



Scholarly salvo against scourge of bad books

By BY JOHN BURNSIDE
BARTLEBY AND CO
Enrique Vila-Matas
Harvill, £12

READERS of Herman Melville will need no explanation of the title of this, the first, but hopefully not the last, of Enrique Vila-Matas's novels to appear in English. In Melville's story, Bartleby is a mysterious clerk who "when he is asked where he was born or given a job to do, or asked to reveal anything about himself, responds always by saying, 'I would prefer not to.'"

According to Marcelo, the narrator of *Bartleby and Co* - a hunchbacked clerk who once published "a short novel on the impossibility of love" but never followed up with the famously difficult second book - this refusal is symptomatic of a syndrome that has afflicted writers throughout the ages; men and women who either chose not to write at all, or gave up after a tantalising show of initial promise never to be heard from again.

In order to investigate this syndrome, Marcelo builds a catalogue of such writers, some of them familiar, such as Rimbaud or Salinger, others less so, and a few of them fictional to make matters interesting. What he discovers in the process is that refusal is an art in itself: "I remembered Albert Camus: 'What is a rebel? A man who says no.'" And not only an art, but a moral choice. As Che Guevara said: "Silence is argument carried on by other means."

Marcelo's book about "writers of the No" is ingeniously composed of "footnotes commenting on a text that is invisible, which does not mean it does not exist, since this phantom text could very well end up held in suspension in the literature of the next millennium". In so doing, of course, he completes his second book, and in the process comes to a difficult and beautiful conclusion.

"Already my voice is growing distant as it prepares to say it is going, going to try other places. I have only existed, the voice says, if talk of me can be talk of life. It says it is eclipsing itself, it is going, to end here would be perfect, but it wonders if this is desirable. And it answers itself that it is, that to finish here would be marvellous, perfect, whoever it is, wherever it is."

Never has the honest writer's position been so perfectly expressed: on the one hand, reports of the "death of the author" may have been exaggerated, but it is a condition of his art not only that he removes himself from the picture but also that he is the sole author of his disappearance.

What emerges from Vila-Matas's meditation on presence and absence, on the why of writing and the metaphysics of refusal, is that silence is not a simple choice, refusal not an easy option. The quality of the silence, the nature of the refusal, is at least as

important as the truth of the written word.

In both cases - the act of self-removal through writing, or the election of silence - the war is with bad books. The best opposition to bad writing is a good book - and *Bartleby and Co* is an excellent book, well-served by Jonathan Dunne's fine translation. It is a work of honesty and profound beauty to set against the "latest novelties" that erode the spirit of readers everywhere.

John Burnside's novels include *Living Nowhere*