Notes on Enrique Vila-Matas, *Because She Never Asked*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

A Vertiginous Slide Into Literary Self-Regard

Vila-Matas's "Bartleby & Co." is a kind of masterpiece, and "Montano's Malady" its appendix. But Vila-Matas has a tendency to slide into self-regarding, unchallenging, self-fulfilling meditations on writing, the writer's life, writer's careers, and the life of books, where all that matters is a kind of pale poetry of authors and reputations. The slide is steep enough in "Dublinesque," which is a preposterously, inexcusably hermetically sealed version of literary Ireland consisting only of Vila-Matas's own personal pantheon of mostly older Irish authors. There's nothing of the current Irish literary scene in that book, and of course nothing at all of the texture and sounds of the country itself. Vila-Matas is as far sunken in his literary universe, as padded and cocooned by his world of writers, as Borges or Bellows became in later life. (I have longer and more annoyed reviews of Vila-Matas's books elsewhere on this site.)

The slide away from "real life" is a theme in this book. The author, who presents himself as the narrator, is fascinated with Sophie Calle's "wall novels," and in particular with her idea, proposed to Paul Auster, that he write a novel she would then act out. "For years," Vila-Matas says, he has been "speculating on the relationship between life and literature, rummaging around for a technique to go beyond them, especially beyond literature" (p. 73), and that would be believable, if it weren't for the fact that "beyond literature" doesn't mean anything more than pallid looks at possible real-world interruptions. Vila-Matas writes an aestheticized, safe, anemic sort of poetry in which literature and writers take the place of things, places, and people, and quotations and allusions speak placidly and soothingly among themselves. It's all very "elegant," as he says at the decisive moment at the end of this book (p. 88).

A sign of how deeply things are sunken here is that it would never occur to Vila-Matas that a reader might think his relentless recourse to writers is laughable. In section 3, the narrator is describing a woman who is posing as a private detective. A potential customer comes in, and asks the woman to find her ex-husband. He was, she tells the detective, "a famous young writer" (p. 9). A few lines later, we learn the writer had published his "fifth novel... in which he had staged his own disappearance." I doubt I'd be wrong if I said that Vila-Matas would never imagine a reader -- like me! -- might write in the margin: Oh, for God's sake!

I don't have a problem imagining a kind of reader for whom this book is a pleasure. Such a reader will be an art-world person, who knows and loves Sophie Calle and Duchamp, and ideally also a fan of Spanish literary fiction including Jean Echenoz, Olivier Rolin, and others. (See tinyurl.com/ht24mub for more on this.) But surely the pleasures of recognizing art-world references should be regarded with suspicion.

Vila-Matas is so relaxed in his literary cushioning, so pampered by his self-affirming self-regard, that he's become weak. His imagination can still wander toward what he still calls "real life," but it's the lack of obstacles of any kind, literary or "real," that make the newer work so anemic and distasteful, and so far from the earlier work.