Introduction

'I'm scared,' the Swedish poet, novelist and essayist Karin Boye told her friend, the writer Harry Martinson, when they discussed her acclaimed novel *Kallocain* (1940) on their last meeting. Her mother, after reading the book, told her that she had 'done it well'. 'Do you think *I* did it?' was the reply.[1]

The author's fear was partly related to the political context: she was concerned that her book might draw the attention of neutral Sweden's security police, who were on watch for signs of anything that might spark an invasion by Nazi Germany. She even considered revising the work and giving all of its characters Chinese names (which only a few characters in the published version have), in the hope that this would have the effect of 'neutralizing' the text. Fortunately, the danger was avoided, and the book passed almost unnoticed by the Swedish authorities. Nonetheless, in early 1940, ordinary Swedish citizens had to be careful whom they talked to and what they talked about – even what books they bought and read. Authors had to be even more careful with what they released in print.

Boye's sense of disquiet also reflected the mystery of how she had managed to write a science-fiction novel that was unlike anything she had produced before, and unlike almost anything that had appeared in earlier Swedish literature. Somehow, the war that was engulfing Europe had triggered something within her that made it possible for her to create a vision of enslaved humanity, an allegory dream-like and grotesque, yet instantly recognizable to anyone then living through the international crisis.

Kallocain was the last major work of Karin Boye, who was

born in 1900 and wrote during the 1920s and 1930s. In those decades the 'ice-cold reasoning' of Hitler and the 'merciless dialectics' of Stalin began to dominate the political and intellectual scene, and the novel was among the international reactions of horror at what was taking place in Europe. On the book's first publication, it attracted strongly positive reviews. The modernist poet Artur Lundkvist called it 'in the international class', while others characterized it as 'a work of art', with one critic suggesting that in her novel she had injected a dose of the truth drug Kallocain into the world of 1940 and 'enabled it to lay bare its innermost tendencies'.[2]

Boye's early writing had been subjective in character: for the most part, meditative poetry that reflected on an inward journey towards God or individual personal fulfilment and transformation. Partly as a result of economic pressure, she began to write fiction and reviews for literary journals. She also made literary translations, including Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), a work she later criticized for its male-centredness, and the socialist realist novel *Cement* (1925) by the Soviet author Fyodor Gladkov, which she translated from German, a language she mastered with almost native fluency and spoke with only a slight Swedish accent. At the same time, she became involved in the socialist politics of the Stockholm Clarté group, whose members included the poet Gunnar Ekelöf and the author, critic and translator Erik Mesterton, and in 1928, together with some of them, she made a study visit to the Soviet Union. After this visit, which seems to have consisted mainly in a drab pilgrimage between various state institutions, factories and collective farms, she became disillusioned with Soviet life and politics.

Gradually, she moved away from the group's aims and outlook, and concentrated on writing and publishing a series of novels, as well as several collections of poetry. With Mesterton, she edited the avant-garde literary magazine *Spektrum*, which drew its inspiration from French Surrealism, the Imagism of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and also literary Freudianism. With Mesterton's help, she translated Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and then made her first experiments in psychoanalysis (which

continued until her death), which were connected with her desire to confront her own homosexual and bisexual identity in terms that might make her free and independent. The analysis was mostly conducted in Berlin, under professional medical guidance, and led to her ending her heterosexual marriage and embarking on a relationship with a young German-Jewish woman, Margot Hanel, with whom she lived, more or less, until the end of her life.

During her visits to Berlin in the early 1930s, Boye witnessed the rise of Nazism at first hand. On one occasion, together with the critic Vilhelm Scharp, she attended a large election rally at the Sportpalast, where Hermann Goering delivered a speech filled with demagogic rhetoric. According to her biographer Margit Abenius:

> Scharp observed Karin, who stood with her arm stretched aloft, making the Hitler salute, seemingly in complete fascination. Not to make that gesture could cost one's life – neither more nor less.[3]

All of these experiences flowed together in the writing of *Kallocain*, which she seems to have begun in the late autumn of 1939. 'Yes, these have been strange times,' she wrote to a Norwegian colleague in the spring of 1940, in the context of the German invasion and occupation of Norway, '– the political passions have turned old friends into enemies and caused nervous crises in young people . . .' She mentioned a 'low point' tempered by 'the awareness that the values we possess – between one another – are the most precious of all and the most easily lost'. It was in this context that she created her dystopian novel, in which she portrayed not only earth-shaking world events, but also their destructive effects on individual human beings.

In Europe and America the dystopian novel had established itself as a literary genre in the early twentieth century. Although the antecedents of the genre include the prophetic and speculative writings of nineteenth-century authors like Jules Verne (*Paris in the Twentieth Century*) and Imre Madách (*The Tragedy of Man*), the political and theological parable of the Grand Inquisitor in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, and

the futuristic fantasies of H. G. Wells (*The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds*, *The First Men on the Moon*), it was not until the publication in 1924 of an English translation of the novel *We* by the Soviet author Yevgeny Zamyatin that the genre emerged in its modern form, as exemplified also by works like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953).

The critic Erika Gottlieb has characterized dystopian fiction (the term dates from the early 1950s) as 'a post-Christian genre',[4] meaning by this that in dystopian works the historical religious conflict between divine salvation and damnation has been replaced by a secular clash; between a vision of enlightened leadership in the service of social justice and a nightmare of dictatorship and political and personal repression. Although it is not mentioned in Gottlieb's study, *Kallocain* displays nearly all the characteristic features of the dystopian genre. Particularly, in Gottlieb's terms, it shows 'the protagonist [of] an ultimate trial' in confrontation with the 'Grand Inquisitor' of secular, totalitarian authority, and also obliquely expresses the fear that Western intellectuals are too ready to condone the Soviet and Nazi dictatorships, unwilling to admit that the Soviet state is founded on terror, just like its alleged opponent, Nazism.

Subtitled 'A novel from the 21st century', like other books in the genre it depicts a totalitarian future that is really a warning about the dangers of the present day – in the case of *Kallocain*, the Second World War. In 1939 the accommodation between Germany and the Soviet Union, known as the Nazi-Soviet Pact, was signed by Ribbentrop and Molotov, and for the next two years the Nazi leadership worked hand in hand with the Soviet government, dividing and invading Poland, and forming an anti-Western alliance headed by Hitler and Stalin. *Kallocain*'s mechanized, dehumanized landscape is a composite, bearing the traits of both Nazi and Soviet society: here elements of racial biology co-exist with rigid class distinctions, both equally aimed at wiping out the individual conscience and consciousness. Karin Boye had read the work of both Zamyatin and Huxley, and her multi-ethnic totalitarian World State displays

elements familiar from *We* and *Brave New World* – but her narrative has an urgency that is connected with a new and specific historical juncture: the outbreak of the Second World War, and a reality that looks both unpredictable and frightening.

In his essay about the novel, Ekelöf later described the general mood of the time:

> Karin Boye's *Kallocain* appeared in 1940, in perhaps the darkest autumn of the democracies, a disastrous year for such a book. Spain had formed the run-up to the long series of political and military depredations, the Battle of Britain was on, the war in Greece was beginning. On every other street corner glowed the shameless orange posters, and people preferred to avoid listening to German radio. Many were getting used to the idea that there would be no future except underground.[5]

The novel's tone and diction mirror the creeping process of alienation it describes: much of Leo Kall's first-person narrative is written in a detached, unemotional style that sometimes recalls the narratives of Kafka. The secret memoir of a committed bureaucrat and government scientist, it maintains an impersonal aloofness (*kall* is the Swedish adjective for 'cold', 'callous') that is broken only occasionally by scenes and details that suggest the existence of another life below the surface, where human beings actually live, love and suffer. In the bleak, Dantesque landscape of the novel Boye creates a world that is described in meticulous detail. We see 'police eyes' and 'police ears' – cameras and microphones – in the walls of houses and apartments, the card-index systems of the police and intelligence services, the interior of an aircraft, a commune of dissidents and resisters, a state-run dining room. The plot is driven by the story of the 'truth drug', Kallocain, that Kall has developed, which probably has its origins in press coverage of the 1937 Moscow show trials, where the confessions of the 'Trotskyists' and 'Right Oppositionists' were said to have been induced by drugs (scopolamine, the 'truth serum', was often mentioned) or torture. But the core of the narrative lies in the tension between repression and expression, inner and outer, constriction and

freedom. 'You have broken me open like a tin can, by force,' Kall's wife Linda tells him, echoing the author's own assertion in a letter to an acquaintance that 'all human beings want to be forced open like tin cans, *want* to open themselves.' Reor, the 'great man' who is the subject of a myth that sustains the community of dissidents and outcasts living under the surface of the World State, exists in their memory as a Christ-like figure, the centre of something that resembles a religion, suppressed and persecuted by the authorities. He is a symbol of openness and freedom, suspended in time and opposed to the hard, metallic armour of the state.

Kallocain reflects a world in which no one can be trusted – with the collapse of democracy, all are at the mercy of two states, two totalitarian value and belief systems that threaten to crush the individual and obliterate him or her entirely. Because of the absence of trust, no succour is to be found in human relationships, in friendship or in marriage: with the implementation of new thought-crime laws enabled by his drug, Kall anticipates 'colleagues denouncing colleagues, husbands denouncing wives and wives denouncing husbands, subordinates denouncing chiefs and chiefs denouncing subordinates'. Lurking in the background is the apocryphal tale of Pavlik Morozov, the thirteen-year-old Soviet schoolboy who, in 1932, was said to have denounced his father to the authorities and was in turn killed by his family. There is also an awareness of the fate of poets, writers and artists in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. At the time she wrote the book, Boye did not know of the ultimate fate of Jews in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe, and so that dimension is missing from the narrative, though in the occasional references to the 'border peoples' there are hints at something of the kind. Boye's friend Ekelöf also saw a prophecy of the destruction of Hiroshima, half a decade before it took place, in the dream sequence that forms the centre of Chapter Fourteen, in which Kall walks through a ruined city, poisoned by noxious fumes.[6]

The possibility that there may be an escape from the moral and existential death trap of the World State is evinced by the themes of love and personal liberation that run through

Kallocain and are a constant motif in Karin Boye's poetry and fiction,[7] as exemplified in her 1934 novel *Kris* (*Crisis*). The book charts the religious, emotional and psychological development of a twenty-year-old woman in a Lutheran seminary, and is really a kind of semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical diary. It mirrors Boye's own progression, from an enclosed psyche in thrall to a divine will towards the liberation of personality, an opening to the world, and a resistance to an oppressive, patriarchal social and educational structure. The story focuses on a homosexual relationship, as Malin Forst, the novel's first-person narrator, develops an infatuation with Siv, a beautiful fellow student. Gradually, the infatuation becomes something more meaningful: through her involvement with Siv, Malin gains a liberation of self, and, through the psychological crisis, a sense of personal identity.

Beside and behind the main narrative of Leo Kall and the truth drug, *Kallocain* also tells the story of a woman, Leo's wife, Linda, who finds her way to freedom and authenticity in spite of social oppression and overwhelming historical odds. Linda makes a decision to follow her heart and join the dimly glimpsed but nonetheless real community of dissidents and resistance fighters. She also establishes inner contact with a vegetal, plant-like, growing and living reality that undermines and subverts the inhuman surface of the World State, and by doing so contradicts the mechanical, male-dominated totalitarian system – she is now on her way 'somewhere'.

Linda's search for freedom and authenticity reflects the dominant note in Boye's life and work. She lived in an era in which creating art that spoke out for truth and personal liberation could in itself be a heroic act. Peter Weiss, the German writer, artist and experimental film-maker (who adopted Swedish nationality), recognized this when he recreated Karin Boye as a character in the third volume (as yet untranslated into English) of his tripartite novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (*The Aesthetics of Resistance*, 1975–1981). In 1939, at the age of twenty-two, after periods of residence with his family in England and in Czechoslovakia, fleeing Nazi persecution, Weiss moved to the small township of Alingsås, near

Göteborg, Sweden, where his father ran a textile factory. Alingsås was at that time where the writer and theologian Anita Nathorst, Karin Boye's friend and counsellor, had her home, and Boye visited the town regularly to stay with her. It appears that during 1939 and 1940, Boye and Weiss met and formed a brief friendship that was broken when Boye ended her life in Alingsås in 1941. Weiss's clear and vivid portrait of her in his novel seems to be drawn from lived reality:

> This woman, still young, with a small, delicate figure, a thin, boyish countenance, short-cut dark hair, dark eyes, and heavily drawn black eyebrows, sat quietly beside my mother, looking at her and stroking her hands from time to time. I learned that it was the writer Boye, who lived in Bratt's guest house. Her shyness prevented the start of a conversation for a long time, yet she had an almost single-minded devotion to my mother, and not until the autumn, once when she had come alone and I accompanied her to the street, did we exchange a few words, and entered into a dialogue that was initially hesitant but became more and more extensive, lasting – each time interrupted for a month – until the end of March Nineteen Hundred and Forty-One . . . [8]

Weiss's anonymous narrator says that, at some deep psychological level, Boye wanted to fuse with the masses, but that, in the context of the world situation, was not motivated by a desire for life – rather, by a mounting despair and a wish for disappearance and annihilation. Nevertheless, in Weiss's novel, Boye is a heroic figure who stands alongside members of the real-life 'Rote Kapelle', or Red Orchestra – some 400 people who resisted the Nazi regime in various capacities. Many of these resisters had connections in Sweden, and moved between Sweden and Germany in secret. In Weiss's novel, Boye is included in their ranks as a brave fighter against fascism who, like them, has acquired an almost legendary status in world history:

> What she portrayed was not utopia, as I had assumed, but examination of the present day; the time-shifts that seemed to cause a detachment from our reality pointed to what existed now. The

> guilt that she carried within her was less about sexual conflicts than about being party to the inability of people to stop the development of the state into an instrument of murder.[9]

Kallocain is the summation of Karin Boye's poetic and literary career, and also her testament as a human being. While before in her writing she had sought to build an inner cosmos, a realm accessed by hymn-like poems that moved beyond and behind physical reality, in *Kallocain* she portrayed the reality of the contemporary world in terms of a dreamlike, psychoanalytic vision that reproduced the features of collectivist society while also reflecting the ethical and spiritual conflicts on which her poetry was founded. This gave her the strength to defy the oncoming demons in the outside world with a conviction that external reality was only *apparently* invincible: the intense, inner idealism of her poetic credo asserts itself in the story of Linda and her journey towards the 'fools' – the dissidents capable of building an alternative society, even if their struggle is wrought at the expense of their own lives. By courageously submitting to their fate, the dissidents nonetheless survive and fulfil the conditions of T. S. Eliot's mantra-like phrase quoted in the epigraph: 'the awful daring of a moment's surrender'. Beyond the pall of hopelessness in which the novel at times appears shrouded, there is a glimmer of hope. Under the influence of the truth drug, Rissen says:

> I'm a cog. I'm a creature from which they have taken the life . . . And yet: right now I know that it isn't true. It's the Kallocain that's making me full of irrational hope, of course – everything is becoming light and clear and calm. At least I'm alive – in spite of all they have taken from me – and right now I know that *what I am is on the way somewhere*. I have seen death's power spread out across the world in wider and wider circles – but must not life's power also have its circles, even though I haven't been able to see them? . . . Yes, yes, I know that it's the effect of the Kallocain, but can't it be true, even so?

NOTES

1. Margit Abenius: *Drabbad av renhet* ([Afflicted by Purity], Bonniers, 1950), my translation. No full-length biography of Karin Boye exists in English. The major biographical studies by Margit Abenius (*Drabbad av renhet*) and Johan Svedjedal (*Den nya dagen gryr* [The New Day Dawns] Wahlström & Widstrand, 2017) still await translation. A condensed English-language biography forms the introduction to *Karin Boye: Complete Poems* (Bloodaxe, 1994).
2. Quoted in Svedjedal, op. cit.
3. Abenius, op. cit.
4. Erika Gottlieb: *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).
5. Gunnar Ekelöf: 'Kallocain' in *Blandade kort* (Bonniers, 1957).
6. Ekelöf, op. cit.
7. Boye's concept of love was derived from Buddhism and Sufi mysticism, and it embraced a very wide spectrum of experience, thought and emotion. Ultimately it was a semi-religious concept that appealed to figures like UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, who mentioned, discussed and quoted her poetry in his diaries. See Dag Hammarskjöld, tr. Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden, *Markings* (Faber & Faber, 1964).
8. Peter Weiss: *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* [The Aesthetics of Resistance] (Suhrkamp, 1975–81), my translation.
9. Peter Weiss: op. cit., my translation.

Chronology

1900	26 October: Karin Boye born in Gothenburg, Sweden.
1903	Birth of brother, Sven.
1904	Birth of brother, Ulf.
1909	Family moves to Stockholm. Boye starts writing poetry from age of ten.
1915	Family moves to Huddinge, in the countryside near Stockholm.
1921	After graduating from college in Stockholm, moves to Uppsala, where she studies Greek, Scandinavian languages and literary history. Becomes a member of the international socialist and pacifist organization Clarté. Also active in a small group of students called the Poets' Corner, and gives talks and writes articles.
1922	Publication of *Clouds* (*Moln*; poetry).
1924	Publication of *Hidden Lands* (*Gömda land*; poetry).
1926	Gains her Bachelor of Arts degree at Uppsala. Moves back to Huddinge and studies history at Stockholm University.
1927	Gains Bachelor of Arts degree in history at Stockholm University. Publication of *The Hearths* (*Härdarna*; poetry).
1928–30	Member of the editorial staff of Clarté.
1928	Becomes engaged to the author Leif Björk and takes part in a three-week study tour of the Soviet Union.
1929	Works as a teacher at the secondary school in Motala. Marriage to Leif Björk.

1930	Visits Yugoslavia with her husband. Impressions from the journey form part of the essay collection *Varia* (1949). Leaves Clarté.
1931	Publication of *Astarte* (novel). Becomes a member of the literary society 'The Nine' and starts the literary magazine *Spektrum* with Erik Mesterton and Josef Riwkin, which will introduce T. S. Eliot and the surrealists to Swedish readers. With Mesterton, translates T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.
1932	Separates from husband.
1932–3	Lives in Germany, where she undergoes psycho-analysis in Berlin. Meets Margot Hanel, with whom she lives for the rest of her life.
1933	October: Leaves Germany and returns to Stockholm. Leaves *Spektrum*. Publication of *Merit Awakes* (*Merit vaknar*; novel).
1934	Divorce from husband finalized. Publication of *Crisis* (*Kris*; novel) and *Settlements* (*Uppgörelser*; short stories).
1935	Publication of *For the Tree's Sake* (*För trädets skull*; poetry).
1936	Publication of *Too Little* (*För lite*; novel).
1938	Travels to Greece over summer.
1940	Publication of *Kallocain* (novel) and *Out of Order* (*Ur funktion*; short stories). Brief friendship with Peter Weiss.
1941	23 April: Is found dead in open country near Alingsås in circumstances that are still unclear. Hanel commits suicide shortly after. Posthumous publication of *The Seven Deadly Sins and Other Poems* (*De sju dödssynderna och andra dikter*, ed. Hjalmar Gullberg; poetry) and *Annunciation* (*Bebådelse*; a collection including the eponymous novella and some short stories).
1949	Essays and other minor texts published in *Tendency and Effect* (*Tendens och verkan*) and *Varia*.