



PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

The Last Messiah

BY PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

I *One night in times long since vanished, man awoke and saw himself. He saw that he was naked under the cosmos, homeless in his own body. Everything opened up before his searching thoughts, wonder upon wonder, terror upon terror, all blossomed in his mind.*

Then woman awoke, too, and said that it was time to go out and kill something. And man took up his bow, fruit of the union between the soul and the hand, and went out under the stars. But when the animals came to their waterhole, where he out of habit waited for them, he no longer knew the spring of the tiger in his blood, but a great psalm to the brotherhood of suffering shared by all that lives.

That day he came home with empty hands, and when they found him again by the rising of the new moon, he sat dead by the waterhole.

II What had happened? A break in the very unity of life, a biological paradox, a monstrosity, an absurdity, a hypertrophy of the most catastrophic kind. Nature had aimed too high, and outdone itself. A species had been too heavily armed—its genius made it not only omnipotent over the outer world, but equally dangerous for itself. Its weapon was like a sword without hilt or cross guard, a two-edged blade that could cleave through anything; but whoever used the sword had to grip it by its blade and turn one of its edges against himself.

In spite of its new eyes, mankind still had its roots in base matter; its soul was woven into matter and subject to its blind laws. But at the same time man could scrutinize matter as though it were a stranger; he could

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compare himself with other phenomena, uncover and categorize his own vital processes. He came to nature as an unbidden guest; now in vain he extends his arms and prays to be united with that which created him. Nature no longer answers, it made a miracle with man but has refused to acknowledge him since. Man has lost his citizenship in the universe, he has eaten from the tree of knowledge and has been banished from paradise. He is powerful in his world, but he curses his power because he has bought it with his soul's harmony, his innocence, his comfort in life's embrace.

He stands there with his visions, betrayed by the universe, in bewilderment and angst. Animals, too, know angst, under the roll of thunder and the claw of the lion. But man feels angst for life itself—indeed, for his own being. Life—for animals it is to feel the play of forces, of rut and play and hunger, and at the last, to bow before necessity. Suffering in an animal is limited to itself; for men it builds itself up and spilled out into

angst for the world and for life.

From the moment the child embarks on his journey down the river of life, the roar of death's waterfall fills the valley, always nearer and nearer; it gnaws, gnaws at the child's happiness. Man looks out over the earth, and it breathes like a great lung; when it exhales, delicate and graceful life teems out of its pores, and all the creatures stretch out their arms to the sun; but when it takes in its breath, a rustle of fragile spirits breaking sweeps through the multitudes, and their corpses lash the ground like showers of hail. Nor did man see only the number of his own days, but graveyards were exhumed to his view, and the cries of grotesquely decomposed cadavers, the anguish of sunken millennia, beat against him; motherhood's dreams, gone again to earth. The veil of the future was torn aside, and it showed him a nightmare of endless repetitions, a senseless squandering of organic stuff.

The suffering of humanity's billions passes into

Climbing trip of Peter Wessel Zapffe, Else Naess (both on image), and Arne Naess, which took place at some time between 1930 and 1940. PHOTO: ARNE NAESS, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NORWAY



him through the gate of his empathy; every event sneers at his demand for justice, the principle he holds most dear. He sees his genesis in his mother's womb, he holds out his hand and sees that it has five branches. Where does this accursed *five* come from, and what does that have to do with his soul? He is no longer simply at one with himself; in terror he touches his body: this is *you* and you extend so far, and no farther. He carries a meal inside himself, yesterday it was an animal running freely about by its own will, now he is absorbing it, making it a part of himself; where does he begin and where does he end? Things blend into each other in sequences of cause and effect, and everything he tries to seize and hold dissolves before his probing thoughts. Soon he sees mechanics behind everything, even behind that which he used to hold dear, his beloved's smile—there are other smiles, too, toes peeping through a torn boot. At last the nature of things is only his own nature, nothing exists but himself, every road winds back to himself, the world is but a ghostly echo of his own voice—he leaps up with a shriek and wants to vomit himself onto the earth, together with his foul meal, he feels insanity approaching, and tries to kill himself before he loses the power to do even that.

But as he stands an instant away from death, he sees the essence of death as well, and the cosmic significance of the step he was about to take. His creative imagination shapes new, terrifying possibilities behind death's door and he understands that there is no escape even in death. Now at last he can begin to trace the outlines of his cosmic situation: he is the universe's helpless prisoner, he is kept so that he can be condemned to nameless possibilities.

From that moment on he finds himself in a state of chronic panic. Such "cosmic panic" is basic to every human mind. The species, in this light, seems predestined to destruction, since any effort to preserve and continue life is crippled when one's undivided attention and energy is required to stave off the catastrophic pressure of one's inner being. That a species thus becomes unfit for life by reason of an overdevelopment of a single faculty is a tragedy that has befallen not only

man. Some contend, for example, that a certain species of deer once walked the earth but was rendered extinct by a set of antlers that had become far too large. Mutations, after all, are blind, thrown into life without a thought to their viability in the environment.

When one is depressed and anxious, the human mind is like such antlers, which in all their magnificent glory, crush their bearer slowly to the ground.

III Why, then, was the human race not wiped out long ago in great, raging epidemics of insanity? Why are there so few individuals who succumb to the pressure of life because their acuity reveals to them more than they can bear?

A consideration of the spiritual history and present state of our species suggests the following answer: most people manage to save themselves by artificially paring down their consciousness.

Had the great-antlered elk from time to time managed to break off the outermost prongs of its magnificent headgear it might have trod the earth a bit longer. In feverish, continual agony, true; but also in betrayal of its essence, its central characteristic, for from the hands of the creator it had received a commission to be the horned standard bearer above all the beasts of the field. What it won in continued existence it would have lost in meaning, in existential pride; it would have been a life without hope, a march not toward confirmation of its essence, but past confirmation's ruins, a self-destructive race against the sacred will of its blood.

The goal of life and life's own annihilation is common to both the giant elk and the human race; it is their tragic paradox. Faithful to its own essence, the last *Cervus giganticus* bore the standard of its species to the bitter end. Man saves himself, and continues. Ironically, man's survival is made possible by a more or less conscious suppression of his hazardous surplus of consciousness. This suppression is, for all intents and purposes, continuous; it goes on as long as we are awake and active, and becomes a condition for social adjustment and what is popularly called "healthy" and "normal" behavior.

Today's psychiatry operates under the assumption that this health and adjustment is the highest goal one can aspire to. Depression, angst, a refusal to eat, and so forth, are taken without exception to be marks of a pathological condition, and are treated accordingly. In many cases, however, these phenomena are indications of a deeper, more immediate experience of what life is all about, bitter fruits of the genius of the mind or emotion, which is at the root of every antibiological tendency. It is not the soul that is ill, but its defense mechanism that either fails or is abjured because it is considered—correctly—as a betrayal of man's most potent gift.

All life before our eyes is, from its innermost depths to its outermost rim, spun through and through with a crisscrossing net of suppression mechanisms, and we can trace their threads in the most trivial aspects of daily life. These mechanisms are of an almost infinitely colorful variety, but it seems justifiable to indicate at any rate four main types, which naturally occur in all manner of combinations: *isolation*, *attachment*, *diversion*, and *sublimation*.

By *isolation* I mean a completely arbitrary rejection of disturbing and destructive thoughts or feelings. Fully developed and in an almost brutal form, isolation can be observed in doctors who, with an eye to their own self-protection, see only the technical side of their profession. It may also degenerate into pure vulgarity, in ordinary thugs or medical students who try to exorcise any sensitivity to life's tragic sides with violence (e.g., playing soccer with the heads of cadavers).

In our daily social life, isolation manifests itself through universal, unwritten agreements to conceal our existential condition from one another. This concealment begins with children, in order to save them from being rendered senseless by the life they have just begun, to preserve their illusions until they are strong enough to lose them. In return, children are forbidden to embarrass their parents by untimely allusions to sex, shit, and death. Among adults there are rules about "proper" behavior, and we see them quite plainly

when a man who cries in the streets is taken away by the police.

The mechanism of *attachment* is also at work from early childhood, where parents, home, and neighborhood are taken for granted by the child, and give him a sense of security. This embracing ring of secure experiences are the first and perhaps most successful protection against "the cosmos" we come to know throughout the rest of our lives, and in these experiences lies an explanation of the much-discussed phenomenon "infantile bonding." Whether these bonds are also sexual is immaterial in this light. When the child discovers in later life that even these secure attachments are just as accidental and fleeting as any other, he experiences a crisis of bewilderment and anxiety, and quickly looks for new attachments (for example, "Next fall I'm off to college!"). If for some reason the new attachment does not "take," the crisis can either become life-threatening or develop into what I call "attachment paralysis": one clings to one's dead values, and tries to hide from oneself and from others their inadequacy and one's own spiritual bankruptcy. The result is permanent insecurity, feelings of inferiority, overcompensation, nervousness. To the extent that the condition can be analyzed, it becomes an object for psychoanalytical treatment, through which one tries to make a successful transferal to new attachments.

Attachment can be seen as an attempt to establish fixed points in, or a wall around, the shifting chaos of consciousness. Usually this is an unconscious process, but sometimes it is quite conscious, as for example in an attempt to set some sort of goal for oneself, some reason to live. Generally useful attachments are looked upon with sympathy, and those who give their all for their attachments (their company, or a project) are set up as role models for the rest of us. These heroes have managed to set up a strong bulwark against the dissolution of life, and others are supposed to profit by their example. Even *bon vivants*, we say, settle down, get married, and have children—the necessary walls are built automatically. We build a certain necessity into

our lives, we welcome that which formerly might have seemed an evil, only as a balm for our frayed nerves, a high-walled container for a feeling for life that had become slowly saturated with insecurity.

Every social unit is a large, rounded attachment system, built on the solid beams of basic cultural ways of thinking. The common man manages with these shared cultural beams, his personality almost builds itself. Our personality has stopped developing, and rests on inherited cultural foundations: God, the church, the state, morality, destiny, the laws of life, the future. The closer a norm lies to the bearing beams, the more dangerous it is to disturb it. As a rule, those close-lying norms are protected by laws and threats of punishment—the Inquisition, censorship, conservative attitudes, and so forth.

The strength of any one link in a chain of norms depends either on our not seeing through its fictive nature, or on everyone's recognizing that it is a neces-

sary norm, even though we realize that it *is* a fiction. An example is religious instruction in schools, which is supported even by atheists because they see no other way to compel children to act according to socially accepted norms.

As soon as the link's illusory nature or needlessness is perceived by someone, they quickly try to exchange the old norms with newer (there is a saying, "Truths have a limited life expectancy")—and this is the cause of all spiritual and cultural infighting, which, together with economic competition, constitutes the dynamic of world history.

The lust for material goods or power is not motivated so much by the direct usefulness of wealth, since nobody can sit on more than one chair at a time or eat more than their fill. The real value of great wealth is that the wealthy have at their disposal a much wider variety of possible attachments or distractions.

For both individual and collective attachments,

a break in the norm chain precipitates a crisis that is ever more serious the closer the break is to fundamental social norms. In one's inner self, where one is protected by outer walls, crises are encountered daily, but more often minor frustrations than life-threatening disasters. Here one can still toy with attachments, flouting them with mild swearing, "social" drinking, vulgar behavior, and so on. But playing these games can unwittingly dig too deeply at a weak spot in one's protective walls and break a hole through into the yawning void. The situation can change in the blink of an eye from a lighthearted caper



Epilogue.

to a dance of death. The terror of existence stares us in the face, and we realize with a staggering gasp that our minds hang suspended by a web of their own making, and that the abyss of hell gapes below.

The most basic beams supporting our culture can only rarely be changed without causing a major social spasm and a threat of total social dissolution, as during a reformation or a revolution. At such times the individual is thrown back upon his own resources, he must develop his *own* attachments, and there are few who can manage that. Depression, riotous living, and suicide are the result—as was the case for German officers after the First World War.

Another weakness in the system is that one must use very different defenses to confound the variety of dangers on all fronts. Each of these bulwarks comes with its own logical superstructure, and the unfortunate result is that conflicts between incommensurable sets of values inevitably arise. The superstructures col-

lide, and despair seeps in through the resulting cracks. Then one can be possessed of a wanton destructiveness, a lust to dismember the entire life-support system and, in gleeful terror, try to sweep away the whole mess. The terror is due to the loss of all comforting norms; the glee comes from the resulting purposeless identification and harmony with the deepest acknowledgment of our being—its biological transience, its tendency toward death.

We love our attachments because they save us; but we hate them, too, because they hinder our sense of freedom. So when we feel strong enough, it is a pleasure to come together and bury some anachronistic value, to the funerary chime of church bells. Material objects are useful as symbols, here, and these ceremonies are sometimes called expressions of “radicalism.” When someone has slain all the attachments he could lay eyes on, he calls himself a “liberated” man.

Diversion is a third popular defense mechanism.



Skiing under the moon light.

With diversion we keep our field of vision within acceptable bounds by keeping it busy with a ceaseless stream of new impressions. This is a typical dodge in childhood; without diversions a child can't stand himself—witness the common complaint, “Mom, there's nothing to do!” A little English girl I met while she was visiting relatives in Norway used to come constantly in from her room and ask, “What's going on?” Babysitters become virtuosos at diversion: “Look, child, see? They're painting the castle!” The phenomena is too well known to require further illustration. Diversion is the whole lifestyle of high society. It can be compared to an airplane—built of the earth, but able, with self-contained energy, to hold itself in the air as long as the energy is maintained. It must always be moving forward, because the air can only support it for an instant. The pilot can become lazy and secure from habit, but once the engine misfires, the crisis becomes acute.

Diversion tactics are often quite conscious. We need to steadily divert our attention from ourselves, because despair can lie just under the surface, in a catch of breath or a sudden sob. When all possible diversions are exhausted, we end up in a kind of “spleen” or peevishness. This ranges from a mild sulk to a lethal depression. Women, as a rule, seem to be more at peace with their existential situation, and are more likely to calm their anxieties through diversion.

In fact, a central aspect of punishment by imprisonment is that most opportunities for diversion are denied the prisoner. And, there being few other means for protecting oneself against angst, prisoners are for the most part constantly on the brink of utter despair. Any measures he can find to stave off this despair are justified as an attempt to preserve life itself; for the moment he experiences his soul alone in the universe, there is nothing else to see but the categorical impossibility of existence.

Pure, unadulterated despair, “life-panic,” will probably never come to fullness, since defense mechanisms are complex, automatic, and, to some extent, constantly operating. But the no-man's-land in proximity

to despair can also be a kind of death zone, and in them life can continue only under great duress. Death always offers a way out, despite the phantoms that are supposed to lurk behind it; and since the way one feels about death changes with the circumstances, it can even come to seem a welcome escape from life in the death zone. Some people manage, in fact, to build up a “proper death”—ringing elegies, a glorious last stand, the whole bit—as a final diversion, so there really can be “fates worse than death.” Newspapers with their gentle obituaries are in this case a mechanism for social suppression (for a change), since they always manage to find a soothing explanation for a death that was really due to despair; for example, “It is thought that the deceased took his own life because of the sudden fall in the price of wheat on the commodities market.”

When a man kills himself in despair, it is an entirely natural death, resulting from spiritual causes. The modern barbarity of trying to “save face” for the deceased is, then, a horrible misunderstanding of the nature of existence.

Few people can survive arbitrary, meaningless changes in their situation, whether it be a change of jobs, a change in the social life, or a change in the way they relax. Most “spiritually developed” people demand that these changes have a sort of continuity, direction, or progression. For them, no situation can be ultimately satisfying, they must always go a step further, gathering new information, pursuing a career, and so on. These people suffer from an ineradicable yearning to overstep limits, to demand more and more from life, a restless ambition that is never satisfied. When one's previous goal is reached, it becomes only a step to some higher goal—the goal itself, in fact, is immaterial; it is the yearning itself that is important. The absolute height of one's goal is less important than how much higher it is from where one momentarily finds oneself; it is the *marginal* degree of yearning that counts. The promotion from private to corporal is often more important than from lieutenant to general. Accordingly, this “law of marginally increasing demands” destroys

any hope that “progress” will be satisfying; there is no end to progress. Human yearning, then, means not just longing after something, but also longing to be saved *from* something, wherever we are at the moment. And if we use “save” or “salvation” in its religious sense, it becomes clear that this is precisely what characterizes the religious experience. Nobody has ever managed to explain what it is they are longing after in religion, but it is quite clear what they are trying to escape from –

this earthly vale of tears, one’s untenable existential situation. And if becoming aware of this situation is the greatest truth our souls can reach, it is also clear why religion is thought to be a fundamental need of human beings. In light of the above, however, the hope that there might be some ultimate confirmation for the existence of God seems utterly in vain.

With the fourth defense mechanism, *sublimation*, the mode of operation is transformation rather than suppression: with creative talent or unshakable panache, one might be able to transform the very agonies of life into pleasant experiences. One takes on the evils of life with a positive attitude, which can then twist them into useful experiences. It seizes, for example, on their dramatic, heroic, lyric, or even comic aspects and thus dissolves the terror in them.

Sublimation, though, only works so long as these evils have already lost their most bitter sting, or if one manages to sublimate them before despair sinks its fingers firmly into one’s mind. Mountaineers, for example, take no pleasure in gazing into the nauseating abyss below them until they have reached a nice, solid belay. Only then can they relish their exposed situation. Writers of tragedy are another example: to write a tragedy one must first free oneself from—betray—the essence of tragedy, so that one can look at it in a calm, detached way, appreciating its aesthetic qualities. In writing tragedy one has the luxury of being able to dance from one situation to another and another, steadily worse; there is really no end to the heights the writer can reach; in a way it is quite embarrassing. The author chases his ego through a countless variety of

desperate situations, watching with glee as the situation gets worse and worse, glorying (from a safe distance) in the power of consciousness to destroy itself.

This article, in fact, is a classic example of sublimation. Despite his perilous subject, the present writer is not suffering at all; he is merely filling pieces of paper with words, and will probably get paid for the manuscript.

IV Is it possible for so-called “primitive” peoples to manage life without all these philosophical spasms and gymnastics? Is it possible for them to live in harmony with themselves in the undisturbed pleasures of work and love? If these beings are to be called humans at all, I think the answer must be no. The most one could say about these children of nature is that they stand a bit nearer the beautiful biological ideal than we urbanized folk. That we have managed to save ourselves in spite of our harrowing existence is mostly due to those sides of our nature that are hardly or appropriately developed. Our heretofore successful defense, of course, cannot create human life, only delay its extinction. Still, our most positive traits are the proper use of our bodies’ strengths and the biologically useful part of our souls. And these traits must operate under stringent conditions—the limitations of our senses, the frailty of our bodies, and the energy-demanding task of keeping our bodies in one piece and our need for affection satisfied.

And it is just these conditions, the narrow range of possibilities for happiness, that are so crassly flouted by our modern, growing civilization, its technology, and its standardization. And since a large part of our best biological talents are superfluous in the modern, complicated technological game we play with the environment, we are victims of increasing spiritual unemployment. The value of technological advances for human life must therefore be evaluated according to their ability to afford us increasing spiritual activity—without at the same time destroying the nature that gives us the opportunity to practice these activities. The limits of proper technological development are unclear, but I would venture that the earliest flint scrapers were a good discovery.

Every single other technological innovation has had more value to the inventor himself than to anyone else. They represent grand and ruthless larceny from the possibilities for others' experiences, and should be punished with the most stringent penalties if they are made public against the better judgment of an institution established to evaluate them. One crime among many of this sort is the use of aircraft to map unknown areas. In one fell swoop the tremendously rich possibilities for others' experiences are destroyed, experiences that could have been held in trust for the common interest, such that everyone could have had the joy of discovery after his own efforts.

The global fever of life is at the moment characterized by the continual impoverishment of the possibility of spiritually developing experiences. The absence of biologically natural possibilities for fulfilling expe-

rience is evidenced by the mass flight to diversions: amusements, competitive sport, radio—"the rhythm of the times." Attachments are in a bad way—all the inherited cultural attachments have been shot full of holes by criticism, and dread, anxiety, bewilderment, and despair pours in through these same holes. Communism and psychoanalysis, as different as they are in other respects, both try to construct new versions of the old defense mechanism: with violence and cunning, respectively, to make people useful by cutting down their surplus of insight into life's precariousness.

Both of these methods are uncannily logical. But even these attempts will be, in the end, unsuccessful. A purposeful degeneration to a practically useful lower level of consciousness might save the race for a short time, but human nature being what it is, we would not find lasting peace in such a resignation, or in any resignation.



Zapffe with his rowing boat.

V If we follow this train of thought through to the bitter end, the conclusion is inescapable: As long as humankind blunders along under the dire misconception that we are biologically preordained to conquer the earth, no alleviation of our angst for life is possible. As the number of people on the earth grows, the spiritual atmosphere will become tighter, and defense mechanisms will have to become ever more brutal.

And we will continue to dream of salvation, redemption, and a new Messiah. But after many saviors have been nailed to trees and stoned to death in the marketplace, then the last Messiah will appear.

A man will come forth, who before all other men has dared to strip his soul naked and give himself wholly over to our most profound questioning, even to the idea of annihilation. A man who has grasped life in its cosmic context, and whose agony is the agony of the world. But such a rising wail will assail him from all the people of the earth, crying for his thousand-

fold execution, when his voice blankets the world like a shroud, and his peculiar message is heard for the first and last time:

The life on many worlds is like a rushing river, but the life on this world is like a stagnant puddle and a backwater.

The mark of annihilation is written on thy brow. How long will ye mill about on the edge? But there is one victory and one crown, and one salvation and one answer:

Know thyself; be unfruitful and let there be peace on Earth after thy passing.

And when he has spoken these words, they will fall upon him, with midwives and wet nurses at their head, and they will bury him under their fingernails. He is the last Messiah. From father to son, from son after father, he is descended from the archer at the waterhole.



Peter Wessel Zapffe as a painter.
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