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# Vermicular Dither

Michael Hofmann

THE WORLD OF YESTERDAY
by Stefan Zweig, translated by Anthea Bell.
Pushkin Press, 474 pp., £20, 1 906548 12 9

ROMAIN ROLLAND, one of Stefan Zweig's many illustrious friends (he seems not to have had any other kind), expressed surprise that he could be a writer and not like cats: 'Un poète qui n'aime pas les chats!' It's only one of an unending series of things – as if the man did not have a shadow – that strike one as being 'not quite right' about this popular-again populariser who, like the *Kitschmeister* Gustav Klimt, is glitteringly and preposterously back in fashion, and neither of them any better than they were the first time round.

Polygrapher Zweig ('twig'), dubbed 'Erwerbszweig' (something like 'productive branch of the economy') in catty, envious Vienna: this anxious success and oh-so-modest failure; bestselling and most-translated German-language author before World War Two, and now again book of the week here, rediscovery of the century there, and indulgently reviewed more or less everywhere; this uniquely dreary and clothy sprog of the electric 1880s; this un-Austrian Austrian and un-Jewish Jew (Joseph Roth – who has certainly spoiled me for Zweig – was both, to the max); not a pacifist much less an activist but a passivist; this professional adorer, schmoozer, inheritor and collector, owner of Beethoven's desk and Goethe's pen and Leonardo and Mozart manuscripts and busy Balzac proofs and contemporaries out the wazoo, plus 4000 *manuscript collection catalogues*, who logged his phone calls and logged his letters and logged his books, and, who knows, probably logged his logs; this cosmopolitan loner and blue-riband refugee, so 'hysterically discreet' that he got married by proxy; who, in the words of the writer Robert Neumann, 'spent his life on the run. From the Great War to Switzerland. From the symbolic firing-squad across the Channel. From Blitzed London to the safety of provincial Bath. From Hitler's threatened invasion of England to the USA. From Roosevelt's impending entry into the war to Brazil. He even fled Rio for a Brazilian mountain resort. From there there was no more running'; who left a suicide note which, like most of what he wrote, is so smooth and mannerly and somehow machined – actually more like an Oscar acceptance speech than a suicide note – that one feels the irritable rise of boredom halfway through it, and the sense that *he doesn't mean* it, his heart isn't in it (not even in his suicide); 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.

Stefan Zweig just tastes fake. He's the Pepsi of Austrian writing. He is the one whose books made films – 18 of them, and that's the books, not the films (which come in at a stupefying 38). It makes

sense: these are hypothetical and bloodless and stiltedly extreme monuments and monodramas for 'teenagers of all ages', as someone said, books composed for the bourgeoisie to give itself culture or a fright, which needed Hollywood or UFA to make them real, to give them expressions, faces, bodies, rooms and dialogue; and to drain some of the schematic grand guignol out of them. Of course he failed the Karl Kraus test – who didn't? Kraus quotes some yea-sayer to the effect that Zweig with his novellas had conquered all the languages of the world, and adds two words of his own: 'except one'. The story went the rounds that Zweig had his manuscripts checked for grammatical errors by a German professor, which gets most things about Zweig: the ineptitude, the anxiety to please, the respect for authority, and the use of others.

It's not easy to think of a writer so poorly thought of by his maybe peers, and it can't all be attributed to envy or resentment of his great inherited wealth, easy success, unproblematic seductions and vast readership. Even among writers, there may be odd moments of honesty. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who for the best part of 30 years shared a publisher with Zweig, Anton Kippenberg, founder of the Insel Verlag, wrote to dispraise him; when Kippenberg, foolishly trying to change Hofmannsthal's mind, informed him, publisher-paternalistically, that Zweig had won a poetry prize, Hofmannsthal wrote back in a (for him) strange blaze of candour, to say that the prize wasn't a prize at all, but a bursary, and that Zweig had had to share it with 'eight other sixth-rate talents'. When Hofmannsthal and Max Reinhardt started the Salzburg Festival in 1919, it was one of their conditions that Zweig – who had recently moved to Salzburg – be rigorously excluded. (Zweig took to absenting himself from Salzburg every summer while the festival was on.) Hofmannsthal's friend Leopold von Andrian put himself through a Zweig novella (that same *Confusion* I mentioned earlier) 'reluctantly, a spoonful a day, like a nasty-tasting medicine', and, in the course of a comprehensive, paragraph-long taking-apart, wrote: 'each sentence incredibly pretentious, false and empty – the whole thing a complete void'. In his memoir, *The Play of the Eyes*, Elias Canetti recalls a meeting with Zweig, who had come back to Vienna for two reasons: to get his teeth seen to, and to set up a new house that would publish his books. The next sentence is: 'I believe nearly all his teeth were extracted.' The malicious and inescapable and (in a master like Canetti) perfectly deliberate undercurrent is that of course Zweig's books are not worth talking about. The *exeunt omnes* of his teeth is a better and more interesting outcome than anything to do with the publication – or extraction? – of the books.

Even Joseph Roth, a complicated friend of Zweig's who more or less lived off him for the last ten years of his life, picked holes in the style of each successive book he was sent, partly as a way of discharging his debt, and partly to preserve his independence. The veteran Germanist Hans Mayer remembers a visit to Musil in Switzerland in 1940; Musil couldn't get into the USA, and Mayer was suggesting the relative obtainability of Colombian visas as a *pis aller*. Musil, he wrote, 'looked at me askance and said: Stefan Zweig's in South America. It wasn't a bon mot. The great ironist wasn't a witty conversationalist. He meant it … If Zweig was living in South America somewhere, that took care of the continent for Musil.' Nor was it just the Austrians, to whom such *Schmäh* was in their mothers' milk. Hermann Hesse thought neither Zweig's poetry nor 'his many other books' deserved to outlast the day. When Kippenberg was told that his author had a part interest in a factory, he is said to have quipped: 'What – another one?' When Zweig moved to England in 1934 (and was naturalised in 1938), it was taken semi-jocularly in many literary quarters to be a major item in that ongoing 'punishment of England' ('Gott strafe England') that had been on the German agenda since 1914.

The composer Hanns Eisler records a meeting between Brecht and Zweig in London. Brecht, who 'of course never read a line of Zweig' (one admires the economy of effort), sees him only as a possible source of funds for his theatre; Zweig, no doubt, is interested only in adding the notch of another great man to his metaphorical bedpost. Brecht asks Eisler for a tune. Unfortunately, the

tune he asks for is 'Song of the Vivifying Effect of Money', and it's not lost on Zweig. Later, in spite of everything, one would think, the two writers go for lunch together, and when Brecht comes back Eisler – really lovely, the stringent cut-to-the-chase of these Marxist types! – asks him how much Zweig shelled out for lunch. 'Two and six,' Brecht replies, a Lyons Corner House or something (and at the time the multi-millionaire Zweig was residing in Portland Place), and then it's straight back to discussion of the revolution.

Further west, in Princeton, or much further, in Pacific Palisades, Thomas Mann and his family spent diverting evenings – this in 1939 – debating which of Zweig, Ludwig, Feuchtwanger and Remarque was the worst writer. Emil Ludwig himself, in an obituary, wrote that none of Zweig's writings had affected him in a way that could compare with his death. It's a well-meaning but damning and finally ineluctable summation. I have seen the Brazilian press photograph of Zweig and Lotte, his second wife, lying dead of their overdoses of veronal on two pushed-together single iron bedsteads, he on his back, mouth a little agape, in a sweat-stained shirt and knitted tie, she on his shoulder in a floral wrap and clean hair, and you can practically hear the ceiling fan going round. It makes Weegee look tame.

Of course, the 43rd president of the United States knew whereof he spake, and there is such a thing as misunderestimation. As well as knowing him best, a man's contemporaries have every reason for getting him wrong, but the fact remains that there is an unusual consensus here – Mann, Musil, Brecht, Hesse, Canetti, Hofmannsthal, Kraus – to the effect that 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's more to it than that.

There is something touchingly wrong about Zweig. He had a trammelled life and preached freedom; he gave himself to public causes and had little to say; he was obtuse and hypersensitive and worshipped at the altar of friendship. He is like someone walking up a down escalator, his eyes anxiously fixed on Parnassus – all those people and friends whose manuscripts he collected – toiling away and not coming close. He, by the way, knew it: he deprecates himself and means it; he lists writers who are more important than he is, and means it; Friderike, his first wife, wrote to him, 'your written works are only a third of yourself' with little fear of contradiction from him; he is the modest man in the story with plenty to be modest about – so it's his apologists who need telling. In 1981, the last time a Zweig revival was plotted, it failed; this time, with Pushkin Press's nice paper and pretty formats and with new translations by the excellent Anthea Bell,* it seems to be succeeding – John Fowles (a representatively Anglo-Saxon *e* and *u* crossbreed) wrote: 'Stefan Zweig has suffered, since his death in 1942, a darker eclipse than any other famous writer of this century. Even "famous writer" understates the prodigious reputation he enjoyed in the last decade or so of his life, when he was arguably the most widely read and translated serious author in the world.' Fifty languages and millions of copies in circulation, but 'serious author' – ain't no way. I have seen Zweig referred to in German as 'an exemplary subrealist' and 'the notorious writer of bestsellers', which is more like it. The late Viennese critic Hilde Spiel considered his fiction, which has taken the lead in the present reinflation of his reputation, to be 'closest in spirit to Schnitzler's – and not a patch on it'. That seems fair to me.

In Thomas Mann's great story 'Tristan', the bourgeois Klöterjahn has trouble even reading the handwriting of the writer Spinell; Mann's admirably ironic conclusion is that writers are typically

people who write rarely and with great difficulty. Zweig is one writer I can think of who enjoyed writing, and to whom it came easily, all of it: from his teenage poems, straight away put out by the august publishers of Dehmel and Liliencron (in 1901, when he was barely 20), to his first shot at a *feuilleton*, accepted by the paper his parents subscribed to, the *Neue Freie Presse*, while Zweig briefly cooled his heels in the editor's office; to his translations of the Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren (in 1905 and 1910) and others; to the dozens and dozens of essays and the popular biographies of Verlaine, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Erasmus, Nietzsche, Dickens etc, which Paul Bailey, an admirer of at least some of Zweig's fiction, describes as 'slightly embarrassing'; the lectures and statements and appeals; the intermittent plays and the libretto (for Richard Strauss); and all the stories and novellas, mainly framed narratives, encounters with strangers and madmen (unfortunates with stories, one thinks of them as being), mediated always by the same sane, starchy voice.

Zweig himself speaks a little smugly in his autobiography, *The World of Yesterday*, of 'this preference of mine for intense, intemperate characters in my novels and novellas'. 'The typical Zweig story,' the critic William Deresiewicz notes, cooling to his subject in an afterword, 'is a tale of monomaniacal passion set loose amid the veiled, upholstered civility of the Austrian bourgeoisie, the class into which Zweig was born.' The only form to resist his suit at all was the novel; he managed only one, *Beware of Pity*, published in 1939 (*The Post Office Girl* was a posthumously published two-part wreck). The novel form encouraged his prolixity, and he had no idea how most people walked and talked and lived in the world: as Fowles puts it, in a Uri Geller-like conflation, 'the silver spoon that met him when he entered the world was later to become something of a crucifix.' He loved all aspects of writing and publishing, from the fetishistic *cura* of the works of genius in his collection, to his own bibliophile editions with the Insel Verlag, which he praises for appearing without a single misprint that he was aware of (and he would have been aware). He wrote some twenty or thirty thousand letters. He loved his days researching Magellan, say, or Mary Queen of Scots, at the British Library. When he went to India, it's unthinkable that he would have come back without his poem on the Taj Mahal. Hofmannsthal had his 'Chandos' crisis of language and expression; Zweig bespeaks something very like the opposite: an abundant, facile and unhindered lifelong logorrhoea.

At some time, curiously, Zweig's actual methods swung from one pole to the other. I find both descriptions – and conditions – alarming. In 1899, as a very young man, he wrote to an editor:

> I realise … that this novella, as with most of my pieces, is slapdash and over-hasty, but … I find that when the last word is written I can make no more corrections, in fact I do not even check through for spelling and punctuation. This is a silly and obstinate way to go about things, and it is completely clear to me that it will prevent me from ever achieving anything great. I do not know the art of being conscientious and diligent … . I have burned hundreds of my manuscripts – but I have never altered or rewritten a single line. It is a misfortune not easily to be altered, since it is not a purely external thing but probably lies deep in my character.

It is a strange performance, the clash of callow self-certainty with a certain innate modesty, resolved in a (typically Zweigian) stance of passivity and helplessness and evasion ('probably'). Compare this to the insight into his processes provided in *The World of Yesterday,* his last work:

> So if my books are sometimes praised for sweeping readers along at a swift pace, it does not come from any natural heated or agitated approach to the work of writing, but is entirely the result of my system of always cutting unnecessarily slack passages – anything at all that, like radio interference, might distract the reader's attention. If I have mastered any kind of art, it is the art of leaving things out. I do not mind throwing eight hundred of a thousand written pages into the wastepaper basket, leaving me with only two hundred to convey what I have sifted out as the essence of the work.

Here, the modesty is paired with a methodical application of that 'conscientiousness' and 'diligence' he earlier castigated himself for – or boasted of? – lacking. Even then, it is oddly unconvincing, part of a spiritedly oxymoronic two-page attack on 'anything tediously long-winded' that is itself chock-full of redundancies and questions begged. What are phrases like 'tediously long-winded' or 'unnecessarily slack' but examples of what's wrong? (What happens to those passages that are necessarily slack?) What is the dreary and inept simile, 'like radio interference', but an awful instance of something that needlessly 'distracts the reader's attention'? (Roth in his letters is forever taking Zweig to task for his hammy way with comparisons.) What does the last clause, the 19 words from 'leaving' to 'work', really add to the sentence? Every page he writes is formulaic, thin, swollen, platitudinous.

Take some instances: here is the English widow Mrs C. in *Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman*: 'In essence, I regarded my life from that moment on as entirely pointless and useless. The man with whom I had shared every hour and every thought for 23 years was dead, my children did not need me, I was afraid of casting a cloud over their youth with my sadness and melancholy – but I wished and desired nothing any more for myself.' It's not so much riveting as riveted. Here is a description of the servant woman Crescenz in the story 'Leporella' (Zweig seems to be especially bad at those sudden changes to which, as a writer, he is so dependably drawn): 'The sluggish heaviness suddenly left her rigid, frozen limbs; it was as if since she had heard that electrifying news her joints were suddenly supple, and she adopted a quick, nimble gait.' Here is another old woman, the mother in *The Post Office Girl*: 'But then a confused torrent of broken, half-intelligible sentences bursts from her toothless, working mouth, interspersed with floods of wild triumphant laughter. Tears roll down her cheeks and into her sagging mouth as she stammers and waves her hands, hurling the jumble of excited words at her bewildered daughter.' Here – lest it be supposed that it's only older female characters who somehow escape Zweig's otherwise 'meticulous but at the same time condensed style' (Anthea Bell in an afterword) – is Zweig's narrator in the novella *Amok*: 'I had seen a new world, I had taken in turbulent, confused images that raced wildly through my mind. Now I wanted leisure to think, to analyse and organise them, make sense of all that had impressed itself on my eyes, but there wasn't a moment of rest and peace to be had here on the crowded deck.' One appreciates the ease, the fluency, perhaps most of all the fearlessness of the writing, but I fail to see the least dash or economy or precision (let alone beauty) in this clubbing and relentless and unaware deployment of parts of speech that stands in for a style, and is everywhere the same. Zweig is both an absolutely natural and an absolutely dreadful writer; the one quality of course does not preclude the other.

Zweig finished *The World of Yesterday* in 1941, shortly before his death in February 1942, but neither the new form nor the old subject, neither his being in the New World nor the probable end of the rest of it, neither his turning 60 (as he, something of a Peter Pan, wished never to do) nor whatever thanatophile twinkle he had in his eye, enabled him to transcend his ordinary possibilities. Fowles calls it his 'least personal biography'. Hermann Kesten, Joseph Roth's sometime friend and fellow exile, and later his editor, mused expertly:

> A reader of Zweig's autobiography could be pardoned for thinking this Zweig must have been a colourless individual. In fact he was a strange and complicated person; fussy and interesting, bizarre and cunning; brooding, calculating and sentimental; helpful and distant; amusing and full of contradictions; comfortable in his manner, sometimes anything but in the things he said; actor-ish and hard-working; always intellectually stimulating; banal and devious; easily excited and quickly tired.

*The World of Yesterday* is orderly, often bland, sometimes honest, sometimes disingenuous, occasionally unintentionally funny, from time to time downright stupid. Fowles is cross with a

biographer ('one of his less gifted biographers') for remarking 'with an infelicity bordering on the sublime, that "no one has ever accused Zweig of a sense of humour,"' but I really don't know why; it's so obviously true. Another thing: all his life, Zweig prided himself on his lack of any political nous. He is in Belgium in July 1914, and so sure that the Germans won't invade that he offers to hang himself from a lamp post if they do. A few hours later they do, and he doesn't. A book that says – of Maxim Gorky! – 'there was nothing striking about his features' (just as it does, incidentally, and with more justice, about Rainer Maria Rilke: 'features, not in themselves striking') isn't going to raise the bar for perspicacity or boldness. Accordingly, the human portraits are not among the best things here: the pages on Vienna, Paris and especially Berlin are much to be preferred to the sanctimonious, almost slobbering passages on Hofmannsthal, Verhaeren, Rilke, Rathenau, Rolland and Strauss, full of the sort of adulatory humbug that was Zweig's real element. However, saying that his choice of publisher – the later Nazi, Kippenberg, who put him through a long and painful and expensive separation that hurt his reputation and earned him years of scolding letters from the fiery Roth – 'could not have turned out better' is in a different class of untruth: a sort of sentimental and half-deluded, half-diplomatic twaddle.

However, Zweig's worst whitewashing is reserved for his sentiments at the outbreak of World War One. In his guileful paraphrase, and in a chapter entitled, none too bashfully, 'The Fight for International Fraternity', he describes an essay he published in September 1914 in a Berlin newspaper ('After all, I was a writer, I had words at my disposal, and I therefore had a duty to express my convictions in so far as I could at a time of censorship'), called 'To Friends Abroad': 'I addressed all my friends in other countries, saying that I would be loyal to them even if closer links were impossible at the moment, so that at the first opportunity I could go on working with them to encourage the construction of a common European culture.' Then this and that, mostly to underline Zweig's bravery and isolation, and then over the page, '14 days later, when I had almost forgotten the article' (so much for his convictions), he gets a letter from his pacifist friend Romain Rolland: 'He must have read the article, for he wrote: "I for one will never forsake my friends."' As told, the story makes no sense. Here's Zweig, sticking his neck out, courting danger and even a run-in with the censor, and here's the protestation of loyalty from his friend. Why? Why is it so clear that Rolland has read the article? Why the strange, rebuking sound in Rolland's sentence? Isn't everybody being brave together?

Well, no, not when you read the words Zweig actually addressed to his foreign friends, quoted in Donald Prater's 1972 biography: 'This hatred against you – although I do not feel it myself – I will not try to moderate, for it brings forth victories and heroic strength … Do not expect me to be your advocate, however much I may feel this my duty! Respect my silence, as I respect yours!' Inasmuch as this ghastly jelly-wobble of a passage says anything, it prorogues Zweig's foreign friendships for the duration: no wonder the German censor found little to take exception to! German poet sends French poet to Coventry – it's exactly right, it's *magnifique* and *comme il faut*! Imagine Zweig's humiliation then when he got Rolland's letter! That ringing sentence, slicing through Zweig's vermicular dither and duplicity: 'I for one will never forsake my friends.' You have to hand it to the French! And then imagine living with that for 25 years, and then writing it in your autobiography: not what happened, nor what you wish had happened, but the whole thing just so obfuscated that it makes no sense, and the relief you feel when you've done that! And you call it 'The Fight for International Fraternity'. You talk about your 'immunity to this sudden patriotic intoxication' and you wonder, a little repetitiously, but then you're like that, about being 'perhaps … the only person to be shockingly sober amidst their intoxication', and you swear 'an oath that I kept after 1940 as well – never to write a word approving of the war or denigrating any other nation', which perhaps wasn't such a great idea in 1940 as it might have been in 1914, but let that go, and then it turns out, on the next page of Prater's biography, that you wrote to Kippenberg saying, 'My great ambition, however, is to be an officer over with you in *that* army, to conquer in

France – in France particularly, the France that one must chastise because one loves her,' and then you might have understood that Hesse is wrong to say that he dislikes your books but admires your convictions ('Gesinnung', he says, using that rather unpleasant word), because separations of that sort don't really work, and the rottenness of your writing isn't just confined to your style, because rottenness isn't like that, and perhaps more to the point, style isn't like that either – didn't someone once say 'le style c'est l'homme'? – and you admit, not before time, that you are just putrid through and through.

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## Footnotes

* Bell has also translated, for Pushkin Press, Zweig's *Burning Secret*, *Confusion*, *Journey into the Past* and several collections of his stories.

# Letters

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What's got into Michael Hofmann (*LRB*, 28 January)? To whom or what are his accusatory remarks addressed? Stefan Zweig's shade, quivering in heaven or hell as he awaits a scrap of praise or ducks another blow from his superiors? An imaginary stage on which poor old Zweig is arraigned in front of an audience of apparently abused readers? A little balance and a lot more common sense are needed in judging Zweig's merits and flaws.

My own reading of Zweig in translation is limited to *Beware of Pity* (a decent novel with an intriguing psychological theme buried in its period-piece paraphernalia of army officers with their code of honour and their boring garrison life à la Roth, remote country estates inhabited by Jews ennobled through commercial achievements, and the confusions occasioned by the period's erotic and romantic-love fixations and illusions) and his memoir, *The World of Yesterday*, passages of which seem to incite Hofmann to parricidal thoughts. As with any memoir, the reader's response depends on what he or she might be looking for: a self-portrait of a celebrated figure or a portrait of the times and places in which it is set, i.e. a piece of social history. In either case Zweig's memoir is a more than adequate portrait of a certain kind of person in late Habsburg Vienna. That 'representative person' is both the artist and his middle-class audience of obsessive art lovers and hangers-on. I assume Hofmann will grant, irrespective of whether Zweig's work is overrated or contemptible, that he was a 'major player' in this milieu, so that his observations are useful and worthy of examination. In short, they have psychological and historical interest.

*The World of Yesterday* also captures the ominous anxiety of the years that preceded the outbreak of the First World War in a way that has been explicated by historians interested in the relations between politics and culture and by popular historians of late Habsburg Vienna. Schorske and Janik and Toulmin argue that the Viennese preoccupation with art as a sort of substitute religion was a response to the failure of an earlier generation's political liberalism that concentrated its efforts almost exclusively on securing gains for the empire's middle-class denizens, which included many Jews, those very people who later turned to art when palatable ('rational') politics was replaced by parties with agendas built on ideals that were unacceptable to liberal humanists (e.g. Zweig). Some of these movements seem benign or worthy to us today, others deservedly not. You can find a lot of this in Zweig's memoir, though you might be better served by reading Schnitzler's *Der Weg ins Freie (The Road into the Open)*, an excellent novel which handles all aspects of Austrian anti-semitism and the accompanying Austrian-Jewish identity crisis in a smooth, compact way.

Which brings us to more invidious comparisons. Sticking to German-language literature, it's certainly correct to say that Zweig isn't half (pick your own fraction here) the writer that his contemporaries Roth, Musil, Kafka and Broch were. Why not just leave it at that without kicking the corpse? That leaves the disparaging remarks of Hesse, Mann and Kraus, which are neither surprising nor compelling in the agonistic context of professional writing, adduced by Hofmann as some kind of evidence in a notional literary court of honour (Hofmann's further introducing of the two talented skunks, Brecht and Canetti, as character witnesses against anyone, much less Zweig, is risible). Hesse himself was a writer who often expended his ingenuity on insipid adolescent fixations, while the prickly Mann couldn't bear the notion of not being first in place among his peers and competitors, both as writer and central inheritor of the old German ideal of *Bildung*. As for Kraus, he seldom met a man he didn't disdain, extending his pervasive negativism to anyone who dared to admire him. He was a great aphorist without a sense of humour, a lack Hofmann holds against Zweig, and a basket-case rolled up in one.

Where does this leave us? In a realm of subjective evaluations fraught with rhetorical thunderbolts that is the realm of Hofmann's summary judgments, the oddity of which can be noted in his passing remark about Gustav Klimt's paintings as 'kitsch'. The fact that Klimt's work was viewed by many of

his contemporaries as either indigestible, opaque or offensive gainsays the kitsch accusation. Perhaps Hofmann needs a new critical vocabulary that doesn't mislead him into senseless mischief by investing too much in the labels that he affixes to dead writers and old battles. The worm turns. A little perspective, man!

**Terrence O'Keeffe**
Pearl River, New York

After reading Hofmann, I need a bit of Zweig to regain my equilibrium.

**James Plenn**
New York

If Zweig was really as dithery, duplicitous, weak, cowardly, humourless, snobbish, conceited, dull, putrid (select word to taste), and as universally despised by his contemporaries as Hofmann makes out, then why did the *LRB* think it worth devoting a lengthy review to his republished autobiography?

**Gillian Tindall**
London NW5

The adjective 'putrid' is not undeserved.

**Santiago Romero**
Vienna

Mr Hofmann does not grasp at all the essence of Klimt's art. The *LRB* should think twice before publishing unjustified and unexplained attacks on one of the greatest painters ever.

**Gabriel Sabbagh**
Paris

One is tempted to ask why Hofmann chooses to dish the dirt so prolifically when a simple sentence of hatred would have sufficed.

**Geoffrey Godbert**
Milverton Somerset

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Vol. 32 No. 4 · 25 February 2010

To have someone hate a writer and his lifestyle, disparage his work and begrudge his success is no rare event in the history of literature. Nevertheless one cannot but be amazed by the anger and energy Michael Hofmann shows in taking it on himself to string together once more every citation ever penned by his victim's spiteful and envious contemporaries (*LRB*, 28 January).

It would not be worth the effort to try to understand Hofmann's disparaging tirade or to correct its abundant errors and misjudgments: civilised discourse has no room left when such pathetic fury reigns. The article attempts to curse Stefan Zweig and his legacy, and in so doing throws into question Hofmann's own integrity. This is best illustrated by his cynical interpretation of Zweig's suicide: the sheer tastelessness of this section alone should worry us all.

**Klemens Renoldner**, Stefan Zweig Centre, Salzburg
**Lindi Preuss**, Williams and Atrium Press, Zürich
**Karl Müller**, University of Salzburg
**Oliver Matuschek**, Hannover

**Hildemar Holl**, International Stefan-Zweig-Society, Salzburg
**Rüdiger Görner**, Queen Mary, University of London
**Randolph J. Klawiter**, University of Notre Dame, Indiana

**Klemens Renoldner and six others**

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I have no dog in the ring as regards Stefan Zweig; but as Gustav Klimt has come up in your correspondence, and even been claimed as 'one of the greatest painters ever', I do want to say that when I read Michael Hofmann's verdict on the artist I found myself breathing a sigh of relief (Letters, 11 February). At last someone had dared state the obvious. As for 'greatest painters ever', there is a special place in the hell of reputations for those who tried hardest for the title in the first years of the 20th century: the Frank Brangwyns, the Eugène Carrières, the Anders Zorns, the John Singer Sargents, the Giovanni Segantinis. Not that these artists are uninteresting. Someone with a strong stomach and a taste for tragic irony should write a book about large-scale and mural painting in the two decades leading to Mons and Passchendaele. But taken at all seriously – compared with their contemporary Akseli Gallen-Kallela, for example, let alone the last achievements of Puvis de Chavannes – the greats of Edwardian Euro-America strike me as *Kitschmeisters* through and through: early specialists in the new century's pretend difficulty and 'opacity', pretend mystery and profundity, pretend eroticism and excess. Klimt has a place of honour in their ranks.

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