



# Homosexual Desire in the Poetry of Blai Bonet

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## Abstract

This article examines the interplay between homosexual desire and anxiety in the poetry of Blai Bonet, one of the most important, complex, and problematic figures in modern Catalan literature. Bonet is usually presented as a homosexual author, but the way his poetry articulates same-sex desire is far from straightforward. Critics have highlighted the sensuality and eroticism of his poetry, as well as the importance of mysticism and Catholic imagery. However, a specific analysis of homosexual desire in Bonet's poetry has never been undertaken. Through a psychoanalytically-oriented reading of various poems by Bonet, this essay traces the movement and the effect of anxiety in a textual corpus characterised by a tension between a body mortified by pain, illness, and guilt, and an ecstatic body that seeks satisfaction in the social underworld, in voyeurism and fantasy, and in textual play. Blai Bonet's literary project promotes a textual revolution through the dissolution of genres and the proliferation of voices: he defines himself as "a poet without intimacy" whose work performs a radical dispersal of the subject, yet paradoxically his own name is constantly enunciated in the poems, while his body remains silent, concealed behind ellipses or in elusive references to (gay) sex. This article argues that following the trace of anxiety in Bonet's poetry allows us to move towards the locus where he confronts the complexities of his desire: through an act of sublimation that restates the sexual in creative life, Bonet turns anxiety into comedy, guilt into a sense of humour, and textual experimentation into a form of asceticism.

**Keyword** Blai Bonet (1926–1997) · Catalan literature · Homosexuality · Anxiety · Sublimation · Psychoanalysis

Majorcan writer Blai Bonet (1926–1997) is one of the most important Catalan authors of the twentieth century; his narrative (especially *El mar*), his vast poetry production, and his journals have attained the status of modern classics. Yet he is also one of the most complex and problematic figures in modern Catalan literature. Bonet is

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usually presented as a homosexual author, but the way his poetry articulates same-sex desire is far from straightforward. Critics have highlighted the sensuality and the erotic charge of Bonet's poetry, as well as the importance of mysticism and Catholic imagery and themes (Albertí, 1981; Alzamora, 2000; Mesquida, 2000; Pons, 1998, 2014; Susanna, 1989). However, a specific analysis of homosexual desire in Bonet's poetry has not been undertaken so far.

Like the rest of his oeuvre, Blai Bonet's poetry seems to be traversed by a number of tensions. On the one hand, we find a body mortified by pain and illness (Susanna, 1989, 15–16), but also by a very deep-seated sense of guilt, contrasting with an ecstatic body of pleasure which rarely appears, and which seems to give rise to an interest in the social underworld (Barcelona's Raval or slums such as el Somorrostro; the world of male prostitution), to a release through voyeurism and fantasy, and to pleasure in textual play. On the other hand, we encounter a theological discourse about sin, guilt, and redemption (Pons, 1998, 501–520), which contrasts with a biopolitical discourse on the law, the medicalisation of desire, and power (Albertí, 1981; Pons, 1998, 2014; Susanna, 1989). Bonet's poetry seems to attempt to resolve these tensions through a synthesis between the sacred (a discourse focusing on "l'Home", "la Vida", and transcendence understood as embodiment) (Susanna, 1989), and an emphasis on the figures of the Adolescent and the Youth, as well as on the Greek roots of Mediterranean culture (Pons, 1998, 451–454, 495–511). Finally, however, we find the tension between an authorial persona who, unlike many of his contemporaries (Allen Ginsberg, James Baldwin, Thom Gunn, Frank O'Hara, Jaime Gil de Biedma, Juan Goytisolo, Dominique Fernandez...) is seemingly unaffected by the emerging sexual revolution, and a literary project that develops a radical form of textual revolution through the dissolution of genres and the proliferation of voices. Bonet defines himself as "un home sense intimitat" (Bonet, 2014, 493; Pons, 1995) whose textual production performs a radical dispersal of the subject, yet paradoxically his own name is constantly enunciated in the poems (Pons, 2014, 12; Alzamora, 2000, 179; Mesquida, 2000, 226–231); at the same time his body appears to remain silent, concealed behind ellipses or in very elusive references to (gay) sex. Thus Blai Bonet's poetry undertakes a subversion of the subject whose limits remain to be explored.

In order to explore these limits, I think it is necessary to engage with the contradictory, complex character of Bonet's poetry, particularly with regards to the subjectivity it constructs, which appears to be organised around a dialectic between speaking and silence. As Margalida Pons asks in her excellent introduction to Bonet's collected poems: "Com és possible parlar tant i callar tant al mateix temps?" (2014, 8). Homosexual desire, I would claim, occupies a central position in this dialectic, but the difficulty it poses to analysis lies in the fact that it sides with silence, inhibition, invisibility, that which is veiled. As Margalida Pons writes in an earlier essay, about Bonet's book *Cant de l'arc*:

la incursió en el barri xinès barceloní serveix per introduir ("Carrer dels Tres Llits") la temàtica homosexual, *latent* des dels primers versos bonetians però no completament *desinhibida* [...]. En "Carrer dels Tres Llits", el plaer homosexual *s'amaga* en els carrerons adjacents a la Rambla (la via "oberta" per

definició). En “L’amic Àlex Susanna”, la reivindicació d’aquest plaer *es dissimula* rere la metàfora mística de l’Amic. (1998, 504; emphases mine)

Critical attention to the vicissitudes of subjectivity in Bonet’s poetry tends to be focused on affects such as guilt and shame (Pons, 1998, 441, 467–468; Pons, 2014, 31). This is unsurprising, as it is consistent with the poet’s catholic bias, religious upbringing, and theological training. However, the psychologising lens this focus imposes on Bonet’s corpus is problematic given the particular way the Majorcan poet constructs and disperses his own subjective voice. For this reason I would like to recuperate an idea from an article by Josep Albertí published back in 1981. Here Albertí locates the modernity of Bonet’s poetry in his articulation of “les característiques essencials [*sic*] de la persona humana a partir de la meitat del segle XX”: a desolate individual and social experience, the impact of history in this experience, religious contradictions, and “els signes màgics de la sexualitat” (1981, 51). Albertí then argues the following, making a point about the critical reception of Bonet’s prose that may be extrapolated to his entire oeuvre:

Si la crítica parla constantment d’“angoixa” enmig del caos com a característica fonamental de la prosa bonetiana, el defecte principal d’aquesta crítica és no aprofundir en els ressorts de l’angoixa, tant com a element essencial de la psicoanàlisi del text i del seu autor, com per establir paral·lelismes ben palesos amb els corrents europeus que literàriament arribaven a Blai Bonet. (1981, 52)

Following Albertí’s insight, it is my purpose in this essay to explore the link between anxiety and homosexual desire in Blai Bonet’s poetry.<sup>1</sup> This linkage is consistent with the “deriva des de la metàfora cap a la metonímia” that Xavier Lloveras (2000, 209) detects in Bonet’s transition to a realist paradigm from the nineteen-sixties; and it is relevant because metonymy is, as psychoanalysis teaches us, the figure that articulates the movement of desire in the chain of signifiers, along lines of contiguity. Anxiety is the signal that indicates this movement is taking place.

Indeed, in his essay *Inhibition, Symptom, and Anxiety*,<sup>2</sup> Freud argues that anxiety arises from the interplay between the activity of the sexual drives and the intervention of the super-ego, which induces feelings of guilt in the ego. Anxiety is a reaction to “an unrecognized danger emanating from the drives” (Freud, 2003b, 234). More specifically, it is a signal that warns the ego of potentially traumatic danger situations:

A danger situation is a situation of helplessness that we simultaneously recognize, remember and expect; fear is the original reaction to helplessness in the trauma that is then subsequently reproduced in the danger situation as a

<sup>1</sup> Queer theory does not seem to have paid a great deal of attention to anxiety as a relevant affect in the dynamic of subjectivity, and in gay subjectivity in particular. This is surprising, given the central role of anxiety in the dialectics of desire, but also considering the historical circumstances of gay experience.

<sup>2</sup> Whereas the *Standard Edition* of Freud’s works translates the German term *Angst* as “anxiety”, more recent translations, such as *The New Penguin Freud*, edited by Adam Phillips, use the term “fear”, which is closest to the original. I am quoting from the latter, hence the alternation here between the two words.

signal calling for help; the ego, having experienced the trauma passively, now actively repeats a reproduction of it in diluted form, in the hope of being able to keep control of the way it evolves. (Freud, 2003b, 235)

Ultimately, the danger that triggers anxiety is the more fundamental threat of castration:

Fear of castration evolves into *consciential* fear, into *social* fear. [...] [I]n the estimation of the ego, the potential danger [...] resides in the possibility that the super-ego might visit wrath or punishment upon it, or withdraw its love. The final variant of this fear of the super-ego, so it seems to me, is the fear of death (or of life)—fear, that is, of the super-ego in projected form busily determining the forces that rule our destiny. (2003b, 208)

In the Lacanian reading of Freud, anxiety is posited as prior to desire: “en deçà du désir”, states Jacques-Alain Miller, “il y a la jouissance et il y a l’angoisse” (2005, 68). Thus anxiety is rewritten in terms of the ideas of the subject’s constitutive lack, the dialectic between desire and *jouissance*, the Law of the Father and the desire of the Other. As Italian psychoanalyst Vincenzo Marzulli puts it: “L’angoscia è sempre in rapporto con la legge e il suo oltrepassamento”; its very presence prevents us from trespassing the Law: “infatti essa è un segnale che indica che ci troviamo nella possibilità di infrangere la legge, la quale viene ad assumere i contorni di una minaccia di castrazione” (Marzulli, 2017, 67). Anxiety is a signal that we are approaching the traumatic Real, that which cannot be symbolised, the limit to signification:

Il reale che è in causa nell’angoscia è quel reale pulsionale che si presenta sotto la forma di un tormento senza voce, e che il soggetto, in quanto diviso, riceve del desiderio.

L’angoscia è il segnale del reale perché indica un’insistenza pressante della pulsione percepita come volontà di godimento. È la sensazione della vicinanza del desiderio dell’Altro nella sua inconoscibilità più enigmatica. (*ibid.*)

Anxiety is “une angoisse de l’Autre. [...] Le signal avertit le moi que l’Autre le désire, donc cherche à l’annuler” (Diatkine, 2005, 924). Furthermore, it is mobilised by an encounter with an elusive object, the object that causes the subject’s desire: “El objeto de la angustia es un pedazo separado del Otro [...]. [L]a angustia implica ahí al sujeto mismo, pues este objeto viene a nombrar eso que le falta, siendo propiamente el velo de la castración” (Cano and de Frutos 2013, 52). This object, that Lacan terms *objet petit a*, is inherently enigmatic for the subject, as it escapes specularisation and symbolisation: “irréductible à la symbolisation et irréprésentable selon les lois normales du champ visuel, extérieur à l’Autre, et néanmoins inclus dans l’Autre, mais comme différent du signifiant” (Miller, 2005, 75).

Anxiety is thus the affect that signals to the subject that he is in the presence of his constitutive lack, the void in his being that cannot be represented, explained, or symbolised. It is therefore on the side of silence, that which is veiled, the unspeakable and the ineffable. As such it is prior to the act in which the drive is satisfied, and therefore it is also prior to guilt. For this reason, its relevance in relation to my argument has to do not so much with the representation of sexual contact—the act itself, which on the other hand Bonet tends to conceal and repress in his writing—but with

the irruption of an object that mobilises the lyrical subject's desire and confronts him with his unspeakable enjoyment.

This point becomes apparent in some of Bonet's poems from the nineteen-sixties and seventies, when homoeroticism begins to be more explicitly articulated in the texts. For instance, in "Company d'habitació" (Bonet, 2014, 319–321), a poem from *L'Evangeli segons un de tants* (1967), the lyrical voice engages in a voyeuristic description of the beautiful body of the *col·legi major* roommate as he undresses upon returning in the wee hours from a night out. In the silence of this scene, the roommate gives the poet a shell from the beach. Far from presenting this gift as a fetish for the presence and the memory of the desired boy, Bonet interprets it in terms of innocence and guilt: "vaig veure que eres innocent [...] / perquè creies de debò que la salvació d'un noi / pot caber, al primer cant del gall, dintre una petxina" (ll. 62–65). This same scene, however, is evoked much more explicitly in Bonet's novel *Míster Evasió* (Bonet, 2010), where it is not a roommate but the protagonist, Marc Esquert, who returns to the hall of residence from a wild night out during which, as Jordi Cornellà points out, Marc has given in to the advances of another man and presumably murdered him after having had sex for money. Marc thus returns home consumed by guilt and overwhelmed by the possibility that others might think he is "un ma..." (cited by Cornellà, 2011, 82); the offensive, hurtful term of abuse (*maricó*) cannot even be uttered. The shell is therefore a fetish for his lost innocence, or rather for a broken ego ideal, his lost sense of a masculine, heterosexual ego.

In "Carrer dels Tres Llits" (Bonet, 2014, 527–529), from *Cant de l'arc* (1979), we find a more explicit representation of homosexual contact. The title refers to a street near Plaça Reial, in Barcelona's Raval, the social underworld Bonet was so attracted to. The poem is framed by a popular verse in Spanish that places the events in the poem within the context of social sanction and superegoic guilt: "*El Pueblo se amotinó, / y fue culpable y tirano, / ya que culpa le encontró*" (ll. 1–3). Bonet starts with a veiled reference to male prostitution: "Aquí els honoraris són de cent peles" (l. 4). Two characters—the lyrical self and a young man—start a conversation on a Saturday evening, their dialogue strongly suggesting a seductive intent. However, the sexual nature of their interaction is always left to the readers' inference and veiled by ambiguity: as they climb a staircase they appear to be "veïns d'escala" (l. 25); but the poem metonymically indicates—through a reference to the smell of perfume and insecticide "i cinc vies de collar violeta" (l. 27)—that they are in a cheap hotel managed by a lady who, "amb voluntat i maquillatge de no avergonyir" (l. 28), offers them the only twin room left (thus implicitly confirming it to the reader that it is indeed a couple of men) and pretends to believe that they intend to spend the night. This contact thus takes place in the implicit presence of the law.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Huard (2016) documents gay life and male prostitution in Barcelona's Raval—precisely the district portrayed in this poem—through files from court archives between 1956 and 1980, related to cases under the *Ley de Vagos y Maleantes* (1956) and the *Ley de Peligrosidad y Rehabilitación Social* (1970). In this article the richness of this gay underworld is portrayed, but at the same time the constant presence of the legal apparatus's gaze strongly suggests that for many homosexuals, like Blai Bonet, the lived experience of gay sexuality was likely dominated by fear and anxiety.

However, anxiety here seems to have leaked away between the lines of the poem. As the two men start kissing, the lyrical voice evokes the presence of death, but this has a theatrical, inauthentic taint that is ultimately disavowed: looking in the mirror, Bonet sees how his partner kisses him: “em besaves com es besa un mort / vestit, calçat i amb la corbata horitzontal. // Agonitzaves de teatre, sense desvestirte, talment qui besa una persona viva” (ll. 42–45). Soon enough, the passage to the sexual act is governed by the pursuit of *jouissance*. Despite the lurid decor (or perhaps because of it), the two men are able to connect with their animal kinship: “Sota la grogor de la bombeta de vint-i-cinc, / es veia la silvestre alegria d’animal” (ll. 58–59). Once they reach orgasm, the two men part; the poet leaves the scene of seduction behind and hails a taxi, and finally we encounter once again the verse in Spanish that opens the poem.

Interestingly, however, shortly before the poem’s ending, and at the moment of the orgasm, the poet reflects upon the sexual experience:

jo estava content com un nen que s’ha tret les sabates noves  
només per amor; no, només per ganes d’amor,  
però per amor..., com el foll i cristal·lí Ramon d’*Amic e Amat*.  
“Ara, ara, ara, ara!”, després “a mi, ja m’han vingut; encara  
no estàs?”,  
mentre jo, a més d’un noi, era un *tío*. (ll. 65-70)

Sexual transgression is rewritten as being redeemed by the figure of an innocent boy, legitimated by literary prestige (as the reference to Ramon Llull indicates), and valued as transformative in terms of masculinity and coming of age. Thus in this poem homosexual contact occurs under the shadow of the law (and always determined by it, in the form of a super-ego that acts primarily as social judgement), and is played in the imaginary field of the ego’s self-perception.

The emergence of anxiety as an affect identifiable in the text begins to be more clearly articulated in later poems, such as “Cant XVII” and “Cant XVIII” (Bonet, 2014, 710–715), two pieces from *Teatre del Gran Verd* (1983). This is one of Bonet’s more “difficult” and less discussed books—such as *Has vist, algun cop, Jordi Bonet, Ca N’Amat a l’ombra?* (1976), the already mentioned *Cant de l’arc* (1979), and *El poder i la verdor* (1981)—in which the poet engages in an uncompromising form of textual experimentation whereby, as Margalida Pons puts it, “el mateix gènere poesia es dilueix en el magma amorf i subversiu del text” (2014, 25). In Bonet’s textual and subjective dissolution, discourse is at times interrupted “per paorosos crits a mig camí entre l’atavisme i la *jouissance*” (*ibid.*). The presence of the atavistic forces of *jouissance* can indeed be perceived in “Cant XVII” (Bonet, 2014, 710–12) as a remainder of the animal whose drives trigger the subject’s reaction.

This poem presents a lyrical self gone into seclusion with his work: “entotso-lat” (l. 4), profoundly isolated in his solitude. As he contemplates “els cabells de la vida” (l. 5), the very metaphor of the hairs or threads of life leads him metonymically to an association with man’s animal kinship: “vaig recordar, / amb els dits de la mà esquerra, / la matinada dels animals / que començaven d’aixecar les

mans de l'herba, / per no ensumar de tan a prop la terra, que els cridava" (ll. 7–11). The poet thus evokes the origins of human life, when our primate ancestors began to use their hands for physical contact and communication instead of walking, and gave up the sense of smell for the interactions with others.<sup>4</sup> But this signifying chain (hair-hand-grass-smell-earth), firmly rooted in the bodily and the material, connects the evocation of an atavistic past with a much more specific reminiscence: the poet remembers an episode in which he greets a youth he desires by touching him in the back of his neck:

Com que hi mancaven paraules, sovint és que no vénen...  
 amb els dits d'una mà sola et vaig fer *hola*  
 als cabells del clatell, fent així, fent així, aturat,  
 i, dos instants, la mà s'assegué a viure  
 damunt la clatellera del teu coll,  
 on el pelatge dels animals de la vida  
 era lluent, casolà, rentat de fresc i només teu:  
 els cabells del teu nom, els cabells del teu nom,  
 els cabells del teu nom! (ll. 21–29)

As in “Carrer dels Tres Llits”, Bonet establishes a connection with his own animal substratum, but the contact he depicts here, which is located at the intersection of the social and the bodily, is marked by lack: language is unable to express the intensity of the brief physical contact, the subject's capacity to speak and convey his desire through words is inhibited, and the gesture of touching the desired body is both dependent on the animal past and separated from it. The impossibility of a full, intimate contact with the desired, unnamed other leads not to anxiety but to “tristor”, because it is limited by the irretrievable loss of man's animal attributes; still reminiscing, the poet reflects:

I et passo la mà pel final més cerrut del pèl:  
 amb els dits me'n recordo  
 de quan érem els animals del bosc,  
 però ja amb un recer de tristor darrere la cara,  
 perquè teníem no sé què que quedava  
 sempre amb nosaltres, però no es veia  
 com els núvols, els cabrits i les flors que passaven. (ll. 54–60)

It is important to note a significant textual detail in these lines: the animal remainder in the human subject is both undefinable (“no sé què”) and imperceptible (“no es veia”), yet its inaccessible location in the psyche (“darrere la cara”), though it brings sadness, is also “un recer” (a shelter): this “tristor” thus simultaneously protects

<sup>4</sup> Bonet's reflection resonates with Freud's speculation regarding the evolutionary diminution of the sense of smell in humans in two long footnotes in section IV of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud 1991a, 1991b: 288–289 and 297).

and separates the subject from his *jouissance*. However, in the following poem, “Cant XVIII” (Bonet, 2014, 713–15), the sudden appearance of desire has a much more traumatic outlook, and Bonet allows more explicitly the ensuing anxiety to be expressed.

“Cant XVIII” starts with an address to Àlex Susanna, fellow poet, friend, and Bonet’s object of desire. Bonet elaborates a point about the objects of the world, the body, and signification:

Hi ha coses, com hi ha roses, Àlex Susanna,  
que, a més de ser el que són, signifiquen:  
tenyeixen el cos, aquest de la memòria de la terra,  
aquest cos de les passes que arriben  
al lloc creat abans que el viatge... (ll. 1-5)

Some events and objects, says the poet, carry a surplus of meaning because they impregnate the body and its ancestral resonances: the atavistic body prior to human language that we saw in “Cant XVII”. These things constitute a bodily language, in which the flesh becomes word and which is linked to a certain idea of destiny. The scene that the lyrical voice subsequently narrates is perhaps one of these intensely signifying things. Same as in “Cant XVII”, the poet has gone into seclusion: he is in his room, deep into thoughts that allow him mystically to transcend his sense of self (“les crosses del meu pensament / que respirava sense pensar en mi...”, ll. 9–10), and concentrated in his writing, which at least apparently expresses his thoughts without mediation (“Escrivia a mà blanca, la lletra n’era blava, / com el cel de la respiració”, ll. 10–11).

Suddenly, however, something disrupts Bonet’s contemplative scene of writing: as an unnamed visitor (presumably Susanna himself?) calls at the door, the question ““Qui hi ha aquí?”” (l. 23) is uttered, and then insistently repeated throughout the poem (ll. 57, 58, 71, 86), suggesting a traumatic scene provoked by the irruption of desire. It is precisely the arrival of the visitor that releases the flood of anxiety in the lyrical subject, as he is confronted with his own desire, and this is associated with the subject’s death:

Jo et vaig donar una cadira.  
Jo vaig pensar en la mort,  
la meva, la segura, assegurada,  
com la verdor a un xiprer,  
perquè, en veure’t, vaig ullar  
la meva mirada, que era arribada:  
eres tu, eres tu: no eres els meus ulls,  
els dos que han de ser clots a dins d’un clot,  
davall d’una llosa amb una misèria d’herba (ll. 30-38)

The question ““Qui hi ha aquí?”” is therefore the signal of a disturbing presence that threatens the coherence and existence of the subject, reveals his lack



of fullness, and puts him at risk of entering a conflict with the law. In this sense “‘Qui hi ha aquí?’” could be translated as “what does it want from me?”.

The second part of the poem features a temporal ellipsis of two years; we find the lyrical self in the actual scene of writing in the present, reflecting on his experience. However, the opposition between now (“Ara és després”, l. 42) and before (“Abans de ‘Qui hi ha aquí?’”, l. 58) is more meaningful than a simple time gap: the repetition of the adverb “ara” (ll. 42, 51, 56, 77) echoes the portrayal of the orgasm in “Carrer dels Tres Llits”, especially on line 77 of “Cant XVIII”, where it is juxtaposed to an ecstatic affirmation (“Ara ja sí, sí!”). Indeed, in this scene of writing the lyrical subject’s gaze has been located as an object coupled with sex and *jouissance*, but also with castration, writing, language, and the law:

Ara és després... Dos anys  
 té la mirada de finestra  
 que hi ha en mi, que veu la terra,  
 on el masculí boixa, entra fins al cor,  
 on no arriben els ous que sempre queden a la porta.  
 Aquesta terra de finestra amb mi  
 té enteniment i té intel·ligència:  
 es deixa entendre,  
 i és perquè no t’hi veig quan t’hi miro,  
 tot just ara que m’arriba  
 la boira de no veure la blavura  
 de la respiració  
 taciturna i estrictament a dalt,  
 però de casolà i amb un ofici a les mans.  
 Ara ja no trona prop d’aquest cos tan nu,  
 quan el portal pregunta “Qui hi ha aquí?”.  
 Abans de “Qui hi ha aquí?”,  
 damunt aquestes cordes cordades de seure,  
 hi havia uns calçons de la llei,  
 pantaló que era de tergal i podia ser jutjat (ll. 42-61)

These difficult lines deserve a few comments. The subject’s desiring gaze is equated with the window, a subjective border on to the other; it also corresponds to the earth where wild animals belong. It is here “on el masculí boixa”, that is, penetrates (literally “fucks”) into the heart; but the masculine attribute, “els ous”, remain outside, on the other side of the border, on the threshold where the question “‘Qui hi ha aquí?’” is asked. This suggests an unavoidable limit to the full realisation of the subject. On the other hand, the “terra de finestra” is accessible to rational and linguistic understanding precisely because the object of desire cannot be fully grasped (“no t’hi veig quan t’hi miro”); and this awareness occurs in the very act of writing, as “la boira de no veure la blavura / de la respiració” suggests, echoing the reminiscence of the writing scene at the beginning of the poem. Furthermore, this present scene of writing appears to be calmer, more serene (“Ara ja no trona”): the lyrical self seems to

be able to sustain both his sexuality (“aquest cos tan nu”) and the depersonalisation that the emergence of desire brings about (indeed, it is the “portal”, the threshold, and not the subject that asks “‘Qui hi ha aquí?’”), as well as the resulting anxiety.

It should also be noted that the signifier “els calçons de la llei” relies on an opposition between before and now, between clothing and nudity, and between the law and another term that is not directly stated, but that perhaps may be traced in the chain of associations that the lyrical voice subsequently establishes. In the ensuing lines, the lyrical voice associates the “cordes cordades de seure” of the chair where stands the “pantaló que [...] podia ser jutjat” to the strings of a guitar (ll. 66–67), and finally to “les cordes / de fer baixar la fonda gravetat / al forat profund, on ‘Qui hi ha aquí?’ / és traduït pel verd xiprer” (ll. 69–72). This chain of associations—which in turn evokes the hairs of the desired boy in “Cant XVII”—is thus what sustains the lyrical self in the exploration of his own anxiety, where the haunting question “‘Qui hi ha aquí?’” is translated into an image of death (the “xiprer” of the cemetery), but also into writing and *jouissance*. The last line of this stanza reads “arran de la garriga, entre roca i lletrada” (l. 76). This image refers to the path leading to a cemetery, and “lletrada” would be the excess of lime emanating from the rocks that mark the edge of the path; but “lletrada” also means “multitude of letters”, and it is homophonic with “lleterada” or ejaculation.

The last two stanzas confirm the linkage that Bonet establishes between transgressive desire, anxiety, *jouissance*, death, and writing. On the one hand, having stressed the affirmation of the now and the earthly, bodily, and material dimensions of the subject (“Ara sí, sí!, després de la terra, / sobretot sí!”, ll. 77–78), Bonet conjures up images of brutality and death (“el ganivet als porcs”, l. 79), of violence and domination exercised from an outside (“soldat rus a Varsòvia, soldats ianquis a Màlaga”, l. 80), and of the political and institutional misappropriation of writing: the poet mentions Antonio Machado, who died in Cotlliure, as being “esmentat, esmenat i augmentat” (l. 83) in the “palau nacional de la Moncloa” (l. 81), possibly referring to the then deputy prime minister of Spain, socialist politician Alfonso Guerra, and his well-known fondness for the Andalusian author. In the last few lines these threads are brought together leading to a conclusion:

Quan el portal pregunta “Qui hi ha aquí?”,  
 soc la terra asseguda a una cadira de pi,  
 on el mascle és un cos que és a viure  
 on els collons del cel menen a escriure  
 que t’he vist perquè n’era home. Els animals d’ahir,  
 que en mi engruixen, no et podran mai descriure. (ll. 86-91)

Once again, depersonalisation and the identification with bodily matter are stressed. The attributes of the male body are now heavenly (“els collons del cel”) and motivate both a desire for writing and the recognition of the subject’s transgressive desire. This renewed identification, while allowing the lyrical subject to come to terms with his desire and *jouissance* and sustain his anxiety, also entails the acceptance that the object of his desire is elusive and can never be fully apprehended.

Blai Bonet's later poetry continues to work through anxiety and often with a remarkable sense of humour. This is the case of two pieces from *El jove* (1987) where the figure of a beautiful adolescent makes his appearance. The first, "L'àngel de la sopera" (Bonet, 2014, 800–801) presents the reminiscence of a familiar scene, a supper at a restaurant. The poem begins with these enigmatic lines, which place us on the plane of aggressiveness, affection, guilt, and mourning:

A la conca de la crueltat hi ha un interès  
 passionat que no gosa  
 de ser una presència de la pròpia visibilitat,  
 a causa del malentès, que, per por  
 de no res afectuós,  
 rebutja l'espontaneïtat dels vells lliris.  
 M'entrà o va néixer dessota la pell  
 el cornaló del dol, que consisteix  
 en el penediment de l'únic delictes real  
 que grella a la terra: fer sofrir una altra persona.  
 El Gabriel no m'havia fet res,  
 com no fos haver tot ell començat  
 a salvar-me del fòssil de la vida  
 que només arma formes ja fetes (ll. 1-14)

Let us attempt to redescribe these difficult lines. The poem features a characteristically Bonetian beginning, in which a general or abstract reflection is illustrated by an anecdote. In the first stanza we are in the presence of passionate impulses that are inhibited in the visible persona of the self. Their lack of manifestation entails a fear of affection that leads to the withdrawal of spontaneous contact. The abstraction of these lines makes it difficult to ascertain the relationship between the "conca de la crueltat" and the "interès passionat": is the former the source of these impulses (which would lend the latter their negative, destructive quality), or rather is the cruelty the force behind the repression of affection? Does the signifier "conca"—and the emptiness it suggests—resonate in any way with the tureen of the title? The next few lines clarify these issues somehow: they refer to a drama of desire, aggressiveness and guilt performed by the lyrical subject and a youth called Gabriel. The youth has done nothing, Bonet says; but in fact Gabriel has awakened the desire of the lyrical self, leading the latter to develop aggressive impulses towards the object that is the target of his desire—impulses that are repressed and become an unmetabolised, foreign body under the skin.

The rest of the poem narrates the actual scene. Gabriel is a young waiter dressed in a somewhat angelic attire—"Celeste el pantalon i blanca la camisa, / l'armilla celeste amb botonada daurada" (ll. 21–22)—who suddenly irrupts holding a silver tureen to serve a fish soup. His dazzling appearance transforms the facial expressions of the family members sitting at the table, to the extent of inscribing in them the "Anunciació de Gabriel al pare" (l. 28). The Archangel Gabriel visits the father—not the mother—to announce the desire of the son. But the annunciation—which is short of an enunciation of Blai's desire—is quickly translated into "una

lectura dotada d'invisibilitat. / El silenci, però, era d'atrició" (ll. 33–34). According to Alcover and Moll's *Diccionari català-valencià-balear*, "atrició" means both "fregament" (friction) and "dolor dels propis pecats produïda pel temor del càstig", a definition rather close to the psychoanalytic understanding of anxiety. The articulation of body and psyche signaled in the signifier "atrició" is reinforced in the poem by the family's irritated silence, their failure to utter any words, which contrasts "amb el sermó de la muntanya / que pronunciaven la pell dels ulls i de la boca" (ll. 37–38): the eyes refuse to see and the vocal organs do not speak, but the skin that covers them vibrates and sings the Beatitudes of an oral *jouissance*.

The poem concludes with the family eating in silence, "com a uns exercicis espirituals" (l. 47), whilst "el Gabriel dringava, viu, / amb un ramell de cascavells, desota la bragueta celeste, / que duia fermadets al seu brot de murtra" (ll. 48–50). Silence and the mortification of the flesh are set in stark contrast with the innocent yet unbearable presence of Gabriel's genitalia, as a constant reminder of a transgressive desire that the fantasy of a liberated adolescent makes less threatening.

The figure of Gabriel also appears in "Terrasetta de Sòcrates" (Bonet, 2014, 803–805), the second poem from *El jove* that I wish to discuss, and which tells an anecdote set in a Mediterranean beach resort. Here Gabriel is an adolescent who struts his charms along the terrace of the Fonda Mundial: he is described as "un bergantell que duia per banyador / uns calçotets clarins fets de xarxa de barca, / rere els quals l'animal a lloure era vistable" (ll. 21–23). The boy's spontaneity and easy-going demeanor is charming, but also excessive, shocking, and scandalous, and so he complains that he has scared all the punters away: "'Jo me creia / que tots vindrien com a mosques [...] / Els he fet por, i tothom ha fugit'" (ll. 31–32, 34). Shortly afterwards, an exchange of glances occurs between Gabriel and Blai, and a dialogue ensues: "'No sóc professional; és per afició...'" (l. 46), says the boy, protesting an innocence that Blai considers irrelevant. And at this point, closing the poem, an anguished silence invades the scene:

Grellà un silenci anònim entre el caire  
de la taula de marbre, amb la meva ombra,  
que hi seia arran més deserta que un criminal,  
i la xarxa color de vi del Gabriel,  
que mirava enlloc, mansuet animal  
de l'home d'ulls de saliva d'estrella,  
que s'ha reconegut perquè ha callat, en saber  
que, si l'home crida,  
és perquè no pot afegir el que ha trencat. (ll. 51-59)

Gabriel's annunciation becomes Blai's impossible enunciation of desire. In his anguished, nameless silence, the subject, depersonalised and reduced to his shadow, obtains nevertheless a kind of knowledge from his encounter with the ineffable within himself: his silence entails an unarticulated cry of pain that brings together transgressive desire and a traumatic scene. If the subject cries, Bonet says, it is because "no pot afegir" (cannot fix) what he has broken: the subject's transgressive

desire confronts him with his own incompleteness, and yet the subject is left with an unassimilable remainder of his *jouissance*.

I will close my analysis of homosexual desire in Blai Bonet's poetry by looking at two last pieces. Firstly I will briefly discuss "Drets davant la porta" (Bonet, 2014, 782), also from *El Jove*. Margalida Pons rightly claims that in this poem Bonet rewrites "Carrer dels Tres Llits" (Pons, 1998, 520–521); but now the Majorcan poet acknowledges the play of anxiety and engages in a reflection about physical contact with the other in which both partners can abandon the straitjackets of their ego, tenderness replacing narcissistic aggression. The poem, same as "Carrer", evokes the memory of a homosexual encounter; but rather than narrating the whole event, here Bonet focuses on one particular, significant detail. Two men stand on the landing by the door of a cheap pension near the port. As the other man rings the bell, the lyrical self remarks the anguished silence of the occasional couple (ll. 2–3), that he associates with a certain idea of tenderness ("tendror") (l. 8). In order to calm down the lyrical self's nerves as they wait to be let in, the partner reassuringly places a hand on the poet's back: "Un espatló em va estrènyer, allò / de donar entenent que coneixia / la casa, la patrona, molts clients" (ll. 14–16). Cruising is no longer a predatory game of sexual conquest, but a contact that facilitates the transmission of knowledge and experience. It is this gesture that Bonet values: "Sota la pell" (l. 17), he says, we can no longer find the unmetabolised "cornaló" (crust, pocket, corner) made of guilt or aggressiveness we saw in "L'àngel de la soperà", but tenderness:

Sota la pell jo vaig pensar i sentir  
 que la tendror era un fenomen fondo,  
 real, originari: aconseguia  
 que un home es pogués sentir petit  
 davant l'altra persona i el menava  
 a agrair sense els llavis que l'Altre  
 el tractés com a un ésser petit,  
 perquè la luxúria és la cara contrària de la tendror. (ll. 17-24)

Through the acknowledgement of anxiety, the encounter with homosexual desire does not result in phallic competition, but rather gives rise to a shared awareness of incompleteness and vulnerability that modulates the pressure of the drives. The sexual contact of "Carrer dels Tres Llits" is thus rewritten in "Drets davant la porta" in terms of a reconciliation, or a lessening, of the conflict between affection and sensuality that Freud discusses in his essay "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" (Freud, 1991b).

By way of a conclusion, I will finally discuss "Al Brown" (Bonet, 2014, 850–51), from *Nova York* (1991), a meditation on sublimation and gay sex, where literature and boxing are seen as mobilising the animal in us through the notion of style. Like several other poems from Bonet's later period (Pons, 1998, 484), "Al Brown" has a dialogic form: the poem presents a conversation between two interlocutors, concerning the relationship between man and animal:

—Què seria de l'home sense les bèsties?  
 —Si, en un moment, se n'anessin de la terra  
 totes les bèsties de la terra,  
 l'home cauria en una gran depressió... (ll. 1-4)

Once again Bonet elaborates on the theme of the animal kinship of man and his meditation on writing and the drives, as examined in my analysis of “Cant XVII” and “Cant XVIII” from *Teatre del Gran Verd*. However, in “Al Brown” the poet places these issues within a larger social or cultural context that brings them closer to Freud’s argument in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In the long reply that follows this first exchange, and that constitutes the rest of the poem, the memory of a third, unnamed person is evoked: a passionate observer of human mores who defended the commonality of man and animal, and who disliked “sentir parlar de bestialitat / en fets i accions que atanyen la persona, / sobretot persones que tenien la pegada / contundent, com els cops del campió de boxa / Al Brown” (ll. 12–16).

Through these words Bonet rejects the idea that physicality and even the exercise of violent force are necessarily an uncivilised, bestial feature of human behaviour; interestingly, he posits this view by reference to Panama Al Brown (Alfonso Teófilo Brown, 1902–1951), the flamboyant, stylish, Panamanian boxing champion who was a salient figure in the gay scene of Paris and New York in the nineteen-thirties. This cultural reference allows Bonet to frame the question of the animal kinship of man through the equivalence of literature and boxing: “Quan en parlava / el seu comentari sovint era / que en la literatura i en la boxa / s’empra el mateix llenguatge: l’estil” (ll. 16–19). The signifier “style” strongly suggests that for the Majorcan poet literature and boxing (the refinement of high culture and the crude physicality of contact sports) are both artistic ways of articulating the relationship between man and animal, between culture and the sexual drives. Furthermore, style is the expression of the subject’s radical singularity, and its exercise is a powerful demystifying force; indeed, Al Brown knew an important fact about art:

que el caràcter de l’art era la mentida,  
 una raça d’amor mesclat amb l’horror  
 perquè ser boxejador, negre i homoeròtic,  
 és una situació en la qual  
 el pitjor que hom pot fer és penedir-se... (ll. 21-25)

The falseness of art, I would suggest, lies in its concealment of the sexual, in the mistaken idea that sublimation is tantamount to a desexualisation of libido. Freud claimed that sublimation is the satisfaction of the drive without repression (2003a, 24); but as Érik Porge convincingly explains, this does not involve the desexualisation of the drive or an idealisation of the object: on the contrary, “la sublimation commence avec la sexualisation de la parole” (Porge, 2018, 52), and as courtly love shows, sublimation requires “que le poète aime [la] Dame d’un

amour charnel [...]. Il ne rencontre pas l'inaccessible de l'Idée mais un impossible au cœur de l'amour" (2018, 54). As Joan Copjec claims, "sublimation is not something that happens to the drive under special circumstances; it is the proper destiny of the drive", which should disabuse us from the misconception "that it substitutes a more socially respectable or refined pleasure for a cruder, carnal one" (Copjec, 2002, 30). Or, in Leo Bersani's words: "Far from being a transcendence of the sexual, sublimations are [...] grounded in unalloyed sexuality" (1990, 37). Conversely, the truth of art resides in its mixing of love and horror: the unsettling pressure of *jouissance* is the driving force behind aesthetic pursuits, a truth that, like Al Brown's standing (being a black, gay boxer)—or indeed Blai Bonet's: being a gay, catholic writer—, is best not submitted to social sanction or to the approval of the super-ego ("el pitjor que hom pot fer és penedir-se").

It is at this point—the point at which the lyrical subject does not give way on his desire, nor yields to an ideal or to the censure of the super-ego—that the poem presents us with the key anecdote that illustrates Blai Bonet's position regarding writing and homosexual desire:

Això més o menys devia brunzir  
 dins el cap i en els sentiments d'Al Brown  
 quan Jean Cocteau s'enamora apassionadament  
 d'ell i sense aturall va fer passes  
 fins que aconseguí que Cocó Xanel [*sic*]  
 els arreglés una cita a l'Hotel de Castilla,  
 on Cocteau no aconseguí res perquè n'Al  
 era un dandi, enviava les camises  
 a planxar a Londres, li agradava  
 col·leccionar cavalls pura sang,  
 però volia que l'amor fos amb la bèstia  
 d'un garrít jovenet de barriada. (ll. 26-37)

Despite the insistence of Cocteau's advances, mediated by Coco Chanel's intervention, Al Brown rejects his prestigious admirer in favour of a much less socially-acceptable pursuit. This is because his cultural refinement, far from being desexualised, allows him a position from which to sustain his *jouissance*, foregrounding the sexual while avoiding an idealisation of an unrefined, unsophisticated object (the "garrít jovenet de barriada") which, rather, is elevated to the power and the dignity of the subject's lost animality. An experience of self-shattering that brings about the subject while dismantling it as a totality (Bersani, 1990, 36–37), *jouissance* supports the subject "in his or her singularity"—but it is "an unsupportable support, unbearable to the subject who defends against it through the production of a fundamental fantasy" (Copjec, 2002, 7). As Bonet suggests, then, style is the singular way in which each subject experiences their *jouissance* while preserving, through sublimation, the place of the sexual in literature and in life.

It is thus through the tortuous path of textual and subjective experimentation, through writing the self and his passions, that Blai Bonet performs his sublimating act: his literary style is his own singular way of allowing his animal side—his drives—to shatter his ego and pay up the pound of flesh that sublimation demands.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, sublimation “does not separate thought from sex, but rather from the supposed subject of knowledge” (Copjec, 2002, 45). The pairing of writing and the sexual allows Bonet to put sublimation at the service of purging the super-ego from his poetry. Lastly, the dialogic form of “Al Brown”, as well as Bonet’s stress in his preface to *Cant de l’arc* that he is “un home sense intimitat” inhabited by a multitude that builds his subjectivity (2014, 493), suggests Érik Porge’s idea that the cultural value of sublimation resides in its collective dimension, insofar as “le collectif définit un lien social qui rend possible l’advenue du sujet de l’inconscient” (2018, 57).

The figure of Al Brown thus becomes an emblem of Bonet’s trajectory from repression to acknowledging and sustaining anxiety, to positing sublimation as a means of restating the sexual in creative life. As I have argued in this essay, in Blai Bonet’s poetry anxiety is a signal that indicates a path to us—towards the locus where the poet confronts the intractable complexities of his desire. It is a path along which Blai Bonet turns anxiety into comedy, and guilt into a sense of humour, through an act of sublimation, in the act of writing itself. Leo Bersani has spoken of gay cruising as a form of asceticism, where gay subjects can engage in “a training in impersonal intimacy” (2010, 60). Although Bonet’s poetry doesn’t portray a great deal of cruising, or even sex—his poetry bears the weight of the hole left by centuries of tradition and repression—, I would like to suggest that textual experimentation, writing itself, is in Blai Bonet’s oeuvre a form of asceticism: it purges the subject from guilt; by insisting on and multiplying Blai’s presence on the page, it cuts the subject away from the imaginary fetters of his ego; and by separating sexual contact from the aspiration of an ego ideal, it brings sex closer to what Bersani (2010) calls an impersonal narcissism that connects the subject with the world.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Or, as Àlex Susanna puts it: “En aquest tipus d’obra el que més compta és el desig del poeta acomplint-se en l’acte i en el temps de l’escriptura. És a dir, finalment, el poeta ha reeixit a convertir la literatura en una forma de vida, i la vida en una forma de literatura” (1989, 25). This same essay stresses Bonet’s “singularitat” (1989: 11, 13).

<sup>6</sup> Kollias (2013) offers an excellent analysis of this question in Bersani’s work.



## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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