

In Stahlgewittern

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June 30 - July 9, 2009

Als ich schwer auf die Sohle des Grabens schlug, hatte ich die Überzeugung, daß es unwiderrufflich zu Ende war. Und seltsamerweise geht dieser Augenblicke zu den ganz wenigen, von denen ich sagen kann, daß sie wirklich glücklich gewesen sind. In ihm begriff ich, wie durch einen Blitz erleuchtet, mein Leben in seiner innersten Gestalt. Ich spürte ein ungläubiges Erstaunen darüber, daß es gerade hier zu Ende sein sollte, aber dieses Erstaunen war von einer sehr heiteren Art. Dann hrte ich das Feuer immer schwcher werden, als snke ich wie ein Stein tief unter die Oberflche eines brausenden Wassers hinab. Dort war weder Krieg noch Feindschaft mehr¹.

Was this the end of the author - the young lieutenant Ernst Jünger, who up to now had enjoyed such luck? Wounded several times, but always so lightly, the bullets always avoiding critical organs, passing though, making little scath. Up to twenty scars he had received, but all his wounds had healed so quickly and allowed him such speedy recoveries and prompt returns to the fields of battle. However, it is only to be expected that sooner or later, it is after all a matter of statistics inured to the wishes of men and interferences by gods, that the fateful bullet or grenade, will put an end, even to the most blessed of careers.

He was indeed severely wounded, the lungs filled with blood, lying in a trench, temporarily gained from the enemies, thus close to their approaching lines. The raid in which he had led his men, having met with superior force, had been surrounded, and were about to be exterminated. Nevertheless, he quickens after a brief period of unconsciousness, a fellow officer removes tightening clothes, and then he summons reserves of strengths, coughs blood, find the breathing easier as a result, and manages to escape capture. And eventually with the aid of sacrificing fellow comrades, he is able to reach relative safety and medical assistance, after a sequence of lucky breaks indeed. However, it would mark the end of his active duty in the First World War (as it some twenty years later would be referred to), a war in which he had participated for three years.

He was not yet twenty when he was sent to the front as a private (later on he would return as an officer quickly rising in the hierarchy, and after his final mission be awarded Die Order pour la mérite by the Kaiser). It was all very exciting, as it no doubt were to many other young men. He thoroughly enjoys the war, despite some occasional discomforts

¹ As I hit the ground of the trench hard, I was convinced that it was irrevocably the end. And strangely those moments belong to the rather few of which I can say that they were really happy. As in a flash, I understood the deepest essence of my life. I felt a unbelievable surprise that it was exactly here it would all end. But this surprise was of a most joyous kind. Then the sound of firing became ever weaker, as if I sank like a stone under the surface of whirling water. There no longer were war nor peace where I was.

such as cold and rain and bad food. What is so exciting about war, because his attitudes, perverse as they may be conceived of today, were rather widely shared. Certainly war is a big undertaking for a common goal, no matter how vague and elusive, and as such makes you forget yourself and your petty worries and concern. Such merging of an individual consciousness into a collective one, is for most people, if not all, a source of exhilaration and deep happiness. And certainly if not bestowing happy contentment at least liberation from private mental anguish, as many studies seem to have confirmed. True, there are alternative ways of achieving it, with no hang-over effects to boot, but that does not detract from the fact that war is a way of achieving it, and for many maybe the most accessible one.

True, most people are miserable in war, initial exuberance may be there, but the harsh realities soon rid people of such illusions. But not Jünger, he preserved his good spirits and enthusiasm to the very end. Should we think of him as a psychopath, a pervert who glorified the horrible, at best a kind of Marquis de Sade of war? Such accusations would be unfair, after all for generations the backbone of political rhetoric has been fashioned out of a glorification of war and personal courage and sacrifice for the sake of the Nation. Jünger is one of the few who knew of what he was talking and writing about. After all Jünger is a healthy young man, with a lot of mental and physical vitality, which has in some way to be channeled. Warfare seems to be the ideal outlet for such excesses. The young naturally see themselves as immortal, in fact the Polish travel-writer Kapuscinsky has remarked that no soldiers are more cruel than those who are children. They fear no death, nor do they have any capacity for empathy, thus they turn into monsters. Jünger is quite no longer a child, but much of his outlook is that of the young man who does still have childhood in fresh memory. He takes the hardships in stride, he sleeps well, often through grenade-attacks that send lesser mortals for cover, and assumes a fatalistic attitude. The notions of honor and bravery become transcendental values, applicable equally to friend or foe. He admires his British opponents as far as they show grim courage, and states that he always takes the responsibility for the well-fare of his prisoners seriously. This does not prevent him from shooting them in cold blood, if circumstances so demand. Although his sentiments are shared by many, what makes him rather unique is his literary depiction of his experiences. He is not of a truly reflective temperament, if he was,, he would certainly not find such satisfaction in his activities; but that does not mean that he is not observant. His account is imbued with the aesthetic sensibility of a graphic poet. Everything is turned into a kind of beauty, a horrible beauty maybe, but as has often been said, the essence of beauty is horror. He paints the landscape of war. Wasted fields littered with craters. He notes how buildings and entire villages are being ground down by shelling. How the naked forests present a ghostly landscape. He observes the glowing light of sunrises upon the scarred fields. In particular he makes a note of how everyone around him dies. How people get shot between the eyes, how helmets are penetrated by bullets, how they can split skulls, and how through their splintered holes brains can pulsate in still living victims. He notes the pallid color of the skin of those soon to die, the sad and empty expression of their eyes. Some are rendered asunder by explosions, remnants to be scraped from walls. He notes gruesome bodies and covers them under cloth to save the sight from such sores. Putrified remnants of dead soldiers are ubiquitous, there are everywhere where heavy fighting have

taken place. Anonymous, unidentifiable corpses, doomed to unknown graves. Nothing really escapes him, he takes the bad with the good.

The expectation of sweet victory keeps up the soldiers morale, just as an achieved victory excuses his morals. The point of war is victory, and it is only if we forget this, that war becomes so meaningless. There is meaning to war, and that meaning is of course victory and nothing else. When the grand attacks of the spring of 1918 dissipated, Jünger for the first time starts to think that victory might turn out to be elusive after all, and what remains is the negative objective of not to be defeated. But with the loss of victory, the meaning of it all starts to fade, and even as he can still muster himself to the task, he becomes more and more alienated by his role. In the end he realizes that victory will be impossible, as the opponents are able to summon more men, more material, more firepower. Modern wars are not won by valor but by superior material abundance. So indeed, his last mission was undertaken with less than total heart.

War for a soldier is a local affair. He has no sense of over-all strategy, and that goes for the officer as well as the lowly private. The regiment is the largest unit a man can really identify with, Jünger notes. The ulterior national incentive, as well as the notion of victory, are abstract notions, beyond the horizon, and as such equivalent to say a belief in God. In Jüngers account you get no overall feeling of what is happening, what matters are the local skirmishes, the orders to attack, to take prisoner, to spy. All local adventure, similar to those in say a book by a Karl May. What is noted and appreciated is the individual acts of courage, and what matters apparently is the social cohesion, the sense of loyalty to your immediate comrades, the reluctance to let them down. It is life under extreme conditions, in which your friends die right and left, but one to which we seem strangely able to adjust. Most deaths are matter of indifference, it could not be otherwise, only a few touches him deeply, when people close to him in life and sympathy are felled. Occasionally the anonymous body of a fallen enemy can send shocks through his spine, haunt him in sleep, and make him temporarily reflect on the waste, the tragedy.

Many readers of Jünger professes shock, even if they may admire the writing a such. I must admit that I also belonged to that category, when I first became aware of him. His glorification of war, or rather his glorification of an individuals resourcefulness in war and his personal valor and courage, are clearly out-dated. Of course they still are expressed, but almost never in any kind of serious literature. This is of course a good thing, on the other hand we should be wary of self-complacency, such glorifications stem from deep human sources and cannot be so easily eradicated, if denied expression one way, they are bound to find others. His being German, and being a participant of both world wars (he served as an officer in Paris) has naturally exposed him to the accusation of being a Nazi, or at least embodying their elitist fantasies. Surely is he not the role-model for the SS-officer? Ruthless in battle, sophisticated in culture, and with a firm belief in his own mental and moral superiority. No doubt he provided such, and many German officers in the second world war did find inspiration in his example, and more significantly many of them already embodied the same values and temperament which he gave such beautiful articulation. And indeed the German Wehrmacht was technically superior to any of its opponents, being defeated by a combination of strategic insanity on the part of their own

leaders ² and the material superiority of their opponents. (But of course the real reasons for the perceived superiority of the German forces must be far more complicated and not so easily reducible to such sentimental ones). Be it as it may, it can be instructive to compare a Jünger to a Celine. When the latter fled to Denmark to escape the consequences of his collaboration, Jünger remarked that it is curious that people who call for the heads of millions, take their own dirty little lives so seriously.

Had Jünger not been a German, or at least been born during a different era, such accusations would never have been levied against him. In what sense is his enthusiasm for warfare different from that of the youthful Tolstoy? In the fiction of the latter there abounds in expressive accounts of battles, as well as hunting. War of the kind that Jünger and Tolstoy were exposed to and took such pleasure in is like hunting, with the added element of fairness that the hunter is as much as physical risk as the hunted. And one should not forget that the pleasure in hunting, does not preclude a 'love of animal' (one of the sources for the ecological movement can be found among hunters concern that their prey were endangered), likewise a true horror and respect for war can only be found among those with an intimate relation to it. And indeed Tolstoy became a pacifist in his old age, just as he became a celibate, both reactions against youthful excesses. Or why not take a more relevant example - Churchill. The latter took great pleasure in colonial wars. Lacking the vitality and dexterity of a young Jünger his thirst for blood was mostly vicarious, which of course did not prevent him from satisfying it more effectively when sufficiently positioned in the change of command. In what sense was Churchill more humane than Jünger? Of course he is now seen as the very embodiment of the struggle against Nazism, although he no doubt shared more of their values than we would like to admit, and was in particular not above the perpetration of atrocities. But such questions are moot, because as we noted above. The ultimate motivation for war is victory, and with victory everything is forgiven and forgotten.

No matter what, Jünger, at least as a young man, believed in an aristocracy of being, that some men were more worthy than others, that those who lacked courage did not really measure up. One may term such an attitude to life as fascist, and then label him as such, and with that label condemn him. This has been done. Yet the issues are always more complicated than this, the opinions and convictions of a man, are like his clothes, dear to him as individual expressions, but ultimately discardable. And one should not forget that similar elitist attitudes are still very much prevalent, often in the disguise of being anti-elitist.

Jünger not only survived his war-time wounds but lived on until a ripe old age indeed, dying a month or so short of his 103rd birthday in 1998. Testifying no doubt to his congenital mental and physical vitality.

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² In all fairness the reckless schemes advocated by a Hitler, probably added to their initial spectacular successes, against the advice of more cautious generals, just as the same recklessness would later prove equally disastrous.