

## 8. Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub> — Re-Writing the War (2).

### 8.1 Introduction — Jünger's (Modernist) Search for Meaning

In 1922 E. S. Mittler published Ernst Jünger's second book, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>*, a text very different from *In Stahlgewittern<sub>2</sub>* (1922).<sup>1</sup> Although both books have the War as their subject, Jünger, faced with the failure of *In Stahlgewittern* to produce a satisfactory account of the War that would deliver it from the absurd and ground his position in the post-war world, adopted a very different structure and style in his second book-length attempt to deal with his memory of the War. Instead of a linear narrative based on the *Kriegstagebuch*, his second book attempts a new interpretation of the War centred on the question 'Was ging am Grunde vor?' (p. 3). In this sense, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>* is the first conscious step on what Hans-Peter Schwarz has termed Jünger's search for a 'Sinn der Epoche', a search that would characterise his work as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

This form of questioning is inherent to the theoretical imperative that I described in Chapter 3 as characteristic of classical modernity in its search for a comprehensive and coherent description of the world in the form of various meta-narratives. Jünger's questioning of the war experience in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>* is a conscious attempt to theorise the War in order to find a way out of ambivalence and chaos. Successfully theorising the War would mean finding a way of accounting for the horrific in order to disarm it — and thus counteract the dislocations that Jünger faced as an intellectual and a veteran in a defeated state, thereby re-establishing his sense of centred, modern subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *In Stahlgewittern<sub>2</sub>* is only slightly different from *In Stahlgewittern<sub>1</sub>*. For a summary of the changes, cf. Kunicki, *Projektionen des Geschichtlichen*, pp. 53-58.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Der konservative Anarchist*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> It thus pursues a very different project from that which Martin Meyer ascribes to it. In his *Ernst Jünger* (Munich: Hanser, 1990), he argues that 'was sich Jünger unternimmt, ist nicht weniger als das Porträt des "modernen Ich" unter den Bedingungen des kriegerischen Erlebens' (p. 42).

However, this second major text is permanently threatened by its own subject matter. We saw in Chapter 4 just how dislocated and fragmented Jünger's psyche was when he wrote this book and in Chapter 6 I showed how *In Stahlgewittern*<sub>1</sub> constantly deconstructs itself. Without the disciplining framework provided by the linear structure of his diary *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*<sub>1</sub>, constantly disintegrates. Bearing all the traumata of the First World War in a polyphony of styles, ideologies and voices, the book is a fragmented, tortured attempt to make sense of a world in which the experience of the War has made that experience incompatible with all previous meta-narratives. It is a book full of unresolved tensions, whose very form of reflective essays, fragments of narrative which often re-narrate material from *In Stahlgewittern*<sub>1</sub>, ecstatic epiphany and confessions of utter despair, turn constantly against themselves, seemingly blind to each other's existence.

*Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*<sub>1</sub> is thus a highly complex and ambiguous book, albeit one still liable to be read by critics in a conveniently simplistic way. It is a multi-dimensional text still in need of extensive commentary, for which I do not have the space here. Instead, I shall trace a number of issues which are of particular significance for this thesis. First, I shall investigate those strategies that Jünger uses in his attempt to theorise the War by means of various meta-narratives. Second, I shall show how *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*<sub>1</sub> is riven by a radical sense of relativism and thus doubts its own ability to produce any form of centred and coherent account at all. And third, I shall highlight the chronic instability of time as embodied in this text, such that time itself — in this text of 1922, the product of the interaction of early Weimar instability and the shifting memory of the War — becomes the locus of absurdity, emblematic of the powerlessness of the subject to interpret and master the War.

## **8.2 (Meta-)Histories**

Closely associated with classical modernity's concern to centre Man in the world, independent of God and Nature, was the emergence of a new historical consciousness which posited a measurable, linear History progressing ever upwards, overcoming the

darkness of the past through reason and technology and tending towards a future state of perfection. Within such a framework, individuals and nations were seen as centred and rational entities, in control of their actions and accountable only to History, that abstract march forward whose end was the centring of humanity as a whole. Such thinking informed the self-consciousness of the Enlightenment, was re-formulated by Hegel's dialectic and reached a peak in both Comte's Positivism and Marx's Historical Materialism. Even the historians of the German Historicist school still perceived a meaningful course to history. But no matter whether such historical thinking was revolutionary or conservative in its direction, it remained subject to the notion that History as an objective process could be adequately theorised and systematised and that late 19th/early 20th-century European Man was, in one way or another, at its centre. Historical discourse thus not only dovetailed with modernity's construction of a theoretically understandable objective reality — here constituted by memory and the past — it also played a crucial role in modernity's understanding of itself as modern.

In one of the most lucid sections of his text Jünger summarises the world-weariness produced in the extended *fin-de-siècle* which preceded the outbreak of war. He describes the sense of cultural crisis and the oppressive *anomie* which came in the wake of apparent technical and social progress as follows:

Im Schoße versponnener Kultur lebten wir zusammen, enger als Menschen zuvor, in Geschäfte und Lüste zersplittert, durch schimmernde Plätze und Untergrundschächte saugend, in Cafés vom Glanze der Spiegel umstellt, Straßen Bänder farbigen Lichtes, Bars voll schillernder Liköre, Konferenztische und letzter Schrei, jede Stunde eine Neuigkeit, jeden Tag ein gelöstes Problem, jede Woche eine Sensation, eine große überdröhnte Unzufriedenheit am Grund. Technisch noch produktiv, standen wir mit Ben-Akiba-Lächeln am Ende der Kunst, hatten die Welträtsel gelöst oder glaubten uns auf dem besten Wege dazu. Der Kristallationspunkt schien erreicht, der Übermensch nahe herbeigekommen.

So lebten wir dahin und waren stolz darauf. Als Söhnen einer vom Stoff berauschten Zeit schien Fortschritt uns Vollendung, die Maschine der Gottähnlichkeit Schlüssel, Fernrohr und Mikroskop Organe der Erkenntnis [...] (pp. 2-3).

Despite Jünger's evocation of this world and its historical optimism in the past tense he remained, as we have seen with regards both to the *Kriegstagebuch* and *In Stahlgewittern*<sub>1</sub>,

fundamentally indebted to modern epistemology in his attempts to relate and interpret his experience of modernity's mad turn against itself in the War. Consequently, he was concerned to ground the experience of the War in one of those overarching historical frameworks modernity had produced. In so doing, however, he was attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable — with the result that his historical framework, composed as it is of contradictory and fragmentary elements, deconstructs itself. Let us briefly examine a number of these meta-historical fragments in turn.

### 8.2.1 Citing Nietzsche

Jünger begins the book thus:

Zuweilen erstrahlt an den Horizonten des Geistes ein neues Gestirn, das die Augen aller Rastlosen trifft, Verkündung und Sturmsignal einer Weltwende wie einst den Königen aus dem Morgenlande. Dann ertrinken die Sterne ringsum in feuriger Glut, Götzenbilder splintern zu irdenen Scherben, und wieder einmal schmilzt alle geprägte Form in tausend Hochöfen, um zu neuen Werten gegossen zu werden (p. 1).

The apocalyptic imagery, reminiscent of a steel-mill Nietzsche preaching an industrialised 'Umwertung aller Werte', articulates a dramatic sense of break with the past. Such a break is fundamentally incompatible with the established meta-narrative of dialectical progress, an academic doctrine which Nietzsche fiercely attacked. Jünger also plays with Nietzsche's Zarathustrian doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, a concept that is powerfully suggestive but ultimately vague:

Und doch wird auch dieser Sturm zerflattern, auch dieser Glutsturm zu Ordnung erkalten. Noch zerschellte jede Raserei an grauem Gemäuer oder es fand sich einer, der sie mit stählerner Faust vor seinen Wagen spannte (p. 1).

Although such cyclical thinking was to play a highly significant role in Jünger's later work, especially *Auf den Marmorklippen* (1939), here, it remains little more than naive citation from a famous thinker whose philosophy of discourse, will and language had precisely the modern project as its central target.

### 8.2.2 Faking Hegel — Rebuilding the Tower of Babel

At the same time, however, Jünger declares the human project, and thus History, to be teleologically orientated:

Noch immer schaffen die Menschen an einem Turmbau von unermesslicher Höhe [...] langsam wachsen seine Quadern der Gottheit entgegen [...] Noch ist das Bauwerk roh, eine große Gebärde, auf das unklare Ziel eines gelobten Landes gerichtet (p. 6).

The image of the tower,<sup>4</sup> borrowed from Genesis but stripped of God's punishment of humanity's hubris, is emblematic of a conception of history more in tune with classical modernity than with Nietzsche's radical subjectivity. The pseudo-Hegelian image is suggestive, but remains undeveloped, another citation chosen from a catalogue of thinkers.

### 8.2.3 Borrowing from Spengler

Oswald Spengler is another figure to be cited without respect for context or sense. Although Jünger claimed to have read *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* and to have found a sense of intellectual certainty from the programmatic certainties which it enunciated (cf. p. 118 above), little trace of a serious encounter with Spengler's work can be found in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>*. Instead, we find various key words and phrases which ape Spengler's key thesis that cultures are akin to organisms and follow predictable patterns of growth, maturity and decay, in many ways a post-modern thesis in its move beyond Eurocentrism and its concern with theoretical regulation of a supposedly objective *Weltgeschichte*.<sup>5</sup> Jünger proclaimed that in the ruins of French towns and villages he felt 'das hoffnungslose Versinken einer Kultur' (p. 17). He discerned a decadence in the form of pacifism which, for him, was a 'Sturmzeichen nahen Untergangs' (p. 37). He maintained that it was 'die heilige Pflicht der höchsten Kultur, die stärksten Bataillone zu haben' (p. 37) and, trying to turn Spengler against himself, lectured his readers that:

Jedes Volk hat seine eigene Kultur, auf deren scharf umgrenzten Boden seine Möglichkeiten einzig gedeihen können. Redet man trotzdem z.B. von einer abendländischen Kultur, so tut man das mit demselben Recht, mit dem man eine Reihe von Tieren als Insekten bezeichnet (p. 37).

<sup>4</sup> This image recurs, somewhat misplaced, on p. 36, just as Jünger turns to quasi-Spenglerian rhetoric.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gilbert Merlio, *Oswald Spengler: Témoin de son temps*, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Heinz, 1982). Merlio explores the tensions between Spengler's (post)-modernity and his reactionary political instincts, cf. esp. I, pp. 29-116.

Jünger was seemingly unaware of the crass contrast between *Blut und Boden* ideology with its regressive sentimentality on the one hand and modern systems of scientific categorisation on the other. He also seems only to have skimmed the surface of Spengler's massive enquiry and extracted sentiment rather than content. Nevertheless, Spengler forms yet another discrete element in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*<sub>1</sub>, incompatible with either Nietzsche or Hegel.

## 8.2.4 Going beyond History

### 8.2.4.1 Paraphrasing Heraclitus

Parallel to his citations of various historical meta-narratives Jünger also turns to theoretical positions that are essentially a-historical, and meta-narratives only in the sense that they account for past events by adopting a more radically distanced position and posit History as only part of a greater whole where different, but nevertheless discernible, laws apply. The first thinker Jünger draws into his confused text is the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, citing the famous fragment stating that war is the father of all:

Der Krieg, aller Dinge Vater ist auch der unsere; er hat uns gehämmert, gemeißelt und gehärtet zu dem, was wir sind. Zwar haben wir ihn überwunden, wie der Sohn seinen Vater überwindet und überragt, doch bleibt er in uns, versteinertes Gebirge, von dem wir talwärts schreiten, Neuland zu suchen. Und immer, solange des Lebens schwingendes Rad in uns kreißt, wird dieser Krieg die Achse sein, um die es schwirrt. Er hat uns erzogen zum Kampf, und Kämpfer werden wir bleiben, solange wir sind [...] Und ist er in uns, so ist er überall, denn wir formen die Welt, nicht anders, An-Schauende im schöpferischen Sinne [...]

Indes: Nicht nur unser Vater ist der Krieg, auch unser Sohn. Wir haben ihn gezeugt und er uns. Gehämmerte und Gemeißelte sind wir, aber auch solche, die den Hammer schwingen, den Meißel führen, Schmiede und sprühender Stahl zugleich, Märtyrer eigener Tat, von Trieben Getriebene. (p. 2)

There is a profound contradiction between two elements here which Jünger in no way succeeds in sublating. On the one hand, he declares War to be a universal dynamic, a first cause which is always already the same and thus outside history which is thus relegated to a secondary role. But on the other hand, Jünger declares himself and his comrades to be active agents of change, unique, modern subjects acting both within and after a quintessentially modern event, thus located precisely within history which is thus

privileged. In *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, he develops both arguments, oblivious to the gulf which separates the historical models on which they are implicitly based.

#### 8.2.4.2 *Building an Anthropology*

In the book's first sections, after his Nietzschean and Hegelian interludes, Jünger aggressively develops an a-historical anthropology as his theoretical account of the War. In this model, which is closely related to his Heraclitian assertions, he declares — like Freud (cf. Chapter 3.8.6, p. 88 above) — that the violence experienced in the War was due to the sudden return of pent-up repressed instinctual life which had always simmered beneath the apparently smooth surface of classical modernity:

Da entschädigte sich der wahre Mensch in rauschender Orgie für alles Versäumte. Da wurden seine Triebe, zu lange schon durch Gesellschaft und ihre Gesetze gedämmt, wieder das Einzige und Heilige und die letzte Vernunft. Und alles, was das Hirn im Laufe der Jahrhunderte in immer schärfere Formen gestaltet, diente nur dazu, die Wucht der Faust ins ungemessene zu steigern. — — — (p. 3)

Without once acknowledging his debt to modern archaeology, palaeontology and early evolutionary genetics, Jünger proceeds to outline a vitalist anthropology which posits Man as driven by instincts which have allegedly remained constant since *homo sapiens* first evolved. Hans-Harald Müller succinctly terms Jünger's anthropology as a 'Bild einer organologischen geschichtsphilosophischen Evolutionskonzeption der Menschengattung'.<sup>6</sup> Jünger maintains that in war Man returns to an aggressive primitive, animalistic state: 'nackt wie je, bricht er hervor, der Urmensch, der Höhlensiedler in der ganzen Unbändigkeit seiner entfesselten Triebe' (p. 7). According to Jünger, this inherited instinct is the true reason for all war: 'Das wird bleiben, solange Menschen Kriege führen, und Kriege werden geführt, solange noch das tierische Erbteil im Blute kreist' (p. 8). Tellingly, Jünger uses this profoundly a-historical vision in an attempt to deny the importance of industrial technology in the War by relegating all wars to a behavioural constant based on the satisfaction of primitive urges:

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<sup>6</sup> *Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller*, p. 240.

Denn alle Technik ist Maschine, ist Zufall, das Geschöß blind und willenlos, den Menschen aber treibt der Wille zu töten durch die Gewitter aus Sprengstoff, Eisen und Stahl, und wenn zwei Menschen im Taumel des Kampfes aufeinanderprallen, so treffen sich zwei Wesen, von denen nur eins bestehen kann. Denn diese zwei Wesen haben sich zueinander in ein Urverhältnis gesetzt, in den Kampf ums Dasein in seiner nacktesten Form (p. 8).

In arguing thus, Jünger was creating a theoretical model which promised to contain and give significance to his experience even if it meant negating both the rational subject and specifically (historically) modern nature of the War. However, like so many of Jünger's assertions in this book, it is followed by another that is fundamentally opposed to it. Thus, when he reflects: 'Früher wurde der Krieg von Tagen gekrönt, an denen Sterben Freude war, die sich erhoben über die Zeiten als schimmernde Denkmäler männlichen Mutes' (p. 24) his historical consciousness of a system in crisis keeps returning to undo Jünger's attempts to escape by denying History in the name of a theory of biological constants. In other words, his conservative imagination is unable here to use modern science to negate the anti-modern experience of History.

#### 8.2.4.3 *Reading the Landsknecht*

In *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*<sub>1</sub>, Jünger extends the *Landsknecht* metaphor introduced in *In Stahlgewittern*<sub>1</sub> — and obviously linked here to his vitalist and primitivist anthropology — in a chapter entitled simply 'Landsknechte'. Here, Jünger declares the *Landsknechte* to be 'vollendet [...] vom Standpunkt der Front' (p. 55). He describes them as more or less Dionysiac anarchists, post-ideological, post-heroic, revelling in the instant of pure destruction and thus in a sense as post-historical, men who are gloriously indifferent to the bourgeois sense of cultural catastrophe (p. 56). However, it is striking that even in this exaggerated panegyric they remain fantastic figures, described reverently as 'sie' — Jünger could never give up his position as (modern) observer — and located within an intertextual matrix that ranges across Baudelaire (p. 16),<sup>7</sup> Villon (p. 57), Shakespeare's Falstaff (p. 57) and *King Lear* (p. 61), Goethe's *Faust* and Wagner's

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Harald Müller identified the *poète maudit* as Baudelaire, and the lines cited as from 'Le mort joyeux' from *Les Fleurs du mal* (*Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller*, p. 250).

*Fliegender Holländer* (p. 61). This intertextuality starts to reveal the fundamental flaw in Jünger's book for while he celebrates the radically anti-cultural he can do so only in terms of the literary monuments produced by that culture. It is precisely this dependency on the culture of the past, and thus also on historical consciousness, which deconstructs his renewed protests in this chapter that technology was an inessential prop to an unchanging drama: 'nur Theaterkulissen [...], die erst Bedeutung erlangten, durch das Spiel, das der Mensch vor ihnen spielte' (p. 60).

#### **8.2.4.4 Returning to Culture**

The dichotomy between Jünger's desired analysis, account and celebration of the War as a form of Dionysian liberation and his actual cultural background becomes increasingly acute as the text progresses. In the chapter 'Kontrast', which follows 'Landsknechte', Jünger celebrates life, but now life in the form of domestic luxury and cultural sophistication, even declaring that putting on a clean shirt is 'eine Krönung meiner neuen Menschwerdung' (p. 65). Later on in the book Jünger tends to retreat back into conventional certainties. He complains of his men's vulgarity in sexual discussions (p. 89), and accuses them of superficial materialism (p. 85), supposedly the virtues of the *Landsknechte*, whilst being unable to hide his envy of their simple notions of *Heimat* compared to his own complex, contradictory and textually mediated feeling (pp. 85-88), which is exemplarily located in 'die deutsche Lyrik' (p. 88). At this point in the text, Jünger feels able to declare, projecting back into an unspecified past at the Front, 'Wir wissen doch alle, wozu wir hier sind' (p. 90) and a few pages later he asserts that the soldier fought 'für seine Idee' (p. 96). In so doing, Jünger has adopted a position which is radically at odds with his post-ideological celebration of the *Landsknechte* and their supposedly primitive instincts. Or in other words, his attempt to drown out the cultural and intellectual assumptions behind his sense of dislocation by means of rhetorical excess, or 'dezisionistisches Postulieren' (Schröter), merely succeeded in reformulating this crisis.

### 8.2.4.5 *Returning to the (False) Certainties of Patriotic Ideology*

Faced with the chaos within his text, Jünger turns to a nationalist and heroic interpretation of the War that marks the final stage of his meta-historical struggle and a return to a simple, received framework of values. In the last chapter of the book, ‘Vorm Kampf’, these are now merely confirmed for Jünger rather than questioned. Having previously assaulted the ideological production mechanisms of the domestic press,<sup>8</sup> he parrots the Horatian ‘dulce et decorum’, asserting that ‘Der Tod für eine Überzeugung ist das höchste Vollbringen’ (p. 112), that ‘Alle Vielheit der Formen vereinfacht sich zu einem Sinn: dem Kampf. Der Körper des Volkes legt seine gesamte Kraft in einen Ausdruck: das Heer’ (p. 116). This is an attempt at reconciling the Prussian state and its values with his primitivist anthropology and one which is doomed to failure. Jünger cites *völkisch* and nationalist ideology, just as he cites Hegel, Spengler, Nietzsche and Darwin, because it appears to provide him with certainty about the purpose of the War. Indeed, he writes of his ‘horror vacui’ (p. 115) — and seems prepared to use just about anything and everything to fill that empty space of ambivalence and chaos which, to the conservative imagination, is so horrifically devoid of meaning. But by so doing, he actually negates whatever sense previously inhered in his multiple citations.

We have thus seen how Jünger develops an entangled, fractured mesh of conflicting meta-narrative and theoretical assertions, which are sometimes developed and modulated during the course of the book and sometimes stand as isolated points. Their contradictions, which either remain unelucidated in the text or which Jünger tries vainly to sublimate, are in themselves enough to rob the text of all coherence and argumentative clarity. Elsewhere in the book, however, Jünger takes the deconstructive impulse further by exploring the problems involved in developing coherent and objective argumentation in the first place and by giving voice yet again to his own sense of absurdity.

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<sup>8</sup> This takes the form of his resistance to inscription in the banalities of newspaper heroism. Thus he writes: ‘Nein, wir sind nicht die Wachspuppenhelden, die man so gern aus uns macht. Unser Blut wird von Leidenschaften und Gefühlen durchfegt, von denen man am Teetisch keine Ahnung hat’ (pp. 105-06).

### 8.3 Theory and Language in Crisis

#### 8.3.1 Crisis of Theory

At two key junctures in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*,<sub>1</sub> Jünger questions the use and validity of theorising about the War. The first, written in the historic present, addresses the sense of fear which completely overwhelms the attempts of the modern consciousness to rationalise its experience and thus create an impervious, armoured ego:

Was hilft es, Philosoph zu sein und sich drei Wochen lang für diese Stunde [going on a raid – JK] gestählt zu haben, bis man sich hart und ohne Blöße glaubte? Was hilft es, daß man zu sich sagte: “Der Tod? Ha, was ist das weiter? Ein Übergang, der sich doch nicht vermeiden läßt.” Das hilft alles nichts, denn plötzlich ist man aus einem denkenden ein empfindendes Wesen geworden, ein Spielball von Phantomen, die auch die Waffe der schärfsten Vernunft wie ein Nichts durchgleitet. Das sind Faktoren, die wir zu leugnen pflegen, weil wir mit ihnen nicht rechnen können (pp. 72-73).

However, Jünger goes even further than this to disarm reason in its confrontation with modern warfare. In a conversation he (re)-creates with a fellow officer, Botho,<sup>9</sup> the two men address the gulf between real experience and the interpretative systems imposed upon it:

Zwischen Leben und Philosophie liegt eine Welt. Bei uns Abendländern wenigstens. Das ist auch eine der Zwiespaltigkeiten, unter denen wir Deutschen, das Volk Nietzsches, schwer leiden (p. 91).

This dichotomy between experience and theory, body and *ratio* is fundamental to understanding Jünger’s self-deconstructive early texts since their principal aim is to force these and other opposites back together into a meaningful whole whilst acknowledging — here quite explicitly — that this is impossible. Or, in other words, Jünger is conceding, via Nietzsche, the failure of classical modernity to provide a self-sufficient system that could account for its own radicalisation, thereby deconstructing all his previous and subsequent assertions. Although this sense of crisis is symptomatic of modernity’s as a whole from the second half of the 19th Century onwards, Jünger focuses on the dislocated bourgeois intellectual veteran contemplating life in the early Weimar Republic:

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<sup>9</sup> Botho is not named in the *Kriegstagebuch*. The conversation does, however, prefigure, much of the interaction between the intellectual characters in *Sturm*. As a figure, Botho is said to have been a painter in Rome before he War broke out (p. 91) — he thus resembles the Hegershoff of *Sturm*, who had likewise been painting in Rome. Cf. also note 17, p. 219 below.

Unzählige sterben und wissen nicht wofür, Unzählige für ein Vaterland, das vielleicht schon morgen sich selbst verleugnen wird. Vielleicht wird ein Friede geschlossen, der alles so läßt, wie es vorm Krieg war. Der Krieg wird ganz einfach liquidiert. Wofür ist dann alles gewesen? Wofür? (p. 92).

Although Jünger protests ‘Und es hat doch einen Sinn’ (p. 93),<sup>10</sup> he leaves any meaning unspecified and his assertion of meaning thus becomes a hollow statement of faith tacked onto the end of a clear confession of despair over the possibility of ever finding such a meaning. The only solution that Jünger suggests in this passage is a form of actionism, supposedly prefigured by the Italian poet D’Annunzio, which would be constituted in ‘de[m] Brennpunkt der Tat’ (p. 92). Such actionism, silencing words by deeds, anticipates the insistent calls for revolution in his political journalism which can thus be seen as an attempt to escape from the crisis of theory.

### 8.3.2 The Instability of “The World”

Not only does Jünger put a question-mark over the validity of his theoretical reflections, he also reflects on whether an objective world actually exists for philosophy to reflect on. In the introductory section to *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*<sub>1</sub>, he takes up an idea which was to become an article of post-structuralist faith — that the world, or rather our model of the world, is constituted by discourse, or text:

Was man während des rasenden Tanzes zum Abgrund empfand, läßt sich wie jedes seelische Erleben nur umschreiben, nicht beschreiben. Greifbares und Urteil ließen sich naturgemäß nicht vermeiden, sind aber nicht das Wesentliche. Das Tatsächliche ist nur Frage des Stoffes, der daraus gezogene Schluß Frage des Verstandes, der Herkunft und Erziehung; alles könnte ganz anders sein, ohne daß der Inhalt berührt würde.

Individualität und die wechselnden Lichter unserer seltsamen Zeit stürzen aus einem Widerspruch in den anderen. Wir leben im Chaotischen, im Wirbel von Licht und Schatten wie selten zuvor. So muß ein Bild der Seele aus Hoffnung und Verzweiflung, aus Ja und Nein, aus Sinn und Widerspruch zugleich sich fügen (pp. 3-4).

Here, Jünger describes with a startling lucidity the problems he was facing as a writer and intellectual: first, language is incapable of providing a ‘Beschreibung’ of the world; and second, all theory is relative, unable to deliver a closed and coherent model of life and the

<sup>10</sup> The use of the word ‘Wofür’ has an unusual personal note since it recalls one of the most striking passages of despair in the *Kriegstagebuch* (6, 3 July 1916). Cf. p. 146.

world because every theory is liable to be the object of further theoretical consideration, thus creating the disorientation produced in a discursive polyphony which no longer permitted any archimedean point from which to work out a satisfactory account either of the War or, despite his assertion that a world *an sich* still existed, of the world as a whole. And as we have seen, Jünger's attempts to produce a 'Bild der Seele' failed to mould the discrete elements into a whole in the way that his neatly patterned list of opposites suggested would happen. The discrepancies were too radical.

Jünger specified his relativist account in two important areas. First, he declared time to be a key factor in reformulating memory and thus our view of the past, which consequently ceases to have any objective value:

Ja, ja, so war es. Wir hatten alles fein überlegt. Und wenn wir die Sache in zehn Jahren erzählen, so wird sie noch in ganz anderen Farben schillern, denn die Zeit ist der beste Romantiker. Und wenn wir in fünfzig Jahren noch leben [...], dann werden diese in Kampf und Feuer zertobten Jahre wie eine ferne und stolze Insel zu uns herüberschimmern (p. 106).

Second, Jünger is aware of the power of the media to construct world views and criticises the short-sighted partiality of the press:

Und ist es doch auch nicht das Schrecklichste, daß sie uns töten wollen, sondern daß sie uns unaufhörlich mit ihrem Haß übergießen, daß sie uns nie anders nennen als Boches, Hunnen, Barbaren. Das erbittert. [...]. Wir sind selbst nicht besser [...]. Schreibt einer von der Kultur des Anderen, so kann er sich nie verkneifen, sie in Anführungsstriche zu fassen. Na ja, in hundert Jahren wird man vermutlich darüber lachen [...]. Zu jeder Betrachtung gehört eben Abstand. Abstand in Raum, Zeit und Geist (p. 63).

Jünger is thus keenly aware that all judgements are essentially preliminary, all writing a vain attempt to fix a reality, that even as past, is in constant flux, subject to the dynamics of memory and socio-political circumstances. Through this critique of the logocentrism of classical modernity he has already deconstructed any claims his book may make to answer its central question 'Was ging am Grunde vor?'

### 8.3.3 Crisis of Language

The exaggerated, distorted, pathos-laden language of *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* has attracted considerable attention from critics who have traced its indebtedness to Expressionism. For Helmut Mörchen (1973), the book as a whole is characterised by a

‘schwülstige quasi-expressionistische Metaphorik’.<sup>11</sup> Hans-Harald Müller argues that Jünger uses expressionist literary style to celebrate the Dionysiac and elemental whilst at the same time paradoxically rejecting modernist art.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Jünger himself expresses his admiration for the language of Expressionism: ‘Wenn ich im Unterstande Hefte der jüngsten Kunst durchblättere, finde ich vieles, das auch mich bewegt. Noch ist es ein Stammeln, wenigen verständlich und doch ein fernes Wetterleuchten’ (p. 82).<sup>13</sup> Karl Prümm has examined in detail the affinities between *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>* and expressionist prose,<sup>14</sup> and described how ‘der Text entgleitet der Kontrolle des Autors’ (I, p. 137). But this self-deconstructive process is, as we have seen, located at a deeper level than Jünger’s style and cannot simply be explained away by asserting Jünger’s stylistic incompetence. Rather, we should look to Jünger’s own account of the inability of language to describe the world and its failure as a tool of communication which completes his critique of the logocentric view of language.

At a number of significant junctures Jünger forcefully states that human language can fragment and be supplanted by new systems of communication. Trench conversation thus consists of: ‘Wortfetzten, abgerissen wie die kurzen Hiebe draußen zerschellender Geschosse’ (pp. 25-26). In the strange world of the Western Front, he writes, language is no longer adequate and only the screams of the dying carry full meaning: ‘Sie treffen die Seele unmittelbar, alle Sprachen und Gedichte sind dagegen nur ein Gestammel’ (p. 98).

Here, Jünger is diagnosing a crisis of human language and its powers of signification, a key aspect of much modernist writing. Furthermore, he recognises a new language, spoken by a new subject for in this book, artillery always ‘speaks’: ‘Ihre Sprache

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<sup>11</sup> Helmut Mörchen, *Schriftsteller in der Massengesellschaft: Zur politischen Essayistik und Publizistik Heinrich und Thomas Manns, Kurt Tucholskys und Ernst Jüngers während der Zwanziger Jahre* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1973), p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> *Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller*, p. 252.

<sup>13</sup> The *Kriegstagebuch*, however, gives no indication that he had any interest in avant-garde literary journals. The reference is thus most likely the result of his acquaintance with Steegemann in Hanover.

<sup>14</sup> Prümm, pp. 142-43.

ist jedem verständlich' (p. 97). Indeed, it is not just the artillery which speaks as an autonomous subject, the whole process of battle that Jünger had described in the *Militärwochenblatt* becomes an acting subject, displacing man from the centre to position of subjugation: 'Jedes Ding hat seine Sprache, der Mechanismus des Kampfes arbeitet klirrend und überspannt die Menschen mit einem Netze aus Feuer und Stahl' (p. 103). It is typical of the early Jünger not to examine the devastating implications of such a diagnosis, particularly in a book dedicated to producing a meaningful framework within which to understand the War, thereby recentring Man and theory. But by ascribing the modern dream of a universally understandable language to technical systems and casting profound doubt on the efficacy of human language to describe the world we can see how Jünger is once more deconstructing the entire premises on which *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>* is based which assume an essential harmony between subject, language and world.

#### **8.4 Time and the Absurd**

*Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>* does not merely confront the impossibility of its self-appointed task through its desperate exploration of discursive reflexivity and linguistic decentring. As with the *Kriegstagebuch* and *In Stahlgewittern<sub>1</sub>*, it is unable to silence the sense of the absurd which lurks behind the patchwork of citation and assertion. Indeed, the text is full of phrases which explicitly elaborate a radical sense of absurdity and dislocation. Thus he writes of battle as 'furchtbar in ihrer irrsinnigen Zwecklosigkeit' (p. 16) and as a 'Mückentanz' (p. 99). He suggests that the soldier: 'fühlt sich als Marionette, die tanzen muß, um bösen Geistern dämonische Freude zu bereiten' (p. 81). He refines this metaphor into a precise recognition of the decentring nature of industrial warfare when he writes of his soldiers: 'Material, das ist der richtige Ausdruck. So ungefähr wie Kohle, die man unter die glühenden Kessel des Krieges schleudert, damit das Werk im Gange bleibt' (p. 80). Here, there are no illusions of heroism or certainty in theory and meta-narrative.

### 8.4.1 Extravagant Metaphors

When examined more closely, Jünger's use of extravagant metaphor in this book has the effect of contributing to that sense of absurdity. Metaphors of storm-tossed seas, frozen wastelands and deserts tend, for all their much-criticised naturalising direction, not so much to make the War harmless, as to transpose it into a language which vividly suggests exposure and absence of meaning and life. Jünger writes, for example, 'Auf diesen nächtlichen Gängen durch zuckende Wüste war das Herz so einsam und verwaist, als ob es pendelnd über dem tödlichen Schimmer vereister Meere schwänge. Alle Wärme wurde verschlungen von lauernder Unerbitterlichkeit rundum' (p. 13). Ruined houses become: 'wie ein Wrack am Grunde des Meeres' (p. 14). Troops holding out are: 'ein Fähnlein eherner Gesellen [das hielt] sich endlose Tage im Gewölk der Schlacht [...] wie Schiffbrüchige im Orkan an zertrümmerte Masten' (p. 14).<sup>15</sup> Jünger also transposes the War, more extravagantly than in *In Stahlgewittern*<sub>1</sub>, into the other worldly spheres of late medieval visions of Hell: 'Das konnte doch keine irdische Landschaft sein, dieser höllische Tanzplatz des Todes, an den Rändern von gelblichen Flammen umfaßt' (p. 14). All these metaphors suggest that the individual is abandoned in an infinite space of suffering that is unbounded by space or time and thus beyond the comprehension of temporally conditioned reason. Thus, the metaphorical eternities that Jünger invokes give expression to his unresolved sense of absurdity.

### 8.4.2 Time as Absurd

Later on in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*<sub>1</sub> Jünger becomes more concrete in his elaboration of the relationship between time and the absurd, writing instead of the relationship between exposed subjectivity and the sense of the absurd. Why should he write of 'Die Folterbänken der Zeit' (p. 80)? Or why, describing the moments before an assault, should he write:

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<sup>15</sup> Compare the metaphors of flow in *Sturm*. Cf. Chapter 9.7.2, p. 239 below.

Wir haben die vorderste Linie erreicht und treffen die letzten Vorbereitungen. Wir sind emsig und genau, denn wir spüren Drang, uns zu betätigen, die Zeit zu füllen, um uns selbst zu entfliehen. Die Zeit, die uns im Graben schon so unendlich gemartert hat, ein Begriff, der alle denkbare Qual umschließt, eine Kette, die nur den Tod zersprengt. Vielleicht schon in Minuten. Ich weiß, man empfindet bewußt, wie das entströmende Leben ins Meer der Ewigkeit verrauscht; ich habe schon manchmal an der Grenze gestanden (p. 73).

Here, Jünger is constituting time as torture and absurdity, inscribing within it the awful realisation of his own instrumentalisation and the flight of meaning. The comfortable, regulated, regular time of his pre-war existence, oppressive because of its institutionalised role in the life of the educated bourgeoisie, was radicalised by the industrialised military whose mechanised weaponry depended on a mechanised time which overrode and then destroyed the fundamental connection between time and culturally generated meanings. Jünger is rewriting his temporal experience of the War in what was for him the cultural vacuum of the early Weimar Republic and, unconstrained by the stringent chronology of the *Kriegstagebuch* or *In Stahlgewittern*, produced a much more impressionistic textual account in which the experience of absurdity tends to accumulate in extreme experiences of time. Moreover, it is within these extreme experiences that reason reaches its limits most dramatically. It thus confronts the subject with its own vulnerability by failing to produce any satisfactory sense of meaning, let alone recentring the subject as observing, categorising and theorising master of events. It is this experience that leads Jünger to his metaphors of eternal absurdity.

### 8.4.3 The Horrific Moment

But Jünger does not locate absurdity just in his eternal wastelands, he also finds it in singular instants of horror.<sup>16</sup> In *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>* he stylises his first encounter with a corpse as follows: ‘Der erste Tote, unvergeßlicher Augenblick, der Herzblut zu stockenden Eiskristallen zerfror. Da bäumte sich in jedem das Grauen auf:

<sup>16</sup> Bohrer argues that Jünger depicts horror as an aesthetic experience, self-sufficient in its own right. What we see in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>*, however, is that for Jünger it is *not* self-sufficient — for why else would he even ask the question ‘Was ging am Grunde vor?’ Bohrer is more helpful when he points out that ‘Das “Grauen” Jüngers ist das Grauen einer mörderischen Sekunde’ (p. 151).

Blasser, scheuender Gaul vor nächtlichem Abgrund' (p. 13).<sup>17</sup> Again we are dealing with an extreme experience of time — but again one that Jünger is constructing post-war. Let us look more closely at the Jüngerian encounter with horror. Ulrich Linse has suggested that 'Der absurde Augenblick markiert die Bruchstelle, das Zerreißen der Kontinuität alter Symbole — ohne daß schon ein neues Symbol bereitstände, das wieder Sinn stiften könnte. Der absurde Augenblick ist ein Moment der Verlorenheit und der Suche'.<sup>18</sup> Jünger, however, goes further than this. For in the experience of horror, the 'absurd moment', Jünger perceives beyond normal reality and experiences an epiphanic moment in which incomprehension is overcome by intuited revelation:

Entriß sich dann plötzlich in ihrer Mitte ein Glutstrahl der Erde, so trieb ein Schrei von erschütternder Erkenntnis ins Unendliche. Dann mochte den Hirnen im letzten Feuer der dunkle Vorhang des Grauens jäh emporgerauscht sein, doch was dahinter auf der Lauer lag, das konnte der erstarrte Mund nicht mehr verkünden (p. 18).

It is significant that this revelation cannot be articulated and is located beyond language, reason and any metaphysics and is thus wholly unmodern in nature.

#### 8.4.4 Epiphanic Moments

The epiphanic moment is of crucial importance in Jünger's work as a whole and is thematised here for the first time. We saw in Chapter 4.4.3 (p. 114 above) how he had begun to experiment with drugs and had sought meaning in intoxication during this period, constantly seeking to recreate moments in which intimations of significance promised to overcome the crisis of theory and language. In *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*<sub>1</sub> this aspect received particular attention as Jünger rewrites the drunken hooliganism of the mess into an almost sacramental experience or into a search for escape from the shackles of time, suspending that oppressive mode of consciousness which was all too aware of its own instrumentalisation and vulnerability. Exploring shifting and unstable experiences of time in an attempt to find some form of redemption or escape is, however, wholly to reject a

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<sup>17</sup> Jünger is presumably referring to the shelling of Orainville. Neither the *Kriegstagebuch* nor *In Stahlgewittern*<sub>1</sub> describes explicitly the experience of seeing his first corpses.

classical modernity based upon stable, sober, reasonable and precise observations of a supposedly objective reality constituted substantially by a supposedly regular and measurable objective time.

#### 8.4.5 Erotic Escapes

Jünger not only writes about seeking escape through chemical intoxication or in action through the extreme effect on the brain of stress hormones such as adrenaline. He also characterises erotic encounters as flights out of time into a state of suspended bliss.

Describing in sentimental and idealised terms one such ‘typical’ relationship he writes:

Da lagen in einer Bauernkammer zwei Menschen unter groben Linnen aneinander und fühlten sich für kurze Stunden geborgen an der Grenze der Vernichtung, wohl sicher wie zwei junge Vögel in der Höhe eines Baumes, wenn knarrend nächtliche Wälder sich im Sturmwind wiegen. Vielleicht ein Student, ein pikardisches Bauernmädchen [...]. Nun waren sie ganz Empfindung, zwei Herzen ineinander brennend in eisiger Welt [...]. Dann mochte diese Minute eine Ahnung von der Seele ihres Landes in ihm entzünden, heller als die Weisheit aller Bücher und aller hohen Schulen. Denn was ist Verständnis des Hirnes gegen das des Herzens? (p. 35)

The tone in which this is written suggests an idealised re-writing of his relationship with Jeanne.<sup>19</sup> Here, a sexual encounter is a suspension of the oppressive world of the front, an intimation of a wholly different sphere and a celebration of the body, cast sentimentally as ‘Verständnis des Herzens’. In this experience the inadequacies of rationality are overcome by privileging sensuality, a move which as much pre-figures the post-modern rediscovery of the body as it reiterates the long-standing right-radical cultural critique of classical modernity.

In a crucial passage of *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, Jünger relates an incident which centres on the relationship between an oppressive sense of absurdity and a flight out of time through a sexual encounter. Here the protagonists are an ‘Ich’ and the wife of a

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<sup>18</sup> Ulrich Linse, ‘Das Wahre Zeugnis: Eine psychohistorische Deutung des Ersten Weltkriegs’ in *Vondung, Kriegserlebnis*, pp. 90-114 (p. 98).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Noack, pp. 39-40 and *In Stahlgewittern*<sub>3</sub>, pp. 58-60. Jeanne is first mentioned in *Ktb 4* (17 April 1916) as an old girlfriend from Quéant where he had been stationed in December 1915. We also learn that she was a single mother (14 May 1916) and that Jünger was involved in minor machinations on her behalf (21 May 1916). The affair appears to have ended soon afterwards.

*In Stahlgewittern*<sub>3</sub> refers to *In Stahlgewittern. Aus dem Tagebuch eines Stoßtruppführers* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1924).

Walloon worker, but the narrative is strangely unspecific — all we learn is that it takes place in a suburb (of Lille) called Mouvaux.<sup>20</sup> Walking out to the suburb from the cultured town centre, the narrator finds himself leaning against the railings of a canal bridge, where he undergoes a crushing encounter with the absurdity of existence, an absurdity that goes beyond the horror of the Front. The canal becomes an image of a meaningless life — the narrator does not know where it flows from or too, and all that is seen on it is a black barge, ‘ein langer, schwarzer Sarg’ (p. 67). On this grey day the buildings around him become absurd, similar in a way to the battlefield, being full of ‘Objekte zu denen wir jede Beziehung verloren’ (p. 71). Jünger then elaborates once more his ever-present feeling of existential absurdity and describes the cultural crisis of classical modernity in terms of nuclear physics and the strange quest of Cervantes’s hero

Der Raum zergleitet in kalte Unendlichkeit und ich empfinde mich als winziges Atom, von tückischen Gewalten rastlos umhergewirbelt. Ich bin so müde, so überdrüssig, daß ich wünsche, tot zu sein. Ein Landsknecht, ein fahrender Ritter, ein Don Quixote, der manche Lanzen zersplittert und dessen Trugbilder in höhnisches Gelächter zerfließen. Ich fühle mit unzweifelhafter Klarheit, daß irgendein fremder Sinn, eine furchtbare Bedeutung hinter allem Geschehen lauert. Das habe ich schon manchmal gewußt auf dem Grunde toller Räusche oder in würgenden Träumen, ich habe es nur im wogenden Leben wieder vergessen. Über solche Dinge pflegt man zu lachen, wenn man frisch und gesund im Lichte schreitet; treten sie an uns heran, so zersplittert im Nu alle Erkenntnis wie Glas und wie der Traum einer Nacht. Jeder hat Ähnliches erlebt, aber er vergißt es, weil er es vergessen muß (p. 68).

Here, Jünger is intimating that it is precisely his classically modern education and consequent internalisation of its precepts that makes the intuition of the abyss so intolerable. He then meets a woman on the bridge and they go back to her flat for sex. Their time together is ‘eine Stunde des Vergessens, die ich dem Kriege stehle’ (p. 69), much as the night with the farm girl was. Yet here it is described much more in terms of an escape from a crisis of theory. Of the woman he writes:

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<sup>20</sup> The passage is based on a real experience, cf. *Ktb* 12, 4 November 1917: ‘Wir genießen nach der Flandernschlacht natürlich in vollen Zügen die Annehmlichkeiten der großen Stadt. Ich lernte eine Strohwitwe in der Vorstadt Mouvaux kennen. Das “Bonne chance, je ne t’oublierai pas” beim Abschied klang echt und herzlich’.

Ihr Kreis ist klein, doch steht sie ganz im Mittelpunkt. Ich beneide sie darum, der ich grübelnd hineinstarren muß und dem das Leben bald als geschliffener Karfunkel, bald als rätselhaft schimmernder Opal, bald als das wurmzerfressene Gesicht einer Leiche erscheint. Und je mehr ich jage und kämpfe, je heftiger ich es umarme, je tiefer ich hineintauche, desto mehr verzweifle ich an seiner unergründlichen Tiefe (p. 69).

Jünger is jealous of her centredness, her simple life without all the intellectual complications that clutter his and make it unbearable. Life for him constantly refuses to reveal its true nature, it is ‘unergründlich’ and thus wholly beyond the questioning which lies at the heart of modern theorising and its hegemonic project.

### **8.5 Conclusions — Failure of a textual project**

What we have seen in this brief analysis of *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis<sub>1</sub>* is a text laden with contradictions. In it, Jünger’s conservative imagination once more pursues in vain the classical modern project of questioning the environment and experience in order to produce theoretical models that would ensure Man’s centredness and control. Everywhere in the text, however, the project falters and collapses. Meta-historical postulations are cited without regard for either actual experience or for compatibility, depriving themselves and each other of such vestiges of meaning that inhere in them. Jünger’s reflexive passages, suddenly aware of their own relativity, work further to undermine the modern project in this book. His elucidation of the crisis of language and his awareness of the discursive construction of ‘the world’ combine to destabilise this supposedly objective ‘world’ together with modernity which so needed it. This destabilisation is the result of the still unresolved feeling of absurdity which is expressed most fully in Jünger’s descriptions of a destabilised time. Paradoxically, it is also in the experience of destabilised, undisciplined forms of time that Jünger begins to write of a sense of epiphany and ineffable significance, itself a further disruption of the classical modern project. But in 1922 he retained a conservative commitment to a fundamentally modern quest for coherent interpretation and the result is a text spinning centrifugally out of control, attempting to hold itself together whilst acknowledging that it cannot do so. Indeed, the one thing holding the text together may be the binding around the printed text. The result of this second failure was a major

change of direction on Jünger's part as is witnessed by his attempts to break free of the classical modern assumptions of the conservative imagination in his story *Sturm* (1923), to which we shall now turn.