

Chris Andre : On Kay Boyle

Boyle, Kay (19 Feb. 1902-27 Dec. 1992), writer, educator, and political activist, was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, the daughter of Howard Peterson Boyle, a lawyer, and Katherine Evans, a literary and social activist. Her grandfather had founded the West Publishing Company, and the financial security afforded by this background allowed the Boyle family to travel extensively. Boyle's education was sporadic, culminating in two years of architecture classes at the Ohio Mechanics' Institute (1917-1919). In 1922 Boyle joined her sister Joan in New York City, where she began to work for Lola Ridge, New York editor of *Broom*. This brief period in New York marked Boyle's entry into the world of the "little" magazines, the avant-garde literary movement that she helped develop and define over the next decade. Boyle married Richard Brault in 1922. They had no children and were divorced in 1932.

After moving to France in 1923 with Brault, Boyle began to work with Ernest Walsh on his magazine *This Quarter*. In 1927, after Walsh's death, she gave birth to a daughter fathered by Walsh; in this same year, she contributed both a review of William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* and the short story "Theme" to the first issue of Eugene Jolas's *transition*. Over the next two years Boyle published consistently in *transition*, a magazine that offered itself as the playground for revolutionary literary endeavors, as the forum for the self-proclaimed "Revolution of the Word."

In 1932 Boyle married Laurence Vail, with whom she had been living since 1929. The couple had three children. After moving to Austria in 1933, Boyle solicited contributions for a new experiment in publishing, *Short Stories 1934*. Intended to be a collection of page-length stories by different authors that would encapsulate the year, this work was published as *365 Days* (1936), with contributions by Boyle, Vail, William Saroyan (who gave her 365 stories), Langston Hughes, and Henry Miller. In 1934 Boyle was awarded her first Guggenheim Fellowship, and she also won her first O. Henry Memorial Award for the short story "The White Horses of Vienna." This story is exemplary of much of Boyle's writing, for it articulates an urgent need for art to engage with political and social issues. In this story, set in Austria in the early 1930s, the Viennese Dr. Heine travels into the mountains to assist an older doctor whose knee has been sprained during covert socialist maneuvers, and who can no longer attend to his patients. While the young Dr. Heine argues that art, science, and everyday life are fundamentally more important than politics, the older doctor seems to believe that as long as human dignity is threatened, art is meaningful only in the service of freedom.

This same basic theme is played out, with numerous variants and immense subtlety, in the majority of Boyle's short stories, including such acclaimed pieces as "Defeat" (1941), which won Boyle her second O. Henry Memorial Award, and the often-anthologized *New Yorker* masterpiece "Winter Night" (1946). Boyle's novels, fairly popular in their time, have been largely neglected in comparison with her other works. When the eminent literary critic Edmund Wilson reviewed Boyle's novel *Avalanche* (1944), he summed up the position of many critics on her novels with "I cannot see how a writer with a really sound sense of style could have produced this book even as a potboiler."

Boyle and Vail were divorced in 1943, and that same year she married Baron Joseph von

Franckenstein. They had two children. In 1953 Boyle's writing career was nearly devastated when Franckenstein was dismissed from his post in the Public Affairs Division of the U.S. State Department. Although he had been cleared at a loyalty-security hearing, at which Franckenstein was charged with being married to the potentially subversive Boyle, Roy Cohn decided to fire Franckenstein as representing "surplus" labor. Boyle lost her post as foreign correspondent to the *New Yorker*, which she had held since 1947, and was virtually blacklisted by the major magazines to which she had once contributed so abundantly. After a nine-year legal battle against his dismissal, during which Boyle and her family lived in Rowayton, Connecticut, Franckenstein was reinstated by the State Department and appointed cultural attaché to the U.S. embassy in Tehran (1962); he died of lung cancer within a year of assuming his new post.

With a large family to support, Boyle immediately accepted a creative writing position on the faculty of San Francisco State College (1963; now San Francisco State University). She remained on the faculty until 1979. During this time she was also heavily involved in political activism. She traveled to Cambodia in 1966 as part of the "Americans Want to Know" fact-seeking mission; also in 1966 she held daily vigils in front of the San Francisco California Funeral Service, where bodies returning from Vietnam were being processed. In 1967 she was arrested twice and jailed for thirty-one days for participating in sit-ins at the Oakland Induction Center. Until her death in Mill Valley, California, Boyle was involved in a number of activist organizations, particularly Amnesty International. As a political activist and educator, Boyle's legacy of personal commitment and tireless dedication has survived her death. As a literary figure, Boyle remains an important (although often underrated) component of American literary modernism, both for her early experimental work with the émigré avant-garde and for her later pieces in major magazines such as the *New Yorker*.

Bibliography

Most of Kay Boyle's papers and manuscripts are at the Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. The most comprehensive study of Boyle's life and work is Sandra Whipple Spanier, *Kay Boyle, Artist and Activist* (1986). Less specifically about Boyle, but an excellent introduction to the émigré writing community of the period, is Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* (1986). For Boyle's firsthand account of the transition era, see her additions to the revised edition of Robert McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930* (1968). Boyle considered *Monday Night* (1938) to be her best novel, although *Plagued by the Nightingale* (1931) was equally acclaimed; many of her short stories can be found in *Fifty Stories* (1980); her *Collected Poems* appeared in 1962. An obituary is in the *New York Times*, 29 Dec. 1992.

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