Becoming Casal: José Manuel Poveda’s “Canto élego” and “Para una lectura de las Rimas de Julián del Casal”

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In a letter to Regino E. Boti in 1908, the Cuban poet José Manuel Poveda confesses: “Santiago es un medio completamente estéril para las letras. Créame esto [...] me ataca los nervios y me da ganas de emigrar. Por lo menos emigrar intelectualmente” (Epistolario 57). Poveda’s compulsion to emigrate is understandable given the literary and political inertia of Republican Cuba (1902-1932). Though he doesn’t physically leave the island, Poveda does “emigrate intellectually,” writing the poems from his first and only book, Versos precursores (1917), on the pages inexplicably left blank in an edition of Julián del Casal’s Hojas al viento (1890). For Francisco Morán, who relays this anecdote in his Julián del Casal o los pliegues del deseo (2012), the idea of Poveda, pen in hand, “leaning over Casal,” epitomizes the intensity of Casal’s legacy in the 20th century (32-35). I think that it also embodies the central value of Poveda’s poetic mission. Apart from the many letters and essays that Poveda writes about restoring Cuba’s literary

1. The best introduction to Poveda’s life and work is Alberto Rocasolano’s El último de los raros. See also Estènger, Le Corre, Poesía hispanoamericana posmodernista, and Sergio Chaple, Epistolario Boti-Poveda.
2. For a comprehensive anthology of Casal’s critical reception from the 1890s to the 1990s, see Morán, comp., Julián del Casal: In Memoriam.
tradition in Casal’s name, he memorializes Casal in two texts that establish his poetic ethos as transit: “Julián del Casal. Canto élego” and “Para la lectura de las Rimas de Julián del Casal” (1913). Here, Poveda presents Casal as a wanderer, emblematic of a poetics that crosses spatial and temporal boundaries, bringing movement to an atmosphere that Poveda describes as “stagnant,” “intransigent” and “asphyxiating” both because of the weight of US imperialism and the lack of literary focus during the first decades of the 20th century (*Prosa* 2: 20, 74, 116, 201; *Órbita* 490). In his influential “Notas sobre el canon” (2003), Jorge Luis Arcos recognizes Poveda’s dialogue with Casal as a significant moment of “canonical awareness” (42). In this essay, I argue that Casal’s itinerancy is the basis on which Poveda configures his poetic legacy and imagines Cuba’s literary future.

Poveda’s gesture is controversial since to follow Casal, whose aesthetic is informed by French literary movements, is to deviate from a national ethic grounded in 19th century patriotic ideals and José Martí’s symbolic meaning. As Morán has shown, Martí was institutionalized as the emblem of national self-realization by mid-century intellectuals like Fina García Marruz and Cintio Vitier while Casal came to embody what is foreign, distant and “other” to the Cuban experience (Julián 15-17, 45). This inverse reasoning leads Enrique Sainz to ask, “why Casal and not Martí or both?” (19), and Alberto Rocasolano, the top Poveda scholar in Cuba, to speculate that “[d]e haber sido Martí en lugar de Casal, nuestra poesía se hubiera puesto a la cabeza de la lírica en Hispanoamérica” (*Órbita* 50). Rocasolano’s statement reflects the way that Martí holds over Cuba’s poetic canon: Poveda’s choice of precursor is a misstep that effectively diverts the course of Cuban literary history. Therefore, it is not surprising that Rocasolano attenuates Casal’s influence on Poveda rather than exploring it further: “Sin embargo, la cuantía de la deuda con Casal es relativa. Lo que éste puede ofrecerle, Poveda pudo hallarlo por su cuenta en las mismas fuentes en que bebió el poeta de *Bustos y Rimas*” (*El último* 78). An implication of Rocasolano’s statement is that Casal is a derivative poet and therefore an ancillary figure in the poetic canon vis-à-vis Martí.

A similar rhetoric characterizes Duanel Díaz’s more recent essays, “Julián del Casal y su destino ejemplar” (2003) and “Bloom, las tareas de la crítica cubana y el debate del canon cubensis” (2004). While Díaz acknowledges Casal’s influence on later generations, linking Poveda’s elegy, José Lezama Lima’s “Oda a Julián del Casal” and Virgilio Piñera’s “Naturalmente, en 1930” as programmatic texts that configure Casal as a martyr of poetry, he dismisses Casal’s centrality. The critic grants Casal a “place of honor” as the patron saint of the poetic profession in Cuba, but challenges Anton Arrufat’s claim that Casal is Cuba’s first modern poet, an honor that belongs to Martí, whose *Ismaelillo*, according to Díaz, eclipses Casal’s complete work (“Julián”).

Díaz’s analysis of Poveda’s elegy is circumscribed by his conviction that Casal, despite his influence on 20th century poets like Poveda, Lezama Lima and Piñera, is not original. This view contrasts with Arco’s remarks in “Nota sobre el canon” (2003), published the same year: “la asunción de Casal por Botí y Poveda fue trágica, pues más allá de sus calidades innegables, ninguno pudo ir más allá de su poderoso precursor” (42-43). Here, Poveda’s inability to “overcome his precursor” is an affirmation of Casal’s innovativeness. Arcos’s broader claim that Casal is Cuba’s paradigmatic poet precipitates a rebuttal from Díaz in “Bloom, las tareas de la crítica cubana y el debate del canon cubensis” (2004) (“Notas” 43). It is curious that Díaz, who critiques the applicability of Bloom’s theory of poetic influence in Cuba, invokes the Yale scholar in order to make his own determinations about the canon:

3. On the independence process and Republican politics in Cuba, see Louis A. Pérez, *Between Reform and Revolution*. On Poveda’s critique of mainstream nationalism and his itinerant concept of national identity which is informed by Casal’s legacy, see Theumer, *Nomadic Identity and lo cubano in José Manuel Poveda*, and “El alma cubana de José Manuel Poveda.”

4. The continuity between Poveda and Lezama Lima’s recuperation of Casal surrounding the concepts of martyrdom and itinerancy invites further research. See Ruiz Barrionuevo who interprets Casal’s sickness as “a curse that consecrates him as poet-elect” in her reading of Lezama Lima’s "Oda a Julián del Casal" (51). See also Jorge Luis Arcos, “Sobre,” p. 57 and Brioso.
¿Es Casal el centro del canon? Creo que no. No si con Bloom aceptamos la extrañeza y la originalidad como medida de lo canónico. Pues está fuera de discusión la mayor jerarquía de Martí. El autor de Versos libres es un poeta primigenio; el de Nieve es un poeta derivado. Mientras que Casal es uno más entre los poetas de la primera hornada del modernismo hispanoamericano, Martí constituye una de sus cumbres” (“Bloom”).

Díaz takes issue with Arcos’s thinking that those poets who most influence the later generation are canonical. Accordingly, he rationalizes Casal’s influence by claiming that he is easier to imitate because he is derivative, making his influence more “perceptible.” Inversely, Martí, being more original, and therefore more difficult to imitate, boasts fewer successors (“Bloom”). Differentiating between influence and originality in this way allows Díaz to establish a vertical hierarchy in which Martí is “one of the summits” of Spanish American modernismo and Casal is unremarkable. In other words, Díaz offsets Poveda’s (and also Lezama Lima’s and Piñera’s) canonizing gesture in order to hold space for Martí, ratifying his exclusive status. Invoking the Casal-Martí polemic, Díaz also prompts Arcos, in “Sobre el canon. Da capo” (2005), to nuance his claims regarding Casal’s poetic authority:

Yo mismo he aventurado, acaso con exagerado énfasis, como me advierte Duanel Díaz, que Casal ocupa, en cierto modo, el centro del canon poético. Mi afirmación se basa en una constatación práctica: el enorme influjo que ha ejercido su obra y sobre todo su imagen, su mito, su pathos, en sucesivas generaciones. Sé que su obra escrita no puede compararse con el verbo del Martí de Diario de Cabo haitiano a Dos Ríos, o con el de las crónicas norteamericanas” (59).

Casal’s influence is practical, Martí’s is biblical. In both Arcos’s and Díaz’s readings, the question of Casal’s hierarchy relative to Martí (to different degrees, framed by Bloom) displaces the matter of what Casal meant to Poveda.

As it happens, an antagonistic reading of the two 19th century poets is inconsistent with Poveda’s own attitude toward his poetic ancestors since he did not see Casal and Martí as adversaries (Prosa 2: 173). On the contrary, Poveda’s writing on 19th century literature establishes their spiritual kinship as exiles in the literal sense for Martí who lived most of his adult life outside of Cuba and in the symbolic sense for Casal who was essentially exiled by his critics5. My argument is not directly informed by Bloom, but my sense is that Poveda’s recuperation of Casal, which involves the intersection of multiple texts and writers, questions the values of ascendancy and vertical hierarchy that underwrite Bloom’s theory of poetic influence, as my analysis will demonstrate. In what follows, I take a closer look at Poveda’s elegy and his essay on Casal’s Rimas in order to address the question that remains unanswered by Rocosolano, Díaz and Arcos: why Casal?

The answer lies in “Julián del Casal. Canto élego,” which immortalizes Casal as an accrued but also an itinerant poet, a correlation that Díaz overlooks. As noted by Díaz, Poveda represents Casal as a poet cursed by Saturn, an allusion he traces to Casal’s translation of “Los beneficios de la luna” by the French poet Charles Baudelaire. The prose-poem allegorizes the gift and burden of poetic genius, leading Díaz to interpret Saturn’s curse as a pact that reflects Poveda’s own destiny as a poet-elect. This destiny is tragic for the precursor and descendent since according to Díaz, “Casal’s death is the climactic moment of the poem” (“Julián”). Díaz understands Casal’s martyrdom as annihilating, a fate that also reflects his
literary obsolescence. Martí transcends while Casal suffers, dies, but cannot rise again, so that his “exemplary destiny” turns out to be death by poetry, allowing Martí to dominate the national canon. However, the elegy begins and ends with an apostrophe that represents Casal’s final departure as an intransitive process, inviting another interpretation:

Grave campanero, nocturno mastín funerario
que atisbas el Tránsito al brillo de tu lampadario,
y doblas tus dobles con lento ademán:
dime si le viste, y dime a qué obscura ribera
fue el dulce poeta precito en su marcha postrera,
Cerbero que espías a los que se van (231).

If to apostrophize is to “will a state of affairs” (cf. Culler), it is significant that the lyrical “1’s” of the elegy does not will a direct encounter with Casal. Instead, he addresses the watchman (“grave campanero”), represented through the metaphor of Cereberus, the mythical “hound of Hades” who guards the entrance to the Underworld. Against the detailed image of the guard whose role is emphasized through the numerous references to sight and illumination (“atisbas”, “cerbero que espías,” “al brillo de tu lampadario”), Casal is a “present absence,” registered indirectly as the object of the lyrical “1’s” imperatives (“dime si le viste, y dime a qué obscura ribera / fue”) and through the ambiguous noun phrase that expresses his fate, “el dulce poeta precito.” The *ubi sunt* motif draws attention to the transience of life indicating both brevity and passage (from the Latin *trans* meaning across or beyond and *ire* meaning to go). To further underline this point, the stanza is dominated by images of continuous movement – the guard’s slow patrol, the poet’s “march,” and the elevation of “Tránsito,” the only capitalized word in the stanza. These details conjure Casal as an accursed poet and martyr but also as a poet in motion, a circumstance reinforced by the elegy’s circular structure; the poem begins and ends with the same image of Casal, emphasizing the objectless nature of his passing and the infinity of the lyrical 1’s desire to search for him.

To a degree, this portrayal anticipates Dulce María Loynaz who will affirm in “Ausencia y presencia de Julián del Casal” (1956) that “to be absent is consubstantial with Casal’s nature,” a circumstance she interprets also as a kind of martyrdom: “Él no quisiera ser así, él sufre de serlo” (*In Memoriam* 89). Similarly, Fina García Marruz infers that Casal’s perpetual departure expresses a “taciturn desire for annihilation” (“La poesía” 108). If Loynaz and García Marruz understand Casal’s itinerancy as a state of purgatory to be overcome by finally “identifying himself” (Loynaz 89) or settling down, Poveda’s elegy deliberately leaves Casal’s absence unresolved; his perpetual transit is the condition of his survival.

Congruently, the apostrophe distorts the chronological arc of the remaining six stanzas that depict the stages of Casal’s life (cf. Culler 67): Casal at dawn, chiseling the verses of his Hojas al viento (vv. 19-20, p. 232); Casal writing Nieve as the snow falls in the afternoon (v. 25-26, p. 232); Casal by night, his star fading as Baudelaire and Satan preside over his funeral (v. 31, p. 232). In these verses, Casal’s “move from life to death” is as unalterable and inevitable as the move from day to night (cf. Culler 67). But since Casal’s lifespan is also framed by mirror images of his deferred departure, the crux of the elegy’s meaning is not Casal’s annihilation (cf. Díaz). As Johnathan Culler explains, the “tension between the narrative and apostrophe [is a] generative force behind a whole series of lyrics,” elegy being a prime example (Culler 67). This is so because apostrophes do not represent an experience but rather produce a fictive event through discourse, resisting the temporal attributes of narrative like sequentiality or causality (66-68). In other words, apostrophe overcomes loss by “displacing its irreversible structure” to a discursive time governed by poetic power (67). In this case, death is resignified as eternal transit.
through the poem’s cyclical structure and the lyrical “I”s” imperatives that defer and spatialize, but do not resolve, Casal’s absence (“dime adónde fue”). Since the lyrical “I” is destined to search for Casal (and this search will continue indefinitely), the elegy’s anagnorisis, or the revelation of the “true identity of the deceased poet and the speaker’s own situation,” hinges on Casal’s elusiveness and their reciprocal martyrdom as continuous movement (Findlay Potts 63, 37). In other words, through apostrophe, Poveda recognizes and embodies Casal’s itinerary as an essential aspect of Saturn’s curse, redefining the terms of his poetic genius and martyrdom.

The apostrophe also elucidates the depth of Poveda’s canonical awareness. While it is correct to say that “Poveda […] se ve en el espejo de Casal, y más allá, de Baudelaire” (Díaz, “Julián”), Poveda’s elegy to Casal suggests a complex, less linear poetic genealogy that reaches beyond the echo identified by Díaz. As Alberto Rocasolano observes in El último de los raras (1982), the elegy closely resembles Rubén Darío’s “Respónso” to the French poet, Paul Verlaine:

No hay duda de que el responso a “Verlaine” está cercanamente emparentado con el canto élécto a “Julíán del Casal.” […]. Es innegable que la manera de enfocar Poveda la personalidad de Casal se corresponde en gran medida con el procedimiento desarrollado por Darío, pero es natural que así suceda si tenemos en cuenta ciertas afinidades sicológicas comunes a Verlaine y Casal (73-4).

I agree with Rocasolano’s first statement, but a comparison of the poems’ first stanzas calls into question his subsequent claims that their likeness derives from the “psychological affinities” common to Verlaine and Casal, and that Poveda’s treatment of Casal’s personality “to a large extent” follows Darío’s process. Here are the poems:

Padre y maestro mágico, liróforo celeste
que al instrumento olímico y la siringa agreste
diste tu acento encantador;
¡Panida! ¡Pan tú mismo, que coros condujiste
hacia el propileo sacro que amaba tu alma triste,
al son del sistro y del tambor! (Darío, Prosas 141)

Grave campanero, nocturno mastín funerario
que atisbas el Tránsito al brillo de tu lampadario,
y doblas tus dobles con lento ademán:
dime si le viste, y dime a qué obscura ribera
fue el dulce poeta precito en su marcha postrera,
Cerbero que espiás a los que se van (Poveda, Obra 231).

Though structurally similar, the poems differ significantly in their portrayals of the deceased poets, the most evident contrast being the use of direct address to characterize Verlaine as “father,” “master,” and the pagan god, “Pan” (a satyr) in the “Respónso.” In this way, Darío’s lyrical “I” establishes a vertical relationship between himself and Verlaine also reflected in the ascending movement of the poem, which concludes with the following verses: “y el Sátiro contemple sobre un lejano monte / una cruz que se eleve cubriendo al horizonte / ¡y un resplandor sobre la cruz!” (Prosas 142). As Anderson-Imbert points out, the cross that symbolizes Verlaine’s salvation in the final stanza also entails Darío’s apotheosis (90). Poveda’s elegy deviates from Darío’s model in its indirect evocation of Casal with whom he does not establish a paternal relationship. More evidence of Poveda’s divergence from Darío’s pattern is the elegy’s setting in the Greek underworld, its circular trajectory, and, by extension, it’s refusal to settle the question of the ubi sunt (where is he who has gone before me?). Casal’s absence and his transience contradict the values of
presence and transcendence that characterize Dario’s response to Verlaine.

The dialogue between Poveda’s elegy and Dario’s response, however, invites a deeper analysis of Poveda’s canonical consciousness because both Dario and Verlaine author canons of misunderstood poets, Les poètes maudits (1884) and Los raros (1896), respectively. According to José María Martínez, Los raros establishes a vertical hierarchy through which Dario “anchors his own role in literary history” (82). Indeed, the title of Rocosolano’s own monograph, El último de los raros, suggests that Poveda sought a similar relationship of continuity with Dario. On the surface, the correspondence between the two poems establishes Poveda’s authority by analogy: Casal is to Verlaine as Poveda is to Dario. Diaz makes a similar point about Lezama Lima whose “Oda a Julián del Casal” mimics Shelley’s elegy to Keats, consecrating his precursor and himself (“Julián”). The fact that Les poètes maudits is also an antecedent text to Los raros, though, adds another layer to Poveda’s self-portrait: Poveda is mirroring himself in Casal, Dario and Verlaine. Rather than direct filiation with a single precursor, Poveda’s elegy is a gesture of affiliation with representative figures of Cuban, Latin American and French literary modernity (cf. Said 16). If we were to entertain a Bloomian reading of the elegy, it follows that the precursor with whom Poveda enters into an agonistic relationship “to clear imagivative space for himself” is Dario (Anxiety 5). Ironically, Poveda’s “misinterpretation” of Dario’s poem establishes his own poetic authority only to deflate it. “To swerve” means “to turn aside abruptly from a straight line or course” (cf. Bloom, Anxiety 85, my emphasis). What Poveda is turning away from is literally the principle of vertical inheritance that consecrates his poetic power. Thus, Poveda’s engagement with Dario through his elegy to Casal simultaneously legitimates and delegitimates Bloom’s theory.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that Dario himself identifies Casal with Verlaine in his critical prose (Morán, “Hugo” 481). In the letter he writes to Enrique Hernández Miyares in 1894, Dario affirms a propos Casal that “si hubiese sido francés, Verlaine le habría colocado entre sus ‘malditos’” (In Memoriam 30). In the same letter, Dario defines Casal as “an exotic being in our Spanish letters,” extrinsic to the culture of his birthplace where he “would live a life of torment and would always be foreign” (In Memoriam 29). As Antón Arrufat points out, “exotic” is the word most often used to “other” Casal (136). Dario’s letter inscribes Casal’s martyred and exiled identity, leading Francisco Morán to affirm that Dario’s persistent equation between the two poets is a way of inferring and displacing Casal’s sexual difference (“Hugo” 483). That the kinship between Verlaine and Casal is a function of their moral nonconformity is corroborated by Dario’s observation in “Fílmes habaneros. El poeta Julián del Casal” (1910) that Casal “could have been a saint” (martyred in the religious sense) had he not been corrupted by “the lessons of ‘pauvre Lelián’” (In Memoriam 44, cf. Morán, “Hugo” 483). According to Morán, these examples illustrate Dario’s equally ambiguous attitude toward “pauvre Lelián” and “pobre Casal,” which involves a combination of sympathy and distance: “el pobre es él, no yo; y el signo de su pobreza está inscrito en su diferencia” (Morán, “Hugo” 485, original emphasis). If Dario’s comparison of Casal and Verlaine in a way clarifies Rocosolano’s insinuation of the “psychological affinities” between the two poets, it does not explain Poveda’s representation of Casal in the elegy.

Poveda addresses the saturnine element that defines Casal’s martyrdom (and is not inherited from Dario’s “Responso”) in a 1913 essay: “Ya Verlaine habló de la vida precita de los que nacieron bajo el signo fatal de Saturno, y de la muerte de sus ideales por la lógica de una influencia maligna; bajo este terror nocturno y escondido han temblado casi todas las liras del fin de siglo” (Prosa 2: 283). These remarks echo Dario’s textual portrait of Verlaine in Los raros: “ya no padeces el mal de la vida,

7. Zanetti explores Dario’s oscillation between anchoring his project to an existing literary tradition and configuring a creative void from which to define himself as the sole father of a literature (19-21). Zanetti establishes a relationship of continuity between Dario and Martí, concluding that Martí is the “absent father” through which Dario builds his legacy (31). Analyzing the concepts of travel and translation, Caresani identifies a more horizontal principle of organization in Los raros, proposing that the book reflects a “crisis of origin” by “claiming a concept of language linked to the funereal, ghostly, and the systematic mistrust in presence or re-presentation” (10)
complicado en ti con la maligna influencia de Saturno” (Raros 53). Oscar Montero traces this reference to the transgressive sexuality underlying Verlaine’s Poèmes saturniens (1866) as well as Verlaine’s relationship with Arthur Rimbaud as a way of explaining Darío’s flight impulse (“Modernismo” 825): “Darío crea un sujeto que quiere señalar la misa de los elegidos, y los entendidos a la vez que se fuga con el aspaviento moralizante de un inspector de colegio que recoge un papel obsceno” (“Modernismo” 830). As regards Verlaine’s conflicting personality (sinner-saint), Poveda comes to a similar conclusion, remarking in “Acerca de Paul Verlaine” (1909): “Más lo cierto es que ante ese ‘poeta contradictorio’ siente la generalidad una admiración huraña” (Prosa 2: 240). If on the one hand Los raros informs Poveda’s critical understanding of fin de siècle literature (Prosa 2:263-64), the elegy’s outcome reflects a significant difference in Poveda’s interpretation of Saturn’s curse. Darío’s portrait begins by describing Verlaine’s death as a release from the physical pain of his illness and also Saturn’s influence, paralleling Verlaine’s salvation through his faith in god in the “Respuesto.” Conversely, Casal’s subsistence in the elegy depends on his condition as an accursed poet remaining unresolved. In claiming that Poveda emulates Darío in his representation of Casal’s personality, Rocosolano overlooks these intertextual detours and critical subtexts.

By presenting his precursor as “el poeta precito en su marcha postrerá” at the beginning and end of the elegy, Poveda emphasizes continuous transit as a central feature of the curse that connects Casal and Verlaine. This meaning is consistent with Verlaine’s prologue to Poèmes saturniens which shows that to be cursed by Saturn means not only to be exceptional (albeit bound for suffering) but also to be displaced: “Disturbed by their profound speech, the world / Exiles them, and they exile that by which they are exiled?” (11). In Verlaine’s poem, the movement of exile, originating with society’s judgment of the poet, becomes mutual and even necessary to the poetic process which is rendered metaphorically as a “slow march,” relating writing to wandering explicitly: “Because they have finally understood that loneliness suits their / slow march” (11). Poveda’s critical sketch of Edgar Allan Poe, the prince of the accursed poets, corroborates this symbiosis: “el dolor y la hostilidad del medio le hicieron vagabundo […] mala suerte llevaba en su enorme frente (a lo José Martí)” (Prosa 2: 173). Though Poveda does not mention Casal explicitly here, his description of Poe resembles Casal’s image in the elegy (“flamínea en su frente la livida luz de Saturno / rapsoda del propio relato fatal”), establishing Poe, Casal and Martí as spiritual brothers on the basis of their moving martyrdom which is also a double martyrdom, involving the curse bestowed by Saturn and the “fatal stigma” inflicted by society (Prosa 2: 172). If Darío’s Casal is an “exotic,” Poveda’s Casal is an exile (Fowler 156).

These resonances link Casal to a universal network of transient figures that is further illustrated by Poveda’s essays on 19th century Russian literature. Poveda points clearly to the Casalianism of Maxim Gorki’s vagabonds whom he describes as “hojas que el viento arranca de todos los árboles, y que luego el mismo viento hace rodar” (Prosa 2: 144). This allusion to Casal’s first book, Hojas al viento (1890) also underscores the relationship between wandering and writing since “hojas” is polisemous, meaning both pages and leaves. In the same essay, Poveda echoes Casal’s “Tristíssima nox,” in his approval of the active but objectless nature of the vagabond as a metaphor for the nomadic intellect which roves “mientras los demás dormitan o sololzan” (Prosa 2: 145). The lyrical “I” of Casal’s sonnet portrays the poetic process in terms of a similar restlessness: “Mientras del sueño bajo el firme amparo / Todo yace dormido en la penumbra, / Sólo mi pensamiento vela en calma” (Poesías 115). In connecting Casal to the “spirit of vagabondism” that characterizes Gorki’s heroes, Poveda presents his itinerancy as a productive response to the world weariness that “condemns the rest to inaction” but “operates in [the vagabond] as a driving force” (Prosa 2: 144). These intertextualities characterize Casal as the emblem of a poetics of transit that expresses
both a refusal to succumb to suffering and an alternative to contrived transcendence, at the same time configuring a system of poetic affiliation that incorporates Poveda’s own identity as a poet-critic. In “Para la lectura de los versos del autor” (1914), Poveda compares himself to the wandering apparitions “[que] llevan en la frente el sello que en mi propia frente grabó la extraña canción de cuna” (Prosa 1: 237).

Poveda’s “Proemio a las Rimas de Julián del Casal” (1912) similarly configures a “self-defining” poetic legacy through its “itinerant” description of Casal (cf. Martinez 82). Reminiscent of Darío’s portrayals in Los raros, the proemio is framed as a lecture meant to introduce (or re-introduce) Casal, a forgotten and misunderstood poet, to his reading public. It begins with Poveda exhibiting Casal’s book:

Entre mis dos manos exhibo la carátula, ahora más extraña que nunca y menos habitual para vuestros espíritus. Llena de polvo todavía, demasiado llena de polvo de tiniebla, levanto la máscara sobre vuestras frentes, como un divino símbolo destinado a abatirlas. Los lampadarios ágónicos, bajo la arcada, desde su mundo visionario podrán hacer visibles en la nobleza, los rasgos de esa fisonomía profunda. Ante todo, es sin pasiones. Nada grita, nada resuena en ella. Sus pliegues no son los del espanto ni de la cólera; tampoco son los del sobresalto drolático, explosivo por el ridículo, o la gracia hiriente. No hay nada brusco en ella, ni por el dolor ni por el gozo; no hay contrastes de luz y sombra, recios surcos negros y músculos tensos y brillosos, en el desarreglo de la carcajada o el alarido. Muy al contrario, cierta opacidad de bruma suaviza las líneas y pule el conjunto, le da reposo y decoro, lo viste de serenidad y lo enuelve en silencio. No hay sino un sobrio rictus para registrar el estado del alma. Debajo de las pupilas teñebrosas, las ojeras se hunden y ennegrecen; pliégame levemente la piel sobre las cejas, y la boca se contrae como para morder alguna cosa amarga que el paladar rechaza. Descúbirs conmigo la más pura máscara apolínea de la edad nueva, una extraña carátula de decadencia (Prosa 1: 233).

As Silvia Molloy explains in “La política de la pose,” “exhibir no solo es mostrar, es mostrar de tal manera que aquello que se muestra se vuelva más visible, se reconozca” (2). Here, the act of exhibiting the book sets in motion a paradoxical performance that, like the elegy, plays on Casal’s absence and elusiveness. In this long and circular passage, the emphasis on surfaces (carátula, máscara, fisonomía), the gradual anthropomorphism of the book jacket (“sus pliegues,” “pliégame levemente la piel”), and the superimposition of the poet’s face (“la más pura máscara apolínea) and the book’s cover (“una extraña carátula de decadencia”) overtake the objectives of “exhibiting” and “dis-covering” the poet or his book. Fittingly, Rimas is covered by a thick layer of dust (“demasiado lleno de polvo”), and Poveda muses that “una opacidad de bruma lo viste de serenidad y lo enuelve en silencio.” At the lexical level, Poveda mimics Darío’s descriptions of featured “raros” like Edgar Allan Poe (“el pliegue amargo de sus labios”), but at the symbolic level, his concern is not with sketching Casal’s “physical or psychological portrait” (Raros 28; Llopesa 53). The numerous negations that characterize Poveda’s semblance of Casal drive home this point (“es sin pasiones,” “nada grita,” “nada resuena,” “sus pliegues no son,” “no hay nada,” “no hay contrastes”). When Poveda finally settles on Casal’s face, it is the picture of equanimity: “No hay sino un sobrio rictus para registrar el estado del alma” (Prosa 1: 233). The dark circles under Casal’s eyes and his twisted mouth might disclose his emotional state, but Poveda doesn’t offer a diagnosis. In sketching the features of his subject, Poveda is deliberately vague, opting for pronouns that dislocate his portrayal from a stable referent (“en ella,” “le da,” “lo viste,” “lo vuelve”), oscillating between the inanimate “carátula” and more anthropomorphic “mask” and “physiognomy” throughout his description. Are we beholding the book or
the poet? Like Dario, Poveda deploys rhetorical maneuvers that disorient his readers, but these are not “textual precautions” to distance himself from Casal’s difference (cf. Morán, “Hugo” 486). Poveda presents his readers with the portrait of a mask and his portrait functions as a mask: “Descubrirás conmigo la más pura máscara apolínea de la edad nueva, una extraña carátula de decadencia” (Prosa 1: 233). The rhetoric of the proemio draws attention to the acts of covering and uncovering themselves so that Poveda’s semblance of Casal is an instance of “sympathetic recognition” through which Casal eludes critical scrutiny and religious intervention, reprising the same impulse played out in the elegy’s apostrophe (Molloy 3). The inverse of “fleeing” from Casal’s difference is to allow him to escape. In this way, Poveda’s itinerant semantics also simulates the “elusiveness” that validates Casal’s poetic modernity for Morán: “Podemos hablar de una política del yo casaliano articulado en pliegues y repliegues del sujeto, es decir, como una refutación de dejarse retratar o identificar” (Julián 34, 76).

In keeping with this idea, Poveda further foreclosures a clinical examination of Casal’s face by describing it as “hermetic.” Instead, the speaker declares that his poetry “represent[s] the greatest beauty of the greatest epochs” and shifts between Casal’s life and work, meditating not only on his verse but on his physical beauty as well: “Veis en ese rostro la expresión de serena angustia que debió ser en todo tiempo la auténtica de la Belleza: a igual distancia del dolor y el placer, una como voluptuosidad del sufrimiento. Poe, Silva, Casal: es ése el rostro hermético (Prosa 1: 233).” Poveda’s conflation of Edgar Allan Poe, José Asunción Silva and Casal in a single visage (“el rostro hermético”) complicates the relationship and inheritance between precursor and successor. To allow Casal to slide beneath masks and layered portraits, superimposing his image with Poe, Silva, Martí (and others), multiplies the creative possibilities of his poetic legacy, which shifts among Cuban, Latin American, North American, French and Russian literary traditions.

At the same time, Poveda’s intuition of the “voluptuosity of [Casal’s] suffering” eroticizes his martyrdom and transmits a wish for intimacy heightened by the fact that Poveda interchanges the poet and the book throughout his essay, so that he is effectively holding Casal’s face in his hands. Poveda’s words are an act of remembrance and reverence, and also a textual embrace that harks back to his “leaning over Casal,” writing his own verses in the blank pages of Casal’s book (cf. Morán 32-33). Indeed, writing as Casal and writing Casal, Poveda also embodies the “poetics of superimposition” that according to Anton Arrufat characterized Casal’s own practice of “reading, interpreting and understanding himself through literary, imaginary or historical figures” (134). To lean over Casal’s Hojas al viento is to “annull historical time” and commune with the departed poet (Arrufat 147).

In the conclusion of his proemio, Poveda negotiates a similar experience for his audience. As mentioned above, Poveda frames the proemio as an academic presentation and uses direct address to engage with his listeners. These techniques serve a purpose akin to the apostrophe in the elegy in that they produce a “discursive event” in which the audience might “discover” the absent poet (cf. Culler 67). The use of the future tense, the imperative mode and eventually the present tense serve to portray the imagined encounter with Casal as proximous, and even inevitable:

Comprendéis qué gritos de proscripción debió lanzar la vida contra tal espíritu. Os explicaréis, por otra parte, de qué elementos fueron haciendo cosa propia su emoción y su cogitación […]. Luego, os será fácil concebirle en cierta actitud tranquila — […]. Sospecho que ha de fascinaros este violín de sombra que vibra en el fondo de gran templo silente: estáis preparados para comprender lo excelsa de su naturaleza, lo
místico de sus voces espirituales, lo puro de sus ansias supraterrestres (Prosa 1: 234).

The speaker establishes Casal as a victim of social ostracism, a reality that demands understanding with empathy as denoted by the verbs “comprender” and “explicarse” (rae.es). In this way, Poveda’s essay reads as an epilogue to Manuel Márquez Sterling’s remarks in “El espíritu de Casal” (1902): “Un poeta como Casal era un exceso al que no resistíamos por falta de preparación; no nos era posible, tampoco, estimularle, y lentamente, como una luz que oscila y describe enigmas en la sombra, el poeta fue haciéndose exótico” (In Memoriam 42, cf. Morán, Julián 334-35). Just as Márquez Sterling imagines future scholars whose continued search for Casal will preserve his legacy, Poveda foretells a kind of critical reckoning in which Casal’s transfixed readers are prepared to understand him, performing Casal’s vindication in real time. In notable contrast to Dario’s portrayal of a repentant Verlaine, Poveda’s essay on Casal concludes with a rite of contrition demanding penitence from the audience, not the poet: “Y en la comunión sagrada del dolor, alma del mundo, inclinaréis las frentes en contrición, conmovidos por la divina voluptuosidad de la tristeza, con la fatiga de haber vivido mucho, con el ansia de soñar siempre” (Prosa 2: 234-35). To encounter Casal is to learn a lesson (cf. Morán).

Jorge Luis Arcos affirms that “lo casaliano es un tópico y más; una actitud, un pathos, una manera de vivir y de escribir, una cosmovisión inclusiva” (“Palabras” 104, original emphasis). I have argued that the intransitive nature of Casal’s departure in the elegy is crucial to understanding the way that Poveda identifies with his precursor and interprets his “exemplary destiny.” As opposed to an annihilating movement toward death, Poveda defines Casal’s poetic martyrdom in terms of a defiant and productive itinerancy, opening the way for a deeper analysis of his poetic legacy. By engaging Dario and Verlaine through his writing on Casal, Poveda concurrently explores alternative ways of reading the poète maudit, imagining the accursed poet as an exile, a vagabond, an always moving intellect whose transience points to a “network of solidarity” that is more horizontal than vertical (cf. Zanetti 22). On this basis, Poveda not only “relinks Cuba’s poetic tradition with contemporary aesthetic currents,” but also rethinks the parameters of that relationship (Arcos, “Palabras” 110). Poveda internalizes Casal’s itinerary suggesting that “to be and live as a poet in Cuba” is to be an intellectual emigrant (cf. Brioso). Writing his “precursory verses” in the blank pages of Casal’s book, Poveda “becomes” Casal and imagines Casal as becoming (Morán, Julián 57). The continuities between Poveda’s configuration of Casal’s legacy and his recuperation by later 20th century poets like Loynaz, Lezama Lima, and Piñera reflect the lucidity of Poveda’s vision, elevating him as a key voice in shaping Cuba’s poetic tradition. In this light, Poveda’s dialogue with Casal is not tragic but prescient.


