The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-VIII, September 2026
Special Issue: World Literature
www.the-criterion.com

Reading in the Time of Ideology: Liberal Arts, Politics, and the Tragedy of "Buchmendel the Bibliophile"

Anand Nair
Assistant Professor and Visiting Faculty
University of Mumbai
nair.anand.19ba082@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n8.20

Abstract:

We seem convinced today about the indispensability of both politics and liberal arts when it comes to the formation of a meaningful society. What we are less sure about, however, is the nature of these domains and their relationship towards each other: does liberal arts come prior, or does politics? What is the nature of liberal arts – is it best understood and engaged in as an apolitical sphere, or is it merely an appendage of politics? Can there be a fruitful intersection of both, or does each corrupt the other? And most importantly, what is the liberal arts to do when politics comes knocking at the door?

These are the questions at the heart of Stefan Zweig's short story *Buchmendel the Bibliophile*. Published in 1929, Zweig tells here the tale of a man of the mind whose life was increasingly being thrown into turmoil as Europe marched and lived through World War I.

This paper hopes to analyse the nature of the titular character in the story. Did Zweig conjure Buchmendel as a cautionary tale, of how dangerous it is when the cultured remain uninterested in politics, only to soon find the entrails of ideology closing in on them? Is it hence a critique of ivory tower intellectualism oblivious of the political sphere, thus exhibiting a snobbery based on an ignorance of the ontology and telos of politics?

Or is Buchmendel a tragic tale, of politics turning into ideology precisely because its practitioners have forgotten its limits, and are propped up by intellectuals equally ignorant? Is Buchmendel the figure of the ideal intellectual, who, due to his awareness of the exaggerated importance of politics, becomes an indictment to the rest of the world which has changed around him? These are the questions this paper seeks to answer and reconcile.

Keywords: Ideology, politics, intellectual, liberal arts, nationalism.

Article History: Submitted-29/04/2026, Revised-30/06/2026, Accepted-20/07/2026, Published-30/09/2026.
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I. Introduction:

If there is a quote which aptly sums up the emotional attitude of all those engaged in political activism today, it comes from Reverend Charles F. Aked: 'For evil men to accomplish their purpose it is only necessary that good men should do nothing.'[i] Each political faction is at loggerheads continuously with the other, as the political sphere is understood to be a space where apathy, or even a slight slacking off, will result in the opposing faction opening up the door to let in evil forces to pull off their mischief. In such a climate, to be 'apolitical' is to be indifferent to the sufferings of others, a mere posture which ends up meaning signing up to preserve and perpetuate the power of the status quo; as Howard Zinn reminds us, 'you cannot be neutral on a moving train'[ii].

Read with this background, Stefan Zweig's *Buchmendel the Bibliophile* is a story of political apathy leading to its natural consequences. Buchmendel, the book peddler, is completely unconcerned with the political climate changing around him as the world gears towards the Great War. He is so self-absorbed as not to even notice that among the waiters who had served him so graciously, one of them, named Franz, had gone missing (being killed in action at Gorlice) and that the café owner Herr Standhartner's son had been taken prisoner at Przemysl. And when he is apprehended by the police, he is so doltish that he admits to not having taken up an Austrian citizenship, and hence remained technically a Russian national. When, at the end, Buchmendel meets his sorry death with pneumonia, having been thrown out of the café as a regular by the new owner, Florian Gurtner, the natural reaction seems to be to feel that he got what was coming to him.

This would be a straightforward way to proceed, except that Stefan Zweig has positioned two voices within this narrative who act as a collective opposition towards such a reading of this story. These two voices are those of the narrator and of Frau Sporschil, the toilet

lady. Let us start with the former's perspective, which is also an implicit defence of the figure of Buchmendel.

II. The Narrator's Defence:

What is it that the narrator admires about Buchmendel? Let us hear straight from the horse's mouth, and take the passages from the story in which this admiration is expressed:

'As a young man, I had seen the great mystery of total concentration for the first time in this little Galician book dealer, Jakob Mendel, a kind of concentration in which the artist resembles the scholar, the truly wise resembles the totally deranged'[iii].

'This small, squat Galician Jew, entirely enveloped in his own beard and hunchbacked into the bargain, was a Titan of memory'[iv].

'He knew every plant, every microorganism, every star in the eternally oscillating, constantly changing cosmos of the universe of books'[v].

'It was clear that his memory could have been trained and formed to show such demonic infallibility only by the eternal mystery of all perfection: by concentration. This remarkable man knew nothing about the world outside books, for to his mind all the phenomena of existence began to seem truly real to him only when they were cast as letters and assembled as a print in a book, a process that, so to speak, had sterilized them'[vi].

We now have enough of a representative pool of passages. What is admired is quite simple – the powers of concentration that Mendel possessed, his memory, which seemed to know no bounds, his total knowledge about the world of books, etc. All of these are unremarkable observations. But what must really take our interest here is the fourth observation that has been made, which is the narrator pontificating on the conditions necessary for this Titan of memory and knowledge and concentration to be formed, which is his cultivated and

complete lack of interest in the world outside books. The narrator significantly points out to us that without this indifference towards the outside world, Mendel would not be Mendel.

This is the apt place for our inquiry to begin. Can Buchmendel's apathy towards the political sphere not be a vice, as it comes off in a preliminary reading, but rather be a virtue? To evaluate this, we first of all need an idea of politics and its limits. For this, we must turn towards the progenitors of politics in Western discourse; we must put on Grecian eyes.

When Plato pontificated on the nature of politics, he reached what may be alternately called an elitist conception of it, or, following Sir Karl Popper, an authoritarian conception of it. Plato wanted the polis to be ruled by wise men, men who had escaped the cave of the shadows of transient things and had reached the permanent world of Forms. This excluded the majority of the population from the discussions of politics, and rightly so, for they were a mass who knew not what they do, and hence could not be entrusted with the responsibility of running a state. Plato's ideal ruler was the Philosopher-King, a man who could wield power responsibly over people because he had seen through the natures of both power and people.

As always, Aristotle came as a necessary realist corrective towards the idealism of his teacher. First of all, Aristotle pointed out that his master was correct in saying that a Philosopher-King would be the best system of governance available to mankind, except for the slight problem of where this man is to be found. Aristotle, who was modestly aware that he was the wisest among men, said that even he did not meet the criteria to serve as this Philosopher-King, so how could any other? So instead of spending time on such exciting fancies, one must return to the boring business of everyday governance.

First questions first. When does a polis cease to be a polis? Aristotle answers, 'There is a point at which a polis, by advancing in unity, will cease to be a polis; there is another point short of that, at which it may still remain a polis, but will nonetheless come near to losing its essence,

and thus will be a worse polis. It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that the polis is an aggregate of many members.'[vii] The insight here is that for politics to exist within a polis, there necessarily needs to be a diverse group of interests which need to be continually negotiated between the proponents of each group. The moment an overwhelming consensus is imposed on the business of running a state, when the diverse group of interests are denied in order to pursue only a monolithic ideal or interest, politics as an activity and polis as an institution cease to exist. The conclusion merits repetition: politics and polis are only features of society where different interest groups exist and agree to mediate their interests peacefully between each other; everywhere else, there is neither polis, and by implication, no politics.

This original sense of politics is hence a far cry from the way the word is employed today. Today we often speak about the politics of Stalin, of Pol Pot, of Mao being tyrannous, and yet we are engaging in a category error when we do so. Because the defining marks of these tyrants were the suppression of any interests other than those which they decreed for the state, and a centrally imposed uniformity on all facets of life. In such conditions, a polis (which is better understood as a civil society rather than a state) ceases to exist. Fascism, totalitarianism, authoritarianism – the point which unites all these systems of tyranny is that their institution effectively means the cessation of the activity we call politics; these are places without a politics and polis, as these terms are classically defined. You get a sense of this classical understanding by looking at this exchange in the play *Antigone* by Sophocles:

> Creon: Am I to rule this land by other judgment than mine own?
>
> Haemon: That is no polis which belongs to one man.[viii]

So, the query naturally arises – if these regimes are not political regimes, what are they? And what they are is ideological regimes. Now ideology shares its ranks among those dozens of

words of which Raymond Williams ruefully said that they are impossible to define. But efforts must nevertheless be made. A working definition can come from the description of Marxism as an ideology from one of the seminal theorists of ideology studies, Kenneth Minogue. Writes Minogue: 'Marxism is not a political doctrine, though if its claim were accepted, it would be something very much more significant. Political doctrines give reasons; they talk to each other. Marxism could only declare the truth. For Marx, politics is merely the froth cast up by deeper processes.'[ix] The essential feature of ideology can thus be said to be a totalistic claim on truth, with the concomitant claim that all other narratives are not only just false, but also an illusion conjured up to hide from the oppressed the raw workings of power. Thus, the tendency to term ideology as a theory or discourse aimed not at knowledge but at power, following Hannah Arendt's work, is misguided, for the ideologists concern themselves only with power because of their faith that they have already solved the question of truth and hence need not concern themselves more with deliberations over it. Thus, Minogue talks about ideology as 'the belief that everything that happens is explicable in terms of the relevant structure'[x]. The theory that the ideologists profess to be true explains the entire system of human relations, power, and politics, and nothing exists outside this explanation.

Nothing exists outside this explanation – that is where this line of thought meets Buchmendel. A pathway into understanding the ideological mindset is provided by Minogue when he describes the theoretical constitution of an ideological theory, and it deserves to be quoted at length here: 'Ideology is commonly signalled by the presence of a tripartite structure of theory. The first stage reveals to us that the past is the history of the oppression of some abstract class of person. It is concerned with workers as a class, not (as a politician might be) with workers at a particular time and place; or with women in general, or with this or that race. Specific discontents are all swept up into the symptomatology of the structurally determined oppression. The duty of the present is thus to mobilize the oppressed class in the struggle

against the oppressive system. This struggle is not confined to the conventional areas of politics. It flares up everywhere, even in the remoter recesses of the mind. And the aim of this struggle is to attain a fully just society, a process generally called as liberation. Ideology is thus a variation played on the triple theme of oppression, struggle, and liberation'[xi].

What is the major ideological current that turns the chains of motions within the story of Buchmendel? It was the ideology of nationalism. One must here turn one's attention towards the withering critique of this ideology and its proponents advanced by Julien Benda in his *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (1927). The 'treason' Benda speaks of in the title is what he calls the preponderance of political passions among the intellectuals above all other passions, a marked change to particularity from the universal aspirations of intellectual thought. He calls this process the 'divinization of political passions'[xii], i.e. making political passions, especially of the nationalistic nature, the arbiter of all other spheres of knowledge, a position which was previously reserved for God and his truths. Hence, we find Maurice Barras saying, 'To be moral is not to wish to be free from one's race'[xiii], and Charles Maurras saying, 'Good or bad, our tastes are ours and it is always permissible to take ourselves as the sole judges and models of our lives'[xiv], and Ludwig Giesebrecht saying, 'Science must not soar behind the frontiers, but be national, be German'[xv]. The inflammation of national passions to this degree was a novel development for the age, quite probably a first in human history, and its consequences are now clear to us with the death toll of 75 million people, which both the World Wars laid at our doors. And hence, when we consider the wise Buchmendel's position of apathy towards the outside world, one must remember that it is not to politics, but largely to ideology that such an unbothered attitude was aimed at.

Let us trace our steps back here, and consider an important aspect of ideology that Minogue had highlighted: 'This struggle is not confined to the conventional areas of politics. It flares up everywhere, even in the remoter recesses of the mind'[xvi]. Ideological thinking

considers the present political order a sham, a window dressing of fairness over the brute, unequal workings of power. Hence, although seizing political power is a major priority of the ideologists, equally important (if not more important) is to adopt a critical posture, deconstruct, and dispose of the social relations and philosophical ideas which are deemed to be acting towards the reification of the present unjust system. Although done under the veneer of objectivity and fair enquiry, this interrogation is anything but this, for the social relations and philosophical ideas in question are held suspect from the moment go. If the truth of nationalism as the paramount narrative of human meaning is accepted as axiomatic, how could a universalising force like religion be studied neutrally under these terms? All that remains for the ideologist is to show how well the oppression has been hidden in each case.

It is under these terms of nationalism as a totalistic force vying for intellectual and political domination that the description of Buchmendel as given by the narrator's friend is shown to be of importance: 'The ablest man in Vienna, an original into the bargain, a bibliophilic dinosaur, the last survivor of a dying race from the prehistoric world'[xvii]. Mendel does not belong to the current world of political passions, predating it by his universalising concerns in life, which accord no place to nationalism. Hence, his apparent 'stupidity' in confessing openly to the police that his nationality is technically still Russian, for Mendel never gives it an epistemic authority in his mind that the nationalistic forces have forced the rest of the world to assent to. Maybe invoking more ire from his interrogators is the context of the arrest and his admission – Mendel has been brought in for writing letters complaining that he has not received his monthly copies of the *Bulletin Bibliographique de la France* that he has subscribed to. The situation is of a deep irony – a Russian living in Vienna is ordering a French publication in the midst of a World War, which is waged on the belief that such national identities may find no point of common intersection and must be forever closed off to each other, removing all traces of cosmopolitan past.

Moreover, this ‘illegal citizen’ is answering the positions of authority with apparent irritation at being detained and questioned. Rousseau once said that ‘the strongest is never strong enough to be always master, unless he transforms strength into right and obedience into duty’[xviii], and it is precisely this duty of being scared or awed by authority that Buchmendel is not performing, hence laying bare the fickleness of an authority position which, in the terms of nationalism, is assumed to be impregnable. As such, the wise Mendel, by no rational deliberation but by merely being himself, is a relic from the past of cosmopolitanism who acts as a foil to the holistic claims made by nationalism on its behalf.

Another part of Minogue’s idea is important – ideology permits itself no boundaries. Since there is no facet of human life untouched by power (the fact that this is of a trivial degree in most facets being ignored conveniently), ideology admits no restrictions to its reach. Every part of human life needs to be reformed; the struggle is ‘even in the remoter recesses of the mind’, as encapsulated today in claims of ‘false consciousness’ and internalised & invisible forms of oppression claimed by ideologies ranging from Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and whatnot. The reach demanded is that which Othello demands of Iago, ‘Show me thy thought’[xix]. And how the ideologist judges this thought will be in the manner of Iago, ‘nothing, if not critical’[xx]. We will all be found wanting, to be reformed only by the indoctrination of theory by our intellectual betters, who, by default, are also morally superior to us.

This is what Buchmendel resists, his resistance tragic because he is never cognizant of when he became a rebel and everyone else the persecutors. Mendel’s mind will not submit to the claims of ideology because nature and time have shaped him so. He belongs to an older world: a world of politics. The world of politics, as contrasted to the world of ideology, says Minogue, ‘assumes that any state will contain many ways of life, and that a responsible political order must make it possible for its subjects to follow their own bent. One implication of this practice is that most of life will not be about politics, any more than most of football consists of

arguing with the referee. The doctrine that everything is political is an infallible sign of the ideological project of replacing the rule of law by the management of people.'[xxi] Mendel refuses to be managed, staking out a claim by his way of life that the business of politics has no place intruding on his door. Such a refusal of admission is not acceptable to ideology, for as we have seen, it is not a theory that purports to explain politics but rather claims it can explain the whole of human existence, and to be shut out of a domain of human existence is to challenge the claims ideology makes for itself. Hence the nostalgia of the narrator for the figure of Buchmendel: the oblivious rebel, who stood athwart the advance of ideology, and said stop, when no one else could muster the courage.

III. Frau Sporschil's Defence:

'It was a shame, a real shame, the way they let him die'[xxii]. Frau is here not only referring to the immediate death of Buchmendel, but the long, drawn-out process of it, which started from the moment of his interrogation. As she points out, as Buchmendel returned from the concentration camp, 'he was never the same again. He was no longer that *miraculum mundi*, a magical catalogue of all the books in the world. Something in his otherwise still eyes, eyes that read only as if in his sleep, seemed to be destroyed beyond redemption.'[xxiii] That great machinery of memory and concentration had been broached upon, 'in the fantastic and elaborate structure of his memory, some prop must have given way, bringing the rest of it down in confusion'[xxiv]. The clue to why the prop gave way is found in the earlier description of Mendel by the narrator – the great chain of his memory worked only because it could exclude everything else in reality except books. When politics forced itself upon this mind, his concentration was lost forever, never again to be retrieved.

This is Zweig's clearest indictment of the world of ideology. By forcing a mind as unique as Mendel's to conform to the uniform authority of nationalism and to conceive of oneself only in its terms, it killed the uniqueness that had existed prior. And this is not just the

tale of Mendel, for ideology from all stripes of left and right aim to do this and this alone, to iron out the unique individuality unreachable to the claims of ideology by coercion, and it makes it stoop to the authority of the ideology's practitioners. And contrary to the idea that such an imposition will be resisted by the intellectual class, Julien Benda explicated what Zweig had also realized, that is in fact the intellectual class itself that will bring about such imposition since the rational reordering of society is always desirable to intellectuals on the faith that it will be reordered so as to place intellectuals at the echelons of power. is the thought of the useful, beauty and nobility being for it only reifications of oppression.

The resistance to this change will be in two ways – by dissident men of the mind like Buchmendel who will refuse to submit, and by the poor and simple ways of people like Frau Sporschil, who even in her elementary faith is able to explicate what those who read tomes could not: 'Driving away a man who sat here day after day for over 30 years – a shame, it really was, and I wouldn't like to have to answer to the Lord God for it, not me'[xxv].

Frau respects Mendel not because she has rationally deliberated on his importance as the narrator has. In fact, the learned narrator is the first to admit that Buchmendel had not crossed his mind for all these years. It is in the mind of Frau that Mendel survived; for this modest mind, which had never read a book, recognised a universalism reflected in Mendel's mind that her own faith had taught her in a different way. It is hence that the narrator finds it appropriate to tell Frau that she was the ideal person to hold onto Mendel's last book, even though she herself would never read it. For it is in such minds, unblemished from the ideological revolution, who realise instinctively that 'the personal cannot thrive, cannot be its beautiful self, if it is forced into the levers and pulleys of the political game'[xxvi], that the world and truth find its hope.

IV. Conclusion:

The story of Buchmendel by Stefan Zweig posits a true understanding of the political and the polis, which also means the understanding of the limits of both. Ideological thoughts, which brook no such distinctions, are held as the enemy of the political sphere and the intellectual sphere, and Buchmendel is inadvertently a relic from the past who provides resistance against the encroachment of ideology on the polis and the mind. This reading of the story is evident to be the accurate one, rather than the reading of Mendel's fate being an appropriate one accorded to his apolitical nature, if one forms a composite picture of Mendel from the narratives provided by the characters of the narrator and Frau Sporschil, who hail from different social-economic-political-gender backgrounds, thus providing a holistic picture.

It was said by Kenneth Minogue of ideology that it was 'like sand at a picnic, it gets into everything'[xxvii]. The price may have been hefty, but Buchmendel could always say with honour that till his life's end, he always managed to keep his clothes clean from this sand.

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