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The Modern World of Neith Boyce

Mary Jo Binker

The Modern World of Neith Boyce: Autobiography and Diaries. Ed. Carol DeBoer-Langworthy. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. 360 pp. ISBN 0826331475.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Neith Boyce (1872–1951) stood at the center of the literary movement known as modernism. A prolific writer of novels, naturalistic short stories, and creative nonfiction, she wrote for all the major periodicals of the day. She also wrote plays, one of which, “Constancy,” first performed on her own front porch, inaugurated the famed Provincetown Players in 1915. Her friends included such modernist luminaries as the writers Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, Futurist artist Mina Loy, social activist and modernist avatar Mabel Dodge, playwright Susan Glaspell and art connoisseur Bernard Berenson. Boyce’s husband, Hutchins Hapgood, a successful journalist and essayist in his own right, pioneered the craft of writing about tramps, vagrants, and other individuals on the margins of American life.

Underneath all this success, however, lay a bottomless pit of unhappiness. From bitter experience Boyce knew that “life was not to be trusted. It could deal terrifying blows and no one knew when these might come”(101). In Boyce’s case the terrifying blow came at age eight when she lost all four of her siblings in a diphtheria epidemic. Although her parents later had two more daughters, neither they nor Neith ever recovered from their loss.

Boyce’s marriage was also unhappy. In theory, she and Hapgood were both committed to a modern union based on complete equality, total honesty, and a certain amount of sexual freedom. (They also agreed that either partner could leave the marriage at any time.) In practice, Hapgood felt free to roam while Boyce felt tied down. Moreover, Hapgood’s affairs, the details of which he communicated to Boyce as part of their pact of complete honesty, caused her great pain.

At the same time, her flirtations and one serious love affair with a friend of Hapgood’s, all of which he initially encouraged, angered him so much that

he became violent toward her. Depressed and worn out by her complex marital situation, Boyce suffered a complete nervous breakdown in the winter of 1908–09, and her career floundered. After her recovery, she and Hapgood spent extended periods of time apart, only to be reunited through their shared grief over the death of their oldest son, who died in the 1918 flu pandemic. Thereafter, they remained together until Hapgood's death in 1944.

Recent scholarship has focused on Boyce's relationship with Hapgood as the prototype of the modern open marriage. In her book, *Intimate Warriors*, editor Ellen Kay Trimberger uses portions of both writers' works to argue that the couple's "warfare" (33)—over his affairs, her desire to work, and his aversion to working at all—enhanced her creativity and kept the marriage alive.¹ Carol DeBoer-Langworthy takes the opposite view. In her book, *The Modern World of Neith Boyce*, she argues that Boyce's difficult marriage jeopardized her health, sapped her creative energy, and ultimately shortened her career. She maintains that Boyce's autobiographical writings, published here for the first time, were the author's attempt to recover the autonomy that eluded her in marriage. Boyce may not have been able to break with Hapgood in life, but in art, she could make him a minor character, which she does in these biographical fragments—a partial autobiography written in 1940, and two shorter diaries written during European sojourns in 1903 and 1914.

The longest of these three fragments, the one written in 1940, deals with Boyce's life up until her marriage in 1899. Because DeBoer-Langworthy speculates that Boyce intended to publish these fragments together, she has arranged them in chronological order, rather than the order in which they were written.

Building on the work of Boyce's two daughters, who spent years annotating family correspondence, DeBoer-Langworthy has uncovered the details of Boyce's youth, her family's financial reverses and multiple moves, as well as her early career as a journalist in Boston and New York. She has also identified most of the people mentioned in the text, a considerable feat considering that Boyce gave many of her characters (including herself) pseudonyms or identified them by their initials alone. DeBoer-Langworthy also has carefully adhered to Boyce's typed manuscripts, including her handwrit-

¹Trimberger, Ellen Kay, ed., *Intimate Warriors: Portraits of a Modern Marriage, 1899–1944*, (New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the The City University of New York, 1991).

ten changes, and standardizes only punctuation, spelling, and spacing.

The first fragment reads like a novel, albeit one written in solitary confinement. Isolated from her caring but distant parents, trapped in her own grief and fear, Iras (the name Boyce gave herself) struggles to find her place in a world she fears is completely random. She takes refuge in work and becomes aloof in order to mask her “poverty of conversation (163).”

Despite her fears, Iras succeeds in making a life for herself as a writer in New York City and by the time Hapgood makes his appearance in chapter fourteen, she is living on her own and working for the *New York Commercial Advertiser*.

Hapgood’s arrival shatters Boyce’s hermetically sealed world. He is “a born writer with immense energy” (174) who is “like a warm spring breeze bursting into the room (177).” More importantly, he is a man who is not afraid to reveal his feelings. He disagrees with her, and she marvels at “his complete conviction that what he wanted was unquestionably right and in accord with the grand scheme of the universe...(188).” Hapgood proposes to her, and once Iras, who dreads marriage, decides to accept his proposal, she is sure she can combine marriage and “a working life. It was no question of sacrificing anything ... she wouldn’t consider that. She expected to have everything that was going (195).”

The two shorter diary fragments record the progressive shattering of her illusions. By 1903, Boyce and Hapgood have been married four years and have had one child. Boyce’s first novel, *The Forerunner*, is about to be published, and Hapgood, who has published his second book, has already begun to stray. Boyce is now writing in the first person, and her entries are full of the minutiae of life. Instead of sensual descriptions of the landscape and subtly drawn portraits of the people she knew or grew up with, Boyce records the costs of travel, food, and lodging; her child’s behavior; and the stifling conformity of the Anglo-American community living in Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. The central characters in this section are the art connoisseur Bernard Berenson and his wife Mary, lifelong friends of the Hapgoods. This section of the book is based on a revised manuscript Boyce wrote at the same time she wrote the longer autobiographical fragment. She apparently excised portions of the original diary which she considered embarrassing or which she planned to use for future works. DeBoer-Langworthy thinks Boyce’s edits indicate that author planned to publish this fragment, perhaps as part of a larger work. However, no evidence exists that she ever attempted to do so.

DeBoer-Langworthy transcribed both versions and then combined them (a process she compares to “broken-field running” [32]), using the original as the base text and restoring the excisions, which include fuller descriptions of well-known people such as Gertrude Stein. The editor also includes the notes Boyce made for what became her novel, *Eternal Spring* and the diary’s original ending so that the reader is given the fullest, most accurate manuscript possible. The annotation in this section is much more extensive, as DeBoer-Langworthy documents the Hapgoods’ encounters with the English-speaking community in Florence and those few Italians who penetrate its tightly drawn social lines.

Boyce’s acute powers of observation come to the fore in this fragment. Describing a musical afternoon at the Berensons’ villa, I Tatti, she notes, “the crowd was mainly women, all music lovers or pretended to be and not wildly interesting—or interested. Clapped in the wrong places and said ‘How sweet after everything’” (211).

She is equally unsparing about the figure she initially cuts in the couple’s rarefied circle. Compared to the refined (and often snobbish) Europeans who frequent the couple’s villa she is in her own eyes, “raw,” although her seemingly British “impersonal” manner soon wins over the Lithuanian-born Berenson and his Anglophile American wife (210, 213).

Boyce also deftly captures the claustrophobia of an expatriate community turned in upon itself. Commenting on the snobbishness of the British people she meets, Boyce writes, “it is so funny, how the English of a certain rank look down on the others of a lower rank. They would rather associate with Americans who don’t come into their caste system at all!” (253).

Even the people she likes are not spared. Writing of Gertrude Stein, Boyce notes her good friend’s peculiar way of bathing. “She sits out on the hillside at midday in the full sun, without a hat ... and comes in literally streaming with sweat...” (250), a habit that together with wearing the same clothes all the time annoyed Boyce, but not enough to end the friendship.

In this account, Hapgood has moved from the center of Boyce’s life to the periphery. He has also lost much of the romantic glow he possessed in the autobiography and dissatisfaction rather than wonder characterizes Boyce’s description of their time together. She carefully records the details of their fourth wedding anniversary, including the quarrel they had over her deficiencies as a wife. On another occasion, Boyce counters Hapgood’s desire “for an affair with a fascinating Russian woman of the world” by suggesting that if a woman has to have more than one child “she should at least

be able to choose its father (240).”

Yet, not all is gloom and doom in the couple’s relationship. Boyce credits Hapgood with giving her an idea for a novel, and notes their joint pleasure when she becomes pregnant with their second child.

Because Boyce viewed all of life as potential material for novels, her marital ups and downs share space with ideas for future stories, the details associated with the publication of *The Forerunner*, and notes on the people and landscape of Italy. This fragment ends with a brief but vivid account of the Hapgood family’s trip home aboard a German steamer that highlights the tension and sorrow that must have gripped the author as she journeyed home following the death of her father. “Seven days of continuous gales and high seas. A flurry of snow. Two or three fogs. Everybody ill—worst trip in boat’s history (289).”

A different kind of tension and tedium pervades the last biographical fragment, titled “August 1914.” By now Boyce is a seasoned international traveler and the mother of four children, the oldest and youngest of whom are traveling with her. She is estranged from her husband, who is hardly mentioned in this section, although she is traveling with his close friend, Mabel Dodge, her son, and a nurse-cum-secretary. Dodge, who is in the process of obtaining a divorce from her husband, architect Edwin Dodge, is trying to rendez-vous with her former lover, the writer/reporter and political agitator John Reed. (Boyce’s play *Constancy* was based on the relationship between Dodge and Reed.) The women and their children are later joined by Dodge’s friend, writer/social critic Carl Van Vechten.

Like the diary of 1903, the fragment is a revised text from an earlier holograph version which DeBoer-Langworthy believes was lost or thrown away. Embedded in this manuscript are two addenda: one describing Dodge’s Florentine home, the Villa Curonia, and one on the voyage home, which forms the last entry.

Boyce seems to have had a premonition that the trip would be difficult. She takes one look at the crowded, dingy Italian steamer and says to Dodge, “Let’s get off the boat (291).” Instead, they sail in mid-July, arriving in Italy shortly before World War I breaks out. Initially, the party pays no attention to what Boyce describes as “something in the papers about Austria and Servia [Serbia],” although they soon have to, because “the trains stopped, mails stopped, money stopped ... and absolutely no boats running anywhere (298, 302).”

Added to the uncertainty of not knowing whether or not they will be

allowed to leave Europe, is the question of which side Italy would take in the conflict. Boyce's diary entries capture both the chaos and the banality of a civilization on the edge of a precipice. She segues effortlessly from Dodge's conviction that the world they knew is gone forever to the petty intrigues of the expatriate community, which continue as if nothing had happened. Writing of Florence, she says, "I should not want to spend my old age there.... The same gossipy parochial little place—people and everything on a small scale—everybody having an affair and rather sordid (316)."

Although she is sometimes frightened and often worried, Boyce never despairs. Ever the writer, she encourages her thirteen-year-old son to keep a diary telling him to "look round ... at the world (310)." She even manages to go to Rome to view the remains of Pope Pius X, who died in August 1914.

Like the previous diary fragment, the Diary for August 1914 ends with Boyce's partial account of the voyage home with her children and Van Vechten. (Dodge elected to remain behind to wait for Reed.) Once again Boyce neatly encapsulates the chaos of the overcrowded vessel with its bad food, primitive bathing arrangements, and happy-go-lucky crew. "Everybody sings ... the sailors as they pretend to wash the ship with incredibly dirty brooms ... the cooks as they sit on the floor and prepare the pastry ... the waiters as they gaily bring you the wrong thing ... Everybody is cheerfully noisy and dirty. The ship smells and looks like a garbage heap (321)."

The voyage home marked the end of Boyce's attempts at autobiography. Although she lived until 1951, she did not extend her story, although she continued to write fiction and nonfiction, most of which was not published.

Thus, these three biographical fragments are all that remain of Boyce's attempt to write her life story. DeBoer-Langworthy speculates that these materials reflect Boyce's own ambivalence about the life she chose and her inability to meld her beliefs with reality. Yet, she believes Boyce remained true (35) to her calling as a writer, continuing to work despite changing literary styles, the deaths of her husband and eldest son, and financial pressures brought about by the Great Depression.

Likewise, DeBoer-Langworthy remains faithful to the task she set herself: letting Boyce speak in her own behalf. The annotation, while extensive, is never overbearing, and DeBoer-Langworthy has done the minimum amount of editing necessary. Numerous photographs of many of the people and places mentioned and a complete listing of Boyce's published works round out the volume. The index is extensive and well organized, with the names

of all the people mentioned set in boldfaced type for easier reference. DeBoer-Langworthy's introductory essay situates Boyce within the modernist tradition as well as within feminist literature generally and offers a compelling rationale as to why she chose to write her autobiography as a series of fragments. The only missing element is a chronology that would help the reader track Boyce as she moved around the United States and Europe.

Although Boyce was accused often in her life of aloofness—at one point Dodge tells Boyce that she “doesn't feel any of her [own] feelings” (304)—Boyce's presence on paper is palpable. Her struggle to reconcile life's joys with its tragedies ultimately renders moot the question of whether her marriage made or marred her career. By linking these autobiographical accounts and revealing their hidden subtexts, DeBoer-Langworthy smooths out the rawness Boyce so deplored in life while offering a new appraisal of the author's life and work that puts Boyce in the center of both. In doing so she gives the reader a portrait of a woman who, far from being unfeeling, was more sensitive than she let on. If that sensitivity caused her great pain, it was also the source of her greatest professional happiness. Boyce clearly could not resolve all the ambiguities she lived with, so she did the next best thing: She made them into art.

