Antonio Muñoz Molina's historical romance

Love's little room

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Antonio Muñoz Molina
LA NOCHE DE LOS TIEMPOS
958pp. Seix Barral. €24.90.
978 84 322 1275 8

Spain's so-called "Generation of '27" was a large and disparate group of poets, brought together by a shared impatience with the state of their nation's verse. Their literary interests were different, as for that matter were their politics, though almost all were Republicans, at odds with the rising Right. While García Lorca was brutally done to death, others such as Luis Cernuda, Jorge Guillén and Rafael Alberti went into exile. So too did Pedro Salinas, celebrated less for his radicalism than for the unbridled romanticism of the poems he had written to Katherine Reding.

A young American Hispanist, Reding had come to study in Madrid in 1932. Four years later, as Spain slid into civil war, Salinas left his wife and family behind and crossed the Atlantic to take up a post arranged some time before at Wellesley College, Massachusetts. Katherine was not far away, a Professor of Spanish Literature at Smith. We have read too many academic novels now for such liaisons not to seem bathetic, if not unethical, but their affair inspired Salinas to some wonderfully rapturous verse. John Donne wasn't anything like ambitious enough when he claimed that love "makes one little room an everywhere", it seems: the Spanish poet says he can live with his lover "in the pronouns" – "you" and "I". He concludes his most famous poem to Katherine with an impassioned emotional cogito, declaring resoundingly: "I love you; I am I".

Well, was he? Is a love like this the ultimate communication or the ultimate solipsism? Where do I live, if I only live in I and you? The question of where one lives presents itself with especial urgency to the exile, who isn't in his host country by choice. Salinas's case is problematic, of course, in that he was fleeing not just a country in convulsions but a marriage, forsaking a family for a new life with a lover. This is what makes his story appeal to Antonio Muñoz Molina, a writer who has long been fascinated by the idea of exile and what it might mean. Named for the lost homeland of the Sephardic Jews, his big and complex novel of 2001, *Sefarad* (*Sepharad*, 2003) was an extended meditation on that theme.

Train journeys provide the thread that sews together a loose and only partly overlapping set of scraps: individual stories of homesickness, rootlessness, isolation and frustrated love from a Europe and a wider world in which every person appears to be displaced. Yet some degree of outsidership is needed if we are to exist at all: "You are not your consciousness or your memory but that which a stranger sees".

The new university campus in Madrid which replaced the buildings destroyed during the Civil War

Exclusion in some sense reveals us: exile was again a key theme in Muñoz Molina's haunting travelogue-novel, *Ventanas de Manhattan* ("Windows of Manhattan", 2004). Its narrator is intrigued by the ways in which, in its very architecture, New York frames its inhabitants' lives. He is struck by the contrast between the boxy, claustrophobic corridors (all blank, forbidding front doors with tiny spyholes) through which people pass to their apartments and hotel rooms and the panoramic picture windows opening out on the other side. Through these, glimpsed moments of other existences – stripped of context – are frozen into timelessness, taking on something of the status of an "origin myth".

Yet the narrator too has been pared down to nothing. He feels anonymous, "the invisible citizen" of what might as well be "a non-existent country". It is exciting: as "Mr Nobody" here, he is an empty space and at the same time himself in his purest form, the "bone and marrow of my personal identity". To try to find our way around in a strange city, struggling to understand our circumstances and to make ourselves understood, throws everything we have been before into relief, shows how our earlier life was the "apprenticeship" that made us.

Yet to be away from our home country is not just to be removed in place: it is also to be outside our lives in time. Exile is experienced as an interruption, no more than a parenthesis in our life sentence – however long it may end up going on. This idea resonates in Muñoz Molina's first novel, *Beatus Ille* (1986, translated as *A Manuscript of Ashes*, 2008). The bells of Mágina, a small Andalusian town, ring out of synch with each other and with those of the clocks in the old house at the centre of the action. During the day, one barely notices, but in the dead of night it is different: time is in abeyance for the several minutes it takes for the hour to be struck. A young scholar, at work in the 1960s, is researching the biography of Jacinto Solana, a fictive poet of the Generation of '27. He gains a disturbing perspective on the past of his country and his family, and the disruption caused to both by the Civil War and the subsequent repression. The entire Franco era has represented a sort of stasis, a marking time for Spain, it is easy to appreciate, but Muñoz Molina is suggesting rather more. For Mágina has been marooned in time, as though it suffered "shipwreck" centuries before: its whole modern history has been a parenthesis. In the house outside the town in which Jacinto Solana is forced to lie low, there isn't even the sound of clocks to record the passing of the insomniac hours – just the far-distant sound of passing trains. The notion recurs in Muñoz Molina's work: if, in *Sepharad*, rail travel links and separates lives in space, elsewhere the sound of night-time trains serves as a measure of dislocated time.

It is no great surprise, then, that Muñoz Molina's new novel is called *La noche de los tiempos*: literally, the title means "the night of the times". It is a Spanish cliché, though: its English equivalent, the author has himself suggested, might be "the mists of time". Yet, while this could certainly be characterized as a historical novel, its Civil War setting has hardly been lost in antiquity. The mistiness is much closer to hand, in that present moment in which we struggle to establish exactly where – and who – we are. Once again, Muñoz Molina takes a train: the novel begins with his protagonist, a tired and travel-stained Spanish refugee, catching a commuter service from Penn Station. The start of a short ride, it is the end of a long and terrible journey – though for his fellow passengers it has just been another day at work.

It is October 1936, and Ignacio Abel is coming to take up a position at Burton College, in upstate New York. He has no idea what has become of the wife and children he has left behind (who may well think he is dead). He does not know if he will ever again see Judith Biely, the American woman he fell in love with just a year ago. Worst of all, perhaps, he is unsure which of these bereavements is going to cost him more: he is not just a refugee but a "deserter". Such are the thoughts that flick through his mind as his train winds its way up the Hudson Valley amid all the thrilling colours of the fall and, in fits and starts, his story is revealed.

While clearly based on the historical personage of Pedro Salinas, Abel is different – for a start, he is certainly no poet. Ironically, he remembers Judith – his "Katherine", of course – asking him for help with some of Salinas's knottier lines. (As it happens, the "live in pronouns" bit came up. He and she had been "living in pronouns", he now recalls sadly, because for discretion's sake they had so often had to keep to "I" and "You", not daring to use each other's names.) His is a keen intellect, but an unabashedly prosaic one, for whom an idealism that exists only at the level of ideas is not worth having. One of his country's leading young architects, he has been summoned to Burton to build a new library there. As his story begins, in retrospect, he is one of the technocrats helping the Spanish Republic build the future. An architect, he understands the need for internal structures and external perspectives; knows that an airy nothing needs a local habitation and a name. (Love can't make a "little room", let alone an "everywhere".) He likes the crisp, clear lines of geometry, though what really excites him is the fact that the weightless shapes they form can support such massive structures of stone and steel. He is a modernist, and has no time for the mists of time.

He is suspicious of anything vague or nebulous, not least that soft-focused nostalgia that sees his country's backwardness and poverty as picturesque. Specifically, he has been among those engaged in the design and construction of the new University City on the edge of a rapidly expanding Madrid. (This real-life project was eventually completed as the Complutense University.) But architecture addresses time, and not just because, as Abel muses, it takes the passage of the years, weather and settlement to complete a building but because the architect is fashioning a future. To conceive an architectural design is to make "an effort of the imagination: to see what does not yet exist more clearly than what is before the eyes". Already, in his office, the University City has been brought into being in model form; it is taking shape on the ground in a growing mesh of street-grids, power lines and pipes.

And yet look at the shambles he has left behind at the University City site, now a base for militiamen and a battlefield. And what about him? A year ago, Abel remembers, he scoffed at another extravagant line of

Salinas's about being prepared to leave everything in his life for his lover – the wrong response, he ruefully reflects, as far as Judith was concerned. Yet here he is, his old life abandoned, seeking safety of course, but in his heart also heading for a rendezvous he has no reason to imagine will ever take place.

While we are accustomed to the idea that the romantic life is somehow ineffectual, Abel's practical, rational life has been no more availing. His love story has if anything been more convincing for both parties. Judith has been a story to herself: arriving in Europe, she felt like a Henry James heroine, then roamed the streets of a Madrid she knows from the novels of Benito Pérez-Galdos.

What we do in a foreign country is in any case in some sense fictional: things don't seem to count in the way they do at home. While Judith "submerges herself" in her Spanish story, it still takes place at one remove from her "real" life. A love affair is a story, too: it has a narrative trajectory in a way that real workaday life does not. Is romance by definition fictional, as the etymology would suggest? The ease with which Ignacio Abel and Judith slip into their lovers' roles only adds to the sense of a story playing itself out. It is all so innocent: Abel doesn't even have to tell any lies at first, coming and going from his family home at odd times like the busy architect he is. He can be with Judith – or back home or at work – in minutes, flitting back and forth between the "contiguous worlds" of his official routine and his affair, his quotidian streetscape overlain now with a secret "topography of desire".

It grows harder as time goes on, however, and time – it quickly becomes apparent – is of the essence. Quite simply, there is never enough. Time together for clandestine lovers has to be bought like an illegal drug; adultery shares with prostitution a world of bars and by-the-hour hotel rooms. As Abel starts making up excuses to account for his absences, his late homecomings, he finds that every lie is like a loan which somehow seems to keep racking up interest. (Usury was condemned by the medieval Church as the selling of time.) Meanwhile, his married life is itself becoming a "fiction". While he labours at keeping his secret, his wife is in no doubt that something is going on and is acting out her own dignified narrative of normality. But in Spain just now the very idea of normality is becoming fantastical: as the Republic's former President, Manuel Azaña has said, the Nationalist uprising has "set the bases of . . . rationality trembling". The quotation comes in one of the novel's epigraphs: the other has the original Pedro Salinas writing of "a country unmade, life in suspense, everything up in the air".

Like the *Ventanas de Manhattan* narrator, Abel has found his arrival in America disorientating. But in his case there is a great deal more at stake. His invisibility is frightening, his future unimaginable, with every likelihood of his country ceasing to exist. The Spanish Republic has days – maybe hours – left. Perhaps it has gone already. He hasn't seen the papers, which are in any case days behind, to make the time scheme even more bewildering. As, sitting quietly in that commuter train, he returns in memory to Madrid, he recalls a flat "full of absences", his family a world away across an advancing Nationalist line.

There, in his home city, so recently left behind, he felt every bit as out of place and out of time. For weeks, the situation had been swimming in and out of focus in a country which had hardy yet admitted to itself that it was descending into war. Since the fighting had begun in earnest, its boundaries had been twisted this way and that by advances and retreats along the various fronts. Still more confusing were the claims and counterclaims of the rival propaganda machines, the two sides slugging it out in strident headlines. Revolutionary rhetoric; patriotic fanfares; banners; placards; slogans . . . an "apotheosis of typography". And all dead letters: through all the sound and fury, Spain had become a "conjectural country". It's a "madhouse", his friend the Finance Minister Juan Negrín confided. "And that's not a metaphor", the sometime professor of physiology continued. "In a madhouse, everyone goes round in his own state of unreality. They all walk past each other, talking to themselves."

> "We're a government that doesn't exist . . . . We give orders to an army of ghost divisions in which the few officers who've stayed loyal to the Republic don't have any troops to command."

Yet the chaos and carnage on the ground are all too real, and Muñoz Molina weaves together historical and fictional characters and their stories to create an almost unbearable immediacy. For the most part, the developing story of the Civil War is seen in sidelong view, through the babel of good news stories on the one hand and the disruption of Abel's home and professional lives on the other. But when José Bergamín, the president of the Alliance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals, asks him as a favour to take a party of young volunteers to salvage an El Greco altarpiece under threat from the Republic's own fighters – anarchist firebrands for whom art is elitist – their truck takes a wrong turn and they have a terrifying encounter with the war. And Abel's despairing search for Judith through the streets of a central Madrid in which order is breaking down completely is memorably described. The narrator sees that reality has become a film in which frames are missing, so everything lurches and falters forward: he doesn't add that at times like this the film is David Lean's *Dr Zhivago* at its most tumultuous.

Written with lyric intensity and epic scope, *La noche de los tiempos* engages as only a novel can with the everyday stuff of life, relationships and feelings. History itself becomes empty sloganizing if we lose our sense of the experiencing "I": here we read it with the impetuous emotion with which we would read a great love story. But, passionate in his clear-sightedness, Muñoz Molina sees through to the architecture of illusion that sustains our ideals and our deepest desires, our very understanding of who we are. Spain's disintegration in this novel is the sum of clashing idealisms. Lives are displaced into exile and irrelevance, great edifices are raised up only to be razed. As individuals, the realities we construct take shape only in retrospect, in memory. Meanwhile, we find our own way through as best we can.