

A publisher's farewell to literature

# More books at the wake

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Enrique Vila-Matas

DUBLINESCA

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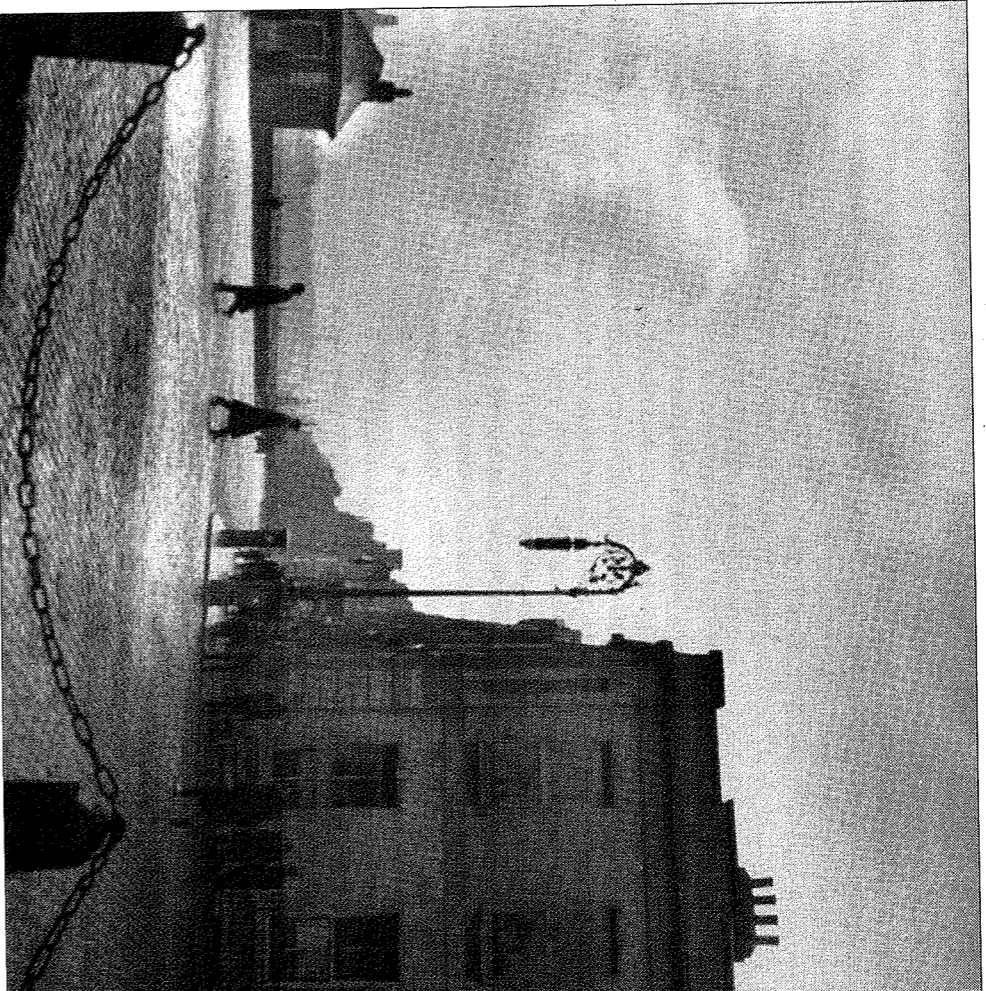
Over ninety years ago, James Joyce ushered in the heroic age of modernism with *Ulysses*. Literature, he believed, was going to sweep away all the old rhetorical codes, and place itself firmly at the centre of life once more, with the appetite and ability to convey everything going on at each and every moment.

For his part, the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas (b. 1948) has spent much of the past thirty-five years demonstrating in ironic but surprisingly moving works of fiction how completely that endeavour has failed. Literature has not only got us nowhere, it has nowhere to go itself. In a dozen novels, Vila-Matas has ploughed this narrow field and received great acclaim in his native country, as well as in France and Germany; the three books which have been translated into English have met with a more mixed reception.

Looking back in *Paris no se acaba nunca*, (Paris is Never-Ending), on his own beginnings as a writer in the early 1970s in Paris, he claimed to have been inspired by the figure of Ernest Hemingway (even going so far, we are told, as to take part in the annual Hemingway lookalike contest in Key West). Hemingway, the author who matched words with deeds, soon palled for this budding writer exiled from Franco's Spain, but his theory of the short story as an iceberg that leaves nine-tenths of its subject matter invisible, was a lasting lesson.

As he struggled to complete his first novel in his Paris attic, the Vila-Matas narrator was left perplexed by the advice of his landlady. She was the "experimental" writer Marguerite Duras who offered a forbidding list of nineteenth-century novel-writing strategies she thought he should take into account, from "1. Structural problems" to "13. Linguistic register". Perhaps his dismay at this daunting catalogue was the starting point for *La asesina ilustrada* (The Illustrated Assassin), in which a female author passes on a book that proves fatal to anyone who reads it. Vila-Matas now admits that, in his view, only the opening sentence of that book could be called his own, the rest being a mishmash of other writers who influenced him.

He took his examination of the impossibility of literature a step further in *Bartleby et Cie* (Bartleby and Co.). This short book, which Vila-Matas claimed recently had been in his head for fifteen years before he could write it, consists of a series of footnotes and digressions on real and imaginary authors who have taken to heart the declaration of



Dublin, 1926, by E. O. Hoppe

Herman Melville's character Bartleby, and have "preferred not to" write. Vila-Matas sees this as proof of the ultimate futility of writing: he has a character say, echoing Ludwig Wittgenstein, "the simple fact that millions of books exist shows conclusively that none contains the truth". Concluding that Joyce's experiment to try to capture the entirety of life had fizzled out by the mid-1930s when brutish reality re-asserted its primacy, he cites Robert Musil's *A Man Without Qualities* as the last true work of literature. Ever since then, Vila-Matas believes, fictional writers have been condemned to the kind of *ressassement*, so poignantly described in the work of another Irish writer, Samuel Beckett.

It is no surprise therefore that Vila-Matas's latest book takes him back to the home city of both Beckett and Joyce, although the work's title *Dublínescas* (Dublinesque) is a reference to the poem by Philip Larkin. As before, the novel is a fake autobiography, this time of a veteran Barcelona publisher, Samuel Riba. Inspired to become a literary editor by the great nineteenth-century novels of Flaubert, Stendhal and others, Riba has given up the struggle of trying to sell books after more than thirty years in the trade. We are offered two reasons for this: that Riba never discovered an overwhelming genius capable of justifying his belief in literature (a rebuke to overbearing editors); and, that the imbecile majority of

the reading public prefer to immerse themselves in the latest implausible Gothic shaggy-dog story rather than read anything truly new and exceptional (a blow aimed at the multimillion-selling *Shadow of the Wind* by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, and his imitators). Beyond this, Riba is weary of the stultifying provincialism of what is being offered as literature in Spain and France, and sees New York and Ireland as offering wider possibilities. There, perhaps, he could put into practice his theory of the five elements of what the "novel of the future" should contain: "intertextuality; links to high poetry; an awareness of a moral landscape in ruins; a predominance of style over plot; writing considered as a clock moving forward".

Another reason for giving up publishing is that Riba is convinced that he is witnessing the end of the Gutenberg era, with its "excessive fanaticism about literature", in the face of the challenge of the virtual age. He sees the dangers of the internet in his own life: his dependence on the computer has led his wife Celia to christen him her "beloved autistic", or *hikikomori*, one of the Japanese teenagers who live almost entirely in virtual space, shut off from the world and devoid of any feelings. Celia seeks to connect more fully with the world and the moment through Buddhism, but Riba has only the uncertain joys of reading.

Determined to give literature as he understands it a proper farewell, Riba gathers

together the few friends he has left and organizes a trip to the Irish capital for Bloomsday in order to hold a wake for the written word. The trip proves traumatic. Completely lost in the English-speaking world, Riba also finds it impossible to communicate with his friends, and is haunted by a nightmare he had had back in Barcelona. The last section of the novel shows him returning to Dublin a month later, this time on holiday with his wife Celia. And on this occasion, it seems as though it is not just the book that is doomed: Riba takes to drink again, convinced that Celia is going to walk out on him. Literature of any sort is no consolation now.

As in Vila-Matas's previous work, this fake autobiography ("an autobiography is also a fiction among many possible ones", he has already pointed out in *Paris no se acaba nunca*) consists largely of the protagonist's interior monologue, with brief dialogues, constant references to other writers, quotations that are the flotsam of a late twentieth-century European culture, images of others who drift in and out without ever really achieving consistency (like Joyce's man in a mackintosh), possible realities that exist only in the imagination.

English readers may view Vila-Matas as too self-absorbed, too self-referential in his choice of the pursuit of literature as the exclusive subject of his fiction. Modernism in fiction may be acceptable, but such post-modern games still seem too much of a Continental fashion. Yet Vila-Matas's obsession shows that the quest to create literature is a metonym for the ability to live a life that has some meaning, rather than being entirely absurd. His creations suffer because of their obsessions, and all risk ending up like Herman Melville's scrivener, locked away for their refusal to compromise with "normality". (The other favourite of Vila-Matas, the Swiss writer Robert Walser, spent much of his adult life in asylums.)

Above all, Vila-Matas is aware that the world of fiction is a dangerous one. Its distance from facts means that it cannot be trusted, that it is by nature suspect. As he points out, we are in the territory of Orson Welles's *F For Fake*, where we learn that "most of what has gone before" is true; but we cannot know for sure which parts are make-believe. Vila-Matas quotes the Greek philosopher Epimenedes: "Everything I write in the next sentence is false. Everything I wrote in the previous sentences is true". Literature's territory is the space created by this paradox, and it can be a very uncomfortable razor's edge on which to try to live.

It can however be extremely funny. One of Vila-Matas's great talents (learned from Laurence Sterne among others) is to make his digressions and inventions entirely absorbing, so that instead of getting a single narrative we are offered a hundred different ones in only a few pages. He also convinces us