



# **FRAGMENTS FROM DARKNESS**

**by Stefan Themerson**

**translated by Barbara Wright**

**FRAGMENTS FROM  
DARKNESS**

**This edition is dedicated to Franciszka.**



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**Illustrations by Franciszka Themerson**

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## PETIT NÈGRE ÉCRIRE PETIT POÈME

I am a poor child abandoned by the Muses. They've gone up the marble staircase, the cloud-staircase, and they've climbed higher towards *On High*, while I've been left down here, all alone.

It's true, the Heavens begin where the earth stops being hard and palpable, they start a quarter of a millimeter above the pavements and the grass. Yes, I too am immersed in the Ocean of the Heavens, but I move through it as the crab moves through the sea—with its claws. It's because my soles and heels are stuck in the bed of the Ocean of the Heavens that I've been left down here, where I was born.

Why did you lose patience, oh my Muses, why did you flee, why didn't you wait until the end of the war?

I've been left all alone with my pencil and a glass of wine—so much has happened around me in thirty long years that I can neither remember it, nor draw any conclusions, nor find any common denominator. Because I've lost the strength of strong men, of magnificent men, of monster men, who have their own warlike will; because I don't want to be a man like them; because I am a poor, abandoned child.

But after a glass of wine, the things we're talking about emerge of their own accord from their strange shells, like snails after rain, and begin their sleepwalk. Alas, the poet's body stays behind, the Muses have fled, but he must stay where his soles and heels are.

Oh, you Engineers! You have measured the surface of the earth, you have divided these two numbers, and you have said: 'But there's an enormous amount of land, there's plenty of space for people to walk where they will, there's enough room for everyone to give free rein to all his fantasies.' But there you are—you've been counting on the logic of counting. And yet we

haven't anywhere to sleep, we haven't anywhere to escape to, we haven't anywhere to move around, or even to stand.

And that's why we can't stay within the two dimensions of the surface of the earth, and why we want to escape to *On High*. But our soles and our heels are stuck to the pavements and the Muses have abandoned our space, and wine costs a hundred sous a litre.

So where is the Celestial Grocer who would sell us a litre of poetry? I'm going to look for him, with a lantern in my thirsty hands, I'm going to look for him in far-off eternal worlds, and in the corners of my mortal room.

But he's hiding in invisible holes, which are camouflaged by the black depths of our time. And the only hope is that he has built up some stocks, and that the time will come when he'll release them, to fill our poor sentimental shops.

I am all alone with my angel—who is no more.

## CROQUIS DANS LES TÉNÈBRES

### I

'Come on, hand it over, Sebastian, Sebastian!'

And Sebāstian, surprised, astonished, thinks:

'What do they want me to hand over?'

'Come on, hand it over, Sebastian!'...so much conviction in their voices, but Sebastian really doesn't know what they want.

The calm surface of the lake ripples and quivers—but no more than is necessary to show that it's alive.

Above the surface: the sky, and clouds much lighter than the sky, like clouds in photos taken through a yellow filter.

But on the bank, between the landing stage and the shore, in a dark gully, the olive-green water is a stagnant, motionless mass, here and there glinting when touched by the light. It is only on the surface that things are reflected: the rotting boards of the landing stage, the stony shore, the sloping deck; but just scratch this surface picture and what will immediately appear—not to your eyes but to your nostrils and your mouth and your fingers—are the dark, humid, stinking depths where rats are swimming on their backs.

And suddenly that ham actor Cucynski shows up. He goes and straddles the gully of stagnant water, he leans over it and looks into its depths, he smiles quite pleasantly, now and then glancing around him.

He's got nicely tanned the last few days, walking along the mule tracks, since he was for ever out walking between his rare auditions; while he walked he would be eating, gossiping, intriguing—living, in other words...pah! he looked as if he was going for a walk even when he was on

the stage, where he was supposed to be someone quite different from Cucynski.

He went walking without a hat on his naked head that he doesn't have shaved any more; and his short black hair is growing, and twists and turns, still very timidly, in little tufts, as if it didn't know that one day it would be allowed to lie flat, quietly and soberly, on either side of a parting.

Is it possible that Cucynski thinks that Sebastian has hidden some mysterious object in the water? That he has grabbed a sunbeam, wrapped it round a spool, and thrown it into the bottom of the lake?

'Hand it over, Sebastian, we've had enough...'

'But what is it you want? tell me!'

They shut their ears, though. They just can't imagine that he doesn't know. They think Sebastian is teasing them, and they ask once again:

'Hand it over!'

Then Sebastian brings his hand up to the inside pocket of his jacket and he feels a handful of warm air in his palm.

This is an unexpected discovery. He's afraid to look...he holds his hand under his jacket and with the tips of his fingers he *h e a r s* the acute trembling of a little yellow beak, and the tickling of the down.

Then he grasps this handful of warmth more tightly, and brings it out of the twilight of his breast into the middle of the aerial landscape, suspended over the surface of the lake.

'Is this what you're talking about? Friends!'

They look at each other, themselves astonished. But there is so much candour in his question that they suddenly realize that he really didn't know what he had to hand over, what they were asking for. And, simultaneously, they realize that they themselves don't know what they want, either, or rather, that they can't imagine what form this 'thing' they are expecting should take.

Is this little chick the form of their desires? Their hearts take fright, and they look Sebastian up and down as if he were a conjuror, and once again they don't know—perhaps he's still teasing them?

The little chick is in Sebastian's palm as if it were in a tiny nest, and they are afraid that the chick might really be the form of their desires, they fear the quivering reality of the chick. Sebastian feels their agitation, and he hides the little bird in his breast.

A flag has been hoisted above the landing stage. It flutters in the wind with its gaily-coloured zigzag, and it's the only bright spot in the opaline air that fills all space. In the middle of the lake there is a sailing dinghy whose mainsail is the colour of the cloud hanging above it in the sky. Everything that is, is in nature: the sail, and Sebastian, and the questions and the answers.

The little chick, snug in the warmth inside his jacket, has melted into Sebastian's body. Sebastian holds out his arms, and, without a word, hugs his friends. There is no Cucynski among them; he's still straddling the stagnant gully, smiling vaguely and examining the water. Sebastian embraces his friends.

And then, suddenly—have they discovered something? have they become wiser?—they understood that their cry of 'Come on, hand it over, Sebastian, Sebastian!' would have been tactless, had it not been childishly naive.

Despite the famine, the chick wasn't eaten.

## II

'I can't get used to...'—he fell silent. He sat down on the windowsill and glanced inside the room.

In this room there was a terrifying reality, and he knew he couldn't touch it, because the real fingers of an angel can't grasp a void that is so sparsely filled with atoms; the fingers of angels are hard, and they can't get a hold on the void that is called matter.

In this room there was a woman, a woman lying on a bed, a woman covered with a blanket pulled right up to her closed eyes.

In this room there was a mirror in a gilt frame, and this mirror reflected the woman on the bed.

In this room there was a table with a glass of water.

In this room the lamp was lit; had the woman forgotten to put it out? had she been afraid to fall asleep in the dark?

It was not because of the light of the lamp that all of this existed, but because of his eyes. Because in the room itself there was no image. They were only in the angel's eyes, the images of the room, of the bed, of the woman, of the mirror, of the table, of the lamp. It may perhaps be difficult to imagine without light, but nowhere are there any images without eyes.

'It's too little: if I had different eyes,' said the angel, 'the world would look different to me. It would be different. Because the world is what I see.' And the angel, rather pleased with this profound philosophical thought, got down from the windowsill and went his way, along the street but high, high up above the road, as if he were walking along an invisible tram wire overhead.

But there weren't any trams in the town. The streets were empty, and the only living things were the houses, examining one another with their half-open windows.

And the angel sat down on the windowsills, and he kept glancing through the windows, and he shrank back in horror at the empty matter piling up in the rooms; often he clung convulsively to the window frames so as not to lose his balance, and he quickly retreated to the middle of the street, high up above the road, his head on the moonlit roofs.

But, attracted once again by the rectangular breach in the wall, he went back to it in order to look outside from the exterior. And suddenly he found himself face to face with the man who was looking at the sky. The man was a poet, but he wasn't looking at the sky to find in the moon, as enigmatic as all nature, the inspiration to write a poem, a sentimental love poem. The sky was much more than that, for him.

He looked out of the window and he knew that with his fingers, which were made of empty matter, he couldn't grasp—he could never get hold of—the hardness of the abstraction outside the window, which lives implacably outside matter.

The man sat down on the windowsill and suddenly shrank back, terrified by the hardness of his own thoughts—it is they that are 'abstraction'; he clung convulsively to the window frame, because he was feeling giddy and he didn't want to lose his balance and fall down on to the pavement below; he quickly retreated to the middle of his room, but soon went back to the window and again sat down on the sill.

And then he found himself face to face with the angel, who was looking into the room. They stared at each other for a long, long time; they stared at each other in a friendly fashion.

It was the man who spoke first:

'Tell me', he began, 'what happens when someone has gone through the window? Is it true that he falls like a stone to the pavement, and that that's all?'

'Oh no', replied the angel. 'That won't be all. At the same time you'll become quite real, you'll grow real wings, and all the angels will be able to touch you with their real, hard fingers... I assure you', he added, in some embarrassment, 'it isn't particularly interesting.'

The man stared at the angel for a very long, long time, as if he wanted to read his eyes: was he speaking sincerely?

And then it was the angel who asked:

'And you too—will you tell me what happens after you've gone through the window? Is it true that you become petrified, that you're transformed into winged stone, such as you see in the cemeteries of museums, and that that's all.'

'Oh no', replied the man. 'That won't be all. At the same time you'll become quite real. You'll become so real, as real as I am, that every man will be able to touch you with his fingers, and he *will* touch you, and there will even be too many of them who'll be touching you.'

The angel stared at the man for a very long, long time, as if he wanted to read his eyes: was he telling the truth?

Then the man pointed to the back of the room where a woman was lying on a bed, covered right up to her closed eyes.

The angel looked at the blanket and he noticed an enormous swelling where her big, pregnant belly was.

Somewhere up above, the clouds were gliding. The squall fell, trapped in the street below. The yellowish street lamps were beginning to reveal the twilight.

The lace curtain quivered, like the surface of a lake, and at that moment the window closed of its own accord.

For a very long, long time, they stared at each other through the transparent window pane, the man and the angel—who was no other than the man's thought.

And then they laid both their hands, the left and the right, on the surfaces of the window pane, and between their hands they pressed their warm lips on the cool glass, and they kissed the two sides of the same thing.

The clouds were racing each other beneath the moon and, on the earth, chasing their own sharp, shapeless shadows.

The man and the angel-his-thought turned away from the window, and each went his own way.

### III

I never believed in Thee, God,  
So Thou owest me nothing.  
But what about those who have gone to churches,  
    chapels, synagogues, mosques  
—they are the ones to whom Thou must give  
a chunk of bread buttered with freedom,  
    a slice of bread covered with a radiant smile of independence,  
—they are the ones to whom Thou must give  
a little wing of thine angel in a soup plate of the clearest  
    of clear soups.  
They have earned this by the sweat of their brow  
    in thine enigmatic workshops,  
and by their slaves' tears,  
and by their services at thine altars.

Here I am, I appear before Thee as the impostor of an emissary,  
as an unbidden, sad go-between.  
Wouldst Thou be the God of anaemic women,  
wouldst Thou be the God of the tuberculous,  
of those pale, wandering shadows  
who gasp for breath when climbing the stairs.  
Art Thou already so distant from thy radiant Hellenic ideal?

Oh, God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob,  
God of Jan, of Jean and of Juan,  
God of Ivan, of Johann and of John!  
Oh totem! Oh, mana! Oh, taboo!  
Oh, impersonal, omnipresent force, both material and spiritual,  
Oh, immortal and eternal Bun-Jil, who hast regulated the course  
of the sun and the moon,  
Oh, moral God, oh Varuna, who watchest over the world and guidest  
humanity,  
Oh, Aton, thou who carest for men's maintenance, and who givest  
them the nourishment they crave,  
Oh, chain of cause and effect of an Alexander of Aphrodisia,  
Oh, natural selection of St. Augustine and Darwin,  
Oh, untranslatable God of Beethoven,  
and Thou, and Thou, and Thou—  
who containest all beings, oh god of Emily Brontë,  
and Thou, and Thou, and Thou—  
whose will is peace for a Dante,  
and Thou, and Thou, and Thou—  
Oh, Spiritual Energy of Bergson,  
and Thou, the categorical imperative,  
and Thou, *natura naturata*  
and Thou,  $\frac{a+b}{n} = x$ , *therefore God exists—answer!*  
of Euler, the vanquisher of Diderot,  
Oh, My God,  
Oh, conventional word of the poet!

As men have created Thee, Oh God, with a hundred aspects,  
showing a different face to everyone,  
so can they destroy Thee and forget.  
As they have created Thee from their unnamed feelings and from  
words which in themselves mean nothing,  
so canst Thou collapse in meaningless feelings and words.  
Where wouldst Thou live, if Thou wert removed from frozen hearts  
beating with anaemic blood,  
where wouldst Thou stay, if, deprived of phosphorus,  
the cells of their brains closed to Thee?  
I can see Thee wandering amongst the empty naves of churches and  
chapels and synagogues and mosques,  
Oh, God of a hundred faces, sculpted by generations.

Then there appeared before Sebastian a form with a hundred faces  
which began to pass by, one after the other.  
And among these hundred faces there were some that were as  
fathomless as the ocean,  
and others that were wrinkled like the surface of a lake swept  
by the wind,  
and others that were hard as diamonds.  
In these faces, there were flashing eyes,  
and there were others as peaceful and transparent  
as the bottom of a well.  
There were lips from which a torrent of lava poured ceaselessly,  
and there were others that whispered no more loudly than grass  
singing a lullaby to mosquitoes.  
Some were strangers' faces, both strange and deaf,  
some were distant, some very close,  
some were eternal, some ephemeral,  
some looked into you  
and some made you look at them.

And this God said:

They did not create me so as to suffer no more,  
but because they suffer.

They did not create me so as to love,  
but because they love.

They did not create me so as to hate,  
but because they hate.

They did not create me so as to forgive,  
but to have someone to forgive them.

They couldn't contain within themselves all the passions,  
all the thirsts, all the stupidities, all the sufferings  
that are human and nothing but human,

and so they expelled, they cast out from themselves all the elements,  
all the characters of the human tragedy.

And it was from these elements that they created their gods.

I am King Lear and Desdemona, I am Iago and Lady Macbeth,  
I am Othello and Puck

—I am at the same time bad and good, bold and cowardly,  
stupid and cunning, prodigal and miserly, material and spiritual,  
materialistic and idealistic—

I am created in the image of men,

I am Hamlet.

It was Xenophanes who said:

*Every crime is attributed to the gods by Homer and Hesiod;  
their songs are full of everything that among mortals incurs  
censure and disapproval, every kind of shameful action: thefts,  
adulteries, mutual deceit...*

*If oxen and lions had hands, if they could draw, as men can,  
they would create gods in their own image.*

And if a blond angel lives in the heart of the ox, and a magnolia  
flower in that of the lion, their gods would have not only horns  
and claws, but also wings and leaves.

And if from time to time I also have an eagle's wings, a jackal's head and a cow's horns—like Anubis, like Isis—it's because men found the images of their own inner forces in the forms of animals, each of which, like Othello, like Iago, represents a single idea, a single characteristic of human nature, and it is when they are all found within one single man that they fight each other, like the thoughts of a Hamlet, it is them that men have cast out, and it is out of them that men have created my hundred faces.

I don't know the name of the bird that Xenophanes expelled from himself in order to create a new God, whom he describes:  
*...there is only one God, who resembles men neither in body nor in thought...*

—but the bird of this idea also had its nest in Xenophanes himself, and—alas—this bird was also a specimen of the great zoological garden of those inner forces: —the gods.

I am not the creator of this Universe which is made from an eighty digit number of protons and electrons.

I was myself created by the fragments of this Universe each of which is made from a billionth of billions of billions of atoms, fragments which are called—men.

I myself am only a creation, a work, a product, made by them, I am only their function.

Alas, even physicists take me seriously as a creator, and that's why they have to reject me.

And yet, I do exist.

As the car, as the gun, as the book exist:

it's from them that you discover men's nature.

And if you discover men's nature from their works, why is it their Gods that you have rejected?

Sebastian gave a start:

Yes, Thou dost exist, Thou hundred-faced God,  
yes, Thou art made by men,  
but art Thou also made, like their cars, of photons, electrons,  
protons and neutrons?

**I am made of their thoughts. And their thoughts—  
they are the function of those fragments of Nature,  
each made from a billionth of billions of billions of corpuscles,  
but are they themselves photons, electrons, protons and neutrons?  
Can we measure scientifically everything that exists,  
or is it only what we can measure that exists?**

**I am a billionth of billions of billions of corpuscles,  
and it is they who speak to their God, to their own thought:**  
*I never believed in Thee.  
So Thou owest me nothing.  
But the other billionths of billions of billions of corpuscles  
who have gone to churches,  
and chapels, and synagogues, and mosques—  
they are the ones to whom Thou must give  
a chunk of bread buttered with freedom,  
a slice of bread covered with a radiant smile of independence,  
they are the ones to whom Thou must give  
a little wing of thine angel in a soup plate of the clearest  
of clear soup.*

Sebastian opened wide his myopic eyes, and put on his glasses.

But he was surrounded by darkness, and it was in darkness that he  
wrote these fragments.

#### IV

There are more keys on this earth, there are more keys than there are men. Everyone rattling his own bunch—and there you are: Lock them! lock them! Ladies and gentlemen! lock them! lock them! all the doors, all the packing-cases, all the cupboards, all the trucks! Lock up all the golden cages full of singing canaries!

It's the great summer shut-down.

You have no more strength, you shut your eyes too, and, with them closed, you hang on to the ski-lift, you leave down below all the packing-cases, all the cupboards and the trunks and the cages, you allow yourself to be pulled up by this enormous cable car to the peak which is waiting with its own mental reservations for somnolent skiers who have taken time off from themselves: exhausted somnambulists.

There are no somnambulists so somnolent whom the instinct of self-preservation wouldn't awaken when they're on the downward path. But here they're on their way up, they're going up hanging on to the ski-lift, and the instinct of self-preservation is dormant, and they sleep the sleep of the exhausted, and they don't know that on the other side of the crest of the hill there is no more soft, white snow, no more swan's-down.

On Sundays Mme. B. took a parrot from her flat to her sweet-shop and put him in the window where he walked up and down amongst the jars of sweets. People bought cakes without flour, and chocolate creams without chocolate, and the little blue parrot chanted:

'Hallo coco! Hallo M'sieur B! long live the Marshal!'

and then:

'long live the young man! long live M'sieur B! hallo Marshal-coco!'

But the canary is still locked up in his cage, and the Shakespeares are still in the cupboards full of camphor and naphthaline, and all the Notre-Dames are

still locked up in the trunks and the packing-cases that were all too heavy to be attached to the ski-lift.

'Why are you sad?' the canary—who was in his right ear—asked Sebastian. 'I don't know...I think I'm beginning to like sadness.' The canary quickly hopped out of his right ear and jumped on to the perch hanging from two very delicate little gold chains in the middle of the cage. And, moved by his enthusiasm, the perch began to swing and the little chains began to tinkle and the roundabouts started going round—in the canary's little head.

But there was no music at the fair, because it was a time of mourning. It was in a noise without rhythm, it was in a rumbling without melody, that the swing swung, that the roundabouts went round, that the painted figures fell, hit by bullets, and that people bought tickets to see the heaviest man in the world.

The canary kept swinging higher and higher, he spread his little wings and jumped into Sebastian's left ear.

'Why are you beginning to like sadness?' he asked anxiously.

'Because gaiety bores me,' replied Sebastian.

The canary made a buzzing sound with his little yellow wings and returned to his cage.

And after ten seconds, everyone came to look at Sebastian.

They jumped off the roundabouts, they brought the swings to a standstill, they stopped shooting at the painted figures.

The heaviest man in the world went to the seaside to watch the sun playing on the waves, and his ticket-seller jumped on to her stool, shouting:

'Come and see the man who likes sadness!

'Come and see the man who is bored by gaiety!

'Come and see the happiest man in the world!

'Buy your tickets, Ladies and Gentlemen, buy your tickets!

'You can beat him up, and here are some pins—five sous each—to stick into him.

'Do your best to make him sad, Ladies and Gentlemen!

'It'll be fun for you, and you'll make him happy,

he said so himself, Ladies and Gentlemen!

'Ask the canary, who never lies,  
if you don't believe me!'

The canary is still shut in his cage, and all the Cervantes and all the Apollinaires are still in the cupboards full of camphor and naphthaline, and all the cloud chambers of C.T.R. Wilson<sup>1</sup> and all the Parthenons are still nailed up in their trunks and packing-cases.

The men looked at Sebastian, and someone said:

'It's like that because he has five fingers on his left hand.'

'But I've got five, too!' another exclaimed.

'Yes, but it's different for you!'

'Oh!' a woman shouted, 'I know! it's because he'll never see thirty-one again!'

'Go on!' another interrupted. 'I'll never see thirty-one again either, and yet...'

'Yes, but it's different for you!'

And they argued, and they already knew why it was 'like that'—so there was nothing interesting about Sebastian any more, and some people even demanded their money back from the ticket-seller. Then the heaviest man in the world had to leave the seaside and the reflections of the sun on the waves and go back to the fair, because the ticket-seller didn't want to die of starvation.

The fair-without-music went on and on, and the great summer shut-down continued. The exhausted somnambulists had no energy left; they shut their eyes, and with them closed they grabbed hold of the ski-lift, they left behind, down below, all their keys, both black and white, they left all their scores

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<sup>1</sup> 1869-1959, distinguished atomic physicist, celebrated for his use of the cloud chamber to study cosmic radiation.

behind, and they allowed themselves to be pulled up by the immense cable car that did their thinking for them.

They were waiting for autumn and its torments to come and to remove the snow from the mountain, but the warm July night was still there, surrounding Sebastian with its greenish, star-studded darkness.

## V

I know, I know, my friend—shooting stars are only meteorites,  
only particles of matter burning above us,  
but at the same time they are a vibrating string—

I know, I know, my friend—a rose  
is only a plant  
that sings in the moist dawn,  
but at the same time it is also a luminous  
star.  
And the sound of a violin is only oscillating air,  
only a number,  
I know, I know, my friend—  
but for the poet it can also be a fragrant  
flower,  
a flower that illuminates the sky  
above the stalk of darkness,  
or just any flower,  
after all.

You won't find it an irreparable loss,  
your knowledge of this dictionary of bloodstained metaphors  
that establish themselves with invincible force.

Don't be afraid, don't be afraid, my friend,  
the earth will always be hard under your feet,

and this knowledge won't do any harm to your Larousses,  
however complete,  
however useful,  
however modern.

A star that sings of the rose,  
a compass rose of the howling winds  
a brilliant string whose sound smells  
like the milky way—  
these make up only a tiny fragment of the deep forest  
in which he works, the desperate poet,  
the woodcutter of the planets,  
the farmer of aerial vibrations,  
the astronomer of plants.

There is a language of science,  
interlarded with the algebra of symbols,  
there is a language of senders and of receivers,  
full of question marks and exclamation marks,  
of dashes, brackets and inverted commas,  
and there is a language of poets.

That is the Trinity of language.

I hate, I hate all the other mumblings of men who quarrel,  
men who persuade one another, who proclaim, who defame,  
who deceive, dupe, cheat and swindle  
someone or themselves,  
who yell, bawl, spread rumours and who rhetoric,  
who demagogue.

They think they are discovering the t r u t h  
when they trample underfoot,  
out of breath,  
their own words, which march past us with gestures and assurance

They think they are accumulating premises  
from which they can draw conclusions,  
rules, principles and reasons  
for everybody

These conjurers who with words stolen  
half from poets and half from scientists  
express their envy, their desire, their intentions,  
their wishes, their will,  
and who return them to us fossilized,  
laying down their personal prayers  
as a law  
which we are obliged to obey.

They stole from the poet the discovery  
that brown and black bodies fall more quickly than pale and pink ones,  
They stole Galileo's formula, too,  
And they juggle with these two worlds for their own ends.

They take advantage of the fact that in poetry everything is truth  
that is well constructed with words from the poet's forest.  
They take advantage of the fact that in science everything is truth,  
that is logically constructed with words from Larousse,  
words that constitute cold, objective images of reality,  
and they make asphyxiating cocktails  
and create syllogisms out of the poet's words,  
and create imperative metaphors out of the scientist's words.

Scientists protect themselves

against the charlatans of the stars, of chemistry and of medicine,  
against the astrologers, the alchemists, the bonesetters,  
but even they have their hands tied.

Others commandeer their photocells,  
their engines, their vitamins, their conditioned reflex formulas,

their method of thinking, which gets falsified,  
but don't allow them to remake our world.

Poets don't protect themselves

In their case too, others commandeer  
their sonorous words which make the surface of the skin tremble,  
they commandeer their tool—the metaphor—  
to use it as a crowbar  
to prise open the strong-box of our good will.  
Balls thrown into the air rise and fall,  
sometimes according to Galileo's law  
all at the same speed,  
at other times according to the poet's law,  
the darker ones, the duskier ones, touch the ground,  
while the pale ones are still near the clouds in the azure sky.

but don't move!

They hide all the balls under a black, symbolic top hat,  
they produce a magic wand,  
and pull out of the parturient hat thirty-six huge alarm clocks,  
one plate with a steaming omelette,  
and some ribbons for the girls.

Then once again they throw up the balls  
which fall according to Galileo's law,  
or according to the poet's law,  
into the black opera hat,  
and they pull out newborn babies.

This time they have legs and a head,  
they have premises and a conclusion,  
yes!  
but they are men's heads, and horses' legs,

and whereas centaurs belong to the domain of poets,  
for them,  
for administrators, directors, economists,  
it is bread, commerce and schools,  
houses and justice,  
that it is their job to provide.

They climb up onto their trestles,  
with their parturient opera hats,  
and, pompously,  
each says something different,  
and each says it *ex cathedra*.

And it rings false, it rings false, so false!  
It reverberates like a slack string!  
Beat the breasts  
of these jugglers with words,  
these falsifiers of syllogisms,  
these robbers of poetic ferries,  
and you'll hear the tinny sound of a bell with a cracked stul.

Open their newspapers,  
and you'll smell the putrid odour of typographic colours.

Listen to their wireless,  
and listen! and listen!  
flagellating your ears,  
to that hissing sound made of a mixture of perfidious metaphors  
constructed according to falsified syllogisms.

I too would like to know how to build syllogisms,  
I too would like to be able to make constructions  
that have the conventional form of truth,  
but I don't know how many make two times two,  
I'm useless when my eyes see differential & integral equations,

and instead of my brain, it's my heart that reacts  
when I jump from the trampoline of this little circle around me  
into the jungle of an almanac.

The world is too complicated,  
the chain of cause and effect is becoming warped, and breaking,  
and I am alone,  
surrounded only by the music of the links of this chain,  
links that vibrate like organs.

I'm not ashamed of still having blood in my veins,  
of having hungers and thirsts and passions,  
of having more black hairs than white ones,  
of having tears that are still unshed.  
The shadows of the night are filled with red flames and  
with mists of sobbing.  
Over the surface of the moon, just as in a specimen  
under the microscope,  
float tuberculosis bacilli  
ready to fall to earth in a rain of shooting stars.  
And I'm not ashamed to confess that I smile at a Colas Bréugnon  
reborn in 1919.

Let me go tonight into that forest  
where desires and defeats,  
suns and butterflies,  
alphabets and smiles,  
ripen on fabulous trees.  
It's only that I'm giving myself a holiday,  
a passive object of the phenomena of the dark hours,  
as you give yourself yours  
every night  
while you breathe into the eiderdown of your warmed pillows,  
while you dream of the steaks  
that represent your hungers,

while you dream of the walking sticks and drawers  
that represent your loves,  
while you dream of the wage increases  
that represent your struggle for the kingdom of heaven on earth.

There is a forest in which all your dreams come together  
just as all your actions are brought together in an almanac.

## VI

On the peel of this apple—  
blood.

Dost Thou, my God, like fruit full of fighting worms?  
We can put it like that—and we can put it differently:  
man,  
when he writes poetry,  
expresses only a tiny scrap of the surface of the earth,  
the one that is inside him.

Those fragments of Nature that are called physicists  
formulate a 'true' reality,  
and they can discover it, describe it,  
always different and always the same,  
by treading different paths,  
by using different microscopes or scalpels.  
Those fragments of Nature that are called poets  
imagine their realities  
growing above matter,  
as flowers grow above well-nourished soil,  
and they build,  
with words, ideas, sounds, shapes and colours,  
their different Natures  
which wouldn't exist without them.

On the peel of this apple—  
a song.

Dost Thou, my God, care for the noises made by men  
who, thanks to the vibration of this mixture of nitrogen, oxygen et cætera,  
try to climb up to the top of the apple tree,  
although the apple has for a long time  
been surrounded by the white solitude of a plate?

We can put it like that and we can put it differently:  
man,  
when he writes poetry,  
expresses only a moment of eternity,  
the moment that lights up inside him.

For physicists, the moment is a part of something bigger  
like a second, which is only a fraction of a quarter of an hour.  
But for poets, the moment is a whole world,  
insoluble in the river of time.

picked out  
like a sort of axiom  
upon which we can build  
the whole geometry of verse.

Round the peel of this apple—  
the oracle.  
Dost Thou, my God, care for the wind  
Anywhere else than in organ pipes?

## GRECIAN NIGHT

### Strophe α

I am in love with her hair which is grey at dawn  
I am in love with her hair which is red in the evening  
Before the wind strips her  
of her dress  
To show me: the darkness.

Oh, summer night! warm negress,  
Dusky mistress flung across the firmament,  
Here, in your dark hollows,  
that grey donkey, your lover, lies sleeping,  
thirsting after tenderness.

And he has immortal dreams,  
and he has warm visions,  
they are idea-cocktails,  
the magnificent sky-bröthels  
that he dreams in his shadowy dreams.

Oh summer night! warm Grecian night,  
bathed as if in the sperm  
of the milky way.  
The coiled years spiral ceaselessly,  
let them pass lightheartedly  
like a dictation  
without end.

### Antistrophe $\alpha$

THE GUNS HAVE FALLEN SILENT  
THE PEOPLE HAVE KILLED ONE ANOTHER  
PLEASE, LET TIME PASS  
THROUGH THE DEPTHS OF YOUR BODY  
DON'T STOP IT, DON'T STOP IT

TAKE THE GREENNESS OF NATURE IN YOUR AERIAL  
ARMS  
AND LET THE PRESENT MOMENT FLEE  
INTO THE DARK FORGETFULNESS OF THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY  
OH BITTER  
NIGHT  
OF WAR

### Strophe $\beta$

Is it dried blood  
that makes the earth red  
like your hair, on a summer night  
at the moment when you close your eyes  
joyful  
with the gaiety  
of the day  
and as blue as the open Greek sea?

And as blue as the open Greek sea  
between the ancient Isle of Salamis  
and the village—Megalo Pefko.

Do you remember, Franciszka,  
the blood-red medusa

drowned in the tepid turquoise  
that our oars broke into a thousand waves?

Do you remember, my dearest  
the medusa in the middle of its dreams,  
that solitary Gioconda of the sea?

It was one world: its flesh  
And all around—a hell  
of blue  
ephemeral  
lies.

### Antistrophe β

DID SHE DREAM, LIKE THAT DONKEY  
WITH THE SO-SENTIMENTAL EYELASHES  
OF THE SPIRITS OF THE DEPARTED,  
- FINALLY  
HAPPY  
OR OF A GOD-GIVEN  
TRUCE  
FROM THE SCOURGE?  
OR DID SHE HAVE A BLOOD-RED  
DREAM

UNDER HER SAD EYELIDS?  
DID SHE SEE, IN A BURST OF HIGH SPIRITS,  
THE MEN SHE TURNED TO STONE  
IN THE DAYS OF MINERVA'S SHIELD?

OH, BLUE WATER THAT DIFFUSES  
THE BLOOD-RED DREAMS OF THE MEDUSAS  
THAT PLUNGE INTO ITS PROFOUND DREAMS!

OH, GREEK WATER,  
LET THE SECONDS PASS  
LIKE THE WAVES ON YOUR SURFACE  
DON'T STOP THEM!  
LET THEM CATCH THE ECHOES OF OUR FEET  
AND LET THEM PASS  
INTO SPACE  
WITH THEM

### **Epode β**

THE GUNS HAVE FALLEN SILENT,  
THE PEOPLE HAVE KILLED ONE ANOTHER  
IT'S ONLY  
THE PARTHENON  
THAT REMAINS  
IN THE LIGHT  
OF THE CELESTIAL  
AZURE  
IN THE SKY  
THAT AZURES  
THE LIGHT

THAT'S ALL WE HAVE LEFT AS REVENGE:  
THE PARTHENON – THOUGHT IN WHITE STONE  
HARDER  
MORE PURE  
THAN A PRAYER.

### Epode α

The guns have fallen silent,  
The people have killed one another.  
Persephone! why are you sad?  
After the autumn, the spring,  
before the summer, the spring.  
Oh, let the blood pass  
through the bouquets of the florists  
that are blossoming on the stones of the Acropolis.  
They were selling withered flowers,  
They were selling plaster saints  
in their own image.

Do you remember, Franciszka,  
Schubert and Schumann in miniature,  
a certain  
Pallas Athene  
with an alarm clock in her belly?  
In that town  
of the eulogist  
of Achilles.

Our florists and our flowers are dead  
and our donkeys, our medusas, our days.  
Oh night, let our tears pass,  
expunge the blood from our love.









Friedrich Schlegel  
1791



STEFAN THEMERSON (1910-1988) was born in Poland. Founder and publisher of Gaberbocchus Press, Stefan also made films, and wrote novels, essays, and poems over a sixty-year period. Except for *Fragments From Darkness (Croquis dans les Ténèbres)*, his poems were written in either Polish or English. This long poem was written in French in 1941, and published privately in London in 1944. It was written while he was separated from Franciszka, his wife, who had escaped to England in 1940. After the collapse of the Polish army in France, Stefan was stranded in the unoccupied zone. He began the poem in Marseille and continued in Voiron where he spent most of 1941, living in a Red Cross shelter for Polish soldiers whose units had been disbanded. Most of the illustrations in this chapbook are from Franciszka's 1940-42 series called 'Unposted Letters.' The last two reproductions are lino-cut proofs from c. 1943, with images by Franciszka and lettering by Stefan.

#### RECOMMENDED READING:

*Bayamus & Cardinal Pólátúo*, by Stefan Themerson, Exact Change, Boston, 1997. Two novels.

*Collected Poems*, by Stefan Themerson, Gaberbocchus Press/De Harmonie, Amsterdam, 1997.

*The Drawings of Franciszka Themerson*, edited by Nicholas Wadley, Gaberbocchus Press/De Harmonie, Amsterdam, 1991.

*PIX 1*, Winter 1993/4, London, ISSN 0967-8727, ISBN 0-85170-015-2. Contains over fifty pages of Themersoniana.

Out-of-print books by Stefan Themerson include the essay *Factor T*, and the novels *Professor Mmaa's Lecture*, *Tom Harris*, *The Mystery of the Sardine*, and *Hobson's Island*.



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