



Everything is Happening



Journey into a Painting



MICHAEL JACOBS

With an introduction and coda by Ed Vulliamy





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GRANTA

After Michael became ill, every meeting with his doctors would begin with him saying 'I must go to Spain and I must finish my book'. He did go back to Spain and, thanks to Ed Vulliamy and Granta, here is his book.

Jackie Rae

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FOREWORD

The travel writer, Hispanist and art historian Michael Jacobs was working on this book when he died. It was to be his magnum opus: an attempt to unlock the secrets of the painting he considered to be the greatest work by the artist he esteemed above all others: *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez. It was also intended to be a reflection on the study and fruitful enjoyment of painting - which to Michael were not necessarily synonymous. Michael Jacobs was a writer who defied 'genre', and he planned to delve into his own experience in art history to define a personal vision for how to look at a work of art, which grew in part out of his tutelage with perhaps the greatest British art historian of his generation: the former director of the Courtauld Institute and Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, Anthony Blunt. Michael remained fiercely loyal to Blunt after he was exposed in 1979 as a spy for the Soviet intelligence services; Michael's book was to have been about that too.

In late September 2013, Michael went for an examination of what he thought was probably lumbago, causing him an irritation of the back. He was instead diagnosed with aggressive renal cancer, and given between three and five years to live. Michael thought he had enough time to complete the book, to which he was passionately committed. But in the event, he was dead within three and a half months - passing away at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, on 11 January 2014.

Though Michael had written half the book by the time of his death, it was not arranged in any order. And this is what Jackie Rae - Michael's partner since the 1970s whom he had married shortly before his death - painstakingly did, collating the manuscript on the basis of the dates on which Michael had written this passage or that.

So what follows is the book which Michael Jacobs had begun but left unfinished, preceded by an introduction to *Las Meninas* which I have written - based in part upon Michael's own writing elsewhere and biographies he trusted - and followed, in the interest of fulfilling Michael's wishes, by a coda, drawn from the conversations I had with Michael during his last months about how he wanted his book to unfold. Or rather - as death assailed him at a pace he himself refused publicly to acknowledge until the final few days - how it might have ended had he lived, even for six further months, to write it. Conversations which became progressively poignant yet brilliant as death approached, right up until thirty-six hours before Michael's end. What results is a book

that is indeed about Velázquez and his picture, but is also, as importantly, a heartfelt manifesto for the liberation of how we look at painting. An intelligent route carved out between the vulgarity of mass tourism on the one hand, and rarefied documentarism of 'art history' on the other.

Michael wanted this. So writing the bookends to his text and assembling the result, which you now behold, has been at once like a seance - more Ouija-board than keyboard - and an intense, daunting but strangely effortless homage to a lost friend to whom, and to whose work, no words can do justice. As Michel Foucault, whose ideas on Velázquez play a crucial part in what follows, wrote: 'It is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.' And as Samuel Beckett - whom Michael admired, and whom we often discussed - asked: what will we do when even words fail? And answered, on another occasion: we try again, fail and fail better.

So here it is: me trying again, now that words have failed.

Ed Vulliamy,
Genova, October 2014

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, *Las Meninas* - which translates as 'The Ladies in Waiting' - appears to be what one might call in England a 'Conversation Piece'; a royal group of sorts, though more intimate. And yet there is no conversation. Quite the reverse: there is a powerful mood in the room and it is silent. Silence is the quintessence of the painting.

Here is the painter Velázquez, in a room at the royal palace of Philip IV of Spain, at work with his palette and before a canvas, in the company of the King's daughter and her entourage. The first thing we notice is that most of the figures are frozen - in their stares and manner, and some even in suspended gestures; their attention caught by, and focussed on, some presence outside the frame. The stare of those aware of this external presence is in our direction, which is also apparently that of Velázquez's sitter or subject. This, one can presume from the reflection in the mirror on the back wall, is likely be King Philip IV and Queen Maria Theresa, whose faded images we see, almost spectral, in the glass.

The awe experienced by a beholder of the painting is so profound, wrote Palomino, the first real chronicler of the lives of the great Spanish painters, that 'it ceases to become art, to become life itself'. 'Life itself' is a phrase Michael uses and relishes in the unfinished book to follow - the ultimate compliment, on the surface of things, to a work of representation. Michael is hardly alone in his wonder. The Italian master Luca Giordano, taken by King Charles II to see the painting, was asked by the King: 'What do you think of it?' and famously replied: 'Sire, this is the theology of painting.'¹

The picture has become iconic: a national treasure of Spain, poster and fridge magnet, model for paintings by Picasso and others and a riddle that confounds to this day. 'At the beginning of the twenty-first century,' writes the art historian Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, 'despite all the analyses of it, *Las Meninas* still somehow eludes us.'² 'Las Meninas,' confers another expert, the painter Avigdor Arikha, 'is no doubt Velázquez's most remarkable and most haunting masterpiece. It hits one's senses like nothing else, and we don't grasp why.'³

Why is the painting so baffling? The stares directed towards us from within it, and the presence of the mirror at the back, reflecting the royal couple apparently in the place where we are standing, are largely responsible for the enigma. The depiction of mirrors was common in painting at this time and earlier - most

often in Flemish art. But this was invariably to offer a different view of what is contained in the frame or – as in the famous portrait of the Arnolfini wedding couple by Van Eyck – to optically distort the contents of the picture. Never until *Las Meninas* was a mirror deployed to reflect something outside the picture, in this eerie way. As Joseph-Émile Muller suggests, the mirror becomes: ‘an ingenious device to give weight to the minor characters and turn into insubstantial ghosts the two who, in reality, occupied the dominant positions’.⁴ ‘Velázquez,’ writes Marco Carminati, ‘seems to want to involve us in a refined intellectual game in which what appears to be real turns out to be an illusion.’⁵

The fact of the mirror in this waltz between reality and illusion is crucial in itself, argues Enrique Lafuente Ferrari, former director of the Velázquez Institute in Madrid. ‘Pure vision,’ he writes, ‘is the image, in an inaccessible space, that a mirror gives us. In a mirror vision takes on the character of a concept: things are or are not, exist or vanish, just as to Calderón life appeared to be a dream, and a dream life.’ Ferrari refers here to the most famous work in Spanish Golden Age drama, by a playwright whom Michael Jacobs admired: Pedro Calderón de la Barca. *La Vida es Sueno* – Life is a Dream – was written in 1635 as a meditation upon fate and free will, and its theme, as the title suggests, is that what we live is but a dream, and that dreams are life, as experienced in the play by a prisoner called Segismundo. The same notion preoccupied Shakespeare and another of Michael’s Spanish favourites, Lope de Vega. Ferrari continues: ‘Mirrors ... play an important role in several paintings by Velázquez. He was fond of them: in the inventory of his household belongings drawn up after his death, ten mirrors are listed.’⁶

Does this, then, make *Las Meninas* a painting of and about Philip IV and his queen? Or is it a self-portrait of Diego Velázquez? Or a ‘Conversation Piece’ depicting the Infanta, her maids and inner circle? The first analyst of the painting, the Portuguese Felix da Costa, writing in 1696, thought that ‘the picture seems more like a portrait of Velázquez than the princess’. Or is it a picture of us, indeed, as we observe the scene of those observing us? Or all, or none, of the above? Perhaps it is a painting about painting, some mercurial visual essay on the artist’s act of representation? Or is it a depiction of the coexistence of reality and illusion? These are among the mysteries of *Las Meninas*, and so the innumerable questions continue.

‘Velázquez is an artist whose works are so dazzling in their technique and so uncannily lifelike that it is difficult at times to think of him as a man of flesh and blood.’ So opens Michael Jacobs’s introduction to an earlier book, *Lives of Velázquez*, which

combines the only two biographies of the Spanish master he considered dependable. One was that by Velázquez's father-in-law, Francisco Pacheco, the other the so-called Spanish Vasari - Antonio Palomino.⁷

Diego Rodríguez de Silva Velázquez came from a Portuguese family on the side of his father Juan Rodríguez de Silva, possibly with some Jewish heritage, while the family of his mother, Dona Jerónima Velázquez, was native to Andalusia where the painter was born, in Seville during 1599. By Andalusian custom, he took his mother's name.

The Seville into which Velázquez was born was on the cusp; the beginning of its end as Spain's predominant city. By the middle of the twelfth century, it had become the third largest metropolis in the world after Rome and Venice, and the poet Luis de Góngora had called it 'the great Babylon of Spain, map of all nations'. But Seville was also headquarters of the Inquisition. Indeed, the 'Golden Age' which followed the unification of Spain in 1492 was accomplished, writes Michael Jacobs, 'in a spirit of brutal fanaticism', with the expulsion or enforced conversion of Andalusia's many Moors and Jews. This dogmatism and what we would now call 'ethnic cleansing' had a major and insidious demographic impact on the city, yet Seville remained characterised by 'an architecture ... of great contrasts', wrote Michael, for 'alongside the Muslim-inspired love of decorative arts richness is an inherently Spanish love of the austere'.⁸

The proximity of people to one another, and of rich to poor, caused plague to scourge Seville during the 'Golden Age', including one pestilence at the turn of the century, 1599-1601, when Velázquez had just been born, decimating the city's population. Seville, writes Michael, 'barely had time to recover when, in 1609, all of Spain's *Moriscos* [converted Moors] were finally expelled from the country'.⁹

And yet 'the obsession with money was one which united all social classes' in Seville, Michael writes in a voluminous guide to Andalusia. The opening of new markets in the Americas created an economy based on the export of olive oil, wine, biscuits, gunpowder and slaves. Seville's population had doubled between 1530 and 1580 to an estimated 85,000 souls, a conurbation which embraced, writes Michael, 'a notorious underworld of thieves, murderers, muggers, swindlers, card-sharps, prostitutes, pimps, entrepreneurs, black-marketeers and all kinds of seekers of fortunes and refugees from justice'.¹⁰

Through the maelstrom of pestilence and expulsion, young Velázquez developed a passion for painting, and was admitted in 1610 to what Palomino calls 'a gilded cage of art' and learning run by Francisco Pacheco. Michael Jacobs calls it 'an important studio' for all Pacheco's own 'stiff, Michelangelo-inspired

paintings and murals'. After five years as Velázquez's tutor, Pacheco writes: 'I gave him my daughter in marriage, persuaded to it by his virtue, chastity and good qualities, and by the expectations raised by his great native talent.'

Velázquez excelled. He had what Jacobs calls 'the innocent eye ... responsible solely to his pictorial instincts'. Young Velázquez, Michael continued, 'stressed his independent position in two significant ways: he painted directly from human models rather than from the antique; and he loved producing genre scenes, or what the Spaniards of his generation began calling *bodegones* (literally tavern scenes)'.¹¹ Although Velázquez did paint religious subjects, he painted relatively few, given the power of the church as patron and presence in society.

Michael liked to think that this suggested a roguish - epicurean and populist - trait in Velázquez's character, which he would have seen as typically Andalusian. He yearned for the kind of exposé of Velázquez's mercurial personality with which historians had unpeeled some of his favourite Spanish literary figures from the period.

It is of great frustration to Michael Jacobs that 'Palomino, like Pacheco before him, is so reverential towards Velázquez that it is difficult to imagine what the artist really was like as a person'. Although the Velázquez expert Enrique Lafuente Ferrari has this to say, which pleased Michael: 'One hesitates to imagine [Velázquez] as a gay and sociable comrade. Yet the imprint of the Sevillian genius seldom fails to make itself felt ... And that imprint is stamped on the rare, pithy, pertinent phrases from Velázquez's mouth which have been preserved. In Madrid he was nicknamed El Sevillano. He never lost the delicate accent of his native province in his manner of speaking Castilian.'¹²

Michael was also interested in Velázquez's apparent obsession with his father's noble lineage. Velázquez claimed that the De Silva family was descended from Silvius, mythical founder of Portugal and son of Trojan Aeneas, creator of Italy and child of Aphrodite, no less. Palomino records of the Silvas that 'fortune unleashed its ire and changed their state', though Michael thinks the family - who came to Seville from Portugal during the 1580s - were probably middle-class merchants, as were Velázquez's maternal forebears. But, as the Spanish writer José Ortega y Gasset observed in 1945: 'The preoccupation with their lineage must have been obsessive ... In the initial and deepest layer of his soul, Velázquez found this commandment: "You must be a nobleman."¹³

Such an obsession, posits Michael, would explain Velázquez's apparently brazen ambition when he reached court. In 1623 he was introduced to Madrid and Philip IV, on Pacheco's recommendation, by his friend Don Juan de Fonseca y Figueroa,

Chief Officer of the royal chapel, who was also canon of Seville Cathedral, and immediately found favour with the King. In 1623, he was appointed 'Painter to the Bedchamber', for a salary of twenty ducats a month, which increased exponentially as favour and praise grew and further offices accumulated.

Philip IV - great-grandson of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and grandson of Philip II, who had overseen the Golden Age - inherited an expanse spanning much of the mapped world, across Europe and the Americas. But King Philip took unnaturally to affairs of state, with keener interests in painting, theatre and learning, hunting and amorous relationships. He seems to have been manic depressive, oscillating between an innate vitality and a passion for things of beauty, and bouts of acute depression. Philip was a reluctant soldier, but for the first half of his reign, Spain was able to live in the aura of its fading Golden Age by squandering wealth plundered in the New World on relentless military campaigns. And at court, that aura lingered, nowhere more obviously than in the fabulous collection of paintings collected by Philip IV's forebears.

Velázquez would have seen the mighty work of his predecessor as court painter, Titian, whose epic portraits of Charles V, Isabella of Portugal and Philip II hung in the palace and El Escorial. Also hanging there were paintings by Tintoretto, Correggio, Veronese and Ribera - and the turning point in Velázquez's own style came when he was granted his greatest wish, to visit Italy, in 1629-30. Velázquez stayed with the Spanish ambassador in Venice, where he studied the masterworks of Titian and others; thence to Ferrara and Cento to meet Guercino, and on to Rome.

Back in Madrid, the strong influences of Velázquez's Italian journey were quickly deployed in the service of the Habsburg dynasty during the latter half of the 1630s. He portrayed Philip's heir, Balthasar Carlos, and the epic *Surrender of Breda*, in which Velázquez notably pays attention just as carefully to roughneck foot-soldiers and onlookers as he does to the moment's main protagonists. This psychological perception, this interest in and ability to convey human nuance, charged Velázquez's great paintings of the late 1630s and early 1640s: his portrayals of the gods of Olympus bring them down to earth; Aesop and the Greek philosophers are portraits of everyman, of rugged, hermitic wisdom.

But above all, there is the poignant and percipient sensibility of the first great paintings of dwarves: *Calabazas*, apparently blind but all-seeing; *El Primo*, the wise and learned fool; and the delicately cocked head of young *Francisco Lezcano*, in his isolated affliction - culminating in the defiantly wise stare of *Sebastián de Morra*, with his exaggeratedly foreshortened legs and fine red

robe.

Velázquez the courtier was busy too, arranging for the decoration of royal quarters at the Alcázar palace and El Escorial retreat outside Madrid. In exchange for the copious favours bestowed upon him, Velázquez was to allow Philip free access to watch him at his canvasses whenever the royal spirit was so moved - which was often, compelled as Philip was by his court painter. The synergy between monarch as patron and painter as confidant opened the way for Velázquez's further career as collector for Philip IV, as the King sought to equal and even outflank the passion for art for which his grandfather, Charles V, had been renowned. And it was this task which set Velázquez en route for Italy a second time in 1648, arriving in March 1649.

This was a longer trip, again starting in Venice, travelling to Rome via Modena, Parma and Florence. Once in the eternal city, Velázquez the emissary arranged for casting of antique sculpture, that copies might be made for Spain - a bureaucratically arduous distraction from his study of the Italian masters, and the work that resulted. He did find time, though, to sire an illegitimate son and paint the magisterial portrait of Pope Innocent X - his posture pontifical, but his expression weary, his stare calculating.

Most of Velázquez's work from the early 1650s is portraiture as Habsburg diplomacy. By now, Philip had become a melancholy man: his queen, to whom he had begun to show belated affection, had died in 1644. The succession became a matter of increasing concern when his heir Balthasar Carlos died two years later, after his betrothal to Princess Mariana of Austria - a match which had been intended to fasten ties between the Spanish Kingdom and the Habsburg Empire. Philip continued his matrimonial policy between the two branches of the Habsburg Dynasty - Spanish and Austrian - by marrying, in 1649, the very same woman to whom his son had been betrothed, now Queen Mariana of Austria (she was also his niece). Queen Mariana now of Spain gave birth in 1651 to Princess Margarita Theresa, of whom more later when we reach *Las Meninas*, of which she is formally the central figure.

But the long revolt of the Netherlands approached its denouement: defeat for Spain and loss not only of the Low Countries but with them domination over the Atlantic. Meanwhile, Spain's economy was sinking under the weight of the Thirty Years War. Velázquez was unable - given his patron's insistence on lifelike representations - to avoid this dejection around the monarch, whom he now painted with greater, and highly effective, simplicity, visibly worn by the cares of office. According to the historian Xavier de Salas, X-rays of Velázquez's portraits of the King show that his first sketches had a 'much less regal appearance: softer and sorrowful; the features were first painted in a realistic way, and afterward heightened to emphasize

majesty'.¹⁴

Velázquez's favour with the King leads Palomino to consider what he calls 'envy' and 'spurious shadows' to which he was subject. Resentment among the nobility reached critical mass when Velázquez became a candidate for the Order of the Knighthood of Santiago, to which he would be ordained at a sumptuous ceremony in 1658. Velázquez's desire to achieve admission to the order can only have been made more ardent by the fact that Titian had received the title of Count Palatine from Emperor Charles V. An 'impediment' was created by nobles who (rightly, from their pompous point of view) questioned the artist's aristocratic lineage, to which Philip retorted: 'Write down that I am certain of his nobility.' The story illustrates the intimate relationship between the painter and the monarch, even suggesting a degree of dependence by the man of power on a sole confidant. Palomino notes how 'His Majesty confided more in him than a King usually does in his vassal, and discussed with him difficult matters, especially in those more intimate hours when the noblemen and other courtiers have retired'. Whether the 'difficult matters' were personal or affairs of state, the scene is irresistible: the monarch staying up late with his brilliant favourite, pomp cast aside, man-to-man, *a quattro occhi*, as the Italians say, four eyes together.

Velázquez in later life was a master, writes Michael in his preface to Pacheco and Palomino, of 'canvasses in which the real life and the otherworldly are often effortlessly interwoven', and this is what characterises the great late period. It began during a phase when Velázquez stopped painting the King, which was his job, and began two mythological subjects: *Apollo in the Forge of Vulcan* and the extraordinary *Fable of Arachne*, which braved new boundaries of composition and plane in order to make didactic statements about humanity, the gods and existence. This innovative surge finally produced *Las Meninas* in 1656, which was both a zenith after what had come before and, with hindsight, the gateway to Velázquez's final period.

Velázquez died only four years after completing the picture - like Michael Jacobs, suddenly, though there was an uncanny prescience of his imminent end. According to Palomino, on 8 June 1660, 'when Velázquez entered his house, he was received by his family and friends with more amazement than joy, for news of his death had spread through the Court, and they could hardly credit their eyes. It seems as if this was a presage of how little time he had left to live.'¹⁵ He gives no detail on how this eerie rumour of Velázquez's death came about.

But on the last day of July 1660, Velázquez became suddenly sick with a 'burning sensation', then 'great anguish and pains to the stomach and heart'. On 6 August, aged sixty-one - the same

age as Michael - he died, according to Palomino, of syncopal tertian fever.

Velázquez's body was interred the following day, dressed in the habit of the Order of Santiago, four days after which his widow, Juana Pacheco, died also. The inventory of his possessions shows Velázquez to have been a wealthy man, with a large house full of expensive furniture, silverware, tapestries, books and paintings.

Velázquez is unlikely to have known that his end was so close when he painted *Las Meninas*, nor will we ever know whether he intended the painting to be a valedictory statement about himself, or a 'legacy' painting, as it appears to us now. The group it portrays has an almost musical, albeit contrapuntal, harmony to it - a movement like that of a *concerto armonico* by that magician of baroque melancholy, Gianbattista Pergolesi - though all stand still. The movement lies between what we instinctively know to have happened immediately before, and feel might occur immediately after, this snapshot. And it is driven by the polyphonic tones of silver and deep shadow, the scattered bright colours which emphasise the casting of light from a multiple secrecy of sources. The room is in the *pieza principal*, or the royal family's residential apartments, rather than the artist's studio - which makes our glimpse of the scene all the more intimate.

Something like it is described in the diary of a courtier called Madame de Motteville, quoted in the first monograph to be written on *Las Meninas*, by Carl Justi, in 1888: 'In Madame de Motteville's memoirs,' writes Justi, 'there is a description of her visit to the Spanish Infanta, made while remaining in the doorway: "She is served with great honours, few have access to her apartments and it was by special favour that we were permitted to remain in the doorway. If she wishes to drink something, the page hands a glass to a maid of honour who curtsies while the page bows; on the other side another maid hands her a napkin, while in front of her is a lady in waiting." Does not this seem to you a description of *Las Meninas* by Velázquez?'¹⁶

Meninas is a word of Portuguese origin, to describe young girls of noble birth, daughters of aides to the crown placed by their fathers in the service of the Infanta as ladies-in-waiting, for career advancement all round. They could hold the post until they were deemed old enough to wear high-heeled shoes. The group has been identified by Palomino. To the artist's left is Maria Agustina Sarmiento, daughter of the King's Chief Councillor for War, Don Diego Sarmiento. She has a beautiful porcelain complexion, slightly flushed at the cheek, or else wears rouge; she kneels forward with delicate elegance, her hair held back by a butterfly ribbon; the shine on her dress is like quicksilver but

carefully less lambent than that of the Infanta. For all its awkwardness in her kneeling position, the dress flows. The maid is entirely focussed on the princess, and though she kneels, her perfectly poised left hand holds a jug known as a *bucaro* on a tray, with which to refresh – with whatever its contents are – the Infanta, who is about to take it with her right hand.

A *bucaro* took its name from scented, reddish earth from which special pottery was made, and which gave a fragrance to water stored in it. Considered a luxury, the pots were exported from Portugal, and were perhaps of interest to Velázquez for that alone. But Michael Jacobs was working on another theory when he was taken ill, to which his Hispanist friend Gijs van Hensbergen is also attracted: that the *bucaro* could contain a dose of 'cocoa'.

'Hot chocolate was prepared,' says van Hensbergen, 'that is to say pure cocoa beans chopped up, and served in a *bucaro*. It had psychotropic qualities and in those days, women of the upper classes became totally hooked on it. Priests would preach, in their sermons, about the evils of the chocolate craze.' J. S. Bach addressed a similar drug craze of its day: addiction among the ladies of Leipzig to coffee, consumed in quantities that were also psychotropic, as a kind of eighteenth-century 'speed'. In his 'Coffee Cantata' of 1732–4, Bach set to music a poem by Christian Friedrich Henrici in which a Herr Scheldrian scolds his daughter Lieschen for her obsession with coffee over the pursuit of a husband.

And not only chocolate: 'It was said also,' reports van Hensbergen, 'that the *bucaro* contained a chemical, which may have been lead, that whitened the skin – and her skin is certainly very white. Ladies would bite off a bit of unglazed *bucaro* from the jug, made of this wonderfully mysterious clay from Mexico.'

On the Infanta's other flank is Dona Isabel de Velasco, daughter of Don Bernardino López de Ayla y Velasco, a 'Gentleman of the bedchamber' at court, Palomino informs us. She is a little older than her opposite number, having been appointed by the Queen on Boxing Day 1649; she died three years after the painting was done. Like her partner in care of the princess, her pale face is flushed or rouged. But unlike her partner, Dona Isabel, though she curtsies towards the Infanta, is focussed, almost as though startled, on this unknown and unseen presence outside the frame, where the viewer of the painting stands, which likewise, and strikingly, commands the stare of the artist, the Infanta and the dwarf to her left – of which more later, as Michael's book proceeds. Her hair, slicked back at the temple, is sumptuously decorated, and her dress, again though awkward, is painted with lavish care. Velázquez's copious application of impasto causes light to glisten across the surface of the dress's

material - a technique brought to perfection by his contemporary Rembrandt van Rijn, on the groom's sleeve in his *Jewish Bride* painted nine years later, in 1667.

Both *Meninas* wear the fashion of the day: dresses made voluminous by a crinoline - a structure of metal hoops formed into a dome-shaped cage over which the skirts were arranged. They also wear the kind of corseted bodice designed to create the slimmest waist and silhouette possible and constrict the bust - and a cause of agony in life after puberty. Dona Isabel compliments her fellow *Menina* harmoniously: choreographically and thematically, she appears to guard over as well as to serve the princess. The two *Meninas* create a kind of bower around the Infanta, their charge.

The two dwarves are strikingly different; one is the macrocephalous Mari-Bárbola, a 'senior' and famous dwarf at court 'of formidable aspect', says Palomino. Mari-Bárbola was of German origin, and features also in a painting of 1666 by Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo, Velázquez's son-in-law, wherein she accompanies Prince Balthasar Carlos. Here, she is painted with all the compassion Velázquez afforded the dwarves in previous portraits, and with reverent respect. If her purpose at court and in the picture is in part to show off the beauty of the Infanta to even greater effect through contrast, Velázquez does not overstate this in the slightest; she is statuesque, commanding for all her small size. The other dwarf, a boy on the right with his foot on the dog, is Nicola - 'Nicolasio' - Pertusato who, absorbed in rousing the animal, is unaware of the unseen presence.

Michael was fascinated by the role of these dwarves: court fools and wise jesters. Although they were intended, cruelly, to entertain with their abnormal physical condition, deeper and mysterious qualities were attributed to them: of intellectual prowess, clairvoyance and the wisdom of the fool - something sinister that cocks a snook at authority and watches the march of time as leveller of all men. Because of this sagacity, perceived or not, dwarves were not only allowed, they were *expected* to goad and pastiche the noble or monarch they served, forever reminding their masters, as did King Lear's fool, of transient existence and the hollow vanity of power in the final hour. When he died, Michael was researching the dwarf Pertusato's family, of aristocratic lineage in Piedmont (indeed, not long before the end, he and I were planning a trip whereby I was to drive him to Turin to find out more about the miniature nobleman). Pertusato entered the royal household in 1650, six years before the painting, and remained there for half a century. It is likely that he replaced the King's favourite dwarf, Francisco Lezcano, painted by Velázquez sitting in a landscape, before he died in 1649.

Nicolasio is here painted with delicacy to match his frame and

features, playful in a way that gives the group an extra domestic intimacy, and testing the obviously accustomed patience of the sleepily unmoved hound. This breed of mountain dog, the Spanish Mastiff - referred to in Virgil's *Georgics* as a 'fierce Molossian' - was a fashionable breed in aristocratic homes, and likely favourite of the King and his family. They were so highly regarded that a royal edict of 1273 restricted their use as sheepdogs.

Also unaware of the unseen presence are two figures behind Dona Velasco and Mari-Bárbola. The lady in a nun's garb, looking pensively aside, is identified as Marcela de Ulloa, 'a lady of honour', says Palomino. She was the widow of a courtier called Don Diego de Peralta, and seems to have taken holy orders upon his death and been recruited to the Palace in 1643. The man next to her is the only figure unnamed by Palomino, with a curiously 'stung' expression painted in broader brushstrokes than the others, as though distracted by some inner vision. He is identified by Palomino as simply *Guardadamas*, a chaperone or 'Ladies' Guard', though some researchers have identified him as a courtier called Don Diego Ruiz de Azcona.¹⁷

Then there is the figure at the back, proceeding through an open door, whether coming or going we cannot be sure. His glance is ambiguous too: he could, over his shoulder, be staring at the group assembled in the room, or at the unseen presence where we stand, or both. He is identified as Master of the Queen's Bedchamber, her *Apostentador*, called José Nieto. But this man's name has been further researched by Marco Carminati to find, weirdly, that his matronymic is Velázquez - an irony that becomes spine-chilling when we reach the end of Michael's adventure with *Las Meninas*.¹⁸

Also at the back, on the wall, is the mirror containing the reflected likenesses of King Philip and his queen. It could either show the royal couple sitting for Velázquez, or that which is shown on the artist's canvas itself, or - in a *trompe l'œil* which would be characteristic of Velázquez and compound the tricks in this painting - both. In either case, it makes the royal couple Velázquez's likely sitters for the painting on which he works.

To the side, on the second plane, Velázquez dominates the scene in terms of mass, though not light. The red on his palette echoes that of the drapery across the top of the reflection in the mirror, suggesting that those we see in its glass are indeed the sitters for a royal double portrait. The brick red also refers to the colour of his cross of the Order of Santiago, which must have been painted on as an afterthought - by whose hand we know not - following Velázquez's inauguration to the order two years after the painting was done. Velázquez's hair is thick, long and free; his posture invites us to 'take me as you find me', his expression neutral but powerful. Of his stare, fixed but at ease, Michael has

much to say.

The paintings hanging above the group are of significance. The one to the left tells the story of Pallas and Arachne, as originally painted by Rubens, only this is a copy after Rubens by Velázquez's son-in-law Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo, who had married the painter's daughter Francisca. The possible importance of the painting to this scene is that it involves the jealousy of a god towards the talents of a mortal. As does the other: the musicianship of divine Apollo challenged by Pan, as originally depicted by Jacob Jordaens and here again copied by Martínez. In his earlier book *Mythological Painting*, Michael writes about the significance to Velázquez of the fact that the gods of Olympus were flawed, and suggests, as does Marco Carminati, a subversion by Velázquez: that he wielded his paintbrush with greater art than the King wielded his power.¹⁹ If this audacity was inferred by the monarch, it appears to have either been forgiven, or caused no offence.

In the middle of the group stands the royal couple's daughter, Infanta Margarita herself; young but regal, a child but beautiful and dressed in the resplendent finery of her station. In her book on Velázquez, Elizabeth Ripley calls the Infanta 'the darling of court', whose previous portraits had been sent 'to every court in Europe'. Ripley relates that 'Velázquez felt sorry for the little model who [had before] posed so stiffly for her portrait. Then one day ... Margarita suddenly announced that she did not want to pose. In this fleeting moment, Velázquez saw the princess as she really was, a lively wilful child. The scene remained so vivid that he decided to make it the subject of a painting.' That painting, claims Ripley, was *Las Meninas*.²⁰ Velázquez has painted her expression to convey both innocence and sagacity, a certain haughtiness but short of a degree that would make her unbecoming. She is majestic, but puckish, lively and wilful indeed. Her dress shows her wearing the latest fashion: a crinoline even at that young age. Carminati relates the Infanta's 'illustrious destiny', betrothed in 1666 'to Emperor Leopold I of Habsburg in order to become Holy Roman Empress, Queen of Germany and Queen Consort of Bohemia and Hungary'. Van Hensbergen tells the story differently: 'she was bred to death, basically, seven years after marriage. By the age of twenty-five or twenty-six, she would have been pregnant nineteen times. After one miscarriage, she was pregnant again within three months.'

The Infanta's presence leads Palomino to regard the painting as Velázquez's bequest to his own immortality, likening it to 'Phidias's portrayal of himself on Minerva's shield, or Titian's holding an image of Philip II - so that so long as the Goddess and King are recalled - likewise royal Infanta Margarita alongside whom Velázquez places himself in this painting - so lives the

artist.' Uncharacteristically, Palomino thus takes an aesthetic priority over royal seniority and protocol, seeing the princess as the focus of the painting - and 'qualification' for Velázquez's legacy - not her father the King or her mother, even though it is they who sit on the throne, command the stare and appear to constitute the all-important unseen presence.

Velázquez had not painted King Philip IV for nearly a decade before *Las Meninas*, even though this was his primary role at court - no doubt because of the ill fortunes of Spain in the Netherlands, in the Thirty Years War and in its domestic economy. Yet here, suddenly and perhaps poignantly, is a painting which has the King 'off-stage' and embraces both his best friend, the painter, and the only surviving child with his wife. (His son, Felipe Próspero, would be born the following year in 1657, subject of a poignant portrait by Velázquez, with charms attached to his skirts to try and ward off the sickness that killed him.) The fact that the King's reflection is faded - on opaque glass, rather than crisp like those mirrors in Flemish art - speaks for itself. The poignant power of this scenario is enhanced by the fact that - with Felipe Próspero as yet unborn - the succession had been settled in favour of Philip's illegitimate son.

This intimate but gently tragic aura of the painting is in part suggested by the initial hanging of *Las Meninas*, not in the public space that its size would suggest, but in a small private office in the summer quarters of the Alcázar palace called the *Cuarto Bajo de Verano*, where the King himself worked. As the usually lone viewer of the finished painting, and as sitter in the painting's 'off-stage' focal point, Philip IV would be the primary figure around whom the painting is constructed, both as senior member of the family portrayed, albeit in miniature at the back and in reflection, and subject of the canvas on which the artist in the painting works, target of his stare both in the scene depicted in the painting, and in reality as it hangs upon his office wall. But even this interpretation is ambiguous, even questionable: the angle of the mirror in which the royal couple are portrayed in reflection at the back of the scene may *not* actually correspond with the object of Velázquez's stare. This would make sense with reference to Velázquez's palpably erotic earlier painting of reclining Venus, lying with her back to the viewer, to whom Cupid holds a mirror in which her face is reflected. As Michael pointed out, the reflection feigns modesty by showing the face, rather than what it 'would reflect' according to the optical logic of its position and angle: 'a much lower part of the woman's body'.²¹ Velázquez may here be up to the same trick, though this time more subtle, baffling and complex, so that the King and Queen are present, but spectrally, illogically, mysteriously. And so that even the idea of a 'royal portrait', however ingenious, only constitutes part of the

answer.

Carminati suggests the possibility of a grander work in progress, depicting what we see in the painting. He posits: 'Let us suppose there was a large mirror - a device typically used for self-portraits - in the viewer's place (that is, where we are standing). The painter could have portrayed himself, the Infanta and her entourage, arranging the models beside him rather than in front of the canvas, in order to reproduce the whole composition reflected in the hypothetical mirror before him. What he is painting on his canvas would be what we see as we look at the painting now.' Then Carminati subverts his own intriguing idea by saying that 'according to the laws of geometry, the mirror in the background cannot possibly reflect what is outside the picture space but must necessarily reflect what is painted on the canvas in front of Velázquez'. But then again: 'there is something else that does not add up. The size of the canvas in front of Velázquez is enormous and almost coincides with the actual size of *Las Meninas* ... Not one individual or double portrait on such a large scale is known to exist in all the painting of the period.' And so the mystery and questions go round and round in a circle game until, Carminati concludes: 'we should to some extent accept the fundamental ambiguity of this composition - an ambiguity that was certainly deliberate on the part of its author' - and this is Michael's point of departure.²²

The painting remained in the possession of the royal family - narrowly escaping a fire - until 1819, when the Museo del Prado was opened. Here, it arrives not as *Las Meninas*, but as *El Cuadro de la Familia* of Philip IV, catalogue number 1174. The name *Las Meninas* appears for the first time in a Prado catalogue written by Pedro de Madrazo in 1843. Michael here traces some of its adventures within the museum itself, but not so much - as he intended to do it later - the painting's 'sanctification and nationalisation', as the historian Alisa Luxenberg calls the rise in status of this work in Spanish culture. Luxenberg traces (and Michael had hoped to explore) how, ironically, it was the interest and attentions of French Romantic, then Impressionist, enthusiasts which initially promoted *Las Meninas*, seeing in it a prescient herald of the revolution in art and representation they themselves advocated, as portrayed in one of Michael's favourite books, *L'Œuvre* ('The Masterpiece') by Émile Zola, about radical intellectual circles around Manet - influenced by Delacroix but forging the Impressionist school. In *Voyage en Espagne*, an early version of the kind of art-travel writing at which Michael was so adept, a famous Frenchman from the Manet circle, Théophile Gautier, wrote of his 'very important artistic pilgrimage' to see the painting.²³

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, *Las Meninas* was

already becoming the major attraction it remains, as visitors to Madrid blazed a trail for the kind of mass tourism of today which preoccupied Michael as much as its nemesis, the rarefied elitism of art history. And yet even then, the painting's mystery was established as part of its appeal: '*Las Meninas*, which the world looks at, and no one sees,' wrote P. L. Imbert in 1875.²⁴

Paul Stirton - Michael's best friend at the Courtauld, and future co-author of a number of books - has written on 'the cult of Velázquez' among British artists at the end of the nineteenth century, itself following in the slipstream of 'the *espagnolisme* that had gripped the French Romantics over the previous three decades'.²⁵ Crucially, one of the English painters hugely influenced by Velázquez was John Singer Sargent, who - along with Michael Jacobs's favourite critic, R. A. M. Stevenson - was a student of Carolus-Duran in Paris. Carolus-Duran, writes Stirton, 'reputedly hectoring his students with the rising trivium of "Velázquez, Velázquez, Velázquez, ceaselessly study Velázquez"'. Sargent, more than any other, had the technical facility to exploit this lesson.' Walter Sickert followed with the confidently simple verdict, of great import to Michael's book, that 'Velázquez was an Impressionist' - a judgement which, says Stirton, 'would later be echoed by virtually all the painters of the New English Art Club, the Glasgow School and the other groupings ... British artists interested in Velázquez, and by now many were, had to make the pilgrimage to Spain as an essential part of their training' - thus laying Michael's own trail.²⁶

Michael himself wrote about those who travelled after Sargent but also before him, including two artists from the Glasgow School 'who introduced to Britain their own brand of Impressionism and accordingly distanced themselves from the stuffy Royal Academy' (thereby clearly impressing Michael!). Joseph Crawhall and Arthur Melville travelled to Spain, where the latter 'developed a literally fatal passion for the place: he would return to Spain, mainly to Andalusia, every year until 1904, when he contracted typhoid and died at the age of forty-nine'.²⁷ Edward Burra, writes Michael, 'fell in love with Spain even before he got there' on the basis of paintings he saw in the Louvre, and was traumatised by Franco's Fascist insurgence against the country he came to love, as was - famously - Michael's tutor at the Courtauld, Anthony Blunt, who became a communist during those years. However, 'the one British artist of this period whose work was dramatically transformed by Spain', judges Michael, 'was David Bomberg, who was responsible for perhaps the most exciting landscapes ever painted of this country'.²⁸

The composition of *Las Meninas* is crucial to the mystery that compelled these pilgrims and, Michael believed, part of the key to

understanding it. The bewildering use of perspective towards multiple vanishing points will, for reasons important to Michael's ensuing text, be considered later. But for now: what an edifice and artifice it is! If the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin can deploy the musical term 'polyphony' to pertain to a novel, here is its visual expression: a breathtaking range of timbres, of intonations, tones and tonalities; of plane and of palette. It is a dramatically (as in stage-like) harmonious arrangement of figures, at once elegant, caught in a 'snapshot', but Caravaggesque in its dynamism. The two *Meninas* are balanced on each flank by the statuesque figures of the artist and Mari-Bárbola, his right arm and her left in nearly mirror-image of one another. The walls and ceiling of the room become a vast, enigmatic chamber of light, half-light, shade and space defined by a maze of horizontals and perpendiculars, emphasised by the paintings within the painting, and crossed by the diagonals of Velázquez's canvas.

Then there is Velázquez's technique. Michael writes elsewhere: 'Something should also be said about the artist's handling of paint, which from a distance and in reproduction seems meticulous, yet on close inspection is as bold as every other aspect of the picture: the glittering sheen of silvers and greys is achieved by the minimum of brushstrokes.'²⁹ An opacity of greys and blues defines the atmosphere: monumental and perhaps impervious - apart from the open door at the back, which will play its part in the story that ensues - but never turbid. The back of Velázquez's canvas complements but defies the blue-grey-green hegemony of the room's colouring with burnt sienna, while the floor and the quicksilver sheen of the ladies' dresses capture much of the light. Elsewhere, the greys merge into blues and greens, even yellows - that the light might catch them and work its magic. Indeed, the whole upper half of the painting becomes a chamber of half-light. Michael's friend Gijs van Hensbergen says: 'Something Michael loved about this picture was the painting of light and shade, and the volume of light in its top half. It's so Spanish: what he loved, and what I love, about Spanish interiors is that half-light, something you see and feel between the walls of the buildings and churches.'

Palomino sets the painting in 'the prince's chamber', which the architectural evidence, plus that of the pictures on the walls, would place in the *pieza principal* of the Alcázar. But Velázquez transforms the room into a mysterious composition of structure, arrangement, light, colour, choreography and human condition - synthesised, sculpted and composed into a mysterious whole so much greater than the sum of its many parts.

This mercurial, multi-layered quality in *Las Meninas* has drawn in and compelled artists, art historians, philosophers, poets and

viewers looking for reasons and themes beyond and behind what is portrayed, but failing, as Arikha acknowledges above, to produce a definitive 'explanation'.

And this mystery is Michael Jacobs's point of departure, as he here returns to consider the first painting with which he really fell irrevocably in love, on his first, defining adventure abroad.

Ed Vulliamy,
Bayswater/Glastonbury, September 2014

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