

Liliane and Cyril Welch

**Review Article:
Criticism in Movement**

Montaigne en mouvement. By Jean Starobinski
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The Swiss critic Jean Starobinski (b. 1920) is perhaps the most broadly based contemporary European literary critic. He completed medical as well as literary studies and has been teaching since 1958 at the University of Geneva, both in medicine and in letters. Starobinski's repertoire of writings is as wide as his educational formation: aside from his *Histoire de la médecine* (1964) and a monumental work *Jean Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle* (1957, 1971), his interpretive excursions have taken him into impressive examinations of both contemporary and classical authors—and into the elucidation of the critical task itself: *L'Oeil vivant* (1961), *La Relation critique* (1970), *Les Trois fureurs* (1974), *Les Mots sous les mots: les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure* (1971). But Starobinski's penetrating critical eye has also undertaken three brilliant safaris into the pictorial arts and into their interpenetration with historical reality: *L'Invention de la liberté* (1964), *1789: Les Emblèmes de la raison* (1973), *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (1970).

What marks uniquely all these works is the inherent belief that criticism is itself a form of literature, and therefore cannot rightly pretend to provide an objective, scholarly knowledge ("a global description of the life, thought and style of an author, a situating into an epoch or the retracing of the history of reception of the work", *Montaigne en mouvement*, p. 8). As literature, criticism extends the themes present in the works studied, expressing the same reality as the work. The critic proves the possibility of reliving the text from within, re-embarking on the spiritual adventure of the art works. The critic then becomes a mediator who simultaneously develops his own spiritual adventure and salvation. This type of inquiry, a form of under-

standing quite closely linked to ethical thinking, must at all costs remain open to the questions which the text asks it: "The work questions me. Before talking on my behalf, I must lend my voice to this strange power which challenges me: otherwise, however docile I may be I always risk preferring to this power the reassuring tunes which I myself invent. It is not easy to keep our eyes open to welcome the book which seeks us out. We must no doubt affirm not only for criticism but also for all enterprises of knowledge: "Look so that you may be looked at." (*L'Oeil vivant*, p. 27). In order to remain thus open to the text, the critic's eyes and ears must remain forever alert, and his critical writing will take on the quality of a journey. In Starobinski's writings we find the concepts of the critical traversal (*parcours*), the voyage (*trajet*), the road (*chemin*) recurring; they are indicative of how this critic sees his relation to the texts studied. The critical enterprise is first of all a quest through different semantic and stylistic layers where the work unfolds all its varied aspects. But then it is also an adventure wherein, hearkening to an alien voice (which the work of literature always is), the critic himself (and perhaps his reader!) undergoes noteworthy changes and gains a renewed understanding of the historical situation in which he himself lives.

Starobinski's most recent work, *Montaigne en mouvement*, embodies in an admirable and passionate way all the critical tools and experiences of three decades of intimate intercourse with literature. Starobinski delineates the intent of his enterprise in this way: "I have listened to Michel de Montaigne the best I could; I have wished that the initiative of the movement remain as much as possible his. But, starting from a modern unease, asking Montaigne in his text the questions of our century, I have not tried to deny that this Montaigne in movement was not also a movement within Montaigne, and that the observing reflection thus establishes a knot or chiasma with the observed work. This is a movement of an interrogative reading where the critic undertakes to clarify his own situation while he interprets, in its distance and particularity, a discourse from the living past." (p. 8)

As readers, now, we must ask: What is, then, the Montaignian movement discovered and interpreted by Starobinski? How does such "movement" question the critic and his own historical situation?

Starobinski begins with the question: What occurs to, or in, Montaigne's thinking after it has rejected the appearances—the hypocrisy, the masks—which are part of every facet of human existence? Evidently, but oddly, Montaigne's rejection of appearances leads him nonetheless to embody, and therefore to recommend a return to appearances. Starobinski sees in Montaigne a resolution diametrically opposed to that of Rousseau, another great denouncer who could at

no cost be reconciled to the sham world. Both argue incessantly that our gestures, our words and our thoughts—not to speak of our writings—come to us endowed with misleading meanings which we hardly grasp yet welcome as ours, as emanating naturally from ourselves, but even use, thanks to their duplicity, to further our own unconscious ends, sometimes to further the ends of greater powers of which we are the accomplices or the victims. But for Rousseau the individual heart of man was still a last clearing where Being could manifest itself in all of its splendour. Montaigne recognizes no such inner clearing, and therefore must pave a way back to the appearances.

Starobinski takes us step by step (not just as a critic but also as an artist, not just with his intelligence but also with his sensibilities) through the moments which Montaigne has to traverse as a result of his initial rejection of and pending return to the world of appearances. Without belabouring the “method”, Starobinski incarnates in his study a somewhat Hegelian approach (indeed, he does make reference to Hegel). The underlying spirit (*Geist*) of the movement of deceit, of its necessity and of its possible resolution, which Hegel delineated in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is already present in Montaigne and runs as follows: We fulfil our humanity only by learning to affirm ourselves. Such affirmation requires that we separate ourselves from appearances. But such separation (negation) requires in turn that we bury ourselves at first in works, actions, projects (the world of appearances). It is this burial which leads us to forget ourselves; most obviously, we fail to recognize ourselves precisely in what we do. Thus our every thought about what we do and who we are generates an obscuration, even a disguise—and ultimately an anguish. In short, man is perpetually lagging behind with respect to himself and with respect to what he has made of himself; his thought lags behind his action and, in order to express what is happening, his language falls back onto forms and categories which in turn lag behind. This lag appears at first as unfortunate but it proves to be the very source of self-affirmation. For the perpetual discrepancy between what we do, say and think, and who we most genuinely are, forces us to become conscious of the dialectical difference between self and world, to deepen this difference so that a movement follows which prevents a stagnant stability from installing itself.

In seven chapters Starobinski returns again and again to the rehabilitation of appearances into which Montaigne's thought was driven after its initial denunciations. Each one of the chapters is a further trek with Montaigne into another aspect of human existence: friendship, death, freedom, the body, love, language, public life. In the Preface, Starobinski states that he wants to espouse the musical movement of a

chaconne, whose basses drive the work through manifold variations. The "return to appearances" is taken through seven scales so that the *Essais* appear in the end as Montaigne's trek which never ends in its movement, a movement not so much *toward* as *of* truth.

Starobinski's mediation allows us to participate *positively* in Montaigne's denouncing of the glamour of appearances. Upon his initial act of opposition Montaigne found himself withdrawing into a space of his own, into a haven of freedom from which untruth would be banned: into his own library, the "bosom of the learned Muses", where philosophic, poetic and historic works were to be his companions, where he was surrounded by the remnants of his dead friend La Boétie, whose unpublished works Montaigne began to edit in 1570. Starobinski sees concealed in Montaigne's retreat into seclusion a *problematic* of identity. In retreat life appears stabilized in its relation to the self and opposed to the world's theatre of illusions, and one hopes never more to be distracted from the self. Yet paradoxically Montaigne remained also willing to stay in close touch with the world, the windows of his library looking out into the country and the chicken yard of his own domain. Thus the duty of fidelity to himself entailed the mediation of others and of the world. And this becomes above all apparent when Montaigne, the enemy of deceptive appearances, resorts to writing, to fictitious representation to stabilize his identity. He receives his identity only from writing his book, and from knowing that he would be read by a reader: "The text is this strange object which draws its life from the disappearance of its worker. The written work, that vicarious mode of our existence, that trace destined to survive us, exteriorizes life and interiorizes death." (p. 49) On a first level Montaigne wants to leave to future generations a monument of a life which was *not* exemplary, "the counter-example of the paradigmatic images from which moral, warring and religious life had derived its models" (p. 51); in this unusual way he, too, is writing to escape from death. On a second level he writes to save his best friend's work from oblivion. The dead friend's memory and the perpetration of his work give a continuity and constancy to Montaigne's own life which was prey to flux and discontinuity. Under Starobinski's analytic pen the reader grasps the dramatic significance of friendship for Montaigne: during La Boétie's life-time, friendship had been an experience of reciprocal transports of wills, now after death and separation the expansion of the will is heightened by memory and by the writing with and for the dead friend. Montaigne thus learns in his seclusion, from the books of his library and from his experience of writing, that time and distance can be overcome. Yet to write means not only to withdraw for a time from appearances, but to return to them. Montaigne thus accepts in a

reflective way the world of phenomena which he gathers and represents in the literary work of his essays.

Starobinski shows with precision how Montaigne never does reach the interior plenitude which he initially wants to oppose to the external dispersion. For a writer has to externalize himself incessantly and to expose himself to the judgement of others. There is always a tripartite movement present in all the relations of Montaigne's thought. At the beginning the self is worried about the opinions of others, then there is an attempt to achieve an interior reappropriation according to the norms of wisdom, and finally the soul can move about freely within the exterior once again. In Montaigne's attitude towards travelling (which also moves with a triple beat) we can see a model for the pattern of all his thinking. At home he feels dependent, he leaves to achieve a liberating distance, and finally he returns to the old ties and concretely binds himself to the old entourage by a network of concrete labours. In this final network the particular flourishes in the universal (or vice versa: another Hegelian thought). Similarly, Montaigne insists on speaking independently in his own name, yet to do this he finds himself letting the great classical authors intrude constantly into his own text: in the end the two discourses—the contemporary and the traditional—feed on one another, co-exist within each other.

Starobinski is at his very best when he deals with Montaigne's exegeses on the body. Given that he is a medical man himself, Starobinski can see with perspicuity the paradox of Montaigne's undertaking. A man who intends to withdraw into privacy does not just go to great lengths to describe his soul, but he goes further and exposes his body with all its peculiar habits and desires, likes and dislikes. The reader who looks for Montaigne's soul will find himself often enough in the presence of an exhibitionism of another sort! Furthermore, Montaigne, who brutally criticizes the practice of medical doctors (for being quacks and for taking the body as an object of observation), sounds like a contemporary doctor himself. Montaigne's solution in this instance is to argue for an art of living, for an anti-medicine whereby one would listen to experience and nature so that the body "becomes the subject of its own knowledge rather than the field of operation of the medical reductionist explications." (p. 197) In Montaigne the body is not seen as an object of scientific investigations but as the mediator between world and subjectivity. Paradoxically, Montaigne can only speak of his body by appropriating into his language the categories of the suspected medical men. At the same time the *Essais* underline the limits of human understanding, our inability to grasp, "besides the necessary cause, the veritable sufficient causes." (p. 206) As a result, in order to speak of what he feels most intimately

within his own body, Montaigne must settle for a kind of empirical report, something which makes sense only in an encounter with others. Precisely because he can only report events, and because he wishes to do so honestly, Montaigne discovers that only his mode of writing (no underlying reality) can lend support to what he says: honesty requires poetry! And so it is that the "sceptic" ends up showing, especially in his reflections on love, the fundamental union of body and soul through the poetic power of metaphor and dissimulation.

With a thinker like Montaigne a reader and critic must make himself ready to be wafted back and forth between opposing thoughts. For Montaigne living means precisely moving and acting, "making oneself", forming one's life like an artist forms the clay, putting into action a vision of oneself. For Starobinski the best way of discovering the matrix of Montaigne is to "discover his movement" (p. 267) and this means practicing "a textual analysis which is done from the closest proximity". A good part of Starobinski's book consists of inner analyses, of the *regard intime*, where the critic sees in every word, in every tone, in every particle how Montaigne's speech and thought move between the double condition of an inner void in opposition to the exterior world: how "the self defines and affirms itself by the energy of its negation". (p. 269) Montaigne's sentence construction embodies this way of being: successive burgeonings. Knowing oneself means in the end knowing the adventure and the movement *on* the way to oneself, for the self is something like an unrelenting tension. Our true, unalienated self, is not that dark reality, toward which tends the forever incomplete action of our perceptions; it is the hungry tension and the mobile incompleteness itself, with a forever renewing and healing present of the appearances. Man must wholeheartedly espouse the movement which propels him on and disintegrates him. Starobinski wants to discover and participate in the art of living which sprouts from Montaigne's writing. Montaigne's literary text creates an artwork from life while also inciting us, the readers, to make our own lives into art works.

Montaigne's wisdom is binary and teaches us a lesson for our personal as well as our public/political life. On the personal level Montaigne affirms the power of self-consciousness: by knowing our limitations we already transcend ourselves. We must face the flight of the gods, our own death and the presence of the world, but we do know that within ourselves there lies our salvation, namely the eternal possibility to begin over again. Rather than seeking an ontological legitimacy for life (as Rousseau did), Montaigne is content with an aesthetic one in the here and now. Montaigne's style (which, with its "we"-form, works at including the reader) mobilizes in us the powers of sensation

by a language rich in sensuous metaphors. Starting with sensorial experience he lures his reader into universally shared thoughts.

In the political order, Montaigne reverts to custom and convention judged critically. He accepts the established order because it assures public peace, not because it is just in itself. After rejecting dogmatic convention Montaigne accepts a political arrangement which serves best the common interest by allowing free relations between individuals.

But we should also note that the *regard intime* in Starobinski is only one side of his critical dialectic, the other side is the *regard surplombant*, the overview, which grasps the literary text within a wider framework. Adjusting himself here also to Montaigne's movement, Starobinski delineates Montaigne's import for and differences with later ages. In the study of the body, for example, Starobinski argues convincingly that and how Montaigne's manner of lingering on his body sharply diverges from contemporary narcissistic hedonism or hypochondria. Similarly, Starobinski measures the differences between Montaigne's humanism and our contemporary visions regarding education: whereas in Montaigne's time the imitations of great heroes from the past provided a norm to be followed, today the heroes are taken right from our midst (often from the film world) and are used economically and politically to manipulate the desires of the masses. Whereas Montaigne affirmed a "polyphonic" present as man's proper habitat, as the only place where he might create a plenitude, the place to which Montaigne circularly returned in an effort to reconsider the phenomenal world, we today are linearly future-oriented and strive to forget the present for a future which might abolish our present unhappiness.

Starobinski roots Montaigne into the entire history of our present and past civilization. He presents him as a man whose doubt places him at the crossroads. For he could inspire "on the one hand the Cartesian 'tabula rasa' and prepare the inaugural gesture of the scientific method, while, on the other hand, his sceptical withdrawal into the sensuous experience of the present, his aesthetic conversion, his increasing interest to paint himself, make of him a writer (and perhaps one of the first ones) according to the definition of modernity." (p. 349)

The passionate moral commitment which emanates from the inside interpretations and from the impressive general accounts of our modern culture make of Starobinski's method an appropriate path into Montaigne. Like Montaigne's thoughts, Starobinski's athletic reading stays forever in movement and never loses its reflective openness. With such mediation, we the readers become accomplices in the breath-taking adventure into a work that lies at the foundation of our present day civilization.