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► **To cite this version:**

Celine Mansanti, Anne Reynes-Delobel. Kay Boyle and/in transition (1927-1938). 2020. hal-03647494

HAL Id: hal-03647494

<https://u-picardie.hal.science/hal-03647494v1>

Submitted on 20 Oct 2022

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Kay Boyle and/in *transition* (1927-1938)

In *Being Geniuses Together*, Kay Boyle reminisces on the role the modernist magazine *transition* played in the early years of her expatriation in Europe. It was in *transition*, she says, that she first read the work of the French surrealists Soupault, Eluard and Desnos. Besides, the letters she exchanged with Eugene Jolas, the magazine's founder and editor, encouraged her to pursue her own experiments in prose and poetry: "Jolas and I wrote to each other almost every week, and his belief in my work and in the work of countless unknown others gave a new meaning not only to my own life but to the international writing scene" (Boyle, 1984 [1968] 209). A count of the texts Boyle published in *transition* confirms this idea. Among the nearly five hundred contributors to the magazine, Boyle ranks first with some twenty poems, stories and reviews published between 1927 and 1938. She was also one of the signatories of the magazine's "Revolution of the Word" manifesto in June 1929. By assessing her contribution to *transition*, this article aims to underscore her participation in an important phase of expatriate, international modernism.

When she arrived in France, in the spring of 1923, Boyle was already familiar with the world of "little" literary and artistic magazines, having worked for six months the previous year in New York as assistant to Lola Ridge for *Broom*, a little magazine founded by Harold Loeb and Alfred Kreymborg in November 1921, and initially printed in Europe. It was through Ridge and *Broom* that Boyle came into contact with Robert McAlmon and William Carlos Williams, the editors of the first *Contact* magazine (1920-1923) which published Boyle's poem "Shore" in June 1923. Another important publication venue was Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine which first published her poems "Monody to the Sound of Zithers" (1922) and "Harbor Song" (Feb. 1925). The latter attracted the attention of Ernest Walsh, the co-founder and editor of the Paris-based American quarterly *This Quarter*. Between 1925 and 1927, several poems by Boyle appeared in *This Quarter* ("Summer," "To America," "For an American," "O this is not Spring but in me," "Carnival 1927," and "Comrade"). The magazine also published two of her early short stories ("Passeres' Paris" and "Flight"), as well as the first forty pages of her novel *Plagued by the Nightingale* which were greeted with enthusiastic approval by Williams (Spanier, 2001 xxxv). Soon after Walsh's premature death in October 1926, Boyle was contacted by Eugene Jolas who was intent on pursuing Walsh's efforts on behalf of the young generation of American writers and poets in a new publication (Ford, 1975 81; McMillan, 1976 17). From the New York headquarters of *Broom* to the pages

of *transition*, Boyle's editorial itinerary was part and parcel of the transatlantic history of modernist journals in the 1920s.

Between April 1927 and June 1930, *transition* published a substantial amount of Boyle's work — nine poems, six short stories, an extract from a novel, three critical reviews, an homage to Harry Crosby, and a translation of the first chapter of René Crevel's novel *Babylone*. As an important locus for the rejuvenation of the American poetic idiom, the magazine offered Boyle the opportunity to experiment with new syntactic and lexical possibilities, and to position herself in the literary field. This explains why she accepted to sign the magazine's manifesto of June 1929: "I would consider important the declaration (proclaimed by *transition*) concerning the revolution of the word. They at least approached a definition of the nature of my own undefined revolt." (Boyle, 1984 [1968] 235). To her, the fact that the manifesto found its roots in the work of living poets and writers was of crucial importance: "We celebrated the work of Joyce, of course, and the short stories of Sherwood Anderson. We hailed the true simplicity of the early work of Hemingway. And we cherished the poetry and the prose and the still-shining illuminated spirit of William Carlos Williams." (Bell, 1992 97). Her words remind us that the "Revolution of the Word" was not only the name given to the magazine's manifesto but also, and even more importantly, a set of texts written by a number of its main contributors with a view to providing practical examples of its objectives.

Boyle conceived of the "revolution of the word" as an opportunity for bold experiment with rhythm and syntax. The prose of "On the Run" or "Vacation Time" registers this evolution which firmly established Boyle as "one of the strongest and most promising talents to have emerged from the shadows of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein," as Katherine Anne Porter (Spanier, 1986 120). In the poem "A Glad Day for L. V." (March 1932), one can also see the influence of Saint-John Perse's "Pour fêter une enfance" (1911) that was translated by Jolas (*transition* 11, February 1928):

Here people and stock and vegetation breathed air not rarer but laid the nostril wide like silver rings set one upon another ... (But a long time shall I see the stony-footed chamois they brought in at night in a leather coat on a mule's back, like a man they had murdered, lifting him out by the chin and gazing into his eyes as brown as deep as limpid death.) (transition 21, mars 1932 157).

The corpus of texts Boyle published in *transition* reads as a coherent and original attempt to continue formal concerns through the use of personal autobiographical material. From “Portrait” (1927) to “A Complaint for M and M” (1938), most of these texts mourns the loss of a beloved companion and poet (Ernest Walsh) though with a vibrancy that bespeaks a will to eschew social respectability and gender conventions. “Theme” (*transition* 1, avril 1927) explores such provocative issues as motherhood, sexuality, incestuous desire, and intellectualism. In “Bitte nehmen Sie die Blumen,” the narrator bluntly addresses her companion as a sexually aroused woman and potential sexual partner, *and* a mother: “And suddenly I was filled with a black anger and I said come out of it for once and stop being the perfect gentleman what kind of a man are you why I know what my little girl is and what my little boy is I know because they open their mouths and yell and if they don’t want a thing they spit in its eye” (*transition* 9, December 1927).

These stories celebrate the coincidence of the prosaic with the aesthetic: “He wanted to put the vegetables among the flowers as he wished, and often the vegetables grew much more beautiful than the flowers. The first tight bunches of lettuce coming out like stars in the black soil were always more beautiful to him than any opening flower” (« Polar Bears and Others » *transition* 6, September 1927). They also claim continuity with a form of sentimental romanticism that was rejected by high modernism: “And I believe in romance : that it should be snatched from the buttonhole where it has withered too long, so that reality can make a fresh thing of this poor faded flower” (*transition* 6, 52).

The reviews Boyle wrote for *transition* emphasized these claims. In her review of *John Brown’s Body*, she scorned Stephen Vincent Benét’s lack of energy and use of a “silly collection of types” (*transition* 15, février 1929, 170). She railed at Crane’s *White Buildings* for its “grand old manner,” “acquired dignities,” and cultured reminiscences” that ranked him, in her opinion, far below the grand-mother his poem mocks: “she was probably a better bet than he; a hard-working old woman maybe, with no time for foolishness; time for loveletters, yes, and time for life” (*transition* 10, janvier 1928, 137). In contradistinction, she extolled William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* for its documentary and concrete “feel” (“the feel of cloth as it must have been”), as well as for its “re-valuation of experience.” Like D.H. Lawrence, Williams seemed to her to offer his readers “the strong sense of a beginning,” “unconfused by the value of inheritance” (*transition* 1, 141).

Boyle's contributed actively to *transition*'s concern with neoromanticism by investigating a form of lyricism distinct from the mystic irrationalism favored by Crane and Jolas. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, a time marked by ideological tensions, she explored the connection between popular culture (the culture of "romance") and elitist culture in a militant progressive manner. Boyle's attempt to rework of modernist issues in plural and inclusive senses also reflects her progressive stance.

Boyle derived much professional benefit from her contribution to *transition*. Not only did the journal make it possible for her to reach new audiences but it brought her the attention of editors and critics. In 1931, in her review of *Wedding Day* and *Plagued by the Nightingale*, Katherine Anne Porter said of Boyle that she summed up "the salient qualities of ["the Transition group"]": a fighting spirit, freshness of feeling, curiosity, the courage of her own attitude and idiom, a violently dedicated search for the meanings and methods of art. In these short stories and this novel there are further positive virtues of the individual temperament: health of mind, wit and the sense of glory" (qt in Bell, 1992 137). Furthermore, Jolas introduced her to Harry and Caresse Crosby, the founders of Éditions Narcisse in 1925, renamed Black Sun Press in 1927. Black Sun published D. H. Lawrence's *The Escaped Cock*, Crane's *The Bridge*, as well as fragments of *Work in Progress* and Pound's *Imaginary Letters*. In 1929, Black Sun published Boyle's first short story collection and three years later, her third novel *Year Before Last* came out under the imprint Crosby Continental Editions. Caresse also asked Boyle to translate Raymond Radiguet's *Le diable au corps* which also came out in 1932 as *The Devil in the Flesh*, with an introduction by Aldous Huxley.

The publication of *Short Stories* received a rave review by William Carlos Williams in *transition*: "[Her stories] are simple, quite simple, but an aberrant American effect is there in the style. There is something to say and one says it. That's writing." (*transition* 18, November 1929, 148-9). The magazine sealed their friendship. In the Summer 1928 issue, Boyle dedicated her poem, « The United States » to Williams with whom she kept up a steady correspondence. In 1932, Williams wrote her a long letter in which he exposed his views on the nature of poetic writing and contemporary American poetry (Thirwall, 1957 129-136). Her regular contribution to Jolas's magazine also facilitated her transfer to the rosters of the magazines that were founded by other members of the *transition* community, including *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms*, *The New Review*, *Caravel*, and *Seven*.

This mutually beneficial relationship came to an abrupt end in 1930 when Kay Boyle ceased her contribution to *transition*. As Lisa M. S. Dunick has demonstrated in “‘I am not a business woman’: Kay Boyle’s Negotiation of the Literary Market”, this decision coincided with Boyle decision to shift from “little” to “big” magazines. Throughout the 1930s, she set her sights on commercial and mainstream magazines such as *Harpers*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, or *The New Yorker* (Dunick, 2008). While financial concerns were her main motivation, Boyle was reluctant to say so. As was the case for many modernist writers, she was trying to juggle between the high aesthetic of the avant-garde and the commercial imperatives of mass-culture magazines. The fact that she continued contributing to such “little” magazines as *Story*, *Contempo*, *Seed*, *The Criterion*, *Direction*, *The Dubuque Dial*, *Signatures*, *Delta*, *Kingdom Come*, and *The Phoenix* throughout the 1930s tends to prove this point.

This points to the ideological nature of Boyle’s “defection” from *transition*. In December 1930, her contribution to Norman MacLeod’s political magazine *Front* marked a turn in her career away from *transition*’s proclaimed apolitical stance. While her continuous interest in engaging with the outside world took precedence over experiments in style, she became overtly diffident about the magazine’s neoromantic, even mystic, aesthetics. Though she remained firm in her friendship to Jolas, she did not support all of his ideas: “I liked the idea of the Revolution of the Word, that really made sense about the whole thing he was doing. But a lot of what [Jolas] wrote about and talked about I couldn’t enter into » (Bell, 1992 92).

Kay Boyle’s defection from *transition* thus symbolized the emergence of a new avant-garde that marked the collapse of the avant-gardist movement that had founded modernism. Far from being an isolated case, Kay Boyle embodied the vanguard of a movement that, from Max Eastman to V. F. Calverton, Malcolm Cowley, Matthew Josephson and Harold Salemsen construed their political engagement against *transition*’s decadent modernist aesthetics as it seemed to them to provide an inadequate response to the emerging cultural and social challenges of the new decade.

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