

Virtual Vienna

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I AM IN VIENNA. Or, rather, I *should* be in Vienna. Put it this way, I would like to be in Vienna, right now, on the Austrian leg of a mini book tour - Salzburg, Vienna, Zurich, Munich - for the reissue in Germany of my novel *Die blaue Stunde* (*The Blue Afternoon*). But *force majeure* has interceded in the shape of Covid-19 and I can now only visit Vienna in my imagination, in my head. However, Vienna-in-the-head has its compensations.

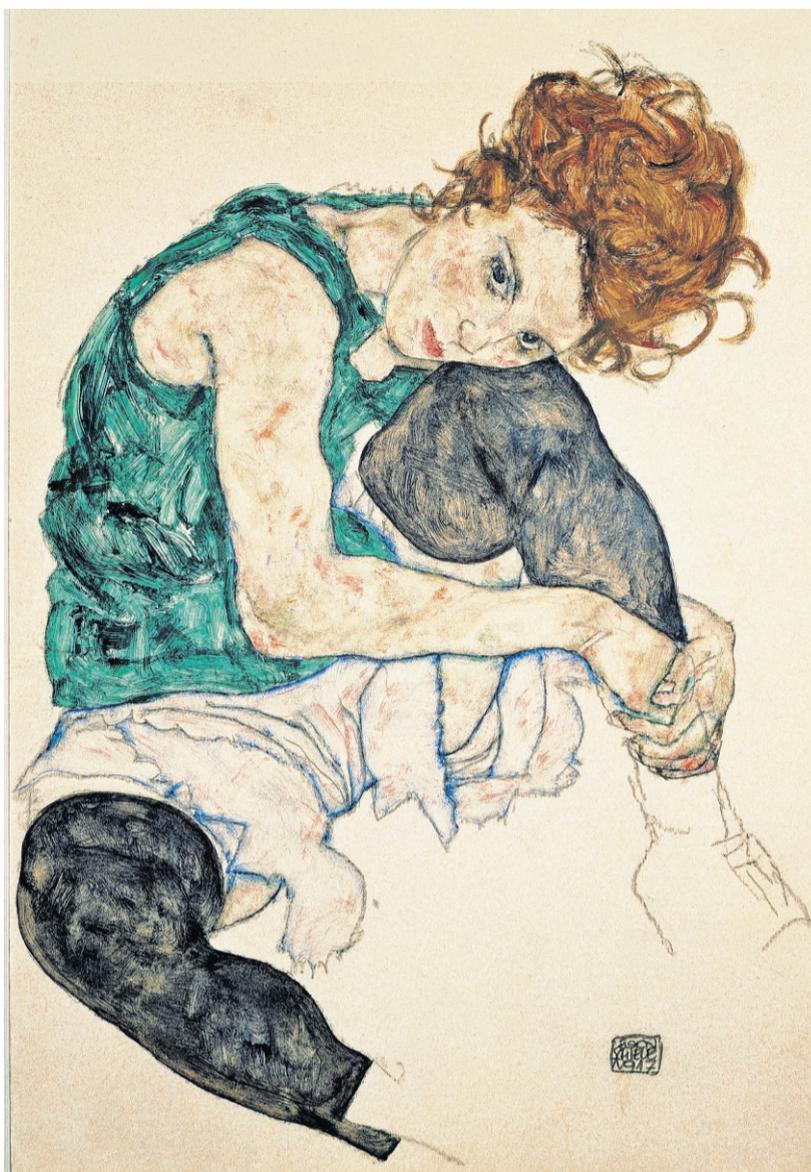
In fact, Vienna was one of four cities I wrote about in fiction long before I visited them. The other three were Berlin, Lisbon and Los Angeles. Why those four? It's curious how the appeal of certain cities haunts and stimulates your imagination prior to any direct acquaintance with the places themselves. And, furthermore, my interest in these cities was confined to very specific periods of their history. Vienna before the First World War, Los Angeles in the 1970s, Lisbon in the 1930s, and Berlin between the wars.

At the beginning of my writing career, I wrote a series of short stories set in a Los Angeles inspired by writers like Raymond Chandler, Christopher Isherwood and Gavin Lambert. Having never been there, I took pains to make it seem as if I were a *habitué*, someone who knew the place well. I pored over photographs, guidebooks and street maps to make sure the details I employed appeared absolutely authentic. Then I wrote a novel (*The New Confessions*) that had many chapters set in interwar Berlin. Lisbon cropped up in an alternative parallel-universe take on the life of Fernando Pessoa. And Vienna first surfaced in a short story I wrote about Ludwig Wittgenstein ("Transfigured Night") set just before and during the First World War. And I still hadn't set foot in any of the cities.

That particular moment in Vienna's history is a clue to my fascination, I believe. Because Vienna was the place to be in the first decade of the twentieth century - and the cynosure, it seemed, of every European artistic, social and intellectual movement - it is not difficult to understand its allure. In literature: Rilke, Roth, Musil, Zweig, Schnitzler. Music: Mahler, Schoenberg, Webern, Berg. Architecture: Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos. Painting: Klimt, Schiele and Kokoschka. Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the origins of the Vienna Circle school. Journalism: Karl Kraus. And so forth. The brew is almost too rich. Then throw in Hitler, Stalin, Trotsky and, of course, Sigmund Freud. One wonders why the intellectual and artistic candlepower of the city didn't set it ablaze.

Among these potent names, however, it was Egon Schiele who first drew my attention to Vienna. It's hard to imagine now, but even in the 1960s Schiele was effectively unknown. I have a compendious encyclopedia of modern art published in 1964 in which Schiele isn't mentioned, although Klimt and Kokoschka are. Then, in the early 1970s, Rudolf Leopold, the pre-eminent Schiele collector, published a book of the artist's work - with some 200 illustrations - and suddenly Schiele was everywhere. Schiele and Klimt, the poster boys for the Vienna Secession, on every bedsit wall, as well as bookmarks, coasters, scarves and greeting cards. Schiele's short, dramatic life, and his death at the age of twenty-eight in the flu pandemic of 1918 stimulated the same interest as his astonishing draughtsmanship and his angular near-pornographic nudes.

Leopold (1925-2010) was a Viennese ophthalmologist, not particularly wealthy but someone who had been quietly buying up Schiele's work for modest sums for years since the war. He ended up own-



"Seated woman with pulled-up knee" by Egon Schiele, 1917

ing more works by Schiele than anyone else. The Austrian state, in its wisdom, offered to buy Leopold's entire collection and build him his own museum to house it, an offer which Leopold accepted. The museum was duly built and can be visited today in Vienna's MuseumsQuartier. Strange destiny. When Klimt died from a stroke, in February 1918, Schiele was the obvious successor, the perfect artist to be crowned the new king of the Secession movement, but influenza claimed him just eight months later. In 2001, however, with the construction and opening of the Leopold Museum, Schiele finally achieved this extraordinary, posthumous apotheosis.

And so I eventually went to Vienna, thirty-odd years after I first became interested in the place. Why had I waited so long? What prevents you from visiting these cities - not so far away - that fascinate? The very fact you have already inhabited them vicariously through your writing may be one reason; added to which is the lurking fear of discovering, when confronted by the brute reality of the metropolis itself, that you got the city entirely wrong. Vienna-in-the-head was perfectly satisfying in its peculiar, virtual way. But then, out of the blue, I was asked by a magazine to contribute to a series called "My Favourite Museum". I spontaneously and disingenuously chose the Leopold Museum in Vienna - claiming to know it intimately - and was sent to the city to "reacquaint" myself with my favourite museum.

Once I arrived there, the Vienna drug bit me, and I've revisited many times since. Now I was able to do all the things I'd imagined doing and actually experience the *Gesamtkunstwerk* - the "total work of art" - that is Vienna. The wonderfully preserved central city, the Innere Stadt, the old town, is relatively small, easily traversed. I even walked around it one day, following the great boulevard of the Ringstrasse. I ate *Sachertorte* in the Hotel Sacher,

watched pastries being made in Demel, went to the opera, visited Schönbrunn and the Belvedere, drank Grüner Veltliner in the famous cafés - Sperl, Hawelka, Landtmann - and returned many times to the Leopold Museum to look at the Egon Schieles.

Parallel to this new physical acquaintance was a further Vienna reading blitz. I read Schnitzler, almost all of Joseph Roth, Gert Jonke, Thomas Bernhard - I even read Vienna's *Ulysses*, Robert Musil's 1,700-page, two-volume masterwork, *The Man Without Qualities*. As if a Vienna dam had broken, I was then commissioned to write a six-hour mini-series about Hitler's rise to power, 1913-33, the first hour of which dealt with Hitler's life as an embittered, paranoid vagrant in Vienna before the First World War began. Then my own Vienna novel swiftly followed, *Waiting for Sunrise*, about a young Englishman, also set in pre-First World War Vienna, undertaking the talking cure with a disciple of Freud. I felt I had the city pretty much covered now, what with my fiction, as a dedicated *flâneur* of its streets and with a burgeoning familiarity with its nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual and artistic life. And then, just a few weeks ago, during a random conversation about Vienna, I was asked if I had ever read Heimito von Doderer.

Who? The name meant absolutely nothing to me. Never heard of him, I confessed. How had I missed von Doderer? A little research quickly confirmed that, as a writer about Vienna, he was another Robert Musil. I was nonplussed by my ignorance. Had his novels been translated into English? Yes - but mainly in the 1950s and 60s and only in the United States. All were now decades out of print. I managed to track down an American edition of his masterwork *Die Dämonen* (*The Demons*), another two-volume Musilian monster, 1,300 pages long. The English translation was published in the US by Knopf and has one of the most bizarre book jackets I have ever seen, consisting entirely of a lengthy letter to future readers from the publisher, Alfred A. Knopf himself. It begins: "For as long as I can remember I have been a reader of the *Times Literary Supplement* of London. It is a curiously uneven publication but in almost every issue one finds something that is not only interesting, but that would be most unlikely to appear anywhere else".

Knopf goes on in this dust-jacket letter to cite a 1957 article in the *TLS* about "The Austrian Scene" in which von Doderer's *Die Dämonen* is described as "the book which seals his reputation as the most formidable German-speaking novelist now living". The *TLS* endorsement was all Knopf needed; he commissioned a translation immediately and it was published in 1961. And now, almost sixty years later, I had the two dusty volumes in my hands.

Heimito von Doderer (1896-1966) had something of a racketsy, controversial life. Like the Wittgensteins, the von Doderers were wealthy. When war broke out in 1914, von Doderer enlisted in the Imperial Dragoons and saw action on the Eastern Front before being captured by the Russians and becoming a prisoner of war. When the war ended, he began to write - poetry and a couple of novels were published with little success. He joined the Austrian section of the Nazi party in 1933 and, called up when the Second World War began, served with the Luftwaffe in Occupied France. Ill health saw him return to Vienna in 1943, where he resumed his writing career. His novel *Die Strudlhofstiege* (1951) marked the beginning of his sudden literary renown, a rapid ascent climaxing in 1956 with *Die Dämonen* - when he was picked out by the *TLS* and subsequently by Alfred A. Knopf. *The Demons* is a vast Dickensian panorama of Viennese life in the mid-1920s, in which all levels of Viennese society feature in a detailed human comedy, all narrated from a shrewder, more worldly perspective in the 1950s.

Frustrated by the virus in my attempt to visit Vienna, I've decided that reading *The Demons* will be my lockdown challenge. I'm 200 pages in, going well. Vienna-in-the-head is as beguiling as ever. Wish you were here. ■

William Boyd's new novel, *Trio*, will be published in October