

depara la incesante inventiva y el exquisito tacto evocativo de su autor. Con todos los ingredientes de una buena novela (amenidad, capacidad de intriga, estímulo de la imaginación) Enrique Vila-Matas, prosiguiendo con la original trayectoria de su narrativa más reciente, nos ofrece un discurso bien articulado y rico de perspectivas, que concentra una experiencia humana y segrega una lúcida visión moral del mundo. Para un tiempo de considerables mutaciones ideológicas, *Lejos de Veracruz* se convierte en una fábula necesaria y en una narración que, en cierto modo, ilustra la peripécia del joven moderno, desdichado e inquieto, de nuestros días. El asiduo lector y escritor de cuentos que es Vila-Matas, como él mismo se autodefine en alguna entrevista («De últimos cuentos y cuentistas», *Ínsula* 568, abril 1994, pp. 3-6), ha preferido apostar en esta ocasión por la novela y, dándonos una vez más muestras de su gran talento y sensibilidad creadora, podemos asegurar, que ha acertado plenamente.

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Pedro Zarraluki. *La historia del silencio*. Barcelona, Anagrama, 1994, 202 pp.

A man and a woman, longtime lovers and underemployed intellectuals who live together in Barcelona, decide to write a book about silence. Their project is the driving force of Zarraluki's own fifth novel (and seventh book), a tragicomic exploration of the illogic of love relationships amidst the uncontrollable psychological chaos of contemporary life —ennui, solitude, incommunication, misunderstanding, betrayal, anguish and, above all, the turbulence of sexual desire. Silence is, in fact, *la nada*, the backdrop to all human activity. In its most terrifying form it is absolute loneliness, the paralysis of having no one to trust or confide in. Yet the only means of protecting intimacy and authenticity is, ironically, silence: that margin of concealment and deception so indispensable even with those we love most, the secret feelings that —to prevent suffering and allow the survival of relationships— we must not reveal. Love, which by nature avidly seeks its own destruction, is, after all, «an enigmatic language that can be deciphered only by two people.»

Such are the lessons learned by the unnamed first-person narrator-protagonist after he has jeopardized and nearly destroyed his

five-year relationship with the lovely and spirited Irene by having an affair with sultry, elegant Silvia, the lover of his best friend, François. Naively, he failed to understand that the world of Silvia and François, longtime lovers who live apart so they can dally with other partners, is closer to the selfishness and refined cruelty of *Les liaisons dangereuses* than to the good-natured amatory bumbblings and successes of the protagonists and their other close friends which form much of the novel's action. Lonely Amador, whose wife Clara left him for a huge Sandinista black man, Johnny, tries and fails to seduce Olga, unfaithful wife of a urologist; he finds happiness with a geologist, Natalia, whom love transforms from a pale, timid wallflower into his insatiable geisha girl. Olga's husband loses his legs in a traffic accident and, embittered, makes life unbearable for her until he commits suicide. Irene has an ambiguous nocturnal adventure with five insurance agents. The narrator seduces Silvia and—in a hilariously awkward scene—overcomes his modesty and self-consciousness enough to reluctantly whip her with a belt. The vicissitudes of the relationship between Irene and the narrator (despite their passionate lovemaking, even in the bathroom of a bar), lead to the novel's climactic moment of surprise: the narrator and Silvia sneak off to François's favorite seaside rendezvous hotel, have their most intense tryst and exit from their room embracing each other only to encounter, also exiting from another room and wrapped in an embrace... Irene and François. The final thirty-four pages recount the shaken narrator's lonely soul-searching, his realization that he and Irene have been toyed with by their dear friends and, finally, his desperate quest to regain Irene. He chases her to Nicaragua, where they seem inclined to start over. But there are no guarantees, as the novel ends ominously. Having failed to write their book on silence, the narrator proposes they do one on danger; at this very instant their car strikes a bird, whose dead body slides down the windshield.

The metafictional nature of this book about the writing of a book is even more pronounced in a vast celebration of storytelling. A skilled short story writer (two published volumes), Zarraluki knows the potential expressive and symbolic power of even a small fragment. Because fabulation is a way to battle the void, and «el enorme simulacro de la literatura»—making love sublime and death grand—may be «la única actividad sincera de una especie acostumbrada a los engaños,» the novel's thirty-three unnumbered

sections contain at least eight stories within the main one. Highly varied in timbre, their «authors» include François (with a hilarious *relato costumbrista* of two fervidly fornicating florists), an enlightened hobo, a hospital nurse and a scholar whose Byzantine love story has three possible endings. The main narrator himself contributes a satirical Genesis fable, a Cortazarian hospital tale and a brilliant Mafia melodrama about a Sicilian undertaker (the tale of silence par excellence). Alongside this harvest of tales is a broad array of literary references and intertexts. Yet despite the novel's literary awareness and self-awareness, its playfulness and improvisation, its skillful movement among a variety of registers, it never becomes a cerebral game. Centered in the contrast of the frank, decisive, responsible yet moody and enigmatic Irene and the somewhat hermitic, passive narrator («un decepcionado permanente») who fumbles through his attempts to understand his woman (Everyman?), and in a gallery of well-drawn characters, it remains a thoughtful and tender probing of how little we may really know those we believe we know best of all. In fact, for all its contemporaneity of form and tone —the narrator even apes Edvard Munch's best-known masterpiece by mailing Irene a photo of himself screaming— Zarraluki's novel, co-winner of the 1994 Premio Herralde, recalls two excellent metafictional love stories that are over a century old: one whose bookish protagonist understood neither his own true character nor that of his beloved Irene, and another *historia del silencio* whose lovers could hardly communicate at all. I refer to Galdós's *El amigo Manso* and *Tormento*.

Zarraluki's narrative has great agility and freedom of range, although each fragment is carefully developed around an idea or image. His prose is direct, accessible and uncomplicated. It repeats but skillfully recasts key words or concepts (*inmóvil, silencio*), subtly expands main images, or fancifully takes flight with them. His images are often cinematographic and satirical. Zarraluki employs García Márquezian logic twists and oxymorons. Johnny is so in love with Clara that he cheats on her only with women who resemble her, lovemaking can be a «sorda explosión de ruido.» Nevertheless, his sense of humor is superbly original and —as in Cervantes— the best means of navigating through the psychological minefields of life and love.