

## ERNST JÜNGER & THE FRENCH NEW RIGHT

The New Right obviously did not have to introduce Ernst Jünger's name in France. When the New Right appeared at the end of the 1960s, the author of *On the Marble Cliffs* was already well-known to the French public. Indeed, Jünger was surely the German writer most famous and most read on this side of the Rhine. This situation, which always astonishes the Germans, is explained multiple ways.

Jünger, first of all, was translated relatively early: his principal works on the First World War appeared at the beginning of the 1930s, and they immediately made him famous.<sup>1</sup> But above all, France played a leading role in Jünger's career, as well as in his life and his spiritual and literary formation. Since his youthful escapade in the Foreign Legion, since the terrible experience of the trenches, France never ceased to occupy a significant place in Jünger's heart, evident in the many relations he maintained with French people, his reading of Barrès or Leon Bloy, but also the translations that he himself made of the *Maxims* of Rivarol or texts by Guy de Maupassant and Paul Léautaud.

Finally, Jünger had the good fortune to always find French translators of great talent, from Henri Thomas and Henri Plard to Julien Hervier and François Poncet, acutely sensitive to his style and his thought to render all their nuances.

"I think," said Jünger in 1973, "that the French can appreciate when a German presents himself as such instead of seeking at all costs to assume a face that is not his."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Orages d'acier. Souvenirs du front de France* (= *In Stahlgewittern* [*In Storms of Steel*]) (Paris: Payot, 1930); *Le boqueteau 125. Chronique des combats des tranchées 1918* (= *Das Wäldchen 125* [*Copse 125*]) (Paris: Payot, 1932); *La guerre notre mère* (= *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* [*Battle as Inner Experience*]) (Paris: Albin Michel, 1934).

<sup>2</sup> "Jünger s'explique" ["Jünger Explained"], interview with Jean-Louis de Rambures, *Le Monde*, February 22, 1973.

This celebrity, however, was won over a long time only at the price of a certain ambiguity. At least until around 1975, the French perceived Ernst Jünger as a figure belonging exclusively to the literary world. Of course the politico-historical background of his work was known, but he did not seem to be an actor in this period, and regarding his sojourn in Paris under the Occupation, for the most part, only his literary acquaintances were remembered (Jean Cocteau, Paul Morand, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, Sacha Guitry, Jean Giraudoux, Henry de Montherlant, Jean Schlumberger, etc.), mostly connected to the salon of Florence Gould. Hadn't Jünger himself described Paris as "the great city of books"?<sup>3</sup> His youthful political writings were completely ignored, at least by the general public. The names of Franz Schauwecker, Hugo Fischer, Ernst Niekisch, Friedrich Hielscher, and even Carl Schmitt were also unknown. In short, Jünger was seen as a writer and nothing else. Moreover, Jünger himself was apparently not only quite well-satisfied with this situation but contributed to it to its way, since he long refused to allow a French translation of his great book of 1932, *Der Arbeiter*.

However, it was precisely his untranslated books—which as a consequence had a kind of mythical aura—that quickly attracted the interest of the New Right. From the beginning of the 1960s, I myself knew only Jünger's books that had already been published in French. I had read, of course, his accounts of the First World War, but—perhaps unlike some of my friends—they had not impressed me, surely because of my lack of interest in military matters! *On the Marble Cliffs* (*Auf den Marmorklippen*) and *African Games* (*Afrikanische Spiele*) had interested me more, as did *Heliopolis* and especially the *Treatise of the Rebel or the Recourse to the Forests* (*Der Waldgang*). *The Universal State* (*Der Weltstaat*), on the other hand, rather repelled me.

Obviously, I owe the discovery of the "other Jünger" to my friend Armin Mohler. His *Handbuch der Konservative Revolution*, that I tried to decipher with my then rudimentary German, was a revelation. In this vast movement with its innumerable ramifications, I by no means saw a current of thought that was

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<sup>3</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Journal parisien* (*Pariser Tagebuch*), July 16, 1942.

merely a *Wegbereiter* with National Socialism, as has sometimes been said, but on the contrary, an alternative course whose development and a better structuring could perhaps have saved the world from the Hitlerian disaster.

In our conversations, Armin Mohler often spoke about Jünger, of whom he had been the private secretary for several years after the war and regarding which, on the basis of its own experience, he nourished rather ambivalent feelings. Whereas I found the young conservative movement the most interesting, politically and intellectually, he did not hide his predilection for the national revolutionary current. I was more reserved than him on the intrinsic value of the concepts of “nation” and “movement,” but the idea of revolution undeniably seduced me.

Thanks to Mohler, I discovered that Jünger had collaborated in “neonationalist” or *bündisch* journals like *Arminius*, *Die Standarte*, or *Die Kommenden*, that he had published *Der Arbeiter* and *Die total Mobilmachung*, that he was connected to the “National Bolshevik” Ernst Niekisch. I discovered also the drawings of A. Paul Weber, who made a big impression on me. All that is well-known today, but at the time it was, for me in any case, complete news.

I hastened to communicate my discoveries. I returned repeatedly to the *Handbuch der Konservative Revolution*, while promising myself someday to publish a translation.<sup>4</sup> The first result of these efforts was the republication by GRECE (Groupe-ment d’études et de recherche pour la civilisation européenne, the principal association of what was not yet called the New Right<sup>5</sup>) in the form of a small booklet of one of the rare texts already

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<sup>4</sup> That happened many years later, in the “Conservative Revolution” series that I edited for a few years: Armin Mohler, *La Révolution Conservatrice en Allemagne 1918–1932* (Puisseaux: Pardès, 1993). This translation, incorporating all the additions of the most recent German editions, included, moreover, an important book of photographs and an inventory of all the publications in France devoted to the Conservative Revolution. It is the only complete translation of Mohler’s book published.

<sup>5</sup> The expression of “New Right” was not initially a self-designation. It was invented by the media in 1979 to describe a current of thought that by then had already existed for more than ten years. This is why, conscious of the ambiguities that attach to it, I personally employ it as little as possible.

published in France on *Der Arbeiter*: Marcel Decombis, *Ernst Jünger et la « Konservative Revolution ». Une analyse de « Der Arbeiter »* [*Ernst Jünger and the “Konservative Revolution.” An analysis of “Der Arbeiter”*] (GRECE, Paris 1973). The work of a deceased Germanist, this text was augmented by a short bibliography and an original Foreword written by Armin Mohler, who presented Jünger’s work as “one of the rare great books of the century,” but also as an “erratic bloc” within his works, and qualified its publication in 1932 as an “extraordinary occurrence.” Speaking of *The Worker* and the first version of *The Adventurous Heart* (*Das Abenteuerliche Herz*), he later said: “Today still my hand cannot pick up these works without starting to tremble.”

In his Foreword, Mohler also said—with three repetitions—that *Der Arbeiter* was an “untranslatable” work. It did, however, end up being translated in 1989 by Julien Hervier,<sup>6</sup> without, moreover, really stirring up the polemics that Jünger had dreaded for some time.

At this time, I had not yet made Jünger’s personal acquaintance. However, on May 15th, 1977, as I took part in the International Book Festival in Nice for both *Figaro-Magazine* and Éditions Copernic, which had a stand there (I had just received the Grand Essay Prize of the l’Académie française for my book *Vu de droite*), I intended to introduce myself. I turned around and saw a man of medium height, very straight, with a helmet of white hair, who wore a velvet jacket over a fine turtleneck sweater. I did not recognize him at all. “Hello,” he said, “I am Ernst Jünger.” I was speechless. That day we talked for more than an hour. Photographs were taken. A great and beautiful memory.

Meanwhile, nearly ten years after the publication of the booklet of Marcel Decombis, I had collected enough documents regarding Jünger’s youthful “political” period to write my own study of *Der Arbeiter*. The first version was published at the end of 1981 in *Eléments*,<sup>7</sup> then another, far longer version appeared

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<sup>6</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Le Travailleur*, trans. Julien Hervier (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Alain de Benoist, “La Figure du Travailleur. Réflexions sur un livre méconnu d’Ernst Jünger,” in *Eléments* 40 (Winter 1981–82): 13–19.

two years later in *Nouvelle Ecole*.<sup>8</sup> The latter, which was followed by a translation of an article by Ernst Niekisch published in *Widerstand* in October 1932 (“Zu Ernst Jüngers neuem Buche”), was in fact a true monograph was later published as a book in Spanish and Italian translations.<sup>9</sup> I made an effort not only to present the principal concepts of *Der Arbeiter* and to trace the author’s development in the 1920s and 1930s by discussing some of the landmarks in the history of the national revolutionary movement, but also to show how the “problem of the Worker” continued to reappear in Jünger’s later works, obviously in different forms, particularly the evolution of his ideas on technology under the influence of his brother, Friedrich Georg Jünger. I presented *Der Arbeiter* as indispensable to the understanding of the transitional period defined as an “interregnum” between the reign of the Titans and that of the Gods. I also made many references to the thought of Carl Schmitt and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, with whom I had then familiarized myself.

On March 29th, 1985, Jünger’s 90th birthday, I sent him a telegram shortly after a public meeting in which I had taken part in Saint-Etienne. He thanked me with a short handwritten letter to which a photograph was attached. Ten years later, on March 25th, 1995, I sent him a letter which contained only these words: “Thank you for being alive.” To celebrate his centenary, the Club des Mille (the financial support association of the New Right) organized an evening in his honor on June 21st in Paris.

In 1996, I decided to devote a whole issue of *Nouvelle Ecole* to Jünger. The editorial that I signed there began with these words: “The 20th century is the century when the Nobel Prize was not given to Ernst Jünger. It is as good a way to define it as any other.” The issue included an interview with Jünger by his Spanish translator, Andrés Sánchez Pascual; essays by Armin Mohler, Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner, Werner Bräuninger, Marcus

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<sup>8</sup> Alain de Benoist, “Ernst Jünger : la Figure du travailleur entre les Dieux et les Titans,” in *Nouvelle Ecole* 40 (September-October, 1983): 11–61.

<sup>9</sup> Alain de Benoist, *Ernst Jünger y El Trabajador. Una trayectoria vital e intelectual entre los Dioses y los Titanes* (Madrid: Barbarroja, 1995); *L’Operaio fra gli Dei e i Titani. Ernst Jünger « sismografo » dell’era della tecnica* (Milano: ASEFI-Terziaria, 2000).

Beckman, Serge Mangin, Pierre Wanghen, and Marcus Beckmann; and also the translation of documents by Friedrich Hielscher, Albrecht Erich Günther, Ernst Niekisch, and Friedrich Sieburg.

Jünger seemed to have become immortal! At the end of 1997, I published a bibliography of his work with a publisher who was courageous (or unaware) enough to bring out that kind of work, which by definition would always find a rather restricted public.<sup>10</sup> This bibliography, with which I was not entirely satisfied, should have received a new, much-enlarged edition, on which I worked many years, but I finally gave up on it Nicolai Riedel, the worthy successor of Hans Peter des Coudres and Horst Mühleisen, published his bibliography in 2003.<sup>11</sup> (Since then my work as a bibliographer has instead concentrated on Carl Schmitt!). At the beginning, I reviewed the main stages of Jünger's life. Reaching 1997, I wrote: "Having entered his 103rd year, he continues to write." Alas! A few months later, on February 17th, 1998, he passed away. I paid homage to him on March 7th in a Radio-Courtoisie broadcast.

Since then, Jünger has been studied more than ever. On November 7th, 1995, I had already taken part in a Jünger conference organized at the La Sapienza University in Rome under the title "Due volte the cometa" ["Two Times the Comet"] (alluding to the fact that Jünger lives to see two appearances of Halley's Comet). I also took part in a large conference on Jünger held in Milan from October 20–24, 2000, where in particular I had the occasion to make the acquaintance of Nicolai Riedel young stag, the day before a concert of Ricardo Mutti at La Scala. At the end of a "pilgrimage" to the Chemin des Dames, I also attended a conference on Jünger and the First World War in Laon, on November 8th, 1998. Danièle Beltran-Vidal, François Poncet, Isabelle Rozet, Olivier Aubertin, Manuela Alessio, and some others also took part.

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<sup>10</sup> Alain de Benoist, *Ernst Jünger. Une bio-bibliographie* (Paris: Guy Trédaniel, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Nicolai Riedel, *Ernst Jünger-Bibliographie. Wissenschaftliche und essayistische Beiträge zu seinem Werk (1928–2002)* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2003). Nicolai Riedel regularly publishes updates of its bibliography in *Les Carnets Ernst Jünger*.

My admiration for Jünger—for the man and his work—has never faded. But perhaps it changed direction a bit. Thirty years ago, I was filled with enthusiasm for the “first” Jünger of the 1920s and 1930s. With time, and thus with age, I undoubtedly became more appreciative of the “second” Jünger—to the Anarch and even more to the Rebel, to the “timeless” thinker who, having risen higher, also sees further.

I would like to add a very personal memory here. On February 6th, 1993, having been invited to take part in a debate in Berlin, I had the unpleasant experience of being physically attacked by a group of young “autonomous” militants advocating an archaic “antifascism” who did not even know that I had come to argue against xenophobia! Returning to Paris after a night spent looking at police photographs trying to identify my attackers, I received a telephone call from Armin Mohler.<sup>12</sup> He told me that Jünger, who had learned of the incident, immediately wanted to know about my condition. This gesture touched me greatly.

Ernst Jünger was probably not one of the authors most frequently quoted by the French New Right, but there is no doubt, as we have seen, that he was very much discussed. Today, there is no longer a need to “complete” Jünger’s image in France. The various aspects of his work are now well-known. Like Schmitt and Heidegger, or Mircea Eliade, Jünger was also, at one time or another, the object of critiques in the form of denunciations. They emanate from sectarian spirits that are not only anachronistic, but only deal with Jünger to arrive at conclusions in conformity with the prejudices that they had at the beginning. These approaches remain very much in the minority. Admittedly, Jünger is still seldom cited by fashionable intellectuals. One has to go to Italy to find intellectuals of all opinions, left and right, citing Jünger constantly (just as they also constantly quote Schmitt and Heidegger). But the readers of the author of *Eumeswil* and *Subtle Hunts* (*Subtile Jagden*) remain quite numerous.

Today, practically all Jünger’s books have been translated into French; they are published by the largest houses; and most are constantly reprinted. The *War Diaries* (*Strahlungen*) have been

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<sup>12</sup> I recognized them perfectly, but I refused to say so. I do not collaborate with the police.

republished by Gallimard in their prestigious “Pléiade” series, with an important critical apparatus by Julien Hervier, to whom we owe also a collection of conversations with Jünger.<sup>13</sup> Academic research is coordinated by the Centre de recherche et de documentation Ernst Jünger (CERDEJ), chaired by Danièle Beltrant-Vidal, who since December 1996 has published an annual volume of *Carnets Ernst Jünger*. What is still needed is a complete translation of the political articles of his youth (they recently appeared in Italy, in three volumes) and of the correspondence (especially the correspondence with Schmitt, Heidegger, Hielscher, Gottfried Benn, and Gerhard Nebel), but also a great “definitive” biography comparable with the one Heimo Schwilk recently published in Germany.

It is very curious that no book of Friedrich Georg Jünger has ever been completely translated into French. Taking into account his many connections in the publishing world, it seems that Jünger could easily have gotten some works of his brother published in France. For my part, it was a mistake that I never did anything. I often wondered why.

Ernst Jünger would be 110 years old today. “The silent revolutions are the most effective,” he said. He should be read in silence.

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<sup>13</sup> Julien Hervier, *Entretiens avec Ernst Jünger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).