

# Muses, Mistresses and Mates



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*Creative Collaborations  
in Literature, Art and Life*

Edited by

Izabella Penier and  
Anna Suwalska-Kołecka

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## INTRODUCTION

O! for a Muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention.  
—Shakespeare

The Muse is one of the oldest archetypes in our civilization. She is usually a representation of an idealized woman—blessed with beauty and creativity and exerting irresistible attraction for many a man. She is thought to ignite an erotic spark and some sort of alchemy in those people she becomes attached to, which, in turn, enables them to fulfill their true potential. This female icon has appeared in European culture in many different guises: as a young Greek goddess, a passionate lover, a caring partner or consort, but also as a sexual predator.

The Greeks believed that Muses were involved in every human creation and that they were the source of knowledge. In ancient Greece there were nine Muses and they were considered the inspiration of literature, science and the arts. Little is known of their origin except that they were the outcome of a short-lived sexual encounter between Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. So Muses, the daughters of memory and untrammelled passion, stirred human imagination and provided a kind of bridge between the spiritual and material world. They introduced into European culture an idea that inspiration comes as a divine vision, from beyond the mind of the creator.

Ancient Muses could be very cruel and harsh in their judgements: they skinned the satyr Marsyas for boasting that he played the flute better than Apollo did, and blinded the Thracian bard Thamyris for challenging their divine powers. Yet they were loved for their vital role in all artistic inventions. As Hesiod wrote in his *Theogony*, “happy [is] he whomever the Muses shall have loved” and “sweet is the sound that follows from his mouth”. Therefore the one who received the blessings of the Muses could attain levels of creativity otherwise inaccessible to men.

Thus the Muse has a long tradition in European literature and art. In Medieval Europe, suspicious of the pleasures of the body, bards platonically seduced ladies, thus creating the ideal of courtly love. The beloved woman was often the chief source of inspiration for a poet who harboured secret and unrequited feelings for her. Beatrice, the idealized Muse of the Florentine

poet Dante, immortalized not only by his sonnets, but also by Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings, or Petrarch's Muse, Laura, are supreme examples of a situation in which one glimpse of the Muse becomes the primary impulse for an outburst of creative power.

Modern times required a new, more down-to-earth explanation for artistic creativity, but artistic potential continued to be associated with love and passion, feelings that were exactly the opposite of reason. In this way modern Muses became flesh-and-blood women, whose relation to the men they inspired was, more often than not, erotically charged. These modern Muses—passionate mistresses or, conversely, unattainable lovers offered initiation into the pleasure and pain of love and of sexual fascination, helping at the same time to sublimate potent desires into creative acts.

In the wake of the three waves of feminism the idea of the Muse may seem a bit obsolete, quaint or downright sexist. It is said to enhance a vicious stereotype of the creative, productive and active man and the passive, submissive and docile woman. This book shows that this, in fact, was rarely the case. The carefully selected essays present creative collaborations in which women were leading figures or at least equal contributors in many literary, artistic and political endeavours. The purpose of the book is to show that Muses were not always listless models, stunningly-beautiful-but-shallow executors of their partners' ideas; nor that the men were merely receptacles into which artistic vision poured.

In spite of the reservation mentioned earlier, Muses still hold power over our imagination. Muses, mistresses and mates—female friends, lovers, sometimes also wives—have always been called upon by poets and artists or looked up to by eminent and powerful men. Muses, mistresses or mates supported and inspired some of history's most influential men. They range from traditional wives to dangerously beautiful femmes fatales: they have been poets' Muses, painters' models, great men's wives, scientists' aides—intriguing, beguiling, tempting, genuinely talented and, by and large, self-effacing.

This volume will focus on some of these fascinating women in history, culture, art and public life and on their vivid personalities, exceptional talent and an expressive imagination that brought them into creative and fruitful partnership with the men who were equally remarkable though sometimes more renowned. The book includes several biographical sketches of well known and less familiar couples and examines intellectual (and sometimes erotic) currents flowing between two remarkable partners. These revisionist essays illuminate the nature of the relationship between the Muse and the man or woman she inspired and often dissect mythologies that have so

far surrounded their relationships. All the essays offer a corrective view of widely circulated cultural biographies. Some essays argue that the Muses, often relegated to obscurity, made a significant contribution to science, arts, literature or history, whereas others highlight the debilitating impact of the Muse on the writer's or artist's life.

All the essays collected in this volume were inspired by Stefan and Franciszka Themerson, Polish intellectuals and artists whose work was celebrated in 2013—the Themersons' year—by means of exhibitions and festivals taking place in Warsaw, Lodz, and Plock in Poland and many other European cities. Stefan Themerson was a renowned writer, filmmaker and philosopher and Franciszka, his wife, was a painter, illustrator and theatre and book designer. They worked together for sixty years, producing avant-garde films and books for children as well as running the Gaberbocchus Press in London from 1948 to 1979. They were among the most versatile avant-garde thinkers and artists in twentieth-century Polish, but also European, art.

The book is made up of five parts, each containing from two to four essays. The first part—"The Blissful Harmony and Perfect Synergy—the Themersons as a Paragon of an Ideal Collaboration"—contains two essays dedicated to Franciszka Themerson and her husband. Halszka Leleń's essay "Avant-garde Conventions Developed by the Themersons in *Mr Rouse Builds his House*" examines typographic experiments in *Mr Rouse Builds his House* as an example of very fruitful co-operation between two experimental artists, rather than an artist and his Muse. Leleń asserts that, thanks to their creative collaboration, the Themersons were not only very prolific but also very innovative, which resulted in producing synergetic and highly original art that defies easy categorization. The essay particularly examines "the nuances of their interrelated and mutually-inspired techniques" in *Mr Rouse Builds his House*, a book for children, in the form of an epic poem, published in England in 1950. In the past that book was considered less important than other works by the Themersons, but recently it has been rediscovered, and its artistic value was recognized by Tate Publishing, which in 2013 issued its new edition. Leleń convincingly argues that the book is a supreme example of "the artists' ground-breaking explorations of diverse artistic media, such as literature, film, photogram, typography, book design, graphic art, collage and theatre design". She also analyses the double "coding" of the book—the simultaneous levels at which the book is pitched, offering distinctive delights to a child and to an adult reader. The author concludes that the book may be seen as an example of the combination of Stefan's philosophical concepts with Franciszka's visual experimentation,

which was so typical of the Themersons.

Anna Suwalska-Kołecka's essay, "Franciszka in the Ubu World—on the Themersons' Creative Explorations and Fascination with *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry", provides an overview of the Themersons' project to produce bestlookers (as opposed to bestsellers) in the Gaberbocchus Press, a publishing house they set up in London in 1948. In particular, it explores the content and artistic layout of *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry, which was their most acclaimed publication. It was the anarchic and nonconformist character of *Ubu Roi*, "challenging the expectations of the theatre audience", that fascinated the Themersons. As Suwalska-Kołecka suggests, *Ubu Roi* "correlated with [their] idea of artistic freedom, transgressing freely all the limiting borders that is so deeply inscribed in the Themersons' artistic creed". Suwalska-Kołecka's analysis of this and other bestlookers is also a pretext to investigate the blurring of boundaries and mutual cross-pollination between the artist and the Muse. In fact one might say that the Themersons were each other's Muses, changing roles and creating synergies that raised their work to unprecedented heights of ingenuity. As Suwalska-Kołecka argues, their collaboration "covering a diverse range of fields and artistic disciplines" was so close that nowadays it is "extremely difficult to assess their individual input".

The second part of the book—"Femmes Fatales and False, Exploitive and Perverse Muses"—contains three essays which focus on relationships that were the reverse of the peaceful harmony in which the Themersons worked. Agata Sitko's work "Elsa and Her Sex-Sun: a Love Story with an Unhappy Ending" presents the figure of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, also known as the Baroness, a writer and a poet, who for a long time was known chiefly as a Muse of several dada artists both in Germany and in the USA. Elsa's life story was overshadowed by her unconventional and overt sexuality, which proves that all ties between creativity and Eros could be very dangerous for the Muse. Sitko describes Elsa as a sexually liberated Muse who transgressed typical female roles; she not only initiated but also controlled sexual encounters with men. Sitko recounts the Baroness' love affair with Felix Paul Greve (known as Frederick Philip Grove), a German-born Canadian novelist and translator, famous for exploring Western prairie pioneer life in multi-ethnic communities. Then she goes on to report Elsa's other relationships: with Marcel Duchamp, who "was for Elsa a platonic lover she tried to seduce but never succeeded" but with whom she had a fruitful partnership nonetheless; and with William Carlos Williams, the poet, writer and doctor, who was both attracted and intimidated by her aggressive femininity. Throughout her essay Sitko documents Elsa's creative

contribution to the art of the men who loved, feared and hated her at the same time.

Joanna Stolarek's essay "The Beautiful and the Damned"—the Influence of Zelda Fitzgerald on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Life and Literary Output", probes the mystery of creation by trying to solve the puzzle of the relationship that *bemused* many critics. The essay grapples with the question of whether Zelda was indeed "insane and deranged, a madwoman who undermined her husband's sexual and artistic self-confidence, drained him emotionally and economically", or whether it was her husband Scott who turned out to be "a monster, Zelda's mental oppressor and torturer, who drove her mad, having destroyed her chances and opportunities as an independent artist". The author focuses on the extent to which Zelda shaped the lifestyle of the Roaring Twenties and enriched Scott Fitzgerald's writing which, as she claims, is "saturated with Zelda's presence, filled with her voice, character and appearance".

Finally, Andrzej Dorobek's essay, "John Lennon in the Fateful Shadow of Women", is the most damning indictment of the destructive power of the Muse. Drawing on numerous articles, biographies and memoirs, the essay uses the oedipal paradigm to cast light on Lennon's relationship with Yoko Ono, his second wife and an avant-garde "Muse". The essay defies the mass media's tendency to idealize Yoko Ono and her allegedly beneficial impact on Lennon, arguing that the converse was true. According to Dorobek, this presumed "romantic harmony of kindred souls" led to "virtual creative impotence" in the last years of Lennon's life. Rather provocatively, Dorobek maintains that Yoko Ono was a "second-rate avant-garde artist" who craved recognition and "took every opportunity to help herself to her husband's worldwide fame". In conclusion, this essay asserts that Yoko Ono and John Lennon's relationship was antithetical to the "genuinely harmonious cooperation of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson", suggesting that Yoko Ono's stardom and Musedom should be reconsidered.

The third part of the book—"Daughters of Clío—the Muse as the Courtesan"—engages with several historic figures and periods showing that each period had Muses in its own image. Dorothea Flothow's essay, "The Actress besides the King: Nell Gwynne and Charles II in Popular Literature of the Nineteenth and Twenty-first Centuries", portrays Nell Gwynne, a seventeenth-century female "celebrity" who earned immortality as an actress, comedian and royal mistress to Charles II. The essay analyses novels, romances and plays based on her life that circulated in popular culture from the early nineteenth century to the present. The essay includes analysis of such comedies as Douglas Jerrold's *Nell Gwynne; or, The Prologue* (1829), John

Walker's *Nell Gwynne* (1833) and several recent historical romances such as Susan Holloway Scott's *The King's Favourite* (2008); Gillian Bagwell's *The Darling Strumpet* (2011) and Priya Parmar's *Exit the Actress* (2011). The author compares the myths surrounding Gwynne at these two distinct moments in time, the early nineteenth and the early twenty-first centuries, and shows how the qualities of Musedom have evolved over time.

Marek Smoluk's work, "The Duke and Duchess of Windsor: the Successful Relationship of a Dominant Female and Submissive Male", looks into another well-known royal affair—"one of the most sensational romances of the first half of the twentieth century"—between Edward VIII, infamous for his abdication, and Wallis Simpson, an American actress and eventually Edward's wife. Smoluk touches upon all hypotheses that could have led to the King's abdication, including Edward VIII's fascist sympathies. The essay uses all the available biographical evidence to draw a psychological portrait of the king and his sexuality, which, Smoluk argues, "determined his day to day life-style up until he became acquainted with Mrs Simpson, then became his life's nadir, when he began to date this notorious American actress". At the same time the author speculates about the content of documents and papers in the archives of the British Foreign Office concerning the private life of Edward VIII, suggesting that they may contain an answer to the enigma of Edward VIII's abdication.

The fourth part of the book, "*Muse-ings on Visual Arts—The Muse as a Goddess of a Master*", is devoted to Muses in fine arts. This part is made up of four essays which depict different artists' Muses in chronological order, and it starts with Małgorzata Rychert's essay about Camille Doncieux' and Claude Monet's creative partnership ("Camille and Claude Monet, a Creative Relationship"). The essay traces Camille's life from the moment she left her well-off family in order to "lead the bohemian life of an undervalued painter's wife" till her death in 1879. Camille was a paragon of a self-effacing Muse who remained in the shadow of Monet; who nurtured, sustained, supported and encouraged him in times of austerity. She was not only an exceptionally talented and inspiring model but also a passionate lover, best friend and the mother of Monet's two children. She also, as Rychert contends, held a unique power over Monet's imagination.

Agnieszka Gawron's essay, "Feminine Continuum: Reflection about the Life and Artistic Creation of Katarzyna Kobro", looks at life and artistic work of Katarzyna Kobro, a Russian artist with German origins married to Władysław Strzemiński, a Polish avant-garde artist of international renown. Gawron looks at Kobro's life through the lenses of artworks by another Polish artist Małgorzata Malwina Niespodziewana, who in 2012 exhibited

a series of paper foldouts devised in the technique of the linocut under the title *Art of Mothers*. Niespodziewana, in turn, based her visualization of Kobro's life on the biographical book by Nika Strzemińska, Kobro's only daughter. As Gawron brilliantly argues Kobro, who was the Themersons' contemporary, was a Muse for both her husband and her daughter. However, her life and her marriage was not a success story, as was the case with the Themersons. Quite the contrary, in spite of their shared interest in art, Kobro and Strzemiński's relationship deteriorated into a kind of rivalry, in which Kobro, as gifted as her husband, was abused by him and barred from the artistic establishment. The essay presents Nika Strzemińska's long-standing efforts to get her mother's works out of her father's shadow, and shows that Nika salvaged her mother's art and redeemed her failure to reach wider audiences, thus providing "a female continuum" for her art.

The-female-Muse-male-artist template is reversed not only in the Themersons' relationship but also in Agnieszka Izdebska's essay which features two same-sex artists and Muses at the same time—the famous photographer Annie Leibovitz and the famous author Susan Sontag, who were lifelong partners. In the past there were precedents for such same sex collaborations—including, for example, the relationship of W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman, Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks, Virginia Woolf and Victoria Sackville-West, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, or Jean Rhys and Selma Vaz Dias, just to give a few examples. Yet due to the ambience of compulsive heterosexuality that dominated previous centuries, such creative collaborations were never at the forefront of critical and academic interest. Izdebska's essay, "In the Lens: Susan Sontag and Annie Leibovitz", adds another notable couple to this list of same-sex Muses. It deals with Leibovitz's representations of her unique relationship with Sontag in the album *A Photographer's Life*. Contrary to what the title of the album announces, it is not, as Izdebska points out, a visual narrative of the photographer's life "but as a story of life (and death) adventures of everybody—with Sontag in the limelight". Rather than concentrate on the romantic or sexual dimensions of the two artists' relationship, Izdebska sets out to explore how their creative collaboration changed their lives and art—"who became Sontag with Leibovitz and who is Leibovitz 'after Sontag'".

Justyna Stępień in her essay, "POP Muse and Mate: Pauline Boty's Refigured Bodies", traces the influences of British Pop Art, which was a male-dominated art movement, on Pauline Boty's oeuvre. As the only female painter working alongside male students at the Royal College of Art, Boty became a Muse and artistic mate of Peter Blake and Derek Boshier, forming the second stage of the British movement. However, despite her

substantial contribution to the iconography of the sixties and enthusiastic reception of her artistic activities, Boty's works were excluded from the official discourse on Pop Art for years. This directly results, as Stepień observes, from Boty's alternative interpretation of the concept of femininity. While subverting the normative conceptualization suggested by Blake and other Pop artists, Boty declares her independence from her peers. In fact, in comparison to Blake's works, her paintings juggle with mass culture representations of females, replacing the visual with the tactile, the act of seeing with the act of touching.

The final part of the book, "Muses in the Service of Community", chronicles lives of three remarkable women, Zitkala-Ša, Zora Neale Hurston and Stefania Wilczyńska, who used their partnerships with men to help their endangered communities. Zitkala-Ša, described in the essay by Katarzyna Piotrowska titled "Zitkala-Ša: a Great Woman Inspired", was a Native American writer and activist, who became famous for her work for the local Sioux community and her efforts to resist through art the process of enforced assimilation that was standard American policy towards Indians at the beginning of the twentieth century. The essay traces the influence of her cooperation with Raymond T. Bonnin, who helped Zitkala-Ša to reconnect to her indigenous heritage and to politicize her writing. He set her on the path of becoming an advocate for Native American rights. In the following part of the essay, Piotrowska analyses another of Zitkala-Ša's creative undertakings—the first Indian American opera *The Sun Dance*, staged in Vernal, Utah in 1913, which also came about as a result of a creative collaboration, this time with William Hanson, a composer and Professor at Brigham Young University.

Izabella Penier's essay, "Zora Neale Hurston's Creative Collaborations: The New Negro, the New Theatre and New Anthropology", tells a similar story of struggle for cultural emancipation. The essay documents the work of Zora Neale Hurston, a leading female representative of the Harlem Renaissance, who at the beginning of the twentieth century tried, like Zitkala-Ša, to launch a campaign against racism in American society. Today Hurston is hailed for her exceptional gift of storytelling, for her unprecedented and unique experimentation in combining literature with anthropology and for writing the first black feminist novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston became a "Muse" for such contemporary Black American female authors as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayle Jones or Edwidge Danticat, who consider her their literary foremother, calling her the "genius of the South". The essay, however, revolves round Hurston's collaborations with black intellectuals of the so-

called New Negro Movement, which preceded the Harlem Renaissance—with Langston Hughes, Alain Locke and with Franz Boas, the white anthropologist who was Hurston’s teacher and mentor. It puts across a thesis that Hurston’s world view and work was mostly influenced by Boas’ progressive ideas, which eventually made Hurston fall out with other literati of the Harlem Renaissance movement, who inspired Hurston, imbued her with new ideas but also occasionally censored and censured her.

The last essay in this collection is Irena Hübner’s “‘After Every War Someone Has to Tidy up’—Stefania Wilczyńska: A Muse in an Apron”. In other essays collected in this book, creativity is the prime electricity between the Muse and her partner, but Hübner’s essay is an exception to this rule. It concerns the life of Stefania Wilczyńska, who was an assistant to Janusz Korczak, a Polish-Jewish educator and paediatrician known as “Mr Doctor” or “Old Doctor”. After spending many years working as director of an orphanage for Jewish children in Warsaw’s ghetto, he refused Żegota’s offer of a sanctuary on the Aryan side and stayed with his orphans, almost 200 of them, when in 1942 the institution was sent from the Ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp. Stefania Wilczyńska was one of the staff members who accompanied Korczak and the orphans to the very end. She was Janusz Korczak’s very close partner, who practically managed the orphanage, from its foundation in 1912 until its tragic end in 1942. Yet she is regularly sidelined in all accounts of the histories of Holocaust as merely Korczak’s aid and disciple. According to Hübner, “what made Stefania Wilczyńska look like a person absolutely subordinate to Janusz Korczak” was a stereotypical belief that “since she was eight years his junior (and was only 23 when they met in 1909), she could not possibly have had any influence on such a mature man who already had the reputation of an excellent physician and of an up-and-coming writer”. In fact, Wilczyńska was neither his shadow nor his (Platonic) mistress, Hübner points out, and she deserves to be finally pulled out of Janusz Korczak’s shadow. Hübner puts forward an argument that seems valid for all the sketches included in this collection. Namely the author claims that Wilczyńska’s case “leads to the conclusion that Muses remain mostly in the shadow of cultural stereotypes” rather than men, which, proves true of all the women discussed in this book.



1

THE BLISSFUL HARMONY AND PERFECT SYNERGY

THE THEMERSONS AS A PARAGON OF AN IDEAL  
COLLABORATION



# 1.1

## AVANT-GARDE CONVENTIONS DEVELOPED BY THE THEMERSONS IN *MR ROUSE BUILDS HIS HOUSE*

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**Abstract:** The oeuvre of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson (1907–88, 1910–88), the Polish artists who spent most of their working lives in emigration in England, is an example of what can come out of a closely-knit co-operation in artistic experiment. Throughout their lives these prolific artists engaged in producing syncretic art that escapes the limits of categorization. This chapter proposes to examine the nuances of the interrelated and mutually inspired techniques to be found in their apparently insignificant work *Mr Rouse Builds His House* (first published in English in 1950, first published in Polish in 1938 as *Pan Tom buduje dom*). The book was written by Stefan and illustrated by Franciszka to earn their living and give them time to engage in their more ambitious work. It seems that this illustrated narrative poem is still topical for contemporary readers, as acknowledged by its new edition of 2013 released by Tate Publishing. This analysis demonstrates that the little book can be viewed in the context of the artists' ground-breaking explorations of the diverse artistic media, such as literature, film, photograph, typography, book design, graphic art, collage and theatre design. There are many notable features which make the book function equally well as a typical, timeless story for children and as an avant-garde work in progress, a channel for voicing the Themersons' fascination with transgressions of social and artistic norms. The story of Mr Rouse is shown to be a complex, though deliberately naïve, work of art which steps outside the format of literature for children. It operates with an ingenious conceptual blend of an adult man as a child, typical of the way the Themersons described the world in their more acclaimed works such as the co-produced avant-garde films and the unconventional Gaberbocchus Press, the philosophical writing of Stefan and the visual art of Franciszka.

**Key words:** Franciszka and Stefan Themerson, avant-garde conventions, poem and book illustration, literature for children, typographic experiments, *Mr Rouse Builds His House*.

Franciszka (1907–88) and Stefan (1910–88) Themerson are remembered in the history of art for their influence on the development of European avant-garde film and photogram. They made their name by engaging in the syncretic artistic practice that was independent and yet constantly interrelated. Notably, it encompassed almost all the artistic media available at their time: poetry, fiction, painting, line art, photography, typography, scenography, opera and poster. The couple's lifetime passion for experimenting with the aesthetic media is expressed in their intermittent and diverse collaboration in producing illustrated books, films and collages.

Of the two half-forgotten giants of culture, the wife is usually placed in the shadow of her husband. *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* by Richard Kostelanetz (2000: 609) mentions her cursorily as "his wife" and devotes only two sentences to her, while it observes the common practice of overlooking Stefan's works in the histories of contemporary British literature, which is attributed to his birth "outside of the British Isles". Franciszka is not mentioned by name as the illustrator on the cover of some of the couple's books. For example, her name does not appear on the cover of the most recent Polish edition of *Mr Rouse Builds His House* (2007), which is lamented by the reviewers who point to Franciszka and Stefan's inseparable contribution (Olech). Franciszka is most frequently viewed as the one who supported the development of Stefan's creative genius and provided visual shape to his new concepts of fiction, poetry and art. Such a view is preserved in the accounts of the people who knew them and in the documentaries of their life, for example in the award-winning film *Themerson & Themerson* (Szymańska 2011).

Just as Franciszka's role is usually marginalized, so are some of their co-produced works. Not much critical or theoretical attention is usually devoted to their seemingly peripheral interest in producing literature for children. It seems that such a situation results from the gross misconception that this type of literature is something of lesser importance. Paradoxically, the critics agree that their avant-garde concept of art emerged gradually and consistently throughout their long creative lives (Pruszyński 2004: 109; Prodeus [2009] 2010: 25). Its precepts can already be seen in the earliest works addressed to children and first published in Poland for purely financial reasons. To fill in this gap in theoretical focus, I propose a diachronic

analysis of a little, inconspicuous book for children, *Mr Rouse Builds his House*, which was first published in English in 1950 and which now enjoys a return to the international publishing market.

### ***Mr Rouse Builds his House in Context***

The book was first written in Polish as *Pan Tom buduje dom* and was published in 1938, soon after the Themersons left Poland for their life as emigrés. The book's idyllic topic of building a perfect house to live in anticipates the couple's problems with finding a home abroad, enhanced in dramatic effect by the imminence of the war. Just as Mr Rouse seeks his identity through giving shape to his concepts of comfortable living, they were soon to estrange themselves from their surroundings as foreigners in a different world. They chose this life of exile following a widespread trend. Other artists writing in exile so as to gain artistic and aesthetic distance are Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), James Joyce (1882–1941), Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) and more recently John Berger (1926– ). Stefan followed Conrad and Beckett in his choice to write not in his mother tongue but in a foreign language, which for him was English, so as to be more detached from his ideas.

However, *Pan Tom buduje dom* was first created in Poland thanks to the close cooperation of the couple, just in the same way as their other books and poems for children such as *Jacusz w zaczarowanym mieście* (*Jacusz in an Enchanted Town* 1931), *Narodziny liter* (*The Birth of Letters* 1932), *O stole, który uciekł do lasu* (first published in Polish in the Parisian *Moja gazeta* in 1940, published in English with Franciszka's collages as *The Table That Ran Away To the Woods* 1963). Simultaneously with writing and illustrating children's poetry, at the onset of their creative lives, they also engaged in experimenting with the novel art of film, with the multimedia interrelations of sound and moving photograms (Majewski 2011: 30). They coproduced a series of partly lost avant-garde films which preceded *Pan Tom buduje dom*, such as *Apteka* (1930, *Pharmacy*), *Europa* (1931–32), *Drobiazg melodyjny* (1933, *Musical Moment*), *Zwarcie* (1935, *Short Circuit*), *Przygoda człowieka poczciwego* (1937, *The Adventures of a Good Citizen*). This is how they spent the money earned by writing and illustrating children's literature (Taborska 2013: 10).

Bearing in mind such chronological implications, it seems worthwhile to examine the elements of avant-garde conventions and concepts devel-

oped by Franciszka and Stefan in this short narrative poem for children published in English as *Mr Rouse Builds his House* and in its Polish editions. The underlying assumption of this analysis is that one can extend to the artistic output of the marital pair the suggestion from Nicholas Wadley's analysis of Stefan's work—that even the smallest example of his oeuvre as an artist is “a continuous collage, its parts distinct but full of allusive echoes and repetition” (1993: 180).

*Mr Rouse Builds his House* indeed shows signs that at the time of creating it the couple also engaged in a lot of conceptual, ground-breaking work such as surrealist and dada-inspired experiments in filmmaking and photography. These were the times when the film *The Adventures of a Good Citizen* was made in 1937. It constitutes a grotesque and comic realization of the literal understanding of the casually used phrase about walking backwards. Tomasz Majewski (2011: 30) points out how the central absurd idea of the film could just as well be found in the children's books by the Themersons. Agnieszka Taborska (2013: 10) notices that the children's books by the Themersons can also constitute adult reading due to the use of subversive humour. In *Mr Rouse Builds his House*, part of the plot is dictated by such subversive literal understanding of phrases. The architect casually states that there are various houses in the world. The plot, as well as Franciszka's illustrations, develop this sentence into showing several natural-world and colonial-world houses: a snail's house, mole's tunnels, a Chinese pagoda and an American skyscraper. They are offered as designs to choose from to the overwhelmed Mr Rouse, who does not want to follow the models presented though.

*Pan Tom buduje dom* was one of the favourite stories of Polish children in the forties, fifties and sixties. On the other hand, because of the conditions of the Polish book market, it always constituted a kind of a rarity, the 1960 edition consisting of 70,000 copies. The London editions were not very large either, this being the policy of the Themersons' Gaberbocchus Press. Now the situation is changing in both countries. In Poland, *Pan Tom buduje dom* was republished in 2007 in the series “Bajki Grajki” by Omedia. Moreover, a varied set of short poems by Stefan and other authors was published under the title *Bajkabaja* in 1996 with illustrations by Franciszka. There is also a publication from 2013 of *Był gdzieś haj taki kraj, była gdzieś taka wieś* by Widnokraż Press (first published in Polish in 1935). In England, Tate Publishing started to republish the Themersons' children's books, starting with *The Table That Ran Away to the Woods* in 2012 and followed by the release of *Mr Rouse Builds his House* in October 2013. The books are all advertised as the work of major avant-garde artists. However, even before

this surge in republishing of the Themerson's children's books, they had been viewed as the most progressive books in the market due to the quality of their language and educational quality (Kopcińska 2005).

## Children's Concept Book

For all its avant-garde connections in terms of chronology and attribution, *Mr Rouse Builds his House* is primarily a book for children, created with a child addressee in mind. This audience is here treated seriously as the ideal addressee of modern culture and art, who can engage in synthetic perception of the world and, at the same time, who wants to learn to comprehend human achievement (Pruszyński 2004: 22). In this poetic little story of the challenges and joys of house building, the objective is seemingly not very complex or advanced. It is both pragmatic and didactic, which perfectly addresses the needs of the primary juvenile addressee. The first editions were sold along with a set of special building blocks for children to play with (Prodeus [2009] 2010: 28). The recognition of the educational quality of the book can be seen in the fact that it was also published in English outside of the British Isles by a Swedish publisher AV Carlsons with a glossary supplement in 1953. It was intended to be used as a subsidiary book along the regular textbooks for primary schools in Sweden.

Despite the passage of time, the book is still inspiring and exciting for children, as is testified by its listing on the webpages advertising children's poetry, such as [lovereadings4kids.co.uk](http://lovereadings4kids.co.uk). The book attracts its little readers by the occasionally rhyming poetic story, rhythmical and at the same time natural. Stefan uses an inventive, imperfect rhyming scheme, implying both the rhythms of common speech and dispersed poetic organization. These techniques can be seen in the following passage: "I am a merry cabman,/a cab—Giddy up!—man/I've been driving round in this old crate since the story first began./ Giddy up!" (Themerson 2013: 44). Children are also attracted by the adventurous plot of embarking on the exciting quest which can only be attained through overcoming obstacles and withstanding difficulties.

The exploration of the central theme is also very philosophical on some level as the story operates with the archetype of building a home space. Gaston Bachelard (1994: 34) suggests that the house is "a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values". The house, for him, constitutes an emblem for a way of axiological thinking, with philosophical

and educational function. The lasting merit of the Themersons' book might thus be ensured by the aesthetic focus on the crucial element of cultural space that is the house itself with all its subdivisions "from cellar to garret" (Bachelard 1994: 3).

### Mr Rouse as Conceptual Blend

The central character is an adult, but he is also child-like in his attitudes and wonder at the world. This is defined as much by his looks as his name and reactions. His Polish surname, as well as the English one, are indicative of his features. The Polish name "Tomasz Łebski" draws attention to his head, which suggests metaphorically his intelligence, the English name "Thomas Rouse" hints at his transformation from the state of passivity to active pursuit of his aims. Moreover, children can appreciate that this intelligence derives from the inquisitive attitude to the world, as he has got an open mind and everything makes him happy.

In the story and in the illustrations for it, Stefan and Franciszka worked with the fused cognitive concept of a philosophical adult man depicted as a child. The theory of conceptual blending and mental spaces, developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 18), can be used to demonstrate how her drawings and his text apply a blend of an adult as a child, the concept symptomatic of Franciszka and Stefan's lifelong artistic imagination. The point of view of a wondering child is, for example, dominant in Franciszka's wartime drawings entitled *The Unposted Letters*, recently published along with Stefan's diaries in a collection of this title (2013). This concept underlies the half-serious and semi-naive text of building a house as well as the illustrations.

The Polish Pan Tom, much more than the English Mr Rouse, is child-like physically and psychologically, while he is also dressed as an adult, thus constituting a projection of the double implied reader of the book. Also Mr Rouse's figure is characterized by the bodily proportions of a three-year-old boy such as a big head, short arms and legs and minute hands and feet. His way of walking, leaning and greeting is over-emphatic, working as a sign of imitation of adult behaviour rather than a mimetic representation of such social conduct. He is child-like in the over-emphatic rendering of psychological reactions to the events described, as seen in the illustration of his wonder at the American high-rise building. Pan Tom, on the other hand, is frequently shown as he clasps his hands tightly and stands on tiptoe, with

a markedly open mouth. He is also shown as over-reacting—he is shouting, with his hands outstretched, in an expressive response to the sudden idea that the houses in the town street might suffocate with their own chimney smoke. In the English book, this effect is reinforced by the typographic shattering of the linear alignment of the verses. Mr Rouse is shown stooping over the broken text in horror at what he sees.

The English Mr Rouse is, however, predominantly an adult person, endowed with a typical English middle-class pragmatism and conservatism. The most recent English edition (2013) is advertised as transmitting such a traditional system of values (see Tate shop). The Polish Pan Tom, on the other hand, is more of a naive baby learning to function in the world of society. The illustrations in the early Polish editions show that he does not know how to make a phone call and tries to enter the receiver. This clashes with his other features which imply his adult status.

The class-related elements of the attire of both the Polish and the English character, such as bowler hat, heeled shoes, tailored suit or overcoat and buttoned waistcoat, function as central class-defining motifs and they appear throughout Franciszka's art as the marker of satire on middle-class mediocrity and aspirations. Such a function of these motifs is more widespread, constituting something of a symbol of the epochs of modernism and post-modernism in their negative attitude to social norms. The bowler hat features importantly in the function of parodic reference to middle-class drama in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and in the surrealist paintings of René Magritte (1898–1967), reappearing also in Tom Stoppard's (1937–) surrealist comedy *After Magritte* (1970). Such elements reappear in the art of the Themersons and they indicate their rooting in the French decadent movement to *épater le bourgeois*.

Bertrand Russell's quasi-educational little book *The Good Citizen's Alphabet*, published in 1953 by Gaberbocchus, can be called Themersonian in origin, as it emerged from the private correspondence of the philosopher and logician with the Polish artists. The thinker evidently did not consider that the effect of the book was of his own making, as he commented that Franciszka's drawings "heightened all the points [he] most wanted to make" (Barnard 2003). There is a clear reference to Mr Rouse in the opening portrait of the good citizen, with a bowler hat on his head and with a walking stick in hand, pondering at the list of letters and entries which they represent. Mr Rouse's transposition is also to be seen in the drawing of a respectable Englishman placed upside down on a chair, with his arms outstretched in the place for the legs, as though he was in the standard seated position. This is the topsy-turvy illustration to the entry for the letter "E" that is the

word “Erroneous”, which is explained as “capable of being proved true” (Russell [1953] 1970). The same propensity to express wonder at the world and at expectations going awry is something which appears already in *Mr Rouse Builds his House*.

The use of the above-mentioned elements is unobtrusively placed alongside the dominant conventions of children’s fiction. The book uses a timeless fairy-tale motif of a quest undertaken by the character who is immature and grows up in the process of attaining his targets. Instead of fairy-tale characters, like fairies or magicians, there are representatives of various building trades and services. Not only does Mr Rouse undertake numerous trips to the various specialists, but he also experiences several journeys in time and across colonial cultures, as the subcontractors show him the history of animal and human inventions related to their trade. Thus the process of building a house is also depicted through the conceptual blend of two processes: the process of evolution and that of a journey. This concept of travel thus works on the metaphorical level as the educational journey through the history of natural evolution and human inventiveness done in the post-Darwinian spirit. Similar way of telling the story through the diachronic cultural perspective is used by the Themersons in *Jacusz w zakzarowanym mieście* (*Jacusz in an Enchanted Town*) and *Narodziny liter* (*The Birth of Letters*). The propaganda film *Calling Mr Smith* (1945), which was intended to influence the public opinion of British citizens during the war, also resorts to this technique yet this time it marked their disillusionment with humanity. In the latter work, the tragedy of the world conflict and simultaneous collapse of culture is shown through a kaleidoscopic enumeration of the achievements of human civilization. In *Mr Rouse Builds his House*, the plot development, paralleled by the witty illustrations, still echoes the avant-garde positive fascination with technology, understood as the miracle of human genius.

### Franciszka’s Illustrations

When we consider the style and features of the poem and the illustrations in the little book under consideration, it turns out that the drawings are not necessarily subsidiary to the text. Franciszka used the thrifty means of contour drawing, freed from the constraints of perspective and scale, so as to create a deliberately naive effect. She continuously returned to this style and even to some key characters, images and page-layouts throughout her artistic life. There are pictures of men embracing in happiness in *Pan Tom buduje dom*

marking the moment when the investor is happy to meet the specialists he requires (Themerson 1960: 60–2). Franciszka later created many drawings and paintings of men meeting and merging through optical illusion in social embraces which foreground the tight patterns of mutual interaction. Such is the focus of the drawings *Encounters I* (1950) and *Encounters II. Tie pins* (1955) was further developed into the merging profiles present in many of her works, as in the series *Traces of Living* (1960).

Many of her drawings experiment with cognition, as in case of the dark page representing night in the Polish edition (Themerson 1960: 85). This prefigures her later experiments with mirror images in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (Carroll 2001). The black picture in Polish *Pan Tom buduje dom* is only dispersed by the white contours of the stumbling Pan Tom, suggestive of the challenge he needs to face when looking for an electrician to fit his house with a lighting system (Themerson 1960: 85). The illustrations are highly but unobtrusively patterned, being somewhat under-defined, simple and archetypal, thus leaving ample scope for a child's imagination.

It is also interesting to note that *Mr Rouse Builds his House* seems to be a kind of proverbial avant-garde work in progress—with its many changing forms. There are basically two versions of the story realized through the many existing editions. The Polish version of the book *Pan Tom buduje dom* is not the same as its English version, entitled *Mr Rouse Builds his House*. In fact, if we compare the Polish book in its five editions—published by Mathesis (1938), Ikar (1943), Czytelnik (1947) and Nasza Księgarnia (1957 and 1960)—with the first English edition published by Gaberbocchus (1950 and 1955), it turns out that they are two different book versions. They are linked by the storyline and the basic concept of the visual representation of the Polish Pan Tom alias the English Mr Rouse. However, the changes are indicated already by a radically different cover, addressing the needs and expectations of the book market (Phillips 2007: 21). The Polish versions use the abstract picture of the building site and the English book is kept in the style of idyllic, quasi-mimetic rendering of a suburban villa surrounded by a garden. The 2013 Tate edition returns to the brickwork cover style of the first Polish text, but without copying its layout or illustrations.

The English *Mr Rouse Builds his House* is obviously a different text, being a translation of the original text. It was written as if from scratch with the help of the renowned avant-garde translator Barbara Wright. Likewise, the visual aspect of the book was changed. It was published in a considerably diminished format that almost halved the physical dimensions of the page. Franciszka redrew the illustrations to fit the changed page size.

The changes affected the semiotic impact of the sketches of the main character and his world. The characteristic children's poetry convention in the illustrations is implemented in both versions although the character in the English book seems more mature in effect and format. What is similar is that the drawings of Pan Tom or Mr Rouse and of some chosen elements of their fictional worlds are dispersed around the pages, drawing attention to certain aspects of the text or commenting on them visually. The spatial organization of the page is very important in the Themersons' books, increasingly so in the Gaberbocchus editions.

The two processes of writing and illustrating must have developed simultaneously as much of the story is written experimentally with the layout of the page, in which the text becomes a visual complement of the drawing or even starts working as an equivalent of a drawing. This is done to enhance the semantic senses of the plot and drawings in their interrelations. This prefigures in a subtle manner the technique used in Franciszka's illustrations for *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry, published by Gaberbocchus in 1951; here she had the text handwritten onto the printing plates by Barbara Wright. Only then did Franciszka complete the space of each page with her anti-aesthetic drawings, which often seem to escape the borders of the page (Kubasiewicz 1993: 28). Similarly inventive is the way of telling the story through the drawings in her *Ubu Comic Strip* based on the same play (created 1969–70, published 1987).

The illustrations in *Mr Rouse* are likewise drawn so as not just to illustrate the text but to tell their story on an equal footing with the text. The typographical solutions of the later books of the Themersons were not so much implemented in the Polish version of the book; however, they are already prefigured by the way the sizes and positioning of the pictures plays a role in reinforcing or shaping the semantic impact of the text. In many pictures, Pan Tom, who is overwhelmed with wonder, is also small and placed at the side, which is the vehicle of axiological evaluation. Franciszka dramatizes even common events with her drawings. At some moment in the story, the character has to choose a clock for his house and considers a tower clock, until he is scared away by a bell tolling. This is depicted by a fragmentary figure—a leg with a corner of the coat—shown in the act of running away from the page. Such meta-artistic illustrative solutions which treat a page of a book as a dimension of the fictional world were later used by Franciszka in her drawings for *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carroll, which is marked by a surrealist approach to Alice's adventures. These illustrations were drawn by Franciszka in 1946, but the book was first published only in 2001 as the original publisher who commissioned them abandoned the project.