

DESTINY IN THE THEATRE OF JEAN COCTEAU

DESTINY IN THE THEATRE OF JEAN COCTEAU

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

September, 1975

MASTER OF ARTS
(Romance Languages)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Destiny in the Theatre of Jean Cocteau.

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NUMBER OF PAGES: v , 103

SCOPE AND CONTENTS: The purpose of this study is to examine the theme of destiny in conflict with free will as it is presented in the theatre of Jean Cocteau. The first chapter deals with this theme as it appears in Cocteau's adaptations of Greek myth; the second chapter treats the dramatist's use of the boulevard tradition in the presentation of this subject in a modern context, and chapter three considers its manifestation in Cocteau's historical plays. In each chapter the central conflict is defined, followed by a discussion of Cocteau's dramatic techniques used in the exposition of this theme.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. B.S. Pocknell for his patient assistance, advice and encouragement in the writing of this paper and also Dr. A.W. Patrick for his meticulous reading and helpful suggestions.

Manai mīļai mātei

Trīs lietas mani moca no mazotnes:
kas biju, kas būšu un esmu kas es?
Daudz atbildes radās, daudz izzuda,
līdz beidzot šī viena man palika:

ne puķe, ne lapa, ne zieds es, ne zars,
ne zvaigzne, ne saule, ne liesma, ne stars, -
es esmu tik sīks zieda puteklīts,
kas mūžības vēju nests lido un trīc.

Fr. Bārda

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INTRODUCTION

In the present century, it is impossible for any student of cultural and artistic life in France to be unaware of the name of Jean Cocteau. Not only was he a fascinating writer with a brilliant reputation, but his talents encompassed such a wide sphere of activity that he is known by musicians, for his association with Erik Satie and the Groupe des Six, by balletomanes, for his collaboration with Diaghalev and the Ballets Russes, and by artists, for his interaction with Picasso and the post-Impressionists.

Unfortunately such a full and interesting life lends itself to colourful biographical accounts, of which there is no lack, and a paucity of scholarly study concentrating on his work, wherein one finds a deeper, more meditative Cocteau, as yet largely neglected.

The present study will attempt to investigate one aspect of Cocteau's works. Out of the post-war neuroses of the 1920s and 1930s, there arose a strong preoccupation with the human condition and there was an equally strong belief that it was not man, but fate that governed events. This force of destiny occupies the centre-stage of many of Cocteau's writings.

But Cocteau is first and foremost a dramatist. His techniques are very refined, although often misunderstood, and closely tied in with the notion of an omnipresent destiny. Hence his dramatic techniques are indivisible from the ideas conveyed; there can be no true distinction of forme and fond, but for practical purposes of organization, the techniques will be considered separately for special study here.

The plays before us were chosen as the most striking reflections on the conflict of destiny and free will. They have been grouped according to three classifications. The first chapter will consider Antisone, Orphée, and La Machine Infernale, all of which are adaptations of Greek myths that centre upon man's struggle to control his own life in the face of an implacable fate. The second chapter includes the modern plays, Les Parents Terribles, Les Monstres sacrés and La Machine à écrire. Here Cocteau remains preoccupied with fate, but now uses as a vehicle for his obsession the traditions of boulevard theatre. Finally the third chapter will concern itself with the theme of destiny as presented in Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, L'Aigle à deux têtes and Bacchus. These dramas, like those of the first chapter, are based on pre-existent material, that of legends and historical fact.

As these plays, with the exception of Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, are also considered in chronological order of writing, this categorization will facilitate the demonstration of the development in Cocteau's approach to and representation of the central conflict.

A select bibliography of Cocteau's works and critical studies useful directly or indirectly in the writing of this paper is appended.

CHAPTER I

DESTINY IN THE GREEK PLAYS

In his essay Théâtre et Destin¹, Pierre-Henri Simon has judiciously underlined the close link between the renaissance of drama in France in the years 1920 to 1940 and the inquiry into the modern human condition, that is, the plight of man in our contemporary world and society. From the beginning of the century this investigation has had recourse to the Greek myths, and many dramatists have availed themselves of these ancient sources, modernizing them and altering them to suit their own philosophical and aesthetic ends. Paul Claudel translated Orestia, André Suarès composed Electre et Oreste, André Gide wrote a version of Oedipe; more recent examples which are better known are La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu and Electre by Jean Giraudoux, Antigone, Medée and Eurydice by Jean Anouilh and Les Mouches by Jean-Paul Sartre. Jean Cocteau for his part, has written three transpositions of the myth: Antigone (1922), Orphée (1925), and La Machine Infernale (1932).²

¹Pierre-Henri Simon, Théâtre et Destin (Paris: Armand Colin, 1960).

²In 1922 Cocteau also wrote an adaptation of the myth, Oedipe Roi, which was never performed, but the theme and the myth of Oedipus are employed in a deeper and more original fashion in La Machine Infernale.

One is naturally led to inquire why such a number of dramatists turned to the ancients as a major source of inspiration. At the end of the nineteenth century the predominant style of French theatre had been to a great extent the realist boulevard dramas such as those of Brieux, Curel, Lemaitre and Bernstein. These works dealt chiefly with the inconsequential incidents of French life and were directed towards the bourgeois audience, their primary purpose being to entertain, with rarely, if ever, a deeper meaning than their formulaic but complicated plots. With the growing consciousness of the human condition, created by various artistic and philosophical movements such as symbolism and surrealism, writers realized that a more substantial fabric was necessary to bring about an awareness of the human predicament. The use of myth created a distance between the stage and reality that is necessary to symbolize the universal as opposed to the episodic truths in man's existence. There is however, a dichotomy present in this thought: although distance is created by the mere fact that an ancient myth is used,

...myths are permanent. They deal with the greatest of all problems, the problems which do not change, because men and women do not change. They deal with love; with war; with sin; with tyranny; with courage; with fate; and all in some way or other with the relation of man to those divine powers which are sometimes felt to be irrational, sometimes to be cruel, and sometimes, alas, to be just.³

As the ideas expressed in myth are of a universal nature, the characters themselves are not mere men but archetypes reflective of this universe: "The value of the mythological character rests precisely

³Gilbert Highet, The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, Galaxy Books, 1954), p. 540.

in the fact that he is not an individual but a type, an archetype...
Larger than life, he embodies a universal truth."⁴

After the shock of the First World War and the totally disordered and anarchistic tendencies that had completely upset the European continent, there was a definite need for a return to an ordered form with some semblance of coherence.

The renewed classical impulse in the arts began to take seed in the year 1919. Feeling that the growing formlessness of modernism was threatening to undermine the very foundations of art, many artists turned to the strict forms of classicism as an antidote to artistic anarchy. Picasso's gigantic mythological nudes, Stravinsky's and Prokofiev's flirtations with classical forms in music, the taut tetrameter quatrains of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound - all of these manifestations of aesthetic entrenchment represented an almost universal desire on the part of the leading artists of Europe to curb the excesses of avant garde art.⁵

The ancient myths of the Greeks provided such a form for the theatre. They served as an aesthetic principle and raw material for other aesthetic objects. Although myth had lost its ritual function, it had not lost its appeal; although it had lost its religious dogmatic function, it still remained an artistic entity.

The ancient function of classical myth is dead. The function of Christian myth (primarily a reconstruction of classical myth) is in its death throes. Our secular myth as a vital force in human affairs is in the process of being born. The secular myth has always been with us, but is now assuming a dominant position in the world and its name is THE STATE.⁶

Ernst Cassirer defines the nature of myth in regard to its relationships

⁴Angela Belli, Ancient Greek Myths and Modern Drama, A Study in Continuity (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 192.

⁵Thomas Rees, "Notes on the Aesthetics of Jean Cocteau: Clair-Obscur, Conscious-Unconscious", Studies in the Twentieth Century, VII (1971), 65.

⁶Chester Clayton Long, "Cocteau's Orphée: From Myth to Drama and Film", Quarterly Journal of Speech, LI (1965), 39.

between the individual and society: "In mythical thought and imagination we do not meet with individual confessions. Myth is an objectification of man's social experience."⁷

As a reflection of "social experience", dramatists tended to modernize the myth, still retaining the distance, but by this action making the spectators more aware of their experience; the myth in the hands of these writers has lost much of its ritual and solemnity through the use of anachronisms and allusions to contemporary life, by which it is brought down to a more personal and immediate level.

On sait que les mythes étaient, chez les Grecs, la réponse donnée par l'imagination des poètes aux problèmes posés par la nature et le destin de l'homme. A notre époque, ils permettent aux dramaturges contemporains d'évoquer les thèmes de réflexion suggérés par l'actualité (fatalité, liberté, engagement et sincérité) à l'aide d'un contexte poétique indéniable - la poésie naît du dépaysement dans le temps - et de façon beaucoup plus libre: en dépouillant leur pièce des scories du présent, de l'événement actuel, contingent, accidental, Sartre, Anouilh ou Cocteau atteignent à une plus grande impartialité en élevant le débat au niveau de l'éternel. Dans l'ensemble...ils ne reprennent pas le mythe dans toute sa solennité et ne cherchent nullement à faire appel à l'adhésion entière du public: leur transposition, où se mêlent imagination et humour, symbolisme et fantaisie, est pleinement libre, leur souci de trouver un prétexte de réflexion pour l'intelligence de l'homme moderne est évident. Le pathétique de la tragédie traditionnelle est comme relégué au second plan: mais il s'efface devant un autre pathétique, celui de la solitude, celui de l'absurde ou celui de la liberté.⁸

With respect to the theatre of Cocteau, Estève continues:

En transcrivant le mythe, Cocteau exprime, par le fait même,

⁷Ernst Cassirer, The Myth of the State (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), p. 39.

⁸Michel Estève, "Les Mythes d'Orphée et d'Oedipe dans le théâtre de Jean Cocteau", Le Français dans le Monde, XLV (1966), 6-7.

quelques-unes de ses plus intimes tendances, de ses plus constantes obsessions, celle de la vocation du poète et celle du duel de l'homme avec son destin.⁹

Cocteau's first attempt at transcribing a Greek myth produced the play Antigone in 1922. This work is the closest to the original myth in its retention of the text and action, and appears to be almost a direct translation of the Greek drama. More significant than the text however, are Cocteau's dramatic techniques and their underlying implications. In 1925 Cocteau completed Orphée, his first original work in which the plot substance of the ancient source is retained but the myth is used as a backdrop for a discourse on the destiny of the poet and artistic creation. His last play directly based on a Greek source is La Machine Infernale, dating from 1932, in which Cocteau considers the plight of man in the face of an implacable destiny. Although the last act closely adheres to Sophocles' text, the first three acts are primarily Cocteau's own invention; in essence Cocteau dramatized what in the original work had been narrative material.

By the mere fact that Cocteau uses a myth, he consciously affirms the existence of forces beyond the human sphere that direct man's life according to an ordered law beyond human perception. Cocteau achieves the dramatic presentation of the myth by a variety of theatrical effects, nevertheless constantly keeping in mind contemporary society and our modern world.

In the preface to Antigone Cocteau describes his adaptation:

⁹Ibid, p. 7.

C'est tentant de photographier la Grèce en aéroplane. On lui découvre un aspect tout neuf.

Ainsi j'ai voulu traduire Antigone. A vol d'oiseau, de grandes beautés disparaissent, d'autres surgissent; il se forme des rapprochements, des blocs, des ombres, des angles, des reliefs inattendus.

Peut-être mon expérience est-elle un moyen de faire vivre les vieux chefs-d'oeuvre. A force d'y habiter, nous les contemplons distraitement, mais parce que je survole un texte célèbre, chacun croit l'entendre pour la première fois.¹⁰

Cocteau attempts to present this Greek tragedy as seen from an aeroplane, a bird's eye view appropriate to the modern age, wherein only the essentials are stressed and the elements are concentrated to a bare minimum. This concentration is seen in the decreasing of actors, specifically in the rôle of the chorus being reduced to one character,¹¹ and in their terse and colloquial language. The absence of a specific décor gives the myth a transcendental and universal context. The costuming is also "concentrated": the characters all wear black leotards and white fencing masks through which their own faces are visible. The masks serve a double function: not only are they a retention of a Greek dramatic tradition, but, as the audience is able to view the formalized features of the artists' masks and the actors' faces simultaneously, it is as if the characters were being regarded from two angles, at once, one of them a distancing angle. As the audience knows the myth but is shown it from a distance, so too this holds true for the characters. Finally in the production notes Cocteau states: "L'ensemble évoquant un carnaval sordide et royal, une famille d'insects."¹²

¹⁰ Jean Cocteau, Antigone, Oeuvres Complètes de Jean Cocteau (Geneva: Marguerat, 1946-1951), V, 139. The Oeuvres Complètes de Jean Cocteau will hereafter be referred to as O.C.

¹¹ In this there is a resemblance to Anouilh's Antigone (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1947), wherein the rôles of the Prologue and Chorus are given to one actor, again underlining the idea of economy.

¹² Cocteau, Antigone, O.C., V, 143.

Once again a distancing view is suggested, an allusion to the view from the aeroplane from above; hence the audience is raised to the ranks of the gods who look down on the drama, the characters being no more than insects in their regard.

Despite the fact that Antigone is almost a direct translation from the Greek, it is not difficult to see, in Cocteau's adaptation, the first manifestations of his preoccupation with the fate of man and other related themes that he would go on to develop in succeeding dramas. Between Antigone and Créon there develops the central conflict of established order versus the pure disorder of youth. Antigone exhibits all of the characteristics of a traditional Cocteau heroine: youth, purity, solitude, love, beauty and mythomania; and she suffers accordingly, ending her life by her virtual suicide in order to cheat her proper destiny as the daughter of Oedipus.¹³

Apart from the many references in the spoken text to the workings of the gods, the only agents of fate appear to be the chorus and Tirésias, both, in their speeches, foreshadowing the eventual fate of Antigone and trying to prevent her self-destruction. Nonetheless, an interesting point is raised by Claude Mauriac, who states that the intense speed at which the drama unfolds elicits a sense of the supernatural:

Il lui est arrivé de se servir délibérément de la vitesse comme d'un procédé particulièrement propre à faire surgir le surnaturel. On devine ce qui l'a séduit dans l'Antigone de Sophocle et ce qui l'a conduit à l'adapter: l'action se déroule d'une haleine et à une telle cadence que tous les chaînons intermédiaires qui

¹³These related subjects are not dealt with in detail at this point as they become the isolated focal points in succeeding dramas, and as such will be elaborated upon in later references.

relient dans la vie habituelle les actes humains, sautent.
Les gestes et les décisions essentiels demeurent seuls et naissent
les uns des autres avec une rapidité qui tend à l'immobilité.¹⁴

Through its extreme rapidity the play becomes almost static, the actor is dehumanized, and a sense of the supernatural is evoked, as if the action occurred in but a moment of time.

* * *

In 1926 Cocteau completed Orphée, his first original work, based on a Greek myth. Whereas in Antigone alterations to the original had been minimal, in Orphée, although the plot substance of the ancient myth is retained, Cocteau added many new elements both to its essence and to its presentation.

The work concerns itself with the destiny of the poet and the process of artistic creation, the search for the sources of poetic inspiration. Cocteau believed that a poet, by extension any artist, possessed the capabilities of exposing mysteries beyond human comprehension.

Le poète est le véhicule, le médium de forces inconnues qui le manoeuvrent, profitent de sa pureté pour se répandre par le monde et, sinon résoudre, du moins soulever jusqu'à l'écoeurement des problèmes contre lesquels chacun veut se mettre en garde dès le réveil.¹⁵

Hence the poet's rôle can be seen as one of dévoilement,

¹⁴Claude Mauriac, Jean Cocteau ou la vérité du mensonge (Paris: Odette Lieutier, 1945), p. 127.

¹⁵Cocteau, Portraits-Souvenir, O.C., XI, 16.

revealing the intrinsic mysteries behind the mundane everyday façade, acting as a balancing force between illusion and reality. Nevertheless the poet cannot recognize these supra-human forces, rather he is their victim; as Orphée comments to Eurydice:

Nous jouons à cache-cache avec les dieux. Nous n'en savons rien, rien, rien.¹⁶

And to reach his final destiny, the poet must pass through various trials or "deaths":

Le poète doit mourir plusieurs fois pour naître.¹⁷

The creative poetic process places the poet in contact with the forces of the beyond by the death of his conscious self. Cocteau describes this process:

A force de me meurtrir...d'attendre parfois des heures, seul, debout, ma lampe éteinte, des parlementaires de l'inconnu, me voilà quelque chose: tout à fait machine, de tout à fait antenne, de tout à fait Morse. Un Stradivarius de baromètres. Un diapason. Un bureau central de phénomènes.¹⁸

In the play Orphée is similarly receptive to these messages from the beyond which are tapped out by the horse. The horse, perhaps a suggestion of Pegasus, is an agent of the poet's fate. It is after finding the horse that Orphée leaves the city to isolate himself, to seek out pure poetry, his true vocation, his destiny. Hence Orphée leaves his conscious self with the aid of this magic animal. By this suppression and by the descent into himself, Orphée succeeds in bringing back pieces

¹⁶Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 25.

¹⁷Cocteau, Orphée, Film (Paris: Editions André Bonne, 1950), p. ii.

¹⁸Cocteau, Prospectus, O.C., XI, 13.

from the beyond, be it in the tangible form of Eurydice or in the form of the phrase "Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers", and in taking these forms from the supernatural:

Ce cheval entre dans ma nuit et il en sort comme un plongeur. Il en ramporte des phrases...Je donnerais mes oeuvres complètes pour une seule de ces petites phrases où je m'écoute comme on écoute la mer dans un coquillage...Je découvre un monde. Je retourne ma peau. Je traque l'inconnu.¹⁹

Every act of poetic creation is also a rebirth for the poet; hence the reason for Orphée's return to find his birth certificate. As art is a process of continuous questioning, exploration and discovery, to continue with one form of creation spells death to the creative process; as Orphée tells Heurtebise:

Ma vie commençait à se faisander, à être à point, à puer la réussite et la mort.²⁰

Even though the poet feels the compulsion to seek contact with the forces of the beyond, he is punished for the destruction of the mystery and for coming too close to understanding the supernatural powers working towards his ultimate annihilation:

L'Inconnu n'aime pas les poètes. Il lutte aussi contre les savants et les autres artistes. Mais il redoute davantage les poètes qui devinent et qui parlent. C'est pourquoi beaucoup de poètes meurent jeunes.²¹

Actions in life make the poet suspect and bring about his death: Orphée is decapitated by the Bacchantes. This feeling of persecution creates the feeling of constriction in the real world and causes Orphée

¹⁹Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 24.

²⁰Ibid, p. 24.

²¹Cocteau, Préfaces, Cavalier de Frise par Jean le Roy, O.C., X, 295.

to collaborate with his death:

La vie me taille Heurtebise!...Il faut que j'accepte,
que je me tienne tranquille, que je l'aide, que je
collabore, que je lui laisse finir son travail.²²

The poet must also be aware of the necessary balance between
the poetic and real worlds. This idea stands as a preface to the play
as it is conveyed in the prologue:

La tragédie dont il [l'auteur] nous a confié les rôles est
d'une marche très délicate...Voici la cause de ma requête:
nous jouons très haut et sans filet de secours. Le moindre
bruit intempestif risque de nous faire tuer, mes camarades et
moi.²³

In essence, therefore, the characters are acting on a tightrope.

Le "fil" sur lequel Orphée et Eurydice danseront le ballet
de leur destinée est tendu entre deux mondes. Le premier
est le monde du visible, du quotidien terne. Le seconde celui
de l'invisible auquel accèdent seuls les êtres privilégiés
capable de briser ce qui les sépare de l'invisible.²⁴

It is this idea of balance that Cocteau himself gives as the reason for
choosing this myth. He states that as his mental work is that of a
lame man, with one foot in life and another in death, he is quite
naturally drawn to a myth in which life and death meet face to face.²⁵

In the drama, Orphée loses his balance, sending Eurydice back
to the underworld, and later, he himself falls to his death:

J'ai dû tomber du balcon. J'ai dû tomber de très haut,
de très haut, très haut sur la tête.²⁶

Not only must the poet submit to this external physical destruction,

²²Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 77.

²³Ibid, p. 17.

²⁴Eva Kushner, Le Mythe Orphique dans la littérature française
contemporaine (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1961), p. 179.

²⁵André Fraigneau, Cocteau on the Film, translated by Vera Trail
(New York: Roy Publishers, 1954), p. 101.

²⁶Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 79.

but also to that of his own work:

Il en résulte que mon oeuvre me mange, qu'elle commence à vivre et que je meurs.²⁷

Thus his entire existence is a life of relentless torture and death.

Même si elle semble agréable, la vie d'un poète est la chose atroce, elle passe dans les supplices et il n'en peut éviter un.²⁸

It is only after his death that the poet's intuition of his ultimate destiny will become totally realized.

...seule la mort nous introduit totalement dans l'au-delà. Si le miroir est la porte de la mort quand elle veut pénétrer dans notre monde, il est vrai aussi que l'autre côté du miroir ne peut être éteint qu'en marchant derrière la mort.²⁹

The poet is capable of communication with the beyond by means of his poetic creation, as poetry results from a feeling of uneasiness in life:

Le confort tue. L'inconfort crée. Je parle de l'inconfort matériel et spirituel.³⁰

As the poet carries his poetry within himself, he carries his own destiny, being at once victim of himself and the external forces.

Orphée's true destiny is the immortality of his art, his life becomes his art, his life is his poetry:

Que pense le marbre dans lequel un sculpteur taille un chef-d'oeuvre: Il pense: on me frappe, on m'abîme, on m'insulte, on me brise, je suis perdu. Ce marbre est idiot. La vie me taille, Heurtebise! Elle fait un chef-d'oeuvre.³¹

²⁷Cocteau, Opium, O.C., X, 93.

²⁸Cocteau, Secrets de la Beauté, O.C., X, 346.

²⁹Cocteau, "Les Choses d'infini", La Table Ronde, 85 (1955), 34.

³⁰Cocteau, Le Mystère laïc, O.C., X, 63.

³¹Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 77.

Nevertheless, the plastic expression of the poet's art survives time, moreso than does the artist; it is his claim to immortality:

Or toute la noblesse de l'oeuvre dont parle Vasari vient de ce contre-ample, de cet acte de présence de l'artiste par lequel il s'affirme et s'écrit au travers des siècles: ce cheval est un prétexte. Il m'empêche de mourir. Je suis là.³²

The form that artistic creation takes, however, is of minimal importance:

Créer: tuer autour de soi tout ce qui empêche de se projeter dans le temps par l'entremise d'une apparence quelconque, l'intérêt de cette apparence n'était qu'un subterfuge pour se rendre visible après sa mort.³³

Cocteau suggests that new forms of art may help the poet further his communication with the beyond. This was fundamentally the purpose of his aesthetic of poésie de théâtre, to awaken his audience to the mystery that is visible in the everyday world; for Cocteau there is a "modern mythology" which, simply because we are actively immersed in it, is not apparent until he reveals it to us. As he states in the Préface de 1922 for Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, "Puisque ces mystères nous dépassent, feignons d'en être l'organisateur."³⁴ This is the rôle of the poet, and specifically Cocteau's own rôle in the theatre.

Le poète doit sortir objets et sentiments de leurs voiles et de leurs brumes, les montrer soudain, si nus et si vite, que l'homme a peine à les reconnaître. Ils frappent alors avec leur jeunesse, comme s'ils n'étaient jamais devenus des vieillards officiels.³⁵

Cocteau's own artistic doctrine is underlined by a modernity of approach using any channel of communication of which modern media were capable.

³²Cocteau, Opium, O.C., X, 77.

³³Ibid, p. 91.

³⁴Cocteau, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, Préface de 1922, O.C., VII, 12. Hereafter Préface de 1922.

³⁵Ibid, p. 12.

Aujourd'hui, c'est notre effort de contradiction qui commence sa fin de course. Car la nouveauté...ne saurait être que la recherche d'une place fraîche sur l'oreiller. La place fraîche se réchauffe vite et la place chaude retrouve sa fraîcheur.³⁶

The poet dramatist unveils the inherent mysteries of life:

...poésie et miracle de la vie quotidienne: voilà ma pièce...
Dans notre spectacle je réhabilite le lieu commun.³⁷

It is this modernity that Cocteau stresses in the presentation of Orphée. By casting the myth in a modern context, he effectively gives a concrete manifestation of poetic destiny by giving abstract notions heretofore latently known but not apparent to the audience, a physical form.

With the exception of Orphée and Eurydice, all of the characters are personifications of the supernatural, in essence the agents of Orphée's fate. In the notes for the costuming Cocteau demands "Orphée et Eurydice en tenues de campagne, les plus simples, les plus invisibles."³⁸ By "invisible" Cocteau means commonplace and inconspicuous. These two characters must be made to appear completely human, and recognizable as such to the audience, as opposed to the remainder who are normally invisible abstractions made visible by Cocteau.

The most striking personification is that of death itself:

La Mort est 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.³⁹

³⁶Cocteau, La Machine à écrire, Preface, O.C., VIII, 13.

³⁷Cocteau, Préface de 1922, O.C., VII, 13.

³⁸Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 14.

³⁹Ibid, p. 14.

It is possible to contrast her appearance with that in medieval allegory:

La Mort fait allusion ici à l'image que se formait d'elle le Moyen Age dans les mystères, image depuis longtemps périmée. Le spectre médiéval fait place aujourd'hui à un personnage civilisé. L'au-delà prend un visage humain...un trait commun entre cette personnification de la mort et celle courante du Moyen Age est l'effort pour rendre plus familier l'au-delà.⁴⁰

La Mort justifies her appearance:

Il y a encore une semaine vous pensiez que j'étais un squelette avec un suaire et une faux. Vous vous représentiez un croquemitaine, un épouvantail...Si, si, si. Tous le croient. Mais mon pauvre garçon, si j'étais comme les gens veulent me voir, ils me verraient. Et je dois entrer chez eux sans être vue.⁴¹

Cocteau wishes to remove the unfamiliarity from death by making her visible to the audience; nonetheless she remains invisible to the characters on stage: to consummate the end of Eurydice's existence La Mort covers the mirror, the gateway to the domain of death, and also blindfolds herself. By this gesture she implies her invisibility in a "mirror image", that is, if she cannot see, by implication she cannot be seen. When Orphée returns, he does not believe that Eurydice is dead; he believes that he can see her, seated close to the bed, but it is only by looking through Heurtebise's panes of glass that he can do so. In reality Eurydice is already in the domain of death and like death, has become invisible to human perception.

By virtue of this personification, Cocteau presents the audience with a physical demonstration of the final destiny of common man: his

⁴⁰Kushner, op. cit., p. 195.

⁴¹Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 47-48.

own death. The fact that death is a constant companion to man is made clear by Heurtebise when he speaks of the mirror:

Je vous livre le secret des secrets. Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la Mort va et vient. Ne le dites à personne. Du reste, regardez-vous toute votre vie dans une glace et vous verrez la Mort travailler comme des abeilles dans une ruche de verre.⁴²

Notwithstanding, the destiny of the true poet is not death but immortality; hence Orphée passes through the fate of common man to that of the true poet, but only after realizing that he must renounce the human world and be reborn through suffering.

Among the mysterious forces surrounding Orphée, some are obstacles that he must overcome to achieve his true vocation. Before finding the horse Orphée was the most popular poet in Thrace, and his poetry was loved and appreciated by all. Bewitched by the horse, however, he is led to sacrifice his fortune, his glory and even his happiness, since the horse causes Eurydice's death. The horse is the first agent of fate, basically satanic, since it brings about suffering. Nevertheless it can be seen as indirectly benevolent in that it brings Orphée into contact with a new zone of his being. The horse is essentially a disruptive force that alters the pattern of Orphée's existence, and sets the drama in motion. As Orpheus was able to charm beasts by his singing in the original myth, so there is irony in having Orphée charmed by a beast. Here Cocteau is using another "mirror image", following the principle of inversion and reversal.

⁴²Ibid, p. 58.

It is Heurtebise who, in an ambivalent capacity, is the most active agent of fate. Heurtebise is sent from the other world beyond human perception as Orphée and Eurydice's guardian angel,⁴³ and as an angel possesses wings in the shape of panes of glass strapped to his back. He is by earthly profession a glazier who comes daily to repair the broken windows in Orphée's villa. The fact that he is a glazier is significant: in Heurtebise Cocteau presents the audience with an animated form of glass, and as glass is related to mirrors, a physical manifestation of the gateway into the realm of death. On this specific day, it is Orphée who breaks a window. This gesture acts as a foreshadowing of his sojourn into the realm of death through the mirror. Nevertheless, Heurtebise appears in his capacity as an agent of the other world with poison for the horse and unknowingly, a poisoned envelope for Eurydice from the Bacchantes.

When Orphée returns to find his birth certificate, he takes the chair from beneath Heurtebise who remains suspended in mid-air; although Eurydice realizes that Heurtebise is not human, rather supernatural, Orphée does not.⁴⁴

Le poète ne sait pas encore que le signe d'élection est sur lui. La lévitation...constitue aux yeux de Cocteau un symbole de la grâce, le signe d'élection de certains saints.⁴⁵

It is Heurtebise who instructs Orphée how to retrieve Eurydice from La

⁴³The character of the angel Heurtebise first appeared in Cocteau's poem L'Ange Heurtebise in 1922, when Cocteau felt himself "possessed" by an angel, an external force governing his own life.

⁴⁴Eurydice states: "Je vous croyais de ma race, vous êtes de celle du cheval." Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 40.

⁴⁵Kushner, op.cit., p. 192.

Mort, and who explains to him the workings of the supernatural: the mirror and the gloves. Finally, it is Heurtebise who leads Orphée and Eurydice back into the room, into the new world, in the last scene.

Perhaps more important at this stage than these characters, are the objects and elements of the décor which act as agents of fate. Cocteau in the directions for the setting writes:

C'est un curieux salon. Il ressemble pas mal aux salons des prestidigateurs. Malgré le ciel d'avril et sa lumière franche, on devine ce salon cerné par des forces mystérieuses. Même les objets familiers ont un air suspect...On ne pourrait ajouter ou supprimer une chaise, distribuer autrement les ouvertures, car ce décor est un décor utile où le moindre détail joue son rôle comme les appareils d'un numéro d'acrobates.⁴⁶

The accessory elements express essential ideas and as such become an integral part of the actual drama. The scene becomes the meeting point of the visible and the invisible, a fusion of concrete objects with abstract notions. The words are not only expressed, but they become real and as such become action.

Au reste, ce décor épouse les personnages et les événements d'une manière aussi naïve et aussi dure que modèle et toile peinte mélangeant sur le camaïeu des cartes-portraites.⁴⁷

The stylized horse becomes Orphée's imagination, his inspiration. The mirror becomes the doorway to the other world. The machinery used in the "operation" by La Mort is a concretization of the process of death which created an impact of immediacy for the audience. By using materials familiar to the mechanized twentieth century, Cocteau creates his own

⁴⁶Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 15-16.

⁴⁷Ibid, p. 16.

allegory for the process of death, and as he does so in contemporary terminology, the idea of death is imparted all the more strongly.

A purely conjectural although plausible assumption might be that the thread that La Mort cuts is a symbol for the thread of human life: here again is the image of the tightrope upon which we walk our precarious path of existence, on either side the unknown. When the thread is cut, Eurydice dies and her soul, in the form of a dove, is set free. Nevertheless, since the play deals not only with death but also with rebirth, specifically poetic creation, this thread could also be a symbol of rebirth for Eurydice: the umbilical cord cut from her everyday earthly life that allows her to be reborn into the world of poetry into which she will guide Orphée.

The gloves that Orphée dons to follow Eurydice belong to La Mort and as such are the password into her domain. They are the means by which, in conjunction with the mirror, the two worlds are brought together. Orphée's gesture in putting them on signifies his voluntary approach to his own death.

Nous retrouvons le thème fondamental de la pièce: que le poète doit revêtir la mort afin de se rapprocher de sa "ligne" qui est la volonté de Dieu [destin] pour lui.⁴⁸

Cocteau had referred to gloves in an earlier work:

Vous savez ce que je nomme les "gants du ciel". Le ciel pour nous toucher sans se salir met parfois les gants...lorsque le ciel ôte sa main, c'est la mort. Prendre cette mort pour

⁴⁸Kushner, op. cit., p. 199.

une mort véritable serait confondre un gant vide avec
une main coupée.⁴⁹

Since it is part of the costume of La Mort that Orphée puts on, he is made partially insubstantial and hence able to pass through the mirror, as Heurtebise tells him:

Avec ces gants vous traversez les miroirs comme de l'eau.⁵⁰

Orphée's passage through the mirror is a step on his journey towards his own immortality which had been predestined and is foreshadowed in physical terms by the empty pedestal in the room. His voyage to the other world is but another aspect of his destiny.

After Orphée returns from the beyond with Eurydice, the phrase of the horse has become physical action and is complete. Nevertheless Orphée is not allowed to keep Eurydice, he cannot go on living a lie: he accidentally looks at her and she disappears once again. It is at this point that Heurtebise gives him Aglaonice's letter and Cocteau notes that "l'enôûtement du cheval est fini. Orphée se transfigure."⁵¹ Orphée realizes his ultimate vocation and the test for which he has been destined, for which no artificial means of evasion exists. The mirror which had been soft before is now hard; the death that awaits him now is his own death, at the hands of the Bacchantes. His acceptance is neither resigned nor passive; he does not wish to resemble the inert marble in the sculptor's hands, and the action that he takes, completes his destiny as a poet - his own

⁴⁹Cocteau, Lettre à Jacques Maritain, O.C., IX, 274-275.

⁵⁰Cocteau, Orphée, O.C., V, 58.

⁵¹Ibid, p. 99.

death will become the chef-d'oeuvre of his terrestrial life.

It is significant to note that after Orphée's death, his rebirth is in his own home, which looks exactly the same but transposed into heaven - essentially immortalized. The "paradise" to which Orphée and Eurydice had aspired was not something ethereal or distant, but immediately at hand, but up until this time enveloped by an enchantment which they had to dispel to attain illumination.

* * *

Cocteau's last dramatic work for the stage based on a Greek source is La Machine Infernale, which was completed in 1932 and first produced in 1934. The central theme of the work is the conflict between man's illusion of his freedom and the implacable governing forces of destiny exterior to this illusion as exemplified by the Oedipus myth. Whereas in Orphée, Cocteau had used the original myth to explain an aesthetic principle, here he uses the myth for its own end, to explain a universal human condition. In contrast to the efforts of concentration seen in Antigone, here the original is greatly expanded. The first three acts are dramatically Cocteau's own invention, or the original Greek narrative dramatized. Only the last act is based on Sophocles' text of Oedipus Rex.

Just as in Antigone, the traditional element of the chorus is present in the character of La Voix. Whereas in Antigone Le Choeur took part in the spoken text of the drama, here La Voix gives a series of prologues for each act, marking the stages in the annihilation process which is dramatized on stage, foretelling what is to come about. In hearing the story beforehand, the spectator is placed on the level of the gods, and as such he views the play from the point of view of destiny.

By its very nature the play does not reveal a traditional tragic vision but rather a particular conception of destiny very near to fatalism, wherein the best a man can do is to live "as if" he were capable of controlling his fate, living his life on his own terms, deluding himself that he is able to do so. Here there is an echo of "Puisque ces mystères nous dépassent, feignons d'en être l'organisateur."⁵² As the photographer in Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel arbitrarily organizes his poses to make a lovely picture, so too man, who cannot comprehend the beyond, organizes his life, presenting a picture, a mirror as it were, of what he believes to be his life and his fate.

Cocteau presents us with a view of a hostile universe in which the gods are malevolent, and man is but a victim of their machinations. Nevertheless man's weaknesses, his pride in himself, his egocentricity and his refusal to accept a higher order cause him to revolt and delude himself:

L'homme est infirme. Je veux dire qu'il est limité par des dimensions qui le finissent et l'empêchent de comprendre l'infini où les dimensions n'existent pas...l'éternité ne saurait avoir été devenir, qu'elle est fixe en quelque sorte, qu'elle est qu'elle se contente d'être que les minutes valent des siècles et les siècles des minutes et qu'il n'y a ni minutes ni siècles, mais une immobilité vibrante, grouillante, terrifiante, contre laquelle son orgueil se cabre, au point qu'il en était arrivé à croire que son habitude était le seul et qu'il en était le roi. ...C'est sa lutte contre un pessimisme compréhensible qui l'a fait inventer quelques jeux pour se distraire pendant son voyage entre la naissance et la mort.⁵³

⁵²Cocteau, Préface de 1922, O.C., VII, 12.

⁵³Cocteau, Journal d'un Inconnu (Paris: Grasset, 1953), p. 26-28.

La Machine Infernale illustrates the conflict between the human delusions of control of one's fate and the all-powerful waiting destiny that allows one to play at such a rôle. In the prologue for Act I *La Voix* explains the implications of the title:

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.⁵⁴

What we witness is the tortuous unwinding of this spring as it shuts the trap of Oedipe's fate.

The play is so structured that dramatic unity results from a repetition of the same symbolic action in the first three acts with a resolution of that action in the final act. In acts I, II, and III, the individual is confronted with a force which seeks to inhibit his impulses and prevent the tragic action from being accomplished. This force is personified in the characters of the ghost of Laius, the Sphinx and Tirésias in the first three acts respectively. All three of these characters are agents of fate and ironically by warning Jocaste and Oedipe against their destiny, unwittingly force them forwards to meet it.

The ghost of Laius appears on the ramparts of Thebes to warn Jocaste against the coming of Oedipe in a parody of the famous rampart scene from Hamlet. Nevertheless, neither Jocaste, Tirésias, nor the general are able to see this apparition. In Cocteau's theatre the supernatural forces only present themselves bodily to a select few: the young and pure in heart who are still susceptible to poetry and imagination and who believe in their existence and presence.

⁵⁴Cocteau, La Machine Infernale, O.C., V, 189.

The soldiers with their rough boyish innocence, can see the ghost. But the priests, the kings and queens, the generals are blind to the truth which is seen only by the simple and the pure in heart.⁵⁵

In the second act it is the Sphinx who, in the guise of a young girl in white, is not recognized by the matron nor by Oedipe. Here one can see the resemblance between the figure of La Mort in Orphée and the Sphinx; both of them are supernatural figures, but they are portrayed as beautiful young women.

In this act Cocteau shows that, just as in human life, the superior agents of fate also have their own hierarchy in which they themselves are victims of yet higher forces. It is Anubis who acts as the mouthpiece here:

Obéissons. Le mystère a ses mystères. Les dieux possèdent leurs dieux. Nous avons les nôtres. Ils ont les leurs. C'est ce qui s'appelle l'infini.⁵⁶

Much in the same manner as La Mort had explained her appearance in Orphée, Anubis proceeds to explain their appearance:

Je répondrai que la logique nous oblige, pour apparaître aux hommes, à prendre l'aspect sous lequel il nous représentent; sinon, ils ne verraient que du vide.⁵⁷

While on earth, the agents of fate are susceptible to human emotions and failings, and hence Anubis must accompany the Sphinx to watch over her:

...que nos maîtres prouvent leur sagesse et m'incarnent sous une forme inhumaine qui m'empêche de perdre la tête, fût-elle une tête de chien; car j'ai votre garde, et je devine que, s'ils ne vous avaient donné un chien de garde, nous serions à l'heure actuelle à Thèbes, moi en laisse et vous assise au milieu d'une bande de jeunes gens...⁵⁸

⁵⁵Neal Oxenhandler, Scandal and Parade, The Theatre of Jean Cocteau (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1957), p. 131. Hereafter Scandal and Parade.

⁵⁶Cocteau, La Machine Infernale, O.C., V, 238.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 239.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 240.

Nevertheless the Sphinx is tired of this rôle and succumbs to her human emotions in falling in love with Oedipe and telling him the answer to the riddle.

J'en ai assez de tuer. J'en ai assez de donner la mort...Voilà le voeu que je forme et les circonstances dans lesquelles il me serait possible de monter une dernière fois sur mon socle. Un jeune homme gravirait la colline. Je l'aimerais. Il n'aurait aucune crainte. A la question que je pose il répondrait comme un égal. Il ré-pon-drait Anubis et je tomberais morte.⁵⁹

In essence she disobeys the higher powers and as such is punished by having to die, just as any other mortal, and her return to the other world is obligatory. It is exactly her human failings that cause her to hasten Oedipe's destiny, which, ironically, she tries to prevent. The timing of her fatigue is dramatically significant. Cocteau brings together the Sphinx and Oedipe at a time when there is a major alteration in the progression of events. Up until the encounter with Oedipe, the Sphinx had not shown any indications of human weakness; suddenly she is tired of her rôle. This results in an unexpected turn of events that is necessary for the drama to develop. This dramatic technique can be seen in the dramas of Racine: in nearly all of his works the drama opens with such a crisis. The feelings that provoke it have been latently existent long before the play commences and Racine begins his dramas at the moment when the true feelings can no longer be held back. This eruption menaces the existing order of an already precarious situation and precipitates the characters towards their tragic fate.

The scene with Anubis and the Sphinx is also important for the

⁵⁹Ibid, p. 249.

illustration of another fatalistic aspect: that of time. Just as man plays the rôle of his life, not only are his actions governed by the gods, but also the time span which is allotted him to be able to do so, is meted out by the higher forces. In the prologue we are told that "Pour que les dieux s'amuse beaucoup, il importe que leur victime tombe de haut."⁶⁰ Hence the forces of destiny are willing to wait as man plays out his rôle to achieve earthly goals and then they crush down with a ferocious force. For the gods, time as the human race knows it, does not exist. Anubis extemporizes on this notion, speaking in terms of a piece of cloth folded many times and punctured with a single pin-prick. When the cloth is unfolded, with all of the creases removed, a human would not realize that all of the perforations were created by one single pin. He concludes:

Le temps pour nous est de l'éternité pliée. Pour nous, il n'existe pas. De sa naissance à sa mort la vie d'Oedipe s'étale, sous mes yeux, plate, avec sa suite d'épisodes.⁶¹

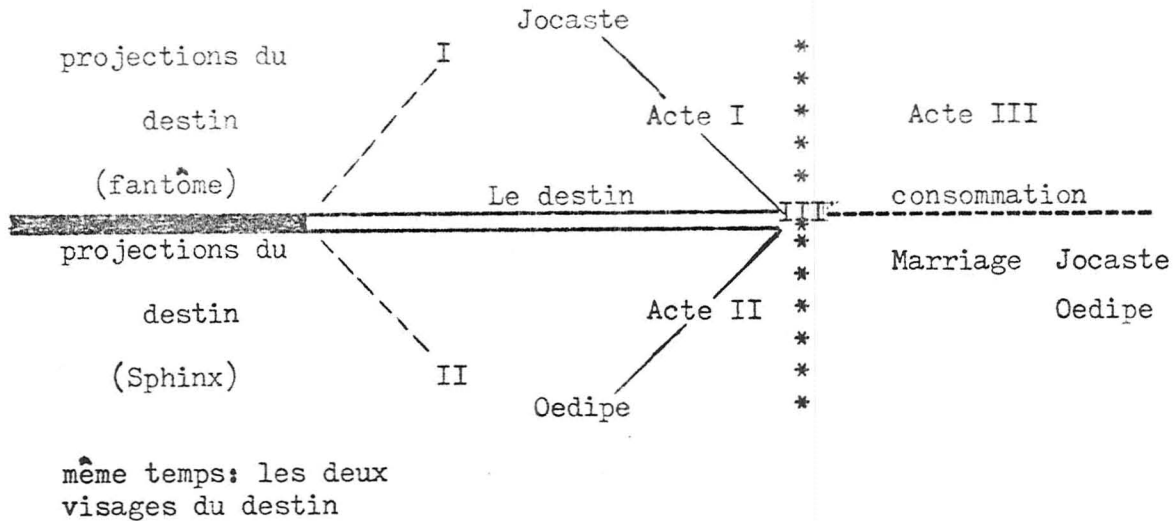
Hence what will appear to be half a lifetime in the life of Oedipe, is no more than an instant for the forces of the beyond.

According to Paul Ginestier, the first two acts are intended to represent two simultaneous projections of destiny to Jocaste and Oedipe respectively. Taken further, this is also a cinematographic technique, here used to full advantage by Cocteau. It is only by hindsight that the spectator realizes that Laius' final appeals for

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 189.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 271.

assistance end at the point where Oedipe kills the Sphinx. Ginestier has concisely portrayed this simultaneous projection in chart form.⁶²



Overriding the two supernatural apparitions, Jocaste and Oedipe marry, but it is Tirésias who, in one last appeal on their wedding night, attempts to prevent the consummation of their incestuous relationship. Although Tirésias is a mortal, by virtue of his physical blindness, he possesses a second sight which enables him to look into the future:

Mes yeux de chair s'éteignent au bénéfice d'un ciel intérieur,
d'un oeil qui rend d'autres services.⁶³

By looking into Tirésias' blind eyes Oedipe is able to see only as far as a happy future and a family until he is momentarily blinded, this being a foreshadowing of his own eventual blindness and tragic fate. Here, just as in *Orphée*, Cocteau is using a mirror image as a means of foreshadowing and

⁶²Paul Ginestier, *Le Théâtre Contemporain dans le monde* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), p. 192.

⁶³Cocteau, *La Machine Infernale*, O.C., V, 208.

as a connection with the other world of death.

Despite these three very clear projections of disaster, the characters of Oedipe and Jocaste will not let themselves be diverted from their illusion; Jocaste is a victim of fear and Oedipe a victim of his proud and egotistical nature, and both simply refuse to see the truth.

Just as in Orphée, not only are characters agents of fate, but the physical objects surrounding the "victims" take on fatalistic connotations. In the first act we are made aware of Jocaste's physical fear of the objects that surround her, specifically her scarf upon which Tirésias unwittingly treads:

Vous marchez sur mon écharpe...Encore il se vexe! Mais ce n'est pas contre toi que j'en ai...C'est contre cette écharpe! Je suis entourée d'objets qui me détestent! Tout le jour cette écharpe m'étrangle. Une fois, elle s'accroche aux branches, une autre fois c'est le moyeu d'un char où elle s'enroule, une autre fois, tu marches dessus. C'est un fait exprès. Et je la crains, je n'ose pas m'en séparer. C'est affreux! Elle me tuera.⁶⁴

This statement becomes even more ironic when the young soldier steps upon the scarf and Jocaste immediately forgives him. This is important not only dramatically for the foreshadowing of her relationship with Oedipe, but also psychologically, since it shows Jocaste's penchant for young men, especially those who bring to mind her son.

Another object, again part of Jocaste's costume, is her magnificent brooch which "crève l'œil de tout le monde."⁶⁵ In the second act it is

⁶⁴Ibid, p. 209.

⁶⁵Ibid, p. 221.

Anubis who foretells the effect of this brooch on Oedipe:

Beaucoup d'hommes naissent aveugles et ils ne s'en aperçoivent que le jour où une bonne vérité leur crève les yeux.⁶⁶

Since both of these objects are part of Jocaste's costume, once again the spectator is made aware of the fact that the characters carry destiny with them through their entire lives. This is seen also at the end of the second act when Oedipe places the body of the Sphinx over his shoulder, and in the third when the Sphinx gives him her belt. Here Cocteau has used costume to present a concrete material form of the characters' abstract fate.

It is in the third act that the closing in of destiny is most flagrantly displayed and the characters' unwillingness to see it is almost unbearable. At the beginning of the third act La Voix states:

Ils dorment debout, et malgré quelque signe d'intelligence et de politesse du destin, le sommeil les empêchera de voir la trappe qui se ferme sur eux pour toujours.⁶⁷

These numerous obvious signs, the implications of which are lost on Jocaste and Oedipe, include her seeing the wounds on his feet,⁶⁸ the beggar's song⁶⁹, the never-ending murmuring of the fountain⁷⁰, their two nightmares in which each relives the preceding two acts⁷¹, and finally Jocaste's awareness of her age as she looks into the mirror.⁷² Their

⁶⁶Ibid, p. 278.

⁶⁷Ibid, p. 281.

⁶⁸Ibid, p. 312. "Elle le déchausse...Soudain elle pousse un cri terrible...Elle recule, regarde les pieds d'Oedipe comme une folle."

⁶⁹Ibid, p. 319.

⁷⁰Ibid, p. 281. "On n'entend plus...que le bruit d'une fontaine."

⁷¹Ibid, p. 304.

⁷²Ibid, p. 319.

true family relationship is also emphasized when Oedipe reveals his desire for a maternal love to Tirésias:

T.:Aimez-vous la prendre dans vos bras?

O.:J'aime surtout qu'elle me prenne dans les siens...Je vais vous répondre que j'ai toujours rêvé d'un amour de ce genre, d'un amour presque maternel.⁷³

Other similar indications are found in the dialogue between Jocaste and Oedipe, where the terms of endearment are those of a mother and her child: "quel enfant"⁷⁴, "mon petit garçon chéri"⁷⁵, and "ma petite mère chérie"⁷⁶, and finally in Jocaste's actions of rocking the cradle upon which Oedipe has placed his head:

Il se couche en travers du lit, appuyant sa tête sur le bord du berceau.⁷⁷

...
Elle berce le sommeil d'Oedipe en remuant doucement le berceau.⁷⁸

Not only are the characters' speeches and actions full of portent, but the entire mise en scène confirms this impression and creates an atmosphere of tension throughout the work. The notes for the décor give specific indications for the setting:

Les quatre décors seront plantés sur une petite estrade au centre de la scène, entourée de toiles nocturnes.⁷⁹

⁷³Ibid, p. 292.

⁷⁴Ibid, p. 311.

⁷⁵Ibid, p. 286.

⁷⁶Ibid, p. 311.

⁷⁷Ibid, p. 317.

⁷⁸Ibid, p. 319.

⁷⁹Ibid, p. 189.

Fergusson seizes the significance of the setting:

The visible arrangement of the stage itself presents a scene-within-a-scene: all that goes on upon the lighted platform in the centre feels as contemporary as the newspaper, while the infernal machine slowly unrolls behind the "nocturnal curtains."⁸⁰

Hence the audience is made aware of the double drama.

In the first act upon the ramparts of Thebes, the eerie atmosphere is created by the strange mercurial light, the flashes of lightning and thunder as well as the references to the gaseous atmosphere. This is intensified by the sounds of music coming from the distant nightclubs. Obviously the city is in a state of unrest and there is a feeling of foreboding.

In the second act we are presented with an unexpected picture of Greece: the desert and almost savage desolation; Dickinson points out that

Cocteau should be credited with the theatrical conception of a barbaric Greece, to supersede the neo-classic view in which Greece was "represented as a white column."⁸¹

This idea had been put forth by Cocteau himself in the notes for Oedipe Roi:

On se présente toujours la Grèce comme une colonne blanche. Imaginez maintenant un lieu brûlé, aride, sous un ciel farouche. Des murs de pierre, des murs de brique, des grilles, des égouts, des chambres basses, des portes secrètes des métamorphoses, la peste.⁸²

In essence it is Cocteau's portrayal of a universe hostile to man:

Emplacement idéal pour les dieux qui aiment bâtir et poser les pièges.⁸³

⁸⁰ Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 210.

⁸¹ Hugh Dickinson, Myth on the Modern Stage (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 97.

⁸² Cocteau, Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 103.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 103.

To keep the notion of simultaneous action between the first two acts, the lighting and sound effects are retained:

Mêmes sonneries de trompettes, même lune, mêmes étoiles, mêmes coqs.⁸⁴

The third act also takes place at night, but now indoors, specifically in Jocaste's bedroom, which is bathed in a blood red light with its obvious implications of death and bloodshed as well as the family bond between Jocaste and Oedipe. It is only in the last act that the lighting changes, but stays harsh; as Cocteau stipulates, "lumière de peste."⁸⁵

It is in the last act that all becomes illuminated and the truth is brought forth. The shepherd and messenger, both bearers of bad tidings in traditional Greek tragedy, appear and divulge their message; Jocaste hangs herself with her scarf and Oedipus blinds himself with her brooch. Ironically, after losing his physical sight, he is capable of true insight, recognizes his destiny, and hence is transfigured. Here once again the hero has reached the other side of the mirror. The established order of the human relationship returns when the ghost of Jocaste appears not as Oedipe's wife, but in the capacity of his mother. The divine order is reinstated and the machine grinds to a halt.

In the original Greek version, the events that determine the king's fate have already happened before the play begins. The spectator's attention is chiefly engaged by two things: the gradual accumulation of the evidence in the search for the slayer of Laius and more important,

⁸⁴Cocteau, La Machine Infernale, O.C., V, 235.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 326.

the hero's agon as he blindly but surely rushes toward the moment of revelation which he seeks to avoid.

The structure of the play is a reversal of Cocteau's aim of extreme concision. For the three acts preceding Oedipe's recognition of his doom, Cocteau invents episodes to dramatize the antecedent action, then expands and elaborates them. The nucleus of Sophocles' play is only the preparation of the climax of his own.

The prevailing humorous tone of the drama acts as a humanizing force on the myth, bringing it closer to modern-day comprehension. The humour provides a contrast rather than dissipates the solemnity; it lightens the tragic effect by intensifying the human angle of the play. Jocaste is presented as an amusing cosmopolitan, flirting with any available young man, an attitude which contrasts sharply with her terrible fate. The all-powerful Sphinx becomes no more than a jealous girl in love with a flirtatious Oedipe.

Despite the fact that in comparison to the fast-moving Antigone and the equally rapid Orphée, the play may be regarded as repetitive and flaccid,⁸⁶ on the other hand, Cocteau must constantly foreshadow the future

⁸⁶Dickinson, op. cit., p. 99. Although the drama appears to be slow-moving, it is this that creates the tension in the spectator; with respect to the first act Kihm writes: "Dès La Machine Infernale, soucieux sans doute de faire passer auprès de l'habituel public de théâtre une action qui, dépouillée à l'extrême, l'eût trop violemment dépaycé, l'auteur consent à intercaler ce qu'il appellera plus tard, à propos de Shakespeare, les longues nécessaires. (Jean Marais, 118) Ainsi tout le premier acte de la pièce (Le Fantôme) peut être considéré comme une de ces longues destinées à mettre le spectateur dans le bain et à lui permettre l'accès d'un second acte tendu à l'extrême." Jean-Jacques Kihm, Cocteau (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 85.

having to create the supernatural world of the forces which watch us from the other side of death by embodying them in the appropriate demonology.

The Voice, speaking out of time, relating the entire story beforehand, distances the action as well as emphasizes the fact that Oedipe is beaten before he begins, that the universe of the play is both satanic and determinist.

It is this determinism, however, that upsets the equilibrium of conflicting forces forming the tension of traditional drama. The basic forces consist of an "outer necessity" and an "inner freedom"⁸⁷ and if there is to be a significant struggle, it is essential that the two are combined, for, paradoxically, it is their balanced combination, not the omission of one or the other, that produces a sense of inevitability. In a comparison of the rôle of destiny in Greek and Shakespearean drama, Kitto remarks:

Neither here [in Hamlet] nor in Greek drama do we have anything to do with characters who are puppets in the hands of Fate. In both we see something of the power of the gods, or the designs of Providence; but these no more override or reduce to unimportance the natural working of individual character than the existence in the physical world, of universal laws overrides the behaviour of natural bodies. It is indeed precisely in the natural behaviour of men, and its natural results in given circumstances, that the operation of the divine laws can be discerned.⁸⁸

Cocteau's method, however, is different; his inevitability or fate is his own aesthetic creation. Not being philosophical determinism, it is rather its complete antithesis, existing quite apart from it, an aspect of the dramatic

⁸⁷Dickinson, op.cit., p. 101.

⁸⁸H.D.F. Kitto, "Hamlet and Greek Drama", Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and "Hamlet" (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1957), p. 318.

presentation of the doctrine of free will. As Eric Bentley has pointed out:

Dramatists are committed to the doctrine of free will. They can say that they don't believe in it; but they have to write their plays as if they did...People in plays have to be able to make decisions and these decisions have got to be both real and influential: they have to affect events.⁸⁹

In Cocteau's theatre, however, it is destiny that affects the events as the cause of the action, and the characters are no more than victims. Equating determinism with foreknowledge in the development of the action, he robs the characters of the freedom without which they cannot engage the spectators' hopes and fears. Throughout the play there is a tendency to submerge the human character in the elements of the theatre and thereby he diminishes and perhaps depreciates their humanity.

The margin of "freedom" given to the characters is particularly small; thematically it can be seen simply as a refinement of the infernal gods' cruelty, an illusion they permit only because it breeds the human feeling of hope, so as to make the crushing of it more cruel. In the second act there is an apparent momentary defeat of the infernal plan when the Sphinx gives Oedipe the answer to her own riddle; in the third act there are the premonitions of Tirésias and "quelque signe d'intelligence et de politesse du destin"⁹⁰, which mother and son are too weary to heed on the point of the consummation of their marriage. A character acts, only to have his action undone, or is warned only to miss the point of the warning. Thus

⁸⁹ Eric Bentley, "The Making of a Dramatist", Tulane Drama Review, V (1960), 6.

⁹⁰ Cocteau, La Machine Infernale, O.C., V, 281.

the technical device on which the entire play is constructed is that of a double reversal, which is essentially self-cancelling.

In this there is an interesting analogy by contrast to the prophecy in the myth as it appears in Sophocles. The same prophecy was made twice, first to his parents and much later to Oedipe. In each case an attempt was made to outwit it. The effect was mathematical, since two negatives constitute a positive, hence the separate efforts of parents and son to negate the prophecy ironically insured its fulfilment. Beginning the play when part of the prophecy, the killing of Laius, has already been realized, Cocteau contrives actions which threaten to alter or to prevent the closing of the trap but in each case the action is annulled by a counter-action which either returns the situation to its original status or carries it one step further to its pre-ordained goal.

What Cocteau has created is a dramatic conflict between the statement of free will by the characters and the infernal machine of their destiny. Despite the fact that the spectators are aware of the outcome of the play, the strength that the characters possess in their belief in their freedom and the "lapses" by the agents of fate at strategic points, create a feeling of hope in the audience and also excite an interest in the play's progression. One might almost claim that just as the gods are playing with the humans on the stage, so too Cocteau is playing with his audience.

The dramatic conflict is also vital for the rhythm of the work as a whole. At the outset, the machine is wound up to its breaking point; as the spring is released, its unwinding begins. Nevertheless it is not an accumulative process, since the moments of acute tension created

by the manifestation of destiny are balanced and relaxed by the feelings of hope created by the twists in the plot, the lapses by the agents of fate and the almost believable confidence of the human characters in their rôle. The tensions created by the conflict come to a head in the last act when the pace of the unwinding becomes unbearable and there is no room for confidence or hope in the face of crushing reality.

* * *

In using pre-existent mythological material, Cocteau effectively presents not only through the plot structure, but by various dramatic and stage techniques, the conflict of common man against the ruling forces beyond human comprehension. The narrative outline of the myth is well-adapted to concrete visual drama. It is the "modernity" of Cocteau's adaptations however, that is the most striking. In Antigone we are made aware of our own age by the play's brevity, the idea of a "bird's eye view" of the tragedy and the immense speed at which the drama unfolds. In Orphée, the myth is definitely transposed in time, and the elements of the magical and marvellous are hidden under simple everyday modern objects, in modern speech, décor, and costume. This contemporaneity effectively produces a shock in the spectator, and doubtless it was Cocteau's aim to point out that even in our modern scientific world, the unknown is still ever-present but in a new disguise. In La Machine Infernale the modernity is more subtle: it is seen in the dialogues, and in the allusions to our twentieth century society, not only in terms of archetypal characters, but also in the objects that surround them. Cocteau uses the myth as a means of short-circuiting the reasoning faculty, so as to appeal directly

to man's instinctive and sub-rational emotions. He uses it to apply his "poetic vision" to everyday life so that the modern mythology becomes visible to the jaded eye.

The element of the arbitrary which myth introduces into both action and character can be extended to the sense of time. Drama is initially a profound shortening or telescoping of the action that it imitates. In the world of myth that foreshortening can be made yet more acute. Time can be accelerated or slowed by showing existence moving at different rates or on different planes as in Orphée. In La Machine Infernale, by dramatizing the simultaneity of time, the playwright permits the spectator, already god-like in his omniscience, to see a mythical action as it might appear to the gods in timeless contemplation: an action which because it is pre-determined has no before or after in our temporal and material sense.

Despite the fact that dramatists have always been preoccupied with the destiny of man, in Cocteau's works, it is the presentation of the forces of destiny that is not only new, but also important: specifically the idea of giving human characteristics to the supernatural to bring it closer to our perception and also the reversal of this in endowing the commonplace with supernatural powers. With his doctrine of poésie de théâtre, an innovation in itself, Cocteau has created a dramatic universe wherein man is made aware of his predicament in completely comprehensive terms, using an age old myth to present a universal truth, but with an impact that is truly a revelation.

CHAPTER II

DESTINY IN THE MODERN PLAYS

Cocteau's three modern plays, Les Parents Terribles, Les Monstres Sacrés and La Machine à écrire, show in their plot substance and settings influences of the boulevard tradition of French theatre.⁹¹

This tradition had begun in the late nineteenth century with the pièces à thèse, such as those of Alexandre Dumas-fils, and after the disruption of dramatic activity created by the First World War, came back to life as a popular form of theatre whose primary aim was that of entertainment for the masses. These commercial plays adhered to naturalistic conventions in all respects. The purpose of the playwright had become to reproduce as realistically as possible an impression of daily bourgeois life, with an object similar to that of the naturalistic novel: a complete reflection of everyday reality, which for the playgoer was the only reality of consequence. The boulevard tradition can be categorized in terms of dramas, psychological studies of manners and character, comedies and melodrama.

⁹¹For a detailed study of the boulevard theatre, its origins and theatrical conventions, see Pierre Brisson, Le Théâtre des Années folles (Geneva: Editions du Milieu du monde, 1943), specifically Chapter VI, "Le Boulevard et ses environs", pp. 83-110.

The principal subject matter for these dramas concerned itself with amorous and generally adulterous relationships. A stress was placed on the psychological element previously neglected by dramatists, many of whom aimed at character analysis rather than plot, making the elements of character responsible for the dramatic crises. Generally the action was swift moving, with twists in the structure created by the actions or ideas of the characters themselves. Bourdet, speaking of his play le Sexe Faible, declared that his aim was to make his characters act "in character" and not subordinate them to an idea:

the characters should not exist to illustrate a theme; the theme should be the pretext for the creation of the characters who then become autonomous.⁹²

Cocteau himself writes of his memories of the boulevard theatre in the preface for Les Parents Terribles:

Je me souviens d'une époque où le "boulevard" régnait en maître. On ne signait pas une mise en scène. Le naturel de L. Guitry, de Réjane, était le naturel des planches, aussi en relief que les excès des monstres sacrés du drame: Sarah Bernhardt, Mounet-Sully, de Max. A cette époque, je rêvais le théâtre à travers des programmes, des titres, des affiches, les départs de ma mère en robe de velours rouge. J'imaginais un théâtre, et ce théâtre de rêve m'influçait.⁹³

Nevertheless one might be led to wonder at the somewhat abrupt change of medium from the Greek myths and Arthurian legend⁹⁴ to the naturalistic convention in both plot substance and setting. Neal Oxenhandler perceives Cocteau's true aim:

⁹²Cited by Dorothy Knowles, French Drama of the Inter-War Years 1918-1939 (London: George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd., 1967), p. 268.

⁹³Cocteau, Les Parents Terribles, O.C., VII, 85-86.

⁹⁴Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, although completed in 1937, will be dealt with in Chapter III, in conjunction with the historical plays.

The naturalistic convention might be an increased desire on Cocteau's part to communicate, to speak to the public out of a familiar context; perhaps then, by use of this familiar context, making his own personal message more unequivocal.⁹⁵

In Les Parents Terribles, rather than writing a melodrama in the boulevard genre, Cocteau exploits this tradition, as he had done with Greek mythology, by using it as a background in which to portray the same notions of the human predicament as evidenced in the earlier plays, but in the most familiar context to the theatre-going public.

Notwithstanding, it appears that Cocteau may have had more than this for a motive. It cannot be denied that Cocteau's association with great actors of his era, such as Yvonne de Bray and Jean Marais, was instrumental in his writing of rôles with these actors specifically in mind: "A Montargis, j'essayai d'écrire une pièce qui, loin de servir de prétexte à une mise en scène, servirait de prétexte à de grands comédiens."⁹⁶ He also expressed a desire to strip away the excesses of the naturalistic convention: "Je détestais les surcharges. J'en suis arrivé à les éviter toutes. Il fallait écrire une pièce moderne et nue..."⁹⁷

In Les Parents Terribles, Cocteau casts himself in the rôle of a painter of social neuroses:

Dans une pièce moderne le casse-tête me semble de faire un grand jeu et de rester un peintre fidèle d'une société à la dérive.⁹⁸

Essentially Cocteau's play acts in the capacity of a mirror, reflecting

⁹⁵Oxenhandler, Scandal and Parade, p. 184.

⁹⁶Cocteau, Les Parents Terribles, O.C., 86.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 86.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 83.

the psychological state of bourgeois society of the time;

The central conflict of the drama clearly emerges as that of order and disorder:⁹⁹

Deux rôles forment l'équilibre de l'ordre et du désordre qui motivent ma pièce. Le jeune homme dont le désordre est pur; sa tante dont l'ordre ne l'est pas.¹⁰⁰

Already, by the definition of the conflict, we are made aware of the fact that this is not merely Boulevard theatre, but a new milieu for the confrontation of the individual's desire to be free and the forces that prevent his freedom, as seen in the earlier plays.

Nonetheless, remaining true to his rôle as a poet in the act of dévoilement, acting merely as an interpreter of the forces that govern the conflict, Cocteau pleads no moral cause in this work; again this is an indication that the play is not purely Boulevard drama. Many of the plays in this tradition presented an obvious ethical lesson.

J'ai poussé aussi loin que possible une attitude qui m'est propre: celle de rester extérieur à l'oeuvre, de ne défendre aucune cause et de ne pas prendre parti.

Le théâtre doit être une action et non point une bonne ou une mauvaise action. La France ne nous oblige plus à jouer au moraliste et la grande difficulté à vaincre doit être d'obtenir du style, sans aucune recherche de langue et sans perdre le naturel.¹⁰¹

In direct contrast to Bourdet's notion of characters,¹⁰² in very basic terms, all of the characters in Les Parents Terribles, as stated clearly in the preface, can be qualified as either representatives of

⁹⁹This theme is a corollary to that of illusion and reality in Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, c.f. p. 62.

¹⁰⁰Cocteau, Les Parents Terribles, O.C., VII, 84.

¹⁰¹Ibid, p. 84.

¹⁰²c.f. p. 42.

of order, by implication the forces of destiny, or disorder: its victims. The character of Yvonne represents pure disorder at its extreme, and as such, she acts as the reflection of the société à la dérive, drawing together and expressing completely its inherent neuroses. Despite the fact that she is a grown woman, her immaturity is shown in her child-like outlook and attitudes; as Léonie points out: "vous êtes de la race des enfants qui ne cessent jamais de l'être."¹⁰³ Not only is she a neurotic, and hence incapable of living in reality, but she seeks to escape from it by taking drugs and refusing to go out, living in her bedroom, in semi-darkness, surrounded by her disorder, both mental and external. Having neglected her husband for many years, she lives only for her son, and cannot realize that he is now an adult. Like so many of Cocteau's characters, and the false milieu of the société à la dérive which the playwright is depicting, she lives a lie, wanting to remain herself a child and refusing to change. Rather than a mother, she pretends to be a friend to Michel, and has him call her "Sophie". This name is that of the heroine in a book entitled Les Malheurs de Sophie to which Yvonne refers; this is in itself significant since the book also deals with a character who lives in a world of dreams and fantasies. She pretends to play the rôle of a confessor to Michel, and Léonie refers to the bedroom as a confessional.

Her actions and her speeches bear out her falsity: she prefers the room in darkness when the others are about, but does not protest when Michel turns on the light; she puts on make-up in the hope that Michel will come,

¹⁰³Cocteau, Les Parents Terribles, O.C., VII, 100.

and lies to him, telling him that she has done so for George's benefit. After Michel's revelation, she proceeds to throw a tantrum: ironically in her self-pity she foreshadows her own death, her own destiny:

Assassin! Assassin! Tu m'as tordu le poignet. Regarde tes yeux...Ils me tueraient s'ils étaient des armes. Tu voudrais me tuer!¹⁰⁴

She carries her lie with her in agreeing to meet Madeleine, since she does not do so graciously, but meets the idea with silence:

Yvonne, la main sur les yeux, tombe sur le bord du lit, assise, et n'accepte que par sa pose, par son silence.¹⁰⁵

In an inferior position to the others by being seated, she shows that she cannot cope with change, and by placing her hand in front of her eyes she physically demonstrates her unwillingness to do so, to see the reality of the situation.

Because of the intrigue between Léonie and Georges, she is given a momentary respite in believing that she can regain her power over Michel. As in La Machine Infernale, it appears that the superior forces of her destiny are allowing her more time in which to delude herself into hoping that she can control her world as she wishes. This hope is short-lived however, as Michel makes the decision to leave completely; as realization strikes her fully, aware that she is beaten, she commits suicide in the last scene. Her deportment throughout the play demonstrates that she cannot cope outside the world that she has designed for herself.

Georges is also one of the "race des enfants", lost in his useless inventions that show the futility of the société à la dérive. Like

¹⁰⁴Ibid, p. 135.

¹⁰⁵Ibid, p. 158.

Yvonne, he also lives a lie: his affair with Madeleine bears out this deceit. Not only does he lie to her about himself, but he hides his clandestine relations from his family. He is also a victim of disorder: although his death is not necessitated, ultimately he will succumb to Léo's order. Throughout the drama he is duped by Michel, who takes his mistress, by Madeleine who takes his money, by Yvonne in their non-existent relationship and finally Léonie who had had intentions on him long before the drama began. In Georges the trait of immaturity is also present, although not in as extreme a manifestation as in Yvonne. He is very weak and easily taken in by any stronger temperament: like Yvonne, he refuses to see the truth and when it is shown him, he reacts violently.

Léonie is the most formidable figure in the family, as Dubourg points out:

Léo est le plus terrible et le plus dangereux des trois, en étant en même temps la victime, le bourreau et la sauveur des personnages de la pièce. Elle noue et dénoue l'intrigue de la pièce. Elle est l'intermédiaire de la fatalité.¹⁰⁶

Cocteau himself qualifies Léo as "une femme qui refoule de vieilles larmes et n'aime que déranger le sort afin de le ranger après."¹⁰⁷ Since the death of her and Yvonne's father, she has run the household and established a sort of ordered existence, with herself in the rôle of "guardian angel". She is the representative of order. At the outset of the drama, Michel's sleeping-out is the first menace to this precarious balance. As seen in La Machine Infernale, an act of infraction

¹⁰⁶Dubourg, op. cit., p. 86.

¹⁰⁷Cocteau, Foyer des artistes, O.C., XI, 405.

against order, by implication the superior forces, sets the machine in motion for its unwinding. It is Léonie who interprets these workings. She reveals the truth to Yvonne, not only about Michel, but also about Georges, at once attempting to destroy Yvonne's false sense of security and also to warn her. In her character reside the same ambivalent capacities as seen in Heurtebise: although she tries to help Yvonne, simultaneously she is hurting her. Her presence is of a multiple nature. Although she spins the thread of the intrigue, she twists it when, becoming prey to human emotion, she sympathizes with Madeleine.¹⁰⁸ Once again we are presented with the notion that the forces of destiny on earth are governed by others higher in the hierarchy of superior powers.

Dubourg speaks of her character in the following terms:

Elle croit que le suicide de sa soeur est l'expression d'un ordre suprême. Le désordre d'Yvonne est pur, et l'ordre de Léo est impur. Voilà pourquoi le destin l'a choisi comme interprète dans cette étrange aventure qui se joue entre la roulotte et lui. Il est ici par intermédiaire de Léo, le grand acteur de la pièce, invisible et toujours présent, tels les démons de La Machine. Léo est donc...une transcendance. Elle donne au débat sa dimension tragique. Elle a l'air de commander les fils de l'intrigue mais c'est elle qui est commandée par plus fort qu'elle.¹⁰⁹

Léo is aware of these higher forces when she chastises Georges:

Ne fouille pas trop le coeur, Georges. Il est mauvais de fouiller trop le coeur. Il y a tant dans le coeur. Ne fouille pas trop dans mon coeur, ni dans le tien.¹¹⁰

Madeleine is Léo's younger counterpart, another representative of impure order and it is her force that has set the drama in motion. In the first act the other characters' use of her word "in-croy-able"

¹⁰⁸In this respect she is like the Sphinx; c.f. p. 27.

¹⁰⁹Dubourg, op. cit., p. 94.

¹¹⁰Cocteau, Les Parents Terribles, O.C., 249.

foreshadows her disruption of the household, and although she is exterior to the family, her complicity is accentuated by her liaison with Georges. Nevertheless it is she who is instrumental in bringing Michel out of his disorder, out of the roulotte, out of the société à la dérive, and as such she can be regarded as an agent of his destiny.

The character of Michel is the representation of disorder, but in its pure form, in its youthful state. Michel does not remain static as does his mother, and is the only character who shows hope of development. He leaves the disorder of his home behind him and is attracted to order in the person of Madeleine. This desire is borne out in his actions: he likes to bathe (unlike at home, at Madeleine's the bath is not stopped up) and his physical revolt against disorder can be seen when he kicks Yvonne's bed. When his relationship with Madeleine is broken up because of Léo's intrigue, he states his plans for leaving: after being in contact with an ordered existence, he cannot and will not fall back into disorder. His slamming of the doors throughout the play is not only a sign of disorder inherited from his parents, but also reflective of the neuroses of his social class.

The entire play works toward the death of Yvonne and the re-establishment of true order. We are made aware of the fact that the higher forces are at work from the outset when Yvonne's first attempt at suicide is a failure; again the notion is present that it is destiny which commands the time of death and not the character himself. She is even allowed to return to her delusion that Michel had returned to her. When reality reasserts itself, her reaction is all the more extreme.¹¹¹

¹¹¹Here there is a reminiscence of La Machine Infernale: "Pour que les dieux s'amuse beaucoup, il importe que leur victime tombe de haut." O.C., V, 189.

In the case of Yvonne, the theme of increasing isolation is heavily stressed; already in her illness she is apart from the others and in her tirades that border on the edge of insanity, there is an impression that she is possessed by forces beyond her control.

La folie, signe visible de la possession d'un être par une puissance inconnue, peut être tragique aux mains d'un poète. De même une passion qui s'égale à la folie: les héroïsmes de Racine, par exemple.¹¹²

It is interesting to note that Dubourg mentions Racine. While Cocteau was writing Les Parents Terribles, he had with him at Montargis a copy of Racine's Britannicus, and there is a striking resemblance to Agrippine in the character of Yvonne. Both heroines cannot conceive of losing control of their power to guide the destinies of their sons, and although Michel does not become a monster, a parallel can be distinguished.

In the last act Yvonne completes her isolation; she does not take part in the discussion, showing her mental isolation. She is lying in her bed: a physical manifestation of her feebleness. Her isolation is transmitted into action when, feeling herself to be superfluous, she silently slips into the bathroom and poisons herself. She has realized that her person is de trop, that she cannot fit into the ordered existence that awaits the others apart from her. She is aware of the fact that she is not wanted in their world when she explains her suicide:

Je vous ai vus ensemble...Je vous gênais, je dérangeais les autres...On voulait se débarrasser de moi...On voulait m'évincer...J'ai compris. Je parlerai...¹¹³

¹¹²Dubourg, op. cit., p. 91. He continues speaking of both sisters as being possessed and draws a parallel: "Toutes deux sont hantées, possédées: l'une par la folie, l'autre par le Destin qui la travaille. Elles sont hors d'elles-mêmes. Les voilà devenues des machines à dire la vérité." Ibid., p. 95.

¹¹³Cocteau, Les Parents Terribles, O.C., 290.

Ultimately it is Léo who confirms the return to order. The forces have re-established themselves, hence producing a dramatically effective conclusion:

C'était la femme de ménage. Je lui ai dit qu'ici elle n'avait rien à faire, que tout était en ordre.¹¹⁴

The destruction organized by the forces of destiny within and without the characters has completed their work.

It is not only the characters that present the juxtaposition of order and disorder; as Cocteau states in his preface to the play, the décor also plays a rôle: "J'ai de longue date employé des décors qui jouent."¹¹⁵ The décor, the lighting and stage properties are used to mirror the abstract conflict in visible and audible material terms. The characters constantly refer to their apartment as a roulotte, a gipsy caravan. Not only does this term appropriately apply to the société à la dérive, but by its implication of movement, suggests that the characters carry their disorder about with them.¹¹⁶ The notes for the décor stress this point:

Les chambres seront celles de cette famille en désordre et de Madeleine (le contraire). ¹¹⁷

Here again Cocteau uses the doctrine of poésie de théâtre as a living vehicle for the theme of destiny.

It is significant that Yvonne's room is a bedroom; J. Kihm

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 300.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 86.

¹¹⁶ This is demonstrated in the second act where Michel cannot find his misplaced shoe in Madeleine's apartment.

¹¹⁷ Cocteau, Les Parents Terribles, O.C., VII, 88.

comments on Cocteau's use of the bedroom in his plays:

C'est la chambre des Enfants Terribles, lieu isolé, lieu intérieur, lieu des tragédies...Chambre dont la signification rejaillit sur toutes les autres chambres du théâtre. Celles-ci représentent un équivalent de l'intériorité des personnages qui sont tous des êtres en qui se livre le combat...Ce combat muet qui se déroule dans les chambres secrètes de l'âme et du corps, lorsque le langage le transpose face aux spectateurs du théâtre, trouve son lieu naturel dans cet équivalent de la chambre de l'âme qu'est la chambre de la maison et, plus particulièrement, celle que d'ordinaire on cache aux regards indiscrets, la chambre à dormir avec son lit, son arsenal de draps sales, de vêtements en désordre et son couvre-lit retroussé.¹¹⁸

Whereas in La Machine Infernale Jocaste's bedroom showed signs of victimization by the forces of the universe, Yvonne's room appears the victim of her neuroses and disorder; a much more intimate impression is created, as befitting the boulevard setting. Whereas in the Greek play the forces were exterior, here the room acts as a projection, a mirror as it were for Yvonne's psychological state.

The lighting is dim:

Près du lit, petite table avec lampe. Lustre central éteint... Les fenêtres sont censées ouvertes dans le mur idéal. Il en arrive une lumière sinistre: celle de l'immeuble d'en face. Pénombre.¹¹⁹

The claustrophobic impression is accentuated by the disordered objects throughout the room:

Le lit très vaste et très en désordre. Fourrures, châles etc... Des ~~peignoirs~~ ^{peignoirs} traînent.¹²⁰

By contrast Madeleine's apartment is described as:

¹¹⁸ Kihm, op. cit., p. 97.

¹¹⁹ Cocteau, Les Parents Terribles, O.C., VII, 89.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 89.

Une grande pièce claire... Sur le mur du fond, planches couvertes de livres. Le mur idéal est censé donner sur des arbres par une baie. Beaucoup d'ordre.¹²¹

There is brightness and light in the big room, It is immaculate and the books are the symbols of her work: she is not a member of the société à la dérive.

Finally there are the "portes qui claquent". In the notes for the setting Cocteau explicitly demands this:

Les décors, très réalistes, seront construits assez solidement pour que les portes puissent claquer.

Léo (Léonie) répète souvent: "Chez vous, c'est la maison des portes qui claquent."¹²²

The noise is an audible sign of disorder, not only in Michel, but of the society of which he is a victim. In a sense his slamming of the doors is indicative of his revolt against disorder: by closing them he implies the desire to keep the disorder interiorized, to prevent it from spreading.

Costuming is also used effectively to illustrate the distinction between order and disorder. Léo, despite her age, is dressed immaculately and elegantly: "Elle entre, en passant une robe de chambre élégante."¹²³ By contrast Yvonne presents an extremely disordered appearance: "Yvonne... apparaît en peignoir éponge."¹²⁴ Yvonne herself comments on their difference in appearance:

...tu as toujours été belle, ondulée, tirée à quatre épingles, élégante, brillante, et moi je suis venue au monde avec un rhume, des foin, avec des mèches de travers et des peignoirs criblés de trous des cigarettes.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 163.

¹²² Ibid, p. 90.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 91.

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 92.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 107.

Once again, even her costume expresses Yvonne's ineptness, her weakness, her dependence and above all her complete inability to take control of her own destiny.

Rather than creating a boulevard drama, Cocteau has used its conventions to create a modern myth in the same way as Sartre did later on in Huis Clos. Critics have seen fit to draw analogies between Les Parents Terribles and La Machine Infernale¹²⁶ and to a degree these opinions are valid. A distant resemblance can be seen between the unwitting murder of Laïus by Oedipe and Michel's murder of his mother. Similarly Oedipe's quest for truth and his true destiny can be compared to Michel's desire for order. The foreshadowings by fate and its agents are to be seen in both dramas as are the punishments for those that dare to try to prevent its workings: as Oedipe is the victim of the gods' machinations, so Yvonne is the victim of the forces of order and her own disorder. As in the myth, there are prototypes: the mother who does not want to lose her son and her power and the son who rebels.¹²⁷

This myth can only be pertinent to this century as revolt against parental authority was not permitted in the bourgeoisie of earlier times. By casting it in a contemporary setting, Cocteau makes a more striking

¹²⁶Robert Kemp, La Vie du Théâtre (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1956), p. 132, states: "J'avais vu...de certaines ressemblances - qui sauteraient aux yeux si même l'auteur ne les souligne pas - entre l'incroyable hasard qui accable Les Parents Terribles et la "machine infernale" dans laquelle les dieux broient Oedipe." Oxenhandler presents a rather forced argument on this point in Scandal and Parade. It appears that his insight into the analogies is somewhat too extreme to be valid.

¹²⁷Rather than derived from a Greek source, these characters appear to be borrowed from the Racinian tradition. c.f. p. 50.

impact on his audience, depicting not only the crisis of a société à la dérive, but also, which is more significant, the fact that even in our modern world forces beyond our human comprehension are still in control despite the technological and social advances of the twentieth century.

* * *

If Les Parents Terribles seems to grow further from the boulevard tradition the more one looks at it, the same could be said for his two other works, Les Monstres sacrés and La Machine à écrire, which are often labelled as boulevard dramas as well. They follow much more closely the style of boulevard theatre and as such, the central conflict that has been traced throughout Cocteau's dramatic works, be it in terms of destiny and free will, or any of its associated corollaries, is not clearly defined in these two plays. Despite Cocteau's desire to perhaps leave this fatalistic domain that governs his work, however, there are still indications in these two plays that he is unable to do so, so pervasive was the hold that this notion of all-powerful destiny had over him.

Les Monstres sacrés was written specifically for Yvonne de Bray, who played the rôle of Esther, a great actress in the style of Réjane or Sarah Bernhardt. Essentially Cocteau has written a play about the theatre, disclosing the problems that arise when actors carry their work, that is, the theatre, into their own lives. Once again the conflict of illusion and reality, truth and falsehood, is present.

Esther carries with her the signs of the poet seen in other

Cocteau characters. As an actress, in her work she transmits art to the rest of the world, being its interpreter. She looks upon the theatre as a religion:

Le théâtre, c'est une sorte de couvent. On sert un dieu. On répète les mêmes prières. On ne va jamais au théâtre. Le jour on ne sort pas. On recommence les mêmes petites farces entre camarades. Et les visites sont très, très rares. J'ajoute qu'il y a de l'encens, des cierges et des fleurs. Et que, dans tous les théâtres du monde, les escaliers des coulisses ressemblent à des escaliers de prison.¹²⁸

She is acting in a play called La Curée, "the quarry" or "the hunt", and in the final scene she receives a deluge of insults from Liane. Like the poet, she is persecuted and misunderstood.

Liane suffers from and also symbolizes mythomania: in her specific instance the confusion of art and reality. Her character type is to be found in the character of Margot in La Machine à écrire¹²⁹ and Lothar in Bacchus, who kills Hans in order that the purity of the myth not be spoiled.¹³⁰ Essentially this person wants to take a short cut to fame or happiness, since he does not possess inner strength to succeed by his own effort. If he cannot himself be great, he attaches himself to some great idol.

Esther also acts the part of destiny: specifically for Florent and Liane. The usual triangle of Boulevard comedy is here enriched by the presence of a force of destiny. She forcefully brings them together and casts herself out as if to teach them a lesson. Liane is the disruptive force that sets this drama in motion; she upsets the balance that Florent

¹²⁸ Cocteau, Les Monstres sacrés, O.C., VIII, 220.

¹²⁹ c.f. p. 59.

¹³⁰ This play will be dealt with at length in Chapter III.

and Esther have created between the theatre and their real lives. Esther proceeds to right the situation, ironically using theatrical methods to do so; in the reconciliation between herself and Florent, she resorts to a scene that she had no doubt many times played on stage before.

Throughout the play there are references to the effects of the theatre on real life. In the second act the characters accuse themselves of being theatrical and allowing the theatre to deform their lives. The intensity of the drama is heightened by the fact that Florent and Liane are preparing to leave for a radio broadcast. This cuts short their explanations; by implication they do not have time to live life for they must be off to the theatre. A second representation of the invasion of the theatre into life is the radio-interview. Florent, who clings to the old conception of art, refuses to be interviewed, whereas Liane takes advantage of the radio to falsely announce that she and Florent are to be married. She prefers the false truth of the theatre and uses the theatrical, in this case the radio, to exert pressure on Florent. Florent, however, hates machines (the radio, film) and believes in the slowly acquired art of the classic actor. Liane attempts to superimpose her own fantasies, her own dreams of art, upon life. For Florent and Esther, art is not a dream, but an acquired discipline, and as they are older than Liane, they are able to distinguish between the real world and that of illusion. Their careers in the theatre are actually ordered activities in the organized sphere of their existence. The play ends with the reconciliation of Esther and Florent and the dismissal of Liane, in Cocteau's terms the re-establishment of order, but summarily in a much less tragic manner than in other plays.

The work is a comedy, and as such very much in the boulevard tradition. It is possible to draw an analogy between Les Monstres sacrés and Paul G  raldy's boulevard play Aimer. The subject is the relationship between a man and a woman after many years of marriage. The dramatic situation is created by the arrival of the tempter who appears to open up a vista of all kinds of happiness hitherto closed to the wife. Nevertheless, the husband believes that true happiness is to be found only in complete understanding and absolute confidence. The entire action consists of the wife's struggle against the attraction for the unknown and the play closes with her final realization of where true happiness lies.

Cocteau's primary concern, however, is not the love relationship, but rather the effect of theatre on real life. There are no visible forces at work, and none of the tragic and fateful elements which lent depth to his earlier plays. Nevertheless, despite the comic effects, it can be seen that the desire for order and truth still prevails.

* * *

La Machine   crire is in the style of a roman-policier, but Cocteau calls it a false detective plot. The actual story involves the working out of the relationship of Didier's twin sons, Pascal and Maxime, their adopted sister Margot, and Solange, a friend of the family. Cocteau desired to paint a picture of provincial life in France, another soci  t      la d  rive, in a rural context. In this venture Cocteau is not as successful as in Les Parents Terribles, since the plot of the work is lacking in evidence to substantiate this idea. Nevertheless, as in the preceding two plays, there are elements that are not in the

boulevard tradition, but rather traces of Cocteau's own preoccupations as evidenced in earlier works. The three young characters all exhibit varying degrees of what can be termed disorder: Pascal slams doors in much the same way as Michel in Les Parents Terribles. Maxime exhibits the characteristics of the Cocteau poet: he is persecuted, having been unjustly imprisoned. Margot is an obvious mythomaniac, consistently dressing up in old theatre costumes and writing five-act plays. She and Maxime also show their mythomania by their confessions. They do not want to succumb to the ordinary and unexciting lives that their environment promises them, and are even willing to confess to a crime in order to make something of themselves. Not able to do this through their own efforts, they pretend and like so many of Cocteau's characters, live a lie.

It is in Solange that the trait of isolation, seen already in the younger people, is most pronounced. Her living at Malemort is a physical expression of being on the fringe of provincial society. The scenes where she is left by Maxime and Fred mark her increasing solitude which is brought to its culmination by her off-stage suicide. By this act she confirms her inability to face up to reality, and in a sense, order is re-established. Nevertheless, the play fails to succeed because of the lack of plot substance. Solange is not given a motive for her crime, since there is no real sense of provincial life felt in the work. Similarly, her character is lacking in the type of latent criminality that would make her deed plausible.

* * *

It appears that Cocteau's search for "une place fraîche sur l'oreiller"¹³¹ did not entirely succeed in this venture into the theatre of the boulevard tradition. Despite the fact that he did affect the tradition's manner and theatrical vocabulary, he could not force his work into that tradition. The notion of the human predicament was too strong within him and he could not make the necessary concessions to this tradition. Although both Les Parents Terribles and La Machine à écrire work on Bernstein's principle of the "épisode-sursaut à triple décrochement",¹³² the central conflict in the former is not one that could be considered boulevard material. The underlying problem is too strong for the commercial theatre and in the last two plays vestiges of Cocteau's philosophy are ever-present.

Indubitably Les Parents Terribles is the most successful of the three plays, perhaps because Cocteau was not forcing his ideas into the boulevard tradition, rather he was making use of its elements for his own ends. Furthermore, by his use of the modern idiom, he clearly illustrates that order and destiny do not belong exclusively to the ancient myths but exactly the opposite: they are constantly at hand no matter what the milieu, the vocabulary of the era.

¹³¹Cocteau, La Machine à écrire, O.C., VIII, 8.

¹³²Pierre Brisson, op. cit., p. 87.

CHAPTER III

DESTINY IN THE HISTORICAL PLAYS

In the three historical plays, Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, L'Aigle à deux têtes and Bacchus, although the sources are no longer to be found in the domain of the Greeks, or in the tradition of the boulevard, the myth itself remains essentially the same. Once again the major conflict centers around the human predicament of man caught in the trap of destiny and his futile efforts to avoid it.

Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde was written in 1937, and despite Cocteau's claim that it is a purely original work that had come to him one night in a dream,¹³³ the work is a derivation of the Arthurian legends of the Middle Ages, specifically those concerned with the quest for the Holy Grail. Once again Cocteau has returned to a mythological source, albeit a more recent one, and the myth is appropriate since it is well-known to the French and, because the original legends also contained, to a great extent, the elements of predestination.

¹³³In the preface to the play, Cocteau gives the following genesis for the work: "En 1934, j'étais malade. Je m'éveillai un matin, déshabitué de dormir, et j'assistai d'un bout à l'autre à ce drame dont l'intrigue, l'époque et les personnages m'étaient aussi peu familiers que possible." Cocteau, Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, O.C., VI, 120. Hereafter Les Chevaliers.

Although the original myth was conceived in Christian terms, with Christian mythology, in this work Cocteau does not include the religious element. Rather, he uses the legend of King Arthur on purely human terms without the aid of a superimposed myth or dogma. Once again, as with the Greek materials, it is a question of the humanization of both the myth and its meaning, to increase its effect on the spectator.

In this play we are presented with destiny in a multiplicity of images, a series of dichotomies that stem from the initial conflict of destiny and free will. The major theme of the work is that of good opposed by evil, but, taken further, the oppositions of reality and illusion, truth and falsehood, order and disorder, the natural and the magic can all be traced in the initial situation. For Cocteau, destiny can be seen as a super-human order that governs the world; no matter under what terms man attempts to circumvent this order, the outcome is always the same: order, truth, good, will be reinstated. For man, the major goal is that he be aware of these dichotomies, and that he retain a sense of perspective and balance. For this reason, Cocteau presents us with "le Graal...qui n'est autre que le très rare équilibre avec soi-même."¹³⁴ Once again Cocteau has defined the notion of balance in physical terms; what in Orphée had been the tight-rope, here becomes the Grail, and the quest for the Grail is actually man's spiritual quest for order, self-knowledge and truth, human

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 122.

ideals that are the expression of his true destiny.

The actual conflict of good and evil between Artus and Merlin is never actively portrayed; rather it is the extensions of this conflict as outlined above, that are given life by the relationships between the remaining characters of the play in a series of parallel subplots which are examples of the reflections of the main subject.

At the outset the castle of Camaalot is a victim of Merlin's enchantment,¹³⁵ and the major symbol of this evil and disorder had been the loss of the Grail before the play had begun. The entire castle is bewitched, and all its inhabitants are living in the shadows of evil deceit, and illusion. The relationship between Lancelot and Guenièvre is the expression of the opposition between truth and falsehood. Lancelot is aware of the fact that they are living a deception and, unwilling for it to continue, he wishes that the truth be reinstated:

J'exige un vrai bonheur, un vrai amour, un vrai château, une vrai contrée, où le soleil alterne avec la lune, où les saisons se déroulent en ordre, où de vrais arbres portent de vrais fruits, où de vrais poissons habitent les rivières et de vrais oiseaux le ciel, où la vraie neige découvre de vraies fleurs, où tout soit vrai, vrai, vrai, vrai, véritable.¹³⁶

Guenièvre, on the other hand, wishes for the deception to continue, since it was her doing that the king is bewitched; she is not a victim of evil, but rather she instigates it to be able to live in her love. Essentially she tries to rule her life, her destiny, through falsehood

¹³⁵This state of enchantment has been seen already in Orphée where the horse has bewitched Orphée, and in La Machine Infernale where the Sphinx has spread an air of pestilence throughout Thebes.

¹³⁶Cocteau, Les Chevaliers, O.C., VI, 155.

and as such must be punished. She believes that she is happy, yet, love, if not in compliance with the divine order, is also doomed to a tragic end. Hence at the end both she and Lancelot must die so that they may be re-united by death in love.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, since it was their love that started the deception, their deaths act as the release from it when reality once again reasserts itself.

The coming of Galaad and the quest for the Grail, can be seen as the beginning of the return to reality, truth and order. Galaad is truth personified, and as such the true agent of destiny. As he is a poet, it is he that makes the others see the Grail; he himself is unable to do so:

Je ne le verrai jamais. Je suis celui qui le fait voir
aux autres.¹³⁸

Similarly, as a poet, he possesses the qualities of angélisme; as such he is but a transient figure that cannot stay where he is loved, and must be off to fight his never-ending battle against evil:

Merlin change vite de place. Il ne s'arrête pas de nuire.
D'autres m'attendent. Je ne séjourne en aucun lieu. Vous
le savez, Artus, je quête la grande aventure. Il faut payer,
payer, payer toujours. Payer de sa personne et de ses actes.¹³⁹

In Galaad's quest, Roger Lannes perceives the many analogies to that of Oedipe in La Machine Infernale:

Oedipe poursuit le secret de sa naissance comme Galaad s'élance

¹³⁷ Here there is a clear parallel to the relationship between Jocaste and Oedipe in La Machine Infernale, when after Jocaste's death she is re-instated into the proper order and assumes her rôle as the mother of Oedipe.

¹³⁸ Cocteau, Les Chevaliers, O.C., VI, 282.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 282-283.

à la conquête du Graal. Tous deux traversent des pièges et des épreuves, protégés par celui-là même qui les leur tend: le Destin. Oedipe défie le Sphinx. Galaad se lève, indemne du siège périlleux. D'avoir vécu dans le mensonge Jocaste meurt et la Reine Guenièvre aussi. Lorsque la vérité surgit, enfin avec sa cruauté auguste et définitive, Oedipe se crève les yeux et Galaad reste aveugle devant cette illumination insupportable.¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless Galaad is not a passive participant, but rather an active agent in control, as far as humanly possible, of the situation.

Finally there is the character of Ginifer who is the embodiment of evil, magic, disorder and virtually the most important character of the play. He himself is never seen, but, rather he takes on the shapes of the other characters: Gauvain, the queen, the Grail and Galaad. It is Ginifer who produces the effect of the permeation of evil, disorder, and falsehood into the true and the real. Whereas in the Greek plays the evil and good had been clearly delineated, here there is a much more subtle and perhaps more difficult interpretation. Just as in human life things are not always seen in terms of black and white, so too here there is the grey merging and permeation of one into the other.

By his "mirror" rôle, he often shows the latent characteristics of the characters whom he inhabits; this is especially true in the second act where he assumes the rôle of the queen. Not only do these double rôles suggest the double nature of man and the latent conflict within, but the reactions of the remaining characters when confronted by the impostor, underline very strongly the conflict between appearances and reality; on

¹⁴⁰ Roger Lannes, Jean Cocteau (Paris: Pierre Seghers, 1948), p. 68.

the surface it is much easier to accept the given, the physical manifestation, rather than to question it. This is especially true in the case of Artus, who lived in the joy of his ignorance, not even thinking to question it.

Ginifer's relationship to Merlin bears a marked resemblance to that of the Sphinx to Anubis. Once again we are made aware of the fact that these evil-mongers are not answerable to themselves, as Merlin points out:

Ginifer, n'oublie pas que tu sers un maître plus fort que nous!¹⁴¹

Ginifer, like the Sphinx, is subject to human impulse, as is evidenced by his statement that he is tired of playing rôles and wishes to become himself again.

Galaad's destruction of the illusion does away with the enchantment, and once again order and truth appear along with their symbol the Grail. The return to reality neither affects all of the characters simultaneously nor in a like fashion. Artus had lived in joy but also in ignorance; with the echoes of Lancelot's and Guenièvre's voices, an audible image of reality, he is forced to kill Lancelot. Essentially this is the first step in the assertion of the truth. Guenièvre realizes that it is not Artus' decision, but rather that of fate:

C'est le destin qui vous a fait deviner cette visite. C'est le destin qui vous a fait tendre ce piège. C'est le destin qui vous a fait tuer.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹Cocteau, Les Chevaliers, O.C., VI, 227.

¹⁴²Ibid, p. 260

She must surrender also to her own death in order that the necessity for the lie be removed and to allow reality to reassert itself. Artus is forced to remain alive having to "pay" for his error, and to live in the harsh light of reality. Blandine and Ségramor, who were the victims of the era of falsehood, are ultimately the reincarnation of Guenièvre and Lancelot. The completion of this transformation signifies a new state of purity and the return to order. As physical witness to the return of truth, Ségramor's wound, received while attempting to sit in the siège périlleux, is miraculously healed.

In terms of stage effects and décor, once again it is an atmosphere of penumbra that envelops the entire play, symbolic of the enchantment that only dissipates when reality illuminates the situation and the truth reinstates itself in the third act. Of some significance are the many magic effects - the chessmen, the moving chairs, the talking flower - all of which contribute not only to the idea of magic and supernatural, but also to the conflict of appearances and reality. These magic properties serve to underline the state of enchantment surrounding the characters as well as fit in appropriately with the historical epoch of the play. Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde can be seen in terms of a medieval allegory, with the idea of precision and balance clearly evident in the struggle of good and evil with its adjoining corollaries personified. Similarly the work has been seen in terms of the baroque dramatists, specifically Rousset.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Lynette Muir points out that the use of the double or sosie and the interaction of dreaming and waking as witnessed here could be claimed as derivatives from the Baroque dramatic tradition. "Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, A Baroque Play?", Modern Languages, XV (1959), 115-120.

Despite Cocteau's affirmation that he was breaking away from "une sorte de manie de la Grèce",¹⁴⁴ it is apparent that he was merely seeking a new means of expression for the dramatic conflict of destiny and free will. In the Greek dramas, specifically in La Machine Infernale, the presence of destiny was reflected in a single terminology which was obvious enough to the spectator, if not to the characters themselves. In Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde the reflections of destiny and its forces are not delineated as clearly, nor as easily perceived, and their manifestation is shown in a more sophisticated and complex manner. The central conflict of destiny and free will lends itself to interpretations on multiple levels that tend to overlap and permeate the drama with a series of conglomerates.

* * *

L'Aigle à deux têtes, written in 1946, is based on an historical event concerning the mysterious assassination of the Empress Elizabeth of Austria by an unknown Italian in 1898. Although Cocteau is not using a known myth as his source, this play is an elaboration on an historical fact that has become a legend.

Up to this drama, Cocteau's characters had not questioned the nature of destiny. They either accepted it or refused it; here however, this is changed and Cocteau asks a question. The incipit for the play

¹⁴⁴Cocteau, Les Chevaliers, O.C., VI, 119.

is ironically significant:

Elle ne pouvait compter sur rien, pas même sur le hasard.
Car il y a des vies sans hasard.¹⁴⁵

It refers specifically to the heroine of the play, La Reine, who interrogates herself on the sense of destiny. She does not count on destiny to come to her, but rather imagines that she can take it into her own power to forge her own fate. In this play Cocteau presents a character who believes that she is capable of completely controlling her life, and her death, but he does so in such a fashion that the spectator, at the conclusion of the drama is forced to ask how much was human effort and how much was predestined.

The entire drama concerns itself with La Reine who believes that she can command a death to match the melodramatic rôle she had created for herself in her lifetime. She dreams of a tragic fate and realizing that it must come in time¹⁴⁶, she has done nothing to force it, remained in the seclusion of her castles and waited. However, nothing has come about other than the results of her own actions. Here again there is an echo from the Greek myths where the forces of destiny wait until the hero is completely deluded into thinking that he can indeed govern his destiny before they crash down on him in reality. Essentially in the character of La Reine, Cocteau has created a mythomaniac who wishes to create a tragedy out of her life, to become a myth in death.

¹⁴⁵Cocteau, L'Aigle à deux têtes, Theatre , II (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), II, 299.

¹⁴⁶Once again the time element is important. Not only has she waited for ten years for something to happen to her, but when Stanislas appears the tragedy is given only three days to complete itself.

As many of Cocteau's heroes, she is isolated from the rest of the world and lives in her own fantasy. Her exile is self-imposed, and pushed to a melodramatic extreme: she stays in her castles, always veiled with her face hidden, not communicating with the rest of the world.

With the appearance of Stanislas, she makes him into the active agent of destiny. Although she believes she is responsible, there are indications that the higher forces are at work, the first indication being in the cards that she reads:

Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq: la mort. Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq...Et voilà le jeune homme blond qui nous intriguait tant.¹⁴⁷

She has read the cards many times before and the results have always been the same. When Stanislas appears through the window, left open to invite chance, he bears a remarkable resemblance to the portrait of the dead king. Once again Cocteau is using a mirror image and its property of reversal. The king is portrayed in peasant costume; Stanislas is a peasant and dressed as such. Nevertheless his resemblance to the king indicates his nobility of character and finally makes the queen believe that he is her destiny.

Another indication that assists her delusion is that she has read his poem "Fin de la Royauté" which he had signed "Azraël", the angel of death. The proof that he is not her destiny however, is that he comes to kill her, but cannot do so. This implies her true fate is yet to appear, and possibly his resemblance to the deceased king fore-shadows their love relationship rather than their death.

¹⁴⁷ Cocteau, L'Aigle à deux têtes, Théâtre, II, 323-324.

The entire play works towards the deaths of these two characters and it is through their interaction that their true destiny comes about.

Une reine d'esprit anarchiste, un anarchiste d'esprit royal, si le crime tarde, s'ils se parlent, si ce n'est pas le coup de couteau dans le dos de l'embarcadere du lac de Genève, notre reine ne sera pas longue à devenir une femme, pas long notre anarchiste à redevenir un homme. Ils trahissent leurs causes pour en former une. Ils deviennent une constellation, ou mieux un météore qui flambe une seconde et disparaît.¹⁴⁸

These interactions can be seen in contrapuntal terms, with the two voices sometimes in harmony, other times dissonant but resolving together at the end only in death. The changing relationship between the two characters can be seen in a series of physical images. In the first act, in her long monologue, La Reine divulges the story of her life of solitude and her death wish. In essence she is not really alive, she no longer rules, she has been completely isolated and lives only for her tragic death. The monologue is thematically important as Dubourg makes the point that

Ce monologue donne sa signification à la pièce en faisant du destin et de sa lutte avec la reine l'objet même du drame, mais il éclaire, il dévoile l'héroïne, il la déshabille jusqu'au coeur devant Stanislas.¹⁴⁹

Significant also is the fact that the queen like many other of Cocteau's heroes is living a lie, in an illusion; as she herself points out, she is dead. In the second act she returns to life, under the influence of Stanislas. She casts off her veil, which had previously hidden her from life; not only does she decide to become a live queen and take up the reins of her rule, but more than that, she comes back to life as a woman

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 302.

¹⁴⁹ Dubourg, op. cit., p. 131.

and falls in love with Stanislas. In the third act, when her true destiny presents itself, she also dies in her double rôle, unveiled not only before the man she loves, but also before her troops as their queen.

The double-faceted character is also present in Stanislas who is not only a would-be assassin, but more important, a poet. Once again, he suffers the persecution of the true poet (the isolation, the pursuit), and in his long speech in the second act, acts as the interpreter of truth for the queen, divulges to her the secret of life and tries to set her on the right way to her proper destiny. He also falls prey to love but realizes that their love cannot be of this world:

Mon Dieu, acceptez-nous dans le royaume de vos énigmes. Evitez
à notre amour le contact du regard des hommes. Mariez-nous
dans le ciel.¹⁵⁰

His rôle is similar to the of Heurtebise in Orphée; not only does he return La Reine to life, but also brings her to her death.

The queen who realizes that Stanislas has poisoned himself out of love for her, also realizes that her love for him is stronger than her urge to live, and tricks Stanislas into killing her. She fulfills his destiny as a true assassin. Nevertheless, by their very natures, (the queen being a mythomaniac, and Stanislas a poet) and their differences in social class, they not only lived in isolation but also die apart with the long staircase between them.

The queen however, retains to the very end her delusion that

¹⁵⁰ Cocteau, L'Aigle à deux têtes, Théâtre, II, 377.

she is still in control of her fate, as she requests Willenstein:

Je vous demande de ne jamais oublier mes paroles, Willenstein.
Et de témoigner devant les hommes que, quoi qu'il arrive,
je l'ai voulu.¹⁵¹

However, it is neither she nor Stanislas that are the masters of their fate, but rather the Count von Föhn. It is his double intervention that sends the characters to their destiny and finishes by killing both of them.

With respect to the décor and properties, the entire play is laden with melodramatic trappings: a tragic lonely queen in an isolated castle, a raging storm, an anarchistic poet, all combine to produce a highly charged "romantic" drama. Here objects like the queen's veil, the candelabra, the vial of poison, intensify the air of intrigue and mystery. Here also colours play a significant part, specifically the combination of red and black. La Reine herself comments on their significance during her play with the cards:

Je me sers d'un éventail noir pour cacher mon visage. Le destin se sert d'un éventail noir et rouge pour montrer le sien. Mais le sien ne change jamais.¹⁵²

The colour black is traditionally associated with doom and death, whereas red is aligned with passion, warmth, violence and blood.¹⁵² Reading her destiny in the cards, according to the colours, she herself submits to it and fulfills their prophecy, even though at the outset she had no indication of the love relationship.

¹⁵¹Ibid, p. 408.

¹⁵²Ibid, p. 323.

The colour black is also predominant in the costumes: the queen dresses herself in black, with a black veil. Similarly Stanislas on the next morning appears dressed in "un costume de ville sombre."¹⁵³

The associated feeling of doom is emphasized by the claustrophobic, oppressive atmosphere of the stage setting: not only is it dark and foreboding, but with the flashes of lightning during the storm there is an undercurrent of violence.

Ce décor fait d'ombres qui bougent, de pénombres, de lueurs de feu et des éclairs.¹⁵⁴

This atmosphere is one in which the queen thrives, and as such not only foreshadows her true fate, but is also for her the reflection of her own life and death in her own melodramatic terms.

In one sensé this décor and the associated trappings serve as a reminiscence of the plays where destiny ruled. The eerie atmosphere effectively evokes the feeling of the supernatural in a typically nineteenth century "romantic" fashion. It is evident that despite the great leap forward in terms of historical time, the higher forces are still at work and fully capable of reappearing in a new disguise.

* * *

Cocteau's last dramatic work Bacchus was completed in 1951 and first performed in the same year at the Théâtre Marigny. In this drama Cocteau has encompassed many of his ideas postulated in his earlier

¹⁵³Ibid, p. 350.

¹⁵⁴Ibid, p. 309.

dramatic and prose writings.

The central conflict focuses upon an individual who wishes to remain free of the existing social order, again to create his own destiny. Once again it is the conflict of order and disorder, with the predominant idea being that of liberty. Cocteau himself, in the Journal d'un Inconnu describes the major theme of the work:

J'abordai le thème du désarroi de la jeunesse au milieu des dogmes, des sectes, des obstacles qu'on lui oppose. En proie aux offres de service et aux sentiments, elle cherche à rester libre. Sa liberté désordonnée se glisse entre les obstacles jusqu'à ce qu'elle s'y écrase.¹⁵⁵

Dubourg takes this definition further:

Bacchus expose deux vérités, deux antagonismes, deux univers... La difficulté d'être... libre et de le rester au milieu des tyrannies dogmatiques d'où qu'elles viennent, voilà le thème de Bacchus... le thème de la liberté est toute la pièce.¹⁵⁶

In the preface for Bacchus, Cocteau explains the origins for this work:

La coutume autour laquelle tourne l'action est une vieille coutume byzantine. Mais à Byzance le lauréat de l'épreuve acceptait d'en être victime. On le sacrifiait le septième jour. J'ignore s'il s'agissait d'un Dionysos. Il s'agissait, il me semble, d'un règne en miniature. La coutume fort atténuée existait en Suisse, il n'y a pas longtemps à Vévy... pour la fête des vendages. Elle m'avait été racontée par Ramuz comme désastreuse en ce sens que les lauréats se montaient la tête et refusaient ensuite de retrouver leur vie médiocre. J'ai naturellement envisagé la coutume à son extrême, lorsque des conséquences risquaient de dépasser les limites d'une mascarade.¹⁵⁷

In effect Cocteau has once again made use of an ancient myth, albeit indirectly. As noticed, in the Greek plays Cocteau had retained

¹⁵⁵Cocteau, Journal d'un Inconnu, p. 87.

¹⁵⁶Dubourg, op. cit., p. 149-150.

¹⁵⁷Cocteau, Bacchus (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 10.

the inherent qualities of the Greek myth, or as in Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde the essence of the Arthurian legend. In the present instance the dramatist is further removed from his source, writing about a custom that is only based on a myth. Nevertheless, Cocteau's ironic outlook can be perceived here particularly since the play is set during the time of the Reformation and the great ecclesiastical crisis. Once again Cocteau is stressing the universality of myth and its permanent relevance to humanity. Although the Christian myth had had a powerful impact on humanity, the pagan traditions still persist with values that are praised even to the point of being idealized. In this play, although Hans plays the rôle of a pagan deity, his actions and words derive much from the Christian myth; hence Cocteau has essentially superimposed two mythologies to create his own myth.

As in Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, in Bacchus the central conflict carries with it certain auxiliary ideas that serve to illuminate the nature of the conflict as well as to reinforce it. Recalling the fact that Cocteau's theatre is governed by the belief that man is not free, human liberty is only an illusion whose affirmation is a revolt against the ordered forces of destiny, always ending in death. These forces can be of a supernatural nature, as seen in the Greek plays, or of a human social order as here in Bacchus, where the Cardinal is the representative of the church, an ordered social institution.

All of Cocteau's heroes are presented as characters who believe themselves to be free and cannot recognize their true fate because of their limited perception of time.¹⁵⁸ They do not realize that the

¹⁵⁸c.f. Anubis' speech in La Machine Infernale, O.C., V, 270-271.

superhuman forces, in this case death, give man a small space of time in which to play his illusory rôle. Although in La Machine Infernale the Greek gods had accorded Oedipe seventeen years, Hans is only given seven days to play out his rôle.

The notion of a hostile universe governed by evil and an implacable destiny is reflected by the historical context in which Bacchus is situated.

L'action se passe en 1523, dans une petite ville allemande.
L'époque est sombre: celle de la Réforme et de la révolution paysanne.
L'époque où les papes disputent le trône, où l'Eglise ruinée monnayait les indulgences, où l'anarchie des dogmes écartelait les âmes, époque de violence et mensonge.¹⁵⁹

As such, this universe demands a hero of exceptional calibre, exhibiting certain constant qualities. In the character of Hans it appears that we are presented with the Cocteau hero par excellence. Firstly, all of Cocteau's heroes are young and Hans is no exception. Cocteau's penchant for youth can be seen in terms of the balance and the tightrope, as Oxenhandler has remarked:

...la jeunesse habite le seuil de la réalité où les rêves et les fantaisies de l'enfance se fondent avec l'ordre rationnel de la vie adulte. La jeunesse représente le lieu où le conflit entre le désordre enfantin, la pureté intégrale, et l'ordre externe imposé soit par les hommes, soit par les dieux, est exposé.¹⁶⁰

It is from this conflict that stems the youthful desire to remain free.

¹⁵⁹Dubourg, op. cit., p. 145. The historical context is effectively mirrored by the décor wherein Cocteau requires a resemblance to a painting by Holbein: Famille de Thomas More. This note is doubly significant since not only does Cocteau retain the sixteenth century setting of the painting, but its subject is appropriate for Bacchus. Doubtless the reference is meant as an indication of the fate of Hans. Here again there is a mirror image in evidence, in the same manner as in L'Aigle à deux têtes.

¹⁶⁰Oxenhandler, "Le Mythe de la persécution dans l'oeuvre de Jean Cocteau", La Revue des Lettres Modernes, Cocteau et les Mythes, 298-303 (1972), 101.

Youth treads a precarious path between its dream world and the true adult world and by its inability to resolve the conflict by accepting rational order, is hence doomed. Since youth exists in its own world, it is by implication isolated. In the preface for Bacchus Cocteau presents this idea as being the aim of the play:

Elle[la pièce]montre seulement la terrible solitude des êtres jeunes qui ne s'engagent qu'en eux-mêmes et refusent d'épouser les directives d'une politique, quelle qu'elle soit.¹⁶¹

On the simplest level Cocteau has isolated his characters by a disparity of social class, as Stanislas and the queen in L'aigle à deux têtes, and the same can be seen here where Hans is a peasant among nobility and the ecclesiastical authorities. However, Hans' isolation is more extreme, since he has exiled himself from his own social class by his feigned madness. His words and actions during his masquerade at the end of the first act underline the integral double nature of youth: although he has the external appearance of an adult, he speaks and acts like a child. As Christine points out:

Ses paroles n'ont pas de sens et sont parfois cocasses, comme celles des enfants.¹⁶²

and later, feigning fatigue, Hans lies down on the floor.¹⁶³

Essentially, it is the established social order which had caused Hans' madness before the drama begins. It is Hans' account of his former disorientation which makes the audience aware of the fact that he is already a

¹⁶¹Cocteau, Bacchus, p. 10

¹⁶²Ibid, p. 68.

¹⁶³Ibid, p. 98.

condemned man, persecuted and fated to die. After having been elected to the rôle of Bacchus, Hans proceeds to isolate himself further. Simply by the fact that he becomes Bacchus, he is apart from the others, now at the other extreme, above them. On stage this is physically demonstrated by the costume that he wears. However, it is his words and actions in the rôle of Bacchus that isolate him absolutely and complete his destiny. Nevertheless even before Hans is introduced onto the stage, there are indications that the fate of Bacchus is a tragic one.

At the outset of the drama, the normal order of the village has been interrupted by the feast of Bacchus and the opening episode between Lothar and Christine serves to foreshadow the fate of Hans. When Christine enters she sees her brother dressed in the costume of Bacchus standing before a mirror. The implications are obvious: their older brother Ulrich had died as Bacchus in the same costume, and here again the mirror can be interpreted as a premonition of death.¹⁶⁴ Along with Christine's revelation about Ulrich:

Et te rends-tu compte que c'est ce costume de Bacchus qui a causé sa mort?

...
Ulrich s'est suicidé,¹⁶⁵

the ecclesiastical authorities emphasize this point in conjunction with previous feasts:

Il y a cinq ans, le fils aîné de notre hôte, alors âgé de dix-neuf ans, a remporté la palme. Car c'est tous les cinq ans qu'a lieu cette élection qui donne les pleins pouvoirs, pendant

¹⁶⁴c.f. p.

¹⁶⁵Cocteau, Bacchus, p. 21.

une semaine à celui qui est élu. Ces huit jours de gloire ont un peu tourné la tête. Le septième jour la jeunesse, et l'avoueraï-je à ma honte, nous mêmes, avons eu la sottise de moquer une petite crise d'orgueil fort excusable à cet âge. Le jeune homme en a pris une ombre que nous ne soupçonnions pas. Ses accès de colère excitaient ses camarades. Bref, il s'est tué.¹⁶⁶

...
Il importe en outre que son Eminence sache que la fête précédante avait provoqué un désastre. Le jeune Wilhelm de Haage, nommé Bacchus, s'était livré à de telles dépenses et à de telles orgies que je m'excuse de n'en pouvoir réciter la liste dont nos compatriotes rougissent de honte. Le peuple l'a voulu lapider. Nous ne l'avons tiré d'affaire que par l'exil.¹⁶⁷

Hence by these indirect narrations one is already made aware of the threatening atmosphere associated with this masquerade. It appears that each time that the prevailing order is interrupted by a Bacchus, it is completed only by a tragedy. By this Cocteau shows that not only is the disruption by revolt and disorder a recurring event, but each time order re-establishes itself. Hence this all foreshadows Hans' doom as Bacchus.

Lothar and Christine also divulge that they are taking part in the Reform movement. In one sense they are also in a state of revolt against the established order, but their disorder is not pure since they are merely changing loyalties to another social order. They do not suffer the true crisis of youth as does Hans, since they have already bridged the gulf separating childhood and adulthood, and as such have achieved a compromise.

Christine's rôle as an agent of destiny can be likened to that

¹⁶⁶Ibid, p. 48.

¹⁶⁷Ibid, p. 49.

of the Sphinx in La Machine Infernale or that of the queen in Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde. As a member of her social class, she was in part responsible for Hans' initial persecution in the man-hunt, and although she had tried to atone for this over the years, it is she who is instrumental in the election of Hans and by implication, responsible to some extent for his death.

In the second act indirect narration is used to comment on Hans' actions in the rôle of Bacchus. It is revealed that his madness had been no more than a masquerade in which he had lain in wait until chance had presented him with the opportunity to act outside the established order; as Lothar relates:

Il a dit: "J'ai retrouvé la raison en voyant torturer mes amis. Je savais que d'être un idiot était ma seule sauvegarde. J'ai décidé de continuer de l'être. J'ai observé, j'ai étudié en silence. Le hasard m'a placé dans un rôle qui me permet de parler et d'agir. J'en profiterai. Soyez prevenus.¹⁶⁸

As the scene unfolds, the deeds of Hans as Bacchus are revealed: he had ordered the doors of the prisons opened, had chased the merchants out of the church with his belt and had done away with taxes. These are all Biblical derivations and what Cocteau has done is to superimpose the Christian and pagan mythologies, perhaps underlining the state of disorder in Hans. Nevertheless, his use of Christian elements once again indicates that the fate of Hans will be like that of Christ who was also persecuted and condemned to die because of his acts.

In the long dialogue between Hans and the Cardinal the dramatic theme of the play becomes verbalized. It is here that the dialogue plays

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 98.

the major rôle, and is used to express the elements associated with the major theme of the work. At the outset of the scene the Cardinal, who likes Hans, tries to warn him of the dangers of his programme:

Vous vous livrez cependant, et coup sur coup à des inventions bien dangereuses pour un homme qui cherche la popularité.¹⁶⁹

Notwithstanding, in the obstinacy of youth, Hans proceeds to inform the Cardinal that he wishes to free the people from the forces of the established order; in stating that he follows the pattern of Christ, he preaches revolt and anarchy. However, he clearly declares that he belongs to no party and that he seeks to remain pure, giving the following definition of purity:

La pureté ne s'exprime ni par des actes, ni par des paroles. Elle ne relève pas d'un code. C'est la matière dont une âme est faite. Le Diable est pur parce qu'il ne peut faire que le mal.¹⁷⁰

Purity is part of disorder; those who remain pure refuse an ordered existence; here it is Hans who refuses to sacrifice his purity to the external pressure of the Church. In this respect Hans is like Antigone who refuses to accept the social order of Créon, or Stanislas who revolts against the nobility in L'Aigle à deux têtes. What Hans succeeds in doing by this affirmation of his purity is to isolate himself and to invite his own destruction. A close link can be seen between Hans and Antigone who also wishes to die to remain pure and uncompromised.¹⁷¹ To keep this purity, essentially this liberty, Hans realizes that he must

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 110.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 111-112.

¹⁷¹ As Antigone states: "Devais-je donc, par crainte de la pensée d'un homme, désobéir à mes dieux? Je savais la mort au bout de mon acte. Je mourrai jeune, tant mieux. Le Malheur était de laisser mon frère sans tombe. Le reste m'est égal." Cocteau, Antigone, O.C., V, 156.

remain alone:

Je suis libre...Si j'appartenais à un parti, je trahirais mon âme libre avec ce parti ou ce parti avec mon âme libre. En outre, mon maître m'avait mis en garde contre le confort moral qui flatte la paresse. S'engager dans un parti est un confort puisque ce parti nous encadre et qu'il nous évite l'angoisse des nuances au bénéfice d'une couleur.¹⁷²

In his speeches Hans affirms his revolt, his disobedience, his liberty. The Church is a constituted society, moreover, a society within a society, hence a party. Hans refuses to bend to its exigencies, which are no more than human, consequently limited, partial, hypothetical and above all self-interested. It is for these reasons that Hans refuses to submit.

In keeping with the religious context of the play, Hans associates the super-human forces governing man's fate with God, a cruel God who seeks to destroy man:

Si Dieu qui habite hors du temps et l'embrasse dans son ensemble, a créé l'homme pour sa perte et pour la nôtre il est un monstre.¹⁷³

Again he underlines the fact that man is no more than a victim in this hostile universe, existing in a state of fear because of the unknown, in this case God, whom humanity has personified as a cruel being:

¹⁷²Cocteau, Bacchus, p. 130-131. In this speech Cocteau is quoting himself, specifically Le Mystère Laïc: "Mon parti est terrible, il me donne des ordres auxquels je dois obéir; il ne me laisse libre de faire aucune des choses qui me plaisent, il exige une obéissance sans bornes et l'abolition totale de mon individu...J'ai pris mon parti, en quelque sorte. C'est la grande guerre éternelle du singulier contre le pluriel et, hélas, elle devient de plus en plus grave puisque le monde se désindividualise et s'oriente vers le pluriel. O.C., X, 25.

¹⁷³Cocteau, Bacchus, p. 117.

S'il craignait moins un Dieu cruel, le peuple se tournerait vers lui-même. Il retrouverait sa dignité, sa responsabilité de l'homme. Il cesserait d'être un bétail qui tremble. Il redeviendrait un homme. Il verserait au compte de Dieu ce qu'il verse au compte du Diable, et pour cause.¹⁷⁴

The programme that Hans advocates is the affirmation of his liberty:

Remuer les forces d'amour qui somnolent. Abolir la crainte. Etre bon comme on tue. Tuer la haine. Ne pas savoir où cela conduit.¹⁷⁵

Nevertheless, such a programme, as the Christian one that Hans imitates is destined to failure. However, Hans knows this, and despite this knowledge he agrees to, even aspires to his own destruction, like Antigone or Orphée.

During this entire scene the Cardinal's responses point out all of the contradictions in Hans; his practical intelligence as a man of state bring down all of Hans' ideologies and show the dangers of such anarchy. Despite the fact that the Cardinal realizes the error in Hans, he cares for him and consequently is not an evil character, but rather the representative of another truth: that of the accepted social order. The Cardinal can see the value of disorder, and see the good in it, but since he is no longer young he sees the impossibility of Hans' programme and tries to save him:

Il découvre avec stupeur l'absolue pureté de l'adversaire, et dès lors est attiré par lui. Sa noblesse a reconnu la noblesse de Hans, il s'incline, il l'aime, son amour dominateur le veut à lui, c'est-à-dire, l'Eglise.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 120.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 124.

¹⁷⁶ Dubourg, op. cit., p. 152.

However, after seeing the futility of argument, the Cardinal leaves Hans.

The scene with Christine and Hans is significant in that it points out that even for love Hans will not sacrifice his liberty. This love relationship bears a marked resemblance to that of other Cocteau heroes - specifically that of Antigone and Hémon where it is not an external force that separates the lovers but their own natures and desire for self-destruction.

After the second act has exposed in great length all of the related arguments, the drama comes breathlessly to its end.

On n'a pas le temps d'y parler, un destin foudroyant ferme la bouche et joue lui-même la fin de la partie.¹⁷⁷

Once again the notion of rhythm evidenced in the acceleration at the completion of La Machine Infernale is felt here as the trap of Hans' destiny shuts down on him.

It is the last hour of the last day of the reign of Bacchus and now it is Hans, in realization of what will come about, who wishes to escape the destiny that he has created for himself with his own doing, by his speeches, by his actions and by his suicide. Nevertheless during the entire last act there is a strong feeling of suspense created as the spectators are not exactly certain how the drama will end.

Although the possibility exists that Hans will relent and sign a confession or attempt an escape to Switzerland, his re-entry onto the stage in the costume of Bacchus dispels all such hope and visibly demonstrates that Hans will die. In this scene it is the window that plays the rôle of the mirror in Orphée: the door that leads to death,

¹⁷⁷Ibid, p. 160.

since, on the other side wait the people who will burn Hans at the stake. The last scene strongly recalls that of Orphée where the hero also goes out onto the balcony and is assassinated by the crowd. The funereal atmosphere is intensified by the sound of drums that roll until the end of the act, again as in Orphée during the suicide scene. However Hans does not die honourably, since he had plotted with Lothar that the latter kill him. Although this is not known, there are indications in the dialogue:

Hans et moi, nous avons un pacte...Il ne regarde personne.
Ce pacte est entre nous.¹⁷⁸

When Lothar leaves the room, he slams the door behind him. This gesture is a visible portrayal of disorder,¹⁷⁹ and by implication Lothar becomes part of Hans' disorder. This gesture also shows that although Lothar had been living in the world of adults, being young, he was still susceptible to falling back into that of adolescence with Hans.

After Hans is wounded, he returns with the arrow in his chest and falls to the ground. The stage directions state:

Christine se précipite, le soulève, s'agenouille et pose sa tête sur ses genoux. Les cloches de la Cathédrale se mettent en branle.¹⁸⁰

Once again this is an image associated with the martyrdom of Christ: the tableau of Christine with the dead Hans in her lap seems an echo of the Pietà. The sounds of the bells, heard above the sound of the

¹⁷⁸Cocteau, Bacchus, p. 196-197.

¹⁷⁹c.f. Les Parents Terribles, see also p. 49.

¹⁸⁰Cocteau, Bacchus, p. 215.

drums indicate audibly that the order will re-establish itself and that destiny will triumph. The last gesture of the drama, when the Cardinal lifts his hand in benediction, is the affirmation that the return to order is complete.

In a similar fashion to la Reine in L'Aigle à deux têtes, Hans is also a mythomaniac; he does not achieve a true victory in the human sense but a "victory of failure". Oxenhandler effectively elaborates this point:

If he cannot control nature, he can atleast control himself and, before he dies, triumphantly affirm his own dignity and power. The hero attempts to transcend the impersonal and anonymous destiny [death] which nature prepares for him. He rebels at the unmarked grave of time and marshalls his forces for a great act of foolhardiness which is doomed to a triumphant failure: failure because man himself is in nature and cannot transcend it into the timeless realm of Grace; triumphant because his audacity wins for him a mythological status in history and in the minds of men.¹⁸¹

Hans believes that his final act of martyrdom, his suicide, is the sign of his victory, the final affirmation of his liberty. Nevertheless this is just an illusion: as he kills himself he is essentially revolting against the time meted out to him by the superhuman forces of destiny, He is merely precipitating the inevitable. When at the end of the play Hans cries out "Libre...", his death is not really a tragic death and should be regarded as his last permitted illusion. His final liberty is in fact unreal, since it only anticipates a predetermined event.

The major difficulty in the work is the fact that all of the characters are benevolent. Cocteau, in explaining the conflict of the play

¹⁸¹Oxenhandler, Scandal and Parade, p. 147.

does so in terms of kindness: "Bacchus est une pièce sur la bonté dure que j'oppose à la bonté molle."¹⁸² Hans is not a victim at the hands of the executioners, but of other men, society and of the life which he had created for himself. Here more than in Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde and L'Aigle à deux têtes the distinctions between the human forces and those of the superior order are more difficult to perceive. Dubourg shows that the solution to the ambiguity of the conflict is that it must be understood in relative terms:

Cocteau a démontré le combat de deux vérités: celle d'un certain désordre pur [Hans] et celle d'un certain ordre impur [le Cardinal] obligé de se salir pour se maintenir.¹⁸³

As this is Cocteau's last dramatic work, it is significant to note the progressive change of style in these three historical dramas. Whereas in Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde magic elements had been very important, here there are none, nor are there the romantic melodramatic trappings of L'Aigle à deux têtes. The entire play is on a more sophisticated level with the greater part of the dramatic conflict created in the dialogues, specifically that of the Cardinal and Hans. Not only does it serve to comment on the central theme and related ideas, but by its very nature, with its abrupt transitions of topic by Hans and the Cardinal's negations, it serves to illustrate the disordered character of Hans. The lack of supernatural elements is significant since it brings the problem of man's search for liberty completely down to human terms.

¹⁸²Cocteau, Bacchus, p. 9.

¹⁸³Dubourg, op. cit., p. 159.

In these historical dramas one notices a development in the presentation of the central conflict in the play. Having left the stricter confines of Greek mythology, Cocteau still retains his penchant for the renewal for a mythical tradition, be it an Arthurian legend, a Byzantine custom based on a legend of a romantic rumour that had become a myth. There is also a development in terms of the central conflict itself: it is no longer as easily definable, no longer as starkly presented. With increasing subtlety Cocteau makes it clear that the destiny of man is not easily perceived, but rather that it takes a certain exterior force to make it apparent. Even then the simplicity and the egocentricity of the human mind cannot grasp its significance. Similarly, the conflict is not merely that of man's struggle against his fate: it becomes exemplified in a series of opposites, manifestations as it were, of various conglomerates of the forces of destiny. These manifestations serve to illustrate the forces that permeate the human predicament: they can be brought down to a common level, but their expression can be seen in related corollaries of order and disorder, truth and falsehood, natural and magic, illusion and reality.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Cocteau's works is based on a two-fold movement: he wished not only to create but also to revive. Recurrently in the prefaces to the plays he affirms the necessity of doing away with what has been established so as not to become static. The continual mobility necessary to the artist is made possible by his repeated changes in the patterns of his plays and his allegiances to tradition.

In his process of invention he consistently refers to a certain past - the world of Greek mythology, or the bygone age of the boulevard tradition, or the historical past of legend and history combined. Doubtless the aim of such an operation is to keep the public's aesthetic consciousness in a state of alert. The multiplicity of changes becomes a pattern in itself, protean but recognizable; in spite of the unexpected and the novel, every one of Cocteau's plays has a group of common characteristics that are easily identifiable as belonging to the dramatist.

Our investigation shows that not only does Cocteau's preoccupation with the clash of destiny and free will provide a rich source for the playwright's material, but further, this conflict is a permanent unifying element in all of his dramas. From this basic premise he derived other conflicts that are but parallels to the first. It is the multi-faceted nature of the conflict that allows for consistency in the presentation of the matter in a variety of styles. To whatever genre it may belong a Cocteau play can be recognized by certain recurring ideas, formulae, words, images, and situations that all return to the initial confrontation.

The development of every drama follows a consistent pattern, a technique Cocteau doubtless derived from the theatre of Racine. Before the play begins the divine forces keep a close rein on an ordered universe. At the outset this precarious balance is threatened by the eruption of a human or supernatural force. The play is the reflection of the period that begins with the initial outbreak of disorder and ends with the realization of the truth and the return to the divine order.

The characters caught up in this mechanism also follow a pattern. Their acts of revolt call for certain traits. Usually youthful, or leading a child-like existence, Cocteau's heroes are expressions of purity, liberty, solitude, illusion and disorder. Too immature to accept the organized world of adults who have accepted their lot, they wish to revolt, to forge their own destiny as it were. Refusing to accept the anonymity and inevitability of their fate, they attempt to escape it by living in a world of illusion, by taking refuge in a lie.

The fact that most of the heroes are young is significant. Youth is the intermediary stage wherein the dreams and fantasies of childhood, in their purity, unsoiled by socially imposed ethics, meet with the established and imperious order of the adult world. Cocteau's heroes, for the greater part, cannot leave their dream world to face up to reality, be it in terms of a divine power as in the Greek plays, or its human equivalent, society. Wishing to remain free from external constrictions, they cast themselves out of their own milieu and become isolated by their pride and their inability to see the futility of such action.

Often the characters exhibit traits of mythomania, creating rôles for themselves as martyrs of certain values: poetry, love, grandeur or

humanity. To them this evasion is the only escape from fate, but it brings with it their tragic end. In the dramas studied, all the heroes, with the exception of Esther in the most 'boulevard' of the plays, Les Monstres sacrés, die, and often by their own hand.

In the face of an implacable destiny, the hero opts for death by suicide, the highest form of human pretence. By precipitating his death, the character believes he can escape the last illuminations of his ordeal. He wishes his own death to be the testament of his values, to become their martyr, but his suicide comes exactly at the moment when these illusions are shown to be impossible. As soon as the hero realizes that the world, society, the superior forces, have tricked him, he answers by playing the only card he holds, his life. He neither triumphs nor makes his peace: he retires. The irony of the situation is obvious: a man is meted out a certain length of time by the gods in which to play out his illusory rôle, but by taking his life prematurely, he is only cheating himself, taking his illusion with him even into his death.

Destiny so colours the world in which Cocteau's heroes abide, that it is a place of danger, full of forces that man is unable to understand, and since he cannot do so, he attempts to organize his life in terms comprehensible to himself. Cocteau, casting himself in the rôle of poet, unveils these forces through the strikingly original process of poésie de théâtre. By its very definition, this approach serves to show the spectator the multiple nature of the supernatural and inhuman forces governing our world. In Cocteau's presentation of the forces of

destiny and its agents many new and unusual interpretations appear on stage. Some of the agents of fate are truly supernatural beings and appear as such, especially in the Greek plays, where abstract notions are given a physical form. Other characters are possessed by these forces and act on their behalf as human intermediaries. This is particularly effective in the more modern plays where their impact is felt all the more strongly when we become aware of the true identity of these agents.

Not only are some of the characters possessed by the unknown, but objects and entire settings of plays are endowed by Cocteau with fatalistic dimensions through the poésie de théâtre, again underlining the hostility of the world in which his heroes live surrounded by traps and pitfalls.

From Antigone to Bacchus it becomes apparent that Cocteau strove to develop a subtlety in the presentation of the theme of destiny and free will. In the earlier plays the superior forces appear on stage, albeit as supernatural powers, but nonetheless visible. In succeeding dramas their presence is felt in less obvious terms as stage properties take on hitherto unconceived powers and humans act on behalf of fate. Similarly the central conflict is defined in varied combinations of opposites, often springing from man's own inner nature. The dividing line between the human and the divine becomes less definite as the forces permeate the drama often making reality indistinguishable from illusion. The true sophistication of Cocteau's method lies perhaps less in adoption of striking technical images to convey the power of destiny than in the ultimate refinement of his technique, so that the subtlety of superhuman powers can be detected and apprehended by the audience by oblique

means. Léonie, it may be argued, is a higher refinement of the force of destiny than, for example, the Sphinx.

The dramatic presentation of the conflict in a novel form however, might detract from its importance, as the audience, so caught up in the effects of Cocteau, whom the critics had called 'conjurer', might not see the true implications of the work. Early in his career Cocteau realized the difficulty his audience might encounter in such circumstances:

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, par l'expression inédite qui le distrait comme une grimace de clown à la porte.¹⁸⁴

Nevertheless, he realized that time was an absolute necessity for his audiences, so that they could become receptive, and on the simplest level, to his innovations:

Les esprits simples voient les fées plus facilement que les autres, car ils n'opposent pas au prodige la résistance des esprits forts.¹⁸⁵

Once attuned to this simplicity, the audience could perceive the painting of reality in an increasingly subtle representation of what Cocteau liked to call "plus vrai que le vrai".

It is time perhaps now for Cocteau's critics to reconsider, as we have done in these pages, something of the poet's insight into the human condition and to find that the poetic effects that dazzle in his works are far more than a conglomeration of delightful tricks or artistic touches. They reflect the artist's analogies of man's fate and man's

¹⁸⁴ Cocteau, Préface de 1922, O.C., VII, 14.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 11.

attempts to combat this destiny by his vain clinging to a notion of free will; we are left with a picture of Cocteau as a contemplative poet, breaking tradition and remoulding it, manipulating all the devices the theatre has to offer to express his own anguish at man's unequal struggle with the gods.

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