

Heidegger and Jünger: Nihilism and the Fate of Europe

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Beginning in the early 1930s, Martin Heidegger began what would become a lifelong engagement with the work of Ernst Jünger. According to Heidegger, a collegial study of two of Jünger's writings, "Total Mobilization" of 1930 and *The Worker* of 1932, framed that most controversial decade of his career. From them Heidegger gleaned "how they express an essential understanding of Nietzsche's metaphysics, insofar as the history and the present of the Western world are seen and foreseen within the horizon of this metaphysics." With Jünger's essays providing a basis for his own subsequent reflections, Heidegger and his small circle of colleagues "were able to think what was coming." This ominous judgment Heidegger summarized in 1940: from Jünger, he learned "the universal rule of the will to power within planetary history" (GA 16: 375).¹ Part of Heidegger's interest in Jünger was a result of Jünger's Nietzsche-inspired cultural diagnosis; in Heidegger's words, "he makes all previous writings 'about' Nietzsche inessential; for Jünger has not discussed the 'will to power' as the content of some doctrine to be adopted and improved; he has made visible, in essential experiences, with sharp and cold eyes, the Being of beings as will to power" (GA 90: 277). Jünger's Nietzsche is thus the clue to understanding "what is coming," the fulfillment of the will to power "in planetary history"; Jünger, from Heidegger's point of view, understood this fact better than anyone. Jünger's Nietzschean judgments concerning the development of nihilism in Europe subsequently help to inspire a series of essays from Heidegger: they are at work especially (although unacknowledged) in "The Age of the World Picture."²

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At the same time, however, Heidegger was quite critical of Jünger. Concerning what he called Jünger's "bedazzlement" (*Blendung*) and "blindness" (*Verblendung*) before the thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger judges that Jünger fails to see the "essence and ground of the contemporary subjectivity of humanity" and therewith "the authentic sphere of decision ... between Being and beings" (GA 90: 13-14). Jünger's limitations are therefore also Nietzsche's: "the contradiction [*Wider-spruch*] of Jünger can only be the contradiction of *Nietzsche's metaphysics* ... a contradiction of metaphysics *as such*, that is, of *Western philosophy in its entirety*." This broad indictment culminates in the harsh verdict, "Jünger is one who recognizes [*Erkenner*], but is in no way a thinker" (GA 90: 27).

What explains Heidegger's interest in Jünger's work, an interest that would eventually grow into a friendship? What was it about Jünger's writings that attuned Heidegger's cultural ear to "what was coming?" How, in short, ought we to estimate Jünger's effect on Heidegger's thought? A complete answer to these questions would have to evaluate the entire ambit of Heidegger's reflections on Jünger, from its earliest stages in 1933 through their correspondence into the 1970s. For present purposes, I wish to focus these questions on a particular exchange during the 1950s, when each penned a work for *Festschriften* dedicated to the other on the occasion of their birthdays: Jünger's "Über die Linie" ("Across the Line") of 1950, and Heidegger's response, "Über 'Die Linie'" ("Concerning 'The Line'") of 1955.³

To begin, the principal theme of Jünger's essay is the abolition of nihilism. Citing Nietzsche's remark in the Preface to *The Will to Power* that he is "Europe's first absolute nihilist" who has nonetheless "lived through nihilism within himself," Jünger notes cause for optimism, in the fact that nihilism is less an end than a phase of a more comprehensive intellectual and spiritual process. Those living through an age of nihilistic decline may not feel so fortunate; their proximity to nihilism does not "allow room for considerations that transcend the nightmare world" of "active nihilism." To transcend nihilism, however, it is necessary to define it, even though doing so

“would be comparable to discovering the causes of cancer.” Jünger therefore enlists the aid of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. While different in their precise diagnoses of the prevailing nihilism of the age, they agree in their hope of escape. Nietzsche, for example, tells us that “in some future or other” a “contrary movement” will develop, abolishing the regnant “absolute nihilism.” Nihilism thus represents but a stage in an ongoing process, a “complete unfolding” that culminates in transcendence. For Dostoevsky, “the prognosis is also optimistic; he does not see in nihilism a final, deadly stage” but “a necessary stage, intrinsic to a movement toward particular ends.” Quoting Bernanos, Jünger writes: “the light flares up when the darkness is complete.” The darkness in question is a leveling of European humanity, a reign of the average that nonetheless does not obviate, but rather provokes, a desire for greatness – an allusion to Nietzsche’s horizon of monumentality and its longings.⁴ Complete nihilism of the sort Nietzsche claims for himself liberates, in short, the possibility for a restoration of human greatness over and above the bourgeois mediocrity of the age, a point Jünger emphasizes by indicating Nietzsche’s and Dostoevsky’s own fascination with Napoleon (70–71).

Jünger devotes the majority of his essay to what he calls “diagnostic remarks” about nihilism’s main features. He notes in particular the political appearances of nihilism: the devastation of technological war; the propaganda of governments threatening the terror of absolute destruction at the hands of anonymous enemies; the assertion of the primacy of the people, the *Volk*, over the individual – all are feats of “annihilation” (73). What, specifically, do they annihilate? Based upon Jünger’s examples, the annihilation is first and foremost of the individual – a judgment Heidegger shared, and which by then had become a staple of European conservatism, especially Catholic conservatism, in which Jünger in small measure participated.⁵ Following Nietzsche, Jünger judges the root of these symptoms to be “the decline of values. . . above all the decline of Christian values.” This decline “corresponds to the impossibility of bringing forth higher types” of individuals, and therefore to profound pessimism concerning the human condition (74).

With the advent of this pessimism, the distinction between higher and lower disappears, and with this disappearance, pessimism drifts into nihilism. Nihilism is therefore “the expression of the uselessness of the other world” – a judgment equally at home in Dostoevsky and in Nietzsche.⁶ But it is not, correspondingly, a renunciation of this world or of existence in general. “Great growth,” Jünger writes, “brings with it immense damage and loss, and in this respect, nihilism’s appearing as the most extreme form of pessimism can be a favorable sign.” Again enlisting the observations of Dostoevsky, Jünger observes that nihilism is a stage of moral purification and strengthening through which one passes.⁷ Nihilism, Jünger concludes, advances then in three phases: “from doubt to pessimism, from there to actions in valueless and godless space, and then to new fulfillment.”

There is, however, a deeper issue involved with the nihilistic diagnosis: the impossibility of representing Nothing. Nothing, he writes, “approaches the zone in which intuition as well as knowledge wither. . . . One makes of Nothing neither image nor concept” (75). And where Nothing defies representation, nihilism cannot be overcome. One response to this circumstance has been an identification of nihilism with chaos or with disease. From Jünger’s point of view, it is neither. In the first case, he indicates that notions of chaos and anarchy are in deep conflict with nihilism, since nihilism “can harmonize with vast systems of order, which is even the rule when it is active and its power deployed” (76). Nihilism finds in order “a favorable substrate” that “nihilism refashions. . . for its purposes.” In this respect, order “belongs to its style.” The type of order Jünger has in mind is political and technological order, which overlap when the state comes to be “arranged for pure functioning.” Dehumanization of politics and of the art of war are for Jünger symptoms of a nihilism that has infested modern regimes; the ensuing decomposition of the state, its devolution into chaos and anarchy, is therefore a consequence of nihilism rather than its origin. Where nihilism prevails, “the great sites of physical annihilation” are accompanied by “sobriety, hygiene, and strict order” – an allusion, to be sure, to Nazi totalitarianism.

But nihilism is also not a disease or a species of decadence. Indeed, “with a bit of observation one will find that physical health is connected with it – above all where it is vigorously at work” (79). The “active nihilist” disdains pity and pain, extols health and strength. Ironically, however, such prototypical *Übermenschen* arise in a world that has become increasingly democratic; Jünger has in mind specifically the “welfare state,” where “entitlements, health insurance, safety nets, and narcotics” prevail. The active nihilist and the citizen of the welfare state are, in Jünger’s words, “complementary figures,” the latter having become a “passive nihilist.” Indeed, Jünger notes that the experience of two world wars has produced not only souls steeled by pain, but “men of iron,” “escapees from the waves of terror, purges, and liquidation.” In short, nihilists of one stripe or another compass the whole of contemporary society; “how a person faced with annihilation can endure in the wake of nihilism” has thus become the great literary theme of the day, in authors as diverse as Verlaine, Rilke, Trakl, T. E. Lawrence, and St. Exupéry.

Finally, Jünger notes that nihilism is not a species of evil: “programs of nihilistic action can be distinguished by good intentions and philanthropy,” specifically as antidotes to emergent political disorder. “The nihilist is no criminal in the traditional sense,” Jünger writes; he is, instead, one who abandons any distinction between good and evil, a situation Jünger deems “more disturbing” than explicit criminality (83).

What then is nihilism for Jünger? It is, he writes, a sort of reductionism: “the nihilistic world is in its essence a reduced and increasingly self-reductive world” (83). Among the principal symptoms of nihilistic reductionism is the turn toward method and toward specialization in the sciences. By wedding the perfection of technological order to a complete absence of moral feeling, all sense of wonder and admiration come to be suppressed. Where specialization reigns, “the synoptic talent dwindles almost completely,” only to be replaced by the image of the worker on an assembly line.⁸ In this scenario, only middling values arise: to be productive, to play a role. It is an age of “apostles without

mandates,” where “political parties participate in the apotheosis. And whatever serves their doctrines and their changing goals becomes divine” – politics and science, in short, emerge as “ersatz religions.”

In the arts, a similar reduction occurs. Nihilism reduces the beautiful to the measurable, and eros to an economic or market venture subject to calculation and measurement. This quantification of desire signifies “a dismantling of taboos, which at first frightens,” but after which “what has then been enucleated becomes a matter of course.” Indeed, Jünger notes, “as macabre a book as Evelyn Waugh’s about the Hollywood funeral industry” – he has in mind *The Loved One* – “belongs to entertainment literature.”⁹ Death, no longer terrifying, is merely comic.

By its symptomatic reductionisms, its shrinking of human values, its transformation of the citizen into the worker, Nihilism for Jünger has become the norm. We have reached, in his words, “the null point.” Jünger cites with approval Nietzsche’s verdict that “the era of the monster state has begun,” driven by “the mechanical and automated world” (94). Technological automation, dehumanization, and totalitarianism are of a piece: “total mobilization.” The modern state is in short the apex of nihilism: organization without principle and motion without goal. Jünger therefore asks whether there exist at this null-point any signs of hope? Is even “a restricted scope of freedom possible?” (96). Yes, he answers, there are “oases in our deserts,” two in particular: poetry and eros. Eros, Jünger observes, is the irruption of the unpredictable and the personal; it is for that reason that tyrants suppress it: “*One* single individual is a sufficient witness that freedom has not yet disappeared. . . . Then the powers of resistance awake in us. Tyrants know this and seek to dissolve the human into the universal and the public – keeping at a distance everything unpredictable and extraordinary. . . . Freedom and the life of the Muses are inseparably bound together.” Poetry in particular gives form (*Gestalt*) to the age; it is consequently an agent of self-understanding as well as of erotic striving. The same is true with thinking. Poet and thinker, Jünger writes, stand in “mirror-like correspondence” (99). Both are able to confront nothingness without

being overwhelmed by it – an observation familiar from Heidegger as well. In this confrontation, poet and thinker become opponents of mechanization and tyranny, that is, of nihilism: “Eros will always triumph as the gods’ true messenger over all titanic constructs.” They will also be the objects of tyrannical attack: “Persecution is the mark of the artist.” Nonetheless, it is the poet and the thinker, not the fanatic bomb-throwers, who are the “authentic anarchists”; it is they who “cross the line.”¹⁰

Liberation from the age, however, requires living through it: “He knows the age the least who has not experienced the immense power of nothingness in himself and has not been tempted by it” (101). For this reason, the future remains cloudy. “Now we are in virgin territory,” Jünger writes, “certainty is slim, but with greater hope of results” (§21). Invoking Heidegger again, he concludes, “forest paths” – *Holzwege* – “is a beautiful, Socratic word for this territory. It explains that we find ourselves off the beaten track and with an abundance of riches.”

It is useful to observe certain features of Jünger’s argument. First and most conspicuously is its indebtedness to Nietzsche on which Heidegger often remarks. Two features of that indebtedness deserve particular attention. The first is its identification of nihilism with a cultural and political phenomenon, and not just a state of certain bleak and literary souls, like Raskolnikov. As Nietzsche indicates especially in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Europe as a whole lives in the throes of political degeneration, symptoms of which are the concerns for equality and right – shadows of Christian values that ought to have been repudiated.¹¹ Jünger however transcends Nietzsche’s political characterization of nihilism: it is no longer a property of European life, but of the planet, evidence of which is Jünger’s association of nihilism with totalitarianisms, whose emergence during the twentieth century is matched by the cataclysms of *world war*. The “planetary” scope of these wars is part and parcel of the universal reach of the totalitarian state. Again following Nietzsche, the dominion of modern natural science and its technological aims is inseparable from the emergence of Leviathan: both are modes of order that prefer efficiency to virtue and the measurable

to the beautiful or astonishing. Yet Jünger exceeds Nietzsche with his emphasis on the universal scope of nihilism. Indeed, by the close of the essay, nihilism and totalitarianism are virtually synonymous. It is clear, however, that the totalitarianism Jünger has in mind is that of Nazi Germany, rather than that of Nietzsche's "socialist fools": its principal features mix fanaticism with strict order and a passion for hygiene. One therefore wonders whether Jünger is not making a covert apologia of sorts for the depredations of Nazism: if we are indeed *über die Linie*, then the null-point represented by the Third Reich is Bernanos' overwhelming darkness before the coming of the light.

A second aspect of Jünger's Nietzschean inheritance worth noting is its aesthetic emphases. Jünger's nihilism is not only political, but literary, as are its solutions in the activity of poets and thinkers. The judgment recalls in particular Nietzsche's conclusions in the final paragraphs of *Advantage and Disadvantage of History*, where art and religion – in effect, a new paganism – are the "antidotes" to the "poisons" of modern natural science and its objectification of human beings. Absent from consideration, both by Jünger and Nietzsche, are any notions of justice: political renewal is to be achieved by non-political or apolitical means, liberating the individual over and against the mass.

Finally, it is necessary to raise the question concerning Jünger's own activity as "poet and thinker" in relation to his age: is his own act of writing a "crossing of the line" or merely the final symptom of nihilism's progress toward the null-point? We recall in this connection Nietzsche's own verdict concerning his relationship to his age: remaining among the "last men," trapped in struggle with the very horizon he wished to overthrow, and which therefore defined him.¹² These questions inform Heidegger's response to Jünger, in the essay "Concerning 'The Line.'"

Heidegger offers us a preview of this response in one letter in particular, dated 18 December 1950. He begins by praising Jünger's essay, stating that "the spirit that was already active in *The Worker*... is now purified, its vision widened..." allowing Jünger "to bring that work once again to the consciousness of the age."¹³ He then locates what

he deems the “metaphysical kernel” of Jünger’s argument in the sentence, “The moment in which the line is passed brings a new turning approach [*Zuwendung*] of Being.” Heidegger writes: “Must we not, in order to respond to the essence of Being, at the same time say: the line is first passable in the moment instigated by Being in its turning approach, which turning approach is first an awakening and eventful addressing of the essence of man?”¹⁴ If so, crossing the line of nihilism is less an advance than an “overtaking by what saves, whose beyond first genuinely illuminates the line for the crossing over.” This thought would translate, in Heidegger’s essay “Concerning ‘The Line’” into a correction of the very image of the line in favor of a “zone” of nihilism, where being and nothingness intersect; Heidegger, both in this essay and in later works would symbolize this different sense of crossing with an X through the word *Sein*.

Heidegger’s essay itself begins with a pun at the expense of the title of Jünger’s essay, a pun that reveals its basic perspective: not “Über die Linie” (“Across the Line”), but “Über ‘Die Linie’” (“Concerning ‘The Line’”). Unlike Jünger, whose title connotes a crossing of the line – *über* in the sense of “across” or “beyond” – Heidegger wishes to call into question the very possibility of passage beyond nihilism. As Heidegger puts it, while Jünger offers “an assessment of the human situation in relation to the movement of nihilism,” he intends to probe nihilism’s essence: “you look across and go across the line; I simply take a look only at the line that you have represented” (GA 9: 389/294). Heidegger thus indicates that their efforts are complementary: both contend that nihilism is neither disease nor chaos nor evil. They agree further regarding Nietzsche’s characterization of the present age as that of the “last men.” In this light, Heidegger praises Jünger’s grasp of Nietzsche.¹⁵ Their disagreement, which takes up the substance of Heidegger’s essay, turns on whether a crossing of the line is conceivable: knowing its essence is not equal to having a cure at hand.

Heidegger begins his critique by returning to Jünger’s earlier works, “Total Mobilization” and *The Worker*; both of which, in Heidegger’s view, form the metaphysical core of Jünger’s judgments concerning

the line. The figure of the worker, Heidegger writes, belongs “to the phase of active nihilism” (GA 9: 389/294). It becomes for Jünger a sign of the “‘total work-like character’ of all that is actual.” Work therefore becomes the mode of total mobilization, which now appears as a “planetary tendency,” evidence for which is the universal reach of technology. It illustrates, according to Heidegger, “the movement of nihilism in the many forms of its inexorable and planetary character” toward becoming the “normal condition” of humanity (GA 9: 392/296). Proof of the normalizing of nihilism are the “reactive” attempts to stem its progress – what Heidegger identifies as “salvation in taking flight” rather than in a genuine confrontation with its essence. In the event, Heidegger asks, what are the genuine prospects for crossing the line, that is, of realizing the fulfillment of nihilism and thus abandoning it? In fact, Heidegger notes, two world wars have failed to check nihilism’s progress or to divert its course. Evidence of this failure is found in the very language Jünger employs: on both sides of the line “you speak the same language.” Language, Heidegger cautions, is intended “not as a mere means of expression that can be taken off and exchanged like a garment” (GA 9: 394/298). Rather, what we express appears “for the first time” in language; expressions shift, but language remains. To illustrate the limits of language to articulate an alternative to nihilism, Heidegger focuses attention on the subtitle of Jünger’s *The Worker*: “Dominance and *Gestalt*.” *Gestalt*, “in the sense of the Gestalt psychology of the time,” means “a whole that contains more than the sum of its parts.” The word also means “form” – a loaded term in the Heideggerian lexicon, given its identity in Greek with the word “idea” (*eidos*). It is this affinity of terms that troubles Heidegger, specifically, their recollection of Platonic metaphysics.¹⁶ As Heidegger reminds the reader, “form” and “idea” signal “being that is at rest” for the Greeks, in contrast to “changeable being.” The motion from the latter toward the former, from beings to Being as such, is “transcendence,” that is, “meta-physical.” To speak of the *Gestalt* of the worker is to invoke this metaphysics of transcendence, a metaphysics that, given its covert

presence in Jünger's argument, helps account for his conviction that a movement away from nihilism is possible.

But *Gestalt* has another valence which Heidegger reminds us is also at work in Jünger's thought: it is "the source that gives meaning," where the relationship between form and what is formed is like that between stamp and impression. The relationship is technological in character; it suggests a divide between the superior being of the artificer and the contingent being of the artifact, the metaphysical expression of which is the divide between subject and object. Jünger's use of the term *Gestalt*, in short, privileges the central position the human being enjoys within the metaphysics of transcendence. Thus, Heidegger: "The appearance of the metaphysical *Gestalt* of the human being as the source that gives meaning is the ultimate consequence of positing the human essence as the authoritative subiectum" (GA 9: 397/300). Heidegger acknowledges the Cartesian provenance of these remarks, that is, Descartes' methodological basis in the *ego cogito* on behalf of technological "mastery of nature."¹⁷ But its origins are Platonic, expressed in the concept of Being as form or idea. In this respect, Platonic philosophy is of a piece with modernity: the Platonic concept of the *eidos* is the source for modern subjectivity; dividing Being from beings inspires a concept of the subject that bestows meaning by stamping its form on beings. Technological mastery of nature is but the culmination of Western metaphysics. Importantly, the point of culmination is Nietzsche: his doctrine of the will to power is but the expression of the oblivion of Being and therewith nihilism. This swift history of metaphysics is a familiar theme in Heidegger's writings, at work especially in his writings from the thirties. Here, however, Heidegger deploys it to indicate the degree to which Jünger's notion of the worker "corresponds to the projection of the essential *Gestalt* of Zarathustra within the metaphysics of the will to power" (GA 9: 396/299). Jünger's metaphysical presuppositions, which Heidegger wishes to expose, remain within the very tradition that has reached a culmination in the nihilism he wishes to escape.

In this respect, Jünger's limitations, in Heidegger's view, are Nietzsche's: both are indelibly stamped by the metaphysical history

of the West. What is most salient in that history is the turn toward the human being as subject, a turn that makes possible technological exploitation of the world. Heidegger writes: “the meta-physical of metaphysics, namely, transcendence, comes to be transformed whenever...the *Gestalt* of the human essence appears as the source that gives meaning” (GA 9: 398/300-301). The degree to which we form the world is the degree to which “the Gestalt of the worker is power...‘a new and special kind of will to power’ (*Arbeiter*, 70). Being in the sense of the will to power.” Heidegger applauds Jünger’s awareness of the totalitarian character of work. Quoting Jünger, Heidegger indicates that technology is “mobilization of the world through the *Gestalt* of the worker” (GA 9: 399/301). Given the dominance of the subject over the world, technology, as expressive of this dominance, is “a reversal of transcendence into the rescendance of the *Gestalt* of the worker, whereby the presence of this *Gestalt* unfolds into the representation of its power.” It is (again quoting Jünger), “the destroyer of every belief whatsoever” (GA 9: 399/301-2). Through technology, in short, the world becomes us, and we lose ourselves.

It is useful to pause briefly with these assertions. By tracing Jünger’s notion of *Gestalt* to antecedent origins in Platonic notions of form or idea, Heidegger has in mind an etymologically correct rendering of the Greek term *eidos* as “look.” However, following Nietzsche, he understands the Platonic notion of form or idea – the look of a being – as a point of view or vista, over and against which some subject stands. Here, Heidegger is informed in large measure by Nietzsche’s critique of modern scientific objectivity, which places the human being at a remove from what it seeks to understand.¹⁸ For Nietzsche and for Heidegger, the subject-object polarity is problematic, if not utterly erroneous. Plato is originally responsible for this polarity, made irrevocable by his distinction between “ideal” and “real” worlds – a conception that Heidegger will later invoke, again following Nietzsche, to criticize Christianity as “Platonism for the people.”¹⁹ In this manner, Heidegger is, along with Nietzsche, able to connect “ancients” and “moderns”: Platonic ideas culminate in Nietzsche’s nihilism, since the metaphysical

position Nietzsche seeks to undermine is originally Platonic in origin and intention. This history becomes germane, for Heidegger, to an understanding of Jünger, given his perception of Jünger's limitations: Jünger still moves within the zone of traditional metaphysics, that is, he shares the same mistakes as Nietzsche. The principal symptom of Jünger's Nietzschean "bedazzlement" is his desire to transcend, to cross the line. Importantly, this very way of posing the dilemma of modernity indicates its insufficiency: the relationship between this side and the other side of the line mimics that between subject and object, between Being and nothingness, reality and appearance, freedom and necessity. Jünger, in short, is trapped amidst the polarities of modernity.

Consequently, transcendence, "crossing the line," seems impossible; the very language in which we articulate the possibility of this transcendence reiterates what is to be transcended. Thus, Heidegger writes:

In what language does the fundamental outline of that thinking speak that prefigures a crossing of the line? Is the language of the metaphysics of the will to power, of *Gestalt*, and of values to be saved over beyond the critical line? What if the language of metaphysics and metaphysics itself, whether it is that of the living or of the dead God, in fact constituted, *as* metaphysics, that limit which prevents a transition over of the line, i.e., the overcoming of nihilism? If this were the case, would not crossing the line then necessarily have to become a transformation of our saying and demand a transformed relationship to the essence of language?
(GA 9: 405/306)

Such a transformation would take time, especially when language is continually confronted by "the temptation" to measure things "according to the tempo of calculation and planning" (26). To this extent, Heidegger agrees with Jünger that we must marshal "still untapped springs of power. . .to hold one's own in the wake of nihilism." Yet Heidegger also cautions that this effort could forestall a confrontation with

the essence of nihilism: we cannot know it while struggling to remain aloof from it. How then to renovate language so that a confrontation with the essence of nihilism could be possible, a confrontation that could lead at the same time to “a new direction of Being”?

Heidegger approaches this question by returning to what he proposes as the root distinction at work within our metaphysical horizon, namely the subject-object distinction. From the point of view of this distinction, stated in simplest terms, to be is to be present; being present is always a presence toward some subject. Therefore, “Presenting (‘being’) is, as presenting. . . a presenting directed toward the human essence, insofar as presenting is a call. . . that on each occasion calls upon the human essence” (GA 9: 408/308). For this reason, the subject-object dichotomy undermines itself: Being is alternatively wholly, exhaustively present toward the human being – in which case “to be” is “to be human” – or wholly absent, as mere object over and against which the human subject stands. Absence, however, is a sort of nothingness, a way in which nothingness is experienced. Yet presence and absence are not intelligible apart from one another; being and nothingness in some sense always belong together. For this reason, confrontation with the essence of nihilism brings along with it the possibility of a new recovery (*Verwindung*) of Being. To enter into this confrontation correctly however requires that we pass beyond the language of traditional metaphysics, that is, the language of sheer presence. As Heidegger puts the matter, “is the question of which language of fundamental words is spoken at the moment of crossing the line. . . left to the whim of those who are speaking?” This question and others must be confronted, “even at the peril of having to relinquish old and established habits of thinking in the sense of metaphysical representation” (GA 9: 409/309).

The solution to the dilemma of metaphysical language Heidegger now proposes takes the form of a graphic rendering of Being as ~~Being~~ (GA 9: 411/310). This celebrated sign is not meant to negate Being as a concept available to the human intellect. Its intention lies at the intersection of the two lines: “not. . . merely the negative sign of crossing out,” but of a gathering at the point of intersection (GA 9: 411/310–311).

This description recalls Heidegger's account of *logos*: in its primordial sense, it means gathering or collecting (GA 40: 132-133/137-138). Fittingly, *logos*, language, is what is at stake here, for Heidegger. What is gathered in this case is the essence of the human being together with the essence of Being itself: "in his essence the human being is the thoughtful memory of being, but of ~~being~~. This means: the human essence also belongs to that which, in the crossing out of being, takes thinking into the claim of a more originary call" (GA 9: 411/311). The human being, in short, belongs to the being that "turns toward" him: the human being is the "place" of Being.

Accordingly, Jünger's image of the line is inadequate; Heidegger proposes in its place the word "zone" [*Zone*]. In this zone, Being and the human essence, but also Being and Nothingness, cross: "Like ~~being~~, the nothing would also have to be written...in the same way" (GA 9: 411/311). Nihilism therefore belongs equally to the essence of the human being as the human essence belongs to Being. The human being therefore "has an essential share" in nihilism. He "does not stand in the critical zone of the line; he himself...is this zone and this line."

What, then, asks Heidegger, is the "topology" of this zone, that is, of the place where Being and nothingness gather in ways that determine both the essence of nihilism and its overcoming? According to Jünger, the place is nihilistic "reductionism" accompanied by "a growing unfolding of power and effective force." Heidegger comments that this reduction...rests on a production of being, namely, on the unfolding of the will to power into the unconditional will to will" (GA 9: 413/312). The interplay of reductionism and will, of Being and nothingness, points to that of presence and absence, oblivion and recollection, that is, to the very pattern of human being and thinking. The presence upon which absence is premised is the basis for transcendence, now conceived as "surpassing," and surpassing, Heidegger asserts, "is metaphysics itself." Here resides "the essential locale of nihilism":

Accordingly, if the nothing prevails within nihilism and the essence of the nothing belongs to being, yet being is the destiny of the surpassing, then the essential

locale of nihilism shows itself to be the essence of metaphysics. (GA 9: 413-414/313)

Just as Being is inextricable from nothingness, metaphysics is inextricable from nihilism.²⁰ Nihilism is therefore not merely something people do or undergo; it is how Being unfolds into “unconcealment.” Famously, “unconcealment” is Heidegger’s etymologically evocative way of rendering the Greek word *alētheia*, customarily, “truth.” Truth as unconcealment is both of the essence of being and of nothingness, falsehood or deception: concealment belongs to truth. The impediment to this way of conceiving truth, Heidegger reminds us, is the sciences, which address only what is present or given in ways that can be quantified and expressed in propositions. The sciences have become “metaphysically neutral.”

Heidegger therefore concludes: “[metaphysical thinking] must content itself with building the *path* which leads into the locality of the restriction of metaphysics and thereby permits a walk through the destined phase of an overcoming of nihilism” (43). Note the shift from crossing a line to walking down a path: the former directed, making progress; the latter, reflective, a meandering stroll following along the unfolding of the path’s dead ends – *Holzwege*. This, he indicates, is the point of his letter to Jünger: “Your assessment of the situation *trans lineam* and my discussion *de linea* are referred to one another,” since together they oblige “planetary building ” of a sort that could foster dialogue between Europe and Asia, neither capable on its own of opening upon “the realm of possible dialogue” (GA 9: 424/320-321). Curiously, immediately after this statement Heidegger recalls a similar reflection of Nietzsche’s. Nietzsche, in whose “light or shadow” we all think, “heard a calling that demands that human beings prepare for assuming a domination over the earth,” predicting “the erupting struggle for domination” upon which we now verge. Heidegger cautions, though, that what Nietzsche – and he with him – intends “is no war, but the *polemos* that first lets gods and humans, freemen and slaves, appear in their respective essence and leads to a critical encounter of ~~being~~.” The recent world wars, he judges, are but the foreground of

this *polemos*; they are inadequate to the struggle, “less and less capable of deciding anything the more technological their armaments” (GA 9: 425/321). Nietzsche, in short, “heard that call to reflect on the essence of a planetary domination,” and “followed the call on the path of the metaphysical thinking granted him and collapsed on the way.” In this way, though, Nietzsche issues an invitation to a new reflection that may do what actual war has failed to do. In so writing, Heidegger also has in mind Jünger, who, he has made clear, shares Nietzsche’s convictions more thoroughly than any other contemporary writer. Like Nietzsche, Jünger’s thought, in Heidegger’s view, breaks down on the way to crossing the line. However, in so doing, he offers our age the same invitation Nietzsche offered his.

We return now to our original questions: What did Heidegger learn from Jünger such that it attuned Heidegger’s cultural ear to “what was coming?” How ought one to estimate Jünger’s effect on Heidegger’s thought?

We now may note certain affinities. First and foremost, there is Heidegger’s endorsement of Jünger’s Nietzscheanism. Jünger, the last true follower of Nietzsche, understood clearly Nietzsche’s view concerning “the universal rule of the will to power within planetary history.” He understood that Nietzschean will to power is a “will to will” stemming from the destruction of Christian values that issues in the essential features of nihilism: fanaticism, moral emptiness, and a technological ordering of all areas of human experience and thought – what Jünger deems rightly to be a form of reductionism. To be sure, Heidegger was persuaded of this judgment decades prior to “Über die Linie” by Jünger’s other writings. That later work however only intensified Heidegger’s perception: “The spirit that was already at work in *The Worker*, but which in a certain way still remains tied there to a fixed reality, is now purified, its vision widened.”²¹ One is tempted to wonder whether the “fixed reality” Heidegger mentions was not the political situation of the 1930s. In that case, Jünger’s insight is to have “purified” and “widened” the nihilistic vision of *The Worker* in

a way fitting for the global reach of technology, as manifestation of “planetary domination.”

If for Heidegger, Jünger’s virtues are Nietzsche’s, so too are his limitations. Heidegger expresses the main limitation in metaphysical terms: Jünger and Nietzsche both remain under the sway of those philosophical positions that have culminated in the very nihilism they seek to oppose. Any optimism about “crossing the line” into an age that would once again liberate the highest human possibilities is therefore ill-founded. Jünger, in short, fails to transcend the “optic” or horizon Nietzsche provides him. In a separate reflection, Heidegger summarizes the matter in this way: Jünger describes the features of his age “more coldly and precisely” than anyone, understanding the being of the age as will to power under the influence of Nietzsche’s metaphysics. He sees the proper *Gestalt* of the age to be “the worker,” rather than poet and thinker. As a result, Jünger sees the age, but not beyond the age: “since Jünger does *not* see what is only able to be thought, he maintains that this fulfillment of metaphysics in the being of the will to power is the advent of a new age.”²²

Heidegger couches his response to Jünger in “Über ‘die Linie’” in metaphysical terms familiar from his *Introduction to Metaphysics*: the unfolding story of the oblivion of Being; the necessity of attempting to think nothingness together with Being; the limitations of modern natural science; the rise of technology and the debasement of rank; the problem of language.²⁵ In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, however, Heidegger linked these metaphysical themes to political judgments, suggesting a connection between the metaphysical destiny of the German *Volk* and an embrace of National Socialism, whose “inner truth and greatness” have yet to be fully realized. Heidegger’s relative silence about matters of political culture in his response to Jünger is therefore telling, especially given the political overtones of Jünger’s own reflections on nihilism. How ought we to understand this silence? It is tempting, of course, to take it as an acknowledgement of sorts (albeit tepid) on Heidegger’s part of the failure of his expectations for metaphysical renewal in Germany. One index of this possibility is his

remark, mentioned earlier, concerning “the universal rule of the will to power in planetary history”: immediately following this statement, Heidegger adds, “Today everything is a part of this reality, whether it is called communism, or fascism, or world democracy.” This statement from 1940 suggests, first, that by that time Heidegger had already surrendered hope for National Socialism.²⁴ It suggests further that the planetary domination of technological nihilism had, at that point, effaced the differences between regimes: communism, fascism, and “world democracy” are equally totalitarian. In that event, political renewal ceases to be a matter of political decision or of political philosophy. It is rather a matter of metaphysics.

When, then, Heidegger remarks in the 1930s that a study of Jünger alerted him to “what was coming,” he intends this usurpation of political life by technology. In this respect, Heidegger’s reading of Jünger provokes a change in the way in which Heidegger had come to think of him: not offering a new beginning for the West, but announcing its end.²⁵ The political and cultural pessimism we have come to associate with the post-war Heidegger, his absorption into the problem of technology, his turn away from will to power in favor of “letting” (*Gelassenheit*), all emerge in response to Heidegger’s occupation with Jünger. In an early letter to Jünger from 1949, Heidegger mentions the need to write with caution.²⁶ His essay in response to Jünger belongs to that period of caution. This caution is perhaps what Heidegger finally gleans from Jünger: a way of articulating political conceptions without politics.

Notes

- 1 Heidegger reports, in a reflection from 1945, “The Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts,” that he participated in small reading groups of Jünger’s essays (GA 16: 375/MHNS 17–18). Heidegger’s reflections on Jünger compose GA 90, *Zu Ernst Jünger*. Excerpts from GA 90 have been translated in *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. Günter Figal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), trans. Jerome Veith, pp. 189–206.
- 2 See also Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 293. Finally, note Heidegger’s own admission at GA 9: 391/295.
- 3 The text of Jünger’s “Über die Linie” is from his *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 7 (Klett-Cotta: Stuttgart, 1978–2003): 237–80. See my translation in Martin Heidegger and Ernst Jünger, *Correspondence 1949–1975* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), 69–102. All references to Jünger’s essay will be to the English translation. Heidegger’s “Über ‘Die Linie’” was subsequently published under the title *Zur Seinsfrage* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1956) and is included in GA 9.
- 4 *On The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1980), §2: 14–19.
- 5 See for example GA 40: 40–41/41–42. See also Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 22–32. Finally, a series of Catholic magisterial statements warn against the emergent power of the “total state”: Pius IX’s *Quanta Cura* (1864); Leo XIII’s *Quod apostolici muneris* (1878); Pius X’s *Vehementer nos* (1906), and finally Pius XI’s *Ubi Arcano Dei* (1921) and *Quadragesimo anno* (1931). Jünger’s *The Worker* echoes some of these traditional Catholic verdicts on state suppression of the individual; yet unlike the Catholic doctrine, Jünger’s statements are wholly without any consideration of rights. See also Jünger’s essay “Der Weltstaat” in his *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 7: 483–526.

- 6 See Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), 485–86.
- 7 This theme of purification through suffering is the focus of Jünger's celebrated novel *Storm of Steel* (1924), trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: Penguin, 2004) as well as of his essay *On Pain* (1934), trans. David C. Durst (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2008).
- 8 Heidegger's essay "The Age of the World Picture" repeats this same theme. Noting "the precedence of methodology over whatever is," Heidegger writes: "The decisive development of the modern character of science as on-going activity also forms men of a different stamp. The scholar disappears. He is succeeded by the research man who is engaged in research projects. . . . The research worker necessarily presses forward of himself into the sphere characteristic of the technologist" (GA 5: 84–85/125). See too Nietzsche, *On The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 59: "The education of German youth proceeds directly from this false and unfruitful concept of culture: its goal, rightly understood, is indeed not the liberally educated man, but the scholar, the scientific man. . . . who stands apart from life in order to grasp it quite clearly."
- 9 Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One* (New York: Penguin, 1956).
- 10 In his 1977 novel *Eumeswil* Jünger would create the figure of "the anarch" to contrast with the more conventional "anarchist." The anarch, for Jünger, is a person (represented in the novel by the character Manuel) who enjoys inner freedom from subordination to societal and intellectual norms, but who behaves outwardly in conformity with society. The anarch is the genuine individual; the anarchist is only superficially free from society. *Eumeswil*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Marsilio, 1994).
- 11 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), §203, 208.
- 12 *On The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* §3, 10; *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974),

- §377; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1983), “The Three Metamorphoses.”
- 13 Jünger and Heidegger, *Correspondence*, 9–12. The German text of the correspondence can be found in Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger, *Briefwechsel 1949–1975*, ed. Günter Figal (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008).
- 14 Heidegger to Jünger, 18 December 1950 (*Correspondence*, 12).
- 15 Heidegger repeats this judgment in several places over a span of years (GA 90: 227, 239, 255, 277–82). Jünger is Nietzsche’s only authentic representative because he grasps the will to power without romantic and positivistic connotations (GA 90: 76, 255).
- 16 See GA 40, Chapter 4, “Being and Seeming.”
- 17 GA 9: 397/300. See also Richard Kennington, “Descartes and the Mastery of Nature,” in *On Modern Origins*, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004): 123–44.
- 18 See *On The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, §6.
- 19 GA 40: 113/116; Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface.
- 20 The notion that transcendence is a sort of nihilism has important origins in Nietzsche; see especially *Twilight of the Idols*, “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable.”
- 21 Heidegger to Jünger, 18 December 1950 (*Correspondence*, 9).
- 22 “Was Ernst Jünger nicht sieht” (GA 90: 264).
- 23 It is worth noting that Heidegger brought out a revised version of *Introduction to Metaphysics* in 1953, between the publication of his and Jünger’s essays.
- 24 At least in its Hitlerian guise, as the recent publication of several volumes of Heidegger’s *Schwarze Hefte* (GA 94–97) makes clear.
- 25 See Michael Zimmerman, “Die Entwicklung von Heidegger’s Nietzsche-Interpretation,” *Heidegger-Jahrbuch* II (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 2005): 97–116.
- 26 See the letter of 23 June 1949 (*Correspondence*, 6–7).