# **Classic Poetry Series**

# **Boris Vian**

- poems -

# **Publication Date:**

2012

## **Publisher:**

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

## **Boris Vian (1920 - 1959)**

Boris Vian was born at Ville d'Avray in 1920. He was trained as a civil engineer, receiving his diploma in 1942. He was also a jazz trumpeter, film actor, cabaret singer, translator, inventor, record company executive & Transcendent Satrap of the College de Pataphysique. Vian's extraordinary work mirrored his fascinating life. He wrote novels, plays, songs, scenarios & one short opera.

In his 39 years Boris Vian wrote 10 novels, 42 short stories, 7 theatre pieces, 400 songs, 4 poetry collections, 6 opera librettos, 20 translations of short stories and novels, and about 50 articles.

#### Early Life

Boris Vian was born in 1920 into an upper middle-class family in the wealthy Parisian suburb of Ville d'Avray (Hauts-de-Seine). His parents were Paul Vian, a young rentier and Yvonne Ramenez, amateur pianist and harpist. From his father Vian inherited the distrust of the Church and the Army, as well as a love of the bohemian life. Vian was the second of four children: the others were Lélio (1918), Alain (1921–1995) and Ninon (1924). The family occupied the Les Fauvettes villa. The name "Boris" does not indicate Russian ancestry; it was chosen by Yvonne, who was an avid classical music lover, after seeing a performance of Mussorgsky's opera Boris Godunov.

Vian suffered from ill health throughout his childhood and had to be educated at home until the age of five. From 1926 to 1932 he studied first at a small lycée, then at Lycée de Sèvres. After the Wall Street Crash of 1929 the family's financial situation worsened considerably and they moved to a small lodge near Les Fauvettes (from 1929 to 1932 the Vians rented the villa to Yehudi Menuhin's family). Shortly after Vian's 12th birthday he developed rheumatic fever and after a while he also contracted typhoid. This combination led to severe health problems and left Vian with a heart condition that would ultimately lead to an early death.

#### Formal Education and Teenage Years

From 1932 to 1937 Vian studied at Lycée Hoche in Versailles. In 1936 Vian and his two brothers started organizing what they called "surprise-parties" (surprises-parties). They partook of mescaline in the form of a Mexican cacticalled peyote. These gatherings became the basis of his early novels: Trouble dans les andains(Turmoil in the Swaths) (1943) and particularly Vercoquin et le plancton(Vercoquin and the Plankton) (1943–44). It was also in 1936 that Vian got interested in jazz; the next year he started playing the trumpet and joined the Hot Club de France.

In 1937 Vian graduated from Lycée Hoche, passing baccalauréats in mathematics, philosophy, Latin, Greek and German. He subsequently enrolled at Lycée Condorcet, Paris, where he studied special mathematics until 1939. Vian became fully immersed in the French jazz scene: for example, in 1939 he helped organize Duke Ellington's second concert in France. When the WWII started, Vian was not accepted into the army due to poor health. He entered Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures in Paris and subsequently moved to Angoulême when the school moved there because of the war.

In 1940 Vian met Michelle Léglise, who became his wife in 1941. She taught Vian English and introduced him to translations of American literature. Also in 1940 Vian met Jacques Loustalot, who became a recurring character in several early novels and short stories. In 1942 Vian and his brothers joined a jazz orchestra under the direction of Claude Abbadie, who became a minor character in Vian's Vercoquin et le plancton. The same year Vian graduated from École Centrale with a diploma in metallurgy and also in 1942 Boris and Michelle's son Patrick was born.

#### Career

After Vian's graduation, he and Michelle moved to Paris' 10th arrondissement and, on 24 August 1942 became an engineer at the French Association for Standardisation (AFNOR). By this time he was an accomplished jazz trumpeter, and in 1943 he wrote his first novel, Trouble dans les andains (Turmoil in the Swaths). His literary career started in 1943 with his first publication, a poem, in the Hot Club de France bulletin. The poem was signed Bison Ravi ("A Delighted Bison"), an anagram of Vian's real name. The same year Vian's father died, murdered at home by burglars.

In 1944 Vian completed Vercoquin et le plancton(Vercoquin and the Plankton), a novel inspired partly by surprise-parties of his youth and partly by his job at the AFNOR (which is heavily satirized in the novel), Raymond Queneau and Jean Rostand helped Vian to publish this work at Editions Gallimard in 1947, along with several works Vian completed in 1946. These included his first major novels, L'Écume des jours and L'automne à Pékin (Autumn in Peking). The former, a tragic love story in which real world objects respond to the characters' emotions, is now regarded as Vian's masterpiece, but at the time of its publication it failed to attract any considerable attention. L'automne à Pékin, which also had a love story at its heart but was somewhat more complex, also failed to sell well.

Frustrated by the commercial failure of his works, Vian vowed he could write a best-seller and wrote the hard-boiled novel I Spit on Your Graves (J'irai cracher sur vos tombes) in only 15 days. Vian wrote an introduction in which he claimed to be the translator of the American shooting star writer by the name Vernon Sullivan. Vian persuaded his friend Jean d'Halluin, a beginning publisher, to publish the novel in 1947. Eventually the hoax became known and the book became one of the best-selling titles of that year. Vian wrote three more Vernon Sullivan novels in 1947–49.

The year 1946 marked a turning point in Vian's life: At one of the popular parties that he and Michelle hosted he made acquaintance of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, became a regular in the inner literary cycles and started regularly publishing various materials in Les Temps Modernes. Vian admired Jean-Paul Sartre in particular and gave him a prominent role in "Froth on a Daydream". Ironically, Sartre and Michelle Vian commenced a relationship that would eventually destroy Vian's marriage.

Despite his literary work becoming more important, Vian never left the jazz scene. He became a regular contributor to various jazz-related magazines, and played trumpet at Le Tabou. As a result, his financial situation improved, and he abandoned the job at the AFNOR. Vian also formed his own choir, La petite chorale de Saint-Germain-des-Pieds.

Later Years

The year 1948 saw the birth of Vian's daughter, Carole. He continued his literary career by writing Vernon Sullivan novels, and also published poetry collections: Barnum's Digest (1948) and Cantilènes en gelée (Cantelinas in Jelly) (1949). Vian also started writing plays, the first of which, L'Equarrissage pour tous (Slaughter for Everyone), was staged the year it was written, 1950. The same year saw publication of Vian's third major novel, L'Herbe rouge (The Red Grass). This was a much darker story than its predecessors, centering around a man who built a giant machine that could help him psychoanalyse his soul. Like the other two books, it did not sell well; Vian's financial situation had been steadily worsening since late 1948, and he was forced to take up translation of English-language literature and articles to get by. Vian separated from his wife, and in 1950 he met Ursula Kübler (1928-2010), a Swiss dancer; the two started an affair, and in 1951 Vian divorced Michelle. Ursula and Boris married in 1954.

Vian's last novel, L'Arrache-cœur (The Heart-extractor), was published in 1953, yet again to poor sales and Vian effectively stopped writing fiction (the only other work that appeared after 1953 was a revised version of L'automne à Pékin', published 1956). He concentrated on a new field, song-writing and performing, and continued writing poetry. Vian's songs were successful; in 1954 he embarked on his first tour as singer-songwriter. By 1955, when he was working as art director for Philips, Vian was active in a wide variety of fields, from song-writing to opera. He also wrote screenplays and several more plays. His first album, Chansons possibles et impossibles (Possible and Impossible Songs), was also recorded in 1955. He was also wrote the first French rock and roll songs with his friend Henri Salvador, who sang them under the nickname Henry Cording. He wrote "Java Pour Petula" (a song about an English girl arriving in France, written in Parisian argot) for Petula Clark's first concert performances in France.

Vian's life was endangered in 1956 by a pulmonary edema, but he survived and continued working with the same intensity as before. In 1957 Vian completed another play, Les Bâtisseurs d'empire (The Empire Builders) (only published and staged in 1959); in 1958 Vian worked on the opera Fiesta with Darius Milhaud, and a collection of essays, En avant la zizique... Et par ici les gros sous (On with the Muzak... And Bring in the Big Bucks), was published the same year.

#### Death

On the morning of 23 June 1959, Boris Vian was at the Cinema Marbeuf for the screening of the film version of I Spit on Your Graves. He had already fought with the producers over their interpretation of his work, and he publicly denounced the film, stating that he wished to have his name removed from the credits. A few minutes after the film began, he reportedly blurted out: "These guys are supposed to be American? My ass!" He then collapsed into his seat and died from sudden cardiac death en route to the hospital.

#### Eserleri:

#### **Novels**

Trouble dans les andains (Turmoil in the Swaths) (1942–43, published posthumously in 1966 by La Jeune Parque)

Vercoquin et le plancton (Vercoquin and the Plankton) (1943–45, published 1947 by Editions Gallimard)

L'Écume des jours (Foam of the Days) (1946, published 1947 by Éditions Gallimard; translated variously as Froth on the Daydream, Mood Indigo and Foam of the Daze)

L'automne à Pékin (Autumn in Peking) (1946, published 1947 by Éditions du Scorpion, revised version published in 1956; Autumn in Peking)

L'Herbe rouge (The Red Grass) (1948–49, published 1950 by Éditions Toutain)

L'Arrache-coeur (Heartsnatcher) (1947–1951, published 1953 by Éditions Vrille; Heartsnatcher)

Vernon Sullivan novels

J'irai cracher sur vos tombes (I Spit on Your Graves) (Éditions du Scorpion, 1946)

Les morts ont tous la même peau (The Dead All Have the Same Skin) (Éditions du Scorpion, 1947)

Et on tuera tous les affreux (To Hell With the Ugly) (Éditions du Scorpion, 1948)

Elles se rendent pas compte (They Do Not Realize) (1948–50, published 1950 by Éditions du Scorpion)

Short story collections

Les Fourmis (The Ants) (1944-47, published 1949 by Éditions du Scorpion)

Les Lurettes fourrées (Ages Fulfilled) (1948-49, published 1950 by Le Livre de

Poche as an addendum to their edition of L'Herbe rouge)

Le Ratichon baigneur (Toothy Bather) (1946–52, published posthumously in 1981 by Éditions Bourgois)

Le Loup-garou (The Werewolf) (1945–53?, published posthumously in 1970 by Éditions Bourgois)

Dramatic works

L'Équarrissage pour tous (Squaring for All), play (1947, published 1950 by Éditions Toutain)

Le Dernier des métiers (The Last of the Trades), play (1950, published 1965 by Éditions Pauvert)

Tête de Méduse (Medusa's Head), comedy in one act (1951, published 1971 by U.G.E.)

Série Blême (Pallid Series), tragedy in three acts (1952?, published 1971 by U.G.E.)

Le Chasseur français (The French Hunter), vaudeville (1955, published 1971 by U.G.E.)

Les Bâtisseurs d'Empire (The Empire Builders), (1957, published 1959 by Collège de 'Pataphysique)

Le Goûter des généraux (The Snack of Generals), (1951, published 1962 by Collège de 'Pataphysique)

Poetry

Barnum's Digest (Barnum's Digest) (1948, a collection of 10 poems)

Cantilènes en gelée (Cantelinas in Jelly) (1949)

Je voudrais pas crever (I Would Like Not to Die) (posthumously published in 1962)

**Translations** 

The Big Sleep by Raymond Chandler as Le grand sommeil (1948)

The Lady in the Lake by Raymond Chandler as La dame du lac (1948)

The World of Null-A by A. E. van Vogt, as Le Monde des Å (1958)

Other works

Manuel de St-Germain-des-Prés, originally commissioned to be a tourist guide to the St-Germain-des-Prés district (published 1950 by Éditions Toutain)

## I wouldn't want to die (Je voudrais pas crever)

Before having known The black mexican dogs Who sleep without dreaming The butt-naked monkeys Gobbling up tropics The silver spiders in Webs riddled with bubbles I wouldn't want to die Not knowing if the moon Behind its fake nickel look Has a sharper side If the sun is cold If the four seasons Are really only four Not having tried To wear a dress On the boulevards Not having peeped Through a sewer peephole Not having put my dick Inside weirdo corners I wouldn't want to end Without experiencing leprosy Or the seven diseases One catches over there Neither the good nor the bad Would cause me some sorrow If if I knew that I would get it firsthand And there iz also Everything I know Everything I like That I know that I like The green bottom of the sea Where the seaweeds waltz On the rippled sand The burnt grass in June The crackling earth The smell of conifers And the kisses of the one She's this and she's that The belle here she comes My bearcub, Ursula I wouldn't want to die Before having used up Her mouth with my mouth Her body with my hands The rest with my eyes I say no more one should Remain polite I wouldn't want to fade Without someone inventing

Eternal roses The two hour day The sea at the mountain The mountain at the sea The end of pain Newspapers in color All children happy And so many other tricks That sleep inside the brains Of genius engineers Of jovial gardeners Of concerned socialists Of urban urbanists And of thoughtful thinkers So many things to see To see and to hear So much time to wait Searching in the dark And me I see the end It swarms and it comes closer With its ugly face And it opens its arms to me Like a cripplety frog I wouldn't want to die No sir no madam Before having tested The taste which torments me The taste which is the strongest I wouldn't want to die Before having tasted The flavour of death...

Boris Vian

### **Surprise Party**

The turntable hacked up a melancholy blues The air was heavy with dust and odors Several zazous danced while holding to their hearts Short girls with spasmodic behinds

In a closet, an amateur obstetrics couple Delivered themselves to games full of art and naivete Another in a corner attempted with ardor Tonsil-coupling, to music.

Hands encountered one another under too-short skirts Drunk, two lovebirds—(what if I said: two dodos?) Looked everywhere for a bed; they were all full...

Let this happy youth screw itself Why eradicate from them this impure manure If their hope restricts itself to rubbing membranes?

Boris Vian

#### The Deserter

Mr. President I'm writing you a letter that perhaps you will read If you have the time.

I've just received my call-up papers to leave for the front Before Wednesday night.

Mr. President
I do not want to go
I am not on this earth
to kill wretched people.

It's not to make you mad I must tell you my decision is made I am going to desert.

Since I was born
I have seen my father die
I have seen my brothers leave
and my children cry.

My mother has suffered so, that she is in her grave and she laughs at the bombs and she laughs at the worms.

When I was a prisoner they stole my wife they stole my soul and all my dear past.

Early tomorrow morning I will shut my door on these dead years I will take to the road.

I will beg my way along on the roads of France from Brittany to Provence and I will cry out to the people:

Refuse to obey refuse to do it don't go to war refuse to go.

If blood must be given go give your own

you are a good apostle Mr. President.

If you go after me warn your police that I'll be unarmed and that they can shoot.

Boris Vian