



Stefan Zweig and World Literature

TWENTY-FIVE PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY BIRGER VANWESENBEECK
AND MARK H. GELBER

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Twenty-First-Century Perspectives

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and Mark H. Gelber



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Summary: The twenty-first century has seen a renewed surge of cultural and critical interest in the works of the Austrian-Jewish author Stefan Zweig (1881–1942), who was among the most-read and -acclaimed authors worldwide in the 1920s and 1930s but after 1945 fell into critical disfavor and relative obscurity. The resurgence in interest in Zweig and his works is attested to by, among other things, new English translations and editions of his works; a Brazilian motion picture and a best-selling French novel about his final days; and a renewed debate surrounding the literary quality of his work in the *London Review of Books*. This global return to Zweig calls for a critical reassessment of his legacy and works, which the current collection of essays provides by approaching them from a global perspective as opposed to the narrow European focus through which they have been traditionally approached. Together, the introduction and twelve essays engage the totality of Zweig's published and unpublished works from his drama and his fiction to his letters and his biographies, and from his literary and art criticism to his autobiography.

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Harry Zohn (1923–2001)

in memoriam

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Introduction

Birger Vanwesenbeeck and Mark H. Gelber

QUO USQUE TANDEM ABUTERE, *Stefan Zweig, patientia nostra?* How much longer, Stefan Zweig, will you be testing our patience? This well-known opening question from Cicero's *In Catilinam* orations (63 BCE), addressed not to Stefan Zweig, but to the Roman senator Catiline, may serve as a model for the exasperation and indignation that the name Stefan Zweig continues to inspire in certain literary and intellectual circles.¹ Mockingly referred to in his lifetime as "Erwerbszweig" (commercial branch) and famously attacked by Hannah Arendt for his apparent refusal to articulate political opinions in public,² Zweig has, perhaps more than any other modern writer, suffered from a steady barrage of attacks on his work and person, even as readers worldwide and in large numbers have continued to read his works. Time and again in such diatribes Zweig has been evoked as a kind of bad seed, as a literary populist whose "plotting," like the more malicious scheming of the Roman senator Catiline, makes his continued presence within the "Republic of Letters" intolerable to those "senators," that is, those critics committed to serious literary value.

Michael Hofmann's highly publicized attack on Zweig in the January 28, 2010, issue of the *London Review of Books* is perhaps the most prominent recent example of a literary polemic against him.³ As does Cicero in his orations against Catiline, Hofmann accuses Zweig of mendacity and deception: "Stefan Zweig just tastes fake. He's the Pepsi of Austrian writing." Noting that there is something "'not quite right' about this popular-again popularizer," Hofmann launches into a series of ever-more specific, demonstratively determined epithets: "*this* un-Austrian Austrian and un-Jewish Jew"; "*this* cosmopolitan loner and blue-riband refugee."⁴ Like the anaphoric structure of Cicero's opening questions, these formulations draw their rhetorical strength from a sudden shift in tone and form. In Cicero, this shift moves from the senatorial "we" that structures his rhetorical questions to the all-inclusive apostrophe of the age itself that immediately follows it: *O tempora, o mores* (O times, o traditions). If the continued presence of Catiline in the Senate is evoked by Cicero initially as damaging the credibility of Rome's republican institutions, by the end it appears to reflect badly on the age as a whole.

Hofmann follows a similar rhetorical trajectory in his essay, except that he reverses direction. Moving from the more general to the more specific, he opens with a catalogue of what *others* have remarked about Zweig. For example, he cites Romain Rolland's surprise at the thought of a writer who doesn't like cats, as well as the visceral, negative reactions to his work in "catty Vienna." In closing, Hofmann comes to the "revelation" that things are, after all, personal. Zweig, so runs Hofmann's concluding epithet, is "this person whose books I briefly thought I wouldn't mind reading, before, while setting down the umpteenth of them amid groans (it was the novella *Confusion*), adding the stipulation to myself: yes, but only if they'd been written by someone else." After a lifetime spent trying to stop worrying and love the bombast of Zweig's prose, Hofmann declares that he cannot and will not do so any longer.

Notwithstanding its rhetorical prowess, Hofmann's essay cannot hide the fact that there is something formulaic and mechanical about his diatribe against Zweig. In fact, Hofmann sounds less like Cicero than that other great Roman orator, Cato the Elder who famously concluded every speech before the Roman Senate with the stock formula, "*Ceterum censeo Carthaginem delendam esse*" (And, by the way, I am convinced that Carthage should be destroyed.)⁵ Meant to remind a younger generation that no contemporary political issue could ever be so pressing as to outweigh the ongoing geopolitical threat of Rome's arch-enemy across the Mediterranean, Cato's stock phrase presents itself as an aside ("*ceterum*") even as its strategic positioning at the end of a speech gives it certain rhetorical weight over the actual speech itself. Both in this willed deflation of the topic at hand and in the explicit reliance on his seniority, Cato serves as an obvious model for Hofmann's argumentation. By presenting an ad hominem attack on Zweig disguised as an objective book review of a new English translation of his popular late autobiography, *Die Welt von Gestern* (translated, as Hofmann notes, "by the excellent Anthea Bell"), Hofmann addresses readers from the vantage of an older authority who faults a younger generation of readers for "plotting" a "Zweig revival." "Older" here means old-world, continental European, for, according to Hofmann, it is the relative absence of comparable intellectual traditions across the seas that accounts for the misconception that Zweig's works have literary value. In Hofmann's words:

Stefan Zweig was a purveyor of *Trivialliteratur* and, save in commercial terms, an utterly negligible figure. From the distance of Britain or America now one erroneously supposes something more like the opposite to be the case: that here is someone who is among the best his country and language and period have to offer, and who comes with the good opinion and endorsement of his peers. Partly it's the distinction—far more rigidly observed in Germany than in

the English-speaking world—between serious and popular (*e* and *u* in German parlance, *Ernst* and *Unterhaltung*) but there is more to it than that.

The question of Zweig's continuing popularity is here reduced, rather unconvincingly, to the Anglophone reader's supposed inability to distinguish between high (serious) and low (trivial) literature, as well as to the "nice paper and pretty formats" in which Zweig's works have recently been reissued in English translation by the London-based Pushkin Press.⁶ Indeed, this characterization is particularly unpersuasive when major international filmmakers from Wes Andersen to Xu Jinglei,⁷ and established essayists like George Prochnik and Will Stone rank among those who have recently turned to Zweig.⁸

World Literature

In calling for the need to consider Zweig within a narrow European context, Hofmann follows a strategy that has long been characteristic of both Zweig enthusiasts and opponents alike. For the former group, Zweig is usually viewed as "der grosse Europäer,"⁹ who advocated for solidarity and peace among European nations; he is the cultural mediator whose "Villa Europa" on the Kapuzinerberg overlooking Salzburg served as a preferred meeting place for continental writers and artists during the 1920s; he is the "remembering European" (as he fashioned himself in the subtitle of *Die Welt von Gestern*) who desperately sought to preserve the cultural memory of a continent torn to pieces by two world wars. For the latter group, by contrast, Zweig is a writer of popular stories who lacked the artistic edge of his European contemporaries (Hofmann cites Joseph Roth as a counterexample). He had an overly simplified understanding of European Jewry. He overstated the Italian ancestry of his mother's family in order to present himself as the genealogical product of North and South.¹⁰

Although no one can doubt the level of Zweig's identification with Europe, with its languages and its mores, both his life trajectory and his literary interests give evidence of a scope that extends well beyond Europe. His fictions include stories set in Vienna and Geneva as well as in Dutch-controlled Indonesia and aboard an Argentina-bound steamer; his literary-biographical interests extend from Balzac and Verhaeren to Walt Whitman and Mary Baker Eddy; his travel writings focus on Belgium as well as Brazil. The Latin title of the opening chapter of Zweig's biography of the world explorer Magellan, "*Navigare necesse est*" (it is necessary to sail),¹¹ could furthermore be read in this regard as an artistic prerogative on the part of the author. One must take to the waters—that is, venture outside of Europe—in order to write. This is also the underlying

credo grouping together the twelve essays in this volume. The first book-length scholarly work on Zweig to appear in the United States in over a quarter-century, *Stefan Zweig and World Literature* aims to offer a global perspective on his career and writings. Recognizing the need for a global framework within which to consider the Austrian-Jewish author, the essays collected here—some of which are revised and expanded versions of papers first read at the international conference “Stefan Zweig’s Transatlantic Connections,” held at the State University of New York at Fredonia in 2009—approach his works through the lens of world literature. This term, one that Zweig held dear, has recently advanced to the forefront of contemporary literary criticism. Focusing on the totality of Zweig’s literary output, including his fiction and letters along with his essays, dramas, literary criticism, biographies, translations, and memoir, *Stefan Zweig and World Literature* explores the author’s relevance and significance at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

“Weltliteratur, wie Goethe sie vorausnahm, schwebte [Zweig] als höchster Besitz vor” (“world literature,” in Goethe’s sense of the term, meant everything to Zweig), wrote the Austrian author Felix Braun, a longtime acquaintance and contemporary of Stefan Zweig, in his 1949 autobiography.¹² As a translator of Romain Rolland and Émile Verhaeren, Zweig contributed significantly to the circulation of these francophone authors’ works in Germany and Austria. As initiator and editor of Insel Verlag’s “Bibliotheca Mundi” series—which produced handsome editions of world masterpieces in their original languages, including French, English, Hungarian, and Hebrew—he also actively contributed to the spread and distribution of world literature within Europe. Zweig wrote introductions for numerous editions of authors whose works were translated into German or into French. In addition, he regularly spoke at PEN conventions worldwide—from New York City to Buenos Aires—and expressed his satisfaction with the reception of his books beyond his native Austria and the boundaries of the European continent.

Although Zweig’s interest and place in world literature have never been a secret, it is only recently, with a new wave of global adaptations of his works and a renewed influx of theoretical analyses of the concept of world literature, that the relevance of this concept for Zweig’s writings has become at once obvious and acute.¹³ In light of the technological advances fueling the processes of globalization, world literature has increasingly come to be viewed within a global framework.

Thus, aesthetic and political values which may have been generated in specific languages and cultures are now being tested in vastly different cultural settings from their original contexts as texts circulate and are received throughout the world. There has been a distinct tendency to contextualize debates about the limitations of globalization and the tenacity of national traditions outside of the European cultural sphere. Already

during his lifetime, Stefan Zweig was recognized as an excellent example of a writer whose works were eminently transportable, capable of appealing and gaining in valence as they crossed national borders in translation far from the European continent. Furthermore, many of Zweig's writings have retained their worldwide appeal, especially in Brazil, Argentina, China, the Far East, and elsewhere, just as new interest in his works has been registered in Central European and in Anglo-American cultures. The concept of world literature that is emerging in the early twenty-first century may prove capable of reformulating the criteria for determining literary value, while attributing primacy to writers like Zweig, whose global reach and importance are being augmented by contemporary digital and film culture. Zweig scholarship will no doubt be challenged to explain and analyze this new phenomenon.

The Essays

In the opening paragraph of *Mute Poetry, Speaking Pictures*, Renaissance scholar Leonard Barkan reminisces about a high school assignment that would turn out to be significant for his later academic interests in the relationship between art and literature:

Shortly before I turned sixteen, I took part in a high school film project. Each member of the group was required to write and direct a movie in the course of the summer, and we all served as each others' crew. My fellow-cineastes devoted laborious thought to the choice of a subject, only to end up with the sorts of themes—rock-and-roll, science fiction, the pangs of young love—that doubtless could have provided rather predictable maps of our various adolescent preoccupations. I, however, seized on some rather arcane material, and without a moment's hesitation. In German class, I had just been assigned a Stefan Zweig story called "Die unsichtbare Sammlung," and I decided it was perfect for a movie.¹⁴

The seemingly incongruous inclusion of Zweig's name at the beginning of a Renaissance scholar's inquiry into the relationship between word and image is of interest for two reasons. First, it provides further evidence of the now ubiquitous ways in which Zweig's works have become central to some of the leading areas of inquiry of contemporary literary criticism, including world literature, exile studies, trauma,¹⁵ and—in Barkan's case—the long-standing question of *ekphrasis*, or how to paint with words. Set during the economic depression of the Weimar Republic, "Die unsichtbare Sammlung" ("The Invisible Collection," 1925) tells the story of a family forced to sell off their father's prized artworks to make ends meet. The father, now blind, does not know that the lithographs he