

THE POESIE DE THEATRE OF JEAN COCTEAU AS A
SYNTHETIC FORM OF THEATRE ARTS

THE POESIE DE THEATRE OF JEAN COCTEAU AS A
- SYNTHETIC FORM OF THEATRE ARTS

by

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: The purpose of this paper will be to examine Jean Cocteau's principle of poésie de théâtre, as expressed in his preface to les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, and to perceive, through the chronological study of his dramatic works, the progressive modification of this principle which consistently retains its validity.

I propose: in Towards a Definition to situate Cocteau in an atmosphere which solicits a change in the form of theatre art; in Rejuvenation of the Classics by poésie de théâtre to study the techniques of conceptual presentation; in Poésie de théâtre at Maturity to show expressive formula imagery as a refinement of the original principle; in From Classical to Modern Myth to examine the import of poésie de théâtre in a contemporary theme; in Later Works to summarily discuss relevant works of lesser range; to evaluate, in the Conclusion, the importance of Cocteau's concept in the art of theatre.

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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

| | Page |
|---|------|
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| TOWARDS A DEFINITION | 6 |
| THE REJUVENATION OF THE CLASSICS BY POESIE DE THEATRE | 32 |
| POESIE DE THEATRE AT MATURITY | 52 |
| FROM CLASSICAL TO MODERN MYTH | 69 |
| LATER WORKS | 81 |
| CONCLUSION | 85 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 89 |

INTRODUCTION

The artist and poet are witnesses of the time. Whether by action or reaction they attest to the prevailing moods, social and political, of their age. More especially, and more importantly perhaps, do they reflect the latent atmosphere of change and the growing under-currents of potential revolution in ideas and their modes of expression. Jean Cocteau, both artist and poet, is undoubtedly one of the most sensitive to the dictates and expectations of the literary vanguard. As dramatist he assimilates and diffuses the similar yet disparate elements of poetry and art, so that his dramatic expression is a synthetic process of total theatre. Cocteau's 'poésie de théâtre' is a valid response to the propositions of Lugné-Poe and Gordon Craig.

This response is more often than not one of reaction rather than action. His best dramas are the result of some catalytic agent, whether one of his numerous protégés, personal misfortune, or the approval or censure of his artistic peers. Shunned by the intelligentsia of the literary left, his forte became one-upmanship anticipating the new and the revolutionary, and exploiting it to the full until the reservoirs are visibly diminished. Once the unexpected becomes conditioned stimulus and the theatrically bizarre becomes artistically quotidian, they lose their appeal. Cocteau's poetic spirit and nimble imagination are shown to best advantage when faced with opposing trends. A leader of the avant-garde in French drama for half a century, he, as much as any popular boulevard dramatist, is moulded by the contemporary, although to entirely different purposes.

Cocteau's poésie de théâtre is an heraldic expression distinguishing a particular approach to theatre. He is its exponent par excellence and an indefatigable source of its means and meanings. Before an attempt is made to analyse and understand Cocteau's perspective on theatre, it might be of value to understand the age which shaped his artistic temperament.

Cocteau's youth took full advantage of "la belle époque." From his birth in 1889 he was swept into a stimulating era of a new century which, for all intents and purposes, began with Hugo's death in 1885. Romanticism was in its death throes and Symbolism was coming into its own. The invention of mechanical and scientific devices, including electric light, contributed to an atmosphere of excitement and discovery. A period of leisure and idleness, which resulted from independent wealth, resulted in the frivolous abandon of the "haute bourgeoisie." The theatre was the most popular recreation for the restlessness of the times and theatre-going took on an air of ritual. Cocteau's earliest memories are those of his mother's perfume and velvet dress of the traditional red and gold colours, of lively adult discussions which accompanied a performance of Mounet-Sully or other "monstres sacrés," or else a Wagnerian opera. The affective memory of odours, colours and excitement were always to remain an integral part of Cocteau's conception of the theatre.

This was also the era of the music-hall, the circus and the café's-concerts. The Russian Circus came to Paris in 1905; three permanent circuses and a new hippodrome were constructed along the boulevards near Montmartre. These gave rise to the artistic transposition of the clown and the acrobat, seen in Picasso's work as early as 1900 and taken up by

Cocteau in Parade and le Boeuf sur le Toit. As a youth Cocteau was fascinated by the magical atmosphere of the Palais de Glace and the Nouveau-Cirque, and this love of exhibition, characterization and acrobatics remains an important aspect of Cocteau's dramatic work. The acrobat-comedian Barquette, who performed dressed as an elegant lady, served as the initial idea for the figure Death in Orphée.

The introduction of American Negro jazz-bands and the discovery of primitive African art objects brought back to France from the Ivory Coast witnessed a new interest in the candid expression of genuine, if brutal, sensation. This Negro culture was valued for its unsophisticated beauty, for the revelation of dormant, primitive instincts.

In the world of formal ballet and classical dance, the can-can, the untraditional, interpretative dance of Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan were iconoclastic in an art which had suffered a lengthy demise in France. Both dancers were close acquaintances of Cocteau. Bringing a surge of renewed interest in dramatic expression through rhythmic movement, these dances ushered in the success of the Ballets Russes in Paris in 1909. Diaghilew's company was the paradox of the classical cum modern repertory. Tired of studied, unnatural poses, the Russian dancers would be yet another example of a new freedom of expression which served Cocteau's purpose.

In art, Fauvism made its debut in 1905 as the immediate harbinger of Cubism, another of Cocteau's interests. Previously, the represented model in reality and its faithful translation on canvas was the criterion of excellence. Now, the personality and the emotions of the artist gained

ascendancy over rigid forms and spatial limitations. The artist was pre-occupied with combining shapes and colours in such a way that this association, through contrast or harmony, would produce a definite, suggestive effect.

Theatre, no less than the other arts, was subject to reinterpretation. Antoine's Théâtre Libre, dedicated to naturalism with realistic décor and accessories, and the exact transposition of everyday life onto the stage, was challenged by the avant-garde dramatists who questioned the degree of reality portrayed. The boulevard drama of Bataille, and Bernstein, which belaboured the psychological portrayal of bourgeois mores, was all but defunct by its poverty. Lugné-Poe's production of Maeterlinck's Pelléas et Mélisande at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre was revolutionary in its attempt to produce visual harmony in costume, colour and décor. This experiment, as early as 1892 and 1902 with Debussy's score, points the way for a new movement in theatre art, that which Cocteau is to make his own poésie de théâtre.

The meeting of Picasso and Apollinaire in 1905 fused the artistic and literary currents. Technical finesse gave way to spiritual expression, and the ancient reverence for objective reality was declining everywhere. Freed of superimposed conventionalism, the artist and poet were at liberty to translate their ideas according to subjective interpretation, without any strict and servile reference to the dicta of sensually perceived reality. Painters, writers and musicians kept in close collaboration to contain and transpose the excitement and idealism of the Esprit Nouveau.

Cocteau, always fearful of being surpassed in theatrical and literary developments, was anxious to interpret this new mood of the restless, younger generation. His particular aptitude for the adaptation and interplay of these several arts in his poésie de théâtre will remain evident throughout his entire dramatic career, albeit with certain modifications and a progressive refinement.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION

As early as 1913 in le Potomak appear the essential ideas and the primary themes which Cocteau's posterior work will develop and clarify. Poetry is not a frivolous game or pastime but a sacred activity which translates the relation of the poet and the supernatural. This presence of a divine essence which lies deep within the poetic spirit demands an intensive and relentless dedication to its development. "Le poète est le véhicule, le médium naturel de forces inconnues qui le manoeuvrent".¹ The poet is on a life-long mission to discover the unknown which is found not in the world of abstraction or of external phenomena, but within man's soul.

To translate these "forces inconnues" Cocteau, like other proponents of the Esprit Nouveau, dislocates the world of appearances in his drama, combining the dissociated elements according to a new order which rests on the power of suggestion rather than overt representation. He breaks up banal associations that rob every aspect of reality of its individual force and discloses a view of the transcendental implicit in the object. It is through this reconstruction of representational spectacle that emerges what Cocteau terms "la part de Dieu. Cette part, qui échappe au poète même, lui réserve des surprises. Telle phrase, tel geste, qui n'avaient pour lui qu'une valeur comparable à celle du volume

¹Portraits-Souvenirs, Oeuvres complètes, II, 16.

chez les peintres, contiennent un sens secret que chacun interprétera ensuite. Le véritable symbole n'est jamais prévu."² By stripping everyday images, phrases and words of their conventional connotations, an ulterior significance is bestowed upon them. "La poésie imite une réalité dont notre monde ne possède que l'intuition."³

As the poet is the vehicle for supranatural forces, so the stage is the vehicle for the poet. Cocteau's fertile and athletic imagination seizes on the pattern of symbols in gesture, action, word, music and décor to create a visible metaphor; through these sensuous appearances shines the unconscious and the poetic. In drama the mise-en-scène is the instrument, the medium through which the poet communicates with the audience: "il ne s'agit pas de vivre sur une scène, il s'agit de rendre une scène vivante. Cette vérité du théâtre, c'est la poésie du théâtre, le plus vrai que le vrai."⁴

The unexpected and inhabitual confrontation of the spectator by dissociated images is further amplified if the totality of the spectacle, its very premise, is foreign to the audience. The new and the unusual, combined with the distortion of the familiar, can have no other reaction than angry indignation. This is Cocteau's method of shocking a complacent audience into a spirit of re-examination and re-evaluation. The purpose

²Préface to the Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, Oeuvres complètes, VII, 11.

³le Mystère Laïc, Oeuvres complètes, X, 28.

⁴Opium, Oeuvres complètes, X, 75.

of scandal is to elicit a response, whether positive or negative. It is unduly emphasizing Cocteau's part in morality and didacticism on stage to believe that the purpose of his scandal is to jolt the spectator into moral awareness; he remains admittedly detached from these questions. As much as this consideration may be an important side-effect, Cocteau's primary purpose in the active implementation of novel, dramatic ideas was simply to astonish and to provoke.

Without having yet affixed a definitive label to his conception and methodology of dramatic art, Cocteau made several early attempts at this "expression plastique de la poésie."⁵ His first active collaboration was with Diaghilew and the Ballets Russes in 1910 when he undertook to compose the libretto for le Dieu Bleu, a ballet based on a Hindu legend. The choreographer, Michel Fokine, drew on his experience with Siamese dance to reintroduce the theme of the sacred on stage, which classical ballet had neglected in favour of the romantic. Le Dieu Bleu was an eminently forgettable work because of Reynaldo Hahn's inept orchestration and the overly exotic theme. Cocteau's argument lacks the imagination and colour that he will acquire in the coming years. What is of value in the ballet is the theme of the religious transposed to modern idiom. The importance of gesture, judiciously used to evoke the potential power of the sacred, and of décor are indications of the future elaboration

⁵ Préface to the Maries de la Tour Eiffel, Oeuvres complètes, VII, 17.

which will constitute Cocteau's poésie de théâtre. "Avec des Serge de Diaghelew, des Rolf de Maré, nous voyons peu à peu naître en France un genre théâtral qui n'est pas le ballet proprement dit... C'est là, en marge, que s'ébauche l'avenir... Ce genre nouveau, plus conforme à l'esprit modern, reste encore un monde inconnu, riche en découvertes."⁶

The presentation of Parade in May of 1917 is an important step in the development of Cocteau's poetic approach to the theatre. Cocteau calls it a "ballet réaliste", a ballet by definition being composed of movement, music and design. It was his controlling hand that attempted to bring about the ideal synthesis of these three elements. Cocteau had originally envisaged the project in 1914 as a ballet entitled David, involving acrobats, a clown and a circus, but, as he later admitted, unnecessarily encumbered with scriptural quotations and a text. He had intended to design this ballet himself, using Cubist paintings by Gleizes as his models, and had urged Diaghelew to commission the score from his recently discovered favorite composer, Stravinsky. This project, however, was turned down by both.

Cocteau, still mindful of Diaghelew's challenge "Etonne-moi" after his mediocre performance of le Dieu Bleu, was anxious for recognition and approval. The Russian company found it necessary to re-form after the loss of many pre-war talents, and Leonid Massine brought the fresh young talent which had disappeared with Nijinsky. Vaslav Nijinsky had offered ruthless new dance techniques against the elaborate stage settings of the Ballets

⁶Ibid., p. 16.

Russes in 1912 and 1913. Petrouchka, "scènes burlesques en quatre tableaux", by Stravinsky in 1911, provided the first influence on Parade. Breaking with the romantic insistence on the sublime, this work repudiates beauty in favour of the common, the banal, even the ugly. The atmosphere of the circus is more healthy because less corrupted by secular vices Parade takes up this theme.

Le Sacre du Printemps was also a notable precedent. The unaccustomed rhythmic and primitive orchestration, minus the stringed instruments, combined with variations of Russian folk-songs caused immediate consternation which was only aggravated by the scenic and choreographic innovations.

Thus by 1916 the foundation had been laid for Cocteau's first scandal. Picasso, whom he had met the year before, was intrigued by Cocteau's ideas and desired to return to artistic expression in the theatre after several years of intensive work formulating the new cubist ethic. Satie had been chosen as the likeliest composer after having inspired Cocteau with his piano duet Morceaux en forme de Poire. Satie's unorthodox sincerity, his brevity, gaiety and unromantic melancholy, free of the enervating charms of the "faux sublime" of Wagner, formed a perfect counterpart to the geometrical and suggestive schemes of cubist representation. Massine contributed the technical realisation of new dance forms following the "indications plastiques" of Cocteau.

Cocteau's idea for the ballet was simple: in front of a fair-booth, on some Parisian boulevard, a group of performers -- an acrobat, a Chinese conjuror and a little American girl -- go through the routine of

performing extracts from their repertory in order to entice the public to enter and see the spectacle inside. Eventually a second acrobat was added, along with three Managers. There was nothing revolutionary about the subject of the scenario, which was basically a blend of Petrouchka and David, and although it was innovative to take a scene of popular life for the subject of a ballet, the real scandal came with the representation itself, Cocteau's attempt to "obtenir l'échange complet entre les personnages et le décor, joindre à l'activité d'un maître celle d'un sous-ordre."⁷

Picasso was instrumental in achieving this harmony. Cocteau admits "avant lui, le décor ne jouait pas dans la pièce; il y assistait."⁸ It is this integral function of décor which Cocteau will independently achieve in his later works. Picasso's large drop-curtain was perhaps the most successful element in the presentation. Its purpose was designed to deceive the audience by its relaxed, realistic style, so that the spectators would be all the more susceptible to the shocks that were to follow. It was a tender and romantically evocative portrayal of contentment in circus life, a crystallization of the scene in action. In a setting of landscape and ruins, six theatrical characters -- two lively harlequins, a sleepy young girl, a jovial Neopolitan sailor, a guitar-playing torero and a second girl -- attended by a Negro, are seated around a table at

⁷Picasso, Oeuvres complètes, IX, 246.

⁸Ibid.

the end of a meal. At the left, watched by the group, a winged white fairy on the back of a winged, white mare who is feeding her foal.

To be sure this decorative and enchanting portrait in a sophisticatedly naive style charms the spectator into a dream-like contemplation. This comfortable ambiance is rolled up to reveal thumping, miming, monolithic Managers, vying with each other "dans leur langage terrible" to present the acts and exhort the public to enter. Cocteau does not consider the Managers as characters, but rather as "des hommes-décor, des portraits de Picasso qui se meuvent."⁹ The costumes were ten feet high, basically having the appearance of sandwich men composed of cubes, cylinders, rectangular figures and cones parading in cumbersome liveliness. They were mobile décor, "inhumains, surhumains, qui deviendraient en somme la fausse réalité scénique,"¹⁰ reduced as characters to the level of awkward automatons. There were two human managers. The first, the French Manager, wore a massive Cubist super-structure of variegated design showing a house and trees on his back, and a moustached man in evening dress and top hat on his front. The second, the New York Manager, was attired in Wild West outfit with cowboy boots, a stove-pipe hat, red pleated shirt front, and an additional appendage of tall buildings and flagstaff. The third Manager was conceived as a dummy negro in evening dress which was carried on the back of a humanly propelled horse.

⁹La collaboration de Parade, Oeuvres complètes, IX, 52.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 51.

However, for lack of equestrian equilibrium, this dummy did not survive rehearsals, although the dancing pantomime-horse remained.

In contrast with the bulky, outlandish appearance of these "hommes-décor" the other four characters, the two acrobats, the Chinese prestidigitator and the little American girl, were reduced to the size of puppets. Where the Managers were "unreal" this group was the "real" element. In contrast to the rhythmic thumping, they mimed, with fluid and precise gestures, a succession of actions and experiences associated with the character in life: "il s'agissait de prendre une suite de gestes réels et de les métamorphoser en danse sans qu'ils perdissent leur force réaliste."¹¹

Counterbalancing the grotesque mechanical movement, the three music-hall dances showed the American girl riding a horse, bicycling, dancing a rag-time, quivering like a film-image; the Chinese conjuror pulled an egg out of his pigtail and ate it only to rediscover it in the toe of his sandal; the two acrobats performed a pas-de-deux. The "realistic" characters translated their exterior appearance into gesture and movement.

Satie's music was also ambivalent. It consisted of two elements: the more orthodox, lyrical score which accompanied the conventional representation, and the bouquet or noise orchestra which paralleled the cubist representation. The noise orchestra produced a loud, raucous cacophony accompanied by regular boulevard noises: the sounds of an airplane, a dynamo, a siren, a typewriter. These were imitated as closely as

¹¹Ibid., p. 53.

possible for technical difficulties prevented their actual reproduction. The orchestration was simple and economical with no gratuitous instrumentation. The modern score, influenced by jazz and music-hall, maintained a linear, rhythmic quality which served as the musical backdrop for the cubist noise elements. Satie's arrangement was a "musical carpet"¹² responding to the steps of the dancers.

In Parade, then, we can see a theme of the dual reality which will occupy Cocteau in his later work. "Ballet réaliste", Parade develops "la méthode picassienne du plus vrai que le vrai." Cubist realism and traditional representational realism are similar only insofar as they are expressed in a common medium, whether dance, music or art. They are radically different in approach, intent and result, and their parallel yet antagonistic development in Parade accounts for the scandal that resulted from the attempted synthesis in one stage spectacle. Parade's construction was too encyclopedic. There is a notable dose of the gratuitous and superficial which detracted from its main thesis and which Cocteau will later repudiate. Parade is his "prétexte par excellence" for artistic ostentation. The exaggerated naturalistic movement, conventional backdrop and costumes and orthodox, melodic orchestration, when coupled with clumsy beats, cubist trappings and anarchistic sound effects, failed to produce a cohesive unity of dramatic expression.

¹²P-D. Templier, Erik Satie, (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1969), p. 87.

Cocteau's enthusiasm and bravura was responsible for this first attempt to synthesize the theatrical elements, yet he still lacked the artistic maturity, that is the aesthetic judgement and technical finesse, necessary to bring about the desired harmony. He had not yet learned the truth of his own aphorism: "Le tact dans l'audace c'est de savoir jusqu'ou on peut aller trop loin."

Le Boeuf sur le Toit did not have the earnest intentions of Parade, but it is perhaps the first example of the isolation and exaggeration of an object which, even though familiar, becomes unreal through disproportion and disassociation. This farcical pantomime, produced in February, 1920, relies heavily on visual imagery. It is one of the first examples of uniquely pictorial theatre and closest to the "théâtre de montrer pur." Like Parade it was intended to startle the audience by the unusual exploitation of theatrical resources and to counteract the public's infatuation with the interminable verbiage of boulevard drama. Refreshing exercises in visual representation, they were intended to salvage the French theatre from its poverty, just as Jacques Copeau was trying to infuse new life with classics and modern works of high literary merit.

Just as Apollinaire had attributed "une sorte de sur-naturel" to Parade, an air of fantasy and mystery permeates the farcical Boeuf sur le Toit: "La poésie prédispose au surnaturel. L'atmosphère hypersensible dont elle nous enveloppe aiguise nos sens secrets et nos antennes plongent dans des profondeurs que nos sens officiels ignorent ... Attention! A qui se trouve dans cet état tout peut devenir miracle."¹³ As Henri Gouhier

¹³ le Secret Professionel, Oeuvres complètes, IX, 191.

explains in le Théâtre et l'existence, a reaction of surprise is the undoubted affirmation of the mysterious, that is of a transcendental order which intrudes into our conception of reality. The "unreal", fantasy and farce, owe their magical quality to characters and objects without existence as we know it. The element of surprise in le Boeuf sur le Toit foresees a more subtle function of these elements in Cocteau's later works.

As in Parade the characters are "du décor qui bouge." The heads are three times the natural size, and the bottles, glasses, cigarettes, which are objects of décor in the bar, are scaled to the same proportion. The dice used in a game at the bar are "véritable boîtes de carton qu'ils remuent en les faisant tourner sur l'axe." Where the movement in Parade was naturalistic gestures "magnifiés jusqu'à la danse,"¹⁴ the characters here execute unexpected acts in a slow-motion effect with a ponderous quality that belies the spirited music of Darius Milhaud. After the book-maker angrily smites the muscular negro boxer with his gigantic tie-pin, he completes a "petite danse de triomphe" while the ladies dance to a tango. The elegant lady hoists a dwarf onto her shoulders and carries him off to the billiard room. A policeman enters and influenced by the alcoholic atmosphere, begins a graceful ballet in the middle of which he is decapitated by a descending ventilator. He gropes about for his head and falls dead as he tries to replace it upside-down, only to subsequently ease himself into a chair as the barman moves his body. The second lady, with bright-red paper hair has previously made her exit walking on her hands.

¹⁴ la Jeunesse et le scandale, Oeuvres complètes, IX, 323.

In this light-hearted pantomime, Cocteau, aided by the Fratellini clowns, instruments the constant eruption of the unforeseen. The juxtaposition of incongruous elements (the disproportion of the décor), of unexpected demonstrations of power and balance, and of supernatural developments (the self-determination of a common ventilator, the actions of a dead body) all combine to show Cocteau's increasing interest in the fantastic as an expression of the real. "L'irréel est la formule extrême de l'anti-réalisme et, donc, dans la mesure où le réalisme pêche contre l'essence du théâtre, féerie et farce, qui vivent de l'irréel, apparaîtront comme ce qu'il y a de plus essentiellement théâtral dans le théâtre."¹⁵ Through visual and cognizable appearance Cocteau has stripped the familiar of its recognizable appearance and is about to endow it with a visual and verbal essence.

* * *

Cocteau's preface to les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel has been defined as his manifesto. It elucidates the function of the poet as medium in translating the esoteric signs of unknown forces which beset the poetic mind into a representational form presented to the audience. The poet's imagination, then, functions as a filter through which the mysterious and the transcendental pass to become a perceptible distillation of the poetic. "Les gens exigent qu'on leur explique la poésie. Ils ignorent que la poésie est un monde fermé où l'on reçoit très peu et où il arrive qu'on

¹⁵Henri Gouhier, le Théâtre et l'existence, (Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1952), p. 108.

ne reçoive pas du tout."¹⁶ The poet is the selected medium responsible for communication between the empirical and the eternal, and Cocteau's theatre is an eclectic and personal transcription of ulterior reality which is truth.

Cocteau reproaches the public for its obsession with rationality and logic: "Le public veut comprendre d'abord, sentir ensuite."¹⁷ It has lost the spontaneous emotional reactions and unsophisticated distinctions which are the property of childhood. In Parade and le Boeuf sur le Toit the spectators resented the lack of plot and intrigue; they were unable to experience a theatrical spectacle through an immediate collaboration of the senses and as a gratuitous provocation of perception. "Toute oeuvre vivante comporte sa propre parade. Cette parade seule est vue par ceux qui n'entrent pas. Or, la surface d'une oeuvre nouvelle heurte, intrigue, agace trop le spectateur pour qu'il entre. Il est détourné de l'âme par le visage."¹⁸ The public is uncomfortable when presented with an unknown quantity, something it does not immediately recognize as familiar.

In les Mariés, then, Cocteau attempts to translate the mysterious quality inherent in everyday objects. Just as he admired in Erik Satie the poetic quality of "la musique de tous les jours", he will develop a "poésie de tous les jours." "Le poète doit sortir objets et sentiments

¹⁶ le Mystère Laic, Oeuvres complètes, X, 20.

¹⁷ le Coq et l'arlequin, Oeuvres complètes, IX, 36.

¹⁸ Préface to les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, Oeuvres complètes, VII, 14.

de leurs voiles et de leurs brumes, les montrer soudain, si nus et si vite, que l'homme a peine à les reconnaître. Ils le frappent alors avec leur jeunesse, comme s'ils n'étaient jamais devenus des vieillards officiels."¹⁹

While the visual imagery of le Boeuf sur le Toit was striking because of its proportion and position, that of les Mariés provokes the sensibility by its very presence.

What better way to examine the familiar than to choose as a theme a platitudinous bourgeois wedding party assembled on the Eiffel Tower for photographs. Whereas Parade and le Boeuf sur le Toit were without text, the dialogue here is transmitted by two actors costumed as phonographs; they also comment on the action and are the first examples of the chorus which is prevalent in Cocteau's theatre. The author, however, had originally conceived the idea for the ballet David ten years previously. The resultant dissociation of speech and action abolishes the conventional empathy between audience and actor so that the spectator's attention is focused on scenic developments: "L'action de ma pièce est imagée tandis que le texte ne l'est pas."²⁰

The play revolves around a pun on the word "cliché" meaning both photograph and banality. The first scene shows an ostrich striding across stage followed by a hunter who, in attempting to shoot it, fires a telegram announcing the arrival of the wedding party. The ostrich is the incarnation of the photographer's counsel "Un oiseau va sortir." The

¹⁹ Préface to les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, Oeuvres complètes, VII, 12.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

camera, however, is not in proper working order, and throughout the play odd figures emerge. Once an object no longer assumes its particular function, its empirical references are also altered. Cocteau strips the catch-phrase of its triteness and exaggerates the literal meaning to elevate it to the status of essence.

The wedding party is ushered in to Milhaud's wedding march, each guest described in worn epithets ("La mariée, douce comme un agneau. Le beau-père, riche comme Crésus"). The public is directly invited to identify when the party sits down "d'un seul côté de la table pour être vue du public". The general mimes a speech in the direction of the orchestra which accompanies him with a imitative composition by Francis Poulenc. Here the orchestra, generally relegated to an intangible presence in the form of background music for action, is invited to participate in a theatrical transposition of sensual perception, a "construction de l'esprit."²¹

As the general reminisces about his experience with mirage in his African adventures, a girl on a bicycle appears to ask directions to Chatou. The general tells her to "suivre les rails du tramway" "car il vient de la reconnaître pour un mirage." The suggestion, then, results in the materialization of the mental phenomenon, and the spatial dislocation ("Cette cycliste pédale en réalité sur la route de Chatou") combined with the incarnation of fantasy is one of Cocteau's favorite examples of

²¹Préface to les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, Oeuvres complètes, VII, 14.

"poésie pure." "Avant la T.S.F., qui fait (de la Tour) une scène de revue, la scène de la cycliste des Mariés était un exemple de poésie pure. C'est dire combien cette pureté poétique est fragile. Un rien la fausse. Il est rare qu'une oeuvre gratuite le reste et ne se charge pas de sens."²²

As the photographer attempts to photograph the party, a beach-clad bather from Trouville emerges from the camera and greets the party and the audience to a light hearted composition again by Poulenc.

The next click of the shutter produces a child, "le portrait de la noce." The preservative function of the camera absurdly dons the regenerative function of the marriage, yet the child is a "portrait" rather than a snapshot, a spiritual representation rather than a scientific reproduction ("Cet enfant est le portrait de la noce -- C'est le portrait de sa mère"). A trite discussion follows concerning the child's family resemblance and future social status, complete with verbal equivocation and irony ("Il sera capitaine ... poète ... président de la République -- C'est un beau petit mort pour la prochaine guerre"). The child is still potentiality in that it is an idea, a vision of the world. In this kind of repartée, the assimilation of both dialogue and commentary into one source, the human phonographs, lends a peculiar and heightened contrast to the the text. The verbal duality of appearance and reality acts as an escort for the visual ambivalence.

²²le Mystère laic, Oeuvres complètes, X, 23.

Immediately the child has grown to maturity and stones the wedding party in rebellion: "Il veut vivre sa vie." The image of an energetic youth revolting against established tradition, dear to Cocteau's heart, is translated musically into a fugue by Milhaud. Artistic and social progression from period to period moves in the same direction but on a different plane. The visible condensation of time on stage is a poetic distillation, a theatrical analogue of the universal theme of regeneration. This idea occurs again: the lion (another product of the malfunctioning camera devours the general and re-enters the camera to Honneger's funeral march. At the end of the play the general reappears. This theme of arbitrary generation and regeneration is accompanied by a superficial glimpse of death which will find fulfilment in Orphée, the lens of the camera becoming the mirror, gateway to the beyond. The general "revient de loin. Il racontera qu'il revient d'une mission sur laquelle il doit garder le silence." His pale, haggard appearance, evidence of his contact with the supernatural, will echo in Orphée's mutilation, but the verbal caesthenics such as "il revient de loin" lose gratuitous humor to become a more refined process of metaphorical imagery.

The arrival of letters of congratulation, delivered by air, is announced by sound imagery and a visual organization of the written text:

"On

entendrait

voler

une

mouche." The personification of the letters

is intensified by an image of chaotic struggle. They dance their messages to a waltz by Germaine Tailleferre and exit.

The ostrich returns and confirms an adage by putting a hat over his head and becoming invisible to the pursuing hunter. The thought of invisibility is actualised into sensual reality. To the delight of the photographer, the ostrich disappears definitively into the camera, and the cliché "un oiseau va sortir" recovers its relevance.

An art dealer and a collector appear to examine the gathering as a work of art. The dealer, like the poet, interprets this seemingly banal event in all its possibilities: "On dirait un primitif ... C'est une des dernières choses de Dieu," the commonplace which betrays endless signs of the infinite to the receptive eye. The quotidian to the public becomes the excitingly novel to the poet. The art collector, like the audience, judges the work "les yeux fermés", impervious to its intrinsic value. He is interested only in the source and the signature, the material and concrete attributes which obscure the true appreciation of a work's spirit, for the transcendental, by definition, does not fall within the realm of the senses. Perception must be used only as a means of interpretation.

As the photographer counts down for the wedding photograph, the party disappears in pairs into the camera to a reprise of the wedding march. The methodical and scientific transposition of the experience bestows it with the banality of a bourgeois wedding on the Eiffel Tower on the fourteenth of July: the commonest of occurrences at the commonest place at the commonest time. The photographer has preserved only the appearance. The crystallization of an action robs it of ideas and feelings which are translated through signs, words and gestures. By materializing

the transcendental, by prolonging the instantaneous and by divesting habit of the habitual, les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel acquires this "aspect terrible d'une goutte de poésie au microscope."

The unexpected developments are analogous to "la part de Dieu" which emerges unsolicited from a poet's work: "Cette part, qui échappe au poète même, lui réserve des surprises ... Le véritable symbole n'est jamais prévu. Il se dégage tout seul, pour peu que le bizarre, l'irréel n'entrent pas en ligne de compte."²³ The poet can only say, like the photographer, "Puisque ces mystères me dépassent, feignons d'en être l'organisateur." By "pretending" to organize the unknown the poet is implicitly lying, yet it is only by establishing some arbitrary order of things that, by natural resistance, the truth will reveal itself.

"Une pièce de théâtre devrait être écrite, décorée, costumée, accompagnée de musique, jouée, dansée par un seul homme. Cet athlète complet n'existe pas. Il importe donc de remplacer l'individu par ce qui ressemble le plus à un individu; un groupe amical."²⁴ With the Ballets Suédois, les Six, Jean-Victor Hugo and a receptive audience Cocteau succeeded in a project of stage-synthesis where auditory, visual and cognitive stimuli are coordinated into a cohesive, theatrical whole.

In Parade and le Boeuf sur le Toit auditory imagery was the sole property of the musical accompaniment. With no written text, the orchestra

²³ le Mystère laïc, Oeuvres complètes, X, 23.

²⁴ Préface to les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, Oeuvres complètes, VII, 11.

assumed the function of expressing irony, sarcasm and mockery. The noise effects in Parade were mistakenly interpreted as the score, obscuring the appreciation of Satie's arrangements. What was intended to be complementary and initiatic was construed as the principal interest, just as the "parade" was construed as the main spectacle. Milhaud's jazz arrangements for le Boeuf sur le Toit set the tone for a bar atmosphere, and his South American tango variations translate the unfamiliar and enchanting quality of the fantastic. In les Mariés the introduction of a text assimilates some of the auditory imagery. The mocking quality of Honneger's funeral march, intended to ridicule the public's obsession with the lofty and sublime, is complemented by the ironic tone of the phonographs' commentary on the action. Textual expression, however, is limited to monotonous verbal recitation, reminiscent of the foot-stamping Managers in Parade. Range, tone and inflexion of auditory imagery is still expressed by orchestral means.

Visual imagery in Parade and le Boeuf sur le Toit is acquired through the exploitation of exaggeration and contrast. Choreographic and scenic elements provoke rather than stimulate the senses. Contrasts between the size of the Managers and the four performers, between the cubist collage costumes and realistic costumes, between slow-motion action and brisk musical background all demand an immediate sensual reaction. In les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel gesture is modified by the additional dimension of verbal imagery, and where action was an extension of the décor it has become an autonomous manifestation of the text.

Roméo et Juliette was Cocteau's first play in which there is a speech-gesture unity, yet the text is almost incidental. This play, written in 1918 and along with Parade and le Boeuf sur le Toit was a "prétexte à mise en scène" intended to "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."²⁵ Cocteau performed a "surgical" operation, paring plot and dialogue to their minimum in order to show choreographic and scenic elements to full advantage. As he stripped conventional objects and phrases of the husk of habit in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, he rid the classics of staleness engendered by familiarity: "je voulais opérer un drame de Shakespeare, trouver l'os sous les ornements. J'ai donc choisi le drame le plus orné, le plus enrubanné." He re-created a poetic atmosphere by counterbalancing the distillation of dialogue with production elements: red footlights, like the variegated lighting effects in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, immediately focus attention on a dramatic transposition of reality, yet keep the audience at a theatrical remove. The black backdrop, the all black costumes with white trimming on millinery, bodices and tunics give the impression of moving silhouettes on stage. Cocteau's Capulets and Montaigus have absolutely no psychological depth as dramatic characters, but are rather, as in Parade and le Boeuf sur le Toit,

²⁵ Antigone, Théâtre (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 37.

extensions of stage setting: "Le noir me servait ... à changer, remuer, machiner les perspectives."²⁶ Mobile stage sets allowed the immediate transition between scenes without dropping the curtain. As well as endowing the dramatic action with the continuity necessary to choreographic fluidity, the simultaneous transition of scenes gave the added effect of a mysterious, inexorable and self-determined destiny which besets the action. Cocteau's stage directions in the passive voice indicate the desired effect of an autonomous force. The gestures of the characters are an inseparable aspect of this mobility of décor. Choreography, rather than dialogue, is the main vehicle of dramatic action, and like the dance of the bather and of the telegrams in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel serves to show an action in which words are insufficient and restrictive: "Tous les jeunes gens élégants de Vérone auront une certaine démarche agressive, la main sur la garde de l'épée. Roméo seul ne suit pas cette mode et marche comme endormi." Visual contrast immediately isolates Roméo. The movements were rehearsed to music which was absent during the performance, giving a precise and rhythmic quality to the physical translation of dramatic development. Capulet's simple-minded servant exits "courant au ralenti" after having informed Roméo of the masked ball. The first encounter of Roméo and Juliette is the more effective as Juliette enters the stage backwards and, not noticing him until face to face, hurries to the opposite side. A symbolic pas-de-deux is performed between the two lovers

²⁶ Le Foyer des Artistes, Oeuvres complètes, XI, 393.

who are destined to be intimately united yet forever separated. When she learns that Roméo is a Montaigu, Juliette's only reaction is to drop her necklace. At the beginning of Act V it is the characters that are on stage when the scenery makes its entrance. Romeo walks on the spot while Balthazar, at the opposite side of the stage, runs on the spot; the druggist's booth is carried on stage and placed between the two, whereupon Balthazar, in two "real" leaps arrives to tell Roméo of Juliette's death. The stage-hands who transported the scenery support Roméo in his anguish, intensifying the illusion of reality and enactment, of décor and character. The extraordinary concision of Cocteau's version of the suicides is intensified by pantomime, as Roméo swallows the poison and Juliette stabs herself with his dagger.

One of the oldest forms of dramatic portrayal, the Idea magnified and abstracted into physical gesture, is given the quality of a magical charm by Cocteau; an indispensable balance and harmony of movements "si bien réglés que la moindre faute violait l'action et la faisait tourner de travers"²⁷ is the choreographic harbinger of Orphée's total poetic atmosphere. As spatial imagery, the arbitrary appearance of streets and characters, heightened the feeling of speed and unity, so temporal imagery condenses the dramatic action. After Juliette takes the sleep-inducing drug a long, black length of material is carried across stage and the window of the bedroom changes from a star-studded sky to a sunlit morning.

²⁷Dedicace to Roméo et Juliette, Oeuvres complètes, VI, 11,

This same effect occurs after the death of the two lovers to abbreviate the dénouement. The succinctness created by these spatial and temporal images is a manifestation of Cocteau's method of simplification into a highly charged poetic atmosphere where no irrelevance or superficiality detracts from dramatic intensity. The death of Lady Montaigu was omitted to sustain the immediate feeling of tragedy at the sacrifice of Roméo and Juliette. The theatrical atmosphere will become electric when Cocteau complements the images of mise-en-scène with images of dialogue and commentary. The addition of the prologue at the beginning of acts one and two is already a familiar device. As in Parade and les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel it acts as a buffer between the audience and the stage, the trumpet it carries signifying objectivity and distancing, as does the voice "noir comme de l'encre" of the phonographs. The second prologue, draped over two people, expresses omniscience and universal relevance by the extraordinary breadth of gesture: "Les allégories des prologues y volaient comme l'aérogyre de la foire."²⁸ The role of the prologue will be amplified, as will the use of irony and metaphorical objects: Roméo trips over a broken sword, the only solution to material dissension, as death is the only solution to spiritual dissension. Shakespeare furnished a ready theme: a passionate love for life which is constantly thwarted by worldly realities.

* * *

²⁸Cocteau, le Foyer des artistes, Oeuvres complètes, XI, 393.

By 1925, then, Cocteau had developed a distinct and personal style of theatre art. Each successive experiment with stage production brought him nearer to what is a unique and delightful approach to audience-stage rapport. By his own admission, Cocteau detested originality. Each subject explored was based on personal experience or classical theme. It is in the treatment of these ideas that Cocteau ironically succeeds in being perhaps the most original dramatist of the early decades of the century.

Very much a product of the moment, Cocteau's works are already permeated with items of topical interest which lend a peculiarly relevant flavour to even the most farcical productions. In Parade, the character of the little American girl, now a familiar sight in Paris, was at the time a relatively novel occurrence. The bar and the jazz music of le Boeuf sur le Toit were, in 1920, experiences of recent introduction into Paris society. The cyclist and bathing beauty of les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel were extremely topical sights at the time of representation; the bicycle, in fact, had only been produced ten years previously and enjoyed a wave of popularity. Cocteau's delight with the intrusion of in vogue ideas continues to appear, especially in la Machine Infernale and les Parents Terribles.

Spectacle and exhibition played an important part in these early works of Cocteau. In production as well as content novelty was the order of the day as the author hastened to be among the avant-garde. Picasso, Satie, Diaghilew, Rolf de Mare and les Six contributed their stylish artistry to Cocteau's own. The Cirque Medrano, haunted by the latter during the early years of the Great War, introduced Cocteau to the Fratellini

brothers, solicited by Jacques Copeau to train his actors for an ideal theatre. The Russian and Swedish Ballets contributed their unique style of plastic expression to Parade and les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel while the acrobatics of the Fratellinis constituted the principal ingredient in audience-stage communication in le Boeuf sur le Toit. Choreography again played a prime role in the transformation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.

The fusion of circus fantasy and current reality, of the latent and the obvious, was achieved by Cocteau through the interplay of every available means of expression. After a seemingly obsessive interest in experiments of originality, he applied the same rules and methodology to re-orient the spectator to time-honoured themes. By re-furbishing the classics, Cocteau endowed them with a new relevance.

THE REJUVENATION OF THE CLASSICS BY

POESIE DE THEATRE

"Voilà une bonne surprise pour l'amateur de chefs-d'oeuvres Dans un chef-d'oeuvre on n'a jamais fini de découvrir des détails inattendus." This comment by the phonograph in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, after the General has resumed his place with the wedding party, expresses Cocteau's approach to any work of art, and explains in part his new attraction for the adaptation of the classics. In le Secret Professionel, Cocteau laments the almost total absence of mythology in the Christian religion, for mythology is the primitive and universal aspect of religion, man's fundamental reaction to his helplessness in an unjust and insensitive universe. Where the philosopher and the theologian attempt to explain the unknown, the artist and poet attempt to express it. In adapting Antigone and Oedipe-Roi, Cocteau highlights "des détails inattendus" which rejuvenates a universal theme and endows it with a new relevance.

Another reason for Cocteau's interest in the classics was his reaction to the Esprit Nouveau which the Dadaist and budding Surrealists had exploited and often abused. In les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel Cocteau had already brought to fruition the valid objectives of Dadaists, that is, rejecting what Baty called "Sire le Mot"²⁹ in favour of the fullest possible

²⁹The parallels between Cocteau's poésie de théâtre and Gaston Baty's love of "plastic" effects in the theatre show that Cocteau was already ahead of Baty, although Baty receives the credit today.

use of theatrical resources whereby plastic, not verbal, poetry transferred to the stage those figurative and imaginative functions usually performed by language. The jarring of perceptual awareness to a new conception of reality deteriorated in Dada to an anarchistic exploitation of brute sensation, while Cocteau continued the search through novelty and refinement.

The "reductive experiments"³⁰ of Roméo et Juliette, Antigone and Oedipe-Roi served to perfect a hard, sharp and precise poetry which is the antithesis of the popular notion of "poetic" style, vague and purposely obscure. "J'étais agacé par le mécanisme d'avant-garde. J'avais voulu démontrer que la nouveauté ne consiste pas à parler de New-York et que n'importe quel chef-d'oeuvre ancien pouvait reprendre une incroyable jeunesse ... Il s'agissait d'ôter la matière morte ... et, sans dénaturer un seul mot, d'adapter Antigone au rythme contemporain ... C'est, je trouve, la servir, que de lui restituer avec amour sa démarche vivante. Ainsi réduite, concentrée, décappé, l'oeuvre brûle les petites stations et roule vers le dénouement comme un express." The search for simplicity, as in Roméo et Juliette results in a potent concentration of known themes which lend themselves to stage conventions ripe for the poet. To omit transitions and telescope slow developments results in the rapid change

³⁰H. Dickinson, Myth on the Modern Stage, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 75.

³¹La Jeunesse et le Scandale, Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 9, p. 319.

of pace which, as in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, traps the imagination by the unexpected confrontation of a poetic image.

The attraction of Antigone was the attraction of a fellow rebel whose only purpose in living is to die, and whose private revolution incurs alienation and disfavour. Cocteau terms Antigone his "saint", for her constant opposition to order is that of the "poète maudit", familiar in Cocteau's subsequent works, and which was with him a self-inflicted state of mind. The rapidity of the action strives to capture the essential moment of martyrdom. Where the backdrop of an aerial view of Paris in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel intensified the contrast of the prolongation of the instantaneous and the exaggeration of the familiar, the speed in Antigone strives towards distanciation and immobility. The chorus, condensed into one voice, "parle très haut et très vite comme si elle lisait un article de journal" so to enforce the impression of depersonalisation which reduces the dramatic characters of Antigone and Créon to pure action, to an act of disorder and a retaliatory act of order. Cocteau assumed the role of the chorus who spoke through a hole in Picasso's back-drop, a large, rich blue, crumpled curtain over which the wavering light effects were to create the impression of a very hot day. Black and white facial masks by Cocteau and Picasso were hung alongside the hole atop miniature representations of Doric columns marbled in red chalk and outlined heavily in black. The costumes by Chanel, white for the women and red for the men, intensified the starkness which, by contrast and traditional colour associations, provided a fiery and portentous setting for the ensuing

tragedy. A more symbolic and expressive décor was chosen for the production in 1927, which, not content with depersonalization, stripped the characters of any human resemblance and endowed them with an air of soullessness and bestiality: "cinq têtes monumentales de jeunes hommes, en plâtre, encadraient le trou du chœur. Les tragédiens portaient des masques transparents du genre des masques d'escrime, sous lesquels on devinait leurs figures et sur lesquels, faits de laiton blanc, des visages aériens étaient cousus. Les costumes se mettaient sur des maillots noirs dont les bras et les jambes étaient recouverts. L'ensemble évoquant un carnaval sordide et royal, une famille d'insectes."³²

The extreme rapidity of dramatic development and dialogue contrasts with the almost total absence of movement on stage. Honegger was a judicious choice for the musical arrangement, for, although of a more serious and classical bent than other members of les Six and unswayed by their anti-emotional bias, he had an unusual talent for infusing traditional music forms and textures with an infatuation of speed and mechanical beauty. His work very often had a "dance of death" quality which admirably evoked the sense of tragedy in the Greek play. Honegger, in fact, adapted Antigone as an opera in 1927.

Oedipe-Roi, written the same year as Antigone, in 1922, was not produced as a play until 1937 for the International Exposition, but found earlier expression as a model for Stravinsky's oratorio Oedipus-Rex, in

³²Préface to Antigone, Oeuvres complètes, V, 143.

which variation of Cocteau's text was translated into Latin. The play also served as the basis for the fourth act of la Machine Infernale, to appear ten years later. The Sophocles' text suffers the same surgical operation of reduction in favour of poetic expression through symbolic décor, object and colour associations. As Cocteau's Antigone was merely a silhouette of the classical character, so Oedipe-Roi is a skeletal play-within-a-play, or rather, play-from-a-play staged on a second podium which expressed in terms of spatial restriction and localisation the centrifugal aspect of Cocteau's production. The podium was surrounded by metaphorical walls: one at the back, one on either side, a garden wall and the wall of the palace. The symbolic colour association of Antigone, blood, purity and death, is here transferred to more contemporary use of lighting effects: the play begins in obscurity and the light progressively increases with acquired information until Oedipe reaches complete awareness of his situation in total light. Despite Cocteau's eschewance of the word "symbolic", it seems fair to classify these rather obvious and banal stage effects as just that. But Roméo et Juliette, Antigone and Oedipe-Roi were primarily artistic experiments, as a sketch is an experiment for a mature, personal and self-expressive painting. Cocteau is still perfecting a method of translating his poetic spirit, which gradually abandons symbolism to become analogy.

There are already indications of his imminent dramatic finesse. In Parade and le Boeuf sur le Toit, concerned primarily with visual impact and motor images, the characters were more properly caricatures and extensions of a

visually provocative décor. In Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel this quality was coupled with word and idea associations where the character was a type, an expression rather than an extension of his surroundings. In Cocteau's classical adaptations the character remains a type, psychologically two-dimensional, but the décor assumes a metaphorical role in dramatic commentary. The back wall in Oedipe-Roi closes in upon the scene after the tragic revelation of Oedipe's identity, trapping the characters in their human frailty. Décor and character have a reciprocal and complementary dramatic activity.

Antigone does not leave the stage but is absorbed into it through a trap door; Juliette leaves to prepare for the fateful ball: "le fond à perspective s'approche de Juliette qui semble y pénétrer." The prologue and chorus are a meeting-point of the two: the chorus of Oedipe-Roi is a golden statue of a young man draped in red, reclining head in hand on a brick pedestal; the prologue in the later production of Antigone was "une sorte de statue vivante" ominously traversing the stage before the announcement of the deaths of Antigone and Hémon. The supernatural assumes a more forcefully expressive imagery by the isolation and reduction of an idea, rather than its exaggeration, so that an object or person is a visible metamorphosis of dramatic action. After Mercutio is wounded, "un valet de scène entre mystérieusement et emporte son épée," the resolution of discord being possible only in death; Ismène holds a child's toy at the opening of Antigone, visibly distinguishing her finite dependence on concrete reality from Antigone's spiritual maturity ready for the eternity of transfiguration conferred only by sacrificial death.

Cocteau's efforts to objectify dramatic action according to "l'esthétique du minimum" reach fulfilment in Orphée and la Machine Infernale. The interiorisation of expressive imagery results in artistic economy which permits the intensification of poetic effect and whereby the metaphorical object becomes functional, an integral part of the play, thus increasing dramatic concentration.

The appealing quality of classical myth is its clarity of outline, the familiarity of theme and perpetual relevance of human destiny with an inviting profundity which offers itself to poetic adaptation. The theme of Orpheus, the priest who sang praise to the sun and charmed inanimate objects to life, held an obvious attraction for a poet infatuated with the powers of art, poetic inspiration, death, destiny and transfiguration. In Oedipe-Roi Cocteau had already voiced the practice of untraditional costumes to contemporise the interpretation of myth. Sixteenth century costumes in Shakespearean plays and fourth century B.C. costumes in Greek tragedy were the style of the day, and a sacrosanct retention of period costumes and dialogue in no way assures the ultimate illumination of the play's inherent truth; the audience must, in fact, perceive the dramatic action across the initial obstacle of temporal disparity. Cocteau, on the other hand, lures the spectator into the action by an immediate yet superficial atmosphere of familiarity, only to confront him with an internalized system of poetic images fraught with deceptive conventionality: "On doit adapter les costumes de l'époque où la tragédie est représentée." Orphée and Eurydice appear "en tenues de campagne,

les plus simples, les plus invisibles." Heurtebise is dressed in common blue overalls with a neckerchief; the police attired in practical black overcoats and modish panama hats and button boots.³³ Contemporary dialogue and setting also serve to ensnare the audience in a false sense of identification. A bourgeois apartment with modern plumbing, French doors and a library, typical verbal thrusts of marital disharmony contribute to an atmosphere of empirical reality which, upon further exposure, is recognized as a repository for mysterious forces: "C'est un curieux salon. Il ressemble pas mal aux salons des prestidigitateurs ... on devine ce salon cerné par des forces mystérieuses. Même les objets familiers ont un air suspect." Cocteau stresses in the stage directions the initial and pervasive antagonism which exists between the world of the real and the presence of the unreal, or more precisely the surreal. Orphée is a tragedy, the nature of tragedy being the inexorable necessity of a transcendental force which is endowed with an active reality by means of audience participation, or at least acquiescence. "Représenter, c'est rendre présent par des présences, de sorte que le fait proprement théâtral est lié à la présence de l'acteur."³⁴ Before assuming the rôle of Orphée, the actor directly invites the audience to participate in an audience-stage symbiosis, and yet, as in Parade, the spectator is held in abeyance by the

³³"Dans mon Orphee, les costumes modernes n'étaient pas une recherche, une originalité, et je prétendais vivre de plain-pied avec le mythe, prouver à la salle que les époques se valent, et qu'il n'en existait pas une où les fées circulaient et une autre où les fées ne circulent plus" (le Foyer des Artistes, p. 106).

³⁴Henri Gouhier, le Théâtre et l'existence, p. 121.

confusion of reality and illusion: an author who creates a prologue explicitly denying the influence of the author can be legitimately accused of dupery, and yet the direct appeal of actor to spectator establishes an immediate rapport which lowers the spectators' resistance. Comforted by the acknowledgement of their role as audience, they can be the more easily subjected to the power of suggestion. The function of poetry is to confer reality on the transcendental, and poetry being exactitude, the play assumes the precision and balance of a tight-rope act. The stage directions specify the exact location and description of each object, "un décor utile où le moindre détail joue son rôle comme les appareils d'un numéro d'acrobats." The directions and prologue have the air of a magical charm or religious incantation which begs manifestation of the unknown. The stage setting is entirely white except for a patch of blue sky and a strip of burgundy velvet which outlines the horse's stall. The septic atmosphere is in keeping with Cocteau's recently discovered premise of an understated décor in which attention is focused only on integral objects and actions, any excess being a distraction.

The feeling of tension and anticipation is immediately absorbed into the play with Eurydice's opening line: "Je peux bouger?", thereby releasing the dramatic action like an elastic band. Orphée is Cocteau's first play in which an original dialogue is attributed directly to the characters and yet, although seemingly realistic, is not used to give psychological depth, but to act as yet another vehicle for the expression of a compact system of poetic imagery: the horse, through a supernatural

quality of rationality and gesture, translates into a verbal enigma messages from another world which the poet intends to use to "transfigurer la poésie", immediately creating an interrelationship between Cocteau's own aesthetic sentiments and dramatic elaboration ("Sait-on ce qui est poétique et pas poétique"). Dialogue enhances the atmosphere of mystery by evoking supernatural imagery of séance ("Aglaonice faisait tourner les tables et sa table répondait toujours ce mot-là"), of sorcery ("c'est le culte de la lune"), of imminent retribution ("Rira bien qui rira le dernier"), and of psychic intuition ("Regarde comme tu es nerveux depuis ton cheval"). The juxtaposition of familiar language and classical references (Thrace, the Bacchantes) seems perfectly coherent and avoids possible incongruity because the dominant image of the presence of a transcendental reality assures that, as in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, the images "s'emboîtent comme les mots d'un poème."³⁵

The poet's efforts to decipher the obscure signs of destiny meet with double resistance. The inherent perceptual limitations of the poet's humanity inhibits total integration with the powers of an abstract force. The process of translating poetic inspiration into poetic expiration must be accomplished through restrictive senses; "Colle ton oreille contre cette phrase. Ecoute le mystère." The receptivity of the poet's spirit, however, is thwarted by barricades erected by the intended recipients of his sensitivity. Eurydice, a willing victim of the blunting social tyranny

³⁵ Préface to les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, VII, 11.

of the bacchantes, actively resists the acknowledgement of a superior force while tacitly paying homage to the possibility by a daily ritual of superstition ("je casse du verre blanc pour me porter la chance") and of fear ("J'ai toujours peur que ce cheval ne m'écoute"). It is this resistance of intelligence and rationality that Cocteau laments in the theatre public, yet it is the self-imposed responsibility of the poet to give voice to his revelation through his power of creativity. The contemporary image of Orphée submitting his poem in a contest is the expression of a poet's self-exposure to an empirical system of arbitrary values and judgments, an unending process of trial and punishment which is dictated by a superior determination and esthetic responsibility: "Il faut jeter une bombe. Il faut obtenir un scandale. Il faut un de ces orages qui rafraîchissent l'air. On étouffe." Poetic sensitivity readily accepts the continuous manifestation of mystery in the commonplace. Orphée, removing the chair from beneath Heurtebise's feet, is unaffected by the fact that the glazier remains suspended in air. It is Eurydice's incredulous reaction which endows the image with a visual expression of the supernatural, for it is the antagonism of solar and lunar forces, of truth and reality, of the transcendental and the empirical which gives the play a dramatic, rather than fantastic, form. Fantasy is present by virtue of materialisation of the abstract (the horse as a diabolical force, a toxic sugar cube as a supposed annihilation by disbelief, a glazier's pack of glass as the wings of an angel) and of personification of a superior force: "Heurtebise apparaît sur le balcon. Le soleil

frappe ses vitres. Il entre, plie un genou et croise les mains sur son coeur." Yet the play is tragic because destiny is in the process of triumphing over illusory free will.³⁶ The images of fantasy are condensed poetic images which have an organic quality essential to the dramatic development. It is a traditional theme of drama, the misunderstanding, which dooms Orphée. The poet is destined to be misinterpreted and each failure of communication comprises a consequential spiritual death which is only transfigured by another affirmation of poetic creativity. The sacrificial vocation of art, the curse of inspiration which is "le sang d'un poète" is only ended by death. It is this theme of death which is the image par excellence of Orphée.

It is an insensitive public which is responsible for the alienation of the poet, and Aglaonice's hatred for Orphée provokes death of Eurydice by means of a fatal substance applied to the envelope which Eurydice must seal and return. For her there is only one reality, that of the world which surrounds us, and her latent sensitivity to a new dimension of this reality is suppressed by wilful denial: "Le mystère est mon ennemi. Je suis décidée à le combattre." She expresses the spontaneous and anti-thetical reactions of spiritual receptivity and rational refusal, of supernatural possibility and natural law: "L'espace d'une seconde je vous ai vu atroce comme un accident et beau comme l'arc-en-ciel. Vous étiez le cri d'un homme qui tombe par la fenêtre et le silence des étoiles."

³⁶ cf. la Machine Infernale in which destiny relentlessly thwarts any apparent act of will.

Heurtebise's suspension in air is a visual, theatrical image of the ultimate unity in cosmic ambivalence and a poetic expression of the reciprocity between natural and supernatural. Heurtebise ironically argues, "Vous devez être le jouet d'un mirage entre mes vitres et les vôtres. Il arrive que les objets mentent. J'ai vu à la foire une dame marcher au plafond." Heurtebise is the theatrical transposition of the psychological dream-state, the intermediary between conscious perception and subconscious apprehension. The dream is a prefiguration of death and Eurydice's rejection of Heurtebise establishes a direct rapport between life and death: "Je vous croyais de ma race, vous êtes de celle du cheval ... J'ai perdu ma confiance en vous." As dream admits of the supernatural, so contact with a supersensory experience severs empirical reality (Heurtebise -- "Vous avez une voix de somnabule") and Eurydice's attempt to re-entrench herself in a world of cause and effect is impossible. She licks the envelope of Aglaonice and is poisoned.

As Cocteau perceives the mysterious in the familiar, he translates its inscrutable forces into readily perceptible images. Death as a poetic concept is personified into "une jeune femme très belle en robe de bal rose vif et en manteau de fourrure. Cheveux, robe, manteau, souliers, gestes, démarche à la dernière mode." Death is merely an extension of life, an undiscovered dimension which offers to Cocteau the fascination of novelty and experience rather than repugnant horror. She says to her newly initiated assistant, Raphaël: "Vous vous representiez un croquemitaine, un épouvantail ... Tous le croient. Mais, mon pauvre garçon, si j'étais comme les gens veulent me voir, ils me verraient." The essential quality

of death is that it is unfamiliar in personal experience, yet familiar in its presentation in life. It is, according to Cocteau's quotation from Beau Brummel, invisible in its elegance: "Plus on touche au mystère, plus il importe d'être réaliste." The presentation and process of death being the least understood aspect of human life, they are portrayed by the mirror, the objectified essence of appearance, and by the surgical operation, the objectified essence of process. Heurtebise tells Orphée: "Je vous livre le secret des des secrets. Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la Mort va et vient ... regardez-vous toute votre vie dans une glace et vous verrez la Mort travailler comme des abeilles dans une ruche de verre." As glass is a scientific variation of the mirror, Heurtebise's supernatural powers are a symbolic variation of Death's transcendence.

Death's process is an inextricable combination of exactitude and relativity. Its eternal and inexorable rhythm is symbolized by the syncopated drum rolls which accompany the entire scene, and yet its timelessness is paradoxically one of absolute precision: "Azraël ... change nos vitesses. Une heure pour moi doit être une minute pour eux." The electric motor, the automatic bobbin, the gauge, the measurement of space and time are all objectified principles of abstract forces which are essentially incalculable: "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." Technical precision carried to infinity is the negation of measure, and Death's temporal and quantitative specifications are Cocteau's poetic translation of eternity. This accuracy

reflects the atmosphere of delicate balance evoked at the beginning of the play. Death's hypnotic trance is the ideal spiritual state of contact with the mysterious, a state of total concentration and receptivity which Cocteau advised for an audience. The borrowing of a spectator's watch for calculation obviously seemed to Cocteau a theatrical manoeuvre to intensify the aura of mystery by audience participation, for he suggests alternate directions for those who see this as a disruptive gesture. The wristwatch aptly serves in lieu of the forgotten chronometer, and these detailed preparations lead to the silent enactment of a concept. A line directs itself from Eurydice's bedroom to the bobbin held by Death and the process is translated through signal communication which, though familiar by conditioning, is essentially the mysterious translation of an idea into gesture just as the mysterious cessation of physiological processes is visibly and audibly translated into the word "death": "Azraël compte avec une main en l'air comme un arbitre de boxe. Raphael exécute lentement des signaux pareils à ceux du code naval." The line becomes taut, the drums stop, and Death retrieves from the bedroom a white dove attached to the end of the wire which is cut with a pair of scissors to release the bird. As in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, this is the visible enactment of a cliché, the theatrical transposition of image-association.

Death is a synthesis of antithetical absolutes: of apathy ("Elle parle vite, d'une voix sèche et distraite") and emotion ("Elle regarde le vide avec une fatigue profonde"); of elegance and practicality ("Sa blouse d'infirmière aussi doit être l'élégance même"); of generosity, when she

gives the horse to Raphael, and of supreme egocentricity, which allows Orphée to retrieve Eurydice ("Elle est avare, elle aime mieux prendre que donner"). Her absolute kingdom is a cosmic extension of an international social hierarchy, an amalgamation of abstraction (la Mort), of biblical mythology (Raphaël and Azraël), of Greek mythology, and of contemporary ethics.

Once Death has left her realm, the mirror assumes its normal function of reflection. Azraël covers the mirror before the ritual, for the reflection of a force would endow it with a tangible reality. After the return of Death, the mirror is re-consecrated with its poetic function of passage to the other world, and the rubber gloves, realistically functional in the previous scene, now take on magical properties by virtue of displacement.³⁷ They become a religious talisman which allow Orphée to find Eurydice: Orphée "prend les gants de loin comme on touche un objet sacré ... avec terreur 'Ah!'" As in Antigone the rapidity of the action strives for the objectification of an idea through immobilisation: Cocteau calls the interval during Orphée's absence "ce tour de cartes abstrait" where the repetition of the short scene is a foil of time. Physical situation is also deprived of meaning: after Heurtebise's directional information, he says "La, comment vous expliquer ... Il n'y a plus de sens ... on tourne."

³⁷ cf. "les mains gantées de rouge" against the white background is both striking and ominous.

Like Eurydice, Orphée finds the return to mundane reality untenable because of the exigencies imposed by contact with the supernatural. The resultant "tension d'esprit" provokes a loss of physical balance which disrupts the atmosphere of poetic equilibrium, and Orphée commits the fatal act of looking at Eurydice. Her disappearance is accomplished by the gradual extinction of light, and Cocteau's exact technical directions demand the visual effect of progressive disembodiment rather than instantaneous disappearance, so that the image is not one of purely sensory provocation but appeals through the senses to the emotions.

The muted drum roll of Death becomes the "tam-tam des sauvages" of the Bacchantes, and the inspired poetic phrase "Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers" has been misconstrued into an obscene anacrostic. Once the supernatural prophecy is realized, Orphée deciphers in the mirror the fatal verdict of Aglaonice. The violence inflicted on the poet is escorted by "l'éclairage des crimes au Musée Grévin" and yet it is a violence which assures transfiguration, for the stones of assault are those that make the poet's statue. The association of blood and marble is a familiar one in Cocteau; the perpetual sacrifice of a poet's life substance is analogous to the chiseling of a statue which achieves fruition only in death. Orphée cries, "la vie me taille" as the stones of the Bacchantes inflict dismemberment. The severed head which rolls onto the stage becomes the posthumous bust which at last occupies the empty pedestal, for an artist's immortality is accomplished by the work he has produced and in life he remains the

"poète maudit": "La masse ne peut aimer un poète que par malentendu."³⁸

The arrival of the police is an abrupt intrusion of reality which is met with a conspiracy of secrecy of which the audience feels a part. Eurydice re-appears through the mirror to summon Heurtebise, while the duty of the poet obliges him to leave his essence behind in the world of reality to provide whatever enlightenment may be produced by his work. The talking bust and the intrusion of biographical information of the author is pure provocation which, by serving to dupe the officious commissioner, gives the audience the feeling of complicity and awareness in communication with the mysterious.

"Orphée, c'est la première fois qu'on montre de la nuit en plein jour."³⁹ The play is essentially "une méditation sur la mort"⁴⁰ which occupies such a prominent place in Cocteau's personal life, his graphic and literary works. The appeal of Orphée resides in the effectiveness of image juxtaposition and interplay: "Le texte doit être très sec et très simple. La poésie doit sortir de l'organisation des images."⁴¹ The theatrical transposition of a skeletal Greek myth acquires a visible corpus through the poetic amalgamation of action, gesture, object, visual and

³⁹ le Mystère laïc, Oeuvres complètes, X, 34.

⁴⁰ Préface to les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, Oeuvres complètes, VII, 14.

⁴¹ Cocteau quoted by R. Gilson in Jean Cocteau. Cinéma d'aujourd'hui, (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1964), p. 104.

auditory effects, which fusion is the more stable by virtue of spare but potent dosage; each image is functional in the development of a "visible" concept, of a "poème agi."⁴² The "dépouillement" of the dialogue strives for the effect of pure action bordering on the "théâtre du silence" where the power of suggestion is omnipotent; yet the reliance on technical effects and visual illusion approaches a display of white magic where "le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vraisemblable, le vraisemblable peut aussi n'être pas vrai."⁴³ With Orphée Cocteau endeavored to represent mystery and transcendence; with la Machine Infernale he endeavored to evoke them.

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Cocteau's early work on the transformation of the classics left the text, if abbreviated, largely unchanged. The skeletal dialogues of Oedipe-Roi, Antigone and Roméo et Juliette left him free to explore alternative methods of communication and expression which involve the spectator in a total theatrical experience. The reduction of the chorus to one voice and a Picasso painting in Antigone, to a shrouded Prologue in Oedipe-Roi, bared the stage for a concentrated dosage of visual imagery

⁴²Orphée: notes de mise en scène, Oeuvres complètes, V, 96.

⁴³Houdini quoted by Christout in le Merveilleux et le théâtre du silence (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1964), p. 146.

and the active appearance of Cocteau's "objets témoins."

The trap door and the dropped sword in Antigone, the child's toy and the red package symbolic of Hémon's death are all objects which succinctly convey whole psychological concepts. The encroaching walls of destiny in Oedipe-Roi and the play of light, one of Gaston Baty's favourite "actresses", are expressive visual images into which is subsumed the pith of Sophocles' classic.

Cocteau's fertile imagination, however, cannot long be confined to the reconstruction of another poet's drama. The rather imprecise Orphic legend allowed him the scope to create both text and mise-en-scène, while at the same time offering the challenge of rendering topical an age-old theme. The latter is accomplished primarily through anachronisms: the Greek Bacchantes became a vicious, modern-day coffee klatsch; Orphée is an avant-garde poet putting his creativity to the test in a municipal contest. The displays of white magic are visible exercises which intermingle the fantastic and the real, expressing Cocteau's particular concept of truth. Object witnesses again play an important part in his poésie de théâtre: the talking horse, the mirror, the red gloves, each object of the décor plays as large a part in the drama as do the characters.

Cocteau's success in reconstructing the classics, either through the effective visual symbolism of Antigone and Oedipe-Roi, or through the multi-faceted paradox of Orphée, shows the perspicacity with which the poet views life and the agility of his imagination which together combine forme and fond into a cohesive, theatrical structure. Later plays unite the artistic sophistication of Antigone and Oedipe-Roi, and the psychology and flair of Orphée.

POESIE DE THEATRE AT MATURITY

Etymologically evocation implies speech, and, given Cocteau's love of paradox and tergiversation, the "langage pauvre" of Orphée could only have as its sequel a monologue. La Voix Humaine is a "prétexte pour une actrice" as Roméo et Juliette was "texte-prétexte". Ever sensitive to criticism, Cocteau's "monodrame" was a response to accusations of contrivance and machination, whereby he proved that the voice, by rhythm, inflexion and intonation could assume all the expressive, non-representational imagery qualities of music; a poet's touch could transform the simplest of themes, "un acte, une chambre, un personnage" into a highly charged theatrical experience.⁴⁴ Cocteau's ulterior motive in la Voix Humaine was to rebuke the contemporary craving for provocation which he was as responsible as any in fostering. It was a return to boulevard drama which had fascinated him in youth, and since the avant-garde was immensely popular, he submitted the play to the Comédie-Française which catered to "un public plus avide de sentiments que de sensations... les théâtre jeunes sont encombrés ... le public de ces théâtres s'attend à tout, sauf au neuf." Where the public inertia of 1917 had called for a scandal of provocation, that of 1929 called for a scandal of banality, an "acte inesthétique, acte de présence contre les esthètes, contre les snobs ...

⁴⁴cf. Opium p. 154. "Le principe de nouveauté devient très difficile à reconnaître lorsqu'une époque nous oblige à le dépouiller à ses attributs habituels de bizarrerie."

capable d'émouvoir seulement ceux qui n'attendent rien et ne préjugent pas."⁴⁵ One of Cocteau's most important and endearing qualities as an artist is that of a catalyst who, if not initiating a movement, at least provided directional impetus. With the aid of Christian Bérard's unusually understated décor Cocteau achieved an example of the fundamental principles of theatre, where silence is as eloquent as speech, facial expression as revealing as a confession, and gesture as explicit as a tirade. By means of a text which he deliberately makes "illisible" an immediate emotional rapport is established between the audience and this typical woman, victim of the commonest dramatic emotion, love. The spectator experiences the action as looking through a keyhole in the fourth wall and never during the prolonged tension of attempted mastery of emotion, hears the word "love". The antagonist in the tragedy, the instrument of torture and death is the common telephone, the inanimate accomplice of so many human dramas.

As in all Cocteau's plays the décor has an active part in dramatic expression. It has an air of wilful malevolence: "La scène ... entourée du cadre rouge"; an oversized photograph is "une image d'aspect maléficieux"; "téléphone, livres, lampe envoyant une lumière cruelle. Le rideau découvre une chambre de meurtre". As in Antigone the starkness is ominous; against the red background, furniture, clothing and set are all white. Lighting, of course, again acts a rôle: the "lumière cruelle" radiated by the familiar objects in the room is repeated in the "salle de bains blanche très éclairée", and the forboding "éclairage du trou du souffleur

⁴⁵Opium, Oeuvres complètes, X, 153.

qui forme une ombre haute derrière la femme assise." The woman's emotional anxiety is reflected by the "lit en désordre", by the "scène réduite", by an intimacy which approaches suffocation.

The telephone conversation is a period of emotional resurrection. The curtain rises to disclose the woman lying on the floor "comme assassinée" and the ring of the telephone re-establishes contact, albeit vicariously, with her lover from whom she seeks only a final act of sincerity, a confession of deception; her successive attempts to coax him through emotional suppression, rationalization, projection and appeal are highlighted by corresponding movements and positions: standing, sitting, pacing the length and breadth of the room, kneeling behind an armchair "la tête coupée." His forgotten gloves which she claims are not there she presses against her cheek as she talks; she hides her face as he attempts to guess her appearance, a face of "une vieille dame maigre avec des cheveux blancs et une foule de petites rides," the essence of a loveless woman who has lost all spirit and has given in vain.

The speech-gesture imagery forecasts a death which results from this spiritual destitution: "Ce coup de téléphone devenait un vrai coup que tu me donnais et je tombais, où bien un cou, un cou qu'on étrangle"; at the end she wraps the telephone cord around her neck and with the click of the receiver cries, "Coupe!" Cocteau's love of puns and ambiguity endows the imagery with a poetic stratification where a word or a phrase reverberates with multiple meaning; this play is perhaps the closest example of Cocteau's verse poetry: "J'ai le fil autour de mon cou. J'ai ta voix autour de

mon cou ... Il faudrait que le bureau (cf. bourreau) nous coupe par hasard." The author cannot resist autographing his work, although more subtly than in Orphée: "Tu dessines sur le buvard des profils, des coeurs, des étoiles."

The poetic atmosphere of la Voix Humaine results from the perceptive theatrical translation of human emotion where the imagery, although less obtrusive than that of Orphée because of familiarity with the theme, is nonetheless of visceral quality. It is the role of the skilled actress to translate this insightful, poetic power of banality for the audience, that is, as in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel to "servir le texte au lieu de se servir de lui," so that the spectator sees the woman "perdre son sang" in a mission she knows is destined to failure; the actress shows us the deceitful ruses by which the woman hopes to regain some sort of faith, and makes felt the invisible presence of the other party.⁴⁶

In le Bel Indifferent, a variation of la Voix Humaine in which the man is physically but mutely present, Cocteau termed the action "la sourde horreur de l'irréciprocité." This phrase can be applied equally well to la Machine Infernale, where the impossibility of communication is transported from the level of human sentiments to the level of human destiny in which "mortal myopia"⁴⁷ is the tragic instrument of abuse and ridicule exploited by cruel and insensitive gods.

⁴⁶Francis Poulenc adapted the play to an opera in which music played the non-representational role of the invisible lover.

⁴⁷F. Fergusson, The Idea of a Theater, (N. J.: Princeton, 1949), p. 197.

The myth itself, as in Orphée, has the poetic quality of symbolic embodiment of man's fundamental religious spirit, his fears and desires which demand expression and attempt explanation. Although the Oedipus myth is more elaborate and detailed than that of Orpheus, the composite dramatic effect of la Machine Infernale is nonetheless one of uniquely poetic imagery, for Cocteau appropriates the cursory yet muscular mythic structure in order to project upon it his personal conception of poetic drama which vibrates from the stage in a harmonious combination of imagination, technical and verbal finesse. The theme of an active presence of unknown forces is fertile enough in itself and Cocteau's introduction of Lais' ghost, of the scene with the sphinx, and of the wedding night together with their particular poetic treatment makes la Machine Infernale a prime example of the author's poésie de théâtre.

The prologue, as in Oedipe-Roi and Roméo et Juliette, acquaints the audience with the skeletal outline in order to subsequently focus attention on the imagery of dramatic development. The prologue here is also an expression of Cocteau's concept of poetry as exactitude and numerical precision devoid of the arbitrary and the superfluous: "Regarde, spectateur, remontée à bloc, de telle sorte que le ressort se déroule avec lenteur tout le long d'une vie humaine, une des plus parfaites machines construites par les dieux infernaux pour l'anéantissement mathématique d'un mortel." The outcome is predestined, and the tragedy results from belated awareness and self-knowledge. La Machine Infernale is not only a theatrical treatment of human destiny and a superior reality, but a sophisticated expression of psychological refinement, that of the in-

teriorisation of fate, motivation and the question of free will. It is the "crainte du parricide et de l'inceste" which propels Oedipus into the methodical and unwitting fulfilment of a prophecy.

As in all Cocteau's plays, the décor has the effect of manipulation and manufacture whereby the presence of the artist's hand automatically prepares to elicit an unexpected "expiration"⁴⁸ of poetic imagery.

The general atmosphere of tension and constraint is reflected in the now familiar device of a stage-within-a-stage where action is restrained and prominent; it is shown even more "en relief" by lighting effects: "Outre les éclairages de détails, les quatre actes baignent dans l'éclairage livide et fabuleux du mercure." The word and effect of "baignent" denote the absolute permeation of this play by unknown and unknowable forces which imperceptibly direct the action. The four acts are surrounded by "toiles nocturnes", and the mechanical manipulation of the set provides symbolic change of visual perspective, whether of height and distanciation in the ramparts scene, or of immediacy and intimacy in the wedding night scene.

After the fateful indications of the prologue ("les noces monstrueuses," "le piège se ferme"), the first act entitled "le Fantôme" opens to the ominous accompaniment of natural forces: "Hautes murailles, Nuit d'orage. Eclairs de chaleurs." The prevalent atmosphere is one of spiritual and psychological anxiety, a contemporary image of "la peste", which manifests itself in

⁴⁸cf. Cocteau's conception of poetry as "expiration" rather than "inspiration". R. Gilson, Jean Cocteau (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1964), p. 105.

Thebes: "Ils s'amuse" -- "Ils essayent ... Ils ne peuvent pas dormir, alors ils dansent." The music of night-clubs in classical Thebes is an anachronism which has, rather than a disruptive effect, an organic quality of emotional appeal by virtue of its dramatic function of juxtaposition. Jocaste's strong foreign accent is also an auditory image which serves to perceptibly isolate her for public, private and divine persecution. The soldier voices the people's distrust: "la reine est gentille, mais au fond, on ne l'aime pas ... On dit qu'elle est excentrique et qu'elle a un accent étranger, et qu'elle est sous l'influence de Tirésias." This spiritual alienation is reflected and amplified in the object of Jocaste's scarf which is endowed with an actively malevolent role of physical persecution: "Je suis entourée d'objets qui me détestent, qui veulent ma mort . Tout le jour cette écharpe m'étrangle." The ominous irony ("Elle me tuera") is exemplified by the relation to Tirésias of her recurrent dream: "Je suis debout, la nuit; je berce une espèce de nourrisson. Tout à coup ce nourrisson devient une pâte gluante qui me coule entre les doigts ... j'essaie de lancer cette pâte; mais (elle) reste reliée à moi ... cette pâte est vivante. Elle a une espèce de bouche qui se colle sur ma bouche." The dream is, as in Orphée and la Voix Humaine, a prefiguration of death, the meeting of reality and truth. The scarf and the child are images of intimacy which threatens suffocation, of "la proximité funeste." The relentless pursuit and manifestations of this working destiny are incombatale by human will: "je crains (cette écharpe), je n'ose pas m'en séparer."

The ghost of Laius is another complete and self-contained visual image of supernatural manifestation;⁴⁹ it has none of the ironic overtones of Jocaste's verbal image, yet its direct appeal is unnoticed because its appearance is contingent. Laius' warning to Jocaste is forbidden by a sort of transcendental hierarchy described by the Sphinx in the second act; the soldier says of the ghost: "Il parlait d'endroits où il peut aller, et d'endroits où il ne peut pas aller, et qu'il s'était rendu où il ne devait pas se rendre." This breach of a supernatural code implies a punishment of restriction and a "dernière mort." Cocteau's image of the ghost is that of a supernatural machine which functions through ritual and charm and yet is controlled by a superior force. Laius can appear only to the simple spirit openly receptive to mystery, yet remains invisible even to the soldiers in Jocaste's presence: "Lorsque le menuisier arrive, la chaise ne boîte plus ... Cherche-les! Il suffira qu'ils arrivent pour que le fantôme disparaisse." The young soldier touches the invisible Laius as he describes where the ghost appeared on the wall, the vivid and presageful "tache rouge vif" on the head, the indistinct warning of tragedy from "le trou noir de la bouche," and the frustration of a limited cosmic energy ("Chaque fois qu'il se donnait du mal pour s'exprimer clairement, il disparaissait").

The resemblance of the young soldier to Oedipe is another image of ironic portent, and in Jocaste's physical attraction to the youth

⁴⁹ cf. the dramatic function of the ghost in Hamlet.

Cocteau gives the tragedy a psychological imperative: "Il aurait son âge ... Il est beau ... Il lui ressemblerait .. tâte ces biceps." This image of physical resemblance elicits dialogue of trenchant irony: "Si j'avais un fils, il serait beau ... il devinerait l'enigme, il tuerait le Sphinx ... Les petites garçons disent tous: 'Je veux devenir un homme pour me marier avec maman'".

The second act, that of Oedipe's encounter with the Sphinx, is a temporal superimposition of the first, and, if not a spatial superimposition, at least a transplantation and reiteration of the dominant images: "Mêmes sonneries de trompettes, même lune, mêmes étoiles, mêmes coqs." There is the same physical elevation, and the stone wall against which appeared Laius' ghost becomes the delapidated wall of a temple on which is seated the Sphinx, in the form of a young girl in a white dress. Like Death in Orphée, the familiarity of the physical image is an "invisible" dissimulation of mysterious forces as Cocteau expresses a synthesis of detailed realism and abstraction. The unnatural turquoise ramparts in a comparatively realistic setting becomes the understated décor of white, grey and brown in the rocks and columns of this desert in which the personification of revenge and destiny demand the spectators' concentration. The combination of Greek ruins in an Egyptian desert, of the coalition of Greek and Egyptian gods is the image of a supernatural osmosis which appeared in Orphée: "L'Egypte, la Grèce, la mort, le passé, l'avenir n'ont pas de sens chez nous" which is Anubis' formally rhetorical reply to the soldier's image: "c'est possible que chez les fantômes, il

n'y a plus de rois et qu'on puisse confondre un siècle avec une minute." Yet the ghost of Laius was a manifestation of a transcendent hierarchy which Anubis explains: "Obéissons. Le mystère a ses mystères. Les dieux possèdent leurs dieux ... C'est ce qui s'appelle l'infini." The Sphinx is a supernatural incarnation of human emotions who is sensitive, like Jocaste, to young men, who expresses anger ("Cela me regarde"), boredom ("J'en ai assez de tuer") and criticism ("Pourquoi toujours agir sans but, sans terme, sans comprendre?"); she is the figure of rebellious youth for whom Anubis is a chaperon of experience, traditional, conservative and callous. "La logique nous oblige, pour apparaître aux hommes, à prendre l'aspect sous lequel ils nous représentent; sinon ils ne verraient que du vide." Anubis and the Sphinx are the visual images of divergent concepts of a superior force expressed in the familiar language of the youth soldier, yet mystery for Cocteau is always related to reality: "s'ils ne vous avaient donné qu'un chien de garde, nous serions à l'heure actuelle à Thebes, moi en laisse et vous assise au milieu d'une bande de jeunes gens." Jocaste describes Tirésias as "notre chien de garde," an earthly and helpless figuration of the essence which is Anubis.

The young soldier envisages the Sphinx as an erotically attractive young girl: "On le rencontre, on le regarde et on meurt d'amour" which in physical appearance she is. The older soldier identifies her with the plague, a pervasive moral scourge, which in force she is ("Dis, maman, comment il est le Sphinx?" le Sphinx seul -- "Un fléau!") Correspondingly the pestilence is objectified into "un simple vampire! Un bonhomme qui se

cache et sur lequel la police n'arrive pas à mettre la main," which in action she is: one of her young victims, the woman's oldest son, had "à la nuque ... une grosse blessure d'où le sang ne coulait même plus", and as she listens to the woman the Sphinx caresses the neck of the child. The analogy of the Sphinx and the police is also true in the sense of tactics, interrogation, indictment and conviction. This complexity of imagery, the interweaving of reality and fable, of concrete and abstract, of past and present results in a delicate balance of unity of appearance, gesture, force and essence which makes "la Rencontre d'Oedipe et du Sphinx" one of Cocteau's finest expressions of poésie de théâtre.

It is the appearance of the young girl which intrigues Oedipe by her incongruous presence in "la zone interdite" propitious only to mystery, and it is the enamoured young girl who divulges the answer of the riddle in order to spare Oedipe. "Les vestiges d'une chimère: une aile, une patte, une croupe," which mark the entrance to the temple, become part of the girl's transfiguration into the Sphinx who proceeds to charm Oedipe, "les bras au corps, comme paralysé," by means of a verbal string of lyrical incantation, recalling the string of Death in Orphée, and the life-death telephone wire in la Voix Humaine: "invisible et majestueux comme la circulation du sang des statues, un fil qui te ligote avec la volubilité des arabesques." This intricate spell produces a hypnotic dream-state in which Oedipe cries out for his mother, and the Sphinx' gesture of love only post facto becomes one of wrathful vengeance when, spurned by Oedipe for personal ambition, she again transfigures herself into Nemesis, the

goddess of retributive justice. The answer she provided becomes the instrument of death, and the web she wove is still invisible because a potentiality. The image of pestilence is now conferred on Oedipe as he heroically shoulders the lifeless remains of "la jeune fille à tête de chacal," a combination of recognizable appearances, and the image of Oedipe carrying destiny on his shoulder recalls Jocaste's ominous lament: "Mon épaule me fait mal. J'étouffe," while Anubis prophesies: "Beaucoup d'hommes naissent aveugles et ne s'en aperçoivent que le jour où une bonne vérité leur crève les yeux," the truth symbolized in Jocaste's brooch.

The third act, "la Nuit de Noces," is a powerful image of superior reality manifesting itself through the subconscious. Jocaste and Oedipe "se meuvent dans le ralenti d'une extrême fatigue", in the somnabulist state where lowered defense mechanisms invite the intrusion of the supernatural. Jocaste's bedroom is "rouge comme une petite-boucherie," the red of, not warm, but tragic and mutilating passion, the red of Laïus' wound and Jocaste's scarf. The décor is entirely functional and each object, animal skin, mirror, cradle, latticed window, are all "objets révélateurs," agents in a dramatic action patterned after discontinuous dream formation from which emerges a sense of reality unrelated to reason. In this "chambre qui embaume" the past and future are metaphorically knit into a present which is paradoxically timeless: "Le temps des hommes est de l'éternité pliée" where "les innombrables trous qui se répètent de distance en distance résultent d'un seul coup d'épingle."

Tirésias is both instrument and agent in the revelation of destiny. His eyes, blind to exterior reality, become for Oedipe "une boule de cristal" in which the king attempts to penetrate the inner sanctum of the future, but at the moment of truth he is momentarily blinded:

"Je suis aveugle. Il m'a lancé du poivre .. c'était du feu, du poivre rouge, milles épingles, une patte de chatte qui me fouillait l'oeil."

Myth, symbol and image condensed into an action prefiguring the ultimate revelation of truth when, like Tirésias, "les yeux de chair s'éteignent au bénéfice d'un oeil intérieur." As an agent of destiny Tirésias returns to Oedipe the belt which he had given the girl-Sphinx as passport to his presence. On Jocaste's approach, Oedipe hides the object under the animal skin which, during the dream, comes alive in the form of Anubis to mock the ingenious success of "l'élève des meilleurs lettres de Corinthe" and to re-enact the terrifying confrontation of the Sphinx. Anubis, holding Oedipe's belt, disappears under the podium as the Sphinx behind the wall, and the animal becomes again its appearance of a rug.

The fountain, ironic symbol of freedom and regeneration, is the audible accompaniment of this oniric image of destiny: "La fontaine monologue... fait une espèce de bruit comme du silence." It will fulfill its role in bathing the mutilated eyes of Oedipe when truth brings freedom and re-birth. The ever present storm, which physically manifests itself in Jocaste's shoulder pain, becomes a spiritual one, and "l'éclairage devient un éclairage de songe." Jocaste, lying beside Oedipe, dreams of the child that becomes an amorphous, adhesive substance of horror. She

lays Oedipe's head on the cradle and rocks him to sleep, the essence of maternity in the appearance of a wife.

The mirror, like Tirésias' eyes, is an image of reflection which reveals a truth behind resemblance: one sees "une mégère", "les cicatrices, les tatouages du destin... la figure giflée par le sort, marquée par le bourreau." As lighting in the dream was a symbol of spiritual illumination "le clair de lune et l'aube" force Jocaste to move the frame of the mirror (the glass remains on the wall) to center front stage where she is physically situated between the gaze of the audience, the virtual image of the mirror who know her fate, and the revealing song of the inebriate outside, the audible reflection of the mirror which is symbolically of human form.

The visual imagery of the prominence of a bed analogous to a sacrificial altar, the barred window forming a claustrophobic cage, the familiar domestic objects (belt, rug, crib, mirror, pepper) all elicit a feeling of unnaturalness in the commonplace. The air of portention is escorted and enhanced by the revealing irony of the dialogue: Jocaste calls Oedipe "mon petit", tells him "Tu es un enfant", talks to him of the "marchand de sable", asks "Voulez-vous embrasser une mégère" in mixed tones of respectful deference and maternal condescendence. Oedipe groggily refers to Jocaste as "ma petite mere chérie," and tells Tirésias "il me semble que j'occupe enfin ma vraie place," while the song from the street warns, "C'est une honte ... Votre époux est trop jeune."

The fears and omens are cached for the seventeen year interlude of "les faux bonheurs" which precede the fourth act, a transcription of Oedipe-Roi, where the stylised rhetoric destined for an oratorio becomes a more aptly familiar dialogue. The development is substantially the same for the revelation of truth to "ce roi de jeux de cartes entre les mains des dieux cruels", whose every happiness has been but "courir d'un piège dans un autre, comme un rat écervelé. Oedipe's self-mutilation is a synthetic action of his mother's antagonistic brooch, the Sphinx' vengeful claws, and the acerbic premonitions of Tirésias. Jocaste, as much as hanging herself, is hung by the scarf which from the beginning willed her death as an active force of destiny.⁵⁰ The image of the wall in the ramparts, the desert and the dream is repeated and, as in Oedipe-Roi, amplified. Cocteau introduces a new image, that of Jocaste transfigured into the mother figure who guides Oedipe's steps, counting them as she counted her own on the rampart steps, and as Oedipe counted the appearance of the Sphinx. Cocteau assimilates the myth of Antigone as guide into his own poetic image of Jocaste: "On entend Jocaste et Antigone parler exactement ensemble." Oedipe is transfigured from studied ambition into myth, from a striker of poses to a true "gloire classique" where the formal "deux pas après chacune de ses actions de grâces" become the faltering steps of the initiated.

⁵⁰This idea came from the death of Cocteau's friend, the dancer Isadora Duncan, who died when her scarf became entangled in the wheel of her sports car.

Through a verbal combination of litany, topical slang and familiar dialogue, through an amalgamation of myth, fantasy and reality Cocteau transforms the recognizable "colonne blanche" of classical Greece into a more revealing "lieu brûlé, aride" composed of "des grilles, des égouts, des chambres basses, des portes secrètes des métamorphoses"⁵¹ where gods, monsters and familiar objects occupy the same plane in supernatural revelation and harmoniously coalesce into a set of theatrical hieroglyphics which show "les forces qui nous surveillent de l'autre côté de la mort."⁵² Cocteau's unique formula of theatrical transcription endows traditional mythic themes with a new sense of mystery and universal relevance and evokes an absolute reality which satisfies the most valid intentions of of surrealist endeavor as expressed in the Manifeste du Surréalisme of 1924: "la résolution ... de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, qui sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de surréalité."⁵³

Cocteau recognized in les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel that "le mystère inspire au public une sorte de crainte", and, after Orphée and

⁵¹ Oedipe-Roi, Oeuvres complètes, V, 103.

⁵² cf. If not for "la politique des lettres ... les surréalistes eussent été mon seul public ... Mais mon rôle consistait à les aimer et à les suivre malgré leurs attaques ... J'étais, en fait, le seul ennemi possible pour eux, parce qu'un ennemi ne saurait se choisir en dehors de sa famille. Ils étaient un groupe, j'étais libre".

⁵³ Cocteau, Secrets de beauté, Oeuvres complètes, X, 345.

la Machine Infernale, reverted to "les pantins et les sucreries" where fantasy supplants mystery. Cocteau, like Darius Milhaud, attempted "non pas de rendre le visible mais de rendre visible," and the criterion of appreciation is belief which demands "l'impeccable naïveté des enfants"; Jocaste says of Antigone, "Elle s' imagine être ton guide. Il faut le lui laisser croire". The inherent truth of a work emerges, regardless of the orthodoxy of the means, through the poet's sensibility and the audiences receptivity.

* * *

Cocteau's achievement in la Machine Infernale is largely similar to that in Orphée, that is, of updating the Greek classic to a modern and viable testimony to man's condition in relation to cosmic forces. The themes and myths of antiquity are timeless but often underestimated through either stilted interpretation or over-familiarity. Cocteau's poésie de théâtre brings to la Machine Infernale a modern touch which renders the characters and forces more appreciable to twentieth-century audiences. The Freudian nuances in the scene of the wedding night are an eloquent and harmonious addition of a still relative new phenomenon. This psychoanalytic image is expressed also by a neurotic Jocaste, persecuted by inanimate objects which surround her. The innovation of the ramparts scene and the encounter with the Sphinx was an idea present since Cocteau's disintoxication at Saint-Cloud in 1929.

Metamorphosis, anachronism, contrast and colour symbolism are again prime components of the author's poésie de théâtre, but it is Cocteau's exceptional success in uniting the classic and the contemporary which makes la Machine Infernale one of his finest examples of this dramatic theory.

One of the most interesting aspects of Cocteau's life is the oscillation of his creative spirit with regard to thematic approach. Between the two great classic myths of Orphée and Oedipe Cocteau wrote the boulevard drama la Voix Humaine, for he sees poetry in the most banal expression and situation. Between the Greek myth of la Machine Infernale and the modern myth of les Parents Terribles, he produced a legend endowed with poésie de théâtre.

FROM CLASSICAL TO MODERN MYTH

The mythical apotheosis of Oedipe which delivered him "au peuple, aux poètes, aux coeurs purs"; the transfiguration of the poet Orphée which assures the birth of poetry; the theme of the ultimate light of freedom and truth, in both Orphée and la Machine Infernale, which dissipates the forces of evil and intolerance; these concepts are all rewoven by Cocteau in les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, but with a distinct flavour of fantasy and faërie where the unreal and the marvelous preclude the exercise of reason and the profound emotional element gains ascendancy. Images of fantasy and mystery in Cocteau's previous plays become themes in les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde. The mirage and the "état second", present since les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, are here the prevalent atmosphere of "enchantement" and "intoxication"; the mirror as symbol of appearance and truth is amplified into a duality of character where Galaad, Gauvain and the queen speak alternately as "le vrai" and "le faux"⁵⁴; the personification of a transcendental force (Heurtebise, la Mort, le Sphinx), although undoubtedly of organic function in the respective plays, becomes in les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde "le personnage principal" of Ginifer who is, ironically, essentially invisible and only detected in transmigration.

⁵⁴ cf. Galaad in Act IV, "Je fracassais un miroir", as he encounters Ginifer.

In spite of the vagueness and fantasy inherent in legend, Cocteau was, as always, careful to "doser le moderne et la fable":⁵⁵ "Tout l'élément surnaturel du drame devra être mis en scène sans la moindre négligence. et donner l'impression de réalisme"⁵⁶ Gabrielle Chanel's costumes were designed to "réunir les forces légères de l'actualité élégante et de l'inactualité mythologique",⁵⁷ for the intention of Cocteau's poésie de théâtre is as much the medicine as the artful entertainment. The author demands of the audience a participatory effort to translate images of "invasion" rather than "evasion", for he charges the given themes of the legend with an original and symbolic poetic role, to which themes he adds novel images of his own creation which results, as in Orphée and la Machine Infernale, in a harmonious intertexture of myth and actuality, of reality and illusion which is peculiarly Cocteau's.

The traditional felicitous enchantment of Camelot becomes in les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde a wan, oppressive force of stagnation and false happiness, "cette lumière morne ... ces campagnes stériles, sans jour, sans nuit, où ne survivent que les bêtes féroces et les rapaces, où les lois de la nature ne fonctionnent plus." Dream and wake no longer have any distinction and one is merely the extension of the other. The love of Guenièvre and Lancelot, because deceptive, is a lie which invites

⁵⁵ le Foyer des Artistes, Oeuvres complètes, IX, 197.

⁵⁶ Notices to les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, VI, 123.

⁵⁷ Preface to les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, VI, 121.

the machinations of Merlin to effect a spell of noxious illusion in the guise of distraction. Segramore, the symbolic incarnation of the adulterous relationship, is afflicted with the never-healing wound of the "siège périlleux": "Ségramor est le fils de notre faute ... Le coup de lance frappe l'adultère." The essence of their love is pure and can only find fulfilment after death, for the falseness of its manifestation in life demands a purgative act. Lancelot, like Jocaste, is the first to recognize the true import: "Un seul d'entre nous s'est-il inquiété de savoir s'il n'était pas responsable de ce fléau?" The agent of the purge is Galaad, the son of Lancelot and Mélusine by a legitimate and supernatural union.

The Christian legend becomes a playground of pagan spirits; Merlin's "Château Noir" is the abode of an invisible devil, dressed entirely in symbolic red with white gloves, of whom Merlin and Ginifer are merely agents. Lancelot is escorted by "good" fairies who warn him of Ginifer's impersonation of Guenièvre, yet he is only partly supernatural, as is Ségramor whose heritage endows him with the ability to communicate with birds. The untainted spirit of the supernatural is Galaad, immune to any of Merlin's magic, whose action is the positive correspondent of the devil's lethargy and apathy. The hierarchical transcendence is already a familiar image in Cocteau's work, but is imbued with a novel duality, which appears again in Les Parents Terrible and Bacchus, which is not a duality of good and evil but rather one of positive and negative, of order and disorder, of action and inaction. Cocteau vociferously disclaimed any intention of moralising in les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, yet, if not a moraliser, he is certainly a moralist, in Genet's

sense, who demands an engagement of whatever sort. The battle between the positive and negative takes place on a chess-board which Lancelot beats his invisible opponent by skill and ability as the devil's chessmen seem to play by themselves: "Voilà un fantôme qui n'aime pas perdre. Une ombre qui joue fort mal aux échecs." The humour produced by these light-hearted mechanical tricks of the devil's manifestation and the fairies' guidance act as a foil for the more important spiritual manifestations. The chessmen and chair are knocked over, the door slammed shut, all magically disarranging themselves as they had magically arranged themselves. Artus' jealousy is also invisibly yet audibly detected when he hears, along with the audience, an imaginary and intimate conversation between Lancelot and Guenièvre provoked by Merlin's revelation of infidelity. The message had been sent to Artus by means of a bat, the ornithological antithesis of Ségramor's talisman, Oribus, whom the devil killed for discovering the true Gauvain in "le Château Noir." In les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde birds are a symbolic repository of revelation; transmitted by a bird the message is ultimately one of salvation, yet borne by a flying rodent the appearance and means of the salvation are distasteful. Artus lures Lancelot into the queen's room by means of a false letter, a lie which is this time an act of positive deception, for after striking Lancelot, Artus is prevented from saving him: "On voit qu'il butte, immobilisé par un charme." Artus' act of retaliation is fulfilled by the fairies, the supernatural image of wisdom and justice

who effect the establishment of a new order where Camelot is freed of the pervasive spell of disorder, and the true love of Lancelot and Guenièvre is consecrated in death. Cocteau designed the third act not as a traditional crisis and denouement, but as a visual image of a singular and prolonged action, a "pleine crise de désintoxication",⁵⁸ at once an action of expiation and transfiguration as in la Machine Infernale.

The resurgence and recognition of the truth are due to the activity of the poet, Galaad "le très pur", whose mission is a relentless search for and exposure of the falsity of comfortable appearance, a poet committed to life and living. Cocteau is an existentialist thinker in the way that he is a surrealist artist, and the last act of les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde is a fine example of a spiritually provocative "poésie de théâtre" as les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel was mentally provocative, and Orphée was emotionally provocative. Blandine is physically transfigured into Guenièvre and Ségramor into Lancelot thus preserving the positive features of the lovers in a valid sibling relationship while the potentiality and essence of their love is realised elsewhere: as Galaad opens the curtains of the bed the bodies have disappeared: "Les fées ... détestent la mort. Elles fabriquent l'invisibilité comme les abeilles distillent le miel." The countryside becomes green again, the vegetation grows and, as Artus sees his kingdom reborn ("La vie"...), the sombre lighting gives way to the

⁵⁸ Préface to les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, Oeuvres complètes, VI, 122.

sunshine, the light of truth which brings the appearance of the yearned Graal, perceptible yet of no form, of all colours, of indescribable scent. It is "le très rare équilibre avec soi-même"⁵⁹ which is only attained through sacrifice. The poet, the figure of sacrifice par excellence, never realises this state of bliss in life, for his vocation is to make others see it, and Galaad must pursue the illusion which is Merlin who "change vite de place. Il ne s'arrête pas de nuire." Cocteau laments, "On m'enlève à tous ceux que j'aime," the penalty of isolation and alienation that poetry imposes. Life is a continual act of expiation: "Vivre n'est pas un rêve ... La vérité se découvre. Elle est dure à vivre," and Ségramor translates the birds' directive of torturous yet hopeful eternal payment.

The poésie de théâtre of les Chevalier de la Table Ronde is a result of Cocteau's symbolic intertexture of magic and myth to which he adds his own original touch, such as the talking flower or Ginifer's distinctive lisp; the combination of speech forms is also a reiteration from la Machine Infernale: the rather crude expressions of Ginifer, Merlin's versified magical charms, and the familiar dialogue. The additional charm of les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, however, consists in the unparalleled blending of moods with which Cocteau gives further scope and feeling to the visual and verbal images. The juxtaposition and super-

⁵⁹ Préface to les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, Oeuvres complètes, VI, 122.

imposition of farce (the devil's chess game), of comedy (Ginifer's crude impersonation of the queen), of tragedy (Artus' torment) and of fantasy (fairies and talking birds) result in dissociated combinations of tone and rhythm which nonetheless coalesce harmoniously to form a sort of musical collage in which no one mood prevails; Cocteau called the play simply "une pièce" in which both optimism and pessimism play a part.

The theme of the establishment of a new order is repeated in Les Parents Terribles with a marked difference in situation and method. Cocteau returned to boulevard drama to depict "une société à la dérive," the corruption of bourgeois habits and mores, in "une pièce moderne et nue." The supernatural functions of magical objects and materialized forces, which Cocteau now calls "des subterfuges décoratifs," are assimilated and condensed into objects and dialogue. The statement in the preface to les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, "l'action de ma pièce est imagée tandis que le texte ne l'est pas" is now modified, for the action of les Parents Terribles is subsumed into key words and phrases. As a "prétexte à de grands comédiens" the play was designed with the particular voices and styles of Yvonne de Bray and Jean Marais in mind, so that the dramatic action is revealed through intonation, inflexion and gesture as much as through the verbal text. This artistic economy, reminiscent of the classics,⁶⁰ precludes any decorative or unnecessary expression

⁶⁰cf. Racines Britannicus which Cocteau had with him at Montargis when he wrote les Parents Terribles: the tension and tragedy which result from an unacceptable love thwarted by family ties and obligation.

so that the tension implied in the rôles is transmitted to the audience.

Concrete details are subordinated to the theme, that of the purity of the disorder of the impulsive mind and the impurity of the order of the calculating mind. Light, as is usual with Cocteau, plays an active rôle in dramatic revelation. The somber half-light of Yvonne's bedroom contrasts with the brightness and clarity of Madeleine's apartment; any increase in illumination unnerves Yvonne (symbolic of the illumination of reality) and the intrusion of a light from outside is "une lumière sinistre", a threatening force which Madeleine represents. As in la Voix Humaine the bathroom is supposedly "blanche et très éclairée," the scene of Yvonne's ultimate act of desperation.

The bed, a recurrent symbol, is the image of a phantom happiness which degenerates into sorrow and tragedy through awareness, of an intimacy destined to evolve into a fatal suffocation. The disorder of Yvonne's bed reflects the state of mind of "la roulotte", as do the piles of clothing, Yvonne's unkempt appearance, her gown full of cigarette holes which drags on the floor, all conspiring to create an atmosphere of claustrophobic stagnation in a family which is "l'épave de la bourgeoisie." Yvonne, Georges and Michel are of the race of children, egoists who interpret reality as an extension of themselves.

The adult counterpart of those who attempt to manipulate reality through helplessness is Léo, "la maniaque d'ordre," and Madeleine, whose presence has "un faux air d'ordre." It is Léo who keeps "la roulotte" in some semblance of tidiness and who pierces the cloud of complacency

by revealing the real motivations and implications of events to which Yvonne and Georges are blind. With Léo every act is studied and plotted, everything transpires in the brain, while "la roulotte" acts on impulse and feeling. Léo brutally confronts Yvonne with her negligence, her blindness and her naïveté like Electra relentlessly destroying everything in her path to establish truth. Yvonne is "une mère excessive", "une mère enfant" who has lost all conception of time: "Je ne ferais aucune différence entre le Mik de trois ans et le Mik de vingt-deux ans;" when Michel tells her of his interest in Madeleine, "La figure d'Yvonne se décompose, jusqu'à devenir terrible." Self-deception and rationalization are the barricades against the intrusion of reality, and there is no longer any distinction between semblance and actuality, between lies and truth. Léo says, "Je croyais que tu jouais un rôle. Je me trompais. Tu es aveugle." This denial is expressed by Georges repeated "Incroyable!" which he gave to Yvonne and Michel like "une maladie honteuse." The only reflection of truth comes from Yvonne's vanity mirror which she attempts to belie by make-up and cosmetics, taking a naïve pride in her peer relationship with her son.

Léo's extirpation of the admission that Yvonne thwarted Michel's entry into business society brings the emotional discomfort which presages an unbearable truth: "Ici nous approchons de la vérité. Nous sommes moins loin du mensonge." The verbal imagery of truth is one of violent assault. For Madeleine to tell Georges of Michel would be "lui tirer ce coup de

révolver à bout portant"; after Michel's confession, Yvonne sincerely believes "Il m'a frappé." Léo's love of order is similar to Yvonne's and Madeleine's in its intensity: Madeleine ironically admits, "quand on aime comme je t'aime, on passe par-dessus tout, on assassine, on égorge."

"Les portes qui claquent" which allow Michel to leave the "roulotte" also let destiny, in the form of Madeleine, enter. Just as the visit to Madeleine's apartment is "aller de la nuit au soleil", the third act takes place in a progressive and gradual illumination, the intensity of perception which is fatal to Yvonne's illusions and so to her life. The sun is the symbolic counterpart of these "gens de la lune", their "clair de lune ... allonge les ombres et enchante les objets." Yvonne's insulin, symbolic of dependence and artificial life, is purposely administered in exaggerated dosage to combat the confrontation of reality.

This exercise of "invisible" drama where the mise-en-scène is pared to a functional minimum, and where theme and interpretation constitute the movement and rhythm of poésie de théâtre, is generally considered to be one of Cocteau's best plays, along with la Machine Infernale, and is probably the closest the author comes to presenting a moral statement in his drama. "La roulotte" is symbolic not only of disjointed and artificial family relationships but also of the instability of "une société à la dérive."⁶¹ Yvonne's dependence on insulin is more

⁶¹Les Parents Terribles, Oeuvres complètes, VII, 83.

than one woman's inability to cope with reality; it is the dramatic representation of a whole society fettered by false values and specious security. "Les portes qui claquent" are, like the insulin, metaphors of neurotic disorder and anxiety, the hallmarks of a modern, technological age. This interiorized destiny is reminiscent of Jocaste in la Machine Infernale, the title of which evokes an image of the same kind of modern holocaust as is present in les Parents Terribles. In the latter, the gods and heroes are present in the form of Love and Léonie, both ultimately victorious after purge and punishment. Les Parents Terribles, then, becomes a modern myth through Cocteau's management of décor, gesture, sound and light, all symbolic and all organic components of his poésie de théâtre.

LATER WORKS

In Cocteau's subsequent dramas of les Monstres Sacrés and la Machine à Ecrire, the themes are similar: the confusion of reality and illusion, the interpersonal conflict which constitutes dramatic tension and purgation, the initial mutation in established order which brings psychological repercussions. It is not, however, the text or the theme of a play which testifies to the uniqueness of Cocteau's art form, but the treatment of these two. Like his Théâtre de Poche, (L'Ecole des Veuves, Le Bel Indifférent, Anna la Bonne, La Dame de Monte-Carlo), les Monstres Sacrés was written by Cocteau for specific actors and actresses. In Edith Piaf, Jean Marais and Marianne Oswald, Cocteau saw the exceptional talent which would, by itself, transfigure even the most trite script into a poetic representation. These plays, then, serve only as unrefined material for dramatic interpretation, as scripts "dont l'écriture véritable n'était qu'une écriture virtuelle et dont il faudrait publier la chorégraphie."⁶²

True to artistic form, "après une période de ligne droite, de nu, de simplicité," Cocteau made a volte-face to "le clair de lune et les feuillages" of Renaud et Armide. He had originally envisaged an "opéra-parlé" which is translated into lyrical, alexandrine verse in

⁶²Préface to Théâtre de Poche, (Paris: Editions Paul Morihien), 1949, p. 7.

which Cocteau observes the classical three unities and the soliloquy. The play was an exercise to renew the art of tragedy through the voice, and to "nouer ensemble les styles classiques et romantiques" where the word is the essential instrument of expression and awareness, and the melifluous lyricism is the musical effect of a theme of love dear to Cocteau. Renaud et Armide was staged the same year as a renewed production of Antigone in which the palace took on the appearance of a farmyard on washday and where the torches were strung on a line like laundry to dry. The multifaceted imagination and artistic dexterity of Cocteau allows the alternation and superimposition of ideas, themes and images. It is this unity in diversity which accounts for the charm of Cocteau as a poetic dramatist, a charm which exerts "une véritable prise de contact directe entre l'auteur, les acteurs et le public,"⁶³ and which is a novelty at once refreshing and disturbing.

L'Aigle à deux Têtes, like Renaud et Armide and les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, has a fairy tale atmosphere with serious pretensions. This play of 1945 was Cocteau's reaction to "une certaine dégénérescence du drame, une chute du théâtre actif en faveur d'un théâtre de paroles et de mise en scène."⁶⁴ The theme of the anarchist poet and the "belle dame sans merci" is a familiar one with Cocteau, but the importance of the play, as far as poésie de théâtre is concerned, is the portrayal of

⁶³ Préface to Renaud et Armide, Oeuvres complètes, VI, 289.

⁶⁴ Préface to L'Aigle à deux Têtes, Théâtre, (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), II, 302.

"deux idées qui s'affrontent et l'obligation où elles se trouvent de prendre corps."⁶⁵ The confrontation of opposite forces which can be united only in death is an attempt by Cocteau to restore action to the stage, the action of the character through which the author communicates with the audience.

The entry of Stanislas during a violent storm and the amazing resemblance to the Queen's dead husband are metaphors of destiny at work. The transformation of the Queen into a Fury and the gradual self-efacement of the poet is symbolic of Cocteau's theory of the artist subservient to an ever-dominant Muse, yet the presiding image of the two-headed eagle suggests the indispensability of either of the antagonistic forces. Peace comes only in death when the two lie at opposite ends of a staircase of marble, the symbolic perpetuity.⁶⁶

* * *

Cocteau's dramatic works since les Parents Terribles in 1939 show him to be increasingly aware of the power of an actor to become a vehicle for his poésie de théâtre. His love of the forceful and petulant monstre sacré had already seen a precedent in la Voix Humaine of 1929, and derived from his childhood memories of Sarah Bernhardt and Edouard

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ cf. the marble bust in Orphée and the marble statue in Sang d'un Poète.

de Max. Although he entrusted a great deal to the actor, he never relinquished his position as the guiding force which elicited the exact gesture and intonation necessary to confer the desired poetic atmosphere on the presentation.

Cocteau's later years also saw him devote much of his artistic endeavour to the field of cinematography, which allowed him an even freer range of poetic treatment. Orphée, l'Aigle à deux Têtes and les Parents Terribles were masterfully converted to poésie de cinéma. Cocteau realized the value in the presence of a strong, capable actor who was able to endow a rôle with the necessary degree of authenticity and insight just as he, as a poet, was able to translate invisible forces into perceptible images. Whether novel, verse, cinema or drama, every work of Cocteau radiates that elusive quality of poetry.

CONCLUSION

Gordon Craig believed, "L'art du théâtre n'est ni le jeu des acteurs, ni la pièce, ni la mise en scène, ni la danse; il est formé des éléments qui le composent: du geste, qui est l'âme du jeu, des mots qui sont le corps de la pièce, des lignes et des couleurs qui sont l'existence même du décor, du rythme qui est l'essence de la danse." Author, choreographer, actor, director, Cocteau is all of these, and his unique talent combined with the imagination and sensitivity of a poet allows him, perhaps more than any modern dramatist, to amalgamate these elements into a poetic unity of theatrical expression. The extreme difficulty inherent in uniting these various elements into a new and harmonious art form testifies to the credit due to Cocteau as a herald of modern theatre.

The majority of Cocteau's plays were provoked by example or suggestion, whether Greek classics, legends or personal experience. Yet it is not only in the source of inspiration that one finds poetic quality, but in the treatment and translation of the idea into a perceptible image of the concept. "Plus on accusera l'originalité des techniques mieux on discernera celle des fins."⁶⁷ It is Cocteau's technique which results in the poetic "expiration" of symbols, metaphors and images inherent in

⁶⁷H. Gouhier, le Théâtre et l'existence, (Paris: Editions Montaigne), 1952, p. 126.

all facets of stage production. Whether Auric's music, Berard's décor, or Massine's choreography, it is Cocteau's controlling hand which fuses the elements into a harmonious reverberation.

This harmony of effect is detected in all Cocteau's work from Parade to Bacchus, if in varying proportions. In the first stage, of experimentation, Parade, les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel and le Boeuf sur le Toit were exaggerated doses of décor, rhythm and enactment so that the effect was one of provocation and "divertissement", albeit with a legitimate purpose of artistic responsibility. The overpowering aspect was due to the ambition of Cocteau to strip habit and appearance of its dross and to render palpable the true meaning and potential behind the word and the gesture. The opposite treatment of Oedipe-Roi and Roméo et Juliette, where the effects are stripped to necessity, proved just as effective in the active coalition of décor, dialogue and movement. These experiments of inflation and reduction brought an artistic maturity which allowed Cocteau to strike a delicate balance of evocation and invocation. Where les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel rendered visible the invisible, and Roméo et Juliette rendered the visible in abstract terms, Orphée and la Machine Infernale succeeded in mending the two by means of neither exaggerated nor deficient elements but an agreeable symbiosis of gesture, word and object. The style, nonetheless, remains aphoristic insofar as it is necessary to condense meaning and imagery into visceral expressions of love, death, poetry or the divine. The unexpectedness of the imagery, whether a talking bust, an antagonistic brooch or a misplaced shoe,

elicits at once a dirth of experience, analogy and conceptions oscillating between an image of the world and an image of the poet's sensibility.

Cocteau's poésie de théâtre is a technique of progressive refinement where poetic evocation becomes more subtle while retaining its rudimentary quality of dissociation. The rumped bed of la Voix Humaine suggests all the emotion and tragedy of Oedipe-Roi; the word "ranger" in les Parents Terribles expresses the exorcism and revolution of les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde. The dialogue of les Parents Terribles is the quintessence of action, the post-factum result of emotions and feelings long denied, and the verbal expression of a progressive dramatic interaction. It is a verbal precision as le Jeune Homme et la Mort is a choreographic abstraction, yet their total emotional tone is of equal poetic value. The themes of love-in-death or love-to-death, of death as a realisation or a comfort, of a positive or negative transcendance are all theatrically transcribed in images of perceptual appeal, whether auditory, visual or emotional, which radiate from the stage.

Cocteau, after Antoine and Lugné-Poe, initiated a new form of theatre art which is seen in later Surrealist works and the new avant-garde dramatists of the middle of the century. Although Cocteau worked simultaneously with the early Surrealists and with the Cartel des Quatre, he refused to align himself with any artistic group which might restrain his personal freedom. Parallels have been drawn between his work and that of Salvador Dali, Luis Buñuel or Gaston Baty, but the new dramatists seem

to have a debt to Cocteau which goes still unacknowledged. Ionesco and Samuel Beckett both share Cocteau's aptitude for revealing the reality of the unreal. The fairy tale developments of le Piéton de l'Air, Amédée or Oh! les beaux jours convey, through their very senselessness, an image of overriding emotional impact. The Guignol atmosphere recalls Cocteau's intention of Parade's hommes-décor, "le plus vrai que le vrai". The apocalyptic imagery of Ionesco's le Piéton de l'Air and Amédée are reminiscent of Orphée's transmigration, yet the prevailing mood of absurdity has the same tragic import as Cocteau's notion of destiny.

Cocteau's successful example of harmonious theatrical presentation of various art forms influenced his contemporaries and his successors. The rebirth of the theatre in the twentieth century was made possible, even demanded, by the poet who could confer his talent on a visual presentation. "In the last analysis the designing of stage scenery is not the problem of an architect or a painter or a sculptor or even a musician, but of a poet."⁶⁸ For Cocteau is all these plus choreographer, actor and arbiter, but it is, above all, his unique skill of stage synthesis which assures the charm of his poésie de théâtre.

⁶⁸R. E. Jones, the Dramatic Imagination, (New York: Theatre Art Books), 1941, p. 77.

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