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KILLING AND CONSUMING: THE REBIRTH OF DIONYSUS OR THE POETIC VOICE
OF LEOPOLDO MARÍA PANERO

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Sé más que un hombre
menos que una mujer
(Leopoldo María Panero,
El último hombre)

I would like to begin with some general biographical information about Leopoldo María Panero. Son of Felicidad Blanc and the poet Leopoldo Panero, Leopoldo María Panero was born in Madrid in 1948 and experienced a childhood defined by traditional family values. As a teenager, Panero would openly challenge the image of his father, becoming active in anti-Franco movements, such as the Communist Party and later on the Partido Obrero Revolucionario Trotskista (Blesa 11). Named by Josep María Castellet as the youngest of the *novisimos*, some general characteristics of Panero's poetry are the following: free verse (particularly in his earlier works); the use of other languages such as French, English, and Latin; and intertextuality. Leopoldo María Panero's life has been characterized by mental illness—although his biographer J. Benito Fernández doubts the genuineness of the poet's insanity—and alcohol abuse. Throughout the last thirty years, Panero has been in and out of various health institutions and currently resides in one of the Canary Islands. Nevertheless, he continues to write poetry.

In this study I will examine Leopoldo María Panero's reconceptualization of gendered identity as manifested through the male body in relation to mythical overtones present in the selection of poetry being analyzed. It argues that Panero's poetic voice can be considered that of a Dionysian figure due to the physical consumption and madness caused by his mother, to his capacity to "make people mad," and to his obsession with the consumption of others. Thus, Panero deconstructs the victim / abuser binary, as he embodies both the sacrifice and he who causes the suffering of others for the sake of self-preservation. Interestingly enough, the poet himself has made clear the parallel between the representation of his poetic subject as victim and his own familial experience as "the sacrificial lamb" (Blesa 16). But even more significant, by presenting a male being characterized by the aforementioned multiple subjectivities—a fragmented, irrational, vulnerable being—Panero disengages himself from the collective consciousness that informs / has informed his reality. A "son" of the Franco era (1939-75), Panero was indoctrinated in masculinism, an ideology that assumes a

fundamental difference between men and women, justifies and naturalizes male domination over women, and ultimately assumes heterosexuality as the norm. While the institutionalization and idealization of motherhood during the dictatorship is readily acknowledged, the fact that men were also subjected to the prescription of inflexible social roles encompassing particular familial, economic and leadership responsibilities is often overlooked.

But returning to the thesis at hand, I quote Lydia Feder, who in *Madness in Literature* states:

It is important to recall that Dionysus, the god known for his power to inflict madness on others, was himself once afflicted with madness by Hera [...]. As an infant, [...] he was torn to bits and consumed, but he is also, in one of his manifestations, [...] the "devourer of raw flesh" [...]. Dionysus' experience of the very madness he was to arouse in his victims, his endurance of and participation in cannibalism, [...] are a projection of his creators' conflicting instinctual drives on a being who is both subject to and master of these forces. (39-40)

Like Dionysus, one of the principal characteristics that defines Panero's poetic subject is his condition as victim of consumption. While Panero frequently presents himself as a Christ figure, a sacrifice of the "Father" (and taking into mind Spanish historical reality, one can assume that Panero is making reference to Franco), his most vivid and disturbing imagery is often related to his poetic subject's existence as the vulnerable prey of a maternal figure, primarily his very own mother. This detail strengthens the parallel between Panero and the ancient god; as Feder points out, in many of the Dionysian myths, mothers are those who fall victim to Dionysus, killing and consuming their very own offspring. Consider "Los pasos en el callejón sin salida" (originally published in *Narciso en el acorde de las flautas*, 1979): unable to escape the physical boundaries in which he finds himself—a dead-end street, or metaphorically, a tortuous existence whose harshness leaves permanent markings on his body—, not even sleep provides the subject solace. The use of a third person possessive adjective in reference to his own body's suffering reveals Panero's alienation from his own skin: *El suplicio de la noche y el suplicio del día / y mi cuerpo en potro exhibiendo su tortura / como una vanidad*" (*Poesía completa* 156). This image of a fragmented subject continues throughout the last stanza of the poem; here the poet declares that his anonymous body houses neither a mind nor a soul. Even more shocking is what he names as the principal cause of his suffering: the haunting presence of a bestial, bloodsucking woman—namely his mother—who is slowly draining him of life. Here, the maternal figure's penetration of the poetic subject, depicted by her piercing nails and mouth, and her dominant physical position emphasize Panero's entrapment:

Y avanzaré, avanzaré mi cuerpo
 sin inteligencia ni alma por la calle
 en donde nadie me conoce, andaré por allí
 contoneándome y hablando solo, sin ver
 que llevo una mujer sobre mi espalda
 con las uñas clavadas en mis hombros
 y mordiéndome el cuello ebria de mi sangre. (*Poesía completa* 156)

Ultimately, it is the overbearing presence of the mother that emasculates the poetic subject—both literally and figuratively (i.e. she haunts his mind), resulting in Panero's state of madness, or open frustration with his powerless phallus, symbolic of his lack of male authority. This idea is apparent in "El día en que se acaba la canción." In this poem, the poetic subject takes part in queer performance, parodying the mother-son relationship. He takes the role of the scornful mother, his penis being his impotent son: "aborreces al hijo colgando / como un aborto entre las piernas, balanceándose allí / como hilo que cuelga o telaraña" (*Last River Together* 17). Thus the *niño muerto* in Panero's poetry not only represents his impotent genitalia, his inability to be a "true man," but also his unrealized inner self as seen in "Mujeres venid a mí": "Mujeres venid a mí / tengo entre mis piernas al hijo que no nacerá jamás" (*El último hombre* 45). Also in "El noi del sucre":

Tengo un idiota dentro de mí que llora,
 que llora y que no sabe, y mira
 sólo la luz, la luz que no sabe.
 Tengo al niño, al niño bobo, como parado
 En Dios, en un dios que no sabe
 sino amar y llorar, llora por las noches
 por los niños, por los niños de falo (*Last River Together* 39)

Overall, the image of a god mourning the fate of all male children can be interpreted as Panero's acknowledgement of the high expectations placed on male gender by society.

One of the ways in which Panero's poetic subject deals with his suffering is by projecting his insanity onto the one he deems responsible for his misery. That is to say, as a Dionysian figure, he creates madness in others, particularly his mother. Thus, it can be argued that through the pen, Panero the poet regains some phallic power over the maternal figure by ultimately determining her image. Nevertheless, the poetic subject remains unable to escape his mother's torment as evidenced in "Ma mere" (originally published in *Narciso en el acorde de las flautas*, 1979). Here Panero deems his mother a Medusa reincarnate, befriender of scavengers, identifiable by the cackle of her laugh and her destructive gaze. While the poetic voice contemplates suicide, an action that completely negates his corporeal entity of any value, he stops to consider his mother's reaction to his death, revealing to

the reader her cruelty. Instead of coming to her son's aid, Panero imagines her indulging in voyeurism, passively witnessing the consumption of her son's fragmented body by the vultures and mocking heartlessly his fear of death:

Yo contemplaba, caído

mi cerebro

aplastado, pasto de serpientes, a vena

de las águilas,

pasto de serpientes

yo contemplaba mi cerebro para siempre aplastado

y mi madre reía, mi madre reía

viéndome hurgar con miedo en los depojos

de mi alma aún calientes

temblando siempre (*Los ojos de la escalera* 34)

The maternal figure as monster resurfaces in other poems, such as "M" (originally published in *Teoría*, 1973):

M

m. m. m

adre

de los dioses, sagrada noche

mirada que perfora, mirada que destruye. (*Poesía completa* 99)

By utilizing such imagery to represent the maternal figure, Panero openly refutes the culturally accepted notion of woman's natural capacity to nurture life; that is to say, the image of mother prevalent in Panero's poetry is not that of a life-giver but rather that of the archetypal figure of the "Terrible Mother," the devourer of children and the bearer of death. I quote from "De cómo Ezra Pound pasó a formar parte de los muertos, partiendo de mi vida, III": avanzará siempre, más allá de tus ojos, una mujer vestida / de azul como el cielo apagando / las luces que ella misma encendió (*El último hombre* 78). Thus the poetic subject of Panero freely divulges his vulnerable position in relation to his powerful mother, which from a psychoanalytic point of view, suggests an unsuccessful separation of the son from his mother, a notion that seems true to life for Panero. For example, Felicidad Blanc's frequent presence during her son's interviews, such as the one conducted by Eneko Fraile, and her tendency to interject her opinion when dissatisfied with her son's responses make evident her controlling nature.

Continuing with the notion of Panero as a Dionysian figure, the poetic subject's cannibalistic practices manifest in various poems, for example, "La oración." Here Panero is emphatic about his mother's active role in his adoption of such a behavior: it is because of her demands that he, merely an obedient child, consumes the masculinity, the genitalia, of a dead man, presumably his father. The use of the word *alimento* in relation to his sucking of the phallus suggests that the

poetic subject hopes to be nourished into a true man through the ingestion of the flesh of his father. Thus his state of insecurity about his manliness, his overall struggle with sexuality, is revealed and directly linked to the demands of the maternal figure. Panero emphasizes the mother's authoritative position mechanically by capitalizing the letter *m* in mother:

Y la Madre reprendió al niño, y dijo
 qué haces que no velas el cadáver
 y él puso su boca en aquel falo, y
 sorbió lentamente como de un alimento (*Last River Together* 46)

In "El lamento del vampiro" Panero's poetic subject incarnates a human/animal hybrid of the night that preys on innocent victims. Although he consumes their flesh, he still remains an invisible entity, lacking any true identity before his victims' gaze. That is to say, he is an anonym, a body unintelligible to and insignificant in society. I cite the poem:

Vosotros, todos vosotros, toda
 esa carne que en la calle
 se apila, sois
 para mi alimento,
 todos esos ojos
 cubiertos de legañas, como de quien no acaba
 jamás de despertar, como
 mirando sin ver [...]

.....
 sois para mi alimento, y el espanto
 profundo de tener como espejo
 único esos ojos de vidrio, esta niebla (*Last River Together* 14)

To conclude, I quote Feder's *Madness in Literature* once again:

The study of myths of madness as symbolic expressions of adaptive psychic mechanisms is especially relevant to current psychoanalytic interest [...]. The correspondences between such symptoms [...] obsessional guilt represented as an imagined pursuer, the fantasy of incorporation of a god—and the narrative structure of ancient myths of psychosis reveal a regression to earlier stages of psychic adaption. (37-38)

Leopoldo Maria Panero himself has equated the process of writing to a form of psychoanalysis. Moreover, in the poems analyzed in this study, his poetic voice's multiple subjectivities reflect those characteristic of a Dionysian figure, due to the experiences of physical consumption and madness at the hand of a maternal figure, the capacity to "make people mad" and the obsession with the devouring of others. By presenting such schizophrenic imagery, Panero openly refutes the image of man, what it means to be male as prescribed by masculinism. In doing so, he

demythifies woman's natural capacity to nurture. Overall, Panero's rupture of the mother / agent from the *patria*-son bond and the shattering of the male mold epitomize the detachment of the individual or his new sense of autonomy experienced after the death of the dictator.

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