



## Philippe Lejeune Turns Eighty

John Eakin

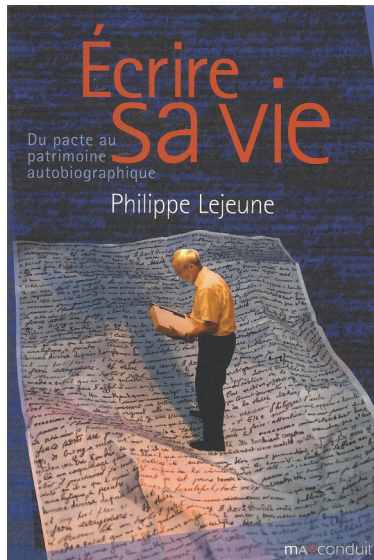
---

“*Tout un homme, fait de tous les hommes et qui les vaut tous et que vaut n'importe qui.*”

–Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*

---

In 2015 Philippe Lejeune published *Ecrire sa vie*, summing up the work of a lifetime. This slim but expansive book is doubly autobiographical, presenting a vision of life writing in all its forms as well as its author's intellectual autobiography in brief. This man's life and his study of lives



coalesce in a clever image on the book's cover, which pictures Lejeune carrying a file of some kind as he stands on a huge, rumpled sheet covered with handwritten words. If we look closely, we can make out fragments of first-person prose that seem to repeat and flow in an unending stream. Because Lejeune has been navigating this stream for decades, anyone studying life writing today would do well to turn to his work for guidance and inspiration.

I know I did when I first became interested in autobiography in the 1970s. Studying autobiography then was a chancy proposition, nothing like the established field of inquiry today. Besides James Olney's *Metaphors of Self* and Elizabeth Bruss's *Autobiographical Acts*, there wasn't much to go on in English. There was not much more in French—Georges Gusdorf's pioneering essay, "*Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie*," and Lejeune's *L'Autobiographie en France* and *Le Pacte autobiographique*—but I had developed a taste for French literary criticism during the year I spent teaching in Paris in the early 1970s. It was the heyday of structuralism and semiotics, transacted in the French manner with a theoretical rigor and method that had been lacking in my literary training at Harvard. So I was primed to appreciate Lejeune's early studies of autobiography when I encountered them a few years later on.

*L'Autobiographie en France* is, to be sure, a slight work, but it already displays many of the characteristic signs of Lejeune's critical style: the attention to definition, the formation of a corpus of texts, the asking of foundational questions, the testing of hypotheses. And his next book, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, had more heft to it, featuring close readings of Rousseau, Sartre, Gide, and Leiris that were colored by his taste for psychological and psychoanalytic interpretation. This last angle may seem dated now, for Freud's place in today's cultural landscape is much reduced from what it was in the 1950s and 60s when Lejeune and I were learning to be critics.

In the years that followed I kept reading Lejeune; I admired his range, his adventurousness, so much so that I thought his work deserved to be better known to English readers. Lejeune liked the idea of a translated volume when I proposed it to him in 1982. We put together a selection of his essays organized into two sections, one devoted to the theory of autobiography as a kind of writing, and one emphasizing autobiography's contribution to social and cultural history. Then I contacted Wlad Godzich, who had launched a "Theory and History of Literature" series at the University of Minnesota Press that struck me as a likely home for the project I had in mind. Luckily, Godzich knew Lejeune's work, and he was enthusiastic.

Little did I know, however, how long it would take to publish this book. In the spring of 1983 I forwarded to Minnesota a proposed table

of contents, and in 1984, following favorable readers' reports, the Press's editorial committee endorsed the project. It was then that I met Philippe for the first time when he came to Indiana to give a public lecture on "*Les Récits de naissance*." By 1985 problems with translation rights and marketing were solved, our project seemed to be on track, and a contract was signed. That spring I gave a paper on Philippe's work at the University of Kent—with Philippe listening in the audience, I was nervous. After the colloquium, Philippe and I proceeded to Paris together, where he gave me a tour of the stack at the Bibliothèque Nationale—*La Cote Ln27*—that serves as home base for the literature the library classifies as "individual biography." Philippe was investigating this huge mass of texts for insight into the conventions and assumptions informing autobiographical discourse practiced by ordinary individuals in the nineteenth century. I also consulted with several of Philippe's colleagues about his work, and Philippe and I met with the translator for our book. We were encouraged by the Press to expect publication by the fall of 1986. By 1987, however, the translation was bogged down with problems, and it would be 1989 by the time that *On Autobiography* with its wonderful "Triple Self-Portrait" by Norman Rockwell on the cover would finally appear in print.

If editing *On Autobiography* was something of a slog, there were important compensations, for the project had put me in close communication with a man I considered to be leading research in my field. "*Cher Monsieur*," ... "*Cher collègue*," ... "*Cher John*,"—the shift in salutations in Philippe's letters marked the growth of our friendship. I valued his expert commentary on his work and my own. For example, we had agreed that Philippe's "Epilogue" to *Lire Leiris* would be the final entry in the Minnesota collection, and I wrote him that I was puzzled by his paradoxical notion that Michel Leiris had managed to write an "*histoire sans récit*"—how could you tell your story without engaging in narrative? Narrative, after all, had been central to his definition of autobiography from the beginning. I surmised—and Philippe confirmed—that what he meant was a life story that was not rehearsed in the chronological form of so much conventional biographical discourse. Philippe, in turn, wanted to know just what I meant by *fictions* in autobiography. There were a range of meanings that required sorting out, he wrote, in works supposedly anchored in biographical fact—inventions, approximations of the truth, lies. Needless to say, I looked forward to Philippe's letters—snail mail was our primary medium then.

Initially intellectual, our friendship eventually grew beyond letters. Thanks to the increasing interest in life writing studies, Philippe and I traveled together many times over the years, in Europe and also in China. And one memorable night, on Hawai'i's Big Island, we picked our way in

the dark across uneven ground with tiny flashlights to reach the point where you could see lava pouring into the ocean in a flaming stream. Our personal exchanges extended as well to our families, with one of Philippe's sons visiting in Bloomington, and one of my daughters visiting in Fontenay-aux-Roses. Philippe, as I discovered, was something of a French twin—we were the same age, we each had four children, and we each had devoted our lives to the study of life writing.

Central to the bond between us has been a shared interest in a key question concerning life writing as a practice: why do people do it, and why do others care about what they do. Philippe has addressed this question more aggressively and imaginatively than anyone working in our field, and his instinct has been to search for social and cultural rather than narrowly literary answers, a search that led him increasingly to focus on ordinary lives. This distinctive tendency in his work is perhaps best exemplified by *Calicot*, which he published in 1984. In this volume Philippe and his father, Michel Lejeune, collaborated in editing the autobiographical manuscripts of their nineteenth-century ancestor, Xavier-Édouard Lejeune. Perhaps there is a genetic predisposition to autobiography running in the blood of the Lejeunes, for Philippe's great-grandfather Xavier-Édouard decided to tell the story of his life sometime in 1860 when he was only fifteen. He continued writing his autobiography for several years, recounting his provincial childhood, his arrival in Paris, and his beginnings in the dry goods trade—he was a *calicot*, or draper. For Philippe and his father, Xavier-Édouard had the instincts of an ethnographer, documenting the life of the middling classes—*les petits-bourgeois*—who flourished in the Third Republic. Rediscovering Xavier-Édouard's manuscripts, the twentieth-century Lejeunes experienced the thrill of archeologists uncovering a buried city: “a monument made with materials drawn from everyday life, built with infinite patience in solitude by an unknown individual” (10). The Lejeunes invoke Sartre's memorable lines from the end of *The Words* to capture the achievement of their ancestor's self-portrait: “a whole man, composed of all men and as good as all of them and no better than any” (255).

*Calicot* is, in its way, a precursor of the most original initiative that Philippe was to undertake in the later part of his career, the founding in 1992 of *l'Association pour l'autobiographie* (APA), the culmination of his almost evangelical pursuit of ordinary lives. He reports that in the course of his search for unpublished nineteenth-century autobiographies—he advertised in various newspapers—he found himself receiving instead contemporary autobiographical material. What his correspondents wanted, he realized, was to be read before they died, and for their texts to survive them (*Écrire* 31). The solution? The creation of an archive in the

library of Ambérieu-en-Bugey, a small town near Lyon, and the formation of a readership that pledged to read, describe, and catalogue every text received— by 2015, around 3500 (*Écrire* 32). This work of validation, performed by the members of APA in reading circles based in various French cities, assures that the deep motive of all life writing is fulfilled: every text eventually finds a reader. I have yet to make my pilgrimage to Ambérieu, “*Ville de l’Autobiographie*,” but it’s definitely on my list.

The signature of Philippe’s career has been his hospitality to life writing of all kinds and periods. His openness to the new thing is remarkable. It was no surprise to me, for example, that the most searching essay in *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (2014) should be Philippe’s “Autobiography and New Communication Tools.” Contemplating the advent of the Internet, he asks bold questions, and shows himself prepared to face autobiography’s possible demise in the time to come. Nonetheless, like the Energizer Bunny, Philippe Lejeune is indefatigable. Last fall he wrote me that he had nothing big in the works, but he went on to say that he would soon publish an enormous, collaborative *Dictionnaire de l’autobiographie* dedicated to Francophone work—some 450 entries in an 850-page tome.

## WORKS CITED

- Bruss, Elizabeth. *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- Gusdorf, Georges. “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie.” In *Formen der Selbstdarstellung. Festgabe für Fritz Neubert*. Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1956. 105–123.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *L’Autobiographie en France*. Paris: A. Colin, 1971.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *Le Pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Seuil, 1975.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *Lire Leiris: Autobiographie et langage*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1975.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *Calicot: Enquête de Michel et Philippe Lejeune*. Paris: Montalba, 1984.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1989.
- Lejeune, Philippe. “Autobiography and New Communication Tools.” In *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. Trans Katherine Durmin. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2014. 247–258.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *Écrire sa vie: Du pacte au patrimoine autobiographique*. Paris: Mauconduit, 2015.
- Olney, James. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1972.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Words*. 1964. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Vintage, 1981.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Eakin edited and introduced the first English language collection of Philippe Lejeune’s essays, *On Autobiography* (University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Eakin’s

most recent essays are “Autobiography as Cosmogram” (*Storyworlds*) and “Self and Self-Representation Online and Off” (*Frame*, Utrecht, Netherlands). He also contributed an “Afterword” to a new edition of *Classic American Autobiographies* (Signet Classics). His last book, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, is forthcoming in Portuguese translation from Letra e Voz (Sao Paulo). Eakin is Ruth N. Halls Professor Emeritus of English at Indiana University.