The Finishing School and Chapter 18
ALSO BY STEFAN THEMERSON

Professor Mmaa’s Lecture
Bayamus
Cardinal Pölüätuo
Wooff Wooff
Tom Harris
General Piesc
The Mystery of the Sardine
Hobson’s Island

Logic Labels and Flesh
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On Semantic Poetry
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The Chair of Decency

Apollinaire’s Lyrical Ideograms
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Six Short Texts

St. Francis & the Wolf of Gubbio

The Adventures of Peddy Bottom
Mr. Rouse Builds His House (with Barbara Wright)
Stefan Themerson

The Finishing School and Chapter 18

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“Watch Out for Obscure Publications”
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"Novelists often succeed where logicians fail," I said. She looked down on me.

"What do you know about logicians?" she sneered, in that polite, post-graduate, full of the pure-gold-of-intellectual-honesty, melodiously-arrogant voice.

Without getting up from my armchair, I took her by the elbows, turned her round, bent her over my knees, lifted her skirt up, pulled her knickers down, and with the palm of my right hand measured three firm spanks on her buttocks. After which I pulled the knickers up and the skirt down. She lingered for a few seconds. But then she stood up and, facing me, said:

"You have committed two fallacies."

"Yes?"

"Firstly: you used force when you should have used arguments. Secondly: you meant it to be punishment, and it was pleasure."

* 

It all started when Lady Cordelia Crab-Walker, parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Education, phoned me one morning and said: "Stefan darling, I need your help, – O, yes, it’s immensely important – as soon as you can, there’s a good boy – no, no, not in my office, the thing is top secret – of course, you silly – no, not that sort of ‘top secret’ – do you know that little place in Soho called ‘Les Enfants Terribles’? it’s either Dean Street or Wardour Street, never remember which – of course you
do – will you invite me there for a cup of coffee at six o’clock? – that will be lovely – you are a poppet – what? – no, I didn’t say ‘a poppet’, of course not, it must have been somebody on the line.”

We were both five minutes late and, arriving from two opposite directions, met at exactly the same moment at the entrance to ‘Les Enfants Terribles’. There were no more than three or four little tables in the café, but there was also a staircase leading down to the basement from which some psychedelic music was percolating upwards towards us. We stood at the top of the staircase, when the man behind the little coffee counter shook his dead disapprovingly.

“No?” I asked.
“No,” he said.
“He doesn’t want us to go down to the basement,” I explained to Cordelia.
“Why?” she asked.
“Apartheid,” I said.
“What!” she exclaimed.
“Well,” I said. “Age apartheid. The generation gap. He’s terrified we might meet our own children there. Or grandchildren.”

“So what if we do? I would like to. After all, I am the Ministry of Education. Good Lord!”

All the same, we didn’t dive into the cellar, we sat politely in the corner by the window and ordered one cappuccino and one espresso.

“Well . . .” she looked straight into my eyes. Her eyes were wide open. They were green. With sparks of gold.

“Well,” she said, “I want you to start something . . .” Keeping her eyes on me, she took the cup in her right hand, the saucer in her left, and took a sip of cappuccino. “I want you to start something from scratch. On a very low budget.”
"To start what?" I asked.

She opened her mouth and closed it, put down the saucer, and the cup, then folded her arms, and said firmly:

"A finishing school. Oh, don't blush! Not that sort of finishing school!" She shrugged her shoulders. "What we have decided is to open a finishing school for academic post-graduates. You see, the trouble with them is that they believe in what they have been taught, they believe that Truth is about statements, which it is, but they forget that statements are about the world, and it is truly extraordinary to observe how most of them, and especially the brilliant ones, and those from the best colleges, find themselves surrounded by a sort of unbridged moat as soon as they leave the groves of Academe and enter the bewildering world of life."

Her words seemed to me bewildering enough.

"And you want me to do the bridging?" I exclaimed. "How ridiculous, my dear Cordelia, and how naïve! Just imagine me taking them down the coal mines, or round the factory floors, or to Butlin's holiday camps!"

"Oh, no," she said calmly. "Those methods have already been tried, in other countries, without much success. What I want you to do is something different. I want you to take them back to what my dear friend Thomas Kuhn calls 'exemplars and paradigms'; I want you to make them - as my dear friend Steven Weinberg says - 'think abstractly and yet at the same time say something of relevance to concrete reality'; I want you - as you yourself my dear friend, said somewhere or other - to give them back the ladder which they had rejected after having climbed up to the top shelf of abstraction, so that they could climb down to reality, in order to go up again strengthened by the experience."

"And how do you think I could do all that?" I asked.

"That" she said "we do not know. If we knew, we wouldn't
have come to you, we would have gone to an expert.”

*

That was how it happened that I found myself in the study of that government sponsored finishing school, spanking the sexy postgraduate lady’s pink buttocks, which seemed to me prettier than her brain.

“You were wrong when you said that I should have used arguments,” I said. “Arguments are for that part of the brain that is enclosed in your skull. But the brain doesn’t end there. It runs down, all the way, down to your toes. And when what’s going on in your skull starts turning round, faultlessly, back to the premises, and then, according to the rules of inference, forward to the same conclusion, like a gramophone needle stuck forever in the same groove, the best way to unstick the brain is to hit that part of it which is in the bottom.”

“Indeed,” she said. “And what about that part of your brain that extends to the palm of your hand, which was in touch with my bottom, does it not affect the part that is in your skull?”

“Indeed it does,” I said. “It affected it very pleasantly.” And, before she had time to answer, I turned to the door, and shouted: “Next, please!”

Before the door opened, she still managed to scribble her telephone number on a piece of paper and to leave it on my desk.

*

The first thing I noticed when he opened the door was his dog-collar. Now, clergymen’s dog-collars induce in me a picture of green fields, blue sky, flowers, a brook perhaps, a few chords of the Pastoral Symphony, little (not big) chirping birds, a quiet
graveyard, peace, and good manners. That’s why I was quite unprepared and taken by surprise when he marched furiously towards my desk, put both hands on its edge, bent over, and said with passion:

“I want you to attack me. I want you to tear me to pieces!”

Instinctively, my head moved a nose-length backwards.

“Won’t you sit down,” I proposed.

He didn’t.

So I stood up.

It was simply ridiculous: two men facing each other across a desk and refusing to sit down. So I asked him my standard test-question: “Could you tell me what you would answer if somebody asked you what an electron is?”

“Free or bound?” he asked.

And he sat down.

And so did I.

He looked so young that if I had had some lollipops in my desk drawer, I would have been inclined to offer him one.

“I believe,” he said. Full stop.

I nodded.

“I believe in God,” he explained.

I nodded.

“Well,” he said. “Come on, attack me, savage me, tear me to pieces.”

“Why should I?” I asked.

“Why should you?” he repeated. “Do you not think that to believe is all wrong? Are you not . . .”

I stopped him.

“You have not come to discuss me,” I said.

“No,” he agreed. “I have non come here to discuss you. I have come here to discuss God.”

“Oh Lord,” I sighed.
"No need to jeer," he said. "So long as I lived inter silvae academi, I was in peace with him. I studied theoretical theology and I was not troubled by any inconsistencies that have been discussed by ecclesiastical philosophers. Well, you see, I studied theology and I studied physics. There is no discrepancy there. Physics is o.k. It is clean. You may even say beautiful. It is morally aseptic. Not so biology . . . But I didn’t know that till I left the University."

"Did you study it afterwards?"

"I didn’t study it. I was it. And either you understand what I mean or you don’t. I can’t explain it any further."

"Try," I said.

"Hell," he said. "The other day I saw on TV an Algerian who said he wanted to be a doctor but became a civil engineer. He couldn’t force himself to study medicine, because — he said — when he was a schoolboy, there was a war in Algeria and he saw too much blood. It was the other way with me. I did my studies first, and saw too much blood later."

"Where?" I asked.

"How do you mean: where? Everywhere. Every-bloody-where! As soon as I left the cozy Shangri-la of the Alma mater, I saw that the whole God-made world is built on the Principle of Devouring; each cubic inch of the God-made soil — a battlefield or a slaughterhouse."

"Are you a vegetarian?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I’m not. One cannot be against suffering death if, without it, there cannot be life. But I do say to myself, as all Christians must have done, at one time of their life or another: If it was God’s aim to make His little creatures suffer, then He is not good. On the other hand, if their suffering is what He uses for some of His higher aims, it follows that He can’t achieve those aims by any other means and, if so, there must be some laws
which He must obey and, if so, they, the Laws, are greater than He
is and, again, if so, it is they, the Laws, that are God.”

He was out of breath.

“Is it in Him that you are losing your faith, or in His
attributes?” I asked.

“Neither,” he burst out. “And that’s what puzzles me. Why
don’t I? That’s incomprehensible. Why do I want to cling to it?
Why do I want to be sure that it is as strong as ever? Because
that’s why I want to put it to the test. That’s why I’m asking you
to attack me, savage me, tear me to pieces. I want it to stand up to
all your atheistic blows.”

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “I haven’t the slightest intention of
fighting it out with you.”

“But . . .” he started. “But they told me . . .”

“Go to hell,” I said. “And don’t tell me what they told you.
Whoever they are. You assume that I don’t believe because I’m
not puzzled. The truth is just the opposite. I’m puzzled too much
to believe in anything. The old man with a white beard sitting on a
cloud, or the Big Bang.”

“Puzzled by what?” he asked.

“Puzzled by everything. By you and by a grain of sand, by
the galaxies and by a butterfly. Puzzled by the fact that there is
something rather than nothing. By the fact that the world is not a
perfect sphere of emptiness, a perfect symmetry of nothingness.
You see, I’m more puzzled than you are, and that’s precisely why
I cannot accept any of your beliefs.”

“They’ve sent me to the wrong chap,” he said.

“They have,” I agreed. “They’ve sent me the wrong chap.
When they send me the right kind of chaps, I tell them: ‘Now, as
you have left the University and entered the real Universe, you
must stop fidgeting and start thinking!’ For you, however, I have a
different message: ‘Stop thinking about Great Because’s and Great
Aims and try, simply, to be nice.”

“How do you mean – nice?”

“Nice. Decent. Forget your theology, and practise the art of being nice. To your parishioners. To other people. And to yourself.”

“You sound like one of those flower-children,” he said.

“That’s the greatest compliment anybody has ever paid me,” I said.

“You devil,” he said, and got up.

I got up.

We were facing each other across the desk. He stretched out his hand to grasp mine. I didn’t notice that he was left-handed. His left hand and my right didn’t fit.

“Next, please,” I shouted, as he opened the door and left.

*

The next arrival was a young bearded man, a graduate. “Won’t you sit down?” I said. He did. And started fiddling with his long hair.

Perhaps because I was still tired and couldn’t invent anything new, or perhaps because I thought it was, in fact, quite successful, I asked my standard test question:

“Could you tell me what you would answer if somebody asked you what an electron is?”

“Electron?” he repeated and looked around anxiously. “Electron? You can’t possibly mean those little things they tell you about in physics? Electron? It must be the masculine of Electra. She loved her father and hated her mother. Therefore Electron must have loved his mother and hated his father. Therefore Electron must be a synonym of Oedipus.”

He was a nice young man, and I found his knowledge of
mythology and psychology quite impressive, but he wouldn't tell me what it was that had made him join the Finishing School. "Well," I recapitulated after an hour and a quarter, "all right. Once upon a time you had an affair with a boy. And you had an affair with a dog. And you had an affair with yourself. That's fine. But did you ever have an affair with a woman?"

He shook his head.

So I took the scrap of paper on which the beautiful blonde post-graduate had written her telephone number, and I gave it to him.

*

The moment he came in, I knew there was some mistake. Firstly because he was so old. Not as old as I am, not many people nowadays are, nevertheless nobody of his age could possibly wish to be a finishing school pupil. And secondly, because I knew who he was. Yes, somebody must have directed him to the wrong door.

He noticed my unease and interpreted it correctly.

"I hope," he said, when we had exchanged some preliminary courtesies, "I hope the fact that I graduated some 25 years ago will not disqualify me for your finishing school and thus rob me of the benefits of your tutorship."

"I don't see why it should," I said. "But wouldn't it be rather absurd? You, with your great experience and knowledge of the world . . ."

"It is kind of you to take that line," he interrupted me, "but you know very well that I wouldn't have come here were I not sure that I would profit by doing so. And what you have just said confirms that I was not mistaken: you said 'experience and knowledge of the world'. By using these two words instead of one you have already put me on the right track. Well, my dear sir, as
you must know, I make occasional speeches in the Upper House, they are recorded in Hansard, and sometimes I manipulate words so that they make people sit up and take notice. I am also active in the City. There I manipulate money by pushing it from one place to another and back again, and, you could say, rolling in it, though I don’t even see it. Now, all this may look very impressive from the outside, but I, in my inner guts, I know that there is something hollow, a vesicle of void, an air-pocket, a vacuum, both in my words and in money. Oh, no,” with a gesture he shut me up before I had time to open my mouth, “I know what you are going to say, my dear sir,” he announced. “You are going to say that both words and money are symbols, and that I am manipulating them according to the Coherence Theory of Truth, so that they would be consistent with each other like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and that I don’t give a damn for the Correspondence Theory of Truth which would insist that my speech acts and my finance acts should portray or represent some facts. Well, you see, I know all that, and I’m not asking you for a diagnosis, I’m asking for a cure. And I trust you will prescribe something less naïve than paying a visit to a widowed shareholder in her drawing room, or to some hard-working fishermen in a seaside resort.”

“All right.” I said. “But first I want to ask you a question.”

“By all means, go ahead, do,” he said.

“Well,” I said, “tell me what you would answer if somebody asked you what an electron is.”

He was taken aback, though he tried not to show it.

“Let me see,” he said. “Electron? That’s an adoption of the Greek word ἕξτρον meaning amber, isn’t it?”

I laughed.

“There you are.” I said. “How typical! You look for the meaning of a word in its past. As if The Good Lord, at the time of His Almighty Big Bang, also created the Omniscient Oxford
English Dictionary, a verbal pool of concepts valid for ever and ever Amen.”

His upper lip kept stiff under the grey mustachio.

“All right,” I said, “my advice is to lay the Amber Dictionary aside, and...”

“And what?” he asked scornfully, “and take to electronics?”

“No,” I said. “And be an eagle.”

He spread his arms, looked at me sharply from under his bushy eyebrows and, reassured, said:

“Oh, I see what you mean! To soar! Up to the vaulted roof! Like prices on the market!”

“You express it better than I could,” I said.

“Naturally,” he said. “Of course. I am a professional speaker. And I am good at it. And a good professional speaker knows what’s in the mind of his listeners. It is his business to know and to express it for them. Especially if they are good listeners. And you are a marvellous listener. I know what you were just going to say. You were going to say that I am a liberal progressive. Tory, endowed with a social conscience. That I like to use such words as tolerance, democracy, progress, evolution, ideology, christianity, alienation. That I manipulate these words with Rhetorical Coherence in the Upper House, just as I manipulate figures with Arithmetical Coherence in the City. But – you were going to ask me – What if the World is not coherent? Anyway, not in my linguistic way? What then? What do my words do when they find themselves in such a world? And what do I do with them? I shut my eagle eyes and say Tolerance. But do I ask myself the question: Can the view-that-all-views-must-be-tolerated contain the view that the-view-that-all-views-must-be-tolerated cannot be tolerated? I say Democracy. But when I say Democracy, do I not mean: majority rule? And is that not tyranny? Exercised by the sacred cow of the majority? Shouldn’t I rather advocate the
Tolerance of minorities? Because *Progress* is evolutionary, and *Evolution* rises on the stepping-stones of mutants, and mutants are always in the minority. Now, I praise *Ideologies*. But do they not cause hatred and violence? Is not the common Decency of Means the essence of all utopian dreams? And thus, is not the Decency of Means the Aim of Aims? And so you are right, My Rhetorical Coherence, which you can find in Hansard, is *not* the same Coherence that is (if at all) in the World. And so, to her I glorify *Christianity*. Yet, isn’t Marxism a wish to translate Christianity into the language of practical deeds?” He stopped, overwhelmed by his own brilliance. And then paraphrased:

“Is not Marxism the continuation of Christianity by other means?”

“Bravo!” I said.

“Or, take *Alienation*. It is so that some people are alienated from the Establishment, or is the Establishment that alienates itself from people?”

“Bravo!” I repeated.

“You shouldn’t clap your hands,” he corrected me. “These are *your* thoughts not mine. I am only formulating them for you, as I said I would.” He paused, wagged his finger at me, and added warningly: “But *you* mustn’t go about putting such thoughts into people’s heads.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Well,” he said. “Don’t be childish. You know perfectly well that people talk about your school. They say Cordelia was mad to start a thing like that. They say it’s irresponsible. They say it allows too much freedom of speech.”

“And you agree . . .”

“Look here, we are all for freedom of speech, but not necessarily at the expense of the tax-payer.”

“But we are all tax-payers,” I protested, “and rate payers. and
VAT payers.”
He laughed.
“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. How much do you pay? Peanuts in comparison with the fortune I give each year to the tax-gatherers.”
“So you think that we should have our freedom of speech in proportion to the income-tax we pay?”
He jumped up.
“That’s am idea! Don’t claim copyright on it because I’m going to use it.”

CODA
(or It’s for me to decide who’s alienated from whom, I from you, or you from me)

“Meet another philosopher,” said Edith at Bertie’s birthday party. So they agglamourated aground me, bright twitching integrogenation marks in their eyes: “Where from? Where from? From where?,” meaning: the womb of which Alma Mater feeds you with her milch juice for teaching young beasts what you have learned from old lizards, meaning: whom have you unsaddled, O unknown reptile; for the vacating of whose chair are you lying in wait, meaning: are we going to beg you to notice us, or is it you who is going to beg us to notice you; come on, quick, quick, this suspense is intolerable, quick, quick tell us, quick, quick, because neither social intercourse nor academic evolutionary processes are possible without that bit of information: quick, “where from? where from? from where?” “From Erewhon,” I said. Their bristles, their quills, their fishescales hedgehogged. Tiny, miniature, electrically lit geographical globuses were turning round quickly in their searching eyeballs. Erewhat?, where was it? They tried to remember what geography they had learnt ten, twenty, thirty years ago at school. “From where?” they repeated. “From Nowhere.”
explained; and thought: if I deserved to carry the name of philosopher, which place to have come from would be more appropriate than a place which is independent of any longitude, or latitude, or altitude, creditude, but I had no time to develop the thought because at this moment one of the blackjacketed teachers shoved forward his arm, – and the well-groomed stiff index finger, and the ring on it, and the hand, and the wrist, went through my chest, effortlessly, as if I were composed of the air that surrounded me. Which is as it must be, because if you come from nowhere then it is logically necessary that wherever you are you are nowhere, because if there were anywhere a borderline such that jumping over it could transfer you to this side of it, then nowhere would have to be on the other side of the borderline and, being there, it would be somewhere, which is not compatible with being nowhere, and thus, consequently, once you are nowhere, nowhere you are wherever you are, the only meaning of which is that you are indistinguishable from what is around you, pierceable by what is around is pierceable by; if it is air then you are air, if you are submerged in water then you are water, if you are buried up to your armpits while your head is in the centre of a soundwave, then you are earth up to your armpits and a scream from your armpits up. The blackjacketed teachers made unequal numbers of steps backwards, three steps, one step, two steps, and the zaubercircle was no more a circle, it broke behind me and its loose ends globetrottered away to akimbo around another point on the parquet floor. Well, they had to be somewhere. They would feel lost anywhere else. It is only I who nowhere am lost and feel at home everywhere. I feel at home in any child’s cot, in any woman’s bed, in any corpse’s coffin. I feel at home with viruses in the guts of a louse, and with lice in a dove’s feathers, and with doves in the heart of Jesus. Goodnight chums. Goodnight everybody. Goodnight.
Translations

What is not translatable is parochial. Even when the parish happens to be of the size of an Empire. This applies to history as well as to geography. What is not translatable from one period to another, belongs not to the current of the river but to the crest of the wave. The universal is translatable, both across the tribal and across temporal barriers. You may reverse this proposition and say: Only what is translatable from one place to another, and from one time to another, is human. The rest is a vanity bag, containing a small, coloured mirror, a powder-puff, and a number of coins.
Chapter 18

‘Oh piss off,’ Judith said and put the receiver down.

On the road to Damascus a jet-black poodle snuffled his way along. His track was traced with little tongues of fire, though that might have been some optical illusion. And the little squeals of pain uttered by the little tongues of fire might have been some acoustical illusion. But the jet-black poodle-dog was not an illusion.

And it was the middle of the day, and a light came from the sky, more brilliant than the sun, and a white poodle appeared on the road in front of the black poodle and said: ‘Poodle, Poodle, why do you persecute me?’ And the Black Poodle said: ‘Why are you always telling me that? You know very well that I’m only doing my job.’

‘That’s what you say,’ said the White Poodle.

‘That’s what He ordained,’ said the Black Poodle. ‘You select-in, and I select-out. That’s His method. Continuous Creation.’

‘Of what?’ asked the White Poodle.

‘Of men,’ the Black Poodle answered.

‘But do not men exist already?’ exclaimed the White Poodle.

‘Have I not suffered for them?’

The Black Poodle snuffled at him confidently, almost as if they were old friends. Then he settled on his hocks and said:

‘Yes, you have. But were they men? In a series of forms graduating insensibly from some ape-like creature to man as he will exist in the future, it would be impossible to fix on any definite point where the term “man” ought to be used.’

‘Quoting?’ asked the White Poodle.

‘Not literally,’ said the Black Poodle.
Now the White Poodle became whiter still and commanded:
‘Rise to your hind feet and stand upright!’ And when the
Black Poodle did so, he said: ‘Bow!’ And when the Black Poodle
did so, he asked sternly: ‘Where have you been?’
‘I have been attending a flower,’ said the Black Poodle.
The whiteness of the White Poodle softened.
‘Well, now,’ he said. ‘Lie at my feet and tell me all about it.
What sort of flower was it?’
‘A flower-pot flower,’ said the Black Poodle. ‘It was a pretty
flower-pot flower in a flower-pot, but it thought that the flower-
pot it was in was everything that there was, that it was the whole
world, and as the flower-pot was rather small and cramp, the
flower thought that the whole world is rather small and cramp, no
room to swing a cat, very logical, don’t you think?, so I thought it
was a sin and a shame to leave it under that ignorant illusion,
considering all the magnitude and power and glory of the
universe, the visible and invisible, and so I thought of
transplanting the flower into a bigger flower-pot, a commendable
thought, don’t you think?’
‘And what did you do to achieve that?’ asked the White
Poodle.
‘Well,’ the Black Poodle said. ‘To begin with, I hid in her
wardrobe.’
‘Her wardrobe?’ asked the White Poodle.
‘Yes,’ said the Black Poodle. ‘Didn’t I tell you that the cramp
flower-pot was female?’
‘No, you didn’t,’ said the White Poodle.
‘Well, she was,’ said the Black Poodle.
There was a longish pause, and then the White Poodle fixed
his eyes on the Black Poodle and asked:
‘And who was that flower-woman, if you please?’
‘She was not a flower-woman,’ the Black Poodle answered.
‘She was a school teacher.’

‘And what was her name?’

‘Oh!’ the Black Poodle exclaimed. ‘What does a name matter? Think of the names they give me! Proud Spawn of hell! Destroyer! Prince of Flies! Tongue of Lies! And I’m not that at all, am I? I am Part of a power, you may call the part I am “evil”, but the Whole of which I am part is good, don’t you think? We are both just two bits of His evolutionary method. You select creatures in, I weed them out. If you were more careful eugenically, I would have less to weed out ethically.’

But the White Poodle seemed not to have been listening. ‘What was her name?’ he repeated.

‘Mrs Judith Sheridan,’ the Black Poodle murmured at length. ‘Wife of Anthony Sheridan?’

‘Well, now you know,’ the Black Poodle said. ‘And I hope you’ll not try to win her to her harm, with your particular determinants of moral ideas. Yes, it was Mrs Sheridan, wife of Anthony, who had just lost her job on the Chronicle, and thought that was the end of the world, and she also thought that was the end of the world, a holocaust of the flower-pot, ha ha, and so when he phoned her for the fourth time to tell her how happy he was to be free, she put the receiver down and said: “Oh piss off!”’

‘Say it again,’ the White Poodle asked, and his hind leg twitched.

“‘Oh piss off!’”, she said and hung up. And the time was 8 o’clock on her watch, and ten past eight on his watch, because he had set his in the pub, and pub clocks are always ten minutes fast. And at that moment the door bell rang and there was a creature five foot ten inches, twelve stone, navy blue serge suit, and the creature said “Are you Mrs Anthony Sheridan?”, and she said “Yes . . . ?” and he said “I am Detective Sergeant Brown. May I come in?”, and she showed him in and seated him in her yellow
brocaded chair, and he said “I understand, Mrs Sheridan, that you are a sister of Miss Rachel Armstrong,” and she jumped up and said “Oh how marvellous that you have come, Mr Brown. I have been wanting to go to the station but I couldn’t leave Aaron alone with no babysitter. Have you brought Jolyon with you? You must bring Jolyon!” “And who is Jolyon?” he asked and took a notebook out of his pocket. “Jolyon is Rachel’s little boy,” she said and he wrote Jolyon in his notebook, and she said “And where is he, anyway? He can’t spend the night at the police station. I want him here, he can sleep with Aaron.” “And who is Aaron, Mrs Sheridan?” he asked, “Aaron is my little boy, he’s asleep upstairs, that’s why I couldn’t leave him alone and . . .” He wrote Aaron in his notebook. She stood up, “Would you have a glass of sherry, superintendent?” she asked. “It’s very kind of you, Mrs Sheridan, but I don’t think I will.” “Well, I must have a glass of sherry” she said and poured two glasses. Then she took a sip and said “I am so glad you have come, Superintendent . . .”, “Sergeant . . .” he corrected her. “Sorry” she said “but there is something else I want to ask you. You see, my two little girls went to the Hampstead fair this morning and they haven’t come back yet. I know they are growing up, and they will be late more and more often, but this is the first time, and I don’t know if I should be anxious or not. Can you tell me whether I should be anxious? It’s already ten past eight. You see, Charlotte is twelve and Harriet is eleven.” He nodded and wrote down Charlotte 12 and Harriet 11. Then he turned to her and asked “Would you mind if I smoked, Mrs Sheridan?” “Oh, no, please do,” she said, and he lit his pipe and asked “And how long have you known your sister?” “How do you mean: How long? I’ve known her since I was born.” “And how old are you, if I may ask?” he asked and she said “Oh, I see what you mean. Well, I’ve known her since she was born,” and then she added “But look here, what about Jolyon?, it’s
getting so late! Perhaps you could phone and ask that nice policewoman to bring Jolyon here?” “And when did you see her last?” he asked. “That policewoman with the pony tail? I think her name was Liz. I saw her when she brought Aaron home. About fiveish, I should say . . .” “No, no,” he said, “I didn’t mean Liz, I meant: When did you see your sister Rachel last?” and she said “Oh, I saw her today, of course. She came with Jolyon in the morning to take Aaron to the Hampstead fair,” and she said “But I thought it was the girls who went to the fair,” and she said “Oh, they went earlier. They went by tube, and they haven’t come back yet, as I told you.” “And how did Mrs Armstrong go?” he asked. “Miss Armstrong,” she corrected him. “O yes, so it is, Miss Armstrong. And do you know Mr Armstrong, Mrs Sheridan?” “Which Mr Armstrong?” she asked. “The little boy’s father, Aaron’s father,” he said, and she said “Good Lord, Aaron’s father is Anthony Sheridan, my husband,” and he said “O yes, I meant the other little boy’s father, Jolyon’s father,” and she said “Well, his father’s name is not Mr Armstrong.” “And what is his name, Mrs Sheridan?” “I don’t know,” she said. “You don’t know?” “No.” “Well, then, if I may ask, if you don’t know his name how do you know that his name is not Armstrong?” “Oh really, Mr Brown,” she said, “are these questions necessary? All I want is…” “I know, Mrs Sheridan, and I’m trying to help. Do you know any other of Miss Armstrong’s friends? Her present gentlemen friends?” “No, I don’t,” she said and she felt awkward because she was still wearing the white trousers which belonged to Rachel’s rich boyfriend. “No, I don’t,” she repeated, and he reached for his glass of sherry and said “This is not, strictly speaking, official, Mrs Sheridan, and you are under no obligation to answer my questions, under no obligation whatsoever, but it would be helpful if you did.” “I was answering your questions,” she said. “Well,” he said, “I asked you a long time ago how she went, and you didn’t
answer me.” “How who went where?” she asked. “Now, now, Mrs Armstrong,” he said. “Sheridan,” she corrected him. “Now, now, Mrs Sheridan,” he repeated, “you told me that your daughters went to Hampstead by tube, and I asked you: And how did your sister go?, and you didn’t answer.” “Oh,” she said, “Rachel has a car.” “Yes, we know that she has a car, but did she go by car?” “She did.” “How do you know?” “I watched from the door as she arranged the boys in the back seat of the brake, and off they went.” “And you are sure it was her car, Mrs Sheridan?” “Yes, of course, it had some transfers on the bonnet.” “And do you remember the time they left?” “Oh, I don’t know, about half past nine, I should say.” He sighed. “And that was the last time you saw her?” “Oh no,” she cried out. “I saw her again just before lunch time.” “You did not tell me that, Mrs Sheridan,” he said drily. And then asked “Did you expect her to come back to lunch?” “Well, not exactly,” she said. “So it was unexpected?” “No, not exactly,” she repeated. “But in a sort of way?” he suggested. “Well, yes.” “And did she come back by car?” “Presumably.” “Why presumably? Didn’t you see her coming?” “No, I was in the kitchen.” “So the front door was open?” “No, you see, the boys came first, through the back door, the garden door, straight into the kitchen.” “And how soon after them did she appear, Mrs Sheridan?” “A few minutes.” “Minutes?” “Oh dear, it’s because she was limping and asked to boys to run on. She went on the children’s roundabout but the little wooden horse wasn’t big enough for her and she fell off and hurt herself. So she came to bathe her knee, bound it up, and I lent her my tights.” “And how do you know that she fell off the roundabout?” he asked. “Indeed,” she exclaimed, “I saw her knee and I saw scratches on her face!” “Yes, but you didn’t see the roundabout.” “No.” “So how do you know that she fell off?” “She told me herself. And the boys.” “Aaron or Jolyon?” he asked. “Oh really,
Mr Brown, does it really matter? I think it was Aaron. And Jolyon. Both.” There was a brief silence. Then he leaned forward and said “Listen to me, Mrs Sheridan. If your sister didn’t have a car, then how could she be at Hampstead in the morning, then – just before lunch time – here, and then, again – just before lunch time – at Trafalgar Square? On the other hand, if she did have a car, then what the hell was she doing on Platform One, Baker Street Station? At noon?” She gasped. “Then perhaps it wasn’t Rachel at all?!” she exclaimed hopefully. “Well,” he said, “I don’t know. But you see now how careful we must be. You said – just before lunch time – that’s pretty vague. Could you be more precise? Did anybody see her when she came here with her bruised knee?” “Oh, Yes.” “Who?” She hesitated for a moment. “Mr Walker was here. He saw Rachel coming.” “And who is Mr Walker, please?” “Raffles Walker, a domestic. Sent by the agency.” “On Easter Saturday?” he asked. She nodded. “And you were giving her lunch in the kitchen, Mrs Sheridan, if you don’t mind my asking?” “No, no. Mrs Twomey didn’t stay to lunch. She just came to see Mr Walker.” “Indeed,” he said. “You see, Mr Walker is her lodger.” “Now, let me put things straight, Mrs Sheridan. Mr Walker, a domestic, is a lodger of Mrs Twomey, and she came to see him in your kitchen?” “Oh, don’t be a snob, Mr Brown. She brought him an urgent telegram.” “Do you happen to know from whom?” “I think it was from his mother.” He fixed his eyes on her and said “Are you quite certain it was Mrs Twomey?” “But of course,” she said, “She is Mr Twomey’s mother. He is the editor of the Chronicle. And my husband is a political journalist under his editorship.” “Mr Raoul Twomey?” he asked. “Yes.” He emptied his pipe slowly and said “Now, listen carefully, Mrs Sheridan. Do you recall . . . Did Mrs Twomey say anything about her son during
your conversation in the kitchen?" “No, I don’t think she did.” “Not even casually?” “No. . . .” and then she asked anxiously “Oh God, has something happened to Mr Twomey?” He struck a match, but his pipe was empty, yet he let the little flame wander towards his fingernail. “Why do you ask?” he watched her. She was much shaken. “I don’t know,” she said. “Did you expect that something might happen to Mr Twomey?” She stared at him. “No, why should I?” He took the box of matches out of his pocket again, and so I thought it was time to stop it, and I barked “Wwow!”

‘Good, it was high time to do so,’ said the White Poodle. ‘Thank you,’ said the Black Poodle. ‘That’s all right,’ said the White Poodle. ‘Go on.’ ‘Well,’ said the Black Poodle, ‘so I barked “Wwow!”’ and she jumped up and exclaimed “Did you hear that? It must be Aaron!” and she ran upstairs, to Aaron’s room, but he was peacefully asleep tucked up in his bed. I don’t know what dreams he had because I didn’t watch them, and then she went to the bedroom, opened the wardrobe, sniffed, and then looked down and saw me sitting there on the three pairs of shoes. That gave her another endocrine shock – so necessary for my purpose of transplanting her into a bigger flower-pot. “Good Lord!” she exclaimed . . .”

“Did she, really?” asked the White Poodle. ‘She did,’ the Black Poodle answered. ‘Such expressions as “piss off” she used only when she was with other people, when she was alone she would always say “Good Lord”. And so she said “Good Lord” and then we went down and she said sternly “Mr Brown, I didn’t know you had brought a dog with you. I found it in my wardrobe.” And he said it wasn’t his dog and could he inspect the wardrobe and she said “certainly not” and he bent down to look at me and saw a telephone number on my collar, so he went to the telephone, and she said “Will you please phone the
station and ask them to bring Jolyon!” but he dialled the number that was on my collar and asked Have they lost a jet-black poodle-dog?, and they said O yes, thank you, thank you very much, and could they come at once and fetch it, they live just round the corner, and in no time at all the bell rang and a male came in, six foot, eleven stone, black suit, white hair, and said “My name is Leech. How exceedingly kind, how very good of you to have taken all that trouble, Mrs Sheridan,” and he moved towards me, and they expected me to jump up at him to greet him, but I took a step backwards and Mr Brown asked “Are you sure it is your poodle-dog?” and Mr Leech said “Of course I am, but he is a neuropath, and jealous, my wife is convinced that he understands every word one says, my wife and I had a little innocent exchange of views this morning which must have looked like a quarrel to him and upset him so much that he escaped and we couldn’t find him.” “What did you quarrel about?” asked Mr Brown. “I beg your pardon, Mr Sheridan?” said Mr Leech. “This is not Mr Sheridan, Mr Leech,” she said, “this is Detective Constable Brown.” “Detective Sergeant,” he corrected her. “Oh . . .” said Mr Leech. “My sister has been arrested, and Sergeant Brown is making quite a fuss about it. All she did was go round in a motor-car with some silly transfers on the bonnet and proclaim a revolution.” “Revolution?” asked Mr Leech. “For the freedom of printing four-letter words, for the sacred right to bring the four-letter word back to the masses!” “Oh . . .” said Mr Leech. “I would still like to know how your poodle found itself in the wardrobe in Mrs Sheridan’s bedroom?” asked Mr Brown. “I say . . .” said Mr Leech. “And I should still like to know what your quarrel with your wife was about?” “Our exchange of views was on some abstract subjects, if you must know, Sergeant,” said Mr Leech. “Oh,” she exclaimed, “are you Professor Leech?” “Yes, I am. And I am very flattered to be known to you.” “Oh, of course I
know of you,” she said. “When I was very young I read philosophy.” “My dear lady . . .” he said, meaning that she was now very young. “I wish I hadn’t,” she said. “Oh?” Professor Leech said. “Well, what is philosophy?” she asked. “Philosophy isn’t . . .” he started but she interrupted him: “I know what Philosophy is not. But what is it? What does it reveal? My mother used to say, Everything is important, my girl. I have modified that slightly. I treat everything as though it may be important until such time as I find out whether it is or not. In my dream last night my mother would not have accepted this modification. Would you?” “Well, it all depends . . .” said Professor Leech. “I know it does,” she said. “Actually, I must confess that the only thing I still remember of my studies is that last sentence, you know, the sacred Number 7. At my time it was the craze at all undergraduate parties.”

“What was that Number 7?” the White Poodle asked.

‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,’ said the Black Poodle.

‘Oh,’ said the White Poodle.

“What is that Number 7?” asked the detective. But they were completely ignoring him by now. “Well,” she said, “when I am teaching, I teach them some separate bits, and they do learn them, but I always fear that one day there will be a bright boy who will ask, What is it all about? and what will I do then? I feel as if I know thousands of separate pieces of a jigsaw-puzzle, I even know how to put some of them together, nevertheless, whenever I take a piece it falls down into a bottomless pit because I have nothing to put it on. Does your philosophy provide a table on which the jigsaw-puzzle could be laid out?” “Well, my dear lady, philosophy is not a religion,” Professor Leech said. She now had her back turned to the detective and was speaking quickly, not to let him butt in. “And all this is because we are warm-blooded.
animals,” she said. “When we were plants or fish we lived in unison with the environment, which was around us, the same for everybody; we had its temperature, its humidity, its everything. As soon as we became warm blooded, all this turned inside out, and now, what can be called ‘environment’ is in every one of us. It is in us that flow the rivers of blood, gales of oxygen, and erupt the volcanoes of endocrine secretion. The outside is cut off, by our clothes, walls, roofs, pavements, codes of behaviour. All that remained of Nature is within our skin. And when we crave to touch her with the outer side of it, the only bits of her that we can still find are ourselves. So we undress and touch each other, anybody. Anybody,” she repeated, and I thought it was time to act, so I barked, “Wwow Wwow” again and there was terrific lightning, a glorious roar of thunder and, in a second, the rain fell in floods upon the street. And then the telephone rang. The detective moved towards it but Mrs Sheridan was ahead of him. “Yes?” she said. It was Mrs Leech. Could she speak to the professor? There was a twinkle in Mrs Sheridan’s eye as, looking at Professor Leech, she said, “He has just left with the poodle.” “Oh,” said Mrs Leech, “it is raining so heavily, would Mrs Sheridan be so kind as to lend the professor an umbrella, he catches cold so easily!” “Yes, of course,” said Mrs Sheridan, and then she went to the hall to fetch an umbrella, and Professor Leech went to the hall, and I produced another poodle who jumped and danced and begged to go with him, and Mrs Sheridan said to the detective “And now please go and send Jolyon here,” and the detective said “I shall see what I can do, Mrs Sheridan,” and they were all in the hall now, and they opened the door, and as they were going out into the downfall the two girls burst in, soaked through and happy, and they cried “Oh, don’t shout at us, mummy,” and she said “Of course not,” and when the door was shut behind the detective and the professor, Charlotte said “Who
are they, mummy? Are they your lovers?” and Harriet said “Which one?” and Charlotte said “Both?” and Harriet said “Do you have a lover?” and Mrs Sheridan said “I am not going to tell you,” and Harriet said “Why not?” and Mrs Sheridan said “Because if I have a lover I don’t want you to know that I have, and if I haven’t I don’t want you to know that I haven’t,” and Charlotte said “pity,” and Mrs Sheridan said “Why?” and Charlotte said “Because I have a lover, and if you don’t have one then you cannot understand how beautiful it is!” and all the time they were taking off their wet things, and Mrs Sheridan rubbed them with a towel, and then the girls ran to the kitchen and started cooking, and I kept the rain falling all the time, because I knew what I was doing, and I was right, because after a while Mrs Sheridan opened the front door, left it unlatched, and stepped out into the rain, and she stood there on the pavement and let herself get soaked through, and I warmed the rain a bit and narrowed it so that it didn’t rain on her left and on her right but only where she was, and I purified it and made it be Nature, and she stood there, pretending to look and see whether her husband was coming back, but she was feeling it and taking it in with every pore of her skin, and what she thought was “Why do I think about him as he when I think about him, and don’t think about him as Tony?” And then she thought “I know that if he knew as little about flying an aeroplane as he knows about political philosophy, and if he were at the controls, I would not go with him across the Channel. I know that if he knew as little about . . .,” then she stopped, and then she said just one word “Tony,” and then she said “But why should I not go with Tony in an aeroplane? What has the fact that the plane will crash to do with it?” and so I knew that I had already transplanted her to a bigger flower-pot, and I stopped the rain, and left her there in the street in front of the open door of her home, and I’m telling you, Don’t touch her, leave her alone,
because, whatever you say, and whatever He says, I shall not weed her out. Do you hear me, Poodle?!

And the White Poodle answered: ‘I am not a Poodle, I am a Lamb.

And he was.
Notes


2. Translations is an undated and previously unpublished manuscript in the Themerson Archive.

3. Stefan Themerson’s only text in a dramatic format, The Bone in the Throat, was excerpted in “New Departures,” no. 1, Oxford, Summer 1959. Among the other contributors to this initial issue, edited by Michael Horovitz and David Sladen, were William Burroughs, Piero Heliczer, Stevie Smith, Kurt Schwitters, Patrick Bowles, and Samuel Beckett. The complete text of the play in English is as yet unpublished.

This edition is limited to 60 copies.

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