

The Suspension of Meaning

An interview with Jean Starobinski

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Creating connections has been the aim of Jean Starobinski's work for more than half a century. His body of work is large and shifting, created in response to life, lying somewhere between the critical and the clinical. *La Vie des Idées* met this citizen of the world at his house in Geneva, following the recent publication of three important books.

Despite the stature he has acquired after five decades of intellectual activity, Jean Starobinski does not often appear onscreen. As a writer, professor and the President of the *Rencontres Internationales de Genève* (1967-1996), he has advocated another form of openness, made possible by a broader comparatism encompassing everything from philology to politics, from literature to the history of ideas and the arts, made possible by a form of writing that is as concerned with harmony as it is with accuracy.

While Jean Starobinski has endorsed the “subjective” criticism of followers of the Geneva School (Georges Poulet, Marcel Raymond, Jean Rousset), he has done so at the right distance from his subjects of analysis. Connecting the history of ideas with textual analysis, he has outlined an anthropology of the various states of Western thought, all centuries and genres included. He has accomplished this task without falling into dogmatism, but in a dynamic exploration of “styles”.

Jean Starobinski's approach is sensitive to the shifting nature of civilisation and developed out of his combined education in Geneva, Paris and Baltimore. He has been a doctor of letters since 1957, after writing a thesis whose perspicacity has been acknowledged – *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* [*Jean-Jacques Rousseau: la transparence et l'obstacle*]; his medical thesis was devoted to the history of the treatment of melancholy. This seminal text, submitted in 1959, is now available to read as part of the “*Librairie du XXIe siècle*” (*L'Encre de la mélancolie*, Paris, Seuil, 2012, 662 p.). Two other collections are also being published by Gallimard, putting into perspective the works he had formerly devoted to Diderot and Rousseau (*Diderot, un diable de ramage*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012, 432 p.; *Accuser et séduire. Essais sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris, Gallimard, 2012, 336 p.). This was an opportunity for *La Vie des Idées* to join Jean Starobinski and look back over his complete body of work.

La Vie des Idées: The volume you entitled *Table d'orientation* (1989) carries the sub-heading “the author and his authority”. Your book reintroduces some forgotten scholars while also giving priority to the “giants” of literature: Montaigne, Diderot, Rousseau, Stendhal, Baudelaire... Despite the criticism it has received since the 1970s, is the concept of “author” still as relevant to you today?

Jean Starobinski: I should like to continue to have the freedom to move within two perspectives. The first is of an etymological nature: where do certain notions come from, dominant one moment and disputed the next? This is a perspective on history that I prefer not to restrict to literature alone, nor to what some call “mentalities”, but really to the history of prevailing discourses. I feel it is important to pay attention here, for there is a philological attention to maintain and there is also an interest in what makes a system one moment and what may be discarded later, and under which circumstances: this is the broader meaning of what Americans call “the history of ideas”, which has been represented by quite varied figures. In addition, we have what is authoritative, the acknowledged work, and at that point we should recognise a constituted universe rather than a genealogy; what matters then is to see how the elements make up a system, how they are organised in order to impose themselves – if they have indeed imposed themselves – and that may be why some works and some philosophies have met with a deafening silence, because a particular period, history and society were unable to receive them. In fact, increasingly when I look at the opposition between Rousseau and Diderot, for example, I see that Rousseau creates a system and continues to create a system. He brings together elements that do not usually coexist. Take *Julie, or the New Heloise* [*La Nouvelle Héloïse*], for example: if we think of the novel as the story of what happens in a little village in French-speaking Switzerland then we are misunderstanding it. In fact, *The New Heloise* is the story of a small place but whose chief representative – the preceptor – travels around the world; he returns from a voyage with one of the great navigators and contemplates the Clarens countryside and the Wolmars’ garden, and he compares the secret garden with the forests of Tinian and Juan Fernandez. When we finish reading *The New Heloise*, we have travelled through a world in which Rousseau has successfully built up a system of perspectives on a world that expands as the novel unfolds, before falling into death and regret at the very end.

In Diderot, what creates a system is something entirely different: it is the collection of objects or terms in an encyclopaedia, words, and at the same time it is an extraordinarily evasive movement; moving from one object to the next, the Diderot of conversation can also be found in his writings, and to a certain extent he adopts the tone of the person with whom he is communicating. Sophie Volland was certainly the person who provided him with the tone that enabled him to respond in the best way possible. I endeavoured to show this in the volume on Diderot that is currently being published by Gallimard. It is surprising to see (and we do not find this in Rousseau) that when Diderot considered a novel, and at the same time an English model, at one time it was Richardson he closely followed in *The Nun* [*La Religieuse*], with its moving ending as the young woman dies; another time he adopted the tone of Sterne when writing *Jacques the Fatalist* [*Jacques le Fataliste*]. It is Diderot’s volubility that should be acknowledged in its very movement, and that movement can encompass the whole world. Rousseau encompasses it in another way, by making elements coexist; in my *Rousseau* book we shall see how Rousseau, at one point, having educated his pupil, his student, because he is Émile’s teacher, gives a party in the countryside where he imagines himself retired; the party, however, brings together a group of people who live according to the rules of the social contract – in other words, where each and every one is in a constant relationship of reciprocity. There is a model of collectivity, which is Rousseau’s model and which for him is authoritative, whereas [Diderot] remains in a dynamic of movement, investigation, curiosity and also anxiety, and what I find interesting are not the ideas but, dare I say, the internal rhythm of an experience and the relationship with the world it entails.

The great authors are those who have built up a world. Of course, one might be interested in an author like Maurice de Guérin, who had a short life and recounts an experience in *The Centaur* [*Le Centaure*] and *The Bacchante* [*La Bacchante*]; I take an interest in that: Guérin is not a minor author but in fact a very revealing one. But the great authors are those who have sought to create a system; when they reveal a moment in history – and I am somewhat Hegelian on this – they recount that moment in history as it is expressed in human relations, in a form of love sometimes, badinage at a given moment, love-passion as opposed to badinage, and when that badinage ends, love is reinvented in another way, elsewhere; it always finds a way to reinvent itself. I merely take the necessary distance so as to try to observe and understand the system that is established. And I admire Foucault a great deal for that, for he succeeded in analysing systems when he analysed the world of psychiatry and madness.

La Vie des Idées: Your approach by “tracing” is distinct from Foucauldian genealogies. Reading your work, one sometimes has the feeling that you have kept your distance from “French theory”, and yet you have worked for the journal *Critique*, and one of the texts from *L’Encre de la mélancolie* comes from *Tel Quel*. What links have you maintained with French theory?

Jean Starobinski: I have very real links with French theory; I talked to Michel Foucault who himself had some experience with the psychiatry of eastern Switzerland. He had met Binswanger – briefly, I believe, or at least he had spoken to him – and he was aware of this phenomenological approach, which of course had little importance in the development of French psychiatry, and he turned to the history and genealogy of French psychiatry. As for me, my experience led me more – through the kind of attraction one often feels as an adolescent – towards the psychology of Jung and then that of Freud, and then towards the Hamburg school and Hamburg iconology, which is so wonderful – I am thinking of Panofsky’s seminal book and Saxl’s work alongside that. For me, the Warburg institute was a mythical place for certain branches of research; I tried to gain a certain level of knowledge of this field in which genealogy and etymology are so important. At many times in the development of my thought, tracing etymology has been important, but in order to highlight differences. This has led to a return to the founding moments of concepts, to the moments at which notions appear, or are used [...]. The book that preceded *L’Encre de la mélancolie*, published by Seuil, was entitled *Action et réaction*, in which this tendency of mine was even more pronounced: it was less about literature than about a system for interpreting the world and nature in its development up to the contemporary era, or that which immediately preceded it.

I met Jean Wahl very early on, after his return from America, and I was his host in Paris at the Collège de Philosophie; I met him again at the Rencontres de Royaumont. That is also where I met Georges Poulet; he is a great friend of mine who gave me three wonderful years in Baltimore as assistant professor at a centre with a tradition that had been started by a great philosopher, Lovejoy, which was simply called the history of ideas. Monthly meetings of the History of Ideas Club were held. Lovejoy was the one whose magnificent work showed what was meant by a longing for origins, or the return to origins in European thought. And those origins are what Rousseau referred to, and so Lovejoy’s book was given the title *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*. The aim was quite simply to analyse the part played in Western thought by the idea of a lost primitive happiness. No sooner is this question raised than we find the whole of Western thought laid out before us, including that of the Bible: there is a primitive happiness that has been lost. The History of Ideas Club sessions

dealt with all of this: how it has evolved in history, philosophical systems, the psychology of certain schools, and so on.

La Vie des Idées: So do you define yourself as a historian of ideas?

Jean Starobinski: Many things I have produced as part of my literary activity have stemmed from the fact that very early on I was close to poets and friends involved in literary activity. In 1941 there was Pierre-Jean Jouve, and then Pierre Emmanuel whom I visited in Geneva during the war, and then, also very early on, I left university with a bachelor of arts degree and started studying medicine, which provided me with a means of comparing two activities of the mind, two relationships with the world as well; but a distinction should be made between these two activities and their relationships should be contemplated, or should at least give rise to reflection. The fact is that this book [*L'Encre de la mélancolie*], which was published many years later, in a way brings together those two activities to which I devoted myself at the beginning of my life.

La Vie des Idées: Is it for pedagogical reasons that your analyses usually take the form of an account? Just before *Largesse*, rather than describing Correggio's *Eve Offering the Apple* as a historian, you chose, for example, to "recount a drawing"...

Jean Starobinski: I felt that the development of a problem could be the subject of a chronological staging. The model was given to me by Georges Poulet, who built almost all his studies around an initial awareness – a primary motive and its consequences. On this point, I have perhaps too often conformed to the model he proposed. On the other hand, however, when teaching I think I have been quite faithful to the textual analysis that Spitzer and the stylisticians practised: I met Spitzer in the United States, and he taught me a great deal. However, for Rousseau and many others, Marcel Raymond already had a progressive way of finding a contributing motive in the text, a point of departure, and of following the development of a thought process right from the point where the question was formulated or a problem was highlighted, and then it was a matter of weighing the consequences, of going right to the end of whatever stemmed from an initial position.

Of course, there may be some construction or artifice in this way of presenting things, and we could call it a didactic method used to show the reader or listener a problem based on premises or an initial point of surprise in order to gain the impression of having a better understanding at the end of the process; in other circumstances, which I must recall, the idea I had was to find the expressions of a fundamental gesture or attitude. That might give rise to a simple collection of examples, but I felt it was necessary to add some movement. When I had the opportunity – a delightful moment in my experience as a writer and thinker – to organise an exhibition at the Louvre's Department of Graphic Arts which, at the time, was being directed admirably by Madame Françoise Viatte, I took great pleasure in collecting and presenting images of the gift and of largesse; this is a far cry from melancholy, but we can get closer to it if we consider that the gift is what we receive from the hands of the goddess Fortune, and that some are deprived of it: there are those who receive the gift and those who are left out. The theme I followed in that book [*Largesse*], which I took great joy in writing, was that of the gift; it was based on a number of older examples as well as those I could access in more recent literature. Gift-giving scenes can of course be found in Rousseau, and in many other writers as well, and it was necessary to find corresponding images; this brought up another problem regarding the graphic arts and visual expression. I took pleasure in

presenting areas of expression and a theme that was, if I may call it this, existential – one of the possible moments for connecting with others.

La Vie des Idées: So a historian cannot do without images (in both the literal and figurative sense)?

[**Jean Starobinski** comments on one of the Goya etchings that decorate his home]: Goya named this etching *A Circus Queen*, and I think it is wonderful. [...] It depicts a horse balancing on a rope, and the circus queen standing on the horse's back. There is a crowd of admirers or spectators behind them, which we can make out, and the rope is perfectly depicted; the ground, however, is not very clearly shown. What height is the horse at? Is the whole trick simply a ruse to make people think the horse is suspended? And yet, we believe it to be suspended... And we must remain within that suspension of meaning.

Jean Starobinski: I take great pleasure in absorbing myself in an image, and the moment one can present them, oppose them and unite them a whole new group is created from the images one chooses, where messages and different lessons may become apparent. The first book I published with Skira was part of the collection entitled "Art, idées, histoire", and it was called *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque*. At that time, I was interested in the idea of the mask, which came from earlier, more mixed interests I had; ritual masks, sacred dances in which the individual who wants to make contact with the supernatural or a higher power wears a mask in order to face or imitate it. And *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* simply presented a collection of images that can easily be taken from distinct civilisations and especially from distinct eras of Western history. Sometimes there can be great joy in seeing what is constant or what is innovative. The collection for which I was responsible during a certain period, when I was a medical student and starting to write, gave me the chance to bring together Michel Butor, Yves Bonnefoy and Roland Barthes, who had travelled in Japan, to work on this series of books; the group of friends I had at the time was able to find expression in Geneva thanks to Albert Skira's admirable talent for handling images.

[**Jean Starobinski** comments on a second Goya etching]: This etching is entitled *Rain of Bulls*. I especially like it because it unites opposites: the emptiness, the free space and the bulls' muscular mass as they fall, in a totally impossible state which Goya joyously defies: there has never been a rain of bulls, and he invents one...

I am a historian, and I am often tempted to – or I resolve to – erase the methodological or purely historical foundations of my reasoning, and I take a shortcut via metaphors and sometimes via the etymology of a term, which I consider to be sufficient if I give the term's origin in Latin, Greek or another language, thereby inviting the reader to use his or her imagination. Perhaps I have carried my private world too far over into my scientific presentations... Some literary critics – what I call critics – prefer to claim they are followers of science. All the same, I am sensitive to the idea of having created a literary work, with all the vagueness and approximations that come with literature, and perhaps the moments of success that a certain amount of attention brings. I generally finish my work with a nagging feeling of dissatisfaction.

I like textual interpretations; I like interpreting texts which seem obvious at first glance but in fact bring about a surprise, a questioning, a review of one's first impression, a richness that suddenly reveals itself and demands recognition. There are texts that beg to have acknowledged what has gone unnoticed, what they have overlooked themselves; one must

listen carefully in order to discover the silence that lies beneath a text. And sometimes perhaps I imagine a little too much...

La Vie des Idées: Your books show sensitivity to “civic” values; your method shows real ethical concern. In your view, should critics intervene on the public stage? What political impact do you attribute to your work?

Jean Starobinski: We need to know what state things are in and what the true terms of the problem are, and I have always had the feeling of not being sufficiently well informed to intervene by demanding readers’ or listeners’ trust, which means I have reflected a great deal on political issues but I have not really expressed my opinion on them. Perhaps my political views reverberate in some way – but without expanding on their political content – when I am dealing with subjects I am sure of, and those are the texts I have in front of me. I think perhaps I have a duty to intervene when it comes to the texts that are produced in politics, but when it comes to news and situations one must begin by being fully informed, and one rarely is. My perspective requires those whom we say are “responsible”, whom we presume are informed enough to speak out, to state their opinion and remind us of certain principles that cannot be ignored or violated. And I am very demanding of those who work in that field and can say what has to be said in a given situation; but I do not willingly put myself in their place, because politics is not my job.

Interview conducted on 12 November 2012, at the author’s home in Geneva.

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