

The echo chambers of Enrique Vila-Matas

## Repeat performance

The Uruguayan writer Mario Levrero describes dashing off a short story one day and then, on finishing it, realizing it doesn't belong to him. "This isn't mine, it can't be mine", he says, and begins phoning around all his friends who have even a tangential relationship to literature to ask if they remember writing it or telling him about it. No one does, but Levrero remains convinced the story isn't his. He then destroys the manuscript.

Simon Schneider, the protagonist of Enrique Vila-Matas's latest novel, *Esta bruma insensata* (This Senseless Haze), has the opposite problem. What causes him "genuine horror", he says, is discovering that something he has written belongs to him alone. Schneider is a collector of other people's words, driven by his "absolute necessity to absorb, to gather up all the phrases in the world" (my translation) and to store them in his archive. He works as a professional source of literary quotations, kept on retainer by a celebrated writer based in New York who also happens to be his brother. Rainer Bros, as this brother began calling himself when he left Barcelona for his reclusive, Pynchonesque existence in the United States, is the author of five "quickfire novels" famed for their innovative intertextual approach. Simon isn't sure whether he feels jealous of his brother's success or secretly proud to be behind it.

The narrative takes place over a few days at the end of October 2017, when Catalonia is "on the brink of collapse" after the independence referendum, declaration of independence, and street protests earlier in the month. Simon has developed a kind of rewriter's block when copying out a particular quotation, and sets off on a walk along the coast "in search of the lost phrase". That same day, he receives a brief, imperious email from his brother, announcing that he is returning to Barcelona for the first time in decades and wishes to see him. "I don't evolve, I travel", Vila-Matas quotes Fernando Pessoa as saying. The novel follows Simon as he travels along the coast and then into Barcelona to confront "the distant writer". This journey is enveloped in autumnal mist, and in the equally disorienting haze of interpretations and associations that billow around the protagonist as he goes.

I was there but I felt unable to say anything: I thought about what [my friend had] said and then I thought about it some more, after which I started to think all over again, to think about what I'd been thinking, what I'd been ruminating on at such length.

Elsewhere, in a Barcelona "where the crisis sticks to everything, impregnates everything" – though it has not quite yet been shaken to its core by an independence referendum – Mac is taking his first steps as a writer. Out of work, the wrong side of sixty and financially dependent on his wife, he is the protagonist of *Mac y su contratiempo* (2017), now published in Margaret Jull Costa and Sophie Hughes's

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Enrique Vila-Matas

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spirited, inventive translation. Mac is honing his writerly skills by keeping a diary, and he intends, when he feels suitably prepared, to rewrite and improve an early novel by his neighbour, the acclaimed author Ander Sánchez. "My vocation is as a modifier of things", he tells us. "A repeater of things, too." Repetition is at the heart of this novel – and, as Mac would have it, the very heart of life, and of literature. He approvingly quotes Alejandro Zambra's claim that writers "are the real repeaters", producing book after book without ever moving on to something else, like failed students repeating a school year over and over. Writers repeat when they write, readers repeat when they read, and even when Mac is doing neither of these things, "the mere fact of breathing, of course, meant I was repeating myself".

For Mac the repeater, as for Simon Schneider and his brother, authorship is a slippery notion. The novel Mac plans to rewrite is called "Walter's Problem". Its eponymous hero is a ventriloquist whose difficulty – "a very grave one for a person in his profession", though not one that would have kept Mario Levrero up at night – is that he only has one voice, "the voice that writers so yearn to find". He overcomes this "by splitting into as many voices as there are stories or slices of life" contained in the book. Each of these voices also parodies the voice of a past master of the short story form, such as Djuna Barnes, Ernest Hemingway, or Raymond Carver. Within the echo chamber of his neighbour's novel, Mac starts to find resonances that are alarmingly close to home – a chapter about his wife, for example – and wonders whether his "reading of the book is obliging [him] to actually live out certain scenes".

This is quintessential Vila-Matas terrain: we confront kaleidoscopic landscapes made of literature, where voices and stories and phrases are endlessly reflected – repeated and modified, quoted and archived – with no end or beginning in sight. When, in the hallucinatory finale of *Mac and His Problem*, our hero travels to "Arabia Felix" in search of the first ever story, he instead spends several days "recounting ... the most important events of my life, or – what amounts to the same thing – the stories I'd heard others tell and which, during my travels, I'd gradually appropriated". No less revealingly, while Simon and Bros are discussing how "non-fiction thinks it's copying the real when really it's just copying



the copy of a copy of a copy", a waitress approaches the table of two men who have just sat down nearby. "Same again", one man tells her; "I'll have what he's having", adds the second. "But you haven't ordered anything yet", the puzzled waitress replies.

If Vila-Matas is celebrated for these endlessly, recursively interwoven worlds, he is just as famous for the beguilingly flawed characters he sends in to navigate them. The tribulations of these men turn his novels from postmodern circus tricks into moving and deeply human dramas: in addition to exploring how literature behaves when it is placed centre-stage, they show us the frustrations, embarrassments, fears and passions of the people trying to make sense of it. As proud, insecure men on literary missions, financially precarious and struggling to maintain their dignity when faced with the "real" writers in their lives, Simon and Mac are vintage Vila-Matas protagonists. While these men roam around in search of meaning, their often comical exploits allow their creator to explore the pleasures and pitfalls of literary communication.

The frustrations and embarrassments, for Simon and Mac, often come from demeaning attempts at communication with the authors themselves. They may be among the closest readers of Bros and Sánchez but this does not translate into any profound mutual understanding in "real life". Simon suspects that Bros neither believes in nor fully comprehends the intertextual method employed in his books,

for example, and Bros communicates with him only in brusque, patronizing emails: "Dear slave ...". Meanwhile, when Mac eagerly asks Sánchez whether he named his ventriloquist after Walter Benjamin or Robert Walser, Sánchez's response is deflatingly prosaic: "I named him after Walter Marciano de Queirós, a Brazilian forward who played for Valencia". Like someone whose advances have been rebuffed by the object of their affections, it is Mac who feels silly here, not Sánchez.

With the writers apparently too gauche and blustering to appreciate their own work, the readers are left to their own devices, adrift in a sea of pure literature. Instead of leading back to their authors, the texts lead associatively outwards into other texts, and even beyond that, into their readers' lives. The border between writing and "reality" becomes increasingly porous, as Simon and Mac begin to find messages to themselves in the texts they read, and Simon even intuits the presence of a woman, Dorothy, who he thinks must be writing Bros's books for him – and who may even be Simon's soulmate. Both men wonder if they are paranoid. This is indeed a paranoid way of reading: combing books for connections and clues, suspecting characters of "hiding something" and phrases of ulterior motives. There is a fine line between reading and reading too much into things: is literature, we begin to wonder, all in our heads? This is where our two protagonists part company: for Mac, who finds that "excess in itself can feel like life", the boundless possibilities are almost to be celebrated; for the solitary Simon, however, the suspicion that the connections are illusory is a sadder and lonelier prospect.

In many ways, these novels are mirror images of one another. *Mac and His Problem*, which takes place during the hottest Barcelona summer for a hundred years, is bright, busy and bubbling with non sequiturs – one character, for example, "tells a rather weird story about a young man and a parrot travelling on an old French train in a carriage packed with murderers", and then we hear no more about it. *Esta bruma insensata*, meanwhile, is its misty, autumnal counterpart, full of gaps and fraying edges. The gaps seem to leave Vila-Matas with more room than usual to explore his protagonist's emotional state. The passages describing his isolation and grief after the recent death of his father are some of the most lyrical and beautifully crafted he has written. As Simon walks along the coast, he feels the presence of his father. He wonders if his father is:

still stuck in one of those mornings that come after death: stuck in the early-morning mist of one of those days ... that dawn full of hazy silhouettes on the horizon: full of shadows that seem to beckon us to guess who they belong to: vague, shifting figures, friendly because they look so familiar, figures emerging from infinity, the figures who accompanied us in life.

Both novels show Enrique Vila-Matas at the top of his game, but in *Esta bruma insensata* he ventures into rich, rewarding new territory.

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