

THE MISERERE

(A Religious Legend)

A few months ago I visited the renowned Abbey of Fitero, and while I was looking through some of the books in the abandoned library, in one corner I discovered several old sheets of music that were covered with dust and had already been chewed on by rats.

It was a *Miserere*.

I know very little about music, but I enjoy listening to it so much that, even if I don't understand it, I have sometimes taken a musical score and spent time leafing through the pages, examining the complicated groups of notes, the semicircles and triangles, and the strange thing they call keys; all that, without understanding anything or receiving much benefit from it.

Consistent with this mania of mine, I looked through the sheets of music and the first thing I noticed was the fact that, although the last page ended with word *finis*, which in Latin means "The end," the *Miserere* was not finished, because the music did not have more than ten verses.

This was what got my attention at first, but when I looked more closely at the sheets of music, I noticed that, instead of the Italian terms they usually use, like *maestoso*, *allegro*, *ritardando*, *più vivo*, *pianissimo*, there were some lines written in fine print in German, some of which mentioned things that would be difficult to do, like: "they are creaking..., the bones creak and it should seem like cries that come from the marrow"; or this other one, "the chord moans without being out of tune, the brass thunders but does not deafen; therefore, everything is heard and nothing is lost, and all of this is Humanity that sobs and moans"; and then undoubtedly the strangest of all, at the end of the final verse it declared: "The notes are bones covered with flesh; undying light, the heavens and their harmony..., strength!..., strength and sweetness."

"Once I was able to translate some of the phrases that seem to be written by a madman, I asked an elderly mad who was with me, "Do you know what this means?"

The old man then told me the story, which I am now going to repeat for you.

I

Many years ago, on a dark and rainy night, a pilgrim arrived at the door to the cloister of this Abbey and he asked for a fire to dry his clothes, some bread to satisfy his hunger, and a place to stay until the next day when he would continue his journey.

After giving the pilgrim a light meal, a plain bed, and a fire to warm and dry him, and after he had time to recover from his fatigue, the lay brother who provided these services asked him about the purpose of his pilgrimage and the destination to which he was traveling.

"I am a musician," the he answered. "I was born far from here, and in my homeland I had achieved great renown. When I was young, I used my artistic talent as a weapon of seduction and with it I ignited some passions that led me to a crime. Now that I am old I want to take the abilities I used for evil and use them for something good; in this way I hope to redeem myself with the very thing that would condemn me."

Since these enigmatic words of the stranger were not clear to the lay brother whose curiosity had been awakened, he asked more questions, and the pilgrim continued in this fashion:

“Deep inside me I was feeling guilt for what I had done; I wanted to ask God for forgiveness but couldn’t find the appropriate words to express my repentance when, by chance, my eyes happened to fall on a sacred book. I opened it and on one of its pages I found an example of true contrition, a psalm of David which begins: *Miserere mei, Deus!* Ever since the moment when I read the words of that psalm, my only thought has been to discover a musical form, so magnificent and so sublime, that it could express the glorious hymn of pain by the Prophet King. I still haven’t found it; but if I am ever able to convey what I feel in my heart and what I hear in my mind, I am sure to create a *Miserere* so marvelous that nothing on earth could compare to it, so poignant that on hearing the first chord the archangels will join me and they will say to the Lord: “Have mercy!”; and the Lord will have mercy for his poor creature.”

On reaching this point in his story, the pilgrim was quiet for a moment and then, with a sigh he continued speaking. The lay brother, some servants of the abbey, and several shepherds from the farm belonging to the abbey were all gathered in a circle around him, and they listened with great interest.

“After that,” he continued, “I traveled through the entire country of Germany, all of Italy, and most of this classical country, searching for religious music; but I still have not found a *Miserere* that could inspire me, and I have now listened to so many that I think I have heard them all.”

“Heard them all,” one of the shepherds asked, interrupting him, “but have you heard the *Miserere of the Mountain?*”

“The *Miserere of the Mountain!*” said the musician with an air of puzzlement. “What *Miserere* is that?”

“It is as I said,” the shepherd replied and then continued as though he were explaining something mysterious. “This is a *Miserere* which those of us who travel through hill and dale following the herds are able to hear by accident; it is part of a very old story, but it is true, even though it may seem unbelievable. It tells that in the most remote region of the mountains which surround the valley at the bottom of which this Abbey is located, many years ago, or in fact many centuries ago, there was a monastery which they say was built by a Lord whose property was to have been inherited by a son whom he disinherited before he died for the evil things he had done. Until this point everything was fine; but as we will see in what follows, this son seemed to be a disciple of the Devil, or perhaps the Devil himself. So when he found that his wealth had been given to the priests and his castle was transformed into a church, he gathered his dissolute companions who had left their families to participate in this ruinous life, and on the night of Maundy Thursday, when all the monks were in the choir and at the exact moment when they were about to begin, or had already begun, the *Miserere*, they set fire to the monastery and they entered the church to sack it. According to what some said, and others denied, they also murdered all of the monks. After this these evildoers, along with their leader, marched off to God knows where, perhaps the bowels of the earth. The flames reduced the monastery to ashes; what remains of the ruins of the church is still located on top of a hollow rock from which water flows to form the stream which comes to wash the walls of this Abbey.”

“But,” the impatient musician interrupted, “what about the *Miserere*?”

“Just wait,” the shepherd replied; “I will come to that in due time.” Having said that, he continued with his story.

“All the people in the surrounding region were shocked by the crime: from father to son and from son to grandson, they told the story often and on many different occasions; but what stands out in their memory is that every year, on the night when it was burned, one can see lights shining through the broken windows of the church; one can also hear the mysterious sounds of music and mournful songs that are carried by the gusts of wind. It is the monks who perhaps have died without being able to purge their sins before they entered the Court of God and have therefore come back from Purgatory to ask for mercy by singing the *Miserere*.”

Those who were listening to the story looked at each other in amazement; it was only the pilgrim who seemed to be deeply concerned by the events of the story, and he asked the person who was telling it:

“And you say that this wonder still occurs?”

“In three hours it will start again, because this is the night of Maundy Thursday, and it just struck eight on the clock in the Abbey.”

“How far away is the monastery?”

“Perhaps about one and a half leagues.”

“But what are you doing? Where are you going on a night like this? Have you lost your mind?” they exclaimed as they saw the pilgrim rise off his bench and take his staff, walking away from the hearth toward the door.

“Where am I going? Why to hear this marvelous music, to hear the real *Miserere*, the *Miserere* of those who return from the dead and know what it is to die in sin.”

The wind moaned making the doors creak as if a powerful hand was trying to tear them off their hinges; the rain was falling in torrents, beating against the glass in the windows, and from time to time a streak of lightning lit the horizon.

“He’s mad!” the lay brother said when the first moment of astonishment had passed.

“He’s mad,” the others agreed, as they stirred the fire and gathered around the hearth.

II

After traveling for two or three hours the mysterious pilgrim, who was considered a madman by those in the abbey, finally reached the stream which had been mentioned by the shepherd, and at this point he was finally able to see the dark and imposing ruins of the monastery.

The rain had stopped; large, dark clouds were still floating across the sky and from time to time a furtive ray of light shone through them; the wind was still moaning as it whipped the massive buttresses and spread through the deserted cloister. Nevertheless, there was nothing strange or supernatural that struck the imagination. For someone who had spent many nights sheltered by the ruins of an abandoned tower or a solitary castle, who had passed through thousands of storms and torments during his lengthy pilgrimage, all these sights and sounds were quite familiar.

Drops of rain that dripped through cracks in the broken arches and fell on the stone slabs with a rhythmic sound like that of the pendulum in a clock; the hooting of an owl

perched under the stone halo of a statue that was still standing in a recess of the wall; the hissing of snakes who, awakened from their lethargy by the storm, poked their ugly heads out of their holes or slithered through the weeds and brambles growing at the foot of the altars, or through the joints between the burial slabs that formed the floor of the church, all these strange, mysterious sounds of the countryside and the solitude of the night were perceptible to the ears of the pilgrim who was seated on the broken statue of a tomb, anxiously awaiting the hour when the marvelous event would finally occur.

The moments passed by and still nothing happened; the confusing sounds of the night could still be heard, and they blended together in thousands of different ways but were always the same.

“Could I have been deceived?” the musician wondered; but just then, he heard a new sound, an inexplicable sound like a clock makes in the moment before it strikes the hour: the sound of wheels that are turning, of cords that are stretching, of a mechanism that is shaking and about to use its strange, mechanical vitality; and a bell chimed one... two... three... until eleven chimes were heard.

In the ruined church where the pilgrim was seated there was no bell, no clock, nor even a tower that was still standing.

The last stroke of the clock was passing from echo to echo and its vibration was still trembling in the air, when the granite canopies that covered the sculptures, the marble steps of the altars, the stones of the vaulted arches, the ornate railing of the choir, the garlands of clover on the cornices, the black buttresses of the walls, the floors and the vaults, the entire church, was illuminated spontaneously, even though there was no torch, and no candle or lamp could be seen to cause the mysterious brightness. The remains of the church resembled a giant skeleton whose bones were emitting a phosphoric gas that was shining in the darkness with a timid and uncertain glow.

It all seemed to come alive but with a galvanic movement that imposes contractions on death so that it parodies life, an instantaneous change that is even more frightening than the inertia of a corpse shaken by an unseen force. Stones reconnected to stones; the altar, whose broken pieces were scattered, rose up intact, as though the architect had just made the final blow of his chisel; the altar, the demolished chapels, the broken spires, as well as an immense network of broken arches, rose up and reconnected with the fallen columns, forming an amazing labyrinth of stone.

Once the church was restored, a distant chord was heard that could have been mistaken for a gust of air, but was a solemn chorus of voices that seemed to rise from the bowels of the earth and spread out, little by little, becoming more and more noticeable.

The bold pilgrim became frightened, but struggling against his fear was his intense and long-lasting fanaticism, and encouraged by it he arose from the tomb where he had been seated, bent over the edge of the ravine where the stream had become a torrent that was pouring over the rocks, and his hair stood on end in horror.

Barely covered with the remains of their disheveled habits and hoods, under which the empty cavities of their eyes, their fleshless jaws, and their white teeth contrasted with the dark fabric, he saw the skeletons of the monks who were climbing out of the water, holding onto the cracks in the rocks with their bony hands until they reached the edge of the ravine and, with quiet, sepulchral voices and a profound expression of sorrow, they were repeating the first verse of the psalm of David: *“Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam!”*

When the monks reached the colonnade of the church they formed two columns and, marching into it, they went to kneel in the choir where, with slightly louder voices, they continued singing the verses of the psalm. There was music accompanying their voices: the music was the distant sound of thunder which becomes softer as the storm disappears; it was the sound of the wind that was moaning in a hollow of the mountains; it was the monotonous noise of a cascade that was falling over the rocks, of the drops of water that were dripping, the hoots of an owl that was hidden, and the slithering of restless reptiles. The music was all this, and even more that can not be explained nor scarcely imagined, and there was also something that seemed like the echo of an organ that accompanied the verses of the remarkable hymn of contrition by the psalmist king, with notes and chords as impressive as its terrible words.

As the ceremony continued, the amazed and terrified musician who witnessed it felt as though he was somewhere outside the world of reality, in a bizarre state of dreams, where everything was cloaked in strange and fantastic forms.

A terrible spasm of shaking brought him out of the stupor which had been blocking the faculties of his spirit. His nerves were jolted by a powerful shock, his teeth chattered, and he shook with a trembling that was impossible to control as the cold penetrated to the marrow of his bones.

At that moment the monks repeated these frightening words of the *Miserere*:

“In iniquitatibus conceptus sum: et in peccatis concepit me mater mea.”

As the words of this verse resounded and its echoes reverberated through the church, a terrible wail arose that sounded like a cry of pain from all Humanity for the awareness of their sins; it was a horrible cry produced by all the laments of misfortune, all the shouts of desperation, all the oaths of blasphemy; a monstrous presentation, a worthy interpretation of those who live in sin and were conceived in a state of iniquity.

The music continued; first it was sad and then like a ray of sunlight shining through a dark cloud, resounding with a burst of terror and then a burst of jubilation, until there was a sudden transformation and the church shone as though it was bathed in a heavenly light; the bones of the monks were clothed with flesh; a shining halo glowed over their heads; the dome of the church opened and through it the light of the open sky became like an ocean of light before the eyes of the righteous.

The seraphim, the angels and archangels, all the hierarchies of heaven accompanied the next verse with a sound of glory that ascended to the throne of the Lord like a harmonic whirlwind, like a magnificent spiral of sonorous incense:

“Auditui meo dabis gaudium et lætitiā: et exultabunt ossa humiliata.”

At that moment the dazzling brightness blinded the pilgrim's eyes, his temples shook, his ears buzzed, he fell to the ground unconscious, and that was the last thing he heard...

III

The next day, after the lay brother had told them of the strange visit of the previous night, the monks of the Abbey of Fitero saw the mysterious pilgrim, who was pale and exhausted, pass through its doors.

“So were you able to hear the *Miserere*,” the lay brother asked him with a certain tone of irony, while glancing meaningfully at his superiors.

“Yes,” the musician answered.

“And what did you think of it?”

“I am going to write it,” he said, and turning to the abbot, he continued; “if you give me food and lodging here for several months, I will give to you an immortal work of art, a *Miserere* that will erase my sins in the eyes of God and eternalize my memory, and also that of this abbey.”

The monks, who were curious, advised the abbot to grant this request. Although the abbot thought he was mad, out of compassion he agreed and, once he was settled in the monastery, the musician started to work.

All day and all night he worked feverishly without stopping. In the midst of his task he would hesitate for a moment while he seemed to listen to something he heard in his mind; his pupils would dilate, he would jump to his feet and exclaim:

“Yes, that’s it; that’s how it should be”; then he would sit down and continue writing with an avidity that astonished those who were watching him in secret.

He wrote the beginning verses and those that followed until he was more than half way through the psalm; but after he got to the last verse he had heard on the mountain, he was unable to continue.

He wrote one, two, one hundred, two hundred, rough drafts: to no avail. After that he was unable to sleep, he lost his appetite, he became feverish, and he finally died without being able to finish the *Miserere* which, because it was such a strange composition, the monks decided to keep, and it is still preserved in the archive of the Abbey today.”

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When the old man finished telling me this story, I could not help but go back and look at the manuscript again, which was still lying open on one of the tables.

In peccatis concepit me mater mea...

It was these words on the page in front of me that seemed to mock me with their notes, their keys, and the unintelligible scribbles for those who do not know how to read music. I would have given the world to be able to read them.

But who knows if this would not have been madness?