

THE POETIC IMAGERY AND EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA

OF JEAN COCTEAU

by

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## SUMMARY

This thesis is in two parts. In the first I deal with the personal mythology of Cocteau which contributed in great measure to the poetic imagery in his works. After attempting to distinguish the "real" Cocteau from his legendary "persona" by briefly examining aspects of his life and the various influences which impinged upon his artistic development, I proceed to discuss the constituent elements of his personal mythology and try to show how they emerged gradually as a result of his personal and artistic experiences over a long period.

In the second part of the thesis I systematically examine the illustrations of his poetic imagery and aesthetic theories in selected works from the literary spheres in which he was prolifically active. Examples are studied from his poetry, his novels, his plays and his works of artistic criticism, which he described as his poésie critique, and I try to demonstrate the inter-dependence of his works in the various media he employed. In this section I also devote a final chapter to his most characteristic works in the cinema, a medium in which he possibly achieves the climax of his artistic aims by the imaginative use of his oneiric imagery to realise, with great versatility, the corporeal expression of his poetry, while simultaneously broadening the artistic dimensions of the art of the film. In examining his works I attempt to demonstrate that his existential dilemma, which he referred to as his malaise perpétuel, involved him in incautiously and sometimes wilfully fostering a false image. Nevertheless, the resulting conflict within him stimulated his oneiric experiences without which he could not have accomplished his poetic mission, an exploration of the mystery he termed la nuit humaine, from which he emerged endowed with a very individualistic morality of freedom opposed entirely to the conventions of social morality.



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PART ONE

The personal mythology of Jean Cocteau

Chapter 1 : Jean Cocteau : the legendary persona and the  
real person

Chapter 2 : The personal mythology - its gradual emergence  
and its constituent elements

Chapter 1 : Jean Cocteau - the legendary persona and the real person

It is not within the scope of this thesis to document fully a life so rich in activities as Jean Cocteau's, nor to study in depth the varied and artistically enriching background against which he developed. Yet a thorough appreciation and understanding of his aesthetic milieu is essential in order to comprehend the artist. These can be gained by studying the various biographies on Cocteau which I have listed in the bibliography.

Throughout the span of his life Cocteau was both hero and victim of myths many of which he himself perversely helped to create and some of which were deliberately fostered by his enemies. One of the most negative of the defamatory legends survived into the 1960s and is only now beginning to be questioned in the light of research done in the broader perspective of the 1970s. This was the legend that pictured Cocteau as a frivolous, superficial, extremely erratic mystifier - a charlatan who displayed flashes of ephemeral brilliance - by no means to be seriously considered, but merely to be tolerated with grudging indulgence. The legend had its origins in the early period of Cocteau's life when he became part of the entourage of epebes with which the famous and notorious actor Édouard de Max surrounded himself, and, circulating in the fashionable Parisian world of letters, he rather precociously published his first two collections of poems La Lampe d'Aladin in 1909 and Le Prince frivole in 1910. The latter title was soon attached to its author, and, despite the fact that Cocteau later rejected these early, immature examples of precious poetry, the label of "Le Prince frivole" stuck for a considerable time.

Cocteau contributed in no small measure to this false legend by very tactless exhibitions of fawning in public, by gaily playing the chameleon of many colours, traits that persisted in his behaviour throughout his life. As a result of his false legends he ironically became the victim of what he considered to be the greatest sin of the twentieth century - the sin of inattention, in as far as his literary works were concerned. Nevertheless the blame for the sin must rest upon Cocteau the public figure who, by his unwise behaviour, placed this impediment between his works and his prospective readers.

I believe that Cocteau himself must have realised this, especially in the last months of his life, and when he suggested in a recorded



interview that when he died he would like the words "Je débute" to be inscribed upon his tomb, he was in fact saying that with the removal of the distracting and sometimes irritating persona that he created when he was alive, his works would be read and understood after his death.

Unfortunately bad legends take a long time to die. A very scabrous biography of Cocteau<sup>1</sup> which appeared as recently as 1969 presents the image of a clownish "farceur" who dabbled in all the arts but was a true master of none. But this book, which consistently adopts the tone of a malignant diatribe, although it provides useful documentation on the artistic milieu in which Cocteau worked, can not be taken seriously as an evaluation of the poet because it is so obviously and unfairly biased against him.

The term "prestidigitateur" crops up with banal regularity in descriptions of Cocteau in various books, whilst no pains are spared to reveal scandalous, unsavoury details of his private life. Although it cannot be disowned that his private life was, to a certain extent, disorganised by his "goûts particuliers", which he never denied, these have to be accepted in their proper perspective, and, in his case, as a necessary part of his way of life. In the anti-Cocteau vendetta not even the members of his family are spared and veiled insinuations are made concerning his uncle Raymond Lecomte and his connections with the "homosexual camarilla" of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The mysterious circumstances surrounding the suicide of Cocteau's father Georges are also discussed in loud whispers. It is possible that Georges Cocteau may have perceived in himself traits that later became more obviously apparent in his son Jean, but this has never been conclusively proved. In any event, would the possibility not serve to "mitigate" Jean Cocteau's own inversion, if that were necessary?

Just as Cocteau's hostile critics attached the label of "Le Prince frivole" to him early in his life, so they readily found similar catch-phrases or labels to attach to his subsequent periods of development or to the steady procession of dramatically attitudinised personae he presented in public from time to time. Thus, when we are told of how he was dazzled by the brilliance of the Ballets Russes in their season of the year 1912, and how he came to know and associate with Diaghilev, Nijinsky and Stravinsky, the famous incident of a bored Diaghilev's injunction to a rather too winsome and somewhat tiresome Jean Cocteau - "Étonne-moi!" is invariably quoted as if to



suggest that from that time onwards Cocteau strove only to astonish the world with his dazzling works and did not apply himself to the serious business of being a true poet, a serious creator. The fact that Cocteau was just as receptive some years later to Raymond Radiguet's advice that "Elegance consists in not astounding" is most conveniently overlooked by Cocteau's detractors. Their narrow-mindedness also causes them to regard the fruitful and mutually inspirational relationship between Cocteau and Radiguet coldly and uncomprehendingly, emphasising only its purely emotional aspects, and, when Radiguet so prematurely dies, and Cocteau is beside himself with grief for his lost friend, they jeeringly and wickedly refer to him as "Le Veuf sur le Toit", a play on the words of the title of his ballet of the year 1920 Le Boeuf sur le Toit.

Addicted as he already was in his adolescence to the smoking of opium during the period of his "flight" to Marseilles, the habit persisted with Cocteau during the period of his friendship with Édouard de Max. But when, still grieving for Radiguet, he increased his daily intake of the drug under the influence of the journalist and musicologist Louis Laloy, he provided more ammunition for those people who were ever ready to shoot him down. No serious student of Cocteau would deny that much of his work is undoubtedly the product of his hypnagogic hallucinations brought on by the smoking of opium, but there is a case for the justification of this "method" of creation when one examines the works in question. It is not, after all, a phenomenon without precedent, and certainly more and more common and evident in the later years of the present century. Only the nature or type of drug used has altered. The works to which I am particularly referring are Opium and Les Enfants terribles. Opium can be regarded either as an encouragement or a deterrent to the smoking of opium, but it is a fascinating, remarkable work that is in many ways unique, whilst no one can deny the excellence of Les Enfants terribles, a novel that was many years ahead of its time, a work that has not lost its topicality and validly contributes understanding to the problems of adolescence even today. Nor can the greatness of the poem L'Ange Heurtebise, also written under the influence of opium, be seriously denied.

One of the main criticisms directed against Cocteau is that he was a being completely lacking in humour, yet a significant aspect of his humour is illustrated by his reactions to the drug. A good



example is his account of the oft-quoted incident of the lift that remarkably changed its name.

"Il m'arrivait, très intoxiqué, de dormir d'interminables sommeils d'une demi-seconde. Un jour que j'allais voir Picasso, rue La Boétie, je crus, dans l'ascenseur, que je grandissais côte à côte avec je ne sais quoi de terrible et qui serait éternel. Une voix me criait : 'Mon nom se trouve sur la plaque!' Une secousse me réveilla et je lus sur la plaque de cuivre des manettes ASCENSEUR HEURTEBISE. Je me rappelle que chez Picasso nous parlâmes de miracles; Picasso dit que tout était miracle et que c'était un miracle de ne pas fondre dans son bain comme un morceau de sucre. Peu après, l'ange Heurtebise me hanta et je commençai le poème. A ma prochaine visite, je regardai la plaque. Elle portait le nom OTIS-PIFRE; l'ascenseur avait changé de marque."

(Jean Cocteau : Opium pp. 57-58)

This excerpt illustrates only one aspect of Cocteau's very special brand of humour. It is a puckish, tongue-in-cheek type of humour that will obviously appeal only to those who can appreciate the importance of minor incidents seen in a perspective where they will not be taken too literally or too seriously. Examples of Cocteau's humour will be found in the most unexpected of contexts, but always it has a specific function and often we can find in it a key to the maze of his vivid imagery which he deliberately encumbers with the bric-à-brac of those things which have particular significance for him, and many of which are associated with incidents or people in his life, objects such as hands, painted eyes, rubber gloves, busts, lyres, snowballs, mirrors and crystal, which he uses to illustrate his poésie.

When Cocteau came to realise that he could never shake off the false legends that had been fabricating themselves around him, he began to add to them himself, consciously and unconsciously, naively and sometimes perversely.<sup>2</sup> But the perversity of which he was occasionally guilty is that which is typical in the behavioural pattern of the homosexual at moments of extreme frustration, born of anxiety and self-doubt. Moments of weakness such as these were, however, comparatively rare in his life. But when they did occur he was guilty of manipulating people, of playing them against each other, and, when faced with the monstrosity of his actions, he would retire behind a veil of naive innocence that could have been genuine in a stupid person, but in his case could only have been feigned.

Cocteau's attempts to have Igor Stravinsky write a score for his



ballet David provide a perfect example of the exasperating side of his nature. The Cocteau-Stravinsky "friendship" was indeed a very one-sided relationship with Cocteau idolising Stravinsky, who, in point of fact, considered him to be more of a nuisance than anything else. Stravinsky's attitude and remarks concerning Cocteau would appear to be very uncharitable, but the fact remains that Cocteau, persistent and tiresome and even tactless, pestered Stravinsky by letter and telegram when the composer was at Leysin, busy working on the score of The Nightingale and greatly worried by the poor state of his wife's health. Despite Stravinsky's requests for a postponement, Cocteau insisted upon arriving to "visit" him, preceding his arrival with a series of supplicating letters in one of which he even requested Stravinsky to arrange for his accommodation. And when he eventually did arrive he was not alone but accompanied by his latest "protégé" Paul Thévenaz, the Swiss painter and dancer. In any case the projected ballet David, on which they were to collaborate, (Cocteau writing the text and Stravinsky the music), was doomed from the start because there was a Diaghilev-Misia Sert conspiracy against it. Diaghilev was bound to harbour resentment against any artistic project involving Stravinsky that was being planned without his "official" knowledge. Another factor was that Stravinsky himself was not really interested at that particular time in a subject having a Biblical setting. Thus Cocteau's almost naive persistence in desiring to collaborate with Stravinsky showed tactlessness and even impertinence in his assuming that Stravinsky and he were colleagues. Since Stravinsky (even in those days fully aware of his own genius) did consider Cocteau's assumption to be presumptuous, only his own good manners prevented him, at the very start of their correspondence, from telling Cocteau the truth.

Another weakness in Cocteau's nature was his inability to resist the temptation of indulging in self-publicity. Even as he grew older he was never able to cast off this "faible" and his thirst for publicity remained unquenched. It cannot be denied, nevertheless, that he had a positive genius for publicity. Already in 1915 his exploits in accompanying the flying ace Roland Garros in his flights over the German lines were much publicised. The production and first public showings of his film Le Sang d'un poète in 1930 brought him even more publicity. In 1936 his famous wager with Paris-Soir to tour the world in eighty days took a prominent place in the columns of that newspaper for several weeks. In 1937 he took up the cause of the former champion boxer, the American Al Brown, who had become a



drug addict, put him back in training and encouraged and helped him to regain his world title. In 1942 he boldly appeared in the Cour de Justice as a witness for the defence for Jean Genet who was subsequently acquitted.

Commendable and brave activities such as these, because of the attendant publicity, irritated and annoyed Cocteau's enemies. The great climax in Cocteau's campaign to provoke and confound his ever-present detractors was undoubtedly his election to the Académie Française in 1955, and he rose histrionically to the occasion, surpassing himself in a brilliant show in the full panoply of his fine academician's robe in black with green facings and sporting his academician's sword designed and created specially for this glorious and auspicious occasion. The sword has been described as

"a compact kit of Cocteauian symbols, the pommel forming a lyre, and the handle forged into a Greek profile, the haft sheathed in metal grating to represent the Palais-Royal, and the coquille bearing Cocteau's signature in the shape of a six-pointed star." 3

But nothing could have been more appropriate for this occasion than Cocteau having with him a sword embodying so many of the symbols of his personal mythology.

It was perhaps his predilection for the opportunities of such occasions together with his unerring gift for creating publicity for himself on the slightest pretext that brought forth two cruel remarks on the day of his death. Igor Stravinsky commented:

"Cocteau is unable to die without making publicity."

Claude Mauriac remarked -

"I'm amazed, that he could do something as natural, as simple, as undevise as dying"

- not only betraying bad taste on his part in making such an uncharitable comment, but providing with the remark itself a typical example of the manner in which Cocteau's enemies thought about him. It was never in Cocteau's own nature to utter disparaging comments of this kind in referring to the demise of any of his enemies.

While I would accuse the detractors of Cocteau of being guilty of inattention in respect of his works, it is only fair to add that there are certain mitigating circumstances that would account for their neglect. In the first instance they may have been distracted by his outstanding gifts as a "parleur" into thinking that nothing he could write would possibly come up to the high quality of his talk. As a compelling conversationalist Cocteau modelled himself at an early



age upon Anna de Noailles<sup>4</sup> and, in the manner of hers, his conversations invariably assumed the form of brilliant monologues in which his agile mind expressed its ideas upon a thousand different topics as he continued to speak quickly, barely pausing for breath. The flow of his ideas was even faster than his speech and his listeners were so benumbed by the rapid stream of words that they found it difficult on the following day to recall exactly the gist of Cocteau's conversation. In the second instance they may have been confused by the fact that Cocteau excelled in so many different artistic activities. In their eyes such versatility was decidedly suspect. And again, human nature being what it is, his very excellence in so many artistic fields would be bound to excite the jealousy of those who realised that their own work was very ordinary in comparison. Others were prejudiced by his nature which they regarded as abnormal or unnatural and therefore, in their opinion, rendering him incapable of producing a work of art of a consistently high order. By the same token they could have dismissed as insufficient the works of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Fitzgerald, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Proust and Gide, to name but a few.

Who, then, were Cocteau's detractors? First and foremost the surrealists headed by André Breton, whose hatred of Cocteau bordered on the maniacal, and Louis Aragon - his Dadaist and surrealist "enemy", although it should be remembered that in later years Aragon became reconciled with Cocteau and was openly friendly towards him. When Valentine Hugo, who had been Cocteau's close friend, became associated with the Surrealists and André Breton, she turned against Cocteau and often brought accusations of ingratitude against him. André Gide vacillated in his feelings towards Cocteau, alternating great tolerance with bouts of hatred and jealousy. The Gide-Cocteau "war" started early in the century with the publication of Cocteau's La Danse de Sophocle which was reviewed in very cautionary terms in the September, 1912 issue of the Nouvelle Revue Française over the signature of Henri Ghéon. Since Ghéon was intimate with Gide at that time, it is very probable that Gide influenced the content of the article to a very great extent. The relations between Gide and Cocteau, mainly cold on Gide's side, deteriorated further in 1917 when Gide suspected Cocteau of enticing one of his own disciples away from him. Gide's rage exploded in an open letter to Cocteau in the June, 1919 issue of the Nouvelle Revue Française. The essence of Gide's criticism was that Cocteau's work was not original.



From 1922 until Gide's death in 1951 their relations were characterised by a number of exchanges, differences of opinion, truces, reconciliations, but there were never any intimacies between them. Francis Steegmuller suggests that Gide may have had Cocteau in mind when he made his famous remark about someone else: "Je suis pédéraste, il est tapette."

Pablo Picasso, to whom he offered only affection and adulation, used Cocteau and abused him, warmed to his flattery but reviled him to others when he was not present to defend himself.

The poet Paul Éluard, arch-surrealist, was hostile to Cocteau, and on one occasion he caused a scene at a dress rehearsal of Cocteau's play La Voix humaine at the Comédie Française, but in later years he also became friendly with Cocteau.

Coco Chanel befriended Cocteau and often came to his aid when he was financially embarrassed. She paid for his many detoxications when he was trying to overcome the habit of opium-smoking. Yet, after his death, she frequently denigrated him. These were but a few of the many people who were at one time or another hostile to Cocteau.

Yet his greatest enemy was the one which he himself most encouraged - the press, which so often ignored his artistic accomplishments but never failed to publicise his weaknesses, and so unflinchingly drew attention to the false, clownish image which he often assumed. But why did Cocteau so regularly adopt this image? The answer is very simple. He did have a sense of humour and it did not trouble him to appear in public in a ridiculous light. He did not have the great love of himself that other men of genius such as Picasso or Stravinsky obviously had.

How, really, did Cocteau see himself? His physical appearance he described with frankness and honesty in a self-portrait which he included in La Difficulté d'être under the title of 'De Mon physique':

"Je n'ai jamais eu un beau visage. La jeunesse me tenait lieu de beauté. Mon ossature est bonne. Les chairs s'organisent mal dessus. En outre le squelette change à la longue et s'abîme. Mon nez, que j'avais droit, se busque comme celui de mon grand-père. Et j'ai remarqué que celui de ma mère s'était busqué sur son lit de mort. Trop de tempêtes internes, de souffrances, de crises de doute, de révoltes matées à la force du poignet, de gifles du sort, m'ont chiffonné le front, creusé entre les sourcils une ride profonde, tordu ces sourcils, drapé lourdement les paupières, molli les joues creuses, abaissé les coins de la bouche, de telle sorte que si je



me penche sur une glace basse je vois mon masque se détacher de l'os et prendre une forme informe. Ma barbe pousse blanche. Mes cheveux, en perdant l'épaisseur, ont gardé leur révolte. Il en résulte une gerbe de mèches qui se contredisent et ne peuvent se peigner. Si elles s'aplatissent elles me donnent un air minable. Si elles se redressent, cette coiffure hirsute semble être le signe d'une affectation.

Mes dents se chevauchent. Bref, sur un corps ni grand ni petit, mince et maigre, armé de pieds et de mains qu'on admire parce qu'elles sont longues et très expressives, je promène une tête ingrate. Elle me donne une fausse morgue. Cette fausse morgue vient de mon désir de vaincre la gêne que j'éprouve à me montrer tel que je suis, et sa promptitude à fondre, de la crainte qu'on puisse la prendre pour une morgue véritable."

(pp. 24-25)

There is no hint of vanity in this self-portrait! It is indeed in this same passage that Cocteau frankly describes one of his most positive qualities. He says:

"La haine m'est inconnue. L'oubli des offenses est chez moi si fort qu'il m'arrive de sourire à mes adversaires lorsque je me rencontre avec eux face à face. Leur étonnement me douche et me réveille. Je ne sais quelle contenance prendre. Je m'étonne qu'ils se souviennent du mal qu'ils m'ont fait et que j'avais oublié."

How does Cocteau see his function as an artist? He is not modest when he describes himself as a poet using the word in the Greek sense of creator. But he does not give himself the credit of creating, seeing himself rather as the agent of a superior force which is expressing its intentions through him. Thus, not being modest, he nevertheless shows humility - humility in the role of artist or poet which is not to be reconciled with the external persona he presented in public, impeccably dressed, refined in his tastes, fastidious in his good manners, truly exacting in his demands for complete loyalty from his friends, sometimes fickle and cruel, and most of the time apparently intent upon fostering his false legend as a "bricoleur". A very paradoxical and enigmatical person.

Was Cocteau, in encouraging the spreading of his false legends, setting out deliberately to mystify? And, if this was indeed the case, what was his motive in so doing? It seems to me that the simple answer to the first part of the question is Yes, and his motive was, by means of deliberately ambiguous elements and by the special use of the quality of surprise (inspired originally by Diaghilev's injunction), to attempt to create in his spectators a strong feeling of curiosity



that would induce them to study his works and, in their exciting explorations of these, to discover their hidden magic.

If we consider the important events in Cocteau's life (which well-meaning friends as well as his enemies described as "his true masterpiece") so many of these are swathed in mystery or so many different versions exist, that it is extremely difficult to sift out the elements of truth. In two fairly recent biographies on Cocteau there are different accounts of his first meeting with Marcel Khill. Brown describes it thus:

"Cocteau in turn discovered a younger and fresher consort in Marcel Khill, an Algerian boy whom he had been admiring on the beach. Khill's keeper proved to be an aged dandy with a far-flung reputation in North-African homosexual circles and a member of Marshal Lyautey's entourage. ... Providentially (the keeper) died that year, and Cocteau, when at last he returned to Paris, did so with a new lover." (p. 305)

Now here is Francis Steegmuller's account:

"Jean Desbordes married in 1937; a literary and personal disappointment, he had been displaced by the Algerian. ... This was Marcel Khill, born Khelloui, the son of an Algerian soldier and a Norman peasant, enticed by Cocteau away from his discoverer, a French naval officer who had plucked him from a road gang and had been keeping him in his house at Toulon, in Arab costume, to help with the opium pipes and other details." (p. 428)

Apart from minor points of difference the first version gives the impression that Khill's protector had already died when Cocteau lured him away, while Steegmuller's version suggests that Khill's discoverer was at that time still alive. If reliable biographers find it difficult to be consistent and accurate in their recounting of incidents in Cocteau's life it is not to be wondered that Cocteau himself could be similarly inconsistent in his recollection of details and incidents in his past. Indeed, Cocteau himself frequently declared that he was guilty of misremembering. In recalling particular incidents he enlarged and embellished, confusing facts with poetic impressions, mixing dates, times and places, combining or even creating characters or people and describing scenes that in reality had not taken place. Ironically, he recounted these scenes with such sincere conviction that he actually believed in their authenticity. Perhaps the most charming example is his account of a moonlight ride at two o'clock in the morning through the Bois de Boulogne in the company of Diaghilev, Nijinsky and Stravinsky, immediately after the great scandale of the first performance of Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps. According to



Cocteau's account in his essay Le Coq et l'Arlequin, first published in 1918, this is what happened:

"A deux heures du matin, Strawinsky, Nijinsky, Diaghilew et moi, nous nous empilâmes dans un fiacre et nous nous fîmes conduire au bois de Boulogne. On gardait le silence; la nuit était fraîche et bonne. A une odeur d'acacia nous reconnûmes les premiers arbres. Arrivés aux lacs, Diaghilew, matelassé d'opossum, se mit à marmotter en russe; je sentais Strawinsky et Nijinsky attentifs, et comme le cocher allumait sa lanterne, je vis des larmes sur la figure de l'impresario. Il marmottait toujours, lentement, infatigablement.

- Qu'est-ce? demandai-je.

- Du Pouchkine.

Il y eut un long silence, puis Diaghilew bredouilla encore une courte phrase, et l'émotion de mes deux voisins me parut si vive que je ne résistai pas à l'interrompre pour en connaître la cause.

- C'est difficile à traduire, dit Strawinsky, difficile en vérité; trop russe ... trop russe ... C'est à peu près : "Veux-tu faire un tour aux îles?" Oui, c'est cela; c'est très russe, parce que, comprends-tu, chez nous, on va aux îles comme nous allons au Bois de Boulogne ce soir, et c'est en allant aux îles que nous avons imaginé le SACRE DU PRINTEMPS.

Pour la première fois, on faisait allusion au scandale. Nous revînmes à l'aube. Vous n'imaginez pas la douceur et la nostalgie de ces hommes, et, quoi que Diaghilew ait pu faire dans la suite, je n'oublierai jamais, dans ce fiacre, sa grosse figure mouillée, récitant du Pouchkine au Bois de Boulogne."

(p. 52)

According to Stravinsky it did not happen in that way at all. After the performance he and Diaghilev and Nijinsky simply went to a restaurant for a meal. Far from weeping, Diaghilev was very pleased that Stravinsky's music had provoked such a scandale. The publicity following it would prove to be helpful.

The simple fact that Cocteau indulged in the pleasures of opium is another obvious reason for the existence in his memory of so many dramatically delightful but quite fictitious incidents. From another point of view the authenticity of the events or otherwise is of little significance if we regard his descriptions of them as revealing manifestations of the impressions created in his poetic imagination by contact with people whom he respected and venerated. It is also the old problem of what actually happened and what the poet would have wished to happen being poetically confused in recollection. Without this trait, Cocteau would not have created many of the interesting works that fascinate us.

In Cocteau's rapports with other people it is important to note



that no derogatory remarks were ever made concerning him by artists and technicians with whom he worked in the creation of his plays or films. This was because, in the act of creating, Cocteau cast aside his irritating idiosyncrasies and became his true self, the creator in the grip of the superior force which he knew was using him as its instrument, a poet in the process not of inspiration but as he preferred to call it - expiration, suggesting that what was emerging in artistic form was being drawn up from the inner depths of his very being. He has clearly described this process of artistic creation in the following words:

"Le poète est en quelque sorte la main-d'oeuvre d'un moi plus profond que lui-même et qu'il connaît très mal, je me permets même de dire d'un schizophrène qui nous habite tous, dont les grandes personnes ont honte presque toujours, dont toute une partie de l'humanité a honte, et dont les héros, les enfants et les poètes n'ont pas honte. Ils sont les intermédiaires entre ce schizophrène et l'extérieur et ils essaient de le rendre viable - voilà exactement ce que c'est que le poète, et on m'a fabriqué moi un personnage que je ne suis pas, un personnage de légende qui ne me ressemble pas, mais qui me protège en quelque sorte, puisque je ne voudrais pas à ce personnage lui serrer la main. Mais il me protège comme quand Don Juan déguise son domestique pour qu'il reçoive les coups à sa place, eh bien, quand je suis roué de coups, brûlé en place publique, ce n'est pas moi qu'on a roué de coups et ce n'est pas moi qu'on a brûlé en place publique et ce personnage intérieur qui m'habite est un personnage totalement intemporel et que je connais, je vous le répète, extrêmement mal. Donc, je ne suis pas responsable de ce que je suis en train de vous dire, je ne suis pas responsable de mes poèmes, je ne suis qu'un intermédiaire, qu'un médium et qu'une main-d'oeuvre, et tous les poètes sont des médiums et des mains-d'oeuvre de cette force mystérieuse qui les habite. Par conséquent j'ai du mal à vous en parler, mais je ne m'en vante pas, je ne parle pas d'inspiration, cette inspiration ne nous arrive pas de quelque ciel, l'inspiration devrait s'appeler l'expiration. C'est quelque chose qui sort de nos profondeurs, de notre nuit et en somme le poète essaie de mettre sa nuit sur la table ..."5

No better example of Cocteau in the grip of the mysterious creative power is to be found than the period of production he spent making his film La Belle et la Bête. It is fortunate that he has left us an almost complete day-to-day account of his activity in the book La Belle et la Bête - Journal d'un film. Here we find a Cocteau who is completely absorbed, despite persistent and painful illness, in creating a great work of art, inspiring a loyalty from his actors and actresses and production crew that amounts to idolatry.



un accident redevenait un atout pour lui. Je vous cite un exemple. Nous tournions Les Parents terribles et nous tournions la dernière scène du film. C'était une scène qui partait en gros plan de Josette Day et de moi et avec un travelling qui reculait, qui découvrait une partie de la chambre avec Dorziat debout, Marcel André qui jouait mon père à côté, puis l'appareil reculait, et découvrait toute la chambre, et puis il découvrait les pièces à côté, il découvrait tout l'appartement, et le lendemain on avait démoli le décor sans attendre la projection, et le lendemain à la projection on a vu que le travelling était mal calé et que l'image bougeait. Tout le monde, les producteurs, l'opérateur, tout le monde désespérait, les assistants disant 'C'est une catastrophe. Il faut rebâtir tout le décor qui était très compliqué car c'était tout l'appartement.' Il y a eu un silence. Jean Cocteau a dit : 'Non, non, non on ne va, on ne refera pas la scène. Je parlerai pour finir le film et je dirai - Et la roulotte continue son chemin.' " 7

Cocteau as creator was, according to those who worked or collaborated with him, a genius to be admired and respected, a man free from frivolity whose seriousness of purpose was beyond question. This was the real Cocteau - the serious creator and philosopher, the deeply perceptive theoretician, the cinéaste who, on the screen, could distil magic from beautiful images.

It is very greatly to his credit that Cocteau was able to bear his false legends and continue with his work realising that it would not be completely understood in his lifetime. In some pages from La Difficulté d'être he explains how he philosophically came to terms with his false image:

"C'est cette rage de lutter contre des crampes qui me vaut d'être un homme recouvert de légendes plus absurdes les unes que les autres. Invisible à force de fables et monstrueusement visible de ce fait. Une démarche qui le dérouté ne tarde pas à lasser le monde. Il se fatigue à nous suivre. Il nous en invente une et si nous ne conformons pas à cette démarche, il nous en veut. Il est trop tard pour nous plaindre. Nous avons 'bonne mine', comme on dit. Il est dangereux de ne pas correspondre à l'idée que le monde se fait de nous, car il ne recule pas volontiers dans ses avis. C'est par où on lui échappe que la légende va son train. Qu'un critique étranger nous juge, il y a beaucoup de chances qu'il tombe juste. Il nous connaît mieux que nos compatriotes qui s'écrasent le nez sur nous. L'espace joue là le rôle du temps. Nos compatriotes jugent l'oeuvre à travers l'homme. Ne voyant de l'homme qu'une image fausse, ils jugent faux." 8

But he derived a measure of comfort with the hope of an eventual comprehension of his real character by readers who would one day judge him by his works alone. Thus he wrote in Opium:



Why did Cocteau embrace the medium of the film with so much enthusiasm? He tells us in his Entretiens autour du cinématographe:

"Plus j'ai de travail manuel, plus j'aime à croire que je participe aux choses terrestres et plus je m'y acharne, comme on s'accroche à une épave. C'est pourquoi j'ai abordé le cinématographe, dont le travail est de chaque minute et m'éloigne du vide où je me perds." (Op. cit. page 19)

And Cocteau brought to the medium of the film an originality of approach and a simplicity of technique that make his work in this sphere unique. These qualities will be discussed more fully in Part II Chapter 7.

Among the many circumstances described by Cocteau in his journal of the production of La Belle et la Bête is the spate of bad luck that assailed him throughout the entire period devoted to the making of the film. Lesser spirits would have renounced the project. Cocteau went on doggedly despite his misfortunes and accidents. To add to his worries he was also being pestered by the press. The entry for the last Wednesday of October 1945 reads:

"How can I protect my privacy? How silence this noise that bellows round my silence? How can I stop these write-ups, photographs and all the fantastic rumours which invade my silence and prevent me from getting on calmly with my work? I have an unhappy and inexplicable faculty of creating a detestable tumult round my own head, which the journalists increase every day, thinking in all good faith that they are doing me a peculiar favour. Shall I always have to put up with either extreme fulsome praise or personal insults? And be the centre of a legend that devours me and cuts across my work?" 6

But when things went wrong technically, he very often profited by the accident, putting it to positive use as an essential part of the film. This gift he had of taking advantage of accidents, an essential part of his technique, he referred to in the opening lines of his poem Par lui-même in the collection entitled Opéra where he says:

"Accidents du mystère et fautes de calculs Célestes,  
j'ai profité d'eux, je l'avoue. Toute ma poésie est  
là : Je décalque L'invisible (invisible à vous)."

(p. 13)

Jean Marais, in an interview with Carl Wildman, described very vividly how Cocteau took advantage of a particular accident on the last day of shooting of the film version of his play Les Parents terribles. Marais said:

"Pour moi, par exemple, c'est là où je trouvais que Jean Cocteau avait du génie. C'est qu'il profitait des accidents, c'est-à-dire que ... un ennui, un problème,



"L'espace joue un peu le rôle du temps. C'est déjà un recul. Un étranger, qui juge notre caractère d'après notre oeuvre, nous juge mieux que notre entourage, qui juge notre oeuvre d'après nous." (p. 249)

One of the justifiable criticisms that can be made against Cocteau is the simultaneous appearance in his artistic output of works of high quality together with others that can only be considered as banal. This apparent inconsistency in him is hard to understand unless we consider his own explanation that many of his works were created when he was "awake", that is they were created deliberately and consciously without the participation of his force supérieure, whilst the better works were created when he was "asleep" and they saw the light as a result of his inner compulsion. There is, however, another more obvious reason for the variable quality of his output, namely, that the pattern of his productivity was affected by his relationship with his friends. He could be over-sensitive and make himself ill at moments of personal crisis.

The most productive friendships in his life were with Raymond Radiguet and Jean Marais, both bringing forth works of first class quality. The three brief years of his friendship with Radiguet were fruitful and satisfying, a period of passionate activity when he set up no new gods and temporarily dropped his intrigues to become famous. Cocteau first met Radiguet on the 8th June 1919 at a *matinée poétique* in memory of Guillaume Apollinaire and he has vividly described the impact which the meeting made upon him.

"Dès ma rencontre avec Raymond Radiguet je peux dire que j'ai deviné son étoile. A quoi? Je me le demande. Il était petit, pâle, myope, ses cheveux mal coupés pendaient sur son col et lui faisaient des favoris. Il grimaçait comme au soleil. Il sautillait dans sa démarche. On eût dit que les trottoirs lui étaient élastiques. Il tirait de ses poches les petites feuilles de cahier d'écolier qu'il y enfonçait en boule. Il les déchiffonnait du plat de la main et, gêné par une des cigarettes qu'il roulait lui-même, essayait de lire un poème très court. Il le collait contre son oeil.

Ces poèmes ne ressemblaient à aucun de l'époque dont je vous parle. Ils contredisaient plutôt l'époque et ne s'appuyaient sur rien d'avant. Dirai-je, au passage, que ce tact suprême, cette solitude des mots, cette épaisseur du vide, cette aération de l'ensemble, nul ne s'en est encore avisé en France et que les nombreux pastiches qu'on tâche d'en vendre n'en présentent même pas une caricature?

Il rendait leur jeunesse aux vieilles formules. Il dépatinait les poncifs. Il décapait les lieux communs. Quand il y touchait il semblait que ses mains maladroitement



remissent dans l'eau quelque coquillage. C'était son privilège. Il était seul à pouvoir y prétendre.

'Il faut être précieux' disait-il, et dans sa bouche, le mot précieux prenait le sens de rarissime et de pierre précieuse.

... ..

Il parlait peu. Voulait-il inspecter une toile ou un texte, il sortait de sa poche des lunettes cassées qu'il employait à la manière d'un monocle.

Non seulement il inventa et nous enseigna cette attitude, d'une nouveauté étonnante, qui consistait à ne pas avoir l'air original (ce qu'il appelait porter un costume neuf); non seulement il nous conseilla d'écrire 'comme tout le monde' parce que c'est justement par où c'est impossible que s'exprime l'originalité, mais encore il nous donnait l'exemple du travail. Car ce paresseux (je devais l'enfermer dans sa chambre pour l'obliger à finir un chapitre), ce mauvais élève qui s'échappe par la fenêtre et bâcle son devoir (il le reprenait toujours dans la suite) était devenu un Chinois penché sur des livres. Il en lisait une foule de médiocres, les confrontant avec les chefs-d'oeuvre, y revenant, notant, annotant, collant des cigarettes et déclarant que le mécanisme d'un chef-d'oeuvre étant invisible, il ne pouvait apprendre que dans les livres qui passaient pour l'être et qui ne l'étaient pas.

Ses colères étaient rares mais terribles. Il devenait pâle comme un mort. Jean Hugo et Georges Auric doivent se souvenir d'une soirée au bord du bassin d'Arcachon, où nous lisions tous autour d'une table de cuisine. J'eus la maladresse de dire que Moréas, ce n'était pas si mal. Je lisais ses stances. Radiguet se leva, m'arracha le livre, traversa la plage, le jeta dans l'eau et revint s'asseoir avec une figure de meurtrier, inoubliable." 9

Out of this passionate friendship came Cocteau's great novels Le Grand Écart and Thomas l'Imposteur, and Radiguet's Le Diable au corps and Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel. Radiguet's death shattered Cocteau not only because of his personal loss but because Cocteau was convinced that Radiguet would have written even greater works.

The pattern of Cocteau's relationships with his friends changed when he acquired a measure of fame. In the days of his youth he preferred to admire or idolise men who were older and more famous than himself such as Édouard de Max, Comte Robert de Montesquiou or André Gide. But, as he became aware of his own importance in the world of the arts, his attentions turned to beautiful young men of promise in whom he saw the potential of greatness and to whom he therefore dedicated a great deal of his time.

If one is to approach Cocteau the artist and his work without



prejudice or bias one must be prepared to offer complete sympathy and comprehension and in order to do this one must fully accept the fact of his homosexuality. Today it is recognised that there cannot be a "cure" for a condition that is accepted as perfectly natural by the homosexual himself. Cocteau realised this early in his life and did not therefore consider his state as unnatural, nor did he see it as an exceptional or forbidden phenomenon to arouse in him any feelings of guilt. But he could not help feeling resentment at the attitude of a society that considered the homosexual to be some kind of monster. He was sufficiently intelligent to realise that, if he experienced the emotion of love, it might not be reciprocated except by understanding and sympathy. The consummation of this love could be realised only by mutual endeavour and with the enthusiastic co-operation of its object in producing great works of art. Thus, by its very nature, this kind of love was condemned to be ephemeral.

Even before Radiguet's death Cocteau had come to realise the impermanence of their bond, and this explains why he could not bring himself to sit beside Radiguet's bed as he lay dying, and why he was unable to attend Radiguet's funeral. Their brief relationship, having produced its works of art, had already been burning itself out. And each time that Cocteau came to the end of these experiences of love he found himself undergoing a transformation. These changes in his life he came to refer to as "mues" and they generally indicate stages in his development as a poet.

When Cocteau was in love his life always assumed a pattern of intense identification with the object of his love. This explains the common assertion by various commentators that Cocteau "wanted to become the persons he loved". We find Cocteau's traits fully described in his novel Le Grand Écart, where, in writing of his hero Jacques Forestier, he might well be describing himself.

"Depuis l'enfance, il ressentait le désir d'être ceux qu'il trouvait beaux et non de s'en faire aimer. Sa propre beauté lui déplaisait. Il la trouvait laide." 10

(p. 14)

In this same chapter he writes:

"Il admirait les beaux corps et les belles figures, à quelque sexe qu'ils appartenissent."

(p. 8)

Then he adds, perhaps in self-defence:

"Cette dernière singularité lui faisait prêter de mauvaises moeurs; car les mauvaises moeurs sont la seule chose que les gens prêtent sans réfléchir." 10

(p. 8)



Cocteau's awareness of the danger of not being able to conform to the ways of the world is apparent in the concluding words of this important novel:

"Jacques se sentait redevenir sombre. Il savait bien que pour vivre sur terre il faut en suivre les modes et le coeur ne s'y porte plus." (p. 166)

Another important factor in the pattern of Cocteau's emotional life is the number of young men with whom he became associated whose names were also 'Jean'. These were but a few : Jean Le Roy, Jean Desbordes, Jean Bourgoint, Jean Genet, Jean Marais, Jean Pierre-Aumont, an immediate if tenuous point of identification with his ideal self. But the archetype of this self is the figure of Dargelos who features so prominently in Cocteau's mythology and whom we first encounter described in detail in Le Livre blanc and Les Enfants terribles.

Since Cocteau underwent so many transformations or "mues" in the course of his life it is understandable that his biographers experience difficulty in tracking down the real person. In his semi-autobiographical works Opium, Journal d'un Inconnu, and Le Cordon ombilical he attains a remarkable degree of what he would refer to as his 'invisibility'. Such an involved compound of faces, personalities, moods, doubts and undeniable talents was bound to create problems for even the most objective and conscientious biographer.

Francis Steegmuller has very cleverly put his finger on a revealing aspect of the anti-Cocteau campaign. In discussing the first two studies on the poet to be published - Claude Mauriac's Jean Cocteau ou La Vérité du Mensonge (1945) and Roger Lannes' Jean Cocteau (1945) he says:

"Those first two studies of Cocteau immediately set the two contrasting tones that were to characterize much of the future writing about him. Denigration was answered by adulation; later the order was sometimes reversed. Interest in Cocteau's work or in his personality often triggered salvos of critical abuse. Sometimes, as in Mauriac, there is an unmistakable echo of Gide; or latter-day partisans of Dada and Surrealism parrot their leader Breton. In the field of abuse, there are few instances in literature comparable to the writings about Cocteau : so magnetic is his fascination that hostile critics have devoted years of their lives to proving that he has no artistic existence. Such attacks range from wild obsession to calculated capitalisation on Cocteau's drawing power. When, as is always the case, the detractors find themselves obliged to point out 'exceptions' in his work, the faintness of their reluctant praise stands in amusing contrast to the



strength of the admiration, even dedication, implied in the energy and scope of the attack." 11

Brown's biography of Cocteau immediately comes to mind in reading these lines from Steegmuller.

It is Cocteau himself, however, who concisely sums up the problem of the biographer faced with the formidable task of writing any poet's life. In his Opium he says:

"Je me demande comment les gens peuvent écrire la vie des poètes, puisque les poètes eux-mêmes ne pourraient écrire leur propre vie. Il y a trop de mystères, trop de vrais mensonges, trop d'enchevêtrement. Que dire des amitiés passionnées qu'il faut confondre avec l'amour et qui sont tout de même autre chose, des limites de l'amour et de l'amitié, de cette zone du coeur auquel des sens inconnus participent et que ne peuvent comprendre ceux qui vivent en série? Les dates se chevauchent les années s'embrouillent. La neige fond, les pieds volent; il ne reste pas d'empreintes." 12

In the last analysis it is not what a person was or was not that really matters. It is his work. What the poet produces is his best testimonial. In the chapters that follow I shall endeavour to demonstrate that Cocteau's contributions to twentieth century poetry and prose, to the theatre and the cinema and the graphic arts merit the most serious consideration. I shall require first to define his mythology and to describe its constituent elements and how they came to exist.

## NOTES

## Chapter 1

1. Frederick Brown : An Impersonation of Angels : A Biography of Cocteau (Longmans, London, 1969).
2. Examples of perversity in Cocteau's behaviour are often quoted, and Francis Steegmuller cites the following that occurred when Cocteau was young: "During the years preceding his adolescence he displayed considerable open antagonism to his mother, illustrated by a strange episode that took place in a train bringing mother, son and governess back to Paris after a holiday in Switzerland. Jean had insisted that Madame Cocteau buy a box of cigars as a present for their Paris manservant, Auguste, and once in the train he threatened to go into a tantrum if his mother didn't grant a whim he had conceived - that she hide the box under her dress to cheat the customs. It is an indication of how fearsome the child's tantrums must have been, and how great his mother's indulgence, that she hid the box as he wished. At the border the customs inspector came to the door of the compartment, made polite enquiries, saluted, and was about to leave when Jean spoke up: 'This lady is hiding a box of cigars under her dress'. Consternation, stammered excuses, surrender of the box, and immediate recognition that a fine must be paid did not satisfy the customs : Madame Cocteau was ordered outside, made to undress, and searched." (Francis Steegmuller : Cocteau : A Biography, p. 11).
3. Frederick Brown : An Impersonation of Angels : A Biography of Cocteau, pp. 396-397.
4. The Comtesse Anna de Noailles was famous for her monologues delivered in a penetrating voice that could be heard some distance away. Cocteau not only imitated her manner of speaking, he also, for a time, copied her particular style of handwriting.
5. Jean Cocteau : Mon testament pour l'an 2000, propos recueillis par Pierre Laforet (Disque Vogue MC20 173, 1962).
6. Jean Cocteau : Diary of a Film (translated by Ronald Duncan) (Dennis Dobson, London, 1950) p. 124.
7. Homage to Cocteau : BBC Broadcast 1963.
8. Jean Cocteau : La Difficulté d'être (Editions du Rocher, Monaco, 1957) pp. 33-34.
9. De Raymond Radiguet, pp. 37-40, op.cit.
10. Jean Cocteau : Le Grand Écart (Stock, Paris, 1947) Chapter 1.
11. Francis Steegmuller : op.cit., p. 462.
12. Jean Cocteau : Opium (Stock, Paris, 1956) pp. 248-249.



Chapter 2 : The personal mythology - its gradual emergence  
and its constituent elements

"Mon oeuvre entière tourne autour du drame de la solitude  
et des tentatives de l'homme pour la vaincre."

(Jean Cocteau : Le Grand Écart - Introduction)

(Ed. Stock 1957)

The "drame de la solitude" to which Cocteau here refers is the drama of the romantic artist who is driven by his very nature to pursue an ideal of his own conception, and who, in the course of this pursuit, consciously and yet unawares, is creating a personal mythology that is to be reflected in his important works. In this context I use the word "mythology" in its very broadest sense to embrace Cocteau's ideas, his characteristic manner of thinking and his unusual visionary speculation. It is of necessity a very complicated and sometimes baffling mythology which has a bearing not only upon his work but upon his way of living inwardly and outwardly.

Highly strung and extremely sensitive as a child, it is not surprising that Cocteau reacted strongly to the milieu in which he was brought up at Maisons-Laffitte, in the heart of a family that was actually Parisian, solidly bourgeois, cultivated, easefully wealthy, dabbling in music, painting and literature - an environment that could not be other than happily propitious to the early development of his artistic nature. Among the ordinary experiences in this early period of his life, two stand out for him as especially significant, his visits to the theatre and his excursions to the circus. He attended with regularity the 'matinées classiques' at the Comédie-Française, and the "red and gold" of the theatre held a fascination for him that was to remain with him always.

His taste for ritual was fed at an early age by the detailed preparations at home that preceded visits to the theatre. His mother would dress with care for the occasion and Jean, with eager eyes, would follow every little detail of her toilette, looking with great interest and enjoyment as Madame Cocteau's maid adjusted her clothes and arranged her coiffure. Cocteau has described this ceremony in the third chapter of his Portraits-Souvenir, first published in 1935, where he wrote:

"Voici comment se passaient les choses. J'assistais à la toilette de ma mère. Un nuage de parfum et de poudre de riz mauve embaumait sa chambre, la pénombre entre les perses à ramages multicolores (arbres exotiques et oiseaux des îles). Une porte ouverte sur le gaz intense



du cabinet de toilette éclairait l'armoire à glace où la scène se reflétait plus belle et plus profonde. C'est dans cette glace que je suivais les préparatifs. Ma mère svelte, monumentale et en raccourci, de ma place assise entre la commode et la cheminée, semblait maintenue par la longue robe raide en velours rouge brodée de jais, une robe de chez Raudnitz, à manches ballon, d'où les bras, les épaules, la poitrine, surgissaient, livides, d'une torsade du même velours sur un corselet très simple, propre à devenir le fond de la scène classique au bord des loges : éventail d'écaille et de dentelle noire qui palpite, mise au point de la lorgnette de nacre, applaudissements discrets. C'est, du moins, la pantomime que j'imaginai, pendant la cérémonie des gants longs, difficiles à mettre, peaux mortes qui commencent à vivre, à coller et à prendre forme jusqu'à l'effort successif de chaque doigt et l'adorable rite final qui consistait à boutonner sur le poignet, d'un geste féminin, immortalisé par Mayol, la petite lucarne où j'embrassais la paume nue. C'était le terme du spectacle véritable pour lequel toutes ces élégances étaient inventées et la glace de l'armoire me montrait ma mère, que dis-je, cette madone bardée de velours, étranglée de diamants, empanachée d'une aigrette nocturne, châtaigne étincelante hérissée de rayons, haute, distraite, partagée entre les dernières recommandations d'être sage et le dernier coup d'oeil au miroir. La femme de chambre étalant la traîne à genoux, prosternée, achevait de conférer à ma mère une noblesse de Vierge espagnole. Ensuite, le manteau de fourrure cachait les bouquets et les poignards lumineux, maman se penchait, m'embrassait vite et partait vers l'océan de rumeurs, de bijoux, de plumes, de crânes, où elle irait se jeter comme un fleuve rouge et mélanger son velours aux velours du théâtre, son étincellement à l'étincellement du lustre et des girandoles."

Written some thirty years after the event, the details here recalled by Cocteau have already been adorned with elements from his personal mythology. Thus his mother is viewed not directly but through the mirror of the wardrobe, in a different dimension. Significantly, he does not actually describe her features. She is present as a rather splendid figure draped in the red, jet-embroidered, velvet of her magnificent dress, which actually seems to be supporting her as she stands, slim, like a monument. And, as she proceeds to put on her long kid gloves, which up to that moment are merely inert pieces of hide, they appear to come to life on her arms. And by the time that the young Jean is kissing the little skylight of bare skin left on the upper palm of her hand after the glove has been buttoned on her wrist, he is already imagining the scene in the box of the theatre, the fluttering of his mother's shell and black lace fan, the focussing of her mother-of-pearl opera-glasses, the cautious, discreet applause proper to her class. This is as typical an example of the poet's use



of double perspective as we shall find in his work. The emphasis on the Madonna-like appearance of his mother is also significant because it is indicative of his attitude to her, his placing her on a kind of pedestal suggesting the invisible barrier that was to exist between them, despite his undeniable affection for her. The fact that he kissed the palm of her hand also suggests a deferential attitude concealing slightly sensual undertones.

It was also at this period that Cocteau had his first experiences of going to the circus and he was fascinated and delighted by the feats performed by the acrobats and tight-rope walkers. The idea of the peril of walking a tight-rope, actually and in a figurative sense, with its attendant danger to life, was another that was to find expression in his method of approach to his work. He said many times that the art of creation, in its many forms, is always a risk. In the throes of creating a new work he was ever a prey to a sense of precariousness, and he was at the same time able to revel in it, conscious as he was that dangers lurked within every sentence, every line of poetry, every foot of film. Thus the notion of risk became another basic element in his mythology. In Le Potomak (1924) he wrote:

"Il y a toujours sur le vide une corde raide.  
L'adresse consiste à marcher, comme sur des oeufs,  
sur la mort.  
Un mot d'écrit : un pas d'ôté à la chute." (p. 257)

In the period of his childhood preceding the years of puberty Cocteau absorbed, in the milieu of his family, many of the basic characteristics of the arts. There was a strong musical influence since the members of his family not only listened to and appreciated good music but also expressed themselves by playing musical instruments. Cocteau's grandfather on his mother's side, Eugène Lecomte, lived with his wife in a separate flat of the large house in the rue la Bruyère where the Cocteau family lived when they were not spending their time at Maisons-Laffitte. It was in this flat that Lecomte, himself a keen violoncellist, proudly kept his valuable collection of Stradivarius violins in a large glass cabinet in the billiard room. Often Lecomte took delight in playing quartets by Beethoven with his friends Grébert, Sarasate and Sivori, and the recitals would take place in the billiard room to the delight of Jean and his brother Paul, as they then felt free to roam around the flat into forbidden little rooms whilst the grown-ups were occupied in playing Beethoven. Many of the unusual objects that they found became important fetishes for Jean and they



were later to be transposed into his poetry and his films. There was, for example, a wig that had belonged to Rossini, inherited by Lecomte, and carefully preserved in a green oval box in his dressing-room. There were beautiful paintings by Ingres and Delacroix. There was a bath made of solid silver no longer used for ablutions but for the storage of shoes and books. Greek busts abounded everywhere in the flat, and, in the billiard-room itself, the focal point of this domestic museum, together with vases from Cyprus resting on the shelves and Florentine medallions and coins carefully arranged, stood, on a revolving plinth, a replica statue of Venus. But the objets d'art which most fascinated Jean were a set of very fine terra-cotta masks from Antinoöpolis with rather frightening faces having enamel eyes -

" ... derrière leur vitre, les Masques d'Antinoë avec des yeux d'émail, des joues pâles de terre cuite, des colliers de barbe, s'étagaient dans le velours rouge comme une loge de Manet." 1

Red velvet, gloves, a wig, violins, vases, medallions and coins, a statue, terra-cotta masks with enamelled eyes - already Cocteau was storing a collection of fetishistic objets d'art that would serve as convenient props or furnishings in the general setting of his inner poetic world, a world that could be enclosed in the claustrophobic atmosphere of a family flat as in his play Les Parents terribles or imbued with the sepulchral, muffled stillness of a no man's land as in his film Orphée.

The enclosed feeling of the flat in the play Les Parents terribles or the heightened, stifling air of the adolescents' room in the novel Les Enfants terribles have their origins in the early impressions gained by Cocteau as a child during his adventurous indoor explorations in his grandfather's flat. Objects similar to those described above were to be a feature of all his homes, and were still to be found in his house at Milly-la-Forêt in the 1960s.

Away from the more strictly Parisian atmosphere of rue la Bruyère, when he was in Maisons-Laffitte Cocteau was no less sensitive to its particular atmosphere. In Portraits-Souvenir he vividly describes the extravagant milieu in which he spent his holidays -

"Au reste, le vrai spectacle, le vrai jeu des tableaux, était, en vacances, à Maisons-Laffitte. Le château de Maisons-Laffitte orne un vaste parc de tilleuls, de pelouses, de plates-bandes, de jets-d'eau, de barrières blanches, de tennis, de chevaux de courses, de bicyclistes et de propriétés bourgeoises. J'y pédalais ferme jusqu'à la forêt de Saint-Germain pour fumer en cachette, avec



Aimé Simon-Girard, un tabac à priser infect dans des marrons d'Inde creusés au canif en forme de pipe, emmanchés d'une tige de sureau. Ensuite nous broutions l'herbe, à quatre pattes, pour ne pas sentir le tabac. Les entraîneurs menaient grande vie. Max Lebaudy, le petit sucrier, lavait ses calèches au champagne et organisait des corridas. On y voyait Mme du Gast, présidente de la Société protectrice des animaux, empoignée par des gardiens de la paix. Il y avait des gymkanas avec course en sacs et dames conduisant des lapins enrubannés en laisse." 2

In the midst of these interesting activities which included Max Lebaudy having his carriages washed down with champagne, supreme extravagance, Jean found time to engage in the mischief of smoking, skilfully concealing the smell of the foul but highly prized tobacco by nibbling grass afterwards. Like all children Cocteau was very sensitive to odours. When he watched his father painting, he found the smell of the oil paints quite delicious, and, in later years, the moment he could smell the oil in a painter's studio he was reminded of his father. And at home the smell of the paste for the pictures which he cut out when he was ill, or the scent of the lime-trees which grew more intense with the approach of thunderous stormy weather, the smell of burnt-out fireworks, or of arnica applied to wasp stings, the mildewed odour from bundles of old newspapers or the heady aroma of dung heaps in the farmyard, the peculiar fragrance from the soil studded with star-shaped white droppings where greengages buried their heads when they fell from the trees, and the warm perfume from the pots of geraniums in the hothouse in contrast to the foul stench of the pool with its dead frogs - vivid as all these smells were, they were eclipsed by "l'odeur du Nouveau-Cirque, la grande odeur merveilleuse" - the smell of the sawdust mingling with that of the animals and the strong smell of the grease-paint worn by the clowns which he would always associate with the danger of creating. Here is how he describes it:

"Certes, on la savait faite de crottin de cheval, de tapis-brosse, d'écuries, de sueurs bien portantes, mais elle contenait, en outre, quelque chose d'indescriptible, un mélange qui échappe à l'analyse, mélange d'attente et d'allégresse qui vous saisissait à la gorge, que l'habitude levait en quelque sorte sur le spectacle et qui tenait lieu de rideau. Et la richesse profonde du fumier d'enfance m'aide à comprendre que cette odeur de cirque est un fumier léger qui vole, une poudre de fumier doré qui monte sous le dôme de vitres, irise les globes de lumière, met une gloire autour du travail des acrobates, et retombe, aidant puissamment les clowns multicolores à fleurir." 3



Cocteau's passion for the circus remained with him during the whole of his life and many of the features of the ring were to play a prominent part in his works, particularly in his first ballets. He also harboured strong feelings of nostalgia for these early days when he could still observe from the viewpoint of the audience, seeing things in an entirely different dimension from that which he would acquire with his backstage experience in later years. Untrammelled as yet by the responsibilities involving him when he would one day be producing or directing, in these early days his imagination could be allowed free rein and he could react to what he saw with strong feelings of awe and wonderment that would leave their imprint on his impressionable psyche.

As the time approached for Jean to start his formal education he had his first innocent experience of the facts of life. It was his little cousin Marianne who, shutting him one day in the family "omnibus", was to play the role of precocious instructress. The episode, innocuous and not without charm, is recounted by Cocteau in Portraits-Souvenir as follows:

"Ma cousine Marianne m'avait enfermé dans cet omnibus et m'avait dit : 'Ecoute, je sais tout. Il y a des grandes personnes qui se couchent en plein jour. On les appelle, les hommes : des lapins, les femmes : des cocottes. Oncle André est un lapin. Si tu le répètes je te tuerai à coups de bêche'."

One cannot refrain from wondering how the course of Cocteau's life and his whole situation might have been altered had he had his initiation into the facts of life on a more practical level.

So now we find the young Cocteau embarking upon an ostensibly inauspicious career at school in Paris where he was to attend the Lycée Condorcet between 1900 and 1904. He was entering his adolescent years, and although it is obvious that many of the elements of his personal mythology had been forming already by this time in his sensitive consciousness, it is nevertheless to this particularly impressionable period in his life, when the deep sensibilities of the pubescent boy are coloured by his sentimental experiences, that we have to look, in order to discover the most durable and the most profound influences upon his spirit. All subsequent experiences and influences will only re-inforce those working upon him in his adolescence.

And the first important setting for his self-created myth, outside the sphere of his family, of Maisons-Laffitte and rue la Bruyère is



to be la Cité Monthiers, a high, rectangularly shaped, long, cobbled courtyard, which still exists today, lying between the rue d'Amsterdam and the rue de Clichy. In fact the archway of the Cité on the rue d'Amsterdam side looks directly upon the Lycée Condorcet. The young Jean was obliged to walk across the Cité Monthiers twice each day on his way to and from school, and it became the setting of his most touching schoolboy adventures. It appears frequently as a frame to events in his literary and cinematic works, figuring particularly prominently in the film Le Sang d'un Poète. It is crucially important in that it acts as a background for the poet's most powerful mythical character, Dargelos.

It was in the Cité Monthiers that Cocteau and his schoolfellows lingered each day after school, rumbustiously trading stamps or boisterously bartering marbles, and always intent upon pursuing the mysteries of their childhood rites. And when the Cité lay under snow in winter, transformed, it became for the young Jean a veritable courtyard of miracles. He describes it under snow in Le Livre blanc, in Les Enfants terribles, and it appears under a thick layer of snow in Le Sang d'un Poète. How does he recall it in his Portraits-Souvenir? He writes:

"Or, le champ de bataille de mon enfance, sa cour des miracles, surtout lorsque la neige l'idéalisait et la calfeutrait de féerie, c'était la Cité Monthiers, où l'on entre au théâtre de l'Oeuvre par une grille de la rue de Clichy et que notre armée de chevaliers en armures de laine et à boucliers de cartables, envahissait, au galop, entre quatre et cinq heures du soir, par la voûte d'un immeuble de la rue d'Amsterdam, en face duquel le Petit Condorcet ouvre ses portes." (p. 108)

Thus he recalls it as a "courtyard of miracles", "a battlefield of knights in woollen armour". The miracle for him was the presence of a particularly magic "knight", his ideal, Dargelos. Now there was in fact a boy called Dargelos in Cocteau's class, but this real Dargelos has little or no connection with the Dargelos that Cocteau created, as a simple perusal of an early photograph of the class showing both Cocteau and the real Dargelos proves. Cocteau was probably lured by the sound of the name, finding it attractive, and he proceeded to apply it to the type of schoolfellow he admired or hero-worshipped, so that this archetype Dargelos whom he created is, in fact, a composite figure of several of the school bullies, handsome, brutal, defiant, possessing a sort of animal-like, sensual magnetism, the school vamp who lent glamour to the otherwise dull school routine. And it is



important to realise that Dargelos remains a type in Cocteau's work who represents quite different elements in each of the works in which he appears.

In Le Livre blanc, for example, Dargelos enacts a very erotic, sensual role, and this particular Dargelos bears little resemblance to the Dargelos described by the poet in Portraits-Souvenir:

"Dargelos, lui, détenait, une fois pour toujours, la dernière, la première place d'élève nul. Mais il la détenait avec une telle force, une telle audace, un tel calme, que personne de nous n'eût songé à la lui prendre, ni même à en être jaloux. Ajouterai-je qu'il était beau, de cette beauté d'animal, d'arbre ou de fleuve, de cette beauté insolente que la saleté accuse, qui semble s'ignorer, tire parti de ses moindres ressources et n'a besoin que d'apparaître pour convaincre. Cette beauté robuste, sournoise, évidente, ensorcelait les personnes les plus certaines de n'y être point sensibles : le proviseur, le censeur, les professeurs, les répétiteurs, les pions, le concierge. Imaginez quels désordres pouvait provoquer un Dargelos, chef de bande, coq du collège, cancre impuni, Dargelos à la mèche nocturne, aux yeux bridés, aux genoux blessés et superbes, sur des larves avides d'amour, ignorant l'énigme des sens et le moins protégées du monde contre les atteintes terribles que porte à toute âme délicate le sexe surnaturel de la beauté.

J'ai toujours supposé que Dargelos connaissait son privilège et en jouait. C'était la vamp de l'école. Il nous éblouissait, nous écrasait, nous éclaboussait de son luxe moral et développait en nous ce fameux complexe d'infériorité dont, certes, on parle beaucoup trop, mais qui existe et qui, plus que l'orgueil, est la cause de bien des misères. Dargelos nous méprisait, en bloc. Obtenir de lui une grâce était à l'origine d'intrigues, dignes des mémorialistes de Versailles." 4

Cocteau, who had always been sensitive to beauty, in his mother, in music, in the theatre and in nature, now found himself before a very different kind of beauty that enchanted him just as strongly as he had previously been mesmerised by the theatre and the circus. The beauty of this new ideal, Dargelos, was a "shock" to his heart which he was to symbolise by the incident of the snowball with which Paul was struck and felled by Dargelos in Les Enfants terribles. And Cocteau worshipped this image of Dargelos, who made him aware for the first time of that havoc that could be wrought upon sensitive souls by le sexe surnaturel de la beauté. Cocteau had already used this very phrase in writing about Barbette, the young boy equilibrist who performed dressed as a girl.<sup>5</sup> In using these words Cocteau is evoking that particular stage of development in adolescence when masculine and feminine traits can be observed simultaneously in



young persons, arousing in the receptive artist a passion which is not based upon sexual desire. Writing about Barbette in the Nouvelle Revue française in 1926 Cocteau said:

"Il plaît à ceux qui voient en lui la femme, à ceux qui devinent en lui l'homme, et à d'autres dont l'âme est émue par le sexe surnaturel de la beauté."

It is remarkable that an incident similar to the famous scene of the fateful snowball at the start of Les Enfants terribles did actually take place when Cocteau was a pupil at the Petit Condorcet. A boy was struck in the chest by a snowball, fainted and stained the snow slightly with his blood. Although it was suggested that the snowball contained a stone, this was not actually proved, but in Cocteau's imagination the incident came to symbolise the tremendously overpowering magnetism of his hero. In any event he says:

"La pierre était inutile. J'ai toujours pensé que le seul contact d'un Dargelos suffit à changer la neige en marbre, à la durcir jusqu'au meurtre et qu'elle peut, entre ses mains, devenir aussi dangereuse que les couteaux d'Espagne." 6

Thus two important symbols emerge from this period of Cocteau's school-days - Dargelos and his lethal snowball. The destructive, attractive, adolescent schoolboy will remain a key figure in many of the poet's mature works, constituting a recurring theme upon which he will compose variations in different artistic media. Thus we shall find Dargelos in Le Livre blanc (1928), in Les Enfants terribles written as a novel in 1929 and produced as a film in 1950 (where the part is actually played by a girl), in Opium (1930), in the film Le Sang d'un Poète (1932), in the poet's reminiscences of Portraits-Souvenir (1934) and in La Fin du Potomak (1939).

In the final analysis what forces does Dargelos represent for Cocteau? In discussing the possible absence of verisimilitude between the Dargelos he created and the real Dargelos, his school-companion, Cocteau definitively describes what Dargelos symbolises for him. In Portraits-Souvenir he says:

"Maintenant Dargelos a quitté mon Olympe intime et, comme le violoniste tzigane se détache de l'orchestre pour jouer entre les tables, il verse du rêve à nombre de jeunes lecteurs inconnus. Je n'ai pas changé son nom. Dargelos était Dargelos. Ce nom est un programme de morgue. Où vit-il? Vit-il? Se manifestera-t-il? Verrai-je son fantôme ironique apparaître mon livre à la main?  
Peut-être serai-je très étonné de retrouver un Dargelos humble, laborieux, timide, déshabillé de sa fable et regrettant, à travers moi, ce qu'il dut prendre, à la



longue, pour des défauts, et peut-être parvenir à vaincre. Peut-être me demandera-t-il de lui rendre son pouvoir et les secrets de son prestige. J'aimerais mieux qu'il demeure dans l'ombre où je lui ai substitué sa constellation, qu'il me reste le type de tout ce qui ne s'apprend pas, ne s'enseigne pas, ne se juge pas, ne s'analyse pas, ne se punit pas, de tout ce qui singularise un être, le premier symbole des forces sauvages qui nous habitent, que la machine sociale essaye de tuer en nous, et qui, par delà le bien et le mal, manoeuvrent les individus dont l'exemple nous console de vivre." 7

Indisputable proof that in fact Cocteau used only the name of the real Dargelos in creating his mythical hero is provided by Cocteau himself in the last book written by him to be published in his lifetime - Le Cordon ombilical (1962) where he writes:

"Peu à peu je devais rompre avec les origines précises. Et déjà pour le personnage de ce Dargelos dont je n'avais emprunté que le nom, que J.-J. Kihm crut être mon modèle, que découvrit en chair et en os Pierre Chanel en 1960 dans une petite maison de Seine-et-Oise, et avec lequel je suis en correspondance. Il accepta, avec une bonne grâce charmante, de prêter son nom prestigieux à un songe." 8

Thus, through the poeticised figure of Dargelos, is created the myth of a particular type of beauty, symbolising in some of its aspects elemental forces in Nature that pervade the poet's works.<sup>9</sup> It is an ideal of beauty which is androgynous in character, the poet's love for the male becoming love for the female who resembles the male, or his love for the female becoming love for the male who resembles the female. Throughout his long period of artistic creation Cocteau openly avowed his ardent feelings for beauty to whichever sex it belonged. The most typical of Cocteau's works in which he deals with the theme of the attraction of androgynous beauty are Le Grand Écart (1923) where the protagonist Jacques falls in love with a brother and sister who resemble each other, and Les Enfants terribles (1929) where the relationship between the brother and sister contains similar undertones.

The period 1904 to 1906 is the time of Cocteau's adolescence when, as a result of his leaving the Grand Condorcet due to a combination of unfortunate circumstances including frequent truancy, ill-health, an operation for appendicitis and the constant distractions to which he subjected himself in the company of young friends, he found himself attending first the Lycée Fénelon and then the private classes of M. Dietz in order to prepare for his "bachot". Immediately before this he had made the fateful trip to Venice in the company of his mother. In Venice he had frequented young people of his own age



group, most of whom were going through the emotional crises concomitant with their tender years. Whatever happened to Jean during his stay in Venice, it was from this time that he began to leave behind him his childhood and to assert his independence from his mother. This is demonstrated by the unpleasant incident at the customs on the return journey referred to in note 2 of Chapter 1. Venice did not impress Cocteau very favourably on its own account, as his description of the city as he saw it at this time proves:

"Un somptueux tir de foire, en miettes, c'est Venise le jour. La nuit, elle est une négresse amoureuse, morte au bain avec ses bijoux de pacotille ... Le lendemain matin, Jacques vit la foule de touristes. Sur la place Saint-Marc, prise au piège par ce décor théâtral, cette foule élégante avoue ses moindres secrets, comme au bal masqué. L'impudence la plus franche croise les âges et les sexes. Les plus timides y osent enfin le geste ou le costume qu'ils souhaitent honteusement à Londres ou à Paris.

C'est un fait que le bal masqué démasque. On dirait un conseil de réforme. Venise, à force de rampes, de projecteurs, montre les âmes toutes nues." 10

So that the change in Jean to which he himself alludes is in no way attributable to the ambiance of the city, but to his experiences with the young people whom he frequented. Following closely upon the Venetian episode and shortly after the start of his attendance at the educational establishment of M. Dietz, a much more important happening was to take place. Cocteau ran away from home and apparently found himself in Marseilles where he was befriended by an old Annamese woman as he wandered along the waterfront. He lied to the woman, telling her that he had run away from home because his family was monstrous, and that he never wanted to go back. She took him to the Old Quarter of Marseilles and there he remained for a year undertaking various jobs including that of washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant. He also worked with the boys who acted as guides for tourists, showing them the local sights and often going dancing with them at night. Cocteau even lived under an assumed name as he was able to use the identification papers of a boy of his own age who had been drowned. Eventually, however, he was traced by his uncle and escorted home in the care of two policemen. These are the only facts known about this mysterious episode in his life, but there would appear to be little doubt that he acquired certain habits in Marseilles that were to remain with him, habits such as the smoking of opium. And opium was to be another of the key elements in his personal mythology.



On his return to Paris he was plunged back into his studies but, recalcitrant as always in that field of activity, he failed his "bachot". He had taken to frequenting the Palais de Glace in the Champs-Élysées, since skating was the great fashion of the moment, and it was here that he met and fell in love with Madeleine Carlier, a lady ten years his senior. He even announced at one of the regular Wednesday evening family dinners his intended engagement to her, but the infatuation proved to be short-lived and it did not contribute in any way to his mythology.

He was now beginning to circulate in theatrical circles and had already made the acquaintance of the famous, notoriously paederastic actor Édouard de Max whose flat, in rue Caumartin, adorned with all kinds of objets d'art and theatrical props, provided a propitious and suitably recognizable milieu for the budding poet in Cocteau. De Max was then considered to be the leading male tragedian on the Parisian stage, playing opposite Sarah Bernhardt, and, despite his infamous reputation, under his protection Cocteau apparently came to no harm, and it was de Max who generously organised a first public reading before a fashionable, sophisticated audience, of Cocteau's early poems at the Théâtre Femina on April 14th, 1908. Cocteau later fully realised the extent of the encouragement he had received from de Max who had evaluated his potential talents with discrimination. In Portraits-Souvenir he says on that account:

"Mais de Max m'aidait en fin de compte. Il lisait plus loin que mes sottises, me devinait une force cachée, m'obligeant à me vaincre et m'enseignant que la grandeur s'accommode mal de nuances délicates." (p. 163)

The scandal created at the costume ball given by Robert d'Humières at the Théâtre des Arts, when de Max arrived swathed in an Arab veil with an eagle on his helmet, escorted by a bevy of ephebes consisting of Chiro Vesperto the model, and Cocteau's schoolmate René Rocher dressed as Arcadian shepherds, and Cocteau as Heliogabalus with red curls, a large tiara, a long train embroidered with pearls, rings on each finger and toe, and varnished toenails, which provoked the anger of the great Sarah Bernhardt who was also present, is only an example of the extreme naïveté of de Max. Today it would be considered an example of "high camp" and accepted with amused tolerance and possibly delight. It is probably due to the early influences exerted upon him by de Max that Cocteau retains strong currents of artlessness and ingenuousness not only in his personal behaviour but also in the many



forms that permeate his personal mythology.

Cocteau was now basking in the glory of the limelight for the first time in his life. He assumed a new sartorial elegance, read Oscar Wilde, and became a close friend of Lucien Daudet, son of Alphonse. Daudet acted as his guide and introduced him to famous people such as Paul Claudel, Jules Lemaître, the theatre critic, and Marcel Proust, who was just then starting work on his A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. Through Daudet he also met the dowager Empress Eugénie, widow of Napoleon III, and on several occasions thereafter called to pay his respects to her. Jean was indeed frequenting the élite of the land. He became acquainted with Princess Bibesco who was an intimate member of Marcel Proust's circle. Contact with such illustrious people helped to polish even more his good manners to the point of impeccability, an attribute that he would never lose and which would stand him in good stead in the long years that lay before him. Indeed his faultless manners came to be regarded as an essential part of his aura and gave him tremendous influence and power in his dealings with the nobility. With his introduction to Edmond Rostand and to the Rumanian-Greek aristocrat, the Comtesse Anna de Noailles, who wrote poems of love in French, his entry into the high sphere of the poets was complete. The Comtesse Anna de Noailles was to exert considerable influence upon Cocteau.

It was she who inspired in him the desire to become a great parleur, because, although she fancied herself as a great conversationalist and could readily discuss any topic with fascinating brilliance, the truth was that her conversations were really long dialogues with herself, thus becoming lengthy monologues that enchanted her interested listeners. She had a penetrating voice which nevertheless possessed a certain charm, her movements were graceful and her gestures expressive. Above all she had great wit and could delightfully amuse her audience. Cocteau not only emulated her poetry and copied her manner of talking, he also imitated the characteristics of her handwriting in his own. In this way he had two excellent mentors to guide him in the art of conversation for Lucien Daudet himself also excelled in that particular sphere. To complete the circle of distinguished figures in the range of his friends and acquaintances Cocteau had also Catulle Mendès, poet and critic, to whom he had been introduced by de Max. He became a



regular guest at the Saturday luncheons to which Mendès and his wife invited their friends at their residence in Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

Firmly convinced that he had arrived as a poet, it was time now for Cocteau to find a suitable poetic environment in which he could independently live, away from home. Fortune was with him and he discovered the Hôtel Biron, vast and beautiful, once a convent, now situated in an immense garden that had become a wilderness, not far from the Boulevard des Invalides. It was within the Hôtel Biron that the great sculptor Rodin had his studio, and indeed it has become the Musée Rodin today. In this beautiful haven Cocteau rented a large room which was quickly transformed into a garçonnière with the aid of a divan, some chairs, some packing cases and a piano. He decorated the large room himself, and one can well imagine that it had all the atmospheric appointments of a typical Coctelian room with a generous array of objets d'art distributed tastefully around it. In this room he joyfully entertained his friends until Madame Cocteau chanced to discover her son's secret, when he was obliged to return to the protective ambience of his mother's house.

The year was 1909 and Cocteau now published his first collection of poems La Lampe d'Aladin. With this same year came another momentous influence in his life. The Ballets Russes arrived in Paris.

The long chronicle of Cocteau's complicated relations with Diaghilew's Ballets Russes and its entourage of patrons, writers, poets and composers has been adequately related in several of Cocteau's biographies. Notwithstanding the influences which dazzled Cocteau and inspired him to create beautiful posters and to write the libretto of the exotic ballet Le Dieu bleu for the famous dancer Nijinsky, the two most important things that happened to him during the time of his association with the company were his meeting with Stravinsky, and the evaluation of his actual worth from the great Diaghilew himself, summed up in his famous injunction to the young poet: "Étonne-moi!"

The mere fact that Diaghilew did not praise Cocteau as highly as he might have expected was a certain indication that Diaghilew was perfectly aware of his potential talent but that he strongly disapproved of the young poet's manner of frittering it away upon indifferent, mediocre creations such as the collections of poems he had published up to that time. Diaghilew's injunction was therefore a direct appeal to Cocteau to use his artistic energies more positively.



Stravinsky too must have been aware of Cocteau's immaturity since he so skilfully managed to avoid any artistic co-operation with him on the projected ballet David, which, in fact, never materialised. And it is very significant that Cocteau's characteristic tendency to indulge in oneiric fantasies became particularly strong from the time of his association with the Ballets Russes. The outstanding non-incident that illustrates this is the dream that Cocteau earnestly imagined to have really taken place after the first performance of Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps in 1913 - the famous coach ride through the Bois de Boulogne with Diaghilew, Stravinsky and Nijinsky.

Now this tendency to oneiric invention is, in Cocteau's case, an artistic as well as a personal necessity. It is part of his nature and should not in fairness be interpreted as an attempt on his part to attach importance to himself by stressing the extent of his intimacy with famous people. Indeed, Cocteau was the last person in the world who required to have recourse to such strategies, surrounded as he always was by famous people from all walks of life. The phenomenon in Cocteau with which we are here confronted, and which is yet another of the basic elements that contributes to his personal mythology, is simply the functioning of his highly attuned poetic consciousness on an oneiric plane. And it is precisely on this plane that Cocteau exerts himself most creatively conferring poetry upon the commonplace and the banal.

Cocteau's first really significant literary work Le Potomak, written in 1914, is a useful illustration as well as a summing-up of what he gained from his experiences in the period of his impressionability under the influence of the company of the Ballets Russes and its attendant host of outstanding personalities. It is in this partly autobiographical and partly critical work that he displays the first signs of the originality that was to characterise most of his subsequent output. By temporarily abandoning all that was traditional in the arts, he was shedding his skin, undergoing the first of his many "mues" and adopting an attitude that was completely modern. In this way, by being aware of his faults as well as his positive qualities, he was trying to be himself. Le Potomak will be the subject of Part II, Chapter 1 of this thesis.

#### The Period from 1914 to 1918

The period from 1914 to 1918 was to be one of spiritual and



and physical adventure for Jean Cocteau in the theatre of war. The war erupted just as he was ending his first artistic transformation, and the best short survey of that war in Cocteau's words is to be found in the opening lines of Thomas l'Imposteur, which, although inspired by his experiences when he served with the ambulance corps organised by Misia Sert, was not actually written until four years after the end of the war. Cocteau wrote:

"La guerre commença dans le plus grand désordre. Ce désordre ne cessa point, d'un bout à l'autre. Car une guerre courte eût pu s'améliorer et, pour ainsi dire, tomber de l'arbre, tandis qu'une guerre prolongée par d'étranges intérêts, attachée de force à la branche, offrait toujours des améliorations qui furent autant de débuts et d'écoles." (p. 7)

He was now twenty-five years of age, and, after the physical adventures which he experienced in the Misia Sert ambulance corps at Rheims, fully described in Thomas l'Imposteur, he was ready for a spiritual adventure that was to start him off on a long, difficult, twisting road on the quest for his poetic self. When Misia Sert disbanded her ambulance corps, Cocteau set out on his own and found himself in the following year on the Belgian front at Nieupoort where he was adopted as a mascot by a company of marines. It was here that he wrote his war poem Discours du Grand Sommeil, later dedicated to Jean Le Roy, a young soldier poet, and the first in the long series of young men with artistic aspirations whom Cocteau would take under his wing, and for whom he would play the role of protector.

It is in Discours du Grand Sommeil that Cocteau, having submitted to his baptism of fire, blood and death in June 1915 in the midst of his comrades in the company of marines, all of whom perished in an assault on the enemy on the day following Cocteau's departure from the company, moved by this primordial experience, comes face to face for the first time with another self within himself, a self which he had not even suspected of existing. And it was this encounter with death,<sup>11</sup> which brushed past him to claim his comrades, that made him realise that he had actually become aware of another dimension within which another self existed.

The momentous day is the 22nd of June, 1915, the longest day of the year, and the shortest night. It is the day when the figure of the Angel takes form in Cocteau's mythology. Discours du Grand Sommeil is the account of the Angel's birth, an awakening of



" ... L'ange informe  
 intérieur, qui dort  
 et quelquefois, doucement  
 du haut en bas s'étire :  
 il se réveille!" (Discours du Grand Sommeil) (p. 163)

Up to that time Cocteau believed that he could recognise the qualities of angels in some of the young men with whom he became infatuated, young men who for him represented the Dargelos archetype. He did not realise that the Angel he was seeking in them was actually within himself, still unknown to him, not yet formed, but asleep in his inner being. And now, suddenly and unexpectedly, the Angel awoke and, like a muse, told Cocteau the words he was to utter. Now this Angel, as Cocteau was later to say, did not have any connection with the angels of religious imagery.<sup>12</sup> It was an incarnation of the poet's dramatic encounters with the phenomenon of beauty as he recognised it, that particular desire within him that, remaining ever unquenched, could never be satiated. The Angel took possession of his inner being and his desire was sublimated. Since the poet could never possess beauty, he would create it. But the presence of the Angel within him called for renunciation and suffering on his part. The Angel represented the night within him, another world that was dark and unknown, perhaps unfathomable, into which Jean could enter only within the limits of his human nature, and essentially alone, for the Angel was no companion but a brutal force pushing him forward by the shoulder.

And now the time had come for Cocteau to make a difficult choice. Was he to lead a normal, external life or should he devote himself entirely to the inner world of poetry that beckoned to him? Therein lay his existential dilemma. Because, although he realised that it was his destiny to be fulfilled as a poet, he was nevertheless drawn strongly to the external world. And, in attempting to participate desperately in both worlds, he found himself baulking, sometimes grumbling as he cursed his extraordinary fate. It was thus that he found himself limping, with a foot in one world and the other in another world. Here we have the obvious explanation for the apparent alternation in the long line of his activities. He turned for affection to human beings, warming himself in the ephemeral glow of personal contact for a time, only to be drawn back forcibly into his inner world of poetry where he was compelled to assume the quality of invisibility. Now Cocteau's concept of invisibility is closely connected with what he refers to as vitesse. His theory, as I understand it, is that the minds of different people function on different



planes at different frequencies. And the frequency of the poet's aura, which represents his mental essence, can be so high as to render him invisible to ordinary beings. Often, both of these qualities, vitesse and invisibilité are implicit in his writing because the typical Coctelian sentence, while being in form essentially swift, articulate, and lucid, yet conceals its true content because it is at the same time mysterious or enigmatical.

The qualities of vitesse and invisibilité are also present in the Angel, and Cocteau wrote in 1921 in Le Secret professionnel:

"... l'ange se place entre l'humain et l'inhumain. C'est un jeune animal éclatant, charmant, vigoureux, qui passe du visible à l'invisible avec les puissants raccourcis d'un plongeur, le tonnerre d'ailes de mille pigeons sauvages. La vitesse du mouvement radieux qui le compose empêche de le voir. Si cette vitesse diminuait, sans doute apparaîtrait-il." (pp. 201-202)

In 1953 in Journal d'un Inconnu he wrote:

"Je suis, sans doute, le poète le plus inconnu et le plus célèbre. Il m'arrive d'en être triste, parce que la célébrité m'intimide et que je n'aime susciter que l'amour. Cette tristesse doit venir de la boue qui nous imprègne et contre laquelle je m'insurge. Mais, si j'y réfléchis, je moque ma tristesse. Et je pense que ma visibilité, construite de légendes ridicules, protège mon invisibilité, l'enveloppe d'une cuirasse épaisse, étincelante, capable de recevoir impunément des coups." (p. 20)

Whilst in 1921, again in Le Secret professionnel he said:

"Lorsque vous l'entendez dire d'un artiste, d'une femme, qu'ils sont angéliques, n'y cherchez pas l'ange de vos images de première communion. Désintéressement, égoïsme, tendre pitié, cruauté, souffrance des contacts, pureté dans la débauche, mélange d'un goût violent pour les plaisirs de la terre et de mépris pour eux, amoralité naïve, ne vous y trompez pas : voilà les signes de ce que nous nommons l'angélisme et que possède tout vrai poète, qu'il écrive, peigne, sculpte ou chante. Peu de personnes l'admettent, car peu de personnes ressentent la poésie." (p. 203)

Cocteau's vocation as poet of his inner world did not come easily. There were many heartbreaks and many crises. For a long time he treated the Angel which wanted to possess him as an adversary, whom he hated and loved at the same time. Then, gradually but surely, he began to resemble the Angel, to fall in with him. And, with this, his life became more and more dedicated to his work. His poetic impulses, which at first appeared to be alienating him, casting him



adrift, little by little brought him back to his new self, which, ever growing within him, was inexorably extirpating his worldly self. And now that he knew how to listen to the superhuman message of the Angel within him, it was his task to express it in words. But words were inadequate to express the message effectively. So he found himself at grips with the written language that poured from his pen, breaking it up, disarticulating it, bespattering the page with words, taking these same words and tossing them into the air so that they might land upon the page in random order to create unforeseeable combinations which only chance could create, or again he might paradoxically return to the alexandrine, or to the stopgap which might inspire the word which he had on the tip of his tongue, but which refused to come forth. And he was obliged to lead astray his intelligence, to lose his memories. In search of the lost treasure of poetry, the poet found himself like a blind man groping at a dense wall constructed of words which, surrounding him, seemed to be protecting him from reality, tragically isolating him from it, as he attempted frantically to find the key word that, yielding to the pressure of his hand, would bring the whole wall tumbling down only to reveal behind it the inexpressible.

This is the concept that Cocteau conveys to us in Discours du grand Sommeil. It is the concept of the Angel within the poet, a basic element in his mythology, not merely a creature that will appear in Cocteau's subsequent works, not merely the emitter of messages that the poet will be receptive to and transcribe as best he can in his poetry, but also an actual being, a person of many incarnations, and at the same time the poet's double, that part of the poet which is his shadow or his night - his unconscious. And in Discours du Grand Sommeil the Angel exists already in two dimensions, for he is not only the creature who appears to the poet on the 22nd of June, 1915, and saves him from death, but he is also the dedicatee of the work, the young soldier Jean Le Roy who died on the 26th of April, 1918, the very spirit who addresses the poet in the prose poem Visite, near the end of the work, and says to him:

"Je suis Nous. Vous êtes Je. Les vivants et les morts sont près et loin les uns des autres comme le côté pile et le côté face d'un sou, les quatre images d'un jeu de cubes. Un même ruban de clichés déroule nos actes. Mais vous, un mur coupe le rayon et vous délivre. On vous voit bouger dans vos paysages. Notre rayon à nous traverse les murs. Rien ne l'arrête. Nous vivions épanouis dans le vide."

(pp. 227-228)



And a little further on he continues:

"Ce qui t'étonne, c'est que je parle comme tes livres, que je sache si bien ce qu'ils contiennent. J'étais de ceux qui doutent. Tu ne me grondais pas. Tu ne m'expliquais pas. Tu me traitais comme un enfant, comme une femme. J'étais naïvement ton ennemi. Je te demande pardon. C'est pour te demander pardon que j'ai fait l'étrange effort d'apparaître. La poésie ressemble à la mort. Je connais son oeil bleu. Il donne la nausée. Cette nausée d'architecte toujours taquinant le vide, voilà le propos du poète. Le vrai poète est, comme nous, invisible aux vivants. Seul, ce privilège le distingue des autres. Il ne rêve pas : il compte. Mais il avance sur un sable mouvant et, quelquefois, sa jambe enfonce jusqu'à nous."

(pp. 229-230)

To sum up, Cocteau's malconformation of personality up to the time of the first appearance of the Angel manifested itself in his inability to love by possession, whilst he at the same time succumbed to the dizziness and tortures of love by adulation of or identification with the object of his affections. The crisis he experienced in 1913, which he described in Le Potomak, began a process of splitting of his personality : a new being, as yet unknown to him, had suggested its existence within him, and had then awakened within him. His subsequent experience in June 1915 began to impart form, contour and nature to this being, and it emerged as the Angel. Up to that moment, before discovering the Angel within himself, he had sought his essence in others. And by loving the Angel whom he saw personified in others, he was actually loving an invisible part of himself, a part whose presence he suspected did exist but could not yet see within himself. Nevertheless, it had been evident to him, materialised or incarnated in others. Thus Cocteau was a Narcissus incapable of loving himself, seeing himself as ugly and physically repulsive. He also reacted in this way to his own spirit and character. Consequently he had an urgent need of those others who represented an enlarged image of himself in the mirror of his sensitivity, an image of what he yearned to be but was all too sadly aware that he was not. A Narcissus in love with his counterpart, and not with himself.

Now, since those others that he loved were none other than projections of himself, frustration and disappointment were bound to attend him, inasmuch as these beautiful young people could not measure up perfectly to his projections. They could not satisfactorily interpret the role assigned to them by Cocteau. A further complication in this dilemmatic condition was that Cocteau, had he been able to do so,



would willingly have detached himself from his other being, since he also felt the need to be his ordinary self.

Thus the Angel came to represent for the poet, at this stage in his artistic development, the sublimation of two tendencies in his nature that were beginning to converge, namely, the recognition of another being within himself and the recognition of his other self which compelled him to seek the form of the other being in other people. The Angel was the paradoxical outcome of the combination of the two tendencies.

The misunderstandings which arise in life are dissipated in death. Thus the young man who speaks to Cocteau in Visite understands what he could not comprehend when he was still alive, because he is now dead. The misunderstanding in their case had arisen from the fact that, since they were both poets, each of the two had his own angel. Thus there were in fact four of them - "les quatre images d'un jeu de cubes" - and the two who were really in love were the angels, constricted or hampered within the two young men who contained them. Cocteau, aware of the Angel within the person he loved, endeavoured to make that person also aware of the Angel's existence. Only death, however, could liberate the angels within them.

Seeking out the Angel in fellow human beings means exposing oneself to the worst possible disappointments and to inevitable slanders. In a manner, it also means deceiving oneself for, in Cocteau's case, the initial attraction is of necessity physical and is only ennobled if it develops into love. But the strange circumstance is that nearly all of the young men whom Cocteau loved in this period of his life bore special characteristics that set them apart from their fellows, and most of them died in their youth. This circumstance, with its strong undertones of coincidence, could not fail to have a profound effect upon the impressionable poet.

In Discours du Grand Sommeil Cocteau added substantially to his personal mythology and the two outstanding concepts that were to survive in the rest of his work were the Angel within and death as a liberating agent.

Almost contemporaneously (1916-1918) with the poetic trauma which he underwent in Discours du Grand Sommeil, Cocteau now experienced another "shock" that was to further his artistic development and enrich his poetic imagery. He became friendly with Roland Garros,



the great flying ace, who, on many occasions, took Cocteau up with him in his aeroplane and executed what appeared to be miraculous feats to the wondering poet. From this adventurous episode in Cocteau's life came forth his collection of poems Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance, dedicated, as might be expected, to his friend Roland Garros. Having tentatively made his first explorations of the zones of death in Discours du Grand Sommeil, he was now able to experience the sublime sensation of flying, which he naturally felt as a vivid perception of yet another dimension of great silence and suspended animation akin to sleep.

Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance is, in many ways, a unique work. Inspired directly in its form, rhythm and imagery by the thrill of flying, it is probably the first collection of poems to describe accurately and poetically the oneiric nature of the experience. Claudel suggested that the poems should be read in the manner in which one flies over a landscape, an observation that is perhaps only apparently correct, since the poems create a kind of art where the spontaneous, pure, crude sensation serves as a starting point and a governor for the poet's spirit. In this respect they constitute a kind of spectacular show, in which we can recognise the poet's adherence to his myth of liberation in his wrench from the earth, and thus from earthly things, even although his attempt to liberate himself is very tentative and clumsy, and he realises that he is not yet ready to break away completely from the order of things that lies below. "Nous sommes lourds mon pauvre ami" (p. 23), he writes in the last line of the first poem Dédicace.

In form the poems are visually striking because of the unusual typographical arrangement of the printed words, which Jean-Jacques Kihm maintains, is meant to represent the aerial acrobatics of Garros. The arrangement certainly imparts a suggestive value to the words themselves in a very impressionistic fashion. But at first glance it resembles the perforations on those mechanical piano music scrolls which only reveal the secret of their music when they are set in motion. I have no doubt that a key element already alluded to in the poet's mythology is at work here, namely that of vitesse, speed that will not tolerate the congestion of words. In fact the first line of the second poem Préambule suggests the poet's haste at the outset:

"Il n'y a pas une minute à perdre." (p. 26)



It is in the following poem Tentative d'Évasion, that the flights with Garros assume the symbolical significance of the poet's attempt to flee from that which is visible towards the unattainable. This is the poem that ends with the famous line:

"Je taquine l'éternité." (p. 68)

Studied in its entirety Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance emerges simultaneously as a poetic if somewhat dogmatic manifesto and an epic poem sung within the developing mythology of the poet. It is indeed a lyrical work, but the lyricism has an almost ethereally icy quality which appears to suffocate the poet. It nevertheless has importance as an indication of a dramatic stage in Cocteau's artistic development.

After the war - new idols - further growth of the mythology.

When Cocteau returned to Paris, the war, as far as he was concerned, was already over. And he was ever ready and eager for new artistic associations and experiences. Paris was no longer under the exotic influences of Diaghilew and the Ballets Russes. In May, 1914, Cocteau had met a strikingly beautiful young woman at the Opéra. Valentine Gross<sup>13</sup> was well known in Parisian society as a talented painter and designer. The two young people were attracted to one another and it was through Valentine that Cocteau came to know the painters of Montparnasse, and, in particular, Pablo Picasso, and the composer Erik Satie. It was indeed around the eccentric Satie that revolved the young composers, whose cause Cocteau now enthusiastically espoused - Les Nouveaux Jeunes, soon to be known as Les Six and consisting of Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and the lady of the group Germaine Tailleferre.

The year was 1918 and Cocteau now published his next important work - Le Coq et l'Arlequin - Notes autour de la Musique. This short book, ostensibly an appreciation of Erik Satie with a dedication to Georges Auric, presents a plea for new attitudes to the art of music. It is however couched in terms which embrace almost every field of artistic and creative activity, and it is written in a new style, very alert and crisp. The book is a veritable treasure store of themes that are central in the poet's mythology. In the first few pages we encounter such Coctelian truths as:

"L'art c'est la science faite chair." (p. 17)



- "Une oeuvre d'art doit satisfaire toutes les muses.  
C'est ce que j'appelle : Preuve par 9." (p. 17)
- "Le tact dans l'audace c'est de savoir jusqu'où on  
peut aller trop loin." (p. 17)
- "Il y a une maison, une lampe, une soupe, du feu, du  
vin, des pipes, derrière toute oeuvre importante de  
chez nous." (p. 17)
- "Un artiste peut ouvrir, en tâtonnant, une porte  
secrète et ne jamais comprendre que cette porte  
cachait un monde." (p. 18)
- "La vitesse d'un cheval emballé ne compte pas."  
(cf. p. 18)
- "Un artiste ne saute pas de marches; s'il en saute,  
c'est du temps perdu, car il faut les remonter  
après." (p. 19)
- "Il faut être un homme vivant et un artiste posthume."  
(cf. p. 19)
- "Un poète a toujours trop de mots dans son vocabulaire,  
un peintre trop de couleurs sur sa palette, un  
musicien trop de notes sur son clavier." (cf. p. 21)
- "Il faut s'asseoir d'abord, on pense après."  
(cf. p. 21)
- "Le beau a l'air facile. C'est ce que le public méprise."  
(cf. p. 22)
- "On ferme les yeux des morts avec douceur; c'est aussi  
avec douceur qu'il faut ouvrir les yeux des vivants."  
(p. 22)
- "Assez de nuages, de vagues, d'aquariums, d'ondines et de  
parfums la nuit; il nous faut une musique sur la terre,  
UNE MUSIQUE DE TOUS LES JOURS." (p. 28)
- "Le music-hall, le cirque, les orchestres américains de  
nègres, tout cela féconde un artiste au même titre que  
la vie. Se servir des émotions que de tels spectacles  
éveillent ne revient pas à faire de l'art d'après l'art.  
Ces spectacles ne sont pas de l'art. Ils excitent comme  
les machines, les animaux, les paysages, le danger."  
(p. 30)
- "La tradition se travestit d'époque en époque, mais le  
public connaît mal son regard et ne la retrouve jamais  
sous ses masques." (cf. p. 34)
- "Le public n'aime pas les profondeurs dangereuses; il  
préfère les surfaces. C'est pourquoi dans une expression  
d'art qui lui demeure encore suspect il incline plutôt  
en faveur des supercheries." (p. 36)



- "Le public n'adopte hier que comme une arme pour frapper sur maintenant." (cf. p. 36)
- "L'extrême limite de la sagesse, voilà ce que le public baptise folie." (cf. p. 37)
- "Le public veut comprendre d'abord, sentir ensuite." (p. 38)
- "S'il faut choisir un crucifié, la foule sauve toujours Barabbas." (p. 39)
- "Un artiste original ne peut pas copier. Il n'a donc qu'à copier pour être original." (p. 39)
- "On ne blâme pas une époque, on se félicite de n'en avoir pas été." (p. 40)
- "On s'est trop longtemps habitué au charme du seul échafaudage. Nous autres, architectes, nous démolissons l'échafaudage une fois la maison construite." (p. 40)
- "L'école impressionniste substitue le soleil à la lumière et la sonorité au rythme." (p. 41)
- "D'une certaine attitude frivole. - Si tu te sens la vocation de missionnaire, ne te cache pas la tête comme l'autruche; va chez les nègres et remplis tes poches de pacotille." (p. 42)
- "On nous demande trop de miracles; je m'estime déjà bien heureux si j'ai fait entendre un aveugle." (p. 43)
- "Nous abritons un ange que nous choquons sans cesse. Nous devons être gardiens de cet ange." (cf. p. 43)
- "Que pense la toile sur laquelle on est en train de peindre un chef d'oeuvre? 'On me salit. On me brutalise. On me cache.' Ainsi l'homme boude son beau destin." (p. 43)

In this fascinating work we encounter for the first time a very powerful anti-sentimental flavour in Cocteau's writing which is aptly expressed in the form of aphorisms and paradoxes that are to become such a regular feature in his work in the years that will follow. A certain number of typically Coctelian attitudes are also first apparent in this work. Since it has the sub-title Notes autour de la Musique it deals obviously with the poet's attitude to music as an art. His contention is that French music, in order to acquire identifiable qualities and characteristics of its own, should purge itself of those Russian and German influences, which, according to Cocteau, had spoiled the music of Debussy. Cocteau desires French music to be essentially French and he indicates that Satie, whose



music is free of foreign influences, is the ideal French composer.

Cocteau's well-informed attitude to the public is also strongly expressed. It is here that he attacks its fickleness and laziness for the first time, suggesting that its taste in matters of art is shallow, that its method of appreciation is mistaken, although he does not suggest (in this instance showing unusual tact!) that the public is guilty of stupidity. Margaret Crosland, in her fine biography of the poet, suggests that Le Coq et l'Arlequin is a clear enunciation of his thought process, his aphoristic statements revealing a very penetrating intelligence combined with "a clear-sighted perception which perpetually finds short cuts and does not make mistakes" (p. 123).

Le Coq et l'Arlequin, in another of its sections, describes the creation of the ballet Parade, when Cocteau found himself collaborating with Satie, who wrote the music, and Picasso, who designed the costumes and the décor. Cocteau's relationship with Picasso was another major influence in the formation of his poetic mythology and the constituent elements of Picasso's methodology have a great deal in common with the poet's own. It is, however, only a few years later, in 1923 to be precise, that the poet reveals the extent of Picasso's influence upon his thought when he writes his testimonial on the artist in his essay Picasso where he says:

"Voici donc un Espagnol, pourvu des plus vieilles recettes françaises (Chardin, Poussin, Le Nain, Corot), en possession d'un charme. Les objets, les visages, le suivent jusqu'où il veut. Un oeil noir les dévore et ils subissent, entre cet oeil par où ils entrent et la main par où ils sortent, une singulière digestion. Meubles, animaux, personnes, se mêlent comme des corps amoureux. Pendant cette métamorphose, ils ne perdent rien de leur puissance objective. Lorsque Picasso change l'ordre naturel des chiffres, il arrive toujours au même total.

A peine possède-t-il ce charme qu'il en use. Sur quoi l'expérimentera-t-il? On imagine Midas après que Bacchus lui a conféré le pouvoir de changer en or ce qu'il touche. Un arbre, une colonne, une statue le rendent timide. Il n'ose pas. Il hésite; il touche un fruit.

Picasso s'essaye d'abord sur ce qui se trouve à portée de sa main. Un journal, un verre, une bouteille d'Anis del Mono, une toile cirée, un papier à fleurs, une pipe, un paquet de tabac, une carte à jouer, une guitare, la couverture d'une romance : Ma Paloma.

Lui et Georges Braque, son compagnon de miracle, débauchent d'humbles objets. S'éloignent-ils de l'atelier? On



retrouve sur la Butte Montmartre les modèles qui furent l'origine de leurs harmonies : cravates toutes faites chez des mercières, faux marbres et faux bois des zincs, réclames d'absinthe et de Bass, suie et papiers des immeubles en démolition, craie des marelles, enseignes des bureaux de tabac où sont naïvement peintes deux pipes Gambier, retenues par un ruban bleu de ciel."

(pp. 278-279)

By transferring the commonplace objects around him on to his canvas, Picasso conferred upon them a special quality as well as a new dimension. In the same manner Cocteau took ordinary everyday articles such as gloves, hands, roses, statues and imbued them with the magic of his poetry. Cocteau and Picasso also both excelled in the art of spontaneous improvisation with felicitous results. Cocteau cites an interesting example involving Picasso:

"La veille de la répétition générale d'Antigone en décembre 1922, nous étions, acteurs et auteur, assis dans la salle de l'Atelier, chez Dullin. Une toile du bleu des boules à lessive formait un fond rocheux de crèche. Il y avait des ouvertures à gauche et à droite; au milieu, en l'air, un trou derrière lequel se déclame le rôle du chœur, avec un porte-voix. J'avais accroché autour de ce trou les masques de femmes, de garçons, de vieillards, peints par Picasso et ceux que j'avais exécutés d'après ses modèles. Sous les masques pendait un panneau blanc. Il s'agissait de préciser sur cette surface le sens d'un décor de fortune qui sacrifiait l'exactitude et l'inexactitude, également coûteuses, à l'évocation d'une journée de chaleur.

Picasso se promenait de long en large.

Il commença par frotter un bâton de sanguine sur la planche qui, à cause des inégalités du bois, devint du marbre. Ensuite il prit une bouteille d'encre et traça des motifs d'un effet magistral. Tout à coup il noircit quelques vides et trois colonnes apparurent. L'apparition de ces colonnes était si brusque, si surprenants que nous applaudîmes."

(p. 289)

What impressed Cocteau most in Picasso's painting was the appearance of three orders of greatness which stand out from one another, namely: precision, lucidity and sovereignty.

"L'intelligence de l'oeuvre d'un Picasso, c'est les chiffres faits chair."

(p. 279)

"La Clairvoyance domine son oeuvre."

(p. 281)

"Chaque ouvrage puise dans la tragédie intime dont il résulte une intensité de calme."

(p. 281)

One can discover so many directly equivalent statements made by Cocteau



in respect of his own poetry, that it is not difficult to find reasons for the exceptional creative comradeship that survived for such a long time between the two artists.

The Affair with Raymond Radiguet.

We come now to the event that was to strengthen Cocteau's personal mythology and inspire it to reach its very fullness. The year is 1919, the date is the 8th of June, and the setting is the Léonce Rosenberg gallery where a matinée poétique was being given in memory of Guillaume Apollinaire who had died on the 12th November 1918, the day after the signing of the armistice that brought to an end the first world war. This was the occasion of the first meeting between Cocteau and Raymond Radiguet, who was then only sixteen years of age. On this important occasion Radiguet was one of the readers of Apollinaire's poems. A week later he presented himself at Cocteau's house at 10 rue d'Anjou to be eagerly welcomed by the vulnerable poet.

Thus began what was to be for Cocteau the most passionate friendship he ever experienced. Radiguet revived for Cocteau the myth of Dargelos and, of all the young men with whom he was to fall in love, it was Radiguet who resembled most closely for him the Dargelos that he had created. Radiguet, in these early days of their liaison, had certain qualities of "commonness" in his manner that appealed greatly to Cocteau who was irresistibly drawn to an uncouthness, sometimes combined with bullying traits, which he interpreted as a kind of noble arrogance. Where Radiguet did differ from many of the young men with whom Cocteau had been involved until then was in the fact that he did have the potential for greatness that the impressionable Jean usually thought he recognised in the most unworthy objects of his affections. When Cocteau became physically attracted to a young man who took his fancy, he tended, in his rather blind admiration, to see qualities in his lover that did not actually exist except in his own heightened imagination. In Radiguet's case he was not mistaken. And the short period of three years in which they were to be together was a time of strong mutual inspiration. Cocteau's influence on Radiguet was to a large extent disciplinary, for he had often physically to compel the erratic and listless younger man to write. Radiguet, on the other hand, discouraged Cocteau from indulging his inclination to "astonish" by creating works that purported to be original in form and style, persuaded him to lend serious study to classics such as Madame de la



Fayette's La Princesse de Clèves and Benjamin Constant's Adolphe, and demonstrated clearly to the older man that a break with tradition in form was not necessarily an advantage. With his rationally classical approach to writing, Radiguet's literary criteria at that time were indeed of a higher order than Cocteau's, and the latter was quick to appreciate the lesson in listening to his young friend's oft repeated words:

"Il faut faire des romans comme tout le monde."

So Radiguet's main influence on Cocteau was to re-direct him to a more strictly classical approach to literature, which is evident in the novels that he wrote during the period of his friendship with the younger man - Le Grand Écart and Thomas l'Imposteur, both of which were published in the same year 1923.

In the same period that Cocteau was writing these novels, Radiguet produced Le Diable au Corps and Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel. Shortly before writing them Radiguet collaborated with Cocteau on the libretto for an opera based upon Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's Paul et Virginie, the music for which was to be composed by Erik Satie, and the two friends also worked together on a one-act comic opera with music by Francis Poulenc - Le Gendarme incompris, the text of which, spoken by a stock-comedy policeman, as it turned out later, had actually been lifted almost word for word from Mallarmé's Divagations, and, in particular, from the poem L'Éclésiastique. I mention these less serious activities to demonstrate that Radiguet, despite the great seriousness of his literary intentions, was not above amusing himself with Cocteau in works of a less urgent nature.

The most striking features to be added to Cocteau's mythology through his affair with Radiguet emerge in his collection of poems Plain-Chant which appeared in print in 1922. These are love poems inspired by the boy, and they show evidence of a new attitude which is very unusual for Cocteau - resignation. In the face of an unattainable ideal - complete identification with the beloved person through perfect, consummate possession - the poet is obliged to acknowledge the imperfections of man and the difficulties of realising love when the object of one's love is impossible to hold because he is a free soul, independent and insubordinate, and paradoxically loved because of those very qualities.

The first section of the collection of poems re-inforces the



Angel theme:

"Chaque fois que je m'amuse  
On ne souffre pas par lui  
Mon ange, espèce de muse,  
Me replonge dans la nuit.

Chaque fois que je dégaine,  
Comme un bouquet de muguet,  
Mon coeur fatigué de haine,  
L'ange cruel fait le guet.

Cet ange, ce monstre informe,  
Ne dort jamais un moment,  
Et non plus il ne m'informe  
De quoi je suis l'instrument." (p. 120)

And the suggestion that the presence of the Angel within him makes him suffer is also made:

"Je n'ai jamais d'argent et chacun me croit riche,  
J'ai le coeur sans écorce et chacun le croit sec.  
Toujours sur ma maison mentira cette affiche,  
Même un aigle viendrait l'en arracher du bec.

Ainsi veut l'ange, afin que la gloire se cache  
Et mûrisse en silence - à l'abri des clameurs.  
Le fouet de son aile interne me cravache :  
Je veux vivre, dit-il; qu'importe si tu meurs." (p. 118)

The Angel here has assumed the form of Radiguet, who, because of his strong propensity for creatures of the opposite sex, made Cocteau suffer.

In the last of the poems in the first section, which is also angel-inspired, Cocteau uses the image of mud to represent our ordinary life on its earthly plane -

"Notre boue a des douceurs,  
Notre humaine, tendre boue." (p. 122)

- an image which is to be used often in this sense, but most compellingly much later in the film of Orphée with the parallel image of eau sale at the moment when Heurtebise, having, at the instigation of the Princess, guided Orpheus back to Eurydice and life, remarks: "Il fallait les remettre dans leur eau sale". Once an element has been implanted in Cocteau's mythology it will appear again and again in his work, becoming an essential part of his poetic language.

The body of the second part of Plain-Chant contains the love poems directly inspired by Radiguet, and they are rich in precious themes that are dear to the heart of the poet's mythology. There is, for example, the chimerical notion of sleep as a link with death or with



the dead. There is also the fanciful idea of the one body with two heads representing the double identity as well as the double nature of the poet, or indicating his presence contemporaneously in two worlds, the actual and the poetic. The figure of the ever-vigilant Angel is always there, and impressively there is also the vast sea, a hostile element in Cocteau's poetry that welcomes the poet's beloved but rejects the poet himself. The sea here is obviously death.

Cocteau is also obsessed with sleep as another element and the large number of drawings which he made of Radiguet show the young writer in the posture of the sleeper, and it is in this state, when his features are in repose, that Radiguet assumes for Cocteau the physical traits of Dargelos. This is very evident in the drawings, and it is the same Dargelos profile that Cocteau was to paint over and over again, decorating the walls of chapels, or drawn to illustrate his novels or plays. Indeed it is the same profile which gained renown and world-wide circulation by appearing on a postage stamp that Cocteau designed before he died.

As always brilliantly versatile and prolific, during this same period Cocteau was not only writing poetry and novels but also his theatrical adaptations of Sophocles' Antigone and Oedipus. In the field of his poésie critique he wrote his important essay Picasso, a thesis on poetry Le Secret professionnel which contains his dissertation on angels, and he gave an address at the Collège de France - D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie in which he not only praised the work of Radiguet, but also neatly summed up in illustrative examples many of the artistic theories which he had recently conceived to add to the body of his personal mythology. Here are some interesting examples culled at random from the body of the address:

"Chaque fois que l'art est en route vers cette profonde élégance qu'on nomme classicisme, l'émotion disparaît. C'est l'étape ingrate. Le serpent glacial abandonne une peau bariolée."

(p. 237)

Only a Cocteau could have used the vivid imagery in the last sentence to illustrate a stage in artistic development.

"Nous contenons tous un ressort. Il ne faut pas le casser. Il faut pourtant le remonter à fond. Ensuite, nous vivrons du mécanisme animé par ce ressort qui se déroule. Le dernier tour de clef est décisif. Il est indispensable d'en avoir l'instinct. Comprenez-moi. Je parle d'un système d'idées qui nous dirige et relie entre



eux nos actes les plus incohérents. Remonter le ressort à fond, c'est rabâcher. Tourner un peu trop loin, c'est radoter. Un peu plus loin, on casse tout."

(p. 238)

In this example we have a brilliant justification for Cocteau's tendency to repeat himself, for which his critics frequently belittled him. What they conveniently overlooked was the fact that, although he repeated the same themes, he gave them an entirely new interpretation each time they re-appeared, or expressed them in other terms with new imagery. A good example is the idea expressed in the last two sentences of the above quotation -

"Tourner un peu trop loin, c'est radoter. Un peu plus loin, on casse tout."

(p. 238)

Another version of the same idea is:

"Le tact dans l'audace c'est de savoir jusqu'où on peut aller trop loin."

(p. 17)

Here are some more examples of his concise manner of expressing important concepts taken from D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie:

"A force de ne pouvoir me mettre d'aucune école, ni m'en fabriquer une, l'opinion éprise d'étiquettes me les accroche toutes dans le dos. C'est ainsi que j'ai représenté Dada aux yeux de l'étranger, alors que j'étais la bête noire des dadaïstes."

(p. 240)

"Je propose l'absence d'un style. Avoir du style au lieu d'avoir un style."

(p. 241)

"La poésie est une électricité. ... La forme des lampes et des abat-jour est une autre affaire."

(p. 254)

"La poésie est un tour de cartes exécuté par l'âme. Elle habite des ruptures d'équilibre et de divins calembours."

(p. 255)

"Après Le Coq et l'Arlequin, nous courûmes le risque d'être pris au sérieux, ce qui est le commencement de la mort."

(pp. 244-245)

"Je vous concède que de loin, l'homogénéité d'une oeuvre prend le dessus et qu'il nous est très difficile de saisir les volte-face par quoi un homme de génie se renouvelle."

(p. 242)

Up to the time when Guillaume Apollinaire died, in 1918, Cocteau had always signed his letters after his name with a little heart. Then, after the death of Apollinaire, he adopted a star symbol, which, with the passing of the years becoming little more than a



slightly smudged asterisk or cross, he used until he died.<sup>14</sup> Now in D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie Cocteau, in discussing Apollinaire and suggesting that he had been born out of his time -

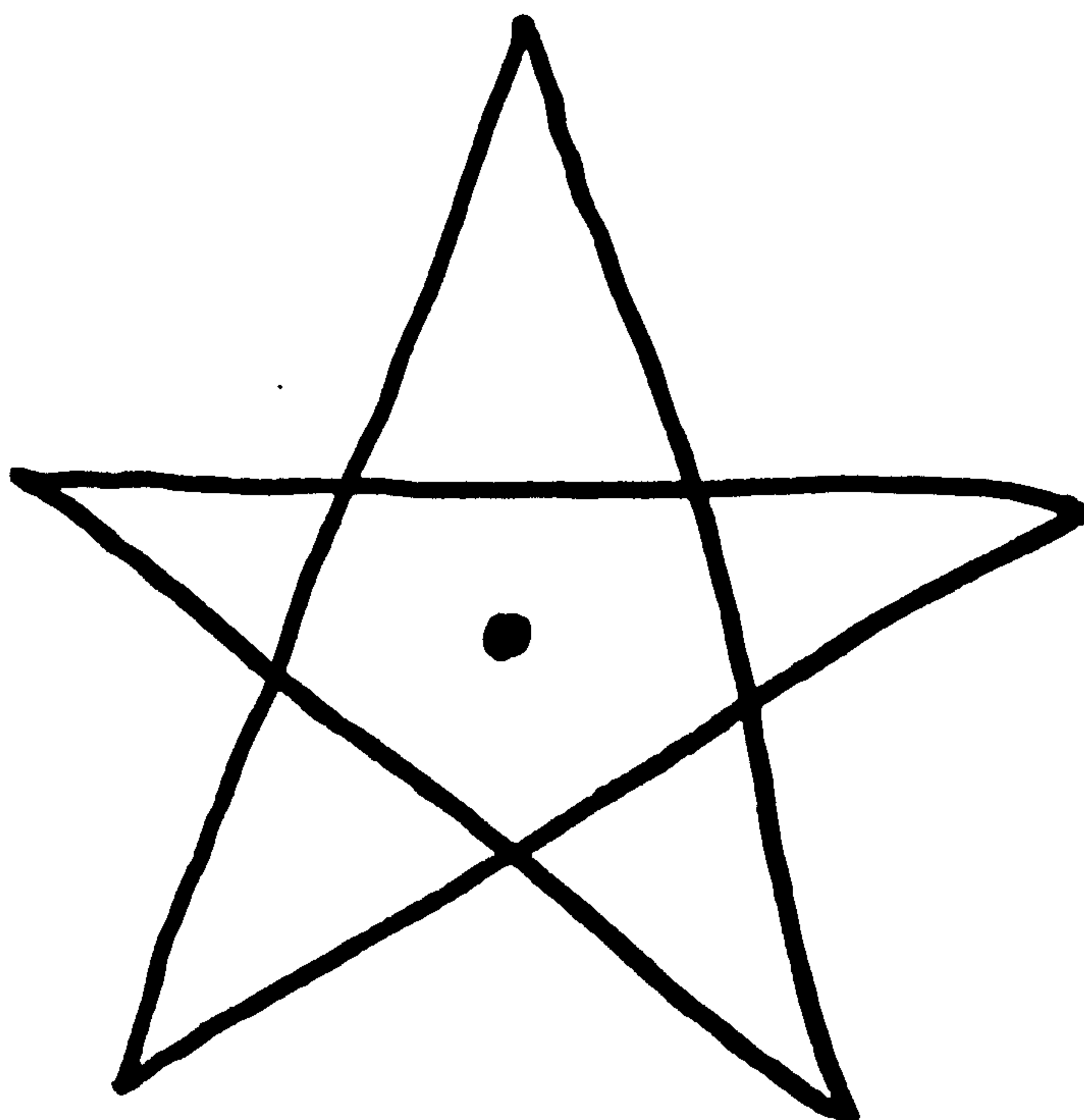
"Je n'ai pas connu d'homme plus mal à l'aise à l'extrême  
pointe de son époque" (p. 243)

- (another recurring theme in Cocteau's work) - goes on to refer to Apollinaire's work and says:

"Voyez la goutte d'encre qui tremble au bout de sa  
plume. Elle tombe et fait une tache étoilée. Toute  
l'oeuvre de ce grand poète est une suite de pâtés  
d'encre exquis." (p. 244)

In indicating the role played by chance in the poetry of Apollinaire, Cocteau is also referring to the existence of the same extraordinary element in his own. Now the allusion to the "star-shaped blot" which fell from Apollinaire's pen is important because it happens to be mentioned not long before the time when Cocteau was to change the sign after the signature of his name from a heart to a star.

And how is this star actually formed in early examples of its use by the poet? It consists of two triangles with a dot in the centre thus:





Naturally, since it was always drawn freehand, it varied slightly in actual form, and sometimes, when it was re-produced with more care in drawings, e.g. in the drawing Ange in Maison de Santé (Paris, 1926), the dot in the centre assumes the outline of a human eye, in the centre of the star, which in turn is placed in the centre of the angel's chest.

Now this star is probably the central symbol in the poet's personal mythology. The fact that he used it for some forty years is significant enough to indicate its importance for him. On its simplest level, inspired as it was supposed to have been by the shape of the scar which Cocteau saw on Apollinaire's forehead, it is a symbol of the poet. But it can also be accepted as a symbol of a many-faceted talent - Cocteau's talent. Again it can also be taken as a symbol of the unification of disparate arts in the indissoluble body of Cocteau's poésie. And it can be taken as a mystical symbol of Cocteau's inner life, the oneiric line of experience into which he sank when he was "asleep".

It is not generally known that Cocteau, for a time at least, was a practising Rosicrucian.<sup>15</sup> The Rosicrucians are a secret society whose members strive for knowledge of the secrets of nature, the transmutation of metals, the existence of elemental spirits, and they study mystical phenomena. They also use magical signatures such as the sign of the inverted triangle combined with the upright triangle to form a star. In Rosicrucian language these symbolise the infinite and the finite planes. Nothing could therefore be more appropriate as a Coctelian symbol than this particular star representing the outer and the inner life of the poet, his extroversion and introversion, his two planes of existence. Rosicrucian symbolology plays an important part in Cocteau's mythology and helps to explain his great love of panoply and his use of various signs and objects as an essential element of his poetic methodology.

From the foregoing observations it should now be apparent that the artistic imagery we shall discover in the body of Cocteau's work is coloured by and indeed a part of his own mythology, which, in turn, he created from the fabric of events and spiritual experiences in his life. Although certain leitmotifs, objects and symbols will appear frequently in nearly all his works, there are certain key works which contain a particular set of their own, peculiar to them, and



representative either of a particular period in his artistic development, or summing up the philosophical experience of a period just completed. In some cases the essence of a particular relationship with someone he loved affects the content and the style of the work. In my illustrations of Cocteau's personal mythology in the selected works with which I shall be dealing in the following chapters, I shall endeavour, in the case of each work, to indicate not only the relevant keys to the symbolism, but to describe the nature of the approach that will be necessary in each case, in order to arrive at an understanding of the content. My reactions will be, to a very great extent, of a subjective nature, since it is in the nature of Cocteau's work to attune the student to a state of very personal response. In such a condition it sometimes becomes difficult to distinguish between one's designative and appraisive perceptions. This is particularly so in studying much of Cocteau's poetry which exists "in the blurred frontier between dream and reality". But it also applies to many of his prose works which often do not keep in focus. The poet's contribution of the cultural factor of his background in his work will also be found to vary in the light of the spatial differentiation which he may employ to set out his ideas. His method will contrastingly be found to be lucidly scientific in some works, even in the exposition of concepts that are essentially philosophical, and hence abstract, subtle and transcendental, and in some instances occult or magical. The pattern of the network of ideas that we shall encounter in each work will, however, in most cases, be peculiar to that particular work, and an indication of the poet's psyche at the time when the work was created.

I am also certain that there exists a unifying pattern in the whole panorama of his work - a homogeneity owing its existence to the personality of the poet behind it. But Cocteau does not actually interfuse his work with the heavy aura of a strong personality. He is rather content to add a suggestion of it, and, for the rest, allow his material to speak for itself.

It is also in vain that we may seek consistency in his art. He was too sensitive to the ever-changing climate of the avant-garde world of movements and vogues to be able to confine himself to any one of these at a given time. And he tried his best to be always one step ahead of current trends in the arts. Also, Cocteau himself had an intense dislike of consistency. He once said that to give oneself



wholly to each particular case, even if this were to involve one in a series of apparent contradictions, puts one on a straighter course, and gives one deeper insights than abstract principles, which so often compel one to be untrue to that which is best in oneself. This helps to explain the form of many of his works.

The idea of ideologies was anathema to Cocteau. And yet, contradictorily, he himself was an ideologist in the sense that he was in many ways a visionary. But he did not recognise himself as such, because, for him, being a visionary would have meant being unpractical, in that the visionary must live in a state of perfect harmony. And, for Cocteau perfection in harmony, symmetry or balance produced a state of inertia fatal to the poet. This explains Cocteau's adherence to one of his favourite dogmas - the cult of imperfection.

And, of course, Cocteau himself was not perfect. He produced a great deal that was inferior in his works. But one must seek out the gold amidst the dross. No one is perfect. The only perfection for Cocteau is to be found in death, which, for him, is one of the many forms of life. Is this why death fascinated him so much? Is this why he was obsessed by death in its many forms? Is this why he treated the theme of death with so much originality in his work, and in his life, even to the extent of arranging to have one of the most unusual of tombs at Milly-la-Forêt in the floor of the little chapel of St. Blaise des Simples where we can look down and see simply his name:

Jean Cocteau

and beneath the name in the poet's characteristically and jauntily linear handwriting the truth:

"Je reste avec vous."

followed by his star?



## NOTES

## Chapter 2

1. Jean Cocteau : Portraits-Souvenir, p. 28.
2. Op.cit., p. 31.
3. Op.cit., p. 64.
4. Op.cit., pp. 111-112.
5. Barbette was later to play a part, that of a beautiful young woman, in a scene in the film Le Sang d'un Poète.
6. Op.cit., p. 112.
7. Op.cit., pp. 114-115.
8. Jean Cocteau : Le Cordon ombilical (Plon, 1962), p. 13.
9. It is also true to say that Cocteau's search for the incarnation of the Dargelos ideal is ever-present in the succession of young men who filled his life. Dargelos also figures prominently in Cocteau's drawings and paintings. His profiles can still be seen on the walls of the little chapel of St. Blaise des Simples where Cocteau is buried. Thus the circle is closed and even in death Cocteau is watched over by the forms of Dargelos.
10. Jean Cocteau : Le Grand Écart, pp. 18-19.
11. In point of fact this was not the first time that Cocteau had come face to face with death. As a boy, returning from Switzerland with his mother on the night train, he inadvertently swallowed powdered cocaine, mistaking it for poppy powder. The doctor attending him told him that he had never been closer to death.
12. In Journal d'un Inconnu (1953) Cocteau wrote: "Avant mon poème l'Ange Heurtebise, le signe 'ange' ne présentait déjà, dans mon oeuvre, aucun rapport avec une certaine imagerie religieuse ..." (p. 46).
13. Although it was rumoured that Cocteau and Valentine Gross were in love and likely to marry, a possibility encouraged by Madame Cocteau who saw in Valentine an eminently suitable partner for her son, Valentine actually married, some time later, Cocteau's friend, the artist Jean Hugo, grandson of Victor Hugo.
14. The simple changing of a symbol after his name naturally had other complicated implications, as, with everything that the poet did, there was always a reason within a reason within a reason!

Elizabeth Sprigge and Jean-Jacques Kihm have given some interesting details to the important event in their biography Jean Cocteau : The Man and the Mirror (Gollancz, 1968) where on pp. 109-110 they write: "Jacques Maritain was naturally deeply



shocked by the book\* and wrote a severe review which ended Cocteau's close friendship with him. Desbordes had already written in J'Adore that he did not want Jacques Maritain's God 'shut up in a church'; now Cocteau, strongly influenced by Desbordes' hatred of dogma and his own more pagan religion wrote: 'Let Maritain return to his Christian philosophy, and I will return to poetry'. As a mark of this change and of his renunciation of the sacred heart, symbolised by the red heart worn by Père Charles Henrion, which had so much impressed him, Jean Cocteau now gave up putting a tiny heart beside his signature and for the rest of his life put a star instead - a star, he said, suggested by the scar on Apollinaire's forehead."

\* The book referred to here was Jean Desbordes' pantheistic novel J'Adore. Desbordes, another protégé of Cocteau, another angel, was a Protestant, and this may in part explain Cocteau's turning away from the Roman Catholic church at this time.

15. I had a short acquaintance in a semi-professional capacity with Cocteau in 1952 of which I shall say more later. I was then a member of AMORC\* the Californian centre of the Rosicrucian Order. In the course of our conversations it became apparent to me that he was well acquainted with the teachings of the Order. I am not at liberty to reveal the details of our conversations for obvious reasons, but when I departed he shook my hand in the manner of a Rosicrucian.

\* AMORC = Ancient Mystical Order of the Rosy Cross.



PART TWO

Illustrations of Cocteau's poetic imagery and  
aesthetic theories in selected works

- Chapter 1 : Le Potomak (1913-1914)
- Chapter 2 : Poésie  
Plain-Chant (1923)  
L'Ange Heurtebise (1926)  
Opéra (1927)
- Chapter 3 : Poésie de roman - I  
Le Grand Ecart (1923)  
Thomas l'Imposteur (1923)
- Chapter 4 : Poésie de roman - II  
Le Livre blanc (1928)
- Chapter 5 : Poésie critique  
Le Rappel à l'Ordre (1926)  
La Difficulté D'Être (1947)  
Journal d'un Inconnu (1953)  
Opium (1930)
- Chapter 6 : Poésie de théâtre  
La Machine infernale (1932)  
Bacchus (1952)
- Chapter 7 : Poésie de cinéma  
Le Sang d'un Poète (1930)  
Orphée (1950)  
Le Testament d'Orphée ou Ne me demandez pas  
pourquoi (1960)



Chapter 1 : Le Potomak (1913-1914)

The Potomac is a river in America that flows into the Bay of Chesapeake. Cocteau, doubtlessly, attracted to the sound and look of this exotic word used it to describe the "megoptera coelenterous" (a combination of scientific terms that is strictly of Cocteau's devising!) - a monster that has the form of a large-winged, very fictitious jellyfish, found in the river Potomac, imported to France, and displayed in a "dry" aquarium in a cellar in the Place de la Madeleine. This may explain the title of the book but its connection with the subject matter is another problem.

The publication of Le Potomak was held up until 1923, and when it did appear it also contained a Prospectus that had been written in 1916 and which precedes the actual text. Cocteau looked upon it as his first actual book, since he disowned anything he had written before it.

It is supposed to be a novel, but anyone looking at it would find it difficult to apply this description to it. It consists of a series of notes and observations, fragments of free verse, dialogues, a set of drawings constituting the Album des Eugènes, all of which, at a first examination appear to have been thrown together without unity or continuity. The illustrations are horrendous and yet there appears to be a strong poetic quality in certain parts of the book. The reader, naturally, looks for a key to the maze. The key is a simple one. If one looks upon it not as an actual novel, but as an autobiographical notebook, the difficulties disappear. It becomes apparent that it is a work reflecting Cocteau's crisis, his period of self-questioning when he went through a process of torment and purification, and, undergoing his first great "mue", was casting off the last fetters of the frivolous phase in his artistic development. Seen from this point of view the work does have an internal unity and represents not only a summation of the poet's achievement up to the period of the war, but a clear indication in embryonic terms of the character that a great deal of the poet's work was to assume in the course of his life. Such an indication is apparent in the poet's frequent use of aphorisms. Another is to be found in his attempt in this work (unsuccessful as it may be) to strengthen one form of expression with another, for example, by using written text and drawings or illustrations together.



The book is dedicated to Igor Stravinsky and Cocteau often claimed in later years that it had been inspired by Le Sacre du Printemps. Since it was this great work by Stravinsky that had brought about his first artistic "mue", he would indicate his gratitude by dedicating Le Potomak to the composer. In the actual dedication he refers not only to Stravinsky's work, but to the fact that the Ballets Russes no longer had importance for him:

"Mon cher Igor,

Ce n'est pas au hasard que je t'offre ce livre.

Après L'OISEAU DE FEU qui, venant des neiges, traverse la forêt de Siegfried pour s'abattre chez nous, et le pauvre pantin qui meurt un soir d'Andersen au soupir des harmonicas, LE SACRE DU PRINTEMPS célèbre ses rites.

Je devine des nuits d'avril sur votre fleuve russe, où 'l'hiver lucide' s'accorde avec la mollesse orientale.

C'est là que peuvent naître de si terribles imaginations.

Ton chef-d'oeuvre ressemble à l'oeuf, parce qu'il en a la plénitude et le mystère. Je me souviens de l'avoir surnommé après la première audition: 'les géorgiques de la préhistoire'. J'ajoute : Ses bucoliques. Une églogue féroce.

Aujourd'hui, je désire oublier Roerich et W. Nijinsky, le gymnase où se mobilisait le troupeau rouge des filles, le vert cru des collines, le jeu des jeunes hommes, ce drame aussi étrange que les moeurs des insectes au cinématographe.

L'Album des Eugènes s'est imposé à moi dans un salon de campagne où, chaque jour, on me jouait ta musique. On entendait le choc sourd des talons contre la terre  
une promenade de mammoth  
une cour de ferme  
un camp.

Parfois, une romance naïve arrivait du fond des âges.

Voici nos drames, la figure de Janus où la gravité alterne avec le rire.

Il y a rire et rire, Igor.

La ballerine de PETROUCHKA me blesse encore le coeur avec sa petite trompette.

J.C." (pp. 43-45)



The "salon de campagne" referred to was at the home of the painter Jacques-Emile Blanche at Offranville in Normandy, where Cocteau had gone to write a play, and instead, inspired by Stravinsky's music, had started to write Le Potomak. It is strangely coincidental that Le Sacre du Printemps thus appears to have inspired on two occasions works of a primeval content, firstly, Le Potomak, primeval in the sense that it is a work delving into the inner sources of the poet, and, secondly, very much later, in 1939, the cartoon sequence in the Walt Disney film Fantasia which interprets Stravinsky's music in the form of a re-creation of a prehistoric age and the migration and extermination through drought of prehistoric mammoths. Perhaps Cocteau's allusion here to "une promenade de mammoth" was visionary?

Cocteau describes in the first section of the book Après Coup how he came to create Le Potomak. It is interesting that the drawings came first and then the text. And the process of creation was almost completely automatic. He writes:

1. - J'ai d'abord connu les Eugènes.
2. - J'ai dessiné, sans texte, l'album des Eugènes.
3. - J'ai senti par eux le besoin d'écrire.
4. - J'ai cru que j'allais écrire un livre.
5. - J'avais un grand nombre de notes en désordre.
6. - J'ai dicté ces notes.
7. - J'ai vu que ce n'était pas un livre, mais une préface. Une préface à quoi? ..."

(p. 49)

Since the creation was automatic it was obviously dictated from within. This, then, is a work created by the poet when he was "asleep". The presence of an element of disorder is propitious to this kind of creative act, and at the same time it encourages the change within him. He writes:

"J'écrivais avec désordre. Au centre, nous nous aperçumes que je muais, que j'écrivais dans une de ces crises où l'organisme change. Ainsi, plusieurs fois avant la mort, on meurt ..." (p. 51)

Once the poet has completed his moulting the book will cease -

"il cessera le jour où cessera la mue :"

(p. 52)

In the odd notes which appear in this same section Après Coup, two refer to the poet's rapports with the public and the press:

"Ce que le public te reproche, cultive-le:  
c'est toi."

(p. 53)



"Les coupures de presse m'eussent fait pleurer jadis et j'y trouve une force. Plus on se moque de moi et plus ce moi évanoui, je souhaite qu'on le moque." (p. 54)

Another refers to his resolution to turn his back upon certain things in his past:

"Je ne sauverai rien de mon passé qui flambe. Ne deviendrai-je pas une colonne de sucre si je me retourne?" (p. 54)

The question in the last sentence is a good example of how Cocteau adapts a Biblical image to suit his own ends. It is also intended as a humorous reference to the fact that shortly before he started writing Le Potomak, he had read somewhere that sugar induced dreams, had taken to eating whole boxes of it, lying down twice a day stopping his ears with wax in order that the dreams might be rooted more deeply than in external sounds. A comparable though more exotic method is practised by Salvador Dali who has perfume dropped upon his eyelids when he is asleep!

The next section of the book Comment ils vinrent begins with a dialogue between the author and his friend Persicaire.<sup>1</sup> But the dialogue, being typically coctelian, is, in this first instance, a monologue, since the author talks while Persicaire presumably listens. In the course of this reminiscing monologue we become aware, as we read, that the visual element is always strong in Cocteau's writing, even in early works such as this. Cocteau had become interested in the cinema by the time he wrote Le Potomak, and there are paragraphs that read like a description of a film sequence:

"Mon oeil regarde un livre jaune, une bouteille d'encre, mon porte-plume. Je cherche.  
Des pans de mémoire, des dates, des lambeaux d'époque, des visages, des choses faites ou dites, et, soudain, sans importance, un fauteuil qui mange tout, qui retrouve le relief au détriment du reste vers quoi je m'efforce.  
Spirales.  
Stupeur d'être moi, d'avoir à mourir." (p. 60)

The first paragraph, which is factual in nature, presents three shots of three objects - the book, the bottle of ink, the pen-holder. And, as the poet searches, he leads into the more figurative montage of the second paragraph with its quick flashes which intermingle experiences with objects in random order until they are devoured by



the image of the armchair which seems to loom out beyond the other elements. The moment of truth is symbolised by the word spirales which, dramatically and vividly, conveys the vertiginous feeling of the poet as, with astonishment, he becomes aware once more of his own identity and simultaneously the cold fact of his mortality. The striking effect which Cocteau so successfully achieves in sections such as these owes nothing to the quality of the vocabulary. It is the manner in which he arranges his words, manipulating them so as to form a series of clear mental images which present a vivid, striking picture, that forms the basis of his poetic method. By the same token, he makes use of the images of common, everyday objects in his poetry and in his films to create similarly striking effects.

One of the most enchanting parables to be found in Cocteau's work is the fable of the butterfly - l'APOLOGUE DU PAPILLON which follows in the same section, and which the poet starts off by reciting to Persicaire. It has an oriental setting. The telling of the tale is interrupted by the fact that the poet forgets how it ends. Then, on the following day, he remembers, and he writes it down and sends it to Persicaire. It is a pity that Cocteau, using poor judgment, elects to record this delightful story in this manner. The device proves irritating, and more so, because the story contains a basic element of the poet's mythology. Here it is, shorn of its irksome interruptions:

"Il était, dans la ville de Tien-Sin,  
un papillon ... C'était un fameux papillon ...  
C'est pour cela que le jeune artiste  
Pa-Kao-Tsai (ou Chou-To-Tsé) ... se promène  
et il aperçoit le papillon. Jamais il  
n'avait vu un papillon si beau. Il  
s'exalte et commence son portrait, de  
mémoire.

Il peignait sur du papier de riz  
d'une main qui, d'abord, minutieuse-  
ment dessine,  
car, dans la ville de Tien-Sin,  
on a bien moins à faire qu'à Paris.

Cette patience le mène à l'âge  
de cent ans. Enfin, un soir,  
avant de mourir, il pose la dernière  
touche.

Alors, le papillon quitte la page  
et s'envole ..."

(pp. 62-64)

The idea which Cocteau expresses in this beautiful parable is one which he often spoke about. Many years later, in an interview with



André Fraigneau in which he was discussing his work in the cinema, he stated that once a film, or indeed any work of art, is completed by the artist, it immediately assumes a life of its own, quite independent of its creator.

The poet, having written down the ending of the fable, and having sent it to Persicaire, receives in reply a letter sent by pneumatic tube, containing Persicaire's thanks and a more modest anecdote. He tells how, in inventing a fairy-tale for the pleasure of his little son Mélique, when he came to the description of the inevitable monster:

"Gras, mélancolique, farouche, il  
reste continuellement à sentir sous  
son ventre la chaleur de la boue.  
Son crâne est tellement lourd qu'il  
lui est impossible de le porter. Il  
le roule autour de lui, lentement, et,  
la mâchoire entr'ouverte, il arrache  
avec sa langue les herbes vénéneuses  
arrosées de son haleine ..." 2 (p. 65)

Mélique was so terrified that he called out to his father:

"J'ai peur de la bête. Si elle allait  
sortir du conte!"

It is in trying to reply to this letter of Persicaire, and under the influence of its content regarding the monster, that the poet, in a state of fatigue, becomes the instrument of his Angel and creates the first of his monsters - the Eugène. He writes:

"Le stylographe, en marge et sur le  
buvard, commence à vivre.  
A mon oreille ... ce sifflet d'ange,  
si, lentement, tu promènes ton doigt  
mouillé au fil d'un bol de verre. 3 (p. 66)  
Tout à coup : L'EUGÈNE."

In the second part of the section Comment ils vinrent Cocteau describes how the Eugènes made their appearance. It began actually with some doodling on the corner of a sheet of pink blotting paper during a sleepless night in the country. The doodle took the shape of a woman with a large eye and a round ear. This was left aside for a year. When he came back to the room and saw the outline of the woman he could not resist the temptation of adding a scar, a blot, a wrinkle and a bag under the eye. On the following day he felt a certain remorse for what he had done. It was almost as if, absent-mindedly, he had caused a young mistress of his to age. Once we have drawn such a figure, Cocteau maintains, we become responsible for it,



and we have the right to suppress it, if it displeases us, and to care for it if we like it.

Now, when the first Eugène made its appearance on his blotting-pad, and it had so much in common with grubs, with the retort-stand, with a graph, with the globe, with a murmuring gyroscope, that he did not require to name it -

"Tiens, dis-je, un Eugène!, comme  
des nègres s'écriant : 'Christophe  
Colomb!' et qui ajoutent :  
'Nous sommes découverts!'" (p. 68)

This was how the Eugènes had transmitted their name to the poet, just as they had some time before sent him a sketch equivalent to their shapeless body on the pink blotting paper. An Eugène had in fact always been there, standing, with eye set, sly mouth and short sleeve. A conventional sign. And from this time many Eugènes poured from his pen. Now, whilst, partly amused, partly ill at ease, he had consciously created the Mortimers, and even their name which contains the word mort, the Eugènes imposed themselves upon him, and they came in squads. People in the poet's vicinity could see that he was scarcely responsible for their appearance. They saw them come down from his pen quickly. And the process became more and more automatic as the poet seemed to be suffering from a craze, namely to extract the Eugène from the blotting-pad where he could actually see it as moulded and at the same time as indecipherable as a hieroglyph which looks like a crocodile but relates a battle. More and more passive, the poet looked upon the Eugène not even seeking the reasons for its strength. It was a question not of drawing the Eugènes in every conceivable pose, but of deciding in the case of each one as it presented itself how best to plan its escape. At this juncture Cocteau tells us:

"Comme je suis poète, je dessine mal." (p. 70)

So the actual manner in which the Eugène took form on paper became an uncanny experience:

"A force de le regarder et d'être suivi par son petit oeil, je m'aperçus que deux lignes près de la courbe du nez et à l'occiput, l'une que Ramsès eût prise pour une tache et l'autre pour une crosse, n'attendaient, afin de mettre en relief le nez et les cheveux, qu'une ligne de retouche. La première était l'angle d'une section courbe du



nez; l'autre, l'arête, pour ainsi dire,  
d'un parchemin roulé à demi.

Il ne me restait plus qu'à suivre  
l'exemple. Après le nez et les cheveux  
vinrent la joue, la bouche, le col, la  
cravate, le ventre, les jambes et les  
petites bottines absurdes. Bientôt il  
y eut partout des Eugènes et aucun d'eux  
n'étant jamais identique, je les supposai  
un et innombrables, comme le zéro, collier  
du néant."

(p. 71)

The poet asked himself whether he had ever seen something that the Eugènes reminded him of.

"Je croyais saisir, perdre et ressaisir,  
montant et replongeant comme un ludion  
dans l'élément de la pensée, une circonstance  
analogue à celle de leur naissance terrestre,  
un vague rapport ancien entre ce buvard et un  
autre buvard, entre le moi de ce geste et un  
autre moi jumeau que je ne pouvais atteindre."

(p. 72)

It was only much later that he came to know that this was a trick played by the female Eugènes, namely, to make one imagine, in the space of a thousandth of a second, that one has already seen or heard elsewhere and in the same circumstances a sight or a sentence which strikes one's eye or one's ear. What actually happens is that the women Eugènes tickle the nerve cells of memory shortly before the image or the sounds touch the senses and the imbroglio causes a maladjustment or want of balance which makes one remember a perception or sensation as something old or already dead at the very moment when it is reaching one for the first time.

The poet is, of course, aware that a revelation such as this will doubtlessly bring a wry, sardonic smile to the lips of the knowing erudite or scientist. But he has his answers ready for them, and they could not be more apposite:

"Là où un mur oblige les philosophes et  
les savants à des haltes méticuleuses  
début le poète."

(p. 73)

and

"La science ne sert qu'à vérifier les  
découvertes de l'instinct."

(p. 73)

To further defend his case he quotes two sentences that were spoken to him by the famous French mathematician Henri Poincaré a few days before his death:



"Pourquoi seriez-vous timide? C'est à moi de l'être. Votre jeunesse et la poésie sont deux privilèges. Le hasard d'une rime sort parfois un système de l'ombre, et la gaieté attrape le mystère au vol."

(p. 73)

"Oui, oui, je devine. Vous voudriez savoir où nous en sommes avec l'inconnu. Chaque jour apporte un prodige dans nos laboratoires, mais la responsabilité nous oblige au silence professionnel ... La foi qu'on nous porte ne peut se nourrir que de certitude. L'inconnu! ..."

(p. 73)

Now how did the women Eugènes make their appearance to the poet?

They came by themselves one evening on a page upon which the poet's lifeless hand was wandering. He was not aware at the time that he had drawn a woman Eugène. It was only on the following day that he noticed the thing among the rough sketches he had been making. Limp and sedate, one of the women was there mingled with an Eugène. The start of the pen stroke of which she was made actually came out of the male Eugène's ribs.

Cocteau then proceeded to draw the pair of them. Then he drew a company of them. Then he drew the album. And that is how the Album des Eugènes came to be.

### The Album des Eugènes

The album consists of sixty-three pen drawings. Each drawing has an explanatory caption or note describing the action. Together, drawings and text tell the account of how the Mortimers, a typical, deadly dull, middle class couple, with middle class tastes, arrive by boat for a brief holiday to end their honeymoon on the Lake of Geneva. They stay at a hotel, visit the theatre and the museums, go to church, attend a reading of poetry, dance, and one morning in their room in the hotel, when they are expecting the maid to bring hot water, are visited instead by the women Eugènes who, with their horrible mouths that look like the suctorial organs of some terrible creature of the sea, devour the Mortimers. The Eugènes then arrive to feast gluttonously on the entrails of the Mortimers. Overeating, they suffer indigestion, as a result of which they vomit the inner organs and pieces of the Mortimers into the river. Because of their strong genesiacal tendency to reform, the Mortimers gradually recompose and find themselves back in time at the moment when the Eugènes were about



to enter their hotel room. The maid enters instead, bringing their hot water. Alas, all is normal again! The last drawing, which, with its air of casualness, is an anti-climax to those that have gone before, shows the Mortimers departing on the boat, surrounded by their pieces of luggage.

Although the album has been described as a comic-strip, in many ways it goes beyond the conventions of the medium. There is a frequent change of perspective in the sequence of the drawings and very sudden transitions from the physical to the abstract. Whilst the drawings of the Mortimers, with their satirical elements, tend to amuse, the horrendous impact created by those of the Eugènes leaves a distasteful impression that in the sensitive spectator creates strong feelings of nausea. But this was doubtlessly the author's intention.

From the very first drawing of the Mortimers, which shows them standing at the rail of the ship looking towards the shore, an Eugène is present, watching them. Blowing on a short pipe in the next drawing, he calls a woman Eugène who suddenly appears on his left, further along the deck. Now we see the Mortimers for the first time, face on, dressed as typical tourists, the wife carrying binoculars in a case hanging from her left shoulder. Their expressions are very blank. But further along the deck a transparent Eugène is standing, and beside him is a small valise containing the Thing. Cut to a drawing bearing the caption Esprit de groupe, which shows an Eugène standing with four others who are arranged around him, adhering to him. The ones on his left and right are upside down, and of the two others one on his left is standing on the upturned feet of the upside down Eugène on his left, whilst the other is lying across the top of his head resting his own head against the upturned feet of the other Eugène on his right. The Esprit de groupe of the Eugènes is obviously very constricting. Leaving this group of Eugènes, we now see the Mortimers getting off the ship at the landing-stage. Cut to the Mortimers dining. Cut to the Mortimers in a box at the theatre. On their right sit three Eugènes and a woman Eugène. The three male Eugènes are slyly watching the Mortimers. Cut to the Mortimers abed with the caption Sommeil. They have a look of bourgeois innocence, as they sleep. And they are both dreaming the same dream as we observe in the next drawing. It is a round dream and very full, a montage of their experiences of the day, and in the centre an element



of nightmare as the woman Mortimer appears to be falling out of the hotel window in her nightdress. And round the perimeter of the circular dream the Eugènes are vainly trying to find a way into it. On the following morning, as the Mortimers kneel and pray in church, from a stone column behind them they are observed by two Eugènes. In the following drawing we see the Mortimers in love, sitting with bland, expressionless faces by the lakeside. Just as they have but a single dream, so they have only one heart between them. The next drawing shows their single heart. We find them next at a poetry reading. They are sitting in the foreground on a sofa, slightly apart, the man asleep, the woman with her hands crossed on her lap, obviously bored in her incomprehension of the poem being recited by a lady on a dais, whom we can see through a doorway on the right of the woman Mortimer. In the next drawing we see the Mortimers dancing. The woman is very contented as she rests her chin on her husband's shoulder. Now they are viewing pictures in a gallery, now they are attending a concert, with Eugènes sitting on either side of them. But the caption tells us - "Rien ne trouble les Mortimer".

Now the poet moves his attention to the Eugènes. A drawing entitled Esprit d'entente is a combination of two Eugènes. The Eugènes have found a device that will permit them to enter the world of the Mortimers. It is the Thing which is contained in the little valise we first saw on the deck of the ship as the Mortimers were arriving. The valise bears the initial E. E for Eugène. The Eugènes look expectantly as one of their number opens the valise. Now, in a series of drawings entitled Parsifal I, II, III and IV we see a group of Eugènes distilling an elixir from a tiny object, the Thing. The Thing is just a thing. The distillation is done with a spirit of ceremonial and a solemn cortège of Eugènes moves to the music of Wagner. Then an Eugène gives the order to a female Eugène. Since the Mortimers are not expecting anything to happen to them, she is to knock at their door. As she goes off to obey the order, three of the Eugènes combine to represent their spirit of ferocity. Meantime the Mortimers, together, are experiencing a feeling of unease. The door of their room opens. It is a female Eugène! The Mortimers are terrified, as the female Eugène is followed by four others. The aspiring females start their horrible work and swallow the Mortimers. Once they are fed they assume the features of Commères. As they gossip two become one, with four eyes and two mouths. Other



gossips then arrive, and they are even more horrible as they bare their stunted teeth. Now it is the turn of the male Eugènes. Flash to a drawing depicting the spirit of gluttony. Meantime in the kitchen of the Eugènes the bodies of the Mortimers are suspended by the tops of their heads through which butcher's hooks have been thrust. Then the dissection of the bodies begins. An Eugène cuts off a leg with a saw. The following five drawings depict the meal. The Eugènes stand as they eat. They sit down on armchairs to digest. We see them first as a group, and then, in another short series of drawings with the heading Digestion we see them singly or in twos. These are followed immediately by drawings depicting the sickness of the Eugènes as they suffer indigestion. They are whimsically described as Indigestion (Pile) and Indigestion (Face). The Mortimers are then recomposed in very sparse outline, at first lacking in features, but as we find them back in time at the moment when the door of their hotel room is about to open, they are exactly as they were before. After the tension generated by the preceding horrors, Cocteau now has to have his little joke. As the maid appears with the jug of hot water, the caption to the drawing says:

"La bonne entre apportant l'eau.  
 - UN DEGAS! remarque madame Mortimer.  
 - Oui, ajoute Monsieur Mortimer. Et en  
 un clin d'oeil :  
 MAIS ON L'AURAIT A MOINS."

Interpreted along the most simple lines the Album is a treatment of the nasty elements in human nature. Prophetically, it can be seen as a depiction, in restricted terms, of the holocaust that was to follow in the war with man eating man. The Mortimers, as well as representing aspects of the middle class, also show the characteristics of a fickle public that cannot appreciate what is fine in the arts. In the first line of the text that introduces the Album, Cocteau writes:

"Ne cherche pas de Mortimer sauf en toi-même." (p. 83)

Although various critics have seen in the Eugènes different types of creatures ranging from "des sortes de vampires adipeux et féroces" (Jacques Brosse) to "half-human robots" (Margaret Crosland) the fact remains that they do resemble pigs, the small portions of their feet that are to be seen resembling pig's trotters. They therefore represent the bestial side of man's nature.



Lettre de Persicaire

The section which follows the Album is Lettre de Persicaire and it comes as welcome light relief after the cannibalism of the Eugènes. It is a very humorous episode involving Persicaire and Pygamon, a poet.<sup>4</sup> The poet invites the boy for lunch to his home on the 14th of the month. Persicaire is beside himself with excitement at the prospect of having lunch with the renowned man. The days cannot pass quickly enough. When, at last, the great day comes, Persicaire hurries to Pygamon's flat in rue Guénégaud. He is disconcerted to discover by the maid's attitude that he is not really expected, but decides to wait nonetheless. The hours pass. Two o'clock is rung out. He wonders how he will address the great poet when he arrives. At last Pygamon arrives. He had forgotten all about Persicaire! He is strangely dressed in a reddish-purple, loose cloak and has a black half-mask on his face. It seems he is developing a cold and is wearing the cloak for that reason. The mask is to hold a plaster against his nose. As if to add to his odd appearance and eccentric behaviour in the odd setting of his home, when they pass into the dining-room, which is largely occupied by an aviary, Pygamon starts to whisper, then suddenly pulls off his boots and throws them away. One lands in the hors-d'oeuvre, the other scares the canaries which are chirping. The meal is very meagre, since Persicaire was not actually expected, and while they are eating, a brat appears to say that his mother will not be coming to the table. She is busy composing. Madame Pygamon is a composer. The sparse meal ends, Persicaire is introduced briefly to Madame Pygamon, and then Pygamon proposes reading his drama in seven acts Le Scaphandrier de Corfou to the hapless young guest, who is obliged to suffer it. The description of the reading with its anti-climactic ending is one of the best pages in Le Potomak:

"Pygamon tenait à la main gauche le manuscrit en désordre. Du coude, il me maintenait le bras. Sa main droite approchait de son nez malade une paire de bécicles d'écaille rondes. Il avait un visage de turbot. Il hurlait, scandait, râlait, apostrophait, bavait, me vaporisait de salive. On devinait des rimes. Rien n'était intelligible.

Il secouait sa grosse tête comme un virtuose, frappait du pied droit et me soulevait du sol à chaque tirade.



Il soufflait des narines, et sa joue pourpre, luisante de sueur, avait les tics d'un ventre de cheval houspillé par les mouches. Parfois il pâmais, parfois il prenait une voix dolente, parfois d'ogre. Il ne fallait pas songer à entendre. J'inspectais, à la dérobée, son oeil pâle, ses boucles, sa barbe jaune où s'évertuait une petite bouche en demi-lune. Je mourais de peur. ....

(p. 225)

Ce manège dura sept actes. C'est vous dire. Il n'y eut ni cigarettes, ni pastilles de menthe. J'avais une crampe et la migraine.

Le coude n'avait pas lâché prise. Debout contre la vitre, sa myopie collée aux pages, se trompant à cause des ratures, l'oeil injecté, la mousse aux lèvres, Pygamon lisait toujours. Enfin, d'un geste, comme il avait jeté ses bottines, Pygamon jeta le drame. Les feuilles s'éparpillèrent. Je me sentis libre. Il se dirigea vers la commode, saisit un vase et pissa."

(p. 226)

Pygamon is the type of eccentric poet whom Cocteau describes with affection, at the same time acknowledging the fact that he lacks true greatness. He says:

"SUR QUELS CHEMINS NE FALLAIT-IL PAS  
LE SUIVRE POUR ATTEINDRE A DES FRUITS  
QUE LE BRAS CUEILLE SI ON L'ALLONGE?"

(p. 227)

Perhaps he recognises in Pygamon's strange behaviour, nuances of his own? Some of Pygamon's activities are odd, to say the least:

"Une de ses turpitudes favorites était complexe. Profitant de troubles de mémoire, il se télégraphiait de Versailles une mauvaise nouvelle au Café Napolitain. Au Café Napolitain, il ouvrait la dépêche, rugissait, et prenait le train pour Versailles."

(p. 228)

The manner of Pygamon's death is tinged with strong undertones of irony. He is poisoned by a ball of guano (bird excrement) dropped by a nightingale into his asparagus tips omelette. This gives him yellow fever. The irony here lies in the fact that he was a keen ornithologist.

When Persicaire goes to pay his respects to the dead man he finds him laid out in his narrow room. In the background, the



nightingale which caused his death is still singing. Persicaire cannot bring himself to weep, even although he turns his thoughts to the saddest moments in his own life. When Céline, the cook, asks him what she should cook, he tells her to prepare anything she likes. At that very moment Pygamon's brother-in-law, who is a captain fireman, butts in and suggests that she cook a fine asparagus tips omelette! All the while, Tussilage, Pygamon's squinting brat of a son, is busy pouring ether into the nightingale's drinking water.

Out of this farcical episode Persicaire does gain something. Pygamon's widow presents him with her late husband's copy of Rimbaud's Illuminations. He adds significantly:

"C'est à le lire que j'ai tout compris." (p. 232)

### Carrefour

The next section, which is short, is an interlude. The poet assures us that we shall not see the Eugènes again in the pages of this book. Nevertheless they are there, always present, for us to breathe them in. There follows a poem Ne sois pas trop intelligent. The message of this poem is one of sensible advice to the poet or the creator. As the opening line implies, there are dangers in being too intelligent. Dealing with these in order, the poet enumerates them: self-exile, solitude, the indifference of other people, the lofty incomprehension of others despite the fact that they and the poet are:

"Le fruit d'une erreur de la nature,  
Des premières nébuleuses du monde." (p. 237)

Then there is another danger inherent in being too intelligent, namely, that of falling into sloth. One must take advantage of one's tender age and enjoy the voracity of youth. And one must not say of the hopes that one harbours in one's heart - Of what use are they? -

"Car si la plus modeste étoile  
Se disait : A quoi bon? au ciel,  
Et s'arrêtait de graviter,  
Il n'y aurait plus rien de ce qui a été.  
Il y aurait le grand chaos universel." (p. 238)

One must not be too intelligent - the line becomes a refrain throughout the poem - one must keep one's place, observe one's duty, guard one's enthusiasms, and above all one must believe in one's role in life... and if one is a creator, then one must bear one's sacred and



secret trust no matter where, with the faith of the missionary who is tortured by the Papuans of New Guinea. Most important of all, the poet must be indulgent and hesitate on the threshold of disapproval. One never knows the reasons nor the inner content of the soul. One does not know what has been happening in houses, under the roofs, between people. There is pleasure and there is study. There are the fertile plains and the smile of good health. But the poet must not run around himself -

"Ne cours jamais autour de toi." (p. 239)

And since man can take delight between one void and another, and stops believing and is resigned -

"A quoi cela sert-il  
De respirer l'inquiétude  
Et les influences célestes,  
Et de se demander si on est digne?" (p. 239)

There is, after all, much more besides. And the final injunction, a positive piece of advice, is in the final line of the poem:

"Profite donc de tout le reste!" (p. 239)

This poem is in many ways unique in Cocteau's poetic output. It is very conventional in form and sentiment. The concepts are very simply expressed with no trace of artifice. It therefore comes as a refreshing surprise after the sophisticated nature of all that has gone before - its simplicity being completely disarming. It is also strategically placed, coming immediately before the section which describes the first visit to the Potomak.

#### Première visite au Potomak

This section starts with a short dialogue between the poet and Argémone, immediately before the visit to the Potomak. Argémone has been trying to tidy the poet's room, to impose order upon the disorder. Old papers had been lying about and Verlaine's works had been sitting on top of the piano. This made it impossible to open the piano, and hence to use it. It would be better to dispense with the piano in such circumstances and send it back to Pleyel. Taking his cue from this remark the poet states:

"Une chambre sans piano ressemble à une  
personne muette, infirme. Une chambre  
avec un piano, voire silencieux, ressemble  
à une personne qui se tait. Vous avez détruit  
le charme de cette chambre. Si Hugo vous  
avait confié son oeuvre inédite, sans doute



lui eussiez-vous rendu le dictionnaire  
Larousse, car, songez-y, Argémone,"

and now comes his ultimate justification for the untidiness of his  
room -

"un chef-d'oeuvre de la littérature n'est  
jamais qu'un dictionnaire en désordre." 5 (pp. 243-244)

The idea of poetry being born from disorder, first sounded in these  
lines, will recur with frequency in many of Cocteau's later works.

As the conversation between the poet and Argémone continues,  
when he tells her that he is taking her to see the Potomak, and she  
questions him about the creature, he makes reference to the river of  
the same name, but amusingly suggests that the river owes its name  
to the creature, thus claiming boldly that the river owes its name  
to his book! This is mischievously coctelian. As to the creature  
itself - it was not taken on to Noah's ark because the crew mistook  
it for a madrepore. The poet does not describe the Potomak at this  
juncture, but refers to two of its activities - strangely contrasted -

"Il rêve aux phénomènes de l'infini  
dont sa gélatine est l'image." (p. 245)

and

"Il fait des petites farces à son  
gardien." (p. 245)

The phrase "les phénomènes de l'infini dont sa gélatine est l'image"  
could well describe some of Cocteau's films! Argémone asks the poet  
where the aquarium is that houses this monster. He tells her it is  
in Place de la Madeleine. She need not change her dress to go there,  
since the aquarium does not attract many spectators - the only two  
faithful attenders are the poet and a rich American.

They arrive at the aquarium. Fed on mandragora and montgolfier  
balloons, the Potomak is dozing in its glass bowl. Argémone is not  
taken with it. It swallows a draught of oil and sighs. The rich  
American throws it white gloves and spelling errors, upon which it  
also feeds. Its eye is blurred with prisms, and its large pink ears  
which have the shape of marine gasteropods are listening to "le  
murmure infini d'un océan intérieur". Although the poet is fascinated  
by the creature, Argémone is not, and they leave. Argémone cannot  
look at anything from a poetic point of view. She says:

"Votre Potomak me fait peur et je préfère  
la tête de veau. C'est encore, comme vos



Eugènes, des imaginations. Moi, je suis normale. Je ne comprends rien à tout cela et n'y veux rien comprendre. C'est un principe. Je m'y refuse." (p. 249)

And in the poet's rejoinder we have an apt description of some aspects of his poetic way of living. He says:

"Ma vie confuse et la cohérence de mes rêves m'apparentent à ce Potomak. Un même fluide nous traverse. Je marche entre chien et loup, ce qui s'appelle. Je continue à vivre dans mes rêves et à rêver dans mon mécanisme diurne. Je peux quelquefois paraître distrait de ne pas répondre à des signes ou de ne pas poursuivre des rencontres; mais c'est à cause que je crois en être le seul averti, comme il arrive dans les rêves.

Je me couche comme on prend un livre. Je me couche quelquefois dix minutes, une heure, tout habillé sous mes draps. Ainsi je prolonge et retarde ma course, car la vie du rêve ouvre la boîte des dimensions humaines." (pp. 249-250)

But the dream is not only a vehicle to open up the box of human dimensions. It is, at the same time, a reflection of a life in another dimension within the poet himself. It is an extension of experience upon a higher plane than that to which we are restricted when we are merely "awake". When the poet is "awake" his eye absorbs sights which are registered upon his subconscious in random fashion and without method, in much the same manner as one would pick up tiny fragments of multicoloured glass so that sleep might co-ordinate them and turn them at the bottom of a dark, mysterious kaleidoscope. And he continues:

"On me juge frivole, instable, versatile, égoïste : je rêve. Et non, comprenez-moi bien, Argémone, non ces rêves de Murger où le dormeur épouse une princesse chinoise. Je continue." (p. 250)

And he likens this experience of going on to a train journey:

"Paysage  
tunnel  
paysage  
tunnel  
tunnel aux yeux bleus." (p. 250)

The illogical personification of the tunnel in the last line is of the very substance of the dream experience itself.



And sometimes the poet's reality so strongly resembles the dream that, thinking he is in one room, he then discovers that he is actually in another. Some of his painful dreams resemble his reality so strongly that, in order to withdraw from them, he is obliged to consider the hope that they are in fact only a dream!

These considerations on the phenomenon of the dream bring the poet to a brief thought on death. Significantly he remarks to Argémone:

"J'estime que la mort est la seule  
certitude qui n'apporte aucune paix."

(p. 253)

But he will discuss his ideas on death in a subsequent section of the book. The conversation with Argémone is about to end. He refers to the pity she had felt for a legless cripple to whom she had given alms when she had remarked: "Comment se plaindre quand on a des jambes?" His rejoinder is typical:

"Je pourrais trouver une consolation  
(égoïste) dans le spectacle de votre  
cul-de-jatte, mais son désir de jambes  
me donne, à moi qui en ai, un désir  
d'ailes."

(pp. 253-254)

### Ariane

Only in the last paragraph of this short section is there any connection with the legendary Ariadne of its title. She, in fact, is not even mentioned.

But this section is interesting as an example of how Cocteau can adapt a Greek myth to suit his own ends. The section starts, however, with one of Cocteau's pet notions, derived from his experience of the circus. He considers first of all the indispensable necessity of balance in all things, and maintains that, in order to achieve balance in this book, he himself requires an equilibrium, momentary but sequential, of sentence and word. This is a concept which he then defines concisely in a short statement:

"L'acrobate, en somme, et dessous le vide.  
Si nul trouble ... et sous le pied  
après le pied la corde, vers l'autre  
paroi ... on arrive.

Il y a toujours sur le vide une corde  
raide.

L'adresse consiste à marcher, comme  
sur des oeufs, sur la mort."

(p. 257)



And a few lines further on comes his intention:

"Je veux marcher libre entre les bras  
ouverts du monde,  
au-dessus  
des muettes sirènes du vertige." (p. 258)

In following his vocation as poet, he will be walking a dangerous tight-rope over the void. But the element of danger excites him, especially as "On n'est pas plus léger d'être en l'air", and so he will walk freely between the open arms of the world, below him the silent sirens of vertigo.

But now, he is brought abruptly to earth by an interruption from Argémone, who has the knack always, of drily cutting the poet in his great moments of enthusiasm. She loves great odes, she tells him, but this book in driblets bores her - "Votre livre au compte-gouttes m'ennuie". Springing to his own defence and playing on her choice of vocabulary he tells her:

"Argémone, moi je n'aime pas les métaphores,  
mais, pour vous suivre et par politesse,  
j'oppose à votre compte-gouttes le  
vacuum-cleaner.  
Voilà mon compte-gouttes.  
Un livre 'par le vide'." (p. 258)

And now an indication and a justification of his method:

"Je pompe, je décante, j'isole.  
Savez-vous le poids occulte et beau  
de ce qui aurait pu être et de ce  
qu'on retranche?  
La marge et l'interligne, Argémone,  
il y circule un miel de sacrifice." (pp. 258-259)

No doubt, for Argémone, the number of tomes in a work is of great importance. A work, in that sense, is a social entity. But Cocteau is compelled, above all, to be himself. What can he do, besides? Since God created man in His own image, the more one is close to oneself, the closer one is to God. And in his case, since he is tempted by God, just as others are tempted by the Devil, he clasps himself with all his strength. This book is his. It represents his outer self. And in writing it, he weeds out. Now Cocteau introduces a very Pirandellian image, when he says:

"Et sache : si telle phrase, ou tel mot  
de telle phrase de moi s'écarte, je  
connais la stupeur de celui qui verrait  
au miroir sa figure indépendante ouvrir  
la bouche qu'il garde close." (p. 259)



He realises that he could have written a greater work - "Mon épiderme enviait d'autres destins". He could have chosen as his theme young Sophocles dancing naked in Athens after the victory of Salamine, or old Sophocles for whom Antigone was pleading, but he did not recognise these profound missions and he ignored the internal heat of the human heart. Instead, he wrote this book.

He is unable to make concessions in his mission as poet. To ask concessions of him is the same as pushing an acrobat or cutting his rope. No single step of his balancing-act is changeable. And he despises the caution of the safety-net. Now he explains why he cannot make concessions:

"Il existe, Argémone, un système universel des ondes. Toujours un poste enregistre leur épanouissement circulaire, au centre duquel un mot, un geste, un sourire s'enfoncent comme un caillou. Argémone, où commence la concession cessent l'estime et l'opulence des ondes. Aucun appareil ne les déchiffre plus. La chèvre mord et le chou empoisonne. On reste seul et misérable. Mais sachant ce qu'on doit dire et s'efforçant pour le mieux de soulager son intelligence, alors la nuit s'organise. Et chacun apporte sa lampe."

(p. 261)

Referring to his character he says he is lazily indigenous, and that is why he prefers to see a moving spectacle at his own door. And to sum up, he states:

"De famille bourgeoise, je suis un monstre bourgeois. Je constate la chose et elle-même m'oblige à une solitude déférente. La bohème, Argémone, hélas! j'y patauge. Contre un blason je me blesse. Et je retourne au Potomak. Et les Eugènes m'envahissent. Et j'écris ce livre."

(p. 263)

To conclude the section he gives this version of a myth which he loves:

"Thésée au Labyrinthe. Il se promène avec le Minotaure. Le Minotaure lui démontre les avantages de son appartement. Un joli monstre, ajoute ce prince original, doit vous attendre à l'entrée du vôtre : vous avec un fil sur vous."

(p. 263)

The myth of Ariadne and Theseus and the Minotaur has here been reduced very facetiously by our incorrigible poet to a mere incident. The



relationship between Theseus and the Minotaur has been completely altered, and the monstrous characteristics of the original Minotaur have disappeared completely. As a portent of what Cocteau is to do with some other Greek myths in later works, this short conclusion to the section entitled Ariane, is not without interest.

### La Mort

The poet is visiting his friend Persicaire on a September morning. Persicaire is naked, about to have his sponge bath. The poet has slept badly, having dreamed that he and Argémone were about to be murdered. This brings up the subject of death. The poet is not at his best in the morning when he breakfasts on cocoa and his malaise. He then explains how he arrived at a first image of death as a child. When he was very little he owned a poetic object he had bought at a cheap store. It was a glass sphere filled with liquid representing a scene in Moscow in the twilight with a young man holding a balloon by a string. When one shook the sphere, tiny white flakes, floating in the liquid with which it was filled, simulated a snowstorm. Now the young boy loved this little object and the scene it represented, and in dreaming about it, it assumed the form of a large soap bubble, and within it he saw what for him represented two images of death. Influenced by the picture of the young man with the balloon, the images, alternating in a melodrama, were of Steerforth from Dickens' David Copperfield and the Russian child in Grandeur et Servitude. Having read the Dickens novel, he saw Steerforth at the moment of his death, between two large waves, his red cap in his hand, and he saw himself standing helplessly on the shore, unable to swim to his hero's aid. With his last bragging gesture, Steerforth symbolised for the young boy "tous ces héros démoralisateurs qui influencent la jeunesse".<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the fact that this early image of death in the form of Steerforth has certain elements in common with Cocteau's archetypal Dargelos, which would account for the attraction he feels towards him, even in later works when this image of death is superseded by images of women such as the Princess in the film Orphée, the poet is never terrified of death but always fascinated by and attracted to it.

Persicaire sees certain dangers in the young poet's world in a bubble.

"Votre bulle où,  
petite, convexe,



à l'envers,  
la fenêtre s'étire,  
va quitter, je vous préviens, la pipe."

(p. 269)

But the poet insists that he is quoting his childhood, and, in referring to Steerforth, he has in mind other young men who found their death by drowning, young men such as Shelley or the young telegraphist on the Titanic. He finds the epitaph written so many centuries ago by the seventh century B.C. Greek lyric poet Alcaeus<sup>7</sup> very appropriate:

"Que la mort des jeunes gens est  
lamentable! et la mer est surtout  
pour eux pleine de deuil et de  
funérailles."

(p. 270)

And Cocteau is often to look upon the sea as an element of death.

Persicaire is irritated by the poet and complains that his observations are leading him astray. In fact he feels lost. He asks the poet to give him his hand. What follows, a walk back in time, a strikingly cinematic image, is to re-appear in another context as a sequence in Cocteau's film Orphée, where Heurtebise, taking Orphée's arm, leads him backwards in time.

"Je lui donnai la main. Nous marchâmes à rebours, le long des phrases prononcées.

Nous n'étions pas si loin, car, de la voûte sombre des arbres, nous vîmes, au bout, prenant son tub au soleil, Persicaire.

Près d'une serviette éponge, sur une chaise, nous me reconnûmes. J'étais pâle et je parlais de mourir.

Alors, nous nous assîmes tous les quatre jusqu'à la minute où, nous étant rejoints, nous nous retrouvâmes être deux." (pp. 270-271)

There is also a suggestion of the duality of the poet and his friend in the image of them being faced with their former selves for an instant before becoming only two again. And the moment is not without a certain humour.

Now, when any characters in Cocteau's work have, for some reason, to go back in time to a given instant, once they have re-attained that instant, they see the world around them from a different perspective. In this case, the poet suddenly becomes aware of the



scene outside Persicaire's window:

"La fenêtre était ouverte sur septembre.

La plaine était vaste,  
on devinait autour de soi la terre  
fuyante et ronde."

(p. 271)

The new perspective does not alter the content of the conversation but the topic is pursued along different lines. The theme is still death and the malaise that the thought of it causes, because the soul would wish to depart but the body rebels.

There follows a short consideration of the physical fact that, as we walk upon the surface of the earth, although we think we are upright, in a sense we are upside down. The poem which follows develops this theme. We should consider that, under the small portion of earth upon which we stand, there is even more earth, and under that, in a straight line, strata of rock, mineral and lava, and incandescent substances, and the fire in the centre of the earth. And from the centre of fire, continuing still in a straight line, more and more fire, and then incandescent lava, rock and mineral, then the earth, more earth, and then the turf, and then a woman who is asleep under her roof in New Zealand with beneath her the abyss, and we should consider that for her it is the same under us!

The form of the poem that expresses this simple thought is a good example of a poem created by Cocteau that gives the impression of having been written effortlessly.

"Quand tu ris de courir sur l'herbe de la terre,  
En plein soleil d'avril,  
Et de tomber sans te faire mal,  
Songe que, sous ta place étroite,  
Il y a de la terre,  
Et encore de la terre,  
En ligne droite,  
Et de la roche et du minéral,  
Et de la lave,  
Et des incandescences,  
Et le feu central.  
Songe, en continuant la descente,  
Qu'il y a encore du feu et encore du feu,  
Puis, des laves incandescentes,  
Puis de la roche et du minéral,  
Puis de la terre,  
Et encore de la terre,  
Et, peu à peu,  
De la terre où pénètre de l'air,  
Et du gazon,  
Et de la nuit sur une saison,  
Et une femme qui dort à la Nouvelle-Zélande,



Avec l'abîme au-dessous d'elle,  
 Au-dessous de son toit,  
 Et songe que pour elle il est pareil sous toi."

(pp. 273-274)

With the poem ended, the poet returns to the theme of death and tells Persicaire of the narrow escape he once had when, returning by night from Switzerland on the train, whilst his mother slept, he swallowed a large dose of cocaine which had been placed in error by a chemist in a box that should have contained powder of poppies. The dose he swallowed would have killed an ox. The excess quantity actually saved him in the same manner as an overload of amperes prevent an electrocution. But the experience gave him a brush with death, accompanied by the peculiar symptoms which he describes in detail:

"Les veines qui se figent,  
 la circulation en dérouté,  
 une zone inerte qui boise les membres,  
 le coeur qui se débat, qui cherche à  
 fuir, frappe la poitrine et s'ankylose.  
 Une poire d'angoisse dans la gorge.  
 Une pâte amère sur la langue raide.  
 Les dents d'un autre.  
 Et ce bruit de l'herbe au crépuscule,  
 quand on croit que les étoiles bavardent."

(p. 274)

Surely the symptoms of poisoning have never been described in a more unusual manner! And the vivid aural imagery of the last two lines is masterly.

Now, when the poet thought he was actually dying, he expected to see a form of death -

"Je me répétais : c'est Elle.  
 C'est la Soudaine,  
 la Célèbre,  
 la Mystérieuse."

(p. 275)

But no such form appeared. All he saw, on the whole, was an outline like the curved surface of a liquid that is about to spill out of an overrunning glass - "un état qui succède à d'autres états, un phénomène à la suite des phénomènes, une vague après les vagues". When he regained consciousness in his room the doctor told him that he would never again be closer to death. Only a miracle had saved his life.

On another occasion he witnessed the death of a friend. He sat



at his friend's bedside, along with other friends of the dying man. When he asked his friend if he was suffering, his friend replied: - "Non, je ne souffre pas, mais c'est atroce". Dying is like nothing else, concludes the poet. To die has no connection with anything, not even with what you are dying of. Death is death. Perhaps the circles of death's fall, the internal shadow of its flight, warn one of its apparition. It is however futile to question the dying person about it. Nothing of death touches him. All of a sudden death stands before and - hey, presto! he is dead.

The section on the theme of death ends with three poems. Each of the three deals with the topic in a different manner. The poems are not spoken or written. When Persicaire plays a record on the gramophone, a voice is heard reciting:

"Ne dis pas, mon pauvre enfant :  
 Je chante l'orgueil d'être jeune  
 Et l'amertume de la mort.  
 Dis-toi plutôt :  
 Il y a la salle à manger où on déjeune,  
 Les choses qu'on permet et celles qu'on défend,  
 Le plaisir de se lever tôt  
 Et d'entendre le coq et la ferme.  
 La pleine mer où le bateau  
 S'aimante vers la terre ferme.  
 Il y a la paix et le combat,  
 Les fleurs, le blé qui germe;  
 Il y a les bûches, le tabac;  
 Il y a Bach, Pascal et Dante,  
 Et Cézanne et tous les artistes;  
 Il y a l'amour qui rend triste  
 Et fait les visages si beaux.  
 Il y a la frénésie ardente  
 De comprendre tout ce qui existe;  
 Il y a les chants des oiseaux;  
 Et les chants grégoriens,  
 Et il y a encore,  
 Lorsqu'on croit qu'il n'y a plus rien,  
 Il y a encore la mort.

(pp. 277-278)

In enumerating many of the elements that go to make up life, the beautiful elements to be sure, the manner in which death is added to these in the last line shows that the poet looks upon it not only as a part of life, but as something to be looked forward to, to be enjoyed as much as all the other beautiful experiences he has mentioned. And, although these appear to be arranged in a very haphazard order, the device is in itself effective because the images and the experiences, intermingled in this way, are thrown into greater relief. And only Cocteau could get away with such a range, listing



together a dining-room, a full sea, peace and battle, logs and tobacco, Bach, Pascal and Dante and Cézanne. What a felicitous choice of words in the phrase "la frénésie ardente de comprendre tout ce qui existe", and the perfect juxtaposition of "les chants des oiseaux" with "les chants grégoriens" both of which can arouse ethereal or spiritual sensations.

When Persicaire turns over the gramophone record the poet's voice is this time heard reciting the second poem:

"Quand tu verras mourir un ami de ton âge  
 Et s'évaporer la rougeur  
 De son visage,  
 Déjà tout enduit de néant,  
 Envie-le comme un voyageur  
 Qui va faire un interminable et célèbre voyage.  
 Après les derniers gestes,  
 Et cette pesante inertie  
 De la mort,  
 Espère connaître aussi,  
 Bientôt,  
 Comme espère celui qui reste  
 Sur le quai,  
 Après le départ du bateau,  
 Ce Havre, ce Cherbourg, ce Brest,  
 Ce départ sans navire, et sans rive et sans eau,  
 Cette lourdeur du corps dont l'âme se déleste."

(pp. 278-279)

The sheer banality of this poem comes as an anti-climax to the one which precedes it. The conventional concept of death as "un interminable et célèbre voyage" is on the level of the verses accompanying obituaries in local newspapers.

Significantly no comment is made upon it. He simply writes:

"Nous nous tûmes" (p. 279)

and then, to change the subject, a short paragraph follows that concisely depicts life going on -

"Une vache arrachait l'herbe courte ...  
 Un Esquimau chassait le morse ... Sous  
 la grosse lune dormaient dans leur hamac  
 les dames de Floride ... Il naissait des  
 hommes ... Entre la terre et rien continuait  
 l'infini.  
 Quel silence!"

(p. 279)

The silence is finally broken by the poet's asking Persicaire if the records he is playing are commercially available. Yes, answers Persicaire, but they are not much in demand. And after this precious little conversation, Persicaire sets another record revolving on the



turntable and we hear the third poem:

"Depuis le jour où tu es né  
 Ton âme n'est pas plus à ton corps  
 Que le feu à la cheminée,  
 Que l'arpège et l'accord  
 Au piano,  
 Que l'eau à l'outre ...  
 Elle est un peu d'un élément,  
 D'un élément invisible et céleste,  
 Comme un peu du lac,  
 Loin du lac, au fond d'une outre,  
 Et, quand tu meurs, écoute-moi,  
 Fuyant le corps vide qui reste,  
 Ton âme s'en retourne à l'élément divin,  
 Au bel océan de mystère,  
 Comme l'eau à l'eau et le feu au feu,  
 et le son au son et la terre à la terre."

(p. 280)

This is one of the first poems by Cocteau to express a concept of the divine. It is also one of the rare occasions when the concept he is expressing is completely unoriginal. For once Cocteau is expressing himself along conventional lines -

"Nous avons tous la même âme, ou mieux,  
 de la même âme.  
 Dieu fragmentaire."

(p. 281)

and

"(Une seule essence anime une machine  
 simple et une machine complexe. Nous  
 abusons pour nos perfectionnements de  
 sa force motrice.)"

(p. 281)

### Seconde Visite au Potomak

This is a short nonsense episode and an excuse to introduce a nonsense rhyme. It is probably intended as a divertissement after the heavy-going of the section on death. It would appear that a group of important people including Dr. Pink, Dr. Jubol, Dr. Richard Strauss (sic!) and a duchess have been to see the Potomak. But they spurned the Potomak and decided instead to teach the Pharynx (another occupant of the cellar) to speak. Eventually the Pharynx is heard. "D'une voix pure et courte et qui parfois semblait jusqu'au velours noir, il récita en détachant les syllabes":

'Odile rêve au bord de l'île  
 Lorsqu'un crocodile surgit.  
 Odile a peur du crocodile  
 Et pour éviter un "Ci-gît",  
 Le crocodile croque Odile.



Caï raconte ce roman,  
 Mais peut-être Caï l'invente,  
 Odile est peut-être vivante,  
 Et je crois bien que Caï ment.

Un autre ami d'Odile, Alligue,  
 Pour qu'on répande cette mort  
 Se démène, paye et intrigue.  
 Moi, je trouve qu'Alligue a tort.'

(pp. 286-287)

As the poet later emerges into a flower market he sees the rich American purchasing a button-hole. After paying for it he makes his way to the aquarium to see the Potomak. The poet is delighted to perceive that the American has a special delicacy to feed to the Potomak on this occasion - a football!

### Vagabondage

Cocteau, in bitter mood, gives vent to some observations denigrating man - a puny creature. The poet's considerations are sparked off by his remarking the blue of Persicaire's sweater, which, he claims, sullies the blue of the sky. That is because its blue is darker than that of the sky, reasons Persicaire. But the poet persists that no blue is darker than that of the sky. Cue for a poem on the blue of the sky:

"Mon enfant, vois l'azur du ciel,  
 Le bel azur essentiel,  
 Comme il est sombre!  
 Que ce bleu, tout ce bleu lumineux  
 Ne te fasse pas trop sourire,  
 Car ce sont des bluets sur un voile funèbre;  
 Sur le néant compact, secret,  
 Où rien ne peut finir,  
 Où il y a des planètes célèbres  
 Et d'autres qu'on ne connaît pas  
 Malgré les lunettes et les compas.  
 Mon enfant, n'oublions jamais  
 Que les ténèbres sont toujours les ténèbres  
 Et l'ont toujours été,  
 Même quand le soleil,  
 Le beau soleil d'été,  
 Joue à leur surface et les éclaire  
 Comme la surface de la mer."

(pp. 291-292)

The poem also creates the dark setting of a large and sombre universe as a background to the remarks that follow. Against its gloomy vastness man appears trivial and unimportant. The poet goes on to observe that man is only the breath of God - a sad biological error that came to life when the ichtyosaurus wandered idly, when plants grazed, trees



bit and animals flowered. As time passed, things evolved upon the earth. Man began to understand that he was something and that he must attempt to become something else. With that idea came progress and intelligence. This was in fact an error.

"Dans une maison, tout à coup, un objet  
se met à croire qu'il est le  
propriétaire et qu'avec effort  
il deviendra un objet plus beau  
et plus coûteux.  
Et lentement l'erreur engraisse.  
Mariages.  
Incestes."

(p. 293)

Thus is exemplified the presumptuousness of man. And, as time goes on still further, he develops an ear for music, an eye for colour, knowledge and a certain talent. And suddenly, amidst the other animals, man stands out as exceptional. Men are proud that they can walk on their hind legs and wear trousers, women that they can wear skirts. In short:

"l'homme fait le beau." (p. 294)

And in attempting to impose order upon the chaos of the universe man merely taints it. He depraves nature, by his inventions, by his strength and his weakness, in everything that he builds and then pulls down. Prophetically the poet looks forward to the day of general destruction. How will it come about? One day, a man, Axonge invents a box in which he hopes to canalize lightning and put it to his use. There comes a storm. Axonge canalizes badly. He blows up the world. In conclusion the poet sees the earth as a mother who has given birth to a monster - who murders her with her own hatpins.

It is hard to imagine that Cocteau could be so bitter, so cynical, when he can, on other occasions, be so uplifted by the nobility of human nature. It is difficult to comprehend how an artist with such high aspirations can occasionally sink so low. Yet this is a basic contradiction in Cocteau's nature which will from time to time express itself in surly observations of this sort. Fortunately they do not occur frequently.

### Troisième Visite au Potomak

On this Sunday evening visit to the aquarium there is an air of agitation. Alfred, the keeper of the Potomak, is annoyed because the American has spoiled the creature with his special tit-bit - an



American music-box that plays Wagner. The Potomak shows no interest whatsoever in the aloe that Alfred is trying to give it. It is stamping about, spitting out its olive oil and is in sullen mood (which perhaps explains the sulkiness of the previous section). The musical box has now been playing for two days. Siegfried has already been heard and Parsifal is commencing.

The poet does not approve of this diet for the Potomak -

"Je crois, insinuai-je, qu'il aurait tout à perdre à  
suivre un régime pareil." (p. 301)

In the meantime the Opoanax is counting its feet, the Cadence is skipping about, the Aratoire is scraping the earth, the Orphéon devouring a geranium, the Pharynx still reciting "Odile" and the mercury lamps are flickering. It is a case of luxury or abundance killing love.

### Lendemain

In these three short pages the poet returns, alone, to visit the Potomak. On this occasion he finds it digesting a Ballets Russes programme. Alfred tells the poet that he could not have come at a better time as the Potomak is about to defecate and nothing could be more charming than its stools. In these bathetic circumstances, when the stools eventually appear, they are emitted from the Potomak's throat in the form of soap bubbles. The Potomak keeps an eye on these iridescent faeces which appear so delicately. Six of them burst as they come into contact with one another. Four of them balance in the air, then, upon landing they burst after a series of little bouncing leaps. One flies through the fan-light of the door. Putting on airs, Alfred remarks:

"Elles échappent à l'analyse." (!) (p. 307)

### Utilisation impossible

We come now to that part of Le Potomak that shows more genuine feeling than any other in the book. Here the theme is love.

The poet starts by declaring that he has loved and suffered. He counted upon making use of these experiences. Now he is giving up. He has in his possession intimate notes on love. No effort would make it possible to co-ordinate these, but if he now sets them in line it is merely to prove that his book is crammed full and that



nothing of these notes can any longer fill it. There follow some of the poet's observations on the feelings that one experiences when one is in love. He starts by explaining that to be in love is to be in a trance. Love is by definition an

"Essai de rejoindre à deux le beau  
monstre primitif." (p. 312)

Now, although the conceits that the poet expresses are universal in the sphere of love, the addition of a qualifying image here, an unexpected or unusual adjective there, still render his expression of the torments and the pleasures of love unique. Here are some examples from this section:

"Ne pas se voir est une angoisse.  
Un vertige de montagnes russes." (p. 312)

"Tout le long du jour, un couteau mou  
me coupe le coeur en deux." (p. 312)

"Que de fois, souffrant d'attendre, j'ai  
fait attendre, et que de fois je n'ai  
pas trouvé sur ma table une lettre  
qu'elle avait, de ne me la point  
envoyer, souffert." (p. 313)

"Les yeux fermés, je vois des choses  
qui ne sont pas toi (des moutons, un  
jongleur, une patineuse, des montagnes),  
et cependant c'est à toi que je pense  
et je ne pense qu'à toi." (p. 314)

And when the poet feels the first promptings of desire, it manifested itself in a particular fashion.

"Mon désir c'était, à l'âge où le sexe  
n'influence pas encore les décisions de  
la chair, non d'atteindre, ni de toucher,  
ni d'embrasser, mais d'être la personne  
élue.  
Quelle solitude!" (p. 314)

Now, in trying to be the person with whom he was in love, he was in the habit of imitating the person's mannerisms or physical peculiarities. Thus, when he fell in love with a girl called Marthe, he imitated her nervous facial twitch, her manner of brushing a lock of hair from left to right, her manner of shrugging her shoulders. Madame Cocteau, sensitive to these unusual signs in her son, sent for the doctor. He diagnosed nervous tics, saying it was not serious, and prescribed showers and a stay in Switzerland. But the poet's condition was more serious than the unsuspecting doctor imagined:



"J'aimais, docteur, je désirais, je souffrais,  
j'espérais, je dépérissais, avec cette  
sensibilité neuve qui, ne se formulant pas,  
se concentre, ronge comme un cancer et  
détermine un avenir."

(p. 315)

In experiencing the first pangs of love, the poet was sensitive to its many manifestations. The effect of desire can be all too obvious upon the human face:

"Le désir brouille les traits d'un visage."

(p. 315)

A girl he loved was of American blood. They experienced at one and the same time understanding and misunderstanding. She could not live without her rivers, her skyscrapers, her Indian corn and her transatlantic liners. His incurable disease was to have to remain at home, since he was by nature indigenious.

The poem which follows is in two parts. The first describes the effect that being in love has upon a person, how love effaces all. Some of the symptoms and feelings of being in love are described:

"Si tu aimes, mon pauvre enfant,  
Ah! si tu aimes!  
Il ne faut pas en avoir peur.  
C'est un ineffable désastre.  
Il y a un mystérieux système  
Et des lois, et des influences,  
Pour la gravitation des coeurs  
Et la gravitation des astres.  
On était là tranquillement  
Sans penser à ce qu'on évite,  
Et puis tout à coup on n'en peut plus,  
On est à chaque heure du jour  
Comme si tu descends très vite  
En ascenseur :  
Et c'est l'amour,  
Il n'y a plus de livres, de paysages,  
De désir des ciels d'Asie ...  
Il n'y a plus qu'un seul visage  
Auquel le coeur s'anesthésie,  
Et rien autour.

(pp. 317-318)

The description of the state of being in love that we find in this part of the poem is not a particularly attractive one since it dwells rather on the discomforts of the "blissful" state. We must not be afraid of being in love, yet it is an inexpressible disaster! The gravitation of the stellar bodies and that of human hearts are governed by the same mysterious system, laws and influences. This idea is amplified in the second section of the poem. The suddenness



with which one can be overtaken by the feeling of being in love is expressed in the next three lines - one moment we are not even thinking of what we are missing and the next we are at the end of our tether. The banality of what follows:

"On est à chaque heure du jour  
Comme si tu descends très vite  
En ascenseur :  
Et c'est l'amour." (pp. 317-318)

is of the level of the average lyric in the pop songs of today and can only be excused by Cocteau's predilection for lifts! One wonders if Cocteau was actually aware of the unconscious humour of the lines:

"Il n'y a plus qu'un seul visage  
Auquel le coeur s'anesthésie,"  
(p. 318)

I think he must have been.

Here is the second part of the poem:

"Si tu redoutes d'aimer seul,  
Ne lutte pas contre l'amour.  
- D'abord parce que c'est impossible  
Et puis parce qu'il n'est pas permis  
De se soustraire aux lois profondes,  
A l'ordre éternel.  
Pense à la docilité des mondes,  
A leurs épidermes sensibles,  
A l'aimantation de leurs géothermies.  
Au divin frôlement des planètes entre elles.  
Songe que notre terre minuscule  
Et tout le système solaire  
S'hypnotise dans l'atmosphère  
Sur un petit monde inconnu  
De la constellation d'Hercule.  
Et que ce petit monde géant  
Il brûle, il gravite, il circule,  
Pour une autre petite étoile du néant."  
(p. 318)

According to the poet, the solar system is really one of love, the poet's kind of love which demands that one must love alone. And all this is governed by the profound laws of the eternal order. So we are fated, when we are in love, to burn with ardour as we gravitate and circle round the object of our love, brushing it but never touching it.

There follows a lullaby - Berceuse - written in poetic prose. As his beloved sleeps, the poet contemplates the evolution of the earth, amidst the planets.

The section ends with a short series of paragraphs some of which



deal with the various torments experienced by the poet in love. The tenor of these paragraphs is typically contained in the following:

"Aimer, c'est d'être aimé. C'est remplir  
une existence d'inquiétude. Hélas!  
n'être plus essentiel à l'autre, voilà  
notre torture."  
(p. 323)

Cocteau was always deeply moved by the horn solo in the Prelude to the final act of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde. It was used as part of the background music for his last film Le Testament d'Orphée. In the opera it serves the function of describing the gentle death throes of Tristan. In a remarkable paragraph here he begins by describing the effect that the Tristan horn solo had upon him in the theatre. Then he passes to a poetic treatment of it:

"Cor de Tristan mourant  
Cor de  
Cor de Tristan  
Cor de Tristan mourant  
Cor de Tristan mourant et attendant  
Cor de Tristan mourant et se rappelant  
Cor de Tristan se rappelant  
Cor  
Cor  
Cor de Tristan"  
(p. 324)

which, in form and sound, reproduces the nature of Wagner's music exactly.

### Tirage Spécial

A brief section describing the poet's last visit to the aquarium reveals that when he arrives there it is closed:

"Fermé pour cause  
de saisie."  
(p. 329)

Thus the poet has to say farewell to his Potomak. He asks the Potomak's forgiveness for having called it Potomak. He had instinctively found a name which limited the creature, and yet, little by little, he had brought out a whole world from the Potomak. He will miss it and the aquarium in Place de la Madeleine, but he will rejoin the Potomak elsewhere.

### Postambule

This, the final section in the book, offers an explanation of it. Cocteau begins by questioning whether it is in fact a book with its dark wordiness and its contradictions. Yet from its depths and its



imperfect appearance and form the poet's secret emerges. It is simply this: that the poet, before he actually dies at the end of his life, undergoes several deaths, and each time he dies he experiences a whiff of the definitive atmosphere into which his final death will plunge him. Each death that the poet suffers in the course of his life can be looked upon as a metamorphosis or "mue". The Eugènes are among the elements, terrible elements, that carry out the changes in the poet. Terrible as they are, they are indispensable. He ends with an image of the poet travelling between two towns on a night train. As he travels, he no longer possesses what he has left behind. He does not yet possess that which he is going towards. He is thus in a kind of no man's land. As he stands at the train window he sees the lights of factories. An express train goes hurtling past in the opposite direction. In a sense, he is going forward, and the express train is hurrying backwards. As the poet looks, a dim partition, alternately dark and light, appears to be interposed between him and the evening outside. Through it he beholds another scene - a river and nautical games. And as he leans against the glass of the window he sees a third image - his own reflection, and behind him the door, and behind the door another door, and another window, and behind these aquariums<sup>8</sup> another river and other factories. The poet's fatigue then confuses the layers of the night, the lamps, the windows and the water. And the poet's double scarcely looks at him, and does not see him, just as a dog ignores its own reflection in a mirror. The perspectives then shift and change round. A railway embankment on the left, a railway embankment on the right. Underneath, the river flows on. Above are the stars.

And on this journey this is all that the poet has left to him between the town destroyed by his absence and the town he will construct simply by looking at it.

"Mirages, tours de carte; je ne  
pouvais pas espérer autre chose."

(p. 336)

### A Igor Stravinsky

This is a short dedication to Igor Stravinsky in which Cocteau demonstrates that he fully recognises the shortcomings and the defects of his book. The dedication was written at Leysin in March 1914 while Stravinsky was still working on Le Rossignol. After a description of the Alps under snow accompanied by poetic observations on the effect



of the snow upon the landscape, Cocteau eventually says:

"Igor, je comptais t'offrir un livre  
et je t'offre ma vieille peau." (p. 340)

This indicates that having undergone his "mue", he can discard the contents of the Potomak, just as a serpent casts off its old skin. He then describes the book's flaws and its merits:

"Des paragraphes boiteux.  
Des paragraphes bêtes.  
Des paragraphes contradictoires.  
Mais, de temps en temps, une phrase,  
pareille à ces colombes que Robert  
Houdin attrape n'importe où. Une  
incandescence qui se gèle ... une  
nébuleuse qui se coagule ... un rapt  
à l'inconnu.  
Des choses dont on espère qu'elles  
vont grandir et qui avortent,  
d'autres qui déconcertent,  
d'autres qu'on ne comprend plus  
après les avoir écrites,  
d'autres qui délestent l'intelligence  
et sans lesquelles on dort bien." (pp. 340-341)

I think this is a fair evaluation of his book on Cocteau's part. Having delivered himself of it, he feels empty, drained. Yet he also feels that he will write more books and he can already see the titles of his future works on the sign-posts of his route. But in the meantime he must wait. Exhausted as he is, he likens himself to a discharged battery, in the book's final image:

"La pile vide se résigne à toujours  
attendre une secousse.  
Elle contemple silencieusement le  
miel qui s'écoule des beaux vases  
penchés." (p. 341)

So ends this elaborate blueprint of the very many works that were to flow from Cocteau's pen in the course of the years.

### Prospectus (1916)

Although the 1923 edition of Le Potomak opens with Prospectus I feel it is more appropriate to deal with it after the main body of the book since it was written one year later. In form it has something in common with Le Potomak since it consists of a short series of observations, but this time, all in prose, and with no hint of the lapses in taste apparent in the earlier work. It is also interesting in that it presents some guidelines in what was to become Cocteau's aesthetics.



### Bureau Central

In this paragraph Cocteau turns to the theme of the function of the artist and of the artist as an instrument of superior forces. The bureau central of the title is, in fact, the poet. He writes:

"A force de me meurtrir, de vivre  
double, de sortir jeune d'une foule  
d'embûches où d'autres se précipitent,  
tête basse, à l'âge mûr, de prendre la  
douche écossaise des milieux, d'attendre  
parfois des heures, seul, debout, ma  
lampe éteinte, des parlementaires de  
l'inconnu, me voilà quelque chose de  
tout à fait machine, de tout à fait  
antenne, de tout à fait Morse. Un  
stradivarius des baromètres. Un diapason.  
Un bureau central des phénomènes." (pp. 7-8)

This notion of the poet as a receiving instrument is central in Cocteau's artistic ideology. His very nature renders him sensitive to the messages that will be transmitted to him, and which it will be his task to render into works of art. Now the poet, as a receiving vessel, must be prepared to renew himself from time to time, in order to retain his high measure of sensitivity. So Cocteau tells us in discussing the Ballets Russes:

"La troupe russe m'apprit à mépriser  
tout ce qu'elle remuait en l'air.  
Ce phénix enseigne qu'il faut se  
brûler vif pour renaître." (p. 9)

### Les Lamentations d'Antigone

In this two page section Cocteau tells us how he was stricken with sunburn as a result of incautious exposure to the sun's rays. With an improvement in his condition he acquired a new lucidity of mind. In this state he recognised another basic requirement for his artistic method:

"J'avais monté vite l'échelle des  
valeurs officielles; je distinguai  
combien l'échelle était courte,  
étroite, chargée de monde. J'appris  
l'échelle des valeurs secrètes. Là  
on s'enfonce avec soi-même, vers le  
diamant, vers le grisou." (p. 11)

### Esthétique du Minimum

As the title of this section implies, Cocteau prefers the minimum



in order to achieve an effect. He reacts violently against what he terms "le pittoresque". Ideally the artist should achieve his effect by concise means. He quotes as a perfect example of economy of expression Gertrude Stein's poem, pregnant with meaning:

"Dining is west"

which, according to him, was printed by itself in the middle of a blank page.<sup>9</sup> For Cocteau this little epithet was "une flèche de poteau indicateur" pointing the way to a kind of artistic freedom, to the duty of writing what others might consider simply to be a joke.

### Le Presse-Papier de Cristal

At a certain period a crystal paper-weight offered Cocteau a great deal of comfort and peace of mind. In it he thought he discovered the very quality of God.

"Il n'était plus pour moi du cristal ...  
un cube ... six faces ... un presse-  
papier ... non. Mais un carrefour  
d'infinis, un carrousel de silences.

Comme ceux qui appliquent leur oreille  
contre un coquillage pour y entendre la  
mer, j'approchais mon oeil de ce cube  
et j'y pensais découvrir Dieu." (p. 14)

In the following section entitled La Liste, le Mur et le Fil a Plomb Cocteau discusses three of his particular obsessions which were to become elements of his personal mythology.

The first of these was his attraction to unusually sounding names around which he constructed poetic images. Thus he was fascinated by the list of characters in Ibsen's Peer Gynt and in particular by the name Solweig. When he eventually came to see the play he was, on the whole, disappointed, since he had originally constructed, in his imagination, a more vivid enchantment around the names. Similarly he was fascinated by the sound of the name Alcibiades.

The second of his obsessions was with certain basic matters around which he created associations and possibilities. In this instance he describes the effect that marble has upon him. Since its substance had been used so frequently to create the youthful nude, then it seemed to him that merely by experiencing the touch of marble it displayed itself to him. And he swooned at the strong dark rhythms which it created within him.



Lastly he alludes to the plumb line becoming his favourite medium of locomotion towards an antipodal lady, a reference to the "femme qui dort à la Nouvelle-Zélande" at the end of the poem Quand tu ris (Le Potomak p. 273) already discussed on page 82.

### Le Pickpocket

Here we have an example of how analytically Cocteau examines an everyday phenomenon - the projection of a film in a cinema. Most of us are aware, if we go to the cinema, that the projection box which houses the projector is at the back of the auditorium. If we have been interested enough to inform ourselves of the basic technical details, we know that the principle of the film is the projection by means of a lens of a series of still pictures on to a screen at the rate of twenty-four frames per second, creating an illusion of moving pictures. Sitting in the darkened auditorium, if we care to glance upwards, we are aware of a beam of light issuing from the projector to the screen. We accept this fact, and think nothing of it.

For Cocteau it is not so simple. He sees the beam of light as a sheaf of moonlight filled with actors and landscapes that we cannot see until the sheaf is sectioned by striking the screen. Again, when we go to the cinema, we are sometimes aware of a slight whirring noise from the area of the projection room and we realise it is the projector mechanism functioning. For Cocteau it is the noise of a grinder of silences sharpening the beams of light which are darker or lighter according to whether they contain a tree, a dress, a letter or a white horse. But what fascinates Cocteau most of all is the possible existence of another dimension in which the drama is taking place in its journey from the projector lamp to the screen. And this other dimension has mathematical implications for him. He says:

"Par-dessus nos têtes, un monde invisible  
traverse l'ombre sous forme de cônes qui  
se tricotent et s'épanouissent indéfiniment,  
à moins qu'une paroi ne les dénonce." (p. 17)

In this state of mind he conjures up a little sequence:

"Le pickpocket, travesti en électricité,  
se sauve par la lucarne derrière la  
salle qui tourne le dos; mais il  
s'écrase contre l'immeuble d'en face.  
Tout le monde le voit ... le détective  
s'élançe ... Alors le pickpocket plonge  
à gauche dans le vide qui encadre le  
mur révélateur." (p. 17)



There is, of course, a great danger in casting the special eye of the poet on everything. One has to know where to draw the line. In a subsequent section Le Voyage vers la Gauche Cocteau writes:

"Certaines nuits, j'étais naïvement  
effrayé par mon intelligence, sachant  
que si l'artiste métamorphose tout  
en or, il ne saurait se passer d'oreilles  
d'âne."

(p. 22)

### Herr Ebel

In this section Cocteau describes how, after the war had started, he amused himself writing an article for the newspaper Le Mot which appeared in print on the 1st of May 1915. To illustrate the article he used an Eugène drawing in order to mock French chauvinism and Prussian militarism. The Eugène was renamed Herr Ebel. During the period of the war the Eugènes came more and more to symbolise the enemy for Cocteau.

### Calchas

Now the poet has come to a time when he nearly met with a relapse and went back to his former ways. But he has emerged victorious from the struggle. He is making a new order for himself:

"Ne plus lire les journaux. Fuir le  
contact des humains pour oublier ma  
cote en eux, car une longue habitude  
familiale des valeurs fausses consi-  
dérées comme justes me laisse du poison."

(pp. 32-33)

So he will no longer play the role of Calchas in Troilus.

### A Vol d'Oiseau

Cocteau explains the delay in the appearance of Le Potomak. Because of the war it lay, already in composite form ready for printing, at the Mercure de France, but could not be published. Even if Cocteau went to visit Alfred Vallette, he did not mention the book, fearing that he might be tempted to alter it. Revision would have destroyed it. He might have been tempted to give it a different title such as: L'Architecte Aveugle, or L'Acrobate Somnambule, or Preuve par 9, or Une Philosophie du Désordre. The strange thing is that every one of these titles is appropriate for the book! The first two are self-descriptions of Cocteau. The last two are elements of his mythology.



Griefs

The last section of the Prospectus falls into two parts. In the first Cocteau, with virtuosity (!) defines the style of the book. It is worth quoting in its entirety:

"La virtuosité mène au lieu commun.  
 Le lieu commun exerce un charme.  
 J'en ai connu d'entre les virtuoses  
 qui suivirent sa pente. Il semblait  
 qu'ils répétassent avec attendrissement :  
 'Moi, Rothschild, je soupe chez les  
 pauvres!'  
 Or, si, lassé de sa propre sources, on  
 s'abreuve à la place publique, il  
 arrive, par contre, qu'une forme qui  
 se cherche mette à fuir le lieu  
 commun une certaine affectation  
 fatigante. C'est mon principal  
 grief contre le style de ce livre.  
 Un style rococo."

(p. 35)

Cocteau's second grievance is levelled against his illustrations in the book. He describes them as "vignettes fades à la surface d'une oeuvre profonde comme l'individu". The ugliness of the drawings scandalises him; and he would have been tempted to take them up again, were it not for the fact that this rather clumsy, gawky ugliness, in parallel with certain pieces of free verse in the text, constitutes the book itself and is the proof of what it proves.

The Prospectus then ends with a final word on the Potomak. The poet went back to the aquarium but there was still no announcement of a re-opening. What he did notice was that the original notice - FERMÉPOURCAUSE DE SAISIE - had been replaced by another:

MAISON FRANÇAISE

FERMÉE

Pour Cause

De

M O B I L I S A T I O N

Over it, a beastly hooligan had written:

JE CHERCHE UN AMI SÉRIEUX

(p. 37)



## NOTES

## Chapter 1

1. Certain of the characters in Le Potomak have names inspired by the names which Cocteau saw on the jars in a chemist's shop in Normandy. He liked to think that the names resembled those of characters in books by Gide. In a footnote to the first page of Le Potomak when he first mentions Argémone he writes:
 

"J'étais dans une pharmacie normande avec un ami commun à Gide et à moi.  
-Regardez sur les pots, lui dis-je, on croirait des noms de Gide. C'est ainsi que je baptisai les personnages du POTOMAK.  
Cette malice amicale et plusieurs autres ne doivent pas être prises en mauvaise part."  
(p. 50, I)
2. In a footnote on the same page Cocteau merely writes "Tentation de saint Antoine" at the end of the description of the monster. Francis Steegmuller in his biography on Cocteau writes:
 

"Certain aspects of the monstrousness of the Eugènes seem to have been suggested by details from Flaubert's La Tentation de Saint Antoine, and the drawings themselves have a comic-strip air, a tinge of Breughel, and what would now be called Surrealism, with occasional fellational details ..."  
(Op. cit.)
3. The Angel's whistle, which Cocteau likens to the sound one obtains by running a wet finger round the edge of a glass bowl, is one that he uses frequently to accompany the sudden appearance or disappearance of a character or object. It is heard on several occasions on the sound tracks of his films and is used with particular effect in Le Sang d'un Poète and in Orphée. Here, then, is an example of a sound becoming part of his mythology - an element with the definitive function of highlighting a moment of action.
4. Pygamon is actually Catulle Mendès.
5. It was probably his attitude to the theme of disorder that attracted Cocteau to making appearances in the film Désordre, produced by Jacques Baratier in 1951. This was a short film dealing with the theme of art and poetry flourishing in the soil of disorder. Many distinguished personalities of the time also made appearances in the film, people such as the actresses Annabel and Juliette Greco, the authors Simone de Beauvoir and Raymond Queneau, and the great American actor and director Orson Welles.
6. Cocteau was later to use Steerforth as a model for the character of Stopwell in his novel Le Grand Écart.
7. Alcaeus invented the alcaic strophe, a poetic form much used by Horace, consisting of two eleven syllable alcaics, a nine syllable and a ten syllable. The form was used also by Alfred Tennyson in "O mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies".



8. It only becomes clear in these last few lines of the book that Cocteau uses the word "aquarium" actually to suggest a space or dimension enclosed all around by glass. The fact that it is used in this context to describe the reflections that the poet sees in the train window suggests the complete intangibility of the space.
9. Cocteau was later to meet Gertrude Stein when he was introduced to her by Pablo Picasso in 1917. The phrase "Dining is west" appeared in the section "Food" of Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons, which was published by Donald Evans in Paris in 1914.



Chapter 2 : PoésiePlain-Chant (1923)L'Ange Heurtebise (1925)Opéra (1927)Plain-Chant (1923)

Under the influence of Raymond Radiguet Cocteau came to alter many of the artistic precepts which he had formulated and adhered to previously. In his critical essay Le Secret professionnel, written by Radiguet's side, he wrote a eulogy on simplicity as well as reflections on the nature of poetry. He advocated a return to lyrical forms, to classical metre and rhyme. To exemplify his change of attitude, in the same year, 1923, he wrote this collection of love poems Plain-Chant. Immediately it was published, it caused a stir. Writing about it in the Nouvelle Revue française Paul Fierens admirably described why it surprised:

"Alors que plus d'un se préparait à célébrer la folie de Jean Cocteau, celui-ci voulut être loué pour sa véritable sagesse. Plain-Chant semble une illustration du livre de critique où Jean Cocteau nous a fait connaître son ange et ses muses; du roman dans lequel il met à nu son 'coeur trop gros';(1) et de certains fragments du Potomak où, parlant de l'amour, il dit 'la sourde horreur de l'irréciprocité' ... "

(N.R.F., Sept. 1923, no. 120, p. 350)

In his earlier poetry Cocteau, under their influence, had tried to emulate Ronsard and Rostand, but he had eventually rejected the forms which they used. Now, once more influenced by these forms, he used them more effectively than he had done before. So, for the first time, learning the anti-avant-garde lesson taught him by Radiguet, Cocteau submits to the forms of classical metre and rhyme.

Plain-Chant, a series of love poems, has little in common with the unmeasured music sung in unison in ecclesiastical modes from early times that the title "Plain-song" might imply, although, to be sure, the range of tone used by Cocteau is restricted and small. The poems are addressed to the poet's angel in his present form, Raymond Radiguet, and they become desire poems, truly erotic, and yet at the same time imbued with a strong feeling of resignation that springs from the poet's acceptance of the flesh and the imperfections of man. This angel, whom the poet addresses, this angel who exerts such a strong fascination upon him, is at the same time a mentor who is strongly conscious of the poet's fate, and will



consequently ensure that the poet will stay upon his appointed path, which will bring him to his death at the right time. Conscious of the passing of time, which he greatly regrets, the poet is saddened. The expression of his sadness imparts an elegiac tone to the poetry. It also accounts for the presence of so many of Cocteau's precious notions - the reverberating themes of sleep and death, of betrayal by the beloved, the drama of being troubled in one's inner self, the problem of not really knowing the stranger who feeds upon the poet while the poet adores him, and finally the drama of encountering in a single destiny forces which tear the poet to shreds before they flee.

Plain-Chant is in three sections. There are six poems in the first, nineteen in the second and eight in the third. As is the case with all of Cocteau's poetry, by being fully aware of the background events in his life at the time of its writing, one can obtain the key to stanzas that might otherwise be mystifying. Knowing the influences to which he was being subjected by Radiguet, it is easy to comprehend the purpose of the first poem in the first part. It is a statement of the poet's attitude to what he has already written, a glance forward to what lies immediately ahead, an allusion to the imminence of death and the brevity of time and the consequent need to move on as quickly as possible without brooding over the trappings of the recent past. It is the angel himself who exhorts the poet to turn his back on certain elements of his life and to turn to him:

"Laisse partir ces gens, laisse fermer la porte,  
Laisse perdre le vin,  
Laisse mettre au sépulcre une dépouille morte;  
Je suis ton nom divin." (p. 117)

Even if the poet were to die in fulfilling his function as poet, it matters little. The angel demands sacrifice. The poet must also be prepared to suffer in the course of his daily life, as long as he is giving expression to the needs of the angel. The second poem describes some of the poet's sufferings.

"Je n'ai jamais d'argent et chacun me croit riche,  
J'ai le coeur sans écorce et chacun le croit sec.  
Toujours sur ma maison mentira cette affiche,  
Même un aigle viendrait l'en arracher du bec.  
Ainsi veut l'ange, afin que la gloire se cache  
Et mûrisse en silence à l'abri des clameurs.  
La fouet de son aile interne me cravache :  
Je veux vivre, dit-il; qu'importe si tu meurs."  
(p. 118)



In the third poem the poet begs the angel for a moment of relaxation from his task. Let the angel sleep a little while he enjoys for a brief spell the feeling of life. In this poem, remarkably, Cocteau uses the sea as an image of life and personifies it as a virago. The metaphor is all the more extraordinary in that Cocteau usually considers the sea as a symbol of death. It is also an indication of his ambivalent attitude to the element of the sea.

"Dormez un peu. N'ayez rien à me reprocher.  
Voici la folle mer qui brise au bord ses coupes.  
Son champagne tonnante inonde le rocher  
D'où je vois ses jupons, ses linges et ses croupes.

Le bain depuis toujours invite le héros,  
Car de tous les dragons la mer est le moins bête."

(p. 119)

The fourth poem reveals the strong feeling of hatred that the angel sometimes arouses in the poet. It is when the poet tries to amuse himself, in temporary distraction, that the angel, referred to now as "espèce de muse", plunges him back into his night. Each time that the poet tries to unsheathe his heart which is heavy with hatred, his cruel angel is on the watch. This shapeless monster never sleeps, nor will he tell the poet whose instrument he has become. This poem, then, is written in a moment of rebellion and hatred. The angel is referred to as "l'ange cruel" and "ce monstre informe". The poet alternates in his feelings towards the angel. Hatred will be followed by love and adoration.

In the fifth poem the poet considers his present situation, his present passage through life, which he likens to an adventure, a noble journey by a beautiful carriage with its jolts, its ups and downs, as it will be seen by his successors. In the present, however, those who look upon his journey find him clumsy, and they would wish to impose their route upon his loves. Anything he writes does not please them because man admires only that which is consistent and monotonous. Yet, after death, our course is given up, the carriage becomes studded with stars like the constellation of the Ursa Major, and our fruits prove to be just right, as we expected.

The last poem in the first section is one of praise for the angel.

"Mon ange, vois, je te loue,  
Après t'avoir oublié.  
Par le bas je suis lié  
A mes chaussures de boue.



Notre boue a des douceurs.  
 Notre humaine, tendre boue.  
 Mais tu me couches en joue,  
 Ange, soldat des neuf soeurs." (p. 122)

In attempting to excuse himself for having temporarily forgotten the angel, Cocteau uses typical figurative language to describe why he has done so. The word "boue" is often used in his works as a symbol of human life, and here he qualifies it specifically with the adjectives "humaine" and "tendre". And the poet is attracted to life by its charms - "douceurs". But the angel is ever present, lying against his cheek, this angel who is the soldier of the nine muses - "neuf soeurs". In the second half of the poem, just as the poet's tormented feelings are intensified, so is the language that Cocteau uses to address the angel who, knowing the mysterious road which the poet is obliged to follow, grabs him by the hand the moment he tries to stray from it.

"Tu sais quel est sur ta carte  
 Mon mystérieux chemin,  
 Et dès que je m'en écarte,  
 Tu m'empoignes par la main.  
  
 Ange de glace, de menthe,  
 De neige, de feu, d'éther,  
 Lourd et léger comme l'air,  
 Ton gantelet me tourmente." (p. 122)

The first section has been concerned mainly with the poet's condition, his tendency to stray from his duty as poet in order to indulge in the pleasures of life, and the restraining influence of the angel, a stern disciplinarian who shows a firmness towards the poet that has cruel undertones.

In the second section the erotic feeling of the poet towards the angel becomes more concentrated and intensive. The first poem reflects this new feeling. The poet welcomes the possibility of mingling with the angel, who now becomes more precious to him than the very poem itself. This is a new tactic adopted by the poet in an attempt to have the angel open his soul to him. But by combining in this way with the angel, in essence, the two of them will become a single machine, many headed and multi-armed just as the gods in Chinese temples. In this new state of mind, the poet wishes to forget everything.

"Je veux tout oublier, et cet ange cornu  
 Comme le vieux Moïse,



Qui de moi se sachant le visage inconnu  
 A coups de front me brise." (p. 125)

The poet is driven to his new strategy by the angel's cruelty and brutality.

"Mêlons dans notre lit nos jambes et nos bras,  
 D'un si tendre mélange,  
 Que ne puisse, voulant m'arracher de mes draps,  
 S'y reconnaître l'ange.

Formons étroitement, en haut de ce tortil,  
 D'un baiser, une rose;  
 Et l'ange, à ce baiser parfumé, puisse-t-il,  
 Avoir l'âme déclose.

Le coeur indifférent à ce que je serai,  
 Aux gloires du poème,  
 Je vivrai, libre enfin, par toi seule serré,<sup>2</sup>  
 Et te serrant de même,

Alors profondément devenus à nous deux  
 Une seule machine  
 A maints têtes et bras, ainsi que sont les dieux  
 Dans les temples de Chine." (p. 125)

The second poem in this section is one of the best known in the collection beginning with the famous lines:

"Je n'aime pas dormir quand ta figure habite  
 La nuit contre mon cou;  
 Car je pense à la mort laquelle vient si vite  
 Nous endormir beaucoup." (p. 126)

The night in this context is the realm of the dream. It is not the thought of their death that dismays the poet, but rather the possibility that his angel may die before him or that he might die before his angel and they would be separated:

"Je mourrai, tu vivras et c'est ce qui m'éveille!  
 Est-il une autre peur?  
 Un jour ne plus entendre auprès de mon oreille  
 Ton haleine et ton coeur." (p. 126)

And as his angel continues to sleep, the poet sees him as a timid bird, curled up in his slumber, and asks if this bird could desert his nest where the merged body of them both with its two heads and four feet now reclines. In this simple image the poet is not only referring to the oneness which he feels with his beloved, but to the essential duality of his own nature symbolised by the one body with two heads.

If only the great joy which they experience in the night would not cease with the coming of morning:



"Puisse durer toujours une si grande joie  
 Qui cesse le matin,  
 Et dont l'ange chargé de me faire ma voie  
 Allège mon destin." (p. 126)

Only this exhilaration which he feels with his angel beside him lightens the burden of his destiny as poet. And he himself feels light under the weight of the angel's heavy head, where he would like to remain despite the crowing of the cock. This very head, severed in sleep, wanders in other worlds where another law is in force, and thus, in his sleep, the angel is thrusting in deep roots, far from the poet and at the same time near him.

"Léger, je suis léger sous cette tête lourde  
 Qui semble de mon bloc,  
 Et reste en mon abri, muette, aveugle, sourde,  
 Malgré le chant du coq.  
 Cette tête coupée, allée en d'autres mondes,  
 Où règne une autre loi,  
 Plongeant dans le sommeil des racines profondes,  
 Loin de moi, près de moi." (p. 127)

But the poet would like to remain always close to his beloved, so close, physically, that he could listen to the delicate forge of his breathing issuing from his sleeping mouth as his head reclines against the poet's throat. Intimate as this closing image is, it is imbued with a beautiful air of peacefulness and relaxation which at the same time suggests the protective attitude of the poet towards his angel.

"Ah! je voudrais, gardant ton profil sur ma gorge,  
 Par ta bouche qui dort  
 Entendre de tes seins la délicate forge  
 Souffler jusqu'à ma mort." (p. 127)

The notion of imagery as simply pictures is, of course, inadequate in considering a poem such as this. A whole range of other sensations besides sight is admirably captured in the language. There is a rich satisfaction of tone present particularly in the last stanza. At every point in the poem there is a control of movement within the image which is sensitive and precise. Apparent also is the exact inflection intended by the poet in each line. In the third and fourth lines of the second stanza -

"Un jour ne plus entendre auprès de mon oreille  
 Ton haleine et ton coeur." (p. 126)

the voice is made to linger on the words "ne plus entendre auprès de mon oreille" with just the right degree of appreciating content. Above all, there is no evidence of conscious contrivance in the form

of the poem. The spontaneousness of the language permits us to share the poet's experience. The theme and intentions are unfussily carried out.

In the third poem of the second section the theme is the jealousy of the poet. He is jealous of those creatures or experiences that his beloved encounters when he is asleep and dreaming. He would love to discover those people whom his beloved charms, when he lies motionless at his side. It is not an outstanding poem but it contains a phrase that, placed in another context, could well describe the phenomenon peculiar to its creator when, in the act of recalling an incident from the past, he was wont to embellish it. It occurs in the first stanza of the poem and is the third line:

"Quand je te vois sortir plus qu'à moitié du songe,  
Et de sa glu tirant un à un tes esprits,  
Ayant le vrai mêlé d'ingénieux mensonge,  
Et tes membres bougeant, à cette mort repris;" (p. 128)

There is also a touch of irony in the last words of the poem, the words spoken by the poet's beloved in answer to his questioning: "Je ne rêve jamais". (p. 128)

The fourth poem in this second section is a variation of the preceding poem. The poet confines himself to describing the feelings he experiences when his friend falls asleep.

"Mauvaise compagne, espèce de morte,  
De quels corridors,  
De quels corridors pousses-tu la porte,  
Dès que tu t'endors?  
  
Je te vois quitter ta figure close,  
Bien fermée à clé,  
Ne laissant ici plus la moindre chose,  
Que ton chef bouclé.  
  
Je baise ta joue et serre tes membres,  
Mais tu sors de toi,  
Sans faire de bruit, comme d'une chambre,  
On sort par le toit." (p. 129)

The keynote once again is in the extreme simplicity of form and the devices used to achieve tonal effects are uncomplicated. The repetition of the phrase "de quels corridors" creates the illusion of lengthening those corridors and at the same time the effect of an echo that suggests the emptiness of the corridors giving them an air of mystery.

The fifth poem, consisting of a mere four lines, simply indicates a short pause:



"Lit d'amour, faites halte. Et, sous cette ombre haute,  
Reposons-nous : parlons; laissons là-bas au bout,  
Nos pieds sages, chevaux endormis côte à côte,  
Et quelquefois mettant l'un sur l'autre le cou." (p. 130)

Completely coctelian is the metaphor in the last two lines describing the "good" feet as horses sleeping side by side.

Still obsessed by the face of the sleeper, the poet writes some more variations on the theme in the sixth poem. The background of the sleeper's dream is now Egypt, with all the atmosphere and the imagery that this country conjures up in the poet's imagination. He sees his beloved in sleep as a mummy with a golden mask. In androgynous mood, he also likens the sleeper to a dying queen and their night of love is compared to a dark embalmer in the effect it has upon the boy's features. There is, perhaps, a hint of anti-climax in the manner in which the poet addresses the boy in the last stanza, but it is redeemed by the clever placing of the boy's face upside-down in the last line -

"Abandonne, ô ma reine, ô mon canard sauvage,  
Les siècles et les mers;  
Reviens flotter dessus, regagne ton visage  
Qui s'enfonce à l'envers." (p. 131)

Another idea that obsesses the poet is the constant intertwining of his body with that of the sleeper - symbolic of his intermingling his essence with that of his beloved. In the first poem of the second part the image he used was that of - "Une seule machine à maints têtes et bras, ainsi que sont les dieux dans les temples de Chine". Now in the seventh poem he makes other comparisons -

"Notre entrelac d'amour à des lettres ressemble,  
Sur un arbre se mélangeant.  
Et, sur ce lit, nos corps s'entortillent ensemble,  
Comme à ton nom le nom de Jean." (p. 132)

In the next stanza their intertwined bodies are described as a loving octopus -

"Croyriez-vous point, ô mer, reconnaître votre oeuvre,  
Et les monstres de vos haras,  
Si vous sentiez bouger cette amoureuse pieuvre  
Faitte de jambes et de bras." (p. 132)

In the last stanza their coming apart is referred to in much simpler terms as a knot undone which leaves a void for the poet, when, his lover falling asleep again, the boy mounts the morphean steed which swiftly takes him to the shores that the poet fears -



"Mais le noeud dénoué ne laisse que du vide;  
 Et tu prends le cheval aux crins,  
 Le cheval du sommeil, qui, d'un sabot rapide,  
 Te dépose aux bords que je crains." (p. 132)

The eighth poem presents yet another vivid picture of the recurring element of the sea - the sea representing sleep or death, or both.

"Je regarde la mer qui toujours nous étonne  
 Parce que, si méchante, elle rampe si court,  
 Et nous lèche les pieds comme prise d'amour,  
 Et d'une moire en lait sa bordure festonne." (p. 133)

This personification of the sea as a woman has sensual undertones, not in its sartorial attributive details, but in the single action described in the third line. There is also the possibility of interpreting a double personification in the use of the verb "rampe" in the second line, since this verb can be used in the sense of "crawls" of a beast or "slithers" as a snake. The fact that the adjective "méchante" occurs in the same line, weighs the interpretation in favour of the image of a serpent. The poem continues:

"Lorsque j'y veux plonger, son champagne m'étouffe,  
 Mes membres sont tenus par un vivant métal;  
 Tu sembles retourner à ton pays natal,  
 Car Vénus en sortit sa fabuleuse touffe." (p. 133)

The comparison of the sea foam with champagne is one that the poet used already in referring to the sea in the third poem of the first section, in the third line of the second stanza where he said: "Son champagne tonnant inonde le rocher / D'où je vois ses jupons, ses linges et ses croupes." while the last line of this same stanza bears a strong resemblance to the last line of the first stanza of the present poem - "Et d'une moire en lait sa bordure festonne." which would suggest a certain uniformity in the poet's vision of the sea, were it not for the change in the element of the sea in the second line of the second stanza from "champagne" to "un vivant métal" which holds the poet's limbs. In the last stanza the sea becomes a poisonous element for the poet - an intoxicating wine for his friend:

"Ce poison qui me glace est un vin qui t'enivre.  
 Quand je te vois baigner je suis sûr que tu mens;  
 Le sommeil et la mer sont tes vrais éléments ...  
 Hélas! tu le sais trop, je ne peux pas t'y suivre."

(p. 133)

Thus the sea of sleep or death separates the poet from his lover.

The image of the sea is carried forward into the first line of the following poem, which is the ninth in the second section.



"Au moment de plonger sous les vagues du songe  
 Tu sembles hésiter;  
 Craindrais-tu, par hasard, qu'à ta suite je plonge  
 Et du même côté."  
 (p. 134)

The theme here, however, is the difference in the dreams that the poet and his friend have. While the poet dreams of his friend in those places he inhabited in his childhood and sees him with his friends who are now dead, when his beloved dreams, the poet has no place within the deep torpor in which the boy shuts himself. The poet would like nothing better than to disturb his lover's dream and to have a place in it.

In the following poem, the tenth of the second section, the poet indulges in conjecture upon what will happen when both he and his lover have died and thus moved into the medium of death. Since all the functions will be turned around, the thick walls of the sleep of men will be open to them:

"Tout sera changé de ce que nous sommes,  
 Oui, tout à l'envers.  
 Et les murs épais du sommeil des hommes,  
 Nous seront ouverts :"  
 (p. 135)

Then the point of the poet's conjectures comes into focus with the last stanza. If he should die first, then he will be able to enter his lover's dream and see how, while the poet still slept, with his hand upon his friend, the latter betrayed him with another lover in his sleep:

"Si je meurs premier, dans tes rêves j'entre;  
 Je verrai comment,  
 Lorsque je dormais, la main sur ton ventre,  
 Tu changeais d'amant."  
 (p. 135)

The pattern of carrying forward the theme or sentiment expressed at the end of a poem into the next is adhered to once again. So we find the poet still in resentful mood in the seventh poem of the second section. But now he has a slight advantage over his lover for there is something he can do which the boy cannot:

"Je peux regarder le soleil en face,  
 Ton oeil ne le peut. 3  
 Voilà bien mon tour, c'est la seule place  
 Où je gagne au jeu."  
 (p. 136)

Cocteau's hell does not exist within the element of fire or flame. When his friend and he go down to hell, if hell indeed exists, they will not inhabit the same diving-suit nor the same sea.

"Lorsque nous devons aux enfers descendre,  
 S'il est des enfers,  
 Nous n'habiterons le même scaphandre,  
 Ni la même mer.

Tu sauras trouver d'autre compagnie  
 Au séjour des morts.  
 Ah! comment guérir ta folle manie  
 De m'ôter mon corps." (p. 136)

In the abode of the dead they will each go their own way. Again the reason for the poet's resentment is revealed in the last two lines of the poem - his lover has repulsed him, denying him his body, by favouring the company of others.

But in the next poem, number twelve, comes sweet reconciliation. When the boy awakens and smiles, the dream that aroused the poet's resentment and jealousy is forgotten. Their gesture of reconciliation is a warm embrace, the fruit of which is a kiss. The poetic language here is somewhat affected, particularly in the opening line where the curling up of the boy's lips when he smiles is compared to the curl on the edge of rose petals.

"Tes rires retroussés comme à son bord la rose,  
 Effacent mon dépit de ta métamorphose;  
 Tu t'éveilles, alors le rêve est oublié." (p. 137)

The association of the boy's physical features with flower or plant is continued in the next line, and when he and the poet are intertwined in their embrace, together they become a plant with a single bark, a single warmth, a single colour:

"De nouveau je me trouve à ton arbre lié,  
 Tu me serres le corps de ta petite force.  
 Que ne sommes-nous plante, et d'une seule écorce,  
 D'une seule chaleur, d'une seule couleur,  
 Et dont notre baiser serait l'unique fleur." (p. 137)

After the reconciliation, the poet feels guilt in the following poem, number thirteen, because of his pride. After a night of love, each of them was living in his own universe. The poet was unhappy and acted accordingly. He lied, and his mind, busied by his pride, wandered from the bed where only his lover's charms should have touched him. What had placed the poet in this state of mind?

"Un mot calomnieux, quelques petites pointes,  
 Me venaient du dehors piquer la crête à vif.  
 Or, indigne cent fois de ton amour naïf,  
 Mon âme galopait, malgré nos jambes jointes." (p. 138)

He had been upset by a lying word, by some barbs which had stung him



to the quick. He felt unworthy of the innocent love of his friend, and although they lay there together, his soul raced out to avenge himself.

"Je me vengeais, j'allais battre mes ennemis;  
Je rentrais, je sortais, je parcourais la France.  
Alors que le bonheur est la seule vengeance,  
Et que la trêve est douce aux amants endormis." (p. 138)

But the only vengeance is to be found in happiness, and happiness is the sweet truce of lovers asleep.

In the next poem, the poet, still irritated by the chicanery of others, returns to the consolation of his lover's bed. He wallows in his love for his friend, and the angel allows him to suffer in love. But again, in beholding his friend asleep, he fears this contrived sleep which carries the boy away from him:

"Tu sais combien le mal à croire cher me coûte,  
Mais quand tu dors je pense à des mondes meilleurs,  
Où tu vogues sans corps, sans air, sans paysage,  
Et faisant de si loin tes lèvres remuer,  
Et de si loin aussi sourire ton visage,"

and again a surprise climax in the last line -

"Que sur ces signes-là, je pourrais te tuer." (p. 139)

His jealousy surging up again, he would be capable of killing his friend.

In the fifteenth poem the poet resolves that he will no longer endure the dream that disturbs him and that he will overcome the anxiety from which he has suffered, for, if his friend loves someone in his twofold existence, then he is deceiving that someone in this existence. Let us therefore deceive this blessed person, he says, for whom you contract in your deep sleep. On the contrary, he, the poet, experiences pleasure in surrendering to the acts which his lover's idle dreams create. And he addresses him thus: "That other in your dreams thinks you are his, but my kiss awakes you, and then he seeks you in vain. Your presence reaches him in these places of your dreams, or through some infernal marvel." (p. 140) Again the motif of jealousy is predominant in this poem.

The next poem, number sixteen, comes as a refreshing change. The poet talks about his travels. He travels little, he says, but he has seen London, Venice, Brussels, Rome and Algiers. Then, remarkably, with a few succinct observations, Cocteau conjures up his subjective impressions of these cities:

"Londres, coeur de charbon, pavot de brique rose,  
 Où l'on marche endormi.  
 Venise, triste à cause  
 Que son vieux corps d'amour n'est ville qu'à demi.  
 Bruxelles, dont la place est un riche théâtre.  
 Rome, à l'oeil inhumain  
 Des moulages de plâtre.  
 Alger qui sent la chèvre et la fleur de jasmin." (p. 141)

These are fleeting descriptions of five important cities, but they immediately create the feeling that the poet was not happy in them. In the last stanza the poet himself confirms this impression:

"Je n'étais pas heureux dans ces villes que j'aime;  
 Mon coeur y souffrait nu.  
 A Paris, c'est de même.  
 Je me sens mal partout, sauf en tes bras tenu." (p. 141)

He is happy only when he is held in his friend's arms.

The conversational tone that Cocteau adopts in many of these poems is never more obviously exemplified than in the opening line of the seventeenth poem which starts with that indispensably convenient adverb -

"Franchement, je croyais qu'amour, en poésie,  
 C'est aimer ce que l'on fait;  
 Et mon coeur en étouffait.  
 Mais pour me détromper les muses t'ont choisie." (p. 142)

Now that the Muses have at last been mentioned, he reveals that he does not see them as sedate, satisfied to inspire the poet but -

"Sans cesse disputant, organisant leurs camps,  
 Comme une ruche d'abeilles,  
 Les neuf muses sans oreilles,  
 Et qui savent toujours intervenir à temps." (p. 142)

and, what is more, they have deliberately made his beloved act in the way he does, so that he may write about him and about his behaviour -

" Car ces déesses des Grecs,  
 Pour jouer leur jeu d'échecs,  
 Me veulent tantôt l'une et tantôt l'autre rive." (p. 142)

Which explains the apparently erratic behaviour of the poet.

The feeling of urgency with which the poet starts the eighteenth poem is explained in the fourth line of the first stanza, where he tells us that he has just completed his thirtieth year. Cocteau's exceptional sixth sense is seen at work in this remarkable poem. He must have sensed in some mysterious way that Radiguet was not to be long of this world. Here is the eighteenth poem:



"Il nous faut dépêcher, ne perdons pas de temps  
 Ne nous imposons point de repos ni de jeûne.  
 Dans quelques jours d'ici tu seras encore jeune,  
 Je ne le serai plus. Je viens d'avoir trente ans." (p. 143)

The situation is obvious. The poet is thirty years old. His friend is still a boy.

"Je peinais, je hissaïs et j'oubliais la pente.  
 Il faut me retenir au lieu de me pousser;  
 Le coeur déroule vite un ruban de passé,  
 Toi de chiffre dix-neuf, et moi de chiffre trente." (p. 143)

The poet had been straining up the slope of his Parnassus. Now he must be held back instead of being pushed. This second line is a direct reference to the angel who always pushed the poet forward on his way. The concept of a "ruban de passé" is filmic. On a strip of film we can preserve a record of our past.

"Que ce maudit ruban peut me faire du mal!  
 Qu'il attende qu'autant le tien de ton coeur sorte,  
 Et côte à côte alors, sentirions de la sorte,  
 Diminuer moins fort le peloton fatal." (p. 143)

The poet's past can be harmful to him on its own. And it can run out quickly, just as his life is passing quickly. If only his life could stand still until the life of his friend had caught up with his and they would be of an age. Then they could stand side by side, on an equal footing, and hear less audibly the inevitable running out of the little ball of thread that represents our time.

The nineteenth poem ends the second section of Plain-Chant.

"Hélas! vais-je à présent me plaindre dans ces stances,  
 Et voir, près de Charon,  
 La mort, indifférente à telles circonstances,  
 Qui la décideront." (p. 144)

Once again, in a lamenting vain, the poet will, for the present, make complaint in these stanzas. But now he finds himself by the side of the ferryman of death, Charon, seeing Death, who is indifferent, and wondering when she will act. Death lives. She awaits. But it is not within her function to select the port at which they will disembark from Charon's boat. This detail for her is simply a tap on the shoulder that will be given her by fate.

"Elle vit. Elle attend. Ce n'est pas dans son rôle,  
 De choisir notre port.  
 Ce détail est pour elle un simple coup d'épaule  
 Que lui donne le sort.

Rien ne sert de prier cette vieille statue,  
 De savoir ses desseins;

Car ce n'est pas la mort elle-même qui tue.  
Elle a ses assassins." (p. 144)

The important concept expressed in the last two lines of this poem is basic in Cocteau's many personifications of death. Death herself does not carry out the function of delivering the poet from the realm of the living. She has emissaries who assume different forms. In the play and in the film Orphée, the Princess is merely one of Death's functionaries. And the moment of the poet's transition from living to being dead is not decided by Death herself but by Fate.

We come now to the third and final section of this long collection. It contains eight poems. The first poem gives a picture of the Muses as they work, embroidering the poet's destiny.

"Ainsi que se tournent les plantes,  
Et que, sises sur un côté,  
Hésitent les tables tournantes,  
On sent les muses hésiter.

Une prend les fils, une trie,  
Une percele canevas.  
Les courbes de leur broderie  
Décident seules où tu vas." (p. 147)

And when the Muses, after hesitating, have decided by the curving graphs of their embroidery where the poet's course is to head, if he should deviate from his target, the angel, who is the inflexible servant of the Muses, strikes him with his frizzy forehead, to remind him.

"Si je m'écarte de la cible,  
Tout mon devoir n'ayant pas pu,  
L'ange, serviteur inflexible,  
Me cogne avec son front crépu." (p. 147)

The poem thus re-inforces the co-operation that exists between the poet's angel and his Muses.

The second poem with a welcome shift of emphasis, is devoted entirely to Pablo Picasso and his art. Elsewhere in this thesis I have referred to the tremendous influence exerted by Picasso upon Cocteau. In this poem Cocteau does not attempt to judge the quality of Picasso's art. He only makes a simple statement describing how the artist has been guided by the Muses to impose human order upon the adorable disorder of the world. In the first stanza we learn that Cocteau is not partial to museums, which he sees as an immense vessel.

"J'ai peine à soutenir le poids d'or des musées,  
Cet immense vaisseau.



Combien me parle plus que leurs bouches usées,  
L'oeuvre de Picasso." (p. 148)

He sees an affinity between the objects that float in the rooms of Picasso's paintings and the intermingling of mouths and limbs which is effected by love.

"Là, j'ai vu les objets qui flottent dans nos chambres,  
Trop grands ou trop petits,  
Enfin, comme l'amour mêle bouches et membres,  
Profondément bâtis!

Les muses ont tenu ce peintre dans leur ronde,  
Et dirigé sa main,  
Pour qu'il puisse, au désordre adorable du monde  
Imposer l'ordre humain." (p. 148)

Turning to his composer friends in the third poem, Cocteau now addresses five members of the Groupe des Six,<sup>4</sup> Auric, Milhaud, Poulenc, Tailleferre and Honegger:

"Auric, Milhaud, Poulenc, Tailleferre, Honegger,  
J'ai mis votre bouquet dans l'eau du même vase,  
Et vous ai chèrement tortillés par la base,  
Tous libres de choisir votre chemin en l'air." (p. 149)

Cocteau saw himself as a spokesman for this group of composers, who worked in a grouping that was not so much of an aesthetic as of a friendly nature. Their understanding was based more upon feelings than upon opinions. If there was a general tendency, it might have been toward a saving of the melodic line which was at that time somewhat lost in the masterpieces of harmony composed by composers such as Debussy. Each of the Groupe des Six worked according to his own fantasy and nobody had to obey arbitrary decrees from any source. The Groupe had its origin in 1916. Cocteau does not mention Louis Durey who would have been the sixth of the Six had he not withdrawn from the Groupe very soon, sober and modest as he was, and having no taste for musical struggle. But Cocteau, even many years later, considered he had strong bonds with these composers. Georges Auric, in point of fact, was to compose much of the music for Cocteau's films. Cocteau in the following stanza declares that he would like to be looked upon as the "gardien nocturne" of the group.

"Or, chacun étoilant d'autres feux sa fusée,  
Qui laisse choir ailleurs son musical arceau,  
Me sera quelque jour la gloire refusée  
D'être le gardien nocturne du faisceau." (p. 149)

In the last stanza he takes credit for having shown his composer friends the deep recipe within his heart which may have inspired them

in their musical flights.

"Je n'imite la rose et sa dure lancette,  
Aspirant goulûment le sang du rossignol,  
Et montre de mon coeur la profonde recette,  
Pour que ces amis-là puissent prendre leur vol." (p. 149)

It has always seemed surprising to me that Cocteau, gifted as he was in so many arts, and an able musician to boot, never composed.

In the fourth poem Cocteau re-affirms that he is but an instrument of the Muses, depending upon their will in order to compose his poetry. Aware that the overall flavour of the poems in this last section is different from those in the first two, he is offering a simple explanation for the fact:

"Si ma façon de chant n'est pas ici la même,  
Hélas, je n'y peux rien.  
Je suis toujours en mal d'attendre le poème,  
Et prends ce qui me vient.

Je ne connais, lecteur, la volonté des muses,  
Plus que celle de Dieu.  
Je n'ai rien deviné de leurs profondes ruses,  
Dont me voici le lieu.

Je les laisse nouer et dénouer leurs danses,  
Ou les casser en moi,  
Ne pouvant me livrer à d'autres imprudences  
Que de suivre leur loi." (p. 150)

As usual, Cocteau does not look upon the workings of the Muses upon him as a fair experience. He considers himself a victim of their profound guiles, and his attitude, as always, is passive.

The theme of the Muses carries forward into the following poem which is the fifth in the last section. The first stanza compares the burning, crystalline Muses to a burning and murmuring chandelier suspended directly above the poet whom the Muses wish to be illustrious and special in speech, in what he has to express for them:

"Les muses sont de feux, de cristaux,<sup>5</sup> comme un lustre  
Brûlant et bruissant,  
Suspendu sur celui qu'elles veulent illustre  
Et spécial d'accent." (p. 151)

In the second stanza he refers to their power which is great in comparison to that of lightning, when they unstitch and restitch our brief futures:

"Vous semblez puérils, tours cruels de la foudre,  
A côté de leurs tours,  
Lorsqu'elles prennent soin de découdre et recoudre  
Nos avens trop courts." (p. 151)



The image of the circuits of lightning created by the Muses in this stanza finds its fulfilment in the content of the last stanza where the electricity created crackles in the poet's soul:

"Un orage, d'ailleurs, avec elles habite  
 Une haute cité.  
 Les voilà! Les voilà! Dans mon âme crépite  
 Leur électricité." (p. 151)

Still on the theme of the Muses in the sixth poem of this last section of Plain-Chant, Cocteau refers to some more of their characteristics.

"Ne m'interrogez plus. Interrogez ces filles  
 Dont je suis le valet;  
 Mais ne les croyez point ni belles, ni gentilles,  
 A qui leur semble laid.  
 Toujours toutes en train de fondre et de refondre  
 De précieux dangers,  
 Pourquoi supposez-vous qu'elles veuillent répondre  
 Quand vous interrogez?" (p. 152)

There is no point in questioning the Muses if they find you ugly. They are always occupied in melting and recasting precious or affected dangers. Why should they therefore answer? These Muses are haughty, standing as they work, letting works of art flow like fountains, conterminously:

"On ne dérange pas ces personnes hautaines  
 Qui travaillent debout,  
 Et qui laissent couler, ainsi que des fontaines,  
 Les oeuvres, bout à bout." (p. 152)

In the seventh poem the poet reveals that it is of no avail to delay the order of the Muses by stroking them on the neck like a horse, for they will bite your hand just as a horse will:

"Les soeurs, comme un cheval, nous savent la main mordre,  
 Et nous jeter au sol,  
 Lorsque nous essayons de différer leur ordre,  
 En leur flattant le col." (p. 153)

But the poet who helps them and stands beside them will be brought by them to his goal, even if he fears them, even if he finds their awe-inspiring beauty ugly:

"Elles portent au but celui-là qui les aide,  
 Et se met de côté,  
 Même s'il en a peur, même s'il trouve laide  
 Leur terrible beauté." (p. 153)

And the poet has given his aid so well to their crude strength, and he also has worked so much that even if he were to die in the following

minute, he could die happy. So, despite the torments he has undergone in the creative process of writing poetry inspired by the Muses, the poet is pleased with the results of his efforts.

Now it is time for the Muses to abandon the poet and in the final poem he addresses them as they leave without even saying farewell:

"Muses qui ne songez à plaire ou à déplaire,  
Je sens que vous partez sans même dire adieu.  
Voici votre matin et son coq de colère.  
De votre rendez-vous je ne suis plus le lieu.  
  
Je n'ose pas me plaindre, ô maîtresses ingrates,  
Vous êtes sans oreille et je perdrais mon cri.  
L'une à l'autre nouant la corde de vos nattes,  
Vous partirez, laissant quelque chose d'écrit." (p. 154)

The morning after the long night of artistic creation is heralded by an angry cock. The poet is no longer the meeting-place of the Muses. He dare not complain because of their indifference to him for they are deaf to his voice. As they depart, braiding each other's tresses into plaits, they are leaving behind them something that has found its way into writing because of the poet, their instrument. The poet is resigned to this fact:

"C'est ce que vous voulez. Allez, je me résigne,  
Et si je dois mourir, reparez avant.  
L'encre dont je me sers est le sang bleu du cygne,  
Qui meurt quand il le faut pour être plus vivant." (p. 154)

He asks the Muses to re-appear to him when he is about to die. Then follows a typical coctelian trouvaille in the beautiful metaphor of the last two lines in the stanza. The poet likens the ink which he uses to the blue blood of the swan which dies when it is necessary in order to be more alive. The last poem, flowing from his pen, is dying out. And, for a time, the poet will hibernate:

"Du sommeil hivernal, enchantement étrange,  
Muses, je dormirai, fidèle à vos décrets.  
Votre travail fini, c'est fini. J'entends l'ange  
La porte refermer sur vos grands corps distraits." (p. 154)

In this enchanted sleep the poet will rest, faithful to the decrees of the Muses. Their work is done and so is his. And now the angel returns to the poet closing the door upon the listless bodies of the Muses.

"Que me laissez-vous donc? Amour! Tu me pardonnes,  
Ce qui reste, c'est toi : l'agnelet du troupeau.  
Viens vite, embrasse-moi, broute-moi ces couronnes,  
Arrache ce laurier qui me coupe la peau." (p. 154)



What do the Muses then leave the poet? Love! Now the poet addresses his angel who has returned as the lambkin of the flock. Wearing the laurel crown of the poet with discomfort, uneasy in his role as poet, he asks his lamb to nibble at the crown, to tear away the laurel which is cutting his skin.

### L'Ange Heurtebise

Written two years after Plain-Chant, in 1925, and thus after the death of Raymond Radiguet, L'Ange Heurtebise<sup>6</sup> is considered to be Cocteau's major poem, and indeed Cocteau himself always thought of it as a perfect work of art. This was because he felt it was the only poem he ever created where good fortune favoured him from its genesis to its final emergence. It was written in a state of unbroken automatism. Conceived from the seed of Radiguet's aura, the angel Heurtebise grew within the soul of the poet just as the foetus grows in the womb of the mother. If my simile appears to be in bad taste, my justification in using it lies in Cocteau's Journal d'un Inconnu (1953), where, in the chapter De la Naissance d'un Poème he considers the technique of the genesis of the poem in terms of a pregnancy.

It was the name of the angel that came first to Cocteau, as he has so vividly recounted in the incident of the Otis-Pifre lift that changed its name to Heurtebise. In Journal d'un Inconnu he gives a full account of what happened after the angel had announced his name. He writes:

"Je ne pensais plus à l'épisode de l'ascenseur. Brusquement tout changea. Mon projet de pièce perdit ses contours. (7) Le soir, je m'endormais et me réveillais en sursaut, incapable de trouver le sommeil. Le jour, je somnais et trébuchais dans une pâte de songes. Ces troubles devinrent atroces. L'ange m'habitait sans que je m'en doutasse, et il fallut ce nom Heurtebise qui m'obséda peu à peu, pour que j'en prisse conscience.

A force d'entendre ce nom, de l'entendre sans l'entendre, d'entendre sa forme, si l'on peut dire, et dans quelque zone où l'homme ne peut se boucher les oreilles, à force d'entendre un silence criant ce nom à tue-tête, à force d'être traqué par ce nom, je me remémorai le cri de l'ascenseur 'Mon nom est sur la plaque', et je nommai l'ange qui se révoltait contre ma sottise, puisqu'il s'était nommé lui-même et que je ne le nommais pas. En le nommant, j'espérais qu'il me laisserait tranquille. J'étais loin de compte. La fabuleuse créature devint insupportable. Elle m'encombra, se déployait, se démenait, frappait comme les enfants dans le ventre de leur mère. Je ne pouvais me confier à personne. Il me fallait supporter

le supplice. Car l'ange me tourmentait sans relâche, au point que j'employais l'opium, espérant le calmer par ruse. Mais cette ruse lui déplut, et il me la fit payer cher.

Aujourd'hui, sur une côte si douce, j'ai peine à revivre les détails de cette période, et ses ignobles symptômes. Nous possédons une faculté d'oublier le mal qui est notre sauvegarde. Seulement notre mémoire profonde veille, et c'est pourquoi nous nous souvenons mieux d'un geste de notre enfance que d'un acte que nous venons d'accomplir. J'arrive, en excitant cette double mémoire, à me remettre dans un état inconcevable pour ceux qui n'exercent pas notre sacerdoce. Et sournoisement, moi qui me vantais d'être libre, en pleine désobéissance envers ce sacerdoce, je me retrouve aux ordres et ma plume court. Plus rien ne la paralyse. Je loge rue d'Anjou. Ma mère est vivante. Je déchiffre mes troubles sur son visage. Elle ne m'interroge pas. Elle souffre. Je souffre. Et l'ange s'en moque. Il se démène diaboliquement. 'Faites-vous exorciser, me dirait-on. Un diable vous habite.' Non, c'est un ange. Une créature qui cherche forme, une de ces créatures dont il semble qu'un autre règne leur défende l'accès du nôtre, que la curiosité les y attire, et qu'elles emploient n'importe quel moyen d'y prendre pied.

\*

L'ange ne se souciait guère de ma révolte. Je n'étais que son véhicule, et il me traitait en véhicule. Il préparait sa sortie. Mes crises accélérèrent leur cadence, et devinrent une seule crise comparable aux approches de l'enfantement. Mais un enfantement monstrueux, qui ne bénéficierait pas de l'instinct maternel et de la confiance qui en résulte. Imaginez une parthénogénèse, un couple formé d'un seul corps et qui accouche. Enfin, après une nuit où je pensais au suicide, l'expulsion eut lieu, rue d'Anjou. Elle dura sept jours où le sans-gêne du personnage dépassait toutes les bornes, car il me forçait d'écrire à contre-cœur.

\*

Ce qui s'échappait de moi, ce qui s'inscrivait sur les feuilles d'une espèce d'album, n'avait rien à voir ni avec le gel mallarméen, ni avec la foudre d'or rimbal-dienne, ni avec l'écriture automatique, ni avec rien que je connusse. Cela se déplaçait comme les pièces d'échecs, s'organisait comme si le rythme alexandrin se cassait et se reconstituait à sa guise. Cela désaxait un temple, en mesurait les colonnes, les arcades, les corniches, les volutes, les architraves, se trompait, et recommençait ses calculs. Cela givrait une vitre opaque, entrecroisait des lignes, des triangles rectangles, des hypothénuses, des diamètres. Cela additionnait, multipliait, divisait. Cela profitait de mes souvenirs intimes pour humaniser son algèbre. Cela m'empoignait la nuque, me courbait sur ma feuille, et il me fallait attendre les haltes et les reprises de l'insupportable envahisseur, me plier au service qu'il exigeait de mon



encre, de cette encre par le canal de laquelle il s'écoulait et se faisait poème. Je me soutenais de l'espoir qu'il me débarrasserait de son encombrante personne, qu'il en deviendrait une autre, extérieure à mon organisme. Peu m'importait son but. L'essentiel était une obéissance à sa métamorphose. Une aide serait trop dire car il semblait me mépriser et n'en attendre aucune de moi. Il ne s'agissait plus de dormir ni de vivre. Il s'agissait de sa délivrance et de la mienne, dont il n'avait, du reste, aucun souci.

Le septième jour (il était sept heures du soir), l'ange Heurtebise devint poème et me délivra. Je demeurai stupide. Je considérai la figure qu'il avait prise. Elle me demeurait lointaine, hautaine, totalement indifférente à ce qui n'était point elle. Un monstre d'égoïsme. Un bloc d'invisibilité.

Cette invisibilité construite d'angles qui lancent du feu, ce navire pris dans les glaces, cet iceberg entouré d'eau, restera toujours invisible. Ainsi l'a décidé l'ange Heurtebise. Sa configuration terrestre n'ayant pas le même sens pour lui que pour nous. Il arrive qu'on en disserte ou qu'on en écrive. Il se cache alors sous les exégèses. Il a, comme on dit, plus d'un tour dans son sac. Il voulut pénétrer notre règne. Qu'il y reste."

(pp. 49-53)

This marvellous account of the birth of the angel Heurtebise is full of wonders performed while the poet was obviously the victim of hallucination induced by his smoking of opium. The familiar coctelian circumstances are there, the strong element of coincidence involving the number seven, the poet as the vehicle of a force that is stronger than him, the intrusion of mathematical dimensions, and the implication that the mystifying existence of the angel is perhaps beyond comprehension since it defies exegesis. This is a typical attempt on Cocteau's part to puzzle us. The fact is that the poem is essentially so pure, so stark that detailed analysis is unnecessary. The allusions to Radiguet are there to be understood. It is Radiguet who, in the poem, undergoes a metamorphosis, and, freeing himself from all earthly gangues, becomes the angel Heurtebise.

That Cocteau saw Radiguet as a personification of his concept of the angel which he first formulated when he wrote Discours du Grand Sommeil, is apparent in the unpublished poems that he wrote about Radiguet when the young writer died.<sup>8</sup> The first of these begins with the lines:

"Parfois le ciel des cieux vient visiter les hommes,  
Il se gante avec les anges que nous aimons;  
Et si ces gants du ciel veulent nous toucher l'âme,  
Le ciel ôte sa main, ainsi mourut Raymond."

The fifth stanza of the same poem contains the lines:

"Moi qui suis bien gêné de mal tenir à terre,  
Essayant des moyens qui paraissent cruels,  
Je savais que Raymond, obligé de se taire,  
Cachait en rougissant un mécanisme d'ailes."

The third poem is even more explicit:

"D'ange, d'ange rebelle je n'en ai jamais vu  
Comme était celui-là trempé d'irrespirable  
Déguisé de calculs : le banal, le prévu,  
La serviette qu'on plie en se levant de table  
Et le reste. Soudain quelque chose de bleu  
D'oiselé, d'étoilé, hérissait son visage  
Les gens qui étaient là se regardaient entre eux,  
Après tout s'arrangeait et redevenait sage.  
Et je disais : Raymond a bu, excusez-le."

The sixth poem throws significant light upon Cocteau's jealousy motivated by Radiguet's affairs with the ladies:

" Conseil de toute importance  
Un ange ne doit pas parler de qui l'occupe.  
Les jeunes filles plument volontiers ces coqs  
Blessés par l'automne, enroulés dans leurs jupes  
Et plus coloriés que maillets de croquet.  
A tout prix il faut se taire, soyons braves;  
N'avoir pas l'air de nous connaître est fort prudent.  
Si c'est par une erreur que vous sortez du rêve,  
Les filles ont vite fait d'y mettre la dent.  
Tenons-nous à l'écart des crimes de l'automne,  
A toute vitesse tournez votre arc-en-ciel.  
Sur l'herbe les filles dansent avec les hommes,  
Sautant naïvement entre leurs bras cruels.  
Bel ange attendez-moi derrière l'arbre à songes.  
(Pourvu que l'orchestre me laisse m'endormir)  
Pourvu que jusqu'à vous mes deux jambes s'allongent,  
Comme le clair de lune allongé sur la mer."

Then there is a poem actually bearing the title:

" Raymond Radiguet<sup>9</sup>  
Un bel ange vint  
M'aider aux vendanges  
Et boire en échange  
La moitié du vin  
Mais le vin d'Anjou  
Met le feu aux joues  
La moitié du vingt  
Désigne ma grange  
A vingt partit l'ange  
Plaignez l'Angevin "

We shall see that the Angel of Cocteau's Secret professionnel loses his anonymity and becomes the hero of Cocteau's personal mythology in L'Ange Heurtebise.





Moving on to the second stanza, the imagery becomes more sensual:

" II  
 L'ange Heurtebise, d'une brutalité  
 Incroyable saute sur moi. De grâce  
 Ne saute pas si fort,  
 Garçon bestial, fleur de haute  
 Stature.  
 Je m'en suis alité. En voilà  
 Des façons. J'ai l'as; constate.  
 L'as-tu? "

(p. 47)

The assonance which added considerably to the effect of the first stanza would be ill-placed here. What we find in its place, apart from the one poetic phrase - "fleur de haute Stature" - is an effective use of everyday language, that, in its banality, suggests that the poet is trying to cover the embarrassment of his realisation that he is enjoying the brutal attentions of the angel. The ambiguity of the phrase - "Je m'en suis alité" is followed by the exclamation - "En voilà des façons" which one associates with the indignation expressed by a lady who has received unwelcome attentions.

" III  
 L'ange Heurtebise me pousse;  
 Et vous roi Jésus, miséricorde,  
 Me hissez, m'attirez jusqu'à l'angle  
 Droit de vos genoux pointus;  
 Plaisir sans mélange. Pouce! dénoue  
 La corde, je meurs. "

(p. 48)

The poet finds himself between the sensual experience of the angel and the uplifting experience of contemplating Jesus. The pleasure is pure, but too intense. "Peace!" he exclaims, "Untie the rope for I am dying." The ecstasy which he experiences could kill him.

" IV  
 L'ange Heurtebise et l'ange  
 Cégeste tué à la guerre - quel nom  
 Inouï - jouent  
 Le rôle des épouvantails  
 Dont le geste non effraye  
 Les cerises du cerisier céleste,  
 Sous le vantail de l'église  
 Habitée au geste oui. "

(p. 48)

This stanza contains an early mention of the angel Cégeste, who is to re-appear as the young poet in Cocteau's film of Orphée. The fact that Heurtebise and Cégeste are associated here in their roles as scarecrows is important if we consider that Cégeste, in Cocteau's later work, is, in a sense the successor of Heurtebise.



" V

Ange Heurtebise, mon ange gardien,  
 Je te garde, je te heurte,  
 Je te brise, je te change  
 De gare, d'heure.  
 En garde été! Je te défie,  
 Si tu es un homme. Avoue,  
 Mon ange de céruse, ta beauté  
 Prise en photographie par une  
 Explosion de magnésium. " (pp. 48-49)

In the first four stanzas the poet has used the third person in speaking of the angel Heurtebise. Now he addresses the angel, his guardian angel, but their roles are temporarily reversed, for it is the poet now who guards Heurtebise, who strikes him, who shatters him. Note how the fourth line can read either as it is written or as "gardeur", when it takes on a new meaning. The colloquial sound of "gar" occurs four times in the course of the stanza. Faintly uncomplimentary is the poet's term "ange de céruse". But there is, on the other hand, a leadenness in the faces of people photographed under magnesium flash.

" VI

Ange Heurtebise, en robe d'eau,  
 Mon ange aimé, la grâce  
 Me fait mal. J'ai mal  
 A Dieu, il me torture.  
 En moi le démon est tortue, animal  
 Jadis mélodieux. Arrive,  
 Sors de l'agate  
 Dure fumée, ô vitesse qui tue.  
 Sur tes patins de diamant raye  
 Le miroir des malades.  
 Les murs  
 Les murs  
 Ont des oreilles  
 Et les miroirs  
 Des yeux d'amant. " (p. 49)

This stanza is laden with many of Cocteau's mythological elements. He begins by addressing his beloved angel whose grace is so great that it gives him pain. This pain evokes the other pain which he feels because God tortures him. There is a crooked demon within him, an animal that was once melodious, hence in harmony with the divine. Now the speed which the poet associates with the act of creation must be conjured like smoke from the divine element of agate. And speed, on its diamond skates, must scratch the surface of the mirror of those who are ill - (perhaps so that they may not see Death at work

in their faces). Rows of walls are suggested by the repetition of "les murs" - walls have ears, and mirrors have the eyes of a lover.

" VII

Ange Heurtebise, abonde, moelle  
 D'avion en sureau et en toile d'albâtre.  
 C'est l'heure. Il faut encore  
 Descendre à mon secours, la tête  
 La première, à travers le verre  
 Sans défaut des yeux, le vide, l'île  
 Où chante l'âtre. Sors ton épée,  
 Viens au ralenti folle étoile.  
 Que n'ai-je ton corps? Ah!  
 Si nous avions tes hanches  
 Drapées de pierre, méchante  
 Bête à bon Dieu. " (p. 50)

In this section of the poem, the poet is calling his angel to come to his aid. He addresses him as the core of an aeroplane made of elderwood and alabaster linen. To the purist this comparison will seem rather ridiculous. To Cocteau the selection of the materials with which the aeroplane is made is all-important. Why elderwood? Because the elder tree has pinnate leaves which have the shape of wings, small flowers with a wheel-shaped corolla and the wheel can be an element of vitesse, and three-seeded fruits, an obvious symbol of the Trinity, hence the divine. Why linen having the appearance of alabaster? Because alabaster has the qualities of softness and semi-transparency. It is time, then, for the angel to come to the aid of the poet, and he must come headfirst, across the unblemished glass of the eyes, the void, the isle where the hearth sings, that is, home. Having drawn his sword to come to the aid of the poet, the angel must come in slow motion, that is to say he must come quickly. The contradiction is simply explained. Slow motion is a cinematic device, but Cocteau does not use it in his films actually to slow down time but to give time to analyse a brief instant, which may be faster than time itself! It is sad to see this poetic cinematic device, used first by Cocteau, being vulgarised in the cinema of the 1970s. Where Cocteau used it to analyse a moment of beauty, our producers today use it to analyse faster-than-time instants of a gratuitous violence that is tantamount to pornography.

" VIII

L'ange Heurtebise, aux pieds d'animal  
 Bleu de ciel, est venu. Je suis seul,  
 Tout nu sans Eve, sans moustaches,  
 Sans carte.  
 Les abeilles de Salomon



S'écarterent, car je mange très mal mon miel  
 De thym amer, mon miel des Andes.  
 En bas, la mer ce matin recopie  
 Cent fois le verbe aimer. Des anges d'ouate  
 Les indécents, les sales,  
 Sur l'herbe traient les pis des grandes  
 Vaches géographiques. " (p. 50)

The angel has come at the poet's bidding, yet the poet, naked without Eve, clean shaven, without a map is alone. He has found honey but cannot eat his fill of it, for honey nauseates him, and so Solomon's bees must scatter. Cocteau is referring here to Solomon's maxim, verse 16 Chapter 25 Proverbs:

"Hast thou found honey? eat so much as  
 is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled  
 therewith, and vomit it."

Naturally, it is no ordinary honey that the poet has. It is bitter thyme honey from the Andes. The angel has nonetheless satisfied the poet in his lovemaking for below, the sea, in rhythm with the poet's feelings, is recopying one hundred times the verb "aimer". Cotton-wool angels, immodest and dirty, are on the grass milking the udders of the large geographical cows. Naturally, I cannot be sure what a geographical cow is, but the image brings to mind another from the final sequence of Cocteau's film Le Sang d'un Poète where we see a bull with four pieces of a torn, dismembered map of Europe stuck on its hide with cow-dung. Presumably one could term this animal a geographical bull. The only interpretation of the cotton-wool angels that occurs to me is that they represent good-looking but bad-living young malingerers who exploit society by accepting its benefits (milking it) without offering anything in return.

" IX

Ange Heurtebise, je triomphe :  
 La colère, le chiffre 13,  
 Mélangent à rebrousse-poil  
 Tes moires blanches,  
 Gonflent tes voiles d'une  
 Façon toute neuve.  
 Jamais, leçons ne me plûtes; J'appris  
 Coûte que coûte,  
 Les affluents de l'Oise, le nom  
 Des branches d'arbre, la brousse  
 Du mois de Mai.  
 Oiseleur tu perds ta mie, apprivoise  
 Plutôt les statues.  
 Des oiseaux ce sont les amies;  
 Le marbre est très influent. " (p. 51)

We find the poet here in a moment of defiance towards the angel. After an altercation in which anger and ill-luck have ruffled the angel's white moires and puffed his veils, the poet feels that he has triumphed. The poet never liked "leçons" - using the word here in both senses - school lessons and warnings or rows. Cleverly, he is making allusion to his poor school performances as a boy, demonstrating that he is to a great extent self-taught, and also making the point that he does not care to be admonished. He then addresses himself using the term "oiseleur", one which he used often to describe himself.<sup>10</sup> The bird-tamer is losing his sweetheart, and should therefore tame statues instead. Birds are lady friends but marble is very influential. In Coctelian language the taming of statues is the equivalent of creating art, and marble, the medium used in statues has great influence, and is of great importance.

"

X

Ange Heurtebise, dites l'Ave.  
 Un pied sur la tortue un autre sur  
 L'aile, c'est jongler avec  
 Plume et boulet de canon.  
 J'eus des torts, j'en conviens : nous nous plumes  
 Après le jeûne. Ange Heurtebise, la terre  
 Mi-soleil, mi-ombre, a tout d'une  
 Panthère de la jungle. Non?  
 Eh bien j'en suis sûr et vous ordonne  
 De vous taire. Vous avez  
 Du sang au bec, mon jeune ami. " (pp. 51-52)

The poet now assumes the role of admonisher. He tells the angel to pray. He is hovering between two worlds, one foot in one world the other foot in another, as if he were juggling with feather and cannonball. True the poet was also in the wrong. After a long period of abstention from making-love, they had indulged. And when the earth is half in the sunlight and half in the shade it takes on the aspect of a jungle panther. In other words, when you swither between two worlds, the brutal instinct comes to the fore. The poet is convinced of this, and, assuming the upper hand, orders the angel to be silent, for Heurtebise has been indulging in the instinct and has blood upon his beak.

"

XI

L'ange Heurtebise, rue d'Anjou,  
 Le dimanche, joue aux faux pas  
 Sur le toit, boite marelle  
 A cloche-pied, voletant comme pie  
 Du merle, ses joues en feu.



Attention, dites-moi tu.  
 Heurtebise, mon bel  
 Estropié, on nous épie à droite.<sup>11</sup>  
 Cache tes perles, tes ciseaux;  
 Il ne faut pas qu'on te tue,  
 Car en te tuant chaque mois  
 Moi on me tue et pas toi.  
 Ange ou feu? Trop tard. En joue  
 Feu!  
 Il tombe fusillé par les soldats de Dieu." (p. 52)

We come now to the untimely death of the angel Heurtebise - of Raymond Radiguet. The allusions to the crippled antics of Heurtebise have two-fold significance. They refer first of all to his illness and its inherent danger - stumbling on the roof of the house in rue d'Anjou, fluttering like a magpie or blackbird. One wonders why Cocteau compares his lover to two birds that are not exactly beautiful to look at, until one remembers that Radiguet's appearance as he lay dying of typhoid was terribly altered. The black of the blackbird has the tone of death in it whilst the black and white of the magpie suggests the blackness of death and the whiteness of the angel in one. The use of the verb "boiter" also suggests someone hovering between two worlds, that of the living and that of the dead, for Cocteau often used the verb in this type of context. Cocteau's use of the descriptive phrase "ses joues en feu" is also important since it incorporates the title of one of Radiguet's own books Joues en feu. As Radiguet hovers between life and death, the poet clings to the slightest signs of intimacy - "dites-moi tu". In killing Radiguet, the forces of death are also killing the poet. The use of assonance is very marked throughout the stanza - the play on the word "joue", and the "u" sound in "tu" and the repeated "tue" alternating with the "oi" in "mois" and "moi". Note the suddenness of the execution when it comes - there is no pause between "en joue" and "feu". The last line is a reconstruction of Radiguet's own words to Cocteau three days before he died, to the effect that in three days he would be executed by God's firing squad.

"

## XII

La mort de l'ange Heurtebise  
 Fut la mort de l'ange, la mort  
 Heurtebise fut une mort d'ange,  
 Une mort d'ange Heurtebise,  
 Un mystère du change, un as  
 Qui manque au jeu, un crime  
 Que le pampre enlace, un cep

De lune, un chant de cygne qui mord.  
 Un autre ange le remplace dont je  
 Ne savais pas le nom hier;  
 En dernière heure : Cégeste. " (p. 53)

The interplay of sounds made by the varying arrangement and juxtaposition of the recurring phrases in the first four lines of this stanza creates the effect of a dirge as the poet laments the passing of his friend. But it is not merely a question of the poet's playing with words or using poetic devices for their own sake. The form adds significance to the content and admirably expresses the subtlety of the nuances of meaning conveyed. When Radiguet died, his death was the death of the angel. It was also the death of an angel. A death of the angel Heurtebise is as a mystery of exchange, in that the poet who has desired death is denied it, whilst the boy who had still so much to give is gone. It is also an accident like an ace which is missing in a game, a sin enlaced by a vine-branch, a vine-stock of the moon, the song of a swan that bites. These are the random images of the angel's death that flit across the mind's eye of the poet. And now a new angel comes to replace Heurtebise: Cégeste.

" XIII

Heurtebise, ô mon cygne, ouvre  
 Ta cachette peu sûre. Une feuille  
 De vigne mise sur l'âme  
 Impudique, je t'achète  
 Au nom du Louvre, que l'Amérique  
 Le veuille ou non. " (p. 53)

The poet's swan image of Heurtebise persists. He addresses him as his swan, and asks him to open his unsafe hiding-place. In the name of the Louvre, and whether America wants it or not, the poet is buying Heurtebise a vine leaf to cover his immodest soul.

" XIV

Heurtebise ne t'écarte  
 Plus de mon âme, j'accepte.  
 Fais ce que dois, beauté.  
 Qu'il est laid le bonheur qu'on veut,  
 Qu'il est beau le malheur qu'on a.  
 Cheveux d'ange d'Heurtebise, lourd  
 Sceptre mâle, danger de l'eau,  
 Du lait, malle de bonne en gare,  
 Au regard de cet élégant animal  
 Sur la carte qui bouge : mon tombeau  
 De l'île aux doigts écartés.  
 Le malheur gante du sept. " (pp. 53-54)

Now the poet implores Heurtebise not to depart from his soul.



In a mood of submission he yields to the aura of the angel. "Do what you must do," he tells him. The balance achieved in the following two lines is an example of the poet at his most successful writing:

"Qu'il est laid le bonheur qu'on veut,  
Qu'il est beau le malheur qu'on a." (p. 53)

The bitter-sweetness of happiness and grief could not be more subtly expressed. The next two lines, start with the image of the angel's hair of Heurtebise seen as a heavy masculine sceptre, an image that merely describes the sense of male power that the poet experiences in the presence of Heurtebise, and not as overtly pederastic a phallic symbol as some interpreters appear to have believed since the word "sceptre" can also mean simply "dominion" or "power". They lead in to short series of impressionistic illustrations of objects that are symbols of happiness or unhappiness, ambiguous to a curious extent - "malle de bonne en gare". The glance of an elegant animal on moving paper is a reference to one of many drawings that Cocteau made of his young friend. The "island of the spread fingers" is the hand which is also a tomb since it contains the secret of his destiny on its palm. The hand, when wearing a glove, takes a size seven, and misfortune also takes a size seven in gloves. Here the poet is contradicting the popular belief of seven being a lucky number.

And thus we come to the final stanza in the poem:

"Ange Heurtebise, les papillons battent  
Mollement des mains malgré la nue.  
Les soupapes et les oreillettes du coeur,  
Fleur de l'aorte, anthracite,  
Ouragan des points cardinaux.  
Cordages de la nuit,  
La lune écoute aux portes.  
La rose n'a pas d'âge,  
Elle a ses becs, ses gants,  
Et les journaux la citent  
Avec les acrobates  
Que la nuit et le jour  
Echangent sans amour." (p. 54)

Things of beauty such as butterflies make faint impression on the hands despite the influence of the high heavens. Now the poet presents us with a very striking image of the essential inner system that controls life within the human body - the aorta, arterial trunk hard as anthracite, hurricane of the cardinal points of the body, that carries the blood from the heart which has received the blood

itself in its auricles through the valves. These are the rigging of the ship of the night that sails on while the moon eavesdrops at doors. The rose (a symbol of poetry) has no age. It has its beads or lips and its gloves (which are sometimes the implements of death). The newspapers quote poetry along with the acrobats (the poets) that night and day exchange without love (which death and life exchange lovelessly). Thus he explains the cruel mortality of the poet.

The final poem Procès-Verbal is no more than its title implies, a report or minutes of what has preceded it, and a very scant record it is:

"

## Procès-Verbal

Dans la nuit du... Quai... Les anges :  
 Heurtebise, Elzévir, Dimanche, Cégeste,  
 Après avoir... ont... du sexe féminin...  
 Il paraîtrait... malgré l'heure...  
 Elles virent... lumière diffuse... l'âne...  
 Fit mine de... une aile... par le manche  
 En fer... sur la bouche... l'atrocité  
 Du geste.

Menés au poste, ils refusèrent  
 De s'expliquer, bien entendu. " (pp. 54-55)

The fragmentary nature of these minutes would suggest that they could have meaning only for their creator. After several readings a little episode appears to emerge from the notes. It could refer to a misdemeanour committed by the four angels Heurtebise, Elzévir, Dimanche and Cégeste. This is suggested mainly by the last two isolated lines:

"Menés au poste, ils refusèrent  
 De s'expliquer, bien entendu." (p. 55)

Certainly an atrocious deed appears to have been committed: "l'atrocité Du geste". Whatever happened, it did so, despite the hour - "malgré l'heure". A violent act is suggested by "par le manche en fer..." followed immediately by "sur la bouche...". "L'âne" who is Heurtebise, since he was addressed with this name in the poem, pretended in some way "fit mine de". There might also be a hint of an impropriety in the reference to ... "du sexe féminin"... And then there is the problem of "Elles virent". Who were they? Some ladies who saw Heurtebise surrounded by a "lumière diffuse" and thought this curious, not knowing that he was an angel? And he, pretending not to see their curious glances, made to pass them, when suddenly, one of his wings - "une aile" - showed beneath his cloak? And when one of the ladies



tittered, did Heurtebise lose control, and strike her "sur la bouche" with a "manche en fer"? Hence their appearance at the police station where, naturally, they refused to explain. No doubt, this may be idle conjecture. But if I may be permitted to indulge in humour of coctelian stamp I would add: "Ne jetez pas le manche après la cognée"!!

### Opéra (1927)

First published in 1927, this book of poems contains some of Cocteau's best and most typical work. When it was re-published in paperback in 1959 by Stock, Cocteau took the trouble to write a brief introduction and I think it is fitting to quote it as an introduction to this study.

"Lorsque parurent les poèmes d'OPERA, ils s'opposaient à l'avant-garde, à cette mode hautaine qui n'en veut pas être une et contre laquelle, jadis, Raymond Radiguet m'avait mis en garde. Ces poèmes résument une époque de l'hôtel Welcome à Villefranche, où tant de mythes modernes prirent naissance. Mes rares lecteurs confondaient avec des calembours le style oraculeux de certaines pièces. En outre j'étais loin de penser que l'atmosphère de ce petit livre finirait par prendre le large. Il y avait dans notre Villefranche comme des secrets qu'on se chuchote à l'oreille. Et je me vois encore circuler entre ma chambre et celles de Glenway Wescott et de Monroe Wheeler pour leur lire les textes de Musée secret, textes où je donnais à nos énigmes la froide allure d'un procès-verbal." 12 (p. 9)

The collection Opéra contains more than fifty poems, most of which are in verse but some of which are prose poems. The collection has a strong flavour of the theatrical, the style of the poems a certain wild flamboyance, and many of them are rich indeed in the sententious, aphoristic qualities that make them a source of irritation to many critics who are not fully acquainted with their artistic background. Cocteau himself was of the opinion that clever "calembours" and verbal "tours de force" could legitimately be used by the poet to create effective poetry. Clever as the majority of his devices incorporating puns are, they tend to amuse at the expense of not interesting or impressing those people who regard the seriousness of poetry as sacrosanct. In many cases these critics do not examine the devices in their proper context, forgetting also that Cocteau did not always take himself as seriously as they take themselves. Most literary critics using a chronological approach come to read Opéra after reading L'Ange Heurtebise<sup>13</sup> expecting to find

poems that will either renew the experiences of the master poem, or have the same degree of extraordinary excellence.<sup>14</sup> The perceptive reader will, however, be aware, across the pure fantasy of the poems in Opéra, of a poet who is tormented. In his suffering he finds relief in unwinding through the speed given him by opium. Sometimes he is unfettered by associations of ideas which surprise even him. Let me quote first of all from Musée secret, the prose poem Le Paquet rouge which recounts the poet's grief and despair following the death of Radiguet:

"                                    Le Paquet rouge

Mon sang est devenu de l'encre. Il fallait empêcher cette dégustation à tout prix. Je suis empoisonné jusqu'à l'os. Je chantais dans le noir et maintenant c'est cette chanson qui me fait peur. Mieux encore : Je suis lépreux. Connaissez-vous ces taches de moisissure qui simulent un profil? Je ne sais quel charme de ma lèpre trompe le monde et l'autorise à m'embrasser. Tant pis pour lui. Les suites ne me regardent pas. Je n'ai jamais exposé que des plaies. On parle de fantaisie gracieuse : c'est ma faute. Il est fou de s'exposer inutilement. Mon désordre s'empile jusqu'au ciel. Ceux que j'aimais étaient reliés au ciel par un élastique. Je tournais la tête... ils n'étaient plus là. Le matin je me penche, je me penche, je me laisse tomber. Je tombe de fatigue, de douleur, de sommeil. Je suis inculte, nul. Je ne connais aucun chiffre, aucune date, aucun nom de fleuve, aucune langue vivante ou morte. J'ai zéro en histoire et en géographie. Sans quelques miracles on me chasserait. En outre j'ai volé ses papiers à un certain J.C. né à M.L. le..., mort à 18 ans après une brillante carrière poétique. Cette chevelure, ce système nerveux mal plantés, cette France, cette terre, ne sont pas à moi. Ils me dégoutent. Je les ôte la nuit en rêve. Ma mère n'y a vu que du feu. Je l'aime. Elle me le rend. Ne dites pas que je la trompe. Je lui donne en échange l'illusion d'avoir encore un fils. J'ai lâché le paquet. Qu'on m'enferme, qu'on me lynche. Comprenne qui pourra : Je suis un mensonge qui dit toujours la vérité. " (pp. 85-86)

The dictum at the end of the poem is the best known and least understood of Cocteau's lines. It merely implies the social lie of the poet's outer life, the truth of the man, the individual, the truth of the poet's world of shadow.



The poet's unwinding through the medium of opium is best expressed in the poem Prairie légère, actually written in the clinic where Cocteau was undergoing his first detoxication.

" Prairie légère

Etre de l'opium les prairies légères,  
Il n'y a rien de tel pour un coeur trop blessé;  
On veut me réapprendre la vie étrangère  
Et que j'invite au bal les filles à danser.

On veut me changer d'ailes en somme.  
J'avais à mon esprit des ailes de fumée;  
On veut que repoussent mes ailes d'homme,  
Ce qui fait mal, surtout à la fin des journées.

Mes ailes cela coûte un prix fou chaque plume.  
Jadis la pipe allait l'oiseleur oisé...  
J'étais liège sur l'eau, nuage en l'air, écume,  
Je montais, étendu sur le tapis ailé.

Là, semblable au sureau qui vole avec ses moelles  
(Il vole sans bouger comme un homme qui dort)  
Tatoué jusqu'à l'âme et pétillant d'étoiles  
Je profitais vivant du mensonge des morts.

Tes bonheurs sont pipés et le malheur te pipe.  
Voilà ce que le sage inscrira sur sa pipe.  
Cependant qu'il est cher à notre esprit chagrin,  
Le pavot sinueux couronné de ses grains.

Je possédais l'arbre céleste des artères.  
Le silence est musique aux flûtes de bambou;  
Mais les bourreaux chinois veulent me faire taire  
Et caressent la mort pour en venir à bout.

Le songe aboutissant aux rizières de Chine,  
Il fallait longer la muraille de Pékin.  
Les docteurs de Paris réparent la machine  
Et dehors j'aperçois rôder jaunes coquins.

Je ne dirai jamais le chiffre du silence,  
La route j'oublierai qui mène au ciel des cieux,  
Sachant que les Chinois sur la pointe des lances  
Plantent la tête du bavard silencieux. "

(Maison de Santé) (pp. 39-40)

The first effect apparent in this beautiful poem is the wonderful tone colour of the text. It is obviously written to be heard, not just read, and the musicality of its form helps to interpret a crucial point in the poet's experience. And just as strong hints of the film Le Sang d'un Poète are very much apparent in the prose poem Le Paquet rouge with its emphasis on the personal problem of the poet and his physical suffering, so Prairie légère seems a lyrical blueprint for Opium which was to appear shortly afterwards.

The poem has its fair share of enigmatic lines. But one of the purposes in Cocteau's creating riddles, apart from the obvious one of

stimulating our imagination, is to render possible several interpretations, all of them meaningful and apposite in the general context of the stanza. The deliberate use of a verb having several meanings effects this device admirably. An outstanding example in the present poem is the line:

"Tes bonheurs sont pipés et le malheur te pipe."

where the key to the several interpretations lies in the verb "piper".

The poem with which Opéra opens - Par lui-même - contains a condensed version of the poet's artistic manifesto in the first stanza of the first part:

"Accidents du mystère et fautes de calculs  
Célestes, j'ai profité d'eux, je l'avoue.  
Toute ma poésie est là : Je décalque  
L'invisible (invisible à vous)  
J'ai dit : 'Inutile de crier, haut les mains!'  
Au crime déguisé en costume inhumain.  
J'ai donné le contour à des charmes informes  
Des ruses de la mort la trahison m'informe  
J'ai fait voir, en versant mon encre bleue en eux,  
Des fantômes soudain devenus arbres bleus." (p. 13)

In the second part of the same poem - Grèce - we have a portent of the Greek or classical background that will be dealt with in other poems in Opéra, but which will also, with the addition of elements from Cocteau's own personal mythology, find expression later in Orphée and La Machine infernale:

"Grèce :

Où le marbre et la mer frisaient comme un mouton  
Où les serpents noués décoraient le bâton  
Où de cruels oiseaux posaient des devinettes  
Où le navire était hérissé de houlettes  
Où le berger battait les aigles libertins  
Où l'inceste sans cœur, monté sur des patins  
Persécutait les rois, les reines de théâtre  
Avec ses cris de folle, avec ses yeux de plâtre...  
Voilà si je ne m'abuse le style grec.  
Les dieux (plutôt le diable) ayant plumes et becs  
Et coiffé d'un chapeau commode pour la fuite,  
Mercure, tenant à la main le chiffre huit." (p. 14)

The third part of the poem harks back to the poet's childhood - a rare occurrence in Cocteau's writing:

"Puis l'enfance. La mienne on y voyait souvent  
Les jockeys accroupis sur le fleuve du vent.  
La fenêtre mêlait oiseaux et fils de fer  
Vint l'amour : Madeleine aux jolis yeux louchons.  
Ses doigts avec les miens trichaient dans le manchon...  
Elle m'a fait du mal autant qu'on en peut faire.



Ensuite ont commencé la cire, les ciseaux,  
 Les bustes comprenant la langue des oiseaux.  
 Les enfants, en jouant, découvrant que les bustes  
 Sous des gants noirs, la nuit, cachent des mains robustes.  
 Et la mort ravissante, adroite sur le fil,  
 Vite me présentait l'un et l'autre profil." (pp. 14-15)

These verses are a rapid survey of the poet's life up to the point of early manhood. The reference to the jockeys establishes the location of Maisons-Laffitte which boasted a racecourse. The striking following image creates in a few words the impression of being within the house - a cage - looking out at the birds from the window through iron threads or fine bars - and this relates to that particular domestic ambience of childhood - indoors - safety - even within the restriction of the cage - followed swiftly with the loss of innocence when love comes. His first infatuation was with Madeleine Carlier with her pretty squinting eyes.<sup>15</sup> Again the use of the word "louchons" is typically coctelian, open as it is to two possible interpretations, "squinting" or "longing". The last stanza follows the poet's journey through several stages of his development and it is rich in elements of his mythology - wax as an element for the creation of artistic objects, scissors as a symbol of wings, busts that understand the language of the birds, busts with black gloves in turn a symbol of the night or death, and lastly death itself ravishingly attractive to Cocteau skilfully presenting the poet, as she walks the dangerous tightrope, with two profiles, life and death alternating, and at the same time blending as Cocteau elsewhere described, like the two faces of a spun coin.

A remarkable poem that appears early in the collection of Opéra is Les Mauvais Elèves. Here Cocteau dwells again on the theme of sleep. He begins by describing a man lying asleep on the ground, rooted to the dimension of the dream by his veins and arteries. Cocteau frequently uses the human arterial system to symbolise a central power point or human factory manufacturing dreams. Children, especially naughty children, in their art classes at school, often produce pictures depicting landscapes that have much in common with the human landscape that is formed within the body by the arterial system. To this landscape Cocteau adds other elements, including the various actions or activities of the naughty schoolchildren:

"Les enfants tirent la langue, dessinent  
 En couleurs les fleuves de cette géographie  
 Extraordinaire des gens nus sans jambes.

Et achètent les photographies en cachette  
Où parmi les nerfs glisse le sang bleu." (p. 26)

The blood, as we find frequently in Cocteau's imagery, is blue. The pupils who are cruel, as most children are, engaged in this imaginative exercise, are carried at random upon the river of the veins, while at the same time preventing their friends from copying the dreams which they are painting. The dream landscape itself is poisonous as the next stanza reveals:

"Ce système fluvial formé de noeuds,  
Pensifs, doux affluents, deltas d'artères,  
Irrigue un paysage vénéneux,  
Mais à peine au-dessus du niveau de la terre." (p. 26)

Thus the blood of sleepers becomes a light ink which escapes from their mouths coming out from the roots of their necks:

"Ainsi les gens tués par le sommeil meurent  
Sous l'orme et leur ombre d'eux s'écoule.  
C'est une encre légère le sang des dormeurs,  
Qui par la bouche sort des racines du cou." (p. 26)

Occasionally in this collection the images conjured have a theatrical-operatic flavour, thus justifying the title of Opéra. At the end of the poem L'Age ingrat, when the poet is describing youthful activities, he presents us with the theatrical image of frogs dying with their hands over their hearts!

"Que fîmes-nous couchés derrière les groseilles?  
A vrai dire surtout des rires moqueurs.  
Nos bouches fleurissaient des filles les oreilles,  
Près des grenouilles, mortes la main sur le coeur." (p. 28)

An example of the clever clever type of poem that infuriates many of Cocteau's critics with its puns and tours de forces is L'Hôtel.

"La mer veille. Le coq dort.  
La rue meurt de la mer. Ile faite en corps noirs.  
Fenêtres sur la rue meurent de jalousies.  
La chambre avec balcon sans volets sur la mer  
Voit les fenêtres sur la mer,  
Voile et feux naître sur la mer,  
Le bal qu'on donne sur la mer.  
Le balcon donne sur la mer.  
La chambre avec balcon s'envolait sur la mer.  
Dans la rue les rats de boue meurent  
(Le 14 que j'eus y est);  
Sur la mer les rameurs debout.  
La fenêtre devant haït celles des rues;  
Sel de vent, aisselles des rues,  
Aux bals du quatorze Juillet." (P. 37)

But one should accept such a poem as a sort of divertissement in the



general spectacle of the collection.

No one could surely quarrel with the fascinating and mesmerising music created by another clever effort - the prose poem - La Toison d'or. There exists a recording of Cocteau himself reading this, weaving a magic sound picture that was later to find echoes in the memorable speech by the Sphinx in the second act of La Machine infernale. Here is the text of La Toison d'or:

"Bouclée, bouclée, l'antiquité. Plate et roulée,  
l'éternité. Plate, bouclée et cannelée, j'imagine  
l'antiquité. Haute du nez, bouclée du pied.  
Plissée de la tête aux pieds.

Plate et roulée, l'éternité. Plate, bouclée et  
annelée; annelée et cannelée. Ailée, moulée,  
moutonnée. La rose mouillée, festonnée, boutonnée  
et déboutonnée. La mer sculptée et contournée.  
La colonne aux cheveux frisés. Antiquité bouclée,  
bouclée : Jeunesse de l'éternité!" (cf. p. 43)

Here the poet appears to see antiquity and eternity in parallel, with characteristics that are at first dissimilar, but which later intermingle. In his consideration of them, constant elements of his mythology arise before him, the sea, the rose and the beauty of youth. Together, antiquity and eternity represent for him the Golden Fleece which, just as it carried Phrixos and his brother Hellé into the air, will lift the poet up into the pure domain of his poetry.

The first prose poem in Musée secret is quite remarkable. It demonstrates how a Roman bust can proceed to strangle a man who is asleep by unwinding the line of its profiles into a long noose which can make its way like a living organism through walls, sliding under doors and through keyholes, remembering as it goes along where it has untied knots which, upon its return, will have to be tied again in the correct places under penalty of death. This can be explained by the fact that marble has certain mysterious qualities that permit the bust to proceed in this way. This prose poem has the title of:

" Le Buste

Il fallait y penser, voilà tout. Résoudre ce  
problème exige une certaine connaissance des  
propriétés du marbre. Bref, voici comment  
procédait le buste romain.

Il attendait la nuit noire. Alors, dépliant  
le lacet dont la sinuosité, sans oublier celle  
des orbites, de l'arcade sourcillière, des  
narines, des oreilles, des lèvres, formait ses  
innombrables profils, dépliant, dis-je, avec

méthode, plus longue qu'un fleuve, plus solide que l'acier, plus souple que la soie, cette chose vivante, propre à se mettre en vrille, à percer les murailles, à se glisser sous les portes et par les trous des serrures, attentif (sans perdre de vue son ouvrage) à retenir les moindres noeuds qu'il défaisait et qu'il lui faudrait exactement refaire au retour sous peine de mort, le buste ingénieux et cruel, après avoir traversé plusieurs immeubles nocturnes, étranglait l'homme endormi." (p. 59)

The theme of the statue coming to life is one that will be re-worked in Le Sang d'un Poète, but in the film it is done very literally, and the statue speaks. Here, the manner in which the bust executes the crime, is much more subtle and poetic. Cocteau takes the abstract qualities of the bust, the outline of the eye sockets, the arching of the eyebrows, the line of the nostrils, the ears and the lips and weaves them imaginatively into a sinuous noose, which, unwound, can assume very solid characteristics, the hardness of steel, the suppleness of silk, the throb of something alive, the dexterity of a spinning tool that can pierce walls.<sup>16</sup> The concretion of abstract qualities, so effectively realised here, will be a challenge which the poet will meet even more effectively in some sequences of his films. But in this poem Cocteau shows a masterly originality of invention that is in itself an essential element of his mythology.

In marked contrast to the poetic device of Le Buste we find a good example of how Cocteau can impart poetry to an everyday setting such as a wash-house in the poem Les Alliances. Again on his favourite theme of angels, on this occasion they are presented like figures in a cartoon by Walt Disney. There is something incongruous about the spectacle of rows of angels, having been laundered, hanging to dry!

"Ce sont les anges qui préparent  
Les boules bleues de la lessive,  
Aussi les blanchisseuses lavent  
A genoux dans le lavoir.

Puis tordent les ailes de linge  
Puis suspendent partout des anges.

Comme l'ange et comme Jacob  
Femmes et anges se battent  
Se tirent les cheveux, les robes,  
A pleines mains, à quatre pattes.

Le lavoir est un lieu cruel.  
Parfois on se démet la hanche,  
Mais toujours reviennent les anges  
Apporter les boules de ciel.



Batteuses d'anges, de tapis,  
 Prenez garde à vos alliances!  
 Car les anges sans surveillance  
 Deviennent plus voleurs que pies." (p. 72)

A certain quality of childish naïvety shines through the lines of this charming poem. It is a child's eyes that see the angels preparing the blue bubbles of the laundry.

A striking poem that incorporates some of the imagery of Le Buste with that in Les Alliances is:

" Le Train musical

Douze statues dans un pré  
 D'étoffe rouge drapées  
 Et qui usent  
 De la ruse

En usage sur les frises  
 Ah! Ah!

Après chaque assassinat :  
 Enroulement du profil  
 Sur une bobine à fil  
 Linge et fausses vaches  
 Sous de fausses taches.

De ces taches empourprées  
 Douze statues dans un pré  
 Se dépeignent  
 Baignent, plaignent  
 Saignent et me font des signes  
 Ah! Ah!

Avec des moignons de bras.  
 Pour celui qui ne sait voir  
 Le pré a l'air d'un lavoir  
 Où des filles tuent  
 Et noient des statues.

Regardez ce pré de près,  
 Il vous livre ses secrets :  
 Ciel! ces linges  
 Et ces langes  
 D'anges n'étaient que les singes...  
 Ah! Ah!

Fuyez vite ce pré-là.

Linges lynchés ou pendus  
 Sang des marbres répandu  
 Sont votre musique  
 Fils télégraphiques. " (pp. 75-76)

It is not until the last two lines of the poem that we realise that the images have been conjured in the poet's imagination by that weird sound which we have all experienced made by telegraph wires along a railway line.

In the poem Les Voleurs d'enfants Cocteau returns to a cherished

milieu - the circus. The poem is a simple account of the kidnapping of a child by a gypsy woman. The child has been taken to be trained to fly in the circus. At supper on his first night with the gypsies the child, overcome by wine, falls asleep on the table and dreams of a terrifying statue that flies with its hands. The situation is a simple one, but by a clever use of assonance involving the sound of a single word "voler" and its associate words, Cocteau weaves an enchanting poetic spell.

" Les Voleurs d'enfants

Presque nue et soudain sortie  
D'un piège de boue et d'orties,  
La bohémienne, pour le compte  
Du cirque, vole un fils de comte.

Tandis que la mère appelle,  
Folle, debout sur l'allée,  
L'enfant, en haut d'une échelle,  
Au cirque apprenait à voler.

On peut voler à tout âge;  
Le cirque est un cerf-volant.  
Sur ses toiles, sur ses cordages,  
Volent les voleurs d'enfants.

Volés, voleurs ont des ailes,  
La nuit, derrière les talus,  
Où les clameurs maternelles  
Ne s'entendent même plus.

Reviens, mon chéri, mon bel ange!  
Aie pitié de ma douleur!  
Mais l'enfant reste sourd et mange  
La bonne soupe des voleurs.

Quatre fois le sommeil lui coupe  
Le cou à coups de vin amer;  
Auprès de l'assiette à soupe,  
Sa tête roule dans les mers.

A voler le songe habitue.  
L'enfant rêve d'une statue  
Effrayante, au bord d'un chemin,  
Et qui vole avec les mains. " (pp. 82-83)

The obvious devices involving the play of words are all here, but in this instance used appropriately to create one of the best little poems in the collection. The wide range of topics dealt with in these poems is an indication of the poet's versatility. That some of the poems are of a somewhat sanguinary character cannot, however be denied, and sometimes elements of horror are also apparent. Here is an example:



"Apparition d'un bras dans une rue de Paris

Sur le buisson ardent du système nerveux  
Où sèche mon linge, apparut  
Un bras en l'air aux veines bleues.

Ce bras sur le braséro  
Déniche un coeur, nid atroce,  
Dans l'enchevêtrement des églantines.

Où fuir? Attachez-moi des ailes sanguinaires!  
J'imiterai les faux des hirondelles,  
Je volerai, je signerai pour elles,  
Je me signerai aux calvaires.

J'ôte, en attendant, mes chaussures.  
Ce bras en l'air, ce coeur qui saigne,  
Sont la pire des enseignes;  
Le sommeil n'est plus un lieu sûr." (p. 84)

The poet's apparent preoccupation with the anatomy of the human body and his obsession with its limbs and organs are given scope once again in this poem. It opens with a striking image - the burning bush of the nervous system upon which his laundry is drying (not exactly a logical arrangement but permissible in a cloud of opium smoke) over which a blue veined arm appears in the air. Now, although the arm is obviously detached from the body,<sup>17</sup> it is alive, and in the next stanza, from above the brazier of the burning bush it takes from its nest, amidst a tangle of dog-roses, a heart. It is the poet's heart and he must flee from it. Where? He will need bloody wings to imitate the scythe-like fluttering of the wings of swallows, and he will fly, he will sign for them and he will cross himself at wayside shrines. But, in the meantime, he takes off his shoes. He waits. The arm in the air and the bleeding heart are the worst signs. They show him that he is no longer safe from them in his dreams. Obviously, these two images haunt the poet.

The poet is also haunted by horrendous images in the prose poem: Sonnerie de Téléphone dans une rue vide where, in describing a crime, he assails us with gory details such as the broken pieces of a gilt chair floating in a pool of blood which trickles through the floor of the flat to appear on the ceiling of the flat below. There is also a strange personification of a hand which is given a voice so that it can call out for help.

A direct reference to the nightmarish quality of some of the poet's opium-induced dreams is contained in the brief prose poem -

" Oh! là là!

Les dieux existent : c'est le diable.  
 J'aimais la vie; elle me déteste; j'en  
 meurs. Je ne vous conseille pas d'imiter  
 mes rêves. La mort y corne des cartes, y  
 jette du linge sale, y couvre les murs de  
 signatures illisibles, de dessins dégoûtants.  
 Le lendemain, je suis le personnage à clef  
 d'une histoire étonnante qui se passe au  
 ciel. "

(p. 89)

The last prose poem in Musée secret is in typically clever vein. It consists of five entirely unconnected and consequently enigmatic statements. The title of the poem is Explication des Prodiges de la nuit du 24 octobre. It yields one interesting piece of information - how young men were made to fly:

"Voici comment volaient les jeunes hommes.  
 On les faisait mettre à quatre pattes. On  
 leur ordonnait de lever le genou gauche et  
 la main droite. Ensuite on les endormait,  
 on leur faisait croire qu'ils étaient à  
 quatre pattes et on leur ordonnait de lever  
 d'abord la main gauche et le genou droit." (p. 95)

There is as much logic in this interesting piece of nonsense as there is in one of the short poems that are contained in the following section which bears the title of Trousse contenant 12 poésies de voyage. Here it is:

"Cher idiot, je vous remets les clefs de la ville.  
 Dans le tiroir de gauche vous trouverez celles du tiroir  
 de droite, et vice-versa." (p. 103)

In this same section we find an interesting glimpse into the tombs and the functions of the long dead kings of Asia and Egypt:

"Rois de l'Asie et de l'Egypte  
 Qui fîtes embaumer vos corps  
 Debout sur les rayons des cryptes  
 Les yeux grands ouverts dans la mort  
 Vous vivez toujours sous la terre  
 Et vous visitez le mystère  
 Comme des scaphandriers d'or." (pp. 99-100)

One of Cocteau's favourite words "scaphandrier" is used again here in what must be his favourite context for that particular word - the diver exploring the depths not only of the sea but of mystery and death itself.

There is a slightly theatrical air about the ninth poem:

"Dans ce paysage nous vîmes deux cloisons et une  
 chaise. C'était le contraire d'une ruine. Des



morceaux d'un palais futur." (p. 103)

The last poem in this section is another example of Cocteau indulging himself in a play of words, a game that has been frequent throughout the whole collection of Opéra.

"                                 Un serpent teint  
                                  Est, le matin,  
                                  Un serpentin.

Le serpent des couleurs accroche aux églantines  
Son chapeau, son manteau, ses petites bottines,  
On ne le reconnaît plus. C'est enfantin. " (p. 104)

The collection ends with five prose poems two of which have the form of dialogues. The first of these is brim-full of coctelian bric-à-brac, greatly treasured odds and ends that will re-appear with frequency in subsequent works. A play in miniature with strong Greek connotations, the protagonists being Athena and Jason. The play bears the title of:

"Le Théâtre de Jean Cocteau"

and the action takes place in a lion's cage, where Oedipus, wearing a lion's head and a lion tamer's costume is declaiming: "Salvator! Salvator!" perched upon a heap of packing cases containing statues and drawers full of mortal secrets. The time is noon. On the right a small emergency exit looks on to a street in Nice where the time is seven o'clock. Men, women, dogs and cyclists can be seen passing in the street. In answer to the call of Oedipus, Athena appears:

" ATHENA. Moi, déesse au nez à l'équerre,  
                                  moi buste grec, j'accours. " (p. 106)

Whereupon the décor changes. The Argonauts build their cargo-boat. They screw down in the place of the helm a woman's head made of wax. This hairdresser's dummy head is wearing a golden fleece. Athena continues:

" ATHENA. Je suis la clef des songes, la  
                                  colonne triste, le buste au pince-  
                                  nez de fer. " (p. 106)

Enter a messenger:

" Le Messenger. Citoyens: la tête divine de Jocaste  
est morte. Jocaste lisait au salon  
étendue sur le canapé rouge. Soudain  
ses membres se détachent et tombent  
par terre. Elle criait : Je suis la  
soeur de mon oncle! Sa tête de  
plâtre est là, seule, atroce, pendue  
au lustre et reliée au tapis par une  
colonne de sang.

Le Choeur.         Que dire?

ATHENA. C'est ta faute Péloponèse. D'autres dangers te menacent, car la nuit les statues enfilent des maillots noirs et assassinent les voyageurs. Moi-même je ne suis pas un buste. J'ai des gants et des bas noirs. Ce piédestal est peint sur mon corps. Tremble! J'ai assez d'écume de mer dans les veines pour comprendre le langage des vagues. En savonnant et battant le linge à genoux, elles t'insultent, elles rient, elles se moquent de toi.

JASON. Ce buste ment et je le prouve. (Il passe un cerceau blanc autour du buste. Athéna ferme les yeux et récite des chiffres).

ATHENA. (d'une voix lointaine) :  
7. 6. 7. 8. - 7. 9. 6. 8. - 6. 9. 7. 7. -  
7. 9. 7. 8. - 5. 5. 7. 2. - 6. 9. 7. 3.

JASON. Pilote, notez ces chiffres et faites le point. "

(p. 107)

The role of assassins is now assigned to statues. The recitation of numbers is meant to represent poetry issuing from Athena's mouth, much in the manner of cryptic messages. From these the pilot is to take the ship's bearings.<sup>18</sup>

The second of the miniature plays is called L'Oracle and this time the protagonists are the poet himself and Athena. Here is the text:

" Jean. Qui a été plus aimé que moi?

Athena. Personne.

Jean. Qui a été plus haï que moi?

Athena. Personne.

Jean. Et toi que penses-tu de moi?

Athena. Je suis née grecque. Je suis l'ainée. Je suis le nez de l'année. Je suis le mur, l'art mûr, l'armure. Je suis la sève héritée. Je suis lasse et vérité. Je suis la sévérité. Je suis la cruelle crue elle. L'aile des rues et des ruelles. Mes mensonges c'est vérité. Sévérité même en songe. Je suis le mythe, la railleuse. La mitre à yeux, l'amie trahie. La lance affront, le front à lance. Je suis la moelle, je suis le sort. De moi l'art sort à ressort. Je dis : L'art meut l'arme des larmes. Le rail du mythe...

(elle s'arrête)

Jean. Et moi? Que penses-tu de moi?

(Il pousse une pièce dans la fente.)



## ORACLE

Tes cris, même sous les tortures  
Sont cris écrits l'orgueil aidant.  
La mer se change en écriture  
Dès qu'on jette l'encre dedans. "

(pp. 108-109)

The cleverness of Athena's long speech is perhaps strained to the point where it makes little meaning, sacrificed as it is to the ingenious play of words. And when the poet, perhaps dissatisfied by Athena's reply turns to the slot machine oracle, feeding it a coin, thus paying for its divine revelation, we can perhaps pardon the dreadful pun in the last line of "encre" with "ancre" in view of the fact that the message of the oracle is accurate and appropriate. The poet is being told that his sufferings are, after all, worthwhile, and that, by pouring his ink upon the sea of death, he is producing writings that will endure.

So we come to the final poem in Opéra where the poet again dies another of his many deaths so that he will be re-born. Here we have a strong image of France being killed by the death-grip of the very poet she has killed by insults, ridicule, deceit and downfall, despite which, even as he strangles this France with delights, he cannot help but love her. The poem is entitled La Mort du Poète:

"Je meurs, France! Approche que je te parle,  
approche encore. Je meurs de toi. Tu m'as  
injurié, ridiculisé, trompé, ruiné. Tout m'est  
égal. Il faut que je t'embrasse, France, que  
je t'embrasse une dernière fois sur ta Seine  
obscène, sur tes vignobles ignobles, sur tes  
champs méchants, sur tes îles faciles, sur ton  
Paris pourri, sur tes statues qui tuent.

Plus près, plus près, que je te regarde. Ah!  
cette fois je te tiens. Inutile de crier,  
d'appeler. Rien n'ouvre les doigts de mort.  
Je t'étrangle avec délices. Je ne mourrai  
pas seul."

(p. 111)

Since the rhyming adjectives are now of a more serious nature, they do not seem to ring quite so glibly, and indeed they contribute greatly to the effect of bitterness and disillusion that the poet intends to convey.

Cocteau himself considered seriously that many of the poems in this collection expressed his poetic essence. He also knew that they contained all the paraphernalia that he would one day be reproached for using. Yet he did not consider the elements contained in them to

be worthless bric-à-brac. On the contrary he felt that he had paid a very high price to shelter such a motley company of ghosts within himself, in order to set them free at will.



## NOTES

## Chapter 2

1. "du roman dans lequel il met à nu son 'coeur trop gros'" - is a reference to Cocteau's Le Grand Ecart, also published in 1923.
2. The feminine e on seule is one of Cocteau's equivalents of Marcel Proust's Albertine.
3. This reference to Raymond Radiguet's inability to look at the sun is perhaps unusually cruel, coming from Cocteau. In La Difficulté d'Etre, in describing Radiguet, Cocteau wrote:  
"Il était petit, pâle, myope ...  
Il grimaçait comme au soleil."
4. The Groupe des Six, which had its origin in 1916, consisted originally of six composers, Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and a promising girl composer Germaine Tailleferre. Although Erik Satie was not one of the Groupe, his pure, discriminate, noble, melodic line was undoubtedly its model. At that period the role of the Six as contradictors was not easy, for they faced two colossi armed with charm, Debussy and Ravel, and a giant armed with thunderbolts, Stravinsky. Stravinsky, indeed, was to render their little fortress almost untenable, for if the Groupe des Six was free, its doctrine, full of admiring respect for those whom it proposed to fight against, made it nevertheless a Group, and a Group somehow has a common tendency. Theirs was to go from drum to flute and from flute to drum, and to reshape certain qualities in French music that had become a little worn. Le Sacre du Printemps by Stravinsky set up a powerful challenge to the Group, and they should have had to admit defeat, had Stravinsky not, some time later, come over to their methods, and had not even the influence of Erik Satie become mysteriously perceptible in Stravinsky's work.

The post-1914 "unbearables" (as Cocteau sometimes called them) were then Auric, Poulenc, Milhaud, Honegger, Durey and Tailleferre. Durey was born in 1888 and studied harmony, counterpoint and fugue under Léon Saint-Requier. His studies continued until 1914 when he enlisted in the army. After the war, for a brief period, he associated himself with the progressive ideas of Les Six, but his temperament was not really suited to the part, and in 1921 he formally left the Group. The gulf which separates his style from that of his erstwhile colleagues is clearly illustrated in his compositions which include many songs of distinct and individual merit, a string quartet, a Pastorale for orchestra, and a one-act opera on Mérimée's L'Occasion.

Georges Auric was born in 1899, and he studied at the Conservatoire and at the Schola Cantorum. Although he is chiefly known in Britain through his film music (which includes, apart from many French films, scores for British classics such as Caesar and Cleopatra, Hue and Cry, and The Titfield Thunderbolt), he has written much vocal and instrumental music, and a number of ballets. His early works, such as the delightful score to Massine's Les Matelots, come closer than anything else by other members of Les

Six to the kind of wit that distinguishes, say, William Walton's Facade. Anything more remote from nineteenth century romanticism would be hard to imagine. And yet Auric, in his music for Cocteau's film treatment of Tristan and Isolde, L'Eternel Retour (1944), turned his back upon much that he had once stood for, and expressed himself in an idiom that was distinctly Wagnerian.

Francis Poulenc was born in 1899, and studied with Ricardo Vines and Charles Koechlin. Fame came to him before his technique and taste had fully matured, but not before he had evolved a style recognisably his own. Without him, the idea of Les Six is inconceivable. It was indeed his particular triumph that at a propitious moment in the history of music he reminded the world that music can be created purely for enjoyment, just as it had been in the days of Chabrier and Offenbach. Yet, while working with material of apparently trivial import, Poulenc discovered in himself a vein of slight but eloquent poetry, half of the gamin, half of the circus clown, which ensured his music a permanency denied to much of the work of his colleagues. The obviously hedonistic exterior of his early songs, ballets and instrumental pieces conceals a genuinely musical quality that enabled him, in his maturity, to turn, with natural ease, to more avowedly serious work. An increasing sobriety of expression became apparent in his music in the late 'thirties - I have in mind especially the works for a capella chorus, including a Mass, the organ concerto which he composed in 1938, and the tenderly beautiful Stabat Mater of 1950. Another noteworthy example of his tendency to sobriety of expression is the cantata Sécheresses, which describes a world deprived of all life and vegetation by the ravages of the sun and the lack of rain. The poems by Edward James, which are here set to music, bear more than a trace of surrealism, and in their imagery recall not only the early work of Paul Eluard, but also the paintings of that mad Spanish genius Salvador Dali.

Milhaud was born in Aix-en-Provence in 1892, and he studied violin and composition at the Paris Conservatoire under Gedalge, Widor and d'Indy. His early work was influenced by Debussy and Franck, but two years from 1917 to 1919 as Attaché to the French Legation in Rio de Janeiro gave him an opportunity and time to develop a more individual style. It also inspired in him a strong love for South American rhythms which is evident in much of his music. The France to which he returned was alive with the kind of musical activity that suited his temperament. A virtuoso by nature, he tried his hand at every musical form - ballets, operas on subjects classical and modern, quartets, concertos, children's music, and so on.

Arthur Honegger was born in Le Havre in 1892 of Swiss parents. He studied at the Conservatoires of Zurich and Paris, and later became a pupil of Widor and d'Indy. Apart from his Concertino of 1924 and a few works now forgotten, everything he has written has been inspired by a deep seriousness of purpose. This in itself, of course, is no guarantee of musical excellence, but it is significant that Honegger has been the only one of Les Six to give continual consideration to problems of structure.

Germaine Tailleferre, the lady of the Group, was born near Paris in 1892. Besides an interesting Ouverture, she wrote, amongst other things, a piano concerto, a string quartet and a cantata for soloists, chorus and orchestra, entitled Narcisse. In the



1950s she enlarged her reputation by acting as accompanist in French songs to the singer Bernard Lefort. It is her Ouverture which accords very closely with the type of music generally associated with Les Six.

5. Cocteau regarded crystal with fetishistic awe as being a sign of the ONE. He made a point of collecting crystal paperweights. In the introduction to the Potomak he said that the crystal paperweight came to represent for him art and reassurance. This attitude to crystal as a symbol of the One was shared by André Breton, although this was probably the only concept which they had in common. For Cocteau (as he wrote in Le Potomak) the crystal paperweight represented an "intersection of infinites, a carousel of silences", and, bringing his eye near to the cube he believed that in it he had discovered God. Breton approached the same concept in a slightly different way. The house in which he lived, he said, his life and what he wrote, he would have wished to be seen from a distance in the manner in which cubes of rock salt appear from close up, thus suggesting that, observed from afar, the crystalline life by reflecting itself both in essence and appearance, not near the surface but transparently, would be subject and object in one. Cocteau's "intersection of infinites" and Breton's distant vantage-point in the mind can be interpreted to signify the absolute present. But the absolute present is fleeting. It occurs transiently. Because of its evanescence the poet is driven to seeking it compulsively. It is equivalent to the view beyond the grave which Cocteau referred to in some of the poems in the second section of Plain-Chant. Cocteau was to seek it over and over again by smoking opium. Breton sought it in excessively motivated dreams.
6. The poem actually appeared in print for the first time in Les Feuilles libres, no. 40, May-June, 1925, and was published later in the same year by Stock with a photograph of the angel by Man Ray.
7. The play to which Cocteau alludes here was an early working of Orphée, which in this early version was planned as a story about the Virgin Mary and Joseph.
8. These poems were distributed to members of La Société des Amis de Jean Cocteau in No. 4 of the series Cahiers Jean Cocteau in 1973.
9. This poem was published for the first time in Faire-Part, poèmes inédits 1920-1962, Paris, Guy Chambelland, librairie Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1968.
10. In the same year of publication as L'Ange Heurtebise, Cocteau, in point of fact, also published his collection of drawings entitled Le Mystère de Jean l'Oiseleur.
11. This is probably a passing reference to the right-wing press which objected to the acclamation given to Radiguet's Le Diable au Corps, considering it to be an immoral book.

12. After the death of Radiguet, Cocteau spent a great deal of his time on the Riviera. Between 1924 and 1929 he spent his summers at the Hôtel Welcome in Villefranche, not far from Nice. Among the other guests in the hotel were the Americans Glenway Wescott, who actually wrote one of his novels The Grandmothers there, and Monroe Wheeler, who was later to become director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Cocteau became friendly with them and corresponded with them for a number of years.
13. In the edition of Opéra published by Stock in 1957, l'Ange Heurtebise is actually included at the end of the poems in verse, immediately preceding Musée Secret.
14. The critic Gabriel Bounoure, obviously with the intention of belittling Opéra, wrote in the Nouvelle Revue française of February, 1928, No. CLXXIII, 259: "M. Jean Cocteau est un beau masque dont la poésie est toute spectacle et jamais événement." He was, of course, writing the truth. What he did not realise was that it was never Cocteau's intention to present an "événement". Jean-Jacques Kihm expressed the poet's intention perfectly when he wrote of Opéra many years later: "Jusque dans ses expressions les plus inattendues, Opéra est le spectacle d'une âme mise à nu et qui emploie, afin de se projeter hors d'elle-même, toutes les ressources, même celles qui sont réputées les plus illégitimes."
15. It is more than coincidental that Cocteau was fascinated by people who had minor optical defects. Radiguet was short-sighted, Madeleine Carlier squinted slightly. Was this because people who are thus afflicted appear to look beyond one at some other plane of existence?

It was in the Palais de Glace in Paris that Cocteau became acquainted with Madeleine Carlier and in Portraits-Souvenir he describes the effect created by Madeleine and her sister when they first came to the Palais de Glace, an unsophisticated pair of young ladies who stood out from the regular habituées. Cocteau writes: "Jadis, deux petites filles de Montmartre rêvaient du Palais de Glace. Elles en avaient lu les annonces à la dernière page du journal, et ces mots magiques: PALAIS DE GLACE, nourrissaient leur imagination. Un palais tout en glaces, une sorte de palais des mirages, voilà ce que ce temple du sport d'hiver était devenu pour elles. Un dimanche, nos petites Montmartroises cassèrent la tirelire, et, rouges de honte, malgré le chapeau de paille à marguerites et les robes de tarlatane, eurent le courage de prendre des tickets à la caisse et de passer le seuil. Quel désastre! Clouées sur place, elles se regardaient, partagées entre les larmes et le fou rire des petites filles qui 'peuvent sortir sans bonnes'. Je veux dire par là qu'elles furent les premières à se moquer de leur méprise. Mais l'effet produit fut loin d'être réciproque. Si le Palais de Glace ne les éblouissait pas, elles éblouirent le Palais de Glace, car ces jeunes imprudentes n'étaient autres que Madeleine Carlier et sa soeur. (Elles ne portaient pas encore ce nom). Vous imaginez, dans un monde habitué aux mêmes types qui tournent comme le lapin, le palmier et le zouave en tôle du tir à la carabine, le coup de théâtre de ces astres neufs, de ces teints naturels, de des quatre joues en feu, avivées par les lampes roses, la gêne, le contraste entre la



chaleur du pourtour et la singulière fraîcheur centrale. Lorsque les petites eurent la force de se ressaisir, de prendre la fuite et de terminer l'escapade, ce fut avec une escorte d'adorateurs, un cortège en extase qui ne devait plus jamais leur faire défaut." (Portraits-Souvenir pp. 77-79)

Cocteau fell in love with Madeleine although she was ten years older than him. He even went as far as to announce their engagement at a Wednesday evening family dinner, but the "engagement" eventually came to nothing.

16. It should, of course, be obvious that the imagery in this prose poem owes much to the deformations experienced by Cocteau when he smoked opium.
17. Cocteau was subsequently to make effective use of the image of detached arms in the famous sequence in his film La Belle et la Bête where Beauty's father, arriving at the castle of the Beast, finds himself walking along a vestibule lit by candelabra held by living human arms fixed along the right hand wall. The arms move, each in turn, to the right, as he walks slowly along and the candles in the candelabra light at each swing of an arm. Later in the same sequence when he is seated at a table in front of a roaring fire of logs, his wine is poured by a living human arm fixed in the centre of the table. The arm lifts the wine bottle and pours the wine into a glass. Beauty's father takes a swift look under the table, but apparently sees no body under it.
18. In much of Cocteau's work the recitation of numbers is to be interpreted as the recitation of poetry or poetic messages in cryptic form. Even in the film of Orphée, the messages of the poet Cégeste being broadcast on the radio of the car belonging to the Princess, eventually take the form of numbers, spoken deliberately and with significant pauses.

Chapter 3 : Poésie de roman - ILe Grand Écart (1923) and  
Thomas l'Imposteur (1923)

Although these two books did not appear until 1923, their germination had occurred a few years earlier, yet they have only one element in common. The incidents recounted take place against the background of the same period. Le Grand Écart is played out against Paris in the 1900s (the same background that Cocteau was to write about once again much later in 1935 in his Portraits-Souvenir) whilst in Thomas l'Imposteur the incidents take place against the background of the first world war. No two more dissimilar works have ever issued contemporaneously from the pen of the same author. Indeed Cocteau himself has alluded to the difference between the two works in his essay Autour de Thomas l'Imposteur which appeared in Le Rappel à l'ordre in 1926. There he wrote:

"Thomas l'Imposteur est une histoire, comme le Grand Écart est un roman. Le titre renseigne sur les genres, non le métrage. La Chartreuse de Parme, deux gros tomes, est une nouvelle." (p. 264)

and a little further on he wrote:

"Dans Thomas, j'ai tenté de placer de l'argent de poche, de lui rendre poids, sérieux et chance de grossir, alors que dans le Grand Écart, je convertissais du capital en argent de poche." (p. 265)

Still further on he wrote:

"Que Thomas ne soit pas construit sur le modèle du Grand Écart, ne marque aucun progrès. C'est un autre système. Le Grand Écart présente aux spécialistes une carcasse de montagnes russes. Le lecteur part de haut, tombe assez bas dans une intrigue médiocre, remonte vite de sa propre impulsion et parcourt (épilogue) quelque distance en terrain plat. Le choc des tampons l'arrête au bout.

Mon prochain livre se déplace en accélérant sa vitesse. On dirait, au ralenti, le trajet entre une fenêtre du cinquième étage et le trottoir. La victime de cette chute n'en tire pas grand bénéfice. Thomas l'Imposteur pourrait porter comme sous-titre : 'Une seconde avec un poète inconnu'." (p. 267)

Another basic difference between the two books is admirably observed by Jean-Jacques Kihm in his study on Cocteau when he relevantly points out that in Le Grand Écart there is a strong element of psychology that is absent in Thomas l'Imposteur which could aptly be described as a texte sans psychologie.



Many critics have misguidedly considered Le Grand Écart to be an autobiographical novel. This assumption is based upon the obvious likeness between its protagonist Jacques Forestier and Cocteau. But, although the two young men followed a similar pattern of incidents, both making a trip to Venice in the company of their mother, both attending the school run by an elderly professor, both having had emotional affairs with members of both sexes, the fact remains that no great importance need be attached to these coincidences because they represent a collection of attitudes and circumstances that are common to many of Cocteau's works. Cocteau himself states in the essay Autour de Thomas l'Imposteur:

"Pour le Grand Écart, on parle d'autobiographie, parce qu'il affecte le genre autobiographique. Il serait aussi faux de dire que Thomas est écrit au courant de la plume, parce que, dans ce livre, où je m'écarte exprès du genre autobiographique, j'imite le style cursif.

Moi, c'est la manière dont j'envisage, dont j'utilise les faits. Un roman, une nouvelle, un conte, une histoire ne peuvent être que de la critique indirecte. Or, dans la critique, ce qui m'importe n'est pas l'oeuvre critiquée (je la juge bien tout seul), mais le critique par rapport à ce dont il parle. Si son prétexte me touche, l'éclairage sur lui se renforce. Dans le Grand Ecart, il n'y a pas plus autobiographie que dans Thomas l'Imposteur."

(pp. 267-268)

So that the autobiographical elements in Le Grand Écart are not related specifically to the circumstances described but rather to the attitude of the author towards these circumstances and his reactions to them.

It would perhaps be more accurate to describe Le Grand Écart as a novel with an autobiographical flavour. In writing about the book "Le lecteur part de haut", Cocteau refers to the high point of its brilliant opening, the first chapter, which in some nineteen pages describing Jacques Forestier, establishes the novel as one of Cocteau's best. In studying some of the paragraphs describing Jacques, one realises why the tag of autobiography was so readily applied to the book, since Cocteau might almost be describing himself when he writes:

"Sa réputation d'homme spirituel venait d'une rapidité d'esprit. Il appelait des rimes d'un bout à l'autre du monde pour les joindre de telle sorte qu'elles parussent avoir rimé toujours."

(pp. 7-8)

and

"Il poussait brutalement les noms propres, les visages, les actes, les propos timides, et les envoyait au bout d'eux-mêmes. Cette manière lui valait la réputation de menteur.

Ajoutons qu'il admirait les beaux corps et les belles figures, à quelque sexe qu'ils appartenissent. Cette dernière singularité lui faisait prêter de mauvaises moeurs; car les mauvaises moeurs sont la seule chose que les gens prêtent sans réfléchir.

N'ayant pas l'apparence qu'il eût souhaitée, ne répondant pas au type idéal qu'il se formait d'un jeune homme, Jacques n'essayait plus de rejoindre ce type dont il se trouvait trop loin. Il enrichissait faiblesses, tics et ridicules jusqu'à les sortir de la gêne. Il les portait, volontiers, au premier plan." (p. 8)

The Cocteau who might have answered to the descriptions in the above paragraphs was the Cocteau most often seen by the world - the outer persona. But there are paragraphs in this same chapter which, just as precisely, describe the young poet, sensitive, dreaming, hesitant, vulnerably unsure of himself:

"Si un des habiles, féroces chasseurs parisiens, le dénichait, il devenait simple de lui tordre le cou. On le démoralisait d'un mot."

"Aussi en vertu de l'axiome : Les extrêmes se touchent se rêvait-il une extrême-droite vierge, touchant à l'extrême-gauche au point de se confondre avec elle, mais où il pût agir seul. Le fauteuil n'existe pas, ou, s'il existe, personne ne l'occupe. Jacques s'y asseyait d'office et, de là, regardait toute chose de la politique, de l'art de la morale."

"Ce jouisseur dont les pieds marchent solidement sur le plancher des vaches, ce critique des paysages et des oeuvres tient à la terre par un fil. Il est lourd comme le scaphandrier. Jacques pioche au fond. Il le devine. Il y a pris ses habitudes. On ne le remonte pas à la surface. On l'a oublié. Remonter, quitter le casque et le costume, c'est le passage de la vie à la mort. Mais il lui arrive par le tube un souffle irréel qui le fait vivre et le comble de nostalgie."

"Jacques vit aux prises avec une longue syncope. Il ne se sent pas stable. Il ne fonde pas, sauf par jeu. A peine s'il ose s'asseoir. Il est de ces marins qui ne peuvent guérir du mal de mer." (p. 11)

The poet's state of being a person apart, detached from the ordinary routine of life, alien to its "normal" pursuits is succinctly described in a short paragraph which in its final word links up with the image of the poet as a scaphandrier which we found above:



"Il voit un bal derrière des vitres : cette race aux papiers en règle, joyeuse de vivre, habitant son vrai élément et se passant de scaphandres." (p. 12)

Note also in the above paragraph the frequently recurring situation of the poet viewing through glass. There is also more than a shade of bitterness in the sentence which follows, justifying the poet's dreaming:

"Donc, sur les figures sans douceur, il amassera du songe." (p. 12)

In the course of this first chapter, the hero, Jacques, goes to Venice with his mother, and there, as a result of his observations and experiences he undergoes a transformation. In a sense he matures. His mother is unaware of the change in her son, whilst he is aware only of a certain feeling of malaise.

"Sa mère croyait ramener la même personne, un peu distraite par des panoramas italiens. Elle en ramenait une autre. Et c'est justement à Venise que s'était produite cette mue. Jacques ne la constatait que par un malaise." (pp. 23-24)

The narrative throughout the novel is consistent with the paragraphs that I have cited above and would suggest that particularly uncompllicated narrative style that has as its model La Princesse de Clèves<sup>1</sup> with its simple precision, but throughout the book Cocteau deliberately alternates it with an occasional passage written in strongly poetic prose using all the elements of his mythology. The simple form is used to advance the story, whilst the poetic form is brought into use in order to philosophise. It is towards the end of this first chapter that the first of these poetic passages occurs at the moment when the author has just described the feeling of mounting distaste which the protagonist Jacques has been experiencing for Venice, a distaste that was actually a symptom of the change in his nature:

"Notre insistance même prouve combien il subissait un charme que repoussait sa moitié d'ombre.

Moitié ombre, moitié lumière: c'est l'éclairage des planètes. Une moitié du monde repose, l'autre travaille. Mais, de toute cette moitié qui songe, émane une force mystérieuse.

Chez l'homme, il arrive que cette moitié de sommeil contredise sa moitié active. La véritable nature y parle. Si la leçon profite, que l'homme écoute et mette de l'ordre dans sa moitié de lumière, la moitié d'ombre deviendra dangereuse. Son rôle changera. Elle enverra des miasmes."

(p. 22)

Here we have yet another variation of the theme dear to the author's heart - the concept of shade and light, sleep and wakefulness, and the phenomenon of poetic inspiration emanating from the shaded realm of sleep, the process itself fraught with potential danger from the somnial element which can change its role and give out poisonous fumes.

The second chapter of the novel Le Grand Écart opens with an introductory short paragraph that has as its theme another of the basic assumptions colouring the outlook of the author - the unavailability of destiny. He writes:

"La carte de notre vie est pliée de telle sorte que nous ne voyons pas une seule grande route qui la traverse, mais, au fur et à mesure qu'elle s'ouvre, toujours une petite route neuve. Nous croyons choisir et nous n'avons pas le choix."  
(p. 25)

To reinforce this belief he then goes on to recount the tale of the Persian gardener, who, having met Death one morning, and having recognised her warning sign, begged his prince to lend him horses that would carry him to Ispahan before nightfall, so that he might be safe from Death. That same afternoon the prince himself met Death and thought to ask her why she had given the gardener a sign of warning in the morning. The story ends with Death's reply to the prince:

"Je n'ai pas fait un geste de menace, mais un geste de surprise. Car je le voyais loin d'Ispahan ce matin et je dois le prendre à Ispahan ce soir."  
(p. 26)

It is in this second chapter that we meet another of the main protagonists, the young Englishman, Peter Stopwell, one of the student lodgers at the educational establishment of Monsieur Berlin. Most of the characters are described with humour. In the case of Stopwell we are presented first with his milieu:

"La dernière chambre était celle du désordre. Là, dans un naufrage de livres, de cahiers, de chemises, de pipes, d'encre, de tubs, d'éponges, de stylographes, de mouchoirs et de couvertures, campait Peter Stopwell, champion du saut en longueur."  
(pp. 27-28)

Ingeniously suggesting the general chaos of Stopwell's room, Cocteau rounds it off perfectly by using the verb "campait", which, apart from suggesting the outdoor aura of Stopwell himself, also gives a flavour of the slightly precarious manner of Stopwell's living that



one would normally associate with the uncertain, makeshift comforts of camping. Two pages further on the description continues, still in humorous vein:

"Peter Stopwell eût possédé la beauté grecque si le saut en longueur ne l'avait étiré comme une photographie mal prise. Il sortait d'Oxford. Il en tenait sa fatuité, ses boîtes de cigarettes, son cache-nez bleu marine et une immoralité multiforme sous l'uniforme sportif."

(p. 31)

Thus in a few swift strokes, Cocteau draws a vivid portrait of Stopwell. Monsieur Berlin is also presented in clear, humorous terms:

"Berlin regardait sa femme, ses élèves, la vie, d'un oeil terne, derrière des besicles."

(pp. 29-30)

The lack-lustre eyes of the professor behind pince-nez spectacles at once suggest a certain disillusionment with life. This is confirmed in the short description which follows, where we are made to realise that the Professor has disenchantedly fallen into the rut of dull routine:

"Il portait une barbe blanche et des pantoufles. Son pantalon était celui du comparse d'arrière lorsqu'on fait l'éléphant au cirque. Il professait à la Sorbonne, jouait aux cartes au café Voltaire et rentrait dormir. On abusait de cette somnolence pour réciter n'importe quoi et bâcler les devoirs à coups de traductions."

(p. 30)

His wife, a stock character of sorts, with naughty attributes, is also described with mischievous humour:

"Madame Berlin était beaucoup plus fraîche que son mari, veuf d'un premier mariage. Elle minaudent et croyait les élèves amoureux d'elle. Parfois, elle entrait dans une des chambres où la hâte d'avoir dissimulé n'importe quelle occupation étrangère au travail laissait à l'élève une pose stupide. Elle dévisageait l'élève qui rougissait et elle éclatait de rire.

Elle déclamait Racine dans des lieux où il est convenable de se taire. Un jour, les élèves l'entendirent, se devinant surprise, transformer sa déclamation en une toux qui la conduisit progressivement au silence."

(p. 28)

The other exotic inmates in this establishment where Jacques is working for his baccalauréat include Mouheddin Bashtarzi, son of a rich merchant from Saint-Eugène in Algiers, an albino - Pierre de Maricelles, and a young boy with a weak but engaging face who answers to the name of Petitcopain, and who, being a "victime des pénombres où les sens rencontrent le coeur", is in love with Stopwell, but the Englishman, although he is flattered, repels the boy's

clumsy advances and advises him to go out with girls. The boy, following this advice too literally, contracts an ugly disease. Stopwell then makes amorous advances to Jacques, and Jacques is also the subject of Madame Berlin's potentially libidinous attentions. Mouheddin Bashtarzi writes poems and inhales ether. This is the bizarre group of inmates of Monsieur Berlin's establishment that creates the milieu against which the story of Jacques is to unfold. It is not exactly the kind of milieu that a doting mother would wish for her son.

"Était-ce là le milieu de rêve pour une mère délicate, redoutant les microbes et les courants d'air?" (p. 34)

asks Cocteau, tongue-in-cheek.

One Sunday Jacques decides to accompany Mouheddin to the theatre. There he meets Mouheddin's mistress: Louise Champagne.

"Louise était plus connue que ses danses et mieux placée dans le demi-monde que sur l'affiche. Elle faisait partie de ces femmes qui touchent cinquante francs au théâtre et cinquante mille à la maison."

Louise tells Jacques that he should not be living alone. She will find him a friend: Germaine.<sup>2</sup> Arrangements are made for Jacques to meet Germaine at the house of Louise, but, when he arrives, it is to be told by Louise that Germaine does not like him. Louise then consoles Jacques by allowing him to make love to her. Later, Jacques discovers it had all been a ruse on the part of Louise to have him make love to her, and Germaine really does like him. So Jacques turns to Germaine and finds himself embroiled in the passionate complications of the Parisian demi-monde. And Cocteau describes certain aspects of this amoral milieu in the opening paragraph of the third chapter.

"L'art, principalement le pire, est à Paris un enlève-taches magique. Il ne les lave pas, il les monte. Dès lors, une mauvaise réputation, mise en vedette, devient aussi avantageuse qu'une bonne. Elle exige les mêmes soins. Beaucoup de femmes entretenues se font immuniser par la scène. Le théâtre est une taxe qu'elles payent. Mais il dérange leur industrie." (p. 43)

So, while Germaine pays her theatre "tax", she is being kept by her rich protector:

"Germaine avait un amant riche, si riche que son seul nom signifiait richesse. Il s'appelait Nestor Osiris, comme une boîte de cigarettes. Son frère Lazare entretenait Loute, soeur cadette de Germaine."



a very convenient family arrangement. Naturally, whilst Germaine deceives Osiris with Jacques, Loute deceives Lazare with a painter.

In the midst of this complicated situation the remarkable thing is that Jacques' heart is still in a state of innocence. He is, in fact, ready for his ideal love, completely unaware that, in his vulnerability, he is about to take a fatal step. Why does Jacques actually take this step? Because of the very nature of his heart:

"Le coeur vit enfermé. De là viennent ses sombres élans et ses grands désespoirs. Toujours prêt à fournir ses richesses, il est à la merci de son enveloppe. Que sait-il, le pauvre aveugle? Il guette le moindre signe qui le sortira de l'ennui. Mille fibres l'avertissent. L'objet pour lequel on sollicite son concours en est-il digne? Peu importe. Il s'épuise avec confiance et s'il reçoit l'ordre d'interrompre, il se crispe dans un épuisement mortel."

(p. 45)

So, Jacques actually falls in love with Germaine. The romantically idealised nature of his love is subtly suggested by a strongly cinematic image:

"Aussi vite que sur l'écran du cinématographe se succèdent une femme petite parmi des groupes et le visage de cette femme en premier plan, six fois grandeur nature, le visage de Germaine remplissait le monde, obstruait l'avenir, masquait à Jacques, non seulement ses examens et ses camarades, mais sa mère, son père, son propre individu. La nuit régnait autour."

(p. 46)

It is at this point in the narrative that Cocteau introduces Jacques' mother, who, just as she had been blissfully unaware of the change in her son during their stay in Venice, is now insensitive to his more recent metamorphosis, finding him thin, but looking rather well, thus translating his actual exhaustion and burning cheeks into maternal language. In order to illustrate poetically this second metamorphosis in Jacques, Cocteau, in a brief paragraph, introduces the short story which has very frequently been quoted:

"Au cirque, une mère imprudente laisse son enfant se prêter à l'expérience d'un magicien chinois. On le met dans un coffre. On ouvre le coffre; il est vide. On referme le coffre. On l'ouvre; l'enfant apparaît et regagne sa place. Or, ce n'est plus le même enfant. Personne ne s'en doute."

(p. 47)

There are strong psychological undertones in Cocteau's descriptions of Jacques' parents. They are, of course, typically middle-

class. Madame Forestier is short-sighted, lives in the past, worships in her son Jacques his resemblance to a grandmother, and in her husband the father of Jacques. She appears a cold sort of person because she has scruples about forming liaisons. She has no close friends, her only lady friend having died. So she divides her rather colourless life between the church, her husband and her fears for her son's future.

Monsieur Forestier keeps himself in the background. As a young man he had suffered from a demon similar to the one that is torturing Jacques. He had mortified the demon in himself by study and marriage. But a demon is difficult to subdue. His upright nature wasted away. It felt that it had been distorted. Monsieur Forestier therefore recognises in Jacques' symptoms, his own earlier malady, but, being passive by nature, he does nothing to help his son. In any event, he would not know what to do. Thus Jacques' fate is inevitable. He must fall headlong in love with Germaine not realising that he will eventually be hurt. This is the situation stated simply. But Cocteau selects such a moment in the narrative to make another comment which reflects certain aspects of his philosophy of love based upon his own particular experience.

"Il ne souhaitait pas être Germaine. Il voulait la posséder. Pour la première fois, son désir ne se manifestait pas sous forme de malaise. Pour la première fois il ne haïssait pas sa propre image. Il se croyait guéri."

(p. 49)

This paragraph sets the situation. Now comes the observation:

"Le vague désir de la beauté nous tue.

Nous avons expliqué comment Jacques s'épuisait à désirer le vide. Car n'est-ce pas le vide, ces corps et ces figures que notre regard traverse follement sans les émouvoir."

(p. 50)

The observation is then followed by the realisation that Jacques, in loving Germaine, is, after all, really loving an aspect of himself.

"Cette fois, le désir rencontrait une surface sensible et la réponse de Germaine était l'image même de Jacques, comme l'écran délivre le film, qui, sans obstacle, n'épanouirait qu'une gerbe blanche. Jacques se voyait dans ce désir et, pour la première fois, sa propre rencontre le bouleversait. Il s'aimait chez Germaine. Il perdait conscience du personnage qu'il développa dans la suite sans chercher à rejoindre son idéal."

(p. 50)



As the affair with Germaine proceeds, for her it is a passing moment of love that will end, but for Jacques it holds deeper and subtler implications because for him Germaine represents the existence of so many of his ideals. Jacques' desires are more sophisticatedly complex than Germaine's. In order to explain the nature of Jacques' emotional needs, Cocteau is compelled to create an elaborate metaphorical passage that has strong narcissian undertones:

"Narcisse s'aima. Pour ce crime les dieux le changèrent en fleur. Cette fleur donne la migraine et son oignon ne fait même pas pleurer. Méritait-il d'autres larmes?"

L'histoire de notre Narcisse est plus complexe. Il aimait les eaux du fleuve. Mais les fleuves coulent sans se soucier des baigneurs, des arbres qu'ils reflètent. Leur désir est la mer. Ils la baisent au terme d'un voyage perpétuel et s'y enfoncent voluptueusement.

Jacques sentait toujours la beauté humaine avoir, comme les fleuves, un lit et un but. Elle passait, elle allait ailleurs.

.....

Cette fois l'eau stoppe, lui renvoie passionnément son reflet. Il trompe la mer. Peut-être prend-il pour l'eau qui parle une voix d'ondine. Mais il n'analyse pas. Son coeur ne lui en laisse plus le loisir."

(pp. 55-56)

The fact that the affair with Germaine is in reality an abnormal experience for Jacques is tinged with much irony in that it grows normally.

"Son amour anormal poussait normalement, lentement. Il s'aimait, il aimait des voyages, il aimait trop de choses sur sa maîtresse. Germaine n'aimait que son amoureux."

(p. 59)

There is always a slightly ironical flavour to Cocteau's humour, whether it be in descriptive passages in his works, or in the creation of certain situations in the plot-line of a novel. Le Grand Écart is very rich in examples of this type of humour. There is, for example, the situation that arises when the affair between Germaine and Jacques has been going on for a time. Osiris receives an anonymous letter (in which he thinks he recognises his brother's handwriting) telling him that Germaine spends all her time at the skating-rink with a lover. Osiris promptly surprises the lovers at the skating-rink but he is unable to conceive the possibility that Jacques could actually be Germaine's lover and regales them with

the following speech:

"Depuis quelques jours on m'accable de lettres anonymes qui racontent que Germaine passe sa vie au skating avec un amant. J'ai voulu me rendre compte et je constate que c'est faux. Voilà, termine-t-il, en posant sa main sur l'épaule de Jacques, - car mon cher, entre nous, je ne veux pas vous dire une chose désagréable (tous les goûts sont dans la nature), mais vous n'êtes pas son type." (pp. 68-69)

Because he thinks Jacques is just not her type, it is inconceivable to Nestor that Germaine could be betraying him with the boy. But the irony does not end here. A few days later he confides in Jacques and asks him to keep an eye on Germaine, and he is to follow her and never leave her!

There are, of course, many elements of farcical humour in this episode, and indeed in the whole Osiris - Germaine relationship. When Nestor Osiris, prompted by his jealousy, starts to make scenes, he breaks ornaments. But Germaine notices that he always gives her a Copenhagen ornament at the inevitable reconciliation. In this way he could break things without actually doing a great deal of damage. He carefully avoids breaking Chinese vases. But on one occasion he breaks a Dresden china group. Germaine knows then that the vaudeville is turning to drama! But the funniest episode is when, returning from the dentist one evening, he finds Germaine reading on the chaise-longue. When he asks her meaningfully if she has had company, she replies negatively, stating she has been reading and sleeping since lunch time. On this occasion she is actually speaking the truth. When Nestor goes out to hang his fur coat in the cloakroom, he returns brandishing a cane with a tortoise-shell top, demanding to know who is the gentleman friend who has left his cane. At this dramatic moment, the telephone rings. It is the dentist, about the cane. One of the dentist's patients has found a cane in place of his own which has a tortoise-shell top, with the initials N.O.

Shortly after this humorous incident Germaine leaves with Jacques for a week-end in the country at the farm owned by her parents. The account of this journey strikes a note of pure joy and makes this chapter (the sixth) stand out from the rest of the book. It is in many ways reminiscent of the Marguerite-Armand idyll in the country in that classic of the demi-monde by Alexandre Dumas fils La Dame aux camélias. There is the same nostalgic longing for lost innocence, for the purity, the goodness and the healthiness of



life in the country.

"La ferme était petite. Germaine tutoyait les servantes et les vaches. Elle marchait, mordillée par une troupe de jeunes chiens. Elle criait, elle sautait, elle se décoiffait.

Ils déjeunèrent dans une salle où le feu était un incendie. Ils mangèrent des nourritures propres qu'on ne mange jamais en ville. Seul le fromage, savamment pourri dans une feuille de vigne, formait un vif contraste avec les viandes et les crèmes blanches."

(p. 78)

For Cocteau there is a quality of purity in the adoration of two human beings for one another. It is the highest sign of their love. Making love, on the other hand, is something specifically physical, that does not necessarily have the quality of adoration. It is in this idyllic setting on the farm that Germaine and Jacques love one another for the last time, although they are not aware of it:

"Elle possédait sa chambre. Ils y couchèrent et s'y adorèrent pour la dernière fois. Jacques le pressentait-il? Pas le moins du monde. Ni Germaine. Ils avaient raison, puisque, dans la suite, ils devaient souvent faire l'amour."

(p. 79)

But the short idyll comes to an end:

"Ils partirent le surlendemain à l'aurore, sans fatigue. On entendait les coqs contagieux prendre les uns aux autres comme les trous d'une vaste girandole de gaz. Tout était glacé, mouillé, virginal. Germaine portait crânement le nez rouge. Elle n'opposait pas une ride au matin pur."

(p. 79)

Germaine gives Jacques an old photograph of herself.

"Elle avait découvert une ancienne photographie dans son armoire. Elle y clignait des yeux de myope. Jacques trouvait cette grimace divine.<sup>3</sup> Germaine la lui donna."

(p. 80)

In Germaine's absence a despairing Nestor Osiris has gone as far as to shatter a mirror - a tragedy for him, since he is so superstitious. He is now determined that all is finished between him and Germaine. To prove the seriousness of the situation he brings her his farewell letter, insisting that he read it to her himself, as he is certain that she would not read it if he were to leave it, since she is very careless about such matters. When she tells him that she has deceived him with Jacques, he still refuses to believe her. Then Jacques arrives in the midst of this farcical

scene. He makes a fatal mistake. Not realising that Germaine would like to be rid of Nestor, and thinking that he is acting cleverly, Jacques tells Nestor that Germaine is merely teasing him. So Germaine, despite herself, makes up with Osiris. When he has gone she reproaches Jacques for his cunning.

So their affair drags on in an atmosphere of disorder. When Germaine receives word that her alcoholic father is dying, she refuses to visit him. When he dies, it is decided to bury him in the Père-Lachaise. This means that Germaine has to go to the country to collect the body. Accompanied by Jacques and taking the car given on loan by Nestor, Germaine goes to the farm, and decides to bring her mother back with her to Paris. The return journey with the car preceding the hearse has elements of irony and farce. At one point they lose the hearse, then find it in a side-street with a puncture. Jacques has to help the driver to replace the wheel. When they set off again, Germaine is irritated by Jacques' silence. When she drops him off before they reach their destination, the drivers of the vehicles gain a wrong impression:

"Par bonheur, le silence de Jacques énervait Germaine et elle le déposa rue de l'Estrapade, ce qui fit que les conducteurs des pompes funèbres purent un instant croire qu'ils conduisaient au Panthéon un mort illustre."

(p. 94)

After the funeral, during which Jacques and Germaine have their first quarrel when he tries to impress her with the humour of Victor Hugo's famous two lines (which Germaine fails to understand)

"Gall, amant de la reine, alla, tour magnanime  
Galamment, de l'arène à la Tour Magne, à Nîme."

(p. 96)

Germaine throws a surprise party at which the Castor Sugar Crowd (la bande Sucre-en-Poudre) arrive unexpectedly. Here we have a lively example of the type of event which Cocteau uses skilfully to create the atmosphere and the colour of the epoch:

"Sucre-en-Poudre comptait soixante ans et en paraissait vingt-cinq. Son régime consistait à ne boire que du champagne et à ne jamais se coucher, sauf avec des jockeys ou des professeurs de danse. Elle tenait une fumerie d'opium. On y endossait des robes japonaises en crêpe de Chine. On fumait, pêle-mêle, sur une descente de lit. On écoutait feu Caruso chanter Pailleasse.

Ce joli monde cria, sauta, boxa.



Vers sept heures, tous s'entassèrent dans un panier à salade que conduisait un chauffeur blanc, sourd, muet, aveugle, comme une statue de cocaïne."

(pp. 103-104)

Against this corrupt background Jacques and Germaine continue to make love, whilst Nestor takes to deceiving Germaine with her friend Louise. One morning Jacques, having forgotten his watch on the previous evening at Germaine's, goes to her flat to fetch it. When he lets himself in, he discovers that Germaine has deceived him with Louise:

"Il enfonça la clef, tourna, traversa le vestibule, ouvrit la porte. Que vit-il? Germaine et Louise.

Elles dormaient, enlacées comme des initiales, et même si curieusement que les membres de l'une semblaient appartenir à l'autre. Imaginons la reine de coeur sans robe.

En face de ces corps blancs épars sur le drap, Jacques devint stupide comme Perrette devant son lait répandu. Fallait-il tuer? Ç'eût été fort ridicule, et, en outre, un pléonasme. Il semblait impossible de faire ces mortes plus mortes. Sauf que Germaine remuait sa bouche ouverte et que Louise avait aux jambes des tics de chienne qui dort.

Une chose frappante était le naturel de ce spectacle.

On eût dit que les situations franches endimanchaient ces belles filles. Grandies dans le vice, elles y trouvent un délassément.

D'où remontent ces deux noyées? Sans doute arrivent-elles de loin. Toutes les vagues et toutes les lunes les roulent depuis Lesbos pour les étaler là, sous une écume de dentelles et de mousseline."

(pp. 108-110)

Here we have an outstanding example in Cocteau's writing of how he can imbue a situation, that would normally be looked upon as sordid, with a certain poetic beauty. We are almost persuaded to accept the situation as natural and normal.

After his initial shock, Jacques finds himself accepting even this state of affairs, since he is able to see it from Germaine's point of view. When he later mentions his discovery to Mouheddin who already knows about the relationship between the two girls, Mouheddin philosophically observes:

"Les lois morales sont les règles d'un jeu auquel chacun triche, et cela depuis que le monde est monde. Nous

n'y changerons rien." (p. 111)

So Jacques goes to meet the girls at the roller-skating rink.

The episode which follows at the rink (chapter 8) begins with one of the most vividly impressionistic passages in the novel. The aural and visual elements, the sense of movement within the images, the crude nature of some of the language used, the slightly exotic nature of the similes, and the resulting sensations of atmosphere - all of these create an unforgettable picture of a setting throbbing with life.

"Le roller-skating était comble. La rumeur de Vésuve des patins sur le béton remplissait les oreilles, même pendant les pauses. Un orchestre nègre alternait avec un orgue mécanique. Les nègres se jetaient des notes de trompette comme de la viande crue. Près de l'orgue qui vomissait par derrière un escalier de carton, une dame en deuil écrivait sa correspondance sur une petite table. Elle changeait les bandes. Une foule triste tournait, chacun croyant avoir autour de lui le vide. Au sous-sol on voyait un charmant tir en ardoises orné de pipes, de cibles rouges, d'un cortège de lapins, de palmiers, de zouaves. Le jet d'eau sur quoi sautille l'oeuf était un tulipier dont le tireur coupe la tulipe. La dame du tir se penchait et le reflleurissait. Des hommes en chandail jouaient au bowling. Du haut, ce bowling, entre deux musiques, faisait un bruit sourd d'embauchoirs qu'on lance aux quatre coins de la chambre.

Sur le balcon du pourtour qui dominait la salle, leurs rubans affolés par les ventilateurs, deux marins américains penchaient sur le gouffre les profils de Dante et de Virgile.

Le décor était d'oriflammes et de projections.

Un numéro consistait en une rétrospective du cancan. Huit femmes, survivantes de l'âge d'or, secouaient un vrai poulailler sur des rythmes d'Offenbach. Quelquefois on ne distinguait que leurs jambes noires dans une literie du Palais-Royal; quelquefois elles faisaient à pleines mains sauter leur pied en l'air comme un bouchon de champagne et la mousse des dessous les inondait. La naissance de Vénus n'agit pas plus d'écume.

Cette danse touche le Parisien comme la corrida l'Espagnol. Elle s'achève sur le grand écart, un groupe de carte transparente, où, cassant son buste de cire, la vieille Môme Tour-Eiffel souriait, fendue en deux jusqu'au coeur."

(pp. 112-114)

How well the overpowering noise of the roller skates is suggested by comparing it to the dull annihilating roar of Vesuvius, with its continuing reverberation in the ears after each wave of sound, even during the intervals! To compare trumpet notes to lumps of raw meat



might seem a perilous device, but in the context it works, since it conjures up another vision of primitive black men actually throwing lumps of raw meat to one another in the jungle. The woman in mourning who changes the organ rolls strikes an effectively sombre note in a scene that is rich in garish elements. Something of the dull impersonality that one associates with the spectacle of groups of people trying gallantly to amuse themselves in artificial surroundings is suggested very simply by the one sentence: "Une foule triste tournait, chacun croyant avoir autour de lui le vide." The key word here is the adjective "triste", while the sudden change to "chacun" in the second part of the sentence suggests that it is a crowd of people who are not actually acting in unison for enjoyment, as for example a choir would be, but individuals trying to play out their own fantasies, each imagining that he is alone. The noise of the bowls is also unusually suggested by comparing it with the sound of shoe-trees being thrown around a room. A masterly stroke, incongruous as the comparison may at first appear, is the reference to Dante and Virgil personified by the two American sailors, looking down upon the scene from the peripheral balcony that surrounds the rink, just as Dante and Virgil may have looked down upon a gulf in the Inferno. The final touch of the can-can danced by the eight women, survivors from the golden age, shaking the theatre gallery to the rhythms of Offenbach's music completes the aural and visual effect of the whole scene.

It is in the midst of this maelstrom of human "entertainment" that the fatal moment arrives that is to signal the end of the Germaine/Jacques relationship. Jacques bumps into Stopwell who is noticed by Germaine and Louise. He is obliged to introduce him. It is the coup de foudre for Germaine. She is at once hypnotised by Stopwell. As Stopwell speaks,

"Germaine boit ses paroles. Ses yeux chavirent. Jacques est éperdu, car, incorporé à cette femme qui se détache de lui sans transition, il se voit diminuer à mesure qu'elle s'éloigne. Pareil au savetier des Mille et une Nuits il réintègre sa forme primitive. Il redevient ce qu'il était avant leur amour."

(p. 118)

And when Stopwell and Germaine move away to skate together, Jacques, shattered, has a traumatic experience which Cocteau skilfully expresses in a deliberately distorted impressionism:

"Jacques regarde la piste. Elle s'allonge et se courbe dans des miroirs déformants. La musique aussi change

comme quand on s'amuse à écouter un orchestre en se bouchant et se débouchant les oreilles. Il voit Peter et Germaine, moines du Gréco. Ils s'étirent, ils verdissent, ils montent au ciel, pâmés, foudroyés par les lampes au mercure. Ensuite ils roulent loin très loin : une Germaine large, nabote; Stopwell devenu un fauteuil Louis-Philippe qui lancerait ses pieds à droite et à gauche. Le bar tangué. Louise approche le visage flou des films artistiques. Elle remue la bouche et Jacques n'entend aucune parole. 4

Il n'est plus richement emboîté par la personne de Germaine. Il sent ses os, ses côtes, ses cheveux jaunes, ses dents en pointe, ses taches de rousseur, tout ce qu'il déteste et qu'il ne constatait plus."

(pp. 119-120)

When Mouheddin, prompted by Louise, becomes aware of Jacques' torture, he is willing to take him away but:

"Jacques refuse. Il n'est pas de ceux qui partent. Il est de la race maudite qui reste, qui boit la dernière goutte." 5

(p. 121)

And he certainly gets no sympathy from Germaine when she returns with Stopwell. When Louise points out to her the state in which Jacques now is, she callously remarks:

"Il se remettra." (p. 121)

Cocteau's comment upon it is piercing. He says:

"Ce mot était humain dans le sens où la loi estime pitoyable la balle que l'officier tire à bout portant sur un fusillé qui respire encore." (p. 121)

And Stopwell's gesture, which follows immediately, is simply to offer Jacques a cigarette.

When Jacques returns to the pension he has a troubled night. He falls on his knees and weeps. And Cocteau has a particular way of describing how his tears distort Jacques' universe:

"Il évacua les larmes qui tendaient une loupe d'eau entre ses cils et lui montraient un univers grotesque."

(p. 122)

Describing Jacques' sleeplessness, Cocteau also has a special manner of describing sleep itself with the double image of a blind fish and a swooping bird:

"Le sommeil n'est pas à nos ordres. C'est un poisson aveugle qui monte des profondeurs, un oiseau qui s'abat sur nous."

(p. 123)

And the double image is continued a little later when he does manage to fall asleep:



"Soudain, une épaisseur habite ses yeux. Ses mâchoires se contractent. L'oiseau est dans le piège, le poisson dans le bocal. Il dort."  
(pp. 124-125)

Jacques dreams. In describing the boy's dream Cocteau demonstrates what a perfect grasp he has of the dream machinery, the illogical logicalness, the logical illogicalness, elements that in a wakeful state would have no sense, but which, within the frame of the dream, have meaning. The dazing, complicated nature of the start of Jacques' dream sets the tone of what follows:

"Il rêve. Il rêve qu'il ne rêve pas et que Stopwell, qui porte une jupe d'Ecoissais, le force à croire qu'il rêve. Ensuite il patine, il vole. Il vole autour du skating où poussent des arbres. Stopwell cherche à l'humilier, dit à Germaine qu'il rêve, qu'il ne vole pas réellement. Germaine sautille auprès de Stopwell à l'aide d'une ombrelle. Cette ombrelle leur sert de parachute. La jupe de Stopwell devient très longue, avec une traîne.

Germaine, accompagnée par un orgue d'église, chante l'Honorat Silencieux. Ce titre dépourvu de sens en possède un dans le rêve.

Jacques tombe. Il arrive au fond d'un trou de linge. Il est réveillé. Il entend Mahieddine qui se couche. C'est donc le matin. Il se rendort. Il retrouve le skating. Sa piste tourne. ....

..... C'est ainsi que Stopwell a l'air de patiner. Il dénonce le subterfuge à Germaine.

Elle rit, l'embrasse. Il est heureux." (p. 125)

The dream reflects Jacques' hope that all is not ended between him and Germaine. So he submits to the final humiliation of a hurried visit to Germaine in order to reassure himself. She receives him coldly, then tells him in no uncertain terms that their affair is ended. He is then shown the door.

In the days that follow he lives in the hope that Germaine will write to him. The waiting is torture, and Cocteau describes its torments with complete conviction.

"Attendre est la plus minutieuse occupation. Le cerveau, comme une ruche le jour de l'essaimage, se vide et ne conserve que les éléments d'un travail sans joie. 6 Si nos sens frivoles le dérangent, les abeilles de la douleur les paralysent. Il faut attendre, attendre, attendre; manger machinalement pour donner des forces à l'usine des faux bruits, des faux calculs, des faux souvenirs, des faux espoirs."  
(p. 130)

One morning, quite against our expectations as readers, a letter does come from Germaine. He is to see her at five o'clock at Louise's flat. When at last he sees Germaine, she explains that Stopwell,

with his English sense of honour, does not wish to continue the affair with her unless Jacques consents. Jacques leaves, completely disillusioned. He goes to see Stopwell who explains that he had actually met Germaine before the meeting at the skating-rink. The bitter moment for Jacques is described with a typically Coctelian mirror image:

"Un miroir n'est pas l'eau de Narcisse; on n'y plonge pas. Jacques y appuie le front et son haleine cache cette figure pâle qu'il déteste." (pp. 135-136)

Thus Jacques goes back to hating himself. He contemplates suicide. He goes to the skating-rink on the following morning and persuades the barman to sell him ten grams of a deadly drug.

The ninth chapter opens with a philosophical prelude to Jacques' attempted suicide. Cocteau uses the metaphor of life being a train which takes us to death at high speed. It would be wise if we could sleep until we reach that destination, but we are allured by the journey itself, and we become so inordinately interested in details that should be merely a pastime that, on the last day of the journey, we find it difficult to fasten our suitcases. Jacques, being too lonely, is trying to leap from the moving train. Or perhaps, this deep-sea diver is attempting to cast off the human form in which he is suffocating. He is trying to find the communication cord.

He pours the packets of drug powder into a box where they sparkle like mica, pours out a whisky, mixes in the powder and drinks the mixture in one gulp. Now in an extraordinary passage Cocteau describes the workings of death using once again the image of an angel, this time the Angel of Death. The symptoms of poisoning seem very authentic, suggesting that Cocteau had done some special research on the subject.

"L'invasion se fit de tous les côtés à la fois. Sa figure durcissait. Il se souvint d'une sensation analogue chez le dentiste. Il touchait d'une langue pâteuse des dents étrangères enchâssées dans du bois. Un froid de chlorure d'éthyle vaporisait ses yeux et ses joues. Des vagues de chair de poule parcouraient ses membres et s'arrêtaient autour du coeur qui battait à se rompre. Ces vagues allant, venant, des orteils à la racine des cheveux, imitaient la mer trop courte et qui ôte toujours à une plage ce qu'elle donne à l'autre. Un froid mortel remplaçait les vagues; il jouait, s'épanouissait, disparaissait et reparaisait, comme les dessins de la moire.



Jacques sentait un poids de liège, un poids de marbre, un poids de neige.

C'était l'ange de la mort qui accomplissait son oeuvre. Il se couche à plat ventre sur ceux qui vont mourir, et pour les statufier guette leur moindre distraction.

La mort l'envoie; on dirait ces ambassadeurs extraordinaires qui épousent à la place des princes. Aussi le font-ils avec indifférence.

Un masseur n'est plus touché par la peau des jeunes femmes. L'ange travaille froidement, cruellement, patiemment, jusqu'au spasme. Alors il s'envole."

(pp. 141-142)

The passage is rich in the elements of the poet's mythology acquired up to the time he wrote the novel. After the description of the apparent physical symptoms around the face and the mouth, the waves of gooseflesh to which Jacques is subjected quickly change into the waves of the sea of death. The alliteration inherent in the repetition of verbs in the imperfect ending in "-ssait" suggests the gradually retreating sound of the waves, in turn compared to the disappearing and reappearing patterns that one sees in watered silk - another favourite material that figures frequently in Cocteau's poetry and prose. The marble and the snow are there also. Finally the angel of death accomplishing his task, awaiting the unguarded moment of the victim to complete it, working coldly, patiently, but also with cruelty - three of the attributes of the angel Heurtebise. The sensual position of the angel lying down upon the dying person also has echoes of similar moments in the poem l'Ange Heurtebise.

As the poison of the drug works upon Jacques' system, Cocteau calls upon his experience of some of the sensations felt in his flights with Roland Garros to express what Jacques feels:

"Les mouvements qu'on exécute en aéroplane ne se constatent pas. L'appareil reste immobile. Enfermé dans le casque et les lunettes, on voit les maisons qui rapetissent et qui enflent, une ville morte que son fleuve divise. Cette ville se balance ou dresse une carte d'atlas contre un mur. Soudain, le looping nous la montre peinte au-dessus de nos têtes. Ce jeu du monde autour des pilotes s'accompagne d'angoisse. Le ventre s'évanouit. Les oreilles se bouchent. Le vertige traverse la poitrine de son fil à couper le beurre. Il arrive d'atterrir en se croyant à mille mètres d'altitude : on prend les bruyères pour une forêt."

(p. 144)

How effectively Cocteau suggests the altered sense of perspective

felt by the dying Jacques! The intrusion of the butter wire may seem incongruous, but it is a common practice by Cocteau to introduce everyday elements unexpectedly in this way. Jacques' feeling of altered perspective is made even more vivid in the following paragraph where qualities and functions associated with specific objects are confused and transposed:

"Jacques, sur son lit, commençait à embrouiller ses symptômes avec les phénomènes extérieurs. Les cloisons respiraient. Le bruit de la pendule sortait tantôt de l'encrier, tantôt de l'armoire. La fenêtre était close ou grande ouverte sur un ciel d'étoiles. Le lit glissait, penchait, se tenait en équilibre instable. Il retombait et se recabrait lentement." (p. 144)

Shortly afterwards, Jacques' head begins to clear despite the fact that it is humming like a beehive. His thoughts float back to moments of his childhood as he considers the effect that the news of his death will have upon his mother. Under the effect of the drug Jacques' dark and light sides are intermingling. He finds himself rising. He seems to be losing his bearings. He is not completely conscious of the system which he is overturning, yet he feels a certain responsibility for it. What does Cocteau mean by the "system" which Jacques is wrecking? At this juncture Cocteau expounds one of his favourite theories, not entirely original perhaps, that each human body is a universe unto itself. He writes:

"La nuit du corps humain possède ses nébuleuses, ses soleils, ses terres, ses lunes. Un esprit moins esclave d'une matière engourdie devine combien le mécanisme de l'univers est simple. S'il ne l'était pas, il se détraquerait. Il est simple comme la roue. Notre mort détruit des univers et les univers de notre ciel sont à l'intérieur d'un personnage dont la taille déconcerte. Dieu contient-il tout?" (pp. 146-147)

But, realising that the simplicity of his theory could be considered to be affected, he hastens to add:

"Les spéculations de cette envergure sont fréquentes chez les intoxiqués. Elles illusionnent bien des médiocres sur leur intelligence. Ils s'imaginent résoudre les problèmes éternels." (p. 147)

Jacques now appears to enter the final phase of his death throes. He feels he is losing strength and is inundated with perspiration. His resistance goes and he appears to be submitting to the angel of Death.



"La ... la ... la ... disait l'ange, vous voyez bien qu'on y arrive ... que ce n'est pas si pénible ...

Jacques répondait

- Oui ... oui ... c'est très facile, très facile ..."

(p. 147)

And at last he appears to die:

"Enfin, pareil au voilier torpillé, devenu lourd comme un immeuble, saluant et s'enfonçant de biais dans la mer, Jacques coula." 7

(p. 148)

But Jacques is not dead. For the angel is obeying an unknown countermand. It is Petitcopain who discovers Jacques and summons help. He is quickly attended to as there is a doctor in the building. After the application of poultices and the forced drinking of black coffee, he is safe by eight o'clock in the morning. There is a further irony in the fact that he actually owes his life to a thief. The barman had sold him a relatively harmless mixture.

Jacques has a long convalescence as a result of having contracted jaundice from the poison in his blood. His mother takes him home to Touraine. One February afternoon he awakes, cured of the poison and its remedies. As he looks back upon the recent events in his life, he finds himself playing a game of chess, the chessmen being himself, Germaine, Stopwell, Osiris. He is trying to correct the mistakes he made, by working out impossible moves. Worn out by his mental game, the chessboard goes dim, and he suddenly finds himself wondering whether Germaine had not been, after all, a false image of his desires, tricking them by a resemblance. Then he thinks this is wrong. For Germaine is one of a special race, the race of the strong, of those who take without really giving. How does Cocteau see this special race to which Germaine and those such as she belong?

" ... ; une race qui ne se retourne pas, qui ne souffre pas, qui n'aime pas, qui ne tombe pas malade; une race de diamant qui coupe la race des vitres." (p. 152)

Both Germaine and Stopwell belong to this diamond race, so they could not harm one another. Jacques and Petitcopain, on the other hand, belong to those who are of glass, "la race des vitres, la race noyée". Jacques has had a lucky escape. He might have drowned. He reflects upon his circumstances and tries to resolve the problem of how he can avoid the dangers he had been subjected to before. After all, what is a diamond? he asks himself. His answer: "Un fils de

charbonnier, devenu riche." shows how, in his new state of mind, he is playing around with words. He thinks that he is defining a type of which he must beware, an enemy on which he can close in, laying a ghost, guarding himself against a danger known to him. Yet the ghost he is trying to lay has too many heads and he recognises in the terms he has been running over in his mind - river, diamond, glass, siren - Negro fetishes.

By this time Jacques' mother has entered the room where he is resting. She tries to warn Jacques against torturing himself for a bad woman (thus revealing a certain jealousy on her part). This has the effect of dispelling all the good resolutions he had been making shortly before to avoid ever being confronted with the danger again. He seeks out the photograph which Germaine had given him, and, looking at it, he simply sees an actress. Closing his eyes, he feels the harness of Germaine enveloping him again. At that unpropitious moment his mother decides to tell him of the death of a former friend Idgi d'Ybreo, announced in the paper that day. Jacques uses this information as an excuse to dissolve into tears. Then he has a fit of sobbing in the midst of which he sees a strange scene:

"Il voit un lit. Contre ce lit, le dieu Anubis se dresse.  
Il a une tête de chien. Il lèche une petite figure  
toute froide, toute noble, déjà momifiée par la douleur."

(p. 154)

This very Egyptian image closes the tenth chapter. It effectively suggests that Jacques sees himself now as dead. The Egyptian god of the dead, his head changed from that of a jackal to that of a dog, is comfortingly licking his dead face already mummified by his suffering.

In the Epilogue (which suggests that, in a sense, the story actually ends at the moment when Jacques realises that suffering has annihilated him) we learn that by the end of the month Jacques is much better, physically. It is decided that he and his mother should live together in Paris, as he feels too unsteady to live without some support. It is he who suggests the plan, although he realises that he and his mother will disagree. Back in Paris, Jacques seems to see the city in a new light:

"La rue excitait son corps guéri. Il se disait: J'ai  
les yeux ouverts. Je regarde Paris comme je regardais  
Venise. Il faut des drames pour m'éveiller."  
(p. 156)



Jacques bumps in to Nestor Osiris who insists upon taking him to his office for a glass of vermouth. He sees a recent photograph of Germaine on the mantelpiece and his eyes fill with tears. Nestor quickly puts Jacques in the picture regarding the latest developments with Germaine. She has now fallen for Mouheddin, looking upon him as a great poet. She is no longer friendly with Louise. The affair with Stopwell had lasted only 37 days! And Osiris had surprised Louise and Stopwell together! Osiris still does not realise that Germaine deceives him with everyone. He assumes that, since Mouheddin's affair with Louise had been of a purely platonic nature, it must be likewise with Germaine. Osiris, in matters of the heart, is as gullible as ever. We see quite another side to his nature, however, when, catching a young telephonist in his office putting the wrong stamps on letters for the town, he fires him on the spot. He is not so ingenuous in the sphere of business. But Jacques is rather dismayed by the apparent callousness of Osiris in dismissing Jules, the telephonist, on such a paltry pretext. He asks Osiris to reconsider:

"- Monsieur Osiris, dit-il, je regrette, j'ai une course rue Réaumur. Mais accordez-moi une grâce. Celle de Jules. Il vous coûtait un franc. Vous êtes injuste. Pourquoi le renvoyez-vous?"

- Pourquoi? (Osiris prit un temps.) Parce que ÇA, mon cher Jacques, ÇA, je peux éviter." (p. 164)

Osiris's reason resounds in Jacques' ears. The phrase seems vague, lofty and mysterious - "Il y retrouva le sourire des colosses." He decides to build his character upon this phrase, to put his feet on the ground, to don a uniform for protection ...

"Je flotte dans moi-même, pensait-il, et ÇA je peux éviter.  
Le reste à la grâce de Dieu." (p. 165)

As Jacques walks around the Bourse he sees Jules, the fired telephonist, looking inordinately happy and gay. He is playing prisoner's base with some cyclists from the Havas agency. He makes a simple observation: "Drôle de pays." This observation leads into the final few lines of the novel:

"C'étaient les propres termes d'un ange qui visite le monde et dissimule ses ailes sous une housse de vitrier. 8

Il ajouta:

- Sous quel uniforme cacherai-je mon coeur trop gros?  
Il paraîtra toujours.

Jacques se sentait redevenir sombre. Il savait bien

que pour vivre sur terre il faut en suivre les modes  
et le coeur ne s'y porte plus." (p. 166)

The temporary "angelification" of Jacques in this final passage is a suitable preliminary to the discovery he then makes that his "éducation sentimentale" has been completed when he realises that he can no longer wear his heart on his sleeve in the hard, unsentimental world of the epoch. Cocteau has successfully recreated, through the petty affairs of a varied company of characters, the flavour of Parisian life within a richly suggestive portrait of the time. He has also managed to convey something of the inherent sadness of the period through the heartbreak of the protagonist Jacques. Cocteau himself has a ready answer to the criticism that the book is now dated, when in the Preface to the 1957 Club des Éditeurs edition he accurately describes the aims he had in mind when he wrote it. He says:

"Le Grand Écart est de tous mes livres, celui qui date et date exprès. Je veux dire où l'époque se trouve prise, épinglée sur un liège cruel comme le papillon de l'entomologiste.

En outre, il me plaisait de substituer aux thèses et aux études-fleuves, des anecdotes rapides, significatives, traversées par le fil rouge du coeur - par une action, propre à éclairer la terrible solitude de la jeunesse - mais d'une jeunesse éprise de contacts.

Mon oeuvre entière tourne autour du drame de la solitude et des tentatives de l'homme pour la vaincre. Ici elle se montre sans artifices (sauf ceux des accessoires de ma jeunesse) et pour ainsi dire toute nue."

And no one else could describe the book more accurately. (1957 Stock Edition)

### Thomas l'Imposteur (1923)

This novel, although it is placed within the mainstream of Cocteau's oeuvre, nevertheless occupies a unique niche in that it has elements peculiar to it, which are not readily discerned in the other novels. The incidents depicted are partly autobiographical, and some of the characters could be based upon actual people, but Cocteau has taken the basic materials of his war experiences and has conferred upon them a poetic atmosphere that transforms them into a suitable background against which the protagonist Guillaume Thomas plays out the action of what Cocteau referred to as 'Une seconde avec un poète inconnu' (Le rappel à l'ordre, p. 267). The novel has subtle,



rarefied qualities that are most apparent in the descriptions of the setting of the Belgian front where most of the action takes place. There the labyrinthine trenches in the moonlight assume the qualities of the no man's land of the poet's inner world - a setting that will find echoes in Le Sang d'un Poète and Orphée a few years later.

The novel is also unique in that none of the main characters described are to be found again in Cocteau's work. Although the setting is the first world war, it was certainly not the author's intention to create a novel about the war. The story itself is based partly upon Cocteau's own adventures first as a member of the ambulance corps organised by Misia Sert and later as the mascot of a company of marines on the Belgian front.<sup>9</sup> The protagonist, Guillaume Thomas, a young man of a good family, in an unguarded, reckless moment, assumes a false identity. Since his family comes from Fontenoy, (the family name being Thomas), when he introduces himself as Guillaume Thomas de Fontenoy, it is assumed his name must be Fontenoy, the name of a famous general. It is a simple step for Guillaume to assume the false identity of the general's nephew. Everyone believes his lie, and he ends by believing it himself. There comes a time when truth upsets him. He is thus compelled to escape from himself, since the fiction he has created has become more real than the truth. His masquerade hence assumes the proportion of a vocational idiosyncrasy and Guillaume is destined to attain the highest point of this déformation professionnelle at the unexpected moment of his death.

Although there may be some frivolous moments in the narrative of Thomas l'Imposteur, the picture of the horrors of the war depicted by Cocteau leaves no doubt as to the impression made upon the poet's mind by the carnage which he witnessed. Cocteau himself has written in his essay Autour de Thomas l'Imposteur describing his intentions in creating this work, which amount to his using his protagonist Guillaume Thomas and the background of the war simply to express particular aspects of his poetic philosophy. He writes:

"On pourra m'accuser de peindre, dans Thomas, la guerre sous des couleurs frivoles. Je m'en excuse comme la légende fait Watteau s'excuser, à son lit de mort, auprès du curé de Nogent pour l'avoir peint en costume de Gilles. ....  
J'ai eu la chance de vivre une période de la guerre dans le Nord auprès du bataillon des fusiliers marins. Bien que leur héroïsme ne puisse être mis en doute, je ne l'ai jamais vu se manifester sous un angle qui me

choquât. On y avait toujours pied. Il ressemblait au courage comme le génie que j'aime ressemble au talent. Les personnages de Thomas ne pouvaient se réunir, faire leur précipité, que dans le vide du début de la guerre. Ce sont les mouches irisées du charnier. Ils entrent et sortent comme Mélisande. La guerre, vue des coulisses, se trouve décrite en raison d'eux. Elle s'arrête avec la mort de Guillaume qui est l'apothéose d'une féerie : le moment où la biche se change en princesse. Guillaume tué net, c'est l'enfant qui joue au cheval, devenu cheval."

(Le rappel à l'ordre, pp. 266-267)

The novel is one of Cocteau's most concise works. In some one hundred and fifty pages we witness the protagonist Guillaume Thomas creating for himself with bold conviction and inspired panache the idealistic identity of a hero which he is then compelled to put to the test against the reality of the war. The road upon which he finds himself will lead him inevitably to his death. Guillaume has this much in common with other Coctelian hero figures, namely that his attempts at finding his ideal self are without hope, so long as he is in life. Only in his death does he achieve his longed-for identity.

Thomas l'Imposteur, being a rapid narrative, is written in a very typical lapidary yet richly imagistic style. It is a style which implies that large portions of the story are conveyed in a few short sentences. The entire history of the Princess de Borme, her birth, her upbringing, her marriage and her early widowhood, essential elements upon which a great deal of the narrative is based, occupies not more than some four hundred words - a device that is rich in the conciseness of poetry.

The book opens on a familiar note of disorder - a kind of overture to a world which will shortly find itself in process of disintegration.

"La guerre commença dans le plus grand désordre. Ce désordre ne cessa point, d'un bout à l'autre. Car une guerre courte eût pu s'améliorer et, pour ainsi dire, tomber de l'arbre, tandis qu'une guerre prolongée par d'étranges intérêts, attachée de force à la branche, offrait toujours des améliorations qui furent autant de débuts et d'écoles."

(p. 7)

Madame de Bormes (la princesse) is introduced at the moment when the Government has left Paris, its departure having caused a wholesale evacuation of the city. Since her daughter Henriette has just been



operated upon for appendicitis, the lady cannot bring herself to leave the city since she must stay by her daughter's side. This is her excuse. In fact she has other motives, linked with the necessities of her very nature which calls out for romance, adventure and heroism. Above all, her duty to herself is one of pleasure and its pursuit:

"Veuve, fort jeune, du prince, mort d'un accident de chasse deux ans après leur mariage, la princesse de Bormes était Polonaise. La Pologne est le pays des pianistes. Elle jouait de la vie comme un virtuose du piano et tirait de tout l'effet que ces musiciens tirent des musiques médiocres comme des plus belles. Son devoir était le plaisir. 10

C'est ainsi que cette femme excellente disait : 'Je n'aime pas les pauvres. Je déteste les malades.' "

(p. 12)

Further on we read:

"Elle voulait s'amuser et savait s'amuser." (p. 12)

and

"Elle était née sous le signe des aventures." (p. 14)

This remarkable woman had shown great perspicacity as a girl. Strong-willed, she made enemies. She could be bold, and sometimes even tactless. "Après avoir diverti, elle dérangeait." (p. 16) As she matured, she also revealed qualities of judgment and taste - "éloignant d'elle le médiocre et ne retenant que la qualité." (p. 16) When her husband died she elected not to play the part of the inconsolable widow. Her daughter Henriette adored her -

"Clémence (Madame de Bormes) était née actrice, sa fille spectatrice, et son spectacle favori était sa mère."

(p. 17)

Those around her were aware of her radiance. She had a strong sense of the theatrical and saw things in theatrical terms -

"La guerre lui apparut tout de suite comme le théâtre de la guerre. Théâtre réservé aux hommes." (p. 18)

She could not be content to live on the edge of what was happening. That was why she came to organise her ambulance corps. She could then participate in the theatre of war.

Her most difficult task is to find vehicles and drivers. But she persists in her efforts because she knows that some people like to live a twofold life -

"Elle croyait une quantité de gens désireux de vivre double et de voir la mort de près." (p. 21)

The personnel assembled by the Princesse contains one real doctor, Verne, who practises spiritualism and hypnotism, and some other strange people. "Il poussait entre les fentes de cette cour d'étranges champignons." (p. 24) The first of these strange mushrooms is the nurse Madame Valiche, a very vulgar and libidinous woman accompanied by a bad dentist, le docteur Gentil, whom she passes off as a hospital surgeon. Cocteau concisely draws a picture of her by contrasting her with Madame de Bormes:

"Elle était aussi laide, vulgaire et rapace que Madame de Bormes était belle, noble, désintéressée. Ces deux femmes se rencontraient sur le terrain de l'intrigue. Simplement, l'une intriguait pour son plaisir, l'autre pour son intérêt." (pp. 24-25)

Madame Valiche sees the theatre of war as an element in which she can profit. She is in love with Gentil and pushes him. She also has in her make-up a morbid taste for cruelty. She is the widow of a colonel who had died of a fever at Tonkin. She finds consolation for her widowhood in Gentil, who has a singularly unprepossessing appearance -

"Il avait une barbe noire, une figure jaune, des yeux d'almée." (p. 25)

At this point Guillaume Thomas makes his first appearance. This sixteen year old appears out of nowhere, and astutely sums up the scene of the ambulance convoy, before descending upon it, to take over. The manner in which he is introduced is not without humour -

"Ce fut cette cour bruyante et encombrée que vit un soir, par la porte large ouverte, un jeune soldat qui passait dans la rue. Il s'arrêta, s'appuya contre une des bornes et jeta sur ce tohu-bohu le regard avec lequel Bonaparte devait observer les Clubs.

Après avoir longuement hésité, il entra et se mêla aux mécaniciens.

Il paraissait si jeune que son uniforme lui donnait un air d'enfant de troupe. Mais ce qui rendait sa jeunesse incroyable, c'était un mince galon de sous-officier, sur la manche de sa petite vareuse bleue. Sa figure, fraîche, animale, bien faite, l'introduisait plus vite que n'importe quel certificat.

Au bout de dix minutes, il aidait tout le monde et savait tout."

(pp. 26-27)

The last sentence immediately calls to mind a picture of a young and



intrepid Cocteau assuming command of a disorganised company. On being asked by doctor Verne who he is, Guillaume introduces himself as Guillaume Thomas de Fontenoy. When asked if he is related to the great general, he says he is the general's nephew. Apparently he is also secretary to General d'Ancourt who is at present hospitalised. Madame de Bormes, quickly realising that this young soldier's name could open doors for them, enrolls him without delay in her convoy. No sooner said than done!

There follows a short passage in which Cocteau reveals at once the extent of Guillaume's imposture. Guillaume had in fact been born at Fontenoy, near Auxerre, but was presently living in Montmartre along with his aunt. Guillaume is an orphan. At the start of the war he is only sixteen years of age. So -

"Trouvant déjà dans le mensonge une antichambre des aventures, Guillaume se vieillissait, racontait aux voisines qu'il allait s'engager, qu'il obtiendrait une autorisation spéciale, et parut un beau jour en uniforme. Il tenait l'uniforme d'un camarade." (p. 30)

Wearing this borrowed uniform Guillaume has been roaming about, prowling around barracks and the iron gate of the Invalides. Caught up in this world of military fantasy, in a short time he had started to believe in the game he was playing. Soon he had conferred upon himself a stripe.

At this juncture Cocteau makes a point of justifying the deception of Guillaume. He writes:

"Vous voyez de quelle race d'imposteurs relève notre jeune Guillaume. Il faut leur faire une place à part. Ils vivent une moitié dans le songe. L'imposture ne les déclasse pas, mais les surclasse plutôt. Guillaume dupait sans malice. La suite montrera qu'il était sa propre dupe. Il se croyait ce qu'il n'était pas, comme n'importe quel enfant, cocher ou cheval. On l'eût bien surpris en lui démontrant qu'il risquait la prison."

(pp. 31-32)

It is significant that in the sub-titles which Cocteau wrote at the end of the book introducing each section, Guillaume's first appearance is described as "Un poète à l'état brut". Cocteau sees his protagonist as a poet, a creator, creating his own myth. In the creation of a myth the artist is therefore justified in using deception, in this case an imposture which, far from lowering his status, raises it, first in his own eyes, then in those of the people who admire him.

Such a person lives part of the time in the world of dreams. Guillaume deceives himself and others almost guilelessly.

At this point in the narrative it becomes apparent that in many ways Madame de Borme and Guillaume are similar souls. The Princesse enlists Guillaume's aid in her convoy because his name will provide an open sesame to the permits which she requires so that she can lead her bizarre, bumping convoy of improvised ambulances to the wonderland of the battlefields. What she and Guillaume have in common is that they both have great expectations of finding romantic and heroic adventures in the fulfilment of their task. Although disappointment awaits them when they finally come face to face with the horrors of death and mutilation - their dreams nevertheless live on for them.

When the convoy finally leaves for its first trip to the front, Madame de Bormes has managed to collect a motley company of drivers including shirtmakers, writers, idlers and her own driver, a poor Russian painter who adores her. It is late in the night when they travel, and there is a rather absurd interlude when, as they are slowly moving along, Madame de Bormes, glancing through the rear window of the car, sees the radiographer's wife in the vehicle directly behind playing with the light switch so that she appears lit one moment like an angel, then disappears, and then re-appears lit once again, just as she manipulates the light-switch. This slightly amusing prelude introduces the first nightscape described characteristically in the most vivid Coctelian language:

"Ils entraient dans les coulisses du drame. La scène se rapprochait, et ils dévisageaient cette solitude, ces arbres à droite et à gauche, cette nuit encombrée de cannonade. Ne ressemblaient-ils pas à ces mélomanes du poulailler, écoutant Stravinsky, penchés sur un gouffre noir.

Le trajet interminable ne les fatiguait pas. Ils supportaient l'odeur brune du charnier, le bruit monotone de l'horizon qui s'écroule."

(p. 37)

The strongly theatrical imagery adds consistency to the earlier allusions to the theatre of the war, whilst the reference to Stravinsky is also appropriate, since much of his music written at that time with its dramatic bursts of rhythmic percussion could readily be associated with the sounds of war.

At this point Cocteau intrudes like a Greek chorus, and comments upon the circumstance that has brought together three characters such



as Guillaume, madame Valiche and Madame de Bormes. Behind the declamatory tone of a question, Cocteau is giving us his answer, namely, that it is Fate which has brought them together:

"Quelle loi mystérieuse rassemble un Guillaume, une Madame Valiche, une princesse de Bormes comme le vif-argent? Leur esprit d'aventure accourt se rejoindre du bout du monde." 11 (p. 38)

When, at length, they come upon their first batch of war wounded soldiers, Madame de Bormes feels somewhat disoriented:

"Sous la tente, une trentaine de martyrs agonisaient par terre sur des bottes de paille. Un parfum sans nom, fétide, douceâtre, à quoi la gangrène ajoutait son musc noir, tournait le coeur. Les uns avaient le visage gonflé, jaune, couvert de mouches; d'autres le teint, la maigreur, les gestes de moines du Gréco. Tous semblaient sortir d'un coup de grisou. Le sang se caillait sur les uniformes en loques, et, ces uniformes n'offrant plus ni teinte exacte ni contour, on ne pouvait comprendre qui étaient les Allemands et qui les nôtres. Une grande stupeur les mariait." (p. 45)

But Madame Valiche rises to the occasion. This is her element.

"Une véritable surprise fut madame Valiche. Elle venait de rejoindre son élément. Cette morgue la transfigurait. Elle plaisantait, employait le vocabulaire des casernes, préparait les bandes et des seringues, coupait des capotes, enroulait, piquait, refusait ou donnait de l'eau." (p. 46)

Shortly afterwards they come upon a field hospital of Germans held prisoners at a farm. The German major's method of discovering which prisoners are still alive is rather crude:

"Le major allemand tenait une fourche et une lanterne. On ne distinguait pas les blessés dans l'ombre. Il fouillait avec sa fourche. C'était son système de triage. Les plus à vif criaient le plus. Il remettait leur fiche au dentiste. On sortait alors ces malheureux de la fange, et on les portait dans la cour." (p. 48)

And in the immediately following paragraph Cocteau demonstrates his skill in depicting the harrowing details of the war victim with a few bold strokes of the pen:

"L'un d'eux, couché sur une civière, était éclairé au visage par un des phares. Il était jeune. Il vivait, les deux mains arrachées. Il attrapait avec sa langue une petite chaîne qu'il portait au cou, et il en prenait les médailles dans sa bouche. Sans doute demandait-il un miracle : se réveiller dans son lit, en Allemagne, et avoir ses mains. Le major lui ôtait les médailles de la bouche en accrochant la chaîne avec

une des cornes de la fourche. Le mutilé laissait faire et recommençait.

Lorsqu'on mit ce pauvre être debout, il eut un réflexe terrible. Voulant saisir les tringles de cuivre de l'ambulance, il dressa ses moignons. Les infirmiers le hissèrent, évanoui."

(pp. 48-49)

The language is effectively simple, stripped of metaphors of any kind, concisely functional, moving. There is no evidence of a frivolous attitude towards the ugliness of the war here. At this point Madame de Bormes rouses herself and goes into action. She is roused by Madame Valiche, for, a moment before:

"Madame de Bormes descendait en scaphandre au fond des mers."

(p. 50)

Now she rolls up her sleeves and helps Madame Valiche to tend the wounded.

On the way back to Paris they run out of petrol at the town of M. Clémence appeals in vain to the local bishop to authorise the issuing of petrol. Since he is solely in charge of the local health services, he is offended that anyone from Paris should be there with a fleet of ambulances. After blasting Madame de Bormes, the bishop emerges into the street in front of his house to be confronted by a very strange scene:

"Pendant le chemin de retour, madame Valiche et Gentil avaient vidé le fond des caisses. La voiture empilait un désordre et une saleté de wagon-restaurant. Ils étaient ivres de Cordial-Médoc. Leur tendresse ne se dissimulait plus. L'évêque, de son perron, vit ce couple vautré, les bouteilles, le séminariste. Il eut un haut-le-corps. Madame Valiche ouvrait un oeil de folle.

- Vite, mon chéri, vite, cria-t-elle au docteur, donne ta bouche, voilà les curés!"

(p. 56)

Tasteless as such a scene might be, it does serve as an effective if vulgar contrast to the horror-filled scenes that have preceded it. The bawdy note which it strikes is peculiarly authentic in the context, and throws further light on the character of Madame Valiche.

It is Guillaume who solves the petrol problem by using the influence of his famous assumed name with the mayor. The convoy is able to make its way back to Paris. After a short interlude in Paris when Guillaume is the guest of Madame de Bormes and her daughter, the shambling convoy of improvised ambulances sets out again, this time heading for Rheims. It is here that the Princess



and Guillaume undergo their baptism of fire. As they approach the town from the hills they see it lying martyred below them, a dark pall of smoke hanging over it. The mournfully striking imagery which Cocteau employs here is among the most striking in the book:

"Dans la ville l'herbe poussait, des arbres sortaient par les fenêtres. Les immeubles ouverts en deux montraient le papier à fleurs des chambres. L'une avait encore sa commode, un cadre sur un mur. Le lit pendait au bord d'une autre.

La cathédrale était une montagne de vieilles dentelles.

.....

Les blessés mouraient de leurs blessures, de la faim, de la soif, du tétanos, du tir. La veille, à l'hôpital, on venait d'apprendre à un artilleur qu'il fallait lui couper la jambe sans chloroforme, que c'était la seule chance de le sauver, et il fumait, blême, une dernière cigarette avant le supplice, lorsqu'un obus réduisit le matériel chirurgical en poudre, et tua deux aides-majors. Personne n'osa reparaitre devant l'artilleur. On dut laisser la gangrène l'envahir comme le lierre une statue." (pp. 61-62)

Madame de Bormes reacts in an ambivalent manner to the conditions in Rheims. Moments of panic are followed by periods of courage and dedication. In the midst of a particularly fierce bombardment Guillaume finds himself running in a state of high exhilaration through the explosions, past houses destroyed by fire, until he stumbles upon Madame de Bormes, trembling against a wall and staring horror-stricken at the dead bodies of a woman and her child. The contradictory emotions aroused by the bombardment, with its spectacle and its horrors, are neatly distinguished as the nonplussed Guillaume listens to Clémence speaking about her daughter and begging him to take her away immediately. Whilst Madame de Bormes appears to be beginning to grasp the horrendous reality of war, gazing in terror at its scenes of carnage, Guillaume looks upon the war in a different light, safely wrapped in his fantasies. In a short philosophical passage Cocteau describes the point in his metamorphosis at which Guillaume has now arrived:

"Il y a des gens qui possèdent tout et ne peuvent le faire croire, des riches si pauvres et des nobles si vulgaires, que l'incrédulité qu'ils suscitent finit par les rendre timides et leur donne une attitude suspecte. Sur certaines femmes les plus belles perles deviennent fausses.

En revanche, sur d'autres, les perles fausses paraissent véritables. De même, il existe des hommes qui inspirent une confiance aveugle et jouissent de privilèges auxquels

ils ne peuvent prétendre. Guillaume Thomas était de cette race bienheureuse.

On le croyait. Il n'avait aucune précaution à prendre, aucun calcul à faire. Une étoile de mensonge le menait droit au but. Aussi n'avait-il jamais le visage préoccupé, traqué, du fourbe. Ne sachant ni nager ni patiner, il pouvait dire : Je patine et je nage. Chacun l'avait vu sur la glace et dans l'eau.

Une fée spéciale jette ce sort à la naissance. Certains réussissent, au berceau desquels aucune fée n'était venue, sauf celle-là.

Il n'arrivait jamais à Guillaume de faire son examen, de penser : 'Comment en sortirai-je?' ou : 'Je triche', ou : 'Je suis un misérable', ou : 'Je suis un habile homme.' Il allait, mêlé à sa fable, étroitement.

Puis il vivait son rôle, plus il s'y incorporait, plus il y apportait de feu et cette franchise qui persuade."

(pp. 68-69)

It is shortly after the episode at Rheims, when they have returned once again to Paris, that Guillaume becomes the object of Henriette's love. She confuses Guillaume with her mother in her thoughts and, caught at the moment of puberty, becomes hopelessly infatuated. Her mother does not observe this. Neither does Guillaume, whose thoughts are in other spheres.

"La princesse, nous l'avons dit, perçait les murailles; elle ne lisait pas dessus. Elle ne s'apercevait aucunement de ce merveilleux mécanisme : une rose qui s'ouvre. Guillaume non plus."

(p. 75)

How does Cocteau depict Guillaume's progress in his adopted milieu? As we would expect, with figurative flair:

"Tout homme porte sur l'épaule gauche un singe et, sur l'épaule droite, un perroquet. Sans que Guillaume s'y employât, son perroquet répétait le langage d'un monde privilégié, son singe en imitait les gestes. Aussi ne courait-il pas le risque des gens excentriques, une semaine adoptés et rejetés par le monde. Il y creusait sa place et paraissait, son nom l'accréditant, y avoir grandi toujours."

(pp. 75-76)

Guillaume's only potential enemy is Pesquel-Duport, owner of Le Jour, who aspires to the hand of Madame de Bormes, and sees in Guillaume a possible rival. What sort of person is Pesquel-Duport?

"Pesquel-Duport croyait au monde intellectuel. Il était de l'époque des salons. Il en souhaitait un. Il ignorait que le palmarès officiel ne porte que les comédiens et les fantoches de l'art, et que ses ouvriers restent dans l'ombre. Il se rêvait une table



chargée de fleurs, de cristaux; les femmes les plus élégantes, les hommes les plus illustres autour, et Clémence au milieu, en face de lui."

(pp. 76-77)

But Clémence is very non-committal in her replies to his constant proposals. Pesquel-Duport thinks that Guillaume is in love with Madame de Bormes and that she is flattered by this circumstance. He casts doubts upon Guillaume's origins, but Madame de Bormes defends the young man. Then Guillaume, incredibly, casting caution to the winds, gets tipsy one evening and has a minor scuffle with an old medical orderly, le comte d'Oronge. Returning to his aunt's house in Montmartre, he complains bitterly to her about the treatment he is receiving at the headquarters of the ambulance convoy in rue Jacob. He even asks her to go to rue Jacob to complain on his behalf. Fortunately, when the good lady goes there, she meets Doctor Verne who, quickly realising Guillaume's imposture, is also wise enough to know that in the interests of the ambulance unit, it must not be interfered with. He tactfully asks the lady not to breathe a word of their conversation to Guillaume, who will probably not remember anything when he is sober. In a masterly stroke, Verne boldly introduces Guillaume's aunt to Madame de Bormes as Mademoiselle de Fontenoy. As Verne had foreseen, Guillaume remembers nothing of the happenings of the previous evening when he awakes in the morning. When, later, Verne mentions to Guillaume that he had received a visit from his aunt, and Clémence interrogates Guillaume about his aunt in Verne's presence, Guillaume coolly explains that his aunt seldom goes out except to go to church. Verne, admiring Guillaume's audacious sang-froid in the face of this minor crisis, is completely won over to the boy's side. Shortly afterwards, the death of General d'Ancourt, whose secretary Guillaume had claimed to be, is announced. Since there is no evidence of Madame de Bormes' convoy of ambulances going into action again, Guillaume begs Pesquel-Duport to send him to one of the canteens which his newspaper runs on the Belgian front. Pesquel-Duport readily grasps this opportunity to be rid of Guillaume and the boy is sent to the canteen at Coxyde. After Guillaume's departure, Henriette falls ill. He, on the contrary, is delighted to leave for the Belgian front. He finds Nieuport in ruins, a labyrinth of underground passages and holes through which the troops find their way. Above ground, parts of buildings still stand, creating a surrealist décor which fascinates Guillaume:

"Une ramification accédait à la cave P.C. du colonel. Cette cave était celle de la villa Pas sans peine, dont, par miracle, la salle à manger restait seule debout. Le colonel, les jours calmes, y déjeunait comme un gros rat dans un morceau de gruyère." (p. 102)

Guillaume has the feeling of moving in another world. The sand-dunes, which are a typical feature of the landscape, play a special role in the configuration of this other world:

"On se trouvait ému devant ce paysage féminin, lisse, cambré, hanché, couché, rempli d'hommes. Car ces dunes n'étaient désertes qu'en apparence. En réalité, elles n'étaient que trucs, décors, trompe-l'oeil, trappes et artifices. La fausse dune du colonel Quinton y faisait un vrai mensonge de femme. Ce colonel, si brave, l'avait construite sous une grêle d'obus, qu'il recevait en fumant dans un rocking-chair. Elle dissimulait, en haut, un observatoire, d'où l'observateur pouvait descendre en un clin d'oeil, par un toboggan. En somme, ces dunes aux malices inépuisablement renouvelées, côté pile, présentaient, côté face, aux télescopes allemands, un immense tour de cartes, un bonneteur silencieux." (pp. 102-103)

It is also, mainly, a world of the night when objects take on new shapes and meanings, and when new and profound dimensions come to bear upon the destinies of men:

"La nuit, le ciel et la terre se balançaient à l'éclairage des fusées, comme une chambre et son plafond éclairés à la bougie, quand la flamme remue. S'il y avait du brouillard, il buvardait les éclairs de la cannonade qui ne formaient plus qu'une seule lueur aveuglante, à rendre fou. Sur la mer, au large, se baisaient, se quittaient et gesticulaient les projecteurs. Parfois ils se réunissaient comme des ballerines, et, au bout, on voyait les ventres blancs des zeppelins, en route vers Londres." (pp. 104-105)

Having created the setting for Guillaume, Cocteau rounds it off in a few words:

"A ce vaste mensonge de sable et de feuilles, il ne manquait que Guillaume de Fontenoy." (p. 105)

It would appear that Guillaume has by this time even won over the author, since he refers to him by the name of de Fontenoy!

When Guillaume arrives at Coxyde, it is to discover that he is being sent to Coventry, because the orderly he is replacing has been the life and soul of the party, and his companions look upon Guillaume as an intruder. He is, however, quite indifferent to the treatment meted out to him and willingly carries out the dangerous duties which



are deliberately assigned to him. His zeal in doing so is considered an insult. He is therefore sent to deliver despatches to the zouaves who are stationed in the dangerous zone. Guillaume is delighted:

"A travers ce parc de feu et de tonnerre, il se promenait,  
ravi."  
(p. 107)

In accomplishing these dangerous duties Guillaume makes the acquaintance of Colonel Jocaste who falls backwards when he learns that Guillaume is the nephew of the famous general. Guillaume uses his influence with the colonel to have himself assigned a guide so that he can visit the lines under fire. He has a thirst for danger:

"Son but était ce lieu redoutable qu'il entendait la nuit  
crépiter comme une pièce d'artifice, cette fusillade  
leste, inégale, semblable aux tics d'un dormeur rêvant  
qu'il marche."  
(p. 113)

So, on the following night, he sets out with his guide, to enjoy the extraordinary lunar landscape:

"On marchait de barrage en barrage, entre les dominos de  
quelques pans de murs et de la lune. La lune grandissait  
ces petites ruines toutes jeunes, et à droite du sable,  
deux ou trois arbres chloroformés dormaient debout.  
Un pont de poutres, de solives, de madriers, de rondins,  
de barriques s'entrechoquant, traversait l'Yser à son  
embouchure. L'eau grise se bousculait, pénétrait  
tragiquement la mer du Nord, comme un troupeau de moutons  
entre à l'abattoir.  
La nuit, cette eau devenait phosphorescente. Si on y  
jetait une douille, elle semblait tout éclairée comme le  
Titanic. Un projectile y tombant, sa chute allumait au  
fond un boulevard de magasins splendides."  
(pp. 113-114)

This whole passage is rich in Coctelian elements, highly imaginative, original, strikingly appropriate. Even in describing the effectiveness of the sandbags placed there to receive bullets, Cocteau uses a poetic image:

"Guillaume toucha le premier de ces sacs de sable qui  
protègent la ville creuse et dans lesquels les balles  
s'enfouissent avec le bruit du frelon dans la fleur."  
(p. 114)

The more specifically Coctelian objects are also there. Observe them at the end of the following passage:

"Le long du mur de première ligne, sur une sorte de remblai,  
de corniche, de piédestal, se tenaient, de place en place,  
les guetteurs. Ce mur se composait de tout, comme le  
reste de la ville. Outre les sacs, on le sentait fait  
avec des armoires à glace, des commodes, des fauteuils,  
des dessus de piano, de l'ennui, de la tristesse, du  
silence.

Ce silence, aggravé par la fusillade et le reflux, était pareil au silence des boules de verre où il neige. On y marchait comme on vole en rêve." (p. 116)

The progression from the purely material objects - "armoires à glace, commodes, fauteuils" piled together to create a wall, to the more intangible "ennui, tristesse, silence" is made all the more effective by the silence itself being set out in relief against the background of the fusillade and the receding sound of the ebb-tide. The ensuing comparison of this silence with that particularly poetic and hermetic silence that Cocteau was aware of in those "boules de verre où il neige" prepares the way for the step from that enclosed ambience into the realm of the dream - "On y marchait comme on vole en rêve." In fact the whole episode is rich in elements from the poet's mythology.

"Un des guetteurs se retourna. C'était un gommier. Il mettait le doigt sur la bouche. Ensuite, il redevint statue.

Car cet Arabe au burnous de journaux et de ficelle se tenait plus immobile que, sur son cheval, Antar mort. Guillaume contemplait, entre les sacs, enfarinée de lune, cette silhouette d'un meunier jaloux, terrible, guettant avec un fusil, à une lucarne de son moulin."

(pp. 116-117)

This remarkable paragraph with its triple image of the Arab soldier is interesting because it presents distinct views of him. He is seen first of all as he was in his burnoose made of newspapers and string. Then, as he sits astride his horse, we have Cocteau's own view of him as the dead Antar, Arab warrior and poet of the sixth century, hero of the epic Le roman d'Antar. Finally we have the fanciful view of him as he is seen by Guillaume, a miller covered in flour, on the lookout with his rifle ready, at a skylight of his windmill.

After a short time Guillaume is bored, despite the letters and presents that arrive in a steady stream from Madame de Bormes and Henriette. He begins to imagine that he has feelings for Henriette. There is a special reason for this. Distance lends her an air of the unreal that permits her to become part of his fictitious world:

"Elle était loin, irréaliste, factice. Elle pouvait donc entrer dans sa fiction." (p. 118)

The actor in Guillaume rises to the occasion of this new feeling which he experiences:

"Il joua cet acte à merveille. Il soupirait, enrageait, ne mangeait plus, gravait des coeurs dans des bagues d'aluminium, écrivait des lettres qu'il déchirait ensuite."

(pp. 118-119)



His love is, however, very self-interested. He is not concerned with the possibility that Henriette may be in love with him. That does not interest him -

"car, avec cette patte des chats qui jouent ensemble et sentent exactement où s'arrête la griffe, Guillaume, torturé d'amour, ne faisait rien qui pût avertir Henriette, donner la moindre racine à son rêve.

Il ne cherchait pas à savoir si cet amour était réciproque. Il pouvait dire, avec Goethe : 'Je t'aime; est-ce que cela te regarde?' " (p. 119)

All that matters to Guillaume at this moment is the fact that he loves, wrapped, as he is, in his own ego.

In the meantime the personnel of the canteen is transferred to the Somme, but Guillaume stays behind on his own as voluntary caretaker. He now becomes acquainted with a young captain Roy of the marines, who invites him to eat at their mess. This is the start of a happy, idyllic phase for Guillaume. He experiences an atmosphere of cultured camaraderie among the marines in which he appears to find an ideal element.

"Leurs chefs étaient des héros charmants. Ces jeunes hommes, les plus braves du monde, et dont pas un ne reste, jouaient à se battre, sans la moindre haine. Hélas! des jeux pareils finissent mal." (p. 121)

In fact, these young men are endowed with all the attributes that Cocteau finds most attractive. The key-word he uses to describe their particular qualities is "désinvolture". -

"On prenait leur désinvolture pour de la morgue. On les traitait d'aristocrates. On se trompait de peu. C'était une aristocratie, c'est à dire une démocratie profonde, une famille, que ce bataillon." (p. 122)

And a little further on:

"Le bataillon entretenait le négligé de la véritable élégance." (p. 122)

The qualities of désinvolture and élégance are always to be found interwoven in Cocteau's hero figures. Désinvolture and all that the word implies - casualness, ease of manners, unconstraint and, above all, a kind of aristocratic off-handedness - all combined in a relaxed bearing, an ease which, together with true elegance (which, as we know from Cocteau, is always invisible!) go to create the aura of young gods, or angels.

The marines are enchanted by Guillaume and make him their mascot.

"Les marins, comme la princesse, furent un foyer pour Guillaume. Ils en raffolaient, le fêtaient, le consultaient. Ils l'emmenèrent dîner chez leur chef.

.....

Le fait est que, comme les ours, singes, marmottes, Guillaume devint fétiche. Il se sentait au but. Son amour pour Henriette tomba. Son coeur s'était mis en marche à cause d'elle, mais son amour était l'amour tout court. Il en reportait l'élan sur ses nouveaux amis. Il leur versait sa richesse. Il était amoureux du bataillon."

(pp. 122-123)

So Guillaume, in love with the batallion, enters a phase of very intense happiness. The young officers even give a banquet in his honour, get tipsy and make speeches. Guillaume is so happy that, when he is due to go back to Paris on leave, he decides to forsake it. Meanwhile Madame de Bormes and Henriette, who have been looking forward to his leave, are intensely disappointed when he writes, saying that he cannot leave the stores lest they be plundered in his absence. They are not entirely taken in by his excuse, sensing he has other reasons for not wanting to return to Paris. In this contingency we are given a glimpse into the romantic notions that Henriette harbours. She sees the situation in black and white with no intermediate shades of grey!

"Henriette, dans son lit, en larmes, embrassant un instantané envoyé par Guillaume, se reprochait son silence, et, le coeur large ouvert, se torturait entre l'idée que Guillaume ne l'aimait pas et la fuyait, ou qu'il l'aimait et voulait éteindre une flamme au couronnement de laquelle il ne croyait pouvoir prétendre."

(p. 126)

So it is decided that the ladies will make the sacrifice. If Guillaume cannot come to Paris, they will go to visit him! It so happens that Pesquel-Duport's newspaper Le Jour has organised a theatrical tour to entertain the troops on the northern front. Pesquel-Duport will accompany the ladies there. Guillaume will be surprised. So the desolate emptiness of the sea-trenches among the sand-dunes on the Belgian coast is descended upon by a theatrical company.

"La troupe, recrutée de brio et de broc, se composait de quelques comparses, d'une cantatrice en robe et en chapeau de Grande-Mademoiselle, d'un tragédien illustre, d'une débutante en deuil, accessit du Conservatoire de l'année précédente, et d'un jeune premier dont le fils colonel venait de gagner sa septième palme."

(p. 128)

In the midst of this company we also unexpectedly find none other than



the redoubtably vulgar Madame Valiche, who has now attached herself to Maître Romuald, the great actor.

Although Guillaume is delighted and flattered that the ladies have taken the trouble to come and see him, he is also particularly happy that he can introduce to them his comrades in the marines.

"Le coeur aéré, exalté de Guillaume ne leur ménagea aucune fête. Il n'avait pu faire l'effort d'aller à elles, mais il exultait qu'elles vinsent à lui et connussent ses camarades. Il n'était pas de ces âmes étroites, soucieuses de cloisons étanches." (p. 133)

But

"Un miracle, s'il dure, cesse d'être considéré comme tel. C'est pourquoi les apparitions disparaissent si vite.

Au bout d'un quart d'heure, on ne s'étonna plus."

(p. 133)

The ladies are accorded the benefit of the preparations made originally for the actresses in the company. They are obviously delighted. They are literally worshipped by the men as Captain Roy conducts them on a tour of the company. Their presence stands out strikingly in the setting:

"De plus, une femme belle et une jeune fille fraîche saisissaient dans un tel décor, autant que roses sur une banquise."

(p. 135)

Madame de Bormes rises well to the occasion and distributes the leather fringes of her coat as souvenirs to the men. Cocteau comments:

"Il est bien rare qu'une femme se trouve en posture de faire un geste pareil. La reine des Belges n'aurait pas mieux réussi."

(p. 135)

When the show finally takes place in a shed, Cocteau creates the vivid impression of life suddenly intruding in this other-worldly setting as the enthusiastic actors declaim the Marseillaise from the improvised stage, whilst a jarring note is struck by the contribution of Madame Valiche, dressed in the costume of a town-crier which gives her a lewd appearance, reciting La Fiancée du Timbalier with accompanying grimaces and a suggestiveness that render the performance vulgar.

The performance over, Guillaume and his comrades take the ladies (against orders) on a tour of the lines. Neglecting to take Madame Valiche with them, she takes her revenge by making insinuations about Guillaume to Henriette. These insinuations still haunt the girl when she is back in Paris, and she confides in Pesquel-Duport who, in the

meantime, has actually discovered the truth about Guillaume's imposture. Tactfully, he says nothing at this juncture about it. Pesquel-Duport promises Henriette that he will speak to her mother about her problem. He plans to persuade Madame de Bormes to give Henriette to Guillaume. His motive is to study her reaction to his suggestion so that he would know once and for all whether Clémence herself has any feelings for Guillaume. Then, if Clémence were to react in his favour, he would eventually prevent the marriage by revealing Guillaume's deception.

But Madame de Bormes, unpredictable as ever, reacts in an unusual manner to Pesquel-Duport's suggestions. She goes up to Henriette's room to interrogate her, then, forgetting that Pesquel-Duport is waiting downstairs, she is gone for hours. He thinks about her:

"On ne pouvait saisir Clémence. Elle glissait, se retournait, s'évaporait. Il la sentait irréelle, sans masse. Il se répétait : 'J'aime une folle; j'aime une fée. Aime-t-elle Guillaume? Non. Elle n'aime personne. Elle ne s'aime pas. Elle n'aime pas sa fille. Elle n'est ni coquette ni mère. Elle a un autre destin qui m'échappe.' "

(pp. 149-150)

Cocteau is subtly suggesting here that Henriette and Pesquel-Duport have something in common in that he, in loving Madame de Bormes, is just as much in love with a phantom as Henriette is, in being in love with Guillaume. Both the princess and Guillaume are ungraspable in this respect. In fact, the whole background of the complicated emotional lives of Pesquel-Duport and Henriette seems to serve only one purpose - it emphasises the extent to which both the princess and Guillaume are immune from or insensitive to the ordinary business of living, intent as they both are in entering a special world where their dreams can live on, acting out their fantasies in their own respective manners. Thus we realise that Pesquel-Duport will never have Clémence and that Henriette will never have Guillaume.

When Pesquel-Duport eventually goes to Henriette's room at one o'clock in the morning, tired as he is of waiting for Clémence, he hears sobs within. He knocks and enters and finds Clémence sitting on her daughter's bed. She has decided that Henriette will have her Guillaume.

It is decided that Henriette will write to Guillaume expressing her feelings for him. She does so in unsophisticated terms, his portrait in front of her as she writes. The letter is in the best traditions of the romantic novel.



Meanwhile, back at Coxyde, captain Roy is blaming himself for the death of a marine Pajot who was about to go on leave when he was hit by a stray bullet. Roy blames himself because he had shone his pocket torch on Pajot's face at the instant when he was shot. Roy is inconsolable:

"-Je l'ai tué, disait-il, comme si ma lampe de poche  
était une arme." (p. 157)

One evening Guillaume and Roy are walking through the countryside. They listen in silence to the wind humming in the telegraph wires. Cocteau suggests that, as a Breton, Roy superstitiously believes that the humming wires, and their echo in the wailing windpipes of a passing Algerian military band, are the sounds of the distressed soul of Pajot for whose death he feels so responsible:

"Le vent attisait une braise de son plaintif dans les  
petites veilleuses que les poteaux télégraphiques  
portent en haut comme le muguet.  
Roy, de mère bretonne, était superstitieux. Il  
entendait l'âme de Pajot se plaindre."

.....

"Tout à coup, éclata dans l'ombre une musique extra-  
ordinaire. C'était la nouba des tirailleurs nègres.  
Ils traversaient Coxyde-ville.

La nouba se compose d'un galoubet indigène que les  
soldats imitent en se bouchant le nez, en prenant  
une voix de tête, et frappant leur pomme d'Adam. Ce  
galoubet nasillard joue seul une mélodie haute et  
funèbre. On dirait la voix de Jézabel. Les tambours  
et les clairons lui répondent.

La troupe s'approchait comme le cortège de l'Arche  
d'Alliance sur la route de Jérusalem. Roy et Guillaume  
se rangèrent et la virent passer.

.....

La nouba, qui amusait Guillaume, trouait le coeur de  
son camarade. Sa plainte funèbre accompagnait son  
deuil. Il revoyait des voyages avec Pajot, leur  
navire, leurs escales, leurs bordées dans les ports  
d'Orient."

(pp. 157-160)

As a preliminary to the final act of Guillaume's drama, Cocteau now introduces another unusual character. She is Miss Elisabeth Hart, daughter of an English general. A tom-boy, she lives with the marines, piloting a small red-cross ambulance here and there. She is a seer, able to read hands. Although she appears in a mere two or three pages, she is one of Cocteau's most delightful creations:

"Mais Elisabeth Hart était un vrai garçon. Elle

s'habillait presque en matelot. Elle portait les cheveux courts, bouclés autour d'une figure d'ange. Elle offrait plus d'un rapport avec les amazones modernes du film américain, sauf qu'on ne la voyait jamais trembler. Elle allait, venait, de La Panne aux lignes, et laissait son ambulance n'importe où, comme dans les rues de Londres. Sa crânerie indisposait le colonel des zouaves. Il la trouvait sans-gêne. ....

Les fusiliers en faisaient une sainte.

C'était, d'ailleurs, sans aucun doute, une héroïne. La condition même de l'héroïsme étant le libre arbitre, la désobéissance, l'absurde, l'exceptionnel."

(pp. 161-162)

Elisabeth is much more a creature of Guillaume's world than Henriette. When she is asked to read Guillaume's hand she is very non-committal about it. At first astonished by the number of life-lines in it (which is one of Cocteau's little jokes when we remember that Guillaume is, in a sense, leading an assumed life) she refuses to answer when Guillaume asks her about his death or his deaths (since he has several lives).

So we come to the final scene of Guillaume's drama. One evening, as the telephone lines are bad, Roy requires someone to take a message through the communication trench. Guillaume volunteers. Roy refuses. Then Roy relents, knowing that the communication trench is not actually a dangerous part of the zone. So Guillaume sets out. There is an air of enchantment about the night as he leaves, alone:

"La nuit froide était constellée de fusées blanches et d'astres. Guillaume s'y trouvait pour la première fois, seul. Un dernier rideau se lève. L'enfant et la féerie se confondent. Guillaume connaît enfin l'amour."

(p. 170)

Embarking on his first and last mission, in the strange mists and livid light of the falling flares in no-man's land, Guillaume is delighted to discover that his dream does, after all, exist, that war is real. He comes upon a corpse and looks upon it with an inquisitive but hard eye. As he crawls along on all fours he is not thinking of Henriette, but suddenly the image of Madame de Bormes rises before him. He is reminded of her by a corner of the communication trench where she had stopped to rest when he and his comrades had taken her on the conducted tour. Then Guillaume comes suddenly face to face with a German patrol some small distance away. The patrol sees him but thinks that he cannot see it. Now the remarkable thing is that Cocteau tells us all



that we really require to know about Guillaume in the three short paragraphs which follow:

"Le coeur de Guillaume sautait en cadence, battait des coups sourds de mineur au fond d'une mine. L'immobilité lui devint intolérable. Il crut entendre un qui-vive.  
- Fontenoy! cria-t-il à tue-tête, transformant son imposture en cri de guerre. Et il ajouta, pour faire une farce, en se sauvant à toutes jambes : - Guillaume II."  
(p. 173)

And when Guillaume calls out his name, he feels that he is Fontenoy. He is therefore ready to fulfil his destiny:

"Guillaume volait, bondissait, dévalait comme un lièvre. N'entendant pas de fusillade, il s'arrêta, hors d'haleine. Alors, il sentit un atroce coup de bâton sur la poitrine. Il tomba. Il devenait sourd, aveugle. 'Une balle, se dit-il. Je suis perdu si je ne fais pas semblant d'être mort.'  
Mais, en lui, la fiction et la réalité ne formaient qu'un.  
Guillaume Thomas était mort."  
(p. 173)

As Jean-Jacques Kihm has so aptly observed, the very essence of Guillaume is evoked in Cocteau's final words. (Kihm, op.cit., p. 173)

Logically, one would expect the book to end here. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, Cocteau continues with a description of how Pesquel-Duport, who is the first to be informed of Guillaume's death, breaks the news to the boy's aunt, and how Madame Valiche takes revenge for the slight at Coxyde when she had not been invited to tour the trenches, by rushing to get in first with the bad news to Madame de Bormes and Henriette, so that she can sadistically enjoy the spectacle of their grief. Fortunately Pesquel-Duport arrives at the crucial moment, in time to forcibly eject the horrid woman. Shortly afterwards, Henriette poisons herself and dies. Madame de Bormes ages prematurely.

The final image is of the cemetery of the marines at Nieuport, which Cocteau compares to a brig adrift, its crew overwhelmed by a deep sleep. It is a passage rich in the elements of the poet's mythology and is worthy of being quoted in full:

"A Nieuport près de l'église, le cimetière des marins est un brick à la dérive. Un mât cassé marque le milieu. Ce brick transporte-t-il de l'opium? Un profond sommeil emplit l'équipage.  
Chaque tombe étale un joli décor de coquilles, de

cailloux, de vieux chenets, de vieux cadres, de vieux balustres. Une d'elles porte le nom de Jacques Roy.

Jacques Roy s'est éteint en quatre heures, au poste de secours de Nieuport, d'une blessure prise à Saint-Georges, heureux de venger Pajot et Guillaume qu'il imaginait tués par sa faute. Sa croix porte l'inscription réglementaire. Mais, sur la croix voisine, on peut lire : 'G.-T. de Fontenoy. Mort pour nous.' "

(pp. 180-181)



## NOTES

## Chapter 3

1. It is important always to bear in mind that Le Grand Écart was written when Cocteau was strongly under Radiguet's influence. La Princesse de Clèves was one of many texts which Radiguet encouraged Cocteau to re-read and study.
2. There are certain resemblances between the character of Germaine and Madeleine Carlier. This is made abundantly clear in Chapter 4, where, writing of Germaine and her sister when they were young, Cocteau says:  
 "Toutes jeunes, sa soeur et elle rêvaient du Palais de Glace qu'elles imaginaient être un palais de miroirs. Elles y entrèrent un dimanche et en sortirent suivies d'une escorte d'hommes élégants."  
 The resemblance of this description of Germaine and her sister when they first visited the Palais de Glace to that of the first visit to the same Palais de Glace by Madeleine Carlier and her sister, as Cocteau describes it in Portraits-Souvenir, is more than coincidental!
3. This is yet another example of the attraction felt by Cocteau for this odd attribute - the far-away look that one sometimes perceives in the eyes of short-sighted people. Is it the expression of the dreamer that Cocteau recognised in their eyes?
4. There is a very strong cinematic quality in Cocteau's writing throughout this chapter. The scene of Jacques' traumatic experience is couched in the sort of language that one finds in a film script describing a typical montage depicting dream experience. The reference to Louise's face as "le visage flou des films artistiques" confirms the cinematic impression. It is interesting to remember that Cocteau's first plunge into film-making was made only two years after the publication of Le Grand Écart.
5. Cocteau, on more than one occasion, used these very words referring to himself.
6. Bees and hives occur frequently in Cocteau's figurative language. One of the best known and most effective examples is in the film of Orphée where the poet declaims:  
 "Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la Mort va et vient ... Du reste, regardez-vous toute votre vie dans une glace et vous verrez la Mort travailler comme des abeilles dans une ruche de verre ..."
7. It is strangely coincidental that Cocteau himself felt like a sinking ship when he was dying. When he was in pain, he actually said: "The boat is sinking".
8. In many of Cocteau's subsequent works the figure of a vitrier is used to symbolise a passing angel. The image is used literally in the No Man's Land setting in the film Orphée.

9. When the war started Cocteau was classified as unfit for military duty. He went to work for the Red Cross. Misia Edwards, soon after to marry José-Maria Sert, and thereafter to be known as Misia Sert, a rich dilettante, who had crossed Cocteau's path at the time of his interest in the Ballets Russes, and who had conspired with Diaghilev to undermine Cocteau's projected David with Stravinsky, now came forward with the idea of forming a convoy of ambulances to take first-aid to the war wounded. Cleverly persuading some couturiers to donate their vans, which could not be used for deliveries during the war, Misia had these converted into ambulances. Together with her own Mercedes car, she now had a total of fourteen vehicles in her convoy. She then sought volunteers to handle the ambulances and enlisted the aid of José-Maria Sert, Cocteau, Paul Iribe, the artist and designer, and a professional nurse. Cocteau's male nurse's uniform was designed by Poiret! There was undoubtedly a slightly frivolous air about the preparational procedure of this convoy of ambulances and their crews. They were all having such fun. The full meaning of the horrors of war was to assail them forcibly, however, when they reached l'Hay-les-Roses and came upon hordes of untended German prisoners, their open wounds covered with flies, the road littered with the carcasses of dead horses, the trees horrendously bedecked with pieces of human bodies.

When the ambulances eventually reached Rheims, they were only able to transport a tiny number of the thousands of wounded men they found lying on beds of straw. They were beset by many other problems. They could drive into Paris only by night since it was felt that the sight of so many wounded men would have a demoralising effect upon the public. They also met hostility from local authorities who did not want to hand over their wounded to an organisation which appeared rather odd in their eyes. These events are graphically depicted in the narrative of Thomas l'Imposteur.

The Sert ambulance convoy made several expeditions to Rheims, but after a few months the novelty wore off for the redoubtable Misia and she gave the fourteen ambulances to the Empress of Russia.

In the meantime, Cocteau had met Roland Garros, and had experienced the adventure of flying.

Then Count Etienne de Beaumont, a friend of Misia, organised a luxurious ambulance unit, fitted with the most elaborate equipment. The convoy was sent to Belgium and Cocteau willingly accepted the Count's invitation to join it. The ambulance corps thus arrived at Nieuport (described vividly in Thomas l'Imposteur) where Cocteau unexpectedly found himself among a company of Fusiliers Marins who took to him and adopted him as their mascot. In this very distinguished company, which included princes among their numbers, Cocteau spent several happy months, sharing their adventures, their dangers, and their bizarre way of life. But the adventure came to an end following an inspection by a senior officer who reported that Cocteau's presence there was against regulations. Cocteau was actually arrested, managed to escape from his guards, and, by one of those odd coincidences with which his life was riddled, came across a car carrying a general who recognised him. (The general was entering Dunkirk in triumph!) So Cocteau was "rescued by the general". It is ironical that most of the marines forming the company that had taken Cocteau to its bosom were killed a few days later during an enemy attack.



10. There are indeed some resemblances between Madame de Bormes and Misia Sert, similarities of outlook and in their behavioural patterns, but Cocteau makes Madame de Bormes very much older than Misia was at that time.
11. An element that Cocteau often alluded to was quicksilver or mercury. He actually used mercury for the famous hand into the mirror sequence in the film Orphée. I once heard him laughingly remark in a short discussion about this sequence that he favoured Mercury since he was not only the Messenger of the Gods but the God of Eloquence.

Chapter 4 : Poésie de roman - II  
Le Livre blanc (1928)

Although Cocteau never formally acknowledged that he actually wrote this book, first published anonymously in 1928, to anyone who has studied his work in detail, there is not the slightest doubt that he was the author.<sup>1</sup> Why should Cocteau have played the silly game of yes it is mine, no it is not, for such a long period? First published in 1928, a work which dealt so openly with the theme of homosexual love, was obviously slightly ahead of its time. The book is not, as is often imagined, pornographic. It is, simply, a deeply poetic treatment of its theme. But the theme of love of man for man or woman for woman was one that could only be whispered about in the climate of the 1920s.

Another common reason mentioned for Cocteau's unwillingness to admit publicly his authorship of the book is that he did not wish to embarrass his mother, who was still alive when it first appeared in print. This is understandable as a public gesture of respect for his mother. Madame Cocteau always turned a blind eye to her son's emotional affairs, and pretended to herself that they did not exist. Cocteau respected her attitude and protected it by not acknowledging a work that would have left no doubts regarding his personal and emotional inclinations.

These points having been made, it is now incumbent upon me to state unreservedly that Le Livre blanc is one of Cocteau's most beautiful and most moving works. It is also extremely important in the general body of his oeuvre because it sheds significant light on themes that are to be found in many of his other works. For the first time we encounter the figure of Dargelos, who will re-appear shortly afterwards in Les Enfants terribles and Le Sang d'un Poète. The episode of the mirror (one of the most beautiful in the book) shows an intense and vivid use of yet another recurring myth in the author's poetic world. This symbolic use of the mirror as a medium to express the lack of communication accentuating the tragic character and the essential absence of hope within the medium of poetry inhabited by the creative artist we shall find again in the film Orphée.

As there is no way of proving that any of the elements to be



found in Le Livre blanc are really autobiographical, it would be a mistake to consider the book as an autobiography. Yet the fact remains that the authentic nature of the emotions felt by the protagonist leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that these emotions have been experienced in some way by the author. They are too vividly alive to be otherwise. Much of the feeling expressed by the protagonist in the book has elements in common with Cocteau's novel Le Grand Écart.<sup>2</sup> In some ways Le Grand Écart can, indeed, be seen as a step in the direction of Le Livre blanc. The latter does have a more specific purpose, its aim being to present an impassioned plea in the form of a poetic "white paper" for the acceptance and comprehension of the nature of the homosexual. Let us then examine the text with this thought in mind.

In form the book is really a novella consisting of a series of episodes in which the author informs us at the outset of his predilection for the love of boys and young men. This has been a part of his nature since early childhood and he illustrates this by recounting a few incidents he has experienced as a child. He refers to his own father's tendency to homosexuality and then proceeds to describe his own emotional affairs with various people. Twice he thinks he is in love with women, but events go on to prove that his feelings were not directed actually towards the women but in one case to the woman's pimp and in the other towards the brother of the woman. Each affair ends sadly or tragically, which suggests that the author's view of his condition is coloured by society's attitude to such a form of love, which, since it is "unnatural", must be doomed to failure. On the other hand, there is no sign in the author's attitude that the tragic outcome of his various affairs represents a form of castigation on moral grounds, and the criticism of the intolerance of society is indeed implicit in the heartfelt rejection experienced by the protagonist. The poignancy of the narrative is accentuated by its being written in the first person, a device which adds a vivid immediacy to the writing. The general impression gained from the book, then, is of a very sensitive exploration into the remote and secret world of a very ordinary homosexual who cannot allow free rein to his natural inclinations because of society's prejudiced attitude to his kind.

Like many books dealing with this twilight world<sup>3</sup> the author starts

his narrative by describing how the tendencies in his nature have been with him since his childhood, his propensity for members of his own sex having been with him from a very early age. He writes:

"Au plus loin que je remonte et même à l'âge où l'esprit n'influence pas encore les sens, je trouve des traces de mon amour des garçons."  
(p. 9)

He then goes on to describe three decisive happenings, or more accurately, impressions, which confirm his convictions. The first of these occurred when, one day in August, when he was roaming around the grounds of his father's country house, he caught sight of a young farm-boy taking a cart-horse to have a wash. Now follows a beautiful description of the farm-boy as seen through the eyes of the author when he was a boy:

"Afin d'entrer dans l'eau et sachant qu'au bout du parc ne s'aventurerait jamais personne, il chevauchait tout nu et faisait s'ébrouer le cheval à quelques mètres de moi. Le hâle sur sa figure, son cou, ses bras, ses pieds, contrastant avec la peau blanche, me rappelait les marrons d'Inde qui jaillissent de leurs cosses, mais ces taches sombres n'étaient pas seules. Une autre attirait mes regards, au milieu de laquelle une énigme se détachait dans ses moindres détails."  
(pp. 12-13)

He convincingly conveys in this description the air of innocent curiosity that accompanies the boy's observations of the farm-boy. The comparison of the farm-boy's sunburned features contrasted against the whiteness of his other skin with sweet chestnuts bursting from their husks is appropriate and at the same time surprisingly unexpected. The sense of innocence is completed by the description of the farm-boy's genitalia as an enigma, visible in all its detail, while the boy's irresistible fascination for that part of the farm-boy's body is also subtly suggested by the very use of the word "énigme".

The boy is overcome by the beauty of what he sees and faints. The swoon lasts for several hours, the intensity of his feelings having been aroused to such a high pitch, by the nakedness of the farm-boy.

The second incident described by the author takes place in the following year, when, while he is out walking with his nursemaid, they come upon a gypsy encampment (oddly enough in the same place where he had seen the farm-boy!). In the oppressive and fiery heat of the day two young gypsies have removed their clothes and are



climbing trees. The maid is frightened away, but the boy lingers long enough to take in the vivid details of the scene which he then describes:

"Vivrai-je cent ans ... je reverrai toujours une roulotte, une femme qui berce un nouveau-né, un feu qui fume, un cheval blanc qui mange de l'herbe, et, grimpant aux arbres, deux corps de bronze trois fois tachés de noir."

(pp. 14-15)

The third incident shows a development in the boy's feelings. He finds himself attracted to a young servant by the name of Gustave. What first draws his attention to Gustave is the latter's inability to restrain his laughter, which the boy finds delightful. Then, going a step further, he feels, in the light of his memories of the farm-boy and the bronzed, naked gypsies that Gustave is doubtlessly similarly endowed, and that he would love to touch in Gustave what his eyes had only seen in the others.

So he makes a plan. The plan is naïve.

"Je dessinerais une femme, je porterais la feuille à Gustave, je le ferais rire, je l'enhardirais et lui demanderais de me laisser toucher le mystère que j'imaginai, pendant le service de table, sous une bosse significative du pantalon."

(pp. 15-16)

Although the plan is simple, it demonstrates the boy's awareness that, if Gustave is to be induced through excitement to allow himself to be touched, the stimulus must be achieved by "normal" or ordinary means, that is, by showing him a drawing of a woman to arouse him. It also shows that the boy's intuition is already at work, warning him that there is something unconventionally unusual about his own urge. Again, note the delicacy of the choice of word "le mystère" to allude to the servant's private parts. So, the boy executes a drawing which is realistic in that it shows a woman with flabby breasts. He boldly shows Gustave the drawing. Gustave, as anticipated, bursts out laughing, and the boy audaciously touches him. Gustave is embarrassed, goes very red in the face, and repulses him, then covers up by alleging that the boy is tickling him, and then he leads the boy to the door.

Some few days later Gustave steals some wine and is dismissed. We are left with a charming picture of the young boy seeing the servant to the station:

"J'accompagnai jusqu'à la gare Gustave, chargé d'un jeu de massacre que je lui avais offert pour son jeune fils dont

il me montrait souvent la photographie." (p. 17)

Thus the very early erotic experiences of the boy are imbued with a quality of innocence awakening to that particular type of beauty to which he is by his very nature attracted.

We now learn that the boy had no mother as she had died giving birth to him. He had thus lived alone with his father. In the few lines following, the author suggests that his father had an inner sadness even before the death of his mother. This leads to a short statement about the peculiar conditions sometimes governing the state of the pederast:

"Le pédéraste reconnaît le pédéraste comme le juif le juif. Il le devine sous le masque, et je me charge de le découvrir entre les lignes des livres les plus innocents. Cette passion est moins simple que les moralistes ne le supposent. Car, de même qu'il existe des femmes pédérastes, femmes à l'aspect de lesbiennes, mais recherchant les hommes de manière spéciale dont les hommes les recherchent, de même il existe des pédérastes qui s'ignorent et vivent jusqu'à la fin dans un malaise qu'ils mettent sur le compte d'une santé débile ou d'un caractère ombrageux." (pp. 18-19)

The comparison between the state of the pederast and that of the Jew in the first sentence is not without significance, implying as it does two types of outcasts in the world of the 1920s. The complicated and involved psychology of what follows serves as an introduction to the author's contention that his own father was unaware of his own homosexual tendencies, and, had he even suspected their existence in himself, he would have been extremely astonished. Thus, being an unconscious homosexual "il vivait dans l'ignorance de lui-même et acceptait son fardeau" (pp. 19-20).

The story now moves to the setting of the Lycée Condorcet where we find the author at the stage of being in the fourth form.<sup>4</sup> Again we are told the authentic details of the first awakening of the senses among the adolescent schoolboys, as they masturbate in the classroom:

"Ce n'étaient que poches trouées et mouchoirs sales. La classe de dessin surtout enhardissait les élèves, dissimulés par la muraille de cartons. Parfois, en classe ordinaire, un professeur ironique interrogeait brusquement un élève au bord du spasme. L'élève se levait, les joues en feu, et, bredouillant n'importe quoi, essayait de transformer un dictionnaire en feuille de vigne. Nos rires augmentaient sa gêne." 5 (pp. 20-21)

Our protagonist does not approve of these practices, not because he



considers them to be a vice, but because they are but a cheap parody of a kind of love that his true instinct respects. In the meantime "La classe sentait le gaz, la craie, le sperme" (p. 21). It is into this schoolboyishly sensual atmosphere that Cocteau introduces for the first time his archetype Dargelos:

"Un des élèves, nommé Dargelos, jouissait d'un grand prestige à cause d'une virilité au-dessus de son âge. Il s'exhibait avec cynisme et faisait commerce d'un spectacle qu'il donnait même à des élèves d'une autre classe en échange de timbres rares ou de tabac."

(pp. 22-23)

Dargelos makes a very brief appearance in this work and does not consequently play a major role in the plot. But he does serve the specific purpose of demonstrating the author's extreme admiration of his type. The brief relationship that exists between the boy and Dargelos is also important because it shows how hesitant, faltering and weak the boy is in the presence of his idol. The boy, having found a suitable object for his worshipping affection, immediately becomes a prey to his own feelings:

"La présence de Dargelos me rendait malade. Je l'évitais. Je le guettais. Je rêvais d'un miracle qui attirerait son attention sur moi, le débarrasserait de sa morgue, lui révélerait le sens de mon attitude qu'il devait prendre pour une pruderie ridicule et qui n'était qu'un désir fou de lui plaire."

(p. 24)

This is the behaviour pattern of an infatuated schoolboy who has developed a powerful "crush" for his idealised hero-figure. And how does Cocteau describe the physical beauty of Dargelos seen through his eyes as poet?

"Je revois sa peau brune. A ses culottes très courtes et à ses chaussettes retombant sur ses chevilles, on le devinait fier de ses jambes. Nous portions tous des culottes courtes, mais à cause de ses jambes d'homme, seul Dargelos avait les jambes nues. Sa chemise ouverte dégageait un cou large. Une boucle puissante se tordait sur son front. Sa figure aux lèvres un peu grosses, aux yeux un peu bridés, au nez un peu camus, présentait les moindres caractéristiques du type qui devait me devenir néfaste. Astuce de la fatalité qui se déguise, nous donne l'illusion d'être libres et, en fin de compte, nous fait tomber toujours dans le même panneau."

(pp. 23-24)

From these descriptive details there emerges a very strong creature. His physical attributes starting with his precocious virility, are reinforced by details such as his broad neck, powerfully muscular legs, a face with sensually thick lips, narrow eyes that suggest an

inaccessibility which endows him with a slight aura of mystery, a flat nose that suggests pugnacity, and all crowned with a powerfully curled lock of hair falling over the forehead. Dargelos possesses all the characteristics of the type which, for the author, was to prove inevitably fateful.

Drawn irresistibly to Dargelos, the boy confides in a school-friend who suggests that Dargelos is perhaps more readily accessible than the boy imagines. The crude quality of his friend's statement overwhelms the boy. His friend had said: "Dès qu'on le flatte il marche. S'il te plaît, tu n'as qu'à te l'envoyer." (p. 26). Although the boy had tried to explain that his feelings for Dargelos could not be satisfied by a mere physical adventure, his friend had misunderstood his intentions.<sup>6</sup> He continues:

"Je me rendis compte qu'il était impossible de me faire comprendre. En admettant, pensais-je, que Dargelos accepte un rendez-vous, que lui dirais-je, que ferais-je? Mon goût ne serait pas de m'amuser cinq minutes, mais de vivre toujours avec lui. Bref, je l'adorais, et je me résignai à souffrir en silence, car, sans donner à mon mal le nom d'amour, je sentais bien qu'il était le contraire des exercices de la classe et qu'il n'y trouverait aucune réponse." (pp. 26-27)

With its strongly romantic and high-flown notions, the boy's love has already moved into the impossible realm of fantasy.

When the boy, urged on by his friend in whom he had confided, arranges to meet Dargelos in a deserted classroom after the five o'clock prep hour, he is still vaguely relying upon a miracle to guide his behaviour in the presence of his idol. But he loses his head, unable to see anything other than his hero's scarred knees, and when Dargelos suggestively asks him what he wants, he panics and blurts out a tale about Dargelos being watched by the assistant headmaster, thus trying to make out that the purpose of their meeting is merely to warn him.

"C'était un mensonge absurde, car le charme de Dargelos avait ensorcelé nos maîtres.

Les privilèges de la beauté sont immenses. Elle agit même sur ceux qui paraissent s'en soucier le moins."

(p. 28)

The observation made by Cocteau in the second of the above short paragraphs is basic in his aesthetic philosophy.

Naturally, Dargelos is more irritated than impressed by the boy's



warning, and he disappears muttering dire threats against the assistant headmaster as well as against the boy should he have the foolhardiness to annoy him again with his bloody nonsense. So the meeting with Dargelos attains absolutely nothing of the romantic ideal that the boy has been desperately hoping for. For a week he pretends illness to avoid going to school and having to face Dargelos. Then, when he does return, it is to learn that Dargelos is ill. Soon after Dargelos dies. The news is announced during a geography lesson. Overcome, our hero is forced to leave the classroom in tears. Even death had been unable to resist the charm of Dargelos ...

"Malgré tout, l'érotisme venait de recevoir le coup de grâce. Trop de petits plaisirs furent troublés par le fantôme du bel animal aux délices duquel la mort elle-même n'était pas restée insensible." (pp. 30-31)

So the Dargelos episode ends in death.

The appearance of Dargelos in this work differs from the other appearances which he makes in Les Enfants terribles, Opium, Le Sang d'un Poète, Portraits-Souvenir and La Fin du Potomak in that he is here presented in overtly sexual terms. The same is perhaps true of La Fin du Potomak in which the sexual undertones are marked, but not to the extent that they are evident in Le Livre blanc. In the other works Dargelos is idealised into the archetype symbol that represents the perfect beauty that bewitched Cocteau.

The next episode takes place after the holidays, when, upon returning to school, our hero finds that a great change has taken place in his schoolfellows:

"Ils muaient; ils fumaient. Ils rasiaient une ombre de barbe, ils affectaient de sortir tête nue, portaient des culottes anglaises ou des pantalons longs." (p. 31)

Above all, they are now past the hurdle of early adolescence -

"L'onanisme cédait la place aux vantardises. Des cartes postales circulaient. Toute cette jeunesse se tournait vers la femme comme les plantes vers le soleil. C'est alors que pour suivre les autres, je commençai de fausser ma nature." (pp. 31-32)

So, in order to prove to himself that he is no different from the others, the boy goes with them to the brothels of the rue de Provence. There they toss a coin to see which of them should go in first. And when he loses his virginity the boy takes no pleasure in it. It is simply an act that has to be accomplished so that he can be the same

as his schoolfellows:

"Rue de Provence, le seul terrain d'entente était le lit où je m'étendais auprès de la fille et l'acte que nous accomplissions tous les deux sans y prendre le moindre plaisir."

(p. 34)

Emboldened by their visits to the rue de Provence, the boys begin to accost street-walkers and make the acquaintance of a young woman called Alice de Pibrac who receives them in her modest apartment in the rue La Bruyère in a sordid dressing-gown, her thin, poor hair hanging down her back. This ritual pleases the boy but bores his companions. They pool their resources and take a stage box at the Eldorado for the Sunday matinée, throwing bunches of violets to the singers and waiting for them afterwards outside the stage door.<sup>7</sup>

One of the boy's friends introduces him to an actress Berthe who in turn introduces him to her actress friend Jeanne. The boy is attracted to Jeanne and asks Berthe to act as his go-between as he would like Jeanne to be his mistress. Berthe brings him an apparent refusal from Jeanne and so he sleeps with Berthe. Later he discovers that Berthe has lied to him when Jeanne complains about his silence. So Jeanne becomes his mistress after all and they take their revenge upon Berthe "en réservant à Berthe la surprise de notre bonheur" (p. 37). The affair with Jeanne continues throughout the boy's sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth years -

"Et cependant est-il possible de raconter rien de cet amour banal qui se passait en attentes chez les modistes et à jouer un assez vilain rôle, car l'Arménien qui entretenait Jeanne m'avait en haute estime et faisait de moi son confident."

(p. 37)

After several disagreements with Jeanne the affair comes to an end, but not before he discovers that Jeanne has also been deceiving him with Berthe.

"Elle me trompait avec Berthe. Cette circonstance me dévoile aujourd'hui les bases de mon amour. Jeanne était un garçon; elle aimait les femmes, et moi je l'aimais avec ce que ma nature contenait de féminin. Je les découvris couchées, enroulées comme une pieuvre. Il fallait battre; je suppliai. Elles se moquèrent, me consolèrent, et ce fut la fin piteuse d'une aventure qui mourait d'elle-même ..."

(p. 41)

A textual comparison with the similar episode involving Germaine and Louise in Le Grand Écart is very revealing and leaves little doubt regarding the authorship of Le Livre blanc:



"Elles dormaient, enlaçées comme des initiales, et même si curieusement que les membres de l'une semblaient appartenir à l'autre. Imaginons la reine de coeur sans robe."

(op.cit., p. 109)

Apart from the unmistakable textual similarities, there are also the more than coincidental resemblances of the plot.

On the eve of his departure for Switzerland the narrator encounters a soft-voiced young woman called Rose in the place de la Madeleine. He finds her delightfully young and fresh, and, as she enjoys talking, they walk all night until the early hours when the market-gardeners, asleep on their vegetables, drive their carts across a deserted city. Rose and the narrator exchange addresses and they correspond while he is away. Upon his return, he eagerly seeks her out where they had first met. They go to the dismal hotel in the place Pigalle where she lives and there he becomes her lover. Cocteau, always expert at depicting the atmosphere of places, describes the hotel in the following terms:

"L'Hôtel M. était lugubre. L'escalier puait l'ether.  
C'est le dérivatif des filles qui rentrent bredouilles.  
La chambre était le type des chambres jamais faites.  
Rose fumait dans son lit."

(p. 43)

The simplest of language with a few relevant details quickly paint a picture of the ambience.

One Sunday Rose's brother Alfred calls at her room. When he sees Alfred, the narrator is immediately reminded of the farm-boy he had once admired. He is at once infatuated and in no time they are meeting clandestinely:

"Si la pente qui me conduisit vers la soeur montait un peu, on devine combien fut à pic celle qui me fit descendre vers le frère."

(p. 45)

Alfred, who is nineteen, has a physique that closely resembles the narrator's ideal:

"Le corps d'Alfred était pour moi davantage le corps pris par mes rêves que le jeune corps puissamment armé d'un adolescent quelconque. Corps parfait, gréé de muscles comme un navire de cordages et dont les membres paraissent s'épanouir en étoile autour d'une toison où se soulève, alors que la femme est construite pour feindre, la seule chose qui ne sache pas mentir chez l'homme."

(pp. 45-46)

This unusual description of a body is probably unique, the skilful comparison of its muscular development to a perfectly rigged ship

being quite striking. The comparison with a star which follows completes the impression of manifold perfection which the star symbol held for Cocteau.

It is at this point in the story that the protagonist, infatuated with Alfred, decides that from that time he must follow the dictates of his senses:

"Je compris que je m'étais trompé de route. Je me jurai de ne plus me perdre, de suivre désormais mon droit chemin au lieu de m'égarer dans celui des autres et d'écouter davantage les ordres de mes sens que les conseils de la morale."

(p. 46)

It is to take him some time to realise that his decision is a foolhardy one, made in a moment of incautiousness. His mistake is that he assumes that his feelings are corresponded fully by Alfred. Where, for the protagonist, the affair with Alfred is tinged with romantic hues, for Alfred it is merely a divertissement, a break from the monotony of the life he leads, for it soon transpires that he is not the brother of Rose, but her pimp. He is also a seller of his own wares, but he is becoming tired of his way of life -

"Les mensonges commençaient à lasser le paresseux Alfred. Il me confia qu'il ne pouvait continuer cette existence, travailler sur un trottoir tandis que Rose travaillait sur l'autre et arpenter cette boutique en plein air où les vendeurs sont la marchandise. Bref, il me demandait de le sortir de là."

(pp. 47-48)

The narrator jumps at the chance of having Alfred to himself and they quickly arrange to take a room in a hotel in the Ternes district. The arrangement does not work out. Alfred is too set in his ways, and when the narrator goes to the hotel room he finds that his lover has gone. He later finds Alfred in his own room:

"Alfred dormait dans sa chambre. Il se réveilla, pleurnicha et me dit qu'il n'avait pu s'empêcher de reprendre ses habitudes, qu'il ne saurait se passer de Rose et qu'il l'avait cherchée toute la nuit ..."

(p. 49)

So the narrator is forced to take Alfred to his Rose who has by this time fled for consolation to one of her girl friends in the rue de Budapest. There follows a very melodramatic scene with Alfred on the floor, groaning and kissing Rose's knees, and Rose calling out to the narrator that they could all three of them go back to her room in place Pigalle and live together as a ménage à trois.

Shortly afterwards on a trip to Toulon to attend his cousin's



wedding, the narrator notices that Alfred had taken a small gold chain belonging to him. Back in Paris, when he goes to Rose's room to claim his chain he notices a change in Alfred's appearance:

"... Alfred, grisé par le romanesque du cinématographe, s'était fait teindre les cheveux. Sous cette chevelure d'encre sa petite figure blonde se détachait avec une précision anthropométrique. Je lui réclamai ma chaîne. Il nia."

(p. 53)

But Rose gives Alfred away and, throwing a tantrum, he brandishes a gun and chases the narrator down the stairs. In the street the narrator hails a taxi, jumps in and moves off quickly. As he looks back through the rear window of the cab he sees a pitiful picture of Alfred which has strong elements of the grotesque:

"Alfred se tenait immobile devant la porte de l'hôtel. De grosses larmes coulaient sur ses joues. Il tendait les bras; il m'appelait. Sous ses cheveux mal teints, sa pâleur était pitoyable. ....  
Et maintenant encore il me suffit de fermer les yeux dans un taximètre pour que se forme la petite silhouette d'Alfred en larmes sous sa chevelure d'assassin." (pp. 54-55)

It is highly appropriate that Alfred, who has come so strongly under the influence of the romance of the cinema, should be seen for the last time in an image which is so strongly in the cinematic tradition with its device of the receding travelling shot that always confers an air of forlornness upon a character being abandoned in this way. So ends yet another sad episode in the sentimental life of our protagonist. It becomes evident at this stage in the story that each experience lived through by the narrator reinforces his growing conviction that he will never find the happiness which he is seeking, at least in the ordinary world. That is perhaps why he now moves into the particular sphere of the homophile, seeking his elusive fulfilment in the underworld of Toulon which he now describes in the following terms:

"Il serait fastidieux de décrire cette charmante Sodome où le feu du ciel tombe sans frapper sous la forme d'un soleil câlin. Le soir, une indulgence encore plus douce inonde la ville et, comme à Naples, comme à Venise, une foule de fête populaire tourne sur les places ornées de fontaines, de boutiques clinquantes, de marchands de gauffres, de camelots. De tous les coins du monde, les hommes épris de beauté masculine viennent admirer les marins qui flânent seuls ou par groupes, répondent aux oeuillades par un sourire et ne refusent jamais l'offre d'un amour. Un sel nocturne transforme le bagnard le plus brutal, le Breton le plus fruste, le Corse le plus farouche en ces grandes filles décolletées, déhanchées, fleuries, qui aiment la danse et conduisent leur danseur,

sans la moindre gêne, dans les hôtels borgnes du port."

(pp. 55-56)

It is in a café with a dance floor run by a transvestite that the narrator meets a new object upon which to confer his affections.

"Un soir ... je restai cloué sur place. Je venais d'apercevoir, de profil, appuyé contre le piano mécanique, le spectre de Dargelos. Dargelos en marin." 8

(p. 57)

The ambience in which the narrator meets his new passion would be described in the language of today as "gay". It is in such "gay" cafés or clubs that homophiles can cast restrictions aside and enjoy one another's company without inhibitions. Cocteau skilfully conveys the atmosphere of this particular café in a few lines:

"Sur une musique pleine de frisettes et d'accroche-coeurs, nous dansâmes la valse. Les corps cambrés en arrière se soudent par le sexe, les profils graves baissent les yeux, tournant moins vite que les pieds qui tricotent et se plantent parfois comme un sabot de cheval. Les mains libres prennent la pose gracieuse qu'affecte le peuple pour boire un verre et pour le pisser. Un vertige de printemps exalte les corps. Il y pousse des hanches, des duretés s'écrasent, des sueurs se mêlent, et voilà un couple en route vers les chambres à globes de pendules et à édredons."

(pp. 58-59)

Like a blossom flowering in mud the narrator is to experience a moment of idyllic satisfaction, of ephemeral happiness, in the company of this sailor who reminds him of Dargelos.

"De Dargelos ce double avait surtout la morgue, l'allure insolente et distraite. On lisait en lettres d'or Tapageuse sur son bonnet basculé en avant jusqu'au sourcil gauche, un cache-col noir lui serrait le cou et il portait de ces pantalons à pattes qui permettaient jadis aux marins de les retrousser sur la cuisse ... Ailleurs, jamais je n'eusse osé me mettre sous l'angle de ce regard hautain. Mais Toulon est Toulon; la danse évite le malaise des préambules, elle jette les inconnus dans les bras les uns des autres et prélude à l'amour."

(pp. 57-58)

The appearance which the sailor presents with his arrogant, insolent, slightly absent-minded air seems to accord with the name of his ship - Tapageuse, a word which conjures up elements of noisiness, boisterousness, and perhaps a flaunting flashiness of manner, but in the case of the sailor it merely conceals a timidity born of his unsureness of himself.

"Dépouillé des accessoires qui intimident un civil et du genre que les matelots affectent pour prendre du courage,



Tapageuse devint un animal timide. Il avait eu le nez cassé dans une rixe par une carafe. Un nez droit pouvait le rendre fade. Cette carafe avait mis le dernier coup de pouce au chef-d'oeuvre." (p. 60)

The final thumb-stroke that flattens the sailor's nose completes his features for the narrator in the mould of his Dargelos archetype.

Ironically, while the sailor represents a symbol of good luck for the narrator, he looks upon himself as being very unlucky. Indeed he bears upon his chest, tattooed in blue capital letters, the words PAS DE CHANCE. His sad story is a short one, and the heart-rending tattoo on his chest sums it up. He has just come out of a naval prison. He had been mistaken for a colleague after the mutiny on the Ernest Renan. His hair has been shorn, which he naturally deploras, but which adds to his attractiveness as far as the narrator is concerned.

"Je n'ai pas de chance, répétait-il en secouant cette petite tête chauve de buste antique, et je n'en aurai jamais." (p. 61)

It is obvious that the narrator is conferring attributes upon the sailor that he himself is unaware of. This is ever the pattern of such relationships.

The narrator soon engages in intimate gestures with the boy. He puts his gold chain round the boy's neck so that he can keep it for the evening. Then, with his fountain-pen, he crosses out the words on the boy's chest, and beneath them he draws his own emblems - a star and a heart.<sup>9</sup> How does the boy react to these reassuring gestures of affection?

"Il souriait. Il comprenait, plus avec sa peau qu'avec le reste, qu'il se trouvait en sécurité, que notre rencontre ne ressemblait pas à celles dont il avait l'habitude : rencontres rapides où l'égoïsme se satisfait." (pp. 61-62)

In his short affair with the narrator, the boy is experiencing a fleeting affection to which he is unaccustomed in his ordinary encounters with men which are merely short moments of physical self-gratification.

As the narrator lies beside the young sailor, he again looks upon him with eyes influenced by his romantic notions:

"Pas de chance! Etait-ce possible? Avec cette bouche, ces dents, ces yeux, ce ventre, ces épaules, ces muscles de fer, ces jambes-là? Pas de chance avec cette

fabuleuse petite plante marine, morte, fripée, échouée sur la mousse, qui se dérïde, se développe, se dresse et jette au loin sa sève dès qu'elle retrouve l'élément d'amour. Je n'en revenais pas; et pour résoudre ce problème je m'abimai dans un faux sommeil." (p. 62)

The idyllic and sentimental scene which follows is strangely moving. In his feigned sleep the author watches the boy through barely closed eyelids. He observes an odd ritual. The boy takes the chain which the author has placed round his neck, weighs it in his hands many times, then he kisses it and rubs it on his tattoo. Then, with the slow movements of a player who is cheating, he tests the author's sleep, coughs, touches him, listens to him as he lies breathing, brings his face right up to the author's right hand which is lying wide open near his own face, and gently leans his cheek against it.

The extreme tenderness of the boy's gestures betrays his anxiety, and his pitiful attempts to feel safe for a short time in the company of the author. Cocteau effectively describes it in the following words:

"Témoin indiscret de cette tentative d'un enfant malchanceux qui sentait une bouée s'approcher de lui en pleine mer, il fallut me dominer pour ne pas perdre la tête, feindre un réveil brusque et démolir ma vie." (p. 64)

Cocteau is lightly touching upon several themes dear to his heart in these lines. There is his paternal attitude to an object of his affections revealed by the use of the word "enfant". The ominousness of the sea is there, and the image of the boy feeling a lifebelt come close to him on the open sea is appropriate. There is also the theme of the sleeper (in this case feigning sleep) being watched by his lover who is awake - a theme which we have already observed in Cocteau's poems about Radiguet. Intermingled with this theme there is also the theme that we can only be our true selves when we think we are alone - and the boy has this impression when he thinks the author is asleep. It is only because he thinks he is, in a sense, alone that he can act in the uninhibited way in which he does and carry out the little ritual of affection just described.

The idyll ended, the author leaves the hotel in the small hours of the morning. His eyes avoid the eyes of the young sailor which are still looking at him with a hope which he is unable to express in words. The sailor gives him back his gold chain. The author kisses him, tucks him in as he would a child, puts out the light and leaves.



Down in the foyer of the hotel, he notices that he has forgotten his gloves and returns to fetch them. There follows a scene in which the author, in the role of voyeur, witnesses another touching scene:

"Je remontai. L'imposte était lumineuse. On venait donc de rallumer la lampe. Je ne résistai pas à mettre mon oeil au trou de serrure. Il encadrait baroquement une petite tête rasée.

PAS DE CHANCE, la figure dans mes gants, pleurait à chaudes larmes." 10

(p. 65)

The author does not have the courage to enter the room when he sees PAS DE CHANCE in tears. He seems to see the face of Alfred superimposed upon that of the sailor. He is unwilling to form an attachment with the sailor. Why is he held back? As he moves outside to be greeted by a fountain conducting a "grave monologue" in the empty square in front of the hotel he reveals his reason:

"Non, pensai-je, nous ne sommes pas du même règne. Il est déjà beau d'émouvoir une fleur, un arbre, une bête.

Impossible de vivre avec."

(p. 66)

As he walks along to his hotel he is again aware of life continuing in its normal train. Cocks are crowing over the sea from which there emanates a coolness that reveals its presence. A man emerges from a sidestreet with a hunting-gun. The author goes back to his hotel with the feeling that he is carrying a heavy burden.

Having undergone a series of emotional adventures that have drained him, the author feels he has reached a stage when he is incapable of reaction. For that reason he seeks the distraction of a more covert ambience. This he finds in a public baths establishment which, with its little cells, central courtyard and its main low room decorated with Turkish divans where young men sit and play cards, reminds him of the Satyricon.<sup>11</sup> The young men are all for sale -

"Sur un signe du patron, ils se levaient et se rangeaient contre le mur. Le patron leur tâta les biceps, leur palpait les cuisses, débattait leurs charmes intimes et les débitait comme un vendeur sa marchandise." (p. 69)

One is reminded here of the debasing spectacle of the beauty contest that has become so prevalent in our doubtful world of today. Faced with this array of young men, the author is unable to specify his particular requirements. Other clients are sure of their tastes and for that reason the young men are accustomed to satisfying precise demands. They cannot understand a man who prefers talk to action. And here we get a psychological insight into particular aspects of the

author's emotional needs:

"Le coeur et les sens forment en moi un tel mélange qu'il me paraît difficile d'engager l'un ou les autres sans que le reste suive. C'est ce qui me pousse à franchir les bornes de l'amitié et me fait craindre un contact sommaire où je risque de prendre le mal d'amour. Je finissais par envier ceux qui, ne souffrant pas vaguement de la beauté, savent ce qu'ils veulent, perfectionnent un vice, payent et le satisfont." (p. 70)

This description of the author's emotional requirements explains the ephemeral nature of his liaison with PAS DE CHANCE. He is one of those unfortunates who "suffers vaguely from beauty" his feelings having a stronger spiritual orientation than a physical one. Thus, more and more, the author is impressing upon us the utter impossibility of the task he has set himself. He will never find what he is seeking except in fleeting moments.

This episode, which is the core of the book, is rich in observations that reveal not only the author's condition, but which shed light generally upon the peculiarities of human conduct and tastes. Thus he describes the clients at the baths establishment:

"L'un ordonnait qu'on l'insulte, un autre qu'on le charge de chaînes, un autre (un moraliste) n'obtenait sa jouissance qu'au spectacle d'un hercule tuant un rat avec une épingle rougie au feu." 12 (pp. 70-71)

Most of the clients are rich industrialists from the north who come to satisfy their needs before rejoining their wives and children in their normal way of living.

With his unusual demands the author's presence in the establishment makes him a victim of suspicion, so that he is compelled to make his visits less frequent. He comments:

"La France supporte mal un rôle qui n'est pas tout d'une pièce. L'avare doit être toujours avare, le jaloux toujours jaloux. C'est le succès de Molière." (pp. 71-72)

Once one has been categorised, one is forced to play the role which one has been assigned. So the proprietor explains that one is either a buyer or a seller. One cannot be both. The author is thus obliged to give up his visits to the bathing establishment. He tells us that one of the things he most missed, when he had given up going there, was the transparent or two-way mirror.

The client goes in to a darkened booth and opens a flap. The flap uncovers a metallic sheet through which the eye can observe a



small bathroom. On the other side of the metallic sheet, in the bathroom, there is a mirror which is so smooth and has such efficient reflecting qualities that it is impossible to find out that it is actually full of observing eyes. Only one of the bathrooms in the bathing establishment is equipped with the two-way mirror which the owner has purchased specially in Germany. The young working-class men who bathe in this special bathroom thus unwittingly supply a special show for the voyeurs who enjoy surreptitiously watching them bathe. Evidently the narrator finds himself short of money one Sunday and so he decides to spend the day in this special observatory.

There now follows the famous mirror scene in Le Livre blanc which, with its special implications, is very central in and possibly at the very core of the author's mythology. Here it is:

"Tous suivaient le même programme. Ils se déshabillaient et accrochaient avec soin les costumes neufs. Désendimanchés, on devinait leur emploi aux charmantes déformations professionnelles. Debout dans la baignoire, ils se regardaient (me regardaient) et commençaient par une grimace parisienne qui découvre les gencives. Ensuite ils se frottaient une épaule, prenaient le savon et le faisaient mousser. Le savonnage se changeait en caresse. Soudain leurs yeux quittaient le monde, leur tête se renversait en arrière et leur corps crachait comme un animal furieux."

(pp. 73-74)

The start of the mirror scene is not without typical Coctelian humour. There is no doubt that Cocteau is using a common enough device here, that of observing people as they behave without inhibitions in unguarded moments when they think they are completely alone, but Cocteau observes benevolently. The description of the orgasm is rendered in unusual terms and occurs very quickly after the start of the scene. The episode continues:

"Les uns, exténués, se laissaient fondre dans l'eau fumante, les autres recommençaient la manoeuvre; on reconnaissait les plus jeunes à ce qu'ils enjambaient la baignoire et, loin, essuyaient sur les dalles la sève que leur tige aveugle avait étourdiment lancée vers l'amour."

(pp. 74-75)

Up to this point Cocteau is really setting the scene for a poetic climax, and he describes the erotic details of the masturbation of the young men in almost botanical terms. Now comes the unusual episode to which he has been leading up:

"Une fois, un Narcisse qui se plaisait approcha sa bouche de la glace, l'y colla et poussa jusqu'au bout l'aventure

avec lui-même. Invisible comme les dieux grecs,  
 j'appuyai mes lèvres contre les siennes et j'imitai  
 ses gestes. Jamais il ne sut qu'au lieu de réfléchir,  
 la glace agissait, qu'elle était vivante et qu'elle  
 l'avait aimé."

(p. 75)

Thus the scene assumes the form of a beautiful ritual of self-love, which, unknowingly reciprocated as it is, acquires a deeper perspective.<sup>13</sup> The ironical element represented by the presence of the narrator on the other side of the mirror has tragic undertones which suggest the impossibility of complete fulfilment for the author.

It is interesting to note how Cocteau in this scene deliberately selects a working-class type to represent Narcissus. He is suggesting, by his choice, how such types, ordinarily clumsy or stiff in their movements, can, in uninhibited moments of self-worship, acquire a grace or désinvolture when they relax. For Cocteau this désinvolture, with its inherent relaxation and ease, mysteriously suggests an inner power which typifies the male principle in nature, the principle to which he was so sensitive.

The fact that the narrator is separated from the object of his temporary love by the glass is also important. I have elsewhere remarked that Cocteau often looks at the world through glass, or sees it reflected in glass where it acquires another and different dimension. Here the glass functions as a separating agent, cutting the narrator off from a really living experience, and confining him to a makeshift love sensation.

What is striking and remarkable in this short episode is the economy of means with which an unusual effect has been created upon the reader by the author. There is not the slightest trace of an ornamental element in the simple language used. It is indeed the type of everyday language that one would use in conversation. The only simile is a very simple one where the author compares the narrator to the invisible Greek gods, and yet that brief reference itself, connotating the whole atmosphere of ancient Greece, reinforces the similarity of the whole incident described with the legend of Narcissus. Cocteau has the exceptional ability of using a setting or situation within the range of his own experience in order to create from it in the simplest possible way a vivid artistic experience having very deep implications. We shall observe many such examples in his works, particularly in his plays and films. The present one,



obviously based upon his having visited an "observatory" of the kind described, is used tellingly and powerfully to express the concept of uninhibited self-love which is such an essential element of his personal mythology. Finally, observe the skill with which Cocteau subjectively personifies the mirror in the last sentence so that it is simultaneously representing him embracing the young man and a living but cold element - glass - assuming a kind of ephemeral life.

The narrator now moves on quickly, temporarily abandoning his unsavoury way of life with its sordid implications, in order to embrace the comforts of religion:

"Je connaissais et admirais l'abbé X.<sup>14</sup> Sa légèreté tenait du prodige. Il allégeait partout les choses lourdes. Il ne savait rien de ma vie intime, seulement il me sentait malheureux. Il me parla, me reconforta et me mit en contact avec de hautes intelligences catholiques. J'ai toujours été croyant. Ma croyance était confuse. A fréquenter un milieu pur, à lire tant de paix sur les visages, à comprendre la sottise des incrédules, je m'acheminai vers Dieu." (pp. 76-77)

In turning to religion, he is making a brave attempt to convince himself that he may yet be able to lead a "normal" way of life, establish a family and return to the path of righteousness. He will fight against the devil (in his new state of mind he quickly learns to use the language of religion) and he will be victorious. So he turns enthusiastically to the Church and, for a short time, completely unaware of the fact that he is practising self-deception, experiences the illusion of feeling safe, cradled within the arms of a divine family.

"Je montais vers le ciel comme un bouchon sur l'eau. A la messe, lorsque l'astre du sacrifice domine l'autel et que les têtes se baissent, je priais avec ardeur la Vierge de me prendre sous Sa sainte garde:  
'Je Vous salue, Marie, murmurai-je; n'êtes-Vous pas la pureté même? Peut-il s'agir avec Vous de préséances ou de décolletages? Ce que les hommes croient indécent, ne le regardez-Vous pas comme nous regardons l'échange amoureux des pollens et des atomes! J'obéirai aux ordres des ministres de Votre Fils sur la terre, mais je sais bien que sa bonté ne s'arrête pas aux chicanes d'un père Sinistrarius et aux règles d'un vieux code criminel. Ainsi soit-il." (pp. 78-81)

The sudden swing from his feelings of aspiration towards a "normal" way of life to a desperate attempt in the above prayer to the Virgin to justify and exculpate his actual feelings is symptomatic of his

actual realisation that he will never be able to come to terms with "normality" and that he realises within himself that the Church, with its narrow and extremely intolerant view of the sphere of "unnatural" love, would never condone it.

The narrator's obvious awareness that he is deceiving himself in this period of religious enthusiasm is further demonstrated by the paragraph which follows upon the prayer:

"Après une crise religieuse, l'âme retombe. C'est la minute délicate. Le vieil homme ne se dépouille pas aussi facilement que les coulevres de cette robe légère accrochée aux églantines. . . . . Au début, tout se faisait dans une sorte d'extase. Un zèle prodigieux s'empare du néophyte. A froid, il devient dur de se lever et d'aller à l'église. Les jeûnes, les prières, les oraisons nous accaparent. Le diable, qui était sorti par la porte, rentre par la fenêtre, déguisé en rayon de soleil." (pp. 81-82)

So the narrator's love affair with religion is no less ephemeral than his other emotional episodes. But on this occasion he does not turn his back upon religion with the same celerity which he has shown in his other affairs. Since he finds it difficult to discover his salvation in the corrupting atmosphere of Paris, with its carnal temptations, he goes back to the sea. He books a room in a seaside hotel having decided to spend his time between the Church and a boat. On the open sea he would be able to pray far from all distractions. But when he visits the local church he is influenced by the fact that it is practically unused and deserted:

"Pour monter à l'église il fallait prendre des rues puantes et des marches. Cette église était déserte. Les pêcheurs n'y entraient pas. J'admirai l'insuccès de Dieu; c'est l'insuccès des chefs-d'oeuvre. Ce qui n'empêche pas qu'ils sont illustres et qu'on les craint." (p. 83)

Affected by the emptiness of the church, he prefers to go out upon the sea in his boat. There he strips and stretches out in the sun. Yielding to the sun's caressing warmth, he describes the experience in a brief scene of sexual self-gratification:

"Le soleil est un vieil amant qui connaît son rôle. Il commence par vous plaquer partout des mains fortes. Il vous enlace. Il vous empoigne, il vous renverse, et soudain, il m'arrivait de revenir à moi, stupide, le ventre inondé par un liquide pareil aux boules du gui." (pp. 83-84)

One is reminded of the angel Heurtebise by this strongly masterful



image of the sun as lover and the very passive submission of the narrator to his powerful caresses.

Realising that his behaviour is hardly consistent with the state of grace he is seeking from God, the narrator begins by hating himself, then pleads for forgiveness in his prayer:

"Mon Dieu, Vous me pardonnez. Vous me comprenez. Vous comprenez tout. N'avez-Vous pas tout voulu, tout fait : les corps, les sexes, les vagues, le ciel et le soleil qui, aimant Hyacinthe, le métamorphose en fleur."

(p. 84)

In this context, his prayer is an admission of defeat. He realises that he has not changed and cannot change. Thus he is ready for his next emotional adventure.

He has found a small deserted beach where he goes to bathe. There he pulls his little boat on to the pebbles and dries himself among the seaweed. One morning he finds a young man there bathing in the nude. In no time they slip into an easy intimacy. The young man is living in a neighbouring village where he is going through a period of convalescence following a slight touch of tuberculosis.

So begins one of the longest and most complicated affairs experienced by the narrator. The object of his new love, whom he simply calls H., is a very unstable bisexual, drawn alternately to the narrator and to a series of women, and deceiving both simultaneously.<sup>15</sup> But their relationship begins idyllically in a setting of nature bathed in sunshine:

"Le soleil hâte la croissance des sentiments. Nous brûlâmes les étapes et, grâce à de nombreuses rencontres en pleine nature, loin des objets qui distraient le coeur, nous en vîmes à nous aimer sans avoir jamais parlé d'amour. H. quitta son auberge et adopta mon hôtel. Il écrivait. Il croyait en Dieu, mais affichait une indifférence puérile pour le dogme. L'Eglise, répétait cet aimable hérétique, exige de nous une prosodie morale équivalente à la prosodie d'un Boileau. Avoir un pied sur l'Eglise qui prétend ne pas bouger de place et un pied sur la vie moderne, c'est vouloir vivre écartelé. A l'obéissance passive, j'oppose l'obéissance active. Dieu aime l'amour. En nous aimant nous prouvons au Christ que nous savons lire entre les lignes d'une indispensable sévérité de législateur."

(pp. 85-87)

It is interesting to note how the narrator and H., both essentially in their way religious people, try to find justification for their way of loving within the framework of the Church. Their attitude

inevitably implies a compromise. In the case of the narrator his earlier prayer to the Virgin Mary was a special plea for comprehension along very broad lines citing as an example in the universe the amorous exchanges that take place between pollens and atoms. With H. it is rather a question of "reading between the lines of a severe legislator" - and hence of interpreting the moral code laid down by the Church in one's own way, having regard for one's own nature and its special requirements. Implicit in both these attitudes is the necessity for comprehension. There is therefore much of Cocteau's own personal attitude within them.

H. is stronger and more belligerent in his attitude than the narrator.

"Il se moquait de mes remords qu'il traitait de faiblesse. Il réprouvait mes réserves. Je vous aime, répétait-il, et je me félicite de vous aimer."  
(p. 87)

The narrator finds his friend's attitude refreshingly different and even suggests that in the climate of the southern port with its sea and sunshine their dream might have endured:

"Peut-être notre rêve eût-il pu durer sous un ciel où nous vivions à moitié sur terre, à moitié dans l'eau, comme les divinités mythologiques ..."  
(p. 87)

but his friend's mother summons him back to Paris and they return there together. They rent a hotel room where they can meet every day.

The narrator now becomes aware in the setting of Paris that H. has many women friends but he is not perturbed by this fact at first. Having by this time had some experience of the tastes of perverts

"car j'avais souvent observé combien les invertis goûtent la société des femmes, alors que les hommes à femmes les méprisent beaucoup et, en dehors de l'usage qu'ils en font, préfèrent le commerce des hommes."  
(p. 88)

he philosophically accepts his friend's women friends.

Then the deceptions with women begin and the narrator feels the first pangs of uneasy jealousy. He discovers that Madame V. is his friend's mistress and that he spends his nights with her. But still he hopes with impossible tenacity that his friend might after all be innocent:

"J'avais beau voir clair, j'espérais encore qu'il trouverait une excuse et saurait fournir les preuves de son innocence."  
(p. 90)



When they meet in the afternoon in their hotel room his friend indeed confesses, at the same time attempting to exonerate himself by suggesting that his twofold sexuality is due to his tuberculosis. When the narrator suggests that his friend should now choose between women and himself, he says he cannot take the risk of making a promise and breaking his word. It would be better for them to break it off. There follows a melodramatic scene which, because of its very banality, adds a poignancy to the situation. Only Cocteau could so boldly employ such almost risible dialogue and persuade us to ignore its ridiculousness in the particular context. It bears quoting:

"J'étais debout contre la porte et si pâle qu'il eut peur. 'Adieu, murmurai-je d'une voix morte, adieu. Tu remplissais mon existence et je n'avais plus rien d'autre à faire que toi. Que vais-je devenir? Où vais-je aller? Comment attendrai-je la nuit et après la nuit le jour et demain et après-demain et comment passerai-je les semaines?' Je ne voyais qu'une chambre trouble, mouvante à travers mes larmes, et je comptais sur mes doigts avec un geste d'idiot.

Soudain, il se réveilla comme d'une hypnose, sauta du lit où il se rongait les ongles, m'enlaça, me demanda pardon et me jura qu'il envoyait les femmes au diable."

(pp. 91-92)

The melodramatic, and highly predictable events that follow are in keeping with this very touching scene. H. writes a letter to Madame V. breaking off his affair with her. She feigns suicide by swallowing sleeping tablets. The Narrator and H. go to the country for three weeks, leaving no forwarding address so that they can devote themselves to each other without interruptions. Two months pass and the narrator thinks he has found happiness.

In his happiness he tries once again to obtain an official reaction to his emotional state from a functionary of the Church. He goes to the Abbé X. to confession. He informs the priest of his great happiness and states that for him friendship has no limits. The priest at once perceives that the narrator is a victim of scruples and tells him so. He tells the priest that he would never insult the Church by believing that it would come to terms and cheat in any way. He realises the implications of "amitiés excessives" and knows he is close to sin in the eyes of the Church. The priest realises that he is being asked to express an opinion and hurriedly backs down, saying that, if it were only a question of risking his place in heaven he would not worry, because he believes that God's goodness surpasses

our expectations of it, but he must consider his place on earth and the fact that the Jesuits are watching him closely. Reflecting upon his conversation with the good priest, the narrator is struck by the economy of God which grants love when one lacks it, and, in order to avoid an overflowing of the emotions, denies it to those who have it.

H. unexpectedly leaves on a trip with a friend Marcel and sends the narrator a telegram informing him of his departure. He is about to go and question Marcel's servant when the bell rings and a dishevelled, pale woman Miss R. is shown in, and hysterically accuses Marcel of having stolen their mutual lover. It would appear that the faithless H. has also been this woman's lover. This time the narrator is incensed by his friend's behaviour and, when he eventually returns, thinking that he will merely be scolded for having gone off with Marcel, the narrator asks Marcel to leave them alone and then flings Miss R.'s name in his face. After repeated denials, H. finally admits his guilt. In his anger with H. the narrator now takes a further step down into the mire of his moral degradation and resorts to violence:

"Je priai Marcel de nous laisser seuls et je lui jetai Miss R. à la face. Il nia. J'insistai. Il nia. Je le brusquai. Il nia. Enfin, il avoua et je le rouai de coups. La douleur me grisait. Je frappais comme une brute. Je lui prenais la tête par les oreilles et la cognais contre le mur. Un filet de sang coula au coin de sa bouche. En une seconde, je me dégrisai. Fou de larmes, je voulus embrasser ce pauvre visage meurtri. Mais je ne rencontrai qu'un éclair bleu sur lequel les paupières se rabattirent douloureusement." (pp. 98-99)

The short clipped sentences in the narration at the start of the paragraph create a staccato rhythm that reproduces effectively the exchanges between the narrator and H. When the narrator finally uses violence he has sunk to the depths of his anxiety and despair. The trickle of blood from the corner of his friend's mouth sobers him and his rage is transformed into repentant love. The strongly impressionistic last sentence, where the hurt glance from his friend's eyes before the eyelids close over them in pain is rendered as a blue flash, leads vividly into another melodramatic scene which confirms the violent and desperate nature of their relationship:

"Je tombai à genoux au coin de la chambre. Une scène pareille épuise les ressources profondes. On se casse comme un pantin. Tout à coup je sentis une main sur mon épaule. Je levai la tête et je vis ma victime qui me regardait, glissait par terre, m'embrassait les



doigts, les genoux en suffoquant et en gémissant :  
 'Pardon, pardon! Je suis ton esclave. Fais de moi ce  
 que tu veux.'"

(pp. 99-100)

It is remarkable that Cocteau should use in this one paragraph three key words that so aptly describe the roles played by the two partners in their relationship - "pantin", "victime", "esclave". The attitudes adopted by the combatants, (for combatants they are in this desperate struggle) are dramatically appropriate whether they are used to depict pain, affection, a bid for forgiveness or an offer of submission ... "je tombai à genoux", "je sentis une main sur mon épaule"<sup>16</sup>, "ma victime ... glissait par terre", "fais de moi ce que tu veux". It is perhaps unnecessary to point out the strongly sensual nature of this episode. It ends in a month's truce between the narrator and H. when they resembled "dahlias, imbibés d'eau, qui penchent" (p. 100).

So the stormy, ill-fated relationship of the narrator and H. moves on relentlessly to a tragic close. As an introduction to the last part of this episode Cocteau writes a meaningful paragraph on the psychological aspects of the suffering that the homophile is subjected to by love. He writes:

"Alors que rien ne me gêne s'il s'agit de parler des rapports sexuels, une pudeur m'arrête au moment de peindre les tortures dont je suis capable. J'y consacrerai donc quelques lignes et n'y reviendrai plus. L'amour me ravage. Même calme, je tremble que ce calme ne cesse et cette inquiétude m'empêche d'y goûter aucune douceur. Le moindre accroc emporte toute la pièce. Impossible me ne pas mettre les choses au pire. Rien ne m'empêche de perdre pied alors qu'il ne s'agissait que d'un faux pas. Attendre est un supplice; posséder en est un autre par crainte de perdre ce que je tiens."

(pp. 100-101)

A prey to uncertainties and doubts, insecure in himself, his condition imparts pessimistic tones to his general outlook. It is mainly doubt, however, that causes the narrator in the story to pass sleepless nights, as he paces to and fro, lies on the floor, hoping that it will sink down and swallow him up. When he is in the presence of H. he pesters him with his quibbles and questions. H. answers him with silence which either enrages him or drives him to tears. This state of affairs continues for two months until one day, when they are to meet at their hotel at six o'clock, upon his arrival there the narrator is informed by the proprietor that the police have raided their room and have taken H. to the Prefecture in a car along with the commissioner

of the vice-squad and men in plain-cothes. It transpires that H. has been deceiving the narrator with a Russian woman who has given him drugs. Believing that her home was about to be raided by the police, she had given him her cigarettes and powders to take to the hotel for safekeeping. Unfortunately H. had confided his secret to a hooligan whom he had picked up and who had turned out to be a police spy. Thus, the narrator is made painfully aware that H. has betrayed him twice, with the Russian woman and with the hooligan. At police headquarters H. pretends to be a drug addict, and, in order to convince the police he smokes on the floor whilst he is being interrogated. Shortly afterwards H. suffers a haemoptysis and is taken to a nursing home. When the narrator visits him he finds him very weak, yet, in his final illness, he seems to be assuming the appearance of Dargelos:

"Lorsque j'entrai, il eut à peine la force de tourner la tête vers moi. Son nez était légèrement busqué." (p. 105)

He tries to console the narrator by an explanation of his behaviour:

"Je vais t'avouer mon secret, me dit-il, lorsque nous fûmes seuls. Il y avait en moi une femme et un homme. La femme t'était soumise; l'homme se révoltait contre cette soumission. Les femmes me déplaisent, je les cherchais pour me donner le change et me prouver que j'étais libre. L'homme fat, stupide, était en moi l'ennemi de notre amour. Je le regrette. Je n'aime que toi. Après ma convalescence je serai neuf. Je t'obéirai sans révolte et je m'emploierai à réparer le mal que je t'ai fait." (pp. 105-106)

But the new resolutions of H. are fated never to be carried out. After a sleepless night, the narrator falls asleep in the small hours of the morning and has a short, ridiculous dream in which he finds himself at the circus with H. Then the circus changes into a restaurant having two small rooms. In one of the rooms a singer, sitting at a piano, announces he is going to sing a new song. The title of the song is actually the name of a woman who ruled over the world of fashion in 1900. The song that follows is absurd:

"Les salades de Paris  
Se promènent à Paris.  
Il y a même une escarole  
Ma parole  
Une escarole de Paris." (p. 107)

Awaking in a good humour after this ridiculous dream, the narrator hurries to the nursing home to see H. A nurse informs him that H. is dead and that his body is in the chapel. Going there, he discovers a woman praying beside the slab where his friend's body has been laid



out. As the narrator looks at his dead friend's face he thinks:

"Qu'il était calme, ce cher visage que j'avais frappé!  
Mais que lui faisait maintenant le souvenir des coups,  
des caresses? Il n'aimait plus ni sa mère, ni les  
femmes, ni moi, ni personne. Car la mort seule intéresse  
les morts."  
(p. 108)

So the stormy affair ends with the calm of death.

Recovering from the tragedy with H., the narrator now determines that he must seek another means to end the dilemma of his emotional problem. In his solitude he feels that he cannot again turn to the Church. It would perhaps be only too easy to use the Host as a remedy and to receive at the Holy Table an incentive of a negative kind. It is only too easy to turn to Heaven every time we lose that which was enchanting us on earth.

There remains but one other resource - marriage. He realises he could never marry for love and would consider it unethical to deceive a young girl. There is one girl, however, who attracts him mainly because of her boyish appearance - Mlle S. whom he had known at the Sorbonne. So he renews her acquaintance, visits her frequently at Auteuil where she lives with her mother, and in time they come to consider the possibility of marrying. Mlle S. likes the narrator. Her mother fears that she might remain a spinster. So they become engaged.

Fate intervenes once again, this time in the person of the brother of Mlle S. who returns to Auteuil after completing his studies at a Jesuit college near London. The qualities which the narrator finds attractive in Mlle S. stand out in greater relief in her brother. It is a case of love at first sight between the two young men:

"Je ne fus pas long à apprendre que, de son côté, ce frère, instruit par l'école anglaise, (17) avait eu à mon contact un véritable coup de foudre. Ce jeune homme s'adorait. En m'aimant il se trompait lui-même. Nous nous vîmes en cachette et en vîmes à ce qui était fatal."  
(p. 111)

And just as their meeting ends in an inevitable intimacy, so the strong narcissist streak in the young man's character must inevitably lead to disaster between them. The atmosphere in the house becomes charged with evil energy. The young man's love for the narrator turns to destructive passion. He hates his sister and begs the narrator to

break off his engagement with her. The narrator tries his best to slow down the impending catastrophe but, one evening, when he comes to visit his fiancée, he hears her crying. Then he sees her stretched out on the floor, a handkerchief in her mouth, her hair dishevelled. Standing up in front of her is her brother and he is shouting at her:

"debout devant elle, son frère lui criait : 'Il est à moi! à moi! à moi! puisqu'il est trop lâche pour te l'avouer, c'est moi qui te l'annonce!'" (pp. 112-113)

The narrator is so horrified by the cruelty in the boy's voice that he slaps him on the face. The boy rushes away, muttering threats and shuts himself in his room. Then, while the narrator is trying to revive his fiancée, he hears a shot. He rushes to the boy's room and opens the door:

"Trop tard. Il gisait au pied d'une armoire à glace sur laquelle, à hauteur du visage, on voyait encore la marque grasse des lèvres et le brouillard dépoli de la respiration." (p. 113)

In the style of the highly charged narrative we have come to expect from Cocteau the scene that meets the narrator's eyes does not surprise us. But the forceful significance of the boy's suicide is pointed by the clever use of the mirror and the imprint of the boy's lips upon it together with the slightly frosted mist of his breath. His last action in this life has been a desperate self-embrace. He loved himself so much that he could not bear to live any longer.

Haunted by his misfortune and mourning, and finding it impossible to contemplate suicide because of his faith, the narrator now considers the possibility of entering a monastery. Advised by his friend the Abbé X. not to make his decision lightly or hastily, he accepts the good man's counsel to spend a period of retreat at the monastery of M. so that he can truly test the strength of his vocation. When he arrives at the monastery it is freezing. Melting snow is forming icy rain and muddy slush. Yet again, Fate steps in and undermines his noble intentions at the very start of his new experience. The porter arranges for him to be guided by a monk, and at first they walk in silence, side by side, under the arcades. But, when the narrator asks the monk about the times of the services and he answers, the narrator is struck by the beauty of the young man's voice:

"Je venais d'entendre une de ces voix qui, mieux que des figures ou des corps, me renseignent sur l'âge et la beauté d'un jeune homme." (p. 115)



And when the young man actually lowers his hood, the narrator finds himself gazing upon a profile that is a composite of the profiles of all his great loves - Alfred, H., Rose, Jeanne, Dargelos, Pas De Chance, Gustave and the farm-hand. The sight of the monk's profile makes his mind and his heart rush back into the past as he reviews all his affairs in a brief flash. It is the moment of truth for him. He realises finally that he must exile himself because he is an out-cast. Thus the monastery, like everything else, drives him away. So he will depart, leaving behind him this book. If anyone should find it, let him publish it. This is really the end of the statement or report to which the book owes its title of Le Livre blanc.<sup>18</sup> The narrator's hopes concerning the book reveal his purpose in writing it:

"Peut-être aidera-t-il à comprendre qu'en m'exilant je n'exile pas un monstre, mais un homme auquel la société ne permet pas de vivre puisqu'elle considère comme une erreur un des mystérieux rouages du chef-d'oeuvre divin."

(p. 117)

The author's attitude to his condition betrays no sense of guilt or inferiority. He sees it justly as a mysterious cog-wheel in the divine plan. He further maintains that, instead of adopting Rimbaud's gospel Voici le temps des assassins, the young would do better to keep in mind the words: L'amour est à réinventer (p. 118). People are ready to accept perilous experiences or experiments within the domain of art because they do not take art seriously enough, but they are ready to condemn these same experiences or experiments in life. The book ends with a simple statement of the author's position:

"Un vice de la société fait un vice de ma droiture. Je me retire. En France, ce vice ne mène pas au bagne à cause des moeurs de Cambacérès (19) et de la longévité du Code Napoléon. Mais je n'accepte pas qu'on me tolère. Cela blesse mon amour de l'amour et de la liberté."

(pp. 118-119)

Thus the author is requesting that the love of man for man should be recognised for its own sake. He could not bear to be tolerated because the tolerance of others would only hurt his love of love and freedom.

Although many of the incidents narrated in this novella written in the type of rapid, unadorned prose that we found already in Thomas l'Imposteur, are unrestrictedly sensual in nature, the very spirit in which they are described imparts to them a poetic reality which gives them a deeper significance and a more profound dimension. The

protagonist-narrator is, in a sense, an anti-hero. He tries desperately to find a lasting fulfilment but is doomed never to succeed in his quest. He could only come to terms with the world by changing his natural inclinations, by following the precepts suggested by the Chinese proverb: "When the roof is low, the wise man must always bend his head." But it is not in the nature of the homophile to be wise or he would make incautiousness his enemy. Thus the protagonist is doomed to unhappiness by being what he is.

In considering the great merit of this novella I am not entirely unaware of a flaw which mars its excellence. Since Cocteau's attitude to religion and his Church was ever an ambivalent one, I cannot say that I feel convinced by the religious sentiments expressed by the author. I would not go so far as Gide who detected in it strong elements of pseudoreligious sophistry<sup>20</sup> but the sections dealing with the narrator's relations with his Church strike me as being delusively, perhaps even fallaciously, subtle.

Reading the book along with many of Cocteau's other works, my reaction is that in it, as indeed in each new work he created, he is taking another step closer to the great human myths. Since each of his works appears as a further metamorphosis of the same person, a further release of his poetic spirit, Le Livre blanc is no exception to the pattern, and indeed it seems to assume the form of an exorcism on the part of the poet of a vital part of his nature. At the same time he is baring facets of his personality of which otherwise we would be unaware, and without whose knowledge it would not be possible to unravel the poetry in his subsequent works. For these reasons Le Livre blanc occupies an important place in the general body of Cocteau's creative works.



## NOTES

## Chapter 4

1. In the English edition of Le Livre blanc (published under Cocteau's name), Margaret Crosland, who translated it from the original French, discusses at some length in her introduction Cocteau's very prolonged reluctance to acknowledge the work as his own. The fact remains, however, that quite apart from the unmistakable clues in the actual text (typically Coctelian imagery, style, illustrations that leave no doubt whatsoever as to their authorship), Cocteau did allow the work to appear in the authorised bibliography that was compiled in connection with the Marguerat-Lausanne edition of his Oeuvres Complètes 1946-1950.  
The English edition mentioned above was published (complete with illustrative drawings by Cocteau) in 1969 by Peter Owen, London.
2. In Sexual Digest No. 7, 26 of October 1949, referring to Le Livre blanc, Cocteau wrote:  
"Il semble que l'auteur connaisse Le Grand Écart et ne méprise pas mon travail. Mais, quel que soit le bien que je pense de ce livre - serait-il de moi -, je ne voudrais pas le signer parce qu'il prendrait forme d'autobiographie et que je me réserve d'écrire la mienne, beaucoup plus singulière encore."
3. I am greatly indebted to two books which have shed much light for me upon the psychology of the homosexual. They are:  
Sanford Friedman : Totempole (Anthony Blond, London, 1966);  
Gore Vidal : The City and the Pillar (Heinemann, London, 1965).
4. The reference to the protagonist's having been educated in this particular school is yet another proof of the true authorship of Le Livre blanc.
5. I would consider such an incident exaggerated were it not for the fact that I can recall a similar one from my own early schooldays in a Glasgow school when a boy, sitting in the back row, was similarly surprised by a sarcastic teacher, who lost no time, when the boy stood up in flagrante delicto, in hurriedly dismissing the class in an atmosphere of great embarrassment.
6. I think it is obvious that, at this stage, the young hero of Le Livre blanc is yearning for a relationship with his ideal, Dargelos, which, although it may have a physical basis, is nevertheless of a high order, more akin to the ideal of Greek friendship. By this I mean any friendship between men strong enough to deserve one of the more earnest senses of the word 'love'. One has only to recall the heartfelt cry of St. Augustine - "Sweet to me above all sweetness of this life" when he thought of the friend "whom so passionately I had loved" to be aware of this special form of friendship.  
Amongst the Greeks I would cite the heroic comradeship of Achilles and Patroklos and the noble example and manly training offered by Herakles to his page Hylas.  
Plato's idealizing and sublimating attitude to manners which he knew to be sensuous and sensual would be an important example not

to be overlooked, propounding, as it does, much which is later to be found in the ideals of Persian Sufism, in certain aspects of the Christian tradition and in the theory of the Renaissance, and it would inevitably extend to extremes, to the dalliance of the Greek Anthology and the gross, and perhaps hilarious, amours of Rome.

But this limiting extremism is not to the taste of the majority of people. Against the background of our present society, whether regarded in terms of Christian ethics or of the 'natural' self-realization that is implicit in scientific humanism, to accept it for oneself is obviously to invite moral as well as psychological disaster. In the too frank world of contemporary literature one comes upon enough of restlessness, unhappy promiscuity, disillusion, disenchantment, guilt, cult attitudinizing, and the general decay of genuine feeling into maudlin sentimentality or self-pity, together with the alcoholism, drug-addiction and suicide (moral or physical) so often caused by them.

I credit myself with the sense to realise that strongly erotic friendships are normal at certain stages of growing up, but that the time comes when it is necessary to put away childish things (which may be easier to do if one has had one's fill of them). A sense of history prevents any thinking person from assuming that the Greek ideal can be appealed to as condoning much that is prevalent in our present decadent society. The Greeks considered effeminacy to be abhorrent and the family unit in ancient Greece was an essential element of a vigorous polis. It is also an oversimplification to assume that the placing of a supreme value upon the affinity of friends implied that the status of women was held to be inferior. This may have been the case in Sparta and Athens but certainly did not apply to the Greek communities in the East or in Southern Italy. It is certainly untrue of the Provence of the Troubadours, Medicean Florence or Elizabethan England. Aristocratic and militaristic societies often found the love of women distracting and enervating, beside which sexual infatuation was looked upon as being too unstable to provide a central value. It was, in fact, inclined to be regarded as a form of madness. Thus we find Aristophanes arguing in his Symposium:

"It is not immodesty that leads them to such pleasures, but daring, fortitude and masculinity ... in after years they are the only men who show any real manliness in public life."

This sense of a high thinking and very responsible élite extends right down to the Germany of Stefan George.

Before the discovery of romantic love in marriage it was easy to think like Montaigne. It was he who put on record that he would have liked to have been friends with his wife, if this had been possible. To women, men's feelings were a 'rash and wavering fire' which, at their strongest, became an 'ague' and 'mad'; such physical desires were quickly gratified and could form no part of a friendship that was by its very nature, spiritual. 'Love' was thus inferior to friendship. Michelangelo makes the same point in his famous sonnet:

"The love of that whereof I speak ascends:

Woman is different far; the love of her

But ill befits a heart manly and wise.

The one love soars, the other earthward tends;

The soul lights this, while that the senses stir;

And still lust's arrow at base quarry flies."



One could as little deny a fuller sense of this particular friendship to Montaigne's relationship with de la Boëtie as find Plato's idealism in the Phaedrus unpassionate, when a 'god-like face or form' echoes the heavenly vision and induces a 'shuddering chill' followed soon by 'a sweating and glow of unwonted heat' - or consider Michelangelo's or Shakespeare's sonnets to be lacking in feeling, or misunderstand the 'mystical union' of Sir Thomas Browne, or the breezy, democratic feelings of Walt Whitman. All this requires to be said, because homosexuality is by no means generally erotic and it has intensities which may or may not involve sensuousness quite apart from carnality.

Today we are perhaps more ready to admit that there can be a graduated spectrum in these areas of feeling, and that the Unconscious may have reasons and powers of its own which the individual releases in forms adjusted to his own particular sense of reality, at the same time rejoicing in the wealth of the great impulse to live and praise and create while re-interpreting the hidden motive. A key figure here is D. H. Lawrence. He was a pioneer in the sexual revolution, a writer who devoted a lifetime to the exploration of the feelings that existed between men and women, but, from The Plumed Serpent to The White Peacock, he was also interested in the relationship between men. From The White Peacock I need only quote the following short extract to prove the point:

"... we looked at each other with eyes of still laughter, and our love was perfect for a moment, more perfect than any love I have known since, either for man or woman."

This sentiment is echoed in the Gerald-Birkin scenes of Women in Love:

"I've gone after women - and been keen enough over some of them. But I've never felt love. I don't believe I've ever felt as much love for a woman, as I have for you ..."

It is true that Lawrence took life very seriously and there was a great deal of the puritan in his character. Consequently the male ritual of the Mexican novel The Plumed Serpent may strike some readers as being incongruous and absurd. Yet the fact remains that the general truth of what he said is not endangered by the dark, rather visceral nature of his treatment and must have been a commonplace of unsophisticated, unanalytical people throughout history.

To those who would deny the shifting spectrum of human feelings, and the mystery of their source, it may seem unbecoming to place Tennyson's affection for Hallam alongside that of Oscar Wilde for Bosie, that of Marcel Proust for his chauffeur or that of Cocteau for Jean Marais. The question here may well be the nature of their affection which I would prefer to think of as imprecise, veiled, perhaps in a poetic radiance. The serious student of world literature will find traces of this particular ardour in unexpected places - in Sir Thomas Browne, in Gray or Byron or Melville. He may turn back to Aristotle or Cicero, disturbed a little that even the famous Abbot of Bec speaks of 'one soul in two bodies' which echoes Peter Abelard on David and Jonathan. But, although Aristotle is undoubtedly schematic and measured, and Cicero charming and cool, the following lines from Aristotle will be stumbled upon eventually:

"It is only between those who are good, and resemble one another in their goodness, that friendship is perfect."

These lines are followed shortly afterwards by a reference to



male physical beauty, and beauty's waning, and the chance of a friendship lasting because the two have learned to love each other's characters. And Cicero, who may seem to some to go on endlessly, stands firmly for the ideal of friendship, the 'pure and faultless kind' whose entire profit, he says, 'is in the love itself'. It is, then, no wonder that Francis Bacon, thinking of the classical past, remarks 'they were princes that had wives, sons, nephews, and yet all those could not supply the comfort of friendship'.

This particular form of friendship, after all, has awakened responses in the artist of delight and praise, of the desire for possession whether materially or aesthetically, and the sense of consciousness has been heightened by it to the point of exulting in its unity with the whole fabric of being, in relation to landscape, objects of nature, animals, natural phenomena and their reflected presences in art. In our present period of science and technology run wild, when the dominating images are of metal, plastic, smoke and fire, can we have enough of generalized friendship? I am reminded of the Theokritan poem:

"... and on the water floated the voice of a child saying  
'Rejoice ye that love, for he that did hate is slain;  
and love ye that hate, for the God knoweth how to judge'."

7. In the description of the schoolboys' visits to the Eldorado there is another indication of the true authorship of Le Livre blanc. Cocteau and his young friends all adored the famous Mistinguett who was known as "la princesse de l'Eldo". Elizabeth Sprigge and Jean-Jacques Kihm write about this episode with Mistinguett in their biography of Cocteau:

"They would pool their money and take the cheapest box at the Eldorado, from which they peered at the stage between the necks of the musical instruments. Thence they pelted Mistinguett with bouquets and afterwards waited for her at the stage door. Writing her biography in old age, she said that it was not her first appearance at the Café de Paris that she remembered with most pleasure, but the bunches of violets brought her by the students, 'a charming lot'. She particularly mentioned Jean Cocteau and Madeleine Carlier whom she used to meet in the evenings at the Café de l'Eldo."

8. Although, as Margaret Crosland has wisely suggested, there is little point in searching out the identity of the people described in Le Livre blanc, it is nonetheless important to be aware of the fact that many of the characters are indeed based partly on people whom Cocteau actually met. The circumstances surrounding the sailor who now appears as Pas de Chance are as follows: In 1927 Cocteau, accompanied by his current friend Jean Desbordes, stayed several times in Toulon. There they both enjoyed visiting bars where they could engage in conversation with sailors. They made the acquaintance of a young sailor named Marcel Servais, whose chest was tattooed with the words "Pas de Chance". The sailor had evidently just come out of prison. Cocteau and Desbordes were fascinated by this young man and adopted him as their constant companion for the summer. Although the "friendship" naturally came to little as a consequence of their different backgrounds, Cocteau must have kept in touch with the young man in whom he seemed to see a reincarnation of Dargelos. In the Album Cocteau compiled by Pierre Chanel and published by Tchou in



1970 there is a photograph of Marcel Servais in his sailor's uniform taken around 1927. There is also a drawing of him done by Cocteau around 1930.

9. Here is further proof of the true authorship of the book - Cocteau's own emblems - the star and the heart.
10. The manner in which this scene is presented with the author playing the part of a voyeur looking through a keyhole upon a moving scene reminds one very much of the scenes in Le Sang d'un Poète where the poet, crawling along a hotel corridor, peers through the keyhole at the doors of several bedrooms in each of which he sees a different episode.
11. Since the Satyricon by Petronius is rich in examples of the kind of love dealt with in Le Livre blanc, it is all the more appropriate that the atmosphere of the baths described should evoke that of the ancient work.
12. Is the glib style in which Cocteau describes these little deviations in human behaviour not actually reminiscent of some of the episodes in Voltaire's Candide?
13. There is a short scene in the film Orphée where the hero, played by Jean Marais, places his cheek and his two hands on a long mirror and then sinks to the floor, his cheek and his hands sliding down the surface of the glass. The sensation, symbolic as it is of the Narcissus theme, renders him unconscious, and when he regains consciousness he finds himself lying in the same position, his cheek against the mirror, in an open setting of sand dunes.
14. Margaret Crosland in her introduction to the English translation of Le Livre blanc writes:  
 "The appearance of the Abbé X. leads the reader to think of Cocteau's friendship with Jacques Maritain and other Catholic leaders, and of his partial return to the Church, but, as he himself has said, he could not be converted in the conventional sense for he had never ceased to be croyant. For a time he did in fact become pratiquant, but the meaningful account of this incident in his life should properly be read in the Lettre à Maritain and in Maritain's reply. The discussions with the Abbé X. in Le Livre blanc are superficial, but probably have some basis in reality."  
 A very perceptive summary of the Maritain-Cocteau relationship is given by Elizabeth Sprigge and Jean-Jacques Kihm in their biography of Cocteau: Jean Cocteau : The Man and the Mirror, where, in Chapter VI (Pages 99-100):  
 "The deeply religious, indeed saintly, Jacques Maritain had already declared in Art et Scolastique that modern art was more religious than classic art - "l'art pour Dieu". He saw in Jean Cocteau a splendid example of his thesis - a young man whose poetry declared "il y a des anges", who wrote of God, of the Trinity, of Joan of Arc and explored the mysteries: "Je taquine l'éternité" - a young man clearly predisposed to grace. Cocteau opened the doors of literature and art wider for the Maritains, sharing with them, for instance, his admiration for Roualt's religious paintings, and Jacques Maritain took him to his heart,

was quite uncritical of him and overrated his spirituality. Cocteau had been brought up conventionally as a Catholic, but, although as a child he had liked the theatricality, as he saw it, of the Church, he had never shown any tendency to become religious. His angels were not God's angels and his Christ was not so much the Son of God as the symbol of a persecuted poet. But in this moment of inner emptiness and despair he found the religious climate in which the Maritains moved very seductive. His great friend Max Jacob had already been converted to Catholicism and begged Cocteau to seek comfort in his religion. 'Go to Confession and take Communion,' he exhorted him. 'What?' Cocteau wrote to him. 'Are you advising me to receive the Host like an aspirin tablet?' And Max Jacob replied: 'The Host should be taken like an aspirin tablet.'

And Cocteau did indeed confess and receive the Sacraments in the private chapel inside Maritain's house where, as a rare privilege, he was permitted to house the Consecrated Host. This was religion in luxury which strongly appealed to Cocteau, and he was further captivated by meeting, at Maritain's, Père Charles Henrion, who wore on his breast the red heart surmounted by a cross of the Desert Fathers. This blazing heart seemed to Cocteau a symbol of his own agonised heart - he still at this time signed everything with a heart - and he admitted to receiving the same kind of "shock" from meeting this young priest as he had had from his first contacts with Stravinsky and Picasso. His religious fervour increased; Jacques Maritain was overjoyed and people began to speak of Cocteau's 'conversion' which, he pointed out, was absurd, since he was already a Catholic."

15. Whilst H. is obviously a composite character drawn from Cocteau's experience of various people, the pattern of the relationship between H. and the narrator in Le Livre blanc bears close resemblances to that between Jean Desbordes and Cocteau. Desbordes had first written to Cocteau from the Vosges where, at the age of twenty, he was still leading a very secluded existence with his mother and sisters, and, chancing to read a copy of Cocteau's Le Grand Écart which had inadvertently been left behind by a visitor, was so overcome by the novel that he could not wait to meet Cocteau. Later in the same year, finding himself attached to the Admiralty in Paris after his call-up, he had at last made Cocteau's acquaintance. Cocteau took a close interest in the boy and tried to further his literary career for he was convinced that Desbordes had great talent. His best known work J'Adore is a collection of short pieces, strongly pantheistic in flavour, which sing the praises of love. Some of the essays in the book are also passionate appreciations of Cocteau himself. Cocteau probably recognised in his relationship with Desbordes strong similarities with the one he had experienced with Radiguet. It was a relationship fraught with quarrels and reconciliations.
16. The number of times that characters in Cocteau's films place their hands on one another's shoulders is quite remarkable. When Orphée is led into the underworld in Cocteau's film, it is with the hand of Heurtebise upon his shoulder.
17. Cocteau was always fascinated by England and things English. He created for himself a kind of mystique around English characteristics and English people. He visited England several times,



the climax being his visit to Oxford where he was offered the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters in 1956 on the 12th of June.

18. Margaret Crosland in her introduction to Le Livre blanc fully explains the significance of its title as follows:  
"It should be remembered that in the vocabulary of public affairs, 'livre blanc' is the term used to describe official parliamentary documents in France, just as 'white paper' is the term used in England. In other words, this novel is not written for the sake of special pleading - it is a statement of the facts relating to a specific subject, drawn up with care in order to clarify a controversial issue."
19. Jean-Jacques, duc de Cambacérès (1753-1824) was the famous jurist-consult and statesman who participated in the drafting of the Code Civil. He was homosexual by nature and was sometimes ridiculed for his effeminate sartorial tastes. In his capacity as Arch-Chancellor he approved measures in the Code Napoléon dealing with the treatment of sexual offenders. Homosexual behaviour was not punished as such, although legislation protected minors from corruption.
20. Gide was not particularly enamoured with Le Livre blanc, although it was obviously Cocteau's answer to Gide's own defence of homosexuality, Corydon. He found it affected and artificial but considered that certain 'obscenities' were described quite charmingly. He was, however, shocked by what he referred to as its "pseudoreligious sophistry".

Chapter 5 : Poésie critique  
Opium (1930)

Simultaneously with the creation of his poems, plays, novels, films and drawings, Cocteau, throughout his life, dedicated a great deal of his time to what he referred to as his Poésie critique. In some of the works written under this general heading Cocteau provides complementary notes to his creations in the other artistic fields. In others he provides keys to his attitudes to other artists, to composers, to other poets and their works. His critical writing presents us with some of his most difficult pages which sometimes assume significance only in the light of the study of subsequent works. It is above all in his critical writings that we become fully aware of Cocteau's very individual approach to art, and, more specifically, to the aesthetics of art in the twentieth century.

Cocteau does not write with the pen of a professional critic. His writing is creative and he deals with the profound problems of art and aesthetics. Occasionally in his critical writings he actually discusses personal experiences, and these are invariably used as a starting point for the discussion of the general problems surrounding the poet's approach to his works, or the discussion of the creative process itself.

But before I proceed to describe the Poésie critique and its implications let me refer first of all, and briefly, to the general theme which provides the base of Cocteau's entire oeuvre. This is the condition of the poet or creator and its attendant problems. Cocteau's approach to the poet's problems is critical and analytical, but his critical method is peculiar to him and thus untypical of the critical method used by the professional literary critic. Above all Cocteau uses the vehicle of his Poésie critique in order to expound his basic theme and to develop it.

Although the Poésie critique begins officially with the publication in 1917 of Le Coq et l'Arlequin, it is obvious that most of the elements in Le Potomak of 1913 to 1914 could also be classified under the heading of Poésie critique, and indeed Le Potomak, strictly speaking, does not have the form of a novel although it is listed under Cocteau's Poésie de roman. And Cocteau's principal function in writing Le Potomak was undoubtedly to describe his necessity for constant re-birth



on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessity of avoiding the corrupting influences of easy success. Thus Le Potomak is essentially a critical prelude to the general body of the Poésie critique which starts with Le Rappel à l'Ordre, published in 1926, and contains Le Coq et l'Arlequin, Carte Blanche, Visite à Maurice Barrès, Le Secret professionnel, D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie, Autour de Thomas l'Imposteur, and Picasso.

First published on the occasion of the production of the ballet Parade, and dedicated to Erik Satie, Le Coq et l'Arlequin contains notes by Cocteau on the nature of music, observations on Igor Stravinsky, on the Ballets Russes, on the artistic collaboration that produced the ballet Parade where Cocteau pays particular homage to Erik Satie. It is in Le Coq et l'Arlequin, written in a very alert style that contrasts with the uncertain episodes of Le Potomak, and characterised in particular fashion by the author's use of aphorisms, paradoxes and puns, which expressly forbid the intrusion of anything even vaguely sentimental, that Cocteau gives expression to beliefs which will become central in his artistic philosophy. Here are three examples selected at random:

"Une oeuvre d'art doit satisfaire toutes les muses. C'est ce que j'appelle : Preuve par 9." (p. 17)

"Le tact dans l'audace c'est de savoir jusqu'où on peut aller trop loin." (p. 17)

"Un rêveur est toujours mauvais poète." (p. 22)

Implicit even in this early work with its anti-sentimental tone are basic precepts such as the possible syntony of mechanical elements with the natural or the blending of mathematical method with sensuous perception to produce poetry. Margaret Crosland, in her biography of Cocteau, suggests that Cocteau was inspired to arrive at the concept of "this mixture of irreconcilables" whose "extraordinary beauty resides in the superimposition of emotional expression onto a framework which is basically the reduction of the human body to a set of geometric symbols"<sup>1</sup> by the sight of the ballet and, in particular, by the spectacle of Nijinsky's dancing. In fact Cocteau had referred in his programme notes to the ballet Le Spectre de la Rose which Nijinsky made famous, to the limitless pleasure of art and the precise joy of mathematics which he found present in Nijinsky's dancing.

Le Coq et l'Arlequin's importance lies in the fact that it is the

first expression of Cocteau's manner of thinking. Here are the first signs of the lucid intelligence and perception expressing themselves in the form of aphoristic statements and splendid paragraphs that dazzle the reader. Here also, in the author's defence of Parade, is a first expression of his determination to prove that he is right, to justify himself, a characteristic that was to become an essential element of his make-up and which is to be found with frequency in his various writings under the heading of Poésie critique.

Also in the collection of Le Rappel à l'Ordre we find Carte Blanche, which is an interesting collection of articles that appeared under this title between the 31st of March and the 11th of August, 1919 in the newspaper Paris-Midi. In these articles Cocteau discusses his impressions of modern music and poetry, the theatre and art. The text of these articles is often enriched with observations that reflect Cocteau's mythology in the sense of his very particular manner of seeing depth within the commonplace. He also makes some perceptive observations about the state of the arts. Comparing the circus with the theatre, for example, he writes:

"Regardons le cirque. Au beau milieu de la piste le crottin fait s'épanouir des fleurs merveilleuses. Ce sont les clowns. En dix minutes ils nous jettent la vie comprimés au lieu des fragments interminables de certaines vies que le théâtre déroule pendant trois heures." 2 (p. 83)

He then links this truth with the art of Picasso and writes:

"Ainsi fait Picasso. Ses natures mortes paraissent, au premier abord, aussi loin du modèle que les clowns de nos costumes et de notre langage - mais si on regarde, la vérité apparaît, frappante, imprévue, comme un trompe-l'oeil supérieur." (p. 83)

Writing about the cinema, he shows that he is sensitive to its potential as an art form, as well as being fully aware of how it has been misused by commercial exploitation. He writes:

"Le cinématographe, dès sa découverte, fut mis au service de vieilles conceptions, entre des mains mercantiles qui le retardent. On photographia du théâtre. Mais, comme les ingénieurs, qui ne dégagent pas encore l'aéroplane de l'aile, arrivent à la réduire peu à peu, l'Amérique, mieux outillée que nous, tourne des films où théâtre et photographie cèdent peu à peu la place à un genre nouveau.

.....

Je souhaite que des artistes désintéressés exploitent la perspective, le ralentissement, l'accélération, la marche



à l'envers, monde inconnu sur lequel un hasard entr'ouvre souvent la porte. Le cinéma, moyen neuf, servirait un art neuf, imposerait une convention nouvelle, l'art étant un jeu de conventions qui se transforment à mesure que les joueurs se fatiguent. On y verrait grouiller l'architecture des formes, des volumes, des ombres, des plans, évoquant mieux la vie qu'une représentation nécessairement inexacte de la réalité."

(pp. 92-94)

Still writing about the cinema he sums up the universal appeal of the art of Charlie Chaplin in a few apt phrases:

"Chaplin, c'est le guignol moderne. Il s'adresse à tous les âges, à tous les peuples. Le rire espéranto. Chacun y cherche son plaisir pour des raisons différentes. Sans doute, avec son aide, eût-on achevé la tour de Babel. Comme jamais il ne souligne aucun des effets qu'il trouve sans interruption, les esprits rapides en jouissent alors que les autres se contentent de ses chutes."

(p. 94)

On the subject of varnishing-days Cocteau with great zest puts into words the thoughts that others merely dare to think:

"Je ne connais rien de plus triste qu'un vernissage. Des groupes chuchotent. Le peintre a mis son costume neuf. Tout le monde reste debout et semble attendre quelque chose. On dirait une noce où la mariée n'arrive pas.

Impossible de regarder les toiles qui se nuisent entre elles. Que faire? Peut-être rompre le silence de crypte, avoir un orchestre.

Peut-être demander un coup de main aux clowns Fratellini et à M. Lionel.(2) Ils présenteraient les toiles, en crèveraient de fausses, forceraient un compère à comprendre le cubisme en lui cassant une guitare sur la tête.

On s'ennuierait moins."

(pp. 99-100)

Elements of black comedy are also to be found in Cocteau's notes on Landru, the notorious murderer, Bluebeard of the early 1900s:

"L'amoureux médiocre brûle des souvenirs: mèches, lettres, gants, fleurs. N'est-il pas plus simple de brûler toute la dame? Si Landru se livrait à cette liquidation, j'aime l'imaginer au coin du feu, tisonnant les cendres de sa belle d'un air rêveur et soupirant: 'Du courage, il ne faut plus penser à cela.'

De curieuses découvertes nous montrent un Landru moins romanesque. On nous affirme qu'il ne brûlait pas mais transformait en saucisses, engraisant sa nouvelle conquête avec la précédente."

(p. 108)

Writing about Francis Poulenc's Sonata for Four Hands and his Sonata

for Two Clarinets Cocteau gives further evidence of his ability to state effectively and concisely the essential elements of the works and their typical characteristics:

"FRANCIS POULENC. Sonate à quatre mains. L'influence de Satie, toute blanche, écarte peu à peu l'influence bigarrée de Strawinsky. Poulenc peut justifier la brièveté de ses sonates par l'exemple de Scarlatti et de Haydn. Il nous donne la Sonate pour deux Clarinettes. Cette sonate sort du silence et y rentre comme un coucou de pendule. Andante ému. L'oiseau qui bavardait se plaint dans sa boîte, bocage moderne." (p. 136)

Later, writing about a jazz-band at the Casino de Paris he says:

"Les nègres en l'air, dans une sorte de cage, se démènent, se dandinent, jettent à la foule des morceaux de viande crue à coups de trompette et de crécelle. L'air de danse cassé, boxé, contre-pointé, remonte de temps en temps à la surface. Le hall chaud, plein de filles peintes et de soldats américains, est un saloon des films du Far-West. Ce bruit nous douche, nous réveille POUR QUE NOUS EN FASSIONS UN AUTRE. Il nous désigne une trace perdue. Inutile de pasticher mal des fox-trot. La leçon de rythme nous met le nez dans nos molleses. Mais si nous nous laissons enlever par ce cyclone, c'est une autre forme de mollesse." (p. 141)

And in the final pages of Carte Blanche we find short passages with a philosophical flavour such as:

"Ne faisons jamais ce que les spécialistes peuvent faire mieux. Cherchons notre spécialité. Ne nous désespérons pas si notre spécialité se dessine plus délicate, plus petite. On retrouve en finesse ce qui est perdu en force." (p. 141)

Which is a charmingly well-mannered way of consoling us for our mediocrity!

In slightly reproachful vein, three pages further on he writes:

"Rien ne ressemble plus à une maison en ruines qu'une maison en train de se bâtir. Surtout pour les gens qui passent vite et observent mal." (p. 144)

The sin of inattention is the one which Cocteau always found hardest to forgive.

Carte Blanche is followed by the very brief Visites à Maurice Barrès which Cocteau describes as a parody, and which is dedicated to Raymond Radiguet. In fact the tone of the Visites is really that of a game between equals which Cocteau later defined in precise terms in the preface to the Visites which he wrote for the 1926 edition.<sup>3</sup> Here



he wrote:

"Barrès a inventé le jeu dont voici les règles : moquer en respectant. C'est un jeu qui exige de se jouer d'égal à égal."  
(p. 151)

This explains the slightly mocking tone adopted by Cocteau in the six pages devoted to his visits to Barrès between 1914 and 1918. Barrès emerges from these brief pages in somewhat unflattering terms:

"Barrès est de ceux qui craignent d'agir sans exemples. Il se retourne dix fois avant le saut."  
(p. 161)

And a little later:

"Barrès ne saute que des rivières déjà sautées. ...  
Disons qu'il se tâte pour traverser la rivière et la traverse à l'endroit du saut."  
(p. 161)

Cocteau tells how Barrès gave him a gift of a Roman coin which he then proceeded to wear on his left wrist like a watch. Anticipating any criticism that he should be wearing this gift whilst writing in negative terms about Barrès, Cocteau gives proof of the brilliance with which he was able to extricate himself plausibly from difficult situations such as this. He writes:

"D'abord je le porte au poignet gauche, et puis je demande qu'on y reconnaisse ma discipline qui consiste à ne pas me laisser asservir par des algèbres mortes. La sincérité serrée de chaque minute, même lorsqu'elle offre une suite de contradictions apparentes, trace une ligne plus droite, plus profonde que toutes les lignes théoriques auxquelles on est si souvent tenu de sacrifier le meilleur de soi."  
(p. 163)

Perhaps the most important part of the Visites is to be found in the appended notes in which Cocteau discusses Shakespeare, El Greco, Sarah Bernhardt and Oscar Wilde. Here is how he describes Bernhardt playing Athalie:

"Dans une brouette dorée, des porteurs la déposent sur la scène, vieux tigre royal couvert d'oripeaux. On l'acclame. La salle est remplie du public spécial qui habite Venise, l'automne. Il y a, devant moi, un vieil ange de Burne-Jones. Derrière moi, une grosse dame anglaise de la Red-Cross: on dirait Oscar Wilde. En somme, toute rose, illustre, étayée, fleurie, Sarah Bernhardt est la petite soeur de Venise.

Déjà son public l'applaudit d'être encore vivante, souriante, capable de porter la main à sa joue. Mais elle lui réserve plusieurs miracles. Le premier: elle se lève. Un autre: elle salue, penche comme le palazzo Dario. Un autre: elle se rassoit. Un autre: elle parle.

Le public n'aime ni la jeunesse, ni ce qui a l'air facile.

On lui montre un tour de force: l'actrice devenue elle-même, à la longue, un théâtre ingénieux.

A chacun de ses gestes, il s'étonne de ce qu'elle puisse aussi le faire.

D'où arrive cette voix qui découpe Racine? Ici l'artifice et le don se confondent. Venise chante. Je cède. J'écoute. Je deviens pareil au vieil ange de Burne-Jones. Je suis vaincu."

(pp. 168-169)

An unflattering and inculpatory reference is made to Oscar Wilde:

"Le roi des mauvais lieux officiels fut, sans doute, Oscar Wilde. J'aime beaucoup me le représenter comme une Catherine de Médicis, empoisonnant la jeunesse avec des bouquets, des parfums, des gants.

Les victimes du PORTRAIT DE DORIAN GRAY ne se comptent plus. Alors que je croyais tombée à rien la vente du roman de Wilde, j'apprends, en 1923, chez Stock, qu'elle est la plus grosse de la maison.

Le mal fait par Wilde précède Wilde et le prolonge. Wilde en est simplement une affiche plus voyante que d'autres. Il n'est ni le premier ni le dernier à vendre des pilules du diable."

(pp. 170-171)

Le Secret professionnel emerges as the most important of the essays in Le Rappel à l'Ordre. It was written in 1922 when Radiguet was still living and Radiguet's influence is very much apparent in the definitions of poetry, the stress laid upon the role of simplicity in all art, the central ideas expressed in the work. Cocteau is here again elaborating and developing his theme in the form of notes which, he reveals, were written "dans la solitude" (p. 178) and therefore are imbued with frankness but lacking in prudence and politeness because - "Vivre seul, surtout au bord de la mer, c'est rendre à l'esprit quelque chose de primitif, d'enfantin" (p. 178). The text here is rich in propositions concerning the role played by poetry, but Cocteau does not avail himself of a strictly sequential arrangement of his thoughts. Neither does he attempt to construct a regularly reasoned type of argumentation in order to drive home his points. For that reason it is possible to select a page or a paragraph at random and still make sense of the proposition propounded. It also becomes very clear by the end of the essay that Cocteau is postulating a fundamental principle in his artistic method, namely, that the poet is a creator who makes use of secrets from which he derives assurance and confidence thus guaranteeing that he will not be deprived of his poetic hopes and expectations. Above all, it also becomes very apparent that Cocteau is here making a



supreme effort to observe himself as a being of integrity.

What of the problems of technique that beset the poet in his efforts to create? With regard to style, the problem is solved by a simple definition:

"Le style ne saurait être un point de départ. Il résulte. Qu'est-ce que le style? Pour bien des gens, une façon compliquée de dire des choses très simples. D'après nous : une façon très simple de dire des choses compliquées."  
(p. 179)

The influence of Radiguet is most evident in this simple statement. And Cocteau is actually saying that in cultivating thought one cultivates one's own style. To adopt a particular attitude with regard to the expression of one's thought, one's ideas, is to risk falling into a literary style that is artificial. Creating poetry is not so much a way of saying something as it is a way of being. This metaphysical concept is simply explained:

"Écrire, surtout des poèmes, égale transpirer. L'oeuvre est une sueur. Il serait malsain de courir, de jouer, de se promener, d'être un athlète sans sueur."  
(p. 184)

And when a poet has nothing more to express, and can no longer perspire, he ceases to write. Cocteau cites the example of Rimbaud:

"On se demande souvent la raison pour laquelle Rimbaud quitta les lettres. Le doute est impossible. Seul, évité par la race de ceux-là mêmes qui cherchent à réparer l'injustice et la recommencent envers d'autres, écoeuré des cafés, trouvant que ce joli monde ne méritait pas son suicide et que le suicide était un peu ridicule, il choisit le seul dénouement possible.

.....

Rimbaud au Harrar offre l'exemple d'un athlète de la poésie qui ne transpire pas. Mais il ne bouge plus. Si on bouge, une fois admis qu'on en accepte l'inconvénient, il faut suer le moins possible, et, pour ainsi dire, suer sec."  
(pp. 183-184)

And what of the very nature of poetry itself? And under which guise should poetry make itself known?

"L'envers d'une belle étoffe excite la convoitise du petit goût.

Il en arrive de Chine dont l'envers est tout en or pour qu'à l'endroit quelques broderies apparaissent sur une soie mate, du noir de l'encre. Il est rare que nos femmes ne les portent pas à l'envers.

Ainsi le romantisme porte la poésie.

Ce faux luxe étale souvent la plus réelle richesse, mais

s'il en impose au vulgaire, l'oeil exercé souffre de son contresens.

La poésie doit avoir l'air pauvre pour ceux qui ne connaissent pas le luxe. Un poème est le comble du luxe, c'est-à-dire de la réserve, le contraire de l'avarice. De loin, du premier coup d'oeil, j'allais dire en flairant, soupesant un livre, l'expert estime sa qualité." (p. 209)

How conscious should a poet be of his poetical task?

"Un vrai poète se soucie peu de poésie. De même un horticulteur ne parfume pas ses roses. Il leur fait suivre un régime qui perfectionne leurs joues et leur haleine." (p. 209)

But the most remarkable section of Le Secret professionnel is to be found near the end where Cocteau, with uncanny premonition, in summing-up his attitudes to the functions of the artist, unconsciously states his own case.

"... la sottise, le manque de sensibilité, le scepticisme spirituel protègent les primeurs d'un pays en les méconnaissant. Ils sont une glacière où nos fruits se conservent. Trop de curiosité, de gravité, d'aménité, d'indulgence, passent les fruits de mains en mains et leur ôtent le duvet ...

nous avons sans cesse besoin d'un mur comme au jeu de pelote, pour mener notre partie seul, ou avec, ou contre les autres." (pp. 230-231)

In his final summing-up Cocteau also reveals one of the basic concepts in his poetic mythology regarding the figure of the poet:

"... le poète ressemble aux morts en cela qu'il se promène invisible parmi les vivants et n'est vaguement vu par eux qu'après sa mort, c'est-à-dire, si on parle des morts, lorsqu'ils apparaissent sous formes de fantômes." (p. 232)

The theme of the invisibility of the poet among the living is one that Cocteau was to treat with greater amplification in Orphée, and in his films.

Cocteau also effectively differentiates between poems, short poems and poetry:

"... les poèmes, les poésies et la poésie sont choses différentes, et que s'il existe de très bons paratonnerres qui n'attirent jamais la foudre, cela ne discrédite pas les orages." (p. 232)

And he adds:

"... la poésie cesse d'être évidente pour tous dès qu'elle se précise pour quelques-uns." (p. 232)



And he ends by warning against the traps that are present within some of the arts:

"Que musique, peinture, sculpture, architecture, danse, poésie, dramaturgie et cette muse que je surnommais Cinéma, dixième muse, sont des pièges en qui l'homme essaye de capter la poésie à notre usage; Que peu de ces pièges marchent, peu de ces lampes s'allument, et que la plupart des gens se pavanent dans les ténèbres en croyant leur maison richement illuminée."

(p. 233)

D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie, the next essay in the collection of Le Rappel à l'Ordre, is actually the text of an address given by Cocteau at the Collège de France on the 3rd of May, 1923. The speech is studded with quotations and excerpts from Cocteau's own works, or with notions already expressed elsewhere and Cocteau sings the praises of Raymond Radiguet, Erik Satie and Pablo Picasso.

There then follows Cocteau's essay Autour de Thomas l'Imposteur to which I have already referred in Chapter 3 of Part Two of the present work.

The last essay is the one on Picasso which had already appeared in print in 1923 in the collection Les Contemporains. In this essay Cocteau insists upon the necessity of abandoning the jargon of modern criticism in evaluating the work of an artist such as Picasso. Naturally, since he held Picasso in such high esteem, Cocteau regarded him as a poet-artist, and, therefore, to be appreciated as a true creator. Above all, it is important to realise, says Cocteau, that Picasso does not seek to please. He paints what he experiences, what he feels. And he confers new life upon the subject which he depicts. In this way he illustrates a theory which is basic in Cocteau's artistic philosophy.

"Ce n'est pas en pensant à la vie de l'ensemble vers quoi s'organisent les lignes que le dessinateur fera oeuvre vivante, mais en sentant sa ligne en danger de mort d'un bout à l'autre du parcours. Un danger d'acrobate. A ce seul prix l'ensemble vivra d'une vie propre et constituera un organisme au lieu d'être la représentation morte d'une forme vivante. De toute autre maîtrise ne résultera qu'une singerie.

La vie d'un tableau est indépendante de celle qu'il imite. Un chef-d'oeuvre comme le portrait de madame Rivière, par exemple, résulte du mariage des deux forces.

Nous pouvons dès lors admettre un arrangement de lignes vivantes et ce qui motive ces lignes cessant de jouer le

le premier rôle pour ne devenir que leur prétexte.(4) De ce stade à concevoir la disparition du prétexte, il ne reste qu'un pas à franchir. La fin devenue moyen, voilà le coup d'audace, le plus vif de l'histoire de la peinture, auquel nous assistâmes en 1912. Enlever l'échafaudage autour d'une bouteille ou d'une dame peintes était la haute pudeur d'un artiste. Picasso pousse la pudeur jusqu'à considérer dame ou bouteille comme l'échafaudage qui lui permet sa construction. Il les fait disparaître à leur tour.

Que reste-t-il? Un tableau. Ce tableau n'est plus rien d'autre qu'un tableau. Et ce qui fera la différence entre ce tableau et l'arrangement décoratif qu'il menace d'être et que la mauvaise grâce y trouve, c'est justement cette vie propre des formes qui le composent." (pp. 276-277)

The familiar motif of risk in the act of creation is there in the first paragraph. The concept of the work of art assuming an independent existence of its own, quite apart from the object which inspired it in the first place, will be developed by Cocteau even further when he eventually comes to assert that all works of art detach themselves from their creators and assume their own identity. The concept expressed here is but an earlier form of the later. The notion of "pudeur" is also very important and basic for Cocteau but an artist such as Picasso has the privilege of urging it in order to satisfy his own artistic concept. Thus Cocteau defines much of the essence of Picasso's artistic method with a concise but apt example.

Often a consideration of a particular painting by Picasso leads Cocteau to illustrate his point by citing a condition which is obviously a result of his own oneiric experience. Here is an example:

"Selon moi, l'oeuvre la plus fermée de Picasso me paraîtra toujours la plus significative. Il existe, dans la collection de madame Errázuriz, une toile, où le jeune homme assis dans un jardin qu'elle représentait, disparut, entre 1914 et 1918, pour faire place à une splendide métaphore de lignes, de masses, et de couleurs. Là Picasso règne, seul au monde. Aucune des extravagances qu'il suscita ne l'égale.

En face de ses courses le long de l'échelle de lisibilité, je pense au sommeil qui semble, plus on s'y enfonce, arranger le rêve avec des matériaux de moins en moins fournis par la mémoire. Une mémoire si lointaine motive leur amalgame qu'on le croirait presque obtenu sans souvenirs réels. Ces souvenirs, fussent-ils prénatals, n'en restent pas moins l'alphabet dont le songe nourrit son obscur langage."

(p. 278)

The examples of Poésie critique which follow Le Rappel à l'Ordre



are Le Numéro Barbette<sup>5</sup> in which Cocteau writes about the famous clown who performed his act dressed as a woman, and Lettre à Jacques Maritain (1926) which has the double function of evoking the events leading to the poet's spiritual crisis after the death of Radiguet and developing Cocteau's theory concerning poetry that is divinely inspired, poetry which contains elements of divine grace and mysticism. The letter provokes a reply from Maritain Réponse à Jean Cocteau in which, in no uncertain terms, Maritain rejects Cocteau's theory of "art for God".<sup>6</sup>

Also in 1926 there appears the short and personal Lettre-Plainte in which Cocteau, after a discussion on order and disorder and the part they play in artistic creation, complains that his room is ransacked and that many of his valuable books disappear. He has even lost an original edition of a work by Proust containing a letter written by the author.<sup>7</sup>

Une Entrevue sur la critique avec Maurice Rouzaud, which appeared in 1929, apart from being a special plea for a suitable critique for poets, is a summary of the controversies surrounding the novel J'adore by Jean Desbordes.

The above works of criticism are to be considered as written in a minor key and therefore do not merit detailed consideration here. The next really important work under the heading of Poésie critique after Opium (1930) (which I shall discuss in detail in the second half of the present chapter) and in which Cocteau continues the construction of his artistic theories is the Essai de Critique indirecte published in 1932.

In the Essai de critique indirecte Cocteau sets off on a dangerous road. He deliberately rejects or ignores the recognised philosophical systems and turns his back upon logic and aesthetics, striking a strong vein of individualism which implies regarding poetry not from the objective viewpoint of the intelligence but with the subjectiveness of the emotions. The essay falls into two parts the first of which is entitled Le Mystère laïc, the very title suggesting just how far Cocteau had already shifted from his earlier viewpoint of poetry as religious art. There is one paragraph in Le Mystère laïc which succinctly expresses the new attitude of its author:

"La poésie c'est l'exactitude, le chiffre. Or les gens trouvent l'inexactitude poétique, romanesque. La foule adore l'inexactitude avec l'air vrai. Je me demande si

les journaux de chantage relatent des faits inexacts parce qu'ils les apprennent de quatrième main, ou s'ils faussent le vrai par une profonde connaissance du goût public.

Le public devine une réalité derrière l'apparente irréalité d'un Chirico. Il ne marche pas."

(Poésie critique, Vol.I, Gallimard, Paris, 1959, pp. 151-152)

And throughout this part of the essay Cocteau uses the art of Giorgio de Chirico to express his own new outlook. He sees signs of a change in art which expresses a reaction to established aestheticism. The change is symptomatic of a new, moral attitude. He writes:

"Il ne m'intéresse pas d'établir si Chirico peint mieux ou plus mal, s'il se répète ou s'il invente. Ce serait me placer au point de vue esthétique. Or, Chirico m'intéresse au point de vue éthique. Il me prouve l'existence d'une vérité de l'âme, n'ayant jamais de pittoresque avec tous les éléments qui le servent." 8

(Op.cit., p. 152)

It is obvious that Cocteau's beliefs have now formed the basis of a new religion for him, a religion which has emerged partly from his controversy with Jacques Maritain. He writes:

"J'estime que l'art reflète la morale et qu'on ne peut se renouveler sans mener une vie dangereuse et donnant prise à la médisance. Voilà le seul mur entre Maritain et moi. Au fond il pense que l'art est un jeu dangereux, une caricature de la création, un casse-cou, et que la morale est stable, établie une fois pour toutes. C'est exact s'il regarde en arrière ce long règne d'esthétisme et de cruauté où le coeur semblait ridicule et dont la glace commence à fondre. Mais tout change. Au code plastique succède une plastique morale qui ne se juge pas avec l'intelligence. La critique nouvelle exigera l'emploi du coeur, c'est dire qu'elle deviendra d'un commerce moins facile et finira par disparaître. Un des mérites de Chirico, c'est d'avoir, en pleine période plastique, compté davantage sur la morale que sur les problèmes visuels qui aboutissent fatalement à la préciosité."

(p. 154)

The familiar notions are present also in this new concept - the necessity of renewing oneself and the living dangerously which is implicit in the process.

Cocteau now proceeds to establish that Chirico is a poet, and this circumstance does not disturb him, since he himself, if he so desired, could express his own poetry in other artistic media such as sculpture or films. This is because:



"La poésie s'exprime comme elle peut, je lui refuse des limites. Je suis libre." (p. 157)

Above all Cocteau does not look for recognition, he declares:

"Je ne suis pas un poète à buts. Je ne cherche ni les places, ni les récompenses, ni l'admiration. L'admiration me laisse froid. Mon oeuvre exige l'amour; j'en récolte. Comme dit Antigone : Le reste m'est égal. Si je fâche, si je mécontente, si je dérange, ma foi tant pis." (p. 157)

And how is realism to be depicted in art? To confirm his new faith in the inner being of the artist Cocteau says:

"Le réalisme consiste à copier avec exactitude les objets d'un monde propre à l'artiste et sans le moindre rapport avec ce qu'on a coutume de prendre pour la réalité." (p. 159)

And a few lines further on he writes:

"Le vrai réalisme consiste à montrer les choses surprenantes que l'habitude cache sous une housse et nous empêche de voir. ....  
Chirico nous montre la réalité en la dépaysant. C'est un dépaysagiste. Les circonstances étonnantes où il place une bâtisse, un oeuf, un gant de caoutchouc, une tête de plâtre, ôtent la housse de l'habitude, les font tomber du ciel comme un aéroneute chez les sauvages et leur confèrent l'importance d'une divinité." (pp. 160-161)

In discussing what makes a work of art invisible, Cocteau makes an interesting comparison between Picasso and de Chirico:

"L'élégance beaucoup plus que l'obscurité rend une oeuvre invisible. Picasso est l'élégance même. Cela lui assure l'invisibilité. Pour la première fois l'artiste posait l'esprit devant l'objet, au lieu de poser un miroir, même un miroir déformant. L'oeuvre de Picasso est déguisée, masquée, donc mystérieuse. Il intrigue. Mais Chirico est peintre de mystère. Il substitue aux portraits de miracles, par quoi les primitifs nous étonnent, des miracles qui ne relèvent que de lui." (pp. 159-160)

And in further explaining Chirico's art Cocteau demonstrates how completely he comprehends the very essence of it:

"L'incrédulité, dont le premier stade est la platitude, oblige vite l'artiste à remplacer par un lyrisme inventif le mysticisme des peintres religieux qui copiaient les miracles. Il ne faut pas confondre un martyr qui porte sa tête et un mannequin qui marche par la seule volonté du peintre. Chirico est, en somme, un peintre religieux. Un peintre religieux sans la foi. Un peintre du mystère laïc. Il lui faut des miracles. Son réalisme l'empêche de peindre des miracles auxquels il n'ajouterait pas foi. Il faut donc qu'il en produise en dépaysant des objets et des personnages." (p. 160)

Near the end of the essay Cocteau refers to those elements that go to make up a work of art and, in more particular fashion, a masterpiece.

"Tout chef-d'oeuvre est fait d'aveux cachés, de calculs, de calembours hautains, d'étranges devinettes. Le monde officiel tomberait à la renverse s'il découvrait ce que dissimulent un Léonard ou un Watteau, pour ne citer que deux cachottiers connus. C'est par ce que Freud traite d'enfantillages qu'un artiste se raconte sans ouvrir la bouche, domine l'art et dure." (p. 166)

Cocteau's indifference to the theories of Freud is very evident here.<sup>9</sup>

It would be impossible to summarise the second part of the essay which has the title Des Beaux-Arts considérés comme un assassinat, rich as it is in a plethora of observations that continue and develop in further depth the themes already expressed in Le Mystère laïc. In his introduction to the essay in the 1932 edition Bernard Grasset writes:

"De la disposition de son âme, Cocteau a fait une esthétique."

Jean-Jacques Kihm describes the content in a manner that is closer to Cocteau's own style. In his book Cocteau published in 1960 he writes:

"L'attitude de l'auteur, dans ces deux essais, consiste à parler de lui et de son esthétique en ayant l'air de parler d'autre chose, et de faire de la critique, en feignant de ne s'intéresser qu'à lui-même." (op.cit., p. 179)

Here are some significant observations, culled from the text:

"Les chefs-d'oeuvre de la peinture sont des objets chargés d'un fluide qu'on ne saurait obtenir ni fixer sans amour, et qui prennent à travers les siècles un pouvoir d'hypnose." (p. 169)

"Vous posez. Regardez la figure d'assassin du peintre. Par chance, vous êtes un peu son complice." (p. 169)

"Jusqu'à ce qu'une oeuvre d'art devienne un objet susceptible d'envoûter, elle compte peu." 10 (p. 170)

"L'homme qui cache un seul vice sexuel ne connaîtra pas l'inquiétude vague d'un corps aux prises avec les apparences multiples de la beauté. L'art fatal n'inquiète pas le peintre, il inquiète les spectateurs. La liberté du peintre fatal consiste à varier l'aspect de sa prison." (p. 172)

It is very ironical that in this essay Cocteau should say about Picasso what many well-meaning critics said about him. Here are his words on Picasso:

"Les oeuvres dénoncent la vie de l'homme (vices, manies, morale). Ecrire une vie de Picasso serait impossible,



car la beauté monstrueuse de ce peintre réside en ceci que sa vie est son oeuvre. Il travaille comme d'autres vivent. Et il vit comme les autres dorment. Sa manie est la manie de peindre. C'est pourquoi son oeuvre est un drame."

(p. 173)

Perhaps this goes to prove that Cocteau and Picasso had, after all, a great deal in common in their approach to art. Occasionally Cocteau makes a telling observation that contains a wealth of poetic truth in a very short line such as:

"Le silence défile, musique en tête, dans les rues de Chirico."

(p. 175)

or the beautiful line:

"La lune est le soleil des statues."

(p. 181)

These quotations give some idea of the general flavour of the essay.

The next critical work in chronological order is Cocteau's Portraits-Souvenir (1900-1914) which, published in 1935, is a collection of articles written at the beginning of the same year and dedicated to Marcel Khill.<sup>11</sup> The articles had been written originally for the Saturday edition of Le Figaro and Cocteau was trying to recreate incidents from his own life and from the world of letters from 1900 to 1914. It is in these articles that we find the fullest (sometimes highly fantasised) accounts of incidents in Cocteau's youth, told with great verve and aplomb. There are also many pages describing the author's first contacts with the theatre and the circus, embellished with vivid pen-portraits of the picturesque and sometimes slightly grotesque characters of the period. There is no strictly chronological method in Cocteau's writing in these essays and often he blends recent memories with those of several years before. His markedly increasing interest in the theatre is evident throughout the articles and reflect his preoccupation with the art of the theatre in the mid-1930s. The twenty-six articles present a living picture of the epoch, a picture that is very much enhanced by Cocteau's vivid imagination. It is a useful guide to the nature of the artistic training that Cocteau went through in the formative years of his youth. I have already made numerous quotations from this work in earlier chapters and therefore do not propose to quote from it here.

The next work by Cocteau under the heading of Poésie critique is the collection of notes, published originally in Paris-Soir, on his famous tour of the world in eighty days.<sup>12</sup> It has the title Mon

premier voyage (Tour du monde en 80 jours) and appeared in book form, published by Gallimard, in 1936, shortly after the completion of the journey itself. The notes read like a diary of a journey, each entry being preceded by the date and the location, and ranging from observations upon Rome in the moonlight on the night of March 29th to a description of the burlesque at Minsky's in New York, home of the original "strip-tease". While Mon premier voyage does not perhaps have the lyricism and mystery that we associate with Gérard de Nerval's famous Voyage en Orient, it is, nevertheless, a work in the same tradition, written in an easy-going, conversational style that makes it very entertaining reading. It should not, however, be considered as a work that contributes significantly to Cocteau's artistic theories and could only have been listed under Poésie critique since it would be difficult to categorise under any other heading. Mon premier voyage was dedicated to André Gide.

Cocteau's next serious critical work is his essay on Le Greco published in 1943. The book is actually a collection of reproductions of works by Le Greco preceded by Cocteau's essay which bears the title Le Mythe du Greco. A critical study of the relations between the artist and his work, the essay contains some of Cocteau's most lyrical passages. Most of the text is concerned with one work by Le Greco, The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice, owned by Cocteau's friend José-Maria Sert, husband of Misia. Writing of Le Greco, Cocteau says:

"Greco est un appel, Greco est une prière, Greco est un cri, Greco est un regard du prisonnier vers le soupirail, Greco est le plongeur qui remonte la perle, et si ses figures en pointe s'inclinent, dans le dahlia en pierre de la fraise espagnole, vers le cadavre du comte d'Orgaz, elles ne tarderont guère à reprendre la pose et à se redresser comme les tournesols, vers le soleil."

(Poésie critique, Vol.I, p. 193)

But the most important notion that Cocteau draws from this brief study on Le Greco is that of decay producing beauty. He refers, in the first instance, in discussing Le Greco's colour technique to the "divine decay of the colours":

"De l'inconnu, des noces qui s'y consomment et qui nous valent les chefs-d'oeuvre, Greco tire la pourriture divine de ses couleurs."

(p. 192)

This observation prompts Cocteau to discuss his own theory of beauty coming from the process of decomposition:

"On a beaucoup parlé, ces derniers temps, de poésie



pourrie. J'aimerais qu'on m'en citât une qui ne le fût pas. C'est d'une décomposition exquise que la poésie, qu'elle soit écrite ou peinte, qu'on la regarde ou qu'on l'écoute, compose ses accords. On pourrait la définir de la sorte : la poésie se forme à la surface du monde comme les irisations à la surface d'un marécage. Que le monde ne s'en plaigne pas. Elle résulte de ses profondeurs. Voilà de quoi je parle lorsque j'écrivais 'pourriture divine'. Celle qui, du fond de l'âme humaine, cherche sa réponse dans les moires éclatantes de Dieu." (p. 193)

This conception of poetry rising from dark sources is fundamental in Cocteau's aesthetics.

In 1946 there appeared Cocteau's La Belle et la Bête, journal d'un film, which, categorised under Poésie critique, is a day to day diary concerning the production of the film made in 1945. Apart from revealing some of the most interesting of Cocteau's theories on the art of the film, the diary also gives a very vivid picture of the intense activity into which Cocteau threw himself with fervid enthusiasm and dedication when he found himself in the grip of his poetic inspiration. As I shall be referring to this work in Chapter 7 where Cocteau's work in the cinema will be discussed, I do not propose to deal with it here.

1947 is a fruitful year for Cocteau's Poésie critique for in it two works were published. The first Le Foyer des Artistes consists of two series of articles, the first series having been published in Ce soir between March 1937 and June 1938. In this first series Cocteau recounts his meeting with the boxer Al Brown, describes his own life in Paris, or deals with Parisian life generally. There is an interesting article in which he describes the creation of his play Les Parents terribles. The second series of articles appeared originally in Comoedia during the war and Cocteau writes about personalities such as Arletty, Maurice Chevalier, Charles Trenet and Yvonne de Bray. Cocteau also writes about his plays Renaud et Armide and L'Aigle à deux têtes. The book ends with three homages, one to Giraudoux, another to Molière and yet another to Racine. As my purpose here is to deal specifically with those critical works that contribute directly to an understanding of Cocteau's own artistic outlook, I do not propose to discuss Le Foyer des Artistes.

The second example of Poésie critique appearing in 1947 is much more important as a contribution to the appreciation of Cocteau. It is Cocteau's defence of himself and it bears the title La Difficulté

d'Etre. In reading La Difficulté d'Etre one is impressed at once by the very calm and orderly manner in which Cocteau conducts this "conversation avec le lecteur". The opening section, indeed, sets the tone of the essay. He writes:

"J'ai passé la cinquantaine. C'est dire que la mort ne doit pas avoir à faire bien longue route pour me rejoindre. La comédie est fort avancée. Il me reste peu de répliques. Si je regarde autour de moi (en ce qui me concerne) je ne découvre que légendes où la cuiller peut tenir debout. J'évite d'y mettre le pied et de me prendre à cette glu."

(p. 7)

In his middle age, the poet's thoughts turn back to his childhood and he describes the effect upon him of visiting, so many years later, Maisons-Laffitte, where he was born, the inevitable changes shocking his susceptibility. But Cocteau was never actually given to mawkish sentimentality. So he pulls himself up with the words:

"Mais assez dit. S'attendrir embrouille l'âme. On ne communique pas davantage cette sorte de souvenirs que les épisodes d'un rêve. Il est bon de se répéter que chacun de nous en abrite d'analogues et ne nous les impose pas."

(p. 12)

In the section which follows - De mon style Cocteau airs some of the basic precepts of his artistic philosophy. He describes how the process of creation must be for him a spontaneous thing, a working of the inner self:

"Le papier blanc, l'encre, la plume m'effrayent. Je sais qu'ils se liguent contre ma volonté d'écrire. Si j'arrive à les vaincre, alors la machine s'échauffe, le travail me travaille et l'esprit va. Mais il importe que je m'y mêle le moins possible, que je somnole à demi. La moindre conscience de ce mécanisme l'interrompt. Et si je veux le remettre en marche, il me faut attendre qu'il s'y décide, sans essayer de le convaincre par quelque piège." (pp. 13-14)

This notion is not far removed from the one of the artist being the instrument of a superior force, to which Cocteau refers more and more frequently.

As to his dreams, Cocteau, surprisingly perhaps, does not always find in them a direct source of inspiration, and in fact he is more discouraged than encouraged by them:

"Mes rêves sont presque toujours des charges si graves et si précises de mes actes qu'ils pourraient me servir de leçons. Mais ils caricaturent, hélas, l'organisme même de l'âme et me découragent plutôt qu'ils ne me donnent le moyen de me combattre."

(p. 14)



In the following section Du travail et de la légende Cocteau stresses the importance of self-discipline and control. He says:

"Etre doué c'est se perdre, si l'on n'y voit pas clair à temps pour redresser les pentes et ne pas les descendre toutes.

Vaincre un don doit être l'étude de celui qui le constate en sa personne. Et cette étude est délicate si, par malchance, on s'en avise un peu tard. J'ai passé ma vie, et je la passe encore, à contrarier une fortune malheureuse."

(p. 16)

He refers to the legend that the world fabricates around a poet when it cannot follow his particular method of working because:

"Une démarche qui le dérouté ne tarde pas à lasser le monde. Il se fatigue à nous suivre. Il nous en invente une et si nous ne conformons pas à cette démarche, il nous en veut. ... Il est dangereux de ne pas correspondre à l'idée que le monde se fait de nous, car il ne recule pas volontiers dans ses avis.

C'est par où on lui échappe que la légende va son train."

(p. 20)

And a few lines further on he refers again to the artistic process that creates the impression of effortless attainment:

"C'est, paraît-il, un crime social que de souhaiter la solitude. Après un travail, je me sauve. Je cherche un nouveau terrain. J'ai peur du mou de l'habitude. Je me veux libre de techniques, d'expérience - maladroit. C'est être velléitaire, un traître, un acrobate, un fantaisiste. Pour l'éloge : un magicien.

Un coup de baguette, et les livres sont écrits, le cinéma tourne, la plume dessine, le théâtre joue. C'est fort simple. Magicien. Ce mot facilite les choses. Inutile de mettre notre oeuvre à l'étude. Tout cela s'est fait tout seul."

(p. 20)

There follow essays upon Cocteau's physical appearance, upon Raymond Radiguet, upon France, upon haunted houses and upon the element of wonder in the cinema. Among the moral essays in the collection one of the most interesting is the one on death, De la mort, as it reveals some of Cocteau's very particular and original attitudes to the phenomenon. Fascinated by the aspect of death as it is revealed in the faces and bodies of those who have died, death itself does not upset him. Although he did not see Garros, or Jean Le Roy, Raymond Radiguet or Jean Desbordes after their deaths, he did see his mother and Jean Giraudoux, made drawings of them and was left alone for a long time with them. It was then that he studied them in great detail, touched them and admired them. Why?

"Car la mort soigne ses statues. Elle les déride. J'avais beau me dire qu'ils n'étaient pas occupés de ce qui m'occupe, que des distances écoeurantes les éloignaient de moi, je nous sentais bien proches, comme les deux faces d'une pièce de monnaie qui ne peuvent se connaître mais ne sont séparées l'une de l'autre que par l'épaisseur du métal." (p. 88)

One might regard this great interest in the corpses as morbid were it not for the fact that Cocteau was always so genuinely fascinated by the workings of death. The image of "statues", coming as it does from the objects of his mythology, is particularly appropriate here, and his closeness to the dead in his presence being likened to the closeness of the two faces of a coin (another favourite image) is also effective. He goes on to describe the fascination that the prospect of death holds for him in the following lines:

"Si je n'étais triste d'abandonner les personnes que j'aime et qui peuvent encore espérer quelque chose de mon aide, j'attendrais curieusement que me touche et rapetisse l'ombre portée qui précède la mort." (p. 89)

The obvious realisation that we begin to die the moment we are born is one that is constantly with Cocteau. In this essay he refers to it in one paragraph, personifying death with the genderless word "une personne":

"Sur le chapitre de la mort, il me reste beaucoup à dire, et je m'étonne que tant de gens s'en affectent puisqu'elle est en nous chaque seconde et qu'ils devraient la prendre en résignation. En quoi aurait-on si grande peur d'une personne avec laquelle on cohabite, étroitement mêlée à notre substance? Mais voilà. On s'est habitué à en faire une fable et à la juger du dehors. ... Chacun loge sa mort et se rassure par ce qu'il en invente, à savoir qu'elle est une figure allégorique n'apparaissant qu'au dernier acte." (p. 90)

Having once been accused of being frivolous, no one more appropriately than Cocteau could write on the theme of frivolity. In the essay De la frivolité he defines it very neatly:

"La frivolité n'est autre qu'un manque d'héroïsme et comme un refus à s'exposer en quoi que ce soit. C'est une fuite prise pour une danse, une lenteur qui semble une vitesse, une lourdeur apparemment analogue à cette légèreté dont je parle et qui ne se rencontre que dans les âmes profondes." (p. 92)

Then he cites an example of the type of person whom he would consider to be frivolous namely -



"toute personne capable de s'appliquer à résoudre des problèmes d'intérêt local sans le moindre sentiment du ridicule, sentiment qui risquerait de la faire réfléchir et orienter ses efforts vers une paix, par exemple, à la place d'une guerre."  
(p. 93)

It is also very important to distinguish between the frivolous and the freakish character, although freakishness and frivolity are related:

"Le fantaisiste, incapable d'originalité, s'en trouve une dans les ennuis qu'il vous cause par le manque de lien entre ses actes. Il veut étonner. Il dérange. Il se croit une merveille."  
(p. 94)

The essay ends with a perceptive view of the sick state of the world and its great need for escapism which Cocteau sees as an inferior kind of poetry which isolates the true poet, at the same time restoring his invisibility.

"Notre époque est fort malade. Elle a inventé 'l'évasion'. Les horreurs dont souffrent les victimes de la frivolité d'une guerre lui fournissent bien quelques dérivatifs. Elle s'en drogue par l'entremise de ses journaux et même la bombe atomique lui procure un lyrisme à la Jules Verne - jusqu'au moment où un farceur la berne par la voie des ondes. Orson Welles annonce l'arrivée des Martiens. (13) Une radio française, celle d'un bolide. Aussitôt nos foudres de guerre ne songent plus à s'évader par l'esprit, mais par les jambes. Ils se les rompent. Ils se sauvent. Ils s'évanouissent. Ils avortent. Ils appellent au secours. ... On pense bien que la poésie les calmera et les emportera loin de l'affreuse réalité. Voilà ce qu'ils pensent et ce qu'exploite une multitude de magazines dont la moindre réclame entr'ouvre les portes du rêve.

Le poète était seul au milieu d'un monde industriel. Le voilà seul au milieu d'un monde poétique. Grâce à ce monde, généreusement équipé pour l'évasion comme pour les sports d'hiver, par le théâtre, le cinématographe et les magazines de luxe, le poète reconquiert enfin son invisibilité."  
(p. 97)

One of the most revealing of the moral essays is the one entitled De la jeunesse. Here he tells us why he is attracted to young people:

"J'aime fréquenter la jeunesse. Elle m'apprend beaucoup plus que l'âge. Son insolence et sa sévérité nous administrent des douches froides. C'est notre hygiène. En outre, l'obligation où nous sommes de lui servir d'exemple nous force à marcher droit."  
(p. 136)

He then maintains that nothing could be more erroneous than the motives ascribed to his taste for young people.

"Ses figures m'attirent pour ce qu'elles expriment. Ce genre de beauté n'inspire que du respect.

Je n'exige aucun respect en échange. La jeunesse est, chez moi, chez elle. Je constate qu'elle y oublie mon âge et j'en éprouve la même surprise que si j'étais reçu d'égal à égal par les Hiérophantes de Memphis."<sup>14</sup>

(pp. 136-137)

Now the young people he is speaking of are somewhat redoubtable. This he recognises. They are clairvoyant and they live generally in capitals. There they discover for themselves a family of anarchist tradition. Having adopted the family, they grow into it. Then they practise ingratitude, waiting until they are strong enough to murder the family and set fire to the house.<sup>15</sup> It would therefore be ridiculous for Cocteau to expect gratitude from young people. They love him in so far as his mistakes teach them, his weaknesses provide them with excuses and his fatigue puts him at their mercy. But from this mixture he derives certain benefits, and he profits from them just as much as they profit from him. Of course young people tie us up in a tangle of falsehoods, of course they put on a mask when they approach us, of course they criticize us to other people, and, when they make mistakes, blame us. But these risks are worth running because young people reassure us by proving to us that they escape politics and transmit to us the secret of their fiery enthusiasm. There follows an important paragraph that reveals much of the nature of the very temporary encounters experienced by Cocteau in which he finds himself playing the part of the patient, silent listener, or the imparter of small scraps of advice on an evening out of the void when they are trying to find themselves, a moment when they are themselves between childhood and youth:

"Je suis parfois très étonné de la solitude de nos jeunes monstres. En sortant de chez nous, ils traînent les rues. Ils gémissent de ne rencontrer personne de leur âge qui leur convienne. Certains nous arrivent d'une campagne où ils demeurent. Ils ne l'avouent pas. Ils s'attardent. Ils manquent leur train. Nous les reconduisons à la porte sans comprendre ce qui se passe et qu'ils ne peuvent ni se payer l'hôtel ni rentrer chez eux. Leur attitude devient alors si bizarre qu'il m'arrive de craindre qu'ils ne se noient. Que faire? Ils se taisent. Impossible de les sortir d'un trou qu'ils se creusent, d'une chute où leur terrible force d'inertie nous entraînerait. Mais ils savent que toutes les portes ne leur sont pas closes, que j'envisage leurs angoisses, que je les écoute, que je leur parle s'ils ne parlent pas, que je leur donne de petites recettes. Bref, c'est une soirée prise sur le vide où ils se cherchent. Cette minute entre l'enfance et la jeunesse est la pire. Je l'ai déjà dit."

(p. 139)



The two essays which follow, De la beauté and Des moeurs, explain a great deal about Cocteau's attitude to erotic behaviour and its function in the artistic process. In De la beauté he begins by defining beauty as one of the ruses employed by Nature to attract beings to each other in order to assure herself of their support. Nature, however, uses this ruse in a disorderly manner. The mechanism thus functions blindly, resulting in what men call vice. But, whatever the cost, Nature achieves her purpose.<sup>16</sup> Cocteau now presents some examples of erotic spectacles from the vampirism inherent in the act of the "love-bite" (not to be taken too seriously, I would say) to the sexual mechanism of the insects and in particular the arum maculatum. Cocteau is struck by the similarity of these erotic mechanisms and concludes from them that the world is more simple than our ignorance believes it to be.

Now, in art, beauty is a ruse which makes it eternal. She may fall on the way but she makes the minds fruitful. Artists provide her with a medium. They do not know her. But, through them and even beyond them, she persists. Should they attempt to win her by force, they succeed only in producing her artifice. Above all, true beauty avoids absurd or inept representations of Nature. And art comes to exist at the precise moment when the artist moves aside from nature. The means he uses to put himself aside entitles him to live. Cocteau now makes an analogy between the over-abundance of nature and over-fertilisation by the poet. He says:

"L'instinct reproductif pousse le poète à projeter ses  
graines hors de ses frontières."  
(p. 146)

And, even though the seed is badly transmitted, it fertilises. Certain kinds of seed are not amenable to transmission (Pushkin is an example) but this does not prevent them from flying out into the open and, even when reduced to something very small, fertilising. The perfect example of the explosive plant is Shakespeare. His seed has benefited from wings and storms. Beauty rushes to it across the world upon tongues of fire. The work of art through which a man exposes himself heroically or unknowingly (which is another form of heroism) will take root in other people thanks to subterfuges which are comparable to those used by Nature to perpetuate herself.

The theory which Cocteau is here expounding is that the artist or poet, by means of mimicry, submits finally to the universal methods

of creation. There is no doubt, according to Cocteau, that the artist is the slave of these methods, and that, unwittingly, he clothes his creative power with ornamental paraphernalia which merely have the function of announcing his presence and thereby intriguing, frightening, seducing and living at any cost by means of signs that have not the slightest bearing upon his mission.<sup>17</sup>

Finally Cocteau explains how a work of art justifies itself:

"Une oeuvre porte en elle sa défense. Elle consiste en de nombreuses concessions inconscientes qui lui permettent de convaincre l'habitude et de s'implanter par malentendu. Grâce à cette prise, elle s'accroche et son germe secret travaille."

(p. 148)

In the short essay Des moeurs which follows, Cocteau, in discussing sexual habits, reveals himself as a very strict moralist. He begins by re-stating his theory of artistic creation as a free scattering of our seed.

"Ecrire est un acte d'amour. S'il ne l'est pas il n'est qu'écriture. Il consiste à obéir au mécanisme des plantes et des arbres et à projeter du sperme loin autour de nous. Le luxe du monde est dans la perte. Ceci féconde, ceci tombe à côté. Ainsi va le sexe."

(p. 151)

From this point he takes up the cue to discuss the strange rituals of sex with varied examples.

"Le centre du plaisir est fort vague bien qu'il soit fort vif. Il invite la race à se perpétuer. Ce qui n'empêche qu'il fonctionne à l'aveuglette. Un chien épouse ma jambe. Une chienne s'escrime sur un chien. Certaine plante jadis haute, maintenant atrophiée, fabrique encore pour sa graine un parachute qui tombe par terre avant de pouvoir s'ouvrir. Les femmes des îles du Pacifique accouchent dans la bouse afin de ne laisser croître que les enfants forts. Par crainte du surnombre, ces îles favorisent ce qu'on a coutume d'appeler les mauvaises moeurs."

(p. 151)

Having cited the example of the islands where love between members of the same sex is accepted and practised for demographic reasons, Cocteau now proceeds to justify the same practice in the western world attributing its motives to nature:

"Les soldats, les matelots, les manoeuvres qui s'y livrent n'y voient pas de crime. S'ils l'y voient, c'est que le vice les guette. Le vice, écrivis-je, commence au choix. J'ai observé à Villefranche, jadis, des marins américains pour qui l'exercice de l'amour ne présentait aucune forme précise et qui s'arrangeaient de n'importe qui et de n'importe quoi. L'idée de vice ne leur traversait pas



l'esprit. Ils agissaient à l'aveuglette. Ils se pliaient instinctivement aux règles très confuses des règnes végétal et animal. Une femme féconde se déforme à l'usage, ce qui prouve sa noblesse, et qu'il est plus fou d'en user stérilement que d'un homme qui n'offre qu'un objet de luxe aux désirs aveugles de la chair." (pp. 151-152)

One wonders at this point what Cocteau is about to reveal about his own particular tastes, but he makes an amazing volte-face and suggests that he himself has little or no use for this practice:

"Pour moi, j'en ai peu d'usage, mais comme j'aime fréquenter la jeunesse dont j'ai beaucoup à apprendre, et qu'une belle âme se montre sur la figure, le monde en a décidé autrement. En outre j'estime qu'à partir d'un certain âge ces choses-là sont turpitude, ne permettent pas l'échange et deviennent pareillement risibles, qu'il s'agisse d'un sexe ou de l'autre."

(p. 152)

Thus Cocteau now reveals that he is at an age when the sex act means very little to him, and he can be indifferent to it. What kind of a life does he actually lead now? He gives the answer:

"Je mène en somme une vie de moine. Vie incompréhensible dans une vie où les habitants ne songent qu'à se frotter les uns aux autres, à rechercher ce genre de plaisir, fût-ce par la danse, à l'imputer à autrui, à croire toute amitié suspecte."

(p. 152)

And he is somewhat indignant that others should see another person in him who does not actually exist. And yet, in a sense, notoriety can actually offer a form of protection and can teach one how to live at peace with oneself. Above all, one must always distinguish between the inclination and the act. In a crowded last paragraph Cocteau explains this statement with examples involving Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and Picasso. He writes:

"Où le sens de la beauté, je veux dire ce qui nous porte vers la beauté, prend-il sa source? Où commence-t-il? Où finit-il? Quel centre nerveux nous la dénonce? L'emploi gratuit de la sexualité hante, qu'ils le sachent ou non, tous les hommes de grande race.(18) Michel-Ange nous l'exhibe. Vinci nous le murmure. Leurs aveux m'intriguent moins que d'innombrables indices d'un ordre considéré comme un désordre et qui ne va pas jusqu'aux actes. Que veulent dire les actes? Ils relèvent de la Police. Ils ne nous intéressent pas. Picasso est un exemple de ce registre. Cet homme à femmes est misogynne dans ses oeuvres. Il s'y venge de l'empire que les femmes exercent sur sa personne et du temps qu'elles lui dérobent. Il s'acharne contre leurs visages et leurs toilettes. Par contre, il flatte l'homme et, n'ayant pas à s'en plaindre, il le loue par la plume et par le crayon."

(p. 153)

Thus the gratuitous practice of sexuality, which can haunt or obsess all great men, is often sublimated to produce great beauty in works of art.

The last essay in La Difficulté d'Être, written on the 5th of July 1946, reveals the author in a depressed state of mind. The essay bears the title De la responsabilité. Beset by material problems such as the badly arranged dates of his plays, the prospect of being without a home, or even worse the present book which does not seem to progress, Cocteau feels unsettled, unable to concentrate properly on his work. It is not the first time that he has been troubled in this way:

"Je connais ces crises d'angoisse vague pour en avoir été souvent victime."  
(p. 170)

He is physically ill and

"Des souffrances que je croyais en fuite reviennent avec la colère de ceux qui ébauchent une fausse sortie et nous en veulent davantage de s'être crus ridicules. Mes paupières, mes tempes, mon cou, ma poitrine, mes épaules, mes bras, mes phalanges me dévorent. La farce de Morzine recommence. Je vais mieux et le mal y prend des forces. Il semble même qu'il veuille s'attaquer aux muqueuses, aux gencives, à la gorge, au palais. De la machine, cela passe à l'essence de la machine et la corrompt. Des plaques de détresses, des aphtes de malheur, des fièvres de désespoir, nous emplissent de légers symptômes fort pénibles. Ils augmentent vite jusqu'à une sorte de nausée que nous attribuons à l'influence du dehors. Il est probable que c'est notre état qui colore le monde et nous fait croire que nous lui devons notre couleur. Ce mic-mac ne barbouille que davantage le dehors et le dedans. La vie nous apparaît insoluble, trop vaste, trop petite, trop longue, trop courte."  
(p. 171)

Although the device of looking upon the human body as a machine is not an original one, Cocteau's particular way of expressing it is. And the commonplace observation of the world appearing to be grey or dull when one feels indisposed is here rendered with an effective and intriguing suggestion that it is the author's condition which colours the world and then makes him believe that he owes his colour to it.

Cocteau feels that ideally he would like to be his own tuner, so that he could restring his nerves which either heat or cold put out of tune. His particular nature, the way in which he is made, turns him into a wanderer. He is ever seeking different places, yet, when he finds a place which he thinks will be to his liking, a place where he



can hide, it quickly becomes a trap from which he must escape. He escapes, and the seeking starts again. The force which keeps spurring him on is a kind of rhythm.

"Rien n'est solide comme ce rythme qui nous mène et que nous supposons être à notre solde. L'élan nous y dupe. L'échec s'y déguise. Il ne se présente jamais sous la même face. Nous avons beau l'attendre, nous ne le reconnaissons pas."

(p. 172)

Now Cocteau becomes aware that the book he is writing is nearing its end and he questions whether, in keeping this journal, which is not really a journal, based upon what happens to him, he can still speak to his reader. That would mean falsifying the working of the book. It would not be writing the book which comes to him, as an inspiration, but quite another one that would be forced. Yet he is loath to sever connections with the reader and so he makes a special plea, first observing that he will not really be leaving the reader since he has mingled so much of himself in the ink he has used for writing that his pulse still beats in it, and the reader can feel the author's pulse under his thumb by holding the edge of the pages of the book. Indeed, when the reader is carrying the book in his pocket, a certain shaking and noise will be experienced. It is the beating of the poet's heart, such as it was heard on the soundtrack of the film Le Sang d'un Poète. It is a sound that is inimitable, wild,<sup>19</sup> nocturnal, as complex as it can be. Those passing the reader in the street will turn round, wondering what the noise is. That, in fact, is the difference between a book that is only a book and this book which is a person changed into a book. This person cries for help so that someone will break the spell and allow him to be re-incarnated in the reader. This is the magic trick that Cocteau asks of his reader and it is not so very difficult to accomplish as it may at first seem to be. What procedure must the reader adopt in order to break the spell?

"Vous sortez ce livre de votre poche. Vous lisez. Et si vous parvenez à le lire sans que plus rien ne puisse vous distraire de mon écriture, peu à peu vous sentirez que je vous habite et vous me ressuscitez. Vous risquerez même d'avoir à l'improviste un de mes gestes, un de mes regards. Naturellement je parle à la jeunesse d'une époque où je ne serai plus là en chair et en os, et mon sang relié à mon encre." 20

(p. 173)

If the reader carries out these instructions to the letter, a phenomenon of osmosis will occur thanks to which this quite disgusting box, which is a book, will cease to be so, and become instead a pact of reciprocal

help, by means of which the living will help the dead and the dead will help the living. The reader will thus bring Cocteau as much as Cocteau will bring the reader.

Finally Cocteau states that he does indeed represent his ideas, however contradictory they may be, and the tribunal of men can blame only him. He thus assumes complete responsibility for what he says. His ideas, he goes on to say, have the faces of characters. They are in motion and Cocteau alone is responsible for their actions. It is therefore normal that he should adopt the responsibility for the judicial errors which ideas, easy to misrepresent and difficult to explain, will always provoke.

In the years that followed the publication of La Difficulté d'Être, Cocteau wrote under the heading of Poésie critique many essays, most of which were inspired by particular events. In 1949, returning by aeroplane from America where he had spent some twenty days doing so many things (including supervising the presentation in New York of his film L'Aigle à deux têtes) that he found it difficult to realise whether he had been there twenty days or twenty years, he wrote his famous essay in the form of a monologue Lettre aux Américains. Written in a very direct style, this open letter reveals some of Cocteau's impressions of America, a comparison between the mental outlook of the New World and the Old and some thoughts on the American woman.

The essay opens with an admirable example of Cocteau's ability to define something as essential as objectivity by the simple method of quoting some of his own truisms. He writes:

"Il arrive que le premier coup d'oeil qu'on jette sur un visage vous renseigne mieux sur ce qu'il renferme qu'une longue étude. Il arrive qu'on s'embrouille à la longue sur une personne, qu'on révisé le jugement du premier coup d'oeil et que le jugement du premier coup d'oeil nous trompe. Le troisième coup d'oeil et la suite comportent de vivre définitivement avec les personnes et, de ce fait, de devenir un mauvais juge, puisqu'on ne juge bien que de l'extérieur."

(Poésie critique, Vol.II, p. 67)

Although he is quick to explain that New York is no more representative of America in general than any other town in the United States, it is obvious that the city exerted a certain fascination upon Cocteau. And he has the intuitive perspicacity to get to the very core, the very heart of what makes New York what it is. He says:

"A New-York, tout est paradoxe. On exige du neuf et l'on



veut que rien ne change.

.....

New York n'est pas une ville assise. Ce n'est pas une ville couchée. New York est une ville debout, et non à cause des gratte-ciel où les chiffres (qui dévorent New York) ont établi leur fourmilière. Je parle d'une ville debout, parce que, si elle s'asseyait, elle se reposerait et réfléchirait, et que, si elle se couchait, elle dormirait et rêverait, et qu'elle ne veut ni réfléchir ni rêver, mais se partager debout entre les deux mamelles de sa mère, dont l'une lui verse l'alcool et l'autre le lait.

.....

New York déteste le secret. Elle se penche sur celui des autres. Elle ne nomme pas plus le sien que l'Ennui qu'elle exorcise par une méthode d'optimisme.

.....

Je le répète. Vous refusez d'attendre et de faire attendre. A New York, chacun arrive en avance au rendez-vous. La tradition vous répugne et le neuf. Votre idéal serait une tradition instantanée. Le neuf est tout de suite à l'école. De cette minute il cesse de l'être. Vous le classez, vous l'étiquetez et, comme vous n'admettez pas qu'un artiste expérimente, vous exigez de lui qu'il se répète et vous le remplacez lorsqu'il vous fatigue. Ainsi tuez-vous les mouches."

(pp. 68-70)

Cocteau also makes a strong criticism of that American attitude which is contradictory to the point of being perverse. He cites the incident which involved him in posing for a series of eccentric photographs for Life Magazine. He was not keen to pose for these, but the photographers prevailed upon him to oblige, as it was customary since their readers were interested only in that type of photograph. After a photographic session that lasted several hours, during a short break for sandwiches and ginger ale, the journalists and the photographer suddenly asked Cocteau what a man sitting in a barber's chair in Massachusetts looking at these photographs could possibly make of them. Did he not fear that such a man would be disconcerted by the photographs? Cocteau immediately objected that the extravagances had been concocted by them and not by him. In the face of such a difficult situation Cocteau not only was aware of their problem but even rose to the occasion in making an excellent suggestion regarding the text that was to accompany the photographs. Here is how he describes the end of the episode:

"L'angoisse alternait en eux avec la certitude que des photographies de cette sorte étaient les seules valables.

Ils soulevèrent alors le grave problème du texte, me demandant de quelle manière on pouvait expliquer l'inexplicable.(21) Je suggérai de dire que les photographies qu'ils avaient faites étaient très normales, que l'appareil de prise de vues leur avait joué un tour, qu'ils s'en excusaient auprès de public, que les machines devenaient dangereuses à l'image de l'homme. Ajoutez, leur dis-je, une publicité pour le Rolleiflex. Par exemple : Le Rolleiflex pense." (p. 72)

In another admirable short paragraph in this letter to the Americans Cocteau sums up Hollywood as he sees it:

"Cette habitude d'arranger tout est votre méthode. Une oeuvre ne doit, à aucun prix, demeurer ce qu'elle est. Hollywood est la source de ce phénomène. Phénomène qui s'explique par le sang pâle d'une aristocratie de cinéastes (techniciens et artistes) dont le royaume ne communique plus avec le dehors et dont la race s'épuise. Cette aristocratie dont le sang devient fort pâle expulse les têtes trop mystérieusement couronnées. Greta Garbo, Charles Chaplin furent les victimes admirables de cette ruche impérialiste." (p. 74)

The Hollywood mania for arranging or re-arranging the work of the artist in the interests of the box-office was but one of the practices which resulted in the emasculation of the film as a genuine art form for many years. To illustrate this deplorable habit Cocteau quotes the incident involving Stravinsky in Hollywood:

"A Hollywood, après d'interminables débats et malgré sa répugnance à composer de la musique pour un film, Stravinsky allait se mettre d'accord avec Mr. G... - Mr. G... déclara qu'il devait aussi payer l'arrangeur. 'Quel arrangeur? demande Stravinsky. - Celui qui arrangera votre musique.'" 22 (p. 74)

The most important part of this essay is the section in which Cocteau compares the spirit of the Old World with that of the New and, in defining the particular merits of the Old World, he refers to one of his own basic precepts, that of true art or creation arising from disorder. He writes:

"Je connais nos défauts mieux que je ne connais les vôtres. Mais il existe encore chez nous un désordre qui permet la naissance et les surprises, un tas de fumier dans lequel notre coq ancre ses pattes et qu'il ne faudrait pas confondre avec un tas d'ordures, erreur fatale dont notre gouvernement s'est presque toujours rendu coupable." (p. 75)

He then goes on to suggest that an exchange of standpoints and outlooks could help both worlds:



"Et, dites, n'est-il pas nécessaire de vous déspecialiser un peu et de nous apprendre vos recettes de spécialistes? N'est-il pas nécessaire de nous confier un peu vos machines pour voir si nous saurions les humaniser, et de vous humaniser en diminuant les prérogatives de vos machines, bref, d'appriivoiser notre individualisme et d'exciter le vôtre, afin de nous insurger tous contre les fausses morales et les mauvaises habitudes, la main dans la main?"

(pp. 75-76)

Above all, Cocteau is very much aware that the fate of Europeans is strongly linked with that of Americans. Thus, if the false values that menace America triumph, we Europeans will be lost along with the Americans. He says:

"Tout change. Un monde va finir. Un monde commence. Il est entre vos mains de décider s'il sera ténèbres ou lumières. Il n'y a pas une minute à perdre."

(p. 89)

The essay ends with some observations on the notion of decadence. Classifying himself as an old European who is decadent and proud to be so, Cocteau refers to Baudelaire's preface to the works of Edgar Allan Poe quoting a paragraph from it in which Baudelaire discusses his use of the word "jongleur" to describe Poe. Baudelaire had used the word to eulogise the poet.<sup>23</sup> Cocteau now observes that Baudelaire's text could be used as a defence for himself and for those like him:

"Ce texte sensationnel et préambulaire pourrait servir à notre défense à nous autres qu'on traite de jongleurs et de décadents. Il éclairera votre lanterne. Vous verrez, sous la lumière étincelante de l'homme qui en est responsable, ce que vaut cette éternelle confusion entre le jongleur et le penseur, une pensée agile et le geste d'un illusionniste."

(p. 94)

Cocteau thus defends at the same time his own "vitesse". Ruled, of necessity, by a certain cold realism, Cocteau concludes his observations on decadence with the following words:

"Il est fort drôle, en outre, de parler de décadence sur une Terre qui résulte d'une décadence. En effet, la lumière ne résulte que d'une décomposition. Dès qu'un astre cesse d'être à l'état de nébuleuse (qu'il vieillit en quelque sorte), il se décompose et s'enflamme. Lorsque le feu se minimise et se pelotonne, l'astre se croûte. Il est en décadence et la vie se forme. Il grouille de vermine. C'est nous."

(p. 104)

The final words of the Lettre aux Américains are unfortunately prophetic:

"Américains,

Je vais essayer de dormir et de rêver. J'aime vivre mes

rêves et les oublier au réveil. Car j'y habite un monde où le contrôle n'existe pas encore. Il existera si votre pente s'allonge. On contrôlera vos rêves - et ce ne sera pas le contrôle des psychiatres, ce sera celui de la police. On contrôlera les rêves et on les punira. On punira les actes du rêve.

Bonsoir.

Jean Cocteau

"

(pp. 105-106)

Between 1949 and 1952 several publications by Cocteau appeared under the heading of Poésie critique and, in most cases, these essays or prefaces have relevance only to the circumstance or situation which prompted their writing. Maallesh, journal d'une tournée de théâtre, published in 1949, is a diary describing the events which took place between the 6th of March and 23rd of May 1949 when Cocteau accompanied a theatrical company which included artists such as Marcel André, Yvonne de Bray, Tania Balachova, Gabrielle Dorziat and his friend Jean Marais, on a tour of Cairo, Alexandria, Istanbul and Ankara, where they presented with great success three of Cocteau's own plays - La Machine infernale, Les Monstres sacrés and Les Parents terribles, Racine's Britannicus, Sartre's Huis clos, Anouilh's Léocadia and Feydeau's Léonie est en avance. As a preliminary to a topic that Cocteau will discuss in greater detail in a later work, there are some pages on his estrangement from and reconciliation with André Gide.

In 1950 there appeared a volume of reproductions of paintings by Modigliani under the title Modigliani, for which Cocteau wrote an introduction in which he described the painter, and recalled Montparnasse in the days when he knew him and Picasso.

An essay entitled Jean Marais published in 1951 gives Cocteau scope to discuss the general state of the theatre and its young actors and actresses. There follows a biography of Marais, an evaluation of him as a painter, and a series of short annotations on Marais's acting technique in Cocteau's plays and films.

Also in 1951 there appeared Entretiens autour du Cinématographe, transcriptions of interviews with André Fraigneau in which Cocteau discusses very fully his various theories upon the art of the film. As I shall be referring to this work in my chapter on Cocteau's films I do not propose to discuss it here.

In 1952 Cocteau published Reines de la France a series of quick sketches of some queens of France which had already appeared in print



in 1949 accompanying prints by Christian Bérard<sup>24</sup> in a special de luxe edition published by Maurice Darantière. Under the generical title Reines de la France Cocteau includes not only Marie-Antoinette, the Empress Joséphine and the Empress Eugénie, but many other distinguished ladies whom he regards as queens in the sense that they are supreme in their own sphere. Thus we find sketches of Joan of Arc, Juliette Récamier, Sarah Bernhardt and Anna de Noailles. The sketches are brilliantly written in Cocteau's best, concise style and they are beautifully entertaining. Here, as an example, is the opening paragraph of the sketch on Juliette Récamier:

"On parlait autour d'elle, on lui parlait, on lui faisait la cour, elle écoutait. Elle écoutait les personnes qui marchent de long en large, celles qui sont assises, celles qui sont à genoux. Elle les écoutait, étendue sur une chaise longue. Et, comme les jeunes femmes de la mythologie deviennent des arbres, elle devint chaise longue et la chaise longue porte son nom. Peut-être valait-il mieux qu'elle ne parlât pas. Peut-être savait-elle s'astreindre à ce rôle admirable, puisque les hommes, quoi qu'ils en disent, préfèrent le monologue à la conversation et trouvent de l'esprit à ceux qui leur prêtent une oreille attentive." (p. 103)

To complete the sketches there is a brief, brilliantly amusing essay on La femme de demain which turns out to be a penetrating analysis of the phenomena of fashion. Cocteau begins:

"Que peut-on savoir des femmes à venir, elles qui restent toujours les mêmes et changent sans cesse. Un film accéléré des modes nous les montrerait au centre d'un cyclone de jupes qui s'allongent et raccourcissent, de plumes qui volent, d'épaules qui tombent et qui se relèvent à l'angle droit." (p. 153)

Cocteau maintains that women submit to fashions with the passive obedience of soldiers. The important thing for them is to please at all costs, and, even at the risk of embracing the absurd, to flaunt styles that are often contrary to nature, which plumes the male and obliges the female to wear the most modest uniform. That is why women approach men by adopting their styles. Yet in the evenings they re-assume their own role, that of an idol upon which man fixes that which he has earned with his work - an idol which he sends out into the world as his ambassador.

According to Cocteau, fashions are always an accurate reflection of the policies of the times. Thus -

"Il serait difficile, en 1949, de dépeindre la mode

féminine. Une sorte d'anarchie morne pousse les femmes à porter ce qu'elles veulent, leurs couturiers à se contredire et à ne plus collaborer à quelque excès significatif."

(pp. 155-156)

Sometimes women adopt particular fashions in order to conceal physical defects, sometimes they impose what appear to be physical defects upon their bodies by adopting outlandish fashions. Yet these come to be accepted, in a perverse kind of way.

"On s'étonne souvent que la mode déforme le corps des femmes et leur vaille des épaules tombantes ou des épaules carrées, des pieds petits ou des pieds robustes.(25) Ce n'est pas cela. C'est qu'une femme aux épaules tombantes et aux pieds robustes étonne la ville par son rang ou par sa fortune et qu'aussitôt la foule n'admet plus que les femmes qui lui ressemblent. C'est ainsi que la chance change de place et que Mademoiselle de Grandlieu, dont Balzac nous décrit la laideur et qu'il présente comme invariable, serait aujourd'hui une beauté à la mode, alors qu'on trouverait bien molle et bien grasse Esther, le type de la beauté du moment."

(pp. 157-158)

Cocteau maintains that it would be difficult to foresee what would be the type of beauty in the future. The kingdom of fashion is one that is difficult to maintain. No sooner have you been enthroned than you are made to abdicate. His last words concern Paris:

"Paris est une ville de modes. Tenir y est un tour de force.  
Et on vous le fait payer cher."

How very true!

Of the remainder of Cocteau's works which he classified under Poésie critique two of the most interesting appear almost simultaneously in 1953. The first Démarche d'un poète, published in Germany, I have been unable up to the present to consult. The second Journal d'un inconnu is really a continuation of La Difficulté d'Etre, a series of deeply thought out essays, and, like the essays in the earlier work, obviously inspired (in form of presentation) by Montaigne. The very titles give the clue : Des distances, De l'amitié, De la mémoire ... One of the most important is the first, De l'invisibilité.

In this essay Cocteau discusses and defines poetry and the work of art by means of notions that have, by this time, become part of his own mythology. He begins by analysing poetry and describing its function. He says:

"L'invisibilité me semble être la condition de l'élégance.



L'élégance cesse si on la remarque. La poésie étant l'élégance même ne saurait être visible. Alors, me direz-vous, à quoi sert-elle? A rien. Qui la verra? Personne. Ce qui ne l'empêche pas d'être un attentat contre la pudeur, mais son exhibitionnisme s'exerce chez les aveugles. Elle se contente d'exprimer une morale particulière. Ensuite, cette morale particulière se détache sous forme d'oeuvre. Elle exige de vivre sa vie. Elle devient le prétexte de mille malentendus qui se nomment la gloire."

(p. 13)

He goes on to say that not only does poetry express a private morality but that it is in itself a moral law. This permits him to proceed to analyse his own moral law.

"La poésie est une morale. J'appelle une morale un comportement secret, une discipline construite et conduite selon les aptitudes d'un homme refusant l'impératif catégorique, impératif qui fausse des mécanismes.

Cette morale particulière peut paraître l'immoralité même au regard de ceux qui se mentent ou qui vivent à la débâcle, de sorte que le mensonge leur deviendra vérité, et que notre vérité leur deviendra mensonge."

(pp. 15-16)

This last paragraph explains how Cocteau can regard Jean Genet as a moralist. It also explains the significance of Cocteau's famous dictum "Je suis un mensonge qui dit toujours la vérité". It can now be seen that what Cocteau intends to say is that man is socially a lie. Moreover the poet endeavours to fight the social lie when he leagues himself against the truth that is peculiar to himself and accuses it of being a lie. Above all one must remember that each individual has his own truth. This, then, is the essence of Cocteau's own moral law - one must be true to oneself. From this condition a work of art can emerge. He says:

"J'appelle une oeuvre la sueur de cette morale."

(p. 17)

And any work which does not conform to this law, which is basic for Cocteau, although it will be easily convincing and very visible, will also be merely a decorative work of fantasy.

Now a work of fantasy which is decorative will give pleasure because it does not demand the annihilation of the personality of the listener for the benefit of the personality of the speaker. Such a work permits critics and those who consult them to recognise it and also to recognise themselves within it by means of a quick glance. But beauty cannot be recognised by a quick glance.

It is obvious, then, that the moral law taking form within a work of art becomes a kind of insult. It will only convince those who know how to annihilate themselves in the face of a superior power, that is to say, those who love more than they admire. This law gathers neither electors nor admirers. It makes only friends.

Cocteau now goes on to explain how the artist becomes the vehicle of a superior force, since a work of art, once it has been born as a result of the creator's private morality, detaches itself from this morality to the extent of drawing from it only that intensity sufficient to convince (often in the opposite direction, or in a contrary sense) and even modifying within the artist those very feelings that were the cause of its origin. He writes:

"Certains philosophes s'interrogent pour savoir si les dieux sont nommés par l'homme ou s'ils inspirent à l'homme de les nommer, bref, si le poète invente ou s'il reçoit des ordres supérieurs à son sacerdoce. C'est la vieille rengaine de l'inspiration, qui n'est qu'expiration, puisqu'il est vrai que le poète reçoit des ordres, mais qu'il les reçoit d'une nuit que les siècles accumulent en sa personne, où il ne peut descendre, qui veut aller à la lumière, et dont il n'est que l'humble véhicule."

(p. 18)

And for the rest of his life Cocteau sincerely believed this "old story" concerning inspiration, which he preferred to think of as expiration, a process by means of which the poet, having received his directions and motivations from a superior force, expels from himself that poetic essence which represents the accumulated truth of centuries. Now, since the poet is the vehicle of this superior force, it is his firm and earnest duty to care for himself, to clean himself, to look over himself, to check himself endlessly, so that he will efficiently discharge the function for which, as creator, he is intended. It is the checking of the vehicle, in fact, which Cocteau considers to bring into play the private morality of the poet, and the poet must submit to its exigencies, particularly when everything would appear to prove that this thankless obedience attracts only the censure of others.

And the complete dedication of the poet to his function as poetic vehicle implies a way of life that is far from comfortable for him. In submitting to the demands of his private moral law, the poet must give evidence of great modesty. Even to dare to renounce such modesty would involve the poet in the possibility of acting upon his own



authority and thus, by substituting the purely ornamental for the implacable, he would consider himself superior to his own shade, and, on the pretext of pleasing, he would obey others rather than present to them the gods which inhabit him and oblige them to believe in these gods. Yet, by giving evidence of this very modesty, essential to the poet, he draws upon himself the hatred of incredulous people, finds himself accused of pride, artifice and heresy, and his enemies burn him symbolically on the stake. In the face of these unfortunate circumstances the poet must nevertheless carry out his task unflinchingly, a task which is all the more difficult since it is inevitable, incomprehensible to the poet himself, bringing him no hope.

Having argued the case of the poet in these terms, Cocteau now justifies his own seeming similarity to a conjuror:

"Seule la race éprise de gloriolle, mettra son espérance dans une justice posthume, qui ne saurait reconforter un poète, peu crédule en ce qui concerne l'éternité terrestre, et seulement attentif à se maintenir en équilibre sur le fil dont la grande occupation de ses compatriotes est de le faire choir.

Ce doit être ce fil au-dessus du vide qui nous fait traiter d'acrobates, et le passage de nos secrets à la lumière, véritable travail d'archéologue, qui nous fait prendre pour des prestidigitateurs."

(p. 19)

It is also in this essay that Cocteau discusses at some length the concept of time as one which is beyond the comprehension of man. Cocteau was always obsessed by the notion of time as a dimension that had much in common with space. Although he was obviously aware of Einstein's theory of relativity and its mathematical implications, he was more directly concerned with the mechanics of what he referred to as Espace-temps or Temps-espace.<sup>26</sup> Assuming that the extent of our awareness of time is determined by the nature of our cognitive powers, since the latter are limited, then the phenomenon itself is beyond our comprehension. Yet man does manage to conceive the inconceivable. How? Cocteau writes:

"L'homme est un infirme. Je veux dire qu'il est limité par des dimensions qui le finissent et l'empêchent de comprendre l'infini où les dimensions n'existent pas. C'est, plus que par la science, par la honte que lui inflige cette infirmité et la hantise d'en sortir, qu'il arrive à concevoir l'inconcevable. Du moins, à admettre que le mécanisme, où il occupe une place modeste, n'a pas été machiné à son usage.

Il commence même à reconnaître que l'éternité ne saurait

avoir été ni devenir, qu'elle est fixe en quelque sorte, qu'elle est, qu'elle se contente d'être, que les minutes valent des siècles et les siècles des minutes et qu'il n'y a ni minutes ni siècles, mais une immobilité vibrante, grouillante, terrifiante, contre laquelle son orgueil se cabre, au point qu'il en était arrivé à croire que son habitacle était le seul et qu'il en était le roi." (p. 27)

Cocteau also affirms here the problem that besets the writer who is trying to express philosophical concepts through the medium of language. He explains why language is a difficult medium of communication, at the same time referring to the limited vocabulary which he himself employs in discussing his philosophical ideas. He writes:

"Il m'est difficile d'écrire ce chapitre. Notre langue française étant faite de plusieurs langues différentes, il nous arrive d'être aussi mal entendus en France que si nous écrivions une langue étrangère. Je connais des gens qui répugnent à lire Montaigne et s'y perdent, alors qu'il me parle une langue où le moindre mot signifie. Par contre, il m'arrive de m'y reprendre à deux fois pour pénétrer le sens d'un article de journal. J'ai peu de vocables à mon service. Je les amalgame jusqu'à ce que j'en obtienne une espèce de signification." (p. 38)

Cocteau did not have a high opinion of Freud's theories. For that reason he takes care to warn that the night which he speaks of when he enjoins prospective poets to release the night within themselves by becoming its vehicle, has nothing whatsoever to do with Freud's night.

"Il ne faudrait pas confondre la nuit dont je parle et celle où Freud invitait ses malades à descendre." (p. 39)

This serves to introduce a short exposition of Freud's theories.

"La clef des songes de Freud est fort naïve. Le simple s'y baptise complexe. Son obsession sexuelle devait séduire une société oisive dont le sexe est l'axe. Les enquêtes américaines démontrent que le pluriel reste le pluriel lorsqu'il se singularise et avoue des vices qu'il s'invente.

.....

Freud est d'accès facile. Son enfer (son purgatoire) est à la mesure du grand nombre. A l'encontre de notre étude, il ne recherche que la visibilité. La nuit dont je m'occupe est différente. Elle est une grotte aux trésors. Une audace l'ouvre et un Sésame. Non pas un docteur ni une névrose. Grotte dangereuse si les trésors nous font oublier le Sésame.

C'est de cette grotte, de cette épave de luxe, de ce salon au fond d'un lac, que toutes les grandes âmes



s'enrichirent.

La sexualité n'est pas, on le devine, sans y jouer un rôle. Vinci et Michel-Ange le prouvent, mais leurs secrets n'ont que faire avec les déménagements de Freud."

(p. 40)

Finally he sums up the flaw in Freud's theory in a single sentence:

"La faute de Freud est d'avoir fait de notre nuit un garde-meubles qui la discrédite, de l'avoir ouverte alors qu'elle est sans fond et ne peut même pas s'entrouvrir."

(p. 42)

Of the other essays that go to make up the collection of Journal d'un Inconnu, De la naissance d'un poème deals specifically with the genesis of Cocteau's poem L'Ange Heurtebise, D'un morceau de bravoure is the essay in which Cocteau relates the details of his quarrel with François Mauriac over Cocteau's play Bacchus, while in D'une justification de l'injustice he writes about his relationships with Maurice Sachs, André Gide and Claude Mauriac. In the essay De l'amitié he takes up topics which he discussed already in Opium and La Difficulté d'Être.

It is, however, the essay Des distances which Cocteau himself considered to be the central piece of the book. Here he once again discusses the problems of perceiving time and distance with relevant scientific examples, referring also to the change in perspective that can be effected by transferring from one solar system to another or from one atomic system to another. These discursions into the realms of science are difficult to follow unless one has had a scientific and mathematical training. They serve as a preliminary to a final consideration on the life and death of man and the existence and end of different worlds. For Cocteau it is in these that the great enigma of existence lies. He speculates as to whether life or death really count. Perhaps in the greater perspectives of existence every single thing is transformed to become something motionless which is in a sense an uninterrupted catastrophe in which uproar is silence to us, and in which neither silence nor hubbub count more than life or death.

Cocteau also considers (what we have all at one time or another thought) that the mystery of death lies in its apparent impossibility since the infinitely small substances of which we are actually composed, could never end. The infinity of the human body can doubtlessly be ascribed to a lasting quality which is as undecipherable as our distances, and the body possesses a permanence of the invisible,

that eternity from which one tries to magnify the soul. And when Cocteau speaks of eternity it is necessary to bear in mind that this very notion of endless time itself has no sense except in relation to our human distress in considering ourselves short or small. Having made this statement, Cocteau now retreats, wishing that persons more qualified than he could consider these seeming contradictions which must obviously cease to be such in a zone where our three dimensions would provoke laughter.

In the face of these considerations Cocteau feels very humble and very much resigned to his own particular task. And he recognises that such arguments as he has put forward are not inspired by intelligence. In fact he realises that the gift he has is not that of intelligence, but rather one which permits him to have the appearance of being intelligent and, at the same time, to appear to be stupid. This he sees as his drama. It is the drama which contributes to his existential dilemma. Yet he does not feel any shame in confessing to this since, conversely, intelligence seems to him to be a transcendent form of stupidity. It complicates everything. It desiccates everything. It is the large billy-goat which leads the herds to the slaughter.

Finally, in his maturity, Cocteau is more and more convinced that all is destined, that there is no free-will. He writes:

"Plus ma route s'écourte, plus l'idée de mort me semble facile et plus il me semble rejoindre l'état normal de nullité qui était le mien avant de naître. Si un tribunal suprême nous juge, j'estime que l'idée d'avant et l'idée d'après venant de notre impuissance, nous fûmes autant jugés dans le trou qui précède que nous le serons dans le trou qui va suivre. Nos actes n'y peuvent rien, imputables à quelque courant d'air qui bouscule des feuilles mortes. Le tribunal des hommes a vite fait de se substituer à n'importe quel tribunal suprême. Et il suffit de voir avec quelle impudence il retourne sa veste, pour que j'accuse de sacrilège les juges terrestres qui décident du sort des âmes." (p. 190)

### Opium (1930)

Opium is one of the most important works that Cocteau wrote under the heading of Poésie critique and it is a definitive key to Cocteau's thought in the period between 1920 and 1930, summing up the conclusions he reached within that period in his continual search to find the elements of an artistic philosophy. This "diary of a detoxication" he dedicated to Jean Desbordes because he considered that Desbordes



possessed naturally "that profound lightness which opium imitates to a slight extent". Illustrated by the author's own rather horrendous drawings, the book was written in the nursing-home of Saint-Cloud between December 1928 and April 1929 when Cocteau was undergoing a cure there. The work is primarily a diary of the day by day detoxication cure and the thoughts which the author has upon the effects produced by the smoking of opium. There are also considerations upon the relationship between opium and poetry, and notes upon other works by the author such as the novel Les Enfants terribles and the play Orphée and La Voix humaine. There are also interesting notes on Marcel Proust, Luis Bunuel and Sergei Eisenstein.<sup>27</sup> Cocteau begins by explaining the form of the book. Since he is giving an account of a detoxication - "a wound in slow motion" - the drawings in the book are cries of suffering in slow motion, while the notes represent the stages in his passage from a state which is considered abnormal to one which is normal. Perhaps he will be accused of a lack of manners or firmness or steadfastness, but this does not worry him because:

"Le manque de tenue est le signe du héros." (p. 14)

As far as he is concerned Oscar Wilde's words to Lord Alfred Douglas are appropriate:

"Le seul crime est d'être superficiel. Tout ce qui est compris est bien." (p. 14)

He now goes on to explain how he came to be addicted a second time. He must have been badly detoxicated the first time. The effects that one experiences when undergoing a detoxication have been unsuspectingly described in perfect terms by Stravinsky in Le Sacre du Printemps. The main reason for his re-addiction, however, is that the doctors who try to cure the addict never try to remedy the disorders which cause the addiction in the first place. Cocteau, in becoming addicted to opium, was trying to discover an artificial equilibrium, which for him was better than no equilibrium at all. He affirms that his smoking of opium was done in moderation, as he was hoping thus to avoid addiction.

He now goes on to describe some of the effects of the detoxication process. Above all one's sense of perception is affected and also one's sense of time.

"Il semble que l'organisme sorte d'un hivernage, de cette étrange économie des tortues, des marmottes, des crocodiles. Notre aveuglement, notre obstination à juger tout d'après notre rythme, nous faisaient prendre la lenteur du végétal pour une sérénité ridicule." (pp. 23-24)

And now he has recourse to the mechanics of the film in order to reinforce the point he is making:

"Rien n'illustre mieux le drame d'une désintoxication que ces films accélérés, qui dénoncent les grimaces, les gestes, les contorsions du règne végétal. Le même progrès dans le domaine auditif nous permettra sans doute d'entendre les cris d'une plante." (p. 24)

At this point, in order to illustrate what he is about to say about opium, Cocteau inserts his drawing La douleur exquise which at first glance could depict the body of a child, its head turned upwards, its torso cut away to reveal its inner organs, apparently armless, set in a mass of what appear to be visceral organs. It also strangely resembles a small Buddha. Upon closer inspection the face could also be that of a stunted adult. Cocteau could not have presented a more effective deterrent to the potential smoker of opium. But he is strongly in favour of the use of opium despite its bad side effects and writes:

"Naturellement l'opium reste unique et son euphorie supérieure à celle de la santé. Je lui dois mes heures parfaites. Il est dommage qu'au lieu de perfectionner la désintoxication, la médecine n'essaye pas de rendre l'opium inoffensif.

Mais là, nous retombons sur le problème du progrès. La souffrance est-elle une règle ou un lyrisme?

Il me semble que, sur une terre si vieille, si ridée, si replâtrée, où tant de compromis sévissent et de conventions risibles, l'opium éliminable adouciraient les moeurs et causerait plus de bien que la fièvre d'agir ne fait de mal." (p. 27)

Now, while he is still undergoing the cure, Cocteau has decided to write his notes because he knows that later he will no longer believe that which he is presently experiencing. He proceeds to describe in detail the peculiarities of opium, how it affects the smoker, and then repeats that opium can be a positive, helpful agency. Then, characteristically, he uses the drama of opium to illustrate another theory dear to his heart:

"Le drame de l'opium n'est autre à mes yeux que le drame du confort et de l'inconfort. Le confort tue. L'inconfort crée. Je parle de l'inconfort matériel et spirituel.

Prendre l'opium, sans céder au confort absolu qu'il propose, c'est échapper, dans le domaine spirituel, aux traces stupides qui n'ont rien à voir avec l'inconfort dans le domaine sensible." (p. 39)



Then Cocteau explains why he smokes opium. It provides for him a kind of fixative which he lacks in his physical make-up. What is this fixative? It is that particularly absurd sentiment, stronger than reason, which temporarily allows the person endowed with it to imagine, for example, that a group of children playing are not children but actually dwarfs. In other words, this fixative allows the individual temporarily to discard the rules of logic so that the realities of life can be tolerated. Anyone who is not endowed with this fixative is continually aware of the speed of his existence which becomes intolerable. Cocteau found in opium a substitute for the fixative:

"L'opium m'apportait ce fixatif. Sans l'opium, les projets : mariages, voyages, me paraissent aussi fous que si quelqu'un qui tombe par la fenêtre souhaitait se lier avec les occupants des chambres devant lesquelles il passe."  
(p. 40)

After these early pages devoted to opium, Cocteau turns to considerations of a general nature. These are sometimes concisely penetrating, particularly where Cocteau tries to describe the characteristics of other writers, as he sees them. Thus he writes:

"Rimbaud garde le prestige du recel, du sang; chez lui le diamant est taillé en vue d'une effraction, à seule fin de couper une vitre, une vitrine."  
(p. 42)

"Mallarmé, le savant, nous fatigue. Il mérite cette dédicace suspecte des FLEURS DU MAL, que Gautier ne mérite pas.

Mallarmé influence plutôt le style du journalisme."

"Chaque vers de Mallarmé fut, dès sa naissance, une belle ride fine, studieuse, noble, profonde. Cet air plus vieux qu'éternel empêche son oeuvre de vieillir par endroits et lui donne toute une apparence ridée, analogue à celles des lignes de la main, lignes qui seraient décoratives au lieu d'être prophétiques."

"Baudelaire se ride, mais conserve une jeunesse étonnante."  
(p. 42)

A dictum which helps to explain Cocteau's obsession with the Dargelos ideal occurs on page 47 of the text:

"Légalement il faut être fidèle à une personne, humainement à un type."  
(p. 47)

Ever vacillating between the concepts of life and death, in a moment of insight, Cocteau explains another of his motives for smoking opium:

"L'ennui mortel du fumeur guéri. Tout ce qu'on fait dans la vie, même l'amour, on le fait dans le train express qui roule vers la mort. Fumer l'opium, c'est quitter le train en marche; c'est s'occuper d'autre chose que de la vie, de la mort."  
(p. 48)

Explaining the motivations of his early artistic development, Cocteau describes how at the age of eighteen he was obsessed by images. Everywhere he saw images that he wanted to express, and which he feared might never see the light were he to die prematurely. At this stage, the range of images he wished to express was very broad, almost ungraspable. Having said many things, he experienced a sense of deliverance. He began to observe with a certain disinterestedness. After the war he found that the things he wished to express were of a rarer order. The range was more limited. His ideas could not be taken from him since he had gone ahead at such a pace:

"Je respirais comme un coureur qui se retourne, qui se couche, qui se calme, qui ne voit même plus la silhouette des autres à l'horizon."  
(pp. 51-52)

It is also obvious that Cocteau very much regrets what he sees as the real indiscretions of his youthful years when he was in so many ways ignorant:

"Je ne savais rien de rien. J'étais terriblement éveillé, ambitieux, absurde. Il m'a fallu des sommeils pour comprendre, pour vivre, pour regretter."  
(pp. 52-53)

For Cocteau to be awake was to be in a state in which, when one creates, that which is produced is of no significance. Above all, one is negatively pandering to one's own ego and thus being absurd. Those works which he created when he was "awake" were the ones which preceded Le Potomak:

"Je n'ai pas sur la conscience beaucoup d'oeuvres écrites éveillé, sauf mes livres qui précèdent le POTOMAK, où j'ai commencé à dormir : mais j'en ai. Que ne donnerais-je pour qu'elles n'existent pas!"  
(pp. 53-54)

Another recurring theme in Cocteau's awareness of the weaknesses of our age is that of inattention. He is very severe in his attitude to this great sin of the twentieth century. In Opium he refers to it in respect of theatre audiences:

"J'observais, en jouant Heurtebise dans ORPHÉE, que le public le plus attentif échange des remarques; donc qu'il saute des bouts de dialogue indispensables.



Le théâtre exige-t-il qu'on bâcle? Les remplissages, les transitions lentes sont-ils inévitables? Ne peut-on obliger le public à se taire?" (p. 54)

Then, seeing no remedy to the problem, he suggests that the audience is not entirely to blame, having been corrupted by bad practices:

"On se demande si le public ne pourrait pas, à la longue, devenir attentif. En le préparant, en l'hypnotisant, en lui jetant des rimes comme des os pour lui tenir les narines frémissantes, on l'a perverti." (p. 57)

Cocteau was always fascinated by the generous incidence of coincidence in his life. He does not, of course, regard the phenomenon as actually being coincidence since everything is, in a sense, ordained. Coincidences therefore become a manifestation of what he refers to as "le merveilleux". Now "le merveilleux" arises from an exceptional condition in which the normal order of things is, through some unusual circumstance, temporarily upset. Thus "le merveilleux" can readily be confused with small coincidences. He cites some amazing examples of the workings of this upsetting force.

There was the time when a rehearsal of Cocteau's play Orphée was being held in his house at rue d'Anjou. The rehearsal was taking place in the hall and at the moment when Marcel Herrand, the actor, spoke the words: "Avec ces gants vous traverserez les glaces comme de l'eau", a loud crashing sound was heard from another part of the flat. Upon investigation it was discovered that a mirror in a dressing table had shattered and fallen in pieces to the floor. On another occasion when Glenway Wescott and Monroe Wheeler had arrived in Paris for the first performance of Orphée, on their way to the theatre they had an accident, their car window was shattered and they suddenly found themselves looking at the head of a white horse which had penetrated the glass.<sup>28</sup>

About a year later when Wescott and Wheeler were translating Orphée at Villefranche-sur-Mer, they remarked that a glazier would, in a sense, be incomprehensible to an American audience. Cocteau agreed that to see a glazier in New-York, indeed even in Paris, was now a rare thing. Cocteau went on to describe to them what a French glazier, carrying sheets of glass in his special rack over his shoulders, looked like, and as they were walking in the garden, they suddenly saw a glazier walking along the empty street.

Yet another "coincidence" occurred when Orphée was being performed

in Mexico. An earthquake demolished the theatre during the scene of the Bacchantes, injuring several people. When the theatre was reconstructed, Orphée was presented again. At a certain moment during the performance it was announced that the play could not continue. The actor playing the role of Orpheus had fallen dead in the wings just as he was about to step back through the mirror. Nevertheless, Cocteau cautions, it is necessary to face the workings of the unknown with a certain calm and reserve:

"Les tables tournent. Les dormeurs parlent. C'est un fait. Il est écoeurant de le nier. Mais que nous trichions exprès ou sans le savoir, par l'entremise d'une force que notre impatience dégage, revient au même en ce qui concerne le contact avec l'inconnu.

Plus on est avide, plus il est indispensable de reculer coûte que coûte les bornes du merveilleux." (p. 63)

In discussing the strong tendency of the age towards individualism Cocteau finds a reason for the apparent hostility between artists of similar inclinations. He says:

"Nous sommes à une telle époque d'individualisme qu'on ne parle plus jamais de disciples; on parle de voleurs.

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D'un individualisme de plus en plus vif ne résultent que solitudes. Maintenant on ne se déteste plus entre artistes d'un autre bord, mais entre artistes du même bord, entre hommes qui partagent la même solitude, la même cellule, qui exploitent le même carré de fouilles. C'est ce qui fait que notre pire ennemi sera seul capable de nous comprendre à fond et vice versa." (pp. 71-72)

Cocteau was one of the first advocates of the philosophy of living dangerously. In the section in Opium to which he has given the title Choisir ses pièges he alludes to this very philosophy. His theme here is that the rhythm of our lives unfolds in periods which are all in fact the same. It is only the manner in which these periods present themselves to us which renders them unrecognizable. Events or people, which are in themselves a form of trap, are all the more dangerous since they arise from or belong to the same basic law and they wear a mask with sincerity. In the long run it is the act of suffering which awakens us to and indicates a number of traps. But, unless we are content to live insipidly, we must accept certain traps, although we know that they will involve us in disastrous consequences. We are therefore wise if we are mad when circumstances



make it worthwhile to be so.

Still on the theme of life, a few pages further on, Cocteau maintains that it can sometimes be passed with too much perfection, too much comfort. He is alluding here to the comfort that is imposed upon us by modern scientific discoveries. The charm of the imperfections of former ages has now been lost, and we live in a kind of sham theatre. It is as if we were part of an immense audience watching a sound film which is flawed by visual banalities or platitudes. If the sound of the film could be suppressed the banality would be put into focus and the young would arise to sack this sham theatre and would learn to use wisely the charm of the old imperfections which have been destroyed by luxury, commerce and the inevitable scientific comfort of today.

Cocteau often alluded to the fact that the act of drawing and that of writing were, for him, similar activities. There is a notable paragraph in Opium where he interestingly refers to this. He says:

"Je n'aimerais pas qu'on pût me surprendre en train d'écrire. J'ai toujours dessiné. Ecrire, pour moi, c'est dessiner, nouer les lignes de telle sorte qu'elles se fassent écriture, ou les dénouer de telle sorte que l'écriture devienne dessin. Je ne sors pas de là. J'écris, j'essaye de limiter exactement le profil d'une idée, d'un acte. Somme toute, je cerne des fantômes, je trouve les contours du vide, je dessine."

(p. 107)

The economy of means which is characteristic of his single line drawing is thus carried over to his writing and suggests that, in describing an idea, a concept or an act, Cocteau deliberately presents them in concise outline.

In a short paragraph, tucked away at the end of this section of Opium, we unexpectedly encounter one of the explanations for Cocteau's existential dilemma. It helps to clarify the reasons for his apparently willing assumption of what can be seen as a false persona, if one objectively examines the real man. He writes:

"Créer : tuer autour de soi tout ce qui empêche de se projeter dans le temps par l'entremise d'une apparence quelconque, l'intérêt de cette apparence n'étant qu'un subterfuge pour se rendre visible après sa mort."

(pp. 107-108)

The truth which Cocteau is expressing here is appropriate in that it

is particularly prophetic in his own case. With the disappearance of his false day-to-day persona, partly conferred upon him, partly assumed dangerously by him, we can, after his death, see him as a very visible being in his works, which, while he was still alive, were not sufficiently studied in depth.

The short section which follows has the title of Surprises Du Tribunal De Dieu. Always intrigued by the idea of being judged by a higher tribunal,<sup>29</sup> we find tribunals of all kinds as a recurring element in many of Cocteau's works. In this instance he is alluding specifically to judgment by the Almighty. Characteristically he opens the short section with a little parable:

"Une petite fille vole des cerises. Toute sa longue vie se passe à racheter cette faute par des prières. La dévote meurt.

DIEU : Vous êtes élue parce que vous avez volé des cerises."

(p. 108)

It is also in this section that Cocteau offers his own interpretation of the destruction of the innocent fig-tree by Jesus. Cocteau maintains that the gesture by Jesus demands comprehension in the same manner as works which appear to be obscure because they are so concise. Above all, he maintains, the gesture has nothing whatsoever to do with the absurd despotism of kings.

In the section that follows entitled Les Dessesins de ma Plume Les Dessins Obscurs de la Providence we find an explanation for the common misconception that Cocteau's main work of art was his life. It arises from the assertion often made by the poet that the artist is constantly in danger of becoming what he creates, which is not quite the same thing as making his life his masterpiece. It is true that, in discussing the hedonist, Cocteau writes:

"Il ne cherche pas à faire des chefs-d'oeuvre, il cherche à en devenir un lui-même, le plus inconnu, le plus égoïste."

(p. 119)

And discussing a particular type of painter he also writes:

"Le peintre qui aime peindre les arbres devenant un arbre."

(p. 120)

In expressing the significance of the death of Thomas in the novel Thomas l'Imposteur he also says:

"La mort de Thomas l'Imposteur, c'est l'enfant qui joue au cheval, devenu cheval."

(p. 120)



All of these are points made in specific cases to illustrate a point of view or an idea. Nowhere does Cocteau assert that he himself is aspiring to make of his own life a work of art.

Returning to the theme of opium, Cocteau now very impressionistically describes an opium den which he once visited aboard a steamer. In vividly theatrical terms he captures the atmosphere of the setting, and ends with an effective comparison of the young opium smokers with the twisted olive trees of Provence growing on red, flat soil:

"La scène est éclairée par les veilleuses des lampes, au sommet desquelles la drogue crépite. Les corps s'imbriquent les uns dans les autres et, sans soulever la moindre surprise, la moindre mauvaise grâce, nous primes place là où il ne restait vraiment de place pour personne, nos jambes en chien de fusil, nos nuques appuyés sur des escabeaux. Notre remue-ménage ne dérange même pas un des boys qui dort la tête contre ma tête. Un cauchemar le convulse; il a coulé au fond du sommeil qui l'étouffe, qui lui entre par la bouche ouverte, par les grosses narines, par les oreilles décollées. Sa figure tuméfiée, fermée comme un poing furieux, il transpire, il se retourne, il déchire ses loques de soie. Il semble qu'un coup de bistouri le délivrerait, ferait sortir le cauchemar. Ses grimaces forment un contraste extraordinaire avec le calme des autres, calme végétal, calme qui me rappelle quelque chose de familier... Quoi? Sur ces planches les corps recroquevillés où le squelette visible sous la peau très pâle n'est plus que l'armature délicate d'un songe... Au fait, ce sont les oliviers de Provence que ces jeunes fumeurs m'évoquent, les oliviers tortueux sur la terre rouge, plate, et dont le nuage d'argent reste suspendu en l'air."

(pp. 132-135)

And, since Cocteau associates the effects of opium with a feeling of extreme lightness, a sensation of bodilessness, he ends the description of the scene with an apt observation:

"Dans ce poste, je n'étais pas loin de croire que tant de légèreté profonde permettait seule au très monumental navire de flotter sur l'eau."

(p. 135)

This image recalls the similar one at the end of Thomas l'Imposteur where he is describing the cemetery of the marines at Nieuport as a brig adrift, carrying opium, its crew lying in a deep sleep.

Notwithstanding the fact that he himself is drawn to use opium, Cocteau nevertheless maintains that he is not defending the drug:

"Je n'essaye pas de défendre la drogue; j'essaye d'y voir clair dans le noir, de mettre les pieds dans le plat,

d'aborder de face des problèmes qu'on aborde toujours de profil."

(p. 135)

His attitude to sexual behaviour shows a similar indulgent comprehension:

"Un homme normal, au point de vue sexuel, devrait être capable de faire l'amour avec n'importe quoi, car l'instinct de l'espèce est aveugle; il travaille en gros. C'est ce qui explique les moeurs coulantes, attribuées au vice, du peuple et surtout des marins. L'acte sexuel compte seul. Une brute s'inquiète peu des circonstances qui le provoquent. Je ne parle pas de l'amour.

Le vice commence au choix. Selon l'hérédité, l'intelligence, la fatigue nerveuse du sujet, ce choix se raffine jusqu'à devenir inexplicable, comique ou criminel."

(pp. 136-137)

The line of argument here closely resembles that which we have already found in certain passages in Le Livre Blanc.

Cocteau now follows with a section titled Etrange Désintéressement de la Sexualité par l'Existence d'une Progéniture Spirituelle in which he expounds what he considers to be a basic condition of the creative process which produces a work of art:

"L'art naît du coït entre l'élément mâle et l'élément femelle qui nous composent tous, plus équilibrés chez l'artiste que chez les autres hommes. Il résulte d'une sorte d'inceste, d'amour de soi avec soi, de parthénogénèse. C'est ce qui rend le mariage si dangereux chez les artistes, pour lesquels il représente un pléonasma, un effort de monstre vers la norme. Le signe du 'triste sire' qui étoile tant de génies, vient de ce que l'instinct de création, satisfait par ailleurs, laisse le plaisir sexuel libre de s'exercer dans le pur domaine de l'esthétique et le porte aussi vers des formes infécondes."

(pp. 137-138)

Cocteau could only have reached such a theory concerning the creative process as a result of the elements present in his own nature. It is, in a sense, a variation of the theory of the sublimation of the sex instinct in the production of a work of art. The fact that the creative instinct, satisfied in other respects, leaves the sexual instinct free to exercise itself in the pure realm of aesthetics, at the same time leading it towards sterile forms of expression, is also significant, and in Cocteau's case it would help to explain the variable quality of some of his works.

With regard to the relationship between the creative artist and his public, Cocteau has two interesting observations to make at this juncture. The first concerns poetry. Cocteau maintains, correctly, that poetry is untranslatable from one language to another, because



poetic thought demands a specific mould and, if the mould is changed, so is the thought. Thus it is impossible to translate poetry satisfactorily. I have already indicated that Cocteau tends to regard the public with a certain lofty disdain. Here he develops his attitude by making two specific observations. The first, referring to the taste of the public, says:

"La foule aime les oeuvres qui imposent leur chant, qui l'hypnotisent, hypertrophiant sa sensibilité jusqu'à endormir le sens critique."  
(p. 141)

And he adds misogynistically:

"La foule est féminine; elle aime obéir ou mordre."  
(p. 141)

He then goes on to state that works of genius demand comprehension from a public endowed with similar qualities of genius. As it is impossible to find such a public, one is compelled to find a substitute. This consists of a suitably receptive state which can be obtained by the electricity which is generated by a conglomeration of mediocre people. It is indeed this very substitute which can permit one to delude oneself about the fate of any theatrical work. Implicit in this observation is the fact that the public is irremediably stupid and that great artists despise it for its stupidity.

Now Cocteau proceeds to justify another of those traits to be found in some of his work which many people find suspect. He begins by suggesting that the word génie in the Stendhalian sense should be interpreted as meaning a brilliant skill or aptitude. He has in mind here the famous observation made by Stendhal when he described a lady entering a carriage with génie. No poet or artist shows more evidence of this génie than when he engages in certain farces or charades, certain improvised disguises which render him suspect to ponderous people. The artist is at such a moment expressing himself without having recourse to any of the calculations or dead materials that are indispensable for the lasting quality of a work of art. The flash of génie which the artist is expressing is in fact a flamboyant moment of lyricism which is uncontaminated by the boredom which exerts such a fascination upon serious idiots. No one, better than Picasso, gives more evidence of this type of génie. Yet even in this artistic process there lurks a danger. Cocteau illustrates it:

"On n'en sort pas. Si Picasso, dans une de ses crises contre la peinture, sautait par la fenêtre, M. X..., le collectionneur génial, dirait : "Cela fait une jolie



tache", achèterait le trottoir et le ferait encadrer avec une fausse fenêtre, par Z..., l'encadreur génial."

(p. 144)

Having so often found himself in a situation where he was liable to be unfairly judged, Cocteau maintains that he was involuntarily drawn to such situations by an evil force. He writes:

"Ma nature a besoin de sérénité. Une mauvaise force me pousse aux scandales comme un somnambule sur le toit. La sérénité de la drogue m'abritait contre cette force qui m'oblige à m'asseoir sur la sellette, alors que la simple lecture d'un journal me détruit."

(p. 151)

Now he turns to another favourite topic - speed. Cocteau really uses the word vitesse in the sense of frequency as a scientific term to convey the notion of the number of vibrations, cycles or other recurrences in unit time which Cocteau equates with the state of being or existing. Thus he states that everything is a question of speed. He adds as a note to the word vitesse:

"Vitesse immobile. La vitesse en soi. OPIUM : la vitesse en soie."

(p. 151)

After the plants, whose frequency, being different from ours, gives us evidence only of a relative immobility, and the speed of metals which shows us even more relative immobility, there begin worlds which are either too slow or too rapid to allow us to perceive them or even to be perceived by them. Perhaps one day the cinema might be able to film the invisible, and thus to make it visible, by adapting it to our particular rhythm just as the slow motion film sequence adapts to our frequency the gesticulation of flowers. Here is where opium fulfils a certain function. By changing our speeds it places within our reach the possibility of the awareness of worlds which are super-imposed upon one another, interpenetrate, worlds whose existence we do not even suspect.

Coming to grips again with the problem of how best to give form to his poetic concepts Cocteau is once again concerned with style. The manner in which he describes what he considers to be an ideal non-style is rich in varied metaphors. He writes:

"Je ne condamne pas la musique verbale et tout ce qu'elle entraîne de dissonances, de duretés, de douceurs nouvelles. Mais une plastique de l'âme, cela me sollicite beaucoup plus. Opposer une géométrie vivante au charme décoratif des phrases. Avoir du style et non un style. Un style qui ne se laisse pasticher d'aucune sorte. On ne saurait



pas par où le prendre. 'Un style qui ne naisse que d'une coupe de moi, d'un durcissement de la pensée par le passage brutal de l'intérieur à l'extérieur. Avec cette halte ahurie du taureau sortant du toril. Exposer nos fantômes au jet d'une fontaine pétrifiante, ne pas apprendre à figoler des objets ingénieux mais à pétrifier au passage n'importe quoi d'informe qui sort de nous. Rendre volumineux des concepts." (p. 155)

This process of "expiration" implies a kind of spontaneous impassivity which permits the poet to give form to his concepts, obviously with the aid of the superior force which is merely using the poet as its medium. Although opium permits the smoker to give shape or form to that which is formless, it unfortunately prevents the smoker from communicating this privilege to others. At all costs it is necessary to cure oneself of the finical pains that one takes to write. Style which comes from outside oneself is unworthy, even if it superimposes itself precisely upon one's inner style. Cocteau then illustrates this rule with his famous dictum:

"Le seul style possible, c'est la pensée faite chair."<sup>30</sup>  
(p. 156)

Cocteau was often criticised for not taking life seriously enough. Those who criticised did not realise that his attitude arose from his smoking of opium. Again we have an explanation in Opium of this Coctelian trait:

"Il est difficile de vivre sans l'opium après l'avoir connu parce qu'il est difficile, après avoir connu l'opium, de prendre la terre au sérieux. Et à moins d'être un saint, il est difficile de vivre sans prendre la terre au sérieux."  
(p. 162)

Cocteau now reminisces about Marcel Proust. He sees him in a number of settings, in his flat, at Larue's, at the Louvre where they went one afternoon to see Mantegna's painting of Saint Sebastian. On this occasion Cocteau saw Proust in the following terms:

"Proust avait l'air d'une lampe allumée en plein jour, d'une sonnerie de téléphone dans une maison vide."  
(p. 167)

Here we have a fine example of Cocteau's "clever" writing with its unusual visual and aural imagery. The details that Cocteau describes of his relationship with Proust are of an entertaining rather than of an informative nature, although they do shed some light on their peculiarities. Cocteau relates how he found Proust waiting for him one evening at midnight. He was sitting on a bench, in the dark, on



the landing outside Cocteau's flat. When he asked Proust why he had not gone in, as he always left his door unlocked -

"-Cher Jean, me répondit-il de sa voix qu'il barbouillait avec sa main et qui était une plainte, un rire, cher Jean, Napoléon a fait tuer un homme qui l'avait attendu chez lui."  
(p. 168)

Cocteau treasured a notebook in which Proust dedicated verses to him. Unfortunately the book was stolen along with many of Cocteau's papers but he remembers:

"Afin de me couvrir de fourrure et de moire,  
Sans de ses larges yeux renverser l'encre noire,  
Tel un sylphe au plafond, tel sur la neige un ski,  
Jean sauta sur la table auprès de Nijinski."  
(p. 168)

These verses were written at the time when Cocteau was in the habit of dining at Larue's with members of the company of the Ballets Russes.

Proust and Cocteau also indulged in the fanciful activity of addressing letters to one another in verse. The postal authorities evidently did not object. Cocteau quotes two of his own examples:

"Facteur, porte ces mots, te débarrassant d'eux,  
Au Boulevard Haussmann chez Marcel Proust, 102."

and

"102, Boulevard Haussmann, oust!  
Courez, facteur, chez Marcel Proust."  
(p. 167)

A few pages further on we find Cocteau in a reminiscing mood. He relates how, after the death of his grandfather, when he was going through the old man's room, he came upon a full box of Nazir cigarettes and a wild cherry cigarette holder. Pocketing this treasure he later found himself one spring morning amidst the high grass and wild pinks, opening the box of cigarettes to sample his first real smoke. In a few vivid lines Cocteau now describes the importance of that experience which initiated him into the world of adults:

"La sensation de liberté, de luxe, d'avenir, fut si forte, que jamais, quoi qu'il arrive, je n'en retrouverai d'analogue. On me nommerait roi, on me guillotinerait, la surprise, l'étrangeté ne seraient plus intenses que cette ouverture interdite sur l'univers des grandes personnes; univers de deuils et d'amertume."  
(p. 180)

In the following section Cocteau writes about childhood. In some respects guilty of monstrous little acts himself as a child, he is fascinated by this element in the nature of children and relates an incident which occurred when, in 1915, he was serving with the ambulance



corps. When a German field hospital had been captured, one day a little boy of eleven years was discovered in a corner busily engaged with a pair of nail scissors in removing the buttons which he was collecting as souvenirs from the uniform of a German officer whose leg had been amputated. Cocteau describes the officer's reaction to the obnoxious child's behaviour:

"L'officier, ses yeux de statue entr'ouverts, regardait le très atroce garnement qui continuait sa récolte de souvenirs, comme sur un arbre." (pp. 181-182)

In the following paragraph, with the true freedom of the poet, Cocteau turns to fifteenth century Florence to quote a similar example of the monstrosity of children:

"Savonarole exploita cette monstruosité de l'enfance. Son équipe de boys-scouts pillait, cassait, arrachait, traînait les chefs-d'oeuvre jusqu'au bûcher purificateur. Les mêmes enfants durent suivre, sans perdre un détail, les préparatifs de son supplice." (p. 182)

No one more than Cocteau could be an authority on this topic since, as a child, he indulged in a great measure of mischievous petulance at the expense of his suffering mother. Cocteau is very much aware that a great deal of the mischief perpetrated by children is due to their great desire for play-acting. To what extent such an inclination, carried to extremes, can play havoc within a family is illustrated by the following anecdote which Cocteau recalls:

"J'aimais la petite B... J'avais deux ans de moins qu'elle. Pour l'épouser, disais-je, j'attendrai d'avoir deux ans de plus qu'elle. Cette petite B... voulait être plainte. Elle se brossait les gencives à sec. Puis, l'air vague, toussait, crachait, montrait un mouchoir rouge. Toute la famille, consternée, se rendait en Suisse." (p. 187)

After a fairly long section devoted to the writer Raymond Roussel in which he sees points of similarity in the material circumstances of Roussel and Marcel Proust which render all the more remarkable the absolute dissimilarity of their work, Cocteau now comes to those pages in Opium where he discusses the cinema.<sup>31</sup> Up to the year 1929 there were many films that Cocteau had found to be funny and splendid but only four which he considered to be great. These were Buster Keaton's Sherlock Holmes Junior, Charles Chaplin's The Gold Rush, Eisenstein's The Battleship Potemkin and Luis Bunuel's Un chien andalou. In the Keaton film he found evidence of the perfect use of what he always referred to as the merveilleux. In the Chaplin film he found a



masterpiece equal in every detail and general impression to the Greek theatre, while Potemkin was a perfect example of a people expressing itself through the agency of one man. Bunuel's film exemplifies for Cocteau the style of the soul. Where the films made in Hollywood had come more and more to resemble manufactured products such as cars, which year after year became more and more beautiful, with Bunuel's film we are back at the stage of the pushbike.<sup>32</sup> Quite contrary to the Freudian interpretations often put upon Bunuel's film, Cocteau sees it rather as an expression of "ce fantôme du réveil des condamnés à mort, que l'écran nous montre comme des objets sur une table". He maintains that Bunuel looks at his characters at their paroxysmal moments of anguish, when it becomes natural and inevitable to see a man who is well dressed ploughing a Louis XVI room. In other words, at such moments of stress the illogical can be accepted as logical. Making a comparison with Bunuel's later film L'Age d'Or (1930) Cocteau considers it to be the first anti-plastic masterpiece since it has virtually no actual form or shape. The only element he criticises in the film is that in it strength always appears accompanied by its conventional attributes. Nevertheless he sees the film as the truest study that could be made about the habits and customs of men.

Turning to the Eisenstein film, The Battleship Potemkin, Cocteau considers that it illustrates perfectly Goethe's sentence: "The opposite of reality in order to obtain the highest point of truth". If Bunuel were to intrigue Eisenstein it would be through the intermediary of Freud. The film by Bunuel would shock a Russian as being the limit of exhibitionism on the part of the individual - Bunuel. Bunuel could reply that Potemkin is a documentary which gives a brief on Eisenstein, since by means of his film the mass of the people is incarnated in a single man who simultaneously expresses it and himself. One is always documenting and every work is a work of circumstance. But it must be said that one of the many successes of Potemkin is that it gives the impression of having been made and interpreted by no one in particular. One of the remarkable truths about the film is that the incident on the Odessa steps was created at the last moment. It did not actually happen. Yet the incident has now become part of Russian history. Tragic happenings derive their power from these little portentous and anonymous anecdotes which, travelling from mouth to mouth, are perfected so that they become part of history.



Always very much au courant with technical developments and their application to aid the arts, Cocteau now proceeds to discuss the possibilities as yet undeveloped of the gramophone record. Records of the spoken voice in the year 1930 sounded to Cocteau like a photograph of the voice for the ear. To solve the problem Cocteau would like to explore the astounding possibilities of records that could become auditory objects. For example by the improvised placing of the words, or by the fortuitous combination of serious words with the sound of a dance orchestra, original effects could be obtained.<sup>33</sup> Also, anticipating a device that would eventually be used to popularise records by crooners, Cocteau suggests the following recording technique:

"Parler bas très près du microphone. S'appliquer le microphone contre le cou. Je suppose qu'ainsi n'importe quelle voix agréable battrait Chaliapine, Caruso." (p. 213)

Another technique which occurs to Cocteau is that of speeding up or slowing down recordings and re-recording them at normal speed in order to give the effect of deepened or heightened voices. Again, this is a technique which is generally practised today, made easier by the use of the tape recorder of variable speeds. In altering the timbre of the human voice in re-recording, Cocteau is aiming at the effect of a machine-like voice that could be associated with the ancient mask.

Ever intrigued by his oneiric experiences, Cocteau now describes the complicated nature of a dream, the first complete dream, which he has had since he started his cure. Here he demonstrates how a dream within a dream can borrow an episode from an even earlier dream:

"J'ai fait, cette nuit, mon premier rêve, long, colorié, depuis la cure, avec des volumes et une atmosphère générale. Intoxiqué, je me rappelais un fantôme de scénario du rêve, le cadre qu'il remplissait. Aujourd'hui, je me rappelle presque tout le rêve, habité de personnages exacts et de personnages fictifs, des dialogues très plausibles avec des femmes que je ne connais pas mais que je devrais connaître. Il y avait Mary Garden. A propos d'un itinéraire et d'un film tiré du DIABLE AU CORPS, ce rêve empruntait un épisode, non à la réalité, mais à un autre rêve dont je me rappelais l'avoir fait au moment où je rêvais l'épisode. Je pris alors mon rêve pour une réalité prédite par un rêve." (pp. 218-219)

Cocteau goes on to explain that the episodes of dreams, instead of dissolving on some nocturnal screen and thus quickly evaporating, grain deeply the murky areas of our bodies. A form of education or training by means of dreams exists. It superimposes itself upon all



others. Any person trained forever by dreams can be said to have thoroughly undergone their inhumanities. Classical dreams, that is to say the first dreams which we experience as children, far from being naive, feed upon tragedy. If we consider the gags in an American film and the montage of films generally, what happens to us in dreaming is that the dream, instead of projecting its horrible gags, edits the film within us and leaves it there. Then the gags can be used for other montages. Finally, Cocteau wonders whether Freud's disciples could interpret the meaning of a recurring dream which he had several times a week for many years. Here it is:

"Mon père, qui était mort, ne l'était pas. Il était devenu un perroquet du Pré-Catelan, un des perroquets dont le charivari reste à jamais lié, pour moi, au goût du lait mousseux. Pendant ce rêve, ma mère et moi nous allions nous asseoir à une table de la ferme du Pré-Catalan, qui mélangeait plusieurs fermes avec la terrasse des cacatoès du Jardin d'Acclimatation. Je savais que ma mère savait et ne savait pas que je savais, et je devinais qu'elle cherchait lequel de ces oiseaux mon père était devenu, et pourquoi il l'était devenu. Je me réveillais en larmes à cause de sa figure qui essayait de sourire."

(pp. 220-223)

Obviously there is no point in offering an interpretation of such a dream. It is a dream with very personal motivations which can have real meaning only for the dreamer - Cocteau. Indeed it does have a strong element of farce in the situation of Cocteau's father having been turned into a parrot but this somewhat ridiculous aspect of the dream is attenuated by the element of pathos at the end of the dream where Cocteau's mother is bravely trying to smile in the midst of her embarrassment.

Oddly enough, in the short sections which follow immediately upon the re-telling of his dream, Cocteau discusses the significance of birds for him. Cocteau equates birds with artists, starting with a play on words in which he uses the French word oiseau in talking of Paolo Uccello. He writes:

"Seul un oiseau pouvait se permettre de peindre la  
PROFANATION DE L'HOSTIE. Seul un oiseau était assez pur,  
assez égoïste, assez cruel."

(pp. 223-224)

He therefore sees in Uccello the qualities of purity, selfishness and cruelty.

Continuing the theme of the equation of birds to artists, Cocteau next quotes a few lines from a letter which he received from Corot:



"J'ai trouvé ce matin un plaisir extrême à revoir un petit tableau de moi. Il n'y avait rien là-dessus, mais c'était charmant et comme peint par un oiseau." (p. 224)

Then he quotes an enigmatic statement scrawled by Guillaume Apollinaire in the form of a banderole at the top of a short letter he once received from the poet:

"L'oiseau chante avec ses doigts."<sup>34</sup> (p. 224)

Finally in a footnote, Cocteau makes a remarkable observation upon the work of Giacometti:

"Je connais de Giacometti des sculptures si solides, si légères, qu'on dirait de la neige gardant les empreintes d'un oiseau." (p. 225, footnote)

Cocteau's own hands, photographed in large close-up, bear a remarkable resemblance, with their slender elongated fingers, to the long claws of a bird.

Referring briefly once again to poetry, Cocteau revealingly equates it with algebra:

"Importance inexplicable de la poésie. La poésie considérée en tant qu'algèbre.

D'abord elle ne sollicite que les âmes les plus dures, les âmes qui devraient la mépriser comme un luxe; le pire de tous."

(pp. 230-231)

Returning to the theme of false legends he reveals that they can sometimes serve a positive purpose in a poet's life. The incomprehension of the public figures largely in the construction of false legends. In stating this truth, Cocteau is again giving evidence of the disdain with which he looks upon the general public.<sup>35</sup> He writes:

"La légende s'amasse autour des poètes qui habitent une maison de verre. S'ils se cachent, s'ils habitent quelque cave inconnue, le public pense : 'Tu te caches, tu veux nous faire croire qu'il y a quelque chose où il n'y a rien.'

En revanche, s'il regarde la maison de verre, le public pense : Tes gestes trop simples cachent quelque chose. Tu nous dupes. Tu nous mystifies; et chacun commence à deviner, à déformer, à interpréter, à chercher, à trouver, à symboliser, à mystifier.

Les personnes qui m'approchent et découvrent le pot aux roses, me plaignent, s'indignent; elles ne savent pas les avantages d'une légende absurde : lorsqu'on me brûle, on brûle un mannequin qui ne me ressemble même pas. Une mauvaise réputation devrait être entretenue avec plus d'amour et plus de luxe qu'une danseuse.

J'éclaire ainsi la belle phrase que m'écrivait Max Jacob :



Il ne faut pas être connu pour ce qu'on fait.

La gloire anthume ne doit servir qu'à une seule chose :  
après notre mort, permettre à notre oeuvre de débiter  
avec un nom."

(p. 238)

Cocteau's ever-renewing faith in something positive arising from negative circumstances is here applied to affirm that even a false anthumous glory can lead the way to genuine posthumous recognition.

Submitting for once to the sentimental exercise of revisiting a scene from his childhood, Cocteau found himself one day in front of the house at 45 rue La Bruyère where his grandparents had lived on the first floor while his own family had occupied the mezzanine. The main door lying ajar, Cocteau walked in and stood under an archway looking at the little courtyard where he had spent many happy hours on his bicycle. His reminiscences were interrupted by the arrival of a suspicious concierge who obviously did not believe that he had lived there in his childhood and without ceremony showed him on his way banging the main door behind him. The noise of the door evoked a stream of memories which led him to do a remarkable thing.

"... j'imaginai de parcourir la rue depuis la rue Blanche jusqu'au 45, de fermer les yeux et de laisser traîner ma main droite sur les maisons et les réverbères comme je faisais toujours en rentrant de classe. L'expérience n'ayant pas donné grand'chose, je m'avisai qu'à cette époque ma taille était petite et que ma main traînait actuellement plus haut, ne rencontrait plus les mêmes reliefs. Je recommençai le manège.

Grâce à une simple différence de niveau, et par un phénomène analogue à celui du frottement de l'aiguille sur les aspérités d'un disque de gramophone, j'obtins la musique du souvenir et retrouvai tout : ma pèlerine, le cuir de ma serviette, le nom du camarade qui m'accompagnait et de nos maîtres, certaines phrases exactes que j'avais dites, la couverture marbrée de mon carnet de notes, le timbre de voix de mon grand-père, l'odeur de sa barbe, les étoffes des robes de ma soeur et de maman qui recevaient le mardi."

(pp. 247-248)

No passage in all of Cocteau's writings could be more typical of him than the above. He takes a simple practice that all of us have engaged in at one time or another, in this case the touching of the surface of buildings and lamp-posts with one's eyes closed as one walks along a street that has become familiar because one has passed along it repeatedly, day after day, in order to evoke many memories from his past. A game that one has indulged in as a child, replayed casually many years later, can conjure up all sorts of memories. Still



pre-occupied perhaps with his fascination for recording and the gramophone, the image with which Cocteau here compares the game, a gramophone needle creating music by rubbing along the grooves of a record, could perhaps have been expressed in a finer way by comparing it rather to a blind person reading a book in Braille, but this would have precluded the reference to "la musique du souvenir". The device itself recalls, of course, Proust's madeleine dipped into his cup of tea evoking involuntary memories, so that it is far from being in any way original. The fact that, in playing the game, Cocteau closes his eyes is also important because it suggests that, in a sense, he is "asleep" and therefore in a poetic state. The objects, the people, the words, the sound and the smell conjured up by the game are revealing from the order in which they are recalled. The immediate trappings associated with going to or coming from school, would naturally come first, his cape and his leather school-bag. These recall the name of his school-boy friend which in turn conjures up the names of the masters, then some of the sentences which he had spoken possibly at school lead to a recollection of the marbled cover of his jotter, and since the jotter was sometimes brought out at home it leads to a memory of his grandfather's voice which he doubtlessly often heard when he was making notes at home in his jotter, the sound of his grandfather's voice then brings to his memory the smell of his grandfather's beard, and, since his memory is now concentrating on the milieu of the home, he recalls the material of the dresses worn by his sister and his mother when they received visitors on Tuesdays. Thus, his stream of consciousness having been set aflowing, Cocteau remembers parts of his childhood.<sup>36</sup>

He now reflects upon the impossibility of any poet being able to write his own life. In fact he wonders how other people can write the lives of poets since there are too many mysteries, too many truthful lies, too much intertangling, intergrowing which lead to confusion. What can one write, for example, about those passionate friendships which one is obliged to confuse with love and which nevertheless are something other than love, and how can one define the limits of love and friendship, how can one comprehend that zone within the heart where unknown senses are at play, senses which those who live in an ambience which is mass-produced cannot possibly comprehend?

In passages such as these Cocteau demonstrates that he is very much aware of being a person apart, of being in certain ways different



or even special, and conscious, in a sense, that his condition places him above the mass which lives serially, whose thoughts are influenced by living in an environment which is mass-produced and hence, in a sense, mediocre, a mass which finds relaxation in the consumption of material which is pre-digested and does not therefore demand effort to be absorbed into the system, into the mind.

Having now almost completed his cure, Cocteau finds that he no longer requires to write about opium. The opium problem has faded into the distance. Now he must invent in order to write. In writing while he was undergoing the cure he was able to avoid the symptoms of depression which one usually suffers in such circumstances. Now he would like his notes, made during his cure, to find a place in doctors' brochures and in the literature dealing with opium. They would serve as a guide for those novices who, under the slowness of opium, would not recognise one of the most dangerous faces of vitesse.

Cocteau now passes on to some considerations concerning the theatre and the cinema, sparked off by his reading of his play La Voix humaine to a selection committee at the Comédie-Française. His reason for wishing to have his play presented there (a question he was often asked) was that the Comédie-Française was the only place where he would find an audience eager for feelings rather than sensations. The boulevard theatre had by this time changed its function having become the home of the avant-garde. The former theatre of the avant-garde had been replaced by the film studios which also dethroned the boulevard.

What lies ahead for the real theatre? A renaissance. The old theatre has been killed by the talking film. The new theatre, which seemed too exceptional to survive, will in fact do so because there is nothing to take its place. That is because its form is pure, and pure form is irreplaceable. The theatre of the boulevard will become the perfected talking-film. Its action, swift, lively and squat would be best accommodated at the Comédie-Française, which still preserves the remnants of an epoch when feasts and royal ballets allowed for a short presentation.

The short theatrical presentation will find its place somewhere between the talking film and a classic film by Chaplin. This sort of programme could comprise the best music-hall numbers and could be the origin of the future Comédie-Française. This theatre might also find



its own element in a district capable of providing for its audience a public de quartier which would soon be joined by the snobs and the amateurs from Montparnasse. Above all this theatre must be simple, in the red and gold style, with model lighting and young stage hands who are worth all the lifts and revolving stages in the world. Cocteau then goes on to explain why he wrote such a conventionally styled play as La Voix humaine. With the play he hoped to shock the élite, to obtain a "scandale de banalité" and, conventionally, to have a long run. He now realises that to recognise novelty is becoming more and more difficult:

"Le principe de nouveauté devient très difficile à reconnaître lorsqu'une époque nous oblige à le dépouiller de ses attributs habituels de bizarrerie." (p. 262)

His next work, he announces, will be a film. In a brief note he also informs us that Les Enfants terribles was written while he was obsessed with the song Make believe from the American musical by Kern and Hammerstein-Showboat.

Now that the cure is over, Cocteau feels empty, poor, nauseated, ill. He feels that he is floating. He observes that he wrote Les Enfants terribles in only seventeen days. The book was drawn out of him. It needed opium and it also required of him that he should abandon opium. Now that he asks himself whether he will smoke again, the simple answer is that he will smoke again if his work requires it - "et si l'opium le veut" (p. 268) !

Referring back to the novel Les Enfants terribles, Cocteau states that he was not aware when he was writing it that certain elements in it were arranging themselves to form a pattern. He did not realise that the book opened with a white ball (the fatal snowball of Dargelos) and closed with a black ball (the ball of poison) and that Dargelos was connected to both. And when people, who think they like the book, take exception only to the final pages, this surprises Cocteau, because he wrote the final pages first. The rest of the book followed. Without the final pages, the rest of the book might not have been written. He now ends Opium by quoting the poem Le Camarade which served as a starting point for him after he had received the gift of the final pages of Les Enfants terribles. Among the most beautiful of Cocteau's poems Le Camarade was made famous by being spoken in the film that followed - Le Sang d'un Poète. The theme of the poem is the snowball thrown by Dargelos and the effect it has upon its recipient.



The snowball becomes a transmitter of love and beauty.

"

Le Camarade

Ce coup de poing en marbre était boule de neige,  
Et cela lui étoile le coeur  
Et cela étoilait la blouse du vainqueur,  
Étoila le vainqueur noir que rien ne protège.

Il restait stupéfait, debout  
Dans la guérite de solitude,  
Jambes nues sous le gui, les noix d'or, le houx,  
Étoilé comme le tableau noir de l'étude.

Ainsi partent souvent du collège  
Ces coups de poing faisant cracher le sang,  
Ces coups de poing durs des boules de neige,  
Que donne la beauté vite au coeur en passant. "

(pp. 269-270)

The Coctelian elements are obviously much in evidence here, the snowball itself, marble, stars, the blackboard studded with stars,<sup>37</sup> blood. In the imagery of the first stanza one has the uncanny impression of watching an animated cartoon, the blow from the marble-like snowball spattering the recipient's heart with stars. The bouncing back of the stars to spatter the blouse of Dargelos, the conqueror, who is also depicted in dark tones, is an effective device to describe how the assailant is affected by the blow he has aimed. The description of him that follows in the second stanza as he stands, astounded, in his cabin of solitude (we realise that there is in fact no cabin, Cocteau merely wishing to stress the feeling of isolation which he is experiencing) is given a certain poignancy by the addition of the seasonal trappings suggesting the proximity of Christmas (already hinted at by the very presence of the snow). The last stanza sums up the theme of hero worship experienced in school, the blows from the snowballs being used simply to describe what are none other than glances or looks exchanged to convey a sensation of beauty to the heart that passes. So Opium ends on a note dear to Cocteau's own heart.

Although it is, ostensibly, simply a collection of notes, it is really important as a general guide to much that exists in Cocteau's poetic world. From another point of view, that of the poet himself, Opium was an exercise which he himself required to go through, because, by jotting down his observations, he was helping to clarify his own thoughts, his own theories. So many of the elements which we find in his other works, are further elaborated and discussed here. We are thus given an illustration of the interdependence which does exist between Cocteau's works and we are made to realise that it is essential



to be familiar with the whole body of it in order to fully comprehend its various parts. To suggest that this very interdependence is proof of a lack of self-discipline in Cocteau is irrelevant because Cocteau's sense of discipline is in fact practised by him in another dimension. The book does contain a fair number of his favourite themes among which the most significant are perhaps his discussion of the poet as a visionary, the need to remain in the profound creative sleep of poetry, the problems of the modern theatre. The very style of the book demands a slow, deliberate approach in one's study of it. The moral and philosophical statements made by Cocteau are extremely stimulating. And the book probably tells us more about Cocteau himself than it does about opium.

## NOTES

## Chapter 5

1. Margaret Crosland : Jean Cocteau (London, 1955) Chapter VIII Page 122.
  2. In 1915 Cocteau, in collaboration with Gabriel Astruc and Firmin Gémier, mounted a production of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream at the Cirque Medrano for charity purposes. Cocteau had the bright idea of having the famous circus clowns Albert, François and Paul Fratellini play the parts of Starveling, Bottom and Flute, a circumstance that added greatly to the exciting production.
  3. Visites à Maurice Barrès had originally appeared in 1921 in the Editions de la Sirène under the collective title of La Noce Massacrée.
  4. Cocteau uses the word "prétexte" in a multiple sense. Most frequently he uses it in the sense of a "starting point" or "point de départ" as he does here.
  5. Le Numéro Barbette was actually first published in the Nouvelle Revue française, no. CLIV, 33. It was reprinted in another work Deux travestis by Fournier in 1947.
  6. It is Margaret Crosland who has most lucidly in the fifth chapter of her biography on Cocteau summed up this episode with Jacques Maritain. In it she writes: "When he and Maritain exchanged their views in the open letters of 1925 and 1926, Cocteau mentioned that 'scandal and solitude, a sort of resounding non-success', made up the only conduct that suited him. Maritain's reply contained the gentlest, truest and most unanswerable rebuke - 'anything to do with God has always caused a scandal'. He explained how, if Cocteau continued thinking on these lines, there could never be any understanding between them: Cocteau's poetry embodied a conception of the world but it was too concrete to make a system; Maritain's philosophy embodied a doctrine of art but it was too abstract to leave the 'heaven of principles'.  
In spite of his admiration for Maritain, Cocteau did not find him 'un homme libre', as he had found Diaghilev. He could not understand Maritain's acceptance, without questioning, of restrictions, limits and barriers; for him there were none. The Church brought him a support from outside and it was too late for him, he considered, to manage in any way except on his own. He came to this conclusion not entirely out of pride, and not without regret. Then, 'je m'évadai', 'I escaped'. The Lettre à Maritain was apparently written with the intention of 'proving to young people that religion and the audacities of art are not incompatible'.
- These letters caused a stir in France and were discussed everywhere; they were partly responsible for a superficial religious revival and several young men who had made Cocteau their god discovered the existence of God Himself."



7. It was, in fact, one of Cocteau's most ardent admirers, Maurice Sachs, who perpetrated most of these thefts. When he was first introduced to Cocteau, this young Jewish writer had just started to write. Sachs was an extremely amoral young man. He stole from Cocteau in order to be able to afford to buy him presents! Cocteau, who always had a weakness for thieves, invariably forgave him.
8. It is essential to know that Cocteau equates the "pittoresque" with the excessive or the over ornate, and "le pittoresque" is the quality which, in later years, he comes to abhor most in any work of art.
9. Cocteau, in point of fact, rejects Freudian theory and the notion that all art comes from the world of the subconscious. He particularly rejects the possibility that dreams are a substitute for truth. Cocteau sees dreams rather as the literary product of sleep. Even the most bizarre dreams, he maintains, are based upon memories. As for truth, that is a prerogative of the poet alone and each poet discovers his own particular truth, which may, however, correspond exactly with that of another poet, since it is in essence an aspect of the universal truth which is God. This explains perfectly the remarkably high incidence of parallel and often simultaneous discoveries in different artists.
10. This observation comes very much to mind when one looks at a Cocteau film such as La Belle et la Bête, which literally bewitches by its sheer, meticulously constructed form.
11. Marcel Khill, Arab by origin (real name Kélilou) succeeded Jean Desbordes as Cocteau's constant companion around 1934. He was a very attractive young man with agreeable manners and evidently a great deal of charm and personality. In the 1934 production of Cocteau's La Machine Infernale, directed by Louis Jouvet at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, Khill played the small part of the Corinthian messenger. It was Khill who was to accompany Cocteau on his famous tour of the world in eighty days in 1936 inspired by Jules Verne, Khill making a perfect Passepartout to Cocteau's Phileas Fogg!
12. There is no denying that Cocteau had a good nose for publicity and when Marcel Khill suggested to him that they might, in order to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Jules Verne's Tour du monde en 80 jours, follow the route of Phileas Fogg, he made a wager with Jean Prouvost, editor of Paris-Soir, promising to write an account of the journey. The agreement was that Cocteau's travelling expenses would be paid, but that the newspaper would not make payment for the articles submitted unless Cocteau and Khill got back in eighty days. As it turned out, by careful planning (and a great deal of luck) neither more nor less than eighty days were actually required to meet the challenge. The project thus became a record to beat. Cocteau and Khill left Paris on the 28th March and returned on the 17th June, 1936.
13. Cocteau is here referring to the overnight notoriety gained by Orson Welles in 1938 when thousands of gullible Americans took his presentation of H. G. Wells's The War of the Worlds as a genuine news commentary. Many people panicked and fled from their homes, thinking that the Martians were about to land on earth.



14. In truth Cocteau should feel no surprise at such an encounter since he himself can in so many respects be regarded as a modern hierophant, presiding as he does like a high priest at the initiating mysteries of poetry.
15. Once, when on a visit to America in the 1950s, Cocteau was being plagued by a stupid newspaper reporter who kept asking inane questions. When he asked Cocteau what he would take from his house if it were on fire, Cocteau promptly answered: "The fire!"
16. In a footnote Cocteau implies that the disorder is sometimes an order. He writes: "Les chiennes montent des chiens. Les vaches se montent entre elles. Ce désordre est parfois un ordre. Les indigènes des îles s'en firent une règle avant que les missionnaires vinssent. Il s'agissait d'éviter la surpopulation!" (p. 143, I). The last observation regarding overpopulation is one which is often brought forward to justify inversion.
17. Reading between these lines, it is not difficult to see that Cocteau is here attempting to justify certain aspects of his own behaviour.
18. Is Cocteau, by implication, here classifying himself among "les hommes de grande race"? Probably.
19. Cocteau uses the adjective "farouche" here which, as well as meaning "wild" can also mean "timid" or "shy", "fierce", "grim" or "cruel".
20. This very remarkable recipe to break the spell of the author's death not only demonstrates a strong longing on the poet's part to be immortal, but is indicative of a strong desire to be intimately close to his reader and eventually to have the reader re-enact some of his own personal traits of behaviour, the adopting of the gestures of the beloved or the assuming of an expression. Cocteau, towards the end of his life, became more and more concerned with how he would be looked upon by generations yet unborn. His famous record Mon Testament pour l'an 2000 has many passages where he speaks directly to the young people of tomorrow.
21. Cocteau's gift of rising to a difficult occasion and his apparent ease in finding a solution to explain the unexplainable can only be described as a kind of genius. It was a gift which got him out of many a tricky situation.
22. Mr. G... is, of course, none other than Sam Goldwyn, whose aspirations to film art were always hampered by commercial considerations. He was the sort of producer who demanded the best director, the best composer, the best photographer for his films, only to blunt their contributions by his mania for 'arranging'.
23. In discussing the immense field of American literature Baudelaire had decried the terrible number of pedants, compilers, literary drudges and hacks, plagiarists and critics who pursued useless activity producing mediocre works. Against such a background a writer of the calibre of Edgar Allan Poe stood out in relief. As



Baudelaire wrote: "Dans ce bouillonnement de médiocrités, dans ce monde épris des perfectionnements matériels, - scandale d'un nouveau genre qui fait comprendre la grandeur des peuples fainéants, - dans cette société avide d'étonnements, amoureuse de la vie, mais surtout d'une vie pleine d'excitations, un homme a paru qui a été grand, non seulement par sa subtilité métaphysique, par la beauté sinistre ou ravissante de ses conceptions, par la rigueur de son analyse, mais grand aussi et non moins grand comme caricature."

24. Christian Bérard (1902-1949) famous in his own right as a painter, for many years worked in close collaboration with Cocteau as designer and artistic director for his stage productions and films. They were intimate friends from the 1920s until Bérard's death early in 1949. Cocteau and Bérard (who was known affectionately as "Bébé") always worked together in complete harmony. Cocteau, writing about him in an evocation of the artist at the start of Maalesh, journal d'une tournée de théâtre, refers to him as a fellow-traveller who lived his life with deep intensity in the midst of disorder - disorder that grew with the increasing momentum of his work to the extent that he thought he saw in Bérard an Olympian figure, an immortal come to life again. Bérard's last works for Cocteau were the sketches and models for the film Orphée which went into production in November, 1949.
25. It is interesting to speculate what would have been Cocteau's reaction to the horrendous platform shoes so clumsily dragged around by the young ladies of today. Would he have seen in them a sign of the determination of these young people to remain "with their feet on the ground"? More likely he would have seen them as expressing a yearning to "walk upon the face of the moon"!!
26. In point of fact there are two theories by Einstein, the second springing from the first. The first, which is known as "The Special Theory of Relativity", he developed in 1905 and it defines two fundamental principles: (a) all motion is relative and (b) the velocity of light is always constant relative to an observer. From these principles emerges the third, namely, that only relative, not absolute, motion can be detected in the universe. The second theory, the General Theory of Relativity, 1916, embraces the earlier theory and deals with varying velocities and accelerations.
27. Born in 1900 in Calanda, Spain, Luis Bunuel is the outstanding film director whose work, despite a total interruption to his creative career during the fifteen years between 1932 and 1947, is evidence of a continuity of interests and consistency of achievement unmatched in the history of the cinema. Completely uncompromising, even when working under the most constricting commercial conditions, he has remained true to his artistic origins which have their roots in surrealism and the cultural heritage of Spain. His work is tinged with deep undertones of anarchic comedy and anger which, in fact, mask a very deep, sentimental, humanist affection. As a young man he studied philosophy and literature at the University of Madrid, then went to Paris, and in 1923 became assistant to Jean Epstein the famous Polish film director who produced all his films in France. Bunuel enthusiastically



frequented the surrealist group and became associated with Salvador Dali on the film Un Chien andalou in 1928. Creating a deep impression with this film, Bunuel then went on to make L'Age d'or (1930) sponsored by the Vicomte de Noailles. This film, with its blasphemous inferences equating Christ and the Marquis de Sade, provoked enthusiasm on the one hand and indignant protest on the other. Back in Spain, Bunuel directed Terra sin Pan (1932) a mordant, satirical documentary film dealing with the plight of the Hurdes, a poor and primitive rural community in Spain. From 1935-1936 Bunuel was director of production for the Filmofono Company in Madrid. In 1939 he went to Hollywood where he worked on Spanish dubbed versions of films for Warner Brothers. It was only in 1946 that he resumed film production in Mexico where he made Gran Casino (1947), El Gran Cavalero (1949) and Los Olvidados (1950) which brought him great renown when it was awarded the Grand Prix at the 1951 Cannes Film Festival. Indeed it was Los Olvidados which restored Bunuel to the front rank of film directors, and, within the context of the Mexican commercial cinema, he proceeded to make a series of brilliant films on very small budgets and tight shooting schedules, right up to 1959. In this year he began production of a series of masterpieces of his mature years, starting with Nazarin (1959) which deals with the problems of leading a truly Christian life within the framework of a world that is imperfect. After The Young One (1960) he returned to Spain to make Viridiana (1961) which took up once again the theme of Nazarin but with a typically carefree blasphemy which took the Spanish authorities by surprise. From this time his career has been peripatetic. In Mexico he made El Angel Exterminador (1962) in which he returned to surrealist themes. In France he directed Le Journal d'une Femme de Chambre (1964) a film which is in very striking contrast to Renoir's adaptation of the same Mirbeau novel. Back in Mexico he directed the short feature film Simon del Desierto (1967) and in France, in the same year the masterly Belle de Jour, which has become his greatest popular success, and La Voie Lactée (1968) in which he turns a surrealist's eyes upon the heresies of the Catholic church. In 1970 Bunuel returned to Spain to adapt a novel by Perez Galdos as Tristana.

Sergei Mikhailovitch Eisenstein (1898-1948) was born in Riga, Russia. An intensely creative film director, it is remarkable that the circumstances of his career allowed him to complete only six films in the span of twenty-five years. Indeed, his importance is out of all proportion to the slight bulk of his film work. The intellectual and expressive possibilities which we find in his films Strike, The Battleship Potemkin and October and the really vast culture which he brought to film-making, film teaching and the problems of aesthetic theory in cinema establish him incontestably as one of the great masters of the "tenth muse". Eisenstein's experiments in using montage for intellectual, instead of simply narrative, effect caused him to be criticised in his own country. On the contrary, it enhanced his reputation abroad. In fact, together with Alexandrov, famous actor and assistant director, and Tissé, the cameraman, he embarked upon an ill-fated tour of Europe, America and Mexico. The group was asked to prepare a film for the American Film company, Paramount Pictures. Two scripts - Sutter's Gold and An American Tragedy were written, but the projects proved abortive and the trio moved on to Mexico in order to make a film financed with money raised



by Upton Sinclair, the famous American novelist. Eventually lack of funds and disagreement with Sinclair's collaborators prevented Eisenstein from completing the film Que Viva Mexico! and in 1931 he went back to Russia. It was not until 1938 that Eisenstein completed his first sound film Alexander Nevsky, in which he fully illustrated his complex theories on film montage. Eisenstein's images were brilliantly integrated with a remarkable musical score by Prokofiev. Prokofiev also wrote the music for Ivan the Terrible (1943-1946), a monumental film which was halted by adverse criticism when only two of its three projected parts had been made. Indeed the second part was not shown until 1958, ten years after Eisenstein's death in 1948 as a result of a heart attack. Eisenstein's two theoretical works on the art of the film - The Film Sense (1943) and Film Form (1949) are of primary importance to anyone studying the cinema.

28. In the play Orphée a prominent part is played by a white horse which communicates to Orpheus mysterious messages from the unknown.
29. There are tribunals in evidence in the films Orphée and Le Testament d'Orphée.
30. It is interesting to compare Cocteau's concept of style with Marcel Proust's that style, for the writer as well as for the painter, is a matter, not of technique, but of vision.
31. Raymond Roussel (1877-1933) was the fortunate heir to a large fortune. Up to the age of seventeen years he devoted himself to musical composition. Then he began to write poetry. After the failure of his first book La Doublure (1897) he succeeded in focusing his very personal style and published La Vue (1904), Impressions d'Afrique (1910) and Locus Solus (1914). Not one of his works, which showed signs of a veritable genius for the absurd, had any success. The three plays which he adapted from Impressions d'Afrique were complete flops. A new play, adapted from Locus Solus caused a scandale. Similar reactions were provoked by L'Etoile au front (1924) which the Surrealists strongly defended, La Poussière de soleils (1926) and Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique (1932). Roussel committed suicide in Palermo on the 14th July, 1933.

Cocteau was thoroughly acquainted with Roussel's writings some of which he came to know through André Gide. The following short quotations from the text of Opium will give an idea of the qualities which Cocteau discovered and admired in Roussel's writing:

"Le style de Roussel est un moyen, non une fin. C'est un moyen devenu fin sous les espèces du génie, car la beauté de son style est faite de ce qu'il s'applique à dire avec exactitude des choses difficiles, ne relevant que de sa propre autorité, de ne laisser aucune ombre intrigante autour de lui. Mais comme il est une énigme et qu'il n'a rien autour de lui, cet éclairage intrigue encore beaucoup plus." (p. 196).

"Aux yeux de Roussel, les objets qu'il transfigure restent ce qu'ils sont. C'est le génie le moins artiste. C'est le comble de l'art. Satie dirait : le triomphe de l'amateur." (p. 200).



"Equilibre de Roussel pris pour du déséquilibre. Il souhaite l'éloge officiel et il sait son oeuvre incomprise, prouvant par là que l'éloge, officiel n'est pas méprisable en tant qu'officiel, mais en tant qu'il s'exerce mal." (p. 201).

32. The fact that the protagonist in Bunuel's film spends a great deal of the time on a pushbike may have inspired this line of thought.
33. Cocteau did in fact make a recording of the Sphinx's speech in the play Orphée with a backing by a ragtime band. The combination of Cocteau's words spoken with a brittle, metallic voice and the ragtime music anticipates some of the effects of Kurt Weill's Die Dreigroschenoper.
34. These words by Apollinaire appear as one of the poet Cégeste's cryptic messages transmitted over the radio in the Rolls Royce of the Princess in Cocteau's film Orphée.
35. Nowhere in Cocteau's work is the scorn with which the poet regards the attitude of the public more in evidence than in the film Orphée.
36. Cocteau's description of this game with its tactile technique and its accompanying image of the boy "blindly" groping his way along the street reminds me very strongly of a similar image which he created in the film Orphée. I refer to the sequence in which Orpheus, in the underworld, at one point skids along the walls of grey and dark buildings touching them not only with his hands, but with the front of his body.
37. Cocteau, in later years, actually always had a blackboard in his room. On it he would scrawl his appointments as well as working out his ideas with chalk. Invariably a star would find its way upon the surface of the board, here and there.



Chapter 6 : Poésie de théâtreOrphée (1925)La Machine Infernale (1932)Bacchus (1952)

The very phrase poésie de théâtre reveals the essence of Cocteau's conception of the function of the theatre. Here we have a suggestion of an anti-literary tendency in his attitude which compels him to disregard the drama as a purely literary form, considering it instead as an element, part of a whole artistic experience or event which can be realised only in performance. Reacting strongly against any suggestion of symbolism which would be representative only of a poetry imbued with vagueness and imprecision, Cocteau insists upon a poésie de théâtre having the qualities of toughness, sharpness and precision, and that will, above all, make use of the basic resources of the theatre itself.<sup>1</sup> The theatre is thus to be renewed by making use of the whole range of its own basic elements and although dialogue would serve a function it would do so merely as an aural element. It would thus be combined with choreography, pantomime, décor and music, and, where necessary, sound effects would be used. The effect of these combinations would be to create theatre poetry. This new poetry would be plastic in character. In his preface to Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, written in 1922, Cocteau wrote:

"Ce genre nouveau, plus conforme à l'esprit moderne, reste encore un monde inconnu, riche en découvertes. Révolution qui ouvre toute grande, une porte aux explorateurs. Les jeunes peuvent poursuivre des recherches, où la féerie, la danse, l'acrobatie, la pantomime, le drame, la satire, l'orchestre, la parole combinés réapparaissent sous une forme inédite; ils monteront sans moyens de fortune, ce que les artistes officiels prennent pour des farces d'atelier et qui n'en est pas moins l'expression plastique de la poésie."

(Jean Cocteau : Théâtre I,  
Paris, Gallimard 1948, p. 47)

Thus Cocteau seems to be aiming at a concretion of the drama in which, as a result of subordinating the role of the dialogue, the figurative and imaginative role usually created by the language is transferred partly to the plot itself and partly to the settings used. The effect of increasing the importance of the action in the play produces two phenomena. Since the dialogue has to be purely functional it becomes spare and unadorned, even hard in character. The action itself is externalized. Thus the drama is objectified.



This was Cocteau's standpoint when he first started to write for the theatre and his theory was put into practice with some effect in Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel. He then realised that it imposed certain limits, nimbly executed a remarkable volte-face and, by the time he came to write La Voix Humaine in 1930 and La Machine Infernale in 1932, he was placing appropriate emphasis on dialogue. Nevertheless his early theory helped to produce Antigone in 1922 and Oedipe-Roi in 1925, two plays which owe their success to Cocteau's reductive method. In both of these plays the method led to unexpected results. By stripping the plays of prolixious speeches, more emphasis was placed upon the remaining dialogue. Jean-Jacques Kihm aptly describes this unexpected result thus:

"Supprimer ainsi l'ornement, c'est exiger que pas une syllabe du texte, des gestes et de la mise en scène ne soit perdue par le spectateur."

(Jean-Jacques Kihm : Jean Cocteau  
Paris, Gallimard 1960, p. 84)

Cocteau, in his attempts to achieve simplicity, freshness and unusualness, externalised the action and reduced slow plot development. He was obliged to introduce abrupt transitions and to vary the pace throughout the plays. On the whole the action was fast, and the tragic conflict developed at high speed. This created a strong sense of the supernatural at play, the actors being dehumanized by the very pace of the action which, as a result of the contraction, appeared to be occurring in a brief moment of time. Antigone, Oedipe-Roi and Orphée all bore witness to Cocteau's attraction to myth. Of the twelve plays that Cocteau wrote, six were concerned with mythical subjects. Myth attracted him because it offered dramatic elements in a proportion which he found acceptable for his purpose. Myth was, in a sense, independent of the actual world. It had the qualities of clarity of outline, simplicity and also a potential intensity and depth. Above all, its poetry was to be found in its very action. And Cocteau also recognised in myth the elements of universal truth. In 1952 he was to write:

"La mythologie grecque, si l'on s'y plonge, nous intéresse davantage que les déformations et simplifications de l'Histoire, parce que ses mensonges restent sans alliage de réel, alors que l'Histoire est un alliage de réel et de mensonge. Le réel de l'Histoire devient un mensonge. L'irréel de la fable devient vérité."

(Jean Cocteau : Journal d'un Inconnu  
Grasset, Paris 1952, p. 143)



It is also of importance to remember that Cocteau was sensitively aware of the prevailing tendencies and interests in the currents of his time. He was thus fully conscious of the renewal of interest in myth that was in the air.

### Orphée (1925)<sup>2</sup>

The importance of this play in Cocteau's development as a dramatist cannot be overstressed. It was his first really original drama to illustrate his theatricalist theory and attain great popular success. In what way was Cocteau regarded as breaking new ground? Here was a contemporary dramatist attempting to attach the theatre to its very origins. By renovating one of the oldest myths, and by retaining in his treatment of it the very elements of secrecy, mystery and suggestiveness, he was preserving the very essence of myth itself. He boldly tackled the problem of achieving harmony between the actor and the scenery by making the stage set play a very organic part in the play. The theme is one dear to the heart of its creator - the drama of the poet and poetry. Written to be staged in modern dress and startlingly unrealistic scenery,<sup>3</sup> the play is un-Greek in Cocteau's treatment. The action being swift, the protagonist Orphée is not permitted to make long, lyrical speeches, but rather, acting as a medium for Cocteau himself, to utter single phrases. Since the style is extremely simple, the short utterances made by Orphée stand out boldly. This is very appropriate since it is in keeping with the orphic belief of the power of the word, the belief that all depends upon the spoken word. Cocteau was thus achieving his aim. Here was acted poetry in simple language devoid of the symbolism which horrified him. But the success of the presentation depended upon the author's directions being carried out meticulously, and in studying the text we discover that his recommendations for the setting, stage business, and even the stage effects are specific and strict. If they were not executed according to the author's wishes the play would not come to life on stage.

One of the most striking of these effects in the play is the device of the "interval". It involves Cocteau's pre-occupation with time. Here he is trying to suggest the relativity of time by demonstrating that there is one rhythm in life in this world and quite another in the life of the Underworld. The "interval" success-



fully conveys this notion. It happens just after Orphée has gone through the mirror to find the road to the Underworld and search for Eurydice. The curtain slowly falls then rises again at once, indicating the brief interval. Two scenes link it which are repeated word for word. These scenes consist of a very few unimportant phrases exchanged between Heurtebise and the postman. Their exact repetition and their balancing symmetry create a remarkable effect of unease in the spectator. Thus Cocteau successfully suggests that time is changing its rhythm for Orphée, and that there is no longer a common measure between his time and the time in which the action on stage is proceeding. The spectator is made to experience the mystery in a physical manner.

The ancient myth of Orpheus relates the life of the renowned poet and musician, a priest of Apollo whose severed head spoke oracles after he had been mauled to pieces by the Maenads for failing to pay homage to Dionysus, god of wine. Before this fate betook him he had rescued his wife Eurydice from Hades availing himself of the power of his lyre to charm Cerberus, canine guardian of the entrance. Then he lost Eurydice by disregarding the command of Hades that he should not look back before they had completed their return journey to earth.

Cocteau concentrated on two segments of the myth for the purpose of the action of his play - the episode of Eurydice and the death of Orpheus. But he added a happy ending in which the dead lovers are happily reunited in a poetic heaven.

In the first scene of the first act Orphée is asking his wife Eurydice:

"Sait-on ce qui est poétique et pas poétique?" (Ed. Stock, p. 24)

This question, spoken in irritation, is Cocteau's way of informing the spectator that he intends to seek poetry in unusual ways and in unlikely places. By the time that Orphée makes this observation we have already been introduced to a strange setting that ambiguously suggests both ancient Thrace and a modern city. In this milieu we find Orphée the poet, famous and affluent, bored by his life which he feels has become contaminated by success, succumbing to the fascination of the messages which he receives from a horse which taps them out. Eurydice does not take kindly to the presence of the horse in her living room and she cannot appreciate the significance of the horse's messages to which



Orphée attaches such importance. Orphée says to her:

"Ma vie commençait à se faisander, à être à point, à puer la réussite et la mort. Je mets le soleil et la lune dans le même sac. Il me reste la nuit. Et pas la nuit des autres! Ma nuit. Ce cheval entre dans ma nuit et il en sort comme un plongeur. Il en rapporte des phrases. Ne sens-tu pas que la moindre de ces phrases est plus étonnante que tous les poèmes? Je donnerais mes oeuvres complètes pour une seule de ces petites phrases où je m'écoute comme on écoute la mer dans un coquillage. Pas sérieux? Que te faut-il, ma petite! Je découvre un monde. Je retourne ma peau. Je traque l'inconnu."

(pp. 26-27)

Typical of the language used by Orphée throughout the play, we recognise at once in this speech much of the poetic imagery we have already encountered in Cocteau's writings, the allusion to the poet's inner self as la nuit, the fascination of the sea heard within the confines of a shell, the change working within the poet compared to a mue ("Je retourne ma peau."), the poet ever searching for the unknown.

The latest message given to Orphée by the horse when the play begins has so enchanted him that he has submitted it as his entry in the poetry competition in Thrace. It consists of a single sentence Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers and Orphée considers it as un poème du rêve, une fleur du fond de la mort. It is Aglaonice, Orphée's enemy, who is to discover that the sentence contains the acronym merde, an insulting vulgarism which she will use later as a pretext for the fatal attack of the Bacchantes upon Orphée.

The messages conveyed by the horse have another function in the play. They suggest that the action itself is imbued with elements of the supernatural. Orphée realises that they do not come actually from the horse, that the horse is merely a medium for their transmission -

"Que savons nous? Qui parle? Nous nous cognons dans le noir; nous sommes dans le surnaturel jusqu'au cou. Nous jouons à cache-cache avec les dieux. Nous ne savons rien, rien, rien."

(p. 28)

Although Orphée is constantly assuring Eurydice that he does love her, in fact his striving after poetry excludes his wife. She becomes jealous of the horse and decides to kill it by poisoning it with a contaminated lump of sugar, which she obtains from Aglaonice. The sugar is brought by Heurtebise, the glazier, together with a poisoned letter from Aglaonice. For Aglaonice wishes to avenge herself upon Orphée by killing his wife. Heurtebise, who has become the friend of Eurydice, thus assumes the innocent role of her unwitting murderer.



Eurydice dies before she is able to poison the horse. In the throes of death she sends Heurtebise to find Orphée. As soon as he is gone, Death, in the guise of a beautiful young lady in evening dress, flanked by her assistants, the angels Azrael and Raphael, dressed in white like surgeons, comes to claim Eurydice. Raphael is fascinated by the horse and Death lets him feed it with the poisoned sugar. The horse immediately vanishes.

The stage business which follows has all the mysterious elements of a ritual as Death and her assistants, employing technical terms and equipment associated with radio transmission, proceed to release the soul of Eurydice which appears as a white dove. The body of Eurydice is transferred to the Underworld. The terms of reference employed by Cocteau in this remarkable scene are typical of the elements which occur with frequency in his mythology. Here are a few which stand out.

Since Raphaël is an apprentice angel in the service of Death, he asks many questions for fear of making mistakes. In answering his questions, Death expresses herself in Coctelian terms:

"J'exige l'ordre et la propreté comme sur un bateau."  
(p. 56)

"Il y a encore une semaine vous pensiez que j'étais un squelette avec un suaire et une faux. Vous vous représentiez un croquemitaine, un épouvantail ... Si, si, si. Tous le croient. Mais, mon pauvre garçon, si j'étais comme les gens veulent me voir, ils me verraient. Et je dois entrer chez eux sans être vue."  
(pp. 57, 58)

And Azraël then takes up the same argument and elaborates to Raphaël:

"La Mort, pour toucher les choses de la vie, traverse un élément qui les déforme et les déplace. Nos appareils lui permettent de les toucher où elle les voit, ce qui évite des calculs et une perte de temps considérable."  
(p. 59)

When Death is actually exercising the ritual that is to transfer Eurydice to the Underworld she has to be blindfolded by Raphaël. Her gestures are those of a masseuse and a hypnotiser around the head of Eurydice which remains invisible to the spectator. Then, when the moment comes to release the soul of Eurydice, a thread has to be unwound from a reel and led into the bedroom where Eurydice lies. When Death emerges from the bedroom to the sound of rolling drums, she is no longer blindfolded, and she brings the dove which is tied to the end of the thread. She cuts the thread with scissors and the



dove flies away.

Death comes and goes through the mirror in the room. Here Cocteau attributes to an ordinary household object an element of the supernatural. When Orphée wonders how he is to follow Eurydice to the Underworld, Heurtebise guides him to the mirror saying:

"Je vous livre le secret des secrets. Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la Mort va et vient. Ne le dites à personne. Du reste, regardez-vous toute votre vie dans une glace et vous verrez la Mort travailler comme des abeilles dans une ruche de verre."

(p. 71)

The mirror, a commonplace object, is thus endowed with mysterious, magical associations. And here we are faced with a typical example of what could be described as an element in Cocteau's modern mythology. And he would suggest that we are surrounded by commonplace objects endowed with unusual qualities which we do not see because we are too preoccupied in living our own mythology. He therefore makes it his duty to show us the poetry that normally lies concealed in ordinary objects.

Although the language used by Cocteau in his play is simple, it is not so bereft of figures of speech and metaphors as we would expect from his earlier theory of theatre poetry. The image of Death working like bees in a glass hive is a vivid one that stimulates the mind of the spectator to a remarkable degree. At the climax of the play, in one of the longest speeches, when Orphée realises that he is about to die, he expresses his feelings in the following terms:

"Que pense le marbre dans lequel un sculpteur taille un chef-d'oeuvre? Il pense : on me frappe, on m'abîme, on m'insulte, on me brise, je suis perdu. Ce marbre est idiot. La vie me taille, Heurtebise! Elle me fait un chef-d'oeuvre. Il faut que je supporte ses coups sans les comprendre. Il faut que je me raidisse. Il faut que j'accepte, que je me tienne tranquille, que je l'aide, que je collabore, que je lui laisse finir son travail."

(p. 97)

Perhaps Cocteau's greatest departure from the essence of the original Orpheus myth lies in the fact that in his play, whose main function is to exalt the poet, it is not the poetry of Orphée which excites the sympathy of Death and permits her to release Eurydice from the Underworld. It would appear that Cocteau, in his eagerness to create poetry out of commonplace physical objects such as mirrors and rubber gloves, was in fact diverted from his main purpose which presumably should have been to represent the poet Orphée in action at a crucial point in the



plot. But that would have meant to restore the essential importance of the word in a key scene in the play. Thus Cocteau, in attempting to adhere to his theory of theatre poetry, missed a unique opportunity, which, in any event would have been regarded merely as typically paradoxical, coming from him.

Another point of difference between the original myth and Cocteau's play is that here Orphée does bring his wife back to earth although he may not look at her or she will disappear. Orphée does not appear to be dismayed by this condition, and this equivocal attitude is consistent with his behaviour towards his wife throughout the play. Orphée and Eurydice quarrel from the moment that they return to earth, and when Orphée, apparently by accident, looks at Eurydice and she disappears, he stubbornly insists to Heurtebise that he did it on purpose. It would appear that, in losing his balance and looking at his wife, Orphée had shown an unconscious intention to be rid of her.

After the disappearance of Eurydice Orphée discovers a letter which warns him that the Bacchantes are coming to slay him. At the same time the distant sound of African drums is heard slowly approaching. Now Orphée recognizes that the horse had been duping him. As soon as he realises this, the horse's power over him is exorcised and he is transfigured. In this state he is ready to accept death. Thus, in a very sudden transformation, Orphée changes from a petulant poet to a tragic hero. It is a transformation which is hard to accept because, up to this point, Orphée has not given evidence of any signs of psychological development in his character. Then, to confuse the issue even further, after the death of Orphée, when he falls from the balcony and is torn to pieces by the Bacchantes, his head is thrown into the room and is still able to speak:

"Où suis-je? Comme il fait noir ... Comme j'ai la tête lourde. Et mon corps, mon corps me fait si mal. ... Et ma tête ...? au fait, oui ... je parle de ma tête ... où est elle, ma tête ..."

(p. 99)

It would appear that while Orphée's head is visible, his body is not. Eurydice appears to lead him away with her through the mirror, but his head remains behind. Why? So that Cocteau in one of those remarkable lapses, of which he was occasionally guilty, can use it in a farcical interlude in which an idiotic Chief of Police accuses Heurtebise of murder. In this poorly contrived and inappropriate scene of cross-questioning, the head of Orphée, placed like a bust



upon a stand, takes an active part in the police enquiry which culminates in complete confusion and bewildering bad taste when, in answer to the Chief of Police's question

"Vous vous appelez ..."

the head of Orphée replies

"Jean Cocteau."

(p. 114)

The final scene takes place in Heaven in the same room in Orphée's villa where the action had developed. Giving the impression that they are seeing their home for the first time, Orphée and Eurydice come out of the mirror accompanied by Heurtebise. They sit down at table to eat. The scene appears to continue from the point in the ninth scene where Orphée had looked fatally at Eurydice. So they resume the interrupted meal with Orphée giving utterance to the following prayer:

"Mon Dieu, nous vous remercions de nous avoir assigné notre demeure et notre ménage comme seul paradis et de nous avoir ouvert votre paradis. Nous vous remercions de nous avoir envoyé Heurtebise et nous nous accusons de n'avoir pas reconnu notre ange gardien. Nous vous remercions d'avoir sauvé Eurydice parce que, par amour, elle a tué le diable sous la forme d'un cheval et qu'elle en est morte. Nous vous remercions de m'avoir sauvé parce que j'adorais la poésie et que la poésie c'est vous. Ainsi soit-il."

(pp. 118, 119)

This prayer might seem to achieve the end of offering a neat explanation but the implications it raises are unconvincing because of much of the action that has preceded it. The house of Orphée and Eurydice is the only Paradise. What, then, is the Paradise of God to which Orphée also alludes? Is it poetry? No, for, according to the end of the prayer, God is poetry. And how has God saved Eurydice? Has she learned to appreciate poetry, to be sensitive to mystery? Or has she been saved because, out of love, she killed the Devil in the form of the horse? But she did not, after all, kill the horse herself. She hesitated when she was about to give it the poisoned sugar lump. It was actually Death's assistant Raphaël who killed the horse. And this was because he had taken a liking to it. Would Raphaël, with his obviously angelic attributes, have taken a liking to the Devil in the guise of a horse? It is Orphée himself who refers to the horse as the Devil, but the horse's only bad action had been to supply him with a sentence containing an improper acronym. A much more devilish character responsible for a great deal of evil in the story had been Aglaonice. It was she who was responsible for the death of Eurydice as well as the death of



Orphée himself. And Orphée does not appear to recognise that perhaps the greatest guilt could be attributed to him for having sought inspiration by false means. He conveniently overlooks his own guilty action:

"Nous vous remercions de m'avoir sauvé parce que j'adorais la poésie ..."

yet the poetry which he adored is, as he himself asserts, the work of the Devil.

Perhaps the answer to these inconsistencies is to avoid too meticulous an analysis of the play accepting it on its own terms, and to desist from trying to understand it, remembering the words of the Princesse to Orphée in Cocteau's film version:

"Vous cherchez trop à comprendre ce qui se passe, cher Monsieur. C'est un grave défaut." (Jean Cocteau : Orphée Film La Parade, Paris 1961, pp. 18, 19)

It is in the film Orphée that the theme will be dealt with more effectively and with greater conviction by Cocteau. The play may thus be regarded as a prelude or blueprint to the film.

### La Machine Infernale (1932)

Having been drawn to the myth of Orpheus by its association with the problem of the poet and his vocation, in his later play La Machine Infernale Cocteau attempts to deal with the problem of the conflict of man with his destiny. Although the dramatic technique employed by Cocteau in both plays is very similar, his approach to myth in La Machine Infernale is radically different from that in Orphée. In Orphée the myth is uprooted from its historical setting and transferred to modern times, and, in this way undergoes changes. It is thus adapted by the author and in the process loses some of its original force. The element of timelessness is weakened. In La Machine Infernale Cocteau adheres more closely to the original myth of Oedipus and he allows the action to develop in ancient times. Where in Orphée the action is developed in an atmosphere of religious fervour with the basic concept that God is poetry, La Machine Infernale presents us with a devilish universe. The text of the play is indeed preceded by Cocteau's own epigraph:

"Les dieux existent : c'est le diable." (p. 9)

In this satanic universe the gods are decidedly malevolent. This is



immediately apparent in the prologue of the play spoken by La Voix:

"Pour que les dieux s'amusement beaucoup,  
il importe que leur victime tombe de haut."

(Jean Cocteau : La Machine Infernale  
Grasset, Paris Ed. 1934, p. 14)

Cocteau's aim here is different. In Orphée he was creating an atmosphere in which the death and rebirth of the poet could be effectively dramatised. Here he is concerned with the birth and triumph of the myth of Oedipus.

At the very outset Cocteau's production notes suggest that he is attempting to conceive new visual terms for the unfolding of the tragedy. The setting is clearly theatricalist, the four scenes being placed on a small platform in the centre of the stage, surrounded by dark curtains. Each scene is brought into perspective by varying the slope of the platform. The entire action is to be bathed in the pale, mythical light of mercury vapour lamps.

The general structure of the play is contrary to Cocteau's usual aim of achieving terseness in the text. Compared with Orphée, whose action is concise and rapid, La Machine Infernale gives the impression of being limp and iterative in creating its effects. This is attributable in part to Cocteau's placing more importance on the written word, more emphasis upon the language spoken by his characters. Also, instead of attempting to relate two stories simultaneously by overlaying past action upon the present, Cocteau selects direct, episodic action. Thus he is faced with the technical problem of having to forecast the future constantly.

His method is to create deliberately a variation of pace in order to prepare the audience for his particular treatment of the myth. This involves the ironic foreshadowing of a great deal of the action at a deliberately slow pace.<sup>4</sup> It is most apparent in the first and third acts of the play. Then, there is the device of the Voice which, speaking out of time and foretelling the story, has the effect of rendering the action more remote. (It also underlines the fact that Oedipus is defeated before he begins.) Since the spectator is made aware of what is about to happen, his attention can be engaged by each scene as it unfolds. This also leaves him open to the effect of surprise that he will experience at the climax of the play in the last act.



Another aspect of Cocteau's dramatic method is revealed by his treatment of the characters. Oedipus is a very ordinary young man who is not particularly clever or intelligent. Rather is he sly and stubborn. By the machinations of the gods he becomes a hero. His sufferings and his misfortune would seem to be intended to give him the aura of a poet, but he does not have the gift of poetry. It is only the final revelation and catastrophe that will grant him the status of a mythical hero.

Jocasta is a warm, sympathetic and very human character. A creature of very volatile moods, her weakness for beautiful young men predisposes her to the incestuous relationship in which she will later find herself trapped. Sensitive to the essence of the objects which surround her, she is very much aware of their hostility. She is entangled with them and ill at ease because of them.

Tiresias, the blind soothsayer, is strongly devoted to Jocasta but instinctively hostile to Oedipus. He mulls over frightful portents of doom, yet he oddly remains aloof from the suffering around him. His perceptions are perhaps not nearly as sensitive and as clear as he would have Jocasta and Oedipus believe. He does not see the ghost of Laius which is perceived only by the two simple, unsophisticated guards on the ramparts of Thebes. These two soldiers have the qualities dear to Cocteau, since by nature they are childlike and simple, and thus unhampered by reason or incredulity. They are thus conceived with a certain affection.

In a general sense, however, Cocteau tends to diminish the human characteristics of his characters in order to further his aim of creating theatre poetry. It is also his manner of bringing the myth rather than the characters themselves closer to our attention. This involves him in a very sudden projection of Oedipus to a character of greater stature at the moment of climax in the last act, in much the same manner as the transfiguration of Orphée occurs at the moment when he contemplates his very imminent death. Exercising a bold virtuosity by this method, Cocteau justifies it in the interests of his main intention to create the myth.<sup>7</sup>

It is also apparent that Cocteau has no interest in exploring the characters psychologically. That would be tantamount to creating the realism which he deplored. Although he confers human characteristics upon the infernal gods, it is only so that we may perceive more clearly



their satanic universe. The protagonists themselves appear as modern persons with well-marked characteristics, but they are essentially two-dimensional, available to re-live the ancient myth when the author requires them to do so. Cocteau himself regarded his method of characterisation as deliberately anti-psychological and he invented a more appropriate term describing his attitude in his notes in La Difficulté d'Être - Écrit après L'Aigle à deux Têtes where he wrote:

"J'avais décidé (quelque chose en moi, pour être exact - avait décidé) d'entreprendre un ouvrage d'où la psychologie serait en quelque sorte absente. La psychologie proprement dite y céderait la place à une psychologie héroïque ou héraldique. .... Pour être clair, la psychologie de nos héros n'aurait pas plus de rapports avec la psychologie véritable que les licornes et les lions des tapisseries n'en présentent avec des animaux véritables. Leur comportement (rire du lion, licornes qui tiennent des oriflammes) appartiendrait au théâtre comme ces bêtes fabuleuses appartiennent aux écus. Un pareil ouvrage devait d'être invisible, illisible en somme aux psychologues."

(Editions Du Rocher,  
Monaco, 1957, p. 285)

Jean-Jacques Kihm in his book on Cocteau suggests that this "heraldic" psychology is to be found in all of Cocteau's plays including the apparently naturalistic ones such as Les Monstres Sacrés or La Voix Humaine. He also considers that Cocteau's anti-psychologism is in keeping with modern phenomenology and modern philosophy which, disdaining the exposition of mechanism that regards the phenomena of life as explicable by mechanical forces, are concerned only with the sense or ideas of appearances.<sup>6</sup>

Another device employed by Cocteau in La Machine Infernale for the purpose of humanising the myth is humour. In the context of this play it is introduced to provide dramatic contrast rather than to offer a temporary relaxation from its seriousness and solemnity. Jocasta can be portrayed as an unprejudiced and amusing woman in order to provide a striking contrast to the manner of her terrible fate. The Sphinx appears as a jealous creature who at first reveals her secret to Oedipus because she is suddenly infatuated with him and then, vexed and irritated, allows the disagreeably ungrateful Oedipus to undergo his fate. There is a certain humour in her changing attitudes to Oedipus which makes her very real. Tiresias, whom Oedipus treats with a marked lack of deference and respect, manages to retain a certain dignity despite the manner in which he is



obliged to follow a frivolous Jocasta who addresses him with the pet name of "Zizi". Oedipus is presented as immature, selfish, egotistically ambitious. All of these characterisations serve as a striking contrast to the atmosphere of boundless evil in which the action develops.

Despite Cocteau's aim in adhering to his "heraldic" psychology in the characterisation of his protagonists, he is compelled, within the framework of his play to confer a small measure of freedom upon them. How, otherwise, could the ghost of Laïus be introduced, since his purpose is to overturn the will of the gods? The whole of the first act deals with his attempts to warn Jocasta and Tiresias that he was murdered by Oedipus and that she should not marry her own son. Yet the appearance of Laïus serves no purpose, since nothing can be permitted to interfere with the fulfilment of the prophecy.

Similarly, although Cocteau humanizes the gods involved in Oedipus' fate and grants them a measure of freedom, it also proves to be ineffectual and futile. When the gods assume human form, they are endowed with human feelings and emotions. Thus the Sphinx experiences the emotion of pity and infatuation for Oedipus that would permit her to let him go unhurt. Yet, despite this moment of mortal weakness, her confrontation with Oedipus must proceed as planned. When Oedipus comes back to claim the body of the Sphinx, it is Anubis, her watchdog, who is there to ensure that the Sphinx will fulfil the will of destiny and that the infernal machine of the gods will thus continue to unwind unrelentingly. Even when the Sphinx re-assumes the form of Nemesis, she recalls her pity for man as an unbearable emotion:

"Les pauvres, pauvres, pauvres hommes ... Je n'en peux plus, Anubis ... J'étouffe. Quittons la terre."

(p. 135)

In dramatising the gods Cocteau deprives them of their aura of mystery. The Sphinx and Anubis are subservient to their superiors who, in turn, are also subservient to other superiors. Thus they act against the background of an implacable, malevolent entity, which is at the same time objective and infinite. When the Sphinx complains that she is tired of killing, tired of doling out death, Anubis reminds her that they are bound to obey:

"Obéissons. Le mystère a ses mystères. Les dieux possèdent leurs dieux. Nous avons les nôtres. Ils ont les leurs. C'est ce qui s'appelle l'infini."

(pp. 82-83)



As individuals, the gods are neither all-knowing nor all-powerful, but the infernal machine, of which they are but working parts, is. For the gods time has no consequence. So neither the past nor the future has significance. It is in the mouth of Anubis that Cocteau places the words which express one of the poet's basic notions regarding time. Speaking to the Sphinx, as he holds up her dress, Anubis observes:

"Regardez les plis de cette étoffe. Pressez les les uns contre les autres. Et maintenant, si vous traversez cette masse d'une épingle, si vous enlevez l'épingle, si vous lissez l'étoffe jusqu'à faire disparaître toute trace des anciens plis, pensez-vous qu'un nigaud de campagne puisse croire que les innombrables trous qui se répètent de distance en distance résultent d'un seul coup d'épingle? ... Le temps des hommes est de l'éternité pliée. Pour nous il n'existe pas. De sa naissance à sa mort la vie d'Oedipe s'étale, sous mes yeux, plate, avec sa suite d'épisodes."

(pp. 123-124)

Just as Anubis, from his viewpoint as a god, can see the whole of Oedipus' life spread out flat before him, so Cocteau attempts by his dramatic technique to allow us, the audience, to witness the action of the play so that we too can have the illusion of timelessness, and experience simultaneously events that lie in the past, present and future. This aim can be achieved if we consider that as spectators at a performance of the play, although the fate of Oedipus was sealed hundreds of years ago, it is still happening dramatically at the present moment before our very eyes. Each omen, each incident which occurs at intervals throughout the play can be likened to one of the innombrables trous, at the same time as we recall that the simple action of the perforation by the pin has already been accomplished. Thus each of the play's four acts is a reasoned resolution of a stationary or petrified situation. Considered thus, each of the four situations is essentially the same. Since the action has been lateral, we come to realise at the end that the story had already ended before it started. With this realisation comes the perception of Cocteau's view of time.

With the greater emphasis placed by Cocteau on speech in this drama it is to be expected that there will be high points of poetic eloquence. The most famous speech in the play occurs in the second act, spoken by the Sphinx when she is attempting to lull Oedipus into a defenceless state by hypnotising him with verbal brilliance. Here



the poetry of the word takes over from the poetry of theatre.

"Et je parle, je travaille, je dévide, je déroule, je calcule, je médite, je tresse, je vanne, je tricote, je natte, je croise, je passe, je repasse, je noue et dénoue et renoue, retenant les moindres noeuds qu'il me faudra te dénouer ensuite sous peine de mort; et je serre, je desserre, je me trompe, je reviens sur mes pas, j'hésite, je corrige, enchevêtre, désenchevêtre, délace, entrelace, repars; et j'ajuste, j'agglutine, je garrotte, je sangle, j'entrave, j'accumule, jusqu'à ce que tu te sentes, de la pointe des pieds à la racine des cheveux, vêtu de toutes les boucles d'un seul reptile dont la moindre respiration coupe la tienne et te rende pareil au bras inerte sur lequel un dormeur s'est endormi."

(pp. 117-118)

Spoken with great rapidity, this speech has a strong musical quality that assails the senses and overpowers. It has the same mystifying power as the poem La Toison d'or in the collection Opéra.

" La Toison d'or

Bouclée, bouclée, l'antiquité. Plate et roulée, l'éternité. Plate, bouclée et cannelée, j'imagine l'antiquité. Haute du nez, bouclée du pied. Plissée de la tête aux pieds.

Plate et roulée, l'éternité. Plate, bouclée, l'antiquité. Plate, bouclée et annelée; annelée et cannelée. Ailée, moulée, moutonnée. La rose mouillée, festonnée, boutonnée et déboutonnée. La mer sculptée et contournée. La colonne aux cheveux frisés. Antiquité bouclée, bouclée : Jeunesse de l'éternité! "

(Opéra, ed. Livre de Poche, p. 43)

Obviously intended to be heard rather than read silently, these brilliant pieces dazzle by their sheer virtuosity.

It is, however, the first part of the Sphinx's speech, which immediately precedes the accumulative verbal display quoted above, which is rich in the imagery that we normally associate with Cocteau's best work. It is spoken at the point where Oedipus, closing his eyes and turning away his head, is endeavouring to resist the fascination exercised upon him by the Sphinx. She addresses him thus:

"Inutile de fermer les yeux, de détourner la tête. Car ce n'est ni par le chant, ni par le regard que j'opère. Mais, plus adroit qu'un aveugle, plus rapide que le filet des gladiateurs, plus subtil que la foudre, plus raide qu'un cocher, plus lourd qu'une vache, plus sage qu'un élève tirant la langue sur des chiffres, plus gréé, plus voilé, plus ancré, plus bercé qu'un navire, plus incorruptible qu'un juge, plus vorace que les insectes, plus sanguinaire que les oiseaux, plus nocturne que l'oeuf, plus ingénieux que les bourreaux d'Asie, plus



fourbe que le coeur, plus désinvolte qu'une main qui triche, plus fatal que les astres, plus attentif que le serpent qui humecte sa proie de salive; je secrète, je tire de moi, je lâche, je dévide, je déroule, j'enroule de telle sorte qu'il me suffira de vouloir ces noeuds pour les faire et d'y penser pour les tendre ou pour les détendre; si mince qu'il t'échappe, si souple que tu t'imagineras être victime de quelque poison, si dur qu'une maladresse de ma part t'amputerait, si tendu qu'un archet obtiendrait entre nous une plainte céleste; bouclé comme la mer, la colonne, la rose, musclé comme la pieuvre, machiné comme les décors du rêve, invisible surtout, invisible et majestueux comme la circulation du sang des statues, un fil qui te ligote avec la volubilité des arabesques folles du miel qui tombe sur du miel."

(pp. 116-117)

The sheer unexpectedness of the quick succession of images with which the Sphinx confronts Oedipus recalls that element of surprise that Diagilew had once demanded of Cocteau. The image of the blind man is followed rapidly by that of the gladiator's net, human images that could not differ more. The perspective then alters suddenly and we see a flash of lightning followed by the images of the rigid coachman and the heavy cow. The device has the vivid effect of a quickly cut film montage where entirely unconnected shots are strung together to create an unforgettable impression. The power of Cocteau's imagination is at its greatest in the creation and juxtaposition of such images. One of the most striking is that of the bow strung between the Sphinx and Oedipus that would produce a heavenly plaint were it to be stroked. Studied apart from the main body of the text of the play the confrontation scene between Oedipus and the Sphinx is of greater poetic interest than the rest. It would suggest that Cocteau put more creative activity into the writing of this scene than he did for the rest of the play. That the genesis of the play has its starting point in the agon can be proved by reading Cocteau's original plan in his book Opium where he wrote:

"Je rêve qu'il me soit donné d'écrire un Oedipe et le Sphinx, une sorte de prologue tragi-comique à Oedipe roi, précédé lui-même d'une grosse farce avec des soldats, un spectre, le régisseur, une spectatrice. Représentation allant de la farce au comble de la tragédie, entrecoupée de mes disques et d'un tableau vivant : Les Noces d'Oedipe et de Jocaste ou La Peste à Thèbes."

(Opium, Stock 1930, p. 249)

Before leaving this play I should perhaps comment upon the obvious parallel of the apparition in the first act of the ghost of Laius with that of the ghost of the king in Shakespeare's Hamlet. Also,



although the third and fourth acts may not have the force of the second, which is so rich in verbal imagery, they are imbued with a power of their own which springs in the main from the very strong human quality that emerges from their pages. The observations made by Tiresias to Oedipus in the third act have a direct bearing upon or comment upon the condition of the poet as a victim of his fate. One example is in the scene where Tiresias gives Oedipus the belt and Oedipus, snatching it from the old man, comments:

"Et c'était votre dernière carte. Déjà vous échafaudiez tout un système pour me perdre dans l'esprit et dans le coeur de la reine. Que sais-je? Une promesse antérieure de mariage ... Une jeune fille qui se venge ... Le scandale du temple ... l'objet révélateur ..."

(pp. 162-163)

thus betraying in his words a sense of vulnerability which then prepares the way for the warning which Tiresias calls out to him:

"Oedipe! Oedipe! écoutez-moi. Vous poursuivez une gloire classique. Il en existe une autre: la gloire obscure. C'est la dernière ressource de l'orgueilleux qui s'obstine contre les astres."

(p. 164)

The words of Tiresias could well be addressed to Cocteau himself. In fact there is a strong sense of identification between Cocteau and his Oedipus in the last two acts of the play. When, in the fourth act, Tiresias, addressing Oedipus, observes:

"Je vous mettais en garde, contre votre habitude néfaste d'interroger, de savoir, de comprendre tout." (p. 199)

we are reminded of the various observations made by the Princesse to Orpheus in the film Orphée in answer to the poet's persistent questioning. There is, for example, the moment when the poet questions the Princesse regarding the manner of the death of the young poet Cégeste, and she says to Orpheus:

"Vous cherchez trop à comprendre ce qui se passe, cher Monsieur. C'est un grave défaut."

And, at the very end of the film, when the Princesse is about to return Orpheus to the land of the living she warns him:

"Orphée ... je te demande, une fois pour toutes, de ne pas essayer de comprendre ce que je vais faire. Car, en vérité, il serait même difficile de le comprendre dans notre monde."

The recurring theme of the poet as a victim who is to be beaten and ill-treated is also paralleled in La Machine infernale and the film Orphée. When Oedipus has gouged out his own eyes and Tirésias comments:



"Il a voulu être le plus heureux des hommes, maintenant il veut être le plus malheureux." (p. 211)

Oedipus himself says:

"Qu'on me chasse, qu'on m'achève, qu'on me lapide, qu'on abatte la bête immonde." (p. 211)

In the film Orphée when Orpheus is about to be killed by the Bacchantes he says to Heurtebise:

"Que pense le marbre dans lequel on sculpte un chef d'oeuvre? Il pense : on me frappe! On m'abîme! On m'insulte! Je suis perdu! La vie me sculpte, Heurtebise, laissez-la finir son travail."

Lastly, it is significant that the posthumous apparition of Jocasta is seen only by Oedipus. She is visible to him merely in a maternal capacity. And at this moment, Oedipus is very conscious of fearful pains in his neck and his arms. Then, when Creon would wish to prevent Oedipus' departure with Antigone, it is Tiresias who observes that they do not come under Creon's authority because they no longer belong to him. They now belong

"Au peuple, aux poètes, aux coeurs purs." (p. 217)

And these "coeurs purs" are, of course, the "innocents" with whom Cocteau will be so greatly involved in Bacchus.

### Bacchus (1952)

It has long been the case that derisive critics have judged Cocteau's work in the theatre to be superficial. Since they did not fully appreciate his intention to create poésie de théâtre, their attitude was, to a great extent, justified. Unfortunately it had also a negative effect in that it prevented the understanding and appreciation of the true value of many of the author's other works for the theatre, and in particular his last full-length play Bacchus.

This play occupies a unique place in the general body of his poésie de théâtre. Here, for the first time, Cocteau deals with a subject that is almost exclusively religious in character. Twenty-five years after his astounding re-conversion to Roman Catholicism and his famous Lettre à Jacques Maritain.<sup>7</sup> In this letter Cocteau had admired the simplicity of a religion whose first apostles were fishermen, a religion reduced to its most simple expression, to its purely evangelical origins, without the slightest nuance of the subsequent instruction of the organised Church. The protagonist Hans, in the



play Bacchus, serves the function of developing this idea, pushing it to its extreme conclusion, a consequence to which the age in which the action is set, the sixteenth century, is insensitive.

Not only does the faith which Hans professes imply a complete return to evangelical sources, but it accuses the Church of having imposed intolerable and deforming changes upon religion. At one point in his confrontation with the Cardinal he declares:

"Jésus était révolutionnaire et antisacerdotal."

To which the Cardinal retorts:

"Je vois, vous êtes de ceux qui cherchent à dresser l'exemple du Christ contre son Église."

(Bacchus, Gallimard, Paris  
ed. 1952, p. 111)

In effect, a veritable case is made against the institution of the Church, which Hans reproaches for the impurity of its teachings.<sup>8</sup> Hans obviously resembles Cocteau the poet, and possibly to a greater extent than his other idealised protagonists such as Orphée in Orphée, Galaad and Ségramor in Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, Renaud in Renaud et Armide and Stanislas in L'Aigle à Deux Têtes, because he brings into clearer focus the poet's attitude and his grievances. The case made by Hans against the Church is that although it was originally instituted by Christ, its origins have become too distant. In the period since it was founded its teachings have grown further and further away from the lessons of the Gospel. The Church has replaced mysticism with politics. Thus it has disfigured the true countenance of Christ, and hence of God. Hans sees the Church as a constituted society within a society, hence it is really a party. To conform to its demands, which can only be human, and therefore restricted, biased, apportioned and provisional, would be tantamount to betraying or renouncing oneself. Yet Hans cannot persuade himself to bring his allegiance to the adversaries of the Church. He considers himself to be alone and free, maintaining that if he were to embrace a party, he would be betraying his free soul with the party, or the party with his free soul. Because of his attitude Hans becomes an anti-hero.

It is remarkable that in such an apparently unlikely subject as Bacchus, Cocteau should have managed to achieve such convincing examples of true poetry incorporating the elements of his mythology. These we shall find in the words spoken by Hans.

The action of the play unfolds in a small German town near the



Swiss border in the year 1523. Cardinal Zampi, official representative of the Holy See, arrives from Rome in order to clear up the problems created by Luther's doctrines. His arrival coincides with the start of the celebration of a local custom which celebrates the wine harvest each year. A Bacchus is selected from the young men of the town as king of the carnival and he is allowed to reign with complete authority for seven days. On this occasion, upon the instigation of Christine, daughter of the Duke, the town idiot, Hans, is elected Bacchus. No sooner does he gain power than his idiocy disappears. It had, for a time, been feigned. Inspired by a new freedom and love, Hans tries to advocate the cause of charity which is interpreted as anarchy by the townspeople and officials, and which incurs their hatred. On the last day of his brief reign he is about to be burned, not in effigy according to the usual custom, but in reality. Cardinal Zampi offers Hans refuge in Holy Orders but he refuses. As he is about to be seized and burned by the mob, his friend Lothar, brother of Christine, fires an arrow and kills him. Foreseeing that the martyrdom of Hans could give rise to greater problems for the Church, Cardinal Zampi gives the dead Hans his blessing, thus saving the young man despite himself.

This is one of the most accomplished of Cocteau's plays. It is here that he most successfully achieves a poésie de théâtre through the action of his play, through the interplay of ideas, culminating in the dramatic climax of the scene between Christine and Hans in the second act, a confrontation which Hans sums up in language which has a typical Coctelian poetry of its own:

"Je suis le feu et vous la glace. C'est une belle rencontre, et qui fume, et qui rage, et qui ravage, et lorsque le fer rouge pénètre la glace elle crache sa colère comme mille chats." (Bacchus, ed. Gallimard 1952, p. 147)

In addition to the effective poetry of action there are superb moments of dialogue which is poetic in its own right, and whose imagery is strikingly apt as well as dramatically beautiful, and immensely rich in the poet's mythology. It is significant that most of the verbal poetry is placed in the mouth of Hans, who is himself a transfigured image of the poet.

The only other play which comes near to achieving the artistic success of Bacchus in Cocteau's theatre is L'Aigle à deux Têtes, a play which is flawed however by Cocteau's over-insistence upon an



oppressive atmosphere which becomes too symbolical, to the detriment of a fine play. But L'Aigle à deux Têtes is a play of death-desire and spiritual violence - the intense drama of the assassinated young king, the dead husband, who, in the course of the years, rises to an ideal father-figure in the Queen's imagination, and returns to her as a revolutionary son, bringing for a brief spell the youthful Eros and then the deeply longed-for Death. For a moment, paralysed by the intensity of his transference to the Queen, Azrael, poet and Angel of Death, seeks to become the Angel of Life. But the Queen, modelled on the figure of the Empress Elizabeth of Austria, with her natural pride, charm, passion, style and clairvoyance, and out of her conscious recognition of the union between the destiny of the individual and the destiny of the epoch, takes love far beyond the will of the weak son-figure, really seeking only the warmth of fantasy, on to the lofty heights where glowing autumn death prevails and gives to the assassinated the warmth of real blood. And all is played out against a dark, ominous, brooding, stormy setting, which dissipates the power of the poetry.

There are no such flaws in Bacchus. The form is perfect. The first act is, in the main, expository, skilfully depicting the prevailing unrest of the age as well as describing much of the action which has preceded. Cocteau reveals the motivations and attitudes<sup>9</sup> of the characters through their words, and very concisely, in a succession of six short scenes, delaying the first appearance of Hans until scene VII. And this first appearance is immediately striking. He is still playing the part of the idiot, but the Cardinal perceives at once that Hans may not be quite so simple. His first words reveal an awareness that is very untypical of the state of idiocy:

"Chez nous, le curé se cache derrière une petite grille.  
Il pense que je ne le vois pas. Mais je vois ses yeux."

"... Il arrive que le Diable se change en chaise et on s'en aperçoit parce que la chaise boîte."  
(pp. 72-73)

Later, when the Bishop of the town asks him whether he knows of the rebel monk Martin Luther, Hans affirms that Luther is the Devil. Thus Cocteau in this early scene prepares us for the change which we are to see in Hans when he is elected Bacchus to reign for seven days.

In the first two scenes of the second act we learn that, in addition to having an enemy killed, Hans has taken full advantage of his power as ruler to commit two further indiscretions which have raised the



local wrath. He rode on horseback into the Church, and he put to rout the stall-keepers who used the precincts of the Church to carry on their trade. Officials such as the Syndic are displeased by the actions of Hans and, in a brief exchange between the Syndic and the Cardinal, Cocteau pleads his own case for the beneficial effect of a little disorder:

" Le Syndic : Les plaintes n'en restent pas moins des plaintes et le désordre du désordre.

Le Cardinal : Ne prenez pas au tragique des événements qui relèvent de la farce. Un peu de désordre n'est pas à dédaigner, Monsieur le Prévôt. On peut y découvrir certaines erreurs que l'habitude nous déguise. "

(pp. 105-106)

I quote these exchanges to demonstrate that a Coctelian flavour is occasionally apparent in the speeches of the other characters in the play although the main Coctelian language is reserved for the protagonist Hans.

It is in the fourth scene of the second act in the exchanges between the Cardinal and Hans that the latter makes his position clear. It is a position that is, in a sense, ambivalent as well as being independent. On the one hand he is apparently against the organised Church, seeing Christ as revolutionary and anti-sacerdotal. On the other hand he does not approve of the attitude of Martin Luther. He says:

"Je suis de ceux qui n'admettent pas que Martin Luther traite les paysans de cochons et leur refuse une âme. La preuve en est, dit-il, que comme le cochon un paysan mort meurt une fois pour toutes. Je suis de ceux qui n'admettent pas que Rome suce notre sang pour payer la guerre contre les Turcs et construire ses basiliques. Je refuse de m'engager dans l'une ou l'autre de ses effrayantes entreprises. Je cherche à rester pur."

(p. 111)

In these last words Je cherche à rester pur we have not only a reasonable explanation for the attitude of Hans, but a key to the manner in which Cocteau conceives his character. The quality of purity to which Hans alludes is an attribute of the poet-creator. And Cocteau defines for us in the words of Hans what he means exactly by purity.

"La pureté ne s'exprime ni par des actes, ni par des paroles. Elle ne relève pas d'un code. C'est la matière dont une âme est faite. Le Diable est pur parce qu'il ne peut faire que le mal."

(p. 112)



In exercising the function of the substance of which one is essentially made, one attains a state of purity. The implication is clear. The poet in exercising his poetic function attains his state of purity. The thesis is developed further in the contention that the Divine lies within our inner selves. When the Cardinal asks where Hans had obtained his profound knowledge and what he had been taught by his master, the abbé Knopf, Hans replies:

"Que l'humanité se console de n'être rien avec des légendes. Que le royaume de Dieu n'est pas devant nous mais en nous. Que les miracles sont ce que nous ne savons pas encore. Que les choses ne commencent ni ne finissent. Que nos limites nous interdisent d'admettre l'éternité. Que Dieu ne saurait avoir été créé ni créer. Que le temps n'existe pas et n'est qu'une perspective. Que toute minute est éternelle. Que quelque chose s'est cassé en miettes, que la terre est une de ces miettes, que la vermine s'y est mise et que c'est nous."

(pp. 112-113)

The non-existence of time is a notion that we encounter frequently in Cocteau's work and we noted already the explanation given by Anubis to the Sphinx in La Machine Infernale, a notion that is very similar to the one expressed here. The Cardinal pounces upon the last words in Hans' explanation, suggesting that

"si quelque chose s'est cassé en miettes, c'est que le temps existe."

But Hans quickly explains:

"L'éternité est faite de contradictoires qui s'enchevêtrent et s'épousent de telle sorte qu'il nous semble que les choses se produisent au fur et à mesure et qu'elles peuvent se produire ou ne pas se produire. Le Christ l'a dit."

(p. 113)

And Hans develops his argument that what Christ said in two little sentences constituted two inestimable gifts to the human race:

"En deux petites phrases, il a fait, outre sa personne, deux cadeaux inestimables aux humains." (p. 113)

The Cardinal would like to hear these sentences from the lips of Hans himself. Hans then explains:

"Voici la première : 'Mon Dieu, pouvez-vous éloigner de moi ce calice?' Ce qui veut dire : 'Pouvez-vous m'éviter l'inévitable? Qui, après cette petite phrase, n'aurait pas l'excuse d'une faiblesse?' (pp. 113-114)

And when the Cardinal asks for the second of Christ's sentences Hans quotes:

"La second, sur la Croix : 'Mon Père, m'avez-vous abandonné?'



Ce qui veut dire : Avez-vous changé d'attitude à mon égard? Qui, après cette petite phrase, n'aurait pas l'excuse d'un doute."

Hans's interpretation of the first sentence spoken by Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion not only reinforces Cocteau's own conviction of destiny as being inevitable, but it implies the existence of Divine forgiveness for human error, for human weakness. In the same way the second justifies the existence of doubt within the strongest faith. The language itself, with its very similar form in the two speeches of Hans, is made very evocative because of the slight hint of repetition added to the simple beauty of Christ's own words and creates a poetic effect which is very moving.

After a brief interruption in Scene V in which Hans passes judgment upon a thief who has stolen material from one of the merchants who has his stall within the precincts of the Church by punishing the merchant instead of the thief, the debate between the Cardinal and Hans continues with a consideration of free-will and destiny. When Hans maintains that God is responsible for our acts the Cardinal asks him where free-will comes in. Hans replies that free-will is God's alibi. This leads into an argument in which Hans apparently questions the justice of God denying that man is in any way a free agent. Then he declares that man has made of God a judge, because man himself judges and condemns. And when the Cardinal observes:

"Vous oubliez que Dieu a fait l'homme à son image."

Hans takes up this cue to proceed with his exegesis:

"L'homme le lui a bien rendu. S'il craignait moins un Dieu cruel, le peuple se tournerait vers lui-même. Il retrouverait sa dignité, sa responsabilité d'homme. Il cesserait d'être un bétail qui tremble. Il redeviendrait un homme. Il verserait au compte de Dieu ce qu'il verse au compte du Diable, et pour cause. Le Ciel triompherait. L'Enfer perdrait ses droits.

Imaginons ensemble l'âge où le bien, le mal, la beauté, la laideur, que rien ne désigne encore, composent un bloc pur, un mariage total et sans divorce, un noyau d'où le choix est exclu, et, partant, l'hérésie. Le bloc se casse. L'homme commence. Dieu exige d'être aimé pour lui-même. Il choisira donc la beauté qui consiste à être invisible. La beauté visible deviendra le Diable, le prince de ce monde, sur lequel il déverse une fabuleuse charge de splendeurs. Que les créatures choisissent. Le Diable portera ses joyaux. Dieu choisira l'ombre. Il saura, désormais, qui l'aime et qui se laisse prendre au piège."

(pp. 119-120)



The Cardinal finds this explanation both interesting and bizarre. Hans continues:

"Viendra le Christ, le Roi de la beauté secrète. Il rendra visible l'invisible. Mais le visible reste invisible à ceux qui ne savent pas voir, c'est-à-dire à tous. Viendra l'Eglise. Que fait-elle? Un Dieu féroce, un Dieu qui condamne, brûle et se venge. C'était la seule manière de lui rendre quelque prestige, de mettre la beauté du Diable en échec."

(pp. 120-121)

So the idea of an avenging God is repellent to Hans. And his conception of God confers upon Him the essence of poetry - invisibility. The Cardinal insists upon the inconsistencies which he sees in the doctrine of Hans, but Hans explains that inconsistencies are not uncommon even in the teachings of Christ who often contradicted himself. Hans denies that his explanation is a doctrine. The Cardinal insists that whatever it may be, it would not be readily understood by simple souls. This gives Hans his cue to explain in simple terms what the soul is.

"L'âme est une même eau que nous contenons tous. Elle change de forme et de couleur selon la forme et la couleur des bouteilles. Les âmes simples ressentent parfaitement ce qui les touche. Elles le devinent mieux qu'une élite qui veut imposer à toutes les bouteilles sa forme et sa couleur."

(p. 122)

Here again we find Cocteau's insistence upon the greater spiritual sensitivity of the simple and unsophisticated souls. The Cardinal is irritated by Hans and urges him to outline his programme, his intentions. Hans obliges, briefly and concisely:

"Remuer les forces d'amour qui somnolent. Abolir la crainte. Être bon comme on est méchant. Aimer comme on tue. Tuer la haine. Ne pas savoir où cela conduit."

(p. 124)

When the Cardinal points out that a single man could not achieve these intentions without the aid of secret societies, the organisation of the banks and the police, culminating in a régime of terror which Hans himself abhors, otherwise man, in considering himself free, would merely create disorder, Hans replies that the solution may be found in disorder itself.

"Dans le désordre, on se retrouve. Dès qu'une personne étrangère range notre désordre, on ne retrouve plus rien."

(p. 128)

In these simple words of Hans, Cocteau expresses one of his basic concepts. Disorder can be interpreted in various ways in this context. It can represent the unorganised substance within the poet from which



he will distil poetry. It can also represent the ambience in which the poet finds himself as he sees it, as he is aware of it. And it can represent the characteristics of the basic, untreated, primigenial soil from which will grow the plant of the poet's inspiration. But it is peculiar to the poet himself and must not be contaminated or affected by being interfered with by anyone else.

The Cardinal would want to interfere in the disorder of Hans since he is unable to understand it and he cannot conceive of the possibility of Hans acting on his own initiative without the influence of others, without being in the service of others who are manipulating him for their own ends. Hans insists that he obeys only the dictates of his own conscience. When Hans offers to swear upon the Gospel that he is not influenced by anyone, the Cardinal, in a flash of intuition, suddenly realises that the young man may indeed be a true innocent. And when he asks Hans directly whether he is a true innocent, Hans replies with a typically Coctelian play of words:

"Si vous entendez par là le contraire d'un coupable,  
j'avoue. J'avoue être un innocent. Est-ce un crime?"

(p. 133)

And there is no doubt that Cocteau is using the word innocent in both its denotative and connotative senses. Sensitive to the nuances of the word and aware of a greater danger that may arise, the Cardinal, dreaming, comments:

"... L'innocent est parfois dangereux. Le coupable se découvre. L'innocent nous échappe. Coupable en puissance. Si le criminel s'exprime, on le juge sur un acte. Si l'innocent s'agite, il n'engendre que l'anarchie."

(p. 133)

The Cardinal realises that since Hans is so intractable in his attitude, nothing can save him, and says:

"Vous courez au feu comme un papillon de nuit." (p. 137)

It is now up to Christine to attempt to divert Hans from his fate but the long eighth scene between them in the second act merely serves to show that Christine realises that she is fighting a losing battle. She adopts an attitude of anger towards Hans, who sees it merely as a sign of her vanity. Hans uses his meeting with Christine to assure himself, by questioning her, that he has not in fact been used as a pawn in any political game by her family. Christine remains defiant in her attitude to Hans who finds himself drawn physically to her. When she repulses his advances he accuses her of lying to herself



through pride. And when he tries to embrace her she defends herself like a wild cat. Hans has Christine taken away by his archers. Christine avows her hatred of Hans. In the scene with Lothar which follows, Hans declares that he loves Christine.

During the last scene in the second act when the Duke is revealing to Lothar his fears that Christine may be in danger because she is suspected of having known all along that Hans was no simpleton, ironically Hans is at the same time making love to Christine. This will change her attitude to Hans completely.

In the very first scene of the third act the Cardinal, commenting upon Hans in a short speech, would actually appear to be speaking of Cocteau himself:

"... Son drame est de n'appartenir à personne." (p. 170)

Then the Cardinal, becoming aware of the change in Hans, confronts Christine with it in the fourth scene of the third act:

"J'ai constaté, sans chercher à le comprendre, et sans vouloir le comprendre, que votre révolte contre ce jeune homme s'était muée en douceur, en compréhension, en approbation tacite d'une attitude subversive qui, le premier jour, vous inspirait du dégoût." (p. 182)

Having made his point, he then attempts to enlist Christine's aid in saving Hans from being burned at the stake by having him sign a statement of recantation admitting his errors. He could then be allowed to take refuge in a monastery. Christine agrees to help.

When Hans appears in the fifth scene of the last act he has forsaken his Bacchus costume and is dressed as he was before he was made king to rule for seven days. Christine explains to him the Cardinal's plan. Hans refuses to retract.

"J'ai bien voulu jouer un rôle d'idiot pour éviter les supplices, mais pour éviter le supplice, je refuse de jouer un rôle qui me rendrait indigne de vivre."

(p. 192)

The mere thought of retracting and then to be hidden away in a monastery would imply his playing a part which would make him untrue to himself and so he would feel unworthy of living. These words echo Cocteau's own thoughts and reflect the problem of his own existential dilemma. They form an effective contrast to the earlier observation made by Hans in Act 2 scene VIII when he observes to Christine:

"La vie est une mascarade, et chacun en est dupe."

(p. 149)



Hans's sole aim had been to create love and he had engendered only hatred. Now he feels that he can win only by being burned:

"Si on me brûle, je gagne. Si je m'échappe, je perds."

(p. 193)

Then Hans weakens and he agrees, because he loves Christine, to flee with her to Switzerland. But their conversation is interrupted by Lothar who disapproves of Hans' intention to retract. Such an act, according to him, would be dishonourable. Lothar also reveals that Hans and he have made a secret pact. He attacks Christine for having attempted to persuade Hans to sign the abjuration and in his reactions betrays a jealousy that would suggest that his feelings for Hans are strong. Hans also appears to be torn between his feelings for Christine and his feelings for Lothar. In the end he accedes to Lothar's wishes and refuses to sign.

Throughout the whole of the third act the poetry is theatre poetry. There is constant movement, and the action flows through from scene to scene with a fair amount of speed. The feelings and emotions of the protagonists are in constant conflict, rapidly changing to reveal unexpected nuances, to disclose new motivations. Thus the Cardinal, when he enters quickly at the end of the scene between Hans, Christine and Lothar, has already assumed that Hans, persuaded by Christine, is ready to sign. When he perceives that this is not the case, he assumes that it is Christine who has, after all, persuaded Hans not to sign because of her own interest in Hans. And, indeed, by the time that the Cardinal makes this conclusion, Christine's own attitude to the signing has changed and she is now upon the side of Hans. The dramatic tension is building up now, for, while these complicated feelings are motivating the protagonists, the hour is fast approaching when Hans will no longer be in power. Once the Cardinal is sure that Hans will not sign he tries another expedient. He suggests to Hans that he should test his power over his archers by ordering them to arrest him, the Cardinal. Hans calls six of his men and orders them to arrest the Cardinal. They refuse. The Cardinal has made his point to Hans:

"Le roi est mort. Vive le roi! Une seule force pourrait m'arrêter maintenant. C'est la force d'inertie, bien excusable chez des hommes dont l'oeil mesure l'espace qui s'écourte entre la joie de pendre et la crainte d'être pendu."

(pp. 208-209)



At this point the Duke, the Bishop, the Provost and the Syndic enter to reveal what has been happening outside. The Cathedral has been occupied by sixty men-at-arms. There is no possibility of fleeing because a hundred and fifty young people are blocking the side streets that would give access to the main roads.

Hans now feels that he is being hunted like a quarry just as he had been before. And he is oppressed above all by the menacing silence that pervades the square where the stake has been raised in preparation for the burning. He expresses his feelings in an impassioned outcry:

"C'est immonde! Immonde. La chasse à l'homme l'était moins. Cela remuait, éclaboussait, criait, aboyait. Je nageais comme une bête. Je devenais une bête. Il y avait quelque chose de si fou que la peur se changeait en folie et n'était plus la peur, mais une monstrueuse musique de trompes sauvages, de rires, de coeur qui bat, d'oreilles qui sifflent, de chevaux et d'eau qui écument. Il y avait des herbes qui cherchaient à me lier les jambes et des feuilles qui se collaient sur mes yeux. Je m'accrochais aux racines. La haine jouait du cor. Ici, c'est le silence de la haine et de la sottise. Ils guettent la seconde où ils pourront impunément déchaîner les instincts de meurtre qu'ils dissimulent. Ils retournent à ce qu'ils sont. Et comme ils sont lâches, ils se taisent. Ils se réservent pour la curée. Plus humains qu'eux sont les Jaquemarts qui défilent en rond vers ma mort, avec leurs marteaux de bronze. Je n'arriverai pas vivant sur les bûches. Ils m'assommeront et m'étrangleront et me traîneront et brûleront mon cadavre."

(pp. 210-211)

How effectively impressionistic is Cocteau's language here. The very sounds of the verbs which Hans uses at the start vividly suggest the sounds of the chase and the speed. The juxtaposition of the sounds which Hans heard outside himself - musique de trompes sauvages, rires, chevaux, eau, and those he heard within himself coeur qui bat, oreilles qui sifflent, creates an intense and very subjective image of the experience of being hunted which Hans underwent. The dreaded feeling of being unable to make fast progress when one is being pursued is also fancifully recreated by the description of the restricting grasses that bound his legs and the leaves which adhered to his eyes, blinding him temporarily. The final touch in the first part of the passage is the comparison of the strong feeling of odium created with the sound of the horn - La haine jouait du cor. This makes a telling contrast with the silence of hatred and stupidity which follows immediately. The tremendous ominousness that can be contained in a menacing silence



is also wonderfully conveyed in Hans' words as he looks out upon the square.

And now Cocteau, with a masterful stroke, concludes Hans's impassioned speech with a cry for help:

"Il faut trouver quelque chose. Il faut trouver quelque chose. Je ne veux pas de cette mort crapuleuse. Je n'en veux pas!" (p. 211)

To which the Cardinal suggests:

"Un peu d'encre éviterait beaucoup de sang." (p. 211)

Ostensibly the Cardinal is here merely suggesting that all Hans need do is sign the abjuration, but when we recall that the word "encre" has particular significance for Cocteau since the blood of a poet is ink, then we are struck by the intensity of the irony and the power of the paradox contained in the Cardinal's words.

Again the Cardinal and the Duke attempt to persuade Hans to sign, and they are joined by Christine, who yet again changes her attitude. And as Hans refuses, Lothar slips out of the room, and Christine taking his place by the window sees that the square is now swarming with people, their faces turned upward to the balcony. Hans makes to go on to the balcony so that he can address the people but the Provost orders the drums to be sounded so that the words of Hans will not be heard. But Hans does go out, only to return a moment later, transfixed by Lothar's arrow. This had been their secret pact. The last word uttered by Hans as he dies is: Libre..., then he slips and falls backwards as the bells of the Cathedral begin to ring. Then the Cardinal speaks his lie, saying he has the abjuration signed by Hans in his pocket. The Cardinal utters the blessing, saving Hans.

## NOTES

## Chapter 6

1. In the introduction to Antigone Cocteau, defining his aim, had written:  
 "...: sauver la scène française coûte que coûte, exploiter les ressources du théâtre en soi, négliger jusqu'à nouvel ordre la littérature dramatique en faveur d'une beauté qui ne peut se mouvoir hors les planches." (Jean Cocteau : Théâtre, I, Paris, Gallimard 1948, p. 37).
2. Orphée was written during the second half of the year 1925 and was produced at the Théâtre des Arts, Paris in June 1926. The text of the play was published by Stock in 1927.
3. The décor was created by Jean Victor-Hugo and the costumes by Coco Chanel.
4. Kihm, in his book on Cocteau, sums this up admirably:  
 "Dès La Machine Infernale, soucieux sans doute de faire passer auprès de l'habituel public de théâtre une action qui, dépouillée à l'extrême, l'eût trop violemment dépaycé, l'auteur consent à intercaler ce qu'il appellera plus tard, à propos de Shakespeare, les longues nécessaires (Jean Marais, 118). Ainsi tout le premier acte de la pièce (Le Fantôme) peut être considéré comme une de ces longues destinées à mettre le spectateur dans le bain et à lui permettre l'accès d'un second acte tendu à l'extrême." (Jean-Jacques Kihm : Jean Cocteau, p. 85).
5. The exercising of this kind of virtuosity is a basic element in Cocteau's technique of which he was fully aware, and which he justified even in the Prologue to the play Orphée, where the actor playing the part of Orphée appears in front of the curtain before it rises and makes a short speech to the audience ending:  
 "...: nous jouons très haut et sans filet de secours. Le moindre bruit intempestif risque de nous faire tuer, mes camarades et moi." (ed. Stock, 1927, p. 19).
6. For a full and well-reasoned exposition of this theory see Kihm's book on Cocteau, pp. 87-88.
7. Lettre à Jacques Maritain, published by Stock in 1926, but actually written in October 1925 evoked Maritain's equally famous Réponse à Jean Cocteau in January 1926.  
 Cocteau's letter, which is considered significant enough to be included in his Poésie critique, clearly described the author's state of mind following upon the events of the death of Raymond Radiguet, his re-conversion to Catholicism under the influence of Maritain and his strong period of addiction to opium. These events are referred to and discussed in the letter, but perhaps more importantly, in it Cocteau also postulates his theory (eyed with great wariness and suspicion by Maritain) of poetry as a thing of divine origin and hence as a vehicle of grace and mystical contemplation.



8. In dealing with this theme in his Lettre à Jacques Maritain Cocteau had been less direct, had exercised a certain discretion. But he nevertheless implied that religion allowed of shade and light. He rejected the shade which he identified with mysticism.
9. Particularly significant in scene III of the first act is the attitude revealed by the Cardinal in his speech where, referring to Zwingli, he says:  
"Ce Zwingli n'est pas à craindre. C'est un poète. Du reste, les anabaptistes s'en chargeront. Laissez-les faire la besogne. Ils baptiseront Zwingli à leur manière, la tête la première, dans quelque lac. L'Eglise est une. Vos loups s'entredévorent."  
(p. 54).

Chapter 7 : Poésie de cinémaLe Sang d'un Poète (1930)Orphée (1950)Le Testament d'Orphée ou Ne me demandez pas pourquoi (1959)Jean Cocteau and the Tenth Muse

Cocteau was not responsible for the creation of the cinema. But he did invent the Tenth Muse. And he applied to his Muse the term cinematograph in order to distinguish it from the cinema. Their functions are entirely different. The aim of the cinema is mainly to entertain. Cocteau's principal aims in using the medium of the cinematograph are firstly to extend the boundaries of his art by employing a kind of writing (hence his insistence on the word "cinématographe" as opposed to "cinéma") capable of venturing into dimensions where ordinary handwriting could not possibly arrive, and secondly to provoke thought. And Cocteau sees the medium of the cinematograph as a vehicle for thought as opposed to the ordinary cinema which, at its best, is merely a pretext for thought.

What attracted Cocteau to the medium of the film? Two main circumstances. He was a draughtsman. It was thus natural for him to see and hear what he wrote, to endow it with plastic form. In his Entretiens sur le Cinématographe with André Fraigneau (Belfond, Paris 1973) he says:

"Je suis dessinateur. Il m'est naturel de voir et d'entendre ce que j'écris, de le douer d'une forme plastique. Lorsque je tourne un film, les scènes que je règle deviennent pour moi des dessins qui bougent, des mises en place de peintre."  
(p. 18)

Secondly, he realised that the film was the only medium that could allow him to dominate satisfactorily and effectively Time and Space.<sup>1</sup> Thus Cocteau turned to the film availing himself of the services of what he often referred to as l'encre de la lumière<sup>2</sup> to create his poésie de cinéma. Indeed it was a kind of invisible ink upon which he required merely to blow in order to produce his particular kind of magic and enchantment out of the machinery of the cinematograph, machinery which employed mirrors and trapped images, machinery which uttered oracles like the horse of Orphée, machinery that could fly through walls and alter the rhythm of time. It is easy to understand how Cocteau came under the fascination of this fabulous medium at a



time when literature did not even conceive of the possibility of admitting to its domain, on equal terms with the theatre, the art of the film.

Cocteau was quick to realise that the cinematograph required a proper syntax. It would be a mistake to use cinematic images as a writer uses literary images. The syntax of the cinematograph could be created satisfactorily only by the connection of and clash between the images. Above all Cocteau deplored that so-called flow that was considered cinema by the critics who mistook it for style. His primary concern was indeed to prevent the images from flowing, to oppose them to each other, to anchor them and join them without destroying their relief. In this way to each image would be attributed its full value. Although Cocteau served his apprenticeship in film by the enthusiastic study of Méliès in the early French Cinema, Chaplin, D. W. Griffith and Langdon in the American Cinema, Eisenstein and Pudovkin in the Russian Cinema, and his avant-garde contemporaries such as Luis Bunuel in the later French Cinema, he did not attempt to emulate their techniques, but preferred to invent his own. In fact it would be inaccurate to describe his technique as such in the pure sense of the word. His is rather the method of invention involving a great use of improvisation. Another obvious reason for Cocteau's attraction to the medium of the film was that through it he could readily (sometimes accidentally, his mysterious inner force taking over) create out of an existing setting a poetic ambience by transmogrifying (and I use the word deliberately since an element of the grotesque often intruded) the setting by means of subtle lighting effects, widening or squeezing the image by the use of lenses having different and varying optical fields or characteristics, and also by taking advantage of the plastic qualities inherent in the film emulsion itself which could impart, with the clever use of photographic filters, subtle shades varying from pure white to deep black through a range of varying shades of grey, to create an overall monochrome image rich in a broad range of tones.<sup>3</sup>

Cocteau was well aware of that particular other-dimensional quality that can be imparted to an object by film photography as opposed to still photography.<sup>4</sup> The film camera also has the ability to confer a very special beauty or harmony upon a human countenance which to the naked eye has the appearance of being ordinary and commonplace. Added



to this characteristic is the advantage of viewing a person, an object or a landscape from a particular viewpoint that will fit in with the artistic intentions of the creator of the film.

Cocteau's use of yet another element of film-making is special to him. The music which he employs in his films must not synchronise with the action but tend rather to act as a counterpoint to it. This is obviously against the traditional use of film background music which Cocteau regarded as a vulgar pleonasm. What Cocteau prefers is accidental synchronism which, even when a score has been specially written for the film, he provokes by re-shuffling the music. This process he describes most comprehensively in Entretiens sur le Cinématographe:

"Je change les musiques de place. J'ai usé de cette méthode dès Le Sang d'un poète, où j'ai déplacé et interverti les musiques de toutes les séquences. Non seulement ce contraste donnait du relief à l'image, mais encore il arrivait que ces 'musiques déplacées' collassent trop étroitement avec les gestes et semblassent écrites exprès. Pour La Belle et la Bête, la musique de Georges Auric est faite à l'image. Il m'était donc presque impossible de rompre un rythme sans manquer de respect au compositeur. La musique était si belle qu'on eût dit qu'Auric, adversaire de la musique explicative, eût volontairement usé de la méthode des contrastes: chœurs lents, sur des actions rapides, etc. Par contre, dans Orphée où je renouai, à vingt ans de distance, avec Le Sang d'un poète où j'orchestrai en quelque sorte le thème, joué jadis avec un doigt, j'usai vis-à-vis de mon collaborateur des libertés les plus irrespectueuses. J'enregistrai sa musique sans images (au chronomètre) et plaçai, par exemple, le scherzo écrit pour la scène comique du retour à la maison sur la poursuite à travers la ville déserte. Mieux, j'enregistrai les plaintes d'Eurydice, de Glück, comptant ne m'en servir que pour la radio du chalet, coupai la musique d'Auric à la première entrée de Heurtebise chez Eurydice et, m'apercevant que la première et la dernière note de Glück correspondaient avec la première et la dernière image de cette scène, je profitai lâchement de ce petit prodige. Petit prodige assez fréquent chez ceux qui ne calculent que par instinct."

(pp. 51-52)

It thus becomes apparent that Cocteau, in devising his own method of utilising the resources of the film, was actually creating his own individual style. And while his avoidance of parallelism, in his manner of using music and sound to counterpoint the action rather than to underline it, is something entirely new, his method of montage already has a precedent in the aphoristic style of much of his writing. We shall also encounter many examples of paradox in his films when we



observe the visual context within which he places his poetic dialogue or the poetic commentary which he speaks to accompany the action in the manner of a chorus. Also, just as his method of employing visuals and music is contrapuntal, so also is his manner of emphasising or diminishing the range of the spoken word according to the visual background against which the protagonists or the author himself speak.

Now the style which Cocteau invents for his cinematograph requires that the picturesque must be avoided at all costs. For that reason he very rarely has recourse to the use of laboratory tricks for the visuals in his films. Rather does he employ subterfuges which are executed so swiftly that the simple method by which they are achieved is not immediately apparent to the spectator. We shall see several examples of these devices in studying the film Orphée, and although they are in themselves visual tricks, they are carried out with the simplest and most economical means possible.

It is significant that Cocteau never used colour in his feature films with the exception of the single short shot in colour of the hibiscus flower in Le Testament d'Orphée. Quite apart from the problem of the additional expense incurred in the making of colour films I feel that he preferred to work in monochrome because the poetic world he created on film could be better portrayed in the subtle range of monochrome tones. Since the actual world has colour, to deprive it of colour on film confers upon it another dimension, a dimension that is akin to that of the dream world.

We shall see, in studying some of Cocteau's major films that what he creates in them is not only a kind of visual poetry but a picturisation of the very depths of his oneiric universe and his metaphysic brought to light by images and movement that emerge from his own reality. In his style we shall witness occasionally an over-developed self-awareness, a slightly intrusive self-consciousness which give rise to an air of dilettantism. Cocteau justifies this by regarding it as an asset, because he maintains that it imparts a spontaneity upon his work which would not otherwise be present. Now this quality of self-consciousness, arising from Cocteau's own nature, gives evidence at times of skill or cleverness. His various trouvailles are the proof of it and these persuade us that he is indeed a genius. But when his self-awareness assumes a winsomely plausible air it irritates and often gives rise to lapses which would otherwise be



inexplicable. Thus there is a slight flaw in his artistically inventive mechanism. And it is due to that peculiarity in his nature which compels him to draw attention to himself by a demonstration of his exceptional talent and versatility. If I were to phrase it in his own style - we are aware of him being occasionally indulgently over-indulgent in his self-indulgence when he forgets how far he should go too far!

Yet the very flaws which he introduces fall into insignificant perspective themselves when viewed against the entire body of his cinematographic poetry and certainly do not spoil the effect of the whole ... a splendid portrayal of his dream which wins our appreciation for its splendour, candour and sincerity. And we become aware as we study his films that Cocteau the poet, through the medium of the cinematograph, demonstrates that which in reality does not appear to exist. It is thus in his film poetry that Cocteau finally achieves his main aim - the petrifying of the abstract or the normally intangible, a corporeal expression of the workings of his mind as he descends into his inner self. Moreover, in approaching the medium of the film, Cocteau enters a vaster legend bringing his myths before a wider public, and he multiplies the already numerous dimensions of his work within a new framework of film movement.

Cocteau's one regret in embracing the medium of the film was that he saw it as a very ephemeral art form, in that celluloid deteriorates after a number of years, and so he assumed that by the end of the century his films would perhaps no longer exist. In fact this should not be so. Although some of the photographic quality of the originals is lost in the technical process of duplicating, it is now possible to preserve old films indefinitely through the medium of the video-recorder. I am sure that Cocteau's classics will be transferred to tape so that they will be available for future generations to plunge into the depths of the poet's oneiric universe with open and untrammelled minds. The poet's dearest wish Je reste avec vous will thus be granted.

### Le Sang d'un Poète (1930)

It was in 1930 that Charles de Noailles, at his own expense, simultaneously commissioned Luis Bunuel to make his film L'Âge d'Or and Cocteau to make his first professional film Le Sang d'un Poète. Although Cocteau himself described the basic theme of the film in his



essay on Orphée which appears in the first volume of his Poésie Critique in the following terms:

"La nécessité pour le poète de traverser des morts successives et de renaître sous une forme plus proche de sa personne est la base du Sang d'un Poète.

.....

Cette nécessité de morts successives devient inévitable chez l'acteur qui meurt et ressuscite sans cesse et que son métier oblige à ce drame du phénix, à vivre entre le feu et la cendre." (p. 245)

it is also apparent that there are additional themes in the film besides that of the poet's descent into himself. These are the relationship between the poet and his creation, the suffering caused by beauty, and time as a phenomenon of perspective.

Margaret Crosland, in her admirable biography of Cocteau, describes the action of the film in the following words:

"There are four stages to the film : the poet (who has a star-scar on his shoulder) is sketching a face when the mouth becomes alive and transfers itself to his hand. Then he transfers the mouth to the statue of a woman who comes to life, speaks, and sends him out of the room through the mirror. He then finds himself in a long corridor in some strange hotel and observes strange events through the keyhole - the shooting of a peasant, a child being taught to fly. A woman tells him to shoot himself but when he does so his head is crowned with a laurel wreath. The last stage of the film starts with a snowstorm in which schoolboys demolish a snow statue. One of the boys is hurt with a snowball and lies in the snow with blood gushing from his mouth. Then the poet and the statue-woman (both in evening dress) play cards on a table which stands over the schoolboy's body, watched by a man in eighteenth century dress standing on the stairs and by a whole audience in evening dress who occupy theatre boxes round the courtyard. A negro with skeleton-like wings removes the boy's body away by apparently absorbing it into his own. The poet, who had previously taken the ace of hearts from the schoolboy's pocket, loses the game and shoots himself. The woman walks away (leaving no footprints in the snow), changes back into a statue and appears, surrounded by oxen, carrying a lyre. The film ends with the trans-mogrification of an ox's horns into a poet's lyre and a glimpse of the globe sprouting joyously with corn and poetry."

(Margaret Crosland : Jean Cocteau  
Nevill, London, 1955, p. 146)

Before the film actually begins a text is projected upon the screen explaining that every poem is a coat of arms which must be deciphered. The author, free to select faces, shapes, movements,



tones, acts, and places which please him, composes with them un documentaire réaliste d'événements irréels. The function of the composer will be to underline the sounds and the silences. Cocteau dedicates this collection of "allegories" to the memory of Pisanello, Paolo Uccello, Piero della Francesca and Andrea del Castagno, who were all painters of coats of arms and enigmas. There follows a short prologue in which we see Cocteau, masked except for his eyes, holding a plaster hand in his own hand, against a background of studio lights. He announces that the film is beginning. There follows a brief close-shot of a door knob which someone is trying to open from the other side of the door. Now we see a large factory chimney which leans over and begins to collapse while the author's voice intones the words:

"Tandis que tonnaient au loin les canons de Fontenoy, dans une modeste chambre, un jeune homme..."

The sound of the cannon is heard and then we find ourselves in a modest room where a young artist, indifferent to the events of history in his self-absorption, is drawing the outline of a face at his easel. The paper is transparent and the eye can follow the line of his drawing. The artist is stripped to the waist, wears trousers that are rolled up to his calves, cyclist's shoes, white knitted gloves, and on his head is a Louis XV wig. The actor who plays the part, the Brazilian Errique Rivero, bears a striking resemblance to Rudolph Valentino. We cut to a close-up of a large star-shaped scar on the artist's left shoulder blade. The scar is surmounted by fluffy material which later proves to be covering the extension of the scar made by a knife-blade. The author's voice now announces the first episode: La main blessée ou la cicatrice du poète. Up to this point, consistent with Cocteau's theory regarding the contrapuntal function of background music, Auric's music has been bright and merry. Now that the first episode has been announced, the camera shows, near the artist's easel, a figure constructed of pipe-cleaners, its white frame revolving on the end of a string. As the artist continues to draw the face, there is a sudden knock at the door. The artist turns his head away for a moment, then, when he turns around and looks at his drawing an expression of shock appears upon his face. We see in close-up that the mouth in the face he has drawn is alive and it opens to show solid teeth. Meantime the knocking on the door becomes louder. The young man removes the glove from his right hand and begins frantically to rub the drawing in an attempt to wipe out the mouth. He goes to the door and



opens it to reveal a friend (played by Jean Desbordes) in a Louis XV costume. The artist offers his friend his hand, but his friend stares at it in amazement then rushes away and we hear the sound of him falling down a staircase.

The artist is again alone in his room, looks at the door, smiles, shrugs his shoulders, removes his wig and throws it so that it lands neatly upon a hat-rack. He then moves to a washstand. Above the basin, a head, also made of pipe-cleaners, revolves. As it does so it appears to reveal and superimpose its forms. In a close-up of the basin we see the artist plunging his hand into it. Immediately the water begins to bubble and we hear the sound of bubbles. The bubbles are issuing from the mouth that is still in the palm of his right hand. Then the artist takes his hand out of the basin. In a close-up of his hand we can see that the mouth is still engraved in it, alive. The artist moves to the window in order to examine the mouth in his hand. The drowned mouth seems to fade in a little area of light. At this point the actor's hand is substituted for the author's plaster hand, on which the mouth is partially open and water is flowing out of it. The mouth is still surrounded by a small area of light. In a corner of the room, the artist, leaning against a wall, is looking at his hand with an expression of disgust. He shakes his arm and his hand trying to rid himself of the unwanted mouth. But the mouth will not be removed and suddenly speaks, saying: De l'air! The artist brings the mouth to his ear and it repeats: De l'air! He goes to the window, breaks a pane of glass with his heel, puts his arm through and allows the mouth to breathe. Then, when he brings back his arm and looks at the mouth, a new expression flits across his face. He looks stealthily to his left, goes to the door and locks it with his left hand, returns to the window, closes his eyes in a kind of ecstasy, raises the mouth in his hand to his own mouth and glues it there. Then, staggering as if intoxicated, with his hand still on his face, he falls into an armchair near a round table covered with a soiled cloth, old newspapers and an oil lamp with a shade. In a close-up we see the artist's trembling hand moving to his neck. The camera follows the movement of his hand which strokes his left shoulder and slides down towards his left breast, its wet traces apparent on his skin. The hand moves down offscreen presumably to his groin. In a large close-up of his face thrown backwards and viewed from behind the chair, we see that his hair is hanging down his back and his eyes, enlarged, are painted on his



eyelids.<sup>5</sup> The artist has submitted to the fascination of the mouth and has made love to it. We now fade in to a mask which is white on one side, black on the other, revolving mechanically on the end of a stick, and this shot brings the first episode to its end.

Such a sequence is obviously open to an unlimited number of interpretations. One of the most convincing I have encountered is that offered by Jean-Jacques Kihm in his book on Cocteau where he writes:

"La bouche sanglante de son dessin s'imprime dans sa main, dans sa chair : on ne se débarrasse pas facilement de la blessure de la poésie (ou de la blessure de tout autre destin...), on est marqué; d'ailleurs, si cette blessure s'imprime dans la chair du poète, c'est qu'elle y était avant, invisible. Une seule solution : aimer sa blessure et dormir. C'est à dire: s'aimer soi-même."

(Jean-Jacques Kihm : Cocteau 6  
Gallimard, 1960, p. 104)

This understanding of the sequence is in keeping with Cocteau's artistic manifesto, for, as we shall see in the following sequence, it is as a result of the poet's introspection, his descente en soi-même, that his poetry is born.

The second episode is introduced by the author's words:

"Le lendemain matin ..."

It opens with a long shot of the table in the light of dawn, where the artist has fallen asleep with his head resting on one arm and his hand open. Accompanying this shot we hear on the soundtrack the twittering of swallows, the sound of a train hurtling past, cocks crowing in the distance. Moving into a close-shot of the sleeping artist we observe that he has become the author in plaster, his arm being also of plaster, with an open plaster hand. The mouth is dreaming and snoring in the palm of the hand and it whispers disconnected, unintelligible words. The artist awakes and we observe him from the other side, from behind. Further away, between the washstand and the window we see a plaster life-size statue of an armless woman.<sup>7</sup> The artist stands up holding the elbow of his right arm with his left hand. He walks slowly to the statue, then moves around it and, with a sudden movement, puts his right hand over its mouth. In a close-up we see the veins in his arm standing out from the extreme effort he is making. A large close-up shows his hand and the statue's face. The statue opens its eyes, the artist's hand moves away revealing that the mouth of the statue is now alive. The author's voice comments:

"les murs ont-ils des oreilles?"<sup>8</sup>



and the statue also speaks:

"Vous croyez qu'il est si simple de se débarrasser d'une blessure, de fermer la bouche d'une blessure?"

While the statue is speaking the camera viewpoint alters to reveal the whole room seen from above. The windows and the door have disappeared during the night. The artist gropes along the walls, feeling them, and he reaches a tall mirror that has replaced the door. He turns back and asks the statue to open the mirror for him. The statue tells him that he must go into the mirror and walk through. When the artist hesitates, bewildered, the statue urges him on. Then, as he stands in front of the mirror, a chair suddenly materialises next to the frame. He is startled and nervously touches it, walks around it, then stands on it. He touches the surface of the mirror and his ring strikes it three times but the sound of the striking is delayed and is heard later. Then, bracing himself, he plunges into the mirror, that is, into his inner self.

We are now inside the world of the mirror and it is night. In the distance, the artist-poet, himself immobile, is being moved forward on an invisible conveyor. His arms raised and his face lit from below, he seems to be drawn into the camera until his body blocks out the scene.

The setting changes to the Hôtel des Folies-Dramatiques, a disreputable-looking place with dirty wall-paper and linoleum flooring. The scene is a corridor and there are shoes outside the bedroom doors. There is a wall at the end of this corridor that turns to the left. An Annamese dressed in European clothes turns the corner at the end of the corridor. He is reading a newspaper and he stops in front of the third door and speaks through it in Chinese. Then he walks on still reading his paper. He disappears. The poet enters with his back to camera, walking strangely as though he were off balance. As he reaches the first door on the left he stops, listens, then kneels down putting his eye to the keyhole. The author's voice on the soundtrack informs us that in the small hours of the night, Mexico, the trenches of Vincennes, the boulevard Arago and a hotel room are all the same. This information prepares us for the surprising scene which the poet witnesses through the keyhole of the door.

He hears the ticking of an alarm clock as he sees a fireplace carved out of a large rock. On the rock fireplace is a statue of the



Virgin, and in front of the fireplace stands a Mexican who bears a strong resemblance to the poet. In foreground on the left, rifle barrels are aimed at the Mexican. Shots are heard and he falls as the statue of the Virgin is shattered into pieces. This action is carried out in slow motion. No sooner is it completed than the Mexican stands up again in the same position as before and the statue of the Virgin becomes whole again. The whole sequence of the "execution" is repeated, and continues to be repeated as the poet leaves the keyhole and, struggling against an unknown force, moves with difficulty to the right. When he reaches the second door there is a small placard on it that reads : Leçons de vol. His eye once again upon the keyhole, the poet is ready to look upon the second of the myths of his unconscious. He sees an empty room with straw on the floor. There is a fireplace and a ladder. A small girl wearing circus tights with a harness of little bells is crouching near the fireplace. An old governess in a black dress with a white lace collar is threatening her with a whip. The girl protects her face with her elbow and stands up. Each time she moves the bells on her costume tinkle. The woman lifts the girl on to the top of the fireplace. The tip of her whip lashes the girl. We cut back to the poet who moves closer to get a better view. Back in the room we see that the girl, now above the fireplace, seems to be flying in the air although her body is motionless. The sound of the little bells increases in volume. The woman signs to the girl to keep on flying. Now the girl pulls herself up and we see her on the ceiling crawling to the other corner of the room. The bells tinkle. She moves past the flex of the hanging electric light. The old woman lifts up her skirts, becomes agitated, and goes to the ladder which is leaning against the wall. She climbs up the ladder and shakes her fist at the girl. In close-up, the girl makes faces and sticks out her tongue.

The poet, still trying to keep his balance, succeeds in reaching the third door as the author's voice intones : Les mystères de la Chine. There are no shoes in front of this door and the keyhole is blocked with paper which the poet pulls out, tears up and throws away. When he looks into the room all he sees is a ceiling lit by an opium lamp that casts shadows of an opium pipe and the hand of a smoker pushing a needle into the pipe. We hear the sound of opium spluttering and smoke rises. The poet gets up, puts his foot on the



door knob and raises himself up to the crack above the top of the door, trying to look into the room and listen. We hear voices speaking Chinese. The poet's foot slips and he falls, then kneels and puts his eye again to the key-hole. In a key-holed shaped close-up an eye approaches the door from the inside of the room. The poet retreats and drags himself to the last door. Outside it can be seen a woman's shoe and a man's shoe. The author's voice announces that the desperate meetings of the Hermaphrodite took place in room 19. Looking through the key-hole the poet sees a large sofa against a black background. On the left of the sofa an unending spiral in white is revolving. A head, masked in white, is on the right and as it comes into relief we hear a roll of drums that continues for some time. Then a chalk drawing depicting the torso of a woman in a reclining position appears. A male leg and a male arm, bared up to the shoulder, appear. In a close-shot the poet now places his hands against the door and arches his back. The image has a strong sensual quality. The dark background above the sofa becomes covered with stars as the roll of drums continues. More limbs and another torso appear. The Hermaphrodite's hand lifts up a loin cloth to reveal a sign that reads : Danger de mort. We see the poet's eyes in close-shot before cutting back to the key-hole. A mask with real flashing eyes appears. A long Louis XIV wig is added to the mask creating an incongruous and rather horrible impression. A small leg and arm appear on the female torso. All these actions are executed while the drums roll. A confused image of shirts, petticoats, white ties and socks appears, and the articles are thrown about in haphazard fashion to the beating of the drums.<sup>9</sup> We hear a murmured conversation between a man and a woman and then the sound of running water.

The poet stands up and turns to his right. The arm of a woman suddenly appears from behind the corner of the wall. The hand of the arm is holding a revolver. A saleslady's voice says : Mode d'emploi. The poet takes the revolver. As he follows the saleslady's voice giving instructions for the use of the revolver, the shadow of the head made of pipe-cleaners that we saw in the artist's room now revolves on his left. We see the poet place the revolver against his temple. He fires and drops the weapon. Blood spurts out from his temple, flows onto his body and turns into a dark cloth that is draped around him just as a laurel wreath appears on his head. As



he dies the author's voice on the soundtrack exclaims : Toujours la gloire! Then the poet's eyes open again. He is angry. He tears off the robe and the laurel crown and mutters : Merde! Merde! j'en ai assez... assez... Now, in long-shot, the camera follows the fleeing poet along the corridor. His flight is accompanied dramatically by the fast and strangely ominous sound of a beating heart and heavy breathing. The poet is making his way back to his room through the medium of the mirror. In a curious short sequence within the darkness of the night inside the mirror the poet is represented by a white pipe-cleaner figure, and, as the figure walks away, we hear the sound of an approaching tractor. We fade-in to the opposite side of the mirror with the pipe-cleaner figure coming closer to the camera until it fills the entire frame. This shot is accompanied by the sound of the tractor moving away. Now we see the mirror in the poet-artist's room. It expels the poet to the sound of a religious chorus of childish voices. When the sound of the chorus stops, the poet clenches his fist and goes toward the statue. The expression on his face shows a kind of petulant annoyance. The living head of the statue watches him as he takes a hammer and hits it. It breaks and splits in two. He continues to hit the statue and a cloud of dust rises from the rubble. We now cut to a still photograph of the poet holding the hammer. He is covered in plaster dust. We then see a close-up of his head which has the appearance of a flour-covered character in an Italian comedy. The author's voice now comments that by breaking statues one risks turning into one oneself, and, as he speaks, we see a shot of some buildings in ruins in the midst of which a white statue is sitting on a pedestal. In a close-shot we recognise that the statue is that of the poet.

It is the episode in the corridor of the hotel which has given rise to the notoriety of Cocteau's film. But he is being remarkably frank and honest and the actions portrayed in the various rooms are simply the myths of his unconscious. The scenes themselves are singularly devoid of visual poetry of any kind and this is deliberate on Cocteau's part so that he may indicate at the end of the episode that poetry is quite another thing which the poet can attain only by dying. Thus the poet's blood becomes a peplum and a laurel wreath sprouts upon his forehead. The fact that he must first die to gain recognition enrages him. Then, by destroying the statue he runs the



risk of becoming one himself. This does indeed happen in the episode which follows. But the statue of the poet will in turn be destroyed.

When the next episode opens we realise that the statue of the poet on the pedestal is in the Cité Monthiers, a small street in the 9th arrondissement between the rue d'Amsterdam and the rue de Clichy and adjoining the Condorcet school where Cocteau was a pupil. It is snowing. This is the same setting that we encounter in the first chapter of Cocteau's novel Les Enfants Terribles. The poet's statue is covered by a layer of snow. The author's voice introduces the episode with its title : La bataille des boules de neige. Some schoolboys are jostling and pushing each other through the entrance of the arch that opens onto the rue d'Amsterdam. They are wearing short trousers, Basque berets and long, dark, woollen cloaks. Their moleskin satchels filled with books and jotters weigh them down and appear to deform them, giving them an almost crippled air.

It is evening and a gas lamp lights up the slushy snow. Groups of boys chase each other. One of the boys is tripped up and falls over backwards. In a long shot the other boys drop their satchels, pick up handfuls of snow and fight one another around the statue. One boy facing the wall near the lamp-post begs for mercy. Then in long-shot the boys bombard the statue with snowballs and destroy it. One of the boys leaps onto the pedestal and grabs the head of the statue. The author comments : Les guerriers. Now, beside the lamp-post, we see a house on the left in front of which are curved steps with iron railings. At the foot of these steps two of the boys are propping up a limping friend who is biting his lips and snapping his fingers. They approach the camera and we see that the limping boy's knee is bandaged with a handkerchief. Meanwhile, in long-shot, the other boys are continuing their snow battle, using the destroyed statue, as though it were made of snow, as their ammunition. Very little of the statue is left on the pedestal. The author's voice announces the arrival of the big ones. Two larger boys arrive. They are dressed in the same manner as the others. They self-consciously light up two cigarettes which they smoke with pursed lips. When they sit down in the snow at the bottom of the curved steps they are bombarded. The elder of the two boys stands up and leers his hatred at the camera. The battle is now in full swing. The leering boy slips behind the empty pedestal and leans against it, watching the battle. The camera



now turns to show another boy, sitting against the grating of a basement window, who is being strangled by a scarf the ends of which are being pulled by two other boys. He is struggling and trying to cry out. The author's voice now announces : Dargelos était le chef de la bande, just as the camera moves round to show Dargelos sitting on the steps of the curved steps, surrounded by his men. Cocteau again comments : Une boule de neige dans ses mains pouvait devenir plus méchante que les couteaux d'Espagne. Now in close-shot we see the friend of Dargelos, alone in the middle of the Cité. His mouth is half-open in amazement, as Dargelos, tossing back his hair, throws off his beret and cloak and aiming furiously at him, hurls the snowball. It strikes the friend in the chest and he sways and falls. We see him now lying on the ground next to his open satchel, his books strewn here and there in the snow. The top of the shot frame shows several pairs of legs coming up behind the motionless body of the boy. They stop and then move away hurriedly. One pair of legs lingers, then walks slowly away and the camera moves up to reveal that it is Dargelos. He stops and picks up his own satchel. We then see his face in close-shot as he looks in the direction of his friend's body, sticks out his tongue in the manner of a boy concentrating over an exercise in class, shakes back the lock of hair on his forehead and then runs off. The whole Cité is now under snow. It is empty except for the body of the boy lying in a dark little heap in the centre, facing the pedestal where the statue had been. The author's voice rises poetically over the quiet music:

"Ainsi partent souvent du collègue  
 Ces coups de poing qui font cracher le sang,  
 Ces coups de poing durs des boules de neige  
 Que donne la beauté, vite, au coeur, en passant."

We see the dying boy's head on the snow. Blood flows from his mouth forming bubbles. He moans and half-opens his eyes. A sudden close-up of the face of Dargelos bears down upon the camera. The suffering boy closes his eyes as the blood continues to escape from his mouth.

Thus Cocteau incorporates in this episode the myth of the fatal beauty of Dargelos with his lethal weapon of the snowball, effectively played out against the poetry of his memories of childhood which evoke the fascination and irresistible attraction of his idol, in the realistic setting of the Cité Monthiers.

Cocteau now introduces the fourth episode:



Ce soir même la ville était très élégante...

We are still in the Cité Monthiers as the camera moves back to reveal in long-shot a lamp and a card table on the snow between the pedestal of the statue and the body of the dead boy. A lady in evening dress, identical to the statue that we saw earlier in the artist's room, sits on the left of the table. Opposite her is the poet who is also dressed in evening clothes. They are playing cards. The poet's friend, in the Louis XV costume, leans against the empty pedestal wearing a black silk mask. We hear a theatre intermission bell, and the camera moves round to reveal the Cité in the background. The windows with balconies, above the arch, have become two theatre boxes. The camera tracks in on the boxes. A young lady and two old ladies in evening dress come into the box on the left and sit down at the front. They are accompanied by three mature men who stand behind them. Now we move over to the box on the right. A large, rather ugly woman comes in dressed in a low-cut velvet dress.<sup>10</sup> She is accompanied by three formally-dressed men, one of whom is wearing a black patch over his eyes. The woman sits down and brushes the snow from the edge of the box with a large ostrich-feather fan. The occupants of the two boxes appraise each other. The people on the left seem to be scorning the woman on the right, who revenges herself by mocking them behind her fan. Then she closes the fan, raises her eyes skywards and shrugs. The intermission bell stops ringing.

Our attention is now drawn to the card game which is progressing. The statue-lady puts down her cards, opens a gold compact, looks at herself in the small mirror, closes it and puts it down on the table. Then, instead of resuming her game, she picks up her shimmering fan, opens it like a pack of cards, studies it and waves it, turning her head nonchalantly from left to right. Her face betrays no expression whatsoever. Meantime the friend in Louis XV costume removes his mask and lays it down on the pedestal. We now see in close-shot the dead boy at the foot of the table, behind him the legs of the poet. Then, in slow-motion, the poet's hand finds its way into the dead boy's jacket, brings out the ace of hearts with his fingers, then disappears out of the top of the frame. The author now announces the arrival of the boy's guardian angel. The angel is a negro who limps with his left foot. The camera turns to the curved staircase. The door opens and the black angel emerges. His hand lingers on the snow-covered



railing as he limps slowly down the steps then towards the camera. This action is accompanied by the sound of the edge of a crystal bowl being rubbed by a wet finger.<sup>11</sup> Then, when the angel leans over the body of the dead boy, the mechanism of his wings becomes apparent. It looks like an enlarged version of the nervous system of a bee. The black angel covers the boy with his cloak. We cut back to the theatre boxes. The young lady is powdering her face. One of the older ladies is asleep. Her husband touches her shoulder. She opens her eyes and we see that her features are haggard. The large woman smiles as if replying to acknowledgments from the audience.

The black angel is now stretched out flat on his stomach on the cloak that covers the dead boy. Now we hear the roar of the engine of an aeroplane that becomes louder, splutters and roars tearing the silence apart. As this din continues the camera turns to the gas lamp and then to the theatre boxes with their chattering occupants. We cut back to a negative shot of the angel which has the effect of making him look white. Spread out on the cloak, which also looks white, he looks back towards the boxes with the expression of an animal that is dying. The noise of the aeroplane engine rises to an impossible din then fades away as the camera centres upon the boxes once again. The noise stops and we can hear again the muffled, silly chattering of the people in the boxes. The camera now returns to the table and tilts down to the ground. The shape of the dead boy's body, which has now disappeared, can still be seen as a slight hollow in the snow. The crystal bowl sound is heard once more. In close-shot we see the poet's hand holding the cards. But the black hand of the guardian angel appears at the top of the film frame, snatches the ace of hearts and takes it away. Meanwhile the friend in the Louis XV costume looks at the scene and he shudders as he follows the departure of the angel who walks slowly up the steps of the curved stairway, opens the door at the top, turns his head and looks again at the card table before disappearing. We cut to a close shot of the young statue-woman holding her cards. Scornfully she addresses the poet:

"si vous n'avez pas l'as de coeur, mon cher, vous êtes perdu."

In front of her, the poet looks at her and at his cards. Now we hear the sound of his beating heart. The lapels of his coat vibrate to its rhythm. The camera moves behind the poet to show the young



statue-woman in a full-face shot. Her eyes fix upon the poet. He turns away unable to suffer her gaze upon him. In a profile shot of the table, the poet, still under the steady gaze of the woman, brings out a revolver from his pocket, puts it to his right temple and fires. As the sound of the gun is heard he slumps onto the table, that is now snow-covered. From the other side of the table we see the poet's face in close-up. His left cheek is resting on the snow. Blood spurts from his right temple and flows onto his right cheek. It spreads out, comes together and catches on his eyelashes, his nostrils and the corners of his lips. In the theatre boxes the people applaud. The camera returns to the streaming blood on the poet's face. A small plant now decorates the pedestal against which the gentleman in costume still leans. Through the plant leaves can be seen the theatre boxes where the intermission chatter has again begun. In a side shot of the table we see the poet lying with his face turned towards the pedestal. One of his hands is hanging down. The statue-woman stands up. She is wearing black gloves that reach the point where the statue's arms were broken off in the earlier episode of the film. She throws down her cards and they scatter. Immediately her eyes are petrified, drawn in black on her eyelids. The author's voice informs us that having achieved her purpose, the woman has become once more a statue, an inhuman object with black gloves in contrast with the snow upon which her steps now leave no trace. As she passes the gentleman leaning against the pedestal the taffeta cape on his shoulders is suddenly transferred to hers. She walks like a somnambulist going towards the entrance to the rue d'Amsterdam. As she passes the trellis-work at the corner of the house with the curved steps, a light ball made of metal moves very slowly through space from right to left. The statue-woman passes through the arch. The metal ball now moves slowly through space from left to right, towards the spot where Dargelos threw his fatal snow-ball. We see an elaborately sculptured golden door at the top of a few steps. The door is flanked on both sides by identical terracotta busts of Diderot. The music that is heard on the soundtrack now becomes solemn. The two halves of the door open to reveal the woman-statue, her eyes still painted on her eyelids. She moves out carefully and stops at the edge of the first step. Her black-gloved right hand holds back the hood of her cape showing half of her profile which she moves from left to right, just as she did before at the card



table. In a rear shot, the woman raises her hand. Doormen whistle, calling cars. On the lower right of the screen frame the head of a bull appears in the snow. The animal is standing at the bottom of the steps. The woman draws her cloak around her and goes down. Cut to the empty staircase. Cut to the bull, now being led by the woman on its right. Actually they are not moving. It is the camera which is retreating. There follows another shot of the woman and the bull and we see that the bull is now covered with four pieces of a torn map of Europe. Against a jet black background whirling dust silvers the screen. Bull's horns appear at the bottom of the screen frame moving up to reveal a lyre whose frame is constructed from the horns. When the camera draws back the bull with its dismembered map of Europe has disappeared. Two stagehands are there, one standing on the other's shoulders, draped like a woman. Where his face should be, the one on top is holding a slate with a chalk profile drawn upon it. The stagehand underneath is holding the lyre and a globe of the world. The false woman formed by the stagehands recedes into the night becoming smaller and smaller. The author speaks again saying:

"Le chemin ..."

at which there is a fade out followed by a close-up of the woman-statue's face. She is lying down, her head upon her right arm. It is the actress's face that we see but her features are re-drawn in outline on her whitened skin in Cocteau's style. Her eyes are closed. The author finishes his sentence:

"... est long ..."

A fade out is followed by a high-angled view of the woman-statue in a reclining position like an Acropolis of linen and flowing draperies. Beside her are the lyre and the globe. Cut to a close-up of her face. Her mouth, still drawn in relief, is half-open. Smoke comes out of it and rises. In a long shot the screen slowly darkens and only the white surfaces, which appear to become hard and stony and still hold the light, remain. At this point the author says:

"L'ennui mortel de l'immortalité."

We again see the crumbling factory chimney which we saw at the start of the film. After the noise of its final collapse, the author's voice says:

"Fin."

Le Sang d'un Poète is a remarkable film in many ways but it is



unique in that it is probably the first film to have expressed an internal poetic reality in stark, truthful, oneiric imagery. Cocteau has said in Entretiens sur le Cinématographe:

"Le film nous autorise à exprimer n'importe quoi pourvu que nous parvenions à lui communiquer une puissance expressive apte à changer nos fantasmes en faits indéniables."

(p. 76)

Although the images in Le Sang d'un Poète are rendered sometimes intrinsically weak by their seeming naïvety they are arranged in such a compulsive sequence that we come to accept them as essential elements of Cocteau's fanciful, visionary dream world. We also realise that the very mechanism of the film, as Cocteau utilises it, is akin to that of the dream. By means of his montage Cocteau has re-created the apparently illogical, unpredictable sequentiality of the dream. In La Difficulté d'Être he writes:

"Or, Le Sang d'un Poète n'est qu'une descente en soi-même, une manière d'employer le mécanisme du rêve sans dormir, une bougie maladroite, souvent éteinte par quelque souffle, promenée dans la nuit du corps humain. Les actes s'y enchaînent comme ils veulent, sous un contrôle si faible qu'on ne saurait l'attribuer à l'esprit. Plutôt à une manière de somnolence aidant à l'éclosion de souvenirs libres de se combiner, de se nouer, de se déformer jusqu'à prendre corps à notre insu et à nous devenir une énigme."

(p. 81)

This explanation of the cinematic method he used indicates why we experience the phenomenon of free association in watching the film. By submitting to its fascination we obtain the key that permits us to enter the poet's dream world. Naturally each spectator will be inclined to interpret this world in his own terms, thus adding to Cocteau's oneiric experiences some of the dimensions of his own inner depths. Cocteau once tried to explain this to me in simple terms.<sup>12</sup> The gist of his explanation, as I recall it, goes something like this. In Le Sang d'un Poète he tried to film poetry in much the same manner as a film specialist might try to film the bottom of the sea. This meant descending in<sup>a</sup> sort of diver's bell deep down into oneself. In this way he tried to capture the poetic state. Now there are many who do not believe at all that this poetic state actually exists, that it is merely a kind of self-induced excitement. Yet even those people who imagine they are cut off from the poetic state have, perhaps without realising it, known it. They have only to think of some tremendous grief that has befallen them or to exper-



ience an immense tiredness. They at once have associations which are not associations of ideas, or of images or of memories. They are rather like secrets which emerge into the light revealing an entire equivocal, puzzling universe which gives some idea of the nightmare in which the poet constantly lives, a dream that makes the poet's life a moving experience, which the public, not understanding, mistakenly sees as mere exhilaration. In fact nothing is more difficult than trying to approach poetry.

When I pressed him for more precise explanations of his method and intentions in Le Sang d'un Poète he said that he would not conceal the fact that he had used certain tricks in order to render poetry visible and audible in his film. For example, when the poet goes into the mirror, he is swimming in a world that nobody knows but that Cocteau himself has imagined. The mirror leads him to a corridor and he moves as though he were in a dream. His moving is neither swimming nor flying. It is something else that is not like anything else. To use slow-motion in order to suggest this movement would be vulgar. So Cocteau fixed the sets to the floor of the studio and filmed the sequence from above. Thus the poet literally drags himself along instead of walking, but when the scene appears on the screen he appears to be walking in a strange manner making great efforts, and the movements of his muscles do not correspond with his efforts to walk. Lee Miller had pale eyes but at some moments in the film her eyes appear to be dark. Cocteau painted the dark eyes on her eyelids, not for aesthetic reasons but because, when she is blind, she behaves as though she is blind, and as one does not fully realise on the screen that her eyes are unreal, her behaviour adds to the unreality of the character.

Cocteau used another trick in the scene of the destruction of the poet's statue on the pedestal. The statue had to disappear as though it were made of snow. Cocteau replaced the real pure snow with slush, the grey mud that was less photogenic than the white snow. Cocteau also profited by mistakes and happy accidents in the making of the film. In Jean Cocteau par Jean Cocteau he says:

"C'est par les fautes que nous nous exprimons avec violence, et quand nous avons de la poigne, ces fautes cessent d'être des fautes et sont tout à coup si fortes qu'elles ne sont plus des fautes mais des dogmes; et les gens les acceptent comme des dogmes. Quand j'ai fait Le



Sang d'un poète, il fallait donc que j'invente, et très souvent, des hasards, qui me semblaient des hasards (qui n'en étaient peut-être pas) extérieurs, me rendaient service. (sic) Ainsi, par exemple, on se moquait de moi dans le studio, on essayait de me ridiculiser, alors on balayait pour que la poussière m'empêche de travailler; eh bien! mon opérateur disait : 'Laissez, laissez la poussière', et c'est en effet à cause de la poussière qu'on voit les rayons qui la traversent : et j'ai souvent ainsi été aidé par ceux-là mêmes qui voulaient m'empêcher de faire mon film, car souvent ceux qui luttent contre nous, nous aident sans le savoir."

(pp. 15-16)

Cocteau was well aware that such a film would be open to many interpretations, and many that were proffered amused him. Some, although taking a mistaken point of departure, he found intriguing. In Poésie critique Vol. II he writes:

"L'étude que le professeur Werner Wolff lui consacre me semble être la plus lumineuse, bien qu'il commette une erreur de bloc ... En effet, le professeur, s'appuyant sur mon livre Opium, met sur le compte de l'opium les associations indirectes qui composent la trame du film. Or, ce rythme m'est propre, c'est en quelque sorte la démarche, la dégaine de mon esprit, et s'il est possible que l'opium, que j'absorbais à titre médical et sans le moindre effet d'ivresse, ait pu faciliter les associations et dissociations d'idées auxquelles je m'abandonne corps et âme dès que je décide un travail, il n'est en rien responsable d'un mécanisme auquel je reste fidèle, même lorsqu'il ne saute pas aux yeux, depuis les longues années où je n'use plus de la drogue."

(Lettre aux Américains, Poésie critique II,  
pp. 80-81)

Cocteau knew how to answer his critics. When the film was condemned because of the excess of blood that flowed through it he wrote in La Difficulté d'Être:

"Dans Le Sang d'un Poète, le sang qui coule au travers du film dérange nos juges. A quoi bon, se demandent-ils, nous dégoûter et nous choquer exprès? Ce sang qui nous écoeure nous oblige à détourner la tête et nous empêche de jouir des trouvailles (par trouvailles ils entendent : l'entrée dans la glace, la statue qui bouge, le coeur qui bat), mais de l'une à l'autre de ces secousses qui les réveillent, quel lien, je vous le demande, sinon ce sang qui coule et duquel le film emprunte son titre. Que savent-ils du fleuve, eux qui ne veulent jouir que d'esclaves? Et que vaudraient ces 'trouvailles', comme ils disent, si elles n'étaient la conséquence d'une architecture, même inconsciente, et tributaire du reste par ce lien du sang? Ils dorment et pensent que je dors



et que mon réveil les réveille. D'un repas, leur lourdeur les condamne à ne plus distinguer que le poivre. Ils ne sentent plus que les pointes. C'est ce qui les enfièvre, leur donne la bougeotte, les oblige à courir de lieu en lieu." (pp. 86-87)

Cocteau had no clear idea of what he was actually creating until the work in hand was completed. Thus, his interpretation of the film came only after its completion. Only then, when it had assumed a life of its own, independent of him, could he see what it meant. Yet his interpretation varied in detail according to the perspective in which he looked at his film at various times. In November 1953 when I had the pleasure of presenting Le Sang d'un Poète and Orphée in a unique programme in our local film society, Cocteau had supplied me with some notes in which he gave his own interpretation of his films. Without committing himself definitively his explanation ran roughly as follows:

"One cannot really tell the story of a film such as this. One could say that the solitude of the poet is so great that he lives out his own creations. He does this so vividly that the mouth of one of his creations is imprinted upon his hand like a wound. He loves this mouth, and in loving it he is loving himself. He awakes one morning with this mouth against him like a chance acquaintance. He must rid himself of it, and he does so on a statue. But the statue comes to life and takes its revenge by sending him away to submit to frightful adventures. The snowball fight in the film could represent the poet's childhood and when he plays the card game with his Glory or his Destiny he cheats by drawing from his childhood instead of from his inner self. Then, afterwards, when he has created for himself a terrestrial kind of glory he falls into l'ennui mortel de l'immortalité that one always dreams of when one stands in front of the tombs of the famous. I could be right in interpreting my film in these terms but I could also be quite wrong for it would be an interpretation arrived at after the creation of the images. And are these, in any case, images? Does not life create images without realising it? When I was making the film I was not thinking of anything and that is why one must in the end let the film act like the noble music by Auric which accompanies it. Music gives a kind of nameless nourishment to our emotions and to our memories, and if each spectator finds his own personal meaning in the film, I will have realised my aim in making it. I should like to add that two sequences in the film are frequently



misunderstood. The first is the sequence of the bleeding boy. It is a story from my childhood that haunts me, and it can be found in more than one of my works. It is the story of a young boy wounded by a snowball. In Les Enfants Terribles the boy does not die as he does in the film. Here I am not reworking a theme. What happens is that the poet stirs up a piece of his personal mythology and looks at it from various angles. In reality the boy bled very little but, as I remember it, he bled profusely. The scene in the film is therefore not realistic. It is a distorted memory of the original score. The second sequence is where the people in the theatre boxes applaud. These people are not applauding the dead boy. The boy is carried away when they applaud and it is the poet killing himself that they applaud. Poets, in order to live must often die, and shed not only the red blood of their hearts, but the white blood of their souls, the white blood that flows and leaves traces which are easy to follow. That is the price of applause, the price of fame. Poets must give all of themselves in order to get the minimum approval."

The film is, in many respects, close in its ideas and in its analysis of the poet's myth to the play Orphée. We shall find the same themes treated more elaborately in the film Orphée and in the third part of what can be regarded as a trilogy - Le Testament d'Orphée. Le Sang d'un Poète, despite the limitations of its form, has become the archetype of the poetic film. Cocteau could never understand why in so many countries the film was referred to as being surrealist when he thought that he was making it in opposition to the surrealists in 1930.<sup>13</sup> Viewed today, the film does have the air of a surrealist film, its realism appearing to be of a superior kind that reaches into the very depths of visual poetry.<sup>14</sup>

### Orphée (1950)

We come now to Cocteau's central film, Orphée, which he started in 1949 and completed early in 1950. It continues the process, started in Le Sang d'un Poète, of reprojecting on the screen a series of images arising from the cosmogony of the poet. Orphée exemplifies all Cocteau's searchings and experience in the medium of the film during a period of twenty years and it is in this film that he most forcibly opposes poetry to the poetic in a manner comprehensible to those of us who had served our apprenticeship in studying Le Sang d'un Poète. When asked by André Fraigneau why, after all his



explorations in various directions, he returned to the myth of Orpheus already dealt with in his play, Cocteau replied:

"Ma démarche morale étant celle d'un homme qui boite, un pied dans la vie et un pied dans la mort, il était normal que j'en arrivasse à un mythe où la vie et la mort s'affrontent."

(p. 68)

As Orphée is more readily available for viewing than Le Sang d'un Poète, I do not consider it necessary to describe the action in detail and shall restrict myself to commenting upon it assuming that the reader has seen the film.

It opens with Auric's music behind the main titles which are made distinctive by being in the style of Cocteau's drawings. Then the screen darkens and Cocteau speaks an introduction in which he briefly tells the legend of Orpheus. His words end with the question:

"Où se passe notre histoire et à quelle époque?  
C'est le privilège des légendes d'être sans âge.  
Comme il vous plaira!"

Cocteau thus stresses the timelessness of the legend. The visual opening of the film is smooth, starting with a large close-shot of a guitar being strummed by a soft-voiced singer and rising to show the Café des Poètes and its customers. From this first shot the action never slackens and we are held spellbound by the beauty of the individual camera set-ups. Although the first sequence is merely an establishing one, setting the scene, introducing the characters, it is done with a professional polish that is a long way from the tentative technique of Le Sang d'un Poète. The dialogue is crisp, clever and functional. The background music is used skilfully, starting with Auric's music, fading in to the guitar strumming which continues up to the point where Orphée has had a slight brush with Cégeste who bumps into him and makes an insulting noise that sounds like the grunting of a pig. By this time Orphée has glimpsed the Princess and he is ready to resume his conversation with his old acquaintance who will bring him up-to-date with the latest trends in the literary and artistic world. From the moment that they start to discuss these the music changes to jazz, an appropriate accompaniment to the trends they are discussing. The sequence of the scuffle which follows is handled with the same unerring skill and polish, the direction of the extras being quite perfect as are their grouping and movement within the frame.



Let us now move on to the sequence inside the car of the Princess which is bearing away the wounded Cégeste (who is already dead) with Orphée and the Princess beside him in the back. After a preliminary few words of conversation in which the Princess admonishes Orphée harshly for not minding his own business, the atmosphere suddenly changes. This coincides with the much criticised back projection of the receding landscape in negative on the rear window of the car. "Picturesque" the device may be but it is nonetheless effective and it sets the scene for the first pearls of poetry which now emerge from the car radio as they travel along. Before the Princess asks Heurtebise to switch on the radio, the sound of a railway engine is heard in the distance. In the short silence which follows, Heurtebise tunes the radio and after some interference we hear the first poetic message spoken by the voice of Cégeste:

"Le silence va plus vite à reculons."

It is repeated and then followed by:

"Un seul verre d'eau éclaire le monde..."

The sequence then ends with the arrival of the motor-cyclists. With great economy we are prepared by this short, surprising sequence for what follows. The motor-cyclists arrive at the chalet and carry the body of Cégeste inside. There is no background music during this short scene, but we can hear the shrill whistling of night trains in the distance. The sound is evocative of life going on normally elsewhere, while Orphée finds himself in this strange situation in an eerie setting which is somehow unreal.

What Cocteau now conveys is that Orphée has temporarily left the real world and he is dreaming a dream. When the dead Cégeste has been laid down on the floor of the first room the Princess asks Orphée to follow her to another room which is partly furnished. As he is very slow in following her she remarks:

"Décidément vous dormez."

and he replies:

"Oui ... oui ... je dors ... C'est très curieux."

And when Orphée enters the small room which is like that of a an evil-looking hotel, Orphée, ever ready to ask questions, says to her:

"Enfin, Madame ... m'expliquerez-vous? ..."

and she replies:

"Rien. Si vous dormez, si vous rêvez, acceptez vos rêves.  
C'est le rôle du dormeur."



And this sums up neatly the first part of the relationship between Orphée and the Princess, for she is not prepared to give him explanations for the experiences he is having as a dormeur. This attitude creates dramatic tension and we wonder what could possibly happen next. At this point Orphée is still restricted by the attitudes of the conventional world and when the Princess turns on the radio and the room is filled with the subdued tones of Glück's music he is genuinely shocked by the seeming lack of respect being shown to the dead young poet whose body lies in the adjoining room. He moves to the radio to switch it off but inadvertently changes the wave band. Cégeste's voice is heard saying:

"Les miroirs feraient bien de réfléchir davantage."

At the very moment that this phrase is completed the three-faced mirror in the room shatters. The Princess is annoyed with Orphée, tells him to sit down and wait for her in the room while the Chinese servants bring him champagne and cigarettes. As she goes out she turns to him and says:

"Vous cherchez trop à comprendre ce qui se passe, cher Monsieur. C'est un grave défaut."

In the adjoining room the two motor-cyclists are waiting to begin the resuscitation of Cégeste. The scene that follows is one of those brief scenes of ritual which create poetry. As soon as the Princess has asked: "Tout est prêt?", and the aides have replied in the affirmative, Cocteau changes the acoustic of the recording so that the voice of the Princess has an echoing, haunting sound. The room is bare but for a long mirror on each side of which stands one of the motor-cyclists. Cégeste's body lies on the floor in front of the Princess. She stands with her back to the screen frame so that we can see the body on the floor from a high angle. The Princess intones:

"Cégeste, levez-vous ..."

and the young poet rises in a reverse motion shot. The short, extremely simple, dialogue that follows between the Princess and Cégeste is spoken in the hollow silence of the room and not a small measure of its poetry is due to the slight element of repetition which gives it liturgical undertones:

" La Princesse: Salut.

Cégeste: (voix de somnambule). - Salut.

La Princesse: Vous savez qui je suis?



Cégeste: Je le sais.

La Princesse: Dites-le.

Cégeste: Ma mort.

La Princesse: Bon. Vous êtes désormais à mon service.

Cégeste: Je suis à votre service.

La Princesse: Vous obéirez à mes ordres.

Cégeste: J'obéirai à vos ordres.

La Princesse: C'est parfait. Alors, en route ... "

She asks the young poet to take hold of her dress, then leading the way, she, Cégeste and the two aides go through the mirror. Orphée enters the room with his champagne glass in his hand just as the last of the aides is disappearing through the mirror.<sup>15</sup> He drops the glass in his astonishment and it shatters on the floor. He tries to follow them but cannot penetrate the mirror and goes into a deep sleep as he leans his cheek against it. The scene that follows is not remarkable. He finds himself in a sandy landscape, and the only sounds that are heard in the bright, glaring silence are the voice of Orphée calling out and the buzzing of a fly.

There is a great contrast stylistically between the scenes of fancy and those that are supposed to take place in the actual world. The "real" scenes are played at a very fast pace and the dialogue is likewise spoken in great haste. Thus, when Orphée and Heurtebise return to his villa in the car of the Princess, the scene which precedes their arrival with Eurydice, Aglaonice, the Commissioner and a newspaper reporter seems humdrum and dull in comparison to the poetic sequence that has preceded it. Orphée is in a bad humour and impossibly impatient with his wife. He has words with Aglaonice and it is obvious that he finds his wife irritating with her questions. Eurydice observes the change in her husband (he even drinks, something he had never done before) and realises that the moment is not opportune for her to tell him that she is pregnant. Orphée wishes only to sleep, and says so, going off to his room to do so. But he does not, after all, go to his room, and finds himself in the garage. Auric's music at this point tells us that Orphée's thoughts are with the Princess and that he is desperate to re-establish contact with her world. The music changes again to that of Glück as Heurtebise enters the living-room and makes himself known to Eurydice. He gives her an explanation for Orphée's having stayed out all night, a lying



explanation that does not completely convince Eurydice. But she finds Heurtebise likeable and we see that a friendly association is established between them. Meanwhile, Orphée, in the garage, is listening to the voice of Cégeste on the radio and we hear Apollinaire's phrase:

"L'oiseau chante avec ses doigts."

A very short night scene follows introduced by the theme music of the Princess. We are in Orphée's bedroom with its twin beds, Eurydice asleep on the right and Orphée on the left. Moonlight fills the room. The light changes and the Princess comes out of the three-faced mirror and walks to the beds. Then she moves over to Orphée's bed, stands still and gazes upon the sleeping poet with eyes painted upon her eyelids. Cocteau's voice on the soundtrack explains:

"Et, cette première nuit, la Mort d'Orphée vint dans sa chambre le voir dormir."

The theme of the lover watching the beloved who sleeps is a favourite one that we have studied already in the chapter on poetry. Here it re-appears briefly. The author's voice then announces the next sequence: "Le surlendemain ..." and there is a quick cut in the music and a transition to the garage where Orphée, glued to the car radio, is listening to messages that appear to be a kind of morse code followed by numbers. Eurydice is there, objecting to the fact that her husband seems to spend most of his time with the radio. When she observes that he cannot spend his entire life in a talking car he says:

"Ma vie commençait à se faisander, à être au point, à puer la réussite et la mort. Ne comprends-tu pas que la moindre de ces phrases est plus étonnante que tous mes poèmes. Je donnerais mon oeuvre entière pour une de ces petites phrases. Je traque l'inconnu."

Orphée is convinced that the poetic messages are intended for him alone since the station that transmits them cannot be obtained on any other radio. Eurydice mocks the numbers being transmitted as a poor form of poetry. Orphée comments:

"Sait-on ce qui est poétique et pas poétique?"

He is exasperated to the point of being rude again to his wife and she leaves him with Heurtebise who tries to warn him against the messages which he hears on the radio.

Meanwhile a telephone message from the Police Commissioner requests Orphée to present himself there so that he can make a state-



ment regarding the disappearance of Cégeste. He asks Heurtebise to drive him to town and says goodbye to Eurydice, who is resting in her room, before he leaves. He seems to regret his coarse attitude towards his wife and speaks to her nicely. She responds gratefully. Now this scene, which is typical of the banality of ordinary everyday life with the polite exchange of kind phrases with little or no meaning that the Americans so aptly refer to as "small talk", is again in great contrast to the scene which follows in town, a scene full of poetic action with the skilful blending of various locations in Paris and the provinces to create the ambience of a small town.

The sequence starts with Orphée leaving Heurtebise in the car some distance from his destination. Auric's brilliant music, very light and shimmering, introduces it. We find Orphée on the central island of le square Bolivar. A little girl is playing with her skipping-rope. Suddenly Orphée catches a glimpse of the Princess and she disappears under a carriage entrance. He rushes to follow her and comes out under the arcades of the place des Vosges. He sees no-one. But as he steps out from under the arcade he sees the Princess coming out from one of the others, and, after she has glanced at her wrist-watch, she disappears under another of the arcades. Orphée rushes up to find the arcades deserted. He runs to the bottom and turns the corner of the street. There is the covered market of Boulogne. Some campers try to stop a truck which nearly runs Orphée down. He asks the campers if they have seen a young, dark woman. But the camper replies in Swedish and the truck drives on. As Orphée looks around, the Princess suddenly materialises in the centre of the screen image and walks into the covered market. Again Orphée rushes in pursuit and bumps into a cyclist who is propelling his bicycle by hand, carrying a ladder on his shoulder. Since Orphée is famous, the cyclist knows him and addresses him familiarly:

"Eh bien, Monsieur Orphée, le torchon brûle?"

But Orphée has no time for him and rushes on in his mad pursuit of the Princess, down to the bottom of the covered market and past a young couple embracing against a fence. He next meets a fat woman arranging cases on a stand and asks her if she saw a young woman passing. Again he is recognised, and the woman jokingly asks him if he is chasing girls. When he tries to describe the Princess as:

"Une jeune femme très mince, très élégante, qui marchait très vite ..."



the stout woman laughs: "C'est moi." Orphée rushes on. He is stopped by a young girl wanting an autograph. He has no pen. She borrows one from another girl. Suddenly Orphée is surrounded by a horde of girls trying to obtain souvenirs from him, pulling at his clothes. He struggles. As he is doing so he sees the Princess on the other side of the street getting into a car. He breaks away from the group of girls and heads for the car but it leaves before he can reach it. The girls hurl insults at him. As Orphée runs away another girl comes up to the group of girls who had been trying to obtain autographs and souvenirs. She is waving a newspaper which obviously carries a story concerning Orphée, and, as she holds up the paper for the others to read, she observes that it is no wonder that he feels small. The outstretched newspaper is used as a neat cut to the next sequence which starts with a similar shot of a newspaper held by the Police Commissioner.

The sequence of Orphée's pursuit, fast-moving and visually exciting, accompanied by superb music by Auric, suggests that Cocteau's pursuit of the Princess in the actual world is an impossible one. He is hampered and hindered at every turn, and the remarks passed by the various people he encounters underline his role as a celebrity with very restricted freedom of movement. The fickleness of the adoring public is also neatly and satirically expressed in the scene of the autograph hunters.

The short scene with the Police Commissioner is a purely functional one. It shows that the article in the paper in which Orphée had quoted some of his new poems obtained from the radio provides a motive for the assumption that Cégeste has indeed been murdered and that Orphée has plagiarised his poems. Meanwhile, Orphée has made his way back to the car without going to see the Police Commissioner and he finds Heurtebise sitting reading the article in the newspaper which is going to incriminate him. Heurtebise had seen the Princess and she had told him to remain at Orphée's house until he received further orders from her.

A very brief, single shot, scene tells us that Orphée's Death still comes to his room each night to watch over him. There follows the brief scene in which Heurtebise tries to advise Eurydice against going to see Aglaonice to ask for her help. Quick flash to Eurydice's bicycle on the road, riderless, while the deadly motor-cyclists are disappearing into the distance. Quick flash to the garage interior



with Orphée in the car bent over the radio. Then follows a lap dissolve to Orphée's room. The trap door that leads up to it opens and Heurtebise appears carrying Eurydice's body. He places the body on the bed. The lighting changes to lead into the next poetic sequence.

The arrival of the Princess, come to take Eurydice, is announced on the soundtrack by the glass bowl rim sound. The Princess then emerges from the three-faced mirror and as she enters the room it becomes apparent that she is the main source of illumination. An aura of light illumines everything she approaches. Cégeste follows her out of the mirror, clumsily, unsure of his exact movements and what he is to do to help the Princess in her task. She greets Heurtebise and asks if all goes well. His non-committal attitude puts her on her guard against him. The second ritual in the film, that of the transportation of Eurydice to the Underworld is now initiated. But the Princess seems nervous, keeps finding fault with Cégeste and executes many of the details of the actions which he ought to do. She attributes Cégeste's clumsiness to his astonishment at the details of the ritual and exclaims:

"Eh! bien, Cégeste. Pourquoi faites-vous cette figure? Vous vous attendiez sans doute à me voir travailler avec un suaire et une faux. Mais, mon garçon, si j'apparaissais aux vivants comme ils me représentent, ils me reconnaîtraient et cela ne faciliterait pas notre tâche."

She then orders Cégeste to arrange the transmitting apparatus on a table. He is to transmit messages to keep Orphée pre-occupied while she will get on with the business of disposing of Eurydice. The Princess appreciates the poetic messages of Heurtebise saying:

"Vos phrases sont des trouvailles tout à fait exquisés!"

And Cégeste transmits:

"Le crêpe des petites veuves est un vrai déjeuner de soleil."

Then the Princess, slightly distracted, cannot find her rubber gloves. She borrows those of Cégeste. Heurtebise then questions her authority to remove Eurydice. She at once guesses that Heurtebise has fallen in love with Eurydice. There follows an angry confrontation between the Princess and Heurtebise and he accuses her of being in love with Orphée. As the Princess moves to and fro in the room her dress changes from black to white, or from white to grey. This remarkably simple device underlines her agitated state of mind, seeming to



reflect her changing thoughts. Heurtebise, in his rage, suddenly disappears into thin air. The Princess continues to pace to and fro. Cégeste ingenuously asks her if he could disappear and re-appear like Heurtebise. She tells him he would be too clumsy. The young poet continues to transmit:

"Jupiter rend sages ceux qu'il veut perdre."

This phrase seems to reflect more directly upon the Princess herself, an omen of what will happen to her.

Back in the garage, Heurtebise tries to warn Orphée, coming in just as Cégeste's voice intones:

"Le ciel nocturne est une haie de mai..."

Orphée is too preoccupied with the radio messages to heed the warnings of Heurtebise. In the bedroom Eurydice rises at the command of the Princess and the ritual that was carried out previously with Cégeste is now repeated with her. There is the same poetic repetition of phrases. When Heurtebise returns without Orphée, the Princess knows that Orphée has refused to follow him. In the dialogue which follows between the Princess and Heurtebise there is much irony, each accusing the other, the Princess finding Heurtebise ridiculous in his role of lover and Heurtebise commenting that he is not alone. Cégeste is puzzled by the apparent presence of two forms of Eurydice, one still lying on the bed, the other ready to follow the Princess. When he inadvertently turns to look back the Princess unleashes her fury upon him. Then, having forgotten her gloves on the bed, when she finds herself before the mirror without them so that she cannot enter it, she raises her fist and smashes it. At the same moment her dress again changes colour from black to white and she angrily goes through the mirror followed by Eurydice and Cégeste. Heurtebise remains behind, approaches the broken mirror which is suddenly reconstituted as the broken bits of glass rise from the floor to reform it. Heurtebise looks at his reflection in the mirror and, as he turns from it, we see him move over to the bed where the dead Eurydice is lying.

The mere description of this sequence cannot possibly convey the hypnotising, fascinating effect that it conveys in its combination of agitated action, swiftly changing dramatic postures, intriguing and beautiful lighting, compositional perfection in camera set-ups, effectively appropriate plasticity in the monochrome photography with its wide range of hues, economic use of sound (there is no musical



background) alternating with brief but effective moments of complete silence, and dramatic, clashing dialogue with subtle ironic under-currents between the Princess and Heurtebise which is given dramatic emphasis because it stands out in relief against the background of Cégeste's poetic phrases on the one hand, and his naive observations on the other.

The moment that the Princess disappears through the broken mirror with Eurydice and Cégeste, to the sound of the wet finger round the glass bowl rim which we have now come to expect at such moments, Auric's wonderful music takes up the accompaniment to the action, briefly, to be followed again by silence as Heurtebise calls down to Orphée from the bedroom window. When Orphée comes up to the bedroom he cannot understand why Eurydice is dead and he has the impression that he is experiencing some kind of incubus:

"C'est le rêve qui continue! Mon cauchemar qui continue!  
Je vais me réveiller! Qu'on me réveille!"

At such moments of grief or crisis, Orphée is completely self-absorbed in his own painful feelings, so that he does not pay attention when Heurtebise tries to explain that he may possibly be able to reach his wife, that there is yet a means. Eventually Heurtebise manages to engage his attention and he tells him that the Princess is Death. When this realisation dawns upon Orphée his instinctive movement is towards the mirror. So Heurtebise reveals to Orphée the poetic secret of mirrors:

"Je vous livre le secret des secrets ... Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la mort vient et va. Du reste, regardez-vous toute votre vie dans une glace et vous verrez la mort travailler comme les abeilles dans une ruche de verre."

But Orphée still cannot see how he can go through the mirror and meet the Princess again. (Even in this moment of grief over the loss of Eurydice he is more concerned with seeing the Princess.) He will not be able to rejoin the Princess, he thinks, unless he kills himself. No man can do it, unless he kills himself. To which Heurtebise comments:

"Un poète est plus qu'un homme."

So, because he is a poet, Orphée is privileged and he may follow his wife and seek the Princess, his Death, who, as Heurtebise goes on to explain is not actually Death herself but:

"... la Princesse est une des formes de la mort."



Eurydice is now in another world, he also explains, and he invites Orphée to follow him into that other world.

"Votre femme habite un autre monde où je vous invite à me suivre."

When Orphée exclaims:

"Je la suivrais aux Enfers ..."

Cocteau cannot resist introducing a vein of humour in the "tragic" situation for he has Heurtebise reply:

"On ne vous en demande pas tant."

Before they depart in search of Eurydice, Heurtebise has to ask Orphée the important question:

"Je vous pose une question précise, ne l'oubliez pas.  
Est-ce la mort que vous désirez rejoindre ou Eurydice?..."

And Orphée, cornered, replies:

"Les deux ..."

They are now ready to depart through the mirror with the help of the rubber gloves which the Princess, in her haste, left behind. At the crucial moment of entering the mirror, Orphée hesitates and Heurtebise asks him: "Auriez-vous peur?" To which Orphée, in a tone of declamation and with deliberation, answers:

"Non, mais cette glace est une glace et j'y vois un homme malheureux."

And Heurtebise comments:

"Il ne s'agit pas de comprendre. Il s'agit de croire."

We hear the now familiar sound of the wet finger along the glass bowl rim, Orphée's rubber-gloved hands penetrate the mirror in close-shot and, as we cut to a rear view of Orphée and Heurtebise going into the mirror, we catch a glimpse of the Zone into which they are entering, but, once they have gone into it, the reflection of the room reforms in the mirror. We then hear six o'clock being struck by a wall clock.

What follows is an interesting example of how Cocteau uses the technique of the film to replace a simple theatrical device. I refer to his device of the brief "interval" in the play Orphée where the stage curtain is lowered and raised quickly, preceded and followed by identical scenes involving the delivery of a letter by the postman. In the play the dialogue is repeated word for word, and the device successfully suggests that all the parallel action has taken place in the brief time that it took to lower and raise the curtain. (Orphée, Scene VIII, pp. 74-76). Now, in the film Orphée, Cocteau wants to suggest that the journey of Orphée into the underworld or Zone has



no time factor and that the action we shall see lasting some time transpires in fact in a few seconds. He again uses the device of the postman but in the film he splits the action. We see the postman arrive on a bicycle and he goes up to the iron gate at the bottom of Orphée's garden where he rings the little bell on the gate before putting a letter into the letter-box. Before he has completed the action, on a close-shot of the letter being introduced into the letter-box slit, Cocteau cuts suddenly to the first shot of the sequence which he calls the Zone. Auric's music is heard at once and we see a street in ruins. It could be a street in which the buildings are being demolished somewhere on the Left Bank of the Seine. A silent wind is blowing but it stirs only the clothing and hair of Heurtebise who is being followed closely along the ruined street by Orphée.

It is in such sequences in Orphée that Cocteau is most successful in creating poésie de cinéma. Orphée is walking behind Heurtebise who appears to advance without actually moving his body. Now it is apparent that although they seem to be together, within this Zone, since Heurtebise is himself already dead and since Orphée is still alive, an invisible barrier divides them in their common progress. How does Cocteau suggest this? Firstly the image of Orphée is on a back-projection on a large screen. Heurtebise is filmed in front of the screen and thus in front of the image. Moreover, while Orphée's voice appears real and near, the voice of Heurtebise seems to come from an echo-chamber. Yet, as they advance, Orphée's own voice takes on the same echoing acoustic as that of Heurtebise. This subtly suggests that, as Orphée gradually enters the Zone, he takes on some of the characteristics of the Zone's occupants. The poetic dialogue is rich in the concepts of the poet's mythology. When Orphée, at the start of the sequence asks: "Où sommes-nous?" Heurtebise replies:

"La vie est longue à être morte. C'est la zone. Elle est faite des souvenirs des hommes et des ruines de leurs habitudes."

When Orphée stops to look around him, Heurtebise glides on. Orphée seems to experience difficulty in keeping up with Heurtebise. This is to suggest the leaden progress that one sometimes makes in dreams. The inevitable glazier appears and crosses the street behind Orphée, as he calls out: "Vitrier! Vitrier!" And when Orphée questions Heurtebise:



"Que font ces gens qui rôdent? Est-ce qu'ils vivent?"

Heurtebise replies:

"Ils le croient. Rien n'est plus tenace que la déformation professionnelle."

And Orphée persists with his questions that have no meaning in the Zone - are they going far? why, if there is no wind, does Heurtebise look as if he is advancing against a wind? Heurtebise comments:

"Pourquoi ... Toujours pourquoi. Ne me posez plus de questions, marchez."

They cross an esplanade. Then, quite suddenly, they actually walk down a stairway and move into the distance on the left against a background of débris.

Now there is a quick cut to the mirror room in the chalet of the Princess in which Orphée had found himself before. A long table has been placed in the room and three judges sit behind it. The clerk to the court is at the bottom of the table. Standing in front of the table Cégeste is being interrogated. The main source of light is a bright lamp on the table and we can see one of the motor-cyclists of the Princess standing guard at the door that leads onto the landing. It is obvious that Cégeste is being questioned about the movements and actions of the Princess. Now it is the turn of the Princess to be interrogated. She is referred to as "la seconde personne". The first motor-cyclist by the door leads Cégeste out, placing his hand on his shoulder, while the Princess enters, followed by the second motor-cyclist. There is an orderliness about the movement of the actors that suggests a carefully planned choreography of their movements, for, as the Princess advances to the camera, the motor-cyclist behind her takes up the position of the first motor-cyclist by the door. One is reminded of the movements on a chess-board. The Princess is nervous and asks if she may sit. She is allowed to do so. Then she asks if she may smoke. This is also granted and she places her cigarette case and lighter on the table. The Princess is accused of all the actions she has executed - of having taken a young man into her service, of having brought a woman into the zone, of having dedicated herself to private actions, all without permission or without orders - in short, she is accused of having shown initiative. She tries to excuse her actions saying they were due to a chain of circumstances but this excuse is not accepted.

Orphée and Heurtebise are brought in as additional witnesses.



When the Princess sees the look of alarm on Orphée's face as he faces the judges she tries to reassure him:

"Ne vous y trompez pas, Monsieur, vous êtes devant mes juges. Restez calme."

Heurtebise is questioned first and the Princess, almost mockingly, suggests that this is the moment for him to tell what he has to tell. But he refuses to implicate the Princess, since he himself is also guilty of loving Eurydice. Orphée is now questioned and we are given examples of some more of Cocteau's favourite ideas. The judge has to raise his voice as Orphée seems to have retired to his world of daydreams:

"Juge:            Votre nom?  
Orphée:           Orphée.  
Juge:            Votre profession?  
Orphée:           Poète.  
Greffier:        La fiche porte : écrivain.  
Orphée:           C'est presque la même chose ...  
Deuxième  
          juge:        Il n'y a pas de presque ici. Qu'appellez-vous  
                      poète?  
Orphée:           Ecrire sans être écrivain."

The questions are then transferred to the Princess and in the course of the second part of her interrogation she admits that she loves Orphée and that her actions had been motivated by her love for him. Orphée is transfixed when he hears her admissions. He and the Princess are led away from the tribunal and taken to the room of the Princess, after she has signed a paper admitting her guilt.

Eurydice now enters in a somnambulistic state. She is questioned regarding Heurtebise and Heurtebise is made to confess his love for her. He signs his statement admitting his guilt.

Cocteau now cuts to the Princess's room where she and Orphée are embracing. The camera trolleys in to a large close-shot showing them in profile as they break their embrace and look earnestly into one another's eyes. Auric's gentle music accompanies this scene. Orphée is in a state of ecstasy at the realisation that the Princess loves him. The Princess explains how they cannot lie in the zone, and how she had loved him even before their first meeting. But she does not have the right to love anyone. She kisses him again, then sinks on to the divan. Orphée kneels before her, adoring her as he murmurs:

"Tu es toute-puissante."

She replies:

"A vos yeux. Chez nous, il y a des figures innombrables de la mort, des jeunes, des vieilles qui reçoivent des ordres ..."

This is an equivalent to the statement by the Sphinx to Oedipus in the second act of La Machine infernale where the Sphinx begins:

"Les dieux ont leurs dieux ..."

When Orphée suggests that she might disobey orders, since she cannot be killed, she explains that her punishment would be much worse than death. And when he asks where the orders come from she replies:

"Tant de sentinelles se les transmettent que c'est le tam-tam de vos tribus d'Afrique, l'écho de vos montagnes, le vent des feuilles de vos forêts."

And Orphée, protectingly and boldly declares:

"J'irai jusqu'à celui qui donne ces ordres."

But the Princess explains:

"Mon pauvre amour ... Il n'habite nulle part. Les uns croient qu'il pense à nous, d'autres qu'il nous pense. D'autres qu'il dort et que nous sommes son rêve ... son mauvais rêve."

The tender love scene proceeds, the Princess accepting the inevitability of her fate, Orphée refusing to give up all hope.

"Il arrivera un miracle ..."

he exclaims hopefully, while the Princess adds:

"Les miracles ne se produisent que chez vous ..."

And when Orphée comes out with that favourite cliché:

"Tous les mondes sont émus par l'amour,"

the Princess informs him:

"Dans notre monde, on n'émeut personne. On va de tribunal en tribunal."

So the Princess is encouraged to remark that she will leave him but that she will find a means to rejoin him somehow.

The end of Auric's music announces the end of the love scene. A knock at the door brings the second motor-cyclist to conduct them back to the tribunal where the Princess, Cégeste and Heurtebise are released provisionally, while Orphée is allowed to take Eurydice back on condition that he will never look at her. Heurtebise will accompany Orphée and Eurydice to help them in the preliminary difficult period. So they go back through the mirror to the real world. As they do so the judges disappear leaving only the Princess and Cégeste in the room. She is leaning her hand on Cégeste's shoulder and remarks:

"Cégeste ... Si j'étais dans notre ancien monde, je vous dirais : buvons."



A long dissolve brings us back to the letter being placed by the postman in the letter-box at Orphée's house. The gate bell rings. And the wall clock strikes six o'clock.

There now follows the exasperating hide-and-seek sequence in which Orphée almost looks at Eurydice on several occasions. This kind of forced humour is a weakness in Cocteau's method which flaws the film slightly, but, mercifully, it is not prolonged, as the over-playing of the actors in their endeavour to overcome the weakness of the script is embarrassing. This is Cocteau in one of his impossibly naive moments. The scene ends with an irritable Orphée causing his wife to weep.

It is only when the film resumes its serious aims that the thread of its poetry is restored. There is a short, tender scene, introduced by Glück's music, between Heurtebise and Eurydice in which she bemoans the fact that her husband hates her and prefers the car with its radio. There follows the short scene of Eurydice's attempted suicide introduced by the author's words:

"Eurydice ne retrouvait pas Orphée. Elle ne pouvait supporter ce retour. Elle voulait le délivrer d'elle, et il n'y avait qu'un seul moyen."

To Auric's music Eurydice approaches Orphée who is asleep in his bed. She shakes him gently and calls his name. But Orphée is so fast asleep that he is dreaming the events of the tribunal at the moment when the Princess was being asked if she loved him. She manages to rouse him but at that very moment there is a power-cut, Orphée cannot see her, and her suicide plan is foiled.

On the following morning Orphée is, as usual, in the garage listening to the signals on the radio which have now become a kind of morse code. Eurydice joins him, taking care to sit behind him in the car, so that he cannot see her. But he glances up to the driving mirror, sees her and - she disappears.

Now the action of the film is accelerated. Immediately after the disappearance of Eurydice we hear the wild beating of African drums in the distance and the repeated chanting of some mob. It draws nearer and nearer and Orphée, realising that the moment of crisis has at last arrived, appears to welcome it as he addresses Heurtebise:

"Il le fallait! Il le fallait, Heurtebise! J'en ai



assez des demi-mesures et des arrangements! On ne s'arrange pas, Heurtebise. Il faut le drame! Il faut aller jusqu'au bout!"

Stones start to fly as Orphée rushes out to meet his enemies. Heurtebise follows him in an attempt to help him. The stones shatter windows. The noise of the drums gets louder and louder and the mob chants more savagely. Orphée, defiant, calls out to Heurtebise:

"Des pierres! Des pierres! On fera mon buste avec."

The cries increase and we can make out the name that the mob is chanting:

"Cé-geste! Cé-geste! Cé-geste!"

There are quick cuts to the road showing more and more young people arriving, then back to the garden. It is interesting to compare this scene in the film with a similar scene at the end of the play Bacchus where Hans, by the window, describes the scene outside:

"Ici, c'est le silence de la haine et de la sottise. Ils guettent la seconde où ils pourront impunément déchaîner les instincts de meurtre qu'ils dissimulent. Ils retournent à ce qu'ils sont. Et comme ils sont lâches, ils se taisent. Ils se réservent pour la curée. ...  
... Ils m'assommeront et m'étrangleront et me traineront et brûleront mon cadavre." (Bacchus, Act III, Scene 8, p. 211)

Orphée calls out with passion to Heurtebise:

"Que pense le marbre dans lequel on sculpte un chef-d'oeuvre? Il pense : on me frappe! On m'abîme! On m'insulte! Je suis perdu! La vie me sculpte, Heurtebise, laissez-la finir son travail."

The similar passage in the play Orphée has Orphée saying:

"Que pense le marbre dans lequel un sculpteur taille un chef-d'oeuvre? Il pense : on me frappe, on m'abîme, on m'insulte, on me brise, je suis perdu. Ce marbre est idiot. La vie me taille, Heurtebise! Elle fait un chef-d'oeuvre. Il faut que je supporte ses coups sans les comprendre. Il faut que je me raidisse, il faut que j'accepte, que je me tienne tranquille, que je l'aide, que je collabore, que je lui laisse finir son travail."

(Orphée, Scene 9, p. 97)

Heurtebise rushes back to the garage where he grabs a revolver which he loads. Back to the garden, Heurtebise throws over the revolver to Orphée. The din increases. In the street the Bacchantes, headed by Aglaonice, arrive in a large vehicle. A writer has now approached Orphée who is holding the young people at bay with the aid of the revolver. A young Chinese student approaches Orphée from the rear, grabs him by the arm and twists it backwards. The revolver falls to



the ground. A young man picks it up. Orphée frees himself and strikes the young man on the chin. As the young man falls, the revolver goes off and Orphée clutches at his stomach. In the street police vehicles arrive. Then the motor-cyclists of the Princess arrive, park their motor-cycles. The first motor-cyclist drags Orphée's body into the garage while the second, with a machine-gun, holds the police at bay. The Rolls-Royce reverses out of the garage with Heurtebise driving, backs onto the street, turns to the right and makes off followed by the motor-cyclists on their machines, at high speed. The screeching sound of the police whistles is superimposed on the general din and we hear one or two more shots.

The quick-cutting technique which Cocteau employs in the whole of this sequence gives it a tremendous pace. Dramatically it is one of the most convincing scenes in all his film work, creating great excitement in the spectator, and effectively furthering the action with commendable economy.

On a deserted road the Rolls stops briefly and we can see a viaduct in the background. One of the motor-cyclists hails Heurtebise:

"Salut. C'est fait?"

And Heurtebise replies simply:

"C'est fait."

He turns round to look into the back of the car and we see Orphée's face upside down, his eyes open in death. The car moves away, followed by the motorcyclists. The drums on the soundtrack have now assumed a steady African beat of the type that accompanies the steady walking pace of a ritual. We see Orphée and Heurtebise walking up the steps of the chalet of the Princess. It is night. Orphée precedes Heurtebise and he seems to be walking in his sleep. Heurtebise's arms are raised behind him towards his shoulders as if to propel him and support him at the same time. There is a close-shot of their feet going down the staircase of the mirror room in the chalet. The steady beat of the drums recedes into the distance and we are once again in the Zone by a stone staircase where the Princess and Cégeste are standing waiting. The Princess is dressed in long black veil-like robes and her hair hangs down upon her back. She speaks to Cégeste and reveals that, for the first time since she was alive, she has the notion of time and cannot bear the period of waiting until the arrival



of Orphée.

The camera now reveals arcades in the zone, the drums again take up their steady beat, and we see a ruined wall along which Orphée and Heurtebise are advancing with great difficulty. They would appear to be crawling although they are standing as they move. They pass an old woman who appears to be sitting in a niche in the wall. Cocteau's voice is heard above the rhythm of the drums:

"Ce n'est plus le même voyage ... Heurtebise conduit Orphée où il ne devait pas le conduire ... Nous sommes loin de sa belle démarche immobile. Orphée et son guide se traînent, tout à tour empêchés et emportés par un grand souffle inexplicable."

As Cocteau speaks these last words Orphée and Heurtebise indeed appear to be sucked along by a strange force. They land, falling on their feet, at the base of a wall. Orphée drags himself out of frame followed by Heurtebise. The sound of the drums fades and is superseded by majestic music having great dignity.

We are back at the stone staircase where the Princess and Cégeste are still waiting. Cégeste announces that Orphée is arriving. The Princess hurries to the right, leaving Cégeste in his place, motionless. Against a background of more arcades the Princess and Orphée meet and embrace. In the simplest possible language Cocteau now creates a love scene of great tenderness, pregnant with meaning.

"La Princesse: Orphée!  
 Orphée: J'ai trouvé le moyen de te rejoindre.  
 La Princesse: J'ai tant crié tout bas que tu es venu...  
 Orphée: Je t'entendais... je t'attendais...  
 La Princesse: Je ne te voulais pas chez les hommes...  
 Orphée: Où nous cacherons-nous?  
 La Princesse: Nous n'avons plus à nous cacher. Nous serons libres.  
 Orphée: Toujours...  
 La Princesse: Toujours. Serre-moi fort, Orphée. Serre-moi fort...  
 Orphée: Tu me brûles comme de la glace.  
 La Princesse: Tu as encore la chaleur humaine. C'est bon.  
 Orphée: Je t'aime.  
 La Princesse: Je t'aime. Tu m'obéiras?  
 Orphée: Je t'obéirai.  
 La Princesse: Quoi que je te demande?  
 Orphée: Quoi que tu me demandes.  
 La Princesse: Même si je te condamrais, si je te torturais?  
 Orphée: Je t'appartiens et je ne te quitterai plus.  
 La Princesse: Plus jamais."

It is difficult to convey in writing the power and enchantment of this simple dialogue, which, accompanied by some of Auric's most



beautifully ethereal music, assumes the form of an operatic duet, the rise and fall of the lovely voices of Maria Casarès as the Princess and Jean Marais as Orphée subtly emphasising the shades of feeling and emotion which they are experiencing. The Princess is obviously, we sense, preparing to make a sacrifice of her love for Orphée in the interests of her beloved.

She turns to Heurtebise and begins the arrangements for the ritual that has to be carried out in order to undo the death of Orphée and restore him to the world of men. Heurtebise tries to caution her against the step she is going to take as the repercussions will be very serious. "Rien n'est plus grave, dans aucun monde ..." he comments. As she turns to Orphée to tell him that he must not even try to comprehend what is about to happen, Cocteau's voice tells us:

"La mort d'un poète doit se sacrifier pour le rendre immortel."

Heurtebise now grabs Orphée from behind and closes his eyes and his mouth with his hands. Cégeste rushes in from the left and, kneeling, grabs Orphée's legs with his arms, holding him still. Orphée tries to struggle but cannot. The Princess's instructions to Heurtebise and Cégeste as they slowly smother Orphée back to his human life recall the form of the famous speech by the Sphinx in the second act of La Machine infernale:

"Travaillez! Travaillez! Heurtebise, je vous aide! Je travaille avec vous. Ne faiblissez pas. Comptez, calculez, acharnez-vous comme je m'acharne. Allez, murez-le. Il le faut! Sans la volonté, nous sommes des infirmes. Allez ... Allez ... Allez!"

and when Heurtebise complains that he cannot go on, she adds:

"Vous travaillez mal! Ne me parlez plus! Enfoncez-vous en vous-mêmes et quittez-vous! Courez! Courez! Volez! Renversez les obstacles!"

Suddenly, Orphée's body goes limp and reclines, his head back, as if he were asleep, against Heurtebise. Cégeste, in a crouching position still on his knees, is curled up, motionless, against Orphée's legs. The Princess sees that they are approaching their destination and urges them to make a final effort. The screen darkens and we see the décor of Orphée's first journey into the zone, but the film is running backwards and the action is all in reverse. Thus Orphée and Heurtebise go backwards into time, and backwards out of the zone into the actual world. We also see the glazier moving backwards in the ruined street of the zone. They walk backwards out of the mirror into Orphée's



bedroom. The sound of the wet finger on the glass bowl rim is reversed, and we hear the wall-clock again ringing out six o'clock. The Princess, back in the zone, asks Heurtebise where he and Orphée now are. He tells her they are in the bedroom and she asks him to bring back the rubber gloves. Orphée removes the gloves from his hands and throws them to Heurtebise. Thus, all the previous action is undone in every detail. Heurtebise disappears from the room. Orphée now moves over to the bed where Eurydice is reclining. They speak as if nothing untoward had ever happened, completely oblivious of everything but themselves in a typical domestic scene of married bliss. Eurydice complains that she had a nightmare and now has a slight headache. The usual meaningless, polite phrases, that are exchanged between husband and wife at such times, follow, repeating the customary mediocre clichés.

We leave this tender scene and return to the zone where Cégeste rises to his feet, Orphée having now disappeared completely. Heurtebise is holding his head. Cégeste observes that the Princess's aides, the motor-cyclists, are now approaching. Are they coming to arrest her? he asks. When she answers in the affirmative, Cégeste advises her to flee. The Princess, with great lassitude, asks: "Où?" Still a trifle naive in his questions, Cégeste asks what happens when one is arrested in the zone. Heurtebise answers that it is not funny. The Princess moves away to meet her aides, and turns to thank Heurtebise who replies:

"De rien. Il fallait les remettre dans leur eau sale."

As he speaks these words, the gloved hands of the motor-cyclist aides take the Princess and Heurtebise by the shoulders to lead them away. She murmurs:

"Adieu, Cégeste ..."

The roll of the drums is heard again, superseded by the grand, majestic music of Auric as, in an overpowering long shot, the group of four, back to camera, march away in a ruined hall of arcades into the distance where they will meet their punishment. As the music ends, the rolling drums are heard again rising to a climax, then fading away to silence.

The subtle assembly of the elements of Cocteau's mythology in the language of the film is thus impressively preserved for posterity in Orphée. The images which Cocteau has created are so rich and exciting that they linger in the mind. Although I have not seen the film for



three years, I need simply play a recording of the complete soundtrack in order to re-create in my mind's eye the individual shots. This, for me, happens with no other film, where the photographic recall is of a general nature. In the case of Orphée the images rise again in their vivid perfection. One could expound indefinitely upon the innumerable themes to be found in the film, upon the countless allusions to problems of a general nature and to those that are peculiar to Cocteau's work. In this respect the film is an inexhaustible source of information.<sup>16</sup>

Orphée, more successfully than any other of Cocteau's artistic accomplishments, realises the poet's intention of revealing himself in depth. The film has a classical discipline of form and centres powerfully upon the obsessive themes that Cocteau evokes from his repertoire of artistic concepts in the context of his ever-present disillusioned narcissism and his obviously romantic fixation for the spiritual worlds which he perceives on the borders of the real world. He presents his mythology in a brilliant variety of forms in such a manner as to imply, with tremendous effectiveness, the emotional ambivalences from which it is derived.

The links between Le Sang d'un Poète and Orphée offer an intriguing example to the student of film of the manner in which the themes of a puzzling film that is regarded as being very avant-garde can be translated into terms of a mainstream film. Both films are concerned with the poet, his Muse, a false muse who is at the same time Fame and Death. In both films a supernatural female figure instructs the poet to pass through the mirror into a land which is equivocally that of inspiration and fame. Le Sang d'un Poète presents us with Les Mystères de la Chine in the room in the Hotel des Folies Dramatiques and we see shadows representing the smoking of opium. In Orphée the poet is served with champagne by Chinese servants and it is fair to assume that the champagne represents opium. Heurtebise appears in both films, in Le Sang d'un Poète as the negro guardian angel and in Orphée in the dual role of chauffeur and guardian angel and guide. Both films present a progression of action in the development of the poet through external experiences, or experiences from his unconscious which he witnesses. In both films death is followed by resuscitation.

As well as striking similarities there are also many differences between the two films. The snowball battle in the earlier film has



a somewhat different equivalent in the stoning of Orphée by the Bacchantes in the later film. There is no Cégeste in the earlier film. There is no evidence in Orphée of the homosexual undertones evident in the photographic emphasis on the poet's naked torso and back in Le Sang d'un Poète.

In his introduction to the published script of the film Cocteau defines three main themes in his film. The first of these is the theme of the successive deaths and counterdeaths of the poet. In Cocteau's own words:

"Le thème que résume le vers de Mallarmé : 'Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change.' Le poète doit mourir plusieurs fois pour naître. C'est déjà ce thème que je développais, il y a 20 ans, dans Le Sang d'un Poète, mais je le joue avec un doigt, faute de mieux, dans Orphée, je l'orchestre." (p. 2 of introduction)

The second theme is that of inspiration or, more directly, expiration.

"Le thème de l'inspiration. On ne devrait pas dire inspiration mais expiration. Ce qu'on nomme l'inspiration vient de nous, de notre nuit et non du dehors, d'une autre nuit soi-disant divine."

(p. 3 of introduction)

The third theme is that of free-will. Cocteau mentions this in discussing the character of Heurtebise:

"C'est un jeune mort au service d'une des innombrables satellites de la mort. Il est encore très peu mort. Plusieurs fois, il tente de prévenir (thème du libre arbitre) par exemple Orphée du mal fondé de ses messages de la radio, Eurydice de l'accident qui va se produire sur la route. Mais le destin qu'il tâche de contrecarrer par un acte de libre-arbitre est un destin fabriqué par la Princesse. C'est pourquoi le tribunal de commission rogatoire ne lui en tiendra pas compte (ne lui en formulera pas le grief."

(pp. 5-6 of introduction)

The protagonists in the film are at odds with themselves. Orphée, who is alive, loves his Death. His Death, because she loves Orphée, kills his wife Eurydice, and later, when he is killed by the Bacchantes, she undoes his death. Orphée's Death keeps him alive against his own wishes. If Heurtebise tries to thwart the intentions of Orphée's Death, it is less for the sake of Orphée than for that of Eurydice with whom he has fallen in love.

Cocteau thus seems to be forcing his protagonists into reversals of their positions and in doing this he brings out the theme of life in each of the worlds reaching out for the other. Cégeste, the young



poet, remains a contradictory figure. Cocteau writes of him:

"Cégeste a seize ans. L'avant-garde s'est entichée de lui, sans cause apparente, comme il arrive. Il se saoule, son insolence plaît et ses audaces. Une fois dans la zone, il redevient lui-même, à savoir un jeune garçon timide, assez naïf et très noble."

(p. 5 of introduction)

And Cégeste, the favoured of the avant-garde, who in the other world becomes clumsy and shy, is soon drained poetically if one is to judge by the tenor of his messages to which Orphée listens on the car-radio.

The Princess, who, Cocteau insists, does not symbolise Death but rather the specific Death of Orphée, cannot be seen as either a true or a false muse. She is a patroness of the arts but some of her acts are detrimental to Orphée's inspiration, while others fortify it. Eurydice, who can be seen to represent the forces of life and happiness since she is loyal to Orphée, sentimental, about to give birth to his child, later tries to commit suicide, so placing herself, in a sense, on the side of Death. The living in the film are not morally superior to the dead. Orphée is indeed killed by the living, the Bacchantes, whom Eurydice trusts. Thus Death is the work of the living as well as of the dead.

The protagonists being placed into reversals of their positions, any definitive interpretation of the action would have to disregard the tragic force of their contradictions. I see the meaning of the film subjectively, because of its artistic effect upon me when I view it. What it tells me is that the poet's inspiration or expiration comes from his very inability to be either alive or dead. In whichever world he may find himself, he experiences a compulsion to break through into the other. His inspiration thus becomes like a kind of alternating current operating between opposite poles. This explains the ever-present emotional ambivalence which is so close and intimate as to leave the poet ever confused. The function of the poet becomes that of dominating this union of contradictions so that he will become "Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change." But he must also have the strength to renounce, in the famous final words spoken by the author in Le Sang d'un Poète "l'ennui mortel de l'immortalité". It is no easy task to distinguish the two.

On its most superficial level as a kind of thriller which gains a certain tension from supernatural overtones the film is still gripping. And this is how an audience unaware of Cocteau's mythology is bound to



see it. Although the setting is post-war, it is filled with occupation memories and relics. There are midnight arrests, power cuts, a Fascist militia who train guns on the ordinary police exemplified in the fascist virility of the two black-clad and begoggled motor-cyclists of the Princess.

It is obvious that Cocteau in Orphée arrived at a felicitous harmonising of the elements of film. There is a beautiful balance between image, music, sound effect and the word, the one helping the function of the other. The very quality of the photography by Nicholas Hayer has a plastic beauty which exploits the full range of monochrome film stock. The music by Georges Auric and Glück is used in counterpoint to enrich effectively the action within the frame. Appropriate emphasis is placed upon the dialogue which in some of the speeches attains a poetic quality of its own, particularly in many of the lines spoken by Maria Casarès in the role of the Princess. Cocteau, aware that endless questions would be asked regarding his intentions in the film, offered some explanation in the publicity handouts that accompanied the first presentation of the film at a cinema in the Champs-Élysées. In the volume Du Cinématographe published by Belfond in 1973, some of these remarks are quoted:

"Le réalisme dans l'irréel est un piège de chaque minute. On peut toujours me dire : cela est possible ou cela est impossible, mais comprenons-nous quelque chose au mécanisme du destin? C'est ce mécanisme mystérieux que je cherche à rendre plastique. Pourquoi La Mort d'Orphée est-elle vêtue de telle ou telle manière? Pourquoi voyage-t-elle dans une Rolls, pourquoi Heurtebise apparaît-il et disparaît-il à sa guise dans certaines circonstances et use-t-il des règles humaines dans d'autres? C'est l'éternel pourquoi qui hante les penseurs, de Pascal au moindre poète. ....

J'ai voulu toucher aux plus graves problèmes d'une main légère et sans philosopher dans le vide. Le film est donc un film policier qui trempe d'un côté dans le mythe, de l'autre dans le surnaturel.

J'ai toujours aimé 'ce chien et loup', cette pénombre où fleurissent les énigmes. J'ai pensé que le cinématographe s'y prêtait à merveille, à condition de profiter le moins possible de ce que les gens appellent le merveilleux. Plus on touche au mystère, plus il importe d'être réaliste. La radio dans les voitures, les messages chiffrés, le signal des ondes courtes, la panne d'électricité, autant d'éléments familiers à tous et qui me permettent de rester sur le plancher des vaches.

Nul ne peut croire à un poète célèbre dont un auteur invente le nom. Il me fallait un chantre de la fable, le chantre des chantres. Celui de Thrace. Et son aventure est si



belle qu'il serait fou d'en chercher une autre. C'est  
une base sur laquelle je brode." (pp. 125-126)

Le Testament d'Orphée ou Ne me demandez pas pourquoi (1959)

There are not the same apparent links between Le Testament and Orphée as there are between Le Sang d'un Poète and the central film, but Le Testament does have a relationship to the other two films in that some of the themes dealt with in the two earlier efforts are reiterated or alluded to. In this respect the three films can be regarded as a trilogy and also because all three have a common protagonist, Cocteau himself, in the person of the artist-poet in the first film, as Orphée in the second film, and in the last film as Cocteau who bravely plays himself. The film also has importance because it is the culmination of Cocteau's conviction that poetry can be created in cinematic language. In an interview with Derek Prouse, the film writer and critic, during the actual production of the film he said:

"As Le Sang d'un Poète was my first film, so Le Testament will be my farewell to the screen. Orphée in actual fact completed my film work. Le Testament will be rather like the handkerchief one waves before the departing train or boat is out of sight."<sup>17</sup>

Now, while it is apparent that most of Cocteau's work in the cinema has a very personal basis, Le Testament d'Orphée is even more immediately personal because Cocteau's participation is more direct. Also, Cocteau availed himself of the services of many of his personal friends who made appearances in the film.

Most of the film was shot in Les-Baux-de-Provence, a village in the South of France. It is situated at the top of a hill and seems to be made of white chalk. The entrance to the village is called le val d'enfer, because Dante Alighieri once lived there and it is claimed that it inspired certain scenes in his Inferno.

Cocteau appears in every scene in the film. Edouard Dermit plays both Cégeste and a painter who is Cocteau's adopted son. Jean Marais makes a brief appearance as Oedipus, while Maria Casarès and François Périer recreate their roles in Orphée as the Princess and Heurtebise. Other close friends of Cocteau who appear are Yul Brynner, guarding the gate of hell, Daniel Gélin, Picasso, Charles Aznavour, the famous matador Dominguin, Françoise Sagan, and Mme. Weisweiler, in whose



villa Santo-Sospir at Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, Cocteau had been a pampered guest for several years. It is almost as if, in this his farewell to the cinema, Cocteau required the reassuring presence of those people who were particularly dear to him while he acted out his own death and resurrection.

The film has as its theme the poet who, led astray in his journey through space-time, tries to link up with a sage who is the only person who can re-integrate him with his own epoch. But each time he hits a period when the sage is either no longer there, or has not yet become what he will become, or is too old to communicate his knowledge. Finally, the poet guesses correctly, and, once more in his own time, sets forth on the hazardous road of life with all the difficulties that it holds for the free agent.

Here, as briefly as possible, is the story-line of the film. Cocteau, in 18th century costume, seeks to enter space time, and so he tries to meet a sage at various periods in his life : as a schoolboy, as a dying man and finally in middle age. The sage understands Cocteau's predicament (which is in essence his existential dilemma) and manages to reinstate him in the continuum and the twentieth century by killing him. Cocteau thanks him, and goes out to seek an identity. He wanders through a waste land, meets gypsies and a centaur, all figures of evil omen. He then encounters Cégeste, the dead poet from Orphée, who rises out of the sea and offers him a hibiscus flower, the flower of folly, which Cocteau proposes to offer to Minerva, who here becomes the goddess of reason. First he must stand trial before the judges of the underworld, the Princess and Heurtebise, whose terrible punishment, hinted at in the closing sequence in Orphée, is now revealed. They were condemned to judge others.

After a long debate, the Princess and Heurtebise condemn Cocteau to live, their most terrible sentence. His encounter with Minerva is equally dramatic. She refuses his offering of the hibiscus flower and kills him with a lance. But Cocteau rises from the dead and walks away. He meets the Sphinx and the old, blind Oedipus, but he neither recognises them nor do they know him. Then he stands stiffly in the path of two oncoming motor-cyclists, taking them to be, as they were in Orphée, messengers of death. In fact they turn out to be merely two police patrolmen. They take his identity card from him and it turns into the flower of folly. A gust of jazz from a passing sports



car blows the flower away and Cocteau vanishes along with Cégeste who has come apparently to fetch him as he no longer belongs to this world.

A first viewing of this film disappoints. It seems to be a very slight, embarrassingly self-conscious affair, a kind of personal fairy-tale à la mode employing magic tricks and dissolves that Cocteau would have rejected in his earlier period of film creation. Yet, even at a first viewing, there are impressive and wonderful moments, heraldic horses stalking the windswept cliffs of Les Baux, gypsies squatting round a fire. The accompanying narrative by Cocteau seems facile at times, rather like a conversational exercise which detracts from the power of individual scenes. One also experiences a slight sense of embarrassment as Cocteau, apparently and naively eager to please, stumbles with what appears to be studied bewilderment (Cocteau is not really a good cinema actor!) through the studios and caves of his last fantasy. Yet, to offset these discomfiting moments, it would be churlish not to warm to Cocteau's wit. There is the time, for example, when he wears his robes as D. Litt. Oxford to revive the hibiscus flower, or the short scene where he describes an embracing, note-taking young couple as intellectuals in love.

On repeated viewings the film begins to exercise its spell and one comes to appreciate Cocteau's intentions, which he described on a record issued by French Columbia<sup>18</sup> in the following terms:

"Un film abstrait n'a rien à voir avec la peinture dite abstraite. Il ne peut procéder par taches émouvantes ni par lignes antifiguratives. Il est abstrait dans la mesure où il exprime ce plus vrai que le vrai qui est le réalisme des poètes et ne ressemble en rien à ce mensonge de perspectives que l'homme s'accoutume à prendre pour la réalité. Mon film est un auto-portrait sans le moindre académisme où la ressemblance n'est pas celle de l'extérieur mais de l'intérieur - ma nuit mise sur une table en pleine lumière."

And in the preface which he wrote to the published script of the film<sup>19</sup> he also wrote:

"Un homme qui somnole, la bouche entr'ouverte, devant un feu de bois, laisse échapper quelques secrets de cette nuit du corps humain qu'on appelle âme et dont il n'est plus le maître.

La sentinelle de la bouche s'est imprudemment et profondément endormie et des paroles sortent qui ne possèdent pas le mot de passe.

Le Testament d'Orphée n'est autre qu'une machine à fabriquer des significations. Le film propose au



spectateur des hiéroglyphes qu'il peut interpréter à sa guise, et, de la sorte, étancher sa curieuse soif de cartésianisme.

Ce film n'a rien d'un rêve, sauf qu'il emprunte au rêve son illogisme rigoureux, sa manière de rendre, la nuit, aux mensonges du jour, une sorte de fraîcheur qui fane notre routine. Il est, en outre, réaliste, dans la mesure où le réalisme serait de peindre avec exactitude les intrigues d'un univers propre à chaque artiste et sans le moindre rapport avec ce qu'on a coutume de prendre pour la réalité. Il est une désobéissance aux règles mortes, un hommage à tous ceux qui veulent rester libres. Il met en oeuvre une logique étrangère à la raison. Bref, il est cartésien à force d'anticartésianisme."

(Préface, p. 2)

Thus Cocteau tells us how we are to look at the film, forgetting the rules of logical sequence and accepting its form of free association, its transmutation of words into actions, and its arrangement of these actions which replaces the arrangement of words in a written poem with a syntax of images.

Almost as if to say that the film is, in a sense, taking up from the point where Orphée ended, the main title of Le Testament d'Orphée is preceded by the last few shots of the earlier film. After the main title Cocteau appears as artist and draws a chalk profile of Orphée on a slate as he speaks a short introduction against the background music which is from Glück's Orpheus in the Underworld:

"Le privilège du cinématographe c'est qu'il permet à un grand nombre de personnes de rêver ensemble le même rêve et de nous montrer, en outre, avec la rigueur du réalisme, les phantasmes de l'irréalité. Bref, c'est un admirable véhicule de poésie. Mon film n'est pas autre chose qu'une séance de strip-tease, consistant à ôter peu à peu mon corps et à montrer mon âme toute nue. Car il existe un considérable public de l'ombre, affamé de ce plus vrai que le vrai qui sera un jour le signe de notre époque. Voici le legs d'un poète aux jeunesses successives qui l'ont toujours soutenu."

This is followed by a short trick shot which is used as a connecting link to the following short scene. The shot consists of Cocteau's hand holding a knife which pierces a soap bubble that is filled with smoke. The shot is taken in reverse so that we see the smoke disentangling into a soap bubble which then settles on the point of the knife. Cocteau's hand with knife and bubble disappears and reveals an empty film studio where much of the following action will take place.

In one part of the studio representing a schoolroom a young boy



is sitting at his school desk writing. The poet, Cocteau, suddenly materialises in Louis XV dress and asks to speak to the boy's teacher, not realising that the sage he is seeking is the boy, not yet grown into the man. When he realises his mistake, he disappears, frightening the boy, then, having forgotten his gloves (as the Princess did in Orphée) he has to re-appear in order to fetch them, thus adding to the boy's fright. In the next short scene, the poet, again confusing his time frequency, appears when the sage is but a babe in arms. Again in a third short scene in the studio he appears to find the sage a very old man being wheeled by a nurse in a wheel-chair. The old man dies and drops a little box. Cocteau picks it up as it contains the formula for his correct entry into the time frequency of the sage. Thus Cocteau is able to meet the professor, now fifty years of age, in his laboratory. He has just had a slight indisposition when Cocteau enters and is still somewhat dazed. In the conversation which follows, Cocteau is successful in jogging the professor's memory and the latter recalls having met Cocteau before in his schoolroom when he was a boy. He was then thirteen years old and Cocteau had given him a terrible fright. He still would like to understand what happened, and how the poet happens to be present again, unchanged since his last appearance so many years ago. Cocteau explains:

"Professeur, il est difficile d'expliquer l'intemporel et surtout d'y vivre. On s'embrouille. Pensez que je viens de vous voir coup sur coup et sans ordre chronologique à plusieurs âges de votre vie. Je vous ai même connu très vieux, il y a quelques minutes. Votre main malade a laissé tomber cette boîte. Je l'ai prise et je crois, en la ramassant, vous avoir et m'avoir rendu service."

He approaches the professor and hands him the box. The professor opens it to reveal that it is full of bullets. The suggestion would be that each time the poet changes his time sequence he goes through a kind of death. This is the theme of the successive deaths of the poet which we encountered already in Le Sang d'un Poète.

The professor tells the poet that he will have to kill him, relatively, and when the poet asks whether the outcome will be successful the professor says:

"Sans aucun doute. Je déplierai un repli du temps. Tout ce que vous venez de vivre sera supprimé, comme on efface des chiffres sur une ardoise."

This is the same process which Orphée had to submit to at the end of Orphée. Cocteau tells the professor that he is used to being killed -



"Je connais la musique."

The professor shoots him, he falls out of frame and then rises immediately in modern dress, then walks to the door in a dream-like state. The professor goes to the door of the studio and waves goodbye wishing Cocteau good luck. The background music is now by Haendel as Cocteau walks away into the distance while the professor closes the large studio doors against which we see the shadow of a large camera crane appear. The shadow assumes oriental shapes. This is an obvious indication that the short scenes that follow are opium-inspired.

Cocteau is walking in a kind of trance on a road at Baux de Provence. He passes a centaur, a young man wearing a black pullover and a long black tail and a horse's head over his own. The young man stops, removes the horse's head and turns revealing the face of a gypsy. He looks after the retreating Cocteau. Then he puts on the horse's head again, and, as he does so, Cocteau turns round, retraces his steps, following the centaur. This brings him to a high Egyptian tomb into which the centaur disappears. Cocteau enters the tomb and finds himself walking along a wall that leads into a cave. We now hear the distant rhythm of flamenco guitars. The sound increases in volume as the camera follows Cocteau to a gypsy camp in the centre of a circle of rocks. The poet approaches cautiously. The centaur, sitting on the steps of a caravan, is combing his tail, the false horse's head on his knees. The flamenco music fades and gives place to the sound of the comb. A young gypsy removes the cauldron of soup from the fire. In the flames of the fire we suddenly see a photograph of Cégeste in the film Orphée. The photograph jumps, rolling itself up, into the gypsy's hands.<sup>20</sup> She unrolls it, looks at it and takes it to an older gypsy woman who is laying out cards on a table. The woman takes the photograph and tears it up, handing the pieces to Cocteau who has approached her table. The poet, holding the pieces of the photograph, leaves the gypsy camp walking backwards. The centaur rises and follows Cocteau's retreat with his eyes. Cocteau comments on the soundtrack:

"J'avais reconnu de loin la photographie de Cégeste, une des dernières de mon film Orphée. Cet homme-cheval m'avait déplu. Je devinais qu'il m'attirait dans un piège et que j'aurais mieux fait de ne pas le suivre."

We see Cocteau making his way down the road to the lighthouse of Saint-Jean. His voice adds:



"Le sort me laissa croire que j'allais commettre une imprudence ... jeter à l'eau l'image déchirée de Cégeste." 21

There now follows a very effective, beautifully executed sequence, perfectly composed and admirably lit. Cocteau throws the pieces of the photograph into the sea. Immediately a large corolla of foam, pistil-like in shape, seems to rise from the sea and from it emerges Cégeste flying upwards landing on a flat rock above the sea facing Cocteau. He hands Cocteau a hibiscus flower. The dialogue that follows is lit intermittently by the strands of light from the lighthouse:

"Le Poète : Cégeste!  
 Cégeste : C'est toi qui m'as nommé.  
 Le Poète : J'ai peine à te reconnaître. Tu étais blond.  
 Cégeste : Pour un film. Cette fois, ce n'est plus un film. C'est la vie.  
 Le Poète : Tu étais mort.  
 Cégeste : Comme tout le monde.  
 Le Poète : Pourquoi reviens-tu par la mer?  
 Cégeste : Pourquoi? Toujours pourquoi? Vous cherchez trop à comprendre. C'est un grave défaut.  
 Le Poète : J'ai déjà entendu cette phrase.  
 Cégeste : Vous l'avez écrite. Prenez cette fleur ...  
 Le Poète : Mais cette fleur est morte!  
 Cégeste : N'êtes-vous pas expert en phénixologie?  
 Le Poète : Qu'est-ce que cela?  
 Cégeste : C'est la science qui permet de mourir un grand nombre de fois pour renaître.  
 Le Poète : Je n'aime pas cette fleur morte.  
 Cégeste : On ne ressuscite pas toujours ce qu'on aime.  
 En route ...  
 Le Poète : Où allons-nous?  
 Cégeste : Ne m'interrogez plus."

The dialogue is rich in allusions to the elements of Cocteau's mythology - and Cocteau already knows the answers to the questions which he asks Cégeste. He has called on Cégeste because he has reached a stage in his life when he requires someone upon whom he can lean. But Cégeste had fair hair in the film, and now he has brown hair because, as well as being Cégeste, he is also Edouard Dermit the painter, and he is Cocteau's adopted son upon whom Cocteau now depends. Because he was dead he comes back from the element of the sea which symbolised death in so much of Cocteau's poetry. Cocteau's stream of questions is met with the same rebuff as the Princess had already spoken to Orphée and, since the words were Cocteau's own, they must now have a familiar ring. Cocteau always expressed the poetic necessity of the poet to die and be re-born from his own ashes like the Phoenix so Cégeste observes that he is an expert in "phoenixology". When Cocteau remarks that he



does not like the dead hibiscus flower, Cégeste implies that with his poetic powers Cocteau could resuscitate it, but he does not do so.

They now go up together towards the lighthouse. It is twilight. To the sound of trumpets the camera now pans along Cocteau's tapestry of Judith and Holophernes. Cocteau's voice describes its content:

"Judith vient de couper la tête du capitaine de Nabuchodonosor : Holopherne ... La servante s'attarde sur le seuil de la chambre où eut lieu la décollation. Judith n'est plus une femme, la fille d'un riche banquier juif, elle est désormais le sarcophage contenant sa propre légende. C'est sous cette forme qu'elle traverse, au clair de lune, le groupe des gardes endormis."

The camera moves back to show a platform placed in front of the tapestry. There now follows a humorous scene between a presenter, sitting behind a small table, and a little girl in her Sunday clothes. The presenter asks the little girl certain questions to which she gives coctelian answers. The dialogue goes as follows:

"Le Présentateur : Et maintenant, attention! Qui, dans l'antiquité, faisait et défaisait sa tapisserie?  
 La Petite Fille : Pénélope.  
 Le Présentateur : Bravo. Et qui était Pénélope?  
 La Petite Fille : Pénélope était la dernière épreuve qu'Ulysse eût à subir à la fin de son voyage.  
 Le Présentateur : Très bien. Et que représente cette tapisserie?  
 La Petite Fille : Judith et Holopherne.  
 Le Présentateur : Et qui en est l'auteur?  
 La Petite Fille : Jean Cocteau.  
 Le Présentateur : Et qui est Jean Cocteau?  
 La Petite Fille :  
 (hésitante) Un violoniste?  
 Le Présentateur : Exact. Et ce violoniste joue sur un violon ...  
 La Petite Fille :  
 (elle cherche, l'oeil au ciel) un violon ...  
 Le Présentateur : Un violon d'in ... un violon d'In ...  
 La Petite Fille : Un violon dingue!  
 Le Présentateur : Non, pas un violon dingue. Un violon d'Ingres. Eh bien nous allons applaudir notre petite candidate ..."

The presenter applauds while the girl waves to an imaginary audience. Cocteau and Cégeste pass behind the girl on the platform, moving to the right. Cocteau still carries the hibiscus flower in his hand, while Cégeste guides him without touching him. The little girl leaves the studio which takes on the appearance of wings in a theatre.



Behind the whimsy of the scene between the little girl and the presenter, Cocteau is ironically presenting himself as he is seen by the general public. The harshness of his public image is tempered by the device of viewing him through the innocent eyes of the little girl who says what she has to say with an ingenuousness that is endearing, and certainly not without a certain mild humour.

Cocteau and Cégeste now move on to a glass conservatory. It is evening. Under a large sheet is an easel and beside it a stand on which there is an empty vase. Cégeste's hand takes Cocteau's and obliges him to deposit the hibiscus flower beside the empty vase. Cégeste speaks to Cocteau:

"Mettez votre nuit en plein jour. On verra bien celui qui donne les ordres et celui qui les exécute."

This is a clear reference to Cocteau's belief concerning his two selves - his inner self which gives the orders to create and his outer self which is merely the instrument of the other.

Cocteau grasps a sheaf of paint brushes and draws back from the easel. The sheet undulates and flies away revealing a large painting Oedipus and his Daughters. Then, the action is repeated and this time the painting that is unveiled is The Head of the dead Orpheus. The purpose of this sudden appearance of the two paintings is then revealed in the commentary by Cocteau:

"Bien sûr que les oeuvres se font toutes seules. Qu'elles rêvent de tuer père et mère. Bien sûr qu'elles existent avant que l'artiste ne les découvre. Mais toujours cet 'Orphée', toujours cet 'Oedipe'! J'avais cru qu'en changeant de château je changerais de fantômes, et qu'ici une fleur saurait les mettre en fuite."

These are favourite notions in Cocteau's artistic theory, which, as always with him, assign to the creative artist a very passive role. The constant repetition of his Orphean and Oedipean themes is also alluded to. In the action which follows Cocteau states in visual terms that, no matter what the artist creates, he is always making his self-portrait.

The sheet which had covered the last painting flies away to reveal a slate. Cocteau wipes the slate with a rag, looking alternately at the flower vase and the slate as if he were copying the hibiscus flower. From the wiping rag appears a self-portrait of the poet and he draws back and throws away the paint brushes in anger. Now Cégeste has donned a death mask and he says:



"Ne vous obstinez pas, un peintre fait toujours son propre portrait. Cette fleur, vous n'arriverez jamais à la peindre."

At which Cocteau grabs the flower, pulls off its petals, tramples on them and crushes them muttering repeatedly : "Merde." Cégeste reproves him for his churlish behaviour, picks up the crushed petals and puts them in the vase.

They now leave the conservatory and arrive in the patio of Mme Weisweiller's villa Santo Sospir. Cégeste, who has been carrying the vase containing the crushed flower, puts it on a small table which is sitting on the mosaic decorated floor, and draws back to reveal Cocteau in his graduate robes complete with mortar-board.<sup>22</sup> Cégeste now addresses Cocteau inviting him to demonstrate his talents:

"A vous de jouer Docteur. Montrez-nous vos talents."

Endowed with his special academic aura, Cocteau can now accomplish the miraculous. In a long silent scene accompanied only by the Minuet and Scherzo by J. S. Bach the camera concentrates on the poet's hands. They draw from the vase what remains of the torn petals and resuscitate the flower. The flower suddenly appears in colour. Cégeste tells the poet that he is now ready to face the goddess Minerva to whom he is to offer the flower. They disappear through the open door of the villa.

But the poet is not yet ready to face Minerva for he must appear before his judges. In a large empty studio Cocteau and Cégeste walk along some wooden planks. They go through a door and descend three steps. A short distance from the steps, the Princess and Heurtebise seem to rise from below, seated at a long table just as the judges were in the film Orphée. Cocteau makes to retreat up the steps when he sees them, then he comes forward again. Both Cocteau and his adopted son are to be judged.

The two accusations to which Cocteau has to plead guilty or not guilty represent two of the basic problems responsible for his existential dilemma. For this reason this scene is of the greatest importance in the film. The Princess, having explained that she and Heurtebise constitute a court of enquiry before which Cocteau must answer for certain of his acts, then asks Heurtebise to read the two indictments. Heurtebise stands up and reads:

"Primo : vous êtes accusé d'innocence, c'est-à-dire d'atteinte à la justice en étant capable et coupable de tous les crimes, au lieu de l'être d'un seul, apte à



tomber sous le coup d'une peine précise de notre juridiction.

Secundo : vous êtes accusé de vouloir sans cesse pénétrer en fraude dans un monde qui n'est pas le vôtre. Plaidez-vous coupable ou non coupable?"

The irony in these indictments is at once apparent. Innocence implies the capability of being guilty of every possible crime, that is, to be human. Cocteau is thus being accused of being human. His attempts as a poet to penetrate the mystery of his inner world are the basis of the second accusation levelled against him. Since he pleads guilty on both counts, he is, in a sense, declaring his innocence, but he is also saying that he is guilty merely of being himself. And when he replies:

"Je plaide coupable dans le premier et le second cas. J'avoue être cerné par la menace des fautes que je n'ai pas commises, et j'avoue avoir souvent voulu sauter le quatrième mur mystérieux sur lequel les hommes écrivent leurs amours et leurs rêves."

he is not only referring to the slanders of his false legend but in a double sense he is also alluding to his attempts to reach the audience of the theatre on the one hand ... le quatrième mur, and on the other hand he is also alluding to his attempts to create cinema poetry through the medium of the other 'quatrième mur' - the cinema screen. And when the Princess asks him why he pleads guilty, Cocteau's answer reveals that he has become somewhat disenchanted with the world. He says:

"Sans doute par fatigue du monde que j'habite et par horreur des habitudes. Aussi par cette désobéissance que l'audace oppose aux règles et par cet esprit de création qui est la plus haute forme de l'esprit de contradiction ... propre aux humains."

The Princess then accuses him of making of disobedience a priesthood or ministry. To which Cocteau replies:

"Sans elle que feraient les enfants, les héros, les artistes?"

It is interesting to observe how he equates artists with heroes and children. This is in itself another of the basic notions in his poetic credo. The Princess interrupts to remark that they must not fall into contests of eloquence. Cocteau places the hibiscus flower on the table and it disappears. The Princess then asks how he came by the flower and he explains that it was given him by Cégeste. Heurtebise observes that Cégeste is the name of a temple in Sicily. Cocteau explains it is also the name of his young poet in the film Orphée, although he first attributed the name to one of the angels in his poem



L'Ange Heurtebise. At this point the Princess asks him to define what he means by a film. In a flash Cocteau comes up with a revealing definition that describes perfectly his own conception of the cinematograph:

"Un film est une source pétrifiante de la pensée. Un film ressuscite les actes morts. Un film permet de donner l'apparence de la réalité à l'irréel."

And when the Princess asks him to define l'irréel, Cocteau replies:

"Ce qui déborde nos pauvres limites."

Heurtebise then observes:

"Il existerait en somme chez vous des individus pareils à un infirme endormi, sans bras ni jambes, rêvant qu'il gesticule et qu'il court."

And Cocteau remarks that this is a perfect definition of the poet. The Princess now asks what Cocteau means by poet and he replies:

"Le poète, en composant des poèmes, use d'une langue ni vivante ni morte que peu de personnes parlent et que peu de personnes entendent."

And when the Princess asks why these few people speak this language, he explains:

"Pour rencontrer leurs compatriotes dans un monde où, trop souvent, l'exhibitionnisme qui consiste à montrer son âme toute nue, s'exerce chez les aveugles."

It is now Cégeste's turn to be interrogated. He identifies himself as Cocteau's adopted son and declares that his name is Édouard and that he is a painter. He is accused of having used, some terrestrial moments ago, a language which he had no right to use in this world. Cégeste admits the indictment saying that he yielded to an impulse of anger. The Princess now asks him where he obtained the right to appear to Cocteau and to bring him the hibiscus flower. Cégeste replies that the flower was dead and that he had been ordered to take it to Cocteau so that the poet might revive it. The Princess asks for proof of his powers and Heurtebise remarks that he will now convince them by suddenly disappearing. Cocteau interrupts to say that a disappearing act would not be convenient. Heurtebise imprudently observes:

"Pas davantage que le phénomène qui oblige les hommes qui aiment à s'annuler en face de l'objet de leur amour."

At which the Princess takes Heurtebise severely to task for forgetting himself. She advises him not to joke foolishly or clumsily about things which would risk enlightening men on the vanity of their under-



takings. Heurtebise turns again to Cégeste, reminding him that he is to supply proof of his powers. Cégeste, taking a leaf from Cocteau's book, cleverly replies:

"Je partage l'opinion de cet homme lorsqu'il déclare que tout ce qui se prouve est vulgaire. Il vous faut, hélas, me croire sur parole."

The Princess takes note of what she considers to be an insolent reply. She then turns again to Cocteau and asks him if he wrote:

"Ce corps qui nous contient ne connaît pas les nôtres.  
Qui nous habite est habité.  
Et ces corps les uns dans les autres sont le corps  
de l'éternité."

When Cocteau admits that he did, she asks him from what source he obtains these concepts which he expresses in a language that is neither alive nor dead. When Cocteau declares that he obtains them from no-one she accuses him of lying, whereupon he agrees saying:

"Je vous l'accorde si vous admettez comme moi que nous sommes les serviteurs d'une force inconnue qui nous habite, nous manoeuvre et nous dicte cette langue."

As he re-iterates this theory which we have heard so many times before, the Princess and Heurtebise exchange remarks suggesting that Cocteau may indeed be stupid, remembering however that intellectuals are less to be feared than people such as Cocteau. Meanwhile Cocteau has extended his explanation:

"Mascarille et Leporello se firent passer pour leurs maîtres. Le poète leur ressemble un peu."

The Princess takes him to task for chattering on and when Cocteau says that he was merely trying to explain himself in all humility Heurtebise explains to him:

"On ne vous demande ni d'être humble ni d'être superbe. On vous demande de répondre lorsqu'on vous interroge. Un point c'est tout. N'oubliez pas que vous êtes un amalgame nocturne de cavernes, de forêts, de marécages, de fleuves rouges, amalgame peuplé par des bêtes gigantesques et fabuleuses qui s'entre-dévorent. Il n'y a pas de quoi faire le mariol."

Thus Cocteau puts into the mouth of Heurtebise yet another definition of the poet that is in him.

After a short exchange in which the Princess points out to Cocteau that there is no "here" where they are, since they are in fact nowhere, the Professor is brought in as a witness. He appears distractedly in his pyjamas and slippers and does not really know where he is. He had been in bed and was asleep ... The Princess



assures him that he is in fact still in bed, explaining:

"Vous êtes au lit, professeur, vous dormez. Seulement, vous ne rêvez pas. Vous occupez un des replis du temps dont vous avez fait votre étude. Étude qui honore votre intelligence mais que notre règne n'approuve guère."

She then asks him if he knows Cocteau, and he hesitates before replying. This leads to conversation between him and Cocteau, and the Princess, in exasperation, calls them to order and asks the professor in what circumstances he came to know Cocteau. The Professor explains:

"Je désespérais de mener à terme la considérable découverte d'une méthode résurrectionnelle, et il est probable que ma découverte se serait éteinte avec moi si cet homme, doué de pouvoirs que j'ignore, et qui doivent relever des chronons ou particules du temps, n'avait quitté notre continuum, n'avait voyagé dans l'intemporel, ne s'y était perdu et ne m'avait ramené, de mon avenir dans mon présent, la preuve de ma réussite tardive. J'en ai fait sur lui l'expérience."

The Princess then asks the Professor if he has in fact succeeded in restoring a man lost in time into his own epoch. The Professor explains that he had freed the poet from a trap into which he had fallen because of his dangerous attempt. Cocteau interrupts saying that he has merely fallen into another trap -

"Car je n'appelle pas revivre le chien et loup, l'espèce de crépuscule, dans lesquels j'avance depuis que j'ai quitté votre laboratoire."

The Professor deploras this circumstance due to his discovery not having been in perfect running order. For that reason he had destroyed it by throwing it into the Seine. This leads to a discussion of the format of the professor's invention, the box of bullets which moved faster than light. Heurtebise hopes that bad mutations will not result from the presence of the box in the river. The Princess now makes an observation that appears to condemn the whole purpose of modern science:

"En désorganisant par orgueil des mesures (même maladroites) prises à la longue par votre monde contre son désordre originel, les hommes risquent fort de rompre une chaîne pour se donner l'illusion d'un progrès."

The Professor is indignant at this statement.

The Princess asks him what he could say in defence of Cocteau and the Professor replies:

"Qu'il est un poète, c'est-à-dire, qu'il est indispensable, bien que je ne sache pas à quoi."

The Professor is then dismissed, being told gently by Heurtebise to



sleep. As he walks away in a somnambulistic state he says:

"J'éprouve ... comme une difficulté d'être ... une manière de fatigue ..."

thus providing yet another allusion to Cocteau's work.

The Princess turns her attention again to Cocteau summing up the situation in the following enigmatic yet appropriate terms:

"Je n'ignore pas que les détours de votre itinéraire sont une sorte de labyrinthe fort éloigné du nôtre, bien qu'il s'y mélange et que, s'il vous a été possible de découvrir la seule personne apte à corriger vos erreurs et votre désobéissance aux lois terrestres, cet acte ne bénéficiait pas d'une distraction de l'inconnu, mais d'une sorte d'indulgence suprême dont il vous arrive, cher Monsieur, d'abuser, et qui pourrait bien vous manquer un jour."

When Cocteau claims that he does not understand he is told by Heurtebise that he is not being asked to understand, while the Princess reprimands him for playing the fool once again and pretending not to understand. Then she turns again to Cégeste and accuses him of having broken away from his own superior in order to merge the two personalities that were dividing him and because it annoyed him to be two personalities instead of one. Or was he perhaps tempted to assume more than one personality, both of them in the service of the excesses of Cocteau, who was himself a double personality, Cégeste's real father and his adopted father? Cégeste tries to excuse himself by pointing out that there is an infinity of domains and orders and this often prevents one from understanding which persons have to obey and which are to be obeyed. This point is conceded. The Princess asks him to explain the strange route which he adopted in order to appear to Cocteau. He gives a Coctelian answer, saying that this route, through fire and water, arose from orders whose mere instrument he was, orders which went beyond his feeble understanding.

The Princess is unable to accept this explanation and changes the subject. She would like to know what is the extent of Cégeste's potential for metamorphosis. Cégeste makes a grimace and the Princess becomes more explicit, alluding to an incident involving Cégeste where he had changed an orchid into a death's head. Had he done this to impress Cocteau or to warn him in some way? Cégeste explains that this ritual is part of a ceremonial on which he does not have the right to expand. The Princess interprets this reply as a refusal to answer and asks that it be noted. She then asks Cocteau if he has anything to



add in his defence. His reply alludes to his perennial existential dilemma. He says:

"J'ai à dire que, si je mérite une peine, je n'en saurais subir de plus pénible que celle qui m'oblige à vivre entre deux eaux, ou, pour employer votre propre langage : entre deux règnes. Un Cinéaste dirait : 'en fausse teinte'. Je donnerais n'importe quoi pour fouler de nouveau le vieux plancher des vaches et ne pas me perdre dans la pénombre d'un drôle d'univers."

And the Princess points out that this is outwith their competence but that the tribunal will evaluate his position. Then, rising and lifting her papers, she passes sentence:

"La commission rogatoire vous condamne préventivement à la peine de vivre."

The Princess then slowly disappears. And Heurtebise offers Cocteau his flower. This is a friendly gesture and Cocteau cannot prevent himself from uttering the name "Heurtebise", as he refuses the flower, upon which Heurtebise cautiously hushes him, and accompanies him to the door. As they walk along, Cocteau asks Heurtebise about the outcome of certain events at the end of Orphée, the film. First he asks about the Princess and Heurtebise explains that she had transgressed certain laws as she had been in love with a mortal. And Orphée? His survival was but a mirage. His divine head died and Eurydice was put back into Hell.

Heurtebise then urges Cocteau to accept the flower saying that it was neither the first nor the last time that he had taken it from the poet. Cocteau still hesitates to accept it as he feels that Heurtebise is making a gesture that demands great courage and places him and the Princess in great peril, but Heurtebise assures him that he and the Princess could not possibly be condemned to a fate worse than the one which they are suffering, which is to judge others - to be judges.

There is a long silence, then Cégeste comes forward to announce that his duty is to guide Cocteau through inevitable trials at the end of which he, Cégeste, may obtain that which he desires. When Cocteau asks him to enlighten him regarding his rôle in guiding him and the trials that lie before him, Cégeste says he cannot for he does not know them. The only thing he knows is that the hibiscus flower is made of the poet's blood ...

"cette fleur est faite de votre sang, elle épouse les syncopes de votre destin."



But he has already said too much and they must be on their way. Cocteau and Cégeste cross the empty studio and disappear by a staircase that was not there before. They pass the tapestry of Judith and Holophernes.

The scene which follows takes place in the garden of the villa Santo-Sospir where Cocteau's patroness Mme Weisweiller plays the part of a lady who has mistaken her epoch. She is an absent-minded lady dressed in a Balenciaga dress inspired by Japanese impressionist painting. The lady is meant to be a kind of phantom in flesh and blood. She takes part elegantly in the false perspectives of space-time. She is walking round a pond in the garden carrying a Japanese parasol and holding a book from the Série noire collection in her hand. She calls out for her butler and when he appears on the terrace asks him who the murderer is in the book she is reading. When he cannot tell her, she remarks that he is obliging her to read a book that will not appear for seventy years. At that moment Cocteau and Cégeste come down the stairs leading to the garden terrace and she asks the butler who they are, but the butler cannot see them. She is very annoyed with him and dismisses him. She then blows a whistle hanging round her neck and we hear, instead of the sound of the whistle itself, that of the distant whistle of trains at twilight. The lady remarks that everything is topsy-turvy on this day.

Now we cut to the bottom of the garden where two young bathers are enjoying themselves. At the second whistle the one in front puts on a head of Anubis, while the other, who is wearing a dog's tail, grasps his friend by the hips. The camera cuts to Cocteau and Cégeste at the foot of the stairway and Cégeste explains to the poet who the lady is, lost as she is in the wrong age.

At a third whistle from the lady the two bathers dance together like a Picasso faun passing behind the lady who raises her eyes to the sky. Then the lady and the dog formed by the two bathers disappear through a window-door of the villa. As Cocteau leaves the villa with Cégeste he mutters:

"Drôle de chien !"

We now cut to a shot of an iron gate half-way down the coast to the sea. On it a sign reads:

"PROPRIÉTÉ PRIVÉE - PIÈGES"

The hibiscus flower disappears from Cocteau's hand as if someone,



perhaps an invisible Heurtebise, were snatching it from him. We hear the horn solo from Wagner's Tristan und Isolde while Cocteau and Cégeste make their way down a zig-zagging stairway of rocks to the sea. A shot of the yacht Orphée II shows it sailing from left to right.<sup>23</sup> We cut to the deck of the yacht on which the poet and Cégeste are now sitting side by side. They are looking behind them. The captain is at the helm and beside him stands a lady in medieval dress. Each time a lady appears Cocteau thinks it is the Princess and asks Cégeste: "C'est elle?" He had asked this question when the absent-minded lady appeared in the garden of the villa, now he asks it again. Cégeste explains that this lady is Isolde and that she is on every boat in the world always in search of Tristan.

The poet and Cégeste are deposited by a small boat at the port de la Darse at Villefranche. Now we see them ascending the steps to the chapel of Saint-Pierre at Villefranche.<sup>24</sup> Then they appear, still accompanied by Wagner's music, under the arches which lead to the Rue Obscure in Villefranche. In the Rue Obscure the poet meets his double (played by himself) who pretends not to see him and walks on. Once they have passed one another, the double stops and looks back at Cocteau and Cocteau stops and turns to look at his double. This is yet another allusion to Cocteau's existential dilemma, to the fabrication of the mythical persona with which he felt he was cursed. Cégeste and Cocteau discuss the double as they walk along and it is interesting to quote their dialogue as it reveals in precise terms Cocteau's attitude to his double.<sup>25</sup>

"Cégeste : Eh bien, qu'est-ce qui vous arrive?

Le Poète : N'essaye pas de me dire que tu ne l'as pas vu.

Cégeste : Je l'ai vu comme je vous vois.<sup>26</sup>

Le Poète : Il a fait semblant de ne pas me voir.

Cégeste : Vous avez assez crié partout que si vous le rencontriez, vous ne voudriez même pas lui serrer la main ...

Le Poète : Il me hait.

Cégeste : Il n'a aucune raison de vous aimer. On l'a suffisamment insulté et rossé à votre place ...<sup>27</sup>

Le Poète : Je le tuerai.

Cégeste : Je ne vous le conseille pas. Vous avez beau être immortel, si vous le tuez, vous ne trouverez personne d'assez bête pour se faire tuer à votre place.

Le Poète : D'où venait-il? Où allait-il?

Cégeste : Voilà les questions qui recommencent. Il est probable qu'il va d'où vous venez et que vous allez d'où il vient. Vous passez votre temps à



vous efforcer d'être, c'est ce qui vous empêche de vivre. Allez, hop! Les Dieux n'aiment pas attendre."

Cocteau and Cégeste now emerge from an air-hole and they go down a stairway to the seigniorial ruins of the village of Baux. There is a shot of the wild-looking road that leads down to the quarries. Suddenly the poet and Cégeste stop and listen to a voice in the distance which says:

"Je suis la Clef des Songes. La colonne triste. La vierge au masque de fer."

Again Cocteau asks Cégeste: "C'est elle?" but Cégeste does not answer and merely signs to him to follow. They go into the quarries. They appear as very tiny figures in the immense expanse of the quarries. Then we hear the poet's voice declaiming, although it does not seem to issue from his mouth:

"C'est ta faute Péloponèse. D'autres dangers te menacent, car la nuit les statues enfilent des maillots noirs et assassinent les voyageurs. Moi-même, je ne suis pas un buste. Tremble! J'ai assez d'écume de mer dans les veines pour comprendre le langage des vagues. En savonnant et battant le linge, à genoux, elles t'insultent, elles rient, elles se moquent de toi."

Cutting to a close shot of Cocteau and Cégeste jazz music suddenly erupts and we see what they see - a young couple in modern dress are embracing and taking notes in little note books held behind their backs. Cégeste comments: "Amoureux intellectuels." and Cocteau smiles. Then a little boy and a little girl come up to the couple and ask them for autographs which they obtain. The children then run away and reach the foot of a pedestal in the shape of geometrically shaped ruins. On the pedestal is the oracle in a long white robe, its head, made of shells has four faces. The children climb up to its mouths and deposit in them the autographs they have obtained from the intellectual lovers. Cocteau asks Cégeste what this autograph-eating idol is and he replies:

"C'est la machine à rendre n'importe qui célèbre en quelques minutes. Après, il faut essayer d'être connu. C'est moins commode. Dans les pays évolués, les journées de travail sont courtes."

As Cégeste is speaking these words the children come down from the oracle, which opens its eyes and, at the same time, endless bands come out of its mouths, spread out and float in the air. Cégeste explains to the poet that these are bands of novels, poems, songs and that the machine stops until other autograph hunters replenish it with autographs.



The rest of the time it digests, meditates, sleeps. It has six eyes, three mouths and above all, he adds: "ne me demandez pas pourquoi."<sup>28</sup>

Cégeste then draws Cocteau away to a kind of abyss over whose edge they lean like Dante and Virgil. It is here that Cégeste has to leave the poet. The farewell scene is rich in Coctelian concepts, the inevitable orders that come from an unknown source and which must be obeyed, mirrors that reflect too much, pretentiously inverted images that think themselves profound, and can therefore no longer be used as conveyances from one world to another. Cégeste asks the poet to close his eyes, draws back and slowly disappears. He is still there, invisible, when he tells Cocteau to open his eyes again and when Cocteau asks him where he is he replies:

"Très loin et tout près. De l'autre côté de la médaille."

This kind of language Cocteau understands since it is his own! As Cégeste goes further away he asks Cocteau:

"Vous n'êtes pas fatigué de tout vouloir comprendre depuis 70 ans?"

His voice grows dimmer and recedes into the distance when Cocteau asks him where he is and he replies: "Où vous m'avez mis ..."

Cocteau now finds himself going through an empty wash-house. Invisible washerwomen can be heard at their work. The poet wanders on, consults his watch and continues on his way which leads him through a series of underground chambers until he emerges on a different view of the quarries which assume the aspect of an Egyptian temple. Now he finds himself in front of an usher in tails, his chain around his neck, sitting at a table, his right gloved hand replacing a telephone receiver on its stand. He tells the poet that if he will be good enough to take a seat the Minister will receive him shortly. A series of shots of the sitting poet alternating with shots of the usher show Cocteau apparently getting smaller and smaller in the large setting of a ghostly waiting-room. The rank of the person by whom Cocteau is supposed to be received changes, increasing in importance, each time the usher assures him that he will be seen shortly. Thus the Minister becomes the President who becomes the Secretary of his Serene Highness who becomes His Majesty. Meanwhile Cocteau goes on waiting hopelessly and he observes:

"A force d'attendre, il arrive qu'on se transforme en vestibule."



Finally he gets up from the stone where he was sitting and approaches the usher who now stands behind his table and says:

"Ici, laissez toute espérance."<sup>29</sup>

The usher points with his thumb to the emptiness behind him and tells Cocteau to enter without knocking. The usher and his table dissolve away and the poet finds himself walking towards large arcades. At the same time the impersonal voice of an air hostess announces:

"Vous êtes priés d'attacher vos ceintures et d'éteindre vos cigarettes."

in French, English, German and then repeated in French.<sup>30</sup> The poet is now to face Minerva.

He comes into the hall of the goddess. As he does so, the hibiscus flower recomposes itself in his hand. In the distance, on a kind of monumental platform, stands Minerva, an indifferent goddess, flanked by her guards, two men-horses. Minerva is leaning on her lance, holding a shield decorated by a gorgon head and wearing a helmet that shapes upwards like a swan's neck. She is also wearing the strange black, shiny sheath that underwater fishers usually wear. The poet goes up to her and offers the flower but she turns away her head. He backs away excusing himself and Minerva raises her lance and throws it. It transfixes him, its head protruding from his chest. His hands rise to grasp the lance and he falls to his knees, then rolls over on his side as he murmurs:

"Quelle horreur ... quelle quelle horreur ..."

Cutting back to Minerva, the men-horses come down from the platform. One of them pulls out the lance from Cocteau's body. Then they both lift the poet's body and bear it away. A close-shot of the blood where his body lay with the fallen hibiscus flower bursts into colour filling the screen with red.

The scene which follows represents a kind of orphic initiation. Several of the poet's friends witness the ritual of his death. They are sitting in a box that resembles the presidential box at a corrida, but the front of the box is lightly fenced with barbed wire. The friends are Jacqueline Picasso and Lucia Bosé, and, standing behind them Picasso and Luis-Miguel Dominguin.<sup>31</sup> In a high angle long-shot the two men-horses deposit the body of the poet on a large tombstone draped over with a sheet. The gypsies that we saw in an earlier scene now cluster round the poet's body, lamenting his death. These shots



are accompanied by the brasses and drums of the Procession of Seville. A large close-shot of the poet lying on his back shows that he now has false eyes painted wide open on his eyelids. Smoke slowly escapes from his partly-opened mouth. The poet's voice on the soundtrack says:

"Faites semblant de pleurer, mes amis, puisque les poètes ne font que semblant d'être morts."

Suddenly the poet rises stiffly to his feet without bending his knees. He leaves the tombstone and the gypsies and makes for some caves. Then he emerges out of the quarries through a giant crack into the open countryside, wondering which road to take next. He hears the prolonged note of a tuning-fork and seems to answer its call by following a long perpendicular wall over the landscape of the Val d'Enfer. Behind the wall a sphinx made of plaster with a female trunk and straw hair flutters its wings and slides along the wall, unseen by the poet with his artificial eyes.

Now we see the blind Oedipus, leaning on Antigone, emerging from one of the gates of Thebes, whispering incomprehensible words. He passes in front of the poet who moves away without seeing him. Cocteau's voice speaks on the soundtrack:

"Le Sphinx, Oedipe ... Ceux qu'on a trop voulu connaître, il est possible qu'on les rencontre un jour sans les voir."

So, moving from episode to episode, the poet finally comes face to face with two policemen on motor-cycles whom he at first mistakes for the two motor-cyclist black angel aides, of the Princess in the film Orphée. He is thus preparing, in his somnambulist state, to die the same death that Cégeste died in the film, when Cégeste materialises in the rocks at the side of the road, comes forward, takes the poet by the arm and leads him back to the spot in the rocks where he appeared. Cégeste then seems to crucify the poet against the rocks at the roadside, and holding Cocteau he cries out in a kind of storm:

"La terre après tout n'est pas votre patrie."

Together they melt into the rocks and disappear. Meantime, the police motor-cyclists, having studied Cocteau's identity papers, realise who he is and then turn to ask him for his autograph. Astonished by the poet's disappearance, one of them drops the identity card which, as soon as it touches the ground, turns into the hibiscus flower.



Suddenly, to the sound of jazz, a sports car full of gushing young people comes rushing down the road at full speed, amidst a bedlam of screams, laughter and music. The policemen mount their motor-cycles and depart in hot pursuit of the sports car. The hibiscus flower spins in the dust of the road and moves out of the screen frame. Thus Cégeste snatches Cocteau from a world where the police and noisy, boisterous young people prevent poets from living. Cocteau's final words are spoken as the car and the police disappear along the road:

"Et voilà. Une vague joyeuse vient de balayer mon film d'adieu. S'il vous a déplu, j'en serai triste, car j'y ai mis toutes mes forces comme le moindre ouvrier de mon équipe ...

Ma vedette est une fleur d'Hibiscus. Si vous avez reconnu en route quelques artistes célèbres ils n'apparaissent pas parce qu'ils sont célèbres mais parce qu'ils répondent à l'emploi des rôles qu'ils interprètent et parce qu'ils sont mes amis."

A shot follows in which Cocteau's hand finishes the profile of Orphée. Then we cut back to the shot of the soap bubble which changes into smoke, but this time the smoke changes into the word:

FIN

From the foregoing summary of the action of the film it can be seen that it can be examined at various levels. It can be looked upon as a compilation of poetic or poetically contrived hieroglyphs which, although they have specific connotations for Cocteau, can also be interpreted by the ordinary spectator, who is unacquainted with Cocteau's mythology, in his own fashion. Secondly, it can be looked upon as a final gathering together of all of those elements of the poet's personal mythology which still have importance for him in the year 1959. Still basic here is the very problem of the function of the poet and his need to die and to be reborn. On this level, the film itself is not a dream, but it does have the form or nature of a dream and in this respect it presents us with examples of the spontaneous creations of the poet's mind. And on this level, also, Cocteau is still attempting to liberate the mind from the dogma of creation, because for him poetry is not the description of the world as we see it, but a medium for the expression of his own poetic ecstasy. On yet another level we are aware of the underground mechanism of the poet's thought which passes through stark, oneiric landscapes encountering figures and creatures that are ambivalent in that they represent simultaneously beings of myth and the poet's own



own friends. The most important of these beings at this stage in Cocteau's life was obviously Cégeste/Edouard Dermit for his is the key role in the film and it is upon him that the poet finds that he depends.

Jean-Jacques Kihm, who is undoubtedly one of the most percipient writers on Cocteau's work, gives the best analysis of the film in his biography of Cocteau. He points out that where Le Sang d'un Poète and Orphée were paradoxical in that they were at the same time a poem and a meditation on poetry, its origins and its essence, thus simultaneously works of art and self-criticisms, Le Testament d'Orphée was less a critique than a cinematographic poem, pure and simple, linked by an umbilical cord to the mysterious night of the author's most intimate secrets.

What are the basic clues around which the images and associations in Le Testament d'Orphée are orchestrated?

When he is interrogated by the motor-cyclist policemen (earthly replicas of the motor-cyclists in Orphée) who are also guardians, angels of an earthly essence (hence false angels?), Cocteau is enabled to elude their questions through the agency of Cégeste. Cégeste represents poetry and only poetry can come to the aid of the poet.

The Goldoni-like farce on space-time with which the film opens serves to prove the non-existence of space and time, the abolition of distance, an essential condition for all communication between life and death, of the internal with the external, of the poet with his creations, of the poet with his double.

Cégeste asks for a reckoning, but the poet is answerable only to his work, that is to say to himself. He takes exception to the image of himself that is peddled to the world. After discovering his deepest essence in Cégeste, the poet also encounters his most superficial self. Whoever meets his own double is fated to die, such is the romantic belief. The poet dies, he dies constantly, since he condemns his double not to be himself and refuses to grant him a little of his soul. At the same time he wins when he moves on, refusing to confuse himself with his double. By this negation, he conquers himself, for there is no true resurrection, no survival, without this plague, without this death, which is his other self. Thus Cocteau links this film with Le Sang d'un Poète by presenting his double, his false self



here just as he presented it in the person of Rivero in the earlier film and just as he presented it in the person of Jean Marais in Orphée. But the preoccupations which haunt him in 1959 are no longer those that haunted him in 1930. The struggle against the statue has become externalised and has become a struggle against his legend, a struggle which finds its positive counterpart in the dialogue with his poetry, represented by Cégeste. Only by means of this dialectic of his struggle and his dialogue is the poet capable of creating the new poem which is his film.

Kihm concludes by commending Cocteau for his bravery in appearing as himself in the film. He writes:

"Ainsi, devenant plus visible, il trouvera l'invisibilité. Il deviendra pure apparence et le drame qu'il a masqué toute sa vie par les mots - le drame de l'homme, de l'ami, du poète aux prises avec les statues, les vivants et les morts - enfin sera manifesté. Enfin son âme, parce qu'il consentira au sublime sacrifice qui consiste à jouer son propre double, à se placer dans l'atroce situation de pouvoir être, dans une salle, comme n'importe quel spectateur, le spectateur de lui-même, enfin, son âme apparaîtra dévêtue, véritable attentat à la pudeur. J'attache une importance extrême, on le voit, au fait que Jean Cocteau jouera son propre rôle et trouvera ainsi le parfait état de transparence.

C'est une manière de se vider de son sang, de donner son sang pour que son oeuvre, pour que son message de poète vive."

(pp. 143-147)

What makes this appraisal of Cocteau's film all the more remarkable is that it was written before Kihm had actually seen it!

Finally, I find significance in the very presence of the word Testament in the film's title. This, his last work in the medium of the cinematograph, is a poetic bequest exemplifying Cocteau's yearning, as he approached the end of his life, to be immortal.



## Notes

## Chapter 7

1. Cocteau himself said to André Fraigneau:  
 "Ce qui me passionnerait ... c'est de parler avec vous de l'espace et du temps. L'art cinématographique est le seul qui permette qu'on les domine. Il est rare que les chambres communicantes soient construites sur le même plateau et rare qu'un intérieur corresponde à l'extérieur sur lequel il donne. Rare que l'on tourne dans l'ordre. Je vous le répète, on en use à sa guise avec un monde où rien ne semble permettre à l'homme de vaincre ses limites. Non seulement cela relève de la peinture, où l'artiste s'acharne à traduire les trois dimensions dans lesquelles il se meut par l'entremise de deux dimensions, mais encore cet emploi des deux dimensions, au cinématographe, en exprime plus que trois, puisqu'il bouleverse le temps qui est une dimension et que l'on pourrait dire sans ridicule qu'il travaille dans la quatrième." (Jean Cocteau: Entretiens sur le Cinématographe, ed. Belfond, 1973, p. 77).
  
2. When I served a brief period of service in 1952 with my friend Roger Lengrand who was a part-time camera operator assisting Cocteau in the making of his 16mm Kodachrome film La Villa Santo-Sospir in Mme Weisweiller's villa at Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, Cocteau used the term l'encre de la lumière so frequently that it became a sort of bantering byword between us. He was, of course, referring to the essence of cinematographic photography and how light could be used to mould and even to alter characteristics or features of the objects that were being filmed, in order to obtain specific effects in the final shot. Cocteau always placed tremendous importance on the arrangement of the lighting of his films, not only in the studio interiors but on location.
  
3. It has only become sadly apparent in recent years that the range of tones rendered by the orthochromatic film stock on which films were photographed up to the year 1930 was much richer than the more limited "grey" range introduced with the invention of panchromatic film which, although having the advantage of being more sensitive and hence requiring less light in the studio, imposed certain artistic limitations. One has only to visit exhibitions of old photographs taken in the 1900s to realise this. Cocteau observed in his interview with André Fraigneau that more recent copies of Le Sang d'un Poète did not have the brilliance and the contrast of the original made on orthochromatic stock:  
 "Une très vieille copie du Sang d'un poète est aussi brillante et aussi en relief que n'importe quel film américain moderne, tandis que les copies plus récentes ont l'air de vieilles copies et nuisent à l'efficace de l'oeuvre." (Op. cit., p. 16).
  
4. In his Essai de critique indirecte (1932) Cocteau wrote:  
 "Une maison photographiée ou cinématographiée ne se ressemblent pas. Même lorsque rien ne bouge, le cinématographe enregistre encore quelque chose." (Ed. Gallimard 1959, p. 150).



5. This piece of impressive maquillage is to be used again and again by Cocteau. We shall see the Princess in similar make-up in some of the shots in the film Orphée, and Cocteau himself at the moment of his death in Le Testament d'Orphée has eyes painted on his eyelids.
6. The final part of this sequence was cut from the first print I saw, a print distributed by the British Film Institute in the 1950s. It is intact, however, in the print which I viewed at the Cinémathèque in Paris in 1970.
7. The part of the woman statue is played by the beautiful American girl Lee Miller whom Cocteau had met at the house of Man Ray.
8. In Act II Scene 6 of the play Bacchus the Cardinal observes:  
"Les murs de cette ville ont des oreilles."  
To which Hans replies:  
"Les oreilles de cette ville ont des murs.  
C'est plus grave." (p. 124)
9. Although it may seem an incongruous comparison to make one is reminded here of the rolling of drums that accompanies a strip-tease act.
10. The part of this woman is played by the female impersonator Barbette about whom Cocteau had written an essay Le Numéro Barbette in 1926.
11. This is a sound which Cocteau often uses in his films. It is usually associated with a change of some sort from one medium to another, or a change of location on the part of the protagonist. It is a haunting sound that evokes feelings of the supernatural.
12. Cocteau was an honorary member of The Connoisseur Circle, a film appreciation society of which I was secretary in the early 1950s. I had an intermittent correspondence with him and he had occasion to see some of my films which I sent to him for comment. His remarks were always extremely encouraging, perhaps occasionally exaggerated in his praise as on the occasion when he had seen my film Nine O'Clock, which bears more than coincidental resemblances to his film Orphée, and he wrote: "Nous avons fait le même rêve!" Of this correspondence with Cocteau only one letter, the first, survives owing to the carelessness of a secretary who, in my absence, cleaned out my foreign correspondence file and consigned the priceless Cocteau letters to the paper bin.
13. It is a fascinating enigma that contemporaneous artistic movements, which apparently have conflicting aims, when viewed in perspective turn out to have had more in common than their exponents could ever have imagined. It is now acknowledged that surrealism has been one of the most important creative phenomena in the arts in the present century. Cocteau could not possibly have avoided sharing in these aims of the surrealists that were so similar to his own. Among the many characteristics that they shared were, the many-sidedness of their talents dedicated to their common quest for a more profound and complete understanding of the great experience of life and in particular the deep poetic solitude of dreams and the exploration of the unconscious mind.



14. I have not dwelt upon the sound effects and the music on the soundtrack of the film but I should like to mention that Cocteau showed as much inspired ingeniousness in the creation of the soundtrack as he did in the making of the visuals. The commentary is rather dry and colourless, but the music is powerfully effective. Cocteau himself spoke all the voices (even those of the people in the theatre boxes) in the film with the exception of that of Lee Miller which was dubbed by Rachel Berendt.
15. As the group passes through the mirror we hear again on the soundtrack the sound of a wet finger running round the rim of a glass bowl. See note 11 above.
16. I would leave the last word on Orphée to Jean-Jacques Kihm who has written comprehensively about the film in his biography of Cocteau. In his appraisal of the film he ends with the following observations:  
 "... l'une des grandes réussites de l'oeuvre qui traduit en images et rend cohérents dans l'unité compréhensive de sa continuité trois thèmes, l'un romanesque psychologique, l'autre psycho-social, le troisième enfin strictement poétique, on pourrait dire métaphysique, thèmes situés par leur nature même à des plans d'existence différents. Il n'y a jamais nulle virtuosité pour passer de l'un à l'autre, mais ils sont, au départ, et restent durant une heure et demie, intimement liés parce qu'ils le sont effectivement dans la vie de Jean Cocteau, et que son film est une oeuvre d'auteur que ne gêne nulle ingérence de metteur en scène ou de conseiller connaissant trop bien les règles." (p. 108).
17. This interview, translated into English, appeared in the Spring edition 1960 of the British Film Institute periodical Sight and Sound.
18. The gramophone record referred to is Columbia 33FC 1076 which contains extracts from the soundtrack of the film. The record was issued in France in 1964.
19. Jean Cocteau: Le Testament d'Orphée (Monaco, Éditions du Rocher, 1961).
20. This film trick is the one to which Cocteau most frequently resorts in his films. He used it for the resuscitation of Cégeste and Eurydice in Orphée, and he will use it again in the scene in the present film where Cégeste appears to leap miraculously out of the sea. The trick is known as reverse motion and is accomplished very simply. The action (in the case of this shot the rolled photograph in the gypsy's hands is thrown into the fire and allowed to burn) is photographed normally but with the camera placed upside down. The film strip is then reversed in the editing of the film so that the action that was photographed last appears first, right way up.
21. Although, in the cliché-ridden visual language of the cinema, a torn photograph indicates the end of a relationship, Cocteau uses it here in an opposite sense as the means of re-establishing a relationship with Cégeste.



22. Cocteau was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Oxford in 1956.
23. Orphée II was the name of the yacht belonging to Mme Weisweiler which was always at Cocteau's disposal when he lived in her villa of Santo-Sospir.
24. Cocteau had decorated the chapel of Saint-Pierre at Villefranche in 1957. He regarded it as his own sarcophagus and offered it to the fishermen of Beaulieu and Saint-Jean in memory of his departed youth, and to the fishermen of Villefranche among whom he had lived for such a long time.
25. It is interesting to note that while Cocteau as Cocteau is wearing casual, informal clothes, his double is smartly and impeccably dressed in a beautifully cut grey jacket with elegantly upturned sleeves to show the cuffs of his white shirt, and he is wearing dark trousers. Thus he makes a clear differentiation between his real self who is more natural and his image of himself as seen by the public.
26. The manner in which Cégeste phrases his observation suggests that he does not differentiate between Cocteau and his double.
27. This scene is written with such subtle shades of ambivalence that it becomes difficult for us to differentiate between the real Cocteau and his double for they do change identity in the course of the scene.
28. In its physical functions the oracle does have certain coincidental similarities with Cocteau's Potomak.
29. This is the last of a number of Dantean allusions in the film. The part of the usher is played by Yul Brynner.
30. This sort of trouvaille, the collocation, for the purpose of intimate expression, of elements that are both distant and disparate, has no parallel in the language of the cinema, and for that reason can rightly be regarded as a stroke of genius on the part of Cocteau.
31. Although Cocteau's friends do not applaud his death, they do, in a sense, fulfil the same function as the spectators in the theatre box in Le Sang d'un Poète since they witness one of the false deaths of the poet.



A brief conclusionSinging in the Dark

Cocteau said it all in his own words:

"Je me demande parfois si mon malaise perpétuel ne vient pas d'une incroyable indifférence aux choses de ce monde, si mes oeuvres ne sont pas une lutte afin de m'accrocher aux objets qui occupent les autres, si ma bonté n'est pas un effort de chaque minute pour vaincre le manque de contact avec autrui.

Sauf s'il m'arrive d'être le véhicule d'une force inconnue que j'aide gauchement à prendre forme, je ne sais ni lire, ni écrire, ni même penser. Ce vide va jusqu'à l'atroce. Je le meuble comme je le peux et comme on chante dans le noir. En outre, ma bêtise de médium affecte un air d'intelligence qui fait prendre mes maladresses pour une malice extrême et ma démarche de somnambule pour une agilité d'acrobate. Il y a peu de chance que ce mystère s'éclaircisse un jour et je pense qu'il me faudra souffrir, après ma mort, d'un malentendu analogue à celui qui m'empêche de vivre.

.....

Lorsque je déclare que je n'ai pas d'idées, je veux dire que j'ai des ébauches d'idées dont je ne suis pas le maître et que je n'arrive à entreprendre un travail que si, au lieu d'avoir une idée, une idée m'a, me hante, me dérange, me tourmente de telle sorte qu'il me faille la jeter dehors et m'en délivrer coûte que coûte. Le travail m'est donc une sorte de supplice. Après le travail, l'absence de travail en est une autre. Et le vide recommence et me laisse entendre que je ne travaillerai jamais plus."

"Nous sommes tous faits de boue et la pesanteur nous contraint à y retomber vite. Il y a les minutes où nous voyons clair sur nous-mêmes et les minutes où nous aimerions que d'autres vissent clair à notre place. Ce sont ces contrastes qui forment tout le jeu entre la solitude et la présence, entre les plongeurs dans la mer humaine où l'on attrape froid et le coin du feu à la campagne. J'admets que tout ce que je suis en train de vous dire peut créer de la confusion dans l'esprit du lecteur. Mais ma seule école étant de maintenir mon équilibre à chaque seconde, je suis incapable de supprimer le moindre instant du parcours. Notre tissu est de contradictions et, bien que je sache l'intérêt qu'il y a pour un artiste à simplifier sa ligne, à la rendre plus grosse et plus visible, j'y renonce, peut-être par une sorte de paresse, peut-être par une morale que je m'inflige et que je baptise honnêteté."

(Entretiens sur le Cinématographe, pp. 19-20  
and pp. 66-67)

"Si l'on découvre un jour ma grande spécialité, celle où



j'étais seul au monde et incomparable, ce sera le déniaisement des genres."

(Poésie critique Vol. II, Cover note)

Cocteau, with a typical humility that was never considered to be characteristic of him, under-estimated his own talents not the least of which was his exceptional gift as a dazzling conversationalist. It was in the medium of conversation that his poetic verve was most apparent. The verbal sparkling with which he could flash out the formulas of an idea bore witness to the tremendous swiftness of his thought. Cocteau was prodigal in his use of the flitting liveliness of words which he utilised to create effective improvisations, that in themselves became the exercises or scales for future works that would find form in his writings.

He dedicated a full half-century from 1913, when he found himself for the first time in Le Potomak, to 1963, when he died, exclusively to poetry. In order to grasp poetry in its wide range of expression, he availed himself with great virtuosity of the broadest possible selection of techniques : the poem, the novel, the essay, the theatre, the film, the graphic and the plastic arts.

Thanks to the powerful, metaphorical imagination with which he was so generously endowed, he was able to create images which excited wonder because of their novelty and their appropriateness. A Coctelian image effectively gives form to an abstract concept by throwing it into relief with a remarkable, fulgurant conspicuousness that is a veritable coruscation of the poet's genius. But the concept is not coloured by the image, it is simply illuminated by it.

Typical of Cocteau's aesthetic are the qualities of clarity, precision, speed and elegance linked with conciseness. In Le Secret professionnel he wrote:

"Le vrai écrivain est celui qui écrit mince, musclé. Le reste est graisse ou maigreur."

It is this principle that accounts for his preference for the aphorism whose concise form is particularly appropriate for the poetic enthusiasm that animates him.

In Le Journal d'un Inconnu Cocteau wrote:

"L'envers m'intrigue avant l'endroit."

His poetic mission is an attempt to explore the mystery of what he referred to as la nuit humaine, the intimate shades within the



individual, and the shadows of the supernatural. In Orphée the play, and in the film, and in Le Sang d'un Poète the crossing through the mirror by the protagonists is an example of the attraction that Cocteau experienced for the reverse of appearances. Cocteau's own poetic mirror reverses the concept of paradox, splitting the single sounds and actuating the word play of the rhymes to achieve a pun. Often his enthusiasm for the paradox brings about a kind of delay in perspective of the concept he wishes to express, thus conferring upon it an added dimension. He also has recourse to the use of antonyms which cause a deliberate reversal of the image, giving rise to doubts regarding the merits of the image created. But here something remarkable happens. We are struck by the emergence of an essential truth. And we perceive this truth as a direct result of the revolutionary semantic reversal.

Early in his life Cocteau created for himself a personal morality to which he always adhered. His morality was individualistic, a morality of freedom that was opposed to the conventions and hypocrisies of social morality. He defined his morality in Le Journal d'un Inconnu in the following terms:

"Cette morale particulière peut paraître l'immoralité même au regard de ceux qui se mentent ou qui vivent à la débandade, de sorte que le mensonge leur deviendra vérité, et que notre vérité leur deviendra mensonge."

The relations between Cocteau and the public were passionate in the extreme. He was prompted by a necessity to communicate to others his poetic discoveries and he demanded a very prompt response. If approbation was slow in coming forth he became discouraged, bitter and sad. Incomprehension and criticism were quickly interpreted as persecution. The autobiographical vein that is so strong in his work can be explained partly by his strong need to explain and justify himself. His artistic enthusiasm then became for him a defensive weapon.

Two great mythical creatures dominate Cocteau's world - Orpheus and Oedipus. To them he assigns the task of interpreting his own mythology. Following the example of Orpheus who pursues the unknown and enters the domain of death, Cocteau confronted death throughout the whole range of his work. From this continual confrontation comes a certain pessimism which does nothing to temper his meditation on human life or on the great enigma of destiny and free-will which the tragic problem of Oedipus so aptly illustrates, a problem that is to



a great extent Cocteau's own.

Presumably because of its brilliance, Cocteau's work has often been compared to fireworks. Implicit in this comparison is the supposition of a blazing that is as ephemeral as it is intense. This attitude is completely mistaken because it overlooks the fact of Cocteau's total commitment to his work, a commitment that utilises an aesthetic that has as its very basis a demanding, inflexible morality. A durable light does, however, shine from Cocteau's works, the glow of the poet's creative imagination.

"

Epitaphe

Halte pèlerin mon voyage

Allait de danger en danger

Il est juste qu'on m'envisage

Après m'avoir dévisagé. " (Le Requiem, ed. Gallimard, p. 174)

\* \* \* \* \*

In 1969 Noel Scott Engel published his fourth solo record. Dedicated to Albert Camus, the record sleeve bore the following quotation:

"A man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened."

These words could be aptly applied to Cocteau's poésie.

On this same record Scott Engel sings one of his own songs, the lyrics of which could appropriately be dedicated to Jean Cocteau. The words of this song Angels of Ashes run:

"The Angels of Ashes will give back  
 your passions again and again.  
 Their light shines, will reach through  
 the darkness and touch you my friend.  
 They'll fly in a mime dance  
 and blind you with wings wrapped in flame.  
 If you're down to an echo  
 they just might remember your name.  
 In the unbroken darkness  
 where emptiness empties along  
 There's no starting or stopping  
 where there is no right or no wrong.  
 Well that's all right for some  
 who can hang the absurd on their wall.  
 If your blind hands can grope  
 through these measureless waters, you fall...  
 You've been following patterns  
 and breeding sensations too long.  
 And the fullness that fills up  
 the pulse of durations is gone.  
 Let the great constellation  
 of flickering ashes be heard!  
 Let them go with the fire!  
 All it takes to confess is a word, just a word.  
 I can recommend angels -  
 I've watched as they've made a man strong, oh so strong!  
 If your humbleness shows,  
 then I'm sure that they'll take you along.  
 You can tell them who sent you.  
 It might help to get you about.  
 You can say that you laughed  
 and you walked like St. Francis, with love."

(Scott Engel - Scott 4 -  
 Philips SBL 7913  
 released 1969)



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. Primary literature

There does not yet exist a complete collected edition of Cocteau's works. Marguerat of Lausanne published between 1946 and 1951 Oeuvres Complètes in 11 volumes, but the set is far from complete. The content of the 11 volumes, arranged chronologically according to year of publication, is as follows:-

- |      |            |  |
|------|------------|--|
| 1946 | Volume I   | <u>Le Grand Écart</u><br><u>Thomas l'Imposteur</u><br><u>Les Enfants terribles</u><br><u>Le Fantôme de Marseille</u>                                       |
| 1947 | Volume II  | <u>Le Potomak</u><br><u>La Fin du Potomak</u>  |
| 1947 | Volume III | <u>Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance</u><br><u>Poésies</u><br><u>Vocabulaire</u><br><u>Plain-Chant</u><br><u>Neiges</u>  |
| 1947 | Volume IV  | <u>Discours du Grand Sommeil</u><br><u>Opéra</u><br><u>Enigme</u><br><u>Allégories</u><br><u>Le Fils de l'air</u><br><u>Léone</u><br><u>La Crucifixion</u> |
| 1948 | Volume V   | <u>Orphée</u><br><u>Oedipe Roi</u><br><u>Antigone</u><br><u>La Machine infernale</u>   |
| 1948 | Volume VI  | <u>Roméo et Juliette</u><br><u>Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde</u><br><u>Renaud et Armide</u>   |
| 1948 | Volume VII | <u>Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel</u><br><u>La Voix humaine</u><br><u>Les Parents terribles</u><br><u>Parade</u><br><u>Le Boeuf sur le Toit</u>              |

- 1949 Volume VIII La Machine à écrire  
Les Monstres sacrés  
L'Ecole des Veuves  
Le Bel indifférent  
Anna la bonne  
La Dame de Monte-Carlo  
Le Fantôme de Marseille
- 1950 Volume IX Le Rappel à l'ordre  
Le Numéro Barbette  
Lettre à Jacques Maritain  
La Jeunesse et le Scandale  
Une entrevue sur la critique avec Maurice Rouzaud  
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- 1950 Volume X Le Mystère laïc  
Opium  
Des Beaux-Arts considérés comme un assassinat  
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Préfaces  
Le Mythe du Greco  
Coupures de presse
- 1951 Volume XI Portraits-Souvenir  
Mon Premier Voyage  
Le Foyer des Artistes  
Hommages

In the series Les Immortels - Chefs-d'Oeuvre published by Les Editions Rombaldi for the Académie Française there appeared in 1975 a special edition of Cocteau's works in five volumes. The edition is, of course, incomplete. The content of the five volumes is as follows:-

- Volume I Les Parents terribles  
La Machine à écrire  
with illustrations by Jean Cocteau and Jacques-Maurice Pecnard
- Volume II La Belle et la Bête - Journal d'un Film  
L'Aigle à deux têtes  
with illustrations by Edouard Dermit
- Volume III Thomas l'Imposteur  
La Machine infernale  
with illustrations by Leila Mikaeloff and Dino Cavallari



- Volume IV      Les Enfants terribles  
                  Opium  
                  Colette  
                  with illustrations by Jean Cocteau
- Volume V        Picasso  
                  Le Potomak  
                  Le Grand Ecart  
                  with illustrations by Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso  
                  and Leila Mikaeloff

The following (with the exception of his Poésie de Théâtre which will be listed separately) are the published works of Jean Cocteau arranged chronologically according to date of publication:-

- 1908      Sonnet - Les Façades (published in the review Je sais tout)
- 1909      La Lampe d'Aladin (Société d'Editions, Paris)
- 1910      Le Prince frivole (Mercure de France, Paris)
- 1912      La Danse de Sophocle (Mercure de France, Paris)
- 1918      Le Coq et l'Arlequin (Editions de la Sirène, Paris)
- 1919      Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance (Editions de la Sirène, Paris)  
             L'Ode à Picasso (A la Belle Edition, Paris)  
             Le Potomak 1913-1914, précédé d'un Prospectus 1916 et suivi des  
             Eugènes de la Guerre 1915 (Société littéraire de France, Paris)
- 1920      Poésies 1917-1920 (Editions de la Sirène, Paris)  
             Carte blanche (Editions de la Sirène, Paris)  
             Escales, poème illustré par André Lhote (Editions de la Sirène,  
             Paris)
- 1921      La Noce massacrée (Visites à Maurice Barrès) (Editions de la  
             Sirène, Paris)
- 1922      Le Secret professionnel (Stock, Paris)  
             Vocabulaire (Editions de la Sirène, Paris)
- 1923      Le Grand Ecart (Stock, Paris)  
             Plain-Chant (Stock, Paris)  
             La Rose de François (François Bernouard, Paris)  
             Thomas l'Imposteur (N.R.F., Paris)
- 1924      Dessins (Stock, Paris)  
             Férat (Editions de Valori Plastici, Rome)  
             Picasso (Stock, Paris)  
             Poésie 1916-1923/Discours du grand sommeil (N.R.F., Paris)

- 1925 Le Mystère de Jean l'Oiseleur (Edouard Champion, Paris)  
Cri écrit (Imprimerie de Montane, Montpellier)  
Prière mutilée (Editions des Cahiers Libres, Paris)  
L'Ange Heurtebise, poème avec une photographie de l'Ange par Man Ray (Stock, Paris)
- 1926 Le Rappel à l'Ordre/D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie/Autour de Thomas l'Imposteur (Stock, Paris)  
Maison de santé (Brian-Robert, Paris)  
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- 1927 Opéra 1925-1927 (Stock, Paris)  
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- 1928 Le Mystère laïc, essai illustré par Giorgio de Chirico (Editions des Quatre Chemins, Paris)  
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- 1929 Les Enfants terribles (Grasset, Paris)  
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- 1930 Opium (Stock, Paris)
- 1932 Essai de critique indirecte (Grasset, Paris)  
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- 1933 Le Fantôme de Marseille (N.R.F., Paris)
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- 1975 Jean Cocteau poète graphique, choix et présentation par Pierre Chanel, préface par André Fraigneau (Chêne/Stock, Paris)

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- Journal sous l'Occupation (March 1942 to April 1945)  
Le Passé défini, journal (1951 to 1963)

Cocteau's theatrical works were generally, though not always, published after their production on stage. For this reason I have preferred to list them separately below. The date shown on the left in each case is the date of publication.

- 1911 Le Dieu bleu, ballet by Cocteau and Frédéric de Madrazo. Music by Reynaldo Hahn, choreography by Michel Fokine, décor and costumes by Léon Bakst. Produced at the Châtelet on 13 May, 1912 (Heugel, Paris)
- 1919 Parade, ballet réaliste. Music by Erik Satie, choreography by Léonide Massine, décor by Pablo Picasso. Produced at the Châtelet on 18 May, 1917 (Rouart-Lerolle, Paris)
- 1920 Le Boeuf sur le Toit ou The Nothing Doing Bar, farce. Music by Darius Milhaud, décor by Raoul Dufy, costumes by Guy-Pierre Fauconnet. Produced at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées on 21 February, 1920 and at the Coliseum, London on 12 July, 1920 (La Sirène musicale, Paris)



- 1924 Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, spectacle. Music by Les Six, excepting Louis Durey, choreography by Jean Borlin, décor by Irène Lagut, costumes and masks by Jean Hugo, produced at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 18 June, 1921. With a portrait of the author by Jean Hugo. (Editions de la N.R.F. collection Une Oeuvre un Portrait, Paris)
- Le Train bleu, opérette dansée. Music by Darius Milhaud, choreography by Bronislava Nijinska, curtain by Pablo Picasso, décor by Henri Laurens, costumes by Gabrielle Chanel. Produced at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 20 June, 1924 (Heugel, Paris)
- 1926 Roméo et Juliette, prétexte à mise en scène en 5 actes et 23 tableaux d'après Shakespeare. Décor and costumes by Jean Hugo, production by Jean Cocteau, music arranged and orchestrated from popular English airs by Roger Désormières. Produced at the Théâtre de la Cigale on 2 June, 1924 (Au Sans Pareil, Paris)
- 1927 Orphée, tragédie en un acte et un intervalle. Décor by Jean Hugo, dresses by Gabrielle Chanel, produced by Georges Pitoëff at the Théâtre des Arts on 17 June, 1926 (Stock, Paris)
- Le Pauvre Matelot, complainte en 3 actes. Music by Darius Milhaud. Produced at the Opéra Comique on 16 December, 1927 (Heugel, Paris)
- 1928 Oedipe-Roi, Roméo et Juliette. Frontispieces by the author. (Plon, collection Le Roseau d'or, Paris)
- Antigone, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel. Antigone after Sophocles. Music by Arthur Honegger, décors by Pablo Picasso, costumes by Gabrielle Chanel. Produced by Charles Dullin at the Théâtre de l'Atelier on 20 December, 1922 (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1930 La Voix humaine, pièce en un acte. Décor by Christian Bérard, production by Jean Cocteau at the Comédie Française on 17 February, 1930 with Berthe Bovy in the main role. With a drawing by Christian Bérard. (Stock, Paris)
- 1934 La Machine infernale, pièce on 4 actes. Décor and costumes by Christian Bérard. Produced by Louis Jouvet at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées on 10 April, 1934 (Grasset, Paris)
- 1937 Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, pièce on 3 actes. Costumes by Gabrielle Chanel, décors and production by Cocteau. Produced at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre on 14 October, 1937 (Gallimard, Paris)



- 1938 Les Parents terribles, pièce en 3 actes. Décors by Guillaume Monin. Produced by Alice Cocéa at the Théâtre des Ambassadeurs on 14 November, 1938 (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1940 Les Monstres sacrés, portrait d'une pièce en 3 actes. Décors by Christian Bérard. Produced by André Brulé at the Théâtre Michel on 17 February, 1940 (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1941 La Machine à écrire, pièce en 3 actes. Décors by Jean Marais. Produced by Raymond Rouleau at the Théâtre Hébertot on 29 April, 1941 (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1943 Renaud et Armide, tragédie en 3 actes en vers. Décors and costumes by Christian Bérard, production by Jean Cocteau at the Comédie-Française on 13 April, 1943. Illustrations by Jean Cocteau. (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1946 L'Aigle à deux têtes, pièce en 3 actes. Décors by André Beaupaire, dresses by Christian Bérard, royal anthem by Georges Auric, production by Jean Cocteau at the Théâtre Hébertot on 20 December, 1946 (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1948 Théâtre Tome I  
Antigone, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, Les Parents terribles. (Gallimard, Paris)  
Théâtre Tome II  
Les Monstres sacrés, La Machine à écrire, Renaud et Armide, L'Aigle à deux têtes. (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1949 Théâtre de poche  
Parade, Le Boeuf sur le Toit, Le Pauvre Matelot, L'Ecole des veuves, Le Bel indifférent, Anna la bonne, La Dame de Monte-Carlo, Le Fils de l'air, Chansons et Monologues. With 14 drawings by the author. (Morihién, Paris)  
Un Tramway nommé Désir de Tennessee Williams. Adapted by Jean Cocteau from a translation into French by Paule de Beaumont. Produced at the Théâtre Edouard VII on 17 October, 1949. Cover and lithographs by Jean Cocteau. (Bordas, Paris)
- 1952 Bacchus, pièce en 3 actes. Décor, costumes and production by Jean Cocteau. Produced at the Théâtre Marigny by the Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault Company on 20 December, 1951. (Gallimard, Paris)

- 1957 Théâtre Tome I - Colour illustrations by the author. (Grasset, Paris)
- Théâtre Tome II - Colour illustrations by the author. Partly original edition containing L'Epouse injustement soupçonnée adapted from an Annamese drama in the Book of Legends, Oedipus-Rex, Le Jeune Homme et la Mort, La Dame à la licorne. (Grasset, Paris)

B. Periodical articles by Jean Cocteau

- 1949 La Poésie au cinématographe in L'Amour de l'Art Nos. 37-39
- 1952 Cocteau on the Film in Sight and Sound Vol. 22 No. 1
- 1963 Sur "Le Sang des Bêtes" in Cahiers du Cinéma No. 149
- 1964 The Art of Fiction - an interview in The Paris Review No. 32
- 1965 Préface du Cinéma Maudit in Cahiers du Cinéma Nos. 161-162

C. Filmography - Films written and directed by Cocteau

- 1925 Jean Cocteau fait du cinéma (16mm) This is the film which disappeared mysteriously when it had been completed. It is presumed to have been lost.
- 1930 Le Sang d'un Poète
- 1946 La Belle et la Bête
- 1947 L'Aigle à deux têtes
- 1948 Les Parents terribles
- 1950 Orphée  
Coriolan (16mm)
- 1952 La Villa Santo-Sospir (16mm)
- 1960 Le Testament d'Orphée ou Ne me demandez pas pourquoi

Films based upon Cocteau's works

- 1943 L'Eternel retour directed by Jean Delannoy, story and dialogue by Jean Cocteau who also supervised the production of the film.
- 1947 Ruy Blas directed by Pierre Billon, story and dialogue by Jean Cocteau adapted from Victor Hugo's drama of the same name.
- 1948 La Voix humaine directed by Roberto Rossellini.



- 1950 Les Enfants terribles directed by Jean-Pierre Melville.
- 1957 Le Bel indifférent directed by Jacques Demy.
- 1959 Saint-Blaise-des-Simples directed by Philippe Joulia from a script by Jean-Jacques Kihm.
- 1963 Anna la bonne directed by Claude Jutra.
- 1965 Thomas l'Imposteur directed by Georges Franju.
- 1970 La Voix humaine directed by Dominique Delouche, this film is Francis Poulenc's opera of Cocteau's play.

Films in which Cocteau collaborated

- 1940 La Comédie du bonheur directed by Marcel Lherbier. Cocteau was dialogue supervisor on this film which Lherbier adapted from the play by Nicolas Evreïnov.
- 1942 Le Baron fantôme directed by Serge de Poligny. Cocteau wrote the dialogue for this film as well as playing the part of the baron's ghost.
- 1945 Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne directed by Robert Bresson. Cocteau wrote the dialogue for this adaptation by Bresson of an episode in Diderot's Jacques le fataliste.
- 1948 Les Noces de sable directed by André Zwoboda. Cocteau wrote and spoke the commentary for this film.
- 1948 La Légende de Sainte Ursule directed by Luciano Emmer. Cocteau wrote and spoke the commentary for the French version of this film.
- 1950 Ce siècle à cinquante ans directed by Denise Tual on a theme and commentaries by Jean Masson. Cocteau wrote the "scène dramatique" which deals with the year 1914.
- 1952 La Couronne noire directed by Luis Saslavski. Cocteau wrote the original script for the film which Michel Mihura adapted.
- 1961 La Princesse de Clèves directed by Jean Delannoy. Cocteau wrote the adaptation and dialogue from the novel by Mme de La Fayette.

Short films for which Cocteau spoke the commentary

- 1946 L'Amitié noire directed by François Villiers and G. Krull.

- 1949 Tennis directed by Marcel Martin.
- 1950 Venise et ses amants directed by Luciano Emmer and Enrico Gras.
- 1953 Le Rouge est mis directed by Igor Barrère and Hubert Knapp.
- 1956 A l'Aube d'un monde directed by René Lucot.

Films for which Cocteau wrote forewords or commentaries

- 1951 Le Rossignol de l'empereur de Chine, a puppet film by Jiri Trinka for which Cocteau wrote the French commentary.
- 1952 La Porte de l'enfer directed by Teinosuke Kinugusa. Cocteau wrote the foreword for the French version.
- 1956 Pantomimes directed by Paul Paviot. Cocteau wrote the foreword.
- 1958 Django Reinhardt by Paul Paviot. Cocteau wrote the foreword.

Feature films in which Cocteau appeared

- 1943 La Malibran by Sacha Guitry.
- 1952 8 X 8 by Hans Richter.
- 1954 Une mélodie, quatre peintres by Herbert Seggelke.

Short films in which Cocteau appeared

- 1950 Colette by Yannick Bellon.
- 1951 Désordre by Jacques Baratier.
- 1958 Le Musée Grévin by Jacques Demy and Jean Masson.

D. Major biographies

Year of publication shown on left.

- 1955 CROSLAND, Margaret  
Jean Cocteau (Peter Nevill, London)
- 1957 FRAIGNEAU, André  
Cocteau par lui-même (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1960 KIHM, Jean Jacques  
Cocteau (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1960 LANNES, Roger  
Jean Cocteau (Seghers, Paris)



- 1964 GILSON, René  
Jean Cocteau (Seghers, Paris)
- 1965 MOURGUE, Gérard  
Cocteau (Classiques du XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle, Paris)
- 1968 SPRIGGE, Elizabeth and KIHM, Jean-Jacques  
Jean Cocteau : The Man and the Mirror (Gollancz, London)
- 1968/ BROWN, Frederick  
1969 An Impersonation of Angels : A Biography of Jean Cocteau  
(Longmans, London)
- 1970 BROSSE, Jacques  
Cocteau (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1970 PHELPS, Robert  
Professional Secrets : An Autobiography of Jean Cocteau  
(Vision, London)
- 1970 STEEGMULLER, Francis  
Cocteau : A Biography (Macmillan, London)

E. Secondary literature

The following list is selective.

- 1948 ACTON, Harold  
Memoirs of an Aesthete (Methuen, London)
- 1950 MYERS, Rollo H.  
Erik Satie (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1952 MILLECAM, Jean-Pierre  
L'Etoile de Jean Cocteau (Editions du Rocher, Monaco)
- 1953 MAURIAC, Claude  
Jean Cocteau ou la vérité du mensonge (Lieutier, Paris)
- SERT, Misia  
Misia and the Muses : The Memoirs of Misia Sert (John Day,  
New York)
- JACOB, Max  
Lettres à Jean Cocteau (1919-1944) (Morihién, Paris)
- 1956 DAUVEN, Jean  
Jean Cocteau chez les Sirènes (Editions du Rocher, Monaco)
- 1957 MARAIS, Jean  
Mes quatre vérités (Paris)

- 1958 SIMON, Karl Günter  
Jean Cocteau : oder die Poesie im Film (Rembrandt-Verlag, Berlin)
- STRAVINSKY, Igor  
An Autobiography (Steuer, New York)
- 1959 AGEL, Henri  
Jean Cocteau in Les grands cinéastes (Editions Universitaires, Paris)
- MEUNIER, Micheline  
Méditerranée ou les deux visages de Jean Cocteau (Debresse)
- 1960 VLAD, Roman  
Stravinsky (Oxford University Press)
- 1961 SALMON, André  
Souvenirs sans fin (Gallimard, Paris)
- 1963 POULENC, Francis  
Moi et mes amis (La Palatine, Paris-Geneva)
- RAY, Man  
Self-portrait (Atlantic-Little Brown, Boston)
- STRAVINSKY, Igor and CRAFT, Robert  
Dialogues and a Diary (Faber, London)
- 1964 MEUNIER, Micheline  
Présence de Jean Cocteau (Vitte, Lyons)
- 1965 GOUDEKET, Maurice  
La Douceur de vieillir (Flammarion, Paris)
- 1966 BARDECHE, Maurice and BRASILLACH, Robert  
Histoire du cinéma (Livre de Poche, Paris)
- 1969 RICHARDSON, Robert  
Literature and Film (Indiana University Press)
- 1970 CHANEL, Pierre  
Album Cocteau (Tchou, Paris)
- MAURIAC, Claude  
Une Amitié contrariée (Grasset, Paris)
- 1974 FIFIELD, William  
Jean Cocteau (Columbia University Press)



F. Periodical articles

- 1919 GIDE, André  
La Nouvelle Parade de Jean Cocteau in Ecrits Nouveaux (October, 1919)
- 1920 MARNOLD, J.  
M. Cocteau et la musique in Mercure de France (1 May, 1920)
- 1923 POURRAT, Henri  
Jean Cocteau in La Vie (1 August, 1923)
- 1926 RIMBAULT, P.  
Deux prédestinés : Jean Cocteau et Jacques Rivière in Revue catholique d'Alsace (August, 1926)
- 1929 THOMAS, Richard  
Vie et oeuvre de Jean Cocteau in Tambour No. 4
- 1939 RAGEOT, Gaston  
Le Triomphe de la technique : Rostand, Feydeau, Cocteau in Revue bleue 33-35
- 1943 BRISSON, Pierre  
Jean Cocteau au théâtre in Formes et Couleurs No. 2
- TAVERNIER, René  
Blaise Cendrars et Jean Cocteau in Confluences No. 21
- 1944 DELETANG-TARDIF, Yvette  
Jean Cocteau ou la vérité de l'âme in Profil Littéraire de la France Nos. 16-18
- ROY, Claude  
Jean Cocteau ou vingt ans en 1913 in Confluences No. 28
- 1947 DESCAVES, Pierre  
Jean Cocteau, l'ensorceleur in Erasme No. 15
- 1948 MAULNIER, Thierry  
Description de Jean Cocteau par lui-même in Hommes et Mondes (May, 1948)
- MAURIAC, Claude  
Cocteau et Jouhandeau en quête d'eux-mêmes in Table Ronde (January, 1948)
- 1949 HOOG, Armand  
Pour Cocteau in La Nef No. 52

- 1950 KOVAL, Francis  
An Interview with Cocteau in Sight and Sound No. 6 Volume 19  
 (August, 1950)
- LAMBERT, Gavin  
Cocteau and Orpheus in Sequence No. 12 (Autumn, 1950)
- Various articles in  
Empreintes (May-July 1950) the whole issue being devoted to Jean  
 Cocteau
- 1951 MINCHINGTON, John and LAMBERT, Gavin  
 Letter on Lambert's article in Sequence No. 12 (above) and  
 Lambert's reply to Minchington in Sequence No. 13 (Spring, 1951)
- 1952 KIHM, Jean-Jacques  
Orphée et le Livre des Morts tibétain in France-Asie (November,  
 1952)
- KRUSCHE, Dieter  
Jean Cocteau und seine Filme in Filmstudien : Beiträge des  
 Filmseminars in Münster (Verlag Lechte, Emsdetten)
- 1954 DORIGO, Francesco  
Il Cinema di Cocteau in Bianco e Nero No. 2 Volume 15 (June,  
 1954)
- 1955 SICLIER, Jacques  
Jean Cocteau et le cinéma in La Sève (Brussels, December, 1955)
- 1958 GUITTON, Jean  
La Chapelle de Villefranche in Table Ronde (April, 1958)
- MAGNAN, Jean-Marie  
Paraprosodies de Jean Cocteau in Table Ronde (October, 1958)
- 1960 DOMARCHI, Jean and LAUGIER, Jean-Louis  
Entretien avec Cocteau in Cahiers du Cinéma No. 109 (July, 1960)
- 1962 GARLICK, R. J.  
Maalesh : Diary of a Poet in Annotations on Film Term 2  
 (Melbourne, 1962)
- 1963 DORIGO, Francesco  
L'Accademico antiaccademico in Rivista del Cinematografo No. 11  
 Volume 36 (November, 1963)
- DURGNAT, Raymond  
Orphée in Films and Filming No. 1 Volume 10 (October, 1963)



- 1964 DURGNAT, Raymond  
La Belle et la Bête in Films and Filming No. 9 Volume 10  
 (June, 1964)
- OXENHANDLER, Neal  
Cocteau in Film Quarterly No. 1 Volume 18 (Autumn, 1964)
- 1964/ JACOB, Gilles  
 1965 Nouvelle Vague or Jeune Cinéma? in Sight and Sound No. 1  
 Volume 34 (Winter, 1964-1965)
- 1966 MILNE, Tom  
Thomas l'Imposteur (Film) in Sight and Sound No. 2 Volume 35  
 (Spring, 1966)
- 1969 DURGNAT, Raymond  
Time and Timelessness in Films and Filming No. 10 Volume 15  
 (July, 1969)
- 1970 MUIR, Lynette R.  
Cocteau's "Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde" : A Baroque Play?  
 in Modern Language Studies (Summer, 1970)
- 1973 CHARENSOL, Georges  
Une Ame mise a nu  
 de BOISDEFFRE, Pierre  
Notes anciennes pour un portrait
- GALEY, Matthieu  
Cocteau et le théâtre
- MOURGUE, Gérard  
Un Philosophe presocratique
- ROSNAY, Jean-Pierre  
Aux bons soins des hirondelles
- STEEGMULLER, Francis  
Présence d'un génie multiforme  
 all in Dossier Nouvelles Littéraires (8th October, 1973)