

Lost in Fire, Lost in Letters: Archives of the Algerian War

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the status of the Jeanson archives. Sartrean philosopher Francis Jeanson (1922–2009) was the leader of the most prominent network of metropolitan French nationals who actively supported the Front de libération nationale (FLN) during the Algerian War (1954–62). Three dates are seminal when it comes to the Jeansonian trajectory, the Algerian War, and the issue of collecting archives: 2009, 1966, and 1965. In November 2009, three months after Jeanson’s death, his house was severely damaged in a fire that destroyed part of his archives. The year 2016 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the law of June 17, 1966, that granted amnesty to the members of the “Jeanson network.” The amnesty involved an attempt at national reconciliation by trying to erase controversial historical traces of his role during the war. In 1965 Jeanson produced an epistolary novel, *Lettre aux femmes* (Letter to women), which draws on his experience during the Algerian War but without any of the specifics. Hence, the novel can be understood as a space of both memory and forgetting and constitutes an archive in its own right.

What was so threatening about the Jeanson archives that political authorities should find themselves granting them amnesty? Why should these archives surface in the one work of fiction of Jeanson’s considerable oeuvre, and what is behind their partial disappearance in a house fire whose cause remains unresolved?

I thank Jane Kuntz for translating this article from the French.

DIBUR LITERARY JOURNAL
Issue 3, Fall 2016

Archives: Literary Perspectives on the Intersections Between History and Fiction



THREE DATES: 2009, 1966, 1965

“The Jeanson network” and “the Jeanson trial” are the most salient historical markers commonly associated with Sartrian philosopher Francis Jeanson (1922–2009). The symbolic power of his name evokes one of the most divisive issues of the Algerian War, that of the network of French men and women who stood up for Algerian independence.¹

On November 5, 2009, three months after Jeanson’s death on August 1, 2009, while his son was in Algiers attending a day of tribute to his father at the International Book Fair,² Jeanson’s house was severely damaged in a fire whose cause remains undetermined and which destroyed part of his archives.³ To this day, the mystery surrounding this fire has yet to be fully elucidated.

The year 2016 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the law of June 17, 1966,⁴ that granted amnesty to the members of the Jeanson network and to the most emblematic among them, their leader, Francis Jeanson. This law also granted similar amnesty to the partisans of French Algeria, to members of the OAS.⁵ This collective pardon, an attempt at national reconciliation, to forgive and forget what had taken place, has resulted in a symbolic disappearance of historical traces and of a certain kind of archive. The amnesty law of 1966 was an attempt not only to erase Jeanson’s actions during the Algerian War but also to equate Jeanson’s supporters with the OAS members who were fighting on the opposite side of the political spectrum and for the opposite outcome of the war. The law was met with disarray and controversy and sparked heated political debates before and after it was passed. Did it mean that both camps were equally right or wrong, depending on one’s political leanings? The amnesty was a legal stratagem that fed into the more general political process of suppression of the Algerian War during the 1960s, in an attempt to expunge all traces of anything that might weaken national unity and to recapture a national consensus and return the country to peace.⁶

In 1965, the year before this amnesty law was adopted, Jeanson produced an archive of sorts with Seuil, his publisher since 1950, in the form of an epistolary novel entitled *Lettre aux femmes* (Letter to women), which draws heavily on his own autobiography.⁷

What was so threatening about the Jeanson archives that political authorities, the same authorities who decide the fate of all official archives, should find themselves granting them amnesty? Why should these archives surface in the one work of fiction of Jeanson’s considerable oeuvre, and what is behind their partial disappearance in a house fire whose cause remains unresolved?

¹ The Jeanson network also went by the name of “*les porteurs de valises*,” or “the suitcase carriers,” a term coined by Jean-Paul Sartre in his famous letter of support read out during the September 1960 trial.

² See Abderrahmane Semmar, “Quand Jeanson pose ses valises au SILA,” *Djazair*, November 4, 2009, <http://www.djazair.com/fr/latribune/24950>.

³ See writer Dominique-Emmanuel Blanchard’s (DEB) blog entry “Dry Tears” and a photo of the house in flames: <http://domi33.blogs.sudouest.fr/archive/2009/11/06/deb-des-larmes-seches.html#comments>.

⁴ Law 66396 of June 17, 1966, granting amnesty for breaches of state security or other offenses committed in connection with the events in Algeria: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000504433>.

⁵ The Organisation de l’armée secrète, or Secret Armed Organization, was a Far Right paramilitary group that carried out violent acts against those in favor of Algerian independence.

⁶ Unlike a pardon (*la grâce*), which forgives but does not fully rehabilitate, an amnesty wipes the police record clean and restores all rights. See Stéphane Gacon, *L’amnistie: De la Commune à la guerre d’Algérie* [A history of amnesty: From the Commune to the Algerian War] (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002); Robert Frank, “Les troubles de la mémoire française,” [The troubles of French memory], in *La Guerre d’Algérie et les Français* [The Algerian War and the French], ed. Jean-Pierre Rioux (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 1990), 604.

⁷ Francis Jeanson, *Lettre aux femmes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965).

IN SEARCH OF THE JEANSON ARCHIVES

Archives exist by virtue of the authority that has gathered them into a single location, thereby guaranteeing their unity. But the fire that destroyed the Jeanson family home removed that authority and devastated that location. However, even before the 2009 fire, the Jeanson archives were scattered among private and public collections. My journey of recovery involved sifting through a series of national and private archives.

The official national archives are themselves broken down into various subcollections, distributed among a number of state entities: war archives pertaining to World War II and the Algerian War; those housed by the BCRA,⁸ consisting of interrogation transcripts from escapees from France transmitted by Algiers, including Francis Jeanson's, which I was able to consult only thanks to a special dispensation obtained upon the request of Francis Jeanson himself; the archives of the Ministry of War Veterans and War Victims (the file detailing Jeanson's camp internment and resistance work); the archives of the army's history department (especially those pertaining to how the Jeanson trial impacted the morale of the army's officers and troops, a file entitled "Insubordination-desertion-aid to the FLN" [Front de libération nationale]) opened only in 1992; the archives of the Ministry of the Interior, in its capacity as head of intelligence (documentation of trends in national security); and finally, the archives of the University of Bordeaux School of Arts and Letters, where Jeanson pursued a college degree from 1940 to 1943, which house his school records. Traces of his biography have filtered down into a whole range of national and military archives, and other official sources undoubtedly remain to be explored, such as those regarding the wing of the FLN based in France (Fédération de France du FLN).

I made use of other written records prior to the fire, all of them private: the Jeanson family archives most notably, made up of various files and papers, manuscripts of articles and interviews, notes for the Jeanson trial, and various written reports. I also consulted the archives of the publisher Seuil—in particular, the long correspondence between Francis Jeanson and the head of Seuil's literary department, Paul Flamand, dated 1948–79, as well as with other Seuil staff and affiliates, authors as well as editors. The Roland Dumas archives contain the attorney's record of the stenographer's minutes of the Jeanson trial, the file of the accused's hearing and indictment, statements by the accused, interrogation transcripts, witness reports, correspondence between Jeanson and other detainees, etc.

Lastly, I gave due attention to audiovisual archives, both documentaries and features, as well as to voice recordings.⁹

THE STATUS OF THE ARCHIVES

The noun "archive" presupposes the verb "to archive," to classify documents according to an index, making them recoverable and available to all. This is the material challenge of archival organizing, but there is also the issue of choice. What makes an item authoritative and therefore worthy of being archived? What earns the right to be archived, saved from oblivion? Why is this text, and not another, deemed deserving? Where does *arkhē* ultimately reside? What is the source

⁸ The Bureau central de renseignements et d'action (Central Bureau of Intelligence and Operations), a forerunner of France's current intelligence service, was founded by the Gaullist Resistance and headed by Emmanuel d'Astier de La Vigerie.

⁹ For my book *Francis Jeanson, a Dissident Intellectual from the French Resistance to the Algerian War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), I carried out thirty interviews over a six-year period.

of authority that presides over the decision to archive? Who decides that one document rather than another should be entered into the record and leave a trace?¹⁰

The personal archives of Francis Jeanson, those that survived the fire, have yet to find a proper institutional host, to the best of my knowledge. While Jeanson was still alive, no one undertook a systematic organization of his papers, some of which had been organized into folders with headings, while others remained loose or randomly stored. In the absence of an inventory or full-scale index of this tremendous unexplored deposit, the assistance of Jeanson's wife, Christiane, was invaluable to me. A growing awareness that these archives deserved attention, dedication, processing, and conservation¹¹ slowly took shape in the decade 1990–2000,¹² years that coincided with my own research, allowing me to uncover new archives, some completely untapped, others only recently declassified.¹³

As of this writing, there is no official repository, no memorial center, but thanks to Jeanson's intervention on my behalf, I was able not only to consult his personal archives at the family home but also to gain access to official documents that required special clearance for researchers to gain access. It became clear during my research that the Jeanson archives had not been processed with the same care and rigor as had been the Roland Dumas archives, which are on file at the attorney's residence in Bordeaux, available upon request for consultation. I was able to consult the private Dumas collection to supplement the Jeanson papers. Taking stock of the various sources in this way enabled me to pinpoint gaps and better identify the issues at stake.

His registration for his BCRA interrogation in Algiers in 1943; the circulars regularly attempting to clarify his administrative status over the years; his applications for compensation and his requests for a pension and for an interneer/Resistance fighter ID card, all issued during the seventies and eighties; his fake ID used during the Algerian War; correspondence; photographs—to all of these, I am adding some heretofore-unexploited material: his work of autobiographical fiction, *Lettre aux femmes*, which represents his only venture into literary fiction out of the twenty or so books he authored, the rest of which are works of nonfiction.

An astute reader will discern the archival value of *Lettre aux femmes*. These traces are fragmented, impressionistic hints at the heart of the text. They provide a convincing example of how knowledge can be effectively produced by a multivoiced approach to sources: thus, apart from the official records and other writings already produced by Francis Jeanson himself about his case,¹⁴ interviews also contributed to reviving memories that, however sketchy, have proven invaluable when it comes to piecing together his trajectory and learning about his milieu, about the atmosphere of the time, the various paths he took, the aliases assumed by members of his network, the places they would all meet socially, and, finally, thanks to all that remained “unspoken,” the stumbling blocks, the more disturbing episodes, the taboos.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Mal d'archive*, 14.

¹¹ And one day, it is to be hoped, a fully digitized version with index will be produced.

¹² And not in the 1970s, when the first investigative researchers, Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, first started looking closely at the documents housed at the family home in Bassin d'Arcachon, the same residence that continued to house the archives until the 2009 fire.

¹³ It should be mentioned that, by virtue of the law that opened the military archives concerning the Algerian War in 1992, thirty years after the cessation of hostilities, and by virtue of a special dispensation granted by France's national archive authorities, I was able to consult documents heretofore unavailable.

¹⁴ See in particular Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Les porteurs de valises: La résistance française à la guerre d'Algérie* [The suitcase carriers: The French resistance of the Algerian War] (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979).

The interviews also speak to the need to specify the contexts where Jeanson comes to life under the alias he most frequently used during the Algerian War, that of Vincent Allard, or where he used a fake ID, a passport that showed he was Moroccan or Belgian. He made clever use of these various identities and affinities that provided him the necessary leverage to move forward on the political scene. The experience I am attempting to capture is thus quite elusive and hardly unidirectional. It is imperative that splits and fault lines be brought to light, but the issues to be deciphered are endlessly contingent upon social and cultural presuppositions, interpersonal conflicts, generation gaps, political divisions, and so on.

The question remains, however, with regard to this notion of archive, as to whether literature furnishes a kind of trace that differs from the administrative, military, academic, or oral document, at the level both of form and of content, a trace that is truly *other*, a different account of history, something akin to a *subjective* archive.

LETTER-ARCHIVE

Not surprisingly, given Jeanson's complex personal itinerary, the Jeanson collection is scattered, both spatially and institutionally, but herein lies an opportunity for his only work of fiction to reveal valuable biographical clues. It is a fact that details of his personal life provide much of the substance of *Lettre aux femmes*, which was written when his memories of the Algerian War were still fresh. Does this long letter provide insights into his biography that are not available elsewhere? Which Jeanson comes to light in the traces of his life story embedded in his epistolary prose?

Jeanson's novel reveals many nuances of social, political, and cultural experience that call for contextualization. The autobiographical genre is probably unmatched in its ability to discover and portray all the subjectivities that bind an individual to a collective entity, and Jeanson's only exploration of this genre was his *Lettre aux femmes*. The fullest understanding of the "Jeanson" experience requires the comparative approach used in this multivoiced novel, which showcases the figure of Jeanson, front and center, as a kind of pariah. After the Algerian War, he was unable to convince Seuil, his publisher, to take him on as an editor, and as one of their authors he also found himself subject to a certain amount of censorship and even to a measure of self-censorship in order to facilitate his return, rehabilitation, and reentry into the intellectual and professional circles in which he had been involved prior to the beginning of the war in late 1954.¹⁵

Moving among all these texts, I was able to identify the hegemonic personalities within the Jeanson network that regularly recurred in his letters, as well as the places he had lived or merely passed through, his Parisian haunts, his professional itinerary, his regrets as mirrored in the characters. Most of this is established fact by now, but only by reading such a variety of sources can one make the proper concordances and cross-checks. Moreover, by comparing this narrative with those delivered orally and with written archives outside the realm of literature, I have been able to untangle the threads of a war memoir by asking how micro- and macrohistory articulate.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FIELD, ARCHIVAL FIELD

In my attempt to describe the links that unite Jeansonian history through his *Lettre aux femmes*, a declaration to women with a capital *W*, the idea of woman, and his engagement in the political and wartime struggles that shook post-1945 France, I am compelled to consider another introductory

¹⁵ In my book *Francis Jeanson* I have analyzed in detail Jeanson's post-Algerian War period and the impact of his FLN involvement on his life at that time.

point, which is the following: the methodological postulate analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu whereby a life can be interpreted as a story that may be transfigured into a life narrative—in other words, to deliberately “treat life like a story, that is, like a coherent, directed and meaningful sequence of events, thereby rallying to the ‘biographical illusion.’”¹⁶ The underpinnings of the present article rely on the necessary theory that the selection of certain significant elements, creators of meaning, reflects a biographical truth with regard to Jeanson. Moreover, when undertaking an analysis of the interaction between Jeanson’s literary and philosophical production and his political and civic action in society, one comes face-to-face with a philosopher who is himself a biographer, since Jeanson had assumed the function of Sartre’s biographer,¹⁷ adhering fully to the Sartrian notion of life as an “originary project,” a notion that assesses an individual’s trajectory in its “unity and totality.”

The “biographical illusion” is also claimed by Jeanson, who applies it to the author of *Being and Nothingness*. Indeed, Sartre himself promotes this totalizing perspective in his own biographical explorations of Flaubert in *The Family Idiot* and of Jean Genet in his monumental preface to Genet’s works, *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr*.¹⁸ Sartre turns to psychoanalysis viewed through an existential prism to offer readers his interpretive elucidation of Flaubert and Genet. And finally, Jeanson, a Sartrian if there ever was one, acknowledges that life carries with it meaning, one that he strives to instill: “It’s hardly a coincidence that I should be interested in a certain kind of ‘philosophizing’ and in the living conditions of a colonized people. And it’s true that the unity of these two concerns, along with a few others, resides in a certain basic attitude, a certain way of being in the world, that constitutes my very existence and, in a more or less solid, more or less unambiguous way, the meaning of my various behaviors.”¹⁹ Thus, it is this shifting space, this “more or less solid, more or less unambiguous” area, that interests us, for to attempt a historical incursion into the meanders of Jeansonian literature requires that we endeavor to hunt down what’s real in fiction, to wrest meaning from raw facts, to shed light on Jeanson’s relationship with History and with History embedded in fiction, making it an archive. Lived experience is a rewriting of sorts, and Jeanson’s confrontation with his own history is written in a fictionalized text whose writing act is itself an archive that strives to elude the trap of “retrospective anticipation,” what Roger Chartier calls “the origin fallacy.”²⁰

Jeanson’s two wartime involvements took place according to two very different modes: when he joined the Resistance in 1943, France was living under foreign occupation, whereas in 1955 the national community to which he belonged was occupying what Jeanson considered a foreign entity, that is, Algeria, even though it was by law part of France.²¹ The French colonial power

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, “L’illusion biographique” [The biographical illusion], *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* [Proceedings of social science research] 62/63 (June 1986): 69–72. See also Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, “Le français, langue paternelle” [French, paternal language], in *La culture française vue d’ici et d’ailleurs* [French culture: The view from here and from elsewhere], ed. Thomas C. Spear (Paris: Karthala, 2002), 73–95.

¹⁷ Francis Jeanson, *Sartre dans sa vie* [Sartre in his life] (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974).

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’idiot de la famille: Gustave Flaubert de 1821 à 1857*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–72); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).

¹⁹ Francis Jeanson, *La phénoménologie* [Phenomenology] (Paris: Éditions Téqui, 1951), 9.

²⁰ Roger Chartier, “La chimère de l’origine” [The origin fallacy], in *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), 13, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane as *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

²¹ “L’Algérie, c’est la France” (Algeria is France) was the slogan at the time. Algeria itself was divided into three French *départements*, unlike the other French colonies.

was assimilated to the one of the Nazi Occupier during World War II by the Algerian fighters and by the people who were to join Jeanson's underground network. They saw themselves as the direct inheritors of the Resistance. However, in the view of the vast majority of the French, they were traitors: France was at war and Jeanson's supporters were singing the tune of the enemy.

Jeanson's historical traces were thus clearly not staked out in advance, or in any way predetermined. It is this open-endedness that is so noteworthy in his literary production, which attempts to replay the order of events in hindsight, to arrange History in this, his only work of fiction, which is as much a product of History as a document for History, all the more so for a philosopher whose body of work belongs squarely in the literature of political commitment.

He succumbs to the autobiographical urge and follows in the path opened up by the autobiographical works of Simone de Beauvoir, the first of which is *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, published in 1958, and of Jean-Paul Sartre, with his *Les mots*, published in 1964.²² As literary critic Anna Boschetti put it, existentialism, "in attributing to man the power and duty to achieve complete lucidity, elevates autobiography to an unprecedented state of dignity."²³

Although Jeanson disapproved of the narcissism of the confessional genre, *Lettre aux femmes* can nevertheless be read as a covertly autobiographical work, a half confession that only indirectly claims to be autobiographical. *Lettre* stands in for Jeanson's autobiography.²⁴ For this reason, he uses the ploy of literary double, via the character named Vincent.

Even if the Sartrian philosopher feels no need to fully commit to writing his personal story in what is commonly known as an autobiography, he does enter into an "autobiographical pact"²⁵ with his readers. Jeanson's autobiographical production is original to the extent that the hallmarks of the genre are deployed in unexpected ways and reveal Jeanson's taste for introspection. He opens up an "autobiographical space" in a foreword to the book, which he signs with his initials:

One day, a woman writes to a man, he writes back, and they embark upon an endless exchange where the most human tenderness and the keenest sensuality mingle so tightly as to become indistinguishable. . . . This protagonist, about whom I can no longer tell whether I am wearing his disguise or he is wearing mine, this strange sort of alter ego, is nevertheless a man, a living man who is more than a brother to me. And I am in no way his judge. But I sometimes wonder whether my friends would accept him as a friend, whether my children could call him their father, or my wife her husband. Perhaps the publication of these letters, and the reactions they are bound to arouse, will provide the beginnings of an answer. . . . F.J.²⁶

²² Simone de Beauvoir, *Mémoire d'une jeune fille rangée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), trans. as *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (repr., New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), trans. as *The Words* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981). The year 1964 also saw Sartre decline to accept his Nobel Prize in Literature.

²³ Anna Boschetti, *Sartre et "Les temps modernes,"* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985), 12.

²⁴ Jeanson had signed a contract with Seuil in 1963 to write an autobiography. In the Archives of the Éditions du Seuil, see the letter from Paul Flamand to Francis Jeanson dated May 30, 1963, referring to the contract.

²⁵ See Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), 41–44, trans. by Katherine Leary as *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

²⁶ Jeanson, *Lettre aux femmes*, 9–12. When the book came out, critics wrote tepid reviews, unlike their more positive reaction to *La foi d'un incroyant*, which was greeted enthusiastically and did well at the bookstores. See Ulloa, *Francis Jeanson*, 241–57.

It's not that Jeanson refrains from indulging in autobiographical impressions, which he disseminates throughout the fictional narrative, but he does rework the few confessional elements he consents to reveal with an eye toward the literary. And the letter format is one of the more prized representations of autobiographical discourse, where a specific speaker, Jeanson/"Vincent," addresses a distinct recipient of the missives, "Marie-Anne." The result produces an abundance of questions, the first one being: what is the textual identity of the autobiographical narrative in *Lettre aux femmes*? Its basic ambiguity blurs the lines between reality and fiction, between restitution and invention, for we wonder who is speaking to whom? Is it merely "Vincent" to "Marie-Anne," and assuming that "Vincent" is Jeanson's masculine double, might "Marie-Anne" be his feminine double?

The narrator "Vincent" — Jeanson's alias, his *nom de guerre* — writes to "Marie-Anne," a young woman who wavers between her husband and her lover. She turns to the narrator to seek his advice. She's wondering which one she should leave, and the narrator advises her, while presenting his vision of relationships in general between men and women. But we are given only Vincent's letters to read, with Marie-Anne's referred to only indirectly in Vincent's replies. Jeanson is speaking to all women through "Vincent." He is endeavoring to give them a voice in *Lettre aux femmes* by posing as the spokesman for their supposed grievances. Paradoxically, even though *Lettre aux femmes* takes the form of letters written to one woman, while thematically representing a homage to all women, what's missing is the feminine gaze. The letters supposedly written by *Marie-Anne* are restored and mediated by the narrator *Vincent* in his replies.

Where is the woman in these letters? She appears and vanishes at the whim of the narrator, who sublimates her through the male gaze. The narrator is addressing an abstraction of woman, the French woman of the 1960s. The narrator and, by extension, the author do not give a voice to women in this autobiographical fiction. From the outset, *Lettre aux femmes* comes across as an autobiographical homage to women, but one in which the female perspective is absent. The reader is clearly invited to read it from this angle, for the author acknowledges the book's shortcoming in his foreword: "This book, in truth, is only half of what it might have been; I insist on testifying here, I who am the only person to have read the entire thing, that the missing half is as good as all the rest."²⁷

LETTRE AUX FEMMES: LETTERS TO "MARIE-ANNE" OR TO MARIANNE?

Should we take this "missing half" to be one woman or all women? *Lettre aux femmes* can be read in the more metaphorical mode of the preceding question: *Lettre* can be interpreted as a parody of a write-in column of a women's magazine with "Vincent" as editor. In his column, Vincent addresses the modern French woman of the sixties, responding to the imaginary letters of "Marie-Anne." The narrator assumes this role of responder to the female readers of magazines, more feminine than feminist, like the monthly *Marie-Claire*, which started publishing in 1937, with *Marie-France* appearing in 1944 and *ELLE* in 1945. Seeing *Lettre aux femmes* as the metaphor for an imaginary glossy magazine that the author Jeanson christened *Marie-Anne* is a working hypothesis worth positing, for Jeanson could not have found a more loaded feminine name than Marie-Anne to embody French women. Marianne is the female personification of the French Republic par excellence, the feminine allegory of France, whose very name is an archive all its

²⁷ Jeanson, *Lettre aux femmes*, 9.

own, echoing the image of the French Woman.²⁸ “Vincent” provides a clue in *Lettre aux femmes*: “Is it not particularly true that the very absence of Marie-Anne’s letters (plus the fact that they went so long hardly knowing one another) makes my friend’s letters seem strangely impersonal, a single letter addressed to any woman at all who is young, beautiful, and sufficiently alive?”²⁹

The vision of women’s causes channeled in *Lettre* does not necessarily correspond to the feminist causes of the early sixties. The portrait of women that the narrator depicts is that of woman as victim, a neurotic, whom he admonishes on several occasions. *Lettre aux femmes* paints a stereotypical picture of French women, as perceived by the narrator:

You are unsatisfied, Marie-Anne, and I can assure you that I take no pleasure in arriving at this conclusion. . . . I understand perfectly well that you have to take care of your daughter and your husband, cook all the meals, do the housecleaning, and wash the dishes. Believe me, I’m not trying to be ironic here: I would be more inclined (through some absurd feeling of guilt, I imagine) to exaggerate the disgust anyone would feel (however benign the insidious appearance might be) when faced with the daily repetition, an entire lifetime, in fact, of such an utterly stultifying “job.” But good God, Marie-Anne, you’re not the only woman who feels this way! There are others who are just as concerned about self-expression, existing on their own, joining protest movements, taking up painting, playing piano, writing, or having a career. I don’t think they are any more enthusiastic than you are about greasy dishwasher and dirty socks: I just think they approach it differently. . . . But don’t allow the feminist in you to blind the woman! . . . I hear your grievances and conclude that there’s nothing I can do about them: because they are not addressed to me as a person but as that entity that is not me at all, Maleness, with a capital M, . . . and it is not you attacking it before my eyes, but that being that I do not recognize as you, the demon that has expelled you from yourself and has taken your place, even in your bed, the being I will call The Female Condition, as I cannot resolve myself to sully the beautiful term of “feminine.” . . . I would like to understand who it is you would like to become: an equal partner or a happy woman?³⁰

The narrator is resorting to classic antifeminist rhetoric here, a stock vocabulary that deprives women of their free will, comparing them to the hysteric who falls prey to the “demon” of the “Female Condition.” The use of the conjunction “or” in the last sentence is noteworthy. It would appear that, for the narrator, the conjunction “and” would be out of the question, that women could not possibly be both equal partners with men and happy. If “Vincent” is Jeanson’s alter ego, then a first reading, regarding Jeanson and the feminist issue, might infer a homage to women, but a second will reveal a questioning of the image of women put forward in 1960s France, as well as an overt critique of the strategy deployed by French feminists of the second wave of feminism. It is an all-out attack against a certain Marxist-inspired feminism that sees men as enemies rather than allies, according to the narrator. “Vincent” criticizes Marie-Anne’s reading of the great feminist thinkers, who he says are misleading her: “You’re afraid of not being yourself? Of losing yourself in the other? But you’re the one who is alienating yourself from yourself when

²⁸ See Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne au combat: L’imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), trans. as *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

²⁹ Jeanson, *Lettre aux femmes*, 11n1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30–32.

you let your elite friends who find it fun to play at being revolutionary feed you books by the likes of Hegel, Marx, Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir.”³¹

According to Vincent, feminists are going down the wrong path, and if they want to win their struggle, they need first of all to be happy.³² This statement seems unaware of its own blind spots, for how can one be happy when one is alienated? Yet, paradoxically, the one who wants to liberate women doesn’t let them speak. Women have no say in *Lettre aux femmes*, for the narrator “usurps” the feminine voice. They are simply not included in the narration as active speakers. It may be a letter to women, but the letter has remained unopened. One might say that Jeanson’s sly autobiography, *Lettre aux femmes*, is a work of its time, and as such, it is of archival value. It bears witness to the feel of a moment, the historic traces that testify to early 1960s France, in addition to providing an account of Jeanson’s personal history interacting with that of his country, France, since World War II.

Jeanson/“Vincent” wants to see in “Marie-Anne” a “New Eve,”³³ a Marianne worthy of France and the Republic. At the end of this fake correspondence, “Marie-Anne” seems to have finally resolved the dilemma she was experiencing at the start. She decides to stay with her husband and to dump her lover; morality wins the day. Jeanson knew better than anyone else the key importance of women in his network during the Algerian War, but he did not pay them the tribute they deserved for what they had accomplished at that crucial time. By failing to credit them in 1965 for casting off their traditional roles to eventually number among his most active and solid supporters during the Algerian War, and by sending them back to their domestic roles after having benefited from their radical political commitment, Jeanson/“Vincent” displayed a glaring lack of historical foresight if one has in mind the women’s liberation movement about to emerge in 1968.

The autobiographical statement made in *Lettre aux femmes* is both narrative and argumentative: Jeanson divulges a life story while attempting to convince, to win over, the woman he’s corresponding with. If the identity of the addressee is problematic, that of the persons to whom he dedicates the book is more clearly stated: “This book you are about to read is the work of all the women I have ever had the good fortune to know, and in particular Christiane, who is my wife today, as well as Colette, who was my previous wife and will never cease to be.” Thus, Jeanson dedicates this book to “his” wives, but he writes it for his contemporaries, those who still remember the resounding history of his underground network and high-profile trial, as much as he writes it for posterity. The book reaches not only readers in the present of publication but also future readers. The letters shed light on the link between a lived past, Jeanson’s in this case, and the present of the act of writing, the immediate aftermath of the Algerian War. In the writing of the self that Jeanson engages in, there is an archive-related dynamic between private and public, as well as between the lived past and the reenacted past. This pretend private correspondence brings out an intimate side of Jeanson’s discourse, and Jeanson is well aware that he

³¹ Ibid., 141–42.

³² This comment resonates in a strange way with the 2016 firing of Publicis executive and Saatchi and Saatchi chairman Kevin Roberts, who declared that women lack ambition: “their ambition is not a vertical ambition. It’s this intrinsic, circular ambition to be happy.” See <http://fortune.com/2016/08/01/saatchi-publicis-kevin-roberts-women>. On the question of gender in the workplace, see Anne-Marie Devreux, dir., *Les sciences et le genre: Déjouer l’androcentrisme* [The sciences and the type: Thwarting androcentrism] (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016).

³³ Jeanson, *Lettre aux femmes*, 181.

has been preceded in this respect by another Bordeaux native, four centuries his elder, Michel de Montaigne.

THE ESSAYS, BY MONTAIGNE: EXAMPLE AND COUNTEREXAMPLE

Lettre aux femmes draws from literary precedents for the writing of the self, first and foremost from Montaigne's *Essays*, about which Jeanson had written. In 1951, when Jeanson headed up the classics collection *Ecrivains de toujours* (Timeless writers) at Seuil, he published *Montaigne par lui-même* (Montaigne by himself). Who more emblematic than the author of the *Essays* to represent the literary genre of self-portrait?

In this work on Montaigne, written fourteen years before *Lettre aux femmes*, Jeanson scrutinizes the confessional mechanism at work in the *Essays*. Yet, far from heaping praise upon his fellow Bordelais,³⁴ Jeanson deplores the lack of authenticity in the life of Montaigne, for whom sincerity of intention amounts to an act of political engagement. Jeanson castigates the moralist in Montaigne who, beneath his supposed sincerity in wanting to portray himself without complacency, betrays a posture of superiority and contempt for the average person. He appraises the *Essays* according to a Sartrian template, which is how he comes to posit that Montaigne "is therefore not exactly what we call today an *engagé*, a politically involved person,"³⁵ since he tends to argue so endlessly: "And even as he claims that concrete self-analysis serves the purpose of elaborating a life discipline and draws on this intimate self-knowledge to map out rules for behavior . . . , he 'talks' about doing this more than he actually does it."³⁶ In Jeanson's view, Montaigne embodies the paragon of passive moralism. The author of the *Essays* represents a countermodel of writing and life: "The practical impact of such an experience of the self will undoubtedly strike us as quite limited. The most eminent human qualities of Montaigne are negative: his purported tolerance and respect for the views of others amount in fact to a nearly total indifference to any opinions other than those that concern him directly. This 'humanist' does not like humans: he likes himself through them, he needs other people in order to achieve self-discovery."³⁷

Over a decade elapsed between the writing of *Montaigne par lui-même* and of *Lettre aux femmes*, a crucial period during which Jeanson became involved with the FLN and joined in the anticolonialist struggle, and which may have influenced the softer line he took in his *Lettre vis-à-vis* the moralist: "For those who have never been corrupted by a certain morality, or a certain refusal of that morality, for those who believe they are not fated to jeopardize at the outset any chance at true love for fear of sinning or violating some theoretician's rigorist doctrine, nothing could be more important than to 'play the man well,' as Montaigne says, and to 'play the woman well' (as he did not say), by making love, making happiness."³⁸

If Jeanson construes Montaigne as a counterexample in 1951 for his false sincerity, the same Montaigne has become a model for Jeanson/"Vincent" in 1965.

³⁴ Unlike Claude Lévi-Strauss, two of whose recently published lectures, one dating to 1937, the other to 1992, show all the debt and admiration that the ethnologist owes to Montaigne. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *De Montaigne à Montaigne* [From Montaigne to Montaigne], Collection Audiographie 16 (Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2016).

³⁵ Francis Jeanson, *Montaigne par lui-même* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1951), 83.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁸ Jeanson, *Lettre aux femmes*, 162.

HISTORY: THE PRESENT/ABSENT ARCHIVE IN LETTRE AUX FEMMES

The similarities between the author Jeanson and the *Lettre* narrator “Vincent” are disturbing, since he goes so far as to give his alter ego his real-life personal address in Paris, rue Raynouard in the 16th arrondissement. He also slips in a mention of his next place of residence, the villa des Issambres, in the Midi, near Saint-Raphaël.³⁹

Lettre aux femmes is a roman à clef with regard to Jeanson’s personal relationships with women, but equally so regarding his rapport with the world—with his immediate environment, his city, his street—and with History with a capital *H* (“l’Histoire avec sa grande Hache,” or “big ax,” a play on words devised by Georges Perec).⁴⁰ Jeanson makes notable reference in the work to the desperate time he spent in a concentration camp in Spain in 1943.

In this sense, Jeanson’s one venture into fiction can be read as an archival space in which layers of lived experience are revealed with the turning of each page. Jeanson uses the artifice of the pseudonym to avoid fully assuming his own identity when his character is speaking. But the place where literature meets history, where it becomes archive, is in the choice of fictitious names. “Vincent” is significant, as it is the actual alias used by Jeanson as leader of his eponymous network during the Algerian War and throughout his underground period, but it is not the text’s only nom de guerre. Jeanson also carefully picks special pseudonyms for the women in his life who appear in *Lettre*. The love of his World War II years, Josette Dort, emerges in the novel as “Sylvie.” His first wife, Colette, with whom he wrote his incendiary pamphlet *L’Algérie hors la loi* (Outlaw Algeria) in 1955, becomes “Martine.”⁴¹ Hélène Cuénat, his partner during the Algerian years and his closest collaborator in the underground network, appears as “Claire.” And finally, “Nora” matches the personality of Christiane Philip, Jeanson’s second wife, whom he also met during his underground years. *Lettre aux femmes*, a semiepistolary literary work, provides archival reference points to Jeanson’s political career that prove to be historically faithful with regard to the choice of fictional names. A comparison with indicators from his private archives⁴² and public archives⁴³ shows that Jeanson also introduces autobiographical digressions in his literary studies of Sartre, in *Sartre par lui-même* (Sartre by himself), *Un quidam nommé Sartre* (An individual named Sartre), and *Sartre dans sa vie* (Sartre in his life), as well as his afterword to a reissue of *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Black skin, white masks) by Frantz Fanon in 1965.⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid., 156.

⁴⁰ Georges Perec, *W; ou Le souvenir d’enfance* [W; or The memory of childhood] (Paris: Denoël, 1975).

⁴¹ These two fictional first names are reminiscent of the female protagonists in the novels of Colette, whose talent Jeanson admired. He worked with her on the publication of *Colette par elle-même* (Colette by herself) at Seuil in 1951. Colette is the only woman whom Jeanson published in the *Ecrivains de toujours* series, out of the thirty-two books he brought out as head editor. Germaine Beaumont and André Parinaud, *Colette par elle-même* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1951).

⁴² They include most especially other interviews conducted with his wife Christiane between 1974 and 1999 and published in 2000: Francis Jeanson, *Entre-deux: Conversations privées, 1974–1999, en collaboration avec Christiane Philip* [Private conversations, 1974–1999, in collaboration with Christiane Philip] (Lormont: Le Bord de l’eau Éditions, 2000).

⁴³ See the Jeanson file at the archives of the Faculté des lettres de Bordeaux, 1940–43, and the Jeanson archive at the war veteran archives, Les archives du Ministère des anciens combattants, in Ulloa, *Francis Jeanson*, 18, 41–43.

⁴⁴ Jeanson wrote a preface (1952) and a postface (1965, after the death of Fanon) to Fanon’s book, which Jeanson published with Seuil in 1952.

EDITORIAL STRATEGY OF REPRESSION AND A NEW STATUS FOR ARCHIVES

Jeanson's two major political involvements—his efforts for the Resistance during World War II, including his refusal to submit to the work camp requirement in Germany⁴⁵ and his subsequent internment in Spain, and his commitment to the Algerian side of the French war with Algeria—are hinted at impressionistically in *Lettre aux femmes*. While Jeanson mentions overtly his experience as a Resistance fighter and internee during World War II in *Lettre*, he makes no direct mention of his role as leader of the Jeanson network during the Algerian War, except perhaps for a brief allusion to his participation in a fight for the emancipation of a people he fails to specifically name.⁴⁶ What does this silence tell us, this lacuna in his archival reference points? It is a troubling suppression on his part, but there are two possible explanations for it: outside censorship and self-censorship. The time was not yet ripe to foreground his actions during the Algerian War. The wounds of the nation were still too raw for him to evoke his actions in his immediate postwar writings, which responded to the Seuil-imposed censorship rule, as well as to his own self-imposed law of silence. Thus, in his first three publications after 1962, no mention is made of his role.⁴⁷ And yet, the fight for Algerian independence was until then the most important thing he'd done in his life. Does this mean that when Jeanson wrote his *Lettre aux femmes*, barely a year after Algerian independence, he was seeking to wrest himself from the heavy legacy of his status as revolutionary?

Unlike many of his comrades-in-arms in the Jeanson network and other networks backing the FLN, Jeanson himself didn't want to be pigeonholed for his involvement in the anticolonial struggle. It would appear that his publisher wanted him to leave behind the Jeanson of the Algerian War. To that extent, *Lettre aux femmes* can be read as an anti-autobiography. Jeanson critics were waiting to pounce, but he chose to write an intimate testimonial, hardly political at all or, rather, surreptitiously political. Jeanson's material support for the FLN excluded him from the French community, but he refused to be ostracized, even though his editor Paul Flamand was convinced that he would have a hard time reentering mainstream life after 1962. His warnings were unnecessary, however, for the inner circle of Parisian media and intellectuals greeted Jeanson with open arms after the war as he told me when I interviewed him on several occasions. His alter ego "Vincent" relates how he gets invited to all the important parties and events, where he is often the center of attention, his scandalous reputation having preceded him.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ The Service du travail obligatoire (Compulsory Work Service) was a forced-labor program run by the Nazis that required French laborers to work in German factories during World War II.

⁴⁶ "It is true, in a sense, that the unbelievable suffering of a people whom I knew well, whom I had come to love, and toward whom I felt no guilt but rather a huge responsibility brought me even closer to them. My desire to fight against this evil, my anger against the oppressors and their accomplices, made me feel whole again, at peace with myself within the unity of a movement that, by projecting me outside myself, helped keep my trivial personal problems at bay" (Jeanson, *Lettre aux femmes*, 51–52).

⁴⁷ In order, the nonfiction anthology *Lignes de départ* (1963), *La foi d'un incroyant* (1963), and *Lettre aux femmes* (1965).

⁴⁸ "There has been a festival atmosphere here for the past few days, and the Paris literati scene is in full swing; sometimes a guest, sometimes a host, I've gotten to the point where I don't know what distinguishes me from a true intellectual or, in certain extreme cases, from a simple citizen. Still, as for the first of these two, I've managed to keep a semblance of my critical faculties intact; and as for the second, the silence of the governing regime would suffice, if need be, to ground me in the wholesome modesty of souls in transit, in Purgatory, as the catechists of my youth so descriptively put it" (*Lettre aux femmes*, 94–95). For the second, let us recall that Jeanson was sentenced to relinquish his civil rights during the 1960 trial that now bears his name. See Marcel Péju, *Le procès du réseau Jeanson* [The trial of the Jeanson network] (Paris: Maspero, 1961).

Jeanson returned to civilian life in the immediate aftermath of the Algerian War, even if he didn't quite return to civic life. Apart from *Lettre aux femmes*, the philosopher published two other books with Seuil, *Lignes de départ* (Starting line) and *La foi d'un incroyant* (The faith of an unbeliever). His three books completely sidestep the symbolic capital that the name Jeanson carried for the France of those years. They deliberately omit reference to the Jeanson network, the Jeanson trial, the Jeanson who was accused of compromising national security by aiding the FLN. He suffered the consequences of his controversial commitment to the FLN fighters during the Algerian War. But how deliberate was the choice to elide his allegiance to the FLN? To what extent was it imposed upon him? If the back covers of his two books *Lignes de départ* and *Lettre aux femmes* are any indication, it would appear to have been a conscious, deliberate strategy on the part of the publisher Seuil, which wanted to suppress the memory of Jeanson's Algerian war. Still, although the editorial policy of the publisher and the wishes of the author at first seemed to be at odds with respect to which direction *Lettre aux femmes* should take, these eventually converged. The story of Jeanson's war experience would be suppressed not only by the publisher's stance on the matter but also by Jeanson, who finally fell into step with Seuil. His writing of *Lettre aux femmes* attempts to purge the professional revolutionary image that postwar France sought to reduce him to. And to whatever extent Jeanson actually did feel a pressing need to confide an account of his Algerian involvement while it was still fresh in his mind, he was prevented from doing so with Seuil.⁴⁹

In order to secure his publishing future, and to regain his social position in the aftermath of the Algerian War, Jeanson had to please his publisher, Seuil, and to produce an "inoffensive" book. Unable to go on record, to enter the archive, as it were, he discovered a work-around with *Lettre aux femmes*. Jeanson's craftily embedded autobiographical narrative becomes an extension of the clandestine nature of his Algerian years. His writing fully engages its author, a writing that is doubly referential with regard to the historical reality of his involvement in two wars and to a more private reality, his relationship to women.

The strategy of the author, pressured as he was to defer to the publisher who wanted to suppress the Algerian years of one of its stable of authors, consists of calling upon the reader as witness. The marks of history are all there just below the surface. In 1979, when he retires from Seuil, Paul Flamand mentions *L'Algérie hors la loi* by Francis Jeanson and Colette Jeanson as a jewel of Seuil's anticolonialist literature.⁵⁰ But in 1965 it was still too early for Seuil to reappropriate Jeanson's Algerian struggle, and he is not really welcomed back into the Seuil fold until he begins writing about something other than Algeria. Thus, Jeanson resorts to literature in order to record his story for posterity.

⁴⁹ This is in flagrant contrast with the back cover of his 1991 book on Algeria, post-1988 riots, published with Seuil: *Algéries, de retour en retour* [Algeria(s): From return journey to return journey]. The back cover presents Jeanson as a "committed intellectual, having chosen to support the FLN struggle during the Algerian War." Thirty years had elapsed between the end of the war and the publication of this book.

⁵⁰ Paul Flamand, *Sur Le Seuil, 1935–1979* [On Seuil, 1935–1979], 19, unavailable for sale, Archives of the Éditions du Seuil.

CONCLUSION

Lettre aux femmes can be understood as a space of both memory and forgetting and constitutes an archive in its own right. From the present-absent archives in this autobiographical letter of the post-Algerian War years to the written archives that disappeared in the 2009 fire, Jeanson's journey demonstrates a recourse to the artifice of literary creation in the service of historical recording and the disturbingly random status of archives that various parties attempt to repress.⁵¹ A

⁵¹ Sonia Combes's "repressed archive," cited by Derrida, *Mal d'archive*, 16.