***transition***

‘LITTLE MAGAZINE’ running from 1927-1938. Edited by EUGENE JOLAS and associate editors ELLIOT PAUL, ROBERT SAGE, STUART GILBERT, MATTHEW JOSEPHSON, and JAMES JOHNSON SWEENEY. Significant translations by MARIA JOLAS. Produced in Paris, Colombay-les-deux-Eglises, and The Hague.

In a July 1940 letter to James Johnson Sweeney, then curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the literary editor, poet, and journalist EUGENE JOLAS writes of their once-shared project, in need of liquidation with the disastrous events of the war. ‘Everything I believed in for Europe has crumbled overnight’, he writes, thinking back over a decade of fervent belief in the power of literature, now facing an epochal cataclysm. ‘But I have to go on. […] Transition must die.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

*transition*, with its deliberate lower-case ‘t’, was the largest of the ‘LITTLE MAGAZINES’. Acting as a vital bridge between experimental writing in Europe and an eager readership of over a thousand subscribers in the US, it was also among the most important. For a journal scholar Dougald McMillan calls ‘synonymous’ with the LOST GENERATION, *transition* has received comparatively little critical attention, a fact that, with growing recent interest, is now changing.

EUGENE JOLAS formed *transition* with significant assistance from his wife Maria, and various contributing and associate editors. ELLIOT PAUL was a co-founding and major editor for the inaugural year from April 1927, followed by Robert Sage, with contributing editorship from MATTHEW JOSEPHSON in 1928. James Johnson Sweeney also took an editorial position in the late 1930s, and the circle extended to STUART GILBERT. Over 475 contributors are represented across *transition*’s 27 issues, some of which ran to around 400 pages. Initially a monthly with the subtitle “an international quarterly for creative experiment”, JOLAS’s editorial hand is evident in the later, more grandiose heading in later quarterly issues, “An International Workshop for Orphic Creation”. The magazine was originally produced in Paris, then Colombay-les-deux-Eglises, then after a near two-year hiatus between summer 1930 and spring 1932 it was re-launched from The Hague via The Servire Press.

JOLAS infused *transition* with an idealistic, internationalist tenor, incorporating a diverse range of voices from SURREALISM, DADAISM, and EXPRESSIONISM. JAMES JOYCE’s “Work in Progress” was published in seriatim in the majority of issues (later forming the bulk of *FINNEGANS WAKE* in 1939), and GERTRUDE STEIN made fourteen appearances. The Jolases published the first translations of FRANZ KAFKA into English in 1927, and introduced *transition* readers to a panoply of European and American writing, photography, art, and criticism, including texts by PAUL ELUARD, PHILLIPE SOUPAULT, HANS ARP, HUGO BALL, HART CRANE, HARRY CROSBY, KAY BOYLE, and DJUNA BARNES. Early works by SAMUEL BECKETT also appear in later issues.

Although *transition* was consistently mocked in the popular press for being recondite, in the leftist press for being bourgeois, and by WYNDHAM LEWIS in his journal *The Enemy* for its neo-romanticism, the journal withstood all attacks by embracing a self-deprecating and humorous tone. Its signature and arguably jovial ‘Revolution of the Word’ “Proclamation”, published in *transition* 16/17 (July 1929) may have been part of JOLAS’s sustained aesthetic credo to universalize language, but examination of specific issues and arrangements reveal a level of playfulness and irony yet to be fully explored.

*transition*'s impact is significant. New Directions editor James Laughlin produced his first book, a 1936 collection of verse, with a featured dedication to Jolas and his fellow *transition* editors as ‘the great international magazine’ whose participants ‘have begun successfully the REVOLUTION OF THE WORD’. Readers included Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Carl Jung, and a young Henry Miller.

Despite the engulfing end point indicated between war and artistic creation, Jolas oversaw a revival of his magazine under Georges Duthuit’s editorship in the late 1940s (with a capital ‘T’ in place of the lower case letter of the pre-war version). His letter to Sweeney, fellow editor turned arranger of a previous modernism, is a decisive marker. From one curator of artistic experimentation to another, Jolas calls for the final dissolution of over a decade of literary, networked culture, as the magazine framed it, from 1927 to 1938. As the journalistic mind that created the Revolution of the Word, by 1940, Jolas turns executioner.

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1. Eugene Jolas, letter to James Johnson Sweeney, 14 July 1940. Box 59, Folder 1390. The Maria and Eugene Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)