

Family Values: Decoding Boris Vian's
Les Bâisseurs d'empire

Laurence M. Porter
Michigan State University

The initial critical reception of Vian's *Les Bâisseurs d'empire* (*The Empire Builders*) first performed in the T.N.P. on December 22, 1959, was surprisingly reductive.¹ Of the 25 reviews from the winter of 1959-60, collected in L'Arche's edition, the majority saw the play as a belated imitation of the Theater of the Absurd: "Ce n'est plus qu'une copie d'un théâtre trop connu. . . . C'est un jeu, exercice de style et rien de plus"² 'It is but a copy of a well-worn theater. . . . It's a game, a stylistic exercise and nothing more.' Adamov, Beckett, Ionesco, and Vauthier were cited as Vian's sources to prove that *Les Bâisseurs* was derivative.³ With astonishing blindness, explicable only as a collective repression, only three contemporary reviews recognized allusions to the contemporary disintegration of the French empire in Africa and Southeast Asia. The rest assumed that the title had only "de lointains rapports avec la situation dramatique de la pièce"⁴ 'a distant relationship with the dramatic situation of the play.' With only a single word, one reviewer mentioned Freud, and another, with equal brevity, suggested that Vian's unconscious compulsions, not artistic calculation, had generated the psychodrama of the play.⁵ None of the reviewers, nor any critic since, has done Vian justice by recognizing his interweaving of all three codes—the Absurd, anti-colonialism, and psychoanalysis. Despite the more recent popularity of the play, evidenced, for instance, by translations, its few critics still fail to read it with care; they even write erroneous plot summaries.

Vian's virulent bourgeois critique exposes psychic repression as the source of infection, social hypocrisy as the resulting disease, and colonial brutality and exploitation as its most patent symptom.⁶

The richness of this play consists in the mastery with which it fits

together, like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, the anti-dramatic and the dramatic, the individual and the collective, and the aesthetic, objective, and subjective dimensions, so that each illuminates the others. The intratextual density of the play is therefore substantially greater than that of many of its more successful rivals for critical esteem.

The plot is simple. As the play begins, a terrified bourgeois family consisting of parents, daughter, and maid scrambles upstairs into an ugly apartment, carrying all its possessions. Already there, huddled in a corner, is "le schmürz," a limping, bleeding, bandaged figure. (A word coined by Vian's wife Ursula Kübler, "schmürz" suggests the German *Schmerz* or suffering, and in the usage of Vian's circle, it referred to the perversity of inanimate objects).⁷ Wherever the family moves, this creature is present, and whenever the parents become frustrated, puzzled, or elated, they beat and kick it savagely. Zénobie, the daughter, protests their cruelty. Repeatedly, she complains that they keep fleeing into ever more cramped quarters whenever a terrifying, mysterious noise is heard. She demands an explanation. Her parents are evasive. They start trying to get rid of her by arranging her marriage to the neighbor's son Xavier. She is disgusted with them and resists.

In Act II they find themselves in a smaller, uglier room. Zénobie tries to return downstairs by herself, but le schmürz bars the way. Sympathetic to it, she tries to offer it a glass of water, but it knocks the glass to the ground. The maid resigns and departs. During the most recent flight, the neighbor's son Xavier has died or disappeared. Since only one room and one bed remain, Zénobie's parents send her out on the landing to ask for Xavier's bed. The terrifying noise begins anew; the door to the landing closes by itself, locking Zénobie out; her knocking on the door is heard, and then there is silence. The door will no longer open.

Act III begins with le Père leaving his wife behind to die; he is too cowardly and selfish to descend to help her. He finds himself in a small attic room and starts a delirious monologue in which he tries to define his identity. He puts on his "reservist constable's" uniform, then removes it. Gradually he becomes aware that le schmürz is a person, but le schmürz does not react when le Père shoots it, nor when le Père tries to propitiate it with offerings. Unexpectedly, le schmürz collapses, obviously dead. A knocking is heard at the door. Le Père straddles the window sill and stands on the ledge. He slips and falls. The hideous noise fills the room. Now

Vian's stage directions propose two endings. Either darkness or else a group of *schmürz* invade the room.

As an example of the Theater of the Absurd, *Les Bâtisseurs* is filled with anti-dramatic repetitions of both scenes and words. Its word-play at first appears gratuitous. Jarring contrasts divide the characters' actions from their words (the parents' saccharine endearments addressed to Zénobie or to each other, juxtaposed with evidence of their brutal indifference to her, and of le Père's toward la Mère; le Père's vicious beatings of le *schmürz*, or panicky flights toward the upstairs, combined with outward calm). With these devices and with the motif of *l'incommunicabilité*, the play mocks our attempts to impose our personal phantasmal structure of gratified desire on our experience.⁸

The historical, anticolonialist message emerges allegorically, interacting with the political context of 1959, so as to add a polemical meaning to the anti-aesthetic one. On the political level the much-abused *schmürz*—passive recipient of slaps, kicks, stabs, and blows, a safety valve for the parents' tensions, but never acknowledged by them as a human being—represents the colonized native, always already there. Six years earlier, before the fall of Dien-Bien-Phu, Vian had shown that he saw the colony, colonizers, and colonized as an organic unity (then, the body; now, the family).⁹ The absurdity of the play suggests the absurdity of the colonial enterprise; and reality—the ever-shrinking size of the apartment (of France's colonial empire)—undercuts le Père's claims to absolute authority. And the subjective mode, the psychoanalytical suggestions of the play, reinforces the other two codes. It presents a personal pathology of mental breakdown and disintegration parallel to the historical pathology of France's role in Southeast Asia (lost five years earlier) and in North Africa (Morocco had been granted independence, as had Tunisia, in 1946 and 1948 respectively, but the Algerian colony was in the grip of the fifth year of an eight-year war, with terrorism opposed by torture, each victimizing the civilian population). The genius of Vian consists in how he skillfully interrelates these three dimensions of signification.

The full title, "*Les Bâtisseurs d'empire ou Le schmürz*" already suggests the necessity of a choice: trying to build an empire by ignoring le *schmürz*'s rights, or recognizing it as a human being.¹⁰ Le Père does so, implicitly, only with his last words before his suicide, "*je ne savais pas*" 'I didn't know' just after he has finally shot the much-abused *schmürz* and killed it. The coexistence of the

mysterious, indefinable *Bruit* and *le schmürz* suggests the collective implications of abuse of the colonized person. In a self-perpetuating cycle of alienation and oppression, mistreatment of the individuals causes collective resentment among the colonized: protests, resistance, independence movements, and finally, terrorism. Resistance provokes more severe repression; oppression provokes opposition; opposition engenders fear in the oppressors; and their fear isolates them further from any possibilities of communication.

The noise, as a figuration of the rumblings of revolt, is disquieting but not understood because the French don't know Arabic, the language of the colonized; because they do not encounter organized groups of the oppressed, since these groups, being illegal, must remain clandestine; because they do not negotiate with the oppressed; and because ultimately they cannot imagine that the oppressed could have a collective rational voice, since the Algerian natives are considered subhuman. When the noise is heard, it revitalizes *le schmürz* within the apartment, and freezes the Europeans until they bolt for safety. In terms of the anti-colonialist code, the disappearance of individual family members who become isolated from the group—Xavier, Zénobie, la Mère—evokes terrorism, picking off arbitrary European victims one by one. The normal reaction of indignation that one would expect among the survivors does not occur in Vian's play: the Absurdist and the psychoanalytical codes entail that the European family members lack solidarity.

In this play, the conventional dramatic structure appears to hinge on Zénobie, the daughter, whose tag-name, "strange life," suggests her alienation or, more accurately, since hers is a *given* name, her parents' alienation from her. Their fear versus her will to live creates the basic conflict of the play. Its general movement is that of a psychotic breakdown, which Zénobie delays by challenging the delusional structures of her parents' beliefs.¹¹ Vian's broadly caricatural rendering of the categories of Freudian psychoanalysis exploits them for bourgeois critique without taking them seriously. The drama operates like a psychoanalysis in reverse: instead of a modicum of understanding being expanded into a fuller communication between the unconscious and the conscious mind, whatever initial communication there is becomes lost. Some critics have not missed the obvious possibility that *le schmürz* represents the id, and that the parents conventionally represent super-ego figures. In

a “pure” Freudian model of the psyche, only three characters would be necessary: id, ego, and super ego. But what has not yet been pointed out is that in a stageable version of a psychodrama, one needs additional characters to mediate among these three psychic components. Vian faithfully represents the necessary impossibility of conversation between the inarticulate id and the ego or super ego. *Le schmürz* never speaks, nor is it spoken to. But Vian repeatedly uses absurd conversations to dramatize the inaccessibility of the super ego to verbal communications from either the ego or from externality. The maid *Cruche* preserves a tenuous relationship between the family self and externality, and *la Mère* creates a limited rapport between the ego (*Zénobie*) and the remainder of the super ego (*le Père*). She criticizes her husband’s discourse when it becomes too incoherent or irrelevant, which happens particularly whenever *Zénobie* (who embodies memory and lucidity, who defines the self in relation to its past and to its physical and social settings) is not present. Vian introduces the Mother to mediate between the super ego and the ego, and *Cruche* to mediate between the super ego and externality. Then the loss of intercommunication between the formerly interactive parts of the psyche—in other words, a psychotic break—can be dramatized.

The nightmarish qualities of the play result from the absence of a clear sense of time; from a frequent impression of “*déjà vu*,” suggesting behavior dominated by unconscious impulses and by the repetition compulsion; from the absence of all colors (they suggest freedom, joy, variety, life, etc.), except in the speeches where *Zénobie* recalls her past. The only progression is that of flight (provoked by a foreign, mysterious force) and of a movement from terror (dread of a distant or invisible entity) to horror (dread of a visible, physically proximate entity); and in the growing absurdity and dislocation of the conversations. As the behaviorist B. F. Skinner once put it, to be able to observe is to be able to predict is to be able to control: in literature, a verbal universe, conversations represent people’s tools, their attempts to exert their will. Here words do not catch hold; they are mere toys, so the characters using them are disoriented, powerless, helpless, and lacking in rational explanations for what is happening to them. And the repetition compulsion here is not merely comical or neutral: it betrays a failure to adapt, which leads to death.

Despite the play’s absurdist strategies, one can identify a conventional dramatic structure consisting of five successive move-

ments (*exposition*, *noeud*, *crise*, *moment culminant*, *dénouement*). Its cohesion is masked because the focus of the action shifts from one character or group to another. I shall attempt to recuperate dramatic cohesion by seeing all the family members—in terms of one of the play's three codes—as aspects of a single person. The exposition is the initial situation: Zénobie is at odds with her parents. Without a rational explanation, they repeatedly flee upstairs when *le bruit* becomes sufficiently loud. They find themselves in ever-smaller quarters. Zénobie in contrast wants to try to go back downstairs, to find more space, eventually to be able to go outdoors. The *noeud* or complication consists mainly in conflict with her parents and in their hypocritical attempts to get rid of her. They mask this desire ostensibly by reaching out to the neighbors, whose son is Zénobie's age, in hopes the two young people may be married, leaving the parents with more room and less responsibility. In the *crise* (in dramatological terminology, the moment of decision that precipitates a crisis), she is sent out on the landing to ask for the neighbor's recently dead son's bed, since "les enfants doivent se sacrifier pour leurs parents" 'children must sacrifice themselves for their parents.' The climax occurs when she disappears after having tried desperately to come back inside; as we shall see, her absence makes la Mère no longer necessary, and she disappears too. In the *dénouement* le Père flees upstairs to a final room, having abandoned his wife during his flight (although he convinces himself it is she who has abandoned him) and finds himself alone with *le schmürz*. His isolation compels him to an attempt at self-justification and self-definition. His recognition that it is a living being, followed by his awareness that he has killed it, obliges him to disappear as well. In response to insistent, menacing knocking on the door, he straddles the window frame and then slips and falls, presumably to his death.

The repetitions reveal that the parents' desired plot, escape, and Zénobie's desired plot, return, will fail. The unrecognized, inevitable plot is their destruction. It is the ineluctable presence of *le schmürz* (in Acts I and II, the definite article reveals it as a known, permanent feature of the family ecology) that prevents one from interpreting the play as merely a banal family drama. To be sure, the breakdown of communication in absurdist dialogue implies social satire by exposing the dysfunction of the family unit. The five characters composing this community also represent parts of a single psyche undergoing disintegration. To ascribe such a meaning to

Vian's play can be justified by arguing that Freud was much "dans l'air" at the time, and that intellectual fashions spread rapidly in the highly centralized, hot-house atmosphere of Paris. But he treated such fashions with wry humor: he made the psychiatrist/psychoanalyst Jacquemort into the protagonist of one of his four major novels, *L'Arrache-cœur* (Paris: Pauvert, 1962). This text is a rollicking parody where Jacquemort has ludicrous sex ("psy-choser," as one of them puts it) with his female patients, attempts to analyze animals, and finally has to psychoanalyze Fame (la Gloire, an old man who takes on himself the shame of everyone else) because all his other patients have fled (187).

From a classical Freudian perspective, Cruche and Zénobie are aspects of the ego. Therefore they alone always possess first names, labels marking individuality and identity, as opposed to the undifferentiated welter of the unconscious. Zénobie is the coherent sense of personal identity that tests mental connections to externality. Cruche is the ego's active, coping function, related to externality through effective physical action. Le Père leads flights from one story to another, orders the family to bring along their possessions, and with a characteristic gesture of repression, nails shut the trap door behind them. Cruche, however, is the only one who can make or unmake anything: she cooks (in French, *faire la cuisine*) and cleans, and in her final appearance, is shown unraveling a sweater to transform it back into a ball of yarn. This action suggests entropy, and the disintegration of the total personality represented by the family. The strings of synonyms with which she characteristically expresses herself represent not only the possibility of choosing among the ways one may verbally encode externality, but also, a choice among possible modes of action. Cruche (whose name in slang means "stupid" but which literally means a pitcher, a useful and functional container), entirely oriented toward practicality, has no need or desire to relate to the unconscious. She does participate in repression, however, by carefully avoiding the proximity of *le schmürz* whenever possible; moreover, she insists that a partition be built between it and her when the apartment has been reduced to the size where she will have to sleep in the same room.

Commands from the super ego can distort and pervert Cruche's action: she strikes *le schmürz*, but only when ordered to; at other times, she avoids it, and once she has declared her independence from the family, she will strike it no longer. In leaving, she ex-

presses affection only for Zénobie, a kindred spirit. It is only she, physically connected as she is to externality, who clearly recognizes the imminent breakdown of the personality of which she forms part, its mental illness:

Zénobie.—Pourquoi est-ce que je reste couchée?

Cruche.—Tu n'es pas bien . . . Tu présentes des symptômes avant-coureurs de désordres. . . .

Zénobie.—Je suis malade?

Cruche.—On ne peut pas vraiment dire que tu sois malade. . . .

Moi-même, je ne suis pas tellement flambarde. Et chez ton père et ta mère on peut déceler des prodromes . . . [the technical medical term, referring to symptoms that announce an illness, is misplaced in the mouth of a mimetic servant, but appropriate in terms of a lucid evaluation of the health of the mental apparatus, by the part of it that is closest to reality . . .] d'un genre inquiétant.

Zénobie: Why am I still in bed?

Cruche: You're not well . . . you have the first symptoms of. . . .

Zénobie: Am I sick?

Cruche: I wouldn't say that you were sick. . . . I'm not really in the pink myself. And I can even detect some early symptoms in your father and mother . . . that give me pause. (39-40)

When Zénobie wishes to go back downstairs to a larger apartment, Cruche offers a practical objection—"ton père a bouché l'escalier" 'your father has blocked the stairs' (41)—whereas le Père refuses even to acknowledge the possibilities of going back downstairs, of remaining on the same floor despite the noise, or of finding oneself trapped in a dead end if one continues to flee upstairs (47-49).

Zénobie herself represents the part of the ego that calls into question the automatic judgments of the super ego and contains the capacity for relatedness to others. It is she who badly misses the phonograph ("pick-up") and radio they used to have: the songs she played represent music (a rhythmic, harmonious noise, emblematic of a happy relationship with others, as opposed to the terrifying, unidentified "Bruit" that drives them away) and the voices of others; her exchanges of records with Xavier created social bonds outside the family. Situated in time, unlike the timeless unconscious, she recalls the past, and her friends Xavier and Jean, a good dancer.

Her parents were unaware of her friendship with Xavier, and they have forgotten Jean completely (50). Intrinsically asocial themselves, they cannot acknowledge Zénobie as an autonomous social being. In contrast to the mutuality of Zénobie's social relationships, her parents have relations with others only to exploit them (Cruche, *le schmürz*) or under the sign of a loss of relatedness. They invite the neighbor in hopes Zénobie will become engaged to his son, marry him, and leave them; when they next see him, they bring back the report that his son is dead. When they send Zénobie next door to borrow his mattress, since the door to their second room has become sealed shut, the hall door slams shut and she disappears.

The unconscious contents of this collective mind are represented by *le schmürz*, or id, repressed, unrecognized, and a source of fear; and by the parents as super ego, whose unreasoned precepts are frequently heard but never effectively examined within the sphere of consciousness. The super ego's confusion between any particular event and its moral principles is revealed from the outset. As the family, still invisible to the spectators, ascends the stair at the beginning, *le Père*, who has selfishly gone first to flee the danger below, treads on his daughter's hand. She cries out, and he reprimands her: "*Je t'avais dit de ne pas mettre la main là où je mets mes pieds, Zénobie . . . vous êtes indisciplinées, c'est votre faute . . .*" 'I told you not to put your hand where I'm walking, Zénobie . . . *you don't listen, it's your fault . . .*' (5; emphasis added). The shift from the singular *tu* to the feminine plural shows that *le Père* lumps his wife and his maid together with Zénobie as undisciplined: from the super ego's point of view, this one accident is symptomatic of the generalized moral inferiority of the Other.

Since the unconscious is timeless, for *le Père* the future has no meaning. "*Comment, qu'est-ce que nous allons faire?*" 'What do you mean?' he objects in answering Zénobie, once they have safely arrived in their new lodgings, "*la question ne se pose pas*" 'the question doesn't even come up,' and then he quotes Valéry ("*il faut tenter de vivre*" 'we must endeavor to live'; ironically, in this new context, the original was uttered in a graveyard) in an unquestioning appeal to authority. Since the past has no meaning for him either, he evades Zénobie's attempts to reconstruct it:

Zénobie.—De quoi est mort Xavier?

Père.—Pardon?

Zénobie.—De quoi Xavier est-il mort?

Père.—Bah! de tout et de rien, tu sais bien comment on meurt, quand on est jeune.

Zénobie: What did Xavier die from?

Père: Excuse me?

Zénobie: I asked what Xavier died from!

Père: Bah! from everything, and from nothing, you know how people die when they're young. (49)

The automatic nature of his responses, inherited from the self's acculturation but never examined, can be illustrated by a well-known anecdote about baked ham. A certain family always prepared a large ham for Easter, and the mother always cut off the small end before putting it into the oven. One day her daughter asked her why she did so. "My mother always cut the end of the ham," the woman said. By chance, the grandmother was also there for the holiday, and so the grand-daughter asked her why *she* had always cut the small end off the ham. "Our oven wasn't big enough to take a whole ham," the grandmother replied.

La Mère, roughly speaking, and as we shall see, acts as the function of the super ego that allows it some contact with the ego. Le schmürz, finally, represents the id, unconsciously feared and therefore unrecognized, a status symbolized by his condition of not being part of the family, although it is always with them. Its connection with the Bruit (becoming more active when it is heard, whereas the rest of the group becomes immobilized) figures the connection between inadmissible psychic contents and the threat of the lifting of repression. That this danger becomes more imminent is reflected by le schmürz's increased activity in Act II: it crawls over to sit on the trap door to bar Zénobie's attempt to go back downstairs; it strikes away the glass of water she extends to it. The link between le Bruit and le schmürz becomes clearer if one recalls Freud's analogy, in the *Introductory Lectures*, to an unruly person in a lecture hall. He creates a disturbance, and is expelled, but can still be heard shouting and pounding on the door outside. The disruption can be ended only if someone goes out into the hall and negotiates with him, inviting him to come back in if he will be quiet (i.e., through analysis, which puts us into rapport with the unconscious, a compromise between its demands and those of ego-consciousness may be reached).

When Zénobie's memories of the past, and her questions about it, become too pressing, when she insists that she is not dreaming "tout éveillée," as la Mère claims, in recalling and wondering about Jean, la Mère decides that the parents should distract her. Le Père sees such distraction as part of an upbringing that will preserve the unconscious super-ego structures despite the ego's increasing contacts with society as the self matures:

Il est vrai que les parents, autant qu'il est en leur pouvoir de le faire, ont pour rôle de former leurs jeunes enfants et de leur donner une éducation telle que le contact avec la vie réelle qui les guette au sortir du nid familial se produise de façon insensible et douce sans les blesser le moins du monde.

It's true that parents, to the extent possible, have the role to train their young children and to give them the right education so that contact with the real world that lays in wait for them when they leave the nest takes place gently and doesn't wound them in the least. (50)

As the parents, wishing to rid themselves of Zénobie, recall their own marriage as an encouraging example for her to go out on her own, their access to specific memories (uncharacteristic of the super ego) shows Vian's shift from the psychoanalytic to the bourgeois critique code. He will expose the hypocrisy at the basis of marriage, the cornerstone of family structure and middle-class values.

Zénobie leaves the room unnoticed as the parents' reconstruction is going on; they now represent what one could call the social super ego, the collective imperatives of our society. Marriage, their account makes clear, is based on repressed lust and materialism:

Mère.—Moi, de mon côté, timide et rougissante [the hypocritical social mask], encore qu'en réalité je susse, car mes parents étaient des gens modernes, à quoi m'en tenir, . . . une épousée du jour ne pense qu'au petit truc."¹²

The mother: I, for my part, [was] timid and blushing, although in reality I knew, for my parents were up-to-date, what to expect, . . . on her wedding day, a bride thinks only about doing it. (53)

The double ceremony—the civil performed by the mayor, the religious one performed by the priest—is doubly flawed. First, it beto-

kens a society insincere in its protestation of the primacy of religious values; second, neither the gay mayor nor the celibate priest is involved in the activity, marriage, that their official functions sanction.

The materialism underlying the union is ludicrously underlined by the "cinq quêtes" (passing the hat five times, during the marriage, to collect money for the young couple). Le Père remembers them keenly and recalls the wedding party's excessive eating ("On s'est gorgés" 'we stuffed ourselves') while as he eats food brought by Cruche. Materialism itself is insincere; it has its own hypocrisy, for the bride's parents provide not champagne, but rather, a less expensive sparkling wine: they are "radins" 'cheapskates' (55). Ignorant of contraception, the newlyweds have Zénobie nine months later, as she sarcastically observes when she returns, knowing she was an unwanted child.

At this point Cruche re-enters the room, insults le Père, underlines the purely financial basis of her relationship with the parents, and declares her intention to leave. Only she is free to come and go as she will; once she has gone, all hope of the collective self's re-establishing contact with reality is lost. As Zénobie's vitality fades, she answers in a "voix morte" 'in a dying voice,' while Cruche takes over her role of aggressive questioner. (57) It is as if Zénobie as an ego-function were being weakened by the imminent loss of Cruche, her coping faculty. Zénobie refuses to sleep with le schmürz alone; when her parents suggest she sleep in their room, she suggests having that room to herself. Neither arrangement, however, will be possible. The door to the other room has stuck fast. Zénobie reacts by momentarily imitating Cruche's synonymy as a virtual coping strategy.

She is now doomed, however: unless counterbalanced, the super ego will always choose to sacrifice the ego, the mind's connection to reality, rather than itself. Zénobie's declaration that she is ill renders this situation metaphorically. She would like oranges, but they are reserved for le Père; as la Mère (the super ego function of relatedness to the ego) declares: "entre la fleur et le fruit, il est sage de choisir le fruit" 'between the flower and the fruit, it's wise to choose the fruit' (64). So Zénobie is put at risk by being sent across the hall to ask to borrow from the neighbors the deceased Xavier's bed. Before, the parents planned to dispose of her by having her sleep in a living person's (husband's) bed; now, they ask her to sleep in a dead person's. Their plan is tantamount to dispos-

ing of her. Now that Cruche has left, Zénobie as ego-consciousness has no place to sleep within the apartment—metaphorically speaking, nowhere to remain in the now totally alienated mind. The door closes on her, and the noise resounds. Then there is silence; la Mère can't open the door to the landing; le Père is calm.

With Zénobie's disappearance, there remain only the purely unconscious, compartmentalized worlds of the id and of the super-ego. As that part of the super ego that mediated relations with the rest of the psyche, la Mère has no more reason to exist. In the first act, the neighbor was briefly present: the collective self still had a connection to social reality. As the third act begins, la Mère has been left below to pass up packets; we hear a terrified scream, and le Père is left alone. He abandons her and nails the trap door shut, blaming her with an involuntarily ironic expression: "Ce n'est pas une façon de laisser tomber les gens, tu sais" 'that's not a proper way to drop people, you know' (68). Blaming the victim is a common super ego defense. In fact, *he* has "dropped" his wife and soon will literally fall himself.

Without external support, he must now define himself and decide what is his function. He realizes he is alone with le schmürz, and with no exit other than the window 97 feet above the pavement. To evade the realization that he is trapped, he will sporadically distract himself by thinking of growing plants on the balcony (symbols of optimism for the future; impossible since he has no seeds). Here the repetitiousness of the Theater of the Absurd and of involuntary defense mechanisms converge. He is no longer certain whether he ever had a family; it seems like the memory of someone else (72). Detached from reality, his plans are impractical and unrealizable.

In the stage directions at the beginning of Act III, where le Père remains alone, Vian's shift in wording from *le* schmürz to *un* schmürz reflects a shift in emphasis from the psychopathological to the anti-colonialist code. The indefinite article transforms le schmürz into part of externality; it acquires an independent, social existence. The implication is that the total triumph of patriarchy would lead only to its self-destruction since in triumphing it would become completely alienated from its environment.

To try to impose meaning on his situation, le Père feels impelled to put on his reserve uniform. Not only does the uniform make its wearer anonymous, whereas normal clothes individualize one, but as Vian explained elsewhere, "un uniforme, c'est un avant-

projet de cercueil" 'a uniform, that's an initial project for a coffin.'¹³ Being in the reserve is an equivocal situation, being at once in the army and out of it. In a sense, every colonist is in such a situation, as part of a *de facto* army of occupation. At last he reflects on the meaning of the Noise that he has always pretended to ignore before. It must be an aggressive signal; so he should defend himself. But if they had wanted him to leave, they would have left him a way out.¹⁴ He never understands aggression from without as a response to the aggression of his own colonial occupation; he can't explain it to himself because he feels justified in being there. But suddenly he realizes *le schmürz* is not an object, and starts avoiding it, while it increasingly pays attention to him (76). To recognize the colonized victim as a person calls one's own role as occupier into question.

In this new context, self-doubts begin: "Nous étions plusieurs [referring to the community of the mental faculties he ruled], mais je conservais la majorité absolue. Nous avons cessé d'être plusieurs, et je sens ma majorité qui s'effrite" 'There were several of us, but I kept an absolute majority. Now we've stopped being several, and I feel my majority crumbling' (77). He starts taking off his uniform, and in his dialogue with himself discusses an incoherent medley of subjects: his beard, the flowers, his internal organs. This fragmentation of the topic and the referents implies a disintegration of sanity, of self-control: the uniform betokened his artificial but coherent identity. He shoots *le schmürz*, which doesn't move; he then heaps objects in front of it, as if offering tribute. From the objective viewpoint, once the colonizer has been forced to recognize that the colonized cannot be exterminated, he tries to buy them off, to propitiate them. From both the objective and the subjective viewpoint, it is too late: the only remaining function of this super ego is to repress the id; once the id is destroyed, the super-ego must vanish too. "Je ne savais pas. . . Pardon . . . Je ne savais pas . . ." 'slips and falls, howling' (81), he howls as he climbs over the window sill, slips and falls. Awareness can emerge only at the moment of the extinction of the faculty whose function is repression.

Vian's stage directions offer two different possible endings. The first emphasizes the psychoanalytic, and the second, the anti-colonial code. Either noise and darkness invade the set, and the self disappears into madness; or else, as well, the door opens and *schmürzes* appear in the entrance, and the colonized again possess the territory stolen from them. Thus Vian provides both a topical and a relatively timeless significance to his play. Again, at the end-

ing, when le Père “glisse et tombe en hurlant” (81), we assume in reading that he has fallen outside to be broken on the stones 30 meters below, especially since the stage directions for Act III stress that the window gives the impression of great height. That reading goes with the choice of an interpretation in the subjective mode, in which darkness floods over the stage as all rational consciousness ends in death, madness, or both. But, as Vian allegedly suggested to his English translator, one could equally well suppose from a strictly lexical point of view that le Père, failing to escape, has fallen back *inside* (Rybalka 204), at the mercy of the entering party of *schmürzes*. This is the interpretation in the objective mode, according to which the colonial oppressor must finally pay for his crimes. The French audience of 1959 overlooked this interpretive possibility because its implications hit too close to home.¹⁵ The drily humorous, tacit indeterminacy with which Vian tricks us into a one-sided interpretation in the subjective mode at the end of the play keeps him true to his ‘Pataphysical heritage and to the traditions of the Theater of the Absurd.’¹⁶

Notes

1. An accessible edition for classroom use, with intelligent notes, questions, and commentary, is provided by Schofer, Rice, and Berg, eds. Unless otherwise noted, however, page numbers below refer to Vian (1959).

2. “X,” *Arts* 85.

3. See Lebesque 92 and Périer 88.

4. “X,” in *Théâtre* 87.

5. See Poirot-Delpech 90-91 and Bauchère 101-02.

6. Vian was also a jazz musician and a composer. He wrote effective anti-war protest songs, notably “Le Java des bombes atomiques” (shortly after the invention of the H-Bomb) and “Le Déserteur.” The latter tells the politicians who make wars to go fight in place of the draftees. It was banned by the French government.

7. See Schofer, Rice, and Berg 443n9.

8. As the narrator’s actress girlfriend Aurélie explains devastatingly to him in Nerval’s *Sylvie*, “vous cherchez un drame, mais le dénouement vous échappe” ‘you’re looking for a drama, but you can’t get a grip on the outcome.’

9. See Vian, "Le Problème du colin," 1953. Using the wordplay "côlon [large intestine] / colon [colonizer]," Vian explains it as a synecdoche whereby the organ that expels the products of digestion becomes that which it expelled. Like the tapeworm, a parasite that inhabits the intestine, "le colon ne se développe bien que dans un environnement qui, lui, dépérit" 'the colonizer can flourish only in an environment that is itself wasting away.' The hypocrisy of colonization is exposed by its mutually contradictory justifications for A) remaining and B) brutalizing the colonized: "nous leur avons apporté la civilisation" 'we brought them civilization,' and "il n'y a rien à faire avec ces brutes" 'you can't do a thing with those animals.' Evoking Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic, Vian concludes, "l'ennui du colon, c'est l'indigène (sans qui il est pourtant absolument désamparé). L'ennui de l'indigène, c'est le colon. La solution consisterait, semble-t-il, à les séparer" 'what bugs the colonizer, is the native (without whom, however, he's absolutely helpless). What bugs the native, is the colonizer. It seems the solution would be to separate them.'

Stivale comments briefly on the family dynamics. For an analysis of word-play in this text, see Gauthier.

10. Vaquin makes a lucid, interesting contrast between le schmürz and Beckett's Godot (21). I would say that he remains a disquieting but empty sign for the family because he is a *pour-soi* on whom the family tries to impose its own meanings, as if he were an *en-soi*.

11. "Tout au long du drame, elle pose la qu'est-ce-tion qui crée une fêlure dans l'univers de ses parents et de leur voisin, elle est le spot lumineux et dansant qui sert de repère au dramaturge et au spectateur" 'Throughout the play she asks the what's-that-tion that makes a crack in the universe of her parents and their neighbor; she's the luminous dancing spot that provides a reference point for the playwright and the public.' (Ernoul 84).

12. The affected imperfect subjunctive, *susse*, is an obscene pun on the present subjunctive, *suce*. One recalls the classic pun in the story of a bourgeois couple reprimanding their maid for secretly eating the sugar lumps. We wouldn't have minded your taking some, they say, but "il eût fallu que nous le sussions [sucions]" 'we would have had to know about [suck] it.'

13. *Cahier 19 89*, cited in Rybalka 138.

14. Here we may have an allusion to Dien-Bien-Phu, the last redoubt of the French army in Vietnam, a site surrounded by a ring of hills that made it possible for the Viet Cong to shell it from all sides, and made it impossible for the French to escape.

15. For another commentary on inadvertent colonialist critical blindness regarding the same period of French history, see Porter.

16. See *Hommage à Boris Vian*. The special issue of *Bizarre* explains many coded references in his fictional works to Vian's contemporaries.

Works Cited

Bizarre February 1966: 39-40.

Bauchère, Jacques. Rev. in *Réforme*, January 9, 1960. Rpt. in Vian, 101-02.

Ernoul, Claude. "Enfance, irréalité, 'pataphysique dans l'oeuvre de Boris Vian." *Hommage à Boris Vian*, 84.

Gauthier, Philippe. "Schmürz, discours et parole," II, 95-111 *Boris Vian*. Eds. Noël Arnaud and Henri Baudin (Paris: U.G.E. 10/18, 1977. Colloque de Cerisy).

Hommage à Boris Vian, special number of the *Dossiers acénonètes du Collège de 'Pataphysique* 12 (1960): 2-138.

Lebesque, Morvan. Rev. *Carrefour*, December 30, 1959. Rpt. in Vian, 1975, 92-93.

Périer, Denis. Rev. *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1 February 1960. Rpt. in Vian, 1975, 87-88.

Poirot-Delpech, Bertrand. Rev. *Le Monde*, 25 December 1959. Rpt. in Vian, 1975, 90-91.

Porter, Laurence M. "Text of Anxiety, Text of Desire: Boule's *Planète des singes* as Popular Culture," *FR* 68, iv (March 1995): 704-14.

Rybalka, Michel. *Boris Vian*. Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1969.

Schofer, Peter, Donald Rice, and William Berg, eds. *Poèmes. Pièces. Prose. Introduction à l'analyse de textes littéraires français*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973. 441-87.

Stivale, Charles. "Of Schmürz and Men: Boris Vian's *Bâtisseurs d'Empire*," *Cincinnati Romance Review* 7 (1988): 97-112.

Vaquin, Agnès. "Boris Vian et Samuel Beckett," *L'Arc* (France) 90 (1984): 18-25.

Vian, Boris. *Les Bâtisseurs d'empire*. Paris: L'Arche, 1959; 5e édition, 1983.

—. "Le Problème du Colon" (1953), 67-75 in Vian, *Textes et chansons*. Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1975.

"X." Rev. in *Arts*, 30 December 1959. Rpt. in Vian, 1975, 85.

—. Rev. in *Théâtre*, January 1960. Rpt. in Vian, 1975, 87.