

**Academy of Moral and Political Sciences,**  
**Foreign Associate Member Zaki Nusseibeh**  
**13<sup>th</sup> June 2022**

**THE LIFE AND WORKS OF JEAN STAROBINSKI**

Monsieur le Président,  
Mesdames et Messieurs les Académiciens,  
Chers collègues,  
Chers amis,

1. I offer my profound gratitude for the great honour you grant to me today in welcoming me to join you as foreign associate member. I am deeply touched by the words of welcome offered by my friend Professor Jean-Robert Pitte.
2. I am truly humbled and awed by the privilege of taking the place of my distinguished predecessor, Professor Jean Starobinski or 'Staro', to his own family, friends, and colleagues, of whom a few are with us here under the Cupola today.
3. Jean Starobinski had been elected to the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on November 16<sup>th</sup> 1987, like two professors of literature who were very dear to him: Georges Poulet in 1984 and Marcel Raymond, in 1977. This is truly fitting if we think that the first allowed the young Starobinski to pursue research in the history of medicine in Baltimore, a stay during which he wrote his thesis on Rousseau, and that the second was his mentor and took him on as an assistant in French language and literature at the University of Geneva from 1946. In 1998 *l'Académie française* honoured him with the distinction of the *Grand Prix de la Francophonie*, an award made for his critical works of worldwide renown. I would like to take this opportunity to salute Madame *le Secrétaire Perpétuel de l'Académie française* who is present amongst us today. I therefore take over from a man whose stature matches the dimensions of the 20th century since, given he was born in 1920 and died in 2019, he lived for almost a hundred years.
4. As said his friend and French publisher Pierre Nora, a member of la Française, in the fine eulogy he delivered in 2010 when he presented Starobinski with the prize of the *Fondation pour Genève* - "Jean Starobinski, what is the secret of your greatness? ". Over the past few months, this question has become mine.
5. As is customary according to the rite of installation of a member of your academy, it is therefore up to me to evoke Jean Starobinski, whom I would like to present as a personality who embodies "European consciousness" and the ideal of openness to the world. At this time, when France is completing its European presidency, his message - "In spirit, of course, I want to be a citizen of Europe and, if possible, of the world" has renewed meaning. It is a Welt-Mann reaching out to me in the Middle East.

6. Jean Starobinski was both a Doctor of Letters, having defended a thesis in literary history on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, immediately published in 1957 under the title *La transparence et l'obstacle*, and a Doctor of Medicine, author in 1959 of a thesis on the history of the treatment of melancholy from the origins to 1900. After having been a practitioner in psychiatry, he devoted himself to the history of medicine and ideas, to the written form, and to teaching for more than 35 years at the University of Geneva. An internationally renowned literary critic, his books on philosophical thought in the Age of Enlightenment, on Montesquieu, Rousseau, Diderot, Montaigne, Baudelaire, opera, and painting have been translated into fifteen languages. His work covers a wide range of human experiences, from artistic creation to inner suffering and the movement of ideas in Europe, the peaks of which are *L'invention de la liberté entre 1700 et 1789*, published in 1964, and *1789: les emblèmes de la raison*, published in 1973.
7. It is not in my gift in this brief address to render in full the heights and breadths of the personality, life, and works of this great Swiss intellect. Nonetheless I should like to draw out some themes that strike a personal chord with me.
8. Indeed, the first theme – that of humanism – will be the thread that will run throughout my address today.
9. Jean Starobinski, a Russian of Polish origin, was granted Swiss citizenship at the age of 29. Except for a brief period of study in the USA, he rarely left Geneva. In his ninetieth year, he was awarded the prize of *la Fondation pour Genève* in tribute to his public activities and academic publications that had fostered the influence of Geneva in Switzerland and throughout the world. In awarding him the prize, the Foundation recognized a man they called “a Genoise humanist, one of the greatest humanists of the last 100 years”. In his acceptance speech Jean Starobinski responded to this tribute by defining what, in his view, is the true essence of humanism – something far from the superficial “varnish” limited to an erudition of detail with which some adorn themselves.
10. Characteristically, he crafted his concept of literary criticism through an analogy derived through contrast and comparison, drawing on his own interdisciplinary bilingualism in arts and sciences. He defined and positioned the role of humanism through an account of the limits of scientific epistemology.
11. Humanism, he said, “is to prioritise attention to the human experience in all its diversity and contradictions. It is the urge to make sense of the world we inhabit. It is the desire to perceive the history we stand on in the present moment and to formulate a principled way of life”. He said, that while we live in a world transformed by the powers of science, science offers no ethical or moral guidance to follow in acquiring its powers or employing its resources. The notion of neighbour and the imperative of respect for others are not products of science, but are what characterizes humanism: “the priority role given to a moral requirement which makes “a human person not a means but an end, in its existence, in its recognized singularity and difference”.

12. However, Starobinski did not seek to oppose humanism and the sciences in a dichotomous way. Far from this. He who had studied medicine, like his parents, knew the vulnerability of a personal ethic decorrelated from any "objective" proof but also the value of courage in order to guarantee that scientific progress is never to the detriment of humanity.
13. He himself embodied, of course, the strength of one who combines the two worlds, seeking to understand one from the perspective of the other. Thus, he said of reading that it consists in hearing the rhythm and the frequency produced by the physiology of the text, its syntax, the juxtaposition of its elements, as one listens with a stethoscope.
14. Yet he also underlined the necessity to make clear distinctions between the two worlds, saying that one does not 'diagnose' a work of literature just as one does not heal the sick with fine words. According to him, what is important is to search for the precise means and materials that respond to the text or patient in question, to use an approach that is fed by both a creative generosity of spirit and the precision of analysis, and to draw on an experience that understands and a science that measures.
15. Starobinski derived his "method" of literary criticism from the principles of intellectual independence he claimed, refusing to ascribe to any ideological position. The "art" of his interrogation was to select the correct tool from a full range of interpretive resources, a tool that would establish the precise critical distance appropriate to comprehension. He found it essential to find meaning by patiently drawing comparisons and contrasts, and to examine the roots of a text, its beginnings and development, the way it was received by the public, its political impact and its detractors. "The Geneva School", with which he is associated alongside Albert Béguin, Jean Rousset, Georges Poulet and Marcel Raymond, was characterized by this eternally reflective and interdisciplinary openness. To a greater extent than his masters, he expressed the responsibility of the essayist to put himself to the test, by formulating questions that concern the present, such as reason and progress, oppression and its psychological mechanisms.
16. The second theme that I would like to address, and which unravels the common thread of humanism, is Starobinski's taste for art and beauty.
17. The discipline of writing, which for some is a formidable ordeal, was a great happiness for him and he is recognized as a master of the critical essay. In the collection of his texts entitled *La beauté du monde; la littérature et les arts*, Starobinski made sense of his constant attention to art and literature. He also revealed the ethic of his criticism as allowing us to hear and clarify the questions that poets, painters, and musicians pose through their work about the beauties of the world. For Starobinski criticism is the effort to exalt the beauty of the world, to fight against its furies, and to build defences against the madness of men. He believed that it is the compassion of the critic that reveals the order of the world, imposing a rigour at times when waves of darkness and confusion threaten to overwhelm mankind.

18. His moral stance found root and expression in the study of the art, literature, and ideas of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, and in his reading of Rousseau. Rousseau explored the dark sides of human nature and as consequence, investigated the requirements of a society with the capacity to honour human freedoms and desires and to reconcile these with the ideals of equality, progress, and human dignity.
19. We should recall that Starobinski was born in 1920 in Geneva into an intellectually fertile milieu that cherished the arts, culture and sciences. His father had arrived in Geneva from Warsaw with a copy of Faust in his pocket. He had come there to study philosophy and medicine after his Jewish identity prevented him from continuing his studies in Poland. He probably got his copy of Faust from his own father, who had come to Warsaw from the forests of northern Lithuania to open a library. In Geneva, Jean Starobinski's father and mother – also both doctors – shaped a family life steeped in culture and conversations in several languages with poets, political thinkers and philosophers. By creating a family in his turn, Jean Starobinski perpetuated this same harmony with his wife Jacqueline, a renowned ophthalmologist of Russian origin, and their three sons, Michel, oncologist, Pierre, organizer of artistic projects, and Georges, musician and musicologist.
20. Starobinski owed to Geneva his love for music. He was a chorist, a pianist, and a drummer, regularly attended choral and orchestral performances, and took part in chamber music recitals hosted in his home. Music influenced his writing and criticism, he perceived a rhythm and melody as a language that is beneath and beyond words, requiring a special ear to find the meaning of the natural and human experience it evokes.
21. Students and citizens of Geneva thronged to listen to ‘Staro’ who had a passion for teaching but was no didact. He led his classes at the University of Geneva as ‘laboratories’ of inquiry, research, and discovery. He said that his classes were workshops where he and his students would prepare ideas that would be put down later on paper.
22. He described his personal library as a ‘workbench’ and its 45,000 volumes in all fields of human endeavour as ‘his tools’. He knew the location of the texts by touch and assembled works together in preparation for each intellectual project. The collection in his private study demonstrated his eclectic tastes, which ranged from Raymond Chandler to the anagrams of Saussure. Today this library is one of the most important European private libraries and is given to the National Library in the city of Bern.
23. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Geneva was likened to the Jerusalem of Europe, a cosmopolitan and internationalist haven. In Geneva a diverse society of immigrants and refugees found sanctuary from persecution and conflict across the continent. This diverse society formed his circle of friends and nourished it with intellectual and aesthetic stimulation. These included the collections of the Prado Museum, sheltered in Geneva during the Spanish Civil War, which made a strong impression on him and led to a sense of responsibility and a lifelong preoccupation with world affairs.

24. Starobinski served for 30 years as the President of the *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*, from 1965 to 1995 having belonged to the organising committee since 1949. He described this position as ‘paying a public debt’. The *Rencontres* bring multi-disciplinary, international perspectives to bear on themes and currents of the contemporary era. Their purpose is to warn of the dangers of received ideas, manipulation, sleep-walking, and intellectual retreat. Sensitive to the ever-changing complexity of world affairs they seek clarification and elucidation of avenues that maximise progress and wellbeing. During the time of his Presidency *Les Rencontres* the meetings served to bridge Europe with the world, highlighting dangers, defining European identities in the plural, and outlining the conditions of happiness. They generated an academic and cultural festival that manifested Geneva’s public spirit, its independence, and its cultural curiosity and made it the Intellectual Capital of Europe.

## **THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**

25. Ladies and Gentlemen. In the time elapsed since I received notice of my election to the Académie, I have spent much time reflecting on the significance of this event.

26. There is, I believe, a great historical meaning in the election to the Académie of its first member from the Arabian Gulf region. I am humbled that the honour and responsibility of such a fact is bestowed on me. Yet I am also very proud to be the Academy’s first member from the United Arab Emirates, the country that it has been my honour to serve for the majority of my career as its adopted citizen. It is a truly momentous event in the trajectory of my personal life.

27. Yet my reflections persuade me that there is an additional significance to the event. I believe this occasion is a consequence of the good fortune with which I have been blessed in living and working in the UAE. Indeed, I conclude a necessary connection between my own professional and intellectual growth and this milieu I was adopted into. Therefore, the distinction of my election belongs not to me. It is rather testament to the values, aspirations, and capacities of the United Arab Emirates, and the inspirational individuals I have encountered there.

28. Therefore I would like to elucidate for you the philosophy and character of the milieu that provided the necessary conditions for my wellbeing, development, and productivity, and in which trajectory I was so fortunate to play a small part by working so closely with its founding father, the late Sheikh Zayed, and subsequently with today’s leadership. Though far removed in geographic context and time, I truly believe that this milieu would have resonated with the ideals and values of Jean Starobinski.

29. The United Arab Emirates is a young nation established as a Federation in 1971. I am fortunate to have been an active witness to its phenomenal journey in the last 50 years. I am also therefore privileged to have an authoritative insight into its character and values.

30. Let us remember that the commonplace narrative of the Gulf and Middle East speaks of political turbulence, and violent conflict. We also witness acts of barbarism committed

both in France and elsewhere by extremist elements donned in a falsified Islamist garb. These cast a contorted and disfigured image of our religion and fan the flames of islamophobia in many capitals of the world, threatening traditional fraternal bonds between the peoples of both sides of the Mediterranean.

31. In contrast, the UAE is a country rooted in the true heritage of Islam, thus placing a priority on the dignity of human life. The UAE's national vision and strategies resonate with the pursuit of tolerance, empathy, and compassion. They express the forcefully and fundamentally humanitarian values that reflect its Islamic teachings. Its leadership and governance are devoted to ensuring each of its residents has equal access to the security, resources, and opportunity that are necessary to a healthy, safe, and purposeful life.
32. Furthermore, the UAE's horizons expand beyond its shores to promote international openness, cooperation, and charity. This worldview recognises that our national welfare is interdependent with global wellbeing. Above all it advocates peaceful coexistence both within the diverse multicultural communities housed in its territories, and between countries and peoples of the world.
33. This contrasting account of a young Islamic country may surprise those who have not had the opportunity to visit the UAE. The explanation for the UAE's exceptionalism is grounded in the vision and values of Sheikh Zayed. Like my distinguished predecessor Jean Starobinski, and despite the fact that both men belonged to entirely different worlds and cultures, Sheikh Zayed was entirely the Renaissance Man of the Arabian Peninsula. He became, over four decades an essential feature and architect of the milieu of my life experience and I would like, if you allow me, to talk a little about him now.
34. Sheikh Zayed was a transformational leader with deeply humanitarian values and worldview. He understood the purpose of his leadership to be the alleviation of human suffering and the maximisation of human potential. He was emphatic about his vision but viewed that it could only be fulfilled through the collaboration of the people - people motivated by a shared belief in the possibility of building a nation prosperous enough to secure their own wellbeing.
35. Sheikh Zayed's success as a transformational leader lay in something profound, immutable, and powerful. He represented all that the Arabic word *murou'a* conveys – generosity, chivalry, nobility, charity, and empathy.
36. These virtues and instincts led him to prioritise human dignity, coexistence, and wellbeing. Today our national institutions, infrastructure, and norms provide for our statehood and embody his humanitarian worldview. The fabric of the country and the identity of its people is woven through with his values.
37. Today, the domestic policies of the United Arab Emirates, our dealings with Arab and Islamic states, and our wider commitments to the international institutions of global governance continue the humanitarian methodology of the nation's first president. I wish now to bring to life for you how this humanitarianism is expressed.

38. The UAE's record of religious and cultural coexistence and tolerance is longstanding. It is home to more than 200 nationalities and protects in law their right for respect and practice of their individual beliefs, customs, and traditions. It thereby implements its commitments consequent on being signatory to international treaties on religious tolerance.
39. In the Gulf region the UAE stands out for permitting the establishment of non-Muslim religious places of worship and donating land for such purposes. Furthermore, our new Abrahamic Family House, consisting of mosque, church, synagogue, and educational centre, will inspire and nurture mutual understanding and harmonious coexistence among people of faith.
40. Educational development has always been a longstanding feature of the United Arab Emirates' domestic policy. Sheikh Zayed said, "The real wealth of the country is its youth, and we must provide all young people with the means to develop their potential".
41. In 1971, there was only a handful of schools in the new Federation, and no universities. Few people had even the basics of an education. Therefore, it was essential to build the UAE's comprehensive system of primary and senior schooling with speed, to make it free and compulsory for girls and for boys. To encourage parents to send their children to school students received a salary in return for their attendance. Today, over 93% of the population has achieved a basic or high school education and women make up more than 70% of university graduates.
42. Today the UAE is home to over 100 universities and institutes of higher education rooted in all corners of the globe. The diversity of our higher education system mirrors the international, multicultural fabric of the country, our cultural openness, and our tolerance. And it is in this context that our cultural policy plays an important role.
43. Sheikh Zayed laid the foundations for a critical mass of cultural activity to evolve. He believed that a vibrant cultural scene was a sign of a healthy society, a robust national identity, and a source of exploration, reconciliation, and creativity. For this reason, we worked to set up cultural authorities and ministries very early.
44. In the last fifty years the UAE has grown to be one of the world's major centres of culture, and the nature of its cultural life is markedly global. The UAE's cultural industries are important part of the country's economic production and social evolution. We invest in initiatives to strengthen the art scene, music, literature, performance, and crafts and we endeavour to train and promote artistic talents.
45. In the 1960s Sheikh Zayed spoke to me about his ambition to open his country to the modernity of the global community, while preserving the heritage and soul of the Emirati culture. In the context of my executive role in Abu Dhabi's culture, heritage, and tourist authorities, I sought to develop a mutually beneficial relationship between the UAE and

the cultures of the world. Within this, our country's strong ties to the Francophone world were of particular importance.

46. The close relations between the UAE and the wider Francophonie are based on mutual considerations of economic, political, and security strategies. More importantly, they recognise shared values and ideals. In 1975 I took part in Sheikh Zayed's first state visit to France. The visit intended to establish a strategic partnership with a country he considered a natural ally to a new nation that was eager to play an active role in securing stability in the Middle East – a region strategically important to global prosperity but afflicted by conflict and tension. For her part, France gave much credit to the UAE for its desire to work for harmony, moderation, fraternity, and peace. The following year I accompanied the then Crown Prince and subsequently President of the UAE, the late President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan on his visit to seal the friendship of the two nations. It was in this way that the foundations of our historic partnership took shape.
47. We have worked with institutions such as the Alliance Française, which I have had the privilege of leading for over four decades, having joined briefly the Board of Administration of the Alliance Foundation in Paris. Together we have set up many Alliance Française outlets throughout the UAE. This year we celebrated the day of the Francophonie at Expo 2020 Dubai, where French was introduced as a main language together with Arabic and English. I am also proud of my close working relationship with the *Institut du monde arabe* in Paris, led by my distinguished friend Jack Lang. As Minister of Culture under President Mitterrand, Jack Lang was of course instrumental in building the *Institut*, an entity strongly supported by Sheikh Zayed from the outset.
48. **Let me now speak of our foreign policy.**
49. Sheikh Zayed was the architect of the foreign policy that is now carried forward by our present leadership. During my work as Sheikh Zayed's interpreter and advisor I observed his continuous attempts to bring wellbeing, security, and stability in all countries that the UAE deals with.
50. Today our foreign policy extends the hand of friendship around the world, upholds the spirit of the United Nation's Charter, and observes international law. Our international reputation is that of moderation, openness, and collaboration.
51. The UAE plays an active role in the institutions of global governance. As a mid-sized nation we realise that it is important to be part of the international community, and to have laws that work towards peace and prosperity. This year the UAE took up its seat on the UN Security Council for the second time.
52. International charitable giving has always been a cornerstone of foreign policy. From the early days when the country lacked its own infrastructure it made donations amounting up to 10% of its new oil wealth. Today the UAE is one of the world's most important sources of international humanitarian aid. It makes donations irrespective of geography, religion, or ethnicity.

53. The UAE also responds swiftly to instances of international crisis and emergency. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAE played a leading role in accelerating the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to low-income countries. It used its logistics networks, storage capacity, and central geographic location to supply over 2000 tons of ventilators, personal protective equipment, and diagnostic tests to more than 135 countries. Its aid was critical to alleviating suffering, and it brought a practical message of hope and solidarity.
54. **Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me next to speak of the UAE's diplomatic and humanitarian vision for the future.**
55. As I have said, fifty years ago the UAE was born in precarious circumstances, existentially threatened by domestic and regional challenges. Nevertheless, the humanitarian pursuit of progress has succeeded. Today the UAE is a modern, successful, and ambitious nation that has the capacity to provide safety, security, and stability in the region.
56. Today the UAE provides the model of human development for the Arab region. The UAE's journey shows that it is crucial to a nation's resilience and stability to develop human capacity, prioritise human wellbeing, and to promote and implement a humanist ethos.
57. The fiftieth anniversary of the United Arab Emirates gave us cause to reflect on the priorities and processes necessary to secure our growth and prosperity in the future fifty years. It is certain that our advances with nation-building have already generated the intellectual and cultural capital necessary to an economic diversification away from dependency on oil-revenues. Yet our present leadership wished to provide overarching vision and direction to this effort. In doing so they derived ten guiding principles.
58. These ten principles certainly enshrine the legacy of Sheikh Zayed. I also find their echo in the wider mission of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*, in which the UAE is proud to belong as an active associate member.
59. The leadership's two primary principles are to strengthen the union of the UAE and to foster a vibrant, diversified economy. Three further principles identify the tools we must use to do this. They instruct us to further develop human capital, to expand the frontiers of our digital, technical, and scientific excellence, and to continue a foreign policy based on multilateral cooperation.
60. These principles are exciting. They speak to the importance of a university as a generator of intellect and knowledge, innovation, and research. They attest to the wisdom of Sheikh Zayed when he said that the most important investment a nation could make was to educate the next generation so that they are prepared for their future.
61. However, I find the final five principles the most striking.

62. These final five principles enable me to conclude as I began, by speaking of the humanist concern. The principles present an ethical framework for the direction of economic and social progress. They ask us to practice the principles of good-neighbourliness, openness and tolerance, and charitable aid. They instruct us to advocate for peace and harmony, and to use negotiation and dialogue as the means to conflict resolution. They honour and continue our humanitarian legacy.

## CONCLUSION

63. Ladies and gentlemen, I am fortunate to have been participant to the milieu of the United Arab Emirates. It is a milieu impregnated by the humanitarian character of its leadership, institutions, policies, and practices. Its vibrant educational and cultural resources, and its global openness and concern are central to its foundations and sustainability.

64. I have presented my election to the Academy as a tribute to this milieu. I further hope that in taking my place amongst you, our association will be mutually enriching, bringing opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and connection at the level of individuals, organisations, and our nations.

65. I would like to think that any projects resulting from such opportunity might bring outcomes equivalent to those of the *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*. This would be a most fitting tribute to my predecessor Professor Jean Starobinski. I hope that such projects would foster international, interdisciplinary, cultural, and moral perspectives that help us to interpret contemporary world affairs. Such projects would harness our intellectual energy and resources towards the invigoration of a humanist culture that renders a life worth living.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

66. Monsieur le Président, Mesdames et Messieurs, les Académiciens, Chères collègues, Chers amis !

67. You have honored me by inviting me to join your distinguished Academy to fill the chair vacated by the passing away of Jean Starobinski, a great humanist, a polymath of eclectic learning, a talented and dedicated mentor and teacher, an iconic giant of the world of culture, and a global leader of ideas and values.

68. I thank you heartily for this singular privilege.

69. When I look around me today to this august company, gathered in this historic cathedral of human knowledge and enlightenment, I am awed beyond words by the stellar quality and academic preeminence of its illustrious members. I realize fully the inadequacy of my own merits to give justice to Jean Starobinski's legendary legacy. But I wholeheartedly pledge myself to serve the Academy's ideals and purposes, and I promise to try my utmost to live up to honoring my predecessor's memory.