

Rimini (offseason)

Daniel Fonatti

07.09.2023, 18.00h

Verein Fortuna

Text by Sebastian Koeck

This early 17th century brick of a book is the perfect traveling companion, as a reader in transit mirrors the dense collections of the errant adventures that this classic recounts. I found myself finishing it in Abbruzzo this year, after first opening it in Sicily and Tuscany the year before, making the reading an Italian experience for me personally, despite the narration being set in Spain.

While the author's uncertainty towards his own protagonist's birth name constitutes one of the most famous examples of the *unreliable narrator* in literary history, it creates the illusion that what you're about to read actually happened. Nonetheless, the chosen name adapted by his family and friends, the one that stuck with himself and with the rest of world, is Don Quixote. Since this fictional hidalgo was able to read, he's been obsessed with stories of chivalric adventures. A possession-turned-obsession, fueled by the idea, that the folkloristic knights-errant were real people, it pulled him towards the edge of sanity and drove him to observe things nobody else was able to see. Yet is captivating and convincing for the reader, as well as people close to him who play along in order to protect his fantastic mind.

Ready to set out into the world, mounted upon his steadfast equine companion *Rocinante* and well-equipped with shield and lance, when his pastor, barber, niece and maid, in secrecy burned his novels, culprit elect, and bricked up the library doors. A last ditch effort to cure him of his imagined demons. Upon request about the location of his beloved sanctuary, the niece and maid inform the madman that an adversarial wizard came riding in on a cloud, abducted all of his books and — to proof a point — took the whole room with them. Little did they know: The books and the room have already been consumed by the very person they wanted to protect. While the reader laughs at the ease, with which Don Quixote accepted this spectacular spacious illusion, to him it seems reasonable and necessary to turn away and to seek adventures both for the sake of his honor and as a service to the nation. And seeking adventures he did.

What follows is an endless succession of chance encounters, illusions and and slap-sticky brawls spread out over a thousand pages or so, describing in minute detail the life of everyone around Don Quixote and how they deal with his misconceived mind. It so happens that taverns turn into fortresses, windmills into giants and wine-filled skins into nocturnally creeping villains. The comical nature of these »misreadings« becomes repetitive and somewhat tiring after a hundred pages, but allows the reader to look beneath the surface of these mere misconceptions. With fervent conviction and relentless incentive, striving to shape the stubborn world into his own vision of it, Don Quixote seems to be untouched by perpetual defeats. This fixation takes a physical toll, manifested in the title Quixote's loyal quire Sancho Panza ascribes to him: *El Caballero de la Triste Figura*. A title readily adopted by the proud knight, as he transmits an aura of sorrow, regret, and sadness.

The myriad of existing translations of Don Quixote offer an equally large number of interpretations of what *Triste Figura* actually describes. At times referring to his posture, other times to his facial features as well as his expression, it suggesting an intrinsic ineptitude to ever truly read this anti-hero's intentions. It also illustrates the ambiguity of Don Quixotes perception and the porous nature of perception itself, both inside and outside the literary realm.

I love this book. *****