Enchantment and Repulsion: Two Austrian *littérateurs* in Banāras

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It is a rather bold undertaking to present two extremely different writers and personalities such as Stefan Zweig and Josef Winkler in one and the same context. Only this conference, 'Banāras Revisited,' allows me to bring them together, as both these Austrian authors visited Banāras, both felt attracted as well as repelled by the city, and both wrote about their experiences.

Stefan Zweig, born 1881 in Vienna in a well-to-do Jewish family, was a highly educated man. He spoke a number of European languages fluently; he was well connected with outstanding members of the European intelligentsia in many countries. He was part of an international network of *littérateurs* and artists who campaigned for cultural exchange, friendship, and solidarity among nations. He was at home in a cosmos of arts and literature where national boundaries were irrelevant, and he abhorred the political evil spirits of his time such as nationalism, chauvinism, and militarism.

Stefan Zweig became a prolific writer, a very successful narrator, and an author of biographies. An extraordinary talent of empathy and an elegant narrative style made him very popular, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. His books were translated into more than fifty languages. Like everybody of Jewish origin in Europe he had to suffer. Anticipating the takeover of fascism in Austria he migrated to England in 1934, and again, anticipating the Second World War, he left England for Brazil in 1938. Desperate because of his shattered humanitarian and pacifist ideals he committed suicide together with his wife in 1942.

When he set out on a journey to India and South East Asia in November 1908, he was just one of a number of German-speaking intellectuals who visited India at the beginning of the twentieth century, a few years before the First World War.[1] These journeys were a new version of the classical educational trip. There was a widespread awareness that a Eurocentric view of the world was too narrow. Unlike some of his contemporary travelers Stefan Zweig was not tired of Europe and he had no particular romantic longing for India or the East. His motive was to widen his horizon by exposing himself to a non-European culture.

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1 For instance Waldemar Bonsels (1903), Max Dauthendey (1906), Rudolf Kassner (1908), Hermann Hesse (1911), Hermann Graf Keyserling (1911), Ernst Weiß (1912/13), René Schickele (1913).

In March 1909 Zweig published a long article in a Viennese newspaper, entitled *Banāras. City of Thousand Temples*[2] in which he describes in touching words his observations on the ghāṭs and in the lanes of Banāras. He is deeply moved by the religious fervor of the pilgrims and by the citizens who come every morning to take their ablutions or to perform their prayers and rituals. A view that leaves a lasting impression on him is the Hindu rite of cremation in which he sees the great unifier of the otherwise strictly segregated caste society. His descriptions of Banāras include very beautiful as well as ugly, shocking sights.

Hindu religion is a very ambivalent experience for Zweig. On the one hand he is genuinely impressed by 'the flame of faith which burns strong and fervently below the cool glow of the [believers'] averted eyes;' on the other hand it is the same concentration on their inner life which, for Zweig, makes it comprehensible 'why these humble and silent people bear patiently with the servitude of foreign nations and the chains of their own caste system.'[3] While Zweig obviously has an empathetic understanding of the role of the river Ganges as the great purifier, he seems to misconceive the ascetic and yogic exercises he observes on the Gangā ghāṭs when he labels them as 'penitence' or 'expiation,' thus suggesting atonement for committed sins. He also repeatedly uses the words 'passionate,' 'fanatic,' or 'fanaticism' to describe the religious fervor of the believers. Proceeding into the lanes of the city he observes the daily life of the citizens. Nothing seems to remain hidden. The doors and windows are open but still their inner life remains a mystery. 'Strangeness, insurmountable strangeness is the ultimate reaction to all the feelings of this nation.'[4]

As a result of his journey to India Stefan Zweig returned home with a deeper understanding of his European identity. In his autobiography 'The World of Yesterday' he expresses many years later his reaction when he observed the privileged life style of the 'white sahibs': 'I could not get rid of the eerie feeling that the coming decades and centuries would have to bring transformations and changes of this absurd relationship which we did not dare to anticipate in our cosy and seemingly safe Europe.'[5] The consequence of his journey was at the same time the ability to look at his own European culture with different, somewhat dissociated eyes and 'not to see Europe any longer as the eternal axis of the Universe.'[6]

In 1921 Stefan Zweig's interest in India received a new boost. Rabindranath Tagore visited Germany and Austria for the first time and got an overwhelming reception.[7] Zweig wrote an extensive book review about *Sādhana*, Tagore's series of

2 Zweig 1955; reprinted in Kade-Luthra 1993: 181–9.
3 Ibid., 181. Translation of all German quotations by the author.
4 Ibid., 188.
5 Stefan Zweig, *Über Europa hinaus*, in Kade-Luthra 1993: 190. Originally published in *Die Welt von gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers*. Stockholm, 1944.
6 Ibid., 191
7 Zweig even rushed to the Salzburg railway station and met Tagore on his way to Vienna on 15 June 1921 (see Kämpchen 1991).

philosophical lectures that had just appeared in German translation.[8] Still under the influence of the First World War Zweig was deeply attracted by the ethics of non-violence expressed in Tagore's work, put into political practice at the same time by Mahatma Gandhi.

A little later, in 1922, the same year when Hermann Hesse wrote his *Siddhartha*, Stefan Zweig, too, wrote a long story, entitled *Die Augen des ewigen Bruders* (*The Eyes of the Eternal Brother*) which he characterized as an 'Indian legend.'[9] He used a freely invented plot in the style of an ancient Indian narration in order to deal with some of the political and ethical questions for which each human society has to find answers and which were very urgent in the 1920s in Europe. Is there a justification for war and violence (including capital punishment)? How does one exercise political power in a just and fair way? Can a society thrive when some possess land and property and others do not? And he raises a very general question: how does one act in such a way that no harm is done to anyone?

Memories of Banāras where Stefan Zweig got his most impressive exposure to Indian religious life and where he saw many people whom he described as burning with ascetic fervour were certainly in his mind when he wrote his 'Indian legend' about a man who can be called a fanatic of righteousness. Zweig presents Virata, the hero of his legend, in five episodes as a man who passionately strives to lead a pure, a flawless life.

Above the actual story Stefan Zweig quoted a few verses from the Bhagavad Gītā as a motto:

> Not by refraining from action does man attain freedom from action. For not even for a moment can a man be without action.[10]
>
> What is work? What is beyond work? Even some seers see this not aright. I will teach thee the truth of pure work, and this truth shall make thee free.
>
> Know therefore what is work, and also know what is wrong work. And know also of a work that is silence: mysterious is the path of work.[11]

First we meet Virata, a member of the *kśatriya* aristocracy, on a military campaign to quell a rebellion against the king of the country. Although the king is a harsh ruler, a merciless judge and tax collector, Virata remains absolutely loyal and defeats the army of the rebels in a surprise attack at night. In the morning he sees among the

8 Stefan Zweig, 'Rabindranath Tagores Sadhana,' in *Das Geheimnis des künstlerischen Schaffens. Essays*. Frankfurt am Main, 1984, pp. 179–87. Originally published in *Das literarische Echo*, Berlin, 1 October 1921.

9 Zweig 1922. In 1922 Hesse and Zweig point out in their correspondence the common basis of their 'Indian' narratives. Zweig writes to Hesse on 13 December 1922: 'It is not by mere chance, that we […] met again and again in crucial questions, […], that both of us modified similar insights at the same hour in legends from the Indian world.' (Prater 1981: 55).

10 *The Bhagavad Gita* III, 56.

11 *The Bhagavad Gita* IV, 16–17; ibid., 62.

corpses on the battlefield his own brother who had fought for the rebels. The view of his brother's frozen eyes sinks into Virata's heart and haunts him throughout his life. When the grateful king wants to give his saviour the supreme command over his army Virata rejects the offer and declares that from now on he will never touch a sword again, 'because there is violence in the sword and violence is the enemy of justice. He who takes part in the sin of killing is a dead man himself.'[12] His sudden insight that each act of killing is fratricide transforms Virata immediately from a hawk into a dove. Now he pleads for radical non-violence, for he wants 'to live as a just one.'[13]

In each of the following episodes Virata chooses an altogether different way of life and action from the previous one and every time he gives overriding importance to his aims of non-violence and righteousness. Still, again and again he becomes responsible for the suffering of fellow human beings who seem to stare at him reproachfully with the eyes of his dead brother.

In this way the erstwhile warrior is appointed as the kingdom's supreme judge and in the second episode of the legend Virata makes himself a name as an embodiment of justice.[14] But in spite of his best intentions Virata here, too, is led to realize that according to his own high standards he has become guilty of delivering an inhuman judgement and that there is no hope of ever achieving his goal of perfect justice in his profession as a judge.

Now, in the third phase of the story, Virata leaves the King's service for good and retires to his private life, looking only after his family and his estates. He studies the Holy Scriptures, practices meditation and gives charity to the poor. He gives good advice to his neighbors when they have quarrels with each other and helps them to settle their conflicts amicably. Again he makes himself a name as a man of great practical wisdom.

This peaceful period again comes to an abrupt end when he sees one day how his sons fiercely punish a slave, because he had been a little late to start his work, and again Virata sees his brother's glance in the wide-open eyes of the tortured man. Virata tells his sons to leave the man alone to which they comply reluctantly. In the following sleepless night Virata understands that slavery is incompatible with his ideals. When he tells his sons next morning that all their slaves shall be free they do not accept their father's decision. They are afraid that without slaves they themselves would have to work in the fields, which is exactly what Virata wants them to do now. We can feel here the influence of Leo Tolstoy who tried to practice this philosophy on his country estate in Russia and who deeply influenced Mahatma Gandhi. Virata's sons now openly raise a mutiny against their father and tell him that they accept his orders no longer. Virata severs the bonds between himself and his family as he wants neither command nor rule, not even over his sons, nor does he want to subsist on the

12 Zweig 1922: 17.

13 Ibid.

14 Although he never sentences a culprit to death the kingdom's crime rate does not rise. Here Stefan Zweig clearly makes his own statement about capital punishment which was then and still is a topic of discussion.

sweat of the slaves. Following his old ideal to live free from guilt, he leaves his house, saying that only the poor person who works himself is close to God.

In the fourth phase of the 'legend' Virata builds a hut for himself in the forest and becomes a hermit. Only the animals are his companions and friends. He does observe that even Nature is full of violence. One animal kills and eats the other, but Virata remains a silent uninvolved witness. One day a man sees Virata in his forest hermitage and becomes convinced that Virata is a saint. This rumour spreads all over the villages of the area and unexpectedly Virata finds followers. A number of men give away all their possessions, leave their wives and children in order to live as hermits in the forests in the quest for an eternal truth. Once when Virata leaves his hermitage to go to the next village all the villagers greet him reverently, except one woman who stares at him with eyes filled with hatred. Again he feels as if his dead brother were looking at him. On his enquiry the woman answers that her husband had followed Virata's example. He had left her alone in poverty and her children had died of hunger. And she blames Virata for all her misery. Virata is shattered. Again he has become guilty, even though unknowingly. As before, he is immediately ready to correct himself and he criticizes himself severely: 'I meant to be a humble servant of God, but I have been proud and haughty […] I admit: I am to blame for your sufferings […] Even the non-doer acts and thus becomes guilty, even the secluded one lives within all his brothers.'[15]

The incident drives Virata out of his paradise. After spending one more night in the hut he leaves his friends, the birds, and returns to the city. Admitting that he failed to free himself from the web of culpable action he asks the king to accept him now as his humble servant. 'For only he who serves is free.'[16] The king feels insulted by such reasoning which challenges his own lordship. He gives Virata the humblest of all posts and Virata is grateful to become the keeper of the dogs. Now the man who earned fame in many walks of life gradually falls into oblivion. Only the dogs love the friendly old man. Virata lives many more years, he feeds and cleans the dogs, and he is happy about his humble inconspicuous life. When he dies no priest carries out the last rites for him. Only the dogs howl for a day or two, and then they, too, forget Virata.

This philosophical tale poses a number of questions. Does Stefan Zweig mean to present the end of the story as a happy one? Has Virata achieved the goal of his struggle for absolute purity? Or does Zweig intend to reduce Virata's strife for a life free from guilt to absurdity? Is it a tale about pacifism and socialism? Or does Zweig just want to give his readers food for their own personal thought about the ethical implications of violence, power, and social inequality? Unlike most other heroes of Zweig's novellas and narrations Virata is not a psychologically realistic character. The reader can hardly empathize with his quick and radical decisions. But Zweig certainly does prompt the reader to come to his own conclusions.

The story has a dialectical structure. From episode to episode the respective ethi-

15 Zweig 1922: 56.
16 Ibid., 58.

cal position is negated and converted into a new and even more radical position. It is, however, striking that Virata is only interested in his own personal freedom from guilt. When he renounces violence he does not ask if and how human social life in general could be freed from violence and military action. When he steps down from his post as a judge he does not consider the social consequences of a general abolition of criminal justice. The reformed hero retires into private life and doesn't seem to care that others are now warriors and judges.

Again, when he repudiates slavery he does so only personally without committing himself to a change in the entire social system. And again, his solitude in the forest is not so complete that he would not be in touch with human life around him at all. Others follow his example and outdo him. The woman who holds him responsible for her children's death teaches him the impossibility of complete withdrawal from human society and also the impossibility of anticipating all the consequences of his actions. All his efforts to live free from guilt are shattered. The eyes of his killed brother keep haunting him. The ultimate position to which he can fall back is to act without a will of his own, to be a servant carrying out his master's will.

Was it Zweig's intention to show that radical renunciation of personal ambition, even of the ambition to be a holy man, leads to supreme wisdom, freedom, and happiness? Such a notion can, in fact, be found in Indian thought. But is a servant discharged from the responsibility for his actions and omissions? He may very well be at peace with himself, but he too is not immune from becoming guilty. Stefan Zweig rather shows how a man fails to achieve this goal, and it seems impossible to achieve it at all.[17]

Although Zweig's 'Indian legend' begins with a quotation from the Bhagavad Gītā, there is no examination of the Gītā's own answer to the questions of violence and right action. Virata and Arjuna find themselves in a similar dilemma but they choose very different paths of action. Arjuna, like Virata, is ready to renounce violence in order to avoid the sin of fratricide, but he is led to a different solution: to fight for a righteous cause without hatred, without personal ambition, knowing about the wider context of all human life and action.

The Gītā's doctrine of *Karma Yoga* – of acting without desire for the fruits of

17 Lionel B. Steinman comes to the same conclusion:

> The total experience of Virata, if not his final decision, implies a rejection of any quietist solution; but the pitiable peace he gains through spending the remains of his life as a keeper of the king's dogs is not a solution to life's complexity but a denial of its ethical and social dimensions. Indeed, given the terms of Zweig's legend, it is likely that Virata would have continued to encounter, even as a kennel keeper, ethical dilemmas essentially the same as those he was attempting to escape. That Zweig chose such utter self-abnegation in (purportedly) unconditional service indicates his failure to define an operational relationship between individual and social ethics, between ethical values and ethical action, but not a renunciation of them in favor of some Eastern quietism […] Virata was Zweig's confession that life means service and that purely egotistical action is devoid of sense. He never succeeded in developing this ideal into a guide to ethical action. (Steinman 1981: 160f.)

one's actions – could have been the practical answer to Virata's constant search for a life without guilt and entanglement. More important than action itself is the inner attitude of the person who acts. If he acts in a spirit of service and sacrifice he remains free from the binding effects of his doings. Even without ascetic renunciation such a way of life leads to inner freedom. And such an attitude could have given Stefan Zweig himself courage to live and carry on his work in the oppressive times of his exile.

Zweig's interest in India and Indian thought was nourished by the ethical problems which absorbed him throughout his life. In his 'Indian legend' *The Eyes of the Eternal Brother* he deals seriously with questions raised in Europe by Tolstoy and Romain Rolland, and in India by Gandhi. India at the time of her non-violent struggle for independence was for him a possible source of answers to the urgent questions of social ethics. The lasting value of his legend lies in the trenchant presentation of these problems, not in their solution.

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Josef Winkler's background is altogether different from Stefan Zweig's. Winkler was born in 1953 in a tiny village in a very conservative rural area of southern Austria where he grew up on a farm. Much of Winkler's writing deals with his childhood experiences in this environment that seems to have been a hell for him. A traumatic experience was the common suicide of two teenage boys in his village who had been exposed as homosexuals. The topics of death and homosexuality play an important role in many of his writings.

As a boy who was keen to read books, Winkler was an outsider in his village. At the age of 14 he left the village to continue his education in a commercial school. From the age of 17 onwards he worked in various office jobs during the daytime and attended an evening school. Since 1979 he has been a freelance writer. In the beginning his writings were set in the patriarchal and catholic environment of his childhood. Later on he made extensive journeys to Italy, India, and Japan, which resulted in travelogues and novels set in these countries.

In a conversation with Winkler the Austrian professor of literary studies Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler who knew about Winkler's overwhelming interest in death advised him to travel to Banāras, which he knew to be the *Mahāśmaśān* or 'Great Cremation Ground.' This stimulus along with the fact that Winkler's wife had spent four years of her childhood in Rourkela prompted them to travel together to India in the mid-1990s with two extended stays at Banāras. The result of these sojourns is the book *Domra. Am Ufer des Ganges*[18] (*Domra. On the Banks of the Ganges*), labelled as a novel. To me this is a misleading description, as it is not a fictional work. It is rather a diary-cum-travelogue about the city of Vārāṇasī, and more specifically about its Hariścandra Ghāṭ, one of the two places at the river front where cremations

18 Winkler 1996.

according to Hindu rites take place every day. Most of its 283 pages are filled with minute descriptions of everything that happens day-by-day on the cremation ghāṭ: the preparations for and the process of cremation itself and everything that takes place just next to it: children playing, people bathing, animals basking in the sun, and so on. The book is enriched by black and white photographs – depicting scenes on the Gaṅgā ghāṭs – by Winkler's wife, Christina Schwichtenberg.

In the beginning Winkler writes about one of his first days in Banāras. While his wife was happily enjoying some sweets she had just bought and which brought back to her the tastes of her childhood, Winkler was shocked and overwhelmed by the multitude of new, mostly repulsive or threatening impressions which he could neither understand nor digest. Back in their hotel this heavy cultural shock resulted in an uncontrollable emotional upsurge and a flood of tears.

Winkler took it upon himself to spend a few hours a day for several months at the Hariścandra Ghāṭ and to note down what he saw. As he said later in an interview he was fascinated by the contrast between the rituals of death and cremation and the sprawling life that unfolded itself at the same time just next to the funeral pyres.[19] These observations amount to more than three-quarters of the book. Many such passages cover four to eight pages without any segmentation into paragraphs. Typical of his style is also an abundance of descriptive adjectives. Here are a few sentences in the beginning of such a chapter:

> When the sun had disappeared behind the houses of Varanasi and the half moon stood clearly visible at the bluish pink sky and was reflected in the lead-coloured water of the Ganges which was overlaid with a pink gleam, I sat down next to a sleeping meagre white and brown spotted bitch on the large round cremation altar stone in the middle of Hariścandra Ghāṭ where there were still lying white and grey ashes, small pieces of coal and the porous, brittle, white burnt down remains of the bones of a young deceased woman who had been cremated this morning with unveiled face. The rosy teats of the sleeping heavily gasping bitch touched the white grey ashes, the black pieces of charcoal and the porous, brittle, charred bone-particles of the dead woman. Below me a bald-headed man, dressed only in a seamless white cotton cloth, hit again and again with a green bamboo stick on the lower body and the legs of a burning corpse.[20]

The writer does not explain what he sees; he does not comment on it; he does not speak about his own feelings or reactions. He just observes and seems determined not to leave out even the minutest detail, be it each and every step of the gradual (and sometimes incomplete) transformation of a human body into a heap of ash, be it the efforts of the *ḍom* (cremation assistant) to keep the fire burning, be it the children playing nearby or bathing in the river, be it the tourists passing by on a boat. How everybody is dressed, how he or she looks, the style or absence of their hair, the dogs

19 Interview with M. Prangel, 'Deutsche Bücher,' *Forum für Literatur*, 33 (2003) Vol. 4, pp. 257–76; also published on http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=6730.

20 Winkler 1996: 84.

sleeping on the ghāṭ or licking their genitals, etc. – everything seems equally significant. The narrator's special attention is, however, repeatedly attracted by young boys, 'good-looking lads,' who take their bath in the Ganges, covered only by wet loincloths. Basically, the scenes on the cremation ghāṭ are the same every day. So, naturally, their descriptions repeat themselves with some variation.

Hariścandra Ghāṭ, one of the two cremation ghāṭs in Banāras and the site described by Josef Winkler in his *Domra*

In addition to the episodes on the cremation ghāṭ Winkler describes the street life at Lanka market, on the main road from Assī to Godaulia or somewhere else in the lanes of the city. Here, too, the style is the same: detailed descriptions without comment. It is, however, remarkable that almost everything he observes is ugly and repulsive, at least to common taste: how chickens are slaughtered and their intestines are taken out, how a puppy gets run over and killed by a scooter, how vultures take care of the puppy's remains, and many more such instances could be given. No doubt, such scenes can be observed in daily life on the streets of Banāras, but the narrator seems to be blind to attractive and aesthetic sights which can also be seen. In the interview already mentioned Winkler says that the common notions of beauty and ugliness don't count for him. What most people find ugly is beautiful for him. So, the seemingly objective uncommented description of sights has been filtered – consciously or unconsciously – through a subjective awareness.[21]

21 This style of writing has been described as 'monomaniacal circumscription,' characterized

There are a few shorter passages in the book where we see the author resting in his hotel after the day's session on the cremation ghāṭ is over. Here he sometimes tells something about himself, he shares childhood memories that surge up and fill his dreams. The teenage boys who committed suicide in his native village, an always-hungry old farm maid whom he seems to have despised – they keep haunting him, even in his hotel room at Assī Ghāṭ.

To spend so much time at a cremation site is not a small undertaking. It must have needed a strong motivation, tremendous patience, and determination on the part of the author. One is even reminded of certain *sādhus* who live and practice austerities on the cremation grounds although their motives are probably different from Winkler's. The author, however, does not disclose his reasons. Was it a meditative exercise in pure witnessing without the involvement of the judging mind? Did he want to arrive at a deeper understanding of the mystery of death? Did he undertake the journey and write the book in an attempt to heal his childhood traumas? Whether such deeper insight or a healing effect has been achieved cannot be assessed from the book.

Winkler has made use of at least one scholarly source of information about the traditions of Banāras, the German edition of Diana Eck's book *Banaras. City of Light*,[22] a work he quotes several times. Such informative insertions may have led the Austrian critic Sigrid Löffler to suggest that Winkler, however unsuccessfully, was attempting to present an ethno-poetic study of the life of the cremator caste of Vārāṇasī.[23]

In another book Winkler admits that it was 'necrophilic curiosity' which brought him to Banāras (Winkler 2007: 143). And in the interview with Matthias Prangel he declares:

> It was always clear to me […] that I must write what is really within me, that I have to be shameless, that I have to be assailable […] I have never had any censorship in my head and when I wrote I have never looked anybody over his shoulder; I have never imagined what people might think about it. I was never interested in this. To me only the precision and the beauty of the language mattered.

Winkler's descriptions are, indeed, very precise and detailed, and sometimes his language has a poetic quality. On the whole, however, his sentences are, to my taste, too long and too heavily loaded with adjectives and participial constructions.

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by radical subjectivity, plain depiction of certain events and alteration of the same events through the inner eye of the witness (Engelmeier 2011: 67f.).

22 Eck 1983; published in German as *Banaras. Stadt des Lichts*. Frankfurt am Main, 1989.

23 'Winkler enters ethno-poetic territory without being equipped for that in the least. Without trying to comprehend the religious premises of Hindu death rituals and to include the spiritual dimension into the narrative the observations on the banks of the Ganges in their false directness must remain trivial, intrusive or voyeuristic. In Josef Winkler's case they are all this at the same time.' (Sigrid Löffler, 'Fremder Zuschauer vor Scheiterhaufen. Josef Winkler als Buchführer am Ganges,' *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), 12/13 October 1996.)

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Whereas Zweig's books were highly appreciated by millions of readers in many languages Winkler has not had such a widespread impact. Still, he is a very successful writer. Since 1979 he has been awarded at least thirteen Austrian and German literary prizes, some very prestigious among them. The boldness, radicalism, the lack of self-censorship in Winkler's detailed descriptions has impressed the prize-awarding juries.

Summarizing the portraits of these two authors and their India-related writings I find it enriching and enjoyable to read Stefan Zweig's 'legend.' As a reader one feels respected by the author. In his article about Baṇāras Zweig communicates his own views and feelings in a comprehensible way. And in *The Eyes of the Eternal Brother* he takes his readers as thinking beings into a serious intellectual discourse about ethical questions.

A point in favor of Winkler's *Domra* is that while forcing the reader to look at death and decay the book takes him (or her) to see the close proximity of life and death as an indivisible totality. But in spite of Winkler's detailed quasi-objective description of sights and events in Banāras, *Domra* is not a communicative book. The reader remains puzzled by the scenes and rituals described and the author seems to remain locked up in his own inner world.

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