

Jünger, Ernst. "On Danger" in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. ed. Anton Kaes, et. al. Berkeley, CA: U of California Pr, 1994. 369 – 372.

Among the signs of the epoch we have now entered belongs the increased intrusion of danger into daily life. There is no accident concealing itself behind this fact but a comprehensive change of the inner and outer world.

We see this clearly when we remember what an important role was assigned to the concept of security in the bourgeois epoch just past. The bourgeois person is perhaps best characterized as one who places security among the highest values and conducts his life accordingly. His arrangements and systems are dedicated to securing his space against the danger that at times, when scarcely a cloud appears to darken the sky, has faded into the distance. However, it is always there: it seeks with elemental constancy to break through the dams with which order has surrounded itself.

The peculiarity of the bourgeois' relation to danger lies in his perception of it as an irresolvable contradiction to order, that is, as senseless. In this he marks himself off from other figures, for example, the warrior, the artist, and the criminal, who are given a lofty or base relation to the elemental. Thus battle, in the eyes of the warrior, is a process that completes itself in a higher order; the tragic conflict, for the writer, is a condition in which the deeper sense of life is to be comprehended very clearly; and a burning city or one beset by insurrection is a field of intensified activity for the criminal. In turn bourgeois values possess just as little validity for the believing person, for the gods appear in the elements, as in the burning bush unconsumed by the flames. Through misfortune and danger, fate draws the mortal into the superior sphere of a higher order.

The supreme power through which the bourgeois sees security guaranteed is reason. The closer he finds himself to the center of reason, the more the dark shadows in which danger conceals itself disperse, and the ideal condition which it is the task of progress to achieve consists of the world domination of reason through which the wellsprings of the dangerous are not merely to be minimized but ultimately to be dried up altogether. The dangerous reveals itself in the light of reason to be senseless and relinquishes its claim on reality. In this world all depends on the perception of the dangerous as the senseless; then in the same moment it is overcome, it appears in the mirror of reason as an error.

This can be demonstrated everywhere and in detail within the intellectual and actual arrangements of the bourgeois world. It reveals itself at large in the endeavor to see the state, which rests on hierarchy, as society, with equality as its fundamental principle and which is founded through an act of reason. It reveals itself in the comprehensive establishment of an insurance system, through which not only the risk of foreign and domestic politics but also that of private life is to be uniformly distributed and thus subordinated to reason. It reveals itself further in the many and very entangled efforts to understand the life of the soul as a series of causes and effects and thus to remove it from an unpredictable into a predictable condition, therefore to include it within the sphere in which consciousness holds sway.

In this sense the securing of life against fate, that great mother of danger, appears as the truly bourgeois problem, which is then made subject to the most diverse economic or humanitarian solutions. All formulations of questions at present, whether aesthetic, scientific, or political in nature, move in the direction of the claim that conflict is avoidable. Should conflict nevertheless arise, as cannot, for example, be overlooked in regard to the permanent fact of war or criminality, then all depends upon proving it to be an error whose repetition is to be avoided through education or enlightenment. These errors appear for the sole reason that the factors of the great equation – the result of which has the population of the globe becoming a unified, fundamentally good as well as fundamentally rational, and therefore also a fundamentally secure humanity – have not yet achieved general recognition. Faith in the persuasive force of these views is one of the reasons that enlightenment tends to overestimate the powers given to it.

One of the best objections that has been raised against this variation is that under such circumstances life would be intolerably boring. This objection has never been of a purely theoretical nature but was applied practically by those young persons who, in the foggy dark of night, left their parental home to pursue danger in America, on the sea, or in the French Foreign Legion. It is a sign of the domination of bourgeois values that danger slips into the distance, “far away in Turkey,” in those lands where pepper grows, or wherever the bourgeois likes to deplore everyone not conforming to his standards. For these values to disappear entirely, however, will never be possible, not just because they are always present but above all because the human heart is in need not only of security but of danger too. Yet this desire is capable of revealing itself in bourgeois society only as protest, and it indeed does appear, in the form of romantic protest. The bourgeois has nearly succeeded in persuading the adventurous heart that the dangerous is not present at all. Thus do figures become possible who scarcely dare to speak their own superior language, whether that of the poet, who compares himself to the albatross, whose powerful wings are nothing more than the object of a tedious curiosity in a foreign and windless environment, or that of the born warrior, who appears to be a ne’er-do-well because the life of a shopkeeper fills him with disgust. Countless examples could show how in an era of great security any profitable life will depart for the distances symbolized by strange lands, intoxication, or death.

In this sense the world war appears as the great, red balance line under the bourgeois era, the spirit of which explained – that is, believed itself capable of invalidating – the jubilation of the volunteer who welcomed the war by attributing to him either a patriotic error or a suspect lust for adventure. Fundamentally, however, this jubilation was a revolutionary protest against the values of the bourgeois world; it was a recognition of fate as the expression of the supreme power. In this jubilation a reevaluation of all values, which had been prophesied by exalted spirits, was completed: after an era that sought to subordinate fate to reason, another followed which saw reason as the servant of fate. From that moment on, danger was no longer the goal of a romantic opposition; it was rather reality, and the task of the bourgeois was once again to withdraw from this reality and escape into the utopia of security. From this moment on, the words peace and order became a slogan to which a weaker morale resorted.

This was a war that not only nations but two epochs conducted against each other. As a consequence, both victors and vanquished exist here in Germany. Victors are those who, like

salamanders, have gone through the school of danger. Only these will hold their own in a time when danger, not security, will determine the order of life.

Precisely for this reason, however, the tasks that order must accomplish have become much more comprehensive than before; these tasks have to be preformed where danger is not the exception, but is constantly present. As an example, the police force might be mentioned. It has transformed itself from a group of civil servants into a formation that already greatly resembles a military unit. Likewise the various large parties acknowledge the need to adopt means of power that express the fact that the battle of opinions will not be decided solely through votes and programs but also by the stalwarts committed to march in support of those programs. Such facts are in no way to be isolated and regarded as a temporary or transient change in the political landscape. Nor can the inclination to danger be overlooked in intellectual endeavors, and it is unmistakable that new forms of the volcanic spirit are at work. Phenomena like modern atomic theory, glacial cosmogony, the introduction of the concept of mutation into zoology all point clearly completely apart from their truth content, to how strongly the spirit is beginning to partake of explosive events. The history of inventions also raises ever more clearly the question of whether a space of absolute comfort or a space of absolute danger is the final aim concealed in technology. Completely apart from the circumstance that scarcely a machine, scarcely a science has ever existed which did not fulfill, directly or indirectly, dangerous functions in war, inventions like the automobile engine have already resulted in greater losses than any war, however bloody.

What especially characterizes the era in which we find ourselves, into which we enter more deeply with every passing day, is the close relationship that exists between danger and order. It may be expressed in this way: danger appears merely as the other side of our order. This whole is more or less equivalent to our image of the atom, which is utterly mobile and utterly constant. The secret concealed within is a new and different return to nature; it is the fact that we are simultaneously civilized and barbaric, that we have approached the elemental without having sacrificed the acuity of our consciousness. Thus does the path through which danger has penetrated our life present itself as twofold. It has intruded upon us first of all out of an arena in which nature is still more vital. Things, "the likes of which were only possible in South America," are now familiar to us. The distinction is that danger, from a romantic dimension, has in this way become real. Secondly, however, we are sending danger back over the globe in a new form.

This new form of danger appears in the closest connection having been made between elemental events and consciousness. The elemental is eternal: as people have always found themselves in passionate struggle with things, animals, or other people, as is the case today. The particular characteristic of our era, however, is precisely that all this transpires in the presence of the most acute consciousness. This finds expression above all in the circumstance that in all of these conflicts the most powerful servant of consciousness, the machine, is always present. Thus does humanity's eternal struggle with the elemental nature of the sea present itself in the temporal form of a supremely complicated mechanical contrivance. Thus does the battle appear as a process during which the armored engine moves fighting men through the sea, over land, or into the air. Thus does the daily accident itself, with which our newspapers are filled, appear nearly exclusively as a catastrophe of a technological type.

Beyond all this the wonder of our world, at once sober and dangerous, is the registration of the moment in which the danger transpires – a registration that is moreover accomplished whenever it does not capture human consciousness immediately, by means of machines. One needs no prophetic talent to predict that soon any given event will be there to see or to hear in any given place. Already today there is hardly an event of human significance toward which the artificial eye of civilization, the photographic lens, is not directed. The result is often pictures of demoniacal precision through which humanity's new relation to danger becomes visible in an exceptional fashion. One has to recognize that it is a question here much less of the peculiarity of new tools than of a new style that makes use of technological tools. The change becomes illuminating in the investigation of the change in tools that have long been at our disposal, such as language. Although our time produces little in the way of literature in the old sense, much of significance is accomplished through the objective reports of experience. Our time is prompted by human need – which explains, among other things, the success of war literature. We already possess a new style of language, one which gradually becomes visible from underneath the language of the bourgeois epoch. The same, however, is true of our style altogether; it is reminiscent of the fact that the automobile was for a long time constructed in the form of a horse-drawn coach, or that a wholly different society has already long since established itself beneath the surface of bourgeois society. As during the inflation, we continue for a time to spend the usual coins, without sensing that the rate of exchange is no longer the same.

In this sense, it may be said that we have already plunged deeply into new, more dangerous realms, without our being conscious of them.