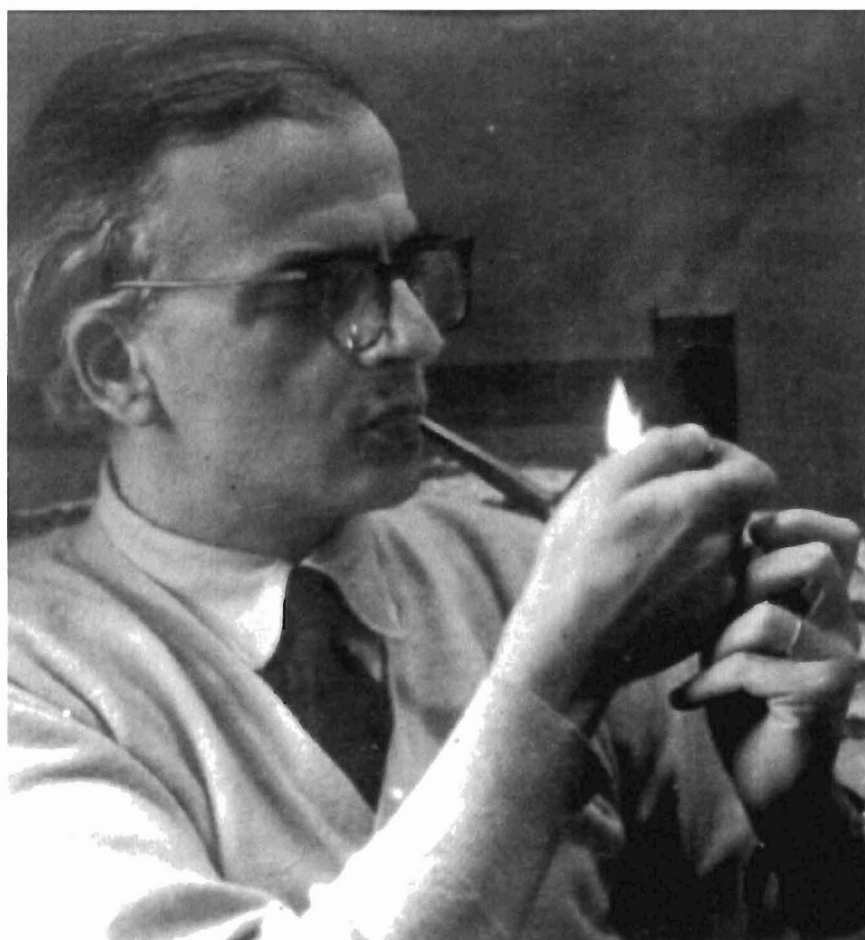


Stefan Themerson

A Few Letters from the 1950s



**A FEW LETTERS FROM
THE 1950s**



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Stefan Themerson

**A FEW LETTERS FROM
THE 1950s:**

Selected Correspondence
with Lars Gustav Hellström
and Bertrand Russell

Obscure Publications – 2009

Stefan Themerson on Semantic Poetry – correspondence with Lars Gustav Hellström

References to pages which appear throughout the correspondence are those to the first edition of *Bayamus* published by Poetry London in 1949

On the 4th July 1950 Franciszka wrote to Stefan who was staying with friends in Cheshire:

'Hugo Manning telephoned a minute ago. That Swedish critic that he once told us about, is in London. [i.e. Lars Gustav Hellström] He has a copy of *Bayamus* and has read it, and he very much wants to meet you. It seems that he wants to write about you, or to translate *Bayamus* into Swedish. Anyway, he is not a phoney, as Manning says, and he absolutely must see you. He is leaving on Saturday, so I made an appointment for him on Friday evening at Manning's. He will give you a "drink and go across the road to see some friend and leave you alone for a couple of hours". Isn't he sweet? "Because Swedes are shy to talk when anybody is around."

Lars Gustav Hellström, is a Swedish writer/translator and the editor of Swedish *Readers' Digest*. Hellström reads several of Stefan Themerson's books and is particularly fascinated by *Bayamus* and Semantic Poetry, which Themerson invented and which makes its first appearance in that book. He decides to translate the book into Swedish.

And here starts the correspondence about it:

25 Östervägen,
Solna,
Sweden

4 August 1950

Dear Mr Themerson,

Unfortunately it was impossible for me to come back to London. It was pouring with rain the whole month, and my wife and I went further away than we had intended. We went to Scotland and had wonderful days in Edinburgh and in Oban. English roads are very good and we had a very comfortable trip.

It was a pity that we could not meet again, but I hope — if the world will last a little longer — that I may soon go back to London and stay for a fortnight. I was very pleased to meet you and I should very much like to discuss semantic poetry further.

Now I wonder if you would send me a copy of *Bayamus*? I have one, but should like to have another to send to my publisher. He has some people reading books for him. He himself does not understand anything of literary matters. I am going to translate one or two chapters of the book and I will show it to the publisher when they are ready. Would you please send me a letter in which you state that you want me to translate the book. Perhaps Poetry London has to do it. I suppose that they have the rights.

I should be very grateful if you would send me some biographical information about yourself and some reviews of *Bayamus*, if possible. Would you? Thank you.

Yours sincerely
Lars Gustav Hellström

49 Randolph Avenue
London W9

12 August 1950

Dear Mr Hellström

Many thanks for your letter.

Born 25 January 1910, as you may deduce from *Bayamus* page 27. In Płock (Poland). Studied natural sciences and architecture. Married 1931. Wife — artist painter. Made experimental films ("avant-garde"), before the war. Wrote a dozen children's books. A volume of poetry in Polish. A volume of "prose poétique" in French: *Croquis dans les Ténèbres*. Films made before the war — destroyed in Warsaw and Paris. MS of a novel written before the war — lost in Paris. *Bayamus* written in 1945, published 1949. A book for children and adults: *Extraordinary Adventures of Peddy Bottom* — to be published before Xmas by Poetry London. Some essays, articles and long short stories. Just finished my 80,000-word novel (begotten in 1942) on termites and the homo: *The Termitary or Between the Points of Pain* [later to be called *Professor Mmaa's Lecture*]. Writing a poem in 'sonata form', with a 'semantic development'. Preparing for publication 8 drawings-cum-semantic texts, under the title *Semantic Divertissements*.

If you tell me which chapters of *Bayamus* you are going to translate first, perhaps I would be able to help. Please don't hesitate, and write if you have any queries.

Have you received the parcel?

The translation rights are kept by me. Should the English publishers dispose of the rights (subject to my approval of the terms) they will receive for their services a commission of my

receipts.

I understand that you need a formal letter, and so I enclose a few lines on a separate piece of paper.

I was very pleased to meet you, and hope to see you again when you come to London.

49 Randolph Avenue,
London W9

12 august 1950

Dear Mr Hellström

I thank you very much for your letter of the 4th of August 1950. The right of translating *Bayamus* is reserved by me, and I shall be only too pleased if you translate the book into Swedish and arrange its publication in Sweden.

Yours sincerely
Stefan Themerson

25 Östervägen,
Solna,
Sweden

6 September 1950

Dear Mr Thomson

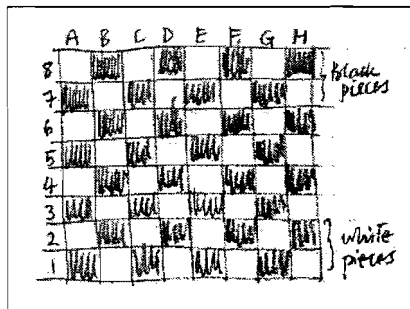
Thank you so much indeed for your letters and for the wonderful books. I have just finished the translation of *Bayamus*, except for the poems. And I am now working on an article on

your production as far as I know it. Apropos the fable by Aesop, I just wonder if even the first version is by Aesop himself, is it? I have looked for it in some Swedish translations of Aesop but have not been lucky in finding it. May I ask you some questions about *Bayamus*? In chapter 1, Bayamus says: '...the Theatre of Anatomy is in 1815.' Can the meaning of this be both in the year 1815 and the street number 1815? I mean, is it a play on words?

In chapter 2, page 14, Karl Mayer is shifting 'a heap of papers, magazines and stills from the bench...' In Swedish the only meaning of the word "still" is an apparatus for making spirits. What is the meaning here?

In chapter 9, page 42: the women have 'laryngeal pouches'. I can't find the medical word for this in Swedish. Maybe I can write it in Latin. It is quite the same thing with 'agitators'. I have Swedish words for 'extensors' and 'flexors' but not for 'agitators'.

In chapter 10, page 54, the last lines. I suppose it is a chess problem? But the lines: /8/7P/8/bR 1B p 2 p/ and so on, I don't understand. Is it a scheme of the position of the pieces? But you know in Sweden, a chessboard has numbers and letters in the following manner:



How to change the numbers and the letters in the problem?

Well, I think these are the only questions in the prose text. As for the semantic translations, I suppose I had better start from Swedish translations from the original poem, e.g. the poem by Li Po. And if I start out from Swedish translations I suppose that I can't follow your semantic translation. I think I have to do a semantic translation for myself, isn't it so? I have to take the poem's Swedish words and find their definitions in a dictionary and in this way make a semantic poem of it. What do you think about that?

When we met in London, you told me that the English critics had not paid any attention to *Bayamus*. Would you mind if I asked you for some of the reviews? I should be very grateful if you would lend me some of them, because I could mention the English critics' point of view in my article as typically reactionary one in the face of all new things and I should like to give some examples of it.

Your semantic ideas have forced me to read, inter alia, a book by the American scientist, S.I. Hayakawa: *Language in Action*, and now I am going to read I.A. Richards and Ogden.

You told me that you were born on 25th January 1910, "as you may deduce from *Bayamus* page 27". Yes, but may I ask you if there are some other autobiographical details in *Bayamus*? Was your father an author? Did you meet Michaux and Queneau in Paris? What were the titles of your experimental films and were they screened in Poland or in France?

I have given you a lot of questions but you know I am so interested in your work and I should like to give the Swedish public a good picture of you and your books, especially *Bayamus*.

Yours sincerely
Lars Gustav Hellström

49 Randolph Avenue,
London W.9.

19 September 1950

Dear Mr. Hellström,

Here is the promised long letter. You are quite right: "The Theatre of Anatomy is in 1815", — "in 1815" means primarily a point in time, but it is talked about as if it were a point in space. Time is treated here on a conversationally equal footing with space so: "in 1815" means both: in 1815 A.D., and "in 1815" (as in "London", or in "England"; — as if "1815" were a name of a street or place etc.) ((The description of the Theatre of Anatomy (Chapter 1) is that of an early 19th Century Theatrum Anatomicum. The description of the road leading from it to the Theatre of Semantic Poetry (Chapter 2) — (Victorian imitation of Gothic, sham Ionic column, Café Royal) suggests our coming back in time. (Besides, there is an intimation; Theatre of Anatomy — Anatomy of Language — Theatre of Semantic Poetry; — description of the Theatre of Anatomy, repeated on page 74-75 in the chapter "Theatre of Semantic Poetry"; — freaks in bottles in Chapter 1, and the living freaks at the Bottle Party in Chapter the last.)))

STILL. (p.14) a photograph, a snapshot abstracted from a motion film, photographs from films as displayed at cinema doors, etc.

Page 42. Laryngeal pouches (remnants of "howling apparatus"). Pouch, sac, saccula, a pouch-like expansion of the lateral wall-cavity of the larynx, between the true and false vocal chords. In certain monkeys, as the orangutan, it is greatly developed, extending over the throat and upper chest (Webster) (Saccus? Sacculus?)

Suggestion: you might cut out agitators and leave only flexors and extensors.

Chapter 10 is composed almost entirely of pieces of authentic newspaper advertisements etc., sewn together; across and down (at the foot of page 53) is a SOLUTION of a crossword puzzle. A solution of any popular crossword puzzle will do. At the end of page 54 – a chess problem. No special significance attached to it. Any popular chess problem in Swedish transcription will do. (It should of course justify the last words: "White to move and mate in two" (or 3 or 4). Plenty of variety!)

As to the Semantic translations, I should think that what you suggest is a marvellous idea, if you feel that way. To take the Swedish translation of Li Po, and develop it 'semantically', using Swedish dictionaries. However, I would like to mention here two points:

1. Rhythm. There is a long-wave rhythm there, built not so much on the 'sonorities' of the words, as on the syntax pattern, if you see what I mean ~~of the printed page~~. Horizontally, the length of the line agrees with syntax: as, when reading, we pause at the end of lines, — the pauses agree with syntax; and as it's they that articulate the rhythm, — the rhythm agrees with syntax. That's horizontally.

The vertical alignment indicates semantic relationship. And, just as the end of a line shows where to stop to make a slight pause in reading, so the vertical alignment shows where to keep and where to change the 'intonation'. I could perhaps risk the suggestion that while the rhythm goes hand in hand with syntax, 'intonation' agrees with the 'semantic movement', whereas all those vertically arranged, aligned, then semantic repetitions, repetitions of the qualifiers (and even of the parts, or of whole sentences) play (like in a litany), in a way, the same role of stressing the rhythm, as rhymes do in a classical verse.

I am tempted to say that in 'semantic verse', rhythm is syntactic (and shown by horizontal lengths), — and rhyme: semantic (and shown by vertical alignment). (I say: 'rhyme' here,

but, of course, not literally. I call here rhyme those repetitions that stress the rhythm.)

I suggest that it would be wrong to think that 'semantic verse' is a, so-called, optical verse, showing a typographically clear structure, good for the eye, but not to be read aloud. It can be read aloud, recited, intoned, — and what the ear would hear will agree in shape (pattern, plan, lay-out) not only with what the eye will see on the printed page, but also with what the brain will discover in the syntactic and semantic structure.

So far I've been talking about form. It springs straight from the meaning, is functionally dependent on, guided, conditioned by the meaning, but still it is form. Now, if I may, a word about meaning.

2. There are many national-English translations of Li Po. And, certainly, there are many national-Swedish translations. I've chosen one that suited my purposes best. Do you intend to translate the national-English translation into the national-Swedish, and, then, to develop it semantically; — or do you want to use one of the already existing national-Swedish translations for your semantic development? I use here the terms national-English and national-Swedish to distinguish them from semantic-English and semantic-Swedish. Non-semantic poetry uses languages in their national attire, with all their traditions, harmonics, etc. Semantic poetry attempts to send a language to the laundry first, it tries to put words through the mangle of a dictionary, to wash all the overtones out of them, so that they become terms (objective and universal) rather than words (subjective and national, or of a class, etc.) I don't know Chinese, but it seems to be the least national and in a sense most 'semantic' language. Perhaps that's why I've chosen Li Po to begin with.

If we were dealing not with a poem but with a simple statement expressed in English — the result would be the same whether we would a) translate our statement into Swedish, and

then develop the translation semantically, or b) whether we first developed semantically the English original, and then translated the English semantic development into Swedish. In a simple classical 'laboratory' case, the result (Swedish semantic translation) of a) and b) must be identical. Not so with the semantic translation of a poem (and that apart from the question of rhythm).

1. There are many words in the original, and not all of them need to be developed semantically. It is for him who writes to make the choice. Art is a perpetual restatement of fundamental notions. It is for him who writes to choose which of the notions of the original written in a 'national' language need to be restated semantically.

2. There exist many dictionaries and many definitions — it is for him who writes to choose. Art is a perpetual restatement of fundamental problems. It is for him who writes to choose how (by means of which of many definitions available) they need to be restated semantically; — and how far the defining process should be carried.

There is still one point I'd rather like to mention. When Sterne went to France, he took a horse carriage. Supposing we want to perform an act that would be as similar as possible to what Sterne did. What should we do? Take a horse carriage? Yes and no. Yes, — because it would be a horse carriage, and no, — because for him it was natural to take a horse carriage while for us it would be something extraordinary. For us natural would be to take a train, or a motor car, so, from a certain (and very essential) point of view, if we want to perform an act that would be as similar as possible to what Sterne did, we have to take a train or a motor car. For, from a certain (and very essential) point of view, our travelling by train is more the same thing as his travelling in a horse carriage than our travelling in a horse carriage would be.

Now, when Li Po says moon and far away, he is referring to experiences known to him and to his contemporary readers. Our knowledge of moon and our notion of far away certainly differ from theirs. Supposing we want to undergo an experience that would be as similar as possible to what Li Po's listeners went through. What should we do? Pretend that we are taking the words moon and far away as we imagine they were taken by Li Po's listeners? Yes and no. Yes, — because it would be the same words. No, — because our knowledge, experience, feelings of moon and far away certainly differ from theirs. And thus, from a certain (and very essential) point of view, our semantic translation is more the same thing as his original than his original itself. Let's be clear: what I mean is: our semantic translation, Europe 1950 A.D. as acting upon the modern reader, Europe 1950 A.D. is more the same thing as his original, China T'ang Dynasty, in relation to his reader, China T'ang Dynasty, than his original, China T'ang Dynasty as acting upon the modern reader, Europe 1950 A.D. Now, — don't think that I am not utterly serious. Most positively I am. But, also, please, don't think that I've lost my sense of humour. There is something funny about the whole business. You see it. And I see it. What is it?

Let's try an allegory. Supposing somebody wants to go far away from the place he's living in; and they say to him: the best method of going far away from the place one is living in is to go straight forward from the place one is living in and to keep going until one is far away from the place one was living in. And he decides to act according to the prescription, and goes straight forward from the place, further and further away, until he rounds the earth and comes back from the opposite direction to the very place he left. The process has its funny side. For those who know so much of cosmology to remember that the earth is a globe, it became funny as soon as he had gone 180° and didn't stop going forward. The observing how his very desire to go still farther away brings him back to the place of departure, the very observing of that makes our laughing (or at least smiling) apparatus start working. But all that doesn't mean that his travelling has been in vain. To have been in a place, and to come

back to a place, are not the same thing. He is not the same, but experience-richer, and so the place isn't any more the same, because now it contains at least one new person, — him, himself.

Supposing somebody wants to go in search of the meaning of things. And they say unto him: the first and most important thing to do is to define as unambiguously as possible the elements of speech you are going to use. So he begins to define the words; — and then he goes on to define the words he had been using in his definition, — and then he tries to define the words he had had been using in defining the words he had been using in his definition; — and he finds some words that are not completely definable by other words, but appear again and again in further trials of defining; — and he finds himself surrounded by linguistic vicious circles whirling around him; — and then it dawns on him that even if he were able, with Bertrand Russell and others, to reduce the whole vocabulary to ostensive words and operatives — (the words 'definable' by showing a thing or demonstrating an action) the ghost of old Berkeley would suddenly appear and ask impertinent questions whether the cat whom we've just seen in the doorway and whom we'll see in a moment through our window — exists or doesn't exist when he walks on the other side of the wall. And our already linguistically turning mind will begin to revolve in those other solipsistic vicious circles, describing vicious epicycloids; — only to find that about the whole process — called: language — you cannot talk in the same language, but you have to invent especially for the purpose a language of a higher degree; and to talk about that higher degree language you have to invent a language of a still higher degree; and so on, steps upon steps; — and so we find ourselves standing in the middle of a Ladder, vicious circles and epicycloids below our feet, and an 'infinity' of meta-languages (Wittgenstein) above our poor tormented mind-containers. The process has its 'funny' side. For those who know so much of the cosmology of language as to remember about the vicious circles, it begins to show its funny side as soon as the printed line defining a word becomes so long that the reader's eye cannot any more take it in one glance. The observing how our hypothetical traveller's very

desire to get deeper into meaning makes him turn in vicious circles, — the very observing of that makes our laughing (or at least smiling) apparatus start working. But it does not follow that his travelling was in vain. A word taken out of any 'private vocabulary' (and any national-, or class-, or slang-vocabulary is, in that sense, 'private', as it is the private property of a particular group), — well, such a word, and the same word but having undergone a trial of the vicious circle variety, are not the same thing any longer.

Most of the words used in poetic writings nowadays consist of overtones — the fundamental tone, (exact meaning) being (as apparently so obvious, evident) disregarded or lost, — gone. We very seldom think about the fundamental tone (exact meaning), and if we do, we very often take it not as it may be defined, but by reconstructing it from the harmonics we hear (associations). It reminds me of the modern telephone. I learn that 'the main frequencies' of both male and female voices lie below its range, so that the telephone transmits very little of the main tones of a conversation. It transmits chiefly harmonics, and out of these the ear drum of the listener reconstructs the main tones as difference tones, which are then transmitted to our brains in considerable strength.

It seems that the basic, fundamental meanings of words don't lie any more within the range of our mind's reaction. If, for instance, we hear the word 'war', (and especially in a poetic context) we are immediately deafened by its harmonica woven from our personal experiences, feelings, ideas, newspaper reports, fears, hopes, etc., — and the word's fundamental meaning 'open conflict between nations, etc.' (as apparently so obvious) does not enter our reaction system.

Now, if art, like poetry, is a perpetual restatement of fundamental problems, I put it that there is 'more' poetry in the semantic version:

'How nice it is in that jolly good open conflict between nations'

'How pretty it is in that jolly smart active inter-national hostility carried on by force of arms . . .'

than in the original:

*'How nice it is when during a little war –
bis'*

And more, I put it that when Saint Francis was saying 'sister' – what he meant was '. . . female and having the same parents as we have.' – and not any of the sentimental and/or romantic stuff forced upon us by some 19th century conceptions. And when he said 'death' he was talking about what our dictionaries may call 'cessation of the functions of the body as an organised whole', he was talking about a phenomenon, a physical event, a natural law, he was talking about 'cessation of the functions of the bodies many trillions of cells', he knew clearly and precisely what he was talking about (and so did Rabelais when shamelessly and semantically enumerating by hundreds, series of adjectives or verbs or nouns).

Li Po's moon, you can take it out of his poem and put it into the Rabelais, and (though the sentences containing it will express different statements) the word itself will refer to the same thing. And you can take Rabelais' moon and put where Saint Francis says 'moon'. It will refer to the same thing. And you can take Saint Francis' sun and exchange it with Copernicus' sun ('where would God Almighty put His most noble candle, if not in the centre of the Universe?' – quoting from memory –) – and they will still refer to the same thing. And when Saint Francis said that, his listener responded to the fundamental tone (exact meaning), harmonics coming later with reflection. It is not so today. When a modern poet uses the word, we think that we ought to respond not to the fundamental tone (which is supposed to be not poetic enough) (and a modern poet would not like us to do that) but to the overtones. We think the 'poetic meaning' lies in the overtones, while the fundamental tone is prosaic, trivial, and belongs to text books. And as we don't know which overtones to

take to begin with, we turn aside the volume of poetry and snatch from the bookshelves a mystery-detective story, where at least everything is clear and evidential. And this seems to me to be a very healthy reaction, because the overtones we deal with are more often than ever second hand ones: 1. we have inherited from the previous generations words together with their harmonics, but 2. the words have changed their meaning, while 3. the harmonics persist; divorced from their fundamental tone, they float in the air (which phenomenon is called: being poetic). Some poets try to introduce new (modern) sets of harmonics, fundamental tone is still banned from poetry.

Semantic poetry tries to cut off the inherited overtone, it tries to restate the fundamental problems in modern terms, it tries to do that by accepting fundamental tones in the form of an exact and commonly used definition, and it waits to see what kind of new overtones will follow. At the beginning 'dictionary method' gives the same fascination as was given by some mechanical devices, photo camera, lithographic stone, etc. However, once this stage is over, it becomes a true poetic medium. It builds new (and sometimes complicated) poetic pictures. However, to build them it uses not the luxurious elements invented by the poetic imagination of today or yesterday; but the commonplace elements discovered, or rediscovered, in the World (World = Language) by means of one of the accepted and actually used dictionaries.

Let's suppose that the word 'skeleton' has the following association-overtone: a), b), c), d). (They probably are different for different people). If the reader finds the word 'skeleton' in a prose text, he attaches the main importance to the fundamental tone (exact meaning) — to the thing called 'skeleton' If he finds the word in a verse, he seems to believe that the significance lies in a), b), c), and d).

Now, let's suppose that the association-overtone of the word 'bony framework' is p), of 'human body' q), of 'soft tissue' v), of 'decay' z), of 'remove' y). If now, instead of saying

'skeleton' I say 'the bony framework of a human body from which all the soft tissues have decayed or had been removed' (pp 11 and 12) I replace a), b), c), d) (familiar to the reader) by p), q), v), z), y) (forgotten by the reader) by means of which I rediscover for him this particular piece of reality called 'skeleton'. Instead of attracting his attention by my attaching to the skeleton some adjectives (white, small, big, terrifying, etc.) — which would individualise the skeleton (make it a particular individual, 'this one and not the other' of its class), I let it remain a universal, anonymous representative of its class, and I try to attract the reader's attention to it not by colouring the skeleton with some added qualifiers, but by finding the qualifiers in the thing itself, (bony structure, soft tissue, decayed, etc.), by enumerating the half-forgotten characteristics that make it a representative of its class, and thus offering the reader a new set of overtones — p), q), v), z), y).

N.B. Thus a semantically developed description becomes a description of a part of the Universe, not merely of some of my impressions.

Am in bed with a slight fever, so you must forgive this too long and too incoherent letter.

You asked me to send you some of the reviews, because you want to quote the English critics' point of view as a typically 'reactionary one'. Well, it will be rather difficult to quote silences, will it not? The fact is that the book has been passed over in perfect silence. Probably the majority of the reviewers didn't think it worth mentioning; some probably just overlooked it; some had difficulties in classifying it; one or two didn't want to commit themselves — either way; one or two waited to see what a colleague would write about it; some didn't know what it is all about; some did write but were censored by their editors. Well, but as you want me to quote, I quote: they are not long; it will not take me long. One review in *European Affairs* I sent you so you know it. There was a note in *The Star*, December 15, 1949: 'Bayamus is a new and lively novel'. Full stop. That's it. *The South American Journal*, October 15th, 1949 is just a naive puppy who

says: "As a specimen of the author's writing, the following will do: ' . . . He shouted, waving that part of his body which formed the extremity of the forearm below the wrist-joint . . . (it quotes the whole sentence).'" Full stop. *The Manchester Evening News*, November 17, 1949: "All about the Theatre of Semantic Poetry, and discussions between three-legged Bayamus and the narrator on all sorts of illogical (!) subjects. The illustrations are odd, and the Semantic poems even odder." Full stop. (Funny thing is — they do not say that Semantic poetry is not poetry, and they cannot say it is not understandable — it is, in principle, more understandable than the originals — they just don't know where to place it. It would be too much to give it a small room of its own.) There remains one only. *The Times Literary Supplement*, December 2, 1949, under the heading **The Home Front**, "With *Bayamus* we pass into a different world, the world of modern poetry. It is principally a skit on certain tendencies which it labels semanticist. The parodies of pseudo-scientific verse are not without wit, but the fantastic, semi-picaresque *conte* that leads up to them, about an encounter with a three-legged creature from which the book takes its title, is flat and tedious."

I don't think that the book is a skit on logical-positivism (for instance), any more than, let's say, Chestertonian Father Brown is a skit on Roman Catholicism. The *Literary Supplement* reviewer takes Semantic translation to be "parodies of pseudo-scientific verse". I can easily imagine another reviewer who would take Semantic translations to be parodies of Li Po, Saint Francis, etc. Who is right? Don't ask me. I'm asking you. I could say it is neither or both. But I don't know. I had just most seriously taken the prescription of how to go into the meaning-jungle and went courageously down to the vicious circles and back, trying not to lose my sense of humour (either way). Maybe that's the most unpardonable sin. And the reviewer must have smiled at least once. He wants to know why? And he says: a parody. So his conclusions are not without wit. And he doesn't know that it was a glance at the tremendous hopelessness with which the mind works in pursuing its own tail (all the revelations being its own product) that made the ends of his lips move up, — it could make

a horse laugh. I don't parody people's works, nor laugh at them, whether they are those of logical-positivists, or of Li Po's, or of Saint Francis. The grinning appears only when I see what comes out of the whole business, what is bound to come out of it, because the world (our minds included) has been built this way and not the other. Maybe that's exactly the moment when one would expect a prayer.

You asked me about some other autobiographical details in *Bayamus*. Yes, there are some. But autobiographical things are like a motor car you take with you (or rather it takes you) to go sightseeing. The motor car you've come by becomes a part of the landscape you want to see. You can't avoid that, but you behave as if it were not there. You censor it in your mind, you exclude it from the mental picture of the landscape. The same, I think, is the case with autobiographical details. They must be in the book, but we should act as if they weren't there. Well, but you may feel differently about it. So as you do question me, perhaps I'd better tell you. My father was a doctor of medicine (G.P.). One of that extinct species I would call 19th century Æsculapians, full of Hippocrates, hypnotism, hydrotherapy and hygiene. He called himself Doctor-Hygienist (Georges Duhamel describes a marvellous example of an old doctor of that generation in his *Chroniques de la famille Pasquier*). In his spare time he did some writing. Plays that never went beyond a provincial theatre. Articles. A volume of short stories and a novel (I can't tell you more, I haven't read it). The incident described in *Bayamus* p. 16 lines 21-23 (that is why you ask, is it not?) is true.

I don't know Michaux and Queneau. Why?

I once had coffee with Karl Mayer at the Café Royal, and the incident with the 'heel', and 3/4 of the dialogue is true. Kurt Schwitters I first met at the P.E.N. conference mentioned, then we became friendly; the incident with the yellow cigarette box is true; — but I don't know whether Schwitters ever met Mayer or not.

You ask me about films. We tried (my wife and I) to adapt to the screen the photogram medium. Photograms, not photograph. (Photogram — you put an object, a small branch of a tree, leaves, palm of your hand, glass objects, three-dimensional structures, etc.) directly on sensitive paper, expose by means of an electric light or a candle, or even a match; develop, — and what was shadow-light, becomes all the gradations from white to black. You can compare it to the negative of what a Chinese painter saw when, before taking his brush in hand, he observed the shadow of plants and flowers on a white wall or on a silk screen. Well, photograms plus movement (a movement achieved by continuous changing of the position of the objects; by deforming the shadow (white!), by moving the sources of light; by cutting) — was the idea of our short films (their titles: *Pharmacy*, *Europa*, *Moment Musical*, *Short-circuit*, *It won't make a hole in Heaven if you try to backwards* made in Warsaw; *Calling Mr. Smith* and *The Eye and the Ear* — made in London.)

Your questions plus staying in bed made me browse in some old papers. I found Fernand Lot saying in an article in *Courrier International* [?], (December 1935) ". . . (les) films qui m'ont paru les plus doués de qualités spécifiquement cinégraphiques: *La Pharmacie* des Themerson, qui utilise ingénieusement le dessin animé, stylise et synthétise, découvre la poésie des plus humbles ustensiles de l'officine; . . ." I've chosen this quotation because I'm tempted to try the mischievous trick of applying it to the Semantic Poetry ideas, and I say that "Semantic Poetry, at least potentially, can use 'ingénieusement le vocabulaire, stylise et synthétise, découvre la poésie des plus humbles définitions du dictionnaire." That's at least a part of what I meant when saying that the dictionary is a mechanical device (as a photo- or film-camera is) that gives first the fascination of discovering new worlds, but then becomes a true poetic medium.

You can cast a scientist's eye on astronomical or on X-ray photographs, and you may cast a poet's eye on them. I don't know, but when I look at Tintoretto's *The Origin of the Milky Way*, I learn and feel things about Tintoretto and a part of the history

of painting, but when I look at a photograph of the Milky Way I feel in communion with the Universe. And with the ear, it is as with the eye. When I (Europe 1950) hear an African aborigine's fable about the Moon splitting the hare's lip with an axe, I feel the lyricism contained in the African who tells the story, while what he felt was the lyricism contained in the Universe. Whilst, when I hear that the moon is so many (exact number) miles 'aloof' I feel some of the lyricism contained in the Universe itself. The only condition is, that the sentence possess its rhythm and be a part of a 'framed' picture. (By rhythm and framed picture' I mean quite a lot here.)

Yours sincerely,
Stefan Themerson

P.S. I've just got a letter from Bertrand Russell. He writes: "*Bayamus*) has given me very great pleasure, and I hope it will receive the praise it deserves.

"I particularly enjoyed your Semantic poetry, which reminded me of pedantic phrases that I amused myself by inserting in my book on Human Knowledge. Perhaps the highest compliment that I can pay to your book is to say that it is nearly as mad as the world."

Hagavägen 14
Hagalund
Sweden

29 December 1950

Dear Mr Themerson

Thank you very much indeed for your letters of long time ago and for the funny children's books. Especially that of *Peddy Bottom* I found one of the most enjoyable books of this kind I have ever read. It is quite easy to see that *Peddy* is a near relation of *Bayamus*. As soon as possible I'll give *Peddy* to one of my publishers who is interested in children's books*. I hope he will be interested in this one. As I told Hugo Manning when he was over here, I have written an article about you in a newspaper here in Stockholm, but unfortunately they have not published it yet. I have given *Bayamus* to a publisher, but he has not read it yet. You know, the autumn is a very time for the publishers, but I hope that he will be able to read the book in the first few days of the new year. If we may have a new year... I mean, if during it the world will be able to publish books. It looks very dark, doesn't it? But what to do? I think we have better work as usual. Maybe someone or something will survive.

My best wishes to you and your wife (her drawings are wonderful!!!)

Yours
Lars Gustav Hellström

* Of course, I'll give him *Mr Rouse Builds His House* too! This book is in the same time instructive and amusing, but I think it will be hell to translate! if the publisher is interested.

Hagavägen 14
Hagalund

14 May 1951

Dear Mr Themerson

I am sorry that it has not been possible for me to get a publisher for *Bayamus* in this country, nor for the children's books you sent me at the beginning of the year. You know the situation for Swedish publishers is now as bad as in England last year. Paper prices are many times higher than some months ago, and everything is more expensive. Because of that all publishers are very restrictive and the book season this coming autumn will be very small and thin.

I have tried three of the biggest publishers and a smaller one, and they all say the same thing. And I have translated the whole book except the poems. But maybe things will get better. Once, I thought of trying publishing myself: three books: *Bayamus*, a selection of poems by Kenneth Patchen, and a prose book by Henry Miller. But I have not so much money, and I don't know any person who wants to invest some thousands of Swedish crowns in such a doubtful business.

Nor has the newspaper published my article on *Bayamus* and you. It is a shame. I have talked to the editor and he says that he has had so much material of current interest, and there it is. One can do nothing with editors of newspapers.

Anyway, I am coming to London at the beginning of June and I shall stay for six months, as a holiday relief programme assistant at the Swedish department of the BBC. Of course, I am very happy and I hope that we will meet sometime during my stay. I am still very interested in your semantic ideas, you know.

Yours truly
Lars Gustav Hellström

This is not the end of Stefan's correspondence with Hellström because their friendship develops and continues until 1988.

Bayamus, in the form of a book, is never published in Sweden, nor is *The Adventures of Peddy Bottom*, but *Mr Rouse Builds His House* is published in English by AV Carlsons with a Swedish glossary supplement in 1953.

A short BAYAMUS bibliography

(written in Cambridge, 1944. In a letter to L.G. Hellström, Stefan Themerson gives the year as 1945.)

Bayamus (and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry). London. Editions Poetry London, 1949, illustrated by Franciszka Themerson. [First published, chapter by chapter, in *Nowa Polska* V-2,3; VI-1,2,3, London, 1945-1946]

other editions

London. Gaberbocchus, 1965

Bayamus suivi de Ouaff Ouaff, ou qui a tué Richard Wagner?
Paris. Christian Bourgois, 1978, (French translation by Gérard-Georges Lemaire)

In *General Piesc i Inne Opowiadania*. Warsaw. Czytelnik, 1980
(original Polish version) pp.5-114

Bayamus und das Theater der Semantischen Poesie. Leipzig.
Reclam-Verlag, 1992 (German translation and 'afterword' by Durs Grünbein)

Bayamus & Cardinal Pölätiö. Exact Change, Boston, 1997. (with introduction by Keith Waldrop)

Stefan Themerson on 'Belief' — correspondence with Bertrand Russell

Stefan Themerson's extensive correspondence with Bertrand Russell starts in September 1950, when Russell receives his *Bayamus*, and responds enthusiastically, calling it 'nearly as mad as the world'. The Themersons publish Russell's *The Good Citizen's Alphabet*, celebrate his 90th birthday with *The History of the World in Epitome*, and remain close friends during his lifetime.

The following text appears in several versions, in several draft letters to Russell and is finally published in *factor T*, 1956, Gaberbocchus Black Series, nos. 8-9.

49 Randolph Avenue
March, 1952

Dear Bertrand Russell,

. . . no, I don't think I believe, or ever believed. You implied that I do, only don't know it, and you asked: do I believe that the sun will rise tomorrow morning? Perhaps that question needs to be re-edited first. For the sun cannot not rise tomorrow morning, because tomorrow morning begins when the sun rises, — by definition. It is a mistake the author of Genesis made when he made God create the Sun on the fourth Day. We can understand Light being created prior to the Sun and the Moon (especially as

the Pope, in his November 1951 address to the Pontifical Academy of Science, translates "Fiat Lux" as a sea of light and radiation bursting forth from nothing), but what is the meaning of "the evening and the morning were the first, second, third, day"? prior in time to the creation of "the greater light"? Yet, if I put away the Bible, take *The Times*, open it at the "Weather Forecast" column, and read: "Sun rises 7.5 a.m." — then your question will take the form: "do I believe that the sun will rise at 7.5 a.m.?" And here, there is something in me that metaphorically-literally revolts against using the word 'believe', and I don't think it is so because of some personal foible. If I say that I 'think' expect, hope, 'understand', take for granted, assume, even: know, that the Sun will rise at 7.5 a.m. (which a.m. I would read here: 'after midnight', as it wouldn't make sense to say 'ante meridiem' if we don't know whether there will be a noon at all), — and then it rises not at 7.5, but 1, or 2, or 3, . . . or n seconds later, — it would only stimulate my curiosity, and I would try to find out where something unexpected had happened, in *The Times*, or in the Cosmos. Yet, if I had said that I believe the Sun will rise at 7.5, and then it had risen a second later, well, in that case I see only two eventualities: the end of me, or the end of the Universe.

There was a Hungarian merchant who, I don't know why, wanted his son to learn Spanish. A student on holiday from Warsaw, who didn't know a word of that language, offered to give him lessons, and for several months diligently taught him Polish. If the boy had hoped, expected, thought or known that he knew Spanish, then, when the truth came out, he would still be free to accept, that what he knew about his knowing Spanish was just to a very much greater degree not true than what he knew about other things about the world, and all the rest would depend on his sense of humour. Yet, if he believed, then he was bound not to let himself become convinced by the evidence, he would have to think that the whole world was wrong and only he was right. He would have to invent a faked universe all around him to suit his belief, and he would have to come to the conclusion that the Polish translation of Cervantes was the original, and *Don Quijote de la Mancha* a Spanish translation from the Polish. And that is

what believers do. And they must do. For, if they really believe, whether in Transubstantiation or in the Railway Time-Table, they know that once they allow their faith to be destroyed by evidence brought forward on Monday, Wednesday may bring new evidence which will destroy what they believed on Tuesday. The world's beastliness that we observe all around us could serve as evidence against the assumption of God's *bonté*. But, if one believes in His goodness, one prefers to forget His omnipotence, and invents devils, original sin, &c. There would be evidence enough to show that excess of suffering and poverty warps a person's character. But, if one believes, one prefers to borrow the idea of purification.

I shall have to talk about myself, though not because I am self-centred (which, in a way I am, and, in a way, I'm not), but because my thinking apparatus is somehow surprised and interested by the strength of my whole's rebellion against using the word 'believe', and it wants to find out whether it is due to my not understanding the meaning of the word, or to some other reasons (psychoanalytic 'explanations' excluded, as they would only be a kind of specific *ignoratio elenchi*). Having thus become my own guinea-pig and looked into its entrails, I find that my reaction to the words "the sun will rise at 7.5 a.m." is not a straightforward one at all. I accused myself of insincerity, though it would be difficult to say in what, in such a case, insincerity could consist; and then, not finding the cause in myself, I looked again at the sentence and saw that it was it which was not straightforward at all.

It is a two-faced sentence, each face has two profiles, and seeing them makes one feel awkward, even if both faces look in the same direction. It is the kind of awkwardness A must feel when, after a long journey with B, B says: "Let's have something to eat now, because you are hungry."

It seems to me that "the sun will rise at 7.5 a.m." is a statement of the two types simultaneously. It is of the type: (1) 'Sugar is soluble in water'; and, at the same time, it is of the type: (2) 'Dogs bark'. The second one is a generalization. The

first one is not. If I have a dog that doesn't bark, I shall not say: "Benjamin is not a dog", but if I bought some sugar, and it didn't dissolve in my tea, I would send it back to the grocer, and he would send it back to Messrs. Tate & Lyle, and, if they cared, they would send it to a Research Laboratory where a Rutherford or a Bohr would finally have to find a structural difference between the sample and the rest of Sugar, and would have to give it a new name, for instance: 'Susugar', or else would have to send it to Rome so that a miracle could be declared. Dogs bark by generalization; sugar dissolves by definition. From the point of view of barking, each dog may be taken as an entire thing; from the point of view of solubility, all sugar, — past, present, and future, — is one thing. So, by testing the barking ability of Benjamin we learn about him only, and not necessarily about other dogs. Yet, by testing one single cup of tea, we learn about the solubility of all sugar. Now, before I come back to the 'Rising Sun', I'm tempted to note four questions that formed themselves, some time ago, I don't know how, in my guinea-pig's brain (mind) that I'm observing:

1. Will the statement 'dogs bark' be valid tomorrow?
2. Will Benjamin bark tomorrow?
3. Will sugar be soluble tomorrow?
4. Will this spoonful of sugar dissolve tomorrow?

And another one:

Do I need the word 'believe' to answer them?

I lit my pipe and began to think about the answers, though I don't exactly know what I mean by saying 'I was thinking about the answers' as my thoughts for this last minute, so far as I remember them now, have had nothing to do with the questions. The first thought was: How silly of me, when going to Richmond I bought at the station a packet of cigarettes as I thought you might hate pipe-smoke, and then you smoked a pipe and I smoked cigarettes; then I thought something about my writing, which I wish to censor here; then I thought something about the tooth I've just had out; then something about money, which I

wish to censor; then something about sex, which I wish to censor; then that I must think about the four questions; then how fortunate it is that I numbered the questions, I just have to put down the figures 1, 2, 3, 4, and it will be easy now; and then I took my pen again, and I do not know what my thinking about the questions was, yet I do know that I wasn't prepared to write the answers a minute or two ago, when I lit my pipe, but that I am ready to do it now, when it needs the help of another match.

1a. The statement 'dogs bark' will be valid tomorrow, unless tomorrow brings so many barkunable puppies that they outnumber all the observed barking dogs of the past ages. In that case, the statement valid tomorrow would be "the statement 'dogs bark' is not valid today and it was not valid yesterday (though people mistakenly thought that it was), unless tomorrow again brings so many barking puppies that they outnumber the mute ones (in which case we mistakenly think that it isn't)". As so much depends on the genes of future bitches, the last sentence would have been much easier to write if we had a simpler method of indicating whether, when we say 'dogs bark', we mean dead dogs, or living dogs, or future dogs. Much confusion would be avoided if, for instance, tenses indicating time were affixed to the nouns and not to the verbs in a sentence.

No three-legged horse has ever won the Derby.
'Red Banner' has three legs.

Yet 'Red Banner' could have won the Derby in 1950, and lost his or her leg in 1951.

It would be much less ambiguous if we could say:
No three-legged horse (past) won Derby.
'Red Banner' (present) has three legs.

and had a rule about *la concordance des temps*.

When we say: 'John laughed at Peter, but now he admires him', — we don't exactly know whether it is because Peter

changed or John did, or both. Yet, if we add the tense suffix (-s for present, -ed for past) to nouns and leave the verbs in the infinitive, it will be clear that 'John-ed laugh at Peter-ed but John-s admire Peter-ed' means that John has changed his attitude, while 'John-s laugh at Peter-ed but John-s admire Peter-' means that Peter has changed. We could even say: 'John-ed and John-s laugh at Peter-ed, but John-s admire Peter-s'.

It is true that what a verb stands for needs time. Yet, what a noun stands for takes place in time too. And though there is a continuity between the President of the French Republic and the foetus he was, there is only a sub-minute similarity between them. On the other hand, the meaning of a verb, for instance: 'to give birth', is today about the same as it was when the President was born.

We could say:

Only an elephant or a whale gives birth to a creature whose weight is 70 kilogrammes or more.

The President's weight is 75 kilogrammes.

The President's mother was either an elephant or a whale.

This monstrosity would not be possible if we had means of attaching tense suffixes to nouns:

Only an elephant-ed-s or a whale-ed-s give-birth to a 70 or more kilogrammes creature.

The President-s weigh 75 kilogrammes.

We immediately see that the tense is 'elephant' and 'President' are not identical, and that the only conclusion we could (if we must) arrive at would be that of all females only an elephant or a whale one could give birth to the President as he is now (which, other considerations apart, is not, at least from the point of view of weights, such a nonsensical statement).

I have often been persecuted by the temptation of sketching a Dictionary of Signs that could serve as grammatical operators guiding the words in a sentence, the words of any language, in their simplest 'nominativus', 'infinitivus' not flexed forms. Here is the Tense-indicator which I propose to be attachable to nouns. It looks like the face of a clock, with one (or 2, or 3) hands:

	past ⊕	present ⊕	future ⊕
an instant in the	"	"	"
a number of instants in the	" ⊕	" ⊕	" ⊕
a length of time in the	" ⊕	" ⊕	" ⊕
a 'started' time in the	" ⊕	" ⊕	" ⊕
an accomplished time in the	" ⊕	" ⊕	" ⊕
&c., &c., &c.			
general statements:	past & present ⊕	present & future ⊕	
	past, present & future ⊕		

Thus the statement 'dogs ⊕ bark' is valid to-day and will be valid tomorrow if there is no radical change in the bark-ability of the canine population. And even if tomorrow will bring forth an overwhelming number of the mute mutants, it will still be valid, though in the form 'dogs ⊕ bark ⊕'. Yet 'dogs ⊕ bark' is a statement is a statement of which we never, — yesterday, today or tomorrow, — can be certain, unless we decide to stop classifying not-barking dogs as dogs, in which case the statement ceases to be a generalization and becomes a tautology, thus moving from descriptive zoology into strict science. And I don't feel any temptation to use the word 'believe' in regard to any of the above statements.

2a. 'Will Benjamin bark tomorrow?' or:

(Benjamin ⊕ bark)? ⊕

I ⊕ don't know.

If he ⊕ bark, he ⊕ probably bark, but he ⊕ may not, who ⊕ know?

If he ⊕ not bark, he ⊕ probably not bark, but he ⊕ may not, who

① know?

I may hope that he will bark (or not bark), I can imagine a situation where I would like to give my life for his becoming a barking dog (or a not-barking dog), but I would not give my life for the comfort (or the discomfort) of a conviction that he will bark (or not bark). Yet people who believe do give their lives not only for the cause they like to serve, but for their own conviction. Their conviction springs probably out of their personal integrity (or deformity) and has little to do with evidence, while my 'knowledge' about Benjamin's bark-ability springs out of generalized evidence ☺ and has nothing to do with conviction. I am tempted to say, that, on the contrary, if I had a conviction it would be a conviction that things change and everything can happen; who barks today can become silent tomorrow, and vice versa, &c., but even of that unchangeability of the changeability of things I am not so homogeneously certain as to find it legitimate for me to say that I believe in it.

3a. 'Will sugar be soluble tomorrow?'

This question is an instance of a more general question: 'Can a law of nature change?'

Here Cardinal Pölättö fiercely opposes Bertrand Russell. Though the Cardinal is too good a theologian to take the Eddington-Jeans bite. ". . . the fact that certain movements of electrons are not determined by any cause" says he, "could not mean that science had discovered what by its nature must be not perceivable by science . . . The Church doesn't ask science to tint herself with Divinity . . . In particular, it is erroneous, if not a heresy indeed, to hold that miracles are scientifically possible. On the contrary, they are not. Why, it is only because they are impossible that they are possible, for only those that are impossible are miracles, and those that are possible are not." And, then à propos a case of a pathological parthenogenesis — "Thus, as a fortuitous concurrence of atoms is possible, it cannot be a miracle. A miracle, to be possible, must be a breach of such a law of nature in which a breach is impossible. Hence, we must be on our guard not only against 'empiricists' like Eddington and

Jeans who expand the universe of science onto what she is not; but also against rationalists, like Russell, who contract it to its roots so much that they arrive at the question: 'Whether a Law of Nature can change?' and there remains in their hands nothing with which they could write: 'No!'" — Then, after having established his case, which is: Laws of Nature cannot change because otherwise it would mean that a total breach of law is possible, which would mean that the total miracle (such as The Day of Judgment) is impossible, — he, Pölätüo, argues again: "Supposing sugar refuses to dissolve tomorrow. If this is due to the Will of God who wanted to show the scientists that His miracles are possible, then the scientists are not to be able to find any cause for the sudden un-solubility of sugar. If, on the other hand, it is not due to the Will of God, then, as all other constants are deducible from e , m , M , h , c , G , λ , (quoted in *Human Knowledge*), it will follow that a sudden change of sugar's solubility must be a result of some change in the numerical value of e , m , M , h , c , G , λ . Yet, as these appear in the fundamental equations of physics, any change of their value must be followed by some changes in all brute fact, such as the structure not only of sugar but also of the instruments measuring the changes and of the brains perceiving them. Now, Pölätüomism maintains that the changes in the instruments will be such that they will compensate for the changes in the fundamental constants, and therefore the instruments will be not able to detect them; which is only another way of saying that the changes in the value of e , m , M , h , c , G , λ , are not possible; which is only another way of saying that Laws of Nature cannot change; which is as it ought to be if a total miracle is to be possible." So much for the Cardinal. I don't know about his rather arbitrary assumption that the changes in the instruments of observation will compensate for the changes of the value of the constants. Otherwise his reasoning seems to be sound. If the sudden un-solubility of tomorrow's sugar implies a change in the constants, and a change in the constants implies a change in the whole universe, then, is it legitimate to call tomorrow's sugar (one having the post-change structure) by the same name by which we call today's sugar? And tomorrow's water by the same name as today's? And 'solubility'

(as it will be understood by the mind implied by the brain that will be having the post-change structure) — is it legitimate to call it by the same name as today's solubility? However, if we agree to call the post-change sugar (whatever it will be) — 'susugar', then we can write down two statements:

sugar ☺ soluble
& susugar ☺ unsosoluble

which are not contradictory; neither is a generalization; each is most perfectly scientific, as it asserts what had already been tacitly embraced by the definition; and the fact that after The Great Change there is going to be no sugar, and before The Great Change there is nowhere to look for the susugar, does not affect their validity.

In other words: all past, present and future sugar is soluble, and all past, present and future susugar is unsosoluble; and I don't see why in expressing these statements I should use a word which other people need to express their (quite different from mine here and now) state of mind which makes them say something like:

"I believe God will help me tomorrow", or:

"I know that you are the worst boy I've ever set eyes on; I've been watching you and I've made some observations: first you kicked your little sister and you did it on purpose; then you pee-ed into the teapot; then I have evidence that you pinched twopence from my purse, so why, O!, why do I still *believe* in your good nature?!"

4a. 'Will this spoonful of sugar dissolve tomorrow?'

Yes, if nothing prevents me from putting it into my tea, in other words: if it finds in itself in the tea; and if there is no trickery with spraying it with an insulating film of shellac or some such, in other words: if the molecules of sugar find themselves in touch with the molecules of tea; and if there is no trickery with temperature, pressure &c., in other words: if the tension is

allowed to force particles of the dissolving substance into solution, in other words: if the solute dissolves in the solvent; and if there is no trickery with substituting another sample of sugar for this spoonful of sugar, in other words: if this spoonful of sugar dissolves tomorrow.

I don't see why I should employ the word 'believe' if that which I have to affirm is: "This spoonful of sugar will dissolve tomorrow if it dissolves tomorrow".

The trouble about the Rising Sun question is that it evokes simultaneously all the four above reactions (1a. dogs; 2a. Benjamin; 3a. sugar; 4a. the spoonful of sugar), and whenever one deals with one, one always knows that there are the others, which, even if it can be disentangled by reason, emotionally remains rather embarrassing.

1b. 'Dogs ☺ bark'.

'Suns (whether constituting one single biographical sun or not) ☺ 'rise'.

This is all we know. Yet dogs are comparatively small and dependent on us, and we can imagine the coming of a new fashion of breeding millions of not-barking dogs; while the Sun's (or the suns' – if it is each time a new one that we see rising in the sky) size (or aloofness – if we haven't been told about its size) and independence intimidates in us any thought of that kind. However, if we do not allow here any of the considerations belonging to the other three answers (2, 3, 4), if we forget all about gravitation &c. &c., and concentrate exclusively on the number of past known cases ☺ of the sun, then it would be difficult to see how the number alone, just because it is great, should make us think that the occurrence will 'repeat itself' again. It isn't what we think in Monte Carlo. There, when 'rouge' comes a number of times we expect 'noire' to follow sooner or later. Why should we be intimidated by the number of past observations? Does not the spindle of any centrifugal machine make during a

day's work more revolutions than the Sun (or Earth) has made since Joshua, and yet we know that when the factory hooter sounds after the 8 hours journey, there must come a revolution that will be the last.

So far I am not convinced that I should use the phrase: 'I believe that the sun will rise tomorrow. On the contrary, if there were no other factor to be taken into consideration, the records of the great number of past revolutions would rather put me on my guard, or even make me a little impatient, and expecting a sudden finale, and perhaps more prepared for it than I am now. After all, the Polynesian Maui, as well as the Christian scholars of 1,000 A.D., also had behind them a number of Risings of the Sun big enough to generalize upon, and yet they were not so sure what it would do next.

2b. 'Benjamin has barked at me, so many times, why shouldn't he bark at me tomorrow?'

'The Sun has been in the sky every day in the past, why shouldn't it be there tomorrow?'

This is the strongest of all the pleas for using the word 'believe', for we deal here not so much with evidence or with numbers as with acquired habits which you call 'beliefs' and which, like passions (if I may quote here from *New Hopes for a Changing World*), "have a certain momentum and a tendency to self-perpetuation", and I admit that the word 'believe' can be used to describe the state of mind of some of the persons who, without paying much attention to zoology and cosmology, think Benjamin will bark and the Sun will rise tomorrow, just as it can be used to describe the state of mind of some of the persons who, without paying much attention to theology, take the liturgy for granted because they were taught (conditioned) so and it never occurred to them to revolt. However, this guinea-pig does revolt. Though it isn't so much "intellectually" that it revolts. The centre of the revolt (or, should I say: the centre of the feeling of revolt) can be localized anatomically. It is not in the brain any more than in the toes. It is in that queer place between the ribs,

at the top of the stomach, called, I think, 'plexus solaris'. That comes first; the intellectual arguments later. And as bodily reactions of that kind are the guinea-pig's sole guidance through the complexity of the world, it cannot afford to ignore them. Thus, as its 'plexus solaris' revolts against its 'larynx's' using the word 'believe' to describe its 'cerebrospinal' attitude towards the problem of the Rising Sun, the whole guinea-pig changes into an interrogation mark asking: "Why is it so?"

I think it is so because the guinea-pig's reactions have been all through its life-time what Pavlov would call: 'deconditioned' by the world's facing it always with the unforeseen, until it becomes conditioned to expect the unforeseen. Benjamin will either bark or not bark tomorrow. But if tomorrow Benjamin comes to me, puts his head on my knees and says in a deep voice: "Hallo, Stefan, do you remember the dreams of your childhood?", or if he jumps onto my window-sill and starts singing like a canary, am I to consider his behaviour as barking or as not-barking? 'A or not-A' seems uneasy when taken out of 'in vitro'. Either there will be a war after the harvest, or not. And then there is a war, but the harvest is late and the stacks rot in the fields; or there is one, but not where we thought it would be; or there is one but it isn't called 'war' but 'preparation for peace'. For the brain's mind it is always 'A or not-A'. For the ensemble brain-cum-plexus-solaris's mind it is always: Neither & Both or Something Third. If I expect that K either will lend me a pound or not, and the result of my seeing him is that he borrows half-a-crown from me, for the brain-cum-plexus-solaris it is neither A nor not-A, it is Something Third.

A hunting for "Neither & Both or Something Third" may be as absorbing an activity as any hunting for a truth. Perhaps that is what our guinea-pig does when it takes a joke and pursues it so far that it ceases to be a joke and becomes a serious matter (or boring); or takes a serious problem and pursues it in such direction that it becomes a joke (or silly). And that may be the reason why some of its few readers find it difficult to make up their mind whether they are expected to smile or to think, and

not knowing whether to review the guinea-pig's books in *Punch* or in *Mind* don't do it in either.

It either rains outside or not-rains. And so I go out into the street, and the edge of the cloud hangs right above my head, and pavement is wet and ringing with the falling drops on my left hand side, and dry and dusty on my right. And though I wouldn't have foreseen that, wouldn't try to define how many square (or cubic?) inches make 'outside' nor how many drops make 'rain', nor whether it is 'raining' in the space between the falling drops or not, — yet, if I were asked: "Do you believe that it is either raining outside or not-raining?" not only the word 'believe' but the very precision of the question would put me on my guard and make me think about (maybe even hope for) the unforeseen.

Yet, what may there be that is unforeseen in regard to the Rising Sun question? Let's expel from here all the other considerations tabulated under 1, 3, & 4, and let's concentrate on No. 2: the 'Benjamin has barked at me so many times, why shouldn't he bark at me tomorrow?' — type. This can be expressed better as follows: "There have been periodical coincidences of the Sun being in the sky (clouds or no clouds) and I being awoken (slumber or no slumber), which phenomenon formed a certain habit that is now a part of me. Will that habit be reinforced by further similar occurrences?" Now, at least, my plexus-solaris and the chief hero of *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* are on the same footing. As much depends on me as it does on the shining him. Shall I sin so that he becomes angry and shows not his face again, — just for the sake of an experiment? Or shall I go to the Polynesian Islands and try to lasso him? 'A or not-A' once acknowledged and pigeon-holed, life becomes dazzling with potentialities. And it comes out that in this equal partnership of Sun & Me, my biography is less boring than his. Less pertaining to routine. If one of my friends hadn't become an ambassador of a country that is not regarded as friendly by the late and the present government, and if another of my friends, whom I haven't seen for ages (how careful I am in making this remark!), had not been a collaborator of Monsieur

Joliot, and hadn't then been to America, and been thrown out from there, I would probably not have been refused a British passport or travelling papers¹, as I have, and my movements would not be confined to the borders of the United Kingdom, as they practically are now, in which case I could embark in a supersonic airplane and, going West, considerably postpone the next Rising of the Sun, or I could go to the North Pole or the South Pole, where I could have to wait a number of months to see him, all of which, after a sufficient length of time, should re-condition or de-condition my habits formed by his periodicity, and as my habits were the Rock on which, in this §, I was expected to build my belief in his Rising, the very foundation of my potential faith crumbles, as have previously crumbled the foundations of other prejudices.

I use the word: 'prejudices', because a prejudice remains a prejudice even if its object is true. I can know (either because I was taught so, or ostensibly) that if I turn on a switch the bulb will give light; and I can believe that if I turn on a switch the bulb will give light. If I know, and then it happens that the bulb doesn't give light, I shall call an electrician. If I believed, I should go down on my knees, or put my hat on, or touch the floor with my forehead, and pray forgiveness from the bulb (or the switch) for my sins with which I must have offended the whole or a part of the electric circuit, even if I didn't know when I committed them.

3b. I tried (1b) to see the Rising Sun problem in a form similar to (1a) 'Dogs bark', and could not find any reason why a number (however great) of past similar occurrences should make me expect (or believe) that the spindle will have one turn more rather than that it will have a rest.

I tried (2b) to see it in a form similar to (2a) 'Benjamin barks', and found that it would be superstitious to base my belief on a habit that had formed in me, as its nature depended no

¹ Bertrand Russell, *Portraits from Memory*, p.205 (J.R.).

more on the Sun's movements than on mine, and these could have been so different as to de-condition me entirely.

Now I'm going to look at it in a form similar to (3a) 'Sugar ☺ soluble'. Here we throw overboard all the past observations of the Sun rising and of Sugar dissolving. They have here & now only a historical value. They served us in gathering our present knowledge about the solubility of sugar and about the movements of the planet, but once we have acquired it, we don't need them any more. No symbol representing the number of observations made by past generations of physicists and astronomers enters any equation for solubility or for the diurnal movements of the Sun-Earth system. If we had here now a visitor from Somewhere Else completely ignorant of our Solar System's past movements, and we gave him all the necessary data concerning the Earth's & Sun's present positions, directions, velocities, gravitation, &c., he would be able, on the strength of these data only, to tell us two things: (A) what was the Sun's position 24 hours ago; and (B) what will be the Sun's position 24 hours ahead; and there is no reason why he should be more convinced of the correctness of (A) than of (B). If he wished to make some reservation, he would have to append it to both, to the "post-diction" as well as to the "pre-diction", to (A) as well as to (B). He would have to say: (A) "24 hours ago the Sun was in such and such position, provided, that is, that the world is older than 24 hours, and that nothing extraordinary happened yesterday". And: (B) "In 24 hours time the Sun will be in such and such position, provided, that is, that the End of the World comes later, and that nothing extraordinary happens tomorrow." Whilst by saying 'nothing extraordinary' he would in both (A) and (B) cases mean: 'something that is not included in the data which you have given me'. I don't see why he should employ the verb 'know' in regard to (A), yet 'believe' in regard to (B); why he should be allowed to say "I know that 24 hours ago the Sun . . . &c.", but expected to say "I believe that in 24 hours time the Sun . . . &c.". Both statements are based for him on the same data about the present state of solar affairs and have causally nothing to do with past observations.

Are we not in exactly the same position as the visitor from Somewhere Else? For us, too, these statements (A) and (B) are based on our being acquainted with the present state of solar affairs, and our remembrances of past observations (or habits conditioned by them) not only as a misleading camouflage for our thinking. So, we too should be allowed to employ the verb 'know' rather than 'believe', when we express our mind, thoughts, expectations, &c., about the Sun's risibility in astronomically not too far ahead a future.

The case is not dissimilar to that of a train and the Time-Table. I hurry not because I believe that the train will leave the station at 4.30 (as usual), but because I know that it leaves the station at 4.30, though I know also that it may, exceptionally, leave later, and, very exceptionally, earlier. And my knowledge about "4.30" is based not on my past experiences but on the Time-Table, though it may be that my knowledge of the Time-Table comes not from reading the printed sheet of paper, but ostensibly from my past experiences. A certain knowledge about the Mechanism of the Railway System [(if only a knowledge that such a mechanism exists), (or a solar system, or a molecular system)] undoubtedly takes a part in forming an opinion (or rather a 'picture' or a plan of the situation). Though it may not be so with Peter and Paul who come from an island of horse-driven carriages. Ignorant of the Time-Table, Peter may form a belief that there is a direct connection between the clock striking 4.30 and the train leaving the station; and Paul — that there is a direct connection between his having business to do in Manchester and the train's going in that direction. The day the Time-Table is changed, Peter, even if told about it, will feel compelled (just 'en tout cas', for safety's sake) to embark at his usual time of 4.29 and wait in the carriage; and Paul, the first week-end he has nothing to do in Manchester, could take his usual train, and ask the guard to take him to Brighton. (It would probably be safe to infer that where they come from Peter is a poor journeyman and Paul is the squire). The same ("4.29" & "Brighton") confusion could, of course, happen to me, too. Yet then it wouldn't be a

question of belief. Peter's case in my case would be called a mistake; and Paul's case in my case would be called absentmindedness.

4a cont. & 4b.

Of course, trains are more likely to be late than the Sun is; and the Sun is more likely to be late than Sugar to become insoluble. How do I know? (The very fact of my asking here: "How do I know?" and not "How do I believe?" seems to add to the argument that it is a question of knowledge rather than of faith). How do I? Many answers come forward (based mostly on the fact of the complex protein molecules taking part in the Railway—, and not in the Solar System), a conclusive one however would be that (a) nothing that may happen to the Railway Time-Table can affect the regularity of the Solar System, yet things that can happen to the Solar System may affect the regularity of the Railway; and that (b) nothing that can happen to the Solar System can affect the Solubility of Sugar, yet any change in the Solubility of Sugar (as involving changes in the fundamental constants) must affect the Solar System, and the Railway System, and the Nervous System, together with the rest of the Universe.

I could push the comparison so far as to say that the Solar System (like Sugar) behaves as it does, by definition; yet this would be a causistic evasion of the problem, and even Cardinal Pölättö doesn't do things like that. An intervention from outside may prevent this spoonful of sugar from being dissolved, but no intervention from outside can effect the Solubility of Sugar without making Sugar into Susugar. Yet some intervention from outside can effect the ways of the Earth and of the Sun without involving any changes in the fundamental constants, and thus, as the case may be, without making it necessary to find a new name for what we call the 'Solar System'. The question is: How much can the Solar System change without losing the characteristics of the Solar System. And: can such a change come without warning. If the Sun, or the Earth, goes to pieces (whatever that means), it might be considered (though not necessarily so) as the end of the

whole machinery or the beginning of the new one. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea." However, if the Earth's rotation slows down twice (in other words: if the Sun doesn't rise when my wrist watch reads 7.5), the Sun-Earth relation may still be considered as a continuation of what it is now. Can this happen without warning? Are all the seven trumpets of St. John the Divine reserved for the total cataclysm, and will not a single one announce the slowing down of the Earth's rotation?

The problem of warning has probably something to do with the "size" of an event. When I strike a match, a sudden breeze may come without warning and blow the flame out. Yet, were my burning match of the size of Chicago on fire, and had it to be extinguished by blowing, it would be hard to imagine a hurricane of suitable majesty, coming up suddenly without any sign of warning. In the scale of the Solar System, the very sudden slowing down twice of the Earth's rotation would probably take longer time than 24 hours (years?, centuries?) during which some such signs as comets, black patches on the sun, or disturbances in the reception of the Third Programme, would have to be noticed. As there has been nothing of this kind today, it is reasonable for me to think that the Sun will rise next according to *The Time's* Weather Forecast (both, its rising tomorrow, and *The Time's* forecast for tomorrow being equally and independently the result of the present state of affairs), — and to act as on any other day of the past that was followed by a not sun-void tomorrow, and this thinking & acting of mine is something other than believing.

As I understand these words, it is 'know' that welcomes evidence and can withstand any number of reservations (in fact it is plunged in an ocean of ifs); and it is 'believe' that doesn't care about evidence (whether supporting or defying a case), and is vulnerable to the ifs, whose growth in number makes the whole business into a parody. If I ask John: "What will happen to this iron rod if I raise its temperature?", and he answers: "I believe

that its length will increase", I am tempted to say: "Look here, John, I will listen to what you believe some other time, what I would like to know now is what will happen to this iron rod if I raise its temperature". A statement: "The length of this iron rod will increase with the raising of its temperature" is hospitable to the evidence, and is surrounded by an unlimited number of tacit ifs, such as: "if I don't cut a piece of it off", "if there is no pressure applied to its ends that will thicken it at the full extent of its length", "if the temperature is not so high that it melts it", "if the supply of oxygen is not so great as to burn it", and so on. The statement survives trial by experiment and enjoys its surrounding ifs. It is different when one says: "My dear Mary, I have heard things like that hundreds of times and they have never come true; yet now I believe you (I don't care about evidence), I believe that you will love Smith for ever, if he doesn't get an abscess on the tip of his nose, if he doesn't go to bed with your hairdresser, and you with his manicurist, and he with your pedicurist, and you with his masseur, and he with your dentist, and you with his physician, and he with your obstetrician, and you with . . ." No, the word believe cannot withstand many reservations. To 'know' plus ifs is a subject for *Mind* or *Nature*, to 'believe' plus ifs is for *Punch*.

The trouble is that people seem very often to know and to believe the same thing at the same time. In such a case it is very difficult to see what they actually do. It may be that the quantity of ifs present in their state of mind can serve as a guide. This guinea-pig has always, in all situations, had a tendency to be conscious of the existence of many ifs, "always knowing there are other moods". And that's probably what made it tell you that it never believed. When it hears praises for Russia and boos for the rest of the Europe, it makes it "intellectually uncomfortable". But it also makes it "intellectually uncomfortable" when I hear boos for Russia and cheers for the rest of Europe. It would be the same were it for Monaco and Andorra, or for Theism and Atheism. There are so many ifs to every question. Whether it is the Sun's rising or God. I don't remember ever believing in God, though I must say that that specific state of mind is not foreign to my

experience, I mean the state of mind which believers (unnecessarily) try to explain by introducing supernatural elements into their vocabulary, and discussing in terms of religion. So, the statement "I never believed" should not be read as a declaration of a self-assured mind believing in its own power; no, it is a statement of fact, delivered without arrogance or undue humility, neither cold nor burning, just simple.

A chain of rational thoughts may be sound and strong yet what is the Rock to which its first link, its first major premise, can be anchored? A chain of religious thoughts can only be false, an agglomeration of shining trinkets, gauds, fineries, but its first link is cemented to something given by revelation. It can be argued that the statement about it being a revelation is itself an arbitrary assumption, and that's exactly what makes the whole situation so grotesque, yet it doesn't dispense us from looking for a Rock for the first link of the chain of our rational thoughts. I hope I am not misinterpreting you if I say that it is that Secular Rock you have in mind when you say two words: "Human Nature". In any case, that is the main thing I have learned from your books. As soon as we substitute words for mathematical symbols, we are already on the road at the end of which we are bound to find ourselves face to face with what you call "Human Nature". What it is, whether it is what I wish it to be, or what Mr. Dupont, or Braun, or Ivanovitch, or Li, wish it to be, whether it becomes what we want it to be, or whether we become what it makes us, this is a wrong sentence, it cannot be finished, and it cannot be crossed out. Perhaps there is a Hope for Human Nature being what I wish it to be.

The very fact of the Churches' survival seems to show that it was due not to the attractiveness of their liturgical or theological trinkets, but that there must have been something reflecting human nature in that to which the first link was attached. If it was the Decalogue, can one purge it ("10" is too big a number for our time), can one clean it, and anchor to it the chain of rational thoughts? Can we agree which commandments we accept (or rather: which are Human Nature, can we make other people

accept them, and how? By persuasion? But persuasion is only another chain of logical reasoning and, however strong it may be, its first link cannot be attached to the same Decalogue at which its last link is expected to arrive. We can persuade people that a is the best method of achieving the result A. But we cannot persuade them to desire A if they want B. For A we can only fight (and can we fight without breaking the very commandments we evangelize?)

It seems as if something is lacking from this picture. If my experimental guinea-pig's nature is human, I detect in it a certain 'configuration' which is the cause of something which I call a sense of symmetry, or — of artistic balance, or — of justice; the name depends on what I apply it to. Is that 'configuration' common to all Human Nature? The question for me is a very important one, and I find that I don't know the answer.

Cardinal Pölättö during his visit to Richmond (which took place a few months before my visit), said: ". . . Dear Bertie, I may have all the pages of your symbols (he referred to *Principia Mathematica*) before me and still be unable to tell what you will do next. On the other hand bring to my confessional the content of your heart, let me hear your soul, and I shall be more in a position to predict what you will do in a certain set of conditions. Now, if science deals with predicting what's going to happen in a certain set of conditions, then does it not follow that it would be more scientific to let me see your soul than to let me read your books?" I do not identify myself with the Cardinal, especially as, at the end, he got knocked down in your study, but here I felt that I should follow his teaching and let you see some of my soul.

And, perhaps, the definition of 'Soul' here could be: "that something to which the first link, the first major premise, of our books is attached."

Yours sincerely,
Stefan Themerson

41 Queen's Road
Richmond
Surrey

26 March 1952

Dear Mr Themerson

Thank you for your most fascinating letter on the subject of the things you don't "believe". I find almost every word of it convincing. Of course, if I wanted to be fussy, I could argue as to the way the word "believe" is to be used. I think that the way you use the word is the usual way. But mine, I think, is common among philosophers. I very much like your Cardinal and wish that the real Cardinals were half as intelligent. My own feeling is that your letter ought to be published in a philosophical magazine. What do you feel? If you have no objection I would see what I could do about it.

Don't forget that I should like to see you and Mrs Themerson whenever it is convenient.

Yours sincerely
Bertrand Russell

The story of Stefan's essay on "belief" does not end there, but for a more complete account we must wait for the publication of the Russell-Themerson correspondence.

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