

1. Introduction

Ernst Jünger was not only one of the longest-lived and most productive German authors of the 20th Century, he was also without doubt one of the most controversial, generating heated and wide-ranging debate throughout the course of his life and beyond. The reasons for the controversy are to be found in the way in which his problematic involvement with National Socialism and the Third Reich has been received by different groups in Germany post-1945. His supposed glorification of the First World War experience and subsequent involvement with nationalist journals has led many, especially on the Left, to identify him with pathological features of the German bourgeois character and he has thus been vilified. On the other hand, his opposition to the National Socialist regime, association with the Stauffenberg conspirators, together with the alleged resistance character of a novel such as *Auf den Marmorlippen* (1939) have led many, especially on the Right, to celebrate him as an exponent of the best features of the German character. Throughout the repeated reassessments of the German past over the last half-century, Jünger has taken on a symbolic role for participants in the debate.

In parallel with this debate which has mainly been conducted in the *Feuilletons* of the German press, a substantial quantity of scholarly research has been produced which has generally tended to follow the same interests. Nevertheless, on my reading, Jünger's earliest work does not map with the simplifications that many critics have imposed in order to suit their own agendas — it is simply too full of contradictions, breaks and *lacunae* to conform to the binary Left-Right debate. But, even as Jünger research in the 1980s and 90s has at last started to move away from such simple politicised debates, critics have still persisted in attempting to distil a simple and coherent set of meanings from Jünger's earliest texts.

Rather than attempting yet again to force Jünger's texts into an artificial coherence, I shall attempt in this thesis to develop a hermeneutic that does justice to their

complexity and contradictions. Given that his First World War texts point to a crisis-ridden mentality, I shall begin by identifying the nature of this mentality — which I term the ‘conservative imagination’. My approach is thoroughly interdisciplinary in character — I refer to cultural history and theory to define what I term ‘classical modernity’; I refer to socio-economic and political history to explore the tensions which arose from Germany’s modernisation using; and I refer to intellectual and military history in order to focus on the relativisation of the assumptions of classical modernity first by rapid scientific advances and second by the experience of the Western Front using. I argue that the ‘conservative imagination’, shared in different forms by Jünger and many other artists and intellectuals, attempted to reinstate those assumptions but the results of such attempts nevertheless remains crisis-ridden, ever prone to self-deconstruction.

When brought to bear on Jünger’s war texts and combined with new material taken from his unpublished manuscript war diary, this approach provides a new matrix within which to approach these earliest texts and, more specifically, a means of identifying and accounting for those contradictions which previous research has tended either to ignore or not to account for adequately.

I begin with a survey of the secondary literature on Jünger which deals with the First World War and theories of (post)-modernity and (post)-modernism which are at the heart of my account of the ‘conservative imagination’.