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NOTES FROM A COLLABORATION: COCTEAU AND STRAVINSKY'S *OEDIPUS REX*

Derek Connon
Swansea University

Abstract

In 1925 Cocteau received a request from Stravinsky to write a libretto for a work based on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. After going through various revisions, Cocteau's libretto was eventually translated into Latin before Stravinsky set it to music, with only a series of narrations for the character of the Speaker remaining in French. Various aspects of the performance history of the work contribute to a sense of Cocteau's progressive elision from it. Then, in his *Dialogues* (1963), Stravinsky made a number of criticisms of the text of the narrations, although it is significant that it is often the translation by E. E. Cummings that he quotes. The accuracy of, and justification for, these criticisms is examined, along with the reasons that might have led Stravinsky to make them.

In 1925 Jean Cocteau received a request from Igor Stravinsky to write a libretto for a work based on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Stravinsky had seen Cocteau's adaptation of *Antigone* (1922), and its austerity and compression suited the atmosphere he envisaged for his new composition, which, from the outset, he intended should have a monumental character.

This was not the first attempt at a collaboration between Cocteau and Stravinsky. The Russian's three major scores for the Ballets Russes, *L'Oiseau de feu* (1910), *Pétrouchka* (1911), and *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913), had established him as the major composer for this important and innovative company, and the riot at the first performance of *Le Sacre* had ensured his avant-garde credentials. Cocteau had already made his theatrical debut with the Russian troupe with his scenario for *Le Dieu bleu* in 1912, and it is easy to see why, for someone keen to establish himself as an *enfant terrible*, a collaboration with its now notorious leading composer would have been eminently desirable. In 1914 Cocteau pursued this aim by beginning work on *David*, for which Stravinsky agreed to provide the music, but the composer eventually pulled out and the project collapsed (although it later developed into *Parade* (1917), with music by Erik Satie).[1] In 1918 Cocteau published *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, a pamphlet aimed at the creation of a new school of French music. In it he identified two nefarious influences that were preventing young French composers from finding a new voice: one was Wagner, the other was the Russian school, typified by Stravinsky. This critical stance perhaps inevitably caused a period of coolness between the two men.

[1] See James S. Williams, *Jean Cocteau* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), pp. 50–51.

Was it the result of pique on Cocteau's part at Stravinsky's withdrawal from the *David* project? If so, it would later suit Cocteau to claim otherwise, explaining in terms that could only be flattering to the composer that it was a juvenile reaction against the influence of the impact of *Le Sacre du printemps*, which had produced in him a profound and continued effect.[2] Nevertheless, this coolness had already ended before Stravinsky issued his invitation, and that Cocteau was prepared to work with him again was certainly partly due to their friendship, even if the composer's obviously increasing importance and his reputation as a member of the avant-garde remained even more significant attractions. So Cocteau agreed to the commission, even though an important condition was that most of his text was to be translated into Latin, for, as Stravinsky later recounted in his *Dialogues* with Robert Craft,[3] he felt that translation of the libretto from a living language into a dead one, or, as he put it, 'from a secular to a sacred language' (*D*, p. 21), might help achieve the monumentality he sought for the work. This is the first and most obvious stage in what nevertheless seems to have been a continuing process of Cocteau's contribution to this work being pushed into the background, culminating in an attack by Stravinsky on the device of the Speaker, the single aspect of the text in which Cocteau's contribution remained clear. It is my intention here to examine that process, then to go on to test the justification of Stravinsky's criticisms of the Speaker's interventions.

Cocteau's work on the project was enthusiastic, but his first version of the libretto proved not to be to Stravinsky's liking, the composer describing it in the *Dialogues* as 'a music drama in meretricious prose' (*D*, p. 22). The comment is interesting, for it is typical of the disparaging tone that prevails when he discusses *Oedipus Rex* in the *Dialogues*; yet, although this has tended to be seen as corroboration of rumours that the collaboration had been an unhappy one, such an interpretation is not borne out by other comments by the two participants. Elsewhere in the *Dialogues* Stravinsky speaks warmly about Cocteau's friendship (*D*, pp. 97–98), and his 1935 autobiography gives an entirely positive account of the collaboration, devoid of his later tetchiness.[4] Cocteau described how working together cemented their renewed friendship,[5] and the two went on to collaborate on a revival in 1952, again apparently perfectly amicably, despite the fact that on that occasion Cocteau's contribution departed radically from the original conception by replacing the dramatic action with a series of *tableaux*

[2] See the article found in a newspaper cutting from an unidentified source included in his journal for 1952: 'J'y suivais cette pente qui pousse la jeunesse à lutter contre ses idoles' (Jean Cocteau, *Le Passé défini: journal*, I: *1951–1952*, ed. by Pierre Chanel ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1983), p. 415).

[3] Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963; London: Faber & Faber, 1968); repr. without the diary as *Dialogues* (Berkeley: University of California Press; London: Faber & Faber, 1982). References to the Faber editions (in which the *Dialogues* are identically paginated) will be given in the text with the abbreviation '*D*'.

[4] Igor Stravinsky, *Chronicle of my Life* (London: Gollancz, 1936), pp. 205–06, 209 (I have been unable to consult the original French version of this text); subsequent references are given in the text with the abbreviation '*CL*'.

[5] In the newspaper cutting found in his journal (*Le Passé défini*, I, 415).

vivants, linked to but not illustrative of the story told by the text — indeed, in the *Dialogues*, the usually critical Stravinsky described it as 'the performance that has pleased me the most, visually' (*D*, p. 25). It was around the time of this production that Cocteau in his journal expressed his disgust at suggestions that his collaboration with Stravinsky had been difficult.[6]

Nevertheless, by the time Stravinsky spoke to Craft, the charge of meretriciousness had become a commonplace in less sympathetic criticism of Cocteau, which depicted him as a showman without substance,[7] and so could well owe more to hindsight than to Stravinsky's perception in the 1920s, since the fact that Cocteau created from this first draft the play *Œdipe-Roi* allows us to establish that the style is very little different from what Stravinsky had admired in *Antigone*.[8]

Following Cocteau's willing response to Stravinsky's requests for changes and cuts, and his close collaboration once the final version had been established with the translator, the future cardinal Jean Daniélou, it would seem that the manuscript of Cocteau's original French text was lost. The French version at last published in the Pléiade edition of his theatrical works in 2003 (*TC*, pp. 209–22)[9] is not the original, which has never been recovered, but a French translation written in Cocteau's hand above the Latin text in his copy of the score,[10] which, close as it is likely to be to that original, may well not correspond with it exactly.

So, with the French text much revised (Stravinsky said it was rewritten twice and then subjected to what he called 'a final shearing' (*D*, p. 23)), then translated into Latin, and then lost, what was left of Cocteau in the libretto of *Oedipus Rex*? In the *Dialogues* Stravinsky comments: 'I am no longer able to say, but I should think less the shape of it than the gesticulation of the phrasing' (*D*, p. 23). It is not immediately obvious what he means by this. Certainly, it is true that the musical structure is bound to be more dominant than the structure of the text, particularly in a work like this written in individual numbers rather than being symphonically through-composed; but surely Cocteau must have had some influence on the overall shape — its similarity to the structure of *Œdipe-Roi*

[6] In the entry for 26 August 1952: 'La dernière ignominie des Parisiens à mon adresse est d'avoir inventé que Stravinski et moi avions travaillé l'un contre l'autre dans *Œdipus Rex*, que nous étions brouillés à mort, etc. Bref corrida grotesque, indispensable aux cochons des arènes' (*Le Passé défini*, I, 324–25).

[7] The famous remark addressed to him by Serge Diaghilev, 'Étonne-moi', is often held against him. Frederick Brown, in his generally unsympathetic biography of Cocteau, *An Impersonation of Angels* (Harlow: Longmans, 1969), comments: 'Cocteau made a veritable career of ambiguity and surprise' (p. 261).

[8] Cocteau says of *Œdipe-Roi* in the preface to the first edition (Paris: Plon, 1928): 'Je le tire du premier travail de l'opéra-oratorio en latin *Œdipus rex*' (Jean Cocteau, *Théâtre complet*, ed. by Michel Décaudin and others ([Paris]: Gallimard, 2003), p. 443; subsequent references to this edition are given in the text and footnotes with the abbreviation '*TC*'). The text of the play bears the date 27 October 1925, just over a fortnight after Stravinsky's letter of 11 October confirming the request for a libretto that had been made informally an unspecified time (though clearly shortly) beforehand. Nevertheless, a note in the first edition suggests subsequent revision to the play after the completion of the final version of the libretto: 'Ici je m'inspire plus du texte d'*Œdipus rex* que de Sophocle' (*TC*, pp. 439, 1674 n. h). It is perhaps worth observing, however, that this note is incomprehensible, since the speech to which it is appended is very close to the equivalent in Sophocles' work, but quite unlike anything in the libretto of *Oedipus Rex*.

[9] The edition of *Oedipus Rex* is by Gérard Lieber.

[10] See Lieber's explanation in *TC*, pp. 1640–41.

confirms that that aspect of the text was not significantly changed by Stravinsky's interventions. When we look at individual sentences, however, we find that, as was usual with earlier opera composers but rarer since the age of Wagner, Stravinsky habitually repeats individual words and phrases in a way that distorts at that level the shape of the text. This is not a criticism; indeed, given Stravinsky's neoclassical leanings, it is to be expected, but it does make his remark harder to understand.[11] Perhaps he is thinking of those moments where the shape of Cocteau's text is so distinctive that it dictates the structure of the music, as in, for instance:

LE BERGER *et* LE MESSAGER	
Laio Jocastaque natus.	Fils de Laïus et de Jocaste.
CHŒUR	
Natus Laio et Jocasta!	Fils de Laïus et Jocaste!
LE BERGER *et* LE MESSAGER	
Peremptor Laii parentis!	Assassin de son père Laïus!
LE BERGER, LE MESSAGER *et* LE CHŒUR	
Conjux Jocastae parentis!	Mari de sa mère Jocaste!
	(*TC*, pp. 219–20)

Here Stravinsky emphasizes the rhythmic similarity of the octosyllables that are thrown from group to group, the second reinforcing the first and each of the others turning the screw a little further, by having each declaimed in the same rhythm on the same note, thus showing the links in both meaning and rhythmic structure. Or take the following:

Natus sum quo nefastum est	Je suis né de ce qu'il ne fallait pas
concubui cui nefastum est	j'ai fécondé celle qu'il ne fallait pas
cecidi quem nefastum est.	j'ai tué celui qu'il ne fallait pas.
Lux facta est!	Lumière est faite! (*TC*, p. 220)

In this case the syntactical and rhythmic similarities between the first three lines are clear, and Stravinsky exploits them by setting the verb that opens each of them to a similar rhythm on the same note; the remainder of each line, identical apart from the pronouns, follows on the same rising and falling phrase. The short closing line, the last uttered by Oedipus, breaks the pattern, but, just as Daniélou's translation provides a link with the end of the preceding lines by echoing the central '-fa-' and the final 'est' of 'nefastum est', Stravinsky's music links it by setting it to a sequence of notes that, though much more widely spaced, imitates the falling phrase that ended each of the preceding lines. In these passages, both occurring at the climax of the work where the meaning of the text is paramount, the words very clearly influence the structure of the musical setting, and the meaning and rhythms of the text are foregrounded by

[11] It is true that repetition of words and phrases is also a common feature of Cocteau's theatrical dialogue, but while in his case this represents an effort to imitate natural conversational patterns, Stravinsky's more frequent repetitions look back to the habits of baroque and classical opera.

Stravinsky. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find other examples as striking as these; elsewhere the structure of Cocteau's phrases is frequently obscured not only by the use of repetition, but also by what Lawrence Kramer calls overvocalizing, where the elaboration of the vocal line takes precedence over the clear projection of the words.[12]

Nonetheless, Cocteau's French did survive in one part of the work: Le Speaker is an intermediary between the audience and the stage, explaining the Latin action in the vernacular. 'Afin de vous épargner tout effort d'oreilles et de mémoire et comme l'opéra-oratorio ne conserve des scènes qu'un certain aspect monumental, je vous rappellerai, au fur et à mesure, le drame de Sophocle' (*TC*, p. 211), he tells us in the Prologue, thus presenting himself as a version of surtitles *avant la lettre*.

The work was given as a present to Diaghilev — 'Un cadeau très macabre' (*D*, pp. 24–25), Stravinsky called it — but perhaps the oddest thing is that a dramatic work that is deliberately static should have been seen as a suitable gift for a ballet impresario. In the event, it was even more static than intended, for time constraints caused by Stravinsky's late delivery of the score resulted in the first performance in 1927 being a concert performance. The score contains a set design by Stravinsky's son Theodore, accompanied by a scenic description by Cocteau; letters from Cocteau to Stravinsky in February 1926 and his early drafts of the text show that Cocteau gave significant advice to Theodore,[13] and in his autobiography of 1935 Stravinsky particularly praised Cocteau's eye for detail in matters like set and costume design (*CL*, pp. 205–06).[14] So, whilst the conception for the staging of the work seems to have evolved collaboratively (its monumental character and the fact that the actors would not move were certainly part of Stravinsky's original vision), the extension of the device in Cocteau's text, making the characters into living statues whose costumes are built into the set, seems a particularly Coctelian idea and one to which he was clearly attached, for, although it was never realized in the case of *Oedipus Rex*, he returned to it for the scene of the Sphinx's transformation in his final elaboration of the Oedipus myth, *La Machine infernale* (1934); and it is also linked to all those other instances of figures who emerge only partially from the walls or the furniture in works like *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930) or *La Belle et la Bête* (1945). However, the decision to opt for a concert performance caused these ideas for staging the work to be abandoned; Cocteau attributed this to Diaghilev, who disliked the designs, saying that he did not want them at any price (*SC*, I, 111),

[12] See Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 132.

[13] Igor Stravinsky, *Selected Correspondence*, ed. by Robert Craft, 2 vols (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), I, 95–98. Subsequent references are given in the text with the abbreviation '*SC*'.

[14] Stephen Walsh, in the second part of his biography of Stravinsky, attributes the entire design concept to Cocteau; see Walsh, *Stravinsky: The Second Exile. France and America, 1934–1971* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), p. 286. It is also in the scenic description accompanying Theodore's set design that the conception of the role of the Speaker, which Stravinsky said was entirely Cocteau's idea, is set out.

although Stravinsky vigorously denied this interpretation, quite clearly because it impinged not only on Cocteau's, but also on his son's, reputation (*SC*, I, 112).

But even if this visual aspect of the work was not to be realized, at least Cocteau would have expected some involvement in the performance, for there is no doubt that he intended the role of the Speaker for himself. He wrote to his mother to that effect on 19 January 1926 (*SC*, I, 95 n. 39), but once Stravinsky had handed over control of the performance to Diaghilev, the decision was no longer Cocteau's, and he could say to Stravinsky only that he would take the part if Diaghilev asked him (*SC*, I 110). It was undoubtedly both frustrating and hurtful when Diaghilev excluded him from the stage by casting in the role Pierre Brasseur, who, according to Stravinsky's description, was 'a very handsome, very young man' (*D*, p. 25). And whilst Stravinsky had denied any suggestion of malice in relation to Diaghilev's rejection of his son's set designs, he told Robert Craft that this choice 'was certainly to spite Cocteau' (*D*, p. 25). Only in 1952, when Cocteau was invited to undertake his own production, would he first play in the theatre the role he had written for himself.

Although *Oedipus Rex* is now recognized as one of the great masterpieces of twentieth-century music,[15] the first performance was not a success — 'Un tas de gens mal habillés ont mal chanté' (*D*, p. 25), commented one critic.[16] It can have been little consolation to Cocteau that, in the end, he had played relatively little part in the failure.

Already in 1951 Cocteau himself underplays his contribution to the work, referring to it in his journal simply as 'l'*Œdipus Rex* de Stravinski',[17] but that was not the end of his progressive elision from it, for the device of the narrator makes sense only if performed in the language of the audience. Quite logically, therefore, performances outside France used translations of Cocteau's narrations, and by the time the work had become popular enough to be performed relatively frequently, Stravinsky had moved to the United States, with the result that many of his own performances were narrated in English. Nevertheless, it is perhaps a pity that, when committing the work to disc for an international market, performers and recording companies did not always feel obliged to use the original text. Stravinsky's first studio recording (1951), originally made for a German radio broadcast, spliced in Cocteau to replace the original German Speaker (although the version currently available returns to the German narrator), and Cocteau is the Speaker in two subsequent live recordings by Stravinsky (1952, 1959). Ernest Ansermet also had a French narration in his recording of this period (1955), but Herbert von Karajan (1952) has Italian, and another live Stravinsky recording

[15] Nevertheless, Stravinsky's inclusion of it in an eccentric list of the masterpieces of contemporary opera that includes only six works, two each by Berg, Schoenberg, and himself (plus a curiously dismissive comment that raises Janáček as a possible contender then just as quickly dismisses him), is surely overoptimistic on his part; certainly *The Rake's Progress* belongs there, but the sheer oddity of the genre of *Oedipus Rex* must put it out of contention for this particular accolade.

[16] See also the selection of extracts from contemporary reviews reproduced in Didier van Moere, 'Stravinsky en question: comment la critique parisienne accueillit *Œdipus Rex*', in *L'Avant-scène opéra*, 174 [Stravinsky, *Oedipus Rex*, *Le Rossignol* issue] (1996), pp. 34–35; we should note, however, that these are not uniformly critical.

[17] Cocteau, *Le Passé défini*, I, 83–84.

(1958), the only one to suppress Cocteau quite so radically, has no narration at all. From this point French ceases to be paramount: Ferenc Fricsay (1960) has German; Stravinsky's second studio recording (1961), which came to be generally regarded as definitive, dominating the market for much of the latter part of the twentieth century, has English (the official translation by E. E. Cummings, but slightly tweaked by Stravinsky[18]), declaimed by the plummy-voiced John Westbrook; Colin Davis's first recording (1962) originally cut in Jean Marais for the francophone market, but the rest of the world (and unfortunately nowadays France too) gets Ralph Richardson. Subsequently, for almost three decades, French appears only in Karel Ančerl's recording (1965) and Davis's second (1983); otherwise we have Claudio Abbado (1969) with Italian, Leonard Bernstein (1975), Georg Solti (1976), and Robert Craft (1991) with English, and Ferdinand Leitner (1989) with German. Mercifully, more modern recordings, responding to the fashion for greater authenticity, have tended to return to Cocteau's French text: Esa-Pekka Salonen (1991), James Levine (1991), Franz Welser-Möst (1992), Seiji Ozawa (1992), and Neeme Järvi (1993), although on DVD Ozawa (1992) has the narration in Japanese.[19] However, the first recording of the present century, another by Robert Craft (2002), who seems to see himself as a torchbearer for Stravinsky,[20] ignores the trend, using a leaden translation radically adapted from Cummings (certainly not for the better) by Stravinsky and Craft himself, recited by a schoolmasterly Edward Fox. Encouragingly, he has been followed by Valery Gergiev (2010), who again prefers French. So, after a good start in early recordings, Cocteau was generally replaced by translations; since the 1990s he has largely returned to prominence, but Craft proves that the battle is not fully won. And an Internet search through the currently available recordings reveals that there are still as many CDs and DVDs not in French as there are in French.[21]

Nevertheless, despite having virtually eliminated Cocteau from the work by recording the narrations in English in 1961, Stravinsky proves all too ready in the *Dialogues*, which date from about the same time, to denigrate what little is left. He begins by disowning and criticizing the narrations: 'The speaker device is Cocteau's and the notion that the speaker should wear a *frac* and comport himself like a *conférencier* (which has too often meant, in practice, like a master of ceremonies)' (*D*, p. 23). Then, responding to a later question, he launches into a list of objections:

> My criticisms of *Oedipus Rex*? Criticism is too easy after thirty-five years, and, what is worse, too late, but I detest the speaker device, that disturbing series of interruptions, and I do not much like

[18] The translation by Cummings was commissioned by the Juilliard Opera Theatre, but is given official status by its inclusion at the beginning of the vocal score of the work: Igor Stravinsky, *Oedipus Rex: opéra-oratorio en deux actes d'après Sophocle*, 1948 version, vocal score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1949), pp. vii–viii. At this stage the tweaking simply involved removing the first three of the phrases about which Stravinsky expressed reservations in the *Dialogues* (see below) and changing Cummings's translation of the fourth.

[19] Much of this information is taken from the discography in *L'Avant-scène opéra*, 174 (1996), 36–40 (p. 37), but also draws on information from various Internet vendors in May 2009.

[20] See, for instance, Walsh, *Stravinsky: The Second Exile*, p. 527.

[21] Although some recordings are available in different formats and editions, I have counted each version only once.

the speeches themselves. '*Il tombe, il tombe de haut*' — from where else, indeed, given the gravity situation? (The English is not much better, though: 'He falls headlong' sounds like the description of a swan dive.) The line 'And now you will hear the famous monologue, "the Divine Iokaste is dead," ' is intolerable snobbery. Famous to whom? And no monologue follows, but only a four-word singing telegram. Another line mentions a 'witness to the murder, who steps out from the shadows,[22] and I have always wondered who that interesting character might be and what might have become of him. But the final '*on t'amait*' is the most offensive phrase of all, for it is a journalist's caption and a blot of sentimentality wholly alien to the manners of the work. But alas, the music was composed with the speeches, and is paced by them. (*D*, pp. 29–30)

We should note that this is Stravinsky's only criticism of the work. Of the music, he comments: 'The music? I love all of it, even the Messenger's fanfares, which remind me of the now badly tarnished trumpets of early 20th-Century-Fox' (*D*, p. 30). Whilst the remark proves that Stravinsky is never above ironic comment on his music (he also refers to a figuration towards the end of Creon's aria as 'the *Folies Bergères* [*sic*] tune', adding the comment 'The girls enter, kicking' (*D*, p. 27),[23] and describes Oedipus's aria 'Nonne monstrum' as the ' "Beckmesser" aria' (*D*, p. 29)[24]), he never actually criticizes it, and vigorously defends it against criticism by others, as with the choral narration of the final catastrophe, his 'mortuary *tarantella*', which had been accused of being 'a piece of inappropriate gaiety, a ballet coda, even [. . .] a cancan' (*D*, p. 29). So for Stravinsky, only Cocteau's contribution to the work is open to criticism.

Noticeable in Stravinsky's extended attack is the hesitation between Cocteau's original text and the translation by Cummings: he begins with a reference to the French text, only to follow it with an expression of preference for the translated version — albeit rather backhanded: 'The English is not much better.' Thereafter he sticks with the translation until his last point, when he returns to the French for his most critical remark. Like any educated Russian of his generation, Stravinsky had excellent French, and had lived in France for nearly twenty years, so if this denotes a preference for the translation it is clearly not because of any difficulty in understanding the original. It does, however, denote a lack of awareness, surprising in a polyglot like Stravinsky, of a problem faced by any translator into English of this text, which is the fact that Cocteau is writing in a formal, rhetorical style in keeping with a mode of public speaking in French that does not have a direct equivalent in English. Hence in French the Speaker sounds authoritative; in English he tends to sound merely pompous. And neither does the concision of the speeches help, for it has the effect of intensifying each small infelicity in the translation of a text that does not always go into English particularly comfortably.

[22] Cummings's translation reads 'The witness of the murder steps from the shadows' (Stravinsky, *Oedipus Rex*, 1948 version, vocal score, p. viii).

[23] Stravinsky, presumably working from memory, refers us to rehearsal number 40 for this, although, given that this is merely a more heavily orchestrated recapitulation of the opening of the aria and shares its marchlike character, it seems more probable that he is referring to the new syncopated figure found in the four bars following 43; *Oedipus Rex*, 1948 version, Hawkes pocket score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1949), pp. 30–31, 33–34.

[24] The reference is to the comic character in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, whose contribution to the song contest featured in the opera is characterized by its ridiculous coloratura; the coloratura in Stravinsky's aria is comic in neither intent nor effect.

Returning to Stravinsky's specific criticisms: we may feel that he, as the composer, is himself to blame for the fact that the narrations come as a 'disturbing series of interruptions'. *Oedipus Rex* was written at a time of considerable interest in the combination of spoken words with music,[25] and yet Stravinsky makes virtually no attempt to combine them. Two speeches are underpinned by sustained low notes, the last is punctuated by fanfares — those '20th-Century-Fox' trumpets (*D*, p. 30) — and there is a single attempt to incorporate the last four words of one speech (that preceding Tiresias's aria) into the rhythm of the music that follows, which rarely comes off in performance.[26] The main impression, certainly, is of the separateness of the narrations from the music; yet surely that is the whole point. The narrations *should* seem independent, for the Speaker is the intermediary between the audience and the music, not actually part of the music — Stravinsky's later criticism apparently misses the point of his own musical decision at the time of composition.

What of the linguistic criticisms? The carping at 'il tombe de haut' on the grounds of gravitational self-evidence is clear facetiousness, a wilful misinterpretation of the metaphorical in literal terms. The notion that tragic characters should be high-born and in a position of good fortune, which originates with Aristotle and becomes a given of French classical tragedy, is clearly what Cocteau has in mind here. Although the image of the fall is not inherent in Aristotle's original text, which speaks rather of a rapid reversal of fortune, it has often been used in translations or paraphrases of the idea, either with or without the attendant notion of falling from a great height, and so would surely have been appreciated by the educated French audiences of the 1920s at whom Cocteau's text was initially aimed. That the image is apposite here is proved by the fact that it is found in the text of Sophocles' *Oedipus* itself in relation to the notion of *hubris*:

ὕβρις φυτεύει τύραννον·	Pride breeds the Tyrant;
ὕβρις, εἰ πολλῶν ὑπερπλησθῇ μάταν,	swollen with ill-found booty,
ἃ μὴ ᾽πίκαιρα μηδὲ συμφέροντα,	
ἀκρότατα γεῖσ᾽ ἀναβᾶσ᾽	From castled height
ἀποτμοτάταν ὥρουσεν εἰς ἀνάγκαν,	Pride tumbles to the pit,
ἔνθ᾽ οὐ ποδὶ χρησίμῳ	All footing lost.[27]
χρῆται.	

[25] Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* dates from 1912, Arthur Honegger's *Le Roi David* from 1921, and, although it reached its definitive form only in 1942, William Walton's *Façade* had received its first public performance in 1923. Besides, Stravinsky had already written his own *L'Histoire du soldat* in 1918, making much more inventive use of the combination of speech and music.

[26] In the phrase 'L'assassin du roi est un roi' (*TC*, p. 214), 'roi est un roi' is to be declaimed rhythmically as the first notes of a musical phrase that continues in the same regular rhythm on lower strings. The transition from the natural speech rhythms of the rest of the narration is not easy, and, since this sets the tempo for the next section (and narrators are rarely musicians), on those occasions when the Speaker makes the effort to attempt it (which many do not), the conductor usually follows at a quite different speed.

[27] Sophocles, *The Plays and Fragments*, ed. by R. C. Jebb, part I: *The Oedipus Tyrannus*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), p. 118, ll. 873–79; translation from Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. by E. F. Watling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947), p. 49.

From this point of view, the Cummings translation, which abandons this association in favour of a more concrete metaphor, is certainly, despite Stravinsky's (admittedly grudging) preference, much inferior to the original.

His next objection, concerning the 'snobbery' of referring to the monologue narrating the death of Jocasta as 'famous', raises more than one issue. First of all, by quoting from the translation, Stravinsky gives an inaccurate impression of the original. 'The Divine Iokaste' sounds more like a society hostess than a character from Greek tragedy. What Cocteau wrote was 'La tête divine de Jocaste est morte', an obviously unidiomatic formulation, which should give the clue that this is not original Cocteau — in the terms introduced by Lawrence Venuti,[28] Cocteau signals that the phrase is not his by adopting a foreignizing and historicizing translation that sets the phrase apart from his own idiomatic French. It would indeed be 'intolerable snobbery' for Cocteau to term a monologue of his own 'illustre', but Stravinsky has not understood that the formulation is deliberately unidiomatic because it is a word-for-word translation of the Messenger's initial announcement of Jocasta's death in Sophocles — 'τέθνηκε θεῖον Ἰοκάστης κάρα'[29] — and hence, in the days of the classical education, famous to a significant proportion of the audience. Furthermore, the opening narration has informed us that the libretto is based on Sophocles, meaning that, once one realizes that this is a direct quotation, as is signalled by the overliteral translation, its source is self-evident. The complaint that we are then given not a monologue but 'a four-word singing telegram' makes it clear that, despite the brevity of the narrations and the number of times he must have heard them by the time of his *Dialogues* with Craft, Stravinsky had not fully mastered their content, for the Speaker has also said: 'Il [le Messager] peut à peine ouvrir la bouche. Le Chœur emprunte son rôle et l'aide à dire comment la reine s'est pendue et comment Œdipe s'est crevé les yeux avec son agrafe d'or' (*TC*, p. 220). And indeed, it is in the choral commentary that we find the paraphrase of the rest of the Messenger's narration from Sophocles; so, as promised, a version of Sophocles' original monologue does follow, but it is mainly delivered, as explained by the Speaker, not by the Messenger but by the chorus.

So what of the 'witness to the murder, who steps out from the shadows', whom Stravinsky has been unable to identify? We will recall that in the Prologue the Speaker comments that, because the work preserves only a certain monumental aspect of the scenes of its model, 'je vous rappellerai, au fur et à mesure, le drame de Sophocle'. In other words, the story the Speaker is telling may be filling out the narrative of the opera-oratorio with details from Sophocles that have been omitted from it. In Sophocles' text we are twice told of this witness to the murder. He is first mentioned in Oedipus's first dialogue with Creon, when the

[28] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995).
[29] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, p. 162, l. 1235.

latter explains that they owe to the sole survivor of the incident in which Laius was killed the information that the murder was carried out by a group of robbers:

ΚΡΕΩΝ	CREON
θνήσκουσι γάρ, πλὴν εἷς τις, ὃς φόβῳ φυγὼν	All died; save one, who fled from the scene in terror,
ὧν εἶδε πλὴν ἓν οὐδὲν εἶχ᾽ εἰδὼς φράσαι.	And had nothing to tell for certain — except one thing.
[…]	[...]
λῃστὰς ἔφασκε συντυχόντας οὐ μιᾷ	His story was that robbers — not one but many —
ῥώμῃ κτανεῖν νιν, ἀλλὰ σὺν πλήθει χερῶν.	Fell in with the King's party and put them to death.[30]

Subsequent revelations will make it clear that he has lied; there is no need for Sophocles to explain why: it would clearly have been out of the question for him to admit that he had run away from a single assailant who had killed the rest of the royal party. The character is mentioned again shortly before the appearance of the Messenger announcing the death of Polybus, Oedipus's adoptive father: Jocasta tells that he was subsequently working in the palace, but, on discovering that Oedipus had become king, horrified, he asked to leave to become a shepherd.

ΟΙΔΙΠΥΣ	OEDIPUS
τίς ἦν ποτὲ	Who told you this?
ὁ τούσδε λέξας τοὺς λόγους ὑμῖν, γύναι;	
ΙΟΚΑΣΤΗ	JOCASTA
οἰκεύς τις, ὅσπερ ἵκετ᾽ ἐκσωθεὶς μόνος.	A servant, the only survivor that returned.
ΟΙΔΙΠΥΣ	OEDIPUS
ἦ κἀν δόμοισι τυγχάνει τανῦν παρών;	Is he still in the household?
ΙΟΚΑΣΤΗ	JOCASTA
οὐ δῆτ᾽· ἀφ᾽ οὗ γὰρ κεῖθεν ἦλθε καὶ κράτη	No. When he came back,
σέ τ᾽ εἶδ᾽ ἔχοντα Λάϊόν τ᾽ ὀλωλότα,	And found you king in his late master's place,
ἐξικέτευσε τῆς ἐμῆς χειρὸς θιγὼν	He earnestly begged me to let him go away
ἀγρούς σφε πέμψαι κἀπὶ ποιμνίων νομάς,	Into the country to become a shepherd,
ὡς πλεῖστον εἴη τοῦδ᾽ ἄποπτος ἄστεως.	Far from the city's eyes. I let him go.[31]
κἄπεμψ᾽ ἐγώ νιν·	

Clearly, the servant has recognized in Oedipus the killer of Laius and so fears for his life, but Sophocles leaves us to draw our own conclusions, for, when the shepherd arrives on stage, he says only that he was also that servant of Laius who rescued the infant Oedipus by giving him to the Messenger. The Greek text

[30] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, p. 26, ll. 118–19, p. 28, ll. 122–23; *Theban Plays*, p. 29.
[31] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, p. 104, ll. 754–63; *Theban Plays*, pp. 46–47.

makes no further allusion to him witnessing the murder; to do so would undermine the plausibility of Oedipus's continued failure to realize the truth. So, as the Speaker is to recount the details of Sophocles' play, the allusion to the witness to the murder would be legitimate even without any mention of him in the libretto. But, again, Stravinsky has not read the text closely enough. Compressed as it is, in the manner of this libretto that had been so severely trimmed by Stravinsky himself, although the first of these two references has been excised,[32] the second is present, this time in the sung Latin text: in the passage before the Speaker's mention of the witness, Oedipus comments, 'Volo videre pastorem. | Sceleris superest spectator', 'Je veux voir le berger. | Il reste un témoin du crime' (*TC*, p. 217). And when he appears he is greeted by the chorus as 'omniscius pastor', 'le berger qui sait tout' (*TC*, p. 218), another phrase that puzzled Stravinsky: '*Why* the shepherd should be omniscient I do not know' (*D*, p. 31, Stravinsky's emphasis), although the fact that he both knows the fate of the infant Oedipus and saw the murderer of Laius seems to answer the question clearly enough.[33] This is also why he and the Messenger can identify Oedipus not only as 'Natus Laio et Jocasta!', 'Fils de Laïus et Jocaste!' (*TC*, p. 219), but as 'Peremptor Laii parentis!', 'Assassin de son père Laïus!' (*TC*, p. 220).

Stravinsky's ignorance of such textual details in a libretto that he set to music is certainly surprising, but is characteristic of his general attitude to word setting; for him the precise nuances of a text are less important than the overall sense and its suitability as a tool for the musician. In his autobiography he wrote of the pleasure of being able to treat the Latin as purely phonetic material, which could be reduced to the essential component of individual syllables (*CL*, pp. 209–10); this is not to say, of course, that he ignored its general meaning, but he was certainly not interested in individual word-painting of the sort practised by many other composers of song or opera, whilst he clearly did take pleasure in the sounds and rhythms of the words. His relative indifference to the precise meaning of the texts he set is illustrated by an incident recounted by Robert Craft: on Boxing Day 1952 W. H. Auden explained to Stravinsky the meaning of various terms in the *Lyke-Wake Dirge*; Stravinsky's setting of the poem had received its first performance the previous month.[34] Nevertheless, most readers of the *Dialogues* will justifiably, but wrongly, assume that Stravinsky's criticisms are based on a precise knowledge of the details of the libretto.

So what of Stravinky's criticism of the final 'on t'aimait', that 'blot of sentimentality'? Certainly the phrase is potentially sentimental, and this time cannot be justified by reference to Sophocles. It is, though, perhaps surprising that, after three quotations from the translation by Cummings, Stravinsky now quotes

[32] The allusion is present in *Œdipe-Roi* (*TC*, p. 430) but was clearly cut at whatever point in the development of *Oedipus Rex* the decision was taken to limit the role of Creon to a single aria.

[33] Stravinsky may be referring, again facetiously, to the fact that the word is usually reserved for the deity.

[34] Robert Craft, *Stravinsky: Chronicle of a Friendship*, rev. edn (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994), p. 89.

the original, since the effect of sentimentality seems to be rather more pronounced in the translation and so could provide one explanation for the composer's extreme reaction. In choosing to translate the verb 'aimer' as 'love' rather than 'like', Cummings surely makes the right choice: traditionally, 'love' is the bond between kings and their subjects, and thus the bathos of an ending stating that people 'liked' Oedipus is clear. But the English word is so much more absolute than the French, with its wider range of meanings. 'On' is also difficult for the translator: the stiltedness of 'one loved you' is clearly out of the question; and 'they loved you' is too vague. Cummings wrote 'we loved you',[35] which is problematic, since the Speaker stands apart from the action and so should not include himself in it by the use of the first person. Stravinsky adopted the habit of changing this to a passive (as can be heard in his 1961 recording) — not an unusual solution to the translation of 'on', but one that is particularly lumpish here. So whilst Cocteau's phrase slips by idiomatically, Stravinsky gives us the leaden 'you were loved' — a blot if ever there was one. It may be because Stravinsky modified Cummings's translation at this point that he quotes the phrase in its original version.

However, Stephen Walsh suggests an additional reason why Stravinsky may have objected so much to this final remark at the time of the *Dialogues*. Drawing in part on an account by Paul Horgan, he refers to a performance of *Oedipus Rex* that Stravinsky conducted in London in November 1959, with Cocteau delivering the narrations:[36]

> 'A Memorable Oedipus Rex', the *Times* voted it, adding by way of footnote that 'M. Cocteau undemonstratively set the various scenes', and that 'the tactful sincerity with which he delivered his last line, "Adieu, Oedipe; on t'aimait", was a concert in itself'. This tribute to the author's modesty will have surprised those who knew him, and certainly it must have astonished Horgan, who had been mesmerized by Cocteau's posturing histrionics during the performance, the way he gestured to the audience before the work started, gazed ostentatiously about him during the music, missed several cues, then leapt to his feet, ready for the applause, well before the final soft orchestral unisons had died away. Horgan felt that Stravinsky was infuriated by Cocteau's antics, and implies that the two co-authors scarcely met outside the performance (though they must have talked long enough for Stravinsky to complain about his lameness, since Cocteau wrote to him a few days later advising him to look after his legs and recommending hot foot baths). The composer had not yet pronounced his famous anathema on 'the speaker device, that disturbing series of interruptions' or in particular dismissed the narrator's very last phrase — precisely the 'on t'aimait' — as 'a journalist's caption and a blot of sentimentality wholly alien to the manners of the work'. But perhaps it was this very performance — and even this very review — that prompted him to express himself in quite that way a mere two or three years later.[37]

This suggestion that the criticism of the Speaker device in general and the 'on t'aimait' in particular in the *Dialogues* may have resulted from jealousy at this

[35] Stravinsky, *Oedipus Rex*, 1948 version, vocal score, p. viii.

[36] This use of the French narrations in a non-francophone country is not completely unheard of in the performance history of the work, but remains unusual; on this occasion the artistic decision to use the author as Speaker clearly overruled the logic that demands the use of the vernacular for the narrations.

[37] Walsh, *Stravinsky: The Second Exile*, pp. 414–15. Walsh refers to Paul Horgan, *Encounters with Stravinsky: A Personal Record*, rev. edn (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), pp. 110–18.

review would certainly explain Stravinsky's reversion to the original French text of the narration for his discussion of this particular point, as well as the choice of words in describing it as 'a journalist's caption', and it is equally possible that irritation at Cocteau's behaviour at this performance was also a contributory factor. But, of course, if it is correct, it also means that we can no longer assume these criticisms (whether right or wrong) to be disinterested.

Nevertheless, most musicians will take Stravinsky's comments at face value; literary critics should not. His failure to differentiate between the original text and the translation is a common error; but he at least knew both versions — it is clear that most anglophones who readily accept his denigration of Cocteau's contribution to the work are quite unaware that they have never actually heard it, but know only the work of Cummings or other translators. Even more bizarre is the contribution of the French music critic André Lischke, who takes it upon himself to attack even the original French text of those parts of the libretto that were translated into Latin:

> Il est indéniable que le latin justifie en grande partie les espoirs que Stravinsky a mis en lui, ne serait-ce que parce qu'il rattrape le texte bien faible et artificiel de Cocteau, qui aurait été désastreux si chanté dans sa version française.[38]

A reasoned response to this would point out that, since Cocteau knew from the outset that his text was to be translated into Latin, he was working with that in mind and tailored his work accordingly, never intending it to be heard in French. And, furthermore, that the manner of Stravinsky's music has its roots in the decision to use Latin, and so adopts a style that is quite unsuited to a text in any living language; obviously, it would not work with Cocteau's French original. However, the most remarkable thing about this criticism is not that its author has failed to grasp these key points, but that he feels qualified to make such judgments about Cocteau's French text without ever having read it: his essay was published some seven years before the first appearance of that original French text (or, at least, as we have seen, the closest we can get to it) in the Pléiade edition of Cocteau's theatrical works, in a publication that prints alongside the Latin text an anonymous retranslation into French that differs significantly from Cocteau's own. This combination of ignorance and prejudice is not unique.

The fact that *Oedipus Rex* is one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century music is, of course, largely the result of Stravinsky's genius; it is the role of the librettist always to play metaphorical second fiddle. However, the text Cocteau provided for translation into Latin is (with Stravinsky's help) a masterpiece of concision that shapes the various episodes of the drama in precisely the way required by this monumental work with its preference for set-pieces. And the punctuation provided by the Speaker device is an essential element in the creation of this block-like structure, something that Stravinsky could not avoid admitting even amid his criticisms: 'The music was composed with the speeches,

[38] André Lischke, 'Commentaire musical', *L'Avant-scène opéra*, 174 (1996), 8–32 (p. 8).

and is paced by them' (*D*, p. 30). The narrations themselves contrive to be remarkably eloquent despite their brevity. The importance of Cocteau's contribution to the work was recognized in the invitation for him to take the role of the Speaker in that London performance of 1959 even though logic demanded an English-speaking narrator. It seems entirely possible that Stravinsky, a man long used by this stage to being the centre of attention, resented the impression given in that newspaper article that he had been upstaged by a collaborator whose contribution to the work had over the years been pushed into the background in so many ways. The great pity is that the criticisms with which he chose to respond, criticisms that, as we have seen, do not stand scrutiny, have for so long been accepted as the truth.