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L’ILLUMI-BATO

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I was with Harry Potter at Jack Nicholson’s place, after a day spent unloading fruit and vegetables.

The poker game had gone well: Jack and I had cleaned out young Potter, and then Jack had partly cleaned out me.

When the clock strikes one, Potter buries his face in his hands in despair, and Jack, blind drunk, snaps furiously: “Get the fuck out of here, the pair of you!”

He doesn’t have to tell us twice.

Potter, ahead of me, faces life with a weary gait, a disappointed stride.

Poor guy.

It happens to everyone sooner or later. Everything’s plain sailing and suddenly… nothing.

The trick doesn’t work anymore.

And the APPLAUSE turns into BOOOO.

Harry sobs into his cloak as he staggers along.

“Don’t think about it, kid… let it go,” I tell him.

He turns, looks at me and points to a broom leaning against the wall.

“Need a lift?”

“No.”

“Then take this. It’s an invitation. Go only when you’re ready.”

He twirls his fingers under my nose and a little card pops up on his ring finger.

Then he jumps on the broom and vanishes into the night.

I look at the card in the moonlight.

MIRABILIA, it says, and an address underneath.

Days later I find myself unloading fruit and vegetables for a few cents, as always; but this time, as chance would have it, right near the place on the card.

Just a stone’s throw away, as if it were a sign, a calling.

Of all places, an urgent request to unload fruit and greens had come from right there; right there my professional skills had become necessary.

So I start thinking about Potter’s words: ‘go only when you’re ready’.

Was I ready to leave the greengrocery trade, to which I owed everything?

What do I do? Do I stay in the business of loading and unloading turnips-courgettes-oranges-bananas, or do I throw myself into the mirabilia just round the corner?

The cultivated fields or the circus.

What would you do?

Well, I don't know what you would do, but I put down yet another crate of Roman courgettes and tell my colleague: "I'm done."

He looks at me, picks the courgettes up off the ground and says "Take care, mate…" and then disappears into the darkness of a supermarket.

I turn my back on him, reach the street number and go in.

And who do I find there?

Drum roll

The Bato.

If I remember correctly, Round Four.

ding-ding

After great drifts into the brush, Jazz and Risorgimentos, and more new conquests of forms in a flora-and-fauna mould[1]… here he is again.

Now he's carrying on with the occult, in fierce and magical beasts, in the Holy Scriptures, in ancient and mighty things.

BATO the illuminATO.

He starts off calmly, without pretensions: just a 200-by-150 of Adam naming the animals.

A two-footed tackle on modernity.

And yet Bato is right there.

He never loses sight of himself for a moment, he is fully present: these are his melodies.

With them he drains the endless verbosity of captions and dries out the tomes of encyclopaedias.

And the Batoid Adam is a conductor who perhaps plays the clarinet, and traces in the air two smoky, bewitched knots that have drawn in all the felines, the snakes, the birds, the sheep and the cattle. All of Bato's Beasts: the tigers, those C-heads and the flowering leonine manes, the crocodiles harnessed in gold with musket snouts, the bears and the birds, the bulls at Mycenae and Adam holding them all, in high-heeled shoes, muzzle outstretched, Orpheus and the Sirens.

And then boom.

A blue whale hits you in the face, shot at full speed from the abyss to the surface, with flicks of its tail and dragon fins. It's a fishy monster with a boxing-glove head, undefeated Champion of the Seven Seas, with Jonah in the corner as its second. It's a bluish right hook that opens up my guard and that I really didn't see coming.

And in fact it knocks my sunshade clean off.

My sunglasses, I mean.

One to Bato.

He knows what he's doing.

This show of monsters is an initiation. Every piece is a trial to be passed. He has slipped into the oldest story ever told, the Blessed Age. Not for the exclusive use of human beings. And so off we go with gods and gnomes, warlike heroes, weapons of everlasting fire and raging winds.

And underneath, the beasts devour each other, entwined.

That's where he takes us this time, into the harsh circle of hell: among a red unicorn charging with forward thrust and taking aim, complete with a drop of blood on its horn, a syringe loaded with a spring-screw-spiral. The maps of the place become ambiguous, they follow sea routes older than the sea itself, no longer the shape of spheres but circles of land bordered by land, peopled by impressive folk, Gog and Magog, Battisti and Mogol, sea dragons, Scylla and Charybdis, Cyclopes, Vampires. The maps show them all, coordinates in hand, but nobody has ever gone to check, and those who did never came back, or got lost at sea.

And on the brink of drowning the Leviathan opens up, like a dandelion with six deadly stems you wouldn't dare blow on, Master of the Land and Master of the Sea. You are saved by a brotherly companion, an everlasting dragon sparkling in many colours, and the more you watch it sparkle the more it feels like biting your head off. You sense the danger but you watch it, you think it over: maybe it's better to end up as food for this monster here,

Schytalis the good-looking, and be done with it.

But you can only choose the ending for the paths that don't matter.

This is a slaughter; you come out a bit chewed up.

Pasiphae the Infamous comes to tend your wounds, as a friend, needless to say: it seems she has high expectations of her lovers (Daedalus's trick is a real Trojan horse).

Then you follow the current and land in the hot desert of prehistoric Pangaea, where a bronze foot rises, baked to perfection by the sun, and beneath it its owner, who crawls on the ground all his life, covering his head with that enormous extremity.

"Friend Sciapod," you feel like saying, "are you sure you want to cover up that ugly head of yours? Is this any way to keep out of the sun?"

But then you say nothing, and he points you towards some horrid woods, and if it were up to me I'd go back to the courgettes, but the path of initiation doesn't wait for fools. In the middle of the woods there is a rooster, a cat and a king inside a ball, held up by the winches of nearby

ships.

I don’t know the names of the rooster and the cat, but I do know the King’s, because no name is better known than his.

Not even ‘Michael Jackson’, not even ‘Bergoglio’, ‘Kennedy’, ‘Rolling Stones’…

He really holds his own against the heavyweights, with Jesus Christ and names like that, never mind…

It’s Alexander, who, not content with conquering all the lands then known, amuses himself by conquering the depths, complete with cat, rooster, a diving suit with a breathing beak, a conical contraption and a golden thread. He has barely had time to dry off when the Great King leaps onto a winged chariot, driven by a Griffin, drawn in pencil and blue-toothed.

No kingdom resists the Great King.

Everything is gathered into one: long live the god of life.

Let the legends turn to stone: the burnished lions brought back to life, rubbed until the gold comes out of them, the she-bear moulding her heir with blows of her muzzle, and Pasiphae with her Minotaur on one side and a Crocodiled Dragon on the other rise up as imperious statues, the columns of a Phantom Gate guarding the great secret: the vibration that sets everything in order and takes everything apart.

And you vibrate with Mirabilia at Bato’s exhibition.

Let’s just hope that, from painting so many monsters, he doesn’t run the risk of becoming a painting himself.

— Danilo Pette, L’ILLUMI-BATO, 2022