

# Jean Starobinski: the history of medicine and the reasons of the body

Fernando Vidal\*

*Abstract:* This article sketches Jean Starobinski's thought on the "reasons of the body" and asks what it may say concerning certain contemporary fields of research and the history of medicine. Current "turns" – the "interoceptive", and the "affective" or "emotional" – claim to reintegrate the body into history, the humanities, and the neurocognitive sciences. Starobinski's perspective helps understand their limits. Conversely, approaching his œuvre from the vantage point of those "turns" highlights the link his critical enterprise operates between history and phenomenology, its sustained attention to the experience of the self and the consciousness of the body, and its demonstration of the inherent link between the "reasons of the body" and the expression that embodies them.

*Keywords:* affective turn; consciousness of the body; emotional turn; history of emotions; interoceptive turn; phenomenology

The inalienable subjectivity of my speech [*parole*] enables me to understand those bygone subjectivities of which objective history gave me only traces.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*

## 1. Jean Starobinski and the history of medicine

Although Jean Starobinski's work on such topics as bodily sensations, chlorosis, nostalgia or melancholy is well known, he does not seem to have entered the pantheon of medical historians. He is one of the five "major voices" in *Discovering the History of Psychiatry*, an influential

\* ICREA (Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies)  
fernando.vidal@icrea.cat

volume edited by Mark Micale and Roy Porter in 1994<sup>1</sup>. A decade later, however, he was not included in *Locating Medical History*, an important overview of the historiography of medicine<sup>2</sup>. It is true that this work implicitly considers the history of psychiatry as a field distinct from the history of medicine. The consequence is that, with the exception of George Rosen, who did not focus on that field, the other “voices” in *Discovering the History of Psychiatry* are not included either. While their absence could make sense because they were mainly historians of psychiatry or psychoanalysis, Starobinski’s case is different. The omission surprises because almost every article about him, every interview and portrait identifies him as a medical historian; and he was celebrated as such<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, he wrote a medical thesis on the *History of the Treatment of Melancholy* (1960) and a short yet suggestive *History of Medicine* (1963), was from 1966 to 1985 in charge of teaching the subject at the Genevan Medical School, became in 1983 vice-president of the Swiss Society for the History of Medicine, and in 1994 honorary president of the European Association for the History of Psychiatry. Yet it is easy to imagine some reasons for his absence from a reference work such as *Locating Medical History*.

First, the history of medicine as an academic profession was never Starobinski’s main institutional home. Second, he casually described himself as “historian out of sympathy”, as someone who likes “to trace how a word has evolved through history [...] Or to gather testimonies about a question or motif from various historical moments [...]”<sup>4</sup>. We shall see that the historical outlook is much more essential in his thought than these words suggest. They nonetheless reflect something substantial about his critical practice. What Starobinski hints at here is that, while his *œuvre* is informed by history, it only rarely aims at purely historical reconstruction. He envisaged the history of medicine as a history of ideas. Ideas were not for him abstract entities. On the contrary, he saw them as held by specific individuals and embodied in concrete material practices, as emerging in particular social and historical contexts, as embedded in the contingencies of real life and inseparable from the words that enunciate

<sup>1</sup> Fernando Vidal, *Jean Starobinski: The history of psychiatry as the cultural history of consciousness*, in Mark S. Micale, Roy Porter (eds.), *Discovering the History of Psychiatry*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994, pp. 135-154.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Huisman, John Harley Warner (eds.), *Locating Medical History: The Stories and Their Meanings*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2004.

<sup>3</sup> For example, *Festschrift für Jean Starobinski*, “Gesnerus”, 42, 3-4, pp. 209-544.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Régnier, *Jean Starobinski: médecin des Lumières*, “L’Histoire”, 310, June 2006, p. 30.

them<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, his incursions into medical history involved a sustained attention to the phenomenology of bodily experience and its expressive forms; they also touched, tacitly but clearly, on the ethical and relational dimension of medicine, in such a way that esthetic language could significantly benefit medical practice<sup>6</sup>. Ultimately, medical history was for Jean Starobinski a resource, not an end in itself.

## 2. *The “somatic turn”*

At the beginning of his “Short History of Bodily Sensation”, published in the *Revue française de psychanalyse* in 1981, Starobinski quoted Paul Valéry’s *Notebooks*:

Somatism (heresy of the end of times)  
Adoration, cult of the machine for living.

Then he commented:

The heresy anticipated by Valéry has almost become the official religion. Everything is related to the body, as if it had just been rediscovered after being long forgotten; body image, body language, body consciousness, liberation of the body are the passwords. Historians, prey to the same infection, have begun inquiring into what previous cultures have done with the body, in the way of tattooing, mutilation, celebration and all the rituals related to the various bodily functions. Past writers from Rabelais to Flaubert are ransacked for evidence, and immediately it becomes apparent that we are far from being the first discoverers of bodily reality. That reality was the first knowledge to enter human understanding: “They knew that they were naked” (Genesis 3.7). From then on, it has been impossible to ignore the body<sup>7</sup>.

These words date from the early days of the history and sociology of the body as they emerged in an atmosphere marked by the thought of Starobinski’s younger contemporary Michel Foucault. They refer to the

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Barras, *Jean Starobinski, l’histoire et la médecine*, “Bulletin du Cercle d’études internationales Jean Starobinski”, 8, 2015, pp. 8-10; Id., *Une critique engagée: Jean Starobinski et l’histoire de la médecine*, in Jean Starobinski, *Histoire de la médecine* [Lausanne, 1963], ed. V. Barras, Héros-Limite, Geneva 2020, pp. 7-18.

<sup>6</sup> Aldo Trucchio, *Le langage esthétique au service de la pratique médicale*, “Bulletin du Cercle d’études internationales Jean Starobinski”, 8, 2015, pp. 11-14.

<sup>7</sup> J. Starobinski, *A Short History of Bodily Sensation*, tr. Sarah Matthews, in Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, Nadia Tazi (eds.), *Fragments for a History of the Human Body II*, Zone Books, New York 1989, pp. 352-370, p. 353. (*Brève histoire de la conscience du corps*, “Revue française de psychanalyse”, XLV, 1981, pp. 261-279).

“somatic turn” that the humanities were then beginning to take<sup>8</sup> – a “turn” whose object was not the body as such, but the historicized biopolitical body construed as the site of subjectivity, intersubjectivity and the exercise of power. Forty years later, at a time when the body continues to appear in new forms as a “battlefield”<sup>9</sup>, his words, in their mild irony towards self-proclaimed innovators and in the doctor’s knack for detecting contagion which they reveal, have not lost their topicality.

A “somatic moment” enacted the arrival of the “turn of the body”<sup>10</sup>. Starobinski contributed to it and can be placed in its context. Nevertheless, in the same way that, as Foucault noted in *Discipline and Punish*, historians had been writing the history of the body long before the 1970s, Starobinski’s interest in it had been manifesting itself since the early 1950s<sup>11</sup>. The title of the 1999 anthology *Reasons of the Body*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Roy Porter, *History of the Body*, in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, University Park, Pennsylvania 1991, pp. 206-232; David Le Breton, *Sociologie du corps: perspectives*, “Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie”, n.s., 90, 1991, pp. 131-143; Bryan S. Turner, *Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body*, in Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, B.S. Turner (eds.), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, Sage, London 1991, pp. 1-35. From the very rich French-speaking domain, let us mention a pioneering study: Jacques Revel, Jean-Pierre Peter, *Le corps. L’homme malade et son histoire*, in Jacques Le Goff, Pierre Nora (eds.), *Faire de l’histoire*, III: *Nouveaux objets*, Gallimard, Paris 1974, pp. 169-191; a major synthesis: Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello (sous la dir. de), *Histoire du corps*, Seuil, Paris 2005-2006, 3 vols.; and an outline of open questions: Yannick Ripa, *L’histoire du corps, un puzzle inachevé*, “Revue historique”, CCCIX, 4, 2007, pp. 887-898.

<sup>9</sup> *Le Corps: un champ de bataille?*, France Culture, 26 June 2019, radio program with Sylviane Agacinski on her book *L’Homme désincarné. Du corps charnel au corps fabriqué* (2019), <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/la-grande-table-2eme-partie/le-corps-un-champ-de-bataille>.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Cooter, *The Turn of the Body: History and the Politics of the Corporeal*, “Arbor”, CLXXXVI, 743, 2010, pp. 393-405, p. 394; Id., *After Death/After-“Life”: The Social History of Medicine in Post-Postmodernity*, “Social History of Medicine”, 20, 3, 2007, pp. 441-464, particularly pp. 448-453; David Le Breton, *La Sociologie du corps*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2018; Nina Degele, Sigrid Schmitz, *Somatic turn?*, “Soziologische Revue”, 30, 2007, pp. 49-58; B.S. Turner, *Body and Society*, in George Ritzer (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Blackwell, Oxford 2007, pp. 335-338; Id., *Introduction: The Turn of the Body*, in Id. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies*, Routledge, New York 2012, pp. 1-17.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, J. Starobinski, *La “sagesse du corps” et la maladie comme égarement: le “stress”*, “Critique”, 59, April 1952, pp. 347-360 (on Hans Selye’s *The Physiology and Pathology of Exposure to Stress*, 1950). On Starobinski’s work on the history and consciousness of mind and body, see F. Vidal, *Jean Starobinski...*, cit.; Id., *L’arc-en-ciel de la mélancolie. Quelques pistes dans l’œuvre de Jean Starobinski*, “Bulletin du Cercle d’études internationales Jean Starobinski”, 6, 2013, pp. 3-7; Id., *Jean Starobinski: historien de la médecine?*, “Bulletin du Cercle d’études internationales Jean Starobinski”, 8, 2015, pp. 3-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Jean Starobinski – Las razones del cuerpo*, Cuatro Ediciones, Valladolid 1999, selection and introduction F. Vidal, tr. and afterword Julián Mateo Ballorica.

highlights the nature of his interest. Starobinski was less concerned with the body of anatomy and physiology than with the bodily experience of the self and with the consciousness of the body, whose “reasons” transmute into expressions that become integral to lived experience. Looking at the “somatic turn” from Starobinski’s vantage point thus brings out its challenges and limitations. Conversely, re-reading his criticism in the perspective of what the “somatic moment” has become since the late twentieth century calls attention to Starobinski’s unique articulation of history and phenomenology. Such is the double purpose of this article.

Let us first consider the latest extensions of the somatic turn of the 1980s. One has been called “emotional” or “affective turn”, the other, “interoceptive turn”. Although they have not been explicitly linked, they reveal a common concern, assumed to be recent and contemporary: that of reintegrating the body not only into history and the humanities, but also into the cognitive and brain sciences. Often taking a simplistic view of the history of philosophy, they are said to help overcome Cartesian dualism and give the body and bodily experience, including their emotional dimensions, the place they should rightfully have in an adequate understanding of the human being.

The “turns” were partly fuelled by Antonio Damasio’s two bestsellers of the 1990s, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994) and *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999). The neuroscientist explained that he wanted to overcome the dualistic disjunctions of body and mind, emotion and rationality. To do this, he proposed neuropsychological models that emphasized the link between the body and the brain, and aimed to show how emotions are part of the mechanisms of reason. Historians did not fail to point out the irony in his misuse of Descartes<sup>13</sup>. It is precisely with regard to feelings and emotions that Descartes, above all in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), provided his most elaborate explanations of the essential role of the body in the production of certain mental states – and therefore did not commit the “error” Damasio and many others attribute to him.

<sup>13</sup> Gary Hatfield, *The Passions of the Soul and Descartes’s Machine Psychology*, “Studies in History and Philosophy of Science”, 38, 2007, pp. 1-35, pp. 3-4.

## 2.1. *The emotional turn*

At least in the English-speaking world, it was also during the 1990s that, reading Descartes, Malebranche and Spinoza anew, historians of early modern philosophy paid increasing attention to the theories of the passions<sup>14</sup>. Such move, which defines the “emotional turn” in the historiography of philosophy, has counterparts in psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology, the various branches of history, and other human sciences. It touches upon a vast range of issues and contexts; and, insofar as it does not theorize affect only in terms of the human body, it “expresses a new configuration of bodies, technology, and matter”<sup>15</sup>.

The field that concerns us here most is the largely professionalized history of emotions. Its boom has been dated to the early 2000s and the idea of an “emotional” or “affective turn”, from the middle of the decade<sup>16</sup>. The history of emotions is said to have reached maturity in the mid-2000s<sup>17</sup>, and recent overviews stress its diversity<sup>18</sup>. It is indeed a transversal research field, ranging from Antiquity to the present, from intellectual history to the history of bodily practices, and from individual experience to the formation of “emotional communities”<sup>19</sup>. By 2016, an otherwise valuable discussion asserted that

the study of emotions has revolutionized our conceptions of human nature. What we now call the “Emotional Turn” challenged earlier scientific understandings of humans – our brains, our bodies, and the laws that govern their functions within and between individuals – and of society as a whole<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Sean Greenberg, *On the Emotional Turn in the History of Early Modern Philosophy*, s.d., <https://emotionresearcher.com/on-the-emotional-turn-in-the-history-of-early-modern-philosophy/>.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia Ticineto Clough, *Introduction*, in Id. (ed.), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, Duke University Press, Durham 2007, pp. 1-33, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, tr. Keith Tribe, Oxford University Press, New York 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Damien Boquet, Piroska Nagy, *Pour une histoire intellectuelle des émotions*, “L’Atelier du Centre de recherches historiques”, 16, 2016; DOI: 10.4000/acrh.7290.

<sup>18</sup> Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2018; Barbara H. Rosenwein, Riccardo Cristiani, *What is the History of Emotions?*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2018.

<sup>19</sup> B.H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2006; Id., *Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions*, “Passions in Context”, I, 1, 2010, <https://www.passionsincontext.de/index.php?id=557>; Id., *Les communautés émotionnelles et le corps*, “Médiévales”, 61, 2011, 55-76.

<sup>20</sup> Otniel E. Dror, Bettina Hitzer, Anja Laukötter, Pilar León-Sanz, *An Introduction to History of Science and the Emotions*, “Osiris”, 31, 2016, pp. 1-18, p. 1.

Such claims are commonplace in recent “turns”<sup>21</sup>. They play a significant role in self-promotion, but the evidence for the kind of impact they proclaim is shaky, scant or nonexistent. Equally self-congratulatory is the introduction to the special section on the history of the emotions published in July 2020 in *Emotion Review*, which celebrates the field’s convergence with “bioconstructionism,” its “relevance for other disciplines concerned with emotion research,” its entanglement “with the history of the body and brain, and with cultural and political history,” the “sheer quantity” of its empirical research, and the “level of maturity and sophistication” it has reached in its theoretical and methodological orientation<sup>22</sup>.

Yet the emotional turn in history has been judged severely, as a “hardly revolutionary” project situated “at the crossroads of a history of *mentalités* and a history of ideas that does not always acknowledge itself as such”, and which, under the guise of restoring past emotions, describes individual experiences or collective representations<sup>23</sup>. As a larger phenomenon, the contemporary interest in emotions has also been depicted as “an example of social reflexivity”, as an attempt to “redress” visions of the human that are excessively marked by the objectification proper to scientific rationality, or even as a “compensatory process” aimed at re-discovering the true self<sup>24</sup>. Valid or not, these interpretations link the emotional turn to a return to the body, and reinforce the idea that the field of the history of emotions belongs to the “multidisciplinary world of the sciences of emotion”<sup>25</sup>. This does not mean that it was born in the wake of these sciences. Its genealogy is more complex, particularly in the French-speaking world, where it can be traced to the *École des Annales* and the history of *mentalités* and *sensibilités*, as well as to Marcel Mauss’

<sup>21</sup> On the “neuroscientific turn”, see F. Vidal, Francisco Ortega, *Being Brains: Making the Cerebral Subject*, Fordham University Press, New York 2017.

<sup>22</sup> R. Boddice, *History Looks Forward: Interdisciplinarity and Critical Emotion Research*, introduction to the special section *The History of Emotions*, “Emotion Review”, 12(3), 2020, pp. 131-134, p. 131.

<sup>23</sup> Arnaud Fossier, *Un “emotional turn” en histoire?*, “Nonfiction”, 7 October 2010, review of D. Boquet, P. Nagy, *Le Sujet des émotions au Moyen Âge* (2008), <https://www.nonfiction.fr/article-3832-un-emotional-turn-en-histoire.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Ana Marta González, *In search of a sociological explanation for the emotional turn*, “Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas”, 85, 2017, pp. 27-45, especially pp. 29-30.

<sup>25</sup> P. Nagy, *Faire l’histoire des émotions à l’heure des sciences de émotions*, “Bulletin du centre d’études médiévales d’Auxerre I - BUCEMA”, 5, 2013, <http://journals.openedition.org/cem/12539>, DOI : 10.4000/cem.12539. The same view is emphasized in R. Boddice, *History looks Forward...*, cit.



article on the “techniques of the body”, published in 1936 in the *Journal de Psychologie* and widely cited in English-language works since the 1970s<sup>26</sup>.

Still, in its present configuration, and by virtue of its explicit links with the cognitive sciences, the “emotional turn”, including the history of emotions, has consolidated in the same atmosphere as the “neuroscientific turn” of the 1990s. In the social sciences and humanities, the latter has been valued as a reaction to the “linguistic turn” of the previous decades, as a backlash to the dematerialization that seemed to follow from the primacy given to the signifier in the interpretation of human phenomena<sup>27</sup>. It has even been asserted that “new tracks are being laid” toward enabling a history of the self, “and they are leading toward neuroscience”<sup>28</sup>. Such claims, though, are pure hand waving, since they are never supported by neuroscientific data, but, at the most, by examples drawn from psychology. They nonetheless instantiate the performative rhetoric that helps give weight to the “neuro”<sup>29</sup>.

In contemporary neuroscience, the study of the emotions has emerged as the field par excellence where attempts are made to reconnect the body and the mind, and to develop an integrative approach to the human being. Indeed, emotions are said to be “your brain’s *creation* of what your bodily sensations mean, in relation to what is going on around you in the world”<sup>30</sup>. They are not “reactions” to the outside world, but ways of “constructing” it that are neurobiologically based and function through the body, while being partly shaped by cultural contexts and individual experience.

## 2.2. *The interoceptive turn*

Close behind it chronologically, but on the same path as the “emotional turn”, the “interoceptive turn” is one of the most recent and significant manifestations of the desire to reinforce the role of the senses and the

<sup>26</sup> D. Boquet, P. Nagy, *Une autre histoire des émotions* (2017), <https://emma.hypotheses.org/3007>.

<sup>27</sup> F. Vidal, F. Ortega, *Being Brains*, cit., chap. 2; F. Vidal, *Le “neuro” à toutes les sauces: une cuisine auto-destructrice*, “Sensibilités. Histoire, critique & sciences sociales”, 5, 2018, pp. 59-69.

<sup>28</sup> Lynn Hunt, *The Self and Its History*, “American Historical Review”, 2014, pp. 1576-1586, p. 1579.

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed analysis of such claims in the case of another “neuro” area, see F. Vidal, *What makes neuroethics possible?*, “History of the Human Sciences”, 32, 2, 2019, pp. 32-58.

<sup>30</sup> L. Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2017, p. 30.



body as foundation of what formerly was, precisely, not corporeal (reason, consciousness). Both theoretically and at the level of research practices, the two turns are intimately related, and have come institutionally together, as illustrated by the Cambridge University Press book series “Elements on Histories of Emotions and the Senses”<sup>31</sup>.

*Interoception* is defined as “the body-to-brain axis of sensation concerning the state of the internal body and its visceral organs”<sup>32</sup>; it refers to the sensing of internal bodily changes. It is distinguished from *exteroception*, or perception of the external environment, and from *proprioception*, or perception of the position of the different parts of one’s own body in space. In fact, the terminology is not clear-cut. On the one hand, it is said that interoception “includes two forms of perception: proprioception (signals from the skin and musculoskeletal apparatus) and viscerception (signals from the inner organs)”<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, a distinction is made between a “restrictive” and an “inclusive” sense of the concept<sup>34</sup>. In the former, interoception comprises only sensations coming from within the body; in the latter, the term is a generic notion for the entire phenomenological experience of the body. In the inclusive sense, emphasis is placed on the subjective experience and representation of bodily states; in both, interoception is a product of the central nervous system.

Over the course of a century since the early 1900s, the meaning of “interoception” has moved from the restrictive to the inclusive. Insofar as interoception is not a novelty in physiological research, the originality of the interoceptive turn consists less in the discovery of a process (the detection of internal bodily changes) than in the phenomenological and ontological importance attributed to it. To the extent that interoception lies “at the core of our very sense of self [where] physiology and mental life are dynamically coupled”, the “turn” toward it is celebrated as the advent of a “rich science of selfhood”<sup>35</sup>. In line with developments in the philosophy of mind and the neurocognitive sciences, the interoceptive

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.cambridge.org/core/what-we-publish/elements/histories-of-emotions-and-the-senses>.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah N. Garfinkel, Anil K. Seth, Adam B. Barrett, Keisuke Suzuki, Hugo D. Critchley, *Knowing your own heart: Distinguishing interoceptive accuracy from interoceptive awareness*, “Biological Psychology”, 104, 2015, pp. 65-74, p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> Beate M. Herbert, Olga Pollatos, *The Body in the Mind: On the Relationship Between Interoception and Embodiment*, “Topics in Cognitive Science”, 4, 2012, pp. 692-704, p. 693.

<sup>34</sup> Erik Ceunen, Johan W.S. Vlaeyen, Ilse Van Diest, *On the Origin of Interoception*, “Frontiers in Psychology”, 7, 2016, art. 743, DOI : 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00743.

<sup>35</sup> Noga Arikha, *The interoceptive turn*, “Aeon”, 17 June 2019, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-interoceptive-turn-is-maturing-as-a-rich-science-of-selfhood>.

turn gives primacy to the embodied self, and to the sense of self, also corporeal or incarnate, that accompanies it, as objects of research for the life sciences, the social sciences and the humanities – in short, for the sciences of the body, the mind, and culture. Claims about the momentous significance of the interoceptive turn often rely on repeating a simplistic understanding of Descartes' alleged "error". For example, a prominent protagonist of the interoceptive turn writes, "By grounding the self in the body, psychology could, at last, overcome Cartesianism and make the bodily self the starting point for a science of the self"<sup>36</sup>. The turn seems to be taking place at all levels, and the cliché has been used to advertise ways of reconnecting with one's own body and reawakening its bond with the self, as proposed by wellbeing practices such as biofeedback and, more recently, mindfulness and breathwork, a meditative technique widespread in the United States that is beginning to be in vogue in Europe.

### 3. *Jean Starobinski and the reasons of the body*

The emotional and the interoceptive turns involve persistent epistemological tensions, which both wish to transcend, between nature and culture, language and experience, discourse and physiology, the individual and the collective<sup>37</sup>. As one of the best-known historians of emotions recently recognized, "The 'problem of emotions', that is, that many of them are both meaningful and corporeal, has yet to be resolved"<sup>38</sup>. On the one hand, historians admit the universality of emotions and interoception: both can be modulated by individual factors and socio-cultural contexts, but are seen as rooted in a transhistorical and transcultural biological sub-

<sup>36</sup> Manos Tsakiris, *The multisensory basis of the self: From body to identity to others*, "The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology", 70, 4, 2017, pp. 597-609, p. 597. The philosopher Frédérique de Vignemont shows more historical and conceptual sensitivity; see her chapter *Was Descartes right after all? An affective background for bodily awareness*, in M. Tsakiris, Helena De Preester (eds.), *The Interoceptive Mind: From Homeostasis to Awareness*, Oxford University Press, New York 2019, pp. 259-271, and her book *Mind the Body: An Exploration of Bodily Self-Awareness*, Oxford University Press, New York 2018.

<sup>37</sup> For enlightening discussion of these tensions in connection with the history of emotions, see Quentin Deluermoz, Emmanuel Fureix, Hervé Mazurel, M'hamed Oualdi, *Écrire l'histoire des émotions: de l'objet à la catégorie d'analyse*, "Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle", 47, 2013, pp. 155-189; Javier Moscoso, *La historia de las emociones, ¿de qué es historia?*, "Vínculos de Historia", 4, 2005, pp. 15-27.

<sup>38</sup> William M. Reddy, *The Unavoidable Intentionality of Affect: The History of Emotions and the Neurosciences of the Present Day*, "Emotion Review", 12(3), 2020, pp. 168-178, p. 168.

stratum. On the other hand, brainmind scientists have to deal with the malleability of their expression and the heterogeneity of discourses and practices relating to emotions and the body. The latter would like their models to account for, or at least fully take into consideration the diversity of concrete forms of emotional and interoceptive phenomena. Conversely, the former would like to shed light on the foundations of their universality. These aspirations converge towards the desire of grasping the other's lived subjectivity as it is, or as they experienced it in their own way, and in their own time and place.

How can Starobinskian criticism inform this primordial desire? Sociologist Éric Gagnon finds clues in the theme of the mask and masked behavior as Starobinski explores it in Montaigne, Rousseau and Stendhal. Gagnon uncovers "a kind of historical phenomenology" that delves into how individuals reflect upon and narrate themselves, and examines how interiority "becomes the pivot around which contemporary subjectivity is formed and organized"<sup>39</sup>. However, as he points out, Starobinski does not limit himself to tracing stages in the history of modern subjectivity, but seeks to grasp the latter's "dramatic" and "poetic" dimension<sup>40</sup>. Such purpose animates the critic's great books on individual authors. While the result there is comparable to sumptuous full-length portraits, the essays around the "reasons of the body" are more like etchings, which the critic, a good connoisseur of the genre, called "the art of synthetic signs" – an art "capable of expressing the monumental in the smallest space"<sup>41</sup>.

As often in the course of his long life, Starobinski saw these scattered essays as drafts and preparatory materials for future large-scale studies. In 1989, prefacing for a book that became a landmark in the history of the "somatic moment" the English translation of his "Short History of Bodily Sensation" and "Monsieur Teste Confronting Pain", he declared:

The following essays are part of a larger study, currently in preparation. It will examine, on the one hand, the particular register of the body's life which consists of somatic sensations, and, on the other hand, the literary use of the images and modes of expression pertaining to that register. Also under investigation will be several of the main variations that have occurred in history, both in the area of medical and psychological theory, and in the most prominent literary works. In the first instance, such a study allows for a broad comparative exercise in which

<sup>39</sup> Éric Gagnon, *Histoire et poétique de la subjectivité. Masque et dédoublement chez Jean Starobinski*, "SociologieS", 2017, <http://journals.openedition.org/sociologies/6073>, §§ 3, 26, 27.

<sup>40</sup> *Ivi*, §§ 28, 32.

<sup>41</sup> J. Starobinski, *Albert Flocon. Paysages gravés* (1951), in *Id.*, *La beauté du monde. La littérature et les arts*, ed. Martin Rueff, Gallimard, Paris 2016, pp. 1086-1088, p. 1086.

the field observed will include both the most highly developed objective thought and testimonies relating to the most ‘immediate’ subjective experience. Further, beyond any thematic restriction, these essays will also focus on the notion of person, or, if you like, the individual; in other words, the way sensory experience (and, more particularly, the organic and locomotive elements) contributes to the formation – or the decomposition – of the subject or the self, and on the several literary representatives of this kind of bodily message<sup>42</sup>.

This passage expresses the vision of a man who was constantly turned toward the future of his œuvre. The announced study, however, never saw the light of day and it does not seem ever to have been “in preparation” as such. Nevertheless, there remain starters, probes and fragments as traces of a lucid exploration of the terrain in which the emotional and interoceptive turns would eventually take place.

### 3.1 *The history of emotions*

In connection with the history of emotions and the emotional turn, we shall examine Starobinski’s work on the history of the concept of nostalgia. He published four articles on the topic, three in the 1960s and one in 2003<sup>43</sup>. His medical thesis of 1960, *History of the Treatment of Melancholy*, limits itself to mentioning nostalgia as a “special variety” of the disease that is cured “quite simply by returning to one’s native land”<sup>44</sup>. The articles go beyond this remark. Their historical sections largely overlap and are here less relevant than the considerations that accompany them. The latter also overlap, but with nuances; above all, they throw light on the critic’s approach to the relationship between words and things in the realm of feeling.

Starobinski’s term of choice is *sentiment*. “Emotionologists” speak rather of “feeling” and (obviously) “emotion”<sup>45</sup>, and the latter term predominates in the interdisciplinary field of the empirical “affective sciences”. In emotion classification, an area rife with debate, nostalgia is one of

<sup>42</sup> J. Starobinski, *The Natural and Literary History of Bodily Sensation*, in M. Feher, R. Naddaff, N. Tazi, cit., p. 351.

<sup>43</sup> Together with two other articles more exclusively focused on literature, these essays have been partially reprinted in the section “La leçon de la nostalgie” of J. Starobinski, *L’Encre de la mélancolie*, Seuil, Paris 2012. We shall here refer to the original publications.

<sup>44</sup> J. Starobinski, *History of the Treatment of Melancholy from the Earliest Times to 1900* (translator’s name not provided), J.R. Geigy, Basel 1962, p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> See the pioneering article by Peter N. Stearns, Carol Z. Stearns, *Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards*, “The American Historical Review”, 90, 4, 1985, pp. 813-830.

the so-called complex, secondary or mixed emotions<sup>46</sup>. Highlighting as it does the experiential and self-reflective dimension of affective states and processes, the critic's terminology points to the phenomenological texture of his historical inquiry. To the enthusiast of semantic history that was Starobinski<sup>47</sup>, nostalgia offered a magnificent opportunity. On the one hand, one can exactly date the invention of the word and follow its dissemination in various contexts. On the other hand, the neologism serves as starting point for a "history of ideas without borders" as he imagined it<sup>48</sup>. With regard to nostalgia, such a history remained undeveloped. In 1963, however, Starobinski listed what it would have to include: the history of feelings and *mentalités*, the history of the social, ethnic and demographic structures that make up the concrete bases "on which the history of feelings is built", the history of science, philosophy and literature and, finally, a philosophical reflection "on the moral and metaphysical meaning of the nostalgic experience"<sup>49</sup>.

The lexical origin of "nostalgia" is to be found in a thesis defended in Basel in 1688; with it, Starobinski writes, we witness "the creation of a disease". Indeed, the word is "forged from scratch to bring a rather peculiar feeling (*Heimweh*, regret, *desiderium patriae*) into the vocabulary of medical nomenclature"<sup>50</sup>. The disease seems to exist only by virtue of being named. That is why Starobinski likens it to love as depicted in La Rochefoucauld's maxim n° 136, *Il y a des gens qui n'auroient jamais été amoureux, s'ils n'avoient jamais entendu parler de l'amour* ("There are people who would never have been in love if they had never heard of love")<sup>51</sup>. Elsewhere, however, while again quoting the same maxim, he

<sup>46</sup> See Michael Hviid Jacobsen (ed.), *Nostalgia Now: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on the Past in the Present*, Routledge, New York 2020, especially chapters 1 and 2 (Krystine Irene Batcho, *Nostalgia: The paradoxical bittersweet emotion*, and Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, *The psychology of nostalgia: Delineating the emotion's nature and functions*).

<sup>47</sup> François Azouvi, *Histoire des sciences et histoire des mots*, in *Jean Starobinski – Cahiers pour un temps*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1985, pp. 85-101; Claudio Pogliano, *Jean Starobinski*, "Belfagor", 45, 1990, pp. 157-179; Id., *Il bilinguismo imperfetto de Jean Starobinski*, "Intersezioni", 10, 1, 1990, pp. 171-183; J.M. Ballorca, *Jean Starobinski: razones del cuerpo, razones del crítico*, "Revista de la Asociación Española de Neuropsiquiatría", XIX, 70, 1999, pp. 313-321; A. Trucchio, *Jean Starobinski e la storia della medicina*, "Scienza & Filosofia", 11, 2014, pp. 84-101, <https://www.scienzaefilosofia.com/2018/03/19/jean-starobinski-e-la-storia-della-medicina/>.

<sup>48</sup> J. Starobinski, *Entretien avec Jacques Bonnet*, in *Jean Starobinski – Cahiers pour un temps*, cit., pp. 9-23, pp. 21-22.

<sup>49</sup> J. Starobinski, *La nostalgie: théories médicales et expression littéraire*, in "Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century", XXVII, 1963, pp. 1505-1518, p. 1505.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, p. 1506.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, p. 1507.

qualifies such apparent lexical determinism, and questions the limits of historical knowledge in the realm of sentiment.

The history of feelings, Starobinski explains in 1966, raises a “question of method concerning the relationship between feelings and language”.

The feelings [*sentiments*] whose history we want to trace are accessible to us only after they have manifested themselves, verbally or by any other expressive means. For the critic, the historian, a feeling exists only after it attains its linguistic status. Nothing can be grasped of a feeling before it is named, designated and expressed. It is therefore not the affective experience itself that is offered to us: only that part of the affective experience that made its way into a style can entice the historian<sup>52</sup>.

For the critic, since “the verbalization of affective experience belongs to the very structure of the experience”, the history of feelings cannot be anything other than “the history of the words in which the emotion was enunciated”<sup>53</sup>. Since we cannot attain past persons’ subjectivity “as such”, we should avoid lending them “our problems and our ‘complexes’” and treat them “like the inhabitant[s] of a faraway country whose customs and language are different and must be patiently learned”<sup>54</sup>.

Such considerations lay bare Starobinski’s methodology or, rather, his “metacritical thinking”<sup>55</sup>. In them, as in the essays on literary history, theory and criticism by which he discreetly participated in the debates that agitated those disciplines in the 1960s and 70s, Starobinski does not codify procedures. Rather, he offers a self-reflexive examination of his own practice. Both in his wish to speak of theory only “incidentally, on the margins”<sup>56</sup>, and in his view of the relationship between literature and life, he shows remarkable constancy. First, as he states with regard to his criti-

<sup>52</sup> “Les sentiments dont nous voulons retracer l’histoire ne nous sont accessibles qu’à partir du moment où ils se sont manifestés, verbalement ou par tout autre moyen expressif. Pour le critique, l’historien, un sentiment n’existe qu’au-delà du stade où celui-ci accède à son statut linguistique. Rien n’est saisissable d’un sentiment en deçà du point où il se nomme, où il se désigne et s’exprime. Ce n’est donc pas l’expérience affective elle-même qui s’offre à nous: seule la part de l’expérience affective qui a passé dans un style peut solliciter l’historien” (J. Starobinski, *Le concept de nostalgie*, “Diogène”, 54, 1966, pp. 92-115, p. 92).

<sup>53</sup> Ivi, p. 93.

<sup>54</sup> Ivi, p. 94.

<sup>55</sup> Michaël Comte, *Postface. Les approches du sens: à propos des écrits sur la critique de Jean Starobinski*, in M. Comte, S. Cudré-Mauroux (eds.), *Jean Starobinski – Les Approches du sens*, La Dogana, Geneva 2018, pp. 345-354.

<sup>56</sup> J. Starobinski, *Remerciements* delivered at a meeting organized by the Fondation Pittard de l’Andelyn and Éditions Zoé to launch C. Colangelo’s *Jean Starobinski. L’apprentissage du regard* (Geneva, 15 June 2004). Printed leaflet.

cal outlook, he does not wish to engage “in an existential perspective”; what matters to him is “what a work conveys”<sup>57</sup>. The most forceful expression of his viewpoint is to be found in *The Critical Relation*:

One is not obligated to look for an *Erlebnis* [...]. The work [of literature] is revealing not only because of its resemblance to the author’s inner experience, but also by way of its difference. If the documents suffice to provide a “plausible” picture of the author’s empirical personality, then it becomes possible to assess a new *deflection* [*écart*]: the one by which the work goes beyond and transmutes the original data of experience. [...] It is necessary to know the *man* and his empirical existence in order to know what the *work* opposes, what its coefficient of negativity is<sup>58</sup>.

In other words, “writing is not the dubious medium of inner experience, it is the experience itself”<sup>59</sup>. Starobinski’s fertile and frequent, but free and pragmatic use of the psychoanalytic vocabulary, and his considering psychoanalysis as an interpretive style rather than a method are consistent with such an outlook<sup>60</sup>.

Starobinski adopts the same position in his more historical research. Yet, the fact that the subject of experience remains at the very heart of his inquiry calls for an explanation. Thus, in *Action and Reaction* (1999), the critic situates his project “in the field of a broad semantic history, not in that of phenomenology”, and adds: “Without neglecting the phenomena that precede the theoretical attention that captures them, we have preferred to focus our attention on the language in which they have been described”<sup>61</sup>. We shall see, however, that precisely such attention to language testifies to a sustained phenomenological disposition. While rejecting psychobiographical analysis, Starobinski did not share his contemporaries’ claims about the “death of the subject”<sup>62</sup>.

The reason for such a stance was indirectly given in 1966, when Starobinski explained that, since language acts as both barrier and gateway, “only that part of the affective experience that made its way into a style can entice the historian”. And yet the first pages of his last article on nostalgia,

<sup>57</sup> J. Starobinski, *Le devoir d’écouter* (interview with Patrizia Lombardo), “Critique”, 4, 791, 2013, pp. 331-343, p. 341.

<sup>58</sup> J. Starobinski, *La relation critique*, Gallimard, Paris 1970, pp. 62-63.

<sup>59</sup> Ivi, p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> Marta Sábado Novau, *Jean Starobinski et la psychanalyse: un état des lieux*, “Bulletin du Cercle d’études internationales Jean Starobinski”, 11, 2018, pp. 3-7.

<sup>61</sup> J. Starobinski, *Action et réaction. Vie et aventures d’un couple*, Seuil, Paris 1999, p. 350.

<sup>62</sup> C. Colangelo, “L’histoire des idées ou l’archéologie du savoir...”, in M. Conte, S. Cudré-Mauroux, *Jean Starobinski...*, cit., pp. 423-437, p. 432.



published almost four decades later, reveal tensions akin to those mentioned in connection with the emotional and interoceptive turns. On the one hand, nostalgia appears as a “basic anthropological potentiality”, as a variety of mourning that antecedes the words designating it; on the other hand, feelings “exist for our reflexive consciousness [*conscience réfléchie*] only from the moment they are given a name”<sup>63</sup>. For Starobinski, the two propositions “are true on a complementary basis”<sup>64</sup>. Such a compromise reveals a principle of his hermeneutics: the language that describes affective phenomena is less important for its naming function than for how it articulates and shapes self-awareness.

Precisely because it is rooted in speech, in *parole*, such awareness is not solipsistic. The “first emotions,” writes Starobinski in *Action and Reaction*, “precede and determine words; but words [...] precede and determine subsequent emotions. We live in social connection and speech, and we know only subsequent emotions. The moments are few in which we feel that we go back beyond them and regain access to an experience before words [...]”<sup>65</sup>. There is an echo to such considerations when, a few years later and again on nostalgia, the critic sketches a process akin to the “looping effects” that Ian Hacking describes about mental illness<sup>66</sup>.

Despite looking the same, a sentiment, once named, is no longer exactly the same. A new word brings together the unknown, which before had no form. Being named makes it a concept, it has a definition, and it calls forth an additional definition: it becomes material for essays and treatises. The name of an affective state, if it is adopted and put into circulation, not only propagates itself in the vocabulary, it produces new sentiments. We live passions whose words precede us and which we would not have felt without them<sup>67</sup>.

<sup>63</sup> J. Starobinski, *Sur la nostalgie. La mémoire tourmentée*, “Cliniques méditerranéennes”, 67, 2003, pp. 191-202, p. 191 (The paragraph quoted here disappeared from the English translation of this article; see reference below, note 67).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>65</sup> J. Starobinski, *Action et réaction...*, cit. pp. 351-352. Starobinski's vocabulary (*premières émotions, émotions secondes*) suggests both a temporal order (initial/subsequent) and the kind of hierarchical classification used in the affective sciences, which differentiate simple, basic or primary emotions, and secondary or complex emotions (in French, *émotions primaires* and *secondaires*). I chose “first” and “subsequent” because he does not seem to refer to a specialized nomenclature.

<sup>66</sup> Ian Hacking, *The looping effects of human kinds*, in D. Sperber, D. Premack, A.J. Premack (eds.), *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate*, Oxford University Press, New York 1996, pp. 351-394.

<sup>67</sup> J. Starobinski, *On nostalgia*, tr. Kristen Gray Jafflin, in Tom Cochrane, Bernardino Fantini, Klaus R. Scherer (eds.), *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Musical Arousal, Expression, and Social Control*, Oxford University Press, New York 2013, pp. 329-340, p. 329. Translation corrected by F. Vidal.

Starobinski quotes once more La Rochefoucauld, but makes the process linking passions and words go beyond the individual. It begins, he writes, as a fashion or commonplace, and then spreads throughout society, in an “interactive process” akin to learning a language<sup>68</sup>. These observations convey a philosophical apprehension of the world, which could also be called “anthropological” insofar as it concerns above all the human being. Philosophy, Starobinski remarks, looks for meaning, but does not treat it “as an object of formal demonstration”; criticism, at least that which he qualifies as “modest, without any avowed doctrinal claim”, is similar to it and crystallizes as philosophical thought, as *une réflexion philosophique en acte*<sup>69</sup>.

Behind such considerations lies a vision of the relationship between words and things, language and existence. Such a vision was fundamentally in place by the 1960s. Revealed over the decades in discrete touches, it is rooted in what Starobinski describes as his “first literary project”, which was to be a “phenomenology of masked behavior”<sup>70</sup>. The critic consistently rejected psychological exegesis, but a phenomenological impulse always nurtured his interpretive activity. According to his first proposal for a doctoral dissertation, dated 1947 and entitled *L'Existence masquée* (*Masked Existence*), he wished to examine “less the mask than the masked man”<sup>71</sup>. He would soon connect that project to what, as early as his medical thesis of 1960, became one of his major themes: melancholy, with the melancholic as the archetypal denouncer of masks<sup>72</sup>.

Writing in 1966 about La Rochefoucauld, one of the main protagonists of his study on masks, Starobinski stressed the function of speech as “the foundation of a specifically human order”<sup>73</sup>. He showed sympathy for the

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*. The translation reads “in a process”, but the original says “dans un processus ‘interactif’” (J. Starobinski, *Sur la nostalgie*, cit., p. 192).

<sup>69</sup> J. Starobinski, *Considérations sur l'état présent de la critique littéraire* (1971), in M. Comte, S. Cudré-Mauroux, *Jean Starobinski – Les Approches du sens*, cit., pp. 76-115, pp. 109, 111. For a detailed demonstration of the philosophical nature of Starobinski's criticism, see C. Colangelo, *Il richiamo delle apparenze. Saggio su Jean Starobinski*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2001.

<sup>70</sup> J. Starobinski, *Jean Starobinski sur la ligne Paris-Genève-Milan* (interview with Michel Contat), “Le Monde”, 28 April 1989, p. 24. On the beginnings of that project, see M. Comte, *L'existence masquée. Situation de Jean Starobinski en 1947*, in M. Comte, S. Cudré-Mauroux, *Jean Starobinski – Les Approches du sens*, cit., pp. 439-464. *Interrogatoire du masque*, Starobinski's first published text on the subject, dates from 1946; together with other two essays, from 1992 and 2014, it has been revised and republished in Id., *Interrogatoire du masque*, Éditions Galilée, Paris 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted by M. Comte, *L'existence masquée...*, cit., p. 444.

<sup>72</sup> F. Vidal, *L'expérience mélancolique au regard de la critique*, afterword to J. Starobinski, *L'Encre de la mélancolie*, cit., pp. 625-639.

<sup>73</sup> J. Starobinski, *La Rochefoucauld et les morales substitutives* (II), “Nouvelle Revue Française”, 164, 1966, pp. 211-229, p. 214.

way in which the classical moralist called forth a “linguistic being” (*être de langage*) and achieved through expression “a kind of redemption” of our corrupt nature<sup>74</sup>. La Rochefoucauld’s “aesthetics of the speaking subject” is also an ethics, which Starobinski called “substitutive” because it brings into existence a kind of being that each person discovers not in themselves, but in the relationships to others<sup>75</sup>. In the end, the melancholy *parole* that exposes virtues as vices in disguise manifests a fundamental trust in language – which, the critic observed, is, “in spite of everything, a trust in human reason”<sup>76</sup>. In these remarks, Starobinski not only indirectly elaborates an epistemological and ontological view about words and things, but also vindicates the ethical function of language and communication. Understanding our contemporaries, as much as past human beings, requires attending to what has “made its way into a style”. This brings us to the interoceptive turn.

### 3.2 *The history of interoceptive experience*

The “inner sense of the body” is one of the main themes that Starobinski pursued throughout his life, even before his medical thesis on the history of the treatment of melancholy. His interest never flagged in what “bears witness to the intimate perception of the body”<sup>77</sup>. Although it rarely becomes his main subject, it transpires in his books on Montesquieu, Diderot, Baudelaire, Montaigne and Rousseau, as well as in a considerable number of articles<sup>78</sup>. In a 1990 interview, Starobinski declared that “the psychosomatic knot is precisely what makes it possible to approach jointly one side [of the experience of the body], which is lived and verbally expressed, and another side, which the physician explores objectively”<sup>79</sup>. The latter held his attention briefly, particularly in a concise history of the concept of *cenesthesia*<sup>80</sup>. But it is elsewhere that he approaches the “psychosomatic knot” most closely.

<sup>74</sup> Ivi, p. 219.

<sup>75</sup> Ivi, p. 224.

<sup>76</sup> Ivi, p. 229.

<sup>77</sup> *Jean Starobinski sur la ligne Paris-Genève-Milan*, cit.

<sup>78</sup> See *Jean Starobinski – Las razones del cuerpo*, cit., and F. Vidal, *Jean Starobinski: historien de la médecine?*, cit.

<sup>79</sup> Vincent Barras, *Entretien avec Jean Starobinski (à l'occasion de son 70e anniversaire) I*, “Médecine et Hygiène”, 48, 1990, pp. 3294-3297, p. 3295.

<sup>80</sup> J. Starobinski, *Le concept de cénesthésie et les idées neuropsychologiques de Moritz Schiff*, “Gesnerus”, 34, 1-2, 1977, pp. 2-19.

Let us first go back to the “Short History of Bodily Sensation”. Starobinski observes that although human’s first knowledge concerned the body, “body consciousness, as it is practiced and spoken of in our society, has certain new and original aspects that it is important to bring out”<sup>81</sup>. The verbs *to speak* and *to practice* reveal the essence of an interpretation that goes beyond historical matters to highlight the phenomenologically constitutive function of discourse. The subsequent analysis indeed takes that direction, describing the metaphorical character of certain psycho-medical arguments about cenesthetic disorders and the abundance of metaphorical formulas patients used to describe their symptoms. Commenting on *La Conscience morbide* (1914), by the French psychologist and physician Charles Blondel, Starobinski underlines the author’s attention to the “poetic nature” of patients’ attempts to express themselves, and concludes:

It was thus not the body that imposed its law on the mind [*conscience*]. It was society that, through the intermediacy of language, took the commands of the mind [*conscience*] and imposed its law on the body. Blondel’s theory tended to dispose of the body as cause in order to return to it later as the agent of the *expressive* intentions that the individual imposed on it under the dictate of the collective consciousness<sup>82</sup>.

The body Starobinski contemplates is not that of anatomy and physiology, but the body that emits messages endowed with meaning: “Social prescriptions dictated not only language, but also nonverbal bodily manifestations”<sup>83</sup>. Hence, in his view, the significance of Freud’s contribution to the history of ideas about cenesthesia and bodily sensations. For all the psychoanalytic emphasis on psychical reality, Freudian dream theory downplays somatic stimuli and organic sensations as explanatory sources, while giving the body prominence “as the place in which were carried out the expressive *aims* of the wish [*désir*]<sup>84</sup>.

We noted above that Starobinski’s “methodological” discourse takes the form of sporadic reflections on his practice. This practice, in turn, bears witness to its own “method”. Starobinski’s tribute to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, published three weeks after the philosopher’s sudden death on 3 May 1961, is a fine example of this. As is well known, the link between corporeality and expression lies at the heart of Merleau-

<sup>81</sup> J. Starobinski, *A Short History of Bodily Sensation*, cit., p. 353.

<sup>82</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 360-361.

<sup>83</sup> *Ivi*, p. 361.

<sup>84</sup> *Ivi*, p. 364.

Ponty's phenomenology. Yet, better than theoretical elaborations, Starobinski's brief article reveals how close he was to the philosopher's sensibility<sup>85</sup>. "One finds in his work models of literary criticism" – *On trouve dans son œuvre des modèles de critique littéraire*<sup>86</sup>. Though made as in passing, this is the crucial remark. For it highlights the fact that the deepest meaning of criticism may lie in its philosophical vocation, just as the most accomplished philosophy may take the form of literary, musical or pictorial criticism. (One could in addition show how such a vocation finds its intrinsic expression in the essay; how, for Starobinski, the essay is the performative materialization of his ideas about criticism as "relation" and about the ethical and ontological function of language<sup>87</sup>).

In his homage to Merleau-Ponty, Starobinski celebrates the philosopher's "long and admirable attention" to human beings' "expressive powers". These powers are rooted in corporeality and in the experience it enables: "Our consciousness is immediately engaged in a body and in a lived situation". Thus, in order to understand human action "from the bottom up", it is necessary to get as close as possible to that which antecedes philosophical reflection. Starobinski's choice of quotations from Merleau-Ponty is compelling:

"All knowledge settles in the horizons opened by perception".

"It is the expressive operation of the body, begun with the slightest perception, which is amplified in painting and art".

"In the moment of expression, the other to whom I speak and I, who am expressing myself, are uncompromisingly bound"<sup>88</sup>.

The free indirect style Starobinski uses to summarize the French philosopher's thought, as well as the placement of quotations in his text underline a debt of inspiration, a profound intellectual sympathy, a kind of

<sup>85</sup> On the relationship between Starobinski's thought and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, see C. Colangelo, *Il richiamo delle apparenze...*, cit., chap. 1, § 3. It is also discussed in several places of A. Trucchio's unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Langage poétique et langage scientifique. Jean Starobinski et la "double légitimité" des savoirs* (Faculté des Lettres, University of Geneva, 2016).

<sup>86</sup> J. Starobinski, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Je ne peux pas sortir de l'être"*, "La Gazette littéraire" (supplement to the "Gazette de Lausanne"), 122, 27-28 May 1961, pp. 18-19. All quotations come from p. 18.

<sup>87</sup> See in particular J. Starobinski, *Les enjeux de l'essai* ("Revue de Belles-Lettres", 2-3, 1987, pp. 93-107, reprinted as *Peut-on définir l'essai?* in *Jean Starobinski – Cahiers pour un temps*, cit., pp. 185-196), as well as the texts on criticism gathered in M. Comte, S. Cudré-Mauroux, *Jean Starobinski – Les Approches du sens*, cit.

<sup>88</sup> The first quotation comes from *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, the two others, from *Signes*. As befits a short tribute, Starobinski provides no references. Translations are mine.

communion of views on the world and on the ontological and ethical role of corporeality. That is echoed in the “lesson” that, the following year, Starobinski drew from nostalgia for a medical audience. Illness, he then said, is irreducible to behavior, because it “is lived in a *body* and by a body”, and is always experienced by an individual consciousness, “up to the confines of coma and death”<sup>89</sup>.

Allergic to jargon and methodolatry, too concentrated on the inner “movement” embodied in the writing of his favorite authors, Starobinski reveals himself best in his thematic choices and the detail of his analyses. For him, discourse does not say a phenomenon that is fully independent from it, but an experience that is partly molded through enunciation. Even if one denied that the connection between language and expression is ontological, it would remain methodologically essential, since experience can be apprehended only through “style,” through expressive forms. It is therefore naturally on the latter that Starobinski focuses. We have already noticed his attention to metaphor in the field of cenesthesia. In the case of Paul Valéry’s *Monsieur Teste*, he demonstrates how metaphorizing is linked to an attempt to control pain and objectify the body<sup>90</sup>. In the history of melancholy, black bile turns out to be “an unconscious metaphor which claims validity as factual experience” (*une métaphore qui s’ignore, et qui prétend s’imposer comme un fait d’expérience*)<sup>91</sup>. While such an assertion echoes the epistemology of Gaston Bachelard, whom Starobinski read in the 1950s<sup>92</sup>, and particularly his ideas about the formation of the scientific mind and the “obstacles” it encounters in its progress toward objectivity<sup>93</sup>, it also refers to expression as a constitutive element of bodily self-awareness.

We could multiply the examples illustrating the extent to which, for Starobinski, interoceptive experience is inseparable from its expressive enunciation. Let us take a single, but major instance, his splendid “reading of the body” in *Madame Bovary*, which raises two primordial questions that lie outside the novel. First, “what is the part of *idées reçues*, of

<sup>89</sup> J. Starobinski, *La leçon de la nostalgie*, “Médecine de France”, 129, 1962, pp. 6-11, p. 11.

<sup>90</sup> J. Starobinski, *Monsieur Teste Confronting Pain*, tr. Lydia Davis, in M. Feher, R. Naddaff, N. Tazi (eds.), *Fragments for a History of the Human Body II*, cit., pp. 371-393 (*Monsieur Teste face à la douleur*, in Valéry, *pour quoi?*, “Les impressions nouvelles”, Paris 1987, pp. 93-119).

<sup>91</sup> J. Starobinski, *History of the Treatment of Melancholy...*, cit., p. 42; Id., *Histoire du traitement de la mélancolie des origines à 1900*, in Id., *L’Encre de la mélancolie*, cit., p. 70.

<sup>92</sup> A. Trucchio, *Jean Starobinski, lecteur de Gaston Bachelard au début des années 1950*, “Bulletin du Cercle d’études internationales Jean Starobinski”, 6, 2013, pp. 8-9 and 15-16.

<sup>93</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind: A Contribution to the Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge* (1938), tr. Mary McAllester Jones, Clinamen Press, Manchester 2002.

ready-made formulas, in the words and images that express bodily sensations?” And second,

while *bêtise* [which Flaubert associates with conventional opinion] permeates all behavior, all discourse, would there not be a realm unscathed by it, and which would be, precisely, sensation, the cenesthetic apprehension of the body by itself; beneath words [*en deçà des mots*], and by its very inarticulateness, would not bodily language be the only human expression uncontaminated by cliché and inanity?<sup>94</sup>

Rather than answering the question, Starobinski asks a new one, which underlines the limits of phenomenological knowledge: “But this truth of feeling, so close to the silent truth of things, on the brink of nothingness, which form could apprehend it and communicate it for others, beyond the borders [*par-delà les frontières*] of the singular body?”<sup>95</sup>

The skillful contraposition of *en deçà* and *par-delà* – *beneath words* and *beyond borders* – defines the surface where cognizance of other people’s experience may come about: that of the *form* of language and the “thin skin of appearances”<sup>96</sup>. Emma Bovary’s cenesthetic experience belongs to a fictional character. This constitutes an epistemic advantage. Insofar as only the omniscient “artist-witness” can depict “that which for a character’s consciousness takes place at the edge of the unrepresentable”<sup>97</sup>, the literary imagination crosses borders, breaks down barriers, and opens up possibilities closed to scientific or historical investigation. Once again, then, bodily experience and awareness come into being as objects of critical and historical knowledge only through the body’s expressively uttering and performing its “reasons”.

#### 4. *A desire for bygone subjectivities*

Saying that literature, and art in general, penetrate realms that lie beyond the kind of knowledge the disciplines involved in the emotional and interoceptive turns may offer points to the special relationship

<sup>94</sup> J. Starobinski, *L'échelle des températures. Lecture du corps dans Madame Bovary*, in Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov (sous la dir. de), *Travail de Flaubert*, Seuil, Paris 1983, pp. 45-78, p. 77. (Initially published in *Le Temps de la réflexion*, 1, 1980, pp. 145-183).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>96</sup> F. Vidal, *La “fine peau de l'apparence”. Style et présence au monde chez Jean Starobinski*, in Murielle Gagnebin, Christine Savinel (sous la dir. de), *Starobinski en mouvement*, Champ Vallon, Seyssel 2001, pp. 216-227.

<sup>97</sup> J. Starobinski, *L'échelle des températures...*, cit., p. 61.



between art and lived experience. Starobinski sketches how Flaubert attributes to Emma elements from his own experience of illusion, desire and the body, and how what he “imagines in Emma’s body resounded in him afterwards”.

There is here a circularity between personal experience and literary imagination whose expression necessarily adopts the structure of the chiasmus: Flaubert represents in Emma’s body sensations that he himself experienced; and he experiences in his body sensations that he represented in Emma’s carnal subjectivity<sup>98</sup>.

The chiasmus figures in static form the dynamic “loop” of emotional experience, adumbrated above with regard to nostalgia. Starobinski, however, emphasizes that such loop does not turn Emma Bovary into “the figuration of the writer in the novel”<sup>99</sup>. Asserting a direct and univocal empirical link between Flaubert and Emma would amount to a retrospective diagnosis, which he rejects as an interpretative tool, while acknowledging its value for the history of medicine and disease<sup>100</sup>. As in the case of Rousseau’s mysterious illness or Baudelaire’s spleen, what counts is what an artist does with a subjective experience that remains in itself elusive<sup>101</sup>. *A Starobinski, insomma, non importa tanto la produzione della malinconia quanto piuttosto la sua produttività*<sup>102</sup>. One could hardly put it better. Works of art are not simply the “reflection” of a life and its circumstances; on the contrary, they must be assumed to possess the power to transcend them. To write, observes Starobinski in connection with Charles d’Orléans’ poetry of melancholy, “is to transform the impossibility of living into the possibility of saying”<sup>103</sup>. The important thing, in sum, is the way in which discourse makes expressive resources available to a reflexivity that “remains united to a troubled body”<sup>104</sup>.

<sup>98</sup> Ivi, p. 67.

<sup>99</sup> Ivi, p. 69.

<sup>100</sup> Pierre-Olivier Méthot, *Jean Starobinski et la rationalité de la médecine*, “Bulletin du Cercle d’études internationales Jean Starobinski”, 12, 2019, pp. 8-13.

<sup>101</sup> J. Starobinski, *Sur la maladie de Rousseau* (1962), in Id., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. La transparence et l’obstacle*, Gallimard, Paris 1971; Id., *L’immortalité mélancolique*, “Le Temps de la réflexion”, 3, 1982, pp. 231-251.

<sup>102</sup> “Starobinski, in short, is not so much concerned with the production of melancholy as with its productivity”: Bartolo Anglani, *Jean Starobinski o la malinconia*, “Lectures: Analisi di materiali e temi di espressione francese”, 14, June 1984 [issue *Malinconia*], pp. 199-211, p. 200.

<sup>103</sup> J. Starobinski, “*Un éclat sans fin pour mon amour*” (1963, original title: *L’encre de la mélancolie*), in Id., *L’Encre de la mélancolie*, cit., pp. 611-623, p. 622.

<sup>104</sup> J. Starobinski, *L’échelle des températures...*, cit., pp. 76-77.

We have seen, on the one hand, that the emotional and interoceptive turns attempt to reconcile nature and culture, language and experience, the individual and the collective. The coveted consilience, however, is problematic because emotional experiences and intimate perceptions of the body can only be grasped through their expressions, which are contingent. On the other hand, we have seen that Starobinski's approach to those experiences and perceptions derives from an understanding of language as that which, while giving access to the experience of others, imposes a barrier beyond which one cannot go without anachronism or risky speculation.

As we also mentioned, however, Starobinski does not give up the desire to access experience. This inherently unsatisfiable motive accounts for the "inquietude" that drives his work as an interpreter<sup>105</sup>. His "task as a reader" is to recognize "a style, an addressed word, an intention that leaves a trace thanks to the resources and constraints of language"; at the same time, true to Merleau-Ponty, Starobinski reminds us that the inner realm "where our intentions are formed" emerges "only through our relationship with the outside world and with the beings life brings us into contact with" – and that these beings ultimately remain beyond our reach<sup>106</sup>. Interiority necessarily refers to an otherness that constitutes it; as Merleau-Ponty noted, that intersubjective link allows us to understand the "bygone subjectivities" whose traces are found in historical documents<sup>107</sup>. However, even the poet, who seeks "integrally to garner the message that is both offered and shrouded by appearances", leaves a void; and in this void lodges "that which the poem seeks without attaining it, [...] that which it faces or desires without being able to capture it"<sup>108</sup>.

If Starobinski's criticism offers a "lesson" for studying the experience of the self and the body, it is that we must follow the "dialectics" of language as resource and constraint, and consider appearances as something that simultaneously reveal and conceal; that we should always keep in mind the gap between real beings and the trace they leave, the distance, with its "coefficient of negativity", between that trace and the original

<sup>105</sup> F. Vidal, "La vue d'ensemble délivre de l'inquiétude". *Notes sur un thème starobinskiien*, in M. Comte, S. Cudré-Mauroux, *Jean Starobinski – Les Approches du sens*, cit., pp. 395-409.

<sup>106</sup> J. Starobinski, *Remerciements*, cit. See also his comments on Montaigne's phrase "La parole est moitié à celui qui parle, moitié à celui qui l'écoute", in Id., *La parole est moitié à celui qui parle... – Entretiens avec Gérard Macé*, La Dogana, Geneva 2009, pp. 9-10.

<sup>107</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World* [1969], tr. John O'Neill, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, p. 25.

<sup>108</sup> J. Starobinski, "Parler avec la voix du jour", preface to Philippe Jaccottet, *Poésie 1946-1967*, Gallimard, Paris 1971, pp. 7-22, p. 12.

experience. We thereby renounce getting hold of the other, but not necessarily the desire to do so. Conversely, reading Jean Starobinski's work from the vantage point of the contemporary emotional and interoceptive turns underlines the radically historical and contextual character of his interpretive enterprise. The history of feelings, sensations and the consciousness of the body turns out to be as integral to his critical undertaking, as his criticism turns out to be a way of doing history that restores to the body the full extent of its reasons<sup>109</sup>.

<sup>109</sup> A shorter, somewhat different French version of this article appears in *Scienza & Filosofia*, 23, 2020, pp. 309-335 (<https://www.scienzaefilosofia.com/>).