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Being Geniuses Together: Ghostwriting and the Uncanny of Robert McAlmon's and Kay Boyle's (Out of) Joint Autobiography

Anna Linzie

- 1 As readers, we expect and sometimes even demand a semblance of truth from discourses of the self, but autobiography rarely presents us with the True Story of the autobiographer. Whatever the autobiographical contract seems to promise, autobiography typically refuses to offer immediate access to the historical person whose name is on the cover, and this is especially apparent when someone's life story has been told more than once and by more than one person. The assumed correspondence between historical person and autobiographical persona is exposed as myth and the autobiographical discourse opens up to a much more complicated landscape of voices and truths in the plural.
- 2 Autobiography gestures towards but cannot fully incorporate or symbolize reality, and the text conjures up the specter of the impossible *hors-texte*. The person speaking the autobiographical "I," the historical person embodying a body, is transformed into a spectral persona, *more abstract than ever* precisely because it seems to summon forth a real flesh-and-blood body, while simultaneously flaunting the distance between the two. In a classical formulation which provides a starting point for the conceptualization of the uncanny in psychoanalysis, "Uncanny [*unheimlich*] is a term for everything which should remain mysterious, hidden, latent and has come to light" (Schelling qtd. in Freud 3-4). Autobiography conjures up a life, a private life hidden from view, but what is supposedly familiar and perhaps secret, *heimlich* (that locus of experience which is referred to by means of the pronoun "I"), is both exposed and made unfamiliar, *unheimlich*, in the text through a doubling, a repetition, where the historical person is reflected, partially and with a difference, in an autobiographical persona.

- 3 It is of course possible to say that the uncanny is there as soon as there is writing, and especially literary writing: “the uncanny is especially relevant to the study of literature” (Bennet and Royle 36). However, it is also possible to say that some types of writing expose the uncanny of signification in a more urgent or obvious way. Autobiography in general seems to do so, since the genre operates to span or even close the gap between the writer and the writing, the history of a person and the story of an autobiographical persona, but never quite succeeds. Saying “I am” does not, cannot, refer back *precisely* to the “I” performing the utterance; there is a slight difference. A trace of that impasse, a kind of vertigo, remains in the text and is experienced as uncanny. This spookiness is what *any* autobiography is all about, but I would like to suggest that some autobiographies, specifically collaborative, mock, or repeated ones, are particularly and more urgently uncanny.
- 4 This article is about Kay Boyle’s 1968 edition of Robert McAlmon’s *Being Geniuses Together* (1938), and the ghostwriting that makes it an uncanny contribution to the myth of literary modernism. Robert McAlmon (1895-1956) was an American writer and publisher famous for his contributions to the mythology and dissemination of literary modernism. He founded the Contact Publishing Company in 1923 and not only published the work of legendary expatriate modernist writers but also knew many of them personally. The original *Being Geniuses Together*, first published in 1938, is an outspoken, cynical, and explicitly non-chronological autobiographical account of McAlmon’s experiences in Europe in the 1920s and early 1930s and people who were drinking and partying with him at the time. The book caused a minor hullabaloo when it was published. James Joyce, who is not portrayed very favorably in the text, called it “the office boy’s revenge,” while Scott Fitzgerald said: “God will forgive everybody—even Robert McAlmon” (Bell n.p.).
- 5 Kay Boyle (1902-1992) was an American writer, educator, and political activist. She was something of an interloper in the Paris crowd of expatriate American writers towards the end of the 1920s, at which time she made McAlmon’s acquaintance. McAlmon as the older writer leaves a legacy of writing, defining, and living modernism to Boyle. In 1968—and it should be noted that the United States in 1968 was a very different place with a very different political and ideological climate compared to Europe in 1938—Boyle took McAlmon’s 1938 memoir, added the subtitle “1920-1930,” discarded everything which did not fit into the temporal frame “the twenties,” organized it into tidy chronological chapters named “Robert McAlmon 1920-1921” and so on, and inserted her own chapters in between his. Significantly, the Boyle chapters are primarily about *her* experiences (rather than her view of McAlmon, or the experiences that they shared, which may seem like a more conventional way of adding to someone’s autobiographical text to pay tribute to the autobiographer). While Boyle’s edition may at first glance seem to be a joint account, a closer inspection reveals that it is the same time extraordinarily out of joint.
- 6 Boyle added her chapters years after McAlmon died. The reader gets a sense of two voices taking turns, telling stories about roughly the same time and place and crowd, but the text does not provide a harmonious frame or conversational context for these disjointed voices. The effect of this absurdly non-dialogic dialogue, especially when combined with an awareness of a time lapse between the “now” of McAlmon’s voice and the “now” of Boyle’s voice, the unusual and prolonged history of textual production, can be conceptualized as uncanny in terms of a haunting double take which calls into question the original status of McAlmon’s story. It is obviously not ghostwriting in a traditional sense when a living writer inserts her own discourse into the crevices of the

autobiography of a deceased one. Boyle was not hired, but embarked on this project on her own initiative, and McAlmon's original memoir remains, albeit cut, adapted, and reorganized to make room for her chapters.

- 7 Rather than a conventional ghostwriter or biographer, Boyle can be seen as a ventriloquist in relation to McAlmon. Originally, ventriloquism was a religious practice and a method for speaking to the dead, which is exactly what Boyle says that she is doing: "this memoir is part of a dialogue I have never ceased having with Robert McAlmon" (McAlmon and Boyle 11). The alternating pattern of the 1968 edition, McAlmon-Boyle-McAlmon-Boyle and so on, constitutes a grid, a holding-in-place of the one "buried" in the text, the deceased writer for whom the living writer is in mourning. At the same time, because of the way that this "dialogue" is staged and performed, McAlmon sometimes appears to be a helpless puppet. The reader cannot be certain about the extent to which he remains "real" in the text after Boyle's intervention—or, for that matter, determine if he, his "I" in the text, was ever real to begin with, before she took control. The textual relation between Boyle and McAlmon corresponds to Jentsch's 1906 definition of uncanny writing: "In telling a story one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton" (Jentsch qtd. in Freud 5). In the 1968 *Being Geniuses Together*, McAlmon has in a sense been turned into a "lifelike doll" (which brings to mind ETA Hoffmann's "The Sandman" as interpreted by Jentsch before Freud).
- 8 In the 1968 edition, we have two voices engaged in an absurdly non-dialogic form of dialogue speak from either side of the ultimate divide, the abyss of life and death. Sigmund Freud's famous essay "Das Unheimliche" defines the uncanny as closely related to death: "Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (13). Similarly, Anneleen Masschelein points out that "[t]he ghost is the most immediate representation of the uncanny as return of the repressed because it represents the return of death—'signifier without signified,' the ultimate secret—in life" (120). The ghostliness of the "return" concerns the encounter between the dead and the living. Straight biographies of dead people may not awaken a sense of the uncanny in the reader, since this genre is decidedly recognizable and thus manageable, but a double-voiced autobiography might, if only one of the autobiographers is alive at the time of publication, and it remains an open question to what extent the deceased party in this discursive relation would have condoned her autobiographical practices. The living writer's control seems disturbing, even revolting, in relation to the dead writer's exposure to discursive manipulation and violent editing.
- 9 Specifically, the way in which Boyle appropriates McAlmon's story is unsettling because the text itself explicitly states that he found her writing lacking in terms of sincerity, at the same time as he himself professes to love the truth, worship reality, and detest everything fake. Talking about Faulkner, McAlmon complains that "Kay Boyle is overcome by the swooning moonlight of his precious moments to such an extent that she... goes too, too fine for the ordinary mortal. Such writing strangely affects one as pretentious, and therefore vulgar or cheap" (253). My reading shows that the text, even as Boyle explicitly purports to present a straightforward and truthful tribute to McAlmon—"I am going to try to set it down without romanticizing and without going 'Irish-twilghty,' the two things that McAlmon kept shouting out to me about my writing" (11)—

instead points up the uncanny nature of autobiography and thwarts expectations for unmediated (auto)biographical truth.

- 10 The 1968 *Being Geniuses Together* is uncanny not only because it stages a dialogue between the dead and the living, but also because it constitutes or performs a supplement in relation to the original text. As Nicholas Royle puts it, the uncanny is “never simply a question of a statement, description or definition, but always engages a performative dimension, a maddening supplement” (16). The haunting double take of the 1968 edition makes it readable, provisionally, by means of Jacques Derrida’s theorization of the supplement in *Of Grammatology*. Derrida’s reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau indicates precisely the danger of discourse referring to reality outside the text: “Writing is dangerous from the moment that representation there claims to be presence and the sign of the thing itself” (144). This danger doubles up, proliferates, as discourses of the self are layered and doubled, signification split, jarring versions of the thing itself joined in the same text. If the supplement is understood this way, Boyle’s supplementary edition of *Being Geniuses Together* does not simply or innocently add another dimension to McAlmon’s story. “The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence,” Derrida says. “But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace” (144-145). As Boyle adds her chapters to McAlmon’s text, the “original” is both supplemented/enriched and supplemented/replaced at the same time.
- 11 When Boyle added her own chapters to McAlmon’s autobiography 30 years after its publication and 12 years after McAlmon’s death, she unsettled not only McAlmon’s story but also the story of modernism and the social and historical context that the two writers shared for a brief period of time towards the end of the 1920s. Something happens to the story, and not only in terms of biographical information. Critics have argued, for instance, that Boyle’s cuts made McAlmon seem more of a party animal and less of a serious intellectual than his original *Being Geniuses Together* suggested: “More than half the book is devoted to her story, and in lopping off the years 1931-1934 she deprived readers of his insights into the social and political unrest in Germany and France during this period” (Smoller qtd. in Bell n.p.). This is a significant point to make about the 1968 edition, which was published at another point of time and in another place characterized by social and political unrest, but the challenge of the supplement is more fundamentally unsettling than that. Boyle’s textual maneuvers are uncanny to the extent that the supplement affects the apparent stability of the “original” and its status as autobiographical “truth.”
- 12 The way in which Boyle uses McAlmon’s text to inscribe her own story specifically into or at least alongside the master discourse of modernism is not incidental. Many instances of autobiographical writing, some of them interrelated and engaged in rehearsing the *same* anecdotes about the *same* events and the *same* people, and in this repetitive process unsettling the very idea of sameness, have contributed to the supposedly True Story of the Lost Generation and literary modernism. As Craig Monk points out, “modernism was defined in part by its participants well before scholars took up the task,” and this “self-conscious gesture [is] indicative of a longing for a cohesive representation of the emerging movement” (486). The myth of writers, artists, critics and publishers in Paris in the 1920s has been told and retold, contested and reestablished, in a chorus of autobiographical and biographical discourses. In Monk’s words, autobiographies are often among “the privileged texts of modernism” and Boyle’s return to *Being Geniuses Together*

in 1968 indicates the longevity of the process of “revising the movement” (486-487). The 1968 *Being Geniuses Together* is one of the texts which help define modernism by way of eyewitness accounts and memories. As part of this tradition, however, it is not particularly prominent. Perhaps this is a consequence of the way in which it confuses and possibly repulses the reader.

- 13 A word count reveals that the 1968 *Being Geniuses Together* in fact includes more words written by Boyle than by McAlmon (Monk 486). Critics have generally been wary of Boyle's project, and suspected her of somehow violating McAlmon's original. Even those who eventually conclude that the 1968 text is alright think that McAlmon is at risk in Boyle's hands: “But McA's most famous work survived dilution and substitution by Boyle—in spite of contrary critical comment at the time of publication and later” (Bell n.p.). Monk defines Boyle's aim as “an orderly history of a clearly defined generation of writers abroad” (489) and goes on to deplore this ambition, even though he concludes that she was not able completely to destroy the modernist genius of McAlmon's original: “The redeeming feature of the 1968 edition of *Being Geniuses Together* is that Boyle is unsuccessful in sustaining this centripetal effect throughout” (491). Monk's attitude towards Boyle is representative of several similar readings of the 1968 edition as a corruption or detrimental straightening of McAlmon's text.¹ As I see it, however, the chronological order is only a ruse, a superficial gesture towards orderliness, while the text in fact foregrounds disorder and division. When McAlmon and Boyle meet, the cold, coincidental nature of their encounters seems to provide a model for the way in which their respective chapters touch and converge, but only sometimes and almost reluctantly, and without really establishing a common ground:
- 14 But one night McAlmon walked into Lipp's... and if his cold eye gave a sign of recognition when he saw me, or even if he saw me, I could not tell.... I got up and left the others and went to where he stood alone at the bar, beginning to drink a beer. ‘Bob,’ I said, unable for the moment to think of anything more to say. He scarcely turned his head, but he put the francs for the unfinished beer down on the counter. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let's go up to Le Grand Ecart. There may be some lively people there.’ (270)
- 15 It seems as though the rare encounters of McAlmon and Boyle—which could presumably have been foregrounded as key moments in a shared autobiography—happen in passing, as if by accident, and without them looking properly at each other or saying something to mark the occasion: “I could not bring myself to look at McAlmon when I said goodbye” (88). Elsewhere, Boyle talks about letter-writing and a list of people to whom she wrote letters includes “McAlmon (who rarely answered)” (214). The intermittent and unproductive nature of this uncanny, suspended “dialogue” is a recurring motif. In Boyle's chapter “1927-1928” we are told that “McAlmon came more or less unannounced and stayed three days with us, and during that time he and I exchanged not more than a dozen sentences.... I found it impossible to ask him anything. I think it was because he had written so much... and because he spoke so cynically... I quailed before his icy gaze” (210).
- 16 This relation of not really looking and not really conversing characterizes the text as a whole, as does the impression that in real life Boyle and McAlmon were far apart. McAlmon—significantly—left his typewriter to Boyle when he left for Mexico (332), but they were never close friends or regular drinking buddies. Critics and readers alike have wondered if Boyle invented friendship (or even romantic attraction) between McAlmon and herself for the purposes of the 1968 text. Chris Bell, for instance, suggests that Boyle

“excised some important sections in order to accommodate her largely illusory impressions of a romantic link between herself and McA” (Bell n.p.). As I see it, this is not a convincing reading, since the relationship is constantly represented as cold and awkward, but it is still striking that so little tangible evidence exists that Boyle and McAlmon were even acquaintances: “It is also extremely telling that, of the 49 plates in the Hogarth Press Edition of the Boyle-McA edition of *Geniuses*, there is not a single photograph showing Boyle and McAlmon together” (Bell n.p.). What was the nature and extent of their friendship? The text itself refuses to answer the question, or even ask it, and instead foregrounds an awkward distance between the two writers.

- 17 Boyle found McAlmon formidable and intimidating because he “had written so much.” As a matter of fact, while McAlmon was central to modernism as a publisher (of Ford Madox Ford, Mina Loy, Ezra Pound, Djuna Barnes, William Carlos Williams, H.D., James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and many others), he was marginalized as a writer. McAlmon wanted Contact Editions to specialize in books “not likely to be published... for commercial or legislative reasons” (Bell n.p.) which meant that many of these works were considered obscene. But even in the context of various modernist challenges to convention, McAlmon’s own writing was controversial and seemed unpublishable, not only to conservative publishers, but also to the most prominent representatives of emergent literary modernism (see for instance Lorusso). When McAlmon died in 1956, then, he had failed to achieve general recognition for his work as a writer. After the 1920s, when he was at the epicenter of modernism in Paris, and the 1930s, when he went to Mexico to find out about “a vital art movement” there (McAlmon and Boyle 309), McAlmon ended up as a salesman in the Phoenix, Arizona branch of his brothers’ Southwestern Surgical Supply Company (McAlmon and Boyle 341). Seemingly an attempt to rescue a neglected writer, the 1968 *Being Geniuses Together* purports to establish McAlmon as a genius in his own right, in line with Boyle’s statement that “my rôle was that of a homage-giver to the great” (McAlmon and Boyle 214). As Monk points out, however, Boyle’s rather extensive—some would say heavy-handed—editing of McAlmon’s original also served to present a narrative in which not only McAlmon *but also Boyle herself* can be established as a member of the Lost Generation and a central figure—or at least a hang-around—of expatriate modernism: “Boyle’s amendments seek to tighten the sense of community shared by the American writers” (486).
- 18 Indeed, Boyle talks about herself as “disqualif[ied]... as a member of the lost generation or as an expatriate” (11) since she was married to a Frenchman and arrived in Paris very late, in 1928, after the “moment” of the Paris expatriates had passed: “The good days of the Quarter were finished, Bob kept telling me; I had come too late” (286). However, in 1968, she defiantly claims a place for herself in the story: “But *I was there*, in whatever guise, and even if a bit late, and this memoir is part of a dialogue I have never ceased having with Robert McAlmon” (11, italics added). This claim brings to mind the “gathering of pieces” that McAlmon presents as the hopeless project of self-definition in the 1923 poem “Growth in the City” that Boyle foregrounds in her first chapter as crucial to her own “rebellion”: “Oh, let me gather myself together / Where are the pieces / Quivering and staring and muttering / That are all to be a part of me?” (12). Simply put, Boyle gathers the pieces of her own and McAlmon’s 1920s to (re)inscribe both in the myth of literary modernism.
- 19 According to Christine Hait, Boyle not only wanted to promote McAlmon but also had a problem with autobiography: “I always feel very happy when I can get away from that

American girl, that American woman... I have tried to get away from that autobiographical figure” (Boyle qtd. in Hait 299). As Hait sees it, McAlmon’s text provided Boyle with a solution in terms of genre, a “dual autobiography,” which in turn placed her “in the company of the twentieth century’s most inventive autobiographers” (299-300). I think Hait is right when she points out that Boyle seems to have had other motives as well, apart from a desire to bestow upon McAlmon’s posthumous reputation the quality of genius. However, I would argue that Boyle’s own autobiographical persona, “that American woman,” is *crucially* present in her part of the text.

- 20 In his part of the text, McAlmon acknowledges Boyle, gratefully, as “a staunch backer of my work” (254), but his verdict on her writing as “romanticizing” remains a key point of dispute. For instance, Boyle, telling the story about the way in which she had to borrow money to be able to go to France with her husband, inserts a lengthy apology in parentheses: “(All right, this was romanticizing, McAlmon. You would have known right off that the debt was never to be repaid. Richard wasn’t able to get a job that summer. The French had no use whatsoever for American university degrees.... Reality was the one totally unreasonable factor that never ceased making its demands upon our lives.)” (40). This is an unusual instance of addressing McAlmon directly, but it contributes to a theme which remains present throughout the text: “‘Maybe it’s time you stopped putting things between yourself and reality,’ [McAlmon] said. After the first gin fizz, and fifteen minutes of listening to him talk about what I was and what I wasn’t, I tried to make a joke of it, and I said my reality was doing very well” (284). This dispute about “keeping it real” is sustained over time, and erupts in two significant crises, which constitute key passages in the text. The first crisis occurs in a bar:
- 21 suddenly McAlmon got down from the bar stool he was sitting on, and walked to the end of the counter and leaned across it and jerked the handsomely printed announcement of Archie’s and my yearbook of poetry from the wall. He looked me straight in the eye with his glacial blue stare as he tore the announcement into two, and then into four, and flung it on the floor. ‘That’s what I think of your crazy, senseless undertakings! That’s what I think of your taste in poetry!’ he said. At our feet lay the scattered uproarious words: ‘the best... ever published... most sought-after... renowned... LIVING POETRY...’ screamed the poor hysterical words with their throats cut now, writhing their last on the bar room floor. (316)
- 22 Even though no explicit causal connection is made in the text, after this incident Boyle breaks down and becomes depressed and suicidal. The second eruption of the ongoing dispute is triggered by a New Year’s Eve party, a particularly potent drink, and McAlmon’s despair about people’s inability to grasp “reality”:
- 23 On that last evening of 1928 Harry [Crosby] concocted a particular drink for McAlmon... which was intended to send Bob into poetic delirium for the next twenty-four hours.... McAlmon was suddenly there beside me in the cold. ‘It’s too damned depressing,’ he said; ‘... God knows what they’ve done with their realities.’
- 24 We walked for a minute or two around the courtyard, around and around, not arm in arm, or holding hands, or anything like that, but always keeping a little distance between us. (327-328)
- 25 The distance—both physical and psychological—between Boyle and McAlmon is emphasized once again. Boyle suggests that the Black Sun Press should do a collection of McAlmon’s poetry, opening with the poem that she “had been saying aloud to [herself]

since 1923" (328)—the one starting "Oh, let me gather myself together." McAlmon goes into a rage:

- 26 'For Christ's sake, six years saying the same poem? When are you going to grow up, kid?' he said. Then he began jerking out—not laughter this time but the words of self-vituperation. 'The God-damned, fucking, quivering pieces of me! Good enough to be flushed like you know what down the drain! Stinking enough to be tacked on the barn door in warning to the young!' he shouted. 'Fouled up enough for—what? *You finish it!* I'm fed up with whatever it is I'm carrying around inside this skin, rattling around inside these bones!' He struck his chest violently with his fist, and his face was as hard as stone. 'For Christ's sake, don't care about me! Stop it, will you! *Let the God-damned pieces fall apart!*' (328, italics added)ⁱⁱ
- 27 McAlmon may have complained about Boyle's unwavering reverence for his work, but here she is, in charge of their (out of) joint autobiography. There are multiple indications in the text itself that he would have been worried about her inclination towards invention, and rightly so. In 1928, when she finally came to Paris, Boyle ghostwrote the memoirs of the Dayang Muda of Sarawak, who found it impossible to remember her own memories: "*Had there been ponies?*" I would ask; and after a long silence she would say: 'Yes, surely there *must* have been ponies, don't you think?'" For the Dayang Muda, "everything was dimmed and blurred." "It was therefore necessary," Boyle says, "to invent her story as one went along" (257-258) This is a very different type of ghostwriting compared to the project Boyle embarked on in relation to *Being Geniuses Together*, but provides a relevant backdrop for it. I think it is fair to assume that McAlmon would never willingly have relinquished the right to his autobiography to Boyle while he was alive. When he was gone she could reinvent his story, not by fabricating content but by reorganizing and supplementing it, quite possibly in a style which he would have dismissed as "romanticizing" or "too, too fine for the ordinary mortal" (McAlmon and Boyle 253).
- 28 The 1968 *Being Geniuses Together* appears challenging, even disturbing, to many readers and critics since it seems to undermine the "original" text and even do a McAlmon a disservice: "There is little doubt that Boyle championed McA, but romanticising his work as a writer and publisher and tying his life immortally to her own was really the last thing he needed" (Bell n.p.). Hait points out that "few reviewers of the memoir judged in favor of Boyle's defense of McAlmon. Instead, they pitted the defendant and the defender against each other, in a contest of dueling autobiographers.... Or they accused Boyle of opportunism, of using McAlmon... to further her own version of history." She also suggests that the form of the "dual" autobiography itself presents the readers with a problem: "And when confronted with two authors, bedded together in this unusual way, they understandably find it difficult not to compare and contrast them, to place them in competition with each other, and to choose a loser and a winner" (300). Instead of recognizing the 1968 text as a "dual" autobiography, then, we as readers construct a "dueling" autobiography.
- 29 Hait still thinks that Boyle's "dual" autobiography functions in such a way as to "achieve desirable results" in terms of honesty and sincerity. She writes: "A rich tension is created between its alternating voices. ... [which] also complement each other. ... [McAlmon] keeps [Boyle] honest, and he keeps the form honest" (300). I do not completely agree, since the "dialogue" going on in the text so seldom takes the form of "alternating" voices, and instead seems to present the reader with two very disparate discourses only

momentarily converging here and there, and more often in a jarring and confusing way, than in a way which allows each strain of the “dialogue” to “complement” the other. “Writing the self through reflection on an Other... has been recognized as a particularly modern and feminist act,” Hait says, “which not only challenges traditional notions of selfhood and conventional narratives of female experience but which also opens up the genre of autobiography to reinvention” (301). This is true, but Boyle’s kind of autobiographical reinvention establishes a far less obvious self-other intimacy than, for instance, Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), which Hait mentions in connection with a comment on it as “relevant to Boyle’s particular employment of the strategy of the Other” (301). I would like to argue that the text also resists the idea of women writing the Other’s autobiography as a way to “appear self-effacing and sacrificing... thus neutralizing the potentially explosive power of a woman claiming significance for herself” (Hait 301). Boyle’s chapters are hardly ever about McAlmon. They are mainly about herself, and the urgent significance of her own experiences. The most important, moving, and dramatic parts of Boyle’s chapters concern relationships with her mother, her female friends, and her children (see for instance page 216 for a declaration of love for her best friend Germaine). Therefore, I would like to question Hait’s assumption that McAlmon “tends to get the first and last word in the writers’ conversation” (307).

- 30 Certainly McAlmon had not intended or expected that Boyle, or anyone else, would amend his memoir after his death. McAlmon’s chapters, frozen at a moment in time when he was bitter, cynical, out of love with Paris and his own role as everybody’s buddy and sponsor, and very likely an alcoholic, seem bracketed by Boyle’s much more urgent, sensible, sensitive chapters. He was in his late thirties when he wrote *Being Geniuses Together*, and his primary mood is frustration. Boyle, a prolific and experienced writer and activist well over sixty years of age when she worked with the 1968 edition, relates to the present moment of writing, the political events of 1968, and her comments on politics, class, justice, family, friendship, love and work create an extreme contrast to McAlmon’s acrimonious and self-centered tales of drinking, partying, fighting, arguing, feeling sorry for himself, and moving constantly from one bar to another in search of *the real thing*: “I learned that whomever he was with, Bob was always seeking another name, and another face, in quite another place” (McAlmon and Boyle 290). In literal, temporal, and symbolic terms, Boyle in fact gets the last word in their “dialogue.”
- 31 Not surprisingly, then, many critics, reviewers and readers resent Boyle’s project. Some recommend reading only McAlmon’s chapters and ignoring Boyle’s: “She should have just written her own memoir instead of completely disrupting McAlmon’s” (Lauren n.p.).ⁱⁱⁱ In her Afterword, Boyle herself notes that “a Milan publisher wanted to bring out a translation in Italian, but of McAlmon’s chapters only, deleting mine” (333). This negative reaction can be found among her peers as well. In the early 1970s, Djuna Barnes, who was a central figure in the expatriate community in Paris herself, wrote in a letter to Natalie Barney, another prolific lesbian intellectual of the Left Bank, that she was “depressed” by Boyle’s edition of *Being Geniuses Together*: “Re-hash of our twenties... all out of shape, it seems to me, and an egregious display of Miss Boyle herself. If you can’t make the passage of time as it was... then why at all?” (Barnes qtd. in Benstock 235) Barnes seems to dismiss Boyle’s project as untruthful in much the same way as the (male) critics who worried about her (mis)treatment of McAlmon.

- 32 The reviewer quoted above seems to expect and desire autobiography as a singular fixed text, an uninterrupted unit, a True Story characterized by connection and correspondence. Barnes too seems to refer to an ideal of ownership—"our twenties"—and singular truth, the right to one's own True Story "as it was." Almost defiantly, Boyle indicates the impossibility of knowing for sure: "But how do I know that I am telling the truth...?" (103). Freud points out that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality" (15) If we think something is true, we can handle it. If we know something is a fairytale, likewise. But if there is radical uncertainty about the extent to which the text corresponds to reality, a space opens up for the uncanny, and possibly for repulsion and disgust:
- 33 The situation is altered as soon as the writer *pretends to move in the world of common reality*. ... he deceives us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth.... We react to his inventions as we should have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object; but it must be added that his success is not unalloyed. *We retain a feeling of dissatisfaction, a kind of grudge against the attempted deceit[.]* (Freud 18-19, italics added)
- 34 The grudge that Freud identifies here, and which is highly interesting in relation to autobiography in general, seems to explain the resistance among readers, critics, and contemporaries to Boyle's edition of *Being Geniuses Together*. One way of dismissing it is to compare it to McAlmon's original and define it as different, or lacking, or less truthful (see for instance Monk 487-488). And sure enough, the very last part of the final chapter—Boyle's, of course—radically undermines and suspends all that went before by repeating what McAlmon once said about Boyle's writing and her own reaction to that judgment: "come hell or high water, [she] had to romanticize every situation. *This may very well be true*" (332, italics added). The text begins, then, with Boyle's promise to try to avoid "romanticizing," and the final sentence indicates not only that she may have failed to keep this promise, but also that she *admits* and *embraces* failure. McAlmon had been worried about Boyle's tendency to "romanticize" things in her writing. In an infinitely deferring gesture of play upon this relation between truth and lies, the older male writer's stern superiority and the younger female writer's ingenious rebellion, Boyle responds that his verdict on her writing may be "true." The reader is baffled, perhaps to the point of disgust, as the autobiographical contract is suspended and the expected sense of correspondence and closure withheld.
- 35 So what, exactly, is Boyle doing in the 1968 *Being Geniuses Together*? She does not even seem to *like* McAlmon, much, and he certainly did not like her. Is this Boyle's alternative enactment and subversion of McAlmon's cynical title: "being geniuses together"? "Because preserving a sense of unity was of no importance to Robert McAlmon," Monk says, "one is tempted to read his title as ironic; indeed, the concept of 'genius' resists collaborative effort. But... Kay Boyle seeks above else to posit the existence of some underlying homogeneity" (490). My reading goes against this conception of Boyle as primarily focused on sameness, similarity, correspondence. The surface level of the text concerns the recuperation of McAlmon as a genius. At the same time, Boyle's chapters seem to undermine this discourse of paying homage through the outline of an alternative to McAlmon's cynicism, bitterness, boredom and constant resort to alcohol; a way for her to be a different kind of genius alongside him (and alongside all the other people who, unlike her, were "qualified" as members of the Lost Generation). In other words, Boyle unsettles the idea of "genius" and makes the plural "geniuses" of the title—McAlmon's

insult directed at Stein and other modernists who, according to him, were shams and charlatans—explode into a sense of radical plurality, a suggestion that there are many ways of being a genius and that neither Stein *nor* McAlmon can provide an ultimate definition.

- 36 Boyle's inscription of her own autobiography alongside McAlmon's can also be interpreted as a reflection or staging of the rare type of displaced communication between them that is, after all, described in the text. They connect, as it were, by proxy:
- 37 McAlmon and I had only one means of communication... and that was the baby. She was a month old then, and she was ill, and when I went out to do the shopping he would sit by her cradle and rock her and sing to her, the frozen blue of his eyes not melting for an instant, his cowboy voice yodelling the hillbilly songs louder and more melodious as she cried. (McAlmon and Boyle 211)
- 38 Boyle and McAlmon do not talk much, and he remains cold and distant, but still he supports her in the one most crucial domain of her life. Somehow a connection is made, which resurfaces as they go to bars together: "McAlmon had begun to sing again. ... and it made me yearn for the baby asleep in somebody else's house now" (292). Finally, in one of the most dramatic of Boyle's chapters, McAlmon is the one who helps Boyle save her child (325). While McAlmon presents himself as always holding a drink, Boyle, on the other hand, tends to present herself primarily as a mother with a child on her lap or in a stroller. While McAlmon's cynicism and aloofness may in part have been effects of his troubled life as a closet homosexual, Boyle, on the other hand, presents herself as almost defiantly straight and maternal. Boyle's 1968 edition does not, then, as some critics have suggested, exaggerate similarities between the two writers, but instead, in this particular domain of experience where they appear to occupy completely opposite positions, a provisional bond of care and trust is formed momentarily as McAlmon supports Boyle specifically *as a mother*.
- 39 Finally, it is interesting to note that Boyle's *Being Geniuses Together* continues beyond the 1968 ending, in which she insolently unsettled the idea of "truth." In 1984, a new afterword by Boyle, then 82 years old, adds yet another dimension of supplementarity. Here, Boyle suggests that "the collapse [of gifted male writers] is brought about... by the terrible hunger... to know the writer, to encroach upon his privacy in order to maneuver the secret from him" (334). Boyle, now an old woman, tries to make sense of the past and specifically McAlmon's fate as a forgotten writer. She openly acknowledges McAlmon's resistance to the demands of autobiography: "It was the bitter recognition of public demands made on the private self that outraged McAlmon" (335). The autobiographical gesture of gathering the pieces together into a "me" and saying "I am, I was there, I am telling you about it" may operate to support the myth of a person or even a time and a place and a crowd, but the effect of this recollection, this provisional gathering, will be haunting and uncanny, and especially if the "me" is split into an unstable, reluctant "us" across the abyss of time. The double autobiography is *unheimlich* because it suggests closeness or intimacy where there is none (or little). The 1968 edition of *Being Geniuses Together* may make us uncomfortable, then, not primarily because McAlmon broke down and cried "Let the God-damned pieces fall apart!" but rather because the text—as Boyle acts on his furious demand "You finish it!" *precisely* by allowing the pieces to resist and displace the impossible fantasy of held-together autobiographical truth—exposes the ghost of the genre, the uncanny of a lifelike apparition which is both familiar and unfamiliar, the danger of (supplementary) writing.

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ABSTRACTS

Kay Boyle's supplementary edition (1968) of Robert McAlmon's *Being Geniuses Together* (1938) is a self-deconstructive survey of the expatriate community of English and American writers and artists in Paris in the 1920s. Boyle's version prompts questions about originality and autobiographical truth through the way in which her chapters are alternated with McAlmon's chapters in a post-mortem "dialogue" or ghostwriting experiment and frequently seem to bracket or undermine his version of the "same" story. I am interested in the way in which self-writing and autobiography in general, and in particular experimental forms of collaborative, queer, or "mock" autobiography, have been used to conjure up supposedly True Stories of the Lost Generation and literary Modernism. Few crowds are as famous, as notorious, as surrounded by myth, as extensively written about in various more or less autobiographical texts, as the "in" crowd of writers, artists, critics and publishers in Paris in the 1920s. The story of Modernism, often a form of contemporary self-definition, has been told and retold and contested in a chorus of autobiographical and biographical discourses competing for the right to present the True Story. In my article, I explore how McAlmon and Boyle present their shared experiences of being

American writers in exile in Europe in ways which are sometimes similar and sometimes widely divergent.

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Keywords: Kay Boyle, Robert McAlmon, autobiography, modernism, ghostwriting, collaborative autobiography