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Review of José Luis de Juan's *Napoleon's Beekeeper* (trans. Elizabeth Bryer)

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de Juan, José Luis. *Napoleon's Beekeeper*. Translated by Elizabeth Bryer. Giramondo, 2020.

———. *El apicultor de Bonaparte*. Minúscula, 2017.

No other 19th-century politico-military figure was as significant for European history as Bonaparte. His banishment to Elba is the historical context for this nouvelle, which was first published in 1996, and re-released in 2017 through an independent Barcelona publisher, Minúscula.

The protagonist is an Elba beekeeper, Andrea Pasolini, an extraordinarily educated man whose library includes books on philosophy, the classics and, naturally, apiculture. Why should an apiculturist be so concerned and involved in Napoleon's arrival in Elba? The story reveals that the two men already share a connection. Many years before, Pasolini had written to Napoleon, and despite receiving no reply, Corsican honey is sent to him in a jar of fine Bohemian crystal bearing the imperial seal. Thus, de Juan creates the imaginary link on which credible historical fiction needs to be built:

He started foraging in the backrooms of booksellers located in Pisa, Luca and Florence, getting hold of the tiniest booklets with some special titbit about the First Consul, the most intimate detail, the most secret. [...] Pasolini sounded out Napoleonic specialists, wearied his eyes reading dull memoirs and court chatter, wrote to beekeepers from Versailles and Paris. A few had heard of N.'s interest in bees but couldn't contribute anything more than a tale or two of dubious authenticity.

(23)

When told that the Emperor would like him to be his guide in a tour of the island's beehives, Pasolini envisages a momentous role for himself in Bonaparte's foreseeable resurgence. The Emperor may have lost a battle, but defeat is not as yet part of his vocabulary. Troubled by the imminent imperial visit, the beekeeper frets and worries; he has been receiving missives from his former teacher in Pisa, Father Anselmo, who wants Pasolini to help him make Napoleon the first Emperor of Italy:

Now is the time to revive the Holy Empire, this is Italy's chance. And for this we need an emperor. A true emperor to lead an army of Tuscans and Milanese, of Venetians and Romans, of peasants from Naples and Calabria.

(75)

Both an apiculturist and a thinker, Pasolini has long studied the behaviour of bees and has found a remarkable similitude between the insects' social structure and the military strategy involved in how they handle the defence of their hives. In short chapters that alternately narrate the progress of events for both Pasolini and Napoleon

on Elba, the author renders a lively portrait of the beekeeper as a man who becomes immersed in a political intrigue against his wishes. For his part, Napoleon is depicted as a taciturn figure, a statesman thwarted by developments beyond his control.

Will the lives of these two men meet in what might be a momentous resurgence of an overly ambitious pan-European aspiration? José Luis de Juan offers the reader a convincing fiction about power and ambition, exploiting the figure of the Emperor for his own literary purposes.

Bryer's translation replicates both the subtle literariness of the original and its austere quality. In some instances, the English text improves the original: for instance, the 'Porto Azzurro' of the Spanish becomes 'Porto Longone' in the translation, for this was the actual name of the harbour town at the time. Still, some oddities and infelicities can be found, perhaps due to a rushed reading of the source language text. On page 52, the Spanish *erupciones volcánicas* is rendered as "volcanic interruptions", an error the editor should have definitely picked up; and the Spanish *modistillas* (i.e., apprentice seamstresses) is rather incongruously translated as "modish young women" on page 61. But these are minor flaws in what is a delightful and commendable novella.