On February 22, 1942, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig and his second wife went to the bedroom of a rented house in Petrópolis, Brazil. They lay down—she in a kimono, he in a shirt and tie—after taking an enormous dose of barbiturates. When news of their suicides broke, it was reported as a matter of worldwide significance. The New York Times carried the news on its front page, alongside reports of the rout of Japanese forces in Bali and of a broadcast address by President Roosevelt. An editorial the next day, titled “One of the Dispossessed,” saw in Zweig’s final act “the problems of the exile for conscience sake.” Zweig, a Jew, had left Austria in 1934, living in England and New York before the final move to Brazil, and his work had been banned and vilified across the German-speaking world. In his suicide note, he spoke of “my own language having disappeared from me and my spiritual home, Europe, having destroyed itself.” He concluded, “I salute all my friends! May it be granted them yet to see the dawn after the long night! I, all too impatient, go on before.”

Zweig’s death arguably marked the high point of his literary standing: to most English-speaking readers, he is now little more than a name. Yet, for a time, in the nineteen-thirties and thirties, he was the most translated writer in Europe. Along with the fiction and the biographies on which his reputation chiefly rests, he produced a seemingly effortless stream of plays, translations, poems, travelogues, and essays—on subjects ranging from manuscripts to Moscow theatre. An energetic literary spokesman and PEN member, he lectured, in several languages, around the world. He also championed many other writers, helping them financially and with glowing appraisals of their work.

Beside contemporaries like Thomas Mann and Joseph Roth, Zweig can seem like an also-ran; he left no single, defining masterpiece. But, in the past few years, it’s become possible to appreciate anew the variety and ambition of his writing. New York Review Books and Pushkin Press have reissued most of Zweig’s important fiction, often in fine new translations by Anthea Bell, and a number of his biographical studies. They have also published translations—the first ever—of an abandoned novel, “The Post-Office Girl,” and of a long-lost novella, “Journey into the Past.”

Now Pushkin Press has released a revealing new biography of Zweig, “Three Lives,” by Oliver Matuschek (translated, from the German, by Allan Blunden). The story of Zweig’s life has always been dominated by the version of it he told in his memoir, “The World of Yesterday,” one of his best-known works. Completed less than a year before Zweig killed himself; “The World of Yesterday” is less an autobiography—he mentions his two marriages only in passing—than a manifesto about his era. He portrays himself as an idealist, devoted to the cause of international brotherhood, even as Europe collapses around him. Subsequent books largely bolstered this narrative—first, memoirs by Zweig’s first wife, Friederike, then, in 1972, a comprehensive biography by D. A. Prater, produced under Friederike’s watchful eye. But Matuschek shows the extent to which Zweig’s public façade masked a tormented and unpredictable private self. The Zweig that emerges isn’t quite the moral authority he seemingly aspired to be. He’s far more lively and human, and his frailties, rather than his noble aspirations, emerge as the source of his best work.

The defining fact of Stefan Zweig’s life was the great wealth to which he was born. This gave him the freedom to arrange his existence as he wished, shuttling restlessly around Europe and maintaining a careful independence...
from personal and professional ties. A friend once remarked that, no matter where you met Zweig, his manner suggested a half-packed suitcase in the next room. He was born in Vienna in 1881, the second son of a successful textile manufacturer and a woman from an Italian-Jewish banking family. While still at school, he began submitting poems and articles to literary journals and sending off ingratiating letters to the great literary men of his day. He also started a manuscript collection: by the time he was sixteen, he owned material by Goethe and Beethoven, and over the years the collection became one of the most important in Europe, containing such treasures as a catalogue of Mozart's works in the composer's own hand and Beethoven's writing desk. Zweig wrote that his collecting grew out of his fascination with "the biographical and psychological aspects of the creation of a work of art." Friderike took a subtly different view, noting that it manifested a desire for "escape from everyday things into the realm of great achievement, evident in his whole mode of life."

When he was still a university student, Zweig published his first volume of poetry, and his work appeared in the most illustrious Viennese newspaper of the day. (Theodor Herzl was his editor.) His success persuaded his parents that he could be excused from working in the family business. He went on from Vienna to study in Berlin, and was stimulated by its seedy social life, a stark contrast to Vienna's religion of bourgeois propriety. So began a mode of life that continued for a decade or more—a quiet bachelor existence in Vienna interspersed with sojourns abroad, making the acquaintance of important artistic figures of the day. In Brussels, he befriended the French-Belgian poet Émile Verhaeren and immediately set about translating his works; in Paris, he got to know Rainer
Maria Rilke and Romain Rolland. He met Rodin, Yeats, Pirandello, Valéry, and many others. It is tempting to see his sedulous gathering of eminent friendships as a counterpart of his manuscript collecting.

In "The World of Yesterday," the chapter covering this period is titled "Detours on the Way to Myself." Zweig writes that "my life was still governed in some odd way by the idea that everything was only temporary. Nothing that I did, I told myself, was the real thing—not in my work, which I regarded as just experimenting to discover my true bent, not the women with whom I was on friendly terms." But, though a good deal of the early work feels tentative, most of it was successful at the time, and he quickly achieved considerable celebrity. After poetry, he tried drama, and his memoir has several faux-ingenious descriptions of how, having sent this or that play to a theatre, he was amazed when the theatre decided to put it on, or by the public acclaim that followed. He also wrote his first novellas, a form that came to dominate his fictional output.

Zweig called the novella "my beloved but unfortunate format, too long for a newspaper or magazine, too short for a book." But in German literature, which largely missed out on big nineteenth-century novels, it's a genre with a venerable literary pedigree—invented, more or less, by Goethe, and refined by figures like Heinrich von Kleist and Paul Heyse. The novella's pared-down format, its atmosphere of tightly controlled sensationalism, and its focus on a single, dramatic turning point suited Zweig's sensibility. In "The Burning Secret," the most successful of his early novellas, a young boy on vacation at a spa resort with his mother fails to realize that a man who befriends him in the hotel has done so purely to have a chance of reducing his mother. Gradually excluded from the developing relationship, the boy furiously decides to thwart the adults, while remaining innocent of the true nature of the relationship. Zweig generates tremendous suspense by evoking the perplexity of the boy's mind, as his vengeful actions threaten to have disastrous consequences that he cannot understand.

The First World War marked the point at which Zweig's love of Europe started to coalesce into something like the pacifist and internationalist credo that he later espoused in his memoir. Conscripted and assigned to work in Austria's War Archive, he was shocked by what he saw—towns laid waste on the northern edge of the Austrian Empire and mutilated soldiers in a hospital train. His response was a fervently antivarian drama, based on the life of the prophet Jeremiah, who vainly urges Jerusalem's populace to make peace with the besieging Chaldean forces. The play now seems dated and grandiloquent, but it had real impact at the time, and was described by Thomas Mann as "the most significant poetic fruit of this war I have yet seen." It couldn't be performed in
wartime Vienna, and Zweig travelled to Zurich to work on the first production.

In “The World of Yesterday,” Zweig claims to have been immune from “the sudden patriotic intoxication” that swept the country. But, as both his biographers have shown, the real story is more nuanced. At first, he was caught up in the nationalistic fervor, publishing pro-war articles and suspending his friendships with writers in enemy countries. His turn toward pacifism, Matuschek shows, had roots in a growing despair at his own situation. Work in the archive kept him from his writing, and he was alarmed that, as the military situation worsened, more and more workers around him were being called up for the front. Matuschek gives a careful account of the strings Zweig pulled to get to Switzerland and to stay there until the end of the war, a catalogue that certainly complicates the steadfast image that Zweig projected.

Zweig’s fiction, though, gave voice to all the panic and uncertainty that his memoir suppressed. In 1918, he wrote a story, “Compulsion,” about an Austrian artist who has been living in Switzerland but knows that he can be called up at any time. When the dreaded papers arrive, he goes to the consulate prepared to give a high-minded speech and imagine the confrontation that will ensue. But the functionary on the other side of the desk is informal, genial, and bored: “I hope you’ve enjoyed your stay here in Switzerland… Your friends are supposed to leave tomorrow, but I don’t suppose it’s all that urgent. Let the paint dry on your latest masterpiece. If you need another day or so to put your affairs in order, I’ll take the responsibility for that. A couple of days won’t matter to the Fatherland.” The artist finds himself minding politely and his convictions evaporate. He returns home, where his wife upbraids him for his spinelessness. The novella ends, somewhat didactically, with the artist regaining his pacifist resolve, but there is no missing the fact that he has arrived at it almost entirely through weakness.

The end of the war instilled a new sense of purpose in Zweig, and the following decade saw his greatest success. He married Friederike von Winternitz, an occasional writer with two children from an unhappy first marriage; she had caught his attention in 1912 by sending him a fan letter. Moving into a palatial house in Salzburg, he decided that his long apprenticeship was finished. Over the next decade, he wrote mostly novellas and biographical essays, often linked in thematic cycles. The novellas are typically stories of obsession that move feverishly toward crises. In “Fear,” an adulterous wife is driven to the point of suicide after receiving blackmail demands—ostensibly from one of her lover’s other conquests, but arranged by her husband, who hopes to effect a reconciliation. In “Twenty-four Hours in the Life of a Woman,” a respectable widow in her forties catches sight of a young compulsive gambler losing in a casino, sees in a flash that he will kill himself, and ends up spending the night with him in order to save him. Much of Zweig’s skill resides in shrewd narrative pacing. In his memoir, he writes about drawing the reader in by cutting out as much material as possible.

Often, the stories hinge on humiliation. In “Moonbeam Alley,” a man drifts into an unsavory quarter of town and goes to a bar, where he meets a prostitute who keeps hurling insults at an old man hovering timidly nearby. The old man turns out to be her husband, who blames himself for the life she leads and is desperate to win her back. A recurrent scenario involves narrators who are well-heeled and aloof (rather like Zweig) deciding to flirt with danger and surrender control. One of the purest examples is “Fantastic Night,” in which a young dandy notes that he has been overtaken by a “curious paralysis of my feelings.” He no longer takes genuine pleasure in his luxurious life. Even the death of an old friend doesn’t grieve him:

I felt as if I were made of glass, with the world outside shining straight through me and never lingering within, and hard as I attempted on this and many similar occasions to feel something, however much I tried, through reasonable argument, to make myself feel emotion, no response came from my rigid state of mind. People parted from me, women came and went, and I felt much like a man sitting in a room with rain beating on the window panes; there was a kind of sheet of glass between me and my immediate surroundings, and my will was not strong enough to break it.

Before long, he is stumbling around a Viennese pleasure garden in pursuit of the one sensation that still stimulates him: shame. He picks up an indigent
Zweig's ability to trace the patterns in human lives is also strongly apparent in his short biographical essays. In the current Zweig revival, these have so far been comparatively neglected, but they are some of his best work. The start of his essay on Kleist vividly conjures the life of the tortured German writer by itemizing his travels for a page and a half:

There was no point of the compass toward which Kleist did not travel in Germany, nor any town of note in which he, a homeless wanderer, did not sojourn for a time... From Berlin he drove by diligence to Dresden into the Erzgebirge, to Bayreuth, to Chemnitz, then he left again to Würzburg; thereafter, throughout Napoleonic campaigns to Paris. He had planned to spend a year in the French capital, but within a few weeks he set out for Switzerland, moving from Berne to Thun, to Basel, and then back to Berne... He zigzagged back to Dresden, whence, during the full blast of the Austrian campaign, he started for Vienna, was arrested at Aspern while the battle was in progress, but escaped, and fled to Prague. Sometimes he vanished like a river that runs underground, to emerge at an immense distance; but always, again and again, a sort of gravitational force drew him back to Berlin... Nowhere could he rest. For the last time, therefore, he climbed into a post-chaise (which had been his only true home during the thirty-four years of his life) and drove to Potsdam, where, beside the Warnow, he blew out his brain. He was buried by the roadside.

This feat of compression—the evocation, through an itinerary, of a whole existence—gets close to the heart of Zweig's sensibility. As in his novels, his fixation on extreme psychological states coexists with something more distant. Zweig relishes both the tumult of feeling and the way that even the most inchoate emotions, seen from the outside, tend to form a pattern. And, of course, a similarly expressive list could be made of Zweig's own wanderings: Ostend, Zurich, Calcutta, London, Bath, Moscow, Osnaburg, Rio, Buenos Aires, Petrópolis. Hermann Hesse called him the Flying Salzburger.

At the height of his career, Zweig was an object of admiration, envy, condescension, and outright contempt. In German literature, the boundary between the commercial and the worthy has tended to be more stringently policed than in English, and for many the popularity of Zweig's books was automatic cause for suspicion. One contemporary critic called them "railway-carriage reading." The great poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whom Zweig tried and failed to cultivate, considered Zweig's career, in
its precocity and range, a plagiarism of his own career. (The joke was on him: after Hofmannsthal died, Richard Strauss, needing a new librettist for his operas, got in touch with Zweig.) Even among Zweig's friends, an edge of irony crept in when describing his carefully husbanded success. One wrote:

In every city of more than 5,000 inhabitants, this unobtrusive, smooth-talking man had a friend—bookseller, member of the local literary society, editor of the local paper—who would be waiting on the platform when Zweig arrived, introduce his lecture, and write the dithyrambic feuilleton for the next day's local journal.

The years of comfort and eminence came to an abrupt end with Hitler's rise to power, in 1933. Zweig's books were widely denounced and later banned. National Socialists were on the rise in Austria, too, agitating for a union with Germany. During political disturbances early in 1934, policemen arrived at Zweig's house, demanding to search for weapons. As soon as they had gone, Zweig packed his bags for London, where he had recently rented an apartment, and he never lived in Austria again. In his memoir, he wrote, "Behind this intrinsically insignificant episode I sensed the present gravity of the state of affairs in Austria, and saw what enormous pressure Germany was putting on us."

As usual with Zweig, though, there was a personal reason for his departure: a desire to escape his marriage. Zweig treated Friderike as a secretary, loathed her daughters, and was constitutionally unsuited for marital life: he once threatened to shoot himself if Friderike became pregnant. Now he wrapped up his life in Austria hastily, dispersing his papers and selling off most of his manuscript collection. Soon after settling in London, he began an affair with his secretary, a sickly young woman named Lotte Altmann, who became his second wife.

Zweig, as a prominent literary exile, was often asked to lend his voice to anti-Nazi and Jewish causes. He was anything but outspoken, however, and his silence frustrated other writers of the time and has been much criticized since. Klaus Mann, who failed to get him to contribute to an émigré journal he was running, was disparaging of Zweig's decision to remain "objective, 'understanding,' and 'just' toward the deadly enemy." Hannah Arendt, reviewing Zweig's memoir years after his death, wrote that "not one of his reactions during all this period was the result of political convictions." Zweig tried to justify his silence, writing in his memoir, "I hate emotional public gestures on principle," and adding that he didn't want to make trouble for Richard Strauss, just before the premiere of their opera. He seems to have clung to the hope that, if he didn't draw attention to himself, his work could somehow continue unimpeached, and his actions at this time hint at deep denial. One bizarre detail mentioned by Matuschek is that, in 1933, Zweig, ever the diligent collector, bought the thirteen-page manuscript of a speech by Hitler.

Starting in the early nineteen-thirties, Zweig wrote a number of full-length biographies, mostly of historical figures caught...
in perilous times—Ennus, Mary Queen of Scots, and (the best of them) Marie Antoinette. He also completed two of his finest pieces of fiction, “Beware of Pity,” his only completed novel, and the novella “Chess Story” (also known in English as “The Royal Game”). Crisis had always been Zweig’s subject, but in his years of greatest success he had tended to handle it by means of plots that operate slightly too efficiently. Now, in genuine crisis himself, he produced work more compelling than anything that had come before.

In “Chess Story,” a group of men on an ocean liner bound for South America find that a great chess master is aboard and form a team to play him. At first, he easily defeats them; then, during a rematch, a stranger appears and prevents the opponents from making a disastrous move. The stranger takes control and manages to force a draw. Later, he tells the narrator his story: an Austrian lawyer, he was arrested by the Nazis, interrogated, and kept in solitary confinement. To while away the hours, he memorized a compendium of great chess games and played them in his head. He progressed to playing games against himself, splitting his mind down the middle, the stress of which brought him close to breakdown. The next day, on the ship, he beats the chess master, but between moves he starts to pace, his steps marking out the dimensions of his former cell. The chess master, noticing that his opponent becomes discomposed when he is forced to wait, exploits this weakness in their second match. As he draws out his moves to unending lengths, the stranger appears to enter into a feverish combat with himself.

From one pause to the next our friend’s behavior became ever more bizarre. He no longer seemed to be taking part in the game: he was involved in something quite different. He had left off his excited pacing and sat motionless in his chair. Staring before him with a vacant, almost crazed expression, he muttered incomprehensible words to himself in a continuous stream; either was engrossed in an endless calculation of moves, or else (this was my deepest suspicion) he was working out entirely different games. . . . I was beginning to suspect that he had actually long since forgotten . . . the rest of us in this quiet madness.

This is melodrama, but of a very high order—the tension of the narrative rising inexorably with the stranger’s gathering psychosis. There is an unmistakable urgency, too. It feels less finished and received, more naked, than almost anything else Zweig wrote. Biographical readings are perilous, but with Zweig, a master biographer, they seem essential, and it is hard not to see in this story of mental disintegration a self-portrait. Its author had recently sailed to South America, where he relieved the isolation of his new life by playing his way through a book of famous chess games. He mailed the final typescript of the story to his publishers the day before he killed himself.

Zweig had spent his life running away from home, but once exile became a way of life—once there was a secure base from which to escape—the strain wore on him. He lived his final years in a state of continual flight. He secured British citizenship, but then decamped with Lotte to New York. The city, full of refugee intellectuals, should have been ideal, but it depressed Zweig; there was no respite from brooding about the fate of Europe. After a tour of South America, he decided that Brazil would be a fresh start. (He even wrote a book in its praise, “Brazil: A Land of the Future.”) But it’s hard to imagine anyone less suited to life there. The recently collected “Stefan and Lotte Zweig’s South American Letters,” edited by Darién J. Davis and Oliver Marshall (Continuum), gives a picture of the daily trials the couple endured. Zweig was isolated from everything that gave his life meaning, deprived of books and like-minded colleagues; the climate was bad for his spirits and for Lotte’s fragile health. Furthermore, Brazil was a dictatorship, with growing anti-Semitic leanings. The regime was proud that a famous writer had taken refuge there, but Zweig was attacked for his apparent complicity.

In “The World of Yesterday,” which he completed in Brazil, he gives a chilling assessment of the hopes that refugees placed in the New World. He recalls seeing a group of European Jews in London—“ghosts” amid the “pitiful ruins of their lives”—frantically trying to obtain passage to various distant countries. He sees a man he knows, a prominent Viennese industrialist and art collector, who hopes to get a visa for Haiti or Santo Domingo. “It wrung my heart,” he writes, “an old exhausted man with children and grandchildren, trembling with the hope of moving to a country he could hardly even have located on the map, just so that he could go on begging his way there, a stranger without any real aim left in life.” This withering objectivity about the futility of the situation is perhaps what enabled Zweig to give up the struggle.

Zweig’s stock-in-trade was reading human lives, both historical and fictional, in search of a moral. His life, ending as it did, acquired just such a meaning, becoming a cautionary tale about the fate of the artist in the face of totalitarianism and ordering all subsequent views of his work. But just as his pacificism in the First World War and his flight from Austria imperiled by Fascism had both principles causes and personal ones, so, too, the public message of his suicide note tells only one side of the story. Matuschek’s biography makes especially clear how much depression afflicted Zweig throughout his adult life. He had often spoken of killing himself, and, in the grip of despair, had asked Fridelinka to join him in death. In his work, suicide is everywhere, and often closely linked to exile. In “Twilight,” a novella written when he was still in his twenties, a lady at the court of Louis XV is banished from Versailles and kills herself, unable to tolerate her provincial new life in Normandy. In the unfinished novel “The Post-Office Girl,” a young woman starts to plan a suicide pact with a disaffected young man, after her rich relatives briefly treat her to a luxurious life and then drop her. In the short story “Incident on Lake Geneva,” a Russian soldier, displaced during the First World War and desperate to return home, wades into the lake and drowns. Zweig’s demise is a story he had told many times.

If Zweig’s death wasn’t quite the political act it seemed, the popularity of that interpretation is understandable. A man in whom genuine modesty and a genius for self-publicity existed side by side, Zweig spent his life backing into the limelight, and his death followed the same pattern. The day after their bodies were discovered, Stefan and Lotte Zweig were given a state funeral. President Getúlio Vargas attended, along with his ministers of state. Petrópolis shuttered its shops as the cortège passed and deposited Stefan and Lotte in a plot near the mausoleum of Brazil’s former royal family. A day or so later, a friend received a farewell letter from Zweig, asking that his burial “should be as modest and private as possible.”