

## **The Laboratory of Discourses and Forms. *Hobson's Island* and other novels by Stefan Themerson in the context of intertextual references to philosophy**

**Abstract:** Although almost all artistic works by Stefan Themerson, a Polish and English novelist, poet, philosopher, filmmaker, and composer can be described metaphorically as a laboratory of forms and discourses, the main goal of the article is to focus on literary experiments contained in the text *Hobson's Island* and in other novels of the writer. One of the most important types of discourse presented in Themerson's novels is philosophical discourse. The article scrutinises the latter, keeping in mind that it co-exists with academic discourse, the reflection on God, intertextuality and graphic experiments in his literary texts.

**Keywords:** Stefan Themerson, literature, philosophy, laboratory, discourse, form, island, novel, intertextuality, literary experiment

Almost all artistic works by Stefan Themerson, a Polish and English novelist, poet, philosopher, filmmaker, and composer can be described metaphorically as a laboratory of forms and discourses. One of the most important types of discourse presented in Themerson's novels is philosophical one. In my article, I would like to focus on it and on literary experiments in this field present *Hobson's Island* and in his other novels, bearing in mind that philosophical discourse co-exists with academic discourse, the reflection on God, intertextuality and graphic experiments<sup>1</sup> in his literary texts. It is my intention to delineate how Themerson, blurring the boundaries between discourses, forms, arts, human and animal, nature and culture, showed that a broadly understood identity in a state of crisis can be a starting point for philosophical reflection.

At the start, it is worth noting that Themerson's novels abound in lexical references to philosophical discourse in the form of terms appropriate for it, such as: solipsism, empiricism, the categorical imperative, a substance, cognition, relativism, logics, positivism<sup>2</sup>, and others.

---

<sup>1</sup> Franciszka Themerson, the Polish avant-garde artist and the wife of writer illustrated a lot of his novels.

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Themerson, *Cardinal Pölätü, General Piesc*, (Warsaw: Iskry, 2013),. 22, 23, 87, 90, 102, 104, 105, 107 and other.

An allusion to Immanuel Kant's well-known work *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Present Itself as a Science* is present in the title *Prolegomena to Philosophy of Pölättöömizm*, which forms a part of the novel *Cardinal Pölättöö*. In this text, philosophical lexis is included, *inter alia*, in the form of letters, a treatise, dialogues, a press article, and a dream-book. They are accompanied by quotes from the works of celebrated philosophers such as Berkeley, Thomas of Aquino and others.

Importantly, in Themerson's novels, we can find not only elements of parody of philosophical discourse but also its paraphrases. The writer paraphrased, for example, fragments of the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Summa contra Gentiles* in his novel *Cardinal Pölättöö*. Although Themerson modified the lexical shape of the original text, he retained its meaning.

The author also created pastiches of philosophical discourse in this work, by using the strategy called "the text in the text". This literary technique allows the writer to include passages written in a philosophical style in the literary text. A good example of that technique is a part of the novel *Cardinal Pölättöö* entitled *Philosophy of Pölättöömizm* (especially, its famous chapter "On the reality of the soul and reality of onions"). It is presented as a work of the main character in which he tries to reconcile phenomena that seem to be contradictory: Direct Knowledge considered to be proof for the existence of God with Intermediate (empirical and scientific) Knowledge.

Themerson introduces references to philosophical discourse also on an architextual level<sup>3</sup>, alluding to generic conventions which were earlier known in literature and philosophy. One of them is philosophical fiction – a genre derived from the eighteenth-century novelistic tradition represented in France by the works of Voltaire, such as *Candide, or the Optimist* (*Candide, ou l'Optimisme* 1759), *Zadig, or The Book of Fate* (*Zadig ou la Destinée* 1747) or Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master* (*Jacques le fataliste et son maître* 1796), and Ignacy Krasicki's *Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Wisdom* (*Mikołaja Doświadczynskiego przypadku* 1776) in Poland. Stefan Themerson drew on this generic tradition when he was writing his novel *The adventures of Peddy Bottom* [1951] (*Przygody Pędrka Wyrzutka*, 1957). In this text, the author describes the main character whose ontological status is not clear and seems to be changeable depending on the assumed perspective. As we read in the novel: "All the men" (...) he "meets on" (...) his "way think there is something doggy about" (...) him, "and all the dogs think there is something human about" (...) him, "and all the saw-fishes think there is something of a nightingale about" (...) him, "and all the cats think there is something fishy about" (...) him (...).<sup>4</sup> Consequently, he decides to embark on a journey in search of his own identity after a certain cat took him for a fish and tried to eat him. *Peddy Bottom's*

---

<sup>3</sup> The terminology presented in this article is used in accordance with Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: La littérature au second degré*. Paris: Seuil 1982 or Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Themerson, *The Adventures of Peddy Bottom*, drawings by Franciszka Themerson, Amsterdam: Gaber-bocchus Press/De Harmonie 2003, 8–9.

encounters with other characters become a starting point to consider philosophical problems of identity, borders, similarity, strangeness, and belonging to the community.

Another parodic strategy, that of including philosophical discourse presented as an object of reflection, is also specific to Themerson's novels. This tendency is visible in his text entitled *Euclid Was an Ass* in the Polish version, and called *The Mystery of the Sardine* in the English-language version because the publisher did not agree to the provocative title proposed by the author. Reflections on philosophy made by the literary character who is a philosopher are metaphilosophical in nature and can take, for example, the form of a dialogue. This kind of metacommentary raises questions about the issues common to the disciplines of physics and philosophy and about the differences between them. When reading the conversations, we may learn, for example, that there are questions which belong to physics but the answers to them can be provided only by philosophy. Philosophy does not deal with questions relating to physics because philosophy is beyond physicality by nature. Existential questions are proper to physics, but the answers must be philosophical. The questions about morality are just the opposite. Their origin is philosophical but physics provides the answers. Reaching for the form of dialogue, Themerson's literary characters consider the benefits of studying philosophers' works instead of direct reading of the Book of Nature because philosophers are interested in how to do that, and they also present the method to others and inform of what has already been established. In *The Mystery of the Sardine*, the form of a dialogue becomes a starting point for a discussion of the weight of philosophy, which does not give consolation.

What is noteworthy is that games with a philosophical context manifest themselves in a different way than philosophical discourse in the novels. References to philosophical discourse take the form of allusions, quotations, comments, metacommentaries, paraphrases, pastiches, and transformations of genre convention. These references are not limited to various types of intertextual connections or evocations of a specific language of philosophy in use, which is embedded in a concrete relationship and in a communicational situation. Reading literature of different epochs while taking into account the historical context, one can find various forms of contextual references to philosophy, for example:

- novelization and fictionalization of the actual person of the philosopher consisting of his presentation as a literary character;
- making philosophers the subject or addressee of the speeches;
- creation of a text to illustrate the celebrated philosophical idea;
- recalling philosophy in the way it appears to the author who thematises it in his novel;
- treating philosophical references as a starting point to comment about the present day;
- parabolization or another type of text structure which has two possible meanings, and which allows one to consider philosophical problems;
- formulation of previously unknown problems in philosophical discourse which, in the author's opinion, deserve philosophical consideration;

- establishing a fictional person of a philosopher as a literary character in the novel;
- recalling a philosophical idea in an encrypted way;
- creation of neologisms in accordance with the rules of coining new philosophical terms;
- presentation of philosophical problems from a non-human perspective;
- recalling philosophical works the character of which is fictional or/and mystified.

Five of these strategies appear most often in Themerson's literary works. The tendency to establish a fictional person of a philosopher as a literary character is visible not only in the novel *Cardinal Pölätüo* but also in the novel *Euclid Was an Ass* (called *The Mystery of the Sardine* in the English language version). In the former text, the main character is a philosopher, in the latter, we can find a legless philosopher (a logical positivist) as well. His strategy of philosophizing is opposed to the style of thinking (also characteristic of Themerson himself) that treats literature as an excellent medium for philosophizing because a logical positivist associates practising aphorist philosophy or, in a wider sense, creating philosophy in a literary form, with both unverified and unfalsified gibberish, which is deprived of logical consistency.

The strategy of novelization and fictionalization of an actual philosopher and his presentation as a literary character sometimes brings surprising and comic results. For instance, in the novel *Cardinal Pölätüo* the person of a well-known philosopher turns out to be an animal figure: a Miniature Pinscher which resembles Aristotle according to the cardinal, his owner, but he does not call it this name out of respect for Thomas Aquinas, and decides to call the dog the name of an Irish bishop – Berkeley. In the novel, this kind of anthroponyms also become components of the names of the Pinscher's pastimes, "The Game of Berkeley" or "The Solipsistic Game of the late Hume" treated as synonyms of an aimless race and metaphors of a vicious cycle of thinking.

A presentation of philosophical problems from a non-human perspective is typical for Themerson's experiments with philosophical context examples of which can be found in the novel *Professor Mmaa's Lecture*, which is a kind of a philosophical fairy tale with elements of satire presenting philosophical dilemmas connected with the human nature from a termite's point of view, or in the philosophical fiction entitled *The Adventures of Peddy Bottom*.

One of the characteristic features of Themerson's prose is the creation of neologisms which resemble new-coined philosophical terms, such as the phrase "philosophy of pölätüomism" in the novel *Cardinal Pölätüo*. A good starting point for the consideration on the construction of neologisms is a reflection on ethics by Sean D'Earth, a character from the novel *Hobson's Island*, who does not formulate ethical postulates, but relies upon practising ethics in a pre-reflective and proverbial way.

As we read in the novel:

"Sean would have like to tell Smith everything, everything about his thoughts. But he knew that he had not enough grown-up words to express them. All he had just learnt was *atheist*, *ethics*, and *logic*. That, he felt, was not enough. Especially as he wasn't quite sure – did he understand

them correctly? Smith had said *ethics* and *ethical*, but could one say to *ethic*? As one says, for instance, to *kill*, or to *eat*? It would be much easier if one could. One would be able to say: the great ape sits and *ethics*. Smith said that animals cannot be *ethical*. Why not, if they *ethic*, and they do, don't they? Doesn't the big mother-ape *ethic*? Don't birds (except for the cuckoo perhaps) when they sit on their eggs instead of eating them for breakfast? Doesn't even the fox *ethic*, even he kills and steals a chicken to take it to his vixen and their little foxes? So perhaps there are two *ethics*. One is the big she-ape's *ethics* based on *ethicking*, the other is Smith's *ethics* based on *commanding*. He, Sean, felt he was much further from Smith than he, Sean, was from the big she-ape, and that he was much closer to her because she and he knew what it was to *ethic*, though neither of them knew how to express it in words (...). Why do they [people] not see that it is precisely what they are afraid call *the ape's ethics* that is at the base of what they call *evolution* (...)"<sup>5</sup>.

It has to be emphasized that Themerson's experiment is related to a search of forms and languages to express original philosophical thinking about known problems. In *Hobson's Island* he wonders, among other things, whether animals and atheists could be *ethical* and whether *ethics* can derive exclusively from God, using a popular convention of a spy novel and combining it with the dystopian and adventure conventions used earlier, for example, in the books *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) and *The Mysterious Island* (1874) written by Jules Verne. By situating part of events on *Hobson's Island*, Themerson refers indirectly and critically to the traditional literary concepts of social utopias such as those present in Plato's dialogues *Timaios* and *Kritias*, which present the just, wisely governed state located on the island named Atlantis, which was plunged into the depths of the ocean as a result of an earthquake; *The New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon, where the island-state of Bensalem was governed in concordance with the principle of the equality of all people, and was to become the beginning of a new civilization. Also, the action of the second part of *Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Wisdom* by Ignacy Krasicki takes place on the island called Nipu, the inhabitants of which organize the systems of families living in harmony and recognize only one power – that of parents over children. In Themerson's *Hobson's Island* as in *Gulliver's Travels*, or *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships*, one can find elements of parody not only of an adventure novel but also of an idea of social experiments conducted on an island. The transformations of *Hobson's Island* treated as a place of social experiments are not less interesting than the events that took place on the islands created by Themerson's famous literary predecessors.

Initially, when the island is inhabited by only one family and when only one family takes care of it at the request of the principals, it resembles a biblical paradise situated in the 20th century, despite the fact that the island is intended to be a place where political dissidents can be harboured, of which the family is not aware. Then, while subsequent

---

<sup>5</sup> Stefan Themerson, *Hobson's Island*, faber and faber, (London–Boston 1988), 38, 43–44.

guests arrive on the island, it begins to recall a contemporary Inferno where a new biological weapon is being tested. This weapon is a special species of monkeys, at the sight of which one dies of laughter.

It is not only the experimental status of the place such as Hobson's Island that is substantial in Themerson's novels and his playing with philosophical context. In *Professor Mmaa's Lecture*, the species of homo sapiens becomes an object of research. Termites, being aware of how many of their confreres were imprisoned in human labs, would like to plan the settlement's budget reasonably, save money and build their own laboratory not only around seventy million cubic millimetres of one human individual but also around all forty million billion cubic millimetres that constitute the volume of the entire homo sapiens civilization<sup>6</sup>.

Themerson exceeded not only the limits of discourses and arts but also – as the above concept presents – the boundaries of what is possible to imagine. Professional academic philosophers – as the writer himself admitted – did not trust him and sometimes asked, thinking that he was mocking them (which was not true): "If you have something important to say, why do you do it in such a strange way?"

Themerson's autothematic statements are the evidence of the fact that the writer treated literature as a laboratory in which experiments are carried out, the aim of which is to deepen the knowledge of man and of the world. In the essay entitled "Factor T", Stefan Themerson pointed out that the science which cannot run an experiment should not be regarded as powerless. If it is unable to conduct an experiment, it has the right to imagine it. "If we cannot bring Reality to help, we can turn for help to the *Imagination*"<sup>7</sup> – said the writer. In his opinion, it is impossible to bring Hamlet, the Karamazov Brothers or an illiterate girl from Domremy to the laboratory and observe them in artificially arranged conditions. Nevertheless, it is possible to do that in a novel or on stage.

One can ask how it is possible and why imagination is helpful in communicating philosophical content. As Santayana noticed in his text entitled *Three Philosophical Poets*:

"In philosophy itself investigation and reasoning are only preparatory and servile parts, means to an end. They terminate in insight, or what in the noblest sense of the word may be called theory, θεωρία – a steady contemplation of all things in their order and worth. Such contemplation is imaginative. No one can reach it who has not enlarged his mind and tamed his heart. A philosopher who attains it is, for the moment, a poet [or writer]; and a poet [or writer] who turns his practised and passionate imagination on the order of all things, or on anything in the light of the whole, is for that moment a philosopher"<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Themerson, *Wykład profesora Mmaa*, (Warszawa: Iskry, 2013), 118.

<sup>7</sup> Stefan Themerson, *Factor I*, (London: Gaberbocchus, 1972), 26.

<sup>8</sup> George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe*, (New York: Columbia University, 1910), 10–11.

## Bibliography

- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: La literature au second degree*. Paris: Seuil 1982.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1997.
- Kraskowska, Ewa. *Twórczość Stefana Themersona – dwujęzyczność a literatura*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk–Łódź: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1989.
- Mróz, Tomasz. "Bertranda Russella spotkania z filozofią polską (L. Chwistek, W. Lutosławski, S. Themerson)", *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* 6 (3), 2011.
- Santayana, George. *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe* New York, Columbia University, 1910.
- Themerson, Stefan. *Factor I*. London: Gaberbocchus, 1972.
- Themerson, Stefan. *Hobson's Island*. London–Boston: Faber, 1988.
- Themerson, Stefan. *Jestem czasownikiem, czyli zobaczyć świat inaczej*. Ed. Klara Kopcińska, Marek Grala, Płock 1993.
- Themerson, Stefan. *Kradynał Pölätüo, Generał Piesc*. Warszawa: Iskry 2013.
- Themerson Stefan. *Logika, etykiety i ciało*. Trans. Małgorzata Sady, *Utwory rozrzucone*. Vol. 6. Wydawnictwo: Gaberbocchus w Polsce.
- Themerson, Stefan. *The Adventures of Peddy Bottom*, drawings by Franciszka Themerson. Amsterdam: Gaberbocchus Press/De Harmonie, 2003.
- Themerson Stefan. *Wykład profesora Mmaa*. Warsaw: Iskry, 2013.

