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# Life Stinks

By Stewart Home

Stewart Home sniffs out some links between art, farts and modernist materialism in three novels by French songwriters and *litterateurs* Boris Vian and Serge Gainsbourg

Tam Tam Books is a very small and fiercely independent publisher dedicated to bringing the cream of French literature to English language readers. Aside from the three books reviewed here they've also put out Guy Debord's *Considerations On The Assassination Of Gérard Lebovici*, and recently announced plans for the forthcoming publication of Boris Vian's *Autumn In Peking*. Vian was one of the most popular novelists of the mid-twentieth century in France and he serves to illustrate very well the global nature of what within the Anglo-American world is sometimes wrongly taken to be quintessentially Gallic culture. Aside from being a writer, Vian was also a trumpet player and jazz critic who was fascinated by all things Afro-American.

[IMAGE] *I Spit On Your Graves* was a literary hoax which was first published as if it had been written in English by an Afro-American author called Vernon Sullivan and Vian was merely its translator. In fact there was no Vernon Sullivan, the ostensible author of this work was a figment of Vian's imagination and the book was written in French and only translated into English by the author and Milton Rosenthal after it became a bestselling sensation. The plot of *I Spit On Your Graves* echoes Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, although Vian's book is both more sadistic and self-consciously misanthropic. In Wright's book the death of a white girl at the hands of an Afro-American is almost accidental, but nonetheless as a direct consequence this victim of racial oppression feels 'free for the first time in his life'. Vian's first person narrator Lee Anderson adopts a prose style and worldview heavily influenced by Henry Miller and James M. Cain, thus the book is self-consciously generic not just in its borrowed plot but also in its style. Although Anderson identifies himself as an Afro-American male, he is able to pass as white and revels in seducing privileged southern girls who have no idea that he is black. These sexual conquests are presented as a form of revenge against the white racists who Anderson tells us murdered his darker skinned brother. However, Anderson's sexual shenanigans are a mere prelude to him slaughtering two white sisters, Lou and Jean Asquith. The twin homicides are coldly planned and self-consciously carried out as an act of revenge against the racist society that has oppressed Anderson and murdered his brother. Given this it seems reasonable to conclude that like the noir novels and films by which it was inspired, Vian's book is an essentially conservative response to the overdeveloped world's mid-twentieth century crisis of masculinity. However, while gender theory provides useful tools with which to examine Vian's book, there are other factors that need to be taken into account. Immediately prior to the narrator Lee Anderson strangling and then shooting Jean Asquith who is pregnant with his baby, the novel is given a particularly nihilistic twist when he asks her: 'Do you always like it so much when you get laid by a colored man?' (Page 166).

Vian clearly conceived his book as an attack on racial injustice but in its realisation this aim is every bit as problematic as those films made by white liberal directors that depict the racism they intend to condemn so graphically that they actually reproduce it. To give a specific example, this problematic aspect of Vian's book is echoed in Larry Cohen's 1973 film *Black Caesar*, where for instance there is a scene in which the main character Tommy Gibbs beats up a racist cop, smears his face with black shoe polish and forces him to sing Al Jolson's *Mammy* while subjecting the plot to the type of racist invective that this reductively stereotyped Irish American is depicted as being more used to dishing out. *I Spit On Your Graves* can be considered dubious not merely because of its sexual politics but also in these terms, regardless of the conscious intentions of its author. While Lee Anderson's desire for revenge is understandable, the manner in which he goes about this settling of scores is blatantly

flawed. While in our alienated society race is experienced as real, it is in fact culturally constructed and there is no such thing as racial justice. Anderson's anger is more than justified but his solutions to racial oppression are clearly a manifestation of false consciousness. While it remains problematic to identify a novelist with the opinions of his fictional creations, Vian did little to create a sense of distance between his own views and that of his narrator Lee Anderson. Indeed, by setting out to hoax his readers into believing that this book was actually authored by an Afro-American, Vian has probably compounded the damage on this front; and it is also worth noting that novels actually written by victims of racial oppression generally show a more developed understanding of the insidious ways in which racism operates.

As a curious aside, Meir Zarchi's notorious 1978 'video nasty' about a raped woman murdering the men who assaulted her rather too self-consciously reverses the sexual politics of Vian's novel and it is probably more than mere coincidence that the film in question is entitled *I Spit On Your Grave*. Meir's film was originally called *Day Of The Woman*, but the distributor Jerry Gross gave it a title he lifted from a sixties racism drama (quite possibly based on Vian's book) when he reissued it and it was under this billing that the movie became infamous. If Meir's movie only really became a box office success after being denounced by critics such as Roger Ebert, Vian's novel also looked like it might disappear without trace but then four months after *I Spit On Your Graves* was first published in November 1946, moral vigilantes took legal action against the book because they deemed it obscene. Two months later the French press were claiming the novel had provided the inspiration for a murder in a seedy Parisian hotel. It was at this point that Vian's cover was blown and he was exposed as the author rather than merely the translator of *I Spit On Your Graves*. Vian's energetic and very readable, but nonetheless dubious piece of hack work which was slung together in just two weeks, went on to become the bestselling French book of 1947.

[IMAGE] If *I Spit On Your Graves* was a pot boiler, then *Foam Of The Daze* is considered by many to be Vian's masterpiece. First published in 1947, *Foam Of The Daze* is a light-weight work filled with puns, bittersweet romance, elements of science fiction and jokes about Vian's friend Jean-Paul Sartre who appears in fictional form as Jean-Pol Partre. The plot, an inconsequential love story exists only as a vehicle for Vian's literary riffing. With its many jazz references this novel appears to be an attempt to translate the Afro-American art of signifying into something that could be found acceptable within Anglo-French literary discourse. Tam Tam's edition reproduces the copious annotations from the ten year old French critical edition of *Foam Of The Daze* put together by Gilbert Pestureau and Michel Rybalka. Since these two critics don't appear to realise that Vian is attempting to dumb up Afro-American street traditions of tall tale telling, they fail to provide clued up readers with any insights into the book and it isn't long before the mute literalism of their annotations becomes grating. Indeed, had I not been reviewing the book I certainly wouldn't have bothered with their notes, and skipping such unnecessary froth can only add to one's enjoyment of the text. *Foam Of The Daze* is an interesting if ultimately faulty experiment which pales in comparison to the work of real masters of the art of signifying such as Rudy Ray Moore. Moore's comedy sketches are often obscenely extended and he is perhaps best known for the routine and subsequent film *Dolemite* both derived from a tale he'd first heard acted out by an alcoholic street bum. Although familiarity with the movie *Dolemite* (1975) would be preferable by a long chalk, for readers unfamiliar with Moore the following short joke will provide an almost adequate flavour of his humour: 'What did the whirlwind say to the palm tree? Hold onto your nuts because you're about to get one hell of a blow job' (included on the album *Good Ole Big Ones*, Kent Records, CD reissue 1995). Returning to *Foam Of The Daze*, it is inferior to Vian's slice and dice hack work *I Spit On Your Graves* precisely because it is more literary, and by the time this was written in the wake of James Joyce bourgeois fiction was already dead.

Moving on, Serge Gainsbourg is best known in the Anglo-American world for his 1969 hit single *Je T'Aime Moi Non Plus* made with the English actress Jane Birkin. Gainsbourg worked mainly as a musician and in *Evguénie Sokolov* (1980), his only novel, it is amusing to witness the boldness with which he moves from the world of entertainment into high brow literature in the form of a post-dadaist shaggy dog tale. Evguénie Sokolov the eponymous anti-hero of the book is a man who can't stop farting. He takes what is potentially a socially debilitating condition and uses it to his own advantage by producing art works that record the way in which his farts drive his hand across the various surfaces on which he chooses to record the gaseous spasms of his bowel tract. By mercilessly riding out this quasi-materialist aesthetic, Sokolov becomes a famous artist. As Lynne Tillman notes in her story *Ode To Le Petomane* (included in her book *This Is Not It*, DAP Inc. New York 2002): 'In the 19th century a French performer Le Petomane farted for the public. He set his farts on fire, too, to give the audience a good show...' (Page 132).

[IMAGE] Contemporary popular entertainment may be peppered with fart jokes but between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries a widespread fixation with the bowel tract and everything that emanates from it was recuperated by high brow aesthetes. As a consequence, by the middle of the twentieth century a truly singular focus on the subject of farting is very much a feature of works that seek to move highbrow culture from an idealist towards a materialist g(r)asp of the world. Indeed, Tillman's story was first published in the catalogue accompanying a 1995 exhibition by the artist Roni Horn. Likewise, in his novel *Molloy*, Samuel Beckett parodies notions of scientific precision by inexactly applying mathematical criteria to farting: 'I can't help it, gas escapes from my fundament on the least pretext, it's hard not to mention it now and then, however great my distaste. One day I counted them. Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all, it's not excessive. Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing...' (page 30, Picador, London 1979, omnibus edition of *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable*). Thus, despite Gainsbourg's long association with popular culture, when he turned his hand to literature he self-consciously created a novel inspired by Beckett that emerged from and meshed back into highbrow debates about the exhaustion of art and modernist endgameism. The end of art goes on and on, almost forever, and Gainsbourg shamelessly exploits the fact that he is only one among very many writers to satirise this situation; indeed the strength of the joke rests partly on how late he was in jumping on this band wagon. As Bergson observed many years ago, repetition is the basis of most humour. In other words, *Evguénie Sokolov* is in odd passages somewhat sad but mostly it is hilarious.

Parodying like Gainsbourg and Beckett scientific and academic method, I must end by almost repeating myself. Tam Tam Books are making available to English language readers works written originally in French that might otherwise be overlooked. One does not have to like or even agree with the texts in question to find them worth perusing. Indeed, you generally learn more from examining books you have disagreements with rather than sticking to those that match exactly the tastes you've randomly acquired. That said, even if I found them to varying degrees problematic, I certainly enjoyed reading *I Spit On Your Graves* and *Evguénie Sokolov*. Likewise, since *Foam Of The Daze* is so much less interesting than Vian's hack novel that preceded it by just a year, this latter book is worth reading simply to find out how decadent and jaded so called high culture can be. Serious culture requires an ever stronger infusion of street vibes or else a severe dose of the shits before it is able to shake its booty. All of which brings to mind the situationists' already hoary detournement of de Sade: 'Nihilists, one more effort if you would become revolutionaries...' These books will appeal to nihilists of all ages, and hopefully they will inspire at least some of them to become revolutionaries. From such ill-digested sources a foul wind may yet envelop the bourgeoisie...

*I Spit On Your Graves* by Boris Vian translated by Boris Vian and Milton Rosenthal (Tam Tam Books, Los Angeles 1998 \$17).

*Evguénie Sokolov* by Serge Gainsbourg (Tam Tam Books, Los Angeles 1998 \$17).

*Foam Of The Daze* by Boris Vian translated by Brian Harper (Tam Tam Books, Los Angeles 2003 \$18).

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