

Abstract

Writing and Rewriting the First World War: Ernst Jünger and the Crisis of the conservative Imagination, 1914-25

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

John King, St. John's College, Trinity Term 1999.

In this thesis I examine the complexities involved in Ernst Jünger's various texts on the First World War using an interdisciplinary approach. I postulate that 'classical modernity' — which privileged self, rationality and totalising meta-narrative — was a (logocentric) project that deconstructed itself through its internal contradictions. These emerged particularly starkly in the industrialised slaughter of the First World War. I argue that the 'conservative imagination' — like Jünger's — responded to this by attempting to reconstruct the assumptions of 'classical modernity' in texts that are often described as 'modernist'. Jünger found himself in precisely this situation and I trace the resultant contradictions in his War texts. Starting with his unpublished manuscript war diary as a base, I show how it attempts to cling to the assumptions of 'classical modernity' but also exhibits considerable instability and a sense of absurdity which persistently undermines his conservative attempts to interpret the war on 'classical modern' lines. *In Stahlgewittern* was intended to be a 'monumental history' with himself as heroic subject but failed to contain the deconstructive energy of the war. His little-known articles in the *Militärwochenblatt* testify to the crisis caused by the conflict between Jünger's assumptions and the reality of his experience. *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* is a profoundly fissured attempt to interpret the War. *Sturm*, however, escapes many of the problems of the other books by turning to what I shall call a 'proto-post-modernism', but because Jünger could not fully accept the implications of this attempt he turned to a 'conservative revolutionary' strategy which is, however, subverted from within. Ultimately, I show that ambivalence and contradiction are at the very heart of Jünger's fissured early work and argue that this has hardly been noticed or accounted for by the majority of critics writing on this far from monumental author.

Long Abstract

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This thesis represents a substantial re-assessment of Ernst Jünger's earliest work. It presents the first scholarly analysis of his manuscript war diary (1914-18) which became available as part of his then *Vorlaß* in 1996. Furthermore, it offers a reading of his texts on the First World War from a theoretical perspective that has never before been attempted in Jünger research and shows how they can be read as exemplary documents of what I shall term the crisis of the 'conservative imagination' of 'classical modernity'.

Jünger has been one of the most controversial German authors of this century. After some introductory comments in Chapter 1, I examine the secondary literature relating to the First World War and the issues of (post)-modernity in Chapter 2. Here I show that there are three significant gaps in the research despite its volume: first, there has been no substantial research on Jünger's manuscript war diary (1914-18); second, most research has tended to create a coherent account of Jünger and to overlook the persistent contradictions, breaks and *lacunae* in his early war books; third, that research which does look at Jünger in the context of modernity and modernism either neglects the war texts, or takes insufficient account of more general theoretical debates, or ignores the specific historical circumstances under which the texts were written, or does both of the latter.

Consequently, in Chapter 3 I address these theoretical debates and historical contexts in an interdisciplinary attempt to establish the axes of my argument. I begin by defining classical modernity as a cultural phenomenon consisting of three main elements: first, the privileging of the monadic, autonomous subject; second, the assumption that science and instrumental rationality could know, represent and control the world; and third, the construction of universalising meta-narratives. I then examine the historical experience of socio-economic modernisation in Germany and show how in the late 19th and early 20th

Centuries, modernity was beginning to enter a period of crisis as the dynamics of social and cultural change subverted its foundational assumptions. As a result of urbanisation and rationalisation the individual subject increasingly experienced the world as fragmented *anomie* (Durkheim), or was subjected to a 'stahlhartes Gehäuse' (Weber). Furthermore, contemporary philosophy, physics, psychology, linguistics and historiography undermined the assumptions of classical modernity even more, especially for those intellectuals who were responsive to them. Their wide variety of responses to the resultant sense of cultural crisis is known as modernism. One aspect of this response, and it was shared with substantial sections of the German population, was a yearning for war and I draw on Georg Heym, Ernst Wilhelm Lotz and Ernst Stadler as pre-War examples before showing how Otto Dix, Rainer Maria Rilke and Thomas Mann welcomed the outbreak of war as a rejuvenating force that would restore an allegedly lost authenticity.

Nevertheless, as I show with reference to military histories, such a hope was profoundly misplaced since the experience of the War actually intensified the sense that the values of classical modernity were in a state of crisis. Assumptions about the autonomous self and the knowability of the world together with a faith in totalising meta-narratives were destroyed by the extremity of trench-warfare on the Western Front. The dislocation felt everywhere by veterans was experienced in an even more extreme way by subalterns in a defeated and revolutionary Germany. In order to provide points of comparison with my subsequent analysis of Jünger, I examine the responses to the War of a number of representative German artists and intellectuals. Lotz's letters trace enthusiasm, disillusion and then a stoic doggedness. Stramm's poetry and letters reveal the deconstructive effect of his attempts to retain control of his language and a celebration of the *Frontsoldat*. Franz Marc's letters home reveal a mind struggling to re-formulate interpretory meta-narratives. Fritz von Unruh's novel *Opfergang* reveals an astonishing affinity with 'soldatischer Nationalismus' despite its pacifist surface text. Hugo Ball's conversion to Catholicism and Johannes R. Becher's to Marxism illustrate the tendency of

some intellectuals to choose extreme solutions, whilst Freud's reassessment of human nature involves an attempt to re-theorise modernity in the light of the War. I conclude by looking again at Dix. I end the chapter by arguing that although the war experience had destroyed the assumptions of classical modernity, it nevertheless generated attempts on the part of artists and intellectuals to rebuild this modernity. It is this persistent desire to reinstate classical modernity that I term the 'conservative imagination'. But because the horror of the trench experience had produced a deconstructive impulse that resisted such attempts many responses to the War involved ambivalence, contradiction and fissures that continued to deconstruct the assumptions of classical modernity.

I then use this context in Chapter 4 to evolve a new analysis of the available biographical material. I begin by showing how Jünger internalised classical modern assumptions through family and schooling and how he attempted to reassert his individual autonomy through literature, the *Wandervögel*, the Foreign Legion and finally the German Army. Using published letters from the early 1920s I then show how Jünger, having seen service as a junior officer in the major battles of the Western Front, suffered from a sense of fragmentation and disorientation with which he attempted to come to terms by pursuing conflicting strategies in an attempt to recentre his ego and regain a sense of certainty. I argue that the biographical sources give the impression of a fragmented conservative imagination struggling to re-establish the assumptions of classical modernity but which, under the pressure of the war experience, was unable to do so satisfactorily. Consequently, I conclude, we should expect to find evidence of exactly the same sense of fragmentation and deconstructive energy in the war texts which I examine in chronological order over the remainder of the thesis.

It is within this same frame of reference that I analyse Jünger's manuscript war diary in Chapter 5. I begin by arguing that the project of diary writing in general and Jünger's attempts to produce a closed narrative of his war experience in particular are embedded in the cultural assumptions of classical modernity inasmuch as they seek to

confirm the autonomous subject and the recordability of the world around him. Given its form, however, I argue that the diary is also eminently placed to trace the fragmentation of the subject — particularly given the circumstances under which it was written. My analysis proper begins with an account of Jünger's precarious attempts to maintain his position as heroic subject in an understandable and knowable environment. We see him attempting to compensate for the passivity of positional warfare by searching out dangerous patrols or applying to the Air Force, obsessed with becoming a heroic subject even as he realises the enormity of the changes wrought by industrialised war-making. We see him attempting to construct a hermetically sealed text which diligently records the present and the contamination of this space by his personal past. We see his clashes with his superiors and growing cynicism with regard to official ideology. We see further disruptions of his closed text through increasing intertextuality and the excitement he feels when his troops inflict a decisive tactical defeat on a British patrol in 1917. The instability generated by these elements is, however, relatively minor for the war diary contains elements which disrupt the text more seriously. I examine a number of entries where Jünger rails explicitly against the destruction and absurdity wrought by the War and his own lack of freedom. I show how his attitude towards conventional society oscillated wildly. I read his depictions of the natural world as a further disruption of his classical modern assumptions. Finally, I focus on a number of gaps in the text — where pages have been removed, entries deleted or narration refused — which I read as indices of a critical instability where the project of his conservative imagination has broken down completely. Thus, I conclude that the war diary involves powerful deconstructive energies that were generated by the war experience.

Over the remaining chapters I trace the effects of these energies on Jünger's published texts dealing with the War. In Chapter 6, I examine *In Stahlgewittern*₁ (1920) and begin by drawing on a number of remarks in the manuscript war diary to shed some new light on the genesis of the book. On my reading, Jünger was attempting to produce a textual war memorial, or in other words, that his text was intended to be what Nietzsche

described as ‘monumentale Historie’. According to Nietzsche, such writing must repress its knowledge of the complexities and ambivalence of the past which then operates as dangerous, potentially deconstructive element below the heroic surface content. I then explore the extent of Jünger’s redactional work on his original diary which, I argue, he undertook according to his monumental agenda and I also show how this agenda is consistently undermined by a whole series of contradictory elements with the result that the book continually deconstructs itself.

In Chapter 7, I undertake the first substantial analysis of two articles Jünger wrote for the *Militärwochenblatt* (1920 and 1921) and show how these are trapped in two conflicting strategies used by the conservative imagination to reinstate its cultural assumptions. Thus, Jünger both privileges the human and heroic in an attempt to recentre the subject — which was no longer appropriate given his recognition of the changed nature of battle — and imagines a flawless machine utopia of battle in which the world is once more orderable but with the subject reduced to an intelligent part of an information machine. I conclude that these articles show how radical Jünger could be in his move away from classical modern assumptions and, simultaneously, just how tenaciously such assumptions reasserted themselves. Consequently, I conclude that his attempt at synthesis is ultimately a failure.

A similar failure characterises *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*₁ (1922), which, proceeding from Jünger’s question about the War — ‘Was ging am Grunde vor?’ — I read in Chapter 8 as an attempt to theorise his experience. I begin by exploring the various strategies that Jünger uses in order to embed the War within a coherent meta-narrative and show how he does this by citing such a disparate range of thinkers and positions that his approach actually produces a cacophony of contradictory statements. More interestingly, I draw attention to those parts of the book where Jünger goes so far as to articulate a critique of his own assumptions. Finally, I show how the pervasive experience of absurdity

infiltrates the text through various metaphors and an obsession with time and so, once again, deconstructs the surface project of the book.

By contrast, I argue in Chapter 9 that *Sturm* (1923) almost succeeds in breaking free from the constraints of the conservative imagination. The result is what I term ‘proto-post-modernism’ inasmuch as the story prefigures various key aspects of post-modernism which I describe at the beginning of the chapter. I then show how *Sturm* involves a subtle critique of the assumptions of classical modernity — through heteroglossia, its dialogic form, acceptance of the impossibility of mimetic representation, parody of the Romantic notion of the Artist genius and *décadent* literature, and an exploration of the collapse of the absolute claims of scientific epistemology — inasmuch as the story contrasts different forms of knowledge, scientific and epiphanic, and encyclopaedic and eclectic. *Sturm* also explores quite consciously the crisis of the modern intellectual subject, the unworkability of the modern meta-narrative project, and the failure of modernist art to reground the conservative imagination. Finally, I show how close Jünger comes to accepting this proto-post-modernism by identifying the prevalence of metaphors of flow and thus of uncertainty and difference in the text. That said, *Sturm* remains only proto-post-modern because the narrator’s conservative imagination shies away from the full implications of the positions with which he has dallied and has the fictional protagonist die.

Chapter 10 offers the first analysis of Jünger’s next text, his final article for the *Militärwochenblatt* (1923), which can be read as a renewed attempt to reground the classical modern view of the ability of language to represent and order the world. Despite an extremely technicist approach, Jünger finally admits that there are vast realms of experience that are uncontainable and unrepresentable by language and, in my view, it is this recognition which leads him to repudiate literature for political action. I explore the results of this move in the final chapter of the thesis.

After a brief review of some of the relevant secondary literature at the start of Chapter 11, I examine the debates surrounding the so-called Conservative Revolution and

conclude that it was a recuperative attempt by the conservative imagination to re-ground modernity in that it sought to produce a totalising meta-narrative, accept the results of modernisation, postulate a unified, if collective subject — the Nation — and achieve its goals by a revolutionary transformation. Turning to Jünger again, I show how his article ‘Revolution und Idee’ (1923) can be read as a rejection of literature in favour of action. I then show how his work producing *In Stahlgewittern*₃ (1924) appears to conform to this project, only to be undermined by a re-assertion of his own individuality. I then look at the first edition of *Das Wäldchen 125* (1925) and begin by exploring the way in which it significantly changes the events of summer 1918 compared to the narrative in the war diary. I then examine Jünger’s attempts to accept the effects of modernisation and produce an allegedly authentic meta-narrative and argue that the results are completely self-contradictory, even in the figure of the *Frontkämpfer* who is set up as the new monadic subject. Finally, I examine Jünger’s last war text, *Feuer und Blut* (1925) and conclude that it very nearly succeeds in systematically placing this new subject into a coherent system, thereby resolving the crisis of the conservative imagination. However, Jünger’s otherwise repressed desire for individual autonomy returns via an intertextual reference to Rimbaud’s ‘Le bateau ivre’ which, I argue, once more deconstructs this attempt to resolve the crisis of classical modernity on its own ground.

In Chapter 12, I conclude that reductionist readings of his war texts have become even more untenable in the light of my analysis of the manuscript war diary and that Jünger has generally succeeded in blinding critics with his (often outrageous) rhetoric which attempts to conceal the ambivalence and contradictions, that are, in my view, so central to his early work. Finally, I conclude that given the terms of reference I established in Chapter 3 and the similarities in his work to other modernist artists and intellectuals, Jünger is very much a modernist writer whose complex early work requires an appropriately sophisticated hermeneutics.