

## Diary Writing as a Queer Technology of the Self: David Vilaseca's *Els homes i els dies*

Álvaro González Montero

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### abstract

This paper examines David Vilaseca's *Els homes i els dies* from a Foucauldian perspective, applying Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self" to queer diary writing and establishing a dialogue with Vilaseca's own theoretical oeuvre. Firstly, the notion of universality of the queer experience that Vilaseca endeavoured to explore in his academic work is complicated by looking at the author's diary writing in combination with theoretical approaches from authors such as Edelman, Laclau and Muñoz, as well as Vilaseca's theory itself, amongst others. Secondly, the practice of writing one's own life, including the reasons behind it and its purposes, is examined. This paper demonstrates the queer sensibility behind Vilaseca's diary writing practice. It also complicates said queerness by showing the ethical, affective, and spatial implications of diary writing. Thus, a complex landscape of autobiographical self-reflection is laid out, where there is more than just resistance or subversion in Vilaseca's *Els homes i els dies*. By closely analysing the tensions and connections between the notions of universality and particularity, resistance and integration, kinship and individualism, under the light of a range of theoretical approaches, such as psychoanalysis and queer narrative theory, this article provides a comprehensive picture of this example of queer, Catalan life-writing in the last decade of the twentieth century.

### keywords

queer theory, life-writing, personal diary, Catalan literature, psychoanalysis

### Introduction

Publishing a personal diary is still a relatively rare occurrence in Spain, mainly because of financial and sales constraints (Mérida Jiménez, 2022: 268). Nevertheless, there have been some publications of autobiographical writing, some of which are variations on the personal diary, by homosexual Spanish authors from the 1980s to nowadays, such as Juan Goytisolo, Terenci Moix, Esther Tusquets, Jaime Gil de Biedma, Rafael Chirbes, David Vilaseca, amongst others. The format and genre of these accounts vary: from traditional memoirs in Moix, to diaries in the case of Jaime Gil de Biedma or Rafael Chirbes, memoirs such as Cristina Ortiz La Veneno's coauthored by Valeria Vegas, or even autobiographical theoretical essays such as the ones authored by Paul B. Preciado. There has been some ongoing academic interest in these life-writings, especially in the genre of memoirs (Smith, 1992; Vilaseca, 2010). The sub-genre of the personal diary in Spanish literature has been

less examined, perhaps because of their comparative scarcity, yet there has been some research published about Gil de Biedma's diaries (Ellis, 1997; Vilaseca, 2003; González Montero, 2021 and 2022), for instance. These diaries share many features with those written by David Vilaseca, which were published in full more recently in 2017.

This paper addresses the autobiographical work of David Vilaseca from a Foucauldian perspective. It applies the concept of "technology of the self" to the analysis of the expression of homosexual desire in *Els homes i els dies*, the author's autobiographical, diaristic account of his own life, simultaneously establishing a dialogue with Vilaseca's own academic work. Vilaseca (2003: 22-23), a self-described follower of psychoanalysis, in its Slovenian Lacanian School version, posits an understanding of the self as grounded in the notion of the Real, defined as "the pre-discursive kernel which [...] both resists and exceeds the Symbolic Order". This essay brings to the fore the tension between Vilaseca's own theoretical understanding of the self and his practice of writing his own self in his autobiographical work. The question I attempt to answer is: what does David Vilaseca's *Els homes i els dies* tell us about the experience of queerness? In order to do this, this essay brings together a range of theoretical frameworks that overlap and sometimes contradict Vilaseca's own theories, but that ultimately provide a comprehensive picture of this example of queer, Catalan life-writing in the last decade of the twentieth century. Vilaseca's use of the concept of Lacanian Real will converse with Foucault's technologies of the self. Antoni Maestre Brotons (2018) posits in his article "L'estranya identitat: l'alteritat sexual en *L'aprenentatge de la soledat*, de David Vilaseca (2008)" that Vilaseca's identity in his novel/autobiography is always provisional and unstable, but also spatially constructed. Juxtaposing that idea, which is also a basic tenet of queer studies, with Vilaseca's theorisation of a queer universality is useful to identify the problems that a completely subject-based reading of life-writing brings about (such as a lack of specificity), when faced with realities that are as much external as internal, such as pain, illness, sex and sexuality. Sex and sexuality are particularly relevant in this case because they are foci of deconstruction for the author in his own academic work, and this is revealed in his autobiographical work at different levels.

## Universal thoughts for particular selves

One of Vilaseca's theoretical endeavours was examining the reflection or enactment of the universal qualities of subjects in literary and filmic works. In his posthumous book, *Queer Events*, the author identifies "[a] Queer 'Passion for the Real'" (Vilaseca, 2010: 216) in a collection of autobiographical Hispanic writers. The author, in his quest to find the universal in the particular, argues, using Žižekian references, that "sometimes one needs to 'abstract' from historical facts and 'decontextualise it' [...] so

as to locate their ‘evental’ character, their point of genuine novelty” (217-218). This project remains as important as ever and that it should be applied to Vilaseca’s own life-writing work. Is there such a thing as a universal queer experience in the particular use of a particular technology of the self by this specific Catalan author from the late twentieth century? Finally, can these works truly be excised from the socio-historical situation in which they are created with the objective of understanding their universality? Ernesto Laclau (1992: 90) posits the paradox that “universality is incommensurable with any particularity yet cannot exist apart from the particular”. Is this gap possible to bridge and does Vilaseca give us a possible answer? An answer to that question can be found going back to the notion of life-writing and its queer use as a technology of the self.

The notion of universal is problematic, as it may easily lead to an erasure of the specificities of race, class, gender, that are rooted in material circumstances; this is why its definition and reach have received a lot of attention in the study of sexuality. John Boswell (1989: 91), in his article “Towards The Long View Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories”, makes a case for the importance of considering the idea of universalism to answer the question: “[D]o categories exist because humans recognize real distinctions in the world around them, or are categories arbitrary conventions, simply names for things which have categorical force because we agree to use them in certain ways?”. Boswell presents a range of examples from sources throughout history that support his idea that sexuality has always been an operating category in human societies, even if not always following our current models of thought. Lee Edelman (1994: xvii) in his *Homographesis* focuses his analysis on “[t]he fiction of a common language that can speak a universally available truth, or even a universally available logic”, which is present in social structures of dominance. José Esteban Muñoz (2009: 123), a decade later, criticises Edelman’s approach, introducing the concepts of race and class in the equation, which he argued had been overlooked by many theorists:

Theories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal — which is to say a subject whose time is a restricted and restricting hollowed-out present free of the need for the challenge of imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now.

It is a basic tenet of intersectional theories that class, race, gender, sexuality and their imbrications with identity are anchored in the individuals’ and their communities’ social realities. However, as Muñoz emphasises, queer theory’s focus on a “crypto-universal” idea of a subject glosses over these realities. While this criticism may be applied to David Vilaseca’s academic work, which given its psychoanalytic filiation is very heavily focused on abstract subjectivity, the author’s life-writing work does include a reflection on the material constraints of the

individual, even if it might not reach a sophisticated level of intersectional criticism. In addition, Madhavi Menon (2015: 125) argues that “[u]niversalism is a movement across partitions that does not privilege any one particular as a basis for ontology”, instead “universal[ising] partition as the condition within which we all labor”. Moreover, Menon (2015: 17) posits desire as “fundamental to the idea and project of universalism”, connecting the universal project to queerness because it is “marked by a desire that refuses the contours of a fixed body [...], desubjectiviz[ing] all categories of identity grounded in sexual specificity”. Vilaseca’s search for a universal queer subject speaks more to the human universality of desire than to the detriment of specific material situations, even if we must be careful to acknowledge them.

Vilaseca’s focus on the concept of “universal” does not mean to dismiss the very important material aspects of lived lives. The author himself proposed the use of the Žižekian term “universalist”. Comparing it with Brad Epps’s “transnational”, Vilaseca (2003: 25) argues in his *Hindsight and the Real* that issues such as “identity”, ‘homosexuality’ or indeed ‘race’ [...] involve the ‘differential relations’ (Epps, 1996: 19) by which subjects, ideologies and nations come to have meaning in the first place”.

Vilaseca’s theoretical approach both in his narrative and his academic work follows psychoanalytic theories, in line with his field of research. Indeed, it can be said that the author proposes a combination of his subjective experience with a theorisation of the subject, in line with certain queer theories, as Maestre Brotons (2018: 228) shows. Vilaseca’s reliance on psychoanalysis encourages him to describe in detail his familial ties, especially with his mother. Eventually, he becomes a gay, psychoanalysed subject (Maestre Brotons, 2018: 215). This focus on family sits uncomfortably with queer ways of understanding kinship. Jack Halberstam (2007: 317), for example, proposes that “[t]he Oedipal frame is particularly damaging and inappropriate when applied to queer culture if only because it presumes a heteronormative frame [...] for a community which is resolutely NOT structured by parent/child relations”. This is perhaps one of Vilaseca’s blind spots, one that is shown in the contradictory relationship he establishes with his own family throughout the book. Ferran Benaiges (2024: 32) interprets this problematic relationship as an example of autoexile, defined as “viure als marges de les categories de centralitat, família i sexualitat imposades per l’heteronormativitat”.

Familial ties complicate queer theory. Elizabeth Freeman (2007: 297) reflects on the “lack of ‘extendability’” of queer groups: there is a sense of impossibility in thinking of queer descendancy, opposed to an “amorphous and generic [idea of] ‘community’”. Indeed, Freeman (2007: 303) reads a wish to abandon kinship in what she terms “white-centered queer theory”, as she also argues for the need of critical

race theory to stick to notions of kinship. Vilaseca's life-writing account rides both tides: the melancholy of family is combined with a search for his own queer kinship, all of which is put into practice in the act of writing the diary. Benaiges (2024: 31) highlights, quite rightly, how Vilaseca uses diary writing as a tool through which to extrapolate his individual position to society, thus making a very valuable contribution to queer Catalan culture.

It is important to point out that Vilaseca's *Els homes i els dies* can be interpreted as two different literary genres at the same time: life-writing and fiction. Rather than looking for the one and only answer to this question of genres, a degree of ambivalence is needed to understand that this literary work is biographical and fictional. The extent to which it is true to an external reality is subject to discussion; indeed, the relation between life-writing and truth is part of an ongoing debate. John Demos (2005) proposes the idea of borderland between history and fiction, an overlapping area where both possibilities, that of objective history and that of fiction, cohabit. Laura Di Summa-Knoop (2017: 3) argues that "not all alterations and not all distortions [in a memoir] qualify as lies, they are often precisely what make autobiography interesting". Vilaseca (2021: 24) himself ponders about this borderland saying that he always finds the same problem: "un no pot ser al mateix temps autor i personatge del seu llibre, i em sembla que el que jo faria bé de veritat seria fer de personatge". While the author revised his diaries, changing his sister into a brother, for example, and changing some names such as his PhD supervisor's, there is a clear, obvious background of life-writing, where the author is the subject of and to the narrative.

Michel Foucault's theories on writing can help us understand the encroachment between subject and life-writing, from the point of view of the technologies of the self. One of Foucault's historical ideas about writing was that it became a practice ancient Greeks and Romans used to improve their own selves (Bernal Marcos, Zittoun and Gillespie, 2024). Ferguson (2017: 313) adds to this general idea that "[w]hereas autobiography is associated with an attempt to know the self in its entirety, in its gradual constitution over time, the *journal intime* is characterized instead by a process of observing the self in its endless variation and instability, a process that renounces any totalizing". David Vilaseca's (2021: 20) own answer to why anyone writes one's own life is the following:

Saber-ho explicar, vull dir, de manera que ho pogués entendre no només jo sinó qualsevol; extraient l'experiència acumulada de l'àmbit estrictament 'individual' i 'privat' per traslladar-la, per mitjà de l'escriptura a l'esfera interpersonal que és allà on les coses compten de debò.

Vilaseca thus presents here his longstanding and ongoing interest in bringing the individual to the general, the specific to the universal, his personal life to the

interpersonal sphere, through explaining his life both to himself and to his reader. Yet, soon after this prologue, he is already doubting himself: “Aquest diari que avui reprenc, té alguna funció?” (Vilaseca, 2021: 37). This is a key question for this paper: what is the function of diary writing in this transformation, this change of shape in its original Latin etymology, from one life to an interpersonal experience?

## Technologies of the self: keeping a diary

Keeping a diary is an activity that has traditionally been associated with women and femininity as Desirée Henderson (2019: 117) states. Given the discrimination of women in a patriarchal society, diaries have also been dismissed as something unimportant, not worthy of academic study (Henderson, 2019: 70). There has been some interest in autobiographical work in Hispanic studies, such as the very important work by Robert Richmond Ellis (1997) *The Hispanic Homograph*. Nevertheless, diaries are still seen with a mixture of suspicion (some would question their use as primary materials along the lines of: private life should be private, why should anyone care?) and morbid attraction. The study of diaries and other autobiographical pieces is not without controversies, especially because of their encroachment with issues of class, privacy, race, and gender. For instance, Rafael Mérida Jiménez (2022: 274), in his latest paper about diaries and gender studies, points at the fact that some Spanish academics still avoid studies or editions of certain works, such as diaries or other life-writing pieces, because of their deviance from the “heteropatriarchy”.

Diaries are a literary instance of what Foucault termed technologies of the self. They have traditionally allowed minority groups to express themselves. Whilst they allow for introspection, queer writers have utilised diary writing as a “technique of verbalization” (Foucault, 1988: 49). This queer instance of verbalization achieves two key objectives: it manages to eschew the closet and its binarism (Sedgwick, 2008) and it avoids what Foucault (1988: 49) terms the “renunciation of the self”, instead “constitut[ing], positively, a new self”. This new self has immense social and political consequences. For instance, diaries, and the authorial personae reflected in them, have an important political dimension, especially when it comes to minority representation and civil rights: e.g., the diaries of persons with AIDS in the 1980s-1990s (Henderson, 2019: 179).

According to Michel Foucault (1988: 18), technologies of the self are a set of “techniques that human beings use to understand themselves”. They allow individuals to transform themselves through action on their bodies and souls, with the objective of attaining a state of “happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (18). Foucault presents these technologies of the self as intertwined with other human technologies, including the ones of production, sign systems and



powers (18). In other words, these tools are imbricated in the system of power and knowledge production, closely connected to the act of writing itself. Using the notion of technology of the self allows us to understand the importance of the diary as a tool to construct writerly selves, in the light of struggles with sexuality. This concept is rooted in a view of the self in a process of active construction, influenced by its social, cultural and historical surroundings.

Foucault (1988: 71) mentions the technology of the diary in relation to religious Puritanism in America, saying that the diary “was not an occasion for just reviewing the day’s events, exposing personal experiences, or indulging in a relaxed reverie. Puritan journals, in fact, were the opposite of personal”. This was because they were instruments to connect the self with the “biblical standards of measurement” (71). Foucault (1988: 77) goes as far as to say there is a certain loss of the self in this Puritan practice of the daily journal, asking: “Could the ‘I’ that so clamantly asserts itself lose itself? And if it could not be lost, how could it be saved?”. Granted Foucault was talking about Puritanical practices of diary writing, the point is still clearly there: can the “I” disappear in the diary? Can it become part of the writing process beyond individual agency?

This worry about individual self against a universal intervention of the self is coterminous with Vilaseca’s (2010: 220) claim that there is an “enduring capacity of human beings to put their life at the service of an Idea and, along with it, of gaining true immortality” through autobiographical writing. This claim is based on Vilaseca’s notion of the Lacanian Real, by way of Slavoj Žižek, defined as the core of the self that refuses symbolisation.

These two theoretical paradigms, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian technologies of the self, are overlapping and opposing in many ways. Cecilia Sjöholm (2013: 153) provides a very clear analysis of these differences in her chapter “Foucault and Lacan: Who is Master?”: “in Foucault, the historical evidence that speaks in favor of the self is overwhelming: the split of the self is a question of technology and of development, not of structural necessity”. Ultimately for Foucault the problem with Lacanian psychoanalysis, and by extension with Vilaseca’s own theories, is that they do not offer a restitution of a self, unlike his technologies of the self are supposed to do. Instead, Lacan insists on the structural gap that is at the core of any subject.

Foucault’s (1988: 77) question, “Could the ‘I’ that so clamantly asserts itself lose itself? And if it could not be lost, how could it be saved?”, however, points at that lack in the structure of the self, even if the author does leave the door open for salvation. Indeed, the sticking point in this theoretical overlap is Foucault’s refusal of the importance of the Freudian concept of the “repressed” unconscious, as

analysed by Judith Butler (1990: 88), because of its “presumption of an original desire [...] that maintains ontological integrity and temporal priority with respect to the repressive law”. The self loses itself, stops being, it is subsumed in the Other of religion, in the example above. Foucault’s preoccupation, however, reflects a wish for a complete self, and an attempt to prop up its structure. These objective frictions against Vilaseca’s (2010: 4) insistence on the Real, “a point of inassimilable otherness”. Of course, one of Foucault’s main intellectual projects involves an understanding of the powers of subjection operating both outside and inside the self. Vilaseca’s (2010: 220) project, however, posits the subject as able to transcend and lay bare the contradictions of all subjective identities despite the “particularity of their subjective, cultural and sexual placements [...] by remaining firmly anchored in their singularity”. At this tensioned junction, the transcendence Vilaseca is interested in, this anchoring in the singular making a general contribution to universal categories, can be identified in the diary as a technology of the self. Diaries are one of the genres where the dichotomy between privacy and publicness becomes blurred. In theory, a diary is private, intimate. In practice, however, writing something makes it available for others to read it, for instance, by casually finding the notebooks. For example, Vilaseca chose to publish these life-writings, though changing some names and genders. Isaias Fanlo (2024: 121) interprets this as the way Vilaseca “se siente capaz de generar un relato y [...] modificarlo”, pointing thus at the complex (and productive) relation between autobiographical writing and truth. Fanlo talks about a series of betrayals to the real referent, such as the change in gender of Vilaseca’s sister, and the change of place names. These betrayals seem to warn the reader against trusting autobiographical writing, posits Fanlo (2024: 122). The result is indeed a book that is placed at the border between diary and fiction (Fanlo, 2024: 115). Vilaseca made thus a conscious choice to expose himself, at least partially, to the gaze of the Other by publishing this work. This follows Lacan’s conception of the self; we are only ourselves in opposition to anOther self.

Moreover, Vilaseca’s use of the diary demonstrates a queer sensitivity, understood in this case as a refusal to pin down a one and only hegemonic identity. This ties in neatly with queer theory’s objective of deconstructing the socially constructed, hegemonic regime of sexuality. Queer theory is worth bringing into the conversation for it offers us the possibility of a theoretical intervention in Vilaseca’s life-writing that starts moving beyond the impasse of the universal and the particular.

Queer technologies of the self can be defined as a narrative tool but, far from the hygiene-oriented ideas that Foucault presents of improving the self and making a better one, the queerness of Vilaseca’s work lies on his refusal of that teleology of the self. This moves beyond the somewhat cliché idea of a resistance to patriarchal, heteronormative society, which can often leave us in a somewhat circular argument.



Instead, what is subversive about narratives of the self such as Vilaseca's is their refusal to posit a complete, fully formed self. What *Els homes i els dies* shows is a writerly subject in the process of becoming, using writing as an unstable anchor to parts of the self and to project it as a universal potency.

For example, the year 1996 in the diary is titled "Una pèrdua irrecuperable" (Vilaseca, 2021: 357), because he had done a faulty duplication of his diary information (in his computer, it is understood), resulting in the loss of a month's worth of diary writing (from 20 February to 14 March). The author talks about this event as a "traumatic realisation of the vulnerability of his diary" (361), which sinks him into a great depression. This passage shows that the connection between the writer and the writing is more than just a mere representation: it is a piece of self whose loss pushes the author into a state of mourning. The disappearance of a piece of writing is an irretrievable loss that has a very noticeable impact on the body and mind of the writer. This aspect of bodily connection to diary writing is as an example of the incompleteness of the writerly self and his reliance on diary writing as a structure. The question that still remains is: what is queer about it? What does examining this piece with a queer theory perspective provide to the understanding of the subject of *Els homes i els dies*?

An important part of Vilaseca's academic work seeks to make an intervention on queer theory in general, especially at the level of the construction of subjective identities through literature. This is expressly stated in *Queer Events*, his last book, where one of his explicit objectives is to plot the "ways [...] queer theory helps us do justice to the full complexity of the representations of self" in authors' texts whose "stance as regards homosexuality often clashes with the dominant 'positive' agendas" of capitalist-influenced gay communities (Vilaseca, 2010: viii). In other words, the author examines what the discursive constructions of homosexual selves is like and how those selves are connected in their acceptance or rejection of current economic and political ideologies. The author does this through "exploit[ing] the tension between the literal and the symbolic/fantasmatic planes" (ix).

This section of the paper examines Vilaseca's autobiographical work in the light of his own theories. What is the stance of Vilaseca's persona in *Els homes i els dies* with respect to sexuality and ideology? Is there anything "queer" about the author's approach to diary writing? Ultimately, as argued in the section above, can this approach be tempered by the application of Foucault's notion of technology of the self that links the subjective stance to the specific, socially constructed writing practice of the diary?

Let us begin by acknowledging a tension in the study of queer theory that appears in many analyses of literary works. Vilaseca was a gay man who openly explored his sexual life in his autobiographical work. He was also an academic (mainly in British universities) with a focus on psychoanalytic theories of the subject. The present paper utilises some theories from Vilaseca's time, but I am aware that psychoanalysis has been contested by authors such as Didier Eribon or Paul Preciado as the only way to address queer epistemologies. It may be easy to assume a queer gaze in the author's approach to his life-writing production, but this should not be taken for granted. Janet R. Jakobsen (1998: 314) proposes that any queer literary practice involves asking "not only what the possibilities are in any given political moment but how we think about possibility, its conditions, its imagination". Indeed, the construction of the "self" is tied into different fantasies of possibility, which in turn are grounded in the processes of normalization at any given time. Ricardo Llamas (1998: 376) talks about queerness as the establishment of an "identity without essence", which is not about defining what is but rather about locating one's marginal position of resistance to the regime. Identity is unstable, moving and only defined in relation to hegemonic ideology, in general Althusserian-Marxist terms. This is similar to Lacan's claim that identity is formed around the symbolic order, mainly constituted by language, which in turn is culpable of splitting the subject.

Jakobsen (1998: 520) signals this stage as the place where resistance becomes a question but a very difficult one to theorise. It is complicated because resisting or opposing is necessarily "dependent on the particular norms and normativity that one resists" (520). How can queer identities resist the very norms and normativity that define their existence? How can something that is moving and has no essence, that is rooted in the material conditions that marginalise it, whilst also takes shape in the resistance to those conditions, be anything other than subservient to that system?

It is at this impasse where autobiographical writing, at large, and David Vilaseca's *Els homes i els dies* in particular, offer a point of reference to the subject's identity. Below are some examples to support the hypothesis about how the queer practice of the diary gives us an answer to the blockage above. Despite the productiveness of these examples, further research across literary traditions, languages, cultures is needed to better understand how life-writing can move the subject in the direction of an identity that is not exclusively defined by the hegemonic bully of ideology, nor necessarily in a position of freefalling into the nihilistic position of refusing any identity. This is in syntony with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2008: 35) work towards deconstructing binaries in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, where the author

presents her worry that our theoretical understanding of sex, sexuality and sexual orientation may be “at the very least damagingly skewed by the specificity of its historical placement”.

Following Vilaseca himself, the seeming obviousness of the material aspects of our lives must be problematised in order to look into something not quite so obvious: what makes an identity queer and, in this case that occupies us, what is queer about Vilaseca’s diaries, beyond his sexual adventures. For this article, several excerpts from Vilaseca’s diaries have been selected, because of their relevance and significance for the study of Vilaseca’s queer position in life-writing.

Vilaseca’s (2021: 19) prologue starts by acknowledging that he has a personal, academic investment in the “autobiographic genre”, but that he had left behind the most important part, his own autobiography. This process of writing his autobiography, when he was close to his fortieth birthday is linked, right at the end of the prologue’s second paragraph, to a process involving important transformations, including, perhaps quite strikingly, dying to be born again as a new person. The thought of the death of oneself as a necessary step to become someone new and, supposedly, better, happier, may seem rather cliché. Indeed, it reminds of reincarnation, resurrection, and other traditional, religious points of view. However, beneath that seeming commonplace, there is something more subversive, because of the upfront identification of the author with the death of the subject. He shows the reader that this life-writing they are about to read is nothing but the process of a subject losing itself, to then die, and finally to be born again at the end of the book. It is a practical example of a queer end of the stable subject, and the emphasis on the positionality of identities. This move is shown in the following paragraph, where Vilaseca (2021: 20) posits as essential to his project the following: “Per alliberar-me de veritat dels anys transcorreguts i poder viure els que em quedessin sense deutes i enriquit per la pròpia experiència, ara també havia de saber explicar què m’havia passat”.

What Vilaseca deems most important is being able to explain the process of change he had undergone. This can be seen as a Lacanian influence of course, because in traditional Lacanian psychoanalytic practice the analysand, in order to become an analyst, has to go through what is called “the pass”, a process of speaking of their analysis to a group of analysts. Jacques Lacan (1995) describes it as a process where the psychoanalyst stops being a look and becomes a voice. In the pass, there is a dissolution of a fantasy into an understanding that “the foothold of desire is nothing but that of a *désêtre*, disbeing” (Lacan, 1995: 9). This idea of disbeing brings us back to the death of the subject that David Vilaseca proposes as key to his autobiographical endeavour. To stop being is, hence, a condition *sine qua non* to start the construction of the new subject, without “debts”.

The use of the term “deutes” (“debts”) in the prologue is telling of Vilaseca’s unique relation to the process of becoming. The choice of words, instead of perhaps the more predictable “dubtes” (“doubts”), which one might expect in the context, grants some reflection. To whom does the author owe what? What is he so worried about owing? The author’s wish for a lack of debts, that is a lack of remaining demands, in the context of Vilaseca’s personal archaeological task signals the importance of cutting with the old ways of being. Sara Ahmed (2006: 21), in her *Queer Phenomenology*, says about debt that: “For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return”. David Vilaseca indeed fails to make that return; he does not want that debt. Thus, diary writing is a tool to eliminate debt, to write it off in the process of becoming a queer subject.

This economic process of debt accrual and settlement is reminiscent of queer processes of socialisation. The nuances are manifold, but because of the influence of social stigma, very often sexual dissidents (or queer people, in other words, people whose sexuality or gender does not conform to social expectations of heterosexuality and binarity) accrue a metaphoric debt with society at large. As Ahmed (2006: 86) explains, heterosexuality is a “social as well as familial inheritance”, and whoever refuses that gift is “seen as a bad debt [...], ungrateful, as the origin of bad feeling”. This bad debt forces one to hide and creates an inability to acknowledge one’s affects. Vilaseca (2021: 21) wants to bring this to the open through writing his own life, thus settling the debts and/or writing them off. Eventually, at the end of a “llarg procés ple d’interrupcions i marrades”, Vilaseca manages to find his autobiography and find himself.

To conclude this section, the dissolution of the subject that Vilaseca declares in his prologue proves the author’s queer life-writing style, thus showing his commitment to transcendence from the individual to the universal. From the beginning the author dissolves any expectation of a permanent subject, of a permanent identity, instead emphasising the impermanency, the constant change. This is more important because the rest of the book, as described below, is decidedly (homo)erotic. Vilaseca (2021: 744) is, however, not interested in pinning down his identity, rather he aims to dissolve it, to put a new one together through the book and, in his own words, right at the end of the book, “poder tornar a ser aquell que era jo abans de l’arribada de la Internet: [...] el David que torna a estar en paus amb el món”. Nevertheless, Vilaseca’s insistence on transcendence and the universal quality of the works may inadvertently overlook important material consequences of sexual dissidence.

David Vilaseca's life-writing work is unapologetically (homo)sexual. Even assuming the impermanency of the Vilasecan subject described above, the ever-changing subject crystallises in specific, material practices that are precisely part of the use of technologies of the self: they allow for that condensation of material in a specific context.

Moreover, Vilaseca's life-writing rejects what Javier Sáez del Álamo (2024: 51) terms the device of the closet. In the same lines as Ricardo Llamas (cited in Sáez del Álamo, 2024: 51), Vilaseca does not go in or out of the "homo" space before and after a sexual practice; he writes his diaries from a queer domain. He does not engage or care about his readers' potential stereotypes or prejudices about homosexuality. He does not excuse his actions to the reader, nor does he cast moral judgement on his sexual adventures. This is, however, not exempt of (very r/Real, both as in external reality and also related to the Lacanian Real) consequences: for example, to this day, the translation of *Els homes i els dies* has not found a publisher. There was a theatrical production of this work, but it stayed for only one season in Barcelona, and there have not been any plans to take it further than the Catalan stage. While there are complicated political and cultural reasons for the somewhat frequent lack of translations between Catalan and Castilian Spanish, there is something about the open queerness and sexuality of *Els homes i els dies* that impacts these processes.

The conscious riddance of the closet that Vilaseca enacts in his writing is shown from the beginning of the book. The author's love life is described in detail without any type of justification or explanation, thus exorcising away the phantasm of the closet. Vilaseca's first lover, Josh, appears at the very beginning of the book, the two of them having slept together after drinking three quarters of a bottle of whisky (Vilaseca, 2021: 24). At this point the author was 23 years old and living in Bloomington, Indiana. In the following diary entries, after Vilaseca's move to London to study his PhD, the relationship between the author and Josh becomes increasingly toxic, because of Josh's continuous infidelities. Yet, from this early point in the diary, Vilaseca is keen on providing a complex view of his own feelings: he feels rage, because of Josh's betrayal, but also envy at the "apparent lack of effort or emotional implication" with which Josh manages to betray him (39). Vilaseca shows a desire to be more detached and less implied in his relationships, which becomes a theme in the book. This can be interpreted as the queer passage from a heteronormative, monogamous conception of relationships to a more pluralistic view, through the deep trauma of Vilaseca's obsessions. In this regard, it is worth remembering these diaries were fully edited by the author for publication, and thus they are likely to have been modified to give a message to the reader. This supports the argument that David Vilaseca took a decidedly queer approach to writing his life, thus avoiding any narrative of the closet. The lack of closet and the candidness with which Vilaseca approaches his sexuality is refreshingly free of prejudice.

However, one can clearly observe the difficulties that Vilaseca struggled with were often related to his sexuality. These difficulties bring to the fore a question that requires more space and reflection: is this closet-free, queer way of writing but a mask, hiding a past of pain and suffering?

The author's struggle to leave Josh altogether, who was hurtful and toxic from the very beginning of their relationship, is also connected to a masochistic aspect of the author's sense of self. This masochistic aspect of Vilaseca is connected to his early writings, dedicated in a large part to the deconstruction of masochism in Dali's autobiography. Vilaseca (2021: 93) says: "Recordo tants bons moments en la seva companyia [...] i em sembla tot tan 'bonic' i tot tan 'com ha de ser' que de cop i volta no puc evitar veure tota l'energia i tot l'esforç que ens està costant la separació actual com una despesa innecessària i injustificada". Everything was as it should be, claims Vilaseca, idealising his early relationship with Josh.

As time goes on in London, Vilaseca starts to become more interested in psychoanalysis, especially after reading Sigmund Freud's works. This leads to his own analysis of his own desire, saying things like "un dels factors que efectivament em provoquen a mi la falta d'erecció és estar amb algú de característiques excessivament tendres i en general 'femenines' – algú que potser em recorda incoscientment la meua mare?" (79). These reflections about his own sexuality are coupled in the diary with steamy sex scenes. Soon after his association of a lack of erection with an unconscious memory of his mother, Vilaseca describes in detail his sexual intercourse with Eric, one of his lovers, whilst thinking repeatedly "[w]e come from different worlds" (80). The following day, Josh goes to see Vilaseca, and they also have sex, but this is only worth a quick mention in the autobiography.

For many readers, these reflections about femininity and masculinity may seem basic, old-fashioned and even not very theoretically queer. I argue that it is necessary at this stage that they be so. Vilaseca's childhood took place in the last stage of Franco's dictatorship in Spain, while his young adult years coincided with the Spanish 1980s and a certain liberalisation of customs. However, the fact that he already eschews the existence of the closet, at a time when very many families would reject their child for being any type of sexual dissident, was very brave. Hence, for Vilaseca to be able to write openly about his sexual life, assuming his dissidence without excuses or justification is already proof of a writer committed to a new way of expressing his own biography.



## A queer passion for the Real and intimate diaries: a technique of the self to destroy the self

This last section examines the way the idea of writing a diary as a technique of the self leads, in Vilaseca's case, to an interesting practice of queer theory. Vilaseca's psychoanalytic analyses of autobiographical texts by a range of authors reach the conclusion that they all share "a queer passion for the Real". What does Vilaseca mean by that? Can this be applied to Vilaseca himself?

Vilaseca (2010: 220) concludes his posthumous book, *Queer Events*, with the following statement:

In their uncompromising fidelity to their ethical choices, in their "saintly" (as well as unabashedly "sinful") commitment to the various queer events to which they dedicated their lives, these twentieth-century authors from Spain are a model to remember and upheld against the mere "ethics of living well" [...] a reminder of the enduring capacity of human beings to put their life at the service of an Idea and, along with it, of gaining true immortality.

The author posits a contrast between a facile ethics of "living well" against a seemingly harder commitment to the "Idea". Vilaseca argues neatly throughout the book for the key relevance of such a difference in the understanding of certain Spanish creators' queerness, concluding that authors such as Antonio Roig or Terenci Moix, or cinema directors like those of *la Escola de Barcelona*, all become "uncompromising subjects of a generic cause" (218). This generic cause is, for the author, the point of "genuine novelty", the rupture with tradition to offer something completely groundbreaking. This is a contentious, even problematic point, for it does away with the problems that impact sexual dissidents and that are at the core of many of these life-writing works, even Vilaseca's *Els homes i els dies* itself.

It is important to emphasise the technological quality of diary writing in a Foucauldian sense as this in turn complicates Vilaseca's theory of the subject by bridging the gap between the universal and the particular. Indeed, using Vilaseca's diaries as a case study, it is possible to sketch an answer to the opposite question: how does the specific technique of diary writing provide a framework for both specific, real-life political action, maintaining the universalising appeal Vilaseca argued for? How can it manage to do that while honouring the abuse and discrimination openly queer authors and their works often suffer and without taking away from it?

Vilaseca's diaries can be read from the point of view of recent developments in what has been called "queer narrative theory", or queer structuralism (Bradway, 2021). In his essay titled "Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form",

Teagan Bradway (2021: 712) argues that “narrative affords important agencies for queerness”, so long as we posit a wider notion of the concept of “narrative”. Bradway puts the emphasis on the notion of “queer relationality” to “trace the shapes that queer belonging takes now” (714). Bradway thus aims to decentre presumptions of an antinarrative purpose in queer theory, as well as other types of prejudices, such as locating queerness “in the punctual shattering of sexual norms, which fails to countenance the queerness of mundane attachments” (714). Vilaseca’s *Els homes i els dies* does not involve any sort of antinarrative approach to life-writing; indeed, it is a chronological diary. It is a “straight” narration of Vilaseca’s life. Yet, paraphrasing Bradway, it is full of intersubjective forms, full of other voices, bodies, and desires that do not lead to a neat resolution, but rather present an ambivalent result (Bradway, 2021). For example, one of the key events in Vilaseca’s life is his relationship with Josh. On 19 March 1990, in Barcelona, Vilaseca (2021: 63) writes: “Acabo de trucar al Josh i m’ha sortit el contestador una altra vegada. Li volia dir que l’estimo, que l’accepto com és, que no em deixi, que vull que continuem...”. This example is paradigmatic of Vilaseca’s relationship with Josh, as the author never quite managed to communicate (in the widest sense of the word) successfully with him. What is key for the queerness of this narrative, though, is that this miscommunication shows the reader mundane, queer attachments. Beyond any teleological aim (and as analysed above, there is some of that in Vilaseca’s prologue), Vilaseca’s *Els homes i els dies* exemplify one of many ways “the affective and social agencies that narrative extends to queer belonging”, moving away from the mere idea of queerness as a narrative shattering approach, and focusing on the importance of queer kinship (Bradway, 2021: 724). David Vilaseca’s diaries show how family, friends and queer kinship are at the centre of queerness in Spanish life-writing.

Kinship is reflected, for example, in Vilaseca’s references to other queer authors of life-writing. In July 1998, a year after the previous diary entry, Vilaseca (2021: 407) reflects on Jaime Gil de Biedma’s idea that writing a diary has the purpose of making events happen. At this point, Vilaseca was immersed in studying Gil de Biedma’s *Diario del artista enfermo*. The latter clarifies that through diary writing, any author is forced to make decisions that morally and intellectually they think are good for themselves. Vilaseca takes this notion of diary writing further, saying that it is exactly that characteristic of making things happen that this type of creation has in common with psychoanalysis. In other words, both the process of psychoanalysis and of diary writing are understood by the author as activities that change lives through bringing on events. Gil de Biedma, however, did not just stop there. For this author, writing diaries was indeed about making things happen, but also about practising his writing craft and, quite importantly, as “un instrumento de control de mí mismo, un modo de ponerme un poco en orden y también de moverme hacia actitudes que por imperativos de orden intelectual o moral creo

que debo adoptar” (Gil de Biedma, 2017: 153). For Gil de Biedma the main point of writing a diary is to use it as a moral and intellectual tool. It is about bringing change, but a specific type of change that takes a moral stance.

David Vilaseca combines this moral, event-inducing concept of the diary with another notion, taken from Josep Pla’s diaries, of connecting with the space where diary writing happens, in his case London or Barcelona, mainly. For example, the different relationships he establishes with other men from Barcelona, London, the USA are conditioned by distance or its lack, all of which is expressed in the diary. As the days pass, the reader follows Vilaseca’s growth through the analysis, the spaces, the places and the distances. Life’s “contingencies”, in Vilaseca’s (2021: 433) words, are just random manifestations, in themselves insignificant, but which can be made sense of in the context and location of the author’s life narrative.

## Conclusion: queering diary writing

This essay started with a reflection on the importance of diary writing as a Foucauldian technology of the self. Whilst diaries can be understood as a device to build the self, they are also located at a crossroads between the public and the private. These ideas converse with Vilaseca’s own notions about subjectivity and life-writing, which lead to the idea of a queer desire for the Real. This desire for the Real is necessarily connected to the material situations of the author *qua* gay person, but also to a subjective position. The subjective position of break with tradition and embodiment of a certain radical break with the past is, however, deeply connected to a sense of life narrative. Indeed, that is what the technology of the diary allows for. What makes it queer, though, in the light of Bradway’s queer relationality and narrativity is the strong bound it has with kinship, with intertextuality and with other authors, as well as its lack of a clear teleology. In other words, Vilaseca’s queer aspect is sharing the Real of his subjectivity, eschewing closets, recognising its difficulties in their rawest form and narrating them in a way that avoids any easy resolution thereof. He posits a new self in the prologue, but actually he finishes the diary with the following assertion: “[T]inc la sensació que el cicle que ara conclou ha estat un llarg y penós parentesi que potser em calia viure a fi de poder tornar a ser aquell que era jo abans de l’arribada de la Internet” (Vilaseca, 2021: 744, emphasis mine).

In other words, the whole narrative’s only purpose is a return to the previous state, a way to keep the self in motion yet returning to the same place. Like a modern-day Penelope, David Vilaseca weaves a narrative of his own life to go back to the origin, undoing the whole process. Thus, Vilaseca shows how life, like sexuality, class, race, gender and other social constructs is twisted, queer, changing, provisional and always anchored in one’s recollection of the past.

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