

# Between Past and Future

GOUVERNEUR PAULDING

GENERATION WITHOUT FAREWELL, by Kay Boyle. Knopf. \$3.95.

It is difficult not to be sarcastic about the abrupt shifts we find ourselves called upon to make in our emotional estimate of foreign nations. At one moment the Japanese are apes chattering in the trees of the jungle; then, because of Hiroshima, they are a challenge to our conscience; then, in what seems no time at all, they are the Far East's sole admirable and intrepid champions of planned parenthood, refusing, despite any restraining Connecticut laws, to be blown up in the explosion of world population. It is a little more complicated with Germany, where the exotic element—the jungle and so on—is not present to make things simple, and where the alternation of what we think of as good and evil has assumed, in the lifetime of many of us, the aspect of



a recurring ritual. Thus we have been called on to hang the Kaiser, applaud a republic, hang Hitler—we had to settle for minor criminals—and now, once again, the Germans have a republic for us to applaud. We have rearmed this twice-combated enemy—as we are trying to rearm the birth-controlling “apes”—and we count both nations as staunch friends.

Sarcasm is out of place, of course, even as a mask for sorrow, but how, by what process, do we manage to hold to the truth that the Japanese, the Germans, and all other peoples of the world are our brothers—even the crazed tribesmen of the Belgian Congo who recently have been busy poisoning hundreds of their witches?

The way to find reconfirmation of mankind's common humanity is not through political thinking and far less by allowing our emotions to respond only to the ups and downs of what nations may do. There must be

some point at which the pendulum is at rest—practically at least, for in theory there can be no point at which anything is ever at rest—and it is at this point, during this lull, that the individual can best be observed. Then understanding becomes possible. The artist is qualified for this kind of observation.

FOR FIVE YEARS Kay Boyle lived in occupied Germany. The action in her novel takes place in 1948. The date is important, since in 1948 Germany was not selling Volkswagens all over the world; Germany was still humiliated and miserable. “Down the uneven path of the paving-stones . . . came now a clot of singularly abbreviated men. They did not stand upright, nor did they sit, for the torso of each had been strapped erect to a small wooden platform, homemade and mounted on castors, and on these platforms they sped forward, propelled by their knuckles, which were cushioned and bandaged with leather pads. There were four of them, with the beaked caps of the *Afrika Korps* worn jauntily on their heads, although the insignia, and the braid, had been deleted with the honor a long time before.” In 1948, nothing yet was rebuilt; nothing pointed to an agreeable future; Germans lived in the ruins of their hopes and in the catastrophe they had brought upon themselves by the betrayal of their past. There were those who had never wanted to dominate the world and those who had remained faithful to the simple, kindly virtues; they suffered with the rest. Inevitably so, for their virtue had been private and the Nazi horror had been public; they had drawn the curtains across the windows of their houses when the police vans came into the street to take away the Jews; they had never inquired what was the new factory, sending up its thin column of smoke in the peaceful countryside near their towns. Yet who can judge them?

A novelist who attempted to judge them would be writing either as if the war were still on, that is to say

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stridently, or as if the war were long past and vastly remote—who is indignant today that Nero tortured his slaves? Kay Boyle does not justify the Germans, nor does she judge them. Her novel is a protracted cry of German anguish, human anguish, with the guilt sometimes admitted and more often denied, but with the acts and the results of the acts never concealed. Miss Boyle somehow re-enters that period of lull at the end of the war in which the Germans stood amidst the ruins, appalled by what must have seemed to them the very essence of emptiness, permitting themselves no expectancy whatever—as it must have been on the first evening after creation when man stood in darkness, not even permitting himself to hope that the sun would rise.

Kay Boyle does not argue about this; she simply keeps her characters unaware of a future they could not foretell. There is the American colonel who would like to be still shooting German soldiers but who is inclined to settle for shooting German and American civilians in love with his wife or his daughter. There is the generous young American who runs the local propaganda-for-democracy services, and it is a measure of the author's artistry that his talk of the "eternal" Germany of the poet and musician does not ring false. There is the young German P.O.W. returned from the United States, whose rediscovery of his country links the images and incidents of the novel.

THE WORD "images" interrupts and renders unneeded any listing of the characters, any summation of the plot, for it is the images, the scenes, the separate narratives in this novel that raise it to its high level of excitement and beauty. A Jewish child wanders through the countryside searching for her parents; two lovers ride Lipizzaner horses in the ring of a German castle; the American colonel requests the university rector to make a speech in English, and all the loving German text on Goethe is lost in the faltering alien tongue. This novel halts for a moment the swift passing of history so that we may look upon the beauty and anguish of our unchanging humanity.

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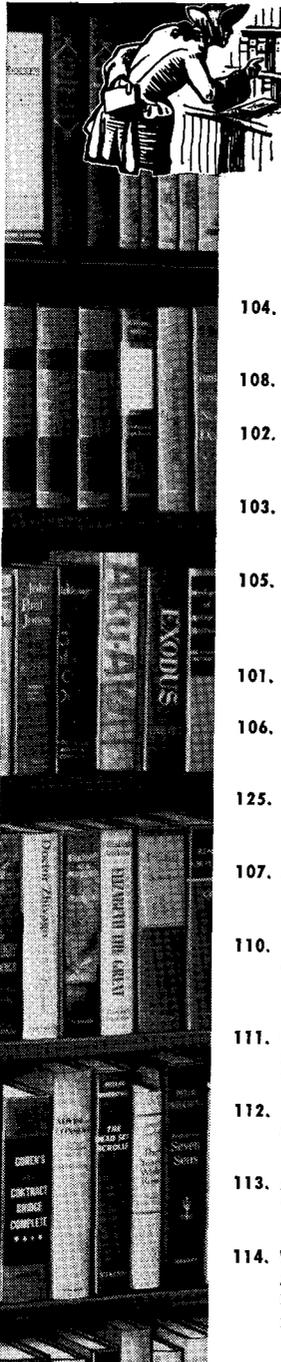
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