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JEAN COCTEAU AND AMERICA

BY KLAUS MANN

Among the literary figures of our time, Jean Cocteau occupies a peculiar, indeed, unique position. For almost four decades has he maintained, indefatigably and ingeniously, the rôle of an impish enfant terrible -- and even while doing so, he gradually assumed the dignity of a master. The French public which used to be scandalised by his vagaries, now accepts him as a national institution. A brilliant juggler and at the same time a highly skilled, conscientious artizan, he represents certain aspects and features of the French genius -- as consistently and effectively as do, in their different ways, pure artists, like André Gide and Paul Valéry, or mere entertainers, like Sacha Guitry and Maurice Chevalier.

It is true, the intellectual vanguard seems to be rather tired, at this point, of Cocteau's stunts and caprices. Some of his former disciples have become his most inexorable foes -- for instance, Maurice Sachs who, in his over-publised autobiography The Sabbath, denounces the idol of his youth with remarkable bitterness. Another young critic, Claude Mauriac -- incomparably more serious and more intelligent than the hysterical, nasty Sachs -- is equally hard on Cocteau, the "seducer," the "nihilist," the irresponsible acrobat and conjurer.

He may be all that; but he also is a real poet. His particular idiom, his very personal accents and images have enchanted and influenced a whole generation. We all are indebted to him. If it is easy enough to see his limitations and ridicule his weaknesses, it would be unfair and erroneous to overlook or underrate the significance of his contribution.

Some of the bright young men who are now inclined to shrug Cocteau off as "obsolete" and "vieux jeu," seem to forget, or not to realize, that a truly poetic novel like Les Enfants terribles undoubtedly ranks with the most precious and characteristic literary documents of the period between the two world wars; that Orophée and La Machine infernale are miracle-plays with whose compelling charm no Giraudoux, no Sartre can compete; that intellectual fantasies like Essai d'une critique indirecte and Opium are rich in insights and intuitions of lasting validity; that the melody of Plain Chant sounds today as sweet and as persuasive as it did when first intoned, thirty years ago.

Undeniably, some of Cocteau's more recent work has fallen short of those early exploits. Already Les Parents terribles -- however unmistakably "Coctesian" in its pathos and imagery -- means a dubious concession to the standards and tastes of the commercial theater. But if this curiously ambiguous tragicomedy is, among other things, "just a thriller," it's at least a successful one: a thriller that comes off -- which is more than can be said of such tenuous products as La Machine à écrire.

Were Cocteau's enemies to prove right, after all? Was his talent petering out?

No, he is resourceful and tenacious. ^(His drama) L'Aigle à deux têtes, may be in parts disturbingly, almost absurdly, fustian and verbose; but it's a come-back. ~~Here we have again that natural grandeur, that tragic sense, that bold and yet organic blend of melodramatic and lyric elements typical of Cocteau, the playwright, where he is at his best.~~

~~Another come-back~~ -- less spectacular, but maybe even more significant and moving, ^{is} the booklet La Difficulté d'être, a slim collection of autobiographic fragments and reflections on such varied subjects as Beauty, Death, Youth, Style, Language, the meaning of dreams, the infinite attraction of certain landscapes, poems, and human faces. What Cocteau offers in this unassuming, yet substantial and generous resumé is not just the

only

brilliant wit we are wont to expect from him, but also something more valuable and more endearing: a candid simplicity, a mellow humaneness and understanding truly akin to wisdom.

The same direct and informal approach, the same cordial frankness is characteristic of Cocteau's ~~most~~ latest publication, Lettre aux Américains (Librairie Bernard Grasset, 1949).

* * * *

Cocteau's fame in the United States has hitherto limited to a small, esoteric clique of snobs and connoisseurs. During the past two or three years, however, his name has become known to a somewhat wider public, ~~at least~~ ^{at least} in New York -- mostly thanks to the ~~late~~ presentations of a play and two motion pictures.

As for the play -- L'Aigle à deux têtes --, it was a flop on Broadway: "La pièce... avait eu un échec à New-York." as the author puts it. This failure, he suggests, may have been mainly due to a poor production -- which does not sound quite convincing. True, Miss Tallulah Bankhead, who played the leading role, is not the ideal embodiment of a romantic, morbidly sentimental empress; but she certainly gave a fascinating, indeed, stunning performance and did her dynamic best to make Cocteau's whimsical rhetorics acceptable to ~~blase~~ ^{at least} sober Manhattan audiences. It's not Miss Bankhead who should be blamed for the fiasco, but rather the audiences and, above all, the critics who proved impervious to the particular charm of this dramatic tour de force. The peculiar blend of Sardou and Surrealism, of melodrama and parody, of poetic vision and sturdy craftsmanship -- this very personal and at the same time typically French combination of incongruous elements must be perplexing to a comparatively naive, unsophisticated public like the American public, that is, not really familiar with the tradition of the literary stage in the Continental sense. Any theatrical style transcending pure realism -- anything more daring, more

fanciful than Ibsen and Shaw, is liable to be misunderstood or rejected by Broadway habitués.

If The Double-Eagle failed on the stage, the screen version -- written and directed by Cocteau himself -- was not too well received, either. "Mon film n'a pas remporté le succès de LA BELLE ET LA BÊTE," he sadly states in his "Letter." It might be added that La Belle et la Bête, in its turn, was less of a sensation than, years before, Le Sang d'un poète -- a cinematographic extravaganza, often labeled as "surrealistic" but actually a style and class of its own, which enjoys a considerable, and justified, prestige among all those interested in the film as a serious form of art.

It was for the opening of the "Eagle" film, and for a one-man exhibition of his drawings at the Hugo gallery, that Cocteau came to New York, the last week of 1948. He had been in the U. S. once before, on a hasty trip around the world which he described in a series of delightful articles (subsequently published also as a book, under the title Mon Premier voyage). On that occasion, he had spent only a couple of days in New York -- just enough time to fall in love with the Burlesque shows, the "bals noirs" of Harlem, and the merry-go-rounds of Coney Island. Now he stayed twenty days, but "did so many things, saw so many people" ~~that~~ -- as he points out in the opening paragraph of his "Letter" -- that he felt, when leaving, as though he had lived for twenty years in the Big City.

~~His~~ "Letter to the Americans" is really a farewell message written in the air-plane taking an enthusiastic, bewildered, worried traveller back to his country: "Paris-New York (Air-France), 12-13 Janvier 1949." As a journalistic piece of work, the "Letter" is less striking, less "réussie" than certain other travel reports and personal memoirs Cocteau previously wrote for the daily press -- for instance, the breezy, fast-moving, ~~highly~~ ~~amusing~~ articles about the trip around the world (Paris-Soir) and the

exquisit Portraits-Souvenir (Le Figaro). Nor does this improvised salute have the iridescent profundity or the paradoxical boldness ~~characteristic~~ of Cocteau's aesthetic criticism. But if Lettre aux Américains is somewhat lacking in structure and compactness (it contains indeed quite a few of those "repetitions and contradictions" for which the author, somewhat coquettishly, apologizes), it ~~moves and~~ ^{yes} convinces in virtue of a certain emotional intensity, a spontaneous, genuine warmth. He wants his message to be "un cri d'angoisse et d'amour." And as such -- as an outcry of affection and anxiety -- ~~Cocteau's~~ ^{his} appeal has a strong, ~~significant~~ ^{moving} impact.

He addressed the Americans as a European, as a poet, as a free man and lover of freedom. "C'est un des derniers hommes libres qui vous parle," he exclaims, not without a certain melancholy pride, and then makes it clear that the freedom he cherishes, the freedom he needs and requires, can survive only with the help of America, only if America remains faithful to her liberal traditions and ideals. "Americans!" he says. "The dignity of the human race is at stake. Be what you really are -- a people that has preserved its childhood! A youthful and honest people!" And, again:

"Américains! Votre rôle est de sauver le vieux monde si dur, si tendre, qui vous aime and que vous aimez. Votre rôle est de sauver la dignité de l'homme."

Will the Americans prove worthy of ^{their} the vast power [?] bestowed upon them by Providence? Will they live up to their great historical mission?

An European poet and freedom-lover, an old individualist, an old rebel and a hard worker, Jean Cocteau ^{ponders these questions} -- high up in the air, somewhere between the New World and the Old -- , and he cannot help feeling worried. The actual flight takes only a few hours; and still, how remote are the two continents from one another! How far is it from an impoverished, weary Europe to that land of rampant prosperity and naiveté, that country of enormous promise and enormous danger -- America! The "gold curtain"

separating the rich U.S. from the poor nations on the other side of the ocean -- is it less impenetrable, less inflexible than any iron barrier?

Cocteau consistently ignores the great social and political problems of our time -- a curious aloofness which may be regarded as his main deficiency, but which is also one of his main forces. Instead of discussing the Marshall Plan or the Cold War, he concentrates, in his Open Letter, on subjects he is really familiar with, and about which he can speak with authority. By doing so, he avoids the platitudes of would-be sociologists and armchair strategists. In accordance with his old technique of "critique indirecte," he deals with the great timely issues in a circuitous, roundabout fashion.

For instance, what Cocteau has to say about Hollywood and the tyranny of box-office-conscious producers, implies an indirect but unequivocal warning against the inordinate power, the dictatorship of Money in general. The American public, he maintains, is responsive, warm-hearted, intelligent: "Le public de New-York est le meilleur public qui soit au monde." But the producers! Not only are they too lazy, too cynical and unimaginative to educate the masses; they take it for granted that the nation as a whole shares their -- the producers' -- instinctive aversion to anything experimental, new, daring, controversial. According to the producers, only the cheapest, most vulgar stuff will appeal to "the man in the street." Which is why only the cheap and vulgar flourish in Hollywood, while the real artists and real personalities, "les têtes trop mystérieusement couronnées" like Greta Garbo and Charles Chaplin, have no chance to develop.

The European poet, ~~high up in the ether~~, somewhere over the Atlantic, warns the Americans against the cult of the dollar. He warns them against the cult of technical gadgets and devices. ("Don't abandon yourselves to the deadly vertigo of radio and television!") He warns them against the

cult of comfort which, to him, is something sterile and materialistic, in contrast to luxury which is "a noble virtue," not to be had for money. ("Vous avez le confort," Cocteau tells the Americans. "Il vous manque le luxe.")

But his main concern is freedom. Americans, he feels, seem inclined, these days, to get tired of freedom, or afraid of it; they seem ready to renounce their most valuable possession. If a certain tendency towards standardization has always been one of the less pleasant characteristics of American life, there now is a new, and even more ~~disturbing~~ ^{ominous}, propensity to regimentation. "They are going to watch and control even our dreams," the flying poet complains. "And it's not the psychoanalysts who will do the controlling: it's the police!"

What Cocteau terms "les fausses morales" -- the spirit of bigotry ^{to} and hypocrisy is the blight withering intellectual life, endangering free thought in the United States of 1949. "You will not be saved by arms or money," the poet admonishes us in his farewell message. "You will be saved by the minority of those who think." And this minority, he tells us, finds itself today, everywhere in America, "the prisoner of a factitious freedom." ("Partout, en Amérique, une minorité... se trouve prisonnière d'une liberté factice.")

Many American intellectuals may agree with him on this point -- in fact, some of them have ~~already~~ expressed very similar ~~opinions~~ views in even more poignant, more aggressive terms. What Cocteau has to say about the American scene sounds moderate and mild in comparison of the fierce bitterness with which writers like Henry Miller -- to mention but one example -- have criticized their own country. Cocteau's diagnose of the American condition is remarkable, not account of its sharpness or originality, but

inasmuch as it comes from a man who has had a mere glimpse of life in the U.S. -- which bespeaks both the perspicacity of the observer and the obviousness of the condition --; a man, moreover, whose attitude towards America is not only free of any malice or hostile prejudice but actually full of ^{tenderness} affection and admiration.

There is a lot to ^{be said} ~~say~~ against this Open Letter. It contains sweeping generalizations, some of them quite disputable. Statements like "New-York déteste le secret" or "There are no trees in New York" strike me as rather dubious. Why, I have known some New Yorkers who were extremely mystery-minded! And as for trees -- what's wrong with those in Central Park?... Also, certain readers may find Cocteau's self-assurance at times embarrassingly close to downright vanity -- for instance, when he remarks that his film Le Sang d'un poète, originally laughed at by the public, has now become "a gospel" ("est devenu bible").

But these are minor objections. More disturbing, to me, is an occasional discrepancy between tone and contents. Sometimes Cocteau assumes a didactic accent, a prophetic gesture, as though he were actually bringing a program, a solution, a formula that might help us in facing and overcoming the present ordeal. "Listen to me!" he demands. "Listen to those few, ~~precious~~ Europeans who really are your friends, and whose words have the weight, the impact, the dynamics of actions. Listen! Listen! Listen!" -- And then? Then comes maybe some amusing crack about Broadway at night. But as for a program, as for constructive advice, you'll have to knock at another door. (If there is any such other door...)

Yet, somehow it is worthwhile listening to this friendly and urgent appeal. If Cocteau has no program to offer, he presents us generously with shrewd observations, clever sidelights, magnificent flashes of wisdom, wit and anger. His outcry of ^{affection} ~~affection~~ and anxiety deserves to be heard, ~~and heeded.~~

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