**Boris Vian**

Boris Vian (1920-1959) may well be the Renaissance man of twentieth century France. In his short life, he was an engineer, a jazz musician, a fiction writer, a poet, a translator, a song-writer and for a brief time a singer, a jazz critic and one of the most flamboyant members of the Collège de ‘Pataphysique. At the age of 26, he wrote *L’Écume des jours* (*Foam of the Daze*), considered today his masterpiece (which still sells just under 100,000 copies each year). That same year, after a bet, he invented a pseudo-American writer in search of a publishing house: Vernon Sullivan, whose first hard-boiled novel Vian would “translate”: *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* (*I Spit on Your Graves*). For the next 5 years, both Vian and Sullivan penned novels alternatively, the latter having a commercial (and scandalous) success and the former remaining quite unknown. In 1951 Boris Vian gave up writing novels and started a new career, turned towards the art of the stage. But his productivity remained high until his premature death. His literary success, though, is entirely posthumous.

Vian was born on March 10, 1920, to a wealthy family who lived in a chic South-West Paris suburb, Ville d’Avray. It was the time when two artistic opposites flourished: surrealism and jazz. If Vian did not contribute to the former, he was to play a key role in introducing the latter in France in the 40s and 50s. During the second world war, he started writing poetry and short fiction, primarily to amuse his entourage, most notably his young wife Michelle. Trained as an engineer, he practiced this profession only for four years. By the end of the war, he was noticed by Raymond Queneau, then a reader at Gallimard’s.

*Vercoquin et le plancton*, written in 1944-45, is a hilarious short novel depicting the best ways to organize “surprise-parties,” honoring jazz of course; Queneau decided that this was the kind of novel he wanted for his new humorous collection “La Plume au vent.” Pushed by this first official recognition, Vian wrote in the spring of 1946 what is considered his master-piece: *L’Écume des jours*. Gallimard would also publish it, but turned it down for the coveted “Prix de la Pléiade.”

*L’Écume des jours* is a fantasy bathed in jazz and romance. It is a classical love story with a tragic ending. Its originality, however, lies more in its play on language than the story *per se*. Jacques Bens, an early and intuitive critic of Vian’s, coined the term “langage-univers” in order to describe how the imaginary worlds depicted by Vian emanate from subverting the language in its most fixed form, and coining new words when necessary (e.g. the “pianocktail”).

Very shortly after completing *L’Écume des jours*, in August 1946, Vian, with the complicity of a young publisher and aided by his wife Michelle, devised a false American writer whom no one would dare publish in the United States. Since the brand new *Éditions du Scorpion* needed a blockbuster book to launch itself into fame, Vian would be the bold “translator” of the infamous Vernon Sullivan, and thereby produce his first hard-boiled novel: *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes*. Scandal was looming, but initial sales remained slow, until a deranged man strangled his mistress in a seedy Montparnasse hotel, leaving on the bedside table a well exposed copy of Sullivan’s book. Vian had become an easy prey for tabloids, a killer by proxy. Naturally, sales rocketed, and Vian thought it was a good hoax, however sour.

Ironically, Vian’s exposure as the real pen behind Vernon Sullivan (the secret could not last long) would mean the demise of his literary career: Sullivan would overshadow Vian. For the next 4 years, Vian/Sullivan continued their separate careers, but Gallimard rejected Vian’s three subsequent novels, which really mattered to him, *L’Automne à Pékin, L’Herbe rouge* and *L’Arrache-cœur* (*Autumn in Peking, Red Grass*, and *Heartsnatcher*) most probably on account of the public turmoil he had generated. Thus in 1952 Vian gave up writing novels, and turned towards music, song-writing, jazz chronicling and managing record collections for Philips.

At the time Vian gave up writing novels, he espoused the ideas and *modus operandi* of the “Collège de ‘Pataphysique”, whose aim was to celebrate the absurd and make contradictory notions meet. This serious/funny institution was created in 1948, in the wake of the works of Alfred Jarry, the creator of Ubu and inventor of ‘Pataphysics. Vian had left his family (with two children) and met Ursula Kübler whom he would eventually marry.

The true claim to fame Boris Vian managed to attain in his short life was through *Le Chevalier de Neige*, a gigantic open-air opera performed in Caen (Normandy) in 1953. This epic based on Lancelot and King Arthur was later adapted to Nancy’s Opera house in 1957, on a music by Georges Delerue. Another sort of fame, yet more controversial, was provoked by his singing “Le Déserteur” on the stage in 1955, in the midst of France faring war in Indochina. Vian would justify himself by saying that he was not so much an antimilitarist as a “pro-civilian.”

In the 1950s Vian received several solicitations to put *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* on the screen, but was either uninterested or weary of such an endeavour. In the end an adaptation was shot near Nice, where the producer attempted to recreate the atmosphere of the deep American South. Vian was invited to the preview on June 23, 1959. His heart stopped beating after a half-hour; witnesses claim that his last words were: “these guys are American like my ass.”

At the age of 39, he died an unknown writer. His fame would only rise in 1962, to peak during the May 68 students uprising. Nowadays, Boris Vian occupies a niche of his own, against all his contemporaries and unlike anyone else. He has become a cult figure in France. He epitomizes eccentricity with a touch of dandyism, eternal youth and joyful creativity. The final recognition came, somewhat paradoxically, with the lavish edition of his fiction works in the famous “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade” (2010, Edition by Marc Lapprand, with Christelle Gonzalo and François Roulmann), published, perhaps ironically, by Gallimard.

**Major Novels by Boris Vian**

*Vercoquin et le plancton* (1946)

*L’écume des jours* (1946 – *Foam of the Daze*\*)

*L’automne à Pékin* (1946 – *Autumn in Peking*\*)

*L’Herbe rouge* (1950 – *Red Grass*\*)

*L’Arrache-cœur* (1951 – *Heartsnatcher*)

**Novels signed Vernon Sullivan**

*J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* (1946 – *I Spit on your graves*\*)

*Les morts ont tous la même peau* (1947 – *The Dead all have the Same Skin*\*)

*Et on tuera tous les affreux* (1949 – *To Hell with the Ugly*\*)

*Elles se rendent pas compte* (1950)

**Major Plays by Boris Vian**

*L’équarrissage pour tous* (1947 – *The Knacker’s ABC*\*\*)

*Le goûter des généraux* (1950 – *The General’s Tea Party*\*\*)

*Les Bâtisseurs d’empire* (1957 – *The Empire Builde*rs\*\*)

\* Published by TamTam Books (Los Angeles).

\*\* Published by Grove Press (New York)

Two major collections are available in French:

*Œuvres complètes* (1999-2003), Paris: Fayard, 15 volumes

*Œuvres romanesques complètes* (2010), Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: Gallimard, 2 volumes.