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The Jean Cocteau Collection: How 'Astonishing'?

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The Jean Cocteau Collection: How 'Astonishing'?

BY PAUL J. ARCHAMBAULT

Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) is reputed to have been the most 'astonishing' of French twentieth-century artists. In one of his many autobiographical works, *La Difficulté d'être*, he tells how, one day in 1909, he was walking on the Place de la Concorde with Sergei Diaghilev, who had captivated Paris the previous year with his Ballets Russes, and Vaslav Nijinsky, his greatest dancer. For nearly two years the young Cocteau had been seeking to win Diaghilev's admiration. "Nijinsky", he writes, "was brooding as usual. He walked ahead of us. Diaghilev was amused by my simperings: when I questioned him about his reserve (I was used to praise), he stopped, adjusted his monocle, and said, 'Etonnez-moi' [Astonish me]. The idea of surprising anyone had not occurred to me before."¹

For the next fifty-four years, Cocteau set about attempting to astonish the art world. He wrote poetry, novels, plays, journals, autobiographical works, memoirs of his opium experiences, as well as hundreds of letters, prefaces, and tributes. Also, he drew and painted extensively; wrote opera oratorios in collaboration with Arthur Honegger and Igor Stravinsky (*Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*); devised ballet scenarios with Erik Satie and Darius Milhaud (*Parade*, *The Ox on the Roof*), and made several memorable films (*The Blood of the Poet*, *Orpheus*, *Beauty and the Beast*). In 1955 Cocteau solicited a chair among the forty "immortals" in the French Academy and was duly elected. Thus, the *enfant terrible* of French letters, who had once written that true "audacity consists in knowing just how far one can go too far", climaxed his career in the most conservative of French artistic establishments. In his acceptance speech, Cocteau said that he spoke in

1. Frederick Brown, *An Impersonation of Angels: A Biography of Jean Cocteau* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 90. Cf. Jean Cocteau, *La Difficulté d'être* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1965), 50.

the name of the great *poètes maudits* of France—Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine—who had never been elected to the French Academy. What he neglected to say was that none of what he called “François Villon’s progeny” had ever actively sought admission.

Between 1963 and 1971, the Syracuse University Library acquired more than two hundred fifty holograph manuscripts by Jean Cocteau. These are now to be found in the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections, where they enhance an already rich assortment of French manuscripts that have been thoroughly listed in a previous article in the *Courier*.² An abridged history of their acquisition might be told here. The story is interesting, for it includes several of those ironical twists that made so much of Cocteau’s life seem like a *chassé-croisé* with Death, choreographed by the artist himself. On 17 July 1963, Martin H. Bush, Deputy Administrator of Manuscripts at the Syracuse University Library, wrote Cocteau a letter describing a “large undertaking” at Syracuse University “aimed at making the important source materials of the theater and the world of art and literature available to teachers, scholars, and practitioners of learned professions”. Moreover, he added, “many participants in the University’s graduate and undergraduate programs are genuinely devoted to art and literature”. The letter continued:

The type of material we are looking for includes: manuscripts of plays, articles, and books (whether published or unpublished), letters and general correspondence, and any records or files of a non-personal nature. Because of the impact you have had on society during your remarkable career, we hope to create a Jean Cocteau Manuscript Collection at Syracuse University in recognition of your past and future achievements. This material would be a boon to historians and students of the theater and the University and scholarly world as well. Scholars for generations to come will be able to gain a better understanding and fresh appreciation of the manifold aspects of your career.

On 11 August 1963, Cocteau, who usually responded generously to requests for manuscripts, prefaces, recommendations, and tributes,

2. Edward Lyon, “French Literary Manuscripts at Syracuse University”, *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 20 (Fall 1985): 78–79, 82–85.

replied that he would donate to Syracuse the bound manuscript of his film, "The Two-Headed Eagle". A month later, in a letter dated 11 September 1963, Cocteau wrote again from his country home at Milly-la-Forêt: "Mon cher Martin H. Busch [sic], Je vais voir si quelque manuscrit moins indirect qu'une oeuvre de films se trouve à ma campagne et, malgré mon écriture illisible, serait, pour votre bibliothèque, un document plus humain et plus amical. Votre Jean Cocteau". To this second letter, Cocteau appended the postscript, "Beaucoup de mes manuscrits ont été volés et vendus".³

However much Cocteau enjoyed dramatization, the postscript does sound like that of a man being stalked by an avenging spirit. A month later, to the day, Cocteau was dead. The recurrence of the number eleven in these dates suggests a dice game with death, an idea that Cocteau would certainly have relished incorporating into one of his films. But there is a further irony: Cocteau died on 11 October 1963, within hours of hearing the news of the death of Edith Piaf, a close friend, whose vocal genius Cocteau appreciated and had written about extensively. In the *New York Times* obituary of 12 October 1963 (which spoke of both deaths in the same front-page article), Cocteau was reported as having almost predicted his own death after hearing the news of Piaf's: "Piaf is dead. The boat is sinking." I have been unable to verify that quotation among Cocteau authorities. What is certain is that at noon, 11 October 1963, one hour before Cocteau's own death, French radio listeners heard his recorded voice pay a moving tribute to Piaf's voice, "that great black-velvet voice magnifying whatever it sings".⁴

Cocteau's death dampened the hope raised by his two previous letters to Syracuse University that a substantial number of manuscripts would be donated. In response to the original offer of the manuscript of "The Two-Headed Eagle", Martin H. Bush had written: "We believe that any scrap of paper which would shed more light on the man Jean Cocteau would be worthy of preservation for scholars of future generations. This is especially true since we have

3. "My dear Martin H. Bush, I will see if some manuscript less indirect than a film work can be found in my country [home] and, in spite of my illegible handwriting, might be, for your library, a more human and friendly document. Your Jean Cocteau. P.S. Many of my manuscripts have been stolen and sold."

4. Brown, *Impersonation of Angels*, 410.

eight thousand people [sic] who either read or speak French at the University.” However, Cocteau’s “Two-Headed Eagle” seems never to have found its way to Syracuse University. A few days before his death, Cocteau did mail a folio volume of manuscript poems entitled *Poèmes 1957*, with a drawing on the cover and a *dédicace*, “à Syracuse University ces quelques calculs d’un mathématicien du verbe avec l’amitié de Jean Cocteau”.⁵ In March 1964 J. Pierre Peyraud, the attorney in charge of Cocteau’s estate, wrote to Syracuse University that in view of Jean Cocteau’s “mort brutale”, it would be impossible to fulfill the wishes he had formulated in his letters of August and September 1963. Presumably, Cocteau had left no written will.

With the exception of the *Poèmes 1957*, the present manuscript collection is the result of purchases made by the Syracuse University Library between 1967 and 1971. It consists of materials written over a fifty-year period: two hundred seventeen letters, manuscripts of dramatic works, essays, fiction, and poetry. Among the letters, perhaps two of the most moving were sent to Max Jacob (1876–1944), the French poet, after the death of Raymond Radiguet (1903–1923), Cocteau’s youthful lover, a most promising writer who died of typhoid, having written two novels that Cocteau ranked with the best of Madame de Lafayette and Benjamin Constant. Jacob, a mystical Breton Jew, had converted to Catholicism in 1909. (His conversion, incidentally, did not prevent his arrest by the Gestapo in 1944 and his extermination at Drancy, a French death camp.) After Radiguet’s death, Jacob presumably wrote Cocteau, whose Catholicism wavered throughout his life, advising him to practise his faith more fervently. One reads a serene letter to Max Jacob dated 29 December 1923, only seventeen days after Radiguet’s death:

Mon Max, mon admirable et cher Max—Il faut que je t’explique pourquoi je semble de pas vouloir t’obéir. Je ne me contracte pas. Je ne me livre pas aux démons. Mais j’ai l’esprit trop religieux—un trop profond respect de l’église—pour user d’elle comme d’une drogue ou d’un fétiche. La communion ne peut se prendre à la manière d’un cachet pour calmer

5. “To Syracuse University, these few calculations by a mathematician of the word, with the friendship of Jean Cocteau.”

l'âme. Je dois souffrir. Je prie. J'essaye de donner prise à la grâce. Je sais maintenant qu'on peut sentir en soi du divin sans se forcer, puisque Raymond m'habite et me protège. Il y avait en lui un ange mal à l'aise dans les vices. Cette mort le sauve et il veut que j'en profite—j'en suis sûr. Tu n'aurais pas honte de moi pour l'attitude. J'en parle et je corrige ses épreuves du Bal sans fléchir. J'ai ton poème sur lui dans ma poche et je t'embrasse Jean⁶

As one might expect, Cocteau's serenity was not fated to last. The very next letter to Max Jacob, dated 29 January 1924, records the beginning of the expected depression:

Mon Max Excuse mon silence. Je suis dans un état atroce. Pire que celui des premiers jours. J'avais alors l'espèce d'ivresse du coup sur la tête. La douleur grise—Imagine moi dégrisé, face à face avec cette chose informe. Je voudrais mourir.⁷

This letter coincides with the start of Cocteau's first experimentation with opium, which he then took regularly during a four-year period of depression.

Besides the more than two hundred letters—the other principal correspondents are Violette Leduc, Maurice Sachs (see fig. 1), and

6. "My Max, my admirable and dear Max, I must explain to you why I seem not to want to obey you. I am not recoiling. I am not selling my soul to demons, but I have too religious a spirit—too deep a respect for the Church—to use her like a drug or a fetish. One cannot take communion as one would a tablet to soothe the soul. I must suffer. I do pray. I try to allow grace to take root in me. Now I know that one can feel divinity in oneself without straining, since Raymond lives in me and protects me. There was about him an angel who was ill at ease with his vices. This death has saved him and he wants me to take advantage of it. I'm certain of that. You would not be ashamed of my attitude. I talk about him, and I am correcting the proofs of the Ball [Radiguet's posthumously published novel, *Count d'Orgel's Ball*] without faltering. I have your poem on him in my pocket and I embrace you. Jean."

7. "My Max, Excuse my silence. I am in an atrocious state. Worse than that of the first days [after Radiguet's death]. I was then drunk like somebody who has been hit on the head. Drunken sorrow. Imagine me now sobered up, face to face with this formless thing. I want to die."

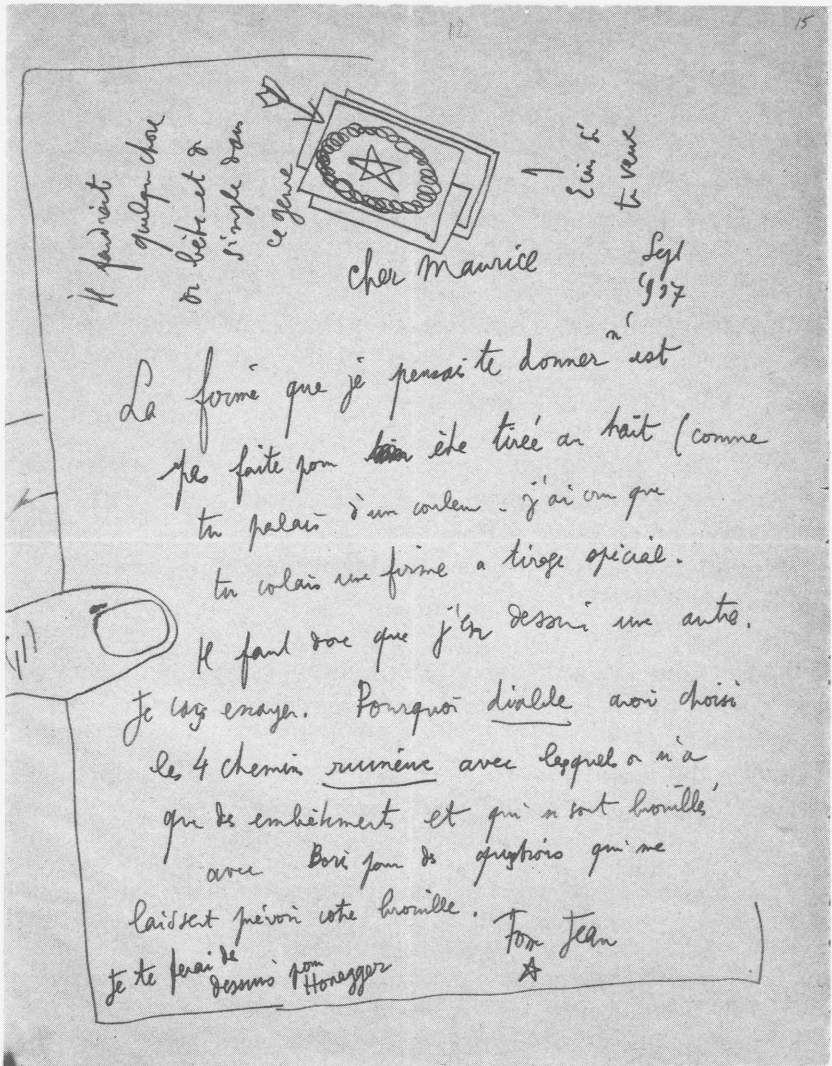


Fig. 1. Cocteau's letter to Maurice Sachs, September 1927. Jean Cocteau Collection, Syracuse University Library.

Marcel Raval—the manuscript collection includes twenty-eight essays alphabetically arranged by title or first line. The essays cover a wide range of subjects: from biographical sketches of contemporaries (Christian Bérard, Coco Chanel, Diaghilev, Max Jacob, Raymond Radiguet, Erik Satie) to critical pieces (“Procès de l’inspiration”;

“Quelques notes autour de 16 millimètres”; “Romantisme”) and historical backgrounds to his life and works (“La Légende du boeuf sur le toit”; “La Machine infernale”; “Notes sur la crucifixion”; “Sources des films”).

The poetry of the collection is of two kinds: bound or collected manuscripts and single poems. The largest of the bound volumes of poetry is the collection of *Poèmes 1957* donated by the author before his death. Though the inscribed and illustrated cover is in itself a flattering donation to Syracuse University, the poems themselves read like five-finger exercises by means of which Cocteau kept himself poetically in trim. Using inks with different colors, he set up the rhyme scheme first, then progressively filled in the verses. Most of the poems in this book are undistinguished in content.

Among the loose manuscripts, there are four drafts of a long and fascinating thirty-quatrains poem, “Un Ami dort”, which is a loving, deeply moving meditation about the poet’s feelings as he watches the man he loves sleeping:

Tes mains, jonchant les draps étaient mes feuilles mortes.
Mon automne aimait ton été.
Le vent du souvenir faisait claquer les portes
Des lieux où nous avons été.⁸

Perhaps the most striking of the long poems among the Cocteau manuscripts is *Crucifixion*, a twenty-five-stanza poem in free verse, published in 1946. “The poem is so densely written”, writes Margaret Crosland, “so dramatic in treatment, that the impact made by a first reading is often unforgettable. Its compression, its use of dynamic rhythm, internal and half-rhymes are reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins.”⁹ Though it contains allusions to the crucifixion of Christ—the “racks” and “ladders” leaning upon the “new dead tree” of the first stanza evoking many a pictorial crucifixion—the poem’s real subject is the experience of pain as felt by the suffering person:

8. “Your hands astride the sheets were my dead leaves.

My autumn loved your summer.

The wind of memory banged shut the doors

Of places where we have been.”

9. Margaret Crosland, ed., *Cocteau’s World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972), 205.

Il y avait les coups. Les coups
 du fer sur le fer. La vieille rose
 des vents. Les coups. La rouille
 des coups sur l'éventail en os
 des pieds. Sur la natte
 en orteils. Sur les planches. Sur
 l'exquise enluminure du missel
 des nerfs où la douleur court
 plus vite que la douleur
 dans le corail des tortures.
 L'écho des coups. Les médailles
 des coups. Les oreilles
 des coups. L'âme du bois. L'âme
 des coups sans âme.
 Les coups du tonneller. Les coups
 du charpentier. Les cratères
 de viande bleue. Les poteaux
 indicateurs des lignes
 de la main. Le cou
 du cygne.¹⁰

Among the other major writings in the Syracuse University collection ought to be mentioned four dramatic works and one work of fiction. There is a six-page holograph scenario of the film *La Belle et la bête*; a twenty-four-page typescript of *Oedipe-Roi*, annotated and with illustrations including set and costume designs; a ninety-two-page holograph of *Paul et Virginie, Opéra-Comique en 3 actes*, by Cocteau, Erik Satie, and Raymond Radiguet, including holograph title and half-title pages; an eight-page *divertissement* written on music sheets about the "retour d'Ulysse à Ithaque, et accueil de Pénélope et ses

10. "There were blows. Blows of iron on iron. The old rose of the winds. Blows. The rust of the blows on the bones of feet spread fan-like. On the mat of the toes. On the planks. On the exquisite illumination of the missal of nerves where pain runs faster than the pain in the coral-reef of tortures. The echo of the blows. The medals of the blows. The ears of the blows. The soul of wood. The soul of blows without soul. The blows of the cooper. The blows of the carpenter. The craters of blue flesh. The signposts of the lines in the hand. The neck of the swan."

This free translation is adapted from Mary Hoeck's original version, which Cocteau authorized (Crosland, *Cocteau's World*, 205, 211).

prétendants”; a one-act play in verse; and, finally, a sixty-four-page oversized holograph, *La Fin du Potomak*, including a four-page manuscript entitled “La Clef de l’oeuvre de Jean Cocteau”.

Paul et Virginie, *Opéra-Comique en 3 actes* is totally unrelated to the famous novel written by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre in 1784, save that the young hero and heroine are also Rousseauistic innocents in the wily, wicked upper-class Paris of the 1920s. This charming comic operetta libretto, dated 16 September 1920, was written by Cocteau and Radiguet at the Bassin d’Arcachon (near Bordeaux), where they spent their summers in the early twenties. The operetta was never performed, for Erik Satie died (in 1925) before completing the score. In a separate manuscript letter, Cocteau describes the ill-fated collaboration between Radiguet, Satie, and himself:

Paul et Virginie a été composé par Raymond Radiguet et moi, en marge de notre travail et comme on se délasse, à Pigney, au bord du Bassin d’Arcachon. C’est dans le petit hôtel en planches de Pigney, que Radiguet écrivit le *Bal du Comte d’Orgel*. Erik Satie nous demandait un prétexte à musique. Jusqu’à sa mort nous crûmes qu’il avait presque terminé l’oeuvre. Il n’en avait pas écrit une note mais nous le faisait croire par crainte que le texte ne le quittât et ne passât en d’autres mains.¹¹

A letter such as this one could provide an interesting footnote for Cocteau specialists, who have previously assumed that Satie “never completed” the score to *Paul et Virginie*.¹² Cocteau’s checkered relationship with Erik Satie did not prevent him from paying the French musician a moving tribute, the manuscript of which is at Syracuse. It reads, in part:

Mon honneur sera de l’avoir vénéré, d’avoir accepté les sautes de son caractère mystérieux, de lui avoir, dès que je l’ai connu,

11. “*Paul et Virginie* was composed by Raymond Radiguet and me, in the margin of our work and as a relaxation, at Pigney, near the Bassin d’Arcachon. It’s in the small, wood-plank hotel of Pigney where Radiguet wrote his *Count d’Orgel’s Ball*. Erik Satie had been asking us for a pretext for his music. Up to the time of his death, we thought he had almost finished the work. He had not written a note but led us to believe that he had, fearing that the text would be given to someone else.”

12. E.g., Brown, *Impersonation of Angels*, 234.

assigné sa vraie place. Lorsqu'on demandait à Rossini qui était le plus grand musicien, il répondait: "Beethoven". Et lorsqu'on lui disait: "Et Mozart?" il répondait: "Vous m'avez demandé qui était le plus grand. Vous ne m'avez pas demandé qui était l'unique." Si l'on m'interrogeait sur notre époque, je répondrais sans doute que les plus grands sont Debussy et Stravinsky. Et j'ajouterais: "Mais Satie est l'unique".¹³

From the Cocteau scholar's viewpoint the two most important prose manuscripts are no doubt the *Oedipe-Roi, pieds gonflés*, a free adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, and *La Fin du Potomak*, a novel published in 1939. The *Oedipe-Roi*, a twenty-one-page typescript with heavy revisions in Cocteau's handwriting, is strikingly illustrated in pencil by the artist. On the cardboard cover of the typescript is a drawing of Jocasta, with a monumental, partly shaded face that reminds one of some of Picasso's "classical" faces of the same period (1923). Jocasta is naked, her breasts and pubic hair are prominently displayed. In her right hand she holds what seems a snake-like umbilical cord. Her left arm resembles a truncated artery, on which her crown (or shield?) is suspended. Her legs, covered with fish scales, seem those of a large frog with web-like feet (fig. 2). On the bottom half of the last page (21) of the typescript, Cocteau has drawn a blinded Oedipus screaming in agony. There is a hole in the center of his outstretched left hand, suggesting a crucifixion. In the space to the upper right hangs a left foot, with a hole through the center, badly swollen and reminding the reader of the root meaning of "Oedipus", and of the subtitle of the play: "pieds-gonflés" (fig. 3). On a separate page at the end of the text is a full-page drawing of the blinded Oedipus, looking skyward, his sex prominently displayed in spite of his toga, standing alone outside a broken wall (fig. 4).

Cocteau wrote this adaptation of Sophocles' play in 1923. An un-

13. "It will be to my honor that I venerated him, accepted the ups and downs of his mysterious character, and, as soon as I knew him, assigned him to his true place. When people asked Rossini who was the greatest composer, he would reply: 'Beethoven'. And when they said: 'What about Mozart?' he would reply: 'You asked me who was the greatest. You did not ask me which one was unique.' If people were to ask me about our age, I would no doubt reply that the greatest are Debussy and Stravinsky. And I would add: 'But Satie is unique.'" Crosland, *Cocteau's World*, 220.



Fig. 2. Jocasta at the city gates. *Oedipe-Roi* typescript, cover. Jean Cocteau Collection, Syracuse University Library.

dated cover letter to “Monsieur l’Administrateur” of the Comédie Française shows that Cocteau attempted to have his play performed by France’s most illustrious classical troupe. Why it was not performed by the Comédie Française in the early twenties is a mystery,

CREON - Alors, tu seras exaucé. Viens, lâche tes filles.

ŒDIPÉ - Ne me les ôte pas.

CREON - Cesse de vouloir, ce que tu as voulu ne t'a pas réussi.

LE CHŒUR - Thébains, regardez cet Œdipe. Il devinait les énigmes. Il était roi. ^{ou à ce point!} Il n'avait personne. Il s'écorou-
le sous le malheur.

Ne dites jamais qu'un homme est heureux avant ~~qu'il~~ ^{d'avoir}

~~ne retourne sa dernière carte!~~

~~en~~ La dernière page.

RIDEAU

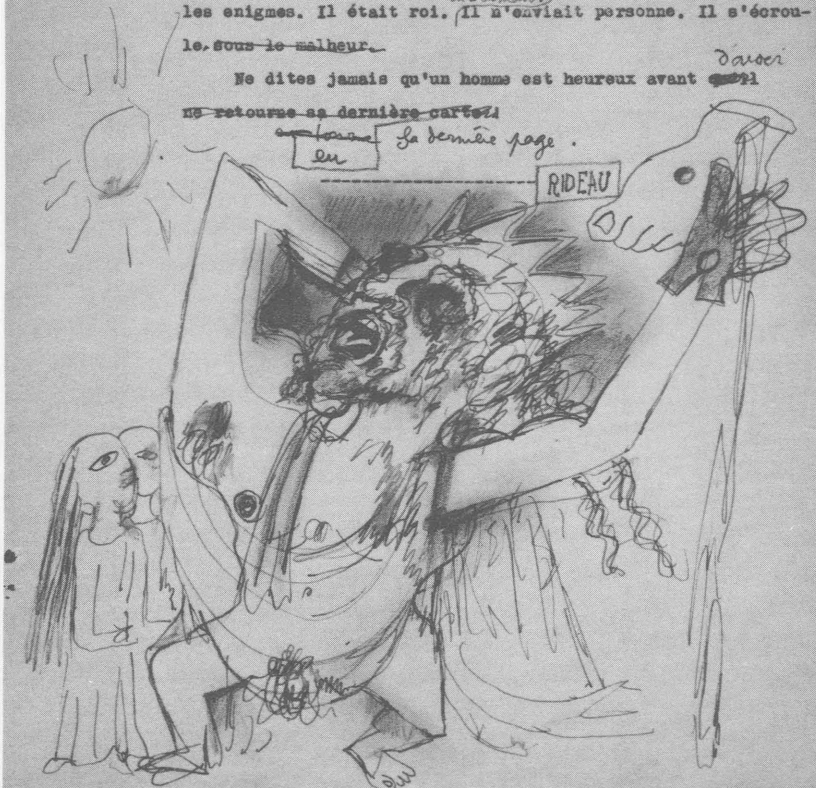


Fig. 3. The blinded Oedipus in agony. *Oedipe-Roi* typescript, on page 21. Jean Cocteau Collection, Syracuse University Library.

but one can surmise that Cocteau's was one of several translations or adaptations to appear during those years. (André Gide is reported to have exclaimed: "C'est une véritable Oedipémie!") In 1926 Cocteau showed the text of his *Oedipe-Roi* to Igor Stravinsky, who wanted to collaborate with Cocteau on an *Oedipus-Rex* opera-oratorio (Cocteau

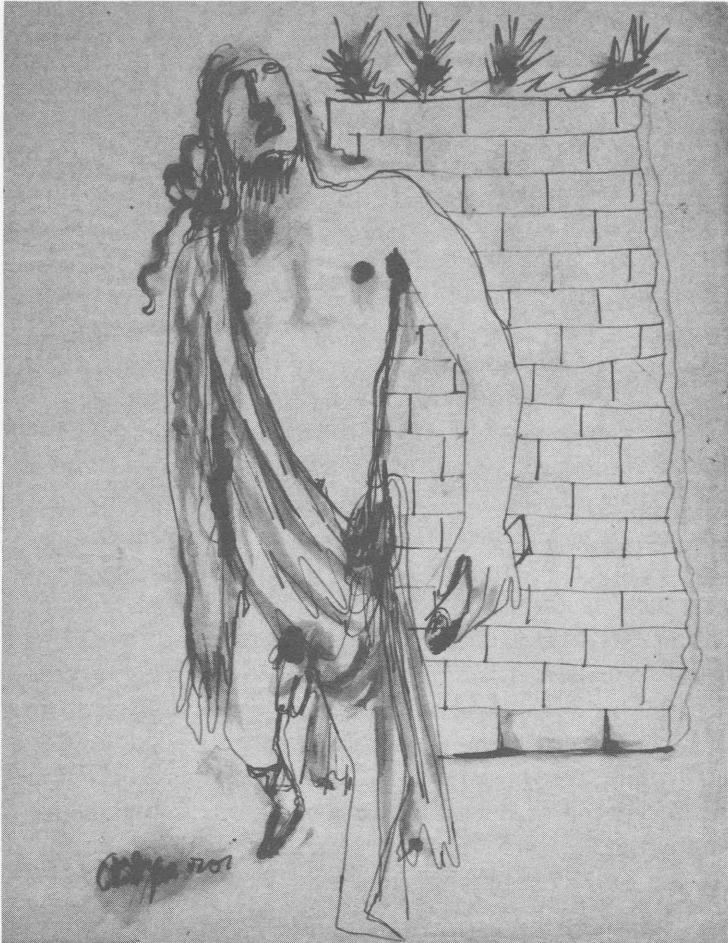


Fig. 4. Oedipus outside the city walls. *Oedipe-Roi* typescript, following page 21.
Jean Cocteau Collection, Syracuse University Library.

had earlier collaborated successfully with Arthur Honegger on an adaptation of *Antigone*). Stravinsky found the prose of Cocteau's text "horribly meretricious" and decided that the opera-oratorio should be sung in Latin, "a medium not dead, but turned to stone, and so monumentalized as to be immune from vulgarization".¹⁴ The Latin text was provided by the eminent Jesuit scholar Jean (later Cardinal) Daniélou and is a free adaptation of Cocteau's French. The Stravin-

14. Brown, *Impersonation of Angels*, 268–71.

sky-Cocteau opera-oratorio was performed for the first time on 30 May 1927. Daniélou's church Latin gives the piece a medieval rather than classical flavor which, combined with the clean dissonances and the dramatic percussions of Stravinsky's score, reminds the hearer of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, with which it is sometimes performed. Cocteau did manage to salvage some part for himself, convincing Stravinsky that he should play the part of the Narrator and that the Narrator should speak in French. The Daniélou Latin text, incidentally, contains a literal rendition of three of the most striking lines in Cocteau's earlier French version. When he learns the full truth about his origins, Oedipus exclaims: "Je suis né de ceux dont il ne fallait pas. J'ai fécondé celle qu'il ne fallait pas. J'ai tué celui qu'il ne fallait pas. Lumière est faite."¹⁵ In the Daniélou-Cocteau-Stravinsky production, Oedipus, whose role is sung by a tenor, expresses this shock of self-revelation by singing *a capella*: "Natus sum quo nefastum est, concubui cui nefastum est, cecidi quem nefastum est. Lux facta est."

La Fin du Potomak is a fifty-eight-page autograph manuscript, folio size, dated "1er mai–5 mai 1939". It is a sequel to a curious book entitled *Le Potomak*, written by Cocteau in 1913–14, "après s'être endormi". The message of both *Le Potomak* and its sequel is not clear. Both proceed from a state Cocteau described as "dans une sorte d'hypnose et au bord du vide". *Le Potomak*, dedicated to Stravinsky, is a piece of reverie to be read as one listens to the half-coherent utterances of someone dreaming. Margaret Crosland explains: "Its characters were named after strange words read on old jars in a chemist's shop. These characters hold discussions and write letters to each other on a variety of topics, while the narrator eventually takes his friend Argémone to see the Potomak, a strange monster."¹⁶ *La Fin du Potomak* has the same obsessive themes as the original work: invisibility, sleep writing, obsession with self. The same horrible, greedy, petits-bourgeois characters of the earlier work, the Eugènes [ironically, the "well-born"] continue to devour the helpless Mortimers and have by now begun to pervade the entire universe:

15. "I was born of those I should not. I have fertilized the woman I should not. I have killed the man I should not. Light is made." Cocteau kept these lines verbatim in his text of *La Machine infernale*, his successful adaptation of the Oedipus myth produced in 1933, directed by Louis Jouvet at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

16. Crosland, *Cocteau's World*, 85.

Peu à peu, ils s'étaient glissés comme des larves et incorporés à l'univers. Ils s'étaient introduits dans les âmes grandes et petites. Le malaise que j'enregistrais, que j'annonçais seul en 1913 était devenu chose commune et en quelque sorte un malaise à prix unific. . . . Les Eugènes, dénouant leurs lignes maléfiqes, s'étaient glissés sous la boucle des moindres noeuds des moindres machines à coudre. Un mecanisme aussi génial que celui qu'inventa le vieux Singer en entendant son voisin se plaindre que sa femme "lui mettait la tête à l'envers", ce qui lui valut la trouvaille de renverser l'aiguille, les avait glissés sous la trame du monde et nul ne leur échapperait plus. L'Europe subissait leurs caprices. Elle se sentait écoeurée. Le dictateur Adolphe, en trenchcoat jouait aux échecs à sa table de Berchtesgaden. Il poussait les pièces d'une main molle et, sous sa petite moustache, souriait de la faiblesse de ses adversaires. Comme ses adversaires perdaient ils l'accusaient de tricherie et demandaient qu'on respectât les regles. Ils brandissaient des parapluies et des colombes. Ils se laissaient prendre leurs rois, leurs reines, leurs cavaliers et leurs tours.¹⁷

When *La Fin du Potomak* was published in October 1939, Cocteau wrote a short preface making it sound more enigmatic and prescient a work than it really was. In fact, like most of Cocteau's prophetic works, *La Fin du Potomak* is "heedless of all but his own upheavals".¹⁸

17. "Little by little they had slipped in like larvae and had incorporated themselves into the universe. They had ingratiated themselves into great and small souls. The malaise that I was alone in recording, in announcing in 1913, had become a common thing, a five-and-ten-cent sort of malaise. . . . The Eugènes, untying their maleficent lines, had slipped under the bow of the slightest knots of the slightest sewing machines. A mechanism as ingenious as that invented by old Singer when he heard his neighbor complain that his wife 'turned his head upside down' (which led to the great discovery of his turning the needle upside down), had slipped them under the fabric of the world, and nobody could avoid them. Europe suffered their caprices. She felt nauseous. The dictator Adolph, in a gabardine trenchcoat, was playing chess at his table at Berchtesgaden. He was pushing his pieces with a soft hand and, under his little moustache, smiling at his adversaries' fear. His adversaries accused him of cheating and asked that the rules be respected. They brandished their umbrellas and their doves, while allowing their kings, their queens, their knights and their rooks to be taken."

18. Brown, *Impersonation of Angels*, 340.

Whatever other talents he may have had, Cocteau was no historical prophet.



In perusing the Cocteau collection one is inclined to reconsider the artist's true talents. Was he ever as 'astonishing' as Diaghilev, that great judge of talent, suggested he try to be? In acquiring this manuscript collection, was the Syracuse University Library reasonable in its hope that "scholars for generations to come will be able to gain a better understanding and fresh appreciation of the manifold aspects of [Cocteau's] career"?

As an *amateur* (in the literal sense) of Cocteau, I am confirmed in my long-held belief that he was an artist of varied and uneven talent who did not excel at everything he practised. I have the highest regard for Cocteau as a filmmaker; but the collection sheds little light, and nothing new, on that side of Cocteau's oeuvre. Many of Cocteau's drawings (like those in the *Oedipe-Roi* manuscript) are very powerful. As to Cocteau the poet, playwright, essayist, and novelist, the collection bears out my impression that he ventured into these genres with imagination, but not with genius. In spite of the high regard in which Cocteau (and his translator) held the poem *Crucifixion*, it ranks neither with the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins¹⁹ nor with the best works of Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Apollinaire, or Valéry. I would, however, never go so far as André Breton, the 'pope' of French surrealism, who called Cocteau "the anti-poet . . . the arch impostor, the born con man".²⁰

Like Oscar Wilde, Cocteau perhaps put talent into his work and genius into his life. What emerges from this collection is the outstanding personality of a remarkable man, whose generosity was not limited to himself. Of Raymond Radiguet he wrote that, "à quatorze ans, Raymond Radiguet nous battait tous aux échecs de la poésie"; and he ended a generous tribute to Erik Satie, who spurned him on several occasions, by writing that "Satie est l'unique". Perhaps his greatest gift lay in his capacity for admiring artists less liberal and more talented than himself.

19. As Margaret Crosland has claimed, *Cocteau's World*, 205.

20. Brown, *Impersonation of Angels*, 402.