

Introduction to Kay Boyle in Contexts

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Introduction: Kay Boyle in Contexts

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the attempts of life and the attempts of art the
claims of each on the other
endlessly separating AM endlessly separating
Kay Boyle, "Poems for a Painter" (1961)

Kay Boyle, photographed by George Platt Lynes, 1941



©The Kay Boyle Papers, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University

- 1 Who was Kay Boyle? Perhaps paradoxically, the aim of this *E-rea* issue is not to answer this question. Indeed, it is quite impossible to grasp Boyle's long, prolific career and tumultuous life in a single coherent portrait. As a poet, a prose writer and the author of a large number of essays and articles published in a vast array of periodicals over three-quarters of a century, she attempted all her life to reconcile her belief that the poet's goal is to provoke literary and social change with the sometimes conflicting imperatives of politics and aesthetics—which led her to make choices that proved detrimental to her career and reputation. The signatory to the “Revolution of the Word” manifesto (*transition*, June 1929) who proclaimed her firm resolution to “disregard existing grammatical and syntactical laws” and not to communicate with “the plain reader,” does not seem to have a lot in common with the author of the politicized and romanticized novels published in the early forties in order to sensitize the general public to the necessity of a U.S. military intervention in Europe. And some may find it hard to believe that the sixty-seven-year-old activist protesting against the Vietnam War and for the civic rights of black and third-world students at San Francisco State College in 1969 was the same woman who took part in the life of the so-called “lost generation” in Paris—where she befriended such artists as Duchamp, Picabia, Ernst, or Brancusi—and lived on the French Riviera at the time when Sara and Gerald Murphy were busy inventing it.
- 2 Kay Boyle's keen sensitivity to aesthetic and political change may explain this astonishing capacity for transformation. In the twenties and early thirties she was closely associated with several of the literary magazines which shaped the modernist avant-garde, first by working as business correspondent and advertising manager for Lola Ridge, the New York editor of *Broom*, then by helping Ernest Walsh publish *This Quarter* in France. After Walsh's premature death in 1926, she became one of the most frequent contributors to *transition*, the Anglo-American review published in Paris by Eugene Jolas. In 1932 she nevertheless realized that the magazine's increasingly romantic and mythological trend represented a risk and a danger for both literature and democracy, for it was precisely the method the authoritarian regimes used to legitimize their coming into power. Forsaking her interest in poetic experimentation, she then adopted a less elaborate prose to write about political turmoil and anxieties. From 1933 to 1936, living in Austria with her second husband Laurence Vail and their six children, she was an eyewitness to the Nazi terrorist attacks following the assassination of Chancellor Dollfuss in 1934 and to the rise of anti-Semitism. Most of her fiction and nonfiction of the period is fraught with the pervading sense of imminent disaster. Her political vision also influenced her life and writing in the turbulent sixties and seventies when her activism led her to being sent to jail twice. Her social conscience probably accounts for the (erroneous) charges of communist sympathies used against her and her third husband, the Austrian-born diplomat Joseph von Franckenstein, during the McCarthyist period, which prompted some publishers to blacklist her. The consequences were emotionally and professionally devastating for her.
- 3 Boyle's long, chaotic life and career were marked by strange interludes and dramatic reversals. Around 1937-38, for instance, she momentarily returned to formal experimentation to produce some of her finest poetry and fiction, such as *Monday Night*, a most intriguing book, part detective fiction, part surrealist novel. As a radical departure from the social and political commitment informing the previous stories and novels, *Monday Night* provided Boyle with the opportunity to return for a short while to the jubilant exploration of new narrative possibilities. Two years later, when Germany went to war against France, Boyle at once supported American intervention. In another

dramatic about-face, she altered her style to produce fiction which focuses on the war and expresses her strong moral convictions in clear, straightforward prose that reviewers such as Edmund Wilson dismissed as “pure rubbish.” Suddenly her poetic energy seemed to run dry. Only twenty years later would she return to poetry to produce, in a brief but dazzling lyrical explosion, the “Poems for a Painter” series (1960-61).

- 4 Boyle’s political awareness and her need to support a large family may account for this radical change—as is documented in her correspondence during the war years. Yet, some of her commentators are convinced that the real reasons remain largely obscure. In one of the first assessments of the corpus, Frank Gado suggested:

The reasons for this transformation are no doubt more complex than the need to make a living from her writing or the urgent desire to alert her countrymen to the evils which menace society, but these are at least the manifest reasons. (Gado 1968, 258)

- 5 This cautionary comment is an invitation to pursue the exploration of Boyle’s multifaceted talent from a variety of critical approaches and perspectives.

- 6 Although its style, as well as its material, have varied considerably over the years, Boyle’s work has always been motivated by the belief that the goal of poetry is to shape people’s lives, and heighten both artistic and democratic awareness. For her, poetic intervention has therefore less to do with politics than with the political. This idea comes up in this passage from the 1968 autobiographical account *Being Geniuses Together* which casts a retrospective glance on the reasons of her departure from the United States in 1923: “If this trip [...] was a search for individual freedom, it was as well a humourless search for what [I] believed could be the true meaning of democracy” (Boyle 1984, 39). She was leaving a country whose destiny, she felt, was not ruled by the precepts of democracy but by the insatiable demands of a liberalist economy. As she had married a French student, she had had to give up her American citizenship. But living outside of her country did not mean for her living outside her American identity. In the same way as other expatriate poets before her, such as Pound— who was a model for the aspiring writer and would become her mentor after she had settled in France—it was as an American that she was determined to provoke social and cultural change in her country of origin. Shortly after her arrival in France, this ambition led her to embrace Ernest Walsh’s and Eugene Jolas’s editorial commitments.¹ In “The United States” (1928), dedicated to William Carlos Williams, Boyle reaffirmed her loyalty to her American identity as well as in a specifically American poetic vision, and clearly stated that she would never want to live outside “the American grain”:

But to go back, to go back to another country, to go back
And to say from here I can see it;
Here and here a leaf opening, here the cherry-gum dripping,
Here a stream broken through, here and here a horse run wild. (1991 37)

- 7 Despite historical and political turbulences, Boyle managed to keep this belief alive. In “Testament for my Students,” written more than forty years later, at the time of the San Francisco State College strike, she addressed a paean to the students of her creative writing class who never lost their faith in poetry despite being confronted everyday to disheartening police violence on campus:

[...] What good were the poets to you then, Baudelaire,
Whitman
Rimbaud, Poe? “All the good in the world!” you shouted out
Through the blood in your mouths. They were beside you on

The campus grass, Shakespeare, Rilke, Brontë, Radiguet
 Yeats, Apollinaire, their fingers on the pulse on your wrists
 Their young arms cradling your bones. (1991, 126-30)

- 8 Another salient element of Boyle's literary commitment is her desire to write *for the Other*, as is demonstrated in "A Landscape for Wyn Henderson" (1931), a poem mourning the loss of Ernest Walsh, in which the urgent necessity to give a form to the sense of loss dislocates words and images:

Were made were not for lament for some melodious grief were not
 Were fashioned from the fox's brush tomato's heel were given
 Should footfall step on mountainside would come to grief by tortuous ways
 Were made for fertile valleys
 So high and perilous grows despair were not for you
 But wind as tasty as a seaman's cheek would stay your hand
 And turn your thoughts to other (1991, 50)

- 9 Unlike writers and poets who shun the commerce of their fellow human beings, Boyle's writings demonstrate a constant need to step towards the Other and extend understanding and support. Her exceptional perceptiveness and depth of feelings has led her to produce some of her most accomplished poems, such as "Angels for Djuna Barnes" (1937) which she dedicated to her compatriot—perhaps as a homage to *Nightwood* published a year before—and in which the transient, undefinable figure of the angel allows contact with otherness by dissembling more than by resembling:

[...] Persuaded you do not know
 But seek and strike your own face for another's, forget your dream
 While dreaming, do not wake nor sleep but halted in wild motion
 Lie, quiver, stand, are held to the ear for roar of music like a shell held.
 Or like a statue found beneath the sand, still limbed, still whole, still marble
 The mouth with terra cotta, eyes with salt weeping for mutilation. (1991, 71-72)

- 10 The omnipresence of the Other at the core of Boyle's writing has inspired the authors of the following essays to examine her work in light of her relationships with other writers or editors. Rather than giving a comprehensive overview of Boyle's life and career, these contributions aim at making her creative energy emerge in different contexts, some of which may provide keys to the understanding of other areas of her work while some stand as unique instances of her artistic vision.
- 11 Focusing on the beginning of Boyle's career, Céline Mansanti retraces her friendship with Eugene Jolas and her active collaboration to *transition* from the launch of the magazine in 1927 to 1932, when her social and political awareness led her to distance herself from the review's increasingly mystic and neoromantic inspiration. Mansanti describes how Boyle found in *transition* an invaluable source of inspiration which provided her with political focus and helped her hone her own literary aesthetics. Another devoted friendship of forty years linked Boyle to Cresse Crosby, the generous patron and editor of writers and artists. Linda Hamalian looks into their altruistic relationship to show that Crosby's support was not only instrumental in establishing Boyle's reputation among American "modern classics" but was also essential to her artistic maturing. It should be noted that it was Crosby who gave Boyle the opportunity to translate Radiguet, Crevel and Delteil, and thus get a thorough knowledge of the writing of three of the most talented French novelists of the twenties. Katherine Anne Porter was another model and friend to Kay Boyle. By selecting and commenting extracts from their correspondence, heretofore unpublished, Beth Alvarez sheds light on a literary dialogue that unfolded over forty-five years. While Boyle voices some enlightening remarks on the life of American expatriate

writers in 1920s Paris, Porter offers comments on two of her friend's novels, *Plagued by the Nightingale* (1931) and *The Underground Woman* (1975). Their letters also provide useful insights into the genesis of *Being Geniuses Together*, a chronicle of the twenties composed of an autobiographical account written by Robert McAlmon in 1934 which Boyle revised by interspersing her own chapters when she reissued the book in 1968. Like Boyle, surrealist artist Mary Reynolds chose expatriation in France where she was politically engaged against fascism. Page Delano explores their friendship by examining how World War II confronted them with the question of identity and allegiance both to France and the U.S. Their experiences of "becoming American" expand our understanding of wartime citizenship. Another example of Boyle's loyalty can be measured by her friendship with the black-American writer Richard Wright, another victim of McCarthy's red scare. Toru Kiuchi retraces their friendship which was initiated by Mary Reynolds and maintained with the help of the editor Richard Aswell. Kiuchi's essay also recalls another important episode in Boyle's literary and political career: her passionate defense, along with Langston Hughes and Nancy Cunard, of the "Scottsboro Boys," in 1931-32, which inspired one of her oft-quoted poems, "A Communication to Nancy Cunard" (1937).

- 12 This issue on Boyle also provides an opportunity to explore Boyle's publishing career, including her role in the modernist press. Boyle's social and political concerns have often been contrasted with her interest in modernist formal experimentation. Shannon Lewitzke's essay qualifies this oversimplified view. By examining a number of poems which have so far drawn very little critical attention, Lewitzke argues that the political aesthetic developed by Boyle in the mainstream magazines after 1932 *already* informed her modernist magazine pieces. This richly documented essay echoes Mansanti's in its exploration of the little magazines' editorial policy and the essential role such writers as Boyle played in bridging the gap between high and low. In the thirties, Boyle's transition from high to middle brow was furthermore facilitated by the fact that several of her short stories were selected for the O. Henry Award (two were actually awarded the O. Henry Prize in 1935 and 1941). Christine Hait resituates Boyle among other writers of her generation, some of whom have since integrated the literary canon while others are now largely forgotten. Hait analyzes the judging process of the O. Henry Award and appraises its function in shaping cultural history. She also points out the importance of the introductions to the annual *O. Henry Prize Stories* collection as a valuable resource for knowledge and understanding for literary scholars.
- 13 Some of Boyle's writings have had a pivotal role in her career. This is for instance the case of her first novel, *Process* (1925), which was lost in the early twenties and serendipitously rediscovered by Sandra Spanier in the files of the New York Public Library at the end of the nineties, after Boyle's death. This novel brings crucial evidence to the importance of Boyle's American background before she left for France in 1923. It demonstrates an astonishing artistic maturity, including a stupendous mastery of the transformative power of language over the perception of the world. It also explores a wide range of stylistic possibilities, mixing traces of Lawrentian vitalism with a marked tendency towards abstraction. Moreover, *Process* can also, as Beth Widmaier Capo demonstrates by comparing it with Meribel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1939), be read as a clarion of social revolt. Indeed, through the story of Kerith, its protagonist, Boyle retraced her own formative years under the guidance of her mother, Katherine Evans Boyle, who was actively committed to the defense of workers in Cincinnati. By relying on recent gender criticism, Capo shows how the confrontation with the urban landscape of the Midwest, a site of

transaction and instability, drives Kerith to develop and negotiate her political, sexual and psychological identity. The themes of identity and alienation also lie at the core of the “The Crazy Hunter,” one of the novellas collected in *Three Short Novels* (1940), which is considered as one of Boyle’s masterpieces. In 2008, “The Crazy Hunter” was translated into French by Robert Davreu as “Le Cheval aveugle,” an extract of which is reproduced in this issue. Davreu’s translation makes it possible to observe how Boyle explores the narrative possibilities of the “stream of consciousness” technique so as to give voice to a story foregrounding her prodigious skills of observation and deep understanding of the human soul.

- 14 Two contributions to this issue deal with important episodes in Boyle’s political and activist career. The first one, extremely traumatic, took place when Boyle and her husband Joseph von Franckenstein had to face Senate loyalty hearings during the MacCarthyst era. If the facts are well-known, Rai Peterson’s essay sheds new light on how Boyle defended her loyalty to the American democracy by offering examples from her own work and in so doing situated her plea in the enlarged political context. Indeed, while the stories she chose are undeniably anti-communist in their content, they also subtly question the issue of individual political responsibility and can, in this respect, be read as pamphlets for the advent of democracy throughout the world. A second crucial episode in Boyle’s political career took place in the sixties and seventies when she joined the protest against the Vietnam War and for more educational equality during the strike at San Francisco State College. An interview with Helene Whitson, who created and organized the strike archive at San Francisco State University Library, locates Boyle’s action and writings in the wider context of an event which brought significant changes into the American academic landscape.
- 15 As the books mentioned in the bibliographies indicate, these essays stem from the groundbreaking critical, biographical and editorial work carried out in the eighties and nineties by David Koch, Joan Mellen, Marilyn Elkins, Susan Clarke and Sandra Spanier, to name but a few. Since the mid-2000s, Boyle studies have become increasingly diversified and international in their scope. The high quality of the recent Ph.D theses and published essays on Boyle show that her prolific and multifarious creative energy keeps stimulating scholarly interest and curiosity. This is reason to rejoice, all the more so as several aspects of her work still remain to be charted.

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