PERSONS OF INTEREST

THE WORLDLY DIGRESSIONS OF JAVIER MARÍAS

Talking about Francisco Franco in the new Trump era.

By Jonathan Blitzer

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The Spanish novelist Javier Marías. ILLUSTRATION BY REBECCA CLARKE

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The Spanish novelist Javier Marías arrived at the Frick, one morning last month, looking shaken. “The Americans, it seems, have just committed suicide,” he said, in a vaguely British accent. This was his first visit to New York in seven years, and his timing had backfired. It was November 9th. Marías, who is sixty-five years old with wispy gray hair, wore a dark overcoat and carried a large umbrella. He begged my pardon—might he smoke a cigarette before we stepped inside? He pulled one from a

brass case in his breast pocket, and then, changing the topic, told me that something rather extraordinary had just happened.

In the cab to the museum, he had been talking to the driver, a thickset American man, about the election. (Marías interrupted himself here. Was "sturdy" a word that could be used to describe a person in English, or was "robust" better? He opted for the latter, and continued.) The driver asked him what he did for a living, and Marías, who is often cited as the likely future recipient of a Nobel Prize, responded with characteristic gentlemanly understatement: "I write books." The driver then asked him, out of the blue, "So, did you ever know Ortega y Gasset?" He was referring to José Ortega y Gasset, the liberal Spanish philosopher, who lived during the darkest years of Francisco Franco's dictatorship. It wasn't just that the driver was an unlikely Hispanophile; he'd mentioned someone of profound personal significance to his passenger. Marías's father, Julián, a philosopher, was a close disciple of Ortega y Gasset's. Marías had grown up in his thrall. "It's just remarkable," he said. "Can you believe the coincidence?"

Marías likes to quote Laurence Sterne to describe his craft: "I progress as I digress." When a dramatic event occurs in one of his novels, it's usually as a prelude to a string of rambling anecdotes or some lengthy existential musing. In "Tomorrow in the Battle Think On Me," first published in 1994, a sudden death gives rise to a detailed consideration of the worst ways to go ("dying in the middle of shaving, with one cheek still covered in foam, half-shaven for all eternity"). At the start of the novel "A Heart So White," from 1992, the mysterious suicide of a newlywed is followed by an excursus on the nature of marital intimacy. One reflection leads to another, and another, until a story line slyly emerges. Marías's novels are cerebral and allusive, long-winded in the best sense. As Colm Tóibín once wrote, "As a novelist, he has a way of posing as a philosopher . . . all the more to fool the reader and cause great shock when the novel turns out to have a plot after all."

The author returned to the plot at hand. Weeks earlier, we'd arranged a meeting to discuss his latest novel to appear in English, "Thus Bad Begins." Marías, who rarely comes to New York—he lives in Madrid, and hates to fly—suggested the Frick because of a painting there he'd been meaning to see, "The Three Soldiers," by Bruegel. Stubbing out his cigarette, he gestured to the entrance.

Marías's erudite characters frequently resemble their author in small ways: one teaches at Oxford, as Marías did; another has the same birthday. Also like Marias, they tend to

"talk and talk and reflect and then digress and narrate all the time," as he once described them to the *Paris Review*. In person, Marías can seem a little withdrawn, as if visiting from another era; he is almost always photographed in his study, with a cigarette trailing smoke and a wall of books behind him. On the page, he is expansive and unrestrained. In addition to publishing more than a dozen novels, he has spent the past two decades writing a column for *El País* that ranges from art criticism to screeds against bicycle traffic. (His father was one of the first columnists for the paper when it was founded, in 1976, a year after Franco died.) Marías is a pedigreed leftist of the old school, which occasionally makes him a target, as much for his style as for his politics, for the younger generation. One critic recently wrote, on a popular Spanish blog, that "Marías does what no one does better: turn politics into a fusty egotrip."

We sat on a marble bench in the museum's interior garden, a colonnaded court with a fountain, bathed in the glow of hanging lamps, and Marías told me how, on the day he was born, his father had left for America. "He used to say that he shook hands with me and said, 'Goodbye, I'll see you in a month.' " Julián Marías was barred from working at Spanish universities at the time because he'd been blacklisted as a leftist. A friend of his, apparently out of jealousy, had falsely reported him to Franco's authorities for writing a column in the Communist newspaper *Pravda*. In the early years of dictatorship, gossip—however baseless and petty—had calamitous consequences.

Javier, his two older brothers, and their mother moved to the American Northeast, where Julián taught first at Wellesley, then at Yale. Marías still remembers the house where they stayed in Massachusetts—Vladimir and Vera Nabokov had lived upstairs a few years earlier. ("We didn't coincide in time but, rather, in place," Marías said.) He returned to Spain as a child, and went on to study philology in Madrid, before publishing his first novel at the age of nineteen. As a young writer, he also translated Nabokov, Conrad, Sterne, and Faulkner into Spanish. One of the best scenes in Marías's fiction involves an interpreter who deliberately mistranslates an entire conversation between Margaret Thatcher and Felipe González, and in so doing seduces his future wife, another translator in the room.

In the first volume of "Your Face Tomorrow," Marías's trilogy about a Spanish academic who is recruited to work in British intelligence, the narrator's father is a scholar who's been betrayed by a slanderous friend. The novel begins, "Telling is almost always done as a gift, even when the story contains and injects some poison, it is also a bond, a granting of trust, and rare is the trust or confidence that is not sooner or later

betrayed." Parsing words has never been a merely academic exercise for Marías. "You think you know everything when you really know someone," he mused. "It's never true." We were strolling through the West Gallery, a long room with a green carpet and a skylight. "One of the reasons we write and read novels, and fiction in general, is that it can't be denied by anyone," he went on. "The first thing I did was tell you about that cab driver. But if someone else had been with me in the cab, he or she would have said, 'No, no, no, what the driver said was different.' What you say can always be contradicted. Your vision is always partial. It's impossible to know anything for certain, not even what we've lived."

The main reason Marías wanted to see the Bruegel painting was that he thought it could be the cover image for a forthcoming book of essays on "Don Quixote." But a Goya had led us to a Veronese, and then the Rembrandts were "just exceptional." He stopped before a self-portrait from 1658. "You feel watched by that man there," Marías said. The face was weathered and knowing, the expression inscrutable. "Although the eyes are in the shadows, the gaze is so profound," he said.

Pausing before a portrait of a fur merchant, one of Rembrandt's first commissions, Marías recalled a scene from "A Heart So White," in which an old security guard at the Prado Museum, in Madrid, tries to light on fire the museum's only painting by Rembrandt, "Judith at the Banquet of Holofernes." The guard resents having had to stand watch over the same painting for twenty-five years, without ever being able to see the face of the servant in the image, who has her back to the viewer. "Paintings show just what they show," Marías said, stroking his chin. "Novels do the same thing. The things that are not told in a novel will never be told, and the things that are will be told that way forever."

Marías has never married, but he often writes about the institution in his fiction, usually as a crucible for his favorite, conflicting themes: our need to share confidences, and the perils of saying too much. At the center of "Thus Bad Begins" is a B-list film director named Eduardo Muriel and his wife, Beatriz. One night, Eduardo excoriates Beatriz for a double transgression: she had not only deceived him once, long ago, but later decided to tell him the truth about it. "If only you'd never told me," he tells her. "If only you'd kept me in the dark. When you embark on a deception you should maintain it right until the end. What is the point of setting the record straight, of suddenly telling the truth?"

The novel is set in 1980, five years after Franco's death. "It's like Balzac's 'Scenes from Private Life,' " Marías said of the novel. "But it has a political background, of course. And you can see it because of the parallelism between the collective attitude toward the past and the private lives of the characters." He was alluding to Eduardo and Beatriz, and to two other characters who have an affair and then deny it. "If you have a memory, and both of you decide that it didn't happen, it is as if it didn't happen at all," he said.

This is also what occurred in Spain during the late nineteen-seventies, when Marías was a young man. With Franco gone, the political establishment—from the dictator's ministers to the king—rebranded themselves as democrats overnight. They drew up a new constitution and legalized previously outlawed political parties; a general amnesty guaranteed that no one could be prosecuted for past crimes. The principle became known, more broadly, as the *pacto del olvido*, an "agreement to forget." It was a denial of the past presented as an embrace of the future. "There was no other way to do it peacefully," Marías explained. "I am very angry that many people got away with what they had done during the dictatorship, but that was the price to pay."

A younger generation in Spain sees the political pacts of the seventies and early eighties as the original sin of the country's new democratic order. "The young people were born with all these rights; they take them for granted," Marías said. It was for their benefit that Marías wrote a "literary reflection" on the period which he included toward the beginning of the novel. (His agent had asked him if the chapter was necessary; Marías argued that it was only five pages.)

We strolled through a room of portraits painted by Whistler: thin, spectral figures wrapped in finery. Bruegel's soldiers could wait for a future visit, he said. Nearing the front of the museum, Marías paused, and then, remembering the grim reality that awaited us all, sat down to talk for a few more minutes.

Jonathan Blitzer is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His first book, "Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here," is due out in January.