



IN THIS WEEK'S TLS

Stefan Zweig's fantastic night

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FANTASTIC NIGHT AND OTHER STORIES

Translated by Anthea Bell and Eden and Cedar Paul

Stefan Zweig

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Full story displayed

Stefan Zweig's reputation in Britain during the 1920s and 30s was based almost entirely on his short biographies of Marie Antoinette, Casanova, Tolstoy and – among the then living – Romain Rolland and Sigmund Freud, both of whom he had befriended. The biographies were popular and made him a great deal of money. Rolland, the author of the turgid but worthy novel *Jean-Christophe*, inspired by the life of Beethoven, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1916. He is virtually forgotten today, but Zweig, his eulogistic biographer, lives on in the comparatively modest forms of the novella and the short story.

He was capable of writing at greater length, as his one substantial work of fiction, *Beware of Pity* (1939), testifies. Yet his heart was in the conte – the tale told by word of mouth, or by letter, that can be read at a single sitting. Each of his varied narrators has something to impart: a long-buried secret, the confession of a misdeed, or the revelation of the truth behind a circumstance others had accepted at face value. They are people with a pressing need to make sense of the inexplicable. They question why their lives have gone astray and why they allowed their feelings to override convention and common sense. They are victims and survivors of the last days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and it would be easy to dismiss them as decadent. Zweig puts decadence in perspective, neither revelling in its attractiveness nor castigating its more squalid aspects. It is to his aesthetic purpose to sound the human note, and to do so in such a disarming manner as to shame the reader who has made facile judgements. His men and women are complicated, and he would not have it otherwise. He is a celebrator of confusion – the word he employs as the title for a masterpiece that bears comparison with *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann – and it is in a confused state that they seek to explicate their often banal misfortunes.

Zweig's narrative method is simple. Someone has a desperate story to tell, and Zweig contrives a way – a chance encounter at a gaming salon at Monte Carlo, a manuscript left among a dead man's belongings – for him or her to tell it. The beauty lies in the act of telling, of exquisite self-exposure, the thrill of sending an illicit message into the unknown. Zweig's contrivances are so obvious that they defy, and indeed challenge, criticism. In the novella "Fantastic Night", he declares at the outset that he has come into possession of a text – it might be fiction, but then again it might not be – passed on to him by the relatives of Baron Friedrich Michael von R . . . , who fell at the battle of Rawaruska in the autumn of 1914, "fighting with a regiment of dragoons as a lieutenant in the Austrian reserve". Friedrich, as accounted for in his brief memoir, which Zweig insists he hasn't altered for literary effect, is a cultivated man who has become bored with culture, with books and music, with the beautiful women he has no problem seducing. Everything is at his disposal and nothing excites him. His boredom cannot even encompass the idea of suicide since he lacks the energy to make it a reality. He is in a state of lassitude when a series of unforeseen events forces him to reconsider his role in society and the plight of those less fortunate than himself. He goes to the races in a lacklustre mood, not expecting to be diverted. He hears a woman's voice and paints a mental picture of her that stirs him sexually. He turns and sees a totally different woman from the ideal one he had imagined, plumper than he had envisaged and of a fairer complexion; but he remains aroused at the sight of her. He tries to attract her attention, and it shocks him that she appears impervious to his advances, for he is not accustomed to being spurned. Her fat, unprepossessing husband arrives, his hands filled with betting slips, a few of which he drops, in his eagerness to watch the first race; one gets caught beneath Friedrich's boot. Husband and unattainable wife go off, and the baron is left with a piece of paper bearing the name of a horse and the odds on the bet. The horse wins, and he collects a large amount of cash. The fact that he is a thief occurs to him, but he feels little compunction. He continues betting winners all afternoon. It is after his day at the races that the "fantastic night" takes place, and what happens to him, and how he gets rid of his ill-gotten earnings, is wholly unexpected and wholly credible. In courting danger, he becomes a finer human being than he was at the beginning of the story, if story it is.

For this edition of five novellas, *Fantastic Night and Other Stories*, the title story has been newly translated by Anthea Bell, whose translations for Pushkin Press of *Confusion* and *Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman* have been properly acclaimed. The other translations here, by the Americans Eden and Cedar Paul, date back to the 1930s. The second novella in this new collection is "Letter from an Unknown Woman", perhaps the most famous of Zweig's moral fables, thanks to Max Ophüls's film in which the director coaxed animated performances out of Louis Jourdan and Joan Fontaine, two of the most wooden actors in the history of the cinema. The story consists of a woman's last letter to the only man she has ever loved. She informs the father of her child that she had to resort to prostitution in order to pay for the boy's education. Prostitutes in English fiction are, by and large, downtrodden, but this is fin-de-siècle Vienna, where girls of all ages could pursue an alternative career in a thriving market. Zweig sees no reason to moralize because his values are not those of the bourgeoisie. His correspondent is

desperate and it is the nature of her desperation that is his concern. He handles with great finesse and literary decorum a story that could easily have been romantic tosh. The three remaining stories are shorter, and two of them – “The Fowler Snared” and “The Invisible Collection” – distinctly anecdotal. The first is a meditation on the art of storytelling. A writer is on holiday at Cadenabbia on Lake Como. He gets into conversation at the hotel with a man in late middle age who is, like so many of Zweig’s characters, cultivated and refined. The man wishes that he was creative himself, rather than a discerning admirer of other men’s literary efforts – a discernment that enables him to distinguish between the unexplainable vagaries of life and the questionable orderliness of a certain kind of fiction. He has his own complicated story to tell. On holiday the previous year, at the same hotel, he noticed a couple of German women, probably sisters, in the company of a shy and beautiful sixteen- year-old girl. He supposed she was the daughter of one of them. He took pity on the child, imprisoned as she was by this straitlaced pair, and decided to release her from them by writing her a love letter, unsigned of course, in elegant German, with the odd allusion to Shakespeare. He watched the girl’s face as she read his letter. Her smiles and blushes captivated him:

"I watched as she sat with idle fingers between the two stitching elders, and I saw how from time to time her hand moved to a particular part of her dress where I was sure the letter was hid. The fascination of the sport grew. That evening I wrote a second letter, and continued to write to her night after night. It became more and more engrossing to instil into these letters the sentiments of a young man in love, to depict the waxing of an imaginary passion.

But then a real young man appeared, off the boat from Bellaggio, and the girl was convinced that he was her would-be lover. Longing glances were exchanged, to the discomposure of the two older women. All three left the following morning. The writer listens to this circuitous account of unrequited love and explains how he would improve it were he to set it down. The man is not impressed by his improvements and leaves him to reflect on truth and make-believe, both of which are integral components of this intriguing narrative.

There is more pretence in “The Invisible Collection”. Once again, there is a story within a story which takes place against the background of economic decline in Germany in the years after the First World War. An art dealer has a priceless collection of drawings by Rembrandt and artists of the Italian Renaissance, or so he believes. He is blind now and can only appreciate and identify his treasures by touch. The narrator, a connoisseur who visits him, is let in on the humane trick that has been played on him by his loving wife and daughter and becomes privy to their game. The drawings have been sold, to pay for heat and lighting and the bare necessities of the table. “Buchmendel”, the final story, might have been dreamed up by Isaac Bashevis Singer, except that Zweig wrote this most obviously Jewish of his works in Germany in 1929, at the beginning of the onset of Nazism. Jacob Mendel is a book dealer from Galicia who does his business at a table in the Café Gluck in Vienna. He drinks coffee and eats cakes, but doesn’t spend much money. What he does is to attract students and scholars, because his wide knowledge of everything that has been published is famous throughout Europe. He lives for his books – not for their literary distinction but for their rarity. When the restaurant changes ownership, Mendel’s shabby presence is tolerated for a while until he is caught stealing bread rolls. The unworldly Mendel, who seems unaware that a war is in progress, is arrested by the military police for writing off for catalogues to France and England – both enemies of Austria. It transpires that he has never applied for Austrian citizenship. He is sent to prison, and when the war is over he is a ruined man. The only person who remembers him is an illiterate old woman who cleans the lavatories at Café Gluck, to whom he has given a precious book she is unable to read.

Zweig belongs with those masters of the novella – Maupassant, Turgenev, Chekhov – of whom he was in awe. He was formidably well read, but in his fiction he is as much at ease with the unlettered as the learned. This writer who relishes confusion and inner chaos was, for a large part of his life, an optimist who believed that the good in humankind would prevail. He and his second wife committed suicide in Brazil in 1942, when Hitler seemed assured of a victory that would destroy everything Stefan Zweig cherished, not least the everyday imperfections and frustrated aspirations of the men and women he analysed with such affection and understanding.

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