



PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

# A Biosophical Perspective

*Humans as a Tragic Species* BY SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

Peter Wessel Zapffe was probably—with his *biosophy*—the leading philosopher in Norway to have a committed and clearly elaborated eco-philosophy of his own. The ideas that the ecological crisis of Western civilization have given such urgency are fundamental in his work from as early as the 1920s—long before he began using the word “ecology.” It is clearly demonstrated in a piece written (in poetical mode) in 1929 for the publication *Tromsø Stiftstidende*.<sup>[1]</sup> His thinking, even at this early stage, tallies with modern system ecology, and was in all probability developed independently of it. As in system ecology, Zapffe grounds the dynamics and existential conditions

of life in reflections on the so-called law of entropy—the theory of the inexorable tendency in the universe to even out energy differences and replace order with chaos—that is, to increase the amount of entropy.

All humanity, and every possibility of realizing values, depend entirely on mankind’s ability to resist this tendency—precisely what life on the planet in general has succeeded in doing for three billion years. Progress in light of this existentially unique counter force—the development of an ever strengthening structured diversity, depends in turn on the unremitting decomposition suggested by the entropic tendency, Growth builds on decay, death makes life possible. Only when

1. The poem *Krig* (“War”) was published under the pseudonym of Per Fjeld, 15 July 1929.

entropy has done its work will the sustained, irreversible change in our established states enable further diversification by exploiting as yet unused reproductive abilities and potentials inherent to organic matter.<sup>[2]</sup>

This conception of the singularity of life might perhaps be pleasing in an aesthetic or religious sense, but the individual person will not necessarily be persuaded as long as it maintains a grip on the affective consciousness which itself is inseparably bound up with the same relentless stream. Duration, understood as ecological balance, is not the same as the static states which ordinarily and unthinkingly provide us with a sense of confidence. On the contrary, the biological process's achievement of "equilibrium through change"<sup>[3]</sup> gives us certainty about one thing only—that growth is followed by decay and that new forms of life must replace the old. The achievements of mankind must fall, and the noise will be all the more deafening the mightier the constructed edifice.

The ecological crisis is a pertinent example, and explains Zapffe's horror of the destruction of the natural environment by industrialized societies and unconscious compulsion in adherents of economic-growth to succeed. It gave his justification of conservation a wider applicability and depth, things which only in recent years have gained a wider currency.

More unusually for Zapffe is how he expands the



scope of systemic/entropic thinking to people's mental life: the more meaning and justice people want, the more people must be prepared to face disappointment. Nature is not designed to meet these demands and their ilk. At the same time, they are precisely what define humanity's singularity. If mankind relents on these demands, it relents on its humanity. The basic principles of biological dynamics—what differentiates life from everything else in the universe—see humanity then as a chance offshoot in the biological undergrowth. It is through this that humanity fulfils the terms of which it means to be a "tragic" being, as Zapffe defined it in his doctoral dissertation from 1941.



Left: Setreng next to a memorial plaque for Peter Wessel Zapffe. PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION / Above: *Peter Wessel Zapffe and the Mountains*, drawing by Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng

2. This is a central point in the critique by system theoreticians of the mechanistic tradition in science (which, among other things, requires all processes to be reversible and that changes are not necessarily qualitative), of traditional Darwinism's accentuating of chance, and also of the analytical and quantifying social planning systems and economies which continue to dominate the field.
3. Which C.H. Waddington calls homeorhesos, to distinguish it from homeostasis.