

# To see the world just so

Two novels of great Spanish painters

BEN EASTHAM

Carlos Rojas

THE VALLEY OF THE FALLEN  
Translated by Edith Grossman  
312pp. Yale University Press. Paperback, £20  
(US \$26).  
978 0 300 21796 4

Amy Sackville

PAINTER TO THE KING  
336pp. Granta. £14.99.  
978 1 78378 390 8



"The Third of May 1808" by Francisco Goya, 1814

Diego Velázquez and Francisco Goya painted themselves into history. In Goya's "Charles IV of Spain and His Family" (1800), which takes inspiration from the former's "Las Meninas" (1656), the artist represents himself in his studio, the royal family having come in full regalia to visit him. Like Velázquez he looks out – albeit rather more conspiratorially – from behind the canvas on which he is painting the image that now stands before the viewer. Not only is the artist pictured at the heart of a great European dynasty, but he is shaping posterity's impression of it. Now these two painters are the subjects of novels that play with the conventions of biography to consider whether it is ever possible to separate the story from the teller.

Entwining different timelines, Carlos Rojas's *The Valley of the Fallen* links Goya's prophetic visions to the modern history of Spain and the life of his biographer. One narrative tells the story of Sandro, who is working on a Life of the painter during the protracted death of Franco in the final months of 1975; another is written from the perspective of Goya at the end of his own long life. Dialogues between the deaf artist and a splenetic Ferdinand VII, and between the drunk writer and his long-suffering partner, are broken up by eccentric biographical readings of Goya's paintings. This is as confusing as it sounds until the reader is made aware, via a series of hints, parallels and slippages across time, that Goya's first-person narrative is drawn from Sandro's unfinished manuscript (which at least shifts responsibility onto the fictional writer for Goya's tendency to fill his interior monologue with exposition: "The French disease, which I contracted at some brothel in my youth, and that thirty-four or thirty-five years ago made me deaf . . ."). It is a slightly weary metafictional premiss, and the novel risks becoming wrapped up in dated postmodernist shadowplay. Thus Sandro tiresomely begins to question his own status as a character when it becomes clear that his career is being directed by a shady offstage figure called – with a stage wink – "R.". And yet the strategy as a whole does advance the point about an artist's presence in his or her own work, whether in the literal sense of "Charles IV", or more broadly in the way that Goya's personality shaped his representation of an era in Spanish history that will forever be tied in the public imagination to his work. Paintings including

his pitiful masterpiece "The Third of May 1808" (1814) – and another that makes reference to the brightly lit massacre depicted in it, Picasso's "Guernica" (1937) – serve notice that artists are not only witnesses to history but the fabricators of it. We are reminded that the intrusion of the author into the text (or of the painter into the painting) long predates the current vogue for autofiction.

If history is shaped by the personalities that record it, then Rojas figures Goya as the prophet of Spain's descent from an enlightened global superpower into a darkness that only began to lift with the Generalissimo's death. Much as art history works in cycles, so a character claims that, in Spain at least, "the past is never corrected . . . it is simply forgotten and repeated later with slight variations". If that is the case, then one of art's functions might be to remind us that no trauma is so unique or unimaginable that we can't find historical precedents for it.

Amy Sackville's *Painter to the King* also seeks to bridge the gap between eras. A startling account of Velázquez's ascent through the intrigues of the court of Philip II is interwoven with his biographer's "search" for the artist through the streets on which he lived and the rooms in which his work now hangs. Sackville's quick and lyrical style captures the heft and shape of seventeenth-century Spain without sacrificing lightness of touch, a quality she shares with Velázquez's genius for what she identifies as the "thisness, the quiddity" of objects. The beautifully controlled rhythm of her prose, littered with dashes and ellipses, seems closer in spirit to Velázquez's art than the more conventional readings of his work that Sackville advances through her characters.

As a historical novel, *Painter to the King* excels when sketching the role of official images in the performance of power – its most compelling character is a Machiavellian, or Mandelsonian, adviser to the king – but it

struggles to explain how Velázquez transcends his basic function as a propagandist. Where Goya's determined independence is apparent in the aggressive cynicism of some of his late work – in his court paintings, this truculence seems sometimes to border on treason – Sackville suggests that Velázquez maintained his freedom simply by refusing to compromise the way in which he saw the world, a kind of plain speech to power. The implication is that this lends him an ability to speak across the centuries that Sackville matches by referring directly to the artist as "you" or "Diego" and by conflating the vocabulary and registers of contemporary and early modern speech, as when a courtier calls anachronistically for a "PR campaign" on the king's behalf.

While no one can rightly argue against the perspicacity of Velázquez's paintings, to focus on his ability to "pull away the veil of customs to see the world just so" risks downplaying the fact that this artist's representations of reality are as constructed as any other (or, as the narrator's own description of the sophisticated play on art, power and artifice in "Las Meninas" makes clear, more so). No artist or writer has the privilege of seeing things "as they really are": where the cynic Goya is traditionally praised for his honesty in portraying the physical and moral corruption of his aristocratic subjects, so the more generous Velázquez tends to be admired for drawing out the dignity of the court's maligned rogues. Neither artist, regardless of how honest they were, could paint like the other. That there is no universal subject – no objective witness to history – is the implicit lesson of Rojas's and Sackville's hybrid novels, as different in style, form and character as the subjects they describe. The mark of a civilized society is its ability, as in the mature masterpieces of two great Spanish painters, to embrace those ambiguities, contradictions and complexities in the pursuit of truth.

# To see as others don't

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Tom Rachman

THE ITALIAN TEACHER  
336pp. Riverrun. £16.99.  
978 1 78648 257 0

Artists' lives are notoriously dysfunctional. Common themes include love affairs with sitters; several wives and abandoned children; a selfishness to succeed – and an arrogance if you do. With the (fictional) American painter Bear Bavinsky in Tom Rachman's compelling third novel it is no different. Bear is famous for his expressionistic close-ups of female body parts. We first meet him in his forties, in 1955, having a bath in the middle of his dingy artist's studio in Rome. His five-year-old son Charles (or "Pinch") waits beside the tub with a towel, trembling under its weight; when Bear climbs out – Rachman's vivid descriptions make him appear both like a Renaissance sculpture and a wild animal – he uses the little boy's head for balance. Bear's third wife, Natalie, a Canadian ceramicist in her mid-twenties ("having first posed on the drapery at the back, then moved in, now raising their son here"), chews her fingernails in the corner, obscured in shadow.

Natalie has her own artistic aspirations, but they are put on hold for Bear's. In one of this book's many tense, heart-rending scenes, Bear makes her freeze at her potter's wheel so that he can paint her: "You're too tempting – it's your own goddamn fault!" Hours pass, her bare knees shiver ("Bear never closed the front door"); she protests but is unheard. He scrawls a note that he instructs Pinch to carry over to his mother, containing an affectionate sentence that he signs off with his full name, underlined. Soon after, Bear destroys the painting that he has just produced – a habit that ensures only a select few of his canvases will endure. Everything he does is self-serving; the effect is quietly nightmarish. "There's this thing my mother always said about Dad", Pinch later tells us:

Imagine if your neighbor was Leonardo da Vinci, okay? Only, he's an absolute pain in the neck . . . He's awful every time you see him, whether you're sick, with a broken leg – doesn't matter. A nasty piece of work. But if you somehow knew what he was going to contribute to the world, how he treated you would seem minor. You wouldn't even mind. It's irrelevant.

Yet we see Natalie twist her hair around her little fingers until they become red, knead herself in the stomach and "wish herself erased". Pinch sees himself as an insect pinned to a board.

The marriage breaks down when Pinch is eleven. Bear moves back to America, takes a new wife (number four of an eventual seven) and has another set of kids. Natalie becomes "strange", manic-depressive, pushing Pinch to worship his father even more. An unconfident teenager, he finds solace in art and decides that he wants to be a painter, too; when he visits Bear's new family in New York, though, his father tells him he'll never be an artist after

glancing at one of his works. Pinch turns to academia instead, studying art history at the University of Toronto with the aim of writing his father's biography one day. Failing at this as well (his doctoral thesis on Caravaggio "lacked inspiration"), he falls into teaching Italian at an adult language school in London. Afflicted by disappointment throughout his life, Pinch nonetheless has a secret, which is at once *The Italian Teacher's* main strength and weakness: it is an intriguing, unexpected plot development that leads to a mawkish tying-up of loose ends.

Bear would seem to be the novel's centre, but its energy lies with Pinch. The narrative is told from his perspective (or occasionally from that of a handful of minor characters), all in the present tense – though it takes place over many decades. Each of the five sections ("Childhood", "Youth", etc) begins with a deft conceit – a label reducing Pinch to mechanics (for example, "Oil on Canvas. 68 x 160 Inches. Courtesy of the Bavinsky Estate"), like those found next to an artwork in a gallery; it is as if Pinch is somehow being used by his father, and as if the chapters that follow are the artworks themselves.

Tom Rachman gained attention with his debut *The Imperfectionists* (2010), an astute satire about a hodgepodge group of people connected to a Rome-based English-language newspaper in decline. In *The Italian Teacher* his eye for the absurdities of the art world is similarly cutting and funny. At an exhibition opening, the gallery owner reminds Bear that "popularity is a tan. It fades when out of the light". One up-and-coming artist is celebrated for his piece "Piss Shit Fuck", "a large electric freezer . . . offering frozen vials of his semen for \$500 each, encouraging collectors to inseminate someone with his seed. He has pledged to sign any resulting offspring". The value of art and what it is to be an artist are the underlying themes. During the one drawing lesson that Bear gives to Pinch as a child, he tells him that "an artist doesn't see as normal people do". This could describe Bear's grim behaviour, as much as his artistic technique.

## Pride in not publishing

KATE WEBB

Jeet Thayil

THE BOOK OF CHOCOLATE SAINTS

496pp. Faber. £17.99.  
978 0 571 34149 8



Jeet Thayil's second novel, *The Book of Chocolate Saints* – following *Narcopolis* (TLS, February 24, 2012) – opens with a poet on the verge of flight. Francis Xavier Newton is about to abandon his wife in Bombay. He is being drawn west again, a lure ever since his childhood in Goa, where he grew up precocious and taciturn, beguiled by Christian saints and English literature. The novel begins *in medias res* and circles around, coming at its subject from multiple angles – a polyphonous, polyglot approach that encourages the reader to question: "This is my take on the matter, of course. You don't have to agree". By this point in his life, Newton has already tried out bohemian enclaves in London, Paris and Milan. Now, with his new muse, Goody Lol, he is running away to the corrupted place he calls "Amurka". Like all poets, he is both an outcast and absconder, even from poetry itself. Having published two brilliant volumes of verse in his youth, he has found the words have run dry; and so he's turned his hand to painting – which is easier to dash off, makes money (unlike the "poverty of poetry"), and slots him comfortably into New York's art scene, with its pastiche and plagiarism, readily available drugs and uninhibited women.

In New York Newton encounters Dismas Bombai, a fellow émigré, who has happily swapped India's caste marks for America's brands, paying their exorbitant prices with wages from an expat newspaper, the *Indian Angle*. Bombai wangles an interview with Newton and goes on to become his friend, biographer and betrayer. Both men witness the nasty racial turn of American politics (a phenomenon mirrored by India's rising sectarianism) and the stories of men like Amrik, a (real) Sikh attacked following 9/11 for wearing a turban, or Balbir Singh (also real), murdered in Arizona because he "looked like" a Muslim terrorist. In *The Book of Chocolate Saints* Amrik becomes Newton's manager – just one of many indications that Thayil's novel is, like the contemporary

artworld, at home in its inauthenticity. Newton himself, Thayil has said in interview, was patched together from the Indian poet Dom Moraes and the artist Francis Newton Souza. Thayil's nods to Frankenstein and vampires underline the book's larger debate about fiction's dual tendency to cannibalize and conjure.

Eventually Newton returns to India, Dismas hot on his coat tails. Here the opportunist biographer interviews academics, journalists, art activists and other poetry camp followers for an oral history of Newton and the "Hungry Realists" – a group of poets who surfaced in Bombay in the 1970s. To call them a group, however, is perhaps to miss the point, because they revel in their obscurity: "They took pride in not publishing and not writing. One book and then nothing for a decade". The talk about poetry, however, is prolific. For many, Auden's

question about what poetry can or cannot make happen is urgent once again in this new "time of rage". There are also arguments about linguistic authenticity and the (for some, deplorable) use of the colonizer's tongue. We see India's lingering sense of cultural inferiority, exacerbated when Western poets such as Ginsberg display "orientalist" responses to Indian poetry – praising Tagore's Bengali mysticism while disdaining Newton's English-language modernism. There are the clamours of the unacknowledged poets (the untouchables, the women); and, most insidious of all, the romance of the self-destructive poet: alienated, intoxicated and suicidal – "the suicide saints" whom Thayil taxonomizes from Anna Akhmatova to Reetika Vazirani, "a partial list because a complete list would be endless".

What's novel here is that these debates take place through the prism of Indian poetry. We are now the emblematic poets, Thayil is telling his Indian contemporaries, and *our* concerns (including postcolonial anxiety, linguistic diversity and a greater global awareness) have become cardinal. Part of Thayil's aim is to rebalance the books: the *Chocolate Saints* are those that have been largely missing from the picture, whitewashed or ignored, and the profound sense of absence this creates chimes in his novel with the roll calls of poetry's lost and martyred.

Thayil's ambitious, wide-ranging and utterly contemporary novel is particularly notable for its reflections on poetry and fiction. As the author amply demonstrates, one of the novel's strengths is its sociability, its being in and of the world: magpie, multiple, dependent. The ideal poem, by contest, might be more like one by Arun Kolatkar, the Maharashtra poet, a poem of the people which "used the demotic" yet was still "a poem that did not care what you thought of it, an untouchable poem that didn't seek your approval or understanding".

Perhaps a secular (novelistic) reading of poetry's "holiness" – a word used by Eric Gill in the epigraph to *The Book of Chocolate Saints* – would suggest that what poetry has to teach the novel is its non-compliance with the times, its utter inadequacy as a thing to be bought.

In this latest outpouring, his tenth novel, the writer Jonathan Buckley continues in his determination to ponder the nature of art through fictional means. Buckley's *grand projet* – begun more than twenty years ago with *The Biography of Thomas Lang* (1997), an epistolary novel that described the life of a troubled concert pianist – amounts to a kind of encyclopedia of artistic types and tropes. In various novels there are portraits of painters (*Nostalgia*, 2013), memoirists (*Telescope*, 2011) and translators (*Invisible*, 2004), to name but a few, and multiple excursions on and investigations of the design and meaning of narratives, characters, scenes, scenarios and storytelling. Exactly why Buckley is not already revered and renowned as a novelist in the great European tradition remains a mystery that will perhaps only be addressed at that final godly hour when all the overlooked authors working in odd and antique modes will receive their just rewards.

As with many of Buckley's books, *The Great Concert of the Night* is structured as a series of riffs – or rifts rather – which allow for lava-like eruptions of memory and great salty lakes of observation. Transnational and trans-historical, Buckley's terrain is a vast territory

## To cease or to become

IAN SANSOM

Jonathan Buckley

THE GREAT CONCERT OF THE NIGHT

304pp. Sort of Books. Paperback, £11.99.  
978 1 908745 77 4

rather than a particular place or a time. The book's narrator David works as a curator at a museum, the Sanderson-Perceval Collection, somewhere in southern England. David is divorced and is – or was – involved in a relationship with an actress named Imogen, who works with a film director named Antoine Vermeiren, whose soft-porny-sounding oeuvre includes films with titles such as *La Châtelaine*, *Chambre 32* and *Le Grand Concert de la Nuit*. The novel consists largely of David's reflections on his relationship with Imogen. It also contains reflections on the work of Georges Bataille and Simone Weil, on the lives of various female saints, and on filmmaking, the

theatre, plus miscellaneous musings on just about anything that catches David's eye – including, for example, a couple passing him on the street: "As they entered a side street she turned, smiled, and brought her lips down onto his mouth, quickly, for a semi-second, as if stamping his face with a mark of her approval".

Bravura passage follows bravura passage, to the point not only of superabundance but of superfluity. As Buckley hauls out yet more personal relics from the narrator's memory for our perusal, the vast array becomes overwhelming. But perhaps that's the point.

Many of the items in the Sanderson-Perceval – the porcelain, the musical instruments, the crystals, the velvet mushrooms, the glass jellyfish – belonged together only because they had been collected. There was no insistence that the visitor be instructed, but instruction might proceed from pleasure and confusion.

Multiple plots and stories compete for the reader's attention: David's ex-wife Samatha is now in a relationship with a woman named Val who advises corporations on "issues relating to

relaxation, diet, organisation of the workspace, et cetera, et cetera". There is also a homeless man named William, who ends up lodging with David, before eventually finding employment and going on to marry. After his wife's death, David's father remarries a woman who is quite unlike his first wife. Buckley seems to be arguing – insisting, indeed – through these various tales that people necessarily adopt personae, like actors, and then move on to other parts. The point is rammed home rather when David and Imogen attend an orgy, which is rather drearily like every other orgy you've ever come across, and where the participants – the usual suspects: lawyers, politicians, judges and what have you – don various cloaks and masks. Bataille summed it up all rather more unfussily in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, as quoted by David: "Secretly or not, it is necessary to become other, or else cease to be".

The odd leaden insight or observation seems unworthy of the brilliance elsewhere on display, but the figure of Imogen – figured and refigured in descriptions of her various screen roles – remains fascinating throughout. She is entirely imaginary, utterly real and alive forever "in the perpetual present of the sentence, where nobody is alive and nobody dead".