

EXPERIENCE, POETRY AND TRUTH: ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF ERNST JÜNGER'S THE ADVENTUROUS HEART

This essay is dedicated to Dr. Chiara De Franco in appreciation of her love and support.

Ernst Jünger (1895–1998) was a German writer, entomologist and soldier mostly known for his literary masterpiece *Storm of Steel* (1920); an autobiographical account on his experiences in the trenches during the First World War. Several commentators have emphasized the philosophical qualities of Jünger's works. Most notably, Martin Heidegger engaged with Jünger's writings and corresponded with him personally on topics including nihilism, modernity and technology.¹ Nevertheless, Jünger's works yet have to be fully recognized by international phenomenologists.² This essay is an attempt to, uncover some of the phenomenological themes present in Jünger's *The Adventurous Heart* (1938), a work of poetry that offers sophisticated insights hidden under a colorful and imaginative prose.

The Adventurous Heart is thematically dense and bears resemblance to a maze in that it lacks an apparent logical structure. It is polycentric and fragmented with numerous entry points, meaning that it is open to different – and

1 Vincent Blok, »An indication of being – Reflections on Heidegger's Engagement with Ernst Jünger«, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42 (2011), p. 194–208.

2 For some of the exceptions, see: Günter Figal, *For a Philosophy of Freedom and Strife*, trans. Wayne Klein, SUNY Press: Albany 1998; Thomas Sheehan, »Nihilism: Heidegger/Jünger/Aristotle«, in: Burt Hopkins (ed.), *Phenomenology: Japanese and American Perspectives*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1998, p. 273–316.

possibly even conflicting – interpretations. I have not written this essay under the illusion of offering an exhaustive investigation of every phenomenological theme of this particular work. Rather, the purpose of my analysis is to show that *The Adventurous Heart*, despite its poetic and esoteric character, ought to be regarded as a work of phenomenology. Seeking to substantiate this claim, I consider Jünger’s views on truth, subjective experience and poetry. In fact, Jünger not only uses poetry to convey his philosophical ideas, but also to show how we as human beings come to a deeper understanding of the world. Jünger holds poetic language in high regard, calling it “true language.”³ Poetry is special, he argues, because it synthesizes two of our cognitive faculties, namely embodied perception and disembodied understanding.

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Before taking a closer look at Jünger’s view on poetry, however, we must first clarify his notion of truth in relation to other phenomenological contributions. For Jünger, truth is irreducible to the factual truth of the natural scientist and the realist philosopher. Rather, truth is more profound in that it does not merely concern empirical facts. Truth is synonymous with extra-sensuous facts that are hidden from – but nevertheless connected with – our everyday experiences. He writes that the world’s “secrets lie exposed on the surface” and that “only a minimal adjustment of the eye is required to view its wealth of treasures and wonders,” thus acknowledging that subjective experience is linked to truth.⁴

Jünger tacitly counters traditional metaphysics and the idea that the phenomenal world exists independently of our experiences. On his view, the subject and the world are mutually constitutive, meaning that the individual has decisive influence on things perceived. He underlines this in the following lengthy quote as he recounts his experiences of a city during a sunset:

3 Ernst Jünger, *The Adventurous Heart – Figures and Capriccios*, Telos Press Publishing, Candor 2012, p. 17.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Shortly before sunset, a startling game of colors transfigured the city. All things red and yellow began to stir and awaken; they took on the hues characteristic of nasturtium flowers. The old tiled roofs in particular resembled bolsters of red chalk—overflowing reservoirs radiating their surplus light energy [...] Incidentally, this lighting seemed so extraordinary to me that in observing the faces of people on the streets, I was surprised to see that they were not alarmed by it.⁵

Evidently, knowledge influences our perceptual experiences, thus rendering neutral observations impossible. This is evident from the associations to ‘nasturtium flowers’ and ‘red chalk-overflowing reservoirs’ which are deeply subjective and, in the case of the former, reflects Jünger’s personal interest in botany. Also, they underline the subject-relative dimension of perceptual experiences which, consequently, are affected by the perceiver’s personal history. Other people will inevitable have different associations, and due to this a “particular fright lies in the awareness that one is alone in being affected by a significant spectacle.”⁶ Individuals have different experiences of what, objectively speaking, is the same phenomenon. This is in line with Merleau-Ponty’s view of perception. He argues that the act of perception and the thing perceived are mutually constitutive, and that sensuous impressions convey a meaning irreducible to a thing perceived or a given stimulus.⁷

Truth, Jünger holds, is concealed in the outset, but it may nevertheless be revealed by the subject. For instance, he writes about penetrating into “disguised chambers that are less subject to gravity and the assaults of time.” He elaborates that thinking “is lighter here—in an incomprehensible instant, the mind harvests fruits it would not otherwise gather in years of work. The difference between present, past, and future also falls away.”⁸ So although we experience the world in authentically in our everydayness, we have the latent possibility of experiencing truth by venturing into the world’s extra-sensuous realm.

5 Ibid., p. 24.

6 Ibid.

7 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London and New York 2002, p. 86.

8 Jünger, op. cit., p. 19.

At this point it makes sense to draw a parallel to Heidegger and his assumption that inauthenticity “has possible authenticity as its basis.”⁹ Thus, although the subject has fallen prey to the practical concerns of the world, she has a transcendental relation to it. For Heidegger, this relation enables her to fall prey in the first place. But, he argues, one may come to experience authenticity by superseding one’s practical engagements with the world. Consequently, the “self is brought to itself.”¹⁰ As a matter of fact, Jünger also holds that authentic self-assessment demands an “extraordinary level of enlightenment.”¹¹ However, he explicitly relates this to realizing truth since reality’s extra-sensuous domain allows man to find “the right measure by which to assess himself when he stands at the crossroads.”¹²

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He introduces an experiential stance called *stereoscopic sensibility* which, according to him, enables the subject to realize truth. Below, I consider this stance in further detail. But before doing so, it is important to stress how Jünger’s phenomenology differs from that of Husserl although he also assumes that truth can be realized on the basis of a special experiential capacity. For Husserl, we experience truth by means of a disembodied intellect (i.e. a *pure ego*) that “occupies a completely isolated position as opposed to all that is real” and requires a degree of reflection.¹³ Conversely, stereoscopic sensibility implies that at least some aspects of truth realization are embodied and pre-reflective. For instance, the feeling of *dizziness* is a way for us to know that we are in authentic contact with a given phenomenon. In principle, this feeling can be experienced by anyone, meaning that one does not need to take a reflective or intellectual stance towards the world. The commonality of this kind of sensibility is underlined by the fact that “everyone has at least once felt how people and things have been illuminated in certain significant moments, perhaps to such a degree that dizziness or even a shudder overcame them. This is true in

9 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, SUNY Press, Albany 2010, p. 249.

10 Ibid.

11 Jünger, op. cit.,

12 Ibid., p. 19.

13 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy – Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1989, p. 107.

the presence of death, but all significant powers, beauty for instance, elicit this effect—and we can ascribe it to truth in particular.”¹⁴ Jünger considers the realization of truth as something that pertains to our existence as human beings.

The purpose of these brief considerations has been to clarify some of the basic similarities and discrepancies between Jünger and key figures in the phenomenological tradition as to how they consider experience and truth. The overall aim has been to validate the claim that *The Adventurous Heart* is a work of phenomenology. I continue this thread by clarifying how Jünger considers the subject’s relation to truth. In the following, I show that we may come to realize truth in a number of ways that differ in terms of how they lend themselves to our everyday activities. Here, the stereoscopy mentioned above is of significant importance.

II

Stereoscopic sensibility is a kind of experience that limits to cases involving perception with more than one sensory modality. Jünger provides several examples of this including the following: ”In the aquarium, at the coral fish. One of these creatures was superlatively colored, a deep dark-red, striped with velvety-black bands, of a hue only possible on this planet at those places where the flesh is produced in islands. Its creamy body seemed so thoroughly tender, so thoroughly color, that I felt I could push through it with a very gentle poke of my finger.”¹⁵ The stereoscopy differs from our perceptions in general since it allows us to extract two different sensuous qualities with the same sense organ.¹⁶ For instance, one might come to sense a color as also having a tactile

14 Ibid., p. 4.

15 Ibid., p. 15.

16 Ibid., p. 16. By introducing this kind of sensibility, Jünger implicitly contrasts his phenomenology with the standard view on perception in philosophy. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger posits that the philosophical tradition has been obsessed with giving unjustified priority to visual perception. As a consequence, other sensory modalities and cognitive functions have been neglected (Heidegger, op. cit., p. 164–166). Contrary to what the aquarium-example suggests, Jünger does not prioritize vision. In fact, he explicitly states that all of our senses are ultimately grounded in tactility: “Generally speaking, the sense of touch, from which all other senses derive, seems to play a special

value. Jünger's example with the aquarium suggests that truth can be realized in relation to what some might call 'mundane' everyday activities like seeing a beautiful fish or an outstanding piece of art.¹⁷ So although stereoscopic experience comprises a special kind of perception, it occurs in our everyday life.

Specifically, this kind of experience constitutes the point of contact between, on the one hand, our embodied cognitive comportment towards the world and, on the other hand, the world's extra-sensuous structures. For Jünger, it is by means of stereoscopic sensibility that we acquire a deep and nuanced impression of a given phenomenon. Epistemologically, however, the relation between stereoscopic experiences and the realization of truth is far from clear: In fact, it is a paradox that stereoscopy not only reveals the world's extra-sensuous dimension, but also conceals it. This is evident from the following observations:

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Stereoscopic sensibility is a mediate – rather than an immediate – experience. Jünger underlines this by stating that the stereoscopy makes us feel the play of our senses moving as “a mysterious veil, like a curtain on the marvelous.”¹⁸ The veil metaphor shows that stereoscopic sensibility conceals parts of reality. One reason for this may be the fluctuating nature of our sensuous experience; a fluctuation that Hegel explores in the first part of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* where he considers sense-certainty and perception.¹⁹ Jünger posits that it is difficult for us to retain our authentic perceptual engagement with things. For instance, he states that: “Alongside the shaping and cultivating done by institutions, there exists a direct relationship to the world, from which primal power accrues to us. Our eyes must retain the power, if only for a moment, to see the works of this earth as if on their first day, that is, in their divine magnificence.”²⁰ However, our experience remains to be affected by the world because our perception continuously changes due to novel sensuous impressions and because the stereoscopy occurs only in a particular instant.

role in perception” (Jünger, op. cit., p. 17).

17 Ibid., p. 40.

18 Ibid., p. 18.

19 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, p. 58–79.

20 Jünger, op. cit., p. 59.

Also, Jünger introduces a more fundamental notion of truth by arguing that we must steer clear of empirical facts in order to gain access to “spiritual centers” that are “unapproachable by ordinary senses and more unknown than the dark side of the moon.”²¹ As the stereoscopic sensibility is enabled by our senses it is evident that these ‘spiritual centers’ are closed off from this experiential stance and, thus, cannot be disclosed by means of it.

For these reasons, the stereoscopic sensibility is dialectical and furthermore, it fails to reveal truth once and for all. Rather, it oscillates between revealing and concealing truth, meaning that the emergent glimpses of truth are insufficient for bringing about a stable truth realization. On my reading, stereoscopic sensibility involves a continuous experiential flow that gives us a brief but far from exhaustive sense of the world’s extra-sensuous dimension. The dialectical nature of this kind of sensibility suggests that we have to progress beyond our sensuous experience in order to have the necessary stability.

Jünger argues that there is a way to secure permanent access to the extra-sensuous. In order to do so, he holds, we must abandon our sensuous perception and experience the world by means of a particular cognitive faculty that is different from our senses, namely *spirit* [Geist]. Our spiritual capacity allows us to bridge the apparent divide between, on the one hand, the domain of the sensible, and, on the other hand, the extra-sensuous domain. In this connection, Jünger introduces *the elusion* as a mysterious and vaguely defined meta-logical figure that reveals truth. When using this figure the individual abstracts from sensuous givens. In contrast to stereoscopic sensibility which is commonly occurring, this figure is only available to a small group of individuals. Jünger underlines this as he refers to the teachings of the imaginary philosopher Nigromontanus:

Nigromontanus could tell us of solitary spirits, whose dwellings, though they seemed to be in our midst, were in an absolutely inaccessible world. Accustomed to the purest, highest grade of fire, they came forth only when the proximity of the highest danger made the transition

21 Ibid., p. 19.

tolerable for them. But he also felt that anyone who moves actively in an inverted orientation to the world and is capable of the elusion for just a moment should already be considered fortunate.²²

This possibility of dwelling suggests that the elusion may bring about a more stable and long-lasting experiential relation with the the world's extra-sensuous realm than what can be achieved by means of the stereoscopy. Particularly skilled individuals (i.e. the few of the few) are thus faced with a choice when stereoscopic sensibility occurs and they begin to feel dizzy:

They may choose to stick to their perceptual attitude. Consequently, they would then live through their senses, and experience truth in glimpses due to the presence of the so-called veil, or;

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They may decide to engage more deeply with truth by using the elusion. Thus they would come to explore the world on the basis of their spiritual faculty while neglecting their perception.

Stereoscopic sensibility relates to something more profound than our everyday experiences, but it is nevertheless enabled by such experiences. As we shall see next, the stereoscopy reveals truth to both layman and poet thus comprising a source for valuable insights and inspiration.

I have argued that, for Jünger, truth may be realized in at least two ways, namely, either by means of stereoscopic sensibility or the elusion. Now, I consider a third option that is available to the skillful poet and relies on poetic articulation. In this connection, Jünger also nuances the phenomenon of spirit as he explicitly links truth realization to the faculty of understanding. This third way of realizing truth does not imply that one has to abandon one's sensuous engagement with the world, meaning that Jünger grants us the possibility of realizing truth without, at the same time, losing sight of the sensuous richness of our experiences.

22 Ibid.

III

The faculty of understanding is crucial to Jünger's view on poetic articulation in that it enables the author to experientially engage with the world. In fact, the poet is not only able to realize the extra-sensuous aspects of a particular phenomenon, but also to communicate these insights to her readers.

Jünger assumes that the poet is informed by means of her stereoscopic sensibility. Experientially, to gain access to a phenomenon implies *grasping* it. Jünger indicates this by stating that the poet uses her so-called 'inner pliers'²³ in order to 'grasp' and 'hold on to' the truth.²⁴ In doing so, he presents grasping as an extra-sensuous activity, as he explicitly links it to the individual's ability to uncover truth. Our understanding enables us to transcend the dialectical movement of " 'revealing-concealing' " caused by the stereoscopy, thus allowing us to experience a phenomenon's extra-sensuous aspects. So instead of being tied to our sensuous experience which is immediate and relative, our ability to grasp is enabled from within. It thus comprises a cognitive activity that relies on a spiritual capacity.

I will now take a closer look at what grasping truth implies. According to Jünger, it is by means of grasping that we come to understand a particular phenomenon while we gain insight into "the secret harmony of things."²⁵ In other words, we come to have a rich intuitive understanding of the interrelatedness of certain phenomena. Jünger's tacit notion of 'the grasped' thus differs from Plato's notion of *εἶδος*. Plato considers *εἶδος* to be synonymous with the universality of a concept in the sense that a given concept refers to an atemporal essence; an *Idea*.²⁶ Conversely, Jünger does not see truth as being traceable to concepts which represent static ideal types existing in an extra-sensuous domain. Instead, he emphasizes the dualistic nature of the content that emerges from a grasping: "Every meaningful phenomenon resembles a circle, whose

23 Thomas Friese translates the German word "Zange" to "claws." However, I find the English term "pliers" to be more accurate.

24 Ibid., p. 17.

25 Ibid.

26 Plato, *The Republic*, Penguin Books, London 2007, p. 337–338.

periphery can be traced by day in fullest clarity. At night, however, the periphery disappears and the phosphorescent midpoint shines forth [...] In the light, the form appears, in the darkness, the procreative power. Our understanding is such that it is able to engage from the circumference as well as at the midpoint.²⁷ This distinction between a phenomenon's surface and depth – or its form and procreative power – emphasizes that our experiences are fallible. Each of its dimensions hides the others, meaning that our engagement with a given thing at hand necessarily involves focusing on either its surface or its depth. Also, Jünger states that what is grasped essentially relates to the stereoscopic experience and the subject's dizziness or fear.²⁸ In other words, it is tied to a particular situated and embodied encounter.

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I have clarified how grasping, considered as a spiritual ability grounded in the faculty of understanding, allows us to realize truth without requiring us to abstract away from our situated, embodied encounter with the world. I will now turn to the role that linguistic concepts play with regards to overcoming the apparent duality of the grasping.

IV

Jünger sees poetic articulation as being different from both stereoscopic sensibility and the elusion. Considered in isolation, however, linguistic concepts have no truth value. Nevertheless, he argues, language has the general capacity to dissolve the apparent conflict between life's surface, on the one hand, and its depth, on the other.²⁹ In other words, it is by means of poetry that we are able to supersede the dialectical movement of the stereoscopy sensibility.

27 Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

According to Jünger, the creative process of writing is necessary for realizing truth. For instance, he refers to the imaginary philosopher Nigromontanus who has "said at one point that the world had been given to us in its elements like the twenty-six letters of the alphabet – and that the elaboration of its image depended on the texts we wrote. Naturally, one had to be a genuine author and not merely a scribe."³⁰ Articulation is positive and creative. Nevertheless, Jünger emphasizes, the poet looks back upon the completed work with the feeling of being a *forger*. He elaborates on this by stating that "precisely this reconsideration of already concluded works has special value" since they offer "a rare opportunity to grasp its language as a whole, to some extent with a sculptor's eye, and to work on it as a single corpus."³¹ The literary work emerges as the author engages and re-engages with her past experiences. Metaphorically, the literary work is a 'sculpture' that is situated in a process of more or less constant becoming. Jünger recognizes that articulation skills improve with time, meaning that one may come to acquire "a sure hand."³²

Realizing truth by means of poetic articulation is possible because the poet does not only rely on the skill of grasping, but also uses her understanding in a *combinatorial* way. Grasping and combining, Jünger holds, are vital to the creative process of writing. The skill of combining is important since it allows one to obtain a higher insight which "does not live in the separate compartments but in the structure of the world." He continues, stating that this insight "corresponds to a mode of thinking that does not move around in isolated and parceled-off truths but rather in meaningful connections, whose power to order lies in its combinatorial faculty."³³ As the quotes suggest, this faculty is primarily used by the poet as she seeks to uncover the extra-sensuous realm. But it is also used by the so-called *eminent specialist* who knows about the genealogy of things and is able to distinguish the profound similarities between the world's phenomena.³⁴ The faculty of combining also enables the poet to manipulate meanings and articulate extra-sensuous insights."

30 Ibid., p. 74.

31 Ibid., p. 2.

32 Ibid., p. 3.

33 Ibid., p. 13.

34 Ibid., p. 14.

Combining implies a kind of ordering. It entails that the poet orders, or better, arranges concepts with the purpose of manipulating their meanings. The poet is a kind of skilled technician. Here, we may draw a parallel to Heidegger who states that craftsmanship relies on a particular kind of knowledge which the ancient Greeks called τέχνη. Heidegger writes that for “Greek thought the nature of knowing consists in ἀλήθεια, that is, in the uncovering of beings. *Τέχνη, understood as knowledge* experienced in the Greek manner, is a bringing forth of beings in that it *brings forth* present beings as such beings *out of* concealedness and specifically *into* the unconcealedness of their appearance... ”³⁵

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The fact that Jünger sees works of poetry as open to revisions also underlines that poetic articulation is not a matter of mere presenting insights from past experiences. Rather, Jünger’s tacit commitment to anti-intellectualism extends beyond the basic cognitive aspects of human living as it relates to how we express ourselves by means of language and, specifically, how we articulate our understanding of past and present experiences. To express truth, he holds, the poet must creatively engage with language in the process of articulation. This gives evidence to the importance of creativity and skills when combining words. For as Jünger writes, every “significant individual work has at least a drop of the combinatorial faculty mixed into it—and how inspired we feel when we stumble already in the introduction across those simultaneously powerful and playful sentences by which sovereignty shows its presence.”³⁶

Importantly, the poet combines words, phrases, tropes etcetera which are available to everyone belonging to a particular speech community. As such, language is accessible to us as a repertoire and words may have both tacit and overt meanings. For Jünger, however, it is by combining words that insights emerge in the difference between different meaningful words: “We have countless expressions at our disposal in which a plain meaning coexists with a deeply concealed one, and what is transparency to the eye is here secret consonance.”³⁷ It is on the basis of a skillful combination of linguistic units that past insights are articulated. Consequently, a transparent structure emerges.

35 Martin Heidegger, »The Origin of The Work of Art«, in Albert Hofstadter (trans.) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York 1975, p. 57.

36 Jünger, op. cit., p. 14.

37 Ibid., p. 4.

Jünger sees language as synonymous with “waters that at once stir and are *transparent*” in the sense that language *moves* and *discloses*.³⁸ Language is transparent, meaning that it transcends the meanings of individual words and the literary work, thus enabling the reader to realize truth. This is possible because secret teachings “are concealed in every language of merit.”³⁹ In fact, articulation does not reveal isolated meanings but *chains of meanings* that emerge as a set of intersecting differences. Truth is uncovered as the author poetically combines words in novel ways. And it is on the basis of these combinations that she reveals truth to her readers.

Language speaks to us, but it also speaks through us as we poetically articulate our experiences. And it does so in a spiritual manner due to the fact that it is capable of *convincing* our readers. In fact, Jünger sees conviction as “a spiritual act” that should not be confused with simple factual knowing and understanding.⁴⁰ Rather, poetic language communicates directly to the reader’s intuitive understanding. Also, the “spirit of language does not lie in the words and images; it is embedded in the atoms, which an unknown current animates and compels into magnetic figures. Only thus is the spirit of language able to grasp the unity of the world, beyond day and night, beyond dream and reality, time and place, friend and foe—under all conditions of spirit and matter.”⁴¹ Thus Jünger ascribes a special status to language in that poetic articulation makes it possible for the poet to transcend the apparent dichotomy between, on the one hand, a phenomenon’s form and, on the other hand, its procreative power. Jünger sees poetic articulation as a more viable epistemic alternative to perception and pure spirituality because it implies a synthesis that abolishes the distinction between perception and understanding. For this reason, poetry allows us to experience truth in ways that neither stereoscopic sensibility nor the elusion is able to bring about.

38 Ibid., p. 3.

39 Ibid., p. 12.

40 Ibid., p. 11.

41 Ibid., p. 105.

