

Ilija Trojanow's *The Lamentations of Zeno*: Prophetic Cli-Fi

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The Lamentations of Zeno (2016; originally published in German, 2011) portrays a man whose anger at the public's blindness to the consequences of climate change and desperation over the destruction of the environment lead him to commit suicide, in a dramatic act which he hopes will shake people out of their lethargy. The story unfolds through successive entries in the diary of Zeno Hintermeier, a glaciologist working as lecturer and expedition leader on board a cruise ship in the Southern Ocean. Eloquent in his indictment of the slaughter of animals, the disfiguring of landscape and above all the impact of global warming, which have all reached the last great untouched wilderness on the planet, Zeno also comments critically on the discrimination of indigenous peoples and the economic exploitation of the developing countries. At the same time, however, he reveals a degree of complicity in both respects, and voices views which are troublingly misanthropic. Zeno is therefore a flawed hero, and, we may suspect, a not entirely reliable narrator – for example, in the passages relating to his conveniently commitment-free, seasonally renewed relationship with Paulina, a Filipino waitress on board the cruise ship.

While he functions as a persona of the author, in a narrative drawing attention to the unsustainability of our way of life, Zeno simultaneously demonstrates the inadequacy of moralizing prophecies of doom as a way of responding to the crisis, since his actions are in the end ineffectual. His role is perhaps best understood as that of a holy fool: he is not a role model whose behaviour is presented for readers to copy, but a wildly impractical eccentric, whose madness commands our respect because it refuses to ignore, play down or rationalize away our treatment of the natural environment. Through tragi-comic dramatization of the curmudgeonly Zeno's struggles with himself and his fellow men and women, and sympathetic depiction of his self-sacrificial end, Trojanow calls on his readers to seek other, more effective ways of halting global warming and promoting social justice. The novel contains interludes of satirical humour, but it is essentially the tragic story of an individual who, wrapped up in his personal sorrow and anger, fails to recognize that others are also concerned about climate change, and to work with them. Zeno seeks to jolt humanity out of its equanimity over environmental destruction with his protest action. But his suicide can also be read as an attempt to expiate the sins of a species bent on destroying nature (he regards

pollution, consumption and the extinction of species as something akin to original sin), and a search for personal redemption.

Among the more memorable aspects of this novel, which, originally published in 2011, remains the best-known work of German climate change fiction, and is the only one to date available in English translation, are poetic passages evoking the overwhelming spectacle of untouched nature at the outermost frontier of civilization, the majestic and mysterious scenery of the Antarctic. Interspersed in Zeno's account of the voyage from the port of Ushuaia in Argentina's far south, to the Falkland Islands, King George Island, South Georgia, Deception Island and the Antarctic mainland are recollections of how he became a glaciologist, and the events which led him to quit his university job in Munich and spend half the year in the Antarctic. He recalls how, on a hot summer day in his childhood, his father drove him from the city down to the Alps, and he first met a glacier. It seemed like a dragon in reverse, breathing cold instead of fire. Over the years he developed an intimate relationship with the great beast, initially as an object of wonder and a playground, later as a subject of scientific investigation, but always as a being for which he felt affection and reverence. Visiting it as a professional researcher to observe and record its gradual shrinkage, he greeted it like a beloved partner afflicted by a terminal illness. Its final meltdown, leaving behind 'lumps of darkened ice strewn over the cliff like rubble waiting to be removed from a building site', coincided with illness and the breakup of his marriage, precipitating an existential crisis.¹ Zeno has sought solace in the icy wastes of the *Terra Nullius*.

At first, he derives satisfaction from his lecturing; he finds companionship with like-minded colleagues, and happiness with Paulina. But everything begins to fall apart when, in full sight of a group of tourists whom Zeno is leading, a Chilean soldier blatantly breaks the internationally agreed codes of behaviour on the continent. Zeno's overreaction nearly precipitates an international incident, and almost loses him his job. His native Bavarian penchant for taciturn stubbornness and contrarianism develops into disgust with his fellow human beings, and his tirades estrange him from all but the most sympathetic people around him. When a famous installation artist joins the cruise with plans to assemble the ship's passengers standing in a giant SOS on the ice and photograph it from the air to promote awareness of global warming, he is alienated by the man's showmanship. It prompts him to turn artistic simulation into a genuine emergency.

¹ Ilija Trojanow, *The Lamentations of Zeno*, trans. Philip Boehm (London: Verso, 2016), 78.

Only at the end of the book do we learn from Zeno's diary exactly what he does and why. However, the essentials have already been gradually revealed. Set off by a section break composed of dot-and-dash Morse Code notation for the international distress signal, each chapter closes with a cacophonous collage of conversational fragments, advertising slogans, lines from popular songs and pornographic phrases, as if the reader were scanning radio stations or overhearing flippant chatter at a crowded bar. What unites the snippets of verbal material is an attitude of superiority and cynical indifference. Embedded in them are maritime distress calls and 'breaking news' announcements of an 'accident' on board the cruise ship which track the loss, hijacking and discovery of the *Hansen*, starting at the point in time of Zeno's last diary entry. As a structural device, these passages represent the clamour of human civilization, contrasting with the silence of the Antarctic, and build tension throughout the novel.

Trojanow's novel is distinguished from the thrillers and disaster novels which make up the bulk of climate change fiction by 'literary' qualities including aphorisms and historical and literary allusions. Zeno describes climate change as 'the blind spot of our calculated optimism', and progress as 'destroying the essential to create the superfluous', commenting: "we're infesting now in our future".² He is compared with Cassandra, the priestess in Greek mythology who was endowed with the gift of foreseeing coming disasters, but condemned never to be believed. His name references Zen Buddhism, but also the Greek founder of Stoicism, whose central tenet is that we should live in accord with nature and promote moral progress. He presents the Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton as a historical touchstone of moral probity, and quotes three poets in his diary. The most important of these is Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is cited at several points. Zeno resembles the ancient mariner, haranguing the public with his tale of ecological transgression, whose atonement demands reestablishment of a natural relationship with the natural world.³

Originally published with the title *EisTau* (literally 'ice thaw'),⁴ Trojanow's novel met with a mixed reception. Read by leading German critics as a disappointing addition to the work of an established author with a reputation for espousing social and political causes, it was dismissed as a crude expression of environmentalist values, marred by maudlin sentiment. However, an extended reading tour, in which the author recited from Zeno's diary,

² Trojanow, *The Lamentations of Zeno*, 80, 124

³ See Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville, VA and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 204-9.

⁴ Trojanow, *EisTau* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2011).

accompanied by violin, saxophone and cello playing specially commissioned music, was enthusiastically received.⁵ The book has also been adapted for the stage, in an ambitious production in Bremerhaven, home of Germany's climate museum, Klimahaus, which involved scientists working at the polar research institute which is based there. It has since come out in paperback and as an audio book. Philip Boehm's sensitive English translation was welcomed by reviewers in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Guardian* and *New Yorker*.

There are several ways in which *The Lamentations of Zeno* might reward inclusion in the teaching syllabus. As a confessional narrative appealing openly to readers' environmental consciences, it illustrates the danger of putting off readers by preaching, and invites critical discussion of how successful Trojanow is in avoiding this pitfall.⁶ Alternatively, it might be read alongside other environmental novels as an exposure of the latent misanthropy in deep ecology, and a critique of the apocalyptic pessimism which has characterized parts of the environmental movement.⁷ Zeno might, for instance, be compared with the melancholic, contrarian environmentalist Walter Berglund in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010).

Passages such as Trojanow's depiction of Grytviken as a site of butchery would support a reading of *The Lamentations of Zeno* as an example of 'toxic discourse',⁸ and of 'dark pastoral'.⁹ The extent to which Trojanow seeks to inform his readers as well as entertaining them, and the ways in which he integrates elements of climate science, are a further subject meriting comparative exploration. Finally, the novel might be read with profit as an example of writing on the Antarctic landscape, alongside travel diaries such as Apsley Cherry-Garrard's classic account of the tragic expedition led by Robert Scott, *The Worst Journey in the World* (1922), and novels such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* (1997).¹⁰

⁵ An excerpt can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELt6OHsZKd0>

⁶ The long interview with Trojanow at <https://soundcloud.com/versobooks/the-lamentations-of-zeno-a-conversation-with-ilija-trojanow> provides information on the autofictional nature of the book.

⁷ See Steve Masover's entry, 'Desperate Books Aren't Suited to Desperate Times' on his blog, 'One Finger Typing', <http://steve.masover.blogspot.co.uk/2016/08/desperate-books-arent-suited-to.html>, which details how he was simultaneously engaged and repelled by the book.

⁸ Lawrence Buell, 'Toxic Discourse', *Critical Inquiry* 2/3 (1998), 639-665.

⁹ Heather I. Sullivan, 'The Dark Pastoral: A Trope for the Anthropocene', in Caroline Schaumann and Heather I. Sullivan, eds, *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 25-44.

¹⁰ For the titles of further novels, see the blog 'Antarctica in Fiction: More than a blank page', <http://www.quixote-expeditions.com/antarctica-in-fiction/>.