

TRANSITION: AN EPILOGUE

BY EUGENE JOLAS

WHEN I suspended *transition* a year ago, the orchestra of vituperation which had accompanied the magazine's three-and-half years of existence started a flourish of hosannas, and the critics and criticasters heaved a sigh of relief. "The Dance of the Wild Men" was over. An era of sanity, beauty and normalcy was to begin in American literature. Manifestoes appeared shouting for "order", headline writers ironically turned hand-springs, college professors took heart and re-organized the régime of their virtuous feudalism. The nightmare which our "international quarterly for creative experiment" had brought on was at last stopped by the dawn of reason and gentility. Since I was the chief criminal responsible for this "epoch of horror", and I am still unable to start penitently on the road to Canossa, I shall try to give my side of *transition's* battles from as objective a view as is possible under the circumstances.

It is not entirely by accident that it was in Paris that *transition* saw the light of day. The atmosphere of the French capital during the years following the war was saturated with disquiet and a new *mal du siècle* which found its outlet in an energy of subversion and a search for evasion in creative expression. In the Winter of 1926-27 Paris was a hotbed of literary and artistic insurrections. James Joyce, it was rumored, was engaged in writing a novel which would go as much beyond "Ulysses" as "Ulysses" went beyond "Portrait

of the Artist as a Young Man." The new work was to present the night-mind, and the few excerpts that had appeared were astonishing because of their recondite substance and composition.

The Surréalistes, under the leadership of André Breton, were "making literature with revolvers in their pockets." I had been on friendly terms with several members of the group for some years, and was often present at their daily conferences, held with almost military regularity at the Café Cyrano in Montmartre. Here they drew up their fulgurant blasts against official French letters. Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, Philippe Soupault, Benjamin Péret, Max Ernst, Roger Vitrac, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes and others acted together in systematically undermining the academic state of mind. Transplanted German poets, such as Hans Arp and Carl Einstein, were continuing the impulse of Dadaism, although a few years later the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and similar barbaric deformations were to strangle these forces. Gertrude Stein was working on her mathematical abstractions and giving the tradition of grammar and syntax a death-blow. Léon-Paul Fargue, France's greatest living poet, had at last been persuaded by Mlle. Adrienne Monnier to write down his prose-poems, daring mixtures of lyricism and *argot*, with which he had been in the habit of entertaining his friends for many years. Everywhere there was a rush towards experiment.

American literature, though rich and fermenting, was dominated during that time by a belated naturalism. It was afraid of phantasms and dreams. Here and there the pre-occupation with psychology showed a tendency to escape a purely objective realism, but it did not seem to go beyond an ethical or sociological orientation. American poetry, in my opinion, remained, for the most part, didactic or descriptive. It lacked a vertical direction. The imagination was held in check by a morbid sense of photography. At that time the *Dial* was continuing its somnolent atticism, thus opening a gap for the theories of Professor Irving Babbitt. The *Little Review* had emigrated to Paris and appeared only at rare intervals. *This Quarter*, which had made a brave effort, under Ethel Moorhead and Ernest Walsh, to gather together the insurgents, had been forced to abandon the fight due to the death of Walsh. Ezra Pound's *Exile* was still unborn. T. S. Eliot, in his *Criterion*, envisaged a neo-classical attitude. I felt there was a need for a review in English which would be a focal point for the creative experiments of the period.

I had just returned to Paris after a brief visit to the United States, where I had renewed contact with the dynamism of the country. The colorful quality of the American idiom made me hope for an epoch when the American language would become the dominating speech of the Anglo-Saxon world. I had grown tired of the eternal "patterns", "delicate perceptions", and similar *clichés* used by the official poets of the day. My own interest in philology, which developed organically through the fact that I had to graft upon my native German, and upon French, my second mother-tongue, a third language, at an age when most people have already stabilized the scheme of their speech,

caused me to occupy myself with the mechanics of language as a major problem. I believed in words as gratuitous elements.

My experience as an American newspaper man became a contributing factor in this decision. The reportorial style, as practiced in America, is, in my opinion, the worst influence a poet can have; for the standardization of language, which it involves, militates against all liberty of expression. It is a stupendous leveling force which stultifies any originality a writer may possess. In this connection it was not without significance that *transition* should have been essentially a newspaper men's review. When I invited Elliot Paul and later on Robert Sage to collaborate with me in the venture, the three of us were working on the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. A number of writers who later appeared in *transition*—among them Leigh Hoffman, Emily Holmes Coleman, Waverly Lewis Root, Edgar Calmer, Whit Burnett—were also employed by American newspapers at that time. We were tired of the hackneyed word mechanism—not to mention the imbecile philistinism of the so-called American colony in Paris—imposed on us by the newspaper machine.

I had in mind a review which should become a haven for the imaginative spirit. I envisaged a kind of inter-continental revival of idealism, a laboratory in which pragmatic manifestations should be combated and a basis laid for an attitude of mind that recognized the magical forces as the major ones of life. I did not want to publish an anthology, as most modern magazines do, but a review with a dialectic, a review which was out for a revaluation of ideological values. Against the sordid cynicism and objectivism of the Middle-Western school, I wanted to place the action of the imagination. I wanted to

encourage a sense of the fabulous in terms of the Twentieth Century, and to work toward a more flexible and lucid speech.

The result was a storm of abuse and sneers in which the words "lunatics", "ravings of madmen", "paranoia", "dishonest quackery", "charlatans", "poseurism", "incredible imbecility", "senseless echolalia", "nauseating", "neo-decadence", "pathology", "Montparnasse fakirs", "expatriate droolings", etc. were among the mildest. A kind of collective fury swept over our opponents, and this feeling against the "incendiaries" still continues. We were accused of being "anarchists" and "fanatic anti-Americans". Our work was "conceived of the stuff of which nightmares are made". Anonymous letters, vicious and freakish, came pouring in. The Montparnasse Bohème, which my friends and I visited only very infrequently, became the bug-bear of our enemies. I remember a cartoon in *Life* during that time which crystallized this sentiment. Four drunken Americans were shown in a Montparnasse bar in front of a huge pile of beer saucers. On their right there was a copy of Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises", and on their left a copy of *transition*. One of the toppers asked the waiter: "*Garçon*, what's that the orchestra's playing?" "Why, that's the Star-Spangled Banner, sir," was the reply.

II

As the preparations for *transition* got under way, I engaged a little room in an obscure hotel where I had been in the habit of staying before. Our "offices", as Elliot Paul called our refuge, overlooked the lovely Place des Invalides and formed part of a quarter which harbors delightful cafés. We started with a typewriter, a card-table and two rickety chairs.

Our début was not without its difficulties. Paul and I had gone to the little town of Mayenne, in Normandy, famous for its apple-jack, in order to supervise the make-up of the first number. Through an oversight on the part of the printer, our names were put down as *gérants*, i.e., the persons legally responsible for the contents of the review. Hardly had we returned to Paris, when we were informed by the police commissioner of the nearest police-station that the district-attorney of Mayenne had started action against us for violation of a law which forbids foreign citizens from assuming the function of *gérant*. Our magazine was held up for many weary weeks, while this complication was being smoothed out. Our *gérant* eventually, was a gentleman who worked in the composing-room, and who was unable to distinguish an English word from a Spanish one.

I had succeeded in getting the Surréalistes, who, on principle had refused to contribute to any other review save their own, to collaborate with us. In their offensive against the traditional ideology, they used the tactics of direct action. I attended many of their public manifestations, when the vehemence with which they proceeded to wreck the official structure resulted in brawls which invariably ended in the hoosegow. I still see André Breton getting up during a "poetic matinée" at the Vieux Colombier and hurling his invective at the heads of the smug burghers who had come to listen to some epicene youth recite modern poetry.

While the Surréalistes were precious allies in the *transition* offensive, I did not follow their evolution. The only point of contact I had with them was the conviction that the study of the irrational was the *a priori* condition for giving the imagination a new dimension. But the

theories of Freud as a basis for a revolutionary literature were abhorrent to me. I did not feel that poetry could be the result of psychiatry. I was not prepared to make the principle of automatic writing the ultimate aim of the creative effort. The poet's vision, it seemed to me, was autonomous and related to other forces than dementia precox or paranoiac hallucinations.

I published the work of the Surréalistes during the first year for documentary reasons. Although I still believe that the exploration of our dream-life is the precondition of the creative activity, I tried to direct the subsequent evolution of *transition* toward æsthetic organization. My break with the Surréalistes became definite when they went over, bag and baggage, to the Communists, and attempted to make poetry the hand-maiden of a sociological movement. But it should not be forgotten that their importance in French letters was enormous. Although they did not attack the problem of language, they presented the first effective counterbalance against the rigidity of style and the mania for classical clarity and restraint which still haunts the best French minds.

While *transition* was still a monthly, I moved with my family to Colombey-les-2-Eglises, a little village in the Haute-Marne. We lived in a rambling old house at the edge of a boar-infested forest, and the Tolstoyan simplicity of our background contrasted grotesquely with the bogey the reviewers had constructed of the "Montparnasse rebellion". The great distance from Paris necessitated our looking for a new printing establishment. We found it nearby in St. Dizier, where M. André Bruillard's two-hundred-year-old plant harbored the review up to the last number. The sixty kilometres that separated our village from St. Dizier were covered in an antediluvian Ford, and as

each number was due, we rolled over and back many times, until the issue was finally put to bed. St. Dizier offered for diversion, aside from the labors at the printshop, a few placid cafés, the town band, and the excellent Fort Carré beer.

It was amusing to work with French printers on English texts. The assiduous modifications which James Joyce brought to "Work in Progress", then running serially in *transition*, caused us many moments of anguish. Mr. Joyce's proofs, of which frequently there were from four to five—not to mention many verbal additions by an execrable long-distance telephone from Paris—were the despair of the printers. M. Noël, the foreman, was never able to penetrate the mystery of why this great writer should be so lackadaisical about his copy. The Joycian proofs would arrive, black with additions, and create a storm in the composing-room. But to the honor of these courteous workers of the old school be it said that the corrections were invariably made.

The almost universal scepticism with which "Work in Progress" was first received, has now, I think, given way to a better understanding of this monumental creation. This is due, in no small measure, to the systematic exegesis which a few American, British and French writers undertook in *transition*. As the work began to unfold its multiple facets and the poetic composition appeared as a vast fairy tale, readers who were tired of the facile methods used in the machine-made novel found pleasure in the intellectual problem the work presented. We who had the privilege of watching with what painstaking care Mr. Joyce developed each instalment of his creation can have only admiration for the passionate sincerity and force of his vision. His attempt to give a time-and-spaceless panorama of the nocturnal world trans-

mitted by means of a new and very personal language, may well become the basis of the coming literary age.

The first year of *transition* was mainly devoted to a research into existing conditions. We published, in English translations, the important work of the younger French, German, Soviet and Spanish writers, as well as that of such Americans as Gertrude Stein, A. Lincoln Gillespie, Jr., Morley Callaghan, Ernest Hemingway, Kay Boyle, Robert M. Coates, Malcolm Cowley, Allan Tate, Matthew Josephson, Hart Crane, Kathleen Cannell, John Herrmann, Samuel Putnam, Yvor Winters, Archibald McLeish, Murray Godwin, Horace Gregory, Robert McAlmon, William Carlos Williams, Alfred Kreymborg, Paul Bowles, and numerous others. The labor of translating, organizing and preparing the monthly issues with a limited staff had in the meantime become a heavy burden, and I decided after the first twelve issues to bring the magazine out as a quarterly. New forces came into *transition* during the following two years and a half, among whom were: Whit Burnett, Harry Crosby, Stuart Gilbert, Peter Neagoe, Francis Brugière, J. Bronowski, Bob Brown, Ruth Pine Furniss, W. C. G. Jitro, John Riordan, Katherine Ann Porter, etc. With number thirteen, there began a period during which I tried to work out an æsthetic based on a modern idealism. I also inaugurated a series of international *enquêtes*, among them the influence of America in Europe, the dream, the word, New York, the American expatriate. These symposia clarified a number of problems then in the air. They seemed to me part of the action of *transition*, and their repercussion throughout America and Europe showed a most gratifying interest in these controversial questions.

Elliot Paul having dropped out, my collaborators after the first year were Robert Sage, Stuart Gilbert, Matthew Josephson and the late Harry Crosby, all of whom helped make the following two years and a half continuous adventures. It was a charming and stimulating experience to spend hours in the company of friends who had certain fundamental points on which they agreed and who were willing to walk with me on a difficult and lonely road. That personal ambitions and the exigencies of life rarely allow the continuation of such idyllic accidents must be taken for granted, and the final dispersion of our little *cénacle* did not take me unaware. But I have a few memories of moments when an almost mystic spirit of collective impulses came over us, and it is enough for me to know that such friendships, even of short duration, were really possible. In this connection I cannot forego mentioning the great debt we owed to my wife, who organized the technical side of *transition*, watched over the increasingly large bulk of correspondence, helped with reading proofs and with translations, and in general was a counselor without whose aid the magazine would have been impossible.

III

As *transition* progressed, the atmosphere of revolt we had created became the magnet for a number of young American and European writers who were groping to find their base. I was out to provoke a crisis through a method of conscious disintegration. As the dialectics of the review became clearer, it was obvious that the chief problem was to find a re-definition of the concepts of reality and beauty.

Roughly speaking, we may distinguish between two main attitudes of mind in

literary history: the classical and the romantic ones. I might say that the line of evolution I tried to follow in *transition* belonged to the latter. This meant the acceptance of a neo-idealistic philosophy. "The magic idealist", says Novalis, "is he who is able to change ideas into objects as well as objects into ideas." This is not *Schwärmerei*, but represents the search for a new world ideal, for a miraculous element in life. It seeks to destroy the dualism between individual and universe, idea and reality, spirit and nature, God and world.

The dream is the paragon of the poetic imagination. It is here that the rationalist principle loses its supremacy and the mystic, the telluric, the demonish, the phantastic, are revealed in astonishing associations. It is clear that the artist's imagination is related to the primary state of the unconscious and not to the secondary, "thinking," processes. The entire creative activity, therefore, has its motor force in the phantasies which relate man to all of humanity. Art perpetuates life through form, and it is in the *conscious* fusion of the subjective and the objective worlds that the creator achieves a voluntary synthesis.

The objection I have to rationalism is not its assumption of finality, but its voluntary narrowness. For we know today that the personality is more complex than previous generations even suspected. The "I" has many dimensions. There is another part of the world in each of us which is related to the instincts. We have learned through the discoveries of Janet, Freud, Jung, Lévy-Bruhl etc., that there are hidden forces in the subconscious which are not only the residua of our own personal lives, but are remnants of those dark ages before history began. When we consider that the geological age of the earth is at least two billion years, and that our actual

knowledge of it hardly encompasses five or six thousand years, it is apparent that the unconscious memory we have of those pre-historic epochs provides immense possibilities for speculation. Now, says modern psychology, this memory exists. We have, within ourselves, direct contact with the primitive periods of humanity, as well as with the cosmic forces. Art, according to these scientists, represents in its most characteristic specimens the wisdom of the ages.

Thus the problem of reality which is at the bottom of every æsthetic consideration assumes new forms. The empire of the imagination, the pure imagination, which life tries to destroy, is the poet's goal. This became the aim of *transition*, which also tried to demolish the traditional idea of beauty and substitute for it a more comprehensive one. When Lautréamont, for instance, says that "the beautiful is the accidental encounter of a sewing-machine with an umbrella on an operating table," we have an emotion of such novelty that we are startled. Here we no longer have the classical division between the categories of beauty and ugliness. The old rules circumscribe the creator's activity and oblige him to remain within certain archaic and pedantic limitations. But having recognized the logic of the unconscious, the poet today realizes his liberty, and moves in a world of the real-unreal.

The juxtaposition of dream-facts heretofore believed to be unrelated, the discovery of a changed *Wesenschau*, the exploration of a night-world hitherto neglected, necessitate not only a new attitude to the word itself, but to its grammatical inter-relationships. It was only natural, therefore, that *transition* should attempt to batter down conventional language, and go towards a liberated expression. The strange symbols produced by the

unconscious associations cannot be expressed by "democratic speech", but by word arrangements which spring directly from the recognition of these processes. It is absurd to evoke such states of mind as the dream, the hallucination, the half-sleep etc. with word combinations created by the waking state.

In my manifesto, "Revolution of the Word", I tried to give aphoristic expression to certain of these postulates. This proclamation had a curious fate. 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. In France, André Thérive, the critic of *Le Temps*, hurled a broadside at us, Benjamin Crémieux discussed it at length, and nationalist organs pointed out the danger *transition's* insurrection might be for the stability of the French language. As a result, literary reviews in France were inundated with poems by young writers trying to invent new words. The manifesto was translated into seven languages, and the discussion is still going on.

In writing this statement, I had no intention of demanding that every writer use only invented words. I wanted to state my belief that the poet has a right to assemble such realities as may come within his purview, even though the traditions of grammar and vocabulary should be violated at the same time. I was not advocating Marinetti's theory of "words in liberty." I merely felt that the poet is privileged—as was Shakespeare when he invented such words as *ærial*, *auspicious*, *castigate*, *bare-faced*, *clangor*, *compact*, *control* etc.—to create vocables of his own, if there is an organic necessity for them. (Freud, in his "Interpretation of Dreams," has an interesting chapter devoted to neol-

ogisms in our dream life.) In addition, it also seemed important to me to combat the notion that literature was to remain aloof from the spoken language. The rapid evolution of the American idiom, which is the result of a subconscious mass-impulse, opens up, in my opinion, possibilities for a future literary medium of great fecundity.

The breaking up of the old ideas of reality and beauty necessarily brings with it the need for new genres in composition. Literature, because of the development of such modern media as the newspaper, the radio, the cinema, etc., no longer needs to imitate life. The imagination has new tasks. The short story as conceived today will soon be a dead form. The novel will be broken up. It will become a compendium of all the forces of life, a dynamic creation in which the pre-logical will play an essential rôle. Poetry will become gnostic. It is for this reason that I tried to encourage in *transition* such forms as the saga, the fairy tale, the scenario, the legend, the fable. It was a Twentieth Century form of these genres capable of giving the fabulous of our age that I sought to find.

IV

I gave up *transition* at a time when it threatened to become a mercantile success. It was being taken up by the snobs, the plagiarists and the parasites. I felt the need for perspective and construction. The war was over, and it was time to consolidate our gains.

Three and a half years of feverish searching lay back of us. Disappointments, hatred, ambushes, treason were some of the results of our effort. Serious and less serious critics had vied with the official powers to paralyze the *élan* of the review.

One or two booksellers, becoming alarmed at anonymous denunciations, had dropped it out of fear it might contaminate their virtuous custom. Twice we had the unpleasant experience of having an entire number seized by the American customs censor and thrown into the ocean. One number so aroused the *policier* designated to pass on the intellectual fare of his fellow-citizens, that he told our representative: "It's a lotta dirt, I tell ye . . .", and, pointing to "Work in Progress," he continued: "And by heck, if anyone could understand *that*, he'd find it was dirty stuff too." Disposition: Destroyed.

In re-reading the sometimes hysterical, sometimes smugly objective criticisms of our effort, I am unable to see much intelligence or even good will. I was told that the ideas I outlined were inadequately exemplified in *transition*, that they were my own private theories, and that I made a mistake in calling the review a group movement. I never intended to organize a group. Whatever group there was—and it was surely more hypothetical than real—developed quite accidentally, without any pressure on my part. I merely wanted to make *transition* the meeting ground for all those interested in a metaphysical renaissance and in fighting the purely naturalistic view of the world. If there was sometimes a discrepancy between my "theories" and the writers I published, it was only natural. Minor talents and borderland cases did undoubtedly slip in. But I felt it essential to be hospitable, even if the work submitted revealed only an approximation to the policy I had in mind, particularly since American writing at that time was largely realistic.

Wyndham Lewis attacked *transition* for trying to introduce "the diabolical principle" into literature. And yet the history of literature seems to show that the greatest

poets were those who pictured in their works the union of the day and the night minds. Why is James Joyce a universal, or even a classical writer, as Stuart Gilbert insists? Because like Shakespeare, Calderon, Sophocles, Dante, he presents life as a totality. He approaches the subterranean zones of human experience before organizing his work into an æsthetic entity. What makes Racine a specifically French and not a universal writer? It is his failure to go into the night-side of things. Even in ancient Greece there was a scission between the Ionic and the Doric civilizations, between the Appolynian and the Dionysian. *transition* was accused by Mike Gold of being "individualistic to the point of insanity". Although I combat the intellectual feudalism of this age as much as the proletarian writers, I feel nevertheless that, even in a collective state, individualism must remain the basis from which to proceed.

transition was essentially a laboratory. It was the first modern review in the English language to turn literature from pragmatism and to make creative expression a transfiguration of life. It was the first to make a systematic effort to overhaul the present structure of language and bring it into relation with the pre-logical. It was the first to destroy the frontiers of prose and poetry and discover the common denominator of conjuration. It was the first to create a fusion of the dynamic reality and the personal and collective unconscious.

Writing, through the influence of *transition*, is no longer the photographic process it was before. It is possible today—and the work of the younger Americans is demonstrating it—to create a miraculous world with the aid of new instruments. The principle of liberty for the fabulist and poet has been definitely established.

GOODBYE, WHEAT FARMER!

BY MORROW MAYO

Large corporations whose sole business it will be to perform the operations of plowing, planting, cultivating and harvesting will supersede the individual farmer, or groups of farmers will combine to perform their work in a wholesale manner. That is the proper way to do it, and the only way in which economic freedom can be won.
—HENRY FORD: *A New Age for Farmers*.

IN THE last few years there has been a very definite movement towards corporation wheat farming in the United States, a movement which has been accelerated by the creation and functioning of the Federal Farm Board. At least half a dozen farm corporations are now operating and expanding in the Wheat Belt, and others are being organized. They have acquired huge wheat acreages at distress prices, erased small farm units, bought out insolvent growers, dispossessed poverty-stricken tenant farmers, and placed a part of the wheat-growing industry on an economical, efficient, mass-production basis.

Farming from 15,000 to 75,000 acres scientifically with modern power equipment, these new corporations can produce wheat profitably at a price which spells ruin to the small American grower. Last year when it was selling at around seventy cents a bushel, with the Federal Farm Board in a state of hysterics, and thousands of farmers beating their breasts and groaning to high heaven, Charles M. Sledd, president of the Sledd Farm Corporation of Lyons, Kansas, said:

Some farmers complain about the price of wheat right now, but so far as we are concerned the price is all right. We can make plenty of money at the present price.

Technically, the machine has revolutionized wheat farming fully as much as it has revolutionized automobile production. In 1900 it required three hours of labor to produce a bushel of wheat; today it requires three minutes of machine time. Under horse conditions 500 acres was about all the land that a wheat farmer could handle. He could plow only from two to four acres a day. Even with a six-horse drill he could plant only eighteen or twenty acres a day. Today with a small tractor he plows fifty acres a day, and drills fifty acres a day. With a tractor and combine two men can cut and thresh fifty acres of wheat in ten hours—an operation that but a few years ago required twenty-three men the same number of hours. The machine has reduced 10,000 acres of wheat land to the size of 500 acres, and 500 acres to the size of 20 acres.

Under horse conditions it took considerable work to farm 500 acres of wheat land. At plowing, planting and harvesting times (the three operations required for wheat farming) the wheat farmer often toiled fourteen and sixteen hours a day, and each operation was a slow, tortuous process. In time hours, on the basis of the city worker, the 500-acre wheat farmer probably worked two-thirds of the year. Today it takes but fifty-three days a year—about