

## I'd prefer not to

Enrique Vila-Matas' *Bartleby & Co* is a highly original, lucid and ludic non-novel, says Mark Sanderson

**Mark Sanderson**

**Saturday August 14, 2004**

**Bartleby & Co**

by Enrique Vila-Matas, translated by Jonathan Dunne  
178pp, Harvill, £12

John Buchan, author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, did not like footnotes: "I never see why one should put the jottings of one's laboratory at the bottom of the page." For writers such as Nicholson Baker or David Foster Wallace, meanwhile, the whimsical digressions at the bottom of the page can threaten to strangle the main narrative. Now Enrique Vila-Matas has gone one step further. Footnotes do not just festoon the text of *Bartleby & Co* - they are the text.

On the eve of the second millennium, a hunchbacked Spanish office worker, feigning depression, takes extended sick leave to write a book about those writers who one day decided to stop pushing the pen and to let their silence do the talking instead. His role-model refusenik is the clerk in Herman Melville's story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" who, when asked to do anything other than copy documents, replies: "I would prefer not to." The character's self-neglect can be taken to symbolise the neglect of Melville's work after *Moby-Dick*.

The "Bartleby syndrome", suggests our malingering guide, is a "labyrinthine theme which lacks a centre". The 86 footnotes to a text that does not exist are "fragments, chance finds, the sudden recollection of books, lives, texts or simply individual sentences that gradually enlarge the dimensions of the labyrinth".

The clew to this labyrinth is Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Letter from Lord Chandos", "pinnacle of the literature of the No", in which the aristocrat supposedly tells Sir Francis Bacon that he is not going to write any more because "the whole of vocabulary" is "too poor to express" the "sublime, moving quality" of even the most ordinary things: "a watering can, a rake left out in the fields, a dog lying in the sun". However, there are as many reasons not to write as there are writers - lack of inspiration, fear of failure, "the impossibility of producing superior art", the public's bad taste - and, "after all, the normal thing is to read".

Given the negativity of the subject, it is not surprising that the narrative is punctuated by suicide, the final full stop. Sébastien-Roch Nicolas Chamfort, for example, who stopped writing because he was "afraid to die without having lived", eventually chose to end it all during the Terror. The moralist "shot himself, breaking his nose and disgorging his right eye in the process. Still not dead, he returned to the attack, slitting his throat with a knife and cutting into his flesh. Bathed in blood, he stuck the knife into his chest and, after slashing his wrists and the back of his knees, he collapsed in a vast pool of blood."

As this quotation demonstrates, Vila-Matas can, when he wishes, provide the satisfactions of orthodox narratives with ease. Generally, though, he prefers not to, constructing daisy-chains of literary allusion instead. The 19th footnote, for example, mentions Franz Kafka, Rosa Montero, Bernardo Atxaga, Leopolda Maria Panero, Albert Camus, Elias Canetti, Claudio Magris and Anthony Burgess. Only the brainiest bookworm will not feel woefully illiterate - but then that is part of the game. The long shadow of Georges Perec and *OuLiPo* falls across this ultimate subtext (which, naturally enough, also features Captain Nemo). Vila-Matas has produced a postmodern paradox, something out of nothing, a positive out of a negative. His non-novel is highly original, both lucid and ludic.

• Mark Sanderson's memoir *Wrong Rooms* is published by Scribner.