REREADING VIAN: A POETICS OF
PARTIAL DISCLOSURE

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Periodically a call is issued from academic circles to reread the works of Boris Vian, whose name has become synonymous both with the exuberance of youth and the haunting menace of death. This call to reread Boris Vian is due in no small part to the way in which his untimely and yet long foreseen death has singularly failed to curb his joie de vivre. To say that Vian was born again in death is, however, something of a misrepresentation: as an author, his success, in his own name at least, has been almost entirely posthumous. As a man, working without respite to assuage an overweening drive to create, and thereby consigning himself to an even earlier death than might otherwise have been his lot, and as an author, determined to “coincide” with his published works, Vian exemplifies the conflation of Eros and Thanatos. Our aim here is

1 Testament to this are academic studies such as Michel Fauré’s Les Vies posthumes de Boris Vian (Paris: UGE, 1975) and, as noted in the introductory essay here, the biographies that have been published with metronomic regularity over the last few decades, including Philippe Boggio, Boris Vian (Paris: Flammarion, 1993); Emma Baus, Boris Vian: ‘Un jour il y aura autre chose que le jour’ (Paris: L’Esprit frappeur, 2002) and Claire Julliard, Boris Vian (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

2 The pseudonymous works that constitute Vian’s Vernon Sullivan project appear at first glance to contradict this coincidence of biography and fiction. However, real life dramatically impinged on the distance and objectivity of these transatlantic, and trans-ethnic, pseudo-translations in the form of a very real murder carried out in Paris in the spring of 1947 and apparently inspired by a strangulation scene from J’irai cracher sur vos tombes. While this event
to reread the interplay of these two apparently mutually exclusive drives in the poems most commonly known by the title under which they were originally, and — as so often in Vian’s case — posthumously, published: *Je voudrais pas crever* (*I wouldn’t wanna die*). In so doing, it is our wish to offer a critical accompaniment to Maria Freij’s translations, thereby presenting readers with the various aspects of rereading that form the basis of Vian scholarship.

Our title, “Rereading Vian”, is itself a partial translation of Marc Lapprand’s “Relire Vian aujourd’hui”, in which he analyses the intersection of man and work that has shaped Boris Vian and that continues both to define and be defined by the popular desire to reread him. One of Lapprand’s key objectives, not merely in that particular article but throughout his career as a *vianiste*, is to account for, and indeed to challenge, the over-determining role of biography in Vian studies in the hope of encouraging a new, critical engagement with the *œuvre*. With this as his goal, he locates the need to reread Vian within a context of opportunity and hindrance; for, while serious academic critique has waxed and waned over the years since the author’s death, popular interest (albeit among an audience made up of predominantly adolescent readers) has continued to grow. (Anecdotally, one would be hard-

could not have been foreseen by Vian, the project seems nonetheless to have contained a built-in failure mechanism, almost as if he always intended the truth of his authorship of these works to come out. Such a commercial and personal death wish by proxy may have formed part of a desire on Vian’s part to become more completely himself through the eventual exposure of his pseudonymous alter ego. This is, of course, the purest of speculation, but there are resonances in the anthology of poems under study here of something akin to a quest for salvation by exposure and death, and by self-othering via a literary, and non-coinciding, “I”.

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4 Lapprand’s essay is especially timely since it was published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Boris Vian’s death in 1959. His analysis also sums up the sentiment of the 2007 conference, *Le Cas Vian*, convened at the Sorbonne by Audrey Camus. Furthermore, it stands as an apologia for a critical engagement with the Pléiade edition, which Lapprand oversaw and which was released in October 2010. No-one, I should argue, has articulated this need to reread Vian more elegantly or more intelligently than Lapprand, who notes that his own initial desire to engage with the text alone was confronted from the outset by the shadow of the man, in a way that has always, as much now as then, proven a source both of frustration and inspiration to him. Lapprand’s work is all the more powerful for this perversity: his defence of Vian the text is predicated on an understanding of Vian the man that few of the author’s biographers can hope to have rivalled.
pressed to meet a current or former undergraduate student in France who has not read a novel by Vian, more often than not *L'Écume des jours*, or who does not know the words to his song “Le Déserteur”. In discussing whether Vian has finally become a classic, Lapprand simultaneously raises the question of whether such a canonisation is likely to prove a catalyst for the kind of critical reread that the author’s stature undoubtedly warrants.

**Reading and Rereading**

It is in this distinction between the critical and uncritical reread that our problematisation of the life and death drives in Vian’s poetic persona finds its parallel. For, if the surfeit of life that is Vian’s hallmark, and that has been concentrated via his own early death into his works, is responsible for the reading public’s desire to engage with his works, either for the first time or in the form of a reread after a long pause (perhaps prompted by the nostalgia that tends to come when people surpass the age Vian himself attained at the time of his death), it leads usually, if not necessarily, to the kind of reread that delimits the text; or rather, this is a reading praxis that marks the text as limited, complete… in other words, as dead. This is how Roland Barthes sums up the work of literature in *S/Z*.

Literature, he suggests, differs from a more hermeneutically challenging text type such as a crossword puzzle or an advertisement inasmuch as its meaning is transparent; the reader can, therefore, be content to digest the story. Barthes calls this the “readerly” text (*le texte lisible*). Its opposite, this difficult text, which forces the reader into a collaborative act of meaning-making, he refers to as the “writerly” text (*le texte scriptible*). The latter comes to life as one reads. As one reads Barthes’s account of the reader’s active production of living text — from the dead mass of the extant, printed work — one becomes aware of the irony intended in his earlier definition of the literary classic. No act of reading — not even the most cursory and unimaginative — can be entirely readerly as there is no single true meaning (what deconstructionism refers to as the metaphysical reading) into which the reader can simply tap.

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The demands are not only made by the text, however. Readers, too, make demands, not only of the text but also of themselves as their own identity becomes (re)forged alongside that of the writerly reading. Thus, the demands of reading are made by the reader as much as they are by the work, for the reader demands to be “made”, to be made different via the construction — and not the absorption — of meaning. Indeed, in accordance with his own essay on the death of the author,6 Barthes’s writerly text produces life in both the text and the reader (who actively produces it). This is, however, only possible because of the break made from the work’s “original” progenitor. To reread, in the sense of making the work come alive, is thus necessarily, in this poststructuralist framework, to circumscribe the life of the author.

Clearly, this goes against the desire of the Vian aficionado. As if it had not been bad enough to lose the man so early once before, it is surely now nothing less than an act of cruelty to use his own works to “kill” him again, and forever. Yet Boris Vian can be seen to have himself predicted this cruel posthumous literary death in a number of his works. In light of this, the poem “I wouldn’t wanna die”, which lends its name to the collective volume of Vian’s poetry, published for the first time here in English translation, can be read as both an acknowledgement of his mortality and the expression of a profound attachment to life. And this paradoxical combination takes on particular poignancy because of the force of the first person singular, which is so atypical of Vian-the-author. The reflexivity of the poem in question suggests that the desire to savour death, which is expressed in its concluding lines, contains a desire to be made again, that is to say to be reread, by the reader.7

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7 I have demonstrated elsewhere how the self-referentiality of the parodic classic *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* operates simultaneously as a death wish, to the extent that it constitutes a victory of bad taste and commercial success (and as such parallels the bloody vengeance of its own storyline), and as an intertextual rebirth (of protagonist, work and, vicariously, the author himself). See Alistair Rolls, “C’est en se déguisant qu’on devient Boris Vian: *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* et la ‘bonne littérature érotique latine’”, *Europe*, 967–968, 2009, pp. 50–60. I have also previously analysed the reflexivity of the poem under study here in another call to reread Vian. See Alistair Rolls, “Prière de relire *Je voudrais pas crever*”, *Poésie*, 96, 2003, pp. 35–41.
And so, perhaps in accordance with the wishes of Boris Vian himself, or at least in a desire to pay tribute to him, accompanied by a parallel desire to do justice to the writings left behind, we find ourselves joining with Lapprand in his request to reread Vian’s works in both senses of the term — by treating them as both readerly and writerly texts. Public and scholars alike, we are called upon to read *de nouveau*, or again, in discovery of our childhood selves, and also *à nouveau*, or anew, with fresh eyes.

**Rereading and Recreation**

Clearly, this double meaning at the heart of the notion of rereading parallels the double objective of the present book, which is to reproduce a number of Vian’s works for an English-speaking audience, thereby making accessible texts that would have remained impenetrable in the original French, and to (re)produce meaning in the “original” versions by reflecting back that meaning — which is to say, both conveying it as a faithful duplication of itself and diverting it from coincidence with itself — and generating new discourse. This is the strength of the prefix *re-*-, which can signify a simple repetition (to “read again”) or a transfer of ownership resulting from the generation of new and personalised meaning (to “read differently” from other readers… and from the writer). In this second sense, the reader is reclaiming the text, taking it back from the author (in Barthes’s poststructuralist account) or from the “meaning” that is widely attributed to it.

Rereading, then, works in two ways. On the one hand, it enables the reader to produce difference in sameness: from one work, a quasi-infinite number of virtual meanings can be actualised into any number of rereads. On the other hand, and this is Barthes’s warning to the faint-hearted reader, it can also be synonymous with the passive type of reading which leaves both the work and the reader “unchanged”. The problem with this undifferentiating type of reading is that it is infectious: it tends to get passed on to all works read by this “same” reader, until all end up being reduced to parts, albeit recognisably autonomous at the surface level of words on the page, of an undifferentiated whole.8 This is, of course, very different from the singularity

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8 In Barthes’s opinion, this process of uncritical reading of different works amounts to reading the same text everywhere, which is the very opposite of the textual production that he
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of Julia Kristeva’s “Intertext”, whose universality is based on differentiation effected everywhere (but always at the local level) and not homogenisation imposed universally. Hence Barthes’s preference for readers to reread the same work, as opposed to reading many different ones: the critical reflection encouraged by this reread not only accentuates the work’s critical difference (from itself rather than from other works), but it also produces fundamental change in the reader. In the reread, then, one does not “lose oneself in a good book”; instead, one recreates oneself in it and, at the same time, recreates the book as a text. This is the erotic call of the work itself, which seduces us into reading its virtual possibilities and, effectively, rewriting it according to its own inchoate desire for differentiation. Given the reflexivity of Vian’s collected poetry (and especially of its eponymous poem), and given the way in which the author both includes and excludes himself from the narrative (in the form of the highly fictionalised use of the first person singular pronoun), we can see that the text is savouring, or rereading, itself — which is, of course, a form of auto-eroticism.

Pleasure

If the call to read — that is to say, the call exerted by the work of literature itself rather than by academia or the reading public — can be justifiably considered a form of seduction, an act more “erotic” than “scholarly” or “leisurely”, it is because the risks associated with reading are also a powerful source of pleasure. The pleasure of the text is located at that magical, convulsive place where two opposing currents meet. If we translate these troubled waters onto our call to “reread” Vian (in the active rather than the passive sense), we urges (in the form of the writerly text). For an excellent account of this process, see Barbara Johnson, “The Critical Difference”, in Diana Knight (ed.), Critical Essays on Roland Barthes (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 2000), pp. 174-182.


This image is taken from L’Écume des jours. It is an enigmatically unspecific analogy, which describes the play of light on water in the eddies where a river runs into the sea. The passage can be found in volume one of Boris Vian’s Œuvres romanesques complètes, edited by Marc Lapprand, Christelle Gonzalo and François Roulmann (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), p. 420. The most recent English translation is Brian Harper’s Foam of the Daze, published by Tosh Berman (California: TamTam Books, 2003), and the reference is located on page 108.
discover that pleasure is a tension: it is derived from the opposition between the critical and the submissive approaches to rereading. Strictly speaking, the latter, with all that it implies in terms of a leisurely loss of self in the text, is the *pleasurable* experience from the reader’s perspective. Indeed, it is in this passive consumption of the written word that Barthes locates *le plaisir*.\textsuperscript{11} Of course, to “lose oneself in a good book” is only to put oneself temporarily aside and to emerge later unchanged by the reading experience. This momentary loss is really more a retention of a limited identity, and not the positive loss of Jean-Paul Sartre’s “loser wins” (*qui perd gagne*), whereby to accept loss of a fixed identity is to embrace responsibility for self and, ultimately, to be free. The critical reread, for its part, requires the reader to take responsibility for the meaning that is brought out of the literary work. From the author’s perspective, this release of the control of meaning is a *blissful* act (referred to by Barthes as *la jouissance*, and generally opposed to *le plaisir*). Finally, from the perspective of the text, pleasure must embrace both these perspectives. This is erotic, passionate, an act of violent collision and not of smooth synthesis. As a living thing, an actualisation of the work’s potential for meaning, the text encompasses both *le plaisir* and *la jouissance*.\textsuperscript{12}

What a reflexive poem like “I wouldn’t wanna die” reminds us, of course, is that the power of pleasure is derived from the complexity of the currents at play. The bliss is not just release on the author’s part, for the reader is seduced by the words on the page and is made to take responsibility for their meaning. In this most intimate and collaborative production of meaning, the reader’s identity must be put on the line, at least partially. And, perhaps


\textsuperscript{12} We should note that Barthes’s preference for the blissful, writerly text over the pleasurable, readerly one does not at first appear to be borne out in his choice of the term *plaisir* for his overarching title, *Le Plaisir du texte*. Our suggestion here is that the pleasure of Barthes’s title is that associated with the text, which does not belong to the reader any more than it does to the author; rather, the text is a virtual entity, an interface at which meaning is (re)created. Our argument in terms of Vian’s poem “I wouldn’t wanna die” is that the author is aligning himself quite deliberately with this liminal, shared pleasure. His bliss is thus pre-read as the text’s pleasure, which, perversely, both strengthens the authorial dominance of the text and weakens the narrative subject’s coincidence with him, as Vian occupies this virtual, textual space. Hence, the idea of his “partial” disclosure of himself in the poem.
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more importantly, it is not only the reader who experiences the pleasure of savouring the words, of enjoying the other’s control: Vian, too, savours the results of his own abandonment of power proleptically. From this perspective, the anthology *I wouldn’t wanna die* might be considered a highly complex, and erotic, example of a “pre-posthumous” poetics. By so forcefully bringing together cathexis and anticathexis, or pleasure and unpleasure, Vian himself urges us to reconsider *le plaisir* and *la jouissance* and, ultimately, to reread pleasure itself.

The Desiring Subject

In the case of *I wouldn’t wanna die*, there is a strong sense that the poetic voice, which can perhaps be conflated with that of the author himself, operates this same problematisation of pleasure. This title phrase can be seen as an expression of the poet’s (and the poetry’s) fear that the collection will become a congealed work of literature. At the same time, inherent in this plaintive cry is the aspiration to live on as (writerly) text through the complicity of the reader, who becomes the direct recipient of the text’s desire. And yet, the closing lines of the title poem itself reveal the pleasure to be had in savouring death, which suggests on the author’s part a desire to coincide — in death — with himself, or in this case, with the sum total of his previously written, if posthumously published, parts. This is the very bad faith of which Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre’s own classic work of 1938 *La Nausée* (*Nausea*), can be considered guilty when he longs for salvation through the eternal life granted to an author who will become known for, and ultimately one with, the novel that he has created. This is the novel as self-founding object (from the existentialist perspective) and as readerly text with one single metaphysical meaning (from the poststructuralist-deconstructionist perspective). The pleasure for the “I” of Vian’s poem exists, therefore, in the tension between the bliss of abandonment of authorial meaning to the reader and the vicarious pleasure the author takes in the reader’s digestion of him (and his work) as transparently meaningful and thus dead. The poem concludes with the enjoyment of death, which inevitably brings death to life, making it, like pleasure, a tense mixture of itself (death) and its opposite (life). From the perspective of the tragically disappointed poet, this is a clever ploy, a trap to generate another self in which he will
manage not only to live on forever as himself (as the author of *I wouldn’t wanna die* and especially of his own beloved novel, *Foam of the Daze*, for which he contentiously did not win the accolades that he and others believed were his due) but also in an infinity of virtual rebirths.¹³

**Intertextual Predecessors 1: “Le Dormeur du Val”**

While Boris Vian proleptically savours his own posthumous publication and recreation, projecting himself forwards in time and text, he also casts himself back into previous poetic deaths. One such intertextual reference in “I wouldn’t wanna die” is Arthur Rimbaud’s poem, “Le Dormeur du val” (“The Sleeper in the Valley”, 1870), which famously paints the picture of a young soldier sleeping peacefully in a lush, green valley. The reason why this poem is so well known, of course, is that the soldier turns out not to be asleep but dead. As one rereads the poem with the benefit of this hindsight, one soon realises that the valley was not entirely green even at the beginning. That is to say that the poem’s linear progression — from sleep to death — is already checked and turned back on itself by the continual use of oxymorons, all of which stand metonymically for the poem itself. In this way, the grass is dressed oxymoronically in silver rags and the pride of the mountain is contradicted by the smallness of the valley. The vernal exuberance of the poem’s beginning is thus inoculated by death even in its opening words: “C’est un trou de verdure” (“It’s a green hole”).¹⁴ “It” — Rimbaud’s poem — announces itself as a space

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¹³ His failure to win the *Prix de la Pléiade* in 1946 for *L’Écume des jours* has entered Vian folklore. It also entered his subsequent novels in the form of various, and variously unflattering, allusions to the winner of the prize (Jean Grosjean) and to those who voted for him (especially Jean Paulhan), all of which has contributed to the delimiting idea that his works can be reduced to such biographical references.

¹⁴ Arthur Rimbaud, “Le Dormeur du val”, in *Rimbaud. Complete Works, Selected Letters*, translated by Wallace Fowlie (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 56. We refer our readers to this text as it includes both the French and the English versions of the poem. Fowlie’s translation of this line does not lend itself to our analysis, however, as he opts for a more poetic term than “hole” to render the French *trou*. His term “hollow” loses the baseness of *trou*, which establishes the oxymoron of the “green hole”, and which becomes the expression of the whole poem. The opening pronoun *ce* (‘it’) pushes forward into this initial oxymoron and thus defines what “it” (the poem) is — namely, a paradox: itself and its own other.
of tension where life is constantly morphing into death and, logically, where death is always brought (back) to life. The poem (‘it’) is therefore both itself and a denial of itself, and as such it sows within its lines the substance of its own reread.

Intertextual Predecessors 2: “Rue de Seine”

If the paradoxical duality of Rimbaud’s “Le Dormeur du val” itself evokes poetry past (for example, Baudelaire’s prose poetry of a decade or so earlier), it also has resonances with poetry to come. Jacques Prévert’s prosaic poem “Rue de Seine” (1946), published in an anthology of poetry entitled Paroles, would have been familiar to Boris Vian — not only because Paroles profoundly marked the Parisian literary landscape of the period immediately following the Second World War, but also because Jacques Prévert was his next-door neighbour!15 Prévert’s “Rue de Seine” is, like so many of the pieces in Paroles, a paradoxical poem of intersection and failed intersection. As a selection of poetic expressions of the prosaic, and vice versa, Paroles articulates with maximum simplicity simple acts of language (French in spoken rather than versified form) and, often, language “unacted” (instances of miscommunication).16 In the famous “Déjeuner du matin” (“Breakfast”), for example, the poem speaks of a couple’s failure to speak; its beauty is thus composed of a repetition of mundane and markedly non-poetic, unbeautiful gestures. In “Rue de Seine”, a further level of reflexivity is introduced as the poem is seen to take the form of the non-

15 From their terraces in Cité Véron, just off Place Blanche, they could talk to each other as they looked out across the roof of the Moulin Rouge. Vian and Prévert moved into their adjoining apartments in 1953 and 1954, respectively.

16 My translation. There has been some debate among Prévert scholars as to whether the poems of Paroles should be read as (prosaic) poetry or (poetic) prose. For his part, Jacques Poujol, having himself hesitated in categorising this “poésie nouvelle qui se moque de la poésie” (“new poetry which mocks poetry”), finally averred in 1958 that “les écrits de Prévert sont de la poésie et non de la prose” (“Prévert’s writings are poetry and not prose”). Jacques Poujol, “Jacques Prévert ou le langage en procès”, French Review, 31, 5, 1958, pp. 391-392. This careful weighing up of options rather misses the point, however, since Prévert’s poems are both at once. Prose poetry after all — and this is why Baudelaire creates it as the perfect expression of his alienation in the face of the duality of Parisian modernity — is oxymoronic and, as such, can abide no synthesis. In this way, Paroles can be shown to function as a prose poetics in terms of its basic dynamics and not merely because of its motifs and settings.
writing of a poem. As an anthology of the self and the self’s opposite, *Paroles* forms part of a poetic tradition stretching, once more, back to Baudelaire himself.

The reflexivity of “Rue de Seine” has particular relevance for Vian’s “I wouldn’t wanna die”. In the case of “Rue de Seine”, the first person singular does not mark the poem’s beginning; it is, however, no less powerful when it bursts into life:

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Pierre dis-moi la vérité
Pierre dis-moi la vérité
je veux tout savoir
[Pierre tell me the truth
Pierre tell me the truth
I want to know all]17
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The power of this pronoun lies arguably in the contrast that it strikes with its predecessors in the poem. Both the masculine and feminine forms of the third person singular have already been used, each time referring initially to a “person” — a stumbling man and a woman shaking him out of his lethargy — but soon becoming paralleled and, to a degree, subsumed by their respective metonyms, a hat for him (*un* chapeau) and a voice for her (*une* voix). Thus, when the personal pronoun “I” (“je”) finally makes its appearance, it does not stand in the poem for a previously introduced “person”; rather, it fleshes out the second person singular imperative that demands that Pierre tell the truth.

In “Rue de Seine”, therefore, the depersonalising effect of personal pronouns rather gives the lie to the romantic idyll. In fact, this poem undermines the myth of the City of Lights, or perhaps underscores its mythological nature. We note in passing that it also contradicts the central idea of Thomas Shapcott’s contemporary poem “Georges Perec in Brisbane”. In Brisbane, or so the poem goes, “Humans are peripheral […] / Whereas they are all that matters in Paris.”18

The absence of sub-tropical fruit and fauna in the Paris cityscape tends to put

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people centre stage. The opposite appears to be true in Prévert’s vision, where beauty is “convulsive”, in accordance with the wish expressed by André Breton in his Surrealist manifesto, and emerges at the meeting point between failed human interaction and the failure of grammatically predicated, or conscious, poetry writing. In “Rue de Seine”, “I” is the voice of the unconscious, oneiric desire “to become poem” desperately trying to surface in the real world, in the waking moment of the poetry-writing process.

It certainly becomes difficult to read “Rue de Seine” as a straightforward story of failed or hesitating romance between two people. Even at the reflexive level of textual erotics and reading pleasure, there is nothing simple at play in this poem. Both “he” (“il”) and “she” (“elle”) are double: they are simultaneously characters in and products of a poem. They are also both expressions of the production process, with her grammatical femininity seeming to function as the abstract voice of la Poésie to his masculine, existent poème, in all its processes and techniques. And so, when this pair of third-person-singular pronouns, depersonalised and reduced to their simplest terms — as the linguistic building blocks of a love poem — are finally joined by the raw emotion of the first person pronoun, this voice is already allotted its place within the structure of this poetry-writing process, which will, in the very instance of its failure to become actualised, finally become a poem (about process).¹⁹

The “I” of Prévert’s “I want to know all” is thus comparable to that of Vian’s “I wouldn’t wanna die”: both assume the voice of the reader from within a reflexive poem where they are associated with the poet himself. This is the desire to know everything as a plea to “be known”; it is the poetics of the pre-posthumous, in which the desire to be voiced, to be brought to life —

¹⁹ Given Prévert’s links to Surrealism one might be tempted to interpret this union of poem and non-poem as an expression of André Breton’s “supreme point”. And yet, this abolition of all binaries (exemplified in the merging of the dream and the waking moment in instances of objective chance) that inspired all the endeavours of the Surrealist movement is a synthesis, however fleeting and fatal. Convulsive beauty and Love itself immediately usher in their opposite: death. Prévert’s collision of life and death, on the other hand, functions as a double motion, an oscillation across the dichotomy, and not as a synthesis. By producing its own reread (poem out of non-poem), “Rue de Seine” already moves us on, away from the coincidence of self and other, and into the other side of the opposition. This is very much “poetry in motion”: it is, continuously, life moving towards decay and death ceding to renewal. It is therefore far too frenetic and too balanced to admit even that most ephemeral stasis of the supreme point.
expressed in “Rue de Seine” as “une furieuse envie de vivre” (“a furious desire to live”)
— is built into the mechanics of the poem as already completed and dead. Hence the importance of Prévert’s conclusion when the reader realises that the poem is only complete once the poet-in-the-poem has finished failing to write it(self).

Incompletion is, of course, only ever a spin on the endless possibility of the virtual space that is the writerly text. This same space also has another name: Paris. For people are not all that matters in Paris, contrary to what Shapcott imagines; instead, we are able to experience a life that is essentially double precisely because we are in Paris, because Paris itself is all that matters, which is to say that Paris, as representation and as a real and present metropolis, is both itself and other than itself. This capacity to encompass two mutually exclusive spaces at any given time, which is the very stuff of Baudelaire’s oxymoronic, prose-poetic Paris, is announced right from the opening lines of “Rue de Seine”:

Rue de Seine dix heures et demie
le soir
au coin d’une autre rue
[Rue de Seine half past ten
at night
on the corner of another street]

As both here and somewhere else, “Rue de Seine” offers itself as a mobile space, a double movement between the Rue de Seine and the corner of another street. This is an auto-differentiating technique directly comparable

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20 “Rue de Seine”, p. 60 (English translation: p. 21).
21 For an excellent analysis of Paris as prose poem, and vice versa, along the lines of presentation and representation/re-presentation, see Michel Covin, L’Homme de la rue: Essai sur la poétique baudelairienne (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000).
22 I have written elsewhere at greater length on Paris as capital of Modernity and on its tendency to be both itself and other than itself. See, for example, Alistair Rolls, “L’Élégante de la rue Lepic: A New Look for Une Passante”, Contemporary French Civilization, 34, 2, 2010, pp. 91-114. For an excellent account of the way in which the flâneur is haunted by the city of his imaginings, and/or the past, as he confronts the modern cityscape in the present moment, see Ross Chambers, Loiterature (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).
23 “Rue de Seine”, p. 60. (English translation: p. 21).
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to the “it” (“ce”) of Rimbaud’s “C’est un trou de verdure” (“It’s a green hole”).
Furthermore, if the poem is predicated on a tension between the Rue de Seine and another street, it is because this is the identity of the Rue de Seine itself. This is a double street because it is both offered (by the poet and poem) and read (by the reader); for reading itself operates the same defamiliarisation as walking in Paris.24 And so too Vian’s poem announces the critical double space of modernity, the poet’s desire to transport himself to unfamiliar places being ultimately the expression of his Parisian self. The source of meaning in “I wouldn’t wanna die” as in “Rue de Seine” is not an in-between space: it is both here and there.

I, It, Boris Vian

This pre-posthumous recuperation by the author of the reader’s erotic encounter with the text evokes all the currents and counter-currents of pleasure. With a slight change of perspective, Boris Vian’s poetics of partial disclosure can be summed up rather neatly by the following quotation from Richard Machin and Christopher Norris:

The source of meaning always used to be an author. But it might be the reader (just another author), language (the medium as the message), or ideology (a mixture of all three). We do always require a source, a centre around which we can coordinate strategies to “make sense” of a piece of writing — much as we require the subject for a verb. (In this sense, “It’s great”, said of a poem, is akin to “It’s raining”, said of the weather.) Within the ensuing discourse a new subjectivity emerges, which the text then claims and reproduces as its own. Since, without enlisting the help of powerful rhetoric, we can’t attribute will to an (often departed) author, and since we get the feeling that, no matter how partisan we are, significance within the text is not solely our own responsibility, on many occasions the text’s usurpation of a strictly human capacity to make meaning takes place by default. There is certainly a sort of floating 24

As Chambers suggests, “reading a text is a matter of activating the split between ‘saying’ and ‘meaning’” (Loiterature, p. 217). I should agree with him that there is no difference between the double encounter of the urban experience, in which streets summon ghosts (of the past and of expectations) to accompany their bricks and mortar, and the dynamics of critical reading, which produces meaning that both matches and deconstructs the words on the page.
If I Say If

subjectivity around when we talk about literature, an “it” waiting to seize its chance to become an “I”.25

The “it is” of Rimbaud’s poem is made personal, or “I”, in Prévert’s Parisian Paroles, only for this personal touch to be revealed as the desiring voice of poetry itself (or the muse of poetry willing itself to live as text, to be concretised as poem). This is the personal as essentially depersonalised. It is this same “I” of the poem that is seized by Vian, and this time its furious desire to live (or not to die) is immediately counterbalanced by a simultaneous summoning of the great death of elsewhere. Intertextually and prose-poetically, the desire to live death vicariously oneself is a partial disclosure of the author because it is an “I” tired of waiting, which has seized its chance to become an “it” and which is living that chance as fully as only Boris Vian ever could.

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