

BORIS VIAN: A LIFE IN PARADOX

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Introducing Boris Vian to an Anglo-Saxon audience presents something of a challenge, principally because he is so well known in his native France that it is difficult to imagine how he could have escaped the attention of the rest of the world. And yet, Vian remains almost unknown outside academic circles in countries such as Great Britain and the United States, where so many other prominent figures of the French cultural and intellectual landscape of the 1940s and 1950s — most of whom Vian frequented and counted as his friends — remain a subject of enduring fascination.¹ Whereas other figures of that heady period such as Georges Perec, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir have long been granted a place in the pantheon of world literature, Vian remains obstinately in the shadows. In terms of public impact, then, we might say that Boris Vian is one of France's most surprising export failures.

Why surprising? Because Vian's involvement in the Parisian intellectual life of the post-war period and the eclectic nature of his artistic pursuits — which ranged from hard-boiled crime writing to science fiction and jazz — give him the kind of profile that would seem tailor-made to appeal to a wider public, and particularly to the English-speaking world. It is nevertheless the case that his life and work have not yet found that broader resonance. British

¹ Interestingly, he has achieved recognition in some other parts of the world. His books are quite widely read in translation in Hungary, for example, and he has a certain following in Japan.

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crime-fiction readers will know Georges Simenon but not have heard of Boris Vian; generations of American feminists will know Simone de Beauvoir but not this man she used to meet at parties and in the cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and of whom she was quite fond; Sci-Fi fans throughout the Anglo-Saxon world are familiar with Jules Verne but not with France's translator of A.E. van Vogt; and soul-searching teenagers around the world work through their angst or at times discover it in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, but will never know the man with whom he shared so much.

It should be noted that, even in France, Boris Vian's work has not acquired the kind of status enjoyed by several of his contemporaries, whose works feature routinely on the curriculum in French universities and are the subject of on-going scholarly analysis. Apart from the few pioneering doctoral theses, Vian's work has remained outside the ivory towers of French academia, and is to some degree still frowned upon by scholars.² As far as the French education system is concerned, he appears to warrant discussion only in high schools, and even then he is treated in little more than a cursory manner. This state of affairs is all the more perverse when we consider that Vian became one of France's most widely read and cherished authors following his death in 1959, and especially following the events of May 1968. His anti-establishment attitude and his image as the "eternal adolescent" made him a much-loved figure for the younger generation in the sixties and seventies. A sign of his enduring popular appeal is the fact that he has been the subject of any number of biographies; indeed, they seem to appear with some regularity, rarely varying much in content or in the packaging of the myth.³

Boris Vian thus occupies a paradoxical position: on the one hand, he is a popular and well-read author who can be counted among the most important figures of twentieth-century French literature in terms of the quality of his work, the depth and breadth of his thinking, the enormity of his commercial success and the impact of his vision (on the French peace movement, to give

² It is still the case that students in France who wish to do postgraduate research on Vian are warned off or offered other, more "suitable", choices.

³ The following is a selection: Jean Clouzet, *Boris Vian* (Paris: Seghers, 1966); Françoise Renaudot, *Il était une fois Boris Vian* (Paris: Seghers, 1973); Philippe Boggio, *Boris Vian* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993); Frédéric Richaud, *Boris Vian. C'est joli de vivre* (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1999); Claire Julliard, *Boris Vian* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

but one example); but at the same time, he is neglected by scholarship and frequently dismissed as an author for young people — not a compliment in France. If we are to describe the man (and the myth with which he has now merged), it is important to keep in mind this fundamental binary opposition, for many others follow from it. It is Vian's frivolous side, for example, rather more than his serious other side, that is largely responsible for the revered position he has acquired in the French popular imaginary. There is further irony in the fact that it is outside France that the scholarly study of Boris Vian has flourished.

It is indeed as an exported commodity that Vian's work has been reconfigured over the decades as something worthy of academic scholarship. Despite his almost non-existent public reputation in the English-speaking world, it is in the Anglo-Saxon system — and most especially in the universities of North America, where some of the great names of Vian studies have worked (we might think of Gilbert Pestureau, Michel Rybalka and Marc Lapprand) — that the most influential work has emerged.⁴ Thanks to the efforts of these and other scholars, for whom Vian's less-than-serious side has been seen not as an impediment to our understanding of his writing but as one of the keys to it, his work has taken on new stature, and new markets are beginning to emerge in various parts of the world. In 2004, Marc Lapprand was thus able to write in a special edition of France's most famous literary journal, the *Magazine littéraire*, that, as far as Vian was concerned, "the most interesting

⁴ Michel Rybalka was Professor of Romance Languages at Washington University, St Louis. He is the author of one of the earliest scholarly studies of Vian, entitled *Boris Vian: Essai d'interprétation et de documentation* (Paris: Minard, 1969). A graduate of the Sorbonne, Gilbert Pestureau ended his career at Loyola University Chicago, having previously taught in various other parts of the world, including the University of Nantes, in France. He was a member of the team that produced the first edition of Vian's complete works with Fayard in 1999-2003. He is also the author of *Boris Vian, les Amerlauds et les Godons* (Paris: UGE, 10/18, 1978) and of the *Dictionnaire des personnages de Vian* (Paris: Bourgois, 1985). Marc Lapprand has taught in the Department of French at the University of Victoria in British Columbia since 1989. He was a member of the editorial team responsible for Vian's complete works, and also led the team that prepared Vian's prose works for publication in Gallimard's *Pléaïde* series in 2010. He is the author of the influential study *Boris Vian: La vie contre* (Ottawa: Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1993).

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contemporary phenomenon [was happening] overseas”.⁵ In support of this claim, he noted that, in addition to the new editions of Vian’s work being published in Japan, Romania and Spain, the Californian case of Tosh Berman’s TamTam press, which has produced English versions of a number of Vian’s longer prose works, has led something of a renaissance for Vian in America.

There are, promisingly, some signs that the literary milieu in France has likewise begun to take Vian more seriously of late. Already in 1999, a project to publish his complete works was undertaken by the reputable publishing house Fayard. More recently, in 2010, Gallimard published Vian’s collected prose writings in its prestigious “Pléiade” series — the ultimate consecration for an author in France and, in Vian’s case, a belated recognition of one of the country’s cultural miracles.⁶ This may be the catalyst for his work to be taken more seriously in academic circles in France. And conversely, given the paradoxes that seem to characterise the man and his work, it is entirely possible that the new-found prestige conferred upon him by this editorial canonisation in his native land might also lead to a larger public profile elsewhere, and in particular in the Anglo-Saxon world. That, at least, is the mission to which this present volume aims to contribute.

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It may surprise those readers who are already familiar with his work that Vian needs to be transported to the Anglo-Saxon world at all. For, in a great many of his texts, his characters famously visit, and often never set foot outside, the United States. He also passed himself off for some time as the translator of a Black American author by the name of Vernon Sullivan, though he himself

⁵ Marc Lapprand, “Lire Boris Vian”, *Magazine littéraire*, 6, 2004-2005, pp. 97-98 (p. 97) (our translation). This special number was the first of the new *Collections* series, a sort of best-of album designed to bring together previously published academic material along with work by the current leading specialists. That Vian was chosen for this inaugural number is testament to his stature among the reading public in France.

⁶ Boris Vian, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, edited by Marc Lapprand, with Christelle Gonzalo and François Roulmann (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2 vols, 2010).

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never crossed the Atlantic.⁷ This is yet another of the paradoxes with which Vian has become synonymous. The foreign has a strangely familiar quality in much of his work. In Vian's second major novel signed under his own name, for instance, *L'Automne à Pékin* (*Autumn in Peking*), his characters are all catapulted from Paris onto the desert sands of the imaginary land of Exopotamia; but this turns out to be a journey into mythical space, and Exopotamia a thinly veiled allegory of Paris itself. In some ways, the more exotic he appeared, in fact and fiction, the more Parisian he turned out to be. As he notes himself in his song "L'Âme slave" ("The Slavic Soul"):

J'ai jamais été plus loin que la barrière de Pantin
Tout c'que j'ai d'russe en moi c'est le prénom
Mais ça suffit bien
[I've never been further than the barrière de Pantin (in Paris)
The only thing Russian about me is my name
But that's quite enough]⁸

This contrast between his real self and his imagined other was learned in childhood. Born in 1920 at Ville d'Avray, on the western edge of Paris, he was raised in a world of imagination, fuelled by literature and society games (including chess with childhood friends and neighbours such as the child prodigy Yehudi Menuhin and François Rostand, the only son of the well-known writer and free thinker Jean Rostand). His early life was carefree and comfortable. His parents were well-off, and the villa where they lived was not far from the Parc de Saint Cloud, where Boris, his sister Ninon and his brothers Léo and Alain would go to catch frogs at the request of their neighbour Jean Rostand. This easy existence was destined to be short-lived, however. The stock market crash put an end to the Vian fortune in 1929, forcing Boris's parents to move the family to the caretaker's cottage in order to let the main house out

⁷ Vian not only wrote a tetralogy of novels under this pseudonym, but he also had far more success with novels such as *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (*I Spit on Your Graves*) (1946) than he did with those that he produced under his own name. This was painfully true in the case of his first major novel *L'Écume des jours* (*Foam of the Daze*) (1947), for which he famously did not win the *Prix de la Pléiade*. Indeed, Vian's only real literary success in his own lifetime, especially popularly but also critically, was as Vernon Sullivan.

⁸ "L'Âme slave" (1954), in Boris Vian, *Chansons* (Paris: Bourgois, 1994), pp. 58-59 (p. 59) (our translation).

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for rent (to the Menuhins). Then, at the age of twelve, a heart problem, which was diagnosed early and which would be a constant, ticking reminder of his mortality until his early death at the age of 39, consigned the young Boris to his bedroom and to the care of an overly controlling mother. The perverse, but understandable, result of this condition was the unbridled imagination seen in evidence above, along with an enormous lust for life.

Despite the regular interruptions to his education caused by the effects of his heart condition, Boris succeeded in obtaining his baccalaureate and in 1939 gained entry to the prestigious engineering school known as the *École centrale de Paris*. The outbreak of war forced the school to relocate to Angoulême, in south-west France, where Boris continued his studies, obtaining his engineering qualification in 1942. He spent the war years largely on the fringe, detached from these dramatic events, a spectator rather than a participant. As he would later observe, “I did not fight, I was not deported, I did not collaborate, I remained for four years just one of many other under-fed imbeciles.”⁹

Following his studies, he financed his rich “other” existence — as a writer of novels, plays, short stories, poems and songs, as a jazz impresario, critic and trumpeter, as an inventor, intellectual and socialite — by working long hours at a series of day jobs, beginning with that most French of French bureaucratic organisations, the mind-numbing office of standardisation (AFNOR: *Association Française de Normalisation*). Unsurprisingly, he left that office as soon as he could and tried his hand at a variety of occupations. He worked as a translator of lengthy memoirs, wrote for jazz journals and eventually found employment with Philips Records, where he was put in charge of the jazz section. In his spare time, he could be found in the trendy hot spots of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, rubbing shoulders and exchanging ideas with the likes of Sartre, Beauvoir, Raymond Queneau, Juliette Greco and Anne-Marie Cazalis, or simply playing his trumpet. He also found the wherewithal to write, producing a prodigious number of novels, short stories, poems, plays, songs... in what would prove to be a limited space of time. In short, he “lived” himself quite literally to death, forcing his body to grab back every one of his limited hours on earth, almost tempting fate. Offices, jazz

⁹ Quoted in Richaud, *Boris Vian: C'est joli de vivre*, p. 31 (our translation).

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cellars and cafés framed his Parisian adventures, and tiny flats were his home. Only summer vacations, spent at Landemer in Normandy during his youth, and later, as an adult, in Saint-Tropez, took him away from Paris.

When Boris Vian died, it was with a sense of poetry and irony that only he could get away with. The story is, like much of Vian's life and legacy, so fabulous that it appears more myth than reality. On 23 June 1959 Boris went into the Petit Marbeuf cinema just off the Champs-Élysées to attend a private screening of a film adaptation of his novel, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (*I Spit on Your Graves*), a film that he had disapproved of from the outset, believing that it betrayed the spirit of his book. No sooner had the opening credits rolled past than, to the great consternation of those gathered in the small theatre, his head slumped back. He would never get to see any more of the film he had publicly denounced and whose production he had fought. A short time later, at the Laennec hospital where he was transported, Boris Vian was pronounced dead from a heart attack.

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Vian's extreme wanderlust of the imagination is certainly in part explained by his medical condition and by his family and working life in Paris. The sense of confinement — of himself in small rooms, in the same city, and of his imagination beating irregularly and too loudly inside his chest — found its natural safety valve in literary outpourings that reached far beyond the particular metropolis to which he was bound. He was quintessentially Parisian, but this did not prevent the rest of the country from also identifying strongly with him. Vian is certainly owned by Parisians and non-Parisians alike. He is synonymous with Paris, its literary avant-garde and its Liberation euphoria (frenetic dancing in cellars, zazous and bobby-soxers, black American jazz musicians, and so on). On the other hand, he is also renowned, and owned, throughout France as a representative of French culture more generally. Few are those who have not heard his songs, especially his famous song about avoiding conscription, "Le Déserteur", which brought him a rare moment of international acclaim. Most people you meet in France are also likely to have read one of his novels — generally *L'Écume des jours* (*Foam of the Daze*) or

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J'irai cracher sur vos tombes (*I Spit on Your Graves*). The release in April 2013 of a new film version of *L'Écume des jours* (English title: *Mood Indigo*) starring Romain Duris, Audrey Tautou, Gad Elmaleh and Omar Sy is likely to win him a new generation of aficionados.¹⁰ He is well known for his tendency to populate his novels and short stories with characters based on his own family members, friends and, quite often, enemies, to the point that much academic work has found it hard to go beyond “biographical interpretation” of his work.¹¹ And yet, the intertextuality on which his work is equally predicated attests to a vast erudition, and especially an extensive knowledge of French literature. He was a voracious and eclectic reader. He is famous, in fact, for having “read everything”.¹² He was thus a repository of France’s literary culture and a catalyst in many ways for its rediscovery and reinvention by subsequent generations.

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Vian began his career as an author of fiction just as the Second World War was drawing to a close. His early novels are attuned to the *Zeitgeist*. The move from prelapsarian bliss to entropy in *L'Écume des jours* is one way of capturing the duality of the Liberation mood with its heady mix of euphoria and recrimination; another is the translation hoax that is *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, which appears to parody the famous translated thrillers of Marcel Duhamel’s *Série Noire*, but which in fact *translates* their allegorical staging

¹⁰ An earlier film version was produced in 1968 (English title: *Spray of the Days*).

¹¹ Marc Lapprand has played a pioneering role in refocusing Boris Vian studies on the text rather than the man. In his opening article for the above-mentioned issue of the *Magazine littéraire*, “Sept mots clés pour expliquer sa postérité” (pp. 7-12), he moves swiftly on from the Vernon Sullivan case and Vian’s sudden death to a discussion of the seven key features of his works that have given him an enduring legacy as an author. These are: humour, eccentricity, eclecticism, jazz (although here Lapprand is forced to discuss Vian’s musicianship in addition to the influence of this musical genre on his writing), sensuality, professionalism and freedom.

¹² Nicole Bertolt of the Vian Foundation, who arguably knows the man behind the myth better than anyone, will point for evidence to the groaning bookshelves in his flat in Cité Véron, whose balcony overlooks the roof of the Moulin Rouge, and then remind you that much less literature was published annually in Vian’s lifetime than today. She adds this disclaimer not to belittle his achievement but to emphasise that the claim is meant quite literally in Vian’s case.

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of the post-war mood with great precision.¹³ Across his range of writings, therefore, Vian played a foundational role in French cultural production under the Fourth Republic, a time during which the influence of American culture could be seen everywhere. To be French, throughout Vian's adult life, meant to define oneself, consciously or otherwise, in terms of one's love or hatred for the new trans-Atlantic superpower. Vian's ambivalent attitude towards the United States is well recorded.¹⁴ His feelings towards the British were equally mixed.¹⁵ Nevertheless, translation into "English" was part of Vian's psyche as much as it was an inescapable part of French post-war literature.

That post-war ambience and Vian's ambivalent attitude towards American culture are certainly in evidence in the poems and stories presented here — as indeed are all of his personal obsessions (his love of jazz and cars, for instance) along with his cultural and literary influences, surrealism and existentialism prominent among them. What is also striking in these texts is his fascination with language itself — a fascination that pre-dates his involvement with the seriously facetious "College of 'Pataphysics", but that was no doubt nurtured by it.¹⁶ Vian's constant recourse to word play and his experimentation with the sounds and syntax of French often appear as almost a reflex reaction on his part, an automatic response to the question of how to represent the world as he perceived it. They are certainly one of the well-springs of his literary creativity.

This creative use of language of course presents a particular challenge for the translator. Some might indeed argue that translating Vian is a highly

¹³ For more on Vian's work in this context, see Alistair Rolls and Deborah Walker, *French and American Noir: Dark Crossings* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁴ See, for example, Christopher Jones, *Boris Vian Transatlantic: Sources, Myths, and Dreams* (New York/Bern: Peter Lang, 1998).

¹⁵ While the poem "If I say if" (as translated in the present volume) stages a stereotypical Anglophobia, Vian at the same time had what might be considered a rather British sense of irony. P.G. Wodehouse's work was among his influences. For more on his British and American influences, see Gilbert Pestureau, *Boris Vian, les Amerlauds et les Godons*.

¹⁶ Founded in 1948, the "Collège de 'Pataphysique" is a society that has as its motto *Eadem mutata resurgo* ("I rise again the same though changed"). It was here that, in the 1950s, Vian frequented such luminaries as Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Raymond Queneau, Eugène Ionesco, René Clair and Joan Miró, among others.

utopian undertaking. For David Bellos, however, there is no such thing as an untranslatable text, only texts demanding greater or lesser degrees of translatorly acrobatics.¹⁷ Furthermore, instances where meaning or even that “certain poetic something” become lost in translation are, to Bellos’s mind, greatly exaggerated. He would certainly take issue with the notion that Vian is untranslatable. After all, he himself has translated Georges Perec, as has Gilbert Adair, while Barbara Wright is renowned for her translations of Raymond Queneau. These authors are just as difficult to translate as Vian, not least because of their association with the Oulipo movement, which was built on a series of word plays and formal constraints.¹⁸

But of course, successfully translating puns is only one aspect of the task facing the literary translator. In the case of Vian, as Sophie de Nodrest has argued, the two early English translations of *L'Écume des jours* — Stanley Chapman’s *Froth on the Daydream* and John Sturrock’s *Mood Indigo* — could both be defended as good translations from that perspective.¹⁹ And yet, both somehow fail to convey the poignancy of the love story that is at the heart of the novel. It was with the avowed purpose of recapturing the spirit of the original manuscript that Brian Harper retranslated the novel in 2003, with the title *Foam of the Daze*. This is spelled out in Tosh Berman’s editor’s note, which precedes the translator’s introduction to the text. As Berman makes clear, fidelity to the “inherent qualities of the author” was a driving factor

¹⁷ David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (London: Penguin, 2011).

¹⁸ “Oulipo” (or “OuLiPo”) is an abbreviation of “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle”, which translates roughly as “Workshop of potential literature”. The movement, which sought to foster the creation of literary works using constrained writing techniques (such as writing a novel without using the letter “e”), was founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. It counted among its members mathematicians, poets and novelists, including Georges Perec and Italo Calvino.

¹⁹ See her Masters thesis, entitled *Re-Creation of a Recreation: A Comparative Study of Two English Translations of “L'Écume des jours,”* in which she bases much of her praise for the work of Stanley Chapman and John Sturrock on their ability to recreate, with linguistic exactitude, Vian’s humour and puns. The thesis can be found at the following website: http://rob.toadshow.com.au/01_cms/details.asp?ID=339 (accessed 8 February 2012). *Froth on the Daydream* was published in London by Rapp & Carroll in 1967; *Mood Indigo* appeared the following year through New York’s Grove Press.

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behind this new edition of the novel; the other was Vian's evolving status in the French popular imaginary.²⁰

To translate a novel by Boris Vian is therefore not just difficult because it is full of jokes with culturally specific points of reference both to French literature or history and to the world of his own personal entourage; it is challenging because the playful allusions and often quasi-adolescent humour are frequently combined with deep pathos. In this respect, Vian's writing at first appears quintessentially bathetic: at one moment sublime and the next ridiculous. And yet, present in bathos is the idea of a marked descent from the one to the other. And it is precisely this movement between states that is absent from Vian's fiction: the shift from farce to pathos always works in both directions and simultaneously. This duality or coexistence of tones presents particular challenges to the translator. To render a dextrous French play on words with an equally clever one in English is possible, and it is to this type of gymnastics that Bellos justifiably pays homage. In Vian's case, however, pathos is grafted onto the punch-lines. Vian's translators therefore have to work that much harder in order to make the jokes work in English without losing that sense of pathos.

The texts translated here pose their own particular problems and specificities. The poems give voice to an "I" that is uncharacteristic in Vian's *œuvre*. There is a sense in which his guard appears to be dropped and a feeling of wholeness restored or daring to show itself for the first time.²¹ Perversely, though, this reunion of Boris Vian and his inner self ends up fragmenting his poetic persona as much as it restores unity. And in this fragmentation more than anywhere else we have bathos. There is a genuine shift from one register to another, from highs to lows, from death to life. And while these opposites vie for space in the poems, with one element evidently flowing from the other,

²⁰ Boris Vian, *Foam of the Daze*, translated by Brian Harper (California: TamTam Books, 2003).

²¹ In his famous essay, "Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses œuvres", Baudelaire notes a comparable change in mood in Poe's poetry: "There is never any love in Poe's short stories. [...] Perhaps he thought that prose was not a suitable vehicle for this bizarre and almost untranslatable sentiment, because his poems, on the other hand, are utterly saturated with it." Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2 vols, 1976), vol. II, p. 312 (our translation).

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the sincerity of these pieces, where the humour is less guarded, the smile more forthright, lies in the deployment of separate spaces for the two aspects of Vian's personality. Easier to translate than the novels, then, one might think, because there is only one voice at a time to render, a lover's discourse between Vian and his Other with inevitable slippage into an erotics of reading in which it is the reader who feels the force of this double seduction. And such a discourse lends itself to music, a music that must not be "lost in translation". To this end, that is to retain this poetic voice with its musicality, tempo and rhyme scheme, the translator must be also, and above all, a poet. As Barbara Folkart has put it: "Only by re-enacting — or better, re-inventing — the 'ratio difficilis' invented by the source-language poet can the translator — the target-language writer — produce a text that not only resonates with the original but is capable of functioning as a freestanding poem".²² A lofty ambition indeed!

The short stories exhibit the same tensions, though the voice is different. In fact, given the time-span covered by the stories presented here, we are dealing with not one but a variety of voices. The task of the translator is therefore not just to capture the tensions to be found in individual stories between humour and pathos, between that confident sense of self and the discreet but insistent sense of anxiety and even alienation that so often lurks in Vian's prose; it is also to capture the shift in stance and tone that can be detected as we move from the early, playful stories to the more genuinely troubling tales of his later years. By presenting these short stories chronologically, therefore, we hope the reader will be able to gain an appreciation of that evolution in Vian's writing.

The poetry and prose works translated here offer Vian at both ends of his broad spectrum. They have fuelled the arguments of those who believe him to be underrated as well as those who have judged him overrated. If the circle of those engaged in this debate can be widened thanks to this volume, the labour of love it has taken to prepare it will not have been in vain.

²² Barbara Folkart, *Second Finding: A Poetics of Translation* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007), p. xi.