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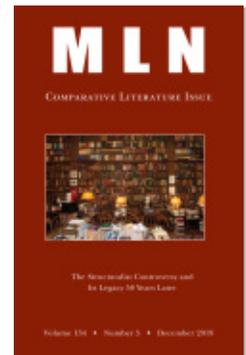
Starobinski's Resistance to Theory—Le regard de l'absent

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# Starobinski's Resistance to Theory—Le regard de l'absent



*Evelyne Ender*

In memory of Jean Starobinski

The work becomes person only if I cause it to live as one. My reading must breathe life into the work so as to endow it with presence and appearances of personality. I must bring the work back to life in order to love it; I must make it speak in order to respond to it . . . One might say the work always begins as 'our dearly departed' awaiting resurrection through us, or if not resurrection then at least the most vivid evocation.

– Starobinski, “The Critical Relation”

This essay, devoted to a master of close reading and of the interpretation of signs and symptoms—textual and medical—was born in a classroom at Johns Hopkins University.<sup>1</sup> It was born, furthermore, in the very place that shaped the vocation and the intellectual trajectory of a young, highly gifted literary scholar and medical student from

<sup>1</sup>An exceptional community of colleagues and scholars has nourished my ideas for this article: Hent de Vries, Jacques Neefs, Marc Redfield, Nidesh Lawtoo, Yves Citton, and, for “emergent forms,” David Wellberry. My intellectual debt is also to Jean-Claude Bonnet, Danièle Cohn, and Martin Rueff—whom I read “après-coup”. My deepest thanks go to Ben Beak, Tracy Kao, Sylvain Egroun as well as Clara Kheykhah for their influence and inspiration for this tribute to Jean Starobinski's teachings.

Geneva. In the mid-1950s, accompanying his wife Jaqueline who was in training at Hopkins Hospital, Jean Starobinski followed medical rounds while polishing his doctoral thesis on Jean-Jacques Rousseau and taking part in the intellectual creative spirit that marked those Hopkins years. This was a time when many ideas about the creative potential of cross-disciplinary exchanges were first seeded, a time that found its echo when visitors (many from Paris) convened with the local *intelligentsia* a decade later at Hopkins at an international symposium. In the chronicle of American intellectual life, this 1966 conference, "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," marked the birth of "theory."

In this initial gathering, local faculty, scholars representing highly diversified fields, and guest speakers from Europe had convened for presentations and conversations that prompted a radical rethinking of longstanding enlightenment ideals and values. Embedded in the cultural and intellectual crisis of a Europe torn apart by two wars, the conference also prompted a radical rethinking of values attached to learning and culture in academia; "human sciences" and the humanities were at the forefront. The proceedings for the 1966 conference were later collected under the heading of Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato's *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism; the Sciences of Man* (1972), thus inviting a connection between the original event and the twentieth-century epistemic and philosophic revolution brought about by structuralism. However, Jean Starobinski was not present and his name is barely mentioned in the proceedings; his absence seems all the more remarkable when one considers the wide-ranging influence of his book, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle*.

On his return to Europe, after finishing his internship in psychiatry, Starobinski did not open a *cabinet médical*, but began instead a life of reading and teaching. The first step into his life journey as a critic had steeped him in the "fusion and confusion of existence and the idea" in the *oeuvre* of an author, Rousseau, which he helped build (*Transparency and Obstruction* 9).<sup>2</sup> The practice of close, symptomatic reading and the philosophical questions defined in this book had a major influence, meanwhile, on critical thought and the linguistic turn that marked late twentieth-century hermeneutics, especially with Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man.

<sup>2</sup>In a context where "text" increasingly prevails, Starobinski's domain is defined by *l'oeuvre* (as an extended corpus) and *l'ouvrage* (as an object resulting from human labor and craft).

In his critical dialogue with Rousseau's texts, Starobinski offers an utterly transformative approach to author criticism. Though indissociable from literature, it deciphers in its subject an epoch-making history of ideas, of sensibility, and of consciousness. Thus, the patient examination of Rousseau's every word and work offers new keys to the "interiority" and sensibility of an eighteenth-century luminary. Seen through the eyes (*le regard*) of a trained psychiatrist, Rousseau's existence provides the richest of case studies for the exploration of the modern psyche and, to use Freud's coinage for "Dora," of *das Seelenleben*, namely what constitutes modern subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

Studying a work of such scope sets up a challenge under any circumstances and yet, as the originating point of Starobinski's critical imprint, *Transparency and Obstruction*, could not be overlooked. In our seminar at Hopkins, we read most of it, adding ancillary materials as well as other crucial pieces by Starobinski as needed. Our first introduction to inner landscape charted in this book and its overall significance was indirect: we followed W.G. Sebald's melancholy pilgrimage to the Ile Saint-Pierre. It seemed right to begin our own trajectory with a text that, steeped in both authors, returns to the site of Rousseau's illumination about consciousness as described in his *Reveries*.

As intimated above, my essay is inspired by a teaching commitment taken on when, at Hent de Vries's invitation, I offered in the spring of 2017 a course entitled "Jean Starobinski and the Art of Interpretation." The course was shaped by the pedagogical exigencies specific to literary studies and by the critical practice that Starobinski's book on Rousseau exemplifies. It involved the ferrying of the work—in this instance a study of Rousseau's *oeuvre*—across the distance from reading to interpretation to understanding. "One must ferry the work from the distant shore where it was created to that place where interpretation is born," wrote Starobinski (qtd. in Bonnet 847).

Indeed, the question of "*comment faire passer?*"—the most basic of pedagogical promptings—took on extraordinary resonances as it became clear very soon that the "transmissibility" of this older text was in question. An immensely praised critical work of twentieth-century criticism, which left its imprint on central debates in theory, and a work that revealed a unique convergence between a humanist and clinical impulsion, *Transparency and Obstruction* seemed ready to be picked up again as a meaningful intervention in our time. And yet, at the outset

<sup>3</sup>Le "*regard*" is untranslatable as it means both "gaze" and "look." Built on semiotic, psychoanalytic, and aesthetic premises, Silverman's differentiation between these two notions helps identify a decisive nuance in Starobinski's conception.

of our course, the breadth of Starobinski's references and the subtle eloquence of his style made every encounter with pages of his text (however well prepared) a peculiar challenge: it risked bringing us back to an older exegetical mode of reading, when this book's value lies precisely in Starobinski's brilliant and yet understated ability to stage moments of hermeneutic illumination.

Much more needs to be said on this topic, for example on why Starobinski chose Rousseau, or the significant role of translations, or on my desire to equip my students with tools required to experience the "pleasure of the text." Suffice it to say that this essay is driven by a unique and treasured teaching experience with my students at Hopkins that, ultimately, held up to the exigencies of an *oeuvre* that, relying on Rousseau as a case study, articulates some of the crucial questions about the fundamental features of modern subjectivity and does so at a remove from politics and from ideological positions.

We held true then, in our seminar, to an ideal which involved bringing to life, that is to "actualize," the deeper truths contained in this Great Book—and we did *not* take the high road so intelligently presented by Pierre Bayard of conversing about a book that we hadn't read! True to our master text, and to Starobinski's convictions and his ideals about reading, we labored and gradually eased into a discipline that "breathed life" into what otherwise would remain a dead letter. Answering this imperative made each weekly meeting, within the interval of time for reading and reflection, an invitation to imagine a dialogue with the words of the absent—with Rousseau-Staro, the rhyming pair, as we joked. Looking back on my experience, I am reminded of his definition of *le regard critique* as the coexistence of imagination and a relation. In my pedagogical role I mobilized both faculties.

What does it mean to read critical works that do not assume a theoretical framework or a system of thought, but, on the contrary, demand responsiveness to uncertain, uncharted meanings? What does it mean to follow, in the intertwining of the critic's voice with that of the author (in that Staro-Rousseau "complex") *une pensée en mouvement*? This text is inflected by the obstacles we faced, such as the difficulties of translations, a widening gap between European and American cultural references, the intimidation factor of working with books (rather than mere "texts" available digitally or processed as excerpts without context). In the *viva voce* version of these materials, the need to give a glimpse of the labor involved in unearthing meanings was met with the props and the conceit of an ABC, which showed the two stages of our textual apprenticeship.

These pages also answer another challenge, of an institutional as well as a practical nature: they respond to a need to address the relevance of Starobinski's *oeuvre* in view of two events held at Hopkins, the 1966 conference and the 2016–7 celebrations. As my title indicates, what drives this essay is a paradox and quandary: the assumption that Jean Starobinski was a missing guest at this symposium while he ought to have been present—and if not in actuality then in the decisive conversations that unfolded in the 1966 event. The most visible proof for this claim can be found in the proceedings of that conference. Charles Morazé, the first speaker from abroad to address the symposium, made a space, unwittingly, for the missing guest, in reflecting on the value of “literary invention” in a context of scientific pursuits. In speaking of “an energy that fixes itself to ideas, signs, and images in order to direct them toward the creation of *new* ideas, signs, and images,” he echoes Starobinski's very words. “Ideas, signs, and images” are the central tokens of his groundbreaking book on Rousseau (Starobinski, “La relation critique” 29). These are indeed the epistemological and conceptual foundations of a critical activity that starting with Rousseau (and later applied and readjusted to other authors) generated a transdisciplinary *élan* that became Starobinski's distinctive contribution to twentieth-century intellectual life and his legacy.<sup>4</sup>

Another way of featuring Starobinski's legacy is adumbrated in my title, in the allusion to Paul de Man's 1982 manifesto “The Resistance to Theory.” This famous, contentious essay serves as a foil to Starobinski's extended reflections on literary criticism and his notion, which resists theorizing, of *la relation critique*. A comparison between their positions helps trace Starobinski's engagement with the structuralist revolution and his eventual rejection of its premises; it also highlights the centrality of “form” in his critical thinking. So what may seem like a detour shows with enhanced clarity the steps of an intellectual journey that from the 1950s onwards was shaped by an interweaving of reading and writing. Ultimately, the heuristic value of this comparison lies elsewhere: it helps us to see why, on these shores, “theory,” while richly indebted to Starobinski's scholarship, pushed his *oeuvre* into the shadow—out of what are meaningful and yet problematic ideological assumptions.

These pages aim then at retracing the steps of an eminent scholar deeply versed in the world of the arts and of medicine and provide a richer context for what, in our seminar and in Oakeshott's definition

<sup>4</sup>Rueff (817–18 in particular) and Vidal evoke in compelling ways the future of his work.

of *paidea*, became a “serious and orderly initiation into an intellectual, imaginative, moral and emotional inheritance” (Neefs, “Paideia”). In facing the exigencies, difficulties, and singular depth of Starobinski’s style, we learned how to give a human face to texts and, symmetrically, in facing the words of these texts with extreme attentiveness we learned how to discern humanity in its very soulfulness.<sup>5</sup> These pages reflect on an absence now all the more palpable since Starobinski died on the shores of Lake Geneva on March 2, 2019.

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“Il faut faire passer l’œuvre de la rive éloignée dont elle est originaire à celle où prend naissance le discours interprétatif.” The image of “ferrying” describes a hermeneutic gesture, and is one of the many examples of the discrete injunctions scattered across “La relation critique.”<sup>6</sup> They are connected to or emerge from the invention of forms of reading that began with Rousseau. A central inspiration and point of origin for Starobinski’s trajectory, Rousseau provides a matrix, epitomized by one sentence in his *Essai sur l’origine des langues*: “In expressing everything as it would be written, all we do in our speech is reading [en disant tout comme on l’écrirait on ne fait plus que lire en parlant]” (79). Here lies the source, as identified by Staro, of a fraught model of linguistic communication—of an *aporia* with crucial resonances for Western modernity. It shows that our inscription in a signifying chain of statements that define language (*une langue*), and that is ruled by conventions, is the cause of an insurmountable pull between language and speech (*parole*). A sustained interrogation of the conditions of possibility for transparent communication and the question of utterance are the points of origin of Staro’s study of Rousseau. They represent his contribution to late twentieth-century critical thought.

His own advocacy seems inseparable, meanwhile, from the dialectic of writing-reading, transparency-obstruction he discovered in Rous-

<sup>5</sup>Like mine, Rueff’s premises are that his writings amount to “a philosophy of the soul” (796–7).

<sup>6</sup>The textual history of this essay, which appeared several times in French before Starobinski’s extensive revision of 2001, is unusually complicated (see bibliography). The translation of this text into English, by Goldhammer, appeared in 1989. I cite the French text whenever the translation misses essential features of the original, and translate it when needed. To my knowledge there is no published translation of the revised and vastly expanded 2001 version. Goldhammer’s work is outstanding, and yet there are places where the finesse of the author’s style reveals “untranslatable.” A different Rousseau, we concluded in our seminar, emerges from the English and the French versions of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*.

seau and his studious, contemplative retreat (in his case the library rather than the *cabinet medical*) enabled a commitment to probing the spaces between writing, reading, and our human need for expression. Discerning what lies behind an utterance gave the impulsion to an “art of interpretation” and to hermeneutic gestures that probe the depth of an *imaginaire*, which nourishes and is nourished by interpretation.

We quipped in our seminar that Starobinski seemed to attend to books as if he had put his ear on his patient’s chest or rather, given his specialty, as if, alerted by symptoms, he strained his ear to capture every verbal nuance of his patient’s pain. The “signs” of Rousseau’s text, we learned, demand interpretation and prompt a call or calling to respond—in a process of rigorous, attentive elucidation—to another human being’s pain. The urgency, the *pathos* of Rousseau’s language, entails an attentiveness that this addresses to his readers epitomizes: “je veux que tout le monde lise dans mon cœur” (qtd. in Cohn 655). Thus, from his realization of the banality of common language, and his urging us to hear what inflects our utterances, a double imperative emerges: the need to forge a literary language *and* to read him literally. It means pondering over the words he penned and seeing through them—into the transparent medium of a soul. Following Staro’s steps, we were led to decipher “Rousseau”—a human being in his madness, his pain as well as ecstasies; we studied the intertwining of experience and ideas that made his fame. With a telling expression—“à visage humain”—French offers a coinage that highlights the modalities of a way of reading we acquired. As Staro shows, Rousseau’s genius is to have found the words that can give a face to human pain and to have shown that all human utterances can carry a truth, however deeply buried.<sup>7</sup>

“Words, accents, all sorts of inflexions are what gives language its energy; they are what enables a phrase, however common it may be, to leave its own distinctive mark,” Rousseau explains. Starobinski’s responsiveness to this claim inflected his career—and offered a new model of humanistic thought away from moral and philosophical abstractions. What brings words to life, meanwhile, is reading or more precisely, the necessary act of “a” reading that validates the author’s inscription of words on a page. The inscription, the message (“the Letter,” Emily Dickinson would write) to the world exists by virtue of a dialogue between writing and reading. In this way, Starobinski’s encounter with Rousseau’s *oeuvre* opened a space for a creative gesture that, in “conversation” with the texts, is shaped as an alternation

<sup>7</sup>Rueff thus attributes to Staro an “anthropology of passions and a theory of expression” (156).

between an empathetic reading and a necessarily reflective, critical, or clinical distancing, which he named “la distance critique.” As part of this decisive turn towards language, and to ward off the temptation that in reading Rousseau’s words we are reading the man,<sup>8</sup> Starobinski states that “writing is not a dubious proxy for inner experience but the experience itself” (“The Critical Relation” 118). Rousseau’s writings are the *makings* of an inner experience, and as such they may well help us trace a life, but the experiences they recount are no more or no less than a textual event.

Prompted by the words on the page, Starobinski explains, the reader’s mind is faced with an event that, upon exploration of its “construction . . . formal make up, inner harmonies and extrinsic relations,” invites a corresponding act, which confers upon the work “un sens agrandi” and its own truth (*sa vérité interne*) (33). The critic’s work amounts to a reading, *une lecture*, which then becomes its own text outside of any predetermined finality or prior model. While criticism aims to offer “a more subtle and differentiated understanding of literary language,” its origin lies in a responsiveness to verbal forms prompted by an “intuition.” Indeed, whereas a structural linguistics sets itself the task of a decoding of a message, Staro privileges an inductive approach “unencumbered by the shadow of systematic premeditation of doctrinal preconception” (114). It assumes the possibility of utterances and of a rhetorical energy or force. As in Rousseau’s “une grande énergie du langage,” it lies outside of a *doxa*, a *logos* or *grammar*.

In the expanded version of “La relation critique” (2001), Starobinski stakes a strong claim against theory, though without engaging with its terminology. He tells us that, in eschewing any *a priori* assumptions, the critic can only dwell in the realm of the particular: “Prior to any theorizing (*toute généralisation d’un savoir transmissible*), he who writes as a critic must have delved into the world of the particular, must have become attached to the singularity of a work” (32, translation mine).<sup>9</sup> The essence of our relation to texts is that of an individuality in need of a translation: literature exists by virtue of an experience of a shared intimacy between a writer and a reader. What breathes life into it is of the order of an act—reading, interpreting. The latter informs a “relation” that, as in the root meaning of *lire* as collecting and gathering, depends on the closest of engagements with the words

<sup>8</sup>“Un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature” (*Confessions* 37).

<sup>9</sup>The augmented text of “La relation critique” is not available in English, thus abruptly curtailing the dissemination and reception of Starobinski’s ideas as well as the American perception of his critical trajectory.

on the page. “Choisir, restituer, interpréter,” Starobinski writes tellingly, relying on verbs that, in later definitions of his critical thought, offer an ethos of reading that amounts to a gesture (a *largesse*).<sup>10</sup> It is made of a series of acts (or gestures) and speaks to “events” that, however microscopic, give shape to a future. Here is his testimonial:

Pour être descendue dans la matérialité des œuvres, pour les avoir explorées dans le détail de leur facture, dans leur être formel, dans leurs rapports intimes et dans leurs relations externes, la pensée attentive y aura reconnu plus nettement les traces d’une série d’actes. Et, déchiffrant ces actes révolus, ou reconnaissant leur qualité d’énigme, la critique aspirera à se faire acte à son tour, afin que lui répondent—s’y ajoutant, la contredisant, s’en détournant—les nouveaux actes sans lesquels l’humaine conversation tarirait. (55)

It is easy to miss the punch line in prose that, given the classical imprint of his style, makes its strongest claim in the form of a classical litotes. Moreover, the words that define his longstanding practice (and discipline) as a literary critic remain impersonal and devoid of a claim for his own person: no “I” in these lines! Indeed, Starobinski’s resistance to theory involves a reluctance to theatricalize thought: the suspension of a self or persona is required to make room for another figure, that comes to life as *prosopopeia*. The ultimate purpose of such acts of reading, as stated above, is to keep alive a conversation described as “human” but that a contemporary translation would define as “humanistic” in its range and intent. Elsewhere, Starobinski tells us that *l’œuvre n’est une personne que si je la fais vivre comme telle*, suggesting that only reading can impart a life and a human face to a writer’s work.<sup>11</sup>

Starobinski’s critical writings are undeniably guided by his study of diseases such as melancholia (the subject of his medical thesis) and nostalgia (as developed in a groundbreaking essay on medical history), and make the unquiet mind defined by such illnesses a symptom of our modernity. Hence perhaps the distinctive strain in his critical prose, which evokes in its figures and rhythms, as in some airs by Mozart, *une fuyante plénitude*, namely a happiness that seems to elude us (Bonnet 843). When so much of modern continental philosophy, and existentialism in particular, reflects on the human condition in the shadow of death, Starobinski’s criticism seizes on those rare moments in which feelings and sensations evoke, if not always a moment of

<sup>10</sup>In 1994, Starobinski curated an exhibition at the Musée du Louvre devoted to *largesse*.

<sup>11</sup>Reading and not just paraphrasing, skimming or skipping—for a thought-provoking reflection on such shifts in reading and culture, see Bayard.

*bonheur*, at least an awareness of their fragile presence. Whereas in its study of how we think and write, “theory” focuses on the deficiencies, impasses, contradictions of our thinking, the impulsion behind his work is “reparative,” as emblemized in his seminal interpretation of the moment, in Rousseau’s *Fifth Promenade*, that describes the *sentiment de l’existence*. In the attention he gave to this (and other) moments of embodiment, and his analyses of a body evoked in its sensory as well as sensual experiences, Starobinski initiated a turn in our comprehension of body-mind phenomena that is still with us.<sup>12</sup>

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If the magic of Starobinski’s approach lies in calling forth such existential moments, how can one place his legacy in the broader framework of a history of twentieth-century critical thought? What is, or rather what was, his imprint on the intellectual landscape of the post WWII years? What distinguishes his own response to the “spirit of an age”? Biographies have shown his vital role on the European stage in organizing the *Rencontres Internationales* held in Geneva for many years. However, pinpointing his place in the literary and philosophical debates of the postwar years demands finer tools. The comparison between de Man’s “Resistance to Theory” and “La relation critique” can provide us with a foil that helps us trace Starobinski’s engagement with the terms of the 1966 debate—in a dialogue that in actuality never happened between two proponents of literary readings divided by a quarrel that boded no reconciliation.<sup>13</sup>

Starobinski (born in 1920) and de Man (born in 1919) were contemporaries. Educated in a European tradition, they shared many references, philosophical and literary, that defined the postwar academic debates.<sup>14</sup> They also shared a commitment to close reading and to teaching “great books” in a tradition beholden to German Romanticism and Idealism, with Rousseau, Baudelaire, and Proust as important points of reference in their thinking. Yet, when it comes to their relation to literature, we find them on very different sides of the fence, a fence that grew taller with every new turn of de Man’s career. In the 1970s, as attested by several pieces in *Blindness and Insight*, he

<sup>12</sup>It has a philosophical counterpart in Merleau-Ponty. Closer to us, see the piece by Stephen Lurie, MD, PhD in *Academic Medicine*.

<sup>13</sup>De Man was present at the conference, not as a speaker, however.

<sup>14</sup>De Man’s complex trajectory, especially its early years, has led to extensive commentaries and soul-searching on these shores.

was making decisive forays into the problematic nature of reading, questioning an aesthetic *engouement* with poets, creative writers, and fiction, that disregarded the “unreliability of [our] linguistic artefacts.”<sup>15</sup>

The center piece of this new turn is the essay “The Resistance to Theory.” It was first published in *Yale French Studies*, after a stark rejection from PMLA, which had commissioned from him an introduction to literary theory.<sup>16</sup> The value of literary theory, de Man explains, depends on the fact that “literature is not a transparent message” and that “it cannot be taken for granted that the distinction between the message and the means of communication is clearly established” (15). Starobinski and de Man are both interested in figuration rather than mimesis, as well as signs (mostly perhaps because of Saussurian linguistics). They share a number of themes: literature (or “literariness” for the latter); linguistic communication; an interest in a “phenomenology of the literary activity” and its residue of “indetermination” (for Starobinski, a hermeneutics that is perforce unstable); aesthetics in its richest sense (as a mode of perception and as an art) *and* the assumption of transparency. In spite of such overlaps, as in an experiment of *Gestalt* theory, the field defined by their different visions of what reading must accomplish reveals two opposed, irreconcilable images.

“For de Man,” Cynthia Chase explains, “literature or texts—works or configurations that as signifying structures require reading—undo claims of authority, claims based on assumptions of the continuity of form with meaning . . .” (195). Conceptual rigor and ideological critique demand a form of lucidity that thus leads to the demotion of naïve models of linguistic expression. Whereas de Man conceives of history as an “irreversible occurrence,” Starobinski retrieves from the Enlightenment its ideals of betterment.<sup>17</sup> Whereas, in his close study of poetry and fiction, the former singles out the risks of ideological, political, and philosophical obfuscation, the latter focuses on literature’s redemptive, redeeming force.

At the heart of this difference, there lies the humanizing gesture that is central to Starobinski’s approach and is evoked in my epigraph. Behind every mask, there is a person—as “literature or texts,” though mere forms and figurations of an absent, cannot but attest to a human

<sup>15</sup>De Man urges us to “consider reference as a function of language and not necessarily an intuition” and involves a “linguistic terminology . . . that designates reference prior to designating the referent” (8).

<sup>16</sup>In the published version, he argues that the institutional resistance to theory hides what is in fact a resistance to reading.

<sup>17</sup>Starobinski’s Enlightenment is that of Rousseau, Diderot, Fragonard, and *not* of Voltaire and Sade.

presence. If, as Rousseau intuited, we are creatures of language, our impulse towards expression preexists and outlasts any attempt to conceive of communication as merely the effect of a structure or grammar. Though beholden to “a system of signs,” Starobinski’s ideal of reading thus implies a commitment to a “metaphysics of presence” incompatible with structuralism. And yet . . . as he affirms that language is the medium of experience and not merely the “proxy” of an experience, he shows an allegiance to *language* that, though absent the references to “speech acts” or “the performative,” shows his involvement in the radical epistemic shift of the linguistic turn. As I have suggested above, the responses by de Man and by Starobinski to Mallarmé’s poetics, as shown in a parallel reading of “The Critical Relation” and “The Resistance to Theory,” take us to the heart of a central divergence of views about the nature of literature and criticism.

Here, Mallarmé’s distinctively philosophical and modern poetics play a central role, as wittily announced by De Man who, taking a stab at literature’s standing in a material, materialist world, reminds his readers that “[n]o one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word ‘day’” (“The Resistance to Theory” 11). “Crise de vers,” the source of this conceit, prompts a philosophical questioning about words and reference, and smacks of an “aesthetic ideology” that De Man is keen on demoting. In a parallel move, in what are unusually difficult, allusive pages of “The Critical Relation,” Starobinski invokes Mallarmé, as part of his commitment to examine “the medium of language,” the “shifting relations between a singular consciousness and the world,” and, most tellingly, his “resolve to make an objective study of the system of signs whose evocative magic [he has] so far endured without resistance and without reflective examination” (16–17).<sup>18</sup>

For Starobinski, “*la disparition élocutoire* [du poète]” (in Mallarmé’s famous formulation) opens up a space for *pure language*, while the signifying chain (*les phrases enchaînées*) produces a “universe of words.” The rhetorical potential or “energy” of the poetic act thus entails a *relation avivée* (“rekindled” or perhaps, borrowing Walter Benjamin’s idiom, “illuminated”) as the *poetic flux* enacts passions as well as actions that find their form in the reader’s imagination.<sup>19</sup> The system

<sup>18</sup>All references are to the passage beginning on p. 16 in “The Critical Relation” or, for the French, to the 1970 text.

<sup>19</sup>See also Paul Ricoeur, who writes on the “poetic function of language” in *La Métaphore vive*, published in 1975.

of Mallarméan signs, upon reflection, is weighted towards a creative, inaugural gesture that adumbrates a future. Thus, the opening of a poem such as “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui . . .” (a poem that makes of poetic performance its theme) becomes, in Starobinski’s interpretation, a “celebration” or alternately, a “profanation,” thereby eschewing negativity. In contrast with De Man’s skeptical and ironic stance, he reads, in the poet’s words, not merely a structure but an emergent form: the tracing of ideas. Against the backdrop of de Man’s quip (a bravura moment of theorizing), we witness the emergence of a “poésie de la pensée” (the glimmerings of a philosophy).<sup>20</sup>

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“No one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word ‘day’” (de Man 11)—this quip does more than “perform” the demotion of Mallarmé’s ideals of poetic action, it takes a serious stab at the notion of reference and at the philosophical and linguistic quandary it entails. On a warpath against the “teaching of delusion,” “The Resistance to Theory” raises the stakes of the structuralist controversy towards a new type of interrogation that becomes a hallmark of post-structuralism.<sup>21</sup> As language, now its own separate object and force, enters the hermeneutic circle, is there ever a way out? Is there ever, to use the Derridian formulation, an “hors-texte”? By contrast, Starobinski muses, as he reaches his conclusions about the linguistic turn, that the benefits of the “structuralist” approach are that they raised the crucial question of “le sens dans son incarnation” (“La Relation critique” [1970] 18).

The differences in intellectual styles are striking, although for a moment these two readers of literature pursue the same question. Indeed for both thinkers, a literary text remains the figment of an imagination: it can only “posit realities rather than revealing given realities” (Chase 195). With “The Afternoon of the Faun” and *l’absente de tous les bouquets* as its background, De Man’s joke at Mallarmé’s breaks open the continuity “between form and meaning.” The witticism becomes the instrument of a theory. Very differently, Starobinski’s

<sup>20</sup>Starobinski insists, in “The Critical Relation” that reading cannot be assessed merely in terms of “scientific technique” and “method” (125). “Poésie de la pensée” echoes the French title of Steiner’s 2011 book *The Poetry of Thought*.

<sup>21</sup>See de Man 11: “the linguistics of literariness is a powerful tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations” and “literary theory is threatening [ . . . ] as it upsets rooted ideologies by revealing the mechanics of their workings.”

critical impulsion is to elucidate a relationship to language that is, for him, of existential significance.

What then separates the two thinkers is not structuralism as much as a controversy about absence and presence, bodies and words, signs and meaning. No theory can encompass or freeze the act, gesture, and search for form that is the signature of Starobinski's way of reading. And yet, another look, more distant look at his essay, and at its structure reveals something else, namely the presence of a statement that, although unanchored and unmoored from the Mallarméan pages, reads like a counterpart to or even a "theory" on Mallarmé's genius. It says, "[o]ne must decipher *within the work* the specific nature of a desire, a power (or genius) that, in responding to its own constraints also found there the impulsion that gave birth to the work" ("La Relation critique" [1970] 24, translation mine). Both an object and a process, *l'oeuvre* is for Starobinski, as with Mallarmé, about its own emergence—and what we find here are perhaps the first elements of a theory.

Or rather, what this parallel reveals is a *poetics* of reading. It also shows Starobinski's *resistance* to de Man so palpably "oppositional" ways of approaching the literariness of language. His own approach cannot be framed as propositions, only as descriptions, and from these a narrative emerges that brings to light—puts into relief—a pattern and perhaps the very scansion of Starobinski's critical thought. Each reading begins with an intuition or an "aimless wandering," even; then comes a moment of reassessment and calibration of a philological nature, until in his writing an interpretation emerges that inhabits a space defined as a relation and defined as an experience ("La Relation critique" [2001] 33). "Writing is not a dubious proxy for inner experience but the experience itself," he had concluded from his study of Rousseau ("The Critical Relation" 118). The author of this statement never reneged on the belief that literature does not represent, but only conjures up—which is where he and de Man share a common ground.

Committed as they were to deciphering the world as a construction, a system, or "bricolage," the proponents of a textual structuralism elaborated the notion of a minimal unit, and applied it, for example, to narrative. A backward glance at Starobinski's critical trajectory suggests that his notion of *le regard* represents the core of his epistemology—its minimal unit. "What I call the gaze [le regard], he wrote," is not so much the faculty of imagination as that of establishing relations" (La Relation Critique 13, translation mine). These two

notions—imagination and relation—serve here as anchoring points for a reconsideration of his *oeuvre*. What would it mean then to recast Starobinski's legacy from an authorial perspective, granting him an imagination and creative energy that is distinctly literary, namely *une invention littéraire*? What does it tell us not only about writing as such, but about the kind of relation his critical work invites?

“There takes shape, in *absence*, a domain more remote than any other, yet endowed with the power to add to reality so as to move us more than any event in the world” (“La Relation critique [2001]). If we were to name this domain, it would be as “imagination” or an *imaginaire*. Meanwhile, only a return to the French text can tell us about the exact nature of the textual experience described here. Indeed, Goldhammer's choice of the verb “move” to render what reads in the original as *pour nous provoquer* misses an essential feature: the English verb carries too many affective overtones, whereas “provoquer” describes physical reaction, a prompting to act, an incitement to the intellect. The word designates an impulsion that is, first and foremost, an attentiveness or attending to an *appel*, as in the Proustian notion.<sup>22</sup> While language is both event and action (*actes*), we readers “react” to words as we interpret them, thus the reaffirmation here of a hermeneutic impulse, a calling “to ferry” and to carry across a divide that, for Starobinski, defines the modern literary experience.

But what is calling us? What does literary language entail or demand? These questions bring us as close as can be to what's at stake in Starobinski's critical writings and to his authorial legacy. Neither theory or philosophy, this legacy can only be traced across a constellation of his aphorisms. It dwells in language and its signs, and although attuned to linguistics and informed by the Saussurian turn, it is not a semiology, but true from the moment Starobinski started reading Rousseau, a creative compact between a writer and a reader. For a deeper understanding of what this relation entails, however, we must return to the structuralist controversy and to the events of the 1966 conference—and to what is revealed in a remarkable exchange between Roland Barthes and the philosopher Jean Hyppolite.

The question of how, and under what guise, writing addresses us—the question of why, against our better intelligence, we respond to a reality that belongs to signs on a page—was indeed raised in the symposium, around Barthes's presentation on the question “To write:

<sup>22</sup>The motif of “la petite phrase de Vinteuil,” vitally important in Proust's aesthetics and poetics, involves the notion of *appel* (a call and invitation). It resonates across the early years of his reception in ways that are palpable in Starobinski's frequent use of *appel*.

An Intransitive verb?” It prompted a debate between the Hegelian philosopher and a theorist, who at that time still rode the wave of semiology and structuralism. Picking up on Barthes’s reference to “a complicity of speech” (*un pacte de la parole*), Hyppolite asked, “When one writes, doesn’t interlocution undergo a sort of transformation, so that writing often becomes a phantasm of interlocution?” (*Structuralist Controversy* 147).

The addition of the word “phantasm” to this conversation amounts to more than a diversion from *les sciences du langage*: it points to a blind spot and unwittingly marks the glaring absence of the scholar who defined his calling through his decipherment of Rousseau’s “phantasm of interlocution,” thus making a decisive breach into our understanding of the psyche. “Interlocution” helps name what, in Starobinski’s *oeuvre*, exists by virtue of a linguistic *relation*; it evokes the emergence, born from the attention given to words on a page, of an inner world constituted by the verbal forms of another’s utterance. What drives his critical trajectory is a covenant, a *pacte de la parole* whose essence lies in its responsiveness to another human being’s words, and not, as is the case with Barthes at that point of his career, a commitment to structuralist frameworks. Starobinski’s focus is on human experiences that emerge from writing and unfold in a temporality and phenomenal space of an interiority, which permits thought and is traversed by affects. Literature, as a language, demands forms of engagement that are relational, psychological, and imaginative, which is what Hyppolite’s question implied and what Starobinski practiced in his critical writings.

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When early in his career Staro had devoted his attention to Rousseau’s autobiographical writings, he understood that he had no insights to offer on the actual man, but only on “experiences” that appeared on the page through the hand that penned them. It thus seemed vitally important that he establish, in his 1967 essay, “The Critical Relation,” a place for forms of thinking nourished through encounters with literature; and he insists, with recourse to an unusually philosophical register, that “la réalité de la pensée consiste à être apparaissante; l’écriture n’est pas le truchement douteux de l’expérience, elle est l’expérience même” (“La relation critique” [1970] 18). With these words, Starobinski goes beyond restating a position that set him apart from other like-minded colleagues of the *Ecole critique de Genève*—as he resisted the notion of a consciousness that, through a mirroring (a

*mimesis*), would exist as a stable entity (*un espace intérieur*).<sup>23</sup> He tells us again, the key word being *truchement*, that there can be no consciousness prior to or outside of writing, namely outside of a transferential space of interpretation (or interlocution). He also offers intimations of what might be a philosophy, as he evokes in *la pensée apparaissante* the Heideggerian notion of *aletheia*.<sup>24</sup>

That Starobinski's *oeuvre* nevertheless stops short of providing us with a philosophy can be best revealed through contrast, and in the framework of a sustained reflection on translation undertaken by George Steiner. "Our speech interposes itself between apprehension and truth like a dusty panel or a warped mirror," Steiner writes in *After Babel*, in a striking rearticulation of the questions of transparency, language, and truth (68–69). In dismissing the possibility of transparency, this proposition invites a search for "real presences," while it posits truth on a horizon that is ontological. By contrast, Starobinski's thinking assumes that language, through the act of writing, reaches for *une vérité interne*. For him, truth is immanent to the text and part of a heightened form of consciousness, and this literary act, to use the Mallarméan notion, constitutes *une action restreinte* (it will indeed never "grow grapes"!); hence his *profession de foi*, to which his *oeuvre* as critic attests, to a hermeneutical activity conceived as *pensée en mouvement* and a celebration of the flux, namely the power of invention, that traverses it.<sup>25</sup>

There are, in Starobinski's writings, discrete traces of a philosophy, as for example in the augmented 2001 version of "La relation critique." With characteristic modesty, he muses that "with all due proportions, it seems [to him], that a passage [from a creative form of criticism to a philosophy] is something a critic can offer," and concludes, with Albert Thibaudet's proposition that "literary criticism is a philosophy of *littérature*" ("La Relation critique" [2001], emphasis mine). Behind the word "literature," penned by Starobinski at the turn of the century and copied from someone else's book, stands an immensely rich memory and library for literary texts. However, his devotion to literature is in

<sup>23</sup>Starobinski and Poulet part ways on this very point—as the latter "reads" minds under an assumption of transparency whereas the former studies a linguistic act only traceable in texts.

<sup>24</sup>Marc Redfield wrote to me in an email: "Is it not fair to say that the phantasmal is also . . . the appearing of thought in and through writing?" I am most grateful to him for this suggestion, and for insisting that Starobinski's creative discipline of critical *reading* can serve a counterpart to Heidegger's thoughts on *poiesis*.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. "The fixed elements of the book or page are traversed by a flux" ("The Critical Relation" 121) and *Montaigne en mouvement* (1982).

no way naïve or indulgent: we have now seen him parse its meaning through the sobering filter of structuralism and theory. The moments he spent reflecting on theory—a necessary suspension—prompted a renewed faith in language and in literature for their *magie évocatoire* and their insights into human existence. “Literary criticism is a philosophy of *literature*”: amidst these reflections on his presence and absence at Johns Hopkins, this sentence calls for a special emphasis. As through the time warp that Freud defined as *Nachträglichkeit*, this citation speaks belatedly to ideas that were beginning to emerge in Starobinski’s early years—when he taught at Hopkins in the 1950s. His own words seem to authorize this move: *L’œuvre n’est une personne que si je la fais vivre comme telle*, he wrote, and then adds (in Goldhammer’s translation) “my reading must breathe life into the work so as to endow it with presence and appearances of personality. I must bring the work back to life in order to love it; I must make it speak in order to respond to it” (“The Critical Relation” 124–125). The greatest homage to this masterful reader lies perhaps in adopting the kind of responsiveness to another person’s words that had been the lesson of our seminar. With Staro’s voice now silent, what remains is the inner voice of his prose—which still speaks to us, his interlocutors, and with the kind of “vivacity” and the “accents, inflexions” and, as Rousseau also wrote, “la grande énergie du langage” (79). With this, “the human conversation” that for Starobinski was the gift of literature will not stop.

“Teaching . . . demands not so much the transmission of a certain body of texts and instruments as an exhortation to make use of a liberty that must in each case be reinaugurated”: this is one of the messages his translator, Goldhammer, ferried to these shores in 1989 (127). But now, perhaps more acutely than ever, we need to hear other words, penned more than a half a century ago. At the middle point of his intellectual journey, around 1966, Starobinski wrote, “l’enseignement . . . est un appel à l’exercice d’une liberté toujours inaugurale” and explains, “La critique . . . se fait acte à son tour, elle s’exprime et se communique pour que lui répondent, dans un avenir qu’elle suscite, des actes plus limpides et plus souverains” (“La Relation critique” [1970] 33). Indeed, in its profound engagement with literature and language, his *oeuvre* speaks to an *ethos* we now call ‘humanistic.’ It demands, as we learned, an education into a *regard*, which requires exacting and patient practice—in an act of interlocution responsive to the *pathos* and the *logos* of our human condition, reasoned and yet compassionate. The practice of his art of interpretation, Starobinski thought, might enlighten us outside of a need for a *doxa* or a

theory—because in his experience, *une grande lumière prend naissance à l'intersection des trajectoires*.

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