

ANATOL STERN AND STEFAN THEMERSON. ON *EUROPA* AND THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO AVANT-GARDE ARTISTS ON THE BASIS OF THEIR MUTUAL CORRESPONDENCE FROM THE YEARS 1959–1968

Anatol Stern (1899–1968) was a poet, one of the founders of Polish futurism, a prose and drama writer, literary critic, essayist and author of memorial sketches¹ as well as a prolific scriptwriter and film journalist of the Polish interwar period. His wife Alicja (1905–1993) was a translator of Russian literature, theatre critic, and columnist, also participating in film script writing. Towards the end of her life, she wrote a children's book. Following her husband's death, she took care of his manuscript collection, preparing previously unedited texts² for publication and making their home archive available to literary researchers interested in Stern's writing.

Stefan Themerson (1910–1988) was a novelist, poet, essayist, philosopher, author of children's literature, and composer; together with his wife Franciszka (1907–1988), he made experimental short films in interwar

1 Cf. i.a. A. Stern, *Legendy naszych dni* [The Legends of Our Days], Kraków 1969; idem, *Poezja zbuntowana. Szkice i wspomnienia* [Rebellious Poetry. Essays and Memories], revised and expanded edition, Warszawa 1970; idem, *Głód jednoznaczności i inne szkice* [The Craving for Unambiguity and Other Essays], Warszawa 1972.

2 Cf. A. Stern, *Dom Appolinaire'a. Rzecz o polskości i rodzinie poety* [Appolinaire's Home. On the Poet's Polishness and His Family], prepared for printing by A. Stern, edition and footnotes Z. Czerny, Kraków 1973.

Poland and later in the UK during the war, laying the foundations for the Polish film avant-garde.³ His wife was a graphic artist, painter, and designer of theatre costumes and props. Together, they set up and ran a publishing company called Gaberbocchus Press, known for books with original graphics designed by Franciszka. They left an extensive collection, managed for the last 25 years by Franciszka's niece, art critic and curator Jasia Reichardt. The couple's heir organised the materials and opened the *Themerson Archive*, located and made available to the public in London only recently.

Literature discussing the works of both Anatol Stern and Stefan Themerson is relatively abundant, including several monographs⁴ (in the case of the Themersons, also exhibition catalogues⁵ and monographic issues of reviews⁶) as well as many scattered articles. Nonetheless, their achievements have not yet been fully explored thus far and may still inspire new research.⁷ It also seems that their artistic activity has not received the recognition it deserves. While there is no doubt that Anatol Stern made a major contribution to the Polish poetic

- 3 The Themersons made seven films in total. *Apteka* [The Pharmacy] (1930), *Europa* [Europe] (1931–1932), *Drobniak melodyjny* [Musical Moment] (1933), *Zwarcie* [Short Circuit] (1935) and *Przygoda człowieka poczciwego* [The Adventures of a Good Citizen] (1937) were shot in Poland, while *Calling Mr. Smith* (1943) and *The Eye and the Ear* (1944–1945) in the UK. Only the last three of these survived World War II. In 1936, they were preparing to make a film entitled *Polski gotyk drewniany* [Wooden Gothic Architecture in Poland] (nothing but photos used as basic visual documentation for the film remain to this day). After they left the country, in 1938–1959, they also authored several film projects, which, however, never made their way to the screen. Working materials related to these projects can be found in the artists' manuscript materials.
- 4 Works on Stern: G. Pietruszewska-Kobiela, *Pejzaż dramatyczny Anatola Sterna* [The Dramatic Landscape by Anatol Stern], Częstochowa 1989; idem, *Psychologizm i surrealizm – proza Anatola Sterna* [Psychologism and Realism. Anatol Stern's Prose], Częstochowa 1991; idem, *O poezji Anatola Sterna* [On Anatol Stern's Poetry], Częstochowa 1992; P. Majerski, *Anarchia i formuły. Problemy twórczości poetyckiej Anatola Sterna* [Anarchy and Formulae. Problems in Anatol Stern's Poetry], Katowice 2001.
Works on Themerson: E. Krasnowska [i.e. Kraskowska], *Twórczość Stefana Themersona – dwujęzyczność a literatura* [The Writing of Stefan Themerson. Bilingualism and Literature], Wrocław 1989; A. Pruszyński, *Dobre maniere Stefana Themersona* [The Good Manners of Stefan Themerson], Gdańsk 2004; A. Prodeus, *Themersonowie. Szkice biograficzne* [The Themersons. Biographic Sketches], 2nd, revised edition, Warszawa 2010.
- 5 Cf. e.g. *Stefan i Franciszka Themerson. Poszukiwania wizualne* [Stefan and Franciszka Themersons. Visual Researches], ed. U. Czartoryska, Łódź 1981; *Themersonowie i awangarda*. [The Themersons and the Avant-Garde], ed. P. Polit, Łódź 2013; *Dwie wystawy. Themersonowie na papierze. O potrzebie tworzenia widzeń* [Two exhibitions. The Themersons on Paper. The Urge to Create Visions], M. Sady, N. Wadley (eds.), Płock 2013.
- 6 Cf. *Ha!art*, vol. 26, 2007; *Gościniec Sztuki. Magazyn Artystyczno-Literacki* [The Art Road. Arts and Literary Magazine], vol. 2/15, 2010; vol. 2/17, 2011; *Literatura na Świecie* [Literature in the World], vol. 9–10, 2013.
- 7 The author of the present contribution is currently working on a book on Anatol Stern's film works.

avant-garde and that the Sterns themselves were notable figures in the literary circles of the past century,⁸ today their names are virtually non-existent in book circulation, with their works available only in antiquarian bookshops and on library shelves, if at all. As to the Themersons, the Polish public have never become fully acquainted with their work. As the artists lived and worked abroad, their achievements have never gained much notoriety in their home country; despite the (mostly recent) specialised and popular reference literature now available, including reprints of Themerson's novels⁹ and some of the couple's children's books,¹⁰ their names remain unfamiliar even to some adepts of Polish studies.

This article studies the relationship between Anatol Stern and Stefan Themerson, two major figures of the Polish literary avant-garde, who met each other and began to work together already in the early 1930s. The article is mainly based, among other sources, on the artists' mutual correspondence, recently compiled by the National Library of Poland.¹¹ Their letters date to the years 1959–1968: 1959 is when the writers re-established communication and 1968 is the year of Stern's death. Regrettably, none of their letters, if any, dating back to the interwar period have survived to date in any of their archives, sharing the fate of the majority of

- 8 Cf. R. Matuszewski, 'Sternowie Anatol (1899–1968) i Alicja (1905–1993)' [Anatol (1899–1968) and Alicja Stern (1905–1993)], in idem, *Alfabet. Wybór z pamięci 90-latka* [The Alphabet. Selected Memories of a 90-year-old], Warszawa 2004, pp. 429–430.
- 9 Cf. i.a. S. Themerson, *Wykład profesora Mmaa* [Professor Mmaa's Lecture], illustrated by F. Themerson, preface by B. Russell, 3rd edition, Warszawa 2013; idem, *Tom Harris*, E. Krasieńska (transl.), Warszawa 2013; idem, *The Mystery of the Sardine*, I. Szymańska (transl.), Warszawa 2013; idem, *Hobson's Island*, E. Kraskowska (transl.), Warszawa 2013.
- 10 Cf. e.g. S. Themerson, *Był gdzieś haj taki kraj – Była gdzieś taka wieś* [Once Upon a Time, There was a Country called High], illustrated by F. Themerson, Piaseczno 2013; idem, *Narodziny liter* [The Birth of Letters], illustrated by F. Themerson, Piaseczno 2014; idem, *Poczta* [Post], illustrated by F. Themerson, Piaseczno 2014.
- 11 In the early 1990s, in accordance with the will of Alicja Stern, the Sterns' home archive was donated to the National Library of Poland, where it was deposited and inventoried at the Manuscript Department. Until then, only the letters from Stefan Themerson (or from Franciszka Themerson) to Anatol Stern, along with a few copies of letters sent by Stern to Themerson, were available in Poland (compare: *Listy od Stefana Themersona* [Letters from Stefan Themerson], Manuscript Department of the National Library of Poland [ZR BN], shelf mark: rps akc. 14359), along with a letter from Franciszka Themerson and a New Year's greeting card from Jasia Reichardt to Alicja Stern (compare: *Korespondencja Alicji Stern* [Correspondence of Alicja Stern], ZR BN, shelf mark: rps akc. 14370, vol. 2). At the end of 2014, the National Library obtained nearly the entire London archive of the Themersons from Jasia Reichardt, with original letters from Stern and his wife to the Themersons, a few copies of Themerson's letters to Stern, as well as at least one letter from Alicja Stern (condolences on the passing of Stefan and Franciszka) to Jasia Reichardt. With materials from both archives, it seems that the National Library is now in possession of their entire correspondence.

other pre-war materials. Neither has the only product of their collaboration from the interwar years, namely a film adaptation of Stern's narrative poetry entitled *Europa* – which Themerson believed to be his greatest cinematic achievement¹² and which was probably one of the most interesting accomplishments of Polish pre-war cinema – been preserved to this day.

It was based on a piece of literature first printed in 1925 in the *Reflektor* literary magazine from Lublin.¹³ Two years later, its extended version appeared in Stern's book of poetry entitled *Bieg do bieguny* [Run to the Pole]. The last publication of this narrative poetry in the interwar period was a separate bibliophile edition of 1929, with a modified graphic layout of the text¹⁴ designed by Mieczysław Szczuka, a graphic artist (who died soon after completing the project, before it was published, falling to his death from Dead Peak in the Tatra Mountains), and Teresa Żarnowerówna, responsible for the collage on the book cover. The Themersons, who at that time already had one title in their filmography, soon became interested in this text, and started working on the film in 1931. In a post-war article on *Europa*, Anatol Stern gave an account of how he first met Themerson and started to work on this adaptation:

“One fine day a young man in glasses with a collected face, an exceptionally intelligent look and a rather frail posture came to me. He said he was a part-time poet also attempting to write prose, but his main passion was the cinema. [...] I asked my guest how I could help him. This was when the word “Europa” was said out loud. With the help of his wife, a young graphic artist, this young man wanted to make an avant-garde film based on my and Szczuka's work. Naturally, with understandable enthusiasm, I agreed. Such a proposal in a country where experimental films by René Clair, Man Ray and Buñuel were regarded as freak pieces of oddity was a truly wonderful, reassuring surprise. We discussed the script. Then, Stefan and Franciszka brought me the finished screenplay. I made almost no corrections; to be honest, I felt so enthusiastic

12 N. Wadley, 'Reading Stefan Themerson', *Dalkey Archive Press*, www.dalkeyarchive.com/reading-stefan-themerson/ [access: 19/09/2016].

13 *Reflektor*, vol. 3, 1925, pp. 99–101.

14 For example, in a few verses Stern applied font size gradation, which could influence interpretation of the entire text. This procedure may remind one of cinematic inspirations, so symptomatic for Polish poetry and prose of the interwar period (imitating the zoom-in effect). Cf. W. Otto, *Literatura i film w kulturze polskiej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [Literature and Film in the Polish Culture of the Interwar Period], Poznań 2007, pp. 127–128.

I was not even able to critically assess the Themersons' work, for I knew far too well how thorny was the trajectory of new art adepts in Poland."¹⁵

What was it in Stern's poem that fascinated Themerson? Even though the meanings of this avant-garde poetry must be interpreted firstly within their specific social and cultural context and read as a poetic and journalistic diagnosis of the human condition in the 1920s, an anarchic vision of the upcoming mass rebellion of impoverished workers, or a catastrophic portrait of a world heading for annihilation, articulated in a futuristic and expressionist language, *Europa* remains a universal work of art, surprisingly fresh even today, as it still imposes careful reading, inspiring new interpretations.¹⁶ It might have been the picture of modernity, dominated by absurdity, wickedness and violence – topics which interested Themerson as a prose writer and essayist later in life – that he found particularly striking. On top of that, beyond *Europa*'s semantic dimension, the young artist might have been impressed by its suggestive, visual imagery, which made this piece of poetry so apt for translation into the language of experimental cinema. Many years after shooting his visualisation of *Europa*, Themerson admitted himself, with what now seems to be excessive modesty, that *Europa* as written by Stern was not an inspiration for a film script – it already was a film script.¹⁷

The film was completed in 1932. It was shown in Warsaw, Łódź, Kraków, and Lviv, preceded by a reading of Stern's text¹⁸ or accompanied

- 15 A. Stern, "Europa". Polski film awangardowy. (Dokończenie)' ["Europa". A Polish avant-garde film. (Conclusion)], *Film*, no. 4, 1959, p. 6 (for a copy of this article in an extended and revised version, see: A. Stern, "Europa" – polski film awangardowy' ["Europa" – a Polish avant-garde film], in idem, *Wspomnienia z Atlantydy* [Memories from Atlantis], Warszawa 1959, pp. 163–186).
- 16 Cf. an analysis of this poem from the perspective of a reflection on modernity in A. Dziadek, 'Doświadczenie nowoczesności w *Europie* Anatola Sterna' [The Experience of Modernity in *Europa* by Anatol Stern], in *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie: analizy kulturoznawcze* [Modernity as an Experience: a Cultural Studies Perspective], A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, R. Nycz, B. Giza (eds.), Warszawa 2008, pp. 12–20 (reprint: A. Dziadek, 'Relektury *Europy* Anatola Sterna. Poemat na nowy wiek' [Re-reading *Europa* by Anatol Stern. A Poem for the New Century], *Gościniec Sztuki. Magazyn Artystyczno-Literacki*, vol. 2/17, 2011, pp. 54–61).
- 17 Letter from Stefan Themerson to Piotr Zarębski, 24 April 1988, carbon copy of typescript [attachment: *Parę uwag na temat filmu EUROPA* (1931/32) [A few notes on EUROPA, the 1931/32 film, carbon copy of typescript], ZR BN, Themerson Archive (works on organising and cataloguing the archive in accordance with the Polish standards are underway, which is why most of its items have no shelf mark in their bibliographic description yet; the author of this paper will refer to further manuscripts by the Themersons quoted here using the acronym "TA"). More about Stefan Themerson's correspondence with Piotr Zarębski in footnote 26.
- 18 According to Bolesław W. Lewicki, prior to the screening of *Europa* in Lviv's Chimera cinema on 25 May 1933 the poem was recited by Leopold Pobóg-Kielanowski ('Z ekranu.

by music from vinyl records¹⁹ (the adaptation was a silent film), leading to extreme reactions from the public, ranging from protest²⁰ to genuine enthusiasm. The critics' community was divided, as illustrated by reviews written by the most eminent film journalists of that time such as Stefania Zahorska²¹ or Jerzy Toeplitz.²² Over time, *Europa* also reached other countries and is known to have been screened at least in the UK, where it was seen by László Moholy-Nagy. The Hungarian artist called it a "sophisticated film".²³ Anatol Stern was also highly appreciative of the Themersons' creative efforts. He believed the adaptation of his poetry by Stefan and Franciszka successfully translated *Europa's* dramatic concept; at the same time, he emphasised that the composition of some frames were not only based on his text, but also evoked the graphic design of the 1929 edition.²⁴

Pokaz filmów awangardowych' [From the screen. A screening of avant-garde cinema], *Słowo Polskie*, no. 144, 1933, p. 4).

- 19 Cf. 'Pokazy filmowe' [Film Screenings], *Kurier Polski*, no. 35, 1933, p. 8.
- 20 As reported by a journalist describing the screening in Lviv, one of the cinemas had to take the film down just one week after its premiere due to furious reactions from the audience (J. M., 'Awangarda filmowa pracuje. Pokaz w kinie "Chimera"' [Avant-garde Film at work. A screening at the "Chimera" cinema], *Gazeta Poranna* [Lviv], 28/05/1933; the original article has not been found; the contents of this account have been provided on the basis of the *Book of Cuttings* by Stefan Themerson, TA, manuscript, shelf mark: rps akc. 19521, p. 28).
- 21 "This film poem [the Themersons' film – J.L.] bears a fresh approach, things are new because they are seen from an unexpected visual-motional point of view, the formulae of interpretation are new. Even the commonplace verbal symbols become fresh, corporeal, palpable thanks to the dynamism that visualizes them, through the plasticity and tangibility of vision." (S. Zahorska, 'Polski film – dobry!' [A Polish Film – A Good One!], *Wiadomości Literackie*, no. 53 (470), 1932, p. 3 [as quoted in A. Stern, *Europa. A poem*, M. Horovitz (transl.), M. Szczuka (illust.), London 1962 – M.B.]).
- 22 "Coming back to the analysis of the film itself, let us emphasise straight away that we believe the very starting point is mistaken. The Themersons' *Europa* is a faithful cinematic illustration, indeed more of an illustration of Stern's narrative poetry than its transposition. To viewers who are not familiar with its literary source, many parts of the film may seem incomprehensible and unclear. [...] The more the film diverts from its literary source, the better it gets, as the filmmakers create their own visual concepts. By contrast, where the words of the poem are nearly photographically transferred, the film loses its expressive power, becomes vague and obscure" (J. Toeplitz, "Europa", *Kurier Polski*, no. 3, 1933, p. 5).
- 23 S. Themerson, *O potrzebie tworzenia widzeń* [The Urge to Create Visions], M. Sady (transl.), Warszawa 2008, p. 61.
- 24 A. Stern, "'Europa". Polski film awangardowy' ["Europa". A Polish avant-garde film], *Film*, no. 3, 1959, p. 6 (more about this article in an extended and revised version in footnote 15).

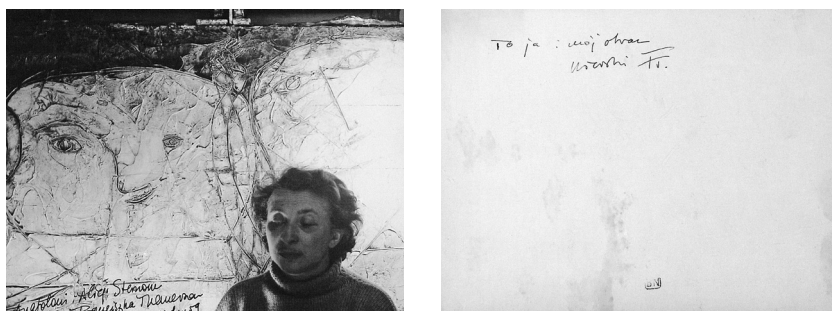


FIG. 1. The recto and verso of a 1959 photograph by Stefan Themerson showing Franciszka against the background of her painting entitled *Comme la vie est lente et comme l'Espérance est violente* (Appolinaire). The title quotes two lines of the poem *Le Pont Mirabeau* by Guillaume Apollinaire. In the bottom left corner – Franciszka's handwritten dedication to Anatol and Alicja Stern; on the rear side – a note by Franciszka

The cinematic paraphrase of *Europa* went missing during the wartime turmoil. However, the available information on this film is not as limited as in the case of other lost Polish experimental works, of which nothing but paper copies of photograms, press reviews, and memories of the filmmakers remain. In the early 1970s, at the request of Józef Robakowski, the Themersons took on the task of restoring *Europa's* cutting script (even though, to their mind, the result was unsatisfactory).²⁵ Furthermore, a dozen years later Piotr Zarębski, cinematographer and film director working for the Educational Film Studio (Wytwórnia Filmów Oświatowych) in Łódź, produced a second film adaptation of the poem (known as *Europa II*), using pieces of this script and compiling new film materials with extant photograms from the original screen version, which to a certain extent reflected the essence of this avant-garde work.²⁶ Thus,

- 25 Cf. letter from Stefan Themerson to Józef Robakowski, 25 November 1973, carbon copy of typescript [attachment: *EUROPA F. i S. Themersona 1931–1932* [EUROPA by F. and S. Themerson 1931–1932], carbon copy of typescript], TA. *Europa's* reconstructed screenplay was first referenced in research literature by Janusz Zagrodzki, who got the Themersons' text from Robakowski (cf. J. Zagrodzki, 'Początki polskiego filmu eksperymentalnego' [Early Days of the Polish Experimental Film], *Projekt*, no. 5, 1974, p. 27).
- 26 The correspondence between Stefan Themerson and Piotr Zarębski confirms that this young artist, fascinated by the Themersons' cinematographic work, requested permission to reconstruct *Europa* as early as in 1982. Back then, he sent Stefan Themerson the introduction to a theoretical work on film avant-garde he was working on, along with the screenplay of a film meant to supplement it (cf. letter from P. Zarębski to F. and S. Themerson, Łódź, 26 April 1982, typescript [attachments: „*EUROPA*” 1932 – *Moja próba rekonstrukcji filmu Franciszki i Stefana Themersonów* [“Europa” 1932 – My Attempt to Reconstruct the Film by Franciszka and Stefan Themerson], typescript; *Scenopis filmu „Europa II” – Piotr Zarębski* [Film Screenplay for “Europa II” by Piotr Zarębski], typescript, TA). The reconstruction was not undertaken until eventually a few years later. Zarębski consulted his project in his correspondence with Themerson and sent him a revised version of the screenplay for approval;

the lost *Europa* became yet another work inspiring subsequent generations of young artists.²⁷ Leaving behind the idea of a literal reconstruction, as suggested to Zarębski by Themerson himself,²⁸ was regarded by both artist as the right solution, saving them from possible allegations of discrepancy with the original.

It remains unknown whether in the last pre-war decade, after shooting *Europa*, Anatol Stern and Stefan Themerson contacted each other; however, they certainly did not work together on any common projects. The Sterns stayed in Poland until September 1939, then spent a few years during the war in the Middle East. The Themersons left for Paris already in 1938 looking for new artistic challenges; afterwards, due to the existing circumstances, they went to live in the UK from 1942. After the war, both the Sterns and the Themersons were invited by officials of the renascent, but already nationalised Polish cinematography to return. The former accepted this proposal,²⁹ while the latter rejected it.³⁰ It was not until the

Themerson replied with comments on the original adaptation of the poem (cf. i.a. letter from P. Zarębski to F. and S. Themerson, Łódź, 12 March 1987, typescript [attached: *Scenopis filmu pt. „Europa II”*] [Film Screenplay for “Europa II”], typescript]; letter from S. Themerson to P. Zarębski, 24 April 1988, carbon copy of typescript [attached: *Parę uwag na temat filmu EUROPA (1931/32)*] [A few remarks on Europa (1931/32), the film], carbon copy of typescript, TA). *Europa II* was completed in 1988. The Themersons did not live to see it; a dedication to the two artists, who died that very year, appears in the opening credits. A digital copy of the film is available from the website of the Film Archive of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw: <http://filmoteka.artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/zarebski-piotr-europa-ii> [access: 24/11/2016]. Zarębski was not the only Polish author to attempt making a film based on the Themersons’ *Europa*. In the early 1980s, two other artists requested permission to reconstruct the film (see letter from Jacek Kasprzycki and Tadeusz Ciesielski to S. Themerson, Desnié [Belgium], 25 September 1983, manuscript, TA). It follows from this letter that the artists were aware of Zarębski’s competing project. Considering that their correspondence with the Themersons was most probably discontinued (there are no more letters from those artists in the Themerson Archive), it may be presumed that due to existing plans for a similar undertaking, they soon gave up on their own project.

- 27 When discussing the Themersons’ impact on other artists, we must not forget the storyline concept behind Roman Polański’s short film *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958), undeniably inspired by *Adventures of a Good Citizen* (1937). A copy of the Themersons’ film was found after the war in the USSR, soon to be handed over to the National Film School in Łódź where Polański could have watched it as a student.
- 28 Letter from S. Themerson to P. Zarębski, 24 April 1988.
- 29 Alicja Stern mentioned that she and her husband returned to Poland, invited by the “Polish Film” State Company (Przedsiębiorstwo Państwowe “Film Polski”), in a memoir she wrote after Anatol Stern’s death (cf. A. Stern, *Życie i wiersze. Pamiętnik liryczny* [Life and Poems. A Lyrical Memoire], Warszawa 1979, typescript, ZR BŃ, shelf mark: rps akc. 11854, sheet 124).
- 30 Stefan Themerson was invited by Stanisław Wohl and Jerzy Toeplitz, who went to London in 1945. He refused to accept their proposal, as the visiting filmmakers informed him that the requirements of the rebuilt Polish cinematography would not allow him to make experimental cinema. At their request, he subsequently wrote a letter to Aleksander Ford – the director of the “Polish Film” State Company back then – explaining the reasons behind his decision, to which – meaningfully – he never got a reply. In his letter, Themerson clarified that the “filmmaking

late 1950s, almost 30 years after the film adaptation of *Europa* was made, that Stern and Themerson resumed their correspondence: “under all latitudes have I seen your books and essays published in reviews, and under all latitudes have I wished to contact you – but what stood in the way was always my incurable distaste for letters.”³¹

His “distaste for letters” (elsewhere Stern also called himself an “epistolophobe”³²) seems to have been an excuse dictated by courtesy more than anything else, considering that his archive contains about twenty volumes of correspondence (indeed, from the post-war period). The real reason why he re-established contact with the Themersons was the visit of Aleksander Rostocki, their old mutual friend, to London, as Stern mentions further in his letter. Stern looked for possibilities to publish his novel *Ludzie i syrena* [The People and a Mermaid] in the UK (and later to stage his play *Cudotwórca* [The Miracle-maker]). He asked Rostocki to provide a copy of his novel to Themerson, hoping that the latter would take an interest in this book and support his efforts. Additionally, Stern was working on an article on Themerson’s film adaptation of *Europa* for his volume of essays and film reviews entitled *Wspomnienia z Atlantydy* [Memories from Atlantis], so he wanted to inquire about the film’s availability.

In his reply, Themerson expressed a highly favourable opinion on *The People and a Mermaid*, suggesting he would endeavour to promote this work among English publishers. Unfortunately, he had no good news about the film version of *Europa*:

“It is almost certain that *Europa* (the film) no longer exists – as far as I know, the negative was on Królewska Street³³ in Warsaw, in a house that burned

fever” had most likely irretrievably abandoned him and his wife Franciszka: – “I feel kind-heartedly jealous” – he added with his unique sense of humour – “when I think of all these young avant-garde artists who will undoubtedly now emerge and, thanks to your support, find resources to materialise their artistic ideas, find understanding for their creative passion, and hold a tool in their hands to produce their art” (letter from S. Themerson to A. Ford, London, October 1945, carbon copy of typescript, TA). The author of *Professor Mmaa’s Lecture* referred to the conversation he had with Wohl and Toeplitz in his letter to the curator of the Museum of Art in Łódź, to which he attached a copy of the above letter to Aleksander Ford (cf. letter from S. Themerson to Urszula Czartoryska, August 1980, carbon copy of typescript, TA).

31 Letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 16 February 1959, typescript, TA.

32 Letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 7 March 1959, typescript, TA (a carbon copy of this letter is available in the Sterns’ manuscript collection; cf. *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*).

33 After they got married, at the time they were making *Europa*, the Themersons lived with Franciszka’s father, the painter Jakub Weinles, in a building situated on the corner of Królewska and Graniczna streets in Warsaw; compare: letter from Mieczysław Chojnowski to Jasia Reichardt, Mexico City, 3 October 1988, manuscript; *Komentarze do danych biograficznych* [Comments to Biographic Data], manuscript (attached to the letter from M. Chojnowski to J. Reichardt, Mexico City, [1989], manuscript, TA). It was possible to

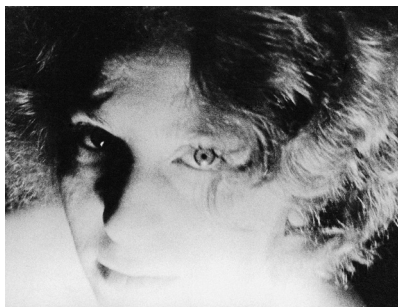
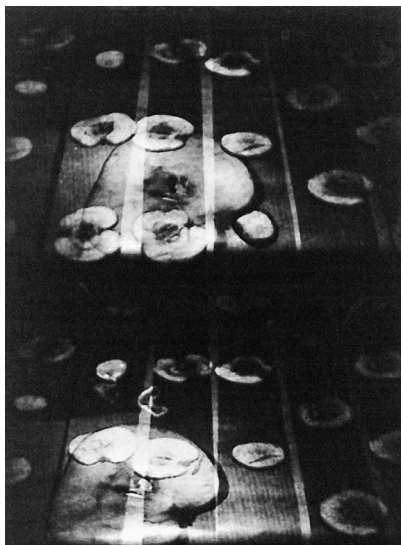
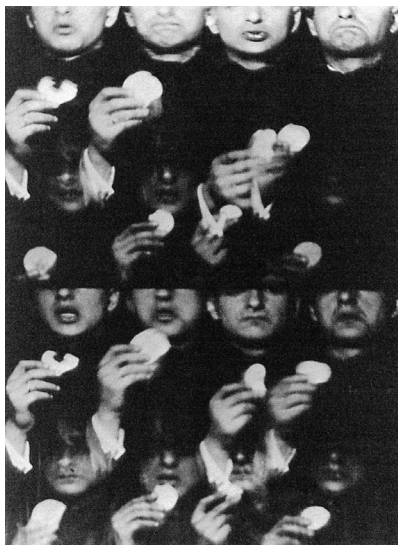
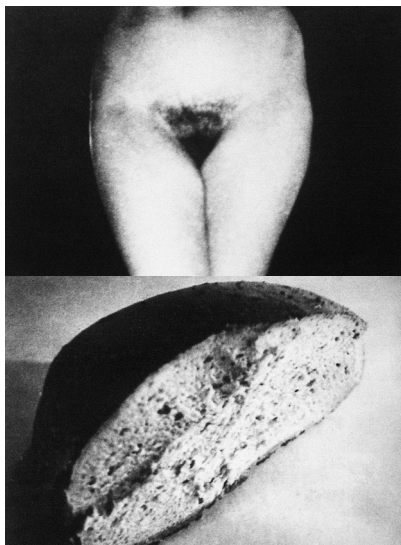


FIG. 2. Stills from the lost film *Europa*. The multiplied figure of a man eating an apple in photo 3 is Stefan Themerson; the woman in photo 4 is Franciszka Themerson

down. A single copy of *Europa* (and of my other films) was in Paris, deposited with Witkiewicz's (not to be confused with Witkacy)³⁴ Vitfer laboratory. I met Witkiewicz in London after the war. He told me all the films had been taken away from his laboratory by the Germans, but he died soon after this conversation, and this is all I know."³⁵

Encouraged by reestablishing contact with his elder friend, further in his letter Themerson mentioned a peculiar idea. "I wish I could publish *Europa* in English, with exactly the same layout as in Szczuka's edition" – he suggested – "perhaps adding only a short introduction at the beginning and a sheet with a few stills from the film at the end."³⁶

Stern was delighted with this idea; the two artists dedicated much of their correspondence to this initiative. Being able to publish a new edition of *Europa* in Gaberbocchus Press meant a great deal to him, especially considering that the attempts both to publish *The People and a Mermaid* and to stage *The Miracle-maker* in the UK had failed.³⁷ Initially, the

establish the number of the building based on a note in their children's book *Narodziny liter* [The Birth of Letters], published in the early 1930s. On the last page of the cover, the authors invited their young readers to share their thoughts on this book by sending a letter to the address "Królewska 20" in Warsaw. Themerson might have been referring to this apartment when saying the negative was left "on Królewska Street".

- 34 This was probably Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, a pre-war engineer and film maker, a mysterious character discussed by Witkacy's biographer Janusz Degler (cf. J. Degler, *Witkacego portret wielokrotny. Szkice i materiały do biografii (1918–1939)* [Witkacy's Multiple Portrait. Biographic Sketches and Materials (1918–1939)], Warszawa 2009, p. 197). In the Themerson Archive, there are three letters from Witkiewicz sent from Lisbon (the first one is dated 1943, and the two others, 1944); in these letters, the sender inverted his initials or omitted one of them (I. St. Witkiewicz or I. Witkiewicz) perhaps in order to avoid being mistaken for Witkacy. A telegram from S. Themerson to Witkiewicz is also available. The last two letters and the telegram suggest that Themerson helped him to find a job with the Film Office at the Ministry of Information and Documentation of the Polish Government in London. Another letter available in the Themerson Archive confirms that in 1944 Witkiewicz replaced Eugeniusz Cękalski as the head of this office (cf. letter from S. Themerson to W. Detko, London, 5 October 1945, carbon copy of typescript, TA).
- 35 Letter from S. Themerson to A. Stern, 25 February 1959, typescript, *Letters from Stefan Themerson...* (a carbon copy of this letter is available in TA).
- 36 Letter from S. Themerson to A. Stern, 25 February 1959.
- 37 Available copies of letters from Themerson to third parties as well as their replies prove that Themerson made efforts to follow up on his friend's request and to have *The People and A Mermaid* published. To this purpose, he contacted representatives of various publishers such as Elek Books or Penguin Books; however, to no effect. Celina Wieniawska (a translator married to Peter Janson-Smith, a literary agent), who was the first person Themerson contacted for this purpose, replied: "I do not think this book has the weight required for the market here, nor is it sufficiently representative. After all, Andrzejewski, Brandys or even Dygat deserve being published in the English market so much more" (letter from C. Wieniawska to S. Themerson, 5 July 1959, typescript, TA). *The Miracle-maker* also stood little chance of dissemination in Britain, of which Wieniawska notified Stern in a personal letter as well (cf. letter from C. Wieniawska to A. Stern, 5 July 1959, typescript, ZR BN, shelf mark: rps akc. 14353, vol. 12).

introduction to the English edition of *Europa* was to be written by the art historian Camilla Gray, who visited Poland in the early 1960s (encouraged by Themerson, Stern met her in Warsaw), but she withdrew from the project at a later stage. Two alternative introductions were written: a shorter one by Oswald Blakeston, a writer and experimental cinematographer, and a longer one by the poet Michael Horovitz. Upon consulting Stern, Themerson decided to remove the preface by Jan Nepomucen Miller that preceded the 1929 edition (to Themerson, the text written by this literary critic was overly dominated by a pompous style which hindered fluent translation).³⁸

Themerson translated the poem himself (later with the help of Horovitz). In subsequent letters, he consulted the effects of his work with the poem's author. In their correspondence relating to specific passages of *Europa* in the context of their translation to English, it is remarkable, especially from an editor's perspective, that Stern wanted some pieces of the text to be translated in a way diverging from his original 1929 version. Initially, the poet, who lived in communist Poland, asked Themerson to delete the line "of class equality"³⁹ from the following fragment:

millions of dance-halls grin
 with their black faces
 here's the jazz-band
 of discoveries
 shimmy of relativity
 jig of
 economic
 catastrophes
 [and this latest dance –
 a surreal Kamarinskaya
 of class equality]
 under which collapses
 the parquet floor of
 europe⁴⁰

38 Cf. letter from S. Themerson to A. Stern, 1 January 1960, manuscript, *Letters from Stefan Themerson*...

39 Cf. letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 18 February 1960, typescript, TA (copy in: *Letters from Stefan Themerson*...).

40 *Europa* in English quoted after A. Stern, *Europa: a poem*, transl. by S. T. and M. H. with a new introd. by M. Horovitz and phot. from the film "Europa" made in 1939 by S. and F. Themerson; pref. by O. Blakeston; ill. and layout by M. Szczuka; cover design by T. Żar-nower. A suggested translation of fragments not included in this edition has been provided in brackets – M.B.

He subsequently requested that the two immediately preceding lines “[*and this latest dance/a surreal Kamarinskaya/of class equality*]” be removed,⁴¹ so as to align this passage with the version of *Europa* included in a controversial 1957 compilation entitled *Wiersze dawne i nowe* [Old and New Poems].⁴²

Finally, Stern suggested⁴³ that in the following passage:

grand
showerbath
of meetings
the massage of propaganda
the gospel of terror—
this is the chasm
into which we jump
since we cannot jump
into heaven

[*the only*
saint
discipline
of humanity!]

the last stanza be removed or modified as follows:

[*where are you*
the only
saint discipline of humanity!]

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- 41 Cf. letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 10 September 1961, typescript, TA; letter from S. Themerson to A. Stern, 20 October 1961, manuscript, *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*; letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 27 October 1961, typescript, TA.
- 42 Stern's futurist poems republished after many years in a volume entitled *Wiersze dawne i nowe* [Old and New Poems] included substantive corrections, which did not go unnoticed by the literary press. The *Kamena* literary journal from Lublin published a review criticising the practice of retouching texts, listing the identified changes (cf. J. W. Zięba, 'Futuryzm z retuszem' [Futurism retouched], *Kamena*, no. 12, 1957, p. 5), which, however, was done unreliably, as the reviewer made mistakes when quoting Stern's poem *The Angelic Churl*. To Stern's mind, this "provocatively manipulated" the poem, as the resentful author stated both in a letter to the editor-in-chief of *Kamena* (cf. letter from A. Stern to Kazimierz Jaworski, 29 August 1957, carbon copy of typescript, *Materiały do działalności A. Stern* [Materials for A. Stern's Activity], ZR BN, shelf mark: rps akc. 14288) and in public reactions in the press. However, it is noteworthy that the corrections introduced in the first retrospective edition of Stern's poems were not only motivated by his belief that an author has the right to amend his own work, no matter when it was first written and published, but first and foremost by the requirement of the editor from the "Czytelnik" publishing house that the poems could only be published if they were re-worked by the author in a way eliminating the stigma of "formalism" (this issue has been discussed in a broader context in P. Majerski, 'Pojedynek' [The Duel], in idem, *Anarchia i formuły*, op. cit., pp. 172–182).
- 43 Cf. letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 27 October 1961.

This means he wanted it to be translated in a variant resembling the one quoted in his article on the poem's film adaptation forming part of his 1959 book *Wspomnienia z Atlantydy* [Memories from Atlantis] (un-surprisingly, this variant differed in some details from the one published in *Old and New Poems*). Analysis of the final English translation proves that Themerson accepted Stern's suggestions and deleted all the indicated lines. In this way, the translation compiles various versions of *Europa*; its contents are, however, much closer to the 1929 version than to the poem's later editions of 1957 or 1959, which were subjugated to political requirements. Nevertheless, if we assume that the owner of Gaberbocchus Press intended to publish a book in line with the spirit of the pre-war edition *par excellence*, allowing Stern to make any modifications whatsoever seems to be a mistaken decision for which, however, it is hard to blame Themerson, who as a publisher felt obliged to respect the author's will.

The British edition of the poem came out in early 1962.⁴⁴ Its format was smaller than the original one, but the cover and graphic layout faithfully followed the 1929 edition. The text itself sparked much interest, at least in Poland (Stern continually asked Themerson to send him additional copies for distribution, which became a leitmotif of their further correspondence). With the book finally published, the artists did not cease to contact each other, even though their correspondence lost intensity over time; they kept sending each other books, New Year's greetings as well as updates on their health and current literary works. Stern and Themerson valued each other's writing, and were able to aptly interpret it. "Apollinaire would be pleased" – Stern wrote referring to Themerson's book *Cardinal Pölätüo* – "to find this subtle tissue of rationalised mystique and poetic mystification, this Mondrianic clarity of colours, this slightly bitter sense of humour".⁴⁵ Themerson returned his compliments, assuring him that he had read his book *Poezja zbuntowana* [Revolted Poetry] in one go, and praised Stern for an accurate theoretical description of futurism in one of the chapters.⁴⁶

44 Cf. A. Stern, *Europa. A poem*, M. Horovitz (trans.), M. Szczuka (illust.), London 1962; the title page bears the following note: "Reproduced here from the original Polish Edition of 1929".

45 Letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 29 January 1962, typescript, TA.

46 Letter from S. Themerson to A. Stern, 12 February 1968, typescript, *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*

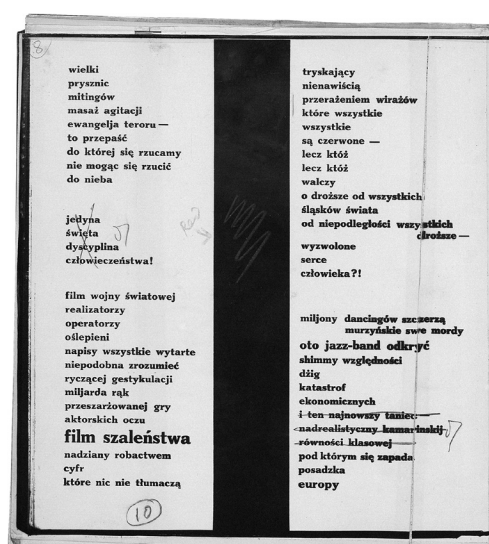


FIG. 3. Fragment of a maquette used as part of the working materials for preparing *Europa*'s English edition. The maquette was made up of drawings and photos of the Polish 1929 edition. This page features hand-written notes, including passages crossed out with a pencil, as Stern wanted to remove them from the text

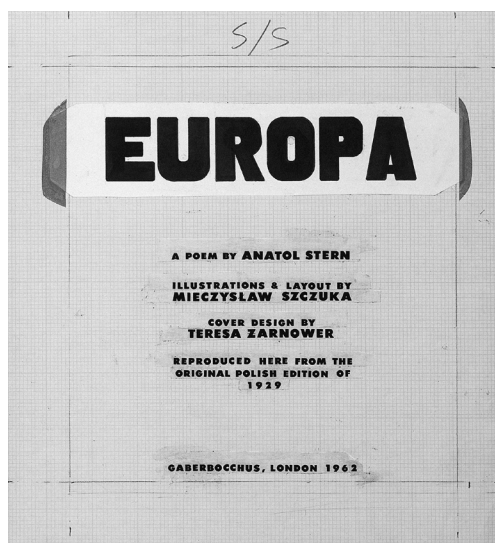


FIG. 4. Graphic design of the title page of *Europa*'s English edition

Not only did the writers commend each other, but also used their mutual contacts to their own benefit. With Themerson's mediation,⁴⁷ Stern published an article in the British journal *Typographica* edited by Herbert Spencer,⁴⁸ while the author of *Hobson's Island* was invited to write a paper for *Cahiers Dada Surréalisme* on the film adaptation of *Europa* and more generally on the Dadaistic inspirations in cinematography (on the basis of their correspondence, there is no saying whether he actually decided to take this opportunity, as he expressed some hesitation in this respect).⁴⁹ In 1966, Stern requested that Franciszka illustrate his book of poetry *Z motyką na słońce*.⁵⁰ As a result, the book, published the following year, could boast outstanding graphics. Stern even planned to portray his friends from London in a book he worked on towards the end of his life entitled *Kolekcja dusz* [A Collection of Souls] (he mentioned this intention in numerous letters, asking the Themersons to send him suitable biographic materials, photographs and the books they published), but eventually did not live to do so.⁵¹

The correspondence of these two avant-garde artists offers a kind of prolegomena to their biography, a portrait of their personalities and a description of the way they approached their own work. In the case of Themerson, it could be used to a certain extent to supplement the available sources for the reconstruction of his post-war relationship with his home country, his contacts with Polish artists and of the Themersons' visits to Poland.⁵² As to Stern, it provides a comment to the story of humiliation

47 Cf. letter from H. Spencer to A. Stern, 4 December 1963, typescript, *Correspondence of Anatol Stern...*, vol. 10; letter from S. Themerson to A. Stern, 15 December 1963, manuscript, *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*; letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 27 December 1963, typescript, TA (carbon copy in: *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*).

48 Cf. A. Stern, 'Avant-garde graphics in Poland between the two world wars', *Typographica*, vol. 9 (New Series), 1964, pp. 3–20.

49 Cf. letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 15 February 1967, typescript; letter from Henri Béhar to S. Themerson, 16 February 1967, typescript; letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 2 March 1967, typescript; letter from S. Themerson to H. Béhar, 5 March 1967, carbon copy of typescript, TA.

50 Stern playfully explained this title [a saying meaning 'to bite off more than one can chew', literally 'to fight the sun with a hoe', *motyka* meaning 'hoe' in Polish – MB] adding that the surname of the then-Minister of Culture and Arts in Poland was Motyka (letter from A. Stern to the Themersons, 24 January 1966, typescript, TA).

51 The book, with no text dedicated to the Themersons, was published after Stern's death under a new title (cf. A. Stern, *Legends naszych dni*, op. cit.).

52 The Themersons visited Poland in September 1959 for the first time in 21 years. Their visit was documented in the press of that time, a notable example of which is the unconventional interview given to Jan Błoński in the *Przekrój* weekly (cf. *Przekrój*, no. 759, 1959, p. 8–9 [reprint: J. Błoński, *Błoński przekorny. Dziennik. Wywiady* [The Cheekiness of Jan Błoński. Diary]

of this left-wing poet by the political regime he supported⁵³ as well as a footnote to his obsessive efforts aiming to give the avant-garde in general and his own works in particular the place they deserved in reflections on the history of Polish literature and culture⁵⁴ (the author emphasised in his letters that the purpose of some of his writing was to fight against falsifying history⁵⁵ and to prevent the victory of “all sorts of curs”;⁵⁶ he mentioned that some of his “friends” tried to belittle the value of his artistic and editing achievements⁵⁷ and pointed out that he felt isolated in his

aries. Interviews], selected and edited by M. Zaczynski, Kraków 2011, pp. 177–182; *Gościniec Sztuki. Magazyn Artystyczno-Literacki*, vol. 2/17, 2011, pp. 6–10]. In the following years, the artists came back to Poland at least several times.

- 53 The reasons behind Stern’s “infamy” after the war were already revealed in his second letter sent to Themerson: “since I returned to the country in 1948 until the end of 1955, I was not able to publish one original piece of work here [at that time, the writer’s main source of income was translating Russian literature – J.L.]. From then on, I published quite a few. Why did that happen? It was only in 1955 that Bruno Jasiński was ‘rehabilitated’: as his closest friend and collaborator, I had been blacklisted for 8 long years. However, I have survived and lived to see better times” (letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 7 March 1959, typescript, TA [carbon copy: *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*]). In his essay *Wspomnienia z wieku kamiennego* [Memories from the Stone Age], Stern described his struggles with publishers when trying to release his works, especially the novel *Ludzie i syrena* [The People and a Mermaid] (first edition in 1955). The text was initially meant to form part of an account-settling book with pieces by a dozen writers reflecting on the literature and literary life in a socialist country. However, the volume compiled in 1956 by the “Czytelnik” publishing house was rejected by the state censorship. It did not come out until 2012 together with an essay by Stern, based on an extant proofreader’s copy (cf. *Rachunek pamięci* [Memory Reckoning], editing committee: W. Bienkowski, H. Boguszevska, P. Jasienica, J. Kornacki, introduction: M. Głowiński, footnotes, notes and indices: P. Kądziała, Warszawa 2012). The Sterns’ personal archive includes a typescript of *Memories from the Stone Age*, which was meant to form part of one of the author’s volumes with pieces of literary criticism and memories (cf. A. Stern, *Materiały warsztatowe do: “O poetach i innych w cztery oczy”* [Working materials for “On Poets and Others, Tête-à-tête”], ZR BN, shelf mark: rps akc. 14294). The book under this title never came out, nor can this account-settling text be found in Stern’s published essay collections.
- 54 The editor of a book of Stern’s collected poems (*Wiersze zebrane*) called the writer’s attitude at that time “barratrous”, which is daring, but probably justified (cf. A. K. Waśkiewicz, “*Irrealna gwiazda*”. *O poezji Anatola Sterna* [An Unreal Star. On Anatol Stern’s Poetry], *Pamiętnik Literacki* [Literary Journal], fasc. 4, 1979, p. 185). However, this “barratry” can be explained not only by Stern feeling undervalued, as it was interpreted by Waśkiewicz, but also by the writer’s biography being strongly marked by the harsh experience of the years he was blacklisted as mentioned above. It is worth a mention that Alicja Stern strongly disagreed with the above judgement and some other comments made by this literary researcher. The Stern’s archive contains an offprint of the above article with Alicja’s blunt, hand-written remarks in the margins (cf. *Recenzje różnych autorów dotyczące twórczości A. Sterna* [Reviews of A. Stern’s works by various authors], ZR BN, shelf mark: rps akc. 14347).
- 55 Cf. letters from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 7 March 1959, 30 August 1967, typescript, TA; 28 February 1968, carbon copy of typescript, *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*
- 56 Letter from the Sterns to S. Themerson, 25 February 1968, typescript, TA.
- 57 Cf. letters from A. Stern to S. Themerson (or to S. and F. Themerson), 3 April 1959, typescript, TA (carbon copy: *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*); 25 June 1964, typescript; 6 February 1967, typescript, TA.

fight to defend some stances dating back to the interwar period⁵⁸). In this context, Themerson seems to be a more restrained correspondent,⁵⁹ his letters tend to be shorter and less emotional than Stern's (with perhaps the exception of concise but constant reflections on the "grey", "cold", and "damp" London where he did not feel well).⁶⁰ Stern's letters include more private comments where the writer complained about not being able to work with the same pace as in the past and mentioned that he felt unwell, suffered from despondency and depression,⁶¹ also revealing his personal aversions (he manifestly disliked Jerzy Toeplitz, an important figure of the post-war Polish film community).⁶²

The death of Anatol Stern, who suffered from diabetes, marked the end of the writers' correspondence in 1968. The last letter from Stefan Themerson was sent on 12 February; the last message from both Anatol and Alicja Stern available in the Themersons' archive is dated 25 February (in the Sterns' archive, there is also a carbon copy of a letter from Anatol to Stefan dated 28 February). Officially, the correspondence ended with a telegram from Alicja Stern of 23 October notifying the Themersons of her husband's death. In the following decade, Alicja sent at least several letters to the Themersons (the last dated manuscript is from 1976);⁶³ moreover, the artists met each other in person several times when the Themersons

58 Letter from A. Stern to S. and F. Themerson, 8 June 1963, typescript, TA.

59 If Themerson ever made any unfavourable remarks about a specific person, it was always in a lenient manner. When Stern suggested that Themerson contact Raymond Queneau (Gaberbochus Press published the very first English edition of his *Exercises in Style*) to inquire about a possible French edition of *Cardinal Pôlâtio*, Themerson replied: "Yes, I know Queneau, I hosted him in London lately, and today, I got a letter from him saying he was sick and doing nothing, and that has not recovered yet. Irrespective of that, as a matter of fact, all he ever cares about are his own pursuits, which is very conceited of him" (letter from S. Themerson to A. Stern, London, 8 March 1962, manuscript, *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*). Also, he referred to Julian Przyboś in slightly condescending, but also humorous terms when calling him "a little thick-headed" after this Kraków Avant-Garde poet failed to mention *Europa* in his preface to Stern's collection of poetry (*Wiersze i poematy*, 1956) (cf. letter from S. Themerson to A. Stern, 2 September 1967, typescript, *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*).

60 Cf. letters from S. Themerson to A. Stern, 31 January 1962, manuscript; 13 August 1963, manuscript; 3 April 1964, manuscript; December 1964, manuscript, *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*

61 Cf. letters from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 29 March 1960, typescript, TA (copy: *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*); 22 April 1960, typescript, TA (copy: *Letters from Stefan Themerson...*); 3 June 1960, typescript; 12 September 1961, typescript; 3 June 1962, typescript, TA.

62 Cf. letter from A. Stern to S. Themerson, 7 March 1959; letter from the Sterns to the Themersons, 19 December 1965, typescript, TA.

63 Cf. letters from Alicja Stern to the Themersons (or to Franciszka Themerson), Warsaw, 9 September 1969, manuscript; Warsaw, 6 September 1976, manuscript, TA (the archive also contains an undated letter and a festive greeting card; the letter can be dated to the years 1969–1970).

visited Poland,⁶⁴ and it seems that their relationship remained warm. However, it follows from the available materials that most probably in the following years they did not correspond with each other (in Alicja's correspondence archive, there is only one letter from Franciszka⁶⁵ and no letters from Stefan).

SUMMARY

Anatol Stern (1899–1968) was a poet, one of the founders of Polish futurism, a prose and drama writer, literary critic, essayist and the author of memorial sketches as well as a prolific scriptwriter and film journalist of the Polish interwar period. Stefan Themerson (1910–1988) was a novelist, poet, essayist, philosopher, author of children's literature and composer; together with his wife Franciszka (1907–1988), he made experimental short films in interwar Poland and later in the UK during the war, laying the foundations for the Polish film avant-garde. The article studies the relationship between these two artists, who met each other and began to work together already in the early 1930s, which has not been analysed in detail before. Manuscript sources documenting their friendship before the war have not survived to this day (*Europa*, an experimental film by Themerson based on Stern's narrative poetry, has also been lost), therefore, what provides fundamental reference for the article – without being its only source of information – is the correspondence between Stern and Themerson from the years 1959–1968, recently compiled by the National Library of Poland.

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- 64 The Themersons' mutual correspondence points to Franciszka meeting Alicja Stern while in Poland in 1971 (cf. *Powojenna korespondencja Franciszki i Stefana Themersonów z lat 1947–1974 i bd.* [Post-war correspondence of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson. 1947–1974 and undated letters], vol. 2, 1964–1974 and undated letters, TA, shelf mark: rps akc. 20241).
- 65 Cf. letter from Franciszka Themerson to Alicja Stern, 28 July 1976, manuscript, *Correspondence of Alicja Stern...*