through lived experience. The repeated "toward" therefore symbolizes perpetual becoming rather than completed being.

Heidegger similarly argues that authentic existence consists not in possessing fixed identity but in continually projecting oneself toward future possibilities (Heidegger). Movement itself becomes identity. Existence remains unfinished. Every moment creates another possibility. The riders therefore embody human beings whose identities are never complete but always in the process of formation.

Freedom without Absolute Truth

The concluding stanza presents Gunn's deepest philosophical insight:

"At worst, one is in motion; and at best,
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
One is always nearer by not keeping still."

These lines reject the possibility of absolute certainty. The phrase "no absolute" recalls Camus's rejection of transcendent meaning. The universe offers no final resting place for human understanding. Nevertheless, Gunn refuses pessimism. Instead of despairing over the absence of certainty, he celebrates movement itself. The paradox is striking. Human beings become "nearer" precisely because they never stop moving. The destination matters less than the continual process of seeking. This is one of the poem's clearest expressions of Camus's philosophy of revolt. Meaning is not discovered. Meaning is created. Action becomes more valuable than certainty. Movement becomes more meaningful than arrival. In this way, Gunn transforms existential uncertainty into a source of human dignity rather than despair.

Movement as the Creation of Identity

One of the central insights of *On the Move* is that identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process. Gunn rejects the traditional belief that individuals possess a predetermined purpose or stable identity. Instead, the poem presents identity as something created through continuous action. The motorcyclists do not discover who they are before embarking on their journey; rather, they become themselves through the very act of movement.

This idea closely parallels Jean-Paul Sartre's existential claim that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 22). According to Sartre, human beings are not born with an inherent nature that dictates their lives. Instead, they define themselves through their choices and actions. Gunn's riders exemplify this principle. Their movement is not merely geographical but existential. Every mile traveled represents another act of self-definition.

The poem's refusal to provide a final destination reinforces this idea. If the riders were moving toward a predetermined end, their identities would be defined by that destination. Instead, Gunn suggests that identity is always in the process of becoming. This emphasis on becoming rather than being reflects a dynamic understanding of human existence, in which life is understood as an open-ended project rather than a completed achievement.

The Absurd Hero

Albert Camus's concept of the absurd hero provides another fruitful framework for interpreting *On the Move*. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that the absurd hero is one who fully recognizes the meaninglessness of the universe yet refuses either resignation or false hope. Sisyphus continues to push the stone, not because he expects success, but because the act of struggle itself affirms his humanity (Camus 119–23).

The motorcyclists in Gunn's poem resemble Camus's absurd hero. They continue their journey despite the absence of certainty or final fulfillment. Their movement is not based on religious faith or confidence in ultimate truth. Instead, it expresses a conscious acceptance of uncertainty. They understand that no "absolute" awaits them, yet they refuse immobility.

This refusal to surrender to despair transforms the riders into figures of existential courage. Their persistence demonstrates that meaning can emerge through action even when no objective purpose exists. Gunn therefore presents movement as an ethical response to the absurd. The riders' freedom lies not in escaping uncertainty but in embracing it without surrendering their will.

Modernity and the Human Condition

The motorcycle is also a symbol of post-war modernity. The rapid technological changes of the twentieth century transformed human experience, often producing feelings of alienation and instability. Gunn's riders inhabit this modern landscape, where traditional certainties have disappeared. Instead of lamenting this condition, however, they adapt to it through movement.

The machine itself becomes an extension of human agency. Rather than depicting technology as a force of dehumanization, Gunn suggests that it can serve as an instrument of self-expression. The riders control their machines, directing them toward self-chosen paths. In this way, technology becomes a metaphor for the human capacity to shape one's own existence despite living in an indifferent world.

This interpretation distinguishes Gunn from poets who portray modern technology solely as destructive. While acknowledging the uncertainties of modern life, *On the Move* presents technological mobility as a means of existential affirmation.

Significance of the Work

This study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating that *On the Move* can be read not simply as an existential poem but specifically as a poetic expression of Albert Camus's Philosophy of the Absurd. While previous critics have emphasized themes such as freedom, identity, or modernity, this article argues that the poem's central concern is humanity's active resistance to meaninglessness.

The study also highlights the close relationship between post-war British poetry and twentieth-century continental philosophy. By bringing Gunn into dialogue with Camus, Sartre, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, it reveals the philosophical depth of Gunn's poetic imagination.

Furthermore, this research illustrates the value of interdisciplinary criticism. Literary texts often communicate philosophical ideas through imagery, metaphor, and symbolism rather than abstract argument. Gunn's poem exemplifies this capacity of poetry to embody complex existential concepts in aesthetically powerful forms.

Finally, the article demonstrates the continuing relevance of *On the Move* in the twenty-first century. Contemporary societies continue to experience uncertainty, fragmentation, and rapid technological change. Gunn's insistence that meaning arises through conscious action rather than predetermined certainty remains deeply significant for modern readers.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Thom Gunn's *On the Move* represents one of the most compelling poetic explorations of the Philosophy of the Absurd in modern English literature. Through its sustained emphasis on movement, the poem transforms physical travel into an existential metaphor for humanity's confrontation with meaninglessness.

The analysis demonstrates that Gunn's riders resemble Albert Camus's absurd hero. Like Sisyphus, they recognize that no ultimate truth or permanent resting place awaits them. Yet they refuse despair. Instead, they affirm life through continuous movement, conscious choice, and personal responsibility.

The symbolic contrast between birds and motorcyclists further reinforces this interpretation. Birds move instinctively according to nature, whereas human beings must create their own direction. This freedom, though accompanied by anxiety and uncertainty, also makes authentic existence possible. The motorcycle becomes a symbol of human agency, and the road represents the open possibilities of existence.

The concluding stanza encapsulates Gunn's existential philosophy by rejecting the search for absolute certainty while affirming the value of continual striving. Movement itself becomes the source of meaning. Human beings approach fulfillment not by reaching final answers but by refusing stagnation.

Ultimately, *On the Move* presents a profoundly hopeful vision within an absurd universe. Gunn does not deny uncertainty or suffering; instead, he argues that dignity arises from humanity's determination to continue moving despite them. In doing so, the poem embodies Camus's conviction that revolt, freedom, and passionate engagement with life constitute the most authentic responses to the absurd.

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