Javier Marías, Spain's most celebrated living writer, has spent his career chronicling his country's long-deferred reckoning with its violent past.

Generalissimo Francisco Franco, one of the few Fascist dictators to die peacefully in his bed, imposed himself on Spain for so long that many came to fear he would live forever. Now, more than 40 years after his demise, he still hasn't gone away. Since the *caudillo*'s grand funeral, his remains have been interred at the Valley of the Fallen, a colossal memorial to the victims of the Spanish Civil War. Located 30 miles northwest of Madrid, the site consists of a vast basilica carved into the side of a granite mountain ridge and topped with a 500-foot stone cross, the tallest in the world. The regime claimed that the memorial, which houses the remains of some 34,000 Civil War dead, was intended to honor all who fell in the conflict, but this was gaslighting on a world-historical scale: Tens of thousands of political prisoners, many of them former Republican soldiers, labored for almost 20 years, between 1940 and 1959, to build what would eventually become their tormentor's final resting place.

In June, Spain's ruling Socialist Party announced it would exhume Franco's remains and rebury them somewhere less conspicuous. For the past decade, the country has been removing symbols of the dictatorship from public spaces, in accordance with the 2007 Law of Historical Memory, and many saw the government's decision as long overdue. Not everyone agreed, however. In July 2018, nearly 1,000 pro-Franco demonstrators gathered at the Valley of the Fallen, where they raised their arms in the Fascist salute and sang the anthem of the Falange, the Spanish Fascist Party; in December, the ultranationalist Vox party, a bastion of Francoist nostalgia, won significant victories in regional elections. As the 80th anniversary of the end of the Civil War approached, the fault lines that continue to divide the country were being thrown into disquieting relief.

Earlier this year, I wrote to Javier Marías, Spain's most celebrated living novelist, to ask if he would be open to attending the exhumation ceremony with me. In Spain, and much of Western Europe, Marías enjoys a kind of cultural authority and prestige that makes even America's most successful literary writers look like obscure hobbyists. His books have sold more than 8.5 million copies; everyone from Roberto Bolaño and John Ashbery to the Nobel laureates J.M. Coetzee and Orhan Pamuk has lavished him with praise; for years, he has been given inviting odds to take home his own Nobel, and will likely be among the favorites again this year. Not content with the sizable fictional territory he has carved out for himself, Marías also makes regular real-world interventions in the form of a widely read, often controversial weekly column for El País, Spain's paper of record.

In both fiction and polemic, Marías has keenly attended to the effects of Spain's long-deferred reckoning with its recent past. The last years of Franco's reign saw a growing number of public demonstrations, but the rapid transition to liberal democracy that followed his death was largely a top-down affair. In 1976, as part of an unwritten agreement known as the *pacto del olvido*, or pact of forgetting, the Fascists agreed to cede power on the condition that no one would be held to account for crimes committed during the Civil War and the dictatorship. "Everyone accepted this condition, not just because it was the only way the transition from one system to another could proceed more or less peacefully, but also because those who had suffered most had no alternative and were in no position to make demands," Marías wrote in his 2014 novel "Thus Bad Begins," which centers on a long, unhappy marriage that starts to come apart in the post-Franco thaw. "The promise of living in a normal country," he added, "was far more alluring than the old quest for an apology or the desire for reparation."

This moral trade-off, and the culture of silence it inaugurated, have been an enduring imaginative incitement for Marías. His novels often revolve around those for whom forgetting, or willed ignorance, has become a way of life. Even when these books are not explicitly about Francoism, they tend to examine structures of feeling that cannot but recall the dictatorship and its aftermath. In "A Heart So White," published in 1992, the narrator hears a disturbing rumor about his father's first marriage. Instead of investigating, as most protagonists would do, he decides he'd just as soon not know about it. Like many of Marías's best novels, the book is a kind of slow thriller, in which a cautious, passive individual is ingeniously miscast as the lead in a noirish tale of adultery and murder. The revelations that finally emerge do so in spite of any action on his part. "I did not want to know, but I have since come to know" is a refrain that echoes throughout the text, coldly encapsulating the attitude of a whole generation of Spaniards to their own troubled patrimony.

To go along with Marías to Franco's exhumation thus seemed altogether fitting and proper. As I awaited his response, I imagined a scene of historical exorcism or catharsis, Spain's laureate of silence and denial looking on as his country finally faced what for decades had been off-limits. When it arrived, his answer promptly shattered this fond vision. "I couldn't care less what happens to Franco's remains," he wrote, "whether they are smashed, thrown away or simply left where they are." Marías, I would come to feel, considers Spain's current regime of commemoration to be almost as evasive and dishonest as the collective amnesia it supplanted. He agreed to talk but said he had never visited the Valley of the Fallen in his life and wasn't about to change that now.

Marías, who is 67, doesn't do email; he fires off his correspondence on the same model of electric typewriter he's been using to compose his books and columns for more than a quarter of a century. These typescripts are then scanned by an assistant and sent as PDF attachments to the person concerned. Receiving them was a bit like carrying on a conversation with someone who insists on referring to you as "Sir" or "My good fellow" — at once quaint and a little intimidating. The Olympia Carrera de Luxe, the kind of typewriter Marías favors, is no longer easy to come by, and his current model is on its last legs. If he can't find a replacement, he announced in a column published just after he finished his latest novel, "Berta Isla" (which will be released in translation in the U.S. this week), he may have no choice but to give up writing altogether.

Marías was joking — probably. Because he cultivates the role of what the Spanish call a *cascarrabias*, or curmudgeon, it can sometimes be hard to tell just how seriously to take him. Like a greedy man at the buffet overfilling his plate, he has heaped scorn on everything from bike lanes (which have "mortally wounded" the capital) and noise pollution (in Spain "there's nothing odd about hearing hammer blows in the middle of the night") to the latent tyranny of virtue signaling — "one of the greatest dangers threatening humanity."

Gauging his seriousness was not a problem when I arrived at his apartment in central Madrid one afternoon in late May. "There is an imbecile downstairs," Marías said shortly after opening the door to me. He speaks very good — if at times somewhat antique — English, and often checks to make sure he is pronouncing a word or rendering an idiom correctly. "Im-be-*SILE*?" he asked me now. I told him he had it right the first time, and Marías didn't look back. "There is an imbecile downstairs," he continued. "An imbecile who is pretending he is broadcasting a soccer match."

That coming Saturday, Liverpool would be taking on Tottenham Hotspur in the UEFA Champions League Final at a stadium in Madrid's suburbs, and according to reports, more than 100,000 British fans had descended on the city for the occasion. Wherever you looked there were giant screens, corporate marquees, hordes of drunken, shirtless men who'd reached, or were well on their way toward, the other side of embarrassment. In the old plaza beneath Marías's apartment, children were playing a game of five-a-side on a makeshift pitch. A man whose voice sounded fairly strident to begin with was commentating on it over a booming loudspeaker.

Marías had already been downstairs earlier to have a word. "I said, 'Listen, this is unnecessary,' " he told me, beginning what was evidently going

Ink markings throughout: Getty Images

to be a detailed account. "'You cannot torment us for 12 hours, from noon to midnight. We aren't able to do anything — to work, to live!'"

"*Gol! Gol! Gol! Gol!*" the imbecile suddenly roared from below.

"'Oh, yeah, we don't want to bother you,'" Marías went on, filling in the other side of the exchange, "'but of course the town hall gave us permission.'" His nostrils flared and he began to slowly nod, a little pantomime of strenuously mastered displeasure. "'Yeah, I'm sure the town hall gave you permission because the town hall gives permission for all kinds of crap! All the time this kind of thing!'" I wondered if I should offer to go down there and talk to them myself. "It's crazy. They're invading the whole city and there's not even a Spanish team in the final!"

Marías has fine, receding hair, heavy-hooded eyes, a thoughtful mouth. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, he also has a cigarette fuming from his fingers. (He has occasionally declined honors and invitations from abroad because such excursions involve so many places — the plane, the hotel, the auditorium — in which he would have to refrain from smoking.) In his youth, and middle age, he was movie-star handsome; the friends of his to whom I spoke made allusions to an energetic bachelor lifestyle. In person, he is charming, warm, attentive. Once he got the noise business off his chest, he offered me a seat and asked what he could bring me: Beer? Coca-Cola? Chocolate? Cigarettes?

Marías is, in Anthony Powell's phrase, an afternoon man. He normally gets up around 11 a.m. Because lunchtime in Madrid is somewhere between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m., this leaves him a good few hours in which to write. After lunch, he returns to his desk and puts in another shift. He might see friends for dinner (9 p.m. at the earliest), and then has what he refers to, somewhat redundantly, as "my time," during which he reads or listens to music or watches films. He goes to bed around 3 a.m. Last year, he married Carme López Mercader, his partner of more than two decades, after being told that, in the event of his death, 70 percent of his bequest to her in his will would be taken by the government. Mercader, an editor, lives in Barcelona and has two grown children from a previous relationship. They typically spend two to three weeks together and four to five apart. Several of Marías's previous relationships have been with women who live in other cities, or even abroad. "It's harder to get tired of each other," he has said. "There's time for longing."

It sounds like an adolescent's dream of adulthood, and indeed, Marías began laying the groundwork for it at an early age. In 1969, when he was 17, he ran away from Madrid, where he grew up, to spend the summer in Paris, at the apartment of his uncle, Jesús Franco, the B-movie auteur and sometime pornographer behind such productions as "Vampyros Lesbos" and "A Virgin Among the Living Dead." Marías was drawn to the French capital less by the political ferment of the time than by the Cinémathèque Française, whose summer program that year was heavy on classic American noir. Over a period of six weeks he watched, he calculates, more than 80 films. They provided the inspiration for his first novel, "The Dominions of the Wolf," a draft of which he had almost completed by the time he returned home in the fall. It was published two years later, when Marías, then an undergraduate at Madrid's Complutense University, was still only 19.

> 'Some things are so evil that it's enough that they simply happened. They don't need to be given a second existence by being retold.'

A scholar recently unearthed a copy of the censorship report on the novel and sent it to Marías. "It said, 'This book is crap and certainly immoral,'" Marías told me, gleefully summarizing the verdict, "'but it doesn't say anything against the State or the Church,' which is what they really cared about." This is true in a literal sense, and yet the novel still managed to signal its contempt for the insular monoculture of Franco's Spain, obsessed as it was with questions of national identity and belonging. More a collection of linked short stories than a full-fledged novel, it takes place entirely in a kind of hard-boiled America of the mind, fabricated from movies, books and popular music. Its content was less provocative than what it *didn't* contain, and what that elision suggested: Not everything has to be about Franco.

By then, Marías also had ample firsthand experience of the actual America. His father, Julián Marías, a prominent philosopher and public intellectual, had spent the Civil War writing and broadcasting Republican propaganda; in 1939, a few weeks after the conflict ended, he was caught up in Franco's systematic purge of the defeated opposition and escaped the firing squad only after a witness called by the prosecution ended up testifying on his behalf. His experience under the regime was formative for his son. Because Julián was barred from teaching at universities in Spain, he would periodically accept short-term academic posts abroad, including at multiple colleges in the States. Javier, his three brothers and their mother, Dolores, a translator, would follow. It was in New Haven, where his father was teaching at Yale for the academic year 1955-56, that he heard English spoken for the first time, a language that would play a decisive role in his life. After publishing his second novel, at age 22, Marías took a six-year hiatus from writing fiction and dedicated himself to various translation projects — that is, to rewriting the fiction of others. He credits this period, during which he rendered Laurence Sterne, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov and others into Spanish, as crucial in his artistic development. In the mid-1980s, he taught Spanish literature and translation theory at Oxford University, the setting for his sparkling academic satire "All Souls," a book in which many of his former colleagues believed they recognized an unflattering reflection of themselves.

It has been noted before that Marías's protagonists are often people who live vicariously through the words of others: there's an opera singer ("The Man of Feeling," 1986), a ghostwriter ("Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me," 1994), an editor ("The Infatuations," 2011). Juan, the narrator of "A Heart So White" — the book that made Marías a European celebrity in the '90s — is a translator and interpreter. In one of the novel's showstopping comic set pieces, he serves as mediator between two politicians who are recognizable as Felipe González, the prime minister of Spain, and his British counterpart, Margaret Thatcher, at a private meeting. By intentionally mistranslating parts of the dialogue (González's question, "Would you like me to order you some tea?" becomes "Tell me, do the people in your country

Opening pages: Photograph by Gianfranco Tripodo for The New York Times

love you?"), Juan draws out the participants' suppressed authoritarian longings. Europe's favorable self-image notwithstanding, Marías often suggests, the continent has yet to fully free itself from fascism's lingering embrace.

Marías's latest novel, "Berta Isla," tells the story of a marriage founded on a kind of private pact of forgetting. As a high school student in Madrid, the female protagonist meets and falls in love with Tomás Nevinson, the son of a Spanish mother and an English expatriate father. During his time as an undergraduate at Oxford University, Tomás is recruited by British intelligence, who believe his bilingualism would make him an excellent spy. He returns to Spain and marries Berta, but his work, which she agrees not to ask about, forces him into a double life. Secrets breed secrets, and soon their marriage has become a game of mutual deception. Spanning a period of more than three decades, from the early 1960s to the end of the Cold War and beyond, the book offers a disturbing examination of how history seeps into and contaminates our most intimate relationships. At one point, Berta finds herself angrily musing on popular enthusiasm for the Falklands War, in which she believes Tomás has become involved:

> *Politicians never dare to criticize the people, who are often base and cowardly and stupid. ... They have become untouchable and have taken the place of once despotic, absolutist monarchs. Like them, they have the prerogative to be as fickle as they please and to go eternally unpunished, and they don't have to answer for how they vote or who they elect or who they support or what they remain silent about or consent to or impose or acclaim.*

Marías, to be sure, is not proposing a spurious moral equivalence between dictatorship and democracy. When I asked him what he felt when he learned Franco had died, he didn't hesitate. "Joy," he said. "Relief and great, great joy." When it became clear that no one would be brought to justice, he also felt great anger. He wasn't alone. One feature of post-transition Spain that was especially maddening to those who suffered under Franco was the way in which certain former supporters of the strongman began to reinvent themselves as lifelong liberals. Such brazen self-refashioning went largely unchallenged at a time when making accusations was seen as petty, vindictive or a threat to the delicate social order.

As recently as 1999, Marías received a blizzard of hate mail after publishing a column in which he attacked the writer Camilo José Cela, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1989, the last Spaniard to do so. Cela had fought on the Nationalist side in the Civil War and worked as a censor; according to one scholar, he also informed on many in his literary milieu under the dictatorship. Since the late 1970s, however, he had been actively playing down his Fascist past, claiming he was a victim of circumstance or the puppet of more powerful actors. Marías, whose parents knew Cela personally and could attest to the fraudulence of these exculpatory contortions, felt compelled to break the conspiracy of silence when the Nobel laureate responded highhandedly to an interviewer who asked him about his collaboration with the old regime. In his column, Marías didn't even name Cela, but it was clear to anyone in the know to whom he was referring, and this violation of the social contract led to an outcry from readers across the political spectrum. "Oh, come on!" was how Marías summarized the response. "You're bringing this up *now*?"

Thanks in no small part to grass-roots activism undertaken by the children and grandchildren of Franco's victims, 21st-century Spain has gone a long way to overturning this morally suffocating consensus. The 2007 Law of Historical Memory not only officially condemned the Franco regime for the first time, it also provided state assistance to those seeking to trace, exhume and formally rebury relatives who perished under the dictator, many of whom were buried in mass graves. Even as he welcomed these developments as necessary and humane, Marías saw new prevarications behind them.

The pact of forgetting was widely embraced, he told me, not simply because it suited the ruling class but also because it served the interests of many ordinary Spaniards who had been complicit in the repression of the Franco years and were happy to let the subject slide. This is a nuance that often gets lost in contemporary polemics, especially those of a generation born after Franco's death, which has come to regard the transition as a cowardly betrayal. Last year, Marías wrote a column for El País titled "A Dictatorship, Fools," in which he castigated those who had begun to attack people his age for letting Franco and his cohort off the hook. Such accusations, Marías argued, betrayed a "criminal ignorance" of history, which in turn made Spaniards susceptible to the "fairy tale" that "the establishment of democracy was the work of the 'people,' when in reality the 'people,' with some exceptions, were devoted to the dictatorship and cheered it on." Had it not been for the leaders of the day, most of them holdovers from the Franco era, "it is possible that this dictatorship would have survived another decade, with the consent of many compatriots."

'I've talked too much, which is something I somehow regret," Marías said when I returned to his apartment late one afternoon. He was referring not to our conversations, which had been going on for several days, but to his career as a columnist, a public intellectual, a professional holder and espouser of opinions. He might have been on to something here. In his student days, Marías was involved in an anti-Franco activist group and spoke out vehemently against the dictatorship and its defenders as soon as restrictions on the press were lifted in the late 1970s. He still considers himself a man of the left, but by his own admission he has grown more conservative over time. When he mounts certain hobbyhorses — the putative excesses of the contemporary left, say, or what he sees as its emphasis on cultural over economic issues — he slips into a flattening, apolitical misanthropy that is more performative than analytical. His expression of regret was certainly the least characteristic thing he said to me during our time together. "I'm in a period in my life when I feel like not giving too much of myself away," he continued, his face caught in a slanting, smoke-filled beam of light coming through the French windows. "Of course, it's too late to become a Salinger now."

Volubility is something Marías has in common with his narrators, but his fiction doesn't simply reproduce this habit; it ironizes and interrogates it. The prodigious sentences out of which the novels are built, at once fluent and unrelaxed, full of tics and stutters and self-corrections, are displays of considerable technical prowess that also reveal a deep, almost metaphysical uncertainty: What to include? What to leave out? Where to fall silent? The latter question has inspired some of his greatest writing. To say nothing, Marías has provocatively argued, can at times require as much moral courage as speaking out.

"Berta Isla" features several characters from "Your Face Tomorrow," Marías's epic novel sequence published in three volumes between 2002 and 2007 about Jacques Deza, a onetime academic who is unexpectedly recruited by British intelligence. A number of powerful episodes concern Deza's relationship with his father, another academic whose story is strikingly similar to that of Julián Marías: Denounced by a former friend shortly after the Civil War, he was later prohibited from teaching at Spanish universities or writing for the newspapers. Deza can't understand his father's lack of animosity toward this individual, who went on to pursue a successful academic career under Franco and faced no consequences for his actions.

For the older man it comes down to the question of evil, which he believes the modern world has turned into a kind of fetish. "There is a taste today for exposing oneself to the base and the vile, to the monstrous and the aberrant, for peering in at the infrahuman and rubbing up against it as if it had some kind of prestige or charm," he says. This strikes him as precisely backward: "There are actions so abominable and so despicable that their mere commission should cancel out any possible curiosity we

Javier Marías at his home in Madrid.

might have in those who committed them, rather than creating curiosity and provoking it." To choose not to know, to deny evil its power to hold and horrify the imagination — this is a radical if not heretical idea in our age, and particularly in Europe, the locus of so many 20th-century horrors. As Tony Judt argues in his 2005 book "Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945," historical memory has become a kind of secular religion, "the very foundation of collective identity." Of course, Marías is not advocating outright ignorance; he is inviting us to consider the tension that exists between memory, which can be stifling and constraining — a form of perpetuating grievance or division — and forgetting, which can be a form of liberation.

The passage, Marías said, was inspired by conversations he had with his own father, who died in 2005. When I asked him about it, he told me that while he never writes books with a "message," he more or less agrees with Deza Sr.'s words. "Some things are so evil that it's enough that they simply happened," he said. "They don't need to be given a second existence by being retold." He took a drag on his cigarette. "That's what I think on some days, anyway," he went on. "Other days I think the contrary."

The giant cross at the summit of the Valley of the Fallen is visible from the northern outskirts of Madrid, and as you draw closer, it comes to dominate the landscape. As the tour bus wound its way up the wooded mountainside leading to the monument, our guide told us that the underground basilica we would soon enter was larger than St. Peter's in Rome, something forbidden by the Catholic Church. Before it could be consecrated, a partition had to be built in the entryway, creating a small, unsanctified vestibule and bringing down the overall dimensions to an acceptable size. When we arrived, I discovered that space to be partly occupied by a small gift store. Here were Valley of the Fallen mugs, Valley of the Fallen fridge magnets, tins of sugar-free Valley of the Fallen mints, each branded with the same image of the immense cross looming over the basilica's concave facade. Browsing the merchandise, I didn't have trouble grasping the figure reported in a recent poll: 38 percent of Spaniards believe Franco should stay just where he is.

They got their way, at least for the time being. On June 4, less than a week before the ceremony was to take place, Spain's Supreme Court ordered the government to suspend its plans to exhume Franco's remains; his family had filed an appeal months earlier, arguing that the removal would constitute the violation of a burial site, and were still awaiting a decision. The legal battle looks likely to drag on for months, if not longer. As Marías himself puts it at the end of "Thus Bad Begins": "The past has a future we never expect."

Inside the church itself, people were praying, inspecting the hooded military effigies along the wall, standing around with the awed and indecisive air of tourists unsure just what to make of their surroundings. A marble slab in the floor behind the circular high altar marks Franco's crypt. Someone had carefully placed a bouquet of red and white carnations at the center of it. An attendant told me that the National Francisco Franco Foundation, whose mission is to glorify the dictator, leaves a new one there every week. ◆

Photograph by Gianfranco Tripodo for The New York Times