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The Ineffable Conservative Revolution: The Crisis of Language as a Motive for Weimar’s Radical Right

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This article provides a new look at Weimar Germany’s Conservative Revolution by exploring its suspicion of conceptual and discursive language. It argues that Conservative Revolutionaries not only disdained intellectualism and public discourse; they also extolled their presumed opposites—instinct, intuition, self-evidence—as crucial ingredients in an “ineffable nationalism” which held that a true nation is based on unexpressed or difficult-to-articulate feelings and values. The origins of this ideology are found in a modernist crisis of representation and in sociological accounts of traditional “organic” communities. These themes were politicized by World War I, whose seeming incommunicability magnified the problem of representation and made the unspoken harmony of wartime comradeship an attractive model for a revitalized national community. The article’s final section examines the early writings of Ernst Jünger in order to show in detail how these issues came together to create the Conservative Revolutionary mind.

The first chapter of Edgar Jung’s 1930 revolutionary nationalist manifesto, *The Rule of the Inferior*, opens with a line from Friedrich Hebbel: “So gewiß das Leben größer ist als sein Schatten, so gewiß ist es größer, der Poesie Stoff zu geben, als Poesie zu machen.” Just as life is more than its shadow, we might translate, so is it better able to give material to poetry than to make it. The passage, Jung declared, “resonates with the prevailing mood of younger Germans who today press for responsibility. For the war generation has no love for the word. Not to write, but to act, is its desire.” It is at first blush puzzling that such a prolix work—at 692 pages, the book hardly suffers from verbal diffidence—should begin by proclaiming its hostility to language. What “presses the plume into the hands of the young,” Jung explained, was a “necessary accommodation to a time in which deeds have been superseded by empty words. Today we can only act through words. But that word counts, which carries deeds within it.”¹

Jung’s paradoxical opening points to a paradox at the heart of Weimar Germany’s “Conservative Revolution.” Voluble prophets of big ideas, Conservative Revolutionaries at the same time trumpeted muteness, tacitness,

¹Edgar Jung, *Die Herrschaft der Minderwertigen* (Berlin, 1930), 15. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

and intuition, proclaiming the “rebellion of blood and soul against intellect and doctrine.”² As Keith Bullivant wryly observed, the style of “Conservative Revolutionary writings is elevated and difficult, functioning at a level of abstraction that is a true reflection of what a Yorkshireman might call the ‘yonderliness’ of the ideas. And yet this language stands in bizarre contrast with another dimension of the Conservative Revolution, namely the suspicion not only of political, but of all conceptual language.”³ Such incongruities have long attached to Weimar’s Conservative Revolution. A loose movement of writers, academics, and gurus, it issued a flood of books and manifestos that helped prepare the cultural and intellectual ground for Nazism’s rise to power in 1933. Yet while some Conservative Revolutionaries joined and helped legitimize the NSDAP, others (including Jung himself, who was murdered in the “Night of the Long Knives” in July 1934) were among Nazism’s victims. Seeming contradictions also make up the core ideas that give the Conservative Revolution a rough coherence. Many of its spokesmen were youth- and future-oriented, though in a neo-romantic mode that pined for a lost faith and wholeness; they called for national rebirth under elite leadership, but with the nation conceived in populist terms and paired with an integrative, non-Marxist “socialism,” and they harbored “cultural despair” and resentment against the new visibility of “outsiders” (especially Jews) in modern life, while also embracing modernity’s disruptive energies and transformative power. Often described as a great counterforce to the French Revolution, the Conservative Revolution was at the same time driven by ideals of national solidarity and liberation from alien values that were dark doppelgänger of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.⁴

This article argues that verbose appeals to ineffability—the attraction, that is, less to cultural and political theory as such than to feelings and beliefs “that cannot adequately be put over in words”—is a much-overlooked thread in the weave of paradoxes that make up Weimar’s Conservative Revolution.⁵ In one form or

²Edgar Jung, *Sinndeutung der deutschen Revolution* (Oldenburg, 1933), 8.

³Keith Bullivant, “The Conservative Revolution,” in Anthony Phelan, ed., *The Weimar Dilemma: Intellectuals in the Weimar Republic* (Manchester, 1985), 47–70, at 59.

⁴While “Conservative Revolution” is widely accepted by scholars, some read this incongruity as incoherence and propose other labels. See Klemens von Klemperer’s preference for “new conservatism” in *Germany’s New Conservatism: Its History and Dilemma in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1968), esp. 227–31; and Stefan Breuer’s preference for “new nationalism” in *Anatomie der konservativen Revolution* (Darmstadt, 1993), 180–202. The classic diagnosis of resentments against liberal society is Fritz Stern’s *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961). On the Conservative Revolution as revenge against “the outsider turned insider” see Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture* (New York, 2001). The label was embraced for apologetic reasons after World War II by the Swiss publicist Armin Mohler, whose early history of the movement endeavored to locate a coherent and supposedly healthy Conservative Revolutionary philosophy that was betrayed by Nazism and which, he hoped, could be revived in the postwar years. See Armin Mohler, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland: 1918–1932* (Stuttgart, 1950).

⁵Bullivant, “The Conservative Revolution,” 47. Alongside Bullivant, an exception to this silence is Roger Woods, who noted the “ineffable conservatism” of the journal *Deutsches Volkstum*, which championed an “idea of a national community that cannot be expressed in concepts.” Roger Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic* (New York, 1996), 102–3. I go beyond Bullivant and Woods, however, in arguing that ineffability was a much larger tributary to Conservative Revolutionary thinking, and that explaining it requires a deeper accounting of *origins* and *motives*, beyond the concerns of a single journal or a general mistrust of intellectualism.

another, in one idiom or another, these writers and thinkers celebrated the value of self-evidence, unspoken agreement, tacit knowledge, and taken-for-granted beliefs. In what follows, I trace this mistrust of language to claims about World War I and to arguments, philosophical and sociological, about the loss of communicability in modern society. No event, I maintain, did more to put tacitness and ineffability into the minds of Conservative Revolutionaries than the war's so-called "front experience." The connection was made clear by one of Weimar's most popular right-wing writers, Ernst von Salomon, who spoke of "that wordless and self-evident fellowship of the front that made dealings among comrades so certain and natural."⁶ Another warrior turned best-selling writer, Franz Schauwecker, similarly dismissed words as "bloodless theory." "These are thoughts without words," Schauwecker wrote in a 1926 war memoir. "I think as it were in feelings."⁷ The aura of profundity surrounding such "wordless" belonging was amplified, I contend, by contemporary currents in the arts and social theory which pronounced language in crisis and praised communities rooted in prelinguistic sentiments and intuitions.

My argument unfolds in four parts. The first section situates what I call "ineffable nationalism" within broader debates over the origins of radical nationalist ideology and the role of "crisis" in Weimar political culture. The following section outlines a modernist crisis of representation that was given wider currency by the supposed incommunicability of the Great War. While the difficulty of describing trench warfare did not create the idea that the most urgent truths defy communication, it certainly helped popularize and politicize the notion. The next section considers how this crisis of communication fed into far-right critiques of liberal politics and into longings for a national community that would speak to the heart and heal social divisions. The section after that follows, closely and at length, the trail of such themes in the case of one figure in particular: Ernst Jünger. The most influential of the right-wing chroniclers of the trench experience, Jünger was also a philosophically informed theorist (if that is the right term) of the Conservative Revolution, penning dozens of essays and nationalist polemics during the Weimar years. For Jünger and others, the tacit understanding shared by men who had gone through the "indescribable" experience of the war provided the model for an ineffable national community that they believed could overcome the fissures of postwar German society.

Conservative Revolutionaries in the "laboratory of modernity"

"Did Weimar Fail?" Peter Fritzsche asked in a provocative 1996 review essay. The question's aim was to complicate conventional accounts of Weimar Germany, which cast the years between 1919 and 1933 as a bright flowering of democratization and social progress against a gloomy backdrop of economic chaos and the republic's tragic demise. Fritzsche urged readers to free themselves from the normative assumptions underpinning such narratives and to recognize the full implications of Detlev Peukert's argument, in *The Weimar Republic* (1987), that Weimar

⁶Ernst von Salomon, *Die Stadt* (Berlin, 1932), 296. Born in 1902, Salomon was not a veteran of the Great War but of the postwar turmoil, having joined the Freikorps at war's end and fought from 1919 to 1921 in Upper Silesia and the Baltic.

⁷Franz Schauwecker, *Der feurige Weg* (Berlin, 1930), 74.

was an extreme case of a general crisis of dislocation caused everywhere by modernization—a crisis that called forth technocratic solutions and visionary interventions. “If Weimar is conceived in terms of experiments designed to manage (however deleteriously) the modern condition,” Fritzsche reasoned, “then the failure of political democracy is not the same as the destruction of the laboratory. Indeed, the Third Reich can be regarded as one possible Weimar production.” A new paradigm, Fritzsche suggested, was already being born, one alert to Weimar’s “eclectic experimentalism” and the role of “desire and imagination” in shaping a highly “malleable postwar social life.”⁸

Fritzsche’s exhortation has been amply met by two decades of subsequent research. As numerous authors have argued, a new consensus has appeared in Weimar studies, one that stresses innovation, contingency, multiple subjectivities, and the fluid boundary between politics and culture. Whereas earlier histories of Germany’s supposed “special path” found Weimar’s politics burdened by “backward” mentalities and structures, more recent scholarship, informed by the cultural and linguistic turns, has sought out creative adaptation in the array of discourses, representations, and performances that fired the imagination and drew participants into politics.⁹ “Weimar’s pluralism,” Jochen Hung suggested, could even succeed the old picture of “glitter and doom,” with “the period’s very openness and the question posed by contemporaries of how to deal with it” serving as a new “grand narrative.”¹⁰ Work on Weimar’s political culture has enriched our view of two issues in particular. The first is the notion of “crisis” itself. “[I]f there is one theme that seems to appear across the entire range of Weimar history,” Peter Gordon and John McCormick observed, “it is the very awareness of anxiety signified by the prevalence of the term *crisis*.”¹¹ Rüdiger Graf and Moritz Föllmer, in

⁸Peter Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?,” *Journal of Modern History* 68/3 (1996), 629–56, at 631, 632. Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York, 1989). For Fritzsche’s own work along these lines see esp. Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York, 1990); and Fritzsche, “Landscape of Danger, Landscape of Design: Crisis and Modernism in Weimar Germany,” in Thomas Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann, eds., *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic* (Columbia, SC, 1994), 29–46.

⁹Examples are Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt, and Kristin McGuire, eds., *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York, 2010); Benjamin Ziemann, “Weimar was Weimar: Politics, Culture and the Emplotment of the German Republic,” *German History* 28/4 (2010), 542–71; Kathleen Canning, “The Politics of Symbols, Semantics, and Sentiments in the Weimar Republic,” *Central European History* 43/4 (2010), 567–80; Peter Gordon and John McCormick, eds., *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy* (Princeton, 2013). This new paradigm is implicit in Eric Weitz’s *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, 2007). Emblematic of the turn to political culture are Thomas Childers, “The Social Language of Politics in Germany: The Sociology of Political Discourse in the Weimar Republic,” *American Historical Review* 95/2 (1990), 331–58; Thomas Mergel, *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik: Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag* (Düsseldorf, 2002); and Wolfgang Hardtwig, ed., *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1939* (Göttingen, 2005).

¹⁰Jochen Hung, “Beyond Glitter and Doom: The New Paradigm of Contingency in Weimar Research,” in Jochen Hung, Godela Weiss-Sussex, and Geoff Wilkes, eds., *Beyond Glitter and Doom: The Contingency of the Weimar Republic* (Munich, 2012), 9–15, at 14.

¹¹Peter Gordon and John McCormick, “Introduction,” in Gordon and McCormick, *Weimar Thought*, 1–11, at 5, original emphasis.

particular, have explored Weimar's rhetoric of crisis, exploding Peukert's singular and all-encompassing "crisis of classical modernity" into a cacophony of component crises.¹² "[T]he meanings of 'crisis' were more diverse than previously acknowledged," Föllmer observed; at the same time, they all generated "strong expectations of unity" and were often "framed in nationalist terms, as national crises that required 'German' solutions."¹³ The remark points to the second issue illuminated by the study of political culture, namely, the myriad ways in which Weimar's denizens mobilized sentiment, symbolism, and myth on behalf of the German nation. If most effectively exploited by the Nazis, the desire for a unified and salvific "national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*)" was broad and deep in post-WWI Germany, extending to the political left as well.¹⁴ "Precisely because the ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was so extraordinarily important and widespread under the Weimar Republic, the expectations of its proselytizers ran far in excess of anything that it was actually capable of delivering."¹⁵

The story of "ineffable nationalism" told below sheds new light on each of these avenues of research: historicizing Weimar's "crisis," mapping the landscapes of experimentalism and desire, and unraveling the millennial hopes heaped on the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Though indebted to work on Weimar's political culture, my attention is not on discourse or representation per se, but on their perceived breakdown, which freed the imagination and spurred intellectual innovation. If this crisis was still discursive, it was also existential and emotional—aspects easily neglected by the approach to crisis as rhetorical construct.¹⁶ My aim is to write the Conservative Revolution more fully into the "laboratory-of-modernity" paradigm of Weimar. This is important because accounts of the radical nationalism typical of Conservative Revolutionary thought have generally (and sometimes rightly)

¹²See Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf, eds., *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt am Main and New York, 2005); Rüdiger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik: Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Munich, 2008); and Moritz Föllmer, "Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin," *Central European History* 42/2 (2009), 195–221. The call for a regenerated national community in response to a pervasive "sense-making crisis" is fundamental to cultural and ideological approaches to fascism. See the essays by Roger Griffin in Matthew Feldman, ed., *A Fascist Century* (Houndmills and New York, 2008).

¹³Moritz Föllmer, "Which Crisis? Which Modernity? New Perspectives on Weimar Germany," in Hung, Weiss-Sussex, and Wilkes, *Beyond Glitter and Doom*, 19–30, at 23.

¹⁴A good introduction to this issue is Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA, 1998). See also his "The Role of 'the People' and the Rise of the Nazis," in John Abromeit, Bridget Maria Chesterton, Gary Marotta, and York Norman, eds., *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies* (London, 2016), 1–14; Geoff Eley, "Conservatives—Radical Nationalists—Fascists: Calling the People into Politics, 1890–1930," in *ibid.*, 15–31; Helge Matthiesen, "Von der Massenbewegung zur Partei: Nationalismus in der deutschen Gesellschaft der Zwischenkriegszeit," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 48 (1997), 316–29; Michael Wildt, "Die Ungleichheit des Volkes: 'Volksgemeinschaft' in der politischen Kommunikation der Weimarer Republik," in Frank Bajohr and Michael Wildt, eds., *Volksgemeinschaft: Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschaft des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 2009), 24–40; and Thomas Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship* (Cambridge, 2017), 45–69.

¹⁵Moritz Föllmer, "The Problem of National Solidarity in Interwar Germany," *German History* 23/2 (2005), 202–31, at 203.

¹⁶On the need for an "emotional turn" in German history see the "History of Emotions" forum, *German History* 28/1 (2010), 67–80.

focused on continuities with the culture and society of prewar imperial Germany. These include the “Nazi pedigree” hunt in intellectual history, as well as efforts to trace how mass politics transformed German conservatism starting in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷ To be sure, *postwar* ideological innovation has played a larger role in works focused on Weimar’s Conservative Revolution. These have stressed how former frontline soldiers envisioned a utopian “new nationalism” or an idealized “new man” on the basis of their war experience.¹⁸ Innovative aspects of postwar Conservative Revolutionary thought have been highlighted in other ways, too, including an irrationalist romance with technology well captured by the term “reactionary modernism.”¹⁹ My account of the pull of the ineffable on the minds of Conservative Revolutionaries expands our knowledge of these right-wing fusions and fantasies. It shows the ingenuity with which pre-1914 influences were combined with wartime experiences, and the pressures of postwar life fueling such *contingent* combinations. Above all, it contributes to answering what Fritzsche declared the “crucial question in German history,” namely how to “account for the enclosure of the modernist spirit of experimentation by the national collective at the expense of the individual and the particular.”²⁰

Ernst Jünger’s conversion to ineffable nationalism offers a window into this enclosure. I suggest that the personal nature of Jünger’s war writings reveals a process of ideology formation that was shared (though not as candidly disclosed) by many Conservative Revolutionaries. Crucial to this process was the intense *feeling* of crisis in the postwar years—a feeling which literary evidence is well suited to bring to light. As Rüdiger Graf pointed out, a “crisis” is not an objective force or condition; it is always subjective and “prognostic,” rooted in a “dramatic plot” that views the present as a “moment of decision” leading either to disaster or to salvation. For this reason, the postwar crisis of language examined here was necessarily linked to a critical interpretation of the present. For Conservative Revolutionaries, recalling the world of the trenches was a way to measure contemporary Germany’s presumed shortcomings and imagine an integrated future nation that was within reach because it had been prefigured in the recent past.²¹ Close attention to Jünger’s shifting perspective on the war makes clear not only how the postwar crisis of communication arose but also how it drove ideological and literary experimentation. “[E]xplanations of intellectual transformations by reference to crisis,” Graf remarked, often leave “unclear how exactly the crisis became causally relevant.”²² In Jünger, historians have a wealth

¹⁷Representative of the former are Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler* (New York, 1941); and George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1964). For the latter see Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven, 1980).

¹⁸E.g. Woods, *The Conservative Revolution*, 1–28; See also George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford and New York, 1996), esp. chap. 8.

¹⁹Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1984).

²⁰Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?” 648.

²¹See Peter Fritzsche, “The Economy of Experience in Weimar Germany,” in Canning, Barndt, and McGuire, *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects*, 360–82.

²²Rüdiger Graf, “Either–Or: The Narrative of ‘Crisis’ in Weimar Germany and in Historiography,” *Central European History* 43 (2010), 592–615, at 599–600, 613–14. Following Graf’s terminology, I treat “crisis” here as both *explanandum* and as *explanans*, as that which requires explanation and as that

of evidence for the internal dynamics of the Conservative Revolution's crisis mentality.

Modernity and the crisis of representation

The problem of communicating an entrapped subjectivity was already a common theme on the eve of World War I. Its archetypal formulation was supplied by those Viennese writers and theorists—Fritz Mauthner, Robert Musil, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others—for whom the inadequacy of language to express ultimate values or one's innermost being had become a burning existential issue. "As soon as we really have something to say," Mauthner avowed, "we are forced to be silent."²³ In Hofmannsthal's "Letter of Lord Chandos" (1902), the fictional correspondent confessed to having "lost completely the ability to think or speak of anything coherently," a source of "anguish" and "loneliness" given the "iridescent colouring" of his every thought and sensation.²⁴ The limits of language were likewise explored in Wittgenstein's 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which attempted to define the boundary between sense and nonsense, between what could be meaningfully expressed and what could not. *Sensical* propositions were shown to be restricted to matters of fact and logic à la the natural sciences, to statements that "pictured" the world and modeled its logical relations. "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence," Wittgenstein concluded, consigning to the realm of the properly unsayable all of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics—the domains, that is, most urgently in need of discussion for those concerned with the significance and value of human life.²⁵

For many, such incommunicability seemed a peculiarly modern affliction. According to one interpretation, the problem of language reflected in Hofmannsthal's "Letter of Lord Chandos" stems from the way modern man lives in two irreconcilable mental worlds. The first is a habitual world of commonsense ideas and everyday practices, especially as encoded in language; the second is the world presented by modern science, with its mathematical theorization and reduction of phenomena to impersonal laws. For those who feel this schizophrenia, forms of thought and expression that "made sense" in traditional society, and which cannot simply be thrown off, are now constantly exposed as fictions. Having lost "the simplifying eye of habit," Hofmannsthal wrote, "everything disintegrated into parts ... Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back—whirlpools which gave me vertigo and ... led into the void."²⁶ As one commentator put it, Hofmannsthal believed that viewing the lifeworld through science's critical lens

which has explanatory power. On the relationship between "critique" and "crisis" see Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg and Munich, 1959).

²³Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York, 1973), 131.

²⁴Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Letter of Lord Chandos," trans. Tania and James Stern, in *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Princeton, 2008), 69–79, at 73–4. See also Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, chaps. 4–5.

²⁵Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London and New York, 2001), 89.

²⁶Hofmannsthal, "The Letter of Lord Chandos," 74.

“deprives language of its object” and consequently casts the individual into mute confusion.²⁷

Social conditions may have been another source of anxiety. As Ernest Gellner observed, the societies created by modern nation-states—mobile and unsettled, with centralized educational and media systems—require standardized languages that allow for communication among distant strangers.²⁸ “For the first time in human history,” Gellner noted of modernity, “explicit and reasonably precise communication becomes generally, pervasively used and important. In the closed local communities of the agrarian or tribal worlds, when it came to communication, context, tone, gesture, personality, and situation were everything. Communication, such as it was, took place without the benefit of precise formulation.”²⁹ Ironically, the decline of implicit forms of expression and the increasing importance of explicit, context-liberated language could make the problem of communication not less intensely felt, but *more*. Articulating complex subjects in print and for an audience of strangers requires linguistic resources far beyond the grunts and nods that convey tacit meaning among intimates. It is no coincidence that Hofmannsthal’s Lord Chandos suffers lost communicability when trying to discuss “loftier or more general subject[s],” developing an “inexplicable distaste” for “abstract words” like “spirit” and “soul.” In response, he turns to a “wordless” rapture focused on concrete experiences—a flight into ineffability that prefigures the Conservative Revolution’s own suspicion of language.³⁰

With the end of the Great War in November 1918, such anxiety over language spread to broader segments of German culture. Central to this transformation was the felt inability to say clearly what the conflict had been about. “Few issues were as highly contested in Germany between 1918 and 1933,” Wolfgang Iser remarked, “as the question of how to render ‘meaning’ unto a war that had left nearly two million dead and nearly five million wounded and furthermore had left Germany the vanquished opponent charged ... with being the sole culprit for the war’s outbreak and devastation.”³¹ For some, the gulf between the war’s realities and its postwar results simply could not be bridged. The war seemed to be what Erich Maria Remarque famously condemned it as: “a completely meaningless

²⁷Hermann Rudolph, *Kulturkritik und konservative Revolution: Zum kulturell-politischen Denken Hofmannsthals und seinem problemgeschichtlichen Kontext* (Tübingen, 1971), 41–6. The expressionists, too, were driven by the problem of how to communicate emotional complexity and psychological depth. The sheer amount of anxious “expression” they produced does not performatively undercut such concerns so much as provide evidence for them.

²⁸Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, 1983), 21, 32–3.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰Hofmannsthal, “The Letter of Lord Chandos,” 73, 78. After World War I, Hofmannsthal not only gravitated toward the Conservative Revolution but popularized the term in a 1927 lecture. See his “The Written Word as the Spiritual Space of the Nation,” in David S. Luft, ed., *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the Austrian Idea: Selected Essays and Addresses, 1906–1927* (West Lafayette, IN, 2011), 157–69. Hofmannsthal’s trajectory aside, most Conservative Revolutionaries paid little attention to Viennese figures like Musil or Wittgenstein. My point is not to trace influence or enhance by association Conservative Revolutionary thinking, but rather to sketch a modernist problematic that would be taken up in politicized form in Weimar Germany.

³¹Wolfgang Iser, *Literature at War, 1914–1940: Representing the “Time of Greatness” in Germany* (New Haven and London, 1999), 15–16.

surface of things linked to an abyss of suffering.”³² According to this turn of mind, the Great War’s air of having followed a deranged logic beyond human control made it “the threshold in the crisis of representation of modern warfare.”³³ Referring to the postwar scene, Natter noted the “absolute divide ... insisted upon by many soldier-poets and their interpreters who deny the possibility of communicating battle experience to those who have not been there.”³⁴ As Carl Zuckmayer put it, the Great War’s “chaos” simply could not be made “clear in a representation or generalization.”³⁵ The trope of incommunicability was voiced outside Germany, too. “Those who have attempted to convey any real war experience,” Richard Aldington wrote in 1926, “must have felt the torturing sense of something incommunicable.”³⁶

The fact that such claims coexisted with voluminous writing about the war, and indeed were woven into personal accounts of the front, makes plain that they served as a paradoxical source of legitimacy for writers who had much to say. “If one could fully understand the initiation to combat by reading about it,” Leonard Smith observed of the demands made by French veterans, “then that experience would no longer be the exclusive realm of combatants themselves, precisely what set them apart forever from their compatriots and gave them a special authority to speak on the war.”³⁷ For Germany’s veterans—and especially for revolutionary nationalists who had no trouble commemorating the fighting—it was the conflict’s supposed ineffability which consecrated them as a priesthood uniquely able to interpret the war.

Walter Benjamin, in probably the most famous account by a nonveteran of how the trench experience defied communication, lamented that the Great War had merely made “apparent” a broader crisis in modern civilization. “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war,” he wrote in 1936, “that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten

³²Michael Minden, “The First World War and Its Aftermath in the German Novel,” in Graham Bartram, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern German Novel* (Cambridge, 2004), 138–51, at 148.

³³Bernd Hüppauf, “Experiences of Modern Warfare and the Crisis of Representation,” *New German Critique* 59 (1993), 41–76, at 49.

³⁴Natter, *Literature at War*, 13.

³⁵Quoted in Eric Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge and New York, 1979), 28. As Paul Fussell observed, “the presumed inadequacy of language itself to convey the facts about trench warfare is one of the motifs of all who wrote about the war.” But Fussell argued that the problem was more rhetorical than linguistic: the war’s ugliness collided with the genteel public language of the day—thus *unspeakable* did not mean literally indescribable, just too *nasty* to talk about. See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford and New York, 2000), 169–70. Julian Walker agrees that “[p]robably the most frequent description of the front was that it defied description,” but notes that this sometimes meant merely that doing so would violate taboos. See Julian Walker, *Words and the First World War: Language, Memory, Vocabulary* (London and New York, 2017), 280–84. Whether World War I was more indescribable than previous wars is beyond the scope of this article. Drew Gilpin Faust, however, remarks on similar problems of intelligibility and communicability in the wake of the US Civil War. See Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, 2008), 207–10.

³⁶Quoted in Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York, 1991), 424.

³⁷Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldier’s Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca and London, 2007), 45.

years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth.”³⁸ For Benjamin, the traumas of the war were incompatible with the kind of “experience”—understood as a cumulative process of learning or the integration of discrete events into an intelligible story-like whole—that had hitherto guided human affairs. Whereas the shared horizon of traditional communal life had once allowed proverbs and tales to be presented without explanation in the trust that their wisdom would be clear, the Great War’s discontinuous shocks resisted any readily transmissible meaning or moral.³⁹ The war’s incommunicability, Benjamin seemed to suggest, was an index of the poverty of communicable experience in modern life as a whole.⁴⁰

Although Benjamin found little to celebrate, this inability to represent the Great War was also an opportunity to imagine new forms of belonging. The diagnosis of crisis was not necessarily a “pessimistic expectation of doom”; more often it was a call to envision—and actively make—an open-ended future.⁴¹ In his influential *Community and Society* (1887), Ferdinand Tönnies had judged “tacit understanding” one of the hallmarks of organic communal existence, the source of the “deep feelings and prevailing thoughts” from which language itself took shape. The contents of this “tacit understanding,” Tönnies wrote, “are inexpressible, interminable, and intangible.”⁴² If the Great War generalized a crisis of representation hitherto confined to writers and theorists like Hofmannsthal, who doubted that words could convey the richness of subjective experience, it also highlighted the brotherhood of men at war as just such an organic community in which linguistic mediation was comparatively unimportant.

The politicized suspicion of language in Weimar Germany

As Benjamin’s comments indicate, doubts about language’s power to describe the First World War were not restricted to the radical right after 1918. Yet it was among Germany’s Conservative Revolutionaries that talk of experiences transcending the expressible fed radical political longings. To those who found little worth preserving in the present, moments of tacit understanding, above all in the trenches, offered touchstones for thinking about the possibility of a revitalized national culture and the creation of an organic national community. This was most clearly the case for those writers and theorists—such as Ernst Jünger—who had known the war’s realities at first hand. But prominent nonveterans, too, infused their assaults on mass society and Weimar liberalism with praise for communities

³⁸Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), 83–109, at 84.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 83–6, 89–91. Benjamin’s concern is for a concept of experience as *Erfahrung*, to be distinguished from the immediate, prereflective, and “lived” notion of experience as *Erlebnis*. See Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2005), 11, 312–60.

⁴⁰To what extent the Great War was the source or merely the symptom of this impoverishment is not easy to make out. See Martin Jay, “Is Experience Still in Crisis? Reflections on a Frankfurt School Lament,” in Jay, *Essays from the Edge: Parerga & Paralipomena* (Charlottesville and London, 2011), 22–35.

⁴¹Graf, “Either–Or,” 600, 609.

⁴²Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society*, trans. Charles Loomis (New York, 1963), 47–9, translation slightly altered.

joined beyond words, often in ways profoundly connected with their own central ideas.

The greatest interwar theorist of tacitness, after all, was Martin Heidegger, whose *Being and Time* (1927) analyzed forms of prereflective awareness that had been obscured since the Enlightenment by a Cartesian model of detached critical reflection. These included the individual's embeddedness in a historical culture, whose customs and language carry built-in interpretations that shape our experience of the world. The task of the poet, Heidegger wrote in 1935, was to make a people's view of the world visible to itself by articulating this background understanding.⁴³ For Heidegger, language is constitutive of human existence, a stock of truisms and commonplace meanings delimiting, for the average person most of the time, what it is possible to interpret or understand. In this sense, Heidegger's notion of *Gerede*—the everyday talk of the “they”—establishes the possibility of comprehending, beneath the surface of words, what is *truly* being said.⁴⁴ Carl Schmitt, in another version of the same idea, deemed such prediscursive agreement the hallmark of a truly populist political order. Given this singular will, Schmitt argued in a gloss on Rousseau's social contract, “the laws come into existence *sans discussion* ... homogeneity elevated into an identity understands itself completely from itself.”⁴⁵

While neither Schmitt nor Heidegger were veterans of the front lines, the same was not true of Hans Freyer, one of the Conservative Revolution's foremost academic theorists, who volunteered in 1914 and served much of the next four years on the Western Front.⁴⁶ For Freyer, as for Schmitt and Heidegger, the stress on unspoken agreement was a crucial ingredient in a larger communitarian vision. Sounding common radical conservative themes, Freyer argued that human beings are in need of boundedness and integration by the outward creations—institutions, traditions, values, myths—of a unified culture. Without enclosure in such collective particularity, the individual was lost, becoming the pitifully disoriented and deracinated creature familiar to students of modern social theory. Yet what would save modern man was hard to articulate. The historical cultures Freyer extolled were the expression of a “primordial attitude toward the world” that was “thoroughly pre-rational, unformulated, and non-conscious.”⁴⁷ In *The State* (1925), he took

⁴³See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (New York, 1993), 139–203. On Heidegger's turn from *logos* to articulating the ineffable see Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton and Oxford, 2001), 91–7.

⁴⁴Though often translated as “idle talk” and cast in a negative light as the banal, unreflective chatter of the herd, *Gerede* is in fact a more ambivalent notion. As a condition of possibility for communication, it “signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of Being of everyday Dasein's understanding and interpreting.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, 1962), 211.

⁴⁵Carl Schmitt, “Preface to the Second Edition (1926): On the Contradiction between Parliamentarism and Democracy,” in Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 1–17, at 14.

⁴⁶Jerry Z. Muller, *The Other God That Failed: Hans Freyer and the Deradicalization of German Conservatism* (Princeton, 1987), 58.

⁴⁷Jerry Z. Muller, “Carl Schmitt, Hans Freyer, and the Radical Conservative Critique of Liberal Democracy in the Weimar Republic,” *History of Political Thought* 12/4 (1991), 695–715, at 706. The lines are from Freyer's *Theorie des objektiven Geistes: Eine Einleitung in die Kulturphilosophie* (Leipzig, 1923).

as a model of renewal this shared “horizon” of primeval communal life, praising that state “whose constitution consists not at all of formal laws, but of unspoken and tacitly followed customs, of the organic interplay of real forces, of simple leadership and willing trust.”⁴⁸

Even when not explicitly invoked, tacitness and ineffability added an aura of profundity to major Conservative Revolutionary themes. A good example is what Walter Benjamin called fascism’s “introduction of aesthetics into political life,” a notion he first developed in a review of a collection of war essays edited by Ernst Jünger.⁴⁹ In his foreword, Jünger wrote that the essays were joined by the search for a German nationalism beyond

the idealism of our grandfathers and the rationalism of our fathers ... what it wishes to grasp is that substance, that layer of an absolute reality of which ideas as well as rational conclusions are only expressions. This stance is thus also a symbolic one, in so far as it understands every act, every thought, and every feeling as the symbol of a unified and unchangeable being.⁵⁰

Here Jünger elevates symbols gesturing at less articulable realities above the elucidation of explicit content: if the idea is “symbol” too, then theory is no better than theater. As Benjamin pointed out, fascism offered the masses “a chance to express themselves” in precisely this way—not in the liberal sense of contributing to rational discourse, but theatrically through participation in the signs and rituals of cultic worship. For one Jünger acolyte, Armin Mohler, this aestheticist stress on expression through style—*aesthetic* in the original Greek sense of something consumed via direct perception, without the rationalist detour through theoretical abstraction—defined fascism *tout court*.⁵¹ Much the same could be said about the radical right’s stress on feeling. For Conservative Revolutionaries, the nation was less a topic of discussion than an object of mute sentimental attachment. As Edgar Jung put it, “Only in feeling, in the silently functioning spiritual rootedness in a totality, lies the certainty for genuine and healthy communal life.”⁵²

Perhaps nowhere is the suspicion of language clearer than in the Conservative Revolution’s attraction to action and decisiveness. Jung himself made the

⁴⁸Hans Freyer, *Der Staat* (Leipzig, 1926), 182–3. See also Freyer, *The Other God That Failed*, 102. Of course, a defense of the taken-for-granted naturalness of institutions and practices was already a concern of eighteenth-century conservatives like Edmund Burke and Justus Möser. As Corey Robin points out, the idea that conservatism represents “the untutored and the unlettered,” and is thus “stupid” in a profound sense, has a long lineage. See Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (New York, 2017), 17–18.

⁴⁹Walter Benjamin, “Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, Edited by Ernst Jünger,” trans. Jerolf Wikoff, *New German Critique* 17 (1979), 120–28; and Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 217–51, at 241–2.

⁵⁰Ernst Jünger, foreword to Jünger, *Krieg und Krieger*, in Jünger, *Politische Publizistik: 1919 bis 1933*, ed. Sven Olaf Berggötz (Stuttgart, 2001), 557–8, at 557.

⁵¹Armin Mohler, “Der faschistische Stil,” in Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner, ed., *Konservatismus International* (Stuttgart, 1973), 172–98. As Mohler put it, “fascism is not mute ... it loves words, but they are not there to communicate a logical connection. Their function is rather to set a certain tone, create a climate, call forth associations.” *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵²Jung, *Die Herrschaft der Minderwertigen*, 97.

association explicit, drawing a contrast between World War I veterans, whom he deemed “realistic, taciturn, and ready to act,” and the “boastfulness, embellishment, and weakness of will” that he believed marked contemporary political life.⁵³ Time and again, Weimar’s right-wing radicals reviled political speech as frivolous, empty, feeble, or dishonest; resolute action, by contrast, regardless of the normative foundations guiding it, promised to clear a path through such prattle. For Carl Schmitt, a leading prophet of this “decisionism,” endless talk was the fatal flaw preventing parliamentary democracy from acting firmly in a time of emergency. “The essence of liberalism,” Schmitt argued, “is negotiation, a cautious half measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion.”⁵⁴ Yet the age itself also seemed impatient with reasoned dialogue. “A calm and factual debate,” Schmitt wrote in 1926, “might appear impractical, naïve, and anachronistic to most people today ... Perhaps the age of discussion is coming to an end.”⁵⁵

For Schmitt, avoiding the “definitive dispute” meant postponing the choice between friends and foes that defined the nation as an existential community—one determined not by talk but by an essential identity in need of defense. In a 1930 essay “On Nationalism and the Jewish Question,” Ernst Jünger connected the dots between loss of faith in public discourse and the nation’s heroic solidarity. Declaring liberal constitutionalism “too hypocritical, too long-winded, and above all too bothersome for modern taste,” Jünger called for a German nationalism grounded in a non-discursive “morphological thinking, that is as opposed to liberalism as fire to water.” This “new German bearing” would intuit German cultural affinities; its *telos* would be a “German empire resting on its particularistic roots”; and it would confront the Jew as “an adversary,” who could only “cease to be dangerous to the German” when recognized in his unassimilable separateness. As the German “will to form” grows, Jünger concluded ominously, so will “the delusion of the Jew that he is a German in Germany become less tenable, until he is faced with his final alternative: either to be a Jew in Germany, or to not be.”⁵⁶

Other Conservative Revolutionaries linked the decay of public language to political crisis in other ways, though with equally decisionistic results. According to Hans Zehrer, editor of the journal *The Deed*, the “chief obstacle” facing self-styled

⁵³Ibid., 80.

⁵⁴Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 63. Daniel Morat notes decisionism’s “intellectual anti-intellectualism,” which elevated vagueness to a guiding principle. See Daniel Morat, “No Inner Remigration: Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger, and the Early Federal Republic of Germany,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9/3 (2012), 661–79, at 669. The stress on action and the radical rejection of the present also came together on the socialist left. A good example, which translated expressionism’s emotional energy into a messianic politics that was impatient with dialogue and sober analysis (though without fully repudiating reason), was Kurt Hiller’s “activism.”

⁵⁵Schmitt, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 1.

⁵⁶Ernst Jünger, “Über Nationalismus und Judenfrage,” *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*, Sept. 1930, in Jünger, *Politische Publizistik*, 587–92, at 591, 592. On the “friend-foe” decision see Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago and London, 2007). On Jünger’s flirtation with “a cultural version of anti-Semitism” see Elliot Neaman, *A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature after Nazism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999), 36–7.

political visionaries such as himself was the shifting meaning of concepts. “[W]hen we reach for words in order to convey the content of this time,” Zehrer lamented, “we suddenly despair at the linguistic material. These words and concepts are old and worn out, they all contain a sense which no longer survives.” Zehrer proclaimed that even formerly clear terms like “conservative” or “socialist” were now muddled. For both speaker and audience, trust in words was “reduced to a minimum.” While traditional political parties continued to use an outdated lingo that no longer corresponded to reality, new political movements reached for vague, emotion-laden language in order to mobilize supporters. Both sides, Zehrer argued, succumbed to the “crisis of language,” albeit in different ways; the only options were endlessly defining one’s terms or speaking in a manner that is “sweeping, long-winded, and obscure.” “Out of the helplessness of linguistic material,” he concluded, “there grows a vitalization which ultimately can only make its impact physically.” The turn to *action* was simply a desperate response to this “chaos of language.”⁵⁷ Zehrer’s analysis is important because it helps us see that the embrace of “decisiveness” and “the deed” was driven at least as much by negative emotions—fear of incommunicability, impatience with existing political idioms, frustration over the failure to reach programmatic clarity—as it was by any positive intoxication with action or violence. One should not forget that Zehrer *wanted* to define what form the German revolution would take. The *raison d’être* of radical-right publications like *The Deed*, after all, was giving content to calls for a “new nationalism” that was supposedly born during World War I, and which would break fundamentally with prewar nationalism and conservatism. As Roger Woods observed, Zehrer had “long envied [communism] for having its ideas clarified.”⁵⁸

The flight from discursive language out of failure to formulate a political program is clearly displayed by the journal *Deutsches Volkstum*. Highly regarded in Conservative Revolutionary circles, it took as its aim the theorization of a forward-looking nationalist movement based on the “German national character” (the journal’s title). To be sure, its coeditors, Wilhelm Stapel and Albrecht Erich Günther, were hardly at a loss for airy definitions of the *Volk*. Already in 1917, Stapel had defined it as “a living entity of people who share a soul,” arising out of the deep past and expressing “a shared culture and shared ideals.”⁵⁹ Like other celebrants of organic community, however, Stapel held the nation to be grounded in self-evident customs and a “natural” feeling of belonging, which resisted conceptual description. The dilemma confronting conservatives was how to speak about the nation imagined in such terms, while at the same time preserving its mystique.

Over the course of the 1920s, the journal repeatedly failed to square this circle: to work out a coherent political program, it was feared, risked turning a nationalist movement supposedly above all parties and divisions into just another political party. Rather than sully the nation, *Deutsches Volkstum* elevated ineffability to a virtue. Its editors posited the nation as a sacred totality that could be rhetorically

⁵⁷Hans Zehrer [Hans Thomas, pseud.], “Politik ohne Worte,” *Die Tat*, July 1930, 241–4.

⁵⁸See Woods, *The Conservative Revolution*, 88–100, esp. 98.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 102.

conjured and emotionally or spiritually felt, but which could not be denotatively described, theoretically formulated, or discursively constituted. This proved an attractive solution to the problem of incommunicability for politically engaged writers who had no desire to retreat into silence. In a 1927 essay, Günther likened a nationalist awakening to religious conversion and proclaimed that the Great War had been such a moment, when the nation was suddenly experienced as a “living reality.” “Only as an activist, not as a philosophical onlooker,” he declared, “can the nationalist become fully aware of his feeling for life.” His own words, Günther acknowledged, were a weak substitute: “Just as these lines do little to describe conceptually nationalism’s feeling for life, so little can the nationalist state be set out in a draft constitution.”⁶⁰ That this hostility to conceptual language presented problems for a nationalist journal was not lost on Günther. Writing in 1929, he argued that the right-wing press was at a disadvantage, since conservatism is “never the result of intellectual discussion, but rather the effect of a life-grounding attitude toward the world,” and is ultimately “unsayable.” It was conservatism’s enemies—socialism and liberalism—which sought an “expansion of what is sayable,” subjecting everything to argument, discussion, and public exposure.⁶¹

Can the stormtrooper speak?

The lure of the ineffable, as I have sketched it here, involved three independent claims. The first was that explicit language, especially as voiced publicly and for public purposes, had been exposed as deceptive or inadequate. The second was that genuine community is grounded in difficult-to-articulate and often unspoken feelings and values. The third was that the experience of trench warfare on the Western Front was impossible to fully convey and thus created a special intimacy and tacit understanding among those who were there. None of these three claims was destined to be joined to any other; certainly they were not always openly combined on the printed page. What I want to suggest, nevertheless, is that there was a tendency for these three claims to cohere in the minds of many Conservative Revolutionaries. In other words, what one veteran dubbed the “little world of the trenches” was imagined as the recovery, under modern conditions, of the prelinguistic harmony that was supposedly a hallmark of traditional organic communities—a recovery made all the more appealing by a felt crisis of language and social cohesion in the present.⁶² The allure of the front community as a model for a revitalized German nation should be understood in this light. This linkage of ideas was made with varying degrees of explicitness across what was always a motley crew of far-right writers and thinkers. In the figure of Ernst Jünger, one finds an archetypal case of this conjunction and the crisis mentality fueling it.

Is Jünger a bona fide modernist, a diagnostician of twentieth-century experience who pushed the boundaries of representation and subjectivity? Or is he a writer of

⁶⁰Albrecht Erich Günther, “Nationalismus,” *Deutsches Volkstum* 7 (1927), 497–502, at 498.

⁶¹Albrecht Erich Günther, “Warum es keine gute konservative Presse geben kann,” *Deutsches Volkstum* 5 (1929), 346–52, at 350. On the *Deutsches Volkstum* circle see Woods, *The Conservative Revolution*, 100–10.

⁶²George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York and Oxford, 1990), 5.

B-literature, a propagandist and “ice-cold sensualist of barbarism,” as Thomas Mann claimed?⁶³ Interpretations of Jünger’s works long hinged on how one judged their political and aesthetic dimensions. While detractors damned his writings as literary fascism, apologists hailed Jünger as a sophisticated author by treating his political activities as secondary, the youthful sins of a great writer.⁶⁴ The battle lines have softened in recent decades, however, as scholars have evinced a greater willingness to coolly evaluate the interplay of ideology and aesthetics in Jünger’s *oeuvre*, exploring the complexities and contradictions of his writings in their historical context. “Rather than reduce literature to [political] journalism, or vice versa,” Matthias Schöning argued, capturing the general mood, “it is more worthwhile to investigate their reciprocal interdependence as characteristic of Jünger’s (and not just his) texts of the 1920s and early 1930s.”⁶⁵ My approach here is similarly focused on the formation of ideology within a matrix of motives that cannot be disentangled from Jünger’s literary ambitions. In Jünger’s ever-evolving corpus, we can investigate writing about the war as an ongoing exercise in which “development, change ... [and the] tension and contradiction between ideas” are visible.⁶⁶

⁶³Quoted in Helmuth Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger: Die Biographie* (Munich, 2007), 540.

⁶⁴Representative of Jünger’s detractors in this regard are Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1977); and Wolfgang Kämpfer, *Ernst Jünger* (Stuttgart, 1981). Examples of the depoliticizing reading are Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens* (Munich and Vienna, 1978); and Martin Meyer, *Ernst Jünger* (Munich and Vienna, 1990). See also Russell Berman, “Written Right across Their Faces: Ernst Jünger’s Fascist Modernism,” in Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick, eds., *Modernity and the Text* (New York, 1989); and Andreas Huyssen, “Fortifying the Heart: Totally Ernst Jünger’s Armored Texts,” *New German Critique* 59/2 (1993), 3–23.

⁶⁵Matthias Schöning, “Kriegserfahrung und politische Autorschaft,” in Schöning, ed., *Ernst Jünger Handbuch* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 2014), 5–29, at 9. Examples of this willingness to concede the diagnostic richness of Jünger’s writings and acknowledge their interwovenness with radical-right ideology, without succumbing to polemics about Jünger’s allegedly defective, fascist sensibility, are Harro Segeberg, “Regressive Modernisierung: Kriegerlebnis und Moderne-Kritik in Ernst Jüngers Frühwerk,” in Harro Segeberg, ed., *Vom Wert der Arbeit: Zur literarischen Konstitution des Wertkomplexes ‘Arbeit’ in der deutschen Literatur (1770–1930)* (Tübingen, 1991), 335–78; Harro Segeberg, “Revolutionärer Nationalismus: Ernst Jünger während der Weimarer Republik,” in Helmut Scheuer, ed., *Dichter und ihre Nation* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), 327–42; Helmuth Kiesel, *Wissenschaftliche Diagnose und dichterische Vision der Moderne: Max Weber und Ernst Jünger* (Heidelberg, 1994); John King, “Writing and Rewriting the First World War: Ernst Jünger and the Crisis of the Conservative Imagination, 1914–25” (D.Phil. dissertation, Oxford, 1999), published as “Wann hat dieser Scheisskrieg ein Ende?” *Writing and Rewriting the First World War* (Schnellroda, 2003); Ulrich Fröschle, “Oszillationen zwischen Literatur und Politik: Ernst Jünger und ‘das Wort vom politischen Dichter,’” in Lutz Hagedstedt, ed., *Ernst Jünger: Politik—Mythos—Kunst* (Berlin, 2004), 101–43; Hans-Harald Müller, “Ernst Jüngers Frühwerk im Kontext der literarischen Moderne der zwanziger und frühen dreißiger Jahre,” in Natalia Zarska, ed., *Ernst Jünger: Eine Bilanz* (Leipzig, 2010), 14–25; Matthias Schöning and Ingo Stöckmann, “Diskrete Diagnosen: Ein Plädoyer für neue Fragestellungen,” in Schöning and Stöckmann, eds., *Ernst Jünger und die Bundesrepublik: Ästhetik—Politik—Zeitgeschichte* (Berlin and Boston, 2012), 3–33; Helmuth Kiesel, “Gab es einen ‘rechten’ Avantgardismus? Eine Anmerkung zu Klaus von Beymes ‘Zeitalter der Avantgarden,’” in Ariane Hellinger, Barbara Waldkirch, Elisabeth Buchner, and Helge Batt, eds., *Die Politik in der Kunst und die Kunst in der Politik* (Wiesbaden, 2013), 109–24; and Clemens Ackermann, “Writing as a ‘Continuation of War by Other Means’: Ernst Jünger in Weimar Germany” (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 2017).

⁶⁶Roger Woods, “The Conservative Revolution and the First World War: Literature as Evidence in Historical Explanation,” *Modern Language Review* 85/1 (1990), 77–91, at 78. Woods notes, “Among Conservative Revolutionaries it is particularly Ernst Jünger whose work contains these productive tensions

Within this dynamic process, we can see ideological and literary experimentation at work. What one commentator called Jünger's "violent rejection of literature and language"⁶⁷—that is, his 1923 turn to political activism in the wake of increasingly frustrated efforts to write about the war—I read as Jünger's abrupt, crisis-driven conversion to ineffable nationalism. As with others in Weimar's Conservative Revolution, this conversion was less the abandonment of language per se than an attempt to find literary means adequate to a vitalist vision of the German nation.

The charge that Jünger is the quintessential fascist aesthete was first brought by Walter Benjamin, who anticipated many subsequent critics in condemning Jünger's "uninhibited translation of the principles of *l'art pour l'art* to war itself." And not without reason: what Benjamin decried as an obtuse "cult of war" was all too plain in Jünger's 1922 essay *Battle as Inner Experience*, which affirmed combat as an "intoxicating orgy" where "instincts, too long damned up by society and its laws, become once more dominant and holy."⁶⁸ To understand Jünger's evolution, however, we need to understand that he arrived at the Western Front largely untouched by the period's jingoism. How little nationalism meant to Jünger even at war's end can be seen from his original diaries. "I believed myself above the national standpoint before the war," he wrote in September 1918, "and I don't stand beneath it today."⁶⁹ We should likewise discard any notion that Jünger was blind to the Great War's brutality. An entry from December 1915 is representative of the "dark thoughts" to which he was prone: "What's this never-ending murder for? ... War has awoken in me a longing for the blessings of peace."⁷⁰

Jünger's diaries provided the source for the postwar essays and memoirs that made him a darling of the revolutionary right. Like many modernist writers, Jünger was drawn to autobiographical experience as an object of investigation. In a 1966 interview, he described this as a lifelong "drive ... to hold onto situations."⁷¹ This graphomaniac need, which marked Jünger's literary production throughout his eight-decade-long career as a writer, was already in place during World War I. "I have tried," Jünger noted in September 1918, "to bring my impressions immediately to paper ... It is curious how quickly impressions blur, how easily they take on a different hue." "The aim of my book," he wrote, "is to portray matter-of-factly for the reader what I underwent in my regiment and what I thought in the moment. I want to not just moan endlessly about blood, mud, hunger, thirst, danger, and exhaustion, but also not forget the merry hours in the bunker, the periods of rest behind the lines, and the nights spent clinking glasses."⁷² It is important to note the documentary impulse in these lines, the urge to press language into honest service in working through the experience of the trenches. What's more, they betray an

... His ideas are all the more interesting because the patterns discernible in his work can be traced in the writings of many others on the radical right." *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁷King, "Writing and Rewriting the First World War," 253.

⁶⁸Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism," 122–3; Ernst Jünger, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (Berlin, 1922), 3, 95.

⁶⁹Ernst Jünger, *Kriegstagebuch: 1914–1918*, ed. Helmuth Kiesel (Stuttgart, 2010), 10 Sept. 1918, 433.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 1 Dec. 1915, 62–3; 17 Feb. 1917, 213.

⁷¹Heinz Ludwig Arnold, "Stendhal war mein Meister," *Die Zeit* 44 (28 Oct. 2010), at www.zeit.de/2010/44/Juenger.

⁷²Jünger, *Kriegstagebuch*, 10 Sept. 1918, 432–3.

ambivalence about the war and a willingness to arrive at nuanced evaluations that is not always evident in Jünger's postwar accounts, which often celebrate the war's violence as a source of spiritual or political rebirth.

We should also recognize that Jünger's diaries are not an unmediated expression of his thoughts and feelings. Rather than revealing his "real" war experience, what the journals show is how Jünger interpreted the war at a time *before it was lost*.⁷³ Two observations are necessary about Jünger's early view of the war. The first is that he *did not* portray the front line as a general space of intimate belonging. The second is that, despite his aim to objectively describe the war, he was not always able to master the war's events and bring them to language. Briefly dwelling on these points in his original diaries will provide a baseline for tracing how, and under what pressures, Jünger gravitated to ineffable nationalism in the early post-war years.

Only in commonplaces do Jünger's diaries reflect a sentimental view of the trench community. In a July 1916 entry, for instance, Jünger remarked that the front's "rough life among men" had its share of "cozy moments."⁷⁴ And returning from leave in April 1917, he expressed happiness to be back among his company's "old stalwarts."⁷⁵ Much more emphatic was his preference for the few soldiers (mostly fellow officers) he thought of as kindred spirits. Jünger's will to prevail over the war's chaos grew out of this elitist self-conception. The longing for mastery was clear in his description of the "utter confusion" of a patrol into no-man's-land. "It is ... stirring," he wrote, "how the men cling to an officer in such circumstances ... 'Lieutenant, Sir, where should we go?' 'Lieutenant, come help.' 'Lieutenant, I'm wounded.' 'Where is Lt. Jünger?' To be a leader with a clear head in such moments is to approximate God. Few are good enough."⁷⁶ But despair sometimes got the upper hand. Just days before the launch of the 1918 Spring Offensive, Jünger wrote, "This time I go into battle with a feeling of utter indifference." Then, in lines crossed out but still legible, he continued: "But that's no concern to anyone else. So no one speaks of it here. *Amico pectus, hosti frontem. O si tacuisses, philosophus mansisses* rubbish rubbish crap nonsense finished *Beati possidentes Aut omnia [sic] aut nihil. Capito? Si Signore*."⁷⁷ Jünger's mix of Italian, schoolboy Latin phrases, and broken German conveys not just isolation and hopelessness in the face of death, but a total failure of comprehension. His language is so far from representational mastery that it collapses into macaronic babble. In the same low spirit a few days later, he recorded his opposition to another "senseless" attack and confessed to a "rotted-out" feeling that was "difficult to describe in words."⁷⁸

⁷³See King, "Writing and Rewriting the First World War," chap. 5.

⁷⁴Jünger, *Kriegstagebuch*, 27 July 1916, 158.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 9 April 1917, 231.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 19 June 1917, 270–1.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 18 March 1918, 370–71. Jünger's choice of phrases is likely significant, but impossible to reconstruct. They mean, respectively: "Offer friends your breast, enemies your forehead"; "Oh, if you had remained silent, you would have remained a philosopher"; "Blessed are those who possess either all or nothing"; "Do I understand? Yes, sir."

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 22 March 1918, 388–9.

Ambivalence about the trench community and anxieties about his ability to grasp the war continued in Jünger's earliest postwar writings. These were years of personal crisis, as he struggled to work through his disorientation by writing about the war. According to Helmuth Kiesel, Germany's defeat cast Jünger into a "crisis of meaning": if what replaced the old Kaiserreich was unbearable, then what had all the sacrifice been for?⁷⁹ As Jünger himself put it in 1926, "the meaning of our experience [in the war] ... must be totally different from the one we believed in at the time ... We must believe in a higher meaning ... Otherwise the ground on which we stand is pulled from beneath our feet and we tumble in a meaningless, chaotic, random world."⁸⁰ The tensions and experimentation in Jünger's early war writings shed light on the source of this crisis. At its heart was a threatened loss of communicability and imprisonment in a kaleidoscope of private impressions.

This was clear in Jünger's 1922 *Battle as Inner Experience*, which confessed the impossibility of fully conveying the trench experience. The work tried to make sense of the war by taking battle as the revelation of a timeless natural order. Jünger's introduction, however, was full of misgivings, admitting that "what was felt to the abyss in that frenzied dance can, like every other psychic experience, only be outlined, not described."⁸¹ The likening of war to a "frenzied dance" is a good example of Jünger's reliance on metaphor in his struggle to express the inexpressible. Investigations of Jünger's war writings, including his most famous memoir, *Storm of Steel*, which he reworked in successive versions from 1920 to 1978, have uncovered both the range of his comparisons—war as eruption, ecstasy, spectacle, sport, hunt, cauldron, etc.—and their increase over time, as Jünger sought the literary tools to convey the war. Metaphors are important because they represent "attempts to master perceptions or experiences that are extraordinary or strange, shocking or staggering, uncanny or unfathomable," by assimilating them to familiar contexts.⁸² Jünger's bewilderment was also evident in his correspondence. In March 1923, days before his twenty-eighth birthday, Jünger brooded that he was approaching an age at which "lack of clarity needs to be overcome." "Every insight," he declared, "is immediately paralyzed and relativized by an opposing one."⁸³ As John King argued, Jünger's early postwar writings should be understood as "often contradictory and unstable" efforts to locate an epistemological position able to comprehend a world in which the Great War had taken place.⁸⁴

The struggle to communicate the war is at the center of Jünger's 1923 novella *Sturm*. Amazingly, Jünger claimed later to have forgotten the work (it was rediscovered in 1960), explaining, "I had so many personal problems [at the time] that one

⁷⁹Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger*, 140.

⁸⁰Ernst Jünger, "Der Wille," *Die Standarte*, 6 May 1926, in Jünger, *Politische Publizistik*, 200–1.

⁸¹Jünger, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, 3–4.

⁸²Helmuth Kiesel, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in Ernst Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 2, *Varianteverzeichnis und Materialien* (Stuttgart, 2013), 9–122, at 83. Kiesel notes that Jünger's choice of metaphors—as in *Storm of Steel's* equation of mechanized warfare with a force of nature—is rarely ideologically neutral. See also Hans Verboven's pioneering *Die Metapher als Ideologie: Eine kognitiv-semantische Analyse der Kriegsmetaphorik im Frühwerk Ernst Jüngers* (Heidelberg, 2003).

⁸³Quoted in Heimo Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Leben und Werk in Bildern und Texten* (Stuttgart, 1988), 94.

⁸⁴King, "Writing and Rewriting the First World War," 114.

can understand why I stopped thinking about the novel.”⁸⁵ Jünger took pains at the outset to demythologize the community supposedly created by the war.

At bottom, this fighting community, this company of life and death, showed the odd ephemerality and sadness of human interaction in particular clarity. Like a race of fleas it danced confusedly and was just as quickly scattered by every wind. When grog was unexpectedly brought forward from the kitchen or when a mild evening melted the mood, then all were like brothers ... But when death hung like a storm cloud over the trenches, then each was for himself; he stood alone in the darkness ... and had nothing in his breast but boundless loneliness.⁸⁶

Language, too, divided the men. Conversation between simple soldiers and their educated superiors, Jünger observed, is like “passing word-coins back and forth, behind which each party sees quite different values ... Today, in the egghead military theorist and the mobilized factory worker, two foreign worlds confront one another.” At stake was the loss of a world in which all are “united [by] views sprung from the same soil.” The problem is amplified when, as in World War I, whole societies are mobilized against one another. Then the “tensions and contradictions” are greater, “the staff officer [stands] disconnectedly above the masses as a cultivated brain” and the masses themselves cannot be “filled equally with the full significance of the goal.”⁸⁷ The loss of communicability, Jünger suggests, is a measure of the fragmentation of mass society.

Sturm dramatized this problem of community and communication on multiple levels. Its protagonist, an Ensign Sturm, styles himself a writer but lives too close to the war’s violence to “contemplate it as an artist.” Instead of writing about the war, he writes character sketches, which he reads to two fellow platoon leaders. The avant-garde discussions of these three friends make up the bulk of the novella, their talks an escape from feelings of “dread” and “absurdity.” The last sketch describes an alienated veteran named Falk, a man who considers himself a writer but is “unable to summon the words.” Falk’s longing for connection is relieved by an encounter with a young lady. Prodded to discuss the war, he is nonetheless unable to articulate the experience in terms she can comprehend. If *Sturm* contains a practical lesson, it is perhaps that one must try to communicate regardless of the outcome, and that a friendly ear is the best one can hope for. Yet Sturm’s remark that “at bottom everyone experiences their own private war” captures the novella’s underlying mood of loneliness and entrapment in “inner experience.”⁸⁸ As one commentator put it, “*Sturm* is in Jünger’s conception not a novel about the war, but rather about the impossibility of writing a novel about the war.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵Neuman, *A Dubious Past*, 26 n. 20; Julien Hervier, *The Details of Time: Conversations with Ernst Jünger*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York, 1995), 18.

⁸⁶Ernst Jünger, *Sturm* (Stuttgart, 1978), 6–9.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 27–8.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 12–17, 30, 41, 72.

⁸⁹Hans-Harald Müller, *Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller: Der Kriegsroman der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart, 1986), 265.

Though the exact timing is impossible to reconstruct, Jünger's disorientation lasted until at least August 1923, when he resigned from the Reichswehr. His first foray into political journalism followed a month later. Jünger's new tone indicated that he had found some resolution to his inner turmoil. In an exceptionally fuzzy piece, he excoriated the democratic revolution of November 1918 for its lack of a determining "idea" and prophesied that Germany's "true revolution" was yet to come. What was needed, Jünger proclaimed, was a "dictatorship" that would "replace words with deeds, ink with blood, phrases with sacrifice, the pen with the sword."⁹⁰ The hostility to language in these lines is striking. In a development mirroring the path taken by the editors at *Deutsches Volkstum*, Jünger's new political turn did not so much solve the problem of communicating subjectivity and meaning as opt to avoid it altogether, appealing instead to domains supposedly "deeper" or "higher" than conceptual language. Like Günther's praise of the nationalist's "feeling for life," Jünger's rhetoric of action and gush of mood-setting signifiers testified to the paradox of a writer who despaired of language while being unable to lay down the pen.

Starting in 1924, Jünger began working out a revolutionary nationalist position in a flurry of essays and memoirs for right-wing publications such as *Die Standarte* and *Arminius*.⁹¹ His conversion to ineffable nationalism was clear. The advent of war in 1914, Jünger now wrote, brought the return of a "connection that had gone lost," a "feeling of community in a grand destiny."⁹² This embrace of collective identity needs to be understood in light of the crisis of language that we have examined thus far. Unable to adequately communicate his war experience, Jünger turned to what Thomas Weitin called "prediscursive harmony," a common consciousness so deeply felt that its expression would be superfluous.⁹³ "What really binds a people," Jünger proclaimed in another memoir, *Copse 125* (1925), "will never be anything of a material nature. Only in feeling can I imagine a lasting cement between men." "There are things of which a man seldom speaks," he wrote, "things like love and belief, and to these the fatherland must once again belong."⁹⁴ That Jünger would resolve his personal crisis by invoking such prediscursive harmony was not a foregone conclusion. With so many competing impulses in his early writings—*Sturm*, after all, suggested a disillusioned view of the trench community and resigned acceptance of the limits of communication—Jünger's literary ambitions might have carried him in quite other directions.⁹⁵ Understanding the *motives*

⁹⁰Ernst Jünger, "Revolution und Idee," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 23–4 Sept. 1923, in Jünger, *Politische Publizistik*, 33–7.

⁹¹For a fuller view of Jünger's Weimar-era writings see Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger*, chap. 4; Heimo Schwill, *Ernst Jünger: Ein Jahrhundertleben* (Stuttgart, 2014), chaps. 11–13; and Louis Dupeux, "Der 'neue Nationalismus' Ernst Jüngers 1925–1932: Vom heroischen Soldatentum zur politisch-metaphysischen Totalität," in Peter Koslowski, ed., *Die Großen Jagden des Mythos: Ernst Jünger in Frankreich* (Munich, 1996), 15–40.

⁹²Ernst Jünger, "Der Krieg als äusseres Erlebnis," *Die Standarte*, 27 Sept. 1925, in Jünger, *Politische Publizistik*, 85–90, at 86.

⁹³See his *Notwendige Gewalt: Die Moderne Ernst Jüngers und Heiner Müllers* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 2003), 82–103.

⁹⁴Ernst Jünger, *Das Wäldchen 125: Eine Chronik aus den Grabenkämpfen* (Berlin, 1926), 125, 132–3, 174.

⁹⁵Karl Prümm put it well, noting, "Positions fundamental to soldierly nationalism find in *Sturm* effective counterweights articulated with full sympathy ... It becomes clear with what sacrifice of the author's own

behind his ultranationalist politics requires us to see the literary and ideological experimentation of his works as reciprocally illuminating, and to relate both to his postwar befuddlement.⁹⁶ The struggle to represent the war traceable in Jünger's early writings was inextricable from his own alienation, his fear of social breakdown, and his desire to find something redemptive in the war experience.

Unable to count on language to deliver him from the "private war," Jünger opted instead for a silent accord based in "feeling." In a 1926 salvo, he celebrated this pre-linguistic communication as thinking with "the blood."

The blood perceives the affinity of person to person ... A handshake exchanged between men, the look in the eye, the tone of the voice, quite independent of the words that this voice speaks ... in all the thousand imponderables that we perceive without thinking about we speak with the blood and the blood speaks to us ... Beyond all the masks, I and you communicate in a secret language prior to all language ... A community in which this feeling is not sensed is, as a community, dead.⁹⁷

Jünger's paradigm for such tacit understanding was that harmony of men in battle that was so marginal to his previous writings—and which he had dismissed in *Sturm* only a few years earlier! The war, he now wrote, had taught the front soldier "to profess with the blood."⁹⁸ In the front lines, Jünger declared in *Fire and Blood* (1925), "we know about each other, and a man is recognized without needing to make a big speech ... Here, where a word calls to memory a long chain of experiences survived together, lifting your glass is enough to know how it stands with the other fellow."⁹⁹

In the tacit sphere of emotion, everything contradictory and difficult to express in Jünger's crisis-ridden postwar consciousness could be reconciled. Like other soldier-poets and anguished theorists on Weimar's radical right, Jünger imagined the fragmented German nation could be similarly reunited by throwing aside intellectualism and public language, and returning to the harmony of shared feeling. But as Jünger also recognized, the dilemma for ineffable nationalism was the dilemma dogging conservatism since the French Revolution—namely the need to mobilize the intellect to defend a cause whose nature supposedly lies far beneath rational thought. "The ties to the nation," Jünger wrote in January 1928, "are roots that have grown, and they are not spun by the slender threads of logic." Those struggling under the banner of nationalism were opposed to the "liberal forces, which, as with

substance Jünger's political engagement had to be bought." Karl Prümm, *Die Literatur des Soldatischen Nationalismus der 20er Jahre, 1918–1933* (Kronberg im Taunus, 1974), 184–5.

⁹⁶See Roger Woods, *Ernst Jünger and the Nature of Political Commitment* (Stuttgart, 1982), 323.

⁹⁷Ernst Jünger, "Das Blut," *Die Standarte*, 29 April 1926, in Jünger, *Politische Publizistik*, 192–3. Jünger's notion of "blood" is not biological or racial, but a gut-based intuition. On Jünger's relation to anti-Semitism, see note 56 above.

⁹⁸Ernst Jünger, "Der Frontsoldat und die Wilhelminische Zeit," *Die Standarte*, 20 Sept. 1925, in Jünger, *Politische Publizistik*, 85.

⁹⁹Ernst Jünger, *Tagebücher I: Der erste Weltkrieg*, in Jünger, *Sämtliche Werke*, 22 vols. (Stuttgart, 1978–2003), 1: 457–8.

everything that's too deep for their shallow understanding, would also like to argue the nation out of existence."¹⁰⁰

Yet Jünger also acknowledged in the same 1928 essay that efforts to use "mind-based means" (i.e. writing) to forge accord among "blood-based" nationalist forces had failed. His own ambition to galvanize Weimar's veterans' organizations into a united front had come to naught. The largest of these, the Stahlhelm, had proven, in his eyes, more a stale bourgeois interest group than a vehicle for translating the front community into a revitalized national community. In response, Jünger announced a reverse course that aimed to "stamp and steer the mind's nervous activity" by infusing it with the supposedly deeper intuitions of "the blood."¹⁰¹ The result was the first edition of *The Adventurous Heart* (1929). The book represented Jünger's partial return to the modernist paradigm that was visible in *Sturm*—to a willingness to struggle at the limits of expression, despite the fact that words are always accidental and never perfectly capture the mind itself. Jünger now endeavored to articulate the subjective side of his nationalist politics, explaining the workings of the "heart" that is moved beyond reason and the value of feelings and instincts in a disenchanted age. He remained committed, however, to the view that the most important truths defy communication. "The inexpressible," he maintained, "debases itself when it is spoken and made communicable; it is like gold that must be alloyed with copper if it is to be used as currency."¹⁰² *The Adventurous Heart* thus marked Jünger's pivot toward his mature aesthetic project to rescue language from a nihilistic age and restore it as a carrier of transcendent meaning. In works like *Radiations* (1949), his diaries from the years surrounding the Second World War, Jünger would endeavor to read objects and situations as allegories of some deeper reality, and to alloy his inner sense of what was revealed with the imperfect—but circulable—stuff of words.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Understanding Ernst Jünger's embrace of ineffable nationalism is important because it illuminates a complex at the heart of Weimar's Conservative Revolution. Before 1914, nostalgia for the traditional world's putative prelinguistic bonds and suspicion of conceptual language were the preoccupations of aesthetes and philosophers. After 1918, they became among the central fixations of Weimar liberalism's enemies. There is no reason to suppose that the war experience was, in every case, the ingredient that politicized this critique. But the belief that

¹⁰⁰Ernst Jünger, "Zum Jahreswechsel," *Der Vormarsch*, Jan. 1928, in Jünger, *Politische Publizistik*, 408–9.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 412.

¹⁰²Ernst Jünger, *Das abenteuerliche Herz: Aufzeichnungen bei Tag und Nacht* (Stuttgart, 1987), 18.

¹⁰³An excellent survey of Jünger's aesthetics and theory of modernity is Marcus Bullock, *The Violent Eye: Ernst Jünger's Visions and Revisions on the European Right* (Detroit, 1992). On Jünger's search for a reenchanted language see Danièle Beltran-Vidal, "Überlegungen der Brüder Jünger zum Wesen und zur Aufgabe der Sprache," in Friedrich Strack, ed., *Titan Technik: Ernst und Friedrich Georg Jünger über das technische Zeitalter* (Würzburg, 2000), 181–93. Jünger pursued the problem of language in later essays, including *Lob der Vokale* (1934) and *Sprache und Körperbau* (1949), and remained fixated on the limits of communication to the end of his life. As he declared in 1990, "Naming is already a cheapening. Silence is deeper than the word." See Ernst Jünger, *1. Supplement-Band*, in Jünger, *Sämtliche Werke*, 19: 446.

soldiers had returned from the Great War with a skepticism of *big words*, and that they carried with them memories of a frontline community unmediated by language, belonged to the common sense of many who wrote about the war. Above all, the romanticized front community fueled the fantasies of prominent Conservative Revolutionaries. Literary and philosophical, they naturally interpreted the war in terms of the theoretical concerns of the day.

It was not inevitable, however, that Conservative Revolutionaries would politicize the war experience the way they did; rather, it was a contingent innovation, driven by Weimar's experimentalism and the confusion which the war itself created. That confusion is best described as a crisis of communication or representation, a desperate need to speak about and find meaning in a war which often seemed baffling and absurd. Of all the crises making up what Hans-Ulrich Wehler called the "crisis-tangle" of Weimar,¹⁰⁴ this was perhaps the most intensely and pervasively felt. Grasping how ineffable nationalism was a solution to this postwar bewilderment helps us see that Weimar's "laboratory of modernity" included its right-wing revolutionaries, too, albeit under psychological conditions in which love of country and trouble talking about the war were amplified to an existential pitch by despair over the present. One result of this anguish was the reinvention of Germany as site of a redemptive prelinguistic rapport. But it was also refinement of a rhetorical style befitting a sacred nation. Ineffable nationalism helps explain the vague and rhapsodic quality of much Conservative Revolutionary prose—its "yonderliness," in Keith Bullivant's words. It is the writing style ridiculed by Walter Benjamin as "sinister runic humbug," and which Siegfried Kracauer diagnosed as a "haze" of "pseudo-reality" and "yearning." For Thomas Mann, writing in the wake of the Nazi Party's electoral breakthrough in September 1930, it was precisely this "high-flown, wishy-washy jargon, full of mystical good feeling," which was seducing Germans away from reason and into Nazism's stupefying "cult-barbarism."¹⁰⁵ The ideological and literary experimentation that produced ineffable nationalism and its turgid style show how, on the right no less than on the left, the modernist search for new forms of expression could bring language itself into the political-cultural "laboratory." And they remind us that Weimar's "creativity and experimentation" were not just in contradiction to "anxiety, fear, [and] a rising sense of doom," but driven by these existential concerns as well.¹⁰⁶

My argument is not only about this crisis-driven conjunction of aesthetics, social theory, and wartime memory. It is also that Ernst Jünger is ideally situated at the point where these three domains overlapped, and that he can help us see how they could come together to create the Conservative Revolutionary mind. For Jünger, and likely for many others as well, it was an intense crisis of communication and comprehension which drove this theoretical fusion, linking representations of the Great War, modernist sensitivity to the limits of language, fantasies of organic

¹⁰⁴Quoted in Graf, "Either-Or," 596.

¹⁰⁵Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism," 128; Siegfried Kracauer, "Revolt of the Middle Classes: An Examination of the *Tat Circle*," in Thomas Levin, ed., *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge and London 1995), 107–27, at 112–13, 126; Thomas Mann, "An Appeal to Reason," in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), 150–59, at 153–4.

¹⁰⁶Gay, *Weimar Culture*, xiv.

community, and frustration at the Weimar status quo. From a frontline soldier eager to bring the war to language, to a postwar writer despondent of his ability to do so, to a revolutionary nationalist who discovered a “deeper” prediscursive harmony (and in doing so reinterpreted his own experience), Jünger’s Weimar trajectory shows how the Great War’s supposed incommunicability could be adapted to a new brand of radical nationalist politics.

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