

STEFAN ZWEIG AND THE EUROPEAN TRADITION:  
THE QUEST FOR THE ABSOLUTE

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This essay is an attempt to understand what it means to be European. Although such a project may seem inappropriate in the context of my specific topic, it is not as presumptuous as it appears at first sight; the concept of the quest for the absolute will be presented here through the eyes of Stefan Zweig as a collective product of European mentality. This is not intended to mean that similar concepts are non-existent in other cultures, or that Zweig's ethnocentrism prevented him from perceiving the diversity of the spiritual life. It rather indicates that, even though the concept in itself is not restricted in meaning and validity to European thought, it is going to be considered here in so far as it was shaped by the Western intellectual tradition.

Stefan Zweig, whose creative activity was deeply rooted in this tradition can be regarded, if not as one of its greatest, perhaps as one of its most conscientious and self-conscious representatives. His work is reflective of the development of European identity and of the parallel growth of self-awareness in modern man. But our understanding of Zweig's reflectivity would be incomplete, if reduced to the idea of passive mirroring, as has often been done; <sup>1</sup> therefore, I propose to investigate what I hold to be the intrinsic ambiguity of his relationship with the European tradition of the quest for the absolute. In this connection, two different, but interdependent perspectives arise: 1) the interpretation of the concept of the quest for the absolute through the medium of Stefan Zweig, 2) bringing out of Zweig's personality

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<sup>1</sup> see Romaine, Stefan Zweig, the Great European.