

# Letters to the Editor: *Transition and Literary Experimentalism*

## "Spook Writing"

SIR:—A few weeks ago you devoted an editorial to a number of contributions to an unnamed magazine under the heading of "Spook Writing." Readers of the magazine in question know, of course, that you were referring to *transition*, the only magazine in English devoted to literary experimentalism. I don't know if this magazine is intended for ordinary readers, but I was very much surprised to find a writer in the *Saturday Review of Literature* treating the contents so unsympathetically: I would have supposed that writers of every kind and all readers interested in the future of literature would have realized that the contents of this magazine would have to be taken into account. *Transition* is the only magazine in English that takes seriously the most important literary problem of today—the problem of the renewal of language. It deals, too, with the effort to reach back to myth, to the beginning of literature, for, as the editor, Eugene Jolas, says in an introductory article, "I believe that the literature of the future will tend towards the presentation of the spirit inherent in the magic tale and poetry, towards the poet's exploration of heretofore hidden strata of human personality." I consider that some of the most beautiful pieces of prose writing that I have read in recent years have appeared in issues of *transition*, and in this particular number there are both prose and poetry of remarkable achievement. I should like to quote this poem by James Agee in the number you so mockingly criticize: I should say that it is continuing the sprung rhythm, the revolutionary experiment not accepted in his own day, of Gerard Manley Hopkins.—

### Vertigral

#### LYRIC

*Demure morning morning margin  
glows cold flows foaled:  
Fouled is flown float float easily earth  
before demurely:*

*Chance gems leaves their harbors  
Sparkle above leaves whom light lifted*

*Drilling in their curly throats severally  
sweet ordinate phrases*

*Smooth ancestral phrases.  
Teaching: touching: sinuous dis-  
unison.*

*Drinking: drafting: each of all  
serenest pleasure.*

*Bring floral earth your breast before  
her,  
Afford your breast before the morning.*

*Demurely, the early margin:  
Fouled is fallen flower flower fear-  
less earth before: serenely:*

#### A SONG

*Give over, give over,  
Whose grievance ever yet delayed the  
sun?  
White flowers the dew, the summer's  
work is over*



"LISTEN! ANY MOMENT NOW HE'LL BEGIN RECITING 'TREES!'"

*And your kind love, your lover  
Is no man now, and now's another one.  
Give over, give over:  
What profits an arraignment of the sun.*

You remark in your editorial that "one of the editors of the magazine . . . avers that Abstract Art no longer needs defence." The sentence mockingly quoted is from a very thoughtful essay built around a sentence in one of George Berkeley's Dialogues: it is from an essay by James Johnson Sweeney dealing with the fact that we confound what actually belongs to touch and movement with what we really see. Let me say that everyone interested in the technique and philosophy of literature finds *transition* always exciting. Amongst other items it has published Joyce's "Work in Progress" and modern American writers like Archibald MacLeish and Hart Crane. It is now being published in America, and this ought to excite an interest here in the problems it is dealing with.

MARY M. COLUM.

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### What is Logic?

SIR:—Although the *Saturday Review* is hardly the most appropriate place in the world for multiplying metaphysical subtleties, I feel that some comment should be made on the review, "Logic Takes a Holiday," in the August 15 issue. Has not Professor Jastrow here indulged himself in just one of those blind credulities, common to the human race, whose prevalence he himself so deprecates? Does he not exhibit the tendency to call an opinion with which he disagrees, forthwith "illogical"?

When Dr. Jastrow charges his author with "an unnecessary betrayal of the fundamentals of logic," merely because the latter has admitted the possibility of prophetic vision, parallel to scientific discovery, he must mean that

there is some meaning of the word "logic," to which science absolutely conforms, but with which prophecy of any kind is in complete disharmony. Now, the question is, what is that meaning?

I discover only two senses in which the word "logic" may be used—a narrower and a wider sense. In its narrower meaning, to be "logical" means to obey the so-called Laws of Thought—Identity, Non-Contradiction, Excluded Middle. In this sense, a prophetic utterance may be every bit as "logical" as the latest scientific formula; all that is required is that it be internally consistent (free from contradiction), and that it state something definite, without ambiguity. Although a great many prophecies have been incoherent and vague, there is surely nothing in the nature of prophecy to make it necessarily so. A prophecy, in short, may be a piece of rational discourse; we may understand perfectly what it means. The wider meaning of "logic," however, seems to be what Professor Jastrow has in mind. This wider meaning has reference, not to mere consistency, but to what is generally called the "uniformity of nature." Anything is "logical" or "rational" if it conforms to this uniformity; "illogical" or "irrational" if it does not. Professor Jastrow evidently holds that any "miraculous" event contradicts the uniformity of nature, and must therefore be rejected as impossible of occurrence in an ordered universe. Philosophically, this is merely one possible view; whereas Professor Jastrow seems to consider it a self-evident truth.

My conclusion is that on the whole there is good ground for claiming science to be more empirical than prophecy, but no ground at all for asserting that it is one whit more "logical." Unless one accepts an iron-mailed, naturalistic determinism, "logic" simply "has nothing to do with the case."

ROBERT W. BRETALL.

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# Thunder on the Left

*HALF WAY WITH ROOSEVELT.* By Ernest K. Lindley. New York: The Viking Press. 1936. \$2.75.

*AFTER THE NEW DEAL, WHAT?* By Norman Thomas. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1936. \$2.

Reviewed by ROBERT C. BROOKS

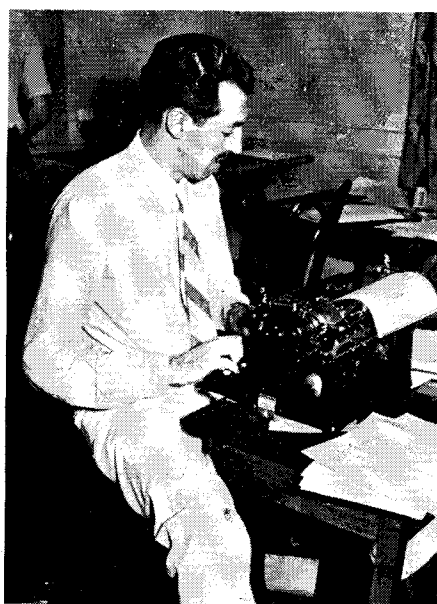
**D**ISREGARDING the risk of having his manuscript land in the editorial wastebasket the reviewer of "Half Way with Roosevelt" has decided to do with it what he has often desired to do in other similar cases, that is to deal with the book in the form of a critical consideration of the publisher's blurb. Hence the numerous quotations in what follows.

"Its title holds a double meaning which readers will discover for themselves," according to the Viking Press. As a matter of fact the publishers might have claimed more than a double meaning. To incautious readers the words "half way" suggest at first blush that Franklin D. Roosevelt is to have a second term in the White House, thereby necessitating the addition of still another volume to the three excellent works already to Mr. Lindley's credit in this field. Incorrect; there is not a word of prophecy in the book as to the outcome of the election in November. Again the cryptic phrase referred to above might be taken to mean that the author goes only half way in support of the policies of the present administration. Also incorrect; while mere quantitative analysis may be misleading in this connection it is a fact that Mr. Lindley's final summary puts down only seven debits as against sixteen credits to the account of President Roosevelt. Third, although apparent to the discriminating reader somewhat earlier, what "half way" really means is definitely stated only in the last paragraph of the book, as follows: "By a longer-range view—say five years—his [Mr. Roosevelt's] measures are not even half measures." In other words Mr. Lindley's criticism is directed from an advanced progressive position. To cyclonic thunder against the New Deal on the reactionary right he adds a sort of premonitory thunder on the left.

"Not a campaign document, this book is an objective history of the first three Roosevelt years—vastly informative for the open-minded reader who is tired of campaign ranting." Certainly Mr. Lindley's extended study is not a campaign document; it is far too independent, too well reasoned, and too thoroughly supported by facts and figures to deserve so mediocre a classification. Nevertheless, in the reviewer's opinion "Half Way with Roosevelt" is by far the most effective plea for the present administration, *as a whole*, that has yet been published. On

the other hand the reference to it as "objective history" is subject to heavy discount. Objective history of so eventful and so controversial a triennium is not possible immediately after its close.

"It gives the most penetrating portrait ever published of Roosevelt's own personality." Taken in connection with the admirable full length characterization presented in Mr. Lindley's earlier book, "Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Career in Progressive Democracy"—a characterization which is brought down to date rather than revised in the present volume—the above statement may be accepted. As a matter of fact the personality of the President is discussed keenly not only in



ERNEST K. LINDLEY

the chapter entitled "A Brief Guide to Mr. Roosevelt," but also in the later pages devoted to the possibility that we may keep out of war under his guidance. Considering the number of foul plays in domestic affairs that have been called against Mr. Roosevelt by would-be political umpires the reader is rather amused to learn that his strongest phrase of condemnation is: "It's dirty ball." The occasional unconventional utterance of the President is delightfully illustrated by what he said to the new minister (diplomatic, not ecclesiastical) who was being presented to him with all the formality usual on such occasions: "I see you have your speech written out. So have I. Suppose you give me your manuscript and I give you mine. Then we can have a good talk."

"It estimates the strength and weakness of Wallace, Farley, Hull, Perkins, Morgenthau, Tugwell, Hopkins, Ickes, and many others." Yes; and these estimates, based on close personal contacts, are marked by great clarity and complete fairness. Among them the characteriza-

tion of James A. Farley will astound many readers who have been misled by partisan clamor into believing him merely a vulgar spoilsman. Instead of confining the above list to high government officials the publishers of "Half Way with Roosevelt" might have extended it to include all the more prominent statesmen and politicians of the day, both Republican and Democratic, whom Mr. Lindley has had ample opportunity to study in his work as a newspaper correspondent. Also the Viking Press might have noted the fact that the author comments fully and trenchantly on the work of his fellow commentators, applying the acid test with sharply etched results to Walter Lippmann, Herbert Agar, Mark Sullivan, James F. Warburg, Raoul Desvernine, and Charles P. Taft. For reasons scarcely requiring elucidation the reviewer has not included William Randolph Hearst among the foregoing bright luminaries of political argumentation. To Mr. Lindley the Lord of San Simeon is neither jabberwock, jub-jub bird, nor frumious bangersnatch; on the contrary poor rich Mr. Hearst is, in his public capacity, simply "a Red-baiter and, as such, one of America's leading breeders of radicals."

"It points out the startling fact that the national debt has actually been made lighter since 1932." Republican papers please copy. Of course the above statement rests upon relative rather than upon absolute figures; thus, as Mr. Lindley interprets the great mass of statistics he has gathered, "the net federal debt when Mr. Hoover left office was forty-eight per cent of the national income for 1932—but the net debt on April 30, 1936, was only forty-four per cent of the national income for 1935."

"It compares America's recent history with that of other democracies today." Unquestionably this is one of the most valuable of Mr. Lindley's contributions. The net result of his far-flung summaries is that the numerous disparaging comparisons between the Rooseveltian New Deal on the one hand and the somewhat similar anti-depression policies pursued by the self-governing countries of Europe on the other, are shown to be largely bunk. As a small but significant illustration Mr. Lindley points out that American paeans of praise for the balanced British budget have been succeeded by deep and discreet silence now that it has become unbalanced again because of the government's rearmament program.

It would take us too far afield to consider, one by one, other statements made by the publishers of "Half Way with Roosevelt" regarding Mr. Lindley's masterly and independent treatment both of the activities and of the agencies, alphabetical and otherwise, of the present administration at Washington. Many readers, of course, will be outraged by his words of praise; many others by his words of condemnation: both will have plenty of facts and figures to take under con-