

A C O C T E A U F O R
O U R T I M E



V I N C E N T G I R O U D

In the introduction to his absorbing biography, Claude Arnaud contrasts the high international reputation Jean Cocteau enjoyed in his lifetime with the suspicion and even rejection he suffered – and to some extent still suffers – in France. In a country where a pejorative value is traditionally attached to the adjective *versatile*, his protean achievements – as poet, playwright, novelist, essayist, diarist, graphic artist, designer, and film director – were bound to be held against him by the avant-garde and academia. Yet despite being repeatedly labeled uneven, frivolous, superficial, opportunistic, and derivative, his oeuvre has stood the test of time surprisingly well. If Gallimard’s prestigious Pléiade collection, belatedly to be sure, admitted him into its pantheon, beginning with his poetical works in 1999, it was clearly because his works continued to sell and be read. Nor is a cultural picture of the first half of the twentieth century complete without him.

Surprisingly, there have been few biographies of Cocteau. Arnaud is particularly critical of his principal predecessor, Francis

Jean Cocteau: A Life, by Claude Arnaud, translated by Lauren Elkin and Charlotte Mandel
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Stegmuller, whose life of Cocteau came out in 1970, for focusing on the man to the detriment of the oeuvre and for being unsympathetic toward his subject's homosexuality. By contrast, Arnaud places the question at the center of his investigation. Indeed, compared to his two great contemporaries, André Gide and Marcel Proust, both of whom Cocteau knew well, let alone the closeted François Mauriac and Henry de Montherlant and the neurotic Marcel Jouhandeau, Cocteau comes out as the first truly gay writer in the modern sense, comfortable with his identity and open about his personal life. As Arnaud points out, he and Jean Marais, even when their intimate relationship was over, were "the first male couple beloved by the public." Notwithstanding two serious relationships with women (Madeleine Carlier in his youth and Natalie Paley in the early 1930s), Cocteau appears to have come to terms with his nature early and without difficulty. This is all the more remarkable considering that the suicide of his father, when Cocteau was nine, may have been due in part to a repressed homosexuality; a maternal uncle, caught in the Eulenburg scandal (involving charges of homosexual relations among German aristocrats), also ended up killing himself.

An indifferent student, expelled from school at age fifteen, Cocteau, whom Arnaud labels a "child prodigy," took some time to find his true voice. (Did he have his old self in mind when, in the 1950s, he declared about a much-publicized child poet: "All children have genius, except Minou Drouet"?) While he had published three volumes of poetry by the age of twenty-three, he eventually disowned them, as he came to shed most of his youthful friendships and influences, from Maurice Rostand and Lucien Daudet, effeminate sons of the world-famous authors of *Cyrano* and *Letters from My Mill*, to the then hardly less famous Romanian-born poet Anna de Noailles. The defining moment in Cocteau's aesthetic upbringing was his discovery of the Ballets Russes, which dazzled Paris audiences from 1908 through 1914. Cocteau's own contribution to these seasons, the 1912 ballet *Le Dieu bleu*, with music by Reynaldo Hahn, was a flop; nor did the project of a "David" with Stravinsky materialize. Only five years later did Cocteau take his revenge with *Parade*, his baptism into modernism: in his preface to the ballet, Apollinaire used the word *surrealist* for the first time in describing it. Arnaud, however, makes clear that this first collab-

oration with Picasso (for the painter's debut) and the equally touchy Erik Satie was anything but easy.

World War I, paradoxically, was for Cocteau not so much a trauma (though he witnessed firsthand the horrors of trench warfare) as another step in his liberation. It also inspired one of his finest works of fiction, *Thomas l'imposteur*, published in 1923, and the 1918 futurist poem *Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance*, a transposition of his flying experience with the ace Roland Garros, whose plane was shot down by the Germans shortly before the Armistice.

The postwar period, vividly evoked by Arnaud, was Cocteau's moment, especially since the death of Apollinaire in 1918 had removed from the scene his most conspicuous rival. With the 1919 musical manifesto *Le Coq et l'harlequin*, Cocteau became the godfather of Les Six, the group of up-and-coming young musicians that included Honegger, Milhaud, and Poulenc. In that same year, he acquired another godson in the precocious Raymond Radiguet, who before the age of sixteen had already written a novel about a woman having an affair with an adolescent boy while her husband is at the front. For the next four years, a smitten Cocteau made himself the mentor, promoter, and patron of this painfully shy "Rimbaud of the novel." Arnaud writes sympathetically and movingly about this one-way love affair – Radiguet was irreversibly heterosexual – and the depth of Cocteau's despair when Radiguet died of typhoid in December 1923. The following year, the bereaved Cocteau discovered opium, to which he was introduced by the sinologist and music critic Louis Laloy and developed a life-long addiction to it.

Another subject Arnaud treats at length and with subtlety is the extraordinary animosity Cocteau encountered from the surrealist group. In the case of its founder and "pope" André Breton, it is clear that sheer homophobia played a role at least equal to literary jealousy and aesthetic preference, such as Breton's distaste for music and the theater. Breton must have found Cocteau's stage successes, beginning with *Antigone* in 1922, all the more galling.

Like many members of his generation, Cocteau in the mid-1920s briefly fell under the spell of the neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, another episode Arnaud deals with sympathetically and with suitable tact, although no amount of tact can rescue the

figure of Maurice Sachs, one of the many colorful characters that people these pages, as well as one of the most unsavory. While Jean Desbordes, who entered Cocteau's life at that time, was not Radiguet's intellectual equal, he restored the poet's emotional balance – and later proved his moral worth as a member of the Resistance, dying under torture in 1944.

Given the turmoil of Cocteau's personal life and the hostility he faced from many quarters in the 1920s and early 1930s, it is hard to believe he found the inspiration and energy to produce some of his best, most enduring work during this period: for the stage, *Orphée* (1926), *La Voix humaine* (1930), and *La Machine infernale* (1934), to which one could add *Oedipus Rex* and *Le Pauvre Matelot*, his collaborations with Stravinsky and Milhaud, respectively, both in 1927; the poetry collections *Plain-chant* (1923) and *Opéra* (1925); *Les Enfants terribles* (1929), his novelistic masterpiece; the film *Le Sang d'un poète* (1932), now widely considered a landmark of avant-garde cinema; and several essays, including *Lettre à Jacques Maritain* (1925) and *Opium* (1930).

So much has been insinuated about Cocteau's attitude during the Nazi occupation of France that it is good to have Arnaud's dispassionate assessment. Though largely apolitical throughout his life, Cocteau obviously had no sympathy with Marshal Pétain's crude nationalism and family values; in fact, his play *Les Parents terribles* (1938), nearly banned on moral grounds at the time of its premiere, had been declared unsuitable in wartime the following year. He was the *bête noire* of many in the collaborationist milieus and the object of frequent attacks in their press – and of actual physical aggression in 1943. He did continue to have his works published and staged – as did Sartre and Camus, among many others. His one grave mistake was to publish in the newspaper *Comoedia* a short "Salute" to Arno Breker, Hitler's favorite sculptor, when Breker's works were exhibited at the Orangerie in the spring of 1942. A serious lapse of judgment, to be sure, but not on the same level as taking part in an official trip to Germany (as did Jouhandeau and Honegger) or denouncing Jewish neighbors (as did, with impunity, countless "respectable," anonymous Frenchmen and women). In short, one imprudence, but no reprehensible behavior – unless one counts as such Cocteau's efforts on behalf of

Jean Genet, whose work he discovered at the time and who repaid the favor with typical ingratitude.

After the war, Cocteau's literary standing was no longer the same. Despite cordial relations with Sartre and Beauvoir, he was not part of the philosophically minded, politically committed existentialist avant-garde. Significantly (if unjustly), his last play, *Bacchus* (1951), was unfavorably compared to Sartre's *Le Diable et le Bon Dieu*. Though he resumed writing poetry and started keeping a fascinating journal, his greatest successes were as film director, from *La Belle et la bête* (1946) to the striking *Testament d'Orphée* (1960). His election to the Académie française in 1954 seemed to indicate that as a writer he had become a classic. He and his last companion, Édouard Dermit, led a sheltered life shared with their wealthy protector Francine Weisweiler, mostly in the south of France. There he pursued his uneasy friendship with Picasso, which Arnaud chronicles perspicaciously. The shock caused by his sudden death in October 1963, on the same day as Edith Piaf, showed how deeply and widely the loss was felt, from Stravinsky to the man in the street.

Arnaud's biography, published in French in 2003, has been discreetly updated for this first edition in English. The translation reads well, which is what matters most, but is not totally error-free. Leaving aside the inevitable typos, endearing slips of the pen (*Spectre de la rose* for *Miracle de la rose*), and a few grammatical lapses ("whom Cocteau always said had been an opera singer"), there are indications that its authors were not completely at ease in Arnaud's virtuosic web of French cultural references. At times, they simply gave up, leaving untranslated phrases like "La croix et la bannière" and – no doubt wrongly assuming they were dealing with a place name – "le boulevard de Guitry"; or translating "Château de Castille" – perhaps thinking Douglas Cooper resided in Spain? They seem to be uncertain when an article is needed, omitting it when it is absolutely required (as in *Le Piquey*, or in Mauriac's *Les Mains jointes*) or supplying one when not (as in the title of the daily *Excelsior*). And someone who renders *spirituel* as "spiritual" (rather than "witty") and *éditeur* as "editor" (rather than "publisher"), confuses "the first woman of the world" with "the first woman in the world," thinks "mange-tout" means string

beans (rather than snow peas), and abbreviates Martin du Gard as “du Gard” still has some way to go before mastering the French language. And one is sorry to see Cocteau’s delightful “jusqu’où on peut aller trop loin” flattened out as the bland “when one goes too far.”