

THE GLASS BEES

(ERNST JÜNGER)

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The Glass Bees, a novel by the crucial Ernst Jünger, is not directly a political work. The focus here is the relation of man to technology, especially the resulting alienation of man, not from the fruits of his labor, but from his grounding in the real. At first, this seems very different from the focus in Jünger's "tyranny trilogy" of *The Forest Passage*, *Eumeswil*, and *The Marble Cliffs* (or tetralogy, if you include *Heliopolis*, still not translated into English). Jünger's constant focus, however, in all these works, although with different emphases, is how a man should govern himself, regardless of the forces that push and pull him. And in these desiccated and atomized days, such a call to individual action is more needed than ever.

This book, published in 1957, is eerily prescient about technology and its effects. We are living in the future Jünger feared. I have discussed Jünger before, so I will not repeat background on his life and works here, but if you are coming fresh to Jünger, you should stop reading and first learn more about him. This is easy enough; as with Carl Schmitt and Jacques Elul, Jünger is increasingly coming back into fashion among forward-thinking men and women, because his thought is so directly relevant to, and applicable to, today.

Smart people, many pseudonymous as is Right tradition, have written excellent pieces lately on the works of all three of these men. As to Jünger, I highly recommend the writings of one Sanfedisti (including an outstanding series on this book, all at his Substack, "Position & Decision"), along with those of Actaeon Press (at the Substack "Jünger Translation Project"), and a man who goes by Martin (his Substack is "Dispatches from the Past," and he translates correspondence and interviews with Jünger). As to Elul, Kruptos (whose Substack is "Seeking the Hidden Thing") is your man. As to Schmitt, well, read me.

Technology splits the Right into optimists and pessimists. In the former group, though the Right usually sees too clearly to not regard modern technology as a mixed bag, the leader is James Poulos. In his seminal book *Human, Forever*, along with other important ongoing writings, he seeks to uncover how technology, here to stay, can be integrated with our humanity. The pessimistic line of thought, exemplified by Paul

Kingsnorth, sees technology as the core of the humanity-destroying “Machine,” something to be aggressively curbed, preferably to a tiny fraction of its current influence, but nonetheless likely to destroy us. (Another prominent voice of this second strand was the late Theodore Kaczynski, who so far has been proven more right than wrong in his thought; strange times make strange bedfellows.)

It is impossible to resolve these competing camps; one will be shown right, more or less, in the fullness of time. I can’t really decide which side I find more convincing. I’m a techno-optimist, but I feel the pull of the pessimists, especially of late. At a minimum, it is certainly true that real technological achievement, of the type that benefits and advances mankind, is unlikely to happen without a virtuous society, and that the technology we do have in practice mostly erodes a virtuous society. It is nearly all poisonous flash, which if it disappeared tomorrow we would be the better for. Advancing on the current path is, let’s say, not a winning strategy, and will have to be changed, as with so much else, most likely by force, for us to recapture our future.

The latest hot technological topic is the rise of statistical processing output generated by “large language models,” often colloquially (though erroneously) referred to as artificial intelligence. I thought about discussing LLMs through the lens of *The Glass Bees*, in particular addressing the moderately optimistic thoughts of Marc Andreessen and Jon Stokes, but I think I will make that a stand-alone piece. Most importantly, I will try to resolve my own techno-optimism with my skepticism about the transformative power of technology we are promised will be transformative. Certainly, everything we have been promised for decades would be transformative, in the sense of assisting mankind to flourish, from stem cells to fusion to 3D printing, has been shown to be vaporware, and instead the technology we have gotten is Tinder, tools so we can consume infinite cheap crap from China, and soon, no doubt, custom-generated pornography. If past performance is any indicator of future results, the techno-optimists will have to show a way forward that is different from what lies behind us.

But that’s for another day; let’s focus on *The Glass Bees*. The narrator is a retired soldier, a cavalryman, one Captain Richard. In many ways, the Captain is a man similar to Ernst von Salomon (whom Jünger knew well)—a man out of time, who is superbly suited for needs that no longer

exist, and whose dreams have turned to dust while he lives on. As with *Eumeswil*, the location of the events is a blend of reality and fantasy. The Captain often refers to the nonexistent “Asturian civil war” in which he fought, for example, but the overall frame is fairly obviously Germany in the late 1940s or 1950s. “Together with a great number of others I had twice paid the piper for inefficient governments. We had carried off neither pay nor glory—just the opposite.”

The novel interweaves his introspective musing on the past with his present actions, in particular his attempt to find a job. He and his wife Teresa are close to total penury, and he needs employment. He needs this not just for himself, but even more to support his loyal wife, whom he does not want to disappoint. “A man will do things for a woman which he would never do for himself.” The challenge is that the Captain is a man who finds it difficult to function in the new world, of new modes and orders, of new focuses and needs. “Times were not propitious for ex-soldiers.” The age of sophisters and calculators is unfriendly to men such as he is. For him, virtue and bravery are everything, even if he implies he has fallen short on the first, but they do not pay the bills, nor did his military service leave him with much that can be of help. “Since everything was now supposed to be based on a contract—which was founded neither upon oath nor atonement nor Man—trust and faith no longer existed. Discipline had vanished from the world. It had been replaced by catastrophe. We were living in permanent unrest, and no one could trust anyone else.” The reader nods in agreement, and sees his own present through the Captain’s eyes.

What employment is suitable, though, for an aging soldier, with a criminal record (for vaguely-specified political crimes—again, echoes of von Salomon), disagreeable by nature, without a patronage network? Only, Richard says, jobs “with a risk attached,” which “troubled sleep.” This is a key theme of the book, the tension between morality and necessity, the compromises a man of the old world must make, or is tempted to make, when faced with the new.

He goes to see an old military companion, Twinnings, who now operates as a fixer, an intermediary who connects the rich and powerful to men who can fulfil specific needs. The job, or rather job interview, Twinnings offers Richard is with Giacomo Zapparoni, a fabulously wealthy and powerful man, entirely self-made, who earned his money by

creating “robots for every imaginable purpose.” Not industrial welding robots or the like; “lilliputian” robots, essentially swarm-type robots operating with nanotechnology. Many of these are useful; others are toys; others are weapons. He also produces realistic movies with artificial actors, fake humans, “marionettes.” These are extremely compelling, adored especially by children, though parents complain their children are “too preoccupied” with the movies; “they could not fall asleep, were overexcited, had nightmares.”

Zapparoni’s problem, however, is that even though he rewards his employees handsomely, they are high-strung artists, intensely creative, so some choose to quit for idiosyncratic, rather than material, reasons, and Zapparoni fears for his secrets when his former employees are beyond his reach. The book mixes the Captain’s reminiscences, as he waits for his interview with Zapparoni, with his analysis of Zapparoni’s factory, house, garden, and personality—all of which he uses, in large part, to reflect on himself as well.

The factory embodies the most modern of everything, and Zapparoni presents his work as an irresistible force. It is not a coincidence that he built his factory on the site of a derelict Cistercian abbey, which has been incorporated into the factory, and into Zapparoni’s home. Out with the old, in with the new. Still, Zapparoni’s gardens, on the grounds of the factory, are filled with nature, lovingly and exquisitely described (Jünger had a sharp eye for nature, and he was fascinated by entomology). And they are devoid of technology. Or so it seems, until the Captain is asked to wait outside by Zapparoni, and fills the time observing the surroundings, using precision binoculars provided by Zapparoni. He comes to realize that the bees he sees are the eponymous glass bees, creations not sold to the public, more tiny automata. They are harvesting nectar, which is processed artificially in artificial hives, and they are surrounded by other flying automata, which appear to observe and control.

Then, lying around the gardens and ponds that surround the beehives, the Captain notices dozens of severed human ears. He cannot figure out why they are there, whether he is “seeing visions,” or decide if they are real, though he knows they are. He cannot decide if their presence is a test, or an attempt to suborn him to participate in evil. Angry when an observation robot hovers near him, which he presumes is relaying

his reaction, he smashes it. Zapparoni reappears, and tells him that he is not getting the job, presumably because he will not worship the new idols of the age. He also tells him that the ears are parts of the artificial actors of his movies, but were cut off by the disgruntled master craftsman of the actors, so that others could not use his creations when he quit. At the end, however, the Captain gets another job from Zapparoni, arbitrating internal disputes. "He needed a man who combined a sharp eye for technical matters with a power of discrimination." Revealingly, it is just this type of judgment that can never be outsourced to a machine; Zapparoni himself, at least, knows the limits of technology.

The Captain will serve Zapparoni, but he is not in awe of Zapparoni. Such minds bring man ever greater speed, ever greater efficiency, ever greater productivity. "But could they create an olive tree or a horse?" No. Moreover, "as long as such admiration lasts, destruction will increase and human standards decrease." In the Captain's mind, Zapparoni's accomplishments are, on balance, negative. Yet he accepts that this is now the way the world is, because most men cannot see past the brilliance of Zapparoni's creations and the ease his automata bring them. The bees are a stand-in, more broadly, for all new technology that is claimed to benefit man, which is rarely examined more closely to see if, on balance, the benefit is net positive. For us, it is not automata, rather most of all the internet and what it enables, but the specifics do not matter, instead the effect on mankind.

It is not just the artificiality injected into human relations, along with spiritual enervation, brought by technology that is the problem. The Captain also sees, correctly, that substituting glass bees for real bees will lead to environmental catastrophe, as the niches filled by real bees, such as pollinizing, disappear. Moreover, the bees suck all the nectar from flowers, destroying them. And the bees are narrower in their capabilities than real bees. "It was evident [examining the hives] that the natural procedure had been simplified, cut short, and standardized. For instance, everything that had to do with the production of wax had been eliminated." Along similar lines, Jünger even foresaw the degradation of our food and drink, not by Zapparoni, but by technology in general. "Bread is no longer bread and wine no longer wine. They are doubtful chemicals. At present one really has to be unusually rich to avoid being poisoned." So also for us; this past week it was revealed, to the surprise

of few, that most of the water supply in America is filled with “forever chemicals,” no doubt one of the pieces of the puzzle as to the radical unhealthiness of our society, and part of why men, in particular, are no longer the men they were.

A more subtle point, implicit here in Jünger’s writing, is that it is not just chemicals which emasculate men. It is technology itself, which brings ease and certainty, inherently feminizing, and upsets the balance that makes a society function. The Captain sees this through the prism of war, which is, as Jünger said elsewhere, “a man’s work,” where bravery and honor are everything. It is much more than that, however—not every man needs to fight in war, but every man needs a man’s work. Technology necessarily takes away agency; it prevents a man, at least a man who follows the path of least resistance, from making his mark and from developing himself as he should. Glory is no longer open to him, nor can he provide and protect, the usual noble calling of the average man. At most, he is interchangeable fuel and grease for the machines which actually provide, and that is no job fit for a man, who likely in response retreats into sterile silence.

Whether Zapparoni sees any of this is unclear. Perhaps he does; that his own house is indistinguishable from a nineteenth-century mansion suggests he does. And it cannot be lost on him that he must rely on men, special men, to create his creations; the robots cannot design themselves. At no point does he express doubt, but then, he expresses little. The reader is left to draw his own conclusions, which makes this a challenging work.

In our age, despite signs and portents, both men and women eagerly embrace technology, and endlessly reach for the technical perfection they are told is coming, yet which never arrives. They dream no great dreams; technology is the actual opium of the people, but one which provides dreamless sleep. The Captain reminisces about how an officer he hugely admired, a colorful man of peerless skills, one day quit the cavalry for no apparent reason. A while later they meet by chance on a streetcar, where the officer is now a conductor, a job he claims to find much more to his tastes. “How can one explain this trend toward a more colorless and shallow life? Well, the work was easier, if less healthy, and it brought more money, more leisure, and perhaps more entertainment. A day in the country is long and hard. And yet the fruits of their present

life were worthless compared to a single coin of their former life: a rest in the evening and a rural festivity. That they no longer knew the old kind of happiness was obvious from the discontent which spread over their features. Soon, dissatisfaction, prevailing over all their moods, became their religion." The source of their dissatisfaction, however, they rarely accurately perceive. Everyone is unhappy, but nobody knows why, even though it's obvious.

This all sounds pretty bad, because it is. What response is called for from a man who will not let his dreams be strangled? It is not political action. The Captain tells of his young friend Lorenz, who after the wars was one of a small group (again, like Jünger and von Salomon) who often met to talk about what might have been and what might yet be. One evening, he rants how "It would be so easy to consummate the sacrifice which the times expected from us. Only when it was consummated would the crack which split the world in two be closed." He then darts toward the window of the tower apartment building where they meet. "Although the youngest of us, Lorenz had been a leader in gymnastics. I had often seen him vaulting over the parallel bars or the horse. In exactly the same way he disappeared from that attic; he had lightly placed his hand on the window sill and then turned round, so that his face once more looked into the room." He shouts a politician's name and plummets, silently and catastrophically. (I suspect Lorenz is meant to evoke Erwin Kern, who assassinated Walther Rathenau in 1922, an episode around which revolves von Salomon's *The Outlaws*.) "[H]e did indeed set an example, though one different from the one he intended. In one single moment he was able to illustrate and accomplish something which most of our circle took a lifetime to do. If a man of strength and good will who draws his nourishment from the past isn't able to find firm ground under his feet in the present, he is doomed to impotence." It is the creation of that firm ground, something inherently eroded by technology, that should be the object of a man's search, yet again very few take this harder path.

Shifting focus a bit, no doubt from the perspective of 1957, titans of cutting-edge industry such as Zapparoni seemed as if they must have certain key characteristics, and that they would continue to emerge to lead the way. Zapparoni has in him the core personality of Alfred Krupp, or of John D. Rockefeller, or of Henry Ford. He "had authority . . .

because he was an embodiment of the spirit of the age." Zapparoni is a man "more capable of taking risks . . . than a great many young people," whose heraldic beast the Captain imagines should be the chimera, "like those which roost on our cathedrals and look down on the town with a knowing smile." When Jünger wrote, this type of man seemed like the certain future.

But that type is long gone. Almost none of the titans of our world are like this at all, and this is one reason our technology is of limited or negative social utility. Yes, one might argue that for, say, Marc Zuckerberg, as with Zapparoni, "A resourceful mind had discovered a gap which no one had seen, and had filled it." But Zuckerberg stole his idea, which anyway was on balance socially destructive, though inevitable. And then he merely (with extensive government support from three-letter agencies) managed to stumble into a monopoly position, which he maintains through manipulation of the political and legal systems. The miserable failure of all of his subsequent endeavors is proof enough that Zuckerberg is no Cornelius Vanderbilt.

If you look at the Forbes 400, billionaires all, it is largely composed of a combination of successful rent seekers, panderers to the desire to consume, mostly cheap Chinese crap, and those who inherited from those two categories. They embody the spirit of the age, to be sure, but that's only because the spirit of the age has collapsed into the gutter. They don't take risks at all, except in some cases non-existential financial risks, which they minimize by corruption and political manipulation. And most importantly, certainly very few of the people on the list have contributed to the flourishing of mankind (and that leaves aside that many of them directly and massively fund evil causes, and will therefore have their assets confiscated when I come to power, including Zuckerberg).

The only man today, however, who is similar to Zapparoni is Elon Musk, who heads the Forbes list. He is a throwback, in part at least, to the earlier type of world-besriding colossus, who remakes the world in his own image, who takes existential risks to reach lofty goals. Some of this is luck, some of this is personality, and there is a certain level of insanity and grifting involved (as there was with the only other such modern man, Steve Jobs, though it turns out in retrospect all his offerings were destructive, but he could not have known that, in the optimism that was ubiquitous even just a few years ago). And Musk, like Zapparoni,

also refuses to see that technology can both exalt man and erode his spirit. "With him, technology took a new turn toward downright pleasure—the age-old magicians' dream of being able to change the world by thought alone seemed almost to have come true." But a magician's dream is often hubristic, and leads to Nemesis.

The Captain recognizes this, and that there is no perfect answer. "Human perfection and technical perfection are incompatible. If we strive for one, we must sacrifice the other; there is, in any case, a parting of the ways. . . . Technical perfection strives toward the calculable, human perfection toward the incalculable. Perfect mechanisms—around which, therefore, stands an uncanny but fascinating halo of brilliance—evoke both fear and a titanic pride which will be humbled not by insight but only by catastrophe." What our path will be, we will see. My bet is we will follow the triptych identified by Poulos—catastrophe, cataclysm, and then apocalypse, with the latter in its original sense of an unveiling.

What, however, is the Captain to do? And what are we to do? He can change neither the past nor the present. This is, we should admit, the situation of all of us today—the only difference is that we actually live in the world that Jünger only imagined. The Captain does not find much difficulty in making his choice, despite his reminiscences and musings. He takes the job and his wife is happy, and that is all he really wanted. "Quite soon the happenings in Zapparoni's garden began to fade in my memory. There is much that is illusory in techniques. But I never forgot Teresa's words, and her smile when she spoke. Now she was happy about me. This smile was more powerful than all the automatons—it was a ray of reality."

Mankind is not going away, neither by extinction nor by replacement by modified humans or never-arriving artificial intelligences. Our essence is not going to change, whatever clowns like Yuval Noah Harari tell us. Maybe the result of the creations of today's Zapparonis will destroy our civilizations, as Kingsnorth thinks. Yet still, we will have our smiles, and everything that is essential to mankind and our world will remain. "A rose or a vine may be conceived without a trellis, but never the other way round." And maybe, if we cannot change the past or the present, we can yet change the future. Maybe we will overthrow our rotten elites and the spirit of the age, and retain the good parts of technology. After all, much of why technology is correctly seen as so

destructive is because the filthy ideologies that rule our society are so destructive. A virtuous society would not face the same despair. We can make man the master of technology and use it, more often than not, for good, by choosing self-control and self-discipline, while still reaching for the stars. At least, I hope we can, through catastrophe and cataclysm, until the apocalypse and the new dawn.