

Desire, Duplicity and Narratology:  
Boris Vian's *L'Écume des jours*

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The importance of Boris Vian's reputation as an iconoclast and innovator, and the resistance to any questioning of this reputation, was emphasized in the most recent "Dossier Boris Vian" published in the *Magazine littéraire*.<sup>1</sup> In a review of Vian criticism, Noël Arnaud characterizes Michel Rybalka's observations pertaining to Vian's misogyny as "a hare that keeps on running despite the repeated shots to which it has been subjected" ("Dossier" 18).<sup>2</sup> Arnaud continues:

La "supposée" misogynie de Boris Vian (prudent, je ne veux pas avoir l'air de prendre parti dans ce débat dangereux, les dames nous surveillent), la prétendue "misogynie" (allons-y des guillemets pour nous protéger de la foudre), une misogynie qui s'avouerait dans les romans signés Vernon Sullivan, travesti sous lequel Vian s'imaginait à l'abri des regards inquisiteurs. Curieuse cette "présumée misogynie" chez l'auteur de *L'Écume des jours*, "le plus poignant des romans d'amour contemporains" selon Raymond Queneau. (18)

The "supposed" misogyny of Boris Vian (careful, I don't want to appear to take sides in this dangerous debate, the ladies are watching us), the so-called "misogyny" (let's add the quotation marks to protect ourselves from lightning), a misogyny that is apparently evident in the novels signed Vernon Sullivan, a disguise by which Vian imagined himself sheltered from scrutiny: it's curious, this "alleged misogyny" by the author of *L'Écume des jours*, "the most poignant of contemporary love stories" according to Raymond Queneau.

I cite the French text as well as provide the English translation in order to show how Arnaud not only strategically employs *L'Écume des jours* to shield Vian from such criticism, but also addresses that criticism with utter disdain. Furthermore, Arnaud's remarks are in implicit accord with the comment in the postface of the novel's 10/18 edition by Jacques Bens who is struck by "the heroes' astonishing purity" as well as by their "innocence" (184-85). By emphasizing these remarks, I do not wish to

suggest that Vian's works have escaped any serious critical interrogations; as will be evident in the following study, Vian criticism admits to a remarkable array of perspectives, and particularly concerning *L'Écume des jours*.<sup>3</sup> However, evaluations such as Arnaud's and Bens's and recurrent dismissal of certain topics in Vian's works (particularly Vian's misogyny) suggest that a critical counter-resistance is warranted in order to call into question these autocratic strategies of containment.

As a means of approaching these problems, I wish in this essay to posit "narrative desire" as the arousal and maintenance of a variable attraction between author and reader that functions not only on the levels of story and discourse (as defined by Genette in *Narrative Discourse*), but also as the psycho-social impetus that establishes a "suture" between text and reader, an implicit interpellation to which a reader must respond.<sup>4</sup> For I maintain that texts and, through them, their authors have designs on the reader, seeking to impose a passive acceptance of implicit subject positions. In response to such positioning, the reader must actively struggle in order simply to "read," i.e. to understand and thereby to resist, as Judith Fetterley has suggested, the narrative and ideological strategies of "imasculation," and thereby to initiate a truly productive act of reading.<sup>5</sup> In order to examine the implications of "narrative desire" for understanding textual and sexual difference, I wish to argue for a narratology that would focus on the concept developed by Ross Chambers of textual "seduction" as a question of narrative duplicity, i.e. emphasizing the complex tension within a text between its authority and its "dependency on the act of reading that is to realize it, in its complexity and plurality as writing" (Chambers 14).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, I propose to do so in a way that would reiterate and extend the appeal for a feminist narratology, articulated convincingly by Susan S. Lanser.<sup>7</sup> For, not only would narratological work already developed, argues Lanser, "be opened to a critique and supplement in which feminist questions were understood to contribute to a richer, more useful and more complete narratology" (345), but this approach would not be limited to women's narrative; it would be applicable to men's texts as well in order to achieve an adequate narratological approach (345-46).<sup>8</sup>

In terms of the questions of "narrative desire" and duplicity in *L'Écume des jours*, I wish to address the political questions regarding the subject (who desires?), the object (what is desired?), and how the effects of "narrative desire," especially the narrative authority and duplicity assumed and developed within a text, can be simultaneously appreciated and resisted. To do so, I will "supplement" the narratological tools at my disposal by following a reading practice consistent with a "dual hermeneutic" that both female and "certain (not all) male texts merit,"

according to Patrocínio Schweickart, “a negative hermeneutic that discloses their complicity with patriarchal ideology, and a positive hermeneutic that recuperates the utopian moment—the authentic kernel—from which they draw a significant portion of their emotional power” (43–44). However, this reading practice implicitly raises important questions relating both to the no doubt undecidable problem of *écriture féminine* versus *masculine*, and to concerns about “men in feminism.”<sup>9</sup> In this context, such concerns can be succinctly stated: by what authority do I/do men address the complex intersection between feminist literary criticism and narratology, and pronounce upon directions and/or strategies to be taken? If I leave this question unanswered at this point, it is with the hope of addressing it through my participation in, and perhaps contribution to, feminist critical practices, whatever the inherent limits may be for a male engaging in this practice. I recall this in preparing to undertake a “re-reading,” as Schweickart suggests, not merely from the perspective of the negative hermeneutic of “ideological unmasking,” but also to suggest the possibility of a positive hermeneutic, or more precisely, the limits of such a move, given inherent difficulties that will be evident in Vian’s text. *L’Écume des jours* will provide, then, the ground for reflections linking narratology to critical strategies that will enable me to pursue three lines of inquiry: first, how do the diegetic episodes depicting the parallel obsessions of the chief male protagonists, Colin and Chick, mask crucial questions of sexual difference in the story? Second, to what extent do the narrator’s means of engaging the reader serve to actualize or occult questions of sexual difference and narrative duplicity? Third, how does the novel’s extensive recourse to dialogue contribute both to the occultation of the narrator’s role and to the apparent neutralization of sexual differentiation?

One approach for studying *L’Écume des jours* in this light is to examine the strategies of the “narrating agency” (*l’instance narrative*) in the novel’s necessarily dual construction.<sup>10</sup> That is, the novel unfolds, on one hand, with supposedly “objective” descriptive passages which apparently divest the “narrating instance” of any interest in engaging the reader and, on the other hand, with the presentation of dialogue between characters as a form of direct documentation, i.e. seemingly without value as narrative intervention. I wish to argue, however, that it is the subtle and myriad interventions of the “narrating agency” that constitute the loci by which various strategies of occultation and “naturalization” of sexual difference can be isolated, thereby allowing the task of ideological unmasking to proceed.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on a thorough narratological study of Vian’s novels by Pia Birgander, one can discern numerous examples that suggest strategies deployed by the seemingly neutral

“narrating agency” to situate and engage the reader through a duplicitous assertion of narrative authority. Notably, Birgander borrows Philippe Carrard’s term “hybrid narrative” (*récit hybride*) to distinguish in Vian’s fiction the dual registers of the protagonist’s as well as the narrator’s perception: “These two fields of vision are not only juxtaposed but are almost always superposed in that the narrator’s field covers over and exceeds the character’s” (42; cf. Carrard 30). These interpenetrations of perspectives (Genette’s *mode*) include Vian’s use of the mirror, of the five senses and of complex shifts of the “reflector/hero” (Birgander 42-72).

To these effects, we may add numerous descriptions in a register that one can call the *techno-fantaisiste*, where highly specialized, technical presentations (e.g., of clothing, of cuisine, of appliances) are juxtaposed with fantastic or strange complementary details (e.g., the ubiquitous mouse; the shrinking apartment fixtures, walls and windows; the officials, the location and staging of the wedding ceremony).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in a detailed study of narrative “voice,” Birgander argues that “the specifically narrative function of the Vianian narrator is realized through levels of increasing objectivity: the narration attributable to the narrator, dialogues and monologues” (95). These distinctions must be nuanced, however, since this function reveals the frequent alternations between different devices: interventions from the “narrating agency,” passages, even entire chapters, in what Vaheed K. Ramazani calls “the free indirect mode,” and interior monologues and exterior “soliloquies” constituting an ambiguous enunciative register between narration and affective expression by characters (Birgander 102-04).<sup>13</sup> Finally, the simulacrum of “neutralized” narrative discourse through the decelerated temporal duration of dialogue empowers the “narrating agency” to orient the reading via assertions attributable directly, and insistently, only to the characters themselves, dialogized confrontations, notes Birgander, that “exceed the effect of a simple exchange of words” (99).<sup>14</sup>

However, juxtaposed with these specifically narratological devices is Vian’s strategic use of irony and humor as a convenient escape mechanism from the deconstruction and self-perforation of the textual elements, which should remain open to criticism. I am suggesting that through this deliberately ironic construction of a parallel universe, Vian masks the dominant function of male wish-fulfillment of female submission and exclusion. Moreover, this use of irony veils secondarily a similar impulse to eroticize lesbian desire in terms of the male gaze and to channel homosexuality into the safe, secure, contained status of career choice and ritual. To locate the operation of this ironic strategy, we may begin with reference to the *péritexte* of the novel’s “instance préfacielle”

'prefatory agency' using Genette's terms (*Seuils* 150-81), that is, with the "Avant-propos" (Foreword):

Dans la vie, l'essentiel est de porter sur tout des jugements *a priori*. Il apparaît, en effet, que les masses ont tort, et les individus toujours raison. Il faut se garder d'en déduire des règles de conduite: elles ne doivent pas avoir besoin d'être formulées pour qu'on les suive. Il y a seulement deux choses: c'est l'amour, de toutes les façons, avec des jolies filles, et la musique de la Nouvelle-Orléans ou de Duke Ellington. Le reste devrait disparaître, car le reste est laid, et les quelques pages de démonstration qui suivent tirent toute leur force du fait que l'histoire est entièrement vraie, puisque je l'ai imaginée d'un bout à l'autre. Sa réalisation matérielle proprement dite consiste essentiellement en une projection de la réalité, en atmosphère biaise et chauffée, sur un plan de référence irrégulièrement ondulée et présentant de la distorsion. On le voit, c'est un procédé avouable, s'il en fut.

La Nouvelle-Orléans  
10 mars 1946 (EJ 7)

The essential thing in life is to judge everything *a priori*. It would seem, in fact, that the masses are wrong and individuals always right. But we must be careful not to deduce from that any rules about how to behave: these should not need to be formulated for us to follow them. There are only two things: love, all sorts of love, with pretty girls, and the music of New Orleans or Duke Ellington. Everything else ought to disappear, because everything else is ugly, and the few pages of proof which follow derive all their strength from the fact that this is a completely true story, since I imagined it from start to finish. Its specific material realization consists in projecting reality in a skewed and heated atmosphere, onto another surface which is irregularly corrugated and distorts everything. As you can see, if ever there was a procedure that does us credit, this is it.

New Orleans  
March 10, 1946 (MI 5, translation modified)

Let us also recall that the novel ends with the postscriptum, "Memphis, 8 mars 1946" followed by "Davenport, 10 mars 1946," toponyms that resemble *la Nouvelle-Orléans* of the foreword in that Vian never visited them, but that also situate the novel, as Viviane Smith has suggested, in the key loci of the birth and proliferation of jazz and the blues.<sup>15</sup> Vian thus posits these cities as fictional sites of enunciation for

the "narrating agency" under the sign of a playful, even wistful irony, an opening pretense to which a larger one follows, that the parallel universe portrayed in *L'Écume des jours* is as innocent and ludic as the narrator (and critics) would wish it to be. Moreover, the *modus operandi* evident in this foreword is paradoxical as well as problematic.<sup>16</sup> On one hand, the "rules about how to behave" should be intuited, not deduced or formulated, from the essential "*a priori* judgment" that "the masses are wrong and individuals always right"; on the other hand, the focal "things" to consider, "love, all sorts of love, with pretty girls, and the music of New Orleans or Duke Ellington," are formally distinguished from the apparently overwhelming ugliness of "*le reste*" "everything else." This opposition is as absolute as possible since this *reste* "ought to disappear," a death sentence which serves to found the hypothesis of the following "pages of proof" whose truth-claims will apparently be strengthened since the story is "imagined from start to finish" by the enunciative "je." Finally, the "procedure" of the experiment's "material realization" is one that "does us credit" only as pseudo-scientific "projection of reality," giving rise to the technological and existential *fantaisie* of the novel's parallel universe, that is, "in a skewed and heated atmosphere, onto another surface which is irregularly corrugated and distorts everything."<sup>17</sup> While this *modus operandi* produces the *conte d'amour* and *de jazz* by which so many readers have been charmed, *L'Écume des jours* is also a tragic tale of obsession and death, a blues tune of which the female protagonists are the most evident subjects and victims through their compulsory submission to the impulses of male fantasies.<sup>18</sup>

In light of the presumption of scientificity suggested in however curious a fashion by the foreword, we can understand the dual and duelling obsessions of the male protagonists, Colin and Chick, as means by which the hypothesis of "love" and "jazz" in their opposition to the ugly *reste* will be "démontrée" "proven" by an implicitly, yet insistently "engaging" narrator.<sup>19</sup> Initially attracted to Alise, who "belonged by right to Chick" (MI 23, EJ 24), Colin is obsessed with the very idea of love and opens himself to his servant and cook, Nicolas, by asking, "Do you think I shall meet my soul-mate today? I should like a soul-mate like your niece . . .," Alise. When Nicolas responds that Colin "is wrong to think about my niece" since "Mister Chick has chosen first," Colin frankly expresses his desire for Love itself: "But, Nicolas, I do so want to be in love" (MI 29, EJ 29). Moreover, anticipating the possibilities of meeting someone at the *matinée* organized by his friend, Isis, Colin readies himself while repeating a veritable "lesson" of love that Alain Costes suggests is indicative of Colin's "besoin d'objet" 'object need':

Je voudrais être amoureux. . . . Tu voudrais être amoureux. Il voudrait *idem* (être amoureux). Nous, vous, voudrions, voudriez être. Ils voudraient également tomber amoureux. . . . (EJ 30)

I would like to be in love. . . . Thou wouldst like to be in love. He would like *idem* (to be in love). We, you, would like, would like to be. They too would like to be in love. (MI 30).<sup>20</sup>

As for Chick, his obsession with Jean-Sol Partre dictates his "choice" of Alise at one of the philosopher's lectures. Discovering how great an interest they seem to share in Partre, Chick later relates to Colin that he attempted "an existentialist experiment" by declaring to Alise, "I love you" and she said "Oh!" instead of simply responding in kind. While this short response would seem to have indicated failure of the "experiment," Chick and Alise immediately became inseparable, and when Colin inquires: "How did it end," Chick can only respond, "Well! It was time to go to bed . . .," hearing which Colin "choked and drank a pint of burgundy before he recovered" (MI 16, EJ 17). Chick's answer feeds Colin's obsession with falling in love as Colin muses the next day, "Do they really talk about Jean-Sol Partre when they're alone?", but then answers himself (through the mediation of the "narrating agency"), "Perhaps it would be better not to think about what they did when they were alone either" (EJ 24, MI 23).

The ellipsis that causes Colin to choke and then to brood is indicative of the complex representation of sexual difference in *L'Écume des jours*. While one might attribute Colin's reaction simply to his affection for Alise despite his friendship with Chick, we can locate a generalized modesty regarding heterosexual relations throughout what Jacques Duchateau has called "Boris Vian's most chaste novel" (127). For example, not only does Nicolas' explanation of current dance steps cause Colin to blush and to "remain thoughtful" (MI 27-28, EJ 27), shortly thereafter, Colin's rapid courtship of Chloé initially seems troubled. While she appeared receptive to his caresses and fondling among friends at the *matinée*, several ambiguous comments by Colin during their first date cause Chloé to blush, even to rebuff any intimacy. However, their relationship and, as the reader soon learns, their engagement, is sealed with a kiss, but one that appears haphazard and is guaranteed by Chloé's silent submission to Colin's awkward expression of desire:

Colin lui parlait presque à l'oreille.

—Vous ne vous ennuyez pas? demanda-t-il.

Elle fit non de la tête, et Colin put se rapprocher encore à la faveur du mouvement.

—Je . . . dit-il tout contre son oreille, et, à ce moment, comme par erreur, elle tourna la tête et Colin lui embrassait les lèvres. Ça ne dura pas très longtemps; mais, la fois d'après, c'était beaucoup mieux. Alors, il fourra sa figure dans les cheveux de Chloé, et ils restèrent là, sans rien dire. (EJ 45)

Colin was almost talking into her ear.

"You're not bored?" he asked.

She shook her head, and Colin took advantage of the opportunity to move closer still.

"I . . ." he said, right against her ear, and at that moment, as if by mistake, she turned her head and Colin kissed her lips. It did not last very long, but the next time was much better. Then he buried his face in Chloé's hair, and they sat there, not speaking. (MI 46-47)

Moreover, other than Chick's early reference to "the time to go to bed" (EJ 17, MI 16), his relationship with Alise is entirely devoid of any intimacy since all of their interactions are mediated by Chick's overwhelming need, or "my vice" as he calls it, to "collect Partre" (EJ 47, MI 48), even to model their relationship after Partre's fiction. As Chick remarks: "It's just that Alise's parents will never want me to marry her, and they'll be right. There's a story like that in one of Partre's books" (MI 48, EJ 46).

In contrast to this heterosexual modesty (for Colin and Chloé) and asceticism (for Chick and Alise) are two scenes in which incest, in one, and lesbian relations, in the other, are casually depicted. At the dinner during which he announces his engagement to Chloé, Colin insists that Nicolas join him, Alise and Chick, and having changed from his *vêtements de service*, Nicolas' appearance prompts his niece, Alise, to remark, "Oh! you do look chic!" Despite Duchateau's insistence that "if Nicolas' excesses are exceptional for the chaste nature of the novel, they are always related with the greatest modesty" (127), Nicolas's response and actions are nonetheless discordant with the text's sexual economy:

How are you, my niece? he answers, 'As lovely as ever?' He caressed her breasts and hips; no longer constrained by his duties as butler, Nicolas commands Alise: "Go to the kitchen and bring back the dish

that's in the oven." . . . She followed Nicolas' instructions and brought back the massive silver dish. (MI 50-51, EJ 49)

The other scene is situated in Chloé's *salle de bains* as she, Alise and Isis, in various states of undress, prepare themselves for Chloé's wedding:

Il faisait chaud dans la pièce pleine de vapeur et le dos d'Alise était si appétissant que Chloé le caressa doucement de ses paumes aplaties. . . .

—Tu me chatouilles!' dit Alise qui commençait à rire.

Chloé la caressait exprès à l'endroit où ça chatouille, sur les côtés et jusqu'aux hanches. La peau d'Alise était chaude et vivante. (EJ 55)

With all the steam the room was warm and Alise's back was so inviting that Chloé stroked it lightly with the palms of her hands. . . . "You're tickling me!" said Alise, beginning to laugh.

Chloé was purposely stroking her in the place where it tickles, down the sides and as far as the hips. Alise's skin was warm and vital. (MI 57)

Then, Chloé's comment to Alise and Isis contradicts her previous modesty with Colin: "You're both lovely. It's a pity you can't come like that, I'd love you to be wearing just your shoes and stockings" (EJ 55, MI 58). The "narrating agency" completes this suggestive passage with an almost fetishistic vision of Chloé as she begins to dress herself: "To start she put on a little cellophane brassiere and a pair of white satin panties that her firm curves made bulge prettily over her derriere" (EJ 55, MI 58).

These apparently casual caresses and glances, between uncle and niece, between women friends, and most notably, between the "narrating instance" and the characters, stand in further contrast to the depiction of "*les pédérastes d'honneur*" the ("best gays," or "fairies of honor" as Sturrock renders the translation), the brothers Desmaret, Pégase and Coriolan. Not only does their "pederasty" have economic and social value, as they are invited frequently to participate in marriage rituals, but virtue and vice are relativized in this context:

Ils avaient embrassé la carrière de pédérastes par nécessité et par goût, mais, comme on les payait bien pour être pédérastes d'honneur,

ils ne travaillaient presque plus, et malheureusement, cette oisiveté funeste les poussait au vice de temps à autre. C'est ainsi que, la veille, Coriolan s'était mal conduit avec une fille. (EJ 51)

They had taken up the career of homosexuality out of necessity and because they liked it, but since they got well paid for being fairies of honor, they hardly worked at all any more, and this fatal inactivity had unfortunately led them into vice from time to time. So it was that the day before Coriolan misbehaved himself with a harlot. (MI 52-53, translation modified)

The irregularity of this heterosexual "vice" is further emphasized as the brothers discuss the couple in whose wedding they will participate: Pégase remarks that whereas Colin is "*bien*" 'nice,' "Chloé's titties are so round that you could never imagine she was a boy!" This comment jolts Coriolan who blushes and admits, "I think she's pretty. You *want* to touch her titties. . . . Doesn't she have that effect on you?" His brother looks at him in amazement. "You're a pig," he says energetically. "You are the nastiest of all. . . ." Pégase then finishes his reproach with what must be, for him, the ultimate outrage: "One of these days you'll go and marry a woman!" (MI 53-54, EJ 51-52). Moreover, Coriolan's bisexual "vice" later seems to direct him toward the *petites filles* whom he insists on helping to undress following the wedding ceremony, and when he cannot resist "getting too close to Isis," Pégase intervenes by pinching "his thigh as hard as he could and calling him a pervert" (EJ 63, MI 67).

I have emphasized these scenes of sexual intimacy, commentary and surveillance in order to situate them in the construction of the "skewed and heated atmosphere" of *L'Écume des jours*, specifically as part of its "proof" of "love, all sorts of love, with pretty girls." That is, this particular *amour* finds expression in various ways, incestuously as well as among *jolies filles* themselves, and its power is enough to tempt even a *pédéraste d'honneur* whose lucrative "career" presumably might be threatened by succumbing to the "vice" of bisexuality. Admittedly, these scenes are isolated, yet they all stand in sharp contrast to the focal moment which they prepare, the wedding of Colin and Chloé, during which the dominant mode of "love with pretty girls," i.e. the monogamous union, is ceremoniously consecrated. As I suggested earlier, the idea of finding "a soul-mate," i.e. a monogamous relationship, functions from the start as Colin's obsession and necessarily completes Chick's need to imitate Partre's works and existence in detail, allied as the philosopher is to "la Duchesse de Bovouard." Furthermore, not only is the dapper Nicolas betrothed to the heretofore elusive Isis by the end

of the novel, but the final encounter of Colin and Alise also reinforces the importance of monogamous relations: at the novel's end, with Chloé dying in the next room, Colin caresses the naked Alise seated on his lap, and she asks, "Why didn't I meet you first? I would have loved you just as much, but now I can't. I love [Chick]." Despite Chloé's earlier explicit approval of Colin's attraction to Alise, Colin responds, "I know. I prefer Chloé too now." He made her get up and picked up her dress (MI 163, EJ 150-51). This choice is not only crucial for the reinforcement of monogamy as dominant mode of "love with pretty girls," it is essential for preparing the dénouement: in her final comments to Colin, "I think I'll be able to do something for Chick all the same" (MI 163, EJ 151), Alise announces her resolve to commit herself totally to Chick, even unto death, by preventing Partre from publishing "cette encyclopédie" 'this encyclopedia' which Alise believes will mean certain death for Chick in his obsessive drive to "collect Partre."

This "ideological unmasking" suggests that the "purity" and "innocence" of the depiction of sexual difference in *L'Écume des jours* relies on the submission of women to the fantasies and needs of their male counterparts. In order to introduce the subsequent, affirmative phase of this analysis, I propose to outline and draw attention to the limits of what Schweickart calls the narrative's "utopian moment." Specifically, I wish to connect the strategies of intervention of "narrating agency" suggested earlier to the depiction of sexual difference in *L'Écume des jours*, not only vis-à-vis the predominant role of the heterosexual, male "gaze," but also vis-à-vis the musical motif in *L'Écume des jours*, the movement between jazz and blues, or at least the manner in which Vian renders these particular idioms. In any number of scenes, whether presented directly through dialogue, through seemingly objective descriptions or through observations introduced by the "narrating agency," the bodies of female characters are discussed in conversations, are at fingertips to be caressed and commanded, and are displayed in numerous descriptive passages. In short, from the perspective of the female characters, this parallel universe truly exists "on a surface which is irregularly corrugated and distorts everything" since it is one, to paraphrase Luce Irigaray, in which feminine sexuality is entirely conceptualized on the basis of male parameters (23). That is, male fantasies of domination and of female submission run wild here, but under the ironized *optique* of the *techno-fantaisiste* "purity," "chastity" and "innocence" with the result, of course, that woman's plot simply cannot be her own (Jardine 52).

The only woman to survive is Isis: from the start, she is depicted as free-willed, even dangerous, as in the conversation with Colin at the *matinée* given in honor of her dog, Dupont:

[Colin] l'attira vers lui par les deux poignets.

—Vous avez une robe ravissante, lui dit-il. C'était une petite robe toute simple, de lainage vert amande avec de gros boutons de céramique dorée et une grille en fer forgé formant l'empiècement du dos. . . .

—Peut-on passer la main à travers les barreaux sans être mordu?

—Ne vous y fiez pas trop, dit Isis. (EJ 34)

Colin pulled her toward him by her two wrists. "Your dress is gorgeous," he said to her. It was a very simple little dress of almond-green wool with huge gilt ceramic buttons and a yoke of cast-iron bars. . . .

"Can one put his hand through the bars without getting bitten?"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Isis. (MI 34-35)

Isis even scolds Colin as he ogles the girls at the *matinée*: "Isis shook him to keep him quiet. 'Are you going to behave yourself?' " (MI 35, EJ 35). In fact, besides this forthright strength, it is Isis who accepts without question the role to which she seems destined, i.e. to comfort and to serve: at Colin's apartment, Isis tenderly consoles Chloé, holding her "in her arms like a sick baby" (MI 152, EJ 140). Despite her misgivings about marrying Nicolas—"I can't," murmured Isis. "I'm not good enough for him" (MI 153, EJ 141)—she seems to have transformed Nicolas into a compassionate guardian as well: he not only retrieves and conserves Alise's "dazzling blond hair," which alone survives the final bookstore conflagration (MI 178, EJ 164). When Isis later keeps her promise and returns to Chloé's side one final time, Nicolas also accompanies her and exhibits, with some trepidation, the same tenderness characteristic of Isis: "Nicolas saw Chloé and turned his head away. . . . He went up and stroked her hand. . . . Isis put her pretty dark head next to Chloé's and kissed her carefully" (MI 180, EJ 166-67). At the end, Isis and Nicolas are among the few who follow the funeral cortege and support Colin throughout the disturbing ceremony of Chloé's burial (EJ 170-74, MI 182-89).

As for Chloé, it is she who serves as focus for Colin's "object need," and her life force is oppressed by Colin's "idea" of love, or as Alain Costes describes it, the "*l'usure*" 'wearing down' of man's desire for

woman (Arnaud, *Boris Vian. Colloque* 1: 171). Both the "idea" and this *usure* are symbolized by the flowers that smother her like his all-encompassing obsession and, in particular, by the "*nénuphar*" 'water lily' which devours her from within as does the existential construct into which she has no choice but to fit and then wither.<sup>21</sup> One must wonder, then, about the nature of the explicit connection that Vian proposes in the foreword between love and jazz. For while love, as we have seen, functions as an oppressive, even lethal, affective impulse, jazz would seem to serve as a liberating force of expression for the characters and author alike, especially as a textual element whose associations in post-World War II France with the long-awaited liberation by American forces and with an emergent Parisian intellectual scene and the concomitant frenetic youth culture, all provide links to liberation, existentialism, and the exotic "American uncle."<sup>22</sup> As has been amply noted, most succinctly by Pia Birgander, "music will seal the musical-sentimental union of Colin and Chloé" (57), even from before their first encounter at Isis' *matinée* through the final scene of the burial. In some ways, as Birgander suggests (59), Chloé is "jazz personified": since Colin picks Duke Ellington's song "Chloé" on Nicolas' recommendation for the dance lesson prior to the *matinée*, the meeting of the "soul-mate" seems musically predestined. This same tune so overwhelms Colin at the *matinée* that he utters "*une stupidité*" 'something stupid' when introduced to Chloé: "How do you do," said Chloé. "How do y . . . Are you arranged by Duke Ellington?" (EJ 35, MI 35). After their first dance and first kiss, Colin expresses this musical personification/creation when he hears the Ellington arrangement and murmurs in Chloé's ear: "It's you absolutely" (MI 38, EJ 38). But rather than a personification, this musical mediation of their relationship develops as *objectification* in the *techno-fantaisiste* register, with the help of Colin's servant, Nicolas, through the cake that he prepares for Colin and Chick following the *matinée*: having traced a spiral on the cake with a knife, Colin uses a holly leaf as a needle to "play" the cake and to produce the sounds of Chloé "in the Duke Ellington arrangement." Then, these magic vibrations seemingly grant a "material realization" of the deepest wishes of those who listen: "Chick took the knife from him and stuck it firmly into the cake. He split it in two, and inside was a new article by Partre for Chick, and a date with Chloé for Colin" (MI 42, EJ 41). And yet, this same tune seems to predetermine Chloé's fate since the song's subtitle, "Song of the Swamp," announces the marshy cemetery which will be her final resting place (EJ 173-79, MI 186-89).<sup>23</sup>

By contrast, Vian develops another musical "line" of "love with pretty girls" in the character of Alise, a resonance corresponding to the

auditive system of echos that creates a fundamental dissonance in *L'Écume des jours* (Birgander 59). As Michel Maillard has argued, "the story speaks the language of feeling, and the text speaks the force of desire. The narrative signifiers exalt Chloé and the textual signifiers magnify Alise. The tale valorizes love, the writing betrays the failed love of the Colin-Chloé couple" (197). Despite the supposed equivalence and interchangeability of the various male and female characters, Maillard demonstrates Alise's predominance as the most caressed and observed woman in the novel (246-48).<sup>24</sup> In contrast to Chloé, whose blandness causes Maillard to call her "Mademoiselle Tout le Monde" (Miss Anybody, 249), Alise is so clearly musically animated that she is the character who most fully incorporates jazz in her existence. Moreover, as Maillard notes (254-59), Alise is intelligent as well as beautiful, not only in terms of the intellectual *savoir* that attracts Chick, but also in terms of her psychological insight regarding those around her, especially Chick. Thus, while fully recognizing his bibliomania, Alise submits to Chick's obsession throughout the novel, a submission that eventually results in their separation and, finally, in her futile attempt to affirm herself. For, as she confronts Partre, Alise acknowledges that Chick is "too deeply engaged," and then apparently affirms her existential "choice": "But I'm free, because he doesn't want me to live with him any more, so I'm going to kill you because you won't delay publication" (MI 170, EJ 157-58). Thus, in a parodic twist on the Sartrean concept of freedom, Alise affirms her own "choice," but still on Chick's terms, first destroying Partre, and then fire-bombing the bookstores in an attempt to help Chick combat his obsession. But her death in the incineration of one last *librairie* is as much a consequence of this obsession as is Chick's demise in his desperate attempt to shoot it out with the tax-cops.

The re-reading that I have initiated suggests that we can find a rough equivalence between Chloé and Alise in their shared status as victims of the male gaze: on one hand, as objects of Colin and Chick's fascinated, appropriating, yet terrorized gaze, their situation recalls an observation by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément: "Women's bodies must be bound so that the constraints will make the demons come out. . . . The female body is only an intermediary, prop, passage. Passage accomplished, that which is no longer woman but beast, devil, symptom is set free. The girls are not released, the demons are; the girls are *bound*" (11). That is, Chloé and Alise serve as intermediaries for the homosocial bond that Colin and Chick repeatedly reinforce in so many ways, but must also continually repress. Yet, despite their similarities, Chloé and Alise can be distinguished by the diverse manifestations of this "effect of passage": whereas Chloé's existence is objectified as musical arrangement

as well as through its “material realization,” Alise embodies jazz through the physical mediation of music that is dance. Let us recall that during Colin’s dance lesson before the *matinée*, Nicolas counsels him to dance “*le biglemoi*” ‘the ogle-me’ slowly, not like “unscrupulous people who have started to dance the ogle-me in the Negro style, to a quick tempo” (MI 27, EJ 27).<sup>25</sup> To Colin’s queries, Nicolas explains that “to a boogie, the effect is, it must be admitted, all the more obscene because one gets so engrossed in the music” (MI 28, EJ 28). Then, the link between music, dance and sexuality is further emphasized as Colin asks, “Where did you learn the ogle-me?” Nicolas reveals not only that “my niece taught it to me,” but also that her father, Nicolas’s brother, helped him develop “the complete theory of the ogle-me.” And he adds: “He even told me he had done it nineteen years ago.” “Your niece is eighteen?” asked Colin. “And three months,” corrected Nicolas” (MI 28, EJ 28). This “correction” links the dance performance to the procreative effect of its “pure,” “theoretical,” i.e. slow form, not to be sullied by the “obscenity” of the quick-step boogie in which one (a male) risks losing control, being swept away (“engrossed”) by an “*air obsédant*” ‘haunting tune.’

Alise is, in fact, revealed at the *matinée* as one of the “unscrupulous people” who shocks Colin when she and Chick “were indulging in a remarkable demonstration of the Negro-style ogle-me.” Colin reacts immediately to this physically, “‘Don’t look at that.’ He leaned her head slightly forward and kissed her between the ear and the shoulder. She shivered but did not withdraw her ear” (MI 38, EJ 37, translation modified). That dance occurs elsewhere in *L’Écume des jours* only on ceremonial occasions—the impressive “parade” and “prancing” of the wedding officials, who reappear in the funeral procession to “jeer at Colin and dance like savages” (MI 186, EJ 172) and finally to disappear “dancing a farandole” after Chloé’s burial (MI 189, EJ 174)—suggests that the role of dance at the *matinée* is ceremonial as well, women’s bodies serving as sites of passage for music situated within fixed boundaries. Even the stylish “dance arena” of the *matinée*, the apartment in which Isis lives with her (absent) parents, contributes to the limitations inherent in this event.<sup>26</sup> Chloé and Alise, then, constitute two facets of the same phenomenon, the “innocent” one fully contained (by Colin) within the ceremonial limits, the other momentarily exceeding these limits via her “obscene” corporal expression (in which Chick gladly participates), yet finally “bound” by the gaze and judgments circumscribing this social ceremony.

On the other hand, as victim’s of the “skewed and heated atmosphere” of Vian’s *démonstration*, the women are laboratory subjects or,

more accurately, objects that never stand a chance since their existence and possibilities of expression are inversely proportional to the obsessions through which the *démonstration* operates. This experimental process may be understood, following Donna Haraway, as a sadism that "is the organizer of the narrative plot and part of the material apparatus for the cultural production of meanings." She continues:

Sadism is about the structure of scientific vision, in which the body becomes a rhetoric, a persuasive language linked to a social practice. The final cause, or telos, of that practice is the production of the unmarked abstract universal, man. (233)

If this "love with pretty girls" is ultimately deadly, what would seem to remain in this *démonstration* is *le jazz*; in fact, despite the *techno-fantaisiste* and the pseudo-scientific trappings of *L'Écume des jours*, Vian allegorizes the struggle of oppressor and oppressed, which Viviane Smith locates precisely in the musical configuration of Colin and Chloé: "Let us note that Chloé is a melody, reified, written music, a musical object, while Colin, on the other hand, is a producer of sounds, an active composer. Man-subject, woman-object, we are indeed in the universe of phalocrats, figured musically" (208). As for Alise, we can see her "transgression" of the "purity" of music's embodiment in the boogie woogie as no longer meriting mere constraint, but annihilation so that the "beast, devil, symptom, demons" can be "set free" (Cixous and Clément 11). Moreover, the liberating and repetitive expressive force of dance that Alise embodies in *L'Écume des jours* transgresses the limits of reproduction which, as Claudette Oriol-Boyer argues, "is attributed to the sites which are man's property" (325), not only in the work place (only men hold jobs in the novel), but even in the "birth place," i.e. with men attempting to seize "this function necessary for the (re)production of the social order in the hope, no doubt, of healing at the same time this 'symbolic wound' that the impossibility of creating a child represents for man" (325-26).

In fact, given Vian's jazz aesthetic of the "ephemeral, fleeting happiness" of jazz performance, we can understand that jazz and pretty girls are here both corporally and spiritually ephemeral, improvisations that their creators know are (to be) lost. As such, they are linked as an operative premise in *L'Écume des jours* in order to contribute to the novel's "feeling of the ephemeral with a nuance of melancholy, if not of anguish" (Pestureau, in Arnaud, *Boris Vian. Colloque* 1: 217). Following the broad structure that Viviane Smith develops of *L'Écume des jours* (221-22), the upbeat rhythms of boogie and jazz correspond to the joyful

period of adolescence that reigns in the novel's first section; it is following the "jazzified" marriage ceremony and honeymoon that the troubles begin and increase, as if the jazz idiom could not support the confinement of marriage and the responsibilities of adulthood.<sup>27</sup> Yet, these women cannot sing their own blues, as Chloé is reduced to monosyllables and then to nothingness, as Alise's affirmation of her "freedom" results in the combustion of all but her golden locks (kept by Nicolas as talisman), as Isis is last seen "stumbling along behind" Nicolas and Colin at the cemetery (EJ 174, MI 188). Despite the jazz reveille of "raucous notes [that] vibrated in the still air" at Chloé's burial, even Colin's alter ego, the mouse, succumbs to the fate of Chloé and Alise in the bizarre suicidal game of "cat and mouse" of the novel's coda.

This ludic strategy might serve allegorically for the interpretive difficulties posed by *L'Écume des jours*: just as the mouse willingly awaits the "eleven little blind girls" to step on the cat's tail and thereby snap its teeth shut around the mouse's head, many critics of *L'Écume des jours* have willingly aligned (and allied) themselves with the novel's apparently "charming" and playful *démonstration* and have succumbed to its "cutting edge" of narrative desire and duplicity. The re-reading that I am proposing suggests, then, that the textual details in the purview of narratological analysis must be situated in their relation to peri-textual, rhetorical and thematic elements as so many narrative strategies deployed by an author to be resisted in an affirmative act of reading. For I believe that narratology understood as a feminist practice can help orient it onto a path that will allow us not only to reflect on and critique our own enterprise, but also to think towards and through the problems of violence and appropriation that a reader (female and male) meets in literary texts, even ones so apparently (and deceptively) "innocent" as Vian's wishful construction of a parallel universe.

### Notes

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1. Vian's prestige in this journal is quite evident since this dossier is the fourth such detailed discussion of the author's works to appear there ("Dossier Boris Vian").

2. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Arnaud here refers to Rybalka and echoes his earlier protest ("Boris Vian and Vernon Sullivan") against Rybalka's analysis.
3. Most notably, this novel inspired five analyses and follow-up commentaries by a team of French scholars (Costes, *Lecture plurielle*).
4. I adopt the terms "interpellation" and "suture," respectively, from Althusser 174-75, and Heath 76-112. See Silverman 194-236 for an extended discussion of "suture" in psychoanalytic and cinema theory.
5. My reading is also indebted in this regard to Dale M. Bauer.
6. By "duplicity," Chambers suggests "the textual understanding of the necessarily *dual* input (of text and reader) into the communicative event and the consequent acknowledgement, in texts, of the irreducible *otherness* of the reader whose involvement in the textual processes is, nevertheless, a precondition of their success" (14).
7. Specifically, "To recognize the dual nature of narrative, to find categories and terms that are abstract and semiotic enough to be useful, but concrete and mimetic enough to seem relevant for critics whose theories root literature in 'the real conditions of our lives'," "Feminist Narratology" 344. Lanser quotes from Newton 125.
8. Lanser extends these remarks in "Shifting Paradigms," in response to a critique of her earlier essay by Diengott. See also Warhol 3-44.
9. Of the numerous discussions on *l'écriture féminine*, Ann Rosalind Jones offers the most enlightening analyses. On "men in feminism," see the extensive discussions in Jardine and Smith, and also Boone and Cadden for more recent interventions in this debate.
10. I employ the term "narrating agency" to designate Genette's *l'instance narrative* (*Figures III*), "the generating instance of narrative discourse" (ND 213), i.e. the wide range of effects of narration deployed in *L'Écume des jours*, not only those attributable to a specific "narrator." Prince defines the "narrating instance" as "the act of recounting a series of situations and events and, by extension, the spatio-temporal context (including the narrator and the narratee) of the act" (57).
11. On "naturalization," see Culler 131-60.
12. Baude emphasizes the link between the novel's "scientific rigor and artistic fantasy" (78). Jarry discusses three logics in *L'Écume des jours*, a "sur-logique" "as in a fairy tale," an "il-logique" "fantastic," and an

“anti-logique,” neither *sur-* nor *il-logique*, but rather one that acts “as subversion, or better, as transgression” (150).

13. On interventions of the “narrating agency,” see Birgander 95-98, and also Gauthier’s distinctions of “la description-narrateur” (142). Regarding the “free indirect mode,” Ramazani states that this “mode” includes “any technique whose grammatical features and proximate verbal context suggest that it is free indirect discourse. As such, it is able to account for a range of effects, from free indirect discourse proper to the ‘free indirect’ narration of phantasmatic tableaux by way of ambiguous intermediate forms” (47).

14. Birgander 99-100, shows how a given exchange can specify the relationship between characters, corroborate assertions already made by the narrating agency, and even undermine the characters’ statements (for example, when Colin questions Chick about the nature and amount of his expenses, EJ 85; MI 90-91). References in the text to *L’Écume des jours* are abbreviated EJ, and to its translation, *Mood Indigo*, MI.

15. Smith summarizes as follows: “New Orleans: cradle of jazz; Memphis: cradle of the blues; Davenport: festival site before Carnegie Hall or Montreux and Nice, still famous as the birthplace of Bix Beiderbecke” (204-05).

16. Haineault calls it a “stylistic high-wire act . . . that forces the reader to dispense with any erudition, sense of coherence, logic of versimilitude and notion of twentieth-century literary certainty” (414).

17. Cismaru 54-61, studies the connections between the novel’s foreword and the existentialism of post-World War II France.

18. On the “charm” of *L’Écume des jours*, see Baude 121-24. On the “tragic” dimension in Vian’s work, see Bordillon, as well as his intervention at the Cerisy colloquium on Vian (Arnaud, *Boris Vian. Colloque 1*: 130). In debate at this colloquium, Michel Rybalka insists: “I think that in *L’Écume des jours*, we are not at all in the tragic, as was suggested, but in the pathetic. It’s not a question of changing the course of events, but simply of reflecting poetically on what has happened” (Arnaud, *Boris Vian. Colloque 1*: 184).

19. Warhol defines the “engaging narrator” as one who intervenes in order “to close the gaps between the narratee, the addressee and the receiver” (29).

20. On this passage, Costes comments, “We see here that this concerns a wish, a conscious wish, and in fact, that we are presented with a need to find an object, in short: an *object need*, an object of any sort” (“*Désir*” 172).

21. Costes argues that "Colin's love object will be infiltrated by destructive motions: we must therefore see in the water lily that devours Chloé the expelled representative, injected within the love object, of Colin's aggressivity" ("Désir" 175). On the *nénuphar*, see the discussion in Arnaud, *Boris Vian. Colloque 1*: 114-26, and Kaufmann.

22. As Pestureau notes, quoting from Vian's *Chroniques de jazz*, "jazz was the constant and dominant passion in his life and caused him to turn constantly toward the Anglo-Saxon world, 'the perfumed shores of the territory of Uncle Sam' (!) or 'the green shores of Pale Albion'" (27). See also Pestureau's chapter, "Amérique, Amérique . . . ou Présence des Amerlos (ou -Lauds)" (37-94), in which he notes Vian's refusal to travel to the United States, thus choosing "the America of his dreams to the real America" (51).

23. Birgander 205, n.84, notes that both Duchateau (109) and Rybalka (Arnaud, *Boris Vian. Colloque 1*: 116) emphasize this prefiguration of Chloé's burial. See also Pestureau 414.

24. See Bens 184-85, and Oriol-Boyer 202-07, on the interchangeability of male and female characters.

25. The translation of "*biglemoi*" as 'ogle-me,' while emphasizing the importance of the gaze in the novel, elides the association of *bigle* with the French interjection, *bigre*, derived from *bougre* according to *Le Grand Robert* dictionary, a word whose archaic connotations suggest sodomy. Roubichou's explanation (64), that *biglemoi* derives from the verb, 'bigler' 'to squint,' seems decidedly incomplete.

26. I borrow the term "dance arena" from Hazzard-Gordon x-xi. This choice of location is all the more striking in contrast to Vian's own celebration of the Paris club scene in his *Manuel de Saint-Germain des Prés*.

27. Vian's much-commented use of jazz as founding element of his art (e.g. Pestureau 377-424) demands further reflection as an adaptation, even an appropriation and containment, of a black idiom, particularly in light of the questionable status of race in *L'Écume des jours* explicitly posed by the phrases "à la façon des Noirs" and "dans le style nègre" (EJ 27, 37). On the "blues matrix" for literary studies, see Baker 1-14, and on the relationship of jazz to black vernacular forms of "signifyin(g)," see Gates 63-64, 104-05, 123-24.

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