CHAPTER 8

Jean Cocteau, *Orphée*, and the Shock of the Old

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Modernist icon and artistic polymorph Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) and his œuvre have not aged particularly well in the modern, postmodern, and now post postmodern eras. Even during his lifetime, Cocteau received considerable critical scrutiny. Jean Boorsch, in his 1950 article “The Use of Myths in Cocteau’s Theatre,” stated that “there remains something limited, brittle and fleeting in his popularity that does not augur too well for his glory among posterity.” Boorsch additionally criticized Cocteau’s “nervousness and instability, his childish need for admiration, [and] a kind of puerile desire to astonish.” Fellow playwright Eugène Ionesco dismissed Cocteau’s dramatic output as “superficial and contrived […] the theatrical tricks too obvious.” Cocteau’s close friend and frequent collaborator, albeit not a noted literary critic, Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel, dismissed him as a “snobbish little pederast who did nothing all his life but steal from people.” In a series of essays in the Pompidou Center’s 2003–2004 retrospective devoted to Cocteau, Dominique Païni noted that “Son incomparable aisance et ses apperentes réussites l’ont rendu suspect. Suspect d’insuffisante rigueur, d’insuffisante profondeur, d’insuffisante morale, d’insuffisante économie, d’insuffisante pudeur. Insuffisante en tout” [his incomparable ease and his apparent successes render him suspect. Suspect of insufficient rigor, of insufficient profundity, of insufficient spirit, of insufficient economy, of insufficient modesty. All in all, insufficient.]

Cocteau suffered derision from those whom he collaborated with, from critics, and fellow writers as well. According to many of them, his protean efforts in the arts only revealed him as a consummate amateur, adept in many métiers but a master of none, despite producing the seminal films *Le Sang d’un poète*,

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1 Boorsch (1950), 75.
2 Boorsch (1950), 75.
3 Ionesco (1961), 22.
5 Païni (2003b), 17. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.
La Belle et la Bête and Orphée. They also ignore his theatrical triad of adaptations of Greek myths and/or plays, Antigone, Orphée and La Machine Infernale (his retelling of the myth of Oedipus) and other projects in the performing arts which included his participation, with Eric Satie and Pablo Picasso, in the Cubist ballet Parade and his collaboration with Igor Stravinsky which culminated in the oratorio Œdipus Rex. What about his more than considerable body of literary (novels, poems, essays, memoires) and artistic works (paintings, sketches, prints, sculptures, murals) that were consistently in the forefront of the arts for many decades? Is this the output of an insufficient artist?

Cocteau’s œuvre, to a certain extent, centered upon his adaptation and transformation of Greek myth. According to avant-garde iconoclast Jean Genet, the word Greek in French – grec – holds the key to understanding the man and his works:

Grec! La séche élégance de ce mot, sa brièveté, sa cassure même, un peu abrupte, sont les qualités qui s'appliquent avec promptitude à Jean Cocteau. Le mot est déjà un précieux travail du découpage: ainsi désignait-il le poète dégagé, dépris d’une manière dont il gait voler les copeaux. Le poète – ou son œuvre mais donc lui – reste une curieux fragment bref, dur, étincelant, cocassement inachevé – comme le mot grec – et qui contient les vertus que je veux dénombrer. Surtout la luminosité. Un éclairage d'abord uniforme et cruel, montrant avec précision les détails d’un paysage apparemment sans mystère: c'est le classicisme hellénique.6

[Greek! The dry elegance of this word, its brevity, its rupture also, a little abrupt, are the qualities which apply with promptitude to Jean Cocteau. The word itself is a neat work of decoupage; it shows the poet as disengaged, debased to the point where he will steal leftovers. The poet – or his works but mostly him – becomes a curious fragment, succinct, comically unfinished – like the word grec – which contains virtues which I wish to enumerate. Above all luminosity, an illumination above all else uniform and cruel, showing with detail a countryside without mystery: Hellenic classicism.]

For Genet, Cocteau’s supposed deficiencies become virtues: his brevity, ego, shallowness and showmanship reveal not insufficiency but an acute eye and an artistic sensibility based in part on appraising the poetic possibilities of contradictions. Genet, in his own characteristically contorted literary analysis,

6 Nemer (2003), 25.