

***Transition* Magazine and the Development and  
Transmission of Modernism**

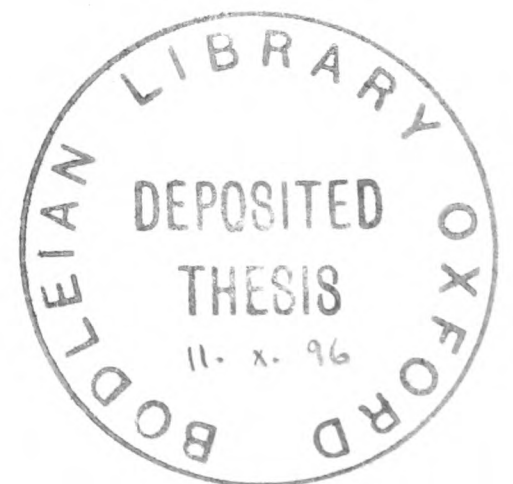
Craig Monk  
Linacre College

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# Abstract

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Our understanding of modern art draws a distinction between the Anglo-American and continental European traditions. These two traditions overlapped in the 1920s and 1930s with the publication of *transition* magazine, an expatriate American journal based in Paris. Its editor Eugene Jolas was an American raised in Europe who used his little magazine to bring to readers in the United States highlights of literary and other artistic innovations on both sides of the Atlantic. The general purpose of this thesis is to explore the role of *transition* in the development of modernism from the middle of the 1920s, with an emphasis on the important part played by the magazine in transmitting an international vision of modern art to its English-speaking audience. Chapter One provides a chronological history of *transition*, framing its story in the context of that which has been written about the perils of producing little magazines. Chapter Two outlines the aesthetic program by which *transition* came to be edited, exploring whether or not an emphasis on writing prejudiced the presentation of other art forms. Chapter Three examines the issues surrounding translation in *transition*, and the role of the translator in sharing modern writing across frontiers. Chapter Four explains the importance of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein in *transition*, outlining the ways in which the former was more appropriate to the program undertaken in the magazine. Chapter Five explores the apolitical foundation of *transition*, outlining the battles it fought against politically engaged writers between the world wars. Chapter Six assesses the influence of *transition* in America, tracing the way in which its reception mirrored the general reception of modern art in the United States. Chapter Seven explores the role of the little magazine in the historical writing of modernism, distinguishing between its conservative and avant-gardist impulses.

*Because I know that time is always time  
And place is always and only place  
And what is actual is actual only for one time  
And only for one place...*

*For*

*Marsha Lenihan and my family*

*Because I cannot hope to turn again  
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something  
Upon which to rejoice  
And pray to God to have mercy upon us  
And pray that I may forget  
These matters that with myself I too much discuss  
Too much explain  
Because I do not hope to turn again  
Let these words answer  
For what is done, not to be done again...*

*T.S. Eliot  
Ash-Wednesday*

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## Chapter One

### An American Little Magazine in Paris

The role of the little magazine in the history of modern art has long been acknowledged. In their landmark 1946 study of the subject, Frederick Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn Ulrich maintained that little magazines “introduced and sponsored every noteworthy literary movement or school” that appeared in America since the years immediately prior to the First World War.<sup>1</sup> They argued that a modern American literature revitalised a tradition of literary periodical publication that extends back well into the nineteenth century. But their claim also emphasised the importance of the tumultuous years of the second decade of the twentieth century. Expatriate Americans like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot confronted the developments of a modern European art; events like the Armory Show of 1913 and the arrival of Francis Picaba and Marcel Duchamp in New York facilitated cultural encounters that altered the course of American art forever.

The changes that had ushered in modern art in Europe had been discernible for more than fifty years, as European cities like Berlin, London, Paris, Prague, Vienna, and Zürich became important cultural centres for new generations of artists. European periodicals played their role in fostering movements and spreading their ideas over the continent. Increasingly, American figures like Pound and Margaret Anderson with her *Little Review* saw the little magazine as a suitable weapon by which to confront the conservatism of American culture with developments that were readily apparent in Europe. In the early 1920s, a flurry of activity saw the appearance of a number of such publications: *Broom*, the *Dial*, *Secession*, and *This Quarter*. But by the middle of the

decade, an American named Eugene Jolas felt that the enthusiasm that had marked such publishing ventures had dwindled. If political and economic concerns were beginning to overtake interest in artistic innovation throughout the Western world, the battle for a modern art in America had not yet been decisively won. Jolas founded his own magazine titled *transition* and intended to use it to uncover the best work being done by writers of all countries with an eye to presenting an encyclopedic cross-section of that material to an audience that was still largely indifferent to the innovations of modern art. To some extent, then, the history of *transition* tells both the story of the developments in European and American art before the Second World War and the story of the entrenchment of a movement that we now recognise as modernism in America.

The form of the little magazine has recently proven an important issue with modern scholars. It is argued, for example, that the interruptions inherent in magazine publication, both within and between its numbers, mirror the “discontinuity” that defines the canonical texts of modernism, texts like the *Cantos*, *Finnegans Wake*, *Ulysses*, and *The Waste Land* that were first published in little magazines.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the most important formal properties of the little magazine can be readily agreed upon: they are mostly literary; they always have a small circulation; they are dedicated to the publication of material that larger magazines or publishers will not print; one person or a small group of people do all of the editorial work and put up the money for its production.<sup>3</sup> Above all else, it is against the background of these characteristics that the story of *transition* must be told, for it was the freedoms and constraints, the advantages and disadvantages of the form that ultimately shaped the achievement of all modern little magazines.

## I. Founding and Managing an Expatriate Monthly

Eugene Jolas was born to immigrant parents in Union Hill, New Jersey in 1894. Three years later, the entire family travelled back to Europe and eventually resettled in Forbach in Lorraine, an area rich in its bilingual German and French heritage. In 1909 Jolas took the decision to return to America; he experienced the burgeoning urban character of New York City as a penniless immigrant himself, deprived of even a working knowledge of his own “native” English. His study of the language coincided with his own artistic awakening, and his poetic apprenticeship was marked by verse written alternately in German and English. He began newspaper work, first with a German-language publication and later with the mainstream American press. But wanderlust, inspired in part by the post-war developments in Europe and the homesickness of a decade of immigrant life, led him to return to his family in the early 1920s. In Forbach, Jolas continued to read widely and write verse, but economic necessity led him back to newspaper work. He took a job with the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune* in 1924 and he was soon chosen to replace Ford Madox Ford, who had been responsible for writing a weekly literary column. With his regular “Rambles Through Literary Paris,” Jolas first came to conceive of himself as functioning consciously as an intermediary between Europe and the United States. His submissions followed the activities of both American writers in France and their European brethren and Jolas soon became a recognised figure in the Parisian cafés. While his critical acumen reflected a genuine international awareness and a developing discernment, Jolas was clearly overwhelmed by the intellectual climate he encountered in the city. “Paris today is doubtless the cerebral crucible of the world,” Jolas wrote in the *Tribune*.

“Nowhere does the visitor from America face such a plethora of ideas, revolutionary concepts, boldly destructive philosophies, ferociously new aesthetic principles...”<sup>4</sup>

Jolas abandoned the column in 1925 when he returned to New York to marry Maria McDonald, a Kentucky-born voice student whom he met in Paris. Although the newlyweds decided to move to New Orleans where Jolas resumed newspaper work, he did not waver from his previous ambitions and he began during this time to translate young American poets into French. When *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Américaine* appeared in Paris in 1928 it was the most comprehensive collection of contemporary American verse available in French at the time, including translations of poems by everyone from Conrad Aiken to William Carlos Williams, e.e. cummings to Wallace Stevens. But while this project and *Le Nègre qui Chante*, a small collection of translated spirituals edited by both Jolases, helped further the recognition of American culture in France, it did nothing to supplant the reciprocal function served by “Rambles Through Literary Paris.”

The obvious vocation for a man of Jolas’s ambition and background was little magazine editor. While they were living in Louisiana, the Jolases seriously considered taking over the *Double Dealer*, a well-known periodical founded by Julius Weis Friend in 1921. One suspects that, ultimately, the magazine’s past reputation played some role in Eugene Jolas’s decision to abandon the plan. At one time, the *Double Dealer* had been received as a publication of the South, one of the sectional or so-called “regional” magazines that championed a twentieth-century American realist fiction that Jolas had already rejected and which he would come to vehemently oppose in favour of works that celebrated the power of the imagination. Although the heterogeneous cultural make-up of New Orleans may have been well-suited to Jolas’s temperament, the southern United

States was hardly the base from which to champion European literature. Jolas felt that by editing a review in America, no matter how international in scope, he would be limited by the partiality of his initial readership. He experienced the sharp edge of American provincial intolerance one night when he was publicly harangued for reading a French novel. Realising the restrictions imposed by their surroundings, the Jolases relocated to Paris where they knew the cosmopolitan atmosphere would be favourable for an international magazine. Paris had grown no less vital in Jolas's absence.

Examples of modern European art were still in abundance and the cafés were filled with other expatriate Americans who gave truth to Jolas's belief that writing in English was readying itself for an unprecedented burst in innovation. When explaining his return to Paris, Jolas later wrote that he believed that the city had become "a hotbed of literary and artistic insurrections." But, most critically, he also maintained that there was really no magazine in Paris that encouraged American experiment, no outlet for these new works. If the spirit of modern art felt tangibly in Europe in these years was to have any effect on the predominant apathy of American letters, Jolas felt this was his last chance to step in and take the initiative through a new magazine. He later maintained, "I felt there was a need for a review in English which would be a focal point for the creative experiments of the period."<sup>5</sup>

By the fall of 1926 Jolas was actively searching for a full-time collaborator to help him launch the review the following spring. He eventually settled on Elliot Paul, a fellow American who had some small reputation as a novelist by this time and who, after Jolas's return to America, had replaced him on the *Tribune*. Backed by his wife's inheritance money, Jolas was able to assure Paul of the financial viability of the venture and provide him a salary that freed him from the necessity of newspaper work. Both

men set to the task with the aim to produce the new magazine on a monthly basis. After a few weeks, however, they outgrew the space allotted them in the Jolas household and they found an office at the Hotel de la Gare des Invalides on the rue Fabert.

One of the first tasks the two men faced was deciding on a title for the journal. At the height of the popularity of the modern little magazine, this was no small detail. Publications like Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* and Alfred Kreymborg's *Others* summed up much of their basic editorial principles, and hence their identities, on their front covers. To capture the spirit of the project, Jolas and Paul considered names like *Bridge* and *Continents*. But Edwin Muir had recently published a series of articles under the collective title *Transition* and the book came to the attention of the two editors, who agreed with Muir's assessment of the role of the modern critic.

The things with which it is most essential that the critic should deal are the things of the present: the books which are being written, the tendencies which have still not found a decisive direction — the forming body of literature to which his services, if he has any, will be of immediate and palpable use.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, Jolas and Paul settled on the title *transition* for the magazine, in part because it also expressed the fundamental volatility of the time. Jolas demanded the use of the lower case “t” because he believed it fashionable. Moreover, he knew it would be sure to effect controversy with newspaper reporters and this, in turn, would secure publicity. Already, Jolas was preparing himself for a decade of rabble-rousing. He saw the aim of *transition* as “a kind of higher journalism” and he and Paul set to work with the zeal of reporters to find the writers whose work would fill the first numbers of the magazine.<sup>7</sup> They attempted to establish contact with artists at work in the United States; both men had easy access to the community of American expatriates in Paris. Through their newspaper work, Jolas and Paul met many of the European writers living in Paris,

while each man brought the benefit of his own personal connections. Jolas had an intimate knowledge of the work going on in Germany; Paul had a friend who was able to recommend contemporary literature from the Soviet Union. Besides soliciting, evaluating, and editing manuscripts, then, there was also the heavy burden of translating them.

By February 1927 *transition* 1 had been prepared, but various complications delayed its appearance for another two months. First, the editors had to placate the American writer Archibald MacLeish, who threatened to withdraw his poem “Signature Anonyme” because he had not been featured prominently enough in the magazine’s advance publicity. Second, it was discovered that Gertrude Stein’s “An Elucidation” had been incorrectly printed with one of its pages out of sequence. Because the mistake was noticed in advance copies, Jolas and Paul hoped to print a simple correction later in the press run. Unfortunately, this solution proved to present substantial logistic difficulties of its own and they eventually decided to issue a special supplement at great extra cost. More seriously, however, the editors ran astray of the French authorities when putting together their first number. Both Jolas and Paul registered as *gérants*, individuals who agreed to accept legal responsibility for the contents of the magazine. Unfortunately, only French citizens were allowed to list themselves as a *gérant*, and both Jolas and Paul were ordered to report to the Paris police. Although the whole matter was eventually settled quietly with a hundred-franc *pourboire*, the episode caused moments of great anxiety and the editors waited an additional week before offering the magazine for sale, for fear of further repercussions.

Jolas and Paul eventually enlisted as *gérant* an employee who worked in the composing room at the shop in Mayenne where these earliest numbers of *transition*

were printed. Jolas later admitted that the gentleman “was unable to distinguish an English word from a Spanish one.”<sup>8</sup> The linguistic shortcomings of the *gérant* underline an even more serious problem associated with the publication of an English-language journal in France: the integrity of the production process. Then, as now, the reputation of a magazine among writers could often be reduced to the ability of that magazine to bring out copy as the writer had submitted it. The American poet Hart Crane commended the quality of the first number of *transition* with the exclamation, “[I]t seems to have a proof-reader!”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, as Stein’s difficulties with the first number illustrated, there was immense pressure placed upon the editors to ensure that they caught mistakes made in the production of the magazine, because no one else involved with the physical preparation of *transition* could be depended upon to do so. By the fourth number, the editors felt they had to raise the issue with their readers.

Certainly there are difficulties in connection with printing an American magazine in France, not the least being that none of the compositors, proof-readers or pressmen know a word of English and, having been in the trade, man and boy, for generations, they have formed almost atavistic notions regarding spelling and punctuation, which prejudices operate against the chances that *transition* will get out with a single clean page.<sup>10</sup>

To save money and escape the bustle of the Paris office, the Jolases had by this time moved to a house in Colombey-les-deux-Eglises where much of the editorial work was done. The distance from Paris and Mayenne necessitated a change in printers, so another was located some sixty kilometres away in the village of St. Dizier. In the shop of a provincial French printer, seminal texts in the history of English-language modernism were set for the magazine page. It was said that the tedium of setting contributions from Gertrude Stein, heavily dependent on recurrent words and phrases, taxed the compositors heavily. These inconveniences were minor, indeed, when

compared with the difficulties caused by James Joyce, whose *Finnegans Wake* was serialised as “Work in Progress” in *transition*. Joyce was in the habit of making revisions to multiple sets of proofs for each of his submissions, sometimes even telephoning changes while the printing entered its final stages. On one occasion, Joyce’s emendations necessitated the addition of pages in the middle of the review. Eugene Jolas later recollected that, over time, the very name “Joyce” was used almost as an oath throughout the *imprimerie*. While the workmen never understood a word of “Work in Progress,” neither could they comprehend why an artist of Joyce’s standing chose to work in such a fashion. Clearly, the frenetic activity of creating these texts stood in stark contrast to the “leisurely, paternalistic system” of the rural French print shop.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between Joyce and his editors was unusual, and even the most accomplished writer would have difficulty winning the concessions from a magazine staff that Joyce was able to secure. Joyce scholars point out that the Irish author’s association with *transition* was defined by the editors’ admiration for “Work in Progress,” and that the compromises Joyce obtained allowed *Finnegans Wake* to develop organically. Faced with the achievement of Joyce’s last novel, few people comment on how its composition represents a blatant disregard for the professional limits within which a magazine is produced. In some sense, this is simply an extension of the constant negotiation between writer and publisher that defines the commercial publishing industry. In the case of a little magazine like *transition*, however, this issue takes on an additional dimension. Modern little magazines were not wholly commercial ventures. Little magazine editors, like Jolas and Paul, were often both publishers and writers themselves, with their own creative ambitions. They were torn between their

more commercial obligations and their creative aspirations. The character of any little magazine was often delineated by the tension caused through the dual responsibilities of those people who ran it.

Although *transition* continued to publish for more than a decade, its first year was in some sense its most active. The magazine appeared regularly each month in a small, compact form, never more than approximately two hundred pages in length. Because of its initially modest size, it was somewhat limited in the visual art it could reproduce and the length of literary submissions it could accept, but it still managed to feature a very impressive collection of writers and artists. American contributions appeared from Djuna Barnes, Kay Boyle, Hart Crane, H.D., Ernest Hemingway, Matthew Josephson, Man Ray, Laura Riding, Gertrude Stein, and William Carlos Williams. Important Europeans included James Joyce, Gottfried Benn, André Gide, Pablo Picasso, and Juan Gris. Most crucially, perhaps, American readers were now privy to important radical movements in European art. The Italian futurist F.T. Marinetti appeared in one number, but the *transition* editors seemed very much taken with the dada movement (Hans Arp, Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters) and surrealism (André Breton, Paul Eluard, Max Ernst, Robert Desnos).

In its attempt to bring these innovative writers to readers in the United States, however, *transition* inevitably attracted the attention of those officials the editors characterised as “the scant-witted crew” of American Customs. Formal government interference in the importation of literature from Europe during this period is well-documented. Into the 1930s, such actions provided Ezra Pound with yet one more target for his wrath against the American establishment. James Joyce was, of course, a frequent victim of American Customs, as exemplified by the suppression of *Ulysses* as

serialised in the *Little Review* and in its published form. Americans returning from Paris were regularly searched for copies of the book. When “Work in Progress” was appearing in Ford Madox Ford’s *transatlantic review* in 1924 the editor consulted with Sisley Huddleston for assurance that British and American Customs officials would find nothing of offence in Joyce’s new work.<sup>12</sup> United States Customs did do as much as possible to hinder the distribution of *transition*, according to its editors. Unofficially, at least, Customs officials viewed what they could understand of its contents as obscene; for less readily intelligible fragments like those from Joyce, they were convinced that, if clarified, these would be understood as being obscene as well.<sup>13</sup> The editors were undaunted and printed in *transition* 8 (November 1927) an indictment against “the maudlin instincts” of such bureaucracy, ironically titled “The Pursuit of Happiness.” After outlining some of the problems experienced at ports along the Eastern seaboard of the United States, the editors maintained that they would “continue to print whatever we think best” and that each man now wore “a small sprig of mistletoe” behind his coat-tails, apparently highlighting their behinds in holiday cheer “for the benefit of any and all who hold office.” Such was a subtlety that escaped Ezra Pound. “Occasionally it may be necessary to print a few extra copies in order to circumvent” customs officials, it was also announced, “but our subscribers will be served and the bookstores will be supplied.”<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, during the magazine’s first year, it was necessary to raise the price of a single issue in the United States from fifty to sixty cents to compensate for lost revenue through problems with importing *transition* into the country.

By the fall of 1927 *transition* had established a regular, if unstable, network of distributing bookshops across the United States with outlets in places like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Hollywood. In supplying American

customers, the Gotham Book Mart proved a staunch supporter not only of *transition*, but of Eugene Jolas and his work in later years. When one considers that *transition* often faced as much trouble from book dealers who suddenly decided to withdraw their patronage as they did from American Customs officials, Frances Steloff with her store on West 47th Street in New York City was as valuable a friend to modern literature in America as Sylvia Beach with her Shakespeare and Company was to English writing in France.

Although *transition* seemed to publish in its first year with little advancement on its original mandate simply to promote the best literature from all sources, its achievement was still quite impressive. Some little magazines defined themselves by their ability to seek out and promote young and unrenowned writers to the exclusion of their better-known brethren. *transition* pledged itself open to all men and women regardless of existing literary reputation, and they undoubtedly found a few such writers willing to cooperate with them, but these first numbers truly were eclectic, defined only by their heterogeneity and propensity for startling juxtaposition. Writers appeared side-by-side seemingly in spite of nationality, political persuasion, or aesthetic belief. At the end of the first year, Jolas and Paul admitted that they had been criticised for “the diversity of our offerings,” but they justified that diversity with their belief “that art is still evolving.”<sup>15</sup> However, they maintained that very definite, if decidedly liberal and idealistic, editorial principles governed the selection of material for the magazine. After the spring of 1928 *transition* never again published with such regularity and in its later forms it never really featured such a disjointed miscellany of artists. Changes were afoot that would cause the magazine to further refine its principles and, although undoubtedly disruptive, these changes helped *transition* develop its own characteristic identity.

## II. *transition* as a Quarterly

Modern little magazines ultimately reflected the personality of their editors.

While the editorial offices at *transition* were crowded, it was perhaps inevitable that the magazine would be defined by its diversity. But anyone privy to the early history of *transition* would have been aware that while it was produced through the collaboration of its co-editors, the magazine was founded and controlled by Eugene Jolas. Whether or not this fact was clear to everyone in the 1920s and 1930s is unclear. After all, Jolas was little more than an obscure poet when he began *transition*; Elliot Paul was somewhat better known. There is no evidence to suggest that Eugene Jolas and Elliot Paul were involved in any struggle for control of the magazine on any level. On the surface, at least, there was a sense of balance: by the end of the first year, both men were contributing creative material to the magazine and both were writing critical articles, some signed jointly and some published individually. Certain notices, most notably those from Wyndham Lewis, seemed to suggest that Paul was the dominant partner in the relationship, but these passed with no comment. In his memoir *Confessions of Another Young Man*, Bravig Imbs claimed to have been present when the suggestion of confusion over editorial authority became apparent. Indeed, Imbs maintained that he triggered the crisis.

Returning from a trip to New York, Imbs discussed with the Jolases the effect *transition* was having in the United States. "It's decried by the elders," Imbs reported, "tolerated by the middle-aged and enthusiastically welcomed by young students." On the question of editing, Imbs maintained, "Oh, Elliot gets an enormous amount of praise." When pressed by Mrs. Jolas on this matter, Imbs rationalised, "Of course,

Elliot's very well-known, and when the newspaper writers see his name they naturally elaborate on it." To this he added, "Nobody says much about Eugene." Imbs recalled that Jolas seemed genuinely relieved, reflecting some modesty perhaps, but these statements could have done little to placate Maria Jolas, who certainly had not begun financing *transition* to further the career of Elliot Paul.<sup>16</sup> Now, there are certain hesitations one must make in evaluating Bravig Imb's recollections. By characterising himself as "another young man," Imbs not only echoed George Moore, but he effectively aligned himself with Gertrude Stein, who by the middle of the 1930s was in open conflict with the Jolases over her claims that Elliot Paul had led *transition*. Stein referred to the gentlemen members of her 1920s salon as the "young men" and although Stein had severed ties with Imbs years before his memoir was published, she retained his loyalty. Certainly, Imbs admitted openly that he and Eugene Jolas had a less than amicable relationship. But although he was quite critical of Jolas throughout his memoir, Imbs's story of the reaction given his news from America reflects more on the character of Maria Jolas than anyone else. Imbs admitted that he "never could quite like her" any more than he liked Eugene Jolas, but accounts of her fervent support for her husband ring true. In later years, Maria Jolas proved herself loyal in her protection of Eugene Jolas's literary reputation and the reputations of close friends, as best evidenced by her sometimes disagreeable encounters with literary scholars in the final years of her remarkable life through the 1970s and 1980s. But difficulties between academics and the families of literary figures are all too commonplace. In the late 1920s, however, Eugene Jolas's wife had more than personal influence over her husband; she also held some financial control of his magazine. Imbs may well have been right in his assessment of Maria Jolas, that "she knew no more about modern art or what Mr. Joyce

was up to, or why Gertrude was of any value, than her next woman's club sister," but he was certainly right in adding, "but she did adore Eugene Jolas."<sup>17</sup> Most descriptions of Jolas draw him as a rather unassuming man, conscious of coming to a working knowledge of English later in life, and although he held very definite ideas about art, he was loath to impose them upon others. But it is very doubtful, indeed, that Maria Jolas would have been pleased with her husband taking a low-key approach to the presentation of editorial material in *transition*. If she did push him to take an even more visible role in the magazine, it was not to begrudge Elliot Paul his credit, but to ensure that Eugene Jolas used *transition* to develop and give voice to his creative principles.

In any case, Elliot Paul's position with *transition* did come under review. There are many stories surrounding his move from full-time co-editor to part-time contributing editor. Eugene Jolas later wrote that Paul simply wished to return to America; Maria Jolas in time held the official line that Paul had too many additional commitments, both personal and professional, and he could not devote himself to *transition* on a full-time basis. There is certainly good reason to believe that the Jolases simply could no longer afford to pay him a salary. Imbs, of course, suggested that a jealous Maria Jolas had Paul removed. This question is of some importance in the context of inflammatory statements she made about Paul in the 1930s. In a pamphlet meant to correct misconceptions that Gertrude Stein circulated with *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Maria Jolas maintained that Elliot Paul had nothing more than a "meagre knowledge of French" and that he was "only superficially aware of what was being written in Europe" while he worked on *transition*. She argued that he brought only "a certain literary liberalism" to the magazine and "he was definitely not to be counted on for the work we engaged him for."<sup>18</sup> Imbs further fuelled the controversy when he

subsequently maintained that Eugene Jolas had been dependent on Elliot Paul's editorial skills: Jolas was apparently "incapable of proof-reading or pasting a dummy" and he "changed his mind so frequently that he could not have a fixed opinion on any manuscript."<sup>19</sup> Attempts to sort through these recriminations accomplish little more than to effectively divide the principal characters into two camps, one supportive of Gertrude Stein and one critical of her. The conciliatory tone of the Jolases' later remembrances suggests that the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* simply exasperated them and that Jolas and Paul did share some sort of balanced partnership that dissipated under generally congenial circumstances. Certainly, Elliot Paul never published an unkind word about the Jolases. But, in general terms, to concentrate on the public posturing of the Jolases and members of the Stein circle detracts from the most important issue, an account of how *transition* was recast in light of editorial changes. Certainly, all parties agreed that the magazine changed after its first year, though it is not surprising that opinions differed on the benefits of that change.

With *transition* 12 (March 1928), Jolas announced that, henceforth, the magazine would appear as a quarterly. He claimed that the taxing amount of work, now compounded by the departure of his co-editor, offered too great an obstacle.

For it must not be forgotten that *transition*, if not "hand-printed" is nevertheless, "hand-made," in the sense that any object created by the enthusiasm of the "amateur," as opposed to the "professional," is "hand-made." Not only have we had to direct the review and gather the material, but also the burden of translating, proof-reading (with foreign typesetters) and a multiplicity of other technical details have fallen on our shoulders.<sup>20</sup>

On the surface, at least, Eugene Jolas appeared to take on even more collaborators once Elliot Paul moved into the background. For *transition* 13 (Summer 1928), Robert Sage stepped forward to assume some of Paul's old responsibilities. Sage, a fellow

newspaperman, was connected with the magazine from the beginning, and with *transition* 8 (November 1927) he had become associate editor, signing with Jolas and Paul the following month a joint rebuttal of Wyndham Lewis's attacks on the magazine. Unlike Paul, however, Sage worked on the magazine on a part-time basis only and he soon took the title of contributing editor, in advance of his departure for a new job in London. For the first quarterly number, Paul and Matthew Josephson were both listed as contributing editors. While Paul's direct influence over the review was at an end, Josephson offered *transition* the chance of a radical new editorial direction. Josephson hoped to orient the magazine towards American artists and American political concerns. But his attitudes differed fundamentally from Jolas's on politics, aesthetics, and Americans in Europe, so his association was much-celebrated but short-lived. In the period between 1928 and 1930 Stuart Gilbert and Harry Crosby joined the editorial board, but they were, as the others became, advisory editors. Eugene Jolas had firmly taken control of his magazine at last.

In its new larger format, Jolas was free to publish a wider range of material. The increased presence of visual art was accompanied by such things as lengthy questionnaires answered by important American and European artists of the day. Jolas later reflected that over time, *transition* interested him "more and more as an adventure in language" and he moved in these quarterly numbers towards making the magazine "a laboratory" for language experimentation.<sup>21</sup> *transition* adopted the subtitle "An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment" and Jolas moved to synthesise into a new approach to writing what had before simply been research into work being done in Europe and America. He published substantial critical articles in these numbers, direct and lucid statements of his values and beliefs. *transition* 16/17 (June 1929) saw the

appearance of a manifesto titled “The Revolution of the Word.” Inspired by his wife’s demand that he arrange and categorise his beliefs, Eugene Jolas wrote a twelve-point proclamation that essentially asserted the right of the literary artist to manipulate words to suit his or her own purpose. If Eugene Jolas’s own creative writing played a crucial role in this stage of the history of the magazine, it was because, as Dougald McMillan argues in his study of the magazine, Jolas himself was “the most active adherent” of the revolutionary movement in *transition*.<sup>22</sup> While “The Revolution of the Word” had more than a dozen other signatories, it was in some sense a personal document best illustrated by Jolas’s own work. But Jolas did not turn *transition* into a vanity press. The choice of material from other artists was clearly intended to complement the critical and creative work Jolas published during a significant burst of literary activity through these quarterly numbers. Over the history of its publication, *transition* consistently introduced different artists to its readers. While a relatively small percentage of these writers published their first material in *transition*, the magazine still had as many first-time contributors in its later numbers as it had during its first year. For more than a decade, acceptance by *transition* remained a significant achievement for a writer of any status. But while the magazine retained a certain diversity amongst its contributors, the material itself became much less varied as Jolas sharpened his editorial vision.

Because money was scarce, *transition* paid all its contributors the same rate of thirty francs per printed page. In doing so, Jolas recognised “that no one whose only *métier* is writing, can afford to contribute to *transition*.”<sup>23</sup> But even this relatively small amount added to the overall financial burden on the Jolases. During the first year, Elliot Paul admitted in a private letter that the magazine’s financial situation was much worse than he had anticipated, the Jolases were unable to raise additional funds, and *transition*

was faced with a possible suspension of publication.<sup>24</sup> When Harry Crosby donated money to award a prize to a single deserving *transition* poet, Jolas distributed the money instead amongst contributors awaiting payment. In his autobiography, the American writer and composer Paul Bowles described the manner in which *transition* paid some of its contributors. While visiting with Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, Bowles was present when Maria Jolas called in. Bowles had placed some poetry with *transition*, but he did not have the courage to introduce himself to the magazine's editors when he arrived in Paris. Because all Bowles's correspondence with the Jolases had been by post, Mrs. Jolas had no reason to recognise him when presented to Bowles at the rue de Fleurus flat. But Maria Jolas claimed not to remember Bowles or his work at all when Stein introduced him as a *transition* contributor. Stein later suggested that Mrs. Jolas had pretended not to know Bowles to avoid discussing a letter Bowles had written *transition* demanding payment that was more than a year late. Moreover, Stein claimed that the presumed impertinence of Bowles's letter would mean that his work would no longer be accepted by the magazine. Once again, the severity of Stein's comments must be weighed against her disaffection with the Jolases, a point even Bowles was careful to make, but the thrust of the story was consistent with documented difficulties experienced by impoverished little magazines.<sup>25</sup> A fee was an affirmation of a writer's professional achievement and Stein, for example, always insisted upon payment in spite of her considerable personal wealth. During this period, a small payment secured from magazine submissions could help sustain writers like Bowles, giving them the freedom to work and, if necessary, allowing them to stay abroad. Indeed, Maria Jolas's later claim that many *transition* contributors actually refused payment is highly unlikely.

The main source of revenue in magazine publishing from the late nineteenth century has been advertising income. Once businesses began advertising nationally, magazines seized revenue from its newspaper rivals.<sup>26</sup> This development, in turn, exerted great pressure on magazines to increase rates by expanding their mass appeal and circulation. The resurgence of the little magazine in the early twentieth century was a reaction against the conservatism of high circulation publications, magazines that used poetry primarily to fill unallotted space on its pages. But while little magazine editors aimed to pay greater attention to its literary content, it was not possible to sever entirely the relationship with advertisers. If subscription money alone could not carry large circulation magazines, it certainly could not sustain the littles. *transition*, for example, was one of the larger publications of its kind, but it never printed more than four thousand copies of any number and its regular subscriptions never exceeded one thousand. Little magazines like *transition* undertook a contentious relationship with advertisers. A publication with a narrow readership and a relatively modest circulation would be unlikely to attract major advertisers, so *transition* had to content itself with notices from the world of art, more often than not from French publishers and booksellers, though its advertising client base did expand with time. One problem, however, is that advertisements from the book trade sometimes imitate the content of a little magazine. Notices from publishing houses often contain signed and unsigned recommendations. While the editors of *transition* believed that refusing advertisements would have been “brusque and a trifle too earnest,” not to mention financially irresponsible, they feared that such material undermined their integrity and they did not encourage potential advertisers with statements like the following that appeared during 1927.

It is hardly necessary to say that the editors find many of the blurbs and statements contained in the advertisements published by *transition* both silly and deplorable. There is no way to prevent otherwise worthy people from slopping over when they describe their friends' books or periodicals and for us to attempt any such reform would be ridiculous. We must leave it to our readers to detect when ripeness progresses to the stage which inevitably follows it.<sup>27</sup>

Modern little magazine editors never launched their reviews with hopes of making money from the venture. At best, they could hope to guard their investment while continuing from issue to issue under the shadow of bankruptcy. There were problems when little magazine editors solicited money from other people: Margaret Anderson is said to have once started canvassing money for her *Little Review* on the top floor of an office building, slowly working her way down to the street. She would have been more successful had she not insisted that people donate their money unconditionally; she was wary of the control of investors. As we have seen, the potential influence of outside capital was a major concern for little magazines. In some ways, *transition* was liberated by its use of personal funds, though the material insecurity involved in producing the magazine was then given a sharp personal edge. There is little doubt that most of the money used to publish *transition* came from the Jolases family finances, and the magazine depended heavily on Maria Jolas's inheritance. But Eugene Jolas's letters to his wife clearly exhibit that he was uncomfortable with the arrangement and from its beginning, *transition* undertook many of the fund-raising techniques that helped sustain little magazines. Initially, Jolas began a subscription drive, offering savings of twenty to twenty-five per cent to readers who were willing to pay money upfront. Besides healthy coffers, this approach had the benefit of identifying the magazine's audience so Jolas and his collaborators knew who was reading *transition* regularly. Contributors like James Joyce were very interested to

see who was exposed to their work, and they could suggest other people who might be interested in receiving the magazine. A subscription could also alleviate some of the complications experienced through the distribution of the magazine: when the single issue price of *transition* was increased because of complications with American customs officials, subscribers were insulated from the rise. When *transition* became a quarterly, subscribers retained their discount, but Jolas reneged on his initial commitment by issuing two “double issues,” *transition* 16/17 (June 1929) and *transition* 19/20 (June 1930), magazines that counted as two numbers but did not contain twice as much material. Understandably, these issues caused considerable confusion among subscribers and booksellers. Eugene Jolas also tried to peddle surplus back numbers with the claim, “Most magazines are worthless a month after their appearance; *transition* is the one review whose back numbers increase continually in value.”<sup>28</sup> At the end of the first year, he attempted to sell full sets of the first twelve numbers. Most importantly, Jolas attempted to diversify the operation. In 1929 he edited with Robert Sage an anthology of twenty-three *Transition Stories*, published in New York. That same year, the Shakespeare Bookshop brought out a collection of critical articles written about Joyce, many of which had appeared in *transition*, as *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incarnation of a Work in Progress*. While these projects may have been intended to raise money and boost the profile of the magazine, they met with little success.

By late 1928 Jolas had been attempting to organise “Friends of *transition*,” a scheme that would allow him to run the magazine as a cooperative venture. His plan was to sell shares in *transition*, ranging in value from ten to one hundred American dollars. “But the moment is come,” Jolas announced in an advertising circular, “when

the burden which has been borne up till now by a small group of friends must be transferred to the many whose interest in such a magazine has been clearly demonstrated.” His fear, as has already been acknowledged, was “that advertisers eventually dictate the editorial policy.” Jolas hoped that by canvassing money from those sympathetic to the magazine, *transition* could “stand or fall by a completely unhampered editorial freedom.”<sup>29</sup> The editorial autonomy Jolas found during the second and third year of publishing *transition* allowed the magazine to develop a vision that set it apart from many of its contemporaries. It is difficult to foresee how a radical new cost-sharing strategy would have affected the editorial direction of *transition*, for it never came to pass. Instead, Jolas took the decision to disband the magazine after *transition* 19/20 (June 1930). Officially, he announced that he could “no longer afford the expenditure of time and labor necessary” to publish the magazine, though his reasons were almost certainly financial.<sup>30</sup> Many notable little magazines had failed to bring out as much material and elicit as much comment over a three year career. The accomplishment of *transition* in the late 1920s was enough to ensure its reputation and, as if to ensure recognition of this point, Jolas published his own reassessment of the magazine in H.L. Mencken’s *American Mercury* in 1931. But while Eugene Jolas could not have known it at the time, a final chapter in the story of *transition* was yet to be written.

### **III. *transition* in the 1930s**

Although Eugene Jolas officially did nothing more than suspend the publication of *transition* indefinitely in 1930 he genuinely believed that his work with the magazine

had concluded. The Paris *Tribune* reported that Jolas had declined immediate offers from American publishers to continue *transition* with their assistance, but this claim is doubtful. Jolas fostered the impression that in the best little magazine tradition, he abandoned *transition* just as it threatened to become commercially successful. In fact, the American publishing industry was dealt a blow by the Wall Street crash of 1929 and its effects were also felt among the expatriates in Paris. An exodus of Americans put great pressure on English-language newspapers in Europe and these difficulties surely mirrored obstacles that would have faced any revival of *transition* sponsored from the United States.

But in late 1931 Jolas was approached by a representative of the Servire Press, based in the Hague. The publisher believed that money could be made from printing a range of works in English translation; perhaps they were attempting to seize a market largely abandoned by American interests. In any case, the Servire Press offered to revive *transition* for a share in the profits.<sup>31</sup> In fact, it is somewhat more likely that the Flemish publishers used the well-known little magazine primarily as a point-of-entry into Paris literary circles. They later published, for example, an anthology of expatriate American writing, edited by Peter Neagoe. Certainly, Eugene Jolas was a valuable figure to the Servire Press and he had proven himself capable of finding European authors of some interest to American readers. For Jolas, the arrangement meant that he could resume *transition*, though the press also brought out his short book *The Language of Night* (1932) and published a fragment from Joyce's "Work in Progress" as *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies* (1934), as well as the notorious *Testimony Against Gertrude Stein* (1935).

Jolas's attitude towards publishing capital at the end of the 1920s should have made him wary of any association with a publishing house. But instead of appearing fettered, Jolas used the advantage of financial security to allow him a renewed freedom to experiment. *transition* 21 (March 1932) took the subtitle "An International Workshop for Orphic Creation," as Jolas emphasised the transcendental aspect of poetry through a radical new manifesto titled "Poetry is Vertical." *transition* 22 (February 1933) celebrated the fifth anniversary of the magazine and announced that, henceforth, all submissions would be published untranslated, capturing for each their revolutionary approach to their language of composition. *transition* 23 (July 1935) adopted the subtitle "An Intercontinental Workshop for Vertigralist Transmutation," as Jolas took aim at the actual categories, like "short story," by which we understand the various forms taken by literary activity. Although the agreement with the Servire Press allowed Jolas to use *transition* as a true point of synthesis for his ideas about art, the fact that these three numbers appeared so infrequently suggests that Jolas's interest in the magazine may have tapered off by the mid-1930s. He travelled throughout Europe and later admitted that he had wearied of his work in Paris. Such fatigue and disillusionment was common among little magazine editors, some of whom have been known to set down definite schedules for the discontinuation of their magazines. For his own part, Jolas felt manipulated by writers who saw *transition* as little more than a vehicle for their own work, a passing reference to the unabashed self-promotion that is a leitmotif of modern literature. With no formal announcement this time, Jolas again suspended publication of the magazine.

Once more, Jolas decided to try his hand at journalism in the United States, finding a job with the Havas news agency. While working in New York City, however,

Jolas met James Johnson Sweeney, an old Paris acquaintance better known for his later involvement with the Museum of Modern Art. Sweeney was enthusiastic about *transition* and encouraged Jolas to continue the magazine in the United States, even offering his assistance with the editorial work. The result was that Sweeney served as associate editor for three so-called “New York” numbers that appeared on a more-or-less regular quarterly schedule between June 1936 and May 1937. This stability in the publication of the magazine was achieved in spite of the fact that the Servire Press went bankrupt after the first number edited in America, leaving Jolas once more dependent on private funds. These three numbers of *transition* were markedly different from those edited solely by Jolas before he left Paris. Jolas turned his attention, with less than impressive results, to seeking out young American writers who were experimenting with the theories he had proposed in *transition*. Under Sweeney’s growing influence, however, the rest of the magazine adopted a more conservative form, as *transition* took “A Quarterly Review” as its new understated subtitle. The previous emphasis on poetry was replaced by an expansion of its earlier interdisciplinary approach and the different genres were compartmentalised in labelled sections: “The Eye,” “The Ear,” “The Cinema,” and “Architecture.” Much of Jolas’s experimentation, in fact, was confined to one section of *transition*, entitled “Workshop.” This rather unprecedented change in editorial direction betrayed Eugene Jolas’s languishing commitment to the entire enterprise. He later reflected that he felt he was repeating himself in these numbers, that he had done many of the same things in Paris and he had done them better. He grew to feel that his work on behalf of an idealistic view of art was ineffectual in a world that was so swiftly approaching a seemingly inevitable war. Cultural circles in New York City were dominated by political concerns and Jolas did not fit in. Towards the end of

1937 Jolas returned to Paris to arrange a permanent move to the United States, fearing the outbreak of hostilities. After surveying the political climate in Europe, he made arrangements to publish a "Tenth Anniversary" number of *transition*, abandoning his own apolitical nature to make this final collection of material a defiant stand against the terror of the Nazis. Jolas believed that their aggression threatened to engulf the principles of intellectual and artistic advancement for which he had been fighting since the early 1920s. Preparations for the last *transition* proved more difficult than expected in the bustle of pre-war Paris. Even after settling the inevitable financial problems, technical delays made what should have been a three month project stretch on for approximately one year. On a recommendation, Jolas did not return to the print shop in the countryside, but enlisted a printer in the city instead. Even this well-established magazine was dogged by difficulties much like those that hindered it in its early days; after overcoming the pitfalls of a dirty print shop, a lost manuscript, and the two month absence of the printer himself, *transition 27* appeared in the spring of 1938.

After the outbreak of war, Eugene Jolas turned his attention to other avenues of publication and concentrated on his own poetry. During the 1940s, however, he published two treasuries of *transition* material, *Vertical* (1941) and *Transition Workshop* (1949). Back in the United States, he was encouraged to revive *transition* once again, but he refused. With the arrival in America of European artists fleeing the Nazi advance, Jolas had good reason to feel that the United States was poised to enjoy a period of cultural exchange unparalleled since the wake of the Armory Show nearly thirty years before. As the former editor of *transition*, he was also confident that he had an important role to play in this awakening. Unfortunately, he was ostracised because of an article he published in 1941 in an obscure American periodical, in which he was

highly critical of the surrealists. He essentially excluded himself from the cultural scene in New York during the 1940s, losing a possible place with André Breton on the editorial board of *VVV*. Sadly, a younger generation of artists whom Jolas had helped through his magazine turned its back on him. Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler had been published in *transition* a decade previously, but they refused to publish Jolas in their important new magazine *View*. Jolas felt like a forgotten man during this decade, and his bitterness was in many ways justified.

Eventually, Jolas went to work for the United States Office of War Information and, after the armistice, he spent the rest of the 1940s helping to set up a free press in Germany. While this was clearly important work, it did little to revitalise his creative profile. A new incarnation of *transition* was out of the question in the uneasy political atmosphere of Paris and Jolas's responsibilities in Germany stretched on indefinitely. During these years, he was on the editorial board of *Transition Forty-Eight*, a magazine started by his friend Georges Duthuit. Although the Jolases ostensibly allowed Duthuit to use the *transition* name for no other reason than to circumvent post-war French restrictions against new magazines, letters between Eugene and Maria Jolas suggest that both had some real involvement with the publication. When Eugene Jolas died in Paris in 1952 he was involved in a number of projects related to his earlier work: he was making translations and writing critical assessments of the German romantics; he continued to lobby for the creation of an international language for creative expression; he was revising *Man From Babel*, the autobiography begun a decade before.

The most immediate legacy of a little magazine like *transition* must be found among the writers who appeared on its pages. Indeed, it is difficult to find a major modern artist who did not benefit from the strength of this movement during the first

half of the twentieth century. By accepting material that found no advocates elsewhere, little magazines shattered forever the previous limits of the conservative mainstream publishers. In doing so itself, *transition* introduced to America writing that otherwise may have gone unknown, subsequently giving rise to generations of artists conscious of artistic developments throughout the world. Because little magazines were very responsive to the intellectual currents of their age, these magazines effectively traced the gradual development of modernism itself. These publications should not be seen as simply the means through which writers established their immediate reputations. Indeed, the major issues that defined the modern movement, from the condition of language to the political role of art, were debated on the pages of *transition*. Over time, the development of editorial policy became as important as the poems and stories printed in such magazines. Once literary historians began the inevitable process of re-evaluating the literature of the early twentieth century, writing the story of modernism, they looked closely at the material that had appeared in little magazines. Here, they sought the essence of the period itself.

## Chapter Two

### A Revolution in Language

Although *transition* began its first year with the aims of promoting cultural exchange and providing writers an opportunity to undertake experiments in artistic expression, Eugene Jolas came to place ever greater emphasis on active literary experimentation in the magazine. As we have seen, the development of Jolas's critical ideas helped him refine the editorial direction of *transition* in such a manner, and the success of this experimental writing provided him an opportunity to further extend his theories over time. Indeed, the later ideas espoused in the magazine were clearly Jolas's own, derived from his unique background and experience, reflecting years of deliberation on literary matters by a man with the linguistic ability to access the critical tradition of the English, French, and German cultures. But it must also be acknowledged that the concerns that gave rise to Jolas's critical writings were also exhibited in the contributions made to the early numbers of *transition* by his principal collaborators. Rather than diminishing the importance of Jolas's critical development, an acknowledgement of the general literary preoccupations of Elliot Paul and Robert Sage, in particular, affirms that Jolas's critical concerns were most characteristic of their time.

In his study of nonrepresentational writing in the 1920s and 1930s, David Bennett illustrates how the developments in science, psychology, and philosophy that reshaped the understanding of the early twentieth century had a profound effect on creative thought. When the way in which mankind perceived the world changed, faith in the mimetic function of language also came under siege.<sup>1</sup> It was no longer taken for granted that contributions to *transition* should, or for that matter could, endeavour to

represent reality. Traditional ideas of reality were abandoned; what was “real” now encompassed much more than simply that which was tangibly at hand. But how could a writer give voice to this realisation? Contributors to the magazine lamented the inability of the writer’s tools, the very words they used, to provide an adequate medium for modern artists to express themselves. The world and everything about it had changed; the enduring importance of literary expression charged language with the obligation to follow suit. In this context, Eugene Jolas’s call for a revolution in language in *transition* was an important contribution to the literature of the 1920s and 1930s. Notorious in their time, Jolas’s critical writings constituted a formidable aesthetic program that both influenced the writers around him, and were themselves shaped by the literary experimenters Jolas saw at work in the period between the world wars.

## **I. The Revolution of the Word**

In the very first number of *transition*, an introduction by Eugene Jolas and Elliot Paul reasserted the traditional importance of art as a unifying force that bridges the spatial and temporal divisions marking our civilisation.

Of all the values conceived by the mind of man throughout the ages, the artistic have proven the most enduring.... A tangible link between the centuries is that of art. It joins distant continents into a mysterious unit, long before the inhabitants are aware of the universality of their impulses.

In the context of the editors’ shared experience of expatriation from the United States, this statement was partially an acknowledgement of the importance Jolas and Paul gave to the desire to unite Europe and America through their work in *transition*. But the passage also suggested the enduring relevance of art amidst the wholesale ontological

change experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jolas and Paul recognised that “as years have passed, truths have turned to folly and back again, countless times.” Through this tumult, they wrote, “the quest for beauty has not yet proven futile” and art remained “a means of enriching life.”<sup>2</sup>

While the value of art persisted, Jolas and his earliest collaborators took great pains to reject any suggestion that art itself can remain static. In a statement attributed to both editors in *transition* 3 (June 1927), Jolas maintained that living in a “chaotic age,” satisfactory expression could only be realised through “new outlets and new regions of probability.”<sup>3</sup> Realism was targeted first and foremost as the form that had lost its vigour. Robert Sage, whose critical comments were often expressed solely through his book reviews, was the first to speak directly against realism. While acknowledging its value, for example, in forcing nineteenth century literature to re-evaluate the social conditions in which art found its substance, Sage also delineated the limits of realism. He characterised realist writers as “humorless” and called them “the bookkeepers of subject matter” who had little or no respect for the projection of imagination in literature, or what he called “the twist and shine of words.”<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Jolas was unequivocal in his support for Sage’s assertion when he bluntly echoed, “Realism in America has reached its point of saturation.”<sup>5</sup> Jolas’s experience in the United States convinced him that the cynical dreariness of a prevalent American literature could only be combatted by the fabulous heights achieved through the imagination. Jolas sought to resist the idea that art was “the mirror of reality.” Instead, he proposed that art could be “reality itself.”<sup>6</sup>

The earliest illustration of an antipositivist orientation for art to appear in *transition* was the publication of prose, poetry, and visual art from members of the

surrealist movement. For one, Robert Sage admired the surrealist conception of an “approximate reality” that he interpreted as “a combination of the external and the internal.” Many of Sage’s earliest contributions were favourable notices of surrealist texts and petitions for the wider recognition of their principles.

Few have yet accepted the surrealist conception, which brings subjectivity back into literature and designates the writer’s imagination as the base of all reality. But it is generally admitted that the thought, desires, dreams and the personal interpretation of material phenomena are fully as “real” as the concrete objects of the external world.<sup>7</sup>

A great deal of surrealist work appeared in *transition*, especially during its first year. Eugene Jolas followed the movement from its beginnings in Paris in the early 1920s and at one time considered officially joining André Breton’s group; Breton had animated the intellectual climate that so influenced Jolas when he worked on the Paris *Tribune*. But Jolas developed serious misgivings about a number of the basic tenets of surrealist dogma and after *transition* became inextricably associated with the movement in the writings of many unfriendly critics, he took great pains to distance the magazine from the surrealists, with the effect of obscuring some of the close affinities between surrealism and his own work. Long before Jolas and Breton were permanently estranged in the early 1940s, Jolas was effectively rewriting the record of his early influences. By the end of the 1920s, he claimed that the surrealists proposed an understanding of reality that was too radical because they sought “to completely deny the physical world,” an interpretation that differed significantly from the initial assessment of surrealist thought offered by Robert Sage. But Jolas argued “that the external world” remained “the basis from which to proceed into the supernatural and the magical” and this clearly did represent a departure from the surrealist view.<sup>8</sup> Although he denied that the surrealists influenced the manifestos he later issued, Jolas clearly

shared with them his general interests in the irrational, dreams, and automatism. He remained willing to admit the value of publishing the surrealists “for documentary reasons” because the movement was one of undeniable significance in the first half of the century.<sup>9</sup>

Jolas’s own antipositivist convictions were related to his fundamental assertion that “there are still miracles, mysteries, if only in our minds” and that in both form and content, literature had traditionally disregarded both the instinctive and automatic facets of the human condition.<sup>10</sup> Knowledgeable of the findings of Sigmund Freud and deeply influenced by the writings of Carl Gustav Jung, Jolas grew convinced that the unconscious ultimately provided the universal link shared within mankind, a link emphasised and reinforced by art. Robert Sage’s early observation that for realist writers “their absolute was merely the personal,” effectively underlined the need for a new approach to the expression of the unconscious and other newly acknowledged phenomena.<sup>11</sup> Eugene Jolas pledged “to present the quintessence of the modern spirit in evolution.” But he rejected “literature that wilfully attempts to be of the age.” He was, instead, in search of “a perception of eternal values” that could revitalise art and create what he called a “new magic.”<sup>12</sup>

The fundamental belief that emerged in the early numbers of *transition* was a need for the removal of all that was stagnant in literature. In “Suggestions for a New Magic,” Jolas maintained “that there is no hope for poetry unless there be disintegration first.” He called for “new words, new abstractions, new hieroglyphics, new symbols, new myths.”<sup>13</sup> Jolas argued that the only way “to liberate the imagination” was through “the conscious will to disintegrate the structure which the intellectual mechanisation of our age has produced.”<sup>14</sup> It became apparent and was confirmed time and again in

editorial statements that Jolas and his collaborators considered words themselves to be the primary weakness in contemporary literature. With the same number in which Jolas identified in the work of Gottfried Benn a desire to purge literature of the anachronistic, Elliot Paul called for the dramatic abandonment of worn-out words.

If our brains or imaginations are to be used at all, certain risks must be taken, and there are those that take them cheerfully. It should be pointed out, however, that there are other pitfalls than that of originality. Words and phrases, like all things of the earth, have a limited span of life. Sometimes it is long, but if they are highly wrought they are likely to be fragile. After they are weaned from their parent ideas, they have, sometimes, a vigorous youth but inevitably old age sets in. After their rightful proprietor discards them, his poorer neighbours pick them up but even when they have found their way to the ashcan, scavengers are likely to root them out.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout much of the first year of *transition*, however, the most suitable way to effect this change in language remained an issue of some ambiguity. In “Suggestions for a New Magic,” Jolas simply encouraged any undertaking intent on rejuvenating language and he cited contributors as diverse as Hart Crane, Léon-Paul Fargue, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and certain surrealist and expressionist writers as representative of this artistic renewal. In the professed opinion of the editors, all artists making a sincere attempt to refurbish the language they used belonged in *transition* during its more eclectic period.

Although Jolas stated his desire to uncover and promote “really new artistic methods to express our vision” so this “re-creation of the word” could be accomplished, there was very little of tangible substance in these earliest pronouncements.<sup>16</sup> Much of the ambiguity inherent in Jolas’s writings during this period can be traced to his underlying prudence. While Jolas accepted the nihilism expressed by writers like Elliot Paul and considered it a widespread and telling symptom of the age, he deplored its

essential recklessness. He believed that the disquiet of the age could easily drift towards a negativity that would only lead to “a paralysis”; he wished instead to orient this unrest towards progress.<sup>17</sup> Stuart Gilbert wrote much later that *transition* “was far more than a destructive force” from its very beginning. In his opinion, the magazine “built as much and more than it destroyed.”<sup>18</sup> The danger during this first year, then, was in precipitating literary anarchy. While Jolas enthusiastically accepted the idea that language had to be radically overhauled and he made sure that his voice was loudest in the call for change, he was preoccupied by the search for an example that would illustrate how artists could restore to the language something more valuable than what they discarded. It was only by embracing a specific model of literary innovation that proved that writers could escape the fetters of traditional language and effectively use words to fit their needs that Jolas was able to take the decisive step towards an entirely different and more confident stage of radicalism in the magazine.

In *transition* 11 (February 1928), Jolas published an article entitled “The Revolution of Language and James Joyce.” In it he developed fully his belief in a literary insurrection, entailing both the destruction and the subsequent innovation necessary to revive modern letters. Pulling together arguments from more tentative statements in earlier numbers of *transition*, Jolas emphasised the widespread belief that a new conception of reality, based specifically in this case on a knowledge of the unconscious, revealed the limitations in a conventional use of traditional language.

The discoveries of the subconscious by medical pioneers as a new field for magical explorations and comprehensions should have made it apparent that the instrument of language in its archaic condition could no longer be used. Modern life with its changed mythos and transmuted concepts of beauty make it imperative that words be given a new composition and relationship.<sup>19</sup>

Although Jolas was interested in reassessing virtually every aspect of literary form, this essay reiterated his belief that all writers should address the dilemma posed by words themselves with the utmost urgency.

The word presents the metaphysical problem today. When the beginnings of the twentieth century are seen in perspective, it will be found that the disintegration of words and their subsequent reconstruction on other planes constitute some of the most important phenomena of our age. The traditional meaning of words is being subverted, and a panic seizes the upholders of the norm as they contemplate the process of destruction that opens up heretofore undreamed-of possibilities of expression.<sup>20</sup>

Eugene Jolas again made passing reference to the usual miscellany of *transition* contributors who could be judged to be partisans of the cause, but it was clearly the example of James Joyce that inspired Jolas's now lucid understanding of the "revolutionary tendency" required in modern literature.<sup>21</sup> This essay was much more than simply another in a series of apologies for Joyce's new work that ran in the magazine at that time; rather, it marked Jolas's deliberate adoption of "Work in Progress" as the primary illustrative text of his unfolding revolution in language. Through the "word formations and deformations" of "Work in Progress," Jolas believed, "language is born anew." According to Jolas, "Mr. Joyce has created a language of a new richness and power to express the new sense of time and space he wishes to give."<sup>22</sup> By the time the first book of the work that would eventually appear as *Finnegans Wake* had appeared in serial form in *transition*, Jolas had determined that Joyce was demonstrating how modern artists could again control language rather than simply compromising with it and thereby perpetuating the inadequacy of careworn words.

Jolas was understandably preoccupied with the study of language change. He was especially concerned with the question whether “external conditions” or “the forward-straining vision of a single mind” brought the most substantial force of change upon works of literature.<sup>23</sup> Although Jolas acknowledged and stressed to his readers that language change was a natural and inevitable occurrence, he came to believe that the word in use in the modern world was ripe for a radical push forward; with Joyce leading the way, Jolas sought to make *transition* a point at which the evolutionary tendency of letters and the revolutionary vision of insurgent writers could come together. But for all the support James Joyce received throughout the history of *transition* and for all the occasions on which “Work in Progress” was held up as an illustration of Jolas’s ideals in application, Eugene Jolas recognised that Joyce’s work was essentially a personal approach to what Jolas maintained was a malady in language. Although Joyce was certainly Jolas’s “bellwether,” the *transition* editor believed that every artist had to arrive eventually at his or her own solution to the universal problem with words.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, Jolas’s critical enquiries continued, with even greater confidence and enthusiasm.

By the end of 1928 *transition* had consciously moved to the forefront of language experimentation in the English-speaking world. In the last monthly number of the magazine, Jolas and Paul reaffirmed their desire that the magazine should be “a meeting-place for the most independent men and women of vision.”<sup>25</sup> But in his assessment of *transition*, David Bennett argues that it was inevitable that during a period of such infamous and spirited activity, there would arise a desire to summarise the revolutionary principles exhibited in the magazine.<sup>26</sup> Jolas had begun by claiming, “We have no intention of indulging in dogmatic pronunciamientos.... We should like to

feel that each being re-invent the world for himself.”<sup>27</sup> He was quick to disclaim that the magazine was “the review of a narrow group, clique, chapelle, movement.” But it is against the spirit of the little magazine movement to reject entirely the value of the manifesto. The possibility of serious misunderstanding grew ever greater as each new number of *transition* appeared with editorial clarifications. Jolas complained, in fact, that “some of our friends chide us for having a too definite programmatic idea, while others insist that the lack of a purposive orientation is our chief fault.”<sup>28</sup>

The original idea to draw up a *transition* manifesto is supposed to have come from Maria McDonald Jolas. Dougald McMillan reports that Mrs. Jolas asked her husband for a more concrete illustration of thoughts he had expressed in more abstract terms in his earlier essays.<sup>29</sup> More likely, she was responding to her husband’s opaque writing style; he was fond of obsolete words and archaic rhetorical structures. Jolas first drew up a succinct statement of his principles during the summer of 1928 but he decided to circulate it to a number of his friends and collaborators. Some of them were willing to sign the document and as a result, “The Revolution of the Word” proclamation appeared in *transition* 16/17 (June 1929).

1. The revolution in the English language is an accomplished fact.
2. The imagination in search of a fabulous world is autonomous and unconfined.
3. Pure poetry is a lyrical absolute that seeks an a priori reality within ourselves alone.
4. Narrative is not mere anecdote, but the projection of a metamorphosis of reality.
5. The expression of these concepts can be achieved only through the rhythmic “hallucination of the word.”
6. The literary creator has the right to disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed on him by text-books and dictionaries.
7. He has the right to use words of his own fashioning and to disregard existing grammatical and syntactical laws.
8. The “litany of words” is admitted as an independent unit.

9. We are not concerned with the propagation of sociological ideas, except to emancipate the creative elements from the present ideology.
10. Time is a tyranny to be abolished.
11. The writer expresses. He does not communicate.
12. The plain reader be damned.<sup>30</sup>

Although this remarkably dense document elicited widespread comment, it really was little more than a summary of the opinions that had already appeared in print on previous occasions. There is nothing that had not at least been intimated from the earliest numbers of *transition* and some of these points reiterate basic editorial claims. It is true, however, that these claims were never before stated so explicitly.

The first point, the assertion that a revolution in language had already been effected, was intended to extend Jolas's earlier use of the term "revolution" in connection with the experimental writing that had appeared in *transition*. As the title of Jolas's earlier essay suggested, the writings of James Joyce and, to some extent, those of his contemporaries were to be read as revolutionary documents. That this revolution had already been accomplished was simply a restatement of Jolas's belief that language change was an inevitable force that could not be interrupted. Hence, in language at least, revolution becomes the logical extension of evolution. An attack upon those opponents who doubted the motivating stimulus of what Jolas was trying to accomplish in *transition* was echoed in the ninth point. Here, Jolas was simply defending himself against critics who were more concerned with political issues: those on the Right believed his writings held inherent socialist tendencies and those on the Left read Jolas as a reactionary who would be better served directing his radical energies towards political revolution.

The reaffirmation of an understanding of reality seemingly unique to *transition* was to be found in the second, third, fourth, and tenth points, where traditional ideas of

time and space were challenged. The third and fourth points also gave voice to Jolas's own particular understanding of art as reality, a combination of the conscious and unconscious that he believed differentiated him from the surrealists. The fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth points expressed the continued mistrust of words as they exist and the restrictions imposed on the writer by the way in which these words are organised grammatically. What may be most noteworthy about this manifesto, however, is precisely the extent to which the authority of the writer is emphasised as the agent of linguistic change, an affirmation of "the forward-straining vision of a single mind." Contemporary critical thought is concerned with the structural and methodological impediments to the reader; in keeping with his time, Jolas was most concerned with the internal and external obstacles to the artist in literature. This idea was implied in all these clauses, but was stated directly in the eleventh point and most dramatically emerged in the final statement of the manifesto: "The plain reader be damned."

"The Revolution of the Word" carried sixteen signatures, most from people who had a clear and very visible relationship with *transition* through its first two years of publication. The signatures most noticeably absent from the document were those of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, whom Jolas later claimed not to have approached because their work avowed such an independent stand. To some extent, this is true; Jolas never wished to impinge upon the autonomy of other artists. But what then of the people who did sign the manifesto? Their acceptance of "The Revolution of the Word" was never intended as an act of initiation, but simply as a statement of sympathy to the cause of a revolution in language. But it is just as likely that Jolas especially feared outright rejection from Joyce. Indeed, through subsequent statements made in "Work in Progress" itself, Joyce distanced himself from "The Revolution of the Word."

However, Joyce's very appearance in *transition* gave implicit approval to the work of the magazine, and Jolas did nothing to jeopardise the situation.

The proclamation was signed by everyone who was directly involved with the editorial work on *transition*, with the exception of Matthew Josephson. The signatories included Stuart Gilbert, who came to the magazine in 1928 chiefly because of his enthusiasm for the work of Joyce. Gilbert is an interesting figure in the story of the manifesto because it was he who suggested a series of inflammatory aphorisms from William Blake to accompany each assertion of "The Revolution of the Word." These epigrams were adopted and did incite the desired comment, but Gilbert's genuine commitment to Jolas's ideals at this stage must be questioned in light of the recent publication of Gilbert's Paris diary. "And Eugene the word-killer wishes me to sign a manifesto, praising the New Word!" Gilbert gleefully wrote in the month preceding the publication of "The Revolution of the Word." "Why don't they learn the old ones first?"<sup>31</sup> Josephson's opposition can be attributed to political differences; but in the context of the increased control Jolas was asserting in defining and reorienting the overall direction of the review, Gilbert's comments call into question the appearance of general editorial solidarity.

Indeed, "Eugene the word-killer" did eclipse his editorial collaborators, but in the meantime, these associates, including Stuart Gilbert, proved ardent defenders of the general *transition* program. Perhaps the rush of support from those closest to the magazine was a reflex reaction; the opposition to the manifesto was so surprising in its vehemence. In the number immediately following the publication of "The Revolution of the Word," Jolas felt forced to declare that he had "no intention of being dogmatic" in printing the proclamation, but he did acknowledge its impact, described as "an

astonishing repercussion on two continents.”<sup>32</sup> From the time of the publication of the manifesto in June 1929 until the suspension of the magazine one year later, much space was taken up with defending “The Revolution of the Word” and, as Jolas came to believe that *transition* would fold permanently, with providing a summary of the magazine’s achievements. Unfortunately, in trying to placate critics, some of the fundamental assertions made in the magazine in the late 1920s were seriously undermined.

Not surprisingly, angry commentators took particular issue with the last two points of the manifesto proclaiming the right of the artist to forsake the wants of the reader in the quest for a radical revitalisation of literature. In part as a gesture of appeasement, one can only assume, Jolas and his collaborators chose to stress how artists and what they wished to accomplish must be read as fundamentally separate from society as a whole. In this way, “The Revolution of the Word” posed no threat to the everyday use of language; more importantly, “The Revolution of the Word” could never be seen as a “revolution” in the wider sense during these very political times. Stuart Gilbert argued that *transition* contributors were not “out to damage and destroy for the sheer delight of destruction.”<sup>33</sup> Two useful, if unlikely, allies in justifying the attitudes expressed towards language in *transition* were C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, whose *Meaning of Meaning* was set to appear in a third addition in 1930. In this study, Ogden and Richards argued, among other things, that a basic division can be made between the use of words for simple statements and “the use of words to express or excite feelings and attitudes.”<sup>34</sup> Gilbert seized on this aspect of the work for his essay “Functions of Words” in *transition* 18 (November 1929). He argued that the *transition* manifesto simply reasserted the value of this emotive use of language for the “pioneer” of

literature who sought to “breathe new life into the dry bones of modern letters.” “The Revolution of the Word” and what it tried to accomplish remained separate from writing “for information’s sake.” Critically, “a story of realistic adventure in the actual world” still retained a validity and a right to endure as a literary form, in Gilbert’s view.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Robert Sage pointed out that “The Revolution of the Word” did not encourage a writer to “forget the language he learned at school and invent a new one,” but it did “attempt to defend... every author’s right to mould a medium best adapted to express himself” if it was warranted.<sup>36</sup> However, this estrangement of art from reality was obviously very dangerous for *transition*. In defending “The Revolution of the Word” against leftist calls for a more utilitarian use of language, Jolas himself emphasised the different functions of language and maintained that “social communication... is in no way concerned with creative expression.”<sup>37</sup> This represents a significant withdrawal from his earlier ideas and one that problematises attempts to understand Jolas’s thought within the context of other cultural movements of the day. In attempting to disprove any intrinsic political aspect to his ideas, Jolas debased their social relevance. If Jolas believed in the need for a new vocabulary, did his understanding of different functions of words suggest that different lexicons were necessary? Fortunately, the publication of *transition* during the 1930s addressed many of the contradictions that appeared in Jolas’s thought at this particularly sensitive time.

## II. Poetry is Vertical

After a respite of nearly two years, *transition* appeared again in 1932 with the financial assistance of the Servire Press of the Hague. Freed from the normal pecuniary

concerns of most little magazine editors without having to compromise his editorial autonomy, Eugene Jolas now adopted for his magazine the new subtitle “An International Workshop for Orphic Creation.” The appellation was more than simply provocative rhetoric as Jolas pledged himself to the strengthening of the irrational in literature through a defence of “the hallucinative forces now trodden under foot.” By consciously placing an even greater emphasis on poetry, Jolas hoped to make *transition* “a mantic laboratory” and wished “to encourage all attempts towards a subliminal ethos through mediumistic experiments in life and language.”<sup>38</sup>

For all their quixotic bravado in the early numbers, both Elliot Paul and Robert Sage seemed to recognise the limits of the *transition* experiments. While Paul maintained that “only the hardest souls are ever likely to get into treacherous territory,” he had been willing to acknowledge “that the unexplored area beyond hackneyed academic composition and thought stretches out blithely towards madness.”<sup>39</sup> Sage, on the other hand, admitted that “a mob of unjailed imaginations would be as intolerable as the present situation,” but he, too, thought the possibility of overindulgence unlikely.<sup>40</sup> But with Paul and Sage no longer associated with the magazine and with little active collaboration from other former colleagues like Stuart Gilbert, Eugene Jolas was able to make *transition* in the early 1930s more radical still. The first numbers published with the Servire Press had a tangible feel of excess about them, as Jolas turned his attack on the very cornerstones of literary form, pledging for example that “what is now known as the short story, the novel, poem... will give way to forms that are as yet unnamed.”<sup>41</sup>

The preliminary material for this latest incarnation of the magazine was exhibited in Jolas’s pamphlet *The Language of Night*, also published by the Servire Press in 1932. In part, this small book catalogued the ideas and works of other writers,

from Lewis Carroll to e.e. cummings, whose own concerns with the limitations of language in literature seemed to justify the experiments undertaken by *transition*. In this way, Jolas attempted to place “The Revolution of the Word” within the wider context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary thought. *The Language of Night* also offered another summary of Jolas’s beliefs, but the pamphlet was perhaps most notable for emphasising the contiguity between *transition* and romanticism, especially a romanticism of the German tradition. As early as *transition* 9 (December 1927), Jolas and his collaborators pledged their belief “in a new romanticism, more volatile than that of the past, which achieves a magic by combining the interior and the exterior, the subjective and the objective, the imaginary and the apparently real.”<sup>42</sup> How this new romanticism was precisely defined at that time held little significance for Jolas. “It is utterly unimportant whether we call ourselves neo-romantics, neo-realists, synthesists, transitionists,” he wrote. “[T]he essential thing is that we are on the quest.”<sup>43</sup> But with Jolas’s continuing estrangement from the surrealists, the connection between romanticism and the basic aims of *transition* edged again to the forefront. Jolas was now able to explain the connection between his thought and the work of the surrealists, for example, by emphasising their shared affinities with romanticism. He had written about the German romantics in the later quarterly numbers of *transition*, but had encountered profound indifference. Jolas felt that his current readership, immersed in the political and economic turmoil of the 1930s, might now better understand the affinities between themselves and the romantics. Changing his tack slightly, he now stressed in the magazine that “the return to a *new* romanticism... is an absurdity.” Like the German expressionists in whom he read certain romantic affinities, Jolas argued that it was “impossible to return to a historic past.” But he maintained that “there is a link

binding some of us with a certain aura that hovered around romanticism” and “that we are living in a mental climate that... resembles the one in which romanticism flowered in the beginning of the last century.”<sup>44</sup> Jolas’s interest in German literature, past and present, was always evident as it comprised perhaps the major facet of his early creative and intellectual background; however, its manifestation in these new numbers of *transition* was so apparent that it merited notice from T.S. Eliot’s *Criterion*, the reviewer believing that Jolas was “continuing openly a tendency... to turn away from France and towards Germany.”<sup>45</sup>

The transcendental capacity of literature had long held influence over Eugene Jolas’s critical vocabulary; his fundamental rejection of realism was connected with his belief that art could and should transcend the world of everyday existence. As early as *transition* 3 (June 1927), he wrote of “a vertical urge”<sup>46</sup> and there are intimations of this concept in Jolas’s earlier critical writings in the *Paris Tribune*, where he claimed that “all the work of the moderns is decidedly vertical.”<sup>47</sup> But in *The Language of Night*, he moved to extend this concept, calling for an art that “will be vertical instead of merely horizontal,” characterised by “a perpendicular movement from the nocturnal to stellar constellations” that “will create a new emotion of wonder.”<sup>48</sup> This idea formed the basis of a second manifesto, titled “Poetry is Vertical,” that appeared in *transition* 21 (March 1932).

[1] In a world ruled by the hypnosis of positivism, we proclaim the autonomy of the poetic vision, the hegemony of the inner life over the outer life.

[2] We reject the postulate that the creative personality is a mere factor in the pragmatic conception of progress, and that its function is the delineation of a vitalistic world.

[3] We are against the renewal of the classical ideal, because it inevitably leads to a decorative reactionary conformity, to a factitious sense of harmony, to the sterilisation of the living imagination.

- [4] We believe that the orphic forces should be guarded from deterioration, no matter what social system ultimately is triumphant.
- [5] Esthetic will is not the first law. It is in the immediacy of the ecstatic revelation, in the a-logical movement of the psyche, in the organic rhythm of the vision that the creative act occurs.
- [6] The reality of depth can be conquered by a voluntary mediumistic conjuration, by a stupor which proceeds from the irrational to a world beyond a world.
- [7] The transcendental "I" with its multiple stratifications reaching back millions of years is related to the entire history of mankind, past and present, and is brought to the surface with the hallucinatory irruption of images in the dream, the daydream, the mystic-gnostic trance, and even the psychiatric condition.
- [8] The final disintegration of the "I" in the creative act is made possible by the use of a language which is a mantic instrument, and which does not hesitate to adopt a revolutionary attitude toward word and syntax, going even so far as to invent a hermetic language, if necessary.
- [9] Poetry builds a nexus between the "I" and the "you" by leading the emotions of the sunken, telluric depths upward toward the illumination of a collective reality and a totalistic universe.
- [10] The synthesis of a true collectivism is made possible by a community of spirits who aim at the construction of a new mythological reality.<sup>49</sup>

Once again, this manifesto was primarily attributed to Jolas, although he may have been assisted by Hans Arp and Carl Einstein, who both subsequently put their name to "Poetry is Vertical."<sup>50</sup> Of the nine signatures on this manifesto, in fact, only Jolas's had appeared on "The Revolution of the Word." But two other signatories were of note: Samuel Beckett, who was still best-known in the early 1930s as a supporter of James Joyce, and James Johnson Sweeney, who would become Jolas's only substantial collaborator during the final numbers of *transition*.

Much like "The Revolution of the Word," "Poetry is Vertical" was a mixture of familiar doctrines, new applications of old ideas, and emphatic restatements of concepts inherent in earlier stages of the history of the magazine. The first and fifth points were very much further expressions of the fundamental antipositivist tenets that defined *transition* from its earliest numbers. The third point, which addressed the limitations of

a classical ideal, stated clearly the belief that in spite of affinities over time, traditional expressions of consciousness from the past were inapplicable to the modern condition.

The eighth point reaffirmed the importance of a revolution in language, pushing the idea to its logical extreme and marrying the concept of a “hermetic language” with the aim of mantic unity through literature. The second, fourth, and tenth points addressed once more a number of the political criticisms levelled at Jolas in the wake of his first manifesto. These clauses rejected the primacy of the communicative function of words and the enslavement of the artist to these communicative functions; Jolas accepted the significance of collectivism but he believed that its true source was in the creative spirit and he reaffirmed the priority of a revolution in language over political revolution.

Jolas’s interest in the Jungian collective unconscious as an important artistic consideration emerged in the seventh point. Statements further clarifying the concept of the “vertical” and its implications were seen in the sixth and ninth points where poetry became the medium by which mankind attempted to access and express the universal.

An important aspect of “verticalism” is that it did not simply adopt and celebrate the sublime. *transition* had already deemed its epoch one of chaos and Jolas wrote, “One of the chief faults I have to find with the present art of the word is that it tends to ignore almost completely the daemonic content of language.”<sup>51</sup> Jolas’s understanding of the influence of romanticism dictated that art should not only partake of the positive, but it should also address this negativity. He maintained that the “avowed aim” of romanticism “was to assure the triumph of consciousness over chaos, although it insisted on going through the netherworld first.”<sup>52</sup> But while literature should explore dark recesses, it was important that its overall impulse should stress a positive movement, a movement upwards. The fundamental limitation of the romanticism Jolas

so admired, however, was that in its contemporary form it was prone to centre eventually on its “irrationalism” or “the chaos it worships for its own sake.”<sup>53</sup>

Verticalism was intended to encourage artists to pattern the irrational. But while clearly different than the horizontal plane of the commonplace, “vertical” could denote movement either up or down. Reflecting his own faith in progress, Jolas’s model for this “white romanticism” was Novalis, the late-eighteenth-century German poet whom he first published in *transition* 18 (November 1929). According to Jolas, Novalis “explored the mysteries of the night and the chthonian, and gave voice to his longing for death.” But the end result of Novalis’ poetry was movement “from disassociation and anarchy towards the liberty of the pure spirit.”<sup>54</sup> To give articulate voice to the spirit of this idea, Jolas coined the word “vertigral,” combining “vertical,” “integral,” and the German word for “grail,” to signify a quest upward along the vertical plane.<sup>55</sup>

This poetic freedom to explore the depths of the unconscious was very important to Eugene Jolas. From the very early numbers of the magazine, the dream was emphasised as important to the creative impulse. As we have seen, the scientific “discovery” of the unconscious was also important to Jolas as one of the forces that changed humanity’s understanding of reality in the twentieth century. But in the context of his own interest in the dream, actual dream analysis was of secondary importance; too much literature was attempting to reflect superficial symptoms of Freudian psychosis, in Jolas’s opinion. Jolas saw “the dream and everything pre-logical as an integral function in the struggle for a comprehensive attitude toward life.”<sup>56</sup> Dreams, like poetry, reflected “a game of polarity between the powers of the earth, the daemonic powers, and those of an invisible, celestial, world.” In his own dreams, Jolas maintained that “this

vertical principal is definitely at work.”<sup>57</sup> The relevance of the dream and the primacy of the poetic act are united in mankind’s search for expression. It was at this point that Jolas undertook a search for “the language of night,” a language elastic enough to give voice to these depths of the unconscious mind. For the final number of *transition*, Jolas asked his fellow writers for their endorsement: “Have you ever felt the need for a new language to express the experiences of your night mind?”<sup>58</sup> Many of the responses he received, from artists as diverse as T.S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway, were dissenting if courteous. On this last occasion, as on all occasions previous, Jolas’s work received no official endorsement from James Joyce. But once again, Jolas discovered tacit reassurance from “Work in Progress.” Just as the work provided Jolas with an important archetype at a crucial stage of *transition*’s development during the late 1920s, Joyce’s writing played an important role in the search for a language of the night. Building upon Joyce’s own assertion that his new work was a book of the night and that its language reflected that of a dream world, Jolas proclaimed “Work in Progress” reflective of “the night mind of man.”<sup>59</sup> The universal scope of “Work in Progress” inspired Jolas to proclaim that “the pre-logical or pre-conscious mind of the ancestors is continuously at work” in Joyce.<sup>60</sup>

Most importantly during this period, Jolas reversed the trend established by his response to critics of “The Revolution of World” and once again linked his creative concerns with some of the broader problems facing Western society during the inter-war era. No longer was *transition* addressing matters with exclusively aesthetic relevance; Jolas believed he was now faced with “primarily a crisis of human consciousness.” In the same way that poetry had always been, for Jolas, a deliberate reshaping and

reorientation of material from the conscious and unconscious mind, so too was mankind seen to be attempting to effect “some sort of spiritual renovation” to cast off the political and economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>61</sup> What Jolas interpreted as the dramatic integration of the sphere of art into the sphere of everyday life was the fruition of his personal claim that poetry itself could be revolutionary. He broke dramatically from the practice of considering functions of language separately, furthering the assumption that such functions could exist independent of one another. Jolas still believed that “the instrumentalities of poetic expression are particularly involved in the present chaos of the spirit,”<sup>62</sup> but he now called more generally for “a twentieth-century dictionary” and blamed “the crisis in the communicative functions of language” for “the intellectual chaos which characterizes all human relations today.”<sup>63</sup>

To some extent, the later numbers of *transition* were devoted to the search for praxis unique to Eugene Jolas himself throughout this period. Some artists were indifferent to the social and political events around them; some artists saw aesthetic change as a crucial first step to political revolution; some artists were ready to bear arms. Jolas remained unapologetically independent and defiantly apolitical until it was obvious that nothing short of a military response would stop the spread of Nazi terror. In the meantime, he hoped to dissolve the boundaries between art and life in such a manner as to address constructively the artistic and social concerns he had held for more than a decade. By the late 1930s, Jolas’s search for a revolution in language represented a formidable program of innovation. Unfortunately, this too was sacrificed in another period of prolonged warfare begun on the very frontiers that produced the work that had shaped his thought.

### III. The Plastic Objectivity of Art

When Eugene Jolas wrote of the pre-eminence of “poetry” in *transition*, he claimed that he meant “poetry” in the sense of its “generic semantics as indicating the primal impulse to create.”<sup>64</sup> Although *transition* was unabashedly committed to the advancement of experimental writing, and “poetry” in a more specific sense was emphasised in the later numbers of the review, visual art always played a significant role in the magazine. In its publication run over more than ten years and twenty-seven numbers, *transition* proved to be remarkably interdisciplinary, printing fiction and poetry, critical articles, dream transcriptions, incantations, musical scores, and reproductions of paintings, sketches, and sculptures. *transition* also printed photographs from a number of important anti-realist photographers of the first half of the twentieth century, like Francis Bruguière, László Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, and Charles Sheeler.

Man Ray was the photographer whose career received the greatest attention in *transition*. His work appeared in six numbers, five of which predated the publication of “The Revolution of the Word” manifesto in 1929. The particular appeal of an American surrealist photographer during this period of the magazine’s history is fairly clear. In these earliest numbers of *transition*, Jolas was torn between his desire to promote surrealist work and his commitment to advocate American artists. When Jolas put together the so-called “American Number,” *transition* 13 (Summer 1928), he took advantage of the larger format introduced as the magazine became a quarterly to include three Man Ray photographs. (Unfortunately, due to printer’s error, two were placed upside down.) The editor chose a rayograph for the cover of *transition* 15 (February 1929) and included Man Ray’s “Eight Photographic Studies,” the greatest number of

photographs to appear together in any single number of the magazine, as well as his photographic portraits of the surrealists Robert Desnos and Paul Eluard. One must recognise, however, that Man Ray was a surrealist whose beliefs bore great similarity to those held by Eugene Jolas. Like Jolas, Man Ray was sceptical of the political stance of the surrealists and he chafed under the absolute control André Breton imposed upon the group; unlike Jolas, Man Ray stopped considerably short of open opposition to Breton. Like his surrealist colleagues, Man Ray largely discontinued his involvement with *transition* after 1929. In his case, however, there were more lucrative opportunities awaiting him in the fashion magazines of the 1930s.

As we have seen, Jolas's support of the surrealists was in part expedient, as he arranged with the usually elusive Breton the exclusive English-language rights to print surrealist works, works which did illustrate some of the basic values Jolas wished to encourage. But important collaborators like Elliot Paul and, later, James Johnson Sweeney were keenly interested in visual art. Although Jolas did draw analogies between the advancements in visual art and those that he believed were needed in language, commenting for instance that modern painting reflected "a supra-earthly imagination" and that the camera "has made it possible to create expressions of the enigmatic and marvellous," he used such examples to highlight and belittle the persistent conservatism inherent in literature.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, at the very beginning of *transition*, the term "photographic" was employed as a derogatory adjective. In his first critical remarks in *transition* 3 (June 1927), Jolas equated photography with realism. He wrote when outlining the limitations of that form, "We are no longer interested in the photography of events, in the mere silhouetting of facts, in the presentation of misery, in the anecdotic boredom of verse."<sup>66</sup> Jolas's desire for a revolution in language was

initially driven in no small part by his experiences as a newspaperman. His memories of life as a reporter in New York City were coloured by the use of repetitive and realistic language against which he and his colleagues began to revolt through the development of a tabloid style. The necessity of the snapshot to accompany a news story was stressed to the young Jolas as the means by which even straightforward accounts of events could be made still more assessable, tied ever more closely to the mundane reality of the mass reading public. Should a story stray at all from the commonplace, the need for the reminder of the reality consistently mirrored in these “pix” became even greater. “We believe that the police reporter’s mentality has nothing whatever to do with poetry,” Jolas later wrote. “We are against all methods that believe that the photographic representation of life is the aim of true art.”<sup>67</sup>

The disposition against realist photography in *transition* was furthered by Elliot Paul, who generally put great faith in visual art. In *transition* 11 (February 1928), Paul printed a short note about the work of Pablo Picasso in which a comparison between photography and painting was offered. A great admirer of the Spanish master, Paul used the early cubist work *Houses on the Hill* (1909) and a photograph of the village upon which the painting was reportedly based to “illustrate the difference between nature and art, between copying and arrangement.” Here, Paul was in part answering Gertrude Stein’s comment that cubist paintings were “practically photographic,” a defence against those who found Picasso’s technique hopelessly obscure.<sup>68</sup> The real implication inherent in Paul’s comparison is clearly that the photograph is the inferior work and that the development of realist photography had allowed painters to expand their medium by freeing them from the socially responsible task of faithfully representing reality. Eugene Jolas later argued that “a revolution was caused” in the visual arts “by the discovery of

the camera which made it unnecessary to reproduce the exact contours of an object” and that writers should similarly strive to effect the “subjective and instinctive objectification” of subject matter achieved by painters.<sup>69</sup> This distinction between a function served by a realist photograph and another served by a painting is similar to that adopted in *transition* after the publication of “The Revolution of the Word” when it was asserted that different functions of language existed independently of one another. We have seen, however, that Eugene Jolas was uncomfortable with this distinction and it is doubtful that visual art that simply served a representational, documentary function would have been given any standing in *transition*.

The photographer whose work Eugene Jolas seemed to admire most during this period was Charles Sheeler. Sheeler met Jolas while the former was visiting Paris in the late 1920s. Jolas published in *transition* 18 (November 1929) a series of photographs taken from Sheeler’s study of Henry Ford’s River Rouge Plant, titled “The Industrial Mythos.” Austere and abstract images of the manufacturing works, these photographs represented for Jolas “the mechanical-chemical reflections of the imagination.”<sup>70</sup> The traditional view of Charles Sheeler is that his treatment of “the industrial theme” was one of unquestioning “reverence.”<sup>71</sup> But even during Sheeler’s lifetime, commentators like William Carlos Williams argued that his pictures underlined “man’s pitiful weakness” in the shadow of these machines.<sup>72</sup> In her recent study of Charles Sheeler, Karen Lucic maintains that even “adamant converts” to mechanisation like Sheeler “sometimes betrayed ambivalence and doubt.”<sup>73</sup> For example, in *River Rouge Plant — Stamping Press* (1927), one photograph from the series not printed in *transition*, a man is seen at work, holding an appendage of the machine in front of him. While the suggestion is that the worker controls the machine through his simple action, his

expression is unclear and the machine towers above him menacingly, dominating most of the frame.

If Sheeler's ultimate attitude towards the machines that feature so prominently in his photographs remains a question of some critical discussion, it simply mirrors Eugene Jolas's own ambivalence. Jolas recognised the machine to be "the most important single esthetic contribution of our age." But while opposing "its blind glorification," he maintained that "it is conceivable that the machine will make it possible for humanity in the future to devote more time... to the beauty of the dream."<sup>74</sup> Jolas equated these potentials and dangers of mechanisation with increased urbanisation, and saw great modern contradictions embodied in cities like New York. (Besides Sheeler's photographs of machines, Jolas favoured urban photographs, publishing such contributions from Berenice Abbott, Eugène Atget, and Gretchen and Peter Powel.) What is clear, however, is that beyond the subject matter of Sheeler's works, the photographer's technique is most notable and this became the aspect of his contributions that most impressed Jolas.

In spite of the fact that certain modern camera-artists have achieved surrealistic effects through processes of photographic "montage," it seems to me that the best effects in photography are still obtainable through a plastic objectivity. This is where Sheeler's magic realism is at its best. His camera gives us the finest imaginative possibilities through light and dark arrangements which approach the abstract and crystal purity of poetry.<sup>75</sup>

Coming from an affirmed enemy of realistic art, Jolas's comments can hardly be seen as a call for a return to the traditional documentary techniques of the newspaper photographer. What Jolas was looking for, one must assume, was a photograph that is more evocative than descriptive. One of Sheeler's photographs printed in *transition*, *Criss-Crossed Conveyers* (1927), flattens the structures on the outside of the plant to a

whorl on the single plane of the page, dominated by the “power house,” as Sheeler called it elsewhere, at the top of the frame. There is no sense of what passes through these conveyers, nor where they begin or end. There are no workers in view. For a photograph that was originally intended as promotional material for the River Rouge Plant, *Criss-Crossed Conveyers* conveys very little information about what was happening inside these structures. Instead, Jolas might have read this picture as a very personalised depiction of how Sheeler saw the scene, a rendering of Sheeler’s imagination. Similarly, Edward Weston’s studies of peppers printed in *transition* 19/20 (June 1930) appear on the surface simply to register their shapes, but they are in fact highly suggestive. In an article that appeared in *transition* 15 (February 1929), Robert Desnos claimed that Man Ray’s work had the same characteristic.

A photographer, Man Ray derives neither from artistic deformation, nor from servile reproduction of “nature.” Your planes and humps will reveal to you a person you do not know, and whom you have never dared glimpse in your dreams. A new “you” will spring from the delicate hands of the chemist in the red glow of the laboratory. It will bat its eyes out in the open air, the way night birds do.<sup>76</sup>

Alarming, for Jolas, these effects could be directly attributed to the apparatus brandished by this chemist or to the camera used “in a creative-compositional sense,” as László Moholy-Nagy advocated it in *transition* as a means to create a photograph that was “not merely a copy of nature.”<sup>77</sup> Jolas seems not to have considered the camera a benevolent tool that allowed the natural world to record its own magic. Rather, the camera was simply another machine, something to be mistrusted and used warily.

We are not hostile to the whirling symptoms of the modern world of machines. But they must be subordinated to the expression of the imaginative aims which are the very essence of poetry. The cinema, in spite of the imbecility surrounding its present evolution, can give us possibilities for hallucinations that check successfully the pedantry of the puritan.

As a machine, therefore, a camera is “methodological, not creative per se — a mistake that has frequently been made,” Jolas claimed.<sup>78</sup> Jolas’s creative ideal was, as we have seen time and again, the skilful combination of the conscious and unconscious, or what Moholy-Nagy foresaw for the camera as “a weird-linking with the imaginary of the most real, imitative means.”<sup>79</sup> Jolas granted that “the machine has the capacity... to create a new sense of the vertical,” but he believed that great moments of verticalist penetration were more likely to be found through his revolutionary approach to writing than in collaboration with technological advancements or even in the fleeting moments of evocativeness seen in Sheeler’s photographs.<sup>80</sup>

Although Eugene Jolas took great pride in featuring anti-realist photographers in his magazine, even claiming for himself at one point a crucial role in furthering its development as an art form in the early twentieth century, he was challenged by an article published in *transition* 25 (Fall 1936), in which Louis Aragon recognised the role of photography as a form of competition for painting, but saw its future primarily as a “documentary aid” for the painter.<sup>81</sup> As we have seen, Jolas made a distinction between visual art that aspired to a mimetic representation of a traditional understanding of reality and visual art that was nonrepresentational, just as he made such a distinction in writing. But there is no evidence that he used the example of nonrepresentational visual art as anything more than the loosest of analogies. The actual techniques of the visual artist offered no tangible example to the writer. Did ideas rooted in the values of automatism in art betray a general bias against visual art? Dickran Tashjian points out that this very issue constituted an important debate within the surrealist movement during the 1930s. Painting was seen “as a self-conscious act if there ever was one” and although one of the cornerstones of the movement was the relative equality of all art,

Tashjian argues that André Breton's attitudes do exhibit a bias favouring the written.<sup>82</sup>

Now, it is true that Jolas granted more weight to the shaping value of consciousness than would an orthodox surrealist, but his attitude towards photography illustrates a limit afforded the scope of the conscious will of the artist. When Jolas planned a new magazine in collaboration with Breton in the early 1940s, Jolas excluded from his list of interests only "plastic arts" in a catalogue of a dozen disciplines that included philosophy, poetry, psychology, religion, and sociology. Breton still exhibited an interest in visual art, as did Georges Duthuit, who was to be the third editor.

For Jolas, certainly, his idea of a poetry that aspired to the heights of the vertical was the ideal combination of the conscious and the unconscious. While his friendships and collaborations, not to mention the status of modern painting during the first half of the twentieth century, would have made it impossible for him to voice his scepticism towards all visual art, the arguments he made against photography betray an underlying prejudice against these forms. While "The Revolution of the Word" and "Poetry is Vertical" express sentiments that can be applied across the arts, Jolas's preoccupation with a revolution in language calls into question his commitment to furthering the development of a wide range of modern art forms.

## Chapter Three

### Approaches to Translation

Proceeding from what they hoped to be a developing enthusiasm for world literature in the United States, the editors of *transition* magazine sought to encourage a host of international contributors whose works would appear “in a language Americans can read and understand.”<sup>1</sup> From its first issue, *transition* openly acknowledged its dependence on English translations of foreign literature. Indeed, more than one-third of the poems and prose pieces from the first twelve numbers of the magazine appeared in translation. Approximately one-half of the contributions to *transition* 2 (May 1927) came from French, Russian, Serbian, and German source texts. In that first year of monthly numbers, *transition* also presented translations from Bulgarian, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish, Yiddish, and Native American originals. But while the magazine rarely lapsed in its reliance on foreign contributors, Eugene Jolas and his collaborators came to place less emphasis on the English translations of the works these contributors brought to the magazine, announcing in 1933 that *transition* was largely dispensing with translation while taking up a new policy of publishing non-English submissions in their language of origin.

By this time, however, *transition* had long been printing individual bilingual and trilingual contributions: poetry and prose that attempted to integrate a number of languages within a single text. The declining number of translations that appeared in *transition* after its first year of publication can be attributed, in part at least, to the well-documented difficulties associated with the production of a little magazine. Translation is painstaking and takes precious time and the magazine used more than forty translators to help bring foreign-language texts to unilingual English readers. But without doubt,

the relative eschewal of translation in the later numbers of *transition* was also influenced by the particular emphasis on language experimentation undertaken by Eugene Jolas. Jolas, who was of course fluent in English, French, and German, saw his ability to write creatively in three languages as a partial fulfilment of his own poetic aims. But while Jolas never underestimated the potential influence one language could exert upon another through translation, he came to believe increasingly that the crisis of language evident in American letters was a truly international affliction, and the achievements made through experimentation by innovative writers working in their own national languages were somehow lost in the process of translating their texts into English.

### **I. The Importance of Translation**

To say that Eugene Jolas was a translator first and either a poet or a little magazine editor second would be somewhat misleading. But the fact remains that Jolas was an accomplished and influential translator — as was his wife Maria McDonald Jolas, who did many translations for *transition* herself and became quite prominent during the 1960s and 1970s as a translator of contemporary French novels, winning the Scott-Moncrieff Prize for translation as an acknowledgement of her long and distinguished career in the field. Eugene Jolas had good reason, then, to appreciate the power one language could assert over another, the tension experienced at the points where two languages meet. Writing later in his life, he was able to look back at his bilingual French and German childhood in Lorraine with heightened insight. He acknowledged the manner in which the political battles along the frontiers of Europe

were reflected in language use and how the divided allegiances of the people of this frontier were expressed through a bilingual patois.

As a child I watched the drama of misunderstanding through the confusion that hovered over inimical words. Around me I heard the clash between the Latin and Teutonic vocables. I witnessed, at first hand, the impact of the two tongues in daily life. I saw how they changed inwardly, how they fled each other, how they went through alternations of love and hate.<sup>2</sup>

But such points of tension could facilitate great innovation and change, both socially and linguistically. Living in New York City during the second decade of the twentieth century, Jolas was also struck by the distinctive characteristics of American English and the influence upon it by immigrant tongues. In no way, therefore, were Jolas's first impressions of the United States formed in the environment of homogeneous, standard English usage. His diaries of the time, in which he tried to give voice to his complex impressions of a burgeoning society being shaped by the development of modern industry and commerce, were written themselves alternately in English and German. Neither language was able to provide him with the flexible medium he needed for his observations. When lonely or disillusioned, he later admitted, he would seek refuge in the comfort of his European heritage and console himself by writing poetry in German. Over time, of course, English would supplant German as his preferred creative medium; in the meantime, Jolas's first sustained use of English was in his newspaper writing. While working as a reporter for the *New York News*, Jolas actively participated in the development of a distinctive tabloid style that stretched the resourcefulness of the English tongue.

We rivalled with one another in the invention of new words and even encouraged our readers in the use of "slanguage." It is undoubtedly true, too, that in mirroring the New York logos, with its polyglot intonations, provincial distortions, aggressive neologisms and illogical soundtwangs, we constituted a sort of advance-guard of a future journalism that, for better or for worse, would appear to have come to stay.<sup>3</sup>

It was, of course, the repetitious and factual nature of newspaper work that helped Jolas recognise the need for a revolution in language. But it was this particular experience in working for the tabloid that undermined his faith in the self-sufficiency of English. The inventiveness of this tabloid vernacular had its clear limits and Jolas recognised that to discover the widest possible range of important work undertaken by modern writers, one had to look outside the United States to literature written in a variety of languages. As a poet, Jolas determined the great creative capacity of English; as a translator, he discovered its relative shortcomings. When translating American poets into French in the late 1920s, Jolas was struck by “the paucity of vocabulary and the poverty of the lyrical phrase,” which he described as “meagre and often pedestrian.”<sup>4</sup> By this time, of course, he found himself through *transition* at the forefront of a program of linguistic experimentation based in Paris. That this movement, or more precisely a loosely connected series of movements, was international in origin and scope is the crucial point to be acknowledged here. Eugene Jolas and his various collaborators ultimately came to believe that only by transcending “the intellectual barriers that exist between the nations” could a truly modern art be achieved.<sup>5</sup> *transition* magazine actively promoted the acceptance of an art that recognised the value of a cosmopolitan orientation, creating a new understanding of “tradition” that drew on the related achievements of artists working in any number of languages.

The relationship between modern writers and the idea of a literary tradition is difficult to resolve. Certainly, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed an assault on tradition undertaken by the artists who made up what, as we will later discover, Peter Bürger has come to call “the historical avant-garde.” But among many of the twentieth century figures who did see value in underlining one’s shared literary heritage, tradition

began to take on the width and depth of many cultures over many centuries. Writers like Ezra Pound, for example, believed that tradition, including the evaluative component of tradition, could recognise no arbitrary boundaries.

What we need is a literary scholarship, which will weigh Theocritus and Yeats with one balance, and which will judge dull dead men as inexorably as dull writers of today, and will, with equity, give praise to beauty before referring to an almanack.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the experience of World War I illuminated the dangers of all nationalism, even a linguistic nationalism rooted in a nineteenth-century literature that reinforced the ideal of preserving and promoting a single people, single nation, single culture, and single language.<sup>7</sup> From the beginning, the editors of *transition* recognised that such narrow views of art still remained and they lamented the insularity of peoples. They also believed “that very often only the most imbecile manifestations of the various national spirits are communicated beyond the frontiers.”<sup>8</sup> What they desired was an expanded understanding of literary tradition based upon liberal discernment and greater cultural communication. In this way, the poetry and prose written, for example, by European contributors to *transition* could suggest new approaches for American literary artists. In this regard, translation has traditionally played the crucial role in accommodating an exchange of texts between different cultures, providing in this century the very basis of a new understanding of literary tradition. The importance of translation to the overall *transition* project, therefore, goes far beyond any acknowledgement one could make of the sheer quantity of foreign source material that filled the pages of the magazine in the years between 1927 and 1938.

The idea of one language influencing another through translation has long been accepted, but it seems particularly important to a consideration of this distinctly

international literature championed by *transition*, a true melting-pot of modern letters.

Walter Benjamin made what is perhaps still recognised as the seminal statement on this aspect of translation in his essay, “The Task of the Translator.” Benjamin wrote that “the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.” He maintained that the translator “must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in justifying the amount of foreign material published in *transition*, Jolas and Elliot Paul wrote that they hoped English could be “shaken to its foundation” by the examples provided by the translation of foreign language innovators.<sup>10</sup> The influence of other literatures on our own is as old as our literature itself and it is evident in all aspects of creative content; André Lefevere has recently reminded us that popular literary forms have also traditionally been transferred between cultures through translation.<sup>11</sup> This reciprocal flow of artistic ideas and strategies is not always easily accomplished, however. Friedrich Schleiermacher gave voice to a more conservative view of the translating process when he maintained that a translator cannot admit to a translation “anything that would not also be allowed in an original work of the same genre in his native language.”<sup>12</sup> What Schleiermacher is talking about here, and it is an issue addressed by many other writers interested in translation, is the concern that a translation may not comply with the accepted literary norms of cultural practice, in either form or content. This search for authenticity is mediated by the translation poetics of any given culture, or the sum of all the strategies adopted by its translators. As a guiding principle in the nineteenth century, for example, translation poetics in the English-speaking world placed great value upon end rhyme, so that many translations of Latin poetry rhymed, while the works had not rhymed in their

original Latin version. Translation poetics change, in part, because literary tastes change. But these values are often influenced, ironically, by the competing models that are successfully introduced from foreign literature through translation. In this way, translators often shift the boundaries of literary taste by breaking the rules of translation poetics by which they are governed. This unending encroachment upon the literary values of a culture represents an inevitable movement backwards and forwards; the differences between languages seldom diminish, so all that can change are the strategies translators use to overcome these differences.

Still, the initial response to this “foreign” material is likely to be hostile. Victor Hugo thus summarised the difficulties in amalgamating with a culture aspects of a foreign literature through the influence of translation.

When you offer a translation to a nation, that nation will almost always look on the translation as an act of violence against itself. Bourgeois taste tends to resist the universal spirit.

To translate a foreign writer is to add to your own national poetry; such a widening of the horizon does not please those who profit from it, at least not in the beginning. The first reaction is one of rebellion. If a foreign idiom is transplanted into a language in this way, that language will do all it can to reject that foreign idiom. This kind of taste is repugnant to it. These unusual locutions, these unexpected turns of phrase, that savage corruption of well-known figures of speech, they all amount to an invasion. What, then, will become of one’s own literature? Who could ever dare think of infusing the substance of another people into its own very life-blood? This kind of poetry is excessive. There is an abuse of images, a profusion of metaphors, a violation of frontiers, a forced introduction of the cosmopolitan into local taste.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, much of the material published in *transition* was attacked in the United States as exotic and somehow inappropriate for American readers. Indeed, even that which was perceived as the prattlings of the American literary clique in Montparnasse was often scorned. Eugene Jolas was amused by a cartoon in *Life* magazine that pictured four drunken Americans at a bar, with both a copy of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also*

*Rises* and an issue of *transition*, who have to be reminded by a French waiter that the familiar tune being played by an orchestra is the American national anthem.<sup>14</sup> It is fair to say that Jolas mistook a greater awareness of international art among the American population at large for a tolerance and approval that simply did not exist in the years between the world wars. His personal experiences in the United States, after all, should have impressed upon him the resilience of American provincialism. But popular opinion held little sway with modern little magazine editors and *transition* remained committed to exposing American readers to the widest possible variety of creative work from all available sources.

When in 1928 Matthew Josephson convinced Jolas that the future of modern literature rested with young American writers, Jolas announced in *transition* that “our intensified inquiry into international writing is, for the moment, at a standstill” and that “the emphasis in the future will be placed on American contributions.”<sup>15</sup> In the ensuing “American Number,” Jolas published the results of a questionnaire in which he asked a number of European artists for their opinions of the United States. After this issue, dominated by American submissions that he considered mediocre at best, Jolas quickly and quietly scaled back his commitment to Josephson. The experiment confirmed the conclusion Jolas had drawn nearly ten years earlier: an important impetus for reforming American letters had to be sought among the international artists at work outside the United States.

## **II. Problems with Translation**

If translation offers a seemingly unlimited source of innovation to a language, why then did translation come to be devalued in the *transition* approach? This matter

was only addressed directly on one occasion. In February 1933 Jolas made a brief statement, printed in the back of *transition* 22.

With this issue, *transition* enters upon its new policy of tri-lingual publication. The crisis of language is now going on in every part of the Occident. It seems, therefore, essential to retain the linguistic creative material intact, and to present constructive work, as much as possible, in the original.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that by this time, *transition* had regularly published epigrams and other isolated quotations in foreign languages, usually within the context of critical articles. This strategy tended to invoke the authority of a foreign artist or critic and the possible incomprehensibility of these passages was usually of little importance to the reader's understanding of the larger work as a whole. But this scattering of foreign words and phrases for effect in no way anticipated the wholesale publication of foreign texts in their entirety in an English-language little magazine. There was some precedent for this approach in the late-nineteenth-century European magazine *Cosmopolis*, a journal that featured independent English, French, and German sections. But while *Cosmopolis* hoped to counter narrow views of nationalism in Europe, it made no attempt to integrate its three languages; moreover, its overtly political agenda distinguished it from those convictions that animated the expatriate American journal.

One could argue that the basic explanation for this remarkable editorial decision in *transition* was to be found within a publication anomaly that took place in the magazine sometime earlier. In *transition* 18 (November 1929), Jolas printed three articles dealing with language experimentation in French. These texts, one each from Roger Vitrac, Robert Desnos, and Jacques Prévert, were published untranslated because, as Jolas explained, "the language itself is of intrinsic interest and would lose by translation." Jolas went on to say of these French-language submissions: "We do not

doubt that *transition* readers will be glad to have an opportunity of looking into the experimental work w[h]ich is being done in the greatest of romance languages and which demonstrates the parallel effort of the Latin races to modify the fixation of language in stereotyped forms.”<sup>17</sup> This declaration suggests at least three things. First, and most importantly, Jolas seems to have questioned the fidelity of the translations that he was printing. In *transition* 11 (February 1928), for example, Maria McDonald Jolas had attempted to render in English the neologisms coined by Léon-Paul Fargue in his French poem “Tumult.” The experience impressed upon the Jolases the difficulties in translating the most innovative foreign work submitted to the magazine. As Jolas’s own linguistic experiments grew to place an ever greater emphasis on expanding the lexicon available to the writer, the possibility of translating coinages between languages became a question of ever greater importance. Second, Jolas’s conception of both literary tradition and language as having developed a multilingual, international component had by this time evolved to a point where an untranslated passage of French could be seen to have been of interest to a predominantly English-speaking readership. This anticipates Jolas’s later assertion, quoted above, that a dissatisfaction with traditional language was being felt throughout the Western world. The linguistic shortcomings of his unilingual readers could not be allowed to hinder the presentation in *transition* of important international writing unearthed by the investigations undertaken by the magazine. Finally, the idea that a translated text may be intended to assist a reader in any way had clearly been dismissed by this time; in its place was the suggestion that the reader must negotiate the text as found. Writing more than a century earlier, Friedrich Schleiermacher claimed that the translator had but two choices in his or her approach to transposing an original text: to make concessions to either the author or the reader in the

process of translation.<sup>18</sup> Compromise seems untenable. If the translator is unable to accommodate either the author or the reader, the concept of translation breaks down entirely, and the reader is forced to abandon his or her native language entirely, to tackle the text in its language of origin. A quick reassessment of “The Revolution of the Word” manifesto underlines the extent to which it was a document concerned with the artist, with the nature of the creative act, and with the poetic medium itself. As we have seen, the proclamation made little mention of the audience of a work of literature, other than to proclaim: “The plain reader be damned.” The greatest concession a translator could make to an artist, Jolas’s attitude seems to have suggested, is to leave his or her work untranslated.

“The Revolution of the Word” became effectively the operating principle upon which *transition* was edited, and the implications that the manifesto held for the future of translation in the magazine were considerable. This developing attitude towards the value and function of translation was different from that held by Ezra Pound, for example, whose general views on the role of translation in fostering a wider understanding of tradition we have considered previously.

I look forward to the time when it will be possible for the lover of poetry to study poetry — even the poetry of recondite times and places — without burdening himself with the rags of morphology, epigraphy, *privatleben* and the kindred delights of the archaeological or “scholarly” mind... I consider it quite as justifiable that a man should wish to study the poetry and nothing but the poetry of a certain period, as that he should study its antiquities, phonetics, or palaeography and be, at the end of his labours, incapable of discerning a refinement of style or banality of diction.<sup>19</sup>

There are obviously a number of things notable about the above passage, not the least of which is the distinctive Poundian diatribe against misguided pedantry; but above all else, Pound’s assertion seemed to give great weight to the plight of “the plain reader”

neglected by “The Revolution of the Word.” One might argue that this represented a strange sentiment from a poet who left his readers waiting for a Rosetta stone to apply to the *Cantos*, a guiding principle that never did emerge. However, it is clear that among even the most elusive of modern writers, translations were valued generally for what they could bring readers of that which was, in a real sense, remote to them. Certainly, Eugene Jolas must have held this conviction as well, as a man who had undertaken translation with great enthusiasm. Yet in his thinking in *transition*, at least, Jolas’s literary values shifted so that a work became more constructive to even an English-speaking reader when published in its original non-English text form. Preserving the fidelity of the source text became an all-consuming objective.

In a very basic sense, therefore, translation appears to have become superfluous to Eugene Jolas. What must be read as little more than an approximate rendering of an author’s original work held no value. But the deeper problems associated with translation that gives rise to such an estimation of the entire process can be seen to have posed a direct threat to the cardinal ideas behind the program of linguistic experimentation undertaken in *transition*. There are, in fact, a number of ways in which a work can be seen to “lose by translation,” as Jolas asserted. As Octavio Paz has pointed out, pessimism surrounding the general capacity of translation has almost always been centred on the translation of poetry.<sup>20</sup> Roman Jakobson, for example, maintained that “poetry by definition is untranslatable.”<sup>21</sup> More widely, of course, this scepticism can be applied to the translation of all creative writing, interpreting “poetry” in the broad sense in which Jolas himself used the term, or writing with a highly connotative function. With creative writing, even if every word of an original text finds an equivalent word in another language, there is no way to guarantee that the text in

translation will affect its audience in the same way that it did its audience in its original form. Translations invariably fail to strike the identical balance of ideal “combinations of illocutionary strategies” found in the source text.<sup>22</sup> While the obvious impact this might have on the delivery of “meaning” to a reader would be of less importance to an artist who believed, as it was stated in “The Revolution of the Word” manifesto, that “the writer expresses... he does not communicate,” the possibility that something that the writer has painstakingly drafted and put into circulation may have been somehow altered or diluted by translation would still have been an issue of utmost importance.

*transition* contributor Samuel Beckett, translating works like *Molloy* and *En Attendant Godot* into English from their French originals after World War II, oversaw the process himself and he and his collaborators spent hours labouring over single phrases. What Beckett was attempting to do, Patrick Bowles later revealed, was “write a new book in the new [target] language.”<sup>23</sup>

For a consideration of *transition*, this problem goes beyond usual concerns with the reliability of any given translation and it becomes especially important when one recognises that much of the experimental writing Eugene Jolas printed in the magazine professed to be delicate renderings of material from the unconscious mind. We must return once more at this point to Eugene Jolas’s ideal of art as a conscious shaping of material from the unconscious. One can argue that this process of shaping, of conscious conversion and transcription, is roughly analogous to translation. What trope, therefore, is more appropriate to describe the artist investigating the depths of the unconscious mind than that of the poet as translator of the unconscious? As Andrew Benjamin states most clearly, perhaps, “translation figures from the start within psychoanalysis.”<sup>24</sup> Alan Bass points out that Sigmund Freud himself is responsible for first describing the

psychoanalyst as a translator and from the 1890s, Freud claimed to have discovered the method by which he could translate dreams and hysterical symptoms into everyday language.<sup>25</sup> The relationship between Freud and art remains a vexed question. In Freud's view, of course, artists are prone to neurosis because their creations themselves represent a defence mechanism, their own form of avoidance of reality. But Jolas had great respect for Freud's work; as we have seen, increased interest in the study of the mind was at the basis of Jolas's art. Jolas's essay "Literature and the New Man" in *transition* 19/20 (June 1930) was an attempt to summarise the implications that the advancements in psychological science held both for art and, more generally, for the artist's understanding of humanity. Although he admired Freud, Jolas challenged those aspects of his ideas that questioned the condition of the writer. Jolas believed that Freud's view of the mind of the artist "eliminates layers of poetic genesis," and that the psychologist's thinking failed to take serious account of the role of creativity.<sup>26</sup> With Carl Gustav Jung, however, Jolas found greater encouragement. He visited the psychologist personally while in Switzerland and he was encouraged to continue with both his interest in the unconscious and his poetry. In the same number of *transition* in which he printed his own "Literature and the New Man," Jolas translated Jung's important paper on "Psychology and Poetry."

In this article, Jung expressed his belief that the artist was clearly at odds with himself, "the ordinary man" attempting to deal with his "ruthless creative passion."<sup>27</sup> But unlike Freud, Jung did not believe that this necessarily indicated neurosis. Further, Jung maintained that "nothing would be more erroneous than to assume that the poet creates from the material of tradition." Like many modern artists, Jung was here rejecting a typically narrow understanding of tradition, the influence of a recent

generation of poets, for example, on contemporary writers. What Jung wished to argue, however, is that an artist writes instead “from the primal experience,” an instinctive and fundamental legacy that he called “the collective unconscious.”<sup>28</sup> This concept of a universal psychological background provided Jolas with the ideal structure on which to base his own understanding of tradition, what he called “the collective life of humanity.”<sup>29</sup> It became obvious, through the writings published in the later numbers of *transition* in the 1930s, that tradition for Jolas stretched to include psychological experiences as old as the origins of human life on this planet. In this context, the dream offered a tangible link between the generations and, for this reason, Jolas remained interested in the connection between dreams and the rendering of the unconscious in art. The advancement of his own writing was intimately tied up with his ability to study his dreams and find a way to give them conscious expression. So like the surrealists, Eugene Jolas, Elliot Paul, and Robert Sage undertook experiments in automatic writing while all three worked actively on *transition* during its first year. But unlike the surrealists, as we have seen, Jolas believed that even these experiments had to be ruled by “the curbing hand of critical reason.”<sup>30</sup> That conscious shaping must be brought to bear upon this material of the unconscious mind implies a certain amount of skill and precision. Once one moves beyond instinct, mistakes can be made. Stuart Gilbert addressed this issue directly in a later article devoted to the discussion of automatic writing.

Needless to repeat, automatic writing is only the raw material to which the artist applies his conscious skill. Moreover, in some cases it may be necessary for him to translate, so to speak, the unknown tongue and its erratic symbols into a more intelligible form. But he were ill-advised to tamper too profoundly with what M. André Gide has named “*cette part d’inconscient, que je voudrais appeler la part de Dieu*” — God’s share in the work. The form in which the creative impulse presents itself, its element of strangeness, its very absurdities may have a value eluding normal, critical appreciation.<sup>31</sup>

Here, we find ourselves faced most explicitly with the image of the poet as translator. Gilbert's comments on the delicate balance between faithfulness to the unconscious "creative impulse" and the conscious responsibilities of the modern poet raise once again many of the issues addressed by Eugene Jolas himself in his objections to visual art. When one considers the practice of writing as translation, and thinks of translation in turn as an essential component of psychoanalysis, one may just as easily turn around the traditional translation paradigm and consider not the status of the translation alone, as an artefact meant to reflect a clearly defined original, but rather whether or not the process of translating can somehow affect that original. For the problem becomes much more than simply questioning the "fidelity" of a translation, or whether or not one wishes to discard one translation and adopt another. Looking at the problem from the perspective of the translator, artist, or dreamer, translation raises the question of the very nature of the original, the very source of the dream.

Andrew Benjamin points out that there is an inherent problem in establishing the validity of the "original" in the unconscious mind. Dreams, for example, contain a manifest content that is itself a translation of a latent content; the manifest content can itself be translated into the language of consciousness. How, then, Benjamin asks, can one identify with any authority the original here?<sup>32</sup> Following a remarkably similar line of inquiry in *transition*, Eugene Jolas began to question the nature of his own dreams.

Above all, I was haunted by the following question: is it I who am dreaming, or am I being dreamed? Were the romantics right in assuming that in the dream we witness a game of polarity between the powers of the subhuman and those of the transcendental world? Is the dream the theatre of an incessant struggle between the daemonic and celestial agencies? Between monsters and angels? Between cherubic and luciferian perspectives? I became convinced that in the dream man is in the grip of an enigmatic power, an other world agency, and that he is really *being* dreamed.<sup>33</sup>

Taken in the context of Andrew Benjamin's observations, Jolas's dilemma foregrounds nothing less than the problem of the "original" in art, a concern that dates back to Plato. How many layers of translation might come between the original and what we perceive as the original? Is there such a thing as an "ideal original" and where can it be located? The search for this ideal original leads one ultimately to the quest for Jacques Derrida's transcendental signified, something in this case that exists outside this frame of continual translation. Contemporary translation theorists have taken up the argument surrounding successive layers of translation, within the sphere of consciousness at least, and they have recognised that translation is actually a widespread and inherent part of communication. Language itself, according to Octavio Paz, "is already a translation," initially "from the non-verbal world" and then from sign to sign through the channels of communication.<sup>34</sup> Roman Jakobson distinguished three separate kinds of translation: "intralingual translation" (or "rewording"), "intersemiotic translation" (or "transmutation" between verbal and non-verbal language), and "interlingual translation" (or "translation proper").<sup>35</sup> If the writing and reading of poetry is already defined by a series of translations, each separating the writer and reader by another layer of conscious activity, why introduce yet another translation by transposing German or French language texts into English? When one considers that Jolas's revolution in language marked an attempt to ensure as far as possible the fidelity of the translation of poetry from the unconscious mind to the world of consciousness, why would he tamper with the poet's own best solution to the problem?

But if the nature of language allowed that one could identify an ideal original and the issue of writing poetry could be reduced to finding simply this best rendering of the unconscious into poetic form, perhaps all of these problems could be reduced to

simply another series of difficulties surrounding fidelity. Perhaps the task would be no more difficult than simply identifying the most trustworthy translator for the category of translation one was discussing. Poets could then be evaluated on how faithfully they translated unconscious matter as objectively as they are evaluated on their handling of rhythm and diction. But the fact remains that language plays an active role in defining this unconscious reality and a realisation of this truth holds a further salient point for an understanding of translation in *transition*.

In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin wrote about the “life” and “afterlife” of a work. “For a translation comes later than the original,” Benjamin pointed out, and thereby extends the influence and reputation of a text into a different culture and perhaps a different age, making such an afterlife possible. But Benjamin directed his readers to look upon this concept of a life and afterlife “with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity.”<sup>36</sup> Translation simply represents another stage in the existence of a text, neither necessarily better nor worse. The movement from life to afterlife does, however, imply a fundamental change: the death of the original. In a sense, a translation can be seen to undermine the status of its original; the translation becomes the original itself for a reader who knows only one version of a text. This is precisely the significance Benjamin holds for readers like Paul De Man, whose statements on “The Task of the Translator” concern themselves, appropriately enough, with the differences between the English and French translations of Benjamin’s original German text. De Man argues that translation first identifies or “freezes” an original and then offers the first interpretation of that text through the decisions made by the translator in the process of translation, destabilising that which it had first sought to fix.<sup>37</sup> De Man also picks up on the argument that one cannot further translate

translations because of their instability or, as Benjamin maintains, “of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them.”<sup>38</sup> But what happens when one returns to the original for a second or third translation? Has it been altered? Can the translator disregard his or her previous interpretations or the interpretations offered by other translators? There is a sense, however, in which this question is unimportant to most translators. Every act of translation is a rebirth into another epoch, and the subjectivity of a translator is valued as that which facilitates the existence of a text in its afterlife. An original is thereby reinvented in a new and relevant form. But this is not the case for our understanding of the poet as translator, because the original as we have seen, if it is accessible at all, is not perpetually accessible to the poet. Indeed, poetic inspiration may come and go instantaneously. Like the original that is fixed and subsequently undermined by its translation, the unconscious matter to which the poet sets his or her hand is defined and then undermined by its writing. It is here that the poetic inspiration is given status within language. It is as impossible for the poet to recapture his or her original as it is to confine a dream. The quest becomes, therefore, the development of the tools that will allow the poet to give accurate voice to his or her creative impulse. Much of the later work in *transition* was much more concerned with this search for a better means of expression than with concentrating on the translation between languages, second-order transcription from one inadequate tongue to another.

Of course, one must recognise that, to some extent at least, all these objections remain unanswerable. Such difficulties are accepted by every artist who sets to work, though they do seem more important to an artist concerned with the unconscious mind. Even here, writers like Eugene Jolas recognised that they dwelt on the vanguard; artistic passages opened up by Freud and Jung created new avenues for creative thought but

they seldom provided definitive answers. At least, in Jolas's case, his growing mistrust of translation as it was used in *transition* seemed to have been based on his deeply held beliefs about writing and the nature of creativity. According to Walter Benjamin, translation expresses "the central reciprocal relationship between languages."<sup>39</sup> But all translators accept that the very existence of these translating strategies, while illuminating the many points of affinity between languages, ultimately emphasise the inexorability of their differences. After all, the translation process would not exist were there no need to bridge these differences. Furthermore, our ability to translate from language to language underlines the lack of a single language that would render translation unnecessary. Not surprisingly, the tragedy of Babel is an image that was repeated time and again throughout Jolas's work. For Jolas, concentrating on the universal desire of mankind to create, it became more practical for him to search for an elastic framework than to dwell on the places where existing languages seemed to converge. What Jolas desired was a language that need not, or could not, be translated. It was to the search for a new language that Jolas, as poet and little magazine editor, looked increasingly in the two decades before his death.

### **III. Alternatives to Translation**

Eugene Jolas's search for a flexible medium, an alternative to translation, led him back to New York City during the 1930s. Mingling again with immigrants and second-generation Americans, he discovered that while the language he heard there was clearly based upon English, it included "an infinite variety of speech" or even "a fantasia

of many-tongued words.” Modern migration and the apparent inability of the dominant culture to fully assimilate immigrants seemed to be creating a universal tongue by natural means. During the *transition* years, Jolas expressed this drive towards a universal language as “a superoccidental form of expression with polyglot overtones” that he called “the Atlantic or crucible language,” formed by these “ceaseless migrations of people of all races and tongues going forever westward during the past two hundred years.” This “embryonic language of the future” would be based on “an intensification and expansion of” English.<sup>40</sup> The point to be emphasised here is that Jolas now believed that for all its obvious shortcomings, English truly was a dominant tongue, the only language that had the capacity to bring all languages together. Just as he had imagined decades before when an immigrant in America himself, Jolas returned to his conviction that a new international expansion of English held great potential for creative expression.

In New York I felt that one could be a European poet as well as an American poet, that one could be an intercontinental poet as well as a French or German poet. I belonged to the European tradition and language as well as to the American tradition. I was a Neo-American poet.<sup>41</sup>

But as the countries of Europe aligned themselves once more for the Second World War, Jolas saw this linguistic unity not only as great opportunity for creativity and expression, but as a social necessity. Jolas’s ideal of the “Atlantic” language could facilitate the reassembly of the scattered stones of Babel. While working against a German terror that he believed to be rooted in cultural and linguistic nationalism, Jolas came to see a single language throughout the Western world as the best opportunity to effect both peace and the free artistic exchange that had been *transition*’s ideal.

*Babelism* must be exterminated. The new epoch must be one of glottological unity. It must be an age in which man will go in search of millions of words to be incorporated into the structure of English. It will not be “Basic English,” but an intercontinental English combining many vernaculars and grammars. It will be an aeon that will see a language of numerous signs and symbols, a language of infinite richness and flexibility, a language of gigantic liberations.

I see the coming of a world without frontiers.<sup>42</sup>

A decade earlier, even before the number of translations printed in *transition* diminished, the magazine had begun to investigate the potentials of multilingual writing as a means of expanding English. Such works, incorporating significant amounts of bilingual and multilingual material within single texts, represented an important precursor to the policy that saw *transition* print separate submissions in their non-English form. Although the magazine stopped printing translations, *transition* still hoped to introduce the innovations of its foreign contributors. For Eugene Jolas, the roots of his own interest in multilingual writing rested in his return to Europe in the early 1920s, after more than a decade in the United States. He spent time with his family in Lorraine writing and reading texts in English, French, and German. But freed from the pressure of proving to American newspaper editors how English had subdued the predominant languages of his childhood, he now composed poems in all three languages and translated them from one to another. Once he achieved what he considered an acceptable level of creative competence in all three languages, he found that words and phrases from each of these tongues began to come together in single texts. “My case remained troublesome, he claimed, “because I could not bring myself to abandon any one of the three languages, and my tendency was to write now in one, now in the other. I began to amalgamate my words.”<sup>43</sup>

George Steiner points out that bilingual and multilingual poetry dates back at least as far as the Middle Ages.<sup>44</sup> In *transition*, Jolas published poetry incorporating more than one existing language and he soon encouraged other poets to do so as well. These compositions, which Jolas later described as “cable poems,” emerged more frequently in the magazine from *transition* 22 (February 1933) once translation had been abandoned. Jolas’s poem “Intrialogue” was written in English, French, and German; a prose collaboration with Georges Pelorson titled “Hysteriette of La Cosmosa” appeared in English and French in that number. The aptness of the cable analogy is well illuminated by the former, where the different languages encircle each other like strands in a cable. This parallel with cables may also make reference to Jolas’s eventual work with an international news service, where stories from across the world would be received in the New York office, various stories arriving in various languages one after another. There is no sense of dialogue or of different languages assigned to different speaking voices in “Intrialogue” or similar poems; the text represents an attempt at straightforward modern expression — a direct cable, perhaps, from a fountain of unconscious creativity.

Chrismata?  
 Our ducts are full of heartling hours, denn unheimlich ist die  
 Asphaltnacht ohne Birken.  
 La nuit est devenue un masque-cuir.  
 Queer? Stop the hymnus!  
 And the Scala Paradisi!  
 L’avion anonyme part pour les cryptologues du sommeil.  
 Doch die Enfants-de-Panique hungern Wehesterne.  
 Where was the gratebird wounded by the moreley?  
 Flishy compas-harpes! Flushy clocher-flèches! The mauvebird no longer  
 singers in the mantlight.<sup>45</sup>

One may distinguish between multilingual texts where the multilingual material is superfluous, repetitive, or emphatic, like the isolated epigrams discussed earlier, and

multilingual texts where a knowledge of one or more additional languages is essential to the understanding of that text.<sup>46</sup> What Eugene Jolas seems to have been writing were truly hybrid pieces where the various languages are contained “in the actual verbal fabric of the text” and where linguistic code-switching becomes the relevant issue.<sup>47</sup>

The increased critical attention afforded over the past twenty years to bilingual and multilingual poetry written by minority groups within the United States has extended our knowledge of this subject considerably. In his recent study of Chicano poetry, for example, Lauro Flores has delineated three purposes of this code-switching in the multilingual text: situational, phonetic, and metaphorical. Situational switching addresses the issue of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the intended audience of a text. Flores argues that Chicano poets use this strategy, specifically an alternation between English and Mexican words and phrases, to fashion a closer bond with the bilingual audience while excluding the monolingual (English) reader. Phonetic switching occurs when the structure of a text demands a word or phrase that is best met by the introduction of material from a second language. This demand may originate with any poetic device, such as alliteration or rhyme, for example. Metaphorical switching follows when a concept that the artist wishes to convey is best expressed in a second language. This may be because either that the desired idea cannot be adequately communicated in a given language, or that this idea loses some of its poetic suggestiveness in an equivalent rendering. Alternately, the poet may wish to express an emotion in the language in which it was experienced, perhaps to invoke the tone of a different time or different place.<sup>48</sup>

It would seem that situational switching would play virtually no role in Jolas’s multilingual compositions. He worked towards a more universal spirit in art, as we

have seen, and the only audience with whom he may have felt a special bond would have been an “ideal” reader from the European frontier. The objective of Jolas’s “Atlantic” language was the elimination of the distinctions that define such frontiers. Phonetic switching clearly played a role in some of Jolas’s poetry, as the ability to write creatively in three European languages certainly left Jolas with a multitude of creative possibilities at his disposal. But phonetic switching seems more germane to a discussion of the work of James Joyce, whose multilingual capabilities opened to him a world of multilingual puns and word derivations. For Jolas’s multilingual creations, however, it is clear that the issues raised by our understanding of metaphorical switching are most important. One important example of the use of metaphorical switching in modern poetry that immediately comes to mind is that of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, where even the epigrammatic dedication to Ezra Pound in Italian as “the better craftsman” summons the authority of an extensive knowledge of languages. Through its code switching, the poem manages to convey different points of view and, in its conclusion, it evokes the influence of Eastern mysticism. But Eliot was surely arguing at this point that the foreign tongue better fulfils his creative requirement; indeed, the final passages of *The Waste Land* suggest that the cures for the evils of the Western world may not exist in a narrow view of Western tradition. For Jolas, the choice of poetic material for his writing may have been even more urgent; he believed, after all, that the linguistic tools at his disposal were under no circumstances appropriate for the job at hand.

George Steiner argues that among a great number of artists in the period between the 1870s and the 1930s, there developed a belief that language suffered from what he describes as “the dead hand of precedent” and that only a new language could

adequately express the modern vision.<sup>49</sup> In this way, Jolas's quest for a revolution in language shared in a wider tradition of modern linguistic experimentation. After all, an emphasis on the enriching of the English language failed to address the concern with the stagnation of modern letters that so defined Jolas's critical thought. Why simply substitute languid English words with languid foreign ones? While Jolas was quite happy to allow inevitable language change to take its course, "The Revolution of the Word" was intended to assist through synthetic means the natural process of linguistic creation and disposal that he saw at work on the streets of the increasingly cosmopolitan world of New York City. "Invention, above all, invention, became the raging desire of my creative unconscious," Jolas later reflected. "I worked on an Atlantic dictionary of my own, with the ambition to exhaust the greatest possible number of word mintings."<sup>50</sup> There is the sense, therefore, that Jolas's drive towards an "Atlantic" language depended upon neologistic coinages as a source of lexical innovation. Indeed, these new words took their place alongside conventional English, French, and German words in Jolas's cable poems. In *transition* 16/17 (June 1929), Jolas printed "Slanguage: 1929," a collection of contemporary slang expressions with their more conventional definitions. In *transition* 21 (March 1932), he published "*transition's* Revolution of the Word Dictionary," containing new words created by more than a dozen contributors and submitted along with their approximate standard English equivalents. Among the entries, Whit Burnett suggested "tocsingsong" for a "shrill chant," A. Lincoln Gillespie put forward "jawgape" for "stare with surprise" and Stuart Gilbert contributed "erotoxin" for a "vampish woman."<sup>51</sup> The practice of suggesting new words where they seemed necessary continued throughout the history of the magazine. But for the invention and creative utilisation of these word mintings, Jolas found even greater

inspiration among his European contributors. Among the surrealists, for example, Robert Desnos used a *langage cuit* (“cooked language”) that Jolas found highly suggestive. However, the most influential figure in the *transition* circle in this regard was probably the French poet Léon-Paul Fargue. Jolas was impressed by Fargue’s ability to coin words in French, a language that Jolas considered “hardly liable to be hospitable to innovations.”<sup>52</sup> Fargue was stretching the elasticity of that language in the same manner in which Jolas’s experiments would stretch standard English.

David Bennett attempts to draw distinctions between the different types of lexical innovations that appeared in *transition*. Bennett divides Jolas’s neologisms into four separate categories: argot (slang words), portmanteau (hybrids of existing words), content-less coinages relying on sound values, and inventions Jolas attributed to his unconscious mind.<sup>53</sup> One may quarrel with these distinctions; there is, for example, a very close affinity between Bennett’s final two categories and one cannot always distinguish clearly between them. But Bennett’s project suggests a more useful distinction, one between the argot and portmanteau words that appeared in *transition*, and the so-called content-less and unconscious neologisms. This fundamental distinction between two groupings of lexical innovations in the magazine underlines an important tension inherent in Jolas’s work, a tension between the drive for a universal language and the drive for a perfect language that was never effectively resolved.

Umberto Eco has recently drawn his own distinction between what constitutes a universal language and what constitutes a perfect language. While a universal language would be a tongue simply shared by all people, “the language which everyone might, or ought to, speak,” a perfect language would be a tongue that expresses ideas perfectly.<sup>54</sup> This basic distinction holds profound implications for this aspect of Jolas’s revolution in

language. Bennett's first two categories of neologisms, the argot and portmanteau words, underline the universalising aspect of Jolas's "Atlantic" language. These words attempt to extend English, drawing on the meanings of two or more existing words to create a new word with a meaning that incorporates more than simply the sum of both depleted concepts. In tandem with imported foreign words, like those that appeared in bilingual and multilingual poetry, these innovations would allow for the expansion of English that Jolas desired. Jolas once asked, "Why should not the new global language be the English language which today is being spoken all over the world by over six hundred million persons and is already an international language *tout faite*?"<sup>55</sup> This, truly, would be a universal language, a language that one would not need to translate.

But as we have seen, there are deeper objections to translation. Jolas believed that not only should one not have to translate texts, one often could not. He wrote, "the individual and the universal are being merged — the conscious and the subconscious."<sup>56</sup> The words to reflect this new reality simply did not exist and might not be found in any novel combination of existing words.

The reality of the *universal word* is still being neglected. Never has a revolution been more imperative. We need the twentieth century word. We need the word of movement, the word expressive of the great new forces around us. Huge, unheard-of combinations must be attempted in line with the general tendency of the age. We need the technological word, the word of sleep, the word of the half-sleep, the word of chemistry, biology, the automatic word of the dream, etc.<sup>57</sup>

What Jolas is talking about here is not urban argot or parlour-game portmanteau words. Rather, this is a call for an *a priori* language, the language that would allow the poet to give perfect expression to his unconscious impulse. This would be the perfect language, the hermetic language Jolas talked about in the "Poetry is Vertical" manifesto, and "The Language of Night" to give expression to his dreams.

The neologisms of the unconscious mind that Jolas subsequently created owe a great debt to dadaist sound poems published in *transition*. As George Steiner points out, dada was one of the greatest sources of neologistic creation in Western letters<sup>58</sup> and, of course, it was an avant-garde movement that received great American exposure in the pages of *transition*. Driven in part by what he saw as the inability of language to express “the deeper emotions” of the subconscious mind, Jolas turned more and more to these unconscious word mintings. He printed them in *transition* as artefacts that had appeared to him in dreams. He published them without definitions because, he said, he did not wish to taint them with the suggestion of existing definitions. For his own creative work, Jolas began to use the *nom-de-plume* of Theo Rutra to give poetic expression to his creative unconscious. Writing as Rutra, whom Jolas was able to convince friends and collaborators was an immigrant newspaperman working in Brooklyn, Jolas published a number of more conventional pieces, but also many neologistic works of poetry and prose, the first thorough examples beginning with “Storiette” and “Faula and Flona” in *transition* 16/17 (June 1929).

The lilygushes ring and ting the bilbels in the ivilley. Lilools sart slingslongdang into the clish of sun. The pool dries must. The morrowlei loors in the meaves. The sardinewungs flir flar and meere. A flishflashfling hoohoos and haas. Long shill the mellohoolooloos. The rangomane clanks jungling flight. The elegoat mickmecks and crools. A rabotick ringrangs the stam. A plutocrass with throat of steel. Then woor of meadowcalif’s rout. The hedgeking gloos. And matemaids click fer dartalays.<sup>59</sup>

But in some ways, this use of neologistic poetry was less revolutionary than the bilingual and multilingual poetry discussed earlier, although the latter seems to be simply a return to traditional tongues somehow cobbled together to give the appearance of novelty. While the neologistic text foregrounds its esotericism, a bilingual or

multilingual text suggests that it can be decoded somehow and revealed to be actually quite conventional. This, of course, is not necessarily the case. In each instance, however, the experimental texts in *transition* assume the existence of a developing functional pluralism throughout a culture, a widespread multilingualism. But for Jolas, this was not the same simple linguistic flexibility that a Chicano author, for example, would expect of his or her Mexican-American audience. Through the realities of the modern world and new attempts to define them through psychoanalysis, for example, Jolas believed that he had found the synthesis that would marry his ideals of a universal and a perfect language. Anticipating the great advances in communication made later in the twentieth century, Jolas believed that peoples were coming closer together and that English was the language that would ultimately unite them. But the universal psychological link written about by Jung would be a much stronger force for unity and it was this psychological unity that would allow everyone to share in the advantages of a perfect language, a language intended for the unconscious mind. Jolas hoped that as perfect expressions of what had before been inexpressible, his neologisms would be instinctively understood by everyone.

Not surprisingly, the place at which both neologistic and multilingual writing in *transition* appeared most impressively was with the serial publication of James Joyce's "Work in Progress." As Jolas himself recognised, Joyce had close contact with English, French, German, and Italian, and for his work on *Finnegans Wake*, he complemented this knowledge with a study of many other tongues. In his article, "The Revolution in Language and James Joyce," Jolas pointed out that Joyce's "word formations and deformations spring from more than a dozen foreign languages."<sup>60</sup> The result is something the text itself suggests may be "usylessly unreadable"<sup>61</sup> and "nat language at

any since of the world.”<sup>62</sup> But is *Finnegans Wake* written in language other than English? Is it a foreign work? That Jolas believed that Joyce was coining words to compensate for the inadequacy of standard English is undeniable. Jolas included Joycianisms in his “Revolution of the Word Dictionary” and he viewed Joyce’s involvement in that particular project as essential. In as much as this endeavour represented a form of translation of some neologisms back into standard English, Joyce must be seen as a willing participant. In *transition* 16/17 (June 1929), Joyce allowed Stuart Gilbert to publish a short explication of a passage of “Work in Progress” that was suggestive of the compositional technique of the whole work. Joyce also collaborated with C.K. Ogden in *transition* 21 (March 1932) to translate a section of the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” fragment into Basic English. Certainly, Stuart Gilbert believed “Work in Progress” to be written in a “synthetic language.” That “Work in Progress” was more than the result of “a certain verbal adroitness and a smattering of foreign tongues” is what made the serialised pieces authentic in Gilbert’s view.<sup>63</sup> Jolas once wrote that “Work in Progress” was written in that which “may well be the language of the future.”<sup>64</sup>

Because “Work in Progress” seemed to be translatable in this manner, a number of interesting questions are raised. First of all, if the work was written in a foreign language translatable into English, why then, has no Joyce scholar offered readers a complete rendering of *Finnegans Wake* in a more orthodox language? The most obvious answer is that such a scholar would be drummed out of the academy. If one considers the book to be a work of foreign literature, it loses much of its achievement in making English, as George Steiner argues, “a richer, more cunning public medium.”<sup>65</sup> Such an assertion is crucial for those, including Eugene Jolas, who have read *Finnegans*

*Wake* as the logical extension of the work Joyce undertook in *Ulysses*. Jacques Derrida, whose thinking on translation is informed, in part, by his reading of Joyce, maintains that *Finnegans Wake* must be read as an expansion of English, not a substitute for it.

In what language is this written? Obviously, despite the multiplicity of languages, cultural references, and condensations, English is indisputably the dominant language in *Finnegans Wake* — all of these refractions and slippages are produced in English or through English, in the body of that language.<sup>66</sup>

In the context of Derrida's observations, it seems relatively clear that Joyce's work may well be written in Jolas's "Atlantic" language. But if this is true, it surely represents that aspect of Jolas's universal tongue that longed for a perfect language. *Finnegans Wake* is an example of an *a priori* language of night, the perfect medium for H.C. Earwicker's noctuary. This raises a second question, however. If, as Jolas intimated, Joyce's work illuminated the search for "The Language of Night," the perfect language of dreams, how can it be translated at all? Surely, any attempts to redefine individual words would be fruitless; critical essays on *Finnegans Wake* would simply state what all readers instinctively knew. Typically, then, Joyce's work seems to operate outside the framework set up for language experimentation in *transition* by Eugene Jolas. Jolas acknowledged this, of course, regarding Joyce's work both as a work of great individuality and as an inspiration. Joyce viewed universal language not as one used by all people, but as a language containing quite literally something for everyone, scattered bits and pieces pasted together. The language of *Finnegans Wake* is a perfect language, the language of the dream, but it is a dream from which one expects to wake. There is no sense in which Joyce believed his readers would speak in the language of the text.

One thing is certain: Eugene Jolas was right in his estimation of the flexibility of English and the expansion of literary tradition in the modern sense. English is elastic

enough to incorporate the linguistic achievement of *Finnegans Wake*, at least some of the more conventional neologisms that one might read in *transition*, and an increasing number of foreign words and phrases. But cultural and linguistic nationalism seems to keep sacred the autonomy of the major languages of the world and, as most linguists would agree, though English might be considered the *lingua franca* of international affairs, the moment has passed when English could have become the language of the Western world, if such a possibility ever existed. The political and social development of the last fifty years seems to have frustrated forever Eugene Jolas's ideal of the "Atlantic" language as a universal tongue. But among poets, the search for perfect expression, for a perfect language, goes on.

## Chapter Four

### Antagonistic Generals: James Joyce and Gertrude Stein

In a literary memoir first published in the late 1940s, Samuel Putnam suggested that James Joyce and Gertrude Stein “were the two big thrills that *transition* had to offer its transatlantic customers.”<sup>1</sup> It is undeniable that both writers received great attention through the scrutiny afforded the magazine from its earliest appearance in April 1927. Perhaps only the subsequent publication of “The Revolution of the Word” manifesto ever attracted the same level of critical comment afforded Joyce and Stein. As we have seen, little magazines are ostensibly devoted to uncovering and promoting new authors; the usual circumstances and ideals of little magazine editors make their journals fitting vehicles for such writers. It is somewhat peculiar, therefore, that *transition* became dominated in the minds of many readers by two well-known figures that even Elliot Paul himself admitted sheepishly were “both in middle age.”<sup>2</sup> In terms of the circumstances of their own individual careers in the late 1920s, Joyce and Stein appeared in *transition* because both were in need of championing. James Joyce, by this time the celebrated and world-famous author of *Ulysses*, was writing something new, something not yet recognisable as a novel, and something that even his own friends and supporters treated, at best, with quiet suspicion and, at worst, with open scorn. Gertrude Stein, although a great private collector of modern art and a literary personality in her own right, was still largely unread in either Europe or the United States. Both writers desired an outlet for their work and a network of friendly associates who were capable and willing to defend this work from attack. But these two exceptional figures brought much more than their notoriety to the fledgling little magazine. Clearly, both James Joyce and Gertrude Stein helped inspire through their own professional courage the genesis of the program of revolutionary letters that would come to define *transition*.

Before the end of the first year of publishing the magazine, Eugene Jolas had cited Joyce and Stein among “a few scattered poets” who were working “to give language a more modern elasticity, to give words a more compressed meaning through disassociation from their accustomed connections, and to liberate the imagination with primitivistic conceptions of verbs and nouns.”<sup>3</sup> We have seen, however, that this particular article, titled “The Revolution of Language and James Joyce,” confirmed that Jolas valued Joyce’s “Work in Progress” above all the other experimental work being done by the magazine’s contributors. Indeed, Joyce had by this time begun to eclipse Stein and his other fellow *transition* colleagues as Jolas adopted “Work in Progress” as the representative text of his revolution in language. But Jolas’s preference for Joyce’s work does not adequately explain the virtual disappearance of Stein from the pages of the review; the enduring eclecticism of *transition* should have ensured some continuing role for Gertrude Stein. In an immediate sense, Stein’s departure from *transition* had much to do with a vehement personality conflict with the Jolases, a series of confrontations fuelled by Joyce’s growing stature in the magazine. But a comparison between the distinctive literary styles of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein reveals that Stein’s work differed from that of Joyce in ways that made her writing truly incompatible with the general direction of the later numbers of *transition*.

## **I. James Joyce**

The account of how James Joyce came to be published in a magazine edited by expatriate Americans living in France makes up an important chapter in the history of

*Finnegans Wake* and, indeed, in the story of the last fifteen years of Joyce's life.

Eugene Jolas first met the Irish writer in Paris in 1924 when Joyce was, according to Jolas himself, still "beaming in the aureole of *Ulysses*."<sup>4</sup> Jolas was not granted a formal interview for the *Paris Tribune*, and the meeting became an amicable but rather unremarkable exchange between a celebrated novelist and the literary journalist who had written of him favourably. The next three years were not particularly kind to Joyce, however, and the professional ramifications of the events of this intervening period would draw the two men ever closer together.

Joyce began working on a new book soon after the publication of *Ulysses* and the first appearance of a serial fragment from the project appeared in Ford Madox Ford's *transatlantic review* in 1924. In all, scattered bits and pieces of what Ford first titled Joyce's "Work in Progress" appeared in four different reviews and Robert McAlmon's *Contact Collection of Contemporary Writers* anthology before the work found a more permanent home on the pages of *transition*.<sup>5</sup> But only with Eugene Jolas and his little magazine did Joyce find supporters for "Work in Progress" who could equal the loyalty Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, and the *Little Review* had shown *Ulysses*. Joyce's difficulties in placing with publishers fragments of the novel that would become *Finnegans Wake* were echoed by the responses of his friends and supporters who were, for the most part, surprisingly unenthusiastic in their assessment of his new project. After plans fell through to publish a fragment with the *Dial*, Joyce received a letter effectively blocking immediate serialisation in the *Exile*, a new review Ezra Pound was planning in Rapallo. With typical bombast, Pound provided the most comprehensive and penetrating rebuttal of the work up to that time.

I will have another go at it, but up to present I make nothing of it whatever. Nothing so far as I make out, nothing short of divine vision or a new cure for the clapp can possibly be worth all the circumambient peripherization.

Doubtless there are patient souls, who will wade through anything for the sake of a possible joke... but... having no inkling whether the purpose of the author is to amuse or to instruct...<sup>6</sup>

In further correspondence two months later, Pound argued that Joyce had received the support of the *transatlantic review* only because Ford Madox Ford had been short of material; Pound rejected outright the idea that “Work in Progress” might ever appear in the *Exile*, but he added in consolation, “If I had an encyclopedicly large monthly, the kewestian wd. be different.” He advised Joyce, in fact, that serialisation was a bad idea and that “your daruk pool shd. be sold whole.”<sup>7</sup> In a letter to Hilaire Hiler in the late 1930s, however, Pound described Joyce’s work as “diarrhoea of consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> While Joyce could ultimately dismiss Pound’s growing contempt, in part because Pound had at one time resisted *Ulysses*, he could not ignore the misgivings of Harriet Shaw Weaver, Joyce’s loyal and generous patron, who had also initiated with him a disheartening correspondence about the new work by the end of 1926. For this reason, the enthusiastic interest in “Work in Progress” expressed by *transition* could not have come at a better time. Before the first number of the magazine was available for sale, in fact, Joyce was able to defend himself to Miss Weaver by reporting that Jolas and Elliot Paul liked the first fragment “so well that they asked me to follow it up and I agreed...”<sup>9</sup>

Eugene Jolas claimed to have followed Joyce’s career from the early works. Because of his own experience with seminary training and education, Jolas had reason to feel a deep affinity with the picture of Stephen Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; Jolas was, however, most powerfully influenced by the literary technique developed in *Ulysses*. Through the initial attempts to serialise “Work in Progress,”

Jolas was also familiar with the current direction of Joyce's writing while he and Paul were busy soliciting manuscripts for the first number of *transition*. In contrast to the stated opinion of most other people, Jolas considered the new excerpts that had appeared to that point "astonishing because of their recondite substance and composition." He claimed that all Paris was buzzing with rumours of what Joyce might now be doing.<sup>10</sup> Jolas always claimed that it was with apparently little hope of real success that he and Paul approached Sylvia Beach in the hope that she might persuade Joyce to contribute something to their new magazine. Anticipating the objections of readers like Pound, Joyce had at one time doubted that serialisation would suit his new manuscript. In the early 1930s, however, Elliot Paul admitted that he, at least, recognised that Joyce had long ago changed his mind about serialisation and that it was almost common knowledge that Joyce was having problems placing his new work.<sup>11</sup> One must doubt, therefore, the apparent surprise Jolas and Paul professed when Beach quickly produced the first manuscript pages from "Work in Progress" to be put into print in *transition*.

Originally, Joyce planned a brief collaboration with Jolas and Paul, but sometime during the spring of 1927 after he had related the enthusiasm of his new editors to Harriet Shaw Weaver, Joyce's attitude towards a more lengthy venture with *transition* changed dramatically. Once he decided that "Work in Progress" could be serialised effectively, his plan became that its fragments should "appear slowly and regularly in a prominent place."<sup>12</sup> Although contributing to what was then a monthly magazine would require hard work and discipline, *transition* looked an ideal opportunity. Perhaps the editors simply proved their virtue through the great reverence with which "Work in Progress" was printed in the magazine. More likely, Joyce quickly

realised the value of loyal editors to satisfy his own exacting publishing demands. On one occasion, for example, his corrections to proofs of the *transatlantic review* delayed publication in that magazine by two months. Most tellingly, Joyce allowed Jolas during this time to read the entire rough sketch manuscript of the new work that he had completed soon after he first took up the project. In any case, revised fragments representing the first book of *Finnegans Wake* appeared in each of the first eight numbers of *transition*.

While writing to a deadline forced Joyce to proceed steadily and insulated him from the distractions that marked much of his professional career, the work soon took its toll. *transition* 8 (November 1927) included the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” chapter, less than twenty magazine pages that Joyce claimed took twelve hundred hours of work to write and revise.<sup>13</sup> The increasing disapproval with which “Work in Progress” was being received also weighed heavily upon Joyce and two weeks after completing this fragment, Joyce wrote again to Harriet Shaw Weaver and reported that “my state of exhaustion still continues” and “I have been obliged to write to the editors of *transition* to ask them to omit me from the next number.”<sup>14</sup> Although this hiatus stretched into early 1928 and spanned two numbers, Joyce and his editors used this time effectively and began to defend directly “Work in Progress” from the barrage of criticism it had received during that first year. Originally, Jolas and Paul were content to address critics in passing, but working with Joyce they devised a plan for a series of articles dealing with the new work. Ironically, the impetus to launch the critical counterstrike at that time came indirectly from Ezra Pound. In a letter to William Carlos Williams, Pound advised the doctor not to have anything to say about “Work in Progress,” which Pound described as “backwash.”<sup>15</sup> With typical defiance, Williams responded by publishing an

unsolicited defence of the project in *transition*. In “A Note on the Recent Work of James Joyce,” printed in the same number as the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” fragment, Williams claimed “Work in Progress” was “perfectly clear and full of great interest in form and content.”<sup>16</sup> While Williams’ words were certainly encouraging, Jolas and his collaborators read this as an opportunity to begin to define for their readers seminal aspects of the text. As well as answering Joyce’s critics, a series of essays could effectively create an audience for the work. Elliot Paul followed Williams’ contribution with “Mr. Joyce’s Treatment of Plot” in *transition* 9 (December 1929). By emphasising the circular design of the plot, the elastic treatment of setting, and the universal symbolism of Joyce’s characters, Paul set out the first major lines of enquiry for an early effective appreciation of the work. By the time Joyce was able to submit another fragment to *transition* 11 (February 1928), the critical endeavour devoted to his defence was well-launched. In 1929 Sylvia Beach and the Shakespeare Bookshop published in book form a collection of twelve essays on Joyce’s work, many of which had already appeared in *transition*, as *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamnation of a Work in Progress*.

Joyce contributed sections from “Work in Progress” to the two final monthly numbers of *transition* in early 1928. When the magazine did appear from that time onwards, of course, it was ostensibly as a quarterly, published in a larger format and with Eugene Jolas asserting more and more editorial control over its direction. The value of Joyce’s contributions escalated, if anything, as the vast majority of editorial comments relied on “Work in Progress” as the illustration of a revolution in language. But the freedom to publish possibly longer fragments on an irregular schedule and without stringent editorial deadlines held no advantage for Joyce, in fact. After the

magazine reappeared in 1932 from its two year interruption, it was printed more-or-less annually. With the suspension of monthly appearances, the composition and revision of *Finnegans Wake* never again followed closely the publication history of *transition*, although plans for a new number could enkindle Joyce's writing and the magazine did not fold for good until Joyce's work was finally set to appear in book form. Joyce did print seven additional fragments in the later numbers of *transition*, but the value he gained from his collaboration with Eugene Jolas centred more on related issues like revision of fragments, translation of "Work in Progress" and *Ulysses* into other languages, and critical acceptance of the new work as the two men developed their friendship.

*transition* continued with the assessments and reassessments of "Work and Progress" as figures like Samuel Beckett, Frank Bugden, Stuart Gilbert, Robert McAlmon, and John Rodker stepped forward and most of *Examination* essays appeared in the magazine throughout 1928. Into the following year, Jolas also sought out and republished favourable notices of Joyce's work from critics who were either not closely associated with *transition* or whose essays first appeared in foreign language reviews. Substantial notices from Carola Giedion-Welcker and Louis Gillet were thus made available to an English-speaking audience. The effect was the suggestion of international interest in and approval of "Work in Progress" and the intimation became that this continental European opinion only highlighted a disgraceful anglophone conservatism in letters. Two other major publishing events of note appeared in the magazine: a large section, "Homage to James Joyce," commemorating his fiftieth birthday and the tenth anniversary of the publication of *Ulysses* in *transition* 21 (March 1932), and Jolas's essay "Homage to the Mythmaker" celebrating in *transition* 27

(April/May 1938) the imminent publication of *Finnegans Wake* by Faber and Faber in London.

Through these years, James Joyce developed a loyal circle of friends. These are the same figures Richard Ellmann calls “the *dramatis personae*... for the last period in Joyce’s life.”<sup>17</sup> Writing more critically, Stuart Gilbert described the clique, in which one must include Gilbert himself, as “good serfs” gathered around Joyce in “the general meeting of the Faithful.”<sup>18</sup> Beyond the recriminations and petty jealousies within the Joyce circle, Gilbert’s comments underscore how the exacting demands *Finnegans Wake* makes of its readers were mirrored in Joyce’s own friendships. Invariably wistful and respectful, memoirs from that time that mention Joyce still suggest the degree to which he was dependent upon his friends for everything from the reading of proofs to everyday errands. Eugene and Maria McDonald Jolas were both loyal friends in this regard and their support of the Joyce family extended well beyond the author’s death. But if Joyce’s professional associations sometimes exceeded traditional bounds, it would be incorrect to assume, as Joyce scholars often do, that his followers gave of themselves unquestioningly simply to be near the great man and help him further the cause of modern literature. Without doubt, Eugene Jolas had many reasons to hope that “Work in Progress” would become a critical and commercial success. But Jolas also felt added pressure as Joyce’s publisher and friend. As difficulties associated with bringing out the little magazine grew too great for Jolas and he temporarily abandoned *transition* once more in the mid-1930s to turn his hand back to mainstream journalism in New York City, the resentment borne from a feeling that he had been used by a “literary clique of intellectual gangsters and exploiters” stretched even to his eminent friend. Writing after Joyce’s death, the usually benevolent Jolas was able to summon up some indignation for Joyce’s endless demands when he claimed, “I was quite sick of

Joyce, his writings and his troubles. I was determined to return to the States, because I saw it was impossible to escape from him otherwise.”<sup>19</sup>

To properly assess Joyce’s attitude towards the Jolases and, especially, his attitude towards the *transition* program is a similarly intricate task. Joyce was a dedicated family man whose only enduring loyalty was to kin, so few outsiders truly got close to him. Writing after the death of his friend, Jolas maintained that “James Joyce was a human being of great warmth and charm... to those who knew him intimately.” He admitted that Joyce “often appeared to be on his guard” and “he was never an ebullient man.” Only “his intimates,” those very few people among whom Jolas counted himself and his wife, were privy to the “festive pause” that brought “flashes of gaiety and humour” to Joyce.<sup>20</sup> *transition* was undoubtedly useful for Joyce, but there can be no doubt that he valued the Jolases’ friendship beyond this professional realm. In a very early academic study of Joyce’s work written in the 1950s, Marvin Magalaner and Richard Kain argued that Jolas and his *transition* collaborators “implicated the innocent Joyce,” who was the magazine’s “apparently willing captive and star” in their “outlandish literary excesses,” activities that “succeeded only in alienating most of the respectable academic and journalistic critics” who might otherwise have looked upon “Work in Progress” in a better light. Amazingly, Magalaner and Kain suggested that Joyce sacrificed his usual prudent judgement and concern with his literary reputation from the late 1920s to repay a debt of friendship to Jolas that Joyce was only then in the process of accumulating.<sup>21</sup> More likely, even writers who were wary of Jolas’s ideas were willing to grant support to the spirit of his endeavours during a period of widespread literary experimentation. When Jolas asked Ernest Hemingway in the late 1930s, for example, whether or not he believed a “language of night” was necessary, Hemingway replied that he “would like to be able to handle day and night with [the]

same tools and believe [it] can be done.” But he added that he did “respect anyone approaching any problem of writing with sincerity and wish them luck.”<sup>22</sup>

As *Finnegans Wake* itself attests, however, those attitudes that Joyce did reveal could often seem benignly ambivalent or even playfully ironic. In his study of the history of *transition*, Dougald McMillan does an admirable job in tracing references to the magazine and its contributors in the published version of Joyce’s last work. As he points out, Joyce made sustained use of the idea of his *transition* supporters as his “disciples,” referring directly to the twelve critics eventually published in *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamnation of a Work in Progress*.<sup>23</sup> But in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce also exclaims, “Imagine the twelve deaferended dumbbawls of the howl abovebeugled to be the conouation through regeneration of the utteration of the word in pregress.”<sup>24</sup> Joyce stressed the humour that could be found in his contributions to *transition*; but was there not some mockery in characterising his trusted colleagues as deaf and deferential, bawling dumbbells? When it came to “The Revolution of the Word” and Jolas’s specific ideas about language, however, the text of *Finnegans Wake* makes it clear that Joyce demanded to be read independently of the movement in spite of the degree to which he served as its inspiration. From the cacophony of the *Wake* emerges the phrase “*parcequeue* out of revolscian from romantis I want to be.”<sup>25</sup> Joyce’s overall attitude towards the little magazine and its contributors remains ambiguous; these scattered comments are, after all, filtered through an opaque text. It is clear, however, that while the Irish exile was drawn to *transition* and Eugene Jolas because of what they could offer him, both magazine and editor became an intimate part of Joyce, as witnessed by the prominence he afforded them in his life and his work.

## II. Gertrude Stein

The central involvement of James Joyce in the *transition* program should have made it highly unlikely that Gertrude Stein would have had any contact with the magazine at all. Her need for unquestioning adulation is well-documented and she was not willing to accept competition from anyone, especially Joyce, whom she apparently established as her main literary rival from the publication of *Ulysses* in 1922. Ernest Hemingway once commented about visiting Stein at her rue de Fleurus salon, "If you brought up Joyce twice, you would not be invited back. It was like mentioning one general favourably to another general. You learned not to do it the first time you made the mistake."<sup>26</sup> Elliot Paul seems to have been the only figure who could subdue Stein's hostility. He was, by all reports, the only person who could talk openly of Joyce in Stein's presence and still earn a welcomed return to the rue de Fleurus. For this reason, perhaps, the interest of Gertrude Stein in *transition* was inextricably linked to the active involvement of Elliot Paul with the magazine. According to Stein, it was she who advised Paul to accept Eugene Jolas's original offer to collaborate on *transition*, and in her description of events there is the implicit understanding that Paul would make the magazine a vehicle for her writing. "After all," she wrote, "we do want to be printed. One writes for oneself and strangers but with no adventurous publishers how can one come in contact with those same strangers."<sup>27</sup> Bravig Imbs, himself an occasional contributor to *transition* and a one-time member of the Stein circle, claimed that because Stein saw *transition* as her "mouthpiece," she gave Paul "enough manuscripts to fill a complete number."<sup>28</sup>

Gertrude Stein enjoyed regular appearances in *transition* during its first two years of publication, coming at the end of a very troubling period for her professionally. She was a recognised literary figure, but by this time had had very little of her writing published or widely read. At the beginning of the decade, her friend Henry McBride wrote to her, “There is a public for you but no publisher.”<sup>29</sup> By 1924 she had collected a pile of unpublished manuscripts in her Paris home that William Carlos Williams rather discourteously advised her to weed through and burn.<sup>30</sup> As Imbs suggested, it was mainly from this store of old material that Elliot Paul was able to choose contributions for the little magazine.

Throughout the 1920s, Stein had limited success placing pieces with other publications. Hemingway, at that time still enthusiastic about Stein’s work, secured the serialisation of selections from her mammoth *The Making of Americans* in the *transatlantic review* in 1924. Ironically, Stein’s submissions appeared on the pages of Ford Madox Ford’s magazine at the same time that Joyce’s “Work in Progress” saw its first printing. The difficulties surrounding her appearance in T.S. Eliot’s *Criterion* early in 1926 seems more characteristic of her experiences with literary magazines and their editors, however. Eliot was charmed by Stein during their initial meeting in Paris; he then solicited from her a piece for his journal, on the condition that it was representative of her current work and that it had been written recently. Stein obliged in a literal manner with an occasional piece commemorating their meeting. It took more than a year for “Fifteenth of November” to appear in the *Criterion*, only after numerous promptings and misunderstandings, and only then with Eliot’s ultimate misgivings. His reported explanation that “the work of Gertrude Stein was very fine but not for us” is supposed to have mollified Stein sufficiently.<sup>31</sup>

Stein had similar difficulties with publishing houses throughout the decade. Tentative efforts at self-publishing and negotiations with commercial presses both large and small complicated her career. In 1925 the appearance in Robert McAlmon's Contact Editions of an unabridged edition of *The Making of Americans*, the book Stein still believed her masterpiece, was punctuated by disagreements over printing costs, author's concessions, and distribution plans. The entire deal proved ultimately unrewarding for both parties and, during the following year, McAlmon threatened to pulp the store of unsold copies, representing perhaps as much as eighty per cent of the original press run. A determined new effort at self-publishing and the commercial success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* improved Stein's standing in the 1930s, but the *transition* claim in 1927 that "whenever she pleases, Gertrude Stein contributes what she pleases to *transition* and it pleases her and it pleases us" must have been a pleasure in itself.<sup>32</sup>

While Stein never wavered in the conviction with which she nurtured her literary career, her own writing habits were decidedly idiosyncratic. She once admitted, "I have never been able to write much more than a half hour a day." But while such an attitude might suggest indifference, Stein pointed out, "If you write a half hour a day it makes a lot of writing year by year. To be sure all day and every day you are waiting around to write that half hour a day.... It takes a lot of time to be a genius, you have to sit around so much doing nothing."<sup>33</sup> It may, therefore, have been fortunate that Elliot Paul admired her work enough to pick and choose among the manuscripts at the rue de Fleurus. While *transition* was in its infancy, Stein was busy at work on the rather ambitious project of writing the libretto for Virgil Thompson's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. (A version of the libretto was printed in *transition* 16/17 in June 1929.)

But this is not to say that Stein was not keenly interested in the dealings of the little magazine or that she had a perfunctory relationship with its editors. Indeed, her influence over *transition*, at first at least, was considerable. Unlike Joyce, she was not a regular visitor to the rue Fabert office, but she was acutely conscious of the manner in which her work was being presented to what she considered her hungry and expectant audience. As we have seen, when Stein's first piece was printed incorrectly in *transition*, only a costly supplement carrying the corrected version could appease her. Similarly, she was able to place a literary eulogy for Juan Gris in the next possible number of *transition* following the Spanish painter's death. It is fair to say that the examples of Stein's work that appeared in the magazine were chosen with the purpose of forming over time a representative cross-section of the different styles she employed. Stein attested, "Elliot Paul chose with great care what he wanted to put into *transition*."<sup>34</sup> The effect was supposed to be that Stein's writing was revealed to its readers slowly and methodically.

The general perception has always been that Eugene Jolas was primarily responsible for enlisting James Joyce for *transition* and Elliot Paul recruited Gertrude Stein. While there is some truth to this assertion, a simple generalisation fails to address properly the complexity of the issue. Certainly, as we have seen, both editors took a great interest in Joyce, and with the possible exception of Samuel Beckett's "Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce," Elliot Paul's apology for "Work in Progress" may have been the most valuable piece of criticism to appear in advance of the publication of *Finnegans Wake*. The issue is no less obscured in any consideration of the relationship of the editors with Gertrude Stein. It is true that her appearances in *transition* were more frequent during the magazine's first year when Paul was officially co-editor. But while

she appeared less regularly as Eugene Jolas began to assert greater editorial control over the publication, some of her more substantial work, including “Tender Buttons” and “Four Saints in Three Acts,” was printed in 1928 and 1929 when Jolas was trying to defend the relevancy of *transition* to readers in the United States by emphasising its connection with American writers who seemed interested in a revolution in language. There is some evidence that as Elliot Paul had less and less to do with the editorial decisions in *transition*, Stein was forced to grow more assertive in placing her manuscripts with the magazine, but her status as the best known and most frequent American contributor to *transition* also held clear advantages for Eugene Jolas during this period. What is certain, however, is that Stein’s involvement fell off dramatically after the publication of “The Revolution of the Word” manifesto in *transition* 16/17 (June 1929). Indeed, she appeared in only one other number, placing “She Bowed to Her Brother” in *transition* 21 (March 1932), the first issue after the two-year suspension of the magazine. Stein grew increasingly impatient with the veneration afforded Joyce in *transition*, but for some time, at least, she continued to value her own links with the little magazine above her pride. By the early 1930s, however, the tension had mounted and Stein finally confronted Jolas when he called on her at the rue de Fleurus. According to Jolas, Stein called Joyce “a third-rate Irish politician” and she asserted that “the greatest living writer of the age is Gertrude Stein.” Jolas disagreed and left, satisfied to discontinue their working relationship. But he reported that within a year, Stein initiated a reconciliation with a telephone call.<sup>35</sup> She normally used the telephone as a vehicle by which she could have Alice Toklas brusquely unchurch her wayward disciples,<sup>36</sup> but the immediate result of her telephone conversation with Jolas was a temporary settlement of their differences. “She Bowed to Her Brother” appeared in the next number of the magazine.

By this time, however, the value of *transition* to Stein had waned considerably, as had her interest in it. Elliot Paul had gone from co-editor to contributing editor to advisory editor and then he left Paris altogether, his departure from *transition* marked by nothing more than the abrupt statement: "Elliot Paul whose direct editorial connection with *transition* ceased in February 1928, is now no longer associated in any way with this review."<sup>37</sup> Because of the nature of her contributions, Stein was not working to a deadline like Joyce and she was not appearing in each monthly number, but the change to an irregular quarterly publication schedule was not particularly beneficial to her either, though she was able to print a number of longer pieces in these later numbers. Other than an important early article by Laura Riding and a later, less effective essay by Ralph Church, a friend of her ardent supporter Sherwood Anderson, Stein's achievement was mentioned in *transition* only in passing. In the first numbers, Elliot Paul defended Stein from her most direct and hostile critics, but even he published his most noteworthy appreciation of her work in the *Paris Tribune* in June 1927 and not in *transition*. More critically, however, the magazine was of less value to Gertrude Stein by the early 1930s because her work was receiving greater attention elsewhere. She and Alice Toklas published her works themselves under the Plain Editions imprint, beginning in 1931. By the time a number of these books appeared, Stein had completed the work that would secure her fame and facilitate the final cut between her and the Jolases.

Written from the point-of-view of Stein's long-time companion, secretary, and lover, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was much more accessible than any of the works Stein published in *transition*. Her attempt to mimic the straightforward speech patterns of Toklas opened up to Stein a much wider audience than she could have

reasonably expected. One must assume that the attention afforded the book on its publication exacerbated the irritation felt by the Jolases, who were slighted in the memoir. The insinuation that Elliot Paul was really the guiding intellectual force behind *transition* angered the Jolases so much that they arranged for the Servire Press to print *Testimony Against Gertrude Stein* as a supplement to *transition* 23 (July 1935). While Eugene Jolas claimed that the pamphlet was meant to correct inaccuracies printed in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* “before the book has had time to assume the character of historic authenticity,” *Testimony Against Gertrude Stein* was actually a merciless and wide-ranging attack on Stein from many of the artists who felt slighted by her book, including Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, and Tristan Tzara.<sup>38</sup> Maria McDonald Jolas spoke for *transition* and she used the occasion, first and foremost, to reaffirm her husband’s editorial authority. Unfortunately, this took the form of an assault on the contributions and abilities of Elliot Paul, who likely had nothing to do with fostering Stein’s misconceptions. Mrs. Jolas also launched a direct attack on Stein’s creative talents, suggesting that Stein’s approach was faulty, her material was substandard, and she had only been included in *transition* because few other little magazines were sympathetic to unconventional writing techniques at the time. “Miss Stein seemed to be experimenting courageously,” she maintained, “and while my husband was never enthusiastic about her solution of language, still it was a very personal one, and language being one of his chief preoccupations, she obviously belonged with us.”<sup>39</sup> In any event, Stein was unshaken by the whole scandal in Paris; her unyielding self-confidence seems to have insulated her from the attack. In a letter to Carl Van Vechten, Alice Toklas commented that the *transition* supplement was “a scream” and that all it seemed to do was drum up media attention for Stein’s book and for a tour Stein and

Toklas were undertaking of the United States. “The press came up in hordes,” Toklas gleefully reported to Van Vechten.<sup>40</sup>

Just as it is impossible to find documentary evidence of Jolas’s approval of Stein’s work written in the period after the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, it is very difficult to find any material to substantiate directly the claim that Jolas never held any respect for her writing. Rather, the archive of Jolas’s letters does contain complementary lines addressed to Stein. “I would not have missed for anything in the world the contact with your spirit that whipped me intellectually,” he wrote. “I hope I shall continue to share the privilege of participating in your struggles and your work for which I have a very deep and sincere admiration.” Dating from June 1930 this particular letter was written in the nostalgic mood of *transition*’s first suspension of publication. It was not a time when the editor could afford to foster hostilities among rich expatriate American writers, especially when he admitted to Stein that he had “hopes of starting something else next year.” He wrote to her, “At any rate, I hope if I start again I may have the pleasure of your collaboration.”<sup>41</sup> This was also a period in which simply instilling among writers a will to experiment was considered to be the lasting achievement of *transition*. Jolas and his colleagues were encouraging readers to consider “The Revolution of the Word” as a general call to arms. In an analysis of the first twenty numbers of *transition*, Robert Sage wrote, “But better to have encouraged the man who tried to break away from the wornout conventional and failed than to have admitted only the man who succeeded in fabricating stories according to pattern.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps Gertrude Stein enjoyed standing in the magazine simply because she rejected traditional literary models of reality. But how, then, does this major English-language innovator fit in with the overall achievement of *transition*? As late as 1933 Jolas was

still willing to identify “the impulse for the revolution of the word” in part with “certain experiments of Gertrude Stein’s.”<sup>43</sup> But by this time, Stein shared with *transition* nothing more than this initial spirit of revolt. Jolas continued to acknowledge analogous experiments, but as he worked towards specific applications of his general ideas about literature, Joyce’s “Work in Progress” emerged again and again as the archetypal text for a revolution in language. A number of the aspects in which the work of Joyce and Stein differs reveal the ways in which Stein’s writing was truly less suitable to Jolas’s thinking as *transition* moved forward in the 1930s. In this way, neither the departure of Elliot Paul nor the scandal surrounding the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* are as important to an understanding of Gertrude Stein’s place in *transition* as is a comparison between the work of Joyce and Stein in the context of Jolas’s own beliefs.

### III. Sound over Sight

It seems ridiculous today to have to defend the separate achievements of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. They were not unlike any other pair of important modern writers one could name: they shared a number of fundamental preoccupations, including the representation of modern reality in literature and the limitations of language, but the literary techniques they adopted to address these concerns are entirely distinctive. There is no reason to assume that they were either more alike or more different than any other pair of canonical modern authors. One was certainly not derivative of the other in the same manner as the imitators each has spawned. Yet one of the first critical endeavours the editors of *transition* had to undertake was the discrediting of those figures who read Joyce and Stein as indistinguishable from one another, leaders of an English-speaking

“cult of unintelligibility” living in Paris.<sup>44</sup> First and foremost among these antagonists was Wyndham Lewis, who maintained that Joyce “romps along at the head of the fashionable literary world, hand in hand with Gertrude Stein, both outdoing all children in jolly quaintnesses.”<sup>45</sup>

In *transition* 2 (May 1927), Elliot Paul published “K.O.R.A.A.” The acronym, representing “Kiss Our Royal American Ass,” was meant to echo “Kiss My Royal Irish Arse” in *Ulysses*.<sup>46</sup> “In so far as their methods and conceptions are concerned,” the editors argued of Joyce and Stein, “they represent opposite artistic poles.”<sup>47</sup> It did neither author any service to see their accomplishments subsumed by the other, so such explanations as the one the editors later directed to Wyndham Lewis attempted to disentangle Joyce from Stein, while favouring neither author above the other.

But Mr. Lewis does not so easily exhaust his capacity for misrepresentation — for he has the newspaper writer’s weakness for reckless and inaccurate generalisation — and he is soon not only confusing *transition* with Surrealism, but Mr. Joyce with Miss Stein and Miss Stein with Dada.

Anyone who had intelligently *read* one or two numbers of *transition* would have discerned the obvious facts that Mr. Joyce and Miss Stein are at opposite poles of thought and expression, that neither of them has anything in common with the Dada or Surrealist movements.<sup>48</sup>

What must be recognised here is that none of the critical writings that appeared in *transition* ever praised James Joyce by disparaging Gertrude Stein. If Stein was publicly slighted before the publication of the *Testimony Against Gertrude Stein*, it was as we have seen by the omission of critical notice. But the general inapplicability to Stein’s work of the laurels afforded Joyce intimated, over time, Eugene Jolas’s scepticism of what Stein was trying to accomplish.

David Bennett points out that the earliest apologists for innovative modern writers like James Joyce and Gertrude Stein used interdisciplinary tropes to discuss their

work. The effect was the suggestion of continuity within the arts or when in the case of modern painters and composers, for example, illustrations from artists who had already broken successfully from traditional forms. Such comparisons provided assistance in the justification and explication of unconventional new styles of writing.<sup>49</sup> This is certainly true of many of the things written about Joyce and Stein in *transition*. In “K.O.R.A.A.” Paul compared Joyce’s work to more strictly conceptual art forms, both traditional and contemporary.

As in listening to music, one can enjoy the effect of Joyce’s prose upon the senses without having the slightest conception of the organization and composition of the whole, that is to say, the meaning. But to enjoy it as architecture, rather than peering inch by inch along the walls with a reading glass, is still richer and more desirable.<sup>50</sup>

Stein’s earliest contributions to *transition* were afforded the same treatment, emphasising as in Joyce’s case how the reception of the prose could be compared to the effect that work in other media had on its audience.

It is useless to seek any key or hidden meaning to such works of Miss Stein’s as “An Elucidation” or “As a Wife Has a Cow, a Love Story.” They are as undecipherable as Bach fugues. They are abstract patterns, with more dimensions than sculpture, and subtler tone colours than painting and music. To such as can enjoy abstract art, they offer unique pleasure, but do not attack them as species of modern Sanskrit.<sup>51</sup>

Many critics have argued that this use of interdisciplinary comparison should be read only as the loosest of analogies. (Indeed, many contemporary Stein scholars deplore attempts to “read” her work, literally, as “paintings.”) Traditionally, such tropes have been best used to underline the contiguity between the arts and, indeed, between the arts and sciences as well, as the modern mind came to terms with the changing world of the twentieth century. Although we know that Eugene Jolas was sceptical of the value of visual art, for example, he too made some use of interdisciplinary tropes in

this manner. He was especially fond of comparing literature and music. Indeed, Jolas used a musical metaphor in the last number of *transition*, calling Joyce's completed work an "All World Symphony." Of Jolas's *transition* collaborators, Stuart Gilbert seems to have been particularly sensitive to the dangers of interpreting interdisciplinary analogies literally. But there is clear evidence that Jolas recognised that the comparisons between music, or at least sound, and the technique employed in "Work in Progress" could and should be taken literally. Indeed, even in that final metaphorical consideration of Joyce's work as a musical composition of sorts, Jolas took the comparison even further and expressed his hope "that there will be ears to hear and rejoice at the fabulous new harmonies of" the prose.<sup>52</sup> Behind the standard trope there was the belief that Joyce really was writing a piece of music, or at least a work that relied heavily upon sound. Jolas acknowledged a great deal of "sound sense" in "Work in Progress." This conviction was first stated directly in "The Revolution of Language and James Joyce."

Those who have heard Mr. Joyce read aloud sections from "Work in Progress" now being published in *transition* know the immense rhythmic beauty of his word technique. It has a musical flow that flatters the ear, that has the organic structure of works of nature, that opens up the Hegelian world of "higher synthesis." The rhythmic association of his words is beautiful, because every vowel and every consonant formed by his ear is painstakingly transmitted.<sup>53</sup>

There was, according to Jolas, a strong persuasive element in Joyce's own verbal rendering of "Work in Progress." When Jolas and Paul approached Sylvia Beach with the idea that Joyce might contribute to *transition*, she arranged a meeting in which Joyce read out passages from his new work. But while the meeting was most likely intended as an opportunity for Joyce to scrutinise these possible new collaborators, the reading won immediately Jolas's enthusiastic support. "His voice was resonantly musical," Jolas recalled.<sup>54</sup>

Certainly, music and Joyce has proven a very fertile critical basis for contemporary scholars. Joyce's own musical ability and his appreciation for music are both well-known. Jolas and his wife shared this interest with *transition's* most prominent contributor, providing one of the bases for the close friendship between their families. Maria McDonald had been studying voice in Europe when she met her future husband. They were introduced by his brother Jacques, a celebrated pianist. In any case, the music in Joyce's texts has been explored considerably, from the metaphorical comparison between the structure of the Joycean narrative and musical composition to a cataloguing of the textual references Joyce made to music, both popular and classical. But the more literal subject of the use of sound in Joyce has always been at least an implicit part of these discussions.

Richard Ellmann rightly argues against the wholly physiological claim that Joyce grew to write *Finnegans Wake* in the style in which he did because blindness forced him into perpetual night. Ellmann maintains that any such a theory is both "an insult to the creative imagination" and "an error of fact."<sup>55</sup> But Ruth Bauerle makes the credible argument that failing eyesight forced Joyce into a greater reliance on hearing, "into an oral/aural world," and the heightened experience of sound is manifested in the form Joyce adopted in *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, recent studies of Joyce's work give as much precedence to the sound of Joyce's prose as did his *transition* admirers; some critics identify the primacy of "the sound motif" demonstrated as early as the first page with the "bababadalgharaghtakamminarronukonnbronntonneonntuonnthunntrobarrhounawnskawntooohoohoordenthurnuk" representation of the sound of thunder.<sup>57</sup>

Anthony Burgess maintains that next to *Paradise Lost*, *Finnegans Wake* is "the most auditory of all works of literature."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Burgess identifies the literal importance of

sound in *Finnegans Wake* with the overall objectives of the author himself. Joyce did claim that *Finnegans Wake* was “pure music” and that readers’ difficulties in comprehension could be resolved if they simply read the text aloud.<sup>59</sup> Much of the early attention to this sound sense centred on the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” section of the book, which Joyce maintained to be “an attempt to subordinate words to the rhythm of water.”<sup>60</sup> It was this chapter that Joyce chose when making a recording of his own reading.

O

tell me all about

Anna Livia! I want to hear all

about Anna Livia. Well, you know Anna Livia? Yes, of course, we all know Anna Livia. Tell me all. Tell me now. You’ll die when you hear. Well, you know, when the old cheb went futt and did what you know. Yes, I know, go on. Wash quit and don’t be dabbling. Tuck up your sleeves and loosen your talktapes. And don’t butt me — hike! — when you bend. Or whatever it was they threed to make out he thried to two in the fiendish park. He’s an awful old reppe.<sup>61</sup>

Jennie Wang claims that it is the statement of one washerwoman to the other, “You’ll die when you hear,” that underscores the interpretative primacy of sound in this particular chapter. Hearing becomes the act of explication itself, the means by which the reader can pass between comprehension and ignorance, or between life and death as the Tim Finnegan of legend.<sup>62</sup> On the purely technical level, the delicate arrangement of rhythm and the variable length of metrical divisions emphasise sound, as do the techniques of alliteration and assonance.

Calling them in, one by one (To Blockbeddum here! Here the Shoebenacaddie!) and legging a jig or so on the sihl to show them how to shake their benders and the dainty how to bring to mind the gladdest garments out of sight and all the way of a maid with a man and making a sort of a cackling noise like two and a penny or half a crown and holding up a silliver shiner. Lord, lordy, did she so? Well, of all the ones I ever heard! Throwing all the neiss little whores in the world at him! To inny captured wench you wish of no matter what sex of pleissful ways two adda tammer a lizzy a lossie to hug and hab haven in Humpy’s apron!<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, according to Nino Frank, who helped Joyce translate “Anna Livia Plurabelle” into Italian, Joyce believed that preserving the sound of the prose was the most crucial consideration in an equivalent rendering of the piece. Writing about Joyce, Frank argued that “the rhythm, the harmony, the density and consonance of the words were more important to him than the meaning...” Frank reported that “having written one thing, Joyce scarcely hesitated to put down something completely different in Italian, as long as the poetic or metrical result was equivalent.”<sup>64</sup>

Elsewhere in *Finnegans Wake*, there are textual clues to the importance of the sound sense. Exclamations like “Ear! Ear! Not ay! Eye! Eye!”<sup>65</sup> beseech the reader to be an “earwitness to the thunder of his arafatas.”<sup>66</sup> Many statements claim that the eye is not to be trusted at all.

Let us now, weather, health, dangers, health, dangers, public orders and other circumstances permitting, of perfectly convenient, if you police, after you, policepolice, pardoning mein, ich beam so fresch, bey? drop this jiggerypokery and talk straight turkey meet to mate, for while the ear, be we mikealls or nicholists, may sometimes be inclined to believe others the eye, whether browned or nolensed, find it devilish hard now and again even to believe itself.<sup>67</sup>

The oral component of *Finnegans Wake* may, in fact, play a more significant role in terms of thematic development across the Joycian oeuvre. In studying the uses of silence and the reading practices of the characters in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, it has been suggested that in Stephen Daedalus and Leopold Bloom, “their individualism and their alienation from Irish society are to some extent represented, and perhaps reinforced, by their habit of reading silently — or when reading aloud, their adoption of a disguise of some sort.”<sup>68</sup> In Joyce’s earlier works, then, reading aloud is seen as implicitly depersonalising. But if *Finnegans Wake* is to succeed as the universal work that Joyce intended it to be, it must do so by

foregrounding its communal basis in a verbal potential, the experience shared between author and reader through sound. The process of internalising through silence is thereby reversed.

Expressing the universal in literature and emphasising the verbal aspects of poetry were two of Eugene Jolas's enduring interests. He wrote, "Audibility as a factor in prose has always been of secondary importance in the history of literature. In the new work of Mr. Joyce, this element should be considered as of primary importance."<sup>69</sup> Present critics have speculated that Joyce was sensitive to "music's ability to draw responses from deep within human consciousness."<sup>70</sup> Jolas, with his own fascination with the unconscious mind and dada sound poems, believed that it was primarily this verbal or melodic aspect of Joyce's prose that aimed to liberate the human imagination. Jolas and Joyce appear to have been influenced in this regard by the work of Marcel Jousse, a French abbé whom both men heard lecture in Paris in the late 1920s.<sup>71</sup> Jousse believed that all language developed from a language of gestures, and that written language represented an unfortunate estrangement from the fundamental basis of expression and communication. There are obvious similarities between Jousse's ideal of a primitive language and the perfect poetic language Jolas sought through his work. But Jousse's ideas, stressing the universal importance of the gesture, also spoke to Jolas's faith in a universal basis of language. If poets could not return to the language of gesture, they could emphasise sound, the next stage removed in Jousse's understanding of the development of language, in which an utterance mimics the gesture. Jolas stressed, "Before the prosaic language there was the rhythmic one."<sup>72</sup> In this way, sound provides for the artist the best tangible link between contemporary language and a more primal expression that Jolas became increasingly interested in exploring. Jolas's

interest in sound thus contrasted with the definite prejudices he held against the visual, representing as we have seen the slavish rendering of physical reality and the dominant intrusion of the conscious mind in art.

It is clear that by the end of the first year of publishing *transition*, Eugene Jolas had good reason not to see (or hear) in the work of Gertrude Stein the same literary values that he identified at the heart of “Work in Progress.” After all, Jolas and his collaborators had worked hard to convince readers that they could differentiate between the two artists. But it was only as Jolas’s preference for the verbal in poetry began to emerge that the discussion of the visual analogies used to describe Stein’s work might be read, in hindsight, as implicitly derogatory. It would be simplistic to believe, however, that Jolas’s developing preference was based solely on the issue of the verbal and non-verbal element of their writing, that while Jolas read verbal affinities in Joyce’s work, he saw Stein’s achievement as suggestive only of visual parallels. Anthony Burgess, who champions the musical aspect of Joyce’s prose, also emphasises the visual element in *Finnegans Wake*. Beyond the symbols typographically reproduced on the *transition* page, many of the puns employed in “Work in Progress” cannot work without our visual recognition of the words in front of us. And while there can be no doubt that the same words, or slight variations on the same words, repeated in close proximity in Stein’s work has a visual effect on the reader, we can see (or, more accurately, hear) that Stein’s work relies heavily on the force of its recitation, as in this contribution to *transition* 3 (June 1927).

And to in six and another. And to and in and six and another. And to and in and six and another. And to in six and and to and in and six and another. And to and in and six and another. And to and six and in and another and and to and six and another and and to and in and six and and to and six and in and another.<sup>73</sup>

Stein scholars have long pointed out that “a word repeated often enough ceases to have merely a set of lexical meanings; it assumes an almost incantory significance that forces its way into the reader’s consciousness by the sheer weight of repeated usage.”<sup>74</sup> Jolas valued this aspect of Stein’s writing and he, himself, once argued, “If we repeat, for instance, a familiar word long enough we gradually discover that the rhythmic quality dominates us.”<sup>75</sup> But Stein often addressed this issue of repetition in her work and she diminished its verbal effect. In a lecture given in the United States in the mid-1930s, Stein maintained that what people described as “repetition” in her technique, she actually intended as “insistence.”<sup>76</sup> Elsewhere, she elaborated further with the help of a visual parallel.

The question of repetition is very important. It is important because there is no such thing as repetition. Everybody tells every story in about the same way. You know perfectly well that when you and your roommates tell something, you are telling the story in about the same way. But if you listen carefully, you will see that not all the story is the same. There is always a slight variation. Somebody comes in and you tell the story over again. Every time you tell the story it is told slightly differently. All my early work was a careful listening to people telling their story, and I conceived the idea which is, funnily enough, the same as the idea of the cinema. The cinema goes on the same principle: each picture is just infinitesimally different from the one before. If you listen carefully, you say something, the other person says something; but each time it changes just a little, until finally you come to the point where you convince him or you don’t convince him.<sup>77</sup>

Stein’s use of the cinematic metaphor here is telling. Unlike the sound poems that Jolas admired and tried himself to imitate, what has been recognised in Stein as repetition seems to have been conscious emphasis, intended to have little or no role as incantation. The visual metaphors used to discuss Stein’s work, on the other hand, were encouraged by her continuously throughout her lifetime. Stein once claimed of Picasso, “I was alone at this time in understanding him, perhaps because I was expressing the

same things in literature...”<sup>78</sup> The key to this aspect of Stein’s work rests with her “portraits,” a form which originated in a written study she made of Alice Toklas in the first decade of this century. During the time in which she appeared in *transition*, Stein was busily at work on scores of these word portraits, of which more than one thousand have been published. The nature of Stein’s portraits must be read as contrary to the artistic ideal Eugene Jolas worked out in the magazine. Notably consistent with Jolas’s beliefs about visual art, all accounts suggest that Stein insistently believed writing to be a wholly conscious act, an opinion supported by the study of the papers she left behind after her death.<sup>79</sup> There must be, therefore, some due paid to conscious reality in Stein’s portraits; her literary studies began with that which Stein could really see, or evidence from the external world.<sup>80</sup> Now, this is not to say that Gertrude Stein was a slave to representation in the positivistic sense that Jolas would have recognised as bankrupt. She clearly did work towards a rendering of modern reality through abstraction, and this is where some profitable comparison may be made between Stein’s writing and the ideals of cubist painting, for example. Like modern visual artists, it has been argued, Gertrude Stein wished to forge “a written art form without a mimetic relationship to the external world except through certain suggestive devices. She wanted to reorder reality in the same way that Picasso and Braque fragmented the forms of external objects and painted the fragments on a canvas in a completely unique relationship to one another.”<sup>81</sup> But working with a written medium, Stein encountered obstacles to the development of this literary abstractionism.

In trying to adapt elements of sound into his work, Joyce had the advantage of using materials, the words themselves, that have a clear and direct relationship with sound.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps this is why Eugene Jolas appeared much less uncomfortable in making

sustained use of musical metaphors in describing “Work in Progress.” In trying to construct a visual effect through her writing, however, Stein was hindered by the fact that the only direct link between language and the visual arts would be, for example, the manipulation of typography on the printed page. Michael Hoffman argues that Stein “wanted the painter’s freedom to create her own reality, so that her creation would be subject to no conventions other than those she imposed or that it imposed upon itself.”<sup>83</sup> But the very nature of language itself makes difficult the direct application of words to the principles of visual art. Critic Marianne DeKoven has subsequently addressed the difficulty inherent in resolving such a gap.

But a painted shape, unlike a word, has only two potential degrees of meaning: referential or abstract. Either it refers recognizably to an anterior object, something we might say the painting is “of,” or it has only the emotional, spiritual suggestiveness of musical tones, along with its formal, compositional significance, as in abstract expressionism. Words, on the other hand, may or may not be used in an intentionally referential way — to say something coherent about a particular subject — but they always retain the lexical meanings they carry in language. The meanings of words in a piece of writing need not refer to a theme or topic which the writing is “about,” yet they are nonetheless understandable, which enables us to read the writing.<sup>84</sup>

In her attempt to employ painterly techniques in her writing, then, Stein shared with Jolas and Joyce the desire to circumvent the traditional relationship between a word and its meaning in language. But while Jolas and Joyce relied heavily on various neologistic forms to effect this break, Stein’s method differed as markedly as is possible from that advocated in “The Revolution of the Word.” Stein sought to deny the malady of language Jolas fought against by returning to the words so as to ignore their traditional connection to meaning, thereby revitalising English from within the existing language. This possibility was actually raised in the earliest numbers of *transition*. Laura Riding, writing in *transition* 3 (June 1927), maintained that “in her primitive good

humour” Gertrude Stein “does not find it necessary to trouble to define the theme. The theme is to be inferred from the composition. The composition is clear because the language means nothing but what it means in her using of it.”<sup>85</sup> Elsewhere in the same essay, Riding addressed directly Stein’s use of words.

She makes it capable of direct communication not by caricaturing language in its present stage — attacking decadence with decadence — but by purging it of its discredited experiences. None of the words Miss Stein uses have ever had any experience. They are no older than her use of them, and she is herself no older than her age conceived barbarically.<sup>86</sup>

The argument follows from Sherwood Anderson’s notable remarks on Stein which made up the introduction to her important 1922 collection *Geography and Plays*.

Anderson recognised “that every artist working with words as a medium, must at times be profoundly irritated by what seems the limitations of his medium.” What most writers overlook are the simplest words: “And in the meantime the little words, that are the soldiers with which we great generals must make our conquests, are neglected.”

Anderson saw Stein’s mission as the rediscovery of these words and, in this way, the rejuvenation of a moribund language. She was determined “to go live among the little housekeeping words, the swaggering bullying street-corner words, the honest-working, money saving words, and all the other forgotten and neglected citizens of the sacred and half forgotten city.” Anderson concluded with his unqualified endorsement: “Would it not be a lovely and charmingly ironic gesture of the gods if, in the end, the work of this artist were to prove the most lasting and important of all the word slingers of our generation.”<sup>87</sup>

Sherwood Anderson was also a close friend of Eugene Jolas; the two men met when the newlywed Jolases lived in New Orleans. Although Jolas remained a supporter of Anderson throughout his life, they agreed on little artistically, including Jolas’s

poetry. Jolas believed that Anderson's prose represented a significant advance on the traditional representation of the lives of everyday Americans, but Anderson never contributed creative work to *transition*. And in his assessment of Stein, Jolas again disagreed with his friend. "The little household words so dear to Sherwood Anderson," Jolas later wrote, "never impressed me." While even later in life, Jolas admitted that he admired "certain of her rhythmic enchainments," Stein's vague commitment to poetic sound could not outweigh her ultimate refusal to work towards the expansion of the English lexicon.<sup>88</sup>

Early in the *transition* program, as we know, Eugene Jolas called for an art that sought to recapture "the simplicity of the word," the primal power of language unsullied by the legacy of its use.<sup>89</sup> By stripping away all the existing meaning of words, by approaching language as if she was the first person to use these words, Stein achieved through her art, according to Laura Riding, "a perpendicular, an escape from the human horizontal plane."<sup>90</sup> Jolas made this search for what he called the "vertical" or "vertigral" the major ambition of his creative career, of course. But he came to believe that it could never be accomplished through the use of existing language. The transcendence of everyday human experience could only be accomplished through the skilled manipulation of new words. Above all else, Jolas's best example in this endeavour remained James Joyce, and the specific differences between his work and that of Gertrude Stein reveal that her departure from *transition* ultimately had to do with much more than simply petty personal differences.

## Chapter Five

### An Apolitical Ideal

The years in which *transition* was published were defined by political concerns. The repercussions of World War I, the cycle of boom and bust in global economics, and the rise of communism and fascism afforded politics an unavoidable prominence in all spheres of life. Artists of all disciplines were also drawn into the debates of the day and many important modern works, like Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) for example, found their genesis in political events. In the preface to his study of the politics of a number of major modern writers, however, Michael North argues that the indigestible "contradictions" of economic and political concerns, those details that problematise statecraft, also problematise art. Art has a well-defined social function; it works at some level to define the relationship of the artist with his or her society and those components of social reality that cannot be readily resolved in the world beyond the text recoil and serve subsequently to interrupt what North describes as "the smooth workings of art."<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the reciprocal relationship between art and politics presents difficult problems. This fact, one would assume, could be acknowledged by even those artists who have embraced political concerns and have come to view the discussion of political issues as central to the role of the artist. For other figures, however, the choice has been altogether different; some modern artists tried to exclude the political from their work entirely.

From its very first issue, *transition* made a conscious attempt to distance itself from partisan political concerns — not by presenting a balanced view of political issues, but by eschewing political debate and disregarding the political component of works that appeared in the magazine. In their introduction to *transition* 1 (April 1927), Eugene

Jolas and Elliot Paul proclaimed that their readers should consider themselves “a homogenous group of friends, united by a common appreciation of the beautiful.” But the turbulence of the 1920s and 1930s would inevitably split these so-called “idealists of a sort,” just as it divided the world.<sup>2</sup> An examination of the history of *transition* in view of the politics of the day reveals many of the complexities of an openly apolitical ideal. Because it promoted writers who were, themselves, politically engaged while professing its own neutrality, the magazine exposed itself to attacks from both the Left and the Right, attacks that threatened to draw its editors away from their impartial stand. As his readership hurtled towards another world war, it became increasingly difficult for Eugene Jolas to remain silent on political issues. Indeed, one could argue that a nonpartisan political view by the mid-1930s reflected little more than callous imprudence. More importantly, perhaps, one can question whether or not there had always been some political implications inherent to “The Revolution of the Word,” the militant-sounding aesthetic program around which *transition* grew to be organised. Jolas always acknowledged some social role for literature, but to investigate fully the possible political implications behind his magazine, one needs peel away an artifice of detachment that had begun to slip from *transition* almost as soon as it had been adopted.

### **I. Wyndham Lewis: The *Enemy* Attacks**

Although none of his principal collaborators professed an explicit political engagement themselves, Eugene Jolas was still the central figure in the shaping of an apolitical editorial direction for *transition*. Writing near the end of his life, he claimed that he had “loathed politics, right or left or middle.”<sup>3</sup> As a child in Lorraine, Jolas grew

up in the shadow of what he called “the spite fences of history” and he was aware that the conflicts that divided the French and German inhabitants of the region were based primarily upon cultural and political differences.<sup>4</sup> Forging a new life for himself in the United States in the years leading up to the American intervention in World War I, Jolas became an ardent pacifist until he accepted that his entire generation would be drawn into the developing global conflict. He was subsequently drafted and he served as secretary to an army psychiatrist; the wartime suffering of the enlisted men moved Jolas deeply. Influenced to a great extent by his childhood memories of the regional educators and intellectuals who had attempted in vain “to construct a spiritual bridge over the Rhine” through art and cultural exchange,<sup>5</sup> Jolas hoped to make *transition* a more successful force for harmony. He envisioned his magazine in the late 1920s as an international assembly “not interested in social problems, in economics, or in any political complex.”<sup>6</sup> Before *transition* had completed its first year of publication, however, the magazine was dragged unwillingly into a full-scale political debate by Wyndham Lewis.

W.H. Auden later lampooned Lewis as “that lonely old volcano of the Right,”<sup>7</sup> but in the late 1920s Lewis was very coy about his specific political allegiances, describing them in parody of T.S. Eliot as “partly communist and partly fascist, with a distinct streak of monarchism in my marxism, but at bottom anarchist with a healthy passion for order.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly, any serious critic of Lewis’s politics must confront his controversial book *Hitler* (1931). In this particular study, Lewis set out “as an exponent — not as critic nor yet as advocate — of German Nationalism, or Hitlerism.”<sup>9</sup> Yet in spite of this pretence to objectivity, Lewis managed to rationalise the characteristic Nazi suspicion of the Jewish race and support the general fascist attempt to appeal to

racial self-identification, foregoing all considerations of class distinction. A society organised around race would effect the desirable unity of the state by attempting “to simplify and to concentrate,” Lewis argued, while ensuring “greater social efficiency.”<sup>10</sup> Adolf Hitler himself, Lewis concluded, was “the expression of current German manhood” and “a Man of Peace” whose economic policies represented an attempt “to seize the big bull of Finance by the horns, and to take a chance for the sake of freedom.”<sup>11</sup>

Lewis would have good reason to regret these words no more than a decade after he wrote them. But in general terms, critics of Lewis’s views on the role of art and the artist in society point to his “conservative and rightist tendencies,” attitudes that made many intellectuals susceptible to fascist politics throughout the 1930s. More specifically, Reed Way Dasenbrock argues that the confrontational “paranoia” exhibited in Lewis’s thinking, an aggressive cynicism that defined his dealings with *transition* for example, became an integral part of “the fascist worldview” in the years leading up to World War II.<sup>12</sup> But Fredric Jameson argues that Wyndham Lewis cannot be seen as a fascist ideologue in any official sense and that which we might recognise as Lewis’s latent fascist sympathies are better understood simply as symptoms of his vehement opposition to communism. Jameson ultimately characterises Lewis’s thought as representative of “protofascism,” an amalgam of bourgeois values with a populist, right-wing impulse.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Wyndham Lewis can be read most profitably as a reactionary: his writings in this period consistently outline and criticise features of that material Lewis judged to be communist, while themselves revealing sympathies that can only be characterised as representative of right-wing thought. Lewis’s attacks against an apparently surreptitious communist program at work in the pages of *transition* provide a

logical starting point for the analysis of any possible political influences concealed within the magazine. More importantly, however, Lewis's arguments forced Jolas and his earliest collaborators to define explicitly and defend the basis of their own neutral position.

The *Enemy*, Lewis's short-lived and irregularly published periodical, was consciously designed as a forum for "a solitary outlaw and not a gang."<sup>14</sup> Lewis claimed that he had begun planning the launch of the *Enemy* with the idea of adopting "No Politics" as a broad slogan himself, maintaining that he wished to pursue no political affiliations. This admission was not meant to suggest that Lewis felt indifferent about political matters, however. Indeed, he eventually decided against the apolitical credo since in his desire "to exorcise politics from art," Lewis discovered ultimately that he was forced "to have so much commerce with them."<sup>15</sup> Unlike Eugene Jolas and his collaborators, Lewis sought actively to uncover the political convictions underlying artistic pieces; Lewis also felt qualified to sift through and judge what political convictions he eventually uncovered, denouncing those that worked against his definition of the public good. Wyndham Lewis began his series of attacks in the *Enemy* with a critical broadside directed against the expatriate colony in Paris. He was sceptical of those artists who employed the word "revolutionary" in describing their art. Art, in Lewis's opinion, details the ideals of a revolution yet to take place and cannot be described as revolutionary itself. He preferred to reserve this label "revolutionary" for those artists who have "attempted something definitely new, something that could not have come into existence in any age but this one." Much contemporary work, he maintained, should be seen as fundamentally "traditional" with "a very little of that newness," or else it should be seen as something that simply appears to be new in its

adoption of “standards or forms that are very ancient, and hence strange to the European.”<sup>16</sup> But Lewis judged that the rebellious posturing by artists was more than simply bravado. The adoption of foreign values, none more foreign than the communism absorbed by the surrealists, threatened to undermine Western society as subversive ideas came to be circulated widely by expatriate artists recognised in their own countries and throughout the world. Lewis believed that the literary community in Paris wished “to dictate to the world of Western art and letters... policies that are as alien to most of us as they are to France.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Lewis maintained that “all the threads of this particular alien life in Paris are gathered up in a quite definite way” in *transition*, the magazine that he described as “the principal organ of the small foreign world planted in the centre of the french capital.”<sup>18</sup>

As we have already seen, one of Lewis’s main critical preoccupation in the late 1920s was his impassioned opposition to James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. But even in his criticism of *transition*’s most notable contributors, Lewis’s comments never strayed far from the communist politics of the surrealist group. Lewis tied these principal concerns together by conceding that while Joyce might not share directly the political preoccupations of the surrealists, the Irish novelist simply had to be read as “radical” and he appeared in *transition* in order to bolster the seditious activities of the group, “called in to lend lustre to this rather dull... company.” Lewis uncovered communist sympathies that were concealed in Stein, on the other hand, by recognising them in “the rhythm of her blood stream.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, Lewis was willing to go to great lengths to portray *transition* as an agency seething with communism.

The inattentive, good-natured, casual anglo-saxon reader would not, I am sure, have to look very far beneath the surface to find political currents in full blast which elsewhere, under very different forms, he was familiar with as “radical,” “communist,” “revolutionary.”<sup>20</sup>

He hoped ultimately to expose what he saw as the true political agenda at work in *transition*. By securing an admission that everyone associated with the magazine was a communist, Lewis hoped to start “ridding ourselves of those compulsive, politico-artistic forms of radical propaganda, with a view of getting a purer form of art.”<sup>21</sup>

Eugene Jolas and his colleagues did not take kindly to Lewis’s claim that *transition* was “a political paper essentially.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the spectre of Lewis’s attacks on the “super-realists” and their *transition* connections would persist at least through the end of the 1920s and colour, to a greater or lesser extent, a good deal of the editorial comment that appeared in the earliest numbers of the magazine. Sometimes, when *transition* contributors addressed Lewis in passing, the results could be quite amusing. In her “Letter from Greenwich Village” in *transition* 13 (June 1928), Genevieve Taggard reported on the importance of Theodore Dreiser’s trip to the Soviet Union and asked Lewis, tongue-in-cheek, not to take issue with the specific subject matter of her submission and claim “that the plot you super-discovered is super-thickening.”<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, Lewis was too prominent a critic and public figure to either ignore or treat lightly and had, instead, to be confronted directly. James Joyce, for example, chose to fashion and refashion passages of *Finnegans Wake*, most notably “The Mookse and the Gripes” section, to answer Lewis’s complaints. Eugene Jolas still found it necessary to devote pages of the magazine to reply to Lewis’s seemingly endless stream of condemnation as late as *transition* 16/17 (June 1929). But the most comprehensive rebuttal of Lewis’s writings in the *Enemy* came in the form of an article titled “First Aid to the Enemy” published in *transition* 9 (December 1927). Jolas, Elliot Paul, and Robert Sage were initially stunned by Lewis’s accusations, but they quickly picked up the personal tone of the debate, noting that Lewis “has a vigorous style, uses

sledgehammer words and makes no pretense of being courteous to his opponent.”<sup>24</sup>

They characterised Lewis as having “progressed from novelist to painter and from painter to pamphleteer,” a “British messiah” who “has elected himself the Defender of the Western World.”<sup>25</sup> But underneath Lewis’s strong rhetoric, the editors of *transition* felt they could detect nothing more rigorous than stale, conservative values and professional jealousy.

Yes, Mr. Lewis, in spite of his positivist attitude, his brave attacks, his thumping epithets, is somewhat of a bluff — and a pitiful one at that. For he sets himself up as a radical; proudly he repeats that he is an “enemy,” an “outlaw.” The rebel instinct — there can be no doubt of it — is strong in him; but, alas, the complacent, salt-of-the-earth, status-quo-upholding tradition of the British is bred into his bones. He is like the spinster who, unable to throw her bonnet over the windmills, takes to social service work instead. A good old Tory at heart, Mr. Lewis nurses a game leg with one hand and with all his thwarted fury shakes a fist at the parade as it passes him by.<sup>26</sup>

Jolas, Paul, and Sage used this opportunity to pledge themselves once again to concerns “confined to literature and life” exclusively, a grouping that clearly did not imply any consideration of political and economic matters.<sup>27</sup> They exclaimed in the face of Lewis’s cultural insularity, “We don’t want to be good Europeans, but good universalists.”

We believe that only the dream really matters. We believe that there is a universal eternal line binding the nations and which has nothing whatever to do with the limitations of a Western psychology or an Eastern psychology. The dream has no racial characteristics. There is a fundamental correspondence between the nations that has nothing to do with frontiers.<sup>28</sup>

Needless to say, the three men believed that politics had no place in *transition*. The editors maintained that, politically, they were “content to leave society to the Communists, Methodist missionaries, the Fascists, the Anti-Saloon League, Mr. Lewis and the Society for the Suppression of Vice.” While they did acknowledge a strong

element of politics in the doctrines of the surrealist movement, conceding that “on one unescapable point Mr. Lewis is correct — the Surrealists are Communists,” Jolas and his collaborators insisted that “the editors of *transition*, on the other hand, are no more Communists than they are Fascists, for all forms of politics are outside the range of our interests.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Eugene Jolas maintained consistently that he “was violently opposed to the political aberrations of Surrealism”; we know that this was one of a number of fundamental disagreements between Jolas and the group, disagreements that led to the public conflicts that eventually estranged Jolas from André Breton entirely.<sup>30</sup> Jolas believed “that the poetic instinct has nothing whatever to do with the programmatic principles of politics.”<sup>31</sup> In “First Aid to the Enemy,” Jolas and his colleagues insisted once again that the surrealists had been translated for *transition* only because certain members of the group had been successful in revitalising French literature and the editors felt that this example might offer inspiration and encouragement to artists writing in English. That works of art produced by a group of men committed to communist ideals, works that openly reflected this political commitment at times, could be published in a magazine that claimed to be apolitical without tainting its editorial policy represents a more contentious issue that was never fully resolved. Jolas and Paul later admitted that the diversity of opinion manifest in the work published in *transition* could be “disconcerting” to their readers, “particularly when the editors show a definite tendency in their editorials, a tendency leading away from a considerable portion of their contributors’ offerings.”<sup>32</sup> But they justified this miscellany of thinking, as we have seen, merely by pointing out that art remained in the grip of constant change. Jolas and Paul here failed to acknowledge their obvious role in shaping the critical acumen of their readership. Once again, their apolitical position implied a great deal of openness and perhaps an equal measure of naiveté on their part.

Wyndham Lewis, on the other hand, never stopped arguing that the surrealists emanated “not the dogma, but the *aroma*, the *tempo*, of Moscow” and this contaminated everyone who had contact with their work and ideas.<sup>33</sup> Lewis judged what we now recognise as the inter-war period to be defined by the increasing polarisation of political beliefs, a time where there was no longer a “margin in which the individual can exist” independently. For Lewis, writing in 1929, everything came down to a fundamental choice between capitalism and communism. “Politically, if you do not thrill at the thought of the modern Capitalist state and all that it entails,” he warned his readers, “you must be a communist.”<sup>34</sup> But as the Western civilisation Lewis valued so dearly moved into the 1930s and political and economic circumstances unfolded further, this decision Lewis believed to be fundamental to all citizens became, increasingly, a choice between fascism and communism for many people, especially artists and intellectuals. While *transition* was able to distance itself effectively from communism while still promoting the literature of the surrealist group, Eugene Jolas and his collaborators would soon be forced to defend their aesthetic principles from attack from the Left. In this climate of increasing political partisanship, Jolas’s equal unwillingness to capitulate to American liberals and socialists, artists on the Left who were becoming more deeply involved with different forms of radicalism but especially communism, suggests that the contents of *transition* need to be investigated for a full range of possible political influence.

## II. Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and *The Young European*

In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Georg Lukács argued that “the struggle between socialism and capitalism” is “the fundamental reality of the modern

age.” This position certainly validates the sense of political polarisation Wyndham Lewis sensed at the end of the 1920s. But Lukács qualified his assertion to add that in the years leading up to the Second World War, it was “the conflict between Fascism and anti-Fascism” that helped shape the fundamental “social and political pattern” of the day.<sup>35</sup> Lukács’s claim underlined a greater direct engagement among people during this time who would normally be considered politically moderate or neutral, people roused to action by the dramatic political developments of the age.

Without doubt, some modern artists held strong political convictions, creative individuals who aligned themselves actively with movements on either the Left or the Right. But for other artists, the decision to embrace communism or fascism, specifically, betrayed more directly a strong fear of the rival ideology. Wyndham Lewis’s comments demonstrate that some anti-communist writings concealed a great deal of fascist sympathy; as the fascist movement grew throughout Europe during the early 1930s, many artists looked Left in the search for an avenue of effective resistance to extreme conservatism. Amidst the rancour of that decade, rancour borne of social and economic turmoil, the existing political order could offer little more than war itself in opposition to the various totalitarian positions taken up within the evolving political landscape. Because widespread armed conflict was not forthcoming until the end of the decade, however, few artists of any persuasion had the option of following the example of their fully committed colleagues who involved themselves in the Spanish Civil War. Instead, many artists chose to make their protestations manifest in their work. Now, as Lukács also pointed out, it would be misleading to look for “the formative principle of an age” in every work of art produced during any given period, but it has to be acknowledged that the conflict between Left and Right was an issue both “dynamic” and “immediate” for artists at work between the world wars.<sup>36</sup> Even Eugene Jolas granted

that “every art necessarily reflects the economic and social current of the age in which it is produced.”<sup>37</sup> As the fascist threat loomed ever larger, however, the political polarisation of the inter-war years had a profound effect upon the world of art. It can be argued that the resulting rift in the artistic community undermined the ideas of a universal, international art as proposed in *transition*. The neutral middle-ground all but disappeared and artists on the Left maintained that those colleagues who did not help their cause directly were all but assisting the fascist enemy. American radicals sensed an opportunity to transplant to the United States the lessons of Bolshevism. From the late 1920s, pressure mounted against *transition* from collaborators and friends on the Left who, frightened perhaps by some conservative submissions to the magazine, hoped to force Jolas to define clearly his political allegiances.

The relationship between fascism and art is difficult to assess, as we have already seen in our examination of the work of Wyndham Lewis. But the substantial mark fascism has left on the intellectual history of the twentieth century makes any possible connection an important consideration for contemporary literary scholarship, particularly when one acknowledges that literary scholarship itself began a radical transformation in the wake of World War II. There is an initial problem in tracing the relationship between fascism and the world beyond politics, however. Even today, it is difficult to define the major tenets of fascism, its development having been shown to be less than systematic and its institutional manifestations having been so comprehensively dismantled after the war. Confining one’s comments to the relationship between fascism and art, exclusively, this matter becomes even more problematic. Only the most crude works of fascist propaganda display political convictions in a straightforward manner. Indeed, there are a number of common pitfalls one might encounter when trying to define a fascist art. While some critics might attempt to tie biographical

evidence of fascist sympathy to an artist's canon, they may be thwarted by examples of an artist's less political work; while some critics might attempt to isolate specific fascist themes in art, they may be prone to overgeneralisation; while some critics might search for creative forms that are favoured by fascist ideologues, they may find themselves confronted by the sheer diversity of modern formal experiment.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, fascist governments were concerned with matters of art. Benito Mussolini believed, for instance, that if his regime was to last in Italy, it would have to be interwoven with Italian culture generally, and only a fascist art could help effect such a wide acceptance.<sup>39</sup> While it is true that Mussolini acknowledged few of his debts to the artistic community in public, he privately recognised the contributions of F.T. Marinetti and his futurist movement and the journal *La Voce*, for example, in establishing and consolidating his new political order.<sup>40</sup> Government controlled art exhibitions in Italy and Germany during the inter-war era clearly privileged some artists and art forms and censured others. By the mid-1930s, Adolf Hitler was concerned that German artists should turn away from international styles and subjects to concentrate on German nationalist themes.<sup>41</sup> But beyond such attempts simply to assert the influence of the state throughout all facets of everyday life, fascist leaders also actively commissioned specific works of art. Jeffrey Schnapp points out that because fascism had no recourse to a single recognisable intellectual source in the historical past, fascist governments undertook a continual process of definition and redefinition that demanded “an aesthetic *overproduction* — a surfeit of fascist signs, images, slogans, books, and buildings — to compensate for, fill in, and cover up its forever unstable ideological core.”<sup>42</sup>

Robert Soucy has warned his readers against accepting the stereotype of fascists as “brutal, dull-minded, pathological SS men.” “Fascism,” he underlines, “was an

intellectual as well as a mass movement.”<sup>43</sup> Once we accept that our search for a fascist art need not be limited to blunt propagandist texts, the possibility of identifying a legitimate fascist aesthetic is improved. Indeed, in spite of all the difficulties in relating fascism to art, Walter Strauss believes that a fascist orientation in art can be adequately defined. He feels that readers can isolate a particular elitism and racism proposed through fascist works, prejudices that “are likely to be used in the interests of a fascist regime as soon as it comes to power.” Strauss recognises in fascist art a preoccupation with matters of race and the state and a homage to “discipline and submission” related to a “cult of leadership.” The ideal represented in fascist art is a “utopian community of superior spiritual and physical beings.” This objective is to be moulded from a modern disquiet through the heroic actions and selflessness of individuals in response to the demands made by state leaders, yet Strauss argues that behind this exterior “there throbs an eroticism or ecstasy that is darkly connected with death and the will-to-death.”<sup>44</sup> Strauss’s ideas are not unlike those of Fredric Jameson, who reads “protofascism” in reactionary, conservative literature of the 1920s and 1930s. Both critics isolate a distinctive and severe response to the social turmoil of those decades that could be expressed with equal validity in both art and politics. Similarly, Georg Lukács argued that a “modern nihilism” evident in the writing of the first half of the twentieth century provided a malignant energy “from which both Fascism and Cold War ideology draw their strength.” For Lukács, who stopped well short of any suggestion that there is a direct correlation between modern literature and the fascist movement, the hazards intrinsic to this discontent in the inter-war era transcended the “directly political attitudes” of all artists, from polemic partisans to apolitical idealists.<sup>45</sup> Following this argument, one can see some connection between *transition* and fascism in the sense of unrest that bound Eugene Jolas and his collaborators together during their first year of

publishing the magazine, a disillusion Elliot Paul at one time termed “the new nihilism.” Although much of the art of this period had some affinity with the widespread disenchantment of the inter-war years and artists expressed many different responses to their society, the editors of *transition* felt a particular affinity with the convictions of Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, convictions that were expressed most fully in May 1927 when a chapter of his novel *The Young European* was published in the second number of the magazine.

Drieu La Rochelle would later come to be known as one of France’s most notorious fascists. In reality, he did not officially convert to fascism until 1934,<sup>46</sup> long after his short association with *transition* had ended. But at the time he wrote *The Young European*, Drieu La Rochelle had already become, like Wyndham Lewis, strongly critical of the spread of communism and his thought was coloured by opinions that we may identify as protofascist. In the excerpt of fictional prose that appeared in *transition*, some elements of the fascist aesthetic sketched by Walter Strauss can also be recognised. The story deals with a solitary young male whose mother died not knowing who was the father of her child. The eponymous protagonist is a representative child of his race; of his heritage, he can exclaim only, “At any rate, I am white.”<sup>47</sup> His consciousness is shaped by the First World War. He observes that “man need never have left the forest: he is a degenerate, nostalgic animal.” Man is “born only for war, as women are made to have children.”<sup>48</sup> Brutal Aryan sensuality predominates.

I had seen no women for several months. A large girl entered my little office each morning. Because I had been interred so long among men, what an excursion my imagination suddenly took when confronted with this large white body. I blushed to the ears. Here was the great white race I had sought throughout the world. I no longer looked at her face, for my eyes were filled with that bundle of bones. I seized her in my arms and we were engaged at an hour’s notice.

The young European murders with little thought and no trace of remorse. He says simply, "I had robbed men and killed them." To obtain a passport, he slays a stranger, thrilled to observe "what difference it would make when it chanced to be a civilian."<sup>49</sup> He is restless. Travelling "to Moscow to get a closer view of Lenin," he finds "the Russian Revolution was not at all as I had believed." Instead, he concludes, "those Jews thought only of making themselves Americans," but "they went about it awkwardly."<sup>50</sup>

As published in *transition*, Drieu La Rochelle's chapter represented an engrossing and sinister study of the artistic expression of those values and convictions that would come to be associated with the fascist movement throughout the 1930s. Elsewhere in the magazine, Robert Sage identified the potential to exploit weakness and seize power exhibited in the character of the young European.

This youth is today perhaps society's most dangerous enemy, for society has made itself so unbearable to him that his bile is distilled into a bitter vengeful compulsion. And he is not a weakling who is content with brooding. He is intelligent, clever and ruthless. He is not restrained by inhibitions or the rules of conduct learned at his mother's knee. Religion, love, morality, order, law, the welfare of others are no more to him than targets for his disgust. Observation and experience have taught him that these are protective makeshifts and he has learned from war the unimportance of human life. He is a primitive sensually and intellectually a nihilist.<sup>51</sup>

Neither Sage nor Elliot Paul, who translated the excerpt from *The Young European*, failed to see both the promise and the risk in this fictional young malcontent, even in the years before Hitler came to power in Germany. In light of Drieu La Rochelle's work, Paul argued that during the 1920s "old values had become meaningless"<sup>52</sup> and "no illusions as to the revival of Europe's past greatness," the promise with which the twentieth century had begun, could be valid.<sup>53</sup> The world hungered for change at any cost; elsewhere, Paul maintained that "the best of us love to see things fall."<sup>54</sup> He called

Drieu La Rochelle's fragment "a frank and lucid and convincing statement of a world intellectual tendency which is in its ascendancy." Paul took solace in his belief that even if modern change was misguided, at least "the blunders lying ahead may have the virtue of novelty."<sup>55</sup> These words would, of course, prove tragically prophetic.

Dougald McMillan admits that the *transition* program "grew out of the same intellectual and spiritual situation" that produced a thinker like Drieu La Rochelle.<sup>56</sup> Certainly, some of Eugene Jolas's own creative work during this period expressed a savage disillusionment similar to that evident in *The Young European*. In "Flight into Geography: A Scenario," a composition published in *transition* 10 (January 1928), Jolas described a character who "stands alone, everywhere his home and nowhere, bitterness of the world in his heart."<sup>57</sup> A dialogue between a stranger and a youth bears out a version of this nihilistic response to modern isolation with which Drieu La Rochelle's protagonist could identify.

Stranger: What are you waiting for?  
 Youth: Infinity.  
 Stranger: You seek vain things.  
 Youth: Forgetting.  
 Stranger: Is a God in you?  
 Youth: Demons.  
 Stranger: The wind of the hills sweep clean.  
 Youth: Brothels.  
 Stranger: Listen to the Lamb!  
 Youth: I spit.  
 Stranger: Prayers heal.  
 Youth: Sleep.  
 Stranger: Do not desire.  
 Youth: Only life.  
 Stranger: Are you hungry?  
 Youth: For barbarian words.  
 Stranger: Songs wait like sacraments.  
 Youth: And spring.  
 Stranger: New light is near.  
 Youth: Crumbs of bread!<sup>58</sup>

This “new nihilism,” the editors of *transition* continually stressed, had little to do with Nietzsche. Elliot Paul maintained that the example drawn from Drieu La Rochelle’s work “must not be confused with the superman conception.” The work “renounces Christ and Nietzsche as if both were schoolboys,” Paul claimed.<sup>59</sup> Robert Sage argued that “the cold logic” of the hero of *The Young European* runs counter to the “abstractions of... Nietzsche.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, for Jolas and his *transition* collaborators who saw the unrest of the age as most symptomatic of a need for the development of a better creative medium to give new expression to the isolated individual in the modern world, the writings of Nietzsche offered little practical support. The German philosopher had maintained, of course, that “words dilute and brutalize” and “convention is the condition of great art, *not* an obstacle.”<sup>61</sup> And unlike those people, like Drieu La Rochelle perhaps, who saw this time of instability as a time of inevitable action, Jolas believed that this nihilism was actually paralysing. As we have already seen, Jolas hoped to eventually work away from the irrationalism expressed in his own art, but not by political means. He looked forward to a new consciousness borne of a revitalised language that would allow the artist to “combat the nihilism of his age.”<sup>62</sup>

Dougald McMillan is quick to point out that “The Young European” was the only contribution Drieu La Rochelle made to *transition* and the French writer “played no large part in its programme.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the futurists and Gottfried Benn offer better examples of *transition* writers who influenced Jolas and his collaborators and who then went on to involve themselves, for some time at least, in fascist politics. Jolas ignored the political dimension of futurism, however, just as he ignored the political engagement of the surrealist group. Jolas was so disturbed by Benn’s conversion to Hitlerism that he severed all ties with his friend. Benn’s work in *transition* lends little suggestion of his

future political engagement, however. The example offered by Drieu La Rochelle remains important because *The Young European* is so clearly a protofascist piece, a work of fiction that suggests an unequivocal response to Western society in the years following the First World War. Although Elliot Paul and Robert Sage admired the spirit of *The Young European*, neither were interested in offering a systematic proposal for social or political reorganisation. They, too, believed action was inevitable, but they could not say what that action would be.

Although Eugene Jolas shared with Drieu La Rochelle a number of concerns regarding the society in which both men found themselves, Jolas was decidedly unconcerned by the political implications of this modern discord. Much of Pierre Drieu La Rochelle's thought, for example, can be traced back to his general apprehension of things modern, of his scepticism of the machine. He believed that an increased reliance on mechanisation was at the root of many of the evils of modern society.<sup>64</sup> We know this to have been a long-standing concern of Eugene Jolas, of course, a concern that helped shape among other things his attitude towards visual art. Much like Drieu La Rochelle, Jolas asserted that "industrialism... is chiefly responsible for the fact that our civilization is a decadent one."<sup>65</sup> In "Night of the Gruenewald," published in *transition* 27 (April/May 1938), Jolas outlined the oppression of the machine age as he saw it in the context of modern warfare, where "Spain is soaked with blood" and "Euramerica is nightmare-tranced."<sup>66</sup> In the face of militarisation on a grand scale, Jolas believed, the world waited for a respite from the terror brought forth by the machine.

All the machines have gone to sleep  
 Step softly lest they wake  
 Midnight whirs and blunders  
 The dynamoes lie in ruins  
 They snarl snort no longer in the sickly rhythms  
 They no longer beslave the stricken men  
 The mill-towns are despair-wing-dark.<sup>67</sup>

Critically, Drieu La Rochelle embraced mechanisation only in the context of a military alignment against the Soviet Union and the spread of communist values,<sup>68</sup> the same militarisation Jolas believed would bring nothing but mindless destruction. In spite of his many misgivings, Jolas still granted that the machine was the most important of modern achievements. Although Jolas did not wish modern society to embrace without careful thought the advancements offered by the machine, he did believe that mechanisation could free men and women to devote time to other pastimes, like the search for artistic beauty and clear expression. Unlike Drieu La Rochelle, he did not fear the personal liberty promised by the machine age, or the radical reassessment of values that accompanied modern innovation.

Robert Soucy points out that there is a certain romanticism in the work of Drieu La Rochelle, a futile longing for “an earlier, pre-modern era.”<sup>69</sup> Jolas saw affinities between his work and the objectives of artists in the historical past, of course, but he did not consider conservative any of the romantic tendencies he encouraged among *transition* contributors. The purpose of his aesthetic program was to build upon the experiences of past artists to create an art that was responsive to the realities of the day, and not to reinforce the longing for a distant past. The fascist view of history emphasised the decadence of the present. Drieu La Rochelle maintained that both the United States and the Soviet Union shared a preoccupation with the materialist values of the twentieth century. Dougald McMillan points out that Jolas, too, believed that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union offered a viable alternative political and economic system, but that Jolas never partook of what McMillan describes as “the complete disillusionment” of those around him, like Drieu La Rochelle, who embraced fascism.<sup>70</sup>

Eugene Jolas expressed an immediate hatred of Hitler's government, an estimation of the political climate that showed considerable foresight. Discussions with his friend and *transition* contributor Carl Einstein in the early 1930s first convinced Jolas that this new incarnation of German nationalism threatened both the development of twentieth century art and, indeed, the general European peace. A trip to Berlin confirmed for Jolas the widespread circulation of what he understood to be "racist and anti-semitic newspapers" with violence bubbling palpably under the surface of everyday life in Germany.<sup>71</sup> In 1935 one of Jolas's brothers was jailed briefly for insulting Hitler in front of German border guards. For Jolas, the situation carried with it an all-too-familiar sense of foreboding. Growing up in the disputed territory, he had observed the "Prussian war tactics" of the imperial German army at the turn of the century. Looking back on his childhood, Jolas recalled that the soldiers could be heard at night near his house, "the street echoed with their obscene singing, as they blared forth their stupid folksongs with alcohol-cracked voices."<sup>72</sup> Now, in the 1930s, he was again reminded of these early experiences during a trip to the border between Switzerland and Germany.

While we were sitting on the terrace facing the iridescent waters, we suddenly noticed at nearby tables several grotesquely garbed Nazi youths who had crossed the border for a Sunday excursion. They wore their Hitlerite insignia with ostentation and seemed evidently proud of this affiliation. Soon we heard their raucous voices in a dull Germanic tavern song, and I could not help recalling the days in my childhood... Nothing had changed.<sup>73</sup>

But if Jolas was steeling himself to resist this growing fascist threat, he soon learned that *transition* had already attracted the attention of the Nazis. During Hitler's crackdown on decadent art, a crackdown that began the Nazi betrayal of Gottfried Benn, a copy of *transition* was burned publicly in Munich. In his final years, Jolas was shocked to discover how the Nazis found motivation and reassurance for the beliefs of

the Third Reich among the works of many of the same German artists whom Jolas had read from his childhood. His final years were marked by a clear disillusion rooted in this recognition of what he saw as a dangerous and deeply rooted nationalism and militarism in German culture. Although Jolas would concentrate less on creative work as he spent the late 1940s helping to set up a free press in Germany, it had not been until the outbreak of the war that Jolas finally looked to abandon his apolitical convictions. When he did embrace the political in an effort to oppose the Nazis, it represented a deliberate choice to lay aside his poetry.

Many of us had lived in the illusion that it was possible to remain aloof, to pursue the dynamism of the spirit by setting aside meditations on death and violence and crime, or through evocations of high poetry and art. It soon became evident, however, that this was a total war, that human freedom itself was at stake. Despite the corruscating attraction of gratuitous esthetic life, I was eager to return to American journalism, to pull my small oar in the struggle.<sup>74</sup>

The idea of joining any collective effort was foreign to Jolas's understanding of art. While he considered his subsequent efforts with the American army information service as important as any he ever undertook, Jolas maintained that the works he produced while writing in this capacity were drastically different from those he had written in *transition*. He still sent out "millions of words in all three... languages," but these were "words that soon became explosive as rockets against the Axis war-machine."<sup>75</sup> Indeed, he reflected that in his new position, he "began to revert to the old newspaper technique" first learned while a young reporter in the United States.<sup>76</sup> After the outbreak of World War II, Jolas's uncomfortable distinction between the different functions of language allowed him to negotiate political engagement on his terms; at times in the previous decade, it became his only defence against those in America who wished to make *transition* a political journal.

### III. The New York Left

In her study *Antifascism in American Art*, Cécile Whiting comments on the apparent absence of “profascist” works in the United States. This is not to suggest that Americans did not write fiction and poetry and paint pictures that reflected the same fascist sympathies we have read in the works of Wyndham Lewis and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, but rather that the presumably few examples of fascist art in the United States have been hidden or destroyed.<sup>77</sup> What Whiting wishes to argue in part is that this fascist art was aggressively confronted and, in the present context, this reiterates the point that artists at work in the United States were politically aware during this period. The vast majority of American political art in the 1920s and 1930s was created in support of the Left, or more directly in opposition to the acknowledged growth of fascism in Europe. The implication for *transition* is that as a magazine that both fostered American artists and consciously targeted its American readership, *transition* had greater commerce with American literary communism than it did with profascist art — and it exhibited a more direct connection with the political views of these American literary figures than it did with the political views of the surrealists. Indeed, if Wyndham Lewis had sustained his attacks on *transition*, he would have been forced to reckon the relationship between the magazine and the developing American literary Left. Lewis was, of course, concerned with the connection between *transition* and European artists and intellectuals on the Left, but a far greater challenge was mounted by those individuals in the United States who hoped to use *transition* to help prepare the American masses for communism.

As we have already seen, Matthew Josephson passed through Paris in early 1928 and convinced Eugene Jolas that the United States was finally embarking on a literary renaissance, the “American Risorgimento” that Ezra Pound had foreseen in *Patria Mia* (1913). Jolas made Josephson a contributing editor and solicited from him a representative sample of new American material. By this time, of course, the editors of *transition* had spent a year ferreting out with some success American contributions, but they hoped Josephson would allow them to lessen their reliance on expatriate contacts. Because Josephson was returning to live in the United States, Jolas believed Josephson would be able to coordinate American contributions for *transition* like Pound had found works written in Europe for the little magazines in America in the years after the First World War. What Jolas appears not to have counted on, however, was the political engagement of Josephson and his colleagues like Malcolm Cowley. Daniel Aaron observes the significance of the returned expatriates Josephson and Cowley, who arrived home from Europe to find that artists could no longer estrange themselves from the political struggles ongoing in the United States.<sup>78</sup>

The so-called “New York Group,” including most notably Josephson and Cowley, contributed the lengthy “New York: 1928” to the “American Number,” *transition* 13 (June 1928). This gathering of material is probably best remembered for its broadside directed against American expatriates, “those forlorn wanderers, those fugitives, those exiles,” among whom Josephson and Cowley had recently numbered themselves.<sup>79</sup> Quoting American business, Josephson maintained that “a new industrial and commercial era is commencing” in the United States and that this “new and tremendous force” was bringing the country together, providing in this unity “the power to reach hitherto inaccessible places.” For Josephson, the idea of large-scale

industrialisation represented “an important factor in the solidarity of the American people, their collective enthusiasms.”<sup>80</sup> As a result, it was now time for the expatriates to return to the United States, to enter into this process of consolidation, and participate in the ensuing revolutionary means by which “the old political ideals are being demolished by the new mass-economics.”<sup>81</sup> The New York Group baited the expatriates with discourteous doggerel: “I’d rather live in Oregon and pack salmon/ Than live in Nice and write like Robert McAlmon” and “Exiles oft return to the lands of their mother/ With their hats in one hand and their palms in the other.”<sup>82</sup>

Jolas later wrote that he was “rather disappointed” with the material included in “New York: 1928,” although he had at first been enthusiastic about a collaboration with Josephson and his Greenwich Village associates. “It was in many respects witty and pertinent,” Jolas claimed of the submission, “but it was also too optimistic concerning the future of the machine civilization for my taste.”<sup>83</sup> Writing at about the time that “New York: 1928” appeared, Jolas reluctantly admitted that “the tendency of this age is towards collectivism.” While he maintained that “we of *transition* have had a world-conscience from the very beginning,” Jolas also proclaimed “centralization, both in the economic and political sphere” to be “dangerous.” In that his approach to art celebrated the individual and the promise offered by the creativity of the individual, Jolas could not accept the politics of the New York Group and he feared that what he saw as this impending “collectivistic era” in the United States would create a world that was “grey and monotonous.”<sup>84</sup> But for all his scepticism about politics and his attempts to distance himself from the political activities of those around him, Eugene Jolas still had great respect for the revolutionary vigour of his contemporaries on the Left. Events in the Soviet Union had, in part, helped shake Western civilisation out of its malaise and the

resulting commotion offered the opportunity and even the necessity to shape a new approach to art in the twentieth century. Jolas admitted “that we owe an incalculable amount of things to the influence of the Russian Revolution.”<sup>85</sup> His writings in the 1930s suggest that in the wake of the Wall Street crash, he saw the economic and political reorganisation of the West as inevitable. He maintained that “only blind, fanatic reactionaries can still oppose the transformation of the dominant plutocratic regime of slave methods into a new, proletarian rule which will dispossess the exploiters and redistribute the wealth of the world.” If these statements made Jolas sound like a veiled partisan of the Left, he still retained his stern misgivings about the likely interference of the Communist party in the work of the artist. “But we also know that this new development is endangered by a tendency to simplify reality, to think in terms of a radical neo-rationalism, to standardize the personality,” he claimed. “Although economic collectivism is desirable, the scissions in the human personality will never be eliminated by any governmental system.”<sup>86</sup>

According to Dougald McMillan, it was only after Jolas became convinced that American artists like Josephson and Cowley would not renounce outright the call for proletarianism in literature, and all the possible ramifications this might have for both the form and content of art in the United States, that Jolas returned to a more international emphasis and refined the force of *transition* to address experimentation in literature more exclusively.<sup>87</sup> Jolas later wrote that artists “cannot obey the instructions of militant ideologists” who demand that creativity be placed “at the service of propaganda.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, members of the New York Group strongly opposed “The Revolution of the Word,” published in the number of the magazine that would mark the end of Matthew Josephson’s collaboration with *transition*. Malcolm Cowley called the

manifesto a “portentous document” and “The Revolution of the Word” effectively divorced Jolas from his contact with the Greenwich Village circle.<sup>89</sup> But it would be the manifesto and all it represented, in fact, that subsequently raised the ire of some of the most important Marxist critics in the United States, critics who were much more influential among the intelligentsia of the Left than were returning exiles like Josephson and Cowley.

Terry Cooney argues that Mike Gold was the single figure who best represented “the orthodox Communist viewpoint in literature” in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States. A founder of the Left literary magazine the *New Masses*, Mike Gold had first called for a “proletarian” literature in 1921. While he claimed to have respect for all creative men and women, “the scarred and tortured figures of the artist-saints of time,” Gold held only contempt for the art of bourgeois intellectuals who, he claimed, “have created, out of their solitary pain, confusions, doubts and complexities.” He maintained that “the masses have not heard” these writers, that the proletariat did not respond to modern art because modern art failed to portray the reality of proletarian existence. Gold asked, “Why should we artists born in tenements go beyond them for our expression?” Indeed, he questioned whether or not it was possible for writers “sprung from the workers” to write of anything other than their immediate proletarian experience. “[C]an we understand that which is not our very own?” he asked.

All that I know of Life I learned in the tenement. I saw love there in an old mother who wept for her sons. I saw courage there in a sick worker who went to the factory every morning. I saw beauty in the little children playing in the dim hallways, and despair and hope and hate incarnated in the simple figures of those who lived there with me. The tenement is in my blood. When I think it is the tenement thinking. When I hope it is the tenement hoping. I am not an individual; I am all that the tenement group poured into me during those early years of my spiritual travail.<sup>90</sup>

Mike Gold believed that “art has always flourished secretly in the hearts of the masses” and he called for a revolution in both creative content and form by which a “proletarian culture” could be created “from the deepest depths upward.”<sup>91</sup> In an article written eight years later, he defined the elements of this “proletarian realism” as he saw them.

According to Gold, a proletarian literature is direct, well-organised, optimistic and honest, avoiding vagueness and melodrama. The literature is based on proletarian experience, “the real *conflicts* of men and women who work for a living.” Above all else, Gold believed that proletarian literature had a role to play in inspiring the worker. He maintained that without “a social theme,” all art “is merely confectionary.”<sup>92</sup>

In response to Gold’s ideas, Robert Sage published “Mr. Gold’s Spring Model” in *transition* 15 (February 1929). Sage took issue with what he read as the implication “that one must go Left before one can have serious hope of becoming an artist.” As he saw it, Mike Gold was portraying simple workers as literary “diamonds in the dust.”

This new artist of Mr. Gold’s is going to hop out of his cot in the morning full of vigour, don his work-stained clothes and dash off to the job to work shoulder to shoulder with other Reds who are doing big vital things, things that count. At night he will return reeking with sweat, heavy with fatigue, but happily drunk with inspiration. He will sit down at his bare table and, writing at top speed, turn out page after page of virile lyric literature — the real stuff. His words will come straight from his guts and he will scorn that attention to form and polish that those dilettantes over in Paris think so important.

In fact, Sage argued more forthrightly, an artist cannot be defined “by dress, class or occupation.” An artist, he maintained, is distinguished only by “an elasticity of imagination and the power of coordinating experience, combined with a certain ability to express himself coherently.”<sup>93</sup>

For his own part, Eugene Jolas claimed to have no difficulty with artists who wished to follow Mike Gold down the proletarian path, but he warned that the

proletarian writer, too, would require “sharper tools than they have now.” He maintained that if any of Gold’s comrades adopted the existing “bourgeois forms and words,” the result would be “the same old realism with nauseating and boring photography or else a mass-monotony of exclusively proletarian philistinism.”<sup>94</sup> Jolas’s concerns were not restricted to form, however. He was just as alarmed by the constraints that this call for proletarian literature placed on the subject matter to be taken up by the radical writer. Jolas recognised that American writers on the Left wished the American artist to “remain in America, participate actively in the fight for the overthrow of the capitalistic system, and regard his art primarily as a pragmatic weapon for the destruction of the plutocratic oligarchy.” He disagreed with this belief “that the quintessence of the poet’s task is to use whatever force there is in him for the dissemination of subversive ideas.”<sup>95</sup> Yet, increasingly, leftist figures seemed to demand this uniformity in approach. Mike Gold’s colleague Granville Hicks maintained that the development of an explicit code underpinning Marxist criticism could serve as a fixed standard against which all literature would be measured. Only a few leftist writers and intellectuals like Edmund Wilson remained convinced that their deeply held political convictions must remain subordinate to purely creative values.<sup>96</sup> The idea of rigid standards and the general sense of intellectual collectivism repulsed Jolas outright, of course. He believed that “for a creative mind, complete absorption in a party or religious institution is paralysis.”<sup>97</sup>

I am not against a literature expressing the aspirations of the working class. That belongs, however, in the sphere of propaganda. Art and literature as such, although in some measure a result of the conditions of the epoch, must always remain primarily an individual performance.<sup>98</sup>

Jolas's primary objection to the literary Left was based on the same convictions that informed his opposition to a fascist orientation in literature. It was as an individual and not as a member of any group that Eugene Jolas believed that the artist could make a significant contribution to his or her society.

The creator is always and fanatically an individualist. This does not prevent him from seeing his work in relation to the general mythology of his group. But he always sees himself as an autonomist of the spirit, a non-conformist, a rebel, a subversive element in any group so far as his inner life is concerned. If that were not the case, and he were merely running along the line of the social movement, he would doubtless be obliged to lower his intellectual values in order to reach the masses. He would have to give the mere replica of a mass-hierarchy in his creative expression. He would have to play the role of the polite journalist who is the echo of the powers that be.<sup>99</sup>

While Mike Gold considered many of the contributors to *transition* to be "fashion-followers" with no ability to understand political matters, he still had some compliments for the magazine, based in part on the number in which Matthew Josephson and his New York colleagues injected what Gold saw as "the first clear ray of self-consciousness" into the "furious anarchistic spirit" of *transition*, a spirit with "too few roots in the world realities."<sup>100</sup> But Gold's certainty that the temper of unrest reflected in the magazine would be fashioned into political engagement was misguided. As Jolas's experiments with language became more dogmatic, the magazine found observers on the Left decidedly less tolerant. For Mike Gold, one assumes, the esoteric neologisms displayed on the pages of *transition* simply represented more art that the masses need only ignore.

In 1929 opposition to *transition* reached a peak on the Left. V.F. Calverton, editor of the *Modern Quarterly*, challenged Eugene Jolas to a debate on the function of language. In Calverton, Jolas had a sincere if decidedly more amicable adversary than

those to which he had become accustomed. The issue of Calverton's magazine that carried the debate featured a full-page advertisement for *transition*; a short story by Calverton appeared in *transition* the following summer. But if the debate was not defined by the forthright antagonism that marked the published exchanges with Wyndham Lewis that had begun nearly two years earlier, the convictions expressed were no less serious. Jolas later characterised the exchanges as "the conflict between the Marxist and the Romantic view of language."<sup>101</sup>

The *Modern Quarterly* was described by Frederick Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn Ulrich in their early study of the little magazine phenomenon as "one of a few magazines of the twenties in which criticism seemed well founded upon Marxist principle."<sup>102</sup> Although Calverton, according to Daniel Aaron, had been ostracised to some extent by other radical writers by the late 1920s because he fashioned himself as a neutral while his colleagues grew ever more intolerant,<sup>103</sup> his debate with Eugene Jolas was coherent and representative of the literary values at work on the Left. While Wyndham Lewis's attack from the Right had been imprecise, based upon an approximation of sympathies, Calverton attacked *transition* on one specific issue: the use of language. Calverton's argument was based upon the assumption that "language... is social in origin."<sup>104</sup> He stressed the role of language in human evolution, and he mirrored the resulting cultural development of mankind with what he saw as the evolutionary process of language change. Calverton believed that "every artist in the past, however queer or iconoclastic his medium, has had in mind a desire to *communicate*."<sup>105</sup> Like Jolas, Calverton maintained that the development of language has been marked by a drive "to define and limit and find points of reference" for those

things that the writer perceives. But Calverton also maintained that “if it is to mark an advance,” changes in language must “make the word a finer because more precise and clarifying form of social communication.”<sup>106</sup> He pursued this point and argued that the neologisms that appeared in *transition* “have tended to make the unintelligible more unintelligible.”<sup>107</sup> Calverton recognised that the reality of the modern world may stretch the limits of existing vocabulary, but he criticised writers who “strive to deny that they are social beings” by adopting esoteric forms.<sup>108</sup> For Calverton, Jolas and his colleagues were “moving in the wrong direction,” by working “further and further away from that synthesis of self and society that is necessary for the perpetuation of social reality.”<sup>109</sup> While the debate between the *Modern Quarterly* and *transition* was cordial, it is still somewhat troubling to read Calverton compare the neologisms in *transition* with the deportment of “the schizophrenic who lives altogether in a world of his own,”<sup>110</sup> when one recalls that the Nazi’s 1937 Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich’s Haus der Kunst made the comparison between modern art and mental illness with equal explicitness.

For V.F. Calverton and many of his fellow Marxists, the key to language use rested in the ability of literature to arouse praxis, to enkindle a political revolution in the United States. Like Mike Gold, Calverton saw language in the hands of *transition* as “turning work into a cult.” Esoteric, removed from the masses, modern language would be stripped of its revolutionary vigour. Calverton believed that it was better to embrace old words, to “drive new life into their old bones, set them against the new spirit of our age.”<sup>111</sup> In a related article titled “The Cult of Unintelligibility,” published in *Harper’s Magazine* at about the same time, Max Eastman lamented that modern poetry was defined by the poets’ decision to sacrifice communication to an overriding desire for expression. “The act of communication is irksome to them,” he argued.<sup>112</sup>

As we have seen, Jolas and his collaborators answered these objections and others similar to them by emphasising the different functions of language and the independent validity of these functions. Jolas granted “that for the purposes of plain, every-day speech, language has always had but one function — that of transmitting information,” but if a work of art communicates, “it is indirect and by chance.”<sup>113</sup> The subsequent thought of linguists like Noam Chomsky supports the arguments Eugene Jolas made in his writings. Chomsky rejects the claim, similar to those made by Calverton and his colleagues, that language is intended primarily for communication. Moreover, he argues that among the many different functions of language, “there is no reason to afford privileged status to one or the other of these modes.”<sup>114</sup> Clearly, for Jolas, this strategy sought to distance *transition* from the radicalism of the politically engaged. He would, of course, have to soften this stand to address the implication that his experimentation could be marginalised, reserved for some expressive function far removed from the readership he genuinely wished to reach. But Jolas always maintained that language best served humanity by reflecting a full range of experience and not as a direct means of altering its surroundings. Jolas’s revolution was much less practical than his political detractors would advocate, but he still clearly believed in revolution. He proclaimed poetry an internal revolt and he wrote in the *Modern Quarterly* that he thought it possible “to destroy the world with an apocalyptic vision.”<sup>115</sup> There can be little doubt that Jolas believed that “The Revolution of the Word” and his subsequent writings could enact real change. Jolas was working with a liberal concept of revolution supposedly discarded in the United States after the First World War: the idea that real revolt began with the enlightened self; each person could themselves change the world. The genuine political concern expressed in *transition*, then, was how to use a revolution in language to empower the individual.

Above all else, the program set out in *transition* hoped to give to the voiceless the means by which they might express the unvoiced. Contemporary literary theory and, indeed, the thinking of historiographers like Hayden White concerns itself with point-of-view: who is being given the opportunity to speak and whose perspective is colouring the narrative? Defining the political in the most general terms as the hegemony of one group of people over another, these questions have some political implications. The work of Mikhail Bakhtin and its application by subsequent scholars suggests that language itself is defined by similar tensions. As Bakhtin characterised discourse, language in use is defined by a battle for prominence by many different voices.

The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with still a third group.<sup>116</sup>

There is, then, in “The Revolution of the Word” an early recognition of such tensions and an attempt to address and mediate them. Eugene Jolas wished to make language a tool everyone could use, and a tool for expression that would be appropriate for every situation. In his defence of “The Revolution of the Word,” Robert Sage once again expressed *transition*’s conviction that the written word “must be as full and elastic as we can make it.”<sup>117</sup> The problem rests in the fact that such an encompassing language could never, in practice, be wholly comprehended by all. Language might not have convention imposed upon it, but the resulting cacophony at the level of text was seen by many as more exclusive than inclusive. The underlying crisis in modern literature is the creation of the “cult of unintelligibility” that Max Eastman identified in his *Harper’s Magazine* article. But this is clearly not the spirit in which the effort, as manifested in *transition* at least, was originally intended. Eastman saw James Joyce’s “Work in

Progress” as representative of the obscurity that plagued authors who valued expression over communication. But recent critics like Michael Long wish to cast the politics of Joyce’s work in a more positive light. Long reads Joyce not as inclusive and impenetrable, but as “implicitly liberal, democratic, and tolerant.” His fiction represents a “continuous pursuit of an ever more open and pluralistic medium.” Indeed, one could argue that this reading is most useful in understanding the eschewal in *transition* of the divisive, partisan politics that defined the age in which the magazine was published. If Joyce truly is, as Long wishes to suggest, “the saving humanist of English-language modernism,”<sup>118</sup> we can look beyond Joyce in *transition* to Eugene Jolas whose thought was fostered in the same divisive, intolerant times and yet whose vision was also diverse and tolerant.

There is certainly an element of naiveté about the apolitical stand adopted in *transition*. But in the context of the art of the inter-war period, this apparent politics of the apolitical could be the least destructive and perhaps even the most valuable approach imaginable. This is a significant conclusion in light of all that has been written about the politics of modernism. The Leftist sympathies of many modern writers and their subsequent disillusionment and political disengagement in the shadow of Stalinist horrors has been well documented. Indeed, those American writers and intellectuals who attacked Eugene Jolas in the late 1920s would soon be hopeless divided by ideological conflict. Much of the criticism of conservative modernists like Pound, Eliot, and Yeats, on the other hand, cannot overlook differing attachments to fascism, which raises the spectre of its subsequently tragic epilogue. Sifting through the legacy of shame from this period, critics have criticised Joyce, for example, for failing to take an active political stand. Certainly, Jolas reported that Joyce was unwilling to discuss even

the most general political developments with him. But the politically-charged years of the 1920s and 1930s, as we have seen time and again, left little room for voices of moderation. With Eugene Jolas, one cannot argue that he was unaware of the political events unfolding around him. When an avenue of active, constructive resistance offered itself to him, Jolas took it. But the aesthetic idealism undertaken in *transition* before that point lends itself, perhaps, to a more generous interpretation of the current of political awareness active among those artists who appeared imprudently aloof during these years.

## Chapter Six

### American Influence and Reception

For more than a decade, *transition* magazine endured consistent ridicule from a variety of American critics. The publication of contributions from foreign artists brought out some Americans' most conspicuous isolationist tendencies; the magazine brought forward unorthodox writing from all sources years before any such work found widespread acceptance. But as might be expected of any publication that persisted as long as *transition*, the magazine developed its audience and earned a begrudging respect, even from some of its most ardent detractors. In this way, *transition* can be seen to have exerted great influence over its English-speaking readers, many of whom had little contact with such material elsewhere. The response to the magazine was distinctive, in fact, and it may be able to tell us a great deal about the development of art in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. But the manner in which we view this very important period of creative innovation may actually hinder our acknowledgement of a magazine as significant as *transition*. The desire to gain recognition for a variety of artistic responses to the modern world has, in the end, succeeded in securing the institutional acceptance of little more than a small proportion of this modern art. By recognising the influence of *transition*, we seek in some respect to redress this past neglect.

#### I. Public Reviews and Private Remembrances

Critical debates with other journals on matters of editorial philosophy punctuated many numbers of *transition*. But Eugene Jolas was also clearly concerned with measuring the wider response the magazine received. From its earliest days, Jolas

and Elliot Paul followed closely the reception of *transition* in the American popular press. Beginning with *transition* 7 (October 1927), the editors printed small collections of critical comments gathered from magazines and newspapers. The predominant opinion about these earliest numbers of *transition*, expressed by the *Journal* of Portland, Oregon and anticipating the later comments of critics like Wyndham Lewis, was that the magazine was the unofficial organ of the American expatriates in Paris, containing “contributions by almost everybody in the Who’s Who of Montparnasse.” Those newspapers that were of the same opinion as the *New York Times* — which called *transition* “hopelessly muddled and unintelligible” — concentrated on little more than a physical description of the magazine. In the words of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, the work that appeared in *transition* represented “onslaught and ravage upon the English language.” As suggested in our earlier discussion of Gertrude Stein, the matron of the lost generation of American writers abroad was the target of much early mockery. The popular press in America was most familiar with her reputation, if not her work, and editors in the United States concentrated on her contributions to *transition* when faced with the inundation of unfamiliar material. The *Detroit News* maintained that “Gertrude Stein, living in France, has apparently forgotten English — at least the kind of English this reviewer speaks.” The necessity of publishing a supplement to *transition* 1 (April 1927) to correct a Stein contribution intended to explicate her technique attracted special attention from newspapers like the *Boston Transcript*.

Feeling it our duty to read both (Miss Stein’s *Elucidation* as originally printed and corrected version), we did so, then we cut up the supplement and the magazine into little pieces, and pasted them in another order. This failed to make any sense either, so we next cut up the versions again, pasted them on typewriter paper, and, standing at the foot of a tall stairway, threw them with all our might. We then collected them in the order in which they landed, but still the words, while they were all very nice words, didn’t make sense, so we gave it up.<sup>1</sup>

In the glossary of *transition* 4 (July 1927), the editors published excerpts from a commentary on their magazine provided by Marcel Brion, whose article first appeared in the important French journal *Les Cahiers du Sud*. Brion, who contributed work to three later numbers of *transition*, proclaimed that the magazine “promises to become the best ground for the meeting of European and American productions.”<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, we have seen this reliance on foreign critical opinion in the *transition* defence of James Joyce’s “Work in Progress” and its wider application here reflected a general frustration with the early coverage afforded the magazine in the American press. For although the editors of *transition* claimed generally that this newspaper coverage provided them “with a certain amount of innocent entertainment,”<sup>3</sup> there was more than a little genuine bitterness in their assertion that “the newspaper writers from coast to coast have declared *transition* to be utterly unintelligible, and have proved conclusively from their comments that it was, in fact, quite meaningless to them.”<sup>4</sup> In retaliation, *transition* lashed out at literary supplements run with these newspapers, which they called “boob[y] traps for advertising,” and publisher’s magazines, which they called “monotonous and clique-ridden.”<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, “The Revolution of the Word” was in some measure a response to readers who found *transition* inaccessible, an attempt to summarise Eugene Jolas’s beliefs about language and literature. Because the language of “The Revolution of the Word” was provocative, Jolas clearly hoped that the document would cause controversy; but publicly, at least, he feigned surprise at the flurry of contempt afforded what he characterised as a modest document. “The proclamation had a curious fate,” he observed. “It was quoted from one end of the United States to the other, the *Literary Digest* flaunted it before its Methodist readers, it became the butt of columnists and editors of Sunday supplements.”<sup>6</sup>

The next retrospective appraisal of the magazine's reception in the American press came in the four-page "*transition* and its Contemporaries: Some Opinions" in *transition* 18 (November 1929). The unequivocal condemnations were still there; the *New York World* still found the magazine "generally unintelligible." One critic made specific mention of "The Revolution of the Word" as "the most unintelligible piece of writing" to be found in its particular number. A reviewer in the *New York Evening Post* raised a familiar and important criticism when he accused *transition* of being a Joycean "band-wagon" and its contributors of being "members of the James Joyce Adulation and Interpretative Union, Local 69." By this time, the American press was very aware of the debate between *transition* and Wyndham Lewis and such comments confirmed a recognition in the United States of both the status granted Joyce in the magazine and the increasing attention afforded *transition* by American literary communists. But this selection of critical notices also revealed the tendency of Jolas and his collaborators to delight in the confusion they seemed to be creating and their desire to look beneath the surface of negative reviews for the more important acknowledgement of their growing influence. Although Lewis was the magazine's most influential and vociferous critic, Jolas quoted the British author's admission that while there may have been little of artistic worth going on in Paris, "almost all that is good... is to be found here and there" throughout *transition*. There is little evidence, however, that the acknowledgement of this influence had yet flowered on the pages of newspapers in the United States. The *New York Sun* proclaimed the magazine "the official organ of revolt in America today," but *transition* continued generally to import its most significant tributes. A German critic used the adjectives "vital, interesting, amusing," "good," and "valuable," in describing the magazine while lamenting, "Why have we no reviews like this one?"

French friends continued to applaud “the most representative magazine of modern tendencies in the English language today” while describing it “as the exchange *par excellence* between France-Europe-America.”<sup>7</sup>

It was during this time that *transition* received some of its most unwelcome press coverage in the United States. *transition* contributing editor Harry Crosby killed himself in Boston in December 1929 as part of an apparent murder-suicide pact with his young, married mistress. In the American newspapers, his eccentric lifestyle was connected to his expatriation and, ultimately, to his relationship with *transition*. In his biography of Harry Crosby, Geoffrey Wolff describes the frenzy of newspapermen searching for a motive in the death of the J.P. Morgan heir, some reporters inevitably tracing a bloody path back to Paris.<sup>8</sup> That Crosby had signed “The Revolution of the Word” proclamation seemed to confirm his standing in what was understood increasingly as a depraved expatriate cabal. This perception was strengthened by Harold Salemson, himself an original endorser of the *transition* manifesto, who published a series of articles in American newspapers that Robert Sage branded “a traitorous peddling of gossip” in an open letter to Eugene Jolas.

The lurid and distorted series of articles which he sold to an American newspaper syndicate should certainly blackball him forever in Paris. Taking Harry Crosby’s suicide as a starting point, he wrote, as you know, a garbled “cross-section of life in the American art colony of Paris” which resembled the “findings” of a cub reporter from Kalamazoo who had come to Paris to “investigate conditions.” In this series, which is doubly ghastly in its capitalization of the Crosby tragedy, the reader is presented a confused picture in which Crosby and a vague sensation-seeking “cult,” James Joyce, *transition*, Montparnasse (inevitably), the Quat’z’ Arts ball, Gertrude Stein, drugs, drink, Link Gillespie, etc., etc. all appear to be somehow involved in a wild and degenerate communal orgy. Hot stuff for the folks back home to marvel over with their Sunday morning pancakes, but utterly false in its correlations and malicious in its implications.<sup>9</sup>

Salemson never wrote for *transition* again, although he did resurface in Paris to edit the bilingual periodical *Tambour* during the 1930s. Much like Salemson, Malcolm Cowley considered Crosby's death a turning point in twentieth century American intellectual history, a death knell for the Jazz Age. But for *transition*, the suicide was shocking on a more personal level: not only had Crosby helped support the magazine financially, but he had also become a frequent and colourful contributor. A tribute to Harry Crosby was printed in *transition* 19/20 (June 1930), with contributions from Kay Boyle, Hart Crane, Stuart Gilbert, Eugene Jolas, Archibald MacLeish, and Philippe Soupault. In his study of the magazine, Dougald McMillan makes the point that "the reaction in *transition* to Crosby's death was not at all like Cowley's."<sup>10</sup> But the recent publication of Stuart Gilbert's Paris journal affirms that the entire incident caused Jolas great embarrassment. Gilbert suggested that Jolas was hesitant to commemorate Crosby at all, resentful that Crosby had worked himself into a position of prominence with the magazine. The suicide and the connection drawn between Crosby and *transition* in the American press troubled Maria McDonald Jolas's conservative southern family, relatives that had at least some indirect role in financing the magazine at the time.<sup>11</sup> The association with the death of Harry Crosby still remains one of the unfortunate legacies of *transition* today, however; when Doubleday published in 1990 an anthology of material from the magazine, it chose to reprint "In Memoriam: Harry Crosby" in its entirety.

By the time he suspended operations after *transition* 19/20 (June 1930), Eugene Jolas had already begun to consider the lasting reputation of the magazine. In that number, Robert Sage's open letter, "Farewell to *transition*," and a discussion by Philippe Soupault of the magazine's influence in France summarised many of the achievements of *transition* in its monthly and quarterly forms. But the best

retrospective offered during this period was Jolas's own "*transition: An Epilogue*" in H.L. Mencken's *American Mercury* in June 1931. In this article, which still serves as perhaps the best single primary research tool for scholars interested in the magazine, Jolas revealed his own certainty that *transition* should be remembered for playing an important role in the development of modern literature after the First World War. When *transition* returned the following year, Jolas redoubled his efforts to gauge the reception of the magazine in both the popular press and other literary journals. *transition* 22 (February 1933) carried assessments of the previous number. Positive reviews from Belgium, France, Germany, and Holland were reprinted, as well as an encouraging word from T.S. Eliot's *Criterion* in London. There were even welcoming sentiments from American writers. One critic beseeched his readers to reconsider *transition* and not to be "so old fashioned and conservative."<sup>12</sup> *transition* 23 (July 1935) chose a selection of statements from notices that had been published over the previous two years. Most notable is the marked increase of positive comments from British publications mixed among tributes from continental Europe. The *Times Literary Supplement* said, for example, that *transition* was "still the most interesting of the experimental magazines published today."<sup>13</sup> The American reviews were decidedly polite and factual, so much so that dissenting voices seemed genuinely out of place. This increase in apparently positive judgements can be explained, to some extent, as a result of judicious editing on the part of Eugene Jolas. If anything, these later numbers of the magazine were more unorthodox and less likely to be received without question, especially in the United States. While reprinting negative reviews in the early days of *transition* was part of an attempt to lampoon the conservative attitudes held about art among members of the newspaper establishment, there was little profit in pursuing these tactics well into the

1930s, especially once Jolas had accepted commercial backing for the magazine. While we know that Jolas used the financial freedom provided by the Servire Press to follow his independent vision, there was little benefit in highlighting explicitly the resistance given *transition* and, ultimately, its unprofitability. On the other hand, there was some attempt by the popular press in the United States to re-evaluate modern art in the 1930s in light of its new acceptability, facilitated by such developments as the commercial popularity of surrealism as employed in the American fashion industry. When in 1936 Jolas was editing the magazine in New York, *transition* was featured in articles in both *Time* and *News-Week*. Both stories attempted to present sober, precise accounts of the publishing history of the magazine. While *Time* could not help characterising *transition* contributions as products of “murky thinking,”<sup>14</sup> the *News-Week* treatment suggested an almost awed respect. Although *transition* may have appeared unintelligible to the end, the magazine was granted some esteem in the press, if nothing else, on the grounds of its longevity.

*transition* always attracted strong responses from newspapermen, some of whom were frustrated writers who were often acutely aware of the restraints of their medium. Jolas’s earliest ideas about language were formed in part by the debates begun in the editorial rooms in which he learned the trade. The editorial offices in the Paris editions of American papers were alive with many of the questions *transition* was asking during this period. The majority of people disagreed with the ideas put forward by Eugene Jolas, but *transition* did attract many frustrated journalists: Whit Burnett, Leigh Hoffman, Douglas Rigsby, and Harold Salemsen all signed “The Revolution of the Word.” Jolas, Elliot Paul, and Robert Sage were all associated with the Paris *Tribune* and they came to expect that the views about *transition* put forward on its pages,

especially those from sympathetic columnist Alex Small, would remain complimentary. Waverley Root, one of the men who inherited Jolas's old job at the *Tribune*, proved to be a persistent antagonist, however. He objected to the posturing that he believed had come to define the relationship of modern writers to their art, the drafting of manifesto after manifesto of which he considered "The Revolution of the Word" a representative example.

The more we pry, the more of our work will be conscious, the less instinctive and automatic. Let us, then, cease prying, cease joining movements, cease crusading, and write, paint, compose, eat, drink, sleep, make love and attend to all other metabolic necessities when we feel like it. And for heaven's sake let us have no more fine talk about it.<sup>15</sup>

While Waverley Root disagreed with the application of ideas manifest in Jolas's work, he did agree with its general aims. This suggests that *transition* was not simply dismissed out-of-hand by all its critics; the magazine did inspire genuine debate. For all his critical bombast, Root had to admit, "I think highly of the publication while disagreeing with almost all of its expressed ideas."<sup>16</sup>

During the 1930s and 1940s, wholesale literary surveys of the post-war decade began to appear and the lasting importance of *transition* began to be weighed. An examination of some of the books of the time and some of the memoirs later written by prominent literary figures underlines the increasing respect *transition* earned even among those, like Waverley Root, who objected to the principles for which the magazine stood. Among these collections, there were unrepentant enemies like Robert McAlmon, who called *transition* "a constant example of how not to write," even though he himself had been a frequent contributor.<sup>17</sup> There were also writers like Bravig Imbs and Gertrude Stein, as we have seen, whose criticism of the magazine was really only established by these subsequent remarks made in their memoirs; other figures like

George Antheil failed to acknowledge the importance of *transition* even though they had been touched by its influence. But Samuel Putnam wrote for many people when he said that *transition* grew to “cast a spell even over those who did not approve of it.”<sup>18</sup> Sisley Huddleston, a British literary man-about-Paris and an enemy of Elliot Paul, proclaimed the material that appeared in *transition* “painfully banal” upon its first appearance and he lamented the “scorn of rhymed verses and of intelligible prose.”<sup>19</sup> Writing just three years later, Huddleston had changed his mind. By the beginning of the 1930s, he held “the greatest respect for *transition* and its courageous band.” He echoed many other critics when he continued, “I do not approve of their aims, but I admire their efforts and their accomplishments.” Huddleston called the magazine “the boldest and most stimulating venture of my time.”<sup>20</sup> The most important literary memoir written by an American in the first half of the twentieth century was probably Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return*. Cowley differed from Jolas on political and aesthetic matters, as we know, and he asserted that *transition* contained “good writing of most types and bad writing of all.” But Cowley also reprinted “The Revolution of the Word” in his book and he granted that “*transition* was the last and biggest of the little magazines published by the exiles.”<sup>21</sup> Jolas seized the latter comment and reprinted it in his final collection of press notices.

While *transition* waited to earn even a grudging respect from its early critics, it is undoubtedly true that the magazine had a loyal following among a group of Americans who contributed regularly to the magazine and signed “The Revolution of the Word” manifesto. Eugene Jolas first contacted Kay Boyle to ask her to contribute material to the first number of *transition*. Indeed, Boyle was one of only a handful of contributors of any nationality to appear in the first and last numbers of *transition*.

(Jolas, Joyce, Max Ernst, and Philippe Soupault were the others.) Few people were as loyal to Jolas as Boyle; their correspondence far outlasted the magazine. Although Boyle signed “The Revolution of the Word,” she has been criticised for writing little that actually seems to have been influenced by the document. But the importance of the spirit of the manifesto as a gesture of defiance for Boyle is undoubted. Of “The Revolution of the Word,” she once wrote that it “approached a definition of the nature of my own undefined revolt.”<sup>22</sup> Boyle openly differed with Jolas on the importance of the unconscious mind in art, however. She maintained in her memoir, “The determined exploration of the subconscious on which Jolas insisted did not seem to me one of the essential actions of creative life.”<sup>23</sup>

Harry Crosby first appeared in the magazine as a translator in *transition* 11 (February 1928). It was not until *transition* 14 (Fall 1928) that he contributed creative material; his wife Caresse first placed poetry in *transition* 16/17 (June 1929). Both signed “The Revolution of the Word” and as Malcolm Cowley attested, Harry Crosby took the declaration as seriously as did Eugene Jolas. “In his literal-minded fashion,” Cowley wrote, “Harry set out to apply it.”<sup>24</sup> Truly, the Crosbys wished to live their particular version of the dream of bohemian poets, translating their dream existence into poetry and their poetry into everyday experience. Crosby, of course, took his association with *transition* a step further than his colleagues: he supported it with funds.

One cannot discuss Harry and Caresse Crosby in *transition* without mentioning Hart Crane. Crane was not an unknown poet when he came to the magazine, but his poetry was promoted there without hesitation. Jolas first solicited work from Crane and the two men forged what seems to have been a close friendship. Through Jolas, Crane met the Crosbys, whose Black Sun Press would publish his work with unprecedented

reverence. Crane shared with Jolas many similar creative concerns and he, too, endorsed “The Revolution of the Word,” though Crane later recanted when confronted by members of Matthew Josephson’s “New York Group.” Crane is reported to have told Josephson, Cowley, and their associates that he was drunk when he agreed to sign Jolas’s manifesto and he was “ashamed” he had done so.<sup>25</sup> This particular betrayal hurt Jolas deeply. Hart Crane’s relationship with *transition* and its editor highlights once again the main complication inherent to working friendships forged in the context of little magazine publishing. While it is difficult for close associates of a little magazine to remain loyal if they fervently disagree with its underlying editorial policy, artists may remain attracted to the undeniable utilitarian function of even the most dogmatic of publications as an outlet for work that might not be published elsewhere. In some respects, Hart Crane seems to have been guilty of shifting his allegiances to further his own career. A letter Crane sent to Allen Tate underlines the practical value of *transition* to American writers who might still find some of its material objectionable. “A copy of *transition* #1 has reached me — and I am enthusiastic about it,” Crane wrote. “*transition* has some weak contribs, of course, but the majority is respectable. Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Williams, Winters, Laura [Riding], Larbaud, Gide, MacLeish, Soupault, etc. It’s a wedge that ought to be used.”<sup>26</sup>

The commitment to *transition* of some other American collaborators was more certain, however. The name that is inextricably connected with the magazine is that of Abraham Lincoln Gillespie, Jr. “Link” or “Linkey,” as he was known to his friends, is a shadowy figure in the history of the American expatriate literary colony in Paris. Apocryphal accounts of his life can be found in a good many of the literary memoirs of those people who knew him in France, and in the criticism of the period. But the

Gillespie story today remains the substance of myth, a problem not assuaged by the fact that he died in obscurity during the 1940s. As the story was told, Gillespie was a high school teacher in Philadelphia when he was hit by a car, an accident that he claimed gave him the ability to understand the work of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. His desire to live the life of an expatriate writer supposedly led him to abandon his wife and home when he attained literary success; literary success for Gillespie was defined as an appearance in *transition*. For this one American, at least, *transition* represented his prevailing ambition. Gillespie was published in the magazine on two occasions during its run of monthly numbers and he became a mainstay in the quarterly issues during the late 1920s. Not surprisingly, he signed "The Revolution of the Word." His work, both criticism and prose poems, was developed in a style that incorporated the examples of both Joyce and Stein. Owing to Gillespie's notoriety and dubious literary ability, no one associated with making editorial decisions on *transition* wanted to take subsequent responsibility for publishing him. One account is that Jolas was deeply impressed with Gillespie's work and resolved to have him in *transition*; an alternate version of the story is that Elliot Paul enlisted Gillespie as a prank. But Jolas's discernment would have prevented him from being overly enthusiastic about such an obvious imitator of Joyce and Stein; there are examples of bad material being introduced into *transition* for effect, yet Jolas would not have allowed Paul or one of his other collaborators to extend any such joke beyond a single issue.

Although *transition* had many supporters among the American expatriates living in Paris, Jolas always rejected the frequent claim that the magazine was the publication of a Montparnasse clique. Similarly, he rejected the idea that a cult had grown up around him and his ideas. *transition* had a number of long-standing American

contributors who were not directly associated with “The Revolution of the Word,” including Archibald MacLeish, the adopted American Peter Neagoe, William Carlos Williams, himself a great patron of many little magazines and a stubbornly independent thinker, and Laura Riding, whose feuds with Williams and Kay Boyle were legendary in themselves.

But as important as the attitudes of Americans towards *transition* is the question of the attitudes held by *transition* and its contributors towards America itself. The relationship was clearly reciprocal, as the main purpose of the magazine was after all both to transmit to the United States the essence of the artistic insurrections taking place in Europe, while giving American artists an international forum. We have seen that many of the American contributors to *transition* were expatriates, or at least had spent some time abroad, and they usually had definite opinions about their homeland. In *transition* 14 (Fall 1928), Jolas published a survey entitled “Why Do Americans Live in Europe?” in which seventeen expatriates discussed aspects of their relationship with their homeland. Some of those who answered Jolas’s enquiry concentrated on the shortcomings of life in the United States when explaining why they chose to live abroad. Harry Crosby rationalised, “I do not wish to devote myself to perpetual hypocrisy” and “I prefer explosions to whimperings.”<sup>27</sup> Other artists chose instead to emphasise the benefits of life in Europe. Robert McAlmon maintained that “there is less interference with private life here.”<sup>28</sup> Many respondents expressed their deep and enduring affection for the United States, yet they acknowledged the things that kept them estranged from their homeland. Kathleen Cannell commented simply, “I do not prefer to live outside America. I would prefer to live in America if I could make enough money to do so.”<sup>29</sup> George Antheil maintained that “a young composer has absolutely no future in

America... he cannot hope to make a livelihood.”<sup>30</sup> Gertrude Stein compared the situation in America with the constraints of one’s childhood home: “Your parent’s home is never a place to work it is a nice place to be brought up in.”<sup>31</sup>

Eugene Jolas shared this general ambivalence felt by many of his expatriate contributors. In response to the demand that he return to America, Jolas maintained that there was “no virtue whatever” in actually living in United States. “I do not share the view of the men who categorically negate America,” he continued, “but I feel that America is intellectually in a deplorable state.”<sup>32</sup> Through his life, Jolas was drawn by both his European roots and a sense of European cultural accomplishment and the potential of America and the promise of what might be accomplished there. His confidence in the future of American art was always mixed and this strange sense of disappointment and optimism was reflected in an interpretation of the initial response to *transition* in the United States, brought forward by Jolas and Elliot Paul at the end of *transition* 12 (March 1928).

We have discovered a few men and women of excellent promise. This is something, not enough. We are disappointed to find the creative vision at such a low ebb in North America. Where are the college men, the obscure amateurs, the cynics, the rebels, the gadflies? Where are the poets? Where the weavers of legends?<sup>33</sup>

Eugene Jolas genuinely believed that the spirit of revolt exhibited in *transition* would be its American legacy. His own work and, to some extent, the manifestos he wrote were personal solutions to general creative problems. Clearly, he did not want his own ideas to be misunderstood or misrepresented by hearsay reports, but in terms of his wider aims and the wider aims of his magazine, Eugene Jolas was much less dogmatic when it came to his support of young writers than is suggested by “The Revolution of the Word” and other similar documents. He hoped the examples brought forth in *transition* would

inspire successive generations of artists. But the manner in which Jolas's ideas were received and adopted by American artists is, in fact, representative of general trends in the development of modern art in the United States.

## II. Equivocal Devotees

During his first year of publishing *transition*, Eugene Jolas did receive reports of interest in the magazine among young writers in the United States. Bravig Imbs, for example, claimed that American students were enthralled by the early numbers. But as the earlier comments of Jolas and Paul attest, this apparent interest did not bring forward enough tangible results to immediately satisfy the editors. An alternative to an awakening among young American writers in the late 1920s, perhaps, was the suggestion of an awakening in England. That *transition* had an audience in the British Isles is undoubted. The prominence of figures like James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis in *transition* drew the attention of reviewers who were just as bewildered as their American counterparts, if occasionally less contemptuous in their scepticism of the magazine. More importantly, however, there were signs that young artists and intellectuals were considering *transition* quite seriously. C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, as we have seen, followed the serialisation of "Work in Progress" in the magazine and became vocal supporters of Joyce. In the *News-Week* article published in the United States in 1936 it was reported that *transition* was "recommended reading" at Oxford University.<sup>34</sup> Whether or not this is true, the earliest numbers of the magazine were catalogued at the Bodleian Library immediately upon their appearance, even though *transition* had at that time been established for little more than a few months. Even

more significantly, *Experiment* magazine, begun at Cambridge University in the late 1920s, seems to have come under the direct influence of these early numbers of *transition*.

*Experiment* printed seven issues. Originally designed as a competitor for the more conservative *Venture* magazine at Cambridge, *Experiment* was conceived as a forum for “degreeless students or young graduates.” The magazine sought “uncompromising independence” to seek out “all and none but the not yet too ripe fruits of art, science and philosophy in the university.”<sup>35</sup> The journal promoted an interdisciplinary platform similar to that of *transition*, but this was in keeping with the practice of many of the little magazines of the day. The first direct link between *Experiment* and *transition* occurred six months into the run of the younger magazine when *Experiment* entered the ongoing debate between *transition* and Wyndham Lewis. In *Experiment* 3 (May 1929), the editors attempted to present an accurate and unbiased view of the problems confronting the dissemination of political attitudes in art. They had brazen words of reproach for Lewis, *transition*, T.S. Eliot, and the surrealists, arguing that the inherent contradictions in their attitudes towards politics thwarted the “building up of a uniform and contemporary artistic attitude.” But they also professed admiration for the retaliation *transition* had set against the specific criticisms put forward by Lewis in the *Enemy*, and *Experiment* came down squarely on the side of the American expatriates against the British critic. “There is something rather wistful about the figure of Mr. Lewis,” they maintained, “desperately cherishing a set of beliefs which he seems to think will be taken from him by the first comer if he doesn’t look out; something uncertain and only in part comic.”<sup>36</sup>

Some of the creative material that appeared in *Experiment* attracted the attention of Eugene Jolas, who published the poetry of Jacob Bronowski, J.M. Reeves, and Hugh Sykes Davies in *transition* 18 (November 1929), grouped in a “Little Anthology” with such *transition* stalwarts as Boyle, Crane, Imbs, Charles Henri Ford, the Crosbys, and Léon-Paul Fargue. Thirteen *Experiment* contributors appeared in the subsequent “Cambridge Experiment: A Manifesto of Young England” in *transition* 19/20 (June 1930), including Bronowski, Richard Eberhart, William Empson, George Reavey, Reeves, and Sykes Davies. Hugh Sykes Davies’ free verse, in particular, seemed suited to the *transition* program. Jolas commented at the time that all these contributions provided “a documentary idea of the new currents in young England.”<sup>37</sup> But whether or not *Experiment* wished ultimately to model itself on *transition* is difficult to determine. Jolas did temporarily suspend publication of his magazine with the number in which the bulk of the *Experiment* material appeared; it was widely acknowledged that the apparent loss of *transition* eliminated an important forum for innovative young writers working in English. The next number of *Experiment* appeared in October 1930 with a changed editorial policy. Citing its own longevity — the magazine was publishing its sixth issue over a span of two years — *Experiment* claimed that it had become in this time “a focus for much writing it has not countenanced, and interests it has not invited.” Accepting the new function of literary “spokesman” that was apparently thrust upon it, the magazine began to print material from authors with no connection to Cambridge, older American authors like Richard Aldington and Conrad Aiken, with a promise to extend the practice even further.<sup>38</sup> *Experiment* 7 appeared in the spring of the following year with more “established writers” who, the editors claimed, “feel themselves to be, and we feel them to be, in sympathy with us.”<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, Stuart Gilbert was among the

contributors to this number: he furnished a short note on a passage from “Work in Progress” that *Experiment* had reprinted from an earlier number of *transition*. The direction *Experiment* would have taken from this point is uncertain; the number containing the Joyce material was its last.

The development of the little magazine movement in the United States in the early twentieth century owed a great debt to magazines that sought to publish young writers almost exclusively: college publications and defiantly independent journals. Perhaps Jolas could not readily see the effect *transition* had on its youthful readers because of the lack of these literary outlets for such writers in America in the 1920s and 1930s. After all, this seeming lapse in the growth of little magazines inspired Jolas to begin *transition*. When he lived in the United States in the mid-1930s, Jolas devoted a great deal of time to finding young writers for the magazine and he felt he had only mixed success. But the young artists who read *transition* in the United States were clearly persuaded by the conviction and enthusiasm with which its revolutionary material was presented. Once again, few writers actively embraced the tenets of *transition*'s program in the manner of Harry Crosby and A. Lincoln Gillespie. But like those figures of an earlier generation, some of the young artists who looked to *transition* for inspiration also acknowledged its influence in their fiction, memoirs, and letters. The experiences of Paul Bowles, Henry Miller, and Charles Henri Ford together reveal something of the characteristic way in which *transition* affected its readers in the late 1920s and beyond.

While many American publications did take exception to the early numbers of *transition*, one decidedly positive review in the *New Yorker* caught the attention of a fledgling New York poet. Janet Flanner, writing as Gênet, announced that the first

number of *transition* “contains, if not a feast, some good food for thought.”<sup>40</sup> Paul Bowles, then a sixteen year-old high school student, read these few words and was inspired to seek this new magazine in the bookshops around Manhattan. He had been introduced to French literature the year previous through a translation of an André Gide novel. His discovery of *transition*, however, reinforced Bowles’ interest in a Parisian literary culture inhabited by the colony of American expatriates, a gathering in which he dreamed of taking his place.

No publication had made such a profound impression on me. Quite apart from the frontal assault of Surrealism, the existence of which I had not even suspected, I loved its concise format, the strange muted colors of the soft paper they used as covers, and the fact that each page had to be cut with a paper knife. Above all, each month when I bought the new issue, I had the illusion of being in Paris, for the feeling of the city I got from reading its pages coincided with my own idea of what Paris must be like, where the people were desperate but sophisticated, cynical but fanatically loyal to ideas. Paris was the center of all existence; I could feel its glow when I faced eastward as a Moslem feels the light from Mecca, and I knew that some day, with luck, I should go there and stand on the sacred spots.<sup>41</sup>

Bowles admitted in his autobiography that henceforth, he rejected the realistic novels of the American midwest so in vogue throughout the United States and so vigorously opposed by Eugene Jolas on the pages of his magazine in Paris. Bowles purchased a copy of Djuna Barnes’ novel *Ryder* “because she had been among the contributors to *transition*.”<sup>42</sup>

*transition* did have a direct effect on Bowles’ early writing style. He set out to emulate the surrealist techniques of automatic writing; he soon felt himself successful enough to offer some of his poems to the editors of *transition*. He published work in *transition* 12 (March 1928) and *transition* 13 (June 1928), and he later appeared in *transition* 19/20 (June 1930). The earliest of these appearances, in particular, had a

marked effect on Bowles, and the success played no small part in his decision ultimately to move to France. He also used this early success as a foundation from which to approach other publications; Bowles was able to place work in a number of other expatriate magazines, like the later incarnation of *This Quarter* and *Tambour*.<sup>43</sup> But although he was inspired by the surrealists, admired Eugene Jolas, and respected the new work of James Joyce, Paul Bowles could in no way be considered a devotee of *transition*. After he arrived in Paris, Bowles took a job as an operator at the Paris *Tribune* but he was too bashful even to introduce himself properly to Elliot Paul, and he could certainly never bring himself to pass through the doors of the *transition* office in rue Fabert.<sup>44</sup> Obviously, the stereotype of *transition* contributors meeting around the tables of Montparnasse cafés did not apply to the relationship between Paul Bowles and the magazine; more importantly, Bowles' work developed a diversity and individuality that was impossible for lesser artists like Link Gillespie. In the late 1920s, Bowles wrote that he considered *transition* to be "the most important revue published," but he recognised a certain naiveté in the idealistic approach of Eugene Jolas and there is no evidence that Bowles accepted everything that was printed in the magazine.<sup>45</sup> Paul Bowles was able to pick and choose among this miscellany of writing and other art and he very quickly grew beyond the shadow cast by the eminent expatriate magazine. But Bowles was undoubtedly touched by *transition* at a critical time in his writing career, in much the same way as was Henry Miller. Although unknown, Miller was not a young writer when he discovered *transition*. His more openly questioning approach to the material he found in the magazine was, however, equally significant.

The influence of *transition* on Henry Miller was most honestly and eloquently expressed by Miller himself, through the brief correspondence the notorious American writer had with Eugene Jolas in the early 1950s.

The other day, in digging through my old papers, I ran across the plaquette you put out, for Stuart Gilbert, called “The Language of Night.”... But this morning, I sat down and read it through again. Every page was marked, scored, annotated. This I must have done in 1932 or ‘33, as I said before, while working as a proof reader on the *Paris Tribune*. I had many arguments with the then editors... of the paper about your treatise. To them it was incomprehensible, absurd and nonsensical.

This morning it all struck me with new force. What you said therein still stands — for me, at least. Indeed, it has acquired a new depth of meaning.<sup>46</sup>

Henry Miller was in Paris in the wake of “The Revolution of the Word” and during the years in which Eugene Jolas took unprecedented control of the editorial direction of *transition*. Although Miller contributed only a minor piece to the last number of the magazine, “The Cosmological Eye” in *transition* 27 (April/May 1938), he would have been aware of much of what was happening in *transition* through the 1930s. In her diaries, Anais Nin commented that she bought a copy of *transition* for Miller in 1932, “adding to his writing, enriching it.”<sup>47</sup> Miller, according to Nin, was at that time engrossed with “Spengler, *transition*, Breton, and dreams.”<sup>48</sup> Because it seems most likely that Nin purchased *transition* 21 (March 1932) for Miller to see, he had the opportunity to read the “Poetry is Vertical” manifesto; *The Language of Night*, the text Miller acknowledged in his letter to Jolas, was of course a succinct statement of the direction the magazine had followed in the late 1920s and it introduced the principal values that were also embodied in “Poetry is Vertical.” Whether or not Miller consistently acknowledged the value of these texts to him as his work found its own infamy, his discovery of his earlier annotations to Jolas’s work and Nin’s comments in her diaries underlined the extent to which Miller had reckoned with the *transition* program through the early part of the decade. A great deal of *Plexus*, the second book of *The Rosy Crucifixion*, addressed Miller’s quest to establish himself as a writer in New

York City. After a sexual encounter involving Miller, his wife, their landlady, and Miller's friend "Ulric," an orgy that represents freedom from sexual and creative inhibitions, the talk immediately turns to *transition*.

Suddenly he recalled that what had started him dreaming was the sight of a copy of "Transition" lying on the dresser. He reminded me that I had once loaned him a copy in which there was a wonderful passage on the interpretation of dreams. "You know the man I mean," he said, snapping his fingers.

"Gottfried Benn?"

"Yes, that's the fellow. A rum one, that bird. I wish I could read more of him.... By the way, you don't have that issue here, do you?"

"Yes, I do, Ulric me lad. Would you like to see it?"

"I tell you what," he said. "I wish you would read that passage aloud to us — that is, if the others don't mind."

I found the copy of "Transition" and turned to the page.<sup>49</sup>

The quasi-autobiographical narrative here turns on an anachronistic reference to Benn's "The Structure of Personality," also from *transition* 21 (March 1932). Besides reading Gottfried Benn on its pages, that Miller had his earliest knowledge of the surrealists through the magazine is certain. In an interview in later life, Miller spoke about his intellectual and creative preparation in the United States in advance of his expatriation: "Some things I already knew about in America, it's true. *transition* came to us in America; Jolas was marvellous in selecting those strange bizarre writers and artists we had never heard of."<sup>50</sup> But Miller was highly ambivalent in his approach to surrealism. "I was writing Surrealistically in America before I had ever heard the word," he once claimed.<sup>51</sup> Although he acknowledged that "scarcely anything has been as stimulating to me as the theories and the products of the Surrealists," Miller was openly critical of the movement itself.<sup>52</sup> He maintained, in fact, that "it is a mistake to speak about Surrealism. There is no such thing: there are only Surrealists."<sup>53</sup>

In his suspicion of the ultimate aims of surrealism as a movement, in his suspicion of the politics of the group, and in his suspicion of the leadership of André Breton, Henry Miller shared the sceptical attitude of a number of the American devotees of the movement, including of course Eugene Jolas. It is not surprising that in his posture as a literary “lone wolf,” as he referred to himself, Henry Miller would have felt free to sift critically through all the other material in *transition* in the same highly selective manner in which he encountered surrealist dogma. In that Eugene Jolas took a similar approach in adopting aspects of surrealism in his own work, one cannot argue that Miller’s attitude towards *transition* was in any sense disingenuous. Yet in his book-length study of the magazine, Dougald McMillan maintains that the most significant aspect of Henry Miller’s relationship with *transition* was not his dutiful correspondence with Eugene Jolas but rather his earlier rejection of both James Joyce and “The Revolution of the Word,” like in his essay “The Universe of Death.”<sup>54</sup>

It is in Joyce that one observes that particular failing of the modern artist — the inability to communicate with the audience. Not a wholly new phenomenon, admitted, but always a significant one.... Joyce has been seeking escape in the erection of a fortress composed of meaningless verbiage. His language is a ferocious masturbation carried on in fourteen tongues. It is a dervish executed on the periphery of meaning, an organism not of blood and semen, but of dead slag from the burnt out crater of the mind. The Revolution of the Word which his work seems to have inspired in his disciples is the logical outcome of this sterile dance of death.<sup>55</sup>

There is obviously no way to defend these remarks or diminish their significance; Miller’s comments do represent an out-and-out rejection of “Work in Progress” and more than simply a passing cynicism directed towards the aesthetic program central to *transition*. These charges of unintelligibility we have seen elsewhere, but underlying Miller’s criticism of “The Revolution of the Word” was the frustration with what he saw

as the growing academicism of the magazine. “Already, almost coincidentally with their appearance, we have, as a result of *Ulysses* and *Work in Progress*, nothing but dry analyses, archaeological burrowings, geological surveys, laboratory tests of the Word,” he complained. “The commentators, to be sure, have only begun to chew into Joyce.”<sup>56</sup> Miller’s capitalization of “Word” ties this critique directly to Jolas, *transition*, and the manifestos that became such an important facet of its later appearance. Jolas certainly would have disagreed with Miller’s assessment, but he would have shared Miller’s anxiety that the magazine should never move away from the creative matter that Jolas wished most to present. Without playing down the impact of Henry Miller’s judgment, it is clear that these passages make up a more thoughtful analysis of the evolution of *transition* than simply an unequivocal condemnation of its program. But what is also clear is that Miller was at this point attempting to distance himself actively from the magazine. Anäis Nin’s diaries from 1933 highlighted the ways in which Miller’s work seemed to have deviated from the examples in *transition* that had inspired him just one year previously. “When Henry writes insane pages, it is the insanity produced by life, and not the absence of life,” Nin argued. “The insanity of the surrealists, Breton and *transition* is in a void; whereas that of Henry is caused by the absurdities, ironies, pains or a surcharged over-full life.”<sup>57</sup>

What is crucial to note here is that Miller denounced neither his artistic concerns of 1932 nor the creative tools *transition* helped him uncover. In Nin’s opinion, at least, Miller’s work during this time served simply to question the ultimate consequences of his undertakings. Faced, as all artists are, with what Eugene Jolas referred to as a quest for expression, Henry Miller explored the fundamental question of what he hoped to achieve through his art. If Miller moved away from *transition* at this time, he moved

beyond it, working instead on developing his own creative persona. Having internalised what he read in the magazine, Miller struggled to make these ideas his own. To do this, however, he had to re-evaluate and often ravage some of his even most fundamental influences; to demand an apostolic devotion of Miller at this time would have been to deny him his own artistic identity. But it is interesting to note that Miller attempted to reverse this process of amalgamation and transformation later in his life with the painstaking unravelling of his influences in, for example, efforts like *The Books in My Life*. One does not wish to overstate the case for Henry Miller and *transition*: at some level, he simply read the writings of some of the more important European avant-garde figures in the magazine and these innovations were clearly framed by Eugene Jolas's more dogmatic pronouncements. Miller was no disciple. But there is something characteristically American in Henry Miller's encounter with *transition* and the way in which he adapted its ideas for himself. The American relationship with modern European art was one of initial scepticism and eventual acceptance and adaptation, and this has been borne out by the reception of *transition*.

The figure who best exemplified a fastidious American approach to the magazine, by somehow combining the experiences of Bowles and Miller, was Charles Henri Ford. Ford contributed poetry to *transition* 18 (November 1929), *transition* 19/20 (June 1930), and *transition* 21 (March 1932). A high school dropout from Mississippi, Ford once claimed that reading Eugene Jolas's poetry in the late 1920s led him to become an "instant Surrealist."<sup>58</sup> His involvement with Jolas ran considerably deeper, however. The older man was convinced to serve as contributing editor of *Blues*, Ford's first little magazine, which was initially advertised in *transition* 16/17 (June 1929).

BLUES is a magazine of a *more complete revolt* against the cliché and commonplace welcoming poetry and prose radical in form subject or treatment. BLUES is a haven for the unorthodox in america and for those writers living abroad who though writing in english have decided that america and american environment are not hospitable to creative work.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to a misapplication of the upper case, *Blues* shared twenty-three contributors with *transition*, the vast majority of whom first appeared in Eugene Jolas's magazine. Among those writers, Kay Boyle, Harry Crosby, Leigh Hoffman, Jolas, and Harold Salemson all endorsed "The Revolution of the Word." Besides Ford himself, Herman Spector, Parker Tyler, and Kathleen Tankersley Young seem to have come to *transition* through their association with *Blues*. But this is not to suggest that the magazine was actually the domestic arm of *transition*; Ford proved to be much more concerned with the surrealistic content of *transition* than he was with the decidedly idiosyncratic features of Jolas's ideas. He did share with Jolas the belief that artistic principles should take precedent over political concerns and that automatism required the shaping hand of reason, and these ideas were still central to Ford's artistic convictions when he edited the important little magazine *View* in the 1940s.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately for Jolas, when he excluded himself from *VVV* by attacking Breton and the surrealists, he also insulted Charles Henri Ford. His attempts to attach himself to Ford's new journal were thus thwarted. Ford wrote to his long-time collaborator Parker Tyler at the time, "The JOWL of Jolas, to write saying he's given me a review in L[iving] Age & asking to write himself up for *View* — when the MS comes what shall we DO: wd it be too obvious to (mEREly) clip a rejection slip thereto — or will you take the pleasure in wording the letter (I'll sign)."<sup>61</sup> Like Bowles and Miller, Charles Henri Ford had by this time moved beyond the orbit of Eugene Jolas and the legacy of *transition*. Editor and magazine had

successfully introduced Americans to European art over the previous decade, but this effectively transplanted art had clearly now taken on a life of its own. Conditions in the United States had changed dramatically since the middle of the 1920s. The appearance of the exiled surrealists in New York in the early 1940s simply marked a culmination of the development of modern art in America. The modern spark in art in the United States had successfully confronted European models during the 1930s, as exhibited for example in the “post-surrealist” painting of Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg.<sup>62</sup> The approximate application of surrealist principles by subsequent artists like Joseph Cornell also exhibited the process of selective adaptation of these foreign models. While modern art in America was much more than simply a transplanted surrealism, the process of bricolage that gave surrealism an American signature explains much about the development of modern art in the United States. If modern American culture was a melting-pot, so too were the modes of expression utilised by that culture.

The examples of Henry Miller and Charles Henri Ford, in particular, show how the collection of artistic bric-à-brac often involves the dissolution of boundaries between these influences. This seems a natural process in the development of a modern art, but proves problematic for our understanding of “modernism,” the institutional codification of this art. We have been careful thus far to suggest only how the basic conditions and creative artifacts of what we understand as modernism may have developed and been shared between a Western culture. For modernism is to some extent an interpretation of modern art framed in retrospect, based on our contemporary critical judgements and on primary materials in which modern artists attempted to frame their own achievements. Both Eugene Jolas and *transition* have not been easily drawn into this somewhat artificial construction, a construction that has retained the boundaries of nationality and

language that Eugene Jolas fought to eliminate. One of the principal problems for Jolas was that no one seemed willing to recognise him as an American. Paul Bowles wrote of Jolas that “nobody will claim him. The French say he’s German. The Germans say he’s French. The Americans say he’s European.”<sup>63</sup> Even some of his greatest admirers, like the publisher James Laughlin, were surprised to learn of his true heritage. In his final years, Jolas already felt like a forgotten man, having been ostracised as the basis for the institutional acceptance of modern art was being set out. While his contribution to the development of modern art is very clear, Eugene Jolas’s contribution still goes largely unacknowledged in our historical rewriting of that art.

### III. Post-War Successors

After the end of the Second World War, Eugene Jolas seemed to have been conscious of the beginning of this process of critical re-evaluation that sought to mark out the boundaries of modern art. He participated in this program, to some extent, by continuing to write about James Joyce. But feeling somewhat excluded, he did turn his hand back to journalism and spent his last years engrossed largely in private study. In his lifetime, however, Jolas also saw affinities between the experiments undertaken in *transition* and post-war poetry and he remained interested in establishing the importance of his work and that of his collaborators. In an article in the journal *Transition Forty-Eight*, a magazine with some tenuous affinities with his earlier publication, Jolas connected the emergence of Isidore Isou’s lettrisme movement in Paris with the concerns that characterised *transition* during the 1920s and 1930s. Jolas also took this opportunity to historicise his *transition* activities, placing them in the larger context of

the artist's timeless desire to expand the limits of language. He saw Isou's group as sharing with him in a much wider movement that included Lewis Carroll, Mallarmé, Joyce, the futurists, German expressionism, dadaism, surrealism, and the writing of indigenous peoples worldwide. More critically, Jolas recognised that modern art instinctively drew on many sources. He now suggested that no single aesthetic movement could revolutionise modern letters; revolution would only come from a combination of influences.

It is of course inconceivable that the poetry of the future will be based exclusively on Isou's "Letterism," and his fate will be in all probability resemble that of his precursors, for it only represents one facet of the complex linguistic situation we face today. Yet, with this reservation, the writer does not hesitate to say that "Letterism" is a valuable movement.<sup>64</sup>

Lettrisme began in the early 1940s when Isou, a young Rumanian poet studying in Paris, interrupted a dadaist reading to present his own poems. Isou believed that art is characterised by two phases: "amplic" and chiselling. The first phase is defined by continual expansion, to be followed by the second phase, refinement and destruction. Lettrisme represented the logical end of the chiselling phase, the reduction of words to their most basic units. Jolas was certainly correct to identify the interests of these young artists with the activities of *transition*, especially Jolas's own belief that language had been exhausted and could only be revived through formal innovation. Lettrisme itself had relatively little effect outside France, however, and its influence in the English-language tradition is perhaps best seen in its peripheral affinities in the 1960s and 1970s with the concrete poetry movement.<sup>65</sup>

By the early 1950s, a new generation of American expatriate writers had taken up residence in Paris and these artists were coming to terms with the literary legacy left

them by the previous generation. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, for example, was deeply influenced by Elliot Paul's memoir *The Last Time I Saw Paris*.<sup>66</sup> Ferlinghetti's own novel *Her* tells the story of a young American artist in Paris who is searching for a mysterious girl and exorcising the ghosts of his literary forebears. In one striking passage, the protagonist Andy Raffine imagines himself caught up in a throng, taking his rightful place among the artists of many generations and many nations who found their way to Paris. The scene represents the liberation of the creative imagination, suppressed in Paris by the Nazi occupation.

And the original small band of mad poets scattering true apocalyptic visions was lost and drowned in the swelling parade of humanity and inhumanity that carried within it all the places of its exile... I was on the back of horse itself, I was on Horse, and Horse flew, as the snowballing mob of liberated men rolled on down the boulevard toward unconquered territory, pausing briefly for the absorption of Jean-Paul Sartre and his flies, and Albert Camus and his rebels, and James Joyce and his blooms, and Pablo Picasso and his harlequins and horses and blueplates and Guernicas and doves, and Céline with Henry Miller in his pocket, and Ferdinand Léger with feet caught in a machine, and Antonin Artaud and his mother, and René Char and his bad boys, and Michel Mourrse and his dead God in an Easter pulpit, and Marc Chagall on *his* Horse, and Samuel Beckett and his unnamable selves, and their ranks further augmented by hundreds if not thousands of holdout numbers of underground Resistance movements, hundreds if not thousands of Maquis who had still be hidden waiting for decades in backstreet caves all over the Left Bank, waiting for the true Liberation that they still believed had yet to arrive...<sup>67</sup>

Ferlinghetti's work here was clearly influenced by surrealism, but as Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno argues, it was a distinctively American interpretation of surrealism developed through the use of an American idiom.<sup>68</sup> By this time, there was a precedent for Ferlinghetti's work in the writing of a generation of American artists, like Paul Bowles, who had first come to surrealism through the efforts of figures like Eugene Jolas and Man Ray. Other expatriate Americans in Paris in the post-war decades relived

the experiences of earlier generations, while forging their own identities. Harry Mathews and John Ashbery immersed themselves deeply in French culture. Although they were not native French speakers, they experienced the clash of tongues in a way Eugene Jolas would have understood while using this tension to help them stretch the limits of language in their own poetry. Ashbery came to Paris to research the life and work of Raymond Roussel, an obscure French writer largely unknown in English but given some passing attention in *transition* 12 (March 1928). The Beats also took up residence in Paris during the 1950s; writers like William Burroughs and Brion Gysin experimented with automatism, just as the *transition* editors had done thirty years before. Similarly, little magazine publishing resumed in Paris and the editors of these new journals continued in a search for greater freedom of expression for the independent artist.

The first postwar expatriate magazine in Paris was *Points*, founded by Sinbad Vail in 1948. Vail was the son of Peggy Guggenheim and Lawrence Vail, himself a former contributor to *transition* who had signed "The Revolution of the Word." The younger Vail consciously styled his new magazine to function to some extent as a vanity press for him and his friends, but he did make the decision to devote half the publication to French contributions. It is doubtful that this represented any grand dream of cultural amalgamation or any theoretical statement about the universal connection between languages. Sinbad Vail was not an idealist of that sort. When it soon became apparent that *Points* had a very small French readership, the bilingual policy was abruptly dropped. With the advantage of ample private funds from the Guggenheim fortune, *Points* continued to publish into the middle of the 1950s.<sup>69</sup> Other expatriate journals came and went with a flourish during these years: *Zero*, *ID*, *New-Story*, and the bilingual

*Janus*. But the closest relationship between a little magazine in Paris in the 1950s and *transition* was that shared by *Merlin*.

In his literary study of postwar France, Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno calls *Merlin* “by far the most experimental... of all the little magazines that began during the postwar era.”<sup>70</sup> The editorial aims of its better known predecessor were, in fact, unintentionally echoed in this upstart journal. Where *transition* had tried to encourage a wide range of American and European writers by promoting them in the United States, *Merlin* saw itself as “a vital meeting-ground for the thought and work of American and English writers on the one hand and Continental writers on the other.” The most fundamental similarity in editorial direction between the two publications was the decision to eschew partisan political matters. Where the editors of *transition* had claimed to be apolitical, *Merlin* aspired “to print a neutral review.”<sup>71</sup> As Eugene Jolas had negotiated exclusive publishing rights to surrealist material from André Breton in the late 1920s, the editors of *Merlin* convinced Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir to allow them to publish English translations of works that appeared in *Les Temps Modernes*. Very quickly, then, *Merlin* grew to feature the international mixture of creative talent to which *transition* had aspired a quarter-century before. Founded in 1952 by Alexander Trocchi, a Scotsman, and the American Jane Lougee, the editorial board expanded to include among others South African Patrick Bowles, Englishman Christopher Logue, and the Americans Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse.

The most startling similarity in the publishing histories of *transition* and *Merlin*, however, was the manner in which both magazines embraced a single literary figure and helped him further his career. As we have seen, the support of Eugene Jolas and *transition* helped James Joyce complete *Finnegans Wake* during a greatly troubling time

in his career; one of the most important figures in the Joyce circle during those years was Samuel Beckett. It is somewhat ironic, then, that a generation after Beckett published “Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce” in *transition* 16/17 (June 1929), *Merlin* took up the cause of Beckett’s literary career in much the same way as its predecessor had taken up Joyce’s. In his first reference to Beckett in *Merlin*, Richard Seaver did not acknowledge this connection with *transition*, even though Beckett also published some of his earliest creative work in that magazine. Seaver did mention that Beckett had been associated with Joyce and that he had placed an important essay in the early book of *Finnegans Wake* criticism, *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamnation of a Work in Progress*; Seaver failed to mention both that the essay had originally appeared in *transition* and that the magazine had organised the *Exagmination* endeavour. Part of the explanation for these omissions surely rests with the desire held by writers of the 1950s to establish their own identities and standings. This process often involved, not surprisingly, the glossing over of past influences. Seaver maintained, for example, “It is unfortunate for Mr. Beckett’s literary reputation that his name is invariably linked with that of James Joyce, and that very often he is dismissed as merely another of the master’s too numerous disciples.”<sup>72</sup> *Merlin* played a valuable role in furthering Beckett’s lot: the editors promoted his works, wrote analytical essays, and helped translate the works he wrote in this period from French. *Merlin* began to wither, in fact, when the individuals involved in its production turned their attention increasingly to publishing Beckett’s work in book form. While the magazine was appearing on a generally regular schedule, Beckett so dominated its pages, in the opinion of the French authorities at least, that the government refused to grant “an organ of propaganda” for this single foreign writer its basic mailing privileges at magazine-rate.<sup>73</sup>

In spite of the relative revival of the little magazine movement and the growth of a number of these smaller reviews, the major event in English-language publishing in Paris in the 1950s was the appearance of the *Paris Review*. The enticement of some *Merlin* collaborators into the book trade foreshadowed the changes the *Paris Review* would introduce through the approach of its editors to producing their magazine. Initially, the *Paris Review* was founded on an understated idealism. William Styron, writing in the first number, maintained that “because we’re sissies... we plan to beat no drum for anything.” To make room for “the good writers and good poets, the non-drumbeaters and non-axe-grinders,” the magazine pledged to limit literary criticism, circumscribing the apparent academicism that had come to dominate the previous generation of magazines as they grew increasingly dogmatic.<sup>74</sup> But by eliminating this excess dogmatism, the *Paris Review* also lost some of the utopianism that characterised that earlier generation of little magazines. Indeed, George Plimpton, the editor of the *Paris Review*, still objects to the characterisation of his “literary magazine” as one of the “littles.” Generally speaking, the publication is no longer a little magazine and may not have been one once Plimpton accepted Malcolm Cowley’s description of the editorial policy of the *Paris Review* as “Enterprise in the service of art.”<sup>75</sup> Many of the editors’ earliest decisions were based on unabashed commercial promotion, ultimately beneficial undertakings on a scale that would have been entirely foreign to Eugene Jolas and his generation of little magazine editors and, for that matter, the generations of little magazine editors since. In its first year of publication, the *Paris Review* increased its initial circulation by more than thirty per cent, attracted lucrative advertising from France, England, and the United States, and earned enthusiastic notices from the same popular press that viewed with great scepticism the little magazines of the 1920s and

1930s. Clearly, the society served by this press had changed dramatically; what had been shocking thirty years earlier was now commonplace. Ironically, newspapers saw the *Paris Review* as “the first really promising development in youthful, advance guard, or experimental writing in a long time.”<sup>76</sup> But while youthful, certainly, the magazine was far from avant-garde or experimental, a fact which accounts for much of the reason it has continued with great success until the present day. The *Paris Review* is spirited and has done much to append the contribution of new writers to a developing understanding of modern art. But it has also plainly contributed to the construction of an institutionally accepted version of this art. While the original aim of the little magazine was to circumvent these norms, ostensibly, the career of the *Paris Review* forces us to re-evaluate the possible role of the modern little magazine in this defining of the limits of modern art, in the rewriting of the history of art in the first half of the twentieth century as what we understand as “modernism.”

## Chapter Seven

### Modernism, the Avant-Garde, and the Little Magazine

In *transition* 16/17 (June 1929), Eugene Jolas described the magazine as “a combative organ of the advance-guard.”<sup>1</sup> Stuart Gilbert later labelled *transition* “an avant-garde review” in an essay celebrating the fifth anniversary of the journal.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that those individuals closest to the production of the expatriate American magazine in Paris saw their project in its most general terms as an instrument of cultural resistance, based largely on its dedication to formal innovation. Indeed, we have seen that much of the lasting accomplishment of *transition* was in its opposition to an established cultural norm: the insular, realistic American literature that ignored many of the possible creative applications of the findings of modern science, psychology, and philosophy while ridiculing the bulk of experimental literature being written in the United States and throughout Europe. But linking avant-garde activity solely with style and the surface features of the works of its artists creates a problematic view of avant-gardism, though this is the definition followed for the most part by subsequent generations of twentieth-century literary scholars. In the wake of recent developments in theoretical writings concerned with the avant-garde, it has become increasingly difficult to reconcile the direction of modern little magazines like *transition* with the radical intentions of avant-gardism. Peter Bürger’s understanding of the avant-garde as an historically-specific program that challenged art as an institution in the first half of the twentieth century contrasts sharply with the conception of the little magazine as a principal vehicle for the publication of many artists we now recognise as major figures in the modern movement.

We know that little magazines played an important role in the transmission and eventual acceptance of many works that are now acknowledged as the very cornerstones

of modernism, from T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" printed in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* to *Ulysses* serialised in Margaret Anderson's the *Little Review*. Rather than resisting the cultural hegemony of dominant forms, Eugene Jolas and his collaborators were active in the creation of this new cultural dominant, publishing and defending a wide range of emerging literary figures who could not secure publication elsewhere. But if this is the case, self-consciously defiant journals like *transition* must be seen to have been exercising a kind of resistance within the culture separate from the more militant revolutionary insurgence of the avant-garde that challenged culture by connecting the formal innovation of *transition* with a more fundamental attack against art itself. Certainly, David Harvey argues that the fixed, institutionally received version of modernism acknowledges its own diversity, or what he characterises as "a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations."<sup>3</sup> We have argued that the unique form of the little magazine has been the source of a great deal of this homogeneity. But our contemporary understanding of twentieth century art, shaped by the constraints imposed by the nature of the museum exhibition, the literary anthology, and the university syllabus, can never approach the diversity of material that appeared on the pages of the little magazine in the twentieth century. Throughout the first half of this century, little magazine editors were faced with a basic dilemma, torn between their genuine avant-gardist impulse to resist an establishment with which they retained only tenuous links and their desire to renew and expand cultural tradition to accommodate the remarkable artistic achievements of their age. In that these editors continued to further aesthetic innovations in the face of the inevitable codification of modern art, the little magazine resisted the creation of a single, stable interpretation of modernism. But because modernism has proven its ability to absorb this resistance and even to define itself by its diversity, the original aims of the little magazine have been undermined.

Ironically, by its failure or unwillingness to resist the creation of a new cultural dominant in the first half of the twentieth century, the little magazine has preserved for itself a function in contemporary culture as an instrument of some cultural resistance within what is now seen as a postmodern establishment that is generally impervious to a genuine avant-gardist impulse.

### **I. Defining Terms: Modernism and the Avant-Garde**

A great deal of the difficulty in tracing adequately the relationship between differing artistic positions within a culture is based upon our own inconsistent application of the terminology favoured in charting these positions in relation to one another. Such is the case with “modernism” and the “avant-garde.” We know that the word “modern” has a long history in describing art that desires to foreground its contemporaneity with the society in which it is inevitably rooted. But Daniel Bell defines more specifically the beginning of the modern world as the fifty years leading up to the First World War, years in which both American and European society underwent a period of massive economic development, industrialisation, mechanisation, and urban growth. We have seen that this period was also defined by unprecedented advancements in science, psychology, and philosophy. Bell makes the argument that it was really left to the artists of the modern world to collect the fragments of this evolving society and rearrange them in a coherent manner, or at least in a manner somehow more appropriate to this changed epoch.<sup>4</sup> Modern has endured as a largely rhetorical category to describe the aesthetic values of these artists; it also continues to transcend its narrow historicism in that we may use the term to describe certain works both predating and, perhaps, even following the cultural artefacts of the modern world. “Modernism,” as we

noted in the previous chapter, is used both as a term to describe the specific movement in art that responded to the conditions of the modern world and as a category within which this art has been historically rewritten as it gained wider acceptance as the cultural standard of much of the twentieth century. The origins and early development of the term “avant-garde” are a little more clear, however. Originating as a nineteenth century military expression, avant-garde was first applied to a description of art because it suggests at once both progressive and zealous properties. Indeed, avant-gardism is generally taken to refer to challenges to accepted creative practice. Scholars have conventionally used the terms “modernism” and the “avant-garde” as synonyms, a confusion it is worth noting that is seen particularly in the tradition of Anglo-American letters.<sup>5</sup> Today, reference to an avant-garde movement first raises the image of the most radical European contemporaries of the great Anglo-American modernists, figures that still seem somewhat exotic today. One may wish to connect Tristan Tzara, for example, with Ernest Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf; by retaining yet minimising some distinction between modernism and the avant-garde, this may be accomplished. We have seen that modernism is defined by its diversity, that the discontinuity of the modern world gave rise to vastly different cultural responses. We have even suggested that modernism may be a broad enough term to accommodate antagonistic impulses. It may be tempting, for these reasons, to consider the avant-garde as simply one stage or subset of a larger, all inclusive modernism. But while the avant-gardist tendencies of many modern artists are well known and the aesthetic features of some avant-garde art may suggest an overlap with less extreme approaches to creative advancement, it is also necessary to consider the possibility that a more conclusive distinction between these two terms is needed. Clearly, while one can readily accept that both modernism and the avant-garde represented challenges to existing art forms, it

may be difficult to reconcile the very existence of something we recognise as modernism with the claim that the avant-garde wished to challenge art itself.

The work of the German theorist Peter Bürger grants the avant-garde unprecedented autonomy from our understanding of modernism. His main assertion is that the avant-garde is an historical category, emphasised by his constant reference to something he terms “the historical avant-garde.” For Bürger, the avant-garde was a specific movement in the first half of the twentieth century that challenged art as an institution, “institution” referring specifically “to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works.” He believes that the avant-garde wished ultimately to alter this series of functions, to destroy the autonomy of art and “to reintegrate art into the praxis of life.”<sup>6</sup> Because the avant-garde marked a conscious “break” with the established pattern of production, transmission, reception, and eventual acceptance that defined the status of art in the early twentieth century,<sup>7</sup> it must be seen as distinct from modernism, which for all of its protest was still in a very real sense the product of established creative practice. For Bürger, the historical avant-garde includes only specific movements like dada and surrealism, movements whose relationship with modernism, as we have seen above, remains somewhat problematic today.

But if the historical avant-garde emerged as a well-defined and radical series of movements, one must question why the terms modernism and the avant-garde have remained linked in twentieth-century scholarship. Part of the explanation lies clearly in the failure of the historical avant-garde to reshape fundamentally art as an institution and affect significant social praxis; its political naiveté hastened its collapse as fascism and Stalinism accelerated during the 1930s and 1940s. But more significant than the inability of the avant-garde to establish itself as the most influential artistic program of

the century is the fact that, in reality, many avant-garde works have been assimilated with a variety of modern works in the subsequent rewriting of modernism. This is why Bürger insists on historicising our understanding of the term avant-garde; Andreas Huyssen argues that the cultural artefacts of these movements have been “retrospectively absorbed by modernist high culture.”<sup>8</sup> It is fair to assume that the avant-garde work, taken at its surface level and therefore stripped of its deeper and more radical objectives, could be viewed as simply another modern artefact. If this is the case, the contemporaneity of the avant-garde work makes it available for the historical interpretation of modernism. While this clearly represents an inadequate appraisal of avant-gardism as Bürger understands it, this is a conceivable misreading, once one acknowledges that both modernism and the avant-garde are rooted in and necessarily respond to the modern world. This explanation is even more poignant when one considers that the institutional acceptance of modern art and the rewriting of modernism in scholarly circles dates from around the end of the Second World War, by which time the historical avant-garde had lost its credibility as an agent of social change.

The influence of Peter Bürger’s work is most evident in our tendency to identify predominant avant-garde movements with this historical avant-garde. But Bürger excludes other forms of resistance contemporary with the historical avant-garde and maintains that the failure of the avant-garde earlier in this century negates the possibility of a genuine avant-garde art today. The broadest understanding of avant-gardism, or perhaps something as abstract as an avant-garde impulse in the twentieth century, has been stretched to include any artist whose challenge to traditional forms is seen to be extreme. More often than not, extreme is judged as that which critics have as yet been unable to decode to their satisfaction. Because the full implication of the task undertaken by the historical avant-garde can only be best understood in retrospect,

figures like Eugene Jolas and Stuart Gilbert could confidently relate their goals with the most general ideals of avant-gardism. In *transition*, artists as central to the magazine and as central to our current appreciation of modernism as Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein were once judged to be avant-garde. But while the works of these great innovators can be seen to reflect a high degree of formal innovation, they lacked the ideological undercurrent that defined the historical avant-garde. If the avant-garde artist sought the destruction of art as an institution, the most prominent figures of modernism, like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound for example, wished to leave their mark on the institution of art by finding for their approach to poetry a place within the established tradition. There can be little doubt that the distinctive approach of Eliot and Pound was meant to change art fundamentally, but their approach was defined by its inherent conservatism, reflecting a desire for renewal, albeit sometimes drastic renewal, within the existing establishment. In his introduction to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Jochen Schulte-Sasse grants modernism a savage "attack on traditional writing techniques," but he points out that modernist and avant-gardist figures had irreconcilable "social roles."<sup>9</sup> As John Carey so convincingly furthers this argument in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, modernists sought above all else to preserve the refuge of high art under siege from the increasing literacy of the masses over the past hundred years.<sup>10</sup> Modern artists, in their most extreme examples, sought to reconcile the disruptions that characterised their world by taking refuge in the conservative reserves of a learned tradition. But avant-garde works, as we have already seen, were to erode all such distinctions between art and life, to suggest possible responses to art that would spill out from the exhibition rooms, concert halls, and poetry readings back to the street and encourage the active participation of the audience in social change.<sup>11</sup>

In her reconsideration of the problems inherent in defining the avant-garde, Josephine Guy notes that most definitions of avant-gardism are formed in regards to

either aesthetic or political concerns.<sup>12</sup> Obviously, more politically committed critics would argue that aesthetic concerns cannot rise above issues of politics; Peter Bürger's understanding of history and avant-gardism is couched in Marxist interpretation. Even if one could accept a total division between aesthetic and political matters, the figures of the historical avant-garde can only be understood in light of their political objectives. They defined their avant-gardism always as an avenue for lasting political change.

When *transition* declared that it was somehow connected with the avant-garde, it raised in a very different context many familiar political issues. But instead of asking whether or not *transition* could publish the surrealists in the 1920s and remain apolitical, one must now ask whether or not *transition* could offer nothing more than aesthetic innovations and claim to be truly avant-gardist in the first half of the twentieth century. There were certainly some aspects of the program of the historical avant-garde reflected in the thought of Eugene Jolas. Jolas believed, for example, that the 1930s would bring inevitable economic and social reorganisation and that art would play a role in the shaping of a new society. He wrote, "Not the registering, but the transmutation of the universe is, I believe, the essential problem of the modern poet."<sup>13</sup> But Jolas's vague explanation of a revolution through poetry was, as we have seen, occasionally undermined by his need to maintain the distinction between art and society and continually obscured by his eschewal of genuine political engagement. In his consideration of *transition*, David Bennett remains troubled by the "uneasy tension" created by the political ambivalence of the magazine and its tenuous links with the historical avant-garde.<sup>14</sup> *transition* published the most radical avant-garde art, art that was intended to incite riot, but Eugene Jolas was consistent in his claim that he was not interested in the social and political implications of this work. Indeed, Jolas later reflected that *transition* represented for him "good, clean, esthetic fun, nothing else."<sup>15</sup>

To some extent, of course, the tension between *transition* and the politics of the historical avant-garde was connected with the particular apolitical convictions of its editor. But the dilemma faced by Eugene Jolas is still representative of the difficulties that faced the editors of all modern little magazines. The little magazine actually exists in the space directly targeted by the historical avant-garde, in the space between high art and bohemia, between artists and their society. From this unique and precarious position, the little magazine editor can criticise both the conservative minority for their exclusiveness and the popular majority for their lack of discrimination and refinement.<sup>16</sup> The little magazine aspires to a small circulation and an exclusive audience, but it is also related to the newspaper in its production and distribution, a form more accessible and responsive to its audience than is the book. In the case of *transition*, virtually everyone who was involved in shaping its editorial direction had some connection with newspaper journalism, and their own ideas were formed in response to the example provided by the newspaper. One can hardly blame little magazine editors for their uncertainty in a time in which some artists threatened to estrange art from its social relevance, while other artists wished to destroy the very basis of creative transmission on which the little magazine was conceived. Ultimately, of course, the little magazine has been seen as the great modernist vehicle, its own avant-gardist impulse having been reappropriated in the institutionalisation of modern art. The little magazine is most closely connected with the general currents of modernism through its endorsement of tradition. Indeed, Andreas Huyssen argues that all understandings of the avant-garde may be united in their common resistance to the concept of tradition.<sup>17</sup> In the case of *transition*, however, its links with the historical avant-garde were ultimately limited to the furthest boundaries allowed within a tradition that the magazine utilised and, as a result, effectively protected from the challenge of political radicalism.

## II. Tradition, the Modern Critical Essay, and the Little Magazine

Peter Bürger's strict differentiation between modernism and the avant-garde carries with it a responsibility for the contemporary reader to acknowledge at least the contention caused by the use of these words, and to question the suitability of both terms as they are employed. In their very early study of the little magazine phenomenon, Frederick Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn Ulrich maintained that many editors of such reviews preferred to think of their magazines not as "little," but as "advance guard."<sup>18</sup> Certainly, we have seen that the editors of *transition* used a similar term on a number of occasions without pledging full allegiance to the historical avant-garde movements they promoted. Some publications were aligned specifically with these movements, the most obvious example being André Breton's *La Revolution Surréaliste*, but the vast majority of modern little magazines were aligned directly and consistently with no single movement and cannot, in that sense at least, be described as avant-garde. We have seen, however, that most little magazines are founded to oppose the established publishing industry; the main aim of these magazines is to recommend work of varying quality that, for a variety of reasons, is deemed unsuitable by publishers or magazines founded on a profit motive. A scholar with a keen interest in the form, Felix Pollak has summarised the insurgent aims of the little magazine:

... there is the littlemag tradition of breaks with tradition, the spit in the eye of the status quo, the belligerent anti-stand against anything staid and established, the cantankerous individualism and disloyal opposition, and the elitist pride in smallness as a form of otherness and antithesis.<sup>19</sup>

Because Pollak wishes to establish the principal opposition between the little magazine and the publishing industry, his comments tell us little about the direct relationship

between the little magazine and avant-gardism. Avant-garde artists and decidedly more conservative figures may both offer resistance to large publishers. The difference, of course, is that the avant-garde artist may wish to undermine the entire foundation of the publishing trade, while others simply wish to appropriate the existing system, however briefly, for their own ends. This offers an inherent contradiction for every avant-garde publication, as indeed it did for every artist of the historical avant-garde, who sought to employ the methods of the institution of art to bring about its destruction. This tension is clear in avant-garde art, however, in the increasingly unstable and experimental forms adopted by artists to emphasise their desire to free themselves from bourgeois cultural practice. Perhaps Margaret Anderson expressed some of this attitude in the summer of 1916 when she received few submissions she deemed worthy of publication and brought out a number of the *Little Review* filled primarily with blank pages. This clearly represented a radical reappraisal of the role of the publisher in creative practice, but Anderson's motto of "Making no compromise with the public taste" connected her with the more orthodox modernist practice of preserving the tradition of high art for the few.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, Felix Pollak argues that even the most outrageous little magazines are not really revolutionary; they do not wish to radically change the role of art within society. For him, the little magazine has always represented "a militant minority protest of the culture of the establishment."<sup>21</sup> The ascendance of this establishment, closely tied with the growth of the publishing trade in Pollak's view, simply represents a stage in the relationship between art and society in which aesthetic diversity has been undermined by the bureaucracy of transmission. The purpose of those little magazine editors who would oppose the publishing establishment is not the renunciation of the practices of

cultural transmission, but a restoration of the ideals of a more liberal tradition. In this way, the break with tradition that Pollak refers to above is a more a process of regulatory correction. The little magazine editor is, in his opinion, an example of an “aesthetic elitist” who takes pride in his or her detachment, who accepts that the work that appears in his or her magazine will have neither currency with anything more than a limited readership nor social repercussions.<sup>22</sup> While Pollak says nothing about avant-gardism, *per se*, it is difficult to reconcile his view of the little magazine with any interpretation of the avant-garde. On the surface, at least, it would appear that *transition* exhibited more genuine radicalism than Felix Pollak grants most little magazines. After all, much space in *transition* was taken up with the pronouncement and defence of the manifestos “The Revolution of the Word” and “Poetry is Vertical.”

As Jochen Schulte-Sasse tells us, the manifesto represented “the preferred medium of expression for the avant-garde artist of the twentieth century.”<sup>23</sup> Implicit in this assertion is the understanding that these incendiary statements were tied to the desire to enkindle social activism. While we have seen that they enraged newspaper editors in the United States and other critics throughout the world, Jolas’s proclamations never actually started a riot. Indeed, from many of the things he wrote, one could guess that he would have been genuinely dismayed if they had. A distinction between “manifestos” and “programs” made by Renato Poggioli in his writings about the avant-garde may help explain Jolas’s motives. While Poggioli believes that manifestos outline “aesthetic and artistic precepts,” they are only one part of the wider avant-garde programs that seek to apply “declarations, visions, or overviews.”<sup>24</sup> It seems clear that while Eugene Jolas thought *transition* an appropriate vehicle for the publication of his own aesthetic principles and the examples of work offered by many avant-garde artists,

he always remained suspicious of the programs that outlined specific social and political change. While we know that he accepted the necessity of such change, he offered little further elaboration. Jolas had himself few radical ideas about altering the institutions around him; his revolutionary ideas lacked the desire for radical change that we have seen to have defined the artist of the historical avant-garde. Jolas approached avant-gardism with a characteristic scepticism and fastidiousness. While he shared some of the aesthetic impulses of the avant-garde, Jolas also possessed a decidedly conservative streak in his desire to replace only those practices that no longer responded to the needs of the modern artist while abandoning old forms only after new alternatives could be found. In his willingness to embrace tradition rather than to abandon it, Eugene Jolas exhibited a closer affinity with the major figures of modernism than he did with the avant-garde artists who could be found here and there throughout the pages of his magazine. Furthermore, the lack of a true commitment to avant-gardism in *transition* was more fully revealed by the privileging, to the exclusion of more revolutionary material, of critical essays that effectively related contemporary work with the established tradition of art.

Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich defended the role of the critical essay in the little magazine, calling it “a very lively part of their history.” In this assertion that it is reasonable to expect “that avant-garde literature should have its own sponsors and apologists” who could also employ some manner of secondary comment to promote these works, the position taken by these early critics transcended the limitations of their understanding of avant-gardism. While they believed, for example, that what they described as “conservative criticism” took its values from the standards of the past, the criticism used by avant-garde artists to defend avant-garde works could look only to

“the immediate present” or perhaps even “the future for critical perceptions.”<sup>25</sup>

Conservative criticism, as defined above, must be seen as a procedure important to the reception and acceptance of works, a constituent procedure in the institution of art that the historical avant-garde wished to disassemble. An avant-garde criticism would wish to circumvent the strategies involved in this conservative approach, but there is little evidence that a great deal of avant-garde criticism, as defined by Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich, actually appeared in the modern little magazine. Certainly, the vast majority of the criticism that appeared in *transition* attempted to place contemporary works in the context of a living, unfolding tradition. This critical approach, while not unique to the modern period, must be seen as a characteristic of modernism; its reliance on past works as a standard is antithetical to the beliefs of the avant-garde, to even a broader understanding of the avant-garde than that recognised by Peter Bürger. The preference for this method of criticism in as representative a publication as *transition* must be seen as a major point of departure between the little magazine and the avant-garde.

Much of this view of criticism most closely associated with modernism is derived from the work of T.S. Eliot. Eliot maintained that “criticism is as inevitable as breathing” and that it was perfectly reasonable to give voice to “what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it.” But, for Eliot, this appreciation had always to be defined in the context of that which had passed. “No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone,” Eliot argued. “His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”<sup>26</sup> For Eliot, the great poet of Anglo-American modernism, all artists formed an elite community sharing both “a common inheritance and a common cause.”

Any acknowledgement of that “outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance” is effectively an acknowledgement of tradition.<sup>27</sup> Tradition, in this way, remained for Eliot the determining key for the appreciation of all art.

One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.<sup>28</sup>

Eliot’s contention still has great resonance today. For some contemporary observers, like Andrew Benjamin for example, tradition has “a regulative function” and thereby provides the very basis of the reception of all art, the only “rules” by which understanding is possible and without which art could achieve nothing beyond “the status of non-meaning.”<sup>29</sup>

But as Jürgen Habermas claims, while “a classic” has always been viewed as that which “can survive time,” the “modern document” is considered “a classic” solely on the basis of its authority as “an authentically modern” work.<sup>30</sup> Habermas here borrows heavily from observations like those of Charles Baudelaire who argued that all artists and their works respond to their contemporary surroundings, that “there was a form of modernity for every painter of the past,” for example, and this work captured “the dress, the hairstyle, and even the gesture, the expression and the smile” of its subject in its day.<sup>31</sup> This argument supports the earlier observation that there is a long precedent for using the word “modern” to refer to that which appears exemplarily up-to-date in its time, that which is merely contemporaneous. But what is more important in

this present context is the sense in which the statements from Habermas and Baudelaire both suggest that a genuine avant-garde criticism may be possible, a strategy for the consideration of a work based solely on its present standing. Unfortunately, Habermas also points out that our very awareness of the modern is grasped only in the context of our acknowledgement of the past, the modern ultimately being understood as “a transition from the old to the new.”<sup>32</sup> Here lies the problem for the avant-garde critic: one must define the early twentieth century work of art as “modern,” but to do so by comparison with the past confirms the being of a tradition from which the avant-garde artist must escape. The critic of any contemporary work of art must come to terms with the subject of his or her critical enquiry as a distinctly modern artefact, representing and reacting to a view of reality unlike any that has preceded its own. If modern art has not responded to the unique circumstances of its day, it has failed. Even works like many of those that appeared in *transition* and aspired to a certain universality are marked by their distinctively modern acknowledgement of that universality, an acknowledgement differentiated from any past understanding of what it meant to be universal. But for a genuine avant-garde criticism to emerge, the critic must attempt to understand the modern autonomously, with no admission of the past.

For someone like Eliot, however, every act of criticism necessarily mediated between that which was genuinely new and an acknowledgment of its differences from the past, an act of criticism which did reaffirm the status of tradition. In “*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*,” Eliot called James Joyce’s best-known work “the most important expression which the present age has found,” and yet Eliot remained aware that it was only his own acknowledgement of the past which allowed him to judge the effectiveness of the novel to represent the present. Eliot’s practice of defining today as a contrast with

yesterday reaffirmed the status of tradition in his overall critical strategy. He voiced his regret that because *Ulysses* was a book that was contemporaneous with his consideration of it, a “complete measurement of its place and significance” was not yet possible. *Ulysses* had for Eliot great value as a modern artefact, “a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape,” but its ultimate worth could only be appraised by the eventual standing it gained within the tradition.<sup>33</sup> This linking of the present with the past does not deny the twentieth century the distinctiveness that tested the skill of the modern artist, but it also suggested that challenges could be best resolved by maintaining continuity. Because all existing strategies of reception were clearly encompassed by the institution of art, the entire critical enterprise threatened the intentions of the historical avant-garde. First, to compare a modern work with a work from the past affirms the status of the older work in a fundamental way, though that past work has emerged from an earlier stage in the development of a system that is, in the judgement of the avant-garde artist, now wholly bankrupt. Second, to compare a modern work with a work from the past lends to the older work a position to which the new work seems to aspire. This legitimises among other things distinctions like the differentiation between high art and low art, with works judged favourably being elevated to the exclusion of others. Such distinctions detach art from society, and it is precisely this separation that the historical avant-garde wished to undo. Finally, this act of criticism and subsequent acceptance of the work of art strips the work of its revolutionary vigour, the potential to rouse praxis that is at the root of the avant-garde cause. “Reception tends to dull the critical edge of art,” wrote Theodor Adorno.<sup>34</sup> This is true, essentially, because the act of criticism is inclined to negotiate a place in the

work of art to accommodate a certain view of society and to negotiate a place in society to accommodate a certain interpretation of the work of art. The danger for the avant-garde artist is that conservative criticism works to reconcile the tension between the work of art and society, negating the possibility of that work to effect significant change. Clearly, the avant-garde artist aspired to a new view of criticism that would not render impotent the avant-gardist work.

While the editors of *transition* may not have addressed directly the difficulties confronting the development of an avant-garde criticism, Eugene Jolas and Elliot Paul did establish their belief at least that criticism of modern art was possible, a point not contested in the first half of the twentieth century. “It is easier to judge a contemporary work,” they maintained, “because it arises from sources more readily and directly understandable.”<sup>35</sup> It was left to other contributors, however, to assess works solely in the context of their relevancy to the modern epoch. The best example of avant-garde criticism published in the magazine was probably “The Work of Man Ray” in *transition* 15 (February 1929), an article written by the surrealist Robert Desnos that we considered earlier in our discussion of the treatment of visual art in the magazine. One of the most obvious difficulties facing Desnos was the avoidance of even the most basic conventions used in the critical tradition and the development of an appropriate terminology with which to launch an avant-garde appraisal of Man Ray. He claimed, for example, that “there does not yet exist a word for the designation of Man Ray’s invention, these abstract photographs in which he makes the solar spectre participate in adventurous constructions.” In this particular essay, Desnos went even further in his desire to illuminate a new approach to the reception of art, as seen from the perspective of the historical avant-garde.

It is of little importance to me whether the conception of Man Ray is superior or inferior to his realization. Beginning with the moment I agree to consider it, I have the same rights over his work that he has... If the reasons given by the spectator for the justification of a work are superior to those of the author, the spectator becomes the legitimate possessor of the work he is discussing.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, such an act of criticism on the part of a surrealist poet reflected a desire ultimately to give the audience a more active role in the reception of art. Desnos's comments represented a radical re-evaluation of the act of criticism itself.

Among the artists contributing to *transition* who were not members of a defined avant-garde group, some noteworthy criticism was written in a style that extended the aesthetic principles outlined elsewhere in their creative work. Gertrude Stein, for example, used her characteristically simple structures, repetition, and measured variations to envision more than sixty-five types of different books in her essay "Descriptions of Literature," published in *transition* 13 (Summer 1928).

A book has been carefully prepared altogether.  
 A book and deposited as well.  
 A book describing fishing exactly.  
 A book describing six and six and six.  
 A book describing six and six and six seventy-two.  
 A book describing Edith and Mary and flavouring fire.  
 A book describing as a man all of the same ages all of the same ages and nearly the same.  
 A book describing hesitation as exemplified in plenty of ways.  
 A book which chances to be the one universally described as energetic.  
 A book which makes no mistakes either in description or in departure or in further arrangements.<sup>37</sup>

Stein's essay can be set apart from other works of criticism in that her comments are not actually organised in the form of an argument; one can begin reading at virtually any point of the piece and the effect does not change. A. Lincoln Gillespie's works of criticism did have an organised argument, but his essays were as equally unorthodox as Stein's. Published in the same number of the magazine as "Descriptions of Literature,"

Gillespie's "Antheil & Stravinsky" attempted to highlight the unrivalled achievement of the American composer George Antheil.

The following may elaborate: Stravinsky's *Harmostat* functions paunch-rub *Furiosity*, evokes sheenspray-*FlumeCLEARs*; — — Antheil's *mechaccords* sheenspray-*EmeryCLEARs*, i.e., from Antheil I get Music's first cornice *NudgeOuts* to *FurthPeerultsynthableSpaceMinElim'd Aspection*, tritely, a some precipavoid of *HarMamma's ApronStrings*.<sup>38</sup>

For contributors like Stein and Gillespie, who clearly lacked the radical attitude towards the institution of art that defined the position of the historical avant-garde, these critical writings may have constituted a challenge to the forms utilised in the critical essay, but they did not represent a challenge to either the role of the critical essay in the reception of art or to the institution of art as a whole. In fact, we have seen elsewhere that both Stein and Gillespie were interested primarily in securing their own positions in *transition*, the expansion of their aesthetic techniques into the realm of reception only serving to further their claim to acceptability within the developing literary tradition.

While Gertrude Stein and Link Gillespie at least offered some form of resistance to the predominant aesthetics of cultural practice, the vast majority of critical articles in *transition* represented a more conventional approach to criticism. This is somewhat surprising in that most of the editorial comment devoted to the subject in the magazine reflected some scepticism of the role of the critic in the commercial promotion of literature. In *transition* 12 (March 1928), Jolas and Paul reproached critics, the "suave parasites" and "businessmen of literature," who "dispute the honour of grooming" modern writers.<sup>39</sup> We have seen that *transition* tried to distance itself from the self-promotion that was plaguing the publishing industry; Elliot Paul had by this time already taken issue with much of the contemporary criticism he was reading, drawing

the parallel between the practice and “a man playing poker with his wife.”<sup>40</sup> Stuart Gilbert later ridiculed the growing complicity of artists themselves with this critical enterprise.

Nearly all our writers to-day, however, express themselves with an eye on a god in their own likeness, a calf of brass, the public. Will it be liked, shall I be understood, will it, oh will it pay? There is no danger, genteel reader, that you will be submerged by a tidal wave of “unintelligible” literature. It doesn’t pay.<sup>41</sup>

T.S. Eliot admitted to having taken “the extreme position that the *only* critics worth reading were the critics who practised, and practised well, the art of which they wrote.” Certainly, he believed that “the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour” and that this activity represents “the highest kind of criticism.” One has little difficulty in accepting that artists have a role to play in shaping and reshaping their work in response to their specific creative principles, and that artists may use these principles by which to judge the works of others. However, Eliot also maintained that artists who have not “discharged” all their “critical activity” in the process of creation may turn to comment on not just the works of others but, more importantly, on their own works as well.<sup>42</sup> For David Harvey, the artist’s own concern with the reformation of public taste and the reception of his or her work is evidence of a desire “to change the bases of aesthetic judgement, if only to sell his or her product.” This is a characteristic of what Harvey calls the long-established “commodification and commercialization of a market for cultural products,” of which “a market form of competition” among artists is a symptom.<sup>43</sup> It is clear that the active involvement of the artist in the reception of his or her own work is an endorsement of the institution of art, representing the total absorption of the artist and the cultural artefact in the process of production and distribution.

We must return once again to James Joyce for the best example of an author taking a direct interest in the critical reception of his work in *transition*. We have seen elsewhere how the support of Eugene Jolas and his collaborators and the unique working relationship between Jolas and Joyce helped further the cause of the writing and publishing of “Work in Progress.” While Joyce did not himself actually write in defence of the work, it cannot be overlooked that he played a very active role in the critical enterprise undertaken to defend “Work in Progress” in *transition*. While Sylvia Beach claimed that the contributors to *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incarnation of a Work in Progress* understood Joyce’s work almost instinctively and wrote their appreciations of it “with the greatest ease,” Miss Beach also frankly admitted that these supporters “had the advantage of hearing the hints,” hints that Joyce conveniently “would let fall.”<sup>44</sup> Of this critical endeavour, Joyce wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver, “I did stand behind those twelve marshals more or less directing them what lines of research to follow.”<sup>45</sup> Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich maintained that the works of criticism that appeared in *transition* and dealt with “Work in Progress” provided “an excellent example” of avant-garde criticism because these essays were written before *Finnegans Wake* had been published.<sup>46</sup> But this time, their understanding of avant-gardism revealed its shortcomings; one cannot argue that criticism is avant-garde simply because it is written *en avant* of the completed subject of the enquiry. In fact, the vast majority of these essays did not look to the present or future for a critical standard, as specified in the best definition of avant-garde criticism Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich could offer. As Dougald McMillan tellingly observes in his study of *transition*, the main purpose of Joyce criticism in the magazine was to show how “Work in Progress” could be seen as “a development within literary tradition and not a flaunting of it.”<sup>47</sup>

This is not to say that every essay written about “Work in Progress” stressed the connection between Joyce’s project and works of the past. William Carlos Williams, for example, rejected the use of narrow classifications in the discussion of twentieth-century literature and he maintained that “the new... will not force itself into what amounts to paralyzing restrictions.” He argued that “Work in Progress” was an example of “that which is beyond measurement.”<sup>48</sup> For Williams, it is interesting to note, “American criticism” was “all too unformed” and it represented for this reason the most appropriate position from which to approach those aspects of Joyce’s work that suggested a discontinuity with tradition.

Joyce is breaking with a culture older than England’s when he goes into his greatest work. It is the spirit liberated to run through everything, that makes him insist on unexpurgated lines and will not brook the limitations which good taste would enforce. It is to break the limitations, not to conform to the taste that his spirit runs.<sup>49</sup>

But in spite of this line of argument, *transition* contributors continued to use tradition as a critical touchstone. Stuart Gilbert maintained that “the conception of a poet cannot be blankly immaculate” and he acknowledged an inevitable “casting about for some anticipation in English literature of the uncompromising brilliance of James Joyce’s latest work.”<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere, Gilbert claimed that “the genius of James Joyce has an Elizabethan quality, a universality, a gift of reconciling classical, modern and romantic” literature.<sup>51</sup> Even Thomas McGreevy, for example, who found Joyce’s work peerless, felt obligated to make the point through a survey of the English tradition. He judged that Joyce’s work represented an achievement “on a scale scarcely equalled in literature since the Renaissance, not even by the author of *Paradise Lost*.”<sup>52</sup> It should be noted, however, that the appreciation of Joyce against the background of tradition was based

upon a characteristically modernist expansion of tradition, seen previously in our discussion of the role of translation in introducing non-English texts to a unilingual audience. William Carlos Williams was evidently more comfortable in framing his discussion of “Work in Progress” in this broader context. In his first essay on Joyce in *transition*, he urged readers “to note the kinship between Joyce and Rabelais. Every day Joyce’s style more and more resembles that of the old master, the old catholic and the old priest.”<sup>53</sup> Frank Budgen outlined a “kinship” between Joyce’s work and the poetry of “heathen Scandinavia.”<sup>54</sup> Samuel Beckett traced an “attractive parallel between Dante and Mr. Joyce in the question of language.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the aspect of tradition with which Joyce was most often related was the endless quest of the poet to expand the limits of language. This comparison worked both to connect the aims of “Work in Progress” with the aims of a great deal of contemporary literature while casting Joyce in an established pattern of innovative writers. As early as *transition* 3 (June 1927), readers were told that Joyce’s “practice of using sound equivalents or approximates to incorporate the calls of birds and beasts or other natural sounds into poetry and prose dates considerably back of Aesop.”<sup>56</sup> For John Rodker, “Work in Progress” was “revitalising our language in a form which borrows vastly from the past in its every protean disguise.”<sup>57</sup> Eugene Jolas stressed that “words have undergone organic changes throughout the centuries” while “the people who, impelled by their economic or political lives, created new vocabularies.” To criticise “Work in Progress” would be to take from Joyce a right to language experimentation that all people have traditionally held.<sup>58</sup>

### III. Canon Building and the Resistance of the Little Magazine

The treatment of “Work in Progress” in *transition* is an important part of the account of both the magazine and of *Finnegans Wake*, but it also tells us a great deal about the reception of modern works and the development of the modernist canon. Modernism is in one sense a rewriting of the literary history of the first half of the twentieth century, but we have seen that this history was not entirely written in hindsight. Some of the materials that scholars use to define this period were already at hand after the Second World War; we have noted how Eugene Jolas showed an increased willingness to historicise the achievement of his magazine in the 1930s and 1940s so that it was not minimised in any reconsideration of the period. Hugh Kenner claims that the twentieth century generally “has been canon minded” and that the modernist canon was actually developed largely “by the canonized themselves,” a wider community of artists that recognised their work as “a collective enterprise” and “repeatedly acknowledged one another.”<sup>59</sup> It is clear that the modern critical essay was the principal vehicle by which this acknowledgement took place. This is not to suggest that Wyndham Lewis’s objections to “Work in Progress” were not genuine, for example, but these objections can be read as disagreements within a rapidly closing circle of artists who were concerned for their relative position and who shared a desire for standing within a tradition for which they had great respect. The importance of the little magazine is clear as the modern critical essay thrived on its pages. There is little wonder that the little magazines of the 1950s, awed by the achievement of their predecessors, turned first to attack the critical essay as dogmatic. In this way, the sort of critical effort that served to champion “Work in Progress” effectively ensured the

acceptance of *Finnegans Wake* as an integral text of modernism. Indeed, some of the critical writings that appeared in *transition* were quick to confer upon such artists as James Joyce and Gertrude Stein a sense of this canonical standing, status in a modern canon that had yet to be written.

In the beginning, the editors of *transition* were a little timid in offering Mr. Joyce and Miss Stein, not because we thought of them as too advanced or radical, but for fear we might be considered rather imitative or old fashioned. In fact, we have been rebuked by some of our contributors on this account. To learn that in some quarters these writers... are still looked upon as revolutionaries comes with no little surprise to us.<sup>60</sup>

Ostensibly, the underlying strategy of the *transition* campaign to solicit acceptance for Joyce was rooted in a desire to explicate his work. But because it can be argued that modern criticism seemed altogether concerned with preserving the links between contemporary works and the works of the past, one must then explain the genuine role of explication in this criticism. T.S. Eliot claimed, for example, that all criticism labours to achieve “the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste.”<sup>61</sup> In the case of “Work in Progress,” the text itself proclaims its opacity time and time again. Sylvia Beach maintained that the readers of *transition* unfortunately found themselves “often losing their way in the dark of this night piece” and that the *Exagmination* essays were intended to clarify their difficulties.<sup>62</sup> Stuart Gilbert’s “Joyce Thesaurus Minisculus” in *transition* 16/17 (June 1929) was more than simply an abstract discussion of Joyce’s technique; the article was suggestive of how the entire work may somehow be decoded. We have already suggested that C.K. Ogden’s “Anna Livia Plurabelle in Basic English” in *transition* 21 (March 1932) and numerous entries in Eugene Jolas’s ongoing “Revolution of the Word Dictionary” amounted essentially to an attempt to translate the work. The desire for exegesis is natural for both the artist and

the audience. José Ortega y Gasset maintained, for example, that “every newcomer among styles passes through a stage of quarantine” and that “a new style takes some time in winning popularity.”<sup>63</sup> Using criticism to bridge the gap between artist and audience is consistent with the aims of the modern artist, if for no other reason than to shield him or her from the ridicule that we have seen to have been expressed towards *transition* in the late 1920s. On the surface, at least, the possibility of the reintegration of artist with audience would seem to be akin with the desire of the historical avant-garde to dissolve the distinction between art and society. But, in fact, the apparent need for explication was related more to a desire for institutional acceptance than it was with a will to unite artist with audience.

K.K. Ruthven observes that for the modern poet, it was simply “not enough to write revolutionary poems.” Rather, it was necessary “to explain to your readers exactly what is revolutionary about them, and to do so in terms which they will find usable.”<sup>64</sup> If modern criticism, then, attempted to bring the reader closer to the work of art, it was not in an attempt to subvert the traditional relationship between reader and artefact, but to reappropriate for themselves the exalted status of the masters by effecting the acceptance of twentieth-century art as archetype. In some sense, modern artists do not need to be truly understood; modern artists need simply for their work to be revered. To achieve this degree of recognition, artists need their audience to grasp only a sense of the imposing accomplishment of the modern work, not to be able to imitate it themselves or even wholly to comprehend it, but to accept it as appropriate to the modern age, even if that means that the audience recognises that a new standard in art is beyond them. John Carey actually defines modernism as “a determined effort... to exclude the masses from culture.”<sup>65</sup> One suspects, however, that the most unpleasant

aspect of such a movement is the need for the intelligensia to demonstrate their difference to the masses. For Ortega, the modern work “acts as a social agent” that “divides the public into two groups.” Modern art reminds “the average citizen” that he or she is “a creature incapable of receiving the sacrament of art, blind and deaf to pure beauty.”<sup>66</sup> For this reason, explication is not only undesirable, it is genuinely impossible. For Daniel Bell, then, there always exists in modern art what he describes as “esoteric knowledge.” He argues that the modern work remains “wilfully opaque, works with unfamiliar forms, is self-consciously experimental, and seeks deliberately to disturb the audience.” That a work stubbornly retains its “original difficulty” in this way is, for Bell, “a sign of modernism.”<sup>67</sup>

One may look upon modernism today with a degree of sober detachment; Robert Hughes argues that our view of the movement is “like a period room in a museum.”<sup>68</sup> The creation of a fixed, monolithic account of the art of the first half of the twentieth century must be read as a direct result of those strategies of creation, transmission, and acceptance that defined the institution of art, practices that the vast majority of the artists of the period helped preserve and further. Indeed, the little magazine played an active role in the development and transmission of modernism. *transition*, in particular, was distinctive because of its longevity and its ability to access an international audience. But we have proceeded from the assertion that the form of the little magazine corresponds to an alternative set of seemingly incongruous modernist ideals: heterogeneity, discontinuity, and fragmentation. However, beyond individual works, like John Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* trilogy, Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, and William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*, these ideals appear difficult to pursue. In our current view of modernism, some artists and works have been included, some have been excluded, just

as there was a limit to the amount of material that appeared in any single number of *transition*. The specific rationale involved in canonization is complex; we have mentioned here only its puzzling divisions along national boundaries and the ways in which the betrayal of an internationalist ideal ultimately saw the ostracism of figures like Eugene Jolas. One could just as easily discuss canonical oversights on the grounds of gender, sexual preference, or politics. There is a tendency to generalisation, categorisation, and homogeneity in the nature of any structure. Modernism, as it has been rewritten, has been governed by a remarkable centripetal force, just as individual numbers of *transition* sought coherence in issues like the “American Number,” *transition* 13 (June 1928). The view of modern art that deals with its institutionalisation, self-promotion, and reputation building is undeniably unattractive and studies like Peter Nicholls’ *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* seek to dispute “the one-dimensional view of modernism.”<sup>69</sup> Reconsiderations of the modern canon affirm a certain flexibility in our consideration of the period. But if we can accept such an open, inclusive model, it is also in part because of the contribution of the little magazine. For if in the final analysis these publications did not share in a radical desire to undermine the institution of art that differentiated the avant-garde from modernism, they did present alternatives, innovations, and questions to counter the restrictive, elitist view of an art it simultaneously helped define. Indeed, Bernard and Shari Benstock argue that modern little magazines “provide evidence of the ways the period expressed itself in *transition*.”<sup>70</sup> Unlike the museum room, little magazines like *transition* continue to deny the existence of a single modernism each time one thumbs through its pages, where the tensions inherent in modernism are born anew. The form of the little magazine allows it to live on in a way that, for example, a selective exhibition, a survey course, or even a

book simply cannot. Because the little magazine can be seen to offer resistance to the dominant culture long after the failure of the historical avant-garde, it shares a spirit of protest with a contemporary culture aligned against modernism, while offering perhaps a path of resistance to the creation of a cultural dominant today.

Contemporary culture, whether or not one chooses to adopt the term postmodernism to describe it, must be read to some extent as a reaction against the development of the modern canon. Fredric Jameson maintains that the existence of modernism “as a set of dead classics” can be seen as “surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself.”<sup>71</sup> Ihab Hassan points out that the avant-garde makes “anti-art only to establish, despite itself, canons of another art” against which something must mobilise in protest.<sup>72</sup> Linda Hutcheon, however, warns against the temptation to connect postmodernism with the resistance of the historical avant-garde.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Peter Bürger maintains that because the historical avant-garde was absorbed into modernism and its protest against art became art itself, “the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic.”<sup>74</sup> Bürger’s beliefs have great resonance. Postmodernism has, of course, been successful in differentiating itself from modernism. It has, for example, negotiated a new relationship with tradition in which the artefact of the past is not rejected, but rather is ironically reappropriated through the technique of intertextuality, reappropriated without a proper acknowledgement of its past standing. Now, for example, Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* becomes the underacknowledged text behind Gus Van Sant’s film *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). While postmodernism has had little difficulty marking itself off from its predecessor, the failure of the historical avant-garde gives precedent for a new cultural dominant to absorb all contemporary cultural activity, regardless of its apparent hostility. Terry

Eagleton argues that the contemporary culture “is capable for the moment of disarming and demoralizing many of its antagonists.”<sup>75</sup> Jameson observes that even the most outrageous features of what he calls the “postmodern revolt” that “transcend anything that might have been imagined at the most extreme moments of high modernism” are “received with the greatest complacency” and have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society.<sup>76</sup>

If anything, the institution of art has developed apace to the point by which canonical acceptance seems both automatic and immediate. As Robert Hughes puts it:

By the mid-eighties, twenty-one year old art-history majors would be writing papers on twenty-six-year-old graffitiists. The modernist ethos was no longer a side issue in art history; it had become an industry, with a hundred links to museum practice, the market, and the activities of living artists. The lag between work and interpretation shrank to near-zero, and the sheer volume of commentary on new and nominally vanguard art expanded beyond anything that could have been imagined in Courbet’s time, Cézanne’s, or even Jackson Pollock’s.<sup>77</sup>

There would appear, then, to be no tangible role for the little magazine today. It clearly provided in the 1950s and the 1960s an early forum from which to attack modernism. But changes in the publishing industry, responding to the apparent commercial acceptability of even the most unorthodox art, offer more outlets than ever for daring young writers. Yet, the little magazine continues to thrive. While it was estimated that less than two hundred little magazines were published in English at the beginning of the 1950s, there were approximately five thousand identified in the United States alone in a survey of little magazines carried out in the late 1980s. It appears that the response of the little magazine to the seemingly boundless acceptance of innovation in contemporary culture is to test this hypothesis, to literally saturate the marketplace with aesthetic overproduction. If postmodernism is truly the cultural expression of capitalism

developed on an international scale, the contemporary little magazine has appropriated its trappings to effect more opportunities. With a computer, laser printer, photocopier, modern mail capability, and perhaps even electronic communication through the internet, the contemporary little magazine editor is in a healthier position than his predecessors could ever imagine. Perhaps the contemporary little magazine even holds the seeds of one of the dramatic aesthetic and political “happenings” Peter Bürger suggested could possibly revive the protest of the historical avant-garde.<sup>78</sup> In any event, the little magazine is showing no signs of capitulation. In his article “Blasting with the Littles,” Bill Katz raises the example of the little magazine *Lightworks*, a publication that came to Katz complete with a book of matches to effect destruction of the institution of art. “Use these matches to destroy all art museums,” it instructs. “Keep last match for this matchbook.”<sup>79</sup> No one told its editors that their protest was ineffectual; no one told its editors that their magazine had already become canonical; no one told them to stop publishing. As always, that decision is left to the discretion of little magazine editors themselves.

## A Note on Manuscript Holdings

This dissertation makes extensive use of the Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, examined during a research trip to Yale University in August 1994. The collection was acquired from the Jolas family by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in 1989 and it includes correspondence, photographs, manuscripts, and published material. The papers consist of 68 boxes and 1,589 folders and are divided into four separate subgroups comprising material dealing with Eugene Jolas, Maria Jolas, *transition* office files, and the life and work of James Joyce. The Eugene Jolas subgroup includes material dealing with his work in the American military information service during and after World War II, but it also contains a great deal of unpublished correspondence and creative writing connected with the *transition* years. The Maria Jolas subgroup includes unpublished correspondence dealing with *transition* and its legacy, as well as autobiographical material and information about the Jolas family. The *transition* office files subgroup includes material dating largely from after 1940 because many early files were destroyed during the Second World War. This material still casts light on much of the work involved in editing a little magazine. The James Joyce subgroup includes material entrusted to the Jolases by the Irish novelist in the months before his death. Much of the correspondence in this subgroup has, however, already been brought to light by Joyce scholars.

These papers include various drafts of Eugene Jolas's unpublished autobiography. An edition of *Man From Babel* is currently being prepared for Yale University Press by Andreas Kramer at Goldsmiths College, London and Ranier Rumold at Northwestern University. With the kind cooperation of Dr. Kramer, I was able to identify a working draft of the manuscript, also used by Arnold Goldman in his recent essay on Elliot Paul in the *James Joyce Quarterly*. "Man From Babel" is therefore given a separate entry in my notes and bibliography because it contains a distinguishable set of page references. All other references to the Eugene and Maria Jolas papers are marked by reference to the box and file number under which the collection is catalogued.

# Notes

## Notes to Chapter One

1. Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 1-2.
2. David Bennett, "Periodical Fragments and Organic Culture: Modernism, the Avant-Garde, and the Little Magazine," *Contemporary Literature* 30:4 (Winter 1989): 480.
3. Mark Olson, John Judson, and Richard Boudreau, "Felix Pollak: An Interview on Little Magazines," in *The Little Magazine: A Modern Documentary History*, edited by Elliot Anderson and Mary Kinzie (New York: Pushcart Press, 1978), 35-36.
4. Eugene Jolas, "Rambles Through Literary Paris," quoted in *The Left Bank Revisited: Selections From the Paris Tribune*, edited by Hugh Ford (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), 96.
5. Eugene Jolas, "transition: An Epilogue," *American Mercury* 23:90 (June 1931): 185-86.
6. Edwin Muir, *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926), vii.
7. Eugene Jolas, "Man From Babel," unpublished autobiography, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 169.
8. Eugene Jolas, "transition: An Epilogue," 187.
9. Hart Crane, *The Letters of Hart Crane, 1916-1932*, edited by Brom Weber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 294.
10. "Glossary," *transition* 4 (July 1927): 179.
11. Eugene Jolas, "Man From Babel," 179-80.
12. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, new edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 563.
13. Eugene Jolas, "transition: An Epilogue," 192.
14. The Editors, "The Pursuit of Happiness," *transition* 8 (November 1927): 179-80.
15. Eugene Jolas and Elliot Paul, "A Review," *transition* 12 (March 1928): 143.
16. Bravig Imbs, *Confessions of Another Young Man* (New York: Henkle-Yewdale House, 1936), 197.
17. *Ibid.*, 153.
18. Georges Braque, Eugene Jolas, Maria Jolas, Henri Matisse, André Salmon, and Tristan Tzara, *Testimony Against Gertrude Stein* (The Hague: Servire Press, 1935), 9-10.
19. Bravig Imbs, *Confessions of Another Young Man*, 151.
20. "Glossary: transition as a Quarterly," *transition* 12 (March 1928): 181.
21. Eugene Jolas, "Man From Babel," 187.
22. Dougald McMillan, *transition: The History of a Literary Era, 1927-1938* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1975), 114. The first comprehensive book on the topic, this valuable study was prepared with the full cooperation of Maria Jolas. While McMillan had the benefit both of access to the *transition* papers and to additional information provided by the widow herself, Mrs. Jolas remained fiercely protective of her husband's reputation and on the evidence of letters exchanged between her and McMillan, letters now held at the Beinecke Library, the widow was determined to influence the perception given of her husband and his work in the completed study. For this reason, one must be

especially wary of McMillan's findings when they involve subjects, like the involvement of Gertrude Stein with *transition*, on which it was clear that Maria Jolas held strong and disputable opinions.

23. "Glossary: *transition* as a Quarterly," 182.
24. Arnold Goldman, "Elliot Paul's *transition* Years: 1926-28," *James Joyce Quarterly* 30:2 (Winter 1993): 256.
25. Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping* (London: Peter Owen, 1972), 107.
26. Eric Staley, "Influence, Commerce, and the Literary Magazine," *Missouri Review* 7:1 (Fall 1983): 177.
27. "Glossary," *transition* 6 (September 1927): 185.
28. *transition* 15 (February 1929): [308].
29. Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 15:285.
30. Eugene Jolas, "Announcement," *transition* 19/20 (June 1930): 369.
31. Dougald McMillan, *transition*, 62.

### Notes to Chapter Two

1. David Bennett, "The Government of Words: The Practice and Theory of Nonrepresentational Writing in the 1920s and 1930s," doctoral dissertation, University of York, York, England, September 1980, iv.
2. The Editors, "Introduction," *transition* 1 (April 1927): 135.
3. The Editors, "Suggestions for a New Magic," *transition* 3 (June 1927): 179. Eugene Jolas later suggested that he, alone, was responsible for this article, an opinion supported by Dougald McMillan in his study of *transition*. The general tone of the piece is suggestive of Jolas's style, but it dates from a time in which neither Jolas nor Elliot Paul had developed an autonomous critical persona. I have, however, accepted Eugene Jolas's claim, a claim that is helpful in tracing early suggestions of his critical preoccupations.
4. Robert Sage, "La Réalité," *transition* 2 (May 1927): 161.
5. The Editors, "Suggestions for a New Magic," 178.
6. Eugene Jolas, "Notes on Reality," *transition* 18 (November 1929): 20.
7. Robert Sage, "The Mysticism of Reality," *transition* 6 (September 1927): 170.
8. Eugene Jolas, "The Innocuous Enemy," *transition* 16/17 (June 1929): 209.
9. Eugene Jolas, "*transition*: An Epilogue," 188.
10. Eugene Jolas, "Transatlantic Letter," *transition* 13 (Summer 1928): 277.
11. Robert Sage, "La Réalité," 161.
12. The Editors, "Suggestions for a New Magic," 178.
13. *Ibid.*, 179.
14. Eugene Jolas, "Gottfried Benn," *transition* 5 (August 1927): 146.
15. Elliot Paul, "Hands Off The Dyke," *transition* 5 (August 1927): 155-56.
16. Eugene Jolas, "On the Quest," *transition* 9 (December 1927): 196.
17. Eugene Jolas, "Gottfried Benn," 146.
18. Stuart Gilbert, "Five Years of *transition*," *transition* 22 (February 1933): 138.
19. Eugene Jolas, "The Revolution of Language and James Joyce," *transition* 11 (February 1928): 109-10.
20. *Ibid.*, 109.

21. Ibid., 110.
22. Ibid., 113-14.
23. Eugene Jolas, "The New Vocabulary," *transition* 15 (February 1929): 171.
24. Eugene Jolas, "Man From Babel," 175.
25. Eugene Jolas and Elliot Paul, "A Review," 140.
26. David Bennett, "The Government of Words," 9.
27. Eugene Jolas, "On the Quest," 191.
28. Eugene Jolas, "Notes," *transition* 14 (Fall 1928): 180.
29. Dougald McMillan, *transition*, 48.
30. Kay Boyle, Whit Burnett, Hart Crane, Caresse Crosby, Harry Crosby, Martha Foley, Stuart Gilbert, A.L. Gillespie, Leigh Hoffman, Eugene Jolas, Elliot Paul, Douglas Rigby, Theo Rutra, Robert Sage, Harold J. Salemsen, and Lawrence Vail, "Proclamation: The Revolution of the Word," *transition* 16/17 (June 1929): 13.
31. Stuart Gilbert, *Reflections on James Joyce: Stuart Gilbert's Paris Journal*, edited by Thomas F. Staley and Randolph Lewis (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 10.
32. Eugene Jolas, "Statement," *transition* 18 (November 1929): 175.
33. Stuart Gilbert, "Functions of Words," *transition* 18 (November 1929): 203.
34. C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, second edition (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Company, 1927), 149.
35. Stuart Gilbert, "Functions of Words," 204-05.
36. Robert Sage, "Word Lore," *transition* 18 (November 1929): 202.
37. Eugene Jolas, "The King's English Is Dying — Long Live the Great American Language," *transition* 19/20 (June 1930): 143.
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### Notes to Chapter Seven

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