# The Mysteries of Cocteau's *Orpheus*

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> The legend of Orpheus is known. In the mythology of Greece, Orpheus sang songs in Thrace. He charmed even the wild beasts, but his songs made him forgetful of Eurydice, his wife. Then Death took her. He went down into Hades and charmed its forces, obtaining her return on condition that he never look at her again. But he did look and was torn to pieces by the Bacchantes.
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> Where does our story happen? And in what year? It is the privilege of legends to be ageless. Therefore, as you like it.

This is Jean Cocteau's preface for his film, *Orphée*. The motion picture story follows the lines established by Cocteau's résumé, except that he has dressed his characters in contemporary garb. The "existentialists" of 1950, in fact, bear a marked resemblance to the hippies of today. Orpheus is a successful modern poet living in a comfortable bourgeois existence, when he encounters the Princess, his "death," who has come for him. Through her he realizes that his existence has been indeed *too* comfortable. She falls in love with him and he glimpses a corner of her world, the underworld. Returned to life, he begins to hear poetic messages from a dead poet, by means of a car radio. Unaware of their source, he feels they are inspiration. The Princess takes his wife Eurydice and thus causes Orpheus to follow, even though he is subsequently allowed to bring her back, under the conditions noted in Cocteau's preface. Orpheus looks at her and she disappears. He is killed by the Bacchantes, a club of women based at an "existentialist" cafe. Now dead, he is received by the Princess, who forthwith sends him back and who goes on to her own unnameable end. Orpheus is with Eurydice in the comfortable bourgeois home, and has forgotten the whole episode of the Princess.

An easy interpretation of the film is that Orpheus was a bad poet whom the Princess throws back into his stagnant pond of mediocrity. She has made a mistake and has sacrificed herself for the wrong poet. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that the film is made of the dreams and delusions of Orpheus, the great poet, who sees Death by means of these non-waking states. According to this interpretation, Orpheus might be seen as feeling rejection by his newly pregnant wife and as fearing the competi-

tion of the child to be born. Once reconciled to the arrival, he ceases dreaming.

Cocteau's own suggestions lead us to believe that the Princess, Orpheus' "death," did come for him and did sacrifice herself that he might continue his existence as a poet. Perhaps she sinks into his subconscious, but she is there. Her action will be worth the sacrifice, since he is a poet.

When asked what his literary or cinematographic poems meant, Cocteau was always impatient and replied as Archibald MacLeish has done: A poem does not *mean*, it *is*. For Cocteau, "To prove something is vulgar." And to add further confusion, Cocteau would say to his interviewer, Andre Fraigneau, "Mystery exists only in precise things."[1]

The many meanings of Cocteau's *Orphée* mask its many mysteries; they do not explain them. Frederick Brown tried to reduce Cocteau to a Freudian womb-searching analogy and ended up with a book replete with catty gossip. Jean-Jacques Kihm confronted Cocteau's film *Orpheus* with the Tibetan Book of the Dead in Cahiers du Cinema (April 1960)[2] and, in spite of many suggestive insights, by no means found any *key*.

Claude Beylie,[3] in an attempt to explain the inexplicable, summed up the film in three essential themes: (1) the successive deaths which the poet must experience in order to realize himself (2) immortality and (3) the mirrors which bring us close to death. Faced with his own oversimplification Beylie points out that there are four corollary themes: (1) inspiration from within (a surrealist commonplace) (2) human love (and for Beylie, this is the "dirty water" of Heurtebise in *Orpheus* and the "tender mud" of one of Cocteau's poems) (3) suspended time and (4) the confrontation of the visible (ordinary life and success) with the invisible (second level existence and enigmas, or mysteries.) In short, Beylie divided and subdivided, but did not come to any solution.

Another category of mystery has been indicated by Neal Oxenhandler, Margaret Crosland and other biographers of Cocteau: namely, that category which lies "outside" the works themselves, the coincidences which attended the productions of the plays—and in particular the catastrophes which, fury-like, pursued *Orphée's* production. The story of the name, Heurtebise, has been told all too often—how Cocteau was inspired by the name of an elevator, although he later found that the name of the elevator was not the name Heurtebise at all, but Otis-Pifre instead, although the name Heurtebise has stuck as one of Cocteau's recurrent characters. Less amusing is the tale told by Oxenhandler who relates it thus: "At the last rehearsal of the play, which was being held in Cocteau's apartment, at the words,

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[1] Cocteau, Jean. *Entretiens autour du cinematographe.* Andre Bonne, Paris, 1951, p. 84.

[2] Brown, Frederick. *An Impersonation of Angels.* Viking, New York, 1968. Kihm, Jean-Jacques, "Orphée et le livre des morts tibétain." *Cahiers du cinéma.* April 1960 (No. 106), pp. 19-24.

[3] Beylie, Claude. *Cocteau.* Anthologie du Cinema No. 12, p. 9192.

'With these gloves you will pass through mirrors as if they were water,' there was a loud, shattering noise, and the cast discovered that the bathroom mirror was pulverized."[4] Again in the Mexico City production, an earthquake interrupted one performance, and in another the actor portraying the character of Orpheus dropped dead.[5] Shortly after completion of the film *Orpheus,* Cocteau was flung to the ground as he alighted on the street side from an automobile by a speeding motorist who veered dangerously close. The incident recalled Cegeste's death at the beginning of the film.[6]

One of the mysteries inside of the works of Cocteau, and which therefore deserves more searching study than the external coincidences, is the apparently gratuitous allusion to fish being thrown into their water. This allusion, or better yet, this image, can be traced back to certain sources and thus dispel a certain part of the mystery, but not all of it. I'm referring to the last line of Heurtebise in the film. It is recorded in the published text as well as in the shooting script: "We had to put them back in their dirty water."[7]

## THE CLOUDY WATER

The play, the shooting script (which I discovered in 1970), and the published text of the film, as well as the film itself, all combine to furnish a kind of "fix" on the birth of this idea. The mystery of this line is clouded by a curiously murky English translation, explained below. Furthermore, it becomes associated with an image which appears to relate to mythology, so that one feels that Cocteau's deliberate ambiguity is simply leaving to the viewer the choice of two possibilities. Both lead to the same general conclusion that one arrives at superficially from the first reading of the script, a vague returning of Orpheus and Eurydice to their original and mediocre milieu: their dirty water.

Water as an element comes repeatedly into the shooting script but has all but evaporated by the time the film is made. It is like the mirage of a little oasis disappearing before the eyes of some desert prospector. There was little if any water imagery in the original play, although passing through mirrors is compared to going through water. Little more is left in the film: only the "dirty water" remark of Heurtebise which could be too easily explained by Cocteau's love for the element of surprise.

The shooting script provides an interesting discrepancy with the finished film when it indicates that the sound of agitated water is to accompany the entrances and exits through the mirror. One can guess easily enough that water was to be used to show hands going through glass, but why

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4 Oxenhandler, Neal. *Scandal and Parade.* Constable, London, 1957, p. 88.

5 *Ibid.,* p. 89.

6 Crosland, Margaret. *Jean Cocteau: A Biography.* Knopf, New York, 1956, p. 220.

7 Cocteau, Jean. *Orphée,* Published Screenplay. Andre Bonne, Paris, 1950, p. 115. Shooting script (unpublished), p. 143.

water? Why not some trick photography? Cocteau certainly knew about all the lab tricks. He always preferred to avoid these and use stage illusions as much as possible. As everyone knows—he talked so much about it—Cocteau decided to use mercury instead of water because it didn't make ripples or concentric circles. Nevertheless, he left the Heurtebise line in. Now, instead of relating to the mirrors, the line simply hangs in the void, letting us interpret it at will. Had he used the water (or even the sound, which he drastically changed as well), we would be able to conceive of something concerning water as life on earth and air as the uncontaminated purity of the other world. If such a parallel can be said to exist, we see a vague hint of man's primordial aquatic nature.

The translation in English offers a problem, as we have indicated above: a happenstance problem which would be appreciated by Cocteau and for which it is difficult to find a reason. Evidently Mary Hoeck, the Englishwoman who translated Cocteau's poems and whom he esteemed highly, was the first to translate "eau sale" as "mire" although it is clearly "dirty water."[8] Perhaps she wanted to be poetic. In any case, Frederick Brown took up the translation in his biography and so did Margaret Crosland in her life of Cocteau. Now "mire" connotes oozy and slimy mud, and even a hint of the pig, while "eau sale" as "dirty water" connotes water made cloudy by soil, branches, or leaves, and more specifically because of its use in the film (it didn't occur in the play) the cloudy water of a poorly tended aquarium.

I think the basic meaning is beyond dispute: the poet must be put back into the world, imperfect though it may be, for that is the environment in which he works. Kihm adds the more elevated idea of a renascence.[9] The added connotations produce the idea that all the murkiness of philosophical and emotional pollution keep the poet from seeing clearly. After all, Cocteau does refer to his friend the philosopher Jacques Maritain as a blind fish: "You are a fish from the deepest depths. Luminous and blind."[10]

The fish, as a matter of fact, hints at the primordial existence of man. In the diary of *Beauty and the Beast, Diary of a Film,* Cocteau makes the following striking entry concerning dreams and dirty water: "Woke up this morning after a night in which my dreams were stirred up like dirty water and formed absurd moires (watered silks)."[11] In his semi-autobiographical novel, *Le Grand Écart,* Cocteau compares sleep to a fish. The hero (Jacques) is trying to sleep to forget an emotional jolt he has received. He can't fall asleep immediately. Says Cocteau: "Sleep is not at our command. It is a blind fish which surfaces from the depths, a bird which swoops down on us . . . He (Jacques) felt the fish swimming in a circle out of reach . . . Sud-

8 Crosland, p. 215. Letter dated July 15, 1949.

9 Kihm, p. 23.

10 Cocteau, Jean. *Oeuvres completes.* Marguerat, Lausanne, 1946-51, v. 9, p. 269.

11 Cocteau, Jean. *Dairy of a Film: La Belle et la bete* (trans. by Ronald Duncan). Roy, New York, 1950, p. 96. Entry dated 11 October 1945.

denly a thickness settled on his eyes. His jaws tensed. The bird was in the trap, the fish in the bowl. He slept."[12]

Is it too much to speculate that "la Princesse" (or her ultimate, unnamed master) sleeps when the fish is in his bowl, when the human being is in his dirty water? Doesn't the Princess say of her commander: "We are his dream, his bad dream"?[13] As for a further reference to man as a fish, we have only to look at the line of one of Death's helpers in the stage play, when he says, "It's like shooting a fish in the water with a gun."[14]

The idea of fishing is deliberately confused with a hint of the three fates in the play as well as the shooting script. In the play, Death prepares the dead for removal from earth with a string or thread and a spool. While the words fish-line or reel are not actually used, the word *amorcer* is used, which means to bait and also to start a process of some kind. Cocteau loved to play on words and made no mystery of that, so we can feel free to allow both meanings to exist side by side at least until one or the other is proved wrong. Whereas, *amorcer* suggests baiting and fishing, spool and thread suggest something else, something akin to the fates spinning, measuring and cutting. Since *Orpheus* is treating a Greek legend, the validity of such an interpretation would seem to stand. In any case, although the spool, the thread and the baiting idea all remain in the shooting script, by the time the film is finished, these references have all disappeared together with the water mirrors and we are left with the problem of deciding whether the two possibilities were separate, whether they were one, or whether we must cross them out of our minds and accept the final speech of Heurtebise at face value. The words, "we had to," continue to imply a residual idea of fatality.

Cocteau's preoccupation with death reduces to a preoccupation with the *preparation* for death. The biographer Frederick Brown treats the idea far too superficially. First developing the idea that Cocteau had in mind the fact that each of us carries his own death within him, he interprets the messages sent to Orphée as actually being sent by his other self. It is strange that Brown, in his inverse puritanism, doesn't suggest that Cocteau is guilty of some kind of necromantic onanism. Cocteau has referred to mirrors as *eau de Narcisse* (Narcissus water)[15] for example. Brown asserts that Cocteau in his writings and his preoccupation with Death was really attempting to *postpone* death.

Margaret Crosland, however, points out that Cocteau's preoccupation was much more in line with Montaigne's conception of life as a preparation for death.[16] Again, Miss Crosland feels that in the play *Orpheus*, Cocteau is conducting a sort of interrogation of death. Cocteau himself says, in the

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12 Cocteau, Jean. *Le Grand écart*. Stock, Paris, 1923.
13 Cocteau, *Orphée*. Bonne edition, p. 83. Shooting script, p. 105.
14 Cocteau, Jean. *Orphée*. Stock, Paris, 1927.
15 Beylie, p. 91.
16 Crosland, p. 204.

story, "Le Secret Professionel": "The poet resembles the dead, inasmuch as he walks about invisibly amongst the living, who only vaguely perceive him after he is dead—that is, when they speak of the dead as ghosts."[17]

Somewhat like Jorge Luis Borges, Cocteau seems to feel that if you imagine all possible ways of dying you will guarantee yourself against death. This is not postponement, but rather a game, which Cocteau, Borges and others play, knowing they will lose, but playing all the same. The name of this game may be deception, but certainly not postponement. The aim of the game, in any case, is preparation.

## WHOSE DEATH?

Cocteau personifies Death in several of his works. Not only in the play *Orpheus,* but also in his choreography for *The Youth and Death,* perhaps in the Sphinx of the *Machine Infernale,* and also in the shooting script of *Orpheus,* the film.

Man's fate for Cocteau is death. Man's fate in general, that is, is Death in general. Yet one man's fate may well be his particular death. Cocteau has spoken much about the Princess in his film as *not* being Death-in-general. Cocteau evolves, and we have neither the right nor the power to stop him. The mystery is not the evolution, but rather the moment when the change took place. It might have been a gradual change, of course, except that the shooting script shows that it was abrupt. And since it was abrupt, an additional mystery is Cocteau's complete silence on the issue.

I need cite only a few examples of the use of the word *la mort* (death) in the shooting script as opposed to *ma mort* (my death, etc.) in the Andre Bonne published edition of the script of the film. The first mention is when the Princess asks Cegeste to say who she is. In the shooting script he says *la mort;* in the Bonne edition he says *ma mort.*[18] Later Cocteau's voice says, in the shooting script, "And on this first night death came into the room."[19] In the Bonne edition the voice says, "Et cette premiere nuit la Mort d'Orphee vint dans la chambre."[20] And to give a third example, toward the end, at the Tribunal, the first judge says, "We, the investigating jury, have decided to put death and her aides on parole,"[21] whereas the Bonne edition (and the film, of course) says "the death of Orpheus."[22]

A few curious discrepancies flaw an otherwise consistent analysis. For example, there are passages in the Bonne edition where *la mort* is kept. Perhaps a significance can be found for the fact that these references are at the moment when Heurtebise convinces Orpheus to follow him. "You

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17 *Ibid.,* p. 141. Reference is to "Le Secret professionel," *Oeuvres completes, op. cit.,* p. 203.

18 Cocteau, *Orphée.* Bonne edition, p. 20. Shooting script, p. 24.

19 Cocteau, *Orphée.* Shooting script, p. 48.

20 Cocteau, *Orphée.* Bonne edition, p. 38.

21 Cocteau, *Orphée.* Shooting script, p. 107.

22 Cocteau, *Orphée.* Bonne edition, p. 85.

know death," and then to make it perfectly clear, Heurtebise adds: "You know her . . . in person."[23] Everywhere else the transition has been completed.

Perhaps a clue to the date of the change might be in a letter to Mary Hoeck in November 1949 in which Cocteau refers to his use of mercury, but still refers to death (not Orphée's death).[24] It is the actual shooting of the film which seems to have led Cocteau to consider the individuality of the individual's death; in other words, not the conception of the film, but something which took place which may have suggested the switch to Cocteau.

Cocteau himself tells Andre Fraigneau, referring to the questions of critics, that the Princess does not represent Death in general. "They can't resist saying that Maria Casares represents Death, that Heurtebise and the motorcyclists are angels of Death, the Zone an infernal place and the judges, those of the Supreme judgement. Everything that I mean to avoid."[25] Later he does admit that the Princess is "one of the innumerable Faces of death."[26] In fact, he has already had Heurtebise say, just after having called the Princess Death, that the dead body of Eurydice is only one form of Eurydice, "just as the Princess is one of the forms of death."[27] This statement is already in the shooting script, and it could well be this speech that suggested to Cocteau the new view of death as particular death.

Even though the mystery of the two remains, and even though the mystery of which is the right interpretation (postponement of death or preparation for it or both), it is clear that the idea of death preoccupied Cocteau at least during the production of *Orpheus* the play, *The Youth and Death, Orpheus* the film, and *The Testament of Orpheus.*

It may be that this very preoccupation led him to omit or to forget many facts which have become minor mysteries. What Cocteau did not say becomes significant since he talked so freely about himself and his works during his lifetime.

We uncover even more such omissions when we try to get enlightenment from associates and friends. Cocteau produced quantities of anecdotal material in his lifetime. Most of it flattering and admiring. Of another person one could perhaps cite modesty as a cause for failure to mention important developments. Perhaps even with Cocteau we should admit the *possibility*, at least, of modesty.

The most striking omission is that of the name of Claude Pinoteau and facts that Pinoteau relates in still another recent interview. Finally, in the

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[23] *Ibid.*, p. 66. Shooting script, p. 85.

[24] Crosland, p. 218.

[25] Cocteau, *Entretiens autour*, p. 153.

[26] Cocteau, Jean. *Entretiens avec André Fraigneau.* Bibliotheque 10/18, Paris, 1965, p. 53. Also to be noted in the front matter of the Bonne edition, "un des fonctionnaires de la mort."

[27] Cocteau, *Orphée.* Bonne edition, p. 68. Shooting script, p. 87.

*Testament of Orpheus,* Cocteau mentions him and shows that he appreciated this man who was often his devoted technical assistant. There is need to mention only two coincidences in which Pinoteau figures, but which are typical of Cocteau and his reliance on a combination of chance and intuition. According to Pinoteau, Cocteau would summarily ask for something he—Pinoteau—considered preposterous. He was always able to comply, not because of any extraordinary gifts of his own—although I found him unduly modest—but by "the magic of Cocteau."

Everyone remembers the chalet in *Orpheus.* Cocteau described the building he wanted Pinoteau to find in great detail. Pinoteau was by this time used to being sent out on such missions. This one seemed to be particularly impossible, though. He searched for some time and then, feeling that Cocteau had gone too far this time, he set out looking for the two motorcyclists. Then one evening for no reason at all, he took a different route home. He was on a motorcycle himself, curiously enough. In the evening twilight of dusk, he came over a slight rise and saw the building. Before he got close, he knew he had it, ruined, deserted, isolated. As he drew closer he saw more and more details: gravel, broken glass, the staircase, everything. When Cocteau was taken there he revealed that he had seen this building, but long ago when it was in good condition, when he was a small child. He had never been in it. Certainly the bombed-out profile had changed it from what it had been when he had known it. He had no way of knowing that it had been hit during the war.

Even more surprising as an omission for such a believer in coincidences is the story of the motorcyclists. Again Cocteau described the kind of persons he wanted, he suggested the son of a doctor friend because he fit the general type and had a motorcycle. Pinoteau located him and then found that he had a brother who could pass for his twin, and who had an identical Indian motorcycle.

If these were the only two coincidences tailored to Cocteau, it would be surprising enough. When I interviewed Pinoteau last summer, he went on seemingly endlessly with such tales. The mystery is why Cocteau did not relate more of them, why he seemed to stop short at a certain distance from himself. Perhaps he wanted instinctively to hang an enigmatic veil in front of his works. After all, the sub-title of Cocteau's *Testament of Orpheus* is "ne me demandez pas pourquoi": "Don't ask me why."