

THE LAST MESSIAH

PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE



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1933

Introduction and Translation

from the Norwegian by

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Hendrick Andriessen and Nicolaes van Verendael

*Vanitas still life with a bunch of flowers, a candle,
smoking implements, and a skull*

1679



Introduction

The gothic writer Thomas Ligotti has called the obscure Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe's thought 'perhaps the most elementary in the history of philosophical pessimism [...] it rests on taboo commonplaces and outlawed truisms'. Ligotti's own book, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, was described by philosopher Ray Brassier as 'perhaps the most sustainable challenge yet to the intellectual blackmail that would oblige us to be eternally grateful for a "gift" we never invited', itself a relentless tirade against normative optimism that is deeply indebted, and also dedicated, to Zapffe. The key text for Ligotti's *Conspiracy* is Zapffe's antinatalist manifesto, 'The Last Messiah', a short and peculiar essay from 1933 proposing why life is indeed no gift but a nightmare.

Human existence, for Zapffe, is nothing but the chronic spasm of a reeling, defunct species whose surplus of consciousness has made it unfit for life. Zapffe compares our situation to that of the *Cervus giganteus*, a giant deer of the paleontological era that at one time was thought to have gone extinct due to its antlers becoming too large. The overdeveloped human intellect, which Zapffe calls 'an abomination, an absurdity, an exaggeration of disastrous nature', can in a similar way be seen as the result of a blind, and highly unfortunate, organic mutation—unfortunate because it makes life existentially unbearable and categorically unsustainable.

But 'The Last Messiah' also provides a quite concrete, final solution to our predicament, namely the voluntary withdrawal of our species into the dark night of extinction. Contrary to most apocalyptic visions, Zapffe's heretic eschatology does not lend much bravado to the event of total obliteration. Instead, he proposes the anticlimactic process of a gradual

phase-out. Affirming the inherent messianic tonality and self-contradictory nature of any proactive antinatalist programme, the text ends with an inversion of the biblical command: 'Be infertile and let the earth be silent after you'—an instruction which Zapffe himself adhered to, leaving no descendants after his death in 1990.

Despite the essay's awkwardness, conservatism, misogyny, technophobia, and so on, Zapffe's point remains clear: if a desert island is no tragedy, why is a deserted planet? H.P. Lovecraft once asked, 'Why hasn't anyone written a story from the view that man is a blemish on the cosmos who ought to be eradicated?' More than as a philosophically sound argument, 'The Last Messiah' can be read as such a story.

I

One night in times long past, man awoke and saw himself. He saw that he was naked under the cosmos, homeless in his own body. Everything dissolved before his probing thought; wonder upon wonder, horror upon horror, sprouted forth in his mind.

Then woman, too, awoke and said it was time to go out and kill something. And man grabbed his bow, fruit of the union between spirit and hand, and ventured out beneath the stars. But when the animals appeared at their waterholes where he awaited them from old habit, he no longer felt the tiger's leap in his blood, but only a great psalm to the brotherhood of suffering between everything that lives.

That day he did not return with prey, and when at the next new moon they found him, he sat dead by the waterhole.

II

What had happened? A breach within the unity of life itself, a biological paradox, a monstrosity, an absurdity, a hypertrophy of catastrophic nature. Life had overshot its target and blown itself apart. A species had been too heavily armed—its genius made it not only all-powerful in the external world, but equally dangerous to its own well-being. Its weapon was like a sword without grip and safeguard, a double-edged blade cleaving everything; anyone who wished to wield such a sword must first take hold of the blade and thus turn one of its edges against himself.

Despite his new eyes, man was still rooted in matter, his soul was woven into it and subordinated to its blind laws. And yet he could look upon matter as a stranger, position himself amongst other phenomena, comprehend and locate his own vital processes. He comes to nature as an unwanted guest; stretching his arms out in vain, pleading to be reunited with what created him. But nature no longer responds—it had performed a miracle with man but ever since disowned him. He has lost his citizenship in the universe; he has eaten from the tree of knowledge and been expelled from paradise. Man is powerful in his immediate world but curses this power bought in exchange for his soul's harmony, his state of innocence, his peaceful existence within life's embrace.

There he stands with his visions, betrayed by the universe, in wonder and in angst. The animal too knew angst, during thunderstorms and under the lion's claws. But man came to feel angst for life itself—indeed, for his very own being. Life—for the animal it is to feel the forces swell, to rut and play and struggle and hunger, and then, in the end, to stoop to the law of necessity. For the animal, suffering is limited to itself. For

the human, suffering breaks open an angst for the world and a despair of life.

As the child begins its journey down life's river, the waterfall of death is already roaring, moving ever closer and wearing, wearing away at its joy. The human looks out across the earth and sees it breathing like a giant lung; when the earth exhales, graceful lives stream from all its pores, stretching their arms towards the sun, but when it inhales, a lamenting moan passes through the crowds and corpses whip the ground like hail. Not only did man see his own end, but graveyards were turned inside out before his eyes, the terrible, decomposed bodies screaming at him with the buried, wretched cries of millennia. The veil of the future was torn and revealed a nightmare of endless repetition, a senseless mire of organic matter.

Through the gate of compassion, the suffering of billions traverses man; all that occurs sniggers at what he takes as his deepest, most profound principle: the demand for justice. He sees himself originating in his mother's womb, he holds up his hand and it has five branches: 'Where does this accursed number five come from and what has it to do with my soul?' He is no longer self-evident to himself—his own body fills him with horror: 'This is you, you extend to this limit and no further.' He carries a meal inside him, yesterday it was an animal running freely about: 'Now I have absorbed it, made it a part of myself; where do I end and where do I begin?' Things chain themselves together in cause and effect, and everything he attempts to grasp dissolves before his probing thought. Soon he sees the mechanisms even in what he holds most dear: the smile of his beloved, for example; there are other smiles too, like that of toes peeping through a torn boot. Eventually, the qualities of all things are nothing but qualities of himself—nothing exists except himself, every line leads back to

him, the world is nothing but a ghostly echo of his own voice. He jumps up with a loud cry and wants to vomit himself and his tainted meal up on the ground. He feels insanity approaching and wants to seek refuge in death before the option is lost to him.

But as he stands on the brink of death, he suddenly understands its nature too and the cosmic scope of this next step he is about to take. His creative imagination constructs new horrifying possibilities behind the curtain of death and he sees that there is no escape even there. And now he can finally trace the full contour of his own bio-cosmic situation: a defenceless prisoner of the universe, detained to incur nameless possibilities.

From this moment on, he is in a chronic state of panic. Such a feeling of 'cosmic panic' is fundamental to any human mind. In this regard, the species would appear to be predestined for annihilation, since any effective attempt at the preservation and perseverance of life is ruled out when all of an individual's attention and energy is spent enduring or warding off the catastrophically high pressure within his own core. That a species becomes unfit for life by the over-development of one single faculty is a tragedy which has not only befallen the human being. It has been suggested, for example, that a certain type of deer of the paleontological era became extinct because their antlers grew too large. Mutations of these kinds must be taken as blind; they operate, are thrown forth, without any consideration for their immediate milieu. In depressive states, the mind may be experienced as an image of such antlers which, in all their splendid might, force their bearer to the ground.

III

Why then has the human race not already gone extinct in great epidemics of madness? Why is it that only a relatively small number of individuals perish under the intolerable pressure of life—perish from an intellect that gives them more than they can bear? Our spiritual and cultural history, as well as the observation of ourselves and others, provide a basis for the following answer: most humans learn to save themselves by artificially reducing the content of their consciousness.

If the giant deer, at appropriate times, had managed to break off the top ends of its antlers, it might have persevered for a while longer. In fever and perpetual pain, certainly, and in betrayal of its own essence, of its singularity as such, given that by nature it was allotted the fate of being a great antler-bearing creature rather than a mere field animal. What the giant deer would have won in terms of prolonged lifespan, it would have lost in meaning, in existential worth. It would have been a continuance without hope; not a continuous affirmation of its own essence, but a self-destructive race against its blood's sacred will.

That the goal of life equates to its own annihilation is, for the giant deer as for the human, the tragic paradox of existence. In devoted self-affirmation, the last *Cervus giganteus* bore the mark of its species until its end. The human on the other hand saves itself and continues. It performs, to use a renowned expression in an extended meaning, a more or less conscious suppression of its damaging surplus of consciousness. As long as we are awake and active, this process is in more or less constant operation; it is a condition for social adjustment and for what is commonly called a 'healthy' and 'normal' life in general.

Psychiatry today operates under the supposition that what is 'healthy' and life-viable is in itself the height of personal achievement. Depression, 'existential angst', eating disorders, etc. are, without exception, viewed as signs of a pathological, sick condition and are treated accordingly. In many cases, however, these phenomena are indications of a deeper, more unmediated sense of life—bitter fruits of the insights of thought or feeling, that are themselves the root of the anti-biological tendency. It is not the soul which is sick, but the defence mechanisms that either fail or are rejected because they are taken, correctly, as a betrayal of the individual's highest ability.

All of life, as we see it before our eyes today, is permeated from inside to out by social and individual mechanisms of suppression; we can trace them all the way down to the most mundane formulas of everyday living. They amount to a mottled and perplexing multitude, but we can with some justification point to at least four main types of suppression mechanism, which of course can appear in an endless variety of combinations: *isolation*, *attachment*, *distraction* and *sublimation*.

By isolation I am here referring to the arbitrary expulsion of any disturbing or destructive thoughts and feelings from one's consciousness, as expressed in the saying by Engström: 'One should not think, it only causes confusion.' This can be observed in an expanded and almost brutal form in certain doctors who, in order to protect themselves, only perceive the technical aspect of their profession. This mechanism may relapse into pure callousness, as with thugs or medical students who attempt to oust any sensitivity to life's tragic aspects by means of violence (e.g. playing football with cadaver heads).

In the social interaction of daily life, the mechanism of isolation is expressed in the customary, mutual agreement to conceal the facts of life from one another. First of all from the child, who is not to be frightened senseless by the life it has only just begun, but should be allowed to keep its illusions intact until it is old enough to handle losing them. In return, the child is not to bother the adults with inappropriate references to sex, shit and death. Between the adults themselves, rules of 'decorum' apply (one obvious manifestation of this is the procedure by which a man crying in the street is removed by the police).

The mechanism of attachment is equally present from the early stages of childhood: the parents, the home, the neighbourhood—all of these attachments are taken for granted by the child and give it a sense of security. This stable sphere of experience values is the first and perhaps happiest form of protection against 'cosmos' that we will ever know throughout our lives, and here unquestionably lies an explanation as to the much discussed 'infantile bond' (whether this concept is also sexual in nature is of no importance in this context). When the child later discovers that all these attachments are as 'arbitrary' and 'impermanent' as anything else, it experiences a crisis of utter confusion and anxiety and is immediately in search of new ones: 'In the autumn, I'll be going to high school.' If, for some reason, the exchange of one attachment for another does not succeed, the crisis can enter a life-threatening stage, or there can occur what I call 'attachment spasms'—one clings to one's already dead experience values and hides as well as possible, from oneself and from others, that they are defective, that one is spiritually bankrupt. The result is permanent insecurity, feelings of inferiority, over-compensation and nervousness. If this condition falls under certain existing categories, it becomes the object of psycho-

analytical treatment whereby the successful transition to new attachments is attempted.

The attachment mechanism can be defined as an instalment of fixed points within, or as the construction of a wall around, the fluid chaos of consciousness. This process usually takes place unconsciously but can also occur by fully conscious means, as in when one 'sets oneself a goal'. Attachments that are viewed as beneficial for the common good are met with approval—someone who 'sacrifices himself' for his attachment (for the company or for a cause) is presented as a role model. He has managed to create a sturdy bulwark against the dissolution of life, and others may benefit from his strength by following his example. In a brutalised form, as a fully deliberate act, this is expressed in the formula of certain *bon vivants*: 'Marry in time and the walls will appear all by themselves.' In this case a necessity is established in one's life; one deliberately allows for what is considered an evil—marriage—in order to acquire a supporting crutch for the nerves, a high-walled container for an increasingly porous life-attitude. Ibsen's characters, Hjalmar Ekdal and Molvik, are glowing examples of this—the only difference between their attachments and those of society is that the former is unfruitful in a practical-economical sense.

Every cultural and social unit is but one large, rounded structure of attachments built atop the basic ideas, the foundational supports, of a culture. The average person makes do with these shared cultural supports which his personality builds automatically, while a so-called 'person of character' has finished a more extensive construction, more or less fully dependent on the inherited, collective foundations (god, the state, destiny, the law of life, the people, the future). The closer any part of the structure lies to the foundational supports, the more

dangerous it is to tamper with, and commonly a safeguard is established via laws and punishments (inquisition, censorship, conservative attitudes, etc.).

The sturdiness of each structural part depends on one of two things: that its fictive nature has not yet been realised, or that it is recognised as necessary in spite of this realisation. This is the reason that even atheists uphold the teaching of religion in schools; they see no other available means for making children adhere to socially acceptable reaction patterns.

As soon as someone realises the fictitious or unnecessary character of any part of the structure, he will attempt to exchange it for new ones (all truths have, as they say, a limited life span), and from this springs all our spiritual and cultural conflicts which, together with economic competition, constitute the dynamic content of world history.

The lust for material goods or power is not, essentially, driven by the immediate pleasure that wealth affords—nobody can sit on more than one chair or eat himself more than full. The existential value of wealth is that it sets a great variety of possibilities for attachments and distractions at the owner's disposal.

For the collective as well as individual attachment structures, the collapse of any one part brings about a crisis, which can be more or less serious in nature according to its proximity to the foundational supports. In the internal spheres, where one is protected by the outer bulwark, such crises happen daily and are relatively painless (what we call 'disappointments'); here it is even possible to play around with one's valued attachments through, for example, jokes, jargon or alcohol. During this kind of play, however, one can cause serious damage by unwittingly

opening a crack all the way through to the foundations, and in the blink of an eye the situation changes from light-hearted to macabre. The horror of existence stares us blank in the face and we sense, in one devastating blow, that all souls are hanging by their own web and that a hellish abyss lurks beneath.

Replacing the existing supports, the foundational ideas of a culture, is rarely achieved without intense social spasms and the risk of total disintegration (reformation, revolution). During such times, individuals are forced to fall back on their own capacity for constructing attachments, and consequently the number of those unable to cope is likely to increase. The result is depression, excess, suicide (as seen with the German officers after the war [WWI] or the Chinese students after the Revolution).

Another weakness of the structure follows from the fact that in order to fend off the various imposing dangers, it becomes necessary to lay down highly disparate supports. When superstructures are then built on top of these, it will eventually result in conflicts between incommensurable sets of values and feelings. This creates crevices which allow for desperation to seep in. In such cases, an individual can be possessed by the thrill of destruction, he or she dismantles the whole of the artificial life-support system, and in delightful terror sets out to make a clean sweep. The feeling of terror is caused by the loss of all comforting life values, while the feeling of delight stems from a reckless yet harmonious identification with the deepest secret of our being: its biologic unsustainability, its incessant disposition for annihilation.

We love our attachments because they save us, but we also hate them because they constrain our sense of freedom. At

times when we feel strong enough, coming together to ceremoniously bury an outlived attachment is therefore a great source of joy. In this context, material objects often gain symbolic meaning and the festivities are considered expressions of a 'radical' life-attitude. When an individual has destroyed all of the perceivable attachments within himself, and is left only with the unconscious ones, he refers to himself as a 'liberated' person.

A very popular defence mechanism is distraction. Here, the attention is steered away from the dangerous outer limits by preoccupying it with an incessant stream of incoming impressions. This mechanism is, as before, typical already in childhood—without distractions even the child is unbearable to itself. 'Mummy, there's nothing to do!' A small English girl I used to know was visiting her Norwegian aunts and constantly appeared from her room asking, 'What are we doing now?' Babysitters automatically become virtuosos of distractions: 'Look, a little doggy!'

With people of high society, distraction is a life-strategy. It may be compared to an airplane—made out of heavy metal but with an inbuilt principle which, as long as it is fully functioning, keeps it in the air. Since the air will hold it for no more than a second, it needs to be constantly moving. Routine may cause the pilot to become drowsy and inattentive, but as soon as the engine fails the situation becomes critical.

The use of distraction is in most cases a fully deliberate strategy. Despair can lie immediately beneath the veneer and may surface at any moment in sudden bursts of sobbing. Once all possible modes of distraction are exhausted a feeling of 'spleen', falling anywhere between mild weariness and deadly depression, sets in. Woman, who by the way is less inclined

towards existential insight than man and therefore more secure, more at ease with life than him, predominantly makes use of the distraction mechanism.

A significant evil of prison sentencing is that the prisoner is deprived of almost all options for distraction. And since prison in general offers very bad conditions for alternative modes of protection, the prisoner will, as a rule, find himself in perpetual proximity to desperation. Any act he may commit in order to ward off the last phase of this desperate state is therefore justified by the vital principle of self-preservation. At this final stage, he is momentarily experiencing his own soul within the universe, and in such an instant nothing else exists but the categorical unsustainability of existence.

Life panic in its pure, undiluted form will probably only ever occur very rarely, since the protective defence mechanisms described so far are both complex, automatic and, to a certain extent, always active. But its more watered-down forms are still tainted by death—even in these conditions life is only just sustainable under severe tribulation. Death always presents itself as an escape, leaving the possibilities beyond it open. And since the experience of death, as of anything else, depends upon the individual's subjective feelings and perceptions, death may very well be viewed as an acceptable solution. If it is possible to achieve a certain posture in death, to sustain a gesture even in rigor mortis—that is, a certain form of final attachment or distraction—death is not at all the worst fate. The newspapers, which in this rare case serve the mechanisms of concealment, always manage to invent the least disturbing explanations: 'It is thought that the cause [of the suicide] was the latest stock market drop on the price of wheat.' When a man takes his own life in depression, it is an entirely natural death due to spiritual causes. The modern

barbarity of attempting to 'save' suicides thus rests on a terrifying misunderstanding of the very nature of existence.

Only a small amount of people can do with mere 'change', whether relating to work, social life or pleasure. The cultured individual demands that the changes have continuity, direction, progression. Nothing is ultimately satisfactory: one moves on, gathers new knowledge, makes a career. This phenomenon can be termed 'yearning' or 'transgressive tendency': when one goal is reached, the yearning moves on; it is not the goal that matters, but rather that it has been reached—it is not the absolute height of, but the degree of increase on, life's upward curve that is of importance. A promotion from private to corporal is in this respect likely to provide greater value experience than one from lieutenant to general. This fundamental psychological law destroys any foundation for optimism regarding progress.

Human yearning is thus characterised not only as a desire *for* something, but as much as a desire to escape *from* something. And if we use the word yearning in its religious meaning, the latter definition becomes the only viable one. For in the context of religion, no one has ever been quite clear about what it is he is longing for, while always being deeply aware of what it is he is longing to get a way from, namely the earthly vale of tears—that is, his own unsustainable existential situation. If the sense of this situation is the deepest truth of our soul, then it becomes understandable why religious yearning is often felt and understood as fundamental to our being. However, the hope that it is a religious criterion, and harbours a promise of its own fulfilment, is put in a rather miserable light by the observations made above.

Regarding the fourth defence mechanism, or fourth medication for life-panic, sublimation, what occurs is more of a transformation than a suppression. In certain cases it is possible to convert the very agony of life into valuable experiences by stylistic or artistic means: positive impulses step in and skilfully exploit to their own advantage the painterly, dramatic, heroic, lyrical or even comical aspects of the evils of existence.

Such an exploitation, however, can only come about if suffering has already lost its most intense sting, or has not yet come to fully dominate one's inner life. The mountaineer might here serve as an image: gazing down into the abyss is only pleasurable when the nauseating feeling of dizziness has been somewhat overcome—only then does it become possible for the mountaineer to enjoy the sight. Likewise, to be able to write a tragedy one must, to a certain extent, separate oneself from—betray—the tragic feeling, in order to look at it from a detached, aesthetic point of view. Such a position can also allow for a wild kind of play wherein one invents evermore dizzying levels of irony and self-embarrassment; in a butchery of one's own self it becomes possible to fully enjoy how the various planes of consciousness have the power to destroy one another. This current essay, in fact, is a classic attempt at sublimation: the author is not suffering, rather he is filling in sheets of paper which are to be published. The self-inflicted 'martyrdom' of certain types of lonely ladies is another similar case of sublimation—being a martyr gives them a sense of importance.

Nevertheless, out of the four defence mechanisms mentioned, sublimation is probably the least common.

IV

Is it possible for individuals of so-called 'primitive cultures' to live without all these spasms and mental acrobatics, to live in harmony with themselves, with an undisturbed joy in work and in love? Insofar as they are to be called humans, I think the answer has to be no. At most, we might say that they perhaps exist in closer proximity to the biological ideal than us unnatural people. And that the reason the majority of us unnatural people have managed to persevere, at least up until now, in spite of our tormenting conditions, is precisely that we have found life-support in the least developed components of our nature.

Since our defence mechanisms are only capable of upholding, and not creating, life, the positive foundation of our being must be sought in the naturally adjusted use of our bodies and the biologically effective parts of our soul's energy, which are all up against severe conditions: the limitation of our senses; the feebleness of our bodies; the hard work necessary for sustaining life and love.

It is upon this limited plot, within these narrow confines, that the expanding civilisation, with its modern technology and standardisation, has such a devastating effect. The interaction with our environment is making still larger parts of our highest mental abilities superfluous and, as a consequence, souls are left to idleness in ever larger numbers.

The value of technological progress, in regard to human life, must be judged by its ability to afford the human race possibilities in terms of the activation of the soul. It is hard to define this in clearer terms, but the earliest cutting tools can perhaps be seen as an example of such valuable technological inventions

Any other type of technological invention has no life-value for anyone else but the inventor himself—they represent a violent and ruthless robbery of humankind's collective experience reserve and ought to incur the most severe penalty if made public against the veto of censorship. One such crime, amongst numerous others, is the use of aircraft for exploring unknown regions. In one single, vandalising swoop, rich possibilities of experience, which could have been shared and enjoyed by many, with each individual discovering his share by his own efforts, are destroyed.

The chronic fever of life, at its current stage, is deeply marked by the situation just mentioned. The lack of natural, biologically anchored soul activities is reflected in the mass refuge into distraction, i.e. entertainment, sports, music—the obsession with 'what's in vogue'. Attachments, on the other hand, are presently having a hard time—all of the collective, inherited attachment structures have been perforated by criticism and anxiety; loathing, bewilderment and desperation are seeping up through the cracks. Communism and psychoanalysis, however incommensurable they may otherwise be, are both trying, once again, to construct variants of the old solution with new tactics: to make the human biologically viable by conning it out of its critical surplus of consciousness—by violence and slyness, respectively. In both cases, the overall idea is uncannily logical. But in the end, neither of these tactics will lead to any ultimate solution. A deliberate degeneration of consciousness to a lower and more practically convenient level can of course potentially save our species by a hair, but the inherent disposition of the human race will make it unable to ever find contentment in this kind of resignation, or any contentment at all.

If we continue these considerations to their bitter end, the conclusion is obvious. As long as humankind recklessly continues in the delusion of being biologically fated to succeed, nothing will essentially change. As the population grows and expands and the spiritual atmosphere thickens, the techniques of protection will have to assume an increasingly brutal character. And humans will persist in dreaming of salvation and affirmation and a new Messiah. But after many a saviour has been nailed to the tree and stoned in the city square, the last Messiah shall arrive. Then the man will appear who, as the first and the only one, has dared strip his soul naked and deliver it alive to the outermost thought of the human species, to the very idea of annihilation. A man who has fathomed life in its cosmic ground, and whose pain is the Earth's collective pain. With what furious screams shall the mobs of all nations demand him killed a thousand times over when his voice, like a cloak, envelops the planet and the strange message has resounded for the first and the last time:

'The life of the worlds is a roaring river, but the Earth's is a stagnant pool. The mark of annihilation is written on your brow—how long will you keep fighting the inevitable? But there is one victory and one crown, one redemption and one solution. Know yourself—be infertile and let the earth be silent after you.'

And when he has spoken these words, they will throw themselves upon him, with the nursemaids and midwives first, and bury him under their fingernails.

He is the last Messiah. Like a father's son, he is the descendent of the hunter by the waterhole.

Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899-1990) was a philosopher and mountain climber from the Norwegian arctic. His writing engages with pessimist, existentialist, and antinatalist theory. Very little of it has been translated.

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