Finger(less)prints

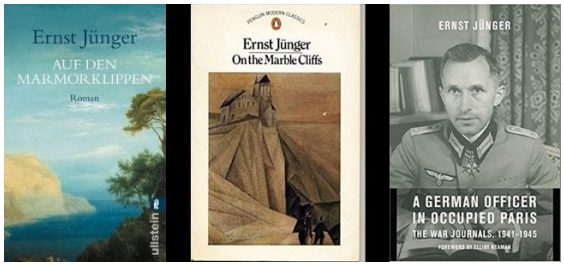
By *Tess Lewis*

In these times of confinement and distancing, I've been thinking often about the desire for communion, for intimacy, for close contact with a kindred spirit or an admired mind. As so often happens, there is a perfect term in German to convey and give form to this feeling: *Berührungssehnsucht.* It is this desire for communion that is my principal drive as a translator.

Putting the thoughts of others into our own words lets us inhabit an alien sensibility, embrace another cast of mind or try on a different view of the world. It's an opportunity to expand our horizons by donning a new pair of spectacles or walking a few steps in another person's shoes, and a way to expand the horizons of friends and strangers by sharing our passions and enthusiasms or urgent political or social views from abroad. And yet familiarity breeds, if not contempt, then certainly varying degrees of discomfort. In translation, too, actions have reactions—and this is where *Berührungsangst* comes in. Lately, trepidation about contact with or even proximity to disreputable, distasteful or discomfiting ideas has gained a frighteningly concrete counterpart in the COVID pandemic. The mere prospect of physical contact fills us with foreboding and we find ourselves caught in a dance between longing and fear.

This state of *Berührungsambivalenz* seems to have crept into every corner of our lives. It overshadows even as solitary an activity as translation. Translators are used to spending hours, days, even weeks in nearly uninterrupted solitude at our desks and when we do go out in public it's often with the nagging worry that we really should be back with our books for just a few more pages… But over the last nine months, as public events were canceled, postponed or felt too ominous to join, that familiar solitude grew suffocating. Then, after yet more murders of Black Americans and beatings of peaceful demonstrators filled the media, the Black Lives Matter protests raised this ambivalence to a high pitch—it was impossible to stay in and dangerous to go out.

A year ago, in the 'before times', I was commissioned to do a new translation of Ernst Jünger's 1939 allegorical novel *On the Marble Cliffs*. In this enigmatic book, at once blind and prescient, a mercenary turned botanist recounts the rise of a tyrannical demagogue and a failed attempted coup that ends in the destruction of an entire civilization. I vaguely remembered reading it years ago and it seemed a timely, even urgent project in understanding how nihilistic populism can stymie even a country "with a long history of law," as Jünger puts it. But as I immersed myself sentence by sentence in the text my misgivings grew. Widely touted as the only act of resistance in German literature under Hitler, *On the Marble Cliffs* is in fact a high-minded but slippery justification for the detached 'inner emigration' of the artistic and intellectual elite. Jünger himself denied the book was an act of resistance, claiming instead that it was above politics. In 1946, he wrote in his diary that he did not want his novel "understood as a political polemic even today. The shoe fit many others [than Hitler] then, and still does…" It does, indeed.



I had already felt apprehensive simply at the thought of trying to capture Jünger's elaborate cut-glass style, which alternates between precise, vivid description and hazy pseudo-archaisms and easy profundities, a style Stuart Hood rendered admirably in his 1947 version. Yet as I got deeper into the novel, I became more and more apprehensive. The parallels between the novel and conflicts playing out in the streets of the United States as well as in the White House and the Capitol Building were becoming ever more pointed, the echoes more insistent.

On the Marble Cliffs tells the story of two men, the narrator and Otho, his brother in arms, who have retired from the Mauretanians, a mercenary order of knights errant, to devote themselves to the study of botany in an isolated hermitage near the shores of Marina, a vast lake. The countryside hosts an ancient and refined agricultural Christian civilization that tolerates pagans in their midst. In the forests surrounding the Marina, however, a cruel despot has been slowly establishing his hold on the criminal, the greedy and the disaffected through a campaign of rumors, threats, the imposition of 'order' if not law and escalating terror. This Chief Forester is loosely based on Hermann Goering, one of whose more fatuous titles was *Reichsforstmeister*. A former governor of the Mauretanians, he is a canny, ruthless operator, prone to terrifying joviality, who spreads his poison indirectly from the depths of his forest stronghold. He does not accomplish this alone, of course, but has legions of enablers who have taken over the ministries, permeated the clergy and packed the courts.

> Precisely this was one of the Head Forester's masterly traits: he spread fear in small doses, which then he gradually increased, with the aim of paralyzing resistance. The role he played in this turmoil, planned in minute detail in his forests, was that of a force of order, for while his lower agents, members of the herders' clans, extended the reach of anarchy, his adepts infiltrated the ministries and courts, even the monasteries, and were seen there as powerful figures who would bring the rabble to heel. In this the Head Forester was like an evil doctor who inflicts an ailment in order to subject the patient to his intended surgery.

> Gerade hierin lag ein meisterhafter Zug des Oberförsters: er gab die Furcht in kleinen Dosen ein, die er allmählich steigerte, und deren Ziel die Lähmung des Widerstandes war. Die Rolle, die er in diesen Wirren, die sehr fein in seinen Wäldern ausgesponnen wurden, spielte, war die der Ordnungsmacht, denn während seine niederen Agenten, die in den Hirtenbünden saßen, den Stoff der Anarchie vermehrten, drangen die Eingeweihten in die Ämter und

> Magistrate, ja selbst in Klöster ein, und wurden dort als starke Geister, die den Pöbel zu Paaren treiben würden, angesehen. So glich der Oberförster einem bösen Arzte, der zunächst das Leiden fördert, um sodann dem Kranken die Schnitte zuzufügen, die er im Sinne hat.

The narrator and his brother watch the increasing violence with concern. They're tempted to join the battle against the Chief Forester but remain firm in their lofty resolve "to resist only through the power of the spirit." Their resolve doesn't waver even after they stumble on a torture site deep in the forest arrayed with the impaled skulls and flayed skin of the despot's enemies. One of the Forester's henchmen, Braquemart, has enlisted a prince from an ancient noble family in a doomed attempt to unseat the Forester. A "short, dark, gaunt" and rather coarse man with a fierce wit, Braquemart is a "full-fledged nihilist," who is resisting the despot out of bitterness rather than tradition and principle, like Prince Sunmyra. This official was clearly modeled on Joseph Goebbels, which did not endear Jünger to the Minister of Propaganda. Braquemart and the prince stop in on the brothers for advice but continue on their fatal mission alone.

As the battle rages, the narrator ventures into the forest to help them but finds only their heads impaled on a spike outside the torture hut. The prince's bravery and self-sacrifice (and, of course, his nobility) restore the narrator's hope in mankind—at least the privileged classes—and he takes an oath to stand firm against the intoxication of mass movements.

> [T]here were still noble beings among us in whose hearts knowledge of the higher order was preserved and perpetuated. And as a lofty example enjoins us to follow, I swore before this head that for all future I would fall with the solitary and free rather than triumph in the company of slaves.

> Und wie das hohe Beispiel uns zur Gefolgschaft führt, so schwur ich vor diesem Haupt mir zu, in aller Zukunft lieber mit den Freien einsam zu fallen, als mit den Knechten im Triumph zu gehn.

On the Marble Cliffs is certainly a condemnation of extremism and the "the reckless arrogance of the few who circle like eagles over the mute suffering of others." But the narrator is a man who has the means to flee and a safe home to return to in the far north. He has lost years of work and witnessing a land and seeing a refined civilization laid waste fills him with regret. Yet, rather than recoil in horror, he revels in the sight of burning cities glittering like a necklace of rubies encircling the lake.

> I did not hear the children crying and the mothers weeping down below, nor did I hear the clansmen's battle cries or the bellowing of the cattle trapped in the stalls. Of all the horrible destruction, only a golden shimmer rose to the Marble Cliffs.

> Ich hörte dort unten nicht die Kinder weinen und die Mütter klagen, auch nicht das Kampfgeschrei der Sippenbünde und das Brüllen des Viehes, das in den Ställen stand. Von allen Schrecken der Vernichtung stieg zu den Marmor-Klippen einzig der goldene Schimmer auf.

And who, here, can hear the cries of children in cages in the shadow of Trump's "big, beautiful wall"?

Jünger himself had nothing but disdain for liberal democracy, believing it inevitably leads to mob rule. He did not join the Nazi Party, a mob that he said "lacked metaphysics," and refused to allow his writing to appear in any of the party's publications, but he did serve as a captain in occupied France. (There, three years after writing his novel, Jünger would watch the bombing of a Renault factory and observe that, yes, 500 lives had been lost, but from where they stood the attack looked like "stage lighting for a shadow play.") Goebbels urged Hitler to ban *On the Marble Cliffs*, but Hitler had admired Jünger ever since the author sent the Führer an inscribed copy of *Storm of Steel*, his account of life in the trenches of World War I. Hitler ordered Goebbels to "let Jünger be." Stationed in Paris from 1941 to '44, Jünger frequented literary salons and artists' studios. Cocteau, whose dirty fingernails repulsed Jünger, said of him: "Some people had dirty hands, some had clean hands, but Jünger had no hands." Nonetheless, he managed to leave fingerprints: his concept of total mobilization—the instrumentalization of all the members of a society, body and soul, into the war effort—was eagerly adopted and adapted by the Nazis and his glorification of violence and his reactionary elitism touched generations of German readers.

So why retranslate *On the Marble Cliffs*? Would it leave a stain on my hands?

When Jünger's American biographer asked him why evil was a central focus of his writing, Jünger replied, "Because it is so often hidden." *On the Marble Cliffs* does lay bare the evil of that time: not just the evil that led to the exploitation and murder of millions, but also the taint of those who chose not to act or who looked away. It is a reminder of how easy it is to dismiss the appeal of fascist thought and aesthetics as vulgar, to explain extremism and intolerance away as ignorance and to downplay calls to 'Burn it all down!' Finally, *The Marble Cliffs* also reminds us that asking "what has it got to do with me?" and casting your lot with the "solitary and free." leaving those who with fewer resources or options to their own fates has a terrible cost too.

COVID19 has shone a terrible light on our society's profound inequity and inequality,

on the fragility of norms, and the failure of political will to serve the common good. We can curb this latest bout of physical and political disease, but the susceptibilities in our body politic remain. Jünger's novel urges us—indirectly—to look and act. Or, as E. M. Forster put it directly: "Only connect…"

Tess Lewis is a writer and translator from French and German. Her translations include works by Peter Handke, Walter Benjamin, Klaus Merz, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Christine Angot, Pascal Bruckner and Jean-Luc Benoziglio.
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