

Poetry Talks Back to Psychiatry:  
Poetic Retellings of Psychiatric Experience in Venezuela  
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**Abstract:** The following paper explores three Venezuelan contemporary poets who wrote about their psychiatric experiences. Through their poems they “talk back” to a psychiatric language that medicalized their suffering and stripped their experiences of meaning. The parallels between their writings and psychiatric survivor literature are considered.

**Key Words:** poetry, psychiatry, survivor literature

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Throughout history, poets have been studied as “psychological curiosities” (Blumenthal, 1995, p.4). Often they are ambivalently portrayed as sublime and profoundly flawed. The diagnoses most frequently attached to poets include: (1) psychological disturbance in general (Ludwig, 1992), (2) bipolar disorder (Jamison, 1993), (3) depression (Kaufman, 2005; Kaufman & Sexton, 2006), (4) personality disorders (Post, 1994), and (5) cognitive disorders (Thomas & Duke, 2007). It is fair to say that psychology and psychiatry have always been fascinated by artists and poets (Bokey & Walter, 2002; Killick & Schaverien, 1997). Research on the psychic processes, pathologies, and mental functioning of creative artists and poets abounds (Abberbach, 1989; Kaufman, 2005; Kaufman & Sexton, 2006; Thomas & Duke, 2007).

However, this fascination has not necessarily led to empathy or benevolence. As if poets were a somewhat different species, the romantic notion of the rebellious and extravagant Lord-Byron-type still colors many stereotypes. Freud (1908/1964), who was not only a confessed admirer of writers such as Cervantes and Goethe, but also sometimes wrote admiringly of poets, said, “We lay men have always been curious to know... from what source that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material” (p. 143). He took amply from their works, as the name of concepts like the “Oedipus Complex” clearly shows, but also sometimes refers to poets with contempt. For example, in *The New Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis* (1932/1964) Freud writes, “But poets are irresponsible people and enjoy the privilege of such license” (p. 106). We get a profound sense of contradiction when examining what psychiatry and psychology have had to say about poets.

But have psychology and psychiatry heard what artists and poets have to say? When clinicians write and speak about artists, have we really heard those artists? Have we just appropriated their works and their words as Freud did? Have we psychiatrists and psychologists used language to expand and deepen artistic comprehension, or rather to tame, domesticate, and intellectualize all that is provocative and unsettling in art? I will focus on a very specific place where poetry and psychiatry have met, that is the world of psychiatric institutionalization and therapy. But I will do it through the poet’s, and not the mental health professional’s, words. I will look at three Venezuelan contemporary poets, who have drawn from their personal experiences as users of mental health institutions, and I will see how the works of these poets link to the testimonies of other psychiatric facility users.

## Methodological Considerations

This paper began about a year ago when I went to a reading by one of Venezuela's more distinguished poets, Armando Rojas Guardia. I had read a little of his work and knew that he had been hospitalized a few years back in a psychiatric ward where I did my training as a clinical psychologist. At the reading, he spoke openly about his crises and the time he spent hospitalized. He introduced the poem "La Desnudez del Loco" [The Nudity of the Madman] as a comment on that hospitalization experience. I did not know this poem beforehand, nor had I known that this was his chosen work for the public reading. To hear about a place where I had worked and studied years before, to go back through the words of the poet to a place that had been filled for me with the most intense and varied of experiences was incredibly moving and thought provoking.

I could relate to his experiences; they chronicled the details of life in a psychiatric ward. His poetry described the daily routines. No extravagant or contentious rendering of the experience was presented. What was compelling, though, was simply the description of how he had experienced it all. It spoke volumes about the subjective experience of being a psychiatric inpatient. It seemed important to return with this account to the place where I was trained, to open space in one of the many staff meetings where we discussed issues related to our practice. But I hesitated, how would this account be taken? Would it be heard? Or would it be dismissed as a curiosity at best, or rejected as the work of a man with a psychiatric disorder at worst. I do not know the answer to that question yet.

All of these considerations are central to methodological approach because they speak of the dilemmas of who is allowed to speak. Under what framework is something accepted as valid, truthful, and relevant, or not? What procedures and languages must ornament human experience to be included in our deliberations? Why is it that a mental exam, a set of lab results, the answers to a survey, or a short phrase taken from a diagnostic manual each seems to have more authority than a man's poetic retelling of his experience?

Post-colonial methodology has pondered some of these issues and offered insights to how we can expand our research tools to give voice to those who are systematically deprived of it and are subjected to and by our professional gaze. The challenges that post-colonial research (Tuhiwai, 1999) has tried to address seem analogous in many ways to the efforts made by the psychiatric user movements.

For example, Tuhiwai (1999) writes about how research on indigenous peoples has, under the expressed intention of goodwill, probed, recollected, appropriated, and ultimately exploited the life experiences of other cultures. This research often romantically and idealistically simplifies or arrogantly dismisses the constructed "Other." All of which leads to dehumanization, to the objectification of the other's experience. Some of these impressions can be applied to much of the relationship between art and psychology and psychiatry. As Blumenthal's (1995) historical revision of the *American Journal of Insanity* (AJI) of the nineteenth century shows, the words of writers were routinely followed by "or in medical terms" (p. 4).

Blumenthal (1995) also mentions how the written works of asylum inmates often voiced their complaints of the inhuman conditions they were subjected to and how these challenges were easily dismissed by the medical institution:

“Some wrote extensively about their own experiences as victims of mental disease, while others spilled considerable ink decrying the iron hand of their keepers, who wrongfully restrained their liberty. But whatever the patients’ purposes in addressing the President, family members, asylum officials, friends, the Governor, and Brigham himself (an author of the AJI) their writings were published in the AJI to communicate the nature and extent to which their minds were impaired by mental illness” (p. 11).

Tuhiwai (1999) considers the need to understand and criticize four concepts in order to develop post-colonial methodologies. She considers them to be: (1) imperialism, or the imposition of a set of methods and research activities that appropriate and simplifies the other while not considering the impact of these actions on their lives; (2) humanity, or the use of terminology that disqualifies the human experiences of those studied as uncivilized, irrational, or only “partially human”; (3) writing, or the telling of stories only through the researchers or colonialists’ eyes and language; and finally (4) theory, or the totalizing tendency of colonial rendering of life. Thus, post-colonial studies may complement disability studies as they both address the themes of power and subjugations as well as possibilities for resistance (Nack Ngue, 2007). Other authors have explored the relationship between post-colonial and disability studies (Parek, 2007). Sherry (2007) though, points out that it is necessary to watch out for the differences of the experience of colonialism and disability that cannot be conflated. Post-colonial studies, he contends, offers tools to analyze issues of power, agency, and resistance, but perhaps tends to ignore issues of embodiment.

Post-colonial methodology would be that which allows “talking back,” “writing back,” or “researching back.” The methodology challenges the simplified, dehumanized, and universal-totalized notions of life controlled by those who position themselves as the most qualified to speak and write: In this case, the discourse of mental health professionals.

Audre Lorde writes: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (as cited in Tuhiwai, 1999, p. 19). But poets have a very potent tool at their disposition to begin the process of writing and talking back at the languages and powers that have sometimes been more oppressive than healing. In a sense, the de-colonizing potentials of the poems to be explored in this paper speak for themselves, as the task has already been done by the authors. Writing an essay to expand on the poems runs the risk of doing just what it criticizes: speaking for them. An analysis of the texts at the same time frames them and interprets them in a particular way that serves the author’s purpose.

I will state my purpose as clearly as possible. As a clinical and community psychologist, who has worked on issues relating the clinical with the social, and as a person who experienced as a student the wonders and the dramas of a psychiatric ward, I will link these poems and psychiatric users’ literature in a way that relays their words back to the academic and

professional settings where their words are not always heard. I will also explore the links that allow us to reflect on the multifaceted experience of being a psychiatric patient.

The four main poems I will be drawing from were written by three contemporary Venezuelan poets. Armando Rojas Guardia, who was born in 1949, is considered one of the country's main contemporary lyrical writers and in the 1980s was part of the poetry collective Tráfico. Among his many published works of poetry and essays are *El Dios de la Intemperie* (1985a), *Poemas de Quebrada de la Virgen* (1985b), *Antología Poética* (1993), and *El Esplendor y la Espera* (2000).

Hanni Ossott was born in Caracas in 1946. She worked for more than twenty years as a professor of literature at the Central University of Venezuela and published numerous books of poetry and literary criticism. She translated some of the works of Rainer María Rilke and Emily Dickinson into Spanish. Her poetry books include among others, *Hasta Que Llegue el Día y Huyan las Sombras* (1983), *Plegarias y Penumbbras* (1986), *El Reino Donde la Noche Se Abre* (1987), *Cielo, Tu Arco Grande* (1989), and *El Circo Roto* (1993). She died in 2002.

Martha Kornblith was born in Lima, Perú in 1959 and moved to Caracas at eleven years of age. She studied literature at the Universidad Central and was part of the poetry collective Eclesidra that was prominent in the 1990s in Venezuela. She published *Oraciones para un Dios Ausente* in 1995 before committing suicide in 1997. Two other poetry books have been published posthumously: *El Perdedor Se Lo Lleva Todo* (1997a) and *Sesión de Endodoncia* (1997b).

### Relationship with the Psychiatric Establishment

The works of these three poets span a varied array of themes, but all three make explicit references to the poet's psychiatric experiences. From Rojas Guardia (2005), I analyze a text titled, "La Desnudez del Loco" [The Nudity of the Madman], which was first published in the national newspaper, *El Nacional*. As mentioned before, I heard Rojas Guardia commenting and reading the text at an open recital in March, 2007. The poem "Pills" is taken from Ossott's (1993) book *El Circo Roto* [*The Broken Circus*] and Kornblith's (1995) poems "Jesse Jones" and "Monseratte Clinic" were taken from *Oraciones para un Dios Ausente* [*Prayers for an Absent God*]. I have translated the four poems from Spanish and included Guardia's in both English and Spanish as an appendix of the paper.

The poets dedicate some of their texts to psychiatrists (in Ossott's case, "Pills" is dedicated to psychiatrists in general and other poems of that book are dedicated to Dr. José Luis Vethencourth) or psychotherapists (Jean Marc Tausik, in the case of Rojas Guardia), and in some cases refer to psychiatric institutions (Clínica Moserratte, in the case of Kornblith). As mentioned in the introduction, Rojas Guardia explicitly referred to his stay at the psychiatric ward of the Hospital Clínico Universitario at the public reading of the poem "La Desnudez del Loco." The details of their psychiatric treatments are unknown to me and can only be guessed from the text. These details are not the main concern since this paper attempts to listen to their experience of the psychiatric system and not produce an "objective" review, but it can be argued that the specific contexts may be relevant to fully understand these experiences. I will deal only with what the poets have voluntarily shared through their writings or interviews.

## Suffering vs. Illness

All three poets, though specifically referring to the experiences in relation to psychiatric care, invoke references to personal breakdowns. For example, Ossott makes a note at the end of her poem that refers to the time and a place where her personal struggle with mental health problems began. The breakdowns involve elements of autonomy, health, identity, self-worth, interpersonal relations, and meaning. The significance of having a mental health issue serious enough to require hospitalization and/or psychiatric medication is enough to occupy a considerable space in these artists' work. Their poems address different aspects of the difficulties of these experiences. I will organize these into recurrent themes.

Anguish and suffering seem to be unavoidable aspects of these retellings. All three, in one way or another, refer to suffering rather than sickness. Ossott (1993) explicitly challenges the description of her situation as a sickness:

“Without a clue of the real sickness  
The sickness is living  
the only  
The sickness is the body  
and pills don't help too much” (lines 13-17)

Kornblith (1995) writes of fear, of loneliness, of hopelessness. The whole book is filled with resigned hopelessness. In other poems, she writes more specifically of rage. In the poem “Tell me Jesse Jones,” she speaks to a fantasized therapist and asks, “Is my hate analyzable?” (line 2). Rojas Guardia (2005) on the other hand, refers to madness and fevered mental states, but rather than expressing it as suffering, emphasizes more the suffering that comes from the stigmatization, control, and exclusion subjected to those who access these rapturous states. His poem is a rendering of life in a psychiatric ward, through the particular experience of having to take a shower at a specific hour with all the other patients:

“We went in groups to the bathroom, disempowered fraternity of bodies, dripping flesh, in the middle of the world – because our stay was a cosmic bad weather, the meridian and absolute orphanage:  
To see yourself nude in front of others, who are also nude, returning to the solar solitude of being a body standing in front of the eyes of others' scrutiny, without the well doing and covering shadow of shame:  
Only naked like guilty Adam with the sudden consciousness of being nude under the panoptic desolation of day, right on the axis of twelve o'clock” (lines 11-21)

Through this image, he challenges psychiatric constraint, but also societal constraints and internalized guilt that are related presumably to his breakdown. He, like Ossott, searches for another meaning to the word sickness, different from a medical description. These texts experientially express and link with critical perspectives on the oppressive gaze of psychiatry and the medical model (Cooper, 1967; Foucault, 1965, 1973; Goffman, 1961).

All three authors have been formally seen by doctors and nurses (as referred to in their poems), thus they have been diagnosed. Psychiatric explanations have been used to render their experiences comprehensible. Probably some of these explanations have been given to them. There is no method to confirm this fact, but it is often standard practice to receive a diagnosis. Yet these formulations do not seem to suffice, they are not the main reference in their poems that try to express and give sense to their experiences. Their relationship with psychiatric language seems at best uncomfortable. They play with this language in their poems, transforming it into something else. Rojas Guardia transmutes symptoms (e.g., hallucinations, delusions, depressions, phobias) into the “only precarious sheet” (line 109) with which the madman who ran off to follow Jesus is covered, thus undermining the medical language, and turning it into a cover for other mystical meanings, perhaps more helpful for the personal assimilation of the experience.

Kornblith’s approach is that of defiance. She appropriates psychiatric language and uses it ironically on occasion. To a fellow hospitalized patient who made empty promises of love she “showed him psychopathy” (line 50, “Montserrat Clinic”). In “Tell Me Jesse Jones,” of her doctor she asks, citing Barthes, “is my boredom my hysteria?” (line 14). Ossott (1993), on the other hand, produces a musical crescendo by listing the pills with which she presumably was being treated. The list produces an escalation of tension that could be likened to the frustrating repetition of taking pills which then contrasts with the question that is left in the air:

“one pill  
two pills  
three pills  
Dayamineral  
Lithium Carbonate  
Haldol  
Neubion  
Ornavit  
Rivotril 2 mg  
and the Doctor?” (lines 1-11)

### Resistance to Psychiatric Confinement

All of the texts deal primarily with the poets’ relationships to the psychiatric establishment. Texts vary in their emphases on different aspects of these experiences. But a few topics are shared among them all. The experience of confinement and of control is very present in Rojas Guardia’s and Kornblith’s works. Both refer to walls, imposed schedules, the lack of privacy, and the control and supervision of even simple daily tasks (such as restrictions on the use of silverware and making patients eat with their hands). Both refer to the constant search for life outside the walls. The lacks of liberty and autonomy are stressed as painful aspects of psychiatric treatment. Rojas Guardia’s poem is built around a patient’s rebellious attempts to bathe alone at the hour he personally desired and not at the scheduled time when all patients were led forcefully. His rebelliousness is not well received by the nurses and leads to imprisonment. He is subjected to solitary confinement in the “dungeon” where tools of control are used to force patients to conform. He reveals the use of strategies that suit the staff’s needs

rather than provide any healing, therapeutic, or calming function. The imposition of these rules and restrictions conveys an experience of oppression and impersonal, dehumanized relationships with the nurses and the doctors: “All under the showers, one by one... we undressed in a hurry (the nurse invited us to do it this way)” (lines 2, 7).

Kornblith (1995) employs irony in “Monserrat Clinic” to expose the same restrictions:

“We were allowed  
to get drunk with water to forget  
what we were not.  
Because in the end  
everything had lost its taste” (lines 1-6)

In her case, these two verses skilfully tie in with other sufferings. The drabness of the circumstance of her hospitalization is underlined by her internal debates: “...what we were not.” The despair of her personal shortcomings is intertwined with the difficult situation in the ward: “because in the end/ everything had lost its taste.” The dehumanized feeling she conveys appears only as an extension of the already depressive state in which she fell.

Medicalization and medication, therefore, seem to compound the impression that their sufferings are not being listened to as a human experience, but devalued and dismissed as symptoms. “and the doctor?” (line 11) asks Ossott, who pictures him as someone detached and incapable of addressing the real sources of her suffering. In her poem “Monserrat Clinic,” Kornblith refers to the patients’ idle hours waiting for the doctors, trying to act like “we still existed.” The need for others to offer support and meaning comes through clearly in this poem. The need to feel confirmation of existing before another’s sight, of being taken into account by the other at the time of grief is part of the plight registered in these texts. In “Jesse Jones,” Kornblith’s rage at being controlled, given medical appointments, and “dosified” runs parallel with her desire to establish an emotional relationship with Jesse Jones. She looked for love in medical meetings and made desperate attempts to be received and heard. She looks him up in the phone directory, calls, then hangs up.

The continuous presence of doctors and nurses, who are aloof and impose their rules and interpretations, is a theme in all of the texts. The dehumanizing effects impact a psychiatric user’s identity and moral standing, and have been documented by classical studies in the area such as Goffman’s (1961) work and reappear in these poets’ renderings. It is perhaps, the most poignant critique of psychiatry and clinical psychology—professions that are based on listening but that are incapable of listening to anything outside of their own jargon. Those who resist are forced to submit to power, as Kornblith (1995) writes of a fellow patient:

“There was a man  
he gave me Laing and Cooper  
and although he preached antipsychiatry  
he didn’t survive the insult  
of the medical conjures” (lines 41-45)

The authors are also aware of and take from the already classical texts that have questioned psychiatric practice as the reference to Laing (1967) and Cooper (1967) exemplifies. Rojas Guardia makes veiled references to Foucault, as well as more explicit analogies to concentration camps.

This approach contrasts with moments where their cries were contained, when they found someone who was capable of hearing. The fact that Rojas Guardia and Ossott dedicate some of their texts to their psychotherapists is significant. Kornblith states that Clínica Monserrate was not bad, just good and bad. Solidarity and camaraderie with other patients appear as the most benevolent aspects of the hospitalization. Rojas Guardia (2005) identifies with a youngster who has been locked in solitary confinement. He finds in the youngster a universal link to all who have experienced states of madness. He constructs a unifying ethos that helps to resist stigmatization and offers dignified interpretations of these experiences:

“We were and are, like him, those fevered searchers of what we haven’t lost, the perpetually perplexed before the real, that to others is only unthinkable – a simple magnitude of custom – those who, thanks to a privileged suffering, see the world upside down, the collective from a fanatical periphery, at man with the virginal startle of amazement, at the whole spinning universe with the fear of being the first human in front of fire or the exclamation of an oceanic plain (we live on atavistic terrors that others hold back from, to be safe of the surprise of the horizon on the immobile Garden of Olives)” (lines 154-165)

Kornblith (1995) also finds a humane connection with fellow patients and is able to gain some solace. She also shares her “symptoms” with others and is able to interpret them in affirming terms:

“My friend and I spoke  
of dog concerts at night,  
of barks that we thought  
were calling us.  
We discovered that delusions  
were a way to hold on  
to the ledges.  
We orchestrated dances  
with music that didn’t sound.  
Except for the hours of fear  
it was also possible to laugh” (lines 56-66)

### Search for Meaning

All of the poems search for meaning outside the medical discourse. In many ways, the poets are deeply engaged in an effort to give shape and meaning to their mental anguish.



Rojas Guardia's search for meaning is a constant in his poetry. He has been classified as a mystical poet and in interviews states the wish to be able to express his "poetic vision of the world" (Márquez, 2000). His poem is a mystical reinterpretation of his psychiatric hospitalization and the experience of being different. He takes freely from the Bible and from Shakespeare, searching for analogies and interpretative metaphors with which to rethink the experience of madness. The image of the young man running from the mob with only a sheet allows him to suggest numerous links to the pariah, the persecuted, and the condemned, that the experience of being subjected to the normalizing gaze of the medical establishment and the stigmatizing interpretation that society commonly makes of madness. Through this image of the mystical rapt, he is able to offer a different interpretation of his experience.

The struggle he presents is also the struggle with the shame of being different. Overboe (2007), from a disability studies perspective, has termed this shame the "normative shadows." That is the "feeling... that one is constantly being judged according to different criteria of normality" (p. 229). Guilt appears over and over again in his poem as one of the obstacles to overcome, a "scarring" of consciousness, the internalized "legislative" gaze before which he feels compelled to dress the "comfortable dresses of submission." Overboe's retelling of the hospitalization and his use of metaphors opens space for a multiple and mysterious reading of the experience instead of the medical, closed, and simplified version. It also offers a dignified interpretation of the harsh experience of maddening passions as well as stigmatization.

Ossott's poetry has been defined as a constant exploration of the meaning of existence, sickness, identity, and the soul (Saraceni, 2003). In the poem "Pills," Ossott not only reinterprets the medical reading of sickness, but also closes the text by stating that it was written based on her personal experiences that began on a particular date (1980). In the book where this poem appears, constant references to psychiatry and hospitalization are made, so it is clearly an attempt to reorganize those experiences. All of her writings are highly influenced by a personal search to comprehend her existence; access to her irrational experiences occupies an important part of it. In the essay, "Defence of My Poetry," (1993) she writes:

"The poet then has to descend from the heights of the light of consciousness to that intermediate zone of dawn. There she will enjoy the feast that the gods have offered. Because a poet, no doubt about it, is a creature touched by the gods. But is also a creature in danger of succumbing. That's why poetry is the practice of a ritual, a litany that can save the poet. Poetry is risk, because it's soul. All poetry is apparently inconclusive, provisional, equivocal and sombre" (p. 1).

Ossott uses a plethora of gods to express her relation to the different dimensions of her experience. Kornblith also looks towards a very personal interpretation of spirituality for comfort. But for her, this comfort is ephemeral. On one hand she prayed to "a god that wasn't mine," presumably having to subject herself to a Catholic environment, in spite of being of Jewish origin. Kornblith's spirituality does not seem to ultimately contain her experience. In interviews, she spoke of feeling essentially without roots (Arráiz Luca, 1994). Only literature or "words" seem to offer a sense of comfort and meaning to her. Interestingly, Kornblith (1995) relates attachments to figures of authority (e.g., her boss, the doctor) in "Tell Me Jesse Jones" to her search for "the word," condensing both:

“You are the word:  
The more it rejects me the more I search for it,  
when I find it, it may comfort or abuse me,  
it stays for only an instant, and then goes with some other.  
You are the word:  
You stone me because I’m foul-mouthed,  
I take literary advantage of you.  
I want to fuck you.” (lines 90-97)

The need to erotically engage the object of her attachments is fused with her need to find “the word,” perhaps the need to articulate her emptiness, sufferings, and lack, but also the need to be physically comforted. She seems to use eroticism to search for control of these relationships. Her constant, desperate search for connection and for “the word” appears in both texts. Poetry is the medium through which this search is conducted. In “Montserrat Clinic” she writes:

“For the wiser  
poetry was a place  
where to orchestrate our escape” (lines 38-40)

There are moments when her desperation finds containment through her writings and she’s able to calm her angst:

“Since then  
God is someone  
that resurfaces in those scribbles” (lines 90-92)

But unfortunately, that comfort was not always enough; her poetry cannot be read without the painful backdrop of her suicide.

### Relation with Survivor Literature

Survivor literature from the psychiatric user’s movement, as well as other critical studies of psychiatric institutions (Goffman, 1961), allows us to draw many parallels with the words of Rojas Guardia, Ossott, and Kornblith and helps to amplify their work. Survivor literature refers to the first person accounts that have appeared from ex-patients, consumers, and psychiatric survivors. Such writing attempts to reclaim the rights of survivors to describe their own suffering and to narrate their own experiences of the psychiatric system (Adame, 2006). This literature has been supported by the psychiatric user’s and the mental health consumer’s movements. These movements have sought to give voice to psychiatric users and challenge oppressive practices.

Survivor literature helps to challenge professional discourse. As a practitioner, I have found this literature compelling and powerful in shifting the focus of the “therapeutic experience” that has been described in professional literature. Instead of focusing on theoretical and abstract considerations, it forces one to ponder the concrete; one must look straight at the

human condition within the therapeutic enterprise. In this literature, the many daily, sometimes simple, inhumane practices that are veiled under seemingly well-intentioned cures are rendered visible. Thus, the limitations of the therapeutic discourse are challenged.

The testimonies of survivors often criticize and reject the coercive nature of many therapeutic settings. For example, they might address how the experience of hospitalization most often involves the loss of choice for a psychiatric user. The person's sense of agency is disavowed and his or her potential contribution to recovery is disdained (Romme & Escher, 2000). One survivor recalls that among her experiences of hospitalization there was one in particular that helped her to feel more empowered because by accident she came to literally hold the key to the ward:

“I did not really think that the nurses were going to lock me in against my will, but it was reassuring to know that I could get out if they did. I think it illustrates well a paradox of mental health care: the need for containment without imprisonment – a fine line” (Holloway, 1999, p. 51).

Even if some of the literature expresses the need to sometimes be in a containing surrounding with access to caregivers, the level of containment plays a crucial role in a patient's experience of autonomy or invalidation.

Like Rojas Guardia, poet Clay (1999) recalls the feeling of being scrutinized and controlled. When asking for a knife and a fork to eat her meal, she receives a large spoon instead. When she complained that she couldn't eat that way, the answer she received was, “Everybody else does... do you think you are something special?” (p. 20). Lack of privacy is also mentioned in the poem.

Perhaps the most repeated element in these testimonies is the disavowal of humanity imposed by the medical discourse (Adame & Knudson, 2007; Champ, 1999; Clay, 1999; Davies, 1999; Manos 1999). Medication plays a complex role in this equation, because even though some poets mention the calming benefit of some drugs, there are a series of complicated effects brought on by the “cure” (Perkins, 1999). The first effect mentioned is the strong feeling of having lost control of one's body. This reaction is especially traumatic if the effects are not brought to the attention of the user and explained beforehand, as many testimonies report (Davies, 1999; Manos, 1999). Patients also complain about the tendency to consider pills the main source of treatment, rendering them passive in the process and offering only a biomedical explanation to their experiences. Through these medical procedures, the person's experience can be completely dismissed and therefore dehumanized, and medical staff can begin to relate to categories and symptoms instead of people (Romme & Escher, 2000). Davies' (1999) writing echoes Ossott's call to the doctor when she expresses:

“One night I instigated a role-play of our madness and we jumped on the beds and proclaimed ‘This is an asylum and we're mad women’. We objectified our madness and made fun of it, also making a mockery of the staff who were so terrified of accepting it. The only interaction we had with nursing staff was through pills, food and ECT” (p. 108).

Or Clay (1999) who reports:

“Dr. Pacella would not talk with me about anything more profound than my eating and sleeping patterns, and our visits at West Hill never lasted more than ten minutes. Never once was I allowed to describe what had happened in my mind and heart or to express what it meant to me” (p. 24).

These limiting conversations coupled with detailed scrutiny and loss of freedom contribute to experiencing a psychological breakdown as a profound loss of dignity and self-worth. All poets report a shattering experience of self-doubt, where previous personal attainments were put into question, professional status was threatened, and perhaps worst of all, moral standing was also diminished. This is not to say that the impact of an emotional breakdown can be simplistically attributed to medical attempts to treat it. But the difficult experience of the breakdown is compounded by the social response of stigmatization and dehumanization that medical practice sometimes perpetuates.

In this context, the process of giving meaning to the experience becomes central. Over and over again, survivor literature refers to trying to understand the breakdown, most of the time at odds with simplistic biomedical formulations. Framing it as pathology served to disavow aspects of the experience. In Adame and Knudson’s (2007) analysis of four survivor testimonies, they write:

“The survivors interviewed rejected the notion that the problems in their lives and various experiences of altered consciousness were the result of a biochemical imbalance. Instead, they connected personal problems with political, societal, and existential ones, such as oppression, discrimination, unemployment, poverty and life’s lack of meaning and purpose” (p. 19).

Similarly Barker, Campbell, and Davidson (1999), in their conclusion of the collection of survivor stories, mention how spirituality seems to come up again and again as a way of making sense and reorganizing one’s sense of self in the midst of profound mental turmoil. This search for meaning and making sense of the experience outside of medical discourse is evidently present in the poems discussed here. Rojas Guardia’s rendering in particular seems to fit with Adame and Knudson’s (2007) notion that survivors acknowledged the suffering as, “An important part of their lives and identities and not something to recover from per se. Most of them felt that if they had anything to recover from, it was the mental health system” (p. 10).

In the process of integrating mental health difficulties, support is undoubtedly considered crucial by the sufferers, but only certain types of support: that which was considerate and not disempowering. Here is where strong bonds are sometimes developed among other people suffering from common ailments. Many psychiatric users mention the important role played by other in-patients during hospitalization or the supportive nature of user groups. This also comes up in the texts mentioned and I argue that the abstract community of poets serves this function in the works of Ossott, Kornblith, and Rojas Guardia, who frequently take from other poets who have also shared their mental health problems. Writing provides the opportunity for engaging with a wider community that can help to speak about and make sense of the experience.

Barker, Campbell, and Davidson (1999) quote the words of Brownbill, another service user, that summarize splendidly many of the needs these voices express:

“They tend to want quiet, comfort, nice surroundings, being close to family and friends, clear information, someone they can trust, somewhere where it is OK to scream, practical help and sometimes medication if necessary... So much of mental health care provision is imposed from the supposed well to the supposed sick. It is time we took our customers seriously. If we were running a shop with as much arrogance regarding knowing what people want, we would be out of business in no time at all” (p.183).

### The Voices of the Poets

I believe the texts of Rojas Guardia, Ossott, and Kornblith offer unique opportunities of “talking back” to a discourse community that, although fascinated by the products of poets, still seems reluctant to listen and take seriously what they have to say about the experience of clinical psychology and psychiatry. The eloquence of these writers helps to expose the dehumanizing aspects of clinical treatment and also offers room to reinterpret and rethink the particular challenges of living with mental health problems.

Their words are not right or wrong in any definitive sense. They are not written for science, but for art. They offer an opportunity to question, to wonder about, and to experience life in its most perplexing occasions. They also offer an opportunity to reflect on what we have come to label pathology and therapy. I contend that not only do these works strive to offer testimony to the dehumanizing aspects of psychiatric treatment, but perhaps more important still they challenge simplistic and comfortable notions about what we contend normality and health to be. These works offer the capacity to disturb, as in Rojas Guardia’s words referring to the disciple who undresses and follows Christ:

“Disturb the habits – even that of dressing as everyone else-, to exile himself from the common place where collective reason feeds to turn himself in- only with his subterranean cloak, rebellious axiom of the proscribed, to the condemned logic of the other side, the hidden face of the real seen and lived inversely, against the grain.

That is what being a disciple meant to him.

And it still does.” (lines 121-128)

Rojas Guardia, Ossott, and Kornblith’s words not only shed light on the psychiatric enterprise, but they go further to call into question and disturb many of the dominant, unquestioned views of what a good life is.

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## The Nudity of the Madman

By Armando Rojas Guardia  
Translated by Manuel Llorens

To Jean-Marc Tauszik

And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where *art* thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I *was* naked; and I hid myself. And he said, Who told thee that thou *wast* naked? (Gen 3, 9-11)

### 1

Bath time was at twelve

All under the shower, one by one

The walls: fading yellow

Midday's sun on the windows

We left the patio behind, the immobile trees and the rotund empire of the August light

We undressed in a hurry (the nurse invited us to do it this way).

Together and nude before the four faucets from where the ancestral therapy applicable in these cases flowed: cold water.

We went in groups to the bathroom, disempowered fraternity of bodies, dripping flesh, in the middle of the world – because our stay was a cosmic bad weather, the meridian and absolute orphanage:

To see yourself nude in front of others, who are also nude, returning to the solar solitude of being a body standing in front of the eyes of others' scrutiny, without the well doing and covering shadow of shame:

Only naked like guilty Adam with the sudden consciousness of being nude under the panoptic desolation of day, right on the axis of twelve o'clock.

Yes, the sun in the windows was also a coherent and vertical eye: the sight of God, omniscient, from which we desired to flee, the only escape to not feel the shame of being always seen nude, with pouring sweat.

And the water of the shower falls over the flagrant and shared nudity and does not lessen the burning of that live Eye stuck in the pulp of being man, that sun without eyelids shining on the skin soaked by the stream of a great liquid fire.

Our feet splashed in the puddles that the cracks on the floor helped to surface around them and a disgust flowers towards the mouth:

Nausea of corrupt water that we step on, of those viscous puddles, of the sticky humidity, the smell of urine, the dirty tiles, disgust of so much genital helplessness in the clear centre of the body while the paranoid stupor of the world continues bombarding with eyes and more eyes inside the totality of the heat.

We finally began to leave, one after the other.

The trees moved. August shone, precise, in the dense light that gravitated around the patio.

Lunch awaited (the food was taken with our hands: silverware could mean suicide attempts).

This jail ration on our fingers became another, embarrassed way of being perpetually watched – ridiculous now, retrieving a fistful of rice with the clumsiness of those who still haven't gotten used to eating this way-, at each bitten mouthful the nude panic of Adam at midday that in the bath was sensorial certainty, clairvoyance.

## 2

But he didn't want to bathe at the hour we all had to. He wanted to be beneath the shower at his own personal schedule, unforeseeable: in the morning or the afternoon, not at twelve. What motives led to this strange desire that automatically implied indiscipline, a heterodoxy of habits violently breaking the imposed norm of the code?

Maybe it was the need, the urge to escape, on time and off time, from that burning Eye before which we were all nude, to refresh with the impetus of water that terrible fever that exposed our solitary shame to the gaze of others, the unique and multiple Eye examining there, in the heat, scrutinizing us, examining us. Maybe it was the call to feel permanently hygienic, clean from any corporeal contamination where to project the timely persecution of guilt, that of being essentially and not circumstantially dirty. Maybe he wanted to bathe alone, away from the promiscuous convergence that reunited the others around the stream, of that crowd where the whole private, intimate perception that the body has of itself was abolished and sacrificed to the mere animal fact of being not together but juxtaposed, like the horde and the herd. Or was it that the desire for a bath not subjected to regulations consisted in the need to install an individual space, oxygenatedly free –to be naked in front of the water also has a sense of physical freedom, plenitude- in which convention, that which is accustomed and institutionalized adjusts itself to the vivacious dictates of the body, and not it to them, penetrating in this manner in an unheard of independence and autonomy?

The nurse disliked this behaviour that broke the rules. Brandishing his right hand the iron that he used to stamp through the gesture of his authority among us, one morning he took the boy –nude, of course- from his personal bath and led him to the dungeon (because in this house there was a dungeon) and left him there for hours. I've always wondered what this guy felt in that stinking room, without any furniture in between the humid walls, sitting or laying on the gelid cement, looking at the unread clarity that amassed without grace in the crystals of the high skylight, the only possible contact with the sun that, outside, feasted in the patio and with the morning breeze and the absurdly remote sky at that hour of the day. The prisoner was nude.

Another nudity, different now from the one sought to clean your own body in the holy water, under the shower, was now offered in that dungeon: that of being without cover in the gelid humidity and that of being excluded, being condemned.

## 3

A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind. (Mark 14, 50-52)

We, nude, in the bathroom –the bathroom was the converging summary of all our life in that house and the kid nude in his prison were and still are that man that Mark infiltrates, surreptitiously in the Gethsemane of then and now.

Who was that youngster who followed Jesus with the lunar flesh covered only by the one cloth of blanket that night of sweat and blood, of unheard cries, of betrayal of the kiss, of torches and groups, tunics and swords, rumour of steps in the bushes, piled up shadows on the prowl, humiliation and arrest and, at the end, stubborn roosters at sunrise?

What unthinkable passion can guide someone to go out to the rejection and threat, under the universal indifference of the stars and only with a solitary sheet for clothes?

Was there not fever in the mind of the young man?

Didn't his presence here and his dress, obey a different consciousness from the ordinary, a vision of Jesus that did not fit into the official regime: the custom?

Mark writes, with precision, that he followed him.

He followed then Jesus as a disciple, as others did in his land, as we must now do one day after the other.

A disciple was, illuminated by a mental ardour that took him to expose himself to danger and disturb the habits – even that of dressing as everyone else-, to exile himself from the common place where collective reason feeds to turn himself in- only with his subterranean cloak, rebellious axiom of the proscribed, to the condemned logic of the other side, the hidden face of the real seen and lived inversely, against the grain.

That is what being a disciple meant to him.

And it still does.

He escaped in the nude. Only nude could he escape the mass avid of blood, the insomniac troop, the confusion of voices and shouting, the pushes, the insults, escape from the societal hour of the law looking for a transgressor, the prisoner of always.

His nudity was momentary liberty to escape from the gregarious plot that needed an expiatory victim, to the eternal signalled of not being like everyone else: the different one.

But he didn't flee, not from the Passion.

He was completely – his presence in the story confirms it- inscribed in the tragedy that Thursday night designed for any disciple of the condemned: I imagine him walking now nude at first at the edge of the nettle that in the field lacerated his skin, then in the streets before the unanimous amazement of the neighbours, the passer-bys, damning perhaps his lack of shame, asking where was he arriving from at this hour without clothes.

His nudity was observed, scrutinized with objecting curiosity, meticulous.

What did he feel, nude, arriving at his room and to think of the house of Caifas, filled with people?

Maybe he too heard the rooster's call in the nubile shame of the dawn.

We all were and are the evangelical youngster:

Twelve o'clock under the shower and the morning in the dungeon make up an only frozen night, a shared agonic Gethsemane.

We were and are, like him, those fevered searchers of what we haven't lost, the perpetually perplexed before the real, that to others is only unthinkable –a simple magnitude of custom- those who, thanks to a privileged suffering, see the world upside down, the collective from a fanatical periphery, at man with the virginal startle of amazement, at the whole spinning universe with the fear of being the first human in front of fire or the exclamation of an oceanic plain (we live on atavistic terrors that others hold back from, to be safe of the surprise of the horizon on the immobile Garden of Olives).

No, it has never been easy for us to live.

Filled with our metaphysical stupor, our dissonance before the Law, our vocational dissent, our tangential oblique ways of being members of the species, our metaphorical following- covered by only a precarious sheet of the hallucinations, delusions, depressions, phobias, the mania.

That who was spoken of in these terms:

He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him? (John, 10,20) and crueller still: When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." (Mark 3, 21) –

Madness as metaphor and image of the following of Jesus:

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God (1, Cor 3, 19) An unconscious way of following him that can become voluntary if one becomes conscious of the grace that receiving this sickness is, as an invitation to live another way, with fear and tremor before the miracle of existing every day, under the sky.

And nude. We are nude, as the youngster, in the bathroom or at the middle of the dungeon escaped, naked of the shared use of social reason that demands victims and nails, naked, on the wood he who, because of his difference carries all the guilt of those that are like the common man, the identical form.

Madness is the nudity through which we escape from the routine of this legislative reason that produces, marginalizing us, the pariahs, the stained, the impure –T'was crazy King Lear who, because of him being it, could pronounce confidently before Edgar from the solitary majesty of his delusion: None does offend, none, I say, none, I'll able 'em. Madness as the acquitting innocence that undresses men of their faults.

But the freeing nudity knows well the paradox of also being that other, our own nudity now perceived as the stigma of being examined by the eyes of others, by the pupil of the Other, in front of who that same nudity leaves us unprotected, observed by the alien gaze that scars the consciousness of self, to its marrow.

And the naked man who didn't care anymore about the comfortable dresses of submission now seeks desperately, to be dressed by the approval of that gaze that scratches, enslaving him.

Both nuditities are intertwined in the body of the only madman.

And I ask my self if health, the only possible and desired healing, which doesn't supply or offer sanatoriums with their multitude of showers of cold water and dungeons for the dissident desire (While I was there I thought of Auschwitz, of Dachau?) consists of breaking the inextricable plot that confuses one with the other:  
the nude freedom of Adam in the Garden and that same nudity already ashamed.

## La desnudez del loco

Armando Rojas Guardia

*A Jean-Marc Tauszik*

(...) El Señor Dios llamó al hombre -¿Dónde estás? Él contestó: -Te oí en el jardín, me entró miedo porque estaba desnudo (...) Y el Señor Dios le replicó: -Y ¿quién te ha dicho que estabas desnudo? (Gen 3, 9-11)

### 1

La hora de bañarse era a las doce.

Bajo la ducha todos, uno a uno.

Las paredes: amarillentas, desteñidas.

El sol del mediodía en las ventanas.

Atrás dejábamos el patio, los árboles inmóviles y el rotundo imperio de la luz de agosto.

Nos desvestíamos con prisa (El enfermero conminaba a hacerlo de ese modo).

Juntos y desnudos ante los cuatro grifos de los que brotaba la ancestral terapia aplicable en estos casos: agua fría.

Llegábamos en grupos hasta el baño, desamparada fraternidad de cuerpos, goteantes carnes, en la mitad del mundo -porque estar allí era una cósmica intemperie, la orfandad meridiana y absoluta: verse a sí mismo, desnudo ante los otros, desnudos también ellos, devolviéndonos a la solar ingrimitud de ser un cuerpo parado allí frente a los ojos del escrutinio ajeno, sin la sombra bienhechora y cobijante del pudor:

sólo desnudo como el Adán culpable con la conciencia súbita de estarlo en la desolación panóptica del día, justo en el eje de las doce en punto.

Sí, el sol en las ventanas también era un ojo coherente y vertical:

la mirada de Dios, omnividente, de la que deseábamos huir, sólo escapar para no sentir la vergüenza de ser vistos siempre desnudos, con el sudor manante.

Y el agua de la ducha va cayendo sobre la desnudez flagrante y compartida y no aminora el ardor de ese Ojo vivo clavado en la pulpa de ser hombre, ese sol sin párpados brillando sobre la piel empapada por el chorro de un gran incendio líquido.

Nuestros pies chapotean en los pozos que las grietas del piso hacen aflorar en torno a ellos y un asco en flor asciende hasta la boca:

náusea del agua corrompida que pisamos, de esos viscosos charcos, de la humedad pringosa, del olor a orina, de las losas sucias, asco de tanto desamparo genital en el centro nítido del cuerpo mientras el paranoico estupor del mundo permanece acribillado de ojos y más ojos dentro de la totalidad de la cánicula.

Íbamos por fin saliendo, unos tras otros.

Cabeceaban los árboles. Agosto refulgía, preciso, en la luz densa que gravitaba alrededor del patio.

El almuerzo aguardaba (la comida era tomada con las manos: los cubiertos podían significar intentos de suicidio).

Y esa ración de cárcel en los dedos venía a ser otra manera, avergonzada, de ser siempre observados -ahora ridículos, asiendo un puñado de arroz con la torpeza del que no se habitúa a comerlo de ese modo-, en cada bocado masticando el pánico desnudo de Adán a mediodía que en el baño fue certeza sensorial, clarividencia.

## 2

Pero él no quería bañarse a la hora en que todos debíamos hacerlo. Deseaba estar bajo la ducha de acuerdo a un horario personal, imprevisible: por la mañana o por la tarde, no a las doce. ¿Cuáles motivos conducían a ese raro deseo que implicaba automáticamente indisciplina, una heterodoxia de hábitos violentando el código impuesto, normativo?

Quizá era la necesidad, la urgencia de escapar, a tiempo y a destiempo, de aquel Ojo calcinante ante el cual todos estábamos desnudos, de refrescar con el ímpetu del agua esa fiebre atroz que exponía nuestra íngrima vergüenza a la mirada de los otros, del Otro único y múltiple oteándonos allí, en caliente, escudriñándonos, examinándonos. Acaso era el llamado a sentirse permanentemente higiénico, limpio de cualquier contaminación corporal en la cual se proyectara la puntual acechanza de la culpa, la de ser -y no sólo la de estar sucio. Tal vez quería bañarse a solas, alejado de la promiscua convergencia que nos reunía a los demás alrededor del chorro, de aquel hacinamiento donde toda la privada, la íntima percepción que tiene el cuerpo de sí mismo era abolida y sacrificada al mero hecho animal de estar no ya juntos sino yuxtapuestos como en la horda y el rebaño. ¿O ese anhelo de baño no sujeto a reglamentos consistía en el ansia de instaurar un espacio individual, oxigenadamente libre -estar desnudo en medio del agua guarda también un sentido de libertad física, plena- dentro del cual la convención, lo estatuido y la costumbre se amoldaran a los dictados vivaces del cuerpo, y no éstos a ellos, penetrando, así, en una autonomía, en una independencia insólitas?

Al enfermero le disgustó esa conducta al margen de las reglas. Blandiendo con la mano derecha el rejo que utilizaba para rubricar gestualmente su autoridad entre nosotros, una mañana sacó al muchacho -desnudo, por supuesto- de su baño personal y lo condujo al calabozo (porque había en ese caserón un calabozo) y lo encerró allí durante horas. Siempre me he preguntado lo que ese compañero sentiría en aquella habitación hedionda, sin un mueble, en medio de los muros húmedos, sentado o acostado sobre el cemento helado, mirando la desleída claridad que se



apelmazaba sin gracia en los cristales de un alto tragaluz, único contacto posible con el sol que, afuera, festejaba al patio, y con el viento matutino, y con el cielo absurdamente remoto a esa hora del día. Estaba desnudo el prisionero.

Otra desnudez, distinta a la buscada para lavar el propio cuerpo en el agua lustral, bajo la ducha, le era ahora ofrecida dentro de aquel calabozo: la de estar sin abrigo en la gélida humedad, y la de estar excluido, siendo un réprobo.

### 3

Un joven lo iba siguiendo, cubierto tan sólo con una sábana. Le echaron mano, pero él, soltando la sábana, se escapó desnudo. (Mc 14, 50-52)

Nosotros, desnudos, en el baño -el baño era el resumen convergente de toda nuestra vida en esa casay el muchacho desnudo en su prisión éramos y aún somos aquel hombre que Marcos infiltra, subrepticio, en el Getsemaní de entonces y de ahora.

¿Quién era aquel joven que seguía a Jesús con la carne lunar cubierta apenas por el único ropaje de una sábana en esa noche de sudor de sangre, de inescuchada súplica, de la traición del beso, de antorchas y grupos, túnicas y espadas, rumor de pasos entre la maleza, amontonadas sombras al acecho, humillación y arresto y, al final, los tercos gallos del amanecer?

¿Qué pasión inaudita puede conducir a alguien a salir hacia el oprobio y la amenaza, bajo la indiferencia universal de las estrellas con sólo una íngrima sábana por ropa?

¿No había fiebre en la mente de ese joven?

¿No obedecía su presencia allí, y su atavío, a una conciencia distinta a la ordinaria, a una visión de Jesús que no cabía en el tácito régimen oficial: lo acostumbrado?

Marcos señala, con exactitud, que lo seguía.

Seguía, pues, a Jesús como un discípulo, como lo hacían algunos en su patria, como hay que hacerlo ahora, un día tras otro.

Un discípulo era, iluminado por un ardor mental que lo llevaba a exponerse al peligro, a trastocar los hábitos -incluso el de vestirse como todos-, a autoexiliarse del lugar común del que la razón colectiva se alimenta para entregarse -únicamente con su sábanaal subterráneo, rebelde axioma del Proscrito, a la réproba lógica del envés, la cara oculta de lo real visto y vivido a la inversa, a contrapelo.

Eso significaba, para él, ser un discípulo.

Y eso significa todavía.

Se escapó desnudo. Sólo desnudo podía huir de la muchedumbre ávida de sangre, la soldadesca insomne, la confusión de voces y de gritos, los empujones, los insultos, huir de la hora societaria de la ley buscando al Transgresor, al Reo de siempre.

Su desnudez fue momentánea libertad para escapar de la gregaria trama que necesitaba a su

víctima expiatoria, al señalado eterno con la culpa de no ser como todos: el distinto.

Pero no huía, no, de la Pasión.

Estaba todo él -su presencia en el relato lo confirma- inscrito en la tragedia que la noche del jueves diseñaba para cualquier discípulo del Réprobo:

lo imagino andando ahora desnudo primero al ras de las ortigas que en el monte le laceraban la piel, luego en las calles ante el unánime asombro de vecinos, transeúntes, maldiciendo acaso su impudicia, preguntándose de dónde vendría sin ropas a esas horas.

Su desnudez era observada, escudriñada con curiosidad objetante, minuciosa.

¿Qué sintió, desnudo, al llegar a su cuarto y pensar en la casa de Caifás, llena de gente? Quizá escuchó él también el canto de los gallos en la vergüenza núbil de la aurora.

Nosotros todos éramos y somos aquel evangélico muchacho:

las doce del día bajo la regadera y la mañana en el calabozo configuran una única noche detenida, un mismo Getsemaní agónico.

Éramos y somos, como él, aquellos afiebrados buscadores de lo que no se nos ha perdido, los perpetuos perplejos ante lo real, que para los demás es únicamente sólito -una simple magnitud de la costumbre-, los que, merced a un privilegio padeciente, ven al mundo al revés, al colectivo desde una periferia contumaz, al hombre con el virgen sobresalto del asombro, al universo entero girando en el pavor del primer ser humano frente al fuego o la exclamación de una llanura oceánica (vivimos de atávicos terrores que los otros se escamotean a sí mismos, para estar a salvo de la estupefacción del firmamento sobre el inmóvil Jardín de los Olivos).

No, nunca fue fácil vivir para nosotros.

Llenos de nuestro metafísico estupor, nuestra disonancia ante la Ley, nuestra subversión vocacional, nuestra manera tangencial, oblicua, de ser miembros de la especie, nuestro seguimiento metafórico -cubiertos por una única sábana precaria en las alucinaciones, el delirio, la depresión, las fobias, la maníade Aquél de quien se habló de esta manera: está loco de atar, ¿por qué lo escuchan? (Jn 10, 20) y más cruelmente todavía: sus parientes fueron a echarle mano, porque se decía que no estaba en sus cabales (Mc 3, 21) -La locura como metáfora e imagen del seguimiento de Jesús: pues la sabiduría de este mundo es locura para Dios (1 Cor 3, 19) Un modo inconsciente de seguirlo que puede convertirse en voluntario si uno toma conciencia de la gracia que ha sido recibir la enfermedad como invitación a vivir de otra manera, con temor y temblor ante el milagro de existir todos los días, bajo el cielo.

Y desnudos. Estamos desnudos, como el joven, en el baño o en mitad del calabozo escapados, desnudos del uso compartido de la razón social que exige víctimas y clava, desnudo, en el madero al que por ser diferente carga todas las culpas de los que son iguales al rasero común, a la horma idéntica.

La locura es aquella desnudez a través de la cual nos escapamos de la cotidianidad de esa razón legislativa que fabrica, marginándolos, a los parias, los manchados, los impuros -Fue el loco Rey Lear quien, por serlo, pudo sentenciar ante un Edgar confidente desde la desolada majestad de su delirio:

Nadie es culpable, nadie, digo que nadie: yo seré su fiador La locura como inocencia absolutoria que desviste a los hombres de sus culpas.

#### 4

Pero esa desnudez libérrima conoce la paradoja de ser también la otra, la propia desnudez ya percibida como maldición al ser examinada por los ojos de los otros, por la pupila del Otro frente a la cual nos desprotege ese mismo estar desnudos, observados por la visión ajena que se lla en la conciencia de sí, hasta su médula.

Y el desnudo al que ya no le importaba el cómodo ropaje de la sujeción busca ahora, desesperadamente, ser vestido por la aprobación de esa mirada que lo escarba, esclavizándolo.

Las dos desnudeces se entrelazan dentro del cuerpo único del loco.

Y me pregunto si acaso la salud, la sola curación posible y deseable que no aportan ni aprontan sanatorios con sus multitudinarios baños de agua fría y calabozos para el deseo disidente (¿Pensé, estando allí, en Auschwitz, en Dachau?) consiste en romper la trama inextricable que confunde la una con la otra:

la libertad desnuda de Adán en el Jardín y esa misma desnudez ya avergonzada.

{ Armando Rojas Guardia, *Papel Literario, El Nacional*, 5 Febrero, 2005