

‘Liberty to Bend a Piece of Wire Into a Space Sculpture’: Stefan Themerson, Kurt Schwitters, and the Rhetoric around Rights and Refugees

What right to speech do the stateless have? Through what mechanisms and to what extent are individual freedoms circumscribed for those without a nation? In the late years of the Second World War, amidst the discussion of the post-war landscape and the discourse around international protections regarding human rights, authors gathered in London to celebrate the tercentenary of John Milton’s *Areopagitica*, that famous tract on free speech. Organized by PEN, the event inspired displaced Polish author Stefan Themerson to ponder the question of freedom of speech in the context of institutions in an era of violence and uncertainty. In Themerson’s embrace of linguistic play and irreverence shown towards cultural norms and institutions, and through multiple tellings of his first meeting with another displaced person, the German artist Kurt Schwitters at the PEN conference, he presents a challenge to how we think about the guarantees which underpin our speech. In a probing and often absurdist manner, Themerson, in two key texts – *Bayamus and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry* (1949) and ‘Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart’ (1967) – points to the pitfalls of universalist rhetoric around speech and human rights. In this article, I will review Themerson’s use of the PEN conference as a meditative point to consider the rhetoric around rights in the context of the refugee crisis in England.

The 1944 PEN conference was held at the French Institute, South Kensington, London (22-26 August). It was organized out of, and hosted by, PEN’s London Centre, albeit with PEN International’s general-secretary Hermon Ould taking point on most of the correspondence and organising. The conference differed in several respects from their annual congresses, which were disrupted by the war, with a gap between the 1941 Congress in London and the 1946 Congress in Stockholm. In the promotional letter, the five-day event was billed as honouring Milton’s defence of freedom of expression, with speakers who would address the ‘place of spiritual and economic values

in the future of mankind'.<sup>1</sup> The conference attracted a number of individuals who interpreted its theme variously. Most tended to engage the 'spiritual and economic values' theme of the gathering more than directly address either Milton or his *Areopagitica*. The event opened with a welcome message from E.M. Forster, and hosted participants such as Herbert Read, Harold Laski, and Mulk Raj Anand presenting on Milton, and others like Olaf Stapledon, C.E.M. Joad, and H. Levy, focused on the conference theme, with a nod towards 'liberty' in many of the addresses. Indeed, some of the criticism which the conference received can be traced to the heterogeneous mixture of societies who were platformed – the Rational Press Association, South Place Ethical Society, the Progressive League the Aquinas Society, the Institute for Jewish Learning, and the Society for Cultural Relations with USSR all donated money and sent speakers. The reception of the event was mixed, and George Orwell, who attended one panel, rather infamously criticised it in the opening of 'The Prevention of Literature'. He acknowledged that while political and economic concerns were addressed, the conference lacked a point of view. In his estimation, not tackling the institutional pressures which limit, co-opt, or corrupt speech was dangerous.<sup>2</sup> There are conceptual limits to Orwell's critique. As I will show below, displaced artists like Themerson and Schwitters were keenly aware of these, especially in regards to how freedoms may be imagined and for whom. As David Dwan notes, Orwell 'liked to criticize other people's freedom-talk [... and he] refused to get embroiled in the metaphysical niceties of freedom: all the arguments he declared, were on the side of determinism, but everyone retained an "instinctive knowledge" of the freedom of the will'.<sup>3</sup> Even so, the universalism of who that 'everyone' included came under pressure by the end of the war, and as Lyndsey Stonebridge has emphasised, '[w]hat Orwell saw was restricted by his Englishness, as he himself understood better than some of his later advocates for whom his vision became the late universally trustworthy reference point in a world of collapsing truths'.<sup>4</sup> Using the references to Jewish refugees in *1984* as her example, Stonebridge argues that 'what Orwell could not comprehend [...] was where the implosion of the moral claims of the European nation state left a politics committed to equality and consensual citizenship'.<sup>5</sup> Stefan Themerson, in contrast, would offer a more nuanced take on the state of postwar liberal order and

international human rights, especially as the plight of refugees troubled what were previously seen as secure universal truths.

## **Refugees in London**

Unlike with Orwell, the event itself was never Themerson's central focus. Rather, it served as a setting for the meeting with Schwitters and a foil for what Themerson found valuable in Schwitters's work. The Schwitters that Themerson met at the 1944 PEN conference had lived through a decade of various forms of harassment, displacement, and confinement. Reproductions of his work were placed in the traveling 'degenerate art' shows arranged by the National Socialists in Germany between 1933 and 1936, and his freedom became so precarious he fled to Norway in early 1937. After the invasion of Norway in 1940, he escaped to Britain on the icebreaker Fridtjof Nansen, and was detained as an 'enemy alien' at Camp Hutchinson on the Isle of Man until his release in 1941.<sup>6</sup> The camp held many intellectuals and artists, and the camp commander supported initiatives like an art show and a camp newsletter (Schwitters contributed to both).<sup>7</sup> The newsletter, simply titled *The Camp*, was generally consumed with items on camp life and attitudes towards the war. Schwitters contributed a short story called 'The Flat and Round Painter' to the 'Exhibition Number' (13 November 1940). Simply told, the story concerns three-dimensional objects drawn in the air – a queen, her page, and the artist himself – who one-by-one float into the sky, rapidly expand, and suddenly burst. The story concludes after the artist bursts, noting 'and with him burst the ability of the painters to paint round figures round in the air with round brushes. Therefore, painters now paint plain, flat figures with flat brushes on flat canvas'.<sup>8</sup> What proceeds as a lightly told tale of floating figures with some fun wordplay (for example, the page 'shivered and schwittered, like the air under him schwittered and shivered' as he chased after his queen), ends on a bleak and tragic note.<sup>9</sup> Not only are the figures in the story destroyed, but the means to reproduce them are lost, and thus the world they inhabited is lost. It is possible to read the queen as representing Schwitters's art and career in Hanover, suddenly destroyed, and the page representing his years in Norway painting, hoping to return to his former life and his

work. With the loss of both, and his internment on the Isle of Man, the artist faces the destruction of all that he was and stood for.<sup>10</sup>

Themerson, too, found his way to London by a circuitous route, and like Schwitters, found a way to reflect on his circumstances through his writing. He arrived in London in 1942 following two years where he was stranded in France. A Polish-born filmmaker and writer, he had moved with his wife, the artist Franciszka Themerson, to Paris in 1937. When war broke out in 1939, he joined a Polish army outfit formed in France, and as the country was overrun he fled, with the assistance of the Red Cross, to a settlement of displaced Poles in Voiron, then part of Vichy France, where he remained until August 1942. Stefan entered Britain by virtue of his active service status in the Polish army (to which he remained attached in various film-related capacities until the end of the war).<sup>11</sup> He had spent nearly two years in Vichy France trying to secure the necessary visas to exit – to either the United States or Britain. He had no luck with Varian Fry at the Emergency Rescue Committee or with the officials at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in securing an American visa.<sup>12</sup> Franciszka, who had meanwhile been separated from Stefan, joined an evacuation to Britain in 1940, and spent her time in London first locating him and then working to get him the required documents to get out of France through Spain and Portugal. She often worked through an intermediary – her friend, the artist and Blok founder Teresa Żarnower, who was then based in Lisbon – also in efforts to get food to her family in the Warsaw Ghetto until that became an impossibility.<sup>13</sup> Stefan's time in Voiron and Marseille is worth its own attention, including more focus on the provisional communities of writers and artists to which he belonged, as well as the public services he was able to use, such as lending libraries and bookshops (mainly in Marseille but also around Grenoble). The collected correspondence, diaries, and other documents from this period in *Unposted Letters* (2013) detail how Stefan negotiated a chaotic sequence of shifting bureaucratic requirements while also threatened by increasingly oppressive measures against Jews in Vichy France, and at the same time, writing, debating, and attending lectures and other events put on in Voiron, Marseille and elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> In this unique milieu, Themerson began drafting what became his satirical novel *Professor Mmaa's Lecture*.

Within a termite hive, Professor Mmaa, a sort of termite Maurice Maeterlinck, offers his observations on the 'homo' (humans) and holds forth on social, political, and biological topics. While it is outside the scope of this essay to explore the particulars of Themerson's satirical targets, either in Voiron or elsewhere, the text clearly shows him working through the turmoil he is experiencing in the Polish community in Voiron. Themerson explores his sense of belonging – insofar as he is able to belong either in Voiron or later in London, and his own insistence on a defined individualism within those contexts – across several texts he started writing in the 1940s (*Professor Mmaa's Lecture* was published in 1953). So, when he arrived at the PEN conference, he was open to the message even as he had his own distance from the community assumed by its speakers.

### **Bayamus and Semantic Poetry**

Schwitters's art, and Stefan Themerson's memorialization of their meeting and friendship, were conditioned by their experiences of displacement and statelessness. The PEN conference happens to have been a symbolically loaded event for them to have first met at, especially as the conditions under which they were able to attend were not entirely voluntary. The estranging effect of their respective situations was initially captured by Themerson in his novel *Bayamus and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry* (1949). The book presents a London slightly askew as the narrator is led to the titular theatre by the three-legged Bayamus. On the way to the theatre, they stop at a cafe where they meet Karl Mayer, the co-writer of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, whom the narrator believes to be dead (indeed, he died a month before the PEN conference, an event which has already occurred in the timeline of the story). After the narrator praises Mayer's filmic innovations and ponders his demise, Schwitters enters mid-conversation. Mayer had just finished lamenting the silence which may greet the end of a film, to which Schwitters replies, 'I don't mind [...] I'm used to it. People always bawl when I'm reciting *dada*. But I don't mind'.<sup>15</sup> In a reference to Schwitters's 'Ursonate,' a long sound poem, structured as a sonata without instruments, and scored as a series of phonemes to be uttered, his entrance in this scene raises the topic of oratory, audience, and reception – all prefiguring a

situation the narrator finds himself in later on in the theatre. When Schwitters next speaks, he announces his interest in found-objects, citing a specific example:

When I was on my way to the Pen-Club conference called to celebrate the tercentenary of the publication of Milton's *Areopagitica*, I found near the Institut Français a piece of wire from a house which had been bombed two hours before, and during Mr. Forster's speech I made a space-sculpture out of it. One always finds beautiful things lying around.<sup>16</sup> These two statements from Schwitters represent most of his dialogue in his only appearance in the book. Together, they link Schwitters's poetic and artistic practice together and set it next to a piece of oratory. On one side there are phonemes and found-objects in the streets, and on the other side an esteemed novelist giving a speech in an institution. Schwitters's disinterest in the expected (applause, attention to the speaker – be it himself or Forster) and his openness to the unexpected (found-objects) made him an attractive figure to Themerson.

Such contrasts, especially as they are framed by the spaces they occupy – outdoors and within an international organisation – raise questions about what speech might be protected, how, and by whom. Themerson does not seek out answers to such questions in *Bayamus*. Instead, he often tests where common sense and received wisdom derived from, stretching logic to often absurdist degrees. In a conversation about how unusual it is to have three legs, Bayamus posits that one-legged individuals are just as extraordinary. The narrator counters with a violent story about his uncle becoming one-legged. In the mid-1920s, his Jewish uncle was shoved off a Warsaw tram by some aggressive university students, and when he landed a wheel of the tram amputated his left leg. The narrator insists this was not extraordinary, but 'quite natural':

Quite in accordance with the ordinary, observed processes of nature; quite in accordance with logical notions of cause and effect. If somebody who was a Jew set himself against a baptised person engaged in the acquisition of knowledge at Warsaw University or engaged in a course of study at Warsaw Polytechnic, then he got thrown out of trams. That was quite ordinary and quite normal. Quite in accordance with the body of rules, usages, or principles, with the

procedure, action and behaviour recognised by custom and usage as correct. I knew that under suitable conditions nothing could prevent the inherent latent capacity for exerting energy from exerting it in the direction of cutting legs off, and I knew that under suitable conditions nothing could prevent the hidden, unexerted powers of intellectual or spiritual action from constructing an argument to justify such a powerful wish to enjoy leg-cutting, or to obtain shoes by that method.<sup>17</sup>In this deliberately over-stretched explanation, our attention shifts from the horror of the event to the horror of its banality. And by the time we reach the end of his explanation, the violent hate crime becomes as inexorable as the rotation of a tram wheel. Rather than make it appear ‘quite natural’, the explanation foregrounds the question of whose rights are natural, what speech is acceptable. It appears it is permissible for students to utter antisemitic slurs and ‘go back to Palestine!’, but the uncle’s defence, according to the narrator, that ‘he had been living in Poland for 890 years’, and that ‘their attitude [was not] in line with the teachings of either the University or Christ’.<sup>18</sup> The rhetorical ploy has the narrator do more than tell a story which may garner a sympathetic response. Instead we are asked to question the grounds on which others may have felt justified in their speech, and in their violence. Indeed, *Bayamus and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry* is rich with such moments, especially when our narrator finally arrives at the aforementioned theatre and we finally learn about ‘semantic poetry’.

Thomerson’s use of the concept ‘semantic poetry’ was very elastic over his career. In *Bayamus*, in the words of a speech given by the narrator in the Theatre of Semantic Poetry, he argues that Semantic Poetry’s business was to translate poems not from one tongue into another but from a language composed of words so poetic that they had lost their impact, – into something that would give them a new meaning and flavour. I had been fed up with political oratory and with ezrapoundafskinian jazz plus joyce plus dada-merz plus some homespun rachmaninoff glossitis.<sup>19</sup> Often his semantic poems would replace key words with their definitions, with the verbal play often achieving a humorous result. A quick two examples from the cafe scene

discussed above would aptly demonstrate how he performed these ‘translations’. Instead of writing ‘Bayamus glanced at his watch,’ he ‘glanced at the small device worked by a coiled spring enclosed in a flat round silver case which was attached to a band he wore round his wrist, and which served for measuring time’.<sup>20</sup> Or, when they left the cafe, they ‘went through a mechanical device consisting of a heavy revolving gate so constructed that only one person could pass at a time,’ instead of a ‘revolving door’.<sup>21</sup> In their reputed attempts to simplify language by stripping away abstraction, the translations often over-complicate the textual moment, embracing a kind of semantic play where we are made to pause and ponder a single object in more depth. In that readerly act of pausing, we become aware of the construct of the text, of word choice, and the structure of language itself. For someone who had spent the duration of the 1940s being doubly displaced from his home and adopted countries of Poland and France, relocated to Britain, and eventually recognized as a British citizen only in 1954, Themerson was subject to a world of unnecessarily bureaucratic language restricting and confounding him. With his semantic translations, we are, in fact, placed in an overdetermined world of semantic play, overly prescribed, overly bureaucratic, suffocating and uncomfortable – where finding meaning becomes an almost thankless task. In this way, understanding the translations themselves is less important than what effects they produce on the reader, a mirroring of the disorienting effects of statelessness.<sup>22</sup>

### **Schwitters and the Liberty to Utter**

In his mixed-media collage essay ‘Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart’ (1967), Themerson recounts his first meeting with Schwitters to explore Schwitters’s working through his own sense of statelessness in his art. This piece is difficult to summarise usefully as Themerson deliberately jumps between straightforward biography, collage, multiple time charts including one tracking three dogs. At one point, in handwriting, he beckons ‘[t]his space, reader, for you to fill with whatever you consider relevant’.<sup>23</sup> First, he opens with two small photos of himself and Schwitters – Themerson in



his Polish military uniform and Schwitters in a suit – and proceeds to describe meeting at PEN, their outfits, and how they were received in those outfits.<sup>24</sup> I was in the uniform of the Polish army, he in the grey, worn-out suit of a German refugee. That at least was how we looked in the eyes of some of our neighbours. The logic of the time was to infer from some ‘public image’ individuals to the aggregate, to mix the mess thoroughly, and then to infer down from the aggregate to other individuals. To some of the onlookers, he was just another German (and once a German always a German, almost a camouflaged nazi), and I, quite undeservedly, one on whose white eagle a bit of the glory earned by Polish soldiers reflected; to others, however, he was an heroic victim of nazidom, and I, again quite undeservedly, one to be blamed for some of my generals’ nationalism or what not.<sup>25</sup> For Themerson, before you can speak about freedom of expression as a right, you must first address identity, citizenship, and place. As Lyndsey Stonebridge reminds us ‘[w]hen the placeless people of the mid-twentieth century were pushed out of the old ‘trinity of state-people-territory’ they also revealed how poor a protection natural rights had turned out to be’.<sup>26</sup> Rights were precarious for Germans like Schwitters, who, after 1938, had ‘to “prove” that they no longer had protection of the German government and were not leaving Germany for reasons of “purely personal convenience.”’<sup>27</sup> Throughout this piece, Themerson is acutely aware of Schwitters’s precarity as a stateless subject in Britain, and is perhaps alert to how, given a slightly altered scenario, he would have found himself similarly classified. The conference itself inhabits an interesting place in Themerson’s piece: it is important enough to mention in some detail, but Themerson, like any bored attendee at a conference, has shifted his focus to something more interesting in the room – Schwitters, while sitting in the audience, bending a piece of wire he had found amongst some bomb damage on the way to the conference. The wire he is bending became part of a December 1944 exhibition of his work at the Modern Art Gallery in London listed as ‘Air and wire-sculpture’.<sup>28</sup> In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Herbert Read argues that Schwitters realizes that the ‘unity of art is not something planned by an external authority, this beauty we find in a rock, in a cloud-formation, in a

landscape, or a human face, is not a measured beauty: it is arbitrary'.<sup>29</sup> Themerson sees Schwitters's artistry along similar lines. As Themerson recounts, Schwitters sat there, getting to work.

Mr. E.M. Forster was delivering his speech. Seeing Schwitters bending the wire, some distinguished writers thought he was an electrician or a plumber who had got lost into their PEN by mistake. Nevertheless, there, at that meeting, it was he, Schwitters, who was practicing what the speakers were preaching.

They quoted Milton: 'Give me the Liberty to know,

to utter,

& to argue freely, according to conscience,

above all Liberties'.<sup>30</sup>

Themerson then moves through a deconstruction of the word 'utter', supplying us with other valences of the word culminating in some *Ur Sonata* text ('Rinnzekete bee bee nnz krr müü'), and concluding '[t]o which you may easily add: the Liberty to bend a piece of wire into a space sculpture'.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, Themerson's projection of what others made of Schwitters may have been misguided. As John Katz, an invited speaker, reported in the South Place Ethical Society's *Monthly Record*, the condition of the space was such that Schwitters's handling of a piece of rubble would not have necessarily looked out of place.

A note of gay insouciance was struck from the outset by the President, E.M. Forster, when he instructed us what to do if, ignoring the alert, we should hear the alarm bell warning us that the doodle-bug was overhead. What we had to do was duck. As things turned out, we did not have to duck; though the windows of the French Institute in which we were meeting had been blasted only a few hours before the conference started [...] And with the blinds down and the lights up because of the broken glass!<sup>32</sup> If anything, Schwitters's wire reflected the surreality of the situation. Even so, in the passage above, Themerson is keen to stage himself and Schwitters away from the speakers and the rest of the audience. This appears to be more of a rhetorical move than an accurate account of his feelings towards PEN.

Themerson's actual position on PEN is more complicated. He eventually became a lifetime member in 1952 and PEN sought out people to write an obituary when he passed, but he was not afraid to speak his mind about the organisation. In the early 1950s, when PEN established the Writers in Exile, he wrote that '[w]riters are never, writers are nowhere in exile, for they carry within themselves their own kingdom, or republic, or city of refuge, or whatever it is that they carry within themselves'. However, he also allows that 'at the same time, *every* writer, ever, everywhere is in exile, because he is squeezed out from the kingdom, or republic, or city, or whatever it is that squeezes itself dry'. Ultimately, he is not rejecting the idea of support for Writers in Exile, but to the duality: '1. freedom of expression 2. writers-in-exile [... as it] derives from reasoning which I personally find fallacious'<sup>33</sup> The fallacy of this formulation, in his view, which either backgrounds the political condition of stateless or displaced persons such as himself (although he would eventually be naturalized as a British citizen in 1954), or worse, reduces people such as himself to that condition only, derives from a suspicion he held of organized ideas or assumptions about what a writer's or artist's obligations are, which is what he expresses next in the Time-Chart.

Themerson's associative leap to 'Liberty to bend a piece of wire into a space sculpture' leads him to a more expansive reading of both the *Areopagitica* and 'freedom of expression'. It is not a purely performative move – the stakes for Themerson and Schwitters are deeply personal and deeply political.

It may perhaps seem that the act of putting two innocent words together, the act of saying: **Blue is the colour of thy yellow hair**, is an innocent aesthetic affair, that the act of making a picture by putting together two or three innocent objects, such as: A Railway Ticket, &

A Flower, &

A Bit of Wood, is an

innocent aesthetic affair.

Well, it is not so at all: Tickets belong to Railway Companies (or to the State),

Flowers – to Gardeners,

Bits of Wood – to Timber Merchants.

If you mix these things together you are making havoc of the Classification System on which the Regime is established: you are carrying people's minds away from the Customary Modes of Thought, and people's Customary Modes of Thought are the very Foundation of Order (whether it is an Old Order or a (in his case: Nazi) Order) [...] you **are** (whether you want it or not) in the very bowels of Political Changes. Whether he wanted it or not, whether he knew it or not, Kurt Schwitters **was** in the very bowels of Political Changes. Adolf Hitler knew it. He knew that putting two innocent things together is **not** an innocent aesthetic affair. And that was why Kurt Schwitters was thrown out of Germany.<sup>34</sup> This process of creation, which Schwitters dubbed 'merz', in Themerson's view, exposes the power of the State over even the mundane aspects of our lives. Schwitters's merz work pre-dates his refugee years in Britain, but as Themerson points out, precipitated his exile and the work gained an acute political aspect: even the stateless, the cast off bits found in the street and in the margins, bear with them the mark of the State. Stonebridge, discussing Simone Weil, shows how the latter 'understood that uprootedness not only tore people from land, communities, traditions and histories, but from reality itself' and that the risk to individuals was that they be treated as 'mere things'.<sup>35</sup> Schwitters's merz objects reclaim the 'mere things' of daily life and foreground their presence.

And yet, the additional complication for Schwitters remained how that presence was circumscribed by the state and the society into which he was thrown. Mira L. Siegelberg opens her book *Statelessness: A Modern History* (2020) discussing Schwitters and his merz collages, noting that 'his works from [the 1920s] powerfully evoke the way in which the First World War unsettled the basic concepts that defined political reality. The map of the world, it seemed, would need to be remade entirely'.<sup>36</sup> In the face of the upheaval of the Second World War, Schwitters was faced with an additional political quandary: how did the identity category 'German' constrict or override the

category 'artist'? How could he continue to express himself in his displaced circumstance? Themerson clearly recognized this quandary, writing about Schwitters, but easily referring to his own circumstances:

The trouble with Schwitters was that he didn't like to be classified according to the set of rules against which he revolted. You can perhaps be an Italian futurist, or a Russian futurist; a French cubist, or a Belgian Congo cubist; a German expressionist, or a Japanese expressionist; but you cannot possibly be an Italian, or French, or German dadaist. You are either a dadaist or a German, &c. &c. You cannot be both. And when you are being refused a job in a factory, you want to be refused because you are a dadaist, or a merzist, and not because you are a German or something else similarly irrelevant, irrelevant if you are Dada, if you belong to the Internationale of the Spirit.<sup>37</sup> This passage from *Kurt Schwitters in England* (1958), a work Themerson published to celebrate Schwitters's late work, and from which parts were reworked for 'Time-Chart', bears a loaded title. It not only denotes the geography of the art and texts represented, but it also stages the individual, Kurt Schwitters, in a space – not of that place nor necessarily categorized by it. Kurt Schwitters remains inexorably himself.

Ultimately, in memorializing his meeting with Schwitters, Themerson spotlights his own plight and the plight of all other refugees struggling to have a voice. 'Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart' ends by acknowledging this struggle with a description of a gathering at Themerson's place. Schwitters and a Polish poet friend Themerson names only as 'A' are there.<sup>38</sup> During the meeting, Themerson invites Schwitters to perform *Ur Sonata* which 'A' begins to mock. Themerson is conflicted.

They were the same age, nearly. Both were men of the world, by which I mean rational, experienced, and tolerant; the ways history had treated them were not dissimilar, both had great talent, enormous senses of humour, and stood by their convictions [...] If they could not make peace, why should the rulers?<sup>39</sup>

Given what has preceded this moment in his essay, Themerson clearly sees this awkward exchange between his friends as representative of the postwar international crisis in miniature. The Time-Chart provocatively places images, quotes, and personal data alongside one another to foreground Themerson's and Schwitters's biographies and art in the context of world history from the turn of the century. History – aesthetic and political – push through the stateless as well. Looping back to the opening of the 'Time-Chart' essay, we can see, perhaps, that 'A' fell victim to the 'logic of the time [...] to infer from some "public image" individuals to the aggregate'.<sup>40</sup> 'Aggregate' thinking threatens to reify cultural difference as animus. Stonebridge, once more discussing Weil, observes that 'our obligations [...] cannot be reduced to the politics of representative sovereignty and cannot, therefore, in her view be co-opted for political force'.<sup>41</sup> Sitting around Themerson's place, Themerson, Schwitters, and 'A' must learn to resolve their aesthetic differences lest they be alienated by identitarian difference, and in the figure of Themerson the host, who remains friends with both, that peace might be managed.

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1 'Promotional Letter'. Miscellaneous. PEN Records circa 1921-1952. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. In addition to volunteering speakers, PEN received financial contributions from the Progressive League, the Rational Press Association, and the National Council for Civil Liberties, among others. 'Financial contributions list'. Miscellaneous. PEN Records circa 1921-1952. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

2 Others were generally more positive. Desmond MacCarthy referred to the book which followed the conference as 'a striking collection of often conflicting views'. Desmond MacCarthy, 'Free Discussion', *Sunday Times* (16 September 1945), p. 3. Rose Macaulay, who had attended most of the conference, wrote along similar lines about the conference's varied views and importance as an event, and yet worried about accusations of 'philosophic apathy' and 'some irrelevance here and there to [the conference's] central purposes'. Rose Macaulay, 'P.E.N. Jamboree', *Time and Tide* (27 October 1945).

3 David Dwan, *Liberty, Equality, and Humbug: Orwell's Political Ideals* (Oxford, 2018), p. 39.

4 Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees* (Oxford, 2018), p. 82.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 75-6.

6 As an interesting historical note, Nansen – an explorer and humanitarian who helped the League of Nations attempt to solve the post-revolution Russian refugee problem, contrived what became known as 'Nansen passports,' or provisional passports which allowed refugees to cross borders and work in the states which recognized them. Schwitters, as a German, would not have been eligible for one. See especially, Mira L. Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 137.

7 See especially his artist biography at the Kurt Schwitters Foundation: <http://www.schwitters-stiftung.de/english/bio-ks3.html>

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- 8 Kurt Schwitters, *Three Stories* (Tate Publishing, 2010), p. 10. The lament which closes the story – ‘painters now paint plain, flat figures with flat brushes on flat canvas’ – also refers to the limited resources he had in the camp to continue making art, and being forced by his circumstances to paint portraits of camp officials to raise money for supplies.
- 9 Ibid., p. 9.
- 10 The story’s concluding lesson seems to be about the permanent distortions the current political landscape has on art, but it is also possible Schwitters is commenting on the limits imposed on the artists during his camp detention. *The Camp* itself is mostly monothematic and drab. As a reader, you are reminded of its context on each page, and there was no space for formal experimentation or radical expression. For anyone familiar with Schwitters’s work at the time, the story would have felt like a curiously straightforward affair.
- 11 The early wartime experience of the Themersons has been recorded in several places, notably in Jasia Reichardt and Nick Wadley, eds., *The Themerson Archive Catalogue* (MIT Press, 2020) and Franciszka Themerson and Stefan Themerson, *Unposted Letters* (Gaberbochus & De Harmonie, 2013).
- 12 Themerson and Themerson, *Unposted Letters*, pp. 118, 126.
- 13 Ibid. There was extensive correspondence with Żarnower and it can be found throughout the volume. For more on Żarnower, see especially Natasza Sytrna, ‘Teresa Żarnower (Żarnowerowna)’, *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* (<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/zarnower-teresa>).
- 14 Themerson and Themerson, *Unposted Letters*, p. 53. The editors note that Stefan never mentions these measures in his diaries. The initial regulation issued on 3 October 1940 would not have directly applied to him, but the growing number of regulations during his time in France would have been increasingly worrying. ‘The Jewish Statute was the start of a thickening web of regulations directed against the Jews. Over the next twelve months, Vichy issued twenty-six laws and twenty-four decrees on the Jews. In June 1941, a second Jewish Statute widened the denition of Jewishness and introduced more occupations banned to Jews. It was followed by decrees imposing quotas on Jewish lawyers, doctors, students, architects, and pharmacists.’ Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 355.
- 15 Stefan Themerson, *Bayamus and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry* (Gaberbochus, 1965), p. 12.
- 16 Ibid., p. 13.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
- 18 Ibid., p. 21.
- 19 Ibid., p. 67.
- 20 Ibid., p. 13.
- 21 Ibid., p. 14.
- 22 As Robert Sheppard is keen to point out, Themerson’s semantic translations are akin to contemporary conceptual writing as ‘their effects are partly communicated by description of the method alone, and continued textual analysis merely repeats – even weakens – the concept’. Robert Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Poetry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 161.
- 23 Stefan Themerson, ‘Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart’, *Typographica* 16 (1967), p. 33.
- 24 Curiously, given how exact Themerson is with details, he misremembers the year as 1943. Other details he provides – being at the French Institute, hearing E.M. Forster speak – mean he was clearly at the 1944 conference.
- 25 Themerson, ‘Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart’, p. 29.
- 26 Stonebridge, *Placeless People*, p. 2.
- 27 Ibid., p. 18.
- It is now held at The Tate Gallery as ‘Red Wire Sculpture (1944)’. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schwitters-red-wire-sculpture-t05767>. There is, in fact, some confusion over which of the two wire sculptures Themerson is thinking of. He shares a photograph in *Kurt Schwitters in England* of a different sculpture made in 1943, which causes him to mis-date the year of the conference to 1943. However, the one held in the Tate looks to be a piece of rebar, hardly something Schwitters would have been able to bend freely while sat at the PEN conference. My thanks to Dr. Isabel Schulz, head of the Kurt Schwitters Archive at the Sprengel Museum Hanover, for clarifying matters.
- 29 Herbert Read, ‘Kurt Schwitters Exhibition at the Modern Art Gallery’ (1944), n.p.
- 30 Themerson, ‘Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart’, p. 30. While I am attempting to capture an aspect of the graphic layout of this piece, it will ultimately be limited. For example, to the right of the above quote, Themerson has placed a large drawing of the wire Schwitters was fiddling with.
- 31 Ibid., p. 30.
- 32 John Katz, ‘Impressions of the Areopagitica Conference’ *Monthly Record* (July 1944), pp. 11, 12.
- 33 Kurt Schwitters, ‘Letter to the Honorary Secretary, Committee for Writers in Exile’ 29 January 1951. PEN Folder, Themerson Papers, National Library of Poland. See also Jasia Reichardt and Nick Wadley eds., *Themerson Archive, Vol. 1 Letters and Documents* (MIT, 2019), p. 301 for further context.
- 34 Ibid., p. 31. Themerson later in the time chart insists that the bus ticket in a Schwitters collage is ‘no more a Protest against the world [... but] a very personal affair. It is his personal bus ticket’. Ibid., p. 38.
- 35 Stonebridge, *Placeless People*, p. 106.
- 36 Siegelberg, *Statelessness*, p.1.
- 37 Stefan Themerson, *Kurt Schwitters in England* (Gaberbochus Press, 1958), p. 27.
- 38 This is likely Anatol Stern, who was an acquaintance of both men and whose personal copy of *Kurt Schwitters in England* is held at the National Library of Poland.

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- 39 Themerson, 'Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart', p. 46.  
40 Themerson, 'Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart', p. 29.  
41 Stonebridge, *Placeless People*, p. 110.