MELANCHOLY-BETWEEN MEDICAL PATHOLOGY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

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Abstract:The texts signed by Jean Starobinski raise general human problems, such as melancholy, the need for transparency, the necessity for culture in order to evolve. Inevitably, no matter how objectively the critic proposes to remain, his writings expose an entire ontological system. Although theoretically Starobinski proposes a detachment from the analyzed texts, once the analysis begins, a merger with its subjects can be observed. What this Swiss critic brings new is how it throws lights and shadows on the studied works, because, as a result of his medical studies, no detail can be eliminated and the very context of the work is defining for its occurrence. Practitioner of psychiatry for a long time, Starobinski has the chance to study literature from a dual perspective: cultural and ailing. In the merger of the two sides lies the mastery of this psychiatrist who has professed his faith to dive into the hidden truths. Critical thinking is an allegorical vision of the human condition along the evolution of culture. The method proposed by Starobinski is to overturn the discrepancies between the inner world and the outer world, for both are interconditioned in our lives, and even more so in the lives of the authors of literary works. Starobinski's moral duty, as he perceives it, is to reveal and expose all the imperfections of human nature.

Keywords: psychiatry, melancholy, philosophy, criticism, disclosure

The literary critic and Swiss physician **Jean Starobinski** (1920-) was born in Geneva, where he also attended the courses of the Faculty of Letters and Medicine. The medical specialization followed is psychiatry which he practiced in Cery University Clinic. But he left the psychiatric career in 1958. Literature brought him spiritual fulfillment as he taught French literature at the University of Baltimore in the United States and in Basel, and in Geneva, in the descent of the American philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy, Starobinski taught history of ideas and history of medicine.

"The greatest critic of post-war European literature and culture", as Mircea Martin calls him, Starobinski was not only a student, but also an assistant to Marcel Raymond. Enjoying a special intellectual atmosphere, Starobinski joins the group that made up the *Geneva School*. What united Raymond and Starobinski was the admiration for the author of the *Social Contract*. In fact, Starobinski signed a study (*J.J. Rousseau: Transparency and Obstacle*-1957) before his mentor. In addition to studies dedicated to the Epoch of Lights, Starobinski also signed a study dedicated to a Renaissance philosopher: Michel de Montaigne (*Montaigne en Mouvement*-1982) reaching with his historical analysis to the founder of semiotics, sociologist and philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure.

The medical interest that Jean Starobinski has had in issues on the border of medicine and literature is best highlighted by the introduction he signed to Robert Burton's (1577-1640) *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Although the title of this Renaissance work can be misleading, melancholy is not analyzed in the book as a pathological element, but is viewed from a satirical, philosophical point of view and even in modern, psychological terms. Vicar and humanist, Robert Burton discusses symptomatic, etiological and therapeutic melancholy but is more of a

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mixture of "medical psychology and literary rhetoric."[1] Starobinski was interested in studying the psychological origin of illnesses and how the topicality of depression was coming back as major psychiatric illness from the middle of the last century towards present day; it was natural for the medical practitioner to address literally this field as well.

William Osler (1849-1919), Canadian physician, writer, historian, and founder of the Society of Medical History (who began his work in 1912) saw Burton's *Anatomy of Medicine* as "a great medical treatise, orderly in arrangement, serious in purpose, and weighty beyond belief with authorities."[2] Melancholy was believed in the Renaissance, to be tributary to the theory of the four humors, that it was the result of an imbalance of the black bile. Even etymologically the term is a compound and comes from Greek: *melas* (black) and *khole* (bile). Jean Starobinski, aware of the pseudo-science behind Burton's treaty, catalogs him as parataxis of wisdom and madness.

Spirit inspired by the multitude of his readings, Starobinski, surpasses the purely medical or literary aspect of Burton's writing, and sees in this treatise a cultural and encyclopedic periplus sculptured in the shape of the satire. But, affected by the apathy, the psychologist and Swiss critic will also signed in his turn *Histoire du traitement de la mélancolie, des origines à 1900(Acta psychosomatica)* în 1960 and *L'Encre de la mélancholie* (2012).Starobinski's books, with the most varied thrills of reading (from ancients, Renaissance, to Enlightenment up to modern day), are an intellectual periplus, full of ingenious notions, "with a flawless erudition, with a peerless art of the enlighten quotation. The influence of psychoanalysis, the dominant ideology of his age, could be said - it is pure, but discreet, never aggressive or pedantic."[3] The thoroughness inherited from medical studies did not allow him to go quickly through a theme without deepening it. From his medical studies period, Starobinski also sensed the need to analyze, to complete didacticism with practical application, a need for meticulous dissection, but also to build a sturdy structure on conceptual considerations and rigorous classification. All these exist because the psychiatrist reveals a "theoretical inclination supported by historical analogies, etymological drills and taxonomic passion."[4]

The literary critic, in the perspective of the Swiss physician, has the duty to uncover the literary work to reach its essence, at the core of the problem. This is the perspective of the analyzed text. The atomization would destroy the fine fabric from which any literary text is made of, but also the distancing could lead to the loss of details. The critic, therefore, has the difficult attempt to find the correct "angle" from which to contemplate the literary work. This approach to the critical act seems to translate the aesthetic values of a medical laboratory analysis considerations. How close are you to the "microscope slide" on which the sample to be analyzed is exposed, which, in the case of the critic, is literary? As in the case of medicine, it is also a science: the one of analysis because the Swiss critic, like a disciple ofHippocrates, makes an anamnesis, establishes correlations, detects anomalies and identifies diagnosis. Criticism is built in a concentric way. As with a spiral, every detail can bring with it a new disclosure of meanings.

[1] Andrew Hadfield, *Robert Burton and The Anatomy of Melancholy*, in *The Oxford Handbook of English Prose 1500-1640*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 647
[2] William Osler, *Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy* in Yale Review, January 1914, Yale Publishing Association, p. 252
[3] Ion Vianu, *Jean Starobinski and the "ink of melancholy"*, in *Old Dilemma*, VIII, no. 80, January 2013
[4] Mircea Martin, *Foreword* to Jean Starobinski, *Fundamental Gestures of Critique*, Translation and Preface by Angela Martin, Art Publishing House, 2014, p. 7

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Melancholy is, according to the Swiss psychiatrist, an abstraction of concepts as a result of the loss of the relationship with the everyday concrete, but also a split in the way of thinking. Starobinski's specific erudition pushed him towards the very genesis of the term nostalgia. This term appeared in 1688, coined by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer (1669-1752) in his paper *Dissertatio curiosa-medica, de nostalgia, vulgo: Heimwehe oder Heimsehnsucht*, printed in 1745 to describe the feeling of natives alienated from their country. Somatization of such a feeling was then further analyzed more and more in medicine. But Starobinski sees in it a deviation as a result of the distortion of the term "country longing." Although in 1960 he seemed determined to reject this notion that seemed ridiculous, Starobinski returned to this psychiatric concept because the conditions of the modern world also demanded it. Recurrent theme, the term melancholy seems indissolubly linked to the very structure of the critic of literary works.

Jean Starobinski also proposes a set of stages in which the reading of a literary work should take place. The physician-critic believes that any text should not be broken from the broader, social, economic, and even political context that generated it and whose outcome is, and the literary critic, in general, has the hard task of interconnecting these landmarks and building a much more complex map because like in the work of a physician, the critic blends objective assessment (symptomatology, factual analysis) with the sensitive analysis. And this structure has three distinct components: the sudden affinity for the text taken into account, the impartial and detached analysis and the meditation on the proposed theme. If this process would only be reduced to the excitement of emotion, criticism would remain without depth; if only the detached analysis would pass, the essence, the message of the text would be lost. Ultimately, the work of the literary critic is a decipherment.

This appetite for symbolism, coupled with the almost physiological need for decipherment, led Jean Starobinski to dedicate a study to Ferdinand de Saussure's way of looking at the linguistic sign. From the introductory words to a linguist study we can deduce Starobinski's attraction for the hidden meanings that are expected to be discovered: "L'essentiel de ces cahiers est occupé par des exercices de déchiffrage. Nous citons ici un vaticinium saturnien, deux passages de Lucrèce, un texte de Sénèque, un poème néo-latin de Politien, tels qu'ils apparaissent dans les cahiers de Saussure, avec l'analyse phonique qui les escorte. Ce n'est là qu'une faible partie des lectures anagrammatiques: elles peuvent néanmoins servir d'exemple pour toutes les autres."[5]

The fascination for hidden symbolism makes Starobinski annoyed with the idea of deciphering the texts of others. It's a recreation of the universe already created by someone else. The art of criticism, however, consists not only in deciphering and associating a signifier with a synchronic and diachronic signified (in terms of Saussurian terminology), but also a subsequent detachment of the critic of its own result of decipherment. This distance from the outcome of criticism is one that gives the measure of objectivity: "We deduce that critical analysis must achieve such clarity and that reconstruction has such evocative force that it seems that the literary work itself speaks, it is revealed to us without the critic's intervention being necessary."[6]

Every act of culture, even one of modernity, has as its primary source antiquity. The work of the critic is an assiduous, documentary and detachment of text layers and resembles the work of a researcher. The same idea is underlined by Adrian Marino

[5] Jean Starobinski, *Avant-propos*, in *Les mots sour les mots. Les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971. p. 9

[6] Mircea Martin, *Foreword* to Jean Starobinski, *Fundamental Gestures of Critique*, Translation and Preface by Angela Martin, Art Publishing House, 2014, p. 11

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"Each literary idea is subjected to an internal radiography that sketches its skeleton and history in the form of a spherical, concentrated reconstruction. It is restored, on the texts, in an analytical way, the very process of the idea, the ordering and the critical systematization, by solving all the qualities and defects of the previous solutions. The fundamental elements of the problem are, in this way, detected, extracted and reformulated in a limited space, by excavation, compression and systematization."[7]

The similarity between the two, Marino and Starobinski, consists in the fact that for both texts express themselves. There is, however, also a difference. In Starobinski's criticism, a creative force is involved, with a certain momentum, as long as the Romanian critic examines the literary work more systematically. One of Starobinski's first critical studies was *J.J. Rousseau, La Transparency et l'Obstacle, suivi de Sept Essais sur Rousseau* (1958). Psychiatrist as formation, the Swiss critic examines the French Enlightenment representative from a medical point of view, psychoanalytically, confirming the diagnoses that have been made over time: paranoia and obsessive behavior. It is this stunning attitude of Starobinski, which is specific to medical sciences, also noted by other exegetes: "Shattered myths, unmasked tutelary figures. He reinterpreted coryphei - beyond Rousseau, Montaigne, Diderot, Voltaire - in their frustrating intimacy, in their true essence, uncorrupted and unadulterated by appearances. So what could be more exciting for a psychiatrist and a literary critic attached to human sciences, such as Starobinski, than trying to understand the subtleties and complications generated by the relationship between man and mask, between the individual and society, between the soul and the body?"[8]

The erudition of this critic is not to be appreciated by all the exegetes. His analysis is pertinent precisely because it represents a cultural periplus through the life of the analyzed author, through the age in which he lived, but also by identifying the way in which the author influenced, or was influenced, in his turn, overwhelmed by all that surrounded him at the time of creation. The Swiss psychiatrist-critic carries readers on a journey of the mind beyond the temporal or spatial boundaries of language or customs, creating a self-contained universe that includes the lecturer: "Il s'agissait d'une sorte de voyage sémantique au travers de la philosophie, de la science et de la littérature, de la mise en lumière d'un mouvement premier et fondateur. L'élargissement propre au geste critique dont je parlais à l'instant a donc bien vocation à embrasser un champ universel."[9]

In 1970 the Swiss psychiatrist signed a new literary work: *L'Artiste en Saltimbanque*. As part of the decipherment, the critic focuses on the subject of the mask this time. This concern for camouflage can have as source Starobinski's childhood. In Geneva, around 11th December, *Fête de l'Esclade*, in which the Genoese celebrate the rejection of the Duke of Savoy, battle carried in 1602. Nowadays, people dress up, carol and watch parades. The grotesque figures used in human history come to deepen the anguish. Whether they are part of a ritual or a celebration, these bizarre figures are associated with the fantastic where anything is possible. Used from the time of the ancient tragedies, the masks change the reflection of reality, the game between the surface and the depth, between what is real and what is fabulous. The question that may arise is: how

[7] Adrian Marino, *Limits of the hermeneutical method*, in *Ramuri*, VIII, no. 10, 1971, p. 8
[8] Angela Martin, *Preface* to Jean Starobinski, *Fundamental Gestures of Critique*, Translation and Preface by Angela Martin, Art Publishing House, 2014, p. 19
[9] Patrick Kéchichian, *Notes de lecture* Jean Starobinski, *La beauté du monde. La littérature et les arts,* in *La nouvelle revue française,* no. 621, novembre 2016, Gallimard, p. 148

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much of what we live is hypocrisy and how real it is and this can create anxiety, anyway a new source of contemplation for the critic.

There is some nostalgia for hidden truths in Starobinski's work, as if he would want to reveal everything concealed, to scrutinize like a cutting surgeon into the flesh, and expose everything that is masked. Both actor and the spectator, the "mask" enters the very fiber of our human existence. Although we want transparency, we are all complicit in camouflage. We are, after all, pursuing a chimera, a dream of innocence to which we do not obey, and even more so, the creators of literary works do. But in the case of writers, the rewriting of reality is a convention ending with the lecturer who knows from the beginning to distinguish between fabulous and real. Unmasking is the work of the critic who has the ethical duty to draw attention to faults.

The critic has a moral and social responsibility. He is endowed with autonomy of the spirit, the sense of responsibility, the requirement of the universe, the hostility of the masks.Starobinski, highly influenced by the ideas of the Renaissance writers, condemns general human defects such as lack of tolerance and aspires to the perfecting of the spirit through culture, because the lack of an evolutionary purpose leads to the decline of the human being. Writing is some sort of catharsis, liberation from frustration, but also a duty to others. Starobinski perceives reality as an ordered set of disparate elements. This is another hope for the critic: creating a system based on syncretism. Which does not seem impossible if we take into account the critic's erudition that has proved capable of completing the exact science of reading and love for culture. He also broke the barriers between disciplines that seemed heterogeneous and managed to bring together free pathology, literature and spirituality in a homogeneous whole, composed of writings from the ancient to the modern ones; through him eclecticism seems to be a self-standing voice.

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