

## “I don’t come from the past, I come from now”: AIDS and temporality in three Catalan texts<sup>i</sup>

Josep-Anton Fernàndez\*

*Estudis d’Arts i Humanitats, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Catalonia*

This article analyses literary representations of HIV/AIDS in Catalan against the background of current debates in Queer Theory about sexuality and temporality, taking into account the invisibility of the disease within Catalan culture, which is symptomatic of a representational crisis. Through a psychoanalytic reading of Maria Antònia Oliver’s *Tallats de lluna* (2000), Xavier Fernández i Gené’s *Del roig al vermell* (1999) and Pepe Sales’s *Sense re, sense remei* (2009), the essay raises three questions related to AIDS, sexuality, subjectivity, and temporality. Firstly, what do the temporal relations and structures in the representations of AIDS available in Catalan tell us about subjectivity with regards to finitude, contingency, and mortality? What does it mean to read literary representations of AIDS in 2012, when this very act seems an anachronism? Finally, what do these representations tell us about the nature of witnessing and its ethical implications, especially when witnessing involves speaking on somebody else’s behalf? The essay argues that these texts and their marginal position within contemporary Catalan literature raise questions about the effects of the ideologies of canonicity on the representation of illness and, more specifically, the representation of HIV/AIDS. It is precisely the marginal status of these texts, the critical oblivion to which they have been subjected, that makes them appear almost as archaeological objects outside their time, as anachronistic as the gesture of discussing AIDS today. I argue, however, that such a critical gesture and its corresponding focus on temporality, mortality, and remembrance, are crucial for understanding the present condition of Catalan culture.

**Keywords:** Catalan literature; HIV/AIDS; illness; temporality; psychoanalysis

What does it mean to discuss and reflect about AIDS in 2012, three decades after the first medical descriptions of the disease? To judge from the level of public presence of the illness and the focus of recent debates in disciplines like Queer Theory, it would be warranted to say that discussing AIDS today has acquired the patina of a quaint anachronism. Indeed, long past are the times of AIDS as an acute health crisis resulting in certain death for those diagnosed with HIV.

During the last fifteen years there has been a massive change in academic and cultural discourses about AIDS. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, academic discussions of the illness

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\* Email: [jfernandezmont@uoc.edu](mailto:jfernandezmont@uoc.edu)

centred around its cultural representations and discourses (especially medical, legal, and political), in particular with regards to issues such as access to treatment in the USA, homophobia and media misrepresentation of gay people and other minorities, as well as the enormous tragedy of AIDS in the African continent. In the late 1990s, after the successful introduction of combination therapies and high activity anti-retroviral therapy (HAART), the discursive construction of AIDS was radically transformed, shifting from a “death sentence” to a “chronic, manageable condition” (Watney 2000, 270). Of course, the very idea of HIV infection as a chronic condition is something that needs to be questioned. Certain important details are all too often overlooked: for example, not all patients respond equally well to treatment, medication has important side effects, and as the constituency of HIV+ population grows older, new aspects of the condition are beginning to come to the fore, such as premature ageing. At any rate, the enormous change in perception brought about by advances in treatment has had important consequences in academic discourse about AIDS in the Humanities: if in the 1980s and 1990s discussions were dominated by an acute sense of a health crisis, current debates around HIV focus on issues of risk and transgressive sexual practices such as barebacking (Dean 2009).

On the other hand, a significant part of the debates within Queer Theory in recent years have to do with temporality. In particular, scholars such as Judith Halberstam (2005), Elizabeth Freeman (2007), Carolyn Dinshaw (2007), Carla Freccero (2006), Heather Love (2007) or Valerie Rohy (2009) are looking into how the lived experience of non-hegemonic sexualities is imbued with a sense of disjointedness relative to dominant, heteronormative time (that of the family and reproduction, for example). Thus queer temporalities are related to an asynchronous character that is often seen as having a political potential. Other authors discuss the issue within the context of the “antisocial thesis”. I’m thinking in particular of Lee Edelman’s polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), which argues in

favour of the rejection of the very idea of the future, seen as the heteronormative territory of what he calls “reproductive futurism”. Critics such as José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Michael Snediker (2009), by contrast, have proposed the rehabilitation of the notions of utopia and optimism in the name, precisely, of a queer future.

What is surprising in all these theoretical discourses about temporality is the conspicuous absence of HIV and AIDS, which appears almost as a distant memory, as if AIDS were a thing of the past; for instance, in his book about utopia and queer futurity Muñoz discusses the cultural memory of the disease in terms of “ghosts of public sex” (2009, 33-48). However, this fading away of AIDS contrasts, and coincides, with the reprinting of Andrew Holleran’s *Ground Zero*, under the title *Chronicle of a Plague, Revisited* (2008), or the release of André Téchiné’s film *Les Témoins* (2007). In both works there is a retrospective impulse to revisit and document the earlier years of the epidemic, so as to bear witness to the crisis and restore a sense of that experience. In Catalonia we find a similar phenomenon in the rescuing from oblivion of Pepe Sales (one of the authors to whom I make reference in this essay) thanks to Albert Pla’s show *Cançons d’amor i droga* (2004), Víctor Bocanegra’s album *Bloc de lírica dura* (2005), the documentary *Pobres pobres que els donguin pel cul* (Martorell and Pla 2007), and the recent edition of Sales’s songs and diaries, *Sense re, sense remei* (2009).

Yet the case of Catalan culture is special because of a significant paradox in relation to AIDS and its representations. On the one hand, Catalonia is one of the European societies worst affected by the epidemic, with HIV infection prevalence indexes consistently higher than in the rest of Europe (Folch, Casabona, Muñoz, González, and Zaragoza 2010; Bermúdez and Teva 2004). The gay population remains the hardest hit: between 2001 and 2011 reported HIV infections in Catalonia among men who have sex with men (MSM) increased by 78%, and within the same period over 50% of all new infections in the city of Barcelona were among MSM (CEEISCAT 2012).<sup>ii</sup> On the other hand, however, and despite remembrance

efforts by organisations such as the Projecte dels Noms, AIDS was in the 1980s and 1990s, and remains, practically invisible in terms of its cultural expression, at least in the Catalan language. In my book *El malestar en la cultura catalana* (Fernández 2008) I claimed that this paradoxical invisibility — also affecting other crucial phenomena such as Spanish-speaking immigration from the 1950s and 60s — was the consequence of a structural deficit in Catalan culture of the symbolic, rhetorical, stylistic, pragmatic, and institutional resources that would allow Catalan society to represent itself in a complex way. This representational deficit is the effect, I argue, of the subordinate position of Catalan culture within the political system of the second Spanish Restoration. Like immigration, AIDS largely remains an unsymbolised trauma in Catalan culture and gives rise to what Simon Watney calls a “crisis of memory” (2000, 156).

Resolving this crisis in representation and memory is important not only for all those who have been affected by the epidemic in one way or another, but also for the health of Catalan culture as a whole. For this purpose, it is essential to bring to the fore the existing representations of AIDS, rescuing them from oblivion if necessary, and read them. To read these texts, however, is not the same as to concentrate on a critique of discourses and forms of representation in order to denounce their ideological flaws; rather, we must focus instead on the attributes and qualities of the texts themselves, however imperfect they might be.<sup>iii</sup> As Brad Epps (2010) has argued, at stake in certain readings of the narratives of illness in Catalan culture are the effects of the logic of canonicity and the ideologies of literary “quality”. Perhaps Catalan literature cannot boast a canon of AIDS authors like Hervé Guibert, Paul Monette or Thom Gunn, but I would concur with Epps that rather than being preoccupied with canon construction or with certain notions of a putative “quality”, what matters is to pay attention to these texts and try to hear what they tell us: not only because we have a duty to remember our dead, but also because the effects of the trauma of AIDS on gay subjectivity are

still there (and there is no way of predicting how long these effects will last, or how they will manifest themselves in future), and because AIDS — this most important event in the history of sexuality — has brought about enormous transformations in gay identity that engaging with these texts might help us understand.

What is at stake in this retrospective look towards the available representations of AIDS in Catalan culture is nothing less than our relationship with the past and our projection towards the future. Hence my focus on temporality in this essay, and on issues such as finitude, mortality, trauma, survival, or permanence. Such focus on temporality is also prompted by one of the most important and influential reflections written on the epidemic, Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. Indeed, Sontag describes AIDS as “a disease of time” (1991, 107). Whereas cancer is a disease of space in that it invades the body and expands within it, AIDS is a “progressive”, “slow” disease; its definition, on the other hand, “depends on constructing a temporal sequence of stages” (108). Moreover, it is characterized by a period of latency (107), a long incubation after which symptoms will start manifesting themselves, once much of the damage has been done to the immune system. Its diagnosis requires testing, and the time lapse involved is a powerful cause of anxiety (121). On the other hand, not only has HIV become the contemporary paradigm for the idea of mutation and change (154), but AIDS is the new threat par excellence: it is “an entirely new disease” (156), and as such it is imbued with historical meaning as a new phase in Western history (169). At an intersubjective level, HIV highlights in an excessive way the temporality of sex, in that every sexual contact, far from being an event exclusively committed to the now, involves a relationship to the other person's past: sleeping with somebody is tantamount to having sex with his entire sexual history (158).

Thus, AIDS engages an enormous and significant number of issues that bring together illness and time. In this essay I intend to follow Sontag's prompt and reflect within a

psychoanalytic framework on three questions linked to AIDS, sexuality, subjectivity, and temporality. Firstly, what do the temporal relations and structures in the representations of AIDS available in Catalan tell us about subjectivity, with regards to finitude, contingency, and mortality? What does it mean to read literary representations of AIDS in 2012, when this very act seems an anachronism? Finally, what do these representations tell us about the nature of witnessing and its ethical implications, especially when witnessing involves speaking on somebody else's behalf?

I hope to be able to answer these questions through a detailed reading of three literary texts, the best known of which is Maria-Antònia Oliver's novel *Tallats de lluna* (2000). One of the most prominent contemporary Catalan novelists, Oliver has her own background of illness and loss: in 1997, while she was working on this novel, she had to undergo a heart transplant, and in 1998 her husband, novelist Jaume Fuster, died of cancer, as noted by Eva Piquer in *Avui* (19 October 2000). *Tallats de lluna*, whose first draft dates from 1995, could not be published until 2000. This five-year lapse is precisely the period when new treatments were introduced and cultural perceptions of the epidemic were quickly transformed, prompting a thorough revision of the manuscript that not all critics consider successful. Thus the very conditions of production of this novel are a manifestation of the crisis of representation brought about by the epidemic. The second text is *Sense re, sense remei* (2009), the posthumous compilation of songs, diaries, letters, and art by Pepe Sales (1954-1994), edited by Lulú Martorell and Martí Sales. A gay man who struggled for years with his heroin addiction, Sales was a prominent figure in Barcelona's countercultural scene as a member of the rock band Bocanegra, as a painter and as a television presenter. He died of AIDS-related complications in 1994.<sup>iv</sup> Finally, Xavier Fernández i Gené's *Del roig al vermell* (1999) went completely unnoticed after its publication, to the extent that not one single review appeared in the press. Yet this book is one of the very few collections of poems in Catalan that deal with

the epidemic, and it does so in very interesting ways: the author rewrites in the form of free-verse poems the diary entries written by his friend David, who had died of AIDS, thus rendering problematic the status of authorship, voice, and witness.

All three texts and their marginal position within contemporary Catalan literature raise questions about the effects of the ideologies of canonicity on the representation of illness and, more specifically, of HIV/AIDS. It is precisely this marginal status, the critical oblivion to which these texts have been subjected, that makes them appear almost as archaeological objects outside their time, as anachronistic as the gesture of discussing AIDS today. But echoing the quotation from Paul Monette's autobiography (2004, 2) that I have chosen for my title — “I don't come from the past, I come from now” — I will argue that such a critical gesture and its corresponding focus on temporality, mortality, and remembrance, are crucial for understanding the present of Catalan culture.

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The experience of HIV is, from the outset, a traumatic disruption in the temporality of the subject. As anthropologists Veena Das and Lori Leonard put it, the diagnosis of HIV can be understood “as a moment that has the quality of an origin”; this moment of origin is “a pure event” which “comes from nowhere —it disrupts the expected and hence puts time out of joint” (2007, 200). Thus diagnosis is a new origin for those who receive it, but it is also a moment of revelation (200) which is another word for apocalypse: it is therefore simultaneously a beginning and an ending. The double character of the diagnosis as beginning and end blasts open the continuum of time and deeply problematises subjectivity. It brings to the fore the coexistence of different temporalities in the subject, and in so doing it exacerbates the psychic conflicts of which this coexistence is a source.

As Freud tells us, the unconscious cannot conceive its own death (Dean 2000, 124-25) because unconscious processes “are *timeless*, i.e., are not chronologically ordered, are not altered by the passage of time, indeed bear no relation to time whatsoever” (Freud 2005, 69-70). At the same time, the ego tries to achieve some coherence through a double movement of retrospection and anticipation, by constructing a story that makes sense of the past and alleviates the anxieties regarding the future. An HIV diagnosis, however, confronts whoever receives it with his own mortality and finitude, radically upsetting the ego’s balancing act. The new origin established by the diagnosis punctures the coherence of this organization, rendering it widely vulnerable to damage and pain.

Two of the texts I examine in this essay, Oliver’s *Tallats de lluna* and Fernández i Gené’s *Del roig al vermell*, illustrate very eloquently the problematic I have just outlined. At the most superficial level, however, their focus on chronology seems to deny the disjointedness of time that Das and Leonard describe above. *Del roig al vermell*, for example, follows the structure and the graphic appearance of a diary in which journal entries — rewritten as poems — are inscribed; we find the dates and corresponding days of the week and even the Catholic saints commemorated on the specific days, thus giving a degree of conceptual and visual fixity to David’s chronicle of the progression of his illness, as though it were a trying but nevertheless smooth process. In *Tallats de lluna*, the narrator and protagonist, Tomeu, is at pains to offer us clues, often indirectly, for us to locate the main events in chronological time: he discovers his homosexuality four years after “el Maig de París” (Oliver 2000, 9), that is in 1972, when he is 19 years old; his lover Patrizio dies in 1992, eight years before he tells his story. As a narrator, Tomeu does indeed attach a great deal of importance to the chronological order of events, partly because of his perceived failure to provide a coherent account of the events in his life.<sup>v</sup>

However, such emphasis on chronology is located at the most superficial level of



temporality in these texts. If we wish to gain some grasp, and make sense, of the effects of the illness on subjectivity and its temporal dimension, we need to consider one of the main defining elements of HIV infection: latency, which essentially entails the existence of a temporal gap between the virus's entrance in the body and the appearance of symptoms. But as Lisa Diedrich (2007) reminds us in an essay on Paul Monnette's work, including his memoir *Borrowed Time* (Monette 1998), this gap is also a defining characteristic of trauma, as defined by Freud. Diedrich says:

HIV/AIDS is an infectious disease that also has the temporal structure of a trauma. While latency is a characteristic of all infectious diseases, HIV/AIDS has added a particular twist to the phenomenon of latency, partly because latency in HIV/AIDS is such an unknown quantity; there is no standard amount of time from the point one becomes infected to the point that one becomes ill. (2007, 54)

Diagnosis does not just bring about fear of death, but also anxiety regarding the uncertain timing of the appearance of symptoms. Significantly, however, the fact that latency binds together infection and trauma is relevant because it links the psyche and the body. This link is, according to Freud, integral to one of the most important structures of subjectivity, the ego, which — as he famously claims in *The Ego and the Id* — “is above all a *corporeal* entity; it is not merely a surface entity, but it is itself the projection of a surface” (Freud 2003b, 117). That is to say, the ego is not just of the body in the sense that it derives from bodily perceptions, but is itself body-like, corporeal, insofar as it is the imaginary projection of the body's surface (what we see in the mirror), and organizes — in an imaginary way — a body originally fragmented in partial objects, the objects of the drives. The human immunodeficiency virus, then, doesn't just damage the body's immune system, but also the psychic defences against external and internal threats, the imaginary construction built around identifications that is the ego.

This is apparent in the first poem in *Del roig al vermell*, the title of which, “Avui he rebut la sentència”, evokes the metaphor of the death sentence that defined the temporality of AIDS

prior to combination therapies:

S'ha produït la gran mutació;  
aparentment tot és com abans  
que el paper dictés sentència,  
i no obstant la terra ha tremolat  
sota els meus peus. El temps  
ha començat a comptar enrere  
i he hagut de prendre possessió  
del meu cos, ara que duu data  
il·legible de caducitat.  
El pànic encara no té rostre  
malgrat que sé que l'aixopluc  
fa aigües i no se sap on és.  
Tampoc les preguntes em vénen  
a cercar. Només un buit incert  
i inexorable em volta per dins.

Em sorprèn el traç de la ploma  
confegint formes que assagen  
una impossible explicació,  
i no entenc que tan gran daltabaix  
tingui només un signe, una creu  
abans d'una terrible definició: positiu. (Fernández i Gené 1999, 10)

The traumatic effects of latency are visible here: a “mutació” has happened, but its consequences are as yet invisible. At the same time the diagnosis (the “sentència”) is a shattering event that directly impacts on time: the new beginning that is the diagnosis sets in motion a countdown towards a point in the future that is absolutely uncertain. Yet what is most relevant here is that David has to take possession of his body (“prendre possessió”), that is, reorganize it, while it simultaneously becomes an illegible object. Such illegibility is also manifested in the “buit incert” David confronts and in the paradoxical, incomprehensible redefinition of his self as “positiu”. A side effect of the trauma of diagnosis is a direct identification between body and self, both of which will be ravaged by the disease and the treatment. In the third poem, “Assaig de futur en la malaltia”, David says: “tinc el que sóc i sempre ha estat així, / la novetat, però, és que d'aquest / territori que fins ara en deia cos / de mica en mica en diré només jo” (12). Later on, in the poem “Cinquè aniversari: Seqüeles del tractament”, David describes his body after undergoing treatment for Kaposi's sarcoma “com un bosc després d'un / incendi” (35): it may be regenerated, but in the meantime the body and

the ego that is its projection have turned into a desolate landscape.

Furthermore, just as the virus attaches to white blood cells and merges with them, it also infiltrates David's most intimate being. In "Quart aniversari: La presència de la malaltia", we read:

Sento la teva presència més endins  
que la sang, en l'interior del temps.  
[...]  
És quan algú entra en la meva intimitat  
i vol conèixer les efemèrides que m'han fet,  
llavors tu ets l'abans i l'inici del després,  
llavors et tornes punt de partida i quan  
vas arribar et creia punt final, d'arribada. (29)

The unwelcome presence of the virus has filled the emptiness at the centre of David's being, and in so doing it profoundly alters the temporality of his own personal narrative: the illness is both past and future, starting point and endpoint. It thus contaminates and turns against itself the function of the future anterior that, for Lacan, organizes the imaginary temporality of the ego. By constructing "ce qui j'aurai été pour ce que je suis en train de devenir" (Lacan 1999, 298), the future anterior eclipses the uncertainties of the present by anticipating a future self that can retrospectively view a previous state in safety. But in *Del roig al vermell*, this future self isn't safe, but dead: in "Festa familiar", David describes how the extended family, sitting around the Christmas lunch table, recount past anecdotes that have become "rondalles". For David, however, the holiday is "com si fos nova": it provides no connection with a past viewed from an imagined future, because "no hi seré quan el meu pas sigui un fet, / que esdevindrà motiu d'anècdotes en les / íntimes i llargues sobretaules" (26).

Most relevant in Fernández i Gené's collection of poems is that here the temporal discourse about AIDS is entirely focused on the fear of finitude, of contingency and mortality, and on the mourning of a lost potentiality (of life, love, and pleasures). This is what David calls a nostalgia for a future time that will not arrive. There is, however, no speculation about the possible moment of infection, no sense of guilt or blame, no questioning of the subject's past.

Maria-Antònia Oliver, by contrast, offers a different perspective, much more closely focused on protagonist Tomeu's construction and dismantling as a subject, and more dependent on the psychic temporality of trauma.

*Tallats de lluna* centres around Tomeu's relationship with his lover Fabrizio, the latter's death from AIDS, and Tomeu's own experience of living with HIV. The narrative, however, begins with a statement of Tomeu's identity, which starts prior to his own existence: his name, Bartomeu, is the name of his mother's lover, and so his identity bears the mark of betrayal and guilt. In these first few pages we are also told of the event that prompts Tomeu's awareness of his own homosexuality. It is 1972, and as 19-years-old Tomeu teaches mathematics to older, working class students, one of them calls him "Mariconàs!" in front of the whole group. This insult is a traumatic interpellation that wounds Tomeu's sense of masculinity.<sup>vi</sup> Yet it has the paradoxical effect of making him feel liberated as he acknowledges his desire for the student who insulted him. As he goes to visit his mother in order to come out to her, Tomeu describes the scene outside: "A fora, el sol anava a la posta i per la banda de llevant s'acostava una gran negror que congriava tempestat" (Oliver 2000, 12); later on, at the end of the first chapter, he insists: "La nigulada negra encara congriava tempestat. Com jo dins meu" (16). The workings of latency are present in this pathetic fallacy: something is developing and its effects, like those of infection, will not manifest themselves until later, although in this case the terms are inverted because the "nigulada" is the symptom that the body (or the psyche) is not yet producing.

Tomeu's ambivalent reaction to the insult and the prolepsis I have just alluded to suggest the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or afterwardsness, a term that refers to the specific temporality of trauma: typically, a sexual incident occurring in adolescence triggers the unconscious memory of another event from childhood, which is now retroactively understood as sexual and as traumatic. *Nachträglichkeit* thus refers to the impact of the present on the

past, the retroactive interpretation of events that the child was not able to metabolize and therefore has repressed. For French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche (1999 and 2006), this concept encompasses psychic temporality in general; sexuality, he argues, is by definition traumatic because it always arrives too early, when the child's psychic apparatus is unable to process all sorts of actions and images of an unconscious sexual nature coming from the adult world. These actions or images are "enigmatic signifiers" traumatically implanted in the child, and become an "internal foreign body" inside it, an otherness that is constitutive of human subjectivity. They will have to be detranslated and retranslated by the subject in order to metabolize them into a story that makes sense.

I bring up the concepts of trauma and afterwardsness in order to understand one of the main differences in how the temporality of AIDS is presented in *Del roig al vermell* and *Tallats de lluna*. Like in Fernández i Gené's poems, in Oliver's novel we find a subject who constructs his experience of illness and loss in terms of the disintegration of his body — "Jo era sorra, però sense la bellesa de la sorra", says Tomeu (Oliver 2000, 49) —, of a wounded ego — he describes himself as a fallen god (56) —, and of a narrative that cannot reach coherence. But unlike in *Del roig al vermell*, in Oliver's novel there is a retrospective gaze that views both homosexuality and AIDS as traumatic and links them in ways that, at least at first sight, are highly problematic. Indeed, the "nigulada" of the pathetic fallacy discussed above anticipates (at an imaginary level) infection and death, thus identifying homosexual identity with death by AIDS in a relationship that could be seen as one of cause and effect.

I would argue, however, that the opposite is true. That is to say, the trauma of Fabrizio's death, Tomeu's own diagnosis of HIV, and the insult that makes him aware of his homosexual desire, all point towards Tomeu's traumatic entrance into adult sexuality. Shortly after Tomeu is sacked from his job by a homophobic school principal director, he and Fabrizio kiss in the street. This public display of affection awakens in Tomeu the repressed

memory of another event twenty-five years earlier, when he was 12 and his friend Carles unexpectedly kissed him:

jo només havia sentit que els pèls del clatell se m'arreveixinaven i que al bell mig de l'enforcadura m'hi passava alguna cosa, un plaer i un dolor tot alhora, ben diferent de quan em tocava jo tot sol [...] Ara sabia per què ho havia de recordar aquell dia precisament. Perquè precisament aquell dia en Fabrizio i jo havíem trencat una barrera i l'havíem creuada, l'havíem traspassada amb peu segur. L'altra vegada, amb en Carles, jo no havia franquejat cap obstacle, sinó que m'havia fet enrere. Amb un dolor i un plaer que em va durar uns dies i que no vaig voler saber què era el que ho provocava. (Oliver 2000, 33).

Sexuality thus arrives too early and it is too intense to bear. Carles's kiss amounts to an enigmatic message that Tomeu cannot translate. This traumatic event inaugurates Tomeu's passion for ignorance, his unwillingness to know about his own desires, about HIV, and about his own serostatus.<sup>vii</sup> It is in this respect that he himself considers this unwillingness to know as suicidal.

The Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or afterwardsness suggests the return of something that has been repressed because it could not be metabolised; it involves the retrospective understanding of traumatic events, the revisiting of them, the reliving of them. This concept, then, suggests return and repetition: the return of symptoms, of cancer, of pneumonia in the second half of *Del roig al vermell*; the return home of David never to leave again in the last few poems; the insistent, obsessive return in Tomeu's narrative to the traumas of Fabrizio's death and of Tomeu's wounded masculinity; Maria-Antònia Oliver's own return to writing after illness and loss; the repetitive character of Pepe Sales's songs; the obsessive repetition of the crucifixion of Christ in his paintings. And stretching this chain of associations perhaps a little too far, we can also think of the Christian promise of resurrection in the face of mortality.

In the texts I am examining we detect three different positions vis-à-vis mortality. David's position in *Del roig al vermell* might be described as heroic: he carries on living against all the odds, motivated — albeit ambivalently — by “l'impuls per lluitar, l'impuls per viure”

(27). This impulse props up on “la rebel·lió contra un destí pervers” (27) that will necessarily lead to his disintegration. By contrast, Pepe Sales’s position in *Sense re, sense remei* is that of martyrdom. A heroin addict since his early twenties, and a gay man from a Barcelona upper-middle class family, Sales lived a life of sexual, social, and artistic transgression. Both his songs and his paintings, however, exude an air of transcendence. By the end of his life he was obsessed with the image of Christ’s crucifixion and painted it incessantly, sometimes as self-portraits, the cross obviously evoking the plus sign of seropositivity (Sales 2009, 192-93, 197). Several of his songs, on the other hand, evoke the figures of Jesus Christ and other martyrs, such as St Sebastian and St Lawrence. In the song “Moro moro”, death will be “la fi del martiri”, for his illness is something that “no ho cura ni un cura això no ho cura ni Crist” (Sales 2009, 52). The identification with the passion of Jesus Christ is eloquently formulated in one of Sales’s most moving songs, “Quando corpus morietur”, dedicated to Cecilio, his room companion at the ironically called Hospital de l’Esperança, who was dying of AIDS. The song locates death from AIDS within the symbolic universe of the passion and the *pietà*: a “l’últim moment” (or “la recta final”, which is how both *Del roig al vermell* and *Tallats de lluna* put it), consolation and comfort in the face of the ultimate sacrifice come from a *mater dolorosa*:

I la seva mare el gronxa  
 com gronxen les mares als nins  
 I la seva mare el gronxa  
 com dormen les mares als fills  
 I la seva mare el gronxa  
 com feia la Mare de Déu  
 I la seva mare el gronxa  
 com féu la Madonna a la creu. (Sales 2009, 71)

Thus mortality in Sales’s work is integrated into a religious discourse, but I would argue that, like transgression, this transcendent gesture is empty because it offers no access to an afterlife.<sup>viii</sup>

In fact, the position of the martyr is not as amiable and generous as some would believe. As

Lacan puts it, “only the martyrs know neither pity nor fear. Believe me, the day the martyrs are victorious will be the day of universal conflagration” (1997, 267). Neither pity nor fear might be a good description for the third position vis-à-vis mortality in these Catalan texts: Fabrizio’s attitude in *Tallats de lluna*, an unbreakable determination to refuse treatment. Fabrizio's decision is tantamount to self-immolation, and as such it is an act of supreme will that Tomeu will always find an enigma.

Fabrizio’s position evokes Freud’s insight in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that “the organism wants only to die in its own particular way” (Freud 2003a, 79). In a dialogue in which Tomeu confronts his lover and implores him to start treatment, Fabrizio retorts: “Tu fas de conillet de rata perquè vols i jo m’estic matant perquè vull. [...] Tu vares decidir. [...] Ara, la meva vida és meva i jo no vull. No vull, ¿entesos?” (Oliver 2000, 100). Fabrizio’s words evoke Freud’s account of the death drive as a demonic force, or evil, as Lacan says (1997: 184), which leads the subject towards his own abolition in infinitude. There is something demonic about Fabrizio, too. Tomeu presents him as “un déu... o un diable” (30); at one point he describes his laughter as “un grinyol bàrbar que sortia de les fondàries de la humanitat, com un bramul tel·lúric que sorgia d’un avenc” (63). Fabrizio considers the very idea of death “absurd” (30), in the same way that the unconscious is unable to conceive of death. Thus in a characteristically masochistic fashion, Fabrizio lives his life to the extreme of his own death, and transfers all anxiety to the other, to Tomeu, who will from then on try to make sense of the enigma of his lover’s death.

I will now enter the *recta final* of this essay, and I will do so by returning to my starting point. What sense does it make to reflect on AIDS in 2012? Is it an anachronism? What sense does it make to read and discuss texts that perhaps do not fit into conventional parameters of literary “quality”; texts that, according some aesthetic positions, perhaps should not be remembered; texts, on the other hand, that from a political viewpoint could be seen as highly



problematic in that they speak on someone else's behalf, stealing their voice, as it were? This last point could be applied to Xavier Fernández i Gené, who rewrites David's diary into poems, in a sort of literary ventriloquism; and to Maria-Antònia Oliver, who is not a gay man nor does she have HIV.

I put it in these terms because in his review of *Tallats de lluna*, published in *La Vanguardia* (7 October 2010), Julià Guillamon charged Oliver with “falso testimonio” in a novel that has a deficit of “autenticidad”. Yet the main problem of *Tallats de lluna* has to do with time being out of joint: “la novela ha estado parada mucho tiempo y se nota, porque hay pasajes de dos tonos diferentes,” and this “desfase temporal”, writes the critic, causes “un cierto embrollo de tratamientos, esperanzas y expectativas”.<sup>ix</sup> Guillamon is referring to the period of five years that lapsed between the first draft of the novel and its final, published form, a period during which Oliver was dealing with her own health condition and the loss of her husband. It is unclear what he means by “embrollo de tratamientos”, however. It is possible that he is alluding to the narrative treatment of certain events in the text. If this is the case, the critic is right in pointing to this issue, for the narrative problems of Oliver's novel do indeed have to do with “tratamientos”: for it was precisely between 1995 and 2000 that combination therapies became widely available in Europe, transforming AIDS from a deadly disease into a chronic condition — or as Simon Watney reflects, from a death sentence into a life sentence (2000, 194). This massive shift introduced yet another kind of temporal disjointedness, in that many of us still inhabit both temporalities, that of the death sentence and that of the chronic condition. The crisis in meaning and representation this new disjointedness provokes is apparent at the end of Oliver's novel:

Em sento sol, sí, però em queda la novel·la que estic escrivint, encara que sé que mai no quedarà escrita, perquè el temps em marca, i s'acaba, s'acaba. O potser no. Perquè som a l'any dos mil, al primer món, la sida ja no és la malaltia letal que era fa vuit anys. Fa cosa de cinc anys que es va començar a dir que seria una malaltia crònica. Ara ja ho és. [...] Però encara que no em mori per ara, no escriuré la novel·la. (Oliver 2000, 170)

Yet the novel must be written, and it must be read, as I argued in my introduction. In a recent essay on the temporality of barebacking (anal penetration without condoms), Tim Dean refers to AIDS as an enigmatic message (in Laplanche's sense of the term) that "for the past three decades gay culture has been trying, in various ways, to translate [...] into a story that makes sense" (2011a: 90). But in Catalan culture AIDS will remain an unsymbolised, untranslated, unmetabolised trauma for as long as the very few texts that represent it are consigned to oblivion or left undiscussed, and there is no way of foreseeing the social and cultural as well as individual consequences of this lack of symbolisation.

In this respect, we can certainly learn from Fernández i Gené, and his friend David. On the one hand, David symbolizes his experience of living with the virus by reference to Penelope's tapestry:

Així, fa més de dos anys que es teixeix  
la catifa, un argument que es va polint  
a cada línia que s'escriu, una història  
que va tancant-se a mida que avança  
pel mar de la por cap a l'illa final. (21)

The journey that he makes in the company of his illness is extremely difficult, because "mentre jo el faig enrere tu el fas endavant" (24). It seems therefore impossible to weave a story that keeps undoing itself, and absurdly so. But each of the ten poems that mark the anniversary of David's diagnosis on a 12<sup>th</sup> of November, right to the bitter end of his life, work in a different direction: that of slowly, patiently, painfully, but constantly revisiting the moment of trauma. This repetition is reminiscent of the *fort/da*, the child's game that Freud presents in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, an "immense cultural achievement" (2003a: 57) that allows the child to cope with the absence of his mother. David's ritual, repetitive remembrance of the event of his own beginning and apocalypse evokes, too, the process of the analytical cure, encapsulated in the title of another of Freud's essays: "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" (Freud 2003c). Yet this remembrance requires bearing witness. Perhaps we should understand this bearing witness not in terms of direct experience,

but as a social act that facilitates the access of others to speech and public representation.

What sense does it make, then, to look at Oliver, Fernández i Gené, Sales's texts today? Are these works and the very act of looking into them anachronisms? Is it too late now to read them? As I have been arguing throughout this essay, this is not the case. These texts don't come from the past, they come from now — from a perpetual now, insofar as they are the enigmatic sign of an individual, cultural, and social trauma that remains unread, undead, and that will remain so unless we engage in a slow, patient, constant work of remembering the ravages of AIDS and working through the textual and social knots that we encounter in the process. Paradoxically, in doing so, these texts will gain eternal life, and our dead will rest in peace.

## <sup>i</sup>Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> For a detailed statistical analysis of the current situation and the evolution of AIDS cases and HIV infections in Catalonia, see Generalitat 2011a and 2011b.

<sup>iii</sup> I make this point because the only existing scholarly essay on Maria-Antònia Oliver's *Tallats de lluna* is a harsh ideological critique of the novel, that chastises it for its reference to “innocent victims” or its construction of homosexuality as effeminacy (Martínez and Velázquez 2004). As I will argue throughout my essay, such a critical stance, for all its theoretical sophistication, prevents us from reaching a proper understanding of the novel and its cultural effects.

<sup>iv</sup> On Sales, the band Bocanegra, and Víctor Bocanegra’s album *Bloc de lírica dura*, see Nopca (2006).

<sup>v</sup> Rotureau highlights the importance of the disjointedness of time in the narrative: “Bartomeu relate donc sa vie présente et passée en mêlant le temps du récit et le temps de l’histoire, l’un et l’autre étant ici indissociables” (2001, 309).

<sup>vi</sup> Lluïsa Julià (2001) also refers to the role of the traumatic irruption of homosexuality in the novel.

<sup>vii</sup> For an excellent account of the passion for ignorance as described by psychoanalytic theory, see Ragland (1996).

<sup>viii</sup> Michel Foucault presents this argument in his essay on Bataille, “Préface à la transgression” (Foucault 1963). For a recent discussion of the relevance of transgression in gay writing, see Dean (2011b).

<sup>ix</sup> Jordi Puntí in *El País* (Quadern, 19 October 2000) and Júlia Zabala (2001) offer rather more favourable reviews of Oliver’s novel.

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