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In the olden days, before creative-writing courses, a young man with a yen to be a novelist would head to Paris. Once there, he would stock up on Gauloises, head to Les Deux Magots and, with intense concentration, attempt to absorb osmotically whatever *genius loci* had proved so inspirational to Sartre & Co. Occasionally, a fine novel would be written; more often than not, our hero would learn that graft and talent, not hallowed streets, are the alpha and omega of becoming a writer. Enrique Vila-Matas, now the doyen of Hispanic authors, made such a pilgrimage in 1974 and his charming and wry new novel is the scarcely fictionalised account of his two years in the city, told by his more mature self in what he claims to be a lecture but is, in fact, 113 reminiscences that vary in length from a few pages to a few sentences.

Our narrator – let's call him, I don't know, Enrique – arrives intent on being hailed the new Hemingway. This is scarcely likely to happen since he is gauche, crippled with self-consciousness and wrenching out of himself with much anguish a very un-Hemingwayesque novel entitled *The Lettered Assassin*, a story he hopes will be so potent that its readers will die on completing it. (In a

JONATHAN BECKMAN

## Duras's Lodger

Never Any End to Paris  
By Enrique Vila-Matas  
(Translated by Anne McLean)  
(Harvill Secker 202pp £12.99)

recapitulation of this failure, *Never Any End to Paris* opens with the older Enrique being disqualified from a Hemingway lookalike competition, not even because he's wearing a false beard but because of his 'absolute lack of physical resemblance to Hemingway'.

Enrique's *éducation littéraire* is raised above the run-of-the-mill by his tenancy of Marguerite Duras's *chambre de bonne*, where previous occupants included Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille and briefly, while living low from the Gestapo, François Mitterrand. From his unsatisfactory conversations with Duras on the stairs – Enrique is convinced she speaks a 'superior' kind of French he can only half-understand – he obtains a set of principles for writing a novel: '1. Structure. 2. Unity and harmony. 3. Plot and story. 4. Time. 5. Textual effects. 6. Verisimilitude. 7. Narrative technique. 8. Characters.

Dialogue. 10. Setting(s). 11. Style. 12. Experience. 13. Linguistic register.' These seem unbearably cryptic to Enrique: 'Couldn't you tell me what a *linguistic register* is like?' he pleads with a friend.

As you might have surmised, cogitation takes precedence over action. Enrique bumbles around the city, spends afternoons in the cinema, reads the type of astringent writer favoured by cerebral *ingénus* (Perec, Laury, Amont, Unamuno), fails to write his novel, fails to chat up Isabelle Adjani at a party and visits Borges. This inconsequence does not matter in the slightest. Roberto Bolaño called Vila-Matas 'a writer who has no equal in the contemporary landscape of the Spanish novel'. Bolaño is being too modest but both writers share the most sought-after skill a writer can hope for: the ability to make the most gossamer material utterly compelling. The judgement with which Enrique's disappointments are ironised in recollection is breathtakingly accomplished. There's never any end to Paris, wrote Hemingway, but sadly *Never Any End to Paris* is only two hundred pages long. I was left satisfied, yet somehow wishing this captivating raconteur had continued indefinitely.