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Bzzz..., Banned, and Indecent Sonnet by Boris Vian

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Jennifer Carr
BZZZ...

Boris Vian
BZZZ...

God knew enough of hate to create flies,
Hideous, velvety, their frightening bodies
Swollen with yellow pus, and in their roving flight
Trailing who knows what of foulness and blight

Spoonerizing Satan who rots all he touches
You, flies, you touch what is rotten, tasting,
Crowded together, the pinkish, seeping eyes
Of beasts that your avid mouths have left blind

And your strident wing with its veins of metal
Conjures in my nightmare a nebulous hell
Of hairy bodies come from the shade where they pound

The nails of the long casket where I will lie down
And which they will burn in the immortal fire
To save me from you, when I expire...

A runt, scrawny and deformed
Had stolen some veal without a scruple
To eat, at the butcher's, and then a barrel
Of wine, to drink, from the grocer at his store.

The prosecutor, what a pathetic struggle,
Seeing in his person the latest Lucifer,
Was after the hide of this unequaled monster.
— He was starved! said the pragmatic counsel.

— It was Ahriman's spirit that pushed him, gentlemen!
— No! From his stomach, those imperious strains!
For three days they kept up the discussion.

And I left, repeating this refrain:
Evil, did you cause the deed?
Cause of evil, were you need?

And, uh, I still don't know.

Jennifer Carr
Indecent¹ Sonnet

Boris Vian
Indécent sonnet

Dreamer, she muses
Through the blinds
The rising sun
Near her reclines

As in a vision
I often see her
Unnerving mirage
Chimera, fiction

The wholesome clarity
Of rose-hued tea
Colors her cheek

On her uncovered
Body the sun's cheek
Plays an unknown lover.

¹ Hardly...

Cent sonnets—which is actually a collection of one hundred and six sonnets and six ballads—features some of the author’s earliest work. Vian wrote several of these poems while he was still a *lycéen*, and although an inescapable buoyancy pervades, they avoid juvenility and posturing, demonstrating instead a precocious dexterity and a talent for wordplay, coy allusions, and subtle (or not so subtle) changes in register. As Noël Arnaud states in his introduction to the work: “on a le sentiment que Boris Vian était bien conscient de mettre à mal la poésie” (“you get the feeling that Boris Vian was well aware of putting poetry to the test”; my translation). Not only that, but he chose the sonnet as the primary form in and through which to do so. This would have been a distinctly anachronistic gesture in the 1930s and ’40s, when Vian was writing *Cent sonnets*. After the sea changes of Dada and Surrealism, rhymed, metered verse could have easily become yet another ossified strata of literary tradition. Yet Vian’s poetry was to be both contrary and prescient. To turn once more to Arnaud’s introduction: “Il s’en faudra de quelques années pour que l’Oulipo réussisse à réhabiliter la poétique ancienne ... et parvienne à convaincre de l’intérêt, sinon de la nécessité, des structures et des contraintes dans la production littéraire” (“It would be several years before the Oulipo succeeded in rehabilitating traditional poetics ... and managed to convince people of the relevance, if not the necessity, of structures and constraints in literary production”; my translation). (*Cent Sonnets*, Livre de poche, 2009: 8–9).

The translator of Vian’s poems is certainly constrained, or at the very least conflicted. Respecting, as far as possible, the dictates of the sonnet and ballad forms would appear necessary, yet adherence to form inevitably entails sacrifices elsewhere. There are no empirical measures available to the translator; nothing to indicate how much of a divergence is too much. In a sense, translation is nothing more—and nothing less—than an exercise in individual taste. However, if, for the sake of establishing some parameters, we were to define the two poles of poetry translation as, say, Robert Lowell’s *Imitations* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin*, then I have done a somewhat messy job of furrowing out the middle ground. As a general rule, though, I did try to preserve some semblance of a rhyme scheme, even when this meant tweaking the meter and syntax.

Vian is also adept at various kinds of wordplay. Consider for instance

the neologism *contrepettant* in “Bzz...,” which takes the French word for “spoonerism,” *contrepet*, and turns it into a present participle by affixing a final *-ant*. I translated this term—which anticipates the deft inversion of the phrases *pourrit ce qu’il touche ... touchez ce qui pourrit* (“rots all he touches ... touch what is rotten”; my translation)—using the equivalent English suffix, “-ing.” Both *contrepettant* and “spoonerizing” have four syllables, which works nicely for the meter, but the internal “an” rhyme of *contrepettant Satan* is lost.

One final consideration worth mentioning stems from Vian’s penchant for footnoting or otherwise attaching “addenda” to his poems. These present a singular challenge: how would the translator distinguish her own (should she feel the need to include any) from those integral to the original? I could easily picture the nightmarish succession of footnotes and footnotes to footnotes that would result, and so decided to avoid adding any of my own, even when I suspected that something wanted elucidating. Yet *Cent sonnets*’s footnotes and addenda can also be understood as subversions of French poetic tradition and its centuries of baggage. So I chose to reason—however self-servingly—that this irreverence, typical of Vian, allows the translator that much more creative leeway.