

PACT
WITH
THE
DEVIL
ON MY
SKIN



Stanisława Przybyszewska





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Translated with an introduction
by Søren A. Gauger



Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

Pact with the Devil on My Skin

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Originally published

in Polish as Stanisława

Przybyszewska, *Cyrograf na*

własnej skórze (2015) and

Wybraniec losu (2021).

Przybyszewska,

Stanisława, 1901–1935

Pact with the Devil on

My Skin, a translation

of *Cyrograf na własnej*

skórze and *Wybraniec*

losu

First Contra Mundum Press
edition 2026.

—1st Contra Mundum Press
Edition

474 pp., 5×8 in.

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ISBN 9781940625652

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reviewer who may quote
brief passages in a review.

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Stanisława.
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Introduction.

2026932805

Library of Congress
Cataloguing-in-Publication
Data



This publication was produced with the support
of the ©POLAND Translation Programme.

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Introduction

It is difficult to overstate the furor caused by what later became known as the Gorgon Affair, surely the most prominent trial in Poland between the world wars. Whatever your prejudices, whatever *piquanterie* tickled your fancy, this trial had something for you. Rita Gorgon (the surname is rather too perfect — but she was born Emilia Margerita Ilić) was from an area presently belonging to Croatia. She married a Pole, Edwin Gorgon, with whom she had a child; the husband had soon contracted syphilis while out on one of his many flings, & so abandoned his family to go live in the USA. Rita parked her son with her stepparents and went off to work in a pastry shop in Lwów (presently Lviv, Ukraine). This was where she was found and hired by an architect, Henryk Zaremba, to be governess to his children; his wife, you see, had been committed to a mental hospital after trying and failing to kill herself. In a matter of months, Rita and Henryk, both estranged from their spouses, were having a torrid affair, a fact that Henryk's daughter, Lusia, found most distressing.

When, on New Year's Eve 1931, the seventeen-year-old Lusia was found there lying in her room, hacked to death with an ice pick, the police all-too-swiftly deduced Rita was the most probable culprit,

and the media and public opinion were only too delighted to follow suit. Rita Gorgon was simply tailor-made for condemnation in Poland in the 1930s: she was a foreigner, living in sin with a married man, she was from the lower classes and, perhaps most egregiously of all, she had harmed a girl who, though not her biological daughter, she clearly *ought* to have mothered. Whatever the overriding cause, the hysteria that ensued was unprecedented in Polish society of the day. Crowds gathered by the thousands, demanding to see Gorgon lynched. The newspapers were filled with “eyewitness interviews,” peddling lurid gossip from servants of the household.

One of precious few dissenting voices — they could be counted on the fingers of one hand — belonged to Stanisława Przybyszewska. In a full front-page article for *Wiadomości Literackie* in 1933, titled “Rita Gorgon, a Surrogate Affair,” she explains how she, too, had initially been swept up in what she calls the “epidemic” of hysteria, but when the fever broke, she gradually came to see the impossibility of Gorgon having committed this murder. Some of her evidence may strike the contemporary reader as doing more to reinforce stereotypes than to overturn them (Gorgon could not have committed such a murder, she argues, because, as a woman and a governess, she would not have tolerated blood

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But the Years We Were Young —

All in all, the farewell party was not a flop — at least as far as the lady of the house could tell. At that moment she was lying on an ottoman with sharp corners & slender legs, somewhat fatigued, her hands folded behind her dainty head — her feet with their oddly svelte ankles virginally crossed. True, the feast had been just a hair's breadth from becoming an orgy; true, the guests ought to have been selected a bit more prudently; but all things considered, the predicament of all those men could go a long way to excuse things. They'd have some pleasant memories, at least.

Jenny's eyelids drooped. She was drowsy. — One chapter of her life had ended, it was short but sweet; now it was over — too bad. At any rate — Lord! It's not as if it were the first time!

After all, a conclusion so irrevocable and so — premature — had an irresistible allure. The pain of separation chisels love into a luminous and immaculate crystal — happiness must die a bloody death to give love a form that is radiant and perhaps — perhaps immortal.

Immortal — Jenny could not stop yawning.

Tomorrow, I myself will go to battle. Time to launch the attack in earnest — to show the world's not big enough for the two of us — Ester & Jenny. Almighty Lord, could you not have dropped this plague on

Berlin, London, even Saint Petersburg? Did you really have to unleash the both of us on Paris? Now you've only yourself to blame that one of us must fall — I frittered away so much time carousing in Capua, but I have no regrets; starting tomorrow, it's off with the silk and on with the armor. Luckily, nothing can stop me from waging this bloody guerilla war; luckily, starting tomorrow, soul and body, mind and will, are mine, all mine.

She dozed off. The dark, transparent glass of the mirror reflected the slender flames of the fragrant candles in flickering streaks. Jenny breathed steadily, still ensconced in the artistry of her dreams and solitude. Not one fold of her gown spoiled the harmony of shapes; not one line of her lovely face betrayed her profound fatigue or illicit thoughts, into whose serene depths she tumbled.

She stood opposite Ester, making a pair like Andromache and Hermione. At that moment, her spite for her rival was tempered by creative effort, the nervous tension, and keen & constant vigilance. Playing audience to Ester's drama drove Jenny half insane. Here on stage, it was far more than just life at stake — she'd have cast it all to the dogs for proof she had vanquished that prancing chambermaid who dared to play a tragedy — and got away with it! But the only referee in this contest had his eye on everything but the artistry. If it was the laurels

I'm after, or at least an end to the conflict, I'll have to take the fight elsewhere. If we were to stand there naked, side-by-side, and instead of straining our voices to recite tiresome alexandrines — if we were to rotate on the spot like two pillars — well, then there'd be no complaints the audience was bored! Then the decision would be swift in coming!

Oh the animals — the animals! They ought to quake in awe instead of feasting their lorgnettes on the two actresses on stage, with the appraising eye of butchers ready to grope the females in their box seats directly afterward.

But what am I really waiting for —? What a pain that feeling is! The line breaks off, runs out of steam — what am I...? Ah yes, the emperor is riding off east — so they'll probably be shooting —? Of course, the cannons are already tumbling onto the box seats — the bourgeois ladies yelp with delight: Such lovely pups! Little cannon-shaped dogs are all the rage at the moment. The aristocratic ladies from Faubourg St. Germain cast a withering glance; evidently the cannons' lineage leaves much to be desired — and they rolled in unannounced, without so much as a letter of introduction!

Their barrels were pointed toward the stage — and everyone in the stalls rose to their feet, hundreds of hands held rifles poised to shoot —

It was only a modern form of applause.

And so *now* we shall see which of us comes in first — time for the verdict at last — it will be sure and binding —

It is the only rational tribute: to offer your beloved a sip of your rival's blood —

Except — who would my beloved be? I'll have to give fate a hand —

Now they stood side-by-side, taut as bowstrings, awaiting the pivotal moment — each ready to push her rival into the flames.

The conductor slowly raised his baton —

The building shook in its foundations, its hundreds of windowpanes groaned, it thundered with echoes of the Last Judgment. Jenny was more nimble; one shove and she pushed Ester right into the line of fire, while hopping to one side — Ester swayed, spun in an arc, tumbled gracefully, following that fine art to the letter — except this time, her death was both play-acting and real —

A wild bloodlust filled Jenny's triumphant eyes and heart; she grinned amid the black hail of bullets. Remembering that an audience longs to be gently moved, she would play out her sorrow at the loss of her dear friend. She approached the corpse splayed out on the floor, oblivious to the bullets, and was about to kneel before it — when panic seized her by the throat. Kneel before a bloody corpse!!! No! Never — never again —

All at once, doors slowly opened in walls that had seemed smooth, in the gloom below the box seats, leading to an even deeper darkness — they opened of their own accord, a gust of icy wind blew in, whipping ghoulishly about the theater — the corpse lay on the floorboards, and in animal terror, Jenny tried to retreat, to flee, anywhere she wouldn't have to see the bloody corpse — she tried in vain to scream — the living body had turned to stone; the air seemed to howl with the tumult of all seven hells.

Finally, she lifted her head. The onslaught was over. The silence was awful.

Olivier was standing over her, slightly bent forward. She wondered if he was a vision.

“Jenny, don't be mad. I'm back. It would have crushed me to leave remembering that feast of the condemned. I want to use every second I still have. At seven in the morning I am no longer a man — I lose hold of my time and my thoughts. Don't deny me these last few hours.”

“Oh, all right, Ollie... stay — I, too, have a fierce and onerous battle to fight — my life is in peril, the cruelties I must inflict and suffer may be as dreadful as a war — stay, we're comrades — though we serve on different fronts. — But really, you could have knocked.”

“Oh, I did knock, darling, & louder than I thought proper.”

“Really?... Seems that rings a bell — but then, I didn’t hear a thing — let’s go.”

Despite the mortal exhaustion that had sent her reeling onto the ottoman after the feast, and now sapped her will to move, three hours later Jenny had no interest in the bedroom. She decided the massive mirror next to the bed fascinated her and filled her with a profound sense of peace; that it loved her and she feared it, she felt that with one simple wish it would sketch her the future. Olivier nodded his understanding: the mirror’s infinite depths surely captured the eyes, and after the eyes, the mind, the soul — with an irresistible attraction. And so they stayed in the boudoir.

Half-succumbing to a sick fascination for the mirror, Olivier tumbled into a vast dismay that sapped his will to live, just as he’d feared for his life before. He had played his part in every battle of the imperial epic, but had not especially distinguished himself or tried to rise in the ranks. All in all, he was a lousy soldier; he was unable to shed that mask of humanity every self-respecting officer removes, bundles up, and tucks deep in his suitcase when the

time comes to serve; evidently it was stuck to his face. Though he had a mean streak and tactical skills, the basic conditions of war sent him spiraling into first a maddening, delirious frenzy, then a mute, numb despair. On two separate, dire occasions he had been seized by hysterical laughter, or what initially seemed to be laughter, but then turned into a grating howl — or fits of demonic cackling — once upon visiting a hospital immediately after Wagram, and another time while executing a few dozen inhabitants of a town full of turncoats.

He was now thirty-three and felt he was standing at the very cusp of life. Two months of freedom in Jenny's company had been the very stuff of existence. He now knew it was inevitable that Jenny would leave him — even if he were to make it back from Russia, the relationship would be dead and gone. This brilliant woman, pouring all her energy and cruelty into fighting for the imperial crown of the theater — a woman like that did not encumber herself with love, she never fell in its trap; for her, love was a recreation, a tonic, never a passion.

As a strong and mature man, Olivier ultimately thought and felt the same thing. It was not losing his lover that made him melancholy, it was an awareness of having reached fulfillment — a sense of even-tide — of autumn — of withering decay.

Moreover, he had a premonition he would not be coming back from Russia. He shuddered at the thought that winter could strike while they were there. Perhaps the Emperor, who was half-African, a southerner, had no idea what a northern winter could do. "The whole campaign is criminally short-sighted; you can see the Great One is declining — quite swiftly — down the western slope — he's crossed the *mezzo del cammin*. He's lost all sense of proportion, no longer has the nose, the instinct for the job. And he's become distressingly fat. All the while he's in charge of the lives & properties of twenty million people — nearly all of us, whether civilians or soldiers, are prone to the whims of his hypertrophic energy —

"And so I'll die, like a dog huddled by a fence — for a lone man and his mania, not for an idea — I'll die reluctantly, indifferent, with a charred and clotted heart. I'll perish somewhere in the snows and mud of Cisuralian Asia — I, who might have fallen at Valmy —" He was interrupted by Jenny's bemused, though muffled shriek:

"Ollie!! What on earth are you doing?"

He quickly wiped his damp eyelashes and the two frosty lines trailing down his cheeks.

"That damn mirror of yours could hobble Samson faster than Delilah's scissors."

“Tell me the source of those tears, rarer than the fragrant blood of a Lahore rose — more precious than the diamonds of the Sultan of Samarkand. Tell me the secret of your buried sorrow — I must know what can move that heart of granite. For it cannot be our parting that gave rise to that priceless pair of tears.”

“It’s your modesty I love.”

“I dare you to repeat that.”

“It would be safer to take it back. It was not ‘modesty’ I meant, but ‘clear-eyed view of yourself.’ You were right — I’d almost forgotten about you. I was thinking of something and someone else.”

“Stop it! You flatter me. I’m blushing. But who is this lucky ‘someone else’?”

“Do you suppose that on the last night of his mortal existence — a man’s thoughts turn to women?!”

“But what else—? Ah, I know. You wept over the nation’s ingratitude to General Dumouriez.”

Olivier narrowed his eyes. You could see he had reached the very brink of exhaustion.

“Don’t mock me, Jenny. You know I don’t get those kinds of jokes. You’re from another world; you never lived through Year Two; so you can’t comprehend the vicious hatred we’ve felt for that scoundrel, that rotten sell-out, who will roam London for the next two hundred years, churning out more of his memoirs, for even more paltry earnings —

"I wasn't thinking about just one man — nor about a single catastrophe. I was thinking about how after Year Two came the disgrace of 1795, and about how even that solitary *Anno Secondo* did not last the entire three hundred and sixty-five days —"

Jenny grew sober. In the depths of her heart, she was bored out of her mind. But she did not want to earn that browbeating, that stare of contemptuous pity she'd gotten the last time she was too sincere, six weeks before. So she adopted a look of utter dismay and waited patiently for her friend to cry his eyes out. She consoled herself that without this flaw, however fatal it was, Ollie would have been the perfect man — and thus no man at all. Fine; but he might have chosen a more amusing quirk. Sometimes she felt downright sorry for him. — A man in the throbbing heart of the burgeoning empire; a man taking part in conquering the world, in molding a new era; and a Parisian — a Parisian who, at the very font of the French soul, still nurtured ideas from the old generation, ideas as dead, bankrupt, forgotten as their methods — an imperial officer moved by neither Wagram nor Leipzig, nor the Treatises of Tilsit, nor Marshal Ney — but who went mad with ecstasy thinking of Valmy and Jemmappes, and whose forehead veins bulged at the mere mention of Dumouriez — and this in what was now 1811, thank God — but Olivier got mired at the Ninth of

Thermidor and there he remained. The Ninth of Thermidor — when would that have been exactly? Ninety-two? No. Ninety-three? Or ninety-four — or ninety-five? No, he mentioned the disgrace of ninety-five — but perhaps that was precisely why —

“Listen Ollie,” she whispered, so as not to stir him too roughly.

“What is it, dear?”

“Tell me, what exactly was the Ninth of Thermidor?”

The officer’s body had been lying quite limp, and now it shook with a deep, violent shudder. He did not shift positions, though every muscle tensed as if bracing for a blow. Not looking at her, after a long pause, he asked in an indifferent whisper:

“Sorry — what was the question, exactly?”

“Ollie, I just thought of the day of the Ninth of Thermidor — and I don’t know when it was —”

“The twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth of July, seventeen ninety-four.”

“What’s that, it was two days — ??”

“Right, two days — from nine in the morning on the Ninth to — six-thirty in the evening of the Tenth. A day — and a night — and then one more day —.”

“I don’t get it, did the Convention sit for the whole time — ?”

Olivier let out a condescending laugh in response.

“I suppose it did — they sat there like dolts and

then basked in tributes from all of France for sitting so splendidly — they sat there, cheering all the good news, gnashing their teeth when the news was bad — they sat there, those fatted pigs, waiting passively for something to happen — the Convention!!! —

“There were thirty Girondins — and there were five of *them* — struck down. In such a shamelessly vile way — five struck down by six hundred — and among those five, two growing boys, driven by personal feelings —”

“Who were they — ?”

“Jenny, please, give it a rest.”

Jenny dutifully put her tragic mask back on and waited. The wait was infinitely long.

At first she feared she would nod off. After all, lying on their back, no one can be totally sure they won't start to snooze. But all of a sudden she was relieved to find herself swept up by a warm, rushing tide of thoughts that swept clean her murky mind. Half-involuntarily, she traveled back to times in which Ollie had never ceased to live, over whose rubble, like Jeremiah, he had lingered in the dismal silence of comfortless mourning. — She too had experienced the revolution — but she experienced it through the thoughts and feelings of those around her; nine-year-old girls seldom have their own.

The beginning was particularly vivid: finally, in life's tedium, which she felt with a profound agony,

there was a bit of action, an electric thrill. Oh, that marvelous anxiety when Paris teetered on the edge of exploding in ferocity and panic — when companies of foreign soldiers poured into the streets in incredible numbers, and riders did not trot along in their usual boring way, but galloped full tilt, making an awful racket, with glistening sabers, terrifying passers-by — a yell, a snort, agitated shouts & calls, curses, commands, laughter — now fearsome, now sharply piercing, now booming & triumphant — the stentorian tones of public speakers, every guardrail by every entryway was a tribunal — in the evenings it all merged into a mighty hum, like the beating wings of a flock of a thousand giants birds, like the sea's rising tide.

Gates and shutters were fastened — a sudden silence, punctuated by the occasional roar of cannons in the distance — an atmosphere of breathless suspense — this was the lingering impression of July fourteenth — the day the Bastille was stormed. — Then everything somehow turned out fine, & there was a mass of celebrations and dances, joyous festivities — enough to make you sick of it. It was an odd combination: there was a holiday every three days, people were always walking about in their Sunday best; always chasing after the crowd, barreling off to catch a new spectacle — and at the same time, there was hunger. Simple, lethal hunger.

Her parents wrung their hands; father, perpetually drunk, quarreled with mother at least four times a day; the children were lost in a thickening cloud of despair. — In the morning the civic processions gathered, city hall hung its flags, the streets and gateways were decked in foliage — at noon the same mob lynched Foulon and Berthier.

People grew accustomed to the racing pulse and the quickening step, to unending excitement, to emotions of all manner and intensity; and so after a major thrill, after volleys of laughter & joy stoked by the famous women's march and their triumphal return with drums, cannons, and the royal family — nothing left a lasting impression, no shock could shake you to the bone. Except that people began looking better — dull eyes were jolted awake, they sparkled with life and thoughts — crumpled bodies recalled they had muscles & nerves — they stretched, warmed up — stopped dragging their legs like a heavy, futile burden — people walked with a spring in their step, as if sure of where they were going, as if they had chosen their own path.

Ah yes — then the wondrous and terrible drama of the crisis: the sinister flag on city hall, the enormous cannon on Pont Neuf, the streets pounding with the motion and hubbub of a crowd in a thrall of excitement: the homeland in peril. — Life ceased to be private; the home was a hole where you went

to sleep — as briefly as possible; life was in the streets. A Homeric laugh, just concealing a muffled roar of rage: this was the response to the Brunswick Manifesto. — The night bled deep red, a luminous glow, the ghoulish choir of all the city's bells, the walls gently trembled from the bronze clamor — in the morning, the rattle of gunfire: Place du Carrousel, August tenth. And then...

The thread snaps. The mirror clouds over: What came next — ? Regrettable memories, it seems — ah yes — a gross parody of ecstasy, drunken caterwauling that aped a triumphant cry — the writhing of a stoked crowd like a ball of maggots, a thousand staggering drunks crammed together. And from time to time, a weird, protracted shriek, sharp as a shard of glass — it had a peculiarly disquieting tone: this was the night of September third and fourth, when a mob of degenerates floated to the surface, egged on by the slaughter of the conspirator prisoners — a mass martial court, and, taking advantage of the city's strange mood, began emulating those who, in grim silence and military discipline, carried out this hideous necessity. The mob flung themselves on ordinary prisoners, massacred the prostitutes in Salpêtrière and the lunatics in Bicêtre, without a trial, of course, with no sober method, with no rhyme or reason —

Jenny shook all over. Now her life's most hideous memory had slithered into the very spotlight of her

consciousness. A memory that nature had shunted into the depths of her unconscious, but which unexpectedly reared its head on occasion, wrapping her body in a revolting, slippery molluscos tentacle, stinging the nerves beneath her skin with a thousand pricks —

Jenny moved so abruptly that Olivier jolted back, afraid. She had been lying in repose, like a beautiful tomb statue, but now she convulsively balled up, her head cradled between her shoulders and in her taut fingers.

“Jenny — what happened?”

It took some doing for her to calm down; still, she could not lift her head.

“I just recalled something — something — dreadful. Something you could never know, not even after spending two-thirds of your life in the hell of war. Oh Ollie, I beg of you, say something to distract me — that thought could just about drive me mad —”

Olivier sat on the edge of the ottoman; his magnetic caress soothed her frayed nerves, eased her cramped muscles.

“You know, Jenny — if you feed that kind of parasite, then all your efforts to forget it only make it worse. The only way is to pluck up your courage, and instead of repelling the phantom, embrace it, shine a light on it, and study it from all sides. Phantoms feed on human blood, gorge themselves on the

energy of their victim, take control of their lives — but these horrid creatures dissolve in a sober light, they never survive precise, factual analysis. — So my advice is that you tell me everything: then you'll have to face and evaluate every detail. From then on, you'll see how the whole thing is subdued."

"Oh no, Ollie. Of course, I'm happy to tell you — keeping that canker to myself is an unbearable weight. But I hesitate — for your sake. This is an odious *crime* I committed as a child. I'm afraid you'll find me despicable — that you'll think of me with a shudder of disgust —"

Olivier smiled.

"Don't worry. I don't doubt you've committed a crime as a child, even an odious one. A child's urges are all steeped in evil; those immaculate souls poets admire are in fact cesspits. But we grow out of it. The ten-year-old Jenny was only a larval seed of today's Jenny; and it's her I love — the old one is of no interest. Go on, tell me."

"Fine. But I won't degrade myself so — not without evening the score. Let's be fair. You think of a crime of yours, something that makes you sick to the stomach at the very thought of it; something you hate yourself for, that terrifies and haunts you —"

"Oh, that's a cinch. I've got skeletons. I don't want to brag, but you're going to have to admit that your crime, whatever it is, pales before my —"

"I sincerely doubt it. You start; I have to figure out if I *can* confide in you —"

"My crime is among the most ordinary — that is, the stupidest; and the vileness of the crime is mainly its stupidity. — I was nine years old; we had just had one of those ghoulish winters before the Revolution, where they had a single, foolproof method against the cold and grim starvation: the gallows. Well, and just a bit of philanthropy, of the private sort. Our family was doing only so-so; I wasn't going hungry, at least, while on my block alone, eight people died a twin death: the cold was hunger's accomplice, finishing the job. Because hunger was an everyday topic of conversation, a point of interest and a major focus, I wanted to see it for myself. But without suffering.

"There's nothing wrong with curiosity when you've heard about something, but cannot imagine it. But a child's curiosity always has a very powerful urge — the simple desire to relish other people's suffering. The child doesn't see this, of course; but does that alter the viciousness of the fact?

"I was quite sure there was something wrong with my desire; I knew I would not be able to confess it to anyone, I was too ashamed. How was I to reach my goal? I wasn't about to creep into some wretch's home and observe him for a few days; fear and shame would have stopped me. I began to sweat over these

impediments — the whim became an obsession — until finally I found an elegant solution. After all, there was a creature weaker than myself, who was defenseless; a creature I could safely use as my plaything. This was our cat, who was generally neglected.

“I got swiftly down to business. I put the animal in a crate, put the crate in the attic, and covered it with wire netting so I could enjoy the view and prod it all I liked without my victim escaping or swiping me with its claws. At home I feigned grief over the missing cat — I searched for it and called out, I even cried — I was quite sure that, even if it was discovered, no one would suspect me of such a thing — I was, after all, their only child. My two slightly older cousins were staying with us; I could use this to my advantage. My lightning rod was all set.

“I’ll spare you the details. I’ll only say I gave the cat no peace; I wanted the experiment to be complete. I watched it rage; when it drifted into a stupor, I waved meat in front of the bars. That was my favorite game. On the fifth day, because it had stopped responding, I even gave it a morsel; thus I invented a new game. I dragged out its life by a few hours to keep from losing my toy, as long as it kept me amused. By day seven I’d had enough. At any rate, caution dictated I put an end to this game, which was taking up several hours every day. Because I was

also interested in death by starvation (mainly for the intoxicating sense of power: I was destroying a life all by myself, on a whim — and in a sophisticated way), I decided I had to witness the end at all costs. I even conquered a mad temptation to rouse the stiffening animal & drive it insane once more; I waited patiently.

“Luckily, the cat survived the time when I had to fake going to sleep. I laid down, then, an hour later, got up as silently as I could; thus I gave the game away — not myself, but my captive. My sixteen-year-old sister came to find me in the attic and discovered the moribund animal, freed it, and carried it downstairs — with my help, you understand. The cat looked frightful — it was like a crumpled rag — I imagine any other woman would have tossed it on the trash pile without a second thought — it seemed to have croaked, the sight would have crushed a delicate soul — which my sister clearly was not; she got down to rescuing it with skill and determination, and really did nurse the thing back to life. About a decade ago, it died of old age.

“Meanwhile, I basked in the praise. I’d heard some groans from upstairs; without wasting a second I ran to help, in spite of the darkness and the fact I was unarmed, not wasting a second to call others. What a heart of gold, what courage! I was praised and admired before our guests. Because the first lie

was such an unexpected success, I decided to protect myself, while satisfying my family's indignant — or aroused — sense of morality, their demand to know the culprit. I dropped an innocent hint that cousin Arthur had been carrying the cat around the garden just before it mysteriously vanished. They believed me, of course; who would not credit their son's testimony against a relative? Arthur, who had shared our sincere shock and revulsion, suddenly became a pariah; everyone kept their distance, viewing him with horror and disgust. For a long time he had no idea what was going on; when finally he did, he raged for two hours, dismissing the accusations as nonsense, as any innocent person would — that is, quite unconvincingly. And like anyone innocently accused who becomes indignant, he behaved like a culprit, defending himself clumsily — and the listeners felt their suspicions turn into certainties. He departed that same evening, in a fit of despair.

“Well then, Jenny, will you stick to your guns, you still think you'll win?”

After an endless silence Jenny's voice surfaced from the depths of the mirror — muted, hesitant, bloodless:

“Actually... I don't know...”

“There you go. Not everyone's got such a masterpiece. Maybe not even every child. And now — it's your turn —”

COLOPHON



PACT WITH THE DEVIL ON MY SKIN
was handset in InDesign CC.

The text & display font is *BC Figural*.

Book design & typesetting: Alessandro Segalini

Cover design: CMP

Opening spread image: Portrait of Stanisława
Przybyszewska with Luka.

PACT WITH THE DEVIL ON MY SKIN
is published by Contra Mundum Press.



Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

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The primary aim of Contra Mundum is to publish translations of writers who in their use of form and style are *à rebours*, or who deviate significantly from more programmatic & spurious forms of experimentation. Such writing attests to the volatile nature of modernism. Our preference is for works that have not yet been translated into English, are out of print, or are poorly translated, for writers whose thinking & aesthetics are in opposition to timely or mainstream currents of thought, value systems, or moralities. We also reprint obscure and out-of-print works we consider significant but which have been forgotten, neglected, or overshadowed.

There are many works of fundamental significance to *Weltliteratur* (& *Weltkultur*) that still remain in relative oblivion, works that alter and disrupt standard circuits of thought — these warrant being encountered by the world at large. It is our aim to render them more visible.

For the complete list of forthcoming publications, please visit our website. To be added to our mailing list, send your name and email address to: info@contramundum.net



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Edited by Rainer J. Hanshe & Erika Mihálycsa (2014 ~)



CONTRA MUNDUM PRESS

is published by Rainer J. Hanshe

Typography & Design: Alessandro Segalini

THE FUTURE OF KULCHUR

THE PROJECT

From major museums like the MoMA to art house cinemas such as Film Forum, cultural organizations do not sustain themselves from sales alone, but from subscriptions, donations, benefactors, and grants.

Since benefactors of Peggy Guggenheim's stature are rare to come by, and receiving large grants from major funding bodies is an infrequent and unreliable source of capital, we seek to further our venture through a form of modest support that is within everyone's reach.

Although esteemed, *Contra Mundum* is an independent boutique press with modest profit margins. In not having university, state, or institutional backing, other forms of sustenance are required to move us into the future.

Additionally, in the past decade, the reduction of the purchasing budgets across the nation of both public and private libraries has had a severe impact upon publishers, leading to significant decreases in sales, thereby necessitating the creation of alternative means of subsistence.

Because many of our books are translations, our desire for proper remuneration is a persistent point of concern. Even when translators receive grants for book projects, the amount is often insufficient to compensate for their efforts, and royalties, which trickle in slowly over years, are not a reliable source of compensation.

WHAT WILL BE DONE

With your participation we seek to offer writers and translators greater compensation for their work, and in a more expeditious manner.

Additionally, funds will be used to pay for translation rights, basic operating expenses of the press, and to represent our writers and translators at book fairs.

If the means exist, we will also create a translation residency, providing opportunities to both junior and more established translators, thereby furthering our cultural efforts.

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Until ten years ago, Stanisława Przybyszewska (1901–35) existed in the public consciousness, if at all, as the bastard daughter of Stanisław Przybyszewski, a prolific author of torrid satanic romances, known for parading around Krakow in a monocle and top hat and holding midnight orgies at the Jama Michalika cafe. Beyond that, it was known she was infatuated with the French Revolution and had written a very good play, *The Danton Affair*, which was favorably received in its day, and revived by Andrzej Wajda in his film *Danton* (1983).

Then in 2015, Przybyszewska's novels and short stories, culled out of an archive, began quietly making their appearance. They revealed an utterly different writer — frank, formally adventurous and challenging, radical for her day when it came to gender politics. The short stories here, selected from two volumes, range from the near-autobiographical to the historical, sometimes blurring the two. Men are seldom useful as more than muses or playthings — maternity is a grotesque nightmare. Her experiences of morphine addiction and life in abject poverty inspire more than one story here. But most of all, Stanisława Przybyszewska is a rare and shimmering example of a full-blooded female avant-garde writer from Central Europe's illustrious 1930s, taking her rightful place in a tradition that includes Bruno Schulz, Franz Kafka, and Hermann Broch.



Translated with an introduction
by Søren A. Gauger