

The following text is excerpted from **CRITICS & MY TALKING DOG: Selected Stories, Essays, Lectures & a Play** by Stefan Themerson, edited by Paul Rosheim (Black Scat Books: 2019)

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LINES & WORDS & THE THEMERSONS

by Nick Wadley

The remarkable range of work produced by the Themersons spanned sixty years. The earliest surviving experimental photograph by Stefan is dated 1928: the earliest surviving drawing and painting by Franciszka are each dated 1929. Their earliest collaboration was probably *Apteka* (1930), the first of five films they made together in Warsaw. The last works they made together were some sheets from the score of his opera *St Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio*, reworked for presentation to a friend in 1986. Both were working until within weeks of their deaths in 1988 – days in Stefan's case. His autobiographical fragments and his extraordinary last novel, *Hobson's Island*, were all published posthumously.

These bare facts say a great deal about the Themersons. Their work was a way of living. They spent periods that were of formative significance to both of them working in intimate collaboration, at first on their films of 1930-1945, and their books for children from the same period, and afterwards on their Gaberbocchus Press, 1948-1979. At the same time – literally at the same time, each had a rich, independent creative career. Her studio in their flat in Maida Vale, and his study along the passage, were sovereign worlds. Visits to one after the other could involve experiences that were in stark contrast.

Despite this, and despite the unusual variety of media and genres in which each worked, the most memorable characteristic that survives them lies in the degree to which they were driven by the

same lasting values. As well as his novels, Stefan wrote essays on philosophy, aesthetics, semantics; canonical studies on Adler, Schwitters and Apollinaire; poems, a play and an opera. As well as making her paintings and drawings, Franciszka was an acclaimed illustrator and designer for the theatre, and her originality as a graphic designer has still to be acknowledged. Whatever they were making, and however various their artefacts may have appeared on the surface, they entertain and seduce us with comparable formal paradoxes in order to confront us, again and again, with the ambiguous crystal of the human condition.

It is not always easy to separate their respective contributions to works which they made together. Stefan told me that he couldn't do so himself in respect to their films, and it's sometimes the same with their books. In their hand-printed edition of *Aesop* (1949), credited solely to Franciszka, the hallmark of Stefan is also pervasive. The reverse is true of Stefan's canonical *Kurt Schwitters in England*. Many of Stefan's writings were illuminated by Franciszka's drawings, inseparably so. On occasion his poems were initiated by her images; on others they acted as the catalyst for her images. In the case of their *Semantic Divertissements* (1962), Stefan's hilarious text of c. 1946 was written as a commentary to a 1945 series of Franciszka's drawings, which were also to be seminal to his satirical opera, *St Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio* (1972). Their common attitude towards forms is to be found in the sort of attention they both paid to the inherent properties of whichever medium they were using.

Stefan lamented the commercial development of the camera inasmuch as it distanced the photographer from significant experience of the camera's processes. Automation and conditions that are preset by the manufacturer took the photographer's finger

away from the camera's pulse. In a similar way, he said that the first talkies had put at risk the integrity of film, inasmuch as the medium was dragged towards emulation of theatre. He singled out Vigo's *L'Atalante* as embodying a complete, unadulterated sense of the medium, and as a lasting model for the future. Both he and Franciszka were urgently concerned with the film, art and writing of the next generation.

Franciszka used a prodigal range of materials for drawing: pencils, chalks, crayons, inks and paints. The apparently effortless fluency of her execution speaks of her intimate ease with each medium. She coaxed from each what was in its character to do most eloquently. A change of medium involved whole change, sometimes in a single drawing. In her *Calligrammes* of 1960-61, the drawings comprise paint that is poured, dripped, run or scraped across the paper: extravagantly gestural, and yet with incidents of great refinement. Her *Traces of Living*, a long series of drawings between 1960 and 1967, involved a different sort of improvisation, in that the linear perambulations across each sheet become conspiracies. From each perambulation of her apparently guileless pen-drawn line emerge eyes, faces, hands, silhouettes, whose clear if ambiguous identities manage not to compromise the integrity of the line. Working in paint on canvas was effectively another form of drawing for her. She celebrated the sensuality of the medium – much of the paint is larded on with a palette knife – but the images are usually formed from incised lines and edges. Her colour was rubbed or stained onto the paint surface rather than being part of it.

Franciszka's intimate identification with her line may well be likened to Stefan's feeling for the word: for its proper meaning, its music, its typographic disposition. His shrewd insights into the work

of Schwitters and Apollinaire are revealing manifestations. His invention of semantic poetry, while explaining as the stripping of a poem to expose the reality behind it, in practice became the platform for a good deal of extravagant and often very funny improvisation. This duality is visible throughout his poems, essays and novels. He loved the exactness and clarity of the English language, as well as its more elusive and oblique properties. He also savoured the musical structures of language, repetition and alliteration, in prose as much as in poems.

It isn't particularly rewarding to discuss for very long the forms of the Themersons' work without the content for which they were a vehicle. Anyone who has read the least thing about the Gaberbocchus Press is likely to have come across Stefan's declared ambition for it: to produce not best sellers, but 'best lookers'. They published 57 titles between 1948 and 1979, and their books are indeed original and seductive in their design. What begs for attention is how different they look, one from another. The germ of each book was formed and nurtured by the nature of its content, the variety of typography, illustrations, format and paper from one book to another is formidable. Close analysis reveals very quickly how much the form was determined by the subject. When economy demanded a more modest format in the later years of the Press, they evolved a cool house style which did not impose itself on the content. As well as affording an outlet for their own work, the founding intention of the Press was to make available unpublished work by continental writers, and new works by younger English writers. They published first English translations of Jarry, Queneau, Pol-Dives, Grabbe, Stern; the work of Schwitters, Apollinaire, Jankel Adler, Raoul Hausmann, Henri Chopin; as well as Bertrand Russell, Stevie Smith, C.H. Sisson, Oswald Blakeston, Kenneth Tynan, and others.

They emerged from a Polish avant-garde which had reconciled in its embrace Constructivist and Dadaist tendencies. Their own work contained extremes both of outraged protest and pure abstraction. Compared to the 1943-44 film *Calling Mr Smith*, their next and last film *The Eye and the Ear* (1945) might seem a purely aesthetic affair, as might the more abstract of Franciszka's drawings. But this very range of their activities – their refusal to accept conventional categories; their constant breaking of boundaries, mixing of media – constitutes a unified statement about individual liberties, about the freedom to walk backwards. In this sense their lives' work may be seen to hold homogeneous moral and political values. Their targets embraced the mindless institutions of the modern world: clichés of thought, behavior and social structure. These were scrutinised and debunked in the clear light of common sense and individual human identity. When asked once what were the strengths and weaknesses of Gaberbocchus Press, Stefan gave the same answer for both: 'refusal to conform'.

He would not have appreciated being called a moralist, but the ultimate implication of their works is never far from the concepts of good and evil. A recurrent theme of Stefan's writing was that we are born with inbred, biological instincts that enable us to behave with decency towards each other. We only lose these values, he says, because we become successively conditioned by faiths, beliefs and causes – whether religious, nationalistic, political or technological. Around the tyrants and fanatics of Franciszka's drawings revolves a world of little men who conform mindlessly to the current faith. It is no coincidence that she responded with such brilliant graphic imagination (and through five successive versions for page or stage, 1951-1970) to the grotesque and timeless fable of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*; nor that both of them identified so readily with the

anarchic emancipation of nonsense of their friend Kurt Schwitters. The Themersons lie in direct succession to that modern tradition. They sang the same music of hilarity and the ridiculous, with lyrics that range from savagery to velvet satire. Their entire oeuvres, independent and collaborative, treat matters of gravity with a seductive levity.

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