A black and white photograph of a man with a mustache and glasses, wearing a striped shirt, pointing his right index finger directly at the camera. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or door.

Are You Sleeping,
Mr. President?

Caupolicán Ovalles

FUNDACIÓN CAUPOLICÁN OVALLES

ARE YOU SLEEPING,
MR. PRESIDENT?

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Fundación Caupolicán Ovalles

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Translation: Marco Jiménez.
Proofreading: Luis Miguel Isava.
“Trash Research”’s translation: Patricia G. Heredia P.
“Trash Research”’s proofreading: Samantha Ruggiero.

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SOME CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT POETRY, THE POEM AND THE PRESIDENTIAL LETHARGY

Miguel Marcotrigiano

Some poems are born with a lucky star and suffice to themselves alone to occupy a place in the reader's memory, from where almost anything won't remove them. At most, they will remain asleep, like in hibernation, until a fortuitous association wakes them up so they can gain prominence as forcefully as the first time.

These texts take many ways to arrive to the place where they'll find shelter. Sometimes, these paths obey to the design of a style, of a certain way, but most of the times (in a definitely higher percentage), such track is paved by what the poem says. Some will say that it's a mixture between both energies, between both elements, and it's very likely for them to be right. Even if it has always been doubts about that analytic obsession that breaks into pieces the object to see how it works and where does its angel hide. A text is not its form, nor its substance, nor the connection between both inquiry levels, but an energetic mass that is a whole same thing. Does that thing have blue or brown eyes? Does its hair have such texture and color features? Do its arms or belly stand out? Even more, does its character or its way to look at things? That,

definitely, doesn't define the man and, least of all, the poem. Even if, at the end, it's its mettle to rate the world what imposes the sign that allows us to identify it in the memory.

Despite the book industry being the oldest mass communication business, poetry goes almost unnoticed in between this market's welter. Avoided by a huge amount of readers, the poem seems to have remained clung to the circle of the few consumers of written poetry –if compared to the percentage of people who read narrative. Still, or understanding this as a reality we must accept or –at least– understand, the poem moves and circulates under the eyes of whom it should. Meaning, it survives. And some of these texts do better than others.

In the previous paragraphs, we talked about the poems that were lucky enough to remain in the memories of their readers. We referred to those works that are self-sufficient, regardless of their length, to occupy a place in that archive-of-everything that the human mind is. They're many in the history of universal lyrical poetry. We could mention here (risking to give away our awful “ability to retain the past” or –even worse– our ignorance towards texts that should be mentioned mandatorily) an untidy list, disrespectful of time, space, language, but only placing us on the territory of the so called Modernity: “Song of Myself”, by Walt Whitman; *Altazor*, by Vicente Huidobro; *Spoon River Anthology*, by Edgar Lee Master; “The Graveyard by the Sea”, by Paul Valéry; *The Waste Land*, by T. S. Eliot; *A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance*, by Stéphane Mallarmé; Howl, by Allen Ginsberg... This, to illustrate what we have barely just outlined.

But there are other poems, of less magnitude (keeping one's

distance), that we also remember, especially for their intensity in the saying, for what they say and for how they say it, too. So, *The Black Heralds*, by César Vallejo; “The Lovers”, by Jaime Sabines; “Hide Tide”, by Enrique Molina; “Poem XV”, by Neruda; “The Unfaithful Housewife”, by Federico García Lorca; or “Defeat”, by our Rafael Cadenas; (may the reader place here a poem belonging to his emotional memory and that he can recognize is remembered by others). Almost every poet has a poem that, despite its author, acquires magical autonomy and becomes “popular” (the inverted commas are due to mistrust or to a biased use of the term, of course). Truth is, those texts, regardless of the academic judgements but, sometimes, in agreement with them, reach their independency and –even when the poet repudiates it or confines it to particular “historical” circumstances– manage to separate from the writer’s will and starts to take the way to its own destiny. Such is the case of Venezuela with *My Father, The Immigrant*, by Vicente Gerbasi; “The Wall”, by Fernando Paz Castillo; *Creature of Habit*, by Juan Sánchez Peláez; “Pure Métier”, by Víctor Valera Mora; “Silvia”, by Hesnor Rivera; “No History Couple”, by Juan Liscano; “The Woman Poet Counts to One Hundred and Leaves”, by Ana Enriqueta Terán; “Elegy to My Father’s Death”, by Ramón Palomares; “Manoa”, by Eugenio Montejo. We squeeze our hand so we don’t let slip other titles and names that are probably following the instructions of a personal favoritism more than those of the impartiality that a review work like this one demands, despite of it being a short essay.

What is out of discussion is that the prior list would be incomplete without mentioning the poem that convenes us here

today: *Are You Sleeping, Mr. President?*, by the howler Caupolicán Ovalles.

REGARDING THE COUNTERCULTURE, THE GROUP AND THE INDIVIDUALITIES

The fall of Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship marked the beginning of a decade –the sixties– that brought with it signs of hope. Winds of democracy blew over our country and this air also carried the idea of freedom in every level. Literature (particularly poetry) has always served as society's seismograph. The slightest movement is noticed by the keen eye of the poet who, in a certain way, reveals it on his work. The massive feeling of liberation from the yokes had to, as it always happens, be felt on the so called letters' republic. The writers' groups (that were almost born in a natural way to be established due to the common ideas and –why not– to defend themselves from the outside or to draw up an action plan and therefore be able to interfere in that nearby “threatening” territory that is what is not at its core), these groups became organized. Either because the ones previously established were now dried up or because it was a natural law to understand that if the scenery has change, the sight must change (or be adapted). Therefore, there would be detachments from Sardio, court of writers established around the homonym magazine. One of those writers, or several of them, came to relocate themselves around El Techo de la Ballena –The Whale's Roof–.

Worldwide, it needs to be said, there was a cultural “movement” characterized by the protests and the agitation, which

logically originates from the will of forcing the limits that had to be denied from inside, since people no longer wished to remain inside and, even less, due to the imposition of a “society” to which they belonged but no longer tolerated. Many were the Latin-American countries living the political and social changes that history brought with it. The inner paths converged, almost without us realizing it, with the highways of the rest of the world, which we considered more civilized. From the North they came, because they came (or from the North they were attracted by our America), the gurus from the Beat Generation. Burroughs and Ginsberg went across our geography and someone even spotted the influence of certain Latin American poets in them. The influence (the contagion) was in both ways and it would be pretentious not to admit it. The Beat Generation gestated in the forties, developed their work in the fifties, and went into the rebellious sixties with steady and authoritative foot. The global atmosphere was antiestablishment due to corruption and the falsification of reality, and the verbal violence became –more and more every time– irreverent as a consequence of intransigence.

Counterculture had its versions in all nations. The different revolutionary episodes (culturally speaking) were acted in almost every country to the south of Río Grande: the Colombian nadaists, the antipoetry “guided” by Nicanor Parra in Chile, the Venezuelan whalers. The socialpolitical criticism was an important basis for the conformation of these types of groups and, of course, for their development. Artists establish some sort of parallel system that allows disagreement to be expressed, basically, but they also allow creativity based on violence and subjugation. It’s the scream, but not

Munch's, that comes from the deepest unconsciousness, but it's more like the "howl" that comes from the cornered animal that the human-poet is. A mixture between a threatening roar and a cry for help towards a society that, beyond indifference, becomes aggressive and a nullifier of individual freedom.

So, they're hardly surprising the two artistic exhibitions with which the artists and writers that took part in them placed the "here we are" sign. That was the real intention of the first exhibition: the first whaler exhibition took place in a house garage, located at El Conde¹, east 10, No. 240 (and not in a proper gallery, as it was "custom"). Innovation, subversion, rebellion, violence, scatology, "visceralism", informalism, waste, experimentalism, sarcasm, irony, in fine, the many ways of anticulture that were present in a language that went beyond the singular territories of the single aesthetic disciplines. Later, in 1962, in another garage, but this time at Villaflor Street, n. 16, of Sabana Grande², took place the second exhibition called "Tribute to Necrophilia" and the words of the pataphysician Alfred Jarry would open the catalogue: "The habit of fornicating with the dead has been considered as the highest moral and health level..." So they signed the aesthetic they meant to impose.

The "voices", we already know them: Juan Calzadilla, Carlos Contramaestre, Adriano González León, Salvador Garmendia, Jacobo Borges, Dámaso Ogaz, Efraín Hurtado, Francisco Pérez Perdomo, Edmundo Aray, Daniel González, and –of course– Caupolicán Ovalles. Others would join later. Instead of mentioning the names of the authors, it would be fairer to mention the

1 Translator's note: Middle class residential area in Caracas.

2 Translator's note: This area of the city hosted very important libraries, cafes, restaurants, and stores. Sabana Grande was frequented by the Venezuelan intellectuals of the time.

names of the works (books or short texts published in magazines or plaquettes). Among the poetry works, we should mention *Dictated by the Pack* (1962), *Presidential Twist* (1962), *The Unfaithful Poisons* (1963), *Papers of the Doomed* (1964)³, and, the poem that concerns us, *Are You Sleeping, Mr. President?* (1962).

A LETHARGY BECOMES A POEM OR ABOUT THE POEM AS AN EMPOWERMENT TOOL

Classified (classifications, we know, are always unfair) as one of the poets of the linguistic and politic subversion (along with Valera Mora, Calzadilla, Rafael José Muñoz, and part of the production of Gustavo Pereira), Caupolicán Ovalles uses the language as an element to exert violence and to violate it to its own limits. His code, as improvised as his own life – Liscano will suggest –, ends up making reality the conjunction between written work and lived work, the two ways in which the poets of word and action finally fuse. On his side, Guillermo Sucre will say that this poet was the founder, in Venezuela, of what the critic named apocalyptic poetry (although we would have to check the work of some previous poets, such as Salustio González Rincones, due to the ease and the usage of a language that has no fear to name concrete referents, and even modern ones), movement that would include the work of Edmundo Aray, José Barroeta, William Osuna, Tarek William Saab, and the already mentioned Víctor Valera Mora and Gustavo Pereira, among others. It's a poetry defined by a direct and aggressive style, full of corrosive ele-

³ Translator's note: The original titles are: *Dictado por la jauría* (1962), *Twist presidencial* (1962), *Los venenos fieles* (1963), and *Papeles del condenado* (1964).

ments, more worried about what must be said than about the way of doing so. A poetry which's *raison d'être* takes place in the denunciation as a tool that pretends to transform reality.

Are You Sleeping, Mr. President? was released under The Roof of the Whale's editions label, in 1962. The book would bring along a load of curse since, due to it, its author had to resort to the exile. Its prologue writer, Adriano González León, went to jail and the edition was confiscated by the police.

Based on a style that inherited the political, historical, social, and cultural conditions of the time, the influence of the Chilean antipoetry and the American beatniks were evident. This poem-letter, with a more than evident communicative intention, is addressed, first, to the current president at the time (Rómulo Betancourt) but, in second place, also to a reader considered to be uninformed about the reality that's oppressing the population. The sender of the message is not afraid of identifying himself with the real poet-author, he doesn't hide behind any mask nor does he seem to show intentions of using an undefined lyric speaker that usually wanders around the lands of poetry. He takes part in the game where the speaker becomes fictional and non-fictional (or tries to become, better said) using concrete information, such as the author's date of birth or age.

What's done with the voice of the text is also done with the references we find throughout the poem: proper names of places (Ohio, New York, United States) that he links to the name of the group that saw the author's birth as a poet, and other elements that are concrete references as well. Likewise, in this same discourse, an imagery that we sense is personal and forces the limits between reality and fiction shows up. This

way the poem dangerously flirts with a language typical of a pamphlet, but without completely entering in that territory.

Another element that “unpoetizices” the poem is the code, more than conversational, rough, vulgar, scatological, one could say. Even if the swear word itself shares the essence of the metaphor, it’s typical of this kind of poem to be use as an essential piece to reinforce the irreverence of the discourse. To rudely speak to the president (beyond saddling him with the substance of the disrespectful term) contributes on demystifying his figure, on lowering him from the inherent condition of the position he represents and to the power he holds. In this way, the territory to symbolically divest him from that power is fertilized, but also –paradoxically– the road to censorship is prepared, just as the anecdote tells.

Forcing the language into making it lose its poetic quality, we were saying, places it near to the pamphlet’s territory. Saying matters the most. But the underlying poem defends itself at each step, and every time we think it’s lost it emerges once again. It shows the old dichotomy between the hyperartistic line and the hypervital line. The excess of vitality –of betting on life more than on art– makes texts like this one to be seen with mistrust by the academy. On the other hand, many are the readers that it captures, academics included. The language can be tested in any way, but if it’s a good text, the poem’s soul is able to survive. It also relies on its artifices: the violence against syntax, the inclusion of signs from the author’s imagery and that respond to a *metaphorization* process, the creation of a particular code with artistic intentions, they all anchor the poem to the bottom of a language that goes beyond com-

mon words. Just like the metaphor, some terms that seem to be coarse reach the categories of the true literary art language.

Beyond the reproduction of a code that belongs to the man of the metropolis (as it was to a large extent the work –yet unfinished– of Juan Calzadilla), Caupolicán Ovalles’ poetic work seems focused on aggressiveness as aesthetic and as a way to see the world. But it’s an aggression more for its questioning character than for aggressiveness itself. Questioning is the key, as long as placing the lens over the established means, at the same time, an awareness raising. That’s why the attack: the verbal aggression against the icon of power: the president is showed as feminized, ridicule, absorbed in his occupation of taking care of his external appearance. Then, the voice of the poem accesses the inner being of the character to show it to us in a monstrous condition: an ulcer eats away not his stomach but his heart (“the kind part of / the heart”). Not having this organ and, thereby, not having feelings transform him into such a monster. We also attend to the moment when he sleeps and an idiotic smile appears in his face (the king that dreams unconcerned about the fate of his “subjects”). The drowsiness, the president’s lethargy, is the origin of the poem.

But to describe what Ovalles expresses in this text is to undertake an inane task. The poem is pretty clear in its expression. It explains itself since this is one of the characteristics of its being. The curious thing, anyway, consists of agreeing that a poet inquires into his primitive roots to connect them with the ones of his present reality and this way he manages, understanding himself, to understand the world; in other words, if his primary function is to re-found or to

create the world again, what sense does it have showing it to us exactly as it is, simply to report it? Isn't all of this –at the end –about transforming reality, even by inventing it?

The word's transformational power is infinite. Prove of this is that some written signs moved the DIGEPOL⁴ to its repressive labors, to persecute, to locate and destroy the copies of a book that, at the end, couldn't physically damage the person it was addressed to. What makes the first addressee of this text think that what is there said constitutes a "truth" that mustn't be known because of the discredit it would mean? What power is the word hiding? What's the psychological game? How much can it transform reality?

"A poet is more dangerous than a country", reads an epigraph from a poem by Gonzalo Fraguí, signed by Simón Rodríguez. Obviously, the phrase refers to power, to the strength it represents for society, to the capacity and the vigor of the writer's word in the symbolic sphere. Then, we'd find out, thanks to Fraguí himself, that the Simón Rodríguez who signed such a forceful sentence wasn't Simón Bolívar's teacher, but a poet of the many that abound in Mérida. The humor, well-aimed weapon of the critic (especially of the critic towards entities that represent power), goes on its own in the different social strata.

The authority figure of the "president of the republic" (like that, in lower case) appears in this poem characterized as unconscious, minimized in his masculinity, ignorant of the reality, with airs and graces, demagogic, and saddled with sins

4 Translator's note: acronym for *Dirección General de Policía* (Police General Management), which was created in 1959 –after Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship– to "practice and coordinate along the national territory police functions intended to preserve order and public peace". However, the politic events of the 60s caused the DIGEPOL to perform intelligence and field tasks against guerrilla groups.

like gluttony, pride, greed, and some more. Verse by verse (line by line, better), as the poem is being built, its subject-object impoverishes until he becomes a simple physiological act that makes him lose all trace of honor or respect to his image. On the contrary, the voice-sender-poet raises as his counter-image and, at the same time, as the incarnation of who has no voice to denounce and, why not, revenge (even just symbolically) the persecuted, the subdued, the victims of power incarnated by the “dictatorial absolutism” in any of its versions.

If we understand a classic of literature as a capability of transcending time and space of a literary text and the quality of adaptation to similar circumstances, even when the original contexts are no longer on, then this poem, *Are You Sleeping, Mr. President?*, by Caupolicán Ovalles, constitutes a true model of this concept.

Today, the poetical lines of this gigantic text belonging to the Venezuelan lyrical poetry resound. The rhythm of the salsa the current president is dancing to, can be heard on the background. Beyond the explosion of gunshots and teargas bombs used like deadly weapons, we keep listening, also on the background, Caupolicán’s recurrent question to the governmental indifference: are you, by any chance, sleeping, Mr. President?



¿ARE YOU SLEEPING, MR. PRESIDENT?

The first edition of this book was issued by Ediciones del Techo de la Ballena. The prologue, *Trash Research*, was written by Adriano González León. The present edition features drawings by the poet Caupolicán Ovalles which he made after the time he spent in Bogotá together with the plastic artists who used to visit the innovative and experimental workshop of the Colombian painter Fernando Oramas (1925-2016).

TRASH RESEARCH

Adriano González León¹

There is a striking possibility that justifies the act of writing. It is a sharpened hormonal purpose that shatters every oily plate of literature because it extracts its matter from the visceral depths, so vilified, where we are sure a possibility of resurrection sprouts. Few could argue, anyway, since the access to those low places on an experimental suit is limited, because of the fear for truth to bounce like a bad odor, and for all its glorious pestilence to flood a perimeter of several leagues populated by civic imbecility and poetic citizenship.

Or, what is more, by *metaphysic poetics*, so scented with juggles as any birthday or post-mortem sonnet, crippled, gorged with impotence, at one hundred degrees under any testicular possibility, or blessedly thrown on relay race to not see the hare-vagina, which in this case comes behind, reversing the order of dog races that are, after all, infinitely radiant next to

¹ Adriano González León (Valera, 1931- Caracas, 2008) is, along with Salvador Garmendia, the greatest exponent of the Venezuelan narrative of the second half of the XX century. His crowning work is the book *País portátil*, awarded with the Biblioteca Breve price, by the Spanish publishing house Seix Barral, in 1968. Nevertheless, he left a vast work that also includes short-story, chronicle, essay, and poetry, as well as his lectures at the Universidad Central de Venezuela.

literary marathons. Until now it has been written, according to the sanctified regulations, due to the urge for transcendence, social commitment, ontic need, or philological research. Some talk about a search for God, pretentiously mended on the head of Saint Anselm. Or some, more daring, board the void in their dominoes game and dress up as a gadabout of the “existential deepness.” And when one plays at the center, a word’s ascetic is born, half Saint Anselm’s head, half ontology’s double-six: hybrid stance that, when it gets to differentiate, drops the terms as empty fancy trays. But, suddenly, it turns out that someone, “Tired of writing foolish things for eleven years, looking for who knows what beautiful combinations of phrases and words,” tries to prove himself in less-known territories.

Even when the prove means to become part of the series, at least it implies the assurance of offering us, for the instant, a new impetus that tomorrow they will already be able to codify. Especially, it’s about the final rejection of poetic chaining while stating, since not the right to tell, at least the possibility to curse, CURSE! Angelic habit, old as the first collapse caused by the riot of an ancient celestial leader named Lucifer, carried on by bad-tempered prophets and *against-everything* poets and, nevertheless, wildly unheard by the everlasting courtiers of good-judgement, of intelligence, and of always-being “above” or “homeward.” And it’s necessary to say it once for all: yes, much had been shouted, there’s nothing new in the libelous will, but no one can deny that many –while preparing their careers as public servants of the State or of Poetry –have their ears capped with country music, with a certainty nobody had granted to them or with bourgeois disdain, since being

bourgeois is enough to nullify the possibility of competence. To keep handling swear words is, at least, healthier than any rhetoric nourishment. And faced to the dilemma, there is an alarmed sector that prefers the purifying vile rather than the purified blessed, appearing as language fervor, professorial serenity, or explanation for society. And it's not because of the will to threaten the bourgeois with the Bogeyman, but because it's a personal obligation generated on the indicated visceral depths, and this remains on the sidelines of any discussion.

Although it has yet to be proven if the tirade imposed by Rebelais to mankind has emptied its content, it can still be asked if the handsome men of good judgement and intelligence, the priests of the verb, the honorable professors, the slippers-and-Sunday-picnics revolutionaries can demonstrate that they have now disappeared the causes that originated Isidore Ducasse's alliance: "I HAVE MADE A PACT WITH PROSTITUTION TO SOW DISORDER IN GOOD FAMILIES." Naturally, they, disguising their condition of sons of a good family, because there are also poetic good families and politic good families, will find shelter in the extremely easy condition of who looks at things objectively. And those who look at things that way don't enjoy things, since they are things themselves. It is worth to insist on Caupolicán Ovalles' proposition, dashingly absurd, that it is tiredness what makes him choose action. Startled idea, in a certain way in the wake of that famous assassin poet, Pierre-Françoise Lacenaire, executed in 1836, who justified his need to live by practicing as a theorist of the right to kill, "thinking up sinister projects against society." And also matching a little bit with that theory of Thomas De Quincey, who stated, while con-

suming his opium doses: “Generally speaking, the few people I have disliked in this world were flourishing people, of good repute. Whereas the knaves whom I have known, one and all, and by no means few, I think of with pleasure and kindness.”

In the spirit of such inversions, this book works. A book unusually addicted to challenge, taking advantage of the matter so far called “non-poetic”, in a definitely singular turn, because there is fatigue when the inefficiency of the traditional word is discovered, the inappropriate of the cultured exercise, the sad invalidity of the literary when “the illness of living intensifies.”

Some have chosen silence. Some others have spoken, like Robert Desnos, who to expand the fertile virtue of his ghosts, wrote in argot against the Nazis, until he was burst at the Terezín camp.

In Caupolicán Ovalles’ case, besides the verbal tiredness, there are other nuisance reasons, too concrete, too evident in our hour even for the least aware eye, which drag him to desert any correct and normal concern for the language. But it is necessary to observe that his watchful activity, almost by instinct, protects him from the easy demagoguery poured through certain poetry called social, where the subversive loses its strength due to the use of all the commonplaces of the bourgeois order that is meant to be undermined.

Besides, there is a certitude: this book doesn’t lead to prices of the revolution, nor to invitations to trips, nor to the tables of the “rebels” with mansions and acclaimers’ syndicates. There is here a pure and disinterested manhood, categorical fact against which they crash all the accusations of the cartel’s or the speculations’ fans around an alleged formal deepness. It is, in a certain way, to get closer to the glandular reflex, not comple-

tely investigated, that supplied Rimbaud, who pissed towards the sky “with the assent of the large heliotropes.” And maybe he conducted Artaud’s cry: “Warped Pope, Pope foreign to the soul. Let us be immerse in our own bodies; we don’t need your knife of enlightenment.” Because –to call to account a last witness– “it is no use putting on rubber gloves”, according to Henry Miller’s statement. “All that can be coolly and intellectually handled belongs to the carapace and a man who is intent on creation always dives beneath, to the open wound, the festering obscene horror. He hitches his dynamo to the tenderest parts; if only blood and pus gush forth, it is something.”

Caupolicán Ovalles, with an acute sense of provocation, poses in this book a continuity for that outrage’s exercise as an instrument of human research. But he adds something more, or much more, as it is the evidence that he faces an expression that has nothing in common with the reasons until now adduced to legitimize the act of writing. It is a kind of poetry that comes as a daily need, without rehearsals, delights, or disturbances of existence. It comes just like that, simply, dishonestly poetic, like whom is about to consume food or defecate. Curious element this one, the expressive efficacy, but less fortuitous and slippery than searching for possible connections between naked words or the empty arrogance of the realisms until now offered. There is a mechanism in the poetic execution that unveils, by brute force, paradoxically, the intelligent application of the trash obtained in any sensible research. It is from this waste gathering, impossible for a common nose to stand, from where certain winds depart without which’s presence a valid approximation to what it is used to be called man is impossible.

The risk, contrary to any sanitary prescription, is not getting infected. And whoever embraces it out of love for the virus, with determination and boldness, will see, in the edge of the night, an exalting succession of *ignis fatuus* rise.



THE PRESIDENT

THE PRESIDENT enjoys his life in his palace,
he eats more than all the nationals together,
and fattens less

for being elegant and traitorous.

His molars are in perfect shape;

however, an ulcer

eats the kind part of

the heart

and that's why he smiles when he sleeps.

Since he's elected by the will of all

the majoritarian owners of immense riches

he's a ruling dog,

he's a dog that obeys his owners,

he's a dog that waddles his tail,

he's a dog that kisses the boots

and gnaws the bones anyone throws at him

to frisk.

His belly and his thought

are what people call emergency toilet.

Through his mouth

run the foul waters

of all the cities.

With his hands he guts virginities

and
like an old whore
he's weak
and proud of his charms.

He thinks he's the youngest
and he is a perilous killer.
Nobody could say
which gesture of his shows he's a loved man,
because they spit his sign
and tell him when he walks by:

“There goes the most charming shit”,

While
people pay the electric bill,
the phone bill,
the gas,

and the water bills,
like a newborn,
among cares and mattress springs,
the old slut sleeps.

Nothing wakes him up.

THE PRESIDENT enjoys his life in his palace.



Walt
1972 1995

VERY SAD, VERY SAD

In arriving THE PRESIDENT says:
“Adulate me, for I am sad.
Look for that guitar player that calms my
nerves.

It’s just that I’m very sad.”

The Mandarin retires
to his inner chambers
saying:

Very sad,
very sad.

And he grabs his ear
and says:

Very sad,
very sad.

And he grabs his belly
and thinks

about the sadness.

He dries his forehead
with a handkerchief
and says:

“Everybody says it’s not true that I
love them.”



H. K.
1998

IF INSTEAD OF SLEEPING

If instead of sleeping
 he'd dance the tango
 with his ministers
 and his chiefs of love,
we could
hear
 from night to night
his heels clacking
like an archduke
or a duchess.
We could laugh
just by watching him,
ridiculous as he is,
waiting for the applause
of all the frantic
gendarmerie.
Sure, we are tired
and wish for a bit of monstrous
 fun,
like this one
 of watching him
with the lyre around his neck
 hanging,

and we'll call it
the Cursed Cave
and it will be forbidden to see it
and to come near it
for fear of awakening your hysterical
tenderness.

They call you
Joseph the Dreamer,
the one with the sacred cows,
the owner of the skinniest cows,
and
President of the "County Society of Sleep".
Your friends call you
Barbiturate.
How much do you sleep, Mr. President?

If he worships the cow,
he sleeps!
If it's the calf he worships,
he sleeps!
And if the General gives him his lunch,
he sleeps like a log
or has a sleep tantrum.

Mud Face,
Eye to see the Serpents and call
and call them,

Eye to keep company
and burn you
with the humble Kerosene,
Eye to be at my service
like a cheap
bellboy.

Are you sleeping, Mr. President?
I ask you as a handsome young man
unlike you, lord of the nap.

Mud Eye and Emergency Toilet.



Handwritten signature or mark, possibly reading "Wald" or similar, located in the lower right quadrant of the image.

ARE YOU SLEEPING, MR. PRESIDENT?

I, Hosts-Poet, Ahab's fifth descendant
with known residence:

 Roof of the Whale
from this city,
called jail
 in the language of the sons of the Magma,
and loved by me,
raise the basket of my life
 above the East End
and start to laugh
 in the morning and at night
like a slum child.

 I laugh in Sad-View
and its denizens,
all owners of great riches,
stun my thought
and surround my neck
with a thousand horrible legends,
 and they take my hand
to show me the way
 we must follow
after the battle,
in which

I
with my hordes
and she
with her Yankees
 tormented by an insatiable
 love
for this land
or for this city,
in love
and lovers of the King of Sleep,
who came
from New York
with a birth certificate
 from Cincinnati or Ohio,
which we pronounce Ojayo,

or
which amounts to the same,
a stone-faced monarch
with tragic seamstress' hands
 like an old whore,
weak
hysterical,
with gorgeous legs,
like the war car
that killed
Abraham,
a real bastard
and western ally,

owner of half the country,
like Caligula's whores,
in times of the King of New York,
looking for amulets
and potions
to give
to all my brothers,
sons of blacks and half-breeds
like Me,
 Hosts-Poet,
hard drinker
and early riser,
 but one who thinks
with a single blow
to throw
the old pest
off his throne,
with a whale in my chest,
while she gives birth to her children
i feed them
out of my own hunger,
I think,
I think i must
fight
to know the truths
that seem hidden.

I, who paint with dirt,
spit, lime, and asbestos

I'll have
the wisdom to frighten and bring to tears
more than one dog
ambushed
in this jail,
this country.

I,
 born in 1936,
since I am
 twenty-five,
ask
 with no support from any
Constitution:
 where's the fly
 that puts The President
 to sleep
 time and time again?
 where is it fed?

And if it's not in the "United States
for the Exploitation
of the Indians and Plebeians
of the South",
let
 the heroic
friends from the
 Roof of the Whale,
denizens of Sad-View,

come to pull out my tongue
to fry it in front of
Me,
the mistaken man!

I, Hosts-Poet,
with a few bills in my pocket,
much heartedly,
I think I'm not wrong
and
I ask:

Are you sleeping?
Old man!
Old elected!
Old Magnificent Pontiff!
Are you sleeping?
young financier!
great banker!
do you sleep?

Tired of writing foolish things
for eleven years,
looking for
who knows what beautiful combinations
of phrases and words,
now I just want
to have an answer
to my questions,
in the distant term,

about the Grand Imbecile
or his Putative Sons
or Whores.

I, Ahab's descendant
and citizen

 who loves his city,
am allowed to ask,
 I have the right
 by the Constitution
 of my acts and my faith
 as a man of the sea,

I have the right

 I say,
to ask
 where is the monster
 that causes
 so much pain,
 so much humiliation,
because I have the order
written on stone
to
finish him off
or to find refuge to
 find the quickest
 and long lasting
solution.

I, Hosts-Poet,
love my city.
I live with only one hope
and only one purpose
out of knowledge
maybe
out of bad faith
or out of ignorance
as I could protest
so much ambushed shit.

I want to know
why all you can do,
old bones,
is sleep?

Roof of the Whale
receiving the visit of the
Astronaut,
also from a known
address,
friend of Sad-View
and an important man
friend and poet.

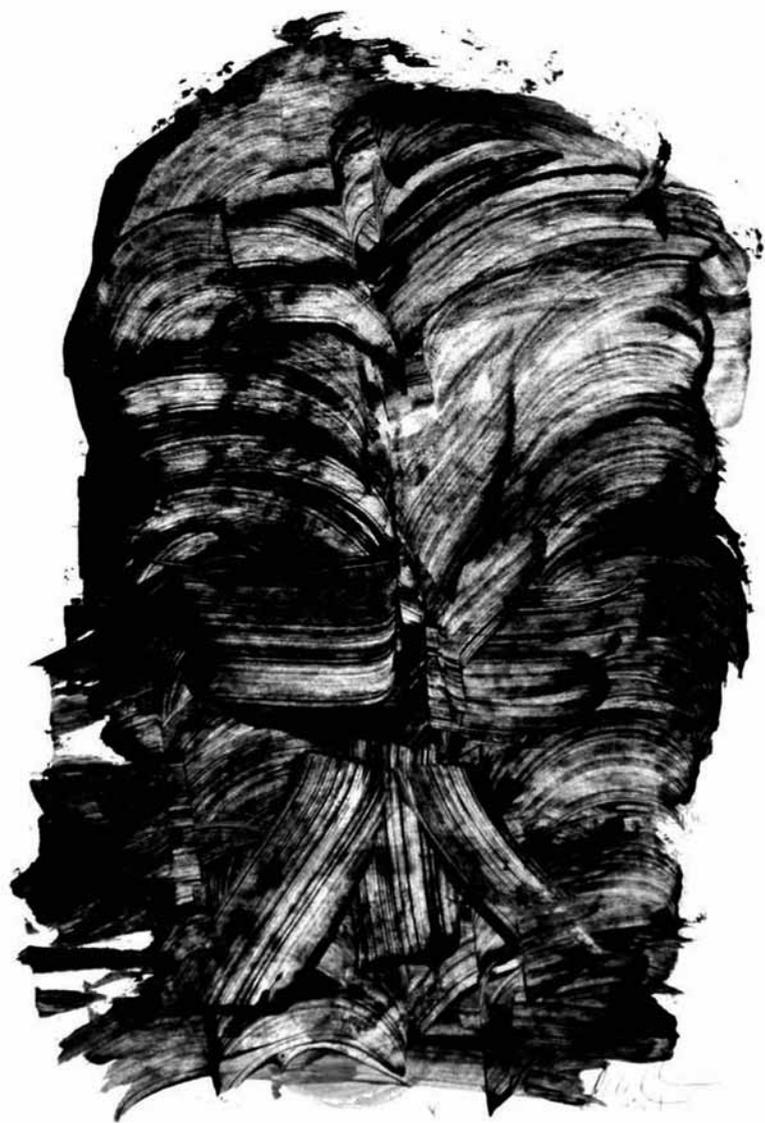
I, Old Ahab, called
Hosts,

twenty-something years
old,

weak,
widows of a cataclysm
that we will see.

I, Hosts-Poet,
ask:
Are you sleeping, sir?

Roof of the Whale
Worl TV Station. Caracas, '62



EPILOGUE FOR A PRESIDENTLESS POEM

Francisco Ardiles

I

Once I heard somebody say that Caupolicán Ovalles was a kid with a mustache. A kid that seemed to come from Tocuyo, San Antonio de los Altos, Carrizal, and Valle la Pascua, but who was born in Guarenas in 1936, the same year that Miguel de Unamuno and Federico Garcia Lorca died, a tiresome and disgusting year, as he used to say every time that he remember it. Caupolicán was a boy whose destiny was defined by books since his birth. He was son and grandson of two men who lived very close to literature and, above all, to words, both printed and written. Two marvelous madmen, carried away by literature. That spiritual genealogy determined his literary vocation, and as well as his bond intense with poetry, which remained intact throughout his entire life.

I remember that Ernestina Salcedo Pizani, an exceptional Spanish literature professor from the Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB) —who I was lucky to meet when I was very young— always talked about Caupolicán Ovalles with great

admiration. At a house in the Montalban neighborhood, located in the west side of Caracas, she received a group no bigger than 8 youngsters almost every Saturday to talk about Gongora, Calderon, Garcia Lorca, Unamuno, Valle Inclan, Machado, and Miguel Hernandez. About all those poets from the Generation of '98 and '27 whom she loved with a passion I've never seen again in anybody else. In her unforgettable poetic sessions, she'd reveal the most intimate secrets of her relationship with San Juan de la Cruz and the most dramatic poems of *Poet in New York*.

Ernestina would give us cookies with coffee for us to gratefully listen to her, and if she even thought of talking about her favorite narrator from the Generation of '98, Leopoldo Alas Clarin, amongst her dissertation's subtleties, she would change the subject to talk about some of the poet's occurrences, who, according to her, was one of the craziest, cleverest, and most intelligent people she had ever met in her life.

Apparently this guy had one of the most prodigious memories of the country. That character of whom Ernestina talked about with such admiration and affection was Caupolicán Ovalles, the poet. It turns out that she used to recall him out loud, every time she had to talk about the work of Leopoldo Alas. According to her, this poet was the only person who could recite by heart the most important passages of *La Regenta*, a work he must have read in his grandfather's library when he was very young.

People and their work are two completely different things. We're always looking for coincidences that sometimes don't quite match the author's texts, but they try to force the rope for the convergence of these two elements that are rarely compatible. This happens with certain authors, but in Caupolicán Ovalles'

case this assumption doesn't sound as far-fetched. His life and his work were always side by side; one was the shadow of the other. It so happens that in the case of his poetry, this association isn't as arbitrary as it seems because his life experiences were crucial for his work's development. When he did politics, he wrote political poems; when he got stuck in his memories, he reconstructed his father's death; when he fell in love, he wrote love poems.

One time Antonio Machado said that the homeland is childhood. If we apply this apparently sudden statement to get closer to Ovalles' sense of poetry, we will be able to notice that there are several motives, recurrent and final, that connect all the aspects of his poems and the recurring themes of his work. Death and childhood were his fundamental obsessions, those that provide a metaphysical support to his poems.

Every time he'd take more than two drinks, Caupolicán Ovalles would say that ever since his most tender infancy he'd see in El Tocuyo how the river fish jumped from one stone to the other just to confuse him. When thinking about this idea, one inevitable connects with that boy who lived in a town close to a river. The books' matter is something else. Literature came to him from the relationship with his parents. They both had plenty of books because they were school teachers in the Altos Mirandinos: San Antonio, San Diego, and Carrizal.

His life went by this way until 1944, the fateful year in which an event, from which he was never able to recover, took place. An incident that is probably the main motif of his poetry: the death of Guatimocin, his father. One of the harshest and most emotional poems of Venezuelan literature came from that episode. Through words he revives with poignan-

cy and resignation the last moments of his father's death, as well as the sorrow it caused him. Let's read some verses that recreate the dramatic atmosphere where the regrettable incident happened. Let's read a fragment of a poem entitled *Elegy on the Death of my Father Guatimocin, alias*, published by Ediciones El Techo de la Ballena, in 1967, so we can understand the internal relationship that exists between both events that delimited the life of a poet, who wasn't yet a poet, and the words that would later come from those incidents:

GUATIMOCIN OVALLES my father since he was frail
always said
that
he
WAS
a deflating balloon
he
used to say
that we should be really
careful
with the
air
that we breathe
every
single
day
Imagine
that he used to say that the best thing life had given him
was that wonderful air
from the small towns
"that air is something that purifies a dead man"
said the innocent

After the passing of Ovalles' father, Guatimocin, he and his brothers fell under the guardianship of their grandfather, an

extraordinary character that, according to the journalist Óscar Yanes¹, had an unexplainable resemblance to the Irish writer George Bernard Shaw, and lived in a huge house where he had filled eight rooms with newspapers and books. This old university professor named Victor Manuel Ovalles was a collector of all types of printed media: articles, news reports, strange books, first editions, columns of unusual stories, news, all kinds of chronicles, cuttings about world history, photographs, pamphlets, incredible classified ads, and all kinds of tabloids. From this habit of obsessed collector, from this recollecting and accumulative fixation emerged *The World's Great Stationery*².

One of the strangest and most important books of Caupolicán Ovalles, *The Marginal Literature Anthology*³, is the exact result of a deliberate selection of paraliterary texts, from different genres and of a fantastic nature, that the poet made out of the infinite newspapers collection of the wise Victor Manuel Ovalles, that extravagant character that never knew he had hoarded, due to his incontrollable and pathological compulsion, one of the most important newspapers archives in Venezuelan history. Now we understand why Clarice Lispector thought that great works came from small routines. The point of view in Ovalles' poetry is probably

1 Oscar Yanes (Caracas, 1927-2013) was a Venezuelan journalist, writer, and chronicler. He was a professor at the UCAB, the 1965 National Journalism Award winner, and the editor in chief of *Elite* and *Bohemia*. On the 25th of July, 1949, he went to Professor Victor Manuel Ovalles' house and interviewed him in a conversation that went down in history. This text appeared in the magazine of the newspaper *Últimas Noticias*.

2 In 1959, Pablo Neruda visited Caracas and he met with his friend Mr. Romulo Gallagos. The welcoming committee took him the library of Dr. Victor Manuel Ovalles. From this experience arose a poem in which the future winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature mentioned this visit, referring to the library as *La Gran Papelería del Mundo* (The World's Great Stationery). Years later, in 1968, Lautaro, Josefa, and Caupolicán Ovalles founded the publishing house *Editorial La Gran Papelería del Mundo*, in honor of the great Chilean poet and their grandfather.

3 *Antología de la Literatura Marginal* (1977), Monte Ávila Editores. Caracas.

the consequence of that crushing overcrowding of images and words that crammed his childhood with printed signs.

II

The original anecdote of how El Techo de la Ballena – Roof of the Whale– emerged is similar to the story of Homer’s Troys. Heinrich Schliemann, that wealthy merchant from the XIX century that read Homer as a little boy and knew his verses by heart, had the brilliant idea of confirming that such epopee couldn’t just be the product of a writer’s imagination, but something that actually existed, and he was devoted to relentlessly search it for more than ten years. His famous expedition is the consequence of his unparalleled faith in fiction. All his archeological knowledge came from fiction’s phantasmagorical spaces. With the book in his hand he traveled through the Peloponnese and the Aegean until he found, in 1871, and after a series of prolonged excavations, at least seven ruins of ancient citadels that unveiled the remains of what seemed to be the Wrathful Achilles’ Troy. Which of all those ruins is that one citadel where Hector, Hecuba, Helena, Paris, Aeneas, and the old Priam lived, if they were in fact alive. Nobody is certain, even today.

There are many stories about the founding of El Techo de la Ballena. Each one of its founding members had their own version. I’ve heard different testimonies from Juan Cazadilla, Rodolfo Izaguirre, Francisco Perez Perdomo, and Edmundo Aray. There are videos and interviews that support them. Furthermore, we have to add to that testimonialchain the fact that the passing of time modifies the traces of memory,

and people end up changing the original story of a fact according to their convenience and motives. The end result of so many interventions and reconstructions is a hybrid that keeps expanding the mythology that supports the legitimacy of the facts that surround the group's establishment and the movement's consolidation. Therefore, we will find in this menu, so filled with options, the version of all those who, somehow, were a part of the movement or are dedicated to its study.

Adriano González León recalls that two of the main figures of El Techo de la Ballena, Caupolicán Ovalles and Carlos Contramaestre, students who lived in exile, like many others, due to Perez Jimenez's dictatorship in Venezuela, took a walk on Salamanca's Plaza Mayor, half drunk, with an iguana. This caused a great impression among those present because no one had ever seen something like that: two people naturally walking an animal with such characteristics. When seeing the effect they produced with their occurrence, they decided to create the conceptual basis of an avant-garde group and provide the small apartment where El Techo de la Ballena lived, alluding to Jorge Luis Borge's book dedicated to the *Ancient Germanic Literatures*, in which they found the meaning of the metaphor that named the movement.

Carlos Contramaestre⁴, founding father of the group, adds the following comment to this anecdote:

Regarding the sea as a name, for example, it didn't exist, but they knew what a whale was and a definition of topo, of roof. So the sea was named "roof of the whale". All these phrases engraved in my memory (...) Caupolicán Ovalles and I made EL TECHO DE LA BALLENA in Spain. I even had an apartment that we named as such. Once we get back here, the political atmosphere starts to rarefy in the

4 Carlos Contramaestre, *Nueva antología del Techo de la Ballena* (2014). Fundecem, Mérida.

middle of that incipient democracy. (...) We found ourselves immersed in a political process that needed to be changed (...) This is how we started to gather and to create the WHALE, but not with a political interest. Without a doubt we were united by the political passion and the love for the country, but these things were sifted by an aesthetic need.

Edmundo Aray, in his *New Anthology of El Techo de la Ballena*⁵, says that El Techo de la Ballena was born in Salamanca, boosted by the drunkenness of one night in which Carlos Contramaestre, Caupolicán Ovalles, and Alfonso Montilla, immensely impressed by Tapies, Millares, Canogar, Sade, Lautreamont, and Rimbaud, accepted life as the act of creation, accepted to devour existence with the poetical fact, madness, humor, provocation, and inebriation; that way they decided to create the magma of El Techo de la Ballena.

Let's see how Edmundo Aray reconstructs this event:

One night in Salamanca, Carlos Contramaestre was discharging his brewing urine in the urinal, but he took the wrong way and ended up in the bar's wine cellar. Caupolicán Ovalles and Alfonso Montilla were very worried, because time had passed by and Carlos didn't return from the urinal, so they decided to look after him, he was not there. Obviously they thought he could be in the wine cellar. When they opened the door, they heard a splash coming from a big barrel. They asked: Carlos, Carlos, are you there? Exactly. Carlos answered: yes, yes, hand me an olive. The debauchery of the ethylic swimming was such that, in the doors of all the bars in Salamanca, they placed a sign that said "Mister Carlos Contramaestre, Caupolicán Ovalles, and Alfonso Montilla are banned from entering." In the end, the misters were arguing between the drunken iguana and El Techo de la Ballena. Jorge Luis Borges and the whalers' metaphor triumphed: the ocean is The Roof of the Whale. (2014)

Caupolicán's version is very interesting. Nobody can attest to that being the original one, but it is the most condensed and rational of them all. In an interview made by Carmen

5 Edmundo Aray, *Nueva antología del Techo de la Ballena* (2014). Fundecem, Mérida.

Virginia Carrillo⁶, he says that some young Venezuelans that were studying in Salamanca conceived, in Christmas 1958, the idea of creating something like a movement that would end up becoming El Techo de la Ballena. We think that it can be considered as the foundational event from a symbolic point of view. On December 11th, nobody cut a ribbon nor did they take a document to any civil registry office. What happened was that while these guys were reading a book of Borges, which mentioned the relation that exists among the sky, the image of El Techo de la Ballena, and the sea in Scandinavian cultures, they thought about creating a group. These three students, who drank too much and read lots of poets from the Generation of '27, were political exiles from the dictatorial regime of Marcos Perez Jimenez. Their names were Caupolicán Ovalles, Carlos Contramaestre, and Alfonso Montilla, and that day they decided to define themselves as an artistic generation, and to empower themselves through the creation of a group that would distance from the group Sardio's postulates and from all of the Venezuelan artistic tradition.

The following year, these young poets, born at the end of the 1930s, finished their studies in the University of Salamanca, returned to Venezuela at the end of the '60s, and then they met in Caracas with other writers that came from the dissolution of Sardio, joining in the initiative to give the group a final shape. So, by the beginning of 1961, these youngsters gathered up in San Agustín, in a house of El Conde neighborhood, east 12 No 240, which apparently belonged to the family of

⁶ Carmen Virginia Carrillo, Entrevista con Caupolicán Ovalles (1998), in *En (des)uso de razón* (2016) pp. 346-347. Rayuela, Caracas

Príncipe Negro, to materialize their revolutionary attempt.

This was the way in which that house turned into a cultural center fueled by life matter and magma, and exempt from false petty-bourgeois values. That space that they would later call El Techo de la Ballena is considered the starting point, from which the plaster columns and the junk from the old Venezuelan culture will collapse, to give back dignity to human soul, the matter that makes us man, those fundamental elements of the creation of the universe. With this objective they organized exhibitions, they conceived publications and events on esthetic intervention, and they wrote some manifests that involved, in its composition and in a large or small extent, all of those painters, sculptors, poets, writers, and intellectuals that paid attention to the urgent call of artistic insurgency and the spirit of freedom.

Among the members of the generation belonging to El Techo de la Ballena we can mention: Adriano González León, Salvador Garmendia, Juan Calzadilla, Francisco Pérez Perdomo, the Chilean poet Damaso Ogaz, Efraín Hurtado, Edmundo Aray, Caupolicán Ovalles, Carlos Contramaestre, Jacobo Borges, Daniel González, Rodolfo Izaguirre, the Catalan profesor and painter Jose M. Cruxent, Efraín Hurtado, Hugo Baptista, Peran Erminy, Manuel Quintana Castillo, Fernando Irazábal, Gabriel Morera, Alberto Brandt, the Argentinian writer José Antonio Vasco, and the Spanish painter Antonio Moya.

With this multilayered group they founded the art gallery and exhibitions with the same name that they'd thought of that December in which they were walking by the streets of the conventual city of Salamanca with a drunken iguana. El Techo de la Ballena was launched in March 1961 with an exhibition na-

med: “*Para Restituir el Magma*” (“To Restore the Magma”). Months after this was followed by another one, named: “*Homenaje a la Cursilería*” (“Homage to Pretentiousness”), specifically in June of that same year, and then another one, in the month of November of 1962, which caused great commotion and indignation in Caracas’ society of back then, and that was called “*Homenaje a la Necrofilia*” (“Homage to Necrophilia”).

Carmen Virginia Carrillo, in her text dedicated to the investigation of the avant-garde proposals of the 60s in Venezuela, entitled *De la belleza y el furor* (2007), summarizes in detail the most remarkable activities of El Techo throughout their almost five years of artistic insurgency:

Among the most remarkable artistic activities of El Techo de la Ballena are the visual arts exhibitions “*Para Restituir el Magma*” (“*To Restore the Magma*”) (March 1961); “*Cabezas filosóficas*” (“*Philosophical Heads*”), Gabriel Morera’s exhibition (November 1961); “*Homenaje a la Necrofilia*” (“*Tribute to Necrophilia*”) (November 1962), “*Sujetos plásticos de la ballena*” (“*Plastic Subjects of the Whale*”), group exhibition (March 1963); “*Dibujos Coloidales*” (“*Colloidal Drawings*”), Juan Calzadilla’s exhibition (April 1963); “*Tubulares*” (“*Tubulars*”), group exhibition (July 1963); “*Engranajes*” (“*Gears*”), by Daniel González (Maracaibo, April 1964), exhibition-publication; “*Vuelve la Ballena*” (*The Whale Comes Back*), group exhibition (August 1964); “*Los falsarios eróticos*” (“*The Erotic Falsifiers*”), by Alberto Brandt (October 1965), and “*Las Jugadoras*” (“*The Players*”), by Jacobo Borges (July 1965). The Whalers also participated in the production of Carlos Rebolledo’s movie, *Pozo Muerto* (*Dead Pond*) (1965). Some of these exhibitions represented some kind of *dada-style* rebellion. Lots of the events were made in garages conditioned by The Whalers: the first one was located in the east Conde, 12, N° 240, in Caracas, where the two first exhibitions took place, and the last one in the garage in Street Villaflor N° 16, in Sabana Grande, Caracas. (2007: 104)

These rebellious activities were accompanied by the publication of some catalogues and a magazine that included the prin-

ted manifests that defined the group's poetic and their political stand. All these texts were published by their editorial house, with their own printing, and presented in some very simple fleeting editions, made of a few folded pages that were assembled in an almost handcrafted way. The magazine they presented to the public also had its name: *Rayado sobre el Techo (Hatchings on the Roof)*. With these simple cultural artefacts and a radical aesthetic proposal they changed the history of national culture.

That deposit ended up being a printing house, a meeting and intellectual creation center, and a design and photography school. In the headquarters of El Techo they would edit their books, schedule the individual and collective exhibitions mentioned previously, they would talk, drink, converse to the hallucinatory extreme of inebriation. Their rupture fixation was such that they dared to name a severe admission jury through which they would substitute those that only buy for those who honestly felt and understood art. The founding answered to both aesthetics and political reasons of extreme authenticity and independence. The members of this group made a subversive and iconoclastic cell of young creators that identified themselves with the European avant-garde movements from the beginning of the century, the Beats and the leftist ideology of the Cuban revolution and the aggressive Dadaism and Surrealism interventions. Caupolicán Ovalles explains this tempting initiation in the following way: “El Techo was a mixture of three essential compartments: a little bit of bible, a little bit of surrealism, and a little bit of Marx⁷.”

⁷ Caupolicán Ovalles, *Entrevista a Caupolicán Ovalles*, 1980. In: *En (des)uso de razón*, 2016, p 347. Rayuela. Caracas.

From this vitalist dynamic of literary creation and investigation emerged a book that Caupolicán Ovalles wrote in Barquisimeto by the end of 1961, founded in the absurd poetic discourse, mocking as means of literary expression and the politics as an inspiring motive, which he called: *Are you sleeping, Mr. President?* The impact that it generated was immediate because it was outrageous to find a political poem with unsuspected ironic shades. That poem and Carlos Contraмаestre's exhibition named "*Homenaje a la Necrofilia*", were decisive in the group's engraving in Venezuela's art and written literary history.

Counterculture is born from the temptation of a certain social group that is interested in invest, ignore, or abolish, in some aspect, the values of a certain society. In this sense, El Techo de la Ballena was an aesthetic countercultural and independent movement with wide range. The poem, the exhibition, the song, the work, the intervention, the story, and the novel were all conceived as a fighting strategy or, failing that, as a sharp criticism of Venezuelan capitalist-bourgeoisie society of the 60s. Caupolicán Ovalles' verses are directed against their values. His fight wasn't armed but discursive, against society's indolence, which he understood as something intolerable; against standardization of the culture dominated by certain social class.

In the post-Gómez Venezuela all the intellectuals and artists talked, wrote, and painted taking into consideration only the formal aspects of the work. They eluded, at all costs, the political dimension of human life. The exceptions came from the work of those writers of the Generation of '28 that had assumed politics as a flag. Otero Silva, Antonio Arráiz, and Guillermo Meneses were examples of that position. The authors from the group

Viernes discarded that possibility as a form of artistic expression.

El Techo de la Ballena takes this back, but also taking advantage of the formal principles of the most extremist European literary avant-gardes. First they catch up by reading the texts of Georges Ribbemont-Dessaignes, the main Dadaist ideologist, Antonin Artaud, Tristan Tzara, Adamov, Beckett, Thomas Wolfe, Dylan Thomas, the Nadaist poets, Enrique Molina, and Borges. Then they assumed the political position according to the times, the Latin-American communism that had revived due to the commotion of the Cuban Revolution.

With these elements in hand, the most eminent writers of El Techo, Caupolicán Ovalles, Carlos Contramaestre, Juan Calzadilla, Salvador Garmendia, and Adriano González León, assumed writing as a literary equivalent to the armed fight. Of course, in their case, this fight's objective was to free imagination from the leashes of taste, prejudice, moralizing thematic restrictions, and verbal boundaries of the bourgeoisie society.

III

Are You Sleeping, Mr. President? was published by Ediciones El Techo de la Ballena. It was a booklet that appeared on May 1st, 1962, and the inauguration of *Homenaje a la Necrofilia* was a bit later, in November of that same year. According to Ángel Rama⁸, both proposals affected Caracas' society back then, due to its unusual and immoral images, its tendency towards the ugly, the grotesque, and the decomposed, as well as its extremist discourse against power entities. From the exhibitions they attacked the

⁸ Ángel Rama, *Antología del Techo de la Ballena* (1987). Fundarte, Caracas.

sense of good taste that dominated Venezuela since the establishment of El Círculo de Bellas Artes (The Fine Arts Circle), and from the poem they infringed upon the figure of the alleged creator of Venezuela's democracy: President Romulo Betancourt.

At that time, readers and spectators were not on the lookout nor prepared to take into consideration, analyze, and value in the right measure, the aesthetic perspective and the formal findings of both the exhibition and the poem, but they were aware that there was something they were infringing upon that was sacred up until that moment: the power. That audience was moved only by scandal, fear, prejudice, and shyness. That's why we don't exaggerate when we say that this poem by Caupolicán Ovalles laid the foundations of a poetic based in violence, hostility, and insults, while demystifying the sacred as a form of beauty.

It is also important to point out that the hostile tone recognized in the words used by the poet in his text didn't emerge spontaneously. There are circumstances that justify all that virulence and insulting hostility present in the verses. El Techo de la Ballena began primarily as a group and later it developed into a political and cultural movement. First it was an occurrence, but then it became a movement made of political content and compromise. And that political compromise was linked to the leftist avant-garde movements. Therefore, it didn't emerge from nothing but it started to come into action in Venezuela between 1960 and 1964, the most violent years of the leftist armed guerrilla combat. Between those years there were 50 thousand prisoners and more than 100 missing or dead Venezuelans in armed conflicts. That's why the figure of the president, in this case, is a synonym of death. These are facts that allude

to a social-historical context of confrontations that determined the outcome of the aesthetic proposals of the members of that generation, those who are part of the group, which explains the violence, radicalization, and extremism of this poem.⁹

When it comes to this first book by Caupolicán, it is very important to take into consideration this frame of reference. That's the main reason why this long poem, divided into four blocks, can be considered as two things: a literary text and the first political manifest of a generation. Through this tempting literary expression, Caupolicán managed to settle the objective of writing a poem with worldwide, universal, political, ironic, and surrealist nature. Deep down, this poem fits perfectly with the literary aspirations of El Techo because it is basically two things: a text that mocks and rebukes at the same time. Mockery because it discredits the figure of the president as a representation of power, democracy, work, and progress, and of the present and future of the country; and denunciation because it points out certain political events. That's why it can be associated with any renowned political figure that holds that position and that stands out due to a human and ludicrous ideological condition debased for power megalomania.

Caupolicán tells that when Adriano Gonzalez León¹⁰ read him he was surprised by the speech's insurgency, the hostility of affirmations, the extremism of his judgment, the provocative spontaneity of his oral chatter, and the satirical inclination of his political themes. Ángel Rama¹¹ says that: "With *Are You*

⁹ In *Entrevista con Caupolicán Ovalles*, the poet reassures the following: "not long ago there was an article where Jose Vicente Rangel says that in the '60s there were about 50,000 prisoners and about one thousand Venezuelans disappeared." (2014: 349)

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 350.

¹¹ Ángel Rama, *Antología del Techo de la Ballena* (1987). Fundarte, Caracas.

Sleeping, Mr. President? the movement managed to remove the means, irritating the priests of the culture.” For that reason, González León had no doubts when he wrote a prologue for the book that was entitled “*Investigación de las Basuras*” (“Trah Research”). He knew that, finally, a 20th century Venezuelan poet had come up with the embodied form of a text of political inspiration and disconcerting poetic structure.

Even though we all know that, in life, Caupolicán Ovalles was a tireless promoter of cultural initiatives, boosting some publications or relating with groups such as Sol Cuello Cortado (Slit Throat Sun), La Pandilla de Lautreamont (The Lautreamont Gang) and La República del Este (The Eastern Republic), it is inevitable to talk about how this work is related to the postulates of El Techo de la Ballena, because there are too many traits associated to his poetic texts that relate to the aesthetic spirit of this iconoclastic movement: the thing that The Whalers called “boiling matter” is evident in his poetry. That can be the raw material, just as it emerges, from sentiment, nostalgia, hate, indignation, and emotion: magma. This image/concept is that visceral, spontaneous, effervescent, automatic, unbearable, and immediate intuition, the same that both Surrealist and Expressionists worshiped at the time. That magma in pure state that overflows in his verses was considered the essential element of writing, plastic, and experimental interventions of the group. Carmen Virginia Carrillo explains this attempt with the following words:

The magma is seen as primitive, the archaic, the vital, the genesis that we need to recover and from which a new world will be constructed, free of leashes and limiting conventionalisms. The magma and the whale, the igneous and the marine

fused to violate and renew the traditional artistic structures.¹²

This identity, marked by its agglutinative start, is the main reason why in his poetry, since *Are You Sleeping, Mr. President?*, one meets with those texts in which the construction of the lyric discourse is based on the fusion of corporal elements, temporal from different moments, spatial from different places, in which here and there, today and yesterday, are confused. An apparently disordered writing that calls upon the dismembering of reality; and that is deliberately assembled with the intention of building sentimental, visual, and poetic elements in some sort of concentrated scene in boiling process in the wasteland territory of the blank page.

This poet doesn't write, but paints, spits, shouts to express his discomfort, his insolence, all the malaise that overwhelms his arrogant consciousness. Ángel Rama (1987) suggested some years ago a very interesting thesis that more or less explains the underlying intention of a poem like *Are You Sleeping, Mr. President?* It's a thesis based on literary terrorism. What does he mean with this? He refers to a group of discursive methods of different nature, conceived to establish a system of symbolic resistance, of an unarmed anarchist combat, based on the personal insult, the poetic flash, the burning and chaotic satire, the frenetic wording, desperate, grotesque, enveloping, that is looking to destroy the image of a power agent that simultaneously represents the self-portrait of a country. In a 1980 interview, Caupolicán Ovalles develops the argument that clarifies this aesthetic and existential position that gives rise to his poem:

If we could have an ideological pretext to justify ourselves it would be

12 Quoted from Carmen Virginia Carrillo, *De la belleza y el furor* (2007), p 98. El otro & el mismo, Mérida.

Sartre, who confronted a collective praxis, which could be the communist one, by establishing a moral, the same one he tried to build in all of his work: two things, a collective behavior, and a moral of our own, which is what I understand Sartre tried to do with existentialism. He's a man who knows that the table bothers me because it's a mean of formal oppression, to say the least, and when he gets rid of the table, he gets rid of the real oppression along with it, this is more or less how I see it.

Are You Sleeping, Mr. President? is a fulminant work that comes from the need of contradicting cultural prevailing values, through a subversive project based on rejection of the pre-established political order and the emphatic asseveration of creational freedom as the only principle that generates a lyrical discourse, a principle that can take the poetic voice to the point of irrational and delirious imagination.

That explains why Caupolicán Ovalles, a young person who was only 25 years old when he wrote this poem, dedicates his first book not to love, not to landscapes, not to the memory of his ancestors, but to critical politics. The poetic instrument, with its shape, its rhythm, its words and ideas, was the vehicle that he used to express the discomfort of a generation, the pain of a country and his profound deception, in a daring, scandalous, interesting, invasive, original, disrespectful, shameless, demential, exaggerated, furious, lascive, and implacable way. With this poem he opens the breach in the contemporary Venezuelan poetic discourse of transgression.

For this and many other reasons, for J.J. Armas Marcelo, Caupolicán Ovalles' and all the people from El Techo de la Ballena's transcendence should not be understood only in function of their subversion, but also with grounds in their findings and aesthetic explorations. Through the way of subversion, they even sculpted the honorific stela of Gallegos and

Uslar Pietri and left aside all the tradition inherited from certain tendencies of the Venezuelan literature. Since the founding and literary creation they even compared themselves with America's greatest poetry, and they put themselves in the same level as Northamerican and Mexican poetry from the second half of the 20th century. They reached the same level of the Peruvian Generation of the 1950. Armas Marcelo reassures that the curious thing about this approach is that while the poetry of a writer such as Jorge Enrique Adoum was known in Europe and all the American continent by that time, the poetic production of Caupolicán Ovalles was only valued in La República del Este, despite him not having anything to envy from the Equatorian poet. That unexplainable paradox has always been for him an unforgivable injustice because Caupolicán was the first Venezuelan poet to demonstrate that literature is fun and painful; that sometimes life is more fun than literature; that alcohol, even if it's bad, it's not always bad; that women are always wonderful even if they are bad; and that life is worth living.



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