

## 'I Am Not Yet Delivered of the Past': The Poetry of Blanaid Salkeld<sup>1</sup>

Blanaid Salkeld was an Irish poet, essayist, dramatist, translator, actress, and publisher who lived and worked between 1880 and 1959.<sup>2</sup> She was an enterprising and resourceful woman who set up her own press, and her poetry was published in several volumes from the 1930s to the 1950s. She wrote many prose pieces, book reviews, and essays that were published in *The Dublin Magazine*, *Ireland Today*, *Irish Writing*, *Poetry Ireland*, and *The Bell*. Salkeld's early work grew out of the Revival whilst her later work was considerably more formally experimental and thoroughly cognisant of the aesthetic and intellectual movements of both European and American modernism. She translated Akhmatova, Bruisov, Blok, and Pushkin from the Russian, and substantially reviewed modernist poetry, Ezra Pound in particular.

Salkeld's inclusion in any definition of an Irish canon to date has been nominal rather than substantive, and she is perhaps better known as the mother of Cecil Ffrench Salkeld, the Irish modernist artist, and as grandmother to Beatrice, Brendan Behan's wife, than for her own work. This is in spite of the fact that Salkeld's poetry received glowing contemporaneous reviews, and that she had access to means of production and to a cultural platform unavailable to many of her female contemporaries. A 1934 review of *Hello Eternity*<sup>3</sup> describes her work as an 'entirely new flower to appear on that roadside of Anglo-Irish literature, and as such, to be cherished — and if it draws the traveller a little aside from the main highway of national tradition it may, for that very reason, bring him a peculiar refreshment of wayside scent and bloom'.<sup>4</sup> Evidently, however, her work has not been cherished by history and it has instead remained a wayside flower lost on the roadside of national tradition. This calls to mind Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's observation that Irish women poets' contribution to *logos* is not seen, but is rather considered decorative and auxiliary, as 'wallpaper and begonias'.<sup>5</sup> In the light of Ní Dhomhnaill's commentary on the current reception of women's writing, the terms in which Salkeld's work were originally applauded remain of interest and are of significance for any current reconsideration not only of her poetry, but also of why it continues to be without a place in the mainstream of Irish literary tradition.

Arguably, in a tradition that was painfully divided in the early parts

of the twentieth century, any writer who was neither a revivalist nor a modernist proper was awkwardly positioned — regardless of gender. But it is not simply being positioned uncomfortably between the two that has prevented Salkeld's work from fitting into any model of Irish literary history and Irish literary identity with which we are familiar. Critical models have evolved that can accommodate and understand what was originally advertised as the mutually incompatible positions of nationalism and modernism, as for instance in recent readings and resurrections of the work of Brian Coffey, Thomas McGreevey, and Denis Devlin.<sup>6</sup> Models for theorizing how gender complicates this relationship yet further are evolving, but despite the exemplary feminist scholarship of the past few decades, these models have yet to be hailed as fellow travellers on 'the main highway of national tradition'.

Salkeld's work represents an axis on which modernism, nationalism, and feminism were (and still are) unsettled, and her contemporaneous reviewers struggled with this, shuttling back and forth between describing her work as 'feminine' when it seemed to be more in line with the sort of patriotic pastoral and lyric mode that characterized much Revival writing, and as masculine when it approached the unconventions of modernism. In the same review that noted the 'peculiar refreshment' of her work, she is credited with a pleasing unconsciousness regarding her femaleness and her nationality that saves her from a 'shrill' feministic (sic) and 'national' aspect:

The whole charm and beauty of this book lies in the fact that it expresses something universal about womanhood. Its freedom from the shrillness of emancipatory adolescence, enhances its value not only from a feministic, but also by virtue of time and place, from a national point of view, making it, in its entire unconsciousness of the need for either feministic or national propaganda a valuable piece of true aesthetic propaganda for both causes.<sup>7</sup>

Salkeld's work is approved of because it appears to embrace the quietism of 'true aesthetic propaganda' and thus to exemplify a truth that should be self-evident, but not self-articulating. Here, the implied universal truth of womanhood is that woman is most truly and maturely woman when embodying the unconscious, and refusing the performance of self-conscious reflection or self-presentation. In this account, the aesthetic value of Salkeld's writing lies in how well it approaches the condition of the authentic, that is, unconscious, woman; in being 'unmistakably and richly woven of the inexplicit stuff of woman's reaction to life'.<sup>8</sup> Her work succeeds in these terms because it has a 'definitely feminine aspect', but (thankfully) avoids falling 'into

the very snares of feminine expression'.<sup>9</sup> In other words, its potency is not seen to be a result of any skilful manipulation of language to accommodate a vision, but rather depends on a fortunate impressionistic accident.

Given that overt self-consciousness and self-commentary metaphysically distinguished modernist writing from its lyrical predecessors, this review also positions the work of Salkeld outside modernist practices of poetry. Furthermore, although it appears to claim aesthetic truth for her work on the basis that it resists this aspect of modernism, the review shares with modernist procedures a critical manoeuvre with regard to gender. The most influential proponents of international modernism theorized that both the intellect and the intent and amalgamating imagination needed for the production of excellent modernist artefacts were masculine. This is clearly evident in W.B. Yeats's gendered understanding of his own transition from early lyricism to his self-styled brand of modernist writing. He remarked that his 'work ha[d] got more masculine. It has more salt in it', and contrasted this to his earlier work where there had been 'an exaggeration of sentiment and sentimental beauty which [he has] come to think unmanly'.<sup>10</sup> The gendering of the modernist intellect as masculine is also illustrated in John Crowe Ransom's essay 'The Woman Poet', in which his observations about Edna St Vincent Millay are understood to extend across her sex. Ransom describes 'the limitation of Miss Millay's poetry thus:

If I must express this in a word, I still feel obliged to say it is her lack of intellectual interest. It is that which the male reader misses in her poetry, even though he may acknowledge the authenticity of the interest which is there. I used a conventional symbol, which I hope was not objectionable, when I phrased this lack of hers: deficiency in masculinity.<sup>11</sup>

This over-compensatory masculinization of the 'intellect' by male modernists is in part a symptom of the suspicion in which literary men were held, for their 'masculinity' was questionable, as 'men of letters'. Ford Madox Ford acknowledged that literary London regarded a man of letters as 'something less than a man',<sup>12</sup> and that such a man is 'at least effeminate if not a decent kind of eunuch'.<sup>13</sup> This over-compensatory hyper-masculinism, a defence against the prevailing ideology of the war hero, reverberates in the critical vocabulary that has grown up around modernist and post-modernist writing. This vocabulary revolves around the ascertaining of the level of a poet's control, courage, self-awareness, intent, and ability to synthesize diverse and often opposing metaphysical and aesthetic practices and

conventions, all of which are tested by measuring the extent to which the form, or body, of the poem is tight, angular, spare, hard, and well-managed: as such an implicit standard whereby a masculinist mastery of passive or feminized form has been established that continues to consider its own gendering of attributes and functions unimportant.

The reception of Salkeld's work therefore was not simply caught on the axis of the Revival and modernism, but also was and is affected by the gendering of the Revival as feminized, and the modern, as masculine, and further complicated by the masculinization of voice and intellect and the feminization of form or body of the text. The critical success of Salkeld's early writing was of the same tenor as that enjoyed by Marianne Moore: both women's work was singled out as 'exceptional' among women, feminine without betraying itself as having been written by a 'self-conscious' woman. By contrast the critical reception that Salkeld's work received in the 1950s appears, on a first reading, to be markedly different to that which it received in the 1930s, but in fact both types of criticism operate upon the same underlying logic: that self-conscious expression compromises a woman's 'true womanhood'. The 1934 review of *Hello Eternity* believed her poetry's excellence to be a result of its being woven into her 'womanhood', whereas Salkeld's 1954 volume, *Experiment in Error*, was praised for the avoidance of any such misfortune through emphasizing her possession of a self-conscious intellect adequate to maintaining poetic hardness. This is evident in Pearse Hutchinson's review of it:

A really soft sonnet is, almost by definition (in English anyway) a really bad poem. Sonnets must be tough and spry. Softness must be kept far away from the word go; otherwise, the harder idea, which it was hoped, would make up for or counterpoint the soft, is likely to be postponed till the fifteenth line. This no doubt, is one reason why Blanaid Salkeld is so successful with and so fond of the sonnet form . . . The final impression is of an unusual compactness, a most un-mediterranean clip and thrust.<sup>14</sup>

He goes on to praise the 'precision' that 'attends a frequent relation between titles and imagery', and notes that although her poems have 'no dearth of abstract words, a concrete — but dry — image always comes in'.<sup>15</sup> Hutchinson's sentiments are echoed by the reviewer of *Experiment in Error* for *The Dublin Magazine*, who calls it the 'most climatic of Blanaid Salkeld's writings to date' characterized by 'metaphysical wrestling, wry humour, self-awareness of a highly developed kind'.<sup>16</sup> The reviewer also comments that *Hello Eternity*<sup>17</sup> 'showed this writer to have a vibrant lyrical sense, controlled by a metaphysical turn of the mind'.<sup>18</sup> The same review notes that 'echoes, somehow, continue, after one has put the book down', and this, the

reviewer takes as a 'good sign' that indeed Salkeld's 'latest poetry will endure'.<sup>19</sup> This review attempted to set up a trajectory from the past into the present for Salkeld's work, by charting a journey from early stirrings of lyrical control into full self-conscious mastery of form. This mapping of her poetic journey did not however succeed in securing her an enduring, or indeed any, place in the national canon, for it partakes of a value system that respects masculinized attributes as a sign of aesthetic excellence. A woman's writing, when aesthetically evaluated in terms of the extent to which it conforms to or resists any prevailing ideology of the feminine, will necessarily be under-read in a tradition that mystifies and redefines woman according to its own needs. The reviewer called her 'a born poet',<sup>20</sup> but Salkeld's speaker in 'Limbo'<sup>21</sup> describes herself as 'not yet delivered of the past',<sup>22</sup> as if prophesizing that, given the gendered terms governing critical discourses, her work could not be birthed into a place in a national canon.

This is a tantalizing invitation for a contemporary critic to practice some midwifery and bring Salkeld's poetic consciousness into representative being. However, there are a number of problems attaching to the recovery of unacknowledged work of writers from the past, the most vexing of which is the issue of the existing frameworks into which they do not comfortably fit. The same perplexed dynamic between masculinity, femininity, nationalism, and modernism that prevailed in Salkeld's time continues today, in terms of situating women's writing, both past and present, in relation to the main body of Irish studies, the twenty-first century's version of the 'main highway of literary tradition'. Delivery can only be facilitated by scrutinizing, and by altering, the terms that govern this tradition today.

### **The Ingenuity of Tradition**

The structure of influence that predominantly underwrites western mainstream literary traditions relies on the oedipal model. This means of structuring chronology and tracing and mapping influence necessarily casts women into an object position within the model of transmission between father and son. In this paradigm, the woman, whether she be mother or daughter, assures the subjectivity of the son's and father's presence. Because only one representative place is given to both mother and daughter, which Luce Irigaray describes as 'the place of the mother',<sup>23</sup> a separation that allows intergenerational symbolic recognition of the other cannot take place. Intergenerational relations between fathers and sons, or even mothers and sons, function as metaphors of specific narratives of political and literary history, but the mother-daughter relationship is not familiar to us as a metaphor for any *collective* fiction of historical or national identity. This is depicted in Eavan Boland's poem 'The Lost Land'. It enumerates 'all of the names

[she] knows for a lost land:/ *Ireland. Absence. Daughter,*<sup>24</sup> drawing attention to the collapse of mother into Ireland, of mother into daughter wherein the possibility of mother-daughter symbolization is lost.

Arguably, feminist literary historiography has been primarily involved in the recovery of the lost object that represents the mother-daughter compound, and thus is in danger of replicating the logic of the oedipal model, which privileges a mode of intergenerational transmission that actually *needs* the absence of the woman-to-woman intergenerationality for its own continuing. This necessary retrieval has often been called upon to justify itself in terms of the work's relevance as an antecedent according to the values already established in a self-promoting tradition. However, accepting the terms already set as the means by which a lost work may be validated disallows the potential such work has to alter the model of tradition already in place.

The attempt to find fitting foremothers thus unwittingly partakes in a model of tradition that forecloses the possibility of symbolization of women as more than objects, for it searches for a phallic model within a chronological 'tradition' that privileges a linear understanding of influence. Margaret Kelleher draws attention to this tendency in her essay 'Writing Irish Women's Literary History':

Asserting legitimacy for the present from the presences or absences of the past is very common in the Irish context; many of the recent retrievals of lesser-known Irish women writers are presented in these terms. Similarly, metaphors of diving into wrecks, recovering the treasures of a lost Atlantis, of a tradition submerged but intact, recur all too frequently; as Tharu and Lolita have sharply observed, 'notions of loss and exclusion are always underwritten by a dream of wholeness or completeness' whereby 'a lost or excluded object can be recognized when it is found, and restored to the place from which it was missed'. This dream of completeness may lead us perilously close to the assumption that for every gap in the literary record there is a body of literary experience denied *and* potentially recoverable.<sup>25</sup>

By considering the work of previous writers as intact objects, such criticism continues to read the work as an object and to invoke a model that needs its object use for itself. In the classical oedipal triangle, a woman represents, in her status as an 'object', the 'absence' that guarantees the presence of others, and thus to focus on the object status of woman's writing is, in psychoanalytical terms at least, to continue to invest in dearth and discontinuities. That is, it is to continue to invest in the dominant model of tradition that already institutionally encodes such discontinuities in support of women's writing.<sup>26</sup>

To treat of woman's difference from the object, critical questions must not only be asked of her work, but also of the very tradition to which she represents an adjunct. The difference of woman cannot be answered, or properly asked, warns Kelleher, unless the values accruing to her work within such a tradition are attended to:

What are the 'differences' of women's writings remains in this regard a valid, and productive question, not alone in relation to the dynamics at work within the literary text but also, and perhaps even more so, in relation to 'the meanings, values and effects' which have accrued and continue to accrue to works authored by women.<sup>27</sup>

Arguably, the primary value attaching to the work of writers such as Salkeld's in the literary tradition as it stands is loss. The continued investment in the trope of loss functions to further the fallacy that women's writing and its topography are inherently problematic. In 'The Influence of Absences: Eavan Boland and the Silenced History of Irish Women's Poetry', Anne Fogarty comments that 'the unwritten history of Irish women's poetry from the 1930's onwards . . . even in absentia . . . succeeds in casting a shadow over and shaping later pronouncements about the thwarted nature of a female literary tradition'.<sup>28</sup>

Crucially then, in order to refute this belief about the 'thwarted nature of a female literary tradition', we must ask how the existing tradition and the critical and interpretational modes of thinking that substantiate it are intimately connected. Seamus Deane's Field Day pamphlet, 'Heroic Styles: the Tradition of an Idea',<sup>29</sup> identifies how the operations of tradition itself become a 'conditioning factor' of our interpretative practices:

In a culture like ours, 'tradition' is not easily taken to be an established reality. We are conscious that it is an invention, a narrative which ingeniously finds a way of connecting a selected series of historical figures or themes in such a way that the pattern or plot revealed to us becomes a conditioning factor in our reading of Literary works — such as *The Tower* or *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>30</sup>

The patterns and plots of this tradition have become a 'conditioning factor' of how we read literary works, to the extent that a considerable body of our critical output concerns itself with the examination of the Irish subject, of Irish identity, as constructed and understood in oedipal terms. In this pattern, woman's writerly subjectivity can only be understood to conform to, or resist, the place of the mother, earning her either a footnote as 'well-behaved' in the tradition, or a bad reputation as its haunting Other, lost to canonical representation. Thus, the notion

of subjectivity privileged by the oedipal model structures the vision of history and tradition that informs canon-production and tradition-making, and the recovery of women's texts must always struggle with the primacy of this model in conditioning the ways in which we read.

This struggle is made all the more difficult by the means with which such tradition-making 'naturalizes' itself and disguises its own underlying structure. Deane's analysis draws attention to this by identifying the lack of a named speaker of the narrative of tradition: it 'ingeniously' finds a way to reproduce itself, through such connections. Its real ingenuity is in its very disingenuousness, for, by refusing to name and situate its speaker it can appeal to the quality of myth — a structure of narrative which resists analysis of its historicized and contextualized speaking subject. The only narrative position identified is that of tradition itself. The subject who tells it is obscured, the narrative is itself attributed agency, and, as such, it takes on the authority of an ancestral voice. Thus, the tradition becomes (dis)ingenuously self-perpetuating through dehistoricization and through appeal to myth. The autochthonic manoeuvres of this tradition are entirely in keeping with the oedipal model it supports; the self-birthing father-son dyad is powerfully woven into the oedipal myth as Jean-François Lyotard notes in his provocative discussion of the differences between repression and foreclosure in 'Figure Foreclosed'.<sup>31</sup> After all, in the oedipal model of transmission, the mother is only by name a mother, for she does not herself regenerate; rather she is the matter through which the son 'births himself' in Agon with the father — thus perpetuating the myth of the new critical Great Man, or the modernist hero-son's originality and disjunctive genius. The mother is not simply repressed, but also foreclosed, as she is nominally important to the version of history that privileges father-son relations.<sup>32</sup> She is both 'within' and 'without' this tradition: inside it as necessary matter, the footnote in the margins, and outside it in her seemingly unrepresentable difference from her object use.

A model that allowed for this oedipal archetype (which does perform a necessary psychic operation, but is not the *only* psychic necessity required for socialization) yet enlarged its terms so that the oedipal moment was not fetishized as the primary mode of achieving identity, could provide for a number of key refigurations of shared symbolic spaces. In the psychoanalytical accounts of identity usually favoured by literary criticism, namely classical Freudian and Lacanian models, the pre-oedipal period is fantasized as a time when mother and child exist in a symbiotic state and only become differentiated by the oedipal crisis, when the mother gains symbolic significance thereafter as the (non-) phallic mother. An alternative model would provide for the reconsideration of the pre-oedipal period as meaningful

and historicizable, and would thus allow for a single symbolic space for women to be replaced with multiple symbolic occasions. This could bring into realization Irigaray's vision of a more just society where 'women were not forever competing for the unique place occupied by the mother', where 'women could differentiate themselves from the mother, and so that women were not reduced to the maternal function'.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, acknowledging that pre-oedipally both mother and child experience each other as separate and relate in numerous subject-object permutations allows for displacing the primacy of the Oedipus complex in establishing historicizable identity. These myriad pre-oedipal relationships are not visible within oedipal accounts of identity, in much the same way that the pre-oedipal past of 'modern Ireland' is overshadowed by the iconographic figure of the phallic Mother Ireland who has popularly birthed the modern state. By venturing into the mists of the state's pre-oedipal past (which in psychoanalytical terms is contiguous to, as well as previous to, post-oedipal experience), literary historians and archivists can set about recovering writers not already *seen* as having any importance or influence. This reversal of the usual chronology of anxious influence would not be to attempt, as Fogarty writes, to 'restore a false unity to Irish women's poetry nor to initiate a spurious, reconciliatory dialogue between the various fragmented and diverse facets of this history that somehow transcends its many silences and elisions'.<sup>34</sup> Nor would it mean recovering such work as intact objects. Instead it would be to suggest as Fogarty does that 'the *oeuvre* of the contemporary woman poet can "bear witness" to a rich heritage that has for so much of the twentieth century been unacknowledged'.<sup>35</sup>

### **Bearing Witness**

Boland's much quoted lines that 'women have moved from being the subjects and objects of Irish poetry to being the authors of them',<sup>36</sup> gesture towards what is needed to bear witness to such unacknowledged works: a critical emphasis on subjects and objects. An accent on complex subject-object relationships is already much in evidence in recent scholarship, most notably in the model deployed by Declan Kiberd's ground-breaking work, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*.<sup>37</sup> The theoretical aspect of Kiberd's work that consciously recognizes the subject and object positions involved in Othering and stereotyping has attracted little explicit attention; despite this however, it has implicitly formed the theoretical backbone of a considerable body of recent criticism that has allowed for the re-reading of Irish authored texts to reveal ironies and subversions that promise liberation from 'objectified' positions. This mode of reading

provides a means of bearing witness to subjects doubly inflected in past and present as object *and* as subject. Indeed, it is this critical awareness of doubleness, of being both subject and object, that Salkeld's work needs in order for its rich experimentalism to become apparent. However, to simply bear witness to any inherent doubleness of her work is in itself not sufficient.

Like the work of many women writers of the early Revival, when read in the terms of the dominant tradition, Salkeld's early work seems to be sentimentally nostalgic and to resist encountering the political difficulties of the day through recourse to pastoral sublimation rehearsed in conventional poetic forms. Accordingly, the aesthetic, and gendered, values of Salkeld's contemporaneous review culture meant that the ironic possibilities of her work were significantly overlooked.<sup>38</sup> For instance, the poems 'Form'<sup>39</sup> and 'Every Tight Trick'<sup>40</sup> explore her relation to poetic conventions and histories and her place in them, or as the case may be, out of them. This characteristic playfulness becomes most obvious in her final volume, *Experiment in Error*,<sup>41</sup> published in 1955. *Experiment in Error* represents a powerful challenge to the modernist orthodoxy of feminized form and masculinized voice predicated on a fetishized notion of the singularity of the subject. Salkeld was not unaware of the constructed condition of formal gender roles. In a foreword to translations of Akhmatova published in *The Dublin Magazine*, Salkeld draws attention with some irony to Janko Lavrin's assumption that no man could have written Akhmatova's poetry.<sup>42</sup> Salkeld was also much preoccupied with form, and in contrast to her 1934 reviewer's understanding of her, did a lot more than simply let it 'emerge',<sup>43</sup> rather she parodically embodies it in *Experiment in Error* as an investigation of her own object positioning within the main culture.

The speaker of the poems dually operates both as the object of modernist poetics, and as a subject whose presence is dangerous to the practice of very poetry that she writes. The theme reiterated throughout *Experiment in Error* is that she 'shall go dual all [her] life'.<sup>44</sup> This duality is first noticeable in the way in which she affectionately distances herself from the poetic culture in which she writes whilst still claiming her place as a poet. In the poem 'As For Me', published first in *The Bell* in 1951,<sup>45</sup> and reprinted in *Experiment in Error* in 1955, Salkeld assumes an ironic, playful posture in relation to the elliptical, stylistic over-determinations of high modernism, to debates about 'antiquarians and moderns' in Irish letters, to mysticism, and to archetypal criticism:

Lapsed Latinity and half lucid Greek  
Here and there helping, with the common root  
Under us of verse — far away to shoot

From the particular, is all we seek.  
 This age forswears, however fair it speak,  
 The personal in art, and would dilute  
 Atom in element, or court dispute  
 With errant ghosts of modern and antique.  
 A dream can fling up words, scarce to be found  
 In the dictionary — to point a quest  
 After buried treasure. Old men, they say  
 Sleep ill. They could well use their thoughts till day  
 Sieving the far-come sands of their unrest  
 For wonders. But, as for me, I sleep sound.<sup>46</sup>

The lines 'Old men, they say / sleep ill' recall Yeats's *Responsibilities*, and this poem teasingly suggests that such old men, preoccupied with the futile task of 'sieve[ing] the far-come sands of their unrest / for wonders', cannot see the possibilities outside of their own well-worn paradigm. The poem ends with the speaker asserting that 'as for me, I sleep sound', signalling her ability to dream into representation the marvels available outside the parameters of the sieve. Here the dream is presented as a theatre for discovering the 'buried treasure' of the difference of woman from the object. The dream after all is where repressed contents are symbolized, and the words that it can fling up are 'scarce to be found / In the dictionary', that is, are not part of the symbolic order as it stands.

The literary self-consciousness with which she seeks a form adequate to expressing 'scarce' words and wonders is lost on her critical biographer, Fred Johnson, who wrote 'it is difficult to determine what rhythm, if any, she had in mind'.<sup>47</sup> So although Salkeld fulfilled the criteria of that 'rare-creature', the poet critic, and wrote professionally, Johnson sees her as lacking an imagination intent enough to be anything other than amateur, describing her poems as 'the sensitive attempts of a highly intelligent amateur'.<sup>48</sup> As a result, he misreads her experimentalism as slapdash incompetence:

She is usually committed to rhyme, but her sense of rhythm is erratic. Even in a traditional and highly restrictive form like the sonnet, she seems to think that any ten higgledy-piggledy syllables compose an acceptable line.<sup>49</sup>

This refusal to recognize an overarching and purposeful mind managing her work effectively aligns her with T.S. Eliot's definition of the mind of the ordinary man, rather than that of the poet.<sup>50</sup> Yet it is this very division itself, along with the over-fetishized modernist imagination, that Salkeld's work refuses to endorse. Salkeld ironizes her own relation to the notion of the 'intent imagination' in 'Interference':

Hush . . . Who now whistles me up from the clever  
 Torrent, this prelude to the dark persuasion  
 Of the abyss? My first pulse of assent  
 Accorded, I am drawn with strong intent  
 Free of False purgatorial evasion . . .  
 Into my destined hell. Come pain forever!<sup>51</sup>

This poem works on two levels in relation to the 'dark persuasions of the abyss', which represents not only death, but also birth into the abyss of the symbolic unknown — the space outside the oedipally configured symbolic order in which the 'difference of woman' is kept. The abyss of the unknown is not only sought in the future possible tense, but also in the foreclosed past — specifically in the pre-oedipal period which includes the original material birth from the mother's body.

'Limbo',<sup>52</sup> taken from *Experiment in Error*, contrasts the maternal, first birth with the oedipal, second birth. The poem explores how in oedipally configured fantasies of pre-oedipal symbiosis the differences of mother and child are obscured. Such an economy of meaning has only silence available for representing 'we': 'We stammer into silence'.<sup>53</sup> In a prophetic stanza that foreshadows the 'better re-birth' of Salkeld's work from the 'past', the speaker of 'Limbo' speaks as the reversal of the paradoxical sibyl of Boland's 'The Muse Mother', who is 'able to sing the past'.<sup>54</sup> The speaker awaits the midwifery that will deliver her from the past, but that will come to her from 'forward mists':

I am no pilgrim of the past — who bear  
 Dim in my blood  
 Its essence always — hid, awaiting there  
 Better re-birth. So I must smile and peer  
 Into the forward mists, ahead of fear.  
 Retrace my steps — who have no time to waste?  
 I am not yet delivered of the past.  
 In some far cavern — the mist curtain lifting —  
 I would essay to hold my All from drifting  
 Off with the flood.<sup>55</sup>

The lifting of the 'mist curtain' to access the 'far cavern' symbolizes a return to the abyss, a return to material birth, which although the original birth, must paradoxically be journeyed back to, and experienced as rebirth. Hence, the culture that represses its material origins in favour of a myth of linguistic origin will be reborn into the knowledge of pre-oedipal difference. The essence of the foreclosed differences of the pre-oedipal 'past' which the speaker 'bear[s] Dim in [her] blood/', and which is 'hid, awaiting there/Better re-birth', is

elucidated. The 'limbo interlude before re-birth—/ dimly enjoyed'<sup>56</sup> can thus be enjoyed in the full light of representation.

Yet, this illumination remains private to the speaker as the sun/son who provides the light determines the re-telling of what is seen through the auspices of the Oedipus complex. Pre-oedipal twoness is replaced by the duality a woman experiences after the oedipal birth, which is represented here as a caesarean birth: 'I was divided, as by a sharp knife—/Henceforth I shall go dual all my life.'<sup>57</sup> However, only the speaker is aware that she is also subject as well as object, as the culture at large views her through the single lens of her object use. In the oedipal birth, only the child is born into symbolic subjectivity, as the mother's role in supporting the presence of the child through her guaranteeing absence becomes her identifying value.<sup>58</sup> The poem then illustrates how the privileged son/sun takes onto himself the power of giving meaning: 'Colouring, discolouring, he shifts and alters/From Violet sky, to gilt scroll on dull waters.'<sup>59</sup> The speaker's use of the pronoun 'our' signals the obscured and unacknowledged labouring of matter to incarnate such a hero-poet. For it is only 'he', the hero, who is able to 'transcend' to a view in the heavens, a vision that allows him to 'coin' content, to authenticate his own story as the canonical tale worth telling and retelling:

— and when our labours cease  
He stares from heavens of the Antipodes,  
Coining content.<sup>60</sup>

In a critical culture where 'content' is determined by the oedipal son, then the woman's duality, however elegantly or brilliantly it is expressed, cannot be meaningfully recognized. Hence, 'Limbo' also represents the historical hiatus in which the poet's own work is lost, as the unacknowledged pre-oedipal difference of modern Ireland. The critical insufficiency of reading her poetry, that is a result of the critical economy between poet and critic, mediated through the feminized body of a poem holds her work in limbo. This state of arrested expression is further explored in 'Monotony':

Summer is various over lake and whin.  
You keep away still from the battering ram  
Of my monotony. It seems, I am  
All of the one colour — without, within.  
Eternal summer steals back, with its din,  
Its glow, unchanged, down history. Doors slam  
On murders and illicit births. The lamb  
Is called to sacrifice, by the old sin.  
While all the surfaces of every shire

Shift with the fires and shadows of the hour —  
 I've no chameleon quality — no change  
 Visits my stubborn sameness, to derange  
 My proper stiffness. Where shall I find power  
 To overleap blind currents of desire?<sup>61</sup>

On first reading, this poem appears to be about the way in which depression renders everything the same, specifically a reactive depression induced by the absence of an object of desire, with which she is in dialogue. The speaker as the eternal feminine is described in terms of uniformity and immutability: 'All of the one colour — without, within'; 'Eternal, unchanged' ; 'I've no chameleon quality — no change/visits my stubborn sameness.' 'It seems' here works as an invitation to read the poem as 'other' by drawing attention to the object status of the speaker; the speaker is the same 'without, within', when literalized as the primary object, but the configurative 'I am', is preceded and qualified by 'it seems', which announces a split between subject and object. She owns each of the projections: '*my* monotony', '*my* stubborn sameness' and '*my* proper stiffness', but they do not configure her. A crucial distinction is set up between the subjective 'I' and the genitive 'my', bringing the differences between the subject and object into representation. Thus, she only 'seems' to conform to projections of the feminine and the 'proper stiffness' of the phallic mother.

Despite the knowledge that such attributes originate elsewhere, signalled by the use of 'without', she still experiences them as disabling. The modification of 'without' with 'within' signals that these projections can be introjected or internalized to the extent that they become part of how she experiences herself, and thus an impediment to her being in the world. The foreclosure of woman is thus seen to exact a real psychic cost from women. The 'naturalness' of a woman being either 'within' or 'without' is challenged in the following lines, which expose the operations at work in the process of foreclosure:

Eternal summer steals back, with its din,  
 Its glow, unchanged, down history. Doors slam  
 On murders and illicit births. The lamb  
 Is called to sacrifice, by the old sin.

The retrospective glance of oedipal restructuring refuses the differences of historicization to the mythicized pre-oedipal period: 'Eternal summer steals back, with its din,/Its glow, unchanged, down history.' This 'stealing back' of history works here on two levels. In the first instance it 'slam doors' on the representation of the operations of the Oedipus complex: 'Doors slam, on murders and illicit births.'<sup>62</sup>

These oedipally configured aesthetics slam the door on the revelation of the subtending matricidal unconscious, an unconscious that yet informs the resurrectional aspects of the new critical dogma of transcendence. In the second place 'stealing back' means a revision of the oedipal version: opening the slammed door to reveal how the birth or realization of the masculinist poetic mind through the feminized body of the poem is illicit, as it depends on the effective 'murder' of her subjectivity.

The experience of representing another's being at the expense of her own is expressed as the paralytic monotony of immutability, occasioned and kept in place by blind currents of desire. These are the very blind currents represented by Tiresias in *The Wasteland*,<sup>63</sup> the prototypical modernist figure in whom a woman's body is explicitly formalized and arranged in hierarchical relation to a masculinized 'mind'. The query 'where shall I find the power to overleap blind currents of desire', expresses her need to transcend the monotony of being this form. The use of the infinitive 'to overleap' expresses the semi-completion of transcending the condition of form, to self-conscious expression. The infinitive is a verb that expresses no tense, and this is therefore an action cut off mid-act. Moreover, overleap is a reversal of the phrasal verb, to leap over, wherein the usual contingent order of the verb 'leap' and the preposition 'over' in phrasal conjunction is reversed to form a compound verb. Movement is thus frozen by this compounded reversal of the usual chronology of the phrasal relationship in 'overleap'.

The poet, through the use of the configuring subjective 'I am', and the transitional 'it seems' begins to transcend the condition of feminized form by speaking from 'without' form, but *within* the poem, within another understanding of form. Thus the woman's perspective — whose difference from form is 'murdered' in the 'illicit births' of the modernist poet-hero — is actually included in the form that within modernist axiomatics is supposed to 'sacrifice' her. This vocal 'transcendence' of the form is arrested in 'overleap' and cannot be completed until such a time as it can *also* be recognized from without the poem — that is, by a reading economy able to recognize expressions of the difference of woman outside of object use. Thus the blind currents of desire refer also to the blind currents of *another's* desire, namely the desire of the blind poetic visionary Tiresias and his correlative ideal critic for one another. This blind desire overleaps the matter of the poem, and overlooks the presence of the woman.

The feminized body/the poem exists as the object through which the desired relationship between ideal critic and poet is realized. Poetry traditions are built on the back of this agonistic interchange, explaining why for the most part, women poets have remained outside the canon,

as the feminine as form operates to earth such currents of desire. Salkeld, as a female author aware of the doubleness of her presence, disturbs this economy, but the power that she seeks to complete the transcendence of form into voice, resides elsewhere, without herself, for 'to overleap' is also a prepositional phrase modifying 'power', and:

No change  
Visits my stubborn sameness, to derange  
My proper stiffness.

And thus, in order for her to become subject, the terms for reading her must supply the 'without' to this arrested act, so that it can be completed. Salkeld's poetic subjectivity cannot fully transcend the condition of form until a critical economy exists that visits her work to 'derange' her proper stiffness, releasing her from the role of phallic mother through introducing the supposed madness of the woman outside the symbolic order of tradition. The foreclosure which demands the madness 'without', and the stiffness 'within' of woman is illustrated, thus keeping Salkeld's work true to the modernist impulse to find a form that both sums and summons up experience. It is properly a 'poem of the mind' that is, in Wallace Stevens's words, in 'the act of finding/What will suffice'.<sup>64</sup> In this case, the poem is the enactment of the experience of being under-read. The poem of *this* mind is in the act of finding a form sufficient to demonstrating how the blindness of the Oedipus complex to its own gendering, renders its critical praxis so insufficient to reading the poem, that it actually arrests the poet's act to find what will suffice. Finally, the verb 'overleap' means both to omit and to leap beyond what one intends: to leap too far. Until now, Salkeld's leap has been a step too far for a tradition that needs her loss to do its own work; it is time, however, to deliver her from the past. The time is long overdue for Blanaid Salkeld to enjoy representational companionship with her fellow travellers on the 'main highway of a national tradition' revised and restructured in the light of her own contribution to it.

#### NOTES

1. Blanaid Salkeld, *Experiment in Error* (Kent: The Hand and Flower Press, 1955), p. 21.
2. Salkeld's work was first brought to my attention through Gerardine Meaney's research for *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Volumes IV and V: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002).
3. Blanaid Salkeld, *Hello Eternity* (London: J.M. Dent, 1933).
4. Review of *Hello Eternity*, in *The Dublin Magazine*, 9.3 (July–September 1934), 80-1.
5. Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, 'Comhrá, with a Foreword and Afterword by Laura O'Connor', *The Southern Review*, 31.3 (1995), 581-614, p. 599.
6. *Modernism and Ireland: Poetry of the 1930s*, edited by Patricia Coughlan and Alex

- Davis (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), constructs and explores frameworks, both in its editorial mission and in individual essays, for rethinking writers considered problematic with regard to a national tradition in a national context.
7. *The Dublin Magazine*, 9.3 (1934), 80-1.
  8. *The Dublin Magazine*, 9.3 (1934), 80-1.
  9. *The Dublin Magazine*, 9.3 (1934), 80-1.
  10. Quoted in David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (Cambridge: Belknap Press and Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 581.
  11. John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (New York and London: Charles Scribner, 1938), p. 98.
  12. K.K. Ruthven, *Ezra Pound as a Literary Critic* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 102.
  13. Ian F.A. Bell, *Critic as Scientist: The Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 87.
  14. Pearse Hutchinson, *Irish Writing*, 34 (Spring 1956), 60-1, p. 60.
  15. Hutchinson, p. 61.
  16. *The Dublin Magazine*, 31.1 (January–March 1956), 63-5, p. 63.
  17. Salkeld, *Hello Eternity* (London: J.M. Dent, 1933).
  18. *The Dublin Magazine*, 31.1 (1956), p. 65.
  19. *The Dublin Magazine*, 31.1 (1956), p. 65.
  20. *The Dublin Magazine*, 31.1 (1956), p. 65.
  21. Salkeld, *Experiment*, pp. 20-1.
  22. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 21.
  23. Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 80.
  24. Eavan Boland, *The Lost Land* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 38.
  25. Margaret Kelleher, 'Writing Irish Women's Literary History', *Irish Studies Review*, 9.1 (Spring 2001), 5-14, pp. 9-10.
  26. Kelleher's essay draws attention to the ways in which such discontinuities configure institutional attitudes to women's writing through erratic funding and *ad hoc* provisions for specific posts dedicated to women's writing; see Kelleher, p. 11.
  27. Kelleher, p. 11.
  28. Anne Fogarty "'The Influence of Absences": Eavan Boland and the Silenced History of Irish Women's Writing', *Colby Quarterly*, 35.4 (December 1999), 256-275, p. 257.
  29. Seamus Deane, *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea*, Field Day Pamphlet No. 4 (Derry: Field Day, 1984).
  30. Deane, p. 6.
  31. Jean-François Lyotard writes:  

The horsemen who founded the city brought with them a myth which Levi-Strauss incorporates into the Oedipus story, because this fragment is essential to any understanding of it . . . The warrior race sprang from the earth armed and armoured, but without parents; they were not *born*. This is the myth of autochthony. It might be seen as representing the predominance of the maternal theme, if it were true that the earth were a universal substitute for *mother*. The truth is probably the reverse; the important point is that it excludes the parental dialectic. Here we have a myth in which the father-son relationship simply disappears. If we replace this myth in its historical and cultural context, it is tempting to add that the religious contribution of the invaders from the north disappears because it is no longer mediated by the maternal relationship, that what the invaders are expressing by means of this myth is the fact that, unlike the people they dominate, that they are born of themselves. We can see in this configuration an erasure of the female element, a denial of castration, in other words of foreclosure. And it is no accident that the foreclosed returns to Oedipus, son of Laius, son of Laddacus, in the truly hallucinatory figure of Jocasta.

Jean-François Lyotard, 'Figure Foreclosed', *The Lyotard Reader*, edited by Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 69-111, p. 76.
  32. A recent example of this is evident in the film *Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese,

- 2002, US), which aspires to the condition of a foundational narrative of Irish American New Yorkers. The plot involves a young man seeking revenge for his murdered father, by murdering his Anglo-identified killer, and bringing back to power the gang led by his Irish-identified father. Effectively then the two fathers represent competing traditions, and the protagonist's mother never appears nor is she mentioned. The only significant female role, played by Cameron Diaz, serves the purposes of the mediating body between the protagonist and the murderer (who had become a surrogate father), that is, she operates in 'place of the mother'.
33. Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 88-9.
  34. Fogarty, p. 257.
  35. Fogarty, p. 258.
  36. Eavan Boland, *A Kind of Scar* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989), p. 6.
  37. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage 1995).
  38. The work of complex and interesting writers such as Katharine Tynan, Eva Gore-Booth, Nora Hopper, Ethna Carbery, Susan Langstaff Mitchell, Mary Devenport O'Neill, to mention but a few, has been under-read in a similar way because of oppositional gendering of the kind discussed throughout this essay.
  39. Salkeld, *The Dublin Magazine*, 23.3 (July–September 1948), p. 7.
  40. Salkeld, *The Dublin Magazine*, 24.3 (July–September 1949), p. 3.
  41. Salkeld, *Experiment in Error* (Kent: The Hand and Flower Press, 1955).
  42. Salkeld, 'Anna Akhmatova', *The Dublin Magazine*, 8.4 (October–December 1933), pp. 51-5.
  43. 'It is not perfection of form we look for or miss in them, but a soft emergence of changing mood brushed lightly in, in freshed (sic) coloured words.' See *The Dublin Magazine*, 9.3 (July–September 1934), 80-81, p. 80.
  44. Salkeld, *Experiment*, pp. 20-1.
  45. Salkeld, 'As For Me', *The Bell*, 16.3 (December 1951), p. 16.
  46. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 29.
  47. Fred Johnson, *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, editor-in-chief, Robert Hogan (London: Aldwych Press, 1996), p. 1080 (the entries in both the 1979 and 1986 editions of the dictionary are the same).
  48. Johnson, p. 1080.
  49. Johnson, p. 1080.
  50. In 'The Metaphysical Poets' Eliot wrote: 'A poet's mind ... is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza and these experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.' See T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, edited by Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 64.
  51. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 5.
  52. Salkeld, *Experiment*, pp. 20-1.
  53. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 20.
  54. Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), pp. 92-3.
  55. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 21.
  56. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 20.
  57. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 20.
  58. The privileging of the oedipal moment as the primary birth into identity effectively endorses the child's perspective and the notions of a singular self and consigns the difference of the mother from her object use to the symbolic wilderness. As Jessica Benjamin notes: 'Although the oedipal achievement of complementarity is supposed by the theory to represent mature acceptance of difference and limits — being only one or the other — it actually harbours the unconscious narcissistic omnipotence of being "the one and only"'. See Benjamin, *Like Objects, Love Subjects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p.105. Benjamin continues: 'Once we have recognised the finesse in the

oedipal manoeuvre, the point is not to imagine a position completely independent of oedipal complementarity, which is no more possible than to eliminate all omnipotence. The point is rather to expose it and the myths to which it gives rise. To challenge the concealed omnipotence in the heterosexual structure — its principle of exclusivity and invidious comparison is not to abrogate difference or to institute defensive notions of being everything. It is rather, to integrate the pre-oedipal identifications of boys with mother and of girls with father as identifications with difference, which sufficiently modify the sense of loss, envy, and concomitant repudiation' (p. 105).

59. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 20.
60. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 20.
61. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 11.
62. Salkeld, *Experiment*, p. 11.
63. T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland and Other Poems* (New York: Harvest, 1962), pp. 27-46.
64. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 239.