

Retelling the Vernon Sullivan Hoax, Or What has been Neglected in the Telling: Why People Do Not Care About *Elles se rendent pas compte* (1950)

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There is a way in which a literary hoax functions as a metonym. It speaks of the broader climate in which it is produced. For scholars like David Brooks a literary hoax cultivated in Paris in the years following the Second World War is necessarily steeped in the collective guilt that would not find any official catharsis until as late as the 1970s. For Brooks the hoax provides a means of self-invention and, importantly, an invention of self at one remove.¹ As we shall see below, the development of post-war French *noir* is bound up in the same tensions and is predicated on the same allegorized, and thus objectively distanced, reinvention of self, via the translated works of American authors.² The problem with generalisations, of course, is that they work against individual stories. In this article we shall try to tread a line between the background of a hoax and the specific mechanics of its genesis. In this way, we hope also to tease out the nihilistic, writerly meanings hidden within the broader framework, of meaning-making, while at the same time creating a new critical space for re-examining a whole hoax.

Boris Vian and, *a fortiori*, the Vernon Sullivan Affair or hoax, as we shall refer to it here, are little known outside France. Over the course of five years Vian wrote four novels under the pseudonym of Vernon Sullivan — *J'irai*

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¹ We are thinking here of his *Sons of Clovis: Ern Malley, Adoré Floupette and a Secret History of Australian Poetry* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2011). We should also like to thank David for his support and his feedback at a presentation of this piece given at the University of Sydney on 25 September 2013.

² For an excellent assessment of the allegorical potential of crime fiction in the French post-war context, see Clare Gorrara, *French Crime Fiction and the Second World War: Past Crimes, Present Memories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

cracher sur vos tombes (*I Spit on Your Graves*, 1946), *Les morts ont tous la même peau* (*The Dead All Have the Same Skin*, 1947),³ *Et on tuera tous les affreux* (*We'll Kill All the Ugly*, 1948) and the novel that will be our object of study in the present article, *Elles se rendent pas compte* (*They Just Don't Get It*, 1950).⁴ For a hoax that spanned the Atlantic and shook the French literary world, it is somewhat surprising that it is so little discussed beyond French borders. With this in mind, Brooks, writing in *Sons of Clovis*, notes that the story of the Vernon Sullivan Hoax needs to be told.⁵ We should agree with Brooks. For even, and perhaps especially, from a French Studies perspective, this, in some ways the most telling and arguably the most recounted French hoax of modern times, is a story that has been inadequately told. Too much detail is known; the rumours clutter the bigger picture; and what remains is a collection of *idées reçues*, a metaphysical reading, as the deconstructionists, from whom we shall hear later, would say. That is, a reading that has come to coincide almost perfectly with the case but which, for all that, is neither 'the whole Truth' nor sufficiently attentive to the detail of the textual fabric to generate a specific actualization of meaning, or 'a truth'.⁶ This powerful and eminently readerly tale has become part of the story, part of the hoax itself, and if French lacks the appropriate terms to distinguish between a prank and a hoax, it is nonetheless the case that the Vernon Sullivan Affair, which has become synonymous in France with the word *canular*, is in fact a 'hoax'. The French *canular* defines what is commonly called a prank, or a joke, and has none of the seriousness required by the hoax or all the

³ Both of which can be found in Boris Vian, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, vol. 1, eds Marc Lapprand, Christelle Gonzalo and François Roulmann (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

⁴ Found in Boris Vian, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, vol. 2, eds Marc Lapprand, Christelle Gonzalo and François Roulmann (Paris: Gallimard, 2010). The last English title has not been published; it is translated here by the authors. All translations of French text are the authors' own.

⁵ Brooks, *Sons of Clovis*, p. 333.

⁶ Our reading of *Elles se rendent pas compte* as a metonym of the Sullivan Hoax will be predicated on an understanding of auto-differentiation, which is itself derived from Yale-School deconstructionist textual analysis. The term 'metaphysical' will be used to refer to an overarching meaning, or 'Meaning', consistent with the most commonly understood reading of a given text; 'nihilistic', on the other hand, will be used to describe those readings that break from the metaphysical. For the deconstructionists, the nihilistic reading of a given text is always already, or virtually, present within it; as such the metaphysical text is only as coherent, or meaningful, as its reader allows it to be, and alternative readings are hosted within it, awaiting actualization as meaning. In this way, Vernon Sullivan is an actualization of Boris Vian's authorial identity, an iteration of his self-alterity, his natural tendency towards otherness.

legal aspects it entails.⁷ Critically, it also lacks what we should like to call the ‘literariness’ that enables a simple *canular* to become a real hoax. This is why the entire story of the Vernon Sullivan Affair needs retelling — so that it may coincide with its Anglo-Saxon ‘other’ and become, finally, the Vernon Sullivan Hoax.

The affair began in 1946 with the infamous *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes*, which was born of a wager between aspiring Parisian author Boris Vian and the director of the publishing house Éditions du Scorpion, and did, at the outset, have all the trappings of a *canular*. It saw the birth of the virtual, mixed-race author Vernon Sullivan, the author that the United States never dared to publish, and subsequently became the epicentre of a French media storm when it was adjudged an affront to public decency. In the novel, Sullivan, its supposed African American author, describes the vengeance of a *nègre-blanc*, or ‘white negro’, against a background of racial tension in a small town in America’s deep south. The issue of race was again developed the following year in the second Sullivan novel, *Les morts ont tous la même peau*, whose protagonist, Daniel Parker,⁸ is sent into a crisis of identity when he becomes convinced that he is part African American. The other backdrop, to both these novels, is of course the postwar period and the relationship between France and the United States, which would become increasingly ambivalent over the course of the Fourth Republic.

Importantly, these are the early years of the *Série Noire* (launched by Marcel Duhamel at Gallimard in 1945), during which the success of a crime novel, in its new hard-boiled form, depended on its classification as *traduit de l’américain* — ‘translated from the American’. *Et on tuera tous les affreux* marked a radical change in direction for Sullivan, when the theme of race gave way to Science Fiction, but still within the parameters of the crime novel. The

⁷ It is important to be quite specific here, since there clearly were legal proceedings in this case in the form of the lawsuit instigated by Daniel Parker of the moral watchdog association *Cartel d’Action Morale et Sociale* against *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* and *Les morts ont tous la même peau* in February 1950. According to Parker, the two novels were an affront to public decency. Boris Vian was condemned to pay a 100,000-franc fine in his capacity as translator, as was Jean D’Halluin in his capacity as publisher. This lawsuit does not preclude the affair’s classification as a *canular* because its focus was not on an instance of plagiarism or fraud, which is typically the case with a literary hoax. Indeed, since Vian was prosecuted in his capacity as translator and not author of the novels, the hoax had not at that stage been revealed and, as such, did not yet exist. Technically therefore, the lawsuit concerns the reception of the literary production deriving from the hoax. For more on this lawsuit, see Noël Arnaud, *Les Vies parallèles de Boris Vian* (Paris: Bourgois, 1970), pp. 151-289.

⁸ Named after Daniel Parker of the *Cartel d’Action Morale et Sociale*.

final novel to bear Sullivan's name, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, was published by Éditions du Scorpion in June 1950. Its radical break from the generic markers of the previous Sullivan novels — it had nothing to do with race or sci-fi, for example — left critics dumbfounded. Its focus, it appeared, was parody itself, articulated through a narrative of vertiginous transvestism and masquerade. More importantly, it seems to us, it is the only Sullivan novel not to bear on its front cover the words *traduit de l'américain*, the famous slogan that had guaranteed not only the success of the first wave of the *Série Noire* (dominated in its formative years, from 1945 to 1948, by Peter Cheyney and James Hadley Chase) but also *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*. So, while the fourth Sullivan has become a metonym for the critical neglect into which all four novels have fallen, it breaks from its predecessor in this important way.

The shift from ostensible parody to ostensible rejection of parody must, however, be tempered in both instances by a closer look at the evolution of the *Série Noire* itself. For, as we shall develop here, *Elles se rendent pas compte* is intertextually bound up with the *Série Noire* in two important ways: first, it is a re-write, or parallel, writerly or nihilistic interpretation of an official *Série Noire* title, Peter Cheyney's *Les Femmes s'en balancent* (1949), translated (from the original English text, *Dames Don't Care*, 1937) by Michelle and Boris Vian; second, its dispensing of any attempt to pass the (actual) author off as the (virtual) translator had in fact already been trialled within the series itself in 1948, in the form of Terry Stewart's *La Mort et l'ange* (*Death and the Angel*).⁹ This novel has since become a classic because it was the first novel of the *Série Noire* to be written by a French author — Serge Arcouët, whose own pseudonymy has passed almost unobserved under the legitimizing cover(s) of the *Série Noire*.¹⁰ There is therefore a very fine line between a parodic attempt to feign 'originality' and an 'original' work (of a parodic tradition).

⁹ *La Mort et l'ange* is peritextually interesting insofar as it occupies a liminal space between pseudo-translations, such as the first three Sullivan novels, and pseudonymous ones like *Elles se rendent pas compte*: initially at least, it boasted the famous slogan 'traduit de l'américain' but with no mention of the translator's name on the inner cover.

¹⁰ See, for example, Claire Gorrara, *The 'Roman Noir' in Postwar French Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). What also goes unnoticed is the debt owed by Stewart's début novel to *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*. For a detailed reading of the passing of Lee Anderson's literary inheritance into *La Mort et l'ange*, and thus into the official sanction of the *Série Noire*, 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.

This rejection of the trappings of pseudo-translation and heteronymy testifies to a will (albeit an almost certainly ironic or self-consciously vain one) to include Vernon Sullivan in the French canon of hardboiled crime fiction as a real French author. The result is appropriately paradoxical: on the one hand, Vian is eclipsed by Sullivan; on the other hand, his presence in the text, through asides to the reader and various intertextual allusions, is stronger than in any of the previous Sullivans. This logic of presence-absence is so complex in fact that when authorial presence is reflexively staged (“je reconnais bien là la main de mon auteur” – “I clearly recognize the hand of my author in this” says the protagonist Sullivan),¹¹ it is almost impossible to decide whether this is a literary embodiment of Boris Vian, in the form of protagonist Francis, referring to Vernon Sullivan’s authorship, or *vice versa*. The fact that Francis has a brother with distinctly Sullivanian traits only serves to intensify this undecidability. It is thus of a diversity of voices as well as genres that *Elles se rendent pas compte* is metonymic; and it is this diversity that we consider here to be the key to the Sullivan Hoax. Yet, nearly seventy years later, the Vernon Sullivan Affair remains synonymous with *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* at the expense of the other three novels, and especially *Elles se rendent pas compte*.

This dominance can be explained by a number of factors. First of all, sales of *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* outstripped those of all the other Sullivan novels: by the early 1970s it had sold over five hundred thousand copies, or approximately seven times as many as all the other Sullivan titles combined.¹² It also showed itself to be a more adaptable text. It was first adapted in 1948 as a play by Vian (with no reference to Sullivan, at a time when he was still considered to be the ‘real’ author of the novel). In 1959 it became a film, which, despite being profoundly different from the novel, would serve to anchor *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* in the French imaginary, at the expense not only of the other Sullivans but, until their periodic renaissances after May 1968, also of Boris Vian’s other works. The final factor at play in the neglect of *Elles se rendent pas compte* has to do with Sullivan himself: at the time of its publication in June 1950, and despite Vian’s own stubborn refusal to admit publically to being the man behind the author, Sullivan’s secret was out. If his sole right to the credits on the novel was a sign of his having nothing to lose, it was a gesture largely lost on the public who had effectively moved on.

Ironically, the paratextual strategy of *Elles se rendent pas compte*, which is such a multi-layered commentary on the Parisian (and thus Franco-American) *Zeitgeist* of the immediate post-war years, fails that most basic of

¹¹ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, pp. 401-498

¹² Sales of *Elles se rendent pas compte* stood at precisely 6,831 at that time. See Arnaud, *Les Vies parallèles*, p. 173.

Genette's definitions of the function of the paratext, which is to take the text towards its readers, in other words making it marketable.¹³ Critics, too, have failed to engage with the text in any degree of depth, almost universally seeing in it *un roman bâclé*, or botched novel. As we have suggested, this negative response to the text is predicated on its ostensibly parodic take on the post-war thriller '*traduit de l'américain*'. There are two obvious problems with such an analysis: on the one hand, it is premised on the metaphysical reading of the text rather than an active, or writerly, engagement with the text itself—a kind of hermeneutics of botchedness; on the other hand, it relies on, and compounds even as it is compounded by, a hasty and misguided reading of those novels parodied by *Elles se rendent pas compte* as translated, in the most straightforward sense, into French from American originals.¹⁴

A closer reading of the novel reveals a highly reflexive text and a complex layering of intertextual references. Unsurprisingly, given its position as the last in the series, it alludes to the other Sullivan novels; the effect is to interlock these apparently disparate texts in a tetralogy. There are also references to the novels written under the name of Boris Vian, particularly to *L'Écume des jours* (translated variously as *Froth on the Daydream*, *Mood Indigo* and *Foam of the Daze*) and *L'Herbe rouge* (*Red Grass*). And finally, there are those references on which we shall concentrate our analysis here, which it to say, those to the *Série Noire*.¹⁵

For Michel Rybalka, the period 1948-1949 corresponded to one of deep personal crisis for Boris Vian.¹⁶ This reinforces the heavily biographical approach adopted in Vian scholarship towards *L'Herbe rouge* whose composition coincided with this period. This crisis culminated in the breakdown of Vian's marriage to Michelle Léglise. It also, however, saw the couple work

¹³ Gérard Genette famously catalogues the functions of the 'paratext' in *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987).

¹⁴ We have elsewhere developed an analysis of the always already parodic translation *skopos* of the *Série Noire* and its ramifications on the reflexivity of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*. See, respectively, Alistair Rolls and Clara Sitbon, "'Traduit de l'américain' from Poe to the *Série Noire*: Baudelaire's Greatest Hoax?," *Modern and Contemporary France* vol. 21, no. 1 (2013), pp. 37-53; Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan, Clara Sitbon and Alistair Rolls, "Jeux textuels et paratextuels dans *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* : au-delà du canular," *Romance Studies* vol. 32 (2014), pp. 16-26.

¹⁵ Such was the notoriety of the Sullivan Affair and its power as hoax that Peter Cheyney publicly bemoaned the choice of Boris Vian as his French translator. See Sonia Pavlik's note on Vian's relationship with the *Série Noire* in the special issue (*hors-série*) of *Le Monde* dedicated to Boris Vian (April-June 2013), p. 118.

¹⁶ Michel Rybalka, *Boris Vian. Essai d'interprétation et de documentation* (Paris: Lettres modernes, 1969), p. 234.

together on the translation of Peter Cheyney's *Les Femmes s'en balancent*.¹⁷ Finally, it was in this period of personal crisis and literary productivity, of collaboration and rupture, that Vian also wrote *Elles se rendent pas compte*. We can only assume that the latter is the second of the two novels, one good and one less good, that Rybalka notes Vian had in preparation at the time.¹⁸ The particular dyad with which we are concerned, however, is that which sees *Elles se rendent pas compte* opposed to *Les Femmes s'en balancent*, an opposition that casts each as a virtualization of the other, an instance of auto-differentiation cleaved between two novels and which cleaves two novels together.

Clearly, the titles *Elles se rendent pas compte* and *Les Femmes s'en balancent* are themselves translations of each other; and, as the editors have noted the former title appears as a sentence (denouncing attractive women as worse than the most hardened of killers) in the latter novel.¹⁹ Certainly, there are a number of similarities between the two plots: both novels contain a staged suicide (Francis's in *Elles se rendent pas compte* and, in *Les Femmes s'en balancent*, that of Granworth Aymes, who takes the place of his lover's murdered husband), and the death of the counterfeiter Periera in Cheyney's novel bears a strong resemblance to Donna Watson's: "Periera ne dit plus rien. J'ai idée qu'il a son compte, lui aussi. Je le regarde. J'ai deviné juste. Ses yeux sont vitreux" — "Periera has stopped speaking. I reckon he's had it. I look at him. I'm right. His eyes are glassy"²⁰; Donna is abandoned by Francis and Ritchie before she dies, just as her eyes are beginning to glaze over.

What we have here is a nexus of interconnected texts, whose interconnections are reflexively staged by *Elles se rendent pas compte*. Such nexuses have, of course, been covered by theorists of deconstruction, for whom they constitute the very nature of text. We are simply embodying such concepts as Jacques Derrida's *différance*, and in this case tracking its embodiment through a cleaving of texts, narratives, characters and authors. As Derrida himself notes in 'Living On: Border Lines', text "is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to

¹⁷ Peter Cheyney, *Les Femmes s'en balancent*, trans. Michelle Vian and Boris Vian (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

¹⁸ Rybalka, *Boris Vian*, p. 234.

¹⁹ Lapprand et al. note that the title phrase "elles se rendent pas compte" is repeated seven times in the novel. If pronominal variations and synonyms are taken into account, this count appears to us to be conservative. See Lapprand, Gonzalo and Roulmann, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, vol. 2, p. 1259.

²⁰ Cheyney, *Les Femmes*, p. 214

other differential traces.²¹ In *Elles se rendent pas compte*, therefore, reflexivity not only points beyond self even as it expresses self but also, necessarily, points up self-alterity. The tendency of all text towards auto-differentiation is staged by Derrida in the same essay in the co-presence of a second, parallel essay that takes the form of one footnote that runs unbroken across the entire length of its larger-sized Other. In 'Border Lines', Derrida reflexively frames the question of translation — reflexively, because 'Border Lines' is itself the becoming-Other of 'Living On'. Furthermore, Derrida is consciously writing his original French text for his English translator, James Hulbert, whose version would be published alongside the work of the others of the famous Yale School. The essay is thus, even as it is written, exemplary of the way in which text dies to 'live on' since the original is only ever virtual insofar as publication is one of the standard tests for modern textual actualization:

For the problems that I wished to formalize above all have an irreducible relationship to the enigma, or in other words the *récit*, of translation. I have sought to present these problems { *les mettre en scène* }, but the stage on which they appear, as will be seen, is one where the unrepresentable is in full force. Thus, I have sought to present them *practically*, and in a sense *performatively*, in accordance with a notion of the performative that I feel must be dissociated, by an act of deconstruction, from the notion of presence with which it is generally linked.²²

This implication of the role of translation with the absent-present of textual performativity offers an attractive model for reading the interdependency of the Sullivan series and those other works that Vian signed under his own name, be it as author or as translator. This is, for us, the crucial role of the *Série Noire* as referenced body; for, more than anything else, it is a series entirely predicated on a stretching of common understandings of translation and its relationship to originality. In this way, *Les Femmes s'en balancent* stands reflexively, or exemplarily, in relation to *Elles se rendent pas compte* as its textual Other, its manifestation of itself as other. The relative degrees of proximity and difference between Vian and Cheyney, and Vian and Sullivan are not Derrida's concern, however; and for us, too, questions of life and death are focused on translation as textual production (both process and product) rather than on the biographical identity of the author's hand.

The choice of crime fiction as the vehicle for this translation-non-translation nexus also appears ideal when seen through the lens of Derrida's

²¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism* ed. Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 84.

²² Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', pp. 89-90.

essay. The following conundrum questions to what extent irony and reflexivity can be said to affect a text's classification of itself as (a particular type of) text:

What are we doing when, to practice a 'genre', we quote a genre, represent it, stage it, expose its *generic law*, analyze it practically? Are we still practicing the genre? Does the 'work' still belong to the genre it re-cites? But inversely, how could we make a genre work without referring to it {quasi-} quotationally, indicating at some point, 'See, this is a work of such-and-such a genre'? Such an indication does not belong to the genre and makes the statement of belonging an ironical exercise. It interrupts the very belonging of which it is a necessary condition.²³

In the case of crime fiction, however, this question does not seem to arise; indeed, crime fiction has as one of its most consistent generic traits its tendency to compare the events of its own story to those of 'fictional crime', which is to say, that it is at its most generically self-coinciding when it denies its status as (crime) fiction. Thus, if it is difficult to tease out parody from the 'real thing' in any textual production, be it Derrida's highly staged single-double essay or a more standard diegesis, the combination of parodic translation²⁴ and crime novel that is the *Série Noire* makes the discrimination of self and Other, author and translator a vexed issue indeed.

Sullivan may not have lived, but as text he 'lives on', where 'living on', in Derrida's scheme, means, *inter alia*, living reflexively. Such textual life, as we have seen, requires simultaneous completion, or death; it means living within and beyond borders, in denial of the *hors-texte*. In the Sullivan Affair, therefore, we have 'difference' (from *différer*), or translation as reflexive writing or auto-differentiation of the 'original' text; we have 'deferral' (from that other meaning of *différer*), or the way in which translation delays writing, passes it through an intermediary phase, temporally as well as authorially, even as it brings it to readers; and, since we are discussing Derrida, in translation, we also have 'deference' (*déferer* in French), or the way in which a translator typically defers to the author. In the case of *Elles se rendent pas compte* a high degree of reflexivity both heightens and blurs difference (between the crime novel and the parody). Delay is both present but kept to a strict minimum if not almost entirely erased (the *Série Noire* translated quickly, and quite often texts that were 'originally' quickly written). Deference, to the author, is present and absent, or

²³ Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', p. 86.

²⁴ The reference here is to Lapprand's discussion of the highly creative translation *skopos* adopted by Marcel Duhamel's team, including Boris Vian himself. See Marc Lapprand, 'Les Traductions parodiques de Boris Vian', *The French Review* vol. 65, no. 4 (1992), pp. 537-546.

‘in other words’, to re-cite Derrida,²⁵ which is to say, that it is disavowed under the fetish that is the slogan ‘*traduit de l’américain*’.²⁶

In the case of *Les Femmes s’en balacent*, Vian translates Cheyney twice, once in the *Série Noire* and once by writing the novel himself; in the second instance, parallel to the first, he decides for the first time in the Sullivan series to drop his name as translator and to place Vernon Sullivan centre stage alone. By cleaving his text between translation and original, and by reflexively blurring the borders between each, Vian is thus able to differ and to defer while simultaneously erasing both difference and deference. Not content to intend beyond itself onto the Other, the double text of auto-differentiation is also, as in Derrida’s essay, mapped internally, that is to say, inside the diegetic parameters of *Elles se rendent pas compte*. This takes the form of a reflexively disavowed twist to the crime plot.

At one point in the story it is important for Ritchie to have his legs waxed like Francis. Ritchie is due to meet his brother’s male beautician, Wu Chang, in Francis’s apartment. When the latter returns to meet them, he is met by an out-of-breath Ritchie who makes an astonishing announcement: “Il y a un Chinetoque avec un poignard dans les tripes au beau milieu de ta chambre” — “There is a Chink with a knife in his guts right in the middle of your bedroom).”²⁷ To Francis’s observation that Wu Chang has been murdered Ritchie replies that he is in fact not dead. The question of whether Wu Chang is or is not dead then recurs throughout the remainder of the novel. Newspaper headlines are reported back to Francis throughout by various characters, all of whom are involved in the various gangs, as agents or double agents. If Wu Chang survives the attack, his testimony will exonerate Francis, and towards the end of the investigation he is informed that Wu Chang has indeed talked. Francis’s ultimate exoneration

²⁵ Derrida, ‘Living On: Border Lines’, pp. 75-76.

²⁶ Marcel Duhamel and his team translated books in which they saw translatorly potential — they saw them as always already translated — and the ‘original’ author was fetishized by appearing on the cover when he was real, as in the case of Peter Cheyney, or when he was not, as in the case of Vernon Sullivan, for, in both cases, he was secondary to the machine that was a prop to the translation itself, providing a pretext for the words ‘*traduit de l’américain*’.

²⁷ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 440. While we do not have room to develop this reading here, this plot element, and thus the nihilistic reading predicated on it, almost certainly owes a debt to James Hadley Chase’s war-time best seller *Twelve Chinks and a Woman* (1940), which was translated as *Douze chinetoques et une souris* by Jean Weil (Paris: Gallimard, 1948). In Chase’s novel the dead body of a Chinese man turns up in the office of Dave Fenner, who first appears in the classic *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (London: Jarrolds, 1939), which is itself one of the key intertextual foundations of *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes*.

seems, however, to rest on his family's influence. Despite Lapprand et al.'s assertions that he is from a "good family," it is revealed that his father, a former high-ranking member of the Chicago police force, is part of the novel's systemic corruption.²⁸ Furthermore, the chapter ends with the following disturbing revelation: "Quand même, quelle vacherie, cette histoire de Chinois. Surtout que je vais vous dire un truc... Ritchie a pas un seul poil sur les jambes" — "Nonetheless, what a shitty thing, this business with the Chinese guy. Especially when I tell you that... Ritchie hasn't got a single hair on his legs."²⁹

This sole overt suggestion that Ritchie killed Wu Chang is sufficient to open a breach in the manifest or metaphysical text, thereby admitting an alternative, nihilistic reading of the novel.³⁰ Rather than a simple hesitation based on whether Wu Chang is dead or alive, there is now the matter of responsibility. Much is made of the use of the term *poignarder*, which suggests that Wu Chang has been stabbed but without necessarily implying that he has died of his wounds. This term, however, is intertextually charged and has penetrated the text through the nihilistic breach left by the suggestion of Ritchie's guilt. It comes from *Les Femmes s'en balancent*: "Elles [les poules] braillent en voyant des araignées, mais elles poignarderaient leur coquin aussi facilement qu'on commande une glace au chocolat" — "Dames scream when they see spiders, but they'd stab their bloke as easily as buying a chocolate ice-cream."³¹ In this instance, the implication is clear: to stab is to kill. The key to Cheyney's novel revolves around two elements that are important for our understanding of Wu Chang's fate: first, a woman has in fact killed her husband; second, that woman's lover has faked his own suicide, and the body that went into the East River was in fact that of the dead husband.

Mapped back onto *Elles se rendent pas compte*, with its cross-dressing of these deadly dames, these elements produce the following nihilistic solution: Wu Chang has indeed been stabbed to death; the killer is a man with epilated legs, not a woman; the need to fake a suicide (in this case Francis's, because he is wanted on suspicion of murder) is a pretext to dispose of the body of the murdered man, Wu Chang, this time in the Potomac River. This explains why Ritchie sets out alone on the pretext of getting a dead body from a clinic (while

²⁸ Lapprand et al, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, vol. 2, p. 1257); Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 496.

²⁹ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 444.

³⁰ The terms metaphysical and nihilistic, which denote the universally accepted reading that is deemed to coincide perfectly with the text and its Other, the counter-reading actively developed by the reader, are used by J. Hillis Miller in 'The Critic as Host', in Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, pp. 217-53.

³¹ Cheyney, *Les Femmes*, p. 9.

in *Les Femmes s'en balancent* Granworth Aymes lies in a clinic in Mexico pretending to be Paulette's dying husband) and also why he escapes just as Francis is captured by the gang just before the novel's final shoot-out. Indeed, the hosting of the nihilistic counter-solution within the metaphysical one (in which Wu Chang lives and exonerates Francis, and both brothers live happily ever after) allows us to revisit the 'original' occurrence of the title line "elles se rendent pas compte" in the translation of Cheyney's novel: Lemmy uses the line to convince Fernandez that he is about to pin the murder of Granworth Aymes, which no one really believes was suicide, on his wife Henrietta; but this is a bluff, a line designed to fool the reader as well as the criminal character. This, it seems to us, is its most telling intertextual effect: it predicates the entire final Sullivan novel on a lie and the art of getting one's interlocutor to believe it.

The story of Wu Chang also translates onto the paratext that is the Sullivan Affair more broadly. This doubly aporetic incident, in which it is not clear whether a man is dead or not nor whether Francis Deacon should consider himself responsible or not (interestingly, he believes that he is indirectly responsible insofar as it was he who telephoned Wu Chang and arranged for him to be in the wrong place at the wrong time), refers to the death in 1947 of Marie-Anne Masson and to Vian's letter published by the magazine *Point de vue* on 8 May of that year, entitled '*Je ne suis pas un assassin*' ('I am not a killer').³² Thus, the media releases that pursue Francis with their suggestions of his guilt have their real-life parallels in the recent past; but they also have their real-life rebuttal. Interestingly, Vian's statement to the press is itself a complex interweaving of literature and reality, denial and confession. The following passage, for example, accuses Sullivan, not only of writing *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* but also of responsibility for Marie-Anne Masson's death:

Enfin, tous (sauf ceux qui n'en parlent pas, et ils ont raison, ou ceux qui le restituent à son véritable auteur, Sullivan, et ils sont peu), me considèrent généreusement comme le responsable et du livre et du crime.

[In short, everyone (except those who aren't talking about it, and they're right not to do so, or those who put it down to its true author, Sullivan,

³² This letter is reproduced in the first volume of the Pléiade edition of *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 2010) where it forms part of the paratext of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, framing the novel in fact as a conclusion or afterword (pp. 337-9). It is worthy of a brief note here that we are using the name attributed to the strangled woman by Lapprand et al, who explain that her first name was Marie-Anne and not Anne-Marie as Vian refers to her in this letter. See Lapprand et al, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, vol. 1, p. 1182.

and they're few and far between) generously considers me responsible both for the book and the crime.]³³

As Lapprand et al. suggest³⁴ there are ample grounds for unmasking *Elles se rendent pas compte* as “ils se rendent pas compte”, where the masculine pronoun would stand in polysemously for the publishing world and those readers who continue to prefer the Sullivan novels to those Vian signed under his own name. It is our contention that the feminine pronoun travesties, instead, those readers who continue to believe in Vian's guilt. And yet, at the same time, given the double, parallel and counter-readings presented in the text, intertext and paratext, it also travesties this previous denial itself. The joke was, then, on those readers who supported Vian and blamed Sullivan. The final chapter of *Elles se rendent pas compte* extends the conclusion to the letter of 1947, according to which cynicism must be maintained to the bitter end, and thus speaks, reflexively and paratextually, to the whole Sullivan Affair.³⁵ The progressive disappearance of Latin quotations refers to the wager with Jean d'Halluin that sought to rival Duhamel's *Série Noire* with home-grown (Latin) eroticism, which now, after all that has happened, seems ill-conceived; and the paean to honesty and brotherly love suggests a sharing of responsibility. Vian here notes that he “made his brother take all the profits... good and bad” — “Moi, mon frangin, je l'ai fait profiter de tout. Du bon et du mauvais...”³⁶ including, we must presume, the fall for Marie-Anne Masson's death. But, of course, this new confession, or anti-confession, is not written by Vian at all. He is not even the translator. This is Vernon Sullivan's reflexively staged literary confession (in what other form could he have written it?). But then again, as he notes, he and his brother (“moi, mon frangin”) are two readings of the same text.

No line was ever drawn under the Sullivan Affair. Boris Vian never made any public confession. As we hope to have shown, it is to the last, the most reflexive, inverted and inverting, of the Sullivan novels that we must look for answers. It is the only one of the four not to bear the slogan ‘*traduit de l'américain*’. This apparent omission at the level of the author function reverses the very premise on which the Sullivan Affair was ‘originally’ founded. Before the opening line articulates Francis's condemnation of masquerade, Vian's peritextual mask is lifted to postulate Sullivan's identity as *bona fide* French author. From emulating the parodic translation *skopos* of those novels that inaugurated the *Série Noire* in 1945-1946 in the form of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* to inspiring and then responding to the first ‘authentically’ French

³³ Vian, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, p. 338.

³⁴ Lapprand et al, *Œuvres romanesques complète*, vol. 2, p. 1261.

³⁵ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 498.

³⁶ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 498.

contribution to it, in the form of Terry Stewart's *La Mort et l'ange* and the rejection of the words '*traduit de l'américain*', Vernon Sullivan has gone full circle. In this way, *Elles se rendent pas compte* stands as a justification for the Sullivan Affair as a whole.

This justification is deployed textually through the last set of references that we shall examine here. From the outset, Francis revels in the quality of his disguise: "[J]e ne risquais rien du côté des signes extérieurs, mais je ne pourrais pas m'empêcher de me tenir les côtes" — "nothing in my external appearance would give me away, but I couldn't help holding my sides."³⁷ The risks are, of course, perversely presented, since Vernon Sullivan's paratextual cover is unblemished by the reference to Boris Vian's collaboration that had accompanied the previous publications; and, at the same time, no one will fail to know that Vernon Sullivan is in fact Boris Vian because the truth of the affair had been out for some time prior to the novel's release. The joke, while funny enough to cause sides to be held, is double-edged. Sides, like covers and borders, have to be held tight, for, the more they are drawn up and alluded to, the more porous they become. Thus, the narrative voice that opens the novel, according to which masked balls should be outlawed and which employs a number of techniques to delay the use of the first person pronoun³⁸ is quite reflexively double, that is to say, deferred, auto-differentiated. This double will—Boris Vian's, to be officially recognized as a successful author, and Vernon Sullivan's, to live on in death, which is the direct inheritance of Lee Anderson's posthumous erection³⁹—recalls that discussed by Derrida a propos of Shelley's unfinished poem 'The Triumph of Life':

The boundary from which we believe we approach *La folie du jour*, its 'first word' ('I'), opens with a paragraph that affirms a sort of triumph of life at the edge of death ... The narrator introduces himself in that simplest of performances, an 'I am', or more precisely an 'I am neither... nor...', which immediately removes the performance from presence.⁴⁰

In Sullivan's case, we are presented with a dual denial and performance of disguise, a perverse confession that will be made increasingly explicit as the text progresses. Indeed, Daniel Parker and his morals brigade are almost certainly the targets of the admission made by Ritchie: "On est assez contents de nous, du point de vue moral" — "From a moral perspective, we are quite pleased with

³⁷ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 404.

³⁸ Until the third paragraph, see Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 403.

³⁹ The size of that particular part of Ritchie's anatomy in particular is regularly referenced in the course of the novel.

⁴⁰ Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', p. 95.

ourselves.”⁴¹ If this is a disavowed (overt-covert) act of defiance, it is first and foremost a revelation.⁴² For, as the story progresses, the more explicit the references become.

The following passage, from an article published in *Esprit* magazine in February 1947, just one of a number of vitriolic articles that appeared in the press after *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*'s publication, stresses how easy it is to write a novel à la *Série Noire*:

La chose est simple: vous écrivez n'importe quelle bêtise, jetez-y deux ou trois termes couleur locale (whisky, drugstore, bobby-soxers) ... Vous choisissez un titre accrocheur et ajoutez 'traduit de l'américain' car l'américain s'achète, la vente est garantie.

[Nothing could be easier: you write any old thing, throw in a bit of local colour (whisky, drugstore, bobby-soxers) ... You chose a catchy title and add 'translated from the American' because anything American sells, and your sales are in the bag.]⁴³

In *Elles se rendent pas compte* we read: “Vous allez me dire que tout ça, je vous le raconte par vice et que ça n'aide rien au développement de l'histoire... Mais c'est les à-côtés du boulot ... et puis ça met de la couleur locale” — “You're going to think that I'm telling you this for my own perverted reasons, that it adds nothing to the story... But this is part of the job ... and it adds *a bit of local colour*.”⁴⁴ Not satisfied with satirizing Parker's law suit, Sullivan here quotes one of the articles that brought it about. The confession-justification takes on an air of vengeance that is itself redolent of the novel that started it all.

The novel continues to tread that fine line between truth and lies, which is the space of the hoax. A good example is the following deployment of one of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*'s most powerful leitmotifs: “Non, je ne me fous pas de vous... [dit Francis] Je veux bien être crucifié si toute cette histoire n'est pas la vérité pure et simple” — “No, I'm not joking... [Francis said] Go ahead and crucify me if this whole story is not the plain simple truth.”⁴⁵ This attests to

⁴¹ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 448.

⁴² This must be weighed against the fact that the lawsuit brought against *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* in February 1947 and subsequently against the second Sullivan novel, *Les morts ont tous la même peau*, concluded just one month before *Elles se rendent pas compte* was published.

⁴³ Noël Arnaud, *Le Dossier de l'affaire 'J'irai cracher sur vos tombes'* (Paris: Bourgois, 2006), p. 43.

⁴⁴ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 45, our emphasis.

⁴⁵ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 468. This biblical allusion adds another dimension to the title *Elles se rendent pas compte*, which is reminiscent of Christ's “they know not what they do” (Luke 23:24). To the tense union of confession and

a will not so much to take the hoax to the grave—it is too late for that—but to extend the hoax in and through a staged act of self-destruction. For, if the hoax were to die, so too would Vernon Sullivan. To live one's death, to control it, stage it and savour it,⁴⁶ on the other hand, is to 'live on', in Derridean (single-) double space. Thus, when Francis decides to abandon the transvestism in which he has revelled since the opening pages (and against his initial diatribe against masquerades), it is a sign that it is time for Vernon Sullivan to make his excuses and leave: "à la longue, je me rends compte qu'en souris, je suis loqué comme un poisson rouge, et c'est triste quand on est mignon comme moi" — "in the end, I now realize that dressed up a girl I look like a goldfish, and that's a shame which you're as attractive as I am."⁴⁷ In these words, the reader can feel a sense of the frustration and entrapment that can only be Boris Vian's. And so, after a burst of paratextual reflexivity in celebration of his great hoax, Sullivan retires.⁴⁸

denial that the novel presents its readers we might add a text of forgiveness. In this way, Vian-Sullivan forgives us, his readers, for not having better understood the intricacies of his hoax even as he uses the confessional trope of the Modernist novel to implicate us in the crime.

⁴⁶ The reference here is to the end of Vian's poem 'Je voudrais pas crever' ('I Wouldn't Wanna Die'), in which the desire not to die is set tensely against a counter-desire expressed in terms of a savouring of death itself. This is a highly reflexive poem. It is also similar to *Elles se rendent pas compte* in its exploitation of the low-register use of only one of the pair of negative particles (ne... pas). While to use only the 'pas' is clearly an appropriate choice of register when writing a hard-boiled text, it also allows room for a mediating space between the positive and the negative, between life and death. This is the (only) space in which Sullivan can die to 'live on'.

⁴⁷ Vian, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, p. 495.

⁴⁸ Yet, in 'other words', Vian's increasingly reflexive coincidence with the victorious Francis and Francis's victory in the metaphysical solution of the case suggest Sullivan's association with Ritchie. And so, by getting away with the murder of Wu Chang, Sullivan escapes through the 'other ending' that is the overt-covert nihilistic re-solution and thus lives on.