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1. Self-portrait from Franciszka Themerson's *Unposted Letters*, 1941.
2. Franciszka and Stefan Themerson through the decades. Photographs courtesy of the Themerson Archive, London.

# AN EXTRAORDINARY VENTURE

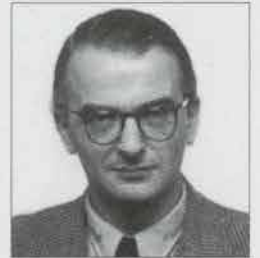
By Jan Kubasiewicz



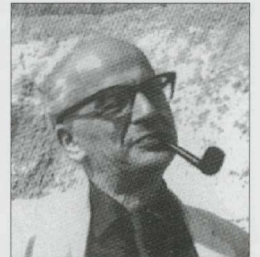
*The Gaborbocchus Press, founded by the legendary Stefan and Franciszka Themerson, transformed book design by fusing opposing traditions of 20th-century art.*



1940s



1950s



1960s

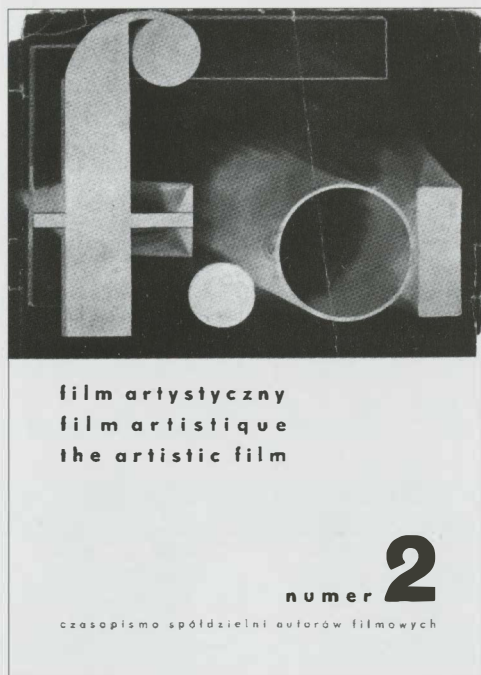


1980s

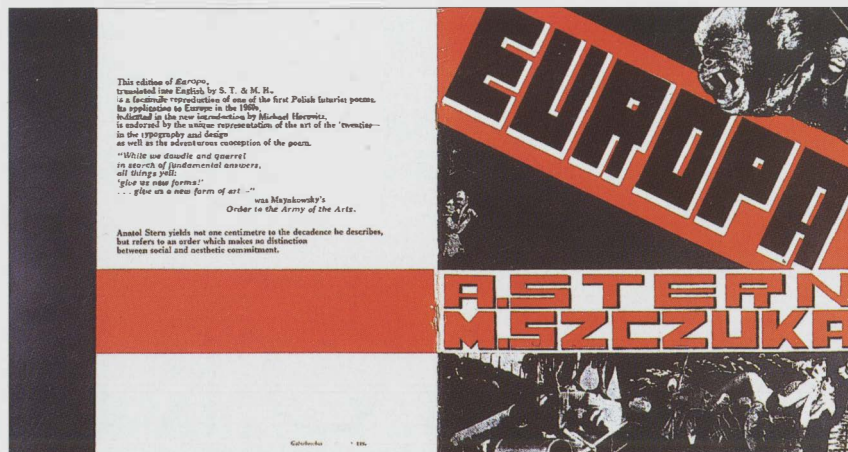
The Gaborbocchus Press, though it is little remembered today even in bookish circles, was an extraordinary publishing venture. Founded in 1948 in London by Stefan and Franciszka Themerson, it produced during the next 31 years over 60 titles, including the first English editions of Alfred Jarry, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Heinrich Heine, the literary endeavors of Kurt Schwitters, and works by such British luminaries as Bertrand Russell and Stevie Smith, as well as the Themersons' own highly original essays, novels, and stories. Gaborbocchus publications explored overlapping boundaries in science and art, poetry and politics, literature and ethics. And even (or perhaps particularly) when technological means were limited, they presented unique and often unpredictable design solutions in which image and typography—all the ingredients of a page—seemed inseparable. Stefan's favorite form of philosophical essay was the classical dialogue combined with drawings by Franciszka that not only illustrated the content but sometimes became the content illustrated by the text. Indeed, before launching the press, the Themersons must have asked themselves the question Lewis Carroll's Alice once posed,

"What is the use of a book. . .without pictures or conversations?"

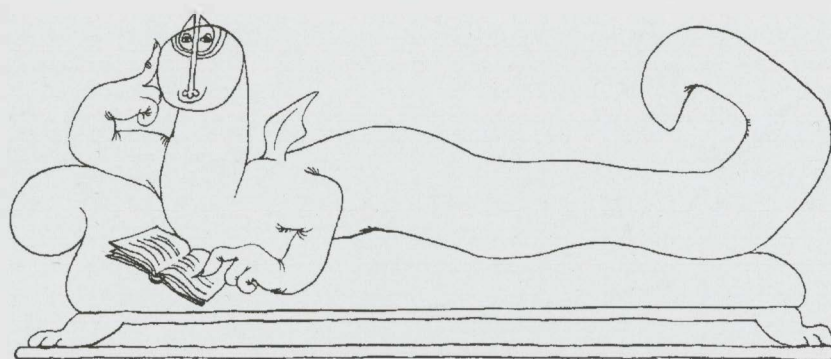
Carroll's influence appears to have been substantive: The name Gaborbocchus is the Latin equivalent of Jabberwocky—the title of a ballad from *Through the Looking Glass* about a dragon called a Jabberwocky, and the logo designed by Franciszka (Fig. 6) represents a reclining dragon reading a book intensely. The Themersons, however, left no notes as to the significance of the name. Perhaps it referred to the suggestive parody and symbolic paradoxes of *Alice in Wonderland*. Or it might have referred to Carroll's amusing portmanteau words, word games, and puzzles. Perhaps the name also has something to do with the serious mathematical treatises, such as *Symbolic Logic* or *An Elementary Treatise on Determinants*, that Carroll wrote under his real name, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. He was not only an author but also a mathematician and photographer whose interests in exploring the inverted logic of language and imagination seem similar to the fundamental questions that Stefan Themerson explored as a writer and philosopher, and at the beginning of his career, as an avant-garde filmmaker and photographer.



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Though running the press was one of the most significant projects the Themersons undertook during a lifelong collaboration, it was by no means their only cooperative venture. In fact, their relationship began long before the press was founded and always functioned as a true partnership—a respectful dialogue between two artists and two individuals.

Stefan was born in Plock, Poland, in 1910. The son of a physician, he was sent to Warsaw as an adolescent to study physics and architecture. Franciszka, born in Warsaw in 1907, was the daughter of Jacob Weinles, a renowned academic painter of large-scale scenes of Jewish life. In a 1957 lecture, she recalled growing up in “a house full of pictures, paints, and brushes, where drawing and painting seemed as natural a function of life as eating and sleeping.” She entered the Academy of Art in Warsaw at 17, and graduated seven years later with the first prize in painting. That same year, 1931, she married Stefan, whom she had met in the late '20s, beginning a creative partnership that was to last for six decades.

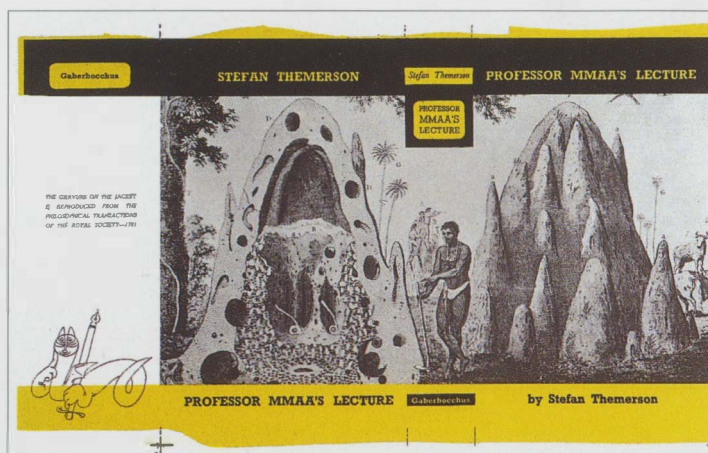
The Themersons' earliest and most widely known collaborative effort was their seven experimental films, the first five of which were produced in Poland between 1930 and 1937. The remaining two were made in England during World War II. For several years, Stefan had been interested in collage, photomontage, and photograms. In his essay *Outsiders of the Avant-garde*, Janusz Zagrodzki, an art historian who rediscovered the Themersons' avant-garde films in Poland in the early '70s, noted that as a high school student in 1927, Stefan had “produced a booklet which consisted of a few dozen 6cm-by-

9cm photograms, a series of still frames put together, in which, when the pages were turned quickly, the circle and a matchbox seemed to move.” Undoubtedly, the flip-book format was his first experiment in representing actual movement, and later, it inspired the couple to put photograms in motion in their film *Pharmacy*, a combination of media that resulted in a new and powerful tool of expression—an “abstract” movie.

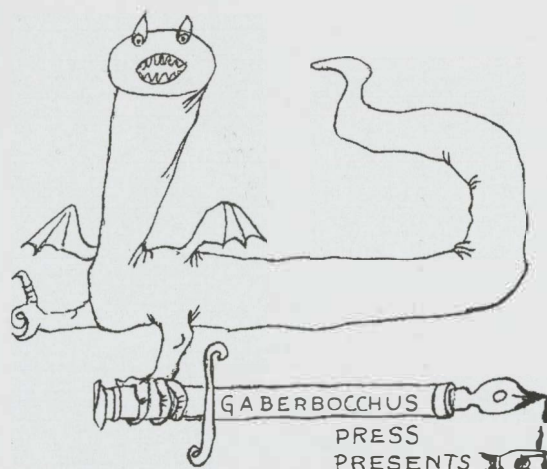
The Themersons continued to explore their interest in combining diverse graphic media by incorporating in their films many elements of publication design, such as a book and typography in the form of individual characters, an inscription, even a whole page. Their fascination with asymmetrical typography was inspired by Polish avant-garde artists, particularly the Constructivist Mieczysław Szczuka, who designed the typographical layouts and collages for Anatol Stern's poem *Europa* published in 1929. The powerful visual arrangement of this book was a direct inspiration for the Themersons' film *Europa* (and many years later, for the Gaberbocchus Press' facsimile edition of the original book) (Fig. 4). The use of bookish motifs was particularly effective in their later films, when not only pure expression but the communication of ideas was an issue.

In the mid-1930s, the Themersons established the Cooperative of Film Authors, an organization of avant-garde filmmakers. Stefan served as publisher and editor of the group's periodical f.a. (Fig. 3), subtitled “film artystyczny, film artistique, the artistic film.” Franciszka was art director. To develop a layout in keeping with the character of a review that included articles by such modern movement





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luminaries as László Moholy-Nagy, Franciszka followed the rules set forth in Jan Tschichold's *Die Neue Typografie*. The cover design was based on the juxtaposition of hand-drawn images of the geometric letterforms *f* and *a* against a tighter structure of sans-serif lower-case typography and well-balanced white space. Inside pages clearly followed a grid structure, which was designed to organize photographs and type in an integrated and readable manner. *f.a.* remained the most formally designed of all the Themersons' publications. The books they produced later at the Gaberbocchus Press displayed more spontaneous approaches to publication design.

Between 1930 and 1937, with Stefan as writer and Franciszka as illustrator, the Themersons collaborated on several books of stories and poems for children for a number of Warsaw publishing houses. Altogether, Stefan wrote more than a dozen children's books (some of which cannot be found, and some of which have been reprinted to serve new generations) and became quite famous in Warsaw's literary community; yet he never considered himself a children's book author. Franciszka, who illustrated many other books besides Stefan's, also gained a reputation as a children's book illustrator.

In 1937, the Themersons made a decision to leave Poland for Paris, where they hoped to live and work among an international community of artists. But the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 shattered their plans. Their personal and professional partnership, which had seemed indivisible, was to be severed for two years. Franciszka escaped to London, while Stefan, as a volunteer in the Polish army in France, left Paris with his regiment for

3. Cover of *f.a.*, periodical of the Cooperative of Film Authors, Warsaw, 1937. Stefan Themerson was publisher and editor of this publication, and Franciszka Themerson was its art director.

4. Back and front covers of 1962 facsimile edition of Anatol Stern's *Europa*, one of the first Polish Futurist poems, written in 1925 and published originally in 1929. Translated from the Polish by Stefan Themerson and Michael Horovitz, it features a preface by Oswald Blakeston, illustrations and layout by Mieczysław Szczuka, and stills from the Themersons' film *Europa*.

5. Back and front covers of Stefan Themerson's *Professor Mmaa's Lecture*, a novel about termites, combining science fiction, fable, and satire. The preface is by Bertrand Russell and illustrations are by Franciszka Themerson. Written in 1942 in France and sent page by page in letters from Lisbon to London, it was published in 1953.

6, 7. Variations on the Gaberbocchus Press logo by Franciszka Themerson.

the unoccupied zone in the south after France fell to the Germans in June 1940. When his regiment was dispersed, it took him two years to get to London via Toulouse, Marseilles, Spain, and Portugal.

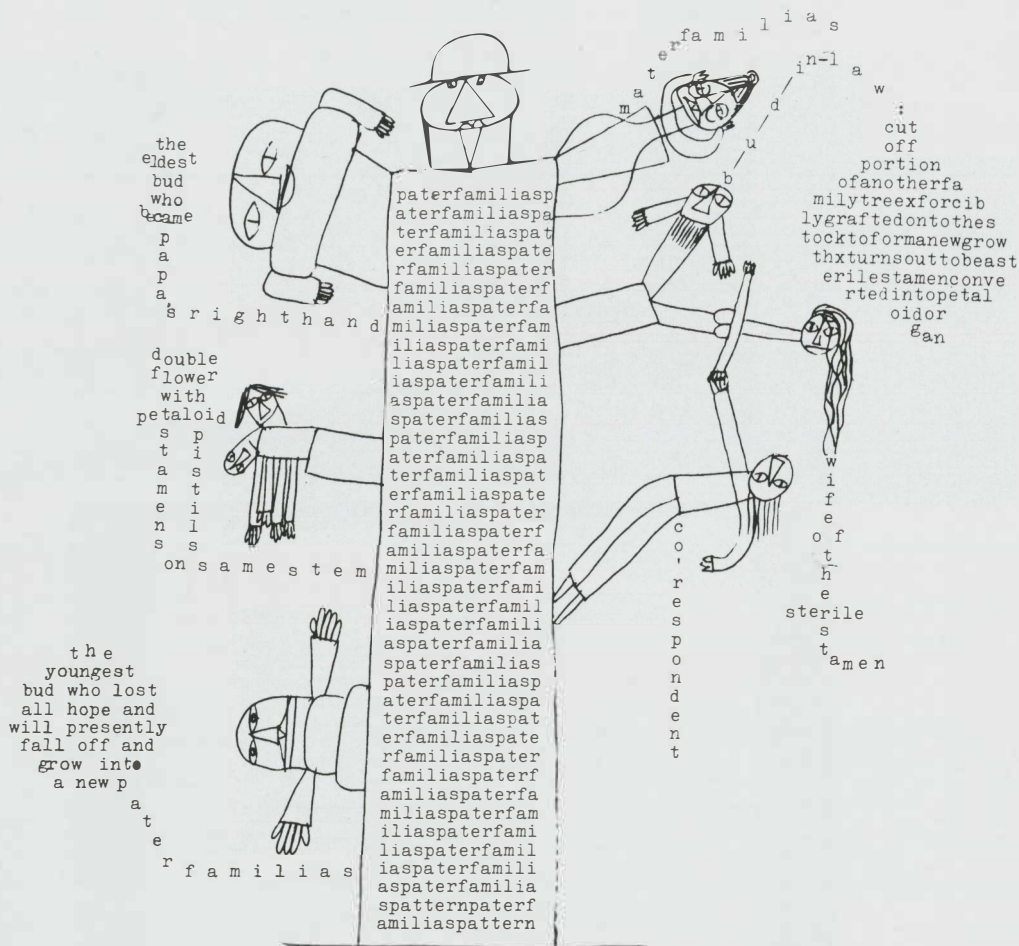
Even during this troubled period, their creative activities continued. Franciszka made a series of expressionist drawings filled with autobiographical symbolism and allegory, which she called *Unposted Letters*. Stefan began the original Polish version of his masterpiece *Professor Mmaa's Lecture* (Fig. 5), and also wrote lyrical poems in French, his first work in a language other than Polish.

Reunited in 1942, while London was a war zone and almost the entire continent was under German occupation, the Themersons worked for the Polish government-in-exile: Franciszka, for the cartographic unit, and Stefan, for the film unit of the Polish Ministry of Information and Documentation, which sponsored their last two films. One of them, *Calling Mr. Smith*, was a protest against the destruction of Polish culture by the Nazis. Visually powerful and explicitly antiwar, it was refused public release by Britain's government censors.

Both during and after the war, Stefan contributed to *Nowa Polska*, a Polish literary periodical published in London. He also began writing in English. Franciszka started to paint again, and re-established her reputation as an illustrator. According to an article in *Graphis* in 1947, she had produced 12 children's books published in Poland, two books for Flammarion in Paris, illustrations (her first in England) for *The Lion Who Ate Tomatoes* (Sylvan Press, London, 1945) and projects for Harrap publishers. It was on this experience

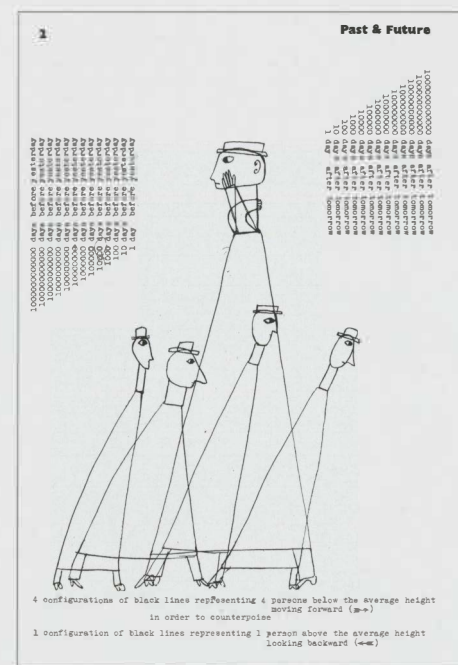






Thomson 1946

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that she would base the house style of the Gaberbocchus publications.

The Themersons founded Gaberbocchus Press in 1948, and worked as closely together on the books as they had on their films, through all the stages of design and production. Franciszka was art director for nearly all the Gaberbocchus publications. The earliest books were printed at their home on Randolph Avenue in the Maida Vale district of London, where they had moved in 1944. After two new editors—Barbara Wright and Gwen Barnard—joined the staff, they moved to new and permanent quarters on Formosa Street.

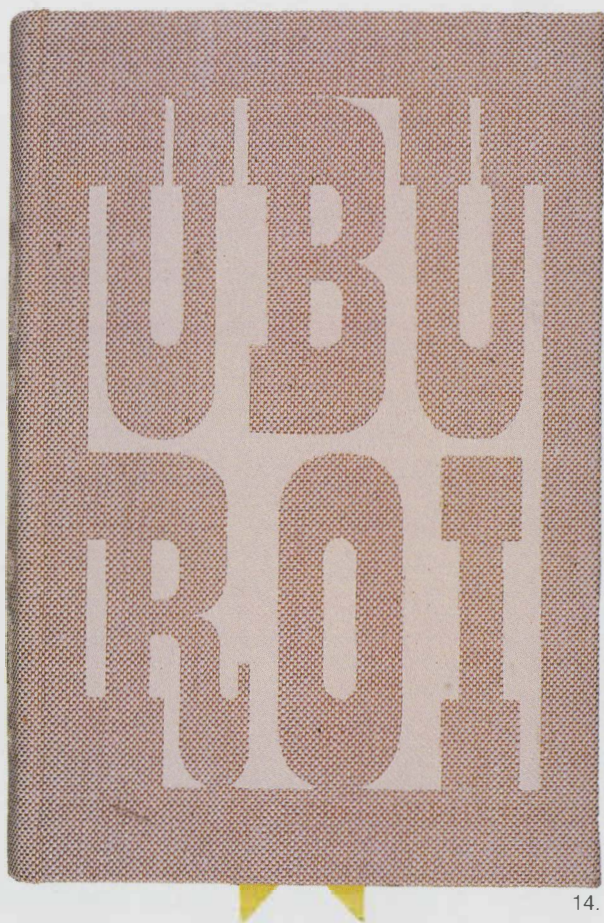
From 1957 to 1959, the basement of the Gaberbocchus office was turned into the Gaberbocchus Common Room, a kind of club for people who were interested in art and science. There were regular gatherings for lectures, discussions, film showings, plays, poetry readings, and music recitals. As Nicholas Wadley recalled in a piece on Stefan that appeared in *Comparative Criticism* 12 (Cambridge University Press, 1990), "For two years . . . the Common Room was a vital, informal weekly forum with a membership of more than a hundred. The members were addressed by writers, painters, poets, actors, scientists, musicians, filmmakers, philosophers. There were talks on physics, metaphysics, and pataphysics; readings of Jarry, Shakespeare, Beckett, Strindberg, Queneau, and Schwitters; performances of modern music and scientific film. Among other contributors: Sean Connery and Bernard Bresslaw read O'Neill; Dudley Moore accompanied Michael Horovitz's poetry reading; Konni Zilli-

acus spoke on the immorality of nuclear weapons. The project was only reluctantly abandoned because it consumed too much working time."

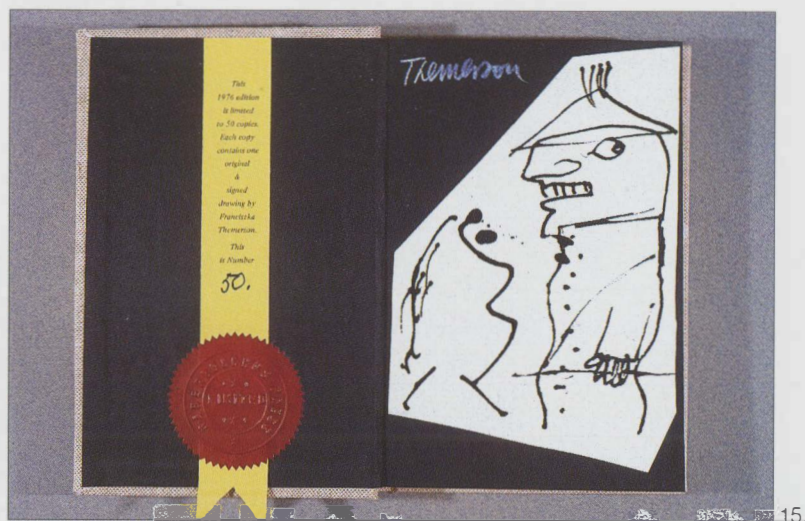
Though the Common Room didn't come into being until the press had been operating for almost 10 years and then lasted only a short time, its eclectic list of participants, programs, and topics reveals the dazzling scope of the publishers and the interdisciplinary outlook on which their projects had been based from the beginning. By searching philosophies of neighboring disciplines for common denominators, the idea was to dissolve, or at least blur, those boundaries that the Themersons found obsolete. Contradicting comfortable clichés (including logic!), and defying categories and classifications became conspicuous characteristics of their publishing venture. Asked what was the press' main strength and what was its main weakness, Stefan gave the same answer to each question: "refusal to conform."

Though Gaberbocchus books displayed an innovative and imaginative integration of typography and image (Stefan called them "best-lookers" as opposed to best-sellers), their nonconformist visual vocabulary had developed within the context of certain trends in European graphic design: the visually dynamic and functional typography promulgated by El Lissitzky and Jan Tschichold, and the "form follows function" dictum first formulated by Louis Sullivan in 1918 and a fundamental concept of Modernism, but which, in the

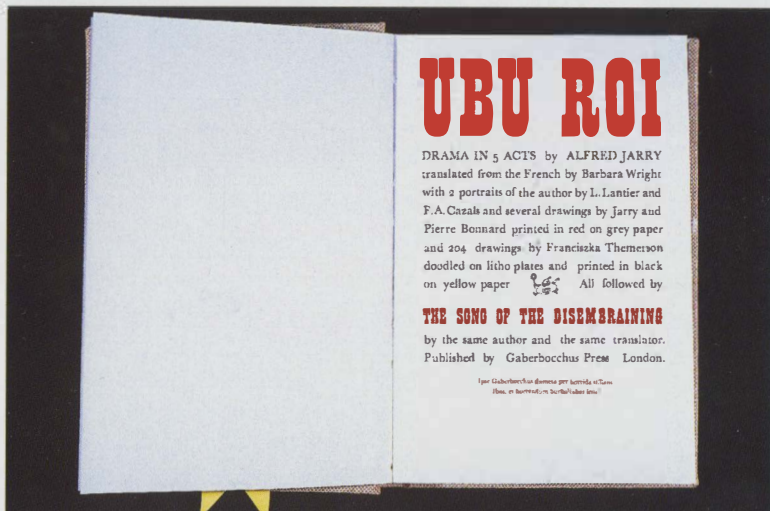




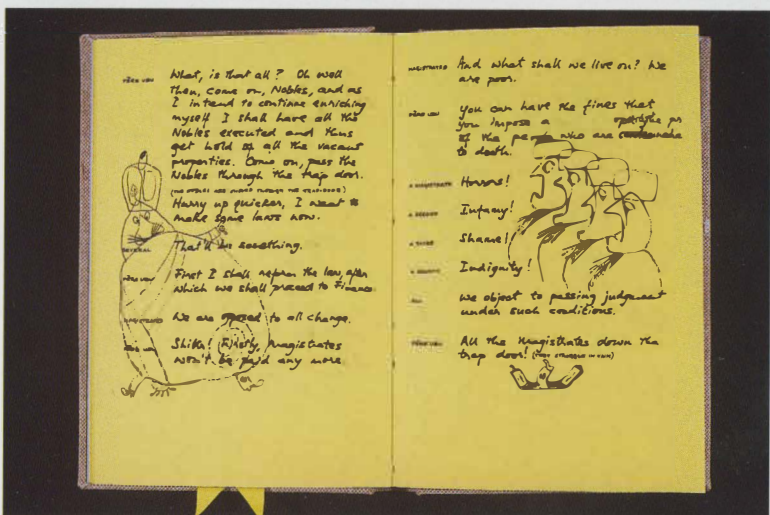
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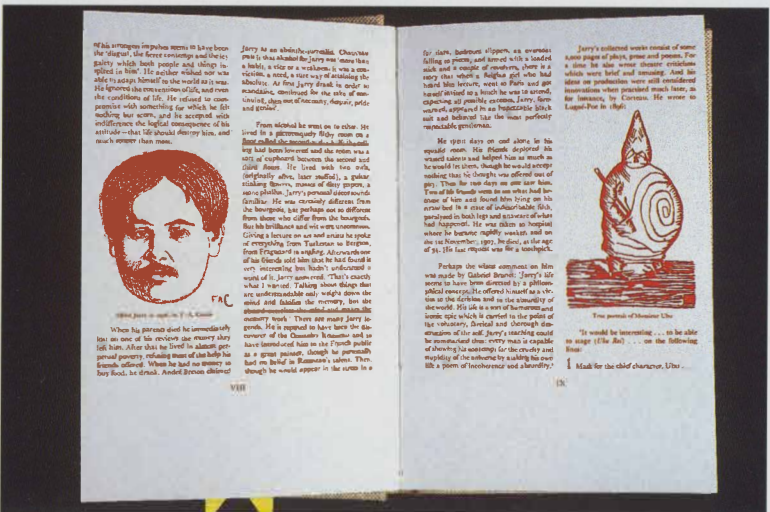
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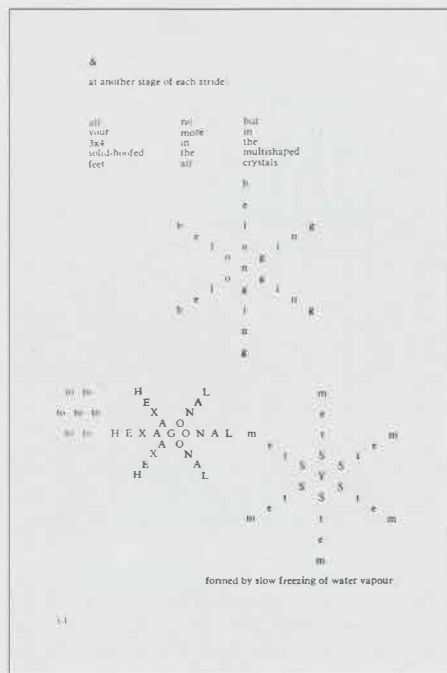


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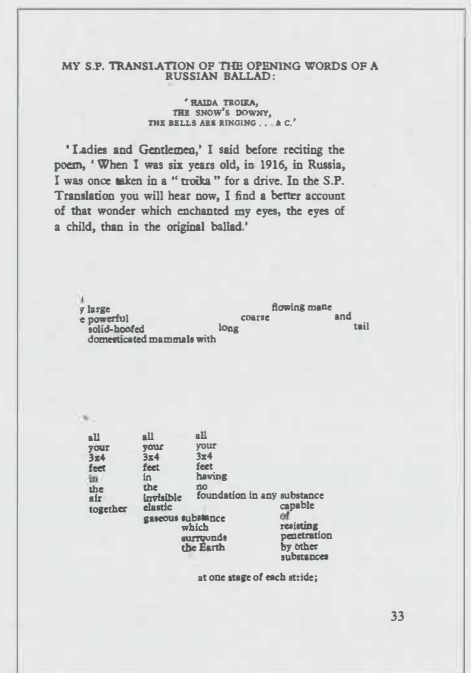
14-18. Cover, endpaper, and spreads from the first English translation—by Barbara Wright—of Alfred Jarry's drama *Ubu Roi*. Written by the translator directly onto litho plates, the text is illustrated with 204 drawings by Jarry and Pierre Bonnard printed in black on yellow paper, portraits of the author by L. Lantier and F.A. Cazals, and several drawings by Jarry and Pierre Bonnard printed in red on glossy white paper. This limited edition of 50 published in 1976 includes an original drawing signed by Franciszka and collaged onto the endpaper.

19, 20. Pages from the second edition (1965) of *Bayamus and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry*, a semantic novel by Stefan Themerson originally published in 1949 by Editions Poetry London.





19.



20.

hands of the Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists, seemed to contradict functionalism.

Gaberbocchus books drew on both these traditions. The element of visual rhetoric borrowed from the Surrealists—the unexpected effect of odd juxtapositions of image and typography—became one of their most distinctive features. At the same time, they might have taken their typographical clarity from the designers of the “new typography,” or from their British counterparts Eric Gill and Stanley Morison, or from Tschichold himself, who was working in England at the time on a commission to redesign the Penguin books. Clear typographical structure, including functional elements such as subtitles and notes in margins that helped a reader navigate a text and understand its content, combined with Franciszka’s uniquely gestural drawings, resulted in the Gaberbocchus publications’ remarkable visual fingerprint.

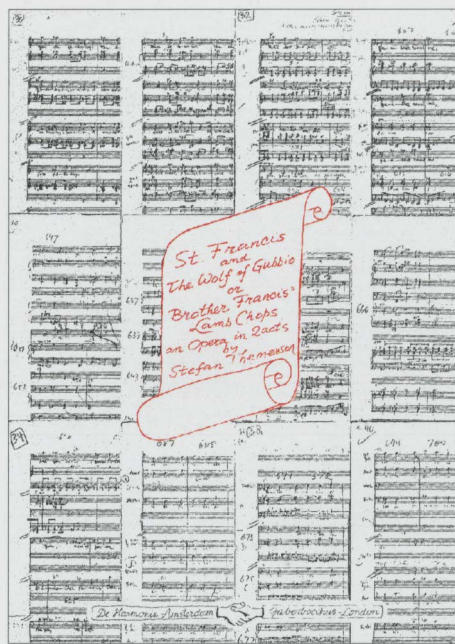
In their macroscale—the level on which a book is perceived as an object with a coherent physical character—Gaberbocchus books are friendly and inviting. They are distinctly normal in size and thickness. The large ones cannot compete with the arrogance of coffee-table books; the small ones seem modest and unpretentious. Regardless of their proportions, number of pages, or type of binding, they attract attention. Publications such as Stefan’s *Jankel Adler or an Artist Seen from One and Many Possible Angles* and *Aesop: the eagle & the fox, the fox & the eagle* (Fig. 11) were limited editions designed as objects to be touched as well as looked at. Hand-printed on heavy, handmade, textured stock, they joined tactile qualities with the rhythm of old-style typography and line drawings printed in sepia. The book-as-object approach and the focus on materials culminated in Stefan’s *Kurt Schwitters in England: 1940-1948*. Assembled from many varieties of colored paper, the whole book was treated as an object/collage.

In their microscale—the level on which a reader perceives a page

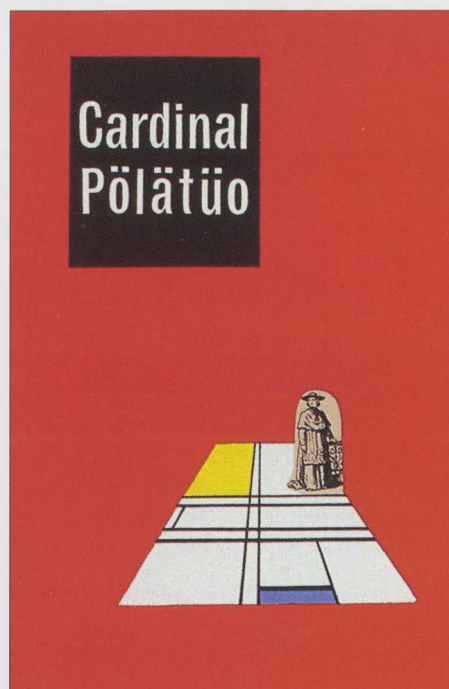
or spread as a unit of rhythm in the space/time continuum of the book—Gaberbocchus editions explored all kinds of layouts and combinations of illustration and typography. Bertrand Russell’s *The Good Citizen’s Alphabet* (New Edition, 1970), for example, separated text from art with large areas of white space forcing the reader to interpret the illustrations and text separately. Rather than illustrating Russell’s words, Franciszka’s drawings create subtle, meaningful contexts (Figs. 8, 9). The resulting sophisticated, humorous visual/verbal connections, however, require time—the time created by the white space of the page; closer integration would have destroyed that interpretive process. *Semantic Divertissements*, on the other hand, exhibits the eloquent integration of image and text (Figs. 12, 13). After Franciszka’s drawings were completed, Stefan typed his verbal interpretations—descriptions that are reminiscent of dull, sterile dictionary definitions. The Themersons’ combined efforts present powerful repetitions demonstrating that art and language do not necessarily describe each other.

Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, undoubtedly the most acclaimed book of the Gaberbocchus Press, also demonstrates Franciszka’s extraordinary sensitivity to achieving a proper balance between content and form (Figs. 14-18). She asked Barbara Wright, who had translated the play, to write the whole text directly onto printing plates, on which Franciszka then added her own layer of drawings. The combination of handwriting and spontaneous line art resulted in gestural forms that seem free from the customary compositional rules and structure of book design, and communicate in an expressive and memorable way the nature of the grotesque and monstrous anarchist Ubu. While the capricious and volatile content of *Ubu Roi* gave birth to an extremely subjective and unpredictable form, this was not the only use of handwriting at Gaberbocchus, where it was not such an uncommon solution as it would have been in ordinary publishing houses. In addition to a serviceable collection of typefaces in

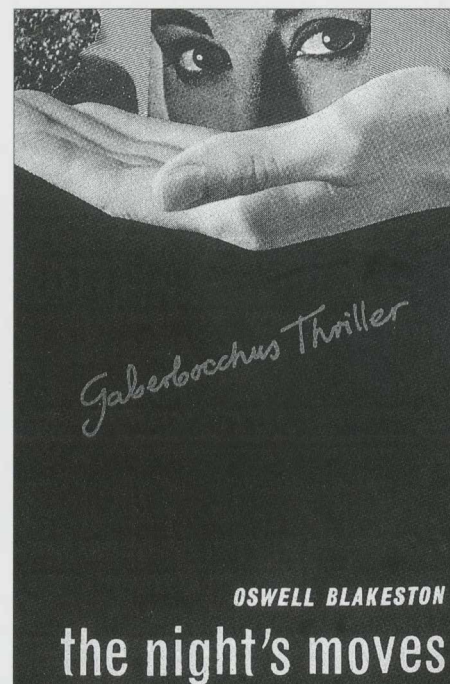




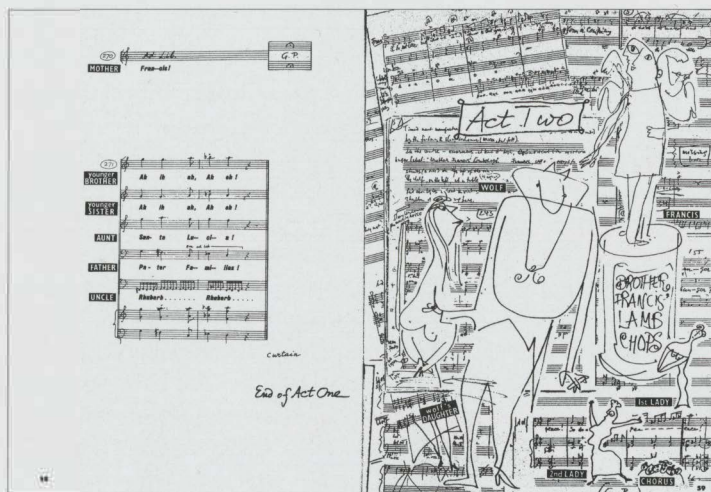
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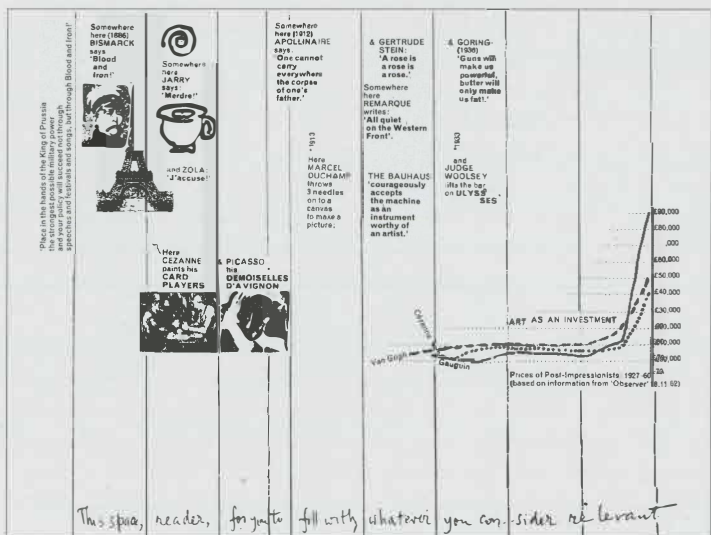
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25.



26.

Now, before I go any further, I wish to tell you two little stories, which I dedicate to Raul Hausmann's 'Three Little Dogs' \*

I call the first story:  
"Three Little Dogs on a Time-chart".

The three little dogs are: an ennobled dog,  
a howling dog,  
a dead dog - and they are underdogs,  
issues of 'Vision in Motion'.

and the second:  
"Three Little Dogs on a Time-chart".

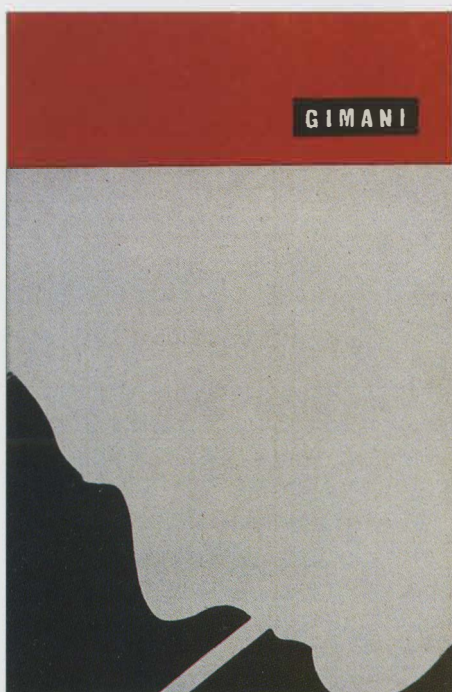
The three little dogs are: a path merchant's dachshund,  
a wandering dachshund,  
a capitalist dachshund.

1850	1870	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960
<p><b>THREE LITTLE DOGS ON A TIME-CHART</b></p>								
<p><b>An Ennobled Dog</b></p> <p>Somewhere upon the earth, a few inches to the left from this line, there are noble words and plebeian words. 'Le Chien' is a plebeian word there. Molière is not afraid of using it: 'Qui veut nager son chien l'accuse de la rage', he says in 'Les Femmes Savantes'. But when Racine wants to use the word 'Le Chien', he has to add 'une épithète noble' to it to let it pass in a Verso. And I cannot decide: is Molière hip, &amp; Racine square, or is it the other way round?</p>			<p><b>A Howling Dog</b></p> <p>Somewhere there behind this line ***</p> <p>K.S. shows the audience a poem, containing only one letter 'W' on a sheet of paper. He starts to 'recite', slowly raising his voice. His consonant changes from a whisper to a howling sound until he ends with the shockingly loud bark of a dog. 'This was his answer (writes Maholy Nagy) not only to the social situation but also to degrading 'cherry-mouthed' 'raven-haired' 'babbling-brook' poetry.'</p>			<p><b>A Dead Dog</b></p> <p>And somewhere there, i.e. on 5 Oct. 1923, D. H. Lawrence writes from Navajo, Sonora, as follows: 'In the middle of the little covered market at Alamos, between the meat and the vegetables, a dead dog lay stretched as if asleep. The meat vendor said to the vegetable man: "You'd better throw it out." The veg.-man looked at the dead dog and saw no reason for throwing it out. So no doubt it still lies there.'</p>		

\* see Kurt Schwitters & Raul Hausmann: 'PIN'  
"quotation from Maholy Nagy is from his 'Vision in Motion'.  
"quotation from D. H. Lawrence is from his 'Selected Letters'.

27.



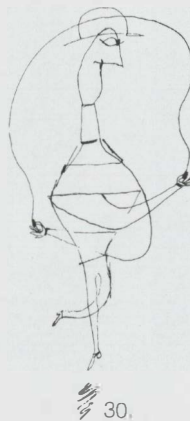


28.



29.

- 21, 24, 25. Cover and spreads from *St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis' Lamb Chops*, an opera in two acts with text and music written and composed by Stefan Themerson between 1954 and 1960 and drawings by Franciszka Themerson, 1976.
22. Cover of *Cardinal Pôlatùo*, a novel by Stefan Themerson, 1961.
23. Cover of *The Night's Moves* by Oswell Blakeston, 1961.
- 26, 27. Pages from Stefan Themerson's *Kurt Schwitters on a Time-chart*, a publication that can be seen to anticipate interactive electronic media; Typographica 16, Herbert Spencer, editor, London, 1967.
28. Cover of *Gimani* by Edmund Héafod, a prose journal with a preface by Osias Bain, the writer behind the pseudonymous author, 1961.
29. Cover of *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau, 1958.
30. Illustration from *The Way It Walks*, a book of cartoons by Franciszka Themerson, 1954.



30.

varying sizes and styles, the Themersons explored calligraphy, handwriting, and typewriter type in a continuation of their search for personal qualities in the spirit of Dada. They drew their own display fonts and initials—designs that rival those of Emigre.

With *Bayamus* (1949), his first published novel, Stefan introduced the concepts of semantic poetry and typographical topography or Internal Vertical Justification, an attempt to make type arrangement more diagrammatic—more planar than linear—and therefore more comprehensible. In *A well justified postscript . . . Typographical Topography* (Penrose Annual, London, 1975), Stefan explains the concept:

*Twenty years ago, I met a man who . . . wanted me to translate some poems not from one tongue into another, but from a language composed of words so poetic that they had lost all their impact, into something that would give them a new meaning and flavor. I decided to do it by replacing some of the key words of those poems by their definitions. For instance: instead of the word "war," I put: "The open conflict between nations, or active international hostility carried on by force of arms." Instead of the word "snow," I wrote: "multishaped crystals, belonging to hexagonal system, formed by slow freezing of water-vapor." This, of course, created a typographical problem. How to print five, ten, fifteen words in place of one, and so they would hold together as one entity. Well, I said to myself, you may read a musical score HORIZONTALLY, following the melodic line, and you may read it VERTICALLY, following the structure and arrangement. Why shouldn't it be the same with poetry? Typographical topography of a printed page is two-dimensional, is it not? If I have a number of words that form one entity, why shouldn't I write them as I would write the notes of a chord: ONE UNDER ANOTHER INSTEAD OF ONE AFTER ANOTHER? Internal vertical justification [I.V.J.] is the answer to my problem.*

To further elucidate this concept, in the same book, Stefan applied this treatment—text broken into customized units (based on sentence structure) that could be spaced horizontally or vertically—to "Printers and Designers," a paper by the influential English graphic designer Herbert Spencer. He used it also in *Semantic Divertissements* and *St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio*, an opera published, with visually innovative musical notation, in 1972 (Figs. 21, 24, 25).

One of Stefan's most creative experiments, *Kurt Schwitters on a Time-chart*, carried the concept of two-dimensional diagrammatic notation of words and images even further (Figs. 26, 27). It was not an essay, or a collage, or a diagram, but it included all of the above. The design allowed the reader to select the sequence, order, and direction of what he or she would like to explore and read. One could enter the diagram at a certain point to follow chronological order, or to investigate all topics limited to one particular selected time-frame—for instance, 1920. The chart included definitions for such words as collage, quotations from Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*, miniature stories such as *Three Little Dogs on a Time-chart*, and separate diagrams for such categories as *Art as Investment*. This remarkable work can be seen in retrospect to anticipate the contemporary concept of electronic books and interactive media.

Unfortunately, the intellectually ambitious and formally experimental character of Gaberbocchus publications translated into limited commercial success. This was the price of the "refusal to conform" that Stefan Themerson cited as the press' main characteristic, both strength and weakness. Gaberbocchus Press supported the The-

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## An Extraordinary Venture

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mersons financially, but (especially in the later years) not particularly well. The press' "marketing" was practically nonexistent, although printed ephemera—book announcements, order forms, promotional cards and brochures—were often as unconventional and creative as the books they described. Consequently, the books' distribution was limited to a group of loyal friends and Gaberbocchus enthusiasts—such as the owner of the Turret Bookshop in London, where even today one can buy original Gaberbocchus editions. In 1979, Gaberbocchus Press, then in relatively poor financial condition, was taken over by a Dutch publisher, Jaco Groot, who runs Uitgeverij De Harmonie in Amsterdam.

The legacy of the press is not limited to the books' esthetic character. What survives besides is not only the Themersons' instinct for selecting landmark authors, but also Stefan's own writing. Semantic poetry—the attempt to reach for meaning in language beyond the façade of daily usage, stereotypes, figures of speech, and clichés—was his major conceptual invention; but his literary oeuvre examines with deep feeling and a somewhat utopian point of view broad moral principles and decent human values. "Contrary to what clergymen and policemen believe," he said in a lecture in Holland in 1981, "gentleness is biological and aggression is cultural. . ."

It was the common critical approach of the Themersons (who died in 1988 within two months of each other)—their creative urge to question and re-examine existing visual and philosophical vocabularies—that enabled them to develop the unique visual ambiance of the Gaberbocchus Press. Because they were never fully accepted by the British literary and artistic establishments, they initiated a cultural ferment of their own, cherishing their artistic freedom and diligently guarding their independence from established channels. This autonomy enabled them to create an inspiring and perhaps timeless model for alternative voices everywhere.

*Note: All visual material in this article is presented by permission of the Themerson Archive, 12 Belsize Park Gardens, London. For the exhibition catalog titled "The Themersons and the Gaberbocchus Press—An Experiment in Publishing 1948–1979," edited by Jan Kubasiewicz and Monica Strauss, contact La Boetie Gallery, 9 E. 82nd St., New York, NY 10028. The catalog is \$25 including postage.*