

REVIEWS

Javier Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow, Volume One: Fever and Spear*. Tr. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: New Directions, 2005. 400pp., \$29.95

Javier Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow, Volume Two: Dance and Dream*. Tr. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: New Directions, 2006. 288pp., \$29.95.

Javier Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow, Volume Three: Poison, Shadow, and Farewell*. Tr. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: New Directions, 2009. 556pp. \$24.95.

In an essay a few years back, the editors of *n+1* wrote:

Just as the '90s witnessed the American canonization of one important foreign writer—W. G. Sebald—the current decade has seen the same happen to the wandering novelist and poet Roberto Bolaño. . . . Bolaño's canonization has taken place so rapidly and completely, and with so little demurral, that one can only reluctantly pile aboard the bandwagon.

Anyone with a hint of contrarian feeling had to sympathize. But rather than blame Bolaño for his hype, the editors recognized that he was “the real thing, as urgent, various, imaginative, and new as any writer active in the last decade.” Instead they turned the problem inside out: “The question is: why *not* canonize anyone else? Why reserve for him the once-in-a-decade beatification?”

Among the books lost in the swells of Bolañomania, I can think of none that proves the wisdom of that question so well as *Your Face Tomorrow*, a three-volume, slow-motion spy novel by the Spanish writer Javier Marías. Marías is hardly an unknown—his books sell in the millions abroad, and he counts high-profile admirers in Orhan Pamuk, J.M. Coetzee, and John Ashbery. But while *Your Face Tomorrow* collected a handful of admiring reviews in the US, it never broke through in the way it could have—or, frankly, should have.

At the start of *Your Face Tomorrow*, Jacques Deza, the novel's protagonist and the author's alter ego, attends a cocktail party hosted by his old friend Sir Peter Wheeler. Wheeler is an eminent Oxford Hispanist and a spy, one of the founding members of a small and mysterious subunit of British intelligence. He introduces Deza to the group's current chief at his party, and by

the end of the first volume, Deza has a new job.

At first Deza thinks he's been hired as an interpreter in the traditional sense. He learns quickly enough, however, that "in reality or, rather, in practice, I was of interest...and was taken on as an interpreter of lives." Like the other members of the group Deza has been selected for his gifts of observation and discernment, which lie somewhere on the spectrum between psychoanalysis and divination.

Until the final volume, when Deza's estranged wife claims center stage, the plot of *Your Face Tomorrow* turns on his dealings with the mysterious group. Deza is never exactly sure whom it works for, or to what larger end, though it seems to operate as a clandestine consulting agency, sometimes vetting candidates for government posts, other times assessing external applicants for assistance, still other times freelancing for private clients. In one early encounter, Deza is asked under what circumstances a pop star would kill; in another, whether a reptile-booted Venezuelan has the mettle to execute a coup.

Marías has said that he wanted to put "everything" into *Your Face Tomorrow*, and this great-book ambition shows itself in extended meditations on love and death, friendship and politics. At its heart, however, *Your Face Tomorrow* is a novel about violence. Treachery, war, and the secret brutality of everyday life fuel the narrative and inspire much of Marías's best thinking and writing.

Certainly some of this violence is the obvious kind. Marías uses 150 pages of the second volume to narrate a ten-minute near-execution involving a sword, and in the final volume Deza awkwardly settles a score with the help of a handgun and an iron poker. Two of the novel's unshakable images are a woman being raped by a horse and a man being killed like a bull in a ring.

Generally, however, the violence in question is more obscure. When Wheeler describes the talent he shares with Deza, it's impossible not to hear the definition of an ideal novelist:

It's a very rare gift indeed nowadays, and becoming rarer, the gift of being able to see straight through people, clearly and without qualms, with neither good intentions nor bad, without effort, that is, without any fuss or squeamishness.

And later Deza will make the link explicit: "To guess at...probabilities, to predict...future behavior, it was almost like writing novels." You can read this as a joke, or a nod at metafiction. But there's something more serious at stake here: in aligning writing and espionage Marías is asking us to consider

not so much the interpretative nature of the latter as the potentially bloody ramifications of the former.

Thus it happens that while Deza's new boss tells him early on, "Here we have no interests.... We merely give our opinion and only when asked," it quickly becomes apparent that "mere opinion" is a weapon of enviable reach. It kills in Franco's Spain, in Churchill's Britain, in present-day London and Madrid, and by the end leaves us tempted to concede the weary wisdom of the novel's opening words: "One should never tell anyone anything."

And yet Mariás also insists that the alternative isn't much of an alternative: silence, too—especially when enforced—can be its own kind of terror. After showing Deza a collection of wartime posters warning against careless talk, Wheeler says,

I don't know if you quite realise what it meant, Jacobo: people were warned against using their main form of communication...it made an enemy of what most defines and unites us: talking, telling, saying, commenting, gossiping.... If there's one thing that they do or we do which is not a strict physiological necessity, if there is one thing that is truly common to all beings endowed with free will, it is talking, Jacobo. The fatal word. The curse of the word.

Mariás's privileged example of the destructive nature of silence is the legacy of the Spanish Civil War and the Fascist regime that followed it. For three decades after Franco's death, a *pacto de olvido* ensured that crimes committed under the regime would be neither investigated nor prosecuted. It wasn't until 2008, a year after Mariás finished the final installment of *Your Face Tomorrow*, that a Spanish prosecutor declared that the pact of forgetting would no longer protect Francoist criminals. In *Your Face Tomorrow* it is Deza's father (like Mariás's own father, a Republican journalist during the war and a persecuted intellectual afterward) who personifies this legacy.

The plot of *Your Face Tomorrow* may be conspicuously spare for a 1,274-page spy novel, but as in all real literature the glory of this novel is its style. Mariás's prose is not the high-wire act of Nabokov, Gaddis, or Amis: his writing never prances or preens, only rarely does it dazzle or dismay. Nor does it share much with his contemporary Bolaño, whose dust-dry sentences shun metaphor and stay resolutely on the surface of things. Introspection is the sea in which Mariás's fiction swims, and the voice of the novel, Deza's voice, is discursive, loquacious, and erudite. To meet the mood Mariás lets his meditations drift along the currents of thought, working metaphors and raveling digressions sometimes for pages at a time.

The ruminative spirit of *Your Face Tomorrow* is incarnated at the formal level in sentences that wind, wend, and sprawl. Clauses are revised and repeated, often in the compass of a single page-long sentence. The best efforts of Henry James and David Foster Wallace notwithstanding, Englishers have never been very confident about the conjunctive possibilities of the humble comma, but Margaret Jull Costa, Mariás's talented translator, has wisely chosen not to break his sentences into smaller units. Here is a shorter example:

Books speak in the middle of the night just as the river speaks, quietly and reluctantly, or perhaps the reluctance stems from our own weariness or our own somnambulism and our own dreams, even though we are or believe ourselves to be wide awake.

In *The Savage Detectives*, Bolaño has the architect Joaquín Font lecture on literature from within the padded walls of a mental clinic. The calm reader, Font explains, is “cool-headed, mature, educated...leading a more or less healthy life.... This man can read things that are written for when you're calm, but he can also read any other kind of book with a critical eye, dispassionately, without absurd or regrettable complicity.” The desperate reader, meanwhile, “is an adolescent or an immature adult, insecure, all nerves. He's the kind of fucking idiot...who committed suicide after reading *Werther*.... He can only read the literature of desperation, or books for the desperate, which amounts to the same thing, the kind of person or freak who's unable to read all the way through *In Search of Lost Time*, for example.” Font laments that Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, the heroes of *The Savage Detectives*, wanted to write books for desperate readers. (“I warned them. I showed them the technically perfect page. I alerted them to the dangers. Don't exhaust the vein! Humility!”)

Reliable accounts describe the last decade of Bolaño's life as a picture of stable productivity, but there's no question that he wrote for the freaks and fucking idiots. We love the nervous, insecure, immature adolescents and adults that populate his books because they remind us of the reckless selves we were or are or want to be.

Mariás, meanwhile, is a writer that Font, Bolaño's insane advocate of literary calm, would have loved. With one exception all of *Your Face Tomorrow*'s personalities are impressively mature; they flatter the world with their consideration. The same is true of the novel's style: the slow changes of direction, the hesitations, digressions, and meditations all conspire to force the mind to slow down and meet the rhythm of contemplation. Mariás's seriousness and

style are foreign enough to be disorienting. And yet I can't help but suspect that his novel's real exoticism stems from something altogether more simple and astonishing: *Your Face Tomorrow* reads like a book written by an adult for other adults.

Robert P. Baird

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Donald Revell, *The Bitter Withy*. Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2009. 61pp. \$15.95

At a recent reading from *The Bitter Withy*, Donald Revell read "Can't Stand It," which begins:

I hear the elephant music
Of the playground's rusted swings, and up,
Up higher, then down again,
Happy children take the sound.

No snakes can read.
Walking across the ocean,
Walking on flowers nowhere to be seen,
I walk on gold.

When he read the line "No snakes can read," the audience laughed at the non sequitur and Revell smiled winningly. And though it is certainly a non sequitur, the allusion to Eden, following a playground scene, is instructive: *The Bitter Withy* is focused precisely on linking the material to the metaphysical, the quotidian to the eternal. In "Can't Stand It," Revell grants, "A diamond is a diamond. / A cloud is a cloud that looks like one," but insists, too, that Heaven is actual, a place where the rusty swings of the playground are transfigured so that they "make no sound." In "Lissen," conversely, there are sounds only the dead can hear:

There is a sound in birdsong
Just before the song,
And you can hear it,
Though only a few,
And those are reflected on lake water
 like beautiful ghosts
Always just at sunrise,
Do.