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The following essay was prepared in response to Meaghan Emery's article and Richard Golsan's response to that article published in *French Historical Studies* 33:4 (Fall 2010) and Emery's response to Golsan's response published in *H-France Salon* vol. 2, issue 1, #2

## The Rural Fantasies of Jean Giono

Julian Jackson\*

Almost no aspect of the Occupation excites more passionate debate than the positions taken up by artists and intellectuals. We want to know how, and why, so many writers collaborated - to understand their intellectual trajectories. Recently we have had fascinating studies of Bernard Faÿ, a close friend of Gertrude Stein, who was also a fanatical anti-Freemason and became director of the Bibliothèque nationale under Vichy, and of Ramon Fernandez (by his son the novelist Dominique) who moved from being one of the stars of the French literary scene in the 1920s to being a fascist collaborator after 1940.<sup>1</sup> Of all the purge trials that took place in 1945, none excites more interest than that of the novelist Robert Brasillach.<sup>2</sup> These were three writers openly committed to collaboration, but even more interesting are the more ambiguous cases. For example, the German historian Ingrid Galster has done very effective detective work on the wartime conduct of Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>3</sup> Pierre Hebey has provided an excellent study of the reasons why so many French writers went on writing for the prestigious *Nouvelle revue française* during the Occupation despite the fact it was edited by the fascist Drieu La Rochelle.<sup>4</sup> The most sophisticated general account of writers in the war is that provided by Gisèle Sapiro who uses a sociological analysis inspired by Pierre Bourdieu to explain their choices.<sup>5</sup>

Our fascination with this issue derives partly from the high status that France has attached to its intellectuals. We pore over every article, social visit and diary entry of writers and artists like Matisse, Cocteau, Gide, Mauriac, Montherlant, and so on. The answers matter to us because we

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<sup>1</sup> Antoine Compagnon, *Le Cas Bernard Faÿ: du Collège de France à l'indignité nationale* (Paris, 2009); Dominique Fernandez, *Ramon* (Paris, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator: the Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach* (Chicago, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Ingrid Galster, *Sartre, Vichy et les intellectuels* (Paris, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Hebey, *La Nouvelle revue française des années sombres 1940-1941* (Paris, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Gisèle Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains 1940-1953* (Paris, 1999).

want writers that we admire to remain 'intact', and we find it hard to accept *dérives*. Galster's work on Sartre has brought down on her head all the wrath of the *Temps Modernes* mafia because they cannot accept that Sartre could not at all times have behaved in the most exemplary way.

There is certainly a lot of passion invested in the case of Jean Giono to judge by the article of Meaghan Emery and the reply by Richard Golsan. Giono was a ruralist writer of considerable reputation, many of whose books were made into films. His harrowing experience of the Great War led him to become an unconditional pacifist, and it was for this reason that he supported the Popular Front in 1936. The same reason led him, like many other intellectuals, to drift away from the Popular Front and oppose war in 1940. He was one of those pacifists originally identified with the left whose previous opposition to fascism now took second place to their opposition to war. This meant many of them were also violently anti-Communist since the Communist Party was, until August 1939, totally committed to the necessity of anti-fascist war. Towards the end of the Occupation, the Conseil National des Ecrivains, the organization of writers involved in Resistance, put Giono on its black list of writers who had collaborated. He was arrested in 1944 and spent some months in prison.

Although there is a somewhat apologetic biography of Giono by Pierre Citron<sup>6</sup>, the consensus of most historians is generally negative when judging Giono's actions in this period. I certainly took a negative line in my own book on the Occupation although I did not devote more than a paragraph to the case.<sup>7</sup> When asked to participate in this debate, I was certainly prepared to review my position and be persuaded that my previous opinion had been wrong. Unfortunately, having now carefully read the pieces by Emery and Golsan – and also looked more closely at Giono's *Journal de l'Occupation* which he started to write September 1943 – I am convinced that the case against Giono is more damning than I had ever suspected. I share Golsan's view much more than Emery's. The only point over which I would differ from Golsan is in his harsh judgment of Giono's "disturbing complacency towards Nazi expansionism" in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> As Nazi Germany became more threatening, many intellectuals and politicians of the left were gradually forced to question their previous commitment to pacifism. But this was a process which involved agonizing reappraisals and the end of long friendships. Some changed their views faster than others, and some did not do so at all. In retrospect the "right" position may be obvious, but it was not at the time, and there is something poignant and tragic in reading Giono's correspondence in the 1930s with his previous friends of the left in the magazine *Vendredi*, as they debated the position they should take towards war and Communism.

In general, however, I find Emery's defense of Giono entirely unconvincing on almost every count. She does to her credit provide (though often buried in footnotes) some very compelling evidence against her own case but only the most contorted intellectual acrobatics or implausibly generous interpretations allow that evidence to be read in the way that she wants us to. Indeed after reading her attempt to rescue Giono, I think it is less effective than Citron's whose defence is that Giono, living in Manosque in Provence, and cut off from Paris life, was an innocent who failed to understand the political implication that his acts might have. Citron does not really have much to

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Citron, *Giono* (Paris, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Julian Jackson, *La France sous l'occupation* (Paris, 2001), 255.

<sup>8</sup> Richard J. Golsan, "Of Jean Giono and Collaboration: A Response to Meaghan Emery" *French Historical Studies* 33:4 (Fall 2010): 612.

say about Giono's politics. Emery goes much further and offers us a reading according to which Giono remained throughout the war faithful to the same left-wing beliefs that had animated him in the 1930s.

Her argument essentially boils down to two related propositions. First, we should not exaggerate Giono's commitment to collaboration: "his pacifism and Germanophilia had never translated into direct support for the Nazi regime or for collaboration;" there may have been similarities "between his writings and Vichyist, pacifist, and ruralist propaganda... [but] he never pronounced his support for the regime;" by declining an invitation to attend the Writers' Conference organized by the Germans in Weimar in 1942, he demonstrated "a silent refusal to collaborate with Nazism."<sup>9</sup> Secondly, Giono remained consistent to his left-wing beliefs: his actions under the Occupation do not "suffice as proof of ideological alignment with the reactionary elements of the Vichy regime;" "his moral bearings as gauged through a close reading of his occupation period writings were squarely in line with France's radical-socialist tradition" and he "remained faithful to the values of the left;" his ruralism was "neither easily [sic] partisan nor inherently reactionary;" he was "escapist and irresponsible, but far from 'pro-Hitlerian;" and he displayed an "unwavering belief in French democracy."<sup>10</sup>

Before going on to consider these two arguments, one should note a tension in her article between wanting to save Giono from his accusers and her occasional realization that there is too much evidence pointing in the other direction. This leads her to offer Giono a way out based on pragmatic necessity and the need for survival. So she admits that his views did "not preclude him from participating, if only obliquely, in collaborationist circles and from earning a living under German occupation"<sup>11</sup> – what she oddly calls his "economic collaboration" (i.e. publishing books and articles) – and from "publishing with Parisian presses and receiving journalists and young German soldiers." But her line is that "such duplicitous behavior was not uncommon; it was, in fact, necessary for survival."<sup>12</sup> This is simply not true. If it is the case – and her reply to Golsan quotes me to this effect – that anyone who published had to make some compromises, one could say, first, that it was for this reason that writers, like Jean Guéhenno refused to publish at all, and, secondly, that these compromises did not require writers to go as far down the road of compromise and complicity as we find in the case of Giono. He was never in any danger, and if a case is to be made for Giono, it cannot be made on these grounds.

So what did Giono do? One problem in Emery's article is a confusion about what Giono is being accused of and consequently what he should be defended from. To take her first proposition, it needs to be made clear that by no means all those who collaborated did so for ideological reasons or because they believed in "Hitlerian ideology." Those who did so are usually described as collaborationists to distinguish them from those who acted from other motives. For many who came from the left, like Giono, their motive was opposition to war and pacifism. They wanted peace even if they did not share the views of Nazi Germany in any way. No one has, to my knowledge, ever accused Giono of this – and so to defend him from supporting Nazi ideology is to defend him against

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<sup>9</sup> Meaghan Emery, "Giono's Popular Front: La Joie au Grand Air, Idéologie Réactionnaire," *French Historical Studies* 33:4 (Fall 2010): 590, 577, and 591 respectively.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 577 and 591, 577, 581, 577, 581, and 593 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 577.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 589 n. 60.

an accusation that is imaginary. The case against Giono is, in the first place, that he was a “collaborator” not a Nazi.

So what was collaboration? There is of course no universally agreed upon and essentialist truth about what constitutes “collaboration.” Collaboration was a concept that emerged out of the situation of Occupation. What it meant changed over time. One of the first tasks of the Resistance was to define the parameters of what was acceptable or not acceptable, but there was never complete agreement. The literary impresario and former editor of the *NRF*, Jean Paulhan, whose Resistance record was impeccable, took the view that it was not *where* one wrote but *what* one said that counted. On the whole this was a minority view, however, and after the war it led Paulhan to break with many of his former resistance colleagues.

In the case of writers, a number of criteria can be applied to judge if they were collaborators. What newspapers did they write for? Did they join any collaborationist group? Did they participate in any of the cultural manifestations organized by the Germans (frequenting the German Institute in Paris, participating in the two trips that were organized to Germany)? And so on. If we apply some of these tests, the case against Giono is pretty compelling. He published in three periodicals, all published in occupied Paris, that were markedly associated with collaboration: *La Gerbe*, *NRF* and *Comoedia* (this last was the least committed of the three and indeed even Sartre published an article in it). *La Gerbe* was run by the ultra-collaborationist Alphonse de Chateaubriant who was a kind of crazed *illuminé* who almost believed that Hitler was a new Christ. The details of Giono’s participation in *La Gerbe* are provided by Golsan so I will not repeat them here. It is clear also that Giono was extremely well viewed by the German authorities. In a report of March 1941 the German Gerhard Heller, who worked for the Propaganda-Staffel, reported that “Giono has taken the initiative himself of contacting our services. He is ready to collaborate with Germany...He expressed himself in a very positive way on questions of Franco-German relations.”<sup>13</sup> In this spirit, Giono allowed himself to be the subject of a big publicity campaign by the German propaganda authorities including a two page spread in the German magazine *Signal* in 1942.<sup>14</sup> He was also the subject of another piece of publicity in *Signal* in 1944. When he visited Paris in May 1942 for the first time in six years he went to meet Karl Epting, Director of the German Institute, and Heller. No one forced him to do this. It is true that he did not accept an invitation to join a delegation of writers visiting Weimar in 1942, but he accompanied his refusal with a revoltingly obsequious letter which Golsan quotes.

So I cannot really see that Emery can convincingly cite Giono as an example of the “risks of noncommittal politics” (I presume what is meant is “non-committed politics”).<sup>15</sup> I would have thought that non-committed politics would have meant *not* publishing in *Gerbe* or *NRF*, *not* contacting the German authorities in Paris, *not* visiting the German Institute. Emery does detect a “breach” in Giono’s wartime experience when the Germans occupied the part of France he was living in (after the Italian defeat) in September 1943.<sup>16</sup> It is not really clear what the nature of this breach

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<sup>13</sup> Gérard Loiseaux, “La Vie culturelle française dans l’Europe Nouvelle” in S. Martens and M. Vaisse, eds., *Frankreich und Deutschland im Krieg (November 1942-Herbst 1944) Okkupation, Kollaboration, Résistance* (Bonn, 2000), 666.

<sup>14</sup> Gérard Loiseaux, *La Littérature de la défaite et de la collaboration* (Paris, 1984), 104, 106, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Emery, “Giono’s Popular Front,” 579.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 598.

was except that possibly for the first time Giono could actually see what the Occupation really meant to those who lived under it. Perhaps the “breach” was expressed in the fact that when two German soldiers visited his home in May 1944 wishing him to sign copies of his books he did it according to his journal “coldly and simply...no more.” This is taken by Emery to show that “if the Germans are not the most pointed targets of his condemnation, they are not the beneficiaries of his sympathy either” – but one is tempted to respond that (1) they certainly had been the beneficiaries of his sympathy previously (during his visit to Paris), and (2) since in May 1944 even Giono could see that the writing was on the wall, it was probably prudent not to seem too friendly to Germans. Indeed one might have more respect for Giono if he had received these two ordinary soldiers in the kind of way he had done to more important Germans in Paris two years earlier. At least this would have been consistent with his previous attitude and demonstrated a certain independence of mind rather than merely a desire to bend with the prevailing wind.

It is clear, then, that whatever definition one wishes to use, Giono collaborated – and that on the collaboration spectrum he was somewhere in the same place as say Marcel Jouhandeau or Jacques Chardonne. He was, of course, less committed than say Fernandez, Drieu or Brasillach but more so than say Cocteau. So what were the reasons for his collaboration, and (to move on to Emery’s second proposition) what conclusions can one draw from it about his politics? The main explanation was of course his commitment to pacifism. This trajectory was not untypical. There were many other intellectuals and politicians who moved into collaboration (or support for Vichy) for this reason. In some exceptional cases this trajectory even led them by a curiously crazy logic to a position so anti-Communist that their pacifism ended with them fighting in German uniform on the Eastern Front. This was the case of the youth hostel activist Marc Augier who moved from support for the Popular Front to fighting in the Charlemagne SS Division.

The distinctiveness of Giono’s pacifism was that he combined it with an almost mystical belief in the peasantry and the countryside. In his view, war emerged from modern urban civilization and industrial progress. For this reason Giono in fact welcomed the defeat of France. He told Jean Grenier, “The defeat of France is only a superficial fact; the important thing is that the world is entering into a new civilization. Machines have exhausted everything. The Germans are not really conquerors. Their civilization founded on machines will disappear...The German victory has no great significance. It could ruin the industry of Northern France; so much the better.”<sup>17</sup> For someone who so disliked violence and war, Giono could be quite sanguinary when he fantasized about the destructions of cities and of modern civilization. In November 1943 he wrote, “we could offer France no more beautiful present than destroying her big cities by bombing.”<sup>18</sup>

So how do we situate Giono’s ruralism in political terms? It is true, as Emery says, that ruralism is not “inherently reactionary” and can take on different meanings in different contexts.<sup>19</sup> Another celebrated regionalist writer of the inter-war years was André Chamson whose book *Roux the Bandit* (1925) (admired by Giono) celebrated the refusal of a peasant in the Cevennes to join the army in 1914. He deserts and takes to the hills. Like Giono, Chamson was involved in the Popular Front but their paths diverged as Chamson became, like Jean Guéhenno, increasingly worried about the threat

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Grenier, *Sous l’Occupation* (Paris, 1997), 209.

<sup>18</sup> *Journal, poèmes essais* (Gallimard, 1995), 361.

<sup>19</sup> Although his advocacy of subsistence farming as representing the best future for the peasantry seems to me to be reactionary in the strictest definition of the term.

of Nazism. He abandoned his pacifist stance and was later involved in the Resistance. His regionalist writings, celebrating the resistance and individualism throughout the ages of the rural Protestant population of the Cevennes, can be clearly situated in a recognizably left-wing tradition.

What of Giono? Emery argues that Giono's ruralism remained left-wing, and I would be happy to believe this except that almost no evidence is offered by her to show it, and I can find no evidence myself in anything I have read. Giono told his friend Jean Grenier that hearing Pétain on the radio in 1940, "I at last heard a human voice after the metallic one of Reynaud and others."<sup>20</sup> Of course Giono was not alone in admiring Pétain in 1940, and Emery quotes some oblique references on his part to disliking dictators and strong men. But that is exactly what one would expect from someone who subscribed to his brand of communitarian semi-anarchist rural messianism. It does not make him left wing. It must be said in fact that Emery's attempts to make sense of his political "ideas" are not successful, but that is because his effusions are so vapid and vacuous as to be almost without meaning (rather than displaying, as Emery would have it, "a complexity of thinking").<sup>21</sup> I glean from her analysis that he did not subscribe to Maurras's particular version of Provençal regionalism,<sup>22</sup> but not being a supporter of Action Française does not situate one by definition on the left: there are many other varieties of reactionary thought besides that of Maurras. I glean also that the philosophy of Giono's 1941 book *Triomphe de la Vie* was based on the idea of "'natural laws' favoring the well-being of the community [to] safeguard individual freedom, whereas 'human laws' designed to achieve the same end abolish it."<sup>23</sup> This sounds to me – if it has any meaning – similar to the Vichyite idea that real freedom is to be found in organic natural communities and not in liberal individualism. Indeed the whole contempt for politics which runs through Giono's writing is entirely in tune with the prevailing ethos of Vichy: unlike politicians "the land does not lie" as Pétain observed in an early speech. Some characteristically gnomic remarks that Giono made about youth are taken by Emery to be "oblique" criticisms of Vichy's youth policies – but they are oblique indeed.<sup>24</sup> He also believed, it seems, in a "cultural rebirth" after catastrophe since survivors would become obliged to be peasants or artisans. In this context she quotes Giono as saying, "man needs invisible objects. So that he can tolerate the fact that the world was created, he is obliged to remake in himself the world's creation."<sup>25</sup> What can this mean?

Emery notes that Giono speaks of his "unwavering belief in French democracy," but the proof provided for this is a rather (typically) obscure passage from his journal for November 1943 about how the "kulak spirit" of the peasantry would eventually overcome "the French Communist establishment" which "will again become a simple radical-socialist democracy."<sup>26</sup> If that single sentence, whatever it means, is the best one can do to rescue a "left-wing Giono," then the case is

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<sup>20</sup> Grenier, *Sous l'Occupation*, 211.

<sup>21</sup> Emery, "Giono's Popular Front," 591.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 594.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 602.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 596.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 593.

thin indeed.<sup>27</sup> She does go on to say that his “written thoughts in late 1943 clearly indicate a desire to recuperate the long-standing republican tradition of his native Provence,”<sup>28</sup> but not a *single* piece of evidence is adduced for this claim. I can find no evidence for it in his writings of late 1943 and 1944. There are simply no other references to the usual signifiers of that tradition: “democracy,” “freedom,” “liberty,” the word “Republican” itself. Nowhere do these words appear in the journal.

If the “long-standing republican tradition of his native Provence” was “recuperated” anywhere at this time it was precisely in the emerging Resistance – which had come to embody an ideological commitment to French democracy. What is striking about Giono, however, is how little sympathy he seems to show for the Resistance in his writings at this time. Buried in the footnotes is the rather callous comment Giono made when asked by someone whom he had known through the youth hostel movement to intervene on behalf of her brother who had been arrested by the Gestapo. Giono comments, “I had warned them all that governments always have a way of persecuting and of making war happen [through calls to patriotism]... This is one of them. If they execute Alain by firing squad, he will have died at war. He only had not to do it.”<sup>29</sup> She returns to this quotation again later and says about it, “what could be a cowardly impulse of self-preservation consciously falls back on a refusal to become a pawn of the powerful rather than offer voluntary complicity or ignorance.”<sup>30</sup> I confess that I cannot make much sense of this sentence except that its very obscurity reveals the author’s difficulty in dealing with this side of Giono. Golsan also cites other compelling pieces of evidence about Giono’s clear distaste for the Resistance and surprising indulgence towards the ultra-collaborationist *Milice*. The truth is that Giono was unable to see the Resistance as anything else but another form of war – and for him war was always bad. He could not see that the Resistance was a voluntary combat of individuals committed to freeing their country in the name of those “left-wing” values which we are told he believed in. Even more disturbing are Giono’s remarks (buried in note 90) when he was asked in 1944 by Vladimir Rabinovitch to condemn anti-semitic persecution. One can see that for prudential reasons he might have preferred not to speak out, but did he really need to add in the privacy of his diary, “I tell him that I don’t give a damn, that I care as much about the Jews as I do about my first pair of underwear, that there are better things to do on earth than worry about Jews”? This remark is dealt with by Golsan at length so I will not linger on the matter further except to say that I think its surely merits more than Emery’s description of it as displaying merely “crassness.”<sup>31</sup> In short, it seems hardly surprising that in 1943 the fascist Drieu la Rochelle could write that the only writers with whom he felt points of affinity were Montherlant, Céline, Jouhandeau, Chardonne, Fabre-Luce, Fernandez, and Giono.<sup>32</sup> Giono seems to fit perfectly into this *galère*.

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<sup>27</sup> It is not really clear what Giono here means by a ‘simple radical-socialist democracy’ but it sounds like a bit the Radical-Socialism of Alain – another of those former pacifists who lost their political bearings in 1940.

<sup>28</sup> Emery, “Giono’s Popular Front,” 594.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 593 n. 79.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 595.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 595 n. 90. Citron, *Giono*, 364, also has problems with these comments that “one is not happy to read,” but sees them as “an escape valve for a certain comprehensible [why “comprehensible” one might ask?] exasperation.”

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Loiseaux, *La Littérature*, 131.

In the end, we should probably not take Giono's "political" ideas very seriously. One cannot but agree – *une fois n'est pas coutume* – with Robert Brasillach's review of Giono's 1942 book *Triomphe de la vie*: "A strange book...I will admit straight away, that I prefer M. Giono the novelist to M. Giono the thinker. But we can't do anything about it, M. Giono has decided to think. These pages constitute a passionate plea for the artisan, a condemnation of the modern world, of the assembly line, of the anonymity of the factory...I would not say that these truths are lies, just that they have no chance of coming to pass, that is the misfortune."<sup>33</sup> Overall Giono's politics do certainly not reveal "a complexity of thinking, as opposed to partisanship;"<sup>34</sup> they reveal on the contrary some rather simple ideas and the most extraordinary naiveté. He was pretty much representative of a number of writers whose experience of the Great War had created a commitment to integral pacifism which the rise of fascism did nothing to change. Those who envisaged the possible necessity of war to fight Nazism were in his eyes dupes of the Communists or indeed in their pay. Anti-Communism is a strong thread of Giono's writing in his Occupation journal (another value that he shared with Vichy until the end). Thus if Chamson had abandoned pacifism, it could only be for one reason: "the orders of Moscow. If in 1932 he and Guéhenno were pacifist it is because Moscow needed pacifism (I got caught out by that) and if in 1939 and now they are bellicose...it is because Moscow needs heroism. (I continue to be pacifist, despised by the one and the other)."<sup>35</sup> Neither of these two was ever a Communist in fact. That they might reluctantly have accepted the necessity of war to fight fascism, and have supported the Resistance because they believed in the defense of freedom and democracy, never occurred to Giono who remained mired in his solipsistic rural fantasy world. In this context it is not surprising that when he heard the news on the radio of the Allied landings in Normandy, an event that for the French as a whole was a moment of hope, he commented in his diary, "the bad days begin...."<sup>36</sup>

To ask whether or not writers "collaborated" in the war is of course not the only question one would want to ask about them. But if that is the question that we are asking, the answer in the case of Giono seems incontrovertible, and the special pleading of Emery does her subject no good. The more one looks at the "case" of Giono, the less "open" it actually seems to be. He affected a kind of disdain for corrupt city life but was only too happy to accept the honors it provided, playing the role of rural sage during his occasional entries on the urban scene. His Occupation journal shows him by turns callous, selfish, cowardly, self-pitying and greedy for honors and recognition (despite an affectation of un-worldliness). Above all, he was a political ninny but certainly not a "left-wing" one.

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Hebey, *La Nouvelle revue*, 345.

<sup>34</sup> Emery, "Giono's Popular Front," 591.

<sup>35</sup> Giono, *Journal*, 422 [11/4/44].

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, *Journal*, 438 [6/6/44].

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