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Interpreters of Lives

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Interpreters of Lives

Javier Marías

Prefatory Note: In Javier Marías's trilogy, Your Face Tomorrow (the final volume of which will be published in English in 2009), the narrator and protagonist is Jaime or Jacobo or Jacques Deza, a Spaniard who, years ago, taught English at Oxford University. After separating from his Spanish wife, he returns to England to occupy himself during this period of disorientation. He finds work in London with a mysterious group that is part of MI6 and was originally created, possibly by Churchill himself, during the Second World War. The group, however, has no name and is based in a building with no name. Those who work there call themselves variously "interpreters of lives" or "translators of people" or "anticipators of stories." They listen in on interviews or watch videos involving all kinds of people, famous and anonymous, and then are asked by their boss, Bertram Tupra, to give a report, written or oral. What do they see in those people? What are they like? What can be expected of them? What will their faces be like tomorrow? Deza works with Tupra, Mulryan, young Pérez Nuix, and Rendel. The following reports on three well-known public figures were taken from the files in the building with no name, possibly photocopied or stolen by Deza, possibly to make money or as a souvenir. Or was it Mulryan, young Pérez Nuix, or Rendel? Or perhaps Tupra himself?

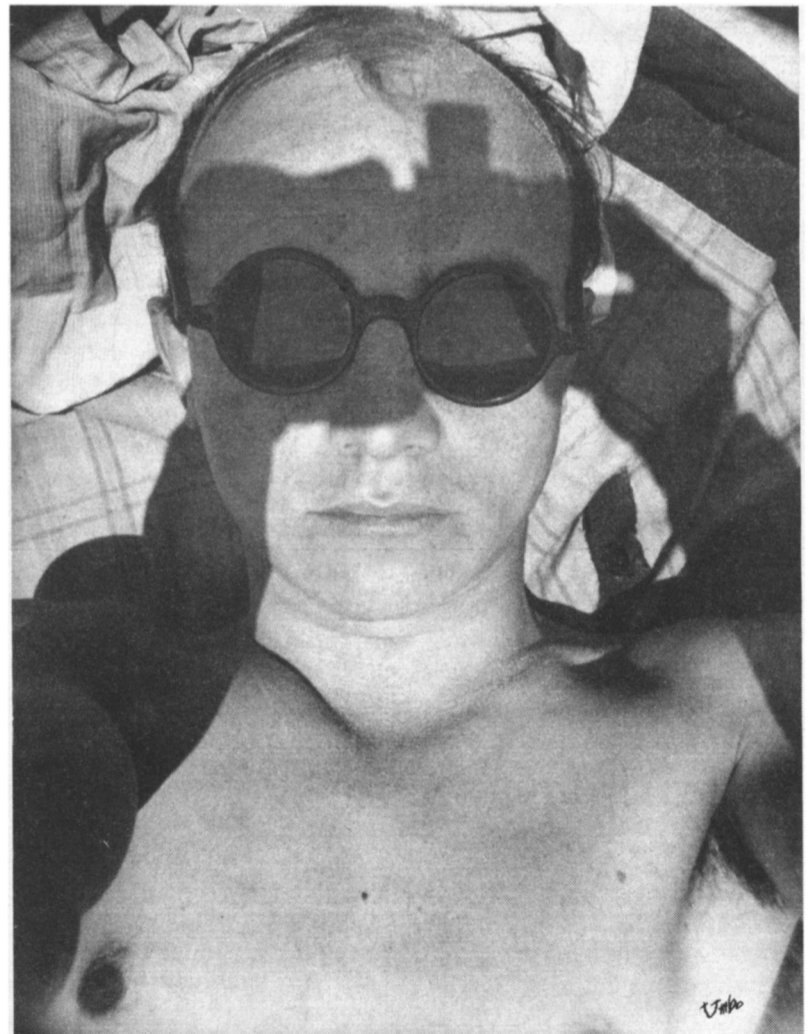
Pérez Nuix's report on Silvio Berlusconi (2002)

ESSENTIALLY THE man is a bore, to judge by the videos in which he appears accompanied by other people, whether at summit meetings with fellow political leaders or at more frivolous social events. He behaves exactly the same in both situations, except that in the former he always pretends to be the host (even, say, in Canada) and in the latter he probably is the host, at least when the event takes place in Italy, but even when he's merely a guest, he has to dominate. Whenever he gets together with other heads of state, it's obvious that, deep down, he feels like an intruder, and it's precisely his jaunty, carefree manner—as I said, just as if he were the host or the guide wherever he happens to be—that betrays his deep-seated insecurity; it's as if he feared that at any moment a steward might come up to him and whisper discreetly in his ear that there has been a terrible mistake and he must leave the room, the office, the lunch, the summit, the ball. His unwavering contentment and self-confidence are excessive, like a phrase underlined in red. They may appear to be spontaneous, almost involuntary, but they're not: he has to make a constant effort (diluted only by habit) and, of course, he is always playing a part. His crazed (because permanent) smile, his jokes, his clowning, the way he embraces people and slaps them on the back, his forwardness, his hyperactivity—as trivial as it is superfluous—are all pure acts of will. It's as if, at every moment, he were saying (to his political colleagues, to the cameras, to the photographers, to the viewers, and above all to himself): "See how at ease I am, how well I handle myself, how I intrigue, how easily I fit into this world of global decision-making." The man himself doesn't quite believe it, in fact he doesn't believe it at all, which is why he has to make it absolutely clear that he is completely in his element.

He thinks that his friendliness (which is how he interprets it) brings him enormous benefits: in his own eyes he is captivating, irresistible, persuasive; he does not dare, however, to think of himself as sexually seductive. He uses friendliness, or so he thinks, as a means of acquiring things and of convincing other people of still more things, even people more powerful than he is. And were his powerful colleagues not, in the main, rather dim (they give off very little light, managing to generate at most a faint penumbra), they would realize that this professional warmth is only Berlusconi's way of asking permission, of asking forgiveness, of craning his neck to ensure that no one obscures his face in the photo. I understand that for a while in his youth he was a crooner, or *cantante confidenziale* (as they say in Italian), who entertained the rich on cruises, or some such thing. As we know, such artistes, however famous they might be (and he was not), are, in the minds of the rich, much closer to the servant class than they are to the guests, and if my information is correct, he found it a useful training in how to break away and distance himself from the stewards and the waiters (when he's seen with them now, he may seem the soul of affability, but, deep down, he loathes them and tries to keep them at

arm's length, for fear of contamination) and to mix instead with the more foolish and more gullible tycoons, those most susceptible to flattery. He has no qualms when it comes to flattery, sycophancy, or even obsequiousness. You might say that he has much in common with the old-style caretakers or porters who used to abound in Franco's Spain and who have still not entirely vanished: the kind who kow-tow to the owners and to the wealthier tenants, but treat delivery men and servants like dirt.

This mentality is always a front for resentment. If such a person also has a terrible fear of appearing ridiculous, then the individual in question can prove dangerous, as could this man behind his façade of jokey cordiality and, one might almost say, "kindliness," if kindness—even in caricatured form—were not completely absent from his nature. The fact that he is occasionally moved or touched is irrelevant; such emotions are within the reach of any simpleton, and are not necessarily a sign of either kindness or compassion. It's incomprehensible really that anyone, far less an entire country, could have been taken in by him, it's incomprehensible that he should have been elected with an absolute majority, but then the same thing has happened many times before and in many countries. Mysteries. Or is it simply that people don't notice, don't pay attention, but only look and listen distractedly, the consequence perhaps of a televisual way of looking and listening? This man is unscrupulous, but in the most real and radical sense of the word: he isn't like those many other people who know that scruples exist, but choose not to bother with them; he doesn't know that they exist and so never thinks of them, not even as something to be dismissed as useless, stupid, costly or annoying. He has never



Self, 1930

rejected them for the simple reason that they are beyond his imagination and have never been a part of his thinking, let alone his values. So alien are they to him that when he notices them in someone else, he takes them as a sign of weakness and judges that person to be feeble or docile and therefore capable of being pushed around.

Most of us are defenseless against such people, because we are ill-equipped to deal with anyone as tiresome and insistent (a bore who cannot be still for a moment, the kind of man to whom one often says "Yes" purely in order to get rid of him, to interrupt his chatter and shut him up), someone apparently so agreeable and even affectionate, and yet who, at the same time, never abides by any rules or regulations. He has no rules to break, no principles to betray. He will never experience the feeling that he has gone too far or exceeded his authority or transgressed, although he might pretend to harbor such feelings, because he has noticed them in other people and learned how to copy them. However, the most difficult thing is this: almost no one is qualified to deal with a man who never feels any kind of shame, either personal, public, political, or aesthetic. Nor any kind of narrative shame. He simply doesn't know the meaning of the term.

Rendel's report on Michael Caine (2002)

THIS MAN appears to have placed himself beyond the reach of many things, including ambition and vanity, which, in an actor, is as remarkable as it is praiseworthy: I can think of no other present-day actor or actress of whom one could say the same. I know very little of his life and have only a vague idea of his cinematographic career (although I've watched him in a number of movies), but the videos I've seen of him being interviewed or attending various public events, including—a few years ago—receiving the Oscar for best supporting actor, all give the same impression. Having placed himself beyond the reach of almost everything, he has become someone whom it would be very difficult to throw off-balance or indeed to harm. And it would, of course, be almost impossible to blackmail him and equally impossible to involve him in anything he didn't deem to be interesting, amusing, or worthwhile. Let's say that there is very little with which one could tempt, let alone threaten, him.

He probably has more than enough money to live several very luxurious lives, and yet he appears quite untroubled and unconcerned by the fact that he will only have the one life, and one that is already fairly well advanced. I would say that he is content with what he has achieved in this life and what remains of it: maybe twenty years, or fifteen, he doesn't deceive himself in that regard, or rebel against the deadline. It is clear that he long ago gave up the idea of actor as circus performer and, therefore, any need to keep pushing himself to come up with ever more prodigious feats. He would never be found racking his brains for unusual or outlandish roles, the sort that leave the ingenuous or the pedantic (who are, after all, almost the same thing) open-mouthed in amazement. He is very sure of what he has done so far, and of his great talent, and he would never fall for the puerile idea that it is better to play a mental defective or someone famous (Stalin, perhaps, or Don Quixote or Churchill) than some other interesting, albeit minor character. He still enjoys acting (he is about to turn seventy) and, besides, he earns good money doing so (this is something he never forgets; he may not need any more money, but neither does he scorn it). He would never be prepared to sacrifice that enjoyment in exchange for some artificial boost to his prestige. I don't think he would ever play the part of a blind man or a hysteric or a cripple simply in order to impress. He knows that such roles are, in fact, the easiest and the most technical, and he would grow bored.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about him is that he seems utterly immune to what other people might think of him and, almost, to what he thinks of himself. This is not, I believe, because he has already received so much praise that he has had his fill. It is more as if he himself knew what was really good about his acting and were satisfied with his own frequent, discreet, but never public self-approbation. Intelligent young actors will know, I imagine, that a couple of sincere plaudits from Sir Michael Caine are worth far more than a lot of cloying praise from their more diplomatic and more excitable colleagues.

He is someone to be trusted, I think, despite his jokey nature and tendency to tease. And precisely because he considers almost nothing to be of any great importance (certainly not himself), he is probably the kind of person who, on the occasions when something important is required of him, commits himself wholeheartedly to it and would never dream of letting anyone down. He's amiable and gently ironic, and doesn't care whether people like him or not. It's as if, when off-screen, he simply couldn't be bothered to pretend and wasn't prepared to waste a single moment trying to make someone like him more than they would anyway. And yet there's nothing arrogant about this attitude; it's not as if he had issued some proud ultimatum. He's not at war with the world—on the contrary, he's very much at peace and even reasonably grateful. This explains the utter serenity with which he receives any honor, be it the title of Sir or an Oscar. This is not to be confused with modesty, for they are two different things. He gives such honors their due weight, it's as if he were thinking: "How very distinguished they are, these people giving me this prize, and what excellent taste they have. Not that it would have mattered if they'd given it to someone else, of course, nor would that have been proof of their bad taste." He is effortlessly equable. He might well be useful if he could be persuaded to work for us occasionally, but I can't really see how he could, for he has put himself too far beyond the reach of such things. And it would be a particularly low blow were we to resort to anything underhand, involving, for example, his adored wife Shakira (she is, or was, his greatest weakness, assum-

ing they're still together; that is one area where he *would* be vulnerable). But that would be a very dirty trick to play on a man as intelligent, kind, and gracious as he. No, that would never do.

Tupra's report on Diana, Princess of Wales (1996)

A STUDY of the interview given by this young woman to the BBC reporter Mr. Bashir, and in which she admitted—before the whole country and before several other countries as well—to various adulterous affairs, turns out to be depressing in the extreme. There was a time when all models, some actresses, and every heroine in every romantic novel wanted to be a princess. Now it seems that this Princess of Wales aspires to being a model or a protagonist in one of the many romances penned by her step-grandmother, Barbara Cartland, of whose books she perhaps read far too many when she was growing up. The mind boggles.

Throughout the interview, the Princess is clearly putting on an act and doing a very poor job of it too. All her feelings are fake and she fakes them appallingly badly, so much so that, on a couple of occasions—in the midst of all this false sincerity and seriousness—she can hardly keep from laughing, despite chewing the inside of her cheek until it's red raw, or so at least I fear; it must have been bleeding. Her contrite expressions are so phony and cheap that she would surely have been expelled from any drama school, although it might not be a bad idea for her to enroll in one, just in case (as seems highly likely) she repeats the experience. It becomes clear in this video more than in any other (by which I mean videos of her social and humanitarian activities) that this young woman loves fame, but not just any fame, and therein lies the problem: being transformed into the unlikely future Queen of England was not enough for her, she found it frustrating. She longs for a kind of narrative or dramatic fame; she aspires to having a story that can be told; more than that, she wants to see it told now and to hear the tale herself, for a merely posthumous fame will not do. This, in part, is why she has agreed to this embarrassing session of melodramatic confessions. She has done so, too, of course, to avenge herself on her scatty husband, who was, after all, the first to set off along the vile televisual path.

She is a rather spiteful young woman, which goes some way to refuting her chosen role, that of victim. Her ill intentions are obvious when, in reply to a question about her husband's equally unlikely future as King, she says: "It would bring enormous limitations to him, and I don't know whether he could adapt to that..." That's a pretty cruel thing to say of someone who must daily curse the extreme longevity of so many of his family members. However, in answer to the question: "What kind of monarchy do you anticipate?" I think it was more stupidity than ill-feeling that led her to reply, without a tremor: "I would like a monarchy that has more contact with its people—and I don't mean by riding round on bicycles and things like that." Perhaps she has the idea that the population as a whole is constantly riding around on bicycles.

Lady Diana is not a person to be trusted, although she is nothing like as daffy as she pretends to be. No one who had really suffered from bulimia would say, when the ineffable Mr. Bashir asked her how many times a day she raided the fridge: "Depends on the pressures going on...[but] it would be a regular pattern to jump into the fridge." And someone who had cut her own arms and legs out of pure desperation would not respond calmly to the absurd question: "What was your husband's reaction to this?" with "Well, I didn't actually always do it in front of him." But the main reason why this young woman is not to be trusted is because at such moments all she cares about is the soap opera in which she has the lead role. She would like nothing better than to have a television series made about her vicissitudes, and in which she would play herself: to have an actress do so would be unbearable to her and ruin the enormous pleasure such a series would bring her. Although this would not, at the moment, be a viable project, she will doubtless continue to provide a ceaseless flow of ideas for the script. We have only just begun.

The most surprising thing—and the thing about which least can be done—is her vulgarity. It's not only that she speaks badly, even making the occasional grammatical mistake; it's not only that she doesn't exercise sufficient control over her facial expressions and even rolls her eyes and so on; it's her very mentality that is so vulgar. An example: when Mr. Bashir asks if she's very alone in Kensington Palace, she's only capable of understanding his question in, how can I put it, a rather salacious way. And so she replied: "You know, people think that, at the end of the day, a man is the only answer. Actually, a fulfilling job is better for me." This remark was accompanied by a rather coarse chuckle: she couldn't resist it, she had to underline her use of the word "man" and her use of "fulfilling," just in case her sauciness had gone unnoticed.

My advice would be that every effort should be made not to upset her, at least until she regains some equilibrium. However, since that's unlikely to happen, given the path she's chosen and given that she feels herself to be an old-fashioned heroine, all one can hope for is that she does not speak in public too often. That, however, is quite simply impossible, as impossible as wishing she would never speak at all, not even on the phone (if only), something she is particularly keen on. I can suggest one other solution: perhaps I could be allowed to meet her, and to tutor, persuade, and guide her, because my sense is that she's very open to influence, especially by men not so very different from the kind of man I could become were I to be entrusted with the task. It would not, I'm sure, be one of my more arduous missions. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)