



PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

Die Norwegische Apparatlandschaft

Zapffe as Conservationist BY DAG O. HESSEN

Early in his life, Peter Wessel Zapffe came to a rather distressing insight: life is impermanent and our possibilities in it are limited. “It might be hard for a healthy and normal functioning person to face the fact that he should need a hundred lives instead of one, so as not to take 99% of his potential with him in his grave.” Despite—or maybe rather because of—this perception of things, Zapffe, during his ninety years long life, played on many different strings, and with great proficiency. From his humorous publication *Barske glæder og andre temaer fra et liv under åpen himmel* (“Rough Joys and Other Themes From a Life Lived Under the Open Sky”) at one extreme side, to his pessimistic view on life as expressed in his dissertation *Om det tragiske* (“On the Tragic,”

1941) on the other, the prolific mountaineer, writer, religion critic, photographer, lawyer and philosopher Zapffe displayed his many talents.

Zapffe’s philosophical perspective can be summarized as follows: humans, because of their mental capacities, have become sovereign masters over all other life, but the price for this has been high. While all other organisms have capacities that are in proportion to the challenges they are faced with—wings to fly, sharp teeth, fast moving legs, and so on—humans have *an excess of consciousness* which is deeply tragic. Our ability to be conscious and self-consciousness constitutes an unanswered cry in the dark, begging for a sense of purpose and meaning. Is there any meaning *at all* in anything? For animals, when they suffer, this remains

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limited to the physical pain itself, but for humans it can aggravate into bottomless fear and existential doubt. From the very moment we, as Zapffe did, start to see ourselves as nothing more than a conglomerate of pure matter that, for the duration of a moment, is on its way from eternity to eternity, we have become “the universe’s helpless captives,” and the “cosmic panic” becomes something very real.

Are we able to handle this “pressure of life,” as Zapffe called it?

The biological response to our excess of consciousness is the application of a broad range of “anchoring mechanisms”: entertainment, distraction, divertimento and organized pastime, all aimed to uphold biological functionality, as it maintains a bulwark against our deepest—and darkest—forms of awareness. “Why, then, hasn’t mankind gone extinct long ago already, during great epidemics of madness?” Zapffe asks himself. In many ways, this can be regarded as the essence of his philosophy, as articulated in his essay “Den sidste Messias” (“The Last Messiah,” 1937). His conclusion was: “Know thyself, be infertile and let there be peace on Earth after thy passing.”

Is this really the same Zapffe who, in his stories of a life under open skies, displayed such a great sense of humor and a rich and elegant use of language? Even though his pessimistic view on our human existence can be regarded as the basic backdrop of the whole of his life and his works, it is hard to catch sight of the dark Zapffe in *Vett og uvett. Stubber fra Troms og Nordland*. (“Wits and witless: Stumps from Troms and Nordland,” published in 1942, together with Einar K. Aas), in which one unmistakably finds the down-to-earth, astute northern Norwegian humor. It was Ar-

thur Arntzen, who may have grasped part of the core of what this life full of contrasts was about, when he said about Zapffe: “He who always felt so much attracted to the highest peaks, may have come to understand high up there, and better than anyone else, that seriousness and gaiety, tragedy and comedy, melancholia and laughter are all part and parcel of what it means to be human.” In his collection of essays *Spøk og alvor. Epistler og leilighetsvers* (“Jest and earnest, epistles and occasional verse”) both parts are present, as the title suggests, and even about seriousness Zapffe writes with a twinkle in his eye. It is first and foremost in his *Barske glæder* that his sharp pen and humor come to their fullest expression. *Barske glæder* could be regarded as one of the classic books on experiences in the outdoors, related to the tradition of travel accounts by Nansen, Amundsen and Ingstad.

An important aspect in Zapffe’s writings is the importance of free, wild nature. On basis of this, some have argued that Zapffe thus should be regarded as the forerunner of modern day deep ecology, of which Arne Naess, strictly speaking, was only a catalyst. This is of course open for discussion as we soon will do, but let us first have a look at Zapffe’s relation to Naess and to the radical nature conservation movement that started in the 1970s. In that context I will also touch upon what Zapffe really meant with his concept of *biosophy*.

At the end of the 1920s, shortly after he had moved from Tromsø to Oslo, student of law Peter Wessel Zapffe got acquainted with Arne Naess who, already at that time displayed a striking self-confidence, talented as he was both as a climber and philosopher. The friendship between Naess and a twelve years older Zapffe was characterized by a mutual sense of admiration. Even though

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Naess in the course of time became a senior in the field (in a formal sense) and already was appointed professor when Zapffe still had to finish his doctoral thesis *Om det tragiske*, Naess never concealed his deep admiration for Zapffe's analytical skill and brilliant use of language. However, the two had such different personalities that Zapffe eventually put an end to his friendship with Naess, whom, he thought, neither took life nor people seriously enough. Until then they had inspired each other through their engagement with both philosophy and mountaineering. And in the amusing tale "Barske glæder" the reader can easily recognize Arne Naess as one of the key characters in the story.

When one reads the at times rather witty and elegant, yet mostly prosaic correspondence that Zapffe and Naess maintained for over fifty years (from 1928

until 1978), one is struck by the fact that biosophy or ecology are hardly ever taken up as themes—or actually: not at all. So how important was Zapffe in Norway, in the context of efforts to advance nature conservation in general and deep ecology specifically?

With respect to Zapffe's views on nature, biology and ecology, one can distinguish three aspects, which are loosely related to each other: in the first place there is his biosophic method, which he practices in his dissertation *Om det tragiske*; then there is his more conventional engagement with the protection of nature; and lastly there is his possible contribution to the development of deep ecology. In order to maintain a chronological order and to adhere to what reason would dictate, it is natural to start with the intersection of biology and philosophy.



Okstinder, Senjen, 1926.

THE BIOLOGICAL METHOD

In brief, Zapffe's biological method, or biosophy, is based on the following reasoning. Humans, like all other living organisms, are confined by certain biological constraints; yet, according to Zapffe, they are also fundamentally unique. Although it counts for all living organisms that they strive for optimal biological operability, and (mostly) only that, humans stand out as an evolutionary wild card. We have developed an intellectual capacity that evolved way beyond what would be necessary from a biological point of view. The fear of "boredom" or fear to be left with nothing but our own thoughts (a fear for fear itself), comes to expression in the need to fill our existence with rumble and noise of all sorts. The biosophic method thus becomes

a kind of ecology that can help mankind to cope with that challenge—a challenge that requires a sophisticated answer, for it is so fundamentally at odds from the kind of direct challenges that other living beings, from amoeba to apes, face on their journey through life.

The biosophic perspective—or biological method—is applied in most of Zapffe's theoretical publications. In *Om det tragiske*, Zapffe indicates that he prefers using the term "biological" above "biosophic" ("thinking about life"), because biosophic "has mystical connotations which wouldn't be appropriate in this context...." In his later writings he uses the term "biosophic" more frequently. The difference between the two concepts is not clear, apart from the fact that "biological" implies something more empirical and less spiritual than "biosophic." It is important to stress that



Looking at Isskartind.

Zapffe employs a biological or biosophic *method*, and not “biosophy” as such. It should thus be distinguished from Arne Naess’s concept of ecophilosophy or Sigmund Kvaløy’s notion of ecosophy, in which, in both cases, nature itself is the central theme. For Zapffe, biology and the living conditions of our species provide the backdrop, the source of metaphors and the analytical tools that we need on our journey through life. Despite Zapffe’s strong environmental engagement and his view that humans are foreigners in nature, it is man’s journey through life that really interests him. The aim of his anthropomorphism (the attribution of human forms or other characteristics to beings other than humans) of nature, which he brings to bear in *Om det tragiske* (especially in the first two chapters), as well as in his animal fables, is to clarify why humans in general are so strongly inclined to use metaphors stemming from the animal world; it’s not the animals themselves that are of interest here.

Zapffe claims that animals have a calming effect on humans because, “in the case of animals, an absolute harmony reigns between their capacities and their needs,” in stark contrast with how the situation is for us, as humans. “When an animal’s needs for food and warmth are met to a satisfactory degree, it will attain a sense of happy peacefulness and carefree contentment. At that moment, the world is calm like a sea and there is nothing to be done. From times immemorial, humans have struggled to achieve such a peaceful state of mind in every possible way, through philosophizing and asceticism, through daydreaming, and through narcotics and war.”

NATURE CONSERVATION

Parallel to his strong passion for being in the outdoors, and his sense of humor that went along with it, Zapffe also had a longtime commitment to the protection of nature, which came to expression in a continuous flow of publications criticizing the “technification” of na-

ture. Even though his main focus was on the human condition, he felt a strong bond with untouched wilderness during the whole of his life. He was fervently against any human intervention in nature—be it the construction of roads, the erection of power lines, the spread of noise, and yes, even human presence in itself. His conservationist engagement was not completely free from elitist traits. Mountains should be “closed off,” they shouldn’t be made widely accessible. With regard to his nature conservation activities and his engagement with other causes, he was deeply conservative in certain respects and radically progressive in others. Through his commitment to nature conservation, he saw human beings as foreign elements and stated that the earth wouldn’t necessarily be worse off without humans. When he stated that it would be better for humankind to die out, either by abstaining from conceiving children (like he himself had done) or at least by having not more than only one child, he didn’t declare this because he saw humans as a menace to nature, but because life couldn’t supply the sense of purpose and justness that Zapffe was craving for.

In Zapffe’s *Barske glæder* there are two classic essays on the protection of nature, “Avskjed med Gausta” (“Parting with Gausta”—Gausta is an iconic Norwegian mountain) and “Farvel Norge” (“Farewell Norway”). “Parting with Gausta” can be considered as one of the first strong condemnations of Norway’s “conquest” of nature, written in a period when the belief in the merits of technology and progress still largely went unquestioned. “Farewell Norway” is a funny interview full of mockery that the writer conducts with himself—or rather with his alter ego, Jørgen, the old man of the mountain. The interviewer is a rather naïve journalist, a strong adherent of the idea of progress, who wants to hear Jørgen’s opinion on how the mountains can best be opened up to as many people as possible. Jørgen reacts furiously when confronted with this issue, firing one shot after the other: “I am talking about the whole filthification of Norway. We have already desecrated the most beautiful places to make room for foreign

exchange factories: mountains resorts. Concrete boxes called ‘Sunny Crest’ and ‘Shady Glade’ to entice asphalt gypsies who will soon find out that ‘Sunny Crest’ is really a parking lot and that the ‘rural fresh air’ comes from overflowing waste disposal units at the hotels down below; while at the same time, higher up, the silver is collected.” Or in more general terms:

Today the total weight of the Norwegian population is 220.000 tons. In this country, the only commonly shared goal is to increase, double, or quadruple the amount of people. The God of our times is called Multiplier. He is omnipotent and omnipresent. He guarantees that six times five is thirty, irrespective of whether this amounts to shit or to lilies. Each and every new cradle is a temple in his honor. Rows of houses with rows of people; apartment blocks with blocks of people; mass production of efficient people. In a world of mathematicians nobody bothers to ask what all these numbers are supposed to mean.”

“Farewell Norway” can thus be seen as the quintessence of Zapffe’s skeptical views on progress. Progress only stands for “more of everything,” an avalanche that covers up mountains. As early as 1934, in his essay “Fjellet i fare” (“Mountains in danger”), Zapffe ventilated his objections against making the mountains more accessible. In this essay he criticizes The Norwegian Tourist Association for its efforts to open the highlands:

Once there are signs, the character of a mountain area changes fundamentally. It’s like the difference between a virgin and a whore... When we go to the mountains, it is because we want to get away from this rationalized, economic and man-made world, in which we are forced to live, and we do not want to be confronted with it in any new way or, God forbid, in any *familiar* way. What we are looking for is absolute

silence, the one that you can only find in wilderness. That’s why it is the *first* sign post that is devastating, not the twentieth or thirtieth.

Another critical essay by Zapffe on the destruction of nature is “Veien” (“The Road,” 1952). It poetically describes a path that gently winds its way past roots and rocks, and that even after its transformation into a dirt road that is fringed with wild flowers continues to maintain its organic relations with its surroundings. Then something radically changes—people plan to build a new hotel in the valley.

The engineers came. Strange men with iron rods, T-squares and eyes of quartz with which they could see the beams. They yelled and they dug and with a lot of roar and smoke they tore a broad and bleeding soar in the rock, right through the valley.... the new road went *berserk*, blind and deaf to everything except reaching its final goal.

Zapffe wanted to save the Norwegians “from *Die norwegische Apparatlandschaft*” (Zapffe is keen to use the German language here; for him it stands for a kind of landscape on which humans and their technological operations have an ever greater impact) and he wanted to see to it that in defense of pristine nature not even red T’s would be painted on rocks, to thus mark a mountain trail. Does this represent an argument *against* humanity? No, Zapffe is not a radical deep ecologist; he is keen to retain wilderness for the sake of us, humans, because it serves as a way to connect to our “inner life” and as an arena for our Dionysian life cravings. Humans are welcome in wilderness areas, on the condition that we leave no traces behind—and there shouldn’t be too many of us at the same time. Undeniably, there is an elitist element in Zapffe’s reasoning: the mountains shouldn’t be made accessible for hordes of people demanding roads and comfort. Rather, access should be allowed to those (few) people who

deserve it—because of their own strenuous efforts, because they are able to truly appreciate the mountains as they are and because they manage to sit quietly on a mountain top, from where they can look down at all the hustle and bustle down in the valleys. His critique of society is mainly built on the view that, due to city life and mass tourism, we are robbed of the deep experience of the silence in nature and we no longer have the ability to reflect upon “that fundamental burning question—what it means to be human.”

Zapffe’s critique of the technification and the ever further dispersal of an “Apparatlandschaft” partly stems from his critical stance against development—or rather, “development”—that aims to subjugate nature, to erase the last blank spots on the map (in that respect, polar expeditions conducted with airplanes were



Zapffe overlooking surrounding mountains, with mount Stetind far in the distance.

PHOTO: FROM THE BOOK *ET LIV PÅ MANGE VIS: EN ANTOLOGI OM PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE*

a curse to him), and to make her accessible or to exploit her. There is a classic line that Zapffe was fond of quoting and it goes like this: “Way too few people enjoy the peacefulness of Ørnedalen. Once the ring road is there, this is bound to change.” The main problem with all this opening up of the landscape and making it widely accessible, in his view, is that it diminishes possibilities for people to experience it in a deep way—and this, ultimately, is more of an anthropocentric than a biocentric concern for Zapffe. He isn’t a deep ecologist in the sense of “all life is sacred.” One of his letters to Arne Naess—a letter dated “Jægervatnet,” August 26, 1939—opens as follows: “Dear friend! Here I find myself again sitting underneath the mountain tops, like a fox under a rowan tree: they rise up high and have become tarnished. Just a small trip, a so-called first ascent, the kind you would ignore....” And he ends the letter by referring to a review he has read of Albert Schweitzer’s life’s philosophy and the latter’s principle that “all life is sacred.” Zapffe is not really impressed by this principle:

Schweitzer is, at a quick glance, a complete joke. ‘Veneratio Vitae’—the golden, metaphysical moral principle: sacred and inviolable. All good and well, but then comes along an angry dog, or some cholera bacteria or a dandelion in a rose bed, then what? Yes, then we are allowed to kill them, we just have to. Have you ever heard of such a thing? When I came upon this part, I put the book aside, and went out to work in the forest.

One could argue that although Zapffe was radical in many ways in his critique of society, in other ways he was also a typical, rather classic conservative (no unusual combination), and this can also be traced in his use of language. He was particular about applying the correct rules of spelling, precisely as he had learned them at school.

DEEP ECOLOGY

In deep ecology, humans are seen as a part of nature, not having a higher moral position than other life forms. In contrast, Zapffe highlights the fundamental differences between humans and other life. For it is only our species that is equipped with an overdeveloped and dysfunctional ability to consciousness. As he argues in a later text, entitled “Biosofisk efterskrift” (“Biosophic epilogue”): “at some point during the millions of years of evolution—among a myriad of bigger and smaller differentiations—a division took place which split the Animal Kingdom in two, with animals on one side and the human species on the other...” Nevertheless, Zapffe also speaks of a “common destiny” for all life. In part, this common destiny is grounded in the fact that there is more to life than merely fulfilling the need of reproduction. “Humans have still not grasped” any higher meaning in the blind and purposeless relay-race of one generation taking over from the previous. Another aspect of this common destiny, however, is that all life is at the mercy of the blind and unpredictable forces of the universe: storms, fires, droughts, colds, meteor impacts—all life will be impacted by the same absolute and blind factor of chance, whether one is schooled or unschooled, amoeba or dictator. We are all given a temporary residence here, and it can be revoked at any time.

Hence, Zapffe’s main concern is humanity, and his view that humans should refrain from reproducing themselves comes forth from his reflections on our own situation, not from his concern for the planet. There is no doubt, however, that his criticism of the hedonistic, anti-intellectual consumer society, of the catastrophic race for ever more without reflecting on the “why,” of the fragmentation of nature, and of the commercialization of the mountains, has resonated widely with persons who were about to take central positions in the Norwegian environmental movement in general and in “mountain philosophy” in particular: Sigmund Kvaløy (later Setreng), Arne Naess, Erik Dammann, Nils Faarlund, and Ivar Mysterud. Sigmund Kvaløy

Setreng particularly was deeply inspired by Zapffe’s critique of society. He developed it further through initiating an activist environmental movement, with the cryptic name (*snm*)—always written in brackets, *snm* stands for *samarbeidsutvalget for natur og miljøvern*, the cooperative organization for nature and environmental protection. Clearly, Kvaløy Setreng himself regarded Zapffe as a major source of inspiration, as demonstrated for instance in his epilogue in an anthology of Zapffe’s writings entitled *Essays* (published in 1992). Arne Naess was also influenced by Zapffe’s criticism of the growth society; a point of view that gained momentum and was more widely embraced during the 1960s.

In 1972, Arne Naess first coined the term deep ecology. It was based on the viewpoint that formal ecology, above-all a science-based, rationalistic and analytic ecology, was not capable of engaging with that dimension of nature that affects human feelings of identification and empathy. Deep ecology can act as some kind of complement, where feelings are considered legitimate and important factors. The concept is related to an attitude towards nature that comes to expression in the slogan “*La elva leve*” (“Let the river live”). This is a deep, yet difficult to define feeling, because *everything* in nature has value—and we humans are part of this whole. Zapffe would have said yes to “*la elva leve*,” but would maybe have been more skeptical about the idea that all life is sacred.

Whether Zapffe indeed played the key role in Norwegian ecophilosophy or deep ecology, as some people have claimed, remains open to contest and, as said before, his biosophic method should not be confused with some of the concepts that were developed at a later instance, such as biosophy or ecosophy. However, no-one would deny that Zapffe has been very influential, as was demonstrated recently, rather compellingly, in the book *Arven og gleden—ett festskrift til naturen* (“Heritage and Joy, a Jubilee Edition for Nature,” 2010). The book was published by “The Council for Eco-philosophy,” chaired by Børge Dahle and Nils Faarlund, and it contains the so-called *Stetinderklæring*-

gen (“Declaration of Stetind”) on sustainable development, as well as many contributions (amongst others by myself) in which reference is made to Zapffe’s ideas. Stetind was really his mountain and a symbol for “the eternal sovereignty of the minerals.” Perhaps the typical “mountain eco-philosophy,” of which Zapffe was the forefather, can be characterized by the slogan “having a rich life with simple means.” These were Arne Naess’s words, but they would also have fitted Zapffe very well, just as they would fit many of us. It partly entails the protection of mountains and nature as such, but it also means the preservation of mountains as lo-

cus for a life of voluntary simplicity that leaves space for unbound thinking—including the kind of thinking that led Zapffe to formulate his philosophy.

But let us not make a too theoretical analysis when we explore Zapffe’s love for nature. It’s to be found in—or shines through—most of his essays in *Barske glæder*. It takes struggle, facing the freezing cold and ploughing through the endless deep snow to make one’s way up to Piggind Mountain, but what ultimately counts, is the freedom and joy—and a little glimpse of what, ultimately, constitutes the meaning of life.