Between in- and re-action: Resistance and resilience in Stefan Zweig's Erasmus of Rotterdam

by Erika Capovilla

ABSTRACT: This article provides a reading of Stefan Zweig's auto/biography *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (1934) as the writer's counteraction to a situation of vulnerability and conflict. Erasmus does not just fall within the genre of the historical biography, but it also represents a "veiled autobiography" in that, by depicting a kindred soul of his, Zweig exposes himself unreservedly to the world. In contrast to most of the studies conducted so far—mainly focused on the author's implicit confession of faintheartedness through his literary alter-ego—this contribution aims to demonstrate that it is not the idea of escapism, but rather that of resistance/resilience, that underpins the text. To this end, the affinities between Zweig and Erasmus in terms of their common marginality and vulnerability will be explored, in order to better understand their personal response to this status, that is, a peaceful fight carried out by means of poetic acts. According to this perspective, Zweig's Erasmus-biography will be presented as a re-action in two different ways: on the one hand the autobiographical references disclose the writer's concerns about National Socialism, turning his work into an artistic form of dissidence, i.e., a practice of resistance; on the other hand, the therapeutic function ascribed by Zweig to the text composition unveils it as a testimony of resilience.

KEY WORDS: Zweig; Erasmus; counteraction; resistance; resilience

An "emaciated, pale and listless" figure with a "small" head and a "delicate" body always bent over his books; a "gray and brittle" skin with "bloodless and transparent" hands; "sparse and not sufficiently pigmented" hair, a "pointed" nose that seems "like a bird's beak", "too thin" lips and "small, [...] veiled" blue eyes in a "thin" face, which is "the face of a man who never lived in real life, but who lived in thought" (Zweig, *Erasmus* 61-62): the words used by Stefan Zweig to describe Erasmus of Rotterdam might ring a bell even to those who are not acquainted with his Erasmus-biography, as they perfectly match Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein's legendary portraits, thanks to which the Dutch humanist is engraved in the collective memory. Erasmus was well aware of the crucial role played by portraits in spreading his influence and reputation as well as in defining and explaining himself to the outer world. It is therefore no coincidence that, at the height of his literary career, he was not only the subject of various artworks, but also the commissioner of most of them, which he used to send to his admirers and protectors throughout Europe to accompany his writings.

The potential of portraits as both vehicles to convey meaning and self-explanatory acts certainly did not escape Zweig's notice either, who, riding the wave of the "biographische Mode"[1] ("biographical trend", Löwenthal 363) of the interwar period, devoted his most successful and productive years to the genre of the *Bildnis*. Between the 1920s and 1930s the Austrian writer composed and published more than twenty biographies paying tribute to personalities whose contribution to society he considered of paramount importance, among which contemporary intellectuals like Romain Rolland and Sigmund Freud, as well as historical and literary figures such as Mary Stuart, Friedrich Nietzsche and Erasmus of Rotterdam himself. The book dealing with the latter occupies a privileged position within the author's literary production, especially because of its auto/biographical texture. As a matter of fact, the affinities between the subject and the object of the writing process are so numerous and evident that they disclose Erasmus as Zweig's literary alter-ego, granting a glimpse into the inner world of a writer who had always shown himself with reluctance even in his officially-recognized autobiographical work, *The World of Yesterday* (1942). Such an interpretation, based on the confession of the writer himself and extensively validated by the *Zweig-Forschung*, traditionally conveys an image of the author that is anything but flattering, as it is mostly centered on the faintheartedness that he appears to share with his protagonist. Though not disregarding the problematic nature of Erasmus' and, consequently, of Zweig's conduct, this article intends to reframe the debate revolving around Zweig's biography, going beyond this reading. More precisely, it will be demonstrated that it is not the idea of escapism, but rather its opposite, that of resistance/resilience, that permeates the text, which will ultimately prove to be the writer's personal counteraction to a situation of vulnerability and conflict.

[1] Translations are by the author, unless otherwise attributed.

ERASMUS AS AUTO/BIOGRAPHY: ERASMUS AND ZWEIG BETWEEN MARGINALITY AND VULNERABILITY

Das ist das nobelste Buch, das Sie je geschrieben haben. Das ist die Biographie Ihres Spiegelbildes
(This is the noblest book you have ever written. This is the biography of your reflection,
letter from J. Roth to S. Zweig, 8/10/1934, in Roth and Zweig 207)

Although Zweig had always followed in the footsteps of the "Prince of the humanists", what really spurred him to eternalize Erasmus through his writing, just as Dürer and Holbein had done with their artworks four centuries before, was Johan Huizinga's newly published Erasmus-biography.[2] As in 1932, at the suggestion of his wife Friderike (F. Zweig 272), Zweig approached Huizinga's monography,[3] he was profoundly impressed and deeply touched. What struck him the most, as confessed to his friend and French writer Romain Rolland, was the double analogy between Erasmus and himself on the one hand and between their similar historical backdrop (the age of the Reformation and the Pre-National Socialist period) on the other hand, which made him feel as if they shared the same destiny (Rolland and Zweig 459, 5/9/1932). Hence the idea of erecting a small monument to Erasmus ("Ich will ihm ein kleines Denkmal errichten", Rolland and Zweig 510, 4/26/1933), that is, of dedicating him a study. Shortly before plunging into the writing of what would be one of his most successful biographies, though, he had toyed with the idea of quitting with this literary genre, for fear of being too strictly linked to his colleague Emil Ludwig, as revealed in a letter to Ben Huebsch: "Nur wird es diesmal keine Biographie werden, ich möchte da nicht als Spezialist neben Emil Ludwig figurieren, wahrscheinlich wage ich mich doch an den Roman und schreibe nur zuvor ein, zwei Novellen, und mir gewissermaßen die Hand wieder einzuarbeiten" ("Only this time it won't be a biography, I don't want to appear there as a specialist next to Emil Ludwig, probably I'll risk writing the novel after all and only write one, two novellas beforehand, and in some way get used to that again", qtd. in Koch 46, 2/13/1933). The fact that, just a few months later, Zweig announced to Rolland the intention of entitling his upcoming book *Bildnis eines Besiegten* (Rolland and Zweig 516, 5/10/1933), recalling his first biographies *Joseph Fouché: The Portrait of a Politician* (1929) and *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman* (1932) clearly shows his final decision to stay true to the genre to which he owed much of his fortune. The reasons behind this change of heart are not explicitly documented, but it may be easily assumed that, besides purely publicistic and economic reasons, Zweig considered the form of the *biographie romancée* more suitable to a subject so emotionally charged and personally felt. It is not by chance that the composition of this literary monument started in 1933, briefly after Hitler's rise to power.

The biography, which kept Zweig busy for ten months, was partly composed in Salzburg, in the villa on the Kapuzinerberg Mountain that he and his wife had bought

[2] Huizinga's monography was first published in Dutch and English in 1924, but was read by Zweig in its German translation by Werner Kaegi (Dolei 27).
[3] Zweig ordered the book on April 16, 1932 (Hamacher 405).

and turned into the nerve center of the European cultural life. The idyllic atmosphere of the 'Villa Europa' was however poisoned in February, 1934, as the police suddenly broke in for a search. Looking for weapons in a pacifist's house clearly betrayed the regime's intention to give Zweig a not too veiled warning—an eye-opener that made him finally realize to be in a "Feindesland" ("enemy's land", Rolland and Zweig 522, 6/26/1933) and led him to go into exile in London, where he would conclude his biography. *Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam*—published at first in its initial chapter in the Viennese *Neue Freie Presse* (December, 1933) and then in its integral version by the Viennese Herbert Reichner (August, 1934)—counts therefore as his first work in exile, as well as his first biography printed with a publishing house other than Insel. The book burning and his inclusion in the "Black List" (May, 1933) had made Zweig aware that the publication of his Erasmus in Germany would have been out of the question, as the following affirmation to Rudolf Kayser indicates: "[...] am liebsten deutsch zunächst als Privatdruck erscheinen lassen für meine Freunde, sonst in ausländischen Ausgabe. In Deutschland will ich, selbst wenn ich könnte, jetzt nicht erscheinen" ("preferably to have it published in German first as a private print for my friends, otherwise in a foreign edition. In Germany, even if I could, I don't want to publish right now", qtd. in Fitzbauer 76, 12/14/1933).

His dangerous position, though, was not only related to his Jewish origins, but it also pertained to the Erasmus-book itself, whose subject matter is so highly personal and topical that puts the text into the twilight zone between biography and autobiography. The reading of the work as an autobiographical expression is widely attested in the *Zweig-Forschung*: Jacob Golomb, for example, starting from the consideration of "certain subjective idealization" projected by Zweig in his Erasmus-representation in comparison to the historical figure, regards the biography "to some degree as a personal confession of its writer," in that it discloses "a strong sense of identity" between the writer and its protagonist (7); in the same way, Daniela Strigl defines the text "eine Art Selbstbespiegelung" ("a kind of self-reflection") and a "verhüllte Selbstdarstellung" ("veiled self-portrait"), being it a sort of "Projektions- und Reflexionsfläche" ("projection and reflection surface") for Zweig (10-21); this view is also shared, among others, by Rüdiger Görner, Helmut Scheuer, Ferdinand van Ingen and Oliver Matuschek, as they refer to the book respectively as a "Selbstschilderung" ("self-portrayal", Görner 22), a "Selbstcharakterisierung" ("self-characterization", Scheuer 355), an "unverkennbares Selbstbildnis" ("unmistakable self-portrait", Ingen 95) and a "Spiegelbild" ("mirror", Matuschek 276). Joseph Pischel and Helmut Koopmann go even further when they consider *Erasmus* as Zweig's most autobiographical text ("es gibt wohl kein anderes Buch, in dem Stefan Zweig offen oder verdeckt so viel von sich selbst verrät, wenn er von seinem Helden spricht", "there is probably no other book in which Stefan Zweig openly or covertly reveals so much of himself when he speaks of his hero [...] Those who have read his novel know this most anti-fanatic of all people even better than through his autobiography", Pischel 34; "Erasmus – das war er selbst, und so ist dieser Roman sein eigenes Lebensbuch. [...] Wer seinen Roman liest, kennt diesen antifanatischsten aller Menschen besser noch als durch seine Autobiographie", "Erasmus—that was him, and so this novel is his own book of life. [...]", Koopmann 79).

Observing "eine Art Wesensverwandtschaft oder Affinität zwischen Erasmus und Zweig" ("a kind of kinship or affinity between Erasmus and Zweig"), Wei Yuqing finally resorts to the Confucian expression of "fu zi zi dao" ("das unmittelbare Selbstbildnis", "the immediate self-portrait") to define the biography, meaning that it would be a kind of self-representation encapsulating both the positive and negative aspects (201-202). This identification finds confirmation in the words of the writer himself, who, in *The World of Yesterday*, explicitly refers to his book as "a veiled self-portrait" (Zweig, *World* 288). Further evidence comes from the impressions of two of the people closest to Zweig: his wife Friderike presented the biography as a "Selbstschilderung" ("self-portrayal", F. Zweig 362), while his friend and colleague Joseph Roth, praising it as "das nobelste Buch" ("the noblest book") of Zweig's, defined it "die Biographie Ihres Spiegelbildes" ("the biography of your reflection", Roth and Zweig 207, 8/10/1934). Moreover, Arturo Larcati puts forward that Zweig's friend and Italian translator Enrico Rocca gave additional proof by recalling that Zweig signed the letter communicating his departure to the United States as "Erasmus" (Larcati, *Carteggio* 48). The affinities between Zweig and Erasmus are indeed numerous and relevant, based primarily on their common humanistic belief, which comes to light in their pacifist attitude, in their shared interest in culture and education (which often took on elitist and idealistic overtones), in their strong desire for freedom and independence and in their nomadic and internationalist spirit of *Weltbürger*. As the above-mentioned points have already been extensively explored by the critics, this contribution seeks instead to bring to light only those similarities concerning the condition of marginality and vulnerability that will later motivate the reading of the biography as Zweig's counteraction.

From a socio-cultural and religious perspective, the two humanists can be considered marginal subjects, inasmuch as both of them found themselves, for different reasons, in the fringe of society. Erasmus' marginality revealed itself even prior to his birth: despite the promising name through which he went down in history, Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus was in fact 'the Undesired', born out of wedlock, "not only an illegitimate child, but the son of a priest" (Zweig, *Erasmus* 32-33). This would have certainly cast a pall over his future, had the Church not realized that this nine-year-old boy had quite a potential, welcoming him into the walls of its monastic schools. This sense of marginalization kept haunting him his whole life, for his decision to pursue the ecclesiastical career was not taken out of a real vocation, but rather out of interest, being the monastic life one of the most efficient ways to fulfill his quest for knowledge. Zweig describes the first steps in the religious path of the man who "was much more the scholar than the priest" (33) as follows:

> In 1487 he entered the Augustinian monastery at Steyn, not so much from religious inclination as because the cloister happened to possess the finest library of classical literature the country could boast of. In due course he became an Augustinian canon, having in 1492 being ordained a priest by the Bishop of Utrecht. His years in the cloister do not seem to have been passed so much in saving souls as in reading the classics and in studying the fine arts (33).

Zweig, stemming from an upper middle-class Jewish family in Vienna, was clearly born and raised in a completely different environment, yet he experienced nonetheless

a sense of displacement. Part of this was due to his status of *Grenzjude*, which refers to subjects who, as Golomb puts it, "were alienated from their religion and traditions, but had not been fully absorbed into secular Austrian society," which condemned them to an "unbearable limbo," "a state of suspension" (9-10) where their identity had to be endlessly negotiated. Zweig, whose relationship with his own Jewishness had always been extremely complicated (Golomb 12-15; Gelber, *Judenfrage*; Gelber, *Judentum*; Botstein; Fraiman-Morris) did not reject his origins, but did not fully relate to them either, perceiving his *Jude-Sein* as a mere accessory element rather than a defining identity trait. According to Ken Frieden and Jacques Le Rider, the "distant, detached, impersonal self-image as a Jew" (Botstein 76) developed by the writer would mirror and could be a projection of the Viennese society's ambivalent attitude of the time (Frieden 232; Le Rider 236). Zweig was brought up by a family of not-practicing, fully-assimilated Jews with a multicultural background: his father Moritz came from Moravia, while his mother Ida (*née* Brettauer) spent her childhood in Italy with relatives spread all over Europe. Rather than with their children's religious training, his parents were more concerned with their scholastic and linguistic education, accustoming them from an early age to a polyglot and culturally vibrant environment. This upbringing was actually in line with that of the educated upper middle class in the multicultural and cosmopolitan turn-of-the-century Vienna, where Jews "were more Frenchmen, Germans, Englishmen, Russians than they were Jews" (Zweig, *World* 428), in that they tended to the assimilation, as Zweig maintains in his autobiography:

> But the Jews of the twentieth century had for long not been a community. They had no common faith, they were conscious of their Judaism rather as a burden than as something to be proud of and were not aware of any mission. […] To integrate themselves and become articulated with the people with whom they lived, to dissolve themselves in the common life, was the purpose for which they strove impatiently. (427-428)

This kind of background fostered the development of an identity based not so much on rigid categorizations—which would be perceived as extremely limiting by Zweig—but rather on a way of being that deemed humanism as the only possible credo. Since the humanitarian and the European ideal were for him inextricably linked, it is no coincidence that what Zweig seemed to admire the most in Jews are their inclination towards the spiritual sphere and their intrinsic *Heimatlosigkeit*—precisely those qualities essential for the foundation of an *Europa des Geistes*. By idealizing and identifying the Jew as the prototype of the Nietzschean Good European—thus developing what Leon Botstein calls a "symbolic, abstract sense of Jewishness" (75)—Zweig found therefore his own personal way to come to terms with his cultural heritage. Yet it would not be long before it became a proper stigma, since not recognizing himself fully in his Jewish roots did not make him less vulnerable to the anti-Semitic fever.

Not less delicate was Erasmus' position as a Catholic clergyman at the time of the Protestant Reformation. In 1517, at the peak of his literary fame, after the publication of the first New Testament in Greek, "the sledge-hammer blows with which the Augustinian monk [Martin Luther] nailed his ninety-five theses to the Church-door at

Wittenberg echoed throughout the land" (Zweig, *Erasmus* 144) and the Dutch humanist, as "the highest moral authority in worldly and theological matters" who enjoyed "the honestly won reputation of being absolutely impartial" (167), was inevitably in the hot seat in the thorny religious dispute. What for most theologians would have been a great honor, was however a cross to bear for him, who was never a natural born fighter, but rather "a born conciliator and mediator" (142).

It is unquestionable that Erasmus, as well as Zweig, found himself in an objectively vulnerable position, but it is equally true that their vulnerability was also fed by an intrinsic factor, meaning their mild, lukewarm, almost submissive nature. As Luther, riding the wave of the public indignation towards the abuses of the Catholic Church (first and foremost the sale of indulgences), set the light that would inflame whole Europe, Erasmus immediately tried to stay out of it. This prudence did not depend on a fundamental disagreement on the points of the 95 theses, since he was actually Luther's forerunner in denouncing the hidden flaws of the ecclesiastical system when, in his *In Praise of Folly* (1511), he scornfully mocked its corruption and superstitions. What really concerned him was the monk's aggressive approach that would easily spark off a rebellion, which deviated so much from his idea of a *reflorescentia* of the Western Church through a progressive and pacific reformation, as implied by Zweig's metaphor:

> They both made the same diagnosis […] But whereas Erasmus proposed gradual amelioration, a careful and progressive course of blood-cleansing by means of the salt injections of reason and mockery, Luther went at the patient with the bistoury and made a bold incision. (158)

Not only was Luther's attitude, according to his view, detrimental and counter-productive for a renewal of the system, but it was also foreign to his own nature. An aristocrat of the mind striving to create a "new world of culture" (11), Erasmus is a *homo pro se*, "a free spirit" (5) whose primary concern was to keep his spiritual sphere intact, to protect his own freedom and independence, which he deemed as the highest values. This, in conjunction with his meek, conciliant temperament, led him to always try to weigh up every opinion, to strike a balance between different poles, to harmonize the inharmonious. Not rarely, though, could a "cautious disposition" (153) be associated with a "cowardly" (19) one and that was certainly the case of Erasmus. Unable—and unwilling—to put himself on the line, he always tried to play safe, avoiding any responsibility whatsoever and "stood aside prudently, […] bent[ing] to right and to left like a reed in the storm" (19) because, when it came to taking sides, he was definitely not in his element. Time and again called on by both parties to express his view on Luther's doctrine, Erasmus bought time to the very last in order not to take a stand and to stick to his usual moderation, up to the point of fleeing to a more neutral land and withdrawing in his "ivory tower" (50). There are times, however, where "neutrality is stigmatized as a crime" (175) and "a free man, a man of independent mind, a man who holds aloof can no longer be tolerated" (179): that happened to Erasmus, too, who, caught in the cross-fire of the parties, was eventually drawn out of his shell, forced to face up to the situation and to put up a fight he was bound to lose from the start, as it always occurs "when an artist or a man of learning exceeds his own limitations and gets in the way of the men of action" (144). His own vulnerability led him therefore to his

historical guilt of being absent, ultimately condemning him to the marginalization from the society above which he had placed himself, to finally die discouraged and disappointed.

The same discouragement and disappointment can be found in the farewell letter of his biographer who, in February, 1942, after having witnessed the self-destruction of his "geistige Heimat Europa" ("spiritual home Europe"), "mit klaren Sinnen" ("with clear senses") spontaneously chose to take his leave from a life always devoted to the "geistige Arbeit" ("spiritual work") and whose supreme good was "persönliche Freiheit" ("personal freedom", Zweig's farewell letter, qtd. in Prater 456). What progressively comes out between the lines of the countless letters sent to his friends, as well as from the praising words of his fellow intellectuals collected by Hanns Arens (*Der große Europäer Stefan Zweig*) and the memoirs of his first wife Friderike, is Zweig's Erasmian profile: a pacifist who, through a humanistic education, aimed at the construction of a borderless Europe, united under the sign of culture; a free-spirited and mild-mannered intellectual who, in order to preserve his inner freedom and independence, always avoided taking too determined a stand and was therefore accused of escapism or faintheartedness at best, or of actual cowardice at worst. From the first months of the Nazi dictatorship Zweig lived in the naive belief that, as an 'apolitical' writer, he would be spared by the policies of the regime (Walter 431; Chédin 68-69), as revealed by these lines to Rolland: "Und persönlich habe ich keine Angst. Man weißt, daß ich Pazifist, Internationalist bin, aber nie gehörte ich zu denen, die ein Wort gegen Deutschland gesagt haben [...]" ("And personally I am not afraid. People know that I am a pacifist, an internationalist, but I've never been one of those who said a word against Germany [...]", Rolland and Zweig 507, 4/10/1933). This neutrality implied neither an approval of Nazi politics (that Zweig, as a pacifist and humanist, abhorred), nor a political disengagement (Larcati, *Appelli* 144) but was motivated by the hope of safeguarding at least his personal freedom and literary career—an attitude that oriented his editorial choices, too. Apropos of *Erasmus*, for example, he sent a first extract to Klaus Mann's "Die Sammlung" for the publication, provided that the journal did not show "einen direkten aggressiven Charakter" ("a direct aggressive character", Zweig, *Freunde* 228, 5/15/1933) and, once realized the overtly subversive nature of the magazine, he distanced himself from it. The choice of the Reichner instead of a traditional publishing house for emigrants for the full publication of his work served the same purpose.

However, Giorgia Sogos thoroughly reconstructs how Zweig, just like Erasmus, while trying to preserve the most extreme neutrality, found himself in the cross-fire of ideologies and was inevitably wounded (Sogos 85-103). On the one hand, the growing anti-Semitic attacks perpetrated against him were making it increasingly clear that he had already been targeted by the regime, regardless of his being *unpolitisch* ("apolitical"): no sooner had Hitler come to power that the film adaptation of his novella *The Burning Secret* (1911) was withdrawn from the market because of the unintended but uncomfortable reference to the Reichstag fire; shortly thereafter, he was summoned by the Nazi because of a misunderstanding, as Goebbels had denounced a sentence by the writer Arnold Zweig on the radio, specifying, however, only his surname; he was then directly attacked for his Jewish origins by the race theorist Günther, who quoted

him in one of his works as a prototype Jew. Were it not for the search of his villa, Zweig would have probably clung to the hope that his work as a writer would not be jeopardized – yet another hope that would be shattered since his inclusion in the "Liste 1 des schädlichen und erwünschten Schrifttums" on March, 1936, officially declared him out of favor with the regime.

On the other hand, however, Zweig was viewed with suspicion also by the anti-nationalist front and, in particular, by emigrant writers such as Bruno Frank, Lion Feuchtwanger, Heinrich and Thomas Mann, who would have expected him to side and fight more explicitly against the dictatorship (Weinzierl 87, 144). Some of the most hurtful accusations, though, were brought from his close friend Roth. In their correspondence the political tension between them builds to the tragic climax of their estrangement, as Roth would bitterly declare in 1937: "Vielleicht führen wir zwei verschiedene Sprachen und verstehen also einander nicht" ("Maybe we speak two different languages and thus don't understand each other", Roth and Zweig 358, 10/8/1937). Always much more far-sighted, Roth repeatedly urged his friend to take off his rose-tinted spectacles and face reality, confronting him with the blood-curdling image of a Europe that was already a corpse but nevertheless kept on committing suicide (53, 10/23/1930) and inviting him not to delude himself ("Machen Sie sich keine Illusionen. Die Hölle regiert!", "Don't delude yourself. Hell reigns!", 91, 02/1933). Not rarely did he spur him to take a stand, warn him about his precarious position as "Weltdichter" ("world poet", 79, 8/7/1932) or against some of his contacts, such as Kippenberg, whom he judged as a sympathizer of the regime (90-91, 1/18/1933). As time went by, Zweig's "schwankenden Haltung" ("wavering attitude") increasingly annoyed him, until "die Stunde der Entscheidung" ("the hour of decision") arrived: pointing out that his friend's moral integrity was at stake, on November 7, 1933, Roth gave him an ultimatum, telling him "Sie müssen entweder mit dem III. Reich Schluß machen, oder mit mir" ("you must either end it with the III Reich, or with me"; 128, 11/7/1933). Roth's harsh words faithfully echo Zweig's comment when his (anti)hero was forced to get out of his ivory tower; in the same way, in Erasmus' tendency "to withdraw into his shell like a snail [...] behind a barricade of books" (Zweig, *Erasmus* 68-69) is partially projected that of Zweig ("in meine Arbeitshaut zurückgezogen", "retreated into my working skin", Rolland and Zweig 554, 1/11/1934), which Roth judged as pure escapism: "Sie *widerlegen gar nichts mit Ihrer Sanftmut*, die übrigens gar keine ist, sondern eine Flucht. Aber, statt zu sagen, daß die ein Flüchtling sind, nennen Sie Sich einen Einsiedler" ("You *don't confute anything with your mildness*, which, by the way, is not mildness at all, but a flight. But, instead of saying that you're a fugitive, you call yourself a hermit", Roth and Zweig 360, 10/8/1937).

ERASMUS AS A POETIC COUNTERACTION

Aber für einen Menschen, der frei sein will, ist es überall schwer
(But for a person who wants to be free, it's difficult everywhere,
letter from S. Zweig to R. Rolland, 6/10/1933, in Rolland and Zweig 519)

The partial autobiographical texture underlying *Erasmus*, which is also extended to the protagonist-writer's vulnerable points, paved the way for the assessment of the work as a sort of self-defense and self-justification, as "an apology for its author's aloofness" (Steiman 166). Prominent spokespersons for this view were, for example, Klaus Mann, René Schickele and Ludwig Marcuse. In his journal, the former mentioned Zweig's "sehr deutliche Rechtfertigungsversuche der eigenen schwankenden Haltung – durch Verklärung (kritische, dezente Verklärung) des Erasmus" ("very clear attempts to justify his own wavering attitude—through transfiguration (critical, discreet transfiguration) of Erasmus", qtd. in Weinzierl 102, 7/25/1934), whereas Schickele addressed his interlocutor directly by writing to him: "Ich hörte sagen, Sie hätten versucht, sich durch ihn zu rechtfertigen – es sei gewissermaßen ein Selbstporträt und natürlich geschmeichelt" ("I heard you were trying to justify yourself through him—it was in some way a self-portrait, and of course flattered", qtd. in Steiman 187, 9/21/1934). The harsher criticism, though, was voiced by Marcuse in his "Erasmus aus Wien" (originally published in *Neues Tagebuch*, August 18, 1934), where he, labelling the book as the "Rechtfertigungs-Schrift eines Wiener Neutralen" ("justification writing of a Viennese neutral"), judgmentally commented Zweig's principle of *Überparteilichkeit* ("[...] Zweig ist so phantastisch unparteiisch, daß er nicht einmal für seine eigene Position ohne Reserve Partei nimmt", "[...] Zweig is so fantastically impartial that he does not even take sides without reserve for his own position") and condemned his humanism as a form of connivance with Nazi barbarism:

> Stefan Zweig lobt den Mut des Neutralen, der es wagt, keiner Partei anzugehören. Er ist also nicht nur neutral – er macht aus der Neutralität noch ein Ethos. [...] der "friedliche", genießende Humanismus ist längst als Stütze der Barbarei entlarvt worden [...]. Wenn heute der Humanismus nicht nur besiegt, sondern auch mit dem Klag der Lächerlichkeit behaftet ist, so ist das die Schuld seiner Bekenner, die es wiederum ablehnen, ihm die Ende zu erobern. (qtd. in Weinzierl 104-107)
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> (Stefan Zweig praises the courage of the neutrals who dare not to belong to any party. So, he is not only neutral—he makes an ethos out of neutrality. [...] the "peaceful", enjoying humanism has long been unmasked as a support of barbarism [...]. If today humanism is not only defeated, but also fraught with the lament of ridiculousness, then this is the fault of its confessors, who again refuse to conquer the end for it.)

Under no circumstances could the problematic nature of Erasmus' and, consequently, of Zweig's behavior be denied. However, his reaction to these criticisms is also worth considering:

> Ich persönlich bin damit am persönlichen Ziel: ganz wie Erasmus von rechts und links zugleich attackiert zu werden. Glauben Sie nicht, dass ich so dumm war, es nicht im Voraus zu wissen: aber gerade deshalb ist ein solches Buch muthaft. (Roth and Zweig 209, 8/24/1934)
>
> (Personally, I am thereby at my personal goal: just like Erasmus, to be attacked from right and left at the same time. Don't think that I was so stupid as not to know it in advance: but that's precisely why such a book is courageous.)

This confession to Roth is extremely enlightening for it allows to go beyond the surface and really see the other side of the coin in the *Erasmus*-debate: not only the awareness of Zweig's own vulnerability, but also his courage to put it on stage. The biography, as the writer's "real response to the challenge Nazism had placed before him" (Steiman 163), may represent therefore his counteraction in two different ways: as a means of resistance and as a form of resilience.[4]

Starting point of the consideration of *Erasmus* as a means of resistance is the parallel between Erasmus' story as written by Huizinga and Zweig's own time, which took him aback ("ich bin frappiert über die Ähnlichkeiten mit dem Heute", "I am struck by the similarities with today", Rolland and Zweig 516, 5/10/1933), since it was precisely from those similarities that he, consciously, built his own biography, as confessed to Rolland and Klaus Mann:

> Ich habe das Leben des Erasmus von Rotterdam gelesen und studiert – ich will ihm eine Studie widmen. … Ich will ihm ein kleines Denkmal errichten und wer zu lesen versteht, wird die Geschichte unserer Tage in der Analogie entdecken. Uns bleibt kein anderes Mittel mehr, uns vernehmlich zu machen, als durch das Symbol – oder zu emigrieren. (Rolland and Zweig 510-511, 4/26/1933)
>
> (I've read and studied the life of Erasmus of Rotterdam—I want to dedicate him a study. ... I want to erect him a small monument and whoever knows how to read will discover the history of our days in the analogy. We no longer have any other means to make ourselves heard than through the symbol—or to emigrate.)
>
> Was ich jetzt arbeiten will, ist eine Studie über Erasmus von Rotterdam, dem Humanisten auch des Herzens, der durch Luther die gleichen Niederlagen erlitten hat wie die humanen Deutschen heute durch Hitler. Ich will durch Analogie darstellen und auf unkonfiszierbare Weise mit höchster Gerechtigkeit an diesem Menschen unseren Typus und den andern. Es wird hoffentlich ein Hymnus auf die Niederlage sein. (Klaus Mann 93, 5/15/1933)
>
> (What I want to work on now is a study of Erasmus of Rotterdam, the humanist also of the heart, who suffered the same defeats through Luther as the humane Germans do today through Hitler. I want to represent our type and the other by analogy and in an unconfiscable way with the highest justice to this man. It will hopefully be a hymn to the defeat.)

The only possible way to stay true to his beliefs on the one hand and to make sure that his voice could be heard on the other hand was to operate indirectly, symbolically, that is, *per analogiam*, a device applied to both the historical context and the characters of the book. With regard to the historical backdrop, the transition from a flourishing age characterized by scientific discoveries, economic growth, cultural development and spiritual unity to an epoch tainted by fanatic fever, streams of abuse, blind ideology and internal struggles narrated in the book may be applied, generally speaking, to both the shift from Renaissance to the age of the Reformation and to that from the Belle Époque of 'the World of Yesterday' to the Nazi era. This connection is consciously sought and

[4] The term "resistance" emphasizes the act of fighting against some external factor, whereas 'resilience' has a much more personal meaning and has to be intended in general as one's inner ability of coping with adversity, to recover after something difficult or bad has happened.

made clear right from the start, as Zweig states, almost *en passant*: "The transition from the fifteenth century to the sixteenth was a fateful period in the destinies of Europe, and in its dramatic succession of events is comparable only with the times in which we live" (Zweig, *Erasmus* 23). As far as the main figures are concerned, their characterization is largely built on the antithesis, so that Erasmus appears as Luther's perfect opposite in both his physical appearance and his psychological profile. Erasmus' "titanic adversary" (130) is described as a "stout, thickset, hard-boned full-blooded clod of clay" "enjoying perfect health" and "palpitating with life"; his "fanatical" temperament, "combative force" and "exhaled power", in conjunction with his "domineering and virile personality" and his "sensual vehemence", make him capable of "guiding the will of the masses to the highest potential of passion" (133-135). There is little doubt as to the living source of inspiration for this portrayal, for "Hitlers Ähnlichkeit mit Luther" ("Hitler's similarity with Luther"), as noticed by Thomas Mann (365, 3/20/1934), is unquestionable. All these parallels, despite the reviewers' reticence to state them clearly (Heydemann 30-31), did not go unnoticed by Zweig's fellow intellectuals. Rolland, for example, enthusiastically reviewed the book as "das Buch der Stunde" ("the book of the hour") commenting: "Unsere Zeit spiegelt sich in der seinen. Nicht nur die Situationen. Nahezu auch die Personen" ("Our time is reflected in his. Not only the situations. Almost also the people", Rolland and Zweig 578, 9/3/1934); Mann, who was also planning a work on Luther (Lehnert 167-170), noted in his diary: "Die 'Wiederkehr' ist insofern anzuerkennen, als der antirationale und antihumane, auf Blut und Tragödie versessene Nationalsozialismus [...] die tumultuöse und blutige Rolle des Luthertums wieder spielen wird" ("The 'return' is to be recognized insofar as the anti-rational and anti-human National Socialism, thirsty for blood and tragedy [...] will play again the tumultuous and bloody role of Lutheranism", Thomas Mann 497, 8/5/1934); Kippenberg, after reading the pre-print of the volume, urged Zweig to modify the preface for the full print because of the dangerous hints at the actual situation (qtd. in Hamacher 406-407).

It should be by now clear and evident that the widely-held assumption about Zweig's cowardice cannot fully explain a book charged with socio-political meaning, brimming with references to the actual situation that, albeit concealed behind the veil of the *biographie romancée*, could never have gone unnoticed by the regime. His Erasmus-book had in fact never been conceived solely as the account of the Dutch scholar's life story, but right from the start as a practice of resistance, as his personal fight against the dictatorship. A fight that was carried out with the only weapons that a pacifist writer could contemplate: his pen and his symbols. *Erasmus* becomes therefore a symbolic form of dissidence, of socio-political criticism – an indirect, poetic, but no less pregnant and conscious one, as visibly demonstrated by the following lines, written to Rolland: "Ich will nichts in Deutschland publizieren (und sie würden auch niemals erlauben, daß dieses Buch erscheint, so sehr habe ich mich bemüht, gerecht zu sein)", "I don't want to publish anything in Germany (and they would never allow this book to appear either, so hard I tried to be fair)", Rolland and Zweig 551, 12/18/1933).

While putting up indirect resistance against the Nazis, Zweig also showed great resilience in the face of the hardships he had to endure. The writer himself admitted that

the composition of his biography coincided with—and was spurred by—a time of inner crisis. In these moments, one tends to cling to faith as a last resort, but Zweig's only creed lied in the humanistic ideal, whose supreme God he recognized in "den heiligen Erasmus" ("saint Erasmus", Hesse, Zweig 193, 12/9/1933). He therefore turned to the *homo pro se* "als Nothelfer" ("as emergency helper", 193) to seek some solace, as he would explain to Hermann Hesse:

> Ich habe mir Erasmus von Rotterdam als Nothelfer gewählt, den Mann der Mitte und der Vernunft, der ebenso zwischen die Mühlsteine des Protestantismus und Katholizismus geriet, wie wir zwischen die großen Gegenbewegungen von heute. Es war mir ein kleiner Trost zu sehen, [...] dass man nicht allein ist, wenn man sich anständigerweise mit schweren Entscheidungen und Entschließungen quält, statt es sich bequem zu machen und mit einem Ruck auf den Rücken einer Partei zu springen. (139)
>
> (I've chosen Erasmus of Rotterdam as an emergency helper, the man of the middle and of reason, who got between the millstones of Protestantism and Catholicism just as we got between the great counter-movements of today. It was a small consolation for me to see [...] that one is not alone in struggling decently with difficult decisions and resolutions instead of making oneself comfortable and abruptly embrace a party.)

Not only, though, was Zweig helplessly witnessing the shipwreck of all his core values, but he also called into question his own behavior in coping with them. As a matter of fact, his "Unentschiedenheit" ("undecidedness", Rolland and Zweig 529, 8/3/1932) had always been perceived as a weak spot, as demonstrated by this honest remark to Roth:

> Ich widerspreche nicht, wenn Sie mir sagen, daß ich flüchte. Wenn man Entscheidungen nicht durchkämpfen kann, soll man vor ihnen davonlaufen – Sie vergessen, *Sie, mein Freund*, daß ich mein Problem im "Erasmus" öffentlich gestellt habe […] Ich verstecke mich nicht, schließlich ist der Erasmus da, in dem ich auch die sogenannte Feigheit einer concilianten Natur darstelle *ohne* sie zu rühmen, *ohne* sie zu verteidigen – als Faktum, als *Schicksal* (Roth and Zweig 361,10/10/1937).
>
> (I don't disagree when you tell me that I'm running away. If one can't fight one's way through decisions, one should run away from them—you forget, *you, my friend*, that I publicly presented my problem in the 'Erasmus' […] I don't hide, after all the Erasmus is there, in which I also represent the so-called cowardice of a conciliatory nature *without* praising it, *without* defending it—as a fact, as a destiny.)

Through the identification with his protagonist, Zweig exposed and 'self-denounced' himself to the world and tried at the same time to come to terms with his own nature, carrying out a self-examination that aimed more to a self-understanding (Dolei 32) rather than to a self-defense, as Strigl underlines when she defines the book a "Versuch einer Selbsterklärung" ("attempt at self-explanation") and an "Akt der Selbsterschöpfung, der Selbsterfindung" ("act of self-creation, of self-invention", 18-22). Writing the Erasmus-biography meant therefore embarking on a personal therapy: by giving vent to his bottled-up feelings and processing behavioral and social patterns, Zweig tried to cope with his crisis, actually performing an act of resilience. At the end of

this emotionally draining therapeutic-literary process—that was sometimes a real "Qual" (torture", Rolland and Zweig 558, 2/14/1934)—he claimed to be "erleichtert" ("relieved", Rolland and Zweig 551, 12/18/1933) and to have overcome his crisis, as these lines to Lavinia Mazzucchetti suggest:

> Nun ist die innere Krise vorüber, der "Erasmus" hat mir so sehr geholfen wie während des Krieges der "Jeremias", er ist für mich eine Art "Nothelfer" geworden und ich habe manches für mich selbst durch ihn in klarer Form gebracht (Zweig, *Briefe* 82, 1/09/1934).
>
> (Now the inner crisis is over, the 'Erasmus' has helped me as much as the 'Jeremias' during the war, it has become a kind of 'emergency helper' for me and I have brought something into clear form for myself through it.)

CONCLUSIONS

> To think in the Erasmic way is to think independently;
> To act in the Erasmic way is to work for mutual understanding (Zweig, *Erasmus* 117)

The investigation of Stefan Zweig's *Erasmus of Rotterdam* carried out herein, focused on the writer's particular response to the status of marginality and vulnerability that he shared with his literary alter-ego Erasmus, has shifted the attention from the perspective of the in- to that of the re-action with reference to the exegetical debate revolving around the text. According to this viewpoint, Zweig's auto/biographical work can be regarded as the showcase of the writer's poetic counteraction to the Nazi era from a double perspective: on the public level, the references to Zweig's own life and historical context concealed in the text turn it into an artistic form of dissidence, of indirect and peaceful opposition against the Nazi regime, thus as a practice of resistance. On the personal level, the composition of the book, allowing him to give vent to his innermost thoughts and concerns at a time of crisis, became a kind of therapy, that is, an actual form of resilience.

In both cases, what comes out at the end is the unifying and saving value of literature, especially in times of vulnerability and conflict, when it may become a weapon to cope with external and internal struggles. Seldom, actually, does a silent, peaceful fight go down in history—which seems to be dominated by great deeds: for this reason, Erasmus' weak voice was drowned out by Luther's revolutionary outcries; for the same reason, Zweig's reaction had not much resonance in comparison to the angrier and more aggressive yells of his fellow intellectuals. Yet it is precisely this kind of reaction that turns into a spiritual heritage and, ultimately, really makes history. The lasting significance of Erasmus' life is openly stated in the final chapter, dedicated to his legacy, where Zweig links him to the whole series of *Besiegten*, i.e., of the anti-heroes of his biographies who, although beaten, are never really defeated, in that the ideals that they embody "are capable of everlasting resurrection" (Zweig, *Erasmus* 243), shaping the future generations. Erasmus is a *Hintergrundfigur* who will die as a "forgotten man" (4) because, in the *hic et nunc*, his project of the "humanization of mankind" (244) will remain a utopia, overshadowed by Machiavelli's utilitarian politics. His "great

humanistic dream," (243) however, will linger on to finally find fulfillment in the future generations of European humanists like Montaigne, Spinoza, Diderot, Voltaire, Lessing, Schiller, Kant, Tolstoi, Ghandi, Rolland (245-246) and, of course, Zweig himself, whose entire life and work, in all their contradictions, are themselves examples par excellence of the Erasmian "humane politics" (241).

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Erika Capovilla is a PhD student and "cultrice della materia" in German Literature at the Universities of Udine and Salzburg (cotutelle PhD program). Her research interests include F. Dürrenmatt (*La decostruzione del giallo in un mondo 'in panne'. L'Anti/kriminalroman di Friedrich Dürrenmatt*, in "Il Confronto Letterario" 76/2021) and Austrian literature of the *Jahrhundertwende* and of the early 20th century, with particular attention to S. Zweig and J. Roth (*"Freilich ist Freundschaft wahre Heimat". Il*

carteggio di Stefan Zweig e Joseph Roth come patria spirituale, in “Studia Theodisca” 28/2021; “Das Erbe des Humanismus im Werk von Stefan Zweig”, conference at the Stefan Zweig Centre, 27/06/2022). She is currently participating in the research project “Le radici mediterranee dello spirito europeo” (Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici).

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2967-6958

erika.capovilla@gmail.com