



Stefan Themerson

**Geometry of Satire and
Non Sequitur**

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Fragments from Darkness

Critics and My Talking Dog

Six Short Texts

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General Piesc or the Case of the Forgotten Mission

The Bone in the Throat

The Chair of Decency

*A Few Letters from the 1950s: Selected Correspondence
with Lars Gustav Hellström and Bertrand Russell*

Stefan Themerson

**Geometry of Satire
and Non Sequitur**

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*In memory of
Barbara Wright and
Stanley Chapman*

THE GEOMETRY OF SATIRE

Satire and Civil Liberties — this is our subject. It consists of three elements: the first is Civil Liberties; the second is Satire, and the third — is us! I see us as living within a system of co-ordinates; they are historical co-ordinates, geographical co-ordinates, and cultural co-ordinates. They are never the same, never identical for two different people, but also never entirely different. It may well be this flexibility that makes a man a reed, but at the same time it may well be his tenacity that makes him a thinking reed.

Us. Without co-ordinates, without a system of classification, whatever that may be, there is chaos. Our eyes see nothing, our ears hear nothing except white noise; it may well be that only our noses that lead us to the breasts of our mothers, towards the perfume of our lovers and away from our biological enemies.



At Conegliano: from left to right, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Vittorio Sereni (partially obscured), Roger Caillois (standing), Stefan Themerson, Carlo Betocchi, and Sławomir Mrozek.

The co-ordinates — or, if you like, the system of classification — represent the first step that lets us out of our zoological cage. Unfortunately, the same step takes us into another cage. The bars of this cage are the co-ordinates put there by our brains — the cage of the philosophical system. It aids our efforts to examine the universe. It also gives us a feeling of security, it protects us against that which goes on outside it. Yes, it is a nice cage of mental security. Provided that we don't take it too seriously, provided that we don't believe that it is the only possible cage. From the moment we start believing that it is the only possible cage, we transform enlightenment into obscurantism.



Philosophers debate: are all swans white? They call that a problem of induction. In other words the question is: should we verify the truth or falsify the hypothesis? Demonstrate that all swans are white, or that we can't find any black ones? (There are black swans in Australia but Australia is too far away from Oxford or Cambridge for anyone to take black feathers seriously.)

Then all of a sudden a Gentleman arrives, a Gentleman who isn't necessarily a philosopher; he turns a green spotlight on to some swans and shows us that they are all

green. I call this Gentleman a Humorist. And if another Gentleman arrived and showed us that it is the light of the spotlight that is not absolute, that it could be red, for example, I would call him a Satirist.

A Humorist is someone who takes an object out of one cage, transports it into another, and hey presto!, what we thought was **A** has become **B**. And yet our Humorist hasn't in the least changed **A**. He has merely transposed it into another system of classification.

And that's precisely what we do. We throw objects from one cage into another, and if we demonstrate that what seemed to be a Pegasus becomes a peccary when we throw it into a different cage, people call us humorists. And if during this operation we destroy the cage itself, they call us satirists. But we are humorists or satirists despite ourselves. If you want to be a satirist don't try to be a satirist. Try to look for the truth. In fact if we look for the truth, we almost automatically become a satirist. For satire is in the world, and not in us satirists.



When a general or an archbishop steps on a banana skin and falls over, we want to laugh. This event has transported him from one cage into another, and we now

see that he isn't merely a general or an archbishop but also a human being. Immediately, all the cultural baggage we carry ready-made in our brains in preparation for this meeting with the general or the archbishop is no longer necessary, and we feel we have dispensed with it. And this sensation of being liberated is accompanied by what we call: laughter. What had been the truth when the general or the archbishop was on his feet stopped being the truth when the banana skin made them fall over. We have made a discovery, namely that truth is not absolute, that it has its own valid domain. And we don't need to wash our hands like the old hypocrite two thousand years ago when he asked: "What is truth?"

And sometimes this discovery can tell us quite a few things about life. It was not a writer who has caused us to make this discovery. It was not a poet who made the general trip. It was a banana skin — life itself. So perhaps it is life itself that is at the same time the humorist and the satirist.



A few years ago I was talking to some Polish writer friends and they asked me: "Do you know why we Polish writers don't have absolute liberty? It is because the authorities think too highly of us. They think that what we write is so important that they can't allow us complete freedom."

They think that it is the poets who can, like a banana skin, make the generals fall.

In England, the situation is certainly very different. There, one can write whatever one wants. Why? Because the authorities don't bother with such things. They don't think that what one writes can have the slightest influence on present-day politics. So they leave their writers absolutely free. There, the satirist can write whatever he likes because he doesn't count.

With the journalists, it is not quite the same. They count. And in consequence, their freedom is not without limits. Of course there is no censorship. That's true. But there are other perfectly legitimate ways of encouraging prudence. For instance, one can give them information and ask them not to use it in their articles. And they don't use it. This is called playing the game. If poets are free because they don't count, and journalists because they play the game, it seems that the only liberty worth fighting for is that of printing four-letter-words.



We mustn't think that the satire is always directed against "the biggest battalions". No. I remember having seen in Paris in 1940, an issue of *Der Stürmer*. This little magazine, I

recall, satirized the shape of the nose of people who were condemned to death. The satirist succeeded in transferring the object to which he was paying attention from one cage to another in such a way that for those who inhabited the same cage as himself, the shape of the nose became the sufficient reason, almost the Supreme Reason, for destroying not only the object that possessed it (a human), but also the system of co-ordinates — philosophical, sociological, etc. that previously protected him.

Satire, then, is not always on our side. "Our?" But who are we? "Men of good will?" That is not a definition, it is a desire. If you can define the "our" satisfactorily, in such a way that your definition includes us all, wherever we happen to be, in no matter what country, belonging to no matter what political party, simultaneously excluding all the "others" — (I'll leave it to you to define the "others"!), if you can do all that, well then, do it! Your definition will be the foundation of a spiritual edifice of enormous importance. A great sociological and philosophical System. A cage of the most delightful co-ordinates. I hope that the bars of this marvellous cage will be sufficiently close together so as to prevent the "others" from penetrating inside, and at the same time far enough apart so that I myself can escape.



Allow me to return to our banana skin, with its miraculous power to transport a general or an archbishop from one system of co-ordinates to another.

I propose to call the first of these systems "the cage of established co-ordinates", and the other "the cage of unmasking co-ordinates". I suggest that it is the transportation from the established cage to the unmasking cage that makes us laugh. Yet if you were to look around carefully, you would find people who were not laughing. It would be too easy just to say that they have no sense of humour. It's quite possible that they would find it quite amusing if it had been one of "us" who had fallen stepping on a banana skin. Which means that humour is not absolute either. But what is it, then, that makes people react differently? It seems to me that it is their attitude to the cage of the established co-ordinates. There are some people that the cage of the established co-ordinates does not naturally suit, and even if they accept it, it is in spite of themselves. It weighs heavily on their shoulders and its bars limit their freedom. But there are others who accept it, who believe in it, who cannot imagine life other than in the cage of the established co-ordinates.

Obviously, "the banana effect" will be different for these two groups. The people in the first group will feel that they

have suddenly been liberated from a system which oppressed them. The others will feel disorientated.

The shock of unexpected liberation, the muscles relaxing — all this is manifested in what we call laughter.

But the other shock, the shock of derailment, is a drama.

And in the case when the general and the archbishop fall so heavily that it is not only their behinds that are damaged but also the whole established cage, that will be a satire for the first group and a tragedy for the second.



The systems I have just described seems to me to be valid not only for those going downstairs to find a banana skin awaiting them at the bottom, but also for those going upstairs.

If a child dresses up in an army or ecclesiastical uniform and pretends to be a very important personage, it makes us laugh. The passage from one system to another is easy.

On the other hand, if the same thing is done by Gogol's Government Inspector, or if it's a German cobbler, Wilhelm Voigt, who dresses in the uniform of a Prussian army

captain and becomes the Captain of Köpenick, the system itself trembles, and this event becomes a satirical event.

Two thousand years ago, a man of humble origin proclaimed himself King. Naturally he said that his kingdom was not of this world, but there were some satirists around who put a crown on his bloodstained head and threw a royal cloak over his stooped shoulders. But years went by, and history changed the meaning of this satirical gesture.

History takes revenge if people mock those who represent the unmasking system. One wonders whether the formula is the same when the revealing system appears to be reactionary? I think so. For example: It was very difficult to satirise Hitler before he came to power, and that not only because he wasn't evil enough, but because he was opposed to the established system of co-ordinates.

The formula seems to be the same whatever the reality in question. The satire of the Copernican system could seem quite amusing to the Ptolemeans. But it didn't survive. The satire of the Ptolemean system is still valid, even though it doesn't amuse us any more.

It isn't altogether the same with Newton and Einstein. Einstein wasn't trying to replace the system of the

Newtonian co-ordinates by a new system. What he put forward is a formula that is valid for every imaginable system. And that is something completely different. Einstein's relativity marks the end of all system; therefore it's the end of laughter. Since if all systems of co-ordinates are relatively equal, a banana skin can no longer transport us from the established system into the unmasking system. So this is the end of humour and satire as we have known them until today. Perhaps it also marks the beginning of what one calls 'black humour'.



If you will bear with me, I shall tell you a little story. A story about something that happened to me last night, here in Conegliano. I came by train. It was raining. I was carrying my bags and was looking for somewhere to leave them, when a Gentleman in a very beautiful uniform addressed me. I didn't understand a word of what he said and I thought that he wanted to help me. That wasn't the case. Another Gentleman appeared and told me in French that the Gentleman in uniform wanted me to open my bags. I asked him why. He explained that the Gentleman in uniform wanted to verify one of his scientific hypotheses. A hypothesis that I had some plastic bombs in my bags. I answered that I had come to Conegliano for a Satirical Conference and not for a Plastic Conference; nevertheless,

as he insisted, I allowed him to verify his hypothesis; or rather, to refute it.

This little incident made me ponder. And I came to the conclusion that one of my civil liberties is not to be bombed plastically or otherwise.

So if the Gentleman in uniform opens my bags, it is he who is the defender of my civil liberties — and perhaps a more efficient defender than satire is. This paradoxical thought amazed me. You see, satire doesn't accept any absolute god. It isn't absolute. It satirises and must be satirized. And if I have told you this little story it isn't to satirise the Gentleman in uniform but to satirise satire.

Translated from the
French by Barbara Wright

NON SEQUITUR

He was four when the First Great War started, and for him the State of War was the Natural State of the World. Not some exquisite rose in a crystal vase, but red poppies and blue cornflowers in the empty shell of the 75mm field gun, a photograph of his father operating on a wounded soldier, a little box with his order of St. Stanislas and a number of grey shapeless shrapnels extracted from the human flesh.

His father's batman, a peasant from somewhere far away, was his nurse and his governess. With a thick pencil, blue on one end, red on the other end, he would draw the endless trains of little rectangles on wheels, which he must have hoped would take him to his village one day.

He remembered things that didn't exist any more except in his memory: the cavalry horses he used to 'borrow' to ride proudly up and down the cobbled street, while the officers were having their drinks and their whores

in the Hotel Angielski; his brother coming back from the front, covered with lice, shouting: Don't touch me, let me have the bath first! He wasn't wounded. He just came back with TB in his spine which killed him some ten years later.

All those artefacts of War, Big Bertha and mustard gas, trenches and barbed wires, were for him as much a part of Nature as the stores and stars and poppies and cornflowers. All, except what they called *dum dum bullets*.

Dum dum bullets were different. They didn't belong to a state of Nature, they didn't belong to a state of Grace, they were ordinary rifle bullets, but their nose was made of a softer metal, or loaded with fulminating quick-silver, or just nipped off, so that they would burst into little bits *inside* the soldier's body. But why? the boy asked himself, Why? What for? It was in-com-pre-hen-sible, it was il-lo-gi-cal. Because, if a clean wound, made by an ordinary bullet, was all that was ne-cess-ssa-ry to in-ca-pa-ci-tate the soldier, whatfor the special effort to make the wound more dreadful? Whatfor this gratuitous un-ne-cess-ssa-ry evil?

And now, some three quarters of the Century later, puzzled, he looked at his own son who had just come to say hello, his son, the celebrated Dr. Adam Tessasson, a nuclear physicist, of whose work not much was known as most of it was military, classified, and the old-fashioned dum dum bullet (banned by the Hague Conference of 1899) which once upon a time seemed to be so in-com-

pre-hens-sible and il-lo-gi-cal, looked today like an innocent lollipop in the Arsenal of modern warfare. And so he, Thomas Tessasson, the old man born before the First World War looked at his son, the scientist, born into the Labour government's world of the Welfare state, brought up on its 1945 free milk and orange juice, and was puzzled. Dr. Thomas Tessasson, the father, *did* have at least a *cliché* image of the workers who worked matter into the nuclear evil, and of the financiers who financed it, and of the politicians who ordered it, and of the priests who blessed it, but he could *not* picture to himself the enigmatic mind of his own son and of all those men and women who actually invent, and design, and blue-print it. Who do they think they are – he mused. The saviours of civilization? Do they think mothers will point them out to their children saying: Look darling, here goes professor Adam Tessasson who has loaded his missile with something so marvellous that it will make your blinded eyes radiate in all their glory for the next 30,000 years; – run darling to him, make a curtsy, and give him this bunch of poppies. Or: Look darling, here goes Dr. Fieser who's managed to mix naphthalene with coconut and made a lovely jelly that will stick to you while burning and make you into the beautiful Olympic torch of Liberty; – run darling, curtsy to him, and give him this bunch of cornflowers. Or: Look darling, here goes Academician Andrei Dimitryewich Sakharov who has developed a

hydrogen bomb that is going to kill you; – run darling to him, hurry up, and – before he goes mad, – give him these lilies of the valley.

'Are you all right, father?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I said: Are you all right?'

'Oh, yes. Why?'

No, he couldn't possibly tell his son his musing thoughts. His son had just brought him some money. And he couldn't risk it that his son would say: Look father, you disapprove of my way of earning money but you do accept it. Not that his son would ever say or even think such thing. And not that he really thought so. But that was the objective reality of it. And so he held his tongue and said nothing.

Avoiding his eye, his son started 'The Queen's next birthday . . .', and stopped.

'Yes?' he prompted him.

'You know, birthday honours . . .' his son said.

'Oh, yes,' he said.

'Well, it looks as if I'm on the list. Knighthood,' his son said.

'That's great! Congratulations, my boy. So you'll be a Sir, and Lucy'll be a Lady. (Lucy was Adam's wife). She'll be delighted,' he said.

'I believe so. But Deborah . . . (Deborah was his daughter). I see Deborah's sneers . . .' his son said.

'I adore Deborah,' he said.

'I'm sorry you don't disapprove of her disdainful superiority and arrogance which I resent,' his son said siffly.

'Oh, dear me,' he said.

'You couldn't have seen her new outfit and make up, father. It's something outrageous,' his son said.

'She so young,' he said.

'She isn't a child any more. And she considers herself quite grown up,' his son said.

He wanted to say 'We all were younger than we thought we were, once upon a time,' but he didn't. Instead, he asked: 'Does the name Lady Cooper mean anything to you?'

'Lady Diana Cooper?' his son asked.

'No, no. Nothing to do with Lady Diana Cooper. No. Yadviga Cooper,' he said.

'No, why?' his son asked.

'She died,' he said.

'Oh,' his son said. Then he thought perhaps she had been one of his father's lady friends, and added 'I'm sorry'. And, after a pause, 'Oh, Lady Cooper! Was she Douglas' mother? He's in some sort of Health Farm racket now, isn't he?'

But he didn't want to talk about Douglas. He wanted to talk about Bukumla. Why about Bukumla? He had already forgotten what it was that made his mind jump from Lady Cooper to Bukumla. The news about the

revolution in Bukumla he read a week?, a fortnight? ago. A black bordered printed card, announcing Lady Cooper's death, came only yesterday. No, no, the fact that he wanted to find something more about Bukumla had nothing to do with Lady Cooper. But he wouldn't ask his son. No. That would make them talk politics, and talking politics would make them quarrelsome, both of them, yes, so instead of mentioning Bukumla he said: 'Do have a drink before you go, my boy.'

'You know that I mustn't. I'm driving, father,' his son said.

He didn't like to be called 'father', but he didn't know that his son didn't like to be called 'my boy'. There had been many things they didn't know about each other.

'Well, good bye and take care,' his son said slamming the door of his car.

He thought the words 'take care' were vulgar and sloppy. Indeed. 'Take care of what?' he snorted.



He shut the windows, took his rolled up umbrella, and went out closing the door behind him. The door squeaked. So he took the key from his pocket, opened the door, fetched a little oil-can from the shelf in the loo, oiled the hinges, took the oil-can back, opened the door, closed it noiselessly, and went for a stroll. Or was it to be a stroll?

Wasn't it to be a walk with a purpose? He wasn't sure. But he didn't need to be sure. Why should he? The word *Bukumla* was still stuck in his mind. There must have been some reason for it being there. Of course there must have been some reason. Well, so what? He felt that if his mind would make a real effort, it would find the reason. But to make a real effort could mean a stroke. And nothing is worth having a stroke. He knew a physicist who said he would gladly go straight to heaven to find the answer to the most difficult problem in physics, the problem of Turbulence, that's to say, he said, if God knows the answer. He knew an ambassador who said he couldn't die peacefully unless he learns who really killed President Kennedy. And there was more than one lover who would give everything to find out whether she slept with his best friend or not. Yeah. People are prepared to pay a lot for a bit of knowledge but nobody is prepared to pay for it with a stroke. Naturally! If only because such knowledge would be self-erasing. 'Self-erasing' is a nice word. Self-erasing. He was now passing the Colonnade Hotel. There was a new blue plaque on its wall, saying: Sigmund Freud lived here. Silly old pornographer. Knew nothing about life. Worse still. Knew everything wrong. Took consequences for causes. Thought Franz-Joseph created the world. His Imperial Majesty Franz-Joseph took an Id, put some biophore clay around it to make an Yid and called him Adam. Ha ha. He too called his son Adam. Why Adam?

Why? Why 'why?'" Why "Why 'why?'"? Does it matter? Anyway, the hotel wasn't called 'Colonnade' before. During the war, it was called 'Esplanade', and it was full of Poles. Polish ministers, Polish generals, Polish poets. Hundreds and hundreds of Polish poets. Lady Cooper stayed there for one night. Was it before she married or after? Well, what does it matter now? He marched on. There used to be that church on the corner. He remembered how they were pulling it down. But when was it? Five years ago? Ten years ago? Fifteen years ago? Oh, no, he wouldn't like to be called as a witness to a court of justice. Why do they call a law court a court of justice? It's not necessarily the same sort of thing, is it? Well, anyway, he wouldn't like to stand in the witness-box in a law court and give evidence. And be told by a bewigged young man 'Come on, you, witless witness, make you're your stupid mind, How long did that bloody whore's scream last, 5 seconds? 10 seconds? 15 seconds?' Now, how could he be sure? 5 seconds for a young man may be like 5 years for an old man, because the old man's mind is selective, the old man's mind may be stuck with old envelopes, but the addresses on them are self-erasing, that's what makes old men wise in a sort of way, yes, in a sort of way, all things in this world are only in a sort of way, and, anyway, the church they pulled down wasn't so beautiful, sad grey stone, but peaceful inside, now it is a sort of very modern annex to a big block of flats, luxury flats, with a lightning

conductor instead of a cross on the tip of its spire, proud of being asymmetrical in an arty sort of way, she would have liked to be seen from afar, but there was still there, in the field of vision, that red brick structure where the wartime barrage balloons had been moored to give protection against low-flying aircraft; now, are those wartime captive balloons worth remembering? He marched on.

In London, rich people pretend to be less rich (not only to the tax inspector), and poor people pretend to be less poor (even to the chaps who give them supplementary benefit). Tall trees along the avenue, splendid stucco houses behind them, and behind them – unseen from the street – private gardens, and tennis courts, and swimming pools. He marched on, crossed the bridge over the Canal. Lady Cooper stood in front of her house (Lady *Diana* Cooper, no, nothing to do with *his* Lady Cooper). And Lady Cooper (Lady *Diana* Cooper) asked him as he was passing by ‘Don’t you wish to admire my roses?’ And he looked through the gate, and the roses he saw were sad and wrinkled and melancholy; and the young woman who was with Lady Cooper (Lady *Diana* Cooper and not *his* Lady Cooper who wanted to start a new life and died without even giving him a tinkle on the telephone) – and the young woman whisked her into the car and slammed the door, and he was glad that he didn’t need to say anything about the roses, and when the car

left he crossed the road into the Rembrandt Garden. They called these parts near the Canal – Little Venice because of the canals in Venice, and they called the little garden – Rembrandt Garden because of the canals in Amsterdam. Some bits of his ‘long’ memory were quite good. He remembered the time when the little garden was not there. In its place, he remembered, was a derelict huge building, empty, abandoned, forbidding; from its black gutted insides strange voices erupting into the night; and – at the other end – two painter’s studios, Topolski’s studio and Zulawski and Halina Korn’s studio; and, at the time, there were brick walls and wooden fences on both sides of the Canal, and some awful slums all along towards the Harrow Road, and now the slums were gone, and the fences were gone, and the horses pulling a barge loaded with coal for the power station do not appear any more on the towing-path, there are pleasure boats now, going to the Zoo, and some colourful dinghies with boys and girls of the youth club. And the haunted house and the studios had given place to the Rembrandt Garden.

The Rembrandt Garden was like a thermometer. When the quicksilver was high up, sparkling in the sun, the naked bodies, clad in the scanty bikinis, appeared on the green grass. When it was a bit cooler, they would dream and sit on the benches. When it was cold, they had a walk or two around the garden and went back home. And when it rained, only the flower beds and tree leaves enjoyed the

luxury of having the urban dust washed away. He entered the garden, passed the time of day with the gardener, and then went out through a small iron gate onto a path running along the edge of the Canal. It led to Paddington.

Paddington Green was not the Paddington Green of 20, 30, 40 years ago. The soot covered, grey brick, Victorian Police Station, with its blue light over the door, was no longer there. Was that Police Station worth remembering just because, when Sir Francis died, that man was interrogated there? He looked at the empty spaces full of ghosts. Sir Francis? Sir Francis Pewter-Smith. It had been clear, of course, that the man had nothing to do with Sir Francis' death. But the old eccentric, Sir Francis, used to call him his Revolutionary Secretary so they *had* to interrogate him. Oh, Memory! Memory! Thou little knowest what a little waste-paper basket thou are! He marched on.

On the bridge, The Bishop's Bridge Road, a woman was coming towards him. Young. Pretty. Sexy. Smoking a cigarette. Drunk. Or drugged? She walked straight towards him. And she must have read his thoughts as, when passing by him, she said in a low husky voice: 'Go to hell!' He laughed. Not very much. Just a little. He marched on. One couldn't see what was under the Bridge Road. But it must have been the Canal first (going to Paddington Basin) and the railway tracks next, going to Paddington Station. Kingdom Brunel. Great Western Railway. He liked the trains

going westwards. Cornwall. Wales. And, of course, Oxford. Oxford! Oh yes, perhaps his son, Adam, should have studied in Oxford, and not at the Imperial College. Oxford would have made him a bit less down-to-earth and perhaps a bit more philosophical. But more snobbish too. Yet, wasn't he snobbish enough anyway? How funny! That other chap, the one they interrogated at the old Paddington Police Station when Sir Francis died, he did never go either to the Imperial College or to Oxford, he was an autodidact, if that's the right word to use in his case, he was just nothing when he lived in Paddington, just a man with a monkey, and the – Hey ho! – some events transplant him to Italy, Genoa, and – surprise, surprise! – would you have believed it, would you? a cockney chrysalis produces a butterfly, actually it *was* the butterflies that he did some research on, butterflies and electronics, wasn't it? 'Nature' reported it, but, anyway, all that had nothing to do with Adam. Adam was not producing butterflies. Adam was producing death. His son, Adam, was a damn dum dum scientist of death. He stopped by the entrance to the booking office and leaned against the wall. Suddenly, death or no death, he realized how much he loved his son. He would hate what his son was doing but he couldn't stop loving him. Just because he was his son. For no other reason. That was precisely the thing that made the carnivorous animal (human and not human) tick over the æons, he mused, the thing that made it fit to survive as a

species, that chemistry of love contained in a bit of DNA which we are born with . . .

'Are you all right, sir?'

He opened his eyes. A tiny Japanese lady was standing in front of him, between two suitcases.

'Oh, yes,' he said. 'Why!'

'You looked so pale. I thought you needed help. I'm glad you don't. I apologize for disturbing you.'

'Not at all,' he said. 'It was frightfully decent of you. And may I help you with your bags?'

'No, no, no,' she had already lifted her two suitcases, effortlessly, and was now trotting to Platform One, Oxford train, and he too would have liked to jump on a train and go to Oxford, Cambridge, Hiroshima, anywhere, but he knew he had no more time left, he had no time even to have tea at the Kingdom Brunel lobby of the Station Hotel, he mustn't be late, mustn't he?, so he marched on, and the Pread Street was noisy and dirty, there were those smelly eating houses, and photographic shops, and sex shops, and the chemist's, and the stationary, and there was St. Mary's Hospital, a dark violet brownish round plaque on its wall, saying

SIR ALEXANDER FLEMING
1881– 1955
DISCOVERED PENICILLIN
IN THE SECOND STOREY
ROOM ABOVE THIS
PLAQUE

and he thought it was such set of things as penicillin, and internal combustion engines, and semiconductors, that change the world, and not those clever dum dum brain-floats who think that it is their own bobbing up and down up and down that rules the waves.

He crossed the road. There was a gunshop on the corner, sporting rifles, triple-barreled rifles, over-and-under shotguns, telescopic sights, yes, all very interesting, no, no patriotic dum dum bullets, just ordinary small-shot cartridges and fishing rods. He looked for a hunting horn. There wasn't one. Not in the window, anyway. He marched on. Eating houses again, and video shops, and a pawnbroker's, and Xerox machines, and then, at last, *the* bookshop. That's where he stopped. But why? His mind was so hummed with thoughts that he had to shut his eyes, wrinkle his forehead, press his temples, and rub his nose to *retrieve the information*. 'To retrieve the information!' he repeated and laughed. That's what we've come to! Foolishly, we gave the computer the use of our terms – information, memory, intelligence – and now they rebound on us and make us think about our own thinking in terms that have acquired the new meaning, the meaning derived from the working of those machines we have anthropomorphised. He walked in. Perhaps, when browsing among the books at random, something will jog his memory. He walked from shelf to shelf. Medical books.

Physics. Chemistry. Electronics. Art books. Dictionaries. Paperbacks. Blank. Blank. Blank. His memory could not be rushed. He walked out. There was a small porn-cinema next door to the bookshop. He looked around. Suspiciously. After all, he was the father of a dum dum scientist whose work was classified. What if they were keeping an eye on him? Mightn't they think that cinéma-cochon was a hollow in the tree where a father of one dum dum scientist met the father of another dum dum scientist to exchange the data how to blind each other? He bought a ticket and walked in.

A big placard displayed on the walled showed a Greek sculpture of a female nude leaning against a Doric column. The title of the film was THE WORD PROCESSOR. But, as he sat down in the darkness of the back row and looked at the screen, he saw no Greek Goddesses. What he saw was a number of ordinary people on a roof-garden of a tall office-block. It looked like a garden party for the members of the staff. Among them a young girl and a man in his forties. There was no music, no talking, no sound-effects, but there was a running commentary. An impersonal, anonymous Voice was saying coolly what was taking place on the screen. And the words seemed to be more powerful than the pictures. ▪ She sprained her ankle ▪ the Voice said. ▪ He comes to her aid ▪ He takes her into the goods lift ▪ He manages a sly feel of her tit ▪ She pretends not to notice ▪ He lays her on the bench ▪ He presses the button ▪

The lift goes down ▪ He presses the STOP button ▪ The lift stops between floors ▪ He starts to massage her ankle ▪ She lets her other leg slide off the bench ▪ He lowers her massaged leg down ▪ His left hand is rubbing her boobs ▪ His right hand is undoing his flies ▪ He gets it out in view ▪ She reaches out and feels the stiffness of it ▪ His hand goes up her skirt under her knickers and finds her hole which is running with desire by now ▪ He pulls her knickers down and thrusts his bulging cock into her ▪ She grips the sides of the bench and pushes against him hard ▪ She feels it when he comes off up her ▪ Now they start again but slowly ▪ He is kissing the hairs of her pussy ▪ He pulls her legs open ▪ She feels his tongue ▪ . . . Suddenly the lift went down, and the next picture was: the office, she sits at her typewriter/word processor, he approaches, and the Voice says: ▪ Next morning ▪ She sits at her desk ▪ He looks down her tits ▪ She feels an itch between her legs ▪ She looks at the bulge in his pants ▪ Such a thing makes her heart flutter in her breast ▪ For when she sees it even for a moment ▪ Then power to speak another word fails her ▪ Instead her tongue freezes into silence ▪ And at once a gentle fire catches through her flesh ▪ And she sees nothing with her eyes ▪ And there's a drumming in her ears ▪ And sweat pours down her ▪ And trembling seizes all of her ▪ And she becomes paler than grass ▪ and she seems to fail almost to the point of death in her very self ▪ – and now a close-up of the word-processor appeared on the

screen:

Φαίνεται μοι κήνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
ἔμμεν' ὦνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός σοι
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδυ φωνεί-
σας ὑπακούει
καὶ γελαιίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μάν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν,
ὡς γάρ ἔς σ' ἰδῶ βρόχε', ὡς με φώναι-
σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἶνει,
ἀλλ' ἄκαν μεν γλώσσα πεπαγε, λέπτον
δ' αὐτίκα χρώι πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὀρημμ' ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,
κάδ δέ μ' ἴδρωσ κάκχέεται, τρόμος δέ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δέ ποῖας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω ἴπιδεύης
φαίνομ' ἐμ' αὐται.

From the neighbouring darkness on his right, a timid female voice asked:

'What's that? Is it Arabic?'

'No,' he said. 'It's Greek.'

'Why Greek?' the timid voice asked. 'The girl isn't Greek. She looks English.'

'It's a Greek love poem. Ancient. By a girl called Sappho. She was a lesbian.'

'But the girl in the film is not a lesbian, is she?' the timid voice said. And a timid hand slightly touched his.

'No,' he said. 'But that's one of those *non sequitur* . . .'

'What's that?' the timid voice asked.

'Oh, that's Latin.'

He didn't explain how *non sequitur* may be part of poetic licence, for the film ended and the screen lightened with the title of the next film: MANE TICKLE FARES, and he would never learn what the title meant to convey, because just now a black man in a black tailcoat and medals appeared on the screen between two white nudes, and the close-up of the black man's face jogged his memory . . . *Bukumla!* of course 'Bukumla' was the word he was searching for, 'Bukumla', he repeated and got up, and the timid voice in the darkness on his right said, 'Oh, don't go!' and the hand grasped his hand for a second, and he heard the plea, and he felt the warmth of the hand, and he knew that he'll never forgive himself for abandoning the voice lost in the darkness, but he was afraid that he might forget the word 'Bukumla' again, and, as the two white Furies on the silver screen started tearing the black man's clothes off his rippling muscles, he turned away from the voice in the darkness and marched on to the word EXIT, shining above the door by the screen.

The exit door opened into a narrow street at the back of the cinema. Repeating the word 'Bukumla' he turned left and walked to the corner of Edgware Road, and then left again, Bukumla, Bukumla, to the corner of Pread Street, and left again, Bukumla, Bukumla, past the entrance to the cinema and to the bookshop. But the bookshop was closed by now. He stood in front of it, feeling silly, when,

suddenly, in the semidarkness of the shop window, he saw it. A thick volume:

ECOLOGY & BIOGEOGRAPHY
IN
BUKUMLA

In Bukumla, there was a revolution. Wherever there is a revolution, there is some looting. Were he in Bukumla, and were he strong enough, he could break the plate-glass window pane and take the book. On the other hand, were he in Bukumla, he wouldn't need it. So he marched on.

There was a nice little pub on the corner. He walked in and asked for dum dum bullets. When the barman said 'I beg your pardon, sir?', he said 'I'm sorry, I meant gin and tonic.' And again he felt rather silly. Why had he ordered a gin and tonic if what he wanted was whisky and soda? He took his gin and tonic to a little table by the window and sat down. There was something *non sequitur* in all that. There were, he felt, so many *non sequitur* things in his mind. When the antecedent had erased itself in your memory, was your affirmation of the consequent a *non sequitur*? Of course not. Of course yes. Of course yes and not. Everything in this world is *non sequitur*. And, on the other hand, nothing is *non sequitur*. Because everything is linked together, and 'thou canst not stir a flower / Without troubling of a star . . .' Now, where do those lines come

from? He felt tired. He looked through the window, outside it was dark already and it was raining. He took a sip of his gin and tonic . . . She . . . She wanted to start a new life and she died without even giving him a tinkle on the telephone . . . He moved the glass away from him. Ten minutes later, he walked to the counter and bought himself a big cigar. A Habana.



NOTES

In May 1963, Stefan Themerson delivered his lecture "The Geometry of Satire," in French, at a conference on "Satira è Libertà Civili," in Conegliano (Veneto), Italy. The conference was organised by the literary review *Il Caffè* (Rome). Moderated by Roger Caillois, other participants included Raymond Queneau, Polish playwright Sławomir Mrożek, and Italian poets Giuseppe Ungaretti, Vittorio Sereni, and Carlo Betocchi. Barbara Wright translated the text of Stefan's talk in late 2008.

"Non Sequitur" was originally intended be the opening chapter of *Hobson's Island*, Stefan's last novel on which he started work in 1985 and which was to be published in 1988 by Faber & Faber. Believing it "too autobiographical," Stefan chose not to use it for that purpose. Instead, portions of "Non Sequitur" can be found throughout the published novel. The novel appeared in 1989, several months after Stefan Themerson died.

Both texts are previously unpublished.

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