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Journal of European Studies 2008; 38: 277
DOI: 10.1177/0047244108094296

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jes.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/38/3/277
Jean Giono: The personal ethics of an author writing under the occupation

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The recently published *Journal de l’Occupation* (1995), written by Jean Giono from September 1943 to September 1944, allows a privileged view of the French author who was subsequently blacklisted for collaboration. Contemporary critics generally consider Giono guilty of literary collaboration. In this article, I inquire into the legitimacy of these claims through a close reading of his occupation diary and other publications of the occupation period. In the end, I reject this commonly held notion in favour of the portrait that the diary provides: that of a disillusioned French author and French citizen, who is unwilling to take sides in the civil conflict beyond his local allegiances, and thus refuses to submit his vision to an overarching political project. Moreover, his total belief in an individual’s freedom of conscience makes him subversive in his refusal to submit to one doctrine or another.

**Keywords**: intellectual resistance, literary collaboration, National Revolution, *retour à la terre*, Vichy

The heady idealism of intellectuals often proves a pitfall in periods of intense political schism, making decisive political action a risky enterprise. Jean-Paul Sartre addressed this dilemma with poignancy in his 1948 play, *Les Mains sales*. Sartre’s existentialist philosophy on the ethical requirement of choice, underpinning his, albeit problematic, association with the Communist Party following the Second World
War, has nonetheless left its mark on post-war scholarship with regard to the moral responsibility of intellectuals. The situation of most French authors living through that war and the German occupation rendered the possibility of clear discernment practically nil, however. As Julian Jackson states in his overview of the period (2001: 314): ‘The problem with publishing anything was that compromises were almost inevitable’. As a result, the tendency of scholars to divide Vichy-era authors into resisters or collaborators, when the reality for most of them was much more complex, is best avoided. Like Jean Giono, many French authors were faced with the dilemma of wanting to practise their art and needing to provide for their families without knowing what the future held or the full extent of Nazi Germany’s schemes. There is also the individual question of moral and ethical grounding, which for Giono grew from a family tradition of political independence and, ultimately, his father’s quiet moral fortitude.

As the grandson of poor Italian (Piedmontese) immigrants in southeast France, and as a beneficiary of the free and secular education provided at the pioneer Collège de Manosque in the Basses-Alpes, Giono is in many respects a model success story of the Third Republic. His mother’s family had long been settled in the town, but he was most inspired by his paternal heritage, and most predominantly by his father, Jean Antoine Giono, a shoemaker and a converted, though non-practising, Protestant. From his literary works and interviews, one can sense how deeply Jean Giono admired Jean Antoine, ‘quarante-huitard dans l’âme’, who was known for his ardent Dreyfusism and his reverence for Voltaire, Lamartine, Hugo, and Zola, seekers of justice and defenders of human rights (Citron, 1990: 25). Jean Antoine’s pacifism, anti-clericalism and anarchism – ‘il était indépendant des religions, des partis, des syndicats’ – are common sources in Giono’s writings and interviews (Citron, 1990: 32). The region of Giono’s birth was likewise a stronghold for traditional republicanism:

Près de 30% des opposants du 10 juillet [1940, the date of the transfer of full powers to Philippe Pétain] sont des parlementaires du Sud-Est ... Dominantes dans les zones de passage et d’industrie, les terres laïques ou parfois protestantes sont les bastions d’une tradition républicaine aux expressions politiques diverses dont les racines se trouvent dans les révoltes du XIXe siècle, en particulier celle de 1851. (Guillon, 1993: 172, 173)

A World War I veteran, Giono had been deeply traumatized by the experience of trench warfare, was adamantly opposed to war, and denounced its inordinate toll on the peasantry and the poor for the
benefit of the bourgeoisie. While in the latter half of the 1930s he began writing of an imagined peasant rebellion, his visions of ‘des flots de sang’, which he shared with André Chamson in 1937, were never actualized in physical violence or political action (Citron, 1990: 273). Such apocalyptic thoughts remained purely fantastical. Nonetheless, Giono’s reference to ‘race’ in these letters and writings has been pointed to as evidence of a reactionary leaning in the author. Pierre Citron, Giono’s biographer, has explained the socio-economic, as well as lyrical, basis for Giono’s use of the term: ‘D’un côté, il y a les poètes, les fabulateurs, les imaginatifs, les pauvres, les désintéressés, les généreux; de l’autre, les avides, les bourgeois pour qui comptent les apparences’ (1990: 187). The original misunderstanding, however, compounded by Giono’s ambiguous record during the Vichy years, has left a blemish on the author’s legacy ever since.

Beginning in 1934 and up to the eve of war, his voice is understood to have inspired Europe’s youth to engage in emerging peace movements, including the Communist Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires (AEAR), les Auberges de la jeunesse, and the Contadour, a group of Giono enthusiasts – predominantly pacifist – who would congregate twice a year under the spiritual guidance of the author in his native region of the Basses-Alpes. Giono’s years working as a bank employee in Manosque, before his decision to live solely through his writing, had made him sympathetic to the proletarian cause. In the years leading up to the war, in the form of essays and signed pacifist tracts, he publicly condemned Nazism and Stalinism, in addition to French ministers Pierre Laval and Paul Reynaud, for their militarism. However, his writings, infused with the rhetoric of disaster, supposedly moved millions to embrace the National Revolution in late 1940 in the hope of salvaging all that was French; and, in 1944, identified with the mouthpiece of an oppressive regime aligned with the enemy, Giono’s works were blacklisted and the author temporarily imprisoned. Giono’s case, never having gone to trial, has since been re-examined again and again, in spite of impassioned or unequivocal dismissals and a renewed appreciation for the artist in his home country. His recently published Journal de l’Occupation (1995) is therefore a significant piece of evidence that opens a new perspective on the author and his work, and one that his ambiguous record simply does not provide.

Such a varied tableau speaks of a complex history and requires careful analysis of the author’s seeming inconsistencies, especially given his problematic reception since the war. Among the most recent analyses, Giono has been variously identified as a writer with
sympathies to Vichy who failed to distance himself from the regime, or as a hard-line collaborator, in the ranks of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Alphonse de Châteaubriant, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and Henry de Montherlant. However, Pascal Ory identified him in the 1988 French edition of *Images de la France de Vichy* as an ‘involuntary contributor’ who was ‘rediscovered’ by Vichy propagandists (Ory, 2000: 136). These conflicting views illustrate the ongoing contention surrounding the author, but more importantly an enduring contradiction that demands a deeper inquiry.

The rural longing of Giono’s rustic works, whose theme of a ‘return to the land’ was assimilated to the nationalist rhetoric of Vichy propaganda, has led many critics to accuse Giono of literary collaboration. While actively engaged in the process of critical social inquiry by exposing the weaknesses of bourgeois liberalism, however, Giono resisted adhering to any one political movement, although he was briefly a fellow-traveller of the Communist Party in the mid-1930s. Ory counts him among the ‘écrivains du Front Populaire’, specifying Giono’s role as ‘chef de petite bande d’irréguliers’: ‘l’œuvre littéraire la plus directement liée à un projet de révolution spirituelle, harmonique du Front populaire quoique autonome par rapport à lui, [est] celle de Jean Giono’ (Ory, 1994: 204, 215). Giono’s occupation-period publications, including a serialized novel and an interview with de Châteaubriant in *La Gerbe*, if suspect for their appearance in the Nazi-financed review, are no less socially critical in their content. A cursory overview of Giono’s implied references to the promises of the National Revolution appears to support claims of ideological collaborationism. But Giono’s other published as well as personal writings of the period – including the *Journal de l’Occupation* – suggest that Nazism, and Vichy too, in the end no more responded to his revolutionary ideals than had the blatant capitalism of the Third Republic.

A close examination of his writings and of the specific context of his experience allows us to gain a better understanding of Giono’s ambiguous behaviour with regard to the overall situation of French writers and the French public. In the end the court’s decision of a ‘non-lieu’ appears justified. While much is disappointing or blameworthy in his behaviour, including his choice to continue publishing and to do so with his long-time editor Bernard Grasset, despite the latter’s ‘philonazisme’, it is nonetheless a far cry from the collaborationism of Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, Louis-Ferdinand Céline or Robert Brasillach. It is only just to view the latter’s call for the merciless destruction of ‘weak’ undesirables as distinct from Giono’s hobnobbing with German Francophiles or his obsequiousness in relation to high-paying
collaborationist publishers and members of the new cultural elite working toward a Franco-German rapprochement. In view of this behaviour, the charge of *attentisme* has potential grounds. However, in light of Robert Gildea’s recent *Marianne in Chains* (2002), perhaps Giono’s more questionable actions were a means of survival at a time when right and wrong were sliding values, increasingly defined by family and community loyalties as the nation was losing credibility. In view of Giono’s writings and publications in 1943 and 1944, this is worthy of consideration.

The experience of Catholic writer François Mauriac sheds light on the pressures faced by authors who wished to continue their craft during the occupation. Having thought better of his previous agreement to write for the new *Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF) under Drieu’s direction, Mauriac nevertheless proceeded to publish a novel, *La Pharisienne*, with Grasset. Mauriac’s outright refusal to associate with the collaborationist press, however, drew forth all the spite of his detractors. Either slighted or assailed by Parisian press editors, including Brasillach and Drieu La Rochelle, following *La Pharisienne*’s publication, Mauriac was even denounced in *Je Suis Partout* for what was reported to be his pro-Semite and anti-German loyalties (Touzot, 1990: 35–6).

In order to secure the German censor’s accord, Mauriac had previously followed Grasset’s directive that he pay a visit to the Institut Allemand in Paris, but he refused to publish an article with *La Gerbe*. Following his reportedly benevolent meeting with Karl Epting and Karl-Heinz Bremer at the Institut in late February 1941, Mauriac resisted pressures to make a public pronouncement in favour of the new Europe or of Pétain. However, he did risk a meeting with Gerhard Heller on 13 May 1941 in order to have the initial 5000-copy limit lifted – which speaks not only of Heller’s duplicity due to his fondness for French literature and art, but also of Mauriac’s courage throughout the ordeal of the German occupation.

Mauriac’s subsequent engagement in the intellectual resistance is unmistakable evidence of his opposition to Nazism and the collaboration. Giono never made his opposition so poignantly clear. Instead, it would appear, Giono complied with Grasset’s protocol. During his visit to Paris in March 1942 to publicize Grasset’s new edition of *Triomphe de la vie*, Giono met with de Châteaubriant and offered him an interview, having already signed a contract with *La Gerbe* in 1941 for the serialized novel, *Deux cavaliers de l’orage*. Once his obligation to the review was hurriedly fulfilled during a second trip to Paris in December, however, he would have no more to do with
Nazi-funded projects. His, albeit backhanded, refusal to attend the European writers’ conference in Weimar, in October 1942 might be seen as confirmation of this (Burrin, 1995: 354–5; Citron, 1990: 351–2).

He nevertheless continued to publish in authorized presses, including the essay ‘Description de Marseille le 16 octobre 1939’ in the NRF, appearing in its complete form three months later as ‘Chute de Constantinople’ in the collection L’Eau vive, published by Gallimard in 1943. As a result of this equivocal behaviour, throughout the occupation Giono was scrutinized from all sides: Communist resisters, French collaborationists and German authorities alike.

His prior claim to independence and his fierce opposition to Soviet militarism had put him at odds with members of the French Communist Party from late 1935 – which some advance as further explanation for his becoming a particular target for Communist resisters and writers and why he was blacklisted following liberation.11 After the 1940 defeat, beyond the expression of his steadfast belief in the rural regeneration of France which appeared to him to be happening, Giono did not pronounce allegiance to any political leader, any regime, or the new order. His decision to continue publishing with his prestigious Parisian publisher makes him an obvious suspect of economic collaboration. However, the subject of his interviews and writings, most of which extolled the peasantry and traditional artisans, with others hinging on the apocalyptic, the politics of some of his publishers and three other media events squarely placed him, in the eyes of his accusers, in line with Vichy or even Nazi ideology. Consecutive to his appearances in La Gerbe, the second volume of Alfred Fabre-Luce’s Journal de la France, published in late June 1942, cited Giono as referring to Adolf Hitler in late 1941 as a ‘poète en action’. In January of the following year, a photo spread on Giono at home appeared in the German magazine Signal. Finally, Georges Régnier’s short lyrical documentary, Manosque pays de Jean Giono, filmed in 1942 and early 1943, premiered in Paris in September 1943. As Alice Kaplan so subtly details in The Collaborator (2000) on the trial and execution of Robert Brasillach in early 1945, for better or for worse, words were equated with actions in the period of France’s liberation and the purge. With regard to Signal’s photo spread and the film Manosque pays de Jean Giono, one might also add image. Given the fierce battle of propaganda, whose initial subtlety would later be replaced with increasingly inflammatory slogans, Giono’s rural appeal as a representative of ‘True France’ clearly made him susceptible to ideological recuperation by Vichy early on.
Kaplan’s comparison of Brasillach to Lyon’s polemical journalist and Anglophobe Henri Béraud (who was ultimately pardoned by de Gaulle) illustrates the precedent set by Brasillach’s condemnation for treason – the crime entailing the heaviest penalty under the existing law code in 1944 and 1945 – by distinguishing his idealism from Béraud’s greed. In her final analysis, economic collaboration had spared the one before the fascistic affinities of the other. ‘We might conclude that ideology was understood in 1945 as more dangerous and significant than personal corruption’, Kaplan argues (2000: 205). Citron similarly considers Giono’s alleged collaboration with Nazi Germany, through his published interview and serialized novel in La Gerbe, to have been motivated by economic rather than ideological considerations. He emphatically points to Giono’s political naïveté, dire financial situation and resulting vulnerability in his exchanges and transactions with publishers, notably de Châteaubriant, and visiting journalists and photographers. As a reasonable conclusion to these arguments, whether out of foolish ambition, egotism or financial necessity, Giono’s publishing activity would appear less pernicious in the context of the occupation and purge trials. Citron fails, however, to engage in the intellectual debate over the moral responsibility of the author that ensued following the final judgment of Giono’s case by the Comité d’opération des gens de lettres as a ‘non-lieu’ and that still hangs over Giono’s legacy today.¹²

In response to those who accused him of ideological collaboration, Giono maintained that he had been writing on the same subject long before 1940, in addition to citing individuals he had helped to escape or to go into hiding, including several Jews, Communists, and other resisters or réfractaires. While these acts are unusually courageous and tend to disprove a possible attentisme on his part, Giono’s most debatable action did indeed take the form of words, and his diary, written between 20 September 1943 and 6 September 1944, offers a more complex portrait of the author. His words are therefore the evidence one must ultimately weigh in order to identify the nature of his literary collaboration, as economic or ideological, and to gain further insight into his moral bearing. It is also useful to investigate the specific context of Giono’s experience in order to understand his relatively late awakening to his ethical responsibilities as a French intellectual.

In general, French public opinion had begun to turn against the Vichy regime following Pierre Laval’s return to power in March 1942, and increasingly so after November 1942, following the allied landings in North Africa and the total occupation of France. The
Comité National des Écrivains (CNE) likewise specified November 1942, upon the occupation of the southern zone, as the date after which continued support of Pétain was worthy of ‘indignité nationale’. As we shall see, however, for the occupants of the south-east, the region occupied by Italian forces until September 1943, this swing in opinion was effectively delayed until late 1943. While the records are not yet complete, it seems fair to say that drawing a generalized picture of occupied France is not possible. This belief is equally held by Pierre Laborie, who pays particular attention to the Haute-Garonne department in his study *L’Opinion française sous Vichy* (1990): ‘Le facteur géographique doit être immédiatement souligné. Globalement, jusqu’à l’hiver 1942–1943, et encore après avec plus de nuances, la spécificité des zones pèse de manière incontestable sur les attitudes’ (Laborie, 1990: 220). After giving vocal support to the nation’s revalorization of rural France in March 1942, the substance and critical stance of Giono’s published essays, short stories and other writings in 1943 and 1944 are more suggestive of intellectual resistance against governmental policy and tactics than of ideological collaborationism.

An examination of the author’s private diary also uncovers the moral grounding of the author at a time when he felt most threatened on all sides. Political independence had come at a high personal cost, and one sees a decidedly moral impulse to retreat from political engagement altogether. Despite his longstanding friendship with Germany as a whole, there is little evidence to suggest that Giono ever felt any affinity for the Nazi regime. However, it seems clear that the National Revolution initially raised Giono’s hopes for the cultural rebirth of France, as it did to varying degrees for the majority of the French population (see, for example, Laborie, 1990: 209–36).

While the degree of Giono’s initial enthusiasm for France’s new political regime is not clear, his *Journal de l’Occupation*, written during the last year of the occupation until the time of his arrest, voices Giono’s subsequent complete disillusionment with the national revolutionary project. His belief in a peasant culture had already been shaken by his misgivings about Stalinist communism before the war (the great purge – including that of the more prosperous Russian peasants, or kulaks, who were perceived by the regime to be undermining farm collectivization – took place between 1936 and 1938). This belief was, as it appears in his diary, irremediably lost during the traumatizing events of the last year of the occupation, which swept up Provence’s youth in the armed *maquis*. It was of course a time when the French were increasingly joining a growing resistance movement, most
intensely in the region surrounding Giono’s home. Giono’s diary is, therefore, testament to the author’s independent streak, which Ory notes in the Popular Front years, by its expression of the author’s desire for autonomy as well as his deep-seated pacifism. Both are clearly manifest in his thinking before the immediately surrounding civil strife and political corruption that ultimately destroyed his dream of communitarianism and of a peasant society, as well as any remaining illusions he may have had in the National Revolution.

In his analysis of Giono’s occupation diary, Richard Golsan arrives at the conclusion that the *Journal* ‘is at best self-delusional ... and at worst suggestive of a reactionary politics that instinctively found sympathy with the ideology of Vichy and even of the Nazis’ (Golsan, 1998: 30). Golsan is not alone in his refusal to excuse the diary’s more disturbing passages. In spite of Giono’s aid to several Jews, *réfractaires*, and Communist friends and acquaintances, including a German Communist, disparaging remarks against the Marseillais ‘bandits’ fighting against the local Milice, occasional crass insensitivity to the plight of Jews, and ambiguous treatment of the occupying forces do indeed require further investigation. Clarification of these most controversial points would allow a fuller understanding of the diary, a text in which Giono appears most preoccupied by the subject of his initial social inquiry: his mythologized country folk who have taken up arms against each other.

I propose that the *Journal de l’Occupation* allows the reader to witness the death of Giono’s ruralist dream of a peasant ‘race’, that is, the ruin of his communal imagining, so central to his pre-war essays and novels. Indeed, Giono’s brooding and expressions of grief are a common theme in the diary. The civil conflict appears the most tragic turn of events, even more so than German occupation and the onslaught of propaganda and coercion, which coincided with increasing violence in the Basses-Alpes region and the genesis of his diary in September 1943. Even so, the diary also communicates Giono’s fear, anguish and a forced political detachment – emotions that are more prevalent than visceral reactionary impulses. While both attitudes are symptomatic of a troubled French identity during the period in question, the ramifications of the two are very different. In favour of the cultivation of one’s garden, however compelling the external circumstances, Giono rejects the greater political project and the excesses of revolution, while a reactionary impulse would tend to participate in them, if only vicariously. One sees Giono’s detachment not only in the diary but also in the collection of essays and short stories – many written prior to the war, including prior to
his political engagement – that Giono chose to publish in 1943. Less allegorical than *Le Voyage en calèche* (written in 1943), which Citron reads as a resistance play, *L’Eau vive* is more open to a reading of ideological resistance, and the diary clearly casts doubt on the case that was subsequently made against him. Before exploring the diary in more depth, it is worthwhile noting some of its similarities with these literary essays.

There is, in particular, a common condemnation of a self-destructive war zealously fought by the populace against itself, whose ‘self-alienation’, in Walter Benjamin’s words, ‘has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic’ (1968: 242). In view of his pre-war anti-Nazi activism, his anti-prophetic essays and novellas published in 1943, and similar passages in the diary, it seems decidedly unlikely that Giono was ‘séduit’ by Hitler, which is how Burrin interprets Giono’s ironic reference to the German Chancellor as a ‘poète en action’ in a 1941 interview with pro-Vichy Alfred Fabre-Luce (1995: 355). It is more probable that this reference communicates Giono’s scorn for the title of prophet, given him by his accusers for his role at the Contadour, just as in his writings Giono clearly distances himself from the prophetic voices inspiring such a war as that wrought by the Nazi chief.

The term ‘poète en action’ points to Hitler’s power of enrapturing an audience and is, in substance and tenor, linked to pro-Nazi propaganda, akin to Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1934), which collaborationist journals enthusiastically diffused. The idyllic atmosphere of Giono’s early rustic works is so closely echoed in Vichy propaganda that cultural historians are more apt to draw comparisons with this. In his diary, however, Giono shows little tolerance for the art of politicking and propaganda, which had effectively made a mockery of his cultural ideal. Vichy’s corporatist peasant society failed to meet the lofty goals of Giono’s vision, and such a society was critically prefigured in his short story ‘Vie de Mlle Amandine’, appearing in a serialized version between 1934 and 1935 and again in *L’Eau vive* (see Giono, 1971b: 140–1).

Likewise, Giono, who refused to call himself a ‘Provençal’, faulted Pétain’s provincial renewal project for its dependence on regionalist iconography. Provençal dress and dances, in the manner of Frédéric Mistral’s regional academy and the Félibrige literary society of Provence, of which the head of Vichy became president of honor. On the contrary, Giono’s 1939 markedly anti-folklore essay entitled ‘Provence’, appearing in the *NRF* in June and July 1942 and later in
L’*Eau vive*, ends with the following phrase: ‘Il n’y a pas de Provence. Qui l’aime aime le monde ou n’aime rien’ (1971b: 234). Giono’s love for his region did not mean he ascribed to the exclusionary cultural politics of regionalism. Similarly, the Franco-German rapprochement as it was stipulated in the 1940 armistice strayed from Giono’s youthful ideal with all its Germanophilia of world peace and solidarity among peoples. As Giono’s writings on the subject attest, the magic spell of the ‘poète’ is as capable of working destruction as redemption.

In the short story ‘Le poète de la famille’, written 23–28 August 1942, also appearing in *L’Eau vive*, the young narrator (based on the author) leaves on a summer trip with his aunt, not as a ‘poet’ but as a ‘son’. It is his cousin Djouan who, by spectacularly destroying the face of a mountain with explosives of his own invention, gives them all their ‘première leçon de poésie’ (1971b: 452). Giono’s cousin Fiorio, whose suicide inspired the short story, had been living in a Paris suburb in the first two years of the occupation and in 1942 had thrown himself under a train when he was prevented from crossing the demarcation line to join his family in southern France. ‘Le poète de la famille’ seems to point to Giono’s increasing wariness of ‘poésie en action’, particularly when irresponsible activism and senseless violence only contribute to the human cataclysm of evil overpowering good. Worthy of further reflection is Giono’s shift in perspective to the observing ‘son’ rather than the active ‘poet’, to which we will return shortly.

Giono’s diary entries offer signs of his withdrawal from projects so central to his identity during his brief period of political engagement (1934–9): from the Contadour, most predominantly, and from his role as spiritual/intellectual guide there and internationally, either through the medium of his written essays or through his activism as a pacifist. Golsan explains Giono’s disavowal of the Contadour in his diary and his overall rejection of political engagement as a means for maintaining the privileged space of Giono the artist. Giono’s essays in *L’Eau vive* and his *Journal de l’Occupation* give more reason to believe, however, that he is abandoning his earlier dream of being a poet/seer out of conscientious objection, combined with a desire for solitude and, as expressed in the diary, his palpable fear for the well-being of his family and loved ones.

One may partly understand Giono’s outward silence before what he calls in his diary his collaborationist ‘légende des journalistes’ as a refusal. He appears unwilling to take part in a battle far removed from the hoped-for cultural revolution, to which he refers in a series of letters to his friend Jean Paulhan (later a member of the CNE) in July and August 1940:16
Nous pouvons et devons être les grands vainqueurs ... Il faut nous y mettre [à la renaissance] tous ... tout est à faire et jamais il n’y a eu tant d’espoir. L’an dernier toutes les portes étaient fermées. L’explosion a tout ouvert et tout renversé. Tout est libre, on est seulement dans l’embarras de pouvoir s’engager de tous les côtés.

In another:

Ne serions-nous pas ‘les plus beaux du monde’ si de là nous repartions tous ensemble; que de là sorte cette ‘culture’ à laquelle malgré tout ils seront humblement obligés de revenir, tous. Ah, et puis, nous aurions la paix!17

In a third letter to Paulhan written in late August 1940, Giono writes:

Il faut doublement nous sauver et revivre. Ne nous mêler de rien, mais faire, pour que ce qui est fait serve d’exemple et de point de départ. Nous pouvons être les vainqueurs des vainqueurs si brusquement ils nous découvrent possesseurs d’un bonheur dont ils ne peuvent s’emparer qu’en nous imitant. Les grands mots d’ordre de la grande révolution, on s’apercevra tout d’un coup que c’est nous qui les avons prononcés sans qu’aucune censure y ait pensé. (Cited by Citron, 1990: 334–5; italics in the original)

Remarkably, between the time of these letters and the diary entry of 21 September 1943, Giono’s enthusiasm is displaced by disillusionment:

Il fallait répondre à la victoire matérielle en s’élevant par l’esprit au-dessus de notre vainqueur, et au-dessus de ce que nous-mêmes nous avions été, au lieu de désirer être vainqueur à notre tour (la chaîne des guerres). Cela devait être le moment des grandes visions. Mais il n’y a pas eu de riches cervelles. (1995b: 315–16)

One clearly senses an oblique criticism of the shortcomings of the National Revolution in this excerpt from the diary’s second entry. Rather than a reactionary politics and sympathy for Vichy ideology, there is evidence of Giono’s disillusionment before the failure of ‘nous’ (i.e. ‘les poètes, les fabulateurs, les imaginatifs, les pauvres, les désintéressés, les généreux’) to renew society and embark on a cultural transformation through its reorganization.

Vichy only figures in the diary as an implicit cause for disappointment. When the Provençal countryside is bitterly split by civil conflict raging all around him in late 1943, Giono is unambiguous in his expressed disgust for Vichy Radio whose nationalist propaganda risks destroying the nation by corrupting the people’s ideals with lies.18 In his entry of 22 September 1943, Giono states the following:

Tout nous prouve bien qu’il n’y a pas là [dans la guerre] une affaire de grandeur: sa facilité, son utilisation du mensonge, de la trahison,
le mépris des paroles données, le ‘la fin justifie les moyens,’ la mort de l’héroïsme; il n’y a même pas intérêt national, on ne défend plus sa patrie. Ceci est clairement exprimé et expliqué chaque jour avec une voix de stentor mais il n’y a que des pires sourds. Personne ne déteste la guerre. (1995b: 317)

Regardless of his sympathy for familiar members of the local Milice murdered by bands of armed youths – or for the few admiring German Wehrmacht soldiers that came to request his autograph – this reference to Vichy’s anti-resistance radio transmissions refutes, I would argue, charges of Giono’s strict alignment with Vichy. It characterizes Vichy’s propaganda onslaught as unpatriotic and treacherous ‘lies’, ‘clairement exprimé et expliqué chaque jour avec une voix de stentor’ and fuelling the burgeoning civil war.

Similarly, he warns against the deficiencies of France’s future liberators:

Parmi ceux qui préparent les malheurs futurs, il y en a de bonne foi qui s’imaginent sauver le monde et cuisiner le bonheur. Mais ils n’ont confiance que dans le matériel. Comme c’est le matériel qui gagnera la guerre. De chaque côté le matériel tue l’héroïsme [non-militaire, he specifies]. (1995b: 316; italics in the original)

The national project of spiritual rejuvenation having succumbed to strategic warfare, and the future portending a return to bourgeois materialism, like Bobi in Que ma joie demeure (1935), Giono becomes disillusioned by the project of social transformation altogether and retreats.

Let us pause briefly to consider the evolving political landscape from 1942 – which in March saw Giono in Paris socializing with the Parisian literati, editors, and members of the German cultured elite – until late 1943, when Giono began his diary. Giono made his most damning comments, which appear favourable to the Vichy regime, to La Gerbe’s de Châteaubriant in March 1942, at the time of the publication of Triomphe de la vie. In his 1998 article Golsan quotes from the interview published in La Gerbe and notes: ‘Giono applauds the fact that France “has rediscovered its true and pure face” – that of a France faithful to its peasant and artisan roots’ (Golsan, 1998: 26). Although Giono does not explicitly name Vichy, Golsan detects an indirect reference in Giono’s response to the question of whether he could have written Triomphe de la vie, a celebration of the traditional Provençal village, before the war:

No, I could not have conceived it then. We could not have imagined yesterday that the destiny of France would be to move toward a peasant, patriarchal civilization. But since then, we have lived through a great
experience, we have learned about ourselves in a few short months of these events more than what we learned during years of errors. Our characteristics, our essential virtues, are now clear to us. (Golsan, 1998: 33)

This response seems to suggest a favourable opinion of Vichy, at least susceptibility to its propaganda, which, particularly in the first two years of the regime, appealed to France’s peasant heritage. For the French living in the occupied northern zone, such comments appear fully complicit with the increasingly suspect collaboration, or naïvely provincial. As Brasillach wrote in critique of _Triomphe de la vie_: ‘M. Giono pense, nous n’y pouvons rien’ (cited by Citron, 1990: 342).

It is widely acknowledged that until the second half of 1942, in the unoccupied southern zone the full impact of the collaboration had been effectively hidden from view behind the reassuring image of Pétain. As a member of the cultural elite, Giono should have been better placed to see past the immediacy of his own experience. But, in the final analysis, it would seem that his keen belief in France’s cultural revolution as a model for Europe impelled him to speak of it publicly, for there is clear evidence that Giono did not subscribe to collaboration. After the first round-ups of Jews in July of that year and before the policy of forced labour in Germany (Service du Travail Obligatoire, or STO) in February 1943, throughout France ‘la rencontre de Montoire devient objet de propagande ... pour les collaborationnistes, “Montoire, c’est encore une façon d’affirmer la France, et de l’affirmer dans l’honneur”’ (Rossignol, 1991: 178–9). Although Giono’s seeming tolerance or enthusiasm for the regime has generally been analysed with regard to the vices of ‘integral pacifism’, one can sense in his _Journal de l’Occupation_ and in his protection of Jews, Communist friends and _réfractaires_, or STO dodgers, that these elements of the collaboration pact offended Giono’s moral sensibilities. We should, therefore, look into the events leading up to the beginning of the diary and specifically at the momentary Italian backdrop to Giono’s wartime experience in order to further our understanding of the author’s attitude.

Living in the Italian-occupied zone from November 1942 to September 1943, Giono had been largely spared the omnipresence of the German occupation before beginning his diary, although he had had a foretaste of it during his trip to Paris in December 1942. The intrusion of Italy across France’s south-eastern border potentially provides insight into Giono’s seeming slowness to comprehend the political situation. Significantly, as Jean-Marie Guillon illustrates (1993), the Italian occupation had the effect of renewing patriotic sentiment in favour of Pétain in the south-eastern departments, including the Basses-Alpes.
In his historical study of the region, Guillon states that after the 1940 armistice:

Vichy joue de l’Allemagne contre l’Italie, ce qui contribue à son succès dans un premier temps, surtout dans les terres, souvent conservatrices, les plus menacées, celles de l’ancien royaume de Piémont [ancestral lands of Giono’s Italian relatives and site for ‘Le Poète de la famille’ and Le Voyage en calèche, reclaimed by Italian irredentists]. Les pétainistes les plus extrémistes qui s’épanouissent dans la Légion française des combattants en profitent, du moins jusqu’à ce que la Résistance, sous ses diverses formes, canalise le sentiment patriotique. (1993: 161; see also Panicacci, 1992)

In addition to causing tensions between Français de souche and Italian immigrants, naturalized or not, the irredentist threat steadfastly rallied many of the latter around Marshal Pétain in defence of family, community and nation. Giono’s family heritage, one may presume, since he drew upon it to a great extent as a source of identity, inspired a certain Pétainiste sympathy in him as well. Rather than hastily drafting Giono’s comments into the pro-Vichy cause, therefore, it seems more appropriate to measure them against the general rule governing ‘legitimate’ relations with the German occupier as recently summarized by Gildea (2002). Gildea is not the first to argue that the history of occupied France cannot simply be broken down into the Manichean categories of ‘bad’ collaboration and ‘good’ resistance. The complex relations between the French and their German occupiers led to the development of a new set of informal rules and social systems of community and survival that risk being misinterpreted from a post-liberation vantage-point. From the perspective of the community in occupied France, he states: ‘As a rule of thumb, actions that undermined the family, community, or nation were illegitimate’ (2002: 405). Once the Italians left and the Germans gained control, with strict collaborationism being the rule within the Vichy regime, family and community were the only viable entities left, to which Giono’s diary bears witness.

Although a veteran of the First World War, Giono did not join the Légion française des combattants, which was first conceived as an intermediary between the official administration and the public in lieu of a single party. 23 In January 1943 Joseph Darnand would restructure the paramilitary arm of the Veteran’s Legion into the Milice, which fought alongside the Germans to combat the resistance. Vichy’s encouragement of anti-resistance vigilantism would subsequently produce the worst excesses of the ensuing civil conflict from late 1943 through the purge. However, before the escalation of attacks against
the Alpine maquis beginning in November 1943, following the Italians’ departure from the south-eastern departments, members of the local Milice had deviated little from the amiable relations they had enjoyed with the local population as légionnaires. Giono, it appears, was on friendly terms with at least two of the local Miliciens who were later involved in the bloody skirmishes with members of the resistance that the author incredulously notes in his journal. His surprise seems to confirm, therefore, that the Italian occupation had lessened the effects of the radical turn of events experienced elsewhere from late 1942 to early 1943 and largely delayed them until nearly a year later.

If the Italian occupier, ‘bon enfant’ and ‘redoutable’, was ‘méprisé’ and ‘brocardé’, the cordial relations between Francophile Italian officers and the public neutralized the effect of incidents of violent repression (Guillon, 1993: 162). Moreover, during their occupation of eight French departments east of the Rhône excluding the new intellectual capital of Lyon, Italian officials had prevented the Vichy administration, and by extension the Nazi regime, from fully implementing their policies, notably the deportation of foreign Jews. Guillon notes the disparity in the levels of repression dealt by the region’s two occupants: ‘Lorsque les “vrais” occupants [the Germans] s’emparent de la zone italienne, la répression, mais aussi les réquisitions, évacuations et destructions provoquées par les travaux de défense prennent une toute autre dimension’ (1993: 175). Although the changing circumstances in France’s south-east oddly appear to have been overlooked in examinations of Giono’s occupation-period writings, the change of guard in September 1943 appears a decisive factor behind the genesis of the diary.

It is within this rapidly changing context that one may understand Giono’s condemnation of the young ‘voyous’ who fled Marseille and fell into lawless bands. Neither does Giono spare the local bourgeois notables who seek to position themselves favourably and reap advantage from the escalating violence. After mocking heroism in the opening entry, where he announces his selective ‘mépris’, Giono relates a bitter anecdote on the growing resistance myth as it was being exploited by the local bourgeoisie, here the enigmatically named ‘Dr G’ specifically. He denounces above all Dr G’s economic collaboration, avid opportunism, indifference to human suffering and, in this instance, selfish use of the fiction of heroism embodied in the figure of a Marseillais youth. Giono characterizes him as a ‘paid assassin’, come to ‘settle accounts’ but shot dead by his intended victim, head of Milice, known as ‘Ch’ (1995b: 312–13). The report of this incident speaks of the blind and faceless violence and the abusive posturing that
plagued all of France in the year preceding liberation, and it starkly contrasts with Giono’s emotional accounts of the fate of many local youths, the fallen resisters Giono perceptibly mourns. Therefore, the portrait of Giono as a Vichy sympathizer is too superficial. At a time when the French nation no longer appeared viable, his sympathies lay with the familiar members of his locale, including those members of the Milice or of the maquis resistance whose turn to armed violence became a source of disappointment and sorrow for him.

Similar to Giono’s accounts, reactions among the Loire Valley’s inhabitants, according to Gildea, suggest that the rural population of France did not necessarily take sides, coinciding with a growing sense of community identity and self-sufficiency. The local supplanted the national as a means to community survival. Throughout France the Vichy regime, both in spite of and because of its increasing show of force, was clearly losing its credibility in mid-1943. However, murderous roaming bands, although separate from the myriad elements of the interior resistance, were at times indistinguishable from the latter in the public’s mind and did not make the alternative necessarily more appealing. Communities throughout rural France, and urban France for that matter, mistrusted outsiders, whether resistant or collaborator.25

Likewise, the increasing level of fear in Giono’s diary entries corresponds to a growing awareness of the German police, who interrogated his friend Lucien Jacques regarding their suspicions of Giono. Fear can also be detected in Giono’s references to the intensified resistance and sniper activity and to the approaching cannon fire as the Allied forces move northwards. Giono and his family had specifically been targeted by the local Communist-led resistance, which had planted the bomb that exploded outside their hilltop residence as a warning in January 1943.26 Even in the absence of direct references to such real and present dangers, Giono’s feelings of foreboding are communicated through his depictions of the weather: the cannon-like sound of thunder or the leaden apocalyptic skies. As the dangers become more palpable to Giono, he is moved to restore strained or broken relationships and to rebuild his community of friends that had been divided by political dissension at the outbreak of the war. At the same time, he is cautious not to draw attention to his sheltering activities and further jeopardize his family’s safety.

The encroachment of the external situation into Giono’s private life may also serve as a framework with which to analyse Giono’s treatment of Jews in the diary. In addition to helping several Jews flee south, he offered refuge to the wife of Max Ernst and to Polish-born
pianist Jan Meyerowitz. He refused, however, to make a public announcement on the Jews’ behalf. In response to former Contadourien Vladimir Rabinovitch’s request that he do so in early January 1944, Giono, who had just learned of the German Gestapo’s surprise interrogation of Lucien Jacques, wrote: ‘je me fous des Juifs comme de ma première culotte’ (1995b: 389).27 Giono’s reaction was partly motivated, it would seem, by a concern for self-preservation. Notwithstanding their offensive coarseness, the remarks in question are linked to an implicit fear of the Gestapo: ‘Seuls vivent ceux qui ne font pas la guerre, aucune guerre’ (1995b: 387). Rarely does Giono speak directly of the threat posed by the German occupation after the Italian retreat. His reference to Jacques’ brush with the Nazi officers is one of those instances, but the transfer of occupational authority to the Germans does coincide with Giono’s increasing anxiety and his vociferous rejection of further risk. In the entries written on the preceding and following day, Giono, though without the ethnic slur, castigates with a similarly angry and scornful tone other members of the Contadour who have sought his assistance in extricating their relatives from impending incarceration.28

In his diary entry of 24 September 1943, little over three months prior to Rabinovitch’s visit, Giono expresses his dismay at reading René Lasne and Georg Rabuse’s selective edition of the *Anthologie de la poésie allemande des origines à nos jours* (1943). After citing an excerpt from Karl Epting’s preface, specifically Epting’s explanation of the editors’ application of ‘les principes qui se sont fait jour en Allemagne au cours de ces dix dernières années et qui ont dégagé la vraie tradition spirituelle allemande’, leading to the exclusion of poets of Jewish origin and Communists, Giono writes the following:

Serviteur, monsieur Epting. Ceci n’est plus l’anthologie de *la mais d’*une poésie allemande et vous faites ainsi très exactement le contraire de ce que bon apôtre vous prétendez faire. Comment voulez-vous qu’on se rapproche? Je veux pouvoir écouter des chants juifs et des chants communistes s’ils sont beaux, et ils représentent aussi l’Allemagne. Que me veut ce choix de poètes? Voilà qu’il est si politiquement fait qu’il me gâte Hölderlin et Novalis. Et entre chaque j’ai toujours envie de me dire ‘Mais on a oublié les plus beaux’ – pire: ‘on a rejeté les plus beaux.’ Ce n’est pas vrai mais quelle maladresse de laisser même la place au soupçon et à la riposte. Mais c’est notre bonne absence de générosité que nous retrouvons ici et que de bêtises elle fait commettre ... Quand il s’agit de mépriser les poètes c’est facile, mais au fond, quelle frousse vous en avez, les uns et les autres, dès que vous voulez *dicter*.

(1995b: 319, 320)
This is the only direct reference to Germany’s programme of ethnic cleansing in the diary, qualified by a paternalistic benevolence toward Jewish and Communist poets and by the statement: ‘Comment voulez-vous qu’on se rapproche?’

In the same entry Giono refers to the ‘légende des journalistes’ of his collaborationism and its consequences: the loss of friends, most importantly Lucien Jacques, and a series of overtures from the German intelligentsia. Without answering to the charges directly, which he says would be ‘inutile’, he writes: ‘je m’imagine que ce qui compte [in lieu of a direct rebuttal] c’est l’œuvre’ (1995b: 318). This passage dates from a time when Giono appears hopeful that France’s occupation will soon end. Corsica had been liberated between 13 and 17 August 1943 by the army of the Free French, and, in an entry dated two days prior to the entry cited above, Giono notes: ‘La guerre n’est plus qu’à cent kilomètres’ (1995b: 317). Although he claims to delight in life’s simple pleasures, the love he shares with his wife, his work’s steady progress, and the harmonious days, the pain caused by his severed friendships qualifies this expressed happiness. His feigned indifference to ‘l’idée que les autres se font de moi à travers cette légende des journalistes’ will, with the passing days and months, be replaced by anger, second-guessing and fear. Similarly his apparent quietude and self-possession are checked by this initial statement of mocking impotence, appearing in the first diary entry:

Je reconnais que je ne peux rien [to remedy ‘le malheur profond de notre génération et des suivantes’]. Pas assez intelligent ... ou bien pas assez simple ... je veux garder le droit de rire et de me soulever dans un mépris exactement appliqué. (312; italics in the original)

If it appears that the advent of Vichy gave him the momentary illusion of peaceful harmony and spiritual enrichment, the incursion of Nazi Germany into both his leisure reading and his mountain refuge beginning in September 1943 portended future misfortunes. In reaction, Giono increasingly turns inwards following his impulse to protect those closest to him.

His later harsh comments regarding Jews appear to contradict the earlier entry where Giono chastises Epting for excluding them from the German poetry anthology. In another entry written in November 1943, Giono wryly refers to Manosque’s and Forcalquier’s Jewish communities with an allusion to medieval Jewish ghettos. Within the context of the secular tradition of the French Republic, Giono’s remarks are not wholly inconsistent with a particular French discourse that hailed assimilation as integral to France’s democratic
model – a sentiment that was not shared by all of his countrymen (see Laborie, 1990: 135–7).

Although interspersed with outbursts of an elementary form of anti-Semitism, his comments are nonetheless evocative of an anti-sectarian, universalistic republicanism in which Giono was raised as the son of Jean Antoine Giono, an ardent Dreyfusard. The two are not mutually exclusive. As Michel Winock argues with regard to the Dreyfus Affair, many if not most of the early Dreyfusards were motivated more by their strict adherence to truth, justice, human rights, and ultimately a secular French Republic, than by a repugnance for anti-Semitism (Winock, 1987: 146, 158–65, 182–91). However, after the Affair: ‘Un homme de gauche ne pouvait plus être antisémite’, although relapses were not uncommon (Winock, 1987: 190). One cannot make excuses for Giono’s recourse to ethnic stereotyping. One can say, however, that it did not preclude him from rescuing a number of assimilated French and foreign Jews. Where Giono’s diary is more troublesome is in its communication of his relative indifference to a crime that extended beyond his immediate circle of friends and acquaintances.

Returning to Giono’s diary entry of 12 November 1943, a day of heavy Allied bombing in the Basses-Alpes region, the allusion to Jewish ghettos is part of a meditation on the British air raids, on the Hundred Years War, and on the immutability of a group’s social characteristics over time. The following remarks are undoubtedly linked to Giono’s cynical view of the basic promise of radical social revolution through warfare:


In this excerpt, one may read an illustration of the world’s degeneracy, brought on by the war’s corruption. As for Giono’s accompanying lack of sensitivity to the present Jewish plight, Laborie’s analysis of
French reaction to the internment and deportation of Jews might offer some clarification. Giono’s attitude is perhaps most closely reflected in the following analysis:


Although Jews found themselves forcibly, not ‘voluntarily’, set apart from the rest of French society, Giono’s derisive, though faulty, discussion of Jewish ‘ghettos’ speaks also of an innately republican and laïque disdain for sectarianism, seen as a remnant of a medieval society.

However, linked to this obituary of the French Republic is Giono’s prefiguration of France’s democratic future in the following passage:

> Ce n’est qu’à la longue, une génération, peut-être même deux ou trois (le temps que l’esprit koulak renaissa dans les jeunes paysans si on le détruit dans les vieux, et cette renaissance est spontanée parce que naturelle), que l’établissement communiste français décomposé intérieurement par la chimie naturelle de sa paysannerie redeviendra une simple démocratie radicale-socialiste. Rien n’aura servi à Rien. Les morts seront morts, un point c’est tout. (Ceci est raisonné sans tenir compte de l’Amérique, qui précipitera peut-être la composition radicale-socialiste.) (Giono, 1995b: 355)

In these passages, we can see Giono’s belief in Germany’s ultimate defeat. He foresees a Soviet victory and the establishment in France of a violent Communist regime unless the United States successfully stops the Soviet advance. His unwavering faith in the French peasantry is just as palpable – faith that they will one day establish ‘une simple démocratie radicale-socialiste’, in keeping with rural Provence’s political history in particular (cf. Citron, 1990; Agulhon, 1969).

How can one reconcile all these comments with his legendary collaboration? His expressed hopes for the future apparently do not lie with de Gaulle, who is not mentioned once in the diary. Nor do they lie with Pétain. In spite of his failure to take a firm stand on the ‘Jewish problem’ before him, Giono’s written thoughts indicate a clear desire to recuperate the republican, anti-clerical tradition of the rural Provence of his youth, which, in view of French history and Laborie’s analysis of ‘ordinary myopia’, does not corroborate the author’s alleged sympathy for the ideology behind the Holocaust.
From the absence of stylistic changes or corrections, the *Journal de l’Occupation* appears a wholly spontaneous and personal work. According to Citron, only the final words were altered much later and are clearly written in another ink. These are the final two paragraphs of the diary, taken from the last entry written on Thursday, 6 September 1944, two days before his arrest:

Besoin plus que jamais de solitude, de montagne, de silence et de paix. Rien de ce que je vois ne peut me faire aimer l’homme et la société, et le tumulte vain des entreprises où se dévore inutilement l’énergie et la force. Rien de ce qui se crée n’est valable. Pour moi en tout cas, je serais au comble du bonheur dans une hutte montagnarde du plus solitaire Valgaudemar. A des kilomètres de tout civilisé, journal, radio ou quoi que ce soit de semblable.


The last sentence replaced the original ‘Oui, je te crois’, written just two days before his arrest and incarceration. Taken alone, one may interpret in any number of ways Giono’s change in outlook once he no longer had the pressure of an unspecified ‘ils’ weighing on the nature of his thoughts. Although Giono acridly denounced his Communist enemies, many of Giono’s critics equate the downfall of Vichy with the end of the author’s creative freedom. While I dispute the claim that Vichy realized Giono’s artistic ‘vision of community’, it is useful to explore in what ways and to what end the war and the occupation years disabused Giono of his prior idealism (Golsan, 1998: 33). The apolitical figure of the mountain hermit and the lure of solitude in 1944 need to be examined more closely, since the freedom of Giono’s creative thought was restored, as his sole corrective mark to his diary suggests.

In view of his numerous self-portraits, I would argue that his enigmatic behaviour during this period resulted from the tension arising between the draw of Pétain’s nationalist myth and his desire to emulate his father, his everlasting source of inspiration and sustenance. Less a ‘retour à la terre’, in the National Socialist or Vichy sense, Giono’s wartime actions speak more clearly of a *retour au père* in his search for personal and political grounding. From the picture Giono paints of his father Jean Antoine, a modest and mild-mannered shoemaker, albeit with deep republican convictions, it would appear that the son’s period of political engagement was markedly off the course of paternal influence.
Likewise, Giono’s post-war literary production would completely withdraw from the social reach of his politically engaged works. As the author/narrator concludes in _Noé_, written in 1947, and in summary of his ideas for his projected novel _Noces_: ‘C’est un mélange de bien et de mal ... dans ceux [les ventres] des hommes et des femmes’ (1971c: 862). What indeed is left after the deluge but the same germs of a malignant society, found in us all and seen, re-seen, and not corrected by the realist author? How can one weigh the value of engagement and define the bounds of responsibility against this position based on popular and biblical wisdom, which transcends politics? Is not the ensuing debate a _dialogue de sourds_, liable to take on absurd dimensions, especially within the context of the liberation?

The tension between Giono’s intensely personal philosophy and its cultural application is absent from his later works, which suggests a self-correcting moral impulse against the dangers of cultural politics, which are at the basis of fascism, National Socialism, and the nationalist politics of Vichy. In his later novels, short stories, and essays Giono often celebrates the man who simply was, like the mountaintop hermit in the short story ‘L’homme qui plantait des arbres’ (1971d). In _Les Terrasses de l’île d’Elbe_ (1976), Giono melds the father/mentor with the solitary artisan and sower of seeds, based on childhood memories of his father planting acorns during their walks together in the hills surrounding Manosque: ‘C’était une joie sans égale: joie de le faire, joie d’imaginer la suite que la nature allait donner à ces gestes simples ... Quels cris quand nous découvrions un de nos sujets bien robuste!’ (cited in Citron, 1990: 39).

In the confusion of the last year of France’s occupation, Giono came to recognize the merits of ruling over his tiny domain. He withdrew into his writing, the upkeep of his farms, and the life of his family amidst a number of guests, refugees or passers-through. If this retreat from the surrounding conflict was self-delusional on his part, as some have suggested, it was not self-delusional in his refusal to take sides. Moreover, as Gildea has shown, this shift was not unusual.37 In the last two years of the German occupation, the Loire Valley’s local communities turned inwards in order to protect their precious spare resources, both human and material. In the climate of the time, however, Giono’s quiet abandonment of politics following a period of high public exposure was considered no less blameworthy and dangerous, just as his new personal ethics of planting seeds seems either anti-climactic or naïve, regardless of its wisdom.

Thus it is possible to narrow down our central question even further: can one reconcile Giono the literary collaborator with his politically
diffident moral guide, the patient planter of trees? His *Journal de l’Occupation* provides us with a number of keys. In the diary’s opening entry, Giono states that his guiding principles are human ‘noblesse’ and ‘grandeur’ (1995b: 311). Though equally evocative of Maurrassian tenets and the moral order of Pétain’s France – whose ideological basis, generally speaking, was common to the period whatever one’s political stripe – they are more appropriately traced back to a late nineteenth-century republican discourse, the same one that ultimately exonerated Dreyfus of the charge of treason. It is this intersection of currents in French political thought, the highly contested and revisited site of the founding idea of post-revolutionary France, on which this discussion turns, mirroring Giono’s continued rectifications, in his diary and elsewhere, with regard to the spiritual basis of the French contract of citizenship. Giono’s most important role model provided him with an ontological foundation not only for his personal trajectory but also, as his letters and private diary reveal, his specific expression of national longing.

Giono’s *Journal de l’Occupation* is more indicative of a philosophical departure from cultural politics, those of Vichy or any other, than the reverse. It is a portrait of the self at a watershed moment. As the threat posed by Nazism becomes clear to him, so do the consequences of his words and the cost of celebrity, as evidenced by an increasing preoccupation with his collaborationist legend or with official inquiries into his relations with local resistance members and sheltering activities. After protesting against book burnings and the persecution and imprisonment of German Communists in the 1930s, Giono had to endure a series of personal attacks and threats from his neighbours against his own life and his family’s well-being. He saw his independence compromised; and the sanctity of the author, which he had believed he enjoyed during the height of his career in the 1930s, muddied. In his private diary Giono announces his political death as an author prior to the purge trials, and long before Foucault proclaims the author’s demise. Finding his art caught in a double bind, inclined to national mythologizing yet resisting potential political abuses of it, Giono seeks retreat in his personal reflections.

Mirroring neither the politics of the Dreyfus generation nor those of the younger generation of pacifist intellectuals, Giono’s life story draws upon both sources (Sirinelli, 1988). Reminiscent of a pacifism born of the First World War, his diary also gives proof of a firm hold on republican principles and a republican sense of justice. It is the steadfastness of his vision and faith in those values that ironically make
Giono, who was neither a normalien nor a celebrated engagé, a French national icon. He may appear, as many claim, an unworthy witness of those extraordinary times. But I would argue to the contrary that his *Journal de l’Occupation* shows him to be in many respects representative of the ordinary French citizen of the rural provinces, torn between a reluctance to take up arms, even against the most hated of regimes, and hope for social change, who then wakes up to his complicity in a terrible crime against humanity as yet unarticulated in legal parlance. Should one condemn his lack of foresight? Sneer at his cowardice? Or celebrate his Gallic cunning, occasionally producing extraordinary spurts of courage, which Gildea hails as a necessary component in France’s survival?

Imprisoned in his situation as a social being according to the Sartrean notion of engagement and forced to take sides – oui ou non, pour ou contre – Giono is subversive in his refusal to submit to one doctrine or another, which speaks of his total belief in an individual’s freedom of conscience. Giono’s ‘betrayal’ of the Communist Party in the latter half of the 1930s provoked the wrath of Aragon and others during the occupation and following the liberation. To explain in part the ostracism Giono faced, Tony Judt’s description of what he terms the ‘resistance complex’ is useful to our understanding:

not only are you with us or against us, but to be against us [the Communists] is to ‘collaborate’ with the forces of Capital, to ‘betray’ the masses. To criticize the party is to join a long line of enemies beginning with Trotsky and passing through Jacques Doriot and Marcel Gitton to Pétain. (1992: 48).

In view of the condemnations of French and other European collaborationist writers and intellectuals over the past few decades, it could seem to some that scholars have barely scratched the surface. However, one must proceed cautiously, for it appears that today, just as in 1944, individual speech acts risk being snared in another’s ideology. It is, therefore, all the more critical to investigate and weigh all available evidence in order to uncover the specificity of a particular context or of a particular individual. Historical accuracy and artistic legacies are still at stake.

**Acknowledgements**

I thank Janet Whatley and others for their valuable recommendations during the long research phase for this article. I further extend my gratitude to Janis Emery, Jean-François Fourny, Gretchen van Slyke and Janet Whatley.
for their careful editing and suggestions for clarification during the writing process. Finally, the expert advice of Patrick Hutton and John Flower has made the publication of this article possible.

Notes

1. Thanks to municipal subsidies beginning under the Second Republic, the Collège de Manosque where Giono had his schooling until the age of 16 was one of only two in France at the time where the poor could receive an education at no cost (French state-subsidized secondary education only began in 1931).


3. Guillon goes on to characterize the political tendencies of the south-east during the Vichy era thus:

   Très vite, Vichy exacerbe l’antagonisme séculaire qui partage chaque communauté en Blancs et Rouges de tradition, grossis de couches nouvelles ... Les foules que le Maréchal rassemble de Lyon, en novembre 1940, à Avignon, en octobre 1942, attestent d’une popularité qui dépasse les limites du Midi ‘blanc’. Mais celui-ci triomphe, avant de se disperser entre le giraudisme, la ‘neutralité’ légionnaire ou l’allégeance à l’occupant. (1993: 173)

Agulhon also emphasizes the traditional republicanism of Provence, firmly implanted in Giono’s department of the Basses-Alpes. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Agulhon notes:

   C’est un bastion de la République au temps de l’‘Ordre moral’; c’est un pays où l’enthousiasme politique national l’emporte aisément sur la fibre locale, et où l’on est toujours fier d’offrir un siège de député au leader célèbre, au porte-drapeau éminent, même s’il n’est pas du pays ... C’est un pays enfin où l’avant-garde d’hier, installée par la victoire dans ‘l’opportunisme’, est très vite l’objet de la critique et puis du débordement par les éléments ‘radicaux’ ... La lutte anticléricalne n’a pas attendu ici les actes du gouvernement (expulsion de congréganistes dans les années 80, inventaires d’églises au lendemain de la Séparation [de l’Église et de l’État en 1905]): elle a commencé dans les années 70. (1969: 513, 515)


   le génie âpre, vigoureux, voire fanatique d’un Maurras est moins accordé à la tradition provençale qu’à celle du Languedoc voisin ... Au reste ... les forces de la droite en Provence ne se trouvent pas (ou du moins pas
principalement) dans le terroir rural, elles sont urbaines et notamment marseillaises. (1969 : 524)

Guillon also notes the presence of royalist tendencies in Ardèche, ‘Vendée provençale’ (1993: 173).

4. With reference to the dichotomy ‘us’–’them’, found in Jean le Bleu, for instance, Citron writes:

L’incompatibilité des deux races affleure dans l’entretien avec Jean Antoine de la dame pieuse qui vient lui demander de mettre son fils chez les bonnes sœurs et non à l’école laïque ... ‘Madame la bouchère salue Madame la Préfète, Madame la Préfète salue Madame l’électeur influent, et le curé compte la quête.’ Déjà, dans Manosque-des-plateaux, on a vu coexister deux Manosque: en bas la ville matérielle des intérêts et des cancans, en haut la ville idéale des plateaux qui la dominent. (1990: 187)

5. Cf. Laguerre (1996), who notes the historical distortion that ultimately saw pacifism and anti-communism as the heralds of a future collaboration with Nazi Germany. ‘Ultrapacifism’ is an umbrella term that has wrongly cast leftists and rightists into the same lot: ‘A partir de l’Anschluss, la coupure droite/gauche cède progressivement le pas devant la coupure pacifisme/résistance’ (1996: 816). The reaches of this epistemological shift can be felt in the commonly held, though mistaken, notion that Giono was a rightist. Citron, among other Giono specialists in France, believes that Giono was a forebear of the ecologist movement.

6. In his important L’Épuration des intellectuels, Assouline (1990) describes Giono’s fate as ‘une question d’exemple et de modèle’, analogous to that of Marcel Peyrouton, Vichy’s Minister of the Interior (September 1940 – February 1941), who was later appointed by the Free French general Henri Giraud as Governor-General of Algeria (January–June 1943), only to resign and be arrested (1990: 15–16). Peyrouton was tried for collaboration and was acquitted in 1948.


9. Mauriac would later send autographed copies of his novel to both Heller and Epting.

10. Burrin cites an excerpt from Mauriac’s letter to his wife, dated 7 June 1941, in which he states the following: ‘Évidemment on voudrait que je me prononce. On trouve que je boude. Il faudra que j’explique mon cas: loyauté absolue à l’égard du vainqueur, accept[ation] de la collabor[ation], mais réserve sur le plan des idées, de la doctrine’ (1995: 342).

11. The signature of the Franco-Soviet pact on 2 May 1935, in the interests of France’s defence strategy against Nazism, was condemned by dedicated
pacifists such as Giono. For more insight into Giono’s relationship with the Communist Party at this time, see Citron (1990: 248, 277–80, 295–6).

12. I would concur with Golsan and Jackson that Citron’s account of the author belittles Giono’s intelligence beyond suggesting the malfunction of his moral compass. Jackson sees Citron’s biography as ‘somewhat apologetic’. Cf. Sapiro (1996). While Simone de Beauvoir, among others, found fault with the relative leniency of the sentencing of economic as opposed to ideological collaborationists – a facet of the debate on the responsibility of the author – since the national idea is so closely linked to the intellectual tradition in France, it seems congruous that signed intellectual production would come under closer scrutiny than the economic structures making publication possible.

13. Citron reports that the play, *Le Voyage en calèche* (1947), was written in 1943 and censored by the German authorities the following December. It was purportedly staged in June 1944, although I have been unable to confirm this.


15. See Lebovics (1992), who refers to Mistral’s regional academy and the Félibrige in his study of the history of folklore museums and societies. After the turn of the century, he states: ‘The backward-focused values of contemporary folklore and regionalism melded with the frequently radical-reactory dispositions of the younger regionalists to imprint the new disciplines with a rightist potential’ (1992: 146).

16. Paulhan would later write in Giono’s defence, arguing the author’s ‘droit à l’erreur’, and drew fierce criticism for his pursuit of Giono’s inclusion in the Pléiade.

17. The referent for ‘de là’ is unclear from the quoted passage. It most likely refers to France’s defeat.

18. Guillon describes the historical role of the French south-east thus: ‘Il était inévitable que les remues d’hommes mises en mouvement par les fascismes et par la guerre aboutissent dans cette région en bout de France, abordée comme un refuge ou une étape, avant qu’elle ne se tranforme en nasse’ (1993: 166). He identifies Marseille as ‘un premier pôle de résistance et de culture’, followed by Lyon, crowned ‘capitale de la Résistance’ by Philippe Henriot in June 1943 and by General de Gaulle on 14 September 1944. Grenoble came to be recognized in 1943 as the ‘capitale des maquis’ (1993: 159). The ‘arrière-pays’, meaning the countryside delimited by the Dauphiné mountain range, stretching between Lyon and Marseille and connecting the Hautes-Alpes region to Provence and to the Gard, became the scene where the most intense fighting took place between the German forces and resistance elements, which, in addition to the maquis (organized by the first groups of réfractaires or STO dodgers), included evacuees escaping the cities of Avignon, Lyon, Marseille and Toulon. Marseille, notes Guillon, had ‘dès 1940’, become ‘un centre important pour les communistes étrangers’ (Spanish and Italian, notably, whose sabotage activities prompted the German and French authorities to order that the Old Port be demolished January–February 1943).
Ferments d’opposition, beaucoup des déracinés que la région accueille sont à l’origine de la lente élaboration des diverses formes de résistance, militaires polonais spécialistes des réseaux d’évasion ou de renseignements, Juifs français ou étrangers, Mentonnais dispersés dans les villages de Provence, antifascists de la MOI, Alsaciens et Lorrains qui, dans le Vaucluse et la Drôme, assurent le développement de Combat ou que le chef de Franc-Tireur, Jean-Pierre Lévy, représente au plus haut niveau. (1993: 164, 168).

Beginning in November 1943, the German military, aided by the French state, targeted repeated attacks in the mountainous Provençal region and the Jura against the maquis, whose numbers swelled following the Allied landing in Normandy on 6 June 1944. ‘Désormais, tout le massif alpin vit au même rythme de la Résistance et de la répression’ and the ‘réalité stratégique d’une sorte de réduit montagnard ... s’est imposée à la Résistance [extérieure]’ as well as the Allied forces (1993: 176).

19. The original interview can be located on microfilm at the Sterling C. Evans Library, Texas A & M University. I am grateful to Golsan for his valuable research.

20. In her study of occupation period propaganda in France, Rossignol refers to the posters showing a peasant rolling up his sleeves, with the caption ‘Paysan, de toi est née la France. Fais-la revivre par la Révolution nationale’ (Rossignol, 1991: 113). See also Peschanski et al. (2000: 67–92). The peasants and small farm owners were, by contrast, less enthusiastic over the necessary reversion to traditions due to the shortage of agricultural supplies: the use of oxen and horse teams and of scythes for harvesting wheat, for example.


22. Citron (1990: 352–3) cites this stay in the capital, still under the shock of the first round-ups, as critical to Giono’s creation of Le Voyage en calèche.

23. See Paxton (1972). See also Cointet (1995). The Milice grew from the Service d’Ordre Légionnaire (SOL), formed in August 1941 and officially recognized on 12 January 1942. It was to be comprised of the most collaborationist members of the original Légion, although Cointet notes that recruitment was difficult in the rural areas, including the Alpine departments. Cointet’s study reveals that most members of the original Légion des combattants became disenchanted with the Vichy regime once Pierre Laval came back to power. They deplored his pro-Germany policy since the Légion were France’s defenders.

24. Cf. Paxton (1972: 182–3), who notes that this show of Italian leniency was in reaction to France’s ‘anti-Italian’ actions in Tunisia.

25. Similarly, reactions among the Loire Valley’s inhabitants were mixed before news of attacks and reprisals between the résistants – characterized by Vichy propaganda as ‘bandits’ and ‘terrorists’ – and the Milice. Both were unpopular due to the resulting disorder; notably, Gildea adds that in the region he studied some Miliciens were known to be unarmed. Of particular interest is Gildea’s mention of the arrests of four Saint-Maure youths who had torn
down Franquist posters in late spring 1943. The gendarmerie reported that these arrests, made by the German police in collusion with a Nantes-based Franquist group, “‘disgusted the population of the region’, which was essentially “agricultural and peaceful’, and caused “much turmoil’” (Gildea, 2002: 310). These accounts and others portray a much more complex image of the two sides fighting in the civil conflict, and suggest that community loyalties rested with their own in the face of conflict, no matter the cause.

26. See Citron (1990: 354–5). Giono and the head of the local resistance Louis Martin-Bret, who was responsible for planting the bomb, knew each other well apparently, and Giono wrote a letter to the court prosecutor in Digne, requesting his official pardon.

27. In his diary entry of 3 January 1944, Giono relates their exchange in the following manner:

Il [Rabi] me demande ce que je pense du problème juif. Il voudrait que j’écrive sur le problème juif. Il voudrait que je prenne position. Je lui dis que je m’en fous, que je me fous des Juifs comme de ma première culotte; qu’il y a mieux à faire sur terre qu’à s’occuper des Juifs. Quel narcissisme! Pour lui, il n’y a pas d’autre sujet. Il n’y a pas d’autre chose à faire sur terre qu’à s’occuper des Juifs. Non. Je m’occupe d’autre chose. (1995b: 389)

28. Similar contemptuous mockery of Contadourien Hélène Laguerre and the Contadouriens in general, except for Lucien Jacques, animates the preceding and following diary entries. Laguerre’s daughter Jacqueline Dez had been to Giono’s home the day before Rabi’s visit, seeking Giono’s aid in the rescue of her younger brother Alain, a member of the resistance who had been arrested by the German police and was awaiting imminent execution. Giono does write letters to de Châteaubriant and Montherlant on Alain’s behalf: ‘Et je sais que tout cela me retombera sur le nez’. However, the Laguerres also figure in Giono’s blanket condemnation of the Contadouriens: ‘ces vaniteux, ces sans âmes, ces laideurs vivantes’, which may partly lie behind his irascibility against Rabi (Giono, 1995b: 387).

29. Giono’s disparaging remarks and sarcastic references to Jewish ghettos require further explanation with regard to France’s history of anti-Semitism. The notion that Jews had a separate identity based on faith and family heritage had been longstanding in France. Assimilation, on the other hand, brought with it access to positions of power. Léon Blum, Socialist Prime Minister of two Popular Front governments, is a prime example. In his Journal (1935–1939) (1995a), covering the Popular Front years of the Third Republic, Giono expresses unmitigated support for Blum, specifically with regard to the government’s decision not to intervene in the Spanish Civil War. It is necessary, therefore, to differentiate France’s cultural form of anti-Semitism from Nazi Germany’s racially based doctrine. The former rarely lessened the effects of Nazi Germany’s programme of ethnic cleansing within French borders, which the public tolerated or encouraged with inordinate zeal. Sadly, such sentiments were commonplace to varying degrees throughout
the French population: in collaborationist circles, in the Communist Party and almost everywhere in between, even among assimilated French Jews who had witnessed the immigration of Eastern European Jews with consternation. Giono mentions two occurrences of the last sort in his journal entry of 27 October 1943, including an official denunciation, which his intervention on behalf of Jan Meyerowitz frustrated. Giono writes:

Éberlué! Mon intervention pour sauver Meyerowitz a fait grouiller tout le panier de crables juif de Manosque ... il semble que tous les Juifs ont collaboré à la dénonciation anonyme qui l’a envoyé aux Mées. Ils se sont associés au commissaire de police qui est franciste, c’est-à-dire qu’ils ont dénoncé M. au commissaire. On se perd dans cette complication, intelligente, sournoise et d’une méchanceté certaine. Alors moi, bel imbécile, je vais aux Mées et je tire M. de là sans me demander s’il est juif ou non, sachant seulement qu’il est emmerdé. (1995b: 336)

30. Nazi readers of Giono’s *Regain* (first published 1930) similarly found support for Hitler’s persecution of Jews in the figure of M. Astruc, the wholesaler to whom Panturle sells his harvest of grain. Potentially slanderous characterizations include the following: M. Astruc ‘ouvre sa main grasse’ to display to the admiring onlookers a handful of the grain he has just purchased, and afterwards ‘M. Astruc court comme un rat malgré son gros ventre, et il a toujours la main à la poche’ (Giono, 1971a: 408–9). In the paper *‘Regain ou un mal entendu sur Giono’*, Bantel-Cnyrim (1996) specifically refutes this view. *Regain*’s potentially slanderous characterization combining the Jew and the capitalist can be traced back to a Socialist form of anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century. Indeed, one of Alfred Dreyfus’s most ardent defenders, Jean Jaurès, was known to make anti-Semitic remarks, although he abstained from such discourse after 1898 (Winock, 1987: 190).

31. Similarly, in the diary entry of 27 October 1943, Giono characterizes Meyerowitz, who, he has discovered, had converted to Catholicism to escape persecution, thus: Bien entendu M. est juif, total quoique dissimulé, quoique catholique (est-ce pour cela), juif de lèvres, de nez, de cœur, et d’âme; and he displays a paternalistic generosity reminiscent of Giono’s remonstrances to the Nazi Epting:

M[eyerowitz] sans noblesse, ce matin (il est venu des Mées) me raconte de petites choses désagréables sur Mme Ernst. C’est tellement écoeurant qu’il le voit sur mon visage. Il me dit: J’ai peut-être eu tort de vous le dire. Je lui assure que je ne ménage jamais mon aide quoi que je pense de celui ou de celle à qui je la donne. (1995b: 336–7)

32. In order to gauge these remarks, see Laborie (1990: 270–82) for an extensive analysis of French anti-Semitism during the period.

33. Within the context of this argument, the French kulaks would be opposed to a Communist takeover. The kulaks were persecuted by Stalin beginning in late 1929.

34. Although the United States’ military promised the more rapid return of the Republic, Giono is flattering of neither American capitalism nor their air war
strategy, specifically the carpet bombnings, which demonstrate to him a lack of courage. To the contrary, Giono notes, brave British pilots would dive low, allowing for more precision in their air strikes.

35. In a revealing phrase written at the end of 1940 and appearing in *Triomphe de la vie*, he wrote: ‘mon plus cher désir (que j’ai toujours) a été pendant toute mon enfance d’être cordonnier comme mon père’ (cited by Citron, 1990: 36).

36. Citron (1990: 36) sees in Giono’s brush with communism a regretful display of the author’s political naïveté and also a betrayal of his father’s legacy.

Mille fois plus sûr et plus important que l’activité politique aux yeux de Jean Antoine – et de son fils – est l’acte de guérir, d’alléger la souffrance, ou le mal d’être, le désespoir, la solitude. Ceux qui écrivent à Giono lui disent que son œuvre a ce pouvoir, ce privilège. (Citron: 1990: 202)

37. See Gildea (2002) in the chapter entitled ‘Disintegration’ in particular, where he describes instances of generosity and, at least as prevalent, discord between rural populations surrounding the city of Tours and urban evacuees from Lorient and Nantes:

We have already seen that in matters of food supply rural communities tended to turn in on themselves as the pressure to share increased. The same pattern emerges with the treatment of evacuees: despite exhortations to solidarity, what predominated was suspicion and hostility. (Gildea, 2002: 297)

There were also tensions between industrial workers and their employers. However, Gildea makes clear that most of the anger felt by the population in his study was directed at the Germans (2002: 294).

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