



PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

The View from Mount Zapffe

BY GISLE R. TANGENES

“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 Stone Age 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 eye-opening 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 cave-man was a man who knew too much. Evolution, he

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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 realization, as our brains have evolved a strict regime of self-censorship—better known as “civilization.” 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 stabilizing 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 civilization 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 carnivalesque humor 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,



Zapffe looking afar from the mountain top.

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Snowy peak.

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 realization 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 armor 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 Naess, 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, mono-

graphs, poetry, plays and humorous writings.

Many of the latter address a favorite 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 comes from Nothing and goes 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.”



Reindeer swimming across the fjord.