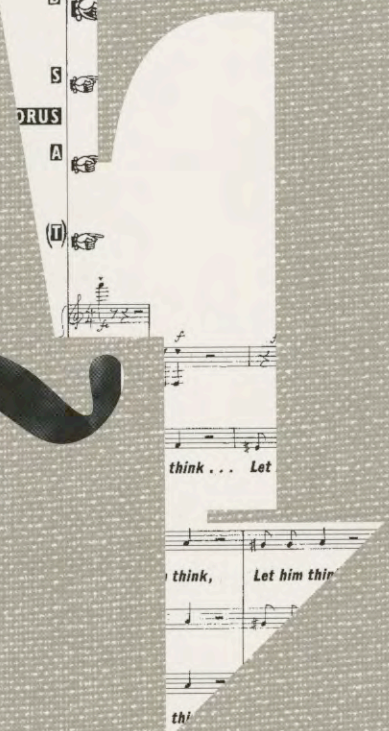
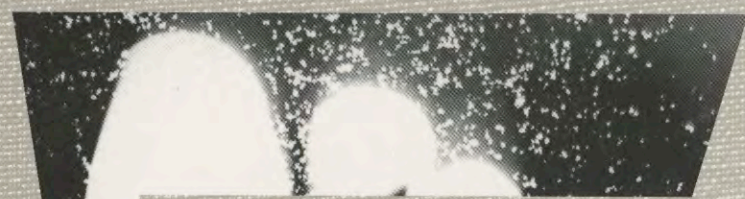
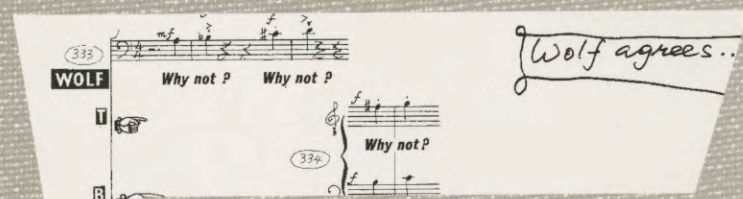


# The Themersons and the **Gaberbochus Press** —an Experiment in Publishing, 1948–1979





The  
and the **Themersons**  
the **Gaberocchus Press**  
– an **Experiment in Publishing,**  
1948–1979

edited by

Jan Kubasiewicz and Monica Strauss

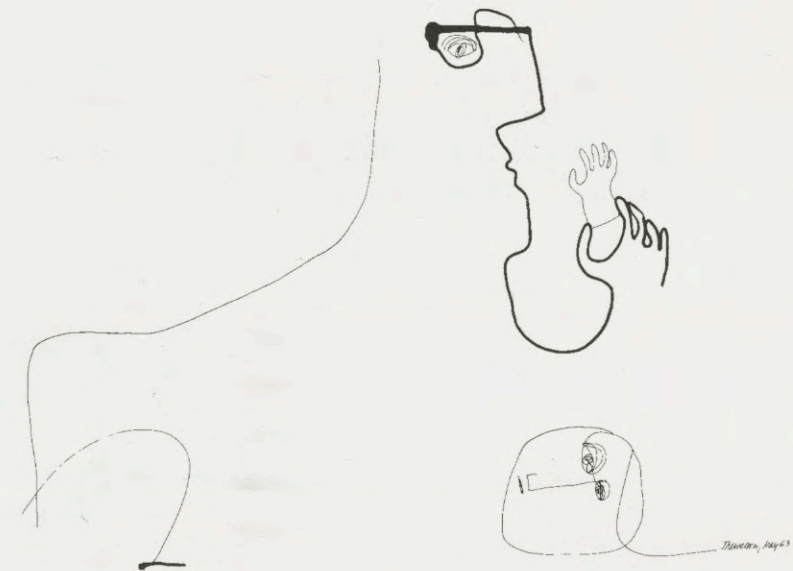
with contributions by

Marcin Gizycki

Jan Kubasiewicz

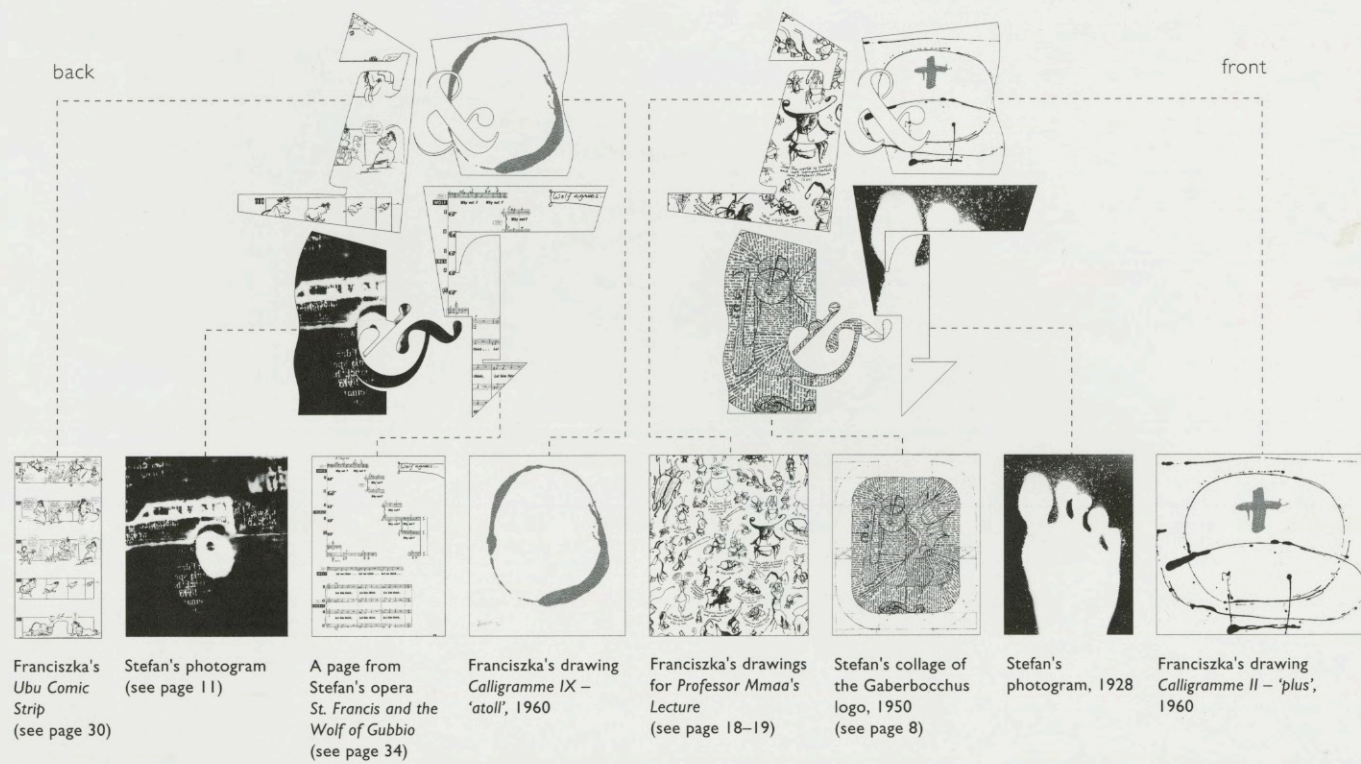
K. Schippers

Nicholas Wadley





On the cover



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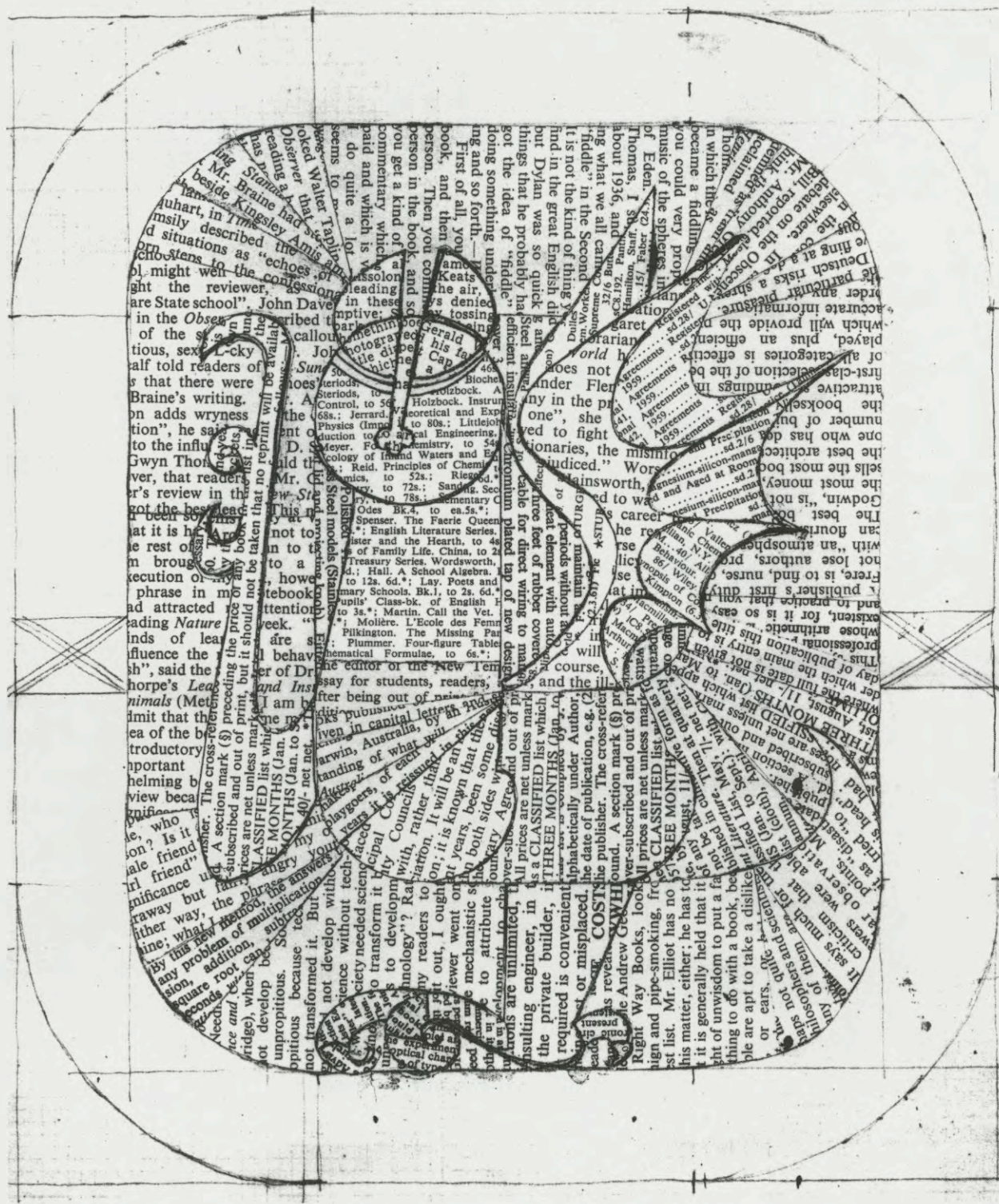
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Stefan Themerson,  
the Gaborbocchus logo  
in a collage of newsprint,  
probably 1950

**The Themersons and  
the Gaborbocchus Press –  
an Experiment in  
Publishing, 1948–1979**

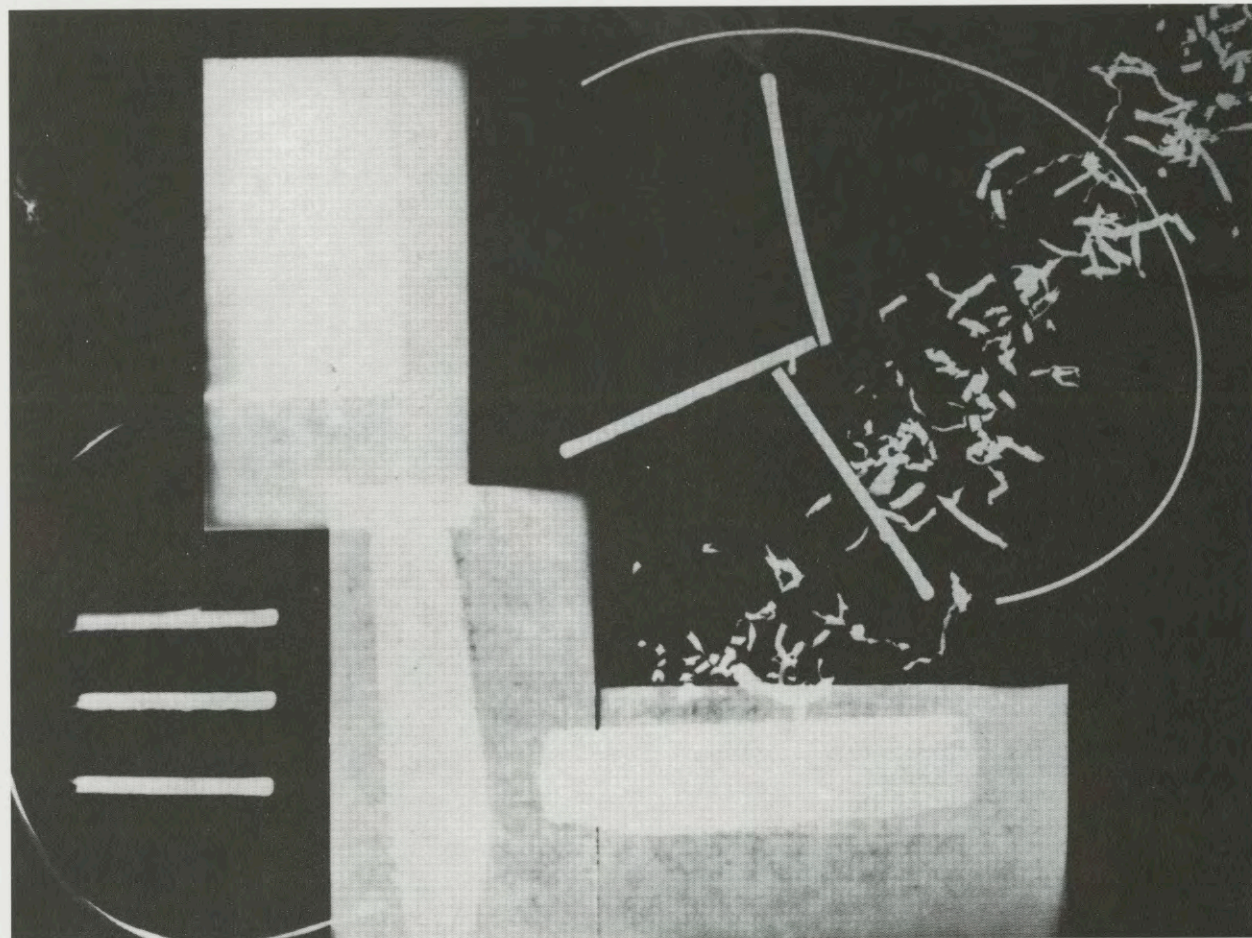
by Jan Kubasiewicz

The *Gaborbocchus Press*, a small publishing house, was founded in London, by Stefan and Franciszka Themerson in 1948. *Gaborbocchus* is the Latin equivalent of Jabberwocky – a species of dragon and hero of one of the ballads by Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

Suppose the name was significant. 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 it also referred to the serious mathematical treatises by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson such as *Symbolic Logic* or *An Elementary Treatise on Determinants*. Actually, Mr. Dodgson and Mr. Carroll were one and the same person. He was a mathematician, author, and talented photographer whose principal enthusiasm was exploring the inverted logic of language and imagination. And in a sense Mr. Carroll-Dodgson's interests seem to be quite similar to Stefan Themerson's: language, logic, and the fundamental questions which he explored as an author and philosopher, and at the beginning of his career, as an avant-garde film-maker and photographer.

There are many – perhaps too many – directions to investigate in an attempt to describe the relatively complicated intellectual provenance and history of the *Gaborbocchus Press*. The logo, as drawn by Franciszka Themerson, represents a reclining dragon reading a book intensely. Perhaps it is one of the more than sixty titles published by the Press. In its 31 years of activity, the *Gaborbocchus Press* was recognized as one of the most original publishing initiatives of its time.



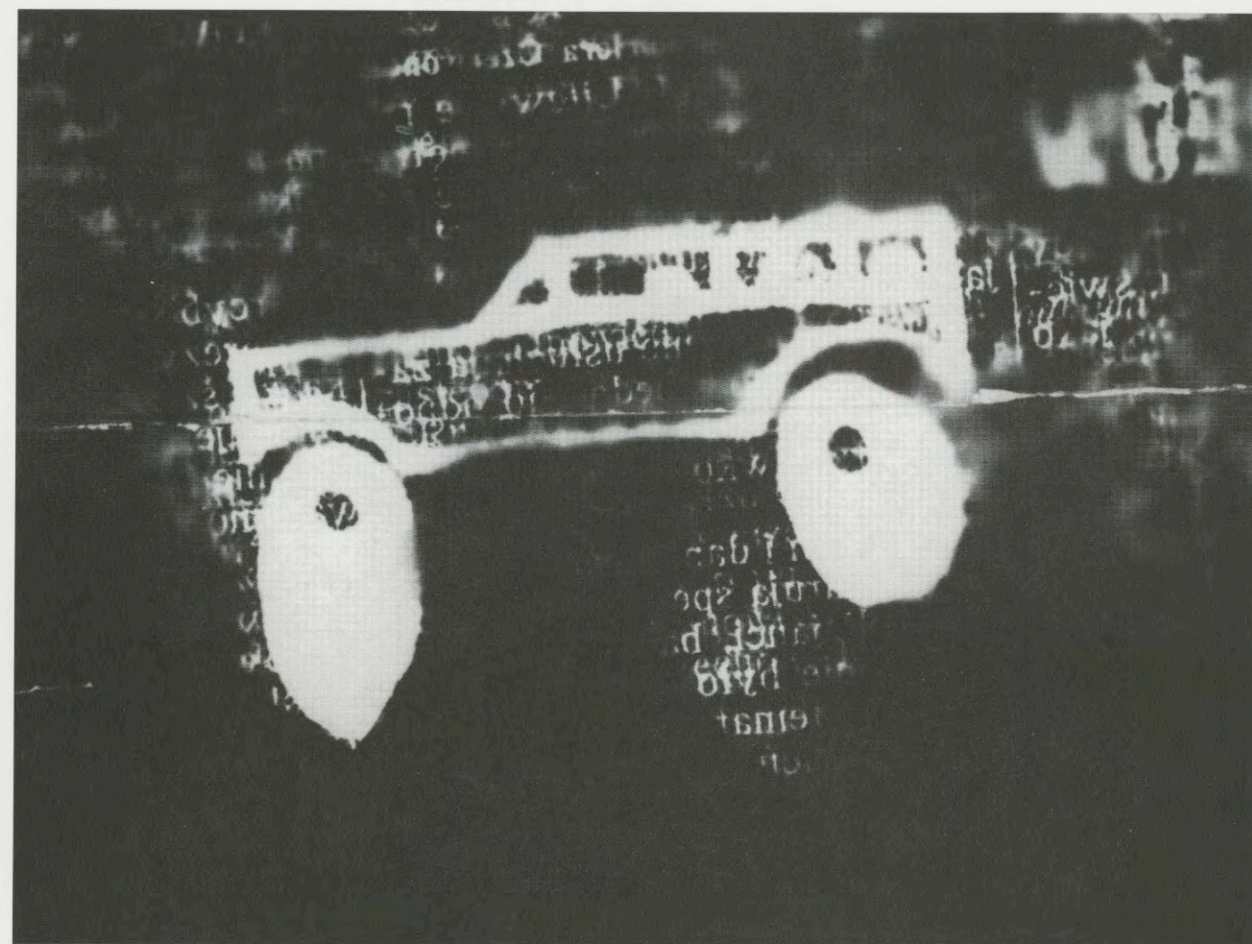


### I + I = PARTNERSHIP

Running the Press, was one of the most significant, but certainly not the only, project Stefan and Franciszka Themerson undertook together during a life-long collaboration. In fact, their relationship began long before the Gaberbocchus Press and always functioned as a true partnership – a respectful dialogue between two artists and two individuals. It was one of those cases in which the equation of *one plus one* equaled more than two.

Franciszka was born in Warsaw in 1907 to the family of Jacob Weinles, a renowned academic painter of large scale scenes from the life of the Jewish community. In her own words, she grew 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."<sup>1</sup> When she was seventeen, Franciszka entered the Academy of Art in Warsaw, and after spending seven years there, she graduated in 1931 with the first prize in painting. That same year she married Stefan Themerson, whom she had met in the late twenties. Stefan was born

<sup>1</sup> Franciszka Themerson, *Bi-Abstract Pictures* [Based on a talk given at the Gaberbocchus Common Room in November 1957], in: *The Drawings of Franciszka Themerson*, edited by Nicholas Wadley (Amsterdam: Gaberbocchus/De Harmonie, 1991), p. 20.

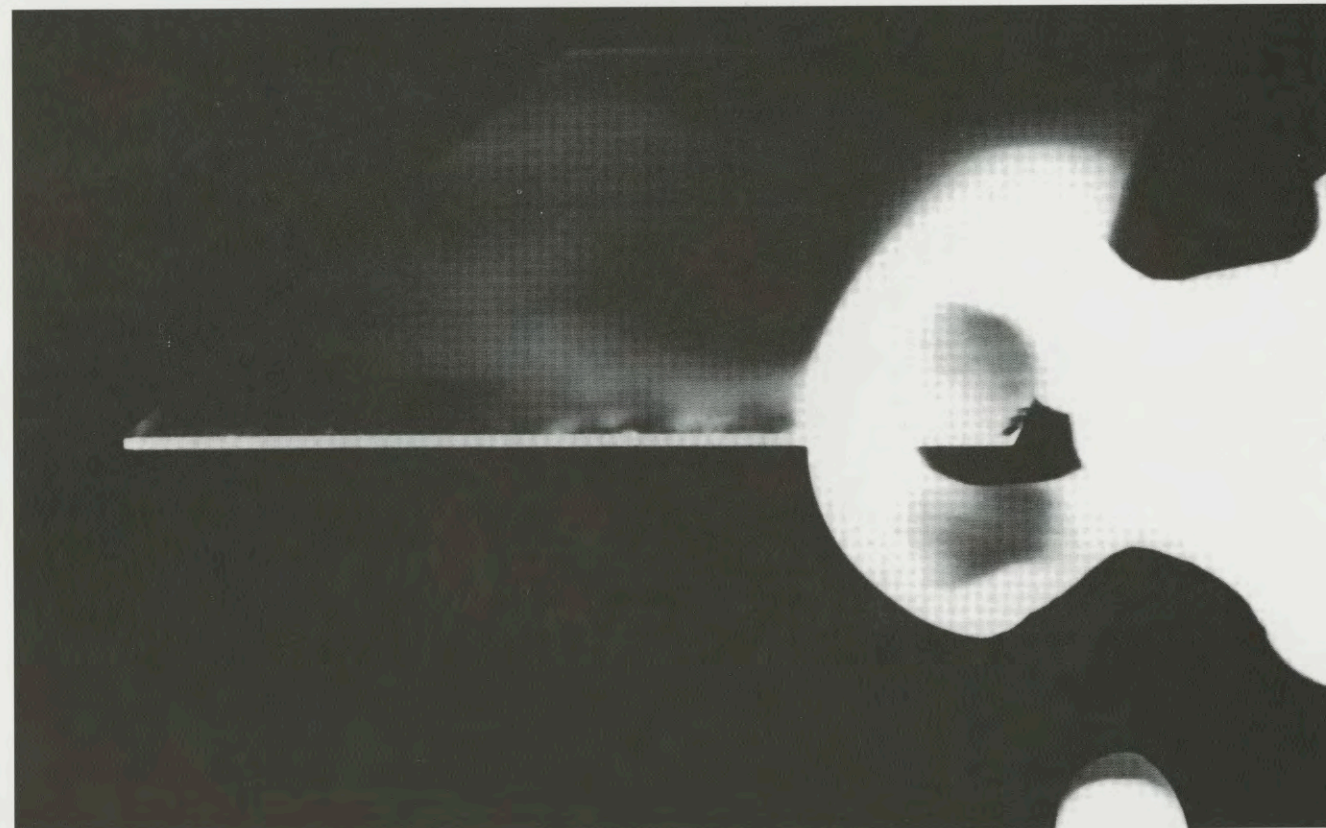
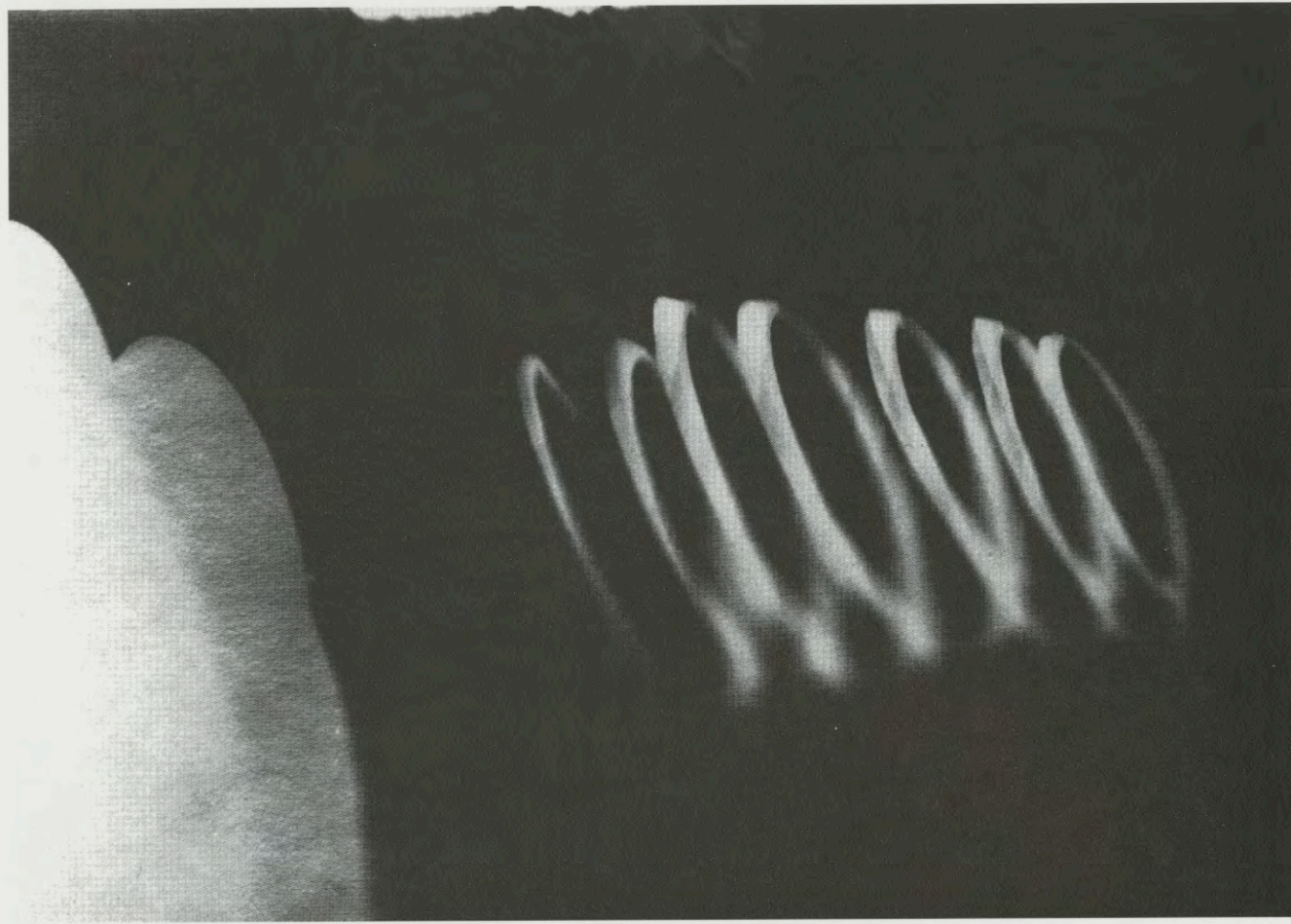


Stefan Themerson,  
photograms,  
left – 1929, above – 1928

in Plock in 1910 to the family of Doctor Mieczyslaw Themerson, a physician. It is likely that Stefan and Franciszka met relatively soon after his arrival in Warsaw to study physics and architecture. Most probably in 1929 they began the creative partnership which was to last for six decades.

In their dynamic creative collaboration, the Themersons consistently explored significant philosophical and artistic ideas and topics regardless of the place, time or media, throughout their whole *œuvre*. The artistic vocabulary that evolved from these activities led directly and consciously – and sometimes indirectly and subconsciously – to the establishment of a publishing house – in order to communicate the content and form of their choice freely. One of the Themersons' characteristic methods of communication was to combine incompatible entities, thereby breaking the syntactical rules of given languages and categories. This approach, along with the integration of two artistically diverse personalities, found its fullest realization in the book format and book publishing.





Stefan Themerson,  
photograms, 1930

Photograms are as old as the world. When the apple was still green, a little leaf got stuck to its surface. The sun shone, the apple reddened, but not under the little leaf. And when Eve took the apple, which was pleasant to the eyes, she flicked off the little leaf, but she didn't notice that a beautiful pale shape of the little leaf was created there, on the peel of the apple. Neither did the serpent notice it. Nor did Adam. Nor the author of Genesis (otherwise he would have mentioned it, and he didn't).

Stefan Themerson

<sup>2</sup> *Films of Stefan and Franciszka Themerson*, an essay by Marcin Gizycki in this volume, examines in detail that important part of the Themersons' work.

<sup>3</sup> Janusz Zagrodzki, *Outsiders of the Avant-garde*, in: *Stefan and Franciszka Themerson. Visual Researches*, exhibition catalog (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1981), quotation translated by J.K.

#### THE THEMERSONS' EARLY COLLABORATION

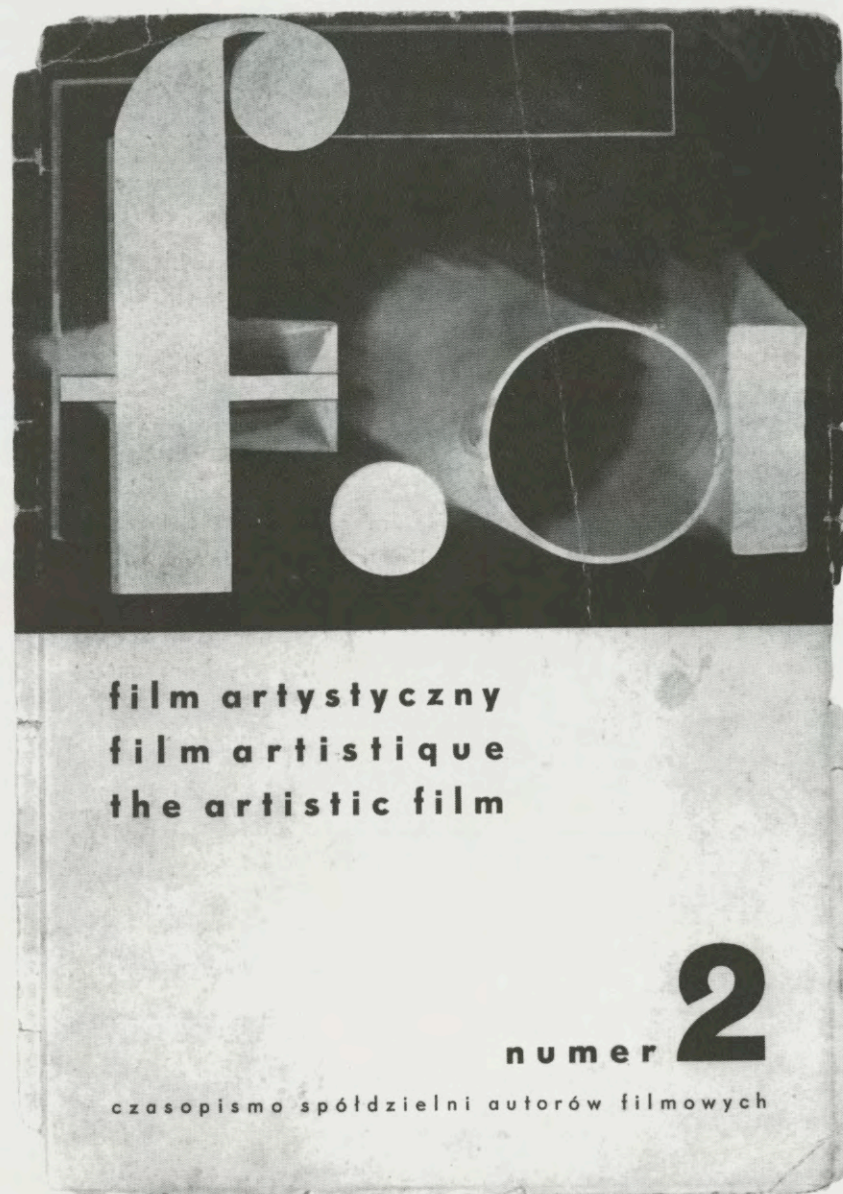
The Themersons' earliest and most widely known accomplishment was their *œuvre* of experimental films. It comprises seven films, five of them produced in Poland between 1930 and 1937, and two produced in England during the Second World War<sup>2</sup>.

Before the Themersons' began film production, Stefan Themerson himself was very much interested in collage, photomontage and particularly photogram. He even referred to their early films as "photograms in motion." Janusz Zagrodzki, an art historian who rediscovered the Themersons' avant-garde films in Poland in the early seventies, wrote a short description of Stefan's early experiments. In his essay *Outsiders of the Avant-garde*<sup>3</sup> Zagrodzki included the information that as a high school student as early as 1927, Themerson "[...] produced a booklet which consisted of a few dozen 6 by 9 centimeter 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 incorporating time to represent movement. Later, it inspired the Themersons to put photograms in motion in their film *Pharmacy*. Such simple confrontations between different media – a book, a photogram – resulted in a new and quite powerful tool of expression, an "abstract" movie. In their later films, when not only pure expression but the communication of ideas was an issue (*The Adventure of a Good Citizen* and *Calling Mr. Smith*), the Themersons incorporated many elements from the vocabulary of publication design – an individual character, an inscription, a book and its parts, a spine, a page – and certainly typography.

The Themersons inherited their fascination with asymmetrical typography from Polish avant-garde artists, particularly Mieczyslaw Szczuka. A prominent figure of Polish constructivism, Szczuka was one of the founders and editors of an avant-garde periodical *Blok*, published in Warsaw between 1924 and 1926. He also designed typographical layouts and collages for Anatol





Stern's poem *Europa* which was released in 1929, two years after Szczuka's tragic death. The powerful visual arrangement of the book, not only the poem alone, was a direct inspiration for the Themersons' production of their film *Europa* – another example of direct confrontation and dialog between different media. Much later, the Themersons paid tribute to Szczuka's book design by publishing a Gaberbocchus Press facsimile of *Europa*.<sup>4</sup>

#### PRE-GABERBOCCHUS PUBLISHING

In the middle thirties, under the auspices of the Themersons, the *Cooperative of Film Authors* was established. Stefan Themerson became publisher and editor

<sup>4</sup> Anatol Stern, *Europa*. Designed and illustrated by Mieczysław Szczuka. Cover designed by Teresa Zarnower after Szczuka's death. Slightly reduced facsimile of the original edition translated from Polish by Stefan Themerson and Michael Horovitz with preface by Oswald Blakeston and introduction by Michael Horovitz (London: Gaberbocchus, 1962).



Cover (left) and a page (right) from *f.a.*, periodical of the Cooperative of Film Authors, Warsaw, 1937

of the cooperative's periodical *f.a.*, with its tri-lingual subtitle: *film artystyczny, film artistique, the artistic film*. As an official review of a quasi avant-garde group of film makers, *f.a.* included articles by modern movement luminaries such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. In keeping with the character of an avant-garde publication, Franciszka Themerson as art director was able to achieve an appropriate visual form for the magazine. The layout followed the rules of the functional, so-called *new typography*. The composition on the cover was based on the juxtaposition of soft, hand-produced images of the geometric letterforms *f* and *a* in the periodicals' nameplate 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. The visual form of *f.a.* remained the most formal and rationalized design structure of all the Themersons' publications. Throughout the history of Gaberbocchus Press, the Themersons preferred less formal, more spontaneous approaches to publication design.

Between 1930 and 1937, the Themersons collaborated on several books of stories and poems for children for a number of Warsaw publishing houses. These were written by Stefan and illustrated by Franciszka. Well before launching their own press, they published one of the children's books privately, setting the precedent which would be followed in the 1940s by two other books printed in a limited edition.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, Stefan Themerson wrote more than a dozen children's books (as he noted "about twenty", some of which cannot be found) and became quite famous in the Warsaw's literary community. Yet he never really considered himself a children's book author. Franciszka, who illustrated most of Stefan's and many other books, also gained a reputation as a children's book illustrator, but this success never limited or narrowed her artistic vision. Since then, some of these books, stories and poems for children in which content and form seem timeless, have been reprinted to serve new generations of young readers.

#### FRANCE - THE WAR - ENGLAND

In 1937, the Themersons decided to leave Poland for France. They wanted to live and work among the international community of artists in Paris, to which they felt they belonged. But their stay in Paris was much shorter than they could have predicted. The beginning of the Second World War in Europe, triggered by the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, shattered their plans and their careers. Their two lives had seemed so inseparable, yet for the next two years their personal relationship and professional partnership was fractured. Franciszka Themerson escaped to London in 1940. Stefan, who voluntarily joined the Polish army in France, left Paris with his regiment to stay in the unoccupied zone in the south of France. After his regiment was dispersed

<sup>5</sup> *Croquis dans les Ténèbres* by Stefan Themerson; illustrated by Franciszka Themerson; privately printed in a limited edition, distributed by Hachette, London, 1944; and *The Lay Scripture* (or 'a draft for a preface to a textbook of physics'); London: Anthony Froshaug, 1947, limited edition.



Self-portrait from Franciszka Themerson's *Unposted Letters*, 1941

<sup>6</sup> *Unposted Letters* was a series of more than 100 drawings Franciszka Themerson made after her arrival in London, from 1940 through 1942. Some of them were published as *Forty Drawings* in a very limited edition of 25, by Lund Humphries in 1943. The drawings were also in a publication entitled *London 1941-42*, produced by Herbert Spencer in an edition of 200 in 1987, to mark Franciszka Themerson's 80th birthday.

<sup>7</sup> *Graphis* Vol. 3, #18, 1947, Amstutz & Herdeg, Zurich, Switzerland. The article included many reproductions: cover, title-page and two pages from *The Three Bears*; cover and title-page from *The Little Pigs*; cover and endpaper from *My First Nursery Book* – all three published by Harrap, London, 1945; pages from a series of books "to be published" by Harrap, London in 1947; illustration from *The Lion Who Ate Tomatoes*, Sylvan Press, London, 1945. One of the captions indicated: "line decorations on page 120-122 are for *Professor Mmaa's Lecture*, a book by Stefan Themerson" – to be published by Gaberbocchus Press in 1953.

in 1940, it took him two years to arrive in London via Toulouse, Marseilles, Spain and Portugal.

During those two years of separation, Franciszka made a series of expressionist drawings filled with autobiographical symbolism and allegory, which she described as *Unposted Letters*.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Stefan began his masterpiece *Professor Mmaa's Lecture* or rather its original Polish version *Wykład Profesora Mmaa*, in Voiron, France, which he finished in Scotland in 1943. He also wrote lyrical poems, among them a prose-poem *Croquis dans les Ténèbres* dedicated to Franciszka. They were written in French. It was the first time Themerson wrote in a language other than his native Polish.

The Themersons were reunited in 1942, after the Battle of Britain, but while London was still a war zone. 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 in London. The Film Unit sponsored the production of what were to be their last two films. One of them, *Calling Mr. Smith*, was a moral protest against the destruction of Polish culture by the Nazis. This visually strong and explicitly anti-war film was refused public release by Britain's government censors.

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 regained recognition as an illustrator.

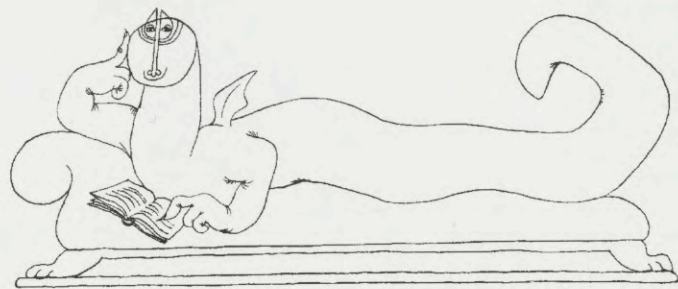
In 1947, *Graphis*, a prestigious international journal for graphic and applied art, published a short article on Franciszka Themerson by Charles Rosner. The author listed Franciszka's impressive achievements including: twelve children's books published in Poland, two books for the *Album du Père Castor* series for Flammarion in Paris, her first illustrations published in England for *The Lion Who Ate Tomatoes*, by Sylvan Press, London, in 1945, and work to be published in 1947 by Harrap, London.<sup>7</sup> This was the extensive professional experience upon which Franciszka would base the house style of Gaberbocchus publications.



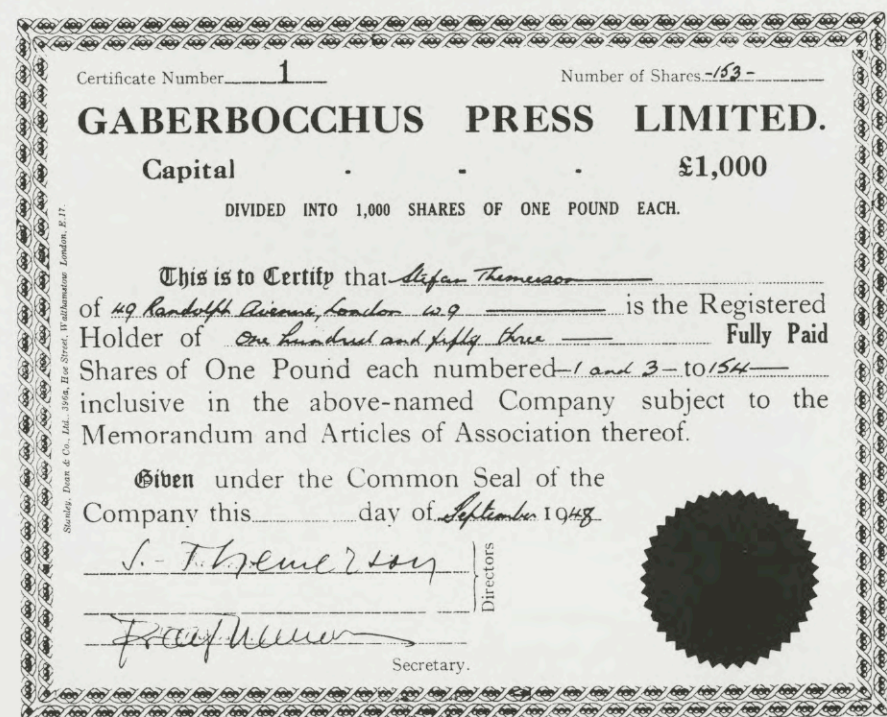




**THE GABERBOCCHUS PRESS – THE BEGINNING**

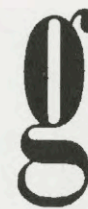
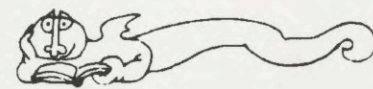


After 1944, the Themersons lived in the Maida Vale district of London. They founded Gaberbocchus Press in 1948 and the earliest books were printed at their home on Randolph Avenue. Franciszka was art director and illustrator for nearly all Gaberbocchus publications. Like their collaboration on the films, the Themersons worked together closely on the books, including all stages of design and production. Shortly afterward they were joined by two other directors, Barbara Wright and Gwen Barnard, and the Press moved to a new and permanent location on Formosa Street. Between 1948 and 1979, Gaberbocchus Press published over sixty extraordinary titles including: the first English translations or editions of Alfred Jarry, Pol-Dives, Raymond Queneau, Guillaume Apollinaire and Heinrich Heine, the literary endeavors of Kurt Schwitters and Raoul Hausmann, works by such British luminaries as Bertrand Russell and Stevie Smith, and many books of their own.



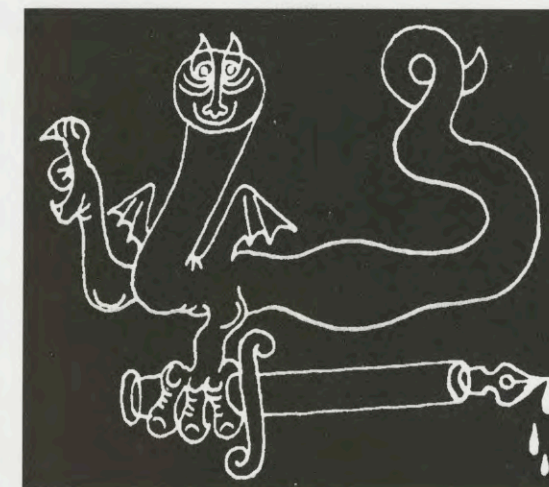
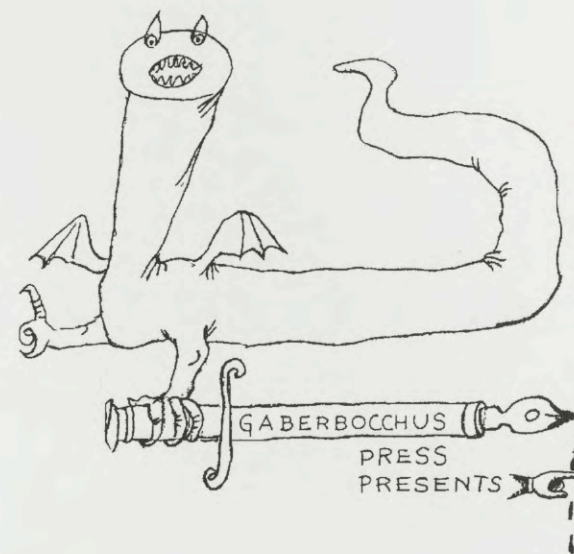
Above and right, variations on the Gaberbocchus Press logo by Franciszka Themerson

Left, Gaberbocchus Press Limited, shareholder certificate number 1



From 1957 to 1959, the basement of Gaberbocchus office in Formosa Street was turned into the Gaberbocchus Common Room, a meeting place for those interested in art and science. There were regular gatherings for lectures, discussions, film shows, plays, poetry readings and music recitals.

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, film-makers, 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 Zilliacus spoke on the immorality of nuclear weapons. The project was only reluctantly abandoned because it consumed too much working time.<sup>8</sup>



<sup>8</sup>Nicholas Wadley; On Stefan Themerson; in: Comparative Criticism, 12; Cambridge University Press, 1990.



Both the list of Gaberbocchus publications and the list of participants and topics discussed in the Gaberbocchus Common Room indicate attempts to explore boundary areas in science and art, poetry and politics, literature and ethics. By searching philosophies of neighboring disciplines for common denominators, which otherwise seemed incompatible, the idea was to dissolve, or at least blur, those boundaries which the Themersons found obsolete. Investigating different disciplines and subjects, contradicting comfortable clichés (including logic!), defying categories and classifications – became one of the conspicuous characteristics of Gaberbocchus Press.

Asked in a questionnaire what were the Press's main strength and weakness, Themerson gave the same answer to each question: "refusal to conform". The "unclassifiability" of Gaberbocchus Press expresses the essential Stefan Themerson.<sup>9</sup>

The most recognizable aspect of a Gaberbocchus book identity is its visual form. "Best-lookers," as opposed to best-sellers, has become the most quoted phrase used by Stefan Themerson to describe the books and ambitious curriculum of the Gaberbocchus Press. Definitions of what makes a book a *best-looker* can vary depending who is asked, and perhaps also where and when. Among bibliophiles, such descriptions might include deckle edged hand-made paper and limited edition hand-printed letterpress typography – and indeed, one can find these on the Gaberbocchus list. But the success of the Press in producing *best-lookers* comes out of the innovative and imaginative integration of typography and image within the time/space continuum of the book structure. Even (or perhaps particularly) when technological means were limited, (for instance, one-color printing on basic paper), typographic clarity, complemented by the personality of the illustrations, led to those unique and often unpredictable solutions, in which all page ingredients seem inseparable. Lewis Carroll's Alice once asked the question the Themersons

**JABBERWOCKY  
RENDERED INTO LATIN ELEGIACS  
by the late Mr. Hassard Dodgson,  
a Master in the Court of Common Pleas.**

Hora aderat briliigi. Nunc et Slythaeia Tova  
Plurima gyrabant gymbolitare vabo;  
Et Borogovorum mimzebant undique formae,  
Momiferique omnes exgrabuere Rathi.

'Cave, Gaberbocchum moneo tibi, nate cavendum  
(Unguibus ille rapit. Dentibus ille necat.)  
Et fuge Jubbubbum, quo non infestior ales,  
Et Bandersnatcham, quae fremit usque, cave.'

Ille autem gladium vorpalem cepit, et hostem  
Manxonium longa sedulitate petit;  
Tum sub turtummi requiescens arboris umbra  
Stabat tranquillus, multa animo meditans.

Dum requiescebat meditans uffishia, monstrum  
Praesens ecce! oculis cui fera flamma micat,  
Ipse Gaberbocchus dumeta per horrida sifflans  
Ibat, et horrendum burbuliabat iens!

Ter, quater, atque iterum cito vorpalissimus ensis  
Snicsnaccans penitus viscera dissecuit.  
Exanimus corpus linquens caput abstulit heros  
Quocum galumphat multa, domumque redit.

'Tune Gaberbocchum potuisti, nate, necare?  
Bemiscens puer! ad brachia nostra veni.  
Oh! frabiusce dies! iterumque caloque calaque  
Laetus eo' ut chortlet chortla superba senex.

Hora aderat briliigi. Nunc et Slythaeia Tova  
Plurima gyrabant gymbolitare vabo;  
Et Borogovorum mimzebant undique formae,  
Momiferique omnes exgrabuere Rathi.

Above, *Jabberwocky Rendered Into Latin Elegiacs by the late Mr. Hassard Dodgson, a Master in the Court of Common Pleas*

Right, *Statement of the aims of Gaberbocchus Common Room, 1957*



**Gaberbocchus Common Room**

August, 1957

The aim of this Common Room is to provide artists and scientists and people interested in both the philosophy of science and the philosophy of art with a congenial place where they can meet and exchange thoughts.

We don't identify science with gadgetry, nor art with a kind of romantic irresponsibility. We would rather prefer to see both sides as investigators and explorers of the universe, whether the part of the universe that is being explored is the nebula in Andromeda, or a molecule, or the constellation of individual experiences of an artist or a poet.

When we say modern science and modern art, the word modern means something more than just "contemporary." It is probably not pure coincidence that both in modern science and modern art we seem to be ceasing to see the world in terms of things and objects, causes and effects, and tending to think in terms of relations, structures, organisations of space, and even "thingless" events. However, we do not advance any particular theory. It is possible to produce so many, all equally plausible! All the same, it seems that the artificial barrier dividing science from the arts is becoming obsolete, and it may be worth while to try to ignore it. This is an attitude to which we feel an urge to contribute, not so much because we want to fulfil a particular programme as because it promises to be interesting, fruitful, and a pleasure.

We aim at having this room open every evening, and having it well supplied with reading matter (magazines) and coffee, refreshments and chess boards, but we are also considering some special ventures, held periodically, whether a recital of music or a talk on, e.g., cybernetics, the reading of a play or the showing of films made in research laboratories, an exhibition of objects of art or an exhibition of scientific objects.

These activities will take the form of a club. It will be started in the Autumn, and in the meantime you are welcome every Thursday as our guest. If you would like to join the club now, you will find subscription forms on the table in the foyer upstairs.

must have asked themselves before launching Gaberbocchus: "What is the use of a book [...] without pictures or conversations?" This seems to have been the recipe for the Themersons' creative method. Stefan's favorite form of philosophical essay was the classical dialogue, combined with Franciszka's illustrations, drawings that not only *illustrate the content* but sometimes *become the content* "illustrated" by the text.

**THE GABERBOCCHUS PRESS – VISUAL CONTEXT**

At the time the Gaberbocchus Press was launched, certain trends in European graphic design, created a context for the visual vocabulary of the Press. The tradition of Constructivism must be mentioned as one of the main sources for a visual functionalism which had dominated Europe since the late forties. Originating in Russia after the October Revolution, it became a synonym for a progressive and extremely rational approach to design. The work of El Lissitzky and other Russian artists, together with the contribution of members of De Stijl and the Bauhaus and other independent German, Dutch and Swiss designers (not necessarily all of *avant-garde* provenance) carried on the idea of visually dynamic and functional typography. In his article *Elementare Typographie* (1925), and then in his first book

*Die Neue Typographie* (1928), Jan Tschichold, one of the most influential European book designers and typographers, introduced El Lissitzky's work and the concept of asymmetrical, so-called *new typography* to the community of printers and designers.

The very concept of *form-follows-function*, first formulated by the father of American modern architecture Louis H. Sullivan in 1918<sup>10</sup>, was one of the fundamental concepts of Modernism. This concept, translated into terms of visual communication, consequently led toward the so-called International Typographic Style, which was successfully developed by American and Euro-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "So remember, and bear ever in mind in your thinking and your doings, that FORM EVER FOLLOWS FUNCTION, that this is the law – a universal truth."; Louis H. Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats*; New York: Dover Publications, 1979, republication of the revised (1918) edition as published by Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., New York, 1947.

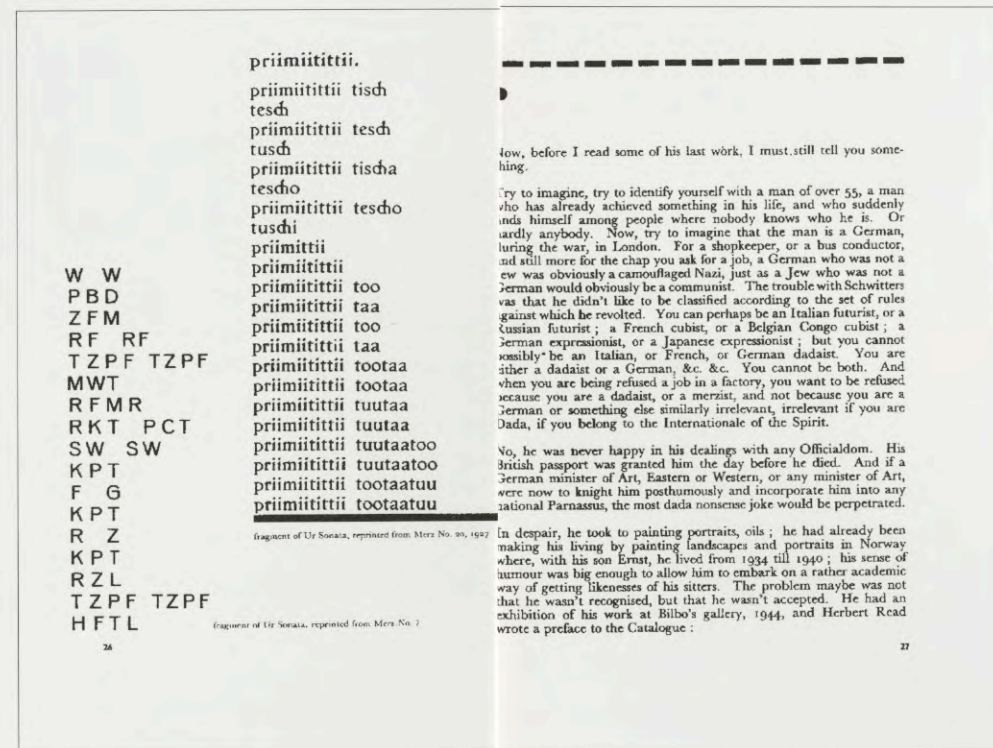
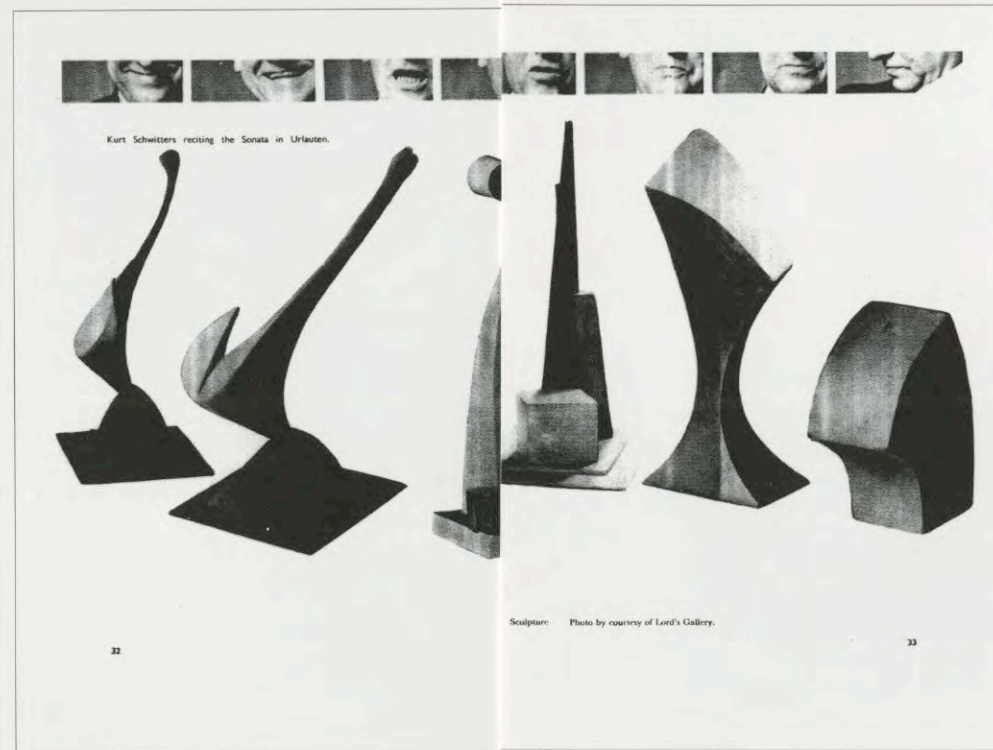




pean corporate designers, and in the intensely radical curriculum of the Ulm school, in Germany from 1955 to 1968.

At its best, the International Style incorporated aspects which seemed to contradict functionalism, i.e., the traditions of Futurism, Dada and Surrealism. The work of Marinetti, Schwitters, Ernst and many others, resulted in the development of extremely powerful tools of persuasion. That element of visual rhetoric borrowed directly from the Surrealists – the unexpected results of odd juxtapositions of image and typography – became one of the most distinctive aspects of the visual vocabulary of the Gaberbocchus Press (clarity and readability of type arrangement was another).

The Gaberbocchus books might have taken their typographical clarity from the designers of the *new typography*, or from their British equivalents, Eric Gill and Stanley Morrison, or perhaps from Jan Tschichold working concurrently in England on the commission to redesign Penguin books. The hierarchy of typographical structure, including functional elements such as subtitles and notes on margins, helped a reader to navigate through a book and understand its content. The founders of the Gaberbocchus Press, treated book design as visual metaphor and exploration, sometimes in extremely unconventional and experimental ways, yet always endeavored to respect the author and perhaps



Cover (above left), and double-page spreads from Stefan Themerson's *Kurt Schwitters in England: 1940-1948*; Gaberbocchus, 1958

even more so, the reader. Clearly structured text combined with the uniquely gestural drawings of Franciszka Themerson managed to inscribe in the readers' minds that remarkable visual fingerprint of Gaberbocchus books.

#### THE GABERBOCCHUS PRESS – VISUAL VOCABULARY

There are many levels on which a book can be comprehended.

#### macroscale

There is a level of macroscale, when a reader approaches a book as an object comprehending it as a coherent physical whole. Holding a book, one perceives its size and weight and realizes its structure by noticing the ingredients of cover, spine, texture of paper, or linen, the smell of printing ink on a book-jacket. One might first decipher the title and author, or try to grasp all elements at once, putting words and images together in one meaningful message. Obviously, many details escape notice, but a book still might feel inviting or friendly or formal or arrogant.

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 the size, number of pages or type of binding – they attract attention.

Stefan Themerson's *Jankel Adler or an Artist seen from One and Many Possible Angles* and *Aesop's The Eagle & the Fox, the Fox & the Eagle* were limited editions hand-printed on heavy, hand-made, highly textured stock. Their design joined an awareness of the material, texture and color, with the rhythm of old-style typography and line-drawings printed in sepia. They were designed as objects to be touched as well as looked at. The *book-as-object* approach and the focus on materials culminated in Stefan Themerson's *Kurt Schwitters in England: 1940-1948*. The book was assembled from many varieties of colored paper, and the whole book was treated as an object/collage – the essential Schwitters.








# UBU ROI

## UBU ROI

DRAMA IN 5 ACTS by ALFRED JARRY  
translated from the French by Barbara Wright  
with 2 portraits of the author by L. Lantier and  
F.A. Cazals and several drawings by Jarry and  
Pierre Bonnard printed in red on grey paper  
and 204 drawings by Franciszka Themerson  
doodled on litho plates and printed in black  
on yellow paper  All followed by

### THE SONG OF THE DISEMBRAINING

by the same author and the same translator.  
Published by Gaberbocchus Press London.

*Ipaë Gaberbocchus dumeta per horrida siffians  
Ibat, et horrendum burbuliabat iens!*

Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, undoubtedly the most acclaimed book of the Gaberbocchus Press, was celebrated in many editions including *Ubu Comic Strip* by Franciszka Themerson.<sup>11</sup> Again, the unusual concept and extraordinary process of execution shaped the final result. Barbara Wright, who translated the play, was asked by Franciszka to handwrite the whole text directly onto printing plates, upon which Franciszka then added her own *layer* of drawings. The result was astonishing. The handwritten text interconnected with spontaneous, gestural drawings, creating a strong contrast with the yellow paper on which the book was printed. These gestural forms seemed free from compositional rules or the structure of the book. They communicated in an expressive and memorable way the nature of the bizarre, grotesque and monstrous anarchist, Ubu. Within the duality of content and form, Franciszka's goal was always the attainment of a proper balance. In the case of *Ubu Roi*, the capricious and volatile content allowed an extremely subjective and unpredictable form to emerge.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*, Gaberbocchus Press 1951, first English translation by Barbara Wright, illustrated by Franciszka Themerson; other Gaberbocchus editions: 1959, 1961, 1966, 1969; New Directions, New York: 1951, 1961; *Ubu Comic Strip* by Franciszka Themerson (created 1969-70), first published in serial form in Dutch, in *De Revisor*, Amsterdam, 1983-1985; in a book form: by De Bezijge Bij, Amsterdam, 1987; and by Seido Sha in Japan, 1993.

Since the first Gaberbocchus edition, there were several exhibitions devoted specifically to Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. The success of Gaberbocchus editions of *Ubu Roi* was enhanced by Franciszka's designs of masks for a reading of *Ubu* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 1952. Later she designed costumes and stage sets for the theatre production of *Ubu Roi* at Marionetteatern, Stockholm, which has been touring since 1964.

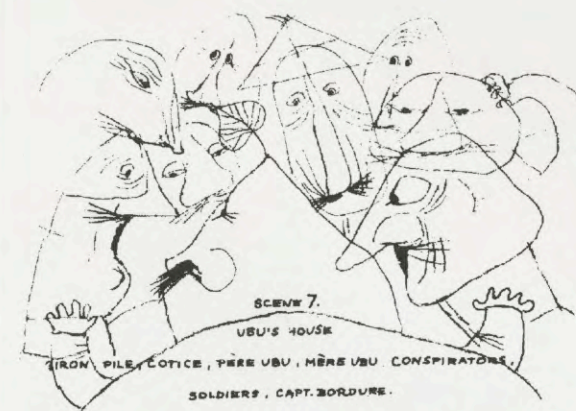
Oh! Ow! Help! By my green  
candle, I've ruptured my  
intestine and busted my  
dungzine.

THE KING (DICKING HIM UP) Père Ubu, hast hunt thyself?

PÈRE UBU Yes indeed I have, and I  
shall certainly pass away.  
What will happen to Mère Ubu?

THE KING We shall provide for her

PÈRE UBU Your kindness knows no bounds.  
(HE GOES OUT) Yes but, King  
Venceslas, you won't be any  
the less slaughtered, you know.



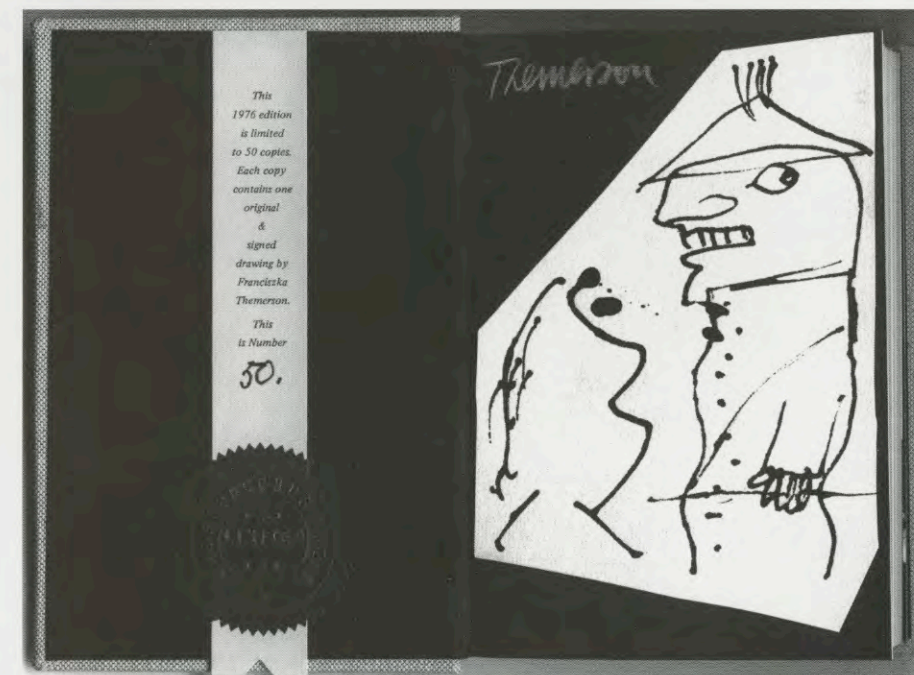
PÈRE UBU Well, my good friends, it's high  
time to decide on our plans  
for the conspiracy. Let's hear  
everybody's views. First of  
all I'll tell you mine, if  
you'll allow me.

CAPT. BORDURE Go ahead, Père Ubu.



*Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry,  
illustrated by Franciszka  
Themerson

Cover, title page and  
double-page spread from  
1976 edition limited to 50  
copies, each containing  
one original and signed  
drawing by Franciszka  
Themerson (right)

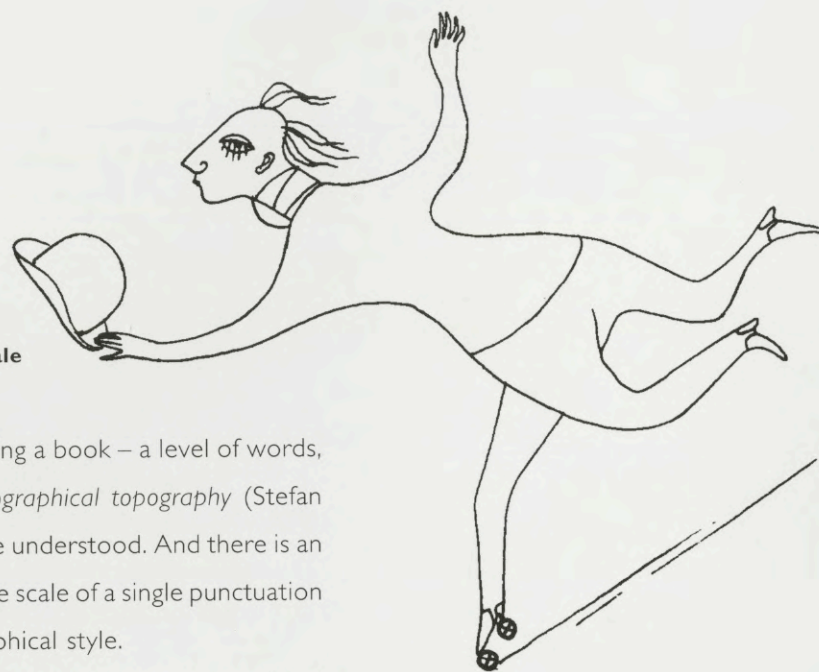








molecular / atomic scale

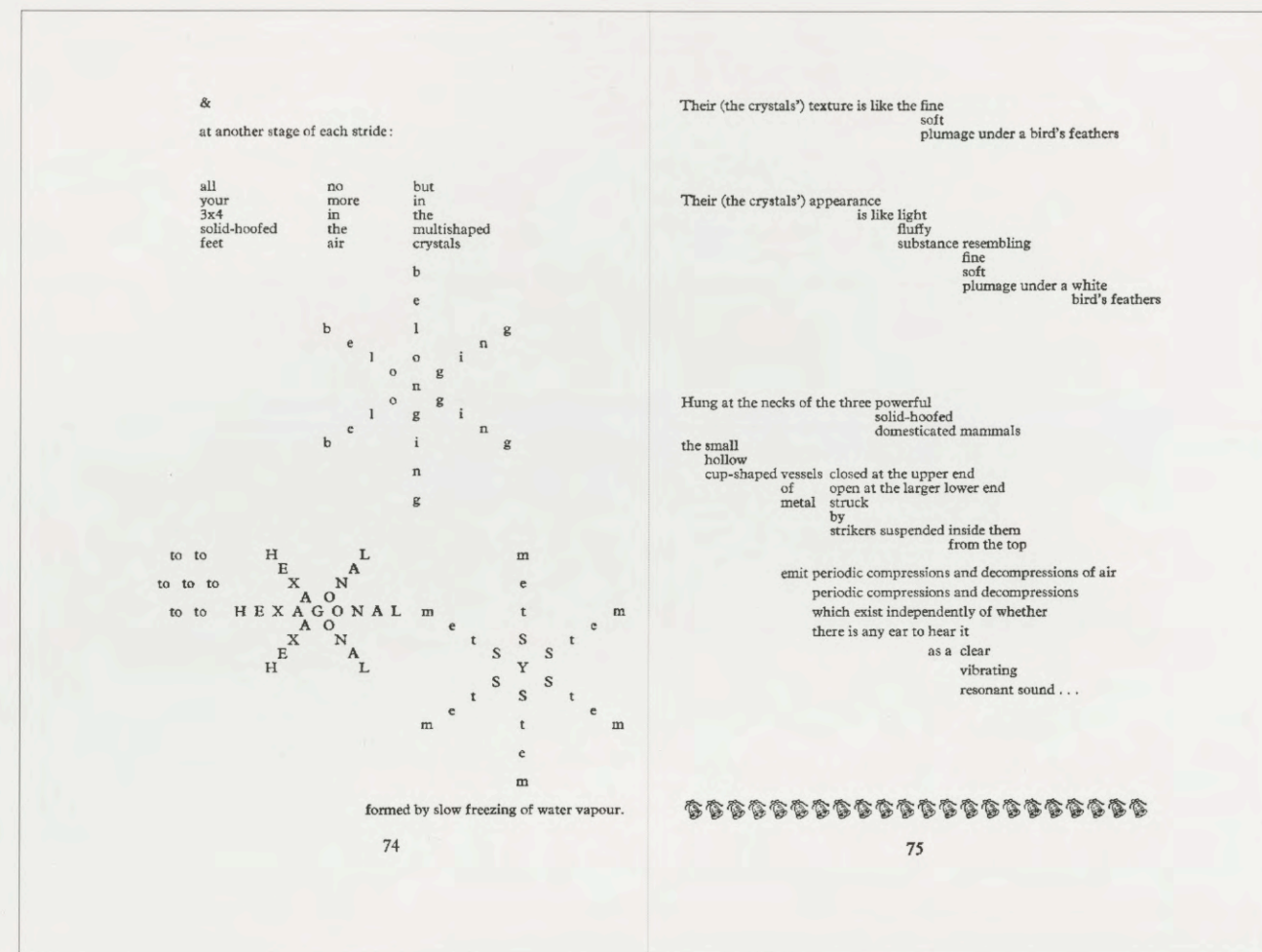


There is a molecular level in the process of reading a book – a level of words, which form lines, and columns, the whole *typographical topography* (Stefan Themerson's term) which needs to be read to be understood. And there is an atomic level in the process of reading a book – the scale of a single punctuation mark, or a single character of a certain typographical style.

On the atomic level, the universe of Gaberbocchus books consisted of elements, some of which would have been uncommon for more ordinary publishing firms. While there were different weights of serif and sans serif type in the Gaberbocchus typographic tongue, there was also calligraphy, handwriting and the typewriter. Typewriter font in black and red, borrowed from two-color typewriter ribbon (in turn borrowed from early printed books) became an important part of the Gaberbocchus visual identity. The exploration of typewriting and handwriting was a continuation of the search for personal qualities in the spirit of Dada. Such Dada characteristics as intellectual improvisation and imperfect visual notation were successfully conveyed by the contrast between calligraphy and typography; the gestural and the mechanical.

Even more unusual arrangements can be observed on the level of Gaberbocchus *typographical topography*: type arrangement which became more planar than linear. This new idea started with *Bayamus*, Stefan Themerson's first published novel, in which he proclaimed the invention of semantic poetry. In *A well justified postscript... Typographical Topography*<sup>12</sup>, the author, in the dialogue with a talking dog named Brutus, explained the concept:

<sup>12</sup> A well justified postscript... *Typographical Topography*; in: *Penrose Annual*, Vol 58, 1965. Edited by Herbert Spencer. Published by Lund Humphries, London. The essay includes *Printers and Designers*, "the paper read to members of the Double Crown Club by Herbert Spencer."



Double-page spread from *Bayamus and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry* by Stefan Themerson, revised Gaberbocchus edition, 1965

Left, Franciszka Themerson's illustration for Stefan Themerson's *Bayamus*, Editions Poetry London, 1949

"Twenty years ago I met a man who had three legs and 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 flavour. 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-vapour". 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 HORIZONTALY, 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, I told myself, 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 is the answer to my problem. I.V.J." (capitals by J.K.)

I.V.J. was an attempt to make type arrangement more visual and therefore more easily comprehensible. The term *visual*, here means diagrammatic – a designer has at hand certain visual strategies in order to designate the locations for certain components: words in a sentence, in a paragraph, etc.

Linear, *one-dimensional* text, broken into lines, to form columns, requires monotonous left to right scanning eye motion.

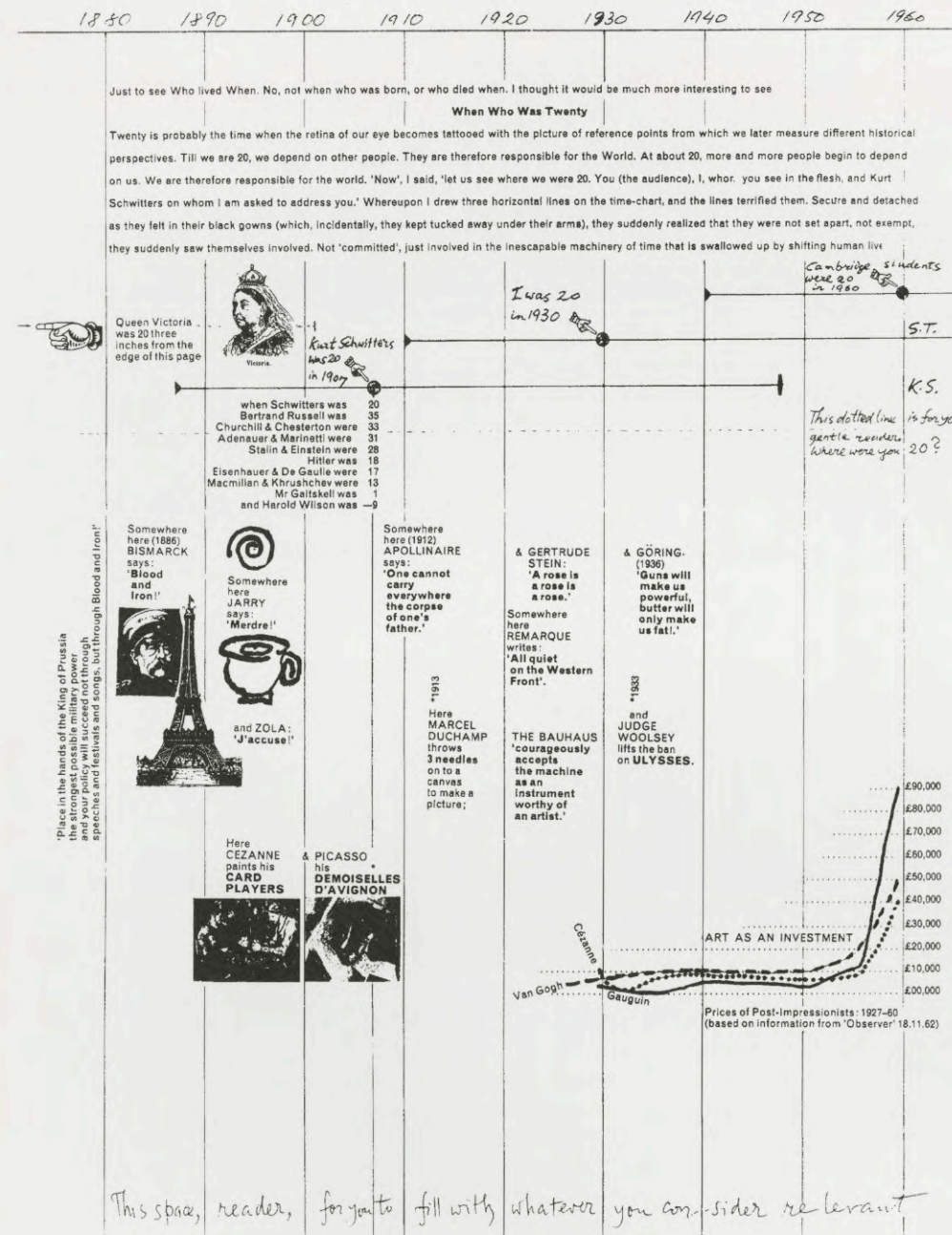
I.V.J., *two-dimensional* text, broken into customized units, based on sentence structure, could be spaced horizontally or vertically, and have tabular arrangements. This allowed irregular scanning eye movements depending on the particular, visual solution.

In *A well justified postscript... Typographical Topography*, Themerson not only explained I.V.J. to Brutus (who remained skeptical), but he also applied the I.V.J. treatment to *Printers and Designers*, a paper by Herbert Spencer, the influential English graphic designer (and a friend of the Themersons). Stefan used I.V.J. in several other works including *Bayamus*, (1949), *Semantic Divertissements*, (published in part in 1946; as a book in 1962), and *St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio*, (written 1954-1960;

Page from *St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio. An Opera in 2 Acts. Text and music by Stefan Themerson, Gaberbocchus Press (in collaboration with De Harmonie, Amsterdam), 1972*

I have just come back from Cambridge, where I was asked to address a Society of Arts on Kurt Schwitters in England. The average age of the audience was about 20. Consequently, I learnt more from them than they did from me. What I learnt I will tell you later. One of my tasks was to make those 20-year-old men and women see that the objects they liked or disliked (such objects as Schwitters' collages) were produced in a world quite larger than theirs, in a world in which clocks turn much more quickly than do those embedded in the old walls of the colleges. Their minds lived in the specially cultivated quiescent isolation of the university green lawns. The objects they wanted to know whether to like or dislike came to them from a different context. They were produced in a world which changes with each turn of its clocks.

I drew a time-chart on the blackboard:



Page from *Kurt Schwitters on a Time-chart by Stefan Themerson, Typographica 16, London, 1967*

<sup>13</sup> Stefan Themerson, *Kurt Schwitters on a Time-chart*. In: *Typographica 16*, London: December 1967; reprinted in: *Blueprint for Counter Education*, New York: Doubleday, 1970; and in: *The Liberated Page*, London: Lund Humphries, 1987; and San Francisco: Bedford Press, 1987.

published 1972). The last one is an opera with remarkable visual musical notation.

The continuation of the concept of 2-dimensional diagrammatic notation of words and images including typography (some treated with I.V.J.), typewriting, handwriting, arrows, asterisks, rules, numbers, illustrations, photographs, etc. – was the basis for one of Stefan Themerson's most creative experiments: *Kurt Schwitters on a Time-chart*.<sup>13</sup> It was not an essay, nor a collage, nor 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 instance, for *Art as Investment*. *Kurt Schwitters on a Time-chart* can in retrospect be seen as anticipation of the contemporary concept of *electronic books* and interactive media.



Now, before I go any farther, I wish to tell you two little stories, which I dedicate to Raoul Hausmann's 'Three Little Pine Trees' \*

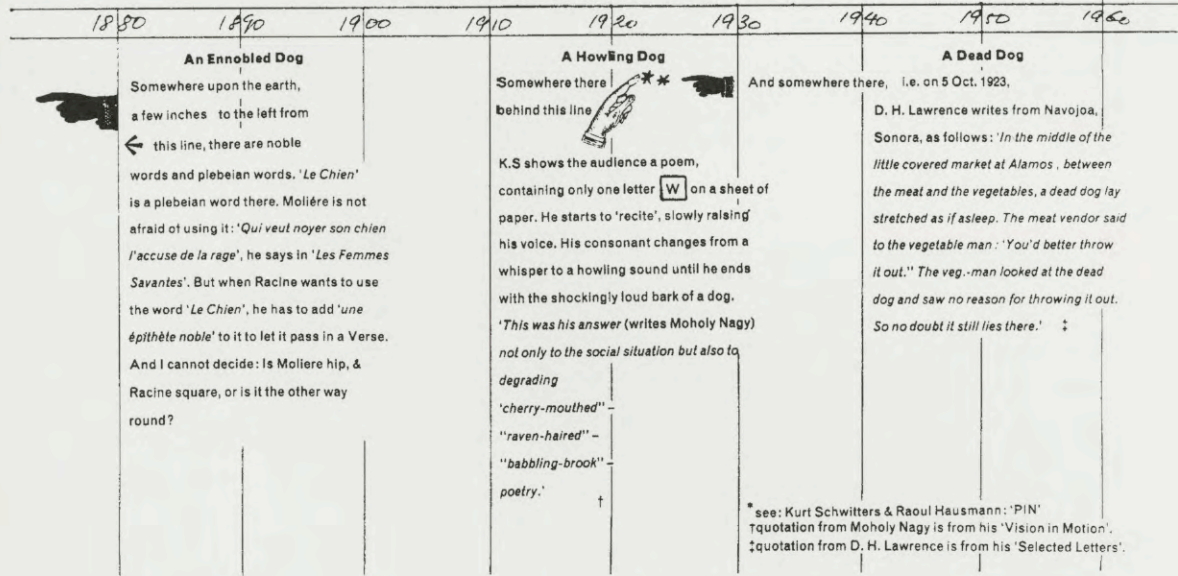
I call the first story:  
'Three Little Dogs on a Time-chart',

and the second:  
'Three Little Dustbins on a Time-chart.'

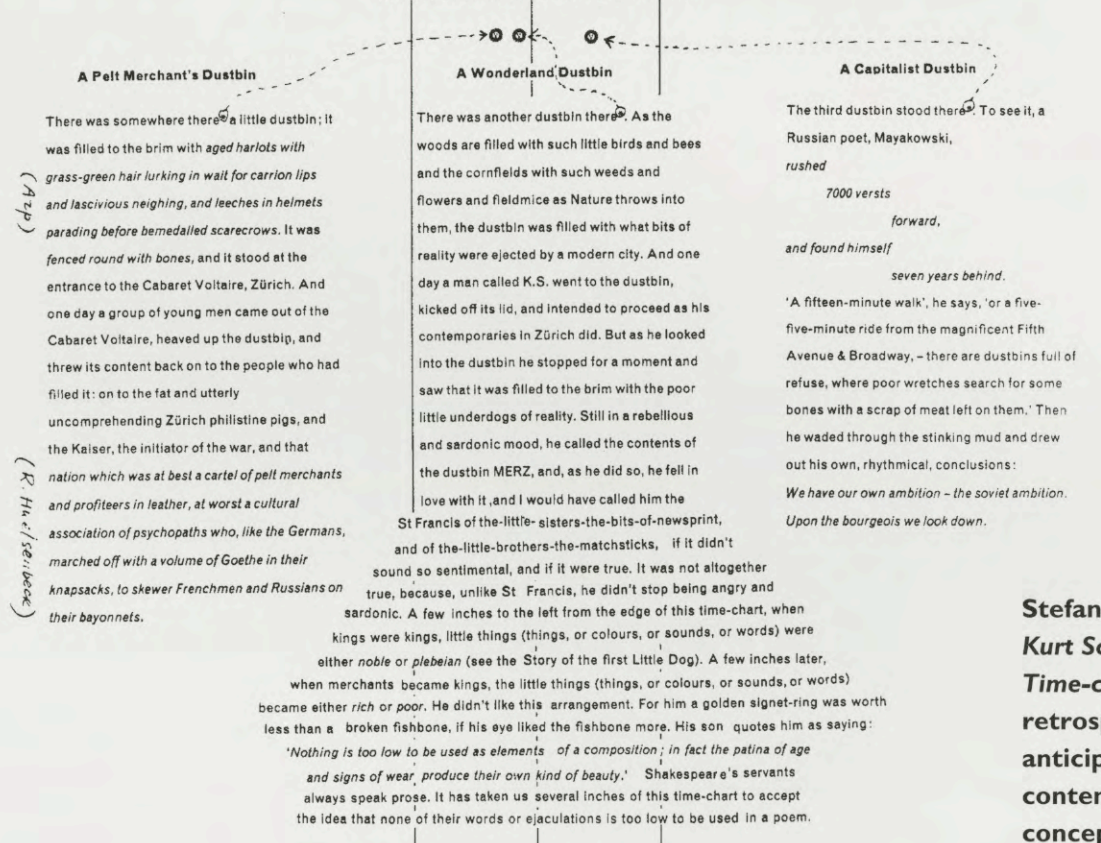
The three little dogs are: an ennobled dog,  
a howling dog,  
& a dead dog - and they are underdogs,  
all three, in a sense.

The three little dust bins are: a pelt merchant's dustbin,  
a wonderland dustbin,  
& a capitalist dustbin.

THREE LITTLE DOGS ON A TIME-CHART



THREE LITTLE DUSTBINS ON A TIME-CHART



**Stefan Themerson's Kurt Schwitters on a Time-chart can in retrospect be seen as anticipation of the contemporary concept of electronic books and interactive media.**

THE GABERBOCCHUS PRESS - LANGUAGE AND MESSAGE

What survives from the Gaberbocchus Press is not limited to the aesthetics of the books' visual form. The content of Stefan Themerson's own books remains timeless and absorbing.

Semantic Poetry was Stefan Themerson's major conceptual invention and contribution.<sup>14</sup> For Themerson the word 'semantic' referred to linguistic manipulations, the purpose of which were to "rediscover" the primary meaning of words. Exploring dictionary definitions was an attempt to reach for original meaning beyond the facade of stereotypes, figures of speech and clichés, and beyond the daily usage of the language.

In *Bayamus*, of which Bertrand Russell was to say, "The highest compliment I can pay is that it is nearly as mad as the world," Themerson explained:

It was a refusal to be taken away from reality, a refusal to be taken for a ride, that made me "devise" (not to say "burst into") SEMANTIC POETRY, some 30 years ago, before the time of television, at a time when political demagogues of all sorts were using oratory devices stolen from poets, just as today, at the time of Enlightenment Through Advertising, commercial demagogues are using motion-picture tricks stolen from visual artists.<sup>15</sup>

On more than one occasion Stefan Themerson warned that "the world is more complicated than the truth about it" expressed in any language. His semantic investigations examined to what degree natural languages as well as formal systems, dominate, shape and falsify reality. As in everything he investigated, Themerson retained a skeptical position, commenting ironically on language's incapacity to describe itself.

Nevertheless, his interest in linguistic exploration resulted in broadening Themerson's spectrum of interdisciplinary studies, for which language

<sup>14</sup> Fourth volume of the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* (1986), offers the following: "Semantic Poetry: 1949 S. Themerson, *Bayamus and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry*. 1951 *Times* 5 Apr. 5/1 Nothing could prevent Mr Vyshinsky or Mr Acheson from discussing Etruscan pottery or Semantic Poetry if they really wished to do so. 1969 *Poetry Review* LX. 274 Semantic poetry is based on the idea that words such as moon, night, heart, flower, etc., having become clichés have become devaluated and devoid of affective effect. SP avoids all forms of rhetorical device and relies upon a text derived from traditional language by replacing each word by its dictionary definition. Semantic Poetry does not rarefy the verbal material to condense the meaning."

<sup>15</sup> Stefan Themerson, *On Semantic Poetry*, London: Gaberbocchus, 1975.



was a vehicle. In fact, many topics and methods of Themerson's linguistic investigations could be claimed by those who argue in favor of the Modernist tradition, or against it. Themerson could not have cared less. He insisted on defying categories, classes and labels. Even so, some of his writing – such as a dialogue between a painter by the name of Mondrian and Cardinal Pölätüo, on the relationship between an abstract image and a song – reminds one of the most brilliant lectures on abstract art in the spirit of Modernism.<sup>16</sup>

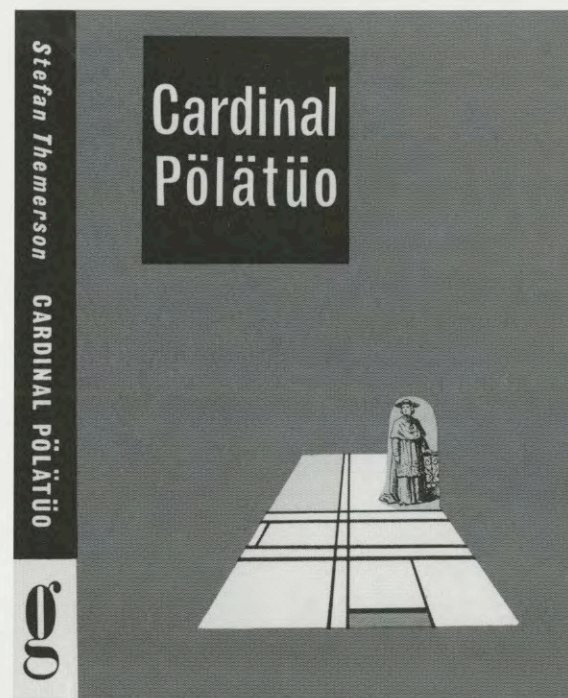
The body of Stefan Themerson's literary œuvre examines the moral principles of the 'Tragic factor' in the human condition, introduced in the early essay, *factor T* in 1956.

There is a tragic discrepancy between our dislike of killing and the necessity of doing so. I call that discrepancy *factor T*, and it seems to me neither virtuous nor wise to ignore that.<sup>17</sup>

In his 1981 Huizinga Memorial Lecture in Leyden, Holland, titled *The Chair of Decency*, Themerson examined simple moral questions and decent human values confrontating *great missions*: beliefs and aims of religion, politics, power, patriotism and even love:

Contrary to what clergymen and policemen believe, [...] gentleness is biological and aggression is cultural [...]. [...] aggression for the sake of food, degenerated into aggression for the sake of ideas. In general, people don't like to be murderers unless it is for the sake of an idea.<sup>18</sup>

Examining these *Aims*, led Themerson to a deeply human, utopian and somehow unfashionable moral message:



**Dustjacket (front and spine) from Stefan Themerson's *Cardinal Pölätüo*, Gaberbocchus Press, 1961**

<sup>16</sup> *The Xth Letter of Cardinal Pölätüo to His Biographer*, limited edition of 99; Lodz: Correspondance des Artes II, 1986. Bi-lingual extract of this particular fragment in English and Polish based on first editions: Stefan Themerson, *Cardinal Pölätüo*, London: Gaberbocchus, 1961, and *Kardynal Pölätüo*, Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971.

<sup>17</sup> Stefan Themerson, *factor T*, London: Gaberbocchus, 1956.

<sup>18</sup> Stefan Themerson, *The Chair of Decency*, The Johan Huizinga Lecture delivered by Stefan Themerson in December 1981 in the Hooglandse Kerk in Leyden. The complete text published by Polak & Van Gennep Uitgeversmaatschappij BV, Amsterdam, 1982.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

**The Themersons and their Gaberbocchus Press created an inspiring and perhaps timeless model for alternative voices, which can emanate only from outside the confines of the establishment.**

Thus, I have come to you tonight empty-handed, having no offerings of Aims to give, because no Aim is so exalted that it be worth a heartbeat more than Decency of Means. Because, when all is said and done, Decency of Means is the Aim of aims.<sup>19</sup>

#### INSTEAD OF EPILOGUE

In 1979 the Press was taken over by a Dutch publisher Jaco Groot, a friend of the Themersons, who runs Uitgeverij De Harmonie in Amsterdam.

Stefan and Franciszka Themerson's life and work should be of great interest to artists, writers and historians. The couple's deaths in 1988 – Stefan died two months after Franciszka – ended a personal and professional creative partnership of nearly six decades. He was a photographer, children's book author, poet, novelist, and philosopher who also wrote a play and an opera. She was a painter, illustrator, typographer, book designer, stage designer, costume designer and art director. Together, they were film-makers and publishers. They started their careers in their native Poland in the 1930s, but spent most of their life together in England. Because they were never fully accepted by the British literary and artistic establishments, they successfully initiated a cultural ferment on their own. They grew to value their artistic freedom, and diligently guarded their independence from established channels. This autonomy enabled them to create an inspiring and perhaps timeless model for alternative voices – such as Stefan's uncompromising moral message – which can emanate only from outside the confines of the establishment.

*Jan Kubasiewicz teaches graphic design and design history at the University of Hartford, West Hartford, Connecticut. His book of essays titled Metaphors of Geometry will be published in March 1994.*