

ENDPAPER:

The Parable of the Cats

Peter Wessel Zapffe

(translated by Peder Anker)

Peter Wessel Zapffe is truly the grandfather of Norwegian environmental thought. A storyteller, humorist, critic, and iconoclast, he labored for years on his mammoth opus, *Om det tragiske* [*On the Tragic*], which was published when he was forty-two years old in 1941. The core of this encyclopedic effort is the revelation of the tragedy of the greatest human uniqueness: We are the only species to become reflective enough to realize that the Earth would be better off without us. The earth will never satisfy human needs, hopes, and desires. Born with particular capacities, "we are like oaks planted in flowerpots; we are doomed to fail." Ultimately, we should abdicate our reigning position and go away with dignity. Stop reproducing, turn the world over to some other species, give another beast the chance. In the words of his *Last Messiah*, "Know thyself; be unfruitful and let there be peace on Earth after thy passing." (Peter Reed and Sigmund Kvaløy have translated this text beautifully in *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, ed. Peter Reed and David Rothenberg [University of Minnesota Press, 1993], the book with the only English translations of Zapffe currently available.)

Zapffe is almost unknown to the English-speaking community but is widely read in Norway. His many works include poems, philosophy, fairy tales, plays, and accounts of outlandish exploits from his curmudgeon mountaineer's life. His critics have marveled at how he lived to be ninety years old, going on and on about how humanity should die off.

Om det tragiske was Zapffe's dissertation in philosophy, supervised by Arne Naess, who many years later coined the term "deep ecology" to describe an environmentalism based not on economics and politics, but on fundamental changes in the way we see the world. Naess was greatly influenced by his unusual student, a man thirteen years older than he, and Naess's later work on deep ecology can be understood as one hopeful answer to Zapffe's pessimistic view of human potential.

You might be reminded of William Faulkner's cat parable, which suggested that many years ago, cats themselves were the dominant species on Earth. When they realized things were not going as well as they had hoped, they banded together and decided to abdicate their rulership and responsibility. They picked humanity to succeed them and elected to stick around, watching from the sidelines. This is why your cats look at you the way they do, with a mixture of sad compassion and pure disgust.

Zapffe's cats go through a more complex dilemma, and we don't really know if they survive. He paraphrases the Christian story of the Fall from Grace, leading to an Augustinian choice between Jerusalem or Babylon, but—and this is the human tragedy—either way you

lose. There is no hope for human salvation, neither among nor beyond life on Earth. Zapffe's philosophical testament was simply this: The human species comes from Nothing and goes to Nothing; besides this there is Nothing. Depressing perhaps, but if it is Zapffe, you know there will be something to laugh about somewhere.

—PA and DR

A ship with a number of cats on board, abandoned by its crew, ran aground on a desert island, whereupon the cats jumped ashore. The sole inhabitants of the island were a species of frisky but inedible beetles, so the fate of the cats would seem sealed. Then it was discovered that the soft mud along the shoreline contained fat and tasty shells, easily opened.

Sadly, digging in the mud is much less appealing to the cats than leaping, tiger-like, on the beetles—for only the latter is a life worthy of a cat. To choose this life is an expression of an idealistic attitude—lofty, yet deadly. The hunting life wins out over any other disgusting, foraging lifestyle that no decent cat would lower itself to.

Those individuals that most wonderfully embodied the distinctive character of the feline form and its attendant practices had the hardest time bringing themselves to take part in the digging for shells, and were thus, in the given circumstances, biologically inferior. Meanwhile, others, of greater indifference to feline standards, spent their days in the mud, gorging themselves and multiplying. From time to time they lifted faces stained with dirt to peer at the snobs ashore: derision and satire alternated with burning hatred, because the inland cats reminded them of their treason towards the most precious attributes of their species. They valued optimism as an antidote to their guilt and ignominy, and if they felt neither smugness nor interest, they would not be cats.

Soon they extended their defenses further—calling the inland cats neurotics and psychopaths—intricate words to stimulate the rundown self-esteem of the mud-foraging colony. The feline analyst sent ashore from the beach ascertained a “resistance to healing” in the uplanders and diagnosed hydrophobia. The mud cats were triumphant, but the others, too, found the explanation rang true, and acknowledged it as such, because they knew what lay behind it.

The hunter cats became pessimists. Not because of their suffering that the shore dwellers made fun of—wounds and hunger, breathlessness and chills—but because they found themselves thrown into a world where the holy formula in their hearts could not be realized. In recognition of this, they ceased reproducing.

Yet soon prophets appeared among them and taught them the art of hope: “Once we came from a land where the proceeds of our noble art of hunting could also be eaten and digested. But many among us were evil and would not nurture their suppleness and their strength, so the ship ran aground. Now the end awaits the faithful, but when we die, a new ship will come and take away those who persevere. Those who have forsaken the true feline nature shall die and never be fetched away.”

But hunger tore their entrails and there was a great crying out. And they complained in many voices, saying; *Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in unsrer Brust*. And many

turned traitors and went into the mud and ate their fill, while others, converted by the words of the prophet, came ashore, cleaning their coats and preparing for the great journey. The proudest banded together, declaring the duty of any decent cat to die sooner rather than sell its soul for a dish of mussels. And when the leader felt his powers weakening, he laid himself down on a tree-stump and simply expired—this is what is known as a *tragic end*. Many others, unable to accommodate themselves to a dutiful resignation, followed his example: they remained faithful to the highest goal dictated by the feline form, though they saw through the empty comforts of the prophet, while despair resided in their hearts.

But most cats of both camps were enslaved by eternal doubt and divided their time between uneasy nourishment and tortured asceticism. Their relief at being rid of the aristocrats was of course great, but the new ideal of becoming as crabs was, after all, impossible to realize.



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