

Zapffe in Translation

A Peter Wessel Zapffe collection in English

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The Last Messiah

By Peter Wessel Zapffe, 1933

Translated by Gisle R. Tangenes.

One night in long bygone times, man awoke and *saw himself*.

He saw that he was naked under cosmos, homeless in his own body. All things dissolved before his testing thought, wonder above wonder, horror above horror unfolded in his mind.

Then woman too awoke and said it was time to go and slay. And he fetched his bow and arrow, a fruit of the marriage of spirit and hand, and went outside beneath the stars. But as the beasts arrived at their waterholes where he expected them of habit, he felt no more the tiger's bound in his blood, but a great psalm about the brotherhood of suffering between everything alive.

That day he did not return with prey, and when they found him by the next new moon, he was sitting dead by the waterhole.

II

Whatever happened? A breach in the very unity of life, a biological paradox, an abomination, an absurdity, an exaggeration of disastrous nature. Life had overshot its target, blowing itself apart. A species had been armed too heavily – by spirit made almighty without, but equally a menace to its own well-being. Its weapon was like a sword without hilt or plate, a two-edged blade cleaving everything; but he who is to wield it must grasp the blade and turn the one edge toward himself.

Despite his new eyes, man was still rooted in matter, his soul spun into it and subordinated to its blind laws. And yet he could see matter as a stranger, compare himself to all phenomena, see through and locate his vital processes. He comes to nature as an unbidden guest, in vain extending his arms to beg conciliation with his maker: Nature answers no more, it performed a miracle with man, but later did not know him. He has lost his right of residence in the universe, has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and been expelled from Paradise. He is mighty in the near world, but curses his might as purchased with his harmony of soul, his innocence, his inner peace in life's embrace.

So there he stands with his visions, betrayed by the universe, in wonder and fear. The beast knew fear as well, in thunderstorms and on the lion's claw. But man became fearful of life itself – indeed, of his very being. Life – that was for the beast to feel the play of power, it was heat and games and strife and hunger, and then at last to bow before the law of course. In the beast, suffering is self-confined, in man, it knocks holes into a fear of the world and a despair of life. Even as the child sets out on the

river of life, the roars from the waterfall of death rise highly above the vale, ever closer, and tearing, tearing at its joy. Man beholds the earth, and it is breathing like a great lung; whenever it exhales, delightful life swarms from all its pores and reaches out toward the sun, but when it inhales, a moan of rupture passes through the multitude, and corpses whip the ground like bouts of hail. Not merely his own day could he see, the graveyards wrung themselves before his gaze, the laments of sunken millennia wailed against him from the ghastly decaying shapes, the earth-turned dreams of mothers. Future's curtain unravelled itself to reveal a nightmare of endless repetition, a senseless squander of organic material. The suffering of human billions makes its entrance into him through the gateway of compassion, from all that happen arises a laughter to mock the demand for justice, his profoundest ordering principle. He sees himself emerge in his mother's womb, he holds up his hand in the air and it has five branches; whence this devilish number five, and what has it to do with my soul? He is no longer obvious to himself – he touches his body in utter horror; this is you and so far do you extend and no farther. He carries a meal within him, yesterday it was a beast that could itself dash around, now I suck it up and make it part of me, and where do I begin and end? All things chain together in causes and effects, and everything he wants to grasp dissolves before the testing thought. Soon he sees mechanics even in the so-far whole and dear, in the smile of his beloved – there are other smiles as well, a torn boot with toes. Eventually, the features of things are features only of himself. Nothing exists without himself, every line points back at him, the world is but a ghostly echo of his voice – he leaps up loudly screaming and wants to disgorge himself onto the earth along with his impure meal, he feels the looming of madness and wants to find death before losing even such ability.

But as he stands before imminent death, he grasps its nature also, and the cosmic import of the step to come. His creative imagination constructs new, fearful prospects behind the curtain of death, and he sees that even there is no sanctuary found. And now he can discern the outline of his biologicocosmic terms: He is the universe's helpless captive, kept to fall into nameless possibilities.

From this moment on, he is in a state of relentless panic.

Such a *'feeling of cosmic panic'* is pivotal to every human mind. Indeed, the race appears destined to perish in so far as any effective preservation and continuation of life is ruled out when all of the individual's attention and energy goes to endure, or relay, the catastrophic high tension within.

The tragedy of a species becoming unfit for life by over evolving one ability is not confined to humankind. Thus it is thought, for instance, that certain deer in paleontological times succumbed as they acquired overly-heavy horns. The mutations must be considered blind, they work, are thrown forth, without any contact of interest with their environment.

In depressive states, the mind may be seen in the image of such an antler, in all its fantastic splendour pinning its bearer to the ground.

III

Why, then, has mankind not long ago gone extinct during great epidemics of madness? Why do only a fairly minor number of individuals perish because they fail to endure the strain of living – because cognition gives them more than they can carry?

Cultural history, as well as observation of ourselves and others, allow the following answer: Most people learn to save themselves by artificially limiting the content of consciousness.

If the giant deer, at suitable intervals, had broken off the outer spears of its antlers, it might have kept going for some while longer. Yet in fever and constant pain, indeed, in betrayal of its central idea, the core of its peculiarity, for it was vocated by creation's hand to be the *horn bearer* of wild animals. What it gained in continuance, it would lose in significance, in grandness of life, in other words a continuance without hope, a march not *up to* affirmation, but forth across its ever recreated ruins, a self-destructive race against the sacred will of blood.

The identity of purpose and perishment is, for giant deer and man alike, the tragic paradox of life. In devoted *Bejahung*, the last *Cervis Giganticus* bore the badge of its lineage to its end. The human being saves itself and carries on. It performs, to extend a settled phrase, a more or less self-conscious *repression* of its damaging surplus of consciousness. This process is virtually constant during our waking and active hours, and is a requirement of social adaptability and of everything commonly referred to as healthy and normal living.

Psychiatry even works on the assumption that the 'healthy' and viable is at one with the highest in personal terms. Depression, 'fear of life,' refusal of nourishment and so on are invariably taken as signs of a pathological state and treated thereafter. Often, however, such phenomena are messages from a deeper, more immediate sense of life, bitter fruits of a geniality of thought or feeling at the root of antibiological tendencies. It is not the soul being sick, but its protection failing, or else being rejected because it is experienced – correctly – as a betrayal of ego's highest potential.

The whole of living that we see before our eyes today is from inmost to outmost enmeshed in repressional mechanisms, social and individual; they can be traced right into the tritest formulas of everyday life. Though they take a vast and multifarious variety of forms, it seems legitimate to at least identify four major kinds, naturally occurring in every possible combination: isolation, anchoring, distraction and sublimation.

By *isolation* I here mean a fully arbitrary dismissal from consciousness of all disturbing and destructive thought and feeling. (Engström: "One should not think, it is just confusing.") A perfect and almost brutalising variant is found among certain physicians, who for self-protection will only see the technical aspect of their profession. It can also decay to pure hooliganism, as among petty thugs and medical

students, where any sensitivity to the tragic side of life is eradicated by violent means (football played with cadaver heads, and so on.)

In everyday interaction, isolation is manifested in a general code of mutual silence: primarily toward children, so these are not at once scared senseless by the life they have just begun, but retain their illusions until they can afford to lose them. In return, children are not to bother the adults with untimely reminders of sex, toilet, or death. Among adults there are the rules of 'tact,' the mechanism being openly displayed when a man who weeps on the street is removed with police assistance.

The mechanism of *anchoring* also serves from early childhood; parents, home, the street become matters of *course* to the child and give it a sense of assurance. This sphere of experience is the first, and perhaps the happiest, protection against the cosmos that we ever get to know in life, a fact that doubtless also explains the much debated 'infantile bonding;' the question of whether that is sexually tainted too is unimportant here. When the child later discovers that those fixed points are as 'arbitrary' and 'ephemeral' as any others, it has a crisis of confusion and anxiety and promptly looks around for another anchoring. "In Autumn, I will attend middle school." If the substitution somehow fails, then the crisis may take a fatal course, or else what I will call an *anchoring spasm* occurs: One clings to the dead values, concealing as well as possible from oneself and others the fact that they are unworkable, that one is spiritually insolvent. The result is lasting insecurity, 'feelings of inferiority,' over-compensation, restlessness. Insofar as this state falls into certain categories, it is made subject to psychoanalytic treatment, which aims to complete the transition to new anchorings.

Anchoring might be characterised as a fixation of points within, or construction of walls around, the liquid fray of consciousness. Though typically unconscious, it may also be fully conscious (one 'adopts a goal'.) Publicly useful anchorings are met with sympathy, he who 'sacrifices himself totally' for his anchoring (the firm, the cause) is idolised. He has established a mighty bulwark against the dissolution of life, and others are by suggestion gaining from his strength. In a brutalised form, as deliberate action, it is found among 'decadent' playboys ("one should get married in time, and then the constraints will come of themselves.") Thus one establishes a necessity in one's life, exposing oneself to an obvious evil from one's point of view, but a soothing of the nerves, a high-walled container for a sensibility to life that has been growing increasingly crude. Ibsen presents, in Hjalmar Ekdal and Molvik, two flowering cases ('living lies'); there is no difference between their anchoring and that of the pillars of society except for the practico-economic unproductiveness of the former.

Any culture is a great, rounded system of anchorings, built on foundational firmaments, the basic cultural ideas. The average person makes do with the collective firmaments, the personality is building for himself, the person of character has finished his construction, more or less grounded on the inherited, collective main firmaments (God, the Church, the State, morality, fate, the law of life, the people, the future). The closer to main firmaments a certain carrying element is, the more perilous it is to touch. Here a direct protection is normally established by means of

penal codes and threats of prosecution (inquisition, censorship, the Conservative approach to life).

The carrying capacity of each segment either depends on its fictitious nature having not been seen through yet, or else on its being recognised as necessary anyway. Hence the religious education in schools, which even atheists support because they know no other way to bring children into social ways of response.

Whenever people realise the fictitiousness or redundancy of the segments, they will strive to replace them with new ones ('the limited duration of Truths') – and whence flows all the spiritual and cultural strife which, along with economic competition, forms the dynamic content of world history.

The craving for material goods (power) is not so much due to the direct pleasures of wealth, as none can be seated on more than one chair or eat himself more than sated. Rather, the value of a fortune to life consists in the rich opportunities for anchoring and distraction offered to the owner.

Both for collective and individual anchorings it holds that when a segment breaks, there is a crisis that is graver the closer that segment to main firmaments. Within the inner circles, sheltered by the outer ramparts, such crises are daily and fairly pain free occurrences ('disappointments'); even a playing with anchoring values is here seen (wittiness, jargon, alcohol). But during such play one may accidentally rip a hole right to the bottom, and the scene is instantly transformed from euphoric to macabre. The dread of being stares us in the eye, and in a deadly gush we perceive how the minds are dangling in threads of their own spinning, and that a hell is lurking underneath.

The very foundational firmaments are rarely replaced without great social spasms and a risk of complete dissolution (reformation, revolution). During such times, individuals are increasingly left to their own devices for anchoring, and the number of failures tends to rise. Depressions, excesses, and suicides result (German officers after the war, Chinese students after the revolution).

Another flaw of the system is the fact that various danger fronts often require very different firmaments. As a logical superstructure is built upon each, there follow clashes of incommensurable modes of feeling and thought. Then despair can enter through the rifts. In such cases, a person may be obsessed with destructive joy, dislodging the whole artificial apparatus of his life and starting with rapturous horror to make a clean sweep of it. The horror stems from the loss of all sheltering values, the rapture from his by now ruthless identification and harmony with our nature's deepest secret, the biological unsoundness, the enduring disposition for doom.

We love the anchorings for saving us, but also hate them for limiting our sense of freedom. Whenever we feel strong enough, we thus take pleasure in going together to bury an expired value in style. Material objects take on a symbolic import here (the Radical approach to life).

When a human being has eliminated those of his anchorings that are visible to himself, only the unconscious ones staying put, then he will call himself a liberated personality.

A very popular mode of protection is *distraction*. One limits attention to the critical bounds by constantly enthralling it with impressions. This is typical even in childhood; without distraction, the child is also insufferable to itself. "Mom, what am I to do." A little English girl visiting her Norwegian aunts came inside from her room, saying: "What happens now?" The nurses attain virtuosity: Look, a doggie! Watch, they are painting the palace! The phenomenon is too familiar to require any further demonstration. Distraction is, for example, the 'high society's' tactic for living. It can be likened to a flying machine – made of heavy material, but embodying a principle that keeps it airborne whenever applying. It must always be in motion, as air only carries it fleetingly. The pilot may grow drowsy and comfortable out of habit, but the crisis is acute as soon as the engine flunks.

The tactic is often fully conscious. Despair may dwell right underneath and break through in gushes, in a sudden sobbing. When all distractive options are expended, spleen sets in, ranging from mild indifference to fatal depression. Women, in general less cognition-prone and hence more secure in their living than men, preferably use distraction.

A considerable evil of imprisonment is the denial of most distractive options. And as terms for deliverance by other means are poor as well, the prisoner will tend to stay in the close vicinity of despair. The acts he then commits to deflect the final stage have a warrant in the principle of vitality itself. In such a moment he is experiencing his soul within the universe, and has no other motive than the utter unendurability of that condition.

Pure examples of life-panic are presumably rare, as the protective mechanisms are refined and automatic and to some extent unremitting. But even the adjacent terrain bears the mark of death, life is here barely sustainable and by great efforts. Death always appears as an escape, one ignores the possibilities of the hereafter, and as the way death is experienced is partly dependent on feeling and perspective, it might be quite an acceptable solution. If one in *statu mortis* could manage a pose (a poem, a gesture, to 'die standing up'), i.e. a final anchoring, or a final distraction (Aases' death), then such a fate is not the worst one at all. The press, for once serving the concealment mechanism, never fails to find reasons that cause no alarm – "it is believed that the latest fall in the price of wheat..."

When a human being takes his life in depression, this is a *natural death* of spiritual causes. The modern barbarity of 'saving' the suicidal is based on a hair-raising misapprehension of the nature of existence.

Only a limited part of humanity can make do with mere 'changes', whether in work, social life, or entertainment. The cultured person demands connections, lines, a progression in the changes. Nothing finite satisfies at length, one is ever proceeding,

gathering knowledge, making a career. The phenomenon is known as 'yearning' or 'transcendental tendency.' Whenever a goal is reached, the yearning moves on; hence its object is not the goal, but the very attainment of it – the gradient, not the absolute height, of the curve representing one's life. The promotion from private to corporal may give a more valuable experience than the one from colonel to general. Any grounds of 'progressive optimism' are removed by this major psychological law.

The human yearning is not merely marked by a 'striving toward', but equally by an 'escape from.' And if we use the word in a religious sense, only the latter description fits. For here, none has yet been clear about what he is longing *for*, but one has always a heartfelt awareness of what one is longing *away from*, namely the earthly vale of tears, one's own unendurable condition. If awareness of this predicament is the deepest stratum of the soul, as argued above, then it is also understandable why the religious yearning is felt and experienced as fundamental. By contrast, the hope that it forms a divine criterion, which harbours a promise of its own fulfilment, is placed in a truly melancholy light by these considerations.

The fourth remedy against panic, *sublimation*, is a matter of transformation rather than repression. Through stylistic or artistic gifts can the very pain of living at times be converted into valuable experiences. Positive impulses engage the evil and put it to their own ends, fastening onto its pictorial, dramatic, heroic, lyric or even comic aspects.

Unless the worst sting of suffering is blunted by other means, or denied control of the mind, such utilisation is unlikely, however. (Image: The mountaineer does not *enjoy* his view of the abyss while choking with vertigo; only when this feeling is more or less overcome does he enjoy it – anchored.) To write a tragedy, one must to some extent free oneself from – betray – the very feeling of tragedy and regard it from an outer, e.g. aesthetic, point of view. Here is, by the way, an opportunity for the wildest round-dancing through ever higher ironic levels, into a most embarrassing *circulus vitiosus*. Here one can chase one's ego across numerous habitats, enjoying the capacity of the various layers of consciousness to dispel one another.

The present essay is a typical attempt at sublimation. The author does not suffer, he is filling pages and is going to be published in a journal.

The 'martyrdom' of lonely ladies also shows a kind of sublimation – they gain in significance thereby.

Nevertheless, sublimation appears to be the rarest of the protective means mentioned here.

IV

Is it possible for 'primitive natures' to renounce these cramps and cavorts and live in harmony with themselves in the serene bliss of labour and love? Insofar as they may

be considered human at all, I think the answer must be no. The strongest claim to be made about the so-called peoples of nature is that they are somewhat closer to the wonderful biological ideal than we unnatural people. And when even we have so far been able to save a majority through every storm, we have been assisted by the sides of our nature that are just modestly or moderately developed. This positive basis (as protection alone cannot create life, only hinder its faltering) must be sought in the naturally adapted deployment of the energy in the body and the biologically helpful parts of the soul¹, subject to such hardships as are *precisely* due to sensory limitations, bodily frailty, and the need to do work for life and love.

And just in this finite land of bliss within the fronts do the progressing civilisation, technology and standardisation have such a debasing influence. For as an ever growing fraction of the cognitive faculties retire from the game against the environment, there is a rising *spiritual unemployment*. The value of a technical advance to the whole undertaking of life must be judged by its contribution to the human opportunity for spiritual occupation. Though boundaries are blurry, perhaps the first tools for cutting might be mentioned as a case of a positive invention.

Other technical inventions enrich only the life of the inventor himself; they represent a gross and ruthless theft from humankind's common reserve of experiences and should invoke the harshest punishment if made public against the veto of censorship. One such crime among numerous others is the use of flying machines to explore uncharted land. In a single vandalistic glob, one thus destroys lush opportunities for experience that could benefit many if each, by effort, obtained his fair share.²

The current phase of life's chronic fever is particularly tainted by this circumstance. The absence of naturally (biologically) based spiritual activity shows up, for example, in the pervasive recourse to *distraction* (entertainment, sport, radio – 'the rhythm of the times'). Terms for anchoring are not as favourable – all the inherited, collective systems of anchorings are punctured by criticism, and anxiety, disgust, confusion, despair leak in through the rifts ('corpses in the cargo.') Communism and psychoanalysis, however incommensurable otherwise, both attempt (as Communism has also a spiritual reflection) by novel means to vary the old escape anew; applying, respectively, violence and guile to make humans biologically fit by ensnaring their critical surplus of cognition. The idea, in either case, is uncannily logical. But again, it cannot yield a final solution. Though a deliberate degeneration to a more viable nadir may certainly save the species in the short run, it will by its nature be unable to find peace in such resignation, or indeed find any peace at all.

V

If we continue these considerations to the bitter end, then the conclusion is not in doubt. As long as humankind recklessly proceeds in the fateful delusion of being biologically fated for triumph, nothing essential will change. As its numbers mount and the spiritual atmosphere thickens, the techniques of protection must assume an increasingly brutal character.

And humans will persist in dreaming of salvation and affirmation and a new Messiah. Yet when many saviours have been nailed to trees and stoned on the city squares, then the last Messiah shall come.

Then will appear the man who, as the first of all, has dared strip his soul naked and submit it alive to the outmost thought of the lineage, the very idea of doom. A man who has fathomed life and its cosmic ground, and whose pain is the Earth's collective pain. With what furious screams shall not mobs of all nations cry out for his thousandfold death, when like a cloth his voice encloses the globe, and the strange message has resounded for the first and last time:

“– The life of the worlds is a roaring river, but Earth's is a pond and a backwater.

– The sign of doom is written on your brows – how long will ye kick against the pin-pricks?

– But there is one conquest and one crown, one redemption and one solution.

– Know yourselves – *be infertile and let the earth be silent after ye.*”

And when he has spoken, they will pour themselves over him, led by the pacifier makers and the midwives, and bury him in their fingernails.

He is the last Messiah. As son from father, he stems from the archer by the waterhole.

The Document from Venus

By Peter Wessel Zapffe, 1936

From the Norwegian by Sirocco

Berlin was in seething fever. And as the voice from Grosse Rundfunken collapsed upon the planet like a cloth, the peoples held their breath until the whole of earth, hirsute with humans, trembled in painfully tense expectation. Month after month the rumours had been swirling, at times met by disdainful snorts, at others, by exultation, at still others, by solemn silence. For this was something else and more than all the technical adventures that had so far come to life before people's eyes; this was the epoch of the epochs, the leap and the metamorphosis, the most decisive crisis in the life of humanity, the realisation of its boldest dreams. And now it had actually happened; now it would no longer do to make a skeptical face; now it was a matter of historical fact!

On the Fourteenth of March Nineteenhundredandninetythree, Professor Amadeus Dreistein, the world-renowned astrophysicist and philosopher, accompanied by his loyal disciple, Dr. Viertelstein, began his journey to the planet Venus. At 21.51.33 ¹/₂ o'clock, a sky-threatening pillar of smoke arose from Tempelhofer Feld, followed by a million staring eyes all unable to believe themselves. On its top rode a rocket on which Dreistein had been working for a lifetime – his own, not just anyone's - and baptised in champagne, 'Flos Veneris'. Inside the rocket, suspended in clever anti-gravitational springs, were two men with less regard for their lives than for the ecstatic consummation of a thirty year long mass at the altar of science. The Argus eyes of telescopes traced them to the edge of emptiness, where they could no longer be distinguished from a mote on the lens.

When the estimated time expired, everyone on earth outside of camps and prisons went on lookout. Endless debates arose on the morning tram and swept around the globe like breaker waves. Had the rocket missed its target, to be consumed by infinity? Many still remembered the transmission from the moonbus 'Hubris XV', which in 1987 passed an Ameuropean astronaut; presumably one ejected during the collision of 'Hubris II' with the unmanned 'Lunatic VIII'. In its obituary, Space Times had pointed out that this was the third of those austronauts who, after the big shipwrecks in the heavily polluted whirls of northern light, continue in orbit 'on their own'. Dressed in their white spacesuits and lit by the set sun, they are, during interlunar periods, visible by ordinary telescope. Unfortunately they can only be identified by position, but their birth certificate names have been retained, and the Institute for Astrology, in cooperation with the Salvation Army, may on request provide their families with the azimuth at the next culmination.

This could have been the destiny of 'R/K Flos Veneris', but the heroic pioneers might also have been caught, slain and devoured by Venuvians. Or was one in store for a triumph to shake the Milky Way? At the least unusual noise, people would leave their desks and workshops and dash to the windows. Crowds, staring and clashing in midroad, behaved threateningly toward buses trying to pass. A state of emergency had to be declared in Berlin, but there were also grave effects elsewhere. In the South of Norway a cult arose which, in accordance with Malachi 4,5, believed that Eliah would join the return to appoint a date for the Day of Reckoning. The hopes invested in the expedition knew no bounds; unfathomable amounts of gems, gold, and radium would be anyone's as soon as a permanent link was established. The Office of Migration spawned an interplanetary department and The Oslo Evening Gazette planned an ambulatory branch.

The 9th of September the following year, the bomb went off: 'Flos Veneris' had landed in the Mediterranean, the Professor being on his way to Berlin. As the morning papers came out on the 10th, the newsstands were rushed and paperboys all across Europe obliterated by the advance of their customers. Indeed, the stacks of the special edition might be so obnoxiously described as 'worth their weight in blood'. The editor of The Swedish Central Times, who had never, even in the heat of polemic, used a stronger word than 'quite', met his secretary with the following morning salutation: "Scimitars in my kidneys, lad, today we have one god-damned, storm-ridden, enormous-as-hell sensation!"

Dreistein and his heroic companion had discovered an extinct planet, its surface so shot through with architectonic filigree as to seem, from a distance, like a hovering bone-coloured lacework against the jet black sky. At landing the two scientists had just enough oxygen left for a half-hour stay outside the rocket. Singleminded as they were, they did not indulge in aimless sight-seeing as was certainly invited by the unutterably beautiful buildings, the strange contraptions of unknown purpose, and the grotesque wax-imbued figures of the crypts. Dreistein sought one matter only: archives and libraries. As the half-hour drew to a close and the quest remained unsuccessful, the Professor, with a heart as heavy as iridium, ordered the retreat.

Then it is that Dr. Viertelstein resolves to sacrifice his life. He shuts off his can of oxygen, and before the Professor can get a hold of the tap, his companion has unwrapped his Nirwana suit, whereupon he drops dead to the ground. Dreistein grasped the situation immediately. His assistant had donated his oxygen supply, not to him, but to Science. He was obliged to use it, and right away. And now the miracle occurs: the Professor makes his way to a vault full of steel cylinders with inscriptions. Semi-conscious and with waning powers, he pulls one of them back to the rocket, slots his respirator into the main supply – and sets course for 14 Unter den Linden.

The inscribed-upon, or more accurately, nucleostilographed cylinder, now preserved in the Professor's laboratory where it has already begun to corrode, is believed to be a kind of matrix for audiographic replication... The cryptic tokens are of course resisting any and all interpretation at the present time. – Thus declared the official communiqué.

Yet the Professor did not begin work on the cylinder before having paid his respects to his brave colleague's bereaved ones; his old lonely mother and pregnant wife. He personally felt it a poor consolation that the earthly shape of the deceased had gained eternal preservation by freezing to -273 degrees, now being as hard as diamond. But he did, at any rate, promise them a copy of the translation when available, complete with a personal dedication, and this seemed to help a little.

Professor Dreistein then went into total seclusion in his highly modern laboratory, to which no sound, beam, or living soul was allowed – except the two young philologists who had shared the last Nobel prize for their work on cryptogral coefficients. The thousand-headed crowd besieging the building all day and all night, preferring to starve and freeze rather than to miss any opportunity of whatever nature, had to be dispersed by the police as it began to assume a threatening attitude. The silence from within the building caused psychosis; many would kneel and pray out loud while others presented their ailing children to the Professor's blackened windows. Armed sentries had to guard the entrance; nothing, it was felt, was quite impossible anymore.

The frantic efforts of the three gentlemen did not fail to bear fruit. On the 24th of December the press, in inch-thick headlines, announced that the Professor and his co-workers, by a supra-brilliant synthesis, had discovered the key to interpreting the cylinder, it being now a matter of time before the first word from transglobal cultures would come forth in intelligible form.

Already on the next morning the trinitarian team, in the Professor's name, dared offer a waiting world the prospect that he, on the following Monday at 20.00.00 o'clock, in a lecture at the Hauptakademie der Integrierten Wissenschaften, would outline the phases of the interpretive process and likely, allow a preliminary glimpse of the result. His sole caveat concerned the eventuality that ill health might preclude his public appearance. The Professor's old age, combined with a lengthy period of late hours and with the absorbing excitement of it all, gave his physicians cause for concern.

The key discovered, the philologists retreated leaving the old enthusiast bent in cosmic solitude over the final hermeneutic meta-theses. One wished to allow him the glory of being alone about this gift to humankind; the apex of his life and of his century.

“There is every reason”, wrote Berliner Abend in high-flown Aryan syntax, “to anticipate the deciphering’s impending announcement, not only with the utmost interest, but even with disquieting unease. A world that has lived its life to the fullest measure can be presumed to have attained such outer and inner maturity, such harmonious balance of technology and spirit, as humans too anticipate at our journey’s end – the end that shall validate our efforts and bestow meaning upon the self-denial and forgotten heroism of all perished generations, upon their shining, unfaltering faith, their productive labours, suffering, and struggle. A world that has passed through the concluding phases of its thousand times ten thousand years of history, onto the final stage, and engraved its profoundest insight into a material everlasting¹ – that insight which is now spilling over to our own world in one fertilising flash, a spark from the singing forge of Depth itself – whatever may it not divulge to a humankind still so painfully on its way, so ravaged by the storms of mature existence? Whatever may not be awaiting us in terms of scientific impulses, of occult apocalyptic revelation, of food for popular thought and conversation, of novel spiritual domains – indeed, in plain terms: of gates flung wide open into the ultimate, so yearningly desired deliverance of the human soul? Surely we do not go too far when anticipating that Professor Dreistein’s lecture on next Monday will signify no less than a mutation in the history of the human spirit, without thereby losing sight of the awe-inspiring fact that culture does not die as planets do, but instead, carries on its elated crusade across universes ever new...”

Every room in the Hauptakademie der Integrierten Wissenschaften was crammed to capacity. From all over Europe, indeed, from the remotest corners of the globe, distinguished scholars had gathered to fully savour the impressions of this event and its creator, while every transmitter on earth was attuned to the little steely lectern in the Hörsaal für Sinnesempfang.

It was already a quarter past eight, yet none would dream of taking offense at this slight academic delay. The Professor’s excuse would doubtless be a valid one.

At about nine o’clock a certain unrest was felt in the lecture hall, and at half past nine the Presidency decided to make for the Professor’s study. One knocked on the door, but there was no reply. One waited another fifteen minutes before knocking again –

with the same result. One then withdrew to cancel the meeting. At five o'clock the next morning, after exhaustive deliberation, one determined to force open the door.

For a moment the little assembly stood as if nailed to the floor – before scrambling to the rescue. Lying on the isopolyrium tiles in front of his desk was Professor Dreistein, his hair whitened overnight, with a bloody wound in his temple and an expression on his harried face suggesting to the gaping adepts the profoundest human despair. His bony, sinewy graybeard's hand convulsively clutched a short-barrelled laser gun.

At the center of the desk were papers indicating various stages of interpretation, and in front of these, at the table's edge, was a sheet with the first few sentences in modern German.

With throbbing heart, the President leaned over the table and recited:

“The prohibition of sale of intoxicating drink will lead to bitterness in wide circles of our people.”

Summary of 'On the Tragic'

Original title "Om det tragiske"

By Peter Wessel Zapffe, PAX Forlag 1941

The summary was first published in English, in the 1983 edition, pp. 619-622.

This summary is protected by Norwegian and International Copyright Laws, hereby violated in the name of Existentialistic Philosophy, due to the lack of translated material.

SUMMARY

The world of experience is considered in this work from the point of view of the *concerns of the individual entities*. This means that the entities are classified according to what is important and necessary for them, what they are concerned with. They can thus be classified in an ascending scale from an assumed lack of all concern (the non-organic world), via entities to which humans attribute concerns (plants, animals without consciousness), to what we call conscious animals with a more differentiated range of concerns (§§ 1, 3, 4).

After these comes the primitive or *low-status* human being, characterized by basic concerns (biological concerns, simple desires), and the scale continues with increasing differentiation, ending with the *great* men and women, the highest representatives of their respective cultures. In addition to the concerns of primitive people, such people have the desires and values in the broadest senses of these worlds, together with the most highly differentiated social and metaphysical concerns. This system has the advantage of including a great deal of material under a single viewpoint.

Alongside the scale of concerns one can draw up a scale of *abilities* (a distinctive group of qualities in the entity, or organism); these are associated with a group of concerns relating to development or realization (§8 et passim). The concerned individual consciously attempts to realize his concerns by using his abilities. Sometimes the abilities are adequate (*sufficiency*), sometimes they are inadequate (*deficiency*), and sometimes there is a surplus of ability in relation to the demands of the problem or situation. The *surplus* may provide additional advantages, it may be irrelevant to the solution of the problem, or it may have harmful consequences (§8 and ch. 5.). When an ability occurs with a single or a very few functional variations it is referred to as *predetermined*; when it is mutable, sometimes with an unlimited

applicability, it is referred to as *non-determined*. These are also the two extremes of a scale; in between one finds for example a *wrong determination*, where an ability is determined in a way that is unfortunate compared with another way assumed to be more fortunate, and variations of this are *over-determination*, where an ability is too strictly determined, and *under-determination*, where it is too little determined (ch. 3, 5 and 6, §82).

The normal and valid realization of a concern is referred to as the *proper solution* to the problem that existed prior to the realization. When a proper realization cannot be obtained (owing to conditions inside or outside the organism), then the concerned individual may settle for a pseudo-solution, a surrogate (ch. 6).

The *environment* (ch. 3) in which the organism attempts to realize its concerns may be so formed that it consciously promotes or wishes to promote the realization; it is then referred to as a *sympathetic* environment as regards of these factors. Sometimes the environment takes no conscious part in the realization; it is then *indifferent*. Finally, it may sometimes consciously work against the organism, and then it is referred to as *inimical* or satanic. In all three cases the environment may have been *propitious*, *unpropitious*, or neither, irrelevant (§4).

The *result* of the conflict (after a single clash or over a longer period) may be the attainment of the concern (*sanction*), or its non-attainment (*veto*); sometimes, on the other hand, it may be opposed or violated. When primary concerns are deeply and irreversibly violated the event is referred to as a *catastrophe* (ch. 7). A catastrophe may be *elementary* or *qualified*, i.e. contain qualities that drawn attention to it rather than to something else. Some of these catastrophes have a particular quality referred to as *tragic*; they are then part of a whole, a *tragic process* (§75).

The tragic process has three characteristics; a *culturally relevant greatness*, or magnitude, in the afflicted individual, a *catastrophe* that befalls him, and a *functional relation* between the greatness and the catastrophe. With this definition of tragedy the study approaches its principal aim: to give a meaning to the word tragic that is sufficiently unambiguous [1] and that cannot naturally be applied to any other term (§1), and one that at the same time lies well within the mainstream of aesthetic and literary tradition.

This choice of meaning has a further advantage, in addition to the purely terminological one: The quality of the process described by the word tragic, in its empirical aspect, has strong *philosophical* implications. Tragedy is given a central and

dominating role in the human battle of concerns and throws a significant light on the human condition here on earth (§§76,90,91). «Significant light» means a light that reveals consequences that are relevant for human concerns. The victim not only undergoes immediate suffering, through the violation of the relevant concern, he is also deprived of his *fundamental expectation*; a spectator with the same concerns as the victim will therefore also feel *his* expectation waver. This expectation is that of a *universal moral system*, a regulation of history according to human values. In other words: the expectation that *perfectibility will lead to fulfilment* is confounded when a tragic constellation blocks the way to a proper solution and opens the way for a pseudo-solution or defeat (§93).

The adequate affective reactions of a spectator to the violation of a concern of his own or of a person he identifies with are aversion, dejection, disgust, bitter revolt, and so on. His reaction as a whole is to reject what has happened; to use Volkelt's expression, the event «should not happen». This ought to be particularly true of qualified catastrophes and especially tragic processes. But experience shows that accidents to others can under certain circumstances attract the spectator. How can one explain (i.e. make available to the understanding through some structural model) this apparent paradox? Is this merely a special case of the fascination contained in *all* unusual events of great magnitude *in spite of* the suffering they may cause a fellow human being? Or are there indications that the spectator is attracted *because of* the human suffering involved? Or are we dealing with two completely different ways of experiencing the event, two irreconcilable aspects? An elucidation of this question in practical terms is attempted in ch. 9, cf. §§13 and 81.

The value of witnessing another's misfortune has been shown to be isolated and to some degree intensified when a tragic process is recreated in literature or in other forms of art. The description and explanation of this and especially «the problem of tragedy» have tempted philosophers and aesthetic writers (particularly Europeans) for over 2000 years. This is briefly dealt with in ch. 11; own studies are described in §§95 ff. Each of the factors that are regularly present in a tragedy are examined for their capacity to contribute to the experience of the spectator, and the results are summed up in the following contention: the richest experience a tragedy can give is a *pseudo-solution of the metaphysical problem of meaning through poetic sublimation* (§102).

Although the problems associated with tragedy have been taken up by many of the most prominent European men of letters, the results are neither convincing nor conclusive for a modern reader, despite a blinding wealth of detail. The newcomer is quite willing to acknowledge the authority vested in this imposing list of names; on the other hand it is notable that the renown attached to names such as Aristotle,

Lessing, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer does not derive from their researches into tragedy, which have been more or less a side issue. There seem to be two main reasons for the lack of clarity and the endless discussions: first, that researchers have not managed to describe the tragic process in such a way that it could be clearly distinguished from a non-tragic process, and secondly that they have not distinguished clearly enough between tragic process, tragic writing, and what they variously refer to as tragic experience, tragic mood, tragic feelings, etc. (cf. §§110, 111, 112).

By distinguishing as accurately as possible between these concepts, I have tried to contribute to research on the subject.

Quotes from 'On the Tragic'

From the blog post 'Zapffe in translation' on [antinatalismblog](#).

Translated by Karim Akerman

"You got me. But my son you will not get. You were committing a fateful mistake when assigning even procreation to my will. And you did not do this out of love..., but rather to burden me with the heaviest of all responsibilities...: Am I to perpetuate this species or not? And from now on I will ask no longer what you want; rather you shall ask what I want. And I will no longer offer further sacrifices to the God of life. I will punish you with the ability you bequeathed to me in order to torment me; I will turn my clairvoyance against you and thus bereaving you of your victims. And the abused millions will stand behind me like a plough... And evermore will two people create one human being... Thus you will feel your powerlessness begging me on your bloody knees."

"I will have to desist from the creation of new holders of interest. This decision would initialise a terminal epoch in the development of humankind; [...] This renouncement, this refusal of a continuation represents the utmost cultural possibility of mankind."

Excerpt from 'On the Tragic' - Animal Fable

By Peter Wessel Zapffe, 1941

Translated by Sirocco

Once upon a time there was a ship carrying cats, a lot of cats of all kinds, to a World Exhibition on Hawaii. Underway, the ship sunk 'with men and mice', the cats clinging to mattresses and other strange things and drifting ashore on a desolate island. There was no life on this island except certain sprightly and irresistibly funny, but sadly inedible beetles, so at first sight they appeared all condemned to miserable death.

Then it was discovered that the soft clay along the beach brimmed with fat and delicious clamshells, easily opened with a claw or two. Thus arose for most a terrible dilemma. The only decent path was surely to leap like tigers for the beetles, the alternative being a foul activity to which no cat of the genus Felidae would descend. They represented the Cat as it had jumped forth from the mind of God, as one of them had learned by mom's knee while a kitten at Mrs. Bloom's, and the very thought of it abhorred them utterly.

But 'cat, schmat', as the madam also used to say, and sure enough, it was not long before the first ones dipped their paws and were followed by others, there being soon a veritable rush. Indeed they displayed such indifference to feline standards as to lie in the pleasantly sun-warmed mud merely gorging and breeding – their progeny slurping clams as soon as weaned. At fitting intervals they would raise their mudstained faces to squint at the snobs ashore; scorn and ridicule altered with a glowing hatred as the sight of land cats reminded them of their betrayal against the family's precious heritage.

Optimism became a treasured way to dull their awareness of guilt and inferiority. Before long, they had to extend their defences; the land cats were called neurotics and psychotics – tricky words, but stimulating to the mud colony. Finally an analyst was sent up from the beach; he found resistance against recovery and diagnosed a fear of water. The plebeians were in triumph, but the others too were convinced by the explanation and acknowledged it, knowing well what the bottom line was.

By contrast, the cats of prey became pessimists. Not due to such burdens as the others gave weight to – lesions and starvation, choking and cold – but to finding themselves

put into a world of poor terms for the sacred formula in their hearts. In recognition of this fact they instilled reproduction, the future appearing darker day by day.

Then prophets arose among them to teach the art of hope: Once upon a time we all came from a land where the objects of our noble pursuit could also be eaten and digested. Yet many were slothful, neglecting to exercise their nimbleness and strength, and that is why the ship went ashore. Now death awaits the faithful, but after death a new ship will come for the ones who did not fail. And then all those who lived in sin shall perish, and no ship shall come to deliver them.

But hunger tore their bowels, and they would whine in many keys and say: "Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in unsrer Brust!" Still some became traitors and went into vulgus and sated themselves, whilst others converted by the prophet's word and went ashore and cleansed their pelt and prepared for their great departure. The proudest of them formed a fraternity, publically declaring it the duty of any honest cat to die before selling one's soul for a dish of clams. And when the leader felt his powers waning, he laid down on a stub to die what humans call a tragic-heroic death. Many would revere him as a saint and follow his lead, as they could not bring themselves to useful resignation; those stayed faithful to the highest ideals of felinity, though they saw through the prophet's consolation and fought despair in their hearts.

Yet a majority in both camps became slaves of eternal doubt, dividing their time between uneasy satedness and abstinence with devouring wants. It was of course a relief to be rid the aristocrats; but the new maxim of merging with the crabs proved unrealisable in the end.

The Mystery

Radio interview with Peter Wessel Zapffe.

NRK 1967.

I remember once on the Arctic Ocean. The steward came up on deck, saying: "You should come down to the lounge, Zapffe. They are arguing vehemently there." "What is it about?" "When I left, they had come around to man."

Interviewer: And so, perhaps, have we?

The human being is not only the bearer of philosophy; it is also at center stage as its object. As far as we can tell, it is the only being that is both alive and able to regard its life 'as from the outside'. It can also view itself as an observer of itself, and so on in absurdum, i.e. until reason folds.

The animal seems to be naturally at one with its existence. This naturalness is broken in the human being. It can experience itself as an foreign guest.

Interviewer: And which are the consequences of that?

The world around us, and man with his I-experience and life-situation, come across as the complete mystery. We know nothing about the origin and the so-called 'deepest nature' of the universe. First we must 'know' what it 'is' to know, i.e., obtain a pair of shoes so tight that we can only get them on after wearing them for a week or so.

Interviewer: We really know nothing, then?

Within the mystery, reason can find relations of greater or lesser constancy. It orients itself, seeking to determine its position. It discovers, for instance, that classes and individuals both have finite life spans; a beginning and an end. We ourselves live within a parenthesis of iron between birth and death.

A basic fabric in the texture are innumerable pathways of origination. Nearby matter is entrapped and turned into wefts. It discovers that it has become a dog, an eskimo, or Peder Jensen in Thorvald Meyer's Street. These have not chosen their form. Yet there they are. And here we have, perhaps, a possible foundation for ethics.

Interviewer: And what kind of difference does such an origination make?

There has arisen a synthesis, a potential, a high pressure. This persists for a while; dissolves; dissipates; and returns to the elements. While they endure, individuals have their own interest status. There is something they want, and something they do not want. Their 'Yes' and 'No' meet their destinies. Fortunate conditions yield a fortunate fate; unfortunate conditions an unfortunate fate. To assist them they have their equipment, their abilities.

Interviewer: And what if we regard man as such a synthesis?

Then it is natural to consider the extent and peculiarity of its endowment, relative to outer and inner conditions.

The rest of the living world seems to be geared exclusively for the survival of the species. Individuals only matter insofar as they serve this end. A large percentage of humankind appears to be similarly geared, both individually and collectively.

This notwithstanding, man has a surplus with respect to biological necessities. With the exception of viruses, it has overcome all its enemies, and the remaining animals exist at the mercy of man. Yet it is not content with being the last species standing. It rages forth toward the depths of future and past, and toward the boundaries of space.

Interviewer: But isn't this just valuable?

Any realisation of active and receptive possibilities for living is experienced as valuable. Playing with the surplus can be harmless, but it can also collide with other vital interests. Think of the Sorcerer's Apprentice. We are becoming more numerous than the planet can sustain. As we divide into groups, the one may obliterate the other five or ten times over. This matter that everybody talks about today is just as much a chromosome bomb.

Within, too, the pressure of possibilities and ends can overthrow the balance. We do have paleontological precursors: lobsters unable to raise their giant claws anymore, deer with antlers measuring more than three meters.

Interviewer: But scientists complain that our abilities do not suffice. Everywhere are problems we are unable to solve.

Indeed; we live upon a silk wrapper of safety. Yet the surplus resides in the fact that we see the problems. Around the bonfire of knowledge, we perceive the darkness. Otherwise, the sheep would despair of its ignorance.

Interviewer: Apart from the extent, you mentioned the peculiarity of our endowment?

Some animals have relatively constant reactions to impressions. Humans are more 'un-fixed'; we are forced to make conscious choices. This can mean a greater pressure than our health endures. Dogs may become hysterical when their food becomes associated with pain.

Interviewer: But in general, surely, things do come out well?

Then one does not only take a 'general' view, but also a selective one. Costs are left out. The promenade on Karl Johan Avenue is more presentable than all the hidden conditions that are rather not mentioned. Such isolation is but one of many means devised to neutralise the disastrous effects of the surplus and the lack of fixation.

Interviewer: But surely, not everything is mere doubt and uncertainty?

Beside the lack of fixation, there are also some fixations, partly in fortunate directions and partly not. The latter ones are especially relevant to our worldview and our view of life.

Interviewer: How so?

The unique quality within the biotic world that we demand morality of our surroundings, and an adequate meaning to it all, that is something we can hardly relinquish. And yet, what we call Nature displays neither morality nor meaning. So the question, What is the meaning of life? is less fertile than, Why do we ask for the meaning of life? Cats do not.

Interviewer: Shouldn't we ask?

To be sure, we see the very criterion of humanity in this question. But anyone who is able to abstain from it, and e.g. breed children without hesitation, has at least a more comfortable spiritual economy. We can imagine an eskimo who suddenly arrives at a boarding house in Lier. He is perplexed and understands nothing. Where is the ice, he queries, and where are the seals? Yet no one can answer, and so he leaves again. Thus has man come into a world estranged from the soul. He asks for the meaning of Life, finds none, and leaves again. Only the moon stares after him in bewilderment.

Interviewer: You say that Nature has no morality. Yet at least it is brilliant in its adaptations?

If nature is seen as brilliant wherever it succeeds, then it is also idiotic wherever it fails. If not idiotic, then it is not brilliant. The Mystery does not call for awe. It just is what it is.

Interviewer: What do you really mean by saying that something 'is'?

Shall we say a conjunction of an X and a property? X derives from the Mystery, and the property, at least in part, from the observer.

Protagoras intuited this when he called man the measure of all things. Berkeley created the sentence 'esse est percipi' – to be is to be perceived by a consciousness. It can be read in many ways, including one that coincides with Kant's doctrine of 'Erscheinung'. Another interpretation appears to be confirmed by the biologist Jacob von Uexküll: The endowment of each individual helps determine its image of the surroundings. With humans, we must then consider more than just the senses.

Interviewer: Can you explain this further?

We have all learned that the so-called 'secondary qualities', the colour red and so on, do not inhere in the 'thing itself' but are formed by light waves plus the eye and the brain. Yet we can go further and regard even the model 'wave' as a human artifact, emerging from X as it meets our mental constitution. And similarly with all our dear and familiar, indispensable and obvious categories, such as time and space, distance, form, unity, beginning and end, ugly and beautiful, small and large, infinity, good and evil, Yes and No, to be or not to be. We take them with us when we leave.

Of the rest, one cannot even say 'it is X'; one must say simply 'X'.

Interviewer: Would you say, then, that the moon is not shining when nobody sees it?

If someone says that the moon is shining when nobody sees it, then he acts as a secret spectator. For we ourselves bring one half of the light.

Interviewer: Do you find this worldview satisfying?

If we need an adequate meaning to it all, that need goes unmet to be sure. A madam asked her husband: "What did the doctor say?" "He thought it was cancer." "But surely, you cannot be satisfied with that."

Interviewer: What, then, about all those who seek something perfect, something absolute?

Imagine a group of castaways afloat on assorted wreckage in mid-ocean. One seizes the floor, saying: "Our situation is untenable. What must we seek for? The only true, genuinely perfect system of rescue!" "What is that like?" says another. "You have to ask? It is something that picks us all up of the water, dries and warms us, treats us to the best of food and puts us into a wonderful bed. Will you not join us in seeking this means?" "I don't think so." "What will you do then?" "I am floating on an oar. Over there is another. I will try to reach it, to get an oar under each arm." "And such a goal satisfies you! You poor, undemanding soul!"

Interviewer: Can one do without the hope for a life after death?

When saying the hope, one presupposes a world or a form of life that is adapted to one's own needs. Otherwise, one would ask: Can you do without the fear of a life after death? And that, I can. Olaf Bull could have written: "I think of days like this, when I shall not live. Buses will run into the ditch – without me." Today is one of the days he had in mind. Terrible – or what?

Interviewer: So death becomes merely a question mark in the light of this?

Only the way of it, but that is not 'mere'. The verdict is not published until the execution has begun. Personally I regard the year 2050 much as the year 1850, when I was nothing but northern wind and potato-land, and the lethal pathways swept past me far away. I did not worry about the war in 1864, nor will I be concerned by what awaits our descendants.

Yet even the image of death depends on whoever has it. We cannot pronounce on aspects of existence without being seated in one of them ourselves.

And this is where the Mystery engulfs us.

Quotes from 'To Be a Human Being'

1990 Documentary, Tromsø Norway: Original Film AS

"Each new generation asks – What is the meaning of life? A more fertile way of putting the question would be – Why does man need a meaning to life?"

"Man is a tragic animal. Not because of his smallness, but because he is too well endowed. Man has longings and spiritual demands that reality cannot fulfil. We have expectations of a just and moral world. Man requires meaning in a meaningless world."

"The seed of a metaphysical or religious defeat is in us all. For the honest questioner, however, who doesn't seek refuge in some faith or fantasy, there will never be an answer."

"We come from an inconceivable nothingness. We stay a while in something which seems equally inconceivable, only to vanish again into the inconceivable nothingness."

"The immediate facts are what we must relate to. Darkness and light, beginning and end."

"Death is a terrible provocation. It appears almost everywhere, presenting a stern but effective scale for both values and ethical standards."

"Death is the most certain and the most uncertain event there is."

"In accordance with my conception of life, I have chosen not to bring children into the world. A coin is examined, and only after careful deliberation, given to a beggar, whereas a child is flung out into the cosmic brutality without hesitation."

"Mankind ought to end its existence of its own will."

“I myself am no longer very much afflicted by the thought of my own death. The synthesis, Peter Wessel Zapffe, did not originate until 1899. It was spared from immediate participation in the horrors of the previous years, and it will not miss what awaits mankind at the end of its vertiginous madness.”

“If one regards life and death as natural processes, the metaphysical dread vanishes, and one obtains ‘peace of mind’”.

Philosopher of Tragedy

Article from *Norway Now* magazine

By Thomas Hylland Eriksen, August 1997

Perhaps one does not have to be a mountaineer in order to be a Norwegian philosopher, but it probably helps. The most famous person to combine the two vocations is octogenarian Arne Næss, an early adherent of logical positivism who later in life turned to ecological thinking and is known internationally as the founder of "deep ecology". Næss has two standard responses to journalists asking him why he climbs: either he would say, in his Buddhist sage fashion: "Because it's there," -- or, if the journalist is male, "Why did you give it up yourself?" The number of other Norwegian philosophers who have a weakness for the experience of dangling helplessly in ropes from dizzying heights is such that there is bound to be a connection between the balancing art of mountaineering and national philosophies. Nowhere is that connection more evident than in the life of Peter Wessel Zapffe, arguably the most original Norwegian philosopher of this century. Almost forgotten outside the inner circles of aficionados, Zapffe's works are about to be republished along with a volume of posthumous writings, edited by philosophy student Jørgen Haave. It is about time.

Peter Wessel Zapffe, the son of a pharmacist, was born in Tromsø in 1899, and died in 1990. He wrote in many genres, including literary essays, drama and poetry -- indeed, as a law student, he not only endeavoured to climb one of the neoclassical columns outside the University of Oslo, but he also submitted a long, rhyming poem as an exam paper, doubtless to his tutor's bottomless despair.

Be this as it may, Zapffe's major work was a massive treatise on human tragedy, *Om det tragiske*, published during the Second World War. This masterpiece was written at the same time as Sartre was working out the doctrine later to be world-famous as Existentialism. Sartre wrote in a world language, while Zapffe's Dano-Norwegian was never translated. Had it been published in German, English or French, the book might have been a classic today.

Zapffe's main argument and world-view was, roughly, this: Like all living species, humans are endowed with a certain number of physiological and social needs; the need for food, rest, security and so on. These needs are quite easily satisfied. However, we humans have an additional need, lacking in all other species, for an overarching meaning of life. This need, according to Zapffe, can never be satisfied unless we deceive ourselves. We can thus either delude ourselves into belief in a false meaning

of life, or we can remain honest and realise that life is meaningless. Unlike Sartre's existentialism, which was ultimately an optimistic doctrine, Zapffe's existential view was bleak. His great survey of tragedy in literature, politics and the arts indicated that all human endeavour was ultimately futile. He was a worthy heir to the great German pessimist Schopenhauer, and his view on the human destiny was simply that we ought to stop procreation immediately.

Others have tried to "out-Zapffe Zapffe", most eloquently another Norwegian mountaineer and philosopher, Herman Tønnessen, the author of "Happiness is for the pigs". Tønnessen argued, against Zapffe's view that life is meaningless, that life is not even meaningless.

Zapffe was a complex man with a great, if dark, sense of humour. One of his most admired books was a collection of essays on the outdoor life, *Barske glæder* ("Rough Pleasures"), and he even published a collection of stories and jokes from his home region. His passion for mountaineering was tantamount to a passion for teasing the God whose existence he denied. Upon hearing of the tragic death of a fellow philosopher, who had been rammed in the chest by a freak boulder during climbing, he reputedly wrote, after expressing his regrets: "I am given to understand that the boulder changed its direction and came after him. That's God!"

The View from Mount Zapffe

Article from *Philosophy Now* magazine

By Gisle Tangenes, 2004

“This world,” mused Horace Walpole, “is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.” And for Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899-1990), humans are condemned to do both. We have evolved a yearning for metaphysical purpose – for intrinsic justice and meaning in any earthly event – that is destined for frustration by our real environment. The process of life is oblivious to the beings it makes and breaks in the course of its perpetuation. And while no living creature escapes this carnage, only humans bear the burden of awareness. An uninhabited globe, argues Zapffe, would be no unfortunate thing.

Born in the arctic city of Tromsø, in Norway, Zapffe was a luminous stylist and wit, whose Law examination paper (1923) – in rhyming verse – remains on display at the University of Oslo. Following some years as a lawyer and judge, he had a revelatory encounter with the plays of Ibsen and reentered university to attack “the ever burning question of what it means to be human.” The answer he reached is an original brand of existentialist thought, which, unlike the more optimistic views of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus, concludes in a minor key. Among its earliest airings was a little essay called ‘The Last Messiah’ (1933).

The piece begins with a fable of a stoneage hunter who, as he leaves his cave at night, is stricken by pity for his prey and has a fatal existential crisis. This is a parable resonating with two archetypal tales of Western culture. Firstly, it recalls the Allegory of the Cave in Plato’s Republic, which also relates the eyeopening exit of a cave; secondly, it alludes to that origin myth of moral sentiment, the Fall of Man in Genesis. Zapffe chimes in with an exegesis to the effect that his caveman was a man who knew too much. Evolution, he argues, overdid its act when creating the human brain, akin to how a contemporary of the hunter, a deer misnamed the ‘Irish elk’, became moribund by its increasingly oversized antlers. For humans can perceive that each individual being is an ephemeral eddy in the flow of life, subjected to brute contingencies on his or her way to annihilation. Yet only rarely do persons lose their minds through this realisation, as our brains have evolved a strict regime of self-censorship – better known as ‘civilisation.’ Betraying a debt to Freud, Zapffe expands on how “most people learn to save themselves by artificially limiting the content of consciousness.” So, ‘isolation’ is the repression of grim facts by a code of silence; ‘anchoring,’ the stabilising attachment to specific ends; ‘distraction,’ the continuous stream of divertive impressions; and ‘sublimation,’ the conversion of anguish into

uplifting pursuits, like literature and art. The discussion is sprinkled with allusions to the fate of Nietzsche: the poster case, as it were, of seeing too much for sanity.

Lastly, Zapffe warns that civilisation cannot be sustained forever, as technology liberates ever more time for us to face our demons. In a memorably ironic finish, he completes the tribute to Plato and Moses by foretelling a 'last Messiah', to appear in a tormented future.

This prophet of doom, an heir to the visionary caveman, will be as ill-fated. For his word, which subverts the precept to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth," is not to please his fellow man: "Know yourselves – be infertile, and let the earth be silent after ye."

The Messiah's ideas are developed at greater length in the treatise *On the Tragic* (1941), unaccountably never translated into any major language. The work is rigorously argued, yet so suffused with carnevalesque humour that one critic acclaimed its author as 'the Chaplin of philosophy.' Nor is there want of poetic imagery; at one point, for instance, a sea eagle bred in cage is evoked as an analogy to the human predicament. While unable to manifest its potential in captivity, such an eagle should doubtless perish if released into the open sky.

That dilemma highlights a fundamental concept of Zapffe's tome: the 'objectively tragic' sequence, that is, any narrative in which excellence is linked to misadventure. Aristotle's theory of tragedy in the *Poetics* centers on the debacle of a generally virtuous individual who makes a fateful error of judgment, expressing a latent flaw of character. By contrast, objectively tragic tales do not hinge on any fault of the protagonist; rather a manifestation of 'culturally relevant greatness' prefigures his demise. Such excellence either engenders the calamity or is else instilled in the protagonist by whatever does, for instance a disease. To clarify his model, Zapffe introduces a hierarchy of 'interest fronts': biological, social, autotelic (pertaining to whatever is rewarding in itself), and metaphysical. The latter one, essential to humanity, requires a dual virtue for objectively tragic sequences to unfold: (i) aspirations to secure a just and meaningful world; and (ii) intellectual honesty. Insofar as (i) alone is found in a character, whether real or a fictional, her response to absurdity and injustice should be to sacrifice lower-ranking interests on behalf of the metaphysical one. This sets the stage for what Zapffe labels a 'heroic' sequence of events. A tragic sequence demands the addition of (ii), and peaks with a devastating realisation that existence never will become satisfactory in terms of meaning and justice. For Zapffe, such resignation to futility marks the apex of many classic tragedies, from *Prometheus Bound* to *Hamlet*. His most intriguing case in point is *The*

Book of Job, in the Bible, which given its seemingly happy ending was never anybody's idea of a tragic tale. Yet on Zapffe's reading, Job has the misfortune to uncover the Lord's genuine nature: a benighted tyrant, mistaking might for right. Even martyrdom would be lost on this 'godly Caliban', and the disillusioned Job takes cover behind a mask of repentance. His is a timeless tragedy, for Jehovah 'holds sway in our experience' even today, as the symbol of 'a familiar social and biological environment:'

"He represents... the blind natural forces oblivious to the human craving for order and meaning, the unpredictable strikes of illness and death, the transience of fame, the betrayal of friends and kin. He is the god of machines and might, of rule by violence, Moscow tribunals, party yoke and conquest, of copper pipes and armour plates. Job is not alone to face him with spiritual arms. Some are downtrodden in heroic martyrdom; others see the limitations of martyrdom as well, yielding in the outer things, but hiding despair in their hearts."

The human condition is so structured, then, that objectively tragic sequences will readily arise (which is ultimately why they are described as 'objective'.) Not only is humankind distinguished by an impossible interest, the need for purpose in a realm of pure causality; it also excels at comprehending that realm. We relate to the truth as do moths to a flame.

Thus the 'thousand consolatory fictions' that deny our captivity in dying beasts, afloat on a speck of dust in the eternal void. And after all, if a godly creator is waiting in the wings, it must be akin to the Lord in The Book of Job, since it allows its breathing creations to be "tumbled and destroyed in a vast machinery of forces foreign to interests." Asserts Zapffe: "The more a human being in his worldview approaches the goal, the hegemony of love in a moral universe, the more has he become slipshod in the light of intellectual honesty." The only escape from this predicament should be to discontinue the human race. Though extinction by agreement is not a terribly likely scenario, that is no more than an empirical fact of public opinion; in principle, all it would require is a global consensus to reproduce below replacement rates, and in a few generations, the likening of humankind would "not be the stars or the ocean sand, but a river dwindling to nothing in the great drought." This rather less than life-affirming message is actually not without historical precedence.

In a preface to the 1983 edition of *On the Tragic*, Zapffe refers to "the insight, or Gnosis, that the Mystery of Life is amoral." That is no mere figure of speech: his philosophy does indeed suggest the mystical viewpoint known as Gnosticism,

influenced by Judaism and Platonism and flourishing early in the Christian era. Gnostic doctrines generally teach as follows. Our innermost selves began on a deific plane, the 'Fullness' (Pleroma), but were dispersed around the earthly shadowland, and locked into a cycle of rebirths, at the dawn of time. They may break free and reunite through Gnôsis: the awareness of their divinity, promoted by holy messengers. Yet the majority keep mistaking the dominion of death for home and partake in its reproduction, encouraged by cosmic slavers (archons) who serve the ignoble creator of matter – the deity of the Old Testament. As Hans Jonas noted in the 1950s, this esoteric lore resembles, to some degree, the outlook of modern existentialism. Both depict the human self as somehow thrown into, and incarcerated in, a foreign world, in which it mindlessly acquiesces unless woken by a sense of alienation. With Zapffe, the match appears closer than usual, for if he denies, like most existentialists, that humankind belongs in a heavenly home, he also echoes Gnostics in rejecting its continuance on earth.

Zapffe defended *On the Tragic* for his doctoral degree, not a risk-free act in the German-occupied Norway of the day; his friend Arne Næss, later the originator of 'deep ecology', took a break from resistance work to serve as opponent. After liberation, Zapffe turned down a professorship to live instead by his essays, monographs, poetry, plays and humorous writings.

Many of the latter address a favourite activity, the art of mountain climbing. This he extolled for being "as meaningless as life itself." (Destinations included, incidentally, the spire of Tromsø Cathedral, whence he proclaimed that he could not ascend further by means of the Church!)

Some find his zeal as a mountaineer, humorist and early champion of environmental conservation rather at odds with his philosophical pessimism. According to another friend and eco-philosopher, Sigmund Setreng, this paradox is resolved by considering the 'light bliss founded on dark insight' of the bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism – a wakened sage who accepts the futility of human accomplishment. In any case, Zapffe lived as he taught in reproductive matters, staying childless by design. Apart from Berit Zapffe, his spouse through 47 years, his name is now borne only by one of the arctic mountains he pioneered. As for Mt. Zapffe's philosophical counterpart, it presents an austere, yet impressive, vista of the earthly vale of tears. In a letter dated 1990, its conqueror described his 'view from the final cairn:' "The human race come from Nothing and go to Nothing. Above that, there is Nothing." At the close of his last major writing, Zapffe answers all who despair of this view. " 'Unfortunately,' rues the playful pessimist, 'I cannot help you. All I have for facing death myself, is a foolish smile.' "