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On Cocteau

Jean Cocteau's film, The Testament of Orpheus, is hardly reviewable in any ordinary sense. We present below, therefore, an informal commentary on the film and on the man, whose remarkable contributions to the medium have not previously been discussed in our pages.

I met Cocteau in 1954, at Cannes, where he was president of the Film Festival. He was staying at the majestic Carlton, a marvel of Riviera rococo. As we entered the bar, the ripple of whispers that greeted him reminded me that celebrities live in a special fluid or medium like aquarium fish. They have forgotten how to breathe air and would probably die if forced to do so. Two martinis went to Cocteau's head and he spoke with great animation, moving nimbly through all the subjects of his repertoire, those obsessional themes and symbols that recur in his books: the poet as exile, discoverer and sacrificial victim; art as Pythagorean system or mathematical formula; the universe as infernal machine; etc. I didn't need to ask the questions I had prepared, for his brilliant monologue renewed itself inexhaustibly. As he was to say in *Testament of Orpheus*: "Poetry is a petrifying fountain"—a self-renewing statue hardened in the shapes of words.

As we entered the enormous dining room, we plunged once again into the fluid secreted by the looks of several hundred people. Cocteau was the celebrity of the day and half the people in that room wanted some favor or attention from him. I felt the extraordinary power of falsification, distortion, and even corruption inherent in those looks—which made Cocteau believe, in spite of his own self-defense manual, that the poet need not be an exile and a rebel. He has always known, of course, that the celeb-

rity becomes a "sacred monster," a three-headed machine (like that he invented for *Testament of Orpheus*) that eats autographs and excretes fame.

It was a magnificent dinner. Cocteau consulted me on the menu, then ordered a superb wine and that rare and expensive fish called *loup de mer*. After dinner, we went to view a tedious Russian film. I left early, to catch the last bus back to Nice, and as I got up to go, he said, using the familiar *tu*, "I must see you again. Call me." When I called him, a few days later, he scarcely remembered my name and our second meeting was as awkward and painful as the first had been intimate. I did not see him a third time.

Cocteau's death, on October 11, 1963, was an event that he had been preparing for many years. The obsession with death has, of course, been a common literary theme in this century. Malraux and Camus forged voluntaristic affirmations of human dignity in the teeth of the judgment and annihilation each man must face; Gide attained a serene if hedonistic indifference to death; while Proust, in his own way, reinvented immortality. As for Cocteau, he has been less concerned with the annihilation of personality than in making sure the world accords him the proper rites. It is in this light that I view his last work, *Testament of Orpheus*. There had been films on Gide, Proust, and Picasso; but since Clouzot did not offer to

film the poet at work, Cocteau decided to produce his own *in memoriam*. This film shares a common purpose with everything that Cocteau has written in the last ten years: it patiently, seductively, didactically tells us what we are supposed to think about the master. It is like the stones inscribed with hieroglyphs the Pharaohs left in their tombs. *Testament* tries to carve a shape in that treacherous fluid secreted by the eyes and ears of the public. (Cocteau knows what a hopeless task this is. He ridicules his posthumous fame in the scene where a radio m.c. quizzes a child who gives correct but irrelevant answers.) In his later years, Cocteau was obsessed by what people did think, might think or ought to think about him. Thus François Périer, playing one of the judges in the trial scene of *Testament* says: "You are accused of being innocent," i.e., you are accused of not having committed the crimes people attributed to you.

The improvised, home-made, low-budget quality of *Testament* makes it an appealing film. In this respect it recalls *The Blood of a Poet*.^{*} It is a film made by Cocteau and his friends, in a few days, while sharing a Riviera vacation at Villa Santo Sospir, the home of Madame Alec Weisweiler at St.-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. It recapitulates, from the opening cut of the original *Orpheus*, Cocteau's films, plays, and life; and since it is acted by Cocteau himself and by his friends, it represents a last effort by the poet to transform the flux of life into the stasis of art.

The eighteenth-century costume Cocteau wears as the film opens recalls that worn by the visitor to the poet's studio in *The Blood of a Poet*. There are many other echoes of that film: the execution of the poet, the viewing of the poet's death by blasé spectators from an opera box, the resuscitation of the dead poet by a suggestive sexual osmosis, the use of statues and drawings as well as film tricks such

as printing sequences backwards, etc. The references to *Orpheus* are more obvious, since Maria Casarès, François Périer, Jean Marais, and Cocteau's "adopted son" Edouard appear here, as in the earlier film. The horse-headed figure is an avatar of the 1926 *Orpheus*, a play produced by the Pitoëffs. For a moment too we see Isolde, sailing over the waters of the bay, as she did in *The Eternal Return*. Jean Marais as Oedipus, blind and led by his child-like daughter, Antigone, appears not because the Oedipus figure has any special relevance here, within the narrative or symbolic context of the film, but because he appeared thus in *The Infernal Machine* and because this sightless hero, symbol of an horrific transgression, has been repeatedly drawn by Cocteau. We even see Cocteau in his academic robes as an Oxford doctor of letters.

In what was to me the most insightful moment of the film, Cocteau stands at his easel, carefully copying an hibiscus flower. But the drawing that emerges is not of the flower. It is Cocteau's own self-portrait. Cocteau plainly tells us that the film is an exercise in narcissism. It is the poet's effort to draw together all the persons, symbols, places, artifacts, events, and memories that compose his past, to give them objective life so that he may one last time see and know them and, in a way, love himself and his past. But he also wants to draw us into his filmed dream, to make us his accomplices and lovers.

After the trial scene, a drama created by glances and innuendos, through the genius of Maria Casarès, François Périer warns us that the judge's role is the hardest and most dangerous of all. Having, at least in my own mind, judged Cocteau as an exhibitionist, a narcissist, and an arrested adolescent, I take that warning to heart and would like to try for a moment to recapture what I felt when I first read him in 1948. He appeared to me as the high priest of a mystery (he calls poetry a priesthood in *Testament*). He made poetry an enigmatic world, opening (and it didn't seem paradoxical to me at the time nor does it now) onto the

^{*} For analyses of Cocteau's films see my *Scandal and Parade: The Theater of Jean Cocteau* (Rutgers, 1957).



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spiritual, the transcendent, but also onto the erotic. Poetry was part dionysian and part apollonian, it was a key to the supernatural and to one's own inner being. I discovered, eventually, that we viewed neither human nor divine love the same way; but I was grateful to him for those early insights.

COCTEAU

Cocteau's films may well prove to be his major creations. They allowed him to combine all his talents—for the word, the image, the dream. We must admire his ability to beat the system at its own game, to remain non-commercial, yet successful, making the films he wanted to make, insisting that films are not public but private, not mass media but archetypes and dreams, not entertainment but art. Wherever he is wandering now, in that Zone through which his imagination so often passed, that place of shadows where *Caligari* and *Oedipus* and *Frankenstein* and *Faust* greet each other and are carried along by the burning wind, unable to rest, I hope that he has found the solution to the puzzle he posed so often, the password for the Sphinx, the code to disarm the infernal machine. I remember the words of a theologian who said: Hell is to see yourself and think about yourself for all eternity.

But Cocteau was far more than a narcissist. There was something extremely primitive in his imagination, some desire to escape from history with its burden of mortality and suffering. He insists on the autonomy of imagination, on its ability to transcend the contingent, the temporal, the accidental. His incantations, spells and charms, the magic rituals that constantly reappear in his works (e.g., the witches' fire in *Testament* from which Cégèste's portrait emerges) are continuity rites like those practiced by shamans and witch-doctors in less sophisticated cultures. In all of Cocteau's works, death is constantly transformed into a myth of eternal beginning. The central theme of *Testament* is resurrection, and there are more floating and resurrected bodies in the film than in a séance.

Film is our contemporary magic. Eternity is the minds of other people where poets and their heroes lead a ghostly existence, dying to one mind only to regenerate in another, trembling between transmigrations, always ready, like wandering spirits, to renew their hold on the imagination. Cocteau met Flaubert's test for greatness. Great art, said Flaubert, is silent and incomprehensible and makes us dream.