

petuous in pushing his cause well before Luther thought of having one. Erasmus was the greater scholar, had more wit, and a different kind of literary genius. From his earliest days, he denounced the monks, discredited the saints, and declared, "almost all Christians wretchedly enslaved by blindness and ignorance."

Erasmus observed all the common religious usages that were not repugnant to the Holy Scriptures, but he complained when relics were presented not as innocent aids to religion, but as the substance of religion itself. He "was the first humanist to earn his living by his writing" and he saw that "his power lay in his pen, not in titles or partisan activities." He was also a humorist "which to the earnest means one who trifles with serious things." He

was serious, however, "when he refuted Luther's doctrine that most of mankind was damned from all eternity and would not accept Luther's denial of Free Will." As Albert Jay Nock has observed, he was "incapable of taking up with any but a sound cause." Martin Luther's "proposal to substitute the authority of a book for the authority of a Pope was merely a proposal to change masters." On the other hand, Erasmus was "for great reforms, fundamental reforms," but these were not to be had, and "so there was no place for him in the fighting front of either army...." Indeed, Nock contended that Desiderius Erasmus was no game for professors or run-of-the-mill parsons and bishops and that "the less one reads *about* Erasmus, the better."

Stefan Zweig and Franz Kafka: A Study in Contrast

Mordecai Roshwald

STEFAN ZWEIG (1881-1942) and Franz Kafka (1883-1924) could have been expected to have much in common and to belong to the same category in modern literature. Born only two years apart, they belong to the same epoch. Although Zweig was born in Vienna and Kafka in Prague, both wrote in German, and Prague, though the center of the Czech region, was till 1918 a city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both authors happened to be Jewish and retained a positive attitude to Judaism,

MORDECAI ROSHWALD taught for twenty-five years at the University of Minnesota.

which may have influenced their writing, even if it did not dominate it.

Yet, anybody examining any of the writings of the two authors, let alone anybody familiar with their respective works, cannot but be struck by the profound difference between the two. They appear to have lived not merely in different centuries, but in divergent worlds. They seem to belong not merely to different ages, but to epochs disjointed by apocalyptic events.

Zweig, as he admirably explains in his autobiographical work, *The World of Yesterday* (1944), grew up in a social environ-

ment which believed in stability and progress. He was deeply attached to the cultural life of Vienna and, at the same time, regarded himself as a European, and maintained strong connections with French literary circles. Life in Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century was solid, cosy, and stimulating. Although Zweig was privileged by economic and social conditions, and aware that not everybody shared in his economic circumstances, he believed that the entire society benefited from constantly improving conditions, and that the progress towards a better Europe—and eventually a better world—was virtually assured. This optimistic view, which may well have been strengthened by his personal well-being, had a profound impact on Zweig's writing and colored his works, especially his early writings.

This does not mean that Zweig the writer presented to his readers diverse episodes in an idyllic setting, or told stories evolving along the way of progress towards a perfect world. For though he essentially believed in the march toward a better, fairer, more peaceful world, he was aware of human tragedies, of flaws in human character, of tragical conflicts. Indeed, he often seems to have been motivated by an urge to unravel human failures with the implicit intent of making a contribution to setting right the moral flaws of humanity. In various novellas, which made him a popular writer, he points to the moral failings of essentially decent people. The motto of his only big novel, *Beware of Pity* (1938), conveys a refined distinction between the common compassion and the true one:

For there are two kinds of compassion. One, the weak-spirited and sentimental, which is really only impatience of the heart to get rid as fast as possible of the painful involvement in an alien calamity, a compassion which is not compassion at all, but an instinctive defence of one's own soul from the alien suffering. And the other one, the only

one that counts—the unsentimental, but creative compassion, that knows what it wants, and is determined patiently and compassionately to endure it all to the limits of one's capacity, and even beyond it.

Clearly, the world is far from being Paradise Regained. Still, it is basically civilized, often humane, and appears to be moving in the right direction. The writer, endowed with insight, interprets the condition of humanity, and makes his own contribution towards its advancement. Zweig did not *proclaim* his own commitment in this respect, but a critical view of his work justifies this conclusion.

The history of Europe, which engulfed Zweig along with his contemporaries, awakened him from this illusory reality. As Europe plunged into the Great War in 1914, the belief in European civilization and progress was shattered. The most advanced nations in the world embarked on a mutual slaughter of cataclysmic proportions. Carnage, destruction, poverty—some of which Zweig witnessed in the regions of conflict between Austria and Russia—could in no way be related to the rosy picture of Zweig's earlier years. Naturally, his work started to display the shady side of the human condition.

Thus, in a story entitled *Buchmendel* (1929), a passionate bibliophile eking out his livelihood as a book dealer, who happens to be technically an enemy alien living in Vienna during the war, is crushed by the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. The government is not wicked or cruel towards Mendel: it merely acts in a way which is procedural, mechanical, indifferent. The result is the destruction of a human individual. Here Zweig discerns the new danger to human progress: the threat of the state, the Leviathan of Hobbes in its twentieth-century manifestation.

And yet, with all the acute realization of the changing world, and of the strained or even shattered belief in a better future for Austria and for Europe, Zweig does

not give up his fundamental faith and his commitment to moral progress. In *Jeremiah (Jeremias)* (1917), a drama written during the war and aiming at spreading the message of peace, he puts into the mouth of the ancient Hebrew prophet the promise of hope—hope for the Jews, which may well symbolize also the hope of civilized humanity:

Stones crumble, walls collapse...
Cities vanish in the stream of time,
Yet what the souls shape in suffering
Lasts in divine eternity...
Who can rob us
Of the blissful faith,
Who destroy the Jerusalem in our heart?

Alas, even this glimmer of hope became subject to a severe test with the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany, which hit Zweig personally, both as a Jew and as a European. First he experienced the public burning of the “forbidden” books, which included the German publications of Jewish writers. All of a sudden he felt cut off from his German readers. Then came the annexation of Austria, accompanied by acts of public humiliation of Jews in Vienna, which he describes in painful detail in *The World of Yesterday*. While Zweig could make his escape to England, and while his resources secured him a comfortable material existence (his books continued to be popular in many translations), he would witness in horror the plight of the Jewish refugees desperately looking for a country which would admit them. The human degradation was insufferable.

Eventually he and his wife reached Brazil, where he was accepted with honor, and where he continued to write. Yet, his world had collapsed, and with the apparently unstoppable advance of the German army, as World War II progressed, he seemed to have despaired of the future, and put an end to his life, along with that of his wife. He was spared the ultimate

degradation of the European civilization as manifested by genocide. He did not live to see the reversal of the fortunes of war either.

While one can view the life of Zweig as a witness to the collapse of civilization, and as a personal tragedy of a man doomed to the destruction of his hope and belief, it is noteworthy that his writings do not faithfully reflect these horrible predicaments. To be sure, he writes about the decline and about the shattering historical events, and he also expresses his personal despair. Yet the tenor of his writing is dominated by a civilized and polished manner of expression and, with some exceptions, by hope and belief in spite of the harsh experience.

Zweig seems virtually incapable of assimilating the tone of resignation and despair. Even the worst is conveyed in style. Even misery is painted in clear colors. Even his suicide letter is that of a civilized person in full control of his intellectual powers and his emotions. In a way, he remained faithful to his vocation and avocation despite the vicissitudes of time and history.

It is his passionate and compassionate personality, and his clear, polished, and explicit literary style, that endeared him to his readers—both in German-speaking countries and in Europe at large. He was an extremely popular writer, and even had some of his stories produced in film. He was self-confident as a writer from an early age and prolific in output. *He was a success story; it was the world that failed.*

Curiously, today he is largely unknown. Few in the United States—including the literary and academic circles—are familiar with Stefan Zweig’s writings.

The life and work of Franz Kafka appear in stark contrast with his contemporary. Kafka was not self-confident, and even instructed his literary executor and personal friend, Max Brod, to destroy his manuscripts—which fortunately the lat-

ter refused to do. While Zweig impresses the reader as an easy writer, Kafka's texts appear to be the product of a laborious and even painful effort. Zweig's works are pleasant to read, as well as interesting and engaging. Kafka's stories, and notably his major novel *The Castle* (*Das Schloss*) (1926) can hardly be described as in any way pleasant. Indeed, they introduce the reader into an imaginary world that is repelling—not only because of its iniquities, but also because of its drudgery and boredom. Kafka's hero in *The Castle*, named merely K., is neither an engaging nor an interesting person, neither noble nor ignoble, neither a hero nor an anti-hero. In fact he is fairly mediocre and caught up in a situation which cannot be described as either epic or dramatic. He is a grey man, deposited in a grey place, and encountered by mediocre people. He and his environment are not the stuff out of which great novels are made.

And yet, it is the grey, uneventful story of *The Castle*, as well as some other works of Kafka, that have enjoyed critical acclaim and that are regarded as modern classics and taught and studied at universities. Why does Kafka receive such attention and appreciation, while Zweig is largely—and rather unfairly—unrecognized?

The fundamental reason for this discrepancy has to be sought in the elusive sphere of the relationship between the works of literature and reality. Zweig's writings, with all their charm and polish, were becoming, in the context of a collapsing Europe, stories of the world of yesterday. Kafka's writing, on the other hand, predicted the world of tomorrow. Today, as we read Kafka, we realize that he had sensed the grim reality which eventually came to pass, and this makes his work prophetic. Zweig's works evoke the past, with its false hopes of a blissful future amounting to no more than an illusion, however beautiful it may have been. Whether Kafka's vision was fully con-

scious or the product of mysterious inspiration is immaterial. It proved to have revealed the impending truth, and this makes it painfully relevant.

Zweig's prose, as well as poetry, is noble and charming—in accordance with his illusory vision. Even in his last novella, *The Royal Game* (*Die Schachnovelle*) (1941), which records events in Vienna under the new Nazi rule, with the protagonist finding himself in a situation which is hopelessly Kafkaesque, Zweig's description remains clear and rational. The author discerns and rationally explains the revolting reality.

Kafka, on the other hand, represses any attempt to explain the evil and the absurd. His hero, K., is caught up in a system which he does not understand and, for all we know, the author does not comprehend either. K. is the casual victim of a mystifying social-political system, and all his efforts to attain access to the ruling authority fail. *The Castle* represents a social system, an establishment, to which individuals submit and against which they do not dare to fight. The system prevails and the individual does not count. The system need not be cruel, but it is incomprehensible. People do not even try to figure out its nature. They passively accept it. Such a situation precludes depiction in a rational, let alone attractive, manner. It can only be described in a dreary and monotonous tone. The system weighs heavily on the protagonist, on the writer, and eventually on the reader.

There have been many attempts to interpret Kafka's work. Some would point to the impotence of the individual in the encounter with the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy, which may not have been as considerate and benevolent as the admirers of the Hapsburg rule have chosen to see it. Others may regard K. as symbolizing the Jew in an alien social setting—a striving stranger doomed to failure. K. may even represent the human

being in a futile attempt for contact with a remote deity, the human remaining essentially alien in the cosmic existence.

The overwhelming impression remains that we face the individual in modern times—in future time from Kafka’s perspective—who is powerless in the face of the regime and the social situation in which he finds himself. Such concern was expressed in futuristic novels of the twentieth century, represented by Yevgeny Zamiatin’s *We* (1924), George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, (1932). The systems depicted may have been vicious, as in the first two examples, or ostensibly well-meaning, as in Huxley’s novel. However, in each case the system rules the individual, and does not allow him autonomous development and freedom of judgment. Kafka sensed this danger and therefore critics look for Kafkaesque motifs in modern fiction. Zweig, mercifully, was spared the nightmarish prospect.

How does one explain the divergence of views and style of these two contemporaries and compatriots? Conceivably, their different backgrounds account for the contrast. Zweig was born into an affluent family, while Kafka had to worry about his livelihood. Zweig was given freedom to choose his career, while Kafka was constrained by his father to choose a “sensible” profession that did not suit his temper and his genius. Zweig lived in Vienna, while Kafka lived in a Czech setting where the benefits of the Austrian rule were doubted.

All such explorations may have a degree of plausibility. Yet, in the end, the way of a writer, a gifted and inspired writer, cannot be adequately explained by accidental circumstances. The essential genius of a writer remains an enigma and a revelation, which shows that he is not a product of a system.

In the Agrarian Conservative Tradition

George A. Panichas

ARTHUR VERSLUIS’S *Island Farm* (2000) is an exemplary piece of writing, a personal memoir of his life on a generational family farm near Grand Rapids, Michigan. It also tenders probing reflections on the agrarian conservative tradition as it, too, disappears into “the sterile new American

landscape, devoid of farms and of lived history on the land.” No less poignant in this book is its evocation of spirit of place struggling to survive in an environment of mega-machines and mega-technology that annul the human factor and mercilessly regulate the rhythms and the seasons of our works and days. In short, it is a synecdochic work about the consequences of loss of human connections and continuity, and about a land and

GEORGE A. PANICHAS is the editor of *Modern Age* and the author, most recently, of *Joseph Conrad: His Moral Vision* (Mercer University Press, 2005).