A Poisonous Game: Anxiety and the Void in Stefan Zweig's Chess or Schachnovelle (1941)

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This article offers a narratologically informed psychological reading of Stefan Zweig's Chess (1941), situating the novella within the context of Austrian diasporic literature and the author's own exile. Building on Kierkegaard's conception of anxiety as a form of existential dizziness and Lacan's structural account of anxiety, the study argues that Chess represents anxiety not merely thematically but structurally. Through Genette's narratological framework, this study shows how Zweig constructs a layered narrative architecture in which an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic shipboard narrator frames the metadiegetic-homodiegetic confession of Dr. B. This shift from zero focalisation to internal focalisation draws the reader progressively closer to Dr. B.'s deteriorating mental state, mirroring the claustrophobic conditions of his Gestapo imprisonment. The analysis examines how Zweig employs narrative rhythm, anachrony, and interpolated narration to replicate the distortions of memory and perception characteristic of trauma. Repetition, temporal looping, and iterative descriptions reflect Dr. B.'s struggle within the existential 'void', while the accelerating pace and fragmentation of his metadiegetic account chart his descent into the psychological "abyss." By integrating narratology with psychoanalytic and philosophical approaches, the article demonstrates that Chess is best understood as a psychological experiment encoded in its own narrative form. Zweig's manipulation of narrative levels, perspective, and temporal structure not only depicts anxiety but structurally compels the reader to inhabit it, uniting form and content in a coherent exploration of trauma, obsession, and exile.

Keywords: H.L.A. Hart, philosophy of language, legal interpretation, philosophy of law, jurisprudence, vagueness in law and language

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Introduction

Stefan Zweig occupies a fascinating place in literary history, with scholars long debating his motivations and reasoning. Born in Vienna on 28 November 1881, Zweig was a member of that generation of Austrians who had touchpoints on either side of the Great War, who could both remember the grandeur and opulence of Habsburg Austria and grieve for its loss in the interwar period and the post-1938 Anschluss. A son of a prosperous Jewish family, themes related to Jews and Jewishness appear in many of his works. Indeed, this is also tied to Zweig's handling of the broader field of the Austrian diaspora in his *Chess* (or *Schachnovelle*) and wider works. Zweig's emigration to England in 1934 and onward travel to New York and then Brazil in 1940 because of the rise of the Nazis places Zweig in a central position within the literature of the Austrian diaspora. At his peak, in the 1920s and 30s, he was a renowned author of both historical biography and literary fiction, with some of his best-known works being *Amok* (1922), *Fear* (1925), *Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman* (1927) and, of course, for this study, *Chess* (1941).

Chess was apparently written during Zweig's time in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, circa autumn 1941. The story takes place aboard a passenger ship sailing from New York to Buenos Aires, carrying two chess prodigies. The setting appears to correspond to elements of Zweig's own life, as he was an Austrian refugee who made numerous transatlantic voyages (Daviau & Dunkle, 1973, p. 370). The anonymous narrator, implied to be Zweig himself, details the first as the reigning world chess champion, Czentovic, whom we might describe as having savant syndrome due to his exceptional chess ability and the social and developmental difficulties he faced. The central character of Dr. B is introduced later in the novella as a shy man who also has a rare talent for chess, though his talent was acquired following incarceration and psychological torture by the Nazis. This effectively pits two distinct forms and psyches against one another: Czentovic, representing a mind that was born with his status, and Dr. B, whose psychological state was artificially altered through isolation and abuse. Zweig's knowledge of Gestapo methods likely came from accounts heard from other refugees from Europe, thus tying themes such as memory and diaspora firmly into this study.

Despite the narrative frame having been one of the most popular elements of German-language novellas over the years, it has now fallen into relative disuse. Zweig's use of the literary frame technique with *Chess* appears to have been a very apt method, owing to it, allowing him to position himself within the frame as the narrator of plot elements such as Czentovic's background, whilst also enabling the inner narrative, conducted by Dr B., to be told with him as a foil. Here, Gérard Genette's (1980, 1988) narratological concepts are particularly useful for clarifying the mechanics of this structure. The anonymous shipboard narrator functions as an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic voice, observing events from outside Dr. B's past, while Dr. B's recollection of his imprisonment operates as a metadiegetic-homodiegetic embedded narrative. This layered configuration mirrors the psychological descent charted in the text: a controlled, detached outer narrative giving way to an intensely focalised inner narrative of claustrophobia and anxiety. The shift from zero focalisation in the frame story to internal focalisation in Dr. B's confession brings the reader closer to the mental unravelling that defines the novella's core. Genette's distinctions thus reveal how narrative form becomes a structural analogue for Dr. B's psychological condition, especially in themes of isolation, temporal distortion, and the collapse of agency.

The frame itself is a very useful tool in examining psychological issues in literature, as it allows the author to present a separate inner story to the narrator's, giving the reader another dimension in which to consider characters and their motivations. This also often incorporates a confessional element through which the speaker of the inner narrative relates events to the narrator, providing authenticity and the semblance of a personal statement (Turner, 1981, p. 117). Although it might be tempting to use such a strategy and material as evidence for an assessment of Zweig himself or other authors in a similar position, *Chess* is itself a psychological study that Zweig used to experiment with characters and neurological issues. As such, it is essential to clarify that this study will not attempt to analyse Zweig himself.

Zweig's choice of the game of chess may seem to be a strange one for him to experiment with, given his alleged personal distaste for the game (Daviau & Dunkle, 1973, p. 372). It may, however, be said to have been well-suited to his purposes of psychological experiment. Zweig also believed he was innovating on a second front, believing that his *Chess* would be the first to tackle the subject. This is, as Oltermann (2008, pp. 170-1) attests, not the case, as chess features heavily in historical German literature, with numerous works incorporating 'the royal game' throughout history. Some well-known examples include *Nathan Der Weise* (1779), *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), *The Strife of Love in a Dream* (1890), *The Turkish Automaton* (1899) and *The Defense* (1930). The allegorisation of chess throughout history is also an important touchpoint, with it being common in Medieval allegory to liken life to a game of chess played against the devil or death itself. Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess* (1624) is an excellent example of chess being used as an allegorical vehicle for wider societal events (Yachnin, 1982, pp. 232, 330). Beyond viewing chess merely as a game, it is also important to consider it as a discourse that allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to converse as equals. It is, in many ways, a leveller in socio-economic terms, with a wide diffusion and historical significance (MacDowell, 1898, pp. 117, 141). It can also be viewed as a form of mock battle, similar to modern tabletop wargaming, as pieces are moved strategically according to a complex system of rules and conventions. It is, in this way, also a testing ground for like-minded individuals to compete (Cleveland, 1907, p. 270).

The appeal of chess to humanity's need for competition and the combat instinct, combined with its potential for innovation in the face of uncertainty, makes it an ideal tool for examining complex subjects such as anxiety. To contextualise this for the present study, anxiety, in the Lacanian canon, may be described as something unpleasurable that is known to the subject, i.e., it has an object, and is entirely free of doubt. It is the sudden appearance of the object of the subject's anxiety, which causes the phenomenon we call anxiety (Lacan, 2016, pp. 75-6, 138). Lacan's thoughts were an evolution of Freud's base theory, with Lacan having contended that Freud's (1926) interpretation in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* lacked structure. Lacan's attempt to resolve this perceived weakness was to construct a matrix that would provide reference to stages of locomotion and severity, thus allowing the analyst, or, for our study, the reader(s), to visualise signifiers and plot them out using his chart (Lacan, 2016, p. 77; Teggin, 2020, pp. 1-13). Lacan's matrix then helps us understand that different signifiers have different points of reference for effect and severity.

The use of interdisciplinary tools, such as Lacanian structural analysis, is particularly valuable when approaching a psychological novella such as *Chess*, since, ostensibly, Zweig uses the characters of Dr. B and Czentovic to

test facets of emotional stability before, during, and after a game of chess (Daviau & Dunkle, 1973, p. 371). The concept is an intriguing one, particularly with Lipking's (2003, p. 161) assessment that to those from outside of the chess world, it may appear that participants are detached from reality and lack conformity to social norms: *"To an outsider, such total absorption may look less like freedom than like an addiction, or even a dance of death."* This interpretation, linking obsession to a lack of freedom, ties in very well with our theme of anxiety and provides space in this work for the Kierkegaardian analogy of anxiety being akin to an individual looking down into a deep abyss and becoming dizzy. The fault, he contends, is equally with the abyss and the individual in question, with independence of thought and action then being taken from them in this state of dizziness (2015, p. 75). Anxiety, here, can be said to be acting as a counterweight to freedom.

This study builds on the anxiety-dizziness analogy to examine the concept of what Dr. B relates to the narrator, via his inner narrative, as the 'void' of his existence when imprisoned by the Gestapo. This imprisonment confined him to a Spartan bedroom containing only essentials such as a bed, chair, and washstand, with a barred window overlooking a firewall. Dr. B was denied any form of entertainment or mental stimulation, leaving him with nothing but an empty room and his thoughts; his thoughts, inevitably, focused on when his next interrogation would be and whether he had given the correct information in his last. The timing of the interrogations was not given to him in advance, so he was left in a constant state of anxious suspense, with the only escape from his prison void being the interrogations themselves. This scenario, it is contended, provides a fascinating opportunity to build on the existing literature surrounding *Chess* and to bring studies using such interdisciplinary methods more firmly into the broader literary debate.

Dr. B and the Void

There is a school of thought that posits that much Austrian literature of the early twentieth century, particularly that written by diasporic authors, is a natural way to express nostalgia for the Habsburg Empire. The feeling of disconnection and loss for a reality that once was is quite natural as people get older and become more distant from their past, whether imagined or otherwise, a sentiment that Rieckmann (2012, p. 49) has commented on. The problem of Habsburg nostalgia is that it encompasses a profound schism between the 'before' and 'after' periods associated with the Great War and the fall of the Austrian monarchy. As Schlipphacke (2014, pp. 1-2) has identified, there is a fissure where the 'present' should be for Austrians and the Austrian diaspora. Nostalgia for an imagined golden era in the past, before the break, is a phenomenon often witnessed in former imperial societies, with a sort of ennui lingering in society (Bădescu, 2020; Bandyopadhyay, 2018; Plopeanu et al., 2021). It is, of course, highly probable in such instances that the imagined state of perfection never actually existed, with the feeling having evolved from romantic ideals into a discourse held in the psyche (Rizzuto, 2021; Saglia, 2023; Talay, 2023).

If we consider Zweig and other Austrian refugees, we may comment that his transition from the before to the after stage of nostalgia must have been a sudden one. Zweig fled Austria to London in 1934 due to the changing political climate associated with increasing nationalism and right-wing politics in the years after the Great War. This is something that was mirrored in Germany with the rise of the Nazis

(Bessel, 2004; Galofré-Vilà et al, 2021). Zweig's cultural stability and home effectively vanished overnight, and he became an exile. His later work, particularly *Chess*, might thus be said to foreshadow the imagined fight between power and intellect; in *Chess*, this plays out between Czentovic and Dr B (Pabisch, 1974, p. 93). As we shall see, the Gestapo's cruelty in occupied Vienna plays a large role in Dr. B's character arc. The linkage between a game of chess and Nazi terror in Europe is a useful parallel for interpreting Zweig's meaning in *Chess*, and it is the clash between Dr. B and Czentovic that Zweig has invested himself in. Zweig uses the narrative frame to build a layered narrative structure that, in Genettian (1980, pp. 228-36) terms, moves from an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator within the shipboard storyline to a metadiegetic-homodiegetic embedded narrative when Dr B. begins his confession. This shift from the outer narrator's zero focalisation, in which events are relayed with limited psychological insight, to Dr. B's internal focalisation, in which the reader sees the void through his perceptions alone, is crucial to understanding the intensification of anxiety in the text. As Turner (1981, pp. 116-7) has highlighted, Zweig has used the presence of the narrator in the story as a strategy for demonstrating authenticity. The confessional mode of the metadiegetic narrative enhances this illusion, though as Genette (1980, pp. 228-36) reminds us, every embedded narrative is also an interpretive construct filtered through someone's voice. It is, for a similar reason, why he names characters with a simple initial, such as Dr. B. This, in effect, gives an illusory form of authenticity since fictional characters, theoretically, have no need for a disguise (Turner, 1981, pp. 116-7). The novella itself, embracing what Wheedon (2011, p. 565) has termed its 'diva' status, freely lends itself to psychological investigation via inner narrative. Figure 1, below, encapsulates this as we see Dr. B begin to outline his torture to the narrator in very human terms. The scene that has been set is one which the reader can instantly identify as unpleasant and one which might induce anxiety, though it must be commented that the narrative certainly attempts to lead us to that conclusion ahead of time. Immediately, we can also see the usage of signifiers such as 'void' and 'vacuum' being deployed to emphasise the confessional element of the inner narrative.

> *"Nothing was done to us – we were simply placed in a concrete void, and everyone knows that nothing on earth exerts so much pressure on the human soul as a void. Solitary confinement in a complete vacuum, a room hermetically cut off from the outside world, was intended to create pressure not from without, through violence and the cold, but from within and to open our lips in the end."*

Figure 1 - *Stefan Zweig, Chess, p. 40.*

The key element for this part of Dr. B's inner narrative is the way in which the room he was incarcerated in, laid out below in Figure 2, was described. Zweig strove to portray the bleakness of the scene by remarking that the room only had a door, a bed, an armchair, a washbasin, and a barred window. These are features that are referenced numerous times in the narrative, with repetition, as Genette (1988, pp. 39-40) would call it, a narrative iteration, being used to highlight the emptiness or void-like status of the setting and to underscore the psychological impact of the experience. The emptiness is then reemphasised through Dr. B's commentary on him being denied any form of material culture, such as a pencil, watch, cigarette, or penknife. The inclusion of the latter in the inner narrative, noting that it was "to prevent me from opening my veins", is a subtle hint inserted by Zweig (p. 40) to demonstrate his awareness of where such imprisonment may lead a prisoner, as well as a means of directing the reader to anticipate the worst for Dr. B. This is something that Daviau and Dunkle (1973, p. 382) have noted as a weakness of *Chess*, in that psychological

elements have been spelled out too clearly with the intention of leading the reader to a predetermined conclusion. However, within the Genettian framework, such prefiguration can be understood as part of the narrative's controlled modulation of distance in keeping the reader close to Dr. B's internal state without allowing the narrative to become fully dramatised.

> *"At first sight, the room I was given didn't seem at all uncomfortable. It had a door, a bed, an armchair, a washbasin, a barred window. But the door was locked day and night; no book, newspaper, sheet of paper, or pencil might lie on the table; the window looked out on a firewall; a complete void had been constructed around myself and even my own body. Everything had been taken from me: my watch, so that I wouldn't know the time; my pencil, so that I couldn't write anything; my penknife, to prevent me from opening my veins; even the smallest narcotic, such as a cigarette, was denied me."*

Figure 2 - *Stefan Zweig, Chess, p. 40.*

Considering the impending psychological break laid out for the reader and the emptiness of the room Dr. B described, it is essential to draw attention to what Kierkegaard said about anxiety, as noted above, and to how this study equates his abyss with Zweig's and Dr. B's abyss. Kierkegaard likened anxiety to dizziness, reasoning that when a person looks down into an abyss and then becomes dizzy, the fault lies equally with the individual and the abyss. The dizziness that results from the situation robs the person of their agency, leaving them frozen in an anxious state (Kierkegaard, 2015, p. 75). We may view Dr. B's cell in much the same fashion, with the concept of an abyss being replaced by a void contained within the walls of his room. In Dr. B's void, he is completely powerless and unable to influence either his daily routine or his life choices. Being kept in this situation amounts to a constant state of Kierkegaardian dizziness, with there being no way to alleviate the anxiety or dizziness. This is clearly repeated once again in Figure 3, below, with the same objects referenced in addition to the simile of being "…*like a diver who already guesses that the cable connecting him to the world outside has broken and he will never be pulled up from those soundless depths."* These images are powerful because they are mediated through internal focalisation, enabling the reader not only to imagine the void but to inhabit its perceptual logic.

> *"In that place, your eyes, ears, and all the other senses had not the slightest nourishment from morning to night and from night to morning. You were left irredeemably alone with yourself, your body, and the four or five silent objects, table, bed, window, washbasin; you lived like a diver under a glass dome in the black ocean of this silence, and even worse, like a diver who already guesses that the cable connecting him to the world outside has broken and he will never be pulled up from those soundless depths."*

Figure 3 - *Stefan Zweig, Chess, p. 41.*

The imagery of being cut off from the rest of humanity and the world is very powerful and effectively conveys Zweig's intended meaning. Dr. B was alone in the void, with no external stimuli to provide him with comfort or context. In short, the identifying signifiers that made up his identity were slowly drained from him. It is curious how Zweig has chosen to describe this feeling in the void, as depicted in Figure 4, below. Indeed, Dr. B's narrative suggests being "*surrounded everywhere, all the time, by the void, that entirely speechless, timeless, vacuum."* This is, of course, oxymoronic since being surrounded by nothing suggests a distortion of reality. This suits Zweig's intention as well, however, and neatly dovetails with our discussion of Kierkegaardian (2015, p. 75) and Lacanian (2016, p. 77) anxiety. We have already touched on how Kierkegaard's abyss comparison fits the setting very well, though it is also important to lean into Lacan's interpretation of structural anxiety to pinpoint exactly what Dr. B was experiencing. Figure 4 also illustrates another Genettian (1980, pp. 215-8) feature of the metadiegetic account. This

is the subtle oscillation between interpolated narration and sustained internal focalisation. Dr. B narrates his experience, but he frequently interrupts his own account with observations about his mental state, pacing, or thought patterns. These narrative interruptions function as breaches in the void, momentary ruptures where awareness pushes against the enclosure, only to fall back into the rhythm of confinement. Such interpolations intensify the claustrophobic effect by reminding the reader of the double frame: the outer narrative still exists, but the inner narrative temporarily overwhelms it.

> *"There was nothing to do, nothing to hear, nothing to see, you were surrounded everywhere, all the time, by the void, that entirely spaceless, timeless, vacuum. You walked up and down, and your thoughts went up and down with you, up and down, again and again. But even thoughts, insubstantial as they may seem, need something to fix on, or they begin to rotate and circle aimlessly around themselves; they can't tolerate a vacuum either."*
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> Figure 4 - *Stefan Zweig, Chess, p. 41.*

The Lacanian interpretation of anxiety presupposes that anxiety is founded on something that possesses an object and is entirely free of doubt, i.e., the object of anxiety must be known to the individual. Lacan (2016, pp. 75-6, 138) posited that anxiety would occur when the object appeared to the subject without warning. Anxiety is, therefore, not the danger itself, but rather the signal received in response to danger. Here, we are faced with a problem, since Dr. B knew exactly what the issue was: his fear of being alone in the void. Although it could not 'appear', per se, since he was almost constantly confined within it. Additionally, there was no potential to act in a fight-or-flight response, in which the person has options for how to deal with the situation. Running away or confronting the danger are the typical motor reactions here (Schmidt et al, 2008). According to Newton and Pollock (1969, p. 146), who have examined the character of Dr. B in terms of learning theory, there are three possible responses to the situation he found himself in. First, to remove the situation. Since Dr. B was a prisoner of the void, this was obviously not feasible. Second, to compromise the situation. This option would have had potential, but for the fact that Dr. B's agency was taken from him, leaving him with only the option to continue with the comparator terms of his imprisonment. Third, to mentally withdraw from the situation. As we shall see in the next section, this was the option Dr. B took unwillingly and unknowingly.

From the Void to the Abyss

The concept of choice and Dr. B's lack of agency are key considerations for our study. Without the freedom to take steps to alleviate his suffering, and with the anxiety-freedom paradigm acting to limit freedom too, Dr. B's mind and body were fixed in place within the void. Dr. B's means of escape, via Newton and Pollock's (1969, p. 146) third option, occurred during one of his interrogations on Wednesday, 27th July. The date was fixed as a memory in Dr. B's mind since he was made to stand in an anteroom for two hours and fixated on the calendar due to what he describes as *"…my hunger for the printed word, for something written, I stared and stared at that one number, those four words on the wall: July 27th. My brain devoured them, so to speak."* (Zweig, 2017, p. 48). This extract illustrates what Genette (1980, pp. 156-7, 228-36) terms the persistence of metadiegetic temporality in that even when recounting events retrospectively, Dr. B's narrative is shaped by the perceptual distortion's trauma imposes on time. The obsession and retention of the date may also be seen as a signifier of anxiety within Dr. B's inner narrative.

Whilst waiting in the anteroom, Dr. B also remarked upon a coat hanging up to dry that was still dripping after the rain. Following the path of a drop of water, he noticed a bulge in the coat pocket, with a book sticking out. At once, he knew he had to have it and concealed it on himself, hiding in his room. The discovery functions as what Genette would call a narrative catalyst, a small event that triggers substantial psychological and narrative movement. His excitement was short-lived, however, since the book he had stolen turned out to be a manual of one hundred and fifty championship chess matches (Zweig, 2017, pp. 51-2). Despite his initial disappointment, he realised that even such a dull book was a means of escape for him, along the lines of Newton and Pollock's (1969, p. 146) thoughts, and was *"…a wonderful weapon against the oppressive monotony of my own space and time."* (Zweig, 2017, pp. 54-5). As shown in Figure 5 below, Dr. B again uses the term 'void' and describes himself as a slave to it, noting that only someone in his position would have the time and patience to appreciate a book such as the chess manual. In terms of our discussion of anxiety and the void, his choice of phrasing in *"…annihilated the void around me"* and *"a wonderful weapon"* demonstrates his awareness of his own anxiety and that he sought to defeat it by 'weaponising' the chess book (Zweig, 2017, pp. 54-5).

> *"But who in the world had as much useless spare time as I did, the slave of the void, and who had such an immense desire to learn and so much patience available?... For all at once, I had an occupation – a pointless, aimless one if you like, but an occupation that annihilated the void around me. In those one hundred and fifty tournament matches, I had a wonderful weapon against the oppressive monotony of my own space and time."*

Figure 5 - *Stefan Zweig, Chess, pp. 54-5.*

Dr. B's use of the chess book to occupy his mind and to create a means of escape for himself worked very well until he had memorised all the games and played each through many times in his head. As the narrative shows in Figure 6 below, the novelty and thus the excitement of the imaginary games began to fade, and the process became mechanical rather than spontaneous. In terms of Dr. B's anxiety, it is ironic that his narrative states that *"…there was no surprise any more, no tension, no problems"*, since anxiety is something that usually capitalises on aspects such as these (Zweig, 2017, pp. 56-7). The monotony of the process or tasks was equated with the void-like nothingness returning. The structure of this, in terms of psycholinguistics, is very interesting, as it is tied to a very specific symbolic discourse. Dr. B created the chess-centric discourse to escape his reality and mask his reactions to the situation; effectively, it created an assumed knowledge as a symbolic authority (Santayana, 1918; Pollack, 1985). The problem Dr. B encountered when he became bored with the same chess games being played repeatedly was a breakdown between the creation of his 'knowledge' as symbolic authority and its failure to adequately categorise his relation to the other or to reality. In structural terms, anxiety is attributed to the slippage that results. This phenomenon is commonly observed in analyses of postcolonial literature and discussions, with the concept of the stereotype being the most well-known example (Bhabha, 1994; Teggin, 2022).

> "Then I unexpectedly came up against a dead end. Suddenly, I was facing the void again. For as soon as I had played each individual game from beginning to end twenty or thirty times, it lost the charm of novelty and surprise; its old power to excite and stimulate me was gone. What was the point in replaying games again and again when I knew them all by heart, move for move? As soon as I had played the first opening, the rest of the game jogged automatically along in my mind; there was no surprise any more, no tension, no problems."

Figure 6 - *Stefan Zweig, Chess, pp. 56-7.*

The path that Dr. B took and the impact on his psyche after this anxious boredom are hinted at throughout *Chess*; this was the descent into psychosis, which the reader comes to expect, and is the weakness that Daviau and Dunkle (1973, p. 382) critique as Zweig leading the reader to a conclusion. As shown in Figure 7 below, Dr. B. split his consciousness into two distinct personas, one black and one white, so he could act as chess players competing with one another and thus keep the process stimulating. Since this amounted to a sundering of his mind into two, each having distinct identities and motivations, we may consider Zweig to be experimenting with psychological conditions for his character. This appears to be what Zweig (2017, p. 64) hinted at as 'chess poisoning'. Newton and Pollock (1969, p. 146) suggest that Dr. B began to exhibit schizophrenic reactions such as inner fantasies, behavioural anomalies, and withdrawal from reality. It is important to note, however, that schizophrenia is often misconstrued as solely consisting of split personalities, whereas it is often the case that subjects suffer from auditory hallucinations (Picchioni & Murray, 2007; Green & Horan, 2010; Addington et al., 2010).

Using Genette (1980, pp. 86-93, 227-34), we can additionally observe how the narrative begins to imitate the breakdown it depicts: the metadiegetic voice grows unstable, the rhythm accelerates, and narrative distance collapses. The reader is pulled into the abyss with Dr. B, experiencing his anxiety not only thematically but structurally. His imaginative world becomes the only refuge from the void, yet it simultaneously becomes a new prison, one that mirrors and magnifies the recursive logic of structural anxiety. Although the splitting of his mind might be described as a defence mechanism intended to protect himself from the anxiety and emptiness of the void, we can also see that this had the unintended effect of creating a new form of anxiety which Dr. B's psyche had to deal with. Namely, anxiety associated with competition and the desire of his two selves to defeat the other: *"…as my Black self, I felt a feverish anxiety after every move to see what my White self would do next."* (Zweig, 2017, pp. 59-60). In Dr. B's narrative, this is depicted as the point of no return, in which he is caught in an inescapable situation. He is physically trapped in his room and prevented from leaving, yet he is also bound to his imaginary competition since it is the sole relief he has from the void. Both factors caused anxiety, so, unsurprisingly, Dr. B's fate was mental exhaustion and, ultimately, a crash (Zweig, 2017, pp. 79-82). As such, terminology such as "the abyss" or "void" seems increasingly accurate.

> *"But even this splitting of myself wasn't the most dangerous part of my abstruse experiment; that was the fact that in devising the games independently, I suddenly lost the ground under my feet and fell into an abyss… Each of my two selves, my Black self and my White self, had to compete with the other, and each separately felt an impatient ambition to triumph, to win; as my Black self, I felt feverish anxiety after every move to see what my White self would do next."*

Figure 7 - *Stefan Zweig, Chess, pp. 59-60.*

Chess Poisoning and Symbolism

Whereas Dr B. was ultimately freed from his incarceration following a psychotic episode in which a sympathetic doctor declared him insane, the damage to him had been done, and it would come back to haunt him later in the narrative (Zweig, 2017, p. 68). This again refers to Zweig's (2017, p. 64) term 'chess poisoning'. The key plot element resulting from his inner narrative describing his incarceration, however, is that he was advised to avoid playing chess ever again, lest his condition relapse. The term chess poisoning, applied to Dr. B's condition, evokes

both addiction and contamination, an intrusion of obsession into a space that once offered solace. In narratological terms, this marks another key stage in the metadiegetic narrative's progression, as the inner story Dr. B recounts begins to reveal its deeper symbolic function. Chess becomes not merely a game he mastered but the site where his psyche fractured. Through Genette's (1980, pp. 228-36) framework, we may understand this shift as the moment when the metadiegetic level asserts dominance over the extradiegetic frame, threatening to overwhelm it.

We have already described how the narrator set the scene of the world chess champion, Czentovic, travelling on the same ship as himself and Dr. B. Prior to his meeting Dr. B and hearing his inner narrative, however, the narrator tells of his excitement at Czentovic's presence, with the hope that he might be able to play a game with him (Zweig, 2017, pp. 16-7). What transpires instead is that the narrator meets an arrogant businessman named McConnor, a man confident in his chess skills, who demands to challenge Czentovic. Czentovic refuses to play for anything less than his exhibition fee of $250, though McConnor agrees, and the match is arranged for the next day (2017, pp. 19-20). The outer narrator, at the extradiegetic level, initially presents chess as a display of skill centred on Czentovic, whose mechanical brilliance seems to affirm the game's traditional symbolism. However, once Dr. B's metadiegetic confession enters the narrative, the meaning of chess shifts dramatically. The focalisation tightens, and through internal focalisation, the reader confronts the game not as intellectual sport but as an instrument of psychic torture and obsessive repetition.

Although McConnor is only a minor character in the narrative, his inclusion is also suggestive of Zweig's experimentation with psychological phenomena once again. This is tied up in the concept of the monomaniac. Monomania is an obsession or exaggerated enthusiasm for a single object or task, and it is an element often used in literature and performance to create tension or add depth to characters (Brittan, 2006; During, 1988; Zimmermann, 2009). As Daviau and Dunkle (1973, p. 372) have discussed, there are three types of monomaniacs presented in *Chess*. We have Czentovic, who was born with monomania, McConnor, who lacks intelligence and has an excessive ego, and Dr. B, who acquired monomania due to artificial deformation. It appears that Zweig was toying with the idea of Dr. B as a new breed of monomaniac in literature, with Czentovic serving as the archetypal savant, a sort of control study to compare him with. The game of chess itself was used as a prism through which to view the competitors' reactions. There were, of course, consequences for each participant. Czentovic, whose whole existence and identity are formed around his talent at chess, could not afford to lose, or else he risked returning to his insignificance as a social outcast. Dr. B, meanwhile, risked a mental relapse due to his supposed chess poisoning regardless of whether he won or lost; chess was not, however, so important to him that life would be altered by victory or defeat.

Since there were not enough chessboards for consecutive matches against all the challengers, it was suggested that Czentovic play against all of them at once over a single board. Czentovic beat the group in the twenty-fourth move and afterwards was dismissive and cold towards the challengers (Zweig, 2017, pp. 22-3). This is where a potential problem creeps into Zweig's study. If chess is supposed to be a pure and ideal discipline played between intellectuals, as the narrator has built it up to be, then the world chess champion, Czentovic, does not live up to this ideal due to his savant syndrome and his demand for a fee to

play (Oltermann, 2008, p. 173). McConnor, in a fit of rage at Czentovic's attitude and having lost, demanded a rematch. The rematch went much the same way as the first game before Dr. B intervened to suggest alternative moves, which allowed the group to draw. McConnor, desiring to see Czentovic beaten, demanded that Dr. B take on Czentovic; however, Dr. B refused and took his leave. This is the point at which the narrator, a fellow Austrian, was sent to try to convince Dr. B to play (Zweig, 2017, p. 32). The resulting inner narrative by Dr. B, which has been discussed at length above, was presented to demonstrate his fear of playing and to explain how he acquired his chess abilities.

Contained within Zweig's narrative of the clash between Czentovic and Dr. B is also a great deal of symbolism. We may see Czentovic representing brute force and Nazi authoritarianism, and Dr. B representing humanism and peace. The same may also be said of Zweig himself returning to Austria, compared with Dr. B returning to chess. Both would be disastrous, with Zweig liable to be tortured or killed, and Dr. B risking his sanity (1973, p. 376). This is also linked to what Turner (1981, pp. 125-6) has written about the parallels between chess imagery and military conflict. The sorrow of Austrian exiles such as Zweig is something that we can, as with the parallels outlined above, see littered throughout the text. It may also be said, however, that there is a definite attempt by the publisher of the edition under examination, Penguin, to tie the work to both the Austrian diaspora and German aggression through the choice of covert art. As shown in Figure 8 below, a 1930 poster for the Hamburg-Amerika Line has been selected. The four ocean liners clearly allude to both transatlantic travel and Zweig's exile to the Americas, while the colour palette is also instructive. The main colours used are black, white, and red, as seen in the flags of the North German Confederation, the German Empire, and Nazi Germany (largely supplanted by the Nazi Party flag after 1935). Indeed, the funnels on the liners even include the flag painted on them. This is capped off by the diagonal red and white stripes beneath the German vessels representing the Austrian flag.

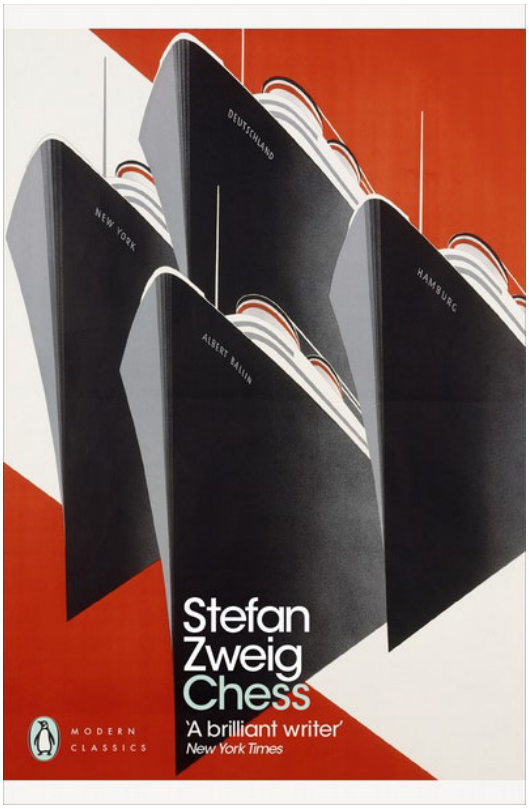

Figure 8 – *Cover, Stefan Zweig, Chess, Penguin (2017), Original Artwork: Hugo Koeke, 'Poster for the Hamburg Amerika Line (1930).*

The rematch between Dr. B and Czentovic is undoubtedly the climax of the novella and is the point to which Zweig subtly directs us as readers. Before the match even begins, we know it will ultimately lead to disaster for Dr. B. The rematch progresses well for Dr. B, and he is ultimately the winner; however, behavioural changes, or signifiers, are evident in both men during the game. Dr. B becomes excitable and paces up and down whilst Czentovic ponders his move; Czentovic, for his part, slows his process

down considerably as if trying to fan the flames of Dr. B's nervous excitement. Upon losing the game, Czentovic immediately offers a rematch, much to the narrator's dismay (2017, pp. 77-8). Despite these misgivings, Dr. B insists on playing. Throughout the rematch, Czentovic again delays his turns, intending to wind up his opponent. This tactic leads to Dr. B becoming increasingly unstable, with signifiers such as fidgeting, pacing, and an imagined thirst, things which also occurred in his void-like room previously. The breaking point comes when Dr. B, in a fit of delirium, claims a checkmate that does not exist, and it is apparent that he is playing another game in his head. The novella concludes with the narrator snapping Dr. B out of his delirious trance and Dr. B meekly apologising before leaving the room (2017, pp. 82-3).

Conclusion

Stefan Zweig's *Chess* occupies a distinctive position in twentieth-century literature, standing at the intersection of psychological experimentation, political commentary, and diasporic reflection. While the novella contains unmistakable markers of Zweig's Austrian exile and the cultural rupture of the interwar period, this study has not sought to psychoanalyse Zweig himself. Instead, it has focused on the conceptual experiment that *Chess* represents: an experiment in modelling anxiety, trauma, and obsession through both narrative content and narrative form. The inner narrative of Dr. B, shaped by imprisonment, sensory deprivation, and what Zweig terms "chess poisoning," provides an unusually concentrated case study in the representation of anxiety, one that draws on both Kierkegaard's dizziness paradigm and Lacan's structural anxiety.

However, the psychological force of the novella derives not only from the extremity of Dr. B's experience but from the structural design through which Zweig conveys it. Genette's narratological framework reveals that the novella's extradiegetic-heterodiegetic shipboard frame and its metadiegetic-homodiegetic confession do more than organise the plot; they mirror the fragmentation of Dr. B's psyche. The shift from zero focalisation in the outer narrative to internal focalisation in Dr. B's testimony draws the reader closer to his collapse, while temporal distortions such as fixation, repetition, and looping reflect trauma's disruption of lived time. Interpolated moments of hesitation and agitation puncture the flow of the confession, signalling cracks in Dr. B's composure and reasserting the tension between narrative layers. Through these techniques, the narrative itself becomes a vehicle of anxiety, structurally reproducing the void it attempts to describe.

The symbolism of chess reflects this dynamic of collapse. A game traditionally associated with rationality and order becomes, for Dr. B, first an antidote to the void and then a toxin. His self-division into competing White and Black personas marks the point at which the poison of chess transforms structure into chaos. Narratively, this corresponds to a destabilisation of the metadiegetic level, which expands and threatens to overwhelm the frame, an enactment of the very psychosis it describes. Zweig's psychological experimentation thus extends beyond theme into form. The fragmentation of narrative authority and rhythm mirrors the fragmentation of the self. Through this convergence of philosophical, psychological, and narratological perspectives, *Chess* emerges as a sophisticated meditation on the fragility of identity under conditions of coercion and exile. Zweig intertwines Kierkegaard's abyss, Lacan's intrusive object, and Genette's layered

diegesis into a coherent model in which anxiety is not merely depicted but embedded within the narrative's architecture. Dr. B's trajectory, from the void of isolation to the abyss of obsession, reveals how literary signifiers of emptiness, confinement, and doubling can be used to model extreme psychological states. At the same time, the novella's experimentation with narrative form lays the groundwork for further inquiries into the structural representation of trauma in literature.

Ultimately, *Chess* becomes far more than the story of a traumatised exile or a critique of European affairs: it is a demonstration of how narrative, memory, and identity fracture under pressure, and how literary form can be manipulated to make the reader inhabit that schism. In doing so, Zweig opens rich terrain for future work at the intersection of narratology and psychological literary studies.

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