

THE LIMINOID IN ALAN HOLLINGHURST'S *THE SWIMMING-POOL LIBRARY* AND *THE FOLDING STAR*

José M. Yebra
Centro Universitario de la Defensa (Zaragoza)

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to be a first approach to the liminoid as a valuable concept in the analysis of gay fiction, more specifically Alan Hollinghurst's first two novels. Being a classic concept, the liminoid addresses how gayness has been and still is articulated as a problematic identity, always in the make, and in a state of "inbetweenness." As the paper shows, the liminoid in *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) and *The Folding Star* (1994) adopts different patterns. Both novels constitute gay *Bildungsromane* whose heroes return to an Arcadian scenario—namely that interstitial moment immediately prior to the onset of adulthood—where the limits between reality and fantasy do not hold. Like Derek Jarman's film *Blue*, Hollinghurst's texts deal with the liminoid as a stage of nothingness which recalls the effects of AIDS. As the paper demonstrates, the liminoid is no longer related to the characters' middle stage in their maturation process, as in classic *Bildungsromane*, but to an abstract space where art breaks down ontological barriers and addresses withdrawal and renunciation.

KEY WORDS: liminal, liminoid, "inbetweenness," nothingness, trauma, AIDS.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo pretende aportar una primera aproximación a lo liminoide como un concepto útil en el análisis de la ficción gay, especialmente en las dos primeras novelas de Alan Hollinghurst. Tratándose de un concepto clásico, lo liminoide aborda la forma en que la homosexualidad ha sido, y aún es, explicada como un tipo de identidad problemática, siempre en desarrollo, y en un punto de "intercesión." Como señala este artículo, lo liminoide en *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) y *The Folding Star* (1994) adopta diferentes patrones. Ambas novelas son consideradas como *Bildungsromane* gays, cuyos héroes retornan a un escenario arcádico—concretamente a ese momento intersticial inmediatamente anterior al inicio de la edad adulta—donde los límites entre la realidad y la fantasía no se mantienen. Como en la película de Derek Jarman, *Blue*, los textos de Hollinghurst se enfrentan con lo liminoide como un estado de vacío que evoca los efectos del SIDA. Como este artículo demuestra, lo liminoide ya no hace alusión a la etapa intermedia del proceso de madurez de los personajes, como ocurre en los *Bildungsromane* clásicos, sino a un espacio abstracto donde el arte elimina barreras ontológicas y aborda el retraimiento y el abandono.

PALABRAS CLAVE: liminal, liminoide, "intercesión," vacío, trauma, SIDA.



According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, liminal makes reference “to the threshold or initial stage of a process,” and more specifically “to a ‘limen’ [in Latin] or ‘threshold’.” The concept was originally considered by Arnold Van Gennep (1909). The French anthropologist firstly used it to explain rites of passage in different societies and cultures. However, it was in the nineteen sixties that Victor Turner expanded and popularised Van Gennep’s model. Out of the three-staged pattern in coming-of-age rites both critics focus their attention on the liminal period, which stands between the social separation and re-assimilation of the hero. Turner calls this intermediate stage “the betwixt and between” of the classic *Bildungsroman* (95), as the hero is within and without social structures. Liminality is therefore a psychological, neurological, or metaphysical state, conscious or unconscious, of being on the threshold between two different existential planes, as defined in neurological psychology and in the anthropological theories of ritual. The liminal is often replaced by the liminoid, a term also coined by Victor Turner, which constitutes an updated version of the former. In his view, the liminal is restricted to the phenomenal and the liminoid to the artistic manifestations of social outcasts. The liminal/liminoid fosters transgression for it escapes easy categorization and keeps the subject at the margins of social structures for some time; “as having departed but not yet arrived, it is “at once no longer classified and not yet classified [...] neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere” (in Wright, 2004). The transient state of indefiniteness of the liminoid is “akin to that of queer identities in Butler’s seminal work” (Wright 2004). Both the liminoid and the queer are unstable concepts or phenomena, rejecting taxonomies that may constrain their free articulation. After a closer reading, however, it is patent that liminality transcends the sex/gender dynamics addressed to by queer theory and responds to postmodern uncertainty as a whole. The liminoid is a sort of limbo, a space of pure possibility (Turner 97), structurally and physically invisible (95), and necessarily ambiguous and ephemeral.

The aforementioned sense of inarticulacy of the liminoid is particularly appropriate for trauma (mis)representation. Being an ambiguous state where limits do not hold—a space which rejects its own spatiality—the liminoid allegorises the inaccessibility of the traumatic event. Likewise, being neither nor, on the verge of self-extinction, the “transitional-being” or “liminal persona” (Wright 2004) is the prospective victim and/or witness to trauma. Trauma is a limit phenomenon that takes place, so to speak, out of classic time-space coordinates. Freud and Breuer already delved into it at the end of the nineteenth century as the incapacitating ef-

¹ This is an improved extended version of the paper “The Liminal as (Homo)Erotic Territory in Alan Hollinghurst’s Fiction,” delivered in the symposium Trauma in Contemporary Culture the 10th of February 2012 at Northampton University. The research carried out for the writing of this article is part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) (code FFI2012-32719). The author is also grateful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H05).



fect of the conscious mind to come to terms and remember psychically-distressing episodes. It is only its traces, never its kernel, that are left and can be witnessed and rendered. The traumatic event can only be glimpsed in retrospect, as it recurs suddenly and unexpectedly, haunting the victim in the form of flashbacks and other temporal ellipses and/or fractures (Caruth 4-5), thus placing him/her in a liminal territory. Drawing on Caruth, Whitehead points out that trauma constitutes a non-experience, causing conventional epistemologies to falter (3). Literature has recently explored new formulae to come to terms with the limits of traumatic experience. Being itself a liminoid phenomenon, the literary text helps render the representational edges of trauma. Artistic discourses reach where psychoanalysis, history, sociology, anthropology and philosophy fall short. It is not that literature can address the 'authenticity' of the traumatic event; but, it can at least ventriloquise how it haunts the survivor(s) through multifarious forms: from narrative temporal ellipses to incoherent discourses, pieces of stream-of-consciousness, split identities and speeches. Hillis Miller's concept of undecidability (1987) can help to understand the nature and possibilities of literature to (mis)represent trauma as a textual phenomenon. The text is a self-deferring event: it simultaneously asserts and rejects representation, thus othering its own textuality. Hence, the poetics of (im)possibility of trauma literature results from the delaying nature of trauma and the self-deferring character of (literary) texts. In other words, although the traumatic event itself is unrepresentable, literature can (and must) address its unrepresentability. This is the closest the text can be to trauma itself, the liminoid being its compelling metaphor.

With all this in mind, I will focus on Hollinghurst's early fiction to explore the tropes of undecidability it uses to render same-sex desire as a liminoid phenomenon. My claim is that the liminoid helps to articulate the traumatic discourses of gayness in the times of AIDS in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Folding Star*. Will Beckwith and Edward Manners, the main characters in both novels, are split for they are simultaneously insiders and outsiders: they remain on the threshold between adolescence and maturity; between the mainstream —being upper-middle class— and social discrimination as sexual dissidents. That is why their representation can only be transient and precarious, potentially traumatic. In fact, and this is my second claim, their liminoid status as gays in the era of AIDS and queer theory makes them remain in a state of becomingness, which is akin to almostness or near-nothingness gayness was identified with.

Being the main representative of British gay literature today, Hollinghurst can barely elude the effects of AIDS. Critics like Gregory Woods claim (or complain) that virtually no main character in Hollinghurst's first two novels dies as a consequence of the disease, though (369). Although there is no direct reference to the disease, there are frequent tropes equating gayness and death. In *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1989) Sontag shows how tropes (un)cover AIDS and other illnesses in (gay) texts. This discourse of indirection is frequently regarded as lack of implication, a way to roundabout the ethical undertones of gay discrimination. In my view, however, Hollinghurst's fiction is primarily an aesthetic event where the effect of gay mass death in the eighties and nineties soundly resonates. Trauma is a double-timed phenomenon and so is AIDS articulation in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The*



Folding Star. The disease cannot be represented as it occurs but belatedly, as Freud claims with the term *Nachträglichkeit*.

Trauma is essentially liminoid as it results from the overlapping of temporalities and epistemologies. The use of troped narratives of trauma helps victims act out and, ideally, work through their suffering. I contend that Hollinghurst's first two novels work as symptoms of a long-lasting community trauma which affects both their protagonists and generations of gays before. As a matter of fact, the logic and effects of trauma are not only (inter)personal but also transgenerational. Abraham and Torok already pointed to the transmission of trauma through generations (165-206). More recently Gabriele Schwab has further delved into the transgenerational impact of the Holocaust as if trauma remained at a standstill between generations of victims and perpetrators (2010). This inbetweenness is especially obvious in novels with different plotlines, alternating past and present narratives. *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Folding Star* constitute *tour de forces* between generations of gays. Will Beckwith and Edward Manners re-live and are haunted in the late twentieth century by the traumas that affected Charles Nantwich and Paul Echevin/Egar Orst decades before. In other words, the AIDS generation comes to terms with its own unspeakability bearing after witness—using Kohlke and Gutleben's terminology—² to their predecessors' grief.

Following Linda Hutcheon's view on postmodern literature—particularly the genre she calls “historiographic metafiction” (1988)—pure genres have been replaced by a widespread generic hybridity. This bent for the hybrid and the liminoid explains why females, non-whites, gays and lesbians take centre stage giving an alternative, more ‘truthful’ version of themselves and their status. In fact, the marginalised, in Turner's view, can see beyond the rest as they live on the edge. This is the case of most heroes in current speculative fiction, namely vampires, walking dead, cyborgs and other liminal species. Hollinghurst's gay characters also form part of the list.

The Swimming-Pool Library and *The Folding Star* update the liminal territory previously explored by Edward M. Forster, Ronald Firbank and L. P. Hartley. In reference to them, Hollinghurst argues in his unpublished dissertation:

It is in the margin between naturalism and fantasy—between responsibility to observed life and to the imagination—that the subversive and unstable element of homosexual concealment flourishes. What at first seems the result of the author's compromise with normality, an adaptation of his personal imaginative scheme to comply with the moral expectations of the public, a reference to a notional heterosexual text, may in the fullness of time be interpreted in its full ambivalence, where the moral norm itself can be seen to have been subverted with new and cryptic meanings. (*Creative Uses of Homosexuality*, 9)

² “Bearing after witness” is the expression coined by Marie-Louise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (2010) to make reference to the delayed “narration” of nineteenth-century traumas in current neo-Victorian fiction.



Hollinghurst's words on early-twentieth-century texts already foreshadowed his own fiction. His notion and compromise with 'normality' is necessarily renewed, as well as readers' moral expectations. After some political reforms, homosexuality is no longer a criminal offence to be hidden or punished. Yet, his novels still play with gayness as a precarious identity, swinging between pleasure and pain (both sides of desire), textual excess and repression. The traumatic enactment of same-sex desire —particularly its AIDS-related articulation— makes its representation still politically and aesthetically ambivalent. Homo-liminality firstly appears on the first pages of *The Swimming-pool Library* when the hero recalls "his belle époque" (3); that moment constitutes the limit between pre-AIDS joy and the traumatic (down) fall into the Real. Both Will and Edward experience the painful transition from an extended adolescence to maturity.

The liminoid in Hollinghurst's fiction adopts different faces: the Dionysian impulse from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the will to art in his fourth novel *The Line of Beauty* (2004), or Derrida's undecidables and "his problematization of aesthetic framing" (Broadhurst 1999), to the original model of Turner and Van Gennep updated to the demands of current sexual politics. Hollinghurst's first two novels render how the liminoid enacts passive subversion: Will Beckwith and Edward Manners fail to overcome heteronormative rites of passage through indirection and/or omission. However, and this is one of Hollinghurst's particularities (if compared to other gay writers), the liminoid turning-point in his heroes' *Bildungsromane* does not coincide with their coming-out. It is the contradiction between their post-liberation politics and the dreadful episodes they go through and those they recall from their predecessors (as well as their problematic representation) that determines his characters' traumatic experience. The type of ambivalence that Hollinghurst claims in Hartley, Forster and Firbank's texts does not apply to his own novels literally. His writing still swings between naturalism and fantasy. Yet, its liminality is not informed by a politics and poetics of compulsory concealment and moral normalcy. Hollinghurst's fiction plays with the limits of representation of same-sex desire and its clash with literary tradition as part of a self-conscious aesthetic project. It is not their coming-out, but their falling down from pre-AIDS freedom, that informs Beckwith and Manners' life stories. Both experience liminoid episodes whereby the recognition of an inassimilable danger or challenge exceeds themselves and their narrating processes. This state of undecidability is the symptom of liminoid trauma in gay poetics/politics. As Dollimore argues in *Sexual Dissidence, Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (1991) gayness has been edified on contradictions, between normalcy and the anomalous, the visible and the closeted, adolescence and adulthood. This is the case of Will and Edward. Being post-liberation gays, they bear witness to their own vulnerability. Although they feel proud about their liberated life style, they find out a moment too soon the shadows of (others') past traumas implicating them in ways unimagined before. They are caught in the double (betwixt) space and time of trauma poetics, and more particularly in what Abraham and Torok have called transgenerational trauma. The ancestors of Hollinghurst's heroes were victims or perpetrators in traumatic episodes which have remained henceforth hidden, or rather encrypted. Thanks to the liberation movement and the trauma of AIDS alike,



Will and Edward ventriloquise their ancestors' voices and encrypted traumas. No matter how reticent they are, the traces of the past come back through them for, as mentioned above, trauma must come out after a period of latency. Theirs is a liminoid voice and time.

In *The Swimming-pool Library* Will's promiscuous lifestyle in the nineteen eighties finds its counterpart in Charles Nantwich's colonial story in the twenties. *The Folding Star* also swings between the nineteen nineties of the hero and the fin-de-siècle and early forties of the symbolist painter Edgar Orst and scholar Paul Echevin respectively. Like gothic heroes, torn between the rational and the Numinous (Aguirre 15), Will and Edward also inhabit a territory they want to abandon. Both —particularly Will (when he finds out his grandfather was the leader of a homophobic crusade) — must respond for the “crimes” committed by their ancestors (260); they are thus trapped in transgenerational trauma. The new generation is supposed to close a circle their ancestors opened, though in vain: Will is commissioned to write Nantwich's biography; likewise, Echevin and Edward Manners try to register Orst's paintings. All of them fail. This is the logic of trauma that forces these characters into being through repetition: a wounded existence, namely that of pre-Stonewall gays and queer Orst and his semi-closeted devotee Echevin, recurs in the AIDS-inflected life of current gay characters.

The two novels and their main characters show and experience ostracism and discrimination, their (prospective) death and that of the whole community, as well as their defective rites of passage. Although they belong to the upper-middle class, their sexual orientation eventually takes them to the edge of social margins. They undergo liminoid experiences as individuals and as part of a group: as males, they are forced into a heteronormative psychosexual development they cannot hold on to, or simply they reject; as gays in the AIDS era, their identity (politics) is doomed to a tragic end. Being outsiders, they reformulate normative rites of passage. Instead of marrying and having offspring, as classic heroes do after fulfilling their individuation processes, Hollinghurst's characters enter an ambiguous territory. They inhabit the threshold between the fantasy of invulnerability and the abject face of disease and death. They make up what Turner calls the “communitas,” simultaneously inhabiting and defying the limits of the margins. Hollinghurst's gay characters merge in spaces, like saunas, swimming-pools, discos or gyms, where their bodies merge into an indistinguishable whole. Thus, they recall (Whitmanian) democratic brotherhood or the members of Turner's “communitas” who “have nothing. They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship, position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows [...]. Each for all, and all for each” (98-101).

Liminality (also) affects the state of consciousness of Will and Edward. They are never fully integrated outside the “communitas” being unable to overcome a series of prescriptive heteronormative phases. The limits between the normative and the perverse in their sexual practices are constantly trespassed. I use perverse etymologically, from Latin “per-vertere” or “thorough turning about” of the “straight” line. In *The Swimming-Pool Library* Will reads the journals of Charles Nantwich, an old gay and former convict for sexual perversion in the nineteen fifties. After his release from prison, the wealthy Nantwich sets up a group mostly made up of (gay)



ex-prisoners. This underground web constitutes a liminoid micro-“communitas” outside the limits of heteronormativity. Its members do not overcome the threshold into maturity and want to remain adolescent forever. Despite his attempts to follow Nantwich’s model and profit from the aftermath of the (gay) liberation movements, Will is eventually slapped in the face with the outburst of AIDS and the return of the past. Will’s current crisis is related to and haunted by his gay predecessors who were imprisoned, as mentioned above, by his grandfather’s homophobic “crusade to eradicate male vice” (260). With Will suffering the effects of his grandfather’s politics the circle of transgenerational trauma comes to an end.

The Folding Star is also a return to origins. Edward Manners revisits home and his childhood when his friend and ex-lover Dawn dies (*Folding Star*, 194). The hero-narrator idealises his return—which coincides with the second part of the novel—in Arcadian terms. Like Will, Edward is also a naïve character unable to come to terms with his precarious status. Although a liberated gay, he is however forced to re-experience past homophobia through the life stories of Orst and Echevin. Both Will and Edward see the true face of their Otherness, as Dorian Gray does when confronted with the picture-mirror of himself. Liminality is rendered not only in the form of a failed maturation process but also as a state of self-dissolution and, with AIDS, of communal extinction.

Both sex and writing constitute liminoid events: the former is interpersonal, engaging the contours of foreign bodies; literature swings between the said and the unsaid, the speakable and the unspeakable, the explicit and implicit, the physical trace and its act of (mis)representation. Being the kernel of gay discourses since the nineteen eighties, AIDS centres most current gay literature. *The Swimming-pool Library* and *The Folding Star* explore the limit between the actual disease and its (im)possible representation. Troping is the excuse to (mis)represent traumatic events. This is the case of AIDS, whose metaphors—like the talcum powder that men exchange throughout *The Swimming-pool Library*—constitute a symptom of the social metastasis of the disease. Likewise, despite being infected with AIDS, Edward’s friend Dawn dies in a car accident so that no one, the narrator argues, “can say he died of AIDS” (194). A sexually-inflected death is thus troped as a desexualised car crash.

Many tropes (mis)represent the specificity of the self-referential inter and intra-textual discourse of sexual dissidence. Among them, I find blankness a particularly compelling one. By blankness I mean the liminoid territory of discourse where the *ergon* and the *parergon* (Derrida, 1987), the textual and the paratextual and intertextual, undecidability and the need to speak, the “I” and the Other clash to produce meaning. Although, in my view, it is Freud’s conception of desire and the compulsion to live and die that best fit the sense of anxiety and blankness mentioned above. Drawing on Freud, Dollimore points out: “undergoing repression, desire tends towards a compulsion to repeat which is a manifestation of the death drive” (2001: 185). The echoes of trauma poetics, always trying to return to a fantasised scenario—a prior state of things—make the death drive a powerful sign; as a matter of fact, it “seeks to ‘dissolve’ life back into its ‘primaeval, inorganic state’ (Dollimore 186). It is there where writers like Thomas Mann and André Gide found their way to represent the dissolution of the self—Aschenbach and Corydon testify to this



process (Dollimore 299)— before postmodernist gay writers like Hollinghurst and Will Self. This fantasy land (be it utopian or dystopian) is plenty of promises and hazards, namely sex and AIDS. Some of Hollinghurst's heroes return to threatening Arcadias as their predecessors did. Others perform sexually in public scenarios, thus blurring the boundaries between intimate acts and public display. All of them live in the limit between their own fictionality, the precarious reality they address to, and the layers of intertextuality they cross over in search of meaning and (self) representation. These characters are occasionally confronted with blankness, as the spectators of Jarman's latest films do. The effect of AIDS incontestably determines this turn to neo-nihilism in homoerotic literature and cinema. *Blue*, a film where there is no action or plot, but a blue screen, can be read as the trace of Jarman's sight degradation as a consequence of AIDS, and as the symbolic representation of the disease. Andrew Moor regards it as an allegory of oceanic dissolution:

A film without images, it is a rare instance of creative Puritanism; a cinema of denial. Consisting of an uninterrupted aquamarine screen, accompanied by a rhapsodic soundtrack revolving around Jarman's experience of AIDS it achieves for queer cinema what Laura Mulvey had advocated for feminist film practice in the mid-1970s, namely an ascetic denial of visual pleasure. (49)

Like Hollinghurst's novels, Jarman's films recall, update, celebrate and vindicate a genuinely British tradition. A combination of Anglophilia, anti-bourgeois politics and high camp make up their artistic discourses which stand between the physical and the metaphysical. As Jarman himself points out: "Film is the wedding of spirit and matter —an alchemical conjunction" (in Moor, 62). In Moor's view, these (meta)physical aspirations "achieve their apotheosis in *Blue*" (63). The semiotic emptiness of a blue screen conveys a message of sublimity which equates Jarman's cinematic language to Hollinghurst's literary one. This is particularly so when Will and Edward keep stuck in prelapsarian romantic-pastoral scenarios. Will attempts to do so by idealising his relations after E. M. Forster's fashion; firstly with Arthur, a young Jamaican (3). Later, Will regains Arcadia with Phil, a working-class teenager he meets at the Corry (84). Edward also romanticizes his perverse fascination with Luc, his Flemish teenager pupil whom he compares with a blond Aztec (*Folding Star* 29). He imagines "with surprising nostalgia of chasing velvety butterflies [...] with Luc" (36) while he admires the teenager's "mythically beautiful mouth" (141).

Blue finishes in a "marginal-magical zone" of aquatic dissolution which recalls the Roman mosaic Will admires at Nantwich's cellar: "The upper parts of two figures could be seen, the one in front turning to the one behind with open, choric mouth as they dissolved into the nothingness beyond the broken edge of the pavement" (79-80). The tesserae are covered in their turn by the Corry, the club where a new generation of gays swim in the same waters as their predecessors. Immediately after his "visit" to the Romans at Nantwich's (82), Will meets seventeen-year-old Phil in the changing-room of the gym. The echoes of the youths of the mosaic resound in the scene between Will and his young lover. This trans-generational/historical mix-up of men-loving men opens up a space of undifferentiation. In Jarman's waters



“lost boys [...] lie in a deep embrace, salt lips touching in submarine gardens, [...] deep love drifting on the tide forever” (Moor 63). The multilayered scenarios in *The Swimming-pool Library* and Jarman’s films address void spaces where outsiders can experience their liminality. In subterranean scenarios, particularly the Corry, Will and his peers make up an undistinguishable whole: “This naked mingling, which formed a ritualistic heart to the life of the club, produced its own improper incitements to ideal liaisons and polyandrous happenings” (16). Likewise, Jarman’s latest films draw on the monochromatic paintings by Edgar Orst in *The Folding Star*. Both constitute the physical and spiritual traces of near-death experiences, that liminal space where spirit and matter dovetail.

Jarman’s paintings in his exhibition *Queer* are the visceral counterpart to *Blue*: “He takes multiple photocopies of homophobic tabloid front pages and almost covers them in paint —mainly reds, browns and yellows. He then scores graffiti-like obscenities into the paint, directly invoking blood, sex and the plague” (Moor 64). The artist juxtaposes the excess of corporeality and its spiritual underside. In Hollinghurst’s fiction there is plenty of sexual activity and the male body is worshipped to the point of idolatry. However, the “truth” of (literary) AIDS, the ultimate fascination with self-extinction/annihilation (as proposed by Freud, Bataille and Foucault), is never explicit. It is troped instead in the form of intertextual references, as well as through aesthetization, displacement and sublimation. In *The Folding Star*, Orst ‘tropes’ the sexually-related deaths of his lovers as mythological extravaganzas. He paints Jane chained-up like “a bronze Andromeda” (*Folding Star* 301). He later paints another woman. Unlike Jane however, this new girl cannot stand for legendary heroines like Janis Hérodias (303) and is paid a sadist use instead (304). Orst’s bonds with women recall *fin-de-siècle* gender transgression and liminality as hinted at in the ambiguous androgyny of Wilde’s *Salome* or Aubrey Beardsley’s pictures. The aesthetics of deviancy runs parallel to that of death, and the fictional painter is a good practitioner of both. In his life and art women lose physicality and become over/de-sexualised objects of worship. His constant performance and pervert defamiliarization of normative sexuality, and particularly his role as diva-worshipper, convert Orst into a ‘queer/liminoid heterosexual who eventually dies of syphilis’ (285). Like Jarman’s ambivalent discourse between carnality and cold spirituality, Orst’s work bears witness to his ambiguous nature. As a diseased almost-blind old man, his former realistic pictures give way to almost monochromatic canvases where the contours blur. Their effect is profoundly spiritual, albeit inflated by a strange physicality, a desire for the exalted and ultimate emotions; the sublime in short (Shaw 121). Orst’s world conveys a bizarre feeling of extinction, nothingness and withdrawal. Looking at one of his pictures the narrator feels impressed “as he was by the idea of total disappearance, the vertigo of it, and the way it none the less left room for wasting hope” (302).

Echoing Jarman’s last film, Orst’s blue seascape was produced “when his sight was deteriorating steady and he only painted from memory” (*Folding Star* 279). Helene, the girl in charge of Orst’s museum, calls the painter’s monochromatic series “the white paintings.” In her view, they are unfinished works: “You can see how broad the handling is, and the composition is of the simplest. [...] His



later works sometimes have that kind of force” (279). Like abstract expressionists’ paintings, Orst’s masterworks confront the spectator with the enigma of nothingness and with its emotional implications. On Orst’s sea scene the hero concludes: “It had a certain power, the lonely sea and the sky, though I felt it took enigma to the verge of emptiness” (300). The spectator or reader is confronted with a vacuum whereby he is exposed to himself and the Other. This is a deeply-charged event, as the ‘visual’ purity of this(these) pictures insinuates an overall sense of moral desolation. Although these artistic language(s) still long(s) for the sublime, it does so from a de-secularised, liminoid and immanent perspective.

Orst’s latest paintings bear witness to his sexually-related disease and his traumatic end as an outcast. As a Jew in occupied Belgium, the painter becomes a prisoner in his own house and country. Old and forgotten, he is secluded in “a scene of curtained gloom, rather as if he had disappeared into one of his own prints [with] so little light that the colour was closed out of things” (411). Addressing silence, his obscure paintings gain a new meaning, particularly with the incursion of the Holocaust in the story. There is no single episode in history that better symbolises the undecidability of trauma than the Jewish genocide. Yet, Hollinghurst’s heroes’ connection with Nazism is rather problematic. Will Beckwith tells how he is attacked by a group of homophobic neo-Nazis whose imagery paradoxically awakens his sexual interest; they have, the narrator explains, “some, if not all, of the things one was looking for” (172). In *The Folding Star* the Nazis condemn Orst to a life in the dark while they arouse Paul Echevin’s sexual desire. Paul reports having had an affair with Willem, a young fascist, “a great big boy [...] in uniform” (410-11), which makes Edward feel liminal by proxy, a “kind of double agent himself” (410). It is as if the liminoid territory between mass death and beauty, hatred and love, the nihilism and sublime in art helped these characters meet the kernel of trauma, the void of extinction: they are death-driven. Both Jarman’s images and Orst’s pictures perform an act of consciousness-raising whereby the traumatic is forced into being, at least as a symptom of itself. They accomplish an ethical task redefining the current sense of crisis by addressing the otherness and dissolution implicit in the aesthetic act. On rejecting figurative representation and evoking nothingness instead their paintings and images constitute ever-deferring semiotic signs. They perform the impossibility of representing the traumatic event itself although they insist on representing its unrepresentability.

Despite eluding AIDS *per se*, Hollinghurst’s oversexualised heroes inhabit oversexualised worlds threatened by annihilating fantasies. As a matter of fact, Will and Edward bear witness to their prospective eradication as individuals and as part of the gay “communitas.” Drawing on Georges Bataille, Dollimore deals with self-extinction when the erotic is concerned:

In eroticism we desire to lose ourselves without reservation; we ask of it that it ‘uses up our strength and our resources and, if necessary, places our life in danger’; this is one reason why the object we desire most is that most likely to endanger or destroy us. Eroticism ‘demands the greatest possible loss’, and this is at heart what we want — to lose ourselves and look death in the face’. (254)



Consciously or not, Hollinghurst's heroes desire what eventually exterminates them. They hang around saunas, bars and other gay scenarios, where the contours of male bodies mix up into an undistinguishable mass. Theirs is not a "clean annihilation" as Western metaphysics claims (Dollimore 256). In other words, their lethal desire does not seek only transcendence but also bodily pleasure. Novels like Will Self's *Dorian* (2002) stick to a neo-medieval drive to physical decomposition, "an immolation in natural process — and of the putrefaction that follows it" (256). However, Hollinghurst's fiction still adheres to Bataille's blending of decomposition with romantic desire. For the French critic: "While the sexual organs are at the opposite pole to the disintegration of the flesh, the look of the exposed inner mucosae makes [him] think of wounds that suppurate, which manifest the connection between the life of the body and the decomposition of the corpse" (Dollimore 256). Wounds are sites of liminality, in constant flux, blurring the boundaries between health and disease, the body and foreign objects. With the outburst of AIDS, sexual acts turned into wound-like incursions into the Other. Despite the traumatic violence of the plague both Will and Edward still abide by a romanticism that eventually fails. Will's romantic affiliations, particularly with Phil, come to an end because the youth turns up less naïve than the hero-narrator presumes (276). Edward turns up an obsessive voyeur in search of an illusion. Hence, the novel closes with the hero as "a victim, to be stared at and pitied" (*Folding Star* 422), trying to find Luc among "the named photos of the disappeared" (422).

Desire and extinction constitute the edges of the liminoid territory Hollinghurst's characters inhabit. The gay genocide is represented very graphically in a scene Will witnesses while waiting to watch a porn film: "We saw the freakishly extensile tongue of the ant-eater come flicking towards us, cleaning the fleeing termites off the wall" (48). The ants symbolise gay victims and the monster eating them stands for the abject face of AIDS. There is always a masochistic underside to most characters and events in Hollinghurst's novels closely linked to the aforementioned self-extinction drive: "A masochism in the sense of a sexual pleasure that crosses a threshold, and which shatters psychic organization; in which 'the self is exuberantly discarded' and there occurs 'the terrifying appeal of a loss of the ego, of a self-abasement. A kind of death'" (Dollimore 303). Although Will and Edward worship beauty, they are confronted with the filthy side of marginality. There are scenes in which the heroes lose their individuality as they blur among "the dozens of bodies, squatting, lying, straining, muscles sliding to the surface [...] shoulders bending and pumping" (66).

The paper has explored how liminality and trauma represent gayness in Hollinghurst's first two novels. Since Wilde's legal process, homosexuality became an interstitial phenomenon. Whereas the sodomite, Michel Foucault points out, "was a recidivist, [...] the homosexual is a species" (43); the effeminate Other to the healthy heterosexual male. *The Swimming-pool Library* and *The Folding Star* swing between past and present representations of same-sex desire. Thus, they can delve into identity politics from a trans-generational perspective. The history and stories of gay generations before Will and Edward help to understand the heroes' liminoid status at the turn of the millennium. Their liminality is structural for it affects and



determines their arrested psychosexual development. In fact, they reject the onset of adulthood and remain in a state of immaturity and permanent inbetweenness instead. They create Arcadias that eventually collapse, though. The heroes' liminality is also spiritual and metaphysical, as the limits between life and death do not easily hold. Same-sex desire is rendered excessive; more concretely, an excess (and blend) of *eros* and of *thanatos*. It is on the edge between both where Will and Edward lose their sense of identity and open themselves to the Other after Lévinas's "Ethics of alterity." They stand between being and non-being, space and non-space, the traumatic events their ancestors suffered and that they re-live. The traumatic character of gayness in the era of AIDS can only be enacted through tropes like erasure and dissolution. However, it is not only the erasure of the contours of the (homo)sexual body, but the role of literature as a liminoid event (which transcends, and complements, the limits of psychoanalysis, ethics or history) that ultimately explains the poetics and politics of postmodern texts like *The Swimming-pool Library* and *The Folding Star*.

Reviews sent to author: 10 September 2014; Revised paper accepted for publication: 25 October 2014

WORKS CITED

- ABRAHAM, Nicholas and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel: v. 1: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1994. Print.
- AGUIRRE, Manuel. "Liminal Terror: The Poetics of Gothic Space." *The Dynamics of the Threshold: Essays on Liminal Negotiations*. Eds. Jesús Benito and Ana M. Manzananas. Madrid: The Gateway Press, 2007. Print.
- ALDERSON, David and Linda Anderson, eds. *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000. Print.
- BATAILLE, Georges. *The Accursed Share*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1988. Print.
- BLUE. Dir. Derek Jarman. *Artificial Eye*, 1993. Film.
- BROADHURST, Sue. "Liminal Aesthetics." 1999. Accessed on 13 Jan. 2012. <<http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/1no1/suebroadhurst.htm>>. Web.
- CARUTH, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. Print.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1987. Print.
- DOLLIMORE, Jonathan. *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction*. London: Vintage. 1978. Print.
- FREUD, Sigmund and Josef Breuer. "On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of*



- Sigmund Freud, vol. II (1893-1895)*. Eds. And Trans. Strachey, James, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. London: Vintage, 2001: 3-17. Print.
- GENNEP, Arnold van. *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960. Print.
- HOLLINGHURST, Alan. "The Creative Uses of Homosexuality in the Novels of E. M. Forster, Ronald Firbank and L. P. Hartley." MLitt. thesis, University of Oxford, 1980. Print.
- . *The Swimming-Pool Library*. London: Vintage, 1988. Print.
- . *The Folding Star*. London: Vintage, 1994. Print.
- . *The Line of Beauty*. London: Vintage, 2004. Print.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- KOHLKE, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben. "Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century." *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness in Nineteenth-Century Suffering*. Eds. Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Christian Gutleben. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010: 1-34. Print.
- MILLER, Hillis. *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, De Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*, New York: Columbia Press, 1987.
- MOOR, Andrew. "Derek Jarman: Spirit and Matter." *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture*. Eds. Alderson, David and Linda Anderson. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000. 49-67. Print.
- NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Francis Golffin. First Anchor Books, 1988 (1872). Print.
- SCHWAB, Gabriele. *Haunting Legacies*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.
- SELF, Will. *Dorian. An Imitation*. London: Penguin, 2002. Print.
- SONTAG, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. London and New York. Penguin, 2009 (1991). Print.
- SHAW, Phillip. *The Sublime*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- TURNER, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967. Print.
- WHITEHEAD, Anne. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. Print.
- WOODS, Gregory. *The History of Gay Literature. The Male Tradition*. Yale: Yale UP. 1998. Print.
- WRIGHT, Allison. "Liminal, Liminality." *Theories of Media. University of Chicago*. 2004. Accessed on 12 Jan. 2012. <<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/liminal.htm>>. Web.

