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Reconsidering the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Kay Boyle: Feminist Aesthetics and Modernism

Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick

By contributing to little magazines that facilitated public discourse around female identities, female bodies, inequality, aesthetics, politics, and female authorship, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874–1927) and Kay Boyle (1902–1992) participated in an alternative approach to avant-garde literature, one that is indebted to feminist ideology and modernist aesthetics. Their work embodies the spirit of a feminist strain of modernism, and yet these two important women writers (important in their day and currently on the fringes of canonicity) are largely neglected. This article discusses the Baroness's and Boyle's critical engagement with gender in twentieth-century manifestos and poems, and it considers the feminist revolution of the word, as well as engagement with the female body, within the selected texts. Close readings of the Baroness's "The Modest Woman" (1921) and "Circle" (1923) and Boyle's "The Revolution of the Word" (1928) and "The Artist Speaks—The Woman Answers" (1960) are presented. Further study of their literary works will participate in feminist recovery or revival work and will show the additional ways in which they (and others) contributed to a feminist brand of modernism.

Keywords: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven / female embodiment and poetry / feminist aesthetics / Kay Boyle / literature and feminism / literature by women / modernism

The little magazines of the 1920s, specifically *transition*, *Broom*, and *The Little Review*, offer insight into how an alternative modernist aesthetic—one that the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874–1927) and Kay Boyle (1902–1992) construct and shape in their poetic manifestos and poetry—came to be. This

aesthetic is inherently political; it speaks directly to issues of language, gender, identity, canonicity, and female modernist authorship. As Peter Booker and Andrew Thacker explain, little magazines “belonged to a nexus out of which an ongoing campaign for artistic, intellectual, and broadly political values were launched and launched again,” and the role of little magazines included “servicing new writing, introducing readers to new movements in the arts across different continents, engendering debate, disseminating ideas, and challenging settled assumptions” (2009, 3). In particular, Boyle’s affiliation with Eugène Jolas’s manifesto in *transition* and the publication of the Baroness’s work in *The Little Review* and *Broom* allows for an analysis of the artistic and political concerns occupying Boyle and the Baroness. Furthermore, the publication of Boyle’s late poetry demonstrates that there was a concerted effort in constructing and maintaining a poetic tradition that encompasses the gender concerns and the sexual politics of the 1920s and modernist literature. By positioning the Baroness’s work and literary agenda alongside Boyle’s work and literary advocacy, we see the gendered coalescence of a feminist, modernist aesthetic that undergirds the creative and theoretical artistic artifacts that were being produced as part of a strong alternative tradition in literary modernism of the 1920s.

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, known as the Baroness by her contemporaries, was a notorious presence, even a celebrity, in New York City in the early twentieth century. She produced art in various media and not only embraced but *was* the embodiment of Dada art. She considered Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray friends and collaborated with them. She befriended many female modernist writers, among them Djuna Barnes, her confidante and her literary executor, and published poetry in avant-garde literary magazines. Twenty-first century critics like Irene Gammel (2002a) and Amelia Jones (2004) consider her to be so far ahead of her time that her performances could not register as anything other than grotesque, mainly because she crosses gendered and aesthetic boundaries and dismantles phallogocentrism by lauding a feminist aesthetic that promoted avant-garde notions of what a female artist and a female subject could be. The Baroness comes across as an abject subject due to her excesses, her liminal occupation of gendered spaces, and her dismantling of gendered expectations.

Similar to the Baroness, Boyle is a feminist avant-garde writer, aligning herself with the Surrealists in “The Revolution of the Word” manifesto, printed in *transition*. Boyle is more of a major figure than the Baroness, however, in that Boyle is on the fringes of canonicity.¹ And yet Boyle’s work has not been as acclaimed as it should be; Suzanne Clark comments in 1991 that Boyle’s “impact on literary history has not seemed so powerful as her writing would warrant” ([1991] 1997, 157). Along with the Baroness, Boyle espouses a difficult modernist poetics that demands that readers reorient themselves and try new strategies when analyzing her literary work; the radical nature of Boyle’s and the Baroness’s aesthetics produces texts that are distinctly modernist and feminist. Perhaps the Baroness and Boyle have not yet received the sanction or critical

acclaim their work deserves not only because their work is challenging but because there is not yet an (over)abundance of scholarship that invites critical conversations about their poetry or manifestos or that offers platforms upon which to engage in scholarly debate or investigation.² Scholarship focusing on the Baroness and Boyle remains mostly relegated to small camps of scholars who are dedicated to recovering the work and status of important women writers—writers who had impact on their time and influenced their contemporaries. I will show that both the Baroness and Boyle set up or aligned themselves with theoretical frameworks that can be applied to their own literary work. And the interpretations of their manifestos and poems will inevitably lead to further and continued discussions of a counter-current and plural modernism(s), pivoting on a feminist aesthetic that incorporates the demands of modernist intellectual rigor and centers female artists and their concerns.

The critical orientations of New Modernist Studies support the premise and the arguments embedded in this essay: namely that special attention to what is contested and in need of recovery can be illuminated by interdisciplinary approaches and the kind of feminist theory that privileges the plural (as well as the transnational) and thereby centers or repositions female authors, women's writing, and feminist concerns. New Modernist Studies interrogates paradigms and promotes the following: a) contested boundaries, b) recovery work, and c) an interdisciplinary critical apparatus. Peter Nicholls insists that he has “always been intrigued by modernism as a plural, transnational set of movements . . . and it's here that I think really new work will be done” (2009, 56). And Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz emphasize that the new directions undertaken by scholars all point to “expansion” (2008, 737): expansion of time, geography, and definitions, as well as “inclusion of a variety of alternative traditions” (739).

In thinking about how modernist studies as a field incorporates feminism in its theoretical orientation, we can turn to the work of Susan Stanford Friedman as an example, who attends to textual identity formation and the importance of such discursive formations. According to Friedman, “[I]dentity is literally unthinkable without narrative. People know who they are through the stories they tell about themselves and others” (1998, 8). She further explains that “narrative texts—whether verbal or visual, oral or written, fictional or referential, imaginary or historical—constitute primary documents of cultural expressivity. Narrative is a window into, mirror, constructor, and symptom of culture. Cultural narratives encode and encrypt in story form the norms, values, and ideologies of the social order” (8–9). And what is important to remember in relation to the present essay is the following assertion: “Cultural narratives also tell the strategic plots of interaction and resistance as groups and individuals negotiate with and against hegemonic scripts and histories” (9).

This essay strives to elaborate on the feminist impetus of Boyle's texts and the Baroness's work, as well as to build on the feminist trajectory that undergirds the impulse toward recovery of women's artistic products. My work attempts

to break new ground by bringing additional feminist scholarship to studies on the Baroness, Boyle, literature by women, and American/transatlantic modernism within the context of New Modernist Studies. The comparative feminist context and the close readings offered herein are new but are informed by current conversations and work in these areas. Additionally, the interpretations and arguments presented in this article will buoy the important research and scholarship that are already working to establish the Baroness and Boyle as important figures in modernism. And there is still much work to be done and more room in which to do it: *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers* only lists one mention each for the Baroness and Boyle, in facing pages, but both are buried in lists of contributors to little magazines (Linett 2010, 70–71). Examination of the Baroness’s contributions to little magazines of the 1920s and Boyle’s own contributions demonstrate how their literary texts break away from the concept of a hard, masculine, traditional modernism. Such study will prove to be significant, as it helps demonstrate that the Baroness and Boyle are much more than footnotes in literary modernist studies; this work will provide evidence of a countercurrent feminist modernism and add to current knowledge of their reputations, which are gaining currency in literary history.

From the outset, as mirrored in the critical landscape of the field, women writers’ relations to the individual male modernists who actively shaped the literary landscape, such as James Joyce, were sometimes complex and fraught with uneasiness. The Baroness (and, much later, H el ene Cixous) admired Joyce’s work and found feminist elements in it. In her manifesto, the Baroness proclaims, “That attitude of the learner—the inferior—you should feel in regard to James Joyce” (1921, 325). On the one hand, the Baroness lauded Joyce as a trailblazer and seemed to revel in his excess, and she saw him as someone male and female writers would do well to emulate, but, on the other hand, she routinely blasted critics and male artists for overlooking her accomplishments in favor of men (e.g., Duchamp) and was jealous of the success of her male contemporaries.³ The editors of *The Little Review*, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, who were staunch feminist avant-garde advocates in their own right, favorably compared Joyce and the Baroness and published the Baroness and Joyce as exemplars of modernist writing, a gesture that the Baroness took to heart. To a lesser extent, Boyle, for her part, associates canonicity with maleness or, minimally, with traditional male imagery and associations, although she hopes for a future of feminist productivity and artistry.⁴ In appending her name to the “Revolution of the Word” manifesto in *transition*, Boyle aligns herself primarily with men. Neither the Baroness nor Boyle was a separatist in practice; instead, they agitated for acknowledgement of the equivalent work being done by women in avant-garde artistic circles, such as the work produced in little magazines. And, in fact, Adam McKible observes that “modernism isn’t only about big, revolutionary ideas; it is about real bodies meeting in real places. Little magazines literally embody modernism, providing a discursive link to the

sometimes strange and disruptive bodies that produced it” (2007, 198). While Boyle and the Baroness offered liberal feminist ways of thinking about signifying gender instead of separatist views, they both deliver sharp and insightful critiques of *how* gender signifies, with probing investigations into *why* the norms are the way they are, as we will see shortly. Ewa Plonowska Ziarek argues that “a feminist creation of new possibilities of action, meaning, and community in politics and literature would have to entail a resignification and the invention of new experimental forms” (2012, 3), both of which the Surrealist/modernist Boyle and the Dadaist/modernist Baroness embraced. For them, the manifesto functions as a statement of revolutionary beliefs; it delineates the revolutionary spirit and feminist transformations of patriarchal attitudes and signifiers, all of which can be found in their respective poetry.

In the Baroness’s manifesto, “The Modest Woman,” published in *The Little Review* in 1921, we are presented with a feminist statement on art. Although a starving artist (literally—the Baroness resented not being paid well for her performance art, modeling, sculptures, and poetry), she constructs herself as an artist and aristocrat in this piece. She presents herself as the embodiment of the elite, part of the high modernist aristocracy, in the privileged half of what Andreas Huyssen (1986) terms the “great divide.” And yet she embraces the abject notion of woman as a consuming subject, and she links the powerful act of consumption and production, conflating the two acts into artistic behavior: “If I can eat I can eliminate—it is logic—it is why I eat! My machinery is built that way. . . . Why should I proud engineer—be ashamed of my machinery—part of it? . . . Joyce is engineer! one of the boldest—most adventurous— . . . to talk shop is his sacred business” (Freytag-Loringhoven [1921] 2001, 324–25). She points to Joyce, whom she references several times, as the male example for her (and other female artists/writers) to follow because she admires his avant-garde experimentation and brazenness: nothing is off limits to him, and the Baroness believes that nothing should be off limits to her.

The manifesto moves on to attack what the author perceives as a provincial attitude toward art in America. The Baroness argues that the American, artist or otherwise, does not perform her or his body artistically or in a dignified manner, implying, of course, that she as an expatriate European does. She criticizes American materialism and offers herself as an example to learn from: one should pursue art for art’s sake in a manner of speaking—art that is not safe (conventional) or predictable (the Baroness wants an aesthetic that pushes boundaries). Dada is the style the Baroness promotes. Ultimately, the Baroness advocates art that transgresses, that blurs boundaries and expectations of gender in literature, and the style of her manifesto is even Dadaist. In trying to persuade her audience of her vision in this poetic essay, she ridicules the reader and adopts an antagonistic stance. For instance, in speaking of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the Baroness adopts a defensive position because she likens her work to Joyce’s: “(thank Europe for such people—world will advance.) Shows him one of

highest intellects—with creative power abundant—soaring! Such one you dare approach—little runt? Whatever made you read him—*Little Review*—anyway? Back to my astonishment! You see how ridiculous you are? Well—if not—others will. That is why I wrote this—!” (Freytag-Loringhoven [1921] 2001, 326). The rhetorical moves at the end of the manifesto, in which she insults the very readers to whom she is appealing, are shocking but fitting for the Dadaist Baroness. And she is right: others will recognize her work and Joyce’s novel as art.

“The Revolution of the Word” by Eugène Jolas and others (signed by Kay Boyle et al.) was published in *transition* in 1928. The manifesto advocates a set of principles that condemn the commonplace and the trite, in short, art that is devoid of freshness. It takes apart the linear symbolic style of traditional art and literature to embrace and celebrate multiplicity, destabilizing conventional expectations for Logos in favor of more Surrealist, Dadaist semiotic styles. Boyle was the first person to sign the manifesto (Hileman 2000, 45), and this act demonstrates her commitment to and belief in modernism. But it also shows that she is among the very first avant-garde artists to usher in a new literary era.

Similar to the Baroness, Boyle calls for an avant-garde artistic revolution of the word, but the signers of the manifesto acknowledge, writing seven years after the Baroness, that the revolution is already being practiced: “THE REVOLUTION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS AN ACCOMPLISHED FACT” (Jolas and Boyle et al. [1928] 2001, 530). Indeed, Surrealism, following Dada, is comprised of an outright rejection of what art has stood for and represented. Revolutionizing language will transform reality or, at least, our notions of it. If our ideas about the world and the people in it can be reconfigured, then the potential for new ways of being in the world emerge. Indeed, the fourth statement underscores the importance of narrative: “NARRATIVE IS NOT MERE ANECDOTE, BUT THE PROJECTION OF A METAMORPHOSIS OF REALITY” (530). Here, Boyle and others acknowledge the importance of narrative as script. As a result of familiarity with many different scripts, we encounter new ways of being and thus discern positive affirmations of difference and otherness.

The third statement of the manifesto (“PURE POETRY IS A LYRICAL ABSOLUTE THAT SEEKS AN A PRIORI REALITY WITHIN OURSELVES ALONE” [1928] 2001, 530) validates the cultural work of poetry. In signing her name to this manifesto, Boyle endorses the expression and articulation of embodied states, experiential reality, and subjective approaches. As such, the sixth and seventh points forwarded in the manifesto expand the cultural work of literature, namely poetry. The revolution of the word requires experimentation (“THE LITERARY CREATOR HAS THE RIGHT TO DISINTEGRATE THE PRIMAL MATTER OF WORDS IMPOSED ON HIM BY TEXT-BOOKS AND DICTIONARIES” [530]), and it entails a radical unhinging of signs in terms of conventional literature. The seventh point, that writers should be free

to disregard conventional grammatical structures, is a practice evident in the works of writers such as the Baroness and Gertrude Stein.

There is an emphasis on subjectivity in this manifesto that complements the awareness of a material reality. The eleventh statement declares that the writer “EXPRESSES” ([1928] 2001, 531). Due to the nature of subjective literary expression, we may not be able to adequately or fully understand a self-referential modernist literary text because it is both personal and experimental, as is sometimes the case with works by the Baroness and Boyle. But this insistence on the subject and expressivist rhetoric imbues the author with power: the implications are that s/he has something important to impart, whether or not we as readers grasp the importance or the meanings attendant to any given literary text. This point leads into the last of the manifesto: the type of art being promoted is not for middlebrow readers. Readers will be disoriented when reading avant-garde literature, and new approaches or perspectives will have to be formed because there is something revolutionary taking place.

The literary magazines, wherein these manifestos were published, are perhaps the best measure for evaluating the gendered tensions and politics in literature and the arts more broadly, as attested by Boyle and Robert McAlmon in *Being Geniuses Together*. McAlmon comments, “I would judge that it was [the journal] *transition* . . . which exerted the most influence on writers. . . . Younger writers were now released to explore new materials and newer phases of social and psychological and circumstantial qualities” (1984, 252–53). The little magazines provided a forum for writers and artists to enter into debates about literary aesthetics and real-world politics, and this forum appealed to Boyle, who was “unwavering in [her] conviction that words, far from being merely self-referential, refer to the ‘real world’ and can make an efficacious difference in the world” (Austenfeld 2001, 9). The little magazines shaped and constituted what we know as modernism today; a cursory look at the tables of contents will reveal poems, short stories, and excerpts from novels that are heavily anthologized.

In fact, these writers became canonized through the little magazines to a great extent, and the literature produced by them helped to form and solidify an idea of an American and transatlantic avant-garde literature. Boyle recounts Jolas’s editorial intentions with the international *transition*: it was to be “‘a proving ground for the new literature, a laboratory for poetic experiment’ . . . that he hoped would express his ‘almost mystical concept of an ideal America.’ But the vocabulary of that ideal America could not be formed, he said[,] without ‘new words, new abstractions, new hieroglyphics [*sic*], new symbols, new myths” (McAlmon and Boyle, 214). This new vision of America and transatlantic literature did not completely revolutionize traditional expectations of the female writer or translate into equitable work relations, however. Boyle remarks, “I remembered . . . that my role was that of homage-giver to the great, and this seemed to me to be increasingly true” (214). Shari Benstock corroborates Boyle’s observation. According to Benstock, “Literary activity in the years following

World War I was characterized by variously competing ‘isms,’ and it was important for new writers to identify themselves with these movements in order to be published. [. . .] As women were excluded from these literary subgroups—except as they served as lovers or literary patrons—they were automatically denied access to publication opportunities” (1986, 381). Although she contributed literary pieces and was a signer of “The Revolution of the Word,” Boyle is careful to record her additional role (“homage-giver”) as one that was foisted on her by Jolas in her memoir. Thus, talented female writers were typically positioned in subservient roles, where they could be of help to male writers and artists.

Because of their familiarity with the operations of patriarchal societies, particularly in the art world, the Baroness and Boyle are cognizant of the need for a different conceptual vocabulary in avant-garde theories of literature and art. I would like to take a moment here to explore what it is that the Baroness and Boyle are dismantling. In essence, their manifestos and poems are combating the foreclosure of phallogocentrism, a male-dominated, masculine-coded linguistic and philosophical system. Feminists have labored to combat such exclusion and establish their own literary, philosophical, and theoretical topographies. As a feminist poststructuralist, Judith Butler maintains that bodies are constructed through discourse; there is not an essential materiality to a gendered body. She defines materialization as a “process of sedimentation,” “a kind of citationality,” and the “acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the ‘I’” (1993, 15). Thus, materiality is “a certain effect of power” (34). Because of the citational quality of materiality, materiality will have something to do with performativity: what kinds of performances are sanctioned? What can be acted out? What is engendered or embodied? Phallogocentrism values male heterosexual bodies and not female and/or homosexual ones; heterosexual hegemony regulates the discourses that are produced. The main argument Butler advances in *Bodies that Matter* is that, in terms of materiality, some bodies have been construed as more important than others, or, in other words, some bodies matter while others do not.

In *The Great Divide* (1986), Huyssen explores how cultural artifacts or qualities are gendered as feminine: the aspects of art that point to excess (especially emotional excess), danger, passivity, imitation, superficiality, and disorder are rendered feminine, especially in relation to consumption of mass or popular-culture objects.⁵ In contrast, good art is distinguished as masculine: it is produced by a masculine author and is rational, active, original, and ordered. We can see how this mass culture/high art divide is somewhat reductive and, therefore, not the most productive way of examining countercurrent movements in modernism, itself a movement invested in pushing borders and boundaries, as Huyssen also suggests. In his more recent work, Huyssen elucidates the high/low binary opposition and maintains that there are more sophisticated ways to conceptualize both modernity and academic scholarship. Arguing for a return

to a consideration of aesthetics and politics and transnationalism/internationalism within disciplinary English studies, among other points, Huyssen urges us to remember that the dichotomy of high and low culture and art is a “powerful imaginary insisting on the divide while time and again violating that categorical separation in practice” (2002, 367). And we know that the Baroness and Boyle are concerned with borders and expectations, as well as aesthetics and politics. Moreover, these women writers complicate binary oppositions. They understand that these distinctions and positions are produced in order to construct anxious distinctions and positions. For Huyssen, what is useful about retaining the high/low relationship as a theoretical concern is its ability to capture “aspects of cultural hierarchies and social class, race, and religion; gender relations and codifications of sexuality; [. . . and] the relation between cultural tradition and modernity” (367). We will see how the Baroness and Boyle denaturalize what it means to be feminine and masculine, irrational and rational, and writer and artist, and we will see that they also take up anachronistically Huyssen’s call for literature that provides “a space of writing to explore issues of aesthetic complexity, formal experimentation, the vicissitudes of representation, and radical political content” (373).

The feminist modernist literary revolution is not limited to manifestos. Poems by the Baroness and Boyle also take part in new literary and feminist experiments. One such poem is “Circle,” which appeared in *Broom* in 1923. The title signifies the movement and the conceptual thrust of the feminist poem.⁶ The Baroness presents us with a text that pivots on returning in a cyclical way to its themes and that remains staunchly unfixed; there is room for play with interpretations amid boundaries. This poem is Dadaist, if we accept that much of Dada art does convey meaning(s).

“Circle” is specifically about the Baroness and her critique of gendered expectations for beauty. She inveighs against patriarchal structures that circumscribe women and their worth. Suzanne W. Churchill notes that for the “New Women” of the early twentieth century, among whom she counts the Baroness, “writing was a means and sign of emancipation, and poetry—especially free verse—was a favored form of expression” (2006, 16). Indeed, the Baroness’s poetry pivots on a poetics that favors free verse and unconventional expression, and her aesthetics embrace difficulty and social critique, thereby dislocating her poems from a conventional or traditional aesthetic and making them more challenging to interpret.

“Circle” interrogates youthfulness and its value in relation to female corporeality. The poem begins with “Where youth / No find her” (1923, 1–2). This opening predicts the kind of feminist, poststructuralist analysis that Cixous (1986) opens with in “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays” from *The Newly Born Woman*.⁷ Cixous claims that we think in logocentric binaries, with man/woman metaphorically divided: “Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized” (63).

These binary oppositions are hierarchical and reinforce the notion of “Superior/Inferior” (64). As such, Cixous states that we have a “universal battlefield” upon which to use language (64). In this hierarchical schema, maturity/youth would make up what Cixous calls a “coupling,” and “youth” would be assigned to women. And yet youth is an unattainable and problematic ideal for the Baroness. Her aging body comes under attack by several of her male contemporaries, one of whom was also an object of her desire. William Carlos Williams published a “violently misogynistic account” of her in the little magazine *Contact* in 1921 (Jones 2004, 7). He blasts her for her age, hygiene, and poverty and dubs her “a dirty old bitch” (Williams qtd. in Jones 2004, 10). The Baroness was in her forties when Williams attacked her, and she was very physically fit, as evidenced by photographs from the 1920s. Regardless of the Baroness’s age, perpetual youthfulness is also a beauty standard for women that is not realistic for any woman. The Baroness counters this query for youthful female beauty with “No find her” as both meta-commentary and critique. If youth is the ideal and, by extension, the criterion by which female bodies are judged, then women are judged by masculine standards that neither account for the aging women’s body nor her contributions.

The Baroness insists on her value as a woman who is not youthful but who is present, insistent, and resilient in “Circle.” In a series of mostly one-word lines, the Baroness writes,

Instead
 Find
 What grew
 Myself.
 (1923, 3–6)

The emphasis in these lines is on a realization, a discovery for the Baroness and/or her readers of her value: it is important to note that virtually all of the poems by the Baroness are autobiographical and expressivist; the speaker is often an extension of the author herself and obviously so.⁸ In “Circle,” the Baroness emphasizes that both her age and her art “grew” naturally; these states developed organically. The Baroness’s performances and artistic works are outrageous and shocking, but they are human acts that play upon and grow from an often-humorous critique of societal expectations of gender and artistic conventions. In terms of gendered expectations, the Baroness is clearly interested in dismantling femininity, masculinity, and appropriate desire when she claims her aging body as art that can and should be performed in literature and in performance art.

The Baroness foregrounds desire embedded in the poem by asking in a one-word line, “Longing?” (7). But who is longing? The speaker could refer to the male reader, the desirer and consumer of the visual images of the female girl’s body. Or the speaker may be addressing the female reader and questioning any latent or overt longing for lost youth. In a patriarchal economy that channels

desire and attaches it to the young, beautiful, vulnerable female body, the aging, wise, powerful body of a woman like the Baroness is rendered repulsive. These interpretations of the cultural critique the Baroness offers us are apt, in light of the overall trajectory of her work in various media.

In “Circle,” the Baroness tells us implicitly that she takes a playful happiness in killing old feminine types and poetic representations. The longing that the Baroness identifies finds “death hilarity” in the next line. This commentary on longing is incisive; the boisterous gaiety or merriment that the Baroness finds in the perversion of desire that elevates and privileges a transitory female state is transformed into a metanarrative. Indeed, the next one-word line, “Sphinx” (9), is appropriated as a marker that points to the Baroness’s own reputation. According to Jones,

The Baroness, then, can be viewed (as she clearly was by many of the male members of the avant-garde) as embodying the cacophonous clash of races, sexes, sexualities, and classes of people that constituted the population of New York City in the World War I era and that accompanied the massive cultural shifts to which Dada responded and which it helped to promote. The Baroness, as constructed and reconstructed through accounts such as Man Ray’s, [William Carlos] Williams’s, and [Margaret] Anderson’s, becomes not only a sign of New York Dada but a figure of the threat posed by these shifts to the normative—Euro-American, white, heterosexual, male—subjects of the modernist avant-garde, in spite of the vast variations among these subjects in their adherence to the codes of normative masculinity. (2004, 9)

While people see the Baroness as a sphinx (a monster that was both dangerous and mysterious with her riddles/art), the Baroness herself pronounces emphatically (with a period, one of the very few punctuation marks used) that she is “Inexorable” (10): unyielding in her position as a feminist modernist who makes valuable things and revitalizes art by making it (very) new.

After explaining what she is not (youthful—and thereby worthy, beautiful, tolerable to society), how she sees herself (as a feminist, offering new performances and thereby ways of being a woman and a poet, while embracing herself as she is), and how others view her or perhaps how she sees herself (sphinx, inexorable), she promises that

Behind
Serpent
I wait
Round.
(11–14)

She literally and figuratively comes full circle with the word “round,” which complements the title as she promises to be inexorable and a monster and present and viable (unlike “youth” who cannot be found).⁹ Understanding that the

Dadaist works by the Baroness are about *something*, we can see how “Circle” is both metacommentary on the Baroness’s own life and social commentary on the modern world.

Boyle’s poem “The Artist Speaks—The Woman Answers” is included in her *Collected Poems of Kay Boyle*. It is dated 1960, and this late poem shows us that the modernist and feminist concerns set up by the Baroness and Boyle in the heyday of modernism continued to be relevant and important to Boyle. (The Baroness died in 1927.) As Clark also acknowledges, Boyle “maintains the political commitments that the modernist revolution seemed to imply in the beginning” in her late work (1997, 178). Thus, the situation of the female, avant-garde artist had not yet been properly acknowledged or reconfigured, even at the end of the modernist era. As a result, Boyle breaks her poem and its title into two sections. The first half of the title and the poem, “The Artist Speaks,” refrains from designating the sex of the artist. It is not until the purposefully delayed response in “The Woman Answers,” the second half of the title and poem, that the tensions of being a modernist female poet surface. Boyle conflates masculine and feminine subject positions in discussing poetry when she opens with a belligerent attitude and closes with a more socially constructed feminine response, a voice that advocates gentleness, patience, and humility. This second section seems to recall Coventry Patmore’s Angel in the House archetype, made famous in Virginia Woolf’s 1929 criticism in which she recounts that the woman writer is plagued by the contrast of what she is expected to be and what she envisions herself being and doing (2007).

It is appropriate that the woman’s (soft) response is delayed because the artist assumes a belligerent position and invokes violent, masculine rape imagery that is the antithesis of stereotypical feminine agency. The violent circumscription of female agency and possibilities is addressed in the third line, suggesting that it has been difficult for this artist to represent her reality due to castigations: “What’s it to you? My art’s for me a seizing of my own reality!” (Boyle 1960, 3). The female artist, the speaker, clarifies in the following lines: “Like the tree which does not force its sap, its leaves, / But stands without tremor in the storms of spring / Not fearing that summer may refuse to come” (6–8). The (female) artist shows herself one who must possess courage, perseverance, faith, and belief in her art—because the female artist will have to wage war to write poetry. Catherine Clément, in her study on “guilty” women, declares, “If women begin to want their turn at telling this history, if they take the relay from men by putting myths into words (since that is how historical and cultural evolutions will take place), . . . it will necessarily be from other points of view” (1986, 6). Women’s stories, couched in verse or prose, “are not inscribed in a void or in ahistorical time when their repetitions would be identical. Each time there is a repetition of memories, a return of the repressed, it will be in a specific cultural and historical context” (6). In this manner, Boyle’s poem continues and extends the agenda her manifesto from the 1920s announces; the cultural and

historical contexts have changed, but the repressed feminine subject in poetry is still problematic (and traumatic) for feminist authors (and readers).

But there is a reward for the effort of staging a revolution. Boyle lived to see her work validated, although the Baroness did not. However, the Baroness is now receiving her accolades, with the revival of interest in her art and writing. And yet there remains an uphill battle for scholars who recover experimental women writers to justify the significance of very experimental literary texts by women in the early twentieth century because such literature has been dismissed or eradicated from the canon due to male bias and the constricting and restricting phallogocentric expectations placed on the female writer/artist. As a contemporary of the Baroness and Boyle, Woolf reminds us in 1929 that we cannot dismiss the burden of gender: “who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?” ([1929] 2007, 52). Woolf explains in her hypothetical scenario in *A Room of One’s Own*, featuring Shakespeare’s sister and published one year after Boyle’s “The Revolution of the Word,” that such a talented woman would be “driven nuts,” become a witch, or commit suicide: “When . . . one reads of a witch being ducked, or a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet . . . who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with torture that her gift had put her to” (52–53). Woolf concludes, “That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think if a woman in Shakespeare’s day had had Shakespeare’s genius” (52). Although the Baroness and Boyle (and Woolf) are far removed from Renaissance culture and literature, the circumscription of the experimental female writer is exacting in modernist literature and culture. From the time that the Baroness published her manifesto in 1921, railing against the “modest woman,” until Boyle’s critique of gendered expectations for the female poet in 1960, we see in these select but important samples that gender has been a contested and defining identity for Shakespeare’s sister’s descendants. Boyle promises us in “The Artist Speaks—The Woman Answers” that a feminist muse or validation for talented women writers is on the horizon: “I tell you summer comes, God damn it! I have seen her yellow hair!” (1960, 9). The struggles and perseverance of the female artist will be rewarded with the coming of a metaphorical spring: according to Boyle, a new world when new freshness and vitality will be realized.¹⁰

Like Amy Lowell in her 1925 poem “The Sisters,” wherein Lowell suggests that there is no need for female modernist poets to search out other (masculine) traditions because they have a poetic legacy, established by Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, and Lowell herself, Boyle alludes to a female poetic tradition that, unlike Lowell, she does not flesh out.¹¹ However, space for female poets is sanctioned by Boyle: “Nothing that belongs to another should befall us, only what has long been ours” (10). Rather than turning to men for answers, Boyle elevates the female speaker to a position in which she can offer

answers and rejoinders. Boyle apparently thought “poetry was the highest form of literature” (Spanier [1986] 1997, 99), and we see that she is championing art in the form of verse.

The allegorical struggle of the woman writer in the poem foregrounds the rebellion that is part of a literary revolution. The speaker declares, “Within the narrow corridors of stamping blood. / I am unique, not repeatable, / Born in rebellion, still being that which at every turning of my life I was!” (1960, 11–13). In a style reminiscent of Lowell’s poem, Boyle maintains her individuality while reminding us that there are other (“stamping”) bodies, other authors, and she thus brings to bear a genealogy of women writers in her conception of literary history, which is a difficult task as Woolf, Cixous, and Lowell contend. Boyle asserts that each female author is unique, not repeatable, and part of a constellation of stars that are “born in rebellion.” We should think here of “The Revolution of the Word.” Boyle is again advocating for a poetic revolution, but this time she is focusing on gender. Anne Reynes-Delobel reminds us that Boyle and the other artists in Jolas’s circle “were all striving to break down the boundaries between different forms of artistic expression,” and Reynes-Delobel argues that these artists were attempting to “create a language in which the respective powers of image and word were merged” (2008, 16). Indeed, Boyle is interrogating the very image and word of woman in this poem. Observing that “Boyle believed that language could change lives” (1997, 237), Linda Wagner-Martin notes that, by the 1960s, Boyle was known more for her political poetry than for aesthetic experiments (237–38). However, “The Artist Speaks—The Woman Answers” blends together Boyle’s political and aesthetic concerns, and this poem extends the cultural work begun, in part, by Boyle and the Baroness in the little magazines of the 1920s.

In the second section of her poem, “The Woman Answers,” we discover that the response or “answer” is not the artist or female poet in the previous section but the “woman” as a politically and socially constituted type (as later articulated by Butler). According to Butler, “Gender is in no way a stable identity . . . ; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (1997, 402). The body is an historical idea rather than a natural fact; the body comes to bear cultural meanings. It is both a product and an agent. And as such, gender performance becomes a strategy. Butler asserts, “The term ‘strategy’ better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (405). When a woman performs her gender correctly, she is protected by cultural norms. In contrast, when a woman deviates from gender roles, she is punished. We can see in what ways avant-garde women writers have been punished when we consider the history of the canon and the shaping of modernist aesthetics.

The woman in the second half of Boyle’s poem performs her gender effectively. She embodies gentleness (which is emphasized), patience, humility,

and quietness. She also possesses a resignation in the face of loss. In the first stanza, the speaker is comforting (perhaps the artist?) and is resigned to loss and disappointment. Boyle uses a simile to compare women to daffodils in the second stanza: there is no rebellion in this section on the part of the woman or the daffodils, and they are subjected to the violent handling of others (perhaps in regard to political treatment, social treatment, and poetic representations of women prior to and including the twentieth century by poets like Eliot and Williams).¹² Boyle's speaker, though, advocates change in modernist poetry and modern life. The "violent hand," she declares, "must not remain," and she believes that "all your sadnesses are moments of illusion" and that "all measures change" ([1960] 1991, 20–22). In this way, then, the woman distances herself from a prescribed role and envisions change, much as the belligerent female artist does. While the woman does not foresee an immediate rebellion or revolution of the feminist word ("whisper that nothing alters" [23]), women will need to function within the logocentric strictures in place, even though such practices can punish: "the rod" and "the single prick of thistle" (23) can harm—and yet these instruments of torture carry Biblical allusions and the promise that salvation will come. The message of both the artist and the woman in Boyle's poem is that a feminist revolution of the word, begun in the early twentieth century in the little magazines with manifestos and poems by the Baroness, Boyle, and others, will be needed in the future.

The means for the feminist revolution of the word will entail that women write in some ways like men ("The arrow" and the punishment and potential rewards as highlighted in the previous line "are the same" [23]) and thus there will be a battle for expression ("the point, / The shaft, the lance" [24–25]) that will point ("the finger" [25]) in new directions. But this process will take a long time, and it will not be heralded by fanfare. Instead, it will be forwarded and cultivated ("planted" [26]) by individual artists working in "stillness" (26).

Eventually, the modernist politics and avant-garde feminist aesthetics of Boyle and others will "take root" (27); in retrospect, we will see the contributions of feminist (and female) poets and canonize them ("give endurance to your name" [27]). As a result, the poem ends with a hopeful tone; the artist and the woman are optimistic that women's art will prevail. The female artist needs patience in her pursuit of the revolution of the (feminist) word, and Boyle predicts that success will come.

Boyle yearns to see poetry connect with the female poet's world, and her contributions to modernist literature, along with the Baroness's poetry, are feminist avant-garde poems that critique gender roles and expectations and revise the poetic space female poets and speakers have traditionally occupied. Reports Boyle, "[The modern world] may appear to have been a time without much humour in the *avant-garde* literary movement, but it must be remembered that it was a time of gravest crisis in letters, of furious schism and revolution in the arts" (McAlmon and Boyle 1984, 214). The Baroness writes to Djuna Barnes about

herself and her art: “I never lie, because it would violate psychological picture of life’s cause and events. Only mediocre sentimental authors lie. All persons who are ruthlessly lonely—by inner rendering of outer circumstances—*must be mad* within commonplace lifemesh for: they are single—singular—absolute. I have always been thus” (1928, 21). In sharing the spirit that motivates Boyle’s work, the Baroness is invested in depicting life and making literature relevant, political, and true in some way: the Baroness is very clear about her integrity in her literary work and in her life as a work of art in progress. And we see that the Baroness fully understands that she has been deemed mad because of her willingness to transgress the conventional boundaries of artistic texts and gendered performances.

In the co-signed “The Revolution of the Word” manifesto, Jolas, Boyle, et al. distance themselves from “sociological ideas,” and yet they agitate for a revolution of the word, a revolution that would reconfigure the way we understand subjectivity, embodiment, experiential reality, and perception. These facets are all components in identity formation/articulation and identity politics. As such, the signatories are absolutely bound to the real (sociological) world, even though they attempt to minimize the impact of such an agenda in order to focus on literary principles and transformations. Similarly, the Baroness, in her manifesto, focuses on literature and art and the need for a different perspective in approaching and appreciating modernist texts, but she delves into issues pertaining to gender in both her manifesto and her poetry, whereas Boyle reserves overt discussion of gender for her creative work.

Although they aligned themselves within experimental artistic movements that were not primarily concerned with sexual and gendered politics (Dada and Surrealism, respectively), the Baroness and Boyle critique prevailing attitudes toward female artists and female bodies, specifically bodies that move within and are governed by patriarchal structures and mechanisms. The feminist avant-garde voice is different from the dominant avant-garde voice of, say, Tristan Tzara because the feminist avant-garde prefigures poststructuralist concerns and acknowledges the material realities of female bodies in the world. There is a socio-historico-cultural awareness about women that extends outside of Imagism, Futurism, Vorticism, Surrealism, and even Dada in feminist avant-garde poetry by women. Part of the attraction to modernist styles for these experimental female writers might be related to what Linda A. Kinnahan calls “poetics of the feminine”: “Yet for [modernists], particularly for women writers, feminism posed questions that naturally intertwined with the modernist revolt against outworn ideas and forms” (1994, 43). When we examine the poetry of the Baroness and Boyle, we discover that they do address a female body politic (i.e., a group of people considered to be a political entity), and the challenges facing women writers and artists set them apart from their male contemporaries, even though they affiliated themselves with male-dominated artistic movements.

Although I use Cixous and Butler as theorists whose works frame the theoretical currents and implications in texts by the Baroness and Boyle, Cixous and Butler are likely the outcome of early feminist musings and work in terms of historical continuity. These feminist theorists provide a framework for accessing gendered and performative implications in radical, experimental writing by artists such as the Baroness and Boyle. I want to show that there is, in fact, an historical arc that encompasses important contributions by women writers who were often producing work that was not so different from men in terms of style (e.g., Joyce, Tzara, and Jolas) but offered the kind of performative gender critique of the art world and society related to female bodies and the space they inhabit and the work they produce that we typically do not see in texts authored solely by men.

The Baroness and Boyle contributed manifestos and poems to little magazines in order to contribute to the dismantling of the “modest woman” and to fuel “The Revolution of the Word” movement. Little magazines provided “a key focus and forum for the expression of anxieties about both the visual spectacles of mass society and the projects of radical democracy” (Ardis 2008, 37). According to Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, “Such periodicals are ideal sites for the rise of an intellectual public sphere in which many types of literacy were encouraged or enabled” (2006, 518–19). By contributing to little magazines that facilitated public discourse through texts of various genres that highlighted female identities, female bodies, inequality, aesthetics, politics, and female authorship, the Baroness and Boyle participated in an alternative approach to avant-garde literature, one that is indebted to feminist ideology and modernist aesthetics. Their work embodies the spirit of modernism; according to Boyle’s biographer, Boyle’s “poetic efforts were shaped by the belief that a poem should not simply convey a message in verse but should exist as an object of art on its own terms” (Spanier [1986] 1997, 99), and both Boyle’s literary output and the Baroness’s poetry and manifesto are evident of this belief. In fact, the Baroness chastised Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and Joseph Stella for “catering to business rather than joining her unconditional fight for art” (Gammel 2002b, 12). The Baroness and Boyle produce work that is steeped in modernist aesthetics and feminist politics. Further study of their literary works will show the additional ways in which they (and others) contributed to a feminist revolution of the word, and new directions in feminist, modernist scholarship could track or map the ways in which avant-garde women writers impinge upon and change the literary canon and the definition of modernism(s) as we currently know it.

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Notes

1. Although Katherine Anne Porter declared in 1931 that Gertrude Stein and James Joyce “were and are the glories of their time,” she predicted that Boyle would join their ranks as “one of the newest” and “the strongest” of the emerging modernists ([1931] 1997, 33). Unfortunately, we are still heeding Porter’s call for acknowledgment of Boyle’s special significance, but we can revel in the ever-increasing scholarship about Boyle and in the active service of the Kay Boyle Society, which was established in 2006 at the conference of the American Literature Association. Important collections and studies of Boyle’s work include *Critical Essays on Kay Boyle* (1997), *Kay Boyle for the Twenty-First Century: New Essays* (2008), and *Mosaic of Fire: The Work of Lola Ridge, Evelyn Scott, Charlotte Wilder, and Kay Boyle* (2012). Important biographies about Boyle (Mellen 1994; Spanier 1986) that predate biographical work on the Baroness have paved the way for Boyle’s star to shine brighter than the Baroness’s. What this present article extends from the previous scholarship is a sense of Boyle’s modernist experimentation, her importance in the formation of modernist letters, and her political mindset. In addition, this article offers new approaches to Boyle’s unstudied or lesser-studied texts in its attempts to showcase Boyle’s feminist poetics and politics in light of other aesthetically radical work, also penned by a modernist woman writer (the Baroness), who deserves recovery and celebration as much as Boyle did and does.

2. A literature review of work about the Baroness reveals a trajectory toward her more pronounced recovery. Exciting biographical scholarship, as well as scholarship in literature and art history, has been produced by Irene Gammel (2002a) and Amelia Jones (2004). The trends in work on the Baroness involve biographical positioning, especially in terms of her Dada writing, art, and performances, and the significance of these artifacts to our understanding of modernity and the intersections of American and international Dada (Sawelson-Gorse 2001). An important collection of essays focuses on the Baroness and her estranged husband, with a total of three essays dedicated to the Baroness and her cultural performances and mediations (Hjartarson and Kulba 2003). Other work considers the Baroness’s representative attitudes in terms of race and modernism within literary magazines (McKible 2007).

3. As an example, see The Baroness’s poem “Café du Dome,” published in *transition* (7 [October 1927]: 134). In this poem, the Baroness lambasts those artists, such as Duchamp, who succeed when female artists, such as the Baroness, are denied the credit she believes is due to them. According to the Baroness, the famous (or soon-to-be-famous) male artists who frequent the Parisian Café du Dome receive the acknowledgement for their artistry that she is denied: she exclaims in frustration that such types are coded as male (“For the love of Mike!” [1]) and elevated to the status of a saint (“Saint Kyk!” [12]): such men are viewed as “Be-whiskered” (4), “Natty” (11) and “Esthetic” (8)—qualities, notably, not associated with the androgynous, unkempt, and artistically unruly Baroness (with the notable exception of her Dada aesthetic). Exasperated and jealous in tone, she directs our attention to male artists whose career trajectory is that of Duchamp’s

(“Marcelled” [3] as she dubs it). She faults successful male artists for being “Pathetic” (6) “Lymphatic” (7) “Pig pink” (9), and “Quaint” (10).

4. In “The Artist Speaks—The Woman Answers,” Boyle writes, “Whisper that nothing alters, the rod, the single prick of thistle, / The arrow are the same; the point, / The shaft, the lance, the finger, / Planted within a long green evening stillness / Take root and give endurance to your name” (23–27). Arguably, there are phallic images embedded at the end of the poem to gesture to the predominance of a male legacy, and yet this poem is distinctly about the worth, contributions, and (the promise of a) legacy of female artists. Boyle suggests, perhaps, that women writers can appropriate the language, genres, and the publishing houses created, maintained, and otherwise enabled by men for advocacy of women’s feminist issues and identity: women, too, can partake in the conversations about art that are shaped by men.

5. Cixous also argues in this vein: “For what [men] have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity from the power relations between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a ‘dark continent’ to penetrate and to ‘pacify’” (1976, 877n1).

6. “Circle” is reprinted in *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* (2011), 246.

7. Compare the Baroness’s “Where youth? / No find her” with Cixous’s opening from “Sorties,” which follows:

Where is she?
 Activity/passivity
 Sun/Moon
 Culture/Nature
 Day/Night
 Father/Mother
 Head/Heart
 Intelligible/Palpable
 Logos/Pathos.
 (63)

8. Churchill offers an example that highlights the connection between the body of the Baroness and her poetry: “A photograph of the Baroness Elsa Von Frietag Loringhoven [sic] serves a similar function [of promoting her poetry through her unconventional public persona in the vein of Mina Loy] in [the September–October 1921 issue of *The Little Review*]: a full-page image of her in profile appears just after the table of contents. In the photograph, the Baroness’s serious expression, dramatic hairline, and heavy jewelry mark her as physically different from feminine norms. Even more bizarre are the handwritten embellishments on the portrait: a crown on her head and her name, etched in a hieroglyphic style below, presumably by the Baroness herself. The handwritten name insists upon a physical connection between the body of the woman artist and her compositions” (2006, 219).

9. Clément asserts, “Societies do not succeed in offering everyone the same way of fitting into the symbolic order; those who are, if one may say so, between symbolic systems, in the interstices, offside, are the ones who are afflicted with a dangerous

mobility. Dangerous for them, because those are the people afflicted with what we call madness, anomaly, perversion” (1986, 7).

10. According to Mellen, Boyle did not consider herself a feminist because she did not understand feminism as a movement of equality and integration; she thought it required separatism instead: “Feminism to Kay was *mistakenly* synonymous with separatism. . . . Kay held out long and hard against supporting women struggling to live independent creative lives” (486–87; emphasis mine). Mellen observes that Boyle is mistaken in thinking that feminism requires separatism; I agree with Mellen in her assessment of feminism as “a movement of equality and integration,” a broad and inclusive definition that might have allowed Boyle to identify as a feminist. We might take into account Friedman’s approach to feminism: the feminist approach she advocates builds “upon the assumption of changing historical and geographical specificities that produce different feminist theories, agendas, and political practices” (1998, 5). Even though we encounter shared feminist concerns in the work of Boyle and the Baroness, we cannot expect them to hold identical personal or political views in all instances, nor will their feminism of the early twentieth century look exactly like twenty-first-century feminism, with its own set of particular issues and its changing landscape.

11. Lowell, however, is clear that there is neither a large network of female poets nor even an especially developed tradition. In “The Sisters” ([1925] 1955), Lowell writes, “Taking us by and large, we’re a queer lot / We women who write poetry. And when you think / How few of us there’ve been, it’s queerer still” (1–3).

12. Clark explains that women’s experimental literature has been overlooked because of its “attachments to everyday life” ([1991] 1997, 157).

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