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George Sand and Boris Vian, Differences among Similarities: On Two Insights into the Mysteries of Love¹

PERVENCHE

Je le dirai à mon grand-père.

LA DUCHESSE

(de plus en plus souriante, désignant le corps)

Il est mort.

PERVENCHE

Il fait peut-être seulement semblant.

LA DUCHESSE

(éclatant de rire)

Oh ! quelle absurdité !

PERVENCHE

Vous faites bien semblant d'être vivante.²

ABSTRACT. My paper is about life and love based on an analogy between two texts. The first is a letter written by the French writer George Sand to her ex-lover, another French writer, Alfred de Musset. The second is a poem, “L'évadé” (“The Escapee”), written by the French poet Boris Vian. Both texts present a way of life, but each is based on a special conception of love. In these two texts, love is the most important value in the model of a good life. However, behind the obvious common points between them, many differences are hidden. The paper has following structure:

¹ This work has been presented during the First World Congress of Analogy, on November 4, 2015 (Puebla, Mexico) [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqppSxPomts>, accessed July 22, 2016], YouTube. Katarzyna Gan-Krzywoszyńska and Piotr Leśniewski (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland) were by my side, in many ways, when I worked on this topic. They gave me so much that all I can do is to write these so little but so intense words: thank you.

² [Prévert, 1972, p. 99].

firstly, I present both texts and their authors, secondly, I discuss similarities and differences and lastly, I explain how these differences enlighten us about the special message of each text.

KEY WORDS: analogical analysis, George Sand, Boris Vian, love

1. Introductory remark

There is a famous note by Max Scheler: *Wer den ordo amoris eines Menschen hat, hat den Menschen*.³ Once the Schelerian remark is accepted as a point of departure, then each inquiry into the problem of love at the same time throws some light on the very foundations of the humanities.⁴ My paper consists in an analogical analysis of two (literary) records of love experiences. The first text is an excerpt from a long letter written by George Sand. “George” is a masculine first name but, contrary to what one might think, George was a female. Her real name was Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin (1804–1876). This French writer was a rebellious woman at the time, especially considering her rank: she wore trousers, smoked, and, most of all, left her husband and her children in order to be more free. In 1833, she met Alfred de Musset (1810–1857), another French writer. They had an intense and violent love affair, lasting some months.

When George writes to Alfred the letter from which we are about to study an excerpt, they had already separated some months earlier. Sand has another lover; but Musset hesitates to fall in love again because he is afraid of being hurt.

The second text is a poem written by Boris Vian (1920–1959), a man who had many talents: he was a writer (of songs, novels, poetry, articles ...), a musician, a singer, an engineer, a translator, etc. He was not healthy and thought that he would die before the age of forty. The poem “The Escapee” (or, sometimes, “Time to live”) was written five years before his death.

³ See [Luther, 1972, p. 124].

⁴ For the counterrationality of love see [Gan-Krzywoszyńska, Leśniewski, 2015, pp. 172-176]. For psychological perspectives in studies on love see for example [Balderston, 2014, p. 527].

2. Analogical analysis of both texts

2.1. Common features

In my opinion, there are two types of common features between both texts examined in this paper: (1) their topics, (2) their message. Indeed, both texts are about *love* and *life*. And George Sand and Boris Vian seem to give us the same message: a life full of love is a complete life. In other words: the more you love, the more you live. Does this mean we can conclude that both texts are “synonymous”, that they tell us the same thing?

If we pay closer attention, using analogical methodology, we discover, however, that there are not only many differences between the two texts, but that these differences are deep. We will address this issue in order to show that, in fact, the messages of these texts are very different, contrary to what we could believe if we read them quickly. What are these differences between the texts that we could mistakenly think are very much alike?

2.2. Differences

2.2.1. Two relations with the world around: harmony and desire of elevation

The first obvious difference is that George Sand speaks in her letter only of the feelings of the lover, that is to say, love lived, felt, by a person in love with another person. With Boris Vian, the escapee runs towards a woman, but this is only a very small part of his love. Indeed, although the word “love” is not at all written in the poem, love is everywhere, and all the man does is tell his love. For example, the escapee loves freedom so much that he is ready to die for it. And he loves plunging his face into the water so much that he stops running in order to do it, while some men shoot him. The escapee is in love, it is true, but not only with a woman: he is in love with freedom, too, and with everything around him (the trees, their smell, their leaves, the water of the river...). The paradise of Boris Vian is on Earth... The escapee feels in harmony with the world and does

not try to add anything to it that would be greater. This harmony becomes even a form of fusion when he dies and his blood runs together with the water of the river.

With George Sand, on the contrary, reality is not loveable at all, it is too low and unworthy. Her paradise is “above”. She writes to Musset: “You were not destined to wallow in the mire of reality. You are made to create your own reality, in a more elevated world”. Musset has to reach “sublime heights” to rise above the “dull world where spiritless men languish”. How? Thanks to love! Because, according to her, to be in love and to “show his heart candidly and generously” is the only way to elevation. She uses many adjectives to describe this higher world that we can reach only when we know really how to love: *beautiful, great, sublime, eternal, rich, powerful, strong, elevated, noble*. In addition to these words, she uses a long metaphor about love in which she compares love to a sacred building. Let’s examine this metaphor to see if it has an echo in Boris Vian’s poem.

2.2.2. The builder and the picker

“Love is a temple”, George Sand writes. Into this temple, the lover dedicates their worship to the divinity that the beloved is. Of course, in our life, we may fall in love with several persons. No problem, George Sand says, only the temple is important: “Whether the idol stands for a long while or is soon broken, you will have built a beautiful temple” or “the god may change, but the temple will last as long as you live”. So, what is important, more than the beloved, is the temple, that is to say, love, love as a work. So, she tells Musset that he has to dare to fall in love again, because “a soul like [his] must create great works”. She adds that looking for love again, always “may be the dreadful, beautiful and dauntless work of a lifetime”. Love would be a temple, an architectural and sacred work, and the life of one who knows how to love would be a literary work: “may your life be as beautiful as the poems your intelligence has devised”. We can notice that, according to George Sand, although she talks about love,

she talks about the heart only one time, and she never talks about the body. Of course: the faculties of creation are “more elevated”. They are intelligence and the soul (the soul inhabits the temple).

It is interesting to notice that in Boris Vian’s poem we also find one building. But it is not a temple: it is... a jail. And the symmetry is perfect: (1) according to the poet, the building has not to be built: it is already done. (2) And it is not a goal, the arrival: it is the starting point, and even a place from where you have to escape, even if you will die escaping. The escapee runs away from this closed place and he never builds another one. And it is not about his soul or his intelligence, but only about his body. He uses his body not to build, but only to run and welcome all around him: he deeply smells the scent of the trees, his shadow dances with the sunlight, he picks up leaves and brings them to his lips, he plunges his face in the creek, he drinks water. He loves sensually, carnally. Unlike what we find in the letter, the lover in the poem does not need to search, painfully, for (something or) someone to love: what he loves is everywhere, handy, simple, intense.

As for the creation, the only two “works” in the poem are “the steel blue guns” and the “four walls”, that is to say, the guns of the jailers and the jail. These creations are not elevated at all: they take away life and freedom.

On the one hand, the intellectual builder. On the other hand, the picker-runner. Two behaviours. And two relationships with time, as well.

2.2.3. Two relationships with time

In Boris Vian’s poem, the word “time” is the most used, with eleven occurrences. Four times, we read what the escapee wants: “If they could just give me time”. He knows that he is the target of men with guns. He knows that he is going to die very soon. If he wants time, it is to live, and love, freely, here and, above all, now. *Hic et nunc*. As Thoreau, he wants “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life”.⁵ So, he’s running, and he

⁵ [Thoreau, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”].

stops only to do simple things that make him happy. He is both in the present time, and in a hurry.

To build, on the contrary, is a long process. In the present, we build, but the result is not immediate. We have to work, to suffer, before we can enjoy: the happiness is at the end of the path. Later. Tomorrow. But the escapee does not need to wait: his happiness is the path. Now. Today.

Furthermore, to build is a process which is based – and which aims at – a kind of stability, a stability which is not compatible with hurrying. We can notice that this stability seems to be a good thing according to George Sand. For example, when she speaks about the love stories we may have in one life, she says that “the more you have had to change, the more apt you may be to keep it”. We would change only when we have to. Here, we can ask ourselves: this research for keeping, for stability, for the refuge we find in the temple, is it on the side of death more than on the side of life? Because all buildings are motionless, made of cold stones, like... graves. In contrast, in the poem, the man runs from the very beginning till the end, under the sun. He is fully alive and only death stops him. We can oppose the dead stones of the temple of love to the rolling stones under the steps of the escapee. “*Pierres qui roulent n’amassent pas mousse* [rolling stones gather no moss]”, a French poem says, unlike the walls of the jail or... of the temple.

Besides, smells guide us to the same reflections: in the temple, we find “divine incense”, a dead and artificial smell; outside, we find the “scent of the trees”, alive and natural, which the escapee breathes deeply...

2.2.4. Two ways of seeing

Let’s go from the sense of smell to that of sight. We have already remarked that beauty is very important, according to George Sand. Well, as reality is a mire, the beauty around us can only be due to creation, the creation of a soul like Musset’s or ours... So, when we admire beauty, it is finally our work, and thus ourselves, that we admire. George Sand says to Musset that if he does what she advises, his life will be a poem so beautiful

that “[he] will reread this poem with the holy joys of pride”. And, at the end of the excerpt, she adds that “here, perhaps, ultimately lies the reward”. Here, that is to say, we “need never blush with shame” when we are judging our life. To blush is to look at our face in a mirror, look at what we have done, and be ashamed. It is as if the supreme goal, the “reward” was the “pride”... Love would only be a way to achieve it. The lover presented by George Sand is looking at himself in a mirror and seems finally to be in love with his reflection, his creations... himself.

What about the eyes of the escapee? Does this man admire his reflection, too (in the water)? Or his works? Or his passed time? Absolutely not. The only eyes set on him are those of the jailers, those men who shoot him. And the escapee never looks [to his] back. He only looks at what is in front of him. This is very, very important. At the end of the poem, Boris Vian makes a list of what the escapee had had time to do, before concluding that he had had time to live. What do we find at the very top of the list? “He’d had the time to fill his eyes”. To fill his eyes. To see. It shows how much seeing is important. To see is, in part, to live.

Are only the eyes of the escapee wide open?

2.2.5. Fear and opened arms

In fact, we met two men in our texts, and each one lives with a fear:

(1) On one hand, we have Musset, who is afraid to suffer if he falls in love again. He knows that love is risky, that it can hurt. He would like a kind of security, to feel safe. Maybe behind the solid walls of a love temple? What is sure is that his fear motivates him to close his arms, his heart...

(2) On the other hand, there is the escapee, who is afraid too, but not to suffer. He does not care about security: he even prefers to die instead of not to live. That is why he leaves the solid walls of the jail, even if it is extremely dangerous. The only thing he needs is freedom, and (enough) time, in order to live deeply. His fear, unlike Musset’s, pushes him to open his eyes, and his arms, that is to say his heart, as much as possible.

3. Conclusion: words and laughs

We have to remember that the text written by George Sand is a part of a long letter she wrote to her ex-lover: she is talking to somebody she knows very well, and she gives a lesson about life, about love, to him. To do this, as we have seen, she does not hesitate to use “big words” and long metaphors.

Boris Vian, writes a short poem in which he probably identifies himself with the escapee. (And, in fact, each of us could do it. Like the escapee, we live, until “a bee of hot copper” will interrupt our walk, our run.) Well, the escapee does not say a single word. From this man, we only hear... his laugh. Because this man, who is going to die, who has no gun, who is the target of jailers, is happy. And his happiness does not come from his pride, from his pleasure to admire himself or his life. It comes from his freedom, and his love for life. This man who does not lecture anybody, inspires us, more than George Sand, who looks like a “siren [which] sang without joy”...

Because it seems that George Sand speaks about a beautiful, grandiose love, but a conceptual love, without flesh too. She talks about life and love, but she remains nearby life, and love. Between her and life, we find words, concepts, ideas, thoughts, art... artificial things?

In contrast, the escapee is in direct touch with the elements and life. We realize it too when we consider the words chosen by the poet. When Boris Vian describes the reality – unlike George Sand who writes in a precious style, almost heavy – he uses only two adjectives: “yellow” and “soaked with sap and sun.” Everything is said. The sap and the sun..., life. Yes, this is life that he picks up and brings to his lips. His words are simple and crude, but very powerful and evocative: we feel these leaves between our fingers and, like the escapee, we bring them to our mouth, we bring *life* to our mouth. That is the reason why the fire described by Vian is not the “eternal flame [which] will ignite [his] heart anew” that we find in the temple: the fire is inside (“his body like a forge”).

Everything is conceptual, cold and built in Sand, everything is sensual, ardent and spontaneous in Vian. The second metaphor of the letter proves

it: Sand compares love with “a path in the mountain – a difficult one, full of pitfalls”. This is the perfect contrast to the path the escapee runs on when “he hurtled down the hill”. A hard ascent in the letter, a “natural slope” full of joy in the poem.

Thanks to analogical analysis, each text has been illuminated by a reading of the other. And although we could believe that George Sand and Boris Vian said the same thing (that love has to be put at the very centre of our life), we discover that, in reality, what Sand puts at the centre is words, beauty, art and, finally, artificial things and oneself, while what the escapee puts at the centre of life is, simply... life.

Yes, the escapee dies. But he is maybe the only one who really lives...

And because of it the following phrase should be recalled here after [Hart, 2009]: *Vive la différence! Vive l'abîme!*⁶

Text 1: A letter written by George Sand to her ex-lover, Alfred de Musset

[...] L'amour est un temple que bâtit celui qui aime à un objet plus ou moins digne de son culte, et ce qu'il y a de plus beau dans cela, ce n'est pas tant le Dieu que l'autel. Pourquoi craindrais-tu de te risquer ? Que l'idole reste debout longtemps ou qu'elle se brise bientôt, tu n'en auras pas moins bâti un beau temple. Ton âme l'aura habité, elle l'aura rempli d'un encens divin, et une âme comme la tienne doit produire de grandes œuvres. Le dieu changera peut-être, le temple durera autant que toi. Ce sera un lieu de refuge sublime où tu iras retremper ton cœur à la flamme éternelle, et ce cœur sera assez riche, assez puissant pour renouveler la divinité, si la divinité déserte son piédestal. Crois-tu donc qu'un amour ou deux suffisent pour épuiser et flétrir une âme forte? Je l'ai cru aussi pendant longtemps, mais je

[...] Love is a temple a lover builds to whomsoever is worthy of his or her worship to some degree or another, and the beauty of it lies not so much in the god but in the altar. Why would you shrink away from it? Whether the idol stands for a long while or is soon broken, you will have built a beautiful temple. Your soul will have inhabited this temple and filled it with divine incense, and a soul like yours must create great works. The god may change, but the temple will last as long as you live. It will be a sublime refuge where the eternal flame will ignite your heart anew – a heart that will be as rich and powerful as to find a new divinity when its predecessor has been toppled from its pedestal. Do you think one or two loves are enough to exhaust and consume a strong soul? I also used to think so, but

⁶ [Hart, 2009, p. 214].

<p>sais à présent que c'est tout le contraire. C'est un feu qui tend toujours à monter et à s'épuiser. Peut-être que plus on a cherché en vain, plus on devient habile à trouver; plus on a été forcé de changer, plus on devient propre à conserver. Qui sait ! C'est peut-être l'œuvre terrible, magnifique et courageuse de toute une vie. [...] C'est un sentier dans la montagne; dangereux et pénible, mais qui mène à des hauteurs sublimes et qui domine toujours le monde plat et monotone où végètent les hommes sans énergie. Tu n'es pas de ceux qu'une fatigue vaine doit décourager ni qu'une chute peut briser. Tu n'es pas destiné à ramper sur la boue de la réalité. Tu es fait pour créer ta réalité toi-même dans un monde plus élevé, et pour trouver tes joies dans le plus noble exercice des facultés de ton âme. Va, espère, et que ta vie soit un poème aussi beau que ceux qu'a rêvés ton intelligence. Un jour tu le reliras avec les saintes joies de l'orgueil. Tu verras peut-être derrière toi bien des débris. Mais tu seras debout et sans tache au milieu des trahisons, des bassesses et des turpitudes d'autrui. Celui qui s'est toujours livré loyalement et généreusement peut avoir à souffrir, mais à rougir jamais, et peut-être que la récompense est là tout entière. Jésus disait à Madeleine : Il te sera beaucoup remis, parce que tu as beaucoup aimé. [...]</p> <p>Lettre de George Sand à Alfred de Musset Venise, le 15 juin 1834</p>	<p>now I know I was wrong. Love is a fire that will grow and wear away. It may be that the more you have searched in vain, the more likely you are to find it; the more you have had to change, the more apt you may be to keep it. Who knows! It may be the dreadful, beautiful and dauntless work of a lifetime. [...] It is a path in the mountain – a difficult one, full of pitfalls, that leads to sublime heights and always towers over the flat and dull world where spiritless men languish. Vain weariness should not daunt a man of your kind; nor should a fall wreck you. You were not destined to wallow in the mire of reality. You are made to create your own reality, in a more elevated world, and to enjoy your own joys through the noblest exercise of your soul's faculties. Go full of hope, and may your life be as beautiful as the poems your intelligence has devised. One day you will reread this poem with the holy joys of pride. You may leave many debris behind you, but you will stand unsullied, amidst the betrayals, meanness and turpitudes of others. He who shows his heart candidly and generously may have to suffer, but need never blush with shame – and here, perhaps, ultimately lies the reward. As Jesus told Magdalene, 'You have loved so much that you shall be highly rewarded.' [...]</p> <p>George Sand, letter to Alfred de Musset Venice, 15th June 1834</p>
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[Musset, Sand, 2014, pp. 85-87], (English translation: Barbara Schmidt (Université de Lorraine, France), Review: Matthew Smith (Université de Lorraine, France))

Text 2: The poem *The Escapee*, by Boris Vian

Il a déval[1]é la colline Ses pieds faisaient rouler des pierres Là-haut, entre les quatre murs La sirène chantait sans joie	He hurtled down the hill Rocks sent flying with every step Up high from those four walls The siren sang without joy
Il respirait l'odeur des arbres Avec son corps, comme une forge La lumière l'accompagnait Et lui faisait danser son ombre	He breathed in the scent of the trees With his body like a forge The light followed his form Making his shadow dance
Pourvu qu'ils me laissent le temps Il sautait à travers les herbes Il a cueilli deux feuilles jaunes Gorgées de sève et de soleil	If they could just give me time Bounding across the grass He picked up two yellow leaves Soaked with sap and sun
Les canons d'acier bleu crachaient De courtes flammes de feu sec Pourvu qu'ils me laissent le temps Il est arrivé près de l'eau	The steel blue guns spitting Rapid bursts of fire If they could just give me time He reached the water's edge
Il y a plongé son visage Il riait de joie; il a bu Pourvu qu'ils me laissent le temps Il s'est relevé pour sauter	He plunged in his face Laughing with joy he drank If they could just give me time He raised himself to jump
Pourvu qu'ils me laissent le temps Une abeille de cuivre chaud L'a foudroyé sur l'autre rive Le sang et l'eau se sont mêlés	If they could just give me time A bee of hot copper Struck him down on the facing bank Blood and water ran together
Il avait eu le temps de voir Le temps de boire à ce ruisseau Le temps de porter à sa bouche Deux feuilles gorgées de soleil	He'd had the time to fill his eyes Time to drink from the creek Time to bring to his lips Two sun-soaked leaves
Le temps de rire aux assassins Le temps d'atteindre l'autre rive Le temps de courir vers la femme	Time to reach the other side Time to laugh at his assassins Time to run towards the one woman
Il avait eu le temps de vivre.	He'd had the time to live.
<i>L'évadé</i> , Boris Vian (1954)	<i>The Escapee</i> , Boris Vian (1954)

[Vian, 2004, pp. 133-134], (English translation: Aimee Orsini)

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