THE RANTINGS OF VIAN/SULLIVAN: RACE UNDERCOVER

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In this paper I will do a close reading of one reviewer's reaction to *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes (I Shall Spit On Your Graves)* that Boris Vian published in France in 1947 under the pseudonym "Vernon Sullivan." In order to understand why I have chosen this very brief critical commentary as a point of departure for my analysis of Vian's text, I would like to give a summary of the novel and the events surrounding its publication.

In 1946, Vian had not yet published what he would later consider his serious work. At this time, his friend, Jean D'Halluin was starting a publishing house, l'*Édition du scorpion*, which hoped to capitalize on the successes of Marcel Duhamel's *Série noire* which was doing a booming business publishing American and English crime fiction in translation. D'Halluin needed a bombshell to inaugurate his series and, in response, Vian decided to write an ersatz American crime novel that he would claim only to have translated: *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*.

But instead of a crime story in the vein of Chandler or Hammett, set in a Northern or Western urban center such as New York or Los Angeles, Vian set *his* story in the rural American South, with a protagonist, Lee Anderson, who is black. And, unlike the usual pulp fiction plot in which the white protagonist solves a crime--one frequently committed by a racially ambiguous crook--Vian reverses this scenario by having Anderson cross the color line to exact revenge upon the racist family that has lynched his brother. In addition, rather than focusing his rage on the individuals responsible for the crime, Anderson takes his brother's death as symptomatic of a racist environment in which such crimes are condoned. Vian therefore turns the genre on its head.

Finally, if the crime novels of Chandler and Hammett consistently frustrate their protagonists' sexuality by inextricably binding the female object of desire with the crime being solved, thereby often rendering her morally inaccessible, Vian reverses the deferred and frustrated sexuality of standard crime fiction. Anderson systematically sleeps with the town's bobby-soxers until he encounters the two daughters of a rich plantation owner in whom he finds the ideal symbolic object of revenge. Because the solution to this crime happens against the backdrop of the posited "criminality" of racism, Vian's narrative "resolution" involves Anderson's seduction and then execution of these two white women, a resolution which in turn is then recuperated by the infinite regress of racist criminality: Anderson is in turn shot down as he is escaping the white police.

Anderson is the racially ambiguous *purveyor* of justice who actively uses sex and violence to "resolve" the crime rather than being the criminal, the object of the private-eyes investigation, in which these different forms of social transgression must be subsumed and suppressed. If, as D.A. Miller has shown in his *The Novel and the Police*, following Foucault's insights in *Discipline and Punish*, the fictional institution itself, in this case the crime novel, serves as a means of hegemonic surveillance and control, Vian uses the medium to undermine its own effectiveness by underscoring writing and race's innate illegibility. Like his murdered brother, Anderson is light skinned. This allows him to take a job as a white bookstore clerk in a small Southern town. By depicting a black man who effortlessly passes as a white *and* as a guardian of white literary culture, Vian formulates a scathing critique of French racism which, I will contend, he compounds by passing himself off as an African American.

With *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, among other things, Vian deliberately challenges the restrictions that white hegemony imposes on writing. The first is that writing-as-literature must remain the domain of a white elite. The second dictates that, having followed the first restriction, the fact of writing's racialization remains a taboo subject. In presenting Vernon Sullivan to the public, Vian violates the first restriction. However, Vian is guilty of his most serious violation when he uses writing's racialization against itself by blurring racial distinctions, both in depicting a light skinned black man who is the empowered agent of his own revenge because of his racial ambiguity, and in successfully passing *himself* off as a black writer.

Vian notes that, if writing facilitates a system of racial control, it doesn't only mediate the boundaries of racial identity, but also its Derridean supplement. Racial segregation is always-already undermined by its negation—the repressed desire of the same for the excluded other. The master rapes his slave woman, producing the mulatto. And, as Sula says in Toni Morrison's novel of the same name:

> White men love you [black men]. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect, I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. (103)

As with the Lacanian reading of Hegel's concept of identity formation, "difference" is always threatening to disolve into "indifference" because of the desire that both generates and undermines consciousness, or identity, as a

mediated category. But here, these categories are racialized: thus, the process of excluding the other is concomitant with the "white same's" projected sexual desire that draws the "black other" back *towards* sameness. In addition, the "other" is not simply or only the *object* of the white subject's Freudian *Fort-Da*. As Vian's story makes amply clear, the black "object" proves its own subjectivity by manipulating *its* other's desire, thus reversing the equation by which (white) identity is established in the first place. In Vian's novel, that manipulation leads to the violent retun of the repressed--the murderous black revenge--to white hegemony, has exposed itself by the very metaphysics that determine its racialized integrity.

Likewise, Vian's text uses these contradictory impulses to draw his reader into a narrative world in which the primary means of racial categorization, namely writing-as-cultural-bulwark, comes face to face with its own fiction[ality]. Vian's readership believes that the writer is black and therefore allows itself to be drawn into a voyeuristic fantasy world of racialized sexual excess in which difference threatens to disappear. The text narrows the distance between the reader and itself by depicting a violent world in whieb whites are attracted to blacks and in which the black protagonist is himself, as light-skinned, already marked by the historical failure of racial categorization. But this landscape remains unthreatening insofar as the protective distance between the reader and the narrative landscape--a distance insured by the apparent foreigness of the writer and of the world he depicts--is maintained.

To succeed, Vian had to maintain the difference between himself and his alter ego. Simultaneously, for his ploy to be effective, he must toy with the readers faith in the black writers supposed "authenticity." Therefore, in his "translator's preface," Vian largely avoids the racial theme of the story, and instead plays with this illusion of protective distance by choosing to emphasize the novel's eroticism:

> Il nous paraît intéressant de souligner la différence foncière qu'il y a entre celles-ci et les récits de [Henry] Miller; ce dernier n'hésite en aucun cas à faire appel au vocabulaire le plus vif; il semble, au contraire, que Sullivan songe plus à suggérer par des tournures et des constructions que par l'emploi du terme cru; à cet égard, il se rapprocherait d'une tradition érotique plus latine. (10)
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> [It appears interesting for us to note the profound difference that there is between this text and Henry Miller's novels; The latter never fails to appeal to the most graphic vocabulary; it would appear that, on the contrary, Sullivan prefers to suggest matters by

> turns of phrase and by constructions than by the crude term itself; in this respect, he more closely resembles a Latin erotic tradition].

While Vian's comparison of Vernon Sullivan with Henry Miller is also a red herring that focuses on the novel's eroticism, it also begins blurring the national-racial boundary between himself and his alter ego by attributing a "Latin style" to Vernon Sullivan. Nevertheless, although Vian toys with the French bourgeoisie's mixed prudishness and sexual desire, when he states that, "Il n'est pas surprenant que son œuvre ait été refusé en Amérique: gageons qu'elle y serait interdite le lendemain de sa publication"(11) ["It isn't surprising that his work has been refused in America: let us wager that it would be forbidden the day following its publication,"], he isn't referring to the novel's graphic sexuality, but the risks taken by a black man who criticizes white oppression in writing. These two lines also anticipate the unspoken basis for the novel's subsequent banishment in France.

It is after this lengthy preamble that I now turn to the short passage that I would like to examine. If Vian succeeded in misleading most of his readers and critics, others immediately understood what was at stake. The following critical review came out shortly after the novel's appearance. Unlike most of the reviews that preceded the revelation of the novel's true authorship, it already challenges the conflation of literary transgression and racial transgression that the novel deliberately exploits:

> Il paraît que nul éditeur américain n'à osé publier cette élucubration maladive d'un métis. C'est à l'honneur de l'édition américaine et il faut déplorer qu'il se soit trouver en France un traducteur et une firme pour diffuser cette incivilité sénile et malhonnête. C'est sur ce livre qu'on peut cracher.'
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> [Apparently no American editor would dare to publish this sickly rant of a half-cast. It does honor to the American publishing establishment and one must deplore that there exists in France a translator and a firm to diffuse this senile and dishonest incivility. It is on this book that one can spit.]

The withering racism inherent in the review's use of the word "métis" suggests that the work's first offense doesn't involve the narrative, but a black writer who confuses racial categories. By employing the word "métis" or "mixed breed," the review ignores the "solution" that the United States, a country to which it pointedly refers, has found to such a dilemma--America, being the setting of the novel and Vernon Sullivan's country of origin. It ignores that Vernon Sullivan, like his erstwhile creation, Lee Anderson, is not

a "métis" by America's "one drop" rule,[2] but unambiguously black. But America's "solution" is also a mask for the miscegenation that is one of the most complex and most problematic legacies of slavery (or for France--slavery and colonialism)--legacy that the novel's putative author and its protagonist bear witness to in their lightness.[3] If writing as a technological system of classification is invoked to guarantee the integrity of racial categories, the existence of writerly "métissage" threatens to erode its effectiveness. The word "métis" therefore takes on both a meta-textual and a metaphysical force here. For this review, therefore, the tale's first sin, before its very existence, is that its *author's* racial identity is a reminder of the a-priori confusion of racial boundaries that the novel will subsequently explore. That this criticism should appeal to long debunked notions of "racial health" ("les élucubration *maladive*" "[the *sickly* rantings"]) confirms the register in which this response is operating.

"Vernon Sullivan" is apparently guilty of another sin: that he wrote at all--regardless of the contents of his novel. These lines subtly hint that the problem presented by a *mixed* race writer doesn't exist for a writer who is "purely black" because he/she *cannot* write. But a "métis," being half-white is stricken with the illusion that s/he *can* write. A "métis" who *does* write, will, by definition, produce "élucubrations maladives" since his/her writing is, to pursue the underlying metaphor, "half-baked"--impelled by an identity, the white half, to which s/he cannot legitimately lay claim because of the black half.

That this sin should be defined as "cette incivilité," not "civilized," therefore makes sense according to the review's logic. A métis is, someone whose confused racial ancestry makes him/her unable to recognize his/her *absence* of civilization precisely because his/her black side's civilization is the negation of his/her white side's.[4] The person of mixed race functions outside the purview of civilization (as well as outside its carefully controlled and monitored negation, black "uncivilization") because he or she carries the positive and negative of civilization both internally and externally. But it is precisely this transcendence of racial categories that makes the "métis" threatening and lends a perceptible shrillness to the reviewers response to the novel. His logic forces him to conclude that there is little of substance, within the novel as without, to which a white subject can cling--which might explain the article's brevity and its notable and total lack of substance regarding the actual contents of the book. Not a word is said about the actual story. Only the writer is discussed.

The revue argues that the miscegenated métis' inability to recognize the breakdown in racial categories s/he represents, is ultimately confirmed by

Sullivan's belief in his right to write. The subtext of this anxious reaction is that the closest that a person with black blood can get to civilization is the acceptance of his/her role as non-literate and non-literary--paradoxically, illiteracy would *be* black civilization *and* a demonstration of black civility. And, even if a black subject were to write, since "total" or "real" blackness is, necessarily visible and recognizable, such a work would at least not necessitate quite so alarmed a response. Writing would retain its effectiveness as a guarantor of racial integrity and/or purity.

This review, short as it is, is nevertheless a-quiver with foreboding. It subtly suggests that "we" may not recognize the inherent sickness being spread by some other "métis" novel that has not been presented as such. Indeed, how, as with the métis him/herself, can one be sure? That very problem, after all, is the guiding principle of the text. The protagonist has black blood, is black by American standards, but not visibly so, which allows him to act out his vengeful fantasy undisturbed until the crime has already occurred.

What is most striking about this racist diatribe is the collapse that takes place between the putative author, Vernon Sullivan, the protagonist, and the novel. All are threatening on precisely the same terms. This conflation graphically confirms the proximity that exist between writing and race. This proximity only explicitly manifests itself, however, when white hegemony's defenses are in danger of being breached. It is at this moment that the relationship between (racialized) identity and the writing forum becomes perceptible. Here, this takes place inn a text: between Vian's presentation of the author from which the review derives its information about "him" and "his text" that follows it.

Nevertheless, the review does not stop here. It is specifically France's integrity that is being challenged. Therefore, despite the alarm triggered by the author's literary transgression of racial borders, the article's final and most virulent opprobrium is leveled at the translator, Boris Vian, and at the publisher. Ultimately, is they who are the most offensive to French civilization precisely because they are white and French. The article cryptically implies that they are guilty of abandoning France as a bastion of true whiteness. Delving a little further, it becomes apparent that if a "métis" guilty of writing *might* be excused because of his/her a-priori deseased mind, his "ill-iteracy," a true Frenchmen, on the other hand, must be expected to act to preserve the national (white) standard that writing mediates and guarantees.

The review's reference to America's refusal to publish Sullivan's novel is also a veiled reference to France's loss of stature on the international stage as well as the continuation of years of discourse on French "racial purity." In 1946, France is still chaffing at ridding itself of the German invader only with

the help of others--specifically Americans. The unstated premise is that America, unlike the France promoted by the likes of Vian, is powerful because it has used institutional segregation to deal with its black and "métis" minority. The revue therefore implies that publishing the novel is not simply an error in judgment, but an act of treason actively contributing to France's diminishing importance on the international stage--a diminution in which race appears to play the central role. The fact that this same racism has played a critical role in France's acceptance of Nazism is another matter.

If the article's subtext illustrates the level of racism and racial paranoia rampant in France, a paranoia that revolves around an undetectable "métis invasion," the reaction elicited by the discovery that the novel was not translated, but *written* by a Frenchman, could only grow more violent. What this article and the subsequent fury that the novel unleashes ultimately prove is that, despite his conviction on obscenity charges, Vian was really being punished for transgressing the racial laws guaranteeing his place as a novelist. Finally, if literature and the power it mediates belong to white hegemony, there are internal limits that hegemony sets for itself in its efforts to preserve the exclusivity of its power. What this review proves is that, in ignoring those boundaries, Vian lost the privileges that white hegemony reserved for him. His case suggests that the domain of liberty, constructed at the expense of those to whom liberty is denied, is only relative to its "other" and is absolute only inasmuch as those parameters are accepted and maintained by those in power. For liberty to be assured him as a hereditary and cultural legacy, Vian should have obeyed the rules whose transgression would revoke the privileges associated with that heritage. [5]

In a broader sense, his experience informs us that the first rule, and perhaps the most important, that regulates the "white right to write" concerns what writing will be permitted to convey: the mimetic repetition of its own integrity and the exclusion of its other. In other words, hegemonic writing may not question its own privilege...its authority to occupy the position of power and legitimacy; and it may not invite nor imagine a response from those it excludes. Yet this is what *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, represents: a degradation and dismantling of the boundaries separating the white subject from the other emanating from within the territory that is being protected. Finally, hegemonically empowered white writing may not silence or critique others with the same privilege by questioning the exclusivity of their right to a voice.[6]

The fury with which Vian was attacked after the release of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, was true to the tenets of white supremacy. Vian was, as the watchdogs of French culture suspected, challenging the enforced difference

between himself and the identity he adopted to write the novel—and in the most threatening terms possible: as an intellectual and class insider who was not only deliberately crossing the barriers that kept him from expressing himself freely, but likewise configuring this transgression so as to demonstrate that the "other" could, unobserved, cross that barrier in the opposite direction. He therefore not only targeted the fiction that founds white superiority but unbderscored its fictionality through, and in, a piece of excessively successful fiction. As a result, Vian's serious work would only gain an extensive and loyal readership after his death.

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NOTES

[1] Cited in Boggio. Philippe. *Boris Vian*. Paris: Flamarion, 1993. 172

[2] For a detailed examination of the differences in racial ideologies between various countries and an extensive discussion of America's own racisl definitions see, F. James Davis. *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1993.

[3] There is clearly a difference between the theories of race that emerge from America's legacy of slavery and France's colonialist history. One such difference is the maintenance, in France, of gradations of racial difference between the two absolutes of black and white. While I won't broach this complex question in the present study, my analysis should nevertheless make it clear that these differences are perhaps not as radical as they might at first appear to be.

[4] I refer to the "métis" in the masculine because the panic that he caused clearly stemmed from his being gendered male.

[5] While in this case, we are speaking of race, it is clear that apparatuses of control, as Foucault has described them, extend to the carceral, the medical, the moral, and the psychiatric.

[6] What in the U.S. falls under the aegis of the first amendment. The Ku Klux Klan can spew its venom while the Black Muslim movement cannot.

WORKS CITED

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