

# Remembering Jean Jamin

Notes from a Friendship...

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IN AUTUMN 1973, I arrived in Paris to begin research for a doctoral dissertation in intellectual history. My proposed topic was a comparative treatment of three twentieth-century anthropological traditions, American, British, and French. I soon abandoned that over-ambitious plan (with a friendly push from George Stocking, who was in London conducting research for *Victorian Anthropology* and was clearly the one best qualified to write about British anthropology). The other stimulus would come from Jean Jamin, who helped me see that the story across the Channel was a lot more interesting than I had imagined.

Like many in the USA, my view of French anthropology was simplistic: a lineage from Durkheim, *via* Mauss, to Lévi-Strauss, all vaguely “structuralist,” and (excessively) theoretical. There were no famous “fieldworkers”—no Malinowski, no Boas, no Mead—so I assumed that ethnography in France was underdeveloped. I soon learned my mistake, and in the process had to rethink my conception of what “ethnography” could mean.

I recall two moments of discovery, both occurring in the old Musée de l’Homme.

In the library’s reading-room, there was an area of “open shelves” (rare in French libraries). One day, I was looking for a volume of essays in honor of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and noticed nearby a collection of tributes to Maurice Leenhardt. The name was unfamiliar. I began to learn about this scientifically minded missionary: his more than twenty years of fieldwork in an ugly colonial situation, work that was concerned with both traditional culture and change, deeply engaged with language and translation, importantly based on writing by Melanesian “informants.” All this shed a critical light on the more familiar forms of academic ethnography—short-term and synchronic. Leenhardt would eventually become the subject of my dissertation and first book.

JEAN JAMIN IN MEMORIAM

But he was obviously an exceptional case, and I continued to pursue other threads, also associated with names that were new to me: Le Cœur, Van Gennepe, Rivet, Griaule, Rivière, Schaeffner, Paulme, Rouch, Métraux and Leiris.

My entry into this complex world of ethnography was a tiny elevator at the Musée de l'Homme which normally carried me to the top floor and the library, but on one occasion—I have no recollection why—took me down to the basement. There, in the Département d'Afrique Noire, in among storage cupboards and scattered artifacts, Jean Jamin was working at a long table. When I told him that I was researching the history of twentieth-century French anthropology, he stopped what he was doing, and a conversation began that would continue for decades.

Jean had already published three reports from Kenya and West Africa. An impressive synthetic work on secrecy, *Les Lois du silence* (Jamin 1977), would appear soon (characteristically, with epigraphs from Herman Melville's fiction). While he held a post in the museum's Africa section, he was not eager to become an area specialist; his interests were too broad and eclectic. Jean had something to say about virtually every topic I mentioned, and he opened up many more. Luckily, I had recently stumbled on *L'Afrique fantôme* (Leiris 1934), a work unknown in the USA. This led to many discussions about the mission Dakar-Djibouti, and about the Paris milieu—academic, social, literary, and artistic—that surrounded it. Surrealism, jazz, “art nègre” (Josephine Baker, the boxer Al Brown), the influence of Lévy-Bruhl, the teaching of Marcel Mauss... Jean showed me images and documents that he was collecting, materials that would appear before long in the heterodox historical journal *Gradhiva*.

He and I were the same age, and we had both recently turned our research to the history of anthropology, especially ethnography. We shared, too, a passion for literature. I invoked Conrad. He, Faulkner. Ethnography for us was not just a method linked to an academic discipline. It included diverse exoticisms and travel encounters: Father Lafitau in the New World, Herman Melville in the Pacific, Robert James Fletcher in the New Hebrides, Victor Segalen in Tahiti and China, the Société des Observateurs de l'homme, and of course the multifaceted and unclassifiable Michel Leiris.

I encountered Leiris in that same little elevator. He had long held a position at the Museum, and his office adjoined Jean's workspace. A deep intergenerational collaboration and friendship was developing. Soon, it resulted in *Gradhiva*. Jean would become the Museum's unofficial historian-archivist and eventually Leiris's literary executor—an enormous, sustained effort, and a labor of love. In the 1970s, Leiris was in the habit of spending afternoons at the Musée de l'Homme, after mornings of literary production at home in the Quartier latin.



**Jean Jamin, Michel Leiris and Clémentine Deliss at “Le Totem” restaurant, Paris (France)**

This photo, taken in 1986, reminds me of the scene. And it illustrates Jean Jamin in action—his intensity and vehemence. Clémentine Deliss, in the foreground, a doctoral student in Britain (destined for a radically innovative curatorial career) wanted to consult with Michel Leiris, and Jean arranged the meeting. He always shared his enthusiasms and connections without hesitation (photo: Wolfgang Stengel)

I interviewed Leiris in his office, seated in the half-light beside a bare steel desk in an almost empty room (only a dramatic Dogon mask on one wall facing a clumsy nineteenth-century copy of a Pompeian painting that depicted rituals of Isis on the other). He patiently answered my questions. But I learned more from the “seminars” that were regularly conducted one floor up, in the atmospheric restaurant “Le Totem.” Jean kindly invited me along whenever I was around. Over café-calva, or some other stimulant, in a haze of cigarette smoke, we talked about anything and everything.

I wish I could remember specific details, scraps of the conversation. There was discussion of Griaule and Dieterlen, Mauss, Leenhardt (Leiris attended his seminars), Louis Armstrong in Paris, also Bataille, Queneau, Jabès (Leiris introduced me), Francis Bacon... I recall the bar where we usually perched, and the restaurant décor, which was pure exoticism. There were large, leafy plants, a Northwest Coast totem pole, a wooden Indian figure, something African, something Oceanian... And seen out the windows, beyond a giant statue of a muscle man subduing a bull, the miraculously floating Eiffel Tower.

I owe a lot to this generosity. Jean translated and published my early efforts. I particularly recall his invitation to write for the catalogue of an amazing exhibition on the urge to collect, *Collections passion*, conceived by Jacques Hainard at the ethnography museum in Neuchâtel. We worked together on the French version of what later became a chapter in my second book. The iconoclastic, dada quality of Hainard's museology appealed to us both. And Jean collaborated on subsequent exhibitions in Neuchâtel that reconceived ethnographic museums as inventive, self-critical places, not repositories for inert "evidence" or jealously guarded *patrimoines*.

Rather than continue in this mode of nostalgic retrospection, let me comment briefly, from across the Atlantic, on some of my friend's accomplishments in the years that followed our early collaboration. (We stayed in touch and exchanged publications. He visited me in California. When I was in Paris, we enjoyed long, well-lubricated lunches at "Le Petit Cardinal," not far from the editorial office of *L'Homme*.

Jean Jamin's books are complex, multifaceted performances: *Miroir de l'Afrique* (1996), the extensively introduced and annotated edition of Leiris's writings on Africa; *Une anthropologie du jazz* (Jamin and Williams 2010); *Faulkner: le nom, le sol, le sang* (2011); *Littérature et anthropologie* (2018). He was among the editors for a collection at Le Sycomore, "Les Hommes et leurs signes," printing classic and new works. He established a similar series at Éditions Jean-Michel Place, which generously included the French translation of my book on Leenhardt, along with works by Denise Paulme, André Schaeffner, Robert Hertz, and others.

As editor of *L'Homme*, he presided over a remarkable evolution. Others are better placed to comment adequately on that achievement. Suffice it to say that, from an American perspective, the journal was transformed into a version of "cultural studies." I doubt that Jean would have liked the label. He always insisted that he was working in a tradition, the expansive "anthropology" of Lévi-Strauss. And he made space in *L'Homme* for classic topics like kinship. But he also brought a dramatic new interdisciplinary freedom and range—entire issues devoted to slavery, to literary themes, to transatlantic influences and misunderstandings, to music (especially jazz). A vast collection in honor of Marc Augé on "le contemporain" included history, ethnography, film, popular religion, literature, philosophy, and more (Colley and Dozon 2008). An admirable—and "French"—inclusiveness. I could not help noticing the absence of issues that would have been prominent in a similar collection of American or British texts: explicit discussions of race, gender, and sexuality. (I recall a long and fruitless argument with Jean in which I failed to convince him that the title "*L'Homme*" was gendered!)

Much scholarship in France has kept such questions of “identity” at a distance, not considering them to be urgent social and political facts. (This disposition has, I believe, been changing, at least among many intellectuals, though not in the political realm.) Jean was skeptical of some directions my later work was taking, aligned with thinkers like Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, or Donna Haraway... I always found it ironic that a book like my *Malaise dans la culture* (1996 [1988]) was quickly labeled “*le postmodernisme américain*,” when it owed so much to French sources, especially those conversations at “Le Totem.”

Not long after I left Paris to write my dissertation, Jean sent me a beautiful small book: *La Tenderie aux grives chez les Ardennais du plateau* (1979). In its pages he explored the history, ornithology, oral traditions, psychology, sociology, technology, and ecological embeddedness of a popular tradition—the snaring of tiny thrushes. He revealed its peculiar intimacy, the human-animal relations enacted, and the emotional sources of a passion driving the practice. In his last message to me, Jean reported that this tradition, dating perhaps from the Paleolithic, was once again under threat of interdiction, even though, as he had clearly shown, its impact on the survival of the species was minimal. He had therefore returned to the fray, preparing an updated edition.

The epigraph for *La Tenderie aux grives* is prophetic for our current “post-truth” moment. (Jean had a gift for epigraphs. A selection from his books and essays would make a piquant small anthology.)

*“Les faits ne pénètrent pas dans le monde où vivent nos croyances, ils n’ont pas fait naître celles-ci, ils ne les détruisent pas: ils peuvent leur infliger les plus constants démentis sans les affaiblir...”* Marcel Proust.

The major achievement of Jean Jamin’s final years was *Tableaux d’une exposition: chronique d’une famille ouvrière ardennaise sous la III<sup>e</sup> République* (2021). A tour de force, it weaves together family and social/industrial histories, stories of popular radicalism and of two devastating wars—all gathered around a quest for a mysterious ancestor known by her assigned name in a nineteenth-century “*exposition*” (register) for foundlings. Jean records his obsession with “Agathe Amand” (his great-grandmother) through a sustained experiment with fact and fiction artfully arranged as a series of “*tableaux*” inspired by Modest Mussorgsky’s 1874 composition for piano, which has the same title as the book:

*“C’est une histoire où l’on oscillerait entre rêve, fiction et réalité, comme il en est pour tout un chacun devant la mémoire et les souvenirs, qui sont plutôt rythmes et battements que récitatifs ou arias...”* (*Ibid.*: 32).

A recourse to fiction, he writes, is not a matter of filling the gaps or revealing the secrets of an incomplete history. Its function is not archival or documentary. Rather, fiction offers its own realism, approaching a truth that is always interrupted, faceted, ever-changing:

*“Malgré son aspect assertorique, implacable, indiscutable (personne ne peut empêcher Peter Grimes de se noyer), la fiction a ses propres incertitudes, ses flottements et ses obscurités, elle a aussi d’incomparables vertus en offrant la possibilité de se livrer, par l’imaginaire, à une sorte de ‘dilatation des rapports sociaux’ ou interpersonnels au regard de laquelle ils recevront une autre et nouvelle signification. Peut-être est-ce cela qui la fait s’approcher d’un peu plus près de la vérité par définition toujours fuyante, en retouchant, en réinventant, en repensant récits et chroniques ainsi que les rapports que les personnes entretiennent avec leurs propres mémoire, histoire et passé qui presque toujours s’accompagnent de brisures temporelles, de plans superposés, et s’apparentent plus à un montage cinématographique (ou à un tableau cubiste) qu’à un enchaînement mécanique d’instant ou à un plan cadastral” (Ibid.).*

We hear Jean Jamin’s distinct voice and cadence in sentences whose syncopated, collaged complexity evoke Leiris. And we can admire the shape that he gives to this final work, inspired, he writes in an e-mail, by Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*: *“une sorte de focale kaléidoscopique sur le terrain ardennais pour faire surgir d’autres passés.”*

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