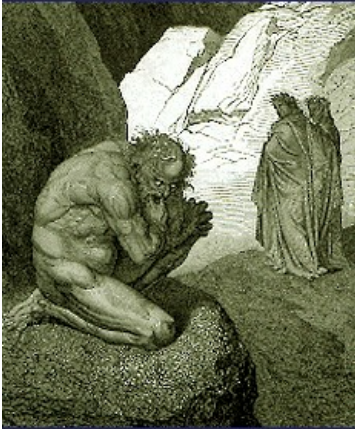


Chapter XVII

Dante's Inferno.



The pit of my stomach writhes in pain. My head is excruciated by the vomits, and in each one of them my eagerness of living escapes. A long plastic tube is pushed down through my nose pouring out an unhealthy, brownish, smelly flux.

A needle thrust in my arm, allows a pure and translucent liquid drop inside. They have had the kindness of bleeding me with the same needle they are using now to pass the serum through. I'm feeling better, much better. I heard somebody saying that my stomach won't be operated yet.

Analysis, Radiographies, Echographies....at last I'm in my room. I rise my head, and in a hospital ward, designed for only four beds; now we are nine patients.

It's night, I suppose it must be about one or two AM. Outside, I can see lightning and hear the thunders of a storm that's rolling swiftly.

In the bed just opposite mine, an old man cries and cries repeating the name of a woman, that only changes to repeat loudly: "My God" "My God". He interrupts his gloomy shrieks for a few seconds.....as if gathering strength..... and then he goes on... on.... and on..... I try to imagine it isn't real, it's only a very bad film somebody is watching on TV. But, for each heartbreaking shriek my hair stands on an end and I'm shivering....

Suddenly, I perceive what I must do: it's to ring the bell to call a nurse...

I do it, but nothing happens. I try to mend it, but hopelessly the wires shatter in my hands. Risking the serum that runs through my arm may get loose I try to call attention knocking or clapping with my hands....

Nothing. Nobody answers. The old man keeps crying and crying. I can't see the patient on my right, farther, there's another one, he's got his eyes opened under a dim light on his bed-head. His shrunken and contracted body pushes weaken head backwards, while saliva drips from one side of his mouth.

Outside the hospital, through the window, I'm watching the storm coming nearer and nearer announcing deafeningly with more and more thunders and lightning which frighten and lighten our poor decrepit bodies. Inside the hospital, on the other side of a closed door of the ward, I can only hear the distant music of a hateful cumbia in a radio. And women's voices. One is the voice of a nurse, who a while ago, injected me the serum:

- *“Bertha, your boy-friend rang you up. It's clear he can't sleep alone”.*

Mocking guffaw mixes surrealistically with the pathetic cries of the old man, who is asking for help or perhaps he's begging to be... Killed.

I feel badly. I don't know if it's due to my stomachache or due to that pain that's smashing my unfortunate companion. The thunders and lightning are more and more continuous and besides I realize the shutters are broken and it's impossible to pull them down, because their old frayed bands are knotted to some rusty peeled off pipes.

Suddenly, the wind burst its way furiously -and one of the windows opens uproariously -like an explosion. In the middle of a winter night the poor old man is whipped by a terribly cold wind and frozen water that soaks him unmercifully. His situation is dantesque and hellish. The misery he had endured some minutes ago seemed to be soft caress comparing with what he's suffering now.

I'd like to help him, but I'm hampered by the serum and the plastic tube in my nose. I'm rooted by a destiny of torture and torment that punishes me hard, very hard. Too much!!!

The old man shivers and trembles at the same time as the leaves of the trees shaken endlessly by the merciless tempest. Water and wind mix and spit on the Godforsaken body of a lonely and hopeless old man.

Where's God? Where are those who pompously preach about ethics and love to mankind? “They are sleeping”, answer the wind and the lightnings. Where are the priests and nuns who talk and talk so much about love? “They are sleeping”, answer the wind and the lightnings. Where are the politics who boastically proclaim the rights of old age? “They are sleeping”, answer the wind and the lightnings, Where are the journalists who say they only live denouncing injustice? “They are sleeping” answer the wind and the lightning.

The old man shivers and trembles at the same time as the leaves of the trees shaken endlessly by the merciless tempest. Water and wind mix and spit on the Godforsaken body of a lonely and hopeless old man.

Where's God? Where are those who pompously preach about ethics and love to mankind? “They are sleeping”, answer the wind and the lightnings. Where are the priests and nuns who talk and talk so much about love? “They are sleeping”, answer the wind and the lightnings. Where are the politics who boastically proclaim. The rights of old age? “They are sleeping”, answer the wind and the lightnings, where are the journalists who say they only live denouncing injustice? “They are sleeping”, answer the wind and the lightning. Everybody sleeps - or pretend to do it - in this night of storm, rain and loneliness; including the good nurses and worthy doctors.....

I can clearly verify that water and wind are furiously dragged as far as the third and even the farthest fourth bed. Soaked, I see how the beds of all those poor wretched old men constantly drain water and water. Water now become into a cruel master and bitter enemy. But none of the other poor old men react; and of course, they are quite

unconscious. The unconsciousness of these sad and forgotten old people must be the indulgent God has granted to them.

But the old man in the bed opposite to mine doesn't stop crying. He has even changed his mournful rhythm of shouting and wailing since the water and wind added to this punishment. He stopped asking for God. I even, can't understand what's he's saying, perhaps he's repeating something like: "mum... mum...".

Probably, he will die today or tomorrow; somewhere, somebody will write: "He died receiving the generous attention granted by the Hospital or his more generous and proud Social Management". If the invisible Ghost of Death is going round the beds, it must be forcing a gloomy and cynical smile, while it's looking at its scythe and sand clock that's emptying...

I can't bear it any longer, and I haven't the slightest hope we'll be helped by anybody. Lost wrecked people in middle of a city of nine million inhabitants. I look at my serum hung dripping faster and faster. The tube that comes out from my aching nose to a half full flask. I decide to get up, although all the things they have connected on me may come out. God or somebody should remember us. By a very brief moment, flashes of bare selfishness cross my mind "If this old man has all his life been a tramp? If he had been cruel and punished regardless any consideration? If I turn a deaf ear to and move over while I'm looking after myself? But I get rid of these thoughts. The charity I'm going to perform, after all, is only God's and mine business.

I sit on my bed, all the room turns round me like the merry-go-round of my childhood, but now it's a boat sailing me in middle of Hell. I close my eyes and try to control myself. The tube in my nose begins to leave, slowly... until it falls next to the bed. scattering by the ground, the revolting flow that tapeworm in my entrails. The pure and crystalline water serum, now has filled with my blood. I off-hook it of the long linkage and I place it below my armpit.

Support my feet in the ground and this, receives to me dunked, cold and flooded. I have very little forces and my legs, as soon as if they manage to maintain to me, temblequeando. Volume a metal chair and the use of unexpected cane. Little by little, I approach the window and with difficulty, between my gloomy you feel nauseous, the slowness in the abdomen and my head that seems on the verge of draining... profit to close it.

I turn my head round and I can see the old man who is looking at me gratefully. He has stopped crying and tries a wan and shy smile. He closes his eyes slowly but no completely, and falls asleep... He doesn't cry... any more. I'm afraid he isn't breathing either...

I want to urinate urgently. It's impossible to do it in my bed; a door shows where the bathroom is. I open the door and it's full of flasks, most of them with different colours and shades of urines... and the toilet... only one for nine beds... is filthy with stinking excrements and pieces of paper... I push the button... and of course... it doesn't work...

At the limit of my scanty strength, I return to my bed, but somehow happy the poor old man isn't suffering any more, and it's then that the other old man, on the right of my

bed, is asphyxiating. He's of a bluish colour, with black wide eyes and looking at me imploring help...

If this isn't Dante's Inferno, it's similar enough... to much...