

## WHEN ART FAILS HUMANITY:

### JACQUES MARITAIN ON JEAN COCTEAU, MODERNISM AND THE CRISIS OF EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION

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#### 1. Introduction

Jacques Maritain's relationship with French artist, playwright and cinematographer Jean Cocteau is a good example of his attempt to rescue modernism from some of its most dangerous fallacies, an effort that he took to a personal level. He and Raïssa tried to save Cocteau from addiction and despair and convince him to return to Catholicism. Maritain felt great compassion for Cocteau as he did for other artists in whose conversion and work he took a loving interest. But he was also deeply troubled by Cocteau's aestheticism, his superficial approach to morality and self-indulgent religious sense in which he saw reflections of a deeper moral crisis in European society and culture.

Maritain wrote two works in which he gave voice to these concerns, *Dialogues*, a series of reflections on art, literature and morality, and *Art and Faith*, a collection of letters exchanged with Cocteau during the height of their friendship and Cocteau's brief return to the sacraments. Of certain interest to the Cocteau student, these texts are also important in assessing Maritain's complex view of modernism, especially in its aesthetic and ethical aspects. In conjunction with other writings, including his seminal *The Peasant of the Garonne*, they help shed light on the reasons for his consistent objection to modernism's formative ideas and their ideological expression in what he termed "absolute Machiavellianism."

The first part of this paper is accordingly aimed at understanding the concepts that formed modernism, and what Maritain found problematic in them. Of particular interest is Maritain's definition of aestheticism that entails a critique of the Kantian concept of the aesthetic that goes beyond the domain of fine art, and shows how aspects of modernism distort human life. The second part considers his relationship and correspondence with Cocteau in that context, and

explains why Cocteau drew Maritain's attention in the period prior and subsequent to his conversion. Finally, the third part examines Maritain's ambivalence toward modernism, and identifies the modernist aspects of contemporary art and popular culture.

## 2. The modern mind

At the heart of Maritain's well-known call on the modern mind to return to the study of being and abandon the errors of rationalism and agnosticism is a notion that applies directly to Cocteau and his milieu. Maritain frames it clearly in *Angelic Doctor*, his biographical study of St. Thomas, published in 1931. There he speaks of the replacement of "speculation and logical discernment" by "a sort of refined play of instinct, imagination, intuition, visceral emotions" a consequence of which is the lack of "courage to form a judgment," to recognize the actuality of good and evil.<sup>1</sup> When truth is not ordered to God and to being, imaginary and subjective realities dominate human life and undermine moral virtue.

Maritain describes prophetically the advent of "a false humanitarian mysticism, pseudo-Buddhist, theosophical or anthroposophical, a false region of the heart which claimed to install itself at the expense of the mind, in contempt of the Word which creates and forms Its laws."<sup>2</sup> He continues with a penetrating foresight about the rise of European totalitarianism that will form the basis of his 1939 *Twilight of Civilization*: "it is from a pseudo-spiritualism and a pseudo-mysticism that we may expect the greatest dangers of deviation in our time."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Angelic Doctor: The Life and Thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Dial Press, 1931), pp. 114 and 130-31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78. "We are face to face... with a demonic *paratheism* or pseudo-theism," he writes in *Twilight*. He offers this analysis of National Socialism: "Racism is existentially related to this demonic pseudo-theism, since, in its reaction against individualism and in its thirst for communion, it seeks that communion in human animality, which, once separated from the spirit, is no longer anything but a biological inferno." Jacques Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization*, translated by Lionel Laundry (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), pp. 20-21.

Thirty-five years later, in *The Peasant of the Garonne*, he remembers Cocteau in a similar context whose relevance to their relationship will become clear later in our discussion. Intimating that charity presupposes an intellect committed to supernatural truth, he tells Cocteau, who signed his correspondence with a heart, that in a world “full of dried up hearts and flabby minds,” “we must have a tough mind and a tender heart.”<sup>4</sup>

The same commitment is required of art. According to St. Thomas, beauty enters the intellect through the senses as brilliant form and is perceived as such only by those who discern in beautiful things the Wisdom of God.<sup>5</sup> Charity and beauty presuppose an intellect joined to God and being. Without this connection, art is a mirage.

The notion that European civilization is in decline (a view also held by Pope Benedict XV)—“Europe has killed her past” (Maritain’s emphasis)—and incapable of generating the vital forms of beauty and the values that embraced the Church for centuries, preoccupied Maritain in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> His discussion of art in that context betrays an incisive grasp of the reasons behind modernism’s passion for decomposition and fragmentation. In *The Things That Are Not Caesar’s* (1927), Maritain writes of the anguish and alienation of contemporary youth, “strolling in its own humanity as in a museum,” indifferent spectators eager to destroy “too many masterpieces” because they cannot create their own. “All the fragrance of beauty, the forms and values, the very pictures by which our ancestors lived, which made nature fraternal to them and the universe familiar...have suddenly become remote from us.” “We are exotic to our very selves,” Maritain observes, “is it surprising that nothing should strike us as exotic and

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 80, Maritain’s emphasis; Raïssa Maritain, *Raïssa’s Journal: Presented by Jacques Maritain* (Albany: Magi Books, 1974), p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, translated by Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), pp. 24-26.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar’s*, translated by J.F. Scanlan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1931), p. 102.

that every human form indifferently should excite our curiosity—or merely bore us?”<sup>7</sup>

The modern imagination is caught in a parade of images. The artist dreams, hallucinates and creates her own myths. This fascination with sights and spectacles of all kinds draws from the aesthetic as Kant defined it: fleeting, subjective, detached and unaffected by the objective conditions of its experience. For Maritain, modern art displays the Kantian dissociation of morality from being, which serves only to “narrow the real and consequently impoverish the materials of art,” by rendering it blind to the “whole truth of the universe of good and evil.”<sup>8</sup> A work bereft of this truth, of “what is most real in the world,” remains invisible to a “darkened soul,” which lives in a world of illusion and easily convinces itself that art can dictate morality. Maritain calls this “an absurdity.”<sup>9</sup>

In the *Peasant*, he sees with trepidation a post-Vatican II Church vulnerable to modernist ideas. Of the term, he writes this: “The word modernism has aged, but I do not know a better, and to have aged makes it especially good: for nothing ages so quickly as fashion, and those theories which make truth or its conceptual formations a function of time.”<sup>10</sup> He warns about the coming of an “*interior*, truly visceral Christianity,” an empty and superficial faith, attractive because of the false euphoria it generates, an imaginary and symbolic religion of the heart, indifferent to natural and supernatural truth.<sup>11</sup> He considers dangerous the rejection of truths established in the Church over the centuries, especially the supra-historical truths of Thomism,

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<sup>7</sup> Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*, p. 103.

<sup>8</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, p. 5, footnote #6. For a discussion of the reaction caused by the book, see Brooke W. Smith, *Jacques Maritain: Antimodern or Ultramodern? An Historical Analysis of His Critics, His Thought and His Life* (New York: Elsevier, 1976), pp. 21-28, 106-17.

<sup>11</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, pp. 7-8.

by theologians who in the name of renewal “would like us to return to a zero point so that we can begin all over again.”<sup>12</sup>

Maritain levels against them the same criticism that he has for the modernist experiment in art. Like many avant-garde artists, theologians are “anxious to serve the idols of the times,” the fashionable Romantic notion of a pure, undiluted Christianity. Among Cubists, Surrealists, Constructivists, and Dadaists the quest for purity and primitive authenticity would lead to artistic and moral supremacy over their tradition.

In *Dialogues*, first published in 1928 in the series *Le Roseau d'Or* in which Cocteau was a collaborator, Maritain is critical of artists who embrace the Nietzschean notion of the spontaneous purity and aesthetic quality of the human act and its indifference to moral qualification. “A *sincere* priest,” he writes rather acerbically of this false naturalism which Cocteau as we shall see embraced, “would mount naked to the altar, as in the black mass.”<sup>13</sup> “The purity of the human being,” he goes on, as if counseling Cocteau on his well-known search for inspiration in opium, “is to recognize the law not of the plant, but of man.”<sup>14</sup>

Maritain sees the art and literature of his contemporaries defined by a paradox. The contraries that define the modern spirit, he explains, making it at once “Rousseauist and Manichean” are “the adoration of nature and the hatred of nature,” the simultaneous exaggeration of instinct and fantasy.<sup>15</sup> Maritain has Oscar Wilde in mind when he writes: “Beauty has not come to the end of its submission to the shameful ascendancy of the god Aesthetics taken as the ultimate end of human life.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, translated by E. de P. Matthews (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), pp. 42-43.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Beauty separated from the good and elevated to an autonomous virtue, as an end in itself and a self-subsistent reality, suggests affinities between art and ideologies that exploit the intuition of supernatural life common to all human beings, by creating a theater or spectacle of the divine. Aestheticism is not benign; the “paper roses” of Wilde’s aestheticism have only a deceptive purity. In essence, their charm conceals a denial of reality in the name of art, nihilism disguised as beauty.<sup>17</sup>

The cult of the supreme race in fascism is “breaking the natural unity of mankind;” the cult of universal community in communism is seeking to “substitute its own earthy universality for that of the mystical body of Christ.”<sup>18</sup> Both have an aesthetic dimension. Thus, for Maritain, aestheticism is by no means confined to the domain of fine art and literature. Rather, it becomes an ontological category that denotes the falsification of human life, the domain par excellence of construed illusion, the malicious simulation of human and divine being—as in what he calls the “demonic pseudo-theism” of the Nazi state.<sup>19</sup>

The origins of this condition lie with Machiavellianism. It was Machiavelli, that “pure artist of the Renaissance,” that envisioned politics as the art that orders ethics, with good and evil being the raw material that the statesman is called to shape, “as a sculptor handles clay or marble.”<sup>20</sup> This “purely artistic conception of politics” introduced for the first time the notion that religion is a myth, whose end as such is to foster unity in the body politic, the ordering, in other words, of the divine to human art.<sup>21</sup> This ontological inversion—and perversion of being—leads, as Maritain explains, to the gradual deterioration of the Machiavellian project evident in contemporary European society and culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization*, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain: Selected Readings* (Garden City: Image Books, 1965), p. 288.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90.

What starts as a refined, well-measured and reasoned art of deceit, becomes the work of “an intelligence no longer artistic but vulgar and brutal and wild.”<sup>22</sup> Machiavellianism crumbles on its own faulty logic that seeks the art of that which by nature cannot be ordered to reason, of evil itself. But, as it crumbles, it assumes its “absolute” and final form, it becomes “a metaphysics...a religion, a prophetic and mystical enthusiasm,” intent on destruction and annihilation.<sup>23</sup>

What in it was rational now disintegrates into the raw exercise of evil; deliberate, massive and “boundless” (emphasis Maritain’s) in violence, injustice and lying, it “draws from this very boundlessness of evil an abominable strength.” “Impetuous, irrational, revolutionary, wild” suggest the artistic genius but also the political madman, whom Maritain describes as “empty of rational personality, but open to the great collective forces of instinct, resentment and tellurian inspiration.” The model for this dual figure, we are told, is the Nietzschean Dionysus. Repulsed by human suffering and the Cross of Christ, he elevates himself to a god.

The Nietzschean artist cannot plead innocent. For Maritain, this “figment of the imagination” has taken flesh and bones, in an incarnation of raw evil. He writes: “Dionysius?—the newspapers and the radio bring us news of him each morning. They have shown us how he leads his dance through the concentration camps...through a Europe delivered up to murder and starvation, oppression and enslavement, through a world set ablaze by war.”<sup>24</sup> And he adds, “Nietzsche did not grasp that man has no choice except between two roads: the road to Calvary and the road to the slaughterhouse.”

In the racial super-state, in the collective utopia and in societies subjugated to the dictates of productivity and profit, man suffers “animalization” and “paganization,” the sacrifice of soul and life to lifeless images and idols.<sup>25</sup> The idolatry of race, the communion of blood

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 290-91.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>24</sup> Maritain, *Twilight of Civilization*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Evans and Ward, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, pp. 159 and 161.

and myth in which the Nazi state found unity and purpose, suggest a world of simulation in which empty (totemic) forms dominate reality and reduce the human person to a nominal and expandable being, whose annihilation bears no consequence or sense. In a world of such radical ontological loss, where human intercourse is reduced to commerce with signs and human beings to tokens of utility, life and love do not have a place.

At the heart of modernism, then, is the deterioration of the aesthetic. Severed from what Maritain calls, in *Angelic Doctor*, the “natural unity” of reason and the “supernatural unity” of grace, the aesthetic has assumed an empty autonomy and has turned unavoidably into the realm of instinct and fantasy, aligning itself with false gods.<sup>26</sup> For Maritain, this is essentially a Kantian error. When Kant excluded intellectual delight from the experience of beauty, he shifted the focus of the aesthetic from the real to the subjective and emotional, rejecting beauty’s transcendental nature.<sup>27</sup>

From Kant onward, beauty, and by extension art, lose their inherent presence in and dependence on being, and are dominated instead by feeling and imagination. The good is now an aesthetic value. Maritain saw clearly that the outcome of this exercise, would be “*counterfeit ...counterfeit of the supernatural and of miracle...of grace and the heroic virtues,*” a farcical morality and faith that would create the passivity and apathy that makes human beings susceptible to demonic influence and heretical thought.<sup>28</sup>

Art that celebrates man made in the image of himself rather than God—the equation of truth and illusion, the fusion of dream and instinct and the estrangement of human life from the moral realities with which it is organically intertwined—is a natural complement to absolute Machiavellianism. Surrealism, with its Freudian underpinnings and idealization of an irrational primitive imagination, the purist ideals of Constructivism and Socialist Realism that served the

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<sup>26</sup> Maritain, *The Angelic Doctor*, p. 90.

<sup>27</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, footnote #56, pp. 162-67.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133, emphasis added, and p. 227, footnote #193.

Soviet State as ideological tools, the hyper-classical art of fascism that perpetrated the myth of a super race, give aesthetic expression to this ideological form.

This is why the artist must be held responsible and where possible turned toward Christ. Maritain is clear that when art, in an abuse of its creative power, intrudes in the domain of morality—an “imperialist invasion,” he calls it—it cannot extricate itself from moral responsibility by invoking aesthetic freedom and disinterest or its rights to a childlike playfulness.<sup>29</sup>

The motto “art for art’s sake” is therefore rejected because it assumes that artist and work can be detached from “the living forces which animate and move the human being,” among which is desire, love, and moral conscience.<sup>30</sup> When a work that is deemed morally evil, and the judgment is true, it is the artist, his moral conscience, that needs to change, to be purified, and not the work through external means (e.g., censorship). Anything else “is not a solution, it is a fake, or an escape.”<sup>31</sup> “There is no purity,” he writes elsewhere, “where the flesh is not crucified...”<sup>32</sup> This last notion is at the heart of Maritain’s interest in Cocteau.

### 3. A descent into magic

“There is no pure sin,” we read in *Dialogues*, in a passage that most likely echoes a conversation with Cocteau: “the pure contour of impurity is an impure thing.”<sup>33</sup> One brings to mind Cocteau’s signature erotic sketches (many shared with Picasso), his erotic poetry (*The Angel Heurtebise*, 1925) and semi-pornographic literature (*The White Book*, published anonymously) all steeped in a calculated and obsessive

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<sup>29</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), pp. 64-65. Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> Maritain, *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>33</sup> Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 51.

language of self-professed innocence, elegance and simplicity.<sup>34</sup> Maritain continues with what seems an admonition:

In making out of your sin beauty, you send it like an angel among your brothers. It kills them without a sound. However, this is not your first fault. But that of yourself within yourself for having hidden a corpse in the branches of your arteries, as if God did not see.<sup>35</sup>

By 1928, Maritain had good reason to think of Cocteau in such terms. In 1927, Cocteau's protégé and companion Jean Desbordes had published a book titled *J'Adore* in which he suggested that lovers in their act of union have more of the Divine Presence than does the Holy Sacrament. Maritain found Cocteau's enthusiastic endorsement of the book disturbing. He completed *Dialogues* on the Feast of the Ascension, 17 May 1928. In the endnote, written a year earlier on June 27, and published only in the 1928 French original, we read:

I have just received the final page proofs of a book with a preface by Jean Cocteau in which he makes himself a laughing stock by celebrating the author as an Adam before the fall and by urging the young to embrace a new religion of love—a religion which proclaims all love to be pure. ...They adore, do they! God and the genitals (and the printed page). I know how puerile this is, but it is a betrayal of Christ perpetrated with the most horrible lack of awareness. I also know what tragic suffering dwells in Cocteau's heart, and I wish I could be silent. But to suffer the profanation of the Gospels, the confusion of raving sensuality with religion—that is impossible.<sup>36</sup>

Maritain is writing these lines only three years after Cocteau's return to the Sacraments in June of 1925, after a period of opium

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<sup>34</sup> Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, "Classical Cocteau," in *Reviewing Orpheus: Essays on the Cinema and Art of Jean Cocteau*, edited by Cornelia A. Tsakiridou (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1997), p. 101, footnote #14.

<sup>35</sup> Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), p. 391. Jacques Maritain, "Dialogues," *Le Roseau d'Or* XXX, Chroniques No. 6 (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie), 1928: 17-62; p. 62.

detoxification. In the Preface to the English edition of *Art and Faith*, written in January of 1947, he explains that he saw in Cocteau's conversion an effort to create "poetry for God" at a time "in which the Prince of the World was the master of Dreams."<sup>37</sup> Although he concedes that the "new poetry" he had hoped for did not come, he offers the letters as evidence of the "mysterious and ambiguous relations it [poetry] entertains with religion."<sup>38</sup> He remains gracious and gallant toward Cocteau ("I know the poets in whom I have my confidence"), emphasizing the testimonial importance of their correspondence "in the perishable day in which it has been born."

Maritain saw Cocteau's opium addiction as symptomatic of modern poetry's (and art's) fascination with "magical powers" that pull it "in the direction of the Devil."<sup>39</sup> "Shall I condemn the opium-smoker," he asks Cocteau in a sympathetic letter, "because he is trying to free himself from this lying life? No, but because he uses wicked means, he makes use of an evil to flee evil; he trusts a lie to escape a lie."<sup>40</sup> He challenges Cocteau's narcissism directly:

Art has trouble defending itself against an impure angel that slaps it in the face, that wants to make use of everything for self-love, of the very gift the heart makes of itself, of its weakness even; even of God. We know this very well my dear Jean, we see this game everywhere.<sup>41</sup>

Maritain considered opium-induced mysticism and inspiration as demonic, an attempt by man to find salvation on his own terms, by creating an artificial, vegetative paradise. He described Cocteau's condition as "the poppy in the place of the Paraclete" and "Quietism in pills, sacrament of the devil."<sup>42</sup> Behind Cocteau's fascination with

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<sup>37</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Faith: Letters between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau*, translated by John Coleman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), pp. 8-11.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

induced illusion he saw the modernist notion that human life is governed by raw instinctual realities and is, in that state, radically pure, with an innocence that mocks the purity of Christ. A conduit to this concealed world, a hallucinogen is rationalized as a moral regimen and instrument of salvation, nature's alternative mysticism.

Narcissism makes a caricature of the human person. In 1930, in *Religion and Culture*, Maritain wrote that the instinctual life of human beings is open and indeterminate because it has reason as its natural end and principle. Raw instinct cannot therefore ground the human person, without profoundly distorting and wounding its rational and spiritual nature. "The truly and fully natural man," he explains addressing the Romantic primitivism so much in vogue among modernists, "is not nature's man, the uncultivated soil, but the virtuous man...formed by the inner culture of the intellectual and moral virtues."<sup>43</sup>

The circumstances that gave rise to the Cocteau-Maritain correspondence were defined by three events: the untimely death of Cocteau's intimate friend, novelist Raymond Radiguet, in the winter of 1923, his opium addiction and detoxification two years later, in the winter of 1925, and the sustained efforts of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain to draw Cocteau into their Catholic circle.

Maritain was familiar with Radiguet's novels and admired his talent. According to Cocteau biographer Frederick Steegmuller, shortly after Radiguet's death, Maritain urged Catholic journalist Henri Massis to write a review of the young man's work.<sup>44</sup> Maritain's purpose, Steegmuller contends, was to counteract the attention given to Radiguet by the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, an agnostic and politically left journal that was hostile to Cocteau, and thus to draw Cocteau to his circle. Cocteau wrote immediately to both Massis and Maritain expressing his gratitude. Raïssa has a different explanation. Cocteau, she records in her diary in July of 1924, "came to Jacques because he

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<sup>43</sup> Evans and Ward, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, pp. 214-15.

<sup>44</sup> Steegmuller, *Cocteau*, p. 337.

had been told he could make him find peace again, and find God again."<sup>45</sup>

In his response to Maritain in August of 1924, Cocteau confesses: "Out of all youth I chose Radiguet to make him my masterpiece. Imagine his death, and me alone, half-mad amidst the rubble of a crystal-cutting workshop."<sup>46</sup> The remark reveals a self-centered detachment that is consistent with Cocteau's refusal to visit the dying Radiguet (who died alone) or even to attend his funeral—according to Coco Chanel he was afraid of contracting typhoid.<sup>47</sup> It also recalls the atelier of fluid mirrors and animated statues in his celebrated films *Orpheus* and *Blood of a Poet*, items that figured prominently in his visual idiom.<sup>48</sup> Both works exhibit the self-indulging, erotic, sensibility whose expression in Catholic idiom was to make Maritain so uneasy in 1927.

Cocteau's inspiration could shift easily from God to his own artistic identity and myth, all part of the Cocteau cult that he so meticulously cultivated. In his Catholic summer of 1925, he had actually entertained writing a play about the Virgin Mary and the mysterious birth of Christ, but abandoned the plan, fearing scandal.<sup>49</sup> The idea eventually translated into his play *Orpheus* (first performed in 1926). There, the mythical poet searches for inspiration and for his own legend only to end up decapitated and metamorphosed into Cocteau. Maritain must have suspected in that first year of their acquaintance (1924) that Cocteau was more interested in Cocteau (and his legend) than he was in Christ.

Cocteau's letters in *Art and Faith* suggest a tenuous conversion, perhaps a search for consolation in a Catholic aesthetic that would allow him to express and dramatize to a sympathetic public the impact

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<sup>45</sup> Raïssa Maritain, *Raïssa's Journal*, pp. 165-66. Steegmuller and others unfairly view Maritain as an astute proselytizer of vulnerable souls who took advantage of Cocteau: see Steegmuller, *Cocteau*, p. 337.

<sup>46</sup> Maritain, *Art and Faith*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>47</sup> Steegmuller, *Cocteau*, p. 317.

<sup>48</sup> On this subject and on the classical in Cocteau, see Tsakiridou, "Classical Cocteau," pp. 78-108.

<sup>49</sup> Steegmuller, *Cocteau*, p. 349.

of Radiguet's untimely death. The most problematic is his facile identification with Christ. The suffering, devastated Cocteau seems taken by his role of roles—Cocteau *Alter Christus*:

Jesus refuses to make a career. He wants to be born and to die every minute. Our crusade will be to shock out of love. I have never caused scandal without premeditation. I deem it indispensable.<sup>50</sup>

This act of appropriation, so typical of narcissism, presages the treatment of the sacred by art in the twentieth century and in our times. The phrase “shock out of love” recalls the rhetoric of Desbordes' *J'Adore*. In a footnote to this passage, he explains:

Scandal and solitude, a kind of sensational flop, that is something hard. It is the only thing that suits me. Jesus sets the example for us. ...He always shocks, He discourages luck, He exposes Himself, He makes Himself ridiculous, He makes doors close on Him, He crucifies Himself.<sup>51</sup>

Readers familiar with Cocteau's style will recognize the self-portrait. This is Cocteau's “Passion,” his de facto redemption and sanctification. The Maritains and their circle form his intrigued audience.

It is interesting to see how Cocteau describes his first encounter on June 15, 1925, at the home of the Maritains, with Father Charles Henrion, a contemplative priest and follower of Father Charles de Foucauld at the Sahara, who had gone into the priesthood under Maritain's influence.

Raïssa recalls an accidental encounter, for her a sign of Providence, with Cocteau waiting the arrival of a late ride to the Russian Ballet, and Father Henrion arriving just in time for Cocteau to hear him talk about a pilgrimage with the dramatist and poet Paul Claudel.<sup>52</sup> She writes: “I

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<sup>50</sup> Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 46.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>52</sup> Raïssa Maritain, *Raïssa's Journal*, p. 182. Cocteau recalls the evening in similar terms, noting that Maritain had mentioned to him a possible visit by Father Henrion and had informed him of the priest's background: see Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 37.

see Jean Cocteau standing, silent, in the embrasure of the window, *gripped* (emphasis hers)...The moment Charles came in, I am convinced Cocteau saw the sign of his destiny appear over the heart of a man. The heart with which he signs all his letters suddenly became *the heart of Jesus* (emphasis hers)."

Raïssa could not have known what went through Cocteau's mind. She noticed that he was deeply impressed by Father Henrion's appearance, especially by the red Heart displayed on his all white, desert habit. Cocteau went to confession three days later, on June 18 and to Communion the next day, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart.<sup>53</sup> "*Misericordias Domini*," Raïssa wrote in her journal for that occasion.<sup>54</sup> This is Cocteau's version of the encounter, which might explain his silence and fascination:

A heart entered the room; a red heart surrounded by a red cross in the middle of a white form that glided about, bowed, spoke, shook hands. This heart hypnotized me, distracted me from the face, beheaded the Arab's robe. It was the real face of the white form, and Charles seemed to hold his head against his breast like a martyr. And indeed the real head, burned by the sun, seemed a reflection of the heart, a mirage in all that African light. The cheekbones and the chin outlined the mirage's reliefs and tip.<sup>55</sup>

In this hyper-aestheticized image, the priest is cast as an exotic apparition, dismembered into heart, face, beard, cheekbones and robe. The order is both arbitrary and haphazard and suggestive of the visual idiom of narcissism and hallucination--perhaps of the faceted Cubist image. Cocteau is here engaging in the religious aestheticism that Maritain finds so disturbing in the *Dialogues*' endnote. Another example from his letters to Maritain describes Father Henrion as a theatrical specter and magician. It is followed by this remark: "A priest struck me with the same shock as Stravinsky and Picasso... Picasso and Stravinsky

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 190; Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 42.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>55</sup> Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 38.

know how to cover the paper with divine signs, but the Host is the only masterpiece Charles offers me.”<sup>56</sup>

His detached observation of Father Henrion in both contexts is quite peculiar for a man reflecting on his religious conversion. It contrasts sharply with Raïssa’s reflections and Maritain’s efforts to help a man in great spiritual need—described by Raïssa as “a mission as delicate as it was difficult.”<sup>57</sup> Cocteau himself had written to Maritain of his “lack of moral appetite” and “nauseated soul” before the conversion, adding, “Help came to me in the nick of time.”<sup>58</sup>

The confession is sincere but the habits of the imagination too powerful to overcome. Cast as an aesthetic and erotic object—even orientalized—Father Henrion is turned into a sacred spectacle with Cocteau as spectator and director. Life and cinematography, faith and fantasy are here indistinguishable. The priest is in essence de-sanctified and desecrated, exactly as Maritain had cautioned in his criticism of *J’Adore*. Raïssa will mention Cocteau again on 15 December, 1931, describing what seems like a pathetic appearance, at a concert that she and Jacques attended: “Cocteau arrives wearing enormous thick white gloves, death enters with him. Desbordes has become quite thin and pale, he looks as if he had been iller than Cocteau.”<sup>59</sup>

In his letters, Maritain warned Cocteau that his new life in the Mystical Body of Christ would not be free of rejection, falls and scandal.<sup>60</sup> But Christ’s Love, he consoled him, would move him to reach out to all humanity.<sup>61</sup> He urged Cocteau to make the Cross the center of his temptations, reminding him of his encounter with Father Charles: “The heart that marks in red the whiteness of desert hermits’ robes is the Heart of Truth.”<sup>62</sup> The following line from *Dialogues* is most likely part of that conversation: “To choose the heart for emblem is to

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>57</sup> Raïssa Maritain, *Raïssa’s Journal*, p. 183.

<sup>58</sup> Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 43.

<sup>59</sup> Raïssa Maritain, *Raïssa’s Journal*, p. 214.

<sup>60</sup> Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 101.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95 and 126-30.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

dedicate one's self to the only heart which does not lie, and it is encircled with thorns."<sup>63</sup>

Art "behaves like a god; it thinks only of its glory," Maritain repeatedly warns Cocteau; it's an "illusionist," a "pretty monster" that makes "beauty from dead matter."<sup>64</sup> "The painter may damn himself, painting doesn't care a straw, if the fire where he burns bakes a beautiful stained-glass window." But when art serves God, it becomes the "most worthy instrument" of grace that prepares the human race "for the life of the spirit."<sup>65</sup> For the artist, narcissism is a constant temptation. Modernism is indebted to this Romantic idolatry of (a deified) artistic self in the work of art, being oblivious, writes Maritain, to God's creative humility: "God does not adore His works...He does not cling to them, He lets them be spoiled by men."<sup>66</sup>

Stegmuller's contention that Cocteau was quite accustomed to conversions is valid and consistent with the aestheticism that we find in Cocteau's remarks about his life, times and art. On the surface benign and harmless, this tendency to translate experience into aesthetic form and moral value into aesthetic value had also a darker side, as Maritain cautioned.

Perhaps the most disturbing example is the period of the Vichy government and the Nazi occupation of France. Stegmuller and Frederick Brown paint an unfavorable portrait of opium addiction, opportunism and indifference. Brown is especially scathing in his judgment that Cocteau "failed to sense what categorical imperatives of shame and dignity the German occupation called into play."<sup>67</sup> And Stegmuller points out that Cocteau's response upon learning about the outbreak of the war and mobilization in September of 1939 was the simple question: "how will I get my opium?"<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization*, p. 49.

<sup>64</sup> Maritain, *Art and Faith*, pp. 95 and 96.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98 and 94.

<sup>66</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, p. 145.

<sup>67</sup> Frederick Brown, *An Impersonation of Angels: A Biography of Jean Cocteau* (New York: Viking Press 1968), p. 352.

<sup>68</sup> Stegmuller, *Cocteau*, p. 436

Cocteau's fascination with the aesthetic, spectacular aspects of Nazism in the presence of its conspicuous and undeniable evil is indeed troublesome. "I find these days exciting," he exclaimed of life in German-occupied France in 1940, "I am intensely curious about this unreal Paris."<sup>69</sup> Three years later, in *Comoedia* (May 1943), he was to praise sculptor Arno Breker, favored by the Nazi state and by Hitler himself, for his 1942 exhibit at the *Orangerie*, proclaiming that he looked forward to the day "when Breker's statues would invade the Place de la Concorde."<sup>70</sup> That same year, he had appeared with Breker on the cover of the Nazi propaganda publication *Signal*.

Maritain was right to find evil in art's alliance with illusion, narcissism and power and to see the demonic in their union, at a time when the world had not yet known how perversely art would turn against itself, making "beauty" out of barbarism. The colossal, lifeless, pseudo-classical sculpture of Arno Breker, Josef Thorak and of other artists who mistook fascism's obsession with racial degeneracy as a promise of cultural regeneration, recalls Maritain's remark about a civilization that is deprived of the living forms of its values and is more fascinated with destruction than creation.

Cocteau remained an admirer of Breker's art and advocated the sculptor's moral integrity throughout his life, ascribing to him the same supra-historical and supra-national status that he desired for himself, in the name of art. "I salute you Breker," he wrote in 1942, "from the high homeland of poets, a homeland where homelands do not exist."<sup>71</sup> Cocteau's bust, completed by Breker in 1963, stands next to his grave in the chapel at Milly-la-Forêt, a testament to the moral supremacy of art and artist. As noted elsewhere, for Cocteau, it is the poet's prerogative to have no country, as it is his advantage to evade history and ignore morality.<sup>72</sup> For Breker, too, as he was to complain to Cocteau in 1952, his art was timeless and universal, while Nazism and his own affiliation with it were but unfortunate accidents of history.

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 438-39.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, *An Impersonation of Angels*, p. 359.

<sup>71</sup> Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, "Greece in Cocteau; Cocteau in Greece," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 26.1 (2000): 29.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

#### 4. Christian Culture

Modernism found in Maritain an astute critic but also a sympathetic friend. In earlier years, both he and Raïssa were especially optimistic if not excited about its prospects, and they often praised and agreed with Cocteau in that context. In an entry to her journal in March of 1919 about the purity and integrity of art, Raïssa mentioned Rouault and Cocteau as artists that have achieved “purity of intention.”<sup>73</sup> Critical of Catholic attitudes toward modern art that at the time she considered ignorant, narrow-minded and “hard on artists,” she hoped for a renewal that would reflect “the full and luminous Catholic doctrine.”<sup>74</sup>

In 1924, Maritain described avant-garde art as striving “toward the purity of creative intelligence” and noted that “it is along this path that the promise of salvation lies: beset by death, a child of genius proved this to us by a masterpiece.”<sup>75</sup> The “child” is Cocteau’s friend and novelist Raymond Radiguet. In “The Frontiers of Poetry” (1927), Cocteau is a frequent source of commentary on the realism and spiritual character of Picasso’s paintings, on the transcendent and mystical dimensions of modern poetry, and its willingness to “practice obedience and sacrifice.”<sup>76</sup>

Maritain’s choice of Cocteau quotations reveals more about Maritain than it does about Cocteau. It shows his eagerness to find in modernism signs of a spiritual regeneration. “The pitiable state of the modern world, a mere corpse of the Christian world,” he explained, “makes one desire with particular intensity the re-establishment of a true civilization.”<sup>77</sup> Anything approaching a confession of faith in Cocteau’s writings drew Maritain’s attention. He singles out this line: “Because Poetry, my God, it’s you,” and the following excerpt from a letter

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<sup>73</sup> Raïssa Maritain, *Raïssa’s Journal*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96. Raïssa’s ideas will influence *Art and Scholasticism*. Maritain indicates this in a footnote to the March 25, 1919 entry, adding that Raïssa’s notebook contained extensive comments on art that were not published (*Ibid.*, p. 98, footnote #5; p. 90). See also Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, p. 60.

<sup>75</sup> Maritain. *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, p. 112.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 134, 149.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36, 137.

Cocteau wrote to him in 1926. Cocteau starts by quoting St. Therese of Lisieux and then offers his signature commentary on poetic sacrifice: “‘To all the ecstasies I prefer sacrifice.’ Poets should have these words tattooed on their hearts.”<sup>78</sup> Tattoos and gloves were favorite Cocteau metaphors for the artist’s sensual and illusory experiments

It might seem from these examples that Maritain misread Cocteau. But this is not true. Maritain knew all along that what he was detecting in Cocteau were only “certain profound desires of contemporary art.”<sup>79</sup> Even though they pointed at the direction of a Christian renaissance, they were by no means evidence that its time had come.

Maritain’s occasional ambivalence about modernism, and his optimism in the early twenties that it would deliver a renewal of Christian culture, can be better appreciated if viewed as an expression of three elements: first, his deep compassion for artists gifted by nature but tormented by their choices and by the spirit of their times; second, his commitment to hope as a Christian virtue nourished by Christ’s Passion and Love; and third, the openness of the Thomist philosophy that he embraced.

Maritain’s admiration of the Middle Ages was often criticized as a dangerous and sterile anachronism. His response was always consistent and valid. “Thomist philosophy,” he wrote in 1931, “is a progressive and assimilative philosophy, a missionary philosophy...at the service of primary Truth...and Saint Thomas is not a relic of the Middle Ages...he is in all fullness of the expression the Apostle of our time.”<sup>80</sup> Maritain tried to see all art through the universality of Thomism: “wherever art—Egyptian, Greek or Chinese—has known a certain degree of grandeur and purity, it is already Christian, Christian in hope, because every spiritual radiance is a promise and a symbol of the divine harmonies of the Gospel.”<sup>81</sup> He found that promise in Cocteau.

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226, footnote #190; p. 229, footnote #209.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148-49.

<sup>80</sup> Maritain, *The Angelic Doctor*, pp. 97, 135-36.

<sup>81</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, p. 66. This is the kind of thinking that made Maritain such an important intellectual figure in Vatican II: see Smith, *Jacques Maritain*, pp. 24-26.

For Maritain, modernism was host to some of the worst fallacies drawn by the human mind. In the form of narcissism and nihilism, they threatened the spiritual, moral and intellectual integrity of the human person. But for Maritain that was not a final or irreversible condition. Even a decadent civilization “bears in its very substance the sacred heritage of human and divine values.”<sup>82</sup> The antidote to the “anti-humanism” of modernity, he wrote, is the “humanism of the Incarnation.”<sup>83</sup>

Maritain sought to ground the self-centered art of his contemporaries in a subjectivity that surrenders to Christ, and rediscovers art and beauty through His Passion. This is the direction, as we have seen, to which he wished to turn Cocteau. The Christian art that he anticipated would not be ecclesiastically prescribed. It would flourish out of this redeemed subjectivity, having been purified and re-humanized through the Cross. The true work of art remained for Maritain a rare phenomenon.<sup>84</sup>

To the great Christian artists from the past, such as Fra Angelico, de Zurbaran and El Greco, Maritain was willing to add Modernists such as Georges Rouault, Marc Chagall and Gino Severini. In their art, and especially in the work of Rouault, he saw the Christian spirit struggle against the forces of adversity, some human, some demonic, and emerge victorious.<sup>85</sup>

In the end, modernism for him was not the art of renewal, the integral art of the “true civilization” that he had hoped for. It was, rather, the art of the struggle and anguish of the human soul for redemption, a perilous passage at the end of which, purged and

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<sup>82</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*, (FQ Classics, 2007), p. 159.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164-65.

<sup>84</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, pp. 64-69.

<sup>85</sup> Maritain *Art and Poetry*, pp. 17-38. Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, “Vera Icona: Reflections on the Mystical Aesthetics of Jacques Maritain and the Byzantine Icon,” in *Truth Matters: Essays in Honor of Jacques Maritain*, edited by John G. Trapani, Jr. (Washington: American Maritain Association, 2004), pp. 232-33.

renewed, art would one day rediscover its intrinsic order of sanctity, a sanctity modeled on the simplicity of Mary, the Mother of God.<sup>86</sup>

This time is yet to come. Judging from the state of post-modern art, its militant narcissism, its obsession with morbidity and nihilism, and the intrusion of aestheticism into morality, Maritain continues to be relevant. The contemporary artist is often no less confused than Cocteau, no less deprived of the true depths of art and humanity, and fascinated with illusion.

From Maritain's perspective, we are still under the modernist configuration. The threat of barbarism looms in our tolerance of what he called the "animalization" of man, the advent of a popular culture so anti-intellectual and base in its tastes that it cannot discern in life the radiance of beautiful form. But we also realize today that artists are as "hungry for beatitude" as Cocteau and other modernists were when they mistakenly sought in the rubrics of art "the mystical fullness that God alone can give."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, p. 149.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.