

Organizing Solitude: Jean Giono by Himself

by [Kevin Anthony Brown](#) (March 2025)



Portrait Writer Jean Giono (Eugene Martel, 1937)

If they knew him at all, English-speakers knew Jean Giono as a novelist. Yet his work spans genres and media: correspondence; criticism; drama; essays; literary translation; novellas; poetry collections; oral history interviews; screenplays; short-stories; stage plays; and travel writing. Archipelago Books and New York Review Books Classics have between them reissued seven titles translated by Paul Eprile, Jody Gladding, Bill Johnston and Alyson Waters.



Fragments of a Paradise contains some of Giono's best writing; but *Occupation Journal*, his war diary of Vichy France under the Nazis, is the sharper lens through which to view Giono's life and work.

The *Journal* divides in two. 1943 chronicles daily life, reflects on prior works like *Hill, Melville* and work-in-progress like *Fragments*. 1944 chronicles the making of novels like *The Open Road*; anticipates late work like *Ennemonde*.

1943

Sunday

"What is the worst that can happen," Giono had asked, "if Germany invades France?" Stalin provokes Germany from the east. Hitler attacks Poland from the west. Days later, Russia invades Germany. "This was 1938," Giono says in *Ennemonde*, "and war was looming."

Art of the Diarist

French literature has a long diary-keeping tradition: Léon Bloy; Claudel; Delacroix; Gaugin; Eugénie and Maurice de Guérin. From the moment they began their collaborative project, the brothers Goncourt never doubted their diary of 19th-Century literary life would fascinate future generations. Edmond used to dictate the day's events to his younger brother Jules, who had the better ear for dialogue. The last of *Pages from the Goncourt Journals* appeared one year after Giono was born.

Why are many potentially riveting diaries so dull in published form? One reason is the date-month-year format itself, chronologically arranged, unimaginatively sequenced. Glossaries of place-names and proper names sometimes help. Indexes are always welcome. Almost indispensable are the tables of topics, subjects and keywords Justin O'Brien uses in the *Journals of André Gide*. Which began appearing before the Second War, continuing in installments up until Gide's death the year Giono's *The Open Road* was published.

The five-volume *Diary of Virginia Woolf* was meticulously edited by Ann Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie. But it only hints at the level of creativity in Leonard Woolf's edition of *A Writer's Diary*. Published by the Woolfs' publishing imprint Hogarth Press, Bruce Frederick Cummings ("Wilhelm Nero Pilate Barbellion"), working from a French model, achieved a breakthrough in English diary-keeping. Mannered to a near-fatal degree stylistically, his *Journal of a Disappointed Man* is bolstered structurally by its set pieces—flash fictions, micro-essays, one-act plays, prose-poems—offset under italicized subheadings. Woolf's *Diaries* were the raw material fully realized masterworks were later mined from. Barbellion, dying of multiple sclerosis, put all his time and energy into the one book he would live to see published.

Diaries survive on either historical or literary importance. *Occupation Journal* has both. "Life," Giono says, "is movement." Narrative momentum in the *Journal* hardly ever stagnates. Because Giono doesn't get stuck in a rut of recordation. He side-steps the pitfalls of chronological format. "I must learn some tricks for entering events here." The trick, Giono discovers, is that there are really only two themes, Works and Days.

His days under Nazi occupation, the annals of life in wartime, is a theme Giono invents endless variations on: the body and sexuality; circumstances, events & situations; community service; culture, history & politics; dreams and the subconscious (sleep paralysis, pyrophobia); family, friends, lovers, colleagues and acquaintances; enjoying life; house & home; mental health & physical fitness (Giono calls it mind-body discipline); portraiture and self-portraiture. The ephemera of daily life downstairs shed as much light on the writer's life as his creative process sheds on the writer's work. Call it organizing chaos.

Upstairs, above the bedroom he shares with his wife Élise, at his desk in the study where he writes from 0800 till noon, Giono turns to his other theme: the great Works—articles he's writing about Virgil, books he's reading by Ariosto or Cervantes (*The Travails of Persiles and Sigismunda*), notes on that reading, correspondence with other readers, this *Journal*, meditations on the art of translation, the performing arts and visual arts. Giono calls it "organizing solitude."

"My days are very full."

In the morning, he chops firewood. Later, in the downstairs library full of rare books illustrated by Doré, Giono autographs copies of his own books. Juicy bits of gossip get swapped. Fellow-farmers talk shop.

Family loyalty's deeply ingrained in him. But there are limits. His uncle, drinking himself to death, banging his head against the wall, walks around the house in pants attracting flies because he's pissed and shitted them.

"This situation can't last."

Giono commits Uncle to an institution. There, he dies.

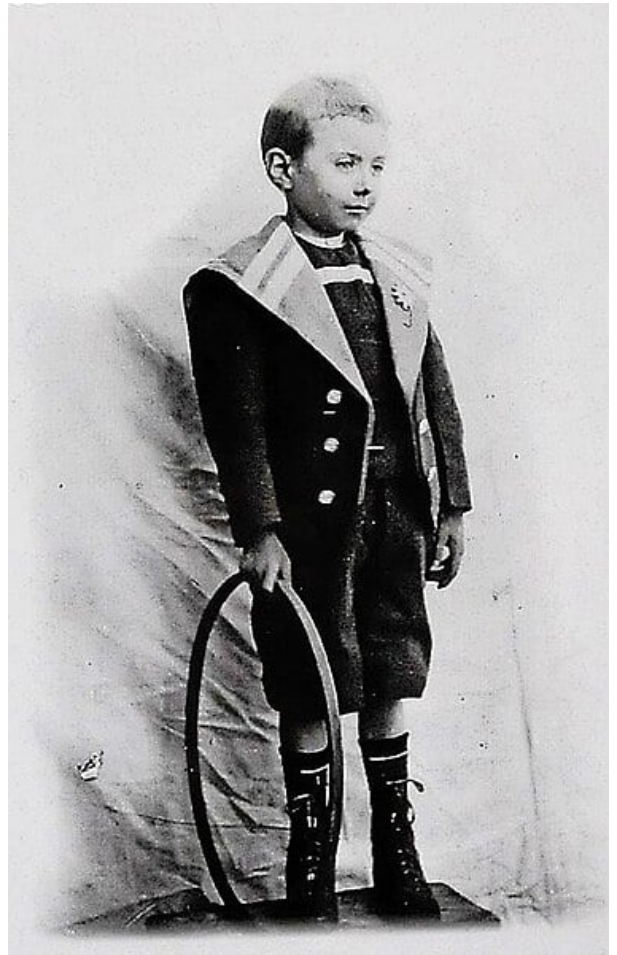
The *Journal* distances Giono's mythology from its mythographers.

"Major money worries," he confides to the *Journal*, "keep me awake at night."

Newspapers inflate his net worth, based on circumstantial evidence: his play, *Bout de la route*, had been performed a thousand times in Paris; Marcel Pagnol owes him, allegedly, millions from a legal settlement.

"They don't know the whole story."

When her blue-eyed son was small, Giono's mother took in ironing to make ends meet. His father loved books, but was forced to toil upstairs, mending shoes. *Hill*, Giono's first novel, won him the Prix Brentano and a cash prize of nearly 6,000 francs. (Giono puts into perspective what 12,000 francs buys you on the Vichy black market: a ham; or a winter coat. In Froissart's era, that sum bought the king of England a sailing ship. Between the tax assessor and the tax collector, Giono owes sixty or eighty thousand francs—due by month's end—only a fraction of which he has in the bank.) A year after *Hill* appeared, during the global depression, Giono quit his day job; bought a house for his family, Le Parais. Devoted the rest of his life to continuing the work he produced until his death from a heart attack, aged 75.



Occupation meant rationing and hardship. Tanks and planes "gorged" themselves on scarce gasoline. Gangs looted peasant farms: only a few potatoes left to feed your family? Too bad. Fork 'em over. Sub-machine gun-toting bank robbers pull off heists in broad daylight.

Giono is dependent on publishers' advances to tide him over. Yet mendicant fawners and flatterers flock to him like sheep flock to shepherds.

"Would one thousand francs be enough?" reluctant money-lender Giono asks.

“Oh, yes.”

She takes the money. Later bums another thousand off him.

Will Giono pay for Aunt Noémie’s surgery?

Can he pay so-and-so’s cook?

“I wonder what the hell I’m doing mixed up in this business!”

Monday

Phone rings off the hook. Rumored raids by Carlingue secret police, proxies for the Gestapo. Muffled aerial bombardment in the near distance. Hundreds of Germans overrun the Manosque region, north-northeast of Marseilles and Aix-en-Provence. Nazis bomb Toulon.

A train whistle blows: mail’s on its way. Two of Giono’s publishers, Gallimard and Grasset, have accepted manuscript versions of *The Song of the World* and *Joy of Man’s Desiring* for 40,000 francs, each.

Giono’s own needs are simple: tobacco-shag for his pipe; five- or six-hour conversations with Gide; and a kiss goodnight from his wife. But he has nine people to support: two children; farmhand; cleaning lady; a gardener. Eighty thousand francs must last six months. It’s either that, sell off farm animals piecemeal (chickens, goats, hens, a horse, a mule, rabbits, wild boar) or mortgage one of the two farms—money-losers both. Even the livestock are stressed: “the hens have laid only small eggs, hardly bigger than quail eggs; they have no yolks.” And then “there’s the government, which took thirty-nine,” the unnamed narrator of *Ennemonde* winks, “out of forty.”

It took Flaubert a quarter-century to publish *L’Éducation Sentimentale*. Flaubert’s a draft horse. Giono doesn’t have

that kind of time. Has to write as fast as he can. Sets himself the task of dashing off *Deux cavaliers* in three months. Giono's a racehorse.

In *Hill* the menfolk, dirt-poor winnowers of wheat, "replace the anxieties of civilization with the anxieties of the primitive world." They tote double-barreled shotguns for stalking big game, like wild boar, or small game like hares. They eat, unbutton their trousers. Womenfolk make coffee, prepare food, washboard dirty laundry in the scrub house out back.



Hill observes plant life and animal life closely. A black cat's "whiskers test the air." It sits "licking its paws and cleaning one of its ears." Gondran, on his way to the olive grove, "whistles for Labri, the dog asleep under a rose bush. Labri comes out, stretches, yawns, sniffs ... and follows. Gondran's reassured to hear the patter of claws behind him."

The village elder, Père Janet, is a perceived threat to all those—Alexandre Jaume, whose wife hanged herself, Jaume's daughter Ulalie, who fornicates in slobbery secret with the knuckle-dragging village idiot Gagou, Gondran le Médéric—who dwell uneasy in the ominous shadow of this Hill, with its "avenging spirits of the vegetal world." Trees "confer in low voices." Janet simply knows all things are *alive*.

Omens portend. The spring runs dry. A wildfire breaks out.

Janet's responsible.

What other explanation can there be?

Jaume: "We have to kill him."

Gondran: "He's my father-in-law. . . . I ought to talk about it with [my wife] first."

Tuesday

The *Journal* is an inter-generational saga. Now blind, *Maman* lives in Jean's house, partially supported by her meager old-age pension. Family-style meals are hearty: a pistou soup of green beans, basil, garlic and olive oil; smothered rabbit; cabbage and potatoes; or mutton stew; goat cheese; for dessert, coffee and brandy rations. Giono's naturally blond hair's going gray. His war years are productive.

"What on earth is this story all about?"

Melville is Giono's fantasia on Herman Melville's voyage to London. There, he delivers *White-Jacket* to his publisher prior to the publication of *Moby-Dick*. Decades before, off an island near the Chilean coast, Melville got wind of a whale white as snow. Tells Hawthorne, who's about to publish *The Scarlet Letter*, "I'm going to get working."

For years, Giono had been as weary of churning out folklore-fiction as Melville was of banging out sea-yarns. Before *Melville*, Edmund White writes in his introduction, "nature was in the foreground, the character in the background." Now, Giono's determined to "put humanity before nature."

Giono worked with an American who transliterated word for word what White calls the biblical-Shakespearian text of *Moby-Dick*.

“Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air!” Poet-editor Lucien Jacques drafted the collaborative translation. Giono revised. What was originally intended as a brief preface to that translation morphed into *Pour saluer Melville*, the hundred-page homage published separately but appearing the same year as the French translation.

“Well, what do you think, Hawthorne?”

1944

Wednesday

At 1300, Giono goes downstairs, famished: “stuffed eggplant,” he turns up his nose, “I don’t like.” After lunch, stretched out on the divan, he reads “joyfully and fruitfully.” Or writes for a few francs more, working as many as seven hours on a good day. Takes frequent breaks between projects, the morning projects cross-fertilizing the evening’s. Once a piece is published, it’s on to the next thing.

Art of the Novelist

Melville “you can really only classify,” says Giono, “under his name.” *Fragments*, a scientific “voyage of discovery on the high seas,” is likewise unclassifiable. Readers and viewers may recognize in it much that’s familiar from deep-space sci-fi like *Star Trek*, Captain Cook’s *Voyages*, Conrad, Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle* or action-adventure features like *Master and Commander*.

There’s lots admire in *Fragments*. The point of view is simple: a captain’s log or supplemental logs kept by officers other than the captain. The characterization, as one would expect,

differentiates the seafaring fictions *Melville* and *Fragments* from *Hill*, *The Open Road* and *Ennemonde*. In the latter works, the village “grocers and butchers” of Provence are “fat, self-satisfied.” In the maritime novels creatures, human or non-human, may be shape-shifting-Elementals—cosmic winds, storms, sea monsters, heavens—or they may be inter-dimensional/angelic.

Here, as throughout Giono’s other work, dialogue is sometimes conventionally broken out upon the page, separated by quotation marks, commas or periods. In one episode of *Open Road*, flirtatious banter goes on for nearly half a dozen pages, entirely in dialogue. In other works, external dialogue and interior monologue coexists side by side, as in Stendhal’s *Red and Black*. With his juniors in the officers’ mess, our commanding officer speaks only the language of Platonic dialogue, Forms being what’s of interest him, not tales of High or Low Country of Provence. This is the captain.

He, his science officer and a crew of regular seamen (the master carpenter, the cook) set sail toward the equator, conducting experiments in various scientific fields.

Like Sterling A. Brown, Giono is a poet of the natural world. His body of work explores the dynamic between humans in relation to one another and humans in relation to their environments, natural and built. He combines a sense of folklore with outsized characters, a sense of place, a sense of history and a biting sense of humor. Hence, the parallels between the ceaseless physical labor of running a farm and keeping a ship souls afloat, between seasonal rhythms of land and sea, are clear.

Structurally sound, *Fragments* is the most visibly scaffolded of all the works in question here. In the *Journal*, Giono notes that “its construction seems right.” There’s no shortage of action-thriller disaster sequences. Waves as tall as a ship compromise the hull. Man overboard! A sailor, aged 22, is

dragged out to sea, forever lost. He'd never learned to swim.

The tough but fair question is whether *Fragments* really works as a novel.

A great narrative artist like Giono always knows which narrative elements they can distort and when. The cause of an effect sometimes goes unstated. Expertly, he'll suppresses chronology. In *Fragments*, we learn that two bells mark the midday meal at 1300 hours, that eight bells toll the end of a watch, or that it's 31 October. We don't always know where Giono's allegorical



ship's drifting in the doldrums. In *Ennemonde*, the unnamed Narrator tells us such-and-such happened in 1898 or 1907; that World War I "was just coming to an end;" or that it's now 1934. In *Hill*, Giono microscopes and telescopes time sequences. "He took his shotgun and waited./Nothing came except the night." [sic] The only chronological clue Giono gives us in *Hill* is a post-office calendar or a reference to the cholera epidemic of 1883. Far more important than precise chronology, what Giono really wants us to know is that "in those parts, people still lived the way they did at the turn of the century."

Giono shares with Flaubert what Mario Vargas Llosa calls the "descriptive frenzy." He "reinvents the natural world," White says, "by describing it." Giono's images are for the most part hard and clear as geologic stratifications. *Fragments'* description works marvelously well most times. Sails drumroll. Other times, excess description causes *Fragments* to stall. Whereas *Bovary's* momentum is unstoppable as a locomotive.

Dictated and revised between 1943 and 1944, partially dormant during the five months Giono spent during his second prison bid, and during his three years' subsequent blacklisting, *Fragments* went unpublished till 1948. The novel then waited a quarter-century after Giono's death to be translated into English. Which partially explains why *Fragments* seems the least "finished" of all the works under discussion here. No critic was harder on him than Giono was on himself. He senses something's wrong. After years of intermittent work, the chronicle is still only "a rough sketch of what I want the book to be."

"*Fragments* can be put off till later," he confides to his *Journal*, "if I return to it at all. It may be a mistake that I'm getting over."

Art of the Translator

Giono's notebook entry reads: "I have to learn some words. Enrich my vocabulary ... Read and pay attention to all the words that are new to me and note them down, humbly keep lists. And then have the wisdom not to use them, almost never, except a few, very rarely, so that they don't become a habit."

In the field of technical as opposed to literary translating and interpreting, there's an equivalent for almost any term you can think of, and many more for terms you never even imagined. Otherwise, machinery won't work; parts can't get replaced. Through years of experience and consulting specialized dictionaries, technical document translators or court interpreters amass, computerized or otherwise stored in a termbase, a vocabulary consisting of twenty thousand words or more of specialized jargon. Giono's in awe of what cultural ecologist, geophilosopher and performance artist Dr. David Abram calls word-magic. Giono's lexicon of place-names and places, to narrow it down to geography alone, is vast. It

comes as no surprise to read in the *Journal* that Giono's read all of Proust, very carefully, "at least ten times."

Giono's writing, White says, "is obviously the work of a man who understands nature and agriculture." Yet "built things," Roman aqueducts and farm machinery, like the tines of a harrow, also "have their agency." Among the most touching passages from his *Journal* is Giono's elegy for Père Giono's cobbler's tools, reflecting the genuine anguish it cost his son to sell them off during the occupation. A novel of knavery, *The Open Road* is among many other things a mock paean to tractors and plowing.

By all accounts, Giono's ear for languages—Basque dialect, Oc, Oil and Provençal—give him a sound unique even by the standards of a literature as rich as French. Canadian subjects of Eprile's generation were born into what was then a Commonwealth, and remains a nation with two officially designated languages, French and English, not to mention the many regional variants of Inuit languages. A poet in his own right and translator of Colette's great *Chéri* novellas, Eprile is used to pondering a single word of Greek or Provençal origin for hours.

Low-frequency words derived from nautical technology and seamanship Giono fished from the *Instructions Nautiques*—foremast, mainmast and mainsail, mizzen mast—not to mention all the flora and fauna, never seem to strain Eprile or even to call undue attention to themselves in his translations of *Fragments* and *Melville*. But translators aren't at liberty to improve upon source texts. Eprile or even Giono's vocabulary doesn't seem to be the problem with *Fragments* as a novel per se.

On the contrary, what's linguistically surprising about the maritime novels is that so much of their "nautical parlance" up to and including *Melville's* wardrobe (beret, dinghy), so much of it is currency of such common usage—idler, knowing the

ropes, lanyard, monsoon, offshore winds, onshore winds, *on the double!*, poop, three sheets to the wind, wheelhouse, whiplash—that we say it every day without even thinking. Check the weather forecast.

Bill Johnston has lived and worked in Honolulu and Bloomington. His particular variant of translated English has a strong UK accent, but not always. Sometimes, Eprile's the one who'll say: "He's a cheeky devil." Sometimes Johnston writes, "skedaddle." A villager keeps "some offcomer" at arm's length. The sheepdog and his shot-gun toting master are "on the qui vive." Johnston sometimes leaves untranslated a French word with a serviceable English equivalent but which in the context of *Ennemonde* works best as is: *département*; *jas*; or *ubac*; an administrative division or territory, whether in the metropole or overseas; a sheep fold; a north-facing slope.

Johnston and Eprile leap off the page at you in different ways. Gladding less so, perhaps because of Giono's more straightforward recording and interpretation of literal truth and events in the *Journal*, for reasons made clear later, and perhaps because of what he calls the lyrical "restraint I've gradually and painfully imposed upon myself." At any rate, none of these translations sounds like the others. And each in its own way sounds like the Giono you've come to know.

Thursday

The violence in Giono's work can seem Grand-Guignol. Pitiless mother nature exists alongside heartless human nature. Hard-scrabble peasants with too many mouths to feed stomp "out an unwanted litter of kittens." Nazis, execution-style, murder a three-year-old in its crib with four shots—one in the belly and three in the neck. Shoot a 20-year-old in the eye at point blank range.

21 April. General Charles de Gaulle's provisional government

decrees French women the right to vote in postwar elections. Frenchmen from eighteen to forty-five shall be mobilized. Giono's 50.

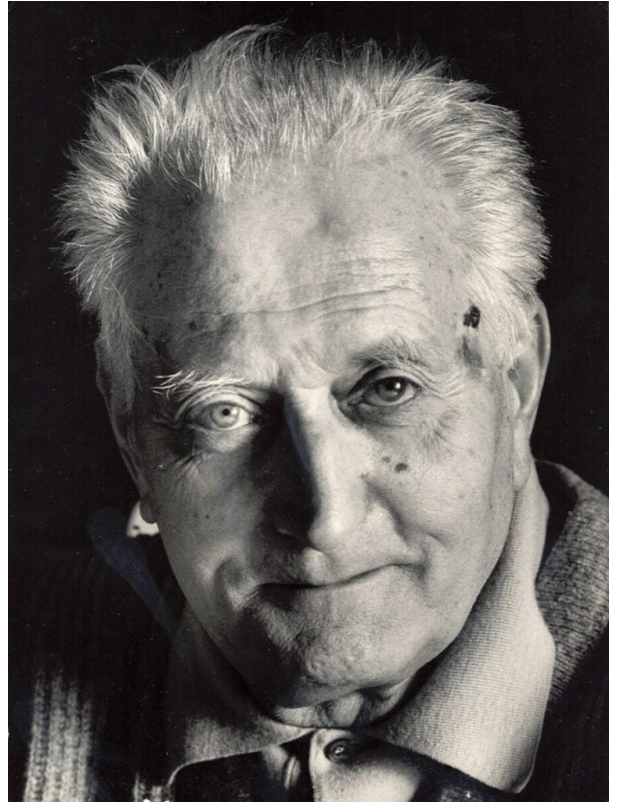
Giono taps out burnt ash out of his pipe. Refills it with black-market tobacco. The *Journal's* final entry is a record of chaos: hundreds dead; multiples of that number wounded. Marseilles stinks of raw sewage. Amid roadblocks, convoys of Cambodians, Laotians, Moroccan Goumiers and Vietnamese by the truckload rumble up through southern France from Indo-China and the North African Arab world. Near the Hôtel de la Pompadour et du New-Vichy, shop windows advertise, "coffins, reduced prices."

Giono's manner ranges from the oracular to the jocular. Jacques Le Gall, in his introduction, observes that *The Open Road* is bursting with aphorism, episode, solitary meditation, monologue, portraiture and proverbs. Eprile's acknowledgments express gratitude for support received from many sources as he negotiated quintessentially regional figures of speech and idiomatic expression, tonal ironies and, hardest of all for a literary translator, jokes and slang. Giono's often funny, even in English. Just imagine how much more so he must be in French.

Friday

25 August. France is officially liberated from Germany. *Les années noires*, an era of secret police, asymmetrical insurgency, "anonymous denunciations" and torture gives way to turncoats shouting *La Marseillaise* while waving blue-white-and-red tricolors from the rooftops. A tank commander passing through Manosque halts his column. Chats up Giono for two hours.

By the time he died, more than a little Machiavelli had crept into Giono's worldview. Part I of the tales of Ennemonde Girard, where her gargantuan character is more amply developed, was originally entitled "Camargue." It derives from Giono's writings on the visual arts, lithographs and photographs, published in 1960. Part II was published under the title "The High Country" in 1965. Giono compiled the narratives amid the eruptions of 1968 under the title *Ennemonde*.



Which explains why *Ennemonde* reads like a series of asides on oral history.

A woman weighs in at two or three hundred pounds; births thirteen children; drinks wine by the quart; smokes cigars. Men who outlive their usefulness to Ennemonde—Ponzi-schemers, unwanted husbands—meet with bad ends. Honoré dies from a kick to the head by a mule. Or does he?

Characters like the wanderer of *The Open Road* recur in *Ennemonde*, doing odd jobs like slaughtering livestock at local farms. Despite its breezily Fieldingesque lightness of touch, *Ennemonde* has a somewhat darker tone than other books under discussion here. It's not that Giono's pronouncements are untrue. It's just that they're the statements of a writer who'd been imprisoned twice. Knew others who'd followed hard time with a seven-year stint in the Foreign Legion. "It's wrong to imagine that Jesus Christ has changed everything . . . the horizon unfurls. And Christendom fades away."

Saturday

“Giono,” asks the exasperated French Resistance leader, “hasn’t he already been arrested? What are you waiting for?”

As a writer, Giono admired Stendhal’s battle-scenes from Waterloo in *The Charterhouse of Parma*. As a reader whose eyelids were blistered by chemical agents during World War I, his pacifism persisted throughout the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Which alienated partisans left and right.

As for rendering aid and shelter to needy Communists or Jews: “It wasn’t even taking a stand,” Giono protests. According to the “log of verifiable facts” that was his *Journal*, it “was an entirely natural thing.” None of that mattered to the authorities who sent him back to prison, this time for alleged collaboration with the Vichy regime.

There, *Occupation Journal* ends. It remained unpublished for a quarter-century after his death.

Given the fragmentary nature inherent in diary form, *Occupation Journal* combines many of a novel’s strengths with few of a novel’s weaknesses. Characters are rooted firmly. Descriptions are unburdened of what Giono himself calls “lyric outbursts.” Few epigrams subsist on what V.S. Pritchett calls, “no visible means of support.”

Giono’s vast bibliography raises the question: where to begin? Christopher Plummer voices J.R. Ackerley in the animated feature based on *My Dog Tulip* (New York Review Books Classics). Plummer also voices an animated short based on Giono’s *The Man Who Planted Trees*. Abram endorses *Joy of Man’s Desiring* and *Song of the World*. Others recommend Alyson Waters’ translation of *A King Alone*. Persuadable readers may see the *Journal* as a good segue into Giono’s vibrant body of work.

Fragments of a Paradise

by Jean Giono

Translated from the French by Paul Eprile

With an afterword by Michael Wood

Archipelago Books

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Ennemonde

by Jean Giono

Translated from the French by Bill Johnston

Archipelago Books

ISBN: 978-1-953861-12-2

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The Open Road

by Jean Giono

Translated from the French by Paul Eprile

With an introduction by Jacques Le Gall

New York Review Books Classics

ISBN: 978-1-68137-510-6

Trade Paper, 210 pp.

Publication Date: 2021

Occupation Journal

by Jean Giono

Translated from the French by Jody Gladding

Archipelago Books

ISBN: 978-1-939810-56-4

Trade Paper, 298 pp., \$18

Publication Date: 2020

Melville: A Novel

by Jean Giono

Translated from the French by Paul Eprile

With an introduction by Edmund White
New York Review Books Classics
ISBN: 978-1-68137-137-5
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Publication Date: 2017

Hill

by Jean Giono
Translated from the French by Paul Eprile
With an introduction by David Abram
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[Table of Contents](#)

Kevin Anthony Brown is author, most recently, of *Countée Cullen's Harlem Renaissance: A Personal History* (Parlor Press, 2024), an essay-cycle themed around his maternal great-grandmother's marriage to that poet. Kevin A. Brown translated Mexican poet Efraín Bartolomé's *Ocosingo War Diary: Voices from Chiapas* (Calypso Editions, 2014). More work is forthcoming from *Poetry Foundation* and elsewhere.

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