

Classic Poetry Series

Jean Cocteau
- poems -

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Jean Cocteau(5 July 1889 – 11 October 1963)

Jean Maurice Eugène Clément Cocteau was a French poet, novelist, dramatist, designer, playwright, artist and filmmaker. Cocteau is best known for his novel *Les Enfants terribles* (1929), and the films *Blood of a Poet* (1930), *Les Parents terribles* (1948), *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), and *Orpheus* (1949). His circle of associates, friends and lovers included Kenneth Anger, Pablo Picasso, Jean Hugo, Jean Marais, Henri Bernstein, Marlene Dietrich, Coco Chanel, Erik Satie, María Félix, Édith Piaf and Raymond Radiguet.

Early Life

Cocteau was born in Maisons-Laffitte, Yvelines, a village near Paris, to Georges Cocteau and his wife, Eugénie Lecomte; a socially prominent Parisian family. His father was a lawyer and amateur painter who committed suicide when Cocteau was nine. He left home at fifteen. He published his first volume of poems, *Aladdin's Lamp*, at nineteen. Cocteau soon became known in Bohemian artistic circles as *The Frivolous Prince*, the title of a volume he published at twenty-two. Edith Wharton described him as a man "to whom every great line of poetry was a sunrise, every sunset the foundation of the Heavenly City..."

In his early twenties, Cocteau became associated with the writers Marcel Proust, André Gide, and Maurice Barrès. In 1912, he collaborated with Léon Bakst on *Le Dieu bleu* for the Ballets Russes; the principal dancers being Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky. During World War I Cocteau served in the Red Cross as an ambulance driver. This was the period in which he met the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, artists Pablo Picasso and Amedeo Modigliani, and numerous other writers and artists with whom he later collaborated. Russian choreographer Sergei Diaghilev persuaded Cocteau to write a scenario for a ballet, which resulted in *Parade*, in 1917. It was produced by Diaghilev, with sets by Picasso, the libretto by Apollinaire and the music by Erik Satie. The piece was later expanded into a full opera, with music by Satie, Poulenc and Ravel. "If it had not been for Apollinaire in uniform," wrote Cocteau, "with his skull shaved, the scar on his temple and the bandage around his head, women would have gouged our eyes out with hairpins." Cocteau denied being a Surrealist or being in any way attached to the movement. Cocteau wrote the libretto for Igor Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, which had its original performance in the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt in Paris on May 30, 1927.

An important exponent of avant-garde art, Cocteau had great influence on the work of others, including the group of composers known as Les six. In the early twenties, he and other members of Les six frequented a wildly popular bar named Le Boeuf sur le Toit, a name that Cocteau himself had a hand in picking. The popularity was due in no small measure to the presence of Cocteau and his friends.

Friendship with Raymond Radiguet

In 1918 he met the French poet Raymond Radiguet. They collaborated extensively, socialized, and undertook many journeys and vacations together. Cocteau also got Radiguet exempted from military service. In admiration of Radiguet's great literary talent, Cocteau promoted his friend's works in his artistic circle and also arranged for the publication by Grasset of *Le Diable au corps* (a largely autobiographical story of an adulterous relationship between a married woman and a younger man), exerting his influence to have the novel awarded the "Nouveau Monde" literary prize. Some contemporaries and later commentators thought there might have been a romantic component to their friendship. Cocteau himself was aware of this perception, and worked earnestly to dispel the notion that their relationship was sexual in nature.

There is disagreement over Cocteau's reaction to Radiguet's sudden death in 1923, with some claiming that it left him stunned, despondent and prey to opium addiction. Opponents of that interpretation point out that he did not attend the funeral (he generally did not attend funerals) and immediately left Paris with Diaghilev for a performance of *Les noces* (The Wedding) by the Ballets Russes at Monte Carlo. Cocteau himself much later characterised his reaction as one of "stupor and disgust." His opium addiction at the time, Cocteau said, was only coincidental, due to a chance meeting with Louis Laloy, the administrator of the Monte Carlo Opera. Cocteau's opium use and his efforts to stop profoundly changed his literary style. His most notable book, *Les Enfants terribles*, was written in a week during a strenuous opium weaning. In *Opium: Journal of drug rehabilitation* (*Opium : Journal d'une désintoxication*), he recounts the experience of his recovery from opium addiction in 1929. His account, which includes vivid pen-and-ink illustrations, alternates between his moment-to-moment experiences of drug withdrawal and his current thoughts about people and events in his world. Cocteau was supported throughout his recovery by his friend and correspondent philosopher Jacques Maritain. Under Maritain's influence Cocteau made a temporary return to the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

The Human Voice

Cocteau's experiments with the human voice peaked with his play *La Voix humaine*. The story involves one woman on stage speaking on the telephone with her (invisible and inaudible) departing lover, who is leaving her to marry another woman. The telephone proved to be the perfect prop for Cocteau to explore his ideas, feelings, and "algebra" concerning human needs and realities in communication.

Cocteau acknowledged in the introduction to the script that the play was motivated, in part, by complaints from his actresses that his works were too writer/director-dominated and gave the players little opportunity to show off their full range of talents. *La Voix humaine* was written, in effect, as an extravagant aria for Madame Berthe Bovy. Before came *Orphée*, later turned into one of his more successful films; after came *La Machine infernale*, arguably his most fully realized work of art. *La Voix humaine* is deceptively simple—a woman alone on stage for almost one hour of non-stop theatre speaking on the telephone with her departing lover. It is, in fact, full of theatrical codes harking back to the Dadaists' *Vox Humana* experiments after World War One, Alphonse de Lamartine's "*La Voix humaine*", part of his larger work *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* and the effect of the creation of the *Vox Humana* ("voix humaine"), an organ stop of the Regal Class by Church organ masters (late 16th century) that attempted to imitate the human voice but never succeeded in doing better than the sound of a male chorus at a distance.

Reviews varied at the time and since but whatever the critique, the play represents Cocteau's state of mind and feelings towards his actors at the time: on the one hand, he wanted to spoil and please them; on the other, he was fed up by their diva antics and was ready for revenge. It is also true that none of Cocteau's works has inspired as much imitation: Francis Poulenc's opera *La Voix humaine*, Gian Carlo Menotti's "opera bouffa" *The Telephone* and Roberto Rossellini's film version in Italian with Anna Magnani *L'Amore* (1948). There has also been a long line of interpreters including Simone Signoret, Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann (in the play) and Julia Migenes (in the opera).

According to one theory about how Cocteau was inspired to write *La Voix humaine*, he was experimenting with an idea by fellow French playwright Henri Bernstein.

Maturity

In the 1930s, Cocteau had an affair with Princess Natalie Paley, the beautiful daughter of a Romanov grand duke and herself a sometimes actress, model, and former wife of couturier Lucien Lelong. She became pregnant. To Cocteau's distress and Paley's life-long regret, the baby was aborted[citation needed]. Cocteau's longest-lasting relationships were with the French actors Jean Marais and Édouard Dermit, whom Cocteau formally adopted. Cocteau cast Marais in *The Eternal Return* (1943), *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), *Ruy Blas* (1947), and *Orpheus* (1949).

Biographer James S. Williams describes Cocteau's politics as "naturally Right-leaning." During the Nazi occupation of France, Cocteau's friend Arno Breker convinced him that Adolf Hitler was a pacifist and patron of the arts with France's best interests in mind. In his diary, Cocteau accused France of disrespect towards Hitler and speculated on the Führer's sexuality. Cocteau effusively praised Breker's sculptures in an article entitled 'Salut à Breker' published in 1942. This piece caused him to be arraigned on charges of collaboration after the war, though he was cleared of any wrongdoing and had in fact used his contacts to attempt to save friends such as Max Jacob.

In 1940, *Le Bel Indifférent*, Cocteau's play written for and starring Édith Piaf, was enormously successful. He also worked with Pablo Picasso on several projects and was friends with most of the European art community. Cocteau's films, most of which he both wrote and directed, were particularly important in introducing the avant-garde into French cinema and influenced to a certain degree the upcoming French New Wave genre.

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In 1945, Cocteau was one of several designers who created sets for the Théâtre de la Mode. He drew inspiration from filmmaker René Clair while making *Tribute to René Clair: I Married a Witch*. The maquette is described in his "Journal 1942-1945," in his entry for February 12, 1945:

I saw the model of my set. Fashion bores me, but I am amused by the set and fashion placed together. It is a smoldering maid's room. One discovers an aerial view of Paris through the wall and ceiling holes. It creates vertigo. On the iron bed lies a fainted bride. Behind her stand several dismayed ladies. On the right, a very elegant lady washes her hands in a flophouse basin. Through the unhinged door on the left, a lady enters with raised arms. Others are pushed against the walls. The vision provoking this catastrophe is a bride-witch astride a

broom, flying through the ceiling, her hair and train streaming.

Cocteau was openly gay. His muse and lover for over 25 years was actor Jean Marais.

Cocteau died of a heart attack at his chateau in Milly-la-Forêt, Essonne, France, on 11 October 1963 at the age of 74. It is said that upon hearing of the death of his friend, the French singer Édith Piaf the same day, he choked so badly that his heart failed. He is buried beneath the floor of the Chapelle Saint Blaise Des Simples in Milly-la-Forêt. The epitaph on his gravestone set in the floor of the chapel reads: "I stay with you" ("Je reste avec vous").

Honours and awards

In 1955 Cocteau was made a member of the Académie française and The Royal Academy of Belgium.

During his life Cocteau was commander of the Legion of Honor, Member of the Mallarmé Academy, German Academy (Berlin), American Academy, Mark Twain (U.S.A) Academy, Honorary President of the Cannes film festival, Honorary President of the France-Hungary Association and President of the Jazz Academy and of the Academy of the Disc.

Awakening

Grave mouths of lions
Sinuous smiling of young crocodiles
Along the river's water conveying millions
Isles of spice
How lovely he is, the son
Of the widowed queen
And the sailor
The handsome sailor abandons a siren,
Her widow's lament at the south of the islet
It's Diana of the barracks yard
Too short a dream
Dawn and lanterns barely extinguished
We are awakening
A tattered fanfare

Jean Cocteau

Jean Cocteau's Poem For Welles

Orson Welles is a poet
through his violence
and through his grace.
Never does he tumble
from the tightrope
on which he crosses cities
and their dramas.

He is a poet too in the
Loyal friendship he bears
our dreams and our struggles.

Others will know better than I
how to praise his work.
I content myself with sending him
my fraternal greeting.

His handshake is as firm as he is
and I think of it each time my work
obliges me to leap over an obstacle.

Jean Cocteau

L'Ange Heurtebise (Translated In English)

I

Angel Heurtebise on the steps
Beats me with his wings
Of watered silk, refreshes my memory,
The rascal, motionless
And alone with me on the agate
Which breaks, ass, your supernatural
Pack-saddle.

II

Angel Heurtebise with incredible
Brutality jumps on me. Please
Don't jump so hard,
Beastly fellow, flower of tall
Stature.
You've laid me up. That's
Bad manners. I hold the ace, see?
What do you have?

III

Angel Heurtebise pushes me;
And you, Lord Jesus, mercy,
Lift me, raise me to the corner
Of your pointed knees;
Undiluted pleasure. Thumb, untie
The rope! I die.

IV

Angel Heurtebise and angel
Cegeste killed in the war-what a wondrous
Name-play
The role of scarecrows
Whose gesture no frightens
The cherries on the heavenly cherry trees
Under the church's folding door

Accustomed to the gesture yes.

V

My guardian angel, Heurtebise,
I guard you, I hit you,
I break you, I change
Your guard every hour.
On guard, summer! I challenge
You, if you're a man. Admit
Your beauty, angel of white lead,
Caught in a photograph by an
Explosion of magnesium.

Jean Cocteau

Preamble (A Rough Draft For An Ars Poetica)

...Preamble

A rough draft
for an ars poetica

.

Let's get our dreams unstuck

The grain of rye
free from the prattle of grass
et loin de arbres orateurs

I

plant

it

It will sprout

But forget about
the rustic festivities

For the explosive word
falls harmlessly
eternal through
the compact generations

and except for you

nothing
denotates

its sweet-scented dynamite

Greetings
I discard eloquence

the empty sail
and the swollen sail
which cause the ship
to lose her course

My ink nicks
and there

and there

and there

and
there

sleeps
deep poetry

The mirror-paneled wardrobe
washing down ice-floes
the little eskimo girl

dreaming
in a heap
of moist negroes
her nose was
 flattened
against the window-pane
of dreary Christmases

A white bear
adorned with chromatic moire

dries himself in the midnight sun

Liners

The huge luxury item

Slowly founders
all its lights aglow

and so
sinks the evening-dress ball
into the thousand mirrors
of the palace hotel

And now
it is I

the thin Columbus of phenomena
alone
in the front
of a mirror-paneled wardrobe
full of linen
and locking with a key

The obstinate miner
of the void
exploits
his fertile mine

the potential in the rough
glitters there
mingling with its white rock

Oh
princess of the mad sleep
listen to my horn
and my pack of hounds

I deliver you
from the forest
where we came upon the spell

Here we are
by the pen
one with the other
wedded
on the page

Isles sobs of Ariadne

Ariadnes

dragging along
Aridnes seals

for I betray you my fair stanzas
to
run and awaken
elsewhere

I plan no architecture

Simply
deaf
like you Beethoven

blind
like you
Homer
numberless old man

born everywhere

I elaborate
in the prairies of inner
silence

and the work of the mission
and the poem of the work
and the stanza of the poem
and the group of the stanza
and the words of the group
and the letters of the word
and the least
loop of the letters

it's your foot
of attentive satin
that I place in position
pink
tightrope walker
sucked up by the void

to the left to the right

the god gives a shake
and I walk
towards the other side
with infinite precaution

Submitted by Linda M. Gibbs

Jean Cocteau

Sobre Las Olas (On The Waves)

The boys in striped knitware
make the waves sprout--is it a storm?
Everything coos and the bathing girl
consults the mirror of the skies
Waltz, emerald carriages
As a rosebush swells its sides
Once more on the merry-go-round
Spring at the bottom of the sea.

Jean Cocteau

Soft Caramel

Take a young girl.
Fill her with ice and gin
shake it all up to make it androgynous
And return her to her family
Hello, hello, operator don't cut me off
Ah! how sad it is to be the king of animals,
Nobody says a word
Oh! Love is the worst of evils
Take a young girl,
Fill her with ice and gin
Put a slight drop of angostura on her mouth
I knew a man very unhappy in love
Who played Chopin's nocturnes on the drum
Hello, hello, operator don't cut me off
I was talking to....I was talking to the....hello, hello?
Nobody says a word.
—don't you find that art is a bit.....
We tell children wash your hands
We don't tell 'em wash your teeth.....
Soft caramel--

Jean Cocteau

Toreador

Pepita queen of Venice
When you go beneath your shutter
All gondoliers call out:
Watch out--Toreador!
No one rules your heart
In the grand palace where you sleep
And near you the old duenna lies in waiting
for the Toreador.
Toreador, bravest of the brave
When in Piazza San Marco
The wild, slobbering bull
Falls slain by your blade
It is not pride that caresses
Your heart beneath your golden cape
It is for a young goddess
That your passion burns, toreador.

(refrain)

Lovely Spanish girl
In your gondola
Dancing and prancing
Carmencita
Under your mantilla
Sparkling eyes
Shining mouth
That's Pepita

Tomorrow is St. Escurio's Day,
With its combat to the death
The canal is full of sails
Celebrating the Toreador
More than one Venetian beauty
Trembles to know your fate
But you despise all their laces—you suffer—
Toreador.
Since not seeing her appear
Hidden behind an orange tree,
Pepita alone at her window

You think about vengeance.
Under your caftan slips your dagger
Jealousy gnaws at your heart
And alone with the noise of the waves
You weep toreador.

So many horsemen! so great a crowd!
Filling the arena to its limits
From a hundred leagues people keep coming
To cheer you—Toreador!
And so he enters the arena
With more composure than a lord
But he can scarcely walk, the poor
Toreador.

His gloomy dream contains no more
Than to die before the eyes of all
As he feels the piercing of those horns
Within his sad, troubled brow
He sees Pepita sitting there,
Offering her gaze and her body
To the oldest doge of Venice
Laughing at the toreador.

Jean Cocteau