

FANTASY OF WATER-LILY AND ICE-NINE:  
METAPHOR OF DEATH IN BORIS VIAN'S *L'ÉCUME DES JOURS*  
AND KURT VONNEGUT'S *CAT'S CRADLE*

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... un art de la mort n'annonce pas nécessairement  
la mort de l'art

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The Atlantic ocean of difference separates the work of Kurt Vonnegut from Boris Vian's *oeuvre*. Nevertheless, the reader sufficiently acquainted with both soon discovers that the two literary continents overlap. It seems that the two authors have found a common discourse, despite the fact that they speak different languages and that almost twenty years elapsed between the first publication of *L'écume des jours* [Froth on the day-dream] (1946) and *Cat's cradle* (1963).

Both writers have become the idols of the youth, literary pop-stars, although, contrary to Vonnegut's novels, those of Vian enjoyed the greatest popularity only after the author's death. *L'écume des jours* and *Cat's cradle* have been the targets of numerous discussions, in which exultant praises alternate with charges of sentimentality and fawning on popular tastes.

On the one hand, Vian's literary output continues the French absurdist tradition going back to Alfred Jarry and, earlier, to François Rabelais. Many features of his dramatic pieces are anticipatory of the French theatre of the absurd, while his novels share the quality of grotesqueness with such writers as, for instance, Henri Michaux, Raymond Queneau, or, later, with Michel Tournier.

Thus at home within the French literary tradition, Boris Vian has also proved his ability to write 'in the American grain.' Four of his works appeared as alleged translations of American novels by a Mr. Vernon Sullivan — the pretence by which Vian overreached even the most expert critics.

Some features of Vian's literary vision reveal him as one of the precursors

of the novel of the absurd which boomed in the United States in the 1960's, with Kurt Vonnegut as one of its main representatives. This affinity may, to some extent, be accounted for by Vian's overt fascination with American culture in its different manifestations, from literature to jazz music. The aim of the following analysis, however, is to take a broader view and to reconstruct the fictional worlds of *L'écume des jours* and *Cat's cradle* in order to investigate the fantastic mode upon which both of them are grounded. It has been assumed that the discernable closeness of Vian's and Vonnegut's visions is brought about by the fact that in both novels death is the governing metaphor of their fictional worlds, as well as the Other of their respective fantasies of water-lily and ice-nine.

On the level of story, *L'écume des jours* was summarized most adequately by Raymond Queneau as "... le plus poignant des romans d'amour contemporains." [The most poignant of the contemporary love stories.] The sentimental plot echoes such classics of popular literature as Dumas's *La dame aux camélias* [The lady of camélias], or Sagal's *Love story*. It has to be noted, however, that Vian encribes himself in this literary convention with deliberate irony, so as to create a parodistic version of the traditional love story.

The main character of *L'écume des jours*, Colin, is an insonciant young man of means living alone in a luxurious apartment. His desperate yearning to fall in love is rewarded with a *coup-de-foudre* reciprocated affection for Chloé, crowned with a sumptuous wedding ceremony. Soon afterwards, Chloé falls ill and the costs of medical treatment empty Colin's chest of doublezons, so that the young man is forced to take even the most humiliating jobs to earn money. To no avail alas; Chloé dies and is given a poor-people funeral. Colin, bereft of love, visits the cemetery every day, a shade of the man. The Colin — Chloé plot is doubled by the story of Chick and Alise. Chick, the devout follower of 'partrism', spends all his time and money on the philosopher Partre's books and relics. His dejected lover Alise kills Partre and sets on fire all bookshops that carry his books. She herself perishes in flames, while Chick is murdered by the police for failing to pay his taxes.

However tearful the story, the Vianesque universe is far from being banal. On entering it, the reader becomes instantly aware of the fantastic aura. The first suggestions of the bizarre are jocular and do not foreshadow the imminent tragic turn of events: Colin empties his bath by making a hole in the tub with his finger, waters the leather of his shoes so that they mend by themselves, while the pimples on his face hide shamefully under the skin when they perceive their own ugliness in the magnifying glass; etc. The inanimate breathes with life: at the beginning the objects behave themselves and are benign to their owners, but gradually they start to betray inexplicable maliciousness (before the wedding ceremony Colin's tie refuses to be knotted and bites Chick's finger, and the sausages jump on the plate escaping the fork). The most perplexing

fantasy, however, consists in the gradual metamorphosis of Colin's apartment which, concomitantly with Chloé's ravaging disease, turns into a muddy cave and eventually disappears altogether, liberating itself from the realm of the artifact and returning to its primordial element — mother-earth. The first portent of the transformation is carried by the disappearing sunlight. Gay spots of light and lingering sun-beams withdraw one by one until they only form a halo outside the window. Even artificial light wanes and the lamps radiate dim, deathly pallor. The walls, no longer bathed in sunshine, come closer together, encumbering their inhabitants: Colin, Chloé, and the gray mouse. Carpets become thinner, the oven turns into carbon coal and the walls emanate the ordour of the cave — the place ceases to be a human habitat and starts to partake of the elemental. The transformation gives the impression of being a natural process, by no means inflicted by some hostile agents, supernatural or mundane, or of the irreversible devolution and recession to the source. It happens by itself and constitutes an unquestionable though disquieting given of the fictional reality, like Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis in Kafka's fantasy.

The change of the solid, man-made inanimate matter into mud and swamp depicts only one of the unintelligible shifts of realms in the world of *L'écume des jours*. The natural order of being is replaced by weird hybrids like man-machine, man-plant, animal-machine, animal-plant and others. The most frequent and most menacing category is the man-machine. He/it is exhibited in shop-windows as a kind of live advertisement: "Dans une autre vitrine, un gras homme avec un tablier de boucher égorge aide petits enfants. C'était une vitrine pour l'Assistance Publique." (Vian 1965: 41) [In another window, a fat man wearing an apron of the butcher was slaughtering little children. It was an advertisement for the Public Aid.] The image of a human being displaying the characteristics of machines and automatons is usually associated with physical work (Chic's factory, copper mines, etc.). The animal-machine is represented by the monstrous "modified rabbit," half-metal, half-fur, designed by the chemist to excrete pills. Another disconcerting combination is the water-lily parasiting in Chloé's lungs — the cause of her illness and eventual death. The plant far transcends its vegetable realm and becomes a carnivorous murderer. Affected by the nenuphar, Chloé herself becomes a woman-plant, no longer capable of any human activity, but vegetating on her bed, attracting humidity and infecting the environment with her unusual malady.

As the natural laws do not operate normally in the universe of *L'écume des jours*, spatial and temporal categories are also distorted and comply only with the novel's internal logic. For example, the characters are able to manipulate time by accelerating or decelerating it; when Colin and Chloé are late for the appointment, Chloé finds a sensible solution: "Ça ne fait rien, règle ta montre." (Vian 1965: 105) [It doesn't matter, set your watch.] Nicholas, Colin's cook,

becomes older by seven years in the course of several days, and the twenty-nine year old man at the munition factory actually *is* an octomoronic, gray-haired wrinkled and withered human wreck.

The dialogue into which the world of *L'écume des jours* enters with reality is of a very complex nature. As Rosemary Jackson remarked in her remarkable study *Fantasy: the literature of subversion*, "Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that 'real' world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite". (Jackson 1981: 20) On the other hand, Boris Vian does not weave the fantastic elements into the texture of the real so as to achieve the effect of awe, surprise and amazement, which is the landmark of the fantastic as a genre according to Tzvetan Todorov. In *The fantastic. A structural approach to a genre*, Todorov maintains that the fantastic "occupies the duration of uncertainty" between the uncanny and the marvelous. (Todorov 1973: 23) In Vian's novel, however, the principle of hesitation does not apply, as both the marvelous and the uncanny, apparently two incompatible genres, coincide so as to create an autonomous 'alternative world'<sup>1</sup> which functions according to the laws and categories inherent in it. Its causal relationships are determined by the rules of the fictional reality which cannot be comprehended in extra-textual terms. Vian's universe displays perfect immanent coherence and it cherishes its exclusiveness, in open disregard for the familiar categories of 'our' reality.

In Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's cradle* the fantastic also appears as a norm according to which the fictional world is structured. The narrator of the story intends to write a factual book on what some important Americans were doing on the day of Hiroshima bombing. Consequently, he investigates the life of one of the alleged fathers of the atom bomb, Dr Felix Hoenikker, who also turns out to have invented ice-nine, one crystal of which can transform all water on earth into the solid. The narrator, a journalist, is assigned to go to San Lorenzo — an arid, miserable island in the Caribbean Sea, governed by tyrannical Papa Monzano. Its law decrees "the hook" for any crime whatsoever, the greatest felony being the practice of bokononism, an outlawed religion established by a Negro ex-soldier who calls himself Bokonon. In San Lorenzo the narrator meets Dr. Hoenikker's children, Angela, Newt and Fank — three unhappy misfits. Soon, he becomes a devotee of bokononism. Meanwhile, Papa Monzano, who has been slowly dying of cancer, commits suicide by swallowing a chunk of ice-nine. As a result of an explosion, Papa's palace tumbles down. His body falls into the sea and, consequently, the whole earth crystallizes into ice-nine. The narrator survives the cataclysm and lives in the debris together with sev-

<sup>1</sup> Not unlike Michel Tournier's alternative world 'in *Vendredi ou les du limbes du Pacifique*, brilliantly explicated in the afterword by Gilles Deleuze.

eral other wrecks. In the end, he encounters the prophet Bokonon who is in the course of writing the momentous last sentence of his *Books of Bokonon*.

The universe of *Cat's cradle* is rendered in less detail than that of *L'écume des jours* and the images lack Vian's poetic quality. However, Vonnegut's terse descriptions convey a vivid image of another 'alternative world' in which, as in the case of Vian's novel, the categories of time, space and physical properties of things are subject to the dictates of the fictional reality. Similarly as in *L'écume des jours* where the transformation of Colin's apartment takes place in the present, the catastrophe in *Cat's cradle* does not occur in the remote future, but is the 'apocalypse-now'. In the words of Rosemary Jackson in the fantastic "chronological time is similarly exploded with time past, present and future losing their historical sequence and tending towards a suspension, an eternal present". (Jackson 1981: 47) At one point of the novel, Vonnegut transfers his 'here' to a dystopian republic. Nonetheless, the fact that the cataclysmic death of the universe by ice-nine spreads from the hinterland does not uplift the sense of the immediacy of experience. The fantasy is by no means restricted to a secluded, remote land but embraces the totality of the fictional world.

Like in the case of Vian's novel, more than mere suspension of disbelief is needed to enter and actively participate in the reality of *Cat's cradle*. The prerequisite for the reader is to abandon the properties of the extra-textual world and common assumptions about reality. The dichotomy of the real and the imaginary in the two novels ceases to exist in the face of the authors' mischievous juggling of these categories, which is manifested in, for example, the confusion of historical facts with purely invented ones.

In Vonnegut's book, the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima becomes the pivot of action — it gives incentive to the narrator's undertaking to write *The day the world ended* and triggers off all subsequent events. However, the historicity of the event is undermined by making Felix Hoenikker one of the fathers of the atom bomb, the manoeuvre carried further by granting him the Nobel prize. Hoenikker's being the inventor of both the atom bomb and ice-nine efficiently obscures the drawing line between fact and fiction.

The most offensive intrusion of history into the world romanesque of *L'écume des jours* occurs through the introduction of the character of Jean-Sol Partre, whose obvious prototype is Jean Paul Sartre.<sup>2</sup> In the episode of Partre's conference, for instance, the two realms of history and fantasy fuse into an escalation of most improbable events: "Partre s'était levé et présentait au public des échantillons de vomi empaillé. Le plus joli, pommecrie et vin rouge

<sup>2</sup> For details concerning the relationship between partrism and existentialism, Boris Vian and Jean Paul Sartre, see: Gauthier, M. 1973. "*L'écume des jours*" par Boris Vian Paris:Hatier.

obtient un franc succès." (Vian 1965: 77) [Partre raised himself and presented to the audience the samples of vomit. The most beautiful one, raw apples and red wine, gained enormous applause.] Even the reader's knowledge that the episode echoes the famous Sartre's conference in October 1945 at the Club Maintenant does not help demarcate the border between historical fact and fictional invention. At no point does Vian's fantasy accord with the extra-textual principle of likelihood, substituting it with the norm which makes the most bizarre and impossible event plausible and perfectly congruous with all other elements of the invented reality. In the preface to his novel, Boris Vian asserts: "... l'histoire est entièrement vraie, puisque je l'imagine d'un bout à l'autre." (Vian 1965: 5) [... the story is entirely true because I have invented it from one end to the other.] The truth, the factuality of the story, lies precisely in its being invented, in its being created, not re-created: fiction is granted the status of the real not at all subordinated to, or dependent on, the extra-textual real, but co-existent with it.

Kurt Vonnegut's text reveals the same preoccupation with the factual status of the fictional constructs. The first sentence of *The book of Bokonon* announces, "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies." (Vonnegut 1976: 14) As in the case of Vian, the paradox lies in Vonnegut's insisting on one hundred percent literary, imaginary status of the world presented, its being woven out of nothing but *foma*, and in the simultaneous making of this fictionality into the very basis of his fictional world's claim to truthfulness. Despite differences, both Vian and Vonnegut, by evoking their fantastic worlds, make an enquiry into the nature of the dichotomy of 'true' and 'untrue', 'real' and 'imaginary', and both unabashedly refuse to make such distinctions at all.

It is clear that the two writers do not make the opposition between mimesis and fantasy an organizing principle of their fictional worlds. What gives coherence to the universe of *L'écume des jours* and to that of *Cat's cradle* is the ruling metaphor of death, which becomes the structuring element of the narrative as well as the Other of the two writers' fantasies. In his discussion of the fantastic as a genre Tzvetan Todorov defines 'the Other' of the traditional fantasy as the supernatural element, the realm 'other' than human, the extraordinary phenomenon which amazes and terrifies both the hero and the reader.<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Jackson suggests, however, that in the modern fantastic 'otherness' is not demonic but consists in "all that threatens 'this' world, this 'real' world with dissolution". (Jackson 1981: 57) Thus, in the two texts, the metaphor of death, as will be argued, operates on several levels, substitutes for the supernatural — the Other — of the traditional fantasy.

<sup>3</sup> Todorov further discusses the supernatural in the fantastic as belonging to one of two thematic groups. In the first, the source of 'otherness', of threat, is the 'I', the self; in the second, fear originates in a source external to the subject, in the 'not-I'.

In *L'écume des jours* the metaphor of death is carried mainly by the central symbol of the water-lily — a lethal flower which not only causes death of an individual human being but as if radiates it throughout the fictional universe. In *Cat's cradle* ice-nine is the symbol through which the presented world continually makes a beckoning sign of death, until finally it brings about total destruction of life on earth. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that in both novels the metaphor of death is developed through associations with different forms of water. In Vian, waters appear as moisture marking the transformation of the apartment; water is the natural environment of the murderous nenuphar; it surrounds the cemetery and hovers over it in the form of mist. Finally, in its solid form of snow and frost, it contaminates Chloé with mortal disease. The girl contracts death when she touches snow, like Mona Aamons Monzano in Vonnegut's book. In *Cat's cradle*, ice operates as the agent of death. Water in its liquid state, though, may prove equally fatal, as it is the medium through which ice-nine affects all living things (doctor Koenigswald turns into ice when he washes his hands after the examination of Papa's dead body, and the followers of Bokonon commit suicide by touching the deadly substance with the tips of their tongues). On the other hand, in both novels water is simultaneously a life-giving force. In *Cat's cradle* this duality is symbolized in the image of ants melting a grain of ice with the warmth of their tiny bodies, which kills half their number but produces one bead of drinkable dew so that the species survives. In *L'écume des jours*, Chloé is ordered by the doctor to abstain from drinking and she suffers tortures from thirst; when she smells flowers, her breath sucks water from them.

In both novels, death appears also as a gruesome, tangible presence. In *L'écume des jours* it permeates every corner of the fictional universe, lurking behind the manifestations of life, an almost palpable being, a supreme reality. The novel is littered with corpses and imbued with intimations of death even when less expected. During the wedding ceremony, for instance, the conductor of the church orchestra falls down from the balcony, crashing on the stones beneath with a thump deafened by a loud fanfare. Places of amusement, like skating rinks, witness gory accidents: "le patineur venait de s'écraser contre le mur du restaurant, à l'extrémité opposée de la piste, et restait là, comme une duse de papier mâché écartelée par un enfant cruel." (Vian 1965: 20) [the skater crashed against the wall of the restaurant at the opposite side of the skating rink and stayed there, like a jelly-fish made of papier mâché torn to pieces by a cruel child.] Partre's conference terminates in shambles: ardent admirers of the dog-head writer devise innumerable ways to enter the hall and they perish, either killed by the policemen or suffocated with dust. Some try to arrive by sewers and are pushed back by the crowds and eaten by rats. The episode is a masterpiece of black-humour comedy, a mock-apocalypse presided by divine Partre.

In *Cat's cradle*, the spectre of the atom bomb hovers over the world the

characters live in, portentous of the final cataclysm. The black-humour violation of the taboo of death is less obtrusive and the descriptions less gory than in *L'écume des jours*, but Vonnegut's novel also abounds in episodes in which death appears in its visible manifestation of the corpse, and it is presented with a "so-it-goes" shrug, as when Philip Castle describes a shipwreck in which everybody but rats got drowned:

The rats and the wicker furniture came ashore.

...So some people got free furniture, and some people got bubonic plague. At father's hospital, we had fourteen hundred deaths inside of ten days. Have you ever seen anyone die of bubonic plague?"

"That unhappiness has not been mine."

"The lymph glands in the groin and the armpits swell to the size of grapefruit."

"I can well believe it."

"After death the body turns black — coal to Newcastle in the case of San Lorenzo."

(Vonnegut 1976: 110–111)

When Felix Hoenikker's son discovered the secret of ice-nine, he went to tell his father "about the stiff dog and found out that his father was stiff, too." (Vonnegut 1976: 167)

The inhabitants of the two literary worlds accept the dissemination of death as the norm. Their total indifference to its ubiquitous presence is related to their infantile credulity, lack of awareness of the existence of pain, and to their ignorance of moral responsibility. In *L'écume des jours*, the characters perceive the world through the pink glass of adolescent naiveté. To borrow Vian's metaphor, they are shielded from ugliness (*laideur*) like Chloé, for whom Colin puts up colourful window panes when she complains about the squalidity of landscape outside the car. None the less, this paramount feature of childish ignorance and purity does not make them evil-proof and invulnerable, nor does it prevent them from becoming the agents of death themselves — they inflict it with the insouciance of egoistic children. For example, Colin exasperated with the news of Chloé's illness, strikes a boy with a skate axing his head off, casually pushes the body into one of the cabins of the skating rink, and leaves horror in his wake: "Sous la porte de la cabine 128 une mince rigole du sang mousseux serpentait lentement, et la liqueur se mit à couler sur la glace en grosses gouttes fumantes et lourdes." (Vian 1965: 85) [Under the door of the cabin 128, a narrow streamlet of foaming blood was winding slowly, and the red liquid began to flow across the ice in big, heavy and steaming drops.] Sweet and fragile Alise, having killed Jean-Sol Partre, ravages through the district book-shops tearing off the hearts of their owners — a fair-haired angel of death with an "arrache-coeur" [heart-tearer] for a sword. Chloé, who falls victim to the carnivorous water-lily, imperceptibly acquires vampirish qualities herself. Her breath sucks life out of flowers: "L'oillet blémissait soudain, se fripa, paru se

desécher. Il tomber maintenant, en fine poussière, sur la poitrine de Chloé." (Vian 1965: 139) [the violet instantly faded, shrank, seemed to have dried. Then it fell down in fine powder, on Chloé's chest.] The nenuphar in her lungs transforms Chloé into a *femme-fleur fatale* who parasites on Colin, draining his life energy together with his money. However passive, she acts as an agent of destruction, and it is no coincidence that the images of bed-ridden Chloé are inseparable from those of the metamorphosis of the apartment.

Vonnegut's characters are likewise the mixture of childish credulity and cruelty. Felix Hoenikker, the playfully minded scientist, on the day of the first testing of the atom bomb responds to the statement "Science has now known sin" with the question: "What is sin?" (Vonnegut 1986: 33) Young Hoenikkers never cease to be carefree adolescents who shun responsibility by "going down spiritual oubliette", (Vonnegut 1976:151) and trade ice-nine for personal happiness. Essential naiveté and general lack of concern are shared by other characters like *Mom* Hasel Crosby or Mona Aamons Monzano. Such an attitude results in the characters' lack of awareness of the omnipresence of death and in their unintentional bringing about the destruction of the world with the carelessness of children at play.

The death-in-life quality of the characters in both novels is one of the factors which precipitate the cosmic process of the death of the universe. In *L'écume des jours*, the law of entropy operates slowly but implacably. It manifests itself mainly through the metamorphosis of the apartment. The ravages the process results in are clearly visible when Chloé's friends, visiting her for the last time, can hardly enter the room, as they descend into the realm of the vegetable and the mineral: "le plafond rejoignait presque le plancher auquel il était réuni par des projections mi-végétales, minérales, qui se développaient dans l'obscurité humide." (Vian 1965: 164) [The ceiling was almost touching the floor with which it was joined by the half-vegetable, half-mineral ejections that were developing in humid darkness.] When Chloé's corpse is being carried to the graveyard, situated on a little island almost sinking in water, Colin's apartment disappears altogether, turned into swamp. Nature effectively completes its act of annihilation: "le plafond rejoignit le plancher et de longs verniculers de matière inerte jaillirent en se tordant par les interstices de la suture." (Vian 1965: 172) [the ceiling joined the floor and long ejaculations of inanimate matter were jetting in twists through the openings in the joints.] As a result of the entropic process, the energy of the system has dispersed and life rigidifies in the state of inert uniformity. The graveyard, where we see Colin for the last time, is shrouded in mist, and the contours of the island incessantly change. The natural cycle of seasons has come to a halt — nature has become deadly still and bluish: "Les arbres, longs and flexibles, retombait maintenant en arc d'un bout à l'autre du chemin. A travers la voûte ainsi fermée, le jour produisait un halo blanc, sans éclat... On

n'entendait pas d'animaux dans les arbres. Seules, des feuilles griseuses se détachaient parfois pour tomber lourdement sur le sol. (Vian 1965: 171) [The trees, long and flexible, were falling down, forming an arch over the path. Through the vault thus formed, the day was producing a white halo, devoid of brightness. One could not hear the animals in the trees. Only the gray leaves were coming off from time to time, to fall heavily on the ground.] The waning shriek of Bedon's bugle announces the triumph of death over life: "... les sons rauques vibraient dans l'air mort. La terre s'éboulait peu à peu, et au bout de deux ou trois minutes le corps de Chloé avait complètement disparu. (Vian 1965: 173) [the coarse sounds of Bedon's bugle vibrated in the dead air. The earth was sliding down, and in two or three minutes Chloé's body disappeared completely.]

In *Cat's cradle*, the final catastrophe acquires eschatological dimensions: "There was a sound like that of the gentle closing of the portal as big as the sky, the great door of heaven being closed softly. It was a grand AH WHOOM." (Vonnegut 1976: 174) The description of the cataclysm is followed by the entropic image of the earth, comparable to Vian's vision of the cemetery island:

The moist green earth was a blue-white pearl. The sky darkened. *Borasi*, the sun, became a sickly yellow ball, tiny and cruel... The air was dry and hot and deathly still... There were no smells. There was no movement. Every step I took made a gravelly squeek in blue-white frost. And every squeek was echoed loudly. The season of locking was over. The earth was locked up tight. It was winter, now and forever. (Vonnegut 1975: 179)

The earth has succumbed to chaos and deadly uniformity, with life petrified and the human body turned into inanimate lumps of ice-nine. Several survivors of the cataclysm exist in a satisfactory semblance of life, performing their daily chores like well-trained automatons. Actually, if ice-nine has not yet contaminated them bodily, it has been contagious to their selves. The narrator complains of feeling completely void of emotions, with even sex urge having left him. The only token gesture that might seemingly restore man to his lost humanity is the display of free will consisting in suicide by freezing in the poise of mock-defiance at the death-inflicting forces, as advocated by Bokonon: "I would make a statue of myself lying on my back grinning horribly and thumbing my nose at You Know Who." (Vonnegut 1976: 182) Still, this mock-heroic message is undermined by the passive acquiescence of Bokonon's followers to death and by Mona's intriguing laughter at the sight of thousands of corpses and her assertion: "[Death] solves so much for so many so simply." (Vonnegut 1975: 182) If Vonnegut presents some thesis, he is also careful enough to undermine it almost at the same instant, leaving the reader baffled and unsure whether it is not he at whom Bokonon, or the writer, thumbs his nose.

Vian's entropic vision leaves even less hope for a human being whose

endeavours to counteract the slow irreversible process of dying are not only in vain, but often, by the rule of tragic irony, even precipitate the total expenditure of energy. This pessimistic view of human existence, which is denied the dignity of the tragic by black-humour comedy, can be matched perhaps only by Samuel Beckett's gloomy vision. For the characters that have lived through the catastrophe, what remains is mere survival in the 'day-after' deadly reality, clinging to the semblance of life without future, with even no Godot to wait upon. In the final scene of *L'écume des jours*, the gray mouse, about to commit suicide, tells the cat that every day Colin goes to the cemetery by a tottery plank, staring into the water at "une chose blanche [qui] remue vaguement dans la profondeur." (Vian 1965: 171) [a white thing which was moving indistinctly in deep water.] Is Colin totally passive and resigned to the process of destruction, entangled in his private, pointless endgame? Or perhaps challenging the nenuphar to seize him is an act of volition, a shred of defiance towards the force that has destroyed his world? As in the case of Vonnegut's novel, the reader is left with an irresolvable ambiguity.

It becomes apparent now that the metaphor of death functions not only as the means of presenting the physical and spiritual extermination of a human being and his universe. It also penetrates deeper into the text so as to expose the disintegration of man's 'reality constructs'. Both novels are preoccupied with man's irresistible desire for significance, and with his superimposing fallacious patterns upon reality as a result of this compelling wish.

In both novels, the religious cult becomes illustrative of man's effort to impose order upon the chaos of existence. Kurt Vonnegut invents bokononism — the religion of "harmless untruths." It consoles man by alleviating the agonizing necessity to search for truth and ultimate answers, and offers instead the satisfaction of pretending that he understands everything. Bokononism veils reality in make-beliefs, letting its followers live the lives which are "a work of art," a pretence that "a bunch of X's between somebody's hands" actually is *cat's cradle*. It bestows on man all the comforts of living by *foma*, the paradise of "bittersweet lies" in place of tormenting uncertainties.

Similarly to Vonnegut, Boris Vian reflects on the fictitious, deceptive nature of the religious worship. Some of his characters try to redeem the sense of meaninglessness by passionate observance of the cult of Jean-Sol Partre. The divine ambiance surrounding Partre is clearly indicated: "Il émanait de son corps souple et ascétique une radiance extraordinaire." (Vian 1965: 74) [His body, supple and ascetic, emanated an extraordinary radiance.] Chick, the most fanatical believer, is gradually turning into a grotesque facet of the cult, his self dispersed and rigidified in the form of shelves crammed with books and gadgets for recording Partre's voice. The capacity for human affection is leaking from him proportionally to the growth of his collection.

The futility of man's attempts to bestow meaning on his existence, predominant in both novels, is best exemplified in one of the parables of *The books of Bokonon*: "What is the purpose of all this?" — man asked God politely. "Everything must have a purpose?" — asked God. "Certainly," — said man. "Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," — said God and he went away." (Vonnegut 1976: 177) In both novels, religion as a symbol for man's reality constructs turns out to be a pack of lies and delusions, a sumptuous froth (*l'écume*) of pretended meaning on the reality devoid of sense. The two texts announce that meaningful systems are but dead concepts and vacuous projections of human mind, the illusion that there exists direct correspondence between the working of a subjective human mind and objective reality.

The annihilation of signification on the level of the reality constructs has further implications. The metaphor of death puts into question the very nature of fictional discourse. In Vonnegut's novel, the events that ensue are predicted in *The books of Bokonon*, which are clearly stated to be a pack of lies.<sup>4</sup> The narrative consists in the enacting of Bokonon's half-playful invention, in turning pages of the mock-prophetic book. Also, the intended title of the narrator's book (which he is writing throughout the novel) proves ominous and as if *causes* the end of the world. Significantly enough, the novel opens with an epigrammatic statement from *The books of Bokonon*, and the narrating voice is silenced as Bokonon writes his last sentence, which is also the last sentence of *The day the world ended*. In *L'écume des jours*, the events materialize from Colin's wish to be in love, precisely from his conjugating, "je voudrais être amoureux, tu voudrais être amoureux". (Vian 1965: 28) [I would like to be in love, you would like to be in love]. Chloé herself is conjured from Colin's favourite tune by Duke Ellington entitled "Chloe". That is why on meeting the girl Colin asks, "Etes vous arrangées par Duke Ellington?" (Vian 1965: 33) [Are you arranged by Duke Ellington?]

Thus, the language not only presents fictional events but, primarily, it begets them. In this way it is revealed as prior instead of subservient to the reality it describes. Boris Vian enhances this point by digging into the nature of language, into its clichés and stereotypes. Taking metaphors *au pied de la lettre* [literally], Vian comes up with such situations, like for example, a prescription which is executed by means of a little guillotine, a man growing roots when planted somewhere, etc.<sup>5</sup> Jacques Bens, in his afterword to *L'écume des jours*, terms it very adequately "un language universe" which is representative of nothing else but itself. Kurt Vonnegut is less detailed in his enquiry

<sup>4</sup> Possibly, Vonnegut's ironic comment on the American Puritan tradition of the literal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and of finding in the Bible the evidence of the coming end of the world.

<sup>5</sup> For detailed discussion see: Gauthier 1973, also: Baudin, H. 1973. *Boris Vian humorist*. Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.

into the nature of language but he also resorts to, for example, the device of the literalization of metaphors or the manipulation of stereotyped statements and common phraseology.

As the two texts insist that their worlds exist only within the texture of the language, the fantastic in the novels must also be conceived as a linguistic construct. Tzvetan Todorov maintains that: "If the fantastic constantly makes use of rhetorical figures, it is because it originates in them. The supernatural is born of language, it is both its consequence and its proof." (Todorov 1973: 182). Rosemary Jackson adds that fantasy wedges itself into the body of the real and splits it open, thus revealing the essential linguistic nature of what we take for 'reality'. Cutting further, the fantastic, considered as the derivative of language, reveals the gap between the sign and meaning. Both Vian's and Vonnegut's fantasies consist in their refusal to distinguish between the real and the unreal, and in their bringing together of these apparently antithetical aspects to the common level of language. By this, they point to the fact that man's inability to cope with the real is due to the impossibility of bridging the gap between signifier and signified. The message is cleverly coded in the very titles of the novels, the titles which mean nothing, which designate emptiness. The nonsensical phrase "cat's cradle" refers to an arrangement of strings, and if "*l'écume des jours*" denotes anything, it is perhaps evanescence and futility. Both titles belong to the category of Samuel Beckett's 'thingless names' — empty signs to which any and no meaning can be attached. They point to the fact that "the 'object' world of the fantastic is one of semiotic excess and of semiotic vacuity." (Jackson 1981: 40).

Both novels display full awareness of their own dependance on language, as "language alone enables us to conceive what is always absent." (Todorov 1983: 182). Simultaneously, they demistify their own medium and unveil the essential emptiness of language, its tendency to fictionalize reality by establishing fallacious relationships between signifier and signified. In this way, *L'écume des jours* and *Cat's cradle* expose man's delusion of logocentrism (to use Derrida's term), of relying on language as an alleged receptacle of meaning. The metaphor of death not only places absence in the semantic center of the text, but also discloses the way in which language itself yields to the same process of entropy.

With language subjected to such a powerful *coup*, the discourse itself is assassinated. But in Vian as well as in Vonnegut, the discourse of death does not necessarily mean the death of discourse. Both writers continue to be "uncertain messengers",<sup>6</sup> who refuse commitment, but recognize the absurd

<sup>6</sup> Tony Tanner's phrase referring to Kurt Vonnegut in: Tanner, T. 1971. *The city of words*. New York: Harper and Row. p. 181.

and treat it seriously. And they never agree to acknowledging reality at its face value as in the following brief dialogue from *L'écume des jours*:

— C'est la vie, dit Chick.

— Non, dit Colin. (Vian 1965: 99)

[This is life — said Chick./No — said Colin]

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