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SACRED
CONTAGION:
ILLNESS AND
THE ORIGINS OF
COMMUNITY IN BLAI
BONET'S *EL MAR*

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Abstract || This article proposes that Blai Bonet's representation of illness and violence in his debut novel *El mar* identifies the sacred as a primary existential component of being-with-others. Bonet's attention to the sacred relates literary representation with theological and philosophical inquiry, particularly that of the French College of Sociology and the mid-century work of one of its founding members, Georges Bataille, who similarly theorized the importance of the sacred in the construction of community. For Bonet, poetics merges abstract existentialist contemplations of the sacred with the practice of everyday life, and especially with the historical moment of *El mar's* writing, which he referred to as a moment of "esfondrament total". The article studies three clear affinities between Bonet and Bataille's interpretations of two related dyads: the sacred and the profane, on the one hand, and taboo and transgression, on the other.

Keywords || Sacred | Blai Bonet | Georges Bataille | Taboo | Tuberculosis | Community

Resumen || Este artículo se propone demostrar que la representación de la enfermedad y de la violencia en la primera novela de Blai Bonet, *El mar*, identifica lo sagrado como un componente existencial clave del ser-con-otros. La atención que Bonet presta a lo sagrado relaciona la representación literaria con una reflexión teológica y filosófica, particularmente la del Collège de Sociologie francés y el trabajo de uno de sus miembros fundadores, Georges Bataille, quien teorizó de manera similar la importancia de lo sagrado en la construcción de la comunidad. Para Bonet, la poética fusiona las abstractas contemplaciones existencialistas de lo sagrado con las prácticas de la vida cotidiana, y particularmente con el momento histórico de la escritura de la novela *El mar*, al que Bonet se refirió como un momento de «esfondrament total». El artículo estudia tres claras afinidades entre las interpretaciones de dos dicotomías, relacionadas entre sí, propuestas por Bonet y Bataille: lo sagrado y lo profano, por una parte, y por otra, el tabú y la transgresión.

Palabras clave || Sagrado | Blai Bonet | Georges Bataille | Tabú | Tuberculosis | Comunidad

Resum || Aquest article planteja que la representació de la malaltia i la violència en la novel·la debut de Blai Bonet, *El mar*, identifica allò sagrat com un dels components existencials clau de l'ésser-amb-altres. L'atenció que mostra Bonet per allò sagrat relaciona la representació literària amb la indagació teològica i filosòfica, particularment amb la del Collège de Sociologie francès i l'aportació d'un dels seus membres fundadors, Georges Bataille, qui va teoritzar de manera semblant sobre la importància d'allò sagrat en la construcció de la comunitat. En el cas de Bonet, la poètica fusiona contemplacions existencialistes abstractes amb la pràctica de la vida diària i, especialment, amb el temps particular en què va escriure *El mar*, un moment que l'autor va considerar com d'un «esfondrament total». L'article estudia tres afinitats clares entre les interpretacions que fan Bonet i Bataille de dues parelles relacionades: d'una banda, allò sagrat i profà, d'altra, tabú i transgressió.

Paraules clau || Sagrat | Blai Bonet | Georges Batallie | Tabú | Tuberculosis | Comunitat

This article examines the intrinsic connection between the sacred, illness and law in the Mallorcan writer Blai Bonet's debut novel, *El mar* (1958). The article proposes Bonet as a singular voice within Catalan literary thought who expands upon theoretical debates that link theology with the emergence of biopolitical modernity. *El mar* narrates the traumatic aftereffects of the Spanish Civil War on a group of adolescents interned in a tuberculosis sanatorium during the first period of the Francoist dictatorship. Myriad literary and philosophical influences appear in the novel, from the *tremendista* violence and viscerality redolent of the work of Camilo José Cela, himself a former resident of a tuberculosis sanatorium, the existentialist philosophy of Camus and Sartre, lyrical narrative, and most especially, the Catholic novel tradition.¹ However, an overt focus on philological categorization risks minimizing the theological import of the novel.² More particularly, *El mar* contains a sustained meditation on the concept of the sacred, a form of religious feeling that transcends the orthodoxy of any one given faith and factors into the metaphysical existentialism through which Bonet articulated the human condition. To the north of Catalonia, the sacred became the primary focus of a philosophy developed from the interwar period until the late 1950s by French intellectuals such as Georges Bataille and Roger Callois, and recently in the second decade of the twentieth century reemerged as a component of what is referred to as post-secularism.

Bonet's development of the sacred in *El mar* coincides significantly with the sociological work of Georges Bataille. For Bataille, feelings of the sacred are aroused in social spaces in which taboo objects that elicit repulsion and attraction are located. These spaces include churches where congregants often reaffirm collective bonds amidst the taboo of corpses. The normally repulsive presence of a lifeless body is turned into a charge for collective magnetism. In Bonet's novel, the dialectics of attraction and repulsion are also at work in sanatoriums, a non-religious space in which the open presence of taboo elements such as blood and phlegm transform, through the commonality of suffering, into elements of interpersonal cohesion.

I will argue that Bonet and Bataille share a clear affinity on three main points. First, for each writer the sacred consists of both impure elements that arouse feelings of disgust and horror, such as blood and refuse, as well as objects considered to be holy and pure. The sacred is constituted by the dynamic alternation between the two poles of purity and impurity, which together form the core atop which the profane world rests. Secondly, for both writers the transgression of taboo briefly destabilizes the profane social order that rests atop the sacred, only to strengthen the law that regulates taboo in the long run. In Bonet's sanatorium, the transgression of taboo unleashes forces that disrupt the world of the profane only to ultimately reinforce the barriers that separate the clinic, and its patients, from the outside, a movement resembling Bataille's emphasis on the importance of

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1 | To name several important studies of the novel, Xavier Pla argues that *El mar* contains "unos de los pocos ejemplos de 'tremendismo' de la novela catalana contemporánea" and further contains several stylistic traces of narrative lyricism, including "una depuración lingüística...la condensación, la concisión y la destilación" (2011b: 31). Elsewhere, Pla cites a letter from Bonet to Cela in which the former praises *Pabellón de reposo* (2011a: 261). In her foundational study of Blai Bonet's work, Margalida Pons has argued that *El mar* departs from the social realism of the 1940s Spanish novel towards the *nouveau roman*: "[Bonet] cerca la presència dels fets consumats i aprima cada vegada més la interferència destorbadora del narrador. L'estil indirecte és refusat com a anacronisme. El resum 'commemoratiu' d'esdeveniments és reduït al màxim... Però hi ha una cosa en la qual Blai Bonet no arribarà a transigir: la trivialització de la trama" (1993: 84). Most critics emphasize the influence of Bernanos and the Catholic novel writ large, the most prominent study being Carles Lluch's chapter on Bonet in *Novel·la catalana i novel·la catòlica* (2014).

2 | *El mar* is undoubtedly indebted to novelists such as Georges Bernanos, who wrote *Journal d'un curé de campagne* while living in Mallorca and is specifically referenced in the text. Bernanos identified originally with the principles of the *Alzamiento* but later evolved a stance against the atrocities committed in Mallorca during the war by Francoist and Italian troops. Massot i Muntaner (1996: 263-291) studied the degree to which Llorenç Villalonga could have served as Bernanos's confidant.

ritual transgression for strengthening the sacredness of holy objects. The force of law, in this analysis, is proportionate to the possibility of its transgression. Thirdly, Bonet's characters are assimilated into an economy of suffering and death in the sanatorium that merges their individual lives into one continuous form of existence, proffering a sense of community amongst the socially and politically excluded. As with Émile Durkheim before him, Bataille believed that the sacred was essential to the unification and strengthening of community. In *El mar*, this sense of interconnection amongst the tubercular patients is reiteratively banished by the society of order reinserting its presence within the clinic, whether physically, such as the visit of a Department of Health minister in the third chapter, or within the conscious minds of the adolescents, seen especially in the feelings of guilt suffered by Manuel Tur that inspire his murder of Ramallo.

In addition to expanding the theological scope of Bonet's novel, this study will also assert that the entanglement of the sacred and pathological illness in *El mar* justifies a more historically contextualized reading of the text than previous criticism has allowed. In lauding the novel as a metaphysical inquiry into the moral aspects of human nature, Campillo and Castellanos argue that despite the novel's use of the techniques of realism, "no és la realitat el que se'n presenta sinó l'experiència ahistòrica, sobrenatural, que se'n deriva" (1984: 81). Carles Lluch concurs, noting that "l'experiència de la guerra no rep un tractament testimonial i històric, sinó simbòlic" (2014: 221). Xavier Pla, along the same lines, asserts that the novel "no tiene ninguna intención de convertirse en una crónica de la Mallorca de la posguerra sino que es básicamente una reflexión existencial sobre la condición humana a partir de las vivencias radicales y subjetivas de un grupo de adolescentes internos en un sanatorio de tuberculosos" (2011b: 29). Undoubtedly, *El mar* indeed investigates the centrality of sin, guilt, and the sacred to the human condition, and moreover should not be confused for a work of testimonial literature that, like more recent twenty-first-century texts, attempts to recuperate the historical memory of 1940s Mallorca via literary representation. Given Bonet's biography, himself a former tuberculosis patient at the Caubet sanatorium, where he wrote the bulk of *El mar*, it would be an especially easy misstep to approach the novel as an autobiographical account of personal experience.

In my reading, however, the novel's ahistorical study of sacred affectivity within the human condition nevertheless inserts itself in the socio-political context of its present. Specifically, one can relate Bonet's work to the ideological appropriation of the sacred by the Francoist regime during its first two decades. Francoism's propaganda habitually warned of the State's susceptibility to the pathological contamination of Marxism, regional nationalism, and so on, which endangered the purity of *la España sagrada*. The historian

Michael Richards describes the dynamic especially well, writing that in the Regime's discourse "issues of class and regional identity were played down as diagnoses of the 'sickness' of the national character and were cast in religious, psychological or medical terms" (2006: 7).³ This essay will show how *El mar*, by conceptualizing the experience of sacred feeling within the walls of the sanatorium, offers an indirect rebuttal to the political appropriation of the concept by the Regime, painting the *alzamiento* as a movement that produces an inauthentic facsimile of the sacred that, far from producing inclusive community, actually produces division through a pathological rhetoric of immunizing the State from the *Anti-España*, the germs of which are perpetually latent and only contained through sovereign power.⁴

1. Theorizing the Sacred: From Durkheim to Bataille

I will first briefly outline the emergence of the sacred as an object of study over the course of the twentieth century and specifically the role it played in Georges Bataille's thought. Émile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, published in 1912, theorizes the links between the sacred, social cohesion, and violence, a study that came to define the practice of sociology in Europe, and indeed the development of the field as an academic discipline, over the first half of the twentieth century. Durkheim viewed religious feeling as a unifying force that could transform profane objects and ideas into sacred entities capable of symbolically reflecting an image of society back onto itself, a phenomenon as inherent to totemism in pre-modern societies as to the process by which more modern events such as the French Revolution set up ideals of homeland, liberty, and reason as sacred metaphysical values considered to be untouchable (2008: 161). Durkheim conceptualizes the sacred as the centripetal force, internal to human communities, that is added to everyday profane life to transform disparate, weak social bonds into more "direct and intimate allegiance[s]" (2008: 161).

Following from both Durkheimian principles of religious feeling as well as concepts of totality originating in the work of Hegel and Marcel Mauss, in 1937 a group of French leftist intellectuals founded the College of Sociology. These thinkers, including Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and others, were disaffected, like the Surrealists, with the French Communist Party's lost adherence to revolutionary Marxist principles, a transition that culminated with the party's integration into the Soviet-aligned Popular Front in 1936 (Richardson, 1994: 54). In a joint founding statement signed by the group's instigators, the College professed its goal to examine "all manifestations of social existence where the active presence of the sacred is clear" (Ambrosino et. al., 1988: 5).

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3 | Sosa Velasco echoes Richards, comparing Francoism to "la ideología nazi" in its way of "biologizing" the enemy: "Mientras los nazis en Alemania justifican la persecución de judíos, gitanos, rusos, polacos y homosexuales, los fascistas en España generalizan dicha persecución incluyendo en el bote a todos los que no están a favor del régimen por ser liberal, anarquista, socialista, catalanista o Marxista" (2010: 178). See also Cayuela Sánchez: "La guerra [civil], *dispositivo inmunitario* esencial y fundacional del régimen de Franco, había hecho posible la *sanación* de la raza española mediante el *asesinato* o la *segregación* de todos aquellos elementos inauténticos que habían corrompido el cuerpo de la nación" (2011: 276).

4 | Brad Epps has argued that *El mar's* critical readings unerringly rest on a tension between praise for its singularity, on the one hand, and endowing it "with a canonical aura that brings it into play, albeit in the key of excess and extravagance, with literary historical and cultural typologies" (2012: 109), on the other. As Epps notes, literary diagnoses of the aesthetic object resemble the task of medical science as regards the taxonomic assignment of sickness, which demonstrates how the act of elucidation inevitably defines the literary object "in accordance with general principles that are always already *beyond* them" (2012: 105). In asserting an affinity between Bonet's understanding of the sacred and that of Bataille, as well as assigning historical significance to the text appearing amidst the ideological power formation of the Francoist regime, this essay participates in the act of diagnosing the novel using principles that are beyond, or, in terms of Bataille's

Bataille's attraction to Durkheimian notions of the sacred in his own writings emerged, in part, as a corrective to the disintegrative tendencies of Marxist class struggle. While Bataille considered Marxism's focus on dissolution as "incomparable", it had "neglected to analyse the complementary motion, which determined the way in which social bonds were formed and how society therefore held together" (Richardson, 1994: 56). For Bataille, the profane zone of everyday social life, with its homogenous set of rules, taboos, categorizations, and hierarchies, rested atop a sacred sphere that converted the excessive energies of disintegration and waste into positive, community-binding charges. Bataille expanded upon Durkheim's more positive view of the sacred by giving it a bipolarity in which the violent energies of dissolution, which collapse boundaries and zones of distinction, are necessary preconditions for the reinstatement of limits vital to the permanence of the social.

Without transgression, the taboos that hold the social together lose much of their force, like a limit that can never be surpassed. For Bataille, transgressing taboos through religious sin, political revolution, and eroticism—to name three of the French writer's interests in the intervening years after the College of Sociology's dissolution in 1939—gives the rules organizing society their force. The periodic opportunity to take part in the transgression of taboo is vital for the renewal of community, a dynamic that Bataille believed was endangered by the emergent hyperrationality of modern society.⁵ Bataille valued the interdependence of opposites within the sphere of the sacred, but he hastened to emphasize that those opposites never become suspended in a stable Hegelian dialectic, since "there is nothing that can conquer violence" (1986: 48). It is the role of taboo, which is always leveled at the contagious outbreak of violence, to prevent the chaos and disorder of the sacred from invading the orderly, rational existence of the profane (1986: 51).

The sacred consists for Bataille in a left pole, which was the space of impurity reserved for objects that provoke horror, repulsion and disgust, and a right pole consisting in the feelings of attraction tied to divine purity, ecstasy, and exuberant joy. The core nucleus of society is built atop the energy produced by the alternation between the two poles of the sacred, a rhythm that generates the possibility for communities to exist and bind together. Society relies on the right pole of the sacred, the space from which organized religion and ritual emerge, to institute taboos that stabilize the chaotic, destructive force of the left pole of sacred, where society deposits "that which is most immediately taboo"; however, society "cannot energise, inspire, or alter the individuals who make up a society without the actions of the left pole (Pawlett, 2016: 32-33). Religious sacrifice is an example of this alternation between repulsion and attraction. Violence is normally the agent for releasing substances, such as blood and

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contemporaneity, alongside it. It is worth considering Epps's reminder that the work of art, like illness, is always at once "shot through with specificities of its own, but also that each can be experienced in remarkably variegated ways" (2012: 122) depending on the theoretical and historical assemblages within which the work is situated.

5 | The banishment of the possibility of violating taboo is also the basis of Bataille's rejection of Christianity, which he believed challenged previous iterations of religious belief that were "based on transgression" and where "the impure aspects were no less divine than the opposite ones. The realm of sacred things is composed of the pure and of the impure. Christianity rejected impurity. It rejected guilt without which sacredness is impossible since only the violation of taboo can open the way to it" (1986: 121).

viscera, that repulse and dissolve communities. Religious belief structures institute taboos that prohibit violence in most instances, and define specific liminal moments in which such prohibitions may be broken, such as in the act of sacrifice. It is symbolic for Bataille that churches are placed in the center of many communities, as they constitute a nucleus of “human agglomeration” that both attracts that which repulses, such as corpses, while also using the repulsive to attract community. When a death interrupts everyday life, funeral rites in a church exhibit openly “the great force of repulsion belonging to lifeless bodies” (Bataille, 1988: 118). And yet, the phenomenon produces a “crowd of the dead person’s kin and acquaintances [...] in the church” (Bataille, 1988: 118), where together they use the occasion to reaffirm their social bond and positive attachment to one another.

2. Blai Bonet’s Poetics of the Sacred

Bataille’s concept of the sacred is an important conceptual framework for understanding how Bonet relates the notion of illness, the erotic, and the conditions of possibility for social life in *El mar*. The novel was published a year after Bataille penned *Erotism* in 1958, though work on the text likely started around 1947 while Bonet, at the age of 19, was interned in the Caubet sanatorium with a debilitating case of tuberculosis that would affect him the rest of his life (Pons, 1993: 34n11). The similarities between Bonet and Bataille are striking: both men suffered through severe bouts of tuberculosis, felt a deep religious vocation and considered courses of study towards the priesthood in Catholic seminaries and monasteries, and were authors whose prose was overshadowed by their contributions in other media: poetry, in the case of Bonet, and sociological theory for Bataille. A primary difference, however, is Bataille’s unconditional rejection of the Catholic faith, a charge one could never level at Bonet.

For both writers the sacred is an indispensable element of human nature that precedes any organized religious practice. To be clear, I have not found evidence that Bonet knew of Bataille work, but argue that their common interest in the sacred owes to the zeitgeist of the moment. Bonet, in rejecting the typological application of “Catholic novel” to *El mar*, counters that the text’s language is the result of being produced “quan hi ha un esfondrament total” (cited in Alzamora, 1998: 51), and it seems natural that intellectuals in such an environment of violence, suffering, and, deprivation would investigate the existential aspects of (re)forming community. In any event, Bonet indeed was familiar with French cultural production, basing his only work of theater, *Parasceve*, on a part of Albert Camus’s *L’homme révolté* (Lluch, 2014: 205). Bonet also translated the work of Jean Genet

and Bernard Marie Koltès to Catalan, and, of course, possessed a familiarity with Bernanos, to name several notable examples.

Àlex Susanna has argued that Bonet's poetry features a longstanding search for a "sagrat personal" in response to both the loss of the sacred in public life and the gap opened by the Nietzschean "mort de Déu". This process slowly intensifies over the course of *Quatre poemes de Setmana Santa* (1950), *Entre el coral i l'espiga* (1952), *Cant Espiritual* (1953), *Comèdia* (1958), *L'Evangeli segons un de tants* (1967), and *Els fets* (1974) and owes in part to the predominance of the capitalist work ethic over the irrational and non-utilitarian aspects of life (1989: 19-20). In the prologue to *Els fets*, Bonet, writing in 1973, adds to this that the "món de consum, i l'estricta agitació de les seves tecnologies, és l'infern de l'esterilitat, on han romàs entrampats els qui, en lloc de ser la missió de comprendre i revelar el sentit de l'univers real, han quedat paralizats, perduts, en *les imitacions de la Naturalesa*" (1989: 109). In the following pages, my analysis of the sacred in Bonet's *El mar* will speak further to the centrality that a sacred "sentit de l'univers real" has in the ambivalent space within which community is constructed, renewed, and threatened with dissolution.

As Margalida Pons (1993: 34) stresses, *El mar's* composition comes in the wake of a series of catastrophic events that shaped Bonet's intellectual and theological orientation: the death of Bonet's father, who was similarly afflicted by tuberculosis, his time in seminary between 1939-1946, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, and, of course, his sickness and recuperation in the Caubet clinic. *El mar*, like Bataille's meditation on religious feeling, works through the complex zone where the sacred, illness, eroticism, and the eruption of violence overlap, a dynamic that is especially evident in Agustí Villaronga's twenty-first-century cinematic adaptation of the novel—unconstrained by the censorship and social norms of Francoism—that appeared in 2000, three years after Bonet succumbed to a pulmonary edema.

After leaving Caubet, Bonet's poetry opened doors for him into the literary world, with his invitation to join Guillem Colom's tertulia in 1950 coming on the heels of publishing *Quatre poemes de Setmana Santa* that same year. The study of transgression and the somatic roots of spiritual feeling were from the beginning part of Bonet's novelistic and poetic work, though Salvador asserts that this interest placed Bonet in "contrast amb el rerefons de l'escola mallorquina" (2014: 4). That said, Pons (1993: 81) notes that it is *El mar* that makes a truly revolutionary aesthetic break with previous literary output in Mallorcan, and indeed, Iberian fiction. In terms of its existentialist overtones, one finds a clear affinity between *El mar* and Joan Sales's 1956 opus *Incèrta glòria*, which had been published in mutilated

form with a *nihil obstat* from the Archbishop of Barcelona two years before Bonet's work.⁶ Sales served on the selection committee that awarded the Premi Martorell to *El mar*, and as Xavier Pla notes, had an influential effect, as editor of the Club dels Novel·listes series at Editorial Aymà, on the final version of the novel, demanding that Bonet reduce it from its original eight-hundred pages to approximately two hundred and fifty (2011b: 30).

El mar's epigraph references the centrality of the sacred to human relations through the poetic figure of the sea, an opening that invites both an historical and a metaphysical reading. The epigraph, authored by Bonet, is a four-verse poem: "L'home és com el mar: penetra i és / penetra, reflecteix i és mogut per la / vida celeste. Amb l'home, Déu il·lumina / la Creació com la lluna la terra" (1958: 9). The action of penetration foreshadows the merging of violence, the erotic, and epidemiology later in the text, as the consumptive, socially isolated bodies featured in the novel are as invaded by the contagion of disease as they are by the periodic eruption of sexual desire and violence. Isolation, violence, and the language of sickness in the novel are together a cipher for reading the historical circumstances of Catalans in Bonet's epoch. With lives constrained by the strictures of the authoritarian Francoist state, Catalans were closed off from the fullest possibility of community, with their erstwhile social and political institutions banished. Catalans were also internally estranged from their own bodies in the public prohibitions surrounding the use of the Catalan language. In addition, Catalans were amongst the categorizations that the State consigned to pathological contagion. The government linked the public expression of the Catalan language to the disaggregation of the national body politic, as if it were an anti-systemic microbe. In 1939, Alfonso Iniesta, a Francoist education minister, described the use of Catalan in Barcelona's schools and intellectual centers as part of a sinister effort to "cultivar afanes de separación" (cited in Benet, 1995: 381), and Catalan Marxists, alongside Basque separatists, were two of the groups originally chosen by Antonio Vallejo Nágera to undergo trials in search of a "red gene" (Serrano). *El mar*, in depicting the connection of ill bodies united in an economy of suffering within an excluded space, reveals the latent possibility of community in a similarly oppressive environment. At the same time, the poetic epigraph is also an existential commentary on the necessity of a metaphysical plane beyond the simple materiality of human existence for the activity that coheres community to take place. God is akin to the lunar magnetism that causes tidal fluctuation, setting waves in motion and opening up closed-off bodies to one another in a penetrative way that fuses discrete realities into an expression of collective life.

The first paragraph of *El mar* initiates the thematization of the sacred as an ambivalent, bipolar concept in the style of Bataille's philosophy.

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6 | For an analysis of Joan Sales's political theology, see Viestenz (2014). Lluch (2014: 57-125) has analyzed *Incerta glòria* within the Catholic novel tradition.

The novel begins with a striking description of a road as it descends slowly into a valley, flanked by pine, oak, and olive trees, towards a city that is seen from afar: “la ciutat acaramullada, grisa, amb la taca blanca, enorme, de la Catedral, en el centre” (1958: 11-12). Bonet’s opening emphasis on the central placement of the Cathedral is notable, but the paradox of its staining whiteness, its “taca blanca”, connotes the synchronic presence of sin and purification in a holy space. Salvation does not merely follow transgression in a linear temporality, but is conjoined to it in an ambivalent bond. Thus, at the novel’s outset, Bonet communicates immediately the contradictory nature of the sacred as a both a transgressive and constitutive nucleus at the center of the social, consisting in both pure and impure elements, or in Bataille’s terms, a left and a right pole that are bound together inextricably.

3. The Interdependence of Taboo and Transgression

I will argue that *El mar* engages primarily with three qualities of the sacred: first, the mutually energizing interdependence of taboo and transgression (purity and impurity), the function of transgression in first unsettling and later strengthening law, and lastly the ability of sacred feeling to create an interpersonal continuity that contrasts with the alienation of profane life. In terms of the first point, over the course of the narrative Bonet thematizes Andreu Ramallo as a diabolical presence that, in my analysis, represents the irresistible, uncontainable force of the sacred’s left pole, a personification of transgressive force. Ramallo was sexually coerced by a bourgeois factory owner prior to his illness and is also blamed by Manuel Tur at the end of the narrative for leading him astray from Catholic moral principles. Tur, Ramallo’s companion in the sanatorium, represents the impulse towards purity and the need to periodically expiate the guilt he feels through self-harm, attacking his own flesh and passing off the wounds as the appearance of the stigmata. This plot element reaffirms the motif of Christ’s passion, particularly its carnality, in Bonet’s early work, including *Quatre poems de Setmana Santa* (Lluch, 2014: 202).

In a conversation with Ramallo, Tur discusses the sacred in the same bipolar terms as Bataille, refusing to separate the repulsiveness of sin from the simultaneous presence of divine grace, theorizing the two as alternating forces that are never dialectically stabilized in the form of a synthesis. Tur argues that Satan and Christ “surten sempre un per causa de l’altre dins el túnel obscur d’un home [...] Els homes ens donam Satanàs uns als altres. Ens donam el Senyor i Satanàs i la seva ironia, com està dins un sol pecador tota la sepultura de Crist” (1958: 123). Satan and Christ, though antithetical, are interdependent

forces that pass back and forth from subject to subject in a continuous moral economy. Humans reiteratively “donen”, or infect, each other with Satan and Christ as if the sacred were, like tuberculosis, a contagious disease requiring isolation, the presence of certified practitioners, and protocols for its treatment. At the same moment that Tur utters this sentiment to Ramallo, blood from his self-inflicted stigmata slowly stains his shirt: “damunt la camisa de Manuel Tur, la sang torna negra” (1958: 123). That Bonet turns to the stigmata of Christ in the context of Tur’s comments on the circulation of sin and grace is important, as in Catholicism the eruption of a normally repulsive taboo substance—blood—becomes, through the filter of dogma, a sign of divine expiation and resurrection that attracts a congregation of followers. This co-extensiveness of taboo and the attraction of community harkens back to Bonet’s description of the church’s “staining whiteness” at the outset of the narrative. Tur, of course, is not actually stigmatic, nor does his self-inflicted suffering translate his sense of guilt into a positive edifice for spiritual renewal within the space of a broader social community. In the wake of the mass violence of civil war, Bonet insinuates that organized religion in Francoist Spain is unable to transform guilt and suffering into a positive, socially binding charge, which adds context to the stain that mars the church’s purity at the outset of the novel.

And indeed, the Spanish Catholic church, represented in the text by a priest named Gabriel Caldentey, is portrayed as an impotent entity that has closed itself off too tightly from the infection of transgression. Caldentey, who critics have seen as a reference to Bernanos’s *Journal d’un curé de campagne*,⁷ notes in an inner monologue that the Church requires priests to choose between “la Gràcia i la jerarquia”, with most of the religion’s practitioners focused more on textual analysis than lived experience. Caldentey posits that the priesthood can only brush up against the truths of Christ “si l’estudi de la matèria sagrada hagués consistit a viure i comprovar interiorment la veritat dels eixuts llibres de text” (1958: 44). Though eschewing a focus on the study of canonical law and papal encyclicals, Caldentey still feels powerless to impart grace onto the sanatorium’s patients, who engage in sin “ardidament” (1958: 45), but the priest never establishes an intimate relationship with the men, affixing a cloth in the confessional out of fear of TB infection: “aquesta covardia meva davant una possible infecció no és apta per al regne de Déu” (1958: 45).⁸ The priest’s fear of becoming biologically ill reflects the church’s own excessive self-immunization from the contagion of the repulsive, taboo aspects of the social, which as we will see, is an essential aspect of the novel’s concept of salvation.

Early in the novel, Tur sees divinity and transgression as synchronous impulses, but fails to situate them within a broader unifying framework of the sacred. This development comes in Chapter 16, when Satan

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7 | See Lluch (2014: 214) and Lloveras (1988: 9).

8 | After Romanticism, Sontag notes that TB came to be “conceived as a variant of the disease of love...As once TB was thought to come from too much passion, afflicting the reckless and sensual, today many people believe that cancer is a disease of insufficient passion” (1978: 20-21). That TB patients in *El mar* engage in sin “ardidament” reflects the metaphorical association of the disease with heat, consumption, and also the prevalence of romantic, erotic desire.

appears in one of Tur's feverish delusions, insisting on the unity of the intermittent alternation of Satanic and Christ-like impulses within the moral subject: "únicament la culpa és capaç d'aconseguir que Déu se reveli [...] En el jardí, no vaig temptar aquells dos adolescents, vaig aconseguir de Déu que manifestàs el seu amor" (1958: 135). Iniquity is as much a part of the divine as are impulses towards purity, and without guilt, sacredness would be impossible. At this juncture, it is revealed to Tur that "el Senyor i Satanàs" are bipolar aspects of a single structure of the sacred. Without Ramallo's visits to Tur's room, the guilt that partly drives Tur's masochistic self-expiation would be absent, a point the Satanic apparition emphasizes in conclusion: "Després, més endavant, et tornaré a enviar Andreu Ramallo, perquè t'omplis tot tu de desesperança, perquè [...] et pugui deixar dins un fermentat entusiasme [...] de vegades, anorreant-me, assaltau la salvació" (1958: 137-8). Through the stigmata, Tur approaches the body as a vessel to be torn apart and ravished to minimize the possible transcendence of Satan over Christ, a classic principle of Gnostic thought. In his original conception of the sacred's bipolarity, Tur overlooked the necessity of the taboos attached to bodily inclinations and material desires for giving divine law its force and logic. Chapter by chapter, however, a more unified vision of the sacred and the energizing relationship between taboo and transgression begins to emerge.

Bonet's novel concludes with Tur killing Ramallo for having ejected "la Passió de Crist del meu cos" (1958: 225) and leading him to sin and impurity. The right pole of the sacred is the space in which the transgression of taboo can be redirected into a productive energy and where feelings of repulsion and horror become those of divinity and ecstasy. Tur commits the taboo of murder, but instead of translating into contagious violence, the negative energy released is filtered through the word of the Gospels and adopts the rhetoric of redemption. As he stands next to Ramallo's lifeless body, Tur passes "el caire de la [seva] unglia per les nafres del Sant Crist del metal" (1958: 232); later, he pleads for forgiveness: "Que Crist, el de l'Evangelí, em perdoni" (1958: 242).

4. Transgression and the Law

Through the example of Ramallo, Bonet demonstrates how the transgressive force of the sacred's left-pole contains the positive ability to unsettle the stable order of the profane world. Given that that same profane order may include exploitative hierarchies, eruptions of the sacred have the potential to take on a positive character, resisting the diminishment of the human body to its being a function of economic production. On this point, it is worth

recalling that the College of Sociology sought to study the sacred in the context of French Marxism losing adherence to revolutionary principles. As argued earlier, Ramallo can be linked to the disruptive left pole within Bataille's stratagem of the sacred. Other critics have assigned Ramallo a similar function. Pérez, for example, puts forth that Ramallo's rebellious character shows how the structure and inner workings of the Francoist regime provide the framework for evilness to take root and prosper (2015: 239). Transgression, in this reading, is both a "mecanismo de resistencia" and a way to avoid being "sometido al poder disciplinario" of the system (2015: 239). Ramallo's most disruptive act is his departure from the sanatorium to murder Morell, a wealthy community member who took advantage of Ramallo's poverty and problematic relationship with his family for sexual favors. Morell, as a hegemonic figure within the system of economic production, symbolically represents the profane world of exchange and capital that is opposed to the sacred realm of excess and unproductive expenditure associated with the socially-excluded space of the sanatorium.

The disruptive force of the sacred must be funneled through the social institutionalization of ritual to allow the profane system of order to operate unimpeded. Writers such as Durkheim, Bataille, and later René Girard, interpret practices such as the ritual sacrifice of animals as allowing society to dispel built-up instincts towards violence that would otherwise threaten to debilitate the social through the escalation of conflict. These dispersions of pent up violence are only allowed during periodic and, well marked, liminal moments. Violence, left unchecked, contagiously infects both others and future generations, a dynamic impossible to ignore in *El mar*, which centers on the transmission of violence from the Civil War to the group of adolescents who are entering adulthood but did not participate directly in the violence of warfare.

In Bonet's novel, tuberculosis patients are afflicted with a condition that externalizes blood, mucus, and other viscera that others find repulsive; indeed, the sight of blood elicits a reaction that exceeds the totality of signification. Tubercular patients thus require institutionalized management apart from society. Such management demands imposing protocols to rehabilitate life that is deemed too contagious for the everyday profane realm. While ritual religious practice emerged at an earlier historical moment to transmogrify the destructive impulses of violence, the clinic is part of what Foucault calls biopolitical modernity, where "power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population" (1990: 137). The sanatorium manages the contagion of illness and classifies which bodies have a right to death in consideration of the biological wellbeing of the overall general population and which lives can be redeemed and reinserted into society's processes of production.

Through Ramallo, Bonet argues that the chaotic, repulsive aspects of the sacred's left pole cannot be fully contained and insistently threaten to return to the ordered profane world from which they were excluded. As Ramallo leaves the sanatorium to murder Morell, Bonet's description of the Mallorcan landscape emphasizes the modern aspects of the world of production and commerce into which Ramallo is being reintroduced. En route to his village, Ramallo focuses especially on aspects of nature that have been co-opted by society for their capitalistic use value. As the truck passes a field of poplar trees, "joves, prims, elegants, ordenats amb una formació quasi escolar", Ramallo remarks that one feels "una tendresa infinita per aquests arbres que no són d'un camp ni d'un cel, sinó de la indústria del xop" (1958: 142). The ineffable, divine character of creation has been disconnected from both nature and the divine, reduced to the industrial machinery of husbandry and use. Ramallo, through his relationship with Morell, is similarly minimized to an object that has become commodified. Evilness, for Bonet, would find its roots not in Ramallo's personal cultivation of violence, but rather in how the carnality of his body is in the first instance desacralized by others, like Morell. In his memoir *Els ulls*, Bonet writes that "el Mal... és sempre una dessacralització de la matèria, el seu caràcter substantiu és tractar l'home com una cosa, convertir l'home en una cosa" (2014: 106).

Ramallo's eruption of sacred violence, however, ultimately unleashes an energy that reestablishes categories of inclusion and exclusion and reaffirms the sanctity of law, both profane and religious. Ramallo is aware of this dynamic, hypothesizing that in the wake of his homicidal violence, "els homes del carrer, que no han baixat, els uniformats, estaran damunt meu. Em dominaran. El seu ganivet també estarà damunt la meva vida" (1958: 203). If law could not be transgressed, it would be superfluous, and therefore Ramallo's homicidal actions provide an impetus for reasserting the legal taboo against murder. In a theological sense, the transgression of the commandment against murder also enjoins Ramallo to Christ's law in a much more binding way. In a plea to God after the act, Ramallo notes that he feels "la condemna d'estar fermat d'esquena damunt la teva llei, sentint els signes de la teva voluntat damunt la meva pell. No t'estimo. Si et volgués, guardaria la teva paraula com si t'encarnassis en mi" (1958: 212). Tur, as argued earlier, binds himself in a positive way to Christ's law in an impulse towards stigmatic purification, and initially fails to see in transgression the necessary link between iniquity, guilt, and salvation in a unified framework of the sacred. Here, Ramallo binds himself strictly to the transgression of taboo, and overlooks the possibility of redemption from sin by emphasizing the castigating effects of divine retribution.

5. The Sacred and Interpersonal Continuity

Moving on to the third affinity between Bonet and Bataille's notions of the sacred, *El mar* stresses that the basis of community is founded in moments in which feelings of the sacred are shared. Such moments require a movement in which the self, as a self-contained entity, is transcended and opened up to the other. Bonet indicates that such a process has taken place in the sanatorium. Tur notes, "aquí tots som al·lucinats, descarnats, com si estiguéssim en calç, i parlem i pensam i estimam sense caràcter, com un sol home" (1958: 14). Indeed, the patients' identities are homogenized through subjection to a series of measurements and diagnoses, but Tur's comments also gesture toward the sense of community that arises amongst shared wounding and suffering. The externalization of the body produced by TB, with phlegm, blood, and the inner material life of the body being turned inside out, simultaneously produces a line of continuity with other patients who are similarly subjected to the sanatorium's circulation of pain.

Bataille theorized the importance of the wound in the unification of multiple subjects, and his idea influences the way that the Italian theorist Roberto Esposito understands his notion of *communitas*.⁹ Esposito argues that community obliges that a subject "escape from himself or herself" in an "originary opening to otherness" (2013: 44). A sense of the common requires offering up, in a form of sacrifice, the possessions and qualities that separate the self from the collective. In Bonet's sanatorium, the patients' dispossession of prior life projects and of their body's own materiality (they are "descarnats") merges the voices, affects, and thoughts of the group into one identity. The spaces in which one is liable to experience feelings of the sacred are also where the separation of the self from the collective is most challenged. When the sacrifice of an animal or a person is witnessed, Bataille argues that one is called "back to the *intimacy* of the divine world, of the profound immanence of all that is" (2006: 44). In Catholicism, the passion of Christ is reenacted in every mass, a transmutation of wine into blood that draws the bonds of the congregants closer together. In the TB sanatorium, the taboo presence of blood, inner viscera, erotic desire, and so on, are openly present, all of which entail an opening of the subject onto the immanence of existence, or "all that is". Bonet's text reinforces that the sacred and the possibility of community are closely intertwined and insinuates the destructive effects of an historical moment in which the practice of the sacred is threatened, whether through the co-opting of organized religion for political purpose or through the ascendance of a hyper-rational bio-modernity that reduces the body to scientific measurements for the purposes of restoring its potential to participate in economic production.

NOTES

9 | Bataille outlines a theory of violence that conceives of the wound, or rent, as a necessary tool for fracturing closed-off subjectivities to open the individual up to what is other, and what exceeds, the self: "human beings are only united with each other through rents or wounds; this notion has, in itself a certain logical force. If elements are put together to form a whole, this can easily happen when each one loses, through a rip in its integrity, a part of its own being, which goes to benefit the communal being" (1985: 251).

Manuel Tur's connection to Jaume Galindo early in the novel is exemplary in this respect. Galindo, experiencing the final throes of the disease, knows that in a short period a rupture in his lungs will cause blood to issue forth from his mouth and deprive his body of air. Galindo shakes off a sheet from his bed and attempts to cover a mirror next to him, remarking that "Jo aquí, tinc el mirall, enfront, i em puc veure quan 'allò' vingui. Però m'agradaria més veure la meva mort i el progrés de la meva agonia dins la teva cara" (1958: 68). For Galindo, the self, and its agony, is reflected best through the face of the other, a connection founded on a shared illness that abolishes the subjective barrier between the two. The mirror, in contrast, is a foreign, utilitarian object that inserts itself between the subject, Galindo, and his visual self-perception, creating a division within self-presence.

Jacques Derrida has argued that seeing oneself perform an act, such as writing, gesturing, or looking into a mirror, breaks the "absolute proximity" between the self as a signified object and as a signifier of itself. Speech, for Derrida, is different, as it requires no mirror, writing implement, or paper: to speak is to reproduce "auto-affection without the help of anything external" (1973: 80). Galindo bears testimony to his own agony through Tur's facial expressions, which only avoids the externality of otherness through the two patients' common experience of suffering, which leads them to act as "un sol home". The sacred is precisely the feeling that constitutes the auto-affection within which both men's identities merge. Unlike Derrida, Bonet's novel theorizes that speech is antithetical to the kind of continuity felt between Galindo and Tur. Ramallo argues, "la substància de la separació és la paraula", while "la vida i totes les coses que uneixen damunt la terra són com blocs de silenci, com pedreres de silenci" (1958: 129). The word is an agent of division while the true sources of unification are experiences that exceed the boundaries of signification. The feeling of pain is one such quarry of silence that eludes representation in language. Elaine Scarry elucidates this point, arguing that real pain is an "incontestable reality" that causes one to lose "those aspects of the world—friend, family, country, cause—that the self is made up of" (1987: 27-29). *El mar* demonstrates that even within such an environment of decarnalization—in this case a clinic, but applicable to other environments of victimization—the seeds of community may yet sprout, perhaps in part due to the inadequacy of language and other marks of identity to capture via signification the shared environment of incontestable agony.

6. Conclusion

This article has proposed that Blai Bonet's representation of illness and violence in his debut novel *El mar* identifies the sacred as a

primary existential component of being-with-others. *El mar*'s traditional diagnosis as a Catholic novel fails to account for the complexity of Bonet's mode of theological critique, which effectively interrogates the relationship between biopolitical modernity and, in the context of the "esfondrament total" of Francoist Spain in the aftermath of Civil War, the subordination of theology to the purposes of political sovereignty. On this latter point, tuberculosis, early in the Nationalist uprising, was mobilized as an object of Francoist ideology that overlapped with claims to power and the formation of a racialized politics. The rebel movement capitalized on the TB epidemic as part of its efforts at international legitimization. During the war, Franco gave interviews to foreign news outlets celebrating the number of sanatoriums being established in rebel-controlled areas, framing the national movement as the deliverance of social justice to an ill nation (Molero Mesa, 2001: 143-44). That most of the sanatoriums were disassembled by 1939 reveals that the actual fight against TB was secondary to the cross-mapping of epidemiological rhetoric to political antagonism, with the Regime's enemies transformed in propaganda into contagious vectors of disease threatening, like the eruption of the sacred, to infect the state. The possibility of periodic contagion, and violent spillover, were central to the Regime, whose law would lose most of its force without the latency of pathological anti-Spain ever ready to shatter its taboos. What Bonet captures in *El mar* is that the root of such evil is not in the actors themselves, as in the case of Ramallo, but rather in the socio-political hierarchies and systems of exploitation that reduce the sanctity of the human body to its pure use value for others.

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