NIETZSCHE AND ERNST JÜNGER: FROM NIHILISM TO TOTALITARIANISM

DAVID OHANA*

I

The aesthetic-nihilistic revolution in western culture initiated by Nietzsche in the nineteenth century was transformed by Ernst Jünger into a modern vision of technology and a new political pattern of totalitarian nihilism. Over and above 'nihilism' and 'totalitarianism' as such, there is an additional dialectical phenomenon, namely a synthesis of both concepts: the nihilist mentality, whether from inner compulsion or immanent logic, is driven to acceptance of totalitarian behaviour which is characterised by its extreme dynamism. The structure of the essay reflects the emergence and crystallization of what I call 'nihilistic-totalitarian syndrome' from its philosophical basis to a fully-developed intellectual current in the form of a new and total consciousness expressed in Jünger's early writings.

Nietzsche used history as the starting point of a reorientation of traditional Western philosophy. According to Nietzsche, modern man, in the genealogy of his basic concepts, has discovered that the idols which he shaped with his own hands—God, morality, reason, truth—are a broken reed, a golem which turned on its creator. Nietzsche was the genealogist of Western culture who found that its values were bereft of any significance whatsoever. For him, they were no more than superstructures, narcotic drugs or energy-pills which injected taste and purpose into a world without taste or purpose. Modern man has discovered that his God is an image which man formed with his own hands in self-protection, reason is a delusion and a fraud, morality, all in all, is institutionalised habit, and objective truth is an impossibility. Nietzsche looked at the nihilism of this epoch and diagnosed it in all its nakedness. Modern man was totally naked, a leaf tossed in the wind. Disillusioned with theology and disappointed with progress, he was suddenly aware of the vast abyss which threatened to swallow everything up, nihilism lieth at the door.

Nietzsche's method of exposure was to destroy prevailing illusions, those fictions which, useful for existence, hide the meaningless of existence. Nietzsche stripped the masks off, one by one, religion, politics, nationality, ideology. 'Nihilism stands at the door' and Nietzsche explained its appearance by invoking the inner logic of European history until that time; the cultural development of Europe with its Christian morality and rational philosophy. Secularism opened up a chasm: until that time Christian morality had served as a fictive defence against nihilism by endowing man with a definite value in face of

*Gdalia 3, Jerusalem 93555, Israel.
the arbitrariness of the forces of creation and destruction. Morality, in short, had
given a purpose to life and a significance to man. What, then, was the significance
of nihilism as an opposing movement, or, to be more exact, as a movement
opposed to itself? The answer is: 'the uppermost values become valueless'. Morality,
which served as a degenerate instrument for the continuation of existence and a
distorted will-to-power, prevented man from perceiving the
depths of nothingness. But, at the same time, morality contained the very truths
which worked against itself: morality was revealed as an illusion and turned
against itself, the golem turned upon its maker.

Likewise, the belief—in the Christian and the Platonic version alike—that this
world is an illusion, and that consequently the next world must be regarded as the
real one, was also revealed as fictive. Nietzsche's analysis is the most radical
possible: nihilism sprang logically and inexorably from the European—Christian
tradition. In other words, Western culture was bound to end up in nihilism. Nietzsche
indicated two forms of nihilism. 'Active' nihilism was the starting
point of modernism because it uprooted the old or normative values and
institutions by denying objectivity, promoting subjectivity and individualism,
and regarding the world as a totality and a work of art. Nietzsche's modernism
recognised nihilism as a path to aesthetics: the value of the objective world being
nullified, man made his private world into an aestheticism. 'Tired' or 'Passive'
nihilism, on the other hand, consisted of 'attempts to escape nihilism without
revaluing our values so far'. This was a reaction of fear before the chaos which
opened up. What did this mean in practice? The liberation of man from religious
beliefs led to an uprooting of man from his world. Man continued to search for
something to hold onto outside himself, a supernatural authority.

Modern man looked for a new authority in something else: the rule of reason
or the tyranny of history. In a different context, Nietzsche had said: 'extreme
positions are not exchanged for moderate positions, but for contrary positions'.
The man who lost his higher authorities succumbed to despair, but the
supernatural authorities were not the contrary of this self-despair: they were its
other face. In either case, man denied his own authority and projected it onto a
dominating external entity: the religious tyranny of God, the intellectual tyranny
of historicism, political religions, or self annihilation. External tyranny and self-
negation are two facets of alienation, or, in other words, man's flight from
himself.

The modern concept of alienation appeared only in the post-kantian world.
Only when man had created his world according to the patterns of his
consciousness did he ask himself why he had become enslaved to the world of his
creation. According to Nietzsche's analysis, a nihilistic consciousness is the
Archimedean point in the encounter between enslavement and freedom. A
nihilistic consciousness is the guarantee of true freedom: modern man's
awareness of his internalisation of the values of society leads to the uprooting of
all values.

But Nietzsche went beyond the analysis of historical or functional
nihilism—that is, beyond comprehending nihilism as a value—to metaphysical
nihilism. As Heidegger said: 'Nothing and nihil... are concepts of being and
not of value'. Nihilism is part of existence, and must be seen as it is, without
searching for a transcendental refuge. Metaphysical nihilism is to be found here and now, and its meaning is not the denial of morality, the denial of the meaning of the universe, or eternal recurrence in the manner of the Stoics or Ecclesiastes. It is a terrified glance at existence as nothingness. In Nietzsche, 'things' do not exist: The 'Rausch' is dominant. The world is 'without form and void', and, if there is no A or B, then there cannot be any relationship between them, and words such as 'value', 'purpose' and 'truth' are meaningless. Seen in this perspective, 'active' nihilism affirms the reality of existence over its irrationality and disharmony.

It is illuminating to compare Nietzsche's grasp of the meaninglessness of existence with that of Albert Camus and Meister Eckhardt. In Camus, it is the absurdity of existence which is dominant, but Camus did not invalidate the material world, only the significance of that world. For Eckhardt, the mystic, this world also had no meaning, but he hoped to be 'swallowed up in God' and to lose his personality in some transcendental entity. Camus could have said: 'My kingdom is this world'. Eckhardt could have said: 'My kingdom is the kingdom of heaven'. Nietzsche agreed with Camus that there is no kingdom of heaven, and with Eckhardt that there is no kingdom of this world. For Nietzsche, there was no 'this world' and no 'next world'. Nihilism was integral to being, and yet, for all that, Nietzsche affirmed existence over meaninglessness.

The will-to-power was not a late manifestation of Nietzsche's philosophy which evolved as a counter-reaction to nihilism. The concept of the will-to-power was integral to Nietzsche's unmethodical method. The nihilistic consciousness and the will-to-power dwell together side by side, and both are the very essence of existence. 'This, my Dionysian world', said Nietzsche, 'of the eternally self-creating the eternally self-destroying.' The Nietzschean therapy of radical diagnosis lay in the existence of the will-to-power as a counterweight to nihilism. After having stripped off the masks of deception, illusion and preconception, Nietzsche concluded that the will-to-power, as the ultimate reality, constituted the fundamental condition of the world. Nietzsche conferred on the cosmos, purposeless and undefined, an immanent explanation in the form of an ontological-monistic factor, the will-to-power, and in this he may be regarded as the last of the pre-Socratics.

Among the other interpretations of the question that have been offered, I suggest that it is worth while to consider the conclusion reached by Nietzsche's positivist philosophy: namely, that beyond nihilism, there is either scepticism which denies everything, or freedom which affirms everything. It is precisely the meaninglessness of the universe which gives rise to the affirmation of destiny. Eternal recurrence is the most extreme form of nihilism. Zarathustra was the personification of the myth of eternal recurrence, and yet he showed the way to the superman. Spinoza's *amor dei* (love of God) was replaced by Nietzsche's *amor fatti* (love of fate). Nietzschean nihilism adopted an absolute position concerning the rejection of objective values. Nihilism was the rejection of everything which deserved to be rejected, and this rejection paved the way for the affirmation and intensification of the will-to-power. The theory of eternal recurrence stripped all values of their value; the theory of the superman was an affirmation of all beings. The superman is both the person who says yes to the disharmonious universe and
affirms fate as it is, and who says no to the value of values and to the very existence of a scale of values. The will-to-power and the nihilistic consciousness are the two faces of the superman.

The Nietzschean superman is a sovereign individual who confirms himself in his destiny. In other words, the superman, in his nihilistic consciousness, is committed to building up his will-to-power. Moreover, the greater his nihilistic consciousness is, the stronger is the basis of his will-to-power. Conversely, without a nihilistic consciousness, no will-to-power can exist. A weak man, lacking nihilistic consciousness, and with an effete will-to-power, joins his fellows and together with them creates a herd society. The superman fuses the critique of pure nihilism (nihilistic consciousness) with the critique of active nihilism (the destruction of dominant illusions), and this establishes the will-to-power. The superman beholds the naked reality and affirms it just as it is.

II

In his ‘Who is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?’, Heidegger analysed what he called Nietzsche’s ‘metaphysical thinking’ and wrote: ‘Nietzsche’s thought of the eternal recurrence of the same is a fantastic mysticism, it would seem that the present age should teach us to know better: assuming, of course, that thought is destined to bring the essence of modern technology to light. What is the essence of the modern dynamo other than one expression of the eternal recurrence of the same?’

In the Feschtschrift for Jünger’s sixtieth birthday, Heidegger wrote: ‘Your work Der Arbeiter (1932) provides a description of European nihilism in the stage which succeeded the First World War. “Die totale Mobilmachung” (1930) is derived from your study; Der Arbeiter belongs to the stage of active nihilism’. Heidegger connected Jünger’s modern technological vision with Nietzsche’s metaphysics. As he said: ‘The being in its entirety appears to you within the light and shade of the will-to-power, which Nietzsche interpreted as a doctrine of values’.

Ernst Jünger saw the First World War as the most concrete manifestation of Nietzsche’s existential, aesthetic and nihilistic outlook. In his early writings, Jünger depicted the war as an existential moment, a mystical experience, an earthquake which overtakes a man unawares. His In Stahlgewittern (The Storm of Steel, 1920), described the war as a beautiful, overwhelming modern experience. He aestheticised the experience of battle: ‘I watched the slaughter...’, he said, ‘as if I were in the loge of a theatre’. In Der Kampf also inneres Erlebnis (Battle as an Inner Experience, 1922), the Jüngerian new man was ‘the storm pioneer, the elite of central Europe. A wholly new race, intelligent and full of will, that emerges here in battle... Tomorrow he will be the axis around which life will revolve faster and faster’. The Nietzschean superman was distorted by Jünger into nationalist, elitist, powerful figure which found its existential significance in the First World War.

In his article, ‘Die totale Mobilmachung’ (‘Total Mobilisation’, 1930) which inspired Walter Benjamin’s thesis on the aesthetiation of politics, Jünger
glorified a society permanently mobilised for a total war. This total mobilisation was pure pleasure, something completely purposeless, a work of art; the battlefield was described as a 'spectacle', a 'volcano', a 'landscape'. Total mobilisation typified the new war and the modern society, whereas partial mobilisation characterised the nineteenth century. The First World War was a watershed point which witnessed a 'growing transformation of life into energy'. Work and war as manifestations of energy for energy's sake were metaphorical actions deriving from the metaphysics of the will-to-power. Man's metaphorical mastery of the universe was made possible by modern technology. Man's mastery of technology had no purpose except mobilisation for its own sake; the result was total mobilisation, in work or war. It represented an active nihilism, or a nihilistic will-to-power.

Technology had now superseded nature, but, in fact, as Jünger said in Der Arbeiter (1932), 'technology and nature are not opposites'. The machine, as an act of will, imposes order on the modern chaos, and in this Jünger's nihilism reaches its climax, because his technology is entirely amoral: it has no rational or functional content. Here we have a revaluation of the idea of the machine and technology: once regarded as a functional matter of technique or utility, it had come to be considered the very essence of modern man. In Feuer und Blut (1926), Jün er invoked Nietzsche to provide a legitimation for his nihilistic technology: 'Yes, the machine is beautiful', he said. 'It must be beautiful for him who loves life in all life's fullness and power. The machine must also be incorporated into what Nietzsche (who, in his renaissance landscape, still had no place for the machine) meant when he attacked Darwinism. Nietzsche insisted that life is not only a merciless struggle for survival but also possesses a will to higher and deeper goals'. In the technology of the First World War, Jünger's superman made his appearance as 'homo mechanicus'. The ideal of this 'man of war' was to turn his body into a 'steel object' or a 'social machine': what Klaus Thewelit called 'the conservative utopia of the totally mechanical body'. The man-machine holism was well exemplified in the relationship between the soldier and the technology of war: 'We have to transfer what lies inside us onto the machine'.

The front-line soldier as the new man had two aspects: on the one hand, he typified the 'chaos of battle' (to use J.P. Stern's expression), and on the other hand, 'total mobilisation'. Jünger's 'new men' comprised the Jüngerian order, which also had a dual character, or, in the words of Walter Struve, was characterised by quiet anarchy within a very rigid order. A characteristic distortion of the Nietzsche ideal of the superman as a creature who creates himself may be found in Jünger's concept of the individual. He saw the individual as a means, not an end, as the bearer of power as well as freedom. The individual develops his higher power, develops domination in general where he is in a position of service... The deepest happiness of man lies in the fact that he will be sacrifice...

In the Der Arbeiter Jünger's 'worker' is neither nationalist nor socialist, neither democratic nor revolutionary, but a technician: a member of the 'hierarchical state', the 'new order' or the 'work-state'. The 'worker' is a standardised creation who wears a uniform and is not a private individual but a type. Jünger used the term 'worker' to designate the type of the new man who supersedes the citizen
(Burger) of bourgeois society and the 'class' with its Marxist consciousness. The 'worker' and the 'bourgeois' are not classes but a Gestalt. What is this Gestalt? Jünger wrote: 'Gestalt must be visible beyond the will and beyond history; it must also be visible beyond values. It does not presuppose any quality'.  
Technology is mobilised through the 'Gestalt of the worker', which Jünger saw as a holistic instrument for creating a new way of relating to the real world. Gestalt was for Jünger what myth represented for Georges Sorel, a passage from the physical to the metaphysical: 'In the Gestalt', he said, 'lies the whole, which encompasses more than the sum of its parts'.

Jünger's axiom 'from mathematics to metaphysics' found a paramount expression in work. His cosmological vision of work accorded the worker an ontological status, and related to work as *energos*, in the original sense of the Greek term as a manifestation of the energy in the universe which is found in man. Work effects a synthesis of human actions and natural energy by means of technology. War is no longer an end in itself, but a manifestation of the general phenomenon of work. The worker-soldiers no longer fight spontaneously but are systematically 'called up for work'. In the society mobilised for work and total war there is no longer any distinction between the civilian and the soldier, between the front and the rear, between war and peace. In the state of the future, war and work become identical concepts.

As Heidegger pointed out in his series of seminars on Jünger which he gave from 1936 to 1940 and from 1940 to 1946, Jünger's 'worker' is to be understood first and foremost as a metaphysical prototype which emerged from the modernism of the beginning of the twentieth century.  

This prototype was influenced by Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, an embodiment of the metaphysics which prepared the way for the new man, in the same way as Rilke's angle, Trakle's stranger, Spengler's barbarian, Sorel's syndicalist, Wyndham Lewis's vorticist and the Italian and Russian futurist. Jünger wished to depart from traditional European history: unlike Max Weber, he did not regard work as an expression of the Protestant desire for acceptance by God, and, unlike Marx, he did not consider it an expression of freedom or alienation. Jünger's 'worker' created the myth of the modern world. The essence of modernity was for him the total mobilisation of the worker as an existential style, and the metaphysical nihilistic consciousness as a normal condition.

Jünger evoked the memory of the first mechanised war in order to create a technological myth in which technology was no longer a function of man, but, on the contrary, directed, guided and moulded man and his role in the new hierarchical society. What the modern Jüngerian vision of technology has taught us is not how totalitarianism used technology for its own purposes, but how technology influenced the totalitarian and nihilistic conception of man. In other words, the modern Jüngerian vision of technology led towards a new political form of totalitarian nihilism.

*Jerusalem*

David Ohana
NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1974), 125. (All references to Nietzsche’s works are to section or aphorism numbers, not page numbers.)


3. ‘Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality’ is the subtitle of Nietzsche’s Daybreak.


11. The Will to Power, book I, 28 (Spring–Fall 1887).


13. I accept Arthur C. Danto definition of Nietzsche’s nihilism: ‘His nihilism, nevertheless, is not an ideology, but a metaphysics ...’. See; Danto, Nietzsche as philosopher (London, 1965), 30.


16. Beyond Good and Evil, 34.

17. The Will to Power, 1067 (1885).


21. Ibid., 11.


23. Jünger, Der Kampf als Inneres Erlebnis (Stuttgart, 1922), 76.


26. Jünger, Der Arbeiter (Stuttgart, 1932), 213.
27. Jünger, Feuer Und Blut, Werke, Band 1, 81.
28. Klaus Theweleit, Männerphantasien, Vol. II (Frankfurt 1979), 188.
29. Jünger, Feuer und Blut, 84.
32. Jünger, Der Arbeiter, 81.
33. Ibid., 80.