
Writing and fighting: Raymond Jean's response to war

Terry Bradford
University of Leeds

'There is nothing so stupid and misleading as the same old, age-old opposition between "intellectual" and "man of action".' - Régis Debray¹

Introduction

Raymond Jean's response to war, from World War Two to wars in Algeria, Vietnam, and the Gulf, has taken many forms. As a young man, he joined the French Resistance. Later, he publicly opposed the war in Algeria, and involved himself in the *Mouvement de la Paix*. As a writer of fiction and autobiography, he has portrayed the intellectual's response to war as part of a committed, literary project. The form of his intervention has varied a great deal: from picking up a gun to seizing a pen. However, his stance as a committed intellectual remains a constant.

In an article about the Resistance, François Ewald distinguishes between 'the writer, the intellectual, and the man of action'.² Despite his assertion that the three are not mutually exclusive entities and that the same person may be all three at the same time, what Ewald perceives as differentiating these three roles contradicts this possibility. On the one hand, he argues, the intellectual shares with the writer or 'savant' certain activities; namely, writing, speaking, communicating and, with the 'man of action', the intellectual shares commitment to, and support for, a cause. On the other hand, the fact that the intellectual supports causes, in the name of truth and justice, intrinsically opposes him or her to the writer whom Ewald describes as standing outside the contingencies of history. Similarly, in characterising the intellectual as a squawker (someone who '*ne fait que parler*') Ewald opposes him or her to the 'man of action' on two counts:

by disqualifying communication as a form of action and by suggesting that the intellectual has no capacity for other forms of intervention.

This flawed taxonomy leads Ewald to write:

The struggle against the Nazi invader was a time when the figure of the intellectual can no longer be said to have had a valid role, words being derisory, in such circumstances, in comparison to action. And the courage to fight was not to be found in philosophy but above and beyond it, in that which distinguishes one man from the next.³

The value to the Resistance movement of the writers of clandestine plays, newspapers, manifestos is dismissed. However derisory the written or spoken word may be said to be, it is impossible to gauge its efficacy when compared with other forms of intervention. Thus, belittling this form of resistance and arguing that it is the only form available to the intellectual is to suggest that the intellectual is an irrelevance in times of war.

Ewald's reductive analysis leaves no room for the committed writer and relegates him or her to an ivory tower together with the aesthete. Yet to suggest that the writer stands outside history is to forget the single most important lesson of the Occupation for a generation of intellectuals and committed writers: that they were bodies as well as voices, that they were 'in situation', and that even their silence or passivity constituted an act. Being a writer or an intellectual did not, moreover, prevent one from picking up a gun, for example, or distributing anti-Nazi literature.

Using the example of Raymond Jean, I intend to examine how the 'man (or woman) of action' and the 'writer' may be reconciled by the figure of the committed intellectual. The context for this discussion is Jean's response to war because, as Ewald indicates, war constitutes a critical and defining time in relation to these terms. Jean opposed war in each of the ways outlined by Ewald, and his activities spanned the period of World War Two to war in the Gulf.

The man of action

Jean's first experience of war was as a teenager living in Marseilles

during the Occupation. He was not yet an established writer but his reaction to the war does help us understand something of the committed intellectual and writer he was to become. Jean has explained that he resisted instinctively. Why he did this, and how this action relates to his later writings and intellectual status, is revealed to some extent by the following commentary he has made on the very word 'resistance': 'One must always go back to its primary meaning, strength and starkness, its sense of radical and elementary *refusal*: a calm but militant rejection of the unacceptable.'⁴ How else would one characterise the Occupation if not as totally unacceptable? As far as Jean, the young intellectual, was concerned, it was unacceptable in that it represented everything he opposed. In the words of Edward Said: 'Real intellectuals are never more themselves than when, moved by metaphysical passion and disinterested principles of justice and truth, they denounce corruption, defend the weak, defy imperfect or oppressive authority.'⁵ The Occupation was oppressive by design. Thus, when faced by the Nazi regime, the only viable response available to the real intellectual was resistance.

For Jean, resistance was the only path open to the real intellectual because he viewed failure to combat the unacceptable as the equivalent of accepting it. Sartre stated that this was what the Occupation taught the intellectual about his or her responsibility and not only in times of war: 'Were we to be as quiet and still as stones, our very passivity would be an action.'⁶ Thus, those intellectuals who chose not to resist, who closed their eyes during the Occupation or deemed resistance to be futile, whilst not actively involved in collaborating with the Nazi regime, relinquished their claim to real intellectual status by collaborating passively.

Before he was even conscious of acting as a committed intellectual, Jean joined the Resistance when he was called up for *S.T.O.* (*Service du Travail Obligatoire*), a scheme set up by the Vichy regime which sent French men and women to work for the war effort in Germany. He decided not to leave for the *S.T.O.* and this refusal itself constituted an act of resistance which had necessarily to be compounded with further acts.⁷ Thus, intent on escaping work in Germany, Jean chose to join the *F.T.P.F.* (*Franco-Tireurs et Partisans Français*), a Communist Resistance organization, and to involve himself in their underground activities. This experience, as Jean sees it, constituted an apprenticeship 'of commitment'.⁸

As far as Jean was concerned, the action he took went hand in hand with his instincts, as well as his intellect. Intellect, mobilised in response to the contingencies of history, did not, therefore, preclude action. Jean's refusal to comply, a '[r]éflexe salubre',⁹ was the first sign of what was to make him a real intellectual.

Resistance can take many forms, some of which are commonly viewed as being peculiar to intellectuals, for example, the writing and dissemination of tracts, manifestos, fiction, poetry, and drama. The specifically intellectual aspect of this form of resistance was the communication of ideas. Jean did not himself produce Resistance literature at the time, being only 15 years old in 1940, yet he was involved, none the less, in the circulation of such material. This was a minimal role, perhaps, but a dangerous one. In *Belle Clarté, Chère Raison*, Jean relates how his father found a case of his filled with 'brochures, newspapers, and clandestine tracts'.¹⁰ Had they been discovered by the Gestapo, Jean might well have been shot. For Jean, no form of Resistance, be it armed combat or writing literature was incompatible with being an intellectual. Provided he or she resisted, the intellectual was performing his or her role: to oppose the unacceptable.

If Jean's experience during World War Two constituted, in his eyes, an apprenticeship for commitment, then the fruits of this apprenticeship were to become apparent in his subsequent reactions to war. As a committed intellectual, Jean's only possible response to the Algerian War was to oppose it and he sided with the Algerian cause. He was living and working in Morocco at the time, and it was here, before the famous «*Manifeste des 121*» (September 1960), that Jean signed the less well-known «*Manifeste des 481*» (March 1959), a petition about which he wrote an article for '*Les Temps Modernes*'.¹¹ In this article, Jean communicates his pro-Algerian Independence position and decries the reactionary hysteria provoked by the manifesto. As a result of such interventions, Jean, in his role as a French Cultural Attachée, was called back to France by the authorities. He may not have picked up a gun this time but there is little doubt that Jean, and hundreds of intellectuals like him who spoke out about events, were influential in the settlement of hostilities in Algeria.

Jean's situation in terms of the Algerian War of Independence was, of course, very different to that in which he found himself in World War Two. His own life was not, this time, in immediate danger. Thus, in my

view, his reaction to the war in Algeria reveals that the writer and committed intellectual is not concerned exclusively with personal safety or the interests of his or her community or nation. As Edward Said has pointed out when speaking of the 'real intellectual':

[...] there is a special duty to address the constituted and authorized powers of one's society, which are accountable to its citizenry, particularly when those powers are exercised in a manifestly disproportionate and immoral war, or in deliberate programs of discrimination, repression, and collective cruelty.¹²

In World War Two Jean fought against the Nazi regime and at the time of the Algerian War he supported Algerian Independence and so opposed French policy. Thus, his allegiances were dictated not by patriotism or fears for personal safety but by a sense of justice. In my mind, by so doing, Jean performs the true role of the intellectual.

The writer

As a novelist, Jean has addressed the subject of war in a number of texts. In his first novel, *Les Ruines de New York*,¹³ he describes the oppressive atmosphere in the States at the time of MacCarthy and the Cold War. In both *La Conférence*¹⁴ and *Les Grilles*,¹⁵ the war in Algeria forms the backdrop to the stories of individuals who come to see commitment as a necessity. *Le Village* is a prize-winning montage of texts describing war and oppression in Vietnam,¹⁶ while in one of his more recent novels, *L'Attachée* (1993), Jean describes the exploits of a Cultural Attachée caught up in the Gulf War. I should like to concentrate on this text alone as an example of Jean's fictional response to war because more than any other text it illustrates and stages his perspective on the intellectual's response to war.

The protagonist of *L'Attachée*, Martine Martin, is a student who is writing a thesis on pornographic and erotic literature. The text relates her experiences as a French Cultural Attachée at an unspecified location in the Levant at the time of the Gulf War. She responds to the war in her capacity as a woman writer, as a woman of action and as an intellectual

when she speaks out against war. In this way, she mirrors Jean's activities in times of war and serves to enforce the idea that, far from being an irrelevance during war, the intellectual is, above all, a body and, as such, an agent whose duty it is to oppose war, to encourage resistance, and to speak out.

Martine's academic appreciation and study of literature helps to situate her as an intellectual type. Thematically, the erotic nature of her studies serves to identify her as a committed intellectual, as will her own sexual activities. For her interest in erotic fiction, as well as her unconventional behaviour, embody her freedom, her disregard for oppressive convention and her capacity for criticism. In all of these aspects she represents the real, committed intellectual. As such she is punished by the French government and is effectively exiled by being sent to Baghdad. That she chooses to take up this posting is itself testimony to her commitment.

Martine arrives in Baghdad during a state of emergency to discover that she is a hostage, a 'human shield' (*«bouclier humain»*). She is emphatically a body, a physical presence, 'in situation'. Together with other Westerners, she finds herself being transported to a camp next to a strategic site in the south of the country. There is no disputing that she is here situated in history, her very presence changing the course of events. Whilst her co-detainees protest, cry and become agitated, Martine informs herself and remains alert. As a hostage in the Gulf War, she is never passive and she motivates her fellow hostages and instils hope and defiance in them.

On the bus to the camp, while most of those around her are losing their heads, Martine actively sets about boosting morale and organising her fellow human shields:

Hey, come on, she said. We've got to do something. We're not going to just give up and shut up like dummies, are we? We may be hostages but they haven't bound and gagged us just yet so let's do something, get ourselves into gear and, seeing as they're offering us something to drink, let's have a drink!¹⁷

The symbol of resistance, Martine communicates her spirit to her co-detainees. She distributes drinks, calms the children, and arranges to have

music played in the coach. Her intention is to speak to everyone, despite the language barrier. This action is indicative of what makes her a committed intellectual. When they arrive at the camp, Martine continues to resist in her way. Her adopted attitude of 'active solidarity'¹⁸ manifests itself in her attempts to organise, assist, and comfort. She plays with the children, makes their quarters more pleasant, and organises meetings and games.

During a bomb attack, Martine nearly gets shot: 'We've got to go out, said Martine, we've got to see what's going on.'¹⁹ In spite of the danger to her person, she chooses to take the risk of witnessing what is happening. That she narrowly escapes getting shot is a timely reminder that she is not a disembodied spirit, but a physical presence and, as such, a target. She chooses to face reality and to witness events for herself and this is more proof of her intellectual vocation. Moreover, in venturing out as a witness, she discovers situations where she can be of service; for example, as a result of a bomb blast a little girl is injured. Martine looks after the girl and arranges for her to see a Japanese doctor in their group. The same doctor, however, will later fail to come to the assistance of the girl's dying brother because he is too busy meditating. In this way, Martine contrasts with the cerebral intellectual, the pure thinker, who prefers and chooses to remain outside history by turning his back on it. Another example of Martine's resistance is her refusal to don a t-shirt which has a picture of the head of the Iraqi State on its front.²⁰ This is doubly indicative of her intellectual outlook. Firstly, she refuses on the grounds that she does not want to cover up her body. Secondly, because she does not want to wear and exhibit the face of an oppressor. Again, her body is the locus of her resistance and the symbol of her freedom.

A year or so after these events, at her public *viva voce*, Martine's tutor is worried that her unconventional character will prevent her from passing. After passing, she seizes the opportunity to reveal another political aspect of her intellectual status; Martine announces that her experiences have taught her that pornography is not what or where she had once thought it to be. Pornography, she says, is: '[...] to be found in these moronic, unenlightened confrontations [...] in the piles and piles of corpses, bodies mutilated, hacked up, and crushed. Real obscenity is to be found in this sinister display of death.'²¹ The novel ends with Martine leaving with one of her pupils who has come to see her talk. A colleague comments that

she is corrupting little boys now. What arguably represents her peaceful philosophy of love and caring, as opposed to belligerent authority and repression, is jokingly, but perhaps more ominously, seen as her wayward and marginal behaviour. Yet children are the future and her exit with the child is testimony to her hope and optimism as well as her awareness of one's responsibilities towards others.

Conclusion

There is, then, continuity between the man of action, the public-speaking intellectual, and the writer that is Raymond Jean. As a novelist, he assumes his intellectual role by writing against war for a wide audience. His fictional and autobiographical accounts of war constitute various interventions in the 'public sphere', in which the writer is consciously not outside history and in which the intellectual is a body, as well as a voice. For Jean, the writer/intellectual is seen as a man or woman of action who is a committed opponent of war where that opposition is emphatically not restricted to the realm of the intellectual, the conceptual, the abstract.

Jean's intellectual apprenticeship of commitment is admirably mirrored in the story of Martine. Initially, an apparently whimsical academic, she comes to understand the significance of her body. In the narrative, her body comes to represent what makes her a committed intellectual: independence of thought and action, resistance to oppression and convention. This body is thrust (willingly) into a war-zone in which Martine actively supports her co-detainees and resists her captors. As a result of her first-hand experiences, she later speaks out against war. Her activities are risky and they bring her punishment but that is the nature of her intellectual intervention. Martine's basic philosophy, which we might summarise as 'make love not war', is perhaps not worthy of serious consideration because it is facile, cliché, or kitsch. Perhaps we cannot take this fictional intervention by Jean as seriously as the combat of the man of action or the speeches and articles of the committed intellectual in the immediate political realm of «la Cité». The point, however, is that the three are compatible, consonant with one another.

Finally, in *L'Attachée*, there is mention of Salman Rushdie being sentenced to death. Nothing has changed in this regard, Jean is implying. To be an intellectual is still to take a risk and sometimes to risk one's life.

By choosing to be marginal and to oppose the unacceptable, Jean's intellectuals show us that the intellectual's role is as relevant today as it ever was because intolerance, oppression, and injustice are not yet things of the past.

NOTES

¹ Régis Debray, *Le Scribe* (Paris, Grasset et Fasquelle, 1980), p.312.

² François Ewald, 'Pérorer ou s'engager', *Magazine Littéraire* (December 1987), p.26.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Raymond Jean, *Belle Clarté, Chère Raison* (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1985), p.30.

⁵ I have used the expression "real intellectual" as it is understood by Edward W. Said who characterises the real intellectual in terms of "enlightenment, emancipation, and freedom". See Edward W. Said, *Representations of the intellectual* (London, Vintage Press, 1994), p.5.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Présentation', *Les Temps Modernes* (1945), 1, p.4.

⁷ For Jean's account of his wartime experiences see *Belle Clarté, Chère Raison* (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1985) and *Les Lunettes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1984).

⁸ Raymond Jean, *Belle Clarté, Chère Raison*, p.30.

⁹ Ibid., p.30.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.31.

¹¹ Raymond Jean, 'La Vérité sur «L'Affaire des 481», au Maroc', *Les Temps Modernes* (1959), 163, pp.533-552.

12. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, pp.72-3.
13. Raymond Jean, *Les Ruines de New York*, (Paris, Albin Michel, 1959).
14. Raymond Jean, *La Conférence*, (Paris, Albin Michel, 1961).
15. Raymond Jean, *Les Grilles*, (Paris, Albin Michel, 1963).
16. Raymond Jean, *Le Village*, (Paris, Albin Michel, 1966).
17. Raymond Jean, *L'Attachée*, (Arles, Actes Sud, 1993), p.133.
18. *Ibid.*, p.138.
19. *Ibid.*, p.142.
20. *Ibid.*, p.138.
21. *Ibid.*, p.186.