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Irish Women Poets 1929–1959 Some Foremothers

By SUSAN SCHREIBMAN

that which ... is always passed off as 'the' tradition... is always active and adjusting.

Raymond Williams

IN HER 1971 ESSAY, "When We Dead Awaken," Adrienne Rich writes of the "psychic geography" explored by her generation of women poets "as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us" (168). For Irish women poets who have come of age in the closing decades of the twentieth century, the exploration of that psychic geography has been conducted within the widely held belief that theirs was the first generation to break into the male-dominated Irish literary scene. A reading of the anthologies and critical studies of Irish poetry which have proliferated since the 1970s only confirms that belief.¹

The "vital texts" (167) written by Irish poets in post-Independence Ireland have been profoundly, one might even be tempted to say systematically, buried, denied, repressed, and discounted. In more recent years, it has been, on the one hand, the source of fierce literary debate, such as that sparked by the publication of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991, and on the other hand, of woeful neglect. But surely the most marginalized of this marginalized community are the poets who had first collections published between 1921 and 1950, such as Rhoda Coghill, Irene Haugh, Temple Lane, Dorothy M. Large, May Morton, Mary Devenport O'Neill, Lorna Reynolds, Blanaid Salkeld, Elizabeth Shane, and Sheila Wingfield.

An investigation of the Irish journals and newspapers that regularly published poetry from the 1920s to the 1950s tells another story. In this version of events, women were an integral part of the Irish literary scene. There is evidence that they supported each other's work, had the support of male editors, and their collections, published both in Ireland and the United Kingdom, were regularly reviewed in Irish publications. This article, therefore, is an exercise in recovery: in documenting a chain of literary events that has contributed sig-

1. I gratefully thank Rhoda Coghill for permission to reproduce her poetry, and Blanaid Beehan Walker and Pauge Beehan for permission to reproduce the work of Blanaid Salkeld. Although several attempts were made to locate the copyright holders of the works of Mary Devenport O'Neill and Temple Lane, I was unsuccessful in locating them. Any information regarding copyright holders for these poets would be much appreciated.

nificantly to their marginalization, and in exploring of the work of three poets, Rhoda Coghill, Mary Devenport O'Neill, and Blanaid Salkeld, whose work may be read as a palimpsest which emerges through the ink stains of present-day Irish poets.

* * * *

THE FIRST MAJOR ACT of exclusion was in the 1970s with Michael Smith's New Writers Press project. Smith's attempted revival of Irish modernist poetry was predicated on the idea that a body of work comprising an alternative Irish tradition lay fallow. This alternative tradition, as Smith writes in volume 4 of *The Lace Curtain*, "has been completely ignored as if it didn't exist" (3). In issue after issue of *The Lace Curtain* Smith restored to the Irish reading public poetry long out of print by writers such as Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin, Lyle Donahy, Patrick MacDonogh, Thomas MacGreevy, and indeed, Samuel Beckett. His seemingly exhaustive research into this alternative Irish tradition, however, was overwhelmingly gendered male. Nearly all of the poetry by women represented in the journal are either not part of the thirties' generation (as Smith calls them), such as Máire Mhac an tSaoi, or are not Irish, such as Ingeborg Bachmann. In fact, the only Irish women poet of the thirties to find her way into *The Lace Curtain* was Lorna Reynolds, who was active in the 1970s as an academic in the field of Anglo-Irish literature.

In the 1980s, a decade in which an unprecedented interest in Irish poetry was tangibly manifested in the publication of several literary studies as well as major anthologies, these women fared no better. The perceived absence of not only any *notable* Irish women poet, but *any* female poet post-Katharine Tynan and pre-Eavan Boland was evident from anthologies such as Maurice Harmon's *Irish Poets After Yeats* (1979; reprint 1981) and Thomas Kinsella's *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986; reprint 1989), in which not a single twentieth-century Irish woman poet appears. Brendan Kennelly's *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse* (1970; reprint 1981) includes women from the revival period (such as Lady Wilde, b. 1820 and Emily Lawless, b. 1845), and poets from the current generation (Eilean Ní Chuilleain, b. 1942 and Eavan Boland, b. 1945), but no poets in-between. This absence was reinforced by major critical studies, such as Robert F. Garratt's *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (1986; reprint 1989) and Dillon Johnston's *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (1985) in which no woman poet except Katharine Tynan, albeit briefly, is mentioned.

Given the overwhelming lack of acknowledgement by critics and anthologists it is not surprising that this absence became self-perpetuating. By 2000, however, it becomes harder to understand how these women continued to remain part of hidden Ireland. In 1988 Wolfhound Press published A. A. Kelly's *Pillars of the House: An Anthology of Verse by Irish Women from 1690 to the Present*. Kelly's anthology was groundbreaking in providing a road map for Irish women's poetry, with a small but representative selection of poems per poet (including the poets mentioned at the outset of this essay),

and well-researched biographical notes. Yet, throughout the 1990s the exclusion persisted. John Wilson Foster's *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (1991) gives the impression that no women wrote in Ireland. (None are mentioned in the table of contents or on the back blurb. There is no index.) Not only male critics ignored the poetry of this generation. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh missed an important opportunity, in *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (1996), to establish a continuous tradition of poetry written by women during the twentieth century as a precedent for the poets of her study, opting instead when discussing the period between the wars, to examine how W. B. Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh portrayed women. Even when Anne Colman took exception to Haberstroh's reading of foremothers in her 1997 review of the book for the *Irish Review* entitled "Women Forgetting Foremothers," naming predecessors from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, she leapt from the twilight poets to those of the present day without identifying a single mid-century foremother. And Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, in her introduction to *Voices on the Wind: Women Poets of the Celtic Twilight* (1995), an anthology that did a great service to the revival poets, writes that "some immensely gifted women in Ireland wrote in the decades between independence and the 1960s," while also perceiving that there was generally a hiatus: "women in Ireland did not follow the pattern established during the revival. Instead we have waited until the 1960s or 1970s to have another resurgence of writing by Irish women, a second literary revival" (14).

Much of the neglect throughout the 1990s is also due, in part, to Eavan Boland's groundbreaking pamphlet, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* (1989) which has been extremely influential in setting the agenda for the ways in which contemporary Irish women's poetry has been understood and studied. Boland's premise exists in the themes, re-memories, and insights implicit in her poem "The Achill Woman," which serves as a prelude to the essay. The essay itself opens with Boland recalling the incident that inspired the poem: an incident in which Boland had her first inkling of the disparity between the lived world and the seemingly contradictory world of the text. Close on the heels of the prose description of the origins of the poem, Boland states the central theme of her essay:

[O]ver a relatively short time—certainly no more than a generation or so—women have moved from being the subjects and objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them. It is a momentous transit. It is also a disruptive one. It raises questions of identity, issues of poetic motive and ethical direction which can seem almost impossibly complex... Most importantly, it changes our idea of the Irish poem; of its composition and authority, of its right to appropriate certain themes and make certain fiats. (6-7)

Yet, these themes had already been appropriated, and these fiats had already been made, albeit not always through a voice common to post-World War II writing. While it is clear that in writing this essay, Boland was assimilating the critical thinking of the day, what this oft-quoted passage did was reinforce the idea that there existed a vacuum that contemporary Irish women poets

needed to fill. And while it is true that the output of several of the poets mentioned at the outset of this article could be considered slight when compared to their male contemporaries, they nevertheless constitute a poetic tradition which, as Terrence Brown (1981) wrote of the male poets of this generation, “has become almost as hidden in Ireland as Corkery’s eighteenth-century Munster” (169). It is time, therefore, in Adrienne Rich’s words, to begin the process of “[r]e-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering the old text from a new critical direction.... Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves” (167).

Anne Fogarty has gone some way in understanding those assumptions. In her 1995 essay, “Gender, Irish Modernism and the Poetry of Denis Devlin,” which appeared in *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s*, she began the process of contextualizing the names that appeared in Kelly’s anthology, although she did not go far enough in discussing their work. Her short article, “Outside the Mainstream: Irish Women Poets of the 1930s” (1999), however, goes further in examining the poetry of Mary Devenport O’Neill and Sheila Wingfield. In this article, Fogarty examines the work of Devenport O’Neill and Wingfield through “the distinctive features of their poetic voices” rather than by their “membership of any literary movement or adherence to the seemingly invariable laws of gender-specific stylistics” (89). And while an article that examines these poets within a feminist and/or modernist aesthetics would be an important addition to the growing body of work in these fields, such a study is also outside the scope of this short article as much more extensive research, both biographical and bibliographical, needs to be done before this type of contextualization is possible. The remainder of this article, therefore, is divided into two parts. The first part is an overview of some of the poets who were active roughly between 1930 and 1950. The second part is a more detailed examination of the work of Rhoda Coghill, Mary Devenport O’Neill, and Blanaid Salkeld.

All of the poets mentioned at the outset of this essay had collections of poetry published except Lorna Reynolds, whose work remains uncollected. Seven were published in the United Kingdom: Devenport O’Neill (Jonathan Cape), Haugh (Oxford), Lane (Longmans), Large (Constable), Salkeld (Hend & Flower Press), Shane (Selwyn & Blount), and Wingfield (Weidenfeld and Nicolson). The Talbot Press in Dublin brought out collections by Coghill (1956), Lane (1946), and Wingfield (1977). All of these poets were published in the major Irish outlets of the time—*The Bell*, *The Dublin Magazine*, *The Irish Press*, *The Irish Statesman*, and the *Irish Times*.

Their poetry ranges from the popular, such that of Belfast-born Elizabeth Shane, to the high modernism of English-born (but for much of her adulthood Irish based) Sheila Wingfield. Some of these poets, such as Morton (1879-1957) and Shane (1877-1951) have much in common with their revival predecessors: their poetry is regularly metered and rhymed, there is a reliance on Irish mythology (as opposed to European), and the theme of the majority of the work is life in rural Ireland, which rarely delves into the unconscious or

subconscious of their protagonists. Although their poetry may not appeal to a modern sensibility, their work was popular during their lifetimes: Morton had four poetry collections published, and Shane three collections of poetry and one of stories. Shane's 1921 collection, *By Bog and Sea in Donegal*, was reprinted in 1927, and her poetry was collected in 1945 in two volumes by the Dundalk Press.

Temple Lane (1899-1982; which was a pseudonym for Mary Isabel Leslie) could be considered a transitional figure. She was the author of twenty books, most of them romances, several of which went into second printings. She also had two collections of poetry published, *Fisherman's Wake* (1940) and *Curlews* (1946). The poem "O'Driscoll's Courting" from *Fisherman's Wake* owes much to the Celtic revival's style and syntax. Yet, it is also a psychologically penetrating exploration of gender roles and the tensions between physical desire and Christian behavior:

She said—"You saw me in a child's white dress,
 With wreath and veil my First Communion day,
 A little bride— and do this wickedness?
 What would that holy man the Bishop say?"
 I laughed—"He's buried!" and she sobbed—"I'll pray!" ...

 So quiet all that early night she prayed,
 While my great wish was powerful strong to fight
 That far, against her prayer: and there I stayed
 Out in the haggart, watching for a light,
 Knowing her father would sleep deaf and tight.

 Against her prayer, my will: as strong to crush
 As carrion crow upon a lamb's weak head:
 Picking its eyes out, thrashing it to slush.
 Against her faith, her love: against her dread
 Greater I'll be than all the Saints, I said. (38-39)

The woman continues to pray in the window where O'Driscoll watches her. Suddenly, the lights go out:

One minute she was in the window square:
 And then the light went dark, and she came through
 Oh, I was rich with pride that she would dare!
 And my desire came living, and came new.
 And—"Girl," I said, "myself is here for you!" (40)

The praying woman walks out past O'Driscoll, as if in a trance, and off the cliff face. O'Driscoll, in a panic, crawls down to the sea's edge, spending the night searching for her:

And did I find her? 'Twasn't I that found
 My white dead love at morning, by the powers!
 Within her window, lying on the ground,
 The life that lit her prayed away for hours.
 They waked her there with candles and with flowers. (41)

Although some of Lane's work begins to delve into that territory of "psychic geography," the poetry of Coghill, Devenport O'Neill, Lorna Reynolds, Blanaid Salkeld, and Sheila Wingfield goes much further, clearly demonstrating the influence of a modernist sensibility. Their literary voices, although distinct, are marked by an engagement with, as Ezra Pound wrote, "the new." Their work speaks to a modernism that often relies on the mythic and has as much in common with a poet like H. D. as W. B. Yeats. The opening lines of Blanaid Salkeld's "One Root" from her 1933 collection *Hello, Eternity*, connoting a female sexuality, power, and psychic understanding that derives its sustenance from the eternal cyclicity of the sea, is a case in point:

Hush, I will hedge you round with mightiness
Of my wild broke-up passions and desires—
Fold you in magic garment of my prayer,—
So pain shall never touch your heart, nor fires
Of Time obscure for you God's upper air.
I put on sea-shells for you, so you'd know
I had the secret of your origin... (28)

The voice these poets chose to write in was overwhelmingly female, as opposed to feminine. Their poetry regularly engaged with issues central to female experience, in many instances with subjects taboo in Irish society, such as wife beating, female sexuality and sensuality (including attraction to the same sex), and marital breakdown. Devenport O'Neill's single volume of poetry, *Prometheus and Other Poems*, was probably the first collection of poetry published by an Irish poet (besides Yeats) which could be considered modernist. In spite of their present-day neglect, these women were active participants in Dublin literary life and were acknowledged as innovators who produced work equal to their male contemporaries. The foreword to Coghill's *The Bright Hillside* was written by Seumus O'Sullivan, editor of *The Dublin Magazine*. In it, he laments:

It has often seemed to me strange that no one has hitherto compiled a representative anthology of the women poets of Ireland. Lack of material can certainly not be pleaded as an excuse for the failure to produce such a book ...

With the women writers of the succeeding generation [i.e. Coghill's], we come to a mode of thought and expression which differs widely from the (mostly objective) writing of "the nineties." They, like their male contemporaries, have adopted the more introspective, subjective manner which is the fashion to-day, and with this joined in the revolt against the verse forms of the older school. But they have—or so it seems to me—retained a music which is all too rare in the raucous voices which at present torment the ears and senses of those who, like myself, were trained in the verse technique of that earlier day. (vii-viii)

O'Sullivan went on to praise Coghill's collection for its "evidence of an equal sincerity, depth of feeling, and of a music which will eventually give their author full title to a place among the poets of our time, and to a hearing when many of the free-verse *yodellers*, and other disturbers of the peace have long since been brought to justice, and locked away securely in a well-deserved oblivion" (viii). Yet, in spite of O'Sullivan's confidence that fifty years on we

would not only be reading Coghill's work, but the work of her female contemporaries, their work has slipped ingloriously into oblivion.

Mary Devenport O'Neill (1879-1967) was the first of these three authors to publish. Her first poetry was copublished in book form in 1917 with her husband, Seósamh O'Neill. *The Kingdom Maker* is a play, with lyrics by M. D. O'Neill, centering on Thuahal, the second-century kingdom maker of ancient Irish legend. It is like much Irish writing published during the Great War. Its relentless escapism hardly acknowledges the awful carnage of that time: be it in Flanders or on O'Connell Street.² It was not until 1929, however, when Devenport O'Neill was fifty, that a collection of her own poetry was published. *Prometheus and Other Poems* is extremely different in voice and language from her earlier collaboration. The collection comprises thirty-three lyric poems, a verse play entitled "Prometheus: A Poem in Five Parts," and "Bluebeard," a one-act play. *The Dublin Magazine* reviewer praised the poet for seeing "perpetually, like her own Storyteller 'across the things that are, the things that may be'" (71). He praised the collection for "a contrast in its mature and restless intellectualism" (71): in contrast, no doubt, to the post-Celtic Twilight note that still reverberated through much Irish poetry of the period. Her references are at once mythic and local, and her poetry becomes the site of conflict in which the inner and the outer worlds coalesce into a blankness that neither mind nor senses can penetrate:

I think the four winds blow
With every wind between
Upon my mind,
No thought can move or go;
I've gathered in
What I would dream upon,
I feel the sun
And see the shadows grow
And day is gone;
My mind is still,
No thought can move or go. (32)

Prometheus and Other Poems, published in the same year as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, also interrogates the act of literary creation, pondering many of the same questions as Woolf does on women's role in the creative process. In "King Lear's Daughters," Devenport O'Neill asks:

Where did he find them?—Shakespeare? It
Was they who made pale colours fit
The narrowed range of his dazed eyes ...
Or did he contain them? Did he spin
Them out of his life as a spider its web? ... (16)

2. Seósamh O'Neill, however, wrote a very interesting preface in which he links the political events of his play with the political situation in 1917, although from a reading of the play, this linkage seems to be an afterthought:

At a time when the minds of men in our own country and throughout the world are turning to the problem of how to build up finer and saner systems of statesmanship out of the wreckage of war, the present study of the tragedy of an old Irish nation-builder may be of some interest. (v)

In her poem "Dead Woman" she both responds to and predates the publication of Yeats's "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz" (although she might have well heard the poem at one of her Rathgar "at homes" at which Yeats was a frequent visitor) in which he laments the ageing of beautiful women. She rewrites Yeats's poem from a feminist perspective asking why the value of women is placed on something that will, ultimately, become "nothing ... but mould / Cold and brown?" (36).

In her poem "Dante," she predates Eavan Boland in taking a journey to the underworld, although in the 1980s Boland could write with impunity in "The Journey" that Sappho was the mentor and guide who welcomed her into that place that is "beyond speech, /beyond song, only not beyond love;" reassuring her of her rightful place, standing "beside me as my own daughter" (*Outside History*, 95-96). Devenport O'Neill, in the male-dominated literary milieu of Dublin in the 1920s, could only travel that path as an interloper—hiding in the shadows of hell behind two great male poets:

I followed them ten steps behind.
My wish to follow dragged against my fear,
As a man will sometimes drag a reluctant beast.
I feared that if there came a flaw
In Dante's deep absorption, and he saw
Me there with him and Virgil in that place,
Scorn would pour on me from his face.
I feared as one's skin fears boiling pitch
His first "Who's this?
How is this creature here?" (51)

Ultimately Devenport O'Neill is unable to take the journey that Boland, fifty years later, with the confidence of one who is secure of her place in history could:

Then Dante took his place on Geryon's back.
In front on Geryon's neck I saw some space;
I ventured, then recoiled. It was not fear
Of Geryon's monstrousness
Nor the abyss,
But the awe that makes all things that I desire
Forbidden as if ringed by fire ... (51-52)

"Dante" describes the glass ceiling of the Irish poetic scene. Thomas MacGreevy, a contemporary of Devenport O'Neill's, described it another way. In his poem "Anglo-Irish" he writes as a Catholic in the largely Protestant literary milieu of the 1920s with a toehold in the door:

*Why are you here?
You are not supposed to know
You little—insider!* (25)

This might explain why it was not until the age of fifty that Devenport O'Neill had a collection published, and why, although she lived for nearly another forty years, this was her only published collection. This is so despite

the fact that throughout the 1940s Devenport O'Neill was far from silent and continued to be a regular contributor to *The Dublin Magazine*. "Scene-Shifters Death," which appeared in the April-June issue 1944, is a rigorously intellectual poem that does not sentimentalize death, but rather confronts it, and in doing so, Devenport O'Neill revisits the use of nature of her earlier poetry:

As it is true that I, like all, must die,
I crave that death may take me unawares
At the very end of some transcendent day;
May creep upon me when I least suspect,
And, with slick fingers light as feather tips,
Unfasten every little tenuous bolt
That held me all my years to this illusion
Of flesh and blood and air and land and sea.

In the last stanzas, death is like a poet, scrupulously and patiently creating something new out of that old rag and bone shop of the heart:

I'd have death work meticulously too—
Splitting each moment into tenths of tenths,
Replacing each infinitesimal fragment
Of old dream-stuff with new.

So subtly will the old be shed
That I'll dream on and never know I'm dead. (2-3)

Rhoda Coghill (b. 1903) is the author of two slim volumes: *The Bright Hillside* (1948) and *Time is a Squirrel* (1956). The latter collection was "Published for the author at The Dolmen Press," and is not listed in the British Museum Catalogue, which is an indication that the collection was paid for by Coghill, a practice not uncommon at the time. Coghill was also not a full-time writer. She had a very successful career as a concert pianist, serving as the accompanist to Radio Eireann from 1939 until 1969. Seumas O'Sullivan was an early supporter of Coghill's work, although the first poem she submitted to *The Dublin Magazine* was submitted under a pseudonym. In the preface to *The Bright Hillside* O'Sullivan cannot praise her work highly enough: "If Rhoda Coghill had, instead of using a pseudonym, signed her poem with her own name—a name which is held in honour wherever music is honoured in Ireland—I might have less cause to congratulate myself on that swift acceptance" (viii).

Like Devenport O'Neill, many of the poems in Coghill's collections are gendered female: "The Young Bride's Dream" is a terrifying psychologically astute poem giving voice to the fears that many women shared (but dared not speak). These were women who were forced into marriage with older, economically secure men. In Coghill's poem, a young bride, prior to her wedding day, ranges over the fears and hopes of her life to be:

I wonder will he still be gentle
When I am fastened safe to his side?
Will he buy grandeur to cover my beauty,
And shelter me like a bird that he'd hide

In a quiet nest, and show me great courtesies,
And make me queen of his body and all that he is? (18)

The last line of this first stanza contradicts our assumptions of women in mid-twentieth century Ireland. Although subtly stated, it is no less concerned with the carnal as her more bawdy eighteenth-century predecessor, also married off to an older man:

The very first night that he came to bed to me,
I longed for a trial at Venus's game,
But to my sad vexation and consternation,
His hautboy was feeble & weak in the main.
For instead of pleasing he only kept teasing;
To him then I turned my back in a huff
But still he did cry, 'twill do by-and-by,
A chusla se sthere! I am killed with the cough. (Carpenter, 395)

Coghill's second stanza acknowledges the repulsion of many older men to their wives' youth and lack of sexual interest in their aged, decaying bodies:

[Would he] use me like a chance woman,
A servant girl that he'd hire at a fair?
Bid me rip my fine gown to a hundred pieces,
Make rags of it then, for the floors and the stair?

The transition in the poem from sexual partner to servant is rapid, and seemingly inevitable, with the woman having no control over her destiny. The poem ends with the young bride recalling a dream. She wonders if the dream was a portent, and if she might do well to decode the seemingly nonsensical phrase she remembered upon waking: "*Obedience is ice to the wine.*" (*The Bright Hillside*, 18).

"The Young Bride's Dream" is framed by a four-line poem entitled "Overheard," which proceeds it, and the title poem, "The Bright Hillside," which follows it. If read as a sequence, "Overheard" seems to allude to an illicit love acknowledged by no less than God himself:

A little bird told me:—
"We love so much,
That even God Himself would creep away,
Finger on lip, leaving us together." (18)

"The Bright Hillside" recognizes both the overwhelming grief and will to live of a lover who knows she will soon be bereaved. It also employs sexual imagery in which the woman (unlike that in "The Young Bride's Dream," where the woman is sheltered "like a bird") becomes the protector and initiator:

With a gull's beak I cry,
And mount through strong resistance.
My wingspan beats the sky,
Across the high distance,

Circling about your place,
Wheeling to cover your bed
With the curve of space
And the airs overhead;

To keep you, to delay
 Spirit in one dear shape;
 But spirit will not stay
 When it has planned escape,

And life at last will leave
 This, and all bodies dead
 Those who remain to grieve,
 The world they habited; (19)

Coghill's second collection, *Time is a Squirrel*, is a collection of nine poems. Most of them are occasional poems: about Christmas ("Christmas Weather"), on watching a yacht race ("When Yachts are Racing at Dunmore"), on the death of a musician ("Epitaph for a Musician"), and "Two Poems for a Child" ("The Bird's Garden" and "In the Train"). Yet "Flight," placed exactly at the center of the collection, pulls the other poems into it like a centrifugal force. In it, an older woman, perhaps the same woman who received the coded warning before her wedding day, takes flight. It is, however, a flight that crosses no borders or frontiers, except internal ones. "Flight," like much of women's poetry from this generation, is firmly rooted in the Irish landscape, creating a poetic discourse, not unlike that created by their male counterparts. It is a discourse that measures time by the ebbs and flows of the seasons. For many of these women's female protagonists, however, the landscape is a place of silences, entrapment, and domestic violence. The poem opens with a woman on a country road:

This is the road that since the summer—since
 their parting—she shunned, for fear of meeting him.

Until the time of ripening their quarrel
 lasted, and in September, when the harvest

was brimming in the fields, she went her way
 by other paths

But today she takes that road in the late afternoon
 when already across the bloodshot sky the rooks

are blinking home. She is no longer afraid while
 the year lasts, knowing the watchdog daylight

whines in November on a shortened leash.... (13)

Just when she thinks she will get by the field unnoticed by the man working a team of horses she spies "a new-made breach in the briars": "At the treacherous gap she stops. Oh! now to run, / to hide like a feathered frightened thing in the dusk!" (14).

The protagonist, trapped like a rabbit in the beam of an oncoming car, is unable to flee. And while she wishes to "pass like a bird or a bat, / encountering only the hedge-high gulls," she "is trapped." It is a far cry from the empowered bird of "The Bright Hillside." Yet the woman of "Flight" chooses not to flee, but face her tormentor:

... So it was vain
 to shield evasive eyes, to discipline
 rebellious feet: vain to her and to him
 the fugitive pretence. For a proud pulse
 beats in her brain like a startled wing; the blood
 tramples its path in the stubborn heart's field
 with the eightfold stamping hooves of a strong team
 of horses; and she feels, raking the flesh,
 the harrow of love's remembered violence. (14)

In "Flight," as in many of Coghill's poems, her protagonist suffers from a kind of psychological lobotomy in which nature becomes an electrode prodding memory:

Thrown on the foreshore of her mind,
 Forgotten things, washed up, and left behind,—
 Thoughts that were once her own. (*The Bright Hillside*, 1)
 drowned/Beneath slow tide on tide of history. (*The Bright Hillside*, 3)

Blanaid Salkeld (1880-1958) was a diverse and prolific poet. She was the author of five books of poetry, and her unpublished play, *Scarecrow over the Corn*, was performed by the Gate Theatre in the 1930s. She was born in Pakistan of Irish parents. Although her father served in the Indian Medical Service, most of her childhood was spent in Ireland. She later married an English member of the Indian Civil Service, living with him in Dacca and Bombay. She returned to Ireland and was active in the second company of the Abbey Theatre, working under the pseudonym Nell Byrne (Kelly, 95). Her son was the painter Cecil Ffrench Salkeld, and her granddaughter married Brendan Behan. She was also a translator from the Russian and a regular reviewer for *The Dublin Magazine*. Although three of her books were published in England, *The Engine is left Running* and *A Dubliner*, both of which were illustrated by her son, were published by Gayfield Press at 43 Morehampton Road, the Salkeld family home.

Salkeld's first collection, *Hello Eternity!*, was enthusiastically praised by the anonymous reviewer of *The Dublin Magazine* who walked a tightrope (and occasionally slipped) between praising her for writing like a poet (i.e., one must assume, a male poet) while having the ability to do it with a "feminine aspect" (81). Like the other poets examined here, nature as a source of imagery pervades this collection—yet it is not the nature of the Celtic Twilighters, but a harsher nature that withholds and punishes. It often represents barrenness—creative, maternal, and spiritual.

In the first line of the first poem entitled "Complaint," the young protagonist asks "How are you incommoded, birds, honey-hearted ones!" (11). In the following stanzas the birds, who don't appear to be incommoded, but are rather "Lucky and ecstatic, heedless of hindrances," receive a visitor:

A barren bird fashioned by man, the destroying one.
 Huge, menacing bird, to whom Spring is irrelevant,
 Off with your droning! For God's birds would be busy now,
 From beaks the straws streaming down like festival ribbons,
 Hope's nest in the dark heart of sun-gilded branch to build.
 Under the leaves of life, so, poets their visions set—
 Scorning what fools delight in: mind-rule and vanity.
 How are we incommoded, birds, honey-hearted ones! (11-12)

Salkeld is setting out her poetic territory here: "Scorning what fools delight in: mind-rule and vanity." She has, instead, opted for the life of the poet, in the best pastoral tradition, albeit, one mired in the middle of the twentieth century, living in a city full of coal soot and unpleasant Liffey smells. Dublin itself becomes the backdrop for many of the poems in the collection in which the "incommoded birds" appear, transfigured into a solitary city stalker who becomes imbued with a Christ-like empathy and the ability to rise above her own loneliness to comfort others. In "Terenure" the poem opens with the poet laughing

at the lovers I passed
 Two and two in the shadows,—
 I, solitary as one old horse I saw
 Alone in the meadows. (14)

She draws strength from their "joy ... common as a weed" and is able to love "all the lovers I passed / Two and two, in the shadows."

In "Templeogue," the narrator, all too aware of her impotence "to reveal spouse to spouse, / To give children and the love of children to every house" wishes "passionately, seriously, that I were God" (17). In "Butterfield Lane," the narrator, again traversing the city at night, finds nature in communion with her. As a student might draw close to the master hoping that through a physical proximity a transference of wisdom might ensue, in Salkeld's poem "the hedges drew to me, / As though they knew the solemn thought I held, /The theme that was my pain and sustenance" (33).

The theme of the poet's "pain and sustenance" is never directly addressed in any of the poems. Instead, it is alluded to, woven into a pattern of images in which attempts at love, at a connection with material and immaterial, fail. For example, the poem "Peggy" explores the love of "a girl of twenty / Who has loved no man, [but who] loves me" (15), although it is unclear whether the narrator returns her love. Throughout the collection, various attempts at love fail: "I know but emptiness and liberty" (55). The poet even doubts her artistic vision, and when she looks out to sea for inspiration, the place she seeks it from is "Innisfail" (55).

Love is often couched in the mythical. In "Anchises,"³ there is no bedding down. There is instead the wish to have the power of the gods to transmute

3. Anchises is the mortal with whom Venus falls in love. She lays with him, and from their progeny, Aeneas, the Roman race is descended.

her beloved to an object in nature. For the chance to gaze upon him the protagonist would, unlike Selene who jealously guarded Endymion for herself, gladly share her beloved with “the rest”:

I wish he were the Polar Star in Heaven,
Or the little Pleiads seven,
And I would be the best astronomer
That ever watched for even.
I wish he were the Sun from East to West—
Even for me to see.... What of the rest?—
I would not grudge their share,— or mind (13)

But when all her prettily rhymed tropes fail, she confesses:

I'd lure him into any snare—
And then, would I not free him?—
But since nowhere I see him,
Sometimes in my sad breast,
I wish him dead, best. (13)

Many of the narrators in Salkeld's poems, like the narrator of “Anchises,” are failures at love. In Salkeld's poetic universe, however, love cannot be read only in terms of the physical, the interpersonal. The poet's perceived failure at her craft is also a love lost, as in the poem “Even the Carrollers”:

I hate verse. I have lost faith....
I know but emptiness and liberty.
My craft grown old and crazy, I still ply
Unwilling oar. No harbour is in sight. (55)

The syntax in many of the poems in this first collection is awkward, difficult to follow, with inversions, not simply for the sake of rhyme, but to hold a thought as long as possible; to savor it before letting it go, as in the first lines of “Quis ut Deus?”:

Your seraph smile, bright hair, and gentle grace
Stir me at times to long, triumphant flight
Unto lone peak superlatively bright
Where lives your heart. (49)

In other cases, the difficulty of the syntax mirrors the difficulty of the poet's journey, as in the opening stanza of “Twilight Cave”:

Us calls he not to that cool twilight cave,
Though much we long to lose the common sight
Of roads and landmen, and untempered light—
To catch faint duelling clash of wind and wave. (27)

Many of Salkeld's poems are worth struggling through: but the reader must be willing to allow the poem to create its own order. These poems bring their own rewards, as in these lines from the end of “Twilight Cave,” in which the narrator prepares for her final journey:

Now gird my loins for journeying, O, Muse!
 Me cloak in smooth habiliments of peace.
 We shall go softly thither How refuse
 His singer entrance? Merman, brief a lease
 Of shelter, grant! And I will not abuse
 The calm, sea-fragrance, dimness and release. (27)

These sensitively beautiful lines, with their overt sexual overtones, draw together many of the themes and imagery of *Hello Eternity!* and promise at least one of Salkeld's narrators an eternity's peace.

Salkeld's last collection, *Experiment in Error*, published in 1955, shows the maturing of her poetic voice. It opens with "Some Lives Exact," a brutally painful poem in which "death brings no relief"—at least not yet. It is a poem, which in the midst of despair, affirms art:

Where can she go,
 If the ways of men look drab and mean,
 But into
 Her own garden that is fresh and green? ...

 Failure has
 Its own tune, with a mystic hand floats—
 And with a pass
 Turns into living chords single notes.

 Night's vigil ends.
 The stars sleep. Day's light diminishes.
 True faith of friends—
 Everything except art finishes. (1-2)

A majority of the poems in *Experiment in Error* are sonnets that follow the same rhyme scheme: *abbaabba cdeedc*. "Error," a sonnet typical of the collection, displays difficulties of syntax as previously mentioned, yet it also has moments of sharpness and clarity of statement. Like many of the other sonnets, Salkeld's range of metaphor is wide, as though no one image can capture her thought. And just like the "incommoded birds" the poet flits from image to image weaving a nest of words and a trail of experience:

I was all for following and submission—
 Who should have guided you to where, exempt
 From weaklings' spite and beauty's kind contempt,
 You could have toiled and taken soft remission.
 But self in wisdom's counsels made division.
 Pain spoils the heart—while, awkward and unkempt,
 Passion undoes the tenderness we meant—
 Suiting us sinners to our sad old prison.
 The devil's pipes and drums for ever sounded.
 A fool screams out for raptures off the ration,
 With blasphemy's theatricality.
 Crazy with decoys of unreality—
 I called to you. Striking in your rough fashion,
 You thought to rescue me, but deeply wounded. (11)

It must have been deeply wounding for many of these poets, some alive today, to have been so completely omitted from the canon of Irish poetry. One could have called it a conspiracy, but it was nothing so organized. If it was difficult for male poets after Yeats as they jockeyed for position while carving up Irish poetic territory, it must have been even more difficult for women who traditionally were never part of the landscape. Over the past thirty years there have been many missed opportunities to give them their rightful places. Eavan Boland was not wrong when she wrote in *A Kind of Scar* that

Irish poetry was predominately male. Here or there you found a small eloquence, like *After Aughrim* by Emily Lawless. Now and again, in discussion, you heard a woman's name. But the lived vocation, the craft witnessed by a human life—that was missing. (11)

But this is not quite the whole truth and nothing but the truth. While Boland's counterparts in the United States were uncovering the poetic trails of their foremothers, Irish women poets were covering up theirs. The belief that there were no post-Revival women writing poetry is very deeply ingrained. When the American-born, British-based poet Anne Stevenson (1992) responded to *Outside History*, taking exception to Boland's argument, and despite her admitted lack of expertise in Irish poetry, resurrected some foremothers, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill swiftly put paid to any suggestion of precedent in an article in *Poetry Ireland* entitled "Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill asks WHAT FOREMOTHERS?"

Perhaps the time is ripe for reappraisal, to understand how women writers lived their lives in post-independence Ireland, and how their contemporaries fared in the North. Perhaps it is time to collect their poetry, and to source their correspondence, so that a new generation of critics can begin serious study of their work. But in the absence of this, perhaps it is also easier to understand how Boland, in 1990, could write with justified anger:

I knew that the women of the Irish past were defeated. I knew it instinctively long before the Achill woman pointed down the hill to the Keel shoreline. What I objected to was that Irish poetry should defeat them twice. (13)

We must not, unwittingly like Peter, deny them thrice.

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