

# *Dentelle secrète*

*une interprétation des Enfants terribles en tant qu'autoportrait à la  
lumière de la pensée et de la mythologie de Jean Cocteau*

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December 1994

**Abstract of thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
at the University of New England, Armidale, NSW:  
*Dentelle secrète: une interprétation des Enfants terribles en tant  
qu'autoportrait à la lumière de la pensée et de la mythologie de Jean  
Cocteau.***

Jean Cocteau wrote often of his work as a *self-portrait*. He appeared to mean by this that each separate work, as well as the totality of his works, is a portrait of its creator, which depends not only on the traits of certain characters but also on structure and imagery.

Whatever the medium in which he was working, Cocteau insisted on calling himself *poet*. For him, poetry was that which is uncovered by a *descent into oneself*. What the poet brought to the surface was not necessarily fully comprehended by him, but was shaped and translated by the *marriage* of his conscious and unconscious to render it visible. The role of the poet, which he saw as vital and sacerdotal, was one of his central preoccupations. He frequently emphasised that his *unconscious* was not that described by Freud, whose work he saw as limited by its emphasis on problems of sexuality. However, he sometimes apparently contradicted himself by saying that sexuality was at the heart of everything he had produced, and that every time he wrote he told the story of Œdipus.

Given Cocteau's definition of the creative act, the self-portrait of which he wrote would be a psychological one. Given his ambivalence with regard to Freud, it is likely that he did not himself see the key to this self-portrait as primarily psychoanalytic in the Freudian sense. A writer's own interpretation of his work and that of others is of course by no means the only valid one, and several Freudian analyses of his work have been produced. Cocteau's sexuality was ambivalent, but for the most part tending strongly towards the homosexual. His father committed suicide when Cocteau was still a child, and his mother, to whom he was very close, is described by biographers and critics as loving, though somewhat possessive and jealous. These factors make Cocteau an obvious candidate for the Œdipus complex. He also wrote frequently on the Œdipus theme.

The present interpretation, however, uses different criteria. It is an analysis of one of Cocteau's works as self-portrait using what may be called Cocteau's own terms. Even in his works of non-fiction, he wrote primarily in a vocabulary of images which recur throughout his long period of serious production (1913–1963). He built up what is known as his *personal mythology* which included, among other things, elements of his own past and special connotations given to everyday objects, as well as elements taken from other mythologies, such as the ancient Greek and Egyptian. The special connotations of the diverse images are in most cases both multiple in the case of each image, and remarkably consistent over time.

One of Cocteau's images is that of the poet as a male-female couple who disagree with one another. He writes also of poetry as being the fruit of the marriage of conscious and unconscious, and of the poet 'dying' each time he creates, only to be reborn like the phoenix. Many of his works contain a central couple who can find unity only in death. Another recurring theme is that of the claustrophobic bedroom, in which the struggle of the central couple at least partially takes place.

Cocteau's novel *Les Enfants terribles* (1929) is centred on a brother-sister couple who are so identified with the bedroom in which they spend the majority of their lives that the room moves with them and recreates itself when they leave their original address. Though the word *incest* is not mentioned until the final pages, its presence is implicit throughout, and is at the heart of the continual struggle between them which leads to their simultaneous suicide.

The first two chapters of the thesis explore the possibility, at one level of interpretation, of the bedroom representing the poet's psyche, and of the brother and sister, Paul and Elisabeth representing his conscious and unconscious. Images from Cocteau's other works which also occur in the novel in the context of the bedroom and the brother and sister are analysed. (The insights of the critics into Cocteau's imagery in general, and *Les Enfants terribles* in particular have of course been of great use here, as throughout the remaining chapters.) It is demonstrated that, in the light of imagery used by the poet elsewhere, the bedroom and the couple can indeed be interpreted in this way. Seen in this light, the novel as a whole thus becomes the story of the poet as *couple*. The remaining eight chapters are a detailed analysis of this story of poetic development.

Another element in Cocteau's *mythology*, which complements that of the poet-couple, is the poet inhabited and ruled by a hierarchy of contradictory beings which together direct his destiny. It is shown, again through the interpretation of the recurrent mythological images which pervade the corpus, that each of the central characters (and most minor ones) can be seen as part of this hierarchy; each character emerges, however, not as a discrete entity, but as possessing traits identifying them with other characters in the novel: sometimes consistently, sometimes momentarily. The *portrait* of the poet is thus rendered extremely complex and frequently contradictory. One of Cocteau's tenets, however, was that of self-contradiction.

Not only the characters, but also the various spaces and objects in *Les Enfants terribles* have a place in the psychic portrait. Characters, objects and spaces reflect and contradict one another constantly; but what emerges from their inter-relationship on the time-line of the story, is an allegory of the poet's struggle to resolve his inner contradictions and finally doing so in the cathartic and transcendent experience of the creative act.

What also emerges is the *portrait* of what the Freudian critics have seen in the work of Cocteau as a whole. The conflicts between the characters as parts of the psyche strongly reflect, in broad terms, an inner struggle consistent with that generally described as Oedipal. What remains in doubt, however, is the extent to which the poet was aware of this content, and to what extent it was consciously included.

Cocteau spoke of himself as 'the lie which always tells the truth'. *Les Enfants terribles* is a fiction which reflects the poet's truth about himself.

*Cette thèse est dédiée à la mémoire de mon père,  
Robert William George Richards (1917–1992)  
qui m'aurait tant encouragée*

## Préface

Je voudrais signaler ici ma dette à tous ceux qui m'ont aidée pendant la rédaction de cette thèse. Je remercie en particulier:

M. Edouard Dermit, qui m'a accueillie avec tant de générosité et de chaleur à la Maison du Bailly, Milly-la-Forêt, qui m'a donné libre accès aux archives Jean Cocteau et qui m'a permis d'examiner les documents de Cocteau à la Bibliothèque Doucet.

M. Clément Borgal, qui m'a également accueillie avec beaucoup de générosité et de chaleur, qui a eu l'amabilité de lire et de commenter les deux articles tirés de cette thèse et de me consacrer une journée où il m'a permis de profiter de sa grande expérience en tant que critique littéraire.

M. Pierre Caizergues, professeur à l'Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier, qui eut aussi l'amabilité de lire et de commenter mes articles.

Je remercie aussi en particulier les personnes suivantes du Département de Français de l'Université de New England:

Mon directeur de thèse, M. James Nicholls, de ses encouragements constants et d'avoir démontré au cours des années tant de patience, et de sagesse dans ses conseils.

Mme Marjorie Hague, de m'avoir patiemment aidée à corriger les épreuves et d'être responsable de la mise en page finale.

M. Dennis Drummond, professeur, de ses conseils sur tant de points et de l'amabilité qu'il a démontrée en lisant la version finale.

M. Christopher Gossip, professeur et chef du Département de Français, de sa patience et de ses conseils.

M. Lee Brotherson, professeur, et M. Jean-Paul Aubry, lecteur, de leurs conseils également inappréciables.

Je remercie aussi les personnes suivantes qui m'ont aidée de diverses manières.

Parmi les professeurs de l'Université de New England:

Mme et MM Mary Dwyer; Robert Baker; Peter Toohey; Bruce Marshall; David Watson.

En Australie:

M. Ian Worthington; Mme Jean Gossip; Mlle Tracy Stevens.

Au Canada:

MM. Bernard Bregaint; Guy Bourbonnais; Thibaud Sallé.

En France:

Mme et MM. Pierre de Loarer; Robert Fürstenheim; André Molia; Christine Ducrocq; Hugues Baudry; Marc Gingold.

Aux Etats-Unis:

MM. Gregory Holmes Singleton; Charles Cameron; Nicholas Mitsos; Drew Clark; John Soyland; Robert Kraft; James Blankenship; Stephen Ogden; Jeff Edmunds; Jordan Stump; Don Spinelli; Jim O'Donnell; Jon Paden.

En Grande Bretagne:

Mmes et MM Gretel Scott; Jill Headey; David Headey; François Crompton-Roberts.

Je remercie surtout ma famille qui m'a patiemment soutenue pendant les années consacrées à ce travail: mon mari, Allan Hatte; mes enfants, Eleanor et Brendan et ma mère, Vera Richards.

J'ai très récemment reçu la triste nouvelle du décès de Mme Marie Maclean, professeur de l'université de Monash, Australie. Bien que dans l'introduction et dans les notes en bas des pages je signale ma dette aux critiques, je voudrais exprimer spécialement ici ma reconnaissance à Mme Maclean, de qui l'article pénétrant sur *Les Enfants terribles* m'a été particulièrement utile.

Jennifer Hatte

## Avis au lecteur

Nous signalons au lecteur que dans ce texte nous nous écartons des conventions des manières suivantes:

1) Là où il est possible, nous reproduisons exactement la présentation et la mise en page originales des passages cités.

2) A part leur usage ordinaire, les italiques sont employés pour indiquer qu'il s'agit d'une phrase ou d'un mot venant d'une citation qui a déjà paru dans notre texte. Par contre, les guillemets ( ' ' ) sont utilisés pour indiquer un usage qui s'écarte de l'usage normal de quelque terme. Ils sont employés aussi pour marquer les citations assez courtes qui ne sont pas imprimées en caractères gras.

3) Dans les notes, nous n'employons *op.cit.* pour signaler une œuvre déjà citée que dans les cas où son omission entraînerait quelque ambiguïté. Sauf dans les cas cités sous 5) et 6), les détails complets de publication de chaque œuvre sont fournis dans la première note; dans les autres notes qui font référence à un texte il s'agit donc toujours d'une œuvre déjà mentionnée.

4) Le nom de l'auteur est toujours omis des notes dans le cas des œuvres de Cocteau.

Nous employons pour références aux *Cahiers Jean Cocteau: Cahiers 1, Cahiers 2, etc.* Les détails de publication des *Cahiers* se trouvent dans la Bibliographie.

5) L'édition des *Enfants terribles* employée est: *Les Enfants terribles*, Paris, Livre de Poche, 1977.

Seules les références aux numéros de page de ce roman se trouvent entre parenthèses dans le texte.

6) Nous faisons référence à plusieurs écrits de trois auteurs en particulier. Dans les notes nous désignons les ouvrages suivants par le nom d'auteur avec un chiffre:

**Borgal 1**

Borgal, Clément, *Cocteau, poète de l'au-delà*, Paris, Téqui, Collection: 'L'Auteur et son message', 1977.

**Borgal 2**

Borgal, Clément, *Jean Cocteau ou De la claudication considérée comme l'un des beaux-arts*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1989.

**Borgal 3**

Borgal, Clément, *Raymond Radiguet. La nostalgie*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, collection: 'PUF écrivains', 1991.

**McNab 1**

McNab, James Potter, *The Personal Mythology of Jean Cocteau: The Emergence of the Poet, 1920–1930*; a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Romance Languages in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Duke University, 1972; Reproduced by University Microfilms, A Xerox Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

**McNab 2**

McNab, James Potter, 'Mythical Space in *Les Enfants terribles*', *The French Review*, XLVII, Special issue No. 6, Spring 1974, pp. 162–170.

**McNab 3**

McNab, James P., *Raymond Radiguet*, Twayne's World Authors Series No. 725, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1984.

**Magnan 1**

Magnan, Jean-Marie, *Cocteau*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1968.

**Magnan 2**

Magnan, Jean-Marie, 'Le jeu des enfants terribles', *Cahiers Jean Cocteau* 8; *Le Romancier*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, pp. 145-171.

**Magnan 3**

Magnan, Jean-Marie, *Cocteau, l'invisible voyant*, Paris, Marval, 1993.