

Jünger, Ernst. "Fire" in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. ed. Anton Kaes, et. al. Berkeley, CA: U of California Pr, 1994. 18 – 20.

We have known one another for a long time as bold adventurers, have met on many a hot day beneath the smoke-filled sky of a battlefield where it is simply the spirit of the hour that always brings those similar together. We know we are the select embodiments of a powerful masculinity and take pride in this awareness. Just yesterday we sat together following the old tradition of a final drink and felt how the will to battle, that peculiar lust to cross the front again and again, to leap where volunteers are needed, would not have lost its familiar intensity and this time, too, would cast us into danger. Yes, if only it were time; we are a race that rises to the challenge.

Nevertheless, this discontent, this unyielding chill from the inside out, these portentous thoughts tearing across our horizon like vague, tattered traces of clouds, were not to be banished; not even once we had taken a long, slow drink of cognac. It is stronger than we are. A fog that lies within us and, in such hours, spreads its mysterious nature across the troubled waters of the soul. Not fear – fear we can stare sharply, disdainfully in the eye and frighten into its cave – but an unknown realm in which the boundaries of our capacity to feel melt away. That is where one first notices how little one is at home in oneself. From deep within, something slumbering, drowned out by restless dailiness, rises and, before quite taking form, dissolves into a dull sadness.

Of what help is it that for three long weeks a man has steeled himself for this hour, until he believes himself to be hard and free of weaknesses. Of what help is it that he says to himself, "Death? Ha, what's that? A transition that can't be avoided anyway." All that is of no help whatever, for suddenly, from having been a thinking being, he becomes a feeling one, a plaything of phantoms against which even the sharpest reason is a powerless weapon. Those are the factors we take care to deny because they are unreliable. But in the moment of experience all denial is futile; then every unknown is possessed of a higher and more convincing reality than all the familiar phenomena of a midday sun.

We have reached the most advanced line and are seeing the final preparations. We are eager and precise, for we sense a pressure to be active, to fill the time, to escape from ourselves. Time, which had racked us so in the trenches, a concept that comprehends all conceivable torment, a chain that only death can break. Perhaps in the coming minutes. I know it to be a conscious experience, the quiet flow of an ebbing life into the sea of eternity; I have already stood at times on the border. It is a slow, deep sinking with a ringing in the ear, peaceful and familiar like the sound of Easter bells at home. One should avoid such ponderings, such a readiness to pounce upon mysteries that will never be explained. Everything comes in its own time. Head high, let the thoughts scatter to the winds. Die with dignity – that we can do; we can stride into the ominous dark with a warrior's cunning and bold vitality. Do not be shaken, smile to the last, even if the smile is only a mask to hide from yourself: that itself is something. A human is incapable of anything greater than mastering oneself in death. Even the immortal gods must envy him that.

We are well armed for our journey, loaded with weapons, explosives, and lighting and signalling instruments, a proper, fighting shock troop, up to the supreme challenges of modern warfare. Not

only up to it through joyful dare-devilry and brutal force. Seeing the people this way in the twilight, slender, haggard, most of them almost children, one has little inclination to trust them. But their faces in the shadow of their steel helmets are sharp, fearless, and smart. I know, they do not waver from the danger for an instant; they pounce on it, fast, sinewy, and smooth. They combine ardent courage with cool intelligence; they are the men who clear a severely jammed shell with a steady hand amidst a maelstrom of annihilation, who fire a smoking grenade back at the enemy, who, locked in a struggle for life and death, read the intentions in the enemy's eyes. They are men forged of steel, whose eagle eyes peer straight over the propeller's whir, studying the clouds ahead, who, captive within the motorized din of the tanks, dare the hellish journey through the roar of shell-pitted fields, who, for days on end, approaching certain death, crouch in encircled nests heaped with corpses, only half alive beneath lowing machine guns. They are the best of the modern battlefield, suffused with the reckless spirit of the warrior, whose iron will discharges in clenched, well-aimed bursts of energy.

When I observe how they silently cut lanes through the tangles of barbed wire, dig stepped assault trenches, compare their luminescent watches, and orient themselves towards north by the stars, then I am overcome with recognitions: this is the new man, the storm pioneer, the elite of Central Europe. A whole new race, smart, strong, and filled with will. What reveals itself here as a vision will tomorrow be the axis around which life revolves still faster and faster. The path will not always, as here, have to be forged through shell craters, fire and steel; but the double-quick step with which events are prosecuted here, the tempo accustomed to iron, that will remain the same. The glowing twilight of a declining age is at once a dawn in which one arms oneself for new, harder battles. Far behind, the gigantic cities, the hosts of machines, the empires, whose inner bonds have been rent in the storm, await the new men, the cunning, battle-tested men who are ruthless toward themselves and others. This war is not the end but the prelude to violence. It is the forge in which the new world will be hammered into new borders and new communities. New forms want to be filled with blood, and power will be wielded with a hard fist. The war is a great school, and the new man will bear our stamp.

Yes, it is now in its element, my old shock troop. The deed, the stroke of the fist, has torn away the fog. Already there comes a quiet joke across the shoulder of the trench. It is perhaps not tasteful to ask: "Well, fatso, are you up to your slaughter weight?" Nevertheless – they laugh, and fatso most of all. Just don't be moved. The festival is about to begin, and we are its princes.

It is a pity nonetheless. If the advance troops fail to penetrate, if just *one* machine gun remains intact of the other side, these splendid men will be cut down like a herd of deer. That is war. The best and most worthy, the highest embodiment of life, is just good enough to be cast into its insatiable maw. One machine gun, just a second's gliding of the cartridge belt, and these twenty-five men – one could cultivate a sizeable island with them – will hang in tattered bundles from the wire, left slowly to decompose. They are students, cadets with proud old names, from whose eyes the Sleeping Beauty dream of some kind of ancient nest has not entirely drifted away. Peasant sons, grown up beneath the lonely thatched roofs of Westphalia or the Lüneburger Heide, ringed by the primeval oaks planted by their forebears around the surrounding fence of stone.

In the neighboring regiment of the left there bursts a storm of fire. It is a feinting maneuver, to confuse and split enemy artillery. It is just about time. Now the task is to gather oneself. Yes, it is perhaps a pity. Perhaps as well we are sacrificing ourselves for something inessential. But no one can rob us of *our* value. Essential is not what we are fighting for, but *how* we fight. Onward toward the goal, until we triumph or are left behind. The warriors' spirit, the exposure of oneself to risk, even for the tiniest idea, weighs more heavily in the scale than all the brooding about good and evil. That is what gives even the knight of the rueful countenance his awe-inspiring aura. We want to show what we have in us, then, if we fail, we will truly have lived to the full.