

**Stefan Themerson**



**CRITICS AND MY  
TALKING DOG**

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2001s

**This edition is dedicated to Jasia.**



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**"Watch Out for Obscure Publications"**

# **CRITICS AND MY TALKING DOG**

**by Stefan Themerson**



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Brutus is my dog. Three years ago, when he was a little puppy, it occurred to me that my difficulty in communicating with him derived not from his being less intelligent—he was not—but from the fact that the best part of my brain was connected to my eyes, while the best part of his brain was connected to his nose. The bit of brain dogs receive their visual patterns with is nothing better than a piece of cheddar. And so is the bit of brain we receive odorous patterns with. In short, I came to the conclusion that if we could so to speak *see* what dogs smell, or if they could so to speak *smell* what we see, it would result in a better understanding between our two species.

I decided to do something about it. Under local anaesthetic I opened the dog's skull, I severed the cords going from his eyes and his nose to his brain, and then I connected those going from his nose to

those leading to the poor, optical part of his brain, while those going from his eyes I joined to those leading to the highly developed olfactory part of it. I say I connected or joined them, but you understand that I didn't do it by means of a soldering iron. The method I developed, aided all the time by the advice and help of my friend, Dr. C. N. Smyth, has been described elsewhere, and the description is too technical to be repeated here. Suffice it to say that two capsules filled with organic semi-conductors had been prepared beforehand, and it was in these two capsules that the terminals of the cords were summarily embedded. I had my reasons to expect that the cut-off ends would, on their own initiative—so to speak—, build for themselves new paths through the semi-conductors. They did. Three weeks later, Brutus, with two capsules in his head, was as healthy and gay as ever. Three months later, he learned to read. His nose was not at all good for smelling. He used its wet black tip for turning the pages. After three months more (mark the sequence), he learned to talk. And now, finally, I have somebody to talk freely to.

I spend most of my time in my room with him, and that is why you don't see me very often in the public houses of Soho, drinking beer and convincing myself what a bright and angry old man I am. For hours I lie

on my couch, looking up on to the sloping ceiling, while Brutus trails through the undergrowth of books and papers strewn in several layers on the floor—and sniffs. I said: sniffs. But it is with his *eyes* that he sniffs now.

He is a voracious reader. But I have never seen him read anything from beginning to end. His eyes constantly searching, he moves from one book to another, puts his nose between the pages, jumps back, jumps sideways, jumps forward, and every few minutes runs to me as if bringing a game bird, lays his head on the couch and says:

'Look, what does it all mean? Chardin says one doesn't paint with colours, one paints with emotions. Braque says that what distinguishes his and Picasso's cubist painting from that of their followers, is poetry. And then Rilke says that one doesn't write poetry with emotions, one writes it with experiences.'

'Quite so', I say, looking at the ceiling.

'But don't you see?' he insists. 'If, according to Braque, *their* pictures have poetry in them, then, according to Rilke, they are not painted with emotions. Yet, if they are not painted with emotions, then, according to Chardin, they are not pictures!...

Because—because if they are pictures, then—according to Chardin—they have been painted with emotions, but if so then—according to Rilke—there is no poetry in them. But didn't Braque say that it was poetry that....'

'Take it easy, Brutus', I say, patting his lovely head. 'Don't get so excited!' I know, of course, that his life is shorter than ours, and so he has to squeeze things into it more compactly. I know also that he can do this all right without special effort, as his breathing and heartbeat and capacity for learning is much quicker than ours, so it is all right, and there is no cause for anxiety. Nevertheless, at moments like this, I feel as if I were responsible for an abnormal, feverish child, and I try to calm him down as much as I can.

'Don't get so excited about their bloody words!' I repeat. 'Take it easy. Even the best painter is capable of talking intellectual hot air when he tries to say something about art.'

'But what they say is a contradiction.' (He is so firmly convinced that he almost barks.)

'So what if it is?' I say lightly. I feel I shouldn't get involved in his worries. I feel he needs me like that,



slightly aloof, lying here on the couch, motionless, unperturbed, firm—the couch being some sort of rock on to which he can always rest his forelegs when he feels like reporting one of his novel, exciting findings, or lay his head when it starts to whirl among the toxic specimens of that Garden of Letters which has so unexpectedly surrounded him with its odours. Yet he is obstinate:

‘It is a contradiction’, he repeats. ‘Contradictions should not be allowed’, he says. ‘It is amoral to let them be’, he adds. And there he is again, running from one corner to another, circling, ferreting among the volumes covered with dust. I know where they all are, and I don’t even need to turn my head to see what he is reading. I bet he is looking for the definition of the word ‘contradiction’, as with his black muzzle he turns the pages of the dictionary. Yes, he is. He must have found the word ‘paradox’ there. And that leads him to Zeno, of course. Good heavens, how quick he is! How did he unearth that old copy of *MIND* with a paper on Achilles and the Tortoise? He wags his tail angrily. With contempt. They say dogs don’t wag their tails when they are angry. So perhaps he does it sarcastically. But the copy of *MIND* is already forgotten. He’s now trying with his teeth the quality of Allen & Unwin’s cloth binding. It’s a Russell. He’s ferreting in the Index.

Oh dear, he's not yet four years old and he's reading Russell's Theory of Description.

He lifts one ear and glances at me, somewhat suspiciously:

'Is it very wrong to ask: What is Art? '

'I don't know.'

'Shouldn't one rather ask: How do pictures actually Behave? '

'They hang', I answer. But I see that he is above my flippancy.

'If they hang they must exist. One must exist in order to be able to hang. Unless one is a Golden Mountain, a Unicorn, or a Jew. But what else do they do? Can you describe it? If you could describe all pictures, we could find what the descriptions have in common, and that would be the answer to the question: "What is Art?" Or rather, "What is the meaning of the word ART as we use it?"'

'There is some barley water in the bowl in the corner', I say. He goes to the corner and starts to lap with his long pink tongue. But I see that he isn't to be drawn off his track.

"Do you know any descriptions of pictures?" (he asks).

'Well,' I say, 'let me see...'

'Where?' (he insists).

I point to the bookshelf. To a volume of Diderot. He's looking at me reproachfully, saying nothing. The shelf is too high for him. I get off my couch—to take the book from the shelf—throw it on the floor for him, and say:

'Listen Brutus. 200 years ago, in 1764, a man called Grimm asked a man called Denis Diderot to write some art criticism for him. Well, here it is. You will find it on the pages headed *SALONS*. When Grimm read them, he exclaimed:

J'en jure sur mon âme,  
aucun homme n'a fait et ne fera  
pareille chose.'<sup>1</sup>

And I go back on to my couch.

Brutus's nose is already in the book. *SALONS* by Diderot. The ice cream van, somewhere in the street,

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<sup>1</sup> Upon my soul, no man has ever done or will ever do anything like that!

plays that horrid electronic tune which will go on till a lascivious infant stops the van to buy his orgiastic ice cream; then the tune will stop too, in the middle of the bar, to start again from the middle of the same bar. If the blind beggar on the corner by the chemist's played his gramophone record half as loudly, the policewoman there would have arrested him a long time ago. That's what I think. And it is a revolutionary thought, I think. And it isn't done to have revolutionary thoughts in England. It classifies you to your disadvantage. Because there is a difference between the two cases: the blind man functions as a beggar, while the ice cream man functions as a respectable salesman, a sort of Old Bond Street Art Dealer, so I should be ashamed of myself—all right, I shall, but let the van stop playing that tune! That's better, it must have turned the corner. I'm sure it didn't disturb Brutus. He lifts his head, well...what is it?

'He's wrong!'

'Who?' (I ask).

'Grimm.'

'Why?'

'Because he said nobody would ever write anything like *SALONS*, and I have that persistent, toothachey feeling that something of the kind is going on all the time...'

'Brutus', I interrupted him. 'Do you realize that you've never had toothache? How can you know what a toothachey feeling is?'

'I have observed *your* toothache.' (he answered). 'Don't you remember, last year, before you decided to go to the dentist? The behaviour of your body then was itself a description of your ache, and, by watching it, I was, 'so to speak, reading that description. Now, you know that even when one reads silently, there is still some movement going on in one's muscles and larynx and...'

'I didn't know you'd read Watson.' I say.

'I haven't.' (he answers).

'All right.' I say. 'Never mind. So you were spying on me when I had toothache, and...'

'...and the muscles of my body were repeating all the movements of the muscles of your body. To a very minute degree, of course. A kind of miniature replica

of what your body was describing to me. And once that replica was in me, I felt exactly what that something in my tooth would have to be, to be able to create the same kind of description. Though stronger. And here I think that all philosophers I read in your books are wrong when they think that the ache they experience is the thing they can be most certain of. It is not so. It is the pregnant female (of your species or of mine) who forgets her pains as soon as she is all right again. The obstetrician does *not* forget her pains. Because he remembers the description. And so it is with your toothache. You have forgotten nine tenths of your ache, and you were too busy to memorise the movements your body was performing at the time. But I observed them at leisure. I can repeat the miniature replica of them any time. And so I conclude that at this moment I know better what toothache is than you do. Therefore, I am perfectly well entitled to use the expression: a toothachey feeling that something of the kind is going on all the time.'

'What's going on all the time?'

'Writing. Writing in the fashion of Diderot's, in *SALONS*.

'My dear Brutus! That is simply impossible. Just look at modern painting and you will see that one couldn't. Even if one wanted to. And nobody does. Neither Eric Newton nor John Berger.'

'I know.'

'Well then...'

'And nevertheless I am quite sure that I read something very like that, —all the time.'

'Where?'

'Where?' he repeats. He tucks up his tail and looks worried. Very worried indeed. He jerks his head back, sinks his muzzle into the fur on his spine and starts to gnaw it.

'Brutus! Don't tell me you've got a flea!'

But he is already under one of my two tables. A booty of a dozen newspapers and weeklies in his mouth, he comes back. Throws them on my couch. And...well?

'Of course I was right. They *do* write criticism like that today. Only it is not about painting. It is about films.'

We spent several hours looking through the review pages of the newspapers and, at the same time, through the old, yellowed with age, pages of *SALONS*.

'You hold the book,' (he said) 'It's easier for you. You've got what you call "hands". And I'll sit on the newsprint.'

So we did. And now he reads from a film review, and I follow him from *SALONS*. Quote after quote. Bite after bite.

Aloud:

'The ruined city of Timgad rises majestically from the desert...'

Thus Brutus, from a film review.

And now I, from Diderot's *SALONS*:

*'O les belles, les sublimes ruines! Quelle fermeté, et en même temps quelle légèreté, sûreté, facilité de*



*pinceau; Quel effet! quelle grandeur! quelle noblesse!*<sup>2</sup>

'...the fluted columns of white limestone soar upwards into the blue oblivion of the sky...'

*'L'étonnante dégradation de lumière! comme elle s'affaiblit en descendant du haut de cette voûte, sur la longueur de ces colonnes!'*<sup>3</sup>

And now he again, from his film reviews:

'And the Trajan arch frowns down upon the absurdities of modern man.'

And I, from my Diderot:

*'Avec quel étonnement, quelle surprise je regarde cette voûte brisée, les masses surimposées à cette voûte! Les peuples qui ont élevé ce monument, où sont-ils? que sont-ils devenus?'*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "O beautiful, O sublime ruins! How vigorous, and at the same time how light, how sure, how fluent his brush! How effective! how imposing! how noble!"

<sup>3</sup> "What astonishing graduation in the light! How it declines as it descends from the top of that arch down the length of those columns!"

<sup>4</sup> "With what astonishment, with what surprise do I regard that shattered arch, the masses superimposed on that arch! Where are they, the peoples who elevated that monument? What has become of them?"

'The film is in colour, and these magnificent glimpses of the grandeur that was Rome almost justify the futility of the story.'

*'Rien, dans un tableau, n'appelle comme la couleur vraie; elle parle à l'ignorant comme au savant. Un demiconnaisseur passera sans s'arrêter devant un chef-d'oeuvre de dessin, d'expression, de composition; l'oeil n'a jamais négligé la coloriste... C'est un effet merveilleux produit sans efforts. On ne songe pas à l'art. On admire, et c'est de l'admiration même que l'on accorde à la nature.'*<sup>5</sup>

'Your turn, Brutus.'

'All right. This is from a Sunday paper: "I can see no point in beating about the burning bush. To me The Ten Commandments seems a long, dull, vulgar, meretricious, mediocre picture..."

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<sup>5</sup> "Nothing in a painting is as appealing as true colour; it speaks to the ignoramus and the scholar alike. The amateur will not stop to look at a masterpiece of drawing, expression, or composition, but his eyes will always be caught by the colourist... It is a marvellous effect, produced without effort. We do not think about art. We admire, and it is the same admiration that we feel for nature." [BW]

*'C'est pis que jamais. Autre logogriphe plus froid, plus impertinent, plus obscure encore que les precedents.'*<sup>6</sup>

'I won't go so far as to say that it is bogus, because I believe Cecil B. de Mille, whose darling project it is, to have been quite sincere in his intentions. I think he really meant to strike a blow for truth, to fill his audience with spiritual grace, to send them away from the theatre in some way uplifted and improved. It is just unfortunate that he has a limited imagination...'

*'Eh bien, mon ami, y avez-vous jamais rien compris? Ça, mettez votre esprit à la torture, et dites-moi le sens qu'il y a là dedans. Je gage que La Grenée n'en sait pas là-dessus plus que nous. Et puis, qui s'est jamais avisé de montrer la Religion, la Verité, la Justice, les êtres les plus vénérables, les êtres du monde les plus anciens, sous des symboles aussi puérils? De bonne foi, sont-ce là leur caractère, leur expression?'*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "It is worse than ever. Another logogriph even colder, more impertinent, more obscure than its predecessors."

<sup>7</sup> "Well, my friend, have you ever been able to make anything of such stuff? Come, rack your brains, and tell me what meaning it has. I wager La Grenée knows it no more than we do. Moreover, who ever took it into his head to show Religion, Truth, Justice, the most venerable things, the most ancient

'Let me finish my quotation: "It is just unfortunate that he has a limited imagination, is accustomed to work with a dollar index, and can think aloud only in clichés." Now let me hear your Diderot.'

*'Mais, me répond l'artiste, vous ne savez pas que ces vertus sont des dessus de porte pour un receveur général des finances? Je haue les épaules, et je me tais, après avoir dit à M. de La Grenée un petit mot sur le genre allégorique.'*<sup>8</sup>

'Your Diderot is much more long-winded than my reviewer.'

'Yes, he is. In his day, printing was set by hand. So one had plenty of time. Now we use setting machines. So we have to hurry. Time is precious. Amortisation. You can call it: The Paradox of the Printer. Well, but that's enough.'

'How do you mean: enough?'

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things in the world, by means of such puerile symbols? In all good faith, is *that* their character, is *that* their expression?"

<sup>8</sup> "But," the artist replies, "Don't you realize that a tax collector would regard these virtues as little more than luxuries for the leisured classes?" I shrug my shoulders and keep quiet, after having said a word or two about the allegorical genre to M. de La Grenée." [BW]

"I said: enough!"

'Oh, but please read his *L'Accordée de Village* by Greuze. He describes everything there, even the sound track: "*Jeanette est douce et sage; elle fera ton bonheur; songe à faire le sien...*"<sup>9</sup> You will see, it is like a scenario for the "Free Cinema" they show in the National Film Theatre. Lorenza Mazetti, you know, and Paolozzi as Jean, "*un brave garçon, honnête et laborieux*".<sup>10</sup>

"We'll read it tomorrow, Brutus."

'But look, just look at the titles of the pictures in his *SALONS*. They read exactly like a sequence from a film script:

1. *Un commencement d'orage au soleil couchant*
2. *Une tempête*
3. *Un naufrage*
4. *Le fils ingrat*
5. *Une tête de fille*
6. *l'amour menaçant*
7. *Jeune fille qui envoie un baiser*
8. *La mère bienaimée*
9. *Un autre naufrage*

<sup>9</sup> *The Village Bride*. "Jeanette is sweet and pure; she will make you happy; try to make her happy, too..."

<sup>10</sup> "a worthy fellow, honest and industrious".

10. *Le mauvais fils puni*
11. *La jeune fille pleure son oiseau mort*
12. *Trois paysages sous un même numéro*
13. *Le coucher de la mariée*
14. *Une matinee après la pluie...*<sup>11</sup>

'Stop it, Brutus!' 'But you don't see the point! But you don't see the point! Woof! Woof! Woof!' (he barks, and I don't like to see him so excited). 'The point is that the INTERPRETATION ACT, 1889, passed in Parliament that year, outflanked Aristotle long before Bertie Russell did.'

'Brutus! Behave yourself!'

'All right. But listen. In the INTERPRETATION ACT 1889, Parliament decided that "*he*" will also mean "*she*" if the person talked about is a female, and that the *singular* will also mean the *plural* and vice versa, which breaks the most fundamental assumptions of Aristotelian philosophy, but is all right if you think that Existence should be asserted only of Description, —and in 1932, the High Court decided that "*road*" includes the *foot-way* as well as

<sup>11</sup> 1. The beginning of a storm at sunset; 2. A tempest; 3. A shipwreck; 4. The ungrateful son; 5. Head of a girl; 6. The threatening love; 7. Girl who sends a kiss; 8. The beloved mother; 9. Another shipwreck; 10. The wicked son punished; 11. The girl weeps for her dead bird; 12. Three landscapes with the same number; 13. The bride's bedtime; 14. Morning after rain.

the *carriage-way*, and you know that while for the purpose of spending money a wife's earnings are *her* income, for the purpose of the Income Tax Inspector your wife's earnings are *your* income; —Thus, for the purpose of the Frame-Maker and the Colour-Merchant, Greuze and Gérard and Girodet and Gros belong to the same category as Picasso and Braque and Nicholson and Bacon; —But if you happen to think that Existence should be asserted only of Descriptions, then the analysis of the Descriptions produced by Diderot, and by the Film Reviewers will force you to conclude that XVIIIth century French painting belongs to the same category as XXth century Film and Glorious Technicolor. I mean that their paintings were for the public not what your paintings are for you, but what films are for you. While modern painting beginning, let's say, with Seurat...

'For heaven's sake, Brutus, stop it.' (I command)  
'You are quite feverish.!' But he doesn't listen to me.

'Have you read your Poincaré?' (he asks)

'I'll tell you tomorrow. Now calm down, and...'

'Well,' (he snarls), 'Poincaré said Mathematics is the art of giving the same name to different things.'

'You can tell me about it tomorrow.'

'But you see his meaning, don't you? He means that the same regularities occur in various places which used to be considered entirely different. Such places as the orbits of planets, the shells of snails, Harvey's Mathematical Models, and Henry Moore's or Barbara Hepworth's sculpture. And as mathematics is...'

'Leave it till tomorrow, Brutus, please,' I say. But he goes on:

'...and as mathematics is the study of all possible regularities that can be recognized by your —or my! —mind...'

'Brutus!' (I interrupt him). 'Look at your hindlegs!' He's frightfully excited. Barks impatiently, and says: 'I can prove to you that both Cubism and Social Realism contain regularities that occur in the outward aspect of the new industrial landscape, and Pop-Art is the industrial townscape's sentimental, naïve, naturalistic ANGELUS, I mean Jean-François Millet...'

'You will prove it to me tomorrow.'



'...while both Mondrians and Action Painting contain regularities which occur in the mind of those chaps you call physicists, and...'

'Tomorrow!'

'You'll see, I'll bite out of *DISCOVERY*, or *NATURE*, or *The New Scientist*, some pictures and show them to you alongside some photographs from the West End art gallery catalogues, and you won't know which comes from where. And I can prove to you that the regularities the physicists are finding in Nature were first discovered by painters...'

'Shut up!'

'...and if the painters hadn't discovered them first, the physicists couldn't possibly have recognized them as regularities even if they were gaping at them through their telescopes and microscopes for bloody centuries!'

'Brutus!'

'And the nameless regularities painters are discovering today, scientists will be discovering tomorrow...'

I jump off my couch:

"Brutus, that's enough! We shall go for a walk now." We climb down the stairs, —and now, as we come to the front door, he whispers:

"Listen!"

He is not allowed to talk in the street. Imagine the sensation it would create. Not so much among Englishmen as among other dogs. Hence it is agreed between us that if he has something to tell me he will do so before I open the front door. And so I bend nearer to him and say:

"Yes?"

"Listen," (he repeats, in a very low voice) "Do you remember the passage Diderot wrote about Boucher?"

*"Je ne sais que dire de cet homme-ci. La dégradation du goût, de la couleur, de la composition, des caractères, de l'expression, du dessin, a suivi pas à pas la dégradation des mœurs. Que voulez-vous que cet artiste jette sur la toile? ce qu'il a dans l'imagination; et que peut avoir dans l'imagination un homme qui passe sa vie avec les prostituées du plus bas état?"*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> "I don't know what to say about that fellow. The degradation of his taste, of his colour, of his composition, of his characters, of his expression, of his

'Well, Brutus. What about it?'

'Well... Can you tell me what is, exactly, "*une prostituée*"?'

'Well... I don't think I can tell you exactly. But approximately, it is a female who is a female as a profession.'

'A human female, or a canine female?'

'A human.'

'Well... And what about canine ones?'

'All right, Brutus.' (I say, opening the door). 'I'll think about it.'

The street is soot black and sodium-light yellow. Both the carriage-way and the foot-way. Bicycles and bipeds, quadricycles and quadrupeds, move along in the black and yellow darkness and display their applications of some few regularities in nature.

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drawing, has followed, step by step, the degradation of his morals. What can such an artist throw upon his canvas? —What is in his imagination; and what can there be in the imagination of a man who spends his life with prostitutes of the lowest type?"

I look at the base of a lamp-post, and realize that ever since his nose has got connected with the less developed part of his brain, Brutus is not able to tell a bitch from a dog until he *sees* her.

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## LINES & WORDS & THE THEMERSONS

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 of 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 are 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 explained 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, behaviour 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 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 *œuvres*, independent and collaborative, treat matters of gravity with a seductive levity.



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