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*The Art of Fiction*

No. 247

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ENRIQUE  
VILA-MATAS

**T**he writing of Enrique Vila-Matas is marked by a dazzling array of quotation, plagiarism, frames, self-plagiarism, digressions and meta-digressions: an intense and witty textual delirium that has made him one of the most original and celebrated writers in the Spanish language. Born in Barcelona in 1948, he published his first novel—a single, sternly uninterrupted sentence—in 1973. Continuing his fidelity to the myth of the avant-garde writer, he then moved to Paris, living in a garret rented from Marguerite Duras, before returning to Barcelona, where he spent the next decade publishing novels, a story collection, and literary essays.

It was with his sixth book, however, *A Brief History of Portable Literature* (1985, translation 2015), that Vila-Matas transformed into a true

original. The book poses as a history of a secret society of twentieth-century artists and writers, including Duchamp, Walter Benjamin, Kafka, and others. Its reckless linking of real names to imaginary quotations and vice versa, its mingling of fiction with history, made him notorious—and represented a new moment in European fiction. Reality can only be apprehended through a comical, dazzling network of texts—that was the book's basic proposition, and its implications and complications are what Vila-Matas has continued to explore in wildly deconstructive novels like *Bartleby & Co.* (2000, 2007), *Montano's Malady* (2002, 2007), and *Never Any End to Paris* (2003, 2011), as well as in *critical fictions* that include *Chet Baker piensa en su arte* (Chet Baker thinks about his art) (2011), *The Illogic of Kassel* (2014, 2015), and *Marienbad électrique* (Electric Marienbad) (2015).

Vila-Matas has won many grand awards (the Premio Rómulo Gallegos, the Premio Herralde, the Premio Leteo, the Prix Médicis, among others), but in person he is modest and generous, always solicitous toward younger generations—I first met him a few years ago through our mutual friends Alejandro Zambra and Valeria Luiselli. He dresses with elegant reserve, a disguise for a mischievous, fantastical soul. We conducted this interview over two prolonged sessions in Barcelona last summer and fall, speaking in a mixture of French and Spanish while his agent, Mònica Martín, offered interpretive aid and sometimes joined in the conversation. This polyglot mixture was transcribed, edited, then retranslated into Spanish and rewritten by Vila-Matas before being definitively translated into English. Its multilingual, multilayered history seems an accurate analogue to Vila-Matas's polymorphous style.

According to the terms of Vila-Matas's thinking, the real can only fully acquire a luminous existence when inserted into a prior network of words—even, for instance, a conversation. Both sessions of our interview took place in the gardens of the Hotel Alma in Barcelona. Vila-Matas chose the location partly for its peacefulness—but really, he observed, because it was where he set the final exchanges of his most recent novel, *Esta bruma insensata* (This senseless haze) (2019). The two conversations, one fictional, one real, could therefore gradually infiltrate each other—this was his hope—and reach their own separate level of truth.

After our final session, before we headed off for coffee at the Europa Café on Diagonal, Vila-Matas invited me over to his apartment and showed me

his small writing room, the bookshelves of which were filled with works by his beloved authors—Beckett, Kafka, Tabucchi, Duras, Joyce, Walser, and friends like Rodrigo Fresán and Roberto Bolaño. That space, I began to think, was the visual form of Vila-Matas’s literary philosophy—fragile, futuristic, and infinitely valuable: an idea of writing as a singular, patient process that can absorb and create the hyper world outside it.

—*Adam Thirlwell*

#### ENRIQUE VILA-MATAS

I warn you—no one believes what I say. I recently gave an interview, and after it was published, the interviewer mentioned to someone that he got the impression everything I told him was made up. I was surprised, because anyone who knows me knows I hate lying, but also because I’ve always thought that the history of literature is missing a chapter, the one that would tell the epic story of all those writers—from Cervantes to Kafka and Beckett—who fought heroically against any form of imposture. And I do mean fought. A plainly paradoxical sort of battle, given that its chief combatants were writers with their heads immersed in the world of fiction, and yet out of that battle or tension emerged the truest—and as such, to my mind the most interesting—pages in the history of literature, pages born out of the tension produced whenever fiction tries to approximate that which seems, a priori, the furthest possible thing from it, the truth. I don’t know, but perhaps what confused that interviewer was my “way of saying things.” Could that be it? I inadvertently lend an air of implausibility to things that really have taken place.

#### INTERVIEWER

Maybe it’s because you suffer from the malady of things happening to you that don’t happen to anyone else. Like the night you took a taxi and the driver said, Good evening, Doctor Pasavento, as if you were a character from your own novel. When I tell people that story no one ever believes me, but I was there! And you reacted as if it were perfectly normal.

VILA-MATAS

Yes, it was normal, as if at that moment I believed that the whole of Barcelona read my books. In those days I was always going out and I would take taxis from one end of the city to the other and chat with the drivers, and I think all those taxi drivers, at some point, listened to me talk about my books and—as unlikely and amusing as this sounds today—about whatever technical problems I happened to be having with them. I'd be crossing Barcelona in the middle of the night talking about Cyril Connolly!

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever worry that the true and what seems to be true don't always coincide?

VILA-MATAS

Yes, but it took me a long time to see there was a problem or really consider what it meant. It first dawned on me in 1988 when I published *Una casa para siempre* (A home forever)—incidentally *Mac's Problem* (2017, 2019) is the remake of this novel. In that novel from my early writing days—the unraveling, oblique biography of a ventriloquist—I write about a woman with a particular obsession for buying bread in every town and city she passes through on her travels. In real life, I'd visited various cities of Poland, Egypt, and Greece with that woman, and in every one she'd made a point of buying some bread, even if she had no intention of eating it. I was quite mystified by this hobby of hers, and she never did enlighten me. So, in *Una casa para siempre*, it occurred to me to include a woman character—the narrator's mother—who collects bread from all the cities she visits. And, well, when the book was published, the eminent literary critic for *El País* wrote that I was a promising young writer but obviously suffered from an "overactive imagination," as demonstrated by "the implausible story of the bread collector." That critic has since died, but when he was alive I used to keep an eye out for him at bookish parties and receptions in order to explain that story really had happened to me and even disclose to him that funny collector's name. [*Laughs*]

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if this malady of yours is linked to something else that's always



Barcelona, ca. 1953.

struck me. I get the impression that you hide behind your texts. For example, I have no idea about your childhood, where you grew up.

#### VILA-MATAS

My childhood was entirely without conflict, a gray and happy childhood in a no less gray Barcelona, so there isn't much to tell. Perhaps that explains why I've worked very little on the theme of childhood in my novels. Just the other day I read something in Ricardo Piglia's *Crítica y ficción* (Criticism and fiction) that seems connected to what we're talking about. There was a sentence, something like: "I really like the first years of my diary because in them I grapple with the total vacuum: nothing happens, nothing ever happens in reality." I can't help Piglia's words taking me back to the days when I had nothing to say and no stories to tell. They were tough, those early years of youth, and then everything became worse, awful, if you did find a story to tell, because you knew you still wouldn't end up writing it, not with that

*desgraciado* Heidegger's words ringing in your ear, which I remember George Steiner quoting—"When you're too stupid to have something to say, you tell a story!"

INTERVIEWER

Could you say more about your childhood? What were your parents like? Were they Catalan?

VILA-MATAS

They were both Catalan, from Barcelona's middle-class bourgeoisie. And within the family—with them, my sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents—we spoke exclusively in Catalan. I spoke Castilian in school and only with a select group of classmates.

I've spoken about this somewhere before. I was born nine years after the end of the civil war, a brutal conflict that was never discussed but which you could still feel in the air. No one ever brought up the civil war, except when we kids didn't want to eat, because then, inevitably, our parents would remind us of the wartime hunger they had endured. The impression any child got in those days was that, not very long before, something terrifying and huge had happened—which reinforced the sense that I had nothing to say, because nothing ever happened to me and instead everything pointed toward something very disturbing having happened, about which no one talked.

All this reminds me of a line by Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, a line I've mulled over for years. "The days when they told stories, properly told stories, must have been before my time. I never heard anyone tell a story."

INTERVIEWER

You say you worked very little on the theme of childhood, but there's that text called "La Calle Rimbaud" (Rimbaud Street) (1994) ...

VILA-MATAS

I wrote that because my friend Mercedes Monmany commissioned me, back in the nineties, to be part of an interesting volume she was putting together about the childhoods of some Spanish writers from my generation. I'd never undertaken the theme of childhood and at first I didn't know what to do, but



out of that came “La Calle Rimbaud,” an essay about the journey between my house on the Calle Rosellón and the Maristes La Immaculada school just off the Passeig de Sant Joan. A five-minute journey, one I’d made each way four times a day for fourteen years. I must have walked it fifteen thousand times!

INTERVIEWER

You once compared that childhood journey to Kafka’s condensed world.

VILA-MATAS

Kafka never strayed far from his personal Passeig de Sant Joan. He barely strayed from the reduced radius of Prague’s Old Town. They say that once, standing at a window of his house, looking out onto the main square of his city, he said to a friend while drawing three circles on the glass, “That’s where my school was, that building there is the university, and a little farther to the left is my office.” He paused, then added, “My whole life contained in the space of these three circles.” It’s the same for me. The Passeig de Sant Joan has become mythic territory in my literature over the years. That journey contained and still contains everything. Whenever I strayed from its path and walk south, although the city certainly did extend beyond the “territory of my childhood,” I would have the feeling I was walking in a barren place, a place with no history. In *Doctor Pasavento* (2005), for example, I invented a parallel world for that Passeig, the Bronx. And “my” Doctor Pasavento had two childhoods, one in Barcelona and the other in New York.

INTERVIEWER

I often think that if only our memories were more expansive, we could understand the complexity of things more easily. But for that journey between your home and school, memory functions very well! It keeps expanding infinitely.

VILA-MATAS

Yes, everything was there on the Passeig de Sant Joan. For example, the paving stones that my friend’s grandma smashed into when she threw herself from a fifth-floor window. She landed not far from the barbershop my mother made me visit twice a week—her way of keeping me out of trouble for a few minutes while she got on with her errands. And on the Passeig there was—and still is, of course—a kind of castle, the classic childhood fantasy, although



it wasn't actually a castle, or was only in my child's imagination, rather the Palau Macaya, by Puig i Cadafalch, which appeared vacant but was in fact inhabited by deaf children who were also, it seemed, orphans, and whom I discovered one day outside the palace. I was completely astounded by their signing—it was the first time I'd ever seen it. I was also astounded that those young people, who were around my age, didn't have parents and were the secret inhabitants of that strange building.

The Passeig was also the location for my initiation into sex—the young nurse whom I fell for, probably because of her uniform, beneath which I could only picture bare flesh—and into politics as well, in the form of my daily encounter with the humble Jewish storekeeper and his wife who sold magazines and comics, and who would occasionally talk about his dark past, a past it took me some time to piece together, ignorant as I was of the Nazis' barbaric history. In my memory, his store resembles Bruno Schulz's "cinnamon shops." Today, that mysterious and dingy place, which seemed like a dark, central European enclave of Mediterranean Barcelona, has become a vulgar and brightly lit bar.

The Passeig also boasted a movie theater. Cine Chile. A neighborhood theater that only showed two movies at any given time, and only those that had been screened a month before at the bigger theaters downtown.

#### INTERVIEWER

You loved the cinema?

#### VILA-MATAS

Even more than the cinema, I loved the movie stills on display in three glass cases in the Chile theater foyer, replaced every Monday—invariably the program was weekly. In the first vitrine would be images from the two movies showing that week. In the second, images from the two movies that would screen the following week. And finally, in the third vitrine, you would find—alongside a magical sign that read *COMING SOON*—the never-before-seen stills from the movies that, as soon as we reached the week's end, would be moved across to the second vitrine. The *COMING SOON* vitrine gave me a real thrill each Monday because, after what were always interminable Sundays, it represented the one novelty along the monotonous route from my house to school.

INTERVIEWER

Your relationship with cinema persisted, didn't it?

VILA-MATAS

Yes. In the seventies, I went to the movies twice a day. I was a big fan of the kind of cinema being made at that time. And in fact, on my twentieth birthday, in March 1968, I began working for a magazine in Barcelona called *Fotogramas*, which was the very symbol of the “in” scene, one of the most “modern” publications in Spain during Franco's dictatorship. I mainly watched what people used to call underground movies, and at the magazine I became an expert on that particular kind of cinema. Philippe Garrel and his actor Pierre Clémenti were my heroes. I wanted to be like them, above all physically. Indeed, as far as directors went I was more interested in Garrel than Godard—I felt a stronger connection to his work.

It was during that time that I discovered the freedom of auteur cinema. Little did I know, but the influence of this kind of free cinema from the seventies was going to be pivotal to my future writing. I remember going to see *Last Year at Marienbad* twenty-five times, basically because I didn't get it and kept wondering if perhaps I just lacked the intelligence to get what all the hype was about.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see any link, formally, between literature and cinema? There's a moment in one of your essays where you talk about Godard and his love of inserting quotations into his works . . . Is that something you borrowed from him? Does it function the same way—if Godard uses a quotation in a film and you insert a quotation in a novel, is the montage the same?

VILA-MATAS

I'd say the two things are connected, I suppose they must be. I watched all of those Godard movies, interrupted by silent-movie posters bearing eloquent literary quotes, and later, when writing, I wanted somehow to do the same. The ultimate decision to work with quotations from other authors came when Susan Sontag, in her 1985 prologue to *Urban Voodoo* by Edgardo Cozarinsky, praised “his lavish use of quotations in the form of epigraphs,” which reminded her of “the quotation-strewn films of Godard.” I think I



Vila-Matas (fourth from left) with friends, Mallorca, 1980.  
“The only prospect of ever stopping writing would be if I immersed myself in life.”

took Sontag’s words as a kind of assurance that it was by no means abnormal, that *ansia* I felt to quote others.

#### INTERVIEWER

*Ansia?*

#### VILA-MATAS

Yes. Anxiousness. A need, I think, to find some vestige of culture in any old frivolity. I watched *Ad Astra*, for example, a few days ago . . . I couldn’t help but compare that space movie to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Brad Pitt’s character’s quest to find his father, lost somewhere in outer space—a search around which the whole movie is structured, just as my latest novel, *Esta bruma insensata*, is structured around a similar search and, incidentally, has its final scenes, a dialogue between two brothers, precisely in the bar of this garden where we’re sitting now—is similar to Conrad’s novel, in which everyone is always talking about Kurtz but Kurtz himself doesn’t appear until the end, and only to utter four stupid words. “The horror! The horror!”

But anyway, how did I get onto this? I’m sure there’s a perfectly good reason, but it’s escaping me. [*Laughs*]

INTERVIEWER

Why *are* we talking about this?! Ah, yes, you were talking about relating everything to everything else. But to return to your beginnings, there you were, watching two films a day . . .

VILA-MATAS

And then a book came along that changed my life—*Locus Solus*, by Raymond Roussel. I discovered that it was possible to write differently from how people in my country had told me one must write . . . It was then that I really started getting into literature. I felt I could see clearly what I'd already glimpsed in Cervantes—that madness, risk, and wisdom could go together.

INTERVIEWER

Where did you study? And even, what did you study?

VILA-MATAS

In the mornings I studied for my law degree, in those days an all-but-inevitable choice for the offspring of Barcelona's middle class, and in the afternoons for a journalism degree, which I found more interesting than memorizing laws I didn't even agree with.

INTERVIEWER

Who were you reading back then? What did the literary landscape look like?

VILA-MATAS

I read the Spanish poets of the so-called Generation of '27—Luis Cernuda, Federico García Lorca, Pedro Salinas—and at that point I had just dipped my feet into narrative prose, but only to read some Juan Benet, a difficult, Faulknerian Spanish novelist.

INTERVIEWER

Am I right that you did your military service in Africa?

VILA-MATAS

Yes, in North Africa. My military service was a lot like *Morocco*, that terrific Josef von Sternberg movie. Or at least I liked to think it was like *Morocco* so

as not to lose all hope, stuck on that dusty base on the edge of the desert for a year. I preferred to imagine I was living the life of Gary Cooper's character, and in the evenings I would stop at all the Arabian coffee shops I came across, always imagining I was being pursued by Marlene Dietrich.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you then?

VILA-MATAS

I turned twenty-three in Africa. And it was there, incidentally, that I wrote my first book, *Mujer en el espejo contemplando el paisaje* (Woman in the mirror contemplating the landscape) (1973). A book that was actually just one sentence, without any punctuation. If you tried to read it, you quickly realized that the book itself literally stopped you from breathing. I mean, you could suffocate. A fairly aggressive avant-garde detail, this absence of punctuation, don't you think? I wrote the book hiding out in a military convenience store where I worked as a clerk in the mornings and, in the afternoons, on the major's orders, I did the bookkeeping. In the process, also on his orders, I was to work out who was stealing the store whiskey supply. In the end I discovered that the one draining that establishment was the major himself.

Whenever I wasn't working, I would sit and write that first novel, which I had begun as a way to avoid wasting too much time during those army days, but never with the intention of publishing it. And yet when I returned to Barcelona, a friend sent it to Tusquets, the independent publishing house that Beatriz de Moura had recently set up, and she insisted on publishing it. I cried, I didn't want to, because all I wanted was to be a movie director. Well now, said Beatriz, clearly made uncomfortable by my outburst, precisely because you're crying like that, I'm definitely going to do it.

As you can see, for me publication was a form of punishment.

INTERVIEWER

You once told me that, as well as publishing your first book, on your return to Barcelona and the magazine *Fotogramas* you fabricated several interviews, including one with Marlon Brando.

VILA-MATAS

Unbeknownst to Elisenda Nadal, the director of *Fotogramas*, it's true, I did make up interviews with Marlon Brando—just terrible, the things I had him say—Rudolf Nureyev, Patricia Highsmith, Anthony Burgess, and others besides. I couldn't speak English and I was afraid Elisenda would sack me when she found out I couldn't even conduct those interviews, let alone translate them—it was my first job—so I decided to just make them up. I began with Marlon Brando and, being young, I had the nerve to make him say these surreal things, like, for example, that he hated hippies because “they only knew how to sleep in the tall grass.”

INTERVIEWER

Do you still recognize yourself in that first novel you wrote?

VILA-MATAS

Yes, because it doesn't traduce who I am. But I recognize myself far more in my second book, *La asesina ilustrada* (The enlightened murderess) (1977). Because *La asesina ilustrada* is a tiny taster—it's a very short book—of what I would go on to produce in the following years. It is also a novella with a strong poetic undercurrent, one that I haven't lost interest in over time. I wrote it in Paris, in Marguerite Duras's *chambre de bonne*, and while it really is a very short work, it took me no less than two years to write—not because I couldn't get the words down on the page, but because it took me so long to work out the murder plot. Although it's also true that I didn't know quite how to tell the story, because up until then I'd only ever read poetry and the works by Juan Benet I mentioned earlier. To put it simply, I had no idea how to narrate, and I wasn't really interested in novels. As a result, my two first books have a strong poetic undercurrent and very little, if any, novelistic force.

INTERVIEWER

I often think that true novelists hate novels and prefer poetry.

VILA-MATAS

Quite possibly. Without a strong connection to poetry, for me the novel doesn't exist.

INTERVIEWER

You've never published poems, though.

VILA-MATAS

No! Because I wrote poetry only until I was sixteen. I remember one title in particular that had airs of a Bob Dylan song. It was called—and this is entirely illustrative of my state of mind in those days—“Juventud a la intemperie” (Youth out in the elements).

INTERVIEWER

So what, for you, is this connection between poetry and the novel? A quality of vision?

VILA-MATAS

Probably. That quality comes from some writers' facility for what we might call perception, the art of perceiving what's going to happen. It's a skill, an art, that we see very acutely in Kafka, for example ... Literature is a mirror with the capacity, like some clocks, to run ahead of time. But we mustn't mistake perception for prophecy itself. Kafka loved that work by Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, with its assessment of how stupidity will spread, unstoppable, in the Western world. But Kafka went one step further than the rest. He went beyond his own sources of inspiration in that, unlike Flaubert, he described the very heart of the problem, the situation of total impossibility, of impotence, that the individual faces before the devastating machine of power, bureaucracy, political systems.

INTERVIEWER

It seems to me that the novelists we both love don't so much relate events as explore an image. When I think about Kafka, there's always this idea of a poetic situation he wants to explore or scrutinize.

VILA-MATAS

The kind of writer I like best is the one who appears to have taken the advice Barthes gave to a critic friend to renounce false objectivity and “join literature no longer as ‘object’ of analysis but as activity of writing.” In other words, the kind of writer I like best is the one who has, at some stage, been a critic, and





With Salvador Dalí, Cadaqués, 1978.

who at a certain point realizes that if he really wanted to honor literature he must immediately himself become a writer—step inside the bullring and prolong, by other means, what was always at stake in literature.

INTERVIEWER

And who could be defined as one of the “explorers of the abyss.”

VILA-MATAS

Well, yes, because the writers I love tend to be professional explorers of the abyss who have an inclination to dissect things, to reinvent themselves in lengthy digressions that cover all manner of seemingly anodyne details that just might give us the clue to something that we cannot see—perhaps for lack

of light—but that exists at the center of a “reality” that, in my opinion, is yet to be constructed. There is a Kafka aphorism, from one of the Zürau notebooks, that has become the motto for my own writing. “We are instructed to do the negative; the positive is already within us.” In *Esta bruma insensata* I recount the life of a secondary figure in literature, and I tell it like a catastrophe in slow motion, with everything suspended, like “bullet time” in *The Matrix*. Simon Schneider is definitely infiltrated or contaminated by parallel dimensions. The whole novel seems to speak to the dominance of the interior world over reality, which takes place somewhere else, in negative territory . . . We know about the positive, that’s been done to death. But I’ve found plenty of work to be done on the negative.

INTERVIEWER

That reminds me, before going to Africa you made two avant-garde, Daliesque short films, in Cadaqués . . .

VILA-MATAS

The first was called *Todos los jóvenes tristes* (All the sad young things) and its whereabouts are unknown. It was based on a story by Ray Bradbury, the story of two fishermen who find a mermaid and don’t want her to go back to sea. The other was *Fin de verano* (Summer’s end). It was inspired by Pasolini’s *Teorema* and told the story of the meticulous destruction of a bourgeois family by a femme fatale.

INTERVIEWER

And that was the end of your career as a filmmaker?

VILA-MATAS

Yes. And, at the same time, the start of my career as a writer, because a few days after the film premiered, I had to leave for Africa, where I began writing the short novel that, after its publication, gave me the ridiculous idea that I was a writer, and as such led me to Paris, where I would try to emulate Hemingway’s life there, the life he describes in *A Moveable Feast*.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know anyone in Paris?

VILA-MATAS

I knew Adolfo Arrieta, a friend of Marguerite Duras's, after meeting him in Madrid. Almost as soon as I arrived I got in on the underground movies he was shooting around the Saint-Germain quarter. It was a happy encounter, since Arrieta made the kind of cinema I would have liked to make, so it reassured me to know that someone was making it on my behalf. He was a walking camera. Today that is less extraordinary, because everyone goes around with their cell phone filming everything. But in those days, in 1974, it was a radical cinematographic proposition. In my mind, by filming everything Arrieta was cinema itself, and life was like a feature film of varying lengths. To accompany Arrieta on his walks through Paris was to constantly make movies.

INTERVIEWER

In *Never Any End to Paris*, you recount your time in the city and the writing of what became your second novel. Do you still feel a kinship with that portrait of a young artist in Paris, in Marguerite Duras's garret? Or would you now disown him and his concerns?

VILA-MATAS

I fully recognize myself in it! Today I know that the best thing about that whole experience was getting to know Duras. I arrived in Paris tired of "normal people," and tired, too, of all the prim, proper writers that proliferated at the time—not to mention these days, today there are even more. In Paris I confirmed that the writers who appealed to me were those like Duras, the kind who don't appear on school honors plaques and who are divisive, distinctly unedifying, full of defects, but show immense talent. I think that really terrible side of Duras—she was spectacularly brutal—had a great influence on me.

INTERVIEWER

Brutal?

VILA-MATAS

Brutal because her obsession with writing sprang from a genuine belief that she could transcend the words and reach another—inexpressible—reality. And in order to reach it she was prepared to do anything. She was, frankly,

scary. To put it another way, she was a writer on a mission. If I remember correctly, she described this process of reaching “the inexpressible” as “piercing the black shadow,” an “interior” shadow. I also remember that, given her belief that absolutely everybody possesses an inner shadow, she found it strange that not everybody wrote.

INTERVIEWER

You’ve said somewhere that you used to really enjoy acting, cross-dressing, and so on . . .

VILA-MATAS

My transformation into Marlene Dietrich, singing like she did in her final phase—barely moving, like an effigy—was a roaring success. In fact, I’ve only truly known success, what we call success, impersonating Dietrich in Arrieta’s hotel room. People would flock from all over the city to see me. I was really quite amazed to discover that you don’t have to move much to have success like that, such inordinate success.

INTERVIEWER

I remember you showing me photos of magnificent poses. Can you say a little more about this love for transformation, theater, gender deconstruction?

VILA-MATAS

I enjoy creating new realities. In that regard I haven’t changed. And I enjoy becoming another, male or female, living lives different from the only one it’s supposed I’ll get to live.

INTERVIEWER

Literature creates reality.

VILA-MATAS

It’s true. For me the most appealing thing about literature is observing how it can destabilize our existence, pushing the question of representation and language out in front. That is literature’s most thrilling aspect. Because language doesn’t reproduce reality, rather makes and unmakes it from an unappealable subjectivity, which drags its own political and aesthetic baggage with it. I think

this has been clear since the second volume of the *Quixote* was written. Plenty of intelligent people have told me that since *Bartleby & Co.* what I've been writing is a sort of automythography, something similar—notwithstanding the obvious insurmountable distances—to the metaliterary atmosphere of Part 2 of the *Quixote*.

INTERVIEWER

And one could argue that, without Part 2, there would be no history of the novel.

VILA-MATAS

Absolutely, there wouldn't. I couldn't agree more, and I'm really starting to think that you and I are quite alike.

INTERVIEWER

Valeria Luiselli once told me that there are two Latin American authors who aren't from Latin America—you and me.

VILA-MATAS

It's a very shrewd observation, I think, the proof being our shared admiration for the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, who without doubt is most remembered in Latin America—maybe because, as Ricardo Piglia said, he was really “an Argentine writer.”

INTERVIEWER

How did you first encounter our Latin American tradition? You said you discovered Borges quite late, for example.

VILA-MATAS

At one point I planned to write a book about my relationship with Latin America, which would have answered your question. It all began when I read Bioy Casares and Borges, who blew me away. Incidentally, in my mind I saw them as two classic writers from the sixteenth century, in the sense that I never imagined them as being alive. I never imagined that I would end up having a friendship with Bioy. So that book I didn't write, but that would have answered your question, would have begun with me reading those two great Argentine

writers, followed by a decisive scene, the foundational scene of my connection to Latin American literature, the day of my first encounter with Sergio Pitol in Barcelona, around 1970. He was the first writer who paid any real attention to what I wrote, to my first babblings, and he gave me the confidence to stick at it. And whom should he have translated into Spanish but Gombrowicz himself. After a while, through my friendship with Pitol I was invited to visit Mexico, a country that has left a greater impression on me than any other.

INTERVIEWER

Which works do you love most by Pitol? *The Art of Flight*?

VILA-MATAS

*The Art of Flight* is the most important. But I really love a quartet of stories he wrote in Russia, *Nocturno de Bujara* (Bukhara nocturne), and the short novel *The Journey*, which is a mini masterpiece. In all these marvelous books there is a real need to travel and mix cultures, which is what he praises above all in Antonio Tabucchi when he says the Italian belongs to that group of admirable writers who, despite not having been born in bilingual or notably border regions, feel a personal calling to embrace different languages. The works of such writers, Pitol says, are both bridge and meeting point, and they consecrate the nuptial act of two or more cultures. Pitol put Tabucchi in that group, which also included Borges, Pessoa, and Larbaud.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a link here to Gombrowicz again, and other writers, like Musil—in their *mestizaje de géneros*, their blend of genres, of fiction and essay? Something that also explains the shared love among these writers of the journal as a form.

VILA-MATAS

There is a link there, yes. Undeniably. Few writers have combined fiction and essay better than Pitol. He was my maestro. Whenever I said that, he'd smile, as if he didn't believe me. [*Laughs*]

INTERVIEWER

And Bolaño? I feel like Bolaño represents another major Latin American encounter for you. How did you meet him? Was it here in Barcelona?



Receiving the FIL Literature Prize in Romance Languages at the Guadalajara Book Fair, 2015.

#### VILA-MATAS

In Blanes. Paula, my wife, a literature teacher, had recently started a job in that town on the Costa Brava. One day she said, There's a Chilean writer in Blanes. And I said, Okay, right. A Chilean. Is that all? Yes, that was all. But it was none other than Bolaño. We met him on November 21, 1996, in Bar Novo, which I remember as a nondescript, drab sort of place. I'd gone for an orange juice with Paula and had just ordered when he walked in.

Meeting Bolaño was key for me. There was something that really united us and that I didn't find easily with other writers, a passion for literature. He was also a great help to me at a critical literary moment, because I was writing *El viaje vertical* (The vertical voyage) (1999) and I was convinced that nothing special happened in the novel, and he wanted to hear the plot and when I told him he said I was mad, that lots of things happened in the novel. With those words I think he spurred me on to keep writing for the rest of my life. A year after that conversation, I began to write *Bartleby & Co.*, a book written under a rare kind of inspiration.



INTERVIEWER

You once said that *The Savage Detectives* showed you a new way of writing. Could you be more precise about that? In its composition?

VILA-MATAS

If I'm honest I can't overlook the fact that I hotly challenged Bolaño over the structure of *The Savage Detectives*. He was furious, but ultimately it was an argument that reinforced our friendship and thanks to which I discovered that he didn't want to retouch anything in the book at all. It also made me see that every last detail of the novel had been deliberated and that nothing was there by accident. The conviction with which he told me all this—he knew every word he'd written—greatly impressed me.

These days, when I look back on that disagreement, I realize that what Bolaño was really trying to tell me was that he knew exactly what he was doing and that he'd spent years in Blanes thinking about and writing that book. He'd also had problems with his liver for years, although no one really believed it, and certainly not that he would die so soon. But he was fully aware that he didn't have much time left and perhaps that explains why he wrote with such intensity in the final years.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk a little about your own intensity. You once wrote that you could summarize your work as a series of reflections on the art of writing. This concept, I think, is very visible in your way of incorporating quotes from other texts in your writing, as well as the names of other authors, and even characters from other texts. It becomes most noticeable in *A Brief History of Portable Literature*, but I kind of sense it in your previous works.

VILA-MATAS

It was already there, yes, but only sketched out, muttered. Where it appears for the first time in any kind of decisive way is in *A Brief History*.

INTERVIEWER

It's as if *A Brief History*, written in 1985, was your second first work—the first one where you play with real names.

VILA-MATAS

It caught people's attention that the characters of that "radical fiction"—that's what they called the novel in Mexico, and it surprised me because I'd believed every word I'd written—were familiar figures like Duchamp, Dalí, Picabia, Scott Fitzgerald, Walter Benjamin, et cetera. In Spain, especially, it surprised people because it seems it was unlike anything they were used to. Back then, Barcelona was European and Madrid was very provincial. When I think about it, what I wrote wasn't so unusual—after all, I'd very much had in mind the experiences of other writers doing the same. Like the extraordinary Peter Handke at the end of *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, in which a real person, John Ford, appears and has a conversation with the book's protagonists—a beautiful episode that had fiction and reality flirt in a way that was entirely new to me. I found Ford's way of speaking just brilliant. He spoke in the plural, like so many Americans. When Judith asks Ford if he dreams a lot, Ford replies, "We hardly dream at all any more. And when we do have a dream, we forget it. We talk about everything, so there's nothing left to dream about."

INTERVIEWER

Another aspect of the same game of yours is that you've also used real quotes and attributed them to different writers or characters.

VILA-MATAS

That began in *A Brief History*, a book written in a kind of unbroken euphoria that I still can't explain today.

INTERVIEWER

But there's something else in all this that interests me, something to do with an idea of literature and the anonymous, or the depersonalized. There's that line you love by Satie, "*Je m'appelle Erik Satie comme tout le monde.*" I think what interests me is that you often use an I who is writing, a narrator who is you and not you, simultaneously, because it's an I that is also a collage of sentences by other writers. And when you use a person's real name, too, it's as if the name has been emptied out in some way.

All this reminds me of a moment in your Caracas speech, in 2001, accepting the Premio Rómulo Gallegos, where you argue that literature exists beyond its writers.

VILA-MATAS

We see this, for example, in Borges. Literature that loses itself to anonymity, literature that openly recognizes that originality doesn't exist in any form. Borges believed that writing is no different from transcribing and that all writers are essentially scribes. That literature is a great palimpsest, a mosaic of quotes in which authors and works are formed out of the authors and works that came before them. By this logic, the modern idea of artistic originality would be a sham. The amanuensis, the writer, never creates from nothing, but instead manipulates stories that have already been passed down. Or, to put it another way, modifies, intensifies, and distorts that which is already given.

INTERVIEWER

You like to borrow names of other writers, but characters more rarely.

VILA-MATAS

Yes, but I'm not sure why. Originally the process went like that thanks to my spontaneous selection of authors from my library. This is what would happen—I wouldn't know where the story of *A Brief History* was going, so I would leave my desk, for example interrupting my writing on a line that went, "And then, Henry Miller, turning to his friends, said . . ." and I would blind pick any book from my library, open it at random, and the first or second sentence I read upon opening my eyes was the one I would assign to poor Miller. This, among other things, helped me resolve the problem of not knowing how to go on. If a line didn't fit, it wasn't an issue because I would just modify it myself, change it, until it did fit with the previous sentence.

INTERVIEWER

So you never suffered from the anxiety of not knowing where the story was going.

VILA-MATAS

Never, because any line taken at random can work within the story that I'm telling and drive the plot on. Ideas, too. It is, at heart, a method similar to that of Raymond Roussel, which he explains in his prodigious *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*.

Incidentally, *Esta bruma insensata* includes a subtle takeoff of my own

process, because the central character is an “expert in quotes,” a kind of walking dictionary of phrases, a man whose job is to apportion and sell literary quotes to other authors. An unusual trade, and little known, which explains why there isn’t a union of *hokusais*—*hokusais* is the name these quote artists go by. There’s an unexpected story in the quotes themselves that appear in *Esta bruma insensata*, because they wove together to form a plot that not even I had seen coming, and in which I end up involving none other than . . . Thomas Pynchon. Who, by the way, could just as well be right here in this garden. I only say this because the final exchange in the novel takes place in the very spot where we are now, in the garden of the Hotel Alma, in central Barcelona. A complete coincidence, I might add. But by this logic, you could very well be Pynchon and I just haven’t realized yet.

#### INTERVIEWER

I remember something Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster wrote about you, which I thought was wonderful. She said, “The scripting of a story through referencing events that occur in one’s life, or scripting events in one’s life so that they develop into a story, would only be marginally interesting if it wasn’t connected with a deep knowledge of writing. For Vila-Matas, this switching between his own life and the world of his stories is always mixed with his exploration of the giant library that the world has become.”

It’s as if the exploration you began in *A Brief History* has become more and more contemporary. Everyone now lives with a kind of portable library, an assortment of other people’s words and images.

#### VILA-MATAS

I loved Dominique’s piece, too. But then, I also had no idea what an impression I’d left on her when, talking about Fritz Lang’s *Secret beyond the Door* one day, I mentioned that I’d never seen the movie but had once bumped into Lang in the public restroom of the Hotel Maria Cristina in San Sebastián. Dominique doubted the veracity of my crossing paths with Lang and from this reasoned that all my writing must be based on fabrications.

#### INTERVIEWER

Something that interests me in the way you describe this problem of continuation is that it’s as if you think about literature in almost topological terms.



“I enjoy creating new realities. In that regard I haven’t changed.”

VILA-MATAS

Well, I hadn’t given it much thought, but it may well be true. In fact, now maybe I see it, the real core of the works by some of the writers I most admire often lies in a spontaneous gesture, for me very much linked to childhood, a kind of expression of surprise before the world and life, always followed by a buried desire to remain at the threshold, undoubtedly precisely in order to keep reinforcing that surprise at being in the world. We can only live trusting that new and agreeable surprises await us, and perhaps that is why we pause at

thresholds. I remember how Elizabeth Hardwick, near the beginning of her book *Sleepless Nights*, reminds us of one of Goethe's aphorisms—"Beginnings are always delightful; the threshold is the place to pause." I find that line utterly beguiling. In fact, it quite literally has the effect of making me stop whatever I'm saying, and pausing.

INTERVIEWER

I feel like in your writing this problem of pausing, of continuing, is both technical and also one of your fiction's deep investigations. As if the truth will have to take the form of digression—only expressed through what you once called "an indefatigably expandable prose."

VILA-MATAS

It would seem so, yes. I think it's a theme that speaks to many writers. I think a lot about the question of continuity when, for example, in an interview I'm asked about my working routine. I have a theory that it's a question that began to be frequently asked after Hemingway's *Paris Review* interview, in which he said, "You write until you come to a place where you still have your juice and know what will happen next and you stop and try to live through until the next day when you hit it again." The Hemingwayesque idea of always pausing when you know what will happen next caused a stir, and his advice became legendary. The practice—so widespread today—of asking writers about their working routine must come from there. It seems like an innocent question, but it masks another one, which is, how do you carry on writing when you don't know where the novel is going?

INTERVIEWER

I imagine that not following Goethe's advice, not pausing at the threshold, can lead into a trap, can't it? To continue the topological talk, you've often spoken about the problem of avoiding a trap or dead end—that every book leads you to the verge of not being able to write, or, as you put it, "Dead ends have been a central motor of my work."

VILA-MATAS

I did say that. Since *Bartleby & Co.*, whenever I finish a book my friends will ask me, How will you carry on writing now? It's as if I'd taken my stories to

the point of no return, to a cul-de-sac. Whenever I notice this happen, whenever I notice that my book has resulted in a terrifying dead end—I always exhaust my explorations of the abyss—I like to remind myself of something Bioy Casares told me in a plaza in the Recoleta district in Buenos Aires. He said, Intelligence is useful when, on finding yourself completely trapped, you are able to find the little hole from which to escape the problem trapping you.

Always, after writing a book, I have felt trapped in a cul-de-sac, with no obvious way to continue writing, and yet always, relying on intelligence, I have found the smallest hole from which to escape that trap. My novels and essays from this century have all come out of these dead ends. Perhaps that's why they tend to open with characters already in extreme situations, on the verge of a dead end, completely unaware that they can get into an even tighter spot.

INTERVIEWER

As if writing, for you, were the construction of the prison from which you later find an escape.

VILA-MATAS

That's a good way to look at it. And you're probably right, the proof being that when I finish a novel, when I'm not creating anything, I feel extraordinarily free.

This all helps me see that writing a novel is a wonderful adventure, but at the same time one always eventually realizes that the novel was born dead, because it's a genre that cannot represent reality. Of course this "manufacturing defect" and reflecting on it is precisely what makes the construction of the novel so appealing.

INTERVIEWER

There are multiple ways, in other words, of constructing what might be believed to be a truth?

VILA-MATAS

Absolutely. In fact, the writer only becomes the writer in the current sense of the word in the nineteenth century, with the discovery of different ways of writing, all of them incommensurable, and the ensuing decision of which to opt for.



INTERVIEWER

And in the twenty-first century?

VILA-MATAS

Whenever people bring this up, I always think of “the chats between the retired mathematicians” that Ricardo Piglia once mentioned to me.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of chats?

VILA-MATAS

Informal gatherings that Piglia himself used to join when he lived in Princeton. These get-togethers are attended by a select group of mathematicians of irrefutable talent, only that, at a very young age—as young as forty—they are already emeriti because they’ve discovered everything that needed discovering within their particular area. Brilliant types, Piglia would say, great enthusiasts of Western literature, expert readers of Joyce and his *Finnegans Wake*, of Samuel Beckett and Witold Gombrowicz, people as fascinated by Arno Schmidt as by Jorge Luis Borges. According to Piglia, there have never been such magnificent, incredible readers. They know they aren’t going to come up with anything new, that they’ve had their best ideas, no matter how much life lies ahead of them. So what do they do? They read. They spend months, for example, studying *The Divine Comedy*, one canto per semester. As evening falls they come together to sit around a table exchanging their impressions, discussing literature as if it were extinct. Just as I believe that literature in the future will become extinct, or already has. This image sums it up, sundown, a group of retired mathematicians, wise and trustworthy readers, discussing an old pursuit—the literary one—as enthralling as it is imperiled.

INTERVIEWER

Something I love in your writing is its dedication to writing as an absolute. And it makes me wonder about the relation of literature to publication. You’re not just a great fictionalizer of writing but also of reading, of what happens when writing reaches another person. Could you imagine a work that you would never publish?

VILA-MATAS

I can imagine it, yes. Floating above the story of universal literature! But I chose in favor of publishing everything when a childhood-friend-cum-foe accused me in a bar in Palma de Mallorca of “writing to publish.” His accusation—because I understood it was a reproach and an accusation—seemed very aggressive to me. Incidentally, I’ve never read anything he’s written. He’s never published. One day I asked him to tell me the titles of the books he claimed to have written and that he kept in a drawer in his desk, and he did. He sent me a piece of paper on which he’d simply written eight titles, which were all equally ingenious. Only, I’d have liked to see the corresponding covers, too.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you think this aggression comes from? It’s as if publication in some way represents the shame of literature, as if publication and literature are a contradiction.

VILA-MATAS

Perhaps, perhaps publication and literature are a contradiction. On the one hand I want to be read and admired, and on the other hand I want to be exposed as an impostor. I don’t like being noticed, but when I am I feel flattered ... I shouldn’t publish anything—deep down I’m very shy—but I do enjoy myself whenever I’m obliged to appear in public, et cetera. Maybe I’m hysterical and obsessive at the same time. And maybe my friend-cum-foe was even worse.

INTERVIEWER

And in the process of literature becoming a published work, how much do you correct or rework?

VILA-MATAS

In recent years I’ve edited myself a lot more than I used to. I edited less when I wrote *Montano’s Malady* and *Doctor Pasavento*, at the start of this century, probably because back then I didn’t strive in any way for perfection. Back then I wrote very uninhibitedly in the knowledge that if I messed up two or three books in a row, it wouldn’t be a tragedy and I’d always have time to redeem myself. I think I wrote more “freely” than I do now, and very much

with the aim of making the priggish stories of some of my fellow Spaniards look ridiculous. I recently read that freedom in writing is linked to a writer's younger years. Later, some of that freedom is lost and replaced by wisdom, thus improving his or her reflective capacity. But sometimes I think that if that's true—and I very much fear that it is—wisdom can really be a millstone for a writer. So everything has its pros and cons.

But going back to editing, these days I edit a lot. With *Esta bruma insensata*, my most recent book, I edited like mad. Sometimes, when I'm asked if I always write, I reply, I don't write, I edit.

#### INTERVIEWER

It sometimes seems to me that literary culture here in Spain—unlike in Latin America—can place a major value on sincerity. Is that accurate? But if so, what does that mean for this idea that truth, or the real, is always constructed?

#### VILA-MATAS

Yes, sincerity and the confessional are highly valued here. What people like most of all is when something sounds authentic. It's nonsense. They are constantly mistaking sincerity for good literature, which leads them to favor "reality"—it's not clear to me which—over fiction. As it happens, I was asked about this just yesterday, about the relationship between reality and fiction, and I quoted Wittgenstein, who, it seems to me, had some light to shed on this question. "Of course, if water boils in a pot, steam comes out of the pot, and also a picture of steam comes out of a picture of the pot. But what if one insisted on saying that there must also be something boiling in the picture of the pot?" And in Spain most people think it's all boiling. It's a strange country. Sometimes I bandy around a Nabokov line in which he jokes about this distinction between reality and fiction, always in the hope of triggering at least one minor crisis in the "nonfiction" writers. "Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth." Nabokov is spot-on there, and if you ask me it's nonsense to talk about writing nonfiction. Don't these writers realize that any narrated version of a true story is always a kind of fiction? The moment you organize the world into words, you modify its nature.

INTERVIEWER

Something I've always admired in your novels is your ability to disrupt the normal scale of things. Small things become big and others disappear altogether. It's as if a miniature had grown to full size. As if a small detail or quote had taken charge of an entire book.

VILA-MATAS

Less is more, and we know that throughout history the human tendency to take interest in minutiae has led to great things. I don't much care for all that is important, solemn, great. Kafka, in his moment, was a master at altering the normal scale of things. It was Piglia, actually, who explained this. In *Formas breves* (Short forms), he says, "Kafka tells the secret story clearly and simply, while furtively narrating the visible story until it turns into something enigmatic and dark. This inversion forms the crux of the 'kafkaian.'" Kafka, like Borges and Poe and Duchamp, knew how to take a narrative problem and turn it into anecdote . . . This last one, for example, makes me laugh, because it sounds dangerously similar to what I would talk to Barcelona's taxi drivers about on my nocturnal journeys across the city.

INTERVIEWER

Duchamp—especially the *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*—has had a real influence on your writing, hasn't he?

VILA-MATAS

He's always been there, that's all I can say. I loved the cover of the Spanish edition of those conversations with Pierre Cabanne, the front of which features *Monte Carlo Bonds*, the Duchamp readymade of a soapy face crowning the top of a casino bond for the Monacan roulette. But even more appealing to me than the front cover of that Anagrama edition was the blurb on the back, which began, "Marcel Duchamp was, according to André Breton, 'one of the most intelligent men (and for many the most annoying) of this century.' He was also one of the most enigmatic." The truth is, it's impossible to understand my work without *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*—my work, or even my life. I took it almost as "self-help," and some of Duchamp's comments to Cabanne had a profound effect on me. In that exchange, he wrote,

Paris, 2006. "The writers I love tend to be professional explorers of the abyss."



I hope that a day will come when we will be able live without having to work. I have had the good fortune to be able to dodge between the raindrops. At a certain point, I realized that it wasn't necessary to burden one's life with too many things, too many things to do, with those things people call a wife, children, a house in the country, an automobile. Happily, it is something that I realized very early.

Those words were the starting point for everything. It might all seem a little naive, but that's how it was, I saw an entire path or model I must follow. Dodging between the raindrops!

INTERVIEWER

Your *Brief History of Portable Literature* especially would be impossible without Duchamp—and, I guess, therefore, without the subsequent history and example of conceptual art.

VILA-MATAS

Although my actual involvement in the contemporary art world really began with a phone call to my house from Sophie Calle, asking to meet me. I didn't know her. Or, rather, I'd seen her once before. I had been due to interview her for *El País* but in the end was too frightened and couldn't even speak to her. I turned around and fled. Ten years later she called my house, completely oblivious to my earlier fear and flight, and we agreed to meet in Paris the following week. And there, in Café de Flore, she proposed that I write her life over a period of six months. She said that, with the exception of killing another person, she'd do anything I asked her to do. I accepted the proposal and, on my return to Barcelona, wrote the first chapter of the story I'd decided she would have to try to live out, on the Azores. But she never went to those islands, so the whole thing was abandoned. At the end of that chapter, she was supposed to discover and photograph my ghost, whom I'd situated in a derelict house on a cliff in São Miguel. But the whole thing went cold after a somewhat dramatic story, which I later recounted—as if it were fiction—in *Because She Never Asked* (2007, 2015).

INTERVIEWER

Tucked away inside her proposal it's as if there was an opportunity to explore

if there could be a difference between what we call life and what we call literature.

VILA-MATAS

I remember being in a café with Carolina López, Bolaño's widow, and I filled her in on what was going on with Sophie, including the fact that Sophie still hadn't set off on the story that she'd asked me to write for her. In other words, that she hadn't gone to the Azores, which was crushing me because, all the while I waited, I couldn't write anything else. And at that point Carolina warned me, from one friend to another, that what Sophie had proposed was a dangerous game because it was very much connected to life but had nothing to do with literature. It goes beyond literature, she said. I swear I hadn't thought about this until that very moment. I think that was the first time I realized that there was something beyond literature. The fringes of literature and, as such, of language.

INTERVIEWER

And when did you meet Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster?

VILA-MATAS

It was after my meeting with Sophie Calle—and it was the exact opposite of my experience with Sophie. From the very start we understood each other extraordinarily well. Dominique didn't ask me to write her life, but to join forces to create something undefined that over the years has remained exactly that, undefined. Dominique is one of the most tirelessly creative people I've ever known, she lives in creation itself.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe all true creation has to be undefined in some way. It's like the way, in your own writing, two models of a future literature seem to jostle and overlap. There's an idea that a future novel will be hybrid, multiple, essayistic—a novel that does away with grand ideas like plot, or character, or unity. But also an idea that in some way the future work won't be literary at all, but closer to a gesture, or a practice.



VILA-MATAS

I'm very interested in the concept of the "readymade novel," which maintains that today's avant-garde writers aspire to be conceptual artists and that their novels should be considered contemporary art. Just as Marcel Duchamp asked if a urinal can be art, the readymade novel asks what literature can be, and what it should be in the future. Instead of trying to make sense of reality by means of many concrete details, or from a place of omniscience, or from multiple points of view, or anything else that we traditionally expect of fiction, the readymade novel sets out one idea or asks one question. The readymade novel is more interested in the concept behind a work of art—behind itself—than in its execution.

INTERVIEWER

All this reminds me that not long ago you wrote that, in the end, difficult art would have its moment and we'd see spectators and readers evolve into artists and poets themselves. And that more than once you've referred to a story of Petronius. "In other words," you write in *Bartleby & Co.*, "if *Don Quixote* is about a dreamer who dares to live out his dream, Petronius' story is that of the writer who dares to live out what he has written, and for that reason ceases to write."

VILA-MATAS

It suggests to me that the only prospect of ever stopping writing would be if I immersed myself in life, if I lived it to the full, without the need for writing.

INTERVIEWER

And what would "living life to the full" consist of?

VILA-MATAS

If I knew that, I'd already be doing it.