

# STEFAN ZWEIG, VIENNA AND TIMES PAST

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*The great Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) witnessed the end of a world, that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and of a certain Europe that disappeared after the First World War.*

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Under his polite and elegant airs of a good-natured author, Stefan Zweig was part of the serious avant-garde, at the beginning of the 20th century, which shone in the most beautiful capital of Europe, Vienna. This placid, well-to-do, charming, happy, distinguished and successful author, from the Jewish and literate bourgeoisie—true to form, immaculately dressed, velvet eyes a little melancholic, trimmed moustache—lived on a volcano, in a Europe of crisis; knew the fall of the old Austrian Empire and the terrible First World War; then exile and the defeat of hope.

Of all the authors that Vienna produced, Zweig is the one who most illustrates the cosmopolitanism of a glittering intelligentsia, of an elite that was sure of itself and its qualities. A friend of Freud, Schnitzler, Richard Strauss, he was one of those writers, like Paul Morand, who saw Europe as a vast salon where life was lived in cafés; he spoke French like a native and thought of Venice as an archipelago. It is a higher cosmopolitanism which prolonged the Concert of Europe, that gallant Europe. A great friend of Emile Verhaeren, Romain Rolland and Paul Valéry, he conceived London as the center of his business affairs and Paris as the second homeland he knew in 1902, with its omnibuses and its carriages. Familiar with bookshops and concerts, a billiard player, a lover of unpublished manuscripts, walks in museums, women and Verlaine, his beloved poet—he lost himself happily in the vibrant whirl of beefsteak washed down with Brouilly and bistros on rue Campagne-Première. "For me, Paris is a reward;" everything was there.

In Zweig there is a tension between *voluptas in motu*, an infernal nomadism, and *voluptas in stabilitate*, pleasure and things; between movement and fixity; displacement and scrutiny. When he wants to write about [Mary Stuart](#), he goes to London; he comes back to Paris to write about [Marie Antoinette](#). Zweig could write without traveling. This tension is present in his work, but also in his life, the most striking synthesis of which is [The World of Yesterday](#), a sort of autobiographical testament published in 1942. As he says in the preface, he seeks to recount "the destiny of a generation, our singular generation."

The "volcanic" upheavals shook Europe, and it is up to Zweig to narrate them: "I was born in 1881 in a great and powerful Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy; but let no one look for it on the map; it has been

erased without a trace." The golden age of security. A nebula of artists, from Rilke to Mahler via the secessionists and Otto Wagner, participated in the greatness of the capital of an Empire that recognized its limits. It turned inward, shaping its own security, to be in the vanguard of the arts: "Austria no longer asserted political ambitions nor experienced particular success in its military ventures, so that patriotic pride was most strongly transferred to the desire to conquer artistic supremacy." Who would have believed it—the Empire—in the image of old Franz-Josef—devoting itself to the *Ver Sacrum*, to new ideas, sensing the new sense of art.

## Vienna

The whole of Vienna was frenzied in ebullition. "Live and let live" was the famous Viennese maxim "instead of this German value which finally poisoned and disturbed the existence of all other peoples." Vienna of the cafés and of a triumphant, precocious youth, gifted for literature, love and the arts, like Hofmannsthal. The *Jung-Wien*. The brothels were an institution to which all youth rushed; syphilis, the mark of the Devil, condemned many talents to an early silence. Sexuality remained, although its era could no longer be considered pious, and tolerance was now a central value, tainted with an anarchic, disturbing aura that agitated modern minds of which Freud was the exorcist.

Music was a hard drug, where the simple mistake of a violinist at a concert was worth the disgrace for life in musical circles. Only accuracy. But already the inevitable First World War was on its way—the conclusion of national consciences all over Europe, from the Italy of the Risorgimento to the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. Austria, subjected to Prussia, qualified as vulgar and arrogant, submitted to a disgraceful alliance; the death of Franz-Ferdinand, if it was not synonymous with tragedy because the archduke, successor of the old emperor, was far from unanimous, led to war by a game of alliances that led to the intervention of France and England to the rescue of Serbia. "Es steht schlimmer als je, die Maschine ist doch schon im Gang—It is more serious than ever, the machine is already in motion." It was the defeat of Europe, the end of empires, the fall of the dream into a generalized civil war.

Stefan Zweig had a delicate but also lively, almost dry and stripped writing style, a style with a light, concise and efficient smile that he shares with Arthur Schnitzler, and a style which cultivates this feeling of erosion, this motif of the irremediable flaw dear to decadentists like Catulle Mendès. Zweig's fragrant, pleasant style cuts like a scalpel, butchers the heart of man. Unlike his friend Josef Roth, he does not have a talent for lyricism and the burlesque, as one can find in [\*The Radetzky March\*](#), a novel of

collapse, a *roman à thèse* and a comic-tragic novel about the saga of the overturned world of the von Trotta.

Zweig's novels are lively, with a talent for finesse. Noteworthy is *Confusion*. A university student recalls the memory of his philology professor who opened up the ways of the mind to him. Beyond the love of study, this text evokes the bond between two men and the ambiguities which agitate against the morals, the law and in the glances of others. The professor has a double and disconcerting attitude towards the student—sometimes he lets him get close to him, sometimes he coldly pushes him away. This behavior plunges the student into a deep confusion that quickly turns into a great torment.

This work, praised by Freud, has a recurrent logic: to highlight internal struggles, triggered by an external event. This logic is present in *Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman*, the story of a young woman who runs away from her world with a young man she met only one day before. The comments of the narrator and an elderly English woman go to great lengths to describe the fires and consuming passions which, despite the extinguished embers, still stir the purest of hearts.

Zweig also excelled in the art of biographical portraiture, to discover the key to genius and its mysteries. A gallery could well be made of his portraits in the Louvre or the Prado. *Nietzsche* describes the philosopher as the martyr of the world, a man who gives birth to his ideas in pain, a man of nerves of steel ready to break, with a head boiling like a still. His *Magellan* fires the imagination, with the tough and courageous adventure of a gentle dreamer; his *Balzac* is a monument to creative force; Tolstoy traces the how and why of a mystical conversion of a writer at the height of his fame.

## **The End of a World**

Yes, yesterday's world is over. In 1916 the old emperor died. In 1918 the Empire became a federal republic, gangrened by socialism. In 1938 it was annexed to the German Reich as a large province of the empire. What disgrace! Zweig, so quick to detect the perversities of the heart, but not very lucid in politics, did not see the rise of Nazism. In Salzburg, he saw nothing of Hitler's rise to power, whereas Josef Roth, a supporter of the restoration of the Empire, had already in 1938 in *The Emperor's Tomb* identified the appearance of men in black uniforms, Hugo Bosses swarming the cafés. The eagle flags, yellow and black, were replaced by swastika flags on a red background.

Zweig believed that the order of history would get rid of Hitler without any drama. That was Zweig's big mistake. Then came exile. Farewell to the Europe that was disappearing. Hofmannsthal died in 1929. Schnitzler in 1931. Roth in 1939.

After exile in London, here he was, lost at the other end of the world, in Brazil, in [Petrópolis](#).

In 1942, in good health but consumed by the black bile buried in his heart, he committed suicide with his wife, in despair at seeing his world collapse, which would never recover and whose resurrection is impossible.

Fortunes and misfortunes carried off Zweig. The society he loved so much has disappeared, but his words yet preserve that world's likeness and its core essence.

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*[Featured](#): Stefan Zweig in Rio de Janeiro, 1936.*

