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The Weight of Forty-Four Pounds:
Commercial Publishing Houses and *transition* Magazine in the 1930s

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As early as the first edition of *Exile's Return*, Malcolm Cowley's 1934 "narrative of ideas," *transition* magazine was acknowledged widely as the European outlet for "dyed-in-the-wool expatriates" from the United States, those "colts who had jumped the fence without breaking their tethers."¹ A divisive topic of discussion amongst its contemporaries, *transition* was eventually lauded by Samuel Putnam, once one of its fiercest critics, in his *Paris Was Our Mistress* (1947), as the magazine "that really awakened the broader circles of the American intelligentsia to the fact that something was going on in Europe and among our expatriates."² But when Cowley revised his memoir in the 1950s, all he could muster was the assertion that *transition* was "a repository for all the types of writing that had already appeared in the little magazines. . . with good writing of most types and bad writing of all."³ It is not surprising that such strong feelings, and shifting allegiances, sometime obscure the facts of the expatriate American magazine's run in Paris. Edited by Eugene Jolas, *transition* had at least three iterations. The first was as a monthly magazine, running for twelve numbers between April 1927 and March 1928. Jolas and Elliot Paul, his principal collaborator at the time, reported at that point that "problems have come up which could not have been foreseen, but which cannot be ignored in the framing of future projects." They suffered having "to direct the review and gather the material," shouldering "the burden of translating, proof-reading (with foreign typesetters), and a multiplicity of other details" in the production of the magazine. "In order to gain a breathing space," they concluded, "the editors have decided to issue *transition*, beginning with No. 13, as a quarterly. . ."⁴ The eight numbers in this second iteration, including two double issues, saw Paul become "contributing editor" for a time, while "associate editor" Robert Sage was joined in a number of supporting roles by Harry Crosby, Stuart Gilbert, and Matthew Josephson, a period that culminated with *transition* 19/20 (June 1930). "With this number I bring to a close the direction of *transition* over a period of three years," Jolas then announced plainly. "I am now suspending the magazine indefinitely, as I can no longer afford the expenditure of time and labor necessary to its preparation."⁵ He might as well have lamented, too, the expenditure of money, as it was scarce even amongst Americans who stayed in Paris in the aftermath of Black Tuesday. So, it was a surprise when a prospectus appeared for further numbers of the magazine, to be published by the Servire Press in The Hague. (See Figure 1.) This final iteration, *transition* 21 to *transition* 27, appeared intermittently between March 1932 and April/May 1938. And while the network of small bookshops that had distributed the magazine throughout the United States would be led, henceforth, by the efforts of Frances Steloff at the Gotham Book Mart in New York, London publisher Faber and Faber quickly resumed distributing *transition* throughout Great Britain. Modernist scholars no longer suggest that little magazines eschewed the contamination of commercial publishing strategies, but the difficulties Eugene Jolas had in bringing out *transition* in the 1930s underline some of the complications inherent to formal collaborations with commercial publishers, houses whose ambitions were maddeningly complex, even when those publishers were sympathetic, broadly speaking, to modernism's experiments. **[Figure 1 here.]**

Dougald McMillan's book-length study of *transition* from the 1970s claims that Carolus Verhulst and his Dutch press partnered with Jolas simply out of a desire to bring to an international audience a greater variety of European and American authors. "They believed that a profit could be made in presenting new works from many countries in translation," McMillan asserts, "and they were familiar with Jolas's ability to find new works."⁶ Maria Jolas, the editor's wife and frequent

financial supporter, once revealed that she had “no takers,” in 1928, when she traveled to New York in order to interest an American publisher in “a volume of translated surrealist texts from *transition* with reproductions of the work of surrealist painters.”⁷ But the mere existence of such a project reinforces the idea that *transition*, founded on the belief that “art has never confused itself with commerce,”⁸ hoped still to benefit in a marketplace that seemed receptive to a burgeoning modernism. Verhulst proclaimed Servire “printers to moderns”⁹ and established a “Transition Series,” directed by Eugene Jolas, “where important new work by contemporary English and American writers,” as well as Jolas’s own “documents of the night mind,” might be brought to the reading public.¹⁰ (See Figure 2.) **[Figure 2 here.]** There is no evidence that anything but a limited number of the latter texts ever appeared, and Jolas even backed away from the translation of foreign works in the magazine as soon as the second number of the new collaboration, preferring instead to publish non-English texts in their language of origin. In fact, it took until the summer of 1935 for Jolas to bring forward three numbers of a magazine to which readers had been invited to subscribe for semi-annual delivery. For *transition* 24 (June 1936), editorial offices had relocated to New York, temporarily, where Jolas had returned, without his young family, to take up a position with the Havas news agency. There, James Johnson Sweeney, a signatory to the “Poetry is Vertical” manifesto in *transition* 21, and a man who would become Director of the Guggenheim Museum, had been appointed as the latest associate editor. It fell to Sweeney to help manage the fallout from what appears to have been an unpleasant separation from Servire.

As sole agent for Great Britain, Faber was a valuable ally for *transition* through the mid-1930s. In October 1936, Sweeney visited London and, while there, arranged with managing director C. W. Stewart for the house to continue to assist with distribution, after years of sporadic appearances. In a letter confirming these arrangements for at least twelve more months, Stewart also conceded that Faber had been in touch recently with Carolus Verhulst, “being unaware that he was not now connected with *transition*.”¹¹ The last number to appear from the Servire Press was, in fact, *transition* 24, though the details of the change were communicated neither clearly nor consistently. *transition* 25 (Fall 1936) appeared at the same time as Sweeney’s autumn meeting with Stewart, and, accompanying an unsigned letter sent to London on April 15, 1937, there were invoices for both that number and for *transition* 26, this latest number having appeared that spring on a rough approximation of the old quarterly schedule. Of course, the difference between those two numbers and the numbers that had come before them is that the most recent packages had been shipped not from continental Europe but from Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sweeney had managed to reverse the flow of fifteen years of publishing that featured the work of expatriate Americans by arranging economical printing in the United States, using family connections. The archive at the Beinecke Library, Yale University, shows half-page invoices, without letterhead, for these transactions. Less than two weeks after that correspondence, Sweeney, this time on *transition* stationary, wrote again to clarify that the letter of the fifteenth, and nothing else, like the subsequent invoice from Ebbett & Richardson in the Midwest, represented the real debt owed the magazine.

Through a misunderstanding on the part of our printer, we believe your shipment of *transition* #26 was invoiced at 50¢, the retail price, instead of 33¢ as of course is our understanding with you.

Kindly disregard the invoice dispatched by our printer with shipment from Cincinnati. On April 15th we forwarded you direct the proper invoice.¹²

These multiple invoices, suggesting contradictory arrangements, were an embarrassment for the magazine in dealing with Faber, during the period when it was proving its “commitment to modernist achievement,” as University College London’s John Mullan observed on the occasion of the house’s seventy-fifth anniversary, by “building a Modernist canon.” Though its stodginess on financial and legal matters led James Joyce to refer to the publisher, apparently, as “Feebler and

Fumbler,” there was ample evidence that the house was interested in balancing contemporary aesthetics with traditional business principles, as with the success of the influential and commercially-viable *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936).¹³ But while seeking retail prices from its distributor was careless, this correspondence does establish that requests for payment for *transition* 25 and *transition* 26, those numbers printed in America, did in fact come from the United States. Faber would prove its own carelessness through a reluctance to acknowledge this fact.

By that autumn, the steady hand of Ruth de Verry, Sweeney’s secretary at the Museum of Modern Art, where he was then employed, appeared in correspondence representing the magazine. On October 5, 1937, de Verry wrote to Maria Jolas in Paris, asking whether they might seek to recoup freight for the two recent numbers. “Does Faber pay for shipping charges, and am I to bill them for same?” she queried. “The charges on 300 #25 were \$11.67 and on 300 #26 \$24.91.” She explained that “the weight of #26 was a good deal more than #25.” (See Figure 3.) **[Figure 3 here.]** In fact, *transition* was responsible for the freight, so any invoice to Faber obscured a fixed cost and, if unsettled, represented compensatory revenue that would go unrealized. “But they have not yet paid for the magazines,” de Verry fretted, understandably.¹⁴ Though this unfinished business was held over from 1936, the Jolases were likely distracted by arrangements to bring forward, once more from Paris, what would turn out to be the magazine’s final number. “*Transition* is regarded as a magazine by the postal authorities while it continues to print more than two issues a year,” de Verry advised on November 27, 1937. “In order to enter this country free of duty, copies must reach here within three months after date of publication. The place of printing (France, if that is the case) must be shown prominently, as well as the nature of publication (quarterly).”¹⁵ These were important considerations for a modernist little magazine, even one with a ten-year pedigree. On June 1, 1938, with the magazine’s bank account dwindling and copies of *transition* 27 ready to hit the streets, de Verry reminded Maria Jolas that they were still owed payment for three hundred copies of *transition* 25 and three hundred copies of *transition* 26. The forty-four pounds then in dispute would more than cover the two hundred dollars budgeted to post through to American addresses copies of the upcoming number of the magazine shipped to New York from Paris.¹⁶

While anxiety over the debt smoldered, its embers tended only by a solitary office worker in New York, perhaps, Faber itself would soon fan the flames. C. W. Stewart wrote the Jolases on July 11, 1938:

We are in doubt who it is to whom we should account for sales of *transition*, and to whom we should charge any expenses there may be. Numbers up to and including 24 came to us from the Servire Press. Numbers 25 and 26 from America and Number 27 from Paris. We should be obliged if you would let us have instructions about this.¹⁷

A month later, the publisher brought its account up to date for all sales through the first half of 1938. While Stewart confirmed “that future settlement for numbers after 24 should be with yourself,” he also conceded that they had “accounted to the Servire Press for Number 25 and some of the sales of Number 26.”¹⁸ On September 22, 1938, Stewart confirmed that Faber had paid more than twenty-eight pounds to the Servire Press, more than half the original disputed amount owing, and, he claimed, “I have asked them if they will kindly refund this.”¹⁹ While Sweeney hoped simply that Faber would “have no difficulty in recovering this payment made” in error,²⁰ Stewart saw his further involvement in the matter as little more than a courtesy. He wrote on November 10, 1938:

But if this does not happen, then, while I think that our claim on S.[ervire] P.[ress] for repayment is a good one, I do not feel (if they refused to repay) there would be an obligation on us to make good the loss to M. Jolas. There are various reasons for this, but it is unnecessary to go into them now, since we hope the contingency will not arise.²¹

What might these reasons have been? At one point, Stewart asked Sweeney, “Are you quite sure that the Nos. 25 and 26 were invoiced to us from the U.S.A.? I have made enquiries in our

Accounts and Trade Departments and cannot find that invoices were seen here.”²² While the earliest correspondence between the New York office and London may have been confusing, *transition* was able to provide Stewart with “duplicate copies of our letter and our various invoices,” and, of these transactions, Sweeney reported to Maria Jolas that Faber “did not contradict my statement.”²³ More likely, it was clear to everyone that the arrangement between the Servire Press and the magazine, under which Faber had entered originally as a third party in order to assist with distribution, had not developed as expected, and this fact complicated matters immensely. Carolus Verhulst had taken some financial risk during a global economic crisis, the crisis that had contributed to Jolas suspending the magazine in 1930. In exchange, Servire expected two numbers each year, and, by the end of 1935, *transition* had under-delivered by as many as five numbers, in addition to the monograph series that never materialized. (See Figure 4.) **[Figure 4 here.]** Contemporary scholars of modernist publishing might concede that Verhulst would probably have made no direct profit from the magazine, and so Servire likely lost less money in its collaboration with *transition* than it would have had Jolas been more prolific. But, as Catherine Turner has argued, and as Faber itself illustrated through the 1930s, “modernism was a gamble” for any publisher at the time, presenting an opportunity “to solidify a firm’s reputation for. . . high quality literature” while pursuing the “commercial prospect” of challenging works that might be marketed effectively to a wider audience.²⁴ Who can say whether or not Carolus Verhulst saw *transition* as a loss leader, an opportunity to connect with modern authors whose subsequent experiments might appeal to a broad readership? The Servire Press certainly made extensive use of the magazine to advertise its other publications. In these ways, the missing numbers truly represented a lost opportunity about which Verhulst almost certainly held hard feelings. At the very least, seeing himself as having had joint interest in *transition*, he would be unlikely to hand back money for numbers that, had they been sold to Faber for distribution on the schedule everyone had expected, would have generated revenue where he had generated none. Speaking plainly, there is every reason to think that Carolus Verhulst believed Eugene Jolas owed him at least \$140.²⁵ After all, the Servire Press had even gone out of its way to help *transition* with a number of vanity projects. James Joyce’s *The Mime of Nick, Mick, and the Maggies* (1934), a fragment from *Finnegans Wake* then being serialized as “Work in Progress” in the magazine, was published in The Hague at its author’s insistence in order to feature illustrations from his ailing daughter, Lucia. *Testimony Against Gertrude Stein* (1935), a free, sixteen-page pamphlet accompanying *transition* 23, answered slights the Jolases perceived in her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1934). In his correspondence with Faber, the Dutch publisher would only say, cryptically, that “we cannot consider your payments as not being due to us.”²⁶

When C. W. Stewart met with James Johnson Sweeney in the autumn of 1936, what he really managed to do was pull his firm into a nascent disagreement between *transition* and the Servire Press. Though he was never given credit for doing so, Stewart tried, subsequently, to encourage his partners, actively, to sort out their problems amongst themselves. He replied to Verhulst:

Our position is still that. . . repayment is due from you to us: of course, if M. Jolas and Mr. Sweeney were satisfied that, for some reason unknown to us but connected with the ownership of *transition*, the repayment need not be made, we shall be satisfied for the matter to rest there. We are glad that you have written to the present publishers of *transition* (presumably to M. Jolas and Mr. Sweeney): we are also writing, and we will now wait until we hear whether you and they have reached an agreement.²⁷

At the point Eugene Jolas moved to sever ties with The Hague and take his magazine to the United States, a great many other modernist little magazines simply ceased operations. When, in 1928, Ezra Pound’s *Exile* was folded by Covici-Friede Publishers in New York, with whom the poet had been collaborating, Pound ranted from Rapallo that “*Exile* will appear when and where I see fit, without Mr. Covici’s or Friede’s permission.”²⁸ But, as Pound never made good on this threat, one can only

speculate as to what his partners would have done had *Exile* resurfaced in the same manner as did *transition*. Meanwhile, to the end of his letter to Verhulst, Stewart added this question: “Are you interested in publishing translations of English books? If so, and if you will let me know which kinds of books, I shall be glad to keep you informed of any we publish that might be suitable.”²⁹ While there is no evidence that anything ever came of this offer, its tone, in contrast to Pound’s bombast, is a reminder that all these parties were bound together in mutual support. The publishers were, ostensibly, competitors in an uncertain marketplace for modernism, but they relied on each other to build and fortify that market. Little magazines remained one of the places where publishers sought what Turner calls an “aura of quality,”³⁰ through contributors who had proven themselves amongst a small but discerning readership. (See Figure 5.) Pound, himself, wrote that publishers “have been content and are still more than content to take derivative products ten or twenty year after” they had appeared in magazines.³¹ By the mid-1930s, that gap had shortened considerably. **[Figure 5 here.]**

There is no evidence that the matter of \$140 sent, in error, to Carolus Verhulst was ever settled to the satisfaction of Eugene Jolas. On December 14, 1938, he wrote once more to C. W. Stewart. “It is not our intention to do anything which would impair the cordial relations that exist between Faber & Faber and ourselves,” he exclaimed, “and we are quite willing to help you in any way possible to rectify your mistake.”³² But he seemed no longer to have the heart to debate small matters, as the house was preparing to release the completed *Finnegans Wake*. In the first weeks of 1939, Sweeney wrote to Maria Jolas. “I believe the last letter I wrote you was with regard to the Faber & Faber situation,” he observed. “Still I do not think anything has come if it in the interval—at least that I have heard of.” The fate of Joyce’s last work had clearly taken precedence. “I doubt if the fact that the copy has reached the publisher necessarily means we can hope to see the book this Spring,” Sweeney sighed, making reference to the “many emendations”³³ usually made by the author Eugene Jolas called his “bellwether.”³⁴ If Joyce wished to delay the book, that would be one thing; if delays were caused by disrupting further the “cordial relations” between Joyce’s biggest supporters and his publisher, that would be something else, entirely. “The first bound copy of *Finnegans Wake* reached Paris just in time for Joyce’s birthday, on February 2, 1939,” Jolas reported in *Man From Babel*, his autobiography. And of the accompanying celebratory banquet, he said, simply, “Joyce let each guest examine the precious volume, which T. S. Eliot, on behalf of the London publishing house, had just forwarded.”³⁵

If the editors of literary periodicals were fated, simply, to dig into their pockets to cover their expenses while commercial publishers realized the profits from a growing demand for modernist texts, these discrepancies reinforce the nebulous position of little magazines in a marketplace that, at critical moments, remained persistently conservative. Felix Pollak, whose work at the University of Wisconsin in the 1960s was essential to the study of modernist periodicals, never considered the inability to break through to profitability a drawback for these publications, maintaining that “when a little becomes big, something unique and uniquely valuable becomes lost.” Magazines could be “fighters on the barricades,”³⁶ and one of the ways *transition* met this responsibility was as an unblinking chronicler of experimentation in the 1920s and 1930s. “As a documentary organ, *transition* began by bringing to the attention of Anglo-Saxon readers translated stories, and poems from various camps, including expressionism, post-expressionism, dadaism, surrealism,” Eugene Jolas summarized in the last number. “It also introduced original work by most of the unorthodox writers of the British Isles and America, as well as countless continental independents who had heretofore been ignored by both the conservative and the radical magazines.”³⁷ There is no evidence that magazine editors and their contributors dismissed, entirely, the commercial potential of their work. In fact, avant-garde magazines feared it, understanding that eventual complicity with that which they once opposed was a common fate of even the most challenging artists. But for those contributors who wished that their efforts might displace other works in the marketplace, magazines

sought to engage, in some fashion, the networks of exchange utilized so effectively by commercial publishers. To suffer indignities on the margins of those networks was not to endure contamination but to bear witness to a mindful disruption of that exchange. About the worst that could be said of these modernists was that they combined a professed independence with a desire to transform art through the mechanisms that sought, initially, to exclude them. The tone of such a tentative engagement could seem both defiant and complicit, as evidenced by the exchanges between *transition* and its commercial collaborators. On October 24, 1939, C. W. Stewart wrote one last time to see if the magazine intended to print another number. It fell to Maria Jolas to respond. "In reply to your letter, addressed to my husband" she began, "I regret to say that he is now in America, and that there seems little probability at the present of his bringing out a new number of *transition*." With great courtesy, she concluded, "May I, at the same time, acknowledge receipt of Faber & Faber's cheque for £2, 8 shillings, for which I thank you."³⁸

Notes

The editors of *American Periodicals* are committed to supplementary vetting of some contributions, so that colleagues connected with the journal and executive members of the Research Society for American Periodicals are assured a comprehensive peer review of their work.

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2. Samuel Putnam, *Paris Was Our Mistress: Memoirs of a Lost and Found Generation* (New York: Viking Press, 1947), 230.
3. Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Viking Press, 1951), 275.
4. Eugene Jolas, "Glossary: *transition* as a Quarterly," *transition* 12 (March 1928): 181.
5. Eugene Jolas, "Announcement," *transition* 19/20 (June 1930): 369.
6. Dougal McMillan, *transition: The History of a Literary Era, 1927-1938* (New York: George Braziller, 1976), 62.
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9. "Printing," *transition* 23 (July 1935): [206].
10. "The Servire Press Announces. . .," *transition* 21 (March 1932): [328].
11. C. W. Stewart to James Johnson Sweeney, October 20, 1936, Box 59, Folder 1372, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
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17. C. W. Stewart to Eugene Jolas, July 11, 1938, Box 59, Folder 1372, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
18. C. W. Stewart to *transition*, August 17, 1938, Box 59, Folder 1372, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
19. C. W. Stewart to James Johnson Sweeney, September 22, 1938, Box 59, Folder 1372, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
20. James Johnson Sweeney to C. W. Stewart, October 5, 1938, Box 59, Folder 1372, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
21. C. W. Stewart to James Johnson Sweeney, November 10, 1938, Box 59, Folder 1372, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
22. C. W. Stewart to James Johnson Sweeney, September 22, 1938.
23. James Johnson Sweeney to Maria Jolas, October 5, 1938, Box 59, Folder 1391, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
24. Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Two World Wars* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 17.
25. According to Lawrence Officer, University of Illinois, the value of British currency, relative to the American dollar, was remarkably stable between 1935 and 1938. One pound was worth just under five dollars. See www.measuringworth.com/exchangepond.
26. Carolus Verhulst to C. W. Stewart, November 9, 1938, Box 59, Folder 1399, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
27. C. W. Stewart to Carolus Verhulst, November 10, 1938, Box 59, Folder 1399, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
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30. Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Two World Wars*, 30.
31. Ezra Pound, "Small Magazines," *English Journal* 19, no. 9 (November 1930): 702.
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33. James Johnson Sweeney to Maria Jolas, January 24, 1939, Box 59, Folder 1391, Eugene and Maria Jolas Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
34. Eugene Jolas, *Man From Babel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 96.
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36. Felix Pollak, "Elitism and the Littleness of Little Magazines," *Southwest Review* 61, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 303.
37. Eugene Jolas, "Frontierless Decade," *transition* 27 (April/May 1938): 7.
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Illustrations

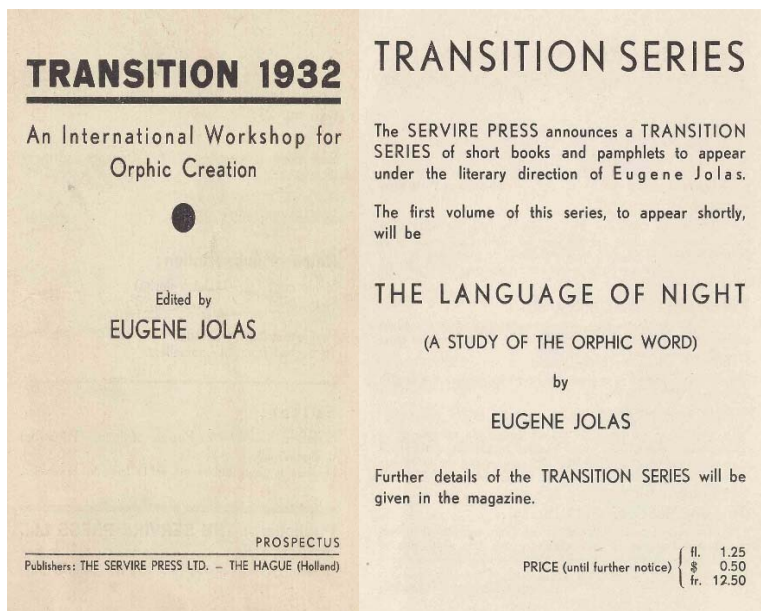


Figure 1

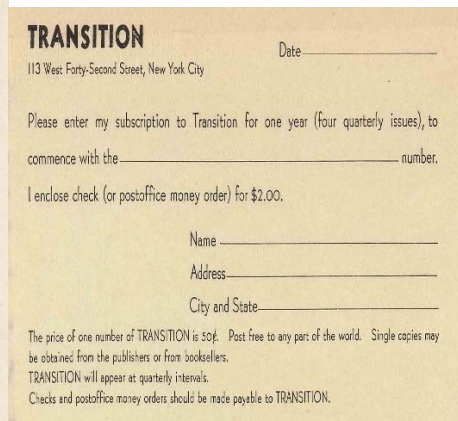


Figure 2

Figure 3

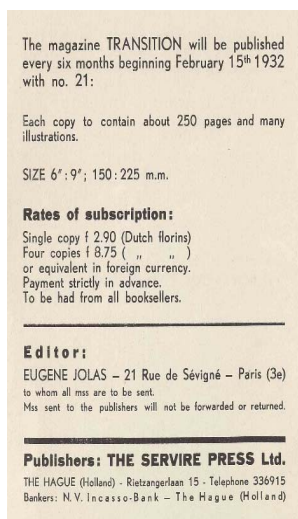


Figure 4

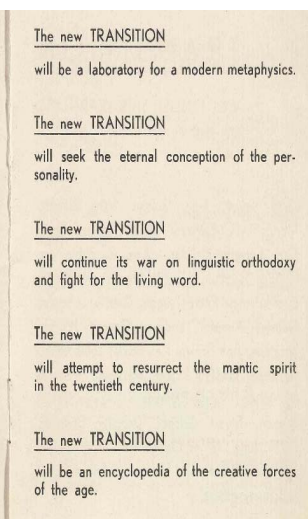


Figure 5

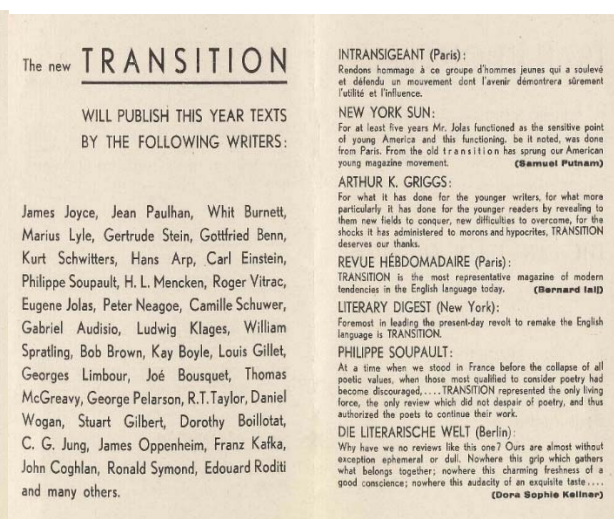


Figure 1. A prospectus for a revived *transition* appeared during what turned out to be a two-year hiatus for the magazine. This third iteration ran for seven numbers between 1932 and 1938. Source: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Figure 2. Eugene Jolas, editor of *transition* magazine, was given the opportunity to produce a series of texts for the Servire Press. Though publisher Carolus Verhulst printed a number of vanity projects for contributors to the magazine, “Transition Series” never materialized. Source: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Figure 3. With the *transition* office in New York City from the mid-1930s, associate editor James Johnson Sweeney printed and shipped worldwide from the United States work produced, largely, by American expatriates in Paris. Source: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Figure 4. *transition* began as a monthly, though it soon became a quarterly. The revived magazine was supposed to print two numbers each year, but only three numbers appeared between 1932 and 1935. Source: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Figure 5. The magazine was infamous, though quite renowned amongst a small readership. Some of the modernists it printed had obvious commercial appeal, by the 1930s, to publishers like the Servire Press or Faber and Faber. Source: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.