

BURNING SECRET

by Stefan Zweig

Stefan Zweig is one of those writers I heard praised at home when I was a child, especially by my father, who also recommended several books to me, all of which suited my taste (genetics, perhaps). So, at an early age (maybe twelve, maybe thirteen), I opened the pages of an old, worn and faded book that some daring dog had already read: *The Tide of Fortune: Twelve Historical Miniatures* (German: *Sternstunden der Menschheit*). A jewel. And Stefan Zweig was already listed as one of my favourite writers. Over the years I would learn that this author was not only those '*Miniatures*'. I have read several of his works: some more than others, but all to my taste. I recently returned to one of them, downloaded from Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/45755>: *Burning Secret*, which you may know from the film of the same name (1988), an excellent remake of the 1933 Austrian-German original, with Klaus Maria Brandauer, Faye Dunaway and David Eberts.

The novel tells of the discovery of the secret of life at an early age (twelve). Zweig uses a successful womaniser and a dissatisfied married woman. And in between: her child. He (the womaniser) is described as '*...a handsome young man, always ready for a new experience. He was the kind of man who was always on the lookout for an opportunity to throw himself into an adventure for the simple fact of its novelty*'; while '*she was at that decisive age when a woman begins to regret having remained faithful to a husband she never really loved, and when the purple twilight of her beauty grants her a last, urgent choice between the maternal and the feminine*' (from the Spanish version in *Acantilado*); and the boy, Edgar, simply as a small, pale child in a black velvet suit.

These three characters are enough for Zweig to develop the plot for about 60 pages (depending on the version, of course). The characters move, search for each other, find each other, evade each other, in a reduced space: a mountain hotel, a sanatorium prescribed for the child's cure (recall Thomas Mann's later novel *The Magic Mountain*). The novel can be defined as a psychological one. The characters move from attraction to need, from indifference to love, from admiration to jealousy and hatred.

The characters' entry into the scene (yes, they 'enter' the scene) is masterly. He, the seducer, arrives by train. He is to stay in a hotel (the stage) in the mountains, where '*there was no partner for a game - the Baron's experienced eye noticed at once*'. Nine paragraphs for the Baron. She, on the other hand, is introduced by the Baron himself, as a soft sound that attracts all his attention: '*Suddenly he heard the rustling of a dress and a woman's voice...*'. And then, only then, as a visual image: '*A tall, voluptuous figure in silk crackled by his table...*' And with this wonderful turning point it begins.

Stefan Zweig was born in Vienna in 1881 and died in Petrópolis (Brazil) in 1942.