Displacing the Father: 
Male Homosexual Desire and Identity 
in Cernuda's Later Love Poetry

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This article is part of a wider project which aims to introduce a range of new issues and theoretical perspectives into critical writing on Luis Cernuda's poetry. One of the main objectives of this project is to stimulate further analysis and a greater understanding of male homosexual desire and identity as they are represented in Cernuda's later poetry. In this article, I draw on Leo Bersani’s account of the modulation of sadism by masochism in male homosexual desire and argue that, in Cernuda's later love poetry, gay male identity is not fixed within the oppressively disciplinarian limitations of identity.

The analysis of gay male identity in Cernuda's later poetry has never, to my knowledge, begun with an account of male homosexual desire. Even when discussing the representation of homosexuality in Cernuda's poetry approvingly, critics have tended to display something of an aversion to their subject-matter. This aversion has taken the form of a concentration on the moral and political implications of the homosexuality portrayed in Cernuda's work. A recurrent element of critics' analyses of male homosexuality in Cernuda's work has been the claim, made most influentially by Octavio Paz, that homosexuality is about morality rather than desire for another man. According to this line of argument, male homosexuality is the effect, rather than the ground, of a political or moral situation. For Paz, "homosexualismo se vuelve sinónimo de libertad; el instinto no es un impulso ciego: es la crítica hecha acto. Todo, el cuerpo mismo, adquiere una coloración moral". 2 Similarly, Manuel Ramos Otero states that Cernuda's homosexuality, "más que pasión erótica, es concepción ética del mundo, producto directo de su marginación". 3 Even Patricia Corcoran Thomas's "working definition of gay sensibility" displays a similar aversion since it is based on the idea of "consciousness of oppression and marginality"! From a different perspective but with the same effect of diverting attention away from the analysis of homosexual desire, Derek Harris has argued that the "erotic concern of [Cernuda's] poems is, in fact, just
another vehicle for the analysis of his personality" and that Cernuda's "search for love" is "part of his struggle for self-affirmation". In contrast to these critics, I will use the fantasy of penetrative anal sex between men as a clear and appropriate dramatization of the interplay between sadism and masochism in gay male desire as it is represented in Cernuda's later poetry.

As will become apparent, a link is made in Cernuda's poetry between love, domination and submission, a link which could encourage a sadomasochistic reading. However, such a reading would overlook the masochistic shattering of the sadistic position evident in these poems. Although a sadomasochistic reading of Cernuda's later love poetry has never been proposed, many critics have analyzed these poems' view of love in terms both of the self's destruction and of its fulfillment. For example, José Luis Cano states that love is (or can be) "destrucción y muerte", Salvador Jiménez-Fajardo that love implies the "surrender of oneself", and Vicente Quirarte that love destroys the lover. These same critics also describe the effect of love in terms of self-realization or plenitude. According to Cano, love is also a moment of "gloria y éxtasis" (225) while Jiménez-Fajardo refers to love as "those instants of greatest self-realization" (97). For his part, Quirarte characterizes love as a moment in which "descubrimos a nosotros mismos" and in which we recover "la idea de totalidad, del ser único e indivisible que fuimos" (79). My argument is close to that of these critics since I establish a link between love and masochism which makes the former an experience of self-dissolution. However, I differ from these critics by arguing that masochism persists in and undermines the hyperbolic sense of self that they highlight. Although I emphasize the place of self-loss in male homosexual desire and identity, I do not view such loss as synonymous with the death of the self but, rather, with what Bersani calls the subject's "nonsuicidal disappearance" (99). By making the subject "unfindable as an object of discipline" (ibid.), such a disappearance may provide a means of specifying a male homosexual identity without fixing it within the "disciplinarian constraints of identity" (101).

In "The Gay Daddy", Bersani explores the modulation of sadism by masochism and, in a related move, seeks to reinstate the father as an object of male homosexual desire. Bersani argues that, by staging the "potential ecstasy in both a hyperbolic sense of self [sadism] and the self's renunciation of its claims on the world [masochism]" (95), sadomasochism raises questions about the link between pleasure and the exercise of power as well as inviting an analysis of the "defeat, or at least the modulation, of power by the very pleasure inherent in its exercise" (83). Ultimately, according to Bersani, sadomasochistic pleasures are derived from the structure of domination and subordination which organizes social relations even though they do not share that structure's oppressive intentionality (88). That is, sadomasochism imagines pleasure in a way which is "almost entirely defined by the dominant culture" (87) and does not challenge the structure of authority itself (88). Nevertheless, sadomasochism does chal-
The "hypocrisy of authority" (87) by revealing that the exercise of power is accompanied by an intense pleasure that "those who exercise power" (ibid.) usually deny. For Bersani, sadomasochism's greatest value lies in its demonstration that "human beings may be willing to give up control over their environment" (95). Such a willingness, Bersani argues, characterizes masochists who are defined by their "potentially dysfunctional rejection of pain" (94), that is, of the body's or ego's "protection against self-dissolution" (ibid.).

An important feature of sadomasochism that Bersani highlights is the reversibility of the participants' roles. One of the effects of this reversibility is the disruption of the "assignment of fixed positions of power and powerlessness" and the denaturalization of the link between power and gender or race (96). Role reversibility, according to Bersani, also allows us to speculate that "inherent in the very exercise of power is the temptation of its renunciation" (ibid.). It is as if, Bersani goes on, the "excitement of a hyperbolic self-assertion, of an unthwarted mastery over the world and, more precisely, brutalization of the other, were inseparable from an impulse of self-dissolution" (96) or "masochistic jouissance" (99) which could potentially modulate the sadistic exercise of power.

For Bersani, Freud's case-history of the Wolf Man offers one of psychoanalysis's "most morbid genealogies of homosexual desire" (108) as well as a form of resistance to the "violence and avidity for power" that inheres in all intimate dealings between human beings (ibid.). The resistance that Bersani has in mind is a resistance "in the Foucauldian sense", that is, a resistance that is produced from within the exercise of power itself (108). The Wolf Man case-history revolves around a scene of parental love-making that, on the basis of a dream his patient had at the age of four, Freud claims his patient witnessed at the age of one-and-a-half. According to Freud, this dream caused his patient to repress his desire for his father because it reminded/showed him that castration was the condition for realizing that desire (Bersani, 108-09). For Bersani, the strangest part of Freud's interpretation of the scene of parental coitus is that it corresponds neither to Freud's own construction of the scene nor to Freud's account of his patient's version of it (109). One example that Bersani gives of this non-correspondence is that, contrary to what one would expect given the castrating function Freud attributes to the boy's father (109), the boy does not have a terrified relation to him in his dream. Instead, according to Freud himself, "compassion for the father" was, "from the very beginning", part of the scene of parental coitus as both he and his patient reconstructed it (110). However, instead of acknowledging that his patient loves his father and does not perceive him as a threat, Freud insists on giving the father the "dubious privilege of exercising his castrating prerogative" (110), thereby confirming the "murderous" nature of relations among men (111).

Bersani picks up on Freud's comment that compassion for the father was part of the boy's primal scene and, disagreeing with Freud, argues that the young boy expressed his compassion by defecating (110). According to
Bersani, the boy’s compassion was motivated by his identification with his father's supposed loss of his penis inside his wife's body during love-making and his defecation was an attempt to compensate his father for that loss (ibid.). Bersani argues that, as a result of this compensatory gesture, the scene of parental love-making gives rise both to the threat of power (in the shape of the castrating father who forces the repression of his son's homosexual desire) and to the "transference" or "reciprocity" of power (ibid.). Whereas Freud describes the relation between father and son as one of permanent separation as a result of a "threat of violence that forces the repression of love" (112), Bersani rereads their relation as a "gentler exchange" (ibid.). In this exchange, the son's power consists of his ability to compensate his father for the supposed loss of his penis and is "improvised as a response to the vulnerability [signalled by that loss] inherent in the very position and exercise of power" (ibid.). Such vulnerability, Bersani makes clear, does not stem from the father's fear of castration but, rather, from the risk he takes in "merging with another, ... risking [his] own boundaries for the sake of self-dissolving extensions" (ibid.). In other words, the son's power lies in his ability to enable his father to experience (rather than deny) the pleasure of masochistic jouissance and, as a result, to abandon his position of sadistic authority. In this gentler relation, which is not sadomasochistic because it undermines the polarized structures of political oppression, the father's sadism is modulated by the masochistic pleasure to which he gains access through his son, a pleasure which enables the father to achieve the subject's "nonsuicidal disappearance" (Bersani, 99).

In my extension of Bersani's model of male homosexual desire to Cernuda's later poetry, I shall focus primarily on a number of poems in the series *Poemas para un cuerpo*, a series that Cernuda addressed to a former lover called Salvador. In the first poem of this series, "Salvador", Cernuda's "destino" (2) is "abolito" (3) and entirely dependent on his lover's actions since Cernuda is waiting for Salvador either to save or condemn him ("sálvale o condénale"; 1). Lines seven to nine, in which the speaker implores Salvador to condemn Cernuda, make it clear that masochism is synonymous with Cernuda's desire: the purpose of such condemnation is not to relieve Cernuda's pain but to release him so that he can repeat his present suffering in relation to another man ("para que a su deseo / Suceda otro tormento"; 8-9). The speaker's plea in lines four to five ("sálvale / De ti y de él"; my emphasis) posits Cernuda as a danger to himself and is further evidence that his desire is grounded in the masochist's "potentially dysfunctional rejection of pain" (Bersani, 94). In the same lines (4-5), the speaker also implores Salvador to save Cernuda. Salvador threatens Cernuda because he directs his sadism at him, a sadism which, together with his power over Cernuda's future (1-3), indicates that Salvador occupies the supposedly desexualized position of the castrating father. In "Salvador", therefore, the polarization of roles between the two men indicates the sadomasochistic nature of their relationship. As will become clear, Salvador would save Cernuda by sexualizing his own position, that is, by modulat-
ing his sadism through an identification with Cernuda's masochism. In turn, Cernuda's salvation from himself would mean his salvation from a masochism tied to the deadly social structure of domination and submission (Bersani, 97). As will become apparent, part of Cernuda's salvation involves his identification with the paternal/sadistic position, an identification which does not, however, lead him to abandon the pleasures of masochism.

In terms borrowed from Bersani's analysis of the Wolf Man case-history, Cernuda wants Salvador to feel compassion for him (to save him) and offers himself to Salvador as compensation for the vulnerability he would experience in responding compassionately to Cernuda. That is, Cernuda occupies the positions of the son in the Wolf Man case-history and of the insertee in Bersani’s account of homosexual desire. He offers himself to Salvador just as the insertee offers his penis to his lover as that "protectiveness" that helps "all human beings" to risk their "own boundaries for the sake of self-dissolving extensions" (Bersani, 112). At the same time, if Salvador responded compassionately to Cernuda, he would also place Cernuda in the paternal position and himself in the filial role. Consequently, in Cernuda and Salvador’s relationship, each man would act as both father and son for the other, each would provide the other with the protectiveness necessary to dissolve the boundaries of his self.

In "Precio de un cuerpo", Cernuda returns to the beginning of his relationship with Salvador and states that Salvador was unconscious of his sadistic effect on him, an unconsciousness in keeping with Salvador’s resistance, implied by his non-identification with Cernuda in "Salvador", to the pleasures of self-loss. In the opening lines of "Precio de un cuerpo", Cernuda writes that when a beautiful body such as Salvador’s "nos lleva / Tras de sí, él mismo no comprende" (2-3) and, at the end of the poem, that Salvador was "inconsciente" (21) of his effect on him. The violence involved in the arousal of Cernuda’s desire is made clear in the final stanza’s metaphor of Salvador ambushing or trapping the unwilling Cernuda, his prey ("inconsciente / De su propia celada, cobró la presa"; 21-22). The masochistic nature of Cernuda's desire is reiterated in the description of the price of being attacked by Salvador, of enjoying his beauty, as "este infierno de angustia y de deseo" (25). However, Cernuda's masochism is also interwoven with an identification with the father’s position. This is clear in his description of love as:

Esta humillante servidumbre,
Necesidad de gastar la ternura En
un ser que llenamos
Con nuestro pensamiento,
Vivo de nuestra vida. (6-10)

In these lines, love’s "humiliating servitude" speaks of Cernuda's masochism while, by claiming to infuse life into Salvador, Cernuda posits himself as god-like and, therefore, as occupying the paternal position. Consequently, Cernuda's desire is one in which sadistic identification and maso-
chistic pleasure are in a relation of continuous and reciprocal modification. 15

The defensiveness of the paternal position is clearly outlined in 'Divinidad celosa' 16 in which God is said to be jealous of the homosexual lovers because they are no longer alone:

El tiempo de amor nos vale
Toda una eternidad
Donde ya el hombre no va solo,
Y Dios celoso está. (5-8)

In these lines, God would like to be (but is not) the object of a man's affections. However, by not revealing how God reacts once He has separated the lovers, the speaker gives the impression that God's jealousy ends with their separation and that He does not seek to overcome his loneliness by becoming a lover himself:

Un día,
Temprano o tarde, Dios
Dispone que el amante deba
Renunciar a su amor. (9-12)

By insisting that "el amante" (11) give up his beloved, God can repress his jealousy and, as a result, his desire. God's punishing/castrating actions, therefore, are a defence against the appeal of homosexual desire, against the pleasure of self-loss experienced in desiring another man. Consequently, God's exercise of power is characterized by the unmodulated sadism of an unreconstructed father.

Nevertheless, in "El amante espera", when the men's relationship has finished, Cernuda appeals to God to act compassionately. 17 In the first stanza, Cernuda implores God to restore Salvador to him as He has done previously with other love-objects which he has lost (1-5). However, God's identification with the desexualized paternal position as judge/critic is clear from Cernuda's knowledge that, in asking God to return Salvador to him, "es pecado, / Ocasión de pecar lo que te pido" (11-12). While God's omnipotence is the obvious reason why He would be able to return Salvador to Cernuda, I want to propose a second reason: God would restore Salvador to Cernuda because He identifies with the son's position in the Wolf Man's primal scene, an identification that implies the modulation of His sadism. This identification and modulation are suggested by Cernuda's statement that God's "compasión" (7) would restore Salvador to him (6-9). This homosexual paternal identity is implied (God has helped Cernuda before) and foreshadowed (Cernuda hopes He will help him again) in this poem. It is also gestured towards when Cernuda explains that he is appealing to God because his relationship with Salvador exempts his past from criticism:

Por eso insisto aún, Señor, por eso vengo De
nuevo a ti, temiendo y aun seguro De
que si soy blasfemo, me perdones.
Devuélveme, Señor, lo que he perdido,
El solo ser por quien vivir deseo. (20-24)

In these lines, Cernuda's use of the conditional "si" (22) raises the possibility that male homosexual desire is not a sin/blasphemous and, therefore, gently weakens the link between God and the castrating father.

In contrast, as I have indicated, Cernuda and Salvador's relationship displaces the figure of the castrating father. Further evidence of this displacement is furnished by Cernuda's statement in "Viviendo sueños" that there is nothing in the world that is worth Salvador's presence (16-18), that Salvador is an object of great value for him. As will become apparent, this statement places Salvador in the son's position. In keeping with this, Cernuda identifies with the paternal position by claiming, as he did in "Precio de un cuerpo", that his thought brings Salvador to life or gives him existence ("tú no existes / Fuera de mi pensamiento"; 23-24). However, Cernuda's identification with the father saves him and is accompanied by life:

Pero de mí qué sería
Sin este pretexto tuyo
Que acompaña así la vida. (13-15)

These lines echo the speaker's claim in "Salvador" that Salvador could save Cernuda from a deadly masochistic identification. However, as the interweaving of the men's roles in their relationship suggests, Cernuda's salvation is not at the expense of Salvador's death. In their relationship, the men's identities are modified in opposing yet interrelated ways. On the one hand, Cernuda moves from a deadly identification with masochism to a sadistic identification which acknowledges the pleasures of masochism. On the other hand, Salvador's initial unconscious identification with sadism is modified by his identification with the son's position. The men's relationship, therefore, is characterized not only by a reversibility of roles between the two men but also, and simultaneously, by a combination of identifications within each man.

Just as Bersani described the relations between men outlined by his reading of the Wolf Man case-history as a gentler exchange, so, in "Salvador", the speaker states that Salvador's salvation of Cernuda would be accompanied by a reduction of violence, a dissolution of the boundaries between the two men ("la violencia / De no ser uno en ti, aquíétala"; 5-6). Similarly, in "Un hombre con su amor", the men's sexual contact, while not penetrative, is described as the experience of peace ("paz"; 6) and is simultaneous with Cernuda's enjoyment of the masochistic pleasures of self-shattering ("olvidado / En ti"; 6-7). That such self-oblivion represents the modulation of Cernuda's paternal identification is suggested in the following lines:

En tregua con la vida,
No saber, querer nada, Ni
esperar: tu presencia Y mi
amor. Eso basta.
Tú y mi amor, mientras miro
Dormir tu cuerpo cuando
Amanece. Así miro
Un dios lo que ha creado.
Mas mi amor nada puede
Sin que tu cuerpo acceda:
Él sólo informa un mito
En tu hermosa materia. (9-20)

These lines make clear that Cernuda's love is a paternal love (15-16) which contains within itself its own modulation through self-shattering (9-12) and which cannot be realized without Salvador's body (17-20).

According to Cernuda, the peace of self-dissolution creates an unrepayable debt between him and Salvador's body: if the accounts were settled between them, Cernuda writes, "aún tendría / Con tu cuerpo una deuda“ (3-4) since the peace of self-dissolution is priceless:

Pues ¿quién pondría precio
A esta paz, olvidado
En ti, que al fin conocen
Mis labios por tus labios? (5-8)

In these lines, in the light of Bersani's argument that the son’s feces are a gift with which he attempts to compensate his father (110), Cernuda reminds us that he cannot enjoy the invaluable experience of self-shattering without Salvador's body/penis. In this scenario, value has been transferred from Salvador's body to Cernuda's experience given that the valuable object or gift is no longer Salvador's body/penis (as it was in lines sixteen to eighteen of "Viviendo sueños") but the experience which Cernuda has by virtue of it. Nevertheless, despite this transfer, Cernuda's identification with the son's position is maintained because value is involved in both cases. Consequently, Cernuda modulates his identification with the father's sadism by identifying with Salvador's compassionate self-offering.

Cernuda describes his relationship with Salvador ("esta dicha"; 17) as follows:

Tantos años vividos
En soledad y hastío, en hastío y pobreza,
Trajeron tras de ellos esta dicha, Tan
honda para mi, que así ya puedo Justificar
con ella lo pasado. (15-19)

These lines suggest that Cernuda's relationship with Salvador brought him companionship and wealth and exempted his past from criticism. In an echo of "Un hombre con su amor", the wealth which Cernuda feels with Salvador is a sign of his identification with the son's position. Therefore, in as much as it justifies his previous existence, Cernuda's relationship with Salvador reworks the former's paternal identification by suspending its castrating/judgemental stance.

In this article, I have sought to show how penetrative sex between men
provides a good physical illustration of the dynamic of male homosexual identity and desire as they are represented in Cernuda’s later love poetry. In this poetry, each partner in the sexual exchange, through his identification with the other, enjoys and reworks the pleasures of both sadism and masochism in a way which takes those pleasures beyond their sadomasochistic polarization and creates a space for a new gay male identity and compassionate relations between men. In these new relations, gay male identity is represented as shattered, a shattering which testifies not to the destruction of male homosexuality but to the capacity of gay male desire to resist and thwart disciplinary attempts to fix identity.

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NOTES


7. Part of Philip Silver's argument is that love is linked with the ecstatic/transcendental realization and completion of the self. See, "Et in Arcadia Ego": A Study of the Poetry of Luis Cernuda (London: Tamesis Books, 1965) 87-123. In addition, one strand of Harris’s argument is that, for Cernuda, love is a "form of self-fulfillment" (120; see also 137-47).


10. One form that the boy's compassion took after the dream was his attempt to distinguish his father from the "cruel and punishing Father of Christianity" (Bersani, 109). For Bersani, the boy's compassion is one of the "remarkably tender paternal feelings" (ibid.) that he felt towards his father.


12. The link between masochism and desire is also clear in "Amor en música" (Cernuda, 464-65) in which "gozo" and "pena" are said to "melt" in love (27-28). For other readings of this poem, see C.P. Otero, "La tercera salida de La realidad y el deseo," Letras: I (London: Tamesis Books, 1966) 150-75 (165 and 171); Harris, 139; and Ángel Sahuquillo, Federico García Lorca y la cultura de la homosexualidad masculina: Lorca, Dalí, Cernuda, Gil-Albert, Prados y la voz silenciada del amor homosexual (Alicante: Diputación de Alicante, 1991) 339-41.

13. Paradoxically, even Salvador's condemnation of Cernuda would be a compassionate act since it would imply his (albeit momentary) acknowledgement of or identification with Cernuda's suffering. Similarly, Jiménez-Fajardo has argued that the "mere recognition of love in the lover [Cernuda] by the beloved [Salvador] is salvation from indifference" (126).

14. Cernuda, 482-483. For other readings of this poem, see Otero, 169 and 170; Harris, 143; and Sahuquillo, 224-25.

15. Lines three to thirteen of "De dónde vienes" (Cernuda, 477-78) provide a further example of Cernuda's identification with the paternal position. For other readings of this poem, see Silver, 44-45; Harris, 141 and 142-43; and Jiménez-Fajardo, 128.

16. Cernuda, 483-484. For other readings of this poem, see Silver, 122; Otero, 16768; and Jiménez-Fajardo, 130.

17. Cernuda, 473-474. For other readings of this poem, see Harris, 83; and Thomas, 187-88.

18. Cernuda, 476-477. For other readings of this poem, see Jiménez-Fajardo, 128; and Luis Maristany, "La realidad y el deseo": Luis Cernuda (Barcelona: Laia, 1982) 8687.

19. Cernuda, 484-485. For other readings of this poem, see Silver, 122; Harris, 14445; Jenaro Talens, El espacio y las máscaras: Introducción a la lectura de Cernuda (Barcelona: Argumentos, 1975) 138-39, 279-80, and 281; and Sahuquillo, 224-25.