

Ernst Jünger and the Problem of Nihilism in the Age of Total War

As a singular witness and actor of the tumultuous twentieth century, Ernst Jünger remains a controversial and enigmatic figure known above all for his vivid autobiographical accounts of experience in the trenches of the First World War. This article will argue that throughout his entire oeuvre, from personal diaries to novels and essays, he never ceased to grapple with what he viewed as the central question of the age, namely that of the problem of nihilism and the means to overcome it. Inherited from Nietzsche's diagnosis of Western civilization in the late nineteenth century to which he added an acute observation of the particular role of technology within it, Jünger would employ this lens to make sense of the seemingly absurd industrial slaughter of modern war and herald the advent of a new voluntarist and bellicist order that was to imminently sweep away timorous and decadent bourgeois societies obsessed with security and self-preservation. Jünger would ultimately see his expectations dashed, including by the forms of rule that National Socialism would take, and eventually retreated into a reclusive quietism. Yet he never abandoned his central problematique of nihilism, developing it further in exchanges with Martin Heidegger after the Second World War. And for all the ways in which he may have erred, his life-long struggle with meaning in the age of technique and its implications for war and security continues to make Jünger a valuable interlocutor of the present.

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*Almost everything that most strongly moved us ... we owed to the lonely Nietzsche.*¹

Penned on the occasion of the *Festschrift* for Martin Heidegger's sixtieth birthday in 1950, Ernst Jünger's *Über die Linie* ("Over the Line") opens with a citation from the preface of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* in which the philosopher proclaims himself to be "the first perfect nihilist of Europe" who has "lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself."² Jünger proceeds to endorse Nietzsche's assertion that it is only through the full completion of nihilism – nihilism in its active form, in other words – that its own overcoming will be realized, laying the ground for a new flourishing of life.³ The essay's willfully optimistic prognosis is that, after two world wars and under the dark shadow of a possible global nuclear conflagration (the Soviet Union had tested its first atomic weapon the previous year), we are collectively on the cusp of that very liminal point of passage, that we are about to "cross the line" and experience the "new turning of being" that will follow from it.⁴ Beyond its passive expression as the exhaustion of a life no longer capable of believing or willing anything, nihilism thus holds within itself "the presence of a great destiny, an originary power, the influence of which none can escape."⁵

Five years later, Heidegger would respond on Jünger's own sixtieth birthday with a text of his own entitled *Über "die Linie"*, a play on the original title to indicate that he was writing *about* "the line" rather than *beyond* it.⁶ Heidegger argues therein against Jünger's broadly sanguine outlook, the latter conceding much later that his post-war optimism had been premature: "after the defeat, I was essentially saying: the head of the snake has already crossed the line of nihilism, it has exited from it, and the entire body will soon follow, and we will soon enter a much better spiritual climate... In fact, we are still far from it."⁷ The crux of Heidegger's critique is directed at the Nietzschean perspective that Jünger had made his own, indicting the will to power as a continuation and even culmination of the Western metaphysical tradition that had led to the impasse of nihilism and from which it could not therefore provide a way out. He does however credit Jünger with being the most faithful interpreter of Nietzsche, observing in an earlier text that "in order to see (to think) the will to power as reality of the real, Nietzsche has to be the *one who questions*. In the region that Nietzsche

¹ Ernst Jünger, *Das Wäldchen 125: Eine Chronik aus den Grabenkämpfen* (Berlin, 1926), p. 154, quoted in Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890-1990* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 199

² Ernst Jünger, *Über die Linie* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), p.5; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 3

³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 17-18

⁴ Jünger, *Über die Linie*, p. 32 (all translations mine)

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 10

⁶ The essay was later republished under the title of *Zur Seinfrage* ("The Question of Being"). Martin Heidegger, *The Question of Being* (London: Vision Press, 1959).

⁷ 1981 interview, cited in the preface to Ernst Jünger, *Passage de la Ligne*, trans. J. Hervier (Paris: Christian Bourgois Editeur, 1997), p. 19

opened up, Jünger is a *describer* who subordinates himself to the answer of that questioner.”⁸

Irrespective of what we make of Heidegger’s appraisal, it is indubitably the case that Jünger’s oeuvre, starting with the earliest war diaries, is infused with the problem of nihilism as set out by Nietzsche and the task of both determining and participating in the conditions of its overcoming. Throughout his long life of 102 years, he would accordingly never deviate from the essence of Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will to power as he understood it. He would however impress two important personal inflections to this Nietzscheanism, the first essentially attributable to the different historical times in which he lived and the second best understood by reference to philosophical temperament.

If Nietzsche was a man of the nineteenth century, Jünger was undoubtedly one of the twentieth and markedly attuned to the spirit of the age at that, including where it most gravely erred. Above all, he was attentive to the significance of developments that were still inchoate in Nietzsche’s own time and accordingly feature only peripherally in his writings. These were, in Heidegger’s words, “the phenomena related to technology, in that they constitute the fundamental manner in which reality organizes itself and affirms itself as will to power.”⁹ Indeed, for Jünger the questions of nihilism and technology were intimately bound, particularly as they related to the cataclysmic wars that shook Europe in his lifetime.

The second characteristic of Jünger’s Nietzscheanism is his overtly metaphysical conception of the will to power. Rather than simply the guide to living for an aristocratic few it is often read as, he would interpret it as an elemental force piercing through the veil of human reality all the more insistently as nihilism entered its final stages. As Ibáñez-Noé puts it, “if indeed this description of the spirit of the age is based on Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will to power, then this doctrine can no longer be understood as the private ideology of some individuals and must, instead, be conceived as the metaphysical law of the age.”¹⁰

Within this broader continuity and coherence in Jünger’s thinking, it is possible to distinguish three main stages in its development from his time in the trenches of the First World War until his reflections and exchanges with Martin Heidegger in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the first period in which he published his war diaries and wrote extensively on his *Fronterlebnis* (“front experience”), he would assert that the war had been the expression of an elemental will to power that nineteenth century bourgeois society had futilely repressed. If the mechanization of war had begotten an industrial slaughterhouse that threatened to render senseless the grounds for which it had been set in motion, technology remained an instrument in the

⁸ Martin Heidegger, “On Ernst Jünger (2)” (1939-40) in Gunter Figal (ed.), *The Heidegger Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 206 (original emphasis). In the same text, Heidegger also compared Jünger to “a miner working with furious industry in a mine blown open by Nietzsche” (p. 206) which appears to echo Nietzsche’s famous claim in *Ecce Homo* to be “dynamite.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 144

⁹ Cited in the preface to Ernst Jünger & Martin Heidegger, *Correspondance 1949-1975*, trans. Julien Hervier (Paris: Christian Bourgeois Editeur, 2008), pp. 10-11

¹⁰ Javier A. Ibáñez-Noé, “Heidegger, Nietzsche, Jünger, and the Interpretation of the Contemporary Age” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 33 (Spring 1995), p. 65

hands of men that came out of the conflict ennobled to the extent that they were able to affirm the experience in all its naked brutality and suffering. From the second half of the 1920s onwards, Jünger endeavored to derive from his earlier writings a vision of the impending future, one in which the timorous bourgeois liberal societies of the nineteenth century would be swept away by a new technological age of total societal mobilization and armed conflict. Seemingly anticipating the totalitarian regimes that were germinating at the time, he imagined a reconciliation of technique with a new humanity under the tutelary figure of the Worker that would realize the completion of nihilism and founding of new values which Nietzsche had prophesized. Finally, the experience of National Socialism that he had always refused to endorse and an even more cataclysmic world war saw Jünger abandon his bellicism but still strive to see in the latest catastrophe the augury of nihilism's curtain call. While he would eventually revise the timing of his prediction, he would continue to express a general optimism in its advent, retreating for the remainder of his life into a quietist position far from the hustle and bustle of politics he previously had been so close to.

Although the present article is primarily concerned with charting this development in Jünger's thinking in the light of his committed Nietzscheanism, its interest does not reside merely in a contribution to intellectual history. Predominantly known in the English-speaking world for his personal account of the Great War, Jünger's wider writings also merit engagement from the standpoint of our present circumstances. If Jünger remains relevant to us, it is evidently not for his objectionable political views and demonstrably false predictions, although the reasoning behind his errors remains instructive in itself. Rather it is for those aspects of his appreciation of the characteristics of his time that continue to be salient for our own age, even where these have taken historical trajectories counter to his original expectations. Appropriately contextualized, Jünger's writings retain pertinence for an insight into contemporary societies that seemingly extend ever further and deeper the ambit of technicized processes of production and rationalization, all the while espousing individual security and comfort as their highest values and the sole sources of legitimation for the unleashing of violence rendered to its purest instrumental expression. While we may justifiably demur from his political and existential recommendations, recoil at his aestheticization of war, and balk at his metaphysical, if not mystical, inclinations, to the extent that we still find the question of nihilism a consequential one we find in Jünger a valuable interlocutor. The task of reconstructing Jünger's thought taking precedence, the explicit treatment of these considerations can only be limited here and a return to them will have to await the concluding discussion, until when it will be left to the individual reader to judge of the contemporary import of his writings. Before we turn to Jünger however, an essential preliminary is to be found in a succinct examination of Nietzsche's own scarce yet instructive thoughts on technology, as they provide an indispensable key to the figure that Heidegger considered "the only genuine continuer of Nietzsche."¹¹

¹¹ Quoted in David Roberts, "Technology and Modernity: Spengler, Jünger, Heidegger, Cassirer" *Thesis Eleven* 111 (August 2012), p. 22

The Machine as Teacher: Nietzsche on Technology

*Premises of the machine age - The press, the machine, the railway, the telegraph are premises whose thousand-year conclusion no one has yet dared to draw.*¹²

While Jünger's reading of Nietzsche is certainly particular and not in any sense exhaustive or definitive, it is nonetheless a broadly coherent one that is grounded in the original texts he was undoubtedly well versed in. His is not one of the opportunistic bastardized interpretations that flourished in the half-century after Nietzsche's death, although he was heavily influenced by the problematic posthumous work *The Will to Power*. If the present article will necessarily assume from the reader some familiarity with Nietzsche's writings, it is nonetheless profitable to briefly examine those that concern technology and its relation to nihilism since this theme comes to occupy a central place in Jünger's work. Nietzsche's thoughts on technology may well be few and far between but those that we can identify are revealing and provide a precious insight into the underpinnings of Jünger's own outlook.

Nietzsche's appreciation of technology, where it can be found, is generally negative. The "machine" "abases" the worker through "an anonymous and impersonal slavery"¹³, it "releases a vast quantity of energy in general that would otherwise lie dormant [but] provides no instigation to enhancement, to improvement, to becoming an artist"¹⁴, and the extent to which society is modeled upon it is the sign of "a weak age."¹⁵ Employing an imagery that Jünger repeatedly draws upon, Nietzsche evokes the risk of men being reduced to mere fuel for their increasingly self-serving machines:

Mankind mercilessly employs every individual as material for heating its great machines: but what then is the purpose of the machines if all individuals (that is to say mankind) are of no other use than as material for maintaining them? Machines that are an end in themselves - is that the *umana commedia*?¹⁶

In these views, Nietzsche appears to share much in common with the wider current of post-romantic cultural pessimism prevalent in his time and its general concern over the noxious effects of modern industrial life. Yet in a more ambiguous passage that must have caught Jünger's eye, the machine is also designated as a teacher that is educating us in the ways of modern politics and warfare, if still to be reproached for its instrumentalization of life:

The machine as teacher - The machine of itself teaches the mutual cooperation of hordes of men in operations where each man has to do only one thing: it provides the model for the party apparatus and the conduct of warfare. On the other hand, it does not teach individual autocracy: it makes of many one machine and of every individual an

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 378

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 383

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 366-7

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, p. 212

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 189

instrument to one end. Its most generalized effect is to teach the utility of centralization.¹⁷

Nietzsche's scattered thoughts on technology need to be related to his broader and more systematic critique of utilitarian thinking with which they evidently dovetail. Indeed, within his account of life as will to power – “wherever I found the living, there I found the will to power”¹⁸ – active forces of creation and affirmation that usher in the new are counter-posed to reactive forces of self-preservation and negation that only ratify the existing. The machine seems to fall squarely on the side of the latter since these forces, in Gilles Deleuze's words, “exercise [their force] by securing mechanical means and final ends, by fulfilling the conditions of life and the functions and tasks of conservation, adaptation and utility.”¹⁹

It would therefore seem that the rampant condition of nihilism as the devaluation of all values and inability to posit any goals towards which life should tend that Nietzsche saw in the late nineteenth century denotes the absolute triumph of reactive forces. And yet Nietzsche insisted upon a drawing a crucial distinction between passive and active forms of nihilism, the latter expressing not an exhaustion of the “spirit's power” but rather that its strength is such that it has outgrown the values and goals that originally supported it and which now must be destroyed so as to clear the way for new ones. Nihilism is thereby diagnosed as a “pathological intermediate state”, an ambiguous liminal condition that brings with it the possibility of its own overcoming and the foundation of a new order of values.²⁰

Perhaps the most interesting discussion in this regard is found in a fragment from *The Will to Power* in which Nietzsche appears to see the total reduction of humanity to mere mechanism as the pre-condition for the production of new species of being that can forge new values and meaning. It is thus at the very highest point of the instrumentalization of man and devaluation of all values that the reversal of that movement can be initiated, that one is able to break through to the other side of nihilism:

To show that an ever more economical use of men and mankind, a ‘machinery’ of interests and actions ever more firmly intertwined, *necessarily implies a counter-movement* ...

Once we have that imminent, inevitable total economic administration of the earth, mankind will *be able* to find its best meaning as a piece of machinery in the administration's service: as a tremendous clockwork of ever smaller, ever more finely ‘adapted’ cogs; as an ever-increasing superfluity of all the dominating and commanding elements; as a whole of tremendous force, whose individual factors represent *minimal forces, minimal values*. Against this miniaturization and adaptation of men to more specialized usefulness, a reverse movement is required – the generation of the *synthesizing, the summing, the justifying* man whose existence depends on that

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 366. Elsewhere, Nietzsche celebrates the autonomous individual that is not subjected to any such instrumentalization: “What a sensation of freedom it is to feel, as we freed spirits feel, that we are not harnessed up to a system of ‘ends’!” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 99

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 89

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p.40

“Slave morality is essentially a morality of utility.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 156

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, pp. 146-147

mechanization of mankind, as a substructure upon which he can invent for himself *his higher way of being* ...

Just as much, he needs the *antagonism* of the masses, of the ‘leveled-out’, the feeling of distance in relation to them; he stands upon them, lives off them. This higher form of *aristocratism* is that of the future. – In moral terms, this total machinery, the solidarity of all the cogs, represents a maximum point in the *exploitation of man*: but it presupposes a kind of men for whose sake the exploitation has *meaning*.²¹

For Marcel Gauchet, Nietzsche is envisaging here the establishment of “domination without any utilitarian role, thereby rendered to its essential function” and transcending the nihilistic crisis of meaning.²² This all points to the profound ambivalence characterizing nihilism, and by extension the machine, in Nietzsche’s thought. While on the one hand it degrades life, deprives it of any higher meaning and reduces it to a function of utility, on the other hand its fullest realization is the ground from which a new vitality can spring. This conception is sustained throughout Jünger’s own work, serving as the consistent lens through which he strove to make sense of the traumatic experience of the First World War and the social upheaval that followed.

Lieutenant Jünger’s *Fronterlebnis*

*The pace of the charge disperses to the wind all the values of the world like so many autumn leaves.*²³

Nietzsche may have prophesized “wars such as the earth has never seen” but he could scarcely have imagined the full extent of the destructive forces that were to be unleashed in the First World War.²⁴ Ernst Jünger, however, is one individual who plunged headlong into the cauldron of war and still emerged determined, in the face of the most terrible slaughter, to be faithful to Nietzsche’s exhortation to affirm life. He drew from it insights that he would develop throughout the following decades regarding the central role of technology to modern society and the full might of the revolutionary effects it was still to impress on the shattered European order.

After the end of the war, Jünger would produce a string of publications based upon his war diaries, narrating and reflecting upon his experience of the conflict in which he served as a highly decorated shock troop commander on the Western front. *War as Inner Experience* (1922), *Copse 125* (1925), and *Fire and Blood* (1925) and above all *Storm of Steel* (1920) would bring to their author fame and recognition throughout Weimar Germany as a prominent literary voice of the “front generation.” Combining a characteristic nonchalance with a genuine talent for evocative prose, Jünger penned accounts that did not shy away from the conflict’s savagery and dreadful human toll

²¹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p. 463, translation from Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, p. 177 (original emphases)

²² Gauchet, *L’Avènement de la Démocratie II: La Crise du Libéralisme 1880-1914* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2007), p. 42

²³ Ernst Jünger, *La Guerre Comme Expérience Intérieure*, trans. François Poncet (Paris: Christian Bourgeois Editeur, 1997), p. 86

²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, p. 144

but simultaneously sought to transcend them in presenting the war as an intense existential and aesthetic experience. While the problem of nihilism does not feature in explicit terms in any of these writings, the influence of Nietzsche is already evident amidst the celebration of the human warring spirit on the infernal stage of the mechanized battlefield.

Confronted with the industrial slaughter unleashed by the First World War, Jünger perceived as acutely as any of its participants that traditional chivalric and heroic conceptions of the warrior could not be sustained in the muddy fields of Northern France. The military machines pitted against each other by the opposing sides mercilessly consumed the human *matériel* that was fed to them, reducing men to “a kind of charcoal, which is hurled under the glowing cauldron of war so as to keep the work going.”²⁵ With direct reference to *Storm of Steel*, Hannah Arendt would write that the “worshippers of war were the first to concede that war in the era of machines could not possibly breed virtues like chivalry, courage, honor, and manliness, that it imposed on men nothing but the experience of bare destruction together with the humiliation of being only small cogs in the majestic wheel of slaughter.”²⁶ While Jünger himself undoubtedly displayed great bravery for which he would receive the *Pour le Mérite*, the highest German military honor available, his war diaries are replete with reflections on the innumerable contingencies that could mean the difference between life and death with scant regard to courage or skill. Face-to-face confrontations with the enemy, the traditional stage for feats of martial valor, were also rare in a war dominated by long-range weaponry.²⁷

The duration and intensity of the conflict, the increasing mobilization of all the resources of the societies involved, and the general subjugation of all social life to its pursuit meant that the war appeared to acquire an autonomous and self-perpetuating life of its own, over and above the goals and values it purported to serve. In those circumstances, the “death of God” took on very concrete manifestations – Jünger narrates how church towers were “unceremoniously” blown up by German engineers to hinder the orientation of enemy artillery, the landmarks of the sacred casually obliterated to serve the immediate instrumental needs of the war machine.²⁸

And yet while Jünger readily acknowledged that the industrialization and mechanization of warfare threatened to dwarf man and render combat meaningless, he sought in his immediate post-war writings nonetheless to continue asserting the warrior’s centrality and enduring ability to imbue conflict with purpose:

The battle of the machines is so colossal that man almost completely disappears before it. Often already, caught in the force fields of the modern battlefield, it seemed to me strange and scarcely believable that I was witnessing world-historical events. Combat took on the form of a gigantic, lifeless mechanism and swept an icy, impersonal wave across the ground. It was like the cratered landscape of a dead star, lifeless and radiating heat. And yet: behind all this is man. Only he gives the machines their direction and meaning. It is he that spits from their mouths bullets, explosives and poison. He that elevates himself in them like birds of prey above the enemy. He that sits in their stomach

²⁵ Jünger, *La Guerre Comme Expérience Intérieure*, p. 128

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 329

²⁷ Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hofman (London : Penguin Books, 2004), p. 149

²⁸ Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, p. 133

as they stalk the battlefield spewing fire. It is he, the most dangerous, bloodthirsty, and purposeful being that the Earth has to carry.²⁹

If technology had undeniably transformed the practice of war, for Jünger the conflict had in fact merely revealed elemental forces and ancestral bellicose drives that modern civilization and its religion of progress had falsely held to be expurgated. Jünger did not thereby attempt to justify the massacre by reference to any specific values or national interests. Indeed, his war accounts eschew any discussion of the rationales for the conflict, even expressing a certain detachment when speaking of “the flags and symbols for which most, and for a long time, held but an incredulous smile” upon the entry of the “community of Europe” into the First World War.³⁰

War and sacrifice were to be their own justification, regardless of the merits of the values in the name of which they were being pursued. Repudiating any hatred of the enemy combatant, he saw in the fraternity of warriors born of the war the future of Europe and reserved his harshest words for those of his compatriots who failed to live up to the exalted demands of the time.³¹ The worth of the combatants was not to be found in those ideas in the name of which they were fighting – indeed these were secondary if not suspect – but in the willingness to sacrifice oneself for them:

Perhaps ... we are sacrificing ourselves for something inessential. But no one can rob us of our value. Essential is not what we are fighting for, but how we fight. Onward toward the goal, until we triumph or are left behind. The warriors' spirit, the exposure of oneself to risk, even for the tiniest idea, weighs more heavily in the scale than all the brooding about good and evil.³²

Yes, the soldier, in his relation to death, in the sacrifice of his being for an idea, knows little of the philosophers and their values. But in him, in his actions, life finds a more poignant and profound expression than it can in any book. And again, out of all the absurdity and insanity of external events, a shining truth prevails: death for a conviction is the highest accomplishment. It is proclamation, deed, fulfillment, faith, love, hope and goal; it is, in this imperfect world, a perfect thing, absolute perfection. In this the cause is nothing and the conviction everything. One can die stubbornly for an indubitable error: that is the greatest thing there is.³³

Jünger appears to be echoing here Nietzsche's famous affirmation that it is not “the good cause that hallows even war” but “the good war that hallows any cause” made in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*³⁴, a book that was widely distributed to German soldiers during the war.³⁵ Or still further the passage from *The Will To Power* that speaks of “the pessimism of active energy: the question ‘for what?’ after a terrible struggle, even victory” and the importance of having “a goal for which one does not hesitate to

²⁹ Jünger, *La Guerre Comme Expérience Intérieure*, p. 162

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34

³¹ Jünger expresses particular hurt at the hatred directed by foreigners at the German soldier: “That one kills men, that is nothing, they must one day die, but one cannot deny them ... the most terrible thing for us is not that they want to kill us, it is that they are constantly pouring their hatred upon us, that they cannot call us anything else than Boches, Huns, or barbarians.” *Ibid.*, p. 107

³² *Ibid.*, p. 123

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 160

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On War and Warriors”, p. 33

³⁵ Aschheim reports that 150,000 copies of an especially durable edition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* were handed out to troops. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, p. 135

offer human sacrifices, to risk every danger, to take upon oneself what is bad and worst: the *great passion*.”³⁶

Above all, Jünger was determined to stay true to Nietzsche’s injunction to affirm life and the manifestations of the will to power, however seemingly insufferable they might be. Over and above courage and martial skill, it was the ability to endure and transcend the horror of the battlefield that was to be the mark of the warrior. The language employed here is unmistakably Nietzschean:

Whom in this war experienced only negation, only suffering proper, and not affirmation, the superior movement, lived it as a slave. He will have had no inner experience of it, only an external one. Here it passes by before us, life itself, the great tension, the will to struggle and power in the forms of our time, in our own form, in the most defiant and resolute attitude imaginable. Against this powerful and incessant flow towards combat, all works are void, all concepts are hollow, one experiences the expression of the elemental, the colossal energy that always was and will be, even when humans and their wars have long disappeared.³⁷

Jünger would repeatedly return to the idea that the war had made manifest “the elemental”, the fundamental vital force of becoming that he interpreted through the lens of a metaphysical reading of the will to power. In the times ahead, the task facing humanity would be to live up to this transcendental experience of the war or risk being crushed by the weight of its apparent nihilism.

In this regard, nothing appeared more urgent to Jünger than to address the question of technology, given the central role it had occupied in the war and the senselessness it had seemed to bring to it. This particular problematique of the relation of humanity to its machines, forged in the crucible of the Great War, would be carried through his entire oeuvre, eliciting a range of the responses as he continued to wrestle with it. In an interview with *Der Spiegel* in 1982, Jünger thus underlined that “in the First World War I still believed that man was stronger than the material. But in the meantime it has become clear that the technicians have won and destroyed the old orders ... The soldier is no longer the soldier of the old estate society and has nothing to do with heroism, since Mars no longer stands behind the warrior.”³⁸ Jünger does not tell us exactly when he made this realization but the war writings certainly exhibit an oscillation between these two positions. On occasion he professed to have witnessed the consecration of technology and the subjugation of its creator: “the domination of the machine over man, of the servant over the master, becomes evident ... here is revealed the style of a materialist generation and technique celebrates its bloody triumph.”³⁹ Elsewhere, as we have seen, he strove to affirm the continued primacy of man as the guiding will that gave machines their purpose and meaning.

Ultimately he strove for a resolution of this tension, writing of his generation that it was the first “to reconcile itself with the machine and to see in it not only the useful but the beautiful as well.”⁴⁰ “Yes, the machine is beautiful”, he continues:

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p. 19 (original emphasis)

³⁷ Jünger, *La Guerre Comme Expérience Intérieure*, p. 160

³⁸ Elliot Y. Neaman, *A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature After Nazism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 159

³⁹ Ernst Jünger, *Feu et Sang*, trans. Julien Hervier (Paris: Christian Bourgeois Editeur, 1998), p. 24

⁴⁰ quoted in Jeffrey Herf, “Reactionary Modernism: Some Ideological Origins of the Primacy of Politics in the Third Reich” *Theory and Society* 10 (November 1981), p. 815

its beauty is self-evident to anyone who loves life in all its fullness and power. Nietzsche might well have been writing of the machine (though it did not yet have a place in his Renaissance landscape) when he argued that life was more than Darwin's wretched struggle for existence, but a will to higher and deeper goals. The machine must be made more than a means of production to satisfy our pitiful basic needs; it should provide us with a higher and deeper satisfaction.⁴¹

The answer thus lay for Jünger in a fusion of man and machine into a totality through the uninhibited mobilization of all energies, above all that of will. "We have to transfer what lies inside us onto the machine. That includes the distance and ice-cold mind that transforms the moving lightning-stroke of blood into a conscious and logical performance. What would these iron weapons that were directed against the universe be if our nerves had not been intertwined with them and if our blood didn't flow around every axle."⁴² Jünger would soon see in such a symbiosis the promise of a new world that could live up to the elemental forces unearthed by the war. However the emblematic figure that would ultimately appear to him as best suited to preside over such a world would not be the warrior, perhaps still too tributary to its aristocratic origins in the age of the masses, but rather the industrial worker.

The *Herrschaftsgebilde* of the Worker in the Age of Total Mobilization

*There is no way out, neither sideways nor backwards; it is instead necessary to intensify the force and speed of the processes in which we are caught up. It is good, then, to sense that hidden beneath the dynamic excesses of the time is an immobile center.*⁴³

It is in the writings of the early 1930s, chiefly *The Worker* (1932) but also *Total Mobilization* (1930) and *On Pain* (1934), that we find Jünger's most systematic attempt to articulate the synthesis that could reconcile humanity with technology and give sense to the social upheaval of his times as the birth pangs of a world beyond nihilism. Heidegger held *The Worker* in particular esteem, as he would repeatedly indicate to Jünger in their post-war exchanges, and dedicated to it an entire semester of teaching in 1939-40 at the University of Freiburg. In his eyes, it provided "a description of European nihilism in the phase which succeeded the First World War" and constituted a work which itself "belongs to the phase of active nihilism."⁴⁴ By Heidegger's own admission, Jünger's writings were a major source of influence on his later reflections on technology although he would, for his part, explicitly distance himself from Nietzschean conceptions of the will to power and adopt a more pessimistic stance.

Jünger would long hesitate over authorizing the post-war republication of *The Worker* (*Der Arbeiter*). It was only in 1964 and with the express encouragement of Heidegger that it was made once more available in print as part of the first edition of Jünger's

⁴¹ quoted in Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, p.159

⁴² quoted in Herf, "Reactionary Modernism", p. 816

⁴³ Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt in Sämtliche Werke, Band 8* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), p. 101

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, p. 40

completed works and appeared free of any of the revisions that he usually saw fit to make to re-editions of his writings. The reasons for Jünger's reluctance and ultimately unrealized concerns that it would reignite past controversies around him are self-evident when the content and original timing of the book are considered. The polemics directed against the bourgeois liberal order, the unrestrained embrace of war, and the heralding of total societal mobilization under the aegis of an all-encompassing state that are found in *The Worker* obviously take on a particularly portentous signification, appearing as they do just as National Socialism acceded to power. Yet if Jünger can be legitimately tasked with contributing to the intellectual climate in which fascist ideology took shape,⁴⁵ he was never seduced by Nazism itself.

Jünger certainly was a major figure in the conservative revolutionary movement of the 1920s and contributed extensively to the virulently nationalist and anti-Weimar publications of that feverish period. There is also no doubt that he generally welcomed the rise of the National Socialists at that time, particularly for their fierce opposition to the terms of the Versailles Treaty. And yet he persistently kept his distance from the Nazi party, systematically turning down numerous attempts to court him that included an invitation to serve as party deputy in the Reichstag in 1927. After 1933, he would refuse any of the honors offered to him, retreating from Berlin to the German provinces and ceasing all political writing, all the while his war memoirs continued to enjoy a wide readership due in part to their active promotion by the new regime. In 1939, Jünger would publish an allegorical tale entitled *On the Marble Cliffs* that was widely perceived to be a veiled critique of Hitler and the Nazi state on the eve of the Second World War.⁴⁶ Whether it was due to some uncanny prescience of the catastrophe that would follow or more probably to an aristocratic detachment and distaste for the base vulgarities of Nazism, Jünger never did compromise himself in the manner of either Martin Heidegger or his friend Carl Schmitt. He was nonetheless viewed as highly suspect in the aftermath of the Second World War for his past nationalist writings and, having refused to submit to denazification, was banned from publishing in Germany until 1949. While somewhat rehabilitated in the following years, he remained a divisive figure in his homeland until the end of his long life with controversy periodically erupting as it most notably did when he was awarded the Goethe Prize in 1982.

Leaving aside the charged question of the degree of responsibility to be personally ascribed to Jünger for the German political turn of the 1930s that was to prove so heavy with consequences, it is clearly in the writings he produced at this time that the determining role within his thought of the Nietzschean problem of nihilism and its overcoming comes most clearly in focus. Jünger believed the era of social galvanization inaugurated by the Great War was rapidly coming to a head, bringing us ever closer in contact with the elemental. Did the visible preparation of states for war, the increasing mobilization of societies and the apparent willingness of the individual

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin delivered in 1930 a stinging critique of *War and Warrior*, a collection of essays edited by Jünger, in a review entitled 'Theories of German Fascism.' Ernst Jünger (ed.), *Krieg und Krieger* (Berlin: Junker & Dünhaupt, 1930); Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays War and Warrior, Edited by Ernst Jünger" *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979), pp. 120-128

⁴⁶ Ernst Jünger, *Auf den Marmorclippen* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1939)

to embrace sacrifice not suggest that “we are witnessing the opening act of the spectacle to come, in which life appears as the will to power, and nothing else?”⁴⁷

Published in 1930, the short piece entitled *Total Mobilization* laid the ground for the lengthier considerations found in *The Worker*, bridging Jünger’s war writings with the broader societal account he developed there. We find therein a formulation of the fundamental principle of the age manifest in the Great War and the period of upheaval that followed it, namely the increasing mobilization of all available energies and the concomitant sundering of society from its traditional moorings. Thus “the process by which the growing conversion of life into energy, the increasingly fleeting content of all binding ties in deference to mobility, gives an ever-more radical character to the act of mobilization.”⁴⁸ This escalation towards total mobilization ultimately “expresses the secret and inexorable claim to which our life in the age of masses and machines subjects us ... each individual life becomes, ever more unambiguously, the life of a worker ... following the wars of knights, kings, and citizens, we now have wars of workers.”⁴⁹ In sum:

the image of war as armed combat merges into the more extended image of a gigantic work process. In addition to the armies that meet on the battlefields, originate the modern armies of commerce and transport, foodstuffs, the manufacture of armaments – the army of work in general. In the final phase, which was already hinted at toward the end of the last war, there is no longer any movement whatsoever – be it that of the homemaker at her sewing machine – without at least indirect use for the battlefield. In this unlimited marshaling of potential energies, which transforms the warring industrial countries into volcanic forges, we perhaps find the most striking sign of the dawn of the age of work.⁵⁰

So if it was through the ordeal of the Great War that the truth of the age had been revealed, the new world that was being ushered in was not to be the dominion of the soldier but that of the worker. It is to the ascendancy of this figure and its world-historical significance that Jünger would turn his full attention in *The Worker* since, in the twentieth century, “one possesses power insofar as one represents the figure [*Gestalt*] of the Worker and thereby gains access to the corresponding dimension of totality.”⁵¹

It is important to grasp what Jünger understood with the notion of *Gestalt* as it occupies a central place in the work’s conceptual apparatus. Vincent Blok shows how *Gestalt* is not to be understood here in the Platonic terms of an idea occupying a transcendental realm that is imperfectly instantiated in the real world of becoming but rather in the Nietzschean conception of *Gestalt* as “the *product* of the will to power of life”, a staging post in the process of expansion and preservation of power. Blok also refers in passing to Jünger’s understanding of *Gestalt* as “a *Herrschaftsgebilde* amidst the world of becoming.”⁵² Nietzsche had indeed argued for discarding the nascent

⁴⁷ Ernst Jünger, *On Pain*, trans. David C. Dust (New York: Telos, 2008), p. 45

⁴⁸ Ernst Jünger, “Total Mobilisation”, trans. Joel Golb & Richard Wolin in Richard Wolin (ed.), *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 126

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 128

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.126 (translation slightly modified, substituting ‘work’ for ‘labour’ to accord with the more appropriate translation of the word *Arbeit* that has been employed for the other writings of the period)

⁵¹ Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, p. 150

⁵² Vincent Blok, “An Indication of Being – Reflections on Heidegger’s Engagement with Ernst Jünger” *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology* 42 (May 2011), pp. 198-199. Blok’s argument is in fact more complex than presented here in that he supports and expands on Heidegger’s assertion that

sociological study of human collectivities in favor of an account of *Herrschaftsgebilde*, formations of ‘domination’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘rule’ or ‘mastery’ according to different translations.⁵³ With explicit reference to these formations, Nietzsche spoke of “ruling centers”, “complex structures that have relatively lasting life within becoming” and for which “the viewpoint of ‘value’ is the viewpoint of [their] conditions of preservation and enhancement.”⁵⁴ It is therefore tempting to see no coincidence in the chosen subtitle of *Der Arbeiter* as “*Herrschaft und Gestalt*” with the latter term a synonym of *Gebilde* in the sense of ‘shape’ or ‘form.’ Jünger effectively understood his work as providing an account of the contemporaneous emergence of a new *Herrschaftsgebilde* whose new values still remained inchoate: “we find ourselves in a last and indeed quite remarkable phase of nihilism, characterized by the broad expansion of new social orders with corresponding values yet to be seen.”⁵⁵

The worker referred to by Jünger is demonstrably not the proletarian figure of socialist discourse which, presumably not without a sense of irony, he dismisses as a mere emanation of bourgeois conceptions.⁵⁶ The *Gestalt* of the worker is rather that which embodies the wider mobilization of energies which can be observed in both capitalist and socialist societies (in regard of which Soviet economic planning constitutes a preeminent manifestation). Economistic analyses are consequently unable to get to the heart of the upheavals of the modern world: “the fulcrum of uprising is neither economic freedom nor economic power but power in general.”⁵⁷ Jünger is also at pains to distance himself from the racialist theories prevalent at the time, insisting that “within the landscape of work race has nothing to do with biological conceptions of race” and that “the *Gestalt* of the Worker mobilizes the entire human stock [*Bestand*] without discrimination.”⁵⁸

The *Gestalt* of the Worker is however everywhere counterposed to the figure of the bourgeois as an enfeebled nihilistic existence concerned merely with creature comforts and petty self-interest. Thus “the bourgeois person is perhaps best characterized as one who places security among the highest of values and conducts his life accordingly.”⁵⁹ This particular obsession with security is for Jünger nothing else than the instantiation of a transhistorical metaphysical drive for self-preservation against the forces of creative change: “the bourgeois’s efforts to hermetically seal his living space against the intrusion of the elemental is the most successful expression of an immemorial striving for security, the trace of which can be followed everywhere, in natural history and the history of the spirit as in any individual life.”⁶⁰

the reversal of Platonism enacted by Nietzsche and pursued by Jünger does not in fact do away with Platonism but instead reinscribes it, all the more clearly in the latter’s work.

⁵³ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p. 255

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, p. 212. Valuation is therefore an interruption in the flow of becoming: “becoming is of equivalent value every moment; the sum of its values always remain the same; in other words, it has no value at all, for anything which to measure it, and in relation to which the word ‘value’ would have meaning is lacking.” (*Will to Power*, p. 378)

⁵⁵ Jünger, *On Pain*, p. 46

⁵⁶ Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, p. 141

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75. Jünger even suggests that, if some peoples may turn out to be better conduits for the *Gestalt* of the Worker, surprises may still await Westerners in the future, anticipating the possibility of future reversals in the distribution of global power.

⁵⁹ Ernst Jünger, “On Danger” *New German Critique* 59 (Spring-Summer 1993), p. 27

⁶⁰ Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, p. 23

Jünger is particularly critical of what he sees as the efforts of liberal societies to ward away pain and discomfort: “progress combines the economic conquest of the globe, which magnetically draws in the most distant lands, with ridding the world of all prejudices that cause pain.”⁶¹ All of which appears to echo Nietzsche’s description of passive nihilism as a condition in which “everything which revives, heals, soothes, benumbs comes to the fore in a variety of disguises: religious, or moral or political or aesthetic, etc.”⁶², his association of “sensitivity to pain” with the decadence of Western civilization⁶³, or still Zarathustra’s foretelling of the advent of the “Last Man” who “invented happiness” and chose comfort and security over the possibility of overcoming oneself.⁶⁴ In contrast to the “heroic and cultic world” that confronts and masters pain through an objectification of the body in the service of a higher calling, modern sensitivity for Jünger “corresponds to a world in which the body is itself the highest value”, relating “to pain as the power to be avoided at all cost, because here pain confronts the body not as an outpost but as the main force and essential core of life.”⁶⁵

This timorousness makes the bourgeois unable to foster nobler forms of life and as such only capable of utilitarian and defensive, but ultimately self-defeating, uses of war for the purpose of safeguarding this impoverished existence:

[The bourgeois] also rejects the highest justification for war, the offensive, because he senses that he does not measure up to it, and where, be it in the most evident self-interest, he calls on the soldier for his assistance or disguises himself as a soldier, he will never renounce the invocation of self-defense, or indeed if possible of the defense of humanity. The bourgeois knows only defensive war, that is to say he doesn’t know war at all, if only because he is by essence excluded from all warring elements. He is unable, however, to prevent their eruption in the midst of his order, as all the evaluation of values he could oppose to them are of an inferior rank.⁶⁶

Jünger sees here the confirmation of Zarathustra’s teachings: “The prophecy of the Last Man has found rapid fulfillment. It is accurate – except for the assertion that the Last Man lives longest. His age already lies behind us.”⁶⁷ Indeed, one can already glimpse the world beyond nihilism on the horizon since “the age of security has been superseded with surprising speed by another, in which the values of technology prevail.”⁶⁸

The bourgeois was the figure that oversaw the rise in the nineteenth century of the forms of domination that correspond to his rule, the terminal decline of the previous aristocratic and dynastic order measured by the extent to which the latter’s remaining bastions kowtowed to bourgeois ideas of constitutionalism, contractualism, and individual liberty. The trial of arms was then as now the final arbitrator since the superior sources of military power unlocked by conscription had as pre-requisite the

⁶¹ Jünger, *On Pain*, p. 11

⁶² Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p. 18 [translation taken from *Late Notebooks*, pp. 146-147]

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 22

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* I 5, pp. 9-10

⁶⁵ Jünger, *On Pain*, p. 17

⁶⁶ Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, p. 9

⁶⁷ Jünger, *On Pain*, p. 13

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46

realization of bourgeois liberty and emancipation from absolutist rule.⁶⁹ But at present technology and its concomitant modes of social mobilization were inexorably ushering in the age of the Worker by imposing their own conceptions and necessities on the bourgeois order of life:

Wherever man comes into the orbit of technique, he is confronted with an unavoidable either-or. It is for him to either accept its peculiar means and to speak its language or to perish. But if one accepts them – and this is very important – one makes oneself not only the subject of technical processes, but also simultaneously their object.⁷⁰

In other words, one can only master technique insofar as one becomes attuned to its demands, reinventing humanity accordingly. Jünger concludes from this that as bourgeois societies submit themselves to the imperatives of technological development, they are being increasingly brought willy-nilly into the ambit of the Worker's *Gestalt*:

In technology we recognize the most effective and incontestable means of total revolution. We know that the sphere of destruction possesses a secret center from which the seemingly chaotic process of the subjugation of the old forces accomplishes itself. This act is manifest in that the subjugated, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, accept the new language. We observe that a new humanity is moving to this crucial center stage. The phase of destruction will be replaced by a real and visible order, if that race which understands the new language as elementary language, and not in the sense of mere intellect, progress, utility and convenience, achieves dominion [*Herrschaft*]. This will come to be to the extent to which the face of the Worker reveals its heroic features.⁷¹

We are reminded here of Nietzsche's account of the will to power as the encroachment, domination and appropriation of the existing by new forces that only belatedly reveal their true character. "The will to power can only express itself against resistances; it seeks what will resist it", Nietzsche thus tells us, "assimilation and incorporation is, above all, a willing to overwhelm, a training, shaping and reshaping, until at last the overwhelmed has passed entirely into the power of the attacker and augmented it."⁷²

This growth of a new power is an inherently disruptive process as it must first lay to waste the old order, tearing it down its idols and hollowing out its values, before it can fully supplant it. "The 'triumph of technique' leaves behind it a wide trail of destroyed symbols. Its inexorable result is anarchy – an anarchy that pulverizes living entities to their atoms ... its character appears of a nihilistic nature, since its offensive extends to the totality of relationships and no value is capable of resisting it." And yet this demolition is but the necessary prelude to a recasting of being: "this anarchy is nothing else than the first necessary step that leads to a new hierarchy of values."⁷³

Jünger would shortly witness the rise of a new regime intent on unseating the existing liberal order and erecting a totalitarian state whose ambition was the production of a new man whose rule would last a thousand years. War would soon follow. Both would fail to live up to Jünger's vision, who from the outset assumed the position of a

⁶⁹ Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, p. 150

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84

⁷² Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, p. 165

⁷³ Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, p. 83

brooding spectator at a remove from the events unfolding before him. While he would always refuse to publicly disown or express regret for any of his previous writings, the post-war period would see him forsake the nationalist rhetoric and eulogizing of war that had characterized them and espouse a quietist and contemplative stance in anticipation of the closure of the age of nihilism that he nevertheless continued to hope for.

Over the Line? Waiting for Nihil

*Above all, one must find security in one's own heart. Then the world will change.*⁷⁴

Mobilized as captain of the Wehrmacht in 1939, Jünger's experience of the Second World War contrasts markedly with that of the first. Stationed in occupied Paris throughout most of the conflict and assiduously frequenting the literary circles there, he was at a remove from the frontline and his war diaries display little of the enthusiasm that his younger self had felt, appearing at times almost indifferent to the drama playing itself out around him.⁷⁵ A more somber tone nevertheless makes itself felt in the last years of the war as disaster for Germany loomed, news of atrocities in the East started to filter through, and Jünger's eldest son was killed in Italy. Throughout the conflict, Jünger worked on an essay entitled *The Peace* that looked ahead to the end of the conflict and proposed a vision of a united federal Europe that some have seen as anticipating the European project that did eventually rise from the conflict's ashes.⁷⁶

This appeased style is also evident in *Over the Line* which is the occasion for Jünger to return to the key themes that animated his past writings. Gone is the incendiary rhetoric and unrestrained celebration of war of the early 1930s but nihilism remains more than ever at the center of his preoccupations. Penning his words a few years after the war amidst the ratcheting of tensions between the two remaining superpowers left standing, Jünger has still not abandoned the hope of overcoming the nihilistic condition and purposely sounds an optimistic note. Insisting on the timeliness of Nietzsche's writings, he reminds his readers that nihilism is not therein "considered as the end, but rather as a phase in a spiritual process that encompasses it, one which not only civilization in its historical unfolding but also the individual in his personal existence can overcome and leave behind, perhaps even growing over it a new skin, like a scar."⁷⁷ As it was after the First World War, the task at hand for Jünger is to salvage a sense of necessity and higher purpose from the debris of yet another global conflagration.

⁷⁴ Jünger, *Über die Linie*, p. 45

⁷⁵ Ernst Jünger, *Strahlungen* (Tübingen: Heliopolis-Verlag, 1949)

⁷⁶ Ernst Jünger, *Der Friede: Ein Wort an die Jugend Europas und an die Jugend der Welt* (Amsterdam: Erasmus Verlag, 1945)

⁷⁷ Jünger, *Über die Linie*, p. 5

After the Holocaust, the firebombing of Dresden, and the atomic annihilation of Hiroshima, Jünger has seemingly lost his previous appetite for armed conflict, expressing the hope that if a Third World War is not implausible it is not inevitable either.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, drawing on the image of the workshop as the site in which the present is being dismantled in preparation for the future, Jünger still endeavors to see a salutary necessity in the horrors of the latest bout of blood-letting:

The landscape of workshops, as we know it, rests essentially on a leveling to the ground of the old forms in favor of the superior dynamics of the work process. The whole world of machines, transport, and war, with their destructions, belongs here. In terrifying images, such as the burning of cities, the leveling reaches its highest intensity. The pain is immense and yet, amidst the historical annihilation, the *Gestalt* of the age is realized. Its shadow falls on the ploughed-up earth, falls on the sacrificial ground. Then come the new plans.⁷⁹

Such an appreciation of the moment finds itself on an appropriate understanding of the phenomenon of nihilism that eschews common misconceptions that Jünger is keen to dismiss. Thus he insists that nihilism is not synonymous with chaos or sickness which are in his eyes only secondary and non-necessary traits. Nihilism seems on the contrary to accord itself very well with order which in fact becomes all the more encompassing and machine-like the further the obstacle of traditional values is swept away. Hence why the vast apparatuses of production and destruction assembled in the modern world seem equally capable of serving under different, even explicitly antagonistic, banners (this of course equally applies to all the individuals required to operate and manage them since, after all, “the virtue of the functionary is to function”).⁸⁰ Consequently, one can observe that:

armies become all the more apt to nihilistic action the more the old law, that which is conceived as tradition, fades away. In the same proportion grows their purely ordering and instrumental character and therefore the possibility of making use of the armed forces for anyone whose hands are on the levers.⁸¹

And in what is undoubtedly an allusion to the Holocaust, Jünger underlines that “even in the places in which nihilism displays its most sinister traits, such as the great sites of physical extermination [*Vernichtungstätten*], there is sobriety, hygiene and strict order to the last.”⁸² Chaos is therefore only the outcome when one of the “constellations” in which nihilism has invested itself comes to fail, as the Third Reich indubitably just had.⁸³ The “decisive question” then becomes “how much genuine anarchy, and thus still unordered fertility, is concealed in chaos.”⁸⁴

The essay is also notable for its attacks on the figure of the “Leviathan”, discussed with direct reference to Nietzsche’s description of the state as a “cold monster” and denoting an inimical stance towards state power that is at odds with the visions of

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 28

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 27

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 15. Jünger also states that if one is looking for a “core of nihilists ... one should not only think of a group of dynamiters or a death squad but for example a meeting of doctors, technicians, or state finance officials discussing questions of their specialisms.” (p. 20)

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 14

⁸² Ibid., p. 16

⁸³ Ibid., p. 15

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 16

total social mobilization Jünger had previously endorsed.⁸⁵ He goes so far as to assert that “one of the Leviathan’s moves is to delude the youth into believing that its call to arms is identical to that of the Fatherland. He reaps in this way his best victims.”⁸⁶ Jünger is rather elusive about the identity of the Leviathan he warns against in these brief passages but it seems to refer primarily to the state as nihilistic and instrumentalist entity since elsewhere Jünger writes of the coming “world state” in more positive terms.⁸⁷ Perhaps we find here the sense of Jünger’s claim that the Nazis had offered only an “ametaphysical solution, the purely technical execution of total mobilization.”⁸⁸ Also noteworthy is the positive connotation now given to security which had previously been scorned as the mark of bourgeois timorousness, even if the security considered here is first and foremost to be found in the “wilderness” and in one’s “own heart”.⁸⁹

Jünger ultimately offers little evidence to substantiate his claim that the line of nihilism is about to be crossed and the tone of piece is generally one of hope rather than expectation. In accordance with his previous writings, he continues to reason in terms of a process of nihilism that must reach its ultimate conclusion before it can be transcended. “The nihilistic world is in its essence a reduced world and being further reduced, corresponding to the necessary movement towards the zero point [Nullpunkt]”, the very point at which this reduction will be reversed.⁹⁰

If he was forced to later concede that his post-war optimism that we had already “passed the zero point”⁹¹ was premature, Jünger would maintain a sanguine outlook regarding its eventual occurrence for the rest of his life, although this increasingly appeared to be grounded more in a sense of cosmic necessity than in any trenchant interpretation of the historical conjuncture.⁹² In the meantime, he would adopt a quietist position above the fray of political struggle, a stance that would be first expressed in terms of the *Waldgänger*’s “flight into the forest”⁹³ before becoming that of the “anarch” as an independent sovereign individual that eschews any direct confrontation with the present order in favor of a discreet existence within its interstices.⁹⁴ Faced with a technologically dominated world that continued to be arrayed under the sign of the Worker but failed to deliver the expected spiritual elevation, Jünger effectively retreated into the quasi-mystical contemplation of an aesthete whom by his own admission was not so easy to differentiate from that of “the

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 34, Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* “On the New Idol”, pp. 34-35

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 37

⁸⁷ Jünger would eventually argue at length in an essay published in 1960 for the anachronism of the nation-state and the need for a world state as the political ratification of an already realised global technical order. Ernst Jünger, *Der Weltstaat: Organismus und Organisation* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1960)

⁸⁸ J.P. Stern, *Ernst Jünger: A Writer of Our Time* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1953), p. 12

⁸⁹ Jünger, *Über die Linie*, p. 45

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 22

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 26

⁹² See for example Julien Hervier, *Entretiens avec Ernst Jünger* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1986), pp. 156-157

⁹³ Ernst Jünger, *Der Waldgang* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1951)

⁹⁴ The figure of the anarchist features prominently in the novel *Eumwesiil*. Ernst Jünger, *Eumwesiil* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1977).

solipsist, who thinks the world is his creation.”⁹⁵ Over time, the prospect of the final overcoming of nihilism would recede ever further in the distance with Jünger evoking in the final years of his life the twenty-third century as the time of its arrival and more calamities to come before then.⁹⁶

Conclusion

*The history of inventions ... raises ever more clearly the question of whether a space of absolute comfort or a space of absolute danger is the final aim concealed in technology.*⁹⁷

Jünger’s philosophical outlook was profoundly and durably shaped by his encounter with Nietzsche’s writings. In particular, he found in the doctrine of the will to power what he took to be an account of the elemental force of becoming that he believed he had witnessed amidst the slaughter of the First World War. Through his military experience and subsequent reflections, Jünger devised keen insights into the historical escalation of war and the demands of total mobilization that it increasingly made upon society. Until at least the mid-1930s, he would unrestrainedly celebrate this development, seeing in it the birth pangs of a new order that would overcome the nihilist condition afflicting the modern world. Yet the forces of destruction unleashed eventually outpaced even his ardent bellicism, razing to the ground major cities and piling ever higher the bodies of soldiers and civilians alike. With the advent of nuclear weapons, it became self-evident that the annihilation of human life was a more likely outcome of another bout of total war than any new blossoming of being. Abandoning the voluntarism that had characterized his earlier work, the post-war Jünger would thereby tacitly concede that the strategy of excess he had advocated through his rapturous embrace of war and the domination of technique had been ruinous. He would thereafter find refuge in the promulgation of an individual form of anarchism able to pragmatically navigate the strictures of the spiritually impoverished times until the dawn of the new age he never ceased to hope for.⁹⁸

One possible conclusion that might be drawn from Jünger’s trajectory from fascistic *élan* to resigned quietism is that the theory of nihilism advanced by Nietzsche and which he had made his own was a deeply problematic conception that rested upon an all too broad cultural diagnosis and ended up sanctioning some of the most disastrous political experiments of the twentieth century. Certainly, one could find particular fault in the arguably perverse notion that an intensification of the processes of technical domination and its concomitant hollowing out of established values would necessarily, by a mechanism that remained as unspecified as numinous, result in their inversion and the founding of a new self-justifying sovereign being. For Jünger as for

⁹⁵ Quoted in Neaman, *A Dubious Past*, p. 237. Jünger published in 1970 a book of reflections on his various psychedelic experiences, including those he shared with the discoverer of LSD, Albert Hofmann. Ernst Jünger, *Annäherungen: Drogen und Rausch* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1970)

⁹⁶ *102 Years in the Heart of Europe: A Portrait of Ernst Jünger* (Director: Jesper Wachtmeister), 1998

⁹⁷ Ernst Jünger, “On Danger”, p. 30

⁹⁸ The elderly Jünger would acknowledge the debt owed to Max Stirner’s writings in his formulation of the figure of the ‘anarch.’ Hervier, *Entretiens avec Ernst Jünger*, pp. 100-101

Heidegger, the cherished Hölderlinian credo that “where danger is, also grows the saving power” would ultimately be synonymous with little more than enduring faith in a form of transcendent intervention once the political programmes they had championed had been so completely discredited.⁹⁹

And yet Jünger’s work should remain of interest to us today as more than mere intellectual history or even a cautionary tale of the perils of a voluntarist strategy of excess. Indeed, if Jünger radically underestimated the resilience of liberalism while the totalitarian regimes he initially welcomed were swept away by the tide of history, his assessment of the centrality of technique to modern societies can be said to retain much of its analytical purchase even where it did not yield all the effects he had anticipated.

For one, the perpetual mobilization of energies for the purpose of war that he identified persists to this day, except that the harnessing of the unimaginable power of the atom and the quasi-instantaneous means of its delivery no longer requires anything like the centrally planned war economies of the first half of the twentieth century. The fact nevertheless remains that, even with the end of the Cold War, the world remains on the very edge of a nuclear apocalypse that could be initiated at the press of a button. Simply, the development of our engines of destruction has been such that if total war remains an ever-present possibility it so far has been warded off by the seeming impossibility of reconciling it with either instrumental designs or the supposed ancestral nobilities of the warring spirit. The marshaling of military power of annihilatory proportions has consequently remained compatible with the kind of liberal bourgeois societies Jünger believed were destined to disappear but which instead came to outlast all their putative rivals.

This is not to say that Jünger’s characterization of our age as one governed by the figure of the Worker has itself lost its salience. Indeed, it can be readily observed that the logic of production and rational optimization has only further extended itself into all facets of social life, seemingly submitting all previous belief systems to its imperatives without replacing them with any new values than those of individual comfort and security. The mass conscription of societies in view of the pursuit of all-out offensive *à l’outrance* may no longer be the order of the day but we have nonetheless experienced a persistent blurring of the states of war and peace in accordance with the changing traits of mobilization and technique. The Cold War never attained the intensity of armed conflict experienced during the previous world wars but it was no less an all-encompassing struggle, in some ways anchoring the imperatives and logic of the technological war machine more deeply and durably than ever. Less a clash of ideologies that rung increasingly hollow, the conflict was first and foremost one of competing military-industrial-scientific complexes that endured until one of them reached a point of complete enervation. Nor did the end of Cold War entail true demobilization, the monolithic threat of superpower rivalry having given way to a proliferation of discourses of security that assert the need to continuously monitor and pre-empt all potential threats to productive life and authorize global projections of calculated violence wherever deemed necessary.

⁹⁹ Jünger, *Über die Linie*, p. 41, Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 310

Ernst Jünger liked to refer to himself as a seismograph registering the underlying tectonic shifts that prefigured the tremors of his age and, personal vanity and retrospective self-justification aside, it is an image to which we can grant a certain acuity.¹⁰⁰ Many of the views Jünger espoused, particularly in the inter-war years, have rightly elicited opprobrium. But they can also be read as a willful exacerbation of the tendencies manifest in his times, propelled by a quixotic mission to rescue a sense of agency and meaning from the cataclysm of the Great War and its aftermath. While ours may be different times, we nonetheless still wrestle today with the question of the place of the human in a world in which technology and war continue to play such a central role. So that, as much as Jünger erred in his historical prognoses and political commitments, his struggle with the problem of nihilism in the age of technique may very well still be our own.

¹⁰⁰ Ernst Jünger, *Strahlungen I, Sämtliche Werke II* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979), p. 13