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## 'The Woman Gardener': Transnationalism, Gender, Sexuality, and the Poetry of Blanaid Salkeld

"Poetry is an approach," said a Chinese professor recently. "Or we suffer" – he went on, "we groan: and that is a poem."<sup>1</sup> In citing a Chinese professor in her opening to translations of four of Anna Akhmatova's poems, Blanaid Salkeld illustrates how her own approach to poetry is conditioned by a transnational perspective that embraces questions about the nature and place of poetry from across the globe. Salkeld is interested in world poetry, and Irish poetry is considered as one of many sets of styles that belong to an international language called poetry: 'since the War, the world's mood is not for poetry. Most people are far too clever and witty now-a-days to believe in the virtues'.<sup>2</sup> Salkeld (1880–1959), a published poet, actress, writer of verse plays, reviewer, and publisher, is fascinating both as an active participant in many literary and artistic circles of early and mid-twentieth-century Ireland and as a poet in her own right. In 1933, Salkeld and Dorothy Macardle founded the Women's Writers' Club, which welcomed non-fiction writers, historians, and journalists as well as fiction writers and poets, and served as a fulcrum for much creative life in Ireland at that time, hosting writers and artists such as Kate O'Brien, Micheál MacLiammóir, and Louis le Brocquy. Brendan Lynch's *Prodigals and Geniuses: The Writers and Artists of Dublin's Baggotonia* (2009) notes that Salkeld's home was a welcome place for many of the creative people working and living in Dublin: 'when her husband died, Blanaid and young Cecil settled in Dublin in 1909. Kate O'Brien, Arland Ussher, Patrick Kavanagh, and Brian O'Nolan were regular visitors to their Dublin home'.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to her role as salon member, friend, and facilitator, Salkeld is frequently mentioned as someone whose work deserves closer study; Beckett named her as one of the writers he admired and

favourably reviewed her first volume of poetry *Hello, Eternity!* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1933). Salkeld was fifty-three years old when she published *Hello, Eternity!*, and between then and 1955 – just four years before her death – she published four more collections: *The Fox's Covert* (London: JM Dent, 1935), *The Engine is Left Running* (Dublin: Gayfield Press, 1937), *A Dubliner* (Dublin: Gayfield Press, 1942), and *Experiment in Error* (Aldington, Kent: Hand & Flower Press, 1955).<sup>4</sup> *Experiment in Error*, her most innovative collection stylistically and thematically, was published when she was seventy-five years old. She contributed many prescient reviews to *The Dublin Magazine* – reviews that were generous yet discerning, and displayed an interest in philosophy, in the political and moral questions that beset Europe as it worked its way into and beyond devastation by war, and also in aesthetic movements and influences.

Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis, the editors of what remains the most important and authoritative work on Irish poetry from the nineteen thirties – *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s* – describe Salkeld as belonging to the ‘poets of the period in Ireland who are inevitably squeezed out of the binary accounts (whether revivalist/modernist or Northern/Free-State-based) and who for various reasons deserve the attention of scholars, readers and historians: Lyle Donaghy, Geoffrey Taylor, Blanaid Salkeld, to name but a few’.<sup>5</sup> Austin Clarke also admired her work, and in correspondence with Professor Sean Lucy in 1971, suggested that at least one woman should be featured in the Thomas Davis Lecture Series, stressing his liking for Blanaid Salkeld’s poetry.<sup>6</sup> Though Salkeld is often roll-called as a woman poet deserving of attention, her work has also been firmly dismissed. In ‘Not Guilty? On the Scholarly Revival of the Irish Revival’, Edna Longley remarks that ‘no doubt there are forgotten treasures out there, but not Blanaid Salkeld’.<sup>7</sup> While there are certainly mawkish moments and dutiful concessions to rhyme in some of her work, it is also possessed of rogue energy, a philosophical restlessness, and an irreverence that combine to make her a continually compelling writer and figure. This tension between the ‘proper stiffness’ of some of her writing,<sup>8</sup> and the undoing of a moral balance it often appears to seek, produces a body of work that is not easy to classify, dismiss, or unequivocally endorse. Across her poetry a desire to leave, to escape a recurring experience of confinement, and to throw off the deathliness of duty and role is repeated in various refrains, and this can be read as referring to the ‘stubborn sameness’ of style as much as to some of the debates in Irish letters,<sup>9</sup> and to the physical, spiritual, and emotional restraint demanded of respectable women. While for some readers the resistance of Salkeld’s work to any of the more easily affirmed

tendencies in Irish criticism promises exciting new possibilities, for others it constitutes weakness. Justin Quinn writes:

many Irish poets of the generation after Yeats refused to embrace the challenge of Modernism, preferring instead to follow the instructions laid down by their great forebear: "Cast your mind on other days / That we in the coming days may be / Still the indomitable Irishry." Blanaid Salkeld (1880–1959), although she began in an archaic sub-Yeatsian mode with her collection *Hello Eternity!* (1933), quickly embraced a kind of hectic futurism in some of the poems of her next book, *The Fox's Covert* (1935). But she is something of an anomaly, and an unsuccessful one at that.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Quinn outlines the primary tensions of the seeming opposition between national continuity and modernist discontinuity that conditioned editorial debates in Irish journals and magazines. These tensions created a number of aesthetic responses, in none of which does Salkeld find a habitus. By contrast, Anne Fogarty's essay 'Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin' notes that 'writers such as Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey, Rhoda Coghill, and Blanaid Salkeld seem to make good this feeling of lack and of conflict mentioned by MacNeice and Clarke, not by reaching for a further compensatory notion of a national organic tradition but by utilizing multifarious cultural contexts to motivate their writing'.<sup>11</sup> When Salkeld was writing, transnationalism – as we understand it – was limited by the insular and inward aspects of Irish culture. Tensions between national and international perspectives conditioned editorials, debates, and definitions of art and the artist: 'provincialism and censorship, these very forces which were anathema to the modernist spirit, became the hallmarks of the Irish cultural scene for many decades'.<sup>12</sup> Fogarty goes on to argue that this is in part accounted for by the complications of a variety of nationalisms, some expressed in cultural and political censorship and insularity, others in resistance to a holding national paradigm: 'most of the adversarial energies of the modernist impetus seem either to have been hijacked by the nationalist cause or else ostracised as marginal or deviant'.<sup>13</sup> Salkeld wrote in this atmosphere, and is one of those writers whose work does not seek to create or restore a sense of national wholeness or belonging, but aims instead to keep opening out the contradictions and ambivalences that exist between praxis and thesis. Across her work there is a consistent tension between confinement and release, and even the seemingly immovable Connemara mountains are rendered as birds poised to fly in 'Radio Train'.<sup>14</sup> There is much focus on the sea

and travel in her work: 'out of the bitter stuff of absence, agape/I yet may fashion a stout vessel/Trim to the tide'.<sup>15</sup> The 'merman' occurs as a lover figure, and the speaker is often borne to transformation on waves. In 'Escape' it is the stuff of poetry itself that leaves the island for the sea:

I will follow the silver springing wave,  
Releasing my cramped spirit to its motion –  
Sun-smitten, gay, along the grey cold ocean –  
Still following the silver springing wave.  
Rhyme runs into the sea and is not drowned.<sup>16</sup>

This movement overseas exerts a shaping force on Salkeld's work more broadly: she has translated a number of poets into English, and her access to a variety of cultural contexts is one of the reasons that she is so difficult to classify under existing categories. Salkeld was born in India, where her father was a doctor in the Indian Medical Service. Many accounts of her life note that her father was a friend of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, but the implications of this, and the extent to which it may have shaped her writing have to date been relatively unexplored. A review of *Experiment in Error* noted that Salkeld 'met Tagore in India when she was only twelve'.<sup>17</sup> She was largely brought up in Dublin, in Fitzwilliam Square. In Calcutta, Salkeld's father privately published two volumes of the poems she sent to him in letters. She married in 1902 and returned to India upon marriage, where she lived for the next six years with her husband, an Englishman in the Indian civil service. Following his death in 1909, she returned to Dublin, where she joined the Abbey and acted under the stage name of Nell Byrne. In Ireland she was part of a cosmopolitan group of friends, who were radical and liberal in varying degrees, and lived unconventional or non Irish-Ireland lives. She translated and reviewed a number of the Russian poets,<sup>18</sup> and was very taken with Pound. Her interests both politically and aesthetically seem to be broad, even contradictory, a catholic openness to life that may be read negatively as dilettantism or could make her work appear as the 'sensitive attempts of a highly intelligent amateur'.<sup>19</sup>

To consider Salkeld's career in the frame of poetic transnationalism as set out in Jahan Ramazani's pioneering work, *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), will allow us to think outside and beyond some of the more over-determined national and aesthetic categories of twentieth-century criticism. Recent books such as Matthew Hart's *Nations of Nothing but Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (2010) extend Ramazani's arguments, while Alex Davis's challenging and prescient review of Hart's analysis testifies to the possibilities

for refiguring glocal, transnational, and internationalist landscapes and national literary histories through the testing and refining of transnational poetics.<sup>20</sup> Ramazani's thesis proposes 'neither to elide the differences between modernism and postcolonialism nor to quarantine these poetics in disciplinary isolation from one another, but by identifying a cross-hemispheric and transhistorical common terrain, to explore significant points of intersection between them'.<sup>21</sup>

As a woman writing in a postcolonial society, Salkeld's class and access to international influences would appear to disqualify her from postcolonial experience proper, given the metropolitan circles in which she moved. And yet her metropolis, Dublin, while incubating much powerful creativity, was not a centre for the radical avant-garde experimentalism that had characterized high modernism. Her family had been part of the colonial machinery in India but she had close working and personal friendships with Dorothy Macardle and other republicans. In terms not just of style but also of politics, Salkeld is hard to claim by any interested party, considered neither postcolonial nor properly modernist. It is precisely because she troubles the edges of these categories that thinking about her work through some of the key ideas elaborated by Ramazani is so productive. In many respects, a transnational aesthetic map is made possible through the travels and connections of those who belong – either through inheritance, education, or through eventual patronage – to the moneyed classes, and Salkeld's own travels, as well as her lack of subalternity, place her more securely in a transnational framework than in any of the well-worn identity categories discussed so fervently during the years she wrote.

Further, Salkeld's style defies categorization, operating at it does between a powerful attraction to both embroidered symbolism and abstraction. To Quinn's designation of a 'sub-Yeatsian' and 'hectic futurist' dimension to her work could be added a rational didacticism, a tendency for impressionistic abstraction, and a private symbolic system as arcane as Yeats's gyres, but more faithfully romantic in its spirit. Where her work veers towards modernism it always swerves back towards symbolism steeped in the European romantic tradition. Finally, what can be added is a tendency to narrative, to story, and to song, all of which recalls not so much the early Yeats, but the Tagore of the *Gitanjali* or 'song offerings', to which Yeats wrote the effusive introduction.<sup>22</sup> Each of these tendencies and 'time periods' meet and overlap in her work, and as such it exemplifies Coughlan and Davis's claim that 'there is no straightforward opposition between a cultural centre and a revolutionary margin'.<sup>23</sup> In this respect though, her 'traditional experimentalism', would seem to be an assumption of one

of the 'various shapes that innovation can take', as outlined by Ramazani below:

to narrow the criterion of genuinely 'modern' or 'modernist' to the formal experimentation of 'open-form' or 'avant-garde' poetries risks obscuring the various shapes that innovation can take. ... A more porous yet still period-based conception recognizes the breakthroughs of modern Irish and Scottish poets in reimagining both national and international identities (e.g., Yeats and MacDiarmid); the ingenuity of Harlem Renaissance poets in infusing literary verse with the blues and jazz, among various oral and musical forms (e.g., Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown); and other examples of the hybridization of distinct aesthetics and discourses, the poetic re-creation of cultural and cross-cultural paradigms. This broader conceptualization may help make recognizable the analogous 'experimentation' of postcolonial poets.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, 'various' is a recurring word across Salkeld's career as are repeated exhortations to, and declarations of, change and transformation, often juxtaposed with a stultifying monotony or rigidity of thought or imagination. This could indeed be said to be a configuring tension in her work: a sense of duty and community chafing against the need for playful shape changing and remaking. This tension is explored through the representation of different civilizations and their discontents. It is also investigated across time – Salkeld's poems often range between ages and experiences without signposting flashbacks or charting chronology. Apart from the internal tendencies within her own work to cross time boundaries, Salkeld's last volume, *Experiment in Error*, can be seen to exist most obviously at the overlap between modernism and postcolonialism identified by Ramazani:

most period-based conceptions of literary modernism locate it in the first half of the twentieth century; and postcolonial poetry, so called because of its emergence in the aftermath of European colonialism, flourished for the most part in the second half, after World War II. Like novelists Chinua Achebe and V.S. Naipaul, poets such as Derek Walcott, Wole Soyinka, and A.K. Ramanujan cut their literary teeth in the 1950s and '60s, after the death rattle of high modernism ... Their contemporaries were not T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound but the supposedly "anti-" or "post-modern" generation of the confessionals, the New York poets, the Beats and the Black Arts poets.<sup>25</sup>

He argues further that the actual influences were much more permeable than the tendency to think in schools allows us to imagine:

As for period boundaries, while we need to grant the centre of modernist and post-colonial gravity in different halves of the twentieth century, this line should not be drawn too neatly, lest it obscure shared terrain. Just as modernist mastodons – Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Langston Hughes, W.H. Auden – still trod the earth in the second half of the century, so too a few influential poets of the colonized world, such as the Bengali Rabindranath Tagore'.<sup>26</sup>

Salkeld exists exactly at this juncture – her life spans the early part of the twentieth century and she published her final, and most formally experimental collection, in 1955. A particularly sympathetic and sensitive review of *Experiment in Error* pays close attention to this, and sees it not as chaotic or promiscuous, but as evidence of this poet's 'steady growth':

The first volume *Hello Eternity!* (1933) showed this writer to have a vibrant lyrical sense, controlled by a metaphysical turn of mind. Two years later, there followed *The Fox's Covert*, which revealed another facet in her creative growth, a strong earthy allegiance which her residing and working in Ireland undoubtedly enriched. In 1937, she as so many poets of that decade, became receptive to the sound waves of Modernism, then permeating the poetic ether.<sup>27</sup>

Salkeld was conversant with the writings of the avant-garde modernists and the more formally patterned versifiers such as W.B. Yeats and Robert Lowell, and stylistically attracted to the experimentalism of Pound: 'Ezra Pound is a master of words: he can make them do anything. Besides having music ever at his disposal, imperceptibly various – he calls in occasionally the visual element'.<sup>28</sup> Salkeld was also deeply moved by the symbolic mysticism of the Russian poets, and admired Alexander Blok, whom she described as the 'glory of the Symbolists', and as a 'mystic and patriot, his out-of-time verse dramas are unlike anything ever written before him'.<sup>29</sup> She was equally attracted to the sparse style of the Futurists, who wrote a 'poetry of prose and revolutionary formalism',<sup>30</sup> and to the Petersburg school with its resonances with imagism and its drive towards concrete verbal expression. The poet Anna Akhmatova properly belongs to none of these schools, and Salkeld's admiration for her reflects their shared tendencies: Salkeld's writing is at once iconoclastic and conservative, and is indifferent

to avant-gardism except where there is reason for technical admiration. Like Akhmatova, Salkeld uses intratextual and privately recurring symbolic words and phrases. The two poets also share an interest in intertextual techniques; these can be traced through Salkeld's work in a number of ways, such as when she directly addresses a named interlocutor,<sup>31</sup> or when she inhabits and often troubles the styles and oeuvres of other writers, a tendency identified by Kathy D'Arcy, who perceptively notes the stylistic links between Salkeld and T.S. Eliot: 'the uses of dashes and ellipses fragments and troubles the poem, and the latter poem ['Invitation'] is formally reminiscent of Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *The Waste Land*'.<sup>32</sup> The long poem that ends *Experiment in Error*, 'The Woman Gardener', implies – both in its title and in its subject – a cultural conversation not only with Tagore's 1913 verse classic, *The Gardener*, but in the wider sense between Irish and Hindi culture. In the foreword to 'The Woman Gardener', Salkeld writes:

Nunni Ayah, from Bas Bareilly, told me many stories, and taught me many folk-songs in her native Hindi. When I asked her the meaning of a word, she would say: 'I never thought of that memsahib' – and I've been told that some old illiterate folksingers in the Gaeltacht would not know the meaning of a word taken singly: they apparently acquired their language in phrases or combinations of words.<sup>33</sup>

*The Gardener*, written in Bengali, is a narrative made up of connected individual stanzas addressing the varieties of love across human experience. 'The Woman Gardener' – which 'springs ... from [Salkeld's] childhood spent in Chittagong'<sup>34</sup> – takes as its source Hindi folk song and thus derives from a different part of the Indian sub-continent, and from a different culture, to Tagore's poem. A dramatic verse form interspersed with translations from Hindi folk song, it references Tagore through the exploration of love, duty and the tropes of husbandry utilized so powerfully in *The Gardener*. Tagore was of course powerfully associated not just with Yeats but also with Pound, and Salkeld had her own relationship with Tagore through her family. Her own 'Gardener' poem draws on both Tagore and Yeats when she ends her foreword with a quotation from 'The Fiddler of Dooney': 'The good are always merry / Save by an evil chance'.<sup>35</sup> This complicated set of intersections between the postcolonial and the modernist, the national and the transnational, raises many questions about how to interpret such crossovers.

Salkeld's work, both in terms of her own geographical peregrinations and the relationships that these nurtured – as well as



of the constellation of contemporaneous cultural references that she herself gravitated towards – represents the ‘cross-hemispheric and transhistorical common terrain’<sup>36</sup> that Ramazani so persuasively identifies as a productive and (at least to date) extra-categorical set of intersections for rethinking the dominant paradigm of modernism and postcolonialism as sequential successive periods and styles. Ramazani goes on to make the case for thinking about experimentalism in less antagonistic and explosive terms than those that have been privileged by an emphasis on the avant-garde:

Modernism is often understood, by analogy with other ‘-isms’ such as communism and feminism, as espousing form-shattering newness and radical experimentation in the arts exemplified by works such as Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, Mina Loy’s ‘Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose’, and Pound’s *Cantos*. Under this definition, early twentieth-century writers who composed formally patterned verse, such as W.B. Yeats, Robert Frost, Wilfred Owen, Langston Hughes, and Hugh MacDiarmid, might qualify as ‘modern’ but not ‘modernist’. This view of modernist style would likewise leave aside the work of most postcolonial poets, whether metrical or unmetred, monoglot or heteroglot, realist or surrealist.<sup>37</sup>

Salkeld’s work is metrical and unmetred, patterned and free, sometimes together – much to the frustration of some of her reviewers. Some of this frustration is specifically linked to her gender and in the following review of *Hello Eternity!* that praises the volume but quibbles with its title, we see how the registers of the modern and the colonial are both deployed to keep her in her place. The review praises the poems for:

a stormy quest to lavish tenderness on beauty, a wounded but never bitter acknowledging of the ironic cage of life, a passionate humbleness, a supplicant pride under pain – and there is a fragile and distinct coherence in every mood that makes up the variable texture. Some hint of the book’s qualities might curiously enough be conveyed by saying that they are contrary of the qualities suggested by the misleading title. The title is a positive invitation to critics to suspect the writer of having fallen into the very snares of feminine expression which she has not merely avoided, but from which her nature renders her immune.<sup>38</sup>

The dubious praise of what is judged to be a pleasing masochism is sharply withdrawn by a high-handed and punitive parsing of the title,

which the reviewer believes ‘strikes a note completely at variance with the sense of ease and completeness from the poems’.<sup>39</sup> The problem with the title, it seems, is not only the imposition of modernity onto the lyrical and pastoral texture of the poems, but also the impudence of a woman daring to speak to the heavens – the gods – without exegetical mediation:

the dialling of infinity, this ostentatious assertion of a modern right to trouble the silent gods and interrupt the chiming spheres with the crude sound of the telephone bell at once suggests the importunate superiority complex of the novice to freedom – the studied impudence of woman long prevented from speaking her mind to Eternity.<sup>40</sup>

The language asserts its masculinist authority still more forcefully as the review proceeds, the reviewer assuming the role of a shaming teacher admonishing a child, even hinting at corporal punishment, and trivializing the (fifty-three year old) poet’s address by likening it to schoolgirl bravado:

Such exaggerated familiarity in approaching the Absolute is out of keeping with the work’s natural dignity of both feeling and manner. The bravado smacks of a schoolgirl escape from enforced silence and the rules of deportment. It sounds the very contrary of proud and suppliant, it merely sounds ‘bold and impudent’, and by its childish implication not only ‘cheeks’ the gods, but rudely contradicts every gracious line of a maturely poetic piece of work.<sup>41</sup>

In many ways, this is a very disturbing piece of writing, but not necessarily unusual: high-handed put-downs were often part of the stylistic feints and shadow boxing of the Irish literary scene. The tone of many of the reviews from the period under consideration can often seem startlingly self-righteous as well as self-important, and Salkeld’s own reviews also strayed into a form of analysis that approaches moralizing. What this review of *Hello Eternity!* does show however, over and above the style of criticism that was current, is the very specifically gendered and sexualized nature of textuality, tied up powerfully with the ‘right to speak’. The poet is imagined in terms of bindings and restraints and is punished for breaking free of those restraints; the imagery is both reminiscent of slavery and of the infantilization of the other at the heart of colonial discourse. The woman poet is not only shamed, nativized, and imagined in terms of imprisonment and escape, and of impudence and its punishment, but

is also seen as in danger of being corrupted by outside influences. It is telling that the use of a talking and listening device, which not only offers potential connection to foreign places, but can give voice to those who have escaped from 'enforced silence', seems to give the most offence, and it seems disproportionate that at least a third of the review is concerned with the objectionable nature of the volume's title.

Reviews such as this, together with the exclusion of women writers from anthologies prompted Anne Fogarty to ask 'why Irish modernist poetry appears to be such an inveterately masculine and consequently patriarchal domain'? Fogarty goes on to assert that, 'sexual difference is inscribed as textual difference in the creative output of Irish writers of the thirties'.<sup>42</sup> Fogarty notes how Samuel Beckett in *Disjecta* 'constructs a rival and in part impromptu tradition of his own',<sup>43</sup> but that even such 'radical revisions of modernism still exclude and bypass the achievements of women'.<sup>44</sup> It would seem then, that not only, as Ramazani argues, do modernism and postcolonialism need to be brought into relationship with one another in ways that can productively animate material that has been discarded for being non-conformist to the rules or patterns of one or another, but that questions of women's writing and the adequacy of prevailing forms to explore a variety of women's experiences, still needs to be emphasized as a key aspect of interpretive practice. In order to explain their comparative invisibility vis-à-vis their male contemporaries, the further complicating categories of gender and sexuality must be added to Ramazani's oppositions between 'postcolonial', 'modern', and 'modernist'. While minor male poets were regularly anthologized and valued, if not for their excellent output, at least for their contribution to the journal, magazine, and pub life in which more noted poets could flourish, the activity and production of women poets – despite many exemplary studies of women writers and activists – remains unintegrated into the larger cognitive maps that shape our understanding of public cultural life in early twentieth-century Ireland. The reasons for this comparative lack of attention to the part that women writers of the period played in contemporary culture are complex and varied, and in some part due to the private nature of the artistic and literary socializing of women, who by and large did not frequent the powerfully masculine spaces of the Palace Bar and McDaid's, but were more inclined to meet in the parlours, drawing rooms, and kitchens of private homes or studios. Salkeld's son, Cecil Ffrench Salkeld, who grew up to become one of Ireland's important artists, painted a mural in Davy Byrnes – an iconic image of a period in Irish writing which was mythically centred on heavy drinking, when the relationship between art, public-private

dynamics, and national identity, was redefined in an especially masculinist culture and space. Even when women met for formal cultural reasons in public places, they tended to use reserved rooms, at venues such as the Hibernian Hotel in Eastmoreland Place in Dublin 4, where the Women Writers' Club held most of its meetings. While membership was not by invitation only, the meetings were not 'open' in the ways in which a pub conversation is staged so that interventions from passing strangers may happen. Salkeld's career spanned this transition from the more woman-friendly spaces of the drawing room, the kitchen, and the salon, to the pub, but although she was occasionally known to join her granddaughter Beatrice with husband Brendan Behan in drinking establishments, her granddaughter's experience of pub life was markedly different from the spaces in which Salkeld debated the value and modes of the arts. However, the semi-private condition of women's public meetings is not enough to explain the persistent side-lining of their works.

Kathy D'Arcy notes that 'Devenport O'Neill, Salkeld, Wingfield and Coghill all feature in the *Oxford* [1958] but not in the *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* [1986]'.<sup>45</sup> Writing about these four poets, D'Arcy observes that

at first glance the poets can appear to be writing within either Revival or modernist discourses, and to concern themselves with the traditionally feminine themes of nature, religion and romantic love, and this is generally how they were read by their peers. The possibility that they were actively engaged in troubling the patriarchal bases of those concepts was not considered.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, as Fogarty goes on to argue, it is not enough simply to add women's experiences and voices to the already existing maps. Proper recuperation will not be possible until the masculinism that has shaped literary concerns and the shape of canons is 'outed' and understood as a shaping factor in what we consider not only literary, but 'modern' and 'modernist':

Even a cursory glance at the work of Rhoda Coghill, Mary Devenport O'Neill, and Blanaid Salkeld, to list but a few almost forgotten names, indicates that Irish female modernism belongs to a literary past which is even more irrecuperable than that of the supposed lost generation of male poets of the period. To triumphantly reinstate their work by seeing it as part of a diffuse but coherent literary context which embraces male and female writing alike, would involve a self-blinkering and premature denial of the unremittingly androcentric and fragmented nature of the Irish modernist literary scene.<sup>47</sup>

In looking for signs of 'troubling the patriarchal bases', today's feminist critic is wary of over-reading a feminist agenda into the work of women who wrote at a time before current concepts of women's writing were elaborated in the ways with which we are today familiar. The contemporary feminist critic, however, can approach Salkeld's work with some certainty that she explored gender roles and sexuality in her poetry, her translations, and her own reviews. Such work invites the reader to think that Salkeld was conscious of the gendered climate in which she wrote, and that she had a sense of solidarity with women as a group, at least in terms of creative practice. This commitment is evident in her founding of the Women Writers' Club, and clearly to the forefront in her review of *Contemporary Irish Poetry* edited by Robert Greacen and Valentin Iremonger. The review begins '[t]he world has been assured of late that Ireland has no new writers',<sup>48</sup> and it soon becomes evident that the term 'writers' has a limited application. Salkeld calls the new anthology 'a delightful book', and notes that 'most of the thirty-four poets represented in this cross-section of contemporary Irish verse are very young men'. While she is pleased to find that 'Rhoda Coghill is represented by two magical poems', she 'should have liked to see Mary Devenport O'Neill included, also Temple Lane, who has written some very beautiful poems'.<sup>49</sup> She continues – clearly identifying herself with women writers as a group (and in this instance specifically members of her own Women Writers' Club) – 'yet, we can toss the head proudly, realising that we have even more good poets who have to be crowded out'.<sup>50</sup> Further, in a strategy familiar to readers in which contentious issues are worked out in less immediately threatening or accusatory ways through distancing, Salkeld raises questions about how poetry, muses, and gender are configured in ways disadvantageous to the woman writer in the discussion of her translations of four of Akhmatova's poems. Here, in a transnational displacement, she can voice more audaciously her opinions regarding the alienation of women's poetry from contemporaneous agendas about authority and literary value in Ireland. Salkeld first asks 'one is tempted to wonder what Pushkin would have thought of this woman poet', before going on to quote an extract from Pushkin's 'Conversation between a Bookseller and a Poet', that centres on the relationship of women to poetry:

What should the lyre's plaint have to do  
 With women's light, inconstant mood  
 Unclean is their imagination;  
 They understand us not at best;  
 God's token, even – inspiration –  
 To them is alien and a jest.<sup>51</sup>

Salkeld goes on to suggest that Akhmatova may possess the qualities to be the one, exceptional (pure and clean) woman who could not write her own poetry, but truly completely understand his:

She only could have understood  
My secret poems and obscure –  
Her deep heart burning with the flood  
Of passion luminous and pure!  
She cast out by a magic spell,  
By prayer, all my spirits' pain:  
The gush of raptures from life's well,  
Being divine, she could disdain.

'Anna Akhmatova is forty-four years old! May she live to see her fame spread throughout all the lands!'<sup>52</sup> Further, while praising and admiring Pound's poetry, Salkeld chooses two examples of Pound's most notoriously misogynist verse to display, highlighting, without comment, the gendering of Europe as an 'old bitch gone in the teeth', and the belief that woman was vacuous and incapable of intellectual thought and poetry:

It rests to me to converse with beautiful women  
Even though we talk nothing but nonsense,  
The purring of the invisible antennae  
Is both stimulating and delightful.<sup>53</sup>

The arguments played out on more distant cultural stages can be brought closer to home though, as D'Arcy argues when she notes how in Salkeld's poem 'Anchises', 'the lover Anchises, whose death is a matter of aesthetic convenience for the speaker, is objectified here just as so many female figures were in the poetry of Salkeld's male contemporaries, both revivalist and European modernist'.<sup>54</sup> D'Arcy's essay also identifies a homoerotic desire in Salkeld's work which appears at odds with the mass-going south Dublin woman, who was an active participant in Donnybrook parish, and who responded to the content of sermons seriously and thoughtfully, but seems less at odds with the hostess, friend, and confidant of many of Dublin's more liberal artists and writers. Linking a characteristic Salkeld style – her seemingly vague poetic impressionism – to Woolf's now well de-coded expressionism, D'Arcy writes that '[t]hemes of sexual desire are glimpsed interspersed with religious themes, and desire as experienced by a fully independent subject is confidently depicted in many of the poems. "Peggy" (pp.15–16) is an evocative lyric which is reminiscent in its final

stanza especially, of Woolf's expressionist representations of lesbian desire in *Mrs Dalloway*:

Spring flashes clear  
 From peak to peak,  
 And a white foam-leaf. . . .  
 Ah, there . . . Ah, here. . . .  
 About the blue sea  
 Unfurls gently,  
 And a girl of twenty  
 Who has loved no man, loves me'.<sup>55</sup>

This is a theme which scholar Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka also explores as she considers how the under-read homoerotics of female literary and artistic activity in Dublin in the early and mid-twentieth century were centred around the Gate Theatre and the artistic and social energies of the much beloved and highly energizing couple Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards. Mentxaka makes suggestive links between the ongoing centrality of Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone – who had introduced 'cubist and abstract painting to Ireland and the UK' – to 'a women-dominated group of visual artists in Dublin', even after their romantic relationship had ended in the nineteen thirties. Mentxaka notes that

just as Jellett was a lifelong friend of Elizabeth Bowen and had connections to the Gate, Blanaid Salkeld, actor at the Abbey and playwright at the Gate, also had connections to the visual arts. Although her work remains out of print, Salkeld was an excellent poet, and gems such as 'As for Me', opening with 'Lapsed Latinate and half lucid Greek' (1955), exemplify many writers' ongoing difficulties, and determination, in gesturing towards an expression of queer desire in the Ireland of the 1950s.<sup>56</sup>

Mentxaka argues along with Fogarty that 'the silences which affected the women writers were at once more hidden and more pernicious than those which also blighted the careers of the male poets',<sup>57</sup> and she notes that these silences are not simply around questions of gender and gender role assignment but also, crucially, around sexuality as well: 'It is not merely Irish lesbian history and culture that has been neglected, the political and artistic contribution of Irish women is yet to be assessed in full'.<sup>58</sup>

Such erotics are explicitly explored in Salkeld's 'The Woman Gardener', in which a wife cross-dresses in order to seduce her husband away from his mistress, by seducing both of them: 'She

must meet / This wanton rival – woo her – and outface'.<sup>59</sup> Further, the insertion of the word 'woman' into a title of a famous poem by Tagore, himself powerfully associated with Yeats, is no mere accident or whim. It brings to the fore a shared spiritual interest in the goddess that appeared to unite Tagore and Yeats in the years of their friendship. The goddess in Yeats's symbology formed no more than an imaginary deep background from which the poet could incubate and individuate himself, a dynamic that throws the relationship of woman to the divine in patriarchal religions into sharp relief. In Christian mythology, Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener in the garden of Gethsemane, and its use as a pastoral metaphor for God is well known. Placing 'woman' in front of 'gardener' makes an audacious claim to godliness in Christian phraseology, and D'Arcy notes that in *Hello Eternity!* '[i]deas of appropriation of divinity recur in several other poems of the collection, the speakers of which express variously-veiled wishes to be, and to defeat, "god"'.<sup>60</sup> While Tagore's *The Gardener* exhorts God throughout, the goddess is only called upon once, while 'The Woman Gardener' closes with a full throated song to the Goodness in which the line 'Sursuti! Mother! Goddess of the World'<sup>61</sup> opens and closes the prayer and is repeated six times. In the refrain, Sursuti is Saraswati, but it is written as it is pronounced, phonetically rendered in the accents of Nunki Ayah, as such the song stays faithful to a vernacular poetry, and to the connection between Salkeld and Ayah. The poem imagines a story woven around the life of Nunki, who was married as a child to an old man. Salkeld writes that '[a]t our parting, in Dacca railway station, the tears were streaming down, as Nunki said: "I'll never be happy again, memsahib"',<sup>62</sup> and in some ways this functions as a love song to honour her, and how she mothered Salkeld. The alignment of the illiterate Gaeltacht folksinger with Hindi folk culture in the poem's overture seems to suggest some degree of primitivism, but the postcolonial model can be complicated by focusing on the relationship between Salkeld and her servant in which both occupy and exchange mother and daughter roles. The mother-daughter bond across classes and across cultures is here mediated not only through the foregrounding of the goddess, but also through the interleaving of life, cultures, fantasy, and reality as a form of madness. The poem begins with a prose introduction explaining that the work was prompted by the memory of early one morning hearing from her 'house in Dacca [that] overlooked the sacred Ganges', a 'mad woman' sing a folk song with a 'most exalted joy'.<sup>63</sup> The 'mad source' for the poem, that travels between styles, cues the reader into how the assertion of female divinity appears as madness in a culture in which the magic of the sacred is cordoned off for the protection of the



authority of patriarchal religious institutions. What audacity did it take, what impudence to dial eternity, to deconstruct the resurrected gardener into a tale of two women, mother and daughter by bond not blood, that borrows from others and that slips from fantasy to truth? What impudence to centre the mother and daughter in the divine, and to imagine a cultural space and dimension for this relationship so often defined by biology alone. Yet Salkeld firmly aligns herself not with the ascribed madness of the culture, but with the sanity of knowing her own capacity for spiritual centeredness while being responsible to the communities in which she lives: it was '[a] beautiful air – although, not being mad, neither Nunner nor I could give it that excess of joy'.<sup>64</sup>

## NOTES

1. Blanaid Salkeld, 'Anna Akhmatova', *The Dublin Magazine* 8.4 (October–December 1933), p.50.
2. Salkeld, 'Anna Akhmatova', p.55.
3. Brendan Lynch, *Prodigals and Geniuses: The Writers and Artists of Dublin's Baggotonia* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2009), p.208.
4. Salkeld published two volumes of her poetry – *The Engine is Left Running* (1937) and *A Dubliner* (1942) – with her own Gayfield Press in Dublin. Gayfield, a collaboration with the poet's son Cecil Ffrench Salkeld, was an innovative publishing enterprise with a strong visual sense. Salkeld's other collections were published in Britain.
5. Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis, 'Introduction', *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), p.10.
6. Austin Clarke to Sean Lucy, National Library of Ireland, Austin Clarke Papers MS 38,662/1.
7. Among the publications that Edna Longley surveys in her essay is the *Irish University Review* Special Issue (33.1) – *New Perspectives on the Irish Revival*, edited by Margaret Kelleher (Spring/Summer 2003). This issue featured work on a number of under-read writers from the period, including an earlier essay of mine on Salkeld, "'I am Not Yet Delivered of the Past': The Poetry of Blanaid Salkeld". Edna Longley, 'Not Guilty? On the Scholarly Revival of the Irish Revival', *The Dublin Review* 16 (Autumn 2004). Accessed 27 January 2012, <http://thedublinreview.com/number-16>.
8. Blanaid Salkeld, 'Monotony', *Experiment in Error* (Aldington, Kent: The Hand and Flower Press, 1955), p.11.
9. Salkeld, 'Monotony', *Experiment in Error*, p.11.
10. Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.80.
11. Anne Fogarty, 'Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin', in *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), p.218.
12. Fogarty, 'Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin', p.213.
13. Fogarty, 'Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin', p.213.
14. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error*, pp.9–10.
15. Blanaid Salkeld, *The Fox's Covert* (London: JM Dent, 1935), pp.6–8.
16. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error*, p.3.

17. L.H.D., review of *Experiment in Error*, *The Dublin Magazine* 31.4 (January–March 1956), p.65.
18. Among her reviews of Russian poets are ‘Anna Akhmatova’, *The Dublin Magazine* 8.4 (October–December 1933): 50–5 and ‘Two Russian Poets’ *The Dublin Magazine* 9.4 (December 1934): 19–24.
19. Robert Hogan, *Dictionary of Irish Literature* (London: Aldwych Press, 1996), p.1080.
20. Alex Davis, review of Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), *The Review of English Studies* 62:257 (2011): 832–4.
21. Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2009), p.118.
22. W.B. Yeats introduced the English language version of Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali* (New York: Scribner, 1997 [1912]).
23. Coughlan and Davis, ‘Introduction’, p.11.
24. Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, pp.118–19.
25. Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, pp.117–18.
26. Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, p.119.
27. L.H.D., review of *Experiment in Error*, p.63.
28. Blanaid Salkeld, review of Ezra Pound’s *Seventy Cantos* and Robert Lowell’s *Poems 1938–1949*, *Irish Writing* 13 (December 1950), p.61.
29. Salkeld, ‘Anna Akhmatova’, p.50.
30. Salkeld, ‘Anna Akhmatova’, p.50.
31. This occurs with Kierkegaard in ‘After Reading EITHER/OR’. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error*, p.6.
32. Kathy D’Arcy, ‘“Almost Forgotten Names”: Irish Women Poets of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s’, in *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. by Patricia Coughlan and Tina O’Toole (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), p.107.
33. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error*, p.30.
34. L.H.D., review of *Experiment in Error*, p.65.
35. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error* p.30.
36. Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, p.118.
37. Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, p.118.
38. L., review of *Hello Eternity!*, *The Dublin Magazine* 10.3 (October–December 1934): 80–1.
39. L., review of *Hello Eternity!*, p.81.
40. L., review of *Hello Eternity!*, p.81.
41. L., review of *Hello Eternity!*, p.81.
42. Fogarty, ‘Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin’, p.210.
43. Fogarty, ‘Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin’, pp.210–11.
44. Fogarty, ‘Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin’, p.211.
45. D’Arcy, p.102. D’Arcy’s study is one such example of the value of revisiting the work of neglected women writers; she includes attentive close readings of the work of some of the very poets that Fogarty names as worthy of attention.
46. D’Arcy, ‘Almost Forgotten Names’, p.102.
47. Fogarty, ‘Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin’, p.209.
48. Salkeld, review of *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, p.89.
49. Salkeld, review of *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, p.89.
50. Salkeld, review of *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, p.90.
51. Salkeld, ‘Anna Akhmatova’, p.54.
52. Salkeld, ‘Anna Akhmatova’, p.55.
53. Blanaid Salkeld, review of Ezra Pound’s *Selected Poems*, *The Pisan Cantos* and Edwin Muir’s *The Labyrinth*, *Irish Writing* 9 (October 1949), p.71.

54. D'Arcy, 'Almost Forgotten Names', p.107.
55. D'Arcy, 'Almost Forgotten Names', p.108.
56. Aintzane Legaretta Mentxaka, 'Orpheo, Eurydice, and Co.' *SQS Journal of Queer Studies in Finland* (2006), p.117.
57. Fogarty, 'Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin', p.212.
58. Mentxaka, 'Orpheo, Eurydice, and Co.', p.117.
59. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error*, p.40.
60. D'Arcy, 'Almost Forgotten Names', p.108.
61. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error*, p.43.
62. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error*, p.30.
63. Salkeld, note to 'The Woman Gardener', *Experiment in Error*, p.30.
64. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error*, p.30.