Autobiographical Interpoetics.

Wartime Works by Franciszka and Stefan Themerson

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Intermediality and intertextuality are probably among the first words that come to mind in the context of the artistic work of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson. The issue has been undertaken by a number of researchers¹; however, the purpose of this paper is to pay attention to yet another heterogeneity of those writers. I would like to investigate their intimistics, and so, at the same time, their artistic activity. Their autobiographical practice is understood here in a dual way: on the one hand, as a form of compensating of the intellectual and physical absence of a loved one (documents are a substitute for physical closeness), and on the other hand, as an experience of a break in the work model, which they had been working out for over a decade since 1929, and which relied on the feeling of community as a creative method, understood both as co-creation (children's books, movies) and co-establishment of the ideological fundaments for artistic work. Separation caused by war is replaced with an autobiographical practice, characterized by interpoetics, i.e. simultaneous preference for numerous formal and discourse organizations within one textual-visual entity. Examples of

¹ See Beata Śniecikowska, "Obraz – dźwięk – słowo – ruch. Intermedialność sztuki Franciszki i Stefana Themersonów", in Słowo – obraz – dźwięk. Literatura i sztuki wizualne w koncepcjach polskiej awangardy 1918-1939, (Cracow: TaiWPN Universitas, 2005); Agnieszka Karpowicz, Kolaż. Awangardowy gest kreacji: Themerson, Buczkowski, Białoszewski Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2007); Adam Dziadek, "Themerson i Schwitters", Teksty Drugie, No 4 (2006); Ewa Kraskowska, "Tylem, ale naprzód". Studia i szkice o Themersonach, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2018); Artur Pruszyński, Dobre maniery Stefana Themersona (Gdańsk: słowo/ obraz terytoria, 2004).

this phenomenon include both the preserved documents housed in the Themersons' archive², and a book including a selection of their works from the years 1940-1942 (*Niewysłane listy*³). I read this book as a secondarily aesthetized example of an intimistic realization, i.e. a form of subjective interpretation of sources, a kind of representation of war experience of those avant-garde writers⁴. I believe that apart from the first (already mentioned) form of representation in today's autobiographical practices, two other strategies of intimistic realizations can be mentioned: documents (manuscripts, typescripts, original e-mails) and stylizations (mai; art, espistolary novel). The urgent need to highlight these three formulae of representation stems not from the desire to point out methodological differences, but rather the cultural dynamics of intimistic genres.

In my analysis of selected examples, I follow a thought already expressed elsewhere in this volume⁵. However, I need to extend Lucyna Marzec's assumption regarding a description of a letter that the character of epistolography can be defined by considering it to be a mobile medium able to: 1) blur the lines between referentiality and fictionality (user, literacy), 2) absorb other genres (short story, anecdote) and generate completely new ones (epistolary novel), 3) adjust to the new media (e-mails, e-postcards). For the analysis of the Themersons' autobiographical experience, I assume that genre dynamics is an issue that refers to all forms of autobiographical writing (letters, diaries, calendars, autobiographies, CVs, journals, medical records, footnotes, postcards, telegrams, etc.). Moreover, it is also assumed that in the case of personal writing, we can observe the functioning of a text in different functional forms, which is a convention of simultaneous encoding of meanings in many registers. In other words, the meaning of those genres develops within some semantic range related to both the paper medium (written text), parol (a phone call urging to reply a letter), and reading letters out loud, dictating, etc., as well as the whole intimistic ritual, in which a text plays a predominantly performative function (acting for the self, in reference to another person). Continuing this line of thinking, one should also add that intimistic writing can be realized visually (documentaries), digitally (blogs, social media posts, online calendars), and orally (voice recordings of those who cannot write), as well as secondarily aesthecized (edited volumes based on documents).

The indirectness of those two poetics in the case of personal documents can be discussed both on the inter- (between-, co-), as well as trans- (layering, infiltration) levels of formal organization. I will focus on the analysis of examples of the former type, to which I include secondary aesthetizations, or all publications which borrow the form of authentic autobiographical experience through a change of context, reforming the base text into an edited representa-

² The major collection belongs to the Department of Manuscripts and Old Prints of the National Library in Warsaw where they function under the name "Archiwum Themersonów". Moreover, a relatively small number of documents are also available at the Museum of Art. In Łódź. It is also known that some documents belong to private collections. Letters and journals from the discussed period have been digitalized and are now available at polona.pl: https://polona.pl/search/?query=themerson&filters=public:1.

³ Franciszka Themerson, Stefan Themerson, *Niewysłane listy. Dzienniki, rysunki, dokumenty 1940-1942*, (Gdańsk: słowo/ obraz terytoria, 2019).

⁴ Although a large numer of people worked on this edition, I believed that the most substantial contributions were made by Jasia Reichardt, Nick Wadley and Pedro Cid Proença.

Lucyna Marzec, "Interpoetics of correspondence: figures for constructing presence, fictionalization, and disruptions of presence technologies", Forum Poetyki, nr 18 (2019).

tion. The second type of indirect distribution of autobiographical writing, in which we can observe not only a change of the medium, shifting meanings from one status to another, but also a semantic transformation and enrichment of the functioning of a document, lies beyond the scope of this paper. Such phenomena can be observed in mail-art or in the modern artistic practices diagnosed by Hal Foster as an "archival impulse", i.e. within a primarily artistic activity using a document as a medium. The difference would thus lie in the change of the means of communication. In other words, transliteration, an edited volume of letters, is a form of translation aiming at increasing the legibility, highlighting the values operated by the editor, whereas including a document into artistic practice changes the basic rule of functioning of a record, subjecting it to new fictionalization within aesthetic rather than intimistic functioning.

By assuming such a method of reading personal writing, I will highlight the rich and varied creative practices of the Themersons from the years 1940-1942, which lie somewhere between autobiographics and artistic activity, revealing a kind of relationship between art and intimistic experience, characteristic for the couple. First and foremost, an analysis of their activity, both documentary (manuscripts, *Niewysłane listy*) and the process of artistic activity (drawings, sketches of notes), as well as consituation⁷ (political events, personal temporary caesurae) will be of utmost importance in those aims. Conducting those observations according to the principles of autobiographical poetics stems mostly from the conviction that those organizations complete each other semantically, and capturing them in an intimistic community creates a space for a broader analysis of relationships which take place in different forms of an autobiographical text.

Secondary aestheticization

The co-existence of textual and visual orders is the fundamental rule of organization of *Niewysłane listy*. It is a collection of letters (sent and unsent), drawings (from the cycle collected under the same title, *Niewysłane listy*), telegrams (in French), postcards, drawings, footnotes, photos, journal entries, excerpts from short stories, official letters, medical records, or – from another perspective – transliterations and reproductions. The rule of combining many poetics into one is done based on putting together selected works by the couple written over the period of two years. The period which defines the senses encoded here is mostly 1940-1942, i.e. a short period of separation between Stefan (who at the time was in France) and Franciszka (who was staying in the UK shortly after being separated from her husband). The year 1938 (i.e. when they arrived in Paris) is present here through the context referred to in the beginning, similarly to the three final years of war (1942-1945).

The caesura of personal chronology – unsurprisingly in the case of intimistics – do not match the default image of a war, dominated by political history. In the case of this pair of artists, the

⁶ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse", October, No 110 (2004).

⁷ I use this term in the meaning proposed by Jan Trzynadlowski, which he defines as an opposition against context (a collection of facts accompanying the production of a text, common qualities of numerous works from a given historical period and place). Consituation is a collection of individual circumstances affecting only intimistic texts. It is a personally experienced expression of culture, social, political, material factors leaving an individual, one-time mark on every record in a different way. See Jan Trzynadlowski, *Male formy literackie*, (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977).

years 1939-1945 do not constitute the frame of their lives; instead, there are three other moments, depending on specific, transgression experiences: 1938 (leaving Poland), 1940 (separation) and 1942 (the beginning of living together in London). The chronology related to the life of the Themersons in Poland, which functions here mostly in the form of textual footnotes, and in letters - only when the spouses inform each other on receiving (or not) postcards from Warsaw and Otwock- is less highlighted, but still present within the edited volume. There are three more important dates of their intimistic practice: 25th January (Stefan's birthday), 22nd June (their wedding anniversary), and 28th June (Franciszka's birthday). In one of her letters, Franciszka writes directly about the incompatibility of the personal sense of time and the objectified order of the calendar: "In fact I am writing continuously, because I measure time from one letter to the next, received and written"8. The regular rituals related to the celebrations of wedding anniversaries are also characteristic: "I don't know whether you will receive this letter by June 22nd [their wedding anniversary]. We start measuring time with anniversaries"9. In a different place, the writer replies: "My love, only a few words so they reach you faster. I thought we would be together on the 22nd, but now I know it won't be possible. My love, buy yourself some flowers and some gift from me, please. And for your birthday [28th June]"10.

However, this string of personal events is interrupted by political ones, evident in the contents of documents; for example, a letter from Franciszka from 1st September 1941 states, "A date which is so difficult to forget, my love. - How long, long and hard those past two years have been"11. Also footnotes, to whose unobvious shape we shall pay attention later, create some space for joining political and personal orders. "In the August of 1941 Hitler declares that «any necessary preparations for the global solution to the Jewish issue in the German area of influence in Europe» shall be undertaken. The policy of exterminating Jews will be implemented first in France, in the spring of 1942: as a result of the Germans' actions one third of the French Jews shall lose their lives"12. The juxtaposition of those two excerpts highlights yet another dissonance: what remains in between is the space of the correspondents' awareness, and what I would describe as a historically updated comment present in the footnote. When writing about the Nazi invasion of Poland, Franciszka obviously does not use the later nomenclatures, such as "World War II". For her, the military conflict in question is mostly related to the endangerment of her family in Poland, her own dilemmas concerning going back, being separated from her husband, and a sense of destabilization in her own life, as well as limitations concerning her work. In this sense, the analysis of wartime letters does not fully take in the perspective of images, sensations and knowledge (historical, political, scientific, medical, etc.) close to the recipient, but in a conventional way adjusts the extent of awareness to the editor.

As already mentioned, the footnotes of this edition are a somewhat interesting editorial choice. The strategy applied for them shifts the concept of the functions of references taken in publications. For instance, we will not find there any biographical notes of the persons who appear

⁸ Themerson, Themerson, Niewysłane listy, p. 289.

⁹ Themerson, Themerson, p. 216.

¹⁰ Themerson, Themerson, p. 348.

¹¹ Themerson, Themerson, p. 248.

¹² Themerson, Themerson, p. 235.

70

in the contents of the letter or extensive descriptions that would acquaint the reader with the specificity of source texts. Such a form of footnotes directs us towards fictionalization and takes us away from the traditionally understood—for this space—agreement with the recipient of the poetics of the concrete, precision and detail. The typological arrangement is also important: instead of placing two footnotes at the bottom of a page (which is common editorial practice), the editors incorporated footnotes into the main text, in a slightly less obvious way than transliterations. In the introduction, Jasia Reichardt writes directly that: "The title of the story is Niewysłane listy because this is how Franciszka called a series of her drawings"13. The word "story" repeated several times sets the reading frame for this book; it is not an attempt at a transparent expression of some experiences represented by documents, but rather a narrative based on a source. The footnotes are the most obvious example of this approach. Similarly to the movie technique, they resemble "off camera narration", which leads the reader through the experience designed within the book: "For now Sewek remains outside of the Warsaw ghetto, but in the October of 1941 he goes there to be with his family"14, or "Stefan still makes lists of topics which he could use in his writing or movies - but «Szkice» from the journal play the role of first-draft notes to the poem Croquis dans les ténèbres [Sketches in Darkness]"15.

The organization of this volume is based predominantly on its biographical multi-genre character, with its own internal hierarchy. All the forms of creative expression function here in a complementary way, and although epistolography is the most represented genre compared to others, one can only understand the intimistic and artistic dimension of the wartime artistic activity of the Themersons only after juxtaposing all their written and visual autobiographical practices.

Wartime artistic activity of the Themersons

The subject of World Wars - both I and II - is a recurring element of the Themersons' writing. The question of the issue of trauma in Stefan's texts, analyzed by Justyna Jaworska¹⁶, among others, gives some idea of the importance of this problem and its materialization in his artistic space. What interests me is not the issue of the access point undertaken by Jaworska (autobiographical elements in the works of both spouses), but the starting point (raw forms of conceptualizing experiences). For me, this issue is a borderline problem between art and autobiography; however, I do not see those relationships in a direct way, as a space of transgression tension, mixing of two orders, but rather as an autonomous register, which had never been there before nor after in the artistic work of the Themersons. The autobiographical interpoetics of the Themersons is a kind of compensation, a temporary solution, which is closely related to their methods of work (multi-media, community), as well as their own concepts of the role of artistic activity. Let us start from reconstructing the last of those issues. To my mind, excerpts from Franciszka's letters are the most significant in conceptualizing the autobiographical and artistic practice of the Themersons:

¹³ Themerson, Themerson, p. 9.

¹⁴ Themerson, Themerson, p. 158.

¹⁵ Themerson, Themerson, p. 158.

¹⁶ Justyna Jaworska, "Co niesie czarny pudel?", Literatura na Świecie, No 9–10 (2013).

It's actually funny what autobiographical *ferydurkisms* I wrote here. You know, a bit like a beginner writer. Sometimes something hits me in the gut, and sometimes it is so naïve that I can't even look at it¹⁷. (...) I got stuck with my drawing. What I have done so far has been rather characteristic, as if an analytical (very uncontrolled and discursive) autobiography. I wanted to leave this circle, I am not satisfied with it – but it's not easy¹⁸.

And in another place:

We need to understand that talking just like that is not our business. That one sense of communicating with people is greeting them with the written word or a visual form, allowing to find somewhere and sometime the true, close reaction¹⁹. (...) Don't tell me, my love, that you would like to do ordinary, utilitarian things. I understand this crisis, I often experience it myself. But knowing that you are there, working for yourself, that you know, feel and understand that you have the same truest truth as me – this gives me so much strength, my love²⁰.

We can find similar thoughts in Stefan's letters:

How much time will it last. So much time has passed in inaction. I am terrified that I have never done anything of any worth²¹. (...) My love, I am so happy that you're working, truly. Despite our separation, I am only when I am reading your letters, and beyond that I do not exist, and in spite of this – and precisely because of this – I am so much happier than all those people around me²².

The issue of everyday artistic attempts is intensely described throughout the entire correspondence between the spouses. The topic of sending their work to each other, as well as drawings and poems, is also a recurring theme; Stefan's recurring question about one of his short stories that he sent to his wife, to which she never replied, is symptomatic of this issue. Worried that she had not received he sent the short story again, and only when Franciszka shares her opinion of the story does the topic end.

In my analysis of the wartime artistic work of the Themersons, I assume that it is firstly, a unique moment in their work (the rare separation, a sense of danger), which is reflected in the visual aspects of their work, significantly different from what they produced in the 1930s, as well as from their later work from late 1940s, and secondly, that their autobiographical practice from the years 1940-1942 favors autothematic-artistic goals at a cost of losing the original self-reflective and intimistic functions combined with the *life-writing* activity. In other words, I want to show that in the case of the Themersons, the borders within one medium (written, visual, and later also oral) are suspended, and that combining numerous poetics within one autobiographical experience is a result of the progressive and searching model of activity of those artists. For this reason, I see various examples of their activity against the such-constructed

¹⁷ Themerson, Themerson, p. 297.

¹⁸ Themerson, Themerson, p. 349.

¹⁹ Themerson, Themerson, p. 279.

²⁰ Themerson, Themerson, p. 298.

²¹ Themerson, Themerson, p. 286-287.

²² Themerson, Themerson, p. 293.

paradigm, as a compensatory activity, a substitute for the real artistic needs, an activity performed in separation from the world and self, using autobiographical genres in the process of problematizing artistic topics (notes, sketches, drawings), as well as working out new aesthetics over the course of the intimistic practice, to be later developed in their future work.

Autobiographical spaces: Niewysłane listy, Muzyka, Calling Mr Smith

Characteristic for the whole post-war work of Franciszka Themerson is the use of lines, both in her drawings (thin, black) and in paintings (carved in paint)²³. However, regardless of whether we treat wartime works as separate from her other artistic works, or assume that they share some relationship with them, composition based on lines is absent from her pre-war works²⁴. The utilitarian character of her work up until the end of the 1930s is also significant. At the beginning of her artistic work – among those works which have survived until today – she focused mostly on book illustrations (Porazińska, Brzechwa, Duninówna etc.) and books for children, co-created with Stefan²⁵. However, even taking this into consideration, there is a stark contrast between the cover of "Płomyczek" and, for example, "Alice in Wonderland" (1942²⁶).

The series of drawings *Niewysłane list* is, then, a unique record compared to Franciszka Themerson's artistic work; on the one hand, it is obvious on the basis of the difference in aesthetics between her earlier and later works, and on the other, on the strong autobiographical character, which is also peculiar compared to her other works. The category of intimacy can be interpreted in many ways. First and foremost, the wartime works are a reaction of a kind, a consistently expressed political attitude. On the other hand, it is a laboratory, getting to know one's own identity during extraordinary circumstances, and finding a way to express a personal change, affected by various stimuli. Those drawings also uncover her privacy in terms of emotions related to the feeling of loneliness, fear, and helplessness. Finally, they can be perceived as a kind of work preceding later artistic forms, if we pay attention to her strategy of using a black line on a white background for the first time.

Similar anticipations can be discussed also in the example of Stefan Themerson's autobiographical writing, for whom the autobiographical character was both utilitarian (the need of constant representation through words, literary sketches in his journals), as well as therapeutic (self-reflections on painful experiences in his journal, correspondence with his wife). It is hard to discuss any fundamental poetics of those records, whose dynamics are especially obvious in the case of journals, whose construction heavily depends on the moment of migration in which Themerson remains, rather than authorial choice. In this sense, short, one-sentence records limited to expenses or places where he stayed develop into several pages long narratives cre-

²³ See Franciszka Themerson (1907-1988): paintings, preface by Nick Wadley, (London: Themerson Estate, 2013).

 $^{^{24}}$ I came to this conclusion with the help of Joanna Błachnio and Paweł Polit, whom I would like to thank for our conversation and their valuable observations from the October of 2019.

²⁵ See Beata Gromadzka, *Themersonowie dzieciom*, (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2019); Beata Śniecikowska, "Interaktywne jaskółki intermediów? O Franciszki i Stefana Themersonów książkach dla dzieci, Pl.it/rassegna italiana di argomenti polacchi, No 9 (2018).

²⁶ See Gromadzka, p. 139.

ated when he was staying at a refugee center. What transpires from those records (to my mind, not always consciously) is the expression of his own political attitudes, which are expressed even more strongly in his post-war artistic work 27 . His poems from that time, very political, are interesting in this respect. The relationship between personal notes and Themerson's artistic work would be a transfiguration of a kind, as evidence for example by the poem Muzyka (Music):

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Grubo muzyka gra
nikt jej nie chciał – na co komu muzyka
co tak rzęzi i jęczy i łka.

Już nie skrzypki, nie bas, nie harmonia
a organy, te najgrubsze, grzmią.

Po lekarsku to się zwie – agonia,
politycznie – okupywać krwią.
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Po księżowsku – zwie się: kara boska, w podręcznikach zaś – szkolnych – ku chwale! familijnie: zmartwienie, cios, troska, a muzycznie – nie nazywa się wcale²⁸.

At least two issues refer the reader of this poem to the Themersons' movie *Calling Mr Smith*, released three years later, in which (in my opinion) the ideological engagement of the artists is expressed to the fullest. I should probably add here that despite the numerous yet marginal political concerns in his post-war texts, in which he undertakes those topics regularly yet incidentally, the issue of politics was also undertaken by the couple before the war, as evidenced by the movie *Europa*, found in 2019. However, going back to the poem quoted above, first of all, it should be admitted that the message of *Calling Mr Smith* is the same as *Muzyka*; although in the visual version, as opposed to the literary work, art has the basic power to make things happen, it is a functionalized way of doctrine-enforcing methods in fascism. What also attracts attention is the verse *but the organs*, *the thickest*, *rumble*, which can be understood in juxtaposition with a motif shown in the 90th second of the movie, in which we can see the instrument in question in dark colors. The sound is also important, as the scene is accompanied by music that inspires anxiety, i.e. the beginning of Bach's "Toccata and Fugue in D Minor".

If we compare those examples with another excerpt from a letter to Franciszka: "I am working a bit, I am only writing poetry – I «lirisize» myself so much, and loose notes, which will be of use later once they set like wine"²⁹, we will see clearly that the written and visual wartime practice of the Themersons is such a kind of activity which, by taking different genre forms (biographical as well as artistic), is a record of transformations of mentality and sensitivity of an individual and a place of experiencing one's own subjectivity during a moment of intense

²⁷ See Stefan Themerson, Wiersze wybrane 1939-1945, edited by Jasia Reichardt, (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003).

²⁸ Themerson, p. 23. The music is playing heavily / nobody wanted it – who needs music / that ruckles and moans and cries.// Not the violin, the basse, the harmony / but the organs, the thickest, rumble. / A doctor would say – agony, / a politician – paying with blood. // A priest would say – divine punishment, / and textbooks – to glory! / a family: worry, blow, concern / and in terms of music – it has no name [translation mine, PZ].

²⁹ Themerson, Themerson, *Niewysłane listy*, p. 151.

experiences. Themerson recorded the pragmatic aspects of his life (recording expenses, places where stayed for the night, meals), as well as ideas, thoughts, sensations from everyday life, and also his observations of different people's characters made over two years of migrations. Those records have a character of constructive action founded on the conviction of the truth within those observations and its transfiguration potential. Likewise, drawings, telegrams, auto-letters and epistolography sent from Franciszka to her husband – although they belong to different communicative and aesthetic orders – remain consistent in terms of the experiences they describe, such as the lack of a dialogue model of work, a sense of danger caused by the war, growing and fading hopes for living together, both existentially and professionally.

Conclusion

It may turn out that after all this we are not the same enthusiastic people whom you knew in Paris. For sure we are much older. I really don't know how we would get through all that if we weren't together now. It was a lot30.

In August of 1942, the Themersons met in London, where Franciszka had been staying for two years. After a short time, she published a book of her drawings, Forty Drawings for Friends London 1940-4231. Also in 1943, the couple completed their movie, Calling Mr. Smith. The period of war, with a clear caesura in the form of a two-year separation, had its closure not when the couple first met in the UK or when the capitulation of the Third Reich was signed; it was rather dependent on the gradual awareness of the radical change in the world order³², and it had consequences in the process of the final resignation from the strategy of expressing directly their attitude to politics and trauma. In my opinion, this gradual erosion can be seen over the years 1944-1948. Jasia Reichardt openly writes about it: "Stefan tells me that you can either live in the past or in the future, and there is no doubt regarding which one of those options is possible. From now on the future will be my major interest and passion³³". The poetics of wartime poems, as well as journalism and narrative forms found in the volume Generał Piesc i inne opowiadnia, the movie Calling Mr. Smith, and Franciszka Themerson's drawings are on the one hand examples of the most openly formulated attitudes of political engagement, and on the other hand, an original (in comparison with works from other periods) reflection of self-analytical activity of the artists.

translated by Agnieszka Kocznur

³⁰ Themerson, Themerson, p. 365.

³¹ There were only five issues released in the 1940s, but later reproductions are easily available.

 $^{^{}m 32}$ The main context here is that the Themersons lost almost all their family and friends from Poland.

³³ Jasia Reichardt, *Piętnaście podróży z Warszawy do Londynu*, (Warszawa-Łódź: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Museum of Art in Łódź, 2018).

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KEYWORDS



Franciszka Themerson

archive

INTERPOETICS

LETTERS

ABSTRACT:

The paper discusses the wartime autobiographical practices by Franciszka and Stefan Themerson characterized by interpoetics, i.e. simultaneous preference for numerous formal and discourse organizations within one textual-visual entity. The paper analyzes the personal documents and literary works of those avant-garde writers. It is proposed to read the written and visual autobiographics according to three forms of representation: document, secondary aesthetization, and stylization. Based on this paradigm, the paper stresses the peculiarity of the Themersons' activity from the years 1940-1942, stressing the discreteness of this moment as opposed to the former and later literary work by the couple.

autobiography

journals

Stefan Themerson

AVANT-GARDE

personal documents

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

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