



Stefan and Alfred Zweig

We Called It “School” ...

To see in them a set of youths who never put down the lyre, so to speak, would not be entirely correct.¹

Friderike Zweig

THE SONG ABOUT “HAPPY, blessed childhood” that Stefan Zweig had to learn in one of his early years at school tells a completely different story to the account he later gives of this time in *Die Welt von Gestern*—school was boring, soulless and dull. Even when approaching the age of sixty he could not recall a single happy memory. So much time had passed, yet he could not even bring himself to see his teachers as figures of fun. Not that they were colourless ciphers—far from it. It was just that the routine of school life, which had followed the same sacrosanct pattern for decades, had so accustomed them to a rigid, authoritarian style of teaching that they simply reeled off the antiquated syllabus and took no account of their pupils as individuals. The teachers had long since accepted this system, and their pupils accepted it sooner or later as well—at least, that’s how Zweig presents it in retrospect. At the height of his distrust of the authoritarian school system he even goes so far as to observe, in an allusion to the work of Sigmund Freud, that it is no coincidence that it was a former grammar-school pupil who chose to study the origins and consequences of inferiority complexes at such length.

After primary school Zweig attended the Maximiliangymnasium, later renamed Wasa-Gymnasium, for the eight years from 1892 to 1900. His accounts do not go into detail about the teaching as such, though we do learn something about the syllabus. In their classes on literature, a subject that was already of special interest to him, they had to listen to well-worn lectures from the teacher with titles like “*Schillers Naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung*” the same lectures he had been giving for decades. The syllabus made no allowance at all, he tells us, for the study of more modern authors such as Baudelaire or Walt Whitman, let alone contemporary writers.

Zweig’s later close friend, the writer Felix Braun, who attended the same school a few years after him and was taught by the same teachers,