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Man vs. Nature

Hill by JEAN GIONO

translated by PAUL EPRILE

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Reviewed by JODY BALLAH

Jean Giono wrote his first novel, *Colline*, in 1929 after serving in the Great War and dedicating his life to pacifism. The novel won the Prix Brentano and was commissioned for an English translation that same year. Translated again in 1986 under the title *Hill*, *Colline* is the initial work in the author's Pan trilogy, in which he evokes the ominous power of the natural world. Paul Eprile's 2016 translation of *Hill* brings to life Giono's poetic prose to a contemporary generation—one who is increasingly concerned with nature and man's place within it.

Throughout his childhood, Giono regularly explored the hills and valleys near his native Manosque, in Provence, which in turn provides the setting for much of his literary work. In this short novel, the small hamlet of *les Bastides Blanches* is home to a dozen characters. Physically and spiritually dominated by a hill, *Mont Lure*, the peasants who occupy the four houses perched at its base live and work along the paths, fields, trees and foliage of a countryside which Giono makes powerfully come alive with rich metaphors and symbolism.

Here we find the stocky Gondran, his wife Marguerite and his old, dying father-in-law Janet; Jaume the boar hunter and his adolescent daughter Ulalie; Arbaud, his wife Babette, and their two young

daughters; Maurras, his mother and a farmhand; and the simpleton Gagou, as the unlucky thirteenth resident, an outsider to the group.

Their days are spent drinking wine and homemade *absinthe*, telling stories and working their land in a bucolic existence where the men make the decisions and have the serious conversations. The women tend to the housework, children, and meals. Alongside their simple life, the magnificent panorama of the scenery and natural elements contributes as much, if not more, to the plot of the novel. The earth is a separate character unto herself as the peasants live “up there among the hills, where the earth's flesh folds in thick rolls” (5) and the storm expands “its muscular back” (20). Through Giono's narrative, nature comes alive through anthropomorphism and human feelings are understood through comparisons to the natural world.

The novel's focus soon turns towards a series of animals: snakes, insects, a lizard, and a black cat, all seeming to exert a kind of foreboding. Nature and this small group of people dwelling within it coexist in uneasy harmony until the appearance of a wild boar threatens to disrupt the balance of things when it escapes Jaume's hunting rifle one day on the hill. Convinced this is a doomsday warning, the men consult old Janet, rough and weathered by time and the elements, who acts as soothsayer of sorts, while confined to his deathbed. He seems to possess a secret knowledge about the natural world and the future of the hill and its inhabitants. Through his often incoherent ravings, Janet predicts the end of the world, when nature will take its

revenge on the peasants as punishment for their lack of respect towards the living earth.

The characters are then presented with a series of natural disasters: one of Arbaud's daughters falls sick with a mysterious illness, the water from their local spring suddenly stops flowing, and finally an apocalyptic wildfire menaces their lives and homes. Janet's ranting convinces the men that he is somehow connected to and responsible for what is happening in their environment. He growls at the men who come in turn to seek his advice:

You realize something's against you, but you don't know what. . . I bet you've never given any thought to the great power? The great power of animals, plants, and rock. (65)

Giono describes Janet's decrepit body and mind as though he was part of the earth, "hard like a laurel trunk" and "dead as a tree trunk" (13).

After days of fighting the blazing fire, the men return to their homes and families. Gagou, alone, is the sacrificial lamb to the elements, somehow appeasing nature on behalf of his fellow man. The others, led by Jaume, decide that Gondran must kill Janet in order to purge themselves of the curse he has brought down upon them. No sooner has Gondran steeled himself to the idea when the old man dies naturally, along with the scorched earth all around them. It is now a time for

rebuilding, as "tears of dark blood weep in the grass" (112).

Rich symbolism permeates Giono's descriptions, both of the events and the natural world. The earth is personified through language rich with spiritual terms. Through his characters, Giono paints a picture of an earth where everything is alive and has feeling. Every time a tree is chopped down, a spade driven into the dirt or an animal falls prey to a hunter's weapon, the earth feels it. This story of primal conflict and man's mistreatment of his environment rings as true today as it did to its author at the end of World War I.

David Abram's excellent introduction provides a timely commentary on the spirituality of nature and our abuse and misuse of the limited resources that the earth gives us, and he puts this novel into a modern day context. Paul Eprile's magnificent English translation evokes the poetic metaphors, earthy descriptions and vibrant colours of Giono's original French text in a language that speaks to us, here and now in the twenty-first century.

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