

## Ernst Jünger's Intercultural Encounters

Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) is one of the most significant writers and thinkers of 20th-century Europe, and one of the most controversial. Famous mainly for *In Stahlgewittern* [Storm of Steel], an account of his experiences in the trenches in World War One, he published more than fifty volumes – diaries, novels, stories and essays – many translated into several languages. The project was concerned with the way Jünger approached, experienced, and interpreted interpersonal encounters across perceived cultural divides. They took place during his extensive international travels, during war, and in every-day settings. Their traces were found in Jünger's own diaries, letters, and published works; in letters to Jünger and memoirs of Jünger by third parties; and in audio recordings of conversations with Jünger which we discovered. Our aims were to challenge notions of Jünger as an aloof and detached writer through evidence of intimate and careful exchanges and to highlight and examine their significance for Jünger's literary and intellectual oeuvre.

A comprehensive framework for the analysis of encounters was found in concepts from phenomenology. We focused on works by Emmanuel Levinas and Bernhard Waldenfels, two philosophers whose approach to personal relationships is commonly seen as very different from Jünger's. It was precisely this distance that attracted us, as it promised to reveal facets of Jünger's life and works that had so far escaped scholars' attention. Our decision brought into view that encounters, for Jünger, constitute a way for man to break free from the constrictions of constant surveillance and ubiquitous technology, thus constituting a form of anarchic yet considerate action.

We analysed this subversive aspect of an encounter in a paper on its temporal aspect. Drawing on current literature on "acceleration," we showed that, for Jünger, encounters and aesthetics are not simply the "slow" opposite of "fast" technology but marked by their own complex rhythms, linking the rapidity of excitement to the painstaking process of reconstructing first impressions. In a study on Jünger's evolving views of the *Autobahn*, we analysed concrete examples of this dynamic.

Our theoretical work on "encounters" formed the basis of an international conference held at Bristol in September 2014. Keynote lecturers were philosopher Prof Robert Eaglestone and German Studies scholar Prof Rolf Goebel. During extended roundtable discussions, scholars of literature, politics, history, philosophy, music, and film explored ways in which encounters are conceived, conducted, remembered, and traced. An edited volume documenting the results is in preparation.

Visits to a private archive in Munich led to a sensational find: five audio tapes with recordings of conversations between André Müller, Germany's best-known "interview artist," and Jünger. These recordings as well as a large number of related manuscripts, letters, postcards, and voicemail messages allowed us to get an unexpectedly close and detailed insight into the way Jünger and Müller viewed and experienced personal relationships: tentatively at first, through correspondence via intermediaries, and then ever more closely, resulting in both cordiality and confrontation. The materials themselves and the first results of our analysis will be published shortly.

Working at the German national literary archive on materials related to Jünger's journey to Brazil in 1936, we developed an understanding of Jünger as a postcolonial author. While this label had, on occasion, been attributed to him before, we were able to shift it from the rather abstract level of "global forces" and economic and political power relations to the specifics of interpersonal contact – a level on which postcolonial theorists, decades after Jünger's journey, began to look for ways out of

a purportedly abusive “Western”-dominated history. This line of inquiry was presented at a German studies conference in Manchester and is currently being prepared for publication as well.

Further archival research yielded insights into two other encounters of Jünger’s: with Bristol-based scholar August Closs, and with English WWI veterans responding to *In Stahlgewittern*. These documents are currently being assessed and will be prepared for publication.

In light of overwhelming public and media interest in the anniversary of WWI, demand was high for us to comment on Jünger’s role in this war whose enduring image he has so decisively shaped. We thus extended our inquiry to interpersonal encounters in his war writings. We travelled to France with a BBC team, explaining Jünger’s philosophy for *War of Words: Poets of the Somme*, premiered on BBC2 in November 2014; and we contributed an article to *Cicero*, one of Germany’s foremost critical monthlies, on the relationship between reading, writing, and personal encounters in WWI.

At Bristol, we welcomed Dr Adrian Daub (Stanford) to talk about notions of encounter and friendship; we hosted a series of “Conversations around Concepts” – informal lunchtime meetings with colleagues from across Modern Languages; we presented preliminary results of our project on both departmental and School levels; and we convened a reading group for graduate students of German. The project fed into Modern Languages teaching through courses on literature, history, and ideology (“The Radical Right: Nationalism and Fascism in Europe”). Engaging with the wider scholarly community, we contributed four reviews on new Jünger-related works to leading journals.

In order to stimulate creative approaches to Jünger’s work, we organised a translation competition. It attracted 64 entries from 11 countries. Participants translated an excerpt of their choice from one of three books of Jünger’s travel writings. The jury included writer Julian Evans and Jünger’s translator Thomas Friese. Joint first prizes were awarded to Jack Davis and Nigel Cooper.

The topic of encounter and its perceived position at the vortex between freedom and friendship triggered great public interest. We were invited by a consortium of youth groups to attend the anniversary celebrations of the meeting on Hoher Meißner, a 1913 event in which German youth protested peacefully against militarism and nationalism. At the anniversary events, attended by a crowd of several thousand, we spoke, on three occasions, on practices of encounter and their literary representations. Other outreach events included a presentation at the Regensburg Film Festival; workshops for high school students at institutions near Frankfurt am Main and near Vienna; and a summer course at the German academy for gifted and talented secondary school students.

We presented our experiences of involving non-university constituencies in research-driven activities at conferences in Leipzig and Durham which both dealt with issues around knowledge transfer.

The project has laid the groundwork for a monograph on Jünger as “world writer” with a keen interest in exploring interpersonal encounters. It highlighted their significance throughout his much-neglected travel writings and linked this body of works with his better-known war diaries and essays. In light of ongoing debates on respectful interpersonal and intercultural relationships in times of violence and bureaucracy, Jünger’s literary interests and strategies have emerged as an important reference point for humanist discourse.

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