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Reviews

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# Heroes of Retreat

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Javier Cercas. *The Anatomy of a Moment: Thirty-Five Minutes in History and Imagination*. (Trans. Anne McLean.) Bloomsbury, 2011.

SOME BOOKS PURPORT TO BE ABOUT ONE thing (al Qaeda, salt) and then are actually about that thing (al Qaeda, salt); others purport to be about one thing (horses, photography, cocaine) and are rather about a different thing (tradition, decency, experiment). The best books purport to be about one thing and are about all other things, about tradition *and* decency *and* experiment. *The Anatomy of a Moment*, by the Spanish novelist Javier Cercas, falls into this last category. It purports to be about one thing—a single moment at the beginning of a miscarried coup d'etat, or *golpe de estado*, staged as a hostage-taking at the Cortes, the Spanish legislative assembly, in February 1981, that was broadcast live on the radio and later shown on television—but is secretly and not so secretly about so many things it verges on the inexhaustible.

The moment in question began with a simple gesture of defiance on the part of a politically finished and personally broken man, outgoing prime minister Adolfo Suárez, who remained in his seat in the Cortes as everyone else, or almost everyone else, cowered under the benches. The book spirals up and out and back from this gesture, a single gesture of defiance that illuminates the thirty-five recorded minutes of an assault on a fledgling regime, thirty-five minutes of an

assault that illuminate seventeen and a half hours of a near-successful coup against an upstart and unlikely democracy, seventeen and a half hours of a near-successful coup that illuminate the political situation in Spain in the apocalyptic late autumn of 1980, a political situation in Spain in the apocalyptic late autumn of 1980 that illuminates the history of Spain's hasty and improvised and successful transition from Francoism to democracy, an improvised transition from Francoism to democracy that illuminates the legacies of authoritarianism and the challenges of its dismantling, legacies of authoritarianism and its dismantling that illuminate the responsibilities of citizens and the performances of their leaders, the peculiarities of heroism, the vice of politics, the ingratitude of democracy, the courage of bourgeois decency, and the final irrelevance of motive.

IN JANUARY 1981, Adolfo Suárez was forced to resign after five years as prime minister of Spain: an initial interim as King Juan Carlos I's appointee, a short term as the popularly legitimate victor of Spain's first free elections in four decades, and finally two full years as the constitutionally legitimate leader of a new parliamentary monarchy. He had managed the transition to democracy with an alacrity and decisiveness no one had anticipated from a Francoist lackey, the last secretary-general of the dictatorship's lone legal political party, the Movimiento. Cercas describes Suárez, in one of the book's mesmeric, murmured leitmotifs, as a politician who was able to do "the hard thing," take apart the authoritarian apparatus, and subsequently unable to do the easy thing, administer the new democracy. He was singularly able to dismantle Francoism because it was the system that created him, because he knew all the "nooks and crannies of the corridors of power"; the very fact that he had forever been a perfectly obedient creature of a dictatorship both allowed him to take Francoism apart and prevented him from keeping democracy together.

At the end of these five years he was politically finished. He was despised by the Francoist right for statutes that allowed for decentralization and greater regional autonomy and seemed to undermine the glory of the state; by business interests

for his inability to manage the worsening economic crisis; by Rome for his facilitation of marriage reform; by Washington for his refusal to join NATO; by the army for his legalization of the Communist Party and his inability to stanch ETA terrorism; by journalists for shutting them out of the power they'd arrogated to themselves in the late cronyist scuffles of a moribund Francoism; and by the political class—an "immature, reckless, and bewildered ruling class," Cercas calls it—for having begun as a provincial upstart and finished as a secluded, indecisive leader.

It thus seemed as though everybody in the "great sewer" of Madrid was conspiring against Suárez. "Touch on the rudder, surgical coup, change of course: this is the fearful terminology that impregnated conversations from the summer of 1980 in the hallways of the Cortes, dinners, lunches and political discussions in the political village of Madrid." That summer there was "hardly a political party that did not consider the hypothesis of placing a solider at the head of a coalition or caretaker or unity government" to replace Suárez, who was after all

> a little provincial Falangist consumed by ambition, an ignorant nonentity, a textbook arriviste who had thrived in the corrupt environment of Francoism thanks to flattery and fiddling and who continued to thrive afterwards thanks to the King putting him in charge of dismantling with a card sharp's tricks and huckster's verbosity the whole Movimiento set-up, a rogue who years earlier was perhaps a necessary evil, because he knew the cesspits of Francoism better than anybody, but who is now driving the country to the brink with his risible statesman
> pretensions.

These reckless propositions—that the only way to save the country from this ignorant nonentity was through some form of soft, disguised, quasi-legal coup—are gently whispered into plausibility, and the door is opened to the enemies of democracy.

In that apocalyptic late autumn of 1980, almost everyone in Madrid had his or her own scheme for how this might work; an intelligence report delivered to the King described the various forms that a near-certain coup might take, describing what Cercas calls "all the coups of the coup." Strangely, almost all of the report's predictions proved correct: the actual coup was three different coups lashed

together. In part for this reason, and in part due to the steadfastness of a canny King—these details unfold over the course of the book with measured suspense—all the coups ultimately failed and, in failing, inadvertently helped to bring Spain's democracy to mature durability. There was the political coup, pro-monarchy and cautiously pro-democracy, that sought to "trim" or "shrink" democracy as embodied by Suárez, and which took as its model de Gaulle's ascent in 1958. There was the military coup of the generals, pro-monarchy but anti-democracy, that sought to confiscate once more for the Crown the power it had abdicated with the new constitution. And there was the coup of the colonels, anti-monarchy and anti-democracy, for which any rupture with Francoism—anything other than "the utopia of Spain as barracks," in Cercas's words—was intolerable.

The colonels were given charge of the coup's theatrical opening. At just after six thirty in the evening on the night of February 23, 1981, as the parliamentary deputies convened for an investiture vote to put Suárez's successor into power, Lieutenant Colonel Tejero stormed into the Cortes with a team of Civil Guards and, with his pistol and his tricorne, assumed control of the parliament and ordered the assembly onto the floor. The whole country sat and listened on the radio as Colonel Tejero secured the hall, firing two shots into the ceiling, after which his brave cadets proceeded to unload the contents of their automatic weapons over the heads of the defenseless parliamentarians. Closed-captioned cameras captured on video the first thirty-five minutes of the proceedings. In Valencia, Captain Milans del Bosch had already declared a state of emergency and mobilized his troops, and in Madrid the Brunete Armored Division was preparing to take control of the city. General Armada sat at army headquarters, waiting for the call from the King at the Zarzuela Palace to send him into the Cortes to defuse the situation and accept his role as the new leader of a caretaker or coalition or unity government, thereby presenting the success of the coup as the solution to the coup. But, for reasons never wholly clear, or perhaps because the colonels had never quite shared the generals' vision of the coup, Tejero had fired his weapon in the Cortes, and an attempted soft coup gained the "scenery" of a hard coup. From there the coup began to falter. Outside, no one took to the streets in support of democracy. The ruling and political classes waited cagily.

As shots rang out, the assembled men and women followed the order to crouch under their benches. Everyone, that is, except for three men. The first was Adolfo Suárez; the second was his deputy prime minister, General Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado; the third was the long-exiled head of the Spanish Communist Party, Santiago Carrillo.

Mellado, the bespectacled 68-year-old general, tried to grab Tejero's pistol, was shoved away roughly by several of the cadets, and then stood, in serene, fearless, outraged shock, while the cadets unloaded their weapons. Carrillo, the communist, quietly smoked a cigarette. And Suárez remained seated, in the book's steady refrain, "solitary, spectral, statuesque in a desert of empty benches," while "bullets whizzed through the air around him."

Cercas writes that this was a courageous gesture, and a graceful gesture, and both an affirmative and a negative gesture, and a supreme gesture of liberty, and a histrionic gesture: "the gesture of a man playing a role." It was also a posthumous gesture, the gesture of a man politically finished and personally broken by accusations of betrayal from every quarter. It was also, finally, an inexplicable gesture, an inexhaustible gesture, and, for reasons Cercas can explain only as he concludes, his history can describe the gesture but cannot pretend to know what it meant.

The other two men who stood and "risked their necks for democracy"—another of the book's incantations—were the only two allies Suárez had left. They too were examples of what Cercas identifies, after a 1989 Hans Magnus Enzensberger essay, as the "hero of retreat." Like Suárez, they had been created and formed by radiantly comprehensive ideologies—for Gutiérrez Mellado, Franco's military; for Carrillo, the Community Party that for four exiled decades maintained its opposition to Franco—and, like Suárez, they were to develop late in life the understanding that the only conceivable way forward (for Spain as a country, for them as political actors) was to take apart what had come before. Their loyalties could no longer lie with the dead certainties of the past. They understood that the need to settle scores would establish justice at the cost of the world—*fiat justitia et pereat mundus*; that, and here Cercas turns from Enzensberger to Weber, "there was nothing more abject than to practice spurious ethics that seek

only to be right, ethics that, 'instead of being concerned with what the politician is interested in, the future and the responsibility towards the future, are concerned with politically sterile questions of past guilt.'"

Carrillo gave up most of the Marxist-Leninist program he'd sworn to defend as a teenage revolutionary; Gutiérrez Mellado made accountable to a civilian administration the military power he'd long held was the salvation of the state; and Suárez deconstructed the hierarchy he'd spent his career scaling. The three men stood alone on a razed plain and, in three years, built a democracy that has given Spain the longest free interim in its history. But it was a democracy that they, like Moses, were fit to prepare and unfit to rule. They were despised men, men punished for their betrayal of a past they loved in favor of a future in which they could play no part, a future that would thus never be grateful: they were men who abjured their accountability to the communities that had meant everything to them in favor of accountability to imagined communities that could never accept them. The three heroes of retreat were politically finished and personally broken, and as the bullets whizzed around the Cortes threatening the ungrateful democracy for which they had given up everything, they were the only ones who remained still, the only ones who risked their necks.

IN THE OPENING CHAPTER, "Epilogue to a novel," Cercas explains that he tried for two years to write the story of the events of February 23 as fiction, an experimental version of *The Three Musketeers*, but that he foundered against the fact that the reality itself had become fictional: this was an event that everyone had listened to live on the radio, and later seen on television, and saw again each subsequent year on television, and the principal actors had become something like fictional characters. "No real person becomes fictitious by appearing on television, not even by being a television personality more than anything else, but television probably contaminates everything it touches with unreality, and the nature of an historic event alters in some way when it is broadcast on television, because television distorts (if not trivializes and demeans) the way we

perceive things." His prime example is that though most Spaniards of a certain age would swear they watched the coup live on television at the time, in point of fact the closed-captioned footage wasn't shown until the following day.

Thus even the best historical accounts, Cercas found, had acquired the tenor of fiction; because the events surrounding the coup had an unusual degree of coherence and symmetry, a reader of the histories could "end up thinking that for once history had been coherent, symmetrical and geometric, and not disorderly, turbulent and unpredictable, which is how it is in reality." He decided that the only way "to erect a fiction on the 23 February coup was to know as scrupulously as possible the reality of the 23 February coup," and thus introduces himself—for this book is a memoir of a political generation—as a figure something like the narrator of Sebald's *Austerlitz*. Only after he failed to write a novel did he "dive into the depths of the mishmash of theoretical constructions, hypotheses, uncertainties, embellishments, falsehoods and invented memories surrounding that day." By the end of his travels to and from Madrid, he concludes his introduction by saying that:

> I understood that the events of 23 February on their own possessed all the dramatic force and symbolic power we demand of literature and I understood that, even though I was a writer of fiction, for once reality mattered more to me than fiction or mattered to me too much to reinvent it by substituting it with an alternative reality, because none of what I could imagine about 23 February concerned me and excited me as much or could be as complex and persuasive as the pure reality of 23 February.

The book is a "testimony," then, and not a fiction; it is accountable not only to itself. It is also an apology and an act of contrition, both a personal act of contrition and an act of contrition made on behalf of Cercas's entire generation. This is the generation of leftists who came to political maturity believing that Suárez and his supporters (who included men like Cercas's father) had bungled the transition to democracy, had ceded the handover to the Francoist right by disarming the leftist opposition with emergency calls for expedient measures. The book lulls you into thinking it's some combination of a story about the treason of the clerks and a story about the revolt of the masses—it seems clear that Cercas thinks the ultimate responsibility for the coup lies with the ruling class that opened the door to the enemies of democracy, and the provincial class

that was ready to go along with it so as to reclaim the lost comforts of their dictatorship—but just as you expect a final condemnation of the cowardice and fearful complacency of his father's cohort, Cercas rises to their defense. The contemporary Spanish left looks back on this period of Spanish history and accuses the political class of the time of not having demanded justice for forty years of Francoism, not having settled the old scores, not having demanded to be right, but what Cercas comes to understand in the writing of this book is that what they did—agreeing to shelve the atrocities of the past for the sake of a new collective future—was an act of strength and courage. Theirs "was not a heroic desire, anxious for justice (or apocalypse); it was just a brave and reasonable bourgeois desire, and the political class fulfilled it, bravely and reasonably: although in the autumn and winter of 1980 the political class behaved with an irresponsibility that verged on sending the country back to barbarism, between 1976 and 1980 it was much less incompetent than its last two centuries of history might have predicted."

It is almost impossible in politics, Cercas implies, to find a place for the heroics of concession, for the heroics of pragmatism; it is almost impossible to admire the hero of retreat. We do not trust the mechanics or the motives. Suárez was a hero of retreat, a stalwart Francoist lackey who managed the astonishing trick, for which he was uniquely suited, of undoing the system that formed him. The political class of the time, at least until it began to panic (for reasons of terrorism and instability and economic fear that, Cercas concedes, were understandable) in the autumn of 1980, was his reflection, and together what they created was an imperfect democracy. But as Cercas reminds us, there is such a thing as a perfect dictatorship but there will never be a perfect democracy. A democracy is an experiment that can always be improved upon.

At the beginning of the book, Cercas writes that he and his generation had never considered Suárez—and, by extension, their own fathers—"anything other than a Francoist on the make who had prospered through back-breaking bowing, an opportunistic, reactionary, pious, superficial and smooth politician who embodied what I most detested about my country and whom, I'm very much afraid, I identified with my father, an obstinate supporter of Suárez." By the end, though, Cercas has come around to refute this attitude of the uncompromising left, an attitude—with its mean model of heroism as resolute and perfectly principled integrity—that left no room for the hero of retreat. His father's

generation, heroes of retreat all, may not have been heroes as usually imagined, but they had been doing the best they could possibly do in an impossibly difficult time. Suárez may have been opportunistic, superficial, and smooth, but he was also

> a basically honest man: while he occupied the leadership of the government his sins were the usual sins of a rotten time. As well as the political successes he harvested, this perhaps explains why for so many years people admired him and kept voting for him; I mean that it's not true people voted for Suárez because they were deceived about his defects and limitations, or because Suárez managed to deceive them: they voted for him in part because he was like they would have liked to be, but most of all they voted for him because, less in his virtues than in his defects, he was just like them. That's more or less what Spain in the 1970s was like: a country of vulgar, uncultivated, swindling, womanizing, gambling men without many scruples, provincials with the morality of survivors brought up between Acción Católica and the Falange who had lived comfortably under Francoism, collaborators who wouldn't even have admitted their collaboration but were secretly increasingly ashamed of it and trusted Suárez because they knew that, although he might have wanted to be the fairest and the most modern and most audacious—or precisely because he wanted to be—he would always be one of theirs and would never take them where they didn't want to go. Suárez didn't let them down: he constructed a future for them, and by constructing it he cleansed his past, or tried to cleanse it.

In the end Cercas says that the only way to explain the meaning of Suárez's gesture, seated on that bench in the Cortes as bullets whizzed around him, would be to write a novel. What he means, I think, is that it's the role of the novelist to find motive. This is what the left of Cercas's generation tried to do in its campaign against Suárez: Suárez did it all for personal gain; he was addicted to power; he stood for nothing except himself as a pure politician. Cercas's proposal is that it's the role of the historian to bracket motive and identify consequence, and the consequence of Suárez's gambits and betrayals and renunciation is that he astonished the world by building a Spanish democracy that took root against all odds and has endured.

The broader point isn't that scores shouldn't be settled, or that justice shouldn't obtain; it's hard to imagine Cercas making the same sort of argument about, say, Argentina or Russia. And his point isn't that the past ought to be forgotten, or that the transition succeeded because the brutalities of the past had been forgotten. His proposal is that the transition succeeded precisely because the past was remembered for its aims rather than its scores. The left managed to get out of the transition pretty much exactly what it had always wanted: Cercas points out that the constitutional monarchy established in the transition was virtually identical to the Republic overthrown by Franco. In one of the historical symmetries that prevents this material from its realization as a novel—that might be seen, in a novel, as cheap—Cercas argues that General Gutiérrez Mellado's rebellion against the coup in 1981 was a personal act of contrition for his support for the coup as a 24-year-old lieutenant in Madrid in 1936. In preserving the fledgling democracy, score-settling became moot. "23 February not only brought an end to the transition and to Franco's post-war regime; 23 February brought an end to the war."

CERCAS HAS WRITTEN his experimental version of *The Three Musketeers*, but not in the way he'd imagined. In his original conception, his novel would resemble Dumas insofar as it was a story about how a coup was nurtured and provoked so that, in failing, it would strengthen an endangered democracy—as the musketeers of M. de Tréville assist the campaign of the Duke of Buckingham only, in the end, to shore up the power of the French court—but that proved too neat and misleading a symmetry to impose on a history full of its own odd symmetries. Instead his book resembles Dumas in its generous profusion of overlapping motives. D'Artagnan and his companions act for love, and for money, and for honor, and part of the reason one loves that book is that they still win every duel and protect every lady and save the King. No reader gives a damn about how messy their reasons might be, just like no Spaniard ought to give a damn about the messy reasons of Suárez, Gutiérrez Mellado, or Carrillo, because whatever their usual sins of a rotten time were, and whatever reasons they had

for betraying the people and principles they had spent their lives obeying, they refused to duck as the bullets flew. This is why Cercas can't assign a final meaning to Suárez's decision to remain seated: the meaning of the gesture is the fact of the gesture.

There is a final, formal symmetry behind all of this. Cercas's own gesture with this book is his refusal to be a classic hero himself, a hero of triumph and conquest and assertion of will—that is, a novelist—and instead to present his narrator, present himself, as a literary version of Enzensberger's hero of retreat, a hero of reduction and dismantling and fixing and negotiation—that is, a historian. A writer accountable not to principles but to reality. I'm not sure it's a distinction that holds up *tout court*, but Cercas only needs it to hold up long enough to deliver his own act of contrition. Just before his father died, in 2008, Cercas asked him for the final time why he had trusted Suárez.

> "Because he was like us," he said with what little voice he had left. I was about to ask him what he meant by that when he added: "He was from a small town, he'd been in the Falange, he'd been in Acción Católica, he wasn't going to do anything bad, you understand, don't you?"

Cercas closes the book wondering whether its writing hasn't been an attempt to show his father that he'd gotten the point, that, as he says at the beginning—when he admits that on February 23 he himself raced to the university looking to protest because he thought such a gesture might win him a girlfriend—none of us are heroes, and that all of us are: "I'd wanted to finish it so my father could read it and know that I'd finally understood, that I'd understood that I wasn't so right and he wasn't so wrong, that I'm no better than him, and that now I never will be." +

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