



PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

Philosopher of Tragedy

BY THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN

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 Naess, an early adherent of logical positivism who later in life turned to ecological thinking and is known internationally as the founder of “deep ecology.” Naess 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.

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 endeavored 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

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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 realize 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 endeavor 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 the essay *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 humor. One of his most admired books was a collection of essays on the outdoor life, *Barske glæder* ("Rough joys"), 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!"

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