

DREAMING (Entre Sueños)

A few days ago I went into a Tyrolean woodworking shop, and since I had to look at something, I looked at a wall clock and asked how much it was.

“Fifteen duros,” the proprietor told me.

“Hmm, fifteen duros,” I repeated to myself, as though I was doubting whether or not I should buy it.

“It’s a bargain,” the proprietor added, trying to convince me to purchase it. “Just think, you can buy a pendulum clock for only fifteen duros. It will always keep you company at night.”

“Keep me company?” I replied; “yes, that’s what I need, something to accompany me during those long hours of boredom, something that fills the silence during my endless nights of insomnia.”

And without making any further inquiries, I bought the clock and took it home. But that was a *big* mistake. It is correct to say that it would be better to be alone, than to be in the company of something you can’t stand. But let’s not be hasty. I should explain one part of this matter at a time. As I said, I bought the clock and took it home; I put it in my bedroom, I wound it up, and the pendulum started to move.

Among the things of which I know nothing, which are many, is anything related to the mechanism of a clock. So for a long time I stood there looking at that tangle of gears, and the pendulum that was moving by itself with the stupidity worthy of a savage on some remote island. For a while the clock began to entertain me, which will show my readers that I can be entertained by practically anything.

The day passed, night came, and I went to bed; now I want to see how this clock works I told my pillow, and making myself as comfortable as I could in my rickety bed, I closed my eyes and put out the light.

In fact, the clock must have understood that the time had come for it to display its abilities, since it seemed to move at a pace that was more regular, and more audible.

For a while the regular *tick... tock...* of the pendulum, which carried the baton for the symphony of sounds that filled the silence of the night, entertained me a bit, and I admit that it did seem to accompany me in my solitude. But after half an hour, I began to feel the monotony of that continuous, alternate hammering, and if I had been able to speed up or slow down the sound of the pendulum, I would certainly have done it. A little later, when my eyelids began to close insensibly, when my thoughts began to move more slowly, when the drowsiness of sleep began to enclose me in a voluptuous lethargy, I was severely tempted to get up and stop that accursed machine which, with its interminable clatter, kept on ticking without decreasing its noise or slowing its pace, until everything else seemed to disappear, both inside and outside of me.

Little by little, my ordinary ideas began to disappear, and another group of vague ideas that belonged to the world of dreams, which parallels that of reality, began to rise out of the depths of my mind, and they floated like a thin vapor before the eyes of my soul. I finally got to sleep, but not so deeply that I stopped hearing the alternating *tick tock* of the clock. That monotonous clicking must have influenced, or at least modified, the vision of

my dream, which is something that often happens with the sensations one experiences during the night.

Our imagination takes control of these sensations, giving them a different form which makes them harmonize with its strange reality. Only in that way, can I explain the vision which I had. I dreamt that I found myself in the middle of an immense field; before my eyes was an endless horizon; there were no clouds in the sky, nor any picturesque shapes in the landscape; everything was equal and monotonous, everything was green at my feet and blue over my head: a gray line spread across the horizon and seemed to separate the ground from the sky. A beautiful woman passed by my side; I spoke to her, but she did not answer, nor did she stop looking at the flower she held in her hand. *Yes-no, yes-no*, she repeated as she removed petals from the flower which was white, with a yellow bud. *Yes... no, yes... no*, over and over, and nothing else. It seemed like the petals she was pulling off were immediately restored, since she never stopped removing them and the flower always had more petals. You cannot begin to imagine how tedious it was to watch something so repetitive. And the strange thing was that the petals also made a strange sound when they were removed so that, as the woman was saying *yes... no, yes... no*, the petals accompanied her, making *tick tock, tick tock*.

But then, it is obvious. Why wouldn't that experience have bored me if there was actually no field, no woman, no flower, and no words, but only that accursed pendulum? "Well," I muttered, half-opening my sleepy eyes, "that clock is going to be a trial tonight, as I turned over and tried to go back to sleep. The clock continued endlessly, and I was not able to sleep any more. Therefore, I decided to make the most of its interminable ticking. I first took my pulse and was interested to note that it was beating with the same speed as the clock. After that, I began to count the beats of the heart of steel in that infernal machine. I counted, I don't know how many, and it got to the point that there wasn't enough time between the *ticks* to say the number of beats; eighty eight thousand, nine hundred and ninety eight, eighty eight thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine, I struggled to speak fast enough so that I wouldn't lose track of the count, and I did it with eagerness and anxiety, as if I were going to receive a doubloon for each beat I counted. I eventually reached the point where I no longer wanted to continue but, in spite of that, I kept on counting in my imagination.

In the midst of this battle with the stubbornness of another will, which is separate from ours and makes us do something we don't want to, I finally went to sleep again. Once more, I had a dream. I have such a confused memory of this second dream that it is difficult for me to coordinate it. I dreamt that I was motionless, and that I was walking. Motionless, because while not wanting to walk, I sat down on a road whose destination I could not see; and walking, because I could hear the sound of my boots that seemed to be made of steel, and were walking over a sheet of glass. And the strange thing about this nightmare was that, in spite of knowing I was motionless, I was sure that the sound was made by my boots, and I was so convinced of this that the movement tired me without moving. "Could it be that someone is walking near me," I said under my breath, while I was sweating blood with great anxiety. I turned my head in each direction, but could see no one. And the sound of the boot steps kept on being heard with mathematic precision. *Click clack, click clack...* the boot heels kept on making but, when I say boot heels, I am wrong, because of course it was the noise of that accursed pendulum.

“Well, it’s clear,” I declared when I woke up; “I’m not going to be able get any sleep all night.” And not knowing what else to do, I began to hum a barcarole¹ in time with the beats of the clock, which I pretended were oars. Imagine a calm night, a deep blue sky dotted with bits of gold, a silver sea with waves that sparkle under the light of the moon, a small boat skimming through the water, leaving behind a bright, narrow wake, and in the midst of a profound silence, the notes of a song float in the air, so that the languid rhythm of the melody mixes with gentle the sound of the oars. There is no romantic poet, nor heroine from a novel, who has not dreamt of that same view of the sea, with the little boat, the song, and the moon; a magnificent scene full of poetry, which may have sometimes been exaggerated, but which is still very beautiful.

Comfortably wrapped in the bed-clothes, while I was half awake and half asleep, and while singing a well-known barcarole by Weber, more in my imagination than my voice, I was able to enjoy all the pleasures of the scene I was picturing. There were moments in which the steel springs of my bed seemed to rock with the same rhythm as the beats of the clock, and it seemed like my face was dampened by the repeated splashes of the oars. Finally, after I had gone through all the songs in my repertoire, which are quite a few, I asked myself, “But where in the devil am I going, rowing like a galley slave through this endless sea?” I rowed and rowed, and it seemed like the oars which kept the beat forced me to sing, whether I wanted or not, always with the same rhythm. My forehead covered with sweat, tired of rocking from one side to the other, and completely tired of the music that kept ringing in my ears against my will, I resolved to sit up in bed and escape from this weird somnambulism I had been caught in.

“Thank goodness!” I exclaimed, when I sat up; “now the noise of the pendulum sounds like what it actually is.”

I calmed down for a while, but then became upset again. I have listened for hours, with an attention worthy of something more important, while a woodworm gnaws on the woodwork of my balcony. I have spent many nights listening to the wind whistle through the flue of the chimney in my study, and in a town next to the sea, I have spent as many as fifteen days listening to the monotonous roar of the waves during a storm; and finally, I have a neighbor and this god-forsaken neighbor has a dog that he leaves, I don’t know if by accident or on purpose, outside on the steps of the house so that the dog barks all night long. So I, who have had the patience to put up with many annoying sounds, have never had to listen to anything as unpleasant and as tiresome as the endless clicking of a clock with a pendulum. After thinking about the noise of an insect that gnaws, the sound of the wind that whistles, the echo of waves that roar in the distance, and the pitiful howling of a dog that is scratching on the door, I realized there is a great range of sounds whose difference is so noticeable that it breaks the monotony. There have been times when I seemed to hear different words and phrases in the whistling of the wind, when I have watched an insect pursue his titanic task, and I have listened to a kind of hymn in the murmur of the waves; but as hard as I tried that night to obtain some benefit from the continuous ticking of that clock, I was not able to find anything more than two sharp, metallic sounds that could not possibly have been more tedious. I could not sleep any more, and I was not able to have any more dreams that might at least have provided some relief from the monotony. In my struggle with the pendulum I was about to admit defeat.

¹ A folksong sung by Venetian gondoliers.

Following my impatient frustration, I had begun to experience a nervous tension that was the precursor of a crisis. I began to feel the beats as though they were actually sounding inside my head. The beats of my temples were no longer in time with those of the clock, because they had become even faster. I don't know where I read that the Inquisition had once had a horrible torture that consisted of letting alternating drops of water fall over the head of the accused, one which was ice-cold, and another which was boiling hot.

By that time I would have sworn that each of the beats of the clock was either a drop of melted lead, or a burst of snow that was piercing my cranium and causing a convulsion with horrible pains. I tried to protect myself from the torment by covering my ears, but to no avail. Finally, desperate, and without the strength to wait for day to arrive, I jumped out of bed and fumbled around in the dark until I found a match and lit it. And I would not swear it wasn't a hallucination but, when a bit of light filled my bedroom and I was able to see the clock, it seemed that the hands and the numbers had been transformed into a devilish face which leered at me mockingly, as I suffered in torment. I could not help myself; I picked up a chair, and I smashed the clock, which was tormenting me, to smithereens. After that I was able to go back to bed and sleep the sleep of the just. When I woke up the next day and saw the pieces of the clock, I couldn't imagine what sort of nervous system our forefathers must have had, since they had been able to endure not only those pendulum clocks but, for God's sake, even those with a cuckoo!