

Nomadic Identity and *lo cubano* in José Manuel Poveda

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José Manuel Poveda (1888-1926) is a contradictory figure in the Cuban literary canon. While he is praised for being the guardian of Cuban letters following the deaths of Julián del Casal and José Martí, Poveda is also censured for his pursuit of creative autonomy and his apparent detachment from immediate reality. For critics like Cintio Vitier, Poveda's "cult to the self" is at odds with the formation of a Cuban national conscience, however what it meant to be Cuban was one of Poveda's central concerns. Confronting the contradictions of the first Cuban Republic, Poveda is outspoken about the island's colonial heritage and the threat of U.S. imperialism, often citing the need to construct a sovereign national personality. Reading Poveda's *Versos precursores* (1917) in dialogue with his critical essays on Cuba's political situation and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85), this article proposes that Poveda's obsession with cultivating his artistic personality—one of the most recognized (and misunderstood) aspects of his poetics—is also an expression of his *cubanía*. Analyzing the recurrent theme of wandering as a metaphor for *becoming*, I argue that Poveda's concept of the "I" is itinerant rather than transcendent, involving not only individual but national identity. In this way, Poveda's nomadism also anticipates the migratory discourse of *cubanía* later developed by Fernando Ortiz, opening the way for a fresh reading of this neglected figure.

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La cultura de los meta-archipiélagos es un eterno retorno, un detour sin propósito o meta, un rodeo que no lleva a otro lugar que a sí mismo.

Antonio Benítez Rojo, *La isla que se repite*

What returns, what finally comes home to me, is my own self.
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In Cuba, transience precedes essence.
Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition*

José Manuel Poveda (1888-1926, b. Santiago) is not a forgotten poet in Cuba, but his canonicity is perplexing.² Cintio Vitier's reading of Poveda in *Lo cubano en la poesía* has largely set the tone for *povedian* criticism, and although Vitier insists that his aim is not to arrive at "absolute conclusions" with respect to *lo cubano*, his lectures establish a poetic genealogy that ultimately anathematizes Poveda (20). Vitier has trouble reconciling Poveda's "Cubanness" with his individualism, affirming that Poveda was "too obsessed with the aesthetics and metaphysics of the 'creative I, the absolute I' to be in touch with immediate reality" (337). But what it meant to be Cuban was one of Poveda's constant concerns. Writing during the early years of the first Cuban Republic, Poveda was outspoken about Cuba's colonial heritage and the threat of U.S. imperialism, frequently citing the need to construct an autochthonous and autonomous national personality. Although Poveda's civics and "cult to the self" have been interpreted as conflicting tendencies and indices of his

contradictory character, Poveda's concern with self-definition was deeply intertwined with the construction of a Cuban national identity. In other words, Poveda's preoccupation with cultivating his artistic personality—one of the most recognized (and misunderstood) aspects of his poetics—is also an expression of his *cubanía*.

Vitier largely bases his assessment on the preface to Poveda's only published book, *Versos precursores* (1917), in which Poveda admittedly adopts a self-aggrandizing tone: *Versos*, he affirms, showcases the trajectory of modern poetry and the pathway of the poet toward the "I" (*Obra poética* 187). Read in isolation, Poveda's preface might suggest a rising trajectory that culminates in a transcendent moment of self-realization. As my analysis will demonstrate, however, this thesis is undermined by the book's inaugural poem which leads to a decidedly more uncertain subtext surrounding self-definition. Reading *Versos precursores* in dialogue with Poveda's critical essays on Cuba's political situation, Nietzsche's philosophy and Russian literature opens the way for a more nuanced reading of Poveda's poetics of identity. Analyzing the recurrent theme of wandering as a metaphor for becoming, I argue that Poveda's concept of the "I" is processual and contingent rather than totalizing and metaphysical, and deeply intertwined with the formation of a Cuban national conscience. In this way, my essay also suggests a continuity between Poveda's project and the "migratory" nature of later twentieth-century discourse of Cuban identity.

What Vitier misses or misreads in his critique of Poveda's cult to the self is the link that Poveda establishes between the prerogative of individual and collective self-definition. Though the critic does

acknowledge that Poveda and Boti set out to “rescue the nation through poetry,” he judges their mission as ultimately unfulfilled because of their *yoísmo*: “se proponía[n] un rescate de la Nación a través de la poesía, un traslado de la finalidad histórica perdida, al mundo de la creación verbal autónoma. Mas para lograrlo le[s] faltó algo que no es la afirmación del yo [...]. Lo que les faltó fue una visión de la realidad y una incorporación de la cultura” (343). Poveda’s affirmation of the “I,” though, implies a sustained and acute view of Republican reality. The consolidation of the Cuban Republic in 1902 unfolded under U.S. military occupation, and the island found itself once again subjected to an imperial power, “divested of national sovereignty and self-determination” (Pérez 122). Poveda frequently maligns the fiction of Cuban independence, denouncing the Platt Amendment which has “placed the destiny of the Republic in foreign hands,” preventing Cuba from speaking in her own voice (“nuestra voz”) (*Órbita* 490-91). “Más que hacer la libertad de Cuba,” writes Poveda paraphrasing Antonio Maceo, a hero of the independence movement, “hay que hacer a Cuba” (*Prosa*, vol. 1, 161). Poveda critiques mainstream reformists precisely for neglecting the task of forming a “national personality” (160), and it is this imperative of nation-building that guides Poveda’s literary mission: “Somos ególatras, y debemos nuestra egolatría a la Patria, la consagramos en sacrificio, a la conciencia cubana. Hemos de colaborar en la forja del alma patria” (171).³ As reflected in these examples, the poet’s rhetoric of self-definition is not self-centered and may also act as a curative to the chief national ill: “El mal que mina nuestra existencia es la falta de personalidad” (“Derecho internacional,” *Órbita* 490). In fact, Poveda’s affirmation of the “I” is expressed as a kind of national *egolatría*, one that might redeem the ailing Republic: “Que la República emprenda el cultivo de su “yo,” que celebremos el culto del “yo” republicano” (221). Although Poveda’s *yoísmo* comes through as an aesthetic concern in the preface to his book, Poveda clearly situates his literary mission in the context of Republican politics and connects his *egolatría* explicitly to the formation of a national conscience.

Poveda’s nationalism is difficult to reconcile with the official discourse of *lo cubano*, however. Louis A. Pérez explains that writers struggling to come to terms with the contradiction between the patriotic ideals of the independence movement and Republican reality often turned to history and the legacy of nineteenth-century as the “basis for national fulfillment,” a prime example being the apotheosis of José Martí as the Apostle of Cuban independence (Pérez 161-2).⁴ Poveda, who is wary of mainstream nationalism for its “cult to the past” and “closed borders,” develops his own national conscience in dialogue with European texts and anchors his literary mission not to Martí, but to Julián del Casal.⁵ Poveda’s transgression is then not only that of self-absorption but also substitution. Vitier’s eighth lecture, “Casal como antítesis de Martí,” establishes a binary and hierarchical relationship between the ethical *modernismo* that Martí embodies and the aesthetic *modernismo* personified by Casal. In this way, Martí transcends the literary criteria of canon formation

and becomes synonymous with “national identity,” meaning that Casal is in conflict not only with an ethical *modernismo* but with the Cuban national discourse (Morán 24). Naming Casal and not Martí as the precursor to his project upsets the continuity of Vitier’s genealogy in *Lo cubano en la poesía* and worse: Poveda’s decision is tantamount to a refusal to “fulfill Cuba’s unfinished history,” leaving the nation incomplete (Pérez 157).

Making Martí the paragon of Cubanness can only produce one outcome: the demotion of those poets in whose works the “historical ideal” and “unifying center” that Martí comes to represent is fuzzy or absent (Vitier 343). For this reason, Rocasolano can only grant Poveda “partial”—not absolute—“insertion into Cuba’s national conscience” (*El último* 77).⁶ In fact, Rocasolano reads Poveda’s choice of precursor as a move that effectively diverts the course of Cuban literary history: “De haber sido Martí en lugar de Casal, nuestra poesía se hubiera puesto a la cabeza de la lírica en Hispanoamérica” (*Órbita* 50). Vitier and Rocasolano’s antithetical reading of Casal and Martí forecloses the possibility of analyzing Poveda’s contribution to a theory of Cuban identity on two counts. Choosing Casal not only threatens the “internal organicity of Vitier’s poetic family tree,” it also implies a concept of Cubanness that embraces centrifugal transit rather than centripetal transcendence (Morán 17).

Like Casal, Poveda’s identity is marked by a sense of itinerancy, a condition that comes through in his letters to Regino E. Boti and the wandering poetic figures that populate his only published book, *Versos precursores*. Born in Santiago, Poveda develops his literary mission from the provinces, and the many addresses recorded in his letters between 1907 and 1923 testify to Poveda’s uprooted state. During this time, the poet moved frequently between Oriente province and Havana to give lectures, promote his work and attend law school, but Poveda’s confessional letters also reveal another kind of displacement: “Santiago es un medio completamente esteril para las letras,” he writes in 1908, “Créame esto [...] me ataca los nervios y me da ganas de emigrar. Por lo menos emigrar intelectualmente” (*Epistolario* 57). Poveda’s compulsion to emigrate, even intellectually, is reminiscent of Casal whose gaze was also oriented outward, away from though not necessarily toward a place.⁷ Poveda admits in another letter: “Estoy viviendo una vida que me aleja de todo lo que más amo,” and the sense of distance and displacement that defines his life translates into the theoretical nomadism that, in my opinion, underlies the message of *Versos precursores* (*Epistolario* 236).

The poetic, literary and philosophical figures that Poveda most admires and frequently poeticizes are wanderers. As early as 1909, in an essay on Maxim Gorki, Poveda praises the “spirit of the vagabondism” that typifies the Russian writer’s heroes: the vagabond is uprooted (“desarraigado”), roams tirelessly, and does not yield in the face of hardship (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 144-45). The same freedom and stoicism that attract Poveda to the figure of the vagabond explain his interest in Friedrich Nietzsche’s itinerant prophet, Zarathustra. Poveda was familiar with *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85), and his 1909 chronicle, “Nietzsche,” is a partial translation of Zarathustra’s

famous parable, "On the Vision and the Riddle," in which Zarathustra is depicted as a traveler and poet, "extraño viajero" (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 153).⁸ Poveda affirms: "Yo no conozco una parábola más hermosa que ésa por medio de la que Zarathustra expresa la liberación del hastío, de la melancolía, del espíritu de la pesadez, que tan a menudo velan nuestros ojos y nos hacen ver sombrío el cielo, marchitas las hojas, triste y esteril la campiña, vacía y despreciable nuestra existencia" ("Nietzsche," *Prosa*, vol. 2, 154). Here, as in "Los vagabundos," Poveda finds in the wanderer's compulsion to roam a powerful and productive alternative to apathy: rather than evading his reality, the wanderer embodies "action" and a "refusal to capitulate" (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 145).⁹ Wandering in Nietzsche and Gorki, though, is not a purpose-driven movement; the freedom and strength of character that the vagabond and Zarathustra both embody derives from their ability to roam *without* a destination or finality to anchor them.

At first glance, aimless wandering might seem to contradict Poveda's goal-oriented discourse of an independent artistic and national personality. But Poveda's dialogue with Zarathustra, which centers on the parable that presents the eternal return and the fiction of intransience, reveals why wandering is an attractive theoretical option for the Cuban poet. In this way, my reading opens the way for a deeper understanding of Poveda's poetics of identity and for a reappraisal of his *Versos precursores*, which is as much a book of ideas as a recital of literary modernity (Poveda, "Nietzsche" 154). If Poveda's nomadism germinates in his reading of a foreign text, the translation of the itinerant figure to the streets of Havana in his important essay, "Elegía del retorno," is also an axis of Poveda's discourse of *cubanía*, which derives from the parallel created between the nomadic poetic subject and the island. Although pilgrimage is sometimes abstract in *Versos precursores*, intertextual dialogues opened with Poveda's essays surrounding the concept of wandering reinforce the connection between Poveda's nomadism and his national conscience, making it possible to read wandering as a redemptive strategy that involves the destiny of the poet and homeland.¹⁰

Entertaining this hypothesis requires first wading through the self-aggrandizing language of the preface to *Versos precursores*. Poveda presents his book as a kind of retrospective itinerary demonstrating the path taken toward the definitive modern poem and the poet's own becoming ("el camino hacia el yo") (*Obra* 187). Admittedly, Poveda's tendency to refer to himself in the third person as *Poeta* and *Autor* as well as his frequent recourse to the time-worn metaphors of ascent and high peaks make it difficult *not* to read self-actualization as a transcendent moment: "el Autor ascendió al sitio ansiado, la cima serena y luminosa desde la cual pudo decir palabras definitivas: se dispuso no ya a aprender del hombre un nuevo poema, sino de enseñarle el poema al hombre" (*Obra* 189). On the surface, the preface seems to support Vitier's claim that Poveda casts himself as the hero of a "vast, creative parable" removed from Cuba's historical and political circumstances (345). But in spite of the book's declared intent, *Versos precursores* undermines a transcendent teleology of the self. Poveda makes clear that these are

precursory verses revealing the pathway *toward* the self and not the self-proper (the truly creative work, he says, comes later). This exordium along with the decidedly uncertain ends of the book's inaugural poem and the first of a series of "wandering" texts, make it just as difficult to read the unity of Poveda's "I" in absolute terms.

In a move that harks back to the plot of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, the poetic subject of "Versos precursores" prepares to break a long silence and period of social isolation in order to impart his wisdom, but the poem that effectively sets Poveda's book in motion, inscribing wandering as a metaphor for poetic creation, also displaces any sense of purpose:

Pasos sobrios y tercios que avanzan callados
hacia fines sombríos, sin saber quizás
cual objeto le muestran los hados,
pero que en la alta noche marchan obstinados
por el gozo de andar no más (v. 6-10).

In fact, the parallel between wandering and composing verses is drawn on the basis of their uncertain ends. Just as forward motion is belied by the tendency to shroud the object of the poetic subject's journey in uncertainty ("fines sombríos," "sin saber [...] cual objeto"), the speaker's song is obscure and aimless: "y he de entonar el canto de abstruso motivo, aún cuando ignore con qué fin" (v. 29-30). The absence of finality that undermines the speaker's message in "Versos precursores" is reinforced throughout the book in poems intertextually linked by the leitmotifs of the pathway and wandering that together suggest a nomadic movement, a "going without destination" (Braidotti 58).¹¹ The poetic subject's formidable itinerary along dark, isolated paths does not lead to the "high peaks" prophesied in the preface. On the contrary, the path in "La senda sola" leads only to itself, becoming a symbol for the speaker's bleak introspection ("y vi la senda sola, desierta y en mutismo / perderse interminablemente en mi corazón"), and the lure of the suburban alley in "Refugio" is the intransitive movement it invites:

Mejor cuanto más sola la propecta
calleja, y mejor cuanto más obscura (v. 1-2).

vivir en un suburbio cuyo ingente
recinto misterioso solamente
tus pasos y los míos transitaran (v. 12-14).

In the end, Poveda's "wandering" poems record a retrograde movement that leads to "Canción de cuna," the lullaby that seals the poetic subject's fate: "Bien veis que es sin linde el confín./Prepare el pequeño su vida primero;/prepare, que luego el sendero/no tendrá fin (v. 5-8).¹²

Because Poveda places "Canción de cuna," the lullaby that pronounces the poetic subject's destiny to wander ceaselessly at the "end" of his series of wandering texts, the itinerary that leads from

"Versos precursores" to "Canción de cuna" is not linear or ascending but cyclical, compelling the subject to set out afresh on the path toward the "I." This pattern nuances the meaning of Poveda's precursory verses and also amends his promise of the "truly creative work" that follows them. Creative mastery and self-mastery are, in the end, not simply deferred but "performative illusions" that conceal a perpetually incomplete self (Braidotti 12). That is, deferral describes the condition of the poetic subject's existence and not the postponed consecration of his status as Author or Poet. By announcing the metaphors of the pathway and wandering that give coherence to *Versos precursores*, the preface effectively guides its readers to the book's far less certain subtext: *precursory* verses are the only kind there can be. This conclusion is inscribed in the book's very title: the Latin root *cursus* indicates movement while *versus*, the past participle of *vertere*, means *to turn* or *revolve* (Merriam-Webster). In this light, Poveda's tendency to refer to himself in the third person does not flaunt his poetic prowess so much as it conveys self-irony. Though these precursory verses undercut Poveda's prophesies of self-actualization, the absence of such an "end" should not be construed as a failure ("el descaecimiento de las fuerzas teleológicas de la nación" (Vitier 34)). The lesson of *Versos precursores* seems to be rather that self-actualization is not a transcendent moment but an ongoing and contingent process, and this lesson "transcends" Poveda's book.

"Canción de cuna," the poem that cements the poetic subject's destiny to wander, is also the axis of a number of intertextual dialogues that reinforce the link between the motif of wandering and Poveda's literary mission. In "Para la lectura de los versos del autor" (1914), Poveda refers to the roving poetic figures that populate his verses as ghosts and shadows that carry the same mark as their author: "y llevan en la frente el sello que en mi propia frente grabó la extraña canción de cuna: se crisparán salvajemente sobre el granito de las rutas, en insensata marcha hacia cumbres siderales" (*Prosa*, vol. 1, 237). Likewise, in "Viandantes en la noche," "La ruta," and "El destino," poems not included in *Versos precursores*, wandering is a fated action, sometimes equated with the process of self-definition rehearsed in Poveda's book. "El destino" specifically establishes this relationship, presenting a nomadic poetic subject who is compelled to wander by a lullaby:

Es el canto de cuna que mis pasos dirige,
la canción que mi angustia no ha saciado jamás;
es el canto de origen que, obstinado, me exige
ser aquel que yo debo, ser yo mismo y no más (v. 5-8).

In the eighth verse, the parallel structure of the two hemistiches equates the potential and the present self, "being who I ought" and "being myself" (who I am), an expression of Zarathustra's much-cited command to "become who you are" (*Zarathustra*, IV, 1 cited in Nehamas 172). Because, as Nehamas explains, you cannot *become* what you already are or already *be* what you may become,

Zarathustra's imperative and Poveda's verse assign an operational rather than an essential meaning to "being," conveying that "to be you" is to "be becoming" (191). These traces reinforce the message of Poveda's book and reveal that wandering is not an isolated metaphor but a determining principle of his poetics which posits the self as "essentially" incomplete.³³ In this context, the conflation of Poveda's "canción de cuna" with the nation's lullaby in "Guitarras campesinas" (1918) is especially significant for the parallel it draws between individual and national identity.

Poveda's chronicle reinforces that his search for personal originality is not only an individual or aesthetic pursuit but a broader creative imperative that involves Cuba's national destiny as well. At the rural home of Juan Gregorio and María Veneranda where friends gather to eat, sing and commiserate, Poveda is transported by the music of a rural guitarist, Pancho Montoya,³⁴ reflecting: "Aquel no era el canto de mi juventud [...], el canto de la victoria, el verso de libertad, el himno de alegría democrática y de fervor patriótico. No. Aquel canto [...], era la canción de cuna, la que escuché en mi infancia, la canción de la patria esclava, la del sacrificio sin esperanza" (*Órbita* 488). Here, as in *Versos precursores*, the lullaby signals a circular movement, but this time it is not only the artist but the homeland that is fated to return. Through Montoya's song, Poveda exposes the irony of Cuba's present circumstance. Montoya's lament does not evoke the "hymn of democratic joy and patriotic fervor" that defines Poveda's youth and coincides with Cuban independence but the lullaby from his infancy, which recalls the difficult pathway toward independence and the legacy of slavery (*Órbita* 487-8). In this way, Poveda draws a bitter parallel between Cuba's colonial past and its neo-colonial present, but by relating the stages of his personal growth to the stages of Cuba's national process, he also establishes an important link between his homeland and himself. Although wandering as a motif in *Versos precursores* takes the shape of an abstract, metaphorical movement, these intertextual dialogues rupture the "world of autonomous verbal creation," reinforcing the link between Poveda's nomadism and his concern with Cuba's construction of a national personality. Reading Poveda's famous essay, "Elegía del retorno" (1918), I will consider the extent to which the poet's nomadism begins to emerge as a redemptive strategy to be shared with his homeland.³⁵ More specifically, confronting the uncertain destiny of his own nation, I think that Poveda finds a productive response to his crisis of identity in Zarathustra's parable on the eternal return.

In "Elegía del retorno," the notion of "return" is polysemous: "Estoy de nuevo en La Habana," begins the essay, but the subject's first compulsion is to roam, supplanting the sense of "being" in (*estar en*) the city. To return is not only *to be in Havana again*, but to be restless, to recall, to *repeat*. This restlessness and repetition (*recorrer, recordar*) is reinforced grammatically through the use of the imperfect tense, suspending "arrival" or "completion" ("iba meditando"), and linking wandering and thinking as simultaneous and ongoing actions.³⁶ At first, the autobiographical subject's de-

spondent introspection seems to convey a sense of defeat which is experienced initially as a loss of voice but also as a sense of distance and alienation from his homeland, reprising the theme of spiritual exile so prevalent in Poveda's letters: "nunca mi país ha parecido tan ajeno a mí [...] Hoy me siento como si no existiera, y el dolor de Patria que sufro es el de no existir" (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 31). The inner exile that the speaker suffers is described hypothetically as a denial of existence, but the nation (*Patria*) is implicated in this suffering in a surprising way (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 31). That is, it is not only the feeling of estrangement *from* a place that causes the speaker's anguish, but the recognition that the nation (*Patria*) itself endures a kind of inner exile as a result of its colonial history.¹⁷ That this condition involves both the subject and homeland is reflected in the change from the first person singular ("Hoy me siento como si no existiera") to the first-person plural:

Estamos aherrojados por dobles cadenas. No somos independientes. No somos sino una factoría colonial, obligada a trabajar, y a dar su cosecha y su fruto, compelida por el látigo. Estamos desorganizados y envilecidos, como una mala mesnada: no podemos defendernos. Un soplo de dispersión ha barrido las conciencias, y todo cuanto había de dignidad, pureza y valentía en las conciencias; un soplo de disolución ha disgregado todas las energías creadoras del alma nacional. Somos la sombra de un pueblo, el sueño de una democracia, el ansia de una libertad. No existimos (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 32, my emphasis).

Although the experience of exile here does not involve physically leaving a place, the imperial presence of the United States certainly justifies the feeling of exile *within* a place; the loss of home is experienced as a negation of existence that is no longer individual and hypothetical ("me siento como si no existiera") but collective and actual: "No existimos" (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 32). In *The Dialectics of Exile* (2014), Sophia McClennen explains that "writing in exile is an act of self-recuperation and a simultaneous effort to construct an identity that struggles against extinction" (121). In this way, the very statement that denies the existence of the speaker and his homeland, can be read as an affirmation of their solidarity and a claim to identity, albeit an endangered one. McClennen affirms that writing becomes a mode of existence for the exile writer, and Poveda's chronicle, which is in a certain sense also a kind of exile writing, constructs a shared identity, one capable of overcoming even the most desperate of situations.

"Return" in Poveda's essay does not only mark Poveda's return to the city, it also signifies the nation's regression to a state of dependence, this time as a result of US imperialism. Poveda's essay does not paper over the "dispersion," "dissolution" and "disintegration" that define the Cuban national consciousness in 1918 with promises of fulfillment or dreams of distant cultures. In fact, the vocabulary that Poveda chooses to describe the island's neo-colonial

condition—"cadenas," "látigo," "noche de esclavitud"—faces up to a painful history and connects his elegy to Pancho Montoya's dirge in "Guitarras campesinas." Facing this national crisis of identity brings Poveda's autobiographical subject to the brink of surrender, but he hesitates before throwing his book into the rushing waters of a stream, concluding: "Sería inútil: no podría prescindir de mí mismo" (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 32). Instead of ditching the book—a gesture that might have cemented his defeat—the speaker instead "turns his back to the current and plunges down the narrowest and darkest path" of the city (32). This decision undermines Rocasolano's interpretation that Poveda "realized that the word, the essential weapon of the poet, was futile in a moment that demanded action" (*Órbita* 78).¹⁸ Abstaining from writing is represented as a form of self-denial that the speaker is unwilling to entertain: it would be futile to *stop* writing. Instead, writing is reclaimed as a tool of survival, the antidote to nonexistence. Poveda's autobiographical subject very clearly does not forswear the word, so his elegy is not sign of resignation but a mode of overcoming through writing, offsetting his rhetoric of despair:

¡Qué terrible elegía, Patria, qué terrible elegía del retorno! ¡Qué silencio de muerte; qué noche interminable, esta noche sin abrigo, sin canción, sin un grito ni un ensueño, esta noche de esclavitud, que parece como si no fuera a tener mañana! ¡Qué elegía, Patria, esta elegía del retorno, después del canto de triunfo y la loca aventura, esta elegía sin palabras, esta muda elegía, Patria, que el viento de la noche despliega, como un harapo, sobre nuestro infortunio" (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 33, original emphasis).

Referring to his lament as a "mute elegy," an "elegy without words," is ironic, coming as it does at the end of what may be one of Poveda's most important statements linking individual and national destiny. By fusing their crises of identity, the elegy shows that Poveda's desire for personality is not self-centered but interwoven with Cuba's national process, and this identification and empathy is emphasized with the apostrophe to "Patria" in the crescendo of the essay. Through the elegy, the speaker memorializes the shared experience of the loss of national sovereignty. In this way, the "elegiac creative process," as Claudio Guillén explains in his essay on exile and counter-exile, can be read as an "extended metaphor for the response of the poetic intelligence to the limits given or immediate realities around us" (820). That is, writing is not a passive stance or a vehicle of escape but form of action and civic engagement. This is not the voice of a writer who is "dehumanized and evaded" from his historical moment (Roa 34, cited in Saínz 20). This is the voice of a writer who has internalized his moment and merged his own voice with the "*vox patriae*" (Pérez Firmat 15). Writing ("componer versos") and wandering ("errar sin rumbo") are thus productive responses to the Republican crisis, the suburb a site of active creation rather than silence. The elegy's despondent tone notwithstanding,

in the end Poveda's autobiographical subject does not concede defeat but rather embraces the "freedom of an undecided fate" (cf. Ulfers and Cohen). Framed in this way, "Elegía" is not Poveda's swan song but an extension of the message of *Versos precursores* that self-definition is not the destination at the end of the path but a continually adjusting process.

The notion of return, then, takes on a further dimension, harking back to Zarathustra's teaching of eternal recurrence as a conditional proposition that tests the strength of one's will. Recurrence tests the strength of one's will not because it implies the eternal repetition of experience, but because it demands "a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is" (Nehamas 191). As a theory of the world, recurrence—eternal circulation—entails that "the universe is not progressing in any way, there is nothing specific toward which it tends, and it will continue as it is now, indefinitely" (Nehamas 145). As a theory of the self, recurrence means that "to be who one is [...] is to be engaged in a constantly continuing and continually broadening process of appropriation of one's experiences and actions" (Nehamas 190-91). This thought brings Poveda to the brink of surrender because affirming the world and self as they are means facing up to the disillusionment of Republican reality and the futility of writing. But Zarathustra's concept also offers an alternative to the broken promise of a sovereign national identity, a productive way of re-reading Cuba's political destiny.¹⁹ In *The Structure of Cuban History* (2013), Louis A. Pérez, Jr. explains that the Republican generation "committed itself to the promise of the past in the form of a leap into the embrace of faith in its history" (162).²⁰ Poveda's response is radical in that it opens itself to the potentiality of an uncertain future (*amor fati*): his narrative of Cuba's national destiny severs ties with a transcendent, historical ideal, but it does not foreclose the possibility of growth (*Prosa*, vol. 2, 32-33). Poveda's decision to "plunge into the narrow path" of the city expresses his affirmation of the experiences that have brought him to this point and the potential for incorporating new experiences that will in turn shape his identity as a writer (and the identity of the nation) in unknown

but potentially enriching ways (Nehamas 192). In this way, Poveda's recourse to German philosophy is transformative and restorative; Poveda inscribes the concept of wandering as a liberating strategy that opens the way for the construction of a "truer home" (Ignacio Díaz 81).²¹

On this basis, we might reconsider Poveda's failure to open a "dialogue with the unknown possibilities of the future" on different terms (Vitier 344). In my view, it is possible to read Poveda's itinerancy in consonance with later twentieth-century concepts of Cuban culture, a high-profile example being Fernando Ortiz's *ajiaco*. In a sense, wandering is also at the heart of Ortiz's metaphor which accentuates the process of cultural formation itself rather than its outcome (Pérez Firmat 23). The concept of identity that Poveda's work advances is itinerant rather than transcendent, and because it involves not only individual but national identity, a potential link emerges between Poveda's nomadism and Ortiz's processual view of Cuban culture. In 1915, 25 years before Ortiz's *ajiaco*, Poveda sees the arrival of the "heterogeneous masses" that produce the *mestiza* population of the island as a viable but disaggregated raw material, the potential richness of the stew still overshadowed by the legacy of colonialism and exploitation. Poveda's circumstance leads him to compare Cuba's national character to "molten metal" with no melting pot to give shape to it ("La personalidad tribúnica," *Órbita* 365). Writing during the first decades of the Republic, a time of disillusionment and uncertainty, Poveda's simile for the "state of the Cuban soul" is far from optimistic, but an analysis of Poveda's nomadism exposes the continuity between Poveda's poetics and Ortiz's "migratory" discourse of Cubanness in which deferral is not the delay of cultural synthesis but a condition of existence (Pérez-Firmat 25, Rojas 56). Caught in a purgatory between the broken melting pot and the *ajiaco*, Poveda develops a poetics characterized by uprootedness, transience and incompleteness, the very values that will shape Ortiz's famous cultural metaphor. The legacy of Poveda's book is thus visible in the "precursory" nature of his concept of identity.

ENDNOTES

¹ I would like to thank Franklin & Marshall College for supporting my research in Cuba (summer 2015) and Jon Stone for his thoughtful comments on my essay. I am also grateful to Sofía Ruiz-Alfaro, Karin Davidovich and Elizabeth Osborne for their feedback.

² Milena Rodríguez Gutiérrez makes the claim that Poveda is not a "forgotten poet" in her presentation on Poveda's *Versos precursores* (814). In Cuba, Alberto Rocasolano is the foremost if not the only Poveda scholar. For a useful introduction to Poveda's life and work, see his *El último de los raros*. See also Estenger, Lizaso and the essays written by the poet's cousin, Héctor Poveda, and Regino E. Boti following Poveda's death. Outside of Cuba, criticism on Poveda is still scarce, but Hervé Le Corre dedicates invaluable pages to Poveda in his *Poesía hispanoamericana posmodernista*. For an interesting essay on Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's influence on Poveda, see Esteban.

³ "Los dos tonos de un nuevo motivo de forjadores" (1915) is one of several chronicles that could be read as an unofficial manifesto of the Grupo Nacional de Acción de Arte spearheaded by Poveda. The group's dual mission was artistic innovation and national restoration: "Sin faltar a la belleza ni a la verdad, tal vez pudiéramos hallar una Patria tan nueva como nuestro arte" (*Prosa*, vol. 1, 168). In his valuable essay, "Poveda, nuestro aspirante a maldito," Reinaldo García Ramos also intuits the complexity of Poveda's mission which he deems not only stylistic but civic: Poveda "[era] vislumbador y guía de la conciencia nacional, como descubridor y crítico de una verdad civil en la desartada república recién nacida" (21). Numerous chronicles support this intuition. In 1914, the poet writes: "Yo busco ansiosamente, por la patria, esa palabra que, ante ella me diga: 'habla,' y a ella le diga: 'cree.'" Entretanto, con los puños ensangrentados, con el alma

exaltada, yo marcho al impulso de una fuerza implacable" (*Prosa*, vol. 1, 156). And in "Noche de luna," Poveda imagines a dialogue with the moon that affirms his destiny: "Te toca la más difícil tarea: formar conciencia. Has de ser tú mismo la conciencia viva del país; debes ser su representación y su síntesis. [...] No importa que ahora parezcas como una idea errante, sin cuerpo que la sustente, y que se pasea, como una luciérnaga, por la orilla del mar" ("Noche de luna" 495).

⁴ In defense of Poveda and Boti's *cubanía*, Sergio Chaple is the most transparent: "restarle *cubanía* a la obra de los autores de *El mar y la montaña* y la "Elegía del retorno" es proclamar desconocimiento o incompreensión paladinos de su producción literaria cuando no una ligereza" (*Epistolario* 17). Still, discussions of Poveda's Cubaness are usually more thematic, drawing on the important essay cited by Chaple and two poems, "La danza global" and "El grito abuelo," acknowledged by Antonio Portuondo, Rocasolano and Hervé Le Corre alike as antecedents to poesía negra later developed by Nicolás Guillén and Emilio Ballagas in Cuba and Luis Palés Matos in Puerto Rico. Without diminishing the importance of these texts, my analysis exposes that Poveda's *cubanía* is not only thematic but theoretical and inextricable from his poetics of identity.

⁵ For an interesting discussion of Martí and Maceo, see Poveda (*Prosa*, vol. 1, 157-67). For Poveda, both José Martí and Antonio Maceo embody the Cuban soul, but Martí is the voice of the national conscience, while Maceo embodies these ideals in action: "Martí y Maceo son dos fuerzas distintas de un alma irreductible: palabra y fuerza. Maceo el pecho de la patria, Martí la frente" (166). In Poveda's prose, we thus see an inversion of Martí's usual role. In Vitier's lecture, Martí embodies action (acto) and Casal the word (palabra).

⁶ Rocasolano makes a similar judgment about Casal in the prologue to his edition of Casal's poetry (6, cited in Morán 29).

⁷ See Theumer, Loynaz and Morán on Casal's itinerancy.

⁸ Poveda likely accessed Nietzsche's works in French translation or through early studies published at the turn of the century in Spain. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a work that was well-known at the turn of the century in Latin America, but the first Spanish translation in circulation is dated 1919, too late to have influenced Poveda's work (Ward 494). Nietzsche was also invoked by influential intellectuals like José Enrique Rodó (*Ariel*, 1900), Rubén Darío (*Los raros*, 1896) (Ward 487). On Nietzsche's influence on Rodó, see Ette. For a thorough analysis of Nietzsche's influence in Latin American *modernismo*, see Ward.

⁹ See also "Viandantes en la noche," a poetic intertext to Poveda's essay, "Los vagabundos" (*Obra poética* 163). For Mary Louise Loe, Gorky's vagabonds, characters who have removed themselves from the urban space to live in nature as "restless seekers of freedom," resemble prophets like Nietzsche's Zarathustra (262-63).

¹⁰ Although Hervé Le Corre is not commenting on Poveda's work specifically, he interprets the poet-wanderer, in the context of *posmodernismo*, as a challenge to the notion of the poet as prophet and the prerogative of literary autonomy (*Poesía* 125-6). For Hervé Le Corre, Poveda's "ambulatory poetic figures" suggest a fragmented subject while poems like "El retorno" exhibit a conversational poetic language that distances Poveda from the prophetic and imperious *torremarfilismo* of the preceding century (*Poesía* 170).

¹¹ See for example poems like "Palabras en la noche," "Refugio," "Retiro" (*Obra poética* 204-05). Poveda's "Nietzscheana," "Esfinge," and "La

senda sola" evoke Zarathustra's "advance along a steep mountain path" at moonlight, inviting the specific comparison between the itinerant prophet and the poetic subject of *Versos precursores* (*Obra poética* 204, 234-35).

¹² "Tú marchas a mi lado" and "Poema de los violines" reiterate the nomadic destiny of the poetic subject and anticipate the message of "Canción de cuna" (*Obra poética* 240, 243, 246).

¹³ This paradigm of identity also unites Poveda with his precursor, Casal. Following Deleuze, Morán interprets Casal as embodying a concept of identity as becoming, one that is rhizomatic rather than arborescent (57).

¹⁴ When Poveda asks Montoya why they sing, Montoya responds that they sing not for entertainment but to unburden themselves, as an outlet for their bitterness: "Ahora que hay más riqueza, nosotros lo hemos perdido todo: estamos en nuestros campos como en suelo ajeno. No sabemos para quién es nuestro trabajo: [...] y nuestra libertad, como nuestras vidas, está en manos de la guardia montada. Teníamos derechos que conquistamos con sangre y hoy no tenemos siquiera el derecho de protestar contra los que nos desposeyeron" (*Órbita* 487).

¹⁵ Hervé Le Corre's interpretation of the essay points out the relationship between "Elegía del retorno" and "El retorno," a poem that also situates the roving poetic subject in the city streets. For Le Corre, this intertextual link exposes the tension between the autonomy of the poetic text and the expression of immediate reality (*Poesía* 154).

¹⁶ See also "Noche de luna" which inscribes wandering and reflection as simultaneous and productive actions (*Órbita* 493-95). The image of the poetic figure as a "paseante solitario" is also reminiscent of Poveda's reading of Casal in his "Canto élego" and "Palabras de anunciación" (*Obra poética* 231, *Prosa*, vol. 2, 12). On Casal's itinerancy, Francisco Morán's Julián del Casal o los pliegues del deseo is an indispensable text. The relationship between Casal and Poveda, however, remains to be explored in detail.

¹⁷ In this way, Poveda's exile is not a willed evasion like Raúl Roa suggests in "La pupila insomne," the prologue to Rubén Martínez Villena's *Poesía y prosa* (34 cited in Saínz 20), but an involuntary condition of estrangement within the island's borders. On the conditions of exile, see Guillén and Tabori.

¹⁸ Reading Poveda's elegy as a sign of "defeat" may have more to do with the politics of canon formation following the Revolution than it does Poveda's actual withdrawal from Republican reality. Poveda was certainly not the only Republican intellectual to express his disillusionment with the status quo. On the discourse of national identity in the first Cuban Republic, see Pérez and Rojas.

¹⁹ Poveda's adaptation of Nietzsche's prophet and Gorky's vagabonds could therefore be read as an example of the "translational" mode of nation-building that defines the "Cuban condition" following Gustavo Pérez Firmat, bringing Poveda into dialogue with more prominent figures like Jorge Mañach and Fernando Ortiz.

²⁰ For Pérez, Poveda's "Elegía del retorno" is one of the most poignant registers of Republican disillusionment (138). While it is true that the bold rhetoric of Poveda's national chronicles is replaced by despondence in "Elegía del retorno," the essay does not disclose any new "revelations" with respect to Cuba's status quo. In another essay from the same year, Poveda proclaims "a new generation and a free people" even as he negates the existence of the Republican "I": "¿Quiénes pueden afirmar que existe el 'yo' de la República? ¿Quiénes pueden negar que—sin esa suprema conciencia—

libertad, independencia, patria, son puros símbolos? (*Prosa*, vol. 1, 221). Poveda expresses the same sentiment in "El candidato de la patria para la presidencia" (1915): "Aún en 1915 no existe la República" (*Prosa*, vol. 1, 182). In this way, the conclusion in "Elegía del retorno," that "we do not exist" is not so much a negative revelation as a reprisal of a common theme in a different tone. The response that the elegy proposes, however, is not so different from the call to action that Poveda articulates elsewhere. Poveda

does not deceive himself with delusions of national grandeur, but he does not concede defeat either.

²¹ Le Corre finds that the modernity of *posmodernista* poetry resides in its deflation of poetry's sublimity which is also the result of the writer's experience of colonialism. According to Le Corre, the recourse to "the liberating strategies of textualities considered more advanced," is an exercise in "importation and transformation" that anticipates the Avant Garde (126).

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