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This is a transcription rewritten from notes of a seminar on typography held in the library at the Museum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland, on the occasion of *The Themersons and the Avant-Garde* (February 22–May 5, 2013). As the group and room were quite small, an unusually lenient librarian let us pass around various bits and pieces from the museum's Themerson archive—an intimacy that allowed for the sort of close reading and careful scrutiny that the talk was out to advocate.

Cover: Detail from Stefan Themerson, *Apollinaire's Lyrical Ideograms* (London: Gaberbocchus, 1968).

This seminar concerns the work of the polymathic Polish couple Stefan and Franciszka Themerson. He was a philosophically inclined writer; she an astute artist and graphic designer. In 1930s Warsaw they worked together on children's books and experimental films before moving to Paris, soon being forced apart by the War. They eventually reunited and settled in London, where they established the staunchly independent Gaberbocchus Press, an avant-garde publishing imprint through which most of their subsequent work was channeled.

To give you a quick taste of their demeanor, here's a telegram he once sent to cheer her up:

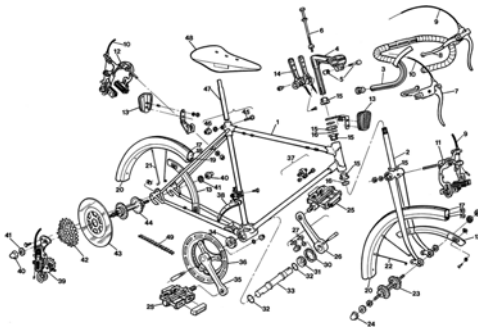
**LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL STOP PLEASE ALLOW FEATURES
ASSUME EXPRESSION INDICATIVE OF AMUSEMENT JOY
PLEASURE BENEVOLENCE ETCETERA BY DRAWING UP
CORNERS OF MOUTH AND GENERALLY RELAXING FACIAL
MUSCLES STOP LOVE FOR ALL = STEFAN**



Now, the modest stack of folders and packets that comprise the Themerson archive here in the museum library are littered with bits of ephemera. That's the technical term for those miscellaneous pieces of print such as announcements, invitations, pamphlets, and promotional material that gather in the margins of the so-called real work, meaning the books, films, drawings, paintings, costumes, masks and so forth on display a few streets away in the gallery.

As the name suggests, ephemera is designed for — and often on — the spur of the moment. Like a telegram, it isn't really meant to last, so it's somewhat paradoxical that this sort of material has been carefully archived for posterity. Thankfully so, as it tells us a lot about the Themersons' attitude and approach, about their colorful humor. I want to take a closer look at this minor miscellany and think about the ways in which it both feeds and extends their major artworks, and vice versa. In fact, in their case I think the distinction is moot — and that it's precisely this lack of distinction which makes their oeuvre persuasive and illuminating.

I often think of the Themersons' output as “publishing in its most exploded sense,” though I have in mind two distinct connotations of “exploded.” The first is an expanded idea of what publishing — literally making things public — could mean: not only magazines and books, or PDFs and websites, but equally readings, performances, films, animations, and even talks like the one you're listening to right now. As for the second, picture the sort of diagram that shows the constituent parts of, say, a bicycle, while simultaneously projecting how they all fit together. While you clearly see these separate bits and pieces, you can equally perceive what the bike will look like when sucked back into the final assembly.



Imagine the bicycle as a publishing house — one for whom “house” is as pertinent as “publishing,” one that deems all its component parts

equally important, however ostensibly insignificant or supplementary; and yet also one that is just as preoccupied with the SUM of those parts—with the imprint of the imprint, so to speak. Both senses of exploded imply questioning the platitudes of publishing, which is one of the things the Themersons and their Gaberbocchus Press were all about.

A couple of years ago I saw the German critic Diedrich Diederichsen speak about the artist Martin Kippenberger's work in terms of two broken joke structures: (1) the endless shaggy dog story that rolls on and on without a punchline; and (2) the joke that ends with the same punchline repeated over and over again. Kippenberger, he said, similarly conceived his work as an endless chain, in the sense that each new piece became the premise for making the next: a painting painted as one of a series to be exhibited in a gallery to be advertised by a poster to be collected into in a book of posters to be announced by a postcard and so on and so on. Kippenberger also once asserted that he'd rather be a comma than a full stop. Wonderful.

According to Diederichsen, this career mechanism conflates both types of broken joke, i.e. (1) the same generating principle on repeat, in view of (2) perpetuating an incessant stream of work. Constituent of this attitude, he went on, Kippenberger worked without any sense of hierarchy between media, so painting and postcard were on equal terms in this unusually egalitarian body of work.

I want to keep this anecdote in mind as we sift through the Themersons' work. When the same sensibility plays out in diverse circumstances and multiple mediums, the character that runs through the accumulating body of work—its essential identity, its peculiar charm—is offset in greater relief and therefore easier to grasp. One of the guardians of the Themerson archive in London, Nick Wadley, recalled that when he finally met the couple after having been familiar with their Gaberbocchus books for some time, he was shocked to discover how completely the couple's character mirrored their publications' personality. "Subtle, wise and funny," he summed up, "affectionate, ridiculous, merciless, and moral." This is especially true if we manage to ignore the usual class

system that separates upper-case Art from lower-case artifacts and simply treat it all as the product of a singular spirit.

Be warned: I'll be using the term "ephemera" very broadly here, and there are a few anomalies that aren't technically ephemera at all. To compensate, I have a handful of other terms that might help situate this stuff in the general scheme of things. The French literary theorist Gérard Genette coined the word "paratext" in the 1980s to refer to those bits of language surrounding—or parallel to—a main text, that serve to present it. The paratextual zone, says Genette, is one "not just of transition but of transaction." It is "the privileged site of a pragmatics and of a strategy, of an action on the public in the service ... of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading—more pertinent, naturally, in the eyes of the author and his allies."

This baggy definition circumscribes any number of supporting devices within the physical bounds of a book, including the author's name, running heads, contents list, illustrations, footnotes, index, preface, and cover blurb. The overarching concept of paratext also covers material in some way related to the text yet published apart from it at other times or in other places, which includes biographies, autobiographies, articles and interviews. A paratext is something outside the main body that the author has had a role in or otherwise consented to. It might add sense or authority to the "main" work, or simply just publicize it. And so with a little artistic license, I want to transpose the relationship between texts and their paratexts to Gaberbocchus books and their ephemera.

ITEM:

Our first example is a newspaper profile of Stefan based on an interview of sorts with a beleaguered journalist called John Hall cut from the February 27, 1971 issue of *The Guardian*. Themerson had an extremely low opinion of the biography genre. A close friend and collaborator once sent along a draft précis of Themerson's life and work for approval, and instead received this typically curt if not altogether unhelpful response:

Mixture of biographic data & personal reminiscences [...] I do not like that kind of literary research which consists in finding bits of author's life & ad hoc connecting them with some bits of his work. It seems to me essentially nonscientific, prejudicial, irrelevant, misleading, & altogether too easy.

He went on to add that he should prefer to learn some irreverent things about a character in one of his novels than some irrelevant things about its author, and elsewhere unequivocally sniffed “bibliography is my biography.” I’d go even further and suggest that Themerson’s work in general is so radically idiosyncratic as to manifest an exceptional degree of character. In any case, given this disdain for literary biography it’s no surprise to learn that John Hall’s supposedly objective profile ends up markedly fraught, snagged somewhere between Themerson’s presumably reluctant consent to a little welcome publicity for Gaberbocchus, and his reflex refusal to play along with commonplace journalistic formulas. Certainly a conventional advertorial gloss wouldn’t do any of their publications justice. And sure enough, Themerson’s obstreperousness yields a seriously off-kilter profile that ends up as sharp and illuminating as anything else that emerged from the Press.

His strategy is to deflect all of Hall’s questions, obliging the interviewer more or less to answer them himself in order to give his readers first an idea about WHAT the work is (already no easy task), then WHY. As it happens, Hall acquits himself quite admirably by distilling a few of his subject’s dense and often obtuse works via a series of well-executed pastiches of his subject’s stylistic conceits.

The article begins, for instance, with a police-style interrogation —a recurring narrative device in a number of Themerson’s novels. Then Hall describes him putting a match to his habitual pipe via a satirical technique of Themerson’s called “semantic translation” that involves replacing stock phrases with their full-blown dictionary definitions.¹

Then he gets annoyed:

Stefan Themerson is a kindly, thoughtful speaker who tends to substitute nodding ruminant smiles for answers, which makes for restful afternoons, but lousy interviews. That is, when you have a preconceived notion of what an interview should be; like for example when you think it might kick off with some reference to the writer's origins and past history. He replies: "That is not important; what matters is what I am now." Allowing that this is water under the bridge, might Mr. Themerson say what sorts of things he has been attempting to say and do, which have required such a diverse output? (Being the second in a series of preconceived notions about interviews.) Answer: "That is for you to tell me, because I'm just doing things and I'd like somebody to tell me what I'm doing." Mr. Themerson and I nod and smile ruminantly in unison. OK I give in. How is an interview supposed to run?

Stefan muses:

"If I wish to learn something about a strange animal, I go along to the zoo and I observe that animal in its cage. But I do not ask for its own observations upon itself ..."

And Hall counters that this particular rhetorical manoeuvre recalls the pedantic deadpan of a convoluted essay on logic and ethics by Themerson called *Factor T*—which of course obliges him to flesh out the reference once again. By now the pattern is set: the interviewer writes himself out of the holes left by the interviewee's refusal to play along.

But I don't think Themerson is merely being arrogant here. There's a generosity to his contrarian stance that's common among the Gaberbocchus roster, coaxing readers and critics alike into thinking for themselves, steering clear of the lazy lapse into cliché. This sounds too severe, as the imprint's work is on the whole captivating and frequently hilarious—only not straightforwardly so, and not in a necessarily convenient or comfortable way either. Audiences are invited to reorient themselves and in doing so become **affected**: connections are made, perceptions tilted. The Gaberbocchus mandate was always to pass on past and present ways of thinking at odds with the mainstream, and to this end they were pointedly provocative. It's even apparent in the

obligatory headshot that accompanies the *Guardian* profile: the camera at arm's length angled sharply upwards to snap a barely legible selfie, subverting the stereotype to the extent that attitude trumps image.

ITEM:

Next I want to quickly pass round this simple folded yellow sheet that grandly declares itself an “unnecessary supplement” to a handful of Franciszka’s wry cartoons of men interacting with abstract sculptural forms and machines. In case the faux-auxiliary conceit is unclear, a subtitle adds that it’s “for those who like their pictures to be attended by a discourse of reason” — a discourse that amounts to one pithy maxim per image, each quoting some kindred spirit on philosophies of mind and spirit, and by no means disposable:

11. When it is abstracted from the commonplace world of everyday life, the Ego longs for a deeper and more authentic existence.
(Nicholas Berdyaev)

18. While the old method of presenting truths in the abstract has been falling out of use, there has been a corresponding adoption of the new method of presenting them in the concrete. (Herbert Spencer)

20. That different people have different purposes is an empirical matter of fact. (A.J. Ayer)

22. It is a fact that human beings do not solve problems unless they are put to them in a very drastic way. (J.D. Bernal)

We can conclude, then, that this supposedly superfluous sheet is really only *disguised* as ephemera. Its proper place is firmly tucked inside the booklet where it indeed tethers Franciszka’s ambiguous abstractions to concrete meanings — if the reader is so inclined. And by emphasizing the option, the “supplement” wryly points out that the drawings can naturally be read in different ways, winking at our general discomfort with open interpretation. In sum, this little leaflet acknowledges its own ostensibly secondary status in order to call that status into question.

UNNECESSARY SUPPLEMENT

to
Gaberbocchus Black Series No. 3
i.e.

THE WAY IT WALKS by FRANCISZKA THEMERSON



*Especially Compiled for Those who like their
Pictures to be Attended by a Discourse
of Reason*

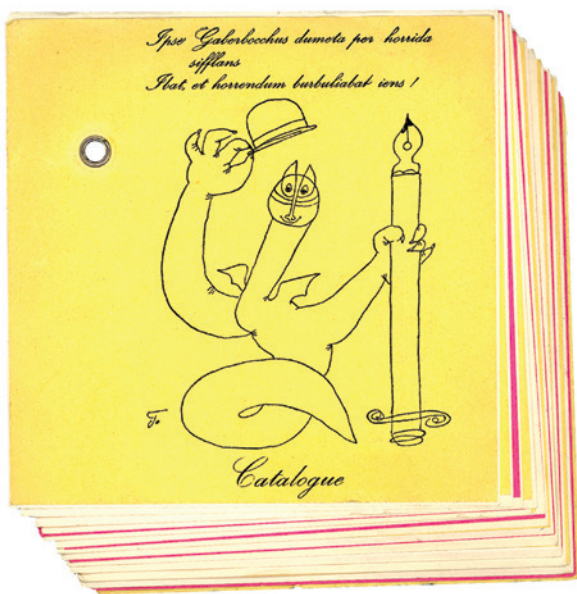
ITEM:

These next two pieces show alternate ways of giving form to what's basically the same information. As a typography student I frequently worked on projects that involved everyone in the class dealing with the same raw material (same text, same images, same context, same audience) to be turned into the same thing (a plausible timetable or poster or magazine or signage system, whatever). Recently, though, I've noticed that design schools have become allergic to this type of homogeneous class project, now usurped by the solipsistic personal one. That's unfortunate, because whereas group projects afford a whole class the considerable benefit of seeing the same basic matter designed in different ways, the personal project tends to answer only to itself. The fact that it's conceived in a relative vacuum precludes the possibility of observing and speaking together about why certain works worked and others didn't—including debating what "working" might mean in each new case. In short, direct comparison affords the opportunity to make work that's more *answerable.*

That said, all I really want to show with these two documents is how, despite being very different, they both remain entirely Themersonian. Both are modest catalogs of Gaberbocchus publications that I imagine were intended for prospective readers and booksellers alike. The first is a pale yellow sheet printed black on one side, with the Press's inventory turned into a cartoon scroll by Franciszka's familiar line. This list is flanked on the left by a matrix that sorts the roster according to category, and on the right by the cost of hard- and softcover editions if still in print. It's a quietly exemplary piece of information design that articulates a considerable amount of data in a small space without fuss and in an entirely accessible manner.

The second instance is a more conspicuously inventive stack of square slips of colored paper, each minutely offset from the last and fixed with a rivet to exaggerate the pile's very shallow three dimensions—like an axonometric projection of Post-it notes. The individual panels announce old and new books, interspersed with Franciszka's bibliographic doodles and fronted by the imprint's louche dragon mascot.

			Gaberbochus		Established 1948	
			(Publishers)			
					Hard	Soft
F	H	A	ABANDON SPA HOT SPRINGS, a short story by John Conrad Russell, with drawings by the Author		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	A LINE IN TIME, 27 drawings by Beverly Jackson Huddleston		OUT OF PRINT	
E	F	PA	A METAPHYSICAL REVERIE, two philosophical essays by Axel Stern, with drawings by Jean Krille		OUT OF PRINT	
F	P	A	AN ASIATIC ROMANCE, a novel by C. H. Sisson		£1.50	£1.50
F	P	A	APOLLINAIRE'S LYRICAL IDEOGRAMS, an essay on his 'caligrammes', by Stefan Thomerson, illustrated		(new edition)	£0.80
F	P	A	BAYAMUS, and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry, a novel by Stefan Thomerson		£0.80	£0.80
F	P	A	BOODY RESPONSES (preceded by Other Poems & followed by Footnotes), by George Buchanan, illustrated		£0.80	£0.80
F	P	A	CAMILLE RENAULT (1866-1954) WORLD-MAKER, reproductions of his work. Text by J. H. Saintmont. Translation and presentation by Stanley Chouin		OUT OF PRINT	
F	D	P	CARDINAL PLOTUOD, a novel by Stefan Thomerson		£1.50	£0.80
F	P	P	COMEDY, SATIRE, IRONY & DEEPER MEANING, a play in 3 acts by Christian Dietrich Grabbe, English version by Barbara Wright, Drawings & Collages by Dr. S. Willoughby		£2.10	
F	P	P	CONFIDENTIAL REPORT (and Other Poems), by James Laughlin		£0.80	
F	P	P	CONVERSATION WITH STRANGERS (Poems and Notes), by George Buchanan		£0.80	
F	P	PA	DAY OFF, a short story by Patrick Fetherston, with drawings by Patrick Hayman		OUT OF PRINT	
F	P	PA	EUROPA, English translation of the Polish futurist poem (1925) by Anatol Stern, faithfully reproduced with illustrations and layout by Mirosław Sroczyński and cover by Teresa Zarowicz, preface by Oswald Blakeston, introduction by Michael Narewicz; also photographs from film 'Europa' (1930).		£1.50	
E	H	A	EXERCISES IN STYLE, by Raymond Queneau. Translation and preface by Barbara Wright, illustrated		£1.50	
E	F	PA	FACTOR T (followed by Beliefs, tethered and untethered, and The phenomena of fear), essays by Stefan Thomerson. ('new edition')		£0.80	
E	F	PA	FINGERS, a story by Oswald Blakeston, Drawings by Herbert Jones		£1.50	£0.80
E	F	PA	GIMANI, (Gide, Marx, Nietzsche), by Edmund Heaford. A journal and the diary of the Author's thoughts		£1.50	
E	H	A	GREEK SEACOCK, an autobiography (1st vol.) by George Buchanan. (Cf. 'Morning Papers')		£1.50	£0.80
E	H	A	HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN EPIGRAM, a new edition by Bertrand Russell, illustrated by Franciszka Thomerson		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	JANKEL KOLER (An Artist seen from one of many possible angles), an essay by Stefan Thomerson with twelve monographs by Jankel Adler		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	KURT SCHWITTERS IN ENGLAND (1940-1948), an essay by Stefan Thomerson, with photographs, reproductions and poems by Kurt Schwitters		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	MONKEY POEMS, poems by Eugene Walter, illustrated		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	MORNING PAPERS, an autobiography (2nd vol.) by George Buchanan. (Cf. 'Green Seacock')		£1.50	
E	H	A	PASS THE POISON SEPARATELY, a new mystery by Oswald Blakeston		IN PREP	
E	H	A	PIN (and the Story of PIN), by Rudolf Hausmann and Kurt Schwitters, introduced by Jasia Richards, designed by Anna Lovell, illustrated		£1.50	
E	H	A	PROFESSOR MAMA'S LECTURE, a novel by Stefan Thomerson, with a preface by Bertrand Russell		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	SAINT FRANCIS AND THE WOLF OF GUBBIO (Brother Francis Lamb Chop), an Opera in 2 acts. Text and music by Stefan Thomerson, illustrated		£3.00	
E	H	A	SEMANTIC DIVERTISSEMENTS, a confluence of drawings by Franciszka and text by Stefan Thomerson		£1.50	
E	H	A	SINGERIE SONGERIE, a poetic Masque by Eugene Walter, illustrated by Zev		£1.50	
E	H	A	SOME ARE MORE HUMAN THAN OTHERS, a sketch-book of drawings and words by Steve Smith		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	SPECIAL BRANCO, a philosophical dialogue by Stefan Thomerson		£1.50	
E	H	A	THE ADVENTURES OF PEDDY BOTTOM, a book for children by Stefan Thomerson, illustrated by Franciszka Thomerson		£0.80	
E	H	A	THE CROWN AND THE FABLE, a poetic sequence by Hugo Manning		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	THE EAGLE & THE FOX & THE FOX & THE EAGLE, (Esop), two semantically symmetrical versions and a revised application, presented and illustrated by Franciszka Thomerson		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	THE FIRST DOZEN, a collection of Gaberbochus Black Series		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	THE GABERBOCHUS INDEPENDENT, a broadsheet 1956		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	THE GOOD CITIZEN'S ALPHABET, by Bertrand Russell, with 28 drawings by Franciszka Thomerson		(new edition)	£1.50
E	H	A	THE NIGHT'S MOVES, a thriller by Oswald Blakeston		£0.80	
E	H	A	THE QUEST FOR CORRETT, a radio-play by Harold Lang & Kenneth Tynan, illustrated by Franciszka Thomerson		£3.10	
E	H	A	THE SHAPES OF THE RIVER, a book of colour monographs by Gwen Barnard, with text by Eugene Walter		£3.10	
E	H	A	THE SONG OF BRIGHT MISERY, (Le Poème de la Misère Claire), Suite d'Images accompagnées d'un texte explicatif et cadence, by Pal Dives, with English translation by Barbara Wright, and preface by Stefan Thomerson, illustrated by Barbara Wright		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	THE TRIGIAN HORSE & At the Edge of the Forest, two short stories by Raymond Queneau, translated by Barbara Wright, illustrated by Franciszka Thomerson		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	THE TRUE LIFE OF SPOKENEY TODD, a collage novel by Colette de Charny		£3.40	
E	H	A	THE WAY IT WALKS, a book of cartoons accompanied by Unnecessary Supplements, by Franciszka Thomerson		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	THIS ROOM BEFORE SUNRISE, poetic prose by Hugo Manning		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	THREE DAYS AFTER BLASPHEMES, poems by Patrick Fetherston, with 4 drawings by Anne Davison		£1.00	£0.80
E	H	A	TOM HARRIS, a novel by Stefan Thomerson		£1.50	
E	H	A	TRACES OF LIVING, a selection of drawings by Franciszka Thomerson, with a preface by Edward Lucie-Smith, and text in French by Lucy Texeira		£3.10	
E	H	A	UBI UNO, a drama in 5 acts by Alfred Jarry, Preface and translation by Barbara Wright, Drawings by Franciszka Thomerson. ('new ed')		£3.10	£1.50
E	H	A	VERSIONS AND PERVERSIONS OF HEINE, by C. H. Sisson, illustrated		OUT OF PRINT	
E	H	A	WODOFF WODOFF or Who Killed Richard Wagner, a story by Stefan Thomerson		(new ed.)	£0.80
			Gaberbochus Press Ltd, 42a, Formosa St., London, W.9.			



The paper mechanics are quintessentially Gaberbocchus: an entirely homegrown operation (initially in the basement of the Themersons' house in North London, later moved to a building around the corner), the Press circumvented the standardizing influence of the regular printing trade. As their ideas didn't need to be transmitted to a third party via written, graphic or spoken instructions, nothing was lost in translation. Instead, stuff was designed reflexively at the source, in view of the technology that was about to reproduce it and therefore manifestly ad hoc. Whoever made these brochures clearly had a good time doing so, as they carry the same sense of knockabout experiment as the books they advertise — a sensibility, in fact, that seems less applied (as we might say of an institutional "identity" today) than *deposited.*

ITEM:

I suspect that Stefan's pen was responsible for this handwritten blue-printed flyer, apparently written in response to a letter of complaint from one Lady Celia, who asserts that Gaberbocchus books are high-minded, elitist, and generally too arrogantly avant-garde for the common herd. The letter is possibly real, possibly fictional, and I'd guess most likely a blend of the two. In any case, the director responds:

Dear Lady Celia,

You are quite right — and at the same time, quite wrong. You are right when you say that we are not your cup of tea. And you are wrong in assuming that we want to be your usual cup of tea. We have so far been successful at least in restricting our publishing ventures to what we like to publish, and we hope to continue that way ...

In order to explain the name Gaberbocchus, he launches into Lewis Carroll's nonsense argot Jabberwocky, which leads into another advert:

Yet before you snicker-snack your vorpal blade through our body, we advise you to borrow from your Public Library our new book, written by an illustrious Pedant, and illustrated by a wretched Nincompoop.

31, King's Road, Chelsea,
London, S.W.3.

Dear Lady Celia,

You are quite right - and at the same time, quite wrong. You are right when you say that we are not your cup of tea. And you are wrong in assuming that we want to be your usual cup of tea. We have so far been successful at least in restricting our publishing ventures to what we like to publish, and we hope to continue that way - per horrida sifflans. You see, we have eyes of flame. That is why our name is Gaberbocchus. It comes from the Latin translation of Lewis Carroll's: The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame... If you wish, and if you can, you may slay us, and let the porogues again be all mimsy, and the mome raths outgabled. Yet, before you snicker-snack your vorpal blade through our body, we advise you to borrow from your Public Library our new book, written by an illustrious Pedant, and illustrated by a wretched Nincompoop. You will find the definitions of these two words - and of 24 others - in the book. It is The Good Citizen's Alphabet, by Bertrand Russell, and for all its lightheartedness it is also a flaming indictment of silly notions. It has a preface which, like all the definitions, is pictorially interpreted by Franciszka Themerson. 56 pp., 9" x 7", cloth, 8/6 net. (Unless you want to pay two and a half guineas; then you will receive one of 100 copies printed on hand made paper, specially bound, and signed by Bertrand Russell.)

We must confess that The Good Citizen's Alphabet is the frontal incisor of our jaws that bite - the sharpest of our claws that catch. But beware the jabberwock, my Lady! We still have other weapons in store to provoke you with. One of them was first devised in 1888 by a French schoolboy. He is dead, so you may quite safely consider his work a classic. André Gide thought it was: "The most extraordinary thing seen in the Theatre for a long time." Of our translation of this riotous drama,

You will find the definitions of these two words — and of 24 others — in the book. It is The Good Citizen's Alphabet by Bertrand Russell, and for all its lightheartedness it is also a flaming indictment of silly notions. It has a preface which, like all the definitions, is pictorially interpreted by Franciszka Themerson. 56 pp., 9" x 7", cloth, 8/6 net.

Again, it's a mundane publicity task turned into a game that generates a useful text, not unlike the challenge imposed on the *Guardian* hack. Stefan continues to address Celia's accusations with passing reference to as wide a range of Gaberbocchus publications as possible, simultaneously inventorizing AND advertising (a) the Press's backlist, (b) its comic disposition, and (c) the outraged Lady's prejudices. Three birds with one stone!

Perhaps it may be as well to tell you that what we do is not a millionaire's fancy. We are just taking advantage of the freedom provided by the private enterprise that still exists within the publishing world in this country, defying as we can the laws of economics and paying the full price for our barbarous pleasures.

Like those two previous booklists, the overtly "domestic" style here doesn't come across as STYLIZED. That's to say, it doesn't strain to look amateurish. It simply is what it is: a casual, expedient means of announcing the books with a bit of impromptu blurb that reads less like marketing, more like a limbering up to write something else.

ITEM:

Here's another quick flyer to advertise Stefan's *Factor T*, visibly patched together on pale blue from a bunch of different reviews and a summary cartoon diagram. Yet again it's plain to see how the particular premise (a collection of clippings) suggests a particular form (a collage). The previous item looked like a letter from the publisher, which is what it was. This one looks like an assembly of others' opinions, which is what it is: things being what they are, so-called ephemera.

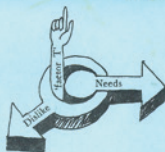
Stefan Themerson

factor T

followed by

Beliefs, tethered and untethered

The pheromones of fear



Beliefs (written in 1952) and *factor T* (written in 1953-1955) were first published in 1956 in *Gaberbocchus Black Series*; also in 1958 in *The First Dozen*. A fragment was published in *Literary Guide* in 1955. *The Pheromones of Fear* (entitled: *Will the discovery of a lead us to ethiophysics?*) appeared first in *The Scientist Speculator*, an anthology edited by Dr. I. J. Good and published in 1962 by William Heinemann Ltd.

Gaberbocchus Press, Ltd.,
42a, Formosa Street, London W.9.

Extracts from reviews (of the first edition):

- 1 This is a brilliant little essay, evidently written by a kind of mind that is all too rare. Factor T is the tragedy that results from Needs plus Dislike of what is needed—when it is vitally necessary to do what one vitally dislikes. ... The quality of the writing is delightful, the author clear and cogent in logic and psychology. ... it abounds in excellent sidelights. ... that especially philosophers of science should enjoy. ... And the essay may be said to contain a fundamental theory of psychology having affinities with Freud and Plato. These are good chromosomes to be endowed with, ...

2 The approach is that of contemporary British analysis, and the style has a refreshing novelty.

- 3 entertaining and stimulating.

4 Thought-provoking essays in social psychology and semantics. Brilliant style.

5 a penetrating, subtle essay by Mr. Stefan Themerson, in which he examines some rational and religious attitudes, and gently but firmly detaches us from our feather-bed of beliefs. *Factor T* considers, in particular, the "tragic discrepancy between our dislike of killing and the necessity of doing so", and it is most salutary reading.

6 Le «facteur T» («T pour «tragédie»»), c'est le conflit entre l'aver-sion innée de l'homme pour certains actes et la nécessité vitale d'accom-plir ces actes: le prototype de ces actes est «tuer». L'auteur se livre à une analyse des réactions psychiques de l'homme devant cette tragédie, et arrive à la conclusion qu'elle est le seul fait concret susceptible de fournir une base concrète à l'éthique: devant ce fait la «révélation» n'est que fantaisie, et le rationalisme préjugé. En somme, observe-t-il, ce seul fait concret étant de nature affective, les religions marquent un point sur le rationalisme, puisqu'elles basent leur éthique sur des con-sidérations purement affectives.

La deuxième partie étudie la distinction entre savoir et croyance, le premier ayant sa source dans des valeurs objectives, et la seconde étant essentiellement arbitraire et absolue. Par des considérations où apparaît l'influence de B. Russel, l'auteur note que bien des affirmations où l'on croit devoir introduire le verbe «croire» ressortissent en fait à la con-naissance. Et il se trouve ainsi ramené au «facteur T», qui est du domaine de la connaissance, tandis que «dignité humaine» et «prima-tat de la raison» ne sont que croyances.

S. Themerson a un don pour exposer des idées profondes de façon vivante; son style imagé et plein d'humour lui permet de se faire com-prendre facilement sans longs discours; la lecture est de ce fait très agréable, et il n'est nul besoin d'être philosophe professionnel pour suivre l'auteur.

- 1 The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science
- 2 The Review of Metaphysics (Yale Univ.)
- 3 Australasian Journal of Philosophy
- 4 The American Rationalist (Chicago)
- 5 The Guardian
- 6 The Dublin Magazine
- 7 Athenaeum

ITEM:

Now for a more involved example; namely, an essay with the dual title “A well-justified postscript ... Topographical typography,” in which Stefan reflects on how typography influences reading. It’s the last piece in the 1965 edition of the *Penrose Annual*, a yearly collection of essays on the graphic arts. Specifically, the document I’m holding here is a complimentary “run on” copy of Themerson’s article, a discrete signature occasionally offered as a courtesy to authors. I mention this only to flag again the fact that it’s not literally or technically ephemeral—but certainly an orphan format.

The first half of the title is a play on the term “justified text,” which is when consecutive lines are forced to correspond in (visual) length by inserting different amounts of space between the words. This results in a squared-up block of type, like most of the excerpts on the blue *Factor T* flyer. Conversely, when text is “unjustified,” the spaces between words are all identical and lines left to run their own length. This yields an irregular or “ragged” edge on one side, usually the right—like the text you’re reading right now.

To digress a little, probably the most celebrated and loaded debate in the history of typography is that of “symmetrical” versus “asymmetrical” layout, the crux of which is compressed into two articles published a few months apart in a Swiss design journal immediately after the Second World War. The first was a statement by the eminent German typographer Jan Tschichold, followed by a loosely veiled rejoinder by the equally eminent Swiss polymath Max Bill. In the postwar context, their apparently harmless aesthetic spat was unusually charged with more broadly ethical overtones.

Tschichold was and still is regarded as the godfather of modern typography, largely due to his books *Die neue Typographie* (1928) and *Typographische Gestaltung* (1935), which remain the ur-arguments for asymmetry. The premise of asymmetric typography is that words and pictures ought not be arranged according to some idea of pleasing composition (e.g. a “classically balanced page”) but actively configured

A well-justified postscript . . .

to emphasize their specific meaning. However, Tschichold drifted from this early hardline, and in a 1946 article renounced his earlier pronouncements as being too extreme, advocating instead the values of conventional etiquette, balance, and order. Meanwhile, Bill steadfastly renounced such traditional views on principle, in favor of an approach that blended Tschichold's earlier doctrine with the cool austerity of industrial aesthetics. Crudely summarized, then, symmetry capitulated to conventions, while asymmetry started from scratch in each new case.²

Although never addressed in Tschichold's early work, the question of justified versus unjustified setting effectively distills the same debate. Justified text conforms to symmetrical tendencies inasmuch as it forces any text into a classically established, orthodox frame, while unjustified text conforms to asymmetrical ones inasmuch as it allows text to run its own "natural" course and so determine its own shape. As typographer Robin Kinross has noted, "the social implications are obvious."

Unjustified setting was the modernist party line on two main counts: it broke from tradition, and it was rational. However, contrary to what we might readily expect from someone who was wholly aligned with the European avant-garde and a rare catalyst of modernist ideas in Britain, Themerson's "well-justified postscript" actually sets out arguing the case FOR justification. His reasoning has nothing to do with abstract principles of balance or geometric order, nor with upholding traditional values, but the far more prosaic fact that conventions are shared codes that can usefully frame the text the reader is about to read. It's a testament to his unwaveringly independent thinking.

Written in dialogue, the piece begins with a Stefan-like protagonist opening a book, reading a line, and slamming it shut. A second character, Brutus, asks him why he's so upset:

"Because it is prose."

"And you expected it to be what? Poetry?"

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because of its layout. A silly new fashion: unjustified setting. I wonder who could justify it.”

“Surely, this isn’t of such great importance ...,” he began.

“It isn’t,” I agreed. “All the same, I’m used to it that, when I open a book, I can tell at once, without reading a word — ‘O, this is a novel; and that one is a play. Here is pure mathematics and there is a musical score. This is a dictionary, that is a telephone book, and that other one is a volume of poetry.’ Now because of unjustified setting all that is no more possible, something essential has been destroyed.”

The melodrama continues as this distraught reader proclaims, first, that only justified setting affords a page of prose a unique gestalt or “face” (to the extent, he claims, that a page of Hemingway is immediately distinct from a page of Proust); second, that justified columns foster easier reading by virtue of being invisible, justified ones disruptively draw attention to their unruly presence; and third, that the line ending has always been one of poetry’s prime “weapons” — the power of which will diminish with this recent vogue for ragged lines.

On the other hand, the story equally posits that such conventions CAN be usefully broken, as the protagonist proceeds to demonstrate an extreme form of unjustified setting called Internal Vertical Justification, or IVJ — another technique that repeatedly crops up in Stefan’s wider body of work. IVJ takes the idea of active, asymmetric layout to radical ends. It is entirely at odds with the premise of justification, which arranges language at the level of the page, i.e. according to an aesthetic principle. Instead, paragraphs and sentences are configured on two axes to more closely embody meaning, i.e. according to a semantic principle. In short, the aesthetics of IVJ derive from the semantics of a text. Shorter still: semantics = aesthetics. There’s no distinction:

**The purpose of all printing, whether of words
or of pictures,
is to communicate - ideas,
information,
instructions
or emotions.**

**The printed message should be not merely read
but understood;
its purpose is to spark off ideas
or activities.**

In this strange appendix, then, Stefan offers a third philosophy of typography that coolly transcends the binary of the Bill-Tschichold debate: neither entirely symmetrical nor asymmetrical, but a considered hybrid of the relative order and relative freedom that they respectively represent *according to the particular nature of the particular job at hand.*

The point is not that every text is unique and so conventions must be perpetually scrapped, but that every case INVOLVING text deserves fresh consideration because each specific situation affects the relative importance of questions like justified versus unjustified or symmetry versus asymmetry. The benefits of conventions, says Themerson, ought to be perpetually weighed against the benefits of breaking them, and neither propagated in the abstract. Pragmatism wins out over ideology.

There are a few other aspects worth noting. First, by writing up his thoughts as a goofy dialogue, Themerson stresses that such questions can and should always be open to debate—whether that debate is with oneself, a client, an audience, or any other critical interlocutor. Second, in creating a character who takes his typography far too seriously the author shows he doesn't take HIMSELF too seriously. And third, the real postscript here is that nothing is sacred, conditions are always prone to change, new axes are always opening up, and when they do, perspectives and requirements change, too. This last point is made succinctly at the article's end when the protagonist casually lets slip that his interlocutor Brutus is in fact a talking dog.

ITEM:

Our final talking point qualifies as ephemeral in the sense that it appears to be a working proof of something Stefan made together with the typographer Anthony Froshaug. It's a prospectus—a sampler or teaser—for a “Semantic Sonata” written by Themerson and printed letterpress by Froshaug according to those aforementioned principles of Internal Vertical Justification. In fact, the two first met when Froshaug was curious about an IVJ section of one of Themerson's pieces of writing published in Polish. Not speaking the language, Froshaug was unable to comprehend the meaning that appeared to dictate the arrangement, so they translated it together, stacking possible words on top of each other and becoming friends in the process. Later they worked on this sonata in tandem, too.

At the time, Froshaug was living in austere conditions in Cornwall, engaged in an elemental, back-to-basics investigation of printing by exploring the limited possibilities afforded by a small hand-operated press. Froshaug's tinkering with the obstinate materiality of moveable metal type mirrored Themerson's tinkering with the graphic atoms of language. Both were out to embody intrinsic relationships to constructive ends, and this project was an ideal opportunity to align form and content, technics and ethics. For instance, as you can already see from the table of contents printed in red, the “Sonata” involved a series of uncommonly large and varied line indents, and this required an equally unorthodox use of the press. Language was being radically re-assembled in both physical and conceptual terms.

Themerson once noted that contemporary philosophers are interested in the idea that the pattern of language “reflects the relationships that are in the world, and therefore [that] the study of the pattern can tell us something about the world.” Out on a limb with few clear precedents, aesthetic adventures like the “Semantic Sonata” suggest yet another analogy with social organization: namely, the theoretical ease and practical difficulty of conceiving newly meaningful arrangements.

- I** Exposition 1st phrase
2nd phrase
Semantic Development 1
2
Recapitulation
Coda
- II** Theme
1st Variation
2nd Variation
3rd Variation
- III** Litany in Z in place of Scherzo
- IV** Exposition 1st phrase
2nd phrase
Development (Verboidal & Semantic) 1
2
Reminiscence of the Litany
Recapitulation
Coda

Stefan Themerson . Semantic Sonata No.2

Gaberbochus Press Ltd, London / Anthony Froshaug, Ludgvan: 1950

ITEM:

To round this up, here's a bonus discovery I'm repurposing as a full stop. It's a detail from the Gaberbocchus-published version of Stefan's essay "Apollinaire's Lyrical Ideograms," which focuses on how the mercurial French poet forged unusually symbiotic relationships between words and the things or ideas they represent, such as in *Il Pleut*, his seminal poem set as cascading lines of rain. To introduce the idea, Themerson supplants the word "red" with a small red sticker in every copy:


Thus, at one extreme is the scientist

(who doesn't mix signs with things),

at the other extreme – the mystic and the possessed

(who identifies signs with things).

But in the middle ground between these limits, exists there a domain where it would be legitimate to use signs and symbols which have been made so as to resemble the things they represent? Where, for instance, it would be legitimate to print

'red'		or to say 'I love you'	liquidly,
'big'	BIG,	'I despise you'	sibilantly
small	small?	& 'I don't care'	mutely?

Yes, I think. I can think of two domains of that sort.

The first contains road signs. The other – poetry.

It's a lovely gesture that marks a quality native to all of the Themersons' work: the idea of things simply *being themselves,* without surplus or spin. It was already evident in the earliest work they made together in Warsaw in the 1930s, first photograms, then the films they conceived as "moving photograms."

A photogram, Stefan once wrote, is a print made by direct contact, which means:

**It doesn't represent anything.
It doesn't abstract from anything.
It is just what it is.
It is reality itself.**

Whether visually or linguistically, earnestly or sardonically, Stefan was always out to convey the unmediated truth of a situation — and usually did so by forging a third route between two orthodox poles. Given the sort of close reading and looking we've been concerned with here, this might sound like a strangely inflated claim to make. But if we conceive of a contrary “untruth” as synonymous with the total mediation typical of today's advertising, marketing, and propaganda, then the rogue ethos that marks the legacy of Gaberbocchus Press and their ilk remains a much-needed beacon for artists, designers, writers, and hybrids working today.

The most apposite word to describe the Themersons' work, from enduring art to throwaway ephemera, is a compliment that sounds like an insult: artless.

*

1. Semantic Translation is more double-edged than this one line summary suggests. Although it's ostensibly an attempt to reclaim the "truth" behind words, the proposition is essentially ironic, not proselytizing. It's more accurate to say that at best "truths" are more properly "beliefs," and that beliefs should be treated with the utmost suspicion. One of the great benefits of Themerson's technique is that it reminds us how "the world is more complicated than the language we use to talk about it." Here's an example: from some clichéd input:

**The wine among the flowers,
O lonely me!**

to its semantically translated output:

**The fermented
grape-
juice
among the reproductive
parts
of
seed-plants

O! I'm conscious
of
my state
of
being isolated
from
others!**

The process of reading through the pedantic extent of a piece of Semantic Translation is to experience language made strange; to perceive both its technical depth and its limitations. Stefan called this "scratching the form to reveal the content."

2. To elaborate on these "overtones": for Bill, the set of conventions collected under the awkward shorthand of "symmetry" was analogous to the conservative, traditionalist, decorative and implicitly fascist tendencies of Nazi Germany, while "asymmetry" aligned with progressive socialist positivism associated with austerity and renewal. Tschichold, meanwhile, equated asymmetry with the sort of blind ideology proclaimed by such as Bill, which now seemed unacceptably doctrinaire. For him, the all-out push for asymmetry was so blindly authoritarian and uncritically obsessed with "machine aesthetics" that it obliterated many useful lessons of tradition. Ultimately, militant modernism disregarded the notion that different kinds of text might require different solutions — some symmetrical, some asymmetrical.