
III. ASPIRATION CORNER

Peter Wessel Zapffe: The Ontological Tragedy of Human Being

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Abstract: The hermeneutics of Peter Wessel Zapffe's tale *The Last Messiah* depicts the difficult condition of human life, which finds itself living as an unwelcome guest in the world. Nature has armed the human being with a sharp sword without a hilt: consciousness. This has allowed humans to survive in the environment but is also a weapon that turns against the human species itself. Self-awareness and awareness of the world do not satisfy the metaphysical interest that humans harbor, on the contrary, it completely empties it, thus annihilating the existence of human beings as well. Through the narrative of a hunting scene and an encounter between the hunter and non-human animals, Zapffe manages to describe, in a few pages, the nature of our species, the reasons for its suffering, its defense mechanisms, and the only possible hope for salvation.

Keywords: Zapffe; Human Predicament; Tragic; Antinatalism; Consciousness; Meaningless.

Introduction

Peter Wessel Zapffe is a unique thinker whose philosophy is placed between moral reflection and metaphysics. From a moral standpoint, he is notable, among other things, for his sensitivity to ecological issues and his Antinatalism as a way to preserve nature from man. Elsewhere¹, I have emphasized Zapffe's crucial role in bridging the gap between ancient Proto-antinatalism and Contemporary Antinatalism, due to his exploration of the harmful yet salvific nature of *knowledge*.

¹ Although Italian language is not available to all scholars, I would like to remind to my papers: Sarah Dierna, *Contemporary Antinatalism*; "Mediterranean Dialogues", (62) July-August 2023: 473-383. See also Alberto Giovanni Biuso & Sarah Dierna, *Antinatalism: History and Meaning of a Radical Philosophy*; "Mediterranean Dialogues" (64), November-Dicember 2023: 56-75.

Zapffe's writing is highly complex and demanding, but it compensates the reader with a deep reflection on what does it mean to be a human being². Unfortunately, much of his philosophical work is available in Zapffe's native language, that is Norwegian, only few essays have been translated into English³, limiting their accessibility to a wider audience. In this article, I shall focus on the archaic story *The Last Messiah*⁴ where, through the narrative of a hunting scene and an encounter between the hunter and non-human animals, Zapffe manages to describe, in a few pages, the nature of our species, the reasons for its suffering, its defense mechanisms, and the only possible hope for salvation.

However, I will also draw on other Zapffe's works, including *Firewall, Norway*, a fictional dialogue between Jørgen, a mountaineer, and an editor. This dialogue presents a confrontation with the radical positions of the interviewee, and highlights the necessity, urgency, and reasons for supporting an antinatalist campaign.

The verses from his poems *Lullaby* and *Epilogue* are also significant. They convey compassion for young life that is yet to embark on its journey of self-affirmation in the world, but also the lucidity of the end which comes up in the maturity. In other words, the tragic truth of existence.

Both the poems and the imaginary interview, along with the 1933 short story, are available in English translation edited by Peter Reed and David Rothenberg. Although these works represent only a part of Zapffe's production⁵, I hope they can show the philosophical core of Zap-

² Zapffe did not immediately study philosophy. Indeed, he had to undertake legal studies because of his father's wishes. An anecdote tells that when he had to discuss his law degree thesis, he expressed himself in verses and rhymes.

³ Zapffe's main work *Om det Tragiske* has finally been translated in English by Ryan L. Showler. See Peter Wessel Zapffe, *On the Tragic*, Peter Lang, New York, Berlin, Bruxelles, Chennai, Lausanne, Oxford, 2024.

⁴ Peter Wessel Zapffe, *The Last Messiah*; Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (edited by), *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, translated in English by S. Kvaløy with P. Reed, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1992.

⁵ Two other short essays are also available in English: the first is *Parting with Gausta*, in which the central issue is the need to preserve Nature from any form of culture and to leave it undisturbed. Gausta is a mountain violated by humans who have built cities, roads, and man-made elements in it that make its beauty fade; I quote the last words of this lay prayer/greeting: «Because you were beautiful, you had to die». See P. Wessel Zapffe, *Parting with Gausta*, «Open Air Philosophy»: 1-2.

ffe's thought clarifying the role of Man in nature and its harmful condition in being into the world.

Nature and the Appearance of Man

The *Last Messiah* (*Den sidste Messias*) is a short story published in 1933. Here Zapffe describes the human condition and its nature, its behaviors, its lies, its death, and the only possible hope of salvation. Written in archaic Norwegian, the story is divided into five brief sections. Before delving into the content of each section, I would like to briefly summarize the plot.

The story opens with a hunter awakening and *seeing* himself for the first time by intuiting his real condition as a part of nature. This experience exacerbates the internal conflict between *his perception* of the world and *the reality of the world* that does not correspond to this perception. This contrast is manifested in the hunting scene in which the hunter is engaged; non-human animals are prey but are also brothers who suffer like him (*Brotherhood*).

In the second part, Zapffe denounces nature's error in aiming too high and generating a highly dangerous species, placing in its hand a powerful weapon: *consciousness*. This has made Homo sapiens master of the external world and of all that exists. Consciousness is like a double-edged sword that strikes the external world, but also the existence of the species of which it is an attribute. Humans remain a guest of creation, a fragile entity that feel the inconsistency of everything, feels the anguish of life, and know the *truth* of the cosmos, namely its lack of purpose and justice, the inevitable end of all things, the pain of existence at the expense of something else, the senselessness of a world that is in itself pure energy. A condition of lucidity and pain that should have led a species like ours to *extinction*, as happened to other animals due to the excessive development of their organs.

In the third part, the author explains why the human animal has not

The second essay presents a commented translation of §106 of *Om det Tragiske*, in which the philosopher discusses the *Book of Job*, presenting God as a traitor and Job as the victor. See K.J. Dell and A. Schytte Blix, *The Norwegian Philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899-1990) and the Book of Job*; "The Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters", Skrifter nr. 1-2022: 5-25.

yet become extinct. Zapffe introduces the four mechanisms by which he has reduced the content of consciousness and diminished the impact of truth in his life. The study of these mechanisms also considers contemporary knowledge, such as psychoanalysis, and examines in practice certain elements of daily life that have been created to suppress certain types of truth.

The fourth part returns to considering some aspects discussed in the second section and moves towards conclusions. Here, Zapffe argues that it has never been an era in human history devoid of anguish, but he recognizes that primitive peoples were much closer to biological unity, while modernity has neglected these elements and favored the development of technological devices, which have separated humans from their home making them disrespectful inhabitants of nature. The author also insists on the partiality of the defense mechanisms for the survival of the species; the deliberate suppression of consciousness may save the human race for a certain period *delaying* its extinction, but it never *excludes* it altogether. Humans cannot escape their destiny.

The fifth section prepares for the arrival of the last Messiah, whose coming is prophesied by the individual who has managed to grasp the cosmic meaning of the world, the web of pain that sustains it, and to follow its threads to the margins of life. This individual finally brings the good news of annihilation and a message of salvation for humanity, which, however, is not yet ready to accept all this and save itself. Thus, it responds by attacking the prophet of the future and leaving humanity nailed to its cross.

The peculiarity of the story lies in narrating an *evolutionary-biological* history of the human organism, which is observed in its biological nature; existential tragedy is traced back to nature and its developments. The notion of the *tragic*, which is at the core of Zapffe's thought, is very close to Camus's notion of *Absurd*, but the two concepts remain distinct and not overlapping. While the absurd is not in the world and not in the self but in the co-occurrence of the world along with the self, the tragic is biologically inscribed in the self that inhabits the world, thus manifesting itself in the dynamic of co-occurrence but the driving force of this feeling belongs intrinsically to human nature. The discourse will be clarified further by examining all the biological and existential variables of this nature.

Ontological Tragedy of Human Being

As mentioned before, the story, set in a long gone past, begins with the curious scene of a man who wakes up: «One night in times long since vanished, man awoke and saw himself». In the moment the hunter opens his eyes, he sees himself «naked under the cosmos, homeless in his own body»; at that moment «everything opened up before his searching thoughts, wonder upon wonder, terror upon terror, all blossomed in his mind»⁶.

The awakening and the ability to see oneself create a space of *revelation*. Awakening happens within being, and the existential sleep in which humanity is evidently dormant is itself an *internal state* of being; but awakening also happens, in a truly original way, as a sort of *external state* at the boundary with non-being, where sleep is the place of nothingness from which the human is pulled out in coming into the world. The first is an *epistemological awakening*, the second an *ontological awakening*.

As an ontological awakening, opening one's eyes is nothing more than the act of coming into the world of a new being who is born naked, without the home of the mother's womb, only with his own body and sensations. This original genesis is better understood in a 1983 work, namely *Epilogue*. In it, Zapffe addresses the central subject of the 1933 story. In the poem, humanity is born from matter, generated by flames (the Heraclitan principle):

In the heart's hollow, in the mind's bitter order,
in secret closets and the shelter of night
is the incomprehensible world of All,
and the mistgloom dawn of time—
billions of years pressed together
to one second of mutatoric light,
where mankind sprang out of smelting flames
and saw itself as an appalling sight⁷.

From the «in-comprehensible world of All» - in the literal sense of that which is not comprehended -, from the passage of time, from the light

⁶ *The Last Messiah* §1: 41.

⁷ Peter Wessel Zapffe, *Epilogue*; Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (edited by), *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, translated in English by Sigmund Kvaløy with Peter Reed, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1992: 59.

that is both mass and energy (as Einstein's rule suggests), humanity springs forth and repeats the same scene with which the story (1933) opens: it sees itself («[mankind] saw itself»). This visual and theoretical experience is therefore immediately subsequent to the cooling of the flames, and *originally* belongs to our species, which is shaped as conscious matter. In other words, the author emphasizes the natural, biological, and constitutive dimension of consciousness; thus awakening may be considered an embryonic event.

The same dichotomy of sleep and awakening, being and non-being, is at the heart of *Lullaby*, first published in Zapffe: *Utvalg og innledning (Selections and introduction)* (Pax Forlag, Oslo 1969)⁸. It is a lullaby, a song sung in order to keep a child asleep a little longer before slipping into the jaws of existence. The child is presented as a small guest who comes from foreign shores and is called by love to become a seed, a child, an adult, a piece of conscious matter. Peter Reed and Sigmund Kvaløy read this poem as a wish or hope that the child may preserve himself as long as possible in childhood, ignorant of the tragedy of existence, in the age that Giacomo Leopardi defined that of imagination.

In *The last Messiah* as well as in *Lullaby*, the existential journey along the river of life begins as children: «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»⁹: «Go then in the mighty stream/ here my eyes are plunging»¹⁰.

The sleeping child under the covers is therefore an embryonic creature, a «little seed»¹¹. As Zapffe writes: «still you are not ours/ – you belong to them out there –,» an expression that admits both interpretations mentioned above regarding awakening: an ontological act and an epistemological act. Immaturity of years represents in this case existential goodness; the goodness of the first peoples and the first epochs of history in which, despite the inescapable condition of their nature, humans had not broken ties with matter. In the fourth part of the story, Zapffe notes

⁸ Peter Wessel Zapffe, *Lullaby*; Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (edited by), *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, translated in English by Sigmund Kvaløy with Peter Reed, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1992.

⁹ *The Last Messiah*: §2: 42.

¹⁰ *Lullaby*: 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

that although primitive peoples were overwhelmed by the same existential spasms that made their lives difficult and tragic, they had not moved too far from biological unity compared to modern and unnatural populations, which have instead created a fracture and increased this distance. While the traits that ensured the survival of the older populations consisted in «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», the development of modern civilizations has neglected «[the] conditions, the narrow range of possibilities for happiness, [...] growing civilization, its technology, and its standardization». The consequence of this distance has made «[the] large part of our best biological talents [...] superfluous in the modern, complicated technological game we play with the environment, we are victims of increasing spiritual unemployment»¹². The culmination of such technological development and such an excess of spirit has led to a *separation* between the human and the whole, has fractured the initial *biological unity* with the result of no longer recognizing this unity with nature, which nevertheless remains: «[what] gives us the opportunity to practice these activities»¹³.

Humanity may be conceived as «a mighty Bomb is he/ of chromosomic-isotopic strength,/ and the fuse fizzes the whole time he/ in play and love, in war and work,/ will always be tilling his own soul going from gnome to dizzy phantom/ He draws himself up and bears his head high,/ and claims all wins as his own,/ believing all his profits are pure»¹⁴.

Humans would in fact have managed to impose a hierarchy within their kingdom through the technical availability that nature has granted them; the hunter takes the bow that Zapffe describes as «fruit of the union between the soul and the hand»¹⁵ to strike the prey of his meal. Technique therefore represents a 'natural' device that arises as a product of two capacities, the spirit (knowledge) and the hand, both entirely biological, which also make the result of their combination, the technique, equally natural. The revealing experience that the hunter undergoes leads him to conceive «the globe's burly belly/ is a pregnant mother from/ which trees

¹² *The Last Messiah* §4: 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Epilogue*: 60.

¹⁵ *The Last Messiah* §1: 40.

and birds, fish and seals come/ and He with them»¹⁶. In fact, when he goes to the usual watering hole, we repeat it, the hunter no longer sees the prey before his eyes, but an organism similar to himself: «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»¹⁷.

The revelation leaves the hunter homeless and without the comforting place of his own truths. Homeless means without any substructure he has elaborated before. So truth subtracts and does not add, for this reason the hunter finds himself naked, exactly as he was generated, exactly as at the beginning of his story.

Zapffe's narrative continues and deepens the author's materialist, anthropocentric, and tragic ontology. In itself considered, «the universe we find ourselves in is purely material – matter and energy petering out into oblivion by the ticking of the entropic clock». The hypothesis of a creator external to creation is therefore excluded, and reality is reduced to *pure matter* in the becoming of which *Homo sapiens* has also arrived. His presence, however, marks «a break in the very unity of life, a biological paradox, a monstrosity, an absurdity, a hypertrophy of the most catastrophic kind»¹⁸. While the indifferent nature of Leopardi or the φύσις of the Greeks simply includes humans among its entities, Zapffe has a different vision in which the initial error was committed precisely by nature, that is 'responsible' for having armed a species, making it omnipotent and dangerous not only for the external world but also for itself.

The first element to be emphasized is precisely this. For pagan thinkers, humans are not a mistake but an entity like the others that the whole can tolerate; regardless of the human attitude towards the whole, he himself remains something that exists like the others, not the end of creation but not even a mistake of nature. In Zapffe's conception nature made a mistake when it generated the human species: «Nature had aimed too high, and outdone itself. A species had been too heavily armed»¹⁹. It has granted it as a tool of defense and survival consciousness, awareness of itself and the world, which modern philosophy has used to claim the primacy of the human animal over others, as well as the triumph of Subjec-

¹⁶ *Epilogue*: 60.

¹⁷ *The Last Messiah* §1: 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* §2: 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

tivism that then reached its peak with Idealism. The tragedy does not depend on consciousness, which in itself is a functional device, but on the never-satisfied need to find a meaning and significance in reality, stifled precisely by the consciousness that instead shows him reality in all its harshness and truth. Let us see, therefore, what the functionality of consciousness consists in and why it makes *Homo sapiens* a tragic animal.

As an organism, humans share biological, social, and autotelic interests with other animals. Biological interest is linked to the need for food and nourishment, social interest to the need to form relationships, and autotelic interest concerns activities that are carried out for the pleasure of doing them, even if they have no utility. Humans, however, have a fourth interest. A *metaphysical interest* that recalls our need for justice, morality, for cosmic meaning to the things that happen and to life as a whole. Zapffe explains the quadruple nature of these needs by taking the example of wine: wine is a drink and therefore a source of nourishment in some way, but it is also an element of conviviality, its autotelic value depends on taste as an intrinsic pleasure of its consumption; in Christianity, however, wine also has a symbolic meaning, in the moment of the Eucharist it becomes the blood of Christ. Metaphysical interest is a heteronomous interest that strives to look at life from the outside to give it a meaning, to understand what its purpose is, its ultimate goal.

Despite the need to satisfy this interest, humans are first and foremost a biological organism; for all that he has wanted to tell himself stories and fantasized about his future, he remains subject to the inviolable laws of nature. To the triumph of time. Knowledge manifests to a 'metaphysical consciousness' that beyond any meaning there is no meaning, beyond any justice the world is profoundly unjust, beyond any morality reality does not contemplate any moral order.

There is only matter and its entropy. Zapffe compares the movement of this matter to the two phases of pulmonary respiration: «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»²⁰. The movement of inspiration and expiration does not only concern the present but all epochs of human and world history. Consciousness therefore makes manifest not only the

²⁰ Ibid. §2: 42.

movement but also its repetition, which continually returns to fill the earth with new living beings and to make the wombs of mothers always pregnant. In this continuous game, the same identical laws of the ancients hold true: the coming of every new organism and its departure is nothing more than matter becoming and transforming. In the story, we read: «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»²¹.

It is above all the *experience of dying* that leads humans to intuit the *absence* of any meaning. Death, in fact, brutally and arbitrarily interrupts existence, depriving life of any sense or purpose.

The first part of the story ends in a surprising way. The animals return to the watering hole but «when they found him again by the rising of the new moon, he sat dead by the waterhole»²². The hunter dies and does so before his prey. Seeing oneself, understanding the principles of nature and submitting to them means being destined, like any other organism, to the law of time, to the inevitable end that awaits all that exists. The moon, which seems only an accessory notion, holds an important meaning. Zapffe announces the advance of death referring to the moon also in the 1983 poem. Here the author contrasts the knowledge of the cosmos that humans claim to have reached with the meagerness of their knowledge («he knows hardly a thing,»²³). The triumphant return from the moon is also the truth of the end: «though your machine was/ impressive, / that Someone awaited you back home»²⁴. *Death awaits him*.

Even one's own finitude is part of the cosmic design of the world, something that the human organism has preferred to remove and does not want to talk about. Even when admitting it, each individual always attributes it to others and never to oneself: «I protest with a veritable NO!» but «yet time races on and the day shall come when no one who knows them recalls me»²⁵. Time/nature always triumphs.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. §1: 41.

²³ *Epilogue*: 60.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. 61-62.

To appease this irresolvable struggle of the oneself with itself and with the world, which would otherwise lead humanity to extinction, *Homo sapiens* has decided to renounce one of the two elements that characterize its existence; it has renounced not the metaphysical interest that it instead maintains and in the light of which only it can continue to observe the time it inhabits, but the result of *consciousness*.

It should be evident that in a matter devoid of meaning, the tragic does not exist; the dissonance with reality depends on the type of order and justice that the human species is willing to accept. The only form of morality and justice that the world possesses is the equity with which it grants the end to all that first began to exist. If one accepts that life and death are merely two natural processes, then the metaphysical horror will dissolve and what we have called tragic «would then be simplified, reduced, to nothing more than the physical end of existence, making the phenomenon of tragedy extensively extrapolable to all forms of life on Earth»²⁶. The tragic then becomes the friction of man in the cosmos, what makes him unsuited to the environment that he nevertheless wants to inhabit for as long as possible. Zapffe renders this gap with an image: it is as if humanity were a vase in which, however, an oak tree has been planted. As I anticipated, humans have nevertheless managed to resist the powerful roots of a centuries-old tree like the oak and thus survive. They have done so at the expense of knowledge. In this way they sometimes make themselves, and for a moment, happy, but at the cost of always remaining ignorant of the truth.

Consciousness Suspended between Ruin and Renewal

Having highlighted the tragic nature of the human condition, which lives on the border between knowledge of nature and metaphysical interest continuously stifled by the harshness of reality, it has been said that humanity has taken a position by resolving the cognitive dissonance and renouncing, more or less voluntarily and artificially, the result of knowledge rather than its expectations. To understand how this happens, we must follow the narrative sequence of the story.

Always in the second part of the text, after discussing the characteristics of nature in general and human nature in particular, Zapffe clarifies the functionality of consciousness. It is compared to a double-edged sword without a

²⁶ A.M. Proszewska, «Investigating the origins of Peter Wessel Zapffe's notion of tragedy in Aristotle's Poetics: the case of mimesis», in Degruyter, *ejss* 50(2), 2020: 290.

hilt: «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»; a weapon that, however, «made it not only omnipotent over the outer world, but equally dangerous for itself»²⁷. Turned outward, the sword is a useful and effective tool of defense granted by nature so that humans can adapt and survive; it is a tool of knowledge that has allowed humans to use their intelligence to ensure technical and scientific development improving their living conditions. It remains a sword without hilt so it helps to defend, but on the other hand it strikes. It thus becomes an instrument of violence and nature suffers a considerable damage because of it. Humans have made the cogito an element of superiority, and of themselves pioneers - to use Zapffe's words - of the spirit. Cogito has subjected nature to his purposes, has privileged the spirit at the expense of biological unity, and has elevated himself above all organisms. His action is destroying the planet and in it Norway.

Firewall, Norway, appears in the title as a greeting to a land that no longer belongs to him, which has been hospitable to our species but has been disfigured. The human who treads on it - and does not live beside it, to recall the verse quoted before - recognizes it only as a means and as a resource that provides and guarantees him a stable development, an effective response to the demand of an immeasurably growing population.

Turned inward, this sword wounds the conscious organisms themselves. Holding a sword without a hilt means *defending oneself* but inevitably also *hurting oneself* by holding it. Consciousness is in fact a revealer of the truth; it is the place where nature communicates its essence, its laws, its necessity. The space in which what happens imprints a stimulus, an excitement, and becomes a conscious happening. From a biological and evolutionary point of view, intellectual and mnemonic faculties have favored the survival of Homo sapiens.

Zapffe's reflection seems to echo Nietzschean thought, particularly the brief but significant book *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn* (*On Truth and Lies in a NonMoral Sense*). Here, Nietzsche dethrones humanity from the idealist and scientific throne by depriving the intelligent animal of the belief in possessing the truth, and by denying such a status even to the knowledge that, more than any other, claims to elaborate truth: scientific knowledge. The hu-

²⁷ *The Last Messiah* §2: 41.

man animal is an animal endowed with knowledge, but this attribute does not confer any privilege on it; it is a function - exactly as for the Norwegian philosopher - granted to the human being and oriented towards vital success.

While Nietzsche, however, highlights the anthropomorphic nature of truth, describing it as illusions that have forgotten their illusory nature; fictions that allude not to the objective perception of things but to their function with respect to the subject who questions them, Zapffe attributes the same fictional, functional, and truthful character not to the result of consciousness, but to its suppression. If Nietzsche's truth, in short, is a shared lie, Zapffe's truth is the authentic knowledge of the world annihilated, repressed, and forgotten by an inauthentic and fictitious knowledge which, however, guarantees the survival of human animals.

In seeing himself without protective lenses, the human falls into a feeling of cosmic panic:

«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»²⁸.

The verse is more effective in saying that «the Throne is transformed to Scaffold»²⁹. In this element consists the further tragic element of existence. To survive, one must renounce one's essence; to pursue it means to bring one's existence to an end. It means that the ultimate purpose of life is the annihilation of life itself in a struggle between two opposites: the instinct to live and the instinct to die. A fate similar to that of the *Cervus Giganticus*, which, due to the excessive size of its antlers, which in zoology are called precisely 'scaffolding', became extinct early; it

²⁸ Ibid. §2: 43.

²⁹ *Epilogue*: 61.

could have eliminated the outermost branches so as to survive a little longer but in doing so it would have renounced its essence: «what it won in continued existence it would have lost in meaning, in existential pride»³⁰. Unlike deer, the human animal has not yet become extinct. «Why,» Zapffe asks, «are there so few individuals who succumb to the pressure of life because their acuity reveals to them more than they can bear?»³¹. The philosopher's answer is the same as that given in the first part of the work: the play of consciousness and unconsciousness, the artificial reduction of the true knowledge of the world; «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»³². And all this not in order to realize some hope but to renew and reiterate the same path of pain, suffering, and loss.

The human being, who, like the deer, has been armed beyond measure, has not instead pursued his essence to the end. He has preferred to reduce the scope of consciousness in order to save himself so as not to become extinct and continue to exist. Consciousness therefore takes on a fictional and deceitful character just as the philosopher of Röcken had established³³. «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»³⁴. To respond, withstand, and resist the glare of reality, every aspect of our life is filtered by suppression mechanisms. These mechanisms are very different from each other and

³⁰ *The Last Messiah* §3: 43.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.* §3: 43-44.

³³ As for the functional and fictional role of consciousness, Nietzsche wrote: «It is remarkable that this was brought about by the intellect, which was certainly allotted to these most unfortunate, delicate, and ephemeral beings merely as a device for detaining them a minute within existence. [...] The pride connected with knowing and sensing lies like a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of men, thus deceiving them concerning the value of existence. [...] Deception is the most general effect of such pride, but even its most particular effects contain within themselves something of the same deceitful character», F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*; quoted from Daniel Breazeale (edited by): *Philosophy and Truth. Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*. Humanities Press, New Jersey 1990: 79-80.

³⁴ *The Last Messiah* §3: 43.

belong so constitutively to *Homo sapiens* that they have become unconscious and what they filter therefore appears natural and not deformed, what one wants it to be and not what it really is. Although they are innumerable, Zapffe groups them into four different types: *isolation*, *attachment*, *diversion*, and *sublimation*. The remaining part of the third section of the story is dedicated to a careful analysis of each of these ways of clouding consciousness.

These four mechanisms are simple and mostly unconscious now, they act in everyday life and allow life to navigate on less turbulent waters. However, their intervention is more essential and drastic in removal of the thought that, if brought to light, would lead the human being to grasp the meaninglessness of life. I am referring to the thought of death. The studies of the Canadian anthropologist Ernest Becker, whose intuition about humanity and the role of consciousness continues with the theses of Zapffe and *Terror Management Theory*, show how the fear of dying decisively conditions the lives of human beings. Whether it happens through religious faith or through secular and transhumanist faith, it does not matter: the important thing is not to die, to continue, to be there, and to remain in existence for as long as possible.

The fear of death is ever-present and timeless - even in the events of our contemporary world - from the moment when organic matter emerged from inorganic matter and, within organic matter, a self-aware form appeared that began to separate itself from nature and to think of itself as a separate entity, with its own laws of growth and development, distinct from those that apply to any other organism. And yet, finitude is inscribed in the very nature of things, where «everything is engaged in a disordered fantasia of carnage. Everything tears away at everything else . . . forever. Yet all this commotion in nothingness goes unnoticed by nearly everything involved in it. In the world of nature, as an instance, nothing knows of its embroilment in a festival of massacres. Only [...] self-conscious Nothing can know what is going on and be shaken by the tremors of chaos at feast»³⁵.

Despite knowledge of death, human beings are unable to know either the How or the When of their own. Prometheus' gift is the only condition that has allowed our species to avoid immediate extinction and to continue its journey towards a predetermined end.

³⁵ Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*, Hippocampus Press, New York 2011: 14.

After describing the main manifestations of the defense mechanisms, Zapffe reflects on death. Despite everything, «death always offers a way out»³⁶. It presents itself as a way out, an escape from existence, and not simply its end. The closing of the epilogue is truly powerful in communicating this form of freedom:

And painmarkers flame to the pyre
when, spit living to the needle of Now,
he casts his wisdom's fraying net—
and all he finds on its empty bottom
is, in the final stand of the spirit,
the single Gnosis as borne by the Dead,
that only the embracing of NOTHINGNESS frees us.
And we are afraid that our children shall suffer
so we cease our propagation in time.
It is the last solid counsel we know
against Heaven's faithless love³⁷.

The Gnosis that arises from the dead, the knowledge that true liberation is only achieved at the end, while everything humans pursue is merely a temporary relief, a painkiller that does not mend the wound. If this is true, then the human organism, rather than being a victim of nature, is a wound inflicted upon nature. Only its extinction can heal it. As previously mentioned, the fourth and fifth parts of the story provide an overview of this species that has pioneered the spirit and, in doing so, has shattered the world and preserved itself, along with its existential anguish. «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»³⁸.

Illusion, deception, and suppression help the biological organism to survive, to save itself, to delay its extinction, but never to avoid it. Illusion, deception, and suppression perpetuate human life because, inca-

³⁶ *The Last Messiah* §3: 48.

³⁷ *Epilogue*: 62.

³⁸ *The Last Messiah* §5: 51.

pable of truly knowing, humans remain a sleeper, a dreamer before whom «a world which is of joy unfolds, / Spring comes into meadows» and whose vision becomes generative: «Little seed in dreamers' mold»³⁹. The suppression of consciousness thus guarantees life but has led Homo sapiens to fabricate tales about their nature, to consider themselves the center of creation, and to feel destined to dominate the Earth. Anthropocentrism arises from ignorance of one's true nature, from the separation that humans have claimed from their origins, their biological, organic, and finite essence. The consciousness that humanity has weakened, preferring to satisfy its metaphysical interests, causes suffering, strips humans of their firm footing, and thus precipitates them into a state of existential loss and exile, but at the same time redeems them by offering a possibility of salvation.

The Last Messiah

In the fourth part of *The Last Messiah*, the author reflects on so-called primitive populations – in the literal sense of the term, those who came before – to highlight that, despite the common fate of existence, these people inhabited the planet in a very different way from modern populations. While the former remained pioneers of the tragic, the latter distanced themselves and deluded themselves to such an extent that they managed to elude the possibility of the tragic from their lives or to consider it surmountable. The biological unity to which primitive humans remain closer is not to be understood as a typically 'animal' and underdeveloped behavior; culture always remains an expression of human nature. The mechanisms previously considered therefore remain natural, as they are themselves natural forms, cognitive and behavioral strategies. The unnaturalness of modern humans does not derive from having engaged these mechanisms but rather from having flouted them in favor of new and more violent strategies – excessive culture, technological development, standardization – destructive both for humanity themselves and for the entire planet.

Subjectivism, in the forms of rationalism and idealism, is the triumph of the spirit that has renounced nature without which even the possibility of the cogito does not exist. Culture is, in fact, primarily the specific nature of the human being, but in order for it to remain so, that is, something natural,

³⁹ *Lullaby*: 63.

it must act within limits and in respect of the whole. Rationalism, like idealism, the unbridled race towards technological development, are just some of the symptoms of this «global fever of life»⁴⁰. This fever is not only oriented towards the vital success of a generation but also towards the biological continuation of the species over time. The number of inhabitants invading the planet is growing desperately, but this exponential increase does not at all mark the victory of the spirit, but rather will make the first laws manifest again, that is, the laws of nature to guarantee survival, thus resorting to even brutal behaviors to secure some resources; the planet will become inhospitable as it was at the beginning when man made his entrance into it: «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»⁴¹.

In the fictional and original 1958 interview (*Firewall, Norway*), the interlocutor poses a series of questions to Jørgen that would seek to justify human action even when the consequences of their actions are unpleasant, but Jørgen is unwilling to yield to any of these justifications. Instead, he uncovers the deception of progress and development, defining the race of the former and the promise of the latter as «pure panic, an itching of the soul that has to be scratched and clawed at until every stone and every little hill in the country is covered with incurable eczema»⁴². Behind the appearance of wanting to meet the needs and demands of population growth, there is, in truth, the need and the desire on the part of some to want to increase their own gain, their own prestige and power, in an expression of wanting to increase and enhance that fever of life. The growing need is not met by improving the system of production and investment; nor is the hypothesis of colonizing new planets appealing, as it would simply mean repeating the same problems and reiterating the same response mechanisms elsewhere; whether on Earth or on Mars, «we will continue to dream of salvation, redemption, and a new Messiah». Only after «many saviors have been nailed to trees and stoned to death in the marketplace,

⁴⁰ *The Last Messiah* §4: 51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* §2: 41.

⁴² Peter Wessel Zapffe, *Firewall, Norway*; Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (edited by), *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, translated in English by S. Kvaløy with P. Reed, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1992: 55.

then the last Messiah will appear»⁴³. Here, Zapffe's reference to the awaited Messiah is subtle in confirming his conception of the religious phenomenon as a wholly human phenomenon, as such fictional and consolatory, which humanity needs to exclude itself from Nature, which remains the mother, the womb, the cradle, the tomb.

The conclusion of the story is truly fascinating. It announces the coming of a man who, before all others, will have had the strength and courage to lay bare his own soul, to observe himself in his nakedness, that is, in his natural dimension; a man who «has grasped life in its cosmic context, and whose agony is the agony of the world»⁴⁴. His voice casts a *shroud* over the world, revealing to them a message of salvation: «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 thy selves; be unfruitful and let there be peace on Earth after thy passing»⁴⁵.

However, this message is not welcomed by the population, who respond by attacking this man, the last Messiah, who has descended from the father near that pool of water; the same where the hunter meets the other animals and recognizes them as brothers, the same where at the rising of the new moon he encounters death. One might think that the hunter, who indeed finds himself naked in the cosmos, is the same Messiah sent by the father to die for us. It is especially the midwives and obstetricians who attack the savior, a significant presence to express humanity's attachment to life.

The words of the last Messiah carry a message of salvation. If life was previously described as the flow of a raging river, now the Messiah instead announces its insignificance because it is nothing but a puddle, a stagnant pool. Its end is inscribed in it, and the course that leads to it is not the smooth itinerary of a river that reaches its delta or estuary, but rather dirty water that remains there emitting its bad smell.

Zapffe's story, however, has a happy ending. There is a victory, a salvation, and an answer. And the answer is the same that is found in Genesis but reversed: be sterile (do not be fruitful). It is in truth more precise and more complete and must be taken in its entirety. The Messiah's first mes-

⁴³ *The Last Messiah* §5: 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* §5: 52.

sage, his first recommendation, is another: «*Know thy selves*». This is a truly original teaching: know yourselves and therefore be sterile.

After this note, the Messiah continues and concludes by stating: «Let there be peace on Earth after thy passing; let the Earth find peace after your passing»⁴⁶. This ending is important because it suggests that Zapffe's antinatalism is not only anthropocentric in the literal sense of the term of putting at the center and having the interest of preserving humanity from the inextinguishable pain of existence but rather, and more decisively, anthropo-de-centric. Zapffe's interest is in preserving the Earth, his Norway, and its mountains. The whole and not a part of it. Such a position emerges more explicitly in the fictional interview to which I have already alluded. In the exchange of remarks, Jørgen responds to the director, who asks him what would be a way to make the Norwegian mountains accessible to the greatest possible number of people, that the goal should be exactly the opposite, that is, to close and not allow these people access to the few mountainous areas still untouched by human elements.

His examination targets what is intended to be passed off as growth, development, or progress, showing the true face of progress: destruction. What most angers Jørgen is that «nobody complains. Nobody wants to be a wet blanket at the celebration of Progress»⁴⁷ (because he hopes that the overwhelming wave of progress includes not only the possibility of living better and being able to keep pain at bay – forgetting that pain is like a nucleotide sequence, something that is inscribed in the bios – but also of reaching and realizing one's immortality. Zapffe considers a series of particular examples in order to demonstrate how what is intended to be presented as progress and aid for the growth of less developed villages is in reality a project aimed at enriching the pockets of a few subjects only. Beyond these examples, what truly concerns the author is that everything that harms even humanity is desired by humanity itself: «We are in the grip of development Neanderthals. It is embarrassing they are descended from humans, these lummoxes with blunt, sterile minds. They are not really alive, they can only keep going on economic stimulants. We're being replaced by people who don't deserve a healthy Earth. People for whom the only important thing is how big their paychecks are»⁴⁸.

After revealing the flip side of the coin of progress and defining its

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Firewell, Norway*: 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 54-55.

true nature, after having established what happiness consists of for humans and having clarified instead how true happiness comes through the full possession of oneself, as an ability, effort, and commitment «to be happy in themselves»⁴⁹, Zapffe expresses the urgency of an antinatalist practice. The happiness that comes from oneself connects with the Messiah's admonition to know oneself. Only in this space is it possible to know what one is and to live in the quiet of one who accepts one's nature and one's limits without opposing them in every way. Instead, progress has substituted for this inner stability a constant tension and projection towards the future, has postponed the arrival at a promised land – to recall the metaphor of the story – instead of understanding that one is nomadic, of accepting and blessing this nomadism.

Zapffe's words suggest that his antinatalism has multiple sources. On the one hand, there is care for the human condition in its own being into the world, on the other hand, there is care for Norway, for nature, and for Being. If humanity had been able to coexist with other beings and together with them in the whole, its nature would still have been painful and difficult, conscious but despite everything – precisely because it is conscious – serene. It should be clear that the antinatalism of the Norwegian thinker becomes necessary to save nature and, in it and with it, humanity that already exists. If before it was a hypothesis, now the day is imminent when we must stop reproducing uncontrollably. If before it was a hypothesis, now the day is imminent when we must stop having children. If before it was a misanthropic hypothesis, now the day is imminent when it must be accepted as a philanthropic strategy. Zapffe's antinatalism, in the words of the last Messiah as in those of Jørgen, is the only possible salvation for humanity, for non-human animality, and for the whole. Its occurrence only anticipates an end that is certain in any case.

The hermeneutics of Zapffe's story allows us to finally relocate the human being in the universal biological to which he belongs. Nature as the *cosmic womb* that generates him, and the tomb that puts him back to sleep in the *cradle of nothingness*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.