

A Cat Called Age

They say that King Cyrus was raised by a one-eyed female dog. Zymbragos by the dark Charybdis. Telephus, the illegitimate son of Hercules, was brought up by a doe. Paris, of the Trojan War, was raised by a bear. No need to mention of course the wolf-nursed founders of Rome, but we will recall the fine Aesop fable about the cat which, in some unknown way, had fallen in love with a young man and pleaded with Aphrodite to transform it into a woman. The cat's plea was heard and the young man was quick to respond to the wiles of the feline-born beauty. Now wanting to test whether the young woman had also been spiritually transformed, goddess Aphrodite sent a mouse her way. And she, upon catching a whiff of the rodent, left the young man high and dry in bed and ran to capture her dinner. Raging with indignation, the goddess of love turned her back into a cat.

But Alcozarán was raised by the absence of a cat.

We must also make mention here of Lewis Carroll's bodiless Cheshire cat, of Bulgakov's diabolical (and keen cigar-smoking) cat, of the introverted Prince of Chavarese, who was cat-ified in 1925, and of Eliot's divers silly cats. It is rumoured that the tame old Chan, a cat belonging to a European doctor living in the outer districts of Saigon until 1899 (the year aspirin was invented), was a debauched opium smoker.

Brecht's *Herr Keuner* did not like cats because he did not consider them a friend to man. However, when some stray whined outside his door, he would get up and let it into the warmth of his home. 'Their plan is a simple one,' he said. 'When they yowl, there will always be someone to open the door for them. And when people stop letting them in, they'll stop yowling. But even yowling shows some progress.'

Being in favour of vocalness, we proceed progressively and unabashedly to the modern city. The city of people and the city of cats are found one within the other, commented Italo Calvino, but they are not the same city.

And yet Alcozarán was born in the city of Toledo and what's more, on April 28th, 1896, the day that the statue of the Charioteer in Delphi was dug up. His father was a merchant of white linens and his mother a natural blonde. He had two sisters, who were, in turn, on the plump side but crushingly respectable. He studied law, owned white cats (Bellfinia, Ystaspa, Cojones and Miamor) and he was fluent in German.

He showed leadership, mild ambition, an inclination for recognition and all other features that co-habit in people with high levels of uric acid in their blood. He remained among the conservative while he had an arranged marriage with the sister of a noteworthy clergyman, who had even unexpectedly served as a naval officer. He acquired a wary daughter and the life-tenancy of a ground-floor shop near Madrid's central train station. He loathed cold coffee and any form of rebellion.

During Franco's regime he found himself working in the diplomatic service in countries of Central America where he metaphorically won laurels and literally won nominations of honour. In the summer of 1962, I think it was, he had a disagreement with the then Minister of Foreign Affairs and in the throes of rage sent a decorative bronze inkpot flying at him, causing scratches upon the said Minister. The incident was hushed up but it contributed to his

being demoted to commonplace position in the corps until he was finally forced to voluntarily resign from civil service.

For a time he wandered around with his spouse on unofficial visits to cosmopolitan capitals of the world, spending modest amounts of money on the gambling tables and entangling himself in French conversations about the high intelligence quotient of the cat; perhaps this was his way of discreetly rekindling old acquaintances.

What is the relation of philosophy to humanism? None. To the Freedom of the Press? Minimal.

On the balcony of some hotel in Zurich he coincidentally read an article about a rhapsodist from Knossos named Thaletus and about the philosopher Theano, also from Crete, the legendary wife of Pythagoras, who, as you may remember, formulated three main theories: first, never breed swallows under the eaves of your roof (a most unwholesome habit of dire consequence) and second, do not describe the image of God in the circle of a ring. The reason is obvious.

So, in late March of 1968, we find our traveller in the loft of the monastery in Arcadia. Was he occupied with the dark truth about the holocaust? Was he concerned about the tremors of the desert? I do not know. Zachariah the cat gazed into the night air rising from behind the walls.

The benevolent Alcozarán decided that this was the land for him. He rode the bus around the neighbouring mountain villages and finally found an inhabitable room near the corner coffee-shop in Myrolithos.

In the years of Ottoman Rule, the area had been plagued by a dragon of feline form, which gulped down fire of any sort. It was not a slight of hand; it was merely the nature of its nutrition. But the world was getting cold. No one could cook. There was a famine. As the story goes, Saint Myron went to visit this dragon one afternoon in the threshing floors of the fields. They argued and in the heat of the moment he threw a pebble at it. What followed was a miraculous rainstorm of stones of unknown origin which buried the Saint. The dragon repented, took on the Saint's form and ended up as an archimandrite. On the hill that was formed by the storm of stones the present town flourished.

Time passed, as it always does, with uncertainty. It's true that the villagers considered Alcozarán an outsider. In spite of all their fabled hospitality, they viewed him warily and provided him only with the bare necessities. This unusual stance originated from an unconfirmed rumour that this man was connected to the importation of a Spanish breed of sheep called merino, which had not become acclimatised to the White Mountains, a fact which had grave financial consequences on the area; in addition he was also suspect because the marrow of the sheep in question was certifiably thought to eliminate the desires of the flesh.

It was only the warrant officer that deeply valued him because he instinctively considered all Spaniards to have identical political ideals, that went along with reborn phoenixes, the emblem of the Greek dictatorship. I wonder if he knew my motto that democrats cannot love cats without being punished. I doubt it. I think he felt his vulnerable authority being attacked at the times which, according to custom, the sericulturists of the province spread false rumours. Let us remind you that this method is believed world-wide to speed up the hatching of the silkworm.

Alcozarán, however, reconciled himself diplomatically with the kittens Xasou and Charkia and lived for four months watching the light play on the clouds. He wrote two commanding letters to his wife: the first one to say he was still alive and the second to request the monographs of Alexander Garden and Michel Bégon (the guardians of the ethereal gardenia and the colour-begetting begonia respectively) because he had recently developed a sudden interest in horticulture.

One night he rose from his bed to make a visit to the outhouse and upon his return saw himself pale and immobile lying in his bed. He immediately collapsed.

The village doctor, Athanasakis, administered first aid and then threw up his hands in despair. Relatives were informed via the embassy and they found him well-steamed, sowing wheat germ to be consumed at his funeral.

For three days the Spaniards wandered around the village gesticulating wildly. At least they consumed vast quantities of omelettes and boiled chicken at the local tavern.

The priest was finally informed that Alcozarán had fixed his gaze on the ceiling and was watching the angel, so two dark-skinned peasants lifted him by the armpits and made him walk around the bed (because he hadn't yet filled his life's quota of steps, so let him take them and be done with it).

They took him down to the Catholic cemetery in Heraklion in a truck. Funeral announcements were printed in two languages, where all his titles were mentioned, but unfortunately with inexcusable typographical errors. Close by the relatives stood the warrant officer in full regalia, some unknowns and a cat called Age.

On the spot where the cat later died no moss ever gathered.