



Books

Just Say No

I would prefer not to: A Spanish novelist praises profound denial

by Ben Ehrenreich

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Bartleby & Co. is a curious book. Its author, the much acclaimed but until now undertranslated Spaniard Enrique Vila-Matas, names his humpbacked and blindingly well-read narrator Marcelo, though you have to keep your nose to the spine to notice —by my count the name comes up only once, dropped in passing by an old unrequited crush. And if along the way Vila-Matas-qua-Marcelo mentions other less renowned Marcells (Schwob and Maniere), it seems more than likely that he had Duchamp in mind as a namesake. He hails the artist as a "first-rate trickster," and tricks get high praise in this odd and almost entirely text-based universe, as do confidence men (Melville's and otherwise), and dodgers and shirkers of every sort. *Bartleby & Co.* is after all a novel disguised as a diary disguised as a "book of footnotes commenting on an invisible text" about writers who do not write. Not imaginary, mind you, just invisible.

Vila-Matas's title, and the topic of Marcelo's compendium of footnotes, come of course from Melville's story "Bartleby the Scrivener," about a copyist in a Lower Manhattan law office who refuses to do anything, rejecting nearly every action requested of him with a soft but firm "I would prefer not to," embracing passivity and negation to the very last. (Book fetishists take note: Melville House has just released the original in a handsome stand-alone paperback.) Bartlebys, thus, are "beings inhabited by a profound denial of the world." Specifically, in this case, they are writers who prefer not to write—both those who give it up and those who "while possessing a very demanding literary conscience (or perhaps because of this) never manage to write" at all. Duchamp, by the by, stopped painting early on.

Poor Marcelo casts himself, not without some bitter glee, in the role of "literature's radical non-hero"—think of Gogol's tormented bureaucrats, Kafka's near-invisibles, Beckett's almost-lumps. ("AlmostWatt," he even calls himself, in almost-homage to the eponymous autistic of Beckett's second novel.) "I never had much luck with women. I have a pitiful hump, which I am resigned to," the book begins. Marcelo has but one friend, Juan, whom he can't stand and almost never calls. He feigns depression and takes sick leave from his "ghastly office" to steal some time to write. He is a reformed Bartleby himself, you see, or a reforming one, having written a "short novel on the impossibility of love" long ago, and then not another word for 25 years.

A self-effacing antihero, Marcelo is as much a copyist as the original Bartleby. He does little to narrate the events of his own life, but tells instead of other acolytes of the "literature of the No": their life stories, the plots of the books they sneaked in before they kicked the habit and fell in with Duchamp in the anti-faith that "language is just no damned good." There's Rimbaud of course, who stopped writing at 19, J.D. Salinger, and the even more mysterious B. Traven. There's the Mexican novelist Juan Rulfo, who blamed his 30-year silence on the death of his Uncle Celerino; the Swiss Robert Walser, who exchanged his desk and journal for a madhouse bunk; the Spanish poet Ferrer Lerín, who wrote "some very daring, rebellious poems" in his youth, but has "devoted the last thirty years to the systematic study of vultures," and enough other assorted literary luminaries (some perhaps fictional themselves) to fill a comp-lit curriculum for a trimester or two. And then there are those who never wrote, like Socrates and that "master of silence," God.

It would be comical to complain that such a work skimps on the expected novelistic pleasures (can you hear a chorus of Bartlebys cackling?), and *Bartleby & Co.* has its strange cerebral satisfactions. Its tensions derive not from the slender extra-textual narrative—Marcelo is anguished and alone, and grows more so—but from the very fact that it is written, that the narrator saw fit to break his lengthy silence, to write about not writing. And to write or not, in this context, denotes larger battles—to live or not, to accept or deny creation, to embrace despair or strive to somehow escape it. Who wins? Don't expect any resolution, or even a straight answer, but he did finish the book.

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