

Elliot Y. Neaman. *A Dubious Past. Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature after Nazism*. Weimar and Now: German Cultural Criticism 19. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. 315p.

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It has been three years since Ernst Jünger died at the age of 103. Elliot Neaman's book on the life and work of this controversial figure is a timely reminder of the confusion over Jünger's place among German authors of the 20th century, illustrated by the numerous debates over Jünger's complicity with fascism that persisted until his death. As Neaman's biography makes clear, the Jünger problem promises to take on even greater complexity after his death, particularly in an era when ideological lines traditionally demarcating right from left become increasingly blurred—a point argued persuasively in Neaman's final chapter. Those looking for a definitive assessment of Jünger's significance as a writer and as a voice for conservative forces within Germany will not find it in Neaman's treatment, and that is precisely what recommends his book. Carefully documented and meticulously argued, Neaman succeeds in explaining why Jünger is likely to remain one of German literature's most ambiguous figures.

Neaman dispenses very early with the suspicions that a study of such a dubious figure as Jünger tends to arouse. He makes clear that his goal is neither to recuperate Jünger for the German literary canon, nor to offer a final condemnation of Jünger among the ranks of infamous Germans of the 20th century. Rather, Neaman hopes to account for the persistence of controversy and success that are inextricably linked in Jünger's biography, confounding both critics and his supporters. His approach to Jünger is as fair as one could hope to encounter, balancing every critical statement with a careful explication of Jünger's literary texts in the context of their concurrent political climates.

Neaman's success in this balancing act comes at a price that some readers may find too high. He does not assess Jünger's volumes in terms of their particular literary achievement, leaving this task entirely to the critics and scholars whom he cites. This omission will prove a source of disappointment for readers looking for insight into the place of Jünger's literary output along the horizon of modern German literature. Neaman's most significant contribution is his treatment of Jünger's complex relations with the fringes of right-wing European intellectual circles. However, this approach leads him to relegate Jünger's texts to the status of political allegories that serve to illustrate the ideological frontlines between Marxism, Conservatism, and Fascism at various moments in recent history. He neglects any thorough discussion of contemporary literary developments, referring to the

other writers only in passing. Of the many contemporary writers who might have served as valuable points of reference for Jünger as an author, only Gottfried Benn and Heiner Müller receive any sustained attention in Neaman's book. Contemporaries such as Erich Maria Remarque, Bertolt Brecht, and Thomas Mann receive scant attention.

The occasionally random sequence of topics and subheadings also presents hurdles to the reader, particularly those less familiar with Jünger's works. But despite the lack of clear transitions, the book adheres to a roughly chronological sequence in which several themes are repeated: Jünger's ambiguous place within both modernism and the conservative revolution of the Weimar era, the notion of *post-histoire* as a vehicle for approaching Jünger's politics, the consistency of Jünger's aloof aestheticism, and the facility with which various incongruous political movements have successfully appropriated Jünger's texts for their own competing aims. Neaman's book thus represents a valuable, if incomplete, contribution to future Jünger scholarship that models a balanced approach for the critical reception of this troubling figure. ✨