Giono

MASTER OF FICTIONAL MODES
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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
This book is most affectionately dedicated to

Professor Jean-Albert Bédé

Columbia University
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Giono

MASTER OF FICTIONAL MODES
Introduction

"Thus, Ulysses was like a flowering almond tree in the midst of furrows, and covered the black earth with light perfumed petals."—Jean Giono.

The following chapters were written in an attempt to explain the fascination exerted by the fiction of Jean Giono. They present him as a major writer in our century, first as a master of French prose who reinforced tastes cultivated earlier by Marcel Proust and André Gide, and then more widely as an Americanophile renewing Melville and William Faulkner. No American studies a French novelist with such gratitude, it would seem, unless he has found him not only authenticating modern existence and personal ethic, but moreover handling as if by request our most plaguing problems: the disquieting relationships, in what appears to be another revolutionary century, within the family and among mothers and women generally; our dilemmas due to the collapses of religions and raisons d'être; our daily metamorphosis on earth despite eyes upon liberating space; our growing awareness of the cruelties of justice and governments; our dismay in the face of barbaric persuaders and savage wars upon persons and plants, urban disintegration, sudden mass pollutions of water and air—all heaped upon our natural anguish.

Occasionally Giono seized the direct address of the essayist in order courageously to attack his own government.¹ Then Socratically he led astray the young from military serv-

¹ Lettre aux paysans sur la pauvreté et la paix (Paris, 1938), notably.
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ice before World War II and into the fastnesses of the Basses Alpes. His idiosyncratic views he expressed foolhardily in polemics, history, and prefaces (as he consequently suffered retaliations under inhumane prison conditions). He also attempted poetry and achieved considerable success in the mass media, meanwhile stealing several marches upon other contemporary masters of prose fiction. In the following essays he will concern us mainly thus, as a master in prose fiction. Because of his scholarship, obvious intellectual independence, and study of such artists as Melville, Proust, Gide, Breton, Sartre, and Faulkner, he became a craftsman and technician par excellence of the novel, the tale, and story collection or cycle.

Self-educated, a lone visionary residing mainly in his native Manosque, thus isolating himself from Parisian notables by distance, climate, and way of life, Giono established himself for a wide, international reading public as an unrepentant social critic, as champion of the poor, as theologian, mythographer, scholar, revolutionary, and humanist. We shall see him also, and in the tradition first proposed at considerable length by Pierre R. Robert, as a chief innovator in the field of the novel.


8 *Accompagnés de la flûte* (1924), *Fragments d’un déluge* (1948).

4 Nine films are listed by Pierre de Boisdeffre in his *Giono* (Paris, 1963), bibliographical assistant, Jean Bottin, p. 277.

6 Translations include fiction in German, Czech, Polish, English, Finnish, Portuguese, Swedish, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, and Hungarian.

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Giono shone unforgettable because of his charm, friendliness, modesty, genuine simplicity; his unmistakable nobility of bearing and speech; the joy of intellect that radiated from the man. When I met him during the sunny summer days of 1970, he sparkled with wit and the joys of talking about old books and of planning new ones. He was unusually pressed for time, he said, since momentarily he expected to die of a heart attack.

With very little acclaim for his virtuosity, but generally with confidence—perhaps with the modest assurance of polar explorers whom as a class of men he much admired—Jean Giono widened our understanding of the uses and the possibilities of prose fiction. He elevated the novel particularly, the very form thought by many to be moribund, to new artistic preeminence. Working experimentally in book after book, as we shall see, Giono demonstrated over forty odd years of daily practice how brilliantly the novel fulfills the conditions, and therefore meets the needs customarily satisfied by several hallowed literary modes.

A learned man, very well read, with a personal library of over 7,000 volumes, Giono often experimented by placing certain of his novels carefully within literary traditions. In such cases he proceeded by first arousing and then meeting in his readers a thirst for literary decorum, where components fit properly into what are recognizable modes. Various of his novels thus clearly recreate long-established sets, or literary structures. Such books read as if the author, having first categorized human experience, set forth its mysteries upon which he imposed order and form. Behind his approach, in other words, underlie not only the super-narrator’s watchful decision made a priori, as Giono explained in the Preface to his *Chroniques romanesques* (1962), concerning the basis for hallowed literary modes.

7 N.R.F. (Gallimard), pp. 7-8.
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...each conception but, even more important, his awareness of those certain issues—political, moral, religious, historical, aesthetic—best treated traditionally by each mode. Thus, adapting in some cases old formats to present use, Giono handled with striking originality various reconstitutions of a frightening, mysterious world. He hoped meanwhile, he added, that his modus operandi passed unperceived.

Adopting several different attitudes towards reality, then, and studying mankind from several different perspectives, Giono began by writing fiction according to the pastoral mode, which to the great comfort of his pre-war reader he initially preferred as an explanation of the world. Then he branched out into what we shall suggest is an apocalyptic mode, when in a spirit of prophecy he chose to treat history and theology. Much later he chose a surrealist mode, when he undertook unearthly, fictional voyages through time and space; a symbolic mode, when he felt constrained to convey, or to suggest, by patterns, knowledge not made explicit in the text, and/or not comprehended fully by him either; an epic mode, when he proposed the ways of saints and barbaric heroes, lest their stories were thought irrelevant to modern life; a tragic mode, either according to Sophocles or to Shakespeare, when he realized that sacrificial offerings were still being made, even in the twentieth century; and twice an autobiographical and Proustian mode, when he resumed his puzzling about motherhood, creativity, and childhood, relying here, of course, upon the Bildungsroman, or portrait of the artist.

While no particular Bildungsroman seems the immediate source of inspiration for Giono, his Jean le bleu would bear a close comparison to Tolstoy’s Childhood (1852), particularly for its frank admissions of sensitivity to people and to the world: beauty, cruelty, memory, shyness, women, vision, great-heartedness leading to genius,
While in the following chapters only twelve texts have been selected for detailed analysis, two per major fictional mode, all of Giono's novels will be brought in for corroborative evidence, comparison, or contrast. The only works more or less neglected are the early pastorals, published from 1928 through *Que ma joie demeure* of 1935, that famous novel which forms a swan song in the pastoral vein, but also, and far more importantly, represents a sickening on Giono's part at the sweet optimism of his youth. No depth of mature consciousness, no great awareness of craft, and no accession to bitter adulthood occur in Giono much before his first near-masterpiece, *Batailles dans la montagne* of 1937.

This book, in other words, presumes to fly, however feebly, in the face of common consensus, when it suggests that Jean Giono came of age as an artist only with *Un Roi sans divertissement*, ten years later, in 1947. Most critics, and all readers, doubtless, know best and still largely prefer the young Giono of the lovely pastorals, much as Victor Hugo always preferred the Molière who wrote before 1659. One need not quarrel with the world, however, by asserting categorically that the twelve novels or works selected here are therefore better works of art; it is only that they appear more interesting technically, or that they experiment more consciously. Furthermore, one cannot even assert that the novels chosen fit absolutely, pair by pair, or even singly, into the modes so emotion leading to action. Specifically, both young *personae*, Tolstoy and Giono, react to the color blue.

Dostoevsky on the other hand, a novelist to whom Giono often referred in print, in his work translated as *Raw Youth* (1875), like Giono focusses upon women, motherhood, and social problems. Giono does not follow him into psychological complications, such as the double nature of Arkady's father Versilov. With both Russian novelists, however, Giono envisions this novelistic form as more fictional than autobiographical.
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arbitrarily chosen; it is merely that one has enjoyed making a case for their several categorizations. Hopefully, such relegations and comparisons will heighten one's enjoyment of Giono's masterpieces. In any case, feeble though he was in the summer of 1970, Giono delightfully rummaged through his books, racked his brains, and aided and abetted my plan.

Two French critics, Jacques Pugnet and Claudine Chomez, noted some fifteen years ago how Giono's novels fell into differently characteristic forms. Both critics then clarified their observations by postulating the musical analogies invited by Giono in such titles as *Que ma joie demeure,* and thus alluding to Giono's novels as composed musically according to "modes majeurs" and "tempo différent." Giono's own emphasis upon musical themes and structures within his novels, especially from Bach as in *Jean le bleu,* which we shall examine finally, places him with the Symbolists, certainly with Proust and Gide. A philosopher such as Etienne Souriau might characterize the same novels as "artistic categories" representing varying artistic climates.

When Jean Giono, a young and poor bank runner and clerk in Provence, published his first verses in 1924 and began writing in a French heavily accented with Provençalisms his early pastorals, novels soaring lyrically with praise of countrymen and countryside alike, André Gide was the man of the hour. After Giono's sensational success in 1928 with his first such attempt to liberate modern man into a joyful paganism


11 Bach's chorale "Jesu, joy of man's desiring."

12 See *Jean Giono* of Pugnet, p. 128.


—what Justin O'Brien called his “natures mortes”\textsuperscript{15}—a curious Gide, whose \textit{Symphonie pastorale} dated from 1919, condescended to call upon the young novelist. Arriving around 10:00 a.m. from the Marseilles train, Gide dispatched Giono’s mother Pauline—she who would years hence become the girlish heroine Marquise Pauline de Théus in \textit{Le Hussard sur le toit} (1951) notably, but also the mother of Orpheus, Eurydice (\textit{sic}), in \textit{Mort d’un personnage} (1949)—to the bank to fetch her son away from his flunkey’s bowing and scraping so that he could entertain the great northerner. It is not Gide, curious but nonetheless disdaining Giono, who tells the story, but the latter in his “Hommage” at Gide’s death in 1951.\textsuperscript{16} Gide’s entry for June 18, 1929, barely mentions a train journey from Marseilles to Manosque, but once there and again later, this self-appointed mentor read to his protégé and follower, correcting him about everything from art to botany, even when Giono happened not to be in error.

Diverging elsewhere widely from Gide, as in his reverence for Greek mythology, Giono still gratefully learned fictional theory from Gide and felt reinforced by that great man’s interest and by his defiance of the traditional novel or \textit{roman d’analyse}. Both the wealthy Gide and the penniless Giono sprang from mixed marriages, Catholic and Protestant. Both approached life and art as moralists, and both wrestled mightily with angels, studied William Blake, Shakespeare, and Christian theology, both men actually rewriting Scripture. Both novelists felt immeasurable propensities to pity and constant inclinations to suffer on behalf of the poor, the

\textsuperscript{15} Professor O’Brien referred to Cézanne in particular. See his “Giono’s Harvest,” \textit{The Nation} (June 3, 1939), reprinted in his \textit{The French Literary Horizon} (Rutgers, 1967), pp. 257-58.

oppressed, and those indicted for punishment in the courts. Giono's *Notes sur l'affaire Dominici* (1955), which lies beyond the scope of our present inquiry, constitutes his attempt to exonerate an old farmer, whose language diverged radically from that used by the court, of first-degree murders. Ponder as he could, Giono never succeeded in understanding any of this trial, neither the allegations nor the prosecution, neither the defense nor the justice alleged, and certainly therefore not the punishments proposed. Again, Giono perhaps followed Gide when he too insisted that every portrait by an artist amounts to a self-portrait. Both writers also weighed the merits of Marxism and were disillusioned by it, Giono during his brief pre-World War II association with André Breton. Always embarrassed by Parisians, and especially angry to have been intimidated by them, and glibly misrepresented, Giono doubtless also resented to some degree Gide's authority. Still championing Giono, however, Gide died unfortunately just after his young friend had finally published his first masterpieces.

The literary career of Giono as a novelist falls easily into three periods of very uneven production: (1) 1910-1935, (2) 1936-1946, and (3) 1947-1972. During the regionalistic phase Giono published nine novels and two collections of tales. Aside from eight pastorals, this group contains the two extraordinary works with which we will commence and conclude our present inquiry, so influential have they already become: the novel of World War I viewed apocalyptically in the wake of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Giono's *Le Grand troupeau* (1931), and, secondly, his first portrait of the artist, his attempt in *Jean le bleu* (1932) to remember his nascent creativity. Here he studies himself only as a child and young man apprenticed to a bank.

17 See Charts 1, 2, and 3, and also the Bibliography.
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PHASE I
1930-1935

MAJOR FICTION

Colline 1928
Un de Baumugnes 1929
Naissance de l'Odyssée 1930
Regain 1930
Le Grand troupeau 1931
Solitude de la pitié 1932*
Jean le bleu 1932
L'Eau vive 1933**
Le Serpent d'étoiles 1933
Le Chant du monde 1934
Que ma joie demeure 1935

* Collection of pastoral tales, which is even more than that, a short story cycle having unity and depth.

** Collection of tales of uneven quality, interspersed with prose pieces that appeared, it seems, from as early as 1910. They will be reprinted as Rondeur des jours. They seem to constitute Giono’s apprenticeship.

During his tragic second period of World War II and two imprisonments, Giono published only one work of fiction, Batailles dans la montagne (1937). It was, because of an old taboo, badly received. In this long novel, as during these years, doubtless, one last time before a final rejection, Giono re-examined Protestantism, studying even the Christian epic, which had long been frowned upon in France but superbly practiced in England by John Milton. During the war years, in other words, Giono again followed Gide’s lead into the liberating English language, gateway to such pioneers as Whitman, Melville, and Faulkner and to English and American

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literature. The horrors of a second major war on home soil (Giono had been badly gassed in World War I) brought down upon his fictional characters a medieval scourge, in this case obliteration by flood or the personally administered wrath of a punishing God. Only the angel and saint was in the end privileged to intercede for man.

Three major political tracts also stem from this period, when Giono became a radical activist, as well as his tribute to Melville, some drama, and what is probably his first long expository celebration of his pastoral land, Provence (1939). Seven works of non-fiction from 1936-1947 made it appear that Jean Giono had, like some of his contemporaries in France, rejected the novel forever. What followed, however, only proves that one can hardly predict genius.

PHASE 2
1936-1946

MAJOR WORKS

Les Vraies richesses (polemic) 1936
(and supplement, Triomphe de la vie, 1941)
Rondeur des jours 1936
(reprinted from L'Eau vive, of 1933, 1943)
Le Bout de la route (theater) 1937
Refus d'obéissance (polemic) 1937
Batailles dans la montagne (fiction) 1937
Le Poids du ciel (essay on astronomy) 1938
Lettre aux paysans sur la pauvreté et la paix 1938
(polemic)
Provence (essay) 1939
Pour saluer Melville (essay, according to Giono) 1939

From 1947, or from the end of World War II to his death in 1970, Giono staggers the imagination because of the sophis-
tication, extent, and virtuosity of his mature productions: thirteen novels, all superior in quality, each worthy of many books of essays; four major works of non-fiction, ending in the last two years of his life with Provence perdue (1968), his most scathing accusation and renewed indictment of modern civilization for the pollution of Provence that resulted in part from the diversion of the Durance River; the second apocalypse text; plus four new tales that, although published separately, obviously form part of a new story cycle, and that appear posthumously in 1972 as Les Récits de la demi-brigade.

**PHASE 3**

1947-1972

**MAJOR FICTION**

*Un Roi sans divertissement* 1947

*Noé* 1948

*(Fragments d'un paradis, out of print,)* 1949

*Mort d'un personnage* 1949

*Les Ames fortes* 1951

*Les Grands chemins* 1951

*Le Hussard sur le toit* 1952

*Le Moulin de Pologne* 1955

*“L’Ecossais” (tale)* 1957

*Le Bonheur fou* 1958

*Angelo* 1962

*“La Nuit du 24 decembre 1826” (tale)* 1962

*“Une Histoire d'amour” (tale)* 1964

*“Le Grand théâtre”* 1965

*“Le Bal” (tale)* 1965

*Deux cavaliers de l'orage* 1968

*Ennemonde* 1968
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MAJOR FICTION (continued)

*L'Iris de Suze* 1970
*Les Récits de la demi-brigade* (posthumous tales) 1972

MAJOR NON-FICTION

*Voyage en Italie* 1953
*Notes sur l'affaire Dominici* 1955
*Le Désastre de Pavie* 1963
*Provence perdue* 1968

This stormy third phase continues as we await not only Giono’s posthumous fiction but the collecting of the unknown numbers of works that he so generously over the decades contributed to charity. The third phase commenced in 1947 with two astonishingly forceful novels that we shall examine in some depth: *Un Roi sans divertissement* and *Noé*, followed in 1948 by the still unavailable *Fragments d'un paradis*, in 1949 by *Mort d'un personnage* and *Les Ames fortes*, in 1951 by *Les Grands chemins* and *Le Hussard sur le toit*, in 1952 by *Le Moulin de Pologne*, and what may be an irreversible climax of resourcefulness in *Le Bonheur fou,*19 where Giono probably moved into a last new domain. Nine of the following twelve chapters deal with phase 3, the major period of Giono’s writing. These books almost instantly brought the


In his *Panorama de la littérature française* (Paris, 1960) Picon added (p. 81): “Seul peut-être de tous les grands écrivains de sa génération, Giono est parvenu à donner à son oeuvre des prolongements imprévus. Et elle s’accompagne d’une audace technique et d’une maîtrise croissantes.”
novelist the acclaim of critics and his only honors in the world’s eyes, the Prix Monégasque from Prince Rainier III, followed in 1954 by the Prix Goncourt.

On March 7, 1953, the French critic André Rousseaux, following congratulatory studies by Maurice Nadeau and Marcel Arland, described phase 3 for Le Figaro Littéraire as Giono’s “seconde manière.” There had been many changes of style from the lyrical novels of phase 1, for even Giono himself fell back upon the term “chronicle” to distinguish these ironical masterpieces, which sardonically castigate the reader and which are narrated by auxiliaries in often hateful and vulgar terms, via blocks of superimposed durations, from the simpler “natures mortes,” or pastorals. Shielding himself from future punishments and from past charges of muddy lyricism and mawkish sentimentality, Giono thus found in adversity the stoical immunity and the methods by which better to “chronicle” the ongoing breakdowns of modern civilization: the warring centers of culture, the powerlessnesses of governments, the dissolution of the family, the world-wide economic collapses, the imminent crises in foodstuffs and power, an exhaustion of the resources of the earth, and the forthcoming departure of man from this planet earth upon a voyage of no return.

By 1938 only two major critical works had been devoted to Giono, and Christian Michelfelder spoke more of Giono’s pagan religious affiliations than of the early pastorals them-

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selves—the designation "pastoral" is not his but ours. In 1955-1956 three book-length studies appeared by Villeneuve, Pugnet, and Chonez. At this same time, when Giono's faithful champion Henri Peyre characterized his return to fiction as "meteoric," seventeen new critics devoted articles to these third-phase novels. In fact, six nations mentioned him in that year alone: France, England, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United States. While Giono had in 1938 admitted to being a "fellow traveller," the London Times Literary Supplement exonerated him in 1954 as an "individual traveller."

In 1956 Chonez associated Giono with surrealism. In 1957 Stephen Ullmann, writing in Cambridge, England, derived him from Rimbaud. Alphonse Roche in 1948 had already noted how his Provençalisms had by phase 3 been replaced by French, i.e., that Giono could no longer be dismissed as a mere regionalist. By 1959 Robert Poulet had placed Giono as


25 The pages devoted to Giono in The Contemporary French Novel (New York, 1955) point to directions we shall explore: the epic qualities of Giono's fiction, relationships to Gide and Faulkner, Bach and Mozart, Greek tragedy and Ariosto, Huguenots and Protestantism. Professor Peyre noted (p. 143): "Giono is significant in French letters because he is, primarily, a great artist. This son of a Provençal shoemaker enriched the French novel of his age with an infusion of virility and of poetry. He broke with the tradition of the psychological novel of Stendhal, Proust, and Gide, as well as with the tradition of huge realistic scope that Roger Martin du Gard and Jules Romains had tried after Zola." See also pp. 124 ("meteoric") and pp. 125-54.

26 Pugnet, Villeneuve, Arland, Chonez, Henry Miller (The Books in My Life, Norfolk, Conn., undated), plus Dominique Aury, René Bailly, Yves Bridault, Jean Dutourd, Jean-Claude Ibert, TLS, Peter de Mendelssohn, Christian Millau, F. Robichon, Pierre Seize, Marguerite Taos, Fernand Vial, etc.


Intent upon correcting Romee de Villeneuve in 1966, defending Giono with all his learning and sense of justice, Maxwell A. Smith, dean of Giono scholars, roundly chastised the persecutors, such as the Comité National des Ecrivains, Les Lettres Françaises, and Tristan Tzara for a personal vilification of Giono on October 6, 1944. In 1967, W. D. Redfern raised Giono to eminence among the latest realists, newer novelists such as Beckett, Sarraute, Simon, and Robbe-Grillet. It seems certain that Giono will not lead into any retreat towards incommunicability and anguished incoherence, but rather into a new phase for the novel. In Giono’s hands it becomes anew, as in its greatest practitioners, a comforting “refuge” (Giono’s term for Melville’s Moby-Dick), a guide and new direction, and, once more, the means to individual and collective revelation. In any case, Giono will not lie down quietly with those novelists popular after 1950, for he scorned them and their admirers upon occasion:

30 See among many publications his Jean Giono (New York, 1966).

For a defense, see also Herbert Read’s work cited by Henry Miller in defense of Giono: Politics of the Unpolitical (London, 1946).
32 The Private World of Jean Giono (Durham, 1967).
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"The fact is that in 1962 literature is in panic because of its past. Like all arts in terror, it hurtles headlong into rhetoric. When an author no longer dares to tell stories, or is no longer able to, he passes his time stringing words like beads. . . . Hence the distress, the nausea that those interested in groaning in cadence over the sadness of the human condition applaud; from this applause, and from the ephemeral success that ensues, arises the exaggerated self-esteem that impales a few mediocre performers on muted trumpets."

Thus, even into phase 3, Giono remained, despite his seeming lack of involvement, a champion of happiness and a promoter of the joy of living.

Since we are awaiting the publication of Giono’s *Journal* and his complete works, it seemed best, in this book, to select an order of presentation that would deepen, as we advance, our knowledge both of the possibilities of prose fiction and of our own situation in the twentieth century. Born in the nineteenth century, Giono in his youth opened his eyes upon a conflict between harmony and disharmony, or the Vergilian and pastoral confrontation for *libertas* between *rusticitas* on the one hand and *urbanitas* on the other. Like William Faulkner, Giono not only rejected the city and foresaw grass growing at the Paris subway exits, but he constructed from bits and geographical particulars what he acknowledged to be a mythical “High Country” peopled by hypothetical beings like those in Jefferson, at the hub of equally mythical Yoknapatawpha County in northwest Mississippi. As early as his novel *Naissance de l’Odysée* of 1930—the novel so titled because it humorously offers a theory and practice for the creation of Homer’s *Odyssey*—Giono had selected two of his chief

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themes: the happiness of man released from society into the wide world as a free adventurer like Ulysses, and the privileged position of the artist, also like Ulysses, creating tales for the delight and knowledge of himself and anyone else. As an apocalypticist, Giono grappled later on at least two major occasions, 1931 and c. 1960, with the catastrophic end of modern civilization, and each man's personal abyss and absorption into the cosmos. As a surrealist rejecting reason and logic and summoning other ways of knowing, Giono imagined trips back into time in Noé and forward into space in Fragments d'un paradis. When he chose a symbolic mode, he summoned reader collaboration for Les Grands chemins as for Le Hussard sur le toit, soliciting theories and conclusions from the mazes of oblique referential patterns relating to twinships and brotherhoods, blacks and whites, warfare between nations and sexes. The epic novels call upon modern humanists to review the behavior of men and women, to decide upon what now in our days can be salvaged from what once were worshipful stances and actions, and to view the heroic women leaders of the future, after our present revolution. Always in the most noble mode, the tragic novels of Giono very movingly treat crimes and justice, triumphs, revenge, and ghastly sacrifices to olden gods, perhaps upon a frozen planet.

This book concludes with a discussion of the place where most novelists start, the autobiographical, perhaps the most difficult mode for fiction. Thence, in fact, every narrator moves on to imitate a crafty Ulysses coolly fabricating tales of vast ships and wrecks and whirlpools from mere wisps of reed dropped in the muddy pool of an irrigation ditch, swirled by gigantic waters past Scabiosa Shoals into the safe harbor of Ithaca at last. When Telemachus tells his true story, no matter how indignant he grows, he is not believed. But when Ulysses rises from his sober contemplation of that bit
of wet reed which miraculously has navigated the fearful mud puddle, and when, advancing towards an incredulous Penelope, he recounts perilous peregrinations, he becomes again her own true love and a chief chronicler of ancient voy­ages. As an artist he alone spoke what all recognized instant­ly as the truth and as commonly experienced reality.

Looking about him, Ulysses, who is Giono’s first portrait of the narrator, sees man’s will faulty, his being corrupted, and the world he knows harassed by cruel gods and therefore fraught with perils. To him, as to Giono, two solutions pro­vide deliverance from evil: the feeling of pity for the falling and the oppressed, and the aesthetic joys of creation. By liber­ating man from himself for a moment, art provides him not only the perspective but also the desire and the knowledge requisite for finishing his life. One may be a great depicter of men without loving them; to paint men well, the novelist must, in very fact, really despise them. Those villagers who lined up to sign the funeral book of the blacksmith Murataure in *L’Iris de Suze* (1969) truly resembled contemptible insects, being themselves devoid of pity. Thus, Giono loathes the twin companions in *Les Grands chemins* even as he de­scribes them, much as Faulkner saw through such individuals in *A Fable*, a modern man, a “... foreigner who moved, breathed, not merely in an aura of bastardy and bachelordom but of homelessness too, like a half-wild pedigreeless pariah dog: fatherless, wifeless, sterile and perhaps even impotent too, misshapen, savage and foul: the world’s portionless and intractable and inconsolable orphan, ...”35 In similar terms Giono also boldly castigates men and society, probably ac­tually preferring women, appealing to them to outlaw wars, evolving in his understanding of them from the Arsules and

Auréliés of his early fiction, pure beasts of burden and sorry but cherished victims, to the lofty Dr. Alithéa, the mathematical genius of *Ennemonde* (1970).

Maurice Nadeau pointed out in 1950 that Giono's overall view of society and the modern world had remained consistently from his earliest prose a tragic view: "As soon as he began to write, Giono wished to usher into our age . . . tragedy. Reread *Colline, Un de Baumugnes*, his presentation of Vergil. Does not this writing incorporate a complex, sometimes obscure plot, does it not require personages who are at the same time straightforward, mysterious, and enigmatic? Was not his goal, in the last analysis, to fill us with 'terror and pity'?"  

Giono's accommodation of the modern world to the exigencies of both Greek classical and Shakespearean tragedies may be characteristic, in fact, of our best novelists. In discussing "The Novel as a Tragic Mode," Roger L. Cox concluded in 1969 that it "functions in relation to our age as tragic drama did in relation to the greatest periods of Greek and English history—by involving the members of its audience in moral life, by inviting them to put their own motives under examination, by suggesting that reality is not as their conventional education has led them to see it. Moreover, understanding and forgiveness are no less indigenous to tragic drama than to the novel."

Thus, Giono claimed in his essay on Vergil that he always tried to pierce below what is generally considered "the truth" and "the real" to the underlying significance, or to be always "le maître du sens des choses." Otherwise, he added, he might

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INTRODUCTION

have wanted to deify the first engineer whom he saw using nitroglycerine. Therefore he personally preferred not the positivistic scientists held up as heroes by Jules Verne, but the solitary essentialists like Robinson Crusoe, alone on the highest points of their islands.

When he wrote his *Notes on the Novel*, Ortega y Gasset observed that adventures no longer interested modern readers, at least not mature readers who had outgrown the “barbaric residue” of their childhoods. “It is not easy nowadays,” he added, “to invent adventures capable of stirring the superior portion of our sensibility.”38 Yet to his reader, Giono offers sources of optimism after the adventures of his novels, for they consist generally of adventures in series: nature, or the beautiful world through which we travel (who could continue to feel anguish on a morning like this? asks Ulysses). Giono suggested that life itself can be lived every minute with the excitement and marvel of a great adventure, mysterious, unforeseeable, and unique for each human being. Thus, Giono’s novels generally commence and close with departures. They commonly figure a circle and a road bisecting it, involve a tangential stranger and peripheral groups encountered by chance and rapidly spun out centrifugally. The latter heroes are unashamedly adventurers, handsome rogues like Pauline de Théus and Angélo Pardi,39 dashing villains of the open road, lawmen on horseback, and coach travelers who spur on and vanish or burst like the iridescent bubbles they always were. All splendid people, truly the simple and splendid ones, live for the sake of living: “They understood that the deliberately ignominious members of the human race amounted to no more than a trifling minority, and that happily

39 Hero and heroine of *Angelo* and of *Le Hussard sur le toit*. 

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all over the world, the overwhelming majority of living, so-called inferior, beings continued to live for the sake of living.”

The great ironic novels of Jean Giono appeal, then, not only because he succeeded in clothing his vision in aesthetically admirable and identifiable forms, which allow the reader the pleasure of placing the works severally into familiar and rich literary traditions; they also afford shelter and comfort by reminding the modern reader, with whom the world is much too much, that beyond his routine and narrow horizons lies a vast, adventuresome universe of freedom and pure delight. They thrill some readers with their portraits of brave men and magnificent women, who trust the earth and their own bodies. Last of all, they delight eye and ear and bring joy to many hearts because, more than most authors, Giono possessed what Aristotle considered the surest mark of a born genius: the gift of abundant metaphor. There lies his waspish humor, and there also the reader’s enjoyment.

Giono’s Ulysses explained parabolically why even we moderns must have our new adventure stories. In the olden times, he said, when heroic poems were chanted and spinning songs sung, the toilers slumped at their tasks until they fell fast asleep. However, whenever tales of adventure were told, all hands worked busily away at tasks grown somehow less arduous, the yarns unfolding, no one dropping off to sleep, so that finally twice as much was accomplished happily in an evening, or an hour: “Thus, Ulysses was like a flowering almond tree in the midst of furrows, and covered the black earth with light and fragrant petals.”

40 *Virgile*, p. 85.
41 *Naissance de l’Odyssee*, p. 207.
When Jean Giono composed his historical novel of World War I, he revealed not only by the point of reference from which he hid himself in order to narrate but also because of the prophetic nature of his view that he considered himself chosen and ordained to have seen that war and to have spoken of it. According to Revelation, Saint John the Divine was also commanded to bear witness:

"1. The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John:

"2. Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw."

Therefore the hidden narrator, Jean Giono, witnesses the departure for war, suffers in war, and returns because he has been enjoined like his namesake to record that event.

Far from being the first novelist to interpret war as a catastrophe predicted in Apocalypse, Giono here follows at least two of his favorite novelists: Melville and Tolstoy. In the former's Israel Potter (1855) the naval battle is prompted by

\[1\text{ }\text{Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile (1855). Melville's Israel feels divinely appointed to undergo trials and witness catastrophes: "being of this race, felicity could never be his lot," says Melville (Israel Potter, Boston, 1926, introduction by C. A. Page, p. 284). The novel is sarcastically dedicated: "To His Highness, The Bunker-Hill Monument."}]}