Eumeswil

(Ernst Jünger)

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Ernst Jünger's *Eumeswil*, one of the famous German's last works, published when he was eighty-two years old, is often regarded as an exposition of libertarian thought. This is understandable, but completely wrong. Such a reading attempts to shoehorn concepts in which Jünger had little interest, or toward which he was actively hostile, into an exploration of unrelated themes. Moreover, it ignores that in this book, though somewhat masked, Jünger has more contempt for so-called liberal democracy than dislike for what some call tyranny. Thus, this book is not a call to rework society, or individual thought, along libertarian lines. It is instead a call for human excellence, and a criticism of the modern West for failure to achieve it, or to even try.

One cannot really understand *Eumeswil* without reading, preferably first reading, Jünger's earlier *The Forest Passage*, which was published in 1951, twenty-six years before *Eumeswil*. On the surface, they are very different—this book is cast as dystopian science fiction, and *The Forest Passage* is a work of philosophical exposition. But Jünger himself explicitly ties the two books together, linking the earlier book's concept of the "forest rebel" with this book's concept of the "anarch." In both books, the author's focus on freedom, specific to each individual, is easily misinterpreted, because what freedom means to most people today is not what Jünger means by the term. Jünger means an internal, spiritual freedom, an elitist freedom, not the freedom of license and consequent ennui. This confusion drives all the misunderstandings of *Eumeswil*.

While they fit together, a key difference between the books is often, or always, overlooked. Both are analyses of how a man should live under tyranny. But the tyrannies to which the protagonist in each book reacts are completely different. Thus, while there are some differences between the forest rebel and the anarch, those differences are best explained not by developments in Jünger's thought, but by the differences in the tyrannies examined in each book. That is to say, Jünger is looking at a general problem of stifled freedom from two radically different angles—in the earlier book, from the perspective of those trapped by Communism or other totalitarian ideologies; in the later book, from those trapped in

a much different type of tyranny, one into which Jünger saw the West decaying, having nothing to do with Communism. It is the difference between 1951 and 1977, one which often escapes us now, but was very evident to a person of the time, and should be even more evident to us today, since the defects found in 1977 in bud form are now in full and poisonous flower, while the evils of 1951 have disappeared entirely.

Not much actually happens, plot-wise, in *Eumeswil*. Most of the book consists of the private musings of the protagonist, Martin Venator. He lives in the city-state of Eumeswil, somewhere in today's Morocco, after an unspecified global apocalypse some time before. (The name comes from Eumenes, the most clever of the Diadochi, the "successors" of Alexander, who fought over and divided his empire. The theme of such decline is everywhere in this book, starting with the city name itself.) Eumeswil is ruled by a man referred to only as the Condor, a soldier who overthrew the "tribunes," the leading men of a broad oligarchic and quasi-democratic order, the "republic," whose adherents viewed, and still view, themselves as beneficent and liberal, in contrast to the Condor, whom they naturally loathe.

Venator, a young man, has two jobs. By day he is a historian, or rather some type of graduate student; by night he tends bar in the Condor's palace, at the Condor's private bar. This permits him to observe the Condor and his aides, as they interact and discuss both high and low events. In Venator's dispassionate telling, the Condor and his men are far from fiends; they are competent and genial men, highly intelligent and rational, concerned mostly with possible rebellions in the city, maintaining order, keeping the people happy, and not getting on the wrong side of people more powerful than they. Of those latter, there are really two—the Yellow Khan, apparently either a very powerful neighbor or some sort of overlord, who sometimes comes for state visits that are a combination of pleasure and peril for the Condor and his men; and the vague "catacombs," subterranean realms of some kind from which come advanced technology, still being developed by unspecified people, not unearthed from dead ones. To accompany these external forces, to the south, across the desert, lies the "Forest," a mutated, wild land, to which (spoiler alert) at the end of the book the Condor leads an expedition, joined by Venator, and none of them are ever heard from again.

Under both the tribunes and the Condor, Eumeswil is a place that is waiting, passing the time, forever, so far as can be seen. There are no grand plans or any real hope for the future. Here, at the end of all things, not much happens. Perhaps it will come around again, though there is no sign of it. (As M. John Harrison says of "defeated, resigned landscapes" in *The Pastel City*, "Or was it just waiting to be born? Who can tell at which end of Time these places have their existence?") Those in Eumeswil birth few children; two maximum, not by law but because people can't be bothered and see no reason to have more children. Abortion is illegal but ignored in practice, along with other vices, such as pederasty and drug use. From a libertarian perspective, pretty much everyone is free to do as he wants, as long as he does not overtly upset the public order (and does not challenge the ruler, on whom more later). History is mostly ignored; the entire society smacks of what is today called postmodernism. In other words, Eumeswil is a stand-in for the modern West, and its people, regardless of their formal type of government, are not analogous to those under Communism in *The Forest Passage*, but to Jünger's West German compatriots of the 1970s.

Martin's father and brother do not approve either of his job with the Condor or of his disinterest in politics. They were prominent partisans of the tribunes, although they were not punished upon their overthrow. (It is not even very risky to oppose the Condor, who executes nobody except a handful of criminals, and governs with a very light touch, though he does exile the most problematic dissidents to offshore islands.) They talk politics incessantly, making family dinners unpleasant, while they hedge their bets, preen themselves, and do nothing, just like all their class. Venator has little sympathy with them (exacerbated by, as he repeatedly notes, his father unsuccessfully having tried to get his mother to kill him in the womb), but fulfils his filial and family obligations. Venator's repeated references to his father's attempts to kill him do not seem incidental; what Jünger appears to be saying is that men like Venator's father, supposedly devoted to freedom, are in fact mediocrities with no future, happy to serve their own interests ("his rights," as Venator bitterly calls his father's attempt to murder him) when push comes to shove, and afraid to take responsibility or take action. They are, thus, the opposite of the forest rebel.

Venator respects the Condor; he has nothing but a distant contempt for the tribunes, even though they seemed to offer more political freedom. They "had stylized the word 'human' into a sublime concept." But their lofty ideals "all cost money, which, however, they collected from concrete and not ideal human beings." The tribunes, moreover, were addicted to regulation, such as forbidding private collection of salt so as to maintain their tax revenue, "patrolling by customs inspectors, who ambushed the poor." They even required the salt sold in government stores to have "mixed in additives that their chemists praised as useful, even though they were injurious. The fact that men with such minds consider themselves thinkers is forgivable; but they also claim to be benefactors." Worst of all, the tribunes offered, if not utopias, abstract visions. " 'There is no progress,' I often hear my [father] say; he seems to regard this as a misfortune. He also says, 'Standing still means going backward.' The little people, in contrast, are satisfied if everyday life remains constant; they prefer to see their chimneys smoking, not their houses." The type of progress that Venator's father looks for, in other words, is not progress at all, but false forward movement paid for by others.

Much of the book is taken up with disjointed thoughts, ranging from discussions of how the Condor's palace, or citadel, the Casbah, is situated a few miles outside the city (complete with references to Machiavelli on such placements), to talk of Venator's girlfriend, to lengthy expositions of the thought of Venator's various teachers. To make sense of *Eumeswil*, you have to pay close attention, pick out, and weave together what Venator says. The only steady and obvious thread is that he clearly and repeatedly identifies himself as an "anarch"; we can presume, I think, that Venator is here a stand-in for Jünger himself. "Such is the role of the anarch, who remains free of all commitments yet can turn in any direction." The anarch is emphatically not an anarchist. The anarchist is focused on overthrowing the existing order, which inevitably leads to its replacement by something not to the anarchist's taste. The anarch's goal is, on the contrary, to remain aloof from all political systems. He obeys the law of the state, just as he obeys, automatically, the laws of nature. His internal freedom is what matters.

This concept, of internal freedom, is as far as most mention of *Eumeswil* ever gets. Venator says, "I am an anarch in space, a metahistorian

in time. Hence I am committed to neither the political present nor tradition; I am blank and also open and potent in any direction." He does not oppose the rules of the society in which he lives. "One must know the rules, whether one is moving in a tyranny, a demos, or a bordello. This holds, above all, for the anarch—it is the second commandment, next to the first: 'Know thyself.' " Usually, this conception gets a nod as a type of pure, Zen-like freedom: the sovereign individual, keeping himself internally liberated, but not choosing to fight for formal freedom in the temporal realm. In other words, as with *The Forest Passage*, a common present-day interpretation of Jünger's politics is as libertarian—the freedom to do as one chooses, which is what we would have if everyone could take the actions that germinate in an anarch's head. This is completely wrong. Jünger is instead pushing an elite freedom, the freedom to avoid the mediocrity and oppression of the collective, not the freedom to do as one pleases. The anarch can move in any direction, true, but to what end?

It is the petty and controlling, fake benefactory and semi-utopian, nature of the tribunes to which Venator objects, rather than to their laws as such. The key is that he rejects the tearing down of authority. "Although an anarch, I am not anti-authoritarian. Quite the opposite: I need authority, although I do not believe in it." Those would who have unbridled freedom are parasitical and destructive. "Why do people who leave nothing unchallenged still make demands of their own? They live off the fact that gods, fathers, and poets used to exist. . . . In the animal kingdom, there are parasites that clandestinely hollow out a caterpillar. Eventually, a mere wasp emerges instead of a butterfly. And that is what those people do with their heritage, and with language in particular." That's what Jünger really thinks of libertarians, and it's not pretty. And for the same reasons, Jünger pretty obviously had no use for what liberal democracy has become, with its closely related destructive rush to atomized freedom and total emancipation.

Most of all, Venator objects to the tribunes' utopian schemes. Remember, in my reading, the tribunes, and Eumeswil itself, are stand-ins for the modern society of the West, which by the 1970s was offering so-called liberal democracy as a utopian panacea, with an insufferable smugness that reached its high point only a few years later in Francis's Fukuyama's "end of history." Jünger, a man who lived through all the

horrors the twentieth century had to offer, had no interest in offering utopias, whether political or philosophical, and had seen first-hand who pays the price for dreams of false progress. At an early age, Venator, and doubtless his alter-ego, Jünger, "formed [his] conviction of the imperfect and peaceless nature of the world." Given that conviction, all utopias are a mistake, because they are impossible, and only result in misery. Along these same lines, Venator endorses the core idea of Carl Schmitt that pinning rationales for war on utopian visions of an abstract humanity, rather than a recognition of who the enemy is by nature, results in far worse killing. "If humanity is written on the standard, then this means not only the exclusion of the enemy from society, but the deprivation of all his human rights." The implication is that for all the supposed freedom under the tribunes, which Venator's father and brother claim to miss so much, it did not mean anything at all that mattered, and cost more than it brought.

On the other hand, Venator seems to have little objection to the Condor. Yes, Venator regularly, though dispassionately, refers to the Condor as a tyrant. But is he really? If he is, he has nothing to do with modern totalitarianisms. More than once Venator ties him to Periander, the Tyrant of Corinth who died in 585 B.C. Periander was one of the Seven Sages, men of wisdom and power, who also included Thales of Miletus (to whom, among others, the Delphic maxim "Know thyself" is attributed), and Solon of Athens. Eumeswil is not even a police state. In fact, it allows all sorts of ordered freedoms, and many disordered freedoms, within the constraints of not too directly challenging the ruler. A modest amount of vice is allowed and it appears that there is a sizable amount of low-level corruption greasing the skids of day-to-day life. What shows most of all that he's not a real tyrant is that the Condor can and does openly move around, "discreetly accompanied," on the public streets and the waterfront, talking to and joking with the people, with whom he is popular. If he is a tyrant, he is a tyrant in the mold of Augustus.

The Condor is explicitly not a despot, by which Jünger means capricious or interested in degrading people to show his power. As far as is evident, Eumeswil has the rule of law. A moderately free press exists. The justice system works. "Tyranny [i.e., the Condor] must value a sound administration of justice in private matters. This, in turn, increases its

political authority." The Condor does not offer any ideology and is pleased to encourage education and what culture there is, as well as try to improve himself. "The Condor sticks to Machiavelli's doctrine that a good military and good laws are the fundaments of the state." Really, the Condor is not dissimilar to Machiavelli's "new princedom," like that of, say, Francesco Sforza (who took over Milan in the fifteenth century). (I suspect that a close reading of *The Prince* with *Eumeswil* would show quite a few interesting overlaps.) The Condor is fiscally prudent, ensuring a hard money economy and restraining state spending, all of which benefits the common people (and is in contrast to the tribunes, who talked of the common people but despised and harmed them). Jünger may not regard the Condor as ideal, but he regards him as having a form of excellence, of aristocracy, and he thinks little of the mass of the population of Eumeswil, and especially the political class of Venator's father and brother, where language is degraded, history is ignored, and nobody is very interested in excellence, or, for that matter, true freedom—all just like today's liberal democracies, but not like Augustan-style "tyrannies."

Jünger makes it explicit that the anarch is the same as the forest rebel—or at least one conception of the forest rebel. In *Eumeswil*, however, Jünger seems less enamored of actual action by the forest rebel than in *The Forest Passage*. He denigrates partisan bands and other commitments to political change (such as anarchism), as "stuffy air, unclear ideas, lethal energy, which ultimately put abdicated monarchs and retired generals back in the saddle—and then they show their gratitude by liquidating those selfsame partisans." Joining the partisans makes one dependent on them; the anarch's goal is to avoid dependence, even while he serves someone, whether the Condor or someone else. "The difference is that the forest [rebel] has been expelled from society, while the anarch has expelled society from himself." Really, though, that's a distinction without a difference, because the result is the same. Perhaps, I think, what Jünger is saying is that under a totalitarian tyranny, that of the forest rebel, action may make more sense (something covered in *The Forest Passage* in some detail), but under the modern tyranny of liberal democracy, action is futile, because it is not the government that is the problem, but the society. If you extend Jünger's line of thought, the Condor points toward a possible solution to the flaws of liberal

democracy, not something against which rebellion is either necessary or desirable.

So what does that imply for the anarch, who can turn in any direction, but presumably will, at some point, choose a direction? Jünger is explicitly not a reactionary in the sense of wanting to return to a better past. In the words of his alter-ego, "It is not that I am awaiting a return to the past, like Chateaubriand, or a recurrence, like Boutefeu [a Nietzsche-like figure]; I leave those matters politically to the conservatives and cosmically to the stargazers. . . . No, I hope for something equal, nay, stronger, and not just in the human domain. *Naglfar*, the ship of the apocalypse, shifts into a calculable position." *Naglfar* is the ship, in Norse mythology, that will ferry dead men to fight the gods in the final battle, Ragnarök. That is, Jünger wants a renewal, but he sees no way that Eumeswil can be renewed in the usual course of life. The Condor cannot do it, nor does he try. But it is significant, in this context, that the book ends with Venator and the Condor marching into, and disappearing into, the Forest, seeking that which they would find. That is, the book ends with the Condor himself turning forest rebel. It is just as significant that Venator, the exemplar of the anarch, chooses wholly voluntarily to accompany the Condor as his servant, as his "Xenophon," on this expedition. Both of them seek excellence and a renewal of things through human action; they are the opposite of José Ortega y Gasset's "mass man," the necessary end product of liberal democracy. As one of Venator's teachers tells him, urging him to go, "A dream comes true in each of our great transformations. You know this as a historian. We fail not because of our dreams but because we do not dream forcefully enough." This is not the language of libertarian inertia or pleasure maximization; it is the language of Godfrey in the gate. Nor is it random (nothing in this book is random, even if frequently it is opaque) that in the very brief postscript written by Venator's brother, committing Venator's writing to a sealed archive (presumably because his thought is dangerous), he says smugly, "A great deal has changed in the city and, if I may say so, for the better. The Casbah is now desolate; goatherds pasture their goats inside the walls of the stronghold." The Condor, and the anarch, may have failed in their goals, but at least they dreamed great dreams, and, even more importantly, took risks to achieve

them, unlike the decayed people of Eumeswil, ruled by the even more decayed class of the tribunes.

Thus, despite the common misconception (including that of the excellent Introduction by Russell Berman), this is not a book about the tyranny of Communism, or about tyranny in general, such as that of some banana republic authoritarianism. It is about the specific tyranny and flaws of liberal democracy, the fatal defects of which Jünger saw clearly long before most. Like Václav Havel, Jünger did not believe that liberal democracy was the solution to much of anything, even if it was better than totalitarianism. Jünger may not have seen, or anticipated, all the specifics of the defects of end-stage liberal democracy, the core problem of which is Ryszard Legutko's "coercion to freedom." (Jünger does explicitly prefigure Legutko when he has Venator remark that in Eumeswil, "freedom was consumed for the sake of equality.") Nor did he, at least here, narrate the inherent defects of the Enlightenment project of atomized freedom. Presumably someone more familiar with Jünger's voluminous output (much of which is untranslated and which, in the German, runs to twenty-two volumes) could offer a more precise answer, and a more precise slotting of this book into Jünger's thought. But still, it is fascinating that Jünger saw our current future long before most, and, perhaps, he also saw possible paths toward, if not finding a solution, at least addressing the problems. Maybe that path is something less dramatic than disappearing into the Forest—but maybe it is marching into it, for nothing ventured, nothing gained.