



**THE GLASS BEES**  
ERNST JÜNGER

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INTRODUCTION BY  
**BRUCE STERLING**

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CLASSICS

## THE GLASS BEES

ERNST JÜNGER (1895–1998), the son of a chemist and pharmacist, was born in Heidelberg and early on developed a fascination with war and soldiers. As a teenager, he ran away to join the French Foreign Legion, then enlisted in the German army on the first day of World War I. Junger served as a storm-trooper, was wounded fourteen times, and became the youngest soldier ever to receive Germany's highest military honor. His first book, *The Storm of Steel*, provided a graphic account of his experience of war. Though a radical right-wing opponent of the Weimar Republic, Jünger kept his distance from the Nazis, and his 1939 novel *On the Marble Cliffs* presented an allegorical account of the destructive nature of Hitler's rule. One of the most remarkable and controversial of twentieth-century German writers, Jünger was the recipient of numerous literary prizes, both at home and abroad, and continued his career as a writer and public figure until his death at the age of 102.

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THE GLASS BEES

Ernst Jünger



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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

IT BEGGARS BELIEF that this novel was first published in 1957. Its speculations on technology and industry are so prescient as to be uncanny. Not merely “ahead of its time,” this book is supremely anachronistic.

Ernst Jünger, who was born in 1895, lived to be 102 years old. Even twentieth-century Germany was hard put to produce enough historical tumult for him. After a teenage stint in the French Foreign Legion, he signed up for patriotic action on the first day of World War I. The ensuing whirlwind of catastrophe inspired his first novel, *The Storm of Steel*. Adolf Hitler, who fought on the same battle front, was a devotee of the book and asked Jünger to run for public office. He declined, preferring to versify, philosophize, and practice entomology. He spent the Second World War, back in uniform again, writing veiled

attacks on the regime and sipping champagne in occupied Paris. He was censored, but survived the Nazi purges. When the war was over, he was censored by the victors, and he survived again. By 1951, Jünger was dropping LSD. In 1962, at age 67, he married his devoted second wife. Even after all that, there were still entire decades ahead: magazine editorship, diaries, learned essays, respectful visits from European heads of state. The calendar could not stop him.

Jünger outlived Imperial Germany, Weimar Germany, Nazi Germany, and even the Federal Republic, finally seeing his country become Germany all over again. This clearly tired him far less than it would most mortals. The greatest strength of *The Glass Bees* is its Olympian disdain for the mere exigencies of time. We're never told the year. Our narrator never gives us his age.

The slithering narrative perfectly suits the spotted career of its hero, the gallant cavalryman, Captain Richard. He tells us of his boyish cowboy-and-Indian games. His formative years at officer school. The ambivalence of his married life. He often alludes to merciless wars which somehow blend seamlessly into one another.

As early as Chapter One, "robots" enter the tale. The ageless Captain Richard (who grows markedly more sinister as he grows more open and confiding with the reader) needs a new job. He needs one pretty badly. He's even willing to forsake his knightly pretensions for a day job in high-tech.

Robots as Jünger portrays them have nothing to do with the common standards of 1957. These robots don't clank, beep, or take any orders, Isaac Asimov-style. On the contrary: these microminiature, computerized, buglike automata are straight out of the MIT Media Lab and *Wired* magazine, circa 1994. Uncannily anticipating the scattered structure of the Internet, Jünger's glass bees "resembled less a hive than an automated telephone exchange."

Inside the moneyed fortress of technocracy, we find ourselves in a pseudo-pastoral campus—in other words, it's Silicon Valley. The robotics mogul, the aptly named Zapparoni, is a hybrid of Bill Gates and Walt Disney. He's made a vast fortune creating high-tech special-effects cinema. Zapparoni also employs fanatical creative squads of hackers, who are, by Richard's standards, nutty, pampered, and vastly overpaid.

Captain Richard's own desolate poverty shows this book's refreshing detachment from the tropes of American science fiction. The cavalier glories of his lost wars may own the Captain's heart, but in his wallet it's always 1933. Captain Richard is a rare example of a science-fiction hero who knows what it means when people line up for soup.

Jünger perceived industrial capitalism as a ridiculous game, so he proved remarkably good at predicting its future moves. *The Glass Bees* combines the icy insights of Stanislaw Lem with the reactionary rancor of Céline.

Jünger understands that technology is pursued not to accelerate progress but to intensify power. He fully grasps that popular entertainment comes with a military-industrial underside. Jünger understands that programmers throw tantrums and act like loons because they are engaged in “a most peculiar kind of work . . . very close to pure fantasy.” He even understands that twentieth-century wars are won not by courageous blitzkriegs but by making your own weapons obsolete as rapidly as possible. Though he sinks sometimes into astrological fatalism—all us science-fiction writers do have our crank aspects—he was a truly powerful and accomplished speculative thinker. Technomoguls, hackers, microminiature assembly, artificial pop stars, agropharmaceuticals—there’s scarcely a single stroke of Jünger’s imagination that hasn’t struck some real-life, merchandizable echo.

The same is true of his hero. Despite the fact that Captain Richard has holes in his shoes and is fainting from hunger, he’s remarkably well qualified as a technical consultant and new-product guru. Captain Richard boldly declares himself “one mass of useless and antiquated prejudices,” but while his colleagues die on battlefields and in brothels, he’s disconcertingly adaptable to every passing moment. Mere modernity cannot contain the man. He has amazing powers of disinterested insight. He fittingly remarks that Zapparoni is basically “a super-Philistine more terrifying than Genghis Khan,” but why bridle at this? Genghis Khan was, at least,



the kind of gentleman who knew how to appreciate a good horse.

In the bleak, buzzing world of *The Glass Bees*, “a half-witted mathematician” can “cause more damage in a second than Frederick the Great,” so why not come to terms with reality? Modernity has suffered enough from Great Men; the true mavens, the true initiates, are men whom history cannot grip. Men who may witness, endure, describe, and perhaps even perpetrate foul historical crimes, yet simply won’t go gracefully. Oh yes, granted, they may have their little unwholesome quirks: dawdling in cafés, dabbling in drugs, discussing Baudelaire with French collaborators as American bombers set occupied Paris on fire. The point is, even when surrounded by atrocity, these veterans will not surrender their sangfroid. Even in moral free fall, jumping through the windows of a flaming civilization, they just soar on and on.

Floating in deliberate elusiveness, wrapped in meditative uncertainty, Jünger does not exonerate and does not excuse. To take any stand on solid ground would likely mean a trench or a grave. The true realist, therefore, will leap and look, yet never land anywhere. There’s something stratospheric about the ascended master: something chilly, remote, and only partially human.

On a technical note, I must take time to praise the glossy sheen of Jünger’s descriptions, and the beautiful transitions between highly disparate scenes. It’s a taut, compact, masterful book, which, though it must have

once seemed highly fantastic and absurd, is never silly. It is discursive, but does not outstay its welcome. It is also terrifying. Ernst Jünger, gentleman poet and soldier, must have been, in many ways, a very scary man. But if there's redemption in the liberating power of imagination, then I imagine he must have found it.

Perhaps we should take the centenarian at his word: "A happy century does not exist; but there are moments of happiness, and there is freedom in the moment."

—BRUCE STERLING