

Jesús Moncada

The Towpath (1988)

Honorat from the Café anxiously surveys the surface of the water with a splendid telescope and waits in vain for the arrival of the Carlota. The boat, steered by the old riverman Arquímedes Quintana, comes into the telescope's field of vision just seven days later. The anonymous narrator - through whose eyes we follow everything that happens in the novel - notes how intently the chemist watches the boat as it comes up through the turbid waters.

Jesús Moncada's novel is built up of scenes like this that relive the memories of over two hundred characters. The story is not the sort of one that has a single narrative thread. The author provides us with a text that we can describe simply by saying that it is the chronicle of a town. In it we find descriptions of historical events in the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1970s. But the presence of the historical past is no more than the distant reverberation of guns. What, therefore, is concealed behind the joyful spurts of the boat cutting through the current as it travels upstream?

With scenes such as the description of the boat returning home, the author creates a kind of secret dialogue with the reader. These sharp images, as precise as if they had been captured on camera, mean that the text not merely a faithful description of the beating heart of a town lying beneath the water.

The faces will change, but the world that spins around its own axis will always be the same: the thread is always the same thread; it is simply at times tangled and then untangled. How different this image is from the mythological Fates spinning the silken thread, the golden thread, the thread of life until it breaks. In ancient tales there is the idea that from the ball of carded wool comes the thread of a unique life that goes in a single direction. Moncada, on the other hand, sets his characters in a different world, enclosed within itself, predestined. Mequinzenza is confronted with a crucial fact that it will never be able to change. Its destiny has been decided, for it will literally disappear from the face of the earth.

The boats carry everything that is part of the life of this community. The houses also conceal objects that are part of a common history. The novel reconstructs the life of the town from innumerable pieces of a broken mirror. Where can we find all the events of the past? What predominates is the awareness that there are too many pieces to be able to fit them together into a complete, coherent image.

At first it seems that the lost Mequinenza represents a self-sufficient world, a mythical universe in which cyclical time reigns, the world of an epic narrative. Moncada's novel does not imitate anything; it is not the imperfect copy of a celestial ideal. His pen does not copy but simply puts together the pieces of the mosaic. And it is impossible to arrange the pieces so that they form a living organism. This novel is a tale of suffering brought about by the loss of a loved world. And if there is some way of making this pain evident it is by showing that nowhere in the whole world is there a master skilful enough to be able to piece together the bits of the mirror that lie scattered on the ground.

A story of the past is as delicate as a fresco painting and it too is subject to the laws of physical decay. In the final instance, books are no more than objects and the paper will also one day turn to dust, just like the boats rotting on the quays of Mequinenza. The story is a mask, behind which is a horrifying void.

This is a novel about memories. About the fact that life slips away through the fingers like fine sand on the beach, and that nothing can hold it back. Man is a being woven from time. But the past is inaccessible: there is nothing we can do to bring back to life the happiness that maybe we only felt for an instant. Nothing can return to us the trusting look of a child who sees the world as a safe, pleasant place. No, it is not necessary to build a dam beside the town where we grew up so that the river inundates the places that taught us to live. The river of time will carry them away in any case.

A merciless flood carries off everything that had previously belonged to us. This happens every day at every moment to everyone. Jesús Moncada is the boatman who has gone down to the bank and, with the aid of a thick rope tied to the top of a tree, pulls behind him the boat that has been his life. His boat carries a heavy load, and the burden of the memory that he hauls behind him is by no means light. But the writer continues stubbornly along the towpath, and at the end, like Trèvol, he reaches the town that is perhaps no longer on any map but still exists in his memory.

This is what is conjured up by the title of the book and it sums up its contents in a very special way. But at the same time we find in it the explanation for so many loyal readers around the world. Everyone, from Catalonia to Japan, from Sweden to Romania, both today and in 1988 when the book was first published, understands that time is a surging river that knows only one direction and that life flows towards death.

Translated by Joanna Martínez