

---

# The Case of Alma Rubens or the Trans-gendered Imagination in José Manuel Poveda

---

KATHRIN THEUMER

FRANKLIN & MARSHALL COLLEGE

The poet José Manuel Poveda (1888-1926) has received mainly anthological attention as an ancillary figure in early twentieth-century Latin American literature. Poveda is usually referenced alongside Regino E. Boti and Agustín Acosta, and the three form the nucleus of intellectuals most actively engaged in seeking new modes of poetic expression during the first decades of the last century in Cuba.<sup>1</sup> The critical consensus is that their project regrettably does not gather steam, if largely because of timing; both Félix Lizaso and Cintio Vitier read Poveda as “catching the wave of modernismo” as it dies down and, consequently, Poveda’s poetry is described as failing to open a dialogue with the “unknown possibilities of the future” (Vitier 344). The role that Poveda’s feminine heteronym, Alma Rubens, plays in determining the breadth of this dialogue is not taken into account by Vitier or Lizaso and has remained a neglected subject in recent criticism.<sup>2</sup> Reference to Alma Rubens is tangential, excepting the two more extensive essays by Alberto Rocasolano and Hervé Le Corre that concentrate predominantly on the style and content of Rubens’s original poetry.<sup>3</sup> Left unexamined is the intriguing heteronymic process itself. In the three semi-fictional chronicles that treat Alma Rubens, Poveda describes Rubens as a woman, as sexually androgynous, as the object of his desire and the artistic subject behind a radical new poetry. Because heteronymic embodiment here encompasses the depolarization of gender identities and the dislocation of a single, artistic subjectivity, it represents both an expansion of the imagination and a theoretical statement on creativity as a fluid and unbound process.<sup>4</sup>

Heteronyms are not widely theorized in Latin American literature and criticism, and so this discussion begins with the Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) who, to my knowledge, coins the term. Pessoa is the inventor of three poet-characters, the bucolic Alberto Caeiro, the neoclassical Ricardo Reis and the most decidedly modern Álvaro de Campos. In his prose and letters, Pessoa comments openly on the origin of his heteronyms as experiences of poetic revelation:

I wrote thirty-something consecutive poems in a species of ecstasy, the nature of which I could not define. It was the triumphal day of my life, and I will never have another one like it. I began with a title, *El guardián de rebaños*. And what

---

followed was the appearance of someone in me, whom I immediately named Alberto Caeiro. Pardon the absurdity of the phrase: in me appeared my master (*Antología* 20).

This description allows us to establish a couple of basic parameters about the function of heteronyms. The origin of the heteronym is felt by Pessoa as a moment of self-expansion and maximum creativity, and the heteronym is described as appearing *within* the poet suggesting a complex synergy. It is impossible to extricate Caeiro from Pessoa, but Caeiro possesses a unique biography, psyche and style that distinguish him from Pessoa, Reis and Campos (*Antología* 22). Writing as his heteronym, the author therefore produces a work that he cannot produce writing as himself, and so heteronymic embodiment is not an elaborate disguise but a “means of enlarging the score of [one’s] poetry” (Scarantino Jones 260).<sup>5</sup>

The prevailing conclusion in the sparse criticism on Alma Rubens is similar. Her uniqueness is remarked on by Le Corre in his essential monograph on *posmodernismo*: “Alma Rubens . . . es a la vez una nueva figura, independiente no solo una máscara, algo otro, una nueva voz” (119). Alma’s poetry which, apart from her lengthy poem, “Agua profunda y escondida,” is written in free-verse, uncomplicated in syntax and spare in style, leads Rocasolano to describe her as a channel of literary experimentation and a new poetic form, a potential that Le Corre also recognizes: “[es] una posibilidad de una nueva configuración textual, a través del poema en prosa, modalidad (forma mixta, casi amorfa) poco explorada en la Cuba de aquel entonces” (119). Although they do not precisely resemble the prose poems of her male and female “contemporaries,” Le Corre identifies Alma’s *poemetos* as reprising the kind of subversive literary exploration characteristic of the period in poets like Delmira Agustini, Alfonsina Storni, Gabriela Mistral, and Juana de Ibarbourou: “El cuerpo de la letra, la amorfa forma del *poemeto*, el cuerpo femenino, el cuerpo escondido . . . forman un continuum trasgresor, que manifiesta de nuevo la labor marginal del posmodernismo, su exploración de los espacios limítrofes” (232, 241-42).

Le Corre’s equating of poetic form with the female body returns us to the question of gender as an instrument of subverting a literary tradition ultimately defined by patriarchal discourses (Castillo 73). This argument is a very relevant one, and it places Alma’s work in the broader context of the representation of feminine identity and sexuality in modern poetry.<sup>6</sup> Apart from their much-commented style, Alma’s poems reflect a range of themes that are relevant to the “reterritorialization” (cf. Zavala) of poetic language undertaken by women writers at the turn of the twentieth century. Poems like “La violeta,” “El deseo,” and “Las Vírgenes” register the homoerotic and sometimes necrophilic desire between

---

women, and “Extravío” is suggestive of a homosexual act in which the female lover exhibits canonically masculine sexual authority (*Poemetos* 26).<sup>7</sup> The way that Alma represents gender roles and feminine sexuality in her work leads Rocasolano to suggest that, through Alma, Poveda intended to widen the artistic horizon of women writers: “sin duda, [Poveda] pretendía alarmar y sorprender al tímido mundo literario de entonces y sentar las bases de una nueva ética—sin trabas ni sujeciones—para la mujer” (*Raros* 94). But Alma is as innovative as she is troubling for Rocasolano who recognizes Poveda’s achievement of an “authentically feminine poetry,” though Poveda’s vigor is underlined and Alma’s authentic feminine psychology is questioned in the same breath: “Poveda, poeta vigoroso aun en sus momentos de melancolía, se transfigura aquí y logra una poesía auténticamente femenina . . . en el grado que puede serlo la psicología de una mujer que relega sexualmente al hombre a un segundo plano” (*Raros* 94).

Rocasolano’s comments raise some important issues concerning gender and sexuality. In the first place, the centrality of homoerotic desire in Alma’s *poemetos* and her own ambiguous sexuality appear to be at odds with an “authentically” feminine poetry. What the criteria for this poetry ought to be (and who should decide) is a thorny issue to be left undecided. Moreover, Rocasolano’s analysis suggests a problematic oversimplification of Poveda’s “transfiguration” as a one-to-one transformation reliant upon essential gender distinctions. By emphasizing Poveda’s masculinity, even in cases of melancholy (a feminine emotion), Rocasolano lets Poveda achieve an “authentically feminine” poetry while maintaining the fundamental stability and autonomy of Poveda’s masculine identity.<sup>8</sup> Rocasolano, however, does not further explore just how gender, masculinity, femininity, and sexuality interact at the level of artistic inspiration, perhaps because the focus on the form and content of Alma’s work displaces the circumstances of her “existence.” The critic’s difficulty in navigating these terms reveals that the heteronymic process is a much more nuanced act of literary gender bending, one that resists an essential distinction between male/masculinity and female/femininity. It is not only the form and content of Alma’s poetry that would have alarmed its audience and threatened the literary and social conventions of the time; the very process of creating Alma—a figure whose gender and sexuality are assertively ambiguous—makes her an emblem of rupture and innovation.

Lisa Rado addresses the subversive potential of gender in the context of the shifting sexual landscape of the twentieth century and the evolving feminine image in the literature of Modernism. According to Rado, artists of this period like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf “used this moment of gender confusion to authorize their creativity in a transgressively innovative way” (10). During this time, androgyny

---

became a common trope because it enabled the artist to “embody newly perceived strengths of both sexes and to transcend artistic limitation altogether” (13). While female poets saw it as “a way to transform their position from aesthetic objects to active creators,” Rado explains that, for male poets, adopting a feminine psyche represented access to an enigmatic “other” knowledge and a way of navigating the crises of inspiration and authority (13). Like the heteronym, the androgyne, to borrow Rado’s term, represented a means of creative expansion. Marilyn Farwell describes androgyny in similar terms, as “defined by the width of perception rather than by a single universal mode of knowing” (435). This shared function and the gender ambiguity entailed in both cases, make androgyny a useful theoretical supplement in approaching Poveda’s chronicles. Androgyny encompasses a vast theoretical domain, but the perspectives of Rado and also Kari Weil are useful here because both highlight the practices of difference that result from blurring gender boundaries.<sup>9</sup>

Before Alma’s *poematos* are published, Poveda writes the three semi-fictional chronicles that establish Alma’s personality and history: “Alma Rubens” (1912), “La personalidad fabulosa y única de Alma Rubens” (1915) and “Cuando conocimos a Alma Rubens” (1917). These essays have not come under scrutiny, perhaps because, at face-value, they are auxiliary documents that establish the context for reading Alma’s poetry. Yet, it is how Alma is *written* that is essential to the kind of theoretical statement that Poveda wishes to issue through his heteronym. In the 1912 chronicle, Alma is presented as a hybrid of canonical binaries where the metaphysical charge of opposing principles—light/dark, good/evil, purity/decadence—is deflated. Her debut poem, “Agua profunda y escondida” is published with the essay and poetically links Alma’s image with a new creative potential in which indeterminacy supersedes the possibility of transcendence. In the 1915 essay, a reciprocal relationship is established between Poveda and Rubens as a further mode of artistic self-expansion. Because Alma is represented as androgynous and as Poveda’s symmetrical opposite, this self-expansion is dependent upon the distortion of subject/object, fiction/reality, and male/masculine/female/feminine distinctions (Weil 140). In the third and final chronicle, the fictionalized amorous encounter between Poveda and Alma renders their reciprocity more explicitly self-conscious so that Alma becomes a vehicle as well as a paradigm of poetic innovation.

The first chronicle was published on July 14, 1912, under the title “Alma Rubens.” Its opening paragraph is a tantalizingly vague account of Alma’s history:

Entre nosotros, en un rincón ignorado que debe permanecer desconocido—sería invadido por los perros y las cotorras—vive Alma Rubens. Lejos de nuestra tierra

---

cubana, como Madeleine de Laterrade, aun cuando aspira su aire y sueña bajo su cielo, como la poetisa exquisita de *Día gris*, vive Alma Rubens. Y yo no encuentro palabras para hablaros de ella, ahora que vengo a deciros quién es esa extraña mujer que Cuba desconoce y que se llama Alma Rubens. (*Prosa* II 49)

Alma immediately becomes an object of intrigue: she is both foreign and “among us,” a kind of absent presence. But Alma invades every nook and cranny of the text: in each sentence, she lives, breathes, dreams, is *named*. Poveda’s narrative intervention—he cannot find the words to tell us about her—is a lapse characteristic of the three essays on his heteronym. In this instance, he subtly involves himself in Alma’s history as keeper-creator of the secret of her illicit existence, inviting the reader to partake of an exclusive knowledge that only he possesses. Thus, Poveda’s insistence on Alma’s authenticity also becomes a staging of her artificiality, so that the subject of this paragraph is not only Alma but also the act of writing her. The absence of words, or the void of Alma’s actual existence, is conspicuously filled with words, cementing Alma’s existence through the repetition of her name, *textualizing* her being or, better yet, making her textual presence *vital* in spite of the fact that we learn very little of her “life,” for which there is no actual referent.

Poveda then moves on to craft the paradox of Alma’s imagination in a series of religious metaphors. Sacred spaces and rituals are profaned by this figure that is described abstractly as “a soul that burns like a candelabra in a cloistral silence” (50).<sup>10</sup> Alma’s verses are laced with “a sensual and brutal venom of cruel pleasures,” her voice a “censer breathing its evil myrrh before an altar of pain and death” and a “flute that sings illogical songs of liturgical and lethal beauty” (50). Alma’s self-sufficiency and authority are linked directly to the opposing principles of good and evil that she embodies: “Es ella para ella, su mal y su bien, su fiebre y su crueldad, son para ella misma” (50).<sup>11</sup> It is no surprise that Alma is also stunningly beautiful: “venía esbelta, blanca, radiante, ella” (“Cuando” 57). Her appearance and the significance of her name, both “soul” and “white” from the Spanish *almo*, suggest qualities that her poetic personality and “harmful ideologies” utterly defy (50). The classical promise of “abstract perfection beyond the manifestation of feminine beauty” is both made and broken in her image (Singer 26). That Alma is the site of purity and decadence, good and evil, the sacred and the profane, pain and pleasure is fundamental to her own creative power because these opposing principles are not neutralized but co-present, suggesting a fresh source of poetic inspiration.<sup>12</sup>

Alma embodies contradiction, but her image reaches a complexity far beyond the superficial dichotomy of her serene beauty and moral decadence in the poetic intertext to this chronicle, “Agua profunda y escondida.” This poem is the

---

longest that Alma will write, and the only poem written in free verse. It does not resemble her prose *poemetos* in form or theme. I would therefore like to propose that this poem represents and produces the synergy between Alma and Poveda by allegorizing Alma's creative potential and enacting the origin of an imagination that involves both Alma and Poveda. This allegory is accomplished through the staging and cross-contamination of binary spaces and energies symbolized with the images of the forest (light) and the water (dark). The poem's sixty three lines ripple across a single stanza and materially inscribe the shape and texture of its title character and determining principle. Although there are no stanzaic breaks, the poem's punctuation signals six parts, each serving a distinct purpose: description (1-13), comparison (14-31), exclamation (32-36), peril (37-43), misery (44-54), and surrender (55-63).

The sinuous single sentence streaming across the first thirteen lines comprises the first part and introduces the principal recourse to repetition carried forward throughout the poem:

Está ignorada y profunda, oculta y profunda en el  
corazón del bosque inmenso, honda y negra  
en la tarde y en el mediodía,  
el agua muda;  
ni una onda, ni un rumor, ni flores ni peces en  
el agua  
inmóvil, oculta y profunda en la selva sin nombre;  
y una hora, y otra hora, y un sol y otro sol pasan  
a lo lejos, muy lejos, demasiado lejos, sobre  
montañas  
azules y mares remotos;  
y permanece inmóvil y profunda, honda y negra,  
el agua muda.

The motionless tension of the pool is inscribed in undulating, swelling lines, a movement that is maintained throughout. The reverberation of the water's qualities—ignored, profound, concealed, deep, dark, mute, remote—announces its unnerving and unrelenting presence, infiltrating every space, even the physical body of the poem. The spatial and temporal remoteness of the nameless forest lends a troubling longevity and exclusivity to the pool that has remained unseen and silent, but now begins its slow invasion. This section begins with a decisive comparison:

Parece el alma oscura del bosque; pero en vano  
busca en ella mi pupila los reflejos de los grandes  
cedros,  
los ligeros claros de cielo apenas entrevistos,  
la majestad tranquila, muy tranquila del bosque. (14-18)

---

That the water should be presented as the soul of a sacred forest—the locus of tranquility, clarity, peace and faith—is a play on signs that immediately involves Alma in the content and process of the poem. “Agua profunda y escondida” recalls the tension between Alma and the sanctity of the spaces she occupies in the accompanying chronicle by reproducing the dangerous sensuality and malevolence of an impure “soul that burns in a cloistral silence” through the contrasting geography of the pool and forest. The intrusion of the water image is a source of anxiety for a poetic “subject” whose physical presence we first encounter in the synechdochical pupil vainly seeking the reflection of the forest on the pool’s surface. Reflection here represents a way of retrieving the image and promise of solace, but the turbid water makes this vision opaque, absorbing the qualities of the forest:

y el agua es demasiado turbia y sin reflejos,  
sin paz y sin fe, honda y sombría como un  
pensamiento de traición,  
alma que espía y teme, calladamente, cual un  
malhechor, (26-30).

These lines also expand the description of the water alternately referenced “soul,” as a threatening, encroaching force, which once more returns us to Alma’s dark imagination.<sup>13</sup> Unnoticed, silent (until now), remote and detached from the passage of time, the water becomes a multiple metaphor refracting an image of Rubens herself, not as a motif of Poveda’s literary universe, but as an active, fluid force that aggressively mediates the creative process.<sup>14</sup>

An almost parasitic relationship begins to emerge between the poetic subject and the dark pool, negotiated in the exclamations of a fearful voice. The apostrophe unfolds first as an introspective appeal to life itself, and to the forest that houses the peace and faith that the poetic subject desires: “¡Oh, corazón mío, vida, sueños míos tranquilos;/ansias de paz y de fe,” (33-34). But the plea, futile against its all-pervading adversary, turns into a lament. The water’s rising strength hinges upon the repeated gestures to its eternity (soul), its opacity and its menacing quality; once again, it is compared with an evildoer lying in wait:

Y esa agua eterna, esa agua negra y honda, turbia  
y honda,  
oculta y honda en *tu* fondo, sin reflejos y sin paz,  
como un malhechor que espía y tiene, oculto  
en la sombra,  
para herir, para herir, oh, corazón mío,  
sueños míos! (37-43, my emphasis)

---

The first and only familiar (second-person) reference to the forest minimizes the distance between the speaker and the space, and the climax of the poem contracts this distance more dramatically with the internalization of the pool: “turbia y honda, oculta y honda en el fondo del ser” (line 47). The contraction or contagion of the images of forest and pool and the disclosure of their metaphoric referents of body and soul occurs subtly and the annihilating power of vice is dramatized with a mounting meditation upon nothingness.<sup>15</sup> This water does not reflect, it clouds, absorbs and will annul even the psyche of the poetic subject (line 48). The explicit references to abyss, absence, loss, and nothingness are conflated in the final, surprising simile of the self-voiding hydrophane whose translucent form absorbs and is absorbed by the water, in whose presence even the creative power of Dionysus abates (48-54).<sup>16</sup> The exclamation that concludes the poem is yet another apostrophe to the pool (“profunda, lúgubre linfa sin reflejos,” line 55), and a strange and anxious acquiescence to its power, with only a feeble appeal to the tranquil majesty of the forest uselessly articulated in the penultimate line.

However, from this negotiated tension and eventual surrender, a creative third space is achieved, one beyond reflection and reference, as the poetic subject becomes indoctrinated into the liturgy of the opaque pool. The water reads also as the rendering of Alma’s elemental and asphyxiating presence, its qualities repeated like a mantra throughout the poem; it is a destabilizing and threatening force that is likewise essential to the poem’s becoming what it is. Alma’s creative potential is imprinted upon the poem’s fluid structure and thematized in its dark metaphor so that the growing power of the water against the waning resolve of the poetic subject poetically rehearses the heteronymic process, producing an imagination that is neither exclusive to Alma nor to Poveda.

We are not, then, witnessing the mere transfiguration of one psyche into another, as Rocasolano would have it, but the formation of a creative force that is unstable, fluid and hybrid. This creative power is not, however, found in the neutralization of binary opposition, for the oppositions between light and dark, pleasure and pain, faith and sin, soul and body, salvation and desire, masculine and feminine are not resolved in absolute union. Marilyn Farwell describes the kind of shared imagination enacted here as a fundamental synergy of masculine and feminine principles where synergy denotes a relationship of “dynamic tension” and masculine and feminine principles remain equally valid (437). But masculinity and femininity cannot be separately or essentially identified with Poveda or Alma or the binary of light and dark that unfolds across the poem. Exactly who engulfs whom remains, in the end, ambiguous, just as it is impossible to determine whose imagination produced the poem. We are thus dealing with a reciprocity in which

---

masculinity and femininity are divested of their “being” as discrete values so that gender and also subjectivity feature as permutations or processes in a creative transaction.

This reciprocity between Alma and Poveda is overtly exposed in the 1915 chronicle where Alma is also described as androgynous. At first, Poveda and Alma experience a moment of mutual recognition: “Pero nunca el creador inadvertida al creador: Alma Rubens supo inmediatamente lo que yo supe enseguida: poseíamos el don del poeta” (52). That Alma is the first to recognize the gift of poetry in Poveda is important because it is her agency—in this case, a textual gaze—that authorizes and empowers Poveda as creator. Enacted here is the kind of aesthetic reciprocity that Octavio Paz describes as underwriting the relationship between the poet and his heteronyms in reference to Pessoa: “Es el encantador hechizado, tan totalmente poseído por sus fantasmagorías que se siente mirado por ellas, acaso despreciado, acaso compadecido. Nuestras creaciones nos juzgan” (*Cuadrivio* 101). In this case, however, and in contrast with Pessoa whose heteronyms are all male, it is not only the distinction between subject and object that is blurred as the poet and his creation behold one another. In her *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* (1992), Kari Weil explains that “the feminine can be seen to embody an idealized other whom the writer/hero creates as his symmetrical opposite” (140). The artificial gaze of the “other,” through which Poveda recognizes himself, fulfills the desire for self-creation by way of symmetrical opposition through which “artist and art are created simultaneously and where the boundary between masculine and feminine shifts between fiction and reality” (140). Because the aesthetic reciprocity between Alma and Poveda augments these boundaries, it therefore also represents a fuller engagement of creative potential (Weil 140).

The complexity that the transgendered imagination acquires is revealed in the description of Alma that follows this scene. Alma embodies a strange hybrid of Christian doctrine and Norse lore: “En el alma de esa mujer extraordinaria hay una Brunhilda andrógina que, muerto Sigifredo, engendra en sí misma el Hombre, crea el Origen, y desaparece. La madre unigenitora tiene el poder de una virgen, y oculta su prodigio” (“Personalidad” 55).<sup>17</sup> Because Alma possesses the power to conceive and give birth as well as the purity of a virgin, her progeny is also a prodigy, even a species of literary messiah. Poveda divinizes the words “Man” and “Origin” preserving the quasi-religious quality of this event, and his essay concludes with an escalating, borderline incoherent profession of faith in the coming of what must be a textual phenomenon, symbolic of the new poetry: “Pero ha de surgir, existe ya, esperamos que se yerga, que se advenga su hijo: de él debe nacer otra humanidad” (“Personalidad” 56). Of course, Poveda is implicated

---

in this genealogy as the supreme father (and son) because Alma's "(pro) creative" potential is created and absorbed by Poveda in order to give birth to a new, more powerful artist (Rado 32). According to Kari Weil, this narcissistic impulse for self-expansion indicates the deliberate assumption of a "fundamental indeterminacy of identity that is both a greater and lesser expression of self" (38). It is thus because "the roles of the *creative* and the *created* are both assumed by the self in this process that demands both self-creation and self-destruction" (Weil 51, original emphasis).

The "secret fertility" that the heteronym and the androgyne embody cannot be accessed without the self-curtailement that the mobilization of a transgendered imagination represents for the male poet (Paz 39). This embodiment does not appear to be an entirely unwelcome consequence for Poveda whose reciprocal relationship with Alma Rubens reaches its maximum expression in the third and final chronicle published in 1917. The subsequent phase of Alma's existence is limited to the publication of her twenty-two *poemetos* between 1917 and 1923; Poveda will not write about Alma again, and so this final installment is especially climactic. This chronicle is also unique because it is not written by Poveda but by a third party, Carlos Prats—another of Poveda's literary creations—a strategy that allows Poveda to engage more authentically as a character in his own fiction and to involve himself in the chronicle on multiple narrative planes. Poveda is the conspicuously concealed writer physically putting pen to paper, the masked narrator relating the story, and a participant in the story told, conceivably as both Alma and a version of himself, thus making this the most overtly self-conscious of the three chronicles. It is Alma that allows Poveda to permeate all discursive levels so that the chronicle becomes an exercise in "concealing" and "unmasking" not the man, but a creative process that is reliant upon the indefinability of gender and subject identities (Hutcheon 24).

It is important to reconstruct here some of the content of Prats's chronicle. Poveda and Prats, having shared dinner and a conversation about Alma Rubens's poetry, which Poveda has translated from French to Spanish, decide to pay a visit to the poet so that she might meet her translator. Alma declines to see them, though she expresses a wish to meet Poveda and believes to be acquainted with Prats. Knowing that Rubens is about to embark on a journey, Prats and Poveda set out for the train station in hopes of catching a glimpse of her. Spy her they do, surrounded by an entourage of butlers, ladies, and youths. She is beautiful, of course, and Prats chatters breathlessly that he had indeed met Rubens; he calls to her to behold her translator. The decisive moment of the chronicle occurs when Alma looks over and speaks, addressing her own creator within his fictional universe, her latent omniscience (Alma, too, is implicated in the writing of this chronicle)

---

barely concealed beneath her words: “Muchísimo gusto. No sé por qué yo me imaginaba que ustedes estarían aquí,” smiling and holding out her hand, saying nothing further (“Cuando” 57). Alma draws away as quickly as she appears leaving Prats to contemplate wistfully that she is of the sort that one rarely sees more than twice in a lifetime and whom one never knows completely. More significantly, as Poveda watches Alma go, Prats describes him as “embebido, abstraído o más bien fuera de sí, absorto, encantado, y—puedo decirlo—enamorado” (“Cuando” 58). Prats’s intervention before his declaring Poveda to be in love is important because this third-party testimony authenticates the love between Poveda and Rubens, a move that fictionally represents Poveda’s *self*-love and accentuates the tension among the multiple discursive voices of the poet that are mobilized through this act (Le Corre 58).

The image of Poveda bewitched by his own creation, staged here in a manner reminiscent of the ill-fated and brief encounters between the unattainable muse and her besotted hero, exposes the “narcissistic desire to be both subject and object, lover and beloved, artist and work of art” already established in the 1915 essay (Weil 122). Poveda writes himself into his art to enact an amorous relationship as an(other) identity and gender; it is likewise a means to “asserting the primacy of his own creative desire” metaphorically from within his own fiction and critically, by exposing the mechanisms of his simulated literary universe. It therefore also represents an auto-erotic act that functions, as Weil puts it, as a metaphor for literary self-consciousness (131).

Alma’s hybridity, as site of good and evil and as androgyne, is indispensable to her involvement in Poveda’s imagination because of the disarticulation of opposing metaphysical principles that she demands and the creative potential she therefore represents. Because the absorption of this potential entails a fundamental ambiguity of gender and identity, Alma becomes a paradigm of a subversive kind of creativity and an emblem of a poetry informed by indeterminacy, instability, and flux. The scope of Poveda’s contribution to modern poetry may be better understood and appreciated if the parameters of his dialogue with the future are widened to include Alma Rubens as a unique expression of heterogeneity and otherness. Consequently, by looking beyond Alma’s *poematos*, my approach fully recognizes the complexity of Poveda’s act of gendered embodiment as informing the potential for poetic innovation in theory and practice.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Regino E. Boti, “Yoísmo.” *Arabescos mentales* (Barcelona: R. Tobella) 1913, and *Epistolario Boti-Poveda*, ed. Sergio Chaple (La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura) 1977.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Virgilio López Lemus, *Oro crítica y Ulises, o, Creer en poesía. Figuras clave de la poesía cubana del siglo XX* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2004) 75. Gema Areta Marigó, *Poesía hispanoamericana: Ritmo(s)/Métrica(s)/Ruptura(s)* (Madrid: Verbum, 1999) 141. Jorge Luis Arcos, *Historia de la Literatura Cubana*, Vol. 3 (La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 2008) 472. Ángel Esteban, *Literatura cubana: Entre el viejo y el mar* (Sevilla: Renacimiento, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Alma Rubens (1897-1931) was an American performer of Irish and Jewish heritage who rose quickly to stardom in the silent film industry. I have not found explicit references to Alma Rubens, the actress, in any of his prose, but the possibility that Poveda's heteronym is modeled after the actress is intriguing and one that has not been studied.

<sup>4</sup> Alma is what Judith Butler might call a "performative" of difference. Butler engages the term, "performative" rather than "noun" in reference to gender in order to emphasize that gender is "performatively produced and compelled," not foundationally or essentially defined. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 34.

<sup>5</sup> See Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas de Doutrina Estética*, ed. Jorge de Sena (Lisbon: Inquérito, 1946): 27-28.

<sup>6</sup> See Nelly Richard, *Masculine/Feminine. Practices of Difference(s)* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004) 28, and Iris Zavala, "Infracciones y transgresiones sexuales en el romanticismo hispánico," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 1.1 (1989): 19.

<sup>7</sup> See Jorge Luis Castillo, "Delmira Agustini o el modernismo subversivo," *Chasqui* 27.2 (1998): 76.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler analyzes the binarization of male/masculine and female/feminine roles and attributes as an effect of the heterosexualization of desire. See *Gender Trouble* 31. See also Carolyn Heilbrun, *Toward a Reception of Androgyny* (New York: Knopf, 1975) ix.

<sup>9</sup> Prominent voices here are Carolyn Heilbrun, and also Nancy Topping Bazin, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision* (New York: Rutgers's UP, 1973). For a useful history of the use of androgyny as theme and critical tool see Marilyn Farwell, "Virginia Woolf and Androgyny," *Contemporary Literature* 16.4 (1975): 436-41.

<sup>10</sup> This and all translations from the original Spanish are mine.

<sup>11</sup> Alma's image harks back to the *femme fatale* of the *fin de siècle*, but though she shares the "perversions" characteristic of her beguiling forbears, she is unique for the creative agency she possesses. See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in fin de siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> This representation is also important in terms of the way that women writers of this period begin to break apart the dichotomy of the divine and diabolical that determines the role of the female in poetry. See Castillo 73.

<sup>13</sup> The theoretical nexus between androgyny and the sublime feeling is relevant here. On the anxiety of engulfment and the disarticulation of the sublime, see Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976):105. See also Rado 22.

<sup>14</sup> See Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985): 118-44.

---

<sup>15</sup> The leitmotif of darkness here also leads to alternative readings of ambiguous identity, attachment and loss as these themes relate to the phenomenon of melancholia. See for example Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Omestes is linked with the Greek deity, Dionysus. See *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. Sir William Smith, William Waylet and George Eden Marindin, Vol. 1 (London: J. Murray, 1890-91): 637.

<sup>17</sup> Brunhilde is a valkyrie of Norse mythology, but it is likely that Poveda is adapting his myth from Richard Wagner's *Der Ring der Nibelungen*. Poveda's affinity toward Wagner is clear in his prose. See for example, "'La república de Nibelheim' (Una escena que no pensó Ricardo Wagner, para 'El oro del Rhin')" in Rafael Estenger, *Proemios de cenáculo* (México: n.p., 1975): 81-86, 90-91.

### Works Cited

- Arcos, Jorge Luis. *Historia de la Literatura Cubana*. Vol. 3. La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 2008. Print.
- Areta Marigó, Gema. *Poesía hispanoamericana: Ritmo(s)/Métrica(s)/Ruptura(s)*. Madrid: Verbum, 1999. Print.
- Boti, Regino E. "Yoísmo." *Arabescos mentales*. Barcelona: R. Tobella, 1913. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Castillo, Jorge Luis. "Delmira Agustini o el modernismo subversivo." *Chasqui* 27.2 (1998): 70-84. Print.
- Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*. Vol. 1. Ed. Sir William Smith, William Waylet and George Eden Marindin. London: J. Murray, 1890-91. Print.
- Dijkstra, Bram. *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in fin de siècle Culture*. Oxford: OxfordUP, 1986. Print.
- Epistolario Boti-Poveda*. Ed. Sergio Chaple. La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1977. Print.
- Esteban, Angel. *Literatura cubana: Entre el viejo y el mar*. Sevilla: Renacimiento, 2006. Print.
- Estenger, Rafael. *Poveda y su doble mundo*. México: n.p., 1957. Print.
- Farwell, Marilyn. "Virginia Woolf and Androgyny." *Contemporary Literature* 16.4 (1975): 433-51. Print.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*. New York: Knopf, 1973. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier UP, 1980. Print.
- Jardine, Alice. *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. Print.

- 
- Kristeva, Julia. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989. Print.
- Le Corre, Hervé. *Poesía hispanoamericana posmodernista: Historia, teoría, prácticas*. Madrid: Gredos, 2001. Print.
- . "Una poética de desarraigo: Alma Rubens en la obra de José Manuel Poveda (1888-1926)." *Mujer, cultura y sociedad en América Latina*. Ed. Roland Forgues and María Fernanda de Abreu. Pau: Université de Pau, 1998. 205-28. Print.
- Lizaso, Félix. *Ensayistas contemporáneos 1900-1920*. La Habana: Editorial Trópico, 1938. Print.
- López Lemus, Virgilio. *Oro crítica y Ulises, o, Creer en poesía. Figuras clave de la poesía cubana del siglo XX*. Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2004. Print.
- Paz, Octavio. *Cuadrivio: Dario, López Velarde, Pessoa, Cernuda*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1965. Print.
- Pessoa, Fernando. *Antología*. Trad. Octavio Paz. México: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1962. Print.
- . *Páginas de Doutrina Estética*. Ed. Jorge de Sena. Lisbon: Inquérito, 1946. Print.
- Poveda, José Manuel. *Poematos de Alma Rubens*. Ed. Alberto Rocasolano. Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2004. Print.
- . *Prosa*. Ed. Alberto Rocasolano. 2 Vols. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1980. Print.
- Rado, Lisa. *The Modern Androgyne Imagination: A Failed Sublime*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000. Print.
- Richard, Nelly. *Masculine/Feminine. Practices of Difference(s)*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- Rocasolano, Alberto. "El caso de Alma Rubens." *El último de los raros: Estudios acerca de José Manuel Poveda*. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1982. 46-55. Print.
- . *El último de los raros: Estudios acerca de José Manuel Poveda*. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1982. Print.
- Scarantino Jones, Marilyn. "Pessoa's Poetic Coterie: Three Heteronyms and an Orthonym." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 14.2 (1977): 254-62. Print.
- Singer, Irving. *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1966. Print.
- Topping Bazin, Nancy. *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*. New York: Rutgers UP, 1973. Print.
- Vitier, Cintio. *Lo cubano en la poesía*. La Habana: Instituto del libro, 1970. Print.
- Weil, Kari. *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1992. Print.
- Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976. Print.
- Zavala, Iris. "Infracciones y transgresiones sexuales en el romanticismo hispánico." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 1.1 (1989): 1-18. Print.