

## ON THE MARBLE CLIFFS

(ERNST JÜNGER)

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As the twenty-first century grinds on, with history returning in spades, Ernst Jünger, German warrior and philosopher, grows more relevant every day. This book, *On the Marble Cliffs*, I view as his third book in an unrecognized trilogy advising us how we should conduct ourselves under different types of tyranny. It fits with two other books, more famous, *The Forest Passage* (1951) and *Eumeswil* (1977), which also parse freedom and oppression, each with a different focus and tone. This book, fiction both dreamlike and phantasmagoric, is lesser known and even harder to grasp than the other two. Yet it serves the same purpose: to instruct us how an individual in society should act when threatened by, or subsumed by, tyranny.

*The Forest Passage* is an examination of how man should live under a completed totalitarianism, notably that of postwar European Communism. *Eumeswil* is an examination of how man should live under a related, but different, tyranny, that of so-called liberal democracy, which promises false freedom and instead demands forced worship of idols. *On the Marble Cliffs*, by contrast, published first, in 1939, is an examination of how man should live under a spreading, threatening tyranny, when one lives in a society not prepared, either spiritually or physically, to resist. Together, these three form a whole.

If *On the Marble Cliffs* is mentioned, which happens rarely (it has only been translated into English once, in 1947, and no edition has notes or a third-party introduction, as far as I can tell, which would be useful) it is usually as a curiosity purportedly showing the bravery of the author. Jünger was one of Germany's greatest heroes of World War I, famous after the war for his memoir, *The Storm of Steel*. He was a man of the Right, yet like many of the German intellectual Right, those involved in the Conservative Revolution, he wanted nothing to do with the National Socialists. Thus, given that this book is often interpreted as an attack on key members of the National Socialist regime (though which ones, it is hard to be sure), and Jünger published it at the apogee of Adolf Hitler's power, it is taken as Jünger sticking his finger in the eye of the National Socialists. Maybe. But maybe not; Jünger himself, after the war, when

he had no reason to dissemble, said the book was “a shoe that fits various feet,” and this seems precisely correct.

Jünger maintained a largely consistent philosophy throughout his very long life (he died in 1998, at the age of 102, pretty good for someone who nearly died of wounds several times in World War I). He opposed what was, and is, common to all modern ideologies—the spiritual oppression of man and the view of man as machine, as an instrument to utopian ends. Jünger’s core belief was that a man should be free, that is, free to choose a path that makes him a virtuous human being. A free man is not one who does as he pleases from moment to moment, unbound by any obligation. A free man is rather one who chooses to live his life in a befitting manner—to be precise, in an elite, aristocratic manner, with an inner spirit of virtuous independence.

The book is narrated by a man never named. He is a youngish (it seems—a great deal is never made explicit in this short book, and the elliptical prose often makes figuring out precisely what is going on difficult) man of leisure, who lives in a type of aerie, a secluded “Hermitage” perched on a range of mountains, the Marble Cliffs, from where he can oversee the lands around. South of the Cliffs lies an inland sea, or perhaps a bay, the Marina, with inhabited islands and surrounded by gracious, ancient seaside towns. North of him are the flatlands of the Campagna, covered with fields and farmsteads, as well as herdlands and a good deal of forest. This is no real place, though Mauretania, the western Maghreb (also the location of *Eumeswil*) is the name used to refer to the overall setting.

The narrator lives with a friend, Brother Otho, who was his companion in war and now works with him in intellectual pursuits. (It does not appear they are monks, of any identifiable sort at least, nor do they appear to be blood brothers, so why he is called “Brother” is, again like much of the book, obscure.) They spend their days studying flora, clarifying and classifying plants they find in the lands about. This is a continuation of the work of unnamed others who came before them, whose work is also cataloged in the rooms of the Hermitage. The narrator’s young son Erio lives with them; the paramour who bore him has abandoned them. Erio does not go exploring, unlike his father, but he has instinctual control over the fauna of his small world, including the many golden vipers that inhabit cracks in the rock of the Marble Cliffs.

The villain of this story is the Chief Ranger, a political actor (his precise position is never stated, but he is implicitly a military chieftain, and explicitly a despot) who has arisen in the forests of the Campagna. The narrator mentions him on the first page, saying “we were on guard against” him, and his spirit permeates the book—even if he never appears in person, though once his laugh is heard. The short version of the book is, in fact, “The Chief Ranger seized power in our territory and terror spread throughout the land.”

The narrator and Otho settled at the Hermitage after serving in a war some years before; they were defeated in a neighboring land by “people who defended their hereditary freedom gallantly against great odds.” The Marina is a place of placid high civilization. The Campagna is less civilized; blood feuds are common, for example, and many of the farmers live in fortified, self-governing farmsteads. This primitive approach to life includes ubiquitous pagan roadside shrines, which the narrator and Brother Otho make fun of, as “Jupiter’s childhood companions”—but on whom is the joke? The Marina is not spiritually strong. “Men [of the Marina] who had deemed themselves strong-minded enough to cut the links with the faith of their fathers fell under the yoke and spell of barbarian idols. The sight they offered in their blindness was more loathsome than drunkenness at noon. Thinking to fly and boasting of their powers, they groveled in the dust.” (Arguably, this is Jünger’s picture of liberal democracy, falling into desuetude, unable to resist when challenged. We should see ourselves in this picture—and it is an uncomfortable coincidence that we too have been recently defeated by a people preserving their hereditary freedom.) But is this the cause of the Chief Ranger’s increasing power, or the result of it? It is hard to say. Probably both.

The Chief Ranger’s aim is completing his domination of the Campagna, followed by conquest of the Marina (and, necessarily, the Marble Cliffs, which stand between). The Chief Ranger poses a greater threat to the Marina than he might otherwise, because its people are Eloi; in their spiritual lassitude, they will not unite to resist the Chief Ranger. They instead hire mercenaries—but the chief of the mercenaries hedges his bets, and lets the Chief Ranger’s men encroach ever closer. Men of the Chief Ranger terrorize the free farmsteads in the Campagna, close to the Marble Cliffs, and the narrator and Otho watch these sieges

from their aerie, as well as random slayings on the road and other evils. Because there is no justice in the land, no punishment is allowed. The Chief Ranger's men corrupt the magistrates, in the Marina as well, and even to speak of the wrongs done by the foresters is forbidden.

Whether or not the Chief Ranger is meant to stand in for Hitler or one of his henchmen (probably not, as I discuss below), he certainly stands in for all political leaders who use extra-legal violence to their own degenerate ends. What Jünger describes is what Sam Francis famously called anarcho-tyranny, something we see all around in the America of today (and, bizarrely, though inevitably in retrospect, suddenly in Canada). Perhaps anarcho-tyranny is not the right term; it is a catchy name, but as Malcolm Kyeyune (yes, I know I keep citing him in what I write) says, what we call anarcho-tyranny is no new thing. It is simply the ancient affliction of factionalism—one faction uses its power to permit its members to attack its enemies, and punishes the other faction for defending itself. A Greek of 400 B.C. would have no problem seeing BLM riots, for example, as a tool exactly like those used in the political disputes of innumerable Greek cities; their filthy ideology is new, to be sure, but the gutter nature of the participants and their use to their masters, as well as the correct solution to their violence, is plain as day.

The Chief Ranger's tyranny is minutely calibrated, not solely thuggish, however (and is far more clever and competent than the degenerates who rule us today, a good reason for optimism here in our own version of the Marina). "Herein, above all, lay a masterly trait of the Chief Ranger. He administered fear in small doses which he gradually increased, and which aimed at crippling resistance." The Chief Ranger's men are drawn from a motley assortment of exiles and refugees, savages and bad men, who hate beauty and practice dark rituals. "Wherever the structures raised by the ordered life of man began to crumble, his brood sprang up like mushroom spawn. They swarmed and burrowed wherever retainers refused service to their hereditary masters, where crews mutinied on storm-tossed barks, where warrior kings were left deserted on stricken fields." As with much of this book, this is symbolic—what Jünger says is that the Chief Ranger's men are those who lack honor, who refuse to recognize a higher authority than themselves, who refuse to recognize the unchosen bonds that rightly bind all men. They are the opposite

of the elite; they are rootless, deracinated scum, by choice. They are, in short, men of the Left.

This highlights a recurring theme of much of Jünger's writing, particularly in *The Forest Passage*—there are two types of men, in essence the noble and the degraded. (He did not necessarily formally map these to Right and Left, but in practice, that's the way his thinking mostly breaks down, and entirely how it is applicable today.) Whatever else he was, Jünger was an elitist. Jünger had no use for egalitarianism, atomized freedom and total emancipation; those things are degraded, parasitical, and destructive. Those who are free in their minds and virtuous in their actions are the aristocracy. But, crucially, any man can choose this path for himself; he can be the virtuous elite, or he can be a Chief Ranger's man.

A related subtext of this book is the Aristotelian idea that only those who lead a life of leisure, for at least part of their lives, can live fully. Those who must work to earn their daily bread are, in essence, slaves. At one point the narrator remarks, speaking of dinners with his peers, that mastery of sparkling intellectual conversation “comes only from a long life of leisure.” The narrator uses his leisure for the study of plants, without any concrete goal such as increasing production, merely for the pursuit of knowledge and beauty. His work is part of a chain that includes those who came before him, and those who will come after him. It is its own reward. “We felt our joy increase, as it must in anyone whose goal is set beyond the common mark.”

In these days of forced egalitarianism and rejection of excellence, when the worst possible vices are honored and worshipped as heroic virtues, Jünger's ideas wouldn't get much traction among our ruling class (what might be called our “pseudo-elite”), if they read books. The way forward probably depends on restoring this concept of the self-generated elite, however. Certainly, no true virtuous elite is lying dormant for us to awake, so we will have to create a new one for ourselves. There can be no more than a handful, if any, people in the West today who lead lives of intellectual leisure, so we cannot limit our search to such people. On the other hand, maybe there are more than we think—after all, among the largest audiences for podcasts are blue-collar workers, forklift operators and truck drivers. Our fake and gay aristocracy, the professional-managerial elite, looks down on these people and treats

them like dirt (as we have just seen in the malicious actions of the cretinous and evil Justin Trudeau), but I think it likely they will ultimately be the kernel of a new aristocracy.

The most famous passage in this book, if one can call any passage from it famous, is the expedition the narrator makes to find a particular flower, a rare orchid, during which he stumbles across a terrifying charnel house, controlled by the Chief Ranger. In a clearing stands a barn, with skulls and severed hands nailed to the outside. "On the trees, too, which ringed the clearing bleached the death's heads; many a one with eye sockets already moss-grown seemed to scan us with a dark smile. Except for the mad dance in which the cuckoo flitted around the whiteness of the skulls it was absolutely still. I heard Brother Otho whisper half in a dream: 'Yes, this is Koppels-Bleek.'" A dwarf works inside at a flaying bench. The wind rattles the skulls and the hands; "The noise was that of wood and bone, like a puppet show in the kingdom of the dead." Koppels-Bleek is the embodiment of man's evil, but also an opportunity for rare men to show their quality:

Such are the dungeons above which rise the proud castles of the tyrants, and from them is to be seen rising the curling savory smoke of their banquets. They are terrible noisome pits in which a God-forsaken crew revels to all eternity in the degradation of human dignity and human freedom. In such times the muses are silent, and truth begins to flicker like a torch in a current of foul air. Scarcely have the first mists begun to brew up than one sees the weak already giving ground, and even the warrior caste begins to lose heart when they see the masklike faces rising up to the battlements from the depths. So it comes about that in this world soldier's courage takes second place, and only the noblest spirits in our midst penetrate into the dwelling-place of terror. They know that all these images in reality live only in our hearts, and pass through them into the portals of victory as if they were mere mirrored shadows. Thus the masked terrors confirm them in their own reality.

Koppels-Bleek is sometimes taken as a comment on National Socialist atrocities, or even more specifically on SS atrocities, given that the SS commonly used the symbol of the *Totenkopf*, the death's head. This is obviously ahistorical, however. In 1939, when this book was published

(and presumably it was written before, perhaps completed in 1938) nobody knew of atrocities such as mass murder in camps that echo Koppels-Bleek, or even in war, because such atrocities had not yet occurred and such camps did not exist, nor was the SS associated in any way in 1939 with mass killing. The only mass killing in which the regime was engaging in 1939 was the Aktion T4 program, of the killing of the disabled, and this was done quietly, with the leadership and cooperation of doctors (whom we today wrongly regard as paragons of virtue, rather than very often prideful and easily corrupted people who are typically desperate to retain elite status—something very visible in our society's gross mishandling of the Wuhan Plague), not in camps.

If this passage is a comment on anything specific, rather than a general comment on evil, Koppels-Bleek is likely a comment on Communist mass murder, which had been going on for decades by 1939 and was most definitely well known in Germany. After all, Hitler largely sold his wars as a crusade against Bolshevism, and this was in fact a truthful description—and to buttress his claim, the crimes of Bolshevism were widely publicized in Germany (unlike in the United States, where they were deliberately concealed by the Communists and philo-Communists who held great sway over our institutions in the 1920 and 1930s). Moreover, Stalin was notably short in stature; perhaps he is meant as the dwarf who inhabits Koppels-Bleek. But I think Koppels-Bleek is yet another metaphor without a necessary specific analog; Jünger's goal is commenting on the end-state of the human condition under modern tyranny, if it not successfully resisted.

As disorders rise and the narrator grows ever more uneasy, he is visited by a lieutenant of the Chief Ranger, who intends to rebel. This is Braquemart, a racist who seeks to regain days of lost, and probably mythical, glory of Mauretania, and a stand-in for the wrong way to resist the Chief Ranger. Braquemart's fault is not cowardice or any other vice, nor is fighting the wrong way to combat the Chief Ranger. Rather, his fault is that "He was led astray by his wild dreams into the realm of Utopias." Jünger strongly disliked utopias (a theme which reappears in *Eumeswil*), because they distract and betray like a will-o'-the-wisp; he preferred clear-eyed reality. But, at the same time, and extremely importantly, "[Braquemart] belonged to the race of men who dream concretely—a very dangerous breed." This echoes the quote I often use,

from T. E. Lawrence, "All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible." True words, these, and relevant for our immediate future.

After Braquemart leaves the Hermitage, the narrator and Otho, together with one of the last remaining free farmers, Belovar, and his men, arm for war—why, precisely, is not clear. Maybe they have just had enough, and decide whatever chaos Braquemart is about to unleash is the moment they must seize. What transpires echoes scenes from the Apocalypse of Saint John filtered through psychedelics. Overrunning Koppels-Bleek, they find the severed head of Braquemart on a pike, a contemptuous sneer on his face for his captors, stamped on his visage at his last breath. The Chief Ranger's men and Belovar's men attack each other with packs of war dogs; the lead dog of the Chief Ranger's men is "Chiffon Rouge"—that is, Red Flag, and is essentially evil personified (again, a possible clue that Communism, not Nazism, is the underlying ideology of the Chief Ranger). When Belovar's dogs are defeated, the men close in hand-to-hand combat with guns and blades. Every one of the free men but the narrator and Otho dies, including Belovar with axe in hand. The Chief Ranger wins and sweeps over the Marina, burning and looting, unopposed by the mercenaries, who see which way the wind is blowing.

The narrator flees back to the Marble Cliffs, pursued to the very steps of the Hermitage by Chiffon Rouge and the Chief Ranger's men. Yet, at the last moment, when all seems lost, the child Erio summons the golden serpents, his friends; they swarm out of the rocks and slaughter dogs and men with their poison. The narrator and Otho then flee, as the Hermitage burns. "With the house our work sank into the dust. But on this earth we may not count on seeing our work brought to completion, and he must be held fortunate whose resolve survives the struggle without inflicting on him too much pain."

What should, then, concretely be done in response to a tyrant such as the Chief Ranger? In *The Forest Passage*, Jünger seems to endorse violent action to overthrow tyranny. In *Eumeswil*, with the focus being on a different tyranny, he seems to say violent action is pointless—rather, simply ignoring the tyranny and taking a different, bold path is necessary. One



must “dream forcefully” and act on one’s dreams, until reality once again takes hold and offers a new tomorrow. Here, violent action is shown as also fruitless, yet glorious and worthwhile. In many ways, the narrator is shown as too passive; even during the fighting, he does not so much fight as glide like a ghost through the smoke and fire. The active, the concrete lover of freedom, is Belovar, shown as more heroic, more free, than the narrator, whose elitism is perhaps implicitly criticized as too abstract. Belovar concretizes his elite status by fighting, axe in hand, until his last breath. This echoes what Jünger says in *The Forest Passage*: “Long periods of peace foster certain optical illusions: one is the conviction that the inviolability of the home is grounded in the constitution, which should guarantee it. In reality, it is grounded in the family father, who, sons at his side, fills the doorway with an axe in hand.”

Ultimately, in all three books of his trilogy, it is very clear that Jünger thinks fighting against tyranny is what any self-respecting man must do. How he does that is somewhat conditioned by the type of tyranny he faces. So, then, what kind of tyranny do we have today? That’s an excellent question; thanks for asking. Until recently, I would have compared ours more to the tyranny of 1977 that Jünger castigated in *Eumeswil*—the desiccated, absurd tyranny of so-called liberal democracy, with its “coercion to freedom” and forced spiritual degeneration. But recent events have shown we have moved out of that weak and effete tyranny to something that can be caught and strangled. Life is moving fast, and I have long predicted that those who believe that liberal democracy results only in “soft totalitarianism” are wrong. It seems I was right. The only relevant difference between, say, Justin Trudeau and the Chief Ranger is not in their desires but in their competence; Trudeau is a very stupid nancy boy, who wishes he could be like, and accomplish evil like, the Chief Ranger, but is actually going to end up, if he is lucky and lives through the coming years, rather than being entirely justifiably torn limb-from-limb by enraged Canadians, as a cut-rate prostitute in some South American provincial city. That is to say, I’m not afraid our own tyrants are going to win, as the Chief Ranger does in this book. But I’m quite afraid of the damage they can do along the path to their defeat. It is the price we will pay.