

NAMES IN BORIS VIAN'S LES BÂTISSEURS D'EMPIRE

Martha O'Nan

State University of New York
College at Brockport

Les Bâtitseurs d'empire by Boris Vian was presented in Paris in 1959, the year of the author's death at the age of thirty-nine. To suggest building empires is very out of date in the twentieth century, which saw their collapse at the end of World War I with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires and at the end of World War II with the dissolution of old colonial empires. Empires belong to the past—to Alexander the Great, the Romans, Charlemagne, Queen Elizabeth the First, and Napoleon. Since empire builders are decadent in the twentieth-century, theatergoers would hardly be attracted to a play about empires unless the builders were berserk, gothic, absurd, or atypical. Receders like the Father and the Mother of Les Bâtitseurs d'empire who leave behind a six-room apartment for smaller apartments until they reach a one-room apartment are acceptable for the twentieth century. Even great is their retreat up a dusty stairway, for up suggests that there must be victims and especially victims of victims because at the top there is only room for a few. The characters have some of the comic pathos of going from an eight- to a four-cylinder car, moving from a plush home to an attic, and the "jazz" and black humor of Ionesco's Victims du devoir and Le Roi

se meurt as well as of Beckett's En attendant Godot.

In the opening of the play, these non-empire builders are not even on stage, not even there. However, after a few moments, the Father speaks in a terrified voice from the stairway. His terror and that of the other characters is caused by the Noise which strikes fear each time it is heard. The Noise is the character, the concept, the fear which throws everyone into action—that is, into flight to a smaller apartment—and its role is as if the famous three blows (les trois coups) which begin all French dramatic presentations are repeated and repeated in order to give many small starts and peripeties throughout the play.

Of all the words which could mean noise in French, Vian selected the most general, le bruit. Bruit comes from the French verb bruire 'to give off a confused sound.' Its origin is from the French verb bruire which comes from Vulgar Latin brūgere 'to roar' and bragere 'to bray like an ass.' In present-day French bruit is used for the noise of thunder, the noise of dishes, the noise of a watch, the thousand noises of night, the noise of a drum, the noise from the street, and so on. It includes heart murmurs, disputes, quarrels, a big splash in life, rumor, reputation, making a lot of noise for nothing, and much more.

Since bruit 'noise' is such a generic word, it is no wonder that its meaning in the play is not understood. Various characters say that it is an image, a symbol, a warning, or confusion, and

that there are thousands of noises. The Father whose language is full of nonsense and syllogisms defines noise in the beginning of the play: "But one must not confuse the image, the sign, the symbol, the mark, the warning with the thing itself. That would be a grave error."¹ At the end of the play, he is still trying to define the word which he finds more and more terrifying because he is alone in an attic room where he believes that the Noise may be his heartbeat:

. . . I know about the inside of my body only by hearsay, in a vague way. It is possible that my heart causes my blood to circulate, but suppose that the movement of my blood was the real cause of my heartbeat. . . . (p. 77)

This line could be the anguish of the dramatist Vian who was waiting to die from heart malfunction. But in the play, the Noise goes beyond any possible subjective distress of the author and suggests a peril which cannot be made tangible, concrete, or material. The Noise survives and continues to threaten after all the characters are dead. Whatever it is, it holds a dreadful, deceiving power over the characters and is comparable to an evil god, deity, the devil, or dangerous fragments of the imagination. It is not a definite enemy which can be seen and avoided or destroyed.

Another character who manages to live through the final, the third act of the play, is the Schmürz whose name is in the subtitle, Les Bâtitseurs d'empire ou le Schmürz. The Schmürz, covered with

rags and band aids, is in every apartment where the family lives. Sometimes from irritation and occasionally for no reason at all, the Father gives the Schmürz a kick, pours water on him, or beats him with a riding crop. The Mother also frequently gets up to kick him. In the last act, the Father alone with the Schmürz and the Noise believes that the Schmürz is becoming aggressive. Therefore, the Father puts on his military uniform, takes his sword, and grabs his revolver, an arm which will permit him to reconquer lost ground. When the Schmürz does not fall after having been shot, the Father believes that he has fired a blank. Then he shoots at the window, which he shatters. Finally, the Schmürz crumples up and dies just moments before the Father falls dead. At the very end of the play, the Noise becomes stronger and stronger and in the blackness there are silhouettes of many Schmürz—somewhat like the little devils who scampered about on the stage in the Middle Ages. Perhaps these will grow up to serve the Noise and tantalize other men who will wrongly hold them responsible for ills and finally, when it is too late, kill them off in a moment of truth just before death.

The origin of the word Schmürz is obscure. One tradition is that it was invented by Vian's wife and was used by him to define all the daily trials of his own poor health (p. 87). The word suggests the German Schmerz 'pain, ache,' a meaning which is appropriate for various pains: the pain which the Schmürz suffers when he is kicked and mistreated like an oppressed person; the pain he causes the one

character who tries to befriend him; and the pain suffered by all the characters.

Among characters who disappear before the end of the play is the maid Cruche, a name indicating that she has some connection with a jug. She is the witty, impertinent, smart-aleck servant of the commedia dell'arte. Some of her lines have the concatenation, long-windedness of Cervantes' Sancho Panza. A good example of her liveliness appears when the family is ready for lunch, and she asks whether they want "veal, soup, radishes, flounder, wheat germ, carrots, or meat balls? Or perhaps eel, slices of veal and bacon, salami, pickled pork head, or mussels?" On hearing this enumeration, the Mother asks what is really available. And the maid answers "noodles" (p. 18).

On another occasion, the maid rants about the poor kitchen facilities: "This kitchen is something else, disgusting, stinking, dirty, hideous, lousy, nauseating, unmentionable, grimy, cracking at the seams, fishy smelling, buggy, revolting, and so on. . . . However, I'll go back to it." The Mother replies: "That's courage for you" (p. 28). At all opportunities, Cruche makes fun of the Father and his pompous language as the following scene indicates:

Father: Cruche, one wonders in what you have become
entangled.

Cruche: Who asks that ridiculous question?

Father: I do.

Cruche: Then don't say "one." Say, "I wonder what you have gotten mixed up in" or "Cruche, what have you been poking your nose into recently?" or "how does this problem concern you? or "what interest can that have for you?" But be direct and don't get lost in allusions. Do you ever hear me making allusions, beating around the bush? (p. 57)

Cruche does not quite tell the truth about herself but she does prove that she is all mouth, all jar, all jug.

Her name could be a surname and connect her or her family with a seller or possessor of jugs. As a common noun, cruche means jug, jar, the contents of a jug, and stupid ("stupid as a jug" which in French means lacking critical sense). It is found in French proverbs such as "if a person keeps taking a jug to get water, it will finally get broken," which warns that if one keeps exposing oneself to danger, one will end up getting killed or hurt.² Indeed, Cruche may have been aware of the wisdom of such a proverb, for one day she becomes so angry that she walks out, and apparently nothing happens to her.

With Cruche gone, Z nobie is sick and alone in her battle against her parents. To them, she no doubt is a cruel youth in blue jeans, an enfant terrible, sassy in her questioning of everything, brash in her refusal to accept with joy their increasing poverty, irritating when she punctures the Father's theories by saying that

they are completely inept, and disgusting each time she recalls the old days when they lived in a six-room apartment and she had her record player, records, radio, and boy friends. She would fit well into the old quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and be on the side of the Ancients who were convinced that the Golden Age was in the past. She bickers constantly with her parents on many subjects and problems which ironically are as illusive as the Noise:

Mother (affectionately): Calm down, dear. You are talking nonsense.

Zénobie: But what am I becoming deep down inside?

Mother : I can reassure you that your father is taking care of that. There are all kinds of possible solutions.

Zénobie: You recognize then that I do have a problem?

Mother : Zénobie, you irritate me. Children talk to their parents only when their parents admit that there are problems. (p. 21)

Zénobie's unhappy relations with her parents make a mockery of the etymology of her name, "her father's ornament," the Arabic meaning, and "Zeus gives life," the Greek meaning.

In history there have been several Zénobies who outwitted their family. One described by Tacitus in his Annals is Zenobia, the wife of Radamistus who was forced to flee from his palace surrounded by his enemies:

The one salvation for Radamistus lay in the speed of the horses which swept himself and his wife away. His wife, however, was pregnant; and though fear of the enemy and love of her husband sustained her more or less in the first stages of the flight, yet before long, with the continuous gallop jarring her womb and vibrating through her system, she began to beg for an honourable death to save her from the degradations of captivity. At first, he embraced her, supported her, animated her, one moment wondering at her courage, the next sick with fear at the thought of abandoning her to the possession of another. At last overmastered by his love, and no stranger to deeds of violence, he drew his sabre, dragged her bleeding to the bank of the Araxes, and, bent on removing even her corpse, consigned her to the current.³

This Zenobia was saved by some shepherds and finally was given royal honors. Later, she was used as a heroine by the eighteenth-century French dramatist Crébillon in his melodramatic tragedy, Rhadamiste et Zénobie. Vian's Zénobie too is forced involuntarily and innocently into flight by others—her parents—and is possibly saved by her neighbor when she walks out on her family at the end of the second act.

Another historical Zénobie was the Queen of Palmyra who was joint ruler in her husband's lifetime and succeeded him about 270

A.D. As regent for her son and as queen, under the cloak of a Roman alliance, she stationed her armies throughout the East, in Asia Minor, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. On Aurelian's accession, she openly defied Rome, and her armies were defeated in 271. She was taken to Rome for Aurelian's triumph and later given an estate by the Romans. This Queen of Palmyra is the heroine of William Ware's historical novel, Zenobia or the Fall of Palmyra. She is also the heroine of an opera written by Silas G. Pratt and performed for the first time in Chicago in 1883. Then there is Zenobia, the impulsive character of Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance who drowns herself and who is believed to be drawn in part from Margaret Fuller, a nineteenth-century American woman, author of the first major woman's rights tract, "The Great Lawsuit--Man Versus Men; Woman Versus Women." Like the Queen of Palmyra and Margaret Fuller, the Zénobie of Vian is bold and unwilling to accept things as they are and to enjoy the worsening, diastrous condition of her family in their smaller and smaller empire.

At the end of the second act, she leaves the apartment and is shut out by the angry Father while the Schürz smiles. The Father soothes the Mother by saying, "Calm down, dear. Children always end up by leaving their parents. That's life" (p. 66). The Mother herself dies on the way to the last room, and the Father says in disgust when she does not answer him: "That's not the way to walk out on people, you know. . . .After twenty years of marriage. . . to

abandon a husband this way. . . . Well, women are incredible. Simply Incredible" (p. 68).

Without his wife, daughter, and Cruche—that is, without an audience—the Father is no longer the admirer of "great builders who founded their work on their sense of duty and the common good" (p. 27). Before an audience of one, himself, the Father admits that retreat is flight and not an ascension and that the cause of what he has called an ascension is the Noise which has made him put on a facade in front of his family. Then he begins to imagine how he will adjust to this new concept of himself. He will grow sweet peas because of their perfume or perhaps nasturtiums, honeysuckles, and other flowers. In other words, he will become a sort of Candide and cultivate his own garden. At all these ideas, the Noise becomes louder, and finally the Father, Léon Dupont 'Lion of the Bridge' (perhaps the bridge is the period between birth and death, blindly and intransigently guarded), realizes that he has always been alone in the "dust of the past" which has covered him like "slipcovers" (p. 81). Yet he can not live in the present or find any way in which to live in his diminished empire which he has reached by having gone from bad to worse—to make a pun on "empire" in French which is not beneath Vian—by having gone de pire en pire.

Martha O'Nan

**State University of New York
College at Brockport**

NOTES

¹Boris Vian, Les Bâisseurs d'empire ou le Schmürz, 4th ed. (Paris: L'Arche, 1959), p. 14. All translations from the French have been made by the author of this article, and further references to this work appear in the text.

²In Paul Robert, Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française (Paris: Le Robert, 1966), "bête comme une cruche" is defined as "completely lacking in finesse and critical sense," and "tant va la cruche à l'eau qu'à la fin elle se casse" is cited as a proverb meaning "should one expose oneself unceasingly to danger, one will end up by perishing."

³Tacitus, The Annals, trans. John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), XI. 51.