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## Jean Cocteau: Theatre as Parade

As Mr. Eric Bentley has said in a recent article, France is the only country in the Western world where the theatre can be considered a living art form. Mr. Bentley's observation is corroborated by a mere glance at the *Semaine de Paris*, weekly catalogue of Parisian entertainment. At the end of July, with more than thirty-five theatres already closed for the season, the summer visitor to Paris had still the choice of the Opéra, the Opéra-Comique the Comédie-Française (Salle Richelieu), and more than twenty-four other theatres offering a choice ranging in variety from the dramatic tour-de-force of Samuel Beckett, *En Attendant Godot*, to the astonishing pantomime of Marcel Marceau.

The French have always considered the theatre a traditional art form; the "classiques," Racine and Corneille especially, are a basic part of the secondary school curriculum. As a result, there has never occurred in France the grievous split between theatre and literature or the fine arts which is suggested in this country by the word "entertainment" and the development of an autonomous "entertainment industry."

The long and fruitful career of an author like Jean Cocteau testifies to the integration of the theatre in the cultural and intellectual life of France. Cocteau's importance as a literary figure has been established by his poetry, his critical manifestoes, especially *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, and his essays, *La Difficulté d'être* and *Journal d'un inconnu*. Often criticized and ridiculed, he emerges nonetheless as one of the great figures of the *entre-deux-guerres*. He is less accessible than Proust or Gide or even Claudel; perhaps because he is less committed. But he resembles Claudel in the fact that his greatest contribution has been to the theatre arts. Cocteau's theories of solitude, human liberty, style and spectacle have found concrete expression in his plays and productions. And the theatre, in its turn, has played a part in the development of his own personal philosophy. This rich, if mysterious, interaction is proof of the vitality of the French theatre and a promise of new creative developments.

Cocteau had been fascinated with the theatre, he tells us in *Portraits-Souvenirs*, ever since the days when he watched his mother dressing with infinite care to go to the Opéra or the Comédie-Française. She *was* the theatre; her velvet, the velvet of the *loges*; her jewels the sparkling brilliance of the chandelier. Like Proust's Marcel, Jean dreamed of the day when he too would be able to watch the magical rites for which his mother prepared with such

ceremony. The impact of Cocteau's first experiences in the theatre (*La Biche au bois*, *Le Tour du monde en 80 jours*) was to retain a unique importance; it was here that Cocteau conceived his one lasting passion.

The people whom Cocteau adores, whom he celebrates again and again, are the stars ("the sacred monsters"), the boxers, the clowns, the fashion mannequins who represent a kind of popularized image of the poet. Cocteau's unique fidelity is to the theatre and its highly publicized but little known inhabitants. He experiences in the theatre what he calls "the intense forms of minor beauty," that is, the beauty of the sets, the lighting, the actors' performances. We might group these things loosely under the title of "spectacle."

Spectacle, or "minor beauty," has in and of itself a kind of meaning. Even in its pure form, in the music-hall, for instance, or in the supreme leap of a Nijinsky, there are analogies with the human and especially the poetic condition. All the forms of "minor beauty" demonstrate a tragic law; the styles of women's clothes, for example, are condemned to the brief existence of a butterfly. The theatre itself is the scene of a nightly execution on which the curtain falls like a guillotine. Much of the poetry which Cocteau finds in "minor beauty" arises from analogies with death.

Death appears in many forms and with many different meanings in Cocteau's work; the equilibrium of the poet (symbolized most often by the circus acrobat) must operate on different levels to save the poet from a fatal fall. The performer, whether an acrobat or a woman entering a cocktail lounge, is always in danger of losing the precarious balance which is the secret of his or her ability to awe the hostile public. Balance is the secret of Cocteau's life and art, and it is no wonder that he feels such an affinity with those who make public show of this power.

Cocteau is an authentic *homme de lettres*; but he came to his fullest development as a writer through a long and intimate contact with the practical arts and crafts of the theatre.

Three important influences shaped the young writer. They were Erik Satie, Picasso and the Ballet Russe of Serge Diaghilev. Cocteau's first important work was the ballet *Parade*, first produced in 1917, with the collaboration of his three great masters. His choreography, he tells us, was derived from Picasso; he calls it the "truer than the true" method. It was, basically, the working up of realistic details into the broader pattern of the dance. So, for example, one of the characters, The Little American Girl, rides a bicycle, imitates Chaplin, boxes, dances a ragtime, takes a snapshot, etc. *Parade* was the first formulation of Cocteau's credo: to give new life to the frivolous or unfashionable with the aim of shocking the public, astonishing and awakening it to the beauty and tragedy which daily take place, un-

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noticed, before its eyes. The Ballet Russe and the enchanting music of Erik Satie provided a framework for this experiment.

Cocteau's next ballet was *Le Boeuf sur le toit* (produced in 1920); here he had the collaboration of the famous Fratellini clowns of the Cirque Médrano.

In 1921, Cocteau wrote his first real text, *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. This is a musical farce, pantomimed and danced, with a spoken narration. The music for *Les Mariés* was written by five of the famous "Six," Auric, Milhaud, Poulenc, Tailleferre and Honegger. The theme of *Les Mariés* would seem to be a deft and airy satire of bourgeois types and their language, but satire without the traditional moral connotation. The action takes place on the first platform of the Eiffel Tower and begins with the arrival of a wedding-party, the members of which march in like dogs walking on their hind legs. Two narrators, costumed as phonographs, announce them: "The bridge, gentle as a lamb." "The father-in-law, rich as Croesus." "The groom, handsome as a heart." "The mother-in-law, false as a bad penny." "The general, stupid as a goose." "The men of honor, strong as Turks." "The maids of honor, fresh as roses." The marriage-party represents the banal world of daily life (as the descriptions with which they are introduced make clear). On the other hand, the photographer, with his surprising camera from which an ostrich, a child, a lion and a bathing-beauty emerge, represents the marvellous; the two worlds are reconciled (at least to the eye) when, at the end of the play, the members of the wedding-party disappear one by one into the camera.

Cocteau, at this phase of his career, was learning the resources of the theatre. And, at a time when the naturalistic style of Antoine was still in vogue, he was able to experiment with the lyric resources of the theatre. Like the German Expressionists, and Gordon Craig in England, Cocteau was feeling his way toward a new kind of theater; freer, more poetic, more flexible. In this he was unconsciously following the trend of European literature as a whole toward a liberation of the imagination and a new and furious exploitation of the self.

This first phase of Cocteau's career as playwright may be considered to end with the translation and production in 1924 of *Romeo and Juliette*. Cocteau played the role of Mercutio and directed the production. The production notes indicate the same extraordinary inventiveness which he displayed in the ballets and *Les Mariés*, but they do not seem to indicate a real interpretation of the text. They are for the eye alone. They stylization of a play is too easy a means for achieving form. Dances, masks and mobile sets do not provide that definitive sense of interpretation and commentary which it is the job of the production to add to the written text. At this stage of his career, Cocteau had not yet fully merged spectacle and

meaning. From the beginning, he had an astonishing dexterity in the discovery and use of effects; but his literary development, which implies the intellectual and the moral, was, by his own admission, a much slower and more painful process.

Three major plays, over the next ten years, delimit the most typical and, perhaps, most successful phase of Cocteau's career as playwright. *Orphée*, *La Machine infernale* and *Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde* are reinterpretations of Greek and medieval myths. The English critic Ronald Peacock in his book *The Poet in the Theatre* suggests that Cocteau's greatest contribution lies in the use of myth; and certainly his plays are important testimonials (like the plays of Anouilh and Giraudoux) to a belief in the meaning of history and the universality of our own contemporary aspirations. It is an American critic, Mr. Francis Fergusson, who points out the specific use of myth in Cocteau: as a foil for the light-hearted, pathetic or ironic stage-business of minor beauty. Minor beauty or the beauty of spectacle is linked with the contemporaneous, the particular, the realistic; it is relentlessly concrete and accurate. A tone of voice, a gesture, a particular shade of lighting. These elements establish man on what Mr. Fergusson calls "the little scene of human reasoned purpose"; but, in the mythical plays of Cocteau, establish him in a tragic and profound context which reveals at once the heroism and inadequacy of his actions.

Movie-goers who have seen the film version of *Orphée* (produced in 1950, twenty-three years after the play) will remember, perhaps confusedly, that it is concerned with poetry and death. *Orphée* is a poet who loses love in the search for poetic truth and finally achieves both in the realm of the dead. The myth offers great opportunity for the use of visual effects and Cocteau exploited them accurately and tastefully; the visual poetry was subsumed in the poetry of a man's search for his own truth.

In *Orphée* and *La Machine infernale*, produced in 1934 by Louis Jouvet, Cocteau finally established his theme, the theme which he had been furiously searching for up to that point. It was, it seems to me, the Romantic theme of the poet's alienation from society and his tragic battle against the forces in himself and the world. Œdipe, the hero of *La Machine infernale*, is, like *Orphée*, a lonely hero who must struggle unequally against the cunning gods who have willed his downfall. Here the enemy is Nature itself, not merely society, as in the case of *Orphée* or *Antigone*, another of Cocteau's idols.

In these plays and in *Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde*, a fantastic and half-comic reworking of the legend of King Arthur, Cocteau put his sense of spectacle at the service of plot. In *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, he had attempted to achieve "the plastic expression of poetry," but it was not until six years later, in *Orphée*, that he

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created a real "poetry of the theatre," that is, a poetry or lyricism inherent not only in spectacle but in speech, character and action. This lyricism is compounded of many things; realism, surprise, exaggeration. It is, for instance, the strange ceremony of Death as she prepares to receive Eurydice into her world; the charming of Œdipe by the Sphinx; the wild ride of Merlin on the back of Queen Guenièvre. It is by these works, strange combinations of Expressionism, Symbolism and Romantic pessimism, cast in the clear, rational language of Racine, that Cocteau is most likely to be remembered.

*Renaud et Armide*, produced in 1943 at the Comédie-Française, is the most appealing of Cocteau's plays. It employs, once again, a mythic theme; magic and the marvellous abound. This is the only play of Cocteau's actually written in verse, and the sustained beauty of many hundreds of alexandrines constitutes an authentic and original revival of the classic form.

Cocteau's last important play, *Les Parents Terribles*, produced in 1938 with Germaine Dermoz (Cocteau had written the play for Yvonne de Bray who later starred in the film) and Jean Marais in the leading roles, is considered by M. Roger Lannes to be his finest work for the theatre. Here, Cocteau willfully denied himself all of the devices which, in the eyes of some critics, showed too much facility. *Les Parents terribles* is an intense, fast-moving *drame bourgeois*, above the standards of boulevard comedy, certainly, but using similar resources and definitely in the Ibsenian tradition. The complete absence of spectacle (Cocteau says that he refused to admit even such normal business as the lighting of a cigarette) was proof that Cocteau had at last come to the end of a cycle. A child of the literary salons, a precocious poet and critic, he came into the theatre through the stage door, learning about the theatre through direct contact with stage and actors. This experience, apparent in his early works, was gradually purified. Once again, past the summit of his career, he returned to the literary world (which, in the interval, had still not got very far away from Ibsen); *Les Parents terribles* is impressive in its knowledge of the theatre, its willful limits, its moral and psychological penetration.

A corollary of Cocteau's development as a playwright has been, of course, his moviemaking. Much the same progression could be shown in this field. The film offered Cocteau rich possibilities for visual poetry, but, by the nature of the medium, the text was less important. The movies are technical triumphs; but the plays of Jean Cocteau are patient and moving creations in the more resistant but, ultimately, more permanent medium of words.