

The Image of Man in Stefan Zweig's *Confusion*

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses the issue of homosexuality in Stefan Zweig's *Confusion*, and attempts to read it against the grain, arguing that homosexuals have always been degraded and misrepresented. It attempts to show that the novella could be read socially and contrapuntally as a letter addressed to a sclerotic Austrian society that, on the whole, showed little tolerance towards homosexuals back then.

KEYWORDS: Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, homosexuality, society, identity.

Stefan Zweig's *Confusion* is likely to put the reader in an uneasy posture in view of the complexity of comprehending the ramifications of the story, as well as the difficulties posed by its interpretation. The veiled treatment of homosexuality in his works immediately puts *Confusion* in the limelight, for it is Stefan Zweig's only text that deals with homosexuality, albeit in a veiled way.

Indeed, *Confusion* attempts to diagnose, not without a degree of compassion, the social and psychological predicament of homosexuals. The poetic language used to paint the characters' inner feelings dwarfs any other literary attempt to portray the complexities of being a homosexual in a sclerotic society. It should be noted here that Stefan Zweig's interest in, and commitment to the defense of homosexuality as a way of being, was not limited to fiction. He did actually defend this socially and politically excluded group, as he supported homosexuals in their rebellion against conservative Austrian society and their struggle against laws that criminalized homosexuality as well. Indeed, homosexuality in its diverse manifestations has been, and still is, a sensitive issue that has not been fully attended to in most Arab countries.

In view of the discriminatory legal conditions against this segment of Austrian society, Stefan Zweig, together with other interested writers and researchers, led by Sigmund Freud, addressed a letter to the Criminal Law Committee of the Austrian National Council:

We express urgently our concern about the controversy surrounding the criminalization of homosexual relationships between consenting adult men [...] Homosexuality is found in all times and in all societies [...], their (gay men) tendencies are inherent to them as is the case with regard to their inclinations. [...] legal follow-up is a flagrant violation of human rights, because it deprives homosexuals from practicing their sexuality despite not violating any legal rights [...] since gay men as well as others have civil duties, so we demand that the legislator, in the name of justice, abolish the clause that criminalizes homosexuality, which impedes homosexuals from enjoying their civil rights, so that the law, being a guarantor of a decent life for this category of citizens, is worthy of achieving human dignity without discrimination in a responsible society.¹

The judicial system was not the only institution that wronged homosexuals by classifying homosexuality as a criminal act; the Church, too, rejected it. As one moral preacher said: "It is a perverse custom to prefer boys to girls because this kind of

¹ The letter was signed by Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, Stefan Zweig, Franz Werfel, Jakob Wassermann, Herman Eckel, Hermann Swoboda, and Moritz Schlick. (My translation)

love is a rebellion against nature. Even untamed animals avoid such sinful caresses, so a person will be more animal than they are when such practices are preferred.”²

This article does not aim to delve into the controversial issue of homosexuality, which has been raised by researchers in the social and human sciences, and most of them concluded that it is a natural phenomenon that characterizes humans and animals alike, but rather the aim is to focus on the psychological mapping of a doomed love relationship destined for failure from the start. Indeed, *Confusion* was not given enough attention by Arabic literary critics and commentators.

Confusion, which is a portrayal of the life of homosexuals, and the controversy related to this phenomenon, is based mainly on the conflict between the mind and instinct, which plunged the professor (one of the main characters) on occasion into deep despair. In *Confusion*, Stefan Zweig, deeply influenced by Sigmund Freud, seems to pose as a psychiatrist *par excellence*. He went about his work with passion, which made him interested, both in his daily life and literary writings, in the psychological and social conditions of vulnerable minorities.

In terms of sheer form, *Confusion* is made up of two overlapping stories which constitute the frame narrative and the embedded story. In the frame story, Roland v. D. tells the story of his sixtieth birthday, which coincided with the end of a thirty-year academic career, during which he published a score of academic writings. The honoree, however, is hardly moved, for he thinks that his colleagues oversaw an important component that went into the making of the academic that he has grown to become. Roland hardly recognizes the person whose achievements are being praised. After leafing through the volume he had been given, he couldn't help smiling, because the volume focused on the intellectual life of the author. He likens the situation to the act of hearing one's voice in a recording; he states: "I felt exactly as I did when I first heard my own voice on a recording: initially I did not recognize it at all, for it was indeed my voice but only as others hear it, not as I hear it myself through my blood and within my very being, so to speak."³ Something fundamental is missing that has made Roland fail to recognize his own voice, and that is certainly his experience with his mentor and professor when he was a young student.

In the context of these memories and his monologue, he declares that the speeches delivered by his colleagues do not reflect his real life, but rather miss the most important and fundamental aspect of his personality. That is why he decided to reveal his true self, namely by narrating the encounter that made him what he is today. This recollected encounter constitutes the framed narrative, and the central story of the confusion of emotions, so the narrator decided to monitor and reveal the "silent image" to represent, along with what appeared from his life, particularly his academic path, a point of recognition and disclosure and revealing the feelings that he has always insisted on concealing: The retrieved voice is likened to an unwritten page: "I will add a page not previously written to those on open display, a confession of feelings to be set beside that scholarly book, and for his sake I will tell myself the true story of my youth." (Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, p. 26)

This revelation takes us into the heart of the mentor's suffering. His torment is best captured through the conflict between mind and instinct, in addition to the duality of scientific research and psychological life.

Since the first meeting between the two, the student is almost hypnotized not only by his professor's outward appearance and bright looks, but also by the enthusiasm that seeps from his lectures, content, interventions, and way of analyzing matters. Suddenly, after this amazement, the narrator puts us in the face of the student's disappointment and frustration when he sees his professor during another lecture; he is now an old, exhausted man, delivering a monotonous, and almost boring lecture.

From the inception, this duality is based on a secret that will gradually manifest itself to the reader as the narration unfolds, until towards the end when the hard truth is revealed: the professor's homosexuality.

Thus, all along his life, the professor's emotion has struggled to have the upper hand over his mind, and so did his mind, for a careful balance between the two is that which builds up the integrity of man, so that he is productive.

Before a young audience, the professor throbs with youthful life and vitality, and delivers his lectures with an enthusiasm that breeds a very powerful speech based on persuasion and argumentation, all clothed in an emotional garb that captivates as it regenerates itself from within. This expansive enthusiasm is, symbolically, indicative of a pent-up desire to disclose what

²Quoted in *Lust, Angst und Provokation: Homosexualität in der Gesellschaft*, (ed.) Helmut Puff (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), pp. 159-160. (My translation)

³ Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, translated from the German by Anthea Bell, with an introduction by George Prochnik (New York: New York Book Classics, 2012), p. 24. (Hereafter page numbers will be provided in the text).

is simmering inside him. The students would be captivated, listening in an ecstasy similar to that which he was feeling. Their enthralment suggests that they absorbed the contents of his lectures, and could see through his crystalline speech.

Yet, as soon as he finds himself alone in his office, his mind takes over, and he quickly returns to his senses to become once again that old man, aware of his passing years that point to the absence of youth vigor, and the strength required to go about one's academic work conscientiously: "when he was teaching a factual subject or was alone in his study he lacked that spark of dynamite which here, in our intense and breathlessly spellbound company, broke down his inner walls; he needed—oh yes, I felt it—he needed our enthusiasm to kindle his own, our receptive attitude for his own extravagance, our youth for his own rejuvenated fervour." (Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, p. 68) This enthusiasm and openness are attributed to the old times marked by all great feelings; the "Circus Maximus, where the wild beats of emotion fall ravenously on one another," (Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, p. 48) generating what the Latin scholars call a raptus. This Circus Maximus is a large-scale outburst "exploding like a petard, and it lasts for fifty years: a rush of blood, an ejaculation, a uniquely wild phenomenon prowling the world, seizing on it as its prey—in this orgy of power you can hardly hear individual voices or make out individual figures." (Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, p. 49)

Through his focus on intense and emotional research in this era, the professor seeks to dive into the current way of thinking. This is in harmony with Stefan Zweig's firm opinion that "All phenomena, all humanity is to be recognized only in its fiery form, only in passion. For the intellect arises from the blood, thought from passion, passion from enthusiasm" (Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, p. 52) The same principle applies to the professor, who can only be productive and creative when the mind fuses with blood, and peace reigns between them. However, the professor cannot always experience these moments. Traditional society, in turn, blocks the way between his identity as a thinker and researcher, and his homosexual tendencies, which he tries to satisfy in the dark alleys of large cities. In this vein, the lack of harmony between mind and emotion occasions a tremendous intellectual rift.

The motive behind satisfying his homosexual desires under the cover of secrecy, far from his scientific and societal surroundings, is mainly due to the attitude of society, religion, and law. All unite to arrogantly and forcefully reject homosexual practices based on their alleged deviance from the norm.

Homosexuals are heavily weighed down by guilt and end up being despised by the overwhelming majority of society. More than that, they are considered sick. Freud's famous "Letter to an American Mother," paints homosexuality in different terms. Indeed, for Freud "Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness."⁴ Furthermore, textual evidence shows that history is replete with renowned people who were gay, such as Plato, Michael Angelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, among others.

The professor must have had his own reasons to conceal his homosexuality, as any leak into the open about his sexual orientation would have exposed him not only to contempt and blackmail, but could have jeopardized his scientific and academic career. His silence, apparent conservatism, and self-imposed isolation are a desperate attempt to narrow the circle of friends and acquaintances who seem, for the most, unworthy of his trust. Even Roland, who is an intimate friend, was horrified by his professor's self-imposed isolation:

His total isolation horrified me more than anything. This man, with his open, very expansive disposition, had no friends of any kind; his students alone provided him with company and comfort. No relationship but correct civility linked him to his university colleagues, he never attended social occasions; often he did not leave home for days on end to go anywhere but the twenty steps or so it took him to reach the university. He buried everything silently within him, entrusting his thoughts neither to any other human being nor to writing. (Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, p. 89)

Yet, gossip did not spare him. People avoided communicating with him, so that they would not be subjected to any suspicion or exclusion. Roland's unconditional support for the professor exposed him to ridicule by some of his colleagues, as well as by the professor of Romance languages, who said "Well, intimate as you are with Professor ... you should know that." (Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, p. 114)

The professor's ultimate goal is to reach a certain degree of harmony. While intellectual harmony, and even a certain degree of symbiosis, may be achieved with students at the university, personal growth in what relates to sexual matters remains

⁴ Quoted in *The Oxford Handbook of Sexual and Gender Minority Mental Health* (ed.), Esther D. Rothblum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 12.

impossible. This is why the professor was forced to set two realms apart, namely the realm of intellect and that of sexuality, which, ideally, should be compatible with each other.

When the professor reached a degree of intimacy with the young student, his long-awaited hope ignited, and he was set to pursue his dream in an attempt to turn it into reality. The student, too, really admired his teacher, but it never occurred to him that their relationship was driven by unacknowledged elements of sex, as his passion for his teacher was a mixture of excessive admiration, respect, and a recognition of his constant willingness to help.

In the context of these events, the fact that the professor did not publish his book is indicative of his lack of success in linking his intellectual work and his (homo-) sexual drives, as there is an invisible force that controls his attempt to distinguish between these two aspects in his life. This hidden force is reflected in a strong, uncontrollable instinct, which is characterized by a kind of attraction and repulsion.

The attractive side is the love of beauty and youth and the satisfaction of sexual desire, while the repulsive side lies in the professor's escapism. This unbridled desire flings him into the dark recesses of modern life in the hope of satisfying it. In other words, he is running away from himself, from the felt yet unacknowledged despicableness of homosexuality.

Indeed, the professor's sudden appearance at night in Roland's room was the result of a sweeping sexual impulse that went suddenly out of control. In fact, the professor could conceal his desires, or rather suppress them, except that he could not bridle that desire and finally ceded to its overwhelming power.

This war of desires that plagues his inner self explains the reason of his constant flights. In fact, they help him to momentarily curb them; yet, they would never heal him. In this perspective, his married life looms like a hiding, because it never contributed to "freeing" him from his homosexuality; worse, it, too, was an impulse. This impulse proved to be a posteriori as *opus contra-naturam*, and it failed to secure the sense of bonding that the professor had been craving for. Living with a woman under the same roof may suggest an ordinary bourgeois marriage, but it is only a social shield that pushed the professor even further down the ravine of isolation because it was fake. Both husband and wife play a part, but the wife performs better the role of the happy and kind wife:

she was always busy yet always had time for herself, went to the theatre, enjoyed all kinds of athletic sports—but this woman aged about thirty-five took no pleasure in books, in the domestic life of the household, in anything abstruse, quiet, thoughtful. She seemed at ease only when—always warbling away, laughing easily, ready for bantering conversation—she could move her limbs in dancing, swimming, running, in some vigorous activity. (Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, p. 91)

As for the professor, he completely ignores her, and does what he likes: leaves when he so wishes, and returns home when he pleases. What is more, he avoids any conversation with her, and harshly excludes her from his study, which constitutes his personal and intellectual world:

As if a pentagram were traced on the threshold, his wife never ventured to enter his study without an explicit invitation, a fact which clearly signalled her complete exclusion from his intellectual world. Nor would my teacher ever allow any discussion of his plans and his work in front of her; indeed, I found it positively embarrassing to hear him abruptly break off his passionate, soaring discourse the moment she came in. There was even something almost insulting and manifestly contemptuous, devoid of civility, in his brusque and open rejection of any interest she showed—but she appeared not to be insulted, or perhaps she was used to it. (Stefan Zweig, *Confusion*, p. 90)

Roland is somewhat just like his former professor. He was a passionate and enthusiastic person who could devote himself to one thing at a turn, either the pursuit of sexual desire, or scientific work, in a big city like Berlin, far from his parents. He had a new life, so he neglected his studies and indulged in all kinds of pleasure. In an effort to get rid of this lifestyle, he moved to another university, and he became another human being. He was no longer that passionate person, but he turned into a hard-working student motivated only by avid learning.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that in *Confusion* Stefan Zweig does not try only to portray the suffering that a homosexual person experiences, but rather he tries to show the reader that a person who is obsessed with his desires can only act with passion, no matter what the field. *Confusion* was another letter, just like the one sent to the Criminal Law Committee of the Austrian National Council, but the addressee was now the Austrian society, which was, back then, invited to show tolerance or sympathy for homosexuals.

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- [5] The letter was signed by Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, Stefan Zweig, Franz Werfel, Jakob Wassermann, Herman Eckel, Hermann Swoboda, and Moritz Schlick.