Rage, Rage Against the Dying of the Light: AIDS and Literary Metaphor in Contemporary Gay French Fiction

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Over the past fifteen years, contemporary French literature has witnessed the publication of a plethora of texts written by young male homosexual authors, texts signifying both a continuation of a particular literary legacy inherited from such writers as Marcel Proust, André Gide, Jean Genet and others — themselves inheritors of the artistic and social traditions of the nineteenth century — and a radical departure in the manner in which the homosexual saw himself and sought active self-definition. Writers such as Renaud Camus, Dominique Fernandez and Hervé Guibert, as inheritors of that earlier tradition, have adapted the theme of homosexuality to reflect the reality of Gay Liberation and the "subculture" it spawned. Their texts have sought to establish a gay rhetoric and to propound a particular epistemology — not of the closet, but of an open, natural and independent life-style. Their texts came to reflect an asceticism of form where the *trick*, the anonymous sexual act, suspended or subordinated traditional narrative forms while encouraging innovation. Characters spoke homosexuality; and those same voices advanced a primary goal: to render homosexuality a topic of no more or no less interest than any other.

The advent and fatal consequences of AIDS have required radically altered perceptions of gay life in order to respond to the mounting tragedy. The reality of the disease has forced gay writers to abandon recently evolved paradigms, structures and techniques in favor of more orthodox images of the homosexual as pariah.[1] Moreover, the resurrected metaphor negatively propounds notions of absolute exclusion, stigma, contagion and death. AIDS does not simply confirm earlier social prejudices of bourgeois society but assisted in the devolution of the homosexual into a mythic outsider. He became the antithesis of all vital, creative forces. The victim of the disease was transformed into an image of death itself.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ontological complexities of the character of AIDS as it has evolved as a silent character in contemporary gay French fiction. Moreover, such an examination must probe those literary metaphors which this fatal syndrome has inspired. But, before engaging upon such an analysis, it is imperative to consider several germane points: 1) the proposal of a unique term to designate the homosexual/gay man; 2) the rejection of the earlier tri-partite paradigm of the homosexual as *sinner-criminal-sickness*; 3) the development of radical narrative forms of gay discourse not destined exclusively for a particularist (*viz.*, homosexual) reading public. Only when these notions have been explored can one engage the challenge of the threat AIDS offers to gay French writers.

In her landmark study *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick proposes that various *fin de siècle* authors propounded a new dimension to human identity. Each person had previously been defined as possessing a gender based upon a male/female dichotomy. Sedgewick stresses that this paradigm was significantly expanded to reflect a second dichotomy which she defines as homo/heterosexual (27-35; 59-63). Writers had come to sense the power of sexuality and also of sexual orientation and they entered the modernist world highlighting the perceived tensions between the two paradigmatic dichotomies. Moreover, through innovative analysis and insightful readings, especially of Proust, Sedgewick provides evidence that the sexual dichotomy replete with its pressures underlie all literary representations in this century (213-251). Though such a broad statement may occasionally be considered too facile or viewed as being reflective of contemporary gay and lesbian politics, it nevertheless has signalled a vital movement toward explaining the evolution of gay discourse in contemporary literature.

A central problem in the development of such discourse has remained the referent term by which those men whose sexual orientation is toward members of their own sex are known. The pseudo-scientific term homosexual, though marginally less pejorative than earlier terms such as sodomite, pederast, uranist or bugger, nevertheless resounds with Barthesian *«mémoire seconde»*, the prefix *homo* — from the Greek for same — frequently being confused with the homonymous Latin word, *homo*, meaning man. From within the French tradition, the use of this term conjures up memories of the word's initial definition in the Larousse *Dictionnaire universel* where '*homosexuel*' referred to 'half-men' who were unnatural, unproductive elements in society. Ironically, as Dominique Fernandez notes in his study *Le Rapt de Ganymède*, that 1907 definition echoed Charles Ancillon's definition of the eunuch as found in Ancillon's 1707 *Traité des eunuques* (2: 28-29). Thus, the post-*Mai 68* homosexual writers who had begun to realize the benefits of more liberal attitudes toward homosexual people as well as the initial effects of the sexual revolution sought to liberate themselves from past linguistic baggage. Even the post-Stonewall[2] appellation '*gay*' was unacceptable.

In his 1978 polyphonic "novel" *Travers*, Renaud Camus establishes a ludic device which eventually proposes a radical solution to the aforementioned problem. The text, itself an example of post-modernist, self-referential document of *le troisième degré*, represents both a failing and a crossing as implied by the book's title. The failure can be seen in the light of the reader's inability to follow the highly complex, cross-references which the text provides. I would propose, however, that the author hints at a second failure: the refusal of heterosexual society to comprehend the homosexual. An active reading of this text and of the "novel" actually provides a veritable "declaration of independence" for the gay man and his sub-culture. Camus here suggests that the homosexual, maligned and marginalized even in the writings of Proust, Gide and Genet, has a fundamental right to live his/her life and love whomever he or she chooses. Richard Howard notes that "the homosexual writer, specifically in France today, is born simultaneously with the text: it is his text which brings him into being" (21). The text thus symbolizes the open closet door.

Camus proceeds a step farther: he stresses the inadequacies of the terms *homosexual* and *gay*, replete as they are with socio-linguistic «*mémoires secondes*» and which propound a negative, even hateful ontology. He fashions a new term, *achrien/achrienne*.

> *Gay* pour signifier homosexuel est une précieuse trouvaille américaine, qui peut fort bien être transposée en français où un tel adjectif fait gravement défaut, ceux dont on dispose étant soit insultants, soit ridicules, soit encore inexacts étymologiquement [. . .] Achrien et achrienne désigneront donc ici, à partir de maintenant, les individus sexuellement attirés par leur propre sexe, et tout ce qui se rapporte à eux. (86-87; 94)

He forges an arbitrary, unconnotated term which is likewise liberated from the tensions of gender dichotomy and phallocentricity.

Camus's radical text was but the first step of many which resulted in the publication of numerous works, each representing a challenge to literary tradition where the homosexual had existed beyond human society. The homosexual who had been viewed as a marginal character/ a character of the margins was brought "center page." The texts of Renaud Camus, Hervé Guibert, Guy Hocquenghem and others were not written for a particularlist audience, but for a broad readership. Their works, frequently combative, always controversial and occasionally bordering on the pornographic, nevertheless sought to wrench all possibilities from the gay experience. Homosexual desire, the authors argued, is specific, though no less real than heterosexual desire. There was an awareness of

the reality of specific homosexual utterance, not the coarse language of Genet's protagonists, but an authentic *pâtois achrien du quotidien*.

Such *éléments achriens* were designed to impart a sense of power and responsibility to influence or alter previous moral perceptions and behavior. The authors employed a host of ludic devices to expound their positions and to establish a fiction in which the *univers achrien* and its *référent contemporain* mirrored one another. The narratives remained neutral, though they ironically highlighted the general intolerance of heterodoxical bourgeois values by expounding the more liberal attitudes of the homosexual community. Yet, such expressions and advances were rendered redundant when as John Donne wrote in 1627: "But in a minute a Cannon batter all, overthrows all, demolishes all; a Sickness unprevented for all our diligence, unsuspected for all our curiositie" (415). The advent and reality of AIDS necessitated some significant response, not only to the fatal consequences which the syndrome produces, but likewise to the re-ghettoization and exclusion HIV imposes.

The American gay activist, Larry Kramer, has referred to AIDS and its ensuing tragedy as a "holocaust" (217-281). Such usage is spurious and, at best, ill advised, not simply because of the Holocaust of European Jewry during the Second World War, but also because of the secondary memories inherently lurking behind and within that potent word. French authors and activists have avoided such visceral, knee-jerking terminology, preferring other means of response. In the space of so short a paper, one cannot hope to provide a definitive analysis, but rather must seek to outline, providing some idea of directions which have been undertaken. Thus, in the space remaining, I should like to provide a broad view of some responses to HIV/AIDS in contemporary *achrien* French fiction.

One of the most commonly employed metaphors *cum* techniques is silence. Silence has been defined by Maurice Blanchot as " [. . .] cette force virile par laquelle celui qui écrit [. . .] a dans cet effacement maintenu cependant l'autorité d'un pouvoir, la décision de se taire . . ." (18). I do not mean to suggest here that this group of writers has opted not to confront directly the reality and threat of AIDS. Rather, they have chosen to employ various textual elements of silence: *le grand silence typographique-respiratoire* and *la page blanche*, about which Mallarmé noted: "L'armature intellectuelle [. . .] se dissimule et tient — a lieu — dans l'espace qui isole les strophes et parmi le blanc du papier: significant silence . . ." (872). By choosing the words and the *blancs* on the page, the author ensures that the white is no longer gratuitous but becomes *certain*, the silence gaining authenticity and meaning. Silence caustically signifies the horrors of the virus and the certain death it announces. And yet, it likewise provides a sense of strength, enabling the writer to address his own

pain and dismay, perhaps even to exteriorize the anger and rage silently suppressed within. An example of such textual silence can be found in the structure of Hervé Guibert's 1990 novel *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*. Guibert has imposed broad white margins which themselves propound meaning, symbolizing, I believe, the silent presence of the HIV virus and announcing the ultimate silence which it will bring, namely death. Moreover, the pressure this silence exerts causes common narrative structures to dissolve. Guibert suspends the traditional use of the paragraph, allowing the text to flow without any interruptions. I would suggest this technique, an approximation of stream of consciousness evolved to its extremes, is a direct result of the "silence" framing each page. Moreover, Guibert's chapters tend to dissolve into *la page blanche*, a mechanism permitting narrator and reader to breathe, perhaps even to regain a composed sense of equilibrium before the next onslaught.

This theme/technique is extended in Guibert's ultimate text, *Cytomégalovirus: Journal d'hospitalisation*, where silence assumes a host of shades and meanings upon which this "journal" is predicated. Guibert continually interrupts the text, thereby establishing a halting forward motion. This textual silence highlights the inevitability of Guibert's approaching blindness due to the AIDS related medical complication, cytomegalovirus, which forms the title of this slim volume. Guibert ironically portrays that ensuing darkness to the reader by the stark, sterile nature of the white page. Moreover, I would propose that such textual lacunae symbolize the significant, universal rupture which the syndrome and its related diseases have imposed on the narrator. These white fissures frequently evoke solitude and loneliness.

> Weekend. Personne. Les portes grandes ouvertes, comme si toutes les chambres étaient vides et que leurs pensionnaires étaient partis pour un grand pique-nique collectif. Sonner cinq minutes, dix minutes, un quart d'heure ne sert plus à rien. (36)

Even language reduces itself to bare essentials, verbs tending to disappear from many phrases: "Les talons des infirmières sur le carrelage" (49); "Toux dans la nuit. Bruit de caverne dans mon pneumothorax. Mauvais sommeil" (74). The textual silences, representative of the reality of death, imperceptibly impose a degree of lethal quietude upon Guibert's semantic structures. And yet, Guibert allows these silences to propound transcendence, as the word is born of these silences and echoes within them: "Ecrire dans le noir? Ecrire jusqu'au bout? En finir pour ne pas arriver à la peur de la mort?" (93).

In her extended essay *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag suggests

that "infected means ill, from that point forward" (32). If we were to link Sontag's idea with those expressed by John Donne: "As Sickness is the greatest misery, so the greatest misery of sickness is solitude" (420), one understands that HIV/AIDS imposes a cruel degree of silence on the infected individual. Infection, according to Guy Hocquenghem in his last novel *Eve*, signifies triple separation: the homosexual from greater society; the HIV-positive man from the HIV-negative one; the living from *les morts vivants*. Profound frustration and intense rage seethe across the pages of his text. Hocquenghem's narrator highlights the psychological pain arising from the destruction of community and traditional support groups. In a manner of speaking, this torment would appear worse than the resulting physical destruction which the virus exacts. Moreover, Hocquenghem's structure and narrative development establish a vicious cycle: infection affects the individual and the community; the HIV-positive individual is excluded from the support and communion which society and one's intimate circle provided. Isolation, solitude and silence metaphorically represent the end of social, psychological and physical life. Though Hocquenghem never provides lurid descriptions of physical deterioration, his use of silence and solitude powerfully impart a profound sense of pathos, tragedy and loss.

The destruction of community and communion is likewise treated in Dominique Fernandez's novel, *La Gloire du paria*. His use of silence as metaphor emphasizes the pain of solitude and the manner in which it is as lethal as the virus itself. Fernandez's narrator breaks the silence concerning the disease, submerging the reader in a realistic eight-page diatribe in which the reality of AIDS is laid bare. The veil of silence is lifted so that the reader might encounter the full face of the Medusa and the paralyzing effect it casts. But this particular explosion of realism, horror and rage results in an unsatisfactory authorial imposition. Having reconstituted the homosexual as pariah, Fernandez becomes obsessively desirous of his outcasts' achieving heroic transcendence. Unable to conquer the disease, the protagonists opt to commit suicide. In a surrealistic denouement overlain with cheap religious and mythic imagery, the condemned, ostracized lovers "embarquent au-delà, vers l'inconnu" (1, 250), expressions suggesting Platonic transcendence, echoing the tragedy of Tristan and Yseult and even summoning up visual images of Watteau's masterpiece, "*L'Embarquement pour Cythère*."

Classical allusion and pseudo-classical structures are indeed another means by which gay authors have sought to respond to AIDS. Hocquenghem's *point de départ* in *Eve* is the Platonic quest first articulated by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*, where it was suggested that each human soul was divided into male and female halves, and each individual

is constantly seeking the "other complementary half." The *quête achrienne* was not so metaphysical; it leads to the *trick*, the anonymous sexual act without attachment. But, in a world where AIDS exists, the unification of souls will not occur and this act of sexual quest and its promise of liberation might well conceal death in the guise of the HIV virus. This truth frames the text, taunts its characters and the reader. Moreover, even the introduction of the common trope, love, cannot ensure the realization of Paradise. AIDS signifies the loss of Paradise; it mocks author, characters and readers, even suggesting Paradise may never have existed.

Renaud Camus has likewise employed classical structures in his initial responses to the gravity and tragedy of AIDS. He expresses the belief that one only possesses three choices: silence, madness or seeking a *fil conducteur*.[3] For the moment, he has chosen to adopt the elegy as his mode of transmitting a message in the face of AIDS. *Elégies pour quelques-uns* nobly recalls a moment when the *achrien* stood on the threshold of a new era. It fondly recalls those *tricks*, known and unknown, whose shadows now populate a dying landscape. Camus mixes quotations from the poetry of Constantine Cavafy and Fernando Pessoa with his own taut, restrained Cartesian prose. The text, a mere one hundred nineteen pages in length, is punctuated seventy-nine times by *le grand silence typographique-respiratoire*, each *élégie* fading into *la page blanche*, the various pieces separated by white pages. Camus's syntactic structure features short sentences interspersed with disjointed fragments. Those elements are randomly coupled to more florid passages which in turn are disjointed by frequent punctuation. I would suggest such structures have been introduced into the elegies as an approximation to a metonomy for rage and sobbing.

The biblical Book of Job represents one of the earliest human endeavors to impart significance to human tragedy and suffering. Its author or authors exteriorized human pain, rage and frustration, posed questions to Humanity and to the Divinity in the hopes of extracting a degree of understanding concerning the fragility of human life. Soldiers who served and survived the trenches of the First World War felt obliged to articulate their experiences in literature not merely to grapple with their own torment, but likewise to engage others in that experience. Survivors of the Holocaust and of the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki have resorted to literature as a means of enlightenment and assuagement. So, too, do we find the traumatized gay community speaking out, railing against the "dying of the light" resulting from the HIV virus and AIDS. Of those gay authors mentioned in the course of this paper, three have now died, another has begun a regime of AZT. Can we state that the texts they have written in response to the tragedy of AIDS will survive them and be read in the next century? In most cases, probably not. But we can state with some

assurance that by writing, by creating literary symbols and paradigms, by involving the reader in the ludic devices they have forged, these men are affirming life. Roland Barthes has stated that "la voix est donc la vie même" (212). By listening to those voices, we engage ourselves in the painful and ironic mystery of life.

NOTES

1 *Cf.* remarks concerning the French literary response to AIDS in "AIDS and the Arts: Looking for a Tolstoy," *The Economist* 22 February 1992: 87.

2 The term 'Stonewall' refers to the events of June, 1969 when lesbians and gay men in a Greenwich Village bar rioted against police harassment. The Stonewall Riots mark the advent of the Gay Liberation Movement in the United States.

3 Renaud Camus, telephone interview, 20 July 1990.

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