

**Women's Modernism in Peripheral Catholic Europe:  
The Poetry of Blanaid Salkeld and Concha Méndez**

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**Abstract**

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Hindered by both the gendering of modernism and entrenched patriarchal Catholic notions of gender, the Irish poet Blanaid Salkeld and the Spanish poet Concha Méndez have been respectively erased from their national canon or only partially accepted. Over twenty years later, Bonnie Kime Scott's seminal work, *Gender of Modernism*, arguing to reread women poets under a broader definition of modernism is still relevant to the recovery of women's modernism in Ireland and Spain. Additionally, because of the period in which these two poets wrote (from the mid 1920s to the end of the 1930s), their modernism is of special interest because it involves a feminist critique of state, institution and Catholic patriarchal hierarchy. Their feminist projects (intended or not) are politicized in significant and unexpected ways, and take on a strong political and aesthetic sense of urgency as their respective governments' contestation of modernity had direct impacts on women's basic freedoms and liberties. What we find in the recovery of both Irish and Spanish women's modernism is that it is not simply about trying to find narrative or political alternatives to their male counterparts, or even just about revising the marriage plot. The work of these poets confronts issues between female autonomy and agency

and the conservative desire to forcefully shape the constructs of nation, state and family. Our literary histories are limited by national and stylistic boundaries, and these can blind us to other important things. For both Salkeld and Méndez, their independent vocation and position as poets, giving voice to a marginal female experience, create unease in the literary world and complicate their full integration in to the national canon. Also, there are fundamental questions of institutional powers of authority shared between Ireland and Spain that reveal a comparable social situation for both women. These include the rise of right-wing conservatism, based on fascist principles, the politicization of gender, and the inextricable ties between the Catholic Church and the government, all of which help shape similar experiences and reactions in their poetry and allow for new modernist readings beyond stylistic and national limitations.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving family and many friends. Particularly to my late mother Shirley who always believed in my ability to finish and regretfully missed it by one day, and to my father who has supported me every step of the way. I must also thank my dear friends who have been my family away from home, Suzanne Goodman, Kristin Ramsdale, Meg McFarland, Paloma Borreguero and Gus Perez, who never gave up believing I could finish this, and who have spent countless hours over these years helping me overcome my doubts, cheering me on and being my number one supporters. You never tired of me and you never left my side.

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**Women's Modernism in Peripheral Catholic Europe:**  
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**Introduction**

In 1990 Bonnie Kime Scott's *Gender of Modernism* was a groundbreaking anthology that inaugurated the study of British and American women's modernism. This landmark intervention into modernist studies showed what is now well known, women's modernism does not necessarily mean the same thing as it does for men's modernism, and what constitutes formal or thematic innovation in writing can be very different for women. The significant impact of this study in the subsequent decades is seen in the increased scholarship in different female and feminist writers from British and American traditions, though Scott notes that the "scholars have been investigating the marginalized archive of women writers" "[s]ince the early 1970s" (2). It is, however, a very different picture once you turn your attention to the peripheral Catholic countries of Ireland and Spain. The speed of even the basic recovery or reassessment efforts of female modernist poets has been shockingly slow. This issue became glaringly obvious during my research for my MA essay on Mary O'Malley, a contemporary Irish poet where I first encountered the deep-rooted issues of canon erasure faced by women poets.

The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing was published in 1991 in Ireland. In three volumes, in over 4,000 pages, only five women writers' names appear in the "Contemporary Writing Section" between 1900 and 1988, this includes writers writing in English or Irish (Ní Dhomhnaill 1291). The local and international reaction to the continued neglect of women from the national canon in modern day Ireland was one of outrage. This led to the commissioning of initially just one volume dedicated to women, but by 2002, two volumes documenting Irish women's history and culture were published. In its introduction, one of the editors points to



something that underlines an important difference between the recovery of Irish women's writing (and Spanish too, for that matter) and that of their American and British counterparts: "In the 1970s and 1980s... the project of defending and redefining Ireland did not accommodate the reevaluation and recovery of women's words and history" (Bourke, IV xxxiv). Instead, both Ireland and Spain were looking to shed their anti-modern and anti-progress reputations, and grant women some of the basic freedoms and liberties denied them over the last forty or so years.

Despite the Field Day fiasco, by the end of the 1990s there was a general consensus that women's poetry "was experiencing a renaissance" "in the publishing houses and the bookstores" (Moloney 4). Yet in a collection of essays published in 2003 (a year after the women's Field Day volumes) about Irish women writers and poets, Caitriona Moloney observes that this "renaissance" did not translate or was not reflected "in academia, literary criticism, and journalism, [where] women writers still [were] not get[ting] anthologized, critiqued, or reviewed with the same attention as men" (Moloney 4). The exception belongs to four contemporary women poets whose names appear over and over again in anthologies, articles and reviews, these are: Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. I had not considered the MA essay on O'Malley a recovery project, but it became clear that little to no attention was given to poets outside of the four named, and once theirs was mentioned in an anthology, review, etc... it appeared not much more needed to be said about Irish women's writing. More recently, *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry* was published in 2010, and the blurb on the Harvard University Press website states, "never before has there been a single-volume anthology of modern Irish poetry so significant and groundbreaking.... Collected here is a comprehensive representation of Irish poetic achievement in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries." Only nine women are represented out of over fifty, and there are no women named

prior to Boland, McGuckian, Ní Dhomhnaill or Ní Chuilleanáin. This “comprehensive representation” furthers the misguided belief that no woman of significant import wrote poetry before the 1960s. The other five names suggest an attempt to reflect the “renaissance” of contemporary women poets. The absence of any female modernist poet demonstrates the importance of this recovery effort for Irish studies.

There is no identical example like the Field Day controversy in Spain. However, contemporary Spanish women poets are experiencing the same anthology issues as their Irish counterparts. Echoing Caitriona Moloney’s complaint over the disconnect between the “renaissance” of women writers publishing and their appearance in anthologies, María Rosal states in her introduction to her 2006 anthology *Con voz propia: Estudio y antología comentada de la poesía escrita por mujeres, 1970-2005*:

“Boom de la poesía escrita por mujeres.”... Todos parecen estar de acuerdo en que una de las características fundamentales de la literatura de los últimos veinticinco años del siglo XX es la abundancia de poesía escrita por mujeres. Sin embargo, ..., cuando los profesores y profesoras de literatura se acercan a los manuales ..., se encuentran con la sorpresa de que ese boom se ha desinflado a la hora de ponerle nombres y lo que era una anunciada masiva presencia femenina se queda en unas cuantas poetas –muy pocas– con nombre y apellidos que se codean con sus compañeros varones.... Si, efectivamente, son muchas las mujeres que escriben y publican en las últimas décadas del siglo XX, ¿por qué sus nombres son silenciados? ¿Por qué sólo se nombra a algunas, pocas, como si con este gesto se hiciera justicia de género y ya una vez representada la categoría “mujer,” siempre por las mismas, no fuera necesario que ninguna otra apareciese? (11)

“The boom of poetry written by women.” ... Everyone seems to agree that one of the fundamental characteristics of literature in the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century is the abundance of poetry written by women. Yet, ..., when literature teachers go to the books ..., they find themselves with the surprise that the boom has deflated itself at the moment of giving it names and what was announced as a massive female presence remains with only a few – very few – with names and surnames that are discussed with their male counterparts. ... If, effectively, there are many women who write and publish in the last decades of the twentieth century, why are their names silenced? Why are only a some named, or a few, as if this gesture gave some justice in the genre and once the category of “woman” was represented, always by the same ones, it was no longer necessary for any other to appear?

I quote at length because it establishes a simultaneous and identical problem with Ireland. Rosal points to the high numbers of women publishing versus the repeated presence of just a few token names. In her anthology, Rosal lists the few names or complete absence of contemporary women poets in “las más importantes antologías que muestran los rumbos y hallazgos de la poesía española contemporánea y que sin afán excluyente -...- se presentan como muestras generales de la poesía del momento” (“the most important anthologies that show the directions and discoveries of Spanish contemporary poetry and without an exclusionary effort -...- they present themselves as general examples of the poetry of that moment”; 56). Rosal looks at twenty-two anthologies that have had significant impact on Spain’s national canon, published between the years 1970 and 2003, and notes 652 male poets appear versus 98 female poets, that is, 13% of the total anthologized are women. The numbers fare worse once she turns her attention to

primary and secondary school textbooks. The argument that literary canons are not “simplemente un juicio formal de la crítica académica..., sino una compleja red de actividades sociales y culturales que se revelan además en las relaciones de poder existentes dentro de cada comunidad” (“simply a formal opinion of academic criticism..., but rather a complex network of social and cultural activities that reveal themselves also in the existent power relations of each community”) is not new (Zavala qtd. in Rosal 74). But clearly it needs to be restated and reconsidered in the case of Irish and Spanish women’s poetry. Along with perpetuating false notions of national identity based solely on a masculine point of view, the erasure of women from national canons does not allow for the existence of a female literary tradition creating identity crises for many poets.<sup>1</sup> These current anthology issues, along with my interest in Irish and Spanish national identities, led to my desire to investigate women’s modernism in these peripheral Catholic countries.

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first both countries were sites of economic prosperity and optimism, and embraced head-on a global perspective. To be Irish or Spanish suddenly meant to be closer to Europe than ever before, open to multiple and diverse cultures and points of view. This was a significant change from the National Catholic ideology, founded on exclusionary and fascist principles of gender and state that sought total control of mass culture (Carlston 24), and took hold of Ireland and Spain from the late 1930s until the 1970s. Paradoxically, perhaps, the Field Day controversy and the lack of studies on female Irish modernist poets introduced me to the modernist poet Blanaid Salkeld. If it hadn’t been for the two extra Field Day volumes on women’s writing I would not have come across some of her poetry. And as already mentioned, present-day research in Ireland on feminist or

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<sup>1</sup> See Eavan Boland’s essay “Outside History” (1990) and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s essay “What Foremothers?” (1991) for their discussion on the absence of an Irish female poetic tradition.

even female modernist writers has been astoundingly slow. When towards the end of the twentieth century feminist recovery projects were well underway in the U.S. and England, newly modern Ireland began to restore to the canon late modernist *male* poets. These projects mentioned signaled Salkeld as a modernist poet, but mentioned her only by name.

Books like *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History* (1998) by John Goodby, *Out of What Began: A History of Irish Poetry in English* (2000) by Gregory Schirmer and *Irish Poetry of the 1930s* (2005) by Alan Gillis, all argue for Irish literary criticism to be more “inclusivist” and move away from a “narrow fixation on identity” as previously promoted by the formerly insular National Catholic country (Goodby 2). These studies set out to recover Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey, Louis MacNeice and Austin Clarke, to name a few, who had been marginalized by the State’s cultural policy post-1930, stating “unless writers were absorbed by either religion, nationalism, or the land, they were not to be considered Irish writers” (Gillis 13). With few exceptions, this call for “inclusiveness,” and the move to establish “competing ideologies” in the 1930s, has only focused on men (Gillis 14). In Schirmer’s 426 page book there is a ten-page long section titled “Covert Voices: Women Poets After the Revival,” which briefly looks at six Irish women poets: Mary Devenport O’Neill, Blanaid Salkeld, Rhoda Coghill, Sheila Wingfield, Máire MacEntee, and Eithne Strong. Gillis mentions Blanaid Salkeld only by name in his introduction as part of a list of forgotten poets and Goodby does not mention her at all.

The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing provided me with a brief biographical blurb on Salkeld, and a couple of poems from her last two collections. . . *the engine is left running* (1937) and *Experiment in Error* (1955) appear under two separate sections titled “Poetry of the Spirit, 1900-95” and “Women and Writing, 1700-1960,” respectively. In 2001, in response to the poet

Ní Dhomhnaill's 1991 article "What Foremothers?" Susan Schreibman's "Irish Women Poets, 1929-1959: Some Foremothers," presented a little more information about Salkeld's life as a poet and active participant in Irish literary circles. Additionally, Schreibman referenced Salkeld's first book and her contributions to a literary magazine. Moynagh Sullivan's 2003 article, "'I Am Not Yet Delivered of the Past': The Poetry of Blanaid Salkeld," furthers the discussion on the poet as a modernist, but primarily focuses on her last collection published late in 1955. In a recent MLA search, Sullivan's was still the only article dedicated exclusively to Salkeld's poetry. References to her second collection *The Fox's Covert* have been few and far between. The more research I did on Salkeld and her poetry, it became clear to me that this was an important key figure writing in the 1920s and 1930s who continued to stylistically and thematically developed a feminist modernism in response to cultural and political pressures to silence women.

While Irish and Spanish women share their present-day struggles over being anthologized or not, one difference between the two is the actual existence already of feminist studies on Spanish women modernist poets. This is perhaps because modernist male poets were already inscribed into the national canon, and are not currently being reevaluated as the Irish male modernists are. It has to be noted though, just like with the Irish contemporaries Boland, McGuckian, Ní Dhomhnaill and Ní Chuilleanáin, the scholarship on Spanish women modernists is very much limited to four names that are repeatedly reviewed and analyzed. These are Concha Méndez, Carmen Conde, Josefina de la Torre and Ernestina de Champourcín.<sup>2</sup> Paralleling

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<sup>2</sup> As recently as 2010, Pepa Merlo's anthology *Peces en la tierra: Antología de mujeres poetas en torno a la Generación del 27* points to the problem of only focusing on a few token names, and has sought to broaden the masculinist definitions of modernism and add more names of women poets to the list of the four already mentioned.

Blanaid Salkeld's poetic trajectory, Concha Méndez stood out to me as someone who embodied everything modern about the period between the two World Wars, writing during the 1920s and 1930s, and witnessing Spain's transition from a modern and progressive Republic to a fascist dictatorship.

In the last fifteen years, many essays have been written about Concha Méndez's unique life and her poetry. Edited by Méndez's granddaughter, her memoir *Memorias habladas, memorias armadas* was published in 1990. In 2001, James Valender's *Una mujer moderna: Concha Méndez en su mundo (1898-1986)* focused on her life and friendships. Additionally, other important critics have furthered the study of her poetry in their essays, included in such books as John Wilcox's *Women Poets of Spain, 1860-1990* (1997), Catherine Bellver's *Absence and Presence: Spanish Women Poets of the Twenties and Thirties* (2001) and *Bodies in Motion: Spanish Vanguard Poetry, Mass Culture, and Gender Dynamics* (2010), and Emilie Bergmann and Richard Herr's *Mirrors and Echoes: Women's Writing in Twentieth-Century Spain* (2007). Unlike Salkeld's poetry, a complete volume of Méndez's poetry was published in 2008. However, despite the scholarship done on her poetry, the more I read, it became clear to me that the bulk of the research centered only on her first three books. These collections stylistically follow masculine definitions of Spanish modernism and have helped place Méndez in the national canon as a female member of the modernist movement *Generación del 27*. Her poetry post-1931, however, tends to be defined in opposition to her early formally innovative work and lumped together in a dismissive category described as personal, intimate or feminine. The implication is that because it strays from the strict confines of gendered and generational definitions of modernism it is inferior and of little significance to Spain's national canon.

Hindered by both the gendering of modernism and entrenched patriarchal Catholic notions of gender, Blanaid Salkeld and Concha Méndez have been respectively erased from the canon or only partially accepted. Over twenty years later, Bonnie Kime Scott's seminal work arguing to reread women poets under a broader definition of modernism is still relevant to the recovery of women's modernism in Ireland and Spain. Additionally, because of the period in which these two poets wrote (from the mid 1920s to the end of the 1930s), their modernism is of special interest because it involves a feminist critique of state, institution and Catholic patriarchal hierarchy. Their feminist projects (intended or not) are politicized in significant and unexpected ways, and take on a strong political and aesthetic sense of urgency as their respective governments' contestation of modernity had direct impacts on women's basic freedoms and liberties. What we find in the recovery of both Irish and Spanish women's modernism is that it is not simply about trying to find narrative or political alternatives to their male counterparts, or even just about revising the marriage plot. The work of these poets confronts issues between female autonomy and agency and the conservative desire to forcefully shape the constructs of nation, state and family. Our literary histories are limited by national and stylistic boundaries, and these can blind us to other important things. For both Salkeld and Méndez, their independent vocation and position as poets, giving voice to a marginal female experience, create unease in the literary world and complicate their full integration in to the national canon. Also, there are fundamental questions of institutional powers of authority shared between Ireland and Spain that reveal a comparable social situation for both women. These include the rise of right-wing conservatism, based on fascist principles, the politicization of gender, and the inextricable ties between the Catholic Church and the government, all of which help shape similar experiences



and reactions in their poetry and allow for new modernist readings beyond stylistic and national limitations.

In chapter one I first provide an introduction to Blanaid Salkeld as a woman and poet writing in Ireland during the 1920s and 1930s. I then give a brief sketch of the political and cultural context in which she wrote in order to fully understand and appreciate the significance of recurring themes found in her poetry. One of the things that is lacking in the few studies on Salkeld is a true sense of her narrative arc, so before moving on to look at the three books she published in the 1930s, I first focus on the poems she published in various literary journals to give a sense of her overall career. This survey introduces us to important themes that surface, develop and become more critical as the political climate in Ireland rapidly moves toward a conservative and right wing government. Her themes show an early feminist preoccupation with inverting women's roles in society, debunking female stereotypes in classical myths and religion, and giving voice to marginal figures. The journals also reveal her feminist politics as her topics move from a colonial to a broader European context. This survey sets us up to then look at Salkeld's first book *Hello, Eternity!* (1933). While not formally innovative, this collection, praised by her contemporaries as a new venture into modernism, shows Salkeld starting to develop her feminist and modernist sensibilities. Getting a sense of her career will prepare us for the next chapter in which I will look at her next two major modernist works.

Chapter two makes the case for Salkeld as an important modernist figure in Irish literary history by looking at her second and third books *The Fox's Covert* (1935) and . . . *the engine is left running* (1937). These two works show Salkeld fusing formal and thematic innovation in her poetry and reveal a developing and committed engagement against the rising political and cultural threats against women. Both books prove Salkeld deserves rightful credit for her

contributions to literary modernism. *The Fox's Covert* is a spectacular, long feminist poem where the "I" is not simply concerned about having her *own* space to write, but rather is arguing over her *right* as a woman to write. The "covert" represents the real pressure she is under as a female poet to mask her critique of her cultural surroundings and the political changes occurring, and the challenge she faces at getting published. Over 156 formally unique stanzas, Salkeld inverts classical and religious myths to assert women's claim to equality on local cultural and political fronts. The last book she published before taking a break of eighteen years, . . . *the engine is left running* is the most modernist out of these three collections. Published by her own printing press she founded the same year, The Gayfield Press, . . . *the engine is left running* plays with complex language and meaning to explore her shifting concerns to broader and more global issues, as pointed out by the survey of career in chapter one.

Chapter three sets the stage to discuss Concha Méndez by briefly discussing her early life and career. A common thread throughout the criticism on Méndez has been that her poetry can be divided into two overly simplistic phases: an early stage that fits neatly in to conventional definitions of modernism and everything afterwards characterized by its non-formally modernist traits. Using literary journals as a point of departure, in this chapter I will look at the poet's first three books that comprise her most formally modernist period. These books show a young female poet embracing and aligning modernity with freedom, challenging conservative Catholic expectations of female behavior with an active, mobile and sexualized poetic "I." *Inquietudes* (1926), *Surtidor* (1928) and *Canciones de mar y tierra* (1930) all detail Méndez's embrace of new technologies, her self-emancipation, and her independent spirit traveling and living alone in England and Argentina. I will establish that yes, while these collections neatly fit into conventional definitions of what is traditionally considered modernism, they also show she is not

simply mimicking her male colleagues. This chapter will set up Mendez's distinctively feminist modernist voice and prepare us to follow it as she continued to explore and develop as a poet throughout the 1930s.

Chapter four concludes with Concha Méndez's next three books, *Vida a vida* (1932), *Niño y sombras* (1936) and *Lluvias enlazadas* (1939). Following the previous chapter, I again use literary magazines as a way in to consider the many personal events that influenced the shift in her poetic style, as well as a way to discuss the various cultural and political changes occurring in Spain throughout this decade. In this chapter I argue that adhering to the belief Méndez only had one modernist period comprised of her first three books before stopping, does not allow for broader definitions of modernism to be applied. As Scott suggested, we need to rethink what constitutes literary modernism and read her trajectory as a logical continuation of her initial modernist reaction to the changing world around her. Despite the added political pressures surrounding Concha Méndez towards the end of the decade (Civil War, forced exile), she refuses to retreat into silence and continues to write and publish on her own terms.

At first glance, it may not seem immediately clear how Ireland and Spain compare during the 1920s and 1930s. Of course there are superficial, but fun, similarities between the amazingly unique Blanaid Salkeld and Concha Méndez. Defying the odds of their historical context, both were involved in theater, were financially independent, published articles on art and literature in leading literary journals, loved to travel, wrote plays, published multiple collections of poetry praised by their contemporaries, held literary salons visited by the leading intellectuals of the time, founded local women's writers clubs in the 1920s, funded and owned their own printing press (managed out of their homes), published the works of their contemporaries, and refused to be silenced in the face of injustice by writing anti-fascist poetry in support of the Spanish Civil

War. Moreover, both did all of this at a time when women were having to fight institutional powers of authority that promoted an essentialist belief in a masculine national identity founded on conservative patriarchal Catholic and later fascist principles. The success with which their respective governments managed to erase Blanaid Salkeld or Concha Méndez from their national canons has continued to have an impact on present day poetry, and simply underscores the importance of continuing to recover and reassess the importance of these women poets.

## Chapter One: Early Feminist Politics in the Poetry of Blanaid Salkeld

### “Laetitia Sighs”

(I)

This hour old spectral kings sway slow and peer.  
Into this windy desolate hiding place,  
I ran for refuge from a pallid face  
That once set red and blue flames for my cheer.  
Life henceforth I refuse: an exile here,  
I watch sage dynasties fill up cold space.  
Long-bearded king, ancient, severe of pace,  
What prince has sprung from you? Since I'm past fear,  
Whisper into my heart forgotten speech,  
Till I have living syllables unlearned—  
Forgetting voice that glowed a star of flame,  
Or icy distance.

Sudden tempest's screech  
Baffles my senses. I am whirled and turned  
Round my own soul, will-less, and with no name.

- Blanaid Salkeld

*The Dublin Magazine*, July-September, 1935

*The Irish Times* published a short item, headed “Women in Industry,” on June 24, 1935, one month prior to the appearance of Blanaid Salkeld's “Laetitia Sighs” in *The Dublin Magazine*. Twenty women, including Salkeld, signed the item taking issue with the Conditions of Employment Act that would be enacted the following year: “This meeting of Irish women writers deplores the proposed legislation which would give a minister power to prohibit the admission of any citizen to any industry on the sole ground of sex, regarding such legislation as unjust, retrograde and deleterious to the community as a whole” (4). Drawing attention to their position as writers, they point to a continued conflation of politics and culture in Ireland's first years as an independent nation. From its foundation in 1922, an ever-growing conservative and exclusivist mood took hold of Ireland, silencing dissenting points of view that went against the

government's "Irish Ireland" agenda.<sup>3</sup> These marginal voices were threatened with censorship, or worse were labeled as anti-nationalist and, as such, foreign in the newly independent Ireland.

Given this stifling atmosphere, Salkeld's anger in "Laetitia Sighs," though cloaked, is striking and provides a fitting introduction to her work. The poem not only expresses a condemnation of the rapid succession of political and cultural changes that succeeded in eroding the rights earned with the founding of the Irish Free State, charging it with attempting to write women out of the national canon, but it also suggests the association of freedom with modernity. Through the use of a sonnet, a form associated since Petrarch with love poetry, Salkeld takes a stand against the current state of affairs and those responsible for it, deploying stodgy and somber words such as "old," "slow," "desolate," "dynasties," and "icy-distance," for example, that suggest a stagnant and stifling present state that clings to the past. The very title—which has Laetitia, the goddess of happiness and joy, sigh as if in grief or despair—expresses the disillusionment that many women who fought for Ireland's independence must have felt witnessing such "deleterious" changes. In the first quatrain the speaker points to the existing hypocrisy: comparing the current cold "pallid face" from which she must seek "refuge" to a warmer past when this same "face" sought her support when it was needed. Salkeld attacks the Irish government, accusing them of merely mimicking England's "ancient" and "severe" rule, with no separate identity of their own but rather "spr[inging]" like a child from the "king" as Athena did from Zeus's head. The poem's "I" is defeated, stunned, and confused at the results, and, in a move that could be described as foreshadowing Salkeld's own fate as an Irish poet, the speaker recognizes that she has been left forgotten, voiceless, and nameless. The poem evokes a

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<sup>3</sup> The term Irish Ireland emerged out of an "anti-colonial discourse" (Goodby 5) defined by its "racial expressivity, ruralism, identitarianism" (Goodby 11) and its "effort to construct Irish identity around a morally restrictive Catholicism, a narrow and equally restrictive version of the Gaelic tradition, and an idealized notion of rural life" (Schirmer 268).

sense of loneliness and alienation brought about by the government's systematic moves to remove women from the public arena and push them back into the home, while promoting a right-wing belief in the existence of an authentic Irishness. As will be demonstrated, "Laetitia Sighs" is only one example of Salkeld's protest against the injustice carried out by a conservative, backward-looking majority.

Salkeld increasingly aligned modernism with women's rights and freedom in her poems, and these can be read as an act of resistance to the increasingly hostile environment in which she lived and wrote. Ironically, it is her active interest in voicing her experience that contributed to her erasure from the national canon. A collaboration in the 1930s and 1940s between the Irish government and various cultural outlets succeeded in shaping a seemingly homogenous nation, defined by Catholic nationalist ideology in opposition to former British rule, and by the marginalization and suppression of any undesirable voices. Recovering writers who were coerced into obscurity, or erased from the canon, for their role in challenging the anti-modern, anti-progressive platform of De Valera's new Ireland, helps expose the fallacy of his nationalist project intent on creating a limiting "us vs. them" Irish identity. During the 1930s, Blanaid Salkeld participated in causes that were diametrically opposed to the government's official policies. She publicly voiced her anger regarding women's position in the new constitution. She frequently reviewed and translated foreign poets in Irish literary magazines such as *Motley*, *The Dublin Magazine*, and *Ireland To-Day*. In 1933 she founded the Women Writers' Club, an association that met monthly to promote and discuss women writers and poets. It lasted until the late 1950s and included such members as Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, Dorothy McArdle,

Dorothy Price, and Irene Haugh.<sup>4</sup> In 1937 she started her own “publishing business” with her son Cecil French Salkeld, the Gayfield Press, and promoted writers that are easily categorized as being on the margin both politically and culturally.<sup>5</sup> Rather exceptionally for an Irish writer, Salkeld supported the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, and she even published a poem in memory of an Irish friend who lost his life to the cause. She widely incorporated themes in her poetry that brought minority and foreign voices to the forefront, as well as experimenting with a modernist style that rejected the popular trend to “venerat[e] the past [which] expressed itself in a crude distaste for the dangerous symptoms of modernism” (Brown 114).

This chapter and the next will take an in depth look at Blanaid Salkeld’s modernist and feminist poetry between 1924–1937. First I provide a brief picture of the political and cultural context in which Salkeld wrote. Then I move on to a survey of Salkeld’s poetic contribution to several of the principal little magazines. This survey offers a quick glimpse of the arc of Salkeld’s work spanning over a decade, provides a critical narrative of her trajectory, and introduces us to some of her characteristic themes. After an in-depth reading of *Hello, Eternity!* (1933), I end the chapter. In the following chapter, I analyze two later works, *The Fox’s Covert* (1935) and . . . *the engine is left running* (1937), which represent Salkeld’s verse at its best and deserve recognition, however belated, as her major contributions to literary modernism. Specific recurring themes that speak to her writing as an act of resistance against De Valera’s Catholic nationalism include a preoccupation with giving voice to figures from the periphery, such as

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<sup>4</sup> See Gerardine Meaney’s “Regendering Modernism: The Woman Artist in Irish Women’s Fiction,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 15.1. Mar. 2004: 67-92. for comments on the striking lack of visibility and research of this women’s organization.

<sup>5</sup> See Kathleen Kirwan’s *Towards Irish Nationalism: A Tract* (1938); Ewart Milne’s *Forty North Fifty West* (1938); *Letter from Ireland: Verses* (1940); Moireen Fox’s *The Fall of the Year* (1940); and the series *Dublin Poets & Artists* that published poets such as Austin Clarke, Samuel Beckett, and Sheila Wingfield.



women, foreigners and the exiled. Additionally, she continues to argue for a progressive and modern nation—one that embraces change and diversity. Salkeld also criticizes the pervasive prejudice against women poets, questions conservative religious myths, and privileges urban settings. Her contemporaries openly admired and recognized the marked difference in her early work from the valued “Irish Ireland” mode, as will be shown. Moynagh Sullivan has noted the modernist qualities in her work, observing that while “her early work grew out of the Revival ... her later poetry is more formally experimental and thoroughly cognizant of the aesthetic and intellectual movements of both European and American modernism” (182).

## I.

To help set the stage for a closer reading of Salkeld, it is crucial to backtrack a little and give the appropriate historical background. On October 25, 1922 the Irish Free State enacted its first constitution adopting the progressive spirit of the 1916 Proclamation. Article 3 declared equal citizenship granting universal suffrage for women over twenty-one: “Every person, without distinction of sex, ... is a citizen of the Irish Free State and shall ... enjoy the privileges and be subject to the obligations of such citizenship” (qtd. in Ingman 10). Over the next fifteen years, the government transitioned towards a far-right conservatism that subscribed to a Catholic and cultural nationalism privileging the Church’s teachings on family and morality, and promoting a belief in a singular and racially authentic Ireland. Tamar Mayer

argues that many nations construct their identity around fixed concepts of gender ... , men become the nation’s protectors, women its biological and ideological reproducers guaranteeing the nation’s purity. Hence: nationalism becomes the language through which sexual control and repression ... is justified and masculine prowess is expressed and exercised. (Ingman 3)

In order for the burgeoning nation to move forward and grow, the government viewed it necessary to dismantle and limit the rights that women had only just earned. Starting in 1925, a series of “restrictions on women’s employment in the civil service” began forcing women to quit their jobs once they married (Ingman 10). This marriage bar would remain in place until 1973 (Beale qtd. in Haberstroh, *Women* 14). In 1927, the Juries Act “exempted women from jury service and thus ensured that only one gender’s voice was heard in the legal process” (Ingman 10). The Censorship of Publications Act appeared in 1929 adhering strongly to Catholic beliefs and biases regarding what is decent and moral, closely aligning it with the “notion that all evil in literary and journalistic matters derived from abroad, particularly from England. It was, therefore, the business of the Irish legislature to protect Irish life from the impure external influences” (Brown 55).

Eamon De Valera’s Catholic nationalist vision strongly influenced the rapidly changing constitution throughout the 1930s. A complete ban on contraceptives under the Criminal Law Amendment was introduced in 1934, and by 1937 De Valera’s draft of the new Constitution secured a ban on divorce, criminalized abortion and adopted with Articles 40, 41 and 45. This series of Articles, along with the already made changes, strengthened the conservative position on women’s roles in Irish society. Article 40,1(2) allowed for the State to differentiate between its citizens: “All citizens shall, as human persons, be held equal before the law. This shall not be held to mean that the State shall not in its enactments have due regard to differences of capacity, physical and moral, and of social function.” Article 41,2(2) pushed his ideology further by equating woman with motherhood (Hynes 148):

In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The

State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

Article 45,4(2) allowed discrimination against women in the workforce: “the State shall endeavour to ensure that the inadequate strength of women and the tender age of children shall not be abused, and that women or children shall not be forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their sex, age or strength” (qtd. in Beaumont 575). Single and separated women were specifically targeted, being “ineligible for welfare payments, [as well as being] openly discriminated against in education, employment and the tax and welfare systems” (Beale qtd. in Haberstroh, *Women* 14). These steps complemented an increasingly hostile public that were becoming suspicious of and targeting any perceived ‘modern’ or ‘foreign’ influences.

Along side these developments, the 1930s saw a rise in anti-liberal views inflamed by measures from the Department of Justice and the Catholic Church. Newly released security files document the “detailed surveillance carried out on members of the Communist Party of Ireland” and on those suspected of “political subversion” (Hickey). The files also point to the Catholic Church’s interest in opposing any progressive or left leaning ideology, “illustrated by a resolution [sent to De Valera] ... call[ing] for the suppression of left-wing beliefs” (Hickey). One shocking incident tells of the beating and tarring of a man who was incorrectly accused, by a priest at the altar, of being a communist. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 provided the far right a stage on which to wage their ideological battle against those perceived as heretic alien entities. With people like Eoin O’Duffy, leader of the fascist Blueshirts organization, the far right could openly attack any progressive, liberal thinking individuals by accusing them of

being godless, communist “whores,” and therefore, enemies of righteous Catholic Ireland.<sup>6</sup> (It most likely did not help sway public opinion for women’s rights that prominent Irish women writers, including Salkeld and feminist activists such as Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, openly supported democracy over fascism and campaigned on behalf of the legally elected Spanish Republican government through their writing, as well as participating in organizations such as the Irish Friends of Spanish Republic.<sup>7</sup>

Despite threats against those who expressed differing opinions, many writers vociferously protested the legal changes. Seán O’Faoláin, the book editor for the little magazine *Ireland To-Day* (1936-1938) and the founder of the later *The Bell* (1940-1953),<sup>8</sup> criticized the “new Ireland,” claiming: “the period since independence had seen a kind of putsch which had

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<sup>6</sup> In a February 3, 1937 anonymous letter, received by Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington in response to an “appeal for funds in aid of the ‘Irishmen’” who were fighting on the Republican side [of the Spanish Civil War], a writer attacks the godlessness of the Republicans, claiming: “[the Moors], at least, believe in GOD. As the photographs of the women fighting on the Communist side amply show, it is a case of MOORS versus WHORES” (Anonymous, Feb 1937). On April 20, 1937, Sheehy-Skeffington received a notice cancelling a reservation for a meeting hall due to being “at the mercy of the “Christian Front” gang” (Anonymous, Apr 1937). In a revealing letter about the rise of intimidation and hostility towards dissenting voices, Sheehy-Skeffington comments on the use of the label communist as a threat, and the deliberate stonewalling of articles that go against the government’s nationalist agenda: “there is a tale going round that Irish Press got held up one week because the word ‘Spain’ got in somewhere. . . . articles I hear are submitted to O’Brien, Duffy, and Co. for ‘vetting’. I had the ONE on Women jurors held up for several weeks. I write as a free lancer of course and am suspect. (I’d be sorry if I wasn’t – to them)” (Skeffington).

<sup>7</sup> The newly released Department of Justice security files reveal the extent of surveillance by “detectives in detailing meetings and those attending, [as well as] tracking Irish people who traveled to Spain to fight on the republican side” with “lists [of] names and addresses of the Irish members of the International Brigade” (Hickey).

<sup>8</sup> As Frank Shovlin notes, the magazine *Ireland To-Day* is an important vehicle that not only “champion[ed] Republican Spain during the Spanish Civil War—... which led to an unofficial boycott of the magazine in Irish newsagents” (754) but also offered a place for O’Faoláin to publicly defend “European modernity” (753). He went so far as to reject the “Irish Ireland” mode, stating in 1936 that the Irish should accept that they “are—the descendants, English-speaking, in European dress, affected by European thought, part of the European economy, of the rags and tatters who rose with O’Connell to win under Mick Collins—in a word, this modern Anglo-Ireland” (qtd. in Shovlin 753).

brought an intellectually and culturally impoverished middle class into power” (qtd. in Boada-Montagut 27). In a letter to Sheehy Skeffington, O’Faoláin attacks the direction in which De Valera was taking the country:

I dislike this common idea that rabid Nationalism was and is necessary. At the bottom of that idea is a contempt, unconscious, for the people, and an innate disbelief in humanity ... It means that nothing but violent emotionalism can direct a people. It springs from the same source as Fascism and Communism, both of which treat the people as children. It is the denial of reason ... Nationalism is a cocaine. It is a religion without any values and without an ethic. To supply values Dev [De Valera] drags in Christianity and talks of the Catholic Church.

Nationalism is merely the gilding of the pill. (O’Faoláin)

It is important to continue to understand that “Dev’s” National Catholic projects were not uniformly supported and were opposed by leading male intellectuals and by multiple women’s groups.

In response to De Valera’s 1937 Draft Constitution, many women’s groups wrote directly to the president expressing their concern over the effects that the legal changes would have on their freedom, including a letter signed by Blanaid Salkeld and forty of her fellow female writers.<sup>9</sup> On May 7, 1937, an *Irish Independent* journalist, Gertrude Gaffney, lucidly pulled apart the Draft point-by-point, highlighting the dangers the changes posed to a fair and democratic nation. Arguing against the logic that Article 45,5(2) would protect jobs for men, Gaffney warns of the dangers of following Germany’s policies:

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<sup>9</sup> Other groups included the Joint Committee of Women’s Societies and Social Workers, the Irish Women Workers’ Union, the Six Point Group, and the National University Women Graduates’ Association.

By creating an artificial situation in thrusting men into industries for which they have not the hands or the natural taste ... you are not going to force men into marrying when they do not want to marry, unless Mr. de Valera is to follow the course of Herr Hitler, of whom he appears to be so ardent a disciple, in banning them from certain jobs unless they are married. (5)

Similarly, on May 24, 1937, Miss Louie Bennett of the Irish Women Workers' Union advised De Valera that "if [he] must keep this [Articles 40, 41, 45] particular door in the Constitution open, [he should] put up a guard against Fascist intrusions" (Bennett, "Irish Women" 1). In June of the same year, the Six Point Group, a British feminist organization, declared "these clauses are based on a fascist and slave conception of women as being a non-adult person who is very weak and whose place is in the home," and it reminded the president that "Ireland's fight for freedom would not have been so successful if Irish women had obeyed these clauses" (Archdale 1). Unfortunately, none of these complaints had their intended effect. Representing the growing misogynistic atmosphere in Ireland, Professor Alfred O'Rahilly patronizingly dismissed women's concerns as "hypercritical if not slightly hysterical," claiming:

There are plenty of jobs a woman will not take unless forced by extreme necessity; and usually a woman would prefer to marry a man who could support her. If this ideal is to be dubbed Fascism, I cheerfully accept the word. What is more, I suspect the rank and file of the I.W.W. would cordially agree with me.

(11)

O’Rahilly’s flippant remark makes light of the serious repercussions for those of opposing political views. Given the extent of police surveillance in the era, the courage of these women writers to defend their rights in such an outspoken way is striking.<sup>10</sup>

Brown observes that these political shifts were complimented by a “cultural exclusivism” that spread an “attitude of xenophobic suspicion ... of what appeared to reflect cosmopolitan standards”:

The theme of Irish tradition was staunchly reiterated in reviews of plays, exhibitions and concerts ... An almost Stalinist antagonism to modernism, to surrealism, free verse, symbolism, and the modern cinema was combined with prudery ... and a deep reverence for the Irish past. (114)

As Nival Yuval-Davis argues, it is important to consider “culture” in order to understand the “centrality of gender relations to nationalist projects.” In *Gender and Nation* she explains:

People’s ‘culture and tradition’, ... is another essentializing dimension.... The mythical unity of national ‘imagined communities’ which divides the world between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is maintained and ideologically reproduced by a whole system of ‘border guards’. These border guards can identify people as members or non-members of a specific collectivity. They are closely linked to specific cultural codes ... [such as] elaborate bodies of customs, religion, literary and artistic modes of production and of course, language. (23)

Daniel Corkery, a prominent “border guard,” elaborated his theory on Irish literature and cultural nationalism in his infamous book *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*.<sup>11</sup> In 1932 P.S. O’Hegarty,

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<sup>10</sup> As early as 1934, a few “communists” protested the visit of the German minister to De Valera, “shout[ing] ‘Down with Hitler’” with “a placard [stating] ... ‘Away with Fascist Murderers’.” They were subsequently “tackled by Gardai,” with one later being arrested. (Hickey)

himself a leading nationalist, published a scathing review of Corkery's book in the Feb – Mar issue of *The Dublin Magazine*.<sup>12</sup> O'Hegarty voiced his concerns over Corkery's exclusivist attitude. The reviewer rails against his intolerance, attacking him for his view that “only an Irish Catholic nationalist can write Irish literature [while] others possess ‘certain inherited prejudices as well as an inherent lack of spiritual delicacy’” (53). O'Hegarty continues:

Mr. Corkery ... defines for us the material out of which, ... Irish literature can be written: ‘The three great forces which, working for long in the Irish national being, have made it so different from the English national being, are: (1) The Religious Consciousness of the People; (2) Irish Nationalism; and (3) The Land’.

(53)

He criticizes Corkery for “carrying his bigotry and intolerance into literature,” and he affirms that “the Irish Nation includes all the people of [its] Island. Catholic and non-Catholic, Gael and Sean-ghall, native and ‘ascendancy’” (53). Unfortunately, Corkery's call for a Catholic Irish literature found sympathetic ears in the ever-growing conservative public, and was promoted by De Valera's government (O'Hegarty 56; Gillis 13).

O'Hegarty, though, was by no means the first to defend a plural society. Throughout the 1920s George William Russel (AE) argued against intolerance and false claims of racial authenticity by “vigorously preach[ing] a doctrine of national synthesis in which no ethnic group is predominant, no culture the assimilative one” claiming that “Ireland is a fertile creation of the historic fusion of races, culture, and language” (Brown 93). O'Hegarty and AE's calls for

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<sup>11</sup> See Shovlin, “From Revolution to Republic,” for more information on the writers who attempted to fight against Corkery's promotion of the stifling Irish-Ireland philosophy.

<sup>12</sup> A note heads the article stating that the article was first published in the 1931 Oct.-Dec. issue of the *Dublin Magazine*; due to an accident omitting portions of the article in the first issue it was republished in its entirety.



tolerance and diversity, though, went equally unheeded by the nationalist hegemony. While many Irish poets continued to work outside of the dominant trend, women were especially affected by its exclusivist definition since, according to D.P. Moran, an enthusiastic supporter of the Irish Ireland movement, “to be truly Irish [one must] cultivate masculinity” and Moran “aspired to ‘making the people sober, moderate, masculine’” (Brown 53).

Some recent academic projects have focused renewed attention on various male Irish poets from the 1930s, including Austin Clarke, Louis MacNeice, Thomas McGreevey, Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey. Their work is being held up as examples a distinctively Irish modernism, and critics have situated it within the broader context of late Anglo-American modernism.<sup>13</sup> These male poets and their verse, however, have never been completely forgotten, so these projects are not exactly ones of recovery. Instead, scholars have looked to them to help to demonstrate that “competing ideologies” still existed within Ireland in the 1930s despite the State’s efforts to control and homogenize its culture, and they hope to challenge the reduction of 1930s Irish poetry to two opposed modes, a “Irish” one and a modernist one (Gillis 14). While these writers’ very content may have been at odds with dominant national trends, their masculinity, and their male privilege, was never in doubt. Anne Fogarty observes:

[A]lthough they attempt to cut through the cultural prejudices of the Literary Revival many of the male poets in this forgotten backwater in the history of Irish modernism still overtly replicate much of the sexual bias of modernist aesthetics. The mystifying universalisms which they invoke are ultimately exclusionary even though they may serve a purpose in indemnifying the diversity of the poetry they themselves were writing. The creative talent either at the center or in the margins

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<sup>13</sup> See Gillis, *Irish Poetry in the 1930s* and Sullivan (183).

of Irish modernism is conceived of in terms which do not take what Mary Loeffleholz calls ‘the experimental lives’ of modern women into account and which fail to acknowledge the significance and otherness of their writing. (219)

It seems not much has changed. As important as this recent scholarly work is, it reproduces the cultural bias against women poets so eloquently put forth in the 1940s by the Irish-language poet Seán Ó’Riordáin: “Ní file ach filíochta bhean”, “*Woman is not poet, but poetry*”.<sup>14</sup> Most literary criticism continues to ignore the fate and significance of women writers in this period, who also experimented with modernist technique but were consigned to obscurity because of their gender and their specifically feminist challenge to the “Irish mode.”

Defining modernism in masculinist terms has served to promote a limited view of Ireland’s national canon. It effectively perpetuates the conservative National Catholic prejudice against women who dare to challenge the Church’s “stereotypes of Irish womanhood” (Ingman 6). As Kathryn Kirkpatrick points out,

In Ireland, ... reclaiming women’s literature helps transform a national culture by including the voices of more of its citizens.... Irish women writers, with experiences as outsiders in both colonial and postcolonial contexts, can provide valuable alternative visions of community, identity, and nation. These alternative visions can, in turn, influence state practice so that a national culture hospitable to diverse Irish identities might flourish. (6)

Recovery projects of women writers then not only valuably rescue forgotten work but also help reveal the Irish government’s deliberate efforts to erase peripheral voices so as to promote belief

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<sup>14</sup> As translated in Lia Mills’s article “‘I won’t Go Back To It’: Irish Women Poets and the Iconic Feminine.”

in their authentic identity defined by its masculinity, rural mode and Catholicism. Heather Ingman, speaking of the possible impact contemporary Irish women poets can have, suggests that “from their position on the margins of the nation, Irish women have the opportunity to use their voices to subvert entrenched Irish nationalism and open it up to a more fluid identity,” and so dispel the notion of an authentic Irishness (49). Importantly, she also notes that “themes such as reaching out to the other, . . . , and translating between cultures feature as much in writers from the earlier part of the century as they do in writers from the later part” (183).

Recovering Salkeld’s life and work reveals her to be a strong Irish woman who attempted early on during the political shift to a right-wing conservative state to “subvert entrenched Irish nationalism” and promote tolerance and inclusivity in the (old) “new Ireland.” In particular, she participated in the late modernist movement in diverse ways. These included her writing, her promotion and translation of foreign writers, her praise for other cultures, and her support of a progressive, liberal and modern society (Sullivan 182). Her poetry represents a body of work that more and more relied on modernist formal elements to express a distinctly female voice searching for recognition in a country working to erase her. Many of the themes that surface in her poetry directly and indirectly challenge the increasingly conservative status quo, and her verse exhibits traits such as a frequently detached and alienated poetic subject, expressions of loss and despair, poetic self-awareness and subjectivity, and an increasing playfulness with language and sound. Salkeld also experimented with the surrealist method and the poetic form. Her activism, poetry, and translations show a woman striving to keep Ireland abreast with the outside modern world despite its push toward insularity. The extent of Salkeld’s removal from Ireland’s canon is such that her name nowadays only surfaces as an aside, sometimes along with a brief snippet of one or two of her poems. We have very little sense of her career trajectory, or

the scope and character of her writing. In the next section, then, I will begin my survey of poems she published in literary journals spanning from 1924 to 1937, in order to begin to establish a critical narrative of her work.

## II.

In August 1924 a modernist literary magazine called *To-Morrow* appeared in Ireland. Its editors, Francis Stuart and Cecil French Salkeld (Blanaid's son), "felt that 'mainstream Irish literature was narrow and that no outlets were available for young writers to publish innovative or experimental work; nor was there a forum for the discussion of developments in poetry, painting, and philosophy'" (McKenna 16). *To-Morrow's* first issue carried works by W.B. Yeats, Lennox Robinson, Joseph Campbell, and Liam O'Flaherty,<sup>15</sup> and it expressed the editors' "hope for a new cultural movement in the arts that would ... influence the newly found [nation]" (McKenna 16). From its inception, however, the magazine caused furor and tension in both political and cultural circles—mainly due to the contributions from Yeats and Robinson—and "political pressure" forced it to be printed outside of Ireland in Manchester, England (McKenna 16; Shovlin 742).<sup>16</sup> Both its title and early publication date signaled a sense of optimism with regard to the future direction and development of the new nation (McKenna 17). Yet *To-Morrow* only managed one more issue before being pressured to close. The resulting controversy now stands as a clear warning shot of what was to come. As Bernard McKenna notes, this incident

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<sup>15</sup> Three of these writers are noteworthy for their varied background and the threat they posed to the burgeoning Nationalist Catholic mentality: Lennox Robinson was a noted Anglo-Irish writer who wrote about the deep divisions between the Protestants and the Catholics after independence; Joseph Campbell, an American, was greatly influenced by the works of James Joyce, among others; and Liam O'Flaherty was a professed member of the Communist Party until shortly before he died.

<sup>16</sup> For more analysis of the controversy surrounding W.B. Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" and Lennox Robinson's "The Madonna of Slieve Dun" please see Bernard McKenna, "Yeats, "Leda," and the Aesthetics of To-Morrow: "The Immortality of the Soul," and Frank Shovlin, "From Revolution to Republic."

“contributed toward creating a climate of public opinion that made the Censorship of Publications Act of 1928 possible” (34).

It is eye opening then, to find two poems by Blanaid Salkeld in the September issue of this important yet short-lived modernist magazine. The bulk of her poetry does not begin to appear again until 1933, an absence that says a lot about the cultural climate itself; however, her poems in *To-Morrow* reveal her to be an early and interested participant in the modernist movement, sketching out a career path that would define her as an outsider in a rigid and judgmental society.<sup>17</sup> Stuart and Cecil French Salkeld’s philosophy behind *To-Morrow*, and the resulting resistance to it, interestingly represents Salkeld’s future efforts as a female poet to find a place and permanence within the national canon.

Salkeld’s poems in *To-Morrow* offer a cursory look at some of the principle concerns that resurface in her later work. The first lyric, which consists of six eight-line stanzas with an *abba cddc* rhyme scheme, is titled “Marriage Song.” The poem expresses the inner musings of an older woman as she melancholically reflects on the fate of strong, younger women. Far from conventional, it does not romanticize or promote a sentimental feminine view of love, does not convey envy of the younger woman, and is not concerned with the celebration of a ‘wedding.’ It is not, granted, an attack on marriage; she matter-of-factly acknowledges the practicality of the ritual for women and the possibility of companionship. However, the sad and quiet tone suggests a covert criticism of the restrictions placed on women’s liberty, making marriage one of the few options available to them. Through a female point of view, the reader gets a brief glimpse of the pain and loneliness behind the public mask of expected female propriety.

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<sup>17</sup> Shovlin groups Salkeld’s poems with the work of Francis Stuart and Charlotte Arthur, labeling it as “similarly experimental” to Joseph Campbell’s poem “As I was among the Captives” found in the first issue (744).

The opening lines set the mood: “Along the ever-change of being / Now not alone / She drifts” (1-3). The poetic “I” emphasizes outright that the young bride will no longer be *physically* alone throughout her life. This fact, in most instances, is a main point of celebration in marriage; yet she tempers the jovial mood by describing the girl who is no longer “alone,” as “She drifts”. “Drifts” connotes a lack of will, or an ambivalent acceptance of her fate. It also conjures an image of a ghostly figure, languishing as she goes through the motions. A description of the girl prior to the union provides some insight:

Always she held wide friendliness  
And high esteem;  
But a chill dream  
Kept her in an enchanted loneliness. (5-8)

Her outer mask fulfills society’s expected behavior of a young woman: pleasant (“wide friendliness”) and well behaved (“high esteem”). However, something inside her, “a chill dream,” has filled her with a desire for something else. This “dream” contradictorily has caused her “loneliness,” setting her apart from those around her, but the use of “enchanted” marks this difference as something positive and treasured by her alone.

The subject’s joy is muted as she solidly identifies with her friend with an intimate “I know”:

That morning of the sacred rites,  
When, veiled and dim,  
She vowed to him-  
.....  
I know how pale and tall she stood:  
Slenderly wrought-  
Still,... (9-11, 13-15)

The first lines evoke a sense of quietness and darkness. Covered, and with her vivacity dimmed, she dutifully says her “vow[s].” The solemnity of the ceremony is not emphasized by the “sacred[ness]” of it but by the evoking of restrictions placed on women through words that recall

silencing and imprisonment: “veiled,” “dim,” “stood,” “wrought,” and “Still.” The theme of silence and control continues into the third stanza: “High sadness on her lips has writ / His signature—” (17-18).

It is important to stress, again, that the poet does not condemn marriage itself or the groom. Instead, she promotes love between two equals. The sadness evoked throughout the poem stems from the girl’s unhappiness at having to act according to a set of conservative social norms and rigid gender roles. However, the poem ends optimistically, with the hope that this union is indeed on an equal footing. She first offers high praise of her friend, a description of her that counters typical female stereotypes of young women being hysterical, giddy or superficial (especially on her wedding day): “Her speech is like the sun’s best phrase: / Loving and slow / and wise, ...” (25-27). The poetic “I” then contemplates the bride’s partner: “I have not caught her comrade’s speech; / But firmly guess / His gentleness” (30-32). She gives him the benefit of the doubt, and what is even more striking here is her use of the word “comrade.” It not only underlines the importance of friendship and equality over romance but, given the period, also possesses a leftist political valence.

The poet refuses to end on a light note by espousing the joys of marriage. Instead, her optimism is grounded in the belief that these two individuals will make a good union:

Passing, I peered into his gaze.  
About his brows  
Hung the shadows  
Of his shy soul’s ancestral forest-ways.  
She, too, altho’ sun-loving, fits  
The forest best.  
High be their nest!  
Secure from thunderous cloud and vulture  
Wits! (36-44)

Subverting the usual role of a woman in poetry, it is she who observes him; the female “I” answers a man’s “gaze” from a position of control and confidence, and the poet plays with the word “peer” again, emphasizing the importance of equality between men and women. Subtly, Salkeld refers to ancient Ireland while also deftly avoiding the pastoral romanticization of the “Irish-Ireland” ideology. Neither the west nor the calm country pastures nationalistically bring together these two people but rather an allusion to a more ancient, pre-Christian identity indicating they are a good fit for each other. Her last wish is that these two beings be able to escape the attacks and judgments of those who do not understand them.

Blanaid Salkeld’s second poem in *To-Morrow* is untitled. It resembles a heroic sonnet with its extra fourth quatrain, but it does not adhere to the proper rhyme scheme. Thematically and structurally, it is dissimilar to the “Marriage Song,” but one word stands out in its first line that links the two together: “forest.” This word, along with tropical “orchids” and “lotus,” conveys a vivid, surrealistic picture that repeats no pastoral Irish stereotypes:

High thro’ darkest forest branches  
Mild, moon-coloured orchids glow.  
Gloom, no spilling planet blanches—  
Nightly gloom, - forever staunches  
The stark lake’s scarce-welling flow,  
On the blackness of whose bosom  
Luminous, spread petals show  
Of the level lotus blossom,  
Meekly offering its snow.  
In the silence, gloom-enwoven,  
On the waters, gloom-enamelled,  
By no fiery whisper cloven-  
Still-inviolat-untrammelled,  
The white lotus flowers blow!  
In deep forest, on still lake,  
It is true what Nature says:  
Lotus pale and orchids make  
Words, surpassing mortal phrase. (1-18)



This poem is full of exotic and erotic imagery, at times surrealistic and dream-like, and presents a magical, dark nature that is neither realistic nor typically Irish but rather creates a sense of foreboding. The word “gloom,” mentioned four times, along with the words “darkest,” “nightly” and “blackness” accompany words like “moon-coloured,” “glow,” “blanches,” “luminous” and “white” and succeed in creating confused contradictory images by aligning dark with pale and “stark” with “bloom[ing].” The eroticism and a sense of expectancy is evoked through the use of words and images like: “bosom / Luminous, spread petals show”; “cloven- / Still-inviolate-untrammelled.” The mood created is one of a vivid, unbridled yet dark life, a lack of control and a belief in the power of images to create a world that is difficult to express with common “mortal phrase[s].” These wild eroticized flowers that “make/ Words” stand in stark contrast with the subdued, traditional roses commonly representing Ireland as a female in need of rescuing and protecting.<sup>18</sup> Salkeld inverts the Irish saying, proving women are *not* poetry, but rather poets. The presence alone of these two poems in such an early and infamous literary magazine in the history of Ireland speaks volumes about Salkeld’s interests. The themes and styles of the two poems show a poet who was interested in exploring a means of expressing a new and awkward point of view in a burgeoning Ireland that was afraid of difference. These poems were the last of Salkeld’s to be printed in a magazine until the 1933, July-Sept issue of *The Dublin Magazine*.

Frank Shovlin has observed that *The Dublin Magazine* “by comparison with [...] *To-Morrow* is a conservative publication, but in [its] longevity and range of vision [it] has a good deal more to tell us about modern Irish culture than [its] shorter-lived competitors” (746). This

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<sup>18</sup> The rose symbolizing Ireland is depicted in such famous texts as James Clarence Mangan’s nationalistic poem “Dark Rosaleen,” the patriotic Irish song “Róisín Dubh” ‘dark little rose,’ and of course in W.B. Yeats’s early lyrical poetry in *The Rose*, “symbolizing ideal beauty, eternal love, perfection, incorruptibility, and the realm of the mysterious, mythical and magical” (Billigheimer 276).

“range of vision” included “the experimental and avant-garde” (748), demonstrated by the presence of “[Samuel] Beckett poems” (748) and “Anna Akhmatova translations by Blanaid Salkeld” (748). Seamus O’Sullivan’s conservatism is linked to his constant awareness of the Censorship of Publications Bill, and as such he can be commended for his role in publishing many artists who would, at some point in their life, succeed in having their work banned (Shovlin 747).<sup>19</sup> Between 1933 and 1936, Salkeld published seven of her poems in the magazine. (Six of those were sonnets, and as we shall see later, Samuel Beckett took personal issue with these despite his overall approval of her work.) Knowing the conservative culture that threatened and shaped *The Dublin Magazine*, one could be forgiven for considering these poems tamer in nature than what is found in her collections, yet an undeniably forceful and critical female voice is present throughout.

Two poems grouped together as “Two Sonnets” appeared in the 1933 July-September issue. The first, an Italian sonnet with the rhyme scheme *abba abba cde cde*, is a surprising instance of feminist critique, challenging “the cultural status quo” (Tarlo 251) by reversing “the traditional ‘I/you’ pronominal structure of love poetry” (Tarlo 253). Harriet Tarlo has observed that “the use of pronouns by experimental women writers should be of particular interest, since these poets are deeply concerned with language, language politics and, very often, social change” (248). Tarlo continues, “contemporary women poets in the innovative tradition often perceive their writing as descending from that of early twentieth-century Modernist women writers like H.D. and Gertrude Stein which also makes great play with the pronoun’s powers and

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<sup>19</sup> As Shovlin observes, though O’Sullivan, as editor, was known for his ambivalence on the subject of Irish censorship, he did publish the article “A Muzzle Made in Ireland,” in 1936, by Francis Hackett whose novel *The Green Lion* was banned by the Censorship Board. The article unequivocally attacks Irish censorship: “The Censorship law is repugnant to every instinct of a free man, [...] ‘ignorant in its conception, ridiculous in its method, odious in its fruits, bringing the name of self-governing Irishmen into contempt’ (qtd. in Shovlin, 748).

ambiguities” (248). This poem is then an early Irish example, “part of a tradition for whom playful manipulation of the smaller elements of language has long been significant” (Tarlo 248).

This sonnet inverts the norm by the absence of a male presence. Initially, perhaps, the reader expects the ‘I/you’ to be the normal binary found in love poetry; there is at first a gender-ambiguous “I” who clearly admires a bright and outgoing “she.” Yet on further reading, it becomes unclear whether the “I” and “she” are actually two separate individuals, with the key word “kinswoman” revealing the “I” to be feminine:

So proud and daring, hopeful, unafraid—  
She is all heart, all jovial tolerance:  
We speak of land or party or finance—  
And then she reads a poem I have made.  
Across her beaming falls a critic shade.  
Her name! she thinks,—what uncouth circumstance  
Could teach her kinswoman so wild a dance?  
Her wide heart’s door shuts to: so kind, so staid. (1-8)

There is no male presence, and Salkeld seems to suggest that female identity is a performance that forces a woman to split herself in two to survive: the “I” which represents the internal and private persona, and the “she” which stands for the external and public one. This in turn creates a crisis between the two, where feelings of recognition and love between them are countered by feelings of disassociation and alienation. The strong, admiring qualities in the opening line enviously describe “She” who puts on a mask in order to perform and be accepted in society. The “I’s” gaze lingers longingly on “she,” just as one might expect in a love poem, but here it suggests a desire on behalf of the female speaker to be able to truly embody and possess these qualities, not merely as an act or as an outsider. The transition from “She” to “We,” before introducing the gender ambiguous “I,” bridges the distance between these two roles and emphasizes their sameness. But the commonality evoked by the first person plural is threatened when the public “She reads a poem” that “I ha[ve] made.” The public persona recognizes

something belonging to her, “her name,” in this intimate offering, and this insight produces a crisis: she must admit and accept that her being is not whole but rather something fractious and difficult to understand and contain.

The *volta* signals a change in the poetic subject’s voice. The “I” and “she” become one, expressed through the active voice that the “I” assumes:

The Play we starred in fills no more the stage.  
If he be resting, I’m not unemployed,  
But walk on in a thousand tragic scenes.  
I choke my spleen; I lull a master’s rage;  
I spill out pity. I am well enjoyed,  
Weeping for beggars and bereaved queens. (9-14)

A woman’s identity, we’re told, is a continuous performance that demands keeping up appearances at all times in public. Continuing with this stage metaphor, the “I” turns and embraces her role as actor as a vehicle to vent frustration and anxiety. Salkeld’s preoccupation with authorship, as first seen in her wild and dark flower poem in *To-Morrow*, continues here but she now moves closer to her own voice acting out so many different scenes.

The sonnet that follows is yet another example of her straying from expected feminine topics, recalling her critical observations in the “Marriage Song.” In this poem the gender ambiguous “I,” evoking Heracles, invites the mythical and alluring Hylas to join him or her on a journey. What stand out are the last two lines that present an active subject ready to take charge and go on an epic adventure: “If wind drop, I’ll spread sail, or I will pull— / Seizing from bright words, shadowy musings, zest” (13-14). Such an outright admission of desired movement (“I’ll spread,” “I will pull”), combined with the actions from the first sonnet—such as I “walk,” “I choke,” “I spill”— set the tone far from a hesitant and sentimental feminine voice. The poetic subject is self-assured and challenges expected themes in poetry by women.

In the July-September 1935 issue of *The Dublin Magazine* two more sonnets are published under the title “Laetitia Sighs.” The first of these has already been discussed, in the opening of the chapter; the second addresses the epic of the knight Roland at Roncesvalles. Salkeld does not undertake a romantic elegy for the famous knight, and she even seems to disdain the stubborn behavior that is usually praised by the legend:

At Roncesvalles, in crowded vale of death,  
To blow his horn knight Roland would not deign;  
In silence dared unsuccoured war sustain;  
Sounded the horn but with his dying breath. (1-4)

The words “deign” and “unsuccoured war sustain” suggest contempt. She then compares his adamant refusal to ask for help with the inevitability of the changes of the seasons:

Our well-loved forests lose their mossy sheath,  
Their foliage, --come Spring, to dress again.  
Since forest keeps what season cannot drain  
Nor tempest reave away, why cancel faith?  
For he, too, cannot change. (5-9)

This critique of what appears to her as typically male stupidity, connects back historically with the previous sonnet in this series “Laetitia Sighs.” The phrase from that poem, “Baffles my senses,” seems to foreshadow her opinion of Roland’s ‘courageous’ valor to not surrender or to not ask for help.

The poems from *To-Morrow* and the four sonnets in *The Dublin Magazine* from 1933 and 1935 sum up themes characteristic of Salkeld’s earliest phase which she then later explores in more detail in her first collection *Hello, Eternity!* Albeit in a veiled manner, her female subjects are concerned with establishing equal footing with their male peers, with finding a vehicle to express their voices, and with critiquing male folly in the realm of politics and war. In the July-September 1936 issue of *The Dublin Magazine*, three further poems are published, two more sonnets and one free verse poem. Here Salkeld’s tongue-in-cheek playfulness shines through

and her criticism of the society around her becomes more direct and focused even as she moves towards more openly engaging with international modernism.

The three are titled “Sonnet,” “Zoo,” and “Poet, Retired.” Published one year before the passing of De Valera’s Constitution, the first of these, “Sonnet,” is another expression of regret over how easily she was fooled and convinced to give herself wholly to the cause of ‘rescuing’ poor Ireland. She begins by mocking the over-wrought image of Ireland as an old hag begging for pity:

Not the ripe beggar with the richest note  
Drew generous alms, but weakness poor and plain:  
A pale old woman’s whisper in the rain,  
Dull quaver, lost in pinched man’s withered throat,  
Spilled out our purses. (1-5)

Pain is felt at reconciling the hopes she had for the new nation with how much it has strayed from the path promised to those who fought for its independence:

We saw delight and splendour—flung out wide,  
To catch them to our bosoms of decay.  
O, could at least man’s foolishness beget  
The Angels’ pity! Trivial our pride,  
Mocked by enduring gold, amid the clay. (9-13)

“Zoo” is charming and cheeky offering Salkeld’s readers a glimpse of her full range, which includes humor as well as protest. Gender roles are inverted again. A coquettish male peacock is mockingly ignored by his plain female subject, despite his royal and supposed glorious virtues:

Before her burning lord—dim-hued, remote,  
As sin it were to be seen or look askance—  
The peahen glides, untuned to dalliance;  
Slants her meek neck as if to peck a mote.  
From quickening glory of his sapphire throat,  
From towering pride, his slow and noiseless dance,  
The many eyes that gloom against her trance,  
That stare among the gold-spread tail, and float—  
In sober dream, the peahen slips away. (1-8)

The playfulness comes through Salkeld's choice of language and juxtaposition of images: "Before her" / "remote," "burning" / "dim-hued," "to be seen" / "look askance." The "peahen" is an independent creature and listens only to herself; she "glides" and "slips away" from the expectations of the conventional world around her, not to be dazzled by glowing "sapphire" jewels. The poet rejects the cliché of the female 'playing hard to get'; rather, this "dream" is one for "the peahen" to escape. The soothing alliterative *s*'s that end the poem jar with the beautifully contrasting visual imagery and internal rhyme: "The silken fronds with lighting tremors sway: / Fine fringes clashed, soft lash the Easter air." The picture evoked of something "soft" and delicate creating bright and quick flashes, along with the frilly feathers sharply "clash[ing]" and "soft[ly] lash[ing]" the air, stirs the imagination. A reader can't help but admire this mysterious subordinate and "dim-hued" creature who refuses to accept her proper place and forswears the stereotypically female superficial trappings of beauty and decoration. Once again, Salkeld inverts stereotypical images of femininity and reinscribes the submissive "peahen" with unladylike and transgressive behavior, like the erotic blooming flowers in the second poem (without a title) in the journal *To-Morrow* "make[ing]/ Words."

The last poem in this group is "Poet, Retired." The title is curious because it does not straightforwardly connect to or describe the lines that immediately follow it. It signals, though, self-awareness and a sense of conflict. Who is this poet? Why is she retired? These questions do not lead to any easy answers, as the poem unfolds. Consisting of one sentence, made up of 26 rhyming lines of varying lengths, it shows an increasingly adventurous poet distancing herself from the sonnet form and announces an investment in formal experimentation that will later culminate in her collection . . . *the engine is left running* (1937). "Poet, Retired" showcases her

ability to use a variety of poetic devices such as alliteration, parallelism, internal rhyme and anaphora, which she deploys to bring to life the imagery in this breathless and rushing poem:

Living in a high verandahed house  
by holy Ganges that changes  
that surreptitiously throws—  
to left demolishing viciously,  
to right lavishing richly  
sand, sand (hard going for horses)  
sand—the hot wind in its courses  
ribs meticulously;  
and then Ganges again changes:  
in solar topee and belati clothes  
ridiculously  
the alien official grows  
without roots—  
like home shoots;  
not an hour too early  
were translated  
from there and fairly  
freely reinstated—  
my knots and twists  
in this peaty earth,  
with rocks and frail birth  
of perpetual mists  
impartially tending  
the various surface  
of bright land . . . lending  
veils . . . till the stroke of grace. (1-26)

Like the strong flowing Ganges, the poem surges forward at a fast pace. The repetition of the prepositions “that” and “to,” along with the word “sand,” create a dizzying sensation of movement. The whirlwind effect is also emphasized by the eight adverbs (“surreptitiously,” “viciously,” “richly,” “meticulously,” “ridiculously,” “fairly,” “freely” and “impartially”) that rapidly and melodically fall off the tongue. Internal rhyme plays a big part in drawing the reader’s attention to the central theme: the issue of belonging. Thematically, the poem offers a vivid picture of life in India for a foreign “alien official,” wrapped in the customary dress, “solar topee and belati clothes,” who lives “without roots— / like home shoots.” It is moving to think of



this person working in the colonies, living and growing, but without really being able to become indigenous or to feel like a natural part of the surrounding culture. The sadness is heightened though, when this person goes back *home* but also encounters feelings of alienation there too. The topic is a personal one, since Salkeld was born in India, and the poem wrestles obliquely with the presence of xenophobia in the new Ireland. She quickly personalizes the roots metaphor with the sudden introduction of the pronoun “my.” The transient “roots” abroad are compared to “[her] knots and twists / in [Ireland’s] peaty earth.” The fact that she has “roots” here is not an overwhelmingly happy ending. Though it is important to emphasize her Irishness, it is not an easy identity to possess, and the lack of its uniformity endangers her and marks her as other. In her last poem to appear in *The Dublin Magazine*, Salkeld demonstrates that she is thinking beyond Ireland's borders and considering the issue of national belonging within global terms. Born into the British Empire, Salkeld became an Irish citizen displaced by colonialism. She reveals the impossibility of ‘returning home’ in terms of De Valera’s call for Irish citizens to return to *their* land. Salkeld’s association or identification with multiple notions of home, along with her femaleness, makes the possibility of her ever truly belonging to/in Ireland in a ‘natural way’ difficult to achieve.

The progression in the poems from “Marriage Song” through to “Poet, Retired” sees Salkeld’s focus shift from reflecting and commenting on women’s roles in Irish society to a larger, political voice touching on issues of colonialism and nationalism. As the 1930s continued with the of fascist ideology in Ireland, and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War abroad, her perspective on the nation at its most politicized comes through in her poem “Casualties,” published outside of Ireland, by T. S. Eliot in the 1937 October issue of *The Criterion*. Certainly, the publishing of “Casualties” could not appear in *The Dublin Magazine* due to the threat of

censorship, mentioned earlier in the testimony of Hannah Sheehy Skeffington’s and Seán O’Faoláin’s experiences and observations of the Irish press. The publishing of this single poem unequivocally reveals her political and cultural position as an Irish pro-Republican woman voicing her stance against fascism, and those in Ireland who attacked the Republican supporters as heathens, communists, and anti-Irish. The plant metaphor in “Poet, Retired” resurfaces here to again address the complicated issues of Irish identity and authenticity:

Who would think the Spanish war  
Flared like new tenure of a star,  
The way our rhymes and writings are?  
That Hilliard spilled his boxer’s blood  
Through Albacete’s snow and mud,  
And smiled to comrade death, Salud.  
That Charlie Donnelly, small, frail,  
And flushed with youth, was rendered pale—  
But not with fear: in what queer squalor  
Was smashed up his so ordered valour,  
That rhythm, that steely earnestness,  
That peace of poetry, to bless  
Discordant thoughts of divers men—  
Blue gaze that burned up lie and stain,  
Put out by death.<sup>20</sup> (1-15)

The opening image of the “Spanish war” taking on a permanent life of its own, like the writing of a text, is interesting because it speaks not only of the intimate relationship between the war and writers already well developed, but it also reflects a sharp awareness of the initial belief the war could not last very long. The very mention of Spain in writing in Ireland was frequently enough to provoke censorship, so it is hardly surprising that this poem was not published anywhere in Ireland (to the best of my knowledge). “Casualties” is not a simple pro-Spanish

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<sup>20</sup> Manus O’Riordan, son of Michael O’Riordan the founder of the Communist Party in Ireland a member of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, set Blanaid Salkeld’s poem “Casualties” to song. He performed it at the unveiling of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Monument in San Francisco on March 30, 2008. For more information on this please see O’Riordan 12-13.

Republican poem but rather a very personal and Irish one that unequivocally honors the deaths of two well-known Irish Republican men who fought in the Connolly Column in the International Brigades: Robert Hilliard, a communist, and Charlie Donnelly, a poet and leftist activist. Salkeld is effusive about their bravery. More importantly, though, she highlights their different talents that specifically contributed culturally and socially to the betterment and development of the new Irish state. In doing so, she vocally argues against those who would exclude them and their cause from the national make-up. The haunting last image of Donnelly's eyes piercing through "lie[s] and stain[s]" suggests a critique of those in Ireland who would tarnish the reputation of these men who fought on the non-Catholic, and therefore wrong side of the war.

The sixteenth line marks the second half of the poem, juxtaposing life ("breath") with "death" which emphasizes the loss felt by those who remain alive: "I keep my breath: / So many grow upon my stem, / I cannot take their sap from them" (16-18). There is a maternal tone to these lines; the "I" feels a sense of responsibility to keep the memory of the fallen soldiers alive through her words. But the subject's confidence is shaken, she doubts whether or not this will be sufficient:

My verity of verse  
Is nothing else  
But rattle of light shells  
With no kernel,  
Since Dublin boys have striven, and are  
Knit to that alien soil, where war  
Burns like the inception of a star. (21-27)

Words as weapons is a powerful and evocative image. It also echoes the self-awareness of the poet's role as advocate for the marginalized voices that is present throughout her work, very much making this poem not an anomaly but a continuation of her interests. Disappointingly for the subject, though, the failure of her words do little "else" here other than "light[ly]" "rattle"

anyone, like lame bullets without real force exudes shame and disappointment on behalf of the speaker to not be able to effect change. This frustration must have helped Salkeld decide to set up her own printing press the same year, and publish her third collection . . . *the engine is left running*. In the next chapter I will discuss this book as a continuation of “Casualties” with the poetic speaker engaged in international, modern and social concerns. “Casualties” wraps up for the moment, this discussion of my general survey of Salkeld’s work published in literary journals. One can mark her move from a reassessment of women’s place in society and their struggle to write their own path toward a more general feminist critique of authoritarian power, empire, and national belonging. It also has offered a brief but useful overview of her poetry and career of the kind that until now has been lacking in Irish literary scholarship..

### III.

The just-completed survey of Salkeld’s poems in literary magazines provided a snapshot of the development of her modern female point of view in the face of repression. It showed different literary journals attempting to foster and promote dissenting or differing voices in an increasingly far-right, conservative public arena. In addition, it offered a brief sketch of a critical narrative of her poetry that has been surprisingly absent from the Irish national canon. Now that we have a sense of the arc of her career, I will look specifically at her first collection, *Hello, Eternity!* published in 1933, and begin by considering the critical reception of it by differing reviewers. These reviews reveal the competing cultural ideologies playing out at the beginning of the young independent Ireland. Moynagh Sullivan, in her article “‘I am not yet delivered of the past’: The Poetry of Blanaid Salkeld,” situates her work on “an axis on which modernism, nationalism and feminism were [...] unsettled” (183). This caused her reviewers to “shutt[le] 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*” (183). However, the 1934 review in *The Dublin Magazine* falls far from granting Salkeld success in achieving “the unconventions of modernism.” The reviewer initially praises the book as “an entirely new flower to appear at the Anglo Irish roadside” (80), but then claims:

the whole charm and beauty of the book lies in the fact that it expresses something universal about womanhood. Its freedom from the shrillness of emancipatory adolescence, enhances its values [...] 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. (81)

As Sullivan observes, this review implies that the “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” (183). The author continues to criticize Salkeld, belittling her attempt to establish her position as an outsider and to offer a dissident point of view by gendering and infantilizing her efforts: “the bravado smacks of schoolgirl escape from enforced silence and the rules of deportment” (81). This striking quote seeks to contain any potential subversion or seriousness that this first collection offers. He acknowledges Salkeld’s “misbehavior,” recognizing her treatment of some unsafe topics, but he dismisses its importance by highlighting his concern for her unladylike behavior – acting like a child – over any potentially new or important commentary in the poetry.

In contrast, as early as 1934, Samuel Beckett recognized Salkeld’s potential as a modernist in his brief essay “Recent Irish Poetry” in the August issue of *The Bookman*, stating “there is much in [...] *Hello Eternity!* (1933) that is personal and moving” (2). Beckett viewed

Irish contemporary poets as a part of two groups: “[they] may be divided into antiquarians and others, the former in the majority, the latter kindly noticed by Mr. W. B. Yeats as ‘the fish that lie gasping on the shore’” (1). He significantly places Salkeld between Thomas McGreevy, “best described as an independent, occupying a position intermediate between [the antiquarians] and the poor fish” (2), and Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, whom he labels as “without question the most interesting of the youngest generation of poets” (2). Later that same year, *Hello, Eternity!* won the first Women Writers’ Club book of the year award. During its annual banquet, where Blanaid Salkeld was the guest of honor, the writer Dorothy McArdle declared “Mrs. Salkeld was the greatest woman writer of the year.”<sup>21</sup> In later years, *Hello, Eternity!* continued to draw occasional, if equally terse, praise. A brief item in *The Irish Times*, in 1939, commented that she was “best known for her original creative work which [had] been highly praised by critics of the distinction of Mr. T. S. Eliot” (“Irishman’s Diary”). Austin Clarke’s defense of Salkeld, in a 1971 letter to a University of Cork professor, also recognizes her innovation, stating: “Apart from the delayed influence of Pound and Eliot here, Blanaid Salkeld was the first to follow the surrealist method” (1). Presently, Susan Schreibman states simply, in reference to *Hello, Eternity!*, that if Ezra Pound considered modernism as an engagement with “the new,” then Salkeld’s “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” (315).

Ironically, given this praise, *Hello, Eternity!* is in fact her least formally experimental book, nonetheless it firmly establishes a set of new and modern, pioneering themes and concerns that Salkeld continued to explore and develop throughout her career. These themes identify her as an original Irish poet who is interested in giving a voice to the new and the marginalized.

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<sup>21</sup> See “Women Writers’ Club: Annual Banquet.” *The Irish Times*, December 11, 1934: 8.

*Hello, Eternity!* is made up of 45 poems, almost half of which are sonnets. Divided into two parts, a short beginning and a longer second half, the opening poem sets the tone with its title: “Complaint.” It is joined by other one word titles such as “Absence,” “Request,” “Choice,” “Apology,” “Fear,” and “Adamant” that together project a feeling of uncertainty, doubt and frustration. Intermixed with these are references to mythological figures and creatures (“Anchises,” “Thetis,” “Unicorn,” “Sea Children”) as well as the names of Dublin suburbs, suggesting a geographical remove from centrality that, as we shall see, parallels its author’s sense of writing from an off-center perspective (“Terenure,” “Butterfield Lane,” “Templeogue”).<sup>22</sup>

Susan Schreibman has proposed that *Hello, Eternity!* is Salkeld’s failed attempt at finding love. Citing the poem “Butterfield Lane,” Schreibman argues: “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” (321). While it is true that there is no clear source of the “pain and sustenance” that make up these “solemn thought[s],”<sup>23</sup> Schreibman’s view is overly simplistic. I believe, given Salkeld’s political and cultural context, that her concern and deep frustration over a failure to make a “material” or “immaterial” *connection*, is better described as a desire to explore or expose an outsider’s struggle to find a place in a xenophobic community increasingly dominated by a National Catholic agenda. A closer look at many of the poems will show her “pain and sustenance” aligned with a critical view of various topics that characterize the “Irish Ireland” movement: nature and ruralness, religion and sexuality, traditional gender roles, nationalism and xenophobia. I agree with Schreibman’s observation that “nature [is] a source of imagery [that]

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<sup>22</sup> Terenure, Butterfield Lane and Templeogue are all names of suburbs outside of Dublin.

<sup>23</sup> See “Butterfield Lane,” *Hello, Eternity!* 33.

pervades [*Hello, Eternity!*] – 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” (320). The poems are often written in first person, the speaker is frequently an outsider questioning behaviors and practices, while also defending her own thoughts and actions.

In the 1930s, both Terenure and Templeogue became new rural suburbs in the expansion of Dublin. The ever-expanding and modern tram system connected the city to these peripheral and isolated communities. This move away from the city however, did not adhere to Daniel Corkery’s vision of returning to pastoral, rural Ireland. Instead, in a newly designed urban project, sitting somewhere in between downtown and the fields, the poet is offered a fresh start to reevaluate old roles and expectations. This is not to say it doesn’t come with its own set of problems and pain. The poems “Terenure” and “Templeogue” express sadness and a sense of alienation from people and places within the poetic “I.” In “Terenure,” a four-quatrain poem, an “I” walks alone by intimate pairings of lovers:

I laughed at the lovers I passed  
Two and two in the shadows,—  
I, solitary as one old horse I saw  
Alone in the meadows.  
The lovers so many I passed,  
In mute embraces:  
A roadside flower, joy,  
In the hid places.  
I wondered, sure, to notice joy  
As common as a weed—  
Out of my loneliness wondering,  
Laughing, indeed.  
I loved all the lovers I passed  
Two and two, in the shadows:  
I, solitary as one old horse, was standing  
Alone in the meadows. (1-16)

A striking element of the poem is the repeated doubling of words, images and structure that highlight the singular loneliness of the “I,” a pronoun repeated nine times standing at odds with



the even image of “lovers... / Two and two.” Significantly outside of the city, the speaker reveals her transition from the first quatrain to the fourth, where she finally fully embodies an old horse that has been left out to pasture “alone in the meadows.” The horse, once a symbol of fertility, strength and youth, has been rendered powerless and useless in this new era, and serves as a reminder of a more fruitful period. Salkeld, too, casts a maternal yet critical eye on these numerous lovers who inhabit these rural shadows. While she is fond of them, in reality they have nothing new to create or offer with their “mute embraces.” A mention of “joy” in the “hid places” hints at some hope for some new voices, but it also suggests the need to cloak them. The image of a “flower” evokes her previous reference to those lush “lotus” and “orchids” that countered the idea of the traditional Irish rose in the poem from *To-Morrow*. This is not an exotic foreign specimen, however, but rather a “common” one, perhaps a real one found in Ireland. Salkeld again eschews the conventional rose, so often used by male poets to represent an unrealistic and unattainable female image, in favor of a “weed,” durable and stubborn, that grows freely by the road—itsself a symbol of travel and modernity. This “roadside flower” and the “joy” associated with it, suggests a level of comfort and confidence with her “commonness,” and her decision to follow her own path.

The speaker in “Templeogue” is also alone and in the dark while observing a seemingly perfect domestic picture. New Ireland promoted the home as a key tenet of Irish identity, with the woman at the center of it, but this “I” sheds light on the artificiality of it all:

Across the dark road, the cottages gleaming with light  
Seemed more like dolls’ houses than men’s, as I passed at night—  
Dreaming that I had power to reveal spouse to spouse,  
To give children and the love of children to every house.  
Broken and sad and helpless, on my lonely road—  
I wished passionately, seriously, that I was God. (1-6)

The usual comfort experienced at seeing warm, glowing lights gleaming from inside is missing; there is no desire to become part of this illusion. Instead, the houses are plastic and superficial, like a doll's house. Henrik Ibsen's Nora and her self-discovery immediately come to mind, though there is no sanctioning of the abandonment of children in favor of female emancipation. However, the dream to "reveal spouse to spouse" suggests a belief that the relationships between spouses are based on falsities and a sense that they are playing roles dictated by the toy houses society has put them in. There is an obviously painful and alienating lack of identification with the scene that she observes in her "broken, and sad and helpless" state. Once again, "a sense of impotence" at not being able to effect change pervades the poem (Schreibman 321). However, unlike in "Terenure" where there is a sense of resignation, here the speaker "passionately, seriously," and impiously, wishes for the ultimate and highest power to change what is before her.

Though Salkeld was Catholic and grew up and spent most of her life in Ireland, she was, as mentioned earlier, born in Chittagong, India and returned there for several years with her husband. This left an indelible mark on how she understood national identity and influenced her views on exile "both within and outside the nation [making it] a prominent topic" in her poetry, as the earlier poem "Poet, Retired" illustrated (Ingman 179). In *Hello, Eternity!*'s "One Root" and "There's None Shall Say," Salkeld once more, and proudly, introduces the topic of her own difference, touching on the idea of foreignness in various ways. In the sonnet "One Root," the speaker passionately addresses a foreign "you," at first expressing a deep desire to surround and protect his identity:

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, (1-4)

The “I” here in no way wishes to live in secrecy. She strips away her own layers of protectiveness to reveal an understanding and support of the other’s origin, while at the same time claiming a common history and a shared desire for life and creativity: “I put on sea-shells for you, so you’d know/ I had the secret of your origin; / .../ A circle, from one root, we spring for wine” (6-7, 11). Beyond simple empathy, Salkeld declares a yearning for knowledge and an outright need to be part of something different. Though the question of belonging permeates this poem, as in others we have seen, it is ironic that in the speaker here unapologetically finds inspiration and comfort in the “alien sea” and all of its parts. This identification with the “alien sea” echoes the speaker in “Poet, Retired,” who recalls her “translat[ion]” from India to her relocation to “this peaty earth” (2). She appears to feel more at home while looking outwards than in the poems set inland in Ireland. There is no stifling, “mute embraces” here or “lonely roads” but instead movement, passion and release:

I’ve seen the salt spray on your pensive lips.  
I thirst, Merman! Unto the alien sea  
I have cried out— to count me of its kin.  
And I am studying boats and sailing ships  
And flying-fish and gulls, and mystery  
Of foam and spray,— knowing your origin. (12-17)

Salkeld’s early transnational modernism comes through clearly here, as she proclaims her desire to be “count[ed]” as “kin” of the “alien sea.” This embrace of foreignness, of rootlessness, of freedom of mobility, which permeates this book and is one of its identifiers as a modernist text, flies in the face of De Valera’s, and the fascists’, organic concept of national identity.

Next I will look at how Salkeld manages the topic of “foreignness” differently in two poems, “There’s None Shall Say” and “Delirium.” In “There’s None Shall Say,” Salkeld takes a defensive posture against a critical Ireland that seeks to silence and shut her out from the national

order. Salkeld's anger at being 'exiled from within' after having loved her country and given it everything is clear from the first stanza, where her once "burning mood," propelled by "love" for the "green leaf of [her] passion," is now "tuned to death":

There's none shall say I bore to you no children—  
Although love tuned to death my burning mood:  
Nerved and carved and coloured to your likeness,  
With no show of mother in their blood.

Ark and dove and green leaf of my passion!  
I being dead, they must be yours to boast.  
(My birth, that knew the sun in pagan fashion—  
My old rebellions— in your sternness lost.) (1-8)

What is considered her "foreignness," which is rooted in her "alien" birth, has estranged her from the general public. However, the poet refuses to apologize for her perceived strangeness and defends her right to be part of the nation. Salkeld fasts to the idea that her children will not just know one truth, despite the conservative government's attempts at homogenizing the culture and erasing any semblance of difference. She dares defend her "pagan" birth and will ensure that her children will embrace their varied and multicultural history:

Gael and Western, Merman— the Atlantic  
Runs pure in you— while I was, babe and child,  
From that ancestral fount— amid the antic  
Forces of alien peoples, far exiled.

My brood shall have sea-colour in their glances—  
And that strange merman fairness of your hair—  
And do no dolorous posturing in dances,  
But, sense-free, fling out passion on the air!

How much I dare! O, heart, past all dissembling,  
You know my fear— yet none shall dare to cry  
On me, your mate— this singer, pale and trembling:  
She reared that tender smile no progeny. (9-20)

"There's None Shall Say" is one more example of Salkeld's desire to present a view that national identity can be multiple and fluid. Like many of the poems discussed throughout this chapter, she

continues to dismantle expected and restricted modes of female behavior by giving agency to a strong female “I” who “dare[s]” live her life full of “passion” on her own terms.

The manner in which “foreignness” is explored in “Delirium” is centered on a defense of otherness in general. Schirmer observes that this poem reveals how Salkeld is “conscious of the poetic and subversive potential of the marginalized” (322):

Not only Heaven is fair. We may, as well,  
Find Hell a genial country, with its rout  
Of gipsy angels raising laugh and shout.  
Bard Dante made much poetry of Hell.  
I see bare crags--white sunblaze, and the spell  
Of Heaven gainsayed, a winged form about.  
Pride is a godlike quality. No doubt,  
The Lost have epic history to tell. (1-8)

From the opening line on, she takes an especially bold stance given the political context in which she was writing. With Dante as her precedent, her playful interest in a jovial Hell filled with a racial other as a source of inspiration, Salkeld challenges Ireland’s conservative religious views, denying and striking down “the spell / Of Heaven,” and criticizing its self-serving “godlike” pride which invalidates and dismisses the voice of others. These poems are evidence of Salkeld’s recurring preoccupation with one of the main topics in her poetry: her concern over national belonging and the effects of marginalization.

Lastly, *Hello, Eternity!* also prepares us for the main theme of her next book *The Fox’s Covert*, by way of the theme of the woman writer in the poems “Finis” and “Even the Carollers” address the topic of the woman as poet, a theme she will deal with at length in her next collection *The Fox’s Covert*. “Finis” strikes an immediate tone of defiance with its assertive title, continuing with a commanding tone right through its first line, refusing to apologize for her past work and actions:

I am not sorry for lost  
Youth and seriousness—  
Now that dreams are a jest,  
And love seems less  
Than a heard-of ghost  
That would have no tie  
With known history.  
Have I not trod  
Regions of dream,  
Muse-led, muse-kissed?  
I had all missed  
Had Eve feared God. (1-12)

In defense of her earlier work, she recognizes that she has outgrown romanticism and its particular brand of “seriousness,” but she denies that these were useless pursuits. They were, rather, fantastic “muse-led” and “muse-kissed” experiences that allowed her to flourish. The final two lines are remarkable, and hint at Salkeld’s future themes. Firstly, segueing from her own youth to that of the origins of Mankind, she remarks that Eve’s own rebelliousness gave way to the beginning of the world as we know it. This encourages her to defend her own youthful adventures. Secondly, given the great lengths that the Catholic Church was taking to force women back into a submissive position, her alignment with, and admiration for, Eve’s individuality and strength, gives her initial refusal to apologize extra weight since she also takes a stab at the Church by being glad and not repenting for Eve’s “original sin.”

“Even the Carollers” even more bluntly expresses Salkeld’s frustration with the creative toll her struggle against the cultural mainstream takes on her. The first two sentences are jagged and aggressive, everything but lady-like:

I hate verse. I have lost faith. To the sky,  
Even the carollers sing cold to-night,  
Precise and stiff— their measure of delight.  
I know but emptiness and liberty.  
My craft grown old and crazy, I still ply  
Unwilling oar. No harbour is in sight.  
I shall not ride at anchor off the bight

Of Innisfail, nor catch the beacon's eye.  
Unstable, dark, my rough inheritance—  
Mapped out by Fate's insoluble mistrust.  
There have been ingrates. How should I affirm  
I had been thankful for a genial chance?  
Unnecessary, sterile, tortured dust—  
Kept— but by uncouth anguish, from the worm. (1-14)

Her desperation at losing faith and confidence in herself in a sea of opposition sets the mood and is expressed clearly and darkly throughout the poem. Though the “I” is in crisis, swinging between states of “emptiness and liberty” and feeling that her work is now “old and crazy,” she refuses to give up entirely and continues “to ply unwilling oar” through the criticism. She is refuses to rest or rely on Ireland, represented synecdochically as Innisfail, as a suitable subject for poetry, blaming her isolation on the country’s mistrust of her gender and her background.

This chapter’s introduction to Salkeld, offered an introduction to her narrative career and her engagement with current political and cultural events at home and abroad through her poetry. This overview of her trajectory and principle themes prepares us now to move on, in the next chapter, to treat her second and third collections. These will not only further establish Salkeld as an innovative poet who rises above typical, period verse from Ireland in the 1930s but will demonstrate that she is a figure who deserves recognition as a major contributor to international modernism.

## Chapter Two: Blanaid Salkeld's Feminist Modernism in the 1930s

### “Ut”

Quite stoop your heads down first, before you enter:  
A secret spot, the fox's covert, greenly veiled;  
Leave alert fear of the hunt, like a sheath, empaled  
Without, on some thorn-bush that guards his centre.

-Blanaid Salkeld  
*The Fox's Covert*, 1935

In the previous chapter I provided a brief introduction to the cultural and political climate that surrounded Blanaid Salkeld as she forged her career during the 1930s—a decade characterized in Ireland by the “Irish-Ireland” mode: insular, repressive, and National Catholic. The survey of several literary journals gave a sketch of the arc of her career. This offered a glimpse of recurring themes in Salkeld's work : her early preoccupation with the treatment and dismissal of women in society, her revising of female myths to promote strong independent female voices, her alignment of modernity with freedom and progressive views of the world, and her concern over questions of right-wing, patriarchal authority on a national and international level. A look at *Hello, Eternity!* foregrounded her feminist politics, focusing on issues of female authorship and citizenship, and demonstrated a burgeoning interest in politics on an international level.

*Hello, Eternity!* prepares us to now take a look at Salkeld's second and third books, *The Fox's Covert* (1935) and . . . *the engine is left running* (1937). These two rise above any typical period verse and represent her major contributions to Ireland's late modernism (recently recovered), as well as international modernism, stylistically and thematically. Following the arc of the survey in chapter one, as seen in poems like “Laetitia Sighs” and “Zoo,” I will first look at Salkeld's long, formally innovative poem *The Fox's Covert* as representative of Salkeld's desire



to revise and invert traditional gender roles, and Catholic and classical female myths. Through these topics, her main preoccupation of asserting women's right to write shines through. I will follow with Salkeld's last collection. Out of her first three, . . . *the engine is left running* is her most modern and complex in both style and theme. In the same year the National Catholic new Constitution re-defined women as mothers, Salkeld founded her own printing press and self-published her most modern, liberal, and critical book. In line with the review of the magazines, her poetic subject's voice feminist politics concerned with the marginal on both national and international stages. While differing stylistically from each other, both *The Fox's Covert* and . . . *the engine is left running* prove the importance of recovering Salkeld. She should not simply be an asterisk by the names of her younger Irish peers such as Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey and Louis MacNeice, who recently have been lauded for "perpetually reimagin[ing] and contest[ing] the reality and potential of the new Irish state" (Gillis 2). As the government adopted fascist laws to restrict women's position in society, Salkeld impressively continued to attack these cultural and political prejudices with her poetry. Additionally, these collections show Salkeld to be a part of a broader international female modernism in peripheral Catholic Europe: women poets challenging conservative notions of gender and urgently writing to promote a modern world-view promising equality and freedom.

## I.

*The Fox's Covert* is an 84 page long feminist poem made up of 156 stanzas in which Salkeld revises and inverts stereotypical images of women, asserts her position as writer, and critiques men's view of women as inferior creatures destined to serve men since before Adam

and Eve.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, she does so all the while employing a new stanza form she invents solely for use in this text. Her polemical purpose though, necessarily cloaked, given the political and cultural atmosphere in which she was writing, hence the word “covert” in her title.

I will discuss the book’s unusual form before analyzing the poem, but first I want to emphasize the stifling mood and tone that hung over women writers by briefly considering the book’s review in *The Dublin Magazine*. Published in the December issue in 1935, this review highlights the increasing bias against women writers in Ireland and the plain ignorance of the dominant male reader who blindly refuses to read value in this woman poet’s work. Once again we see a reviewer who is unable to separate Salkeld’s gender from her writing. Criticizing its “fragmentary” quality, he states:

It is perhaps a psychic grace woman learns and translates from nature—the power of being able to suggest a light polish of infinity over the jagged edges of finite things and so give an illusion of completeness to the intrinsically unfinished avoiding skillfully the opposed dissatisfaction of niggling petrefaction and slovenly unfulfilment. (83)

The aureate diction here is intended to sound impressive and erudite; the sexism, too, is overt. The reviewer sarcastically praises the notion of women’s guile or her ability to ‘pretty’ up things of little substance. The review continues with further back-handed compliments and seeks to explain to the reader the distinguishing traits of these new women writers:

The qualities here indicated might be said to be of a definitely feminine nature, but they are not invariably destined to find expression in the work of women artists. Opening eyes of perception on a world of male values, and having as a

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<sup>24</sup> I will be using page numbers to identify the different stanzas from *The Fox’s Covert* in place of using line numbers.

race but recently swallowed at a gulp the cultural self-consciousness the male race has taken centuries to assimilate, women artists often find it natural and congenial to sell their instinctive birthright for a mess of cerebral pottage. This poet, ... has been able to assimilate the hard-won self-consciousness, and express without aggression a purely feminine attitude with all the pristine grace of unselfconsciousness. (83)

The contempt he has for women writers is barely concealed beneath his suggestion that women are trying their hardest to “assimilate” “male values.” The one thing *The Fox's Covert* has going for her seems to be her avoidance of anything untoward, “agressi[ve],” or expressing conscious thought. As we will see, this leads to the question whether or not the reviewer actually *read* the book with any degree of attentiveness.

In a different take, the Irish feminist Hannah Sheehy Skeffington gave a series of lectures in 1938, entitled “Irish Women Poets of Today” and “Women Poets and Revolution,” where she discusses *The Fox's Covert*:

Coming to the moderns, Blanaid Salkeld [...] is most representative. Her oddly named *Hello, Eternity* and *Fox's Covert* have placed her in the first rank.... [*The Fox's Covert*] consists of a series of loosely woven stanzas, forming a running commentary on life as lived in its daily found by the author.... She has lively and unusual poetic imagery and can make a tram ride to the office or the click of a typewriter evoke magic.... There is an elusive charm about her poems that is impossible to get across in brief extracts. These gossamer-delicate vignettes of soul moods are evasive as clouds. (1)

In her second lecture, she reiterates “among the Irish women poets,... [Salkeld] stands out,” her first two “volumes contain poems ... with a distinctively modern quality as to form and technique.” A couple of things are immediately noticeable in these observations. The first is the recognition of Salkeld’s importance within the Irish contemporary poetry scene and of her participation in the public sphere; the second is her remark on the “gossamer” and “evasive” qualities of *The Fox’s Covert*. Knowing Sheehy Skeffington’s life-long commitment to the advancement of women’s concerns,<sup>25</sup> and taking into consideration the titles of the lectures, initially her comments can be interpreted as vague and elusive in their own right. The so-called evasiveness observed by the lecturer could be understood as Salkeld’s personal struggle with the concealment necessary for a woman poet to succeed in a restrictive environment. It also, though, can be read as her desire to write challenging and modern verse, boldly declaring a disinterest in producing repeated forms of popular, nationalist poetry for mass consumption. This is especially interesting given Moynagh Sullivan’s observation (noted in the previous chapter) that her reviewers “describ[ed] 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” (183). A detailed reading of *The Fox’s Covert* shows Salkeld keenly aware of the need to cloak, or hide in a “covert,” her ideas in language and images deemed permissible by the ruling conservative class. Throughout the long poem, she bravely challenges accepted forms of feminine propriety and unmasks men’s hypocrisy and condescension by pushing the boundaries of masculine language. Thus, Sheehy Skeffington’s statement that *The Fox’s Covert* forms “a running commentary on life as lived in its daily found by [Salkeld]” does little justice to its originality and complexity.

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<sup>25</sup> For more information on Hannah Sheehy Skeffington’s life see Margaret Ward. *Hannah Sheehy Skiffington: A Life*. Cork: Attic Press, 1997.

There are four main features that make this book particularly impressive. The first is its unique stanza form. In 1971, Austin Clarke specifically praised Salkeld's invention of a particular, new stanza form in a letter to Professor Seán Lucy of University College Cork, trying unsuccessfully to argue for the inclusion of a few women poets in a college lecture series in Ireland.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, he was referring to *The Fox's Covert*.<sup>27</sup> Its 156 stanzas are all eight lines in length, calling to mind Lord Byron's use of the Italian *ottava rima* in his mock-epic poem *Don Juan*. The stanza's second and eight lines, though, are short rhyming lines written in dimeter, with the other six longer ones written for the most part in hexameter. The purpose of these two short ones vary: at times they provide an emphatic finish to the previous line, begin a new line, or offer a parenthetical thought to the speaker's musings. Salkeld's sustained experiment here with hexameter connects her to the few other English language poets who have also used it, including fellow countryman W.B. Yeats. Hexameters also suggest a genealogical link to the classical Greek epic poems traditionally written in that meter.

These first two characteristics at once connect her to her modernist contemporaries, and to a wider classical poetic tradition by joining together innovation and experimental use with

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<sup>26</sup> In Clarke's letter, he states: "I have been struck by the few references to any woman writers; the speakers seem to be typically Irish in this matter.... I write this note in the hope that some amends may be made—perhaps even a lecture devoted to our women writers and poets". On May 4, 1971 Prof. Lucy replied: "I must say ... that I am not fully convinced that such a lecture would be called for, though it would be a nice thought.... I know you realize that it is not only good women poets who are neglected, but in fact many writers who deserve mention are unfortunately but unavoidable left out. The Mercier Press are very interested in publishing the series as book, and I think that such publication might give us a chance to make some amends, either by extending the material already in the talks or by putting in additional notes and appendices. I feel that this would be the best way to make amends to the women writers and to other writers who have been neglected" (1).

<sup>27</sup> Clarke continued, "[Salkeld] returned later to tradition, invented a new stanza and, in her late seventies, wrote a series of sonnets which are, in my opinion, as good as anything Emily Dickenson has written. Mr. Montague did not mention this fact and I assume *that he has never even heard her name.*" (1)

traditional form. An important third feature is her chosen unique rhyme scheme, a, b, a, c, c, a, a, b, that recalls the *ottava rima*'s rhyme scheme (a, b, a, b, a, b, c, c).<sup>28</sup> The stanzas' length, meter and odd rhyme scheme can produce striking and jarring effects. Salkeld plays at times with punctuation, alliteration and word choice, varying the sound and the intensity of the stanzas to emphasize different themes and moods. For example, the repetition and parallelism in stanza XXII effectively express the weariness and frustration of being powerless to leave a mark on the world. The first line initially appears to be filled with life, but the rhythm of the words drum monotonously, leading to a sense of expiration of will and hope:

Rosemary, hyssop, lavender, rue, ...  
 .....  
 I, too, their planter, wither—living down and down;  
 Four times a day, shuttled to and fro through the town;  
 From my bed to desk, from desk to bed—and no trace  
 Leave on day's loom, nor with cipher of leaf or face  
 Sign the blank world. (17)

In stanza XLV, Salkeld avoids flowery language in favor of short direct words with a strong alliterative quality to establish a no-nonsense tone and to comment on the challenges and prejudices that women poets face as they work to chip away at the rigid role of cold muse:

But we, still stiff and formal with the marble pose,  
 Shall, loftiness forgetting, will with will enclose  
 In stern constraint—and challenge Time's rough interlude  
 To storm across the void! ... (17)

Note for instance the repetitive hard sounding “t’s” throughout, “But,” “still stiff,” “loftiness forgetting,” “stern constraint,” and “To storm,” all help create the sense of a rigid and still statue attempting to become more fluid evoked by the contrasting alliteration of the softer “l’s,” “formal,” “marble,” “shall,” and “will with will enclose.”

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<sup>28</sup> There are two exceptions found in stanzas VI & CII where the rhyme schemes are a, b, a, c, c, -, b, b & a, b, a, a, a, a, a, b respectively.

These three characteristics complement the fourth, most important feature of the poem – the issues that Salkeld addresses in the book. *The Fox's Covert* mockingly attacks the “new Ireland’s” xenophobic reaction to European modernity, but above all, it unequivocally defends women, specifically women poets, at the height of the government’s project to silence their voices. A few examples where Salkeld addresses the difficulties of female authorship are seen in stanza IV (“From the cold and wild merman I have concealed well,/ Motherly-wise./ A small flame-holiness, male envy cannot quell”) (8), LII (“Sorrow makes the heart too wise, so I cannot sing—/ Grimly controlled/ By this too might teacher”) (32), LXXVI (“Oh, the fox is afraid, though hunger makes him numb,/.../ Fierce is his spirit: but that cunning has him dumb,/ Wild he could cry out on the senseless tribe of death!/.../ Still, he must hide”) (44), and CXXI (“Some poets jests, you say, to make the little less?/ .../ My fellow fox was trapped, clapped into strait duress./.../ They pelted him with death. Sent me his fur to dress” (67).

Salkeld’s work is especially remarkable when a quick look is taken at contemporary poet Eavan Boland, considered the “‘matriarch’ of Irish women’s poetry” (Hynes 148). Reflecting on the beginning of her career, Boland says:

On the one hand, I knew that as a poet I could not easily do without the idea of a nation. Poetry in every time draws on that reserve. On the other, I could not as a woman accept the nation formulated for me by Irish poetry and its traditions. At one point it even looked to me as if the whole thing might be made up of irreconcilable differences... unless, that is I could repossess it. (qtd. in K. Kirkpatrick 6)

Additionally, “according to Boland, it is only recently that ‘women have moved from being the subjects and objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them’” (González Arias 195). Much

of Boland's poetry has focused on "revising the mythic representations of women as renewable creatures (as either hags or young queens)" and "aim[ed] to uncover a more complex version of the nation" (House 103, Broom 115). There is no denying how important Boland's poetry has been in rewriting the contemporary definition of Irish identity, and I do not wish to argue otherwise. Incredibly though, what Boland is recognized and lauded for is exactly what Salkeld does in her second collection; its themes break ground fifty to sixty years earlier than previously acknowledged. Taken as a whole, they express deep "anguish" at the reductive roles assigned to women, "sweet girl, souring hag— / paint or vitriol in a bag" ("Fa" 9), with an active purpose to expose and revise them. The book rejects the belief of an authentic Irish identity based on Catholic nationalist ideals, and presents a first-hand understanding of the damaging effects that "the nation as woman; the woman as national muse" has on women writers (Boland qtd. in Broom 114). In an example from the last twenty years of the unfair and negative impact of Salkeld being erased from the national canon, Boland claimed in her 1990 essay "Outside History" that there was no Irish female literary tradition for her to follow or get inspiration from. In present day Ireland, Boland is considered the foremost important female poet, lauded for being the first to introduce such feminist themes as found in Salkeld's *The Fox's Covert*.

The epic's *praeposito*, titled "Prelude," is made up of seven poems named after the seven musical notes varying in form, length, and rhyme. The "Prelude" gives a snapshot of the three themes I will focus on in Salkeld's second collection. The first poem, titled "Ut" and quoted at the beginning of this chapter, gives the book its title and invites the reader into the poet's safe and "secret spot" where she can be free:<sup>29</sup> "The hid fox needs no guile; ... / ... / A secret spot,

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<sup>29</sup> Ut, in Western music, is known as the central note, the home base that all other notes revolve around and return to. This holds true for the poem "Ut's" message, since it introduces the reader to the recurring preoccupation of having to conceal one's art in the current climate.



the fox's covert, greenly veiled" (1). As she did with the "peahen" in the previous chapter, the poet once again re-appropriates an animal and reinscribes it in feminist terms. Playing on the notion of vixen, Salkeld identifies with the "fox" in this conservative "green" climate where women are in need of safe spaces to challenge the roles assigned to them by society's "sightless men": "I feel mocking flick / Of lids—back-anger's prick— / Towards hearth and private pen" ("Sol" 3-4). In spite of writing from the margins, Salkeld cunningly succeeds at moving the woman from the object to the subject of the poem. Salkeld roots herself in her current historical period, expressing loss and anger at the marginalization of women due to the cultural and political changes post-independence. She also hopes for change though, by arguing that this treatment is hypocritical and even ridiculous.

A second recurring theme in *The Fox's Covert* is a discussion of the value of poetic modernism. Salkeld's "I" rejects the definition of Irish literature promoted by Daniel Corkery as insular and stagnant, while reflecting on the composition and purpose of poetry in "Fa":

Typewriter merry clicks,  
crisp paper cheery flicks;  
little chair, stiff and hard:  
austerity suits a bard— (3).

It is worth noting too, Salkeld's cosmopolitan point of view sees freedom beyond the borders of the island while Ireland systematically oppresses the other for not belonging. Salkeld, aware of her loneliness, cannot help but question if the effort is worth the fight. In "Si" a car speeds her subject past a "lone man" who symbolically "sway[s] his melodeon / at a crossroads" (5). This fleeting vision impresses upon her the temporality of her work, and reveals a crisis of confidence as to whether she should proceed or not. The reader is left wondering, will she find the strength to rise above the silencing of disempowered voices: "for long I wondered / ... / will he sway on, nor step draw near him / any morrow gaily, on the road to Howth?" (5).

A third theme is a revision of “mythic representations of women” to expose the trap that they set out for them. As mentioned, creating an authentic, purely Catholic identity depends on the woman’s ability to produce a homogenous nationalist citizen. With the changes to the constitution, “the ideal of the Catholic Irish mother” became “modeled on the Virgin Mary,” with the expectation that women be submissive, asexual and pure (Schraege-Früh 124). The effect the government and the Church’s success had at creating impossible standards for women to follow is widely apparent in contemporary women’s poetry, with recurring attempts to overcome women’s sense of low self-worth. Though Salkeld does not directly mention the Virgin in her stanzas, her revisions of the Muse, Eve and other female myths and legends expose the harm they have on real women and place the poet ahead of her time. When women fail to be like their perfect sisters on pedestals, they are hypocritically blamed for their failings, and their behavior is controlled through the power of shame and guilt. The poetic “I” in “Re” hints at her desire to overcome these models and find her own path:

noiseless I dropped like a star,  
and with little regard  
as pillared stone—  
crashed flat into Earth’s hard  
and muddy breast-bone! (1)

Salkeld rejects the unattainable hard and cold stone muse, indicated by the image of “star” and “pillared stone,” in favor of a real woman, shaped and affected by the messy and “muddy” life.

Once the “Prelude” is over the epic’s opening stanza proper speaks to the first theme as Salkeld works within the expected tradition to push against the hegemonic boundaries. Moynagh Sullivan comments that Salkeld’s “early work grew out of the Revival” (182), this stanza shows her actually reappropriating its language and images in order to disguise her ideas. At first

glance, words such as “pride,” “holy,” “hope,” “rain,” “Anna Liffey,”<sup>30</sup> and “Gogarty’s swans”<sup>31</sup> paint a romantic picture that adheres to the “Irish Ireland” requirements for poetry: religion, land and masculinity. On closer inspection, Salkeld in fact critiques these tenets by juxtaposing these words with ones that unmask the idyllic to reveal a grim and stifling reality: “pain,” “fall,” “ghouls,” “grinding drabness,” “despair,” “weary leaden,” “chained.” She also subverts “a feminized symbol of Ireland” (Hynes 148): “Lo, as I toilwards, chained to loveless angers, ride— / In early rain, on Anna Liffey’s darkened tide— / Gogarty’s swans!” (7). These calm pastoral swans are hijacked by a wild, unrestrained vixen possessing and riding the river once only tamed by men. There is no reverence for old Revival symbols here; instead, she invokes the name of the unpredictable poet Oliver St. John Gogarty. As a senator of the Irish Free State, Gogarty voiced his personal opposition to De Valera and his government in several occasions. In a frank declaration against the passing of the 1929 Censorship Bill, Gogarty pronounced:

As a matter of fact I do not think that there should be a Bill of this kind at all. It is simply super-imposing a worthy attempt to get rid of certain practices that are coming in here from England. We have had all this hullabaloo about sex. I think it is high time that the people of this country found some other way of loving God than by hating women. (“Censorship”)

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<sup>30</sup> References to the River Liffey as Anna Liffey go back as far as 1830. A chapter in James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* is titled “Anna Livia Plurabelle.” One of Eavan Boland’s most famous poems struggling with the representation of woman as Ireland is titled “Anna Liffey.” Hynes observes of Boland, “as a woman poet she is still, . . ., usurping a name and a theme by adopting a female perspective as she describes the geography of Ireland, so often the voice of a geographical and feminized symbol of Ireland, the River Liffey” (148).

<sup>31</sup> During the Irish Civil War, Oliver St. John Gogarty was pro-Treaty and was kidnapped by the opposition. He managed to escape by diving in to the River Liffey. A few years later, after a promise made to the river for saving his life, he donated a couple of swans to it as thanks.

Interestingly, this raises two important issues relevant to Salkeld's poetry. The first is the government's unreasonable fear of anything English (or foreign), and the second is the blatant sexism present in the government. About five years later, De Valera succeeded in abolishing the Senate, asserting: "a hostile Seanad [was] constantly attempting to harass the government by mutilating its measures or willfully delaying them" (qtd. in Bennett *Seanad Debates*). Gogarty vehemently opposed this: "the Seanad is the only safeguard against not a dictatorship of the future, but a dictatorship already set up, a dictatorship of the Artful Dodger, [that] stands between them and the furtherance of dictatorship" ("Constitution"). During the same debate in June 1934, he accused De Valera of benefiting from the comfort of the "British-begotten Constitution" while "increase[ing] hatred, with the implication that there [was] increased patriotism in the measure of his hate" ("Constitution"). These are damning charges against the leader of the Irish Free State, and support the issues raised in the previous chapter about Ireland's swing towards fascism. Salkeld's reference to Gogarty's name, given his public attacks of De Valera, suggest an unequivocal political position hidden behind the citation of a respected nationalist poet; cheekily, she heads off in a direction of her choosing.

The poet continues to refer to the Revival to shore up her defense against her critics by voicing her loyalty to the fight for Irish independence. She pointedly uses the past tense of the verb love in XVII to recognize the shift from the promising past to the present day reality: "I loved my brother Padraic, as one loves one's kind" (15). Using the Irish form of Patrick, Salkeld's voice is nostalgic but again she uses the Celtic tradition to cloak her current disapproval. In the past, nationalism happily trumped feminism when a sense of equality permeated the fight for independence, there was "no he-and-she,/ While he spun his tales, and [she] spoke out [her] mind." She "loved" the Irish renaissance, embodied by "Padraic" with "his

lofty Dante look,” “soft Gaelic speech” and “reverent hand on the printed book.” The sadness is for something dead and “buried” that cannot be recovered; promises have been broken.

One of the first moves after independence was a clear attempt by men to reclaim their dominance. Salkeld’s need for a “covert” is a problem commonly found in many women’s work throughout history, a need for “a room of one’s own”: “Fearlessly curled, / Set in contentment. ‘Twas my enclosure, that small / Untidy garden;” (XXI 17). This stanza ends by acknowledging the violent rights granted to men not only to reclaim the public sphere but also to mark their territory in private: “He stamps his wet boots in my hall— / Owing my world” (XXI 17). The ownership of space bleeds into men’s sense of entitlement when it comes to manipulating women for their own personal gain. In “XXX,” despair overwhelms when “[men’s] natures prevail” (5) and reveal that they have intentionally misled those who loved and trusted in them:

‘I will praise my wild forbears, ...  
.....  
Though these undo me,’ she cried, to men’s silent hate.  
‘These I loved, these am. Little wonder, my hope failed—  
.....  
Slowly she died. (21)

Salkeld’s use of the third person here, shifts the woman from subject back to object emphasizing the sense of alienation felt over the treatment of women by her own nation. Salkeld makes the point that it is “men’s silent hate” that has driven her to voice her defense of her gender, something which she once believed to be unnecessary.

The seeming hopelessness here is countered by a strong female voice that shows confidence and a self-awareness of her position in society. She has learned to adapt and has survived until now: “From the cold and wild merman I have concealed well, / Motherly-wise. / A small flame-holiness, male envy cannot quell” (IV 8). The “I” musters strength from her maternal instincts to protect and nurture her own “prize” from the male majority, as well as the

‘prizes’ of her fellow women. In another instance, which recalls Yeats’s warning of centrifugal chaos in “The Second Coming,” the speaker strives to build a solid, unshakeable core out of sheer will that will protect her from outside forces bearing down. This center, though, does not threaten to fall apart:

Coiled about my own centre closely, I will squeeze  
Darkness all out.  
Axle of steel: ...  
    I require but the lasting hub—  
Drawing in, static, earth—air—and those stars that grub  
Deep in wet hollows. One temper my will decrees:  
To harden, solidify, immutably freeze—  
Selfed against doubt. (66)

Salkeld embraces any serpentine connotations that “coiled” may possess; it offers a positive protective stance but it also prepares her to spring back into action, or to strike if provoked. The “I” centripetally “draw[s]” from natural elements to create a sense of control and poise as well as a striking sense of command. She also refers to being encouraged by other women, “stars,” who have shunned the fantasy to “grub / Deep in wet hollows.” There is no passivity: “I will squeeze,” “steel,” “I require,” “lasting hub,” “harden,” “solidify,” “freeze,” all paint a picture of an assertive and independent woman that takes a defiant stance to protect herself. Salkeld demonstrates a surprising level of comfort deploying conventionally masculine language without feeling the need to distance herself from it or otherwise compromise her femininity.

The confidence that Salkeld has in herself is all the more impressive in light of the hostile environment that surrounds her and that seems to suggest that any struggle is futile:

My fellow fox was trapped, clapped into strait duress.  
.....  
    —and so, between his bars,  
They pelted him with death. Sent me his fur to dress.  
    Delicatesse  
Warms not the dead. (67)

Her anger and scorn at the cruel targeting of a caged animal is palpable and highlighted by the maliciously hissing sounds of “s” and the spitting “p’s” and “t’s.” The gruesomeness with which she aligns the usually delicate vision of women richly dressed in furs speaks to men’s disparagement of women and the propagation of a stereotype that paints them above all else as superficial and materialistic. Salkeld exposes these attitudes as absurd, and mocks the men’s infantilization and dehumanization of women. Nevertheless, she by no means disregards the danger that they pose. She is fully aware of the legal authority they have on women’s lives:

This unloved infant of oneself to be washed still,  
Garmented, fed,  
Till breath is gone—and for corruption’s perverse will  
To chop and change! No scented dust, nor costly oil,  
Will keep us fresh—embroidered silks, or gems, or toil,  
Or languorous airs: within the intangible crucible  
We are drained, stuffed, and sliced, half cooked, degraded—till  
Flesh is all shed. (65)

The opening line offers a curious image: a specific third person noun coupled with an indefinite reflexive pronoun, stirring feelings of confusion and disassociation between an identifiable thing and an unknown self. The image is complicated by the use of the possessive “of”; it initially and naturally points to a child, as object, belonging to a separate subject, in the same way a mother may feel her child is a part of herself. Yet, within the context, Salkeld cleverly points to the mistreatment of women as children instead of adults, unable to consciously make up their own minds and certainly not able to take care of themselves. This mocking critique is emphasized by the line ending with the impersonal passivity of the need “to be washed still,” followed by two other actions that are imposed on infants, and that strips all agency from women. The irony, of course, is that the women under this regime are viewed solely as mothers, and are trusted to educate and shape future citizens, but are not respected enough to be treated as equal citizens. By the penultimate line the subject has found her first person voice, identifying herself with a plural

“We,” yet aware of her current status as an inanimate object. This politically charged commentary becomes more focused as she accuses the “corrupt” government of arrogantly “chop[ing] and chang[ing]” the Constitution to safeguard men’s dominance by legally defining women’s roles and rights. The governing ‘mother’ though, lacks all maternal instincts, and from birth to death, women are to be looked after—“till breath is gone”—as perverse taxidermic trophies to be displayed, or as prized turkeys to be enjoyed and consumed at a later date. Again, the poet mixes images of femininity with thoughts of death, refusing to play along with expected notions of masculine or feminine language.

Salkeld’s argument for modernism is intricately tied up with her defense of women and women poets. In Salkeld’s promotion of the new, she makes it a point to expose men as the ones who clutch to the past – afraid of the unknown. Her tone shifts from accusatory: “They all would have me stoop and prod into the rank/ Dustbins of life” 16) to one of ridicule and incomprehension at their tunnel vision “Why essay to lift drowned forms that sank / Where I escaped?” (16) and “What darks their eye to beauty? Makes live heart twist / To mechanism? / From splendours?” (24). The series of questions stress the speaker’s personal confusion at the rejection of beauty by the repetition of the repeated “I” versus a distant plural third person. She believes in the power of the new to breathe life into a dull and stagnant atmosphere: “Though Advent gloom, cold air, bare balsied boughs persist— / I cannot tire of those white gulls through the clear mist, / Spruce modernism!” (24). The fact that the darkening religious mood threatens progress does not dampen the optimism that “persists” expressed by the alliterative “b,” contrasting lightness with the heavy “cold” and giving flight to hope and a belief in a light and concise approach to art. The last line, with only two words, hints at Salkeld’s enthusiasm for the breath of fresh air that modernism represents to her. Like a crisp green, verdant tree full of life it



stands as a symbol of hope in the “Advent gloom” and sets up a series of stanzas that place the subject of poetry at its center, wondering about its meaning and purpose.

In both CXXXVIII and CXXXIX Salkeld muses on the purpose of poetry. Her guard is up against the charge of being labeled by dominant voices a feminine poet and, hence, a weak or inferior writer. However, while she is suspicious of completely “drown[ing] reason, and let feeling rule” (76), she does not completely buy into the “dull” declaration that “prose may exhort and teach; [but] true verse has no such task” (75). Instead, she advises:

Fasten the tongue  
Firm unto muteness, till the dull preacher is slain!  
.....

The sudden-risen spark sets fire to painted mask  
Of hypocrite thought, surface motions of joy and pain.  
Come, Spring, about me, flood out reason—with that plain  
Strength of the young! (75)

Echoing her passion for something new suggested in the earlier stanza XXXVI, “I cannot tire of those white gulls through the clear mist,/ Spruce modernism!” the “I” charges for something exciting and different. She clearly encourages the wild passion of youth to attack the old forms. According to her, what makes “the best of poetry” and “lasting verse” is an “authentic record of the common heart,” and “life’s / Sharp intimacies, pitiful charities and strifes” (CXXXVII 75). For Irish literature these lines defend at an unexpectedly early date women’s concerns as being rightfully valid poetic subjects. The poet though, needs to find a steady balance in the presentation of an “authentic record” in order to avoid superficial “thoughts” (75), “hysteria” (75), or dramatic “panic and shriek / Of nerves and senses” (76), which are “not fit crew for stately verse” (76). At first reading these assertions appear to distance the poet from what was typically thought of as feminine poetry; yet amusingly, they also can be read as a critical view of the nationalist movement’s propaganda and self-involvement, hysterically protecting the nation’s

identity from a perceived foreign threat. Above all, Salkeld declares that poetry is “not weak” (25). She warns (and correctly predicts) that not breaking from the past will lead to a dark cultural future and encourage an intellectual drain from the nation (Fogarty 213; Ingman 15):

We prize but what is lost; ...  
.....  
And while vain scorn dries up the heart, our betters die.  
Their noble ghosts halt by us, leisurely they halt,  
To smart our lids with salt remorse...  
.....  
So the warm founts of wisdom in us frozen, die— (54)

Salkeld adopts a more universal “we” over the gendered “I” correlating the fate of women with that of the country. In a twist on the usual gendering of the Irish nation, where Kathleen Ní Houlihan was in need of rescuing from the foreign occupiers, Ireland is now threatened by the “vain scorn” of its own citizens that reject any platform that might be considered as other.

Salkeld’s cosmopolitan and metropolitan points of view see borders as stifling and limiting rather than as protection. Predating her open engagement with international politics during the Spanish Civil War, Salkeld looks outward to places like Serbia, France, India, Japan and Germany to find connections, comfort and a sense of belonging abroad. Salkeld’s preferred version of modernity shines through. It embraces a global perspective that supports equality and freedom of expression, and it opposes a fascist National Catholic patriarchy. The stanzas that refer to beyond the Irish borders convey a belief that art thrives with freedom and without restraints on movement.<sup>32</sup> Her poetic subject though, continues to be rooted in Ireland and a series of stanzas set on a tram ride through the city further ridicule the unequal treatment of women:

On the tram-top this morning every passenger  
Sounded his cough.

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<sup>32</sup> Also see stanzas XIII, XXVII, XXVIII and XLVIII.

I too coughed. Change of the weather. The same set stir  
Of similar machines. We are all one! I thought—  
The like reactions to a cause...

.....  
We are all peppered out of the one canister... (56)

Salkeld strips away the superficial differences between men and women to reveal that the mechanics underneath it all are the same. It seems that she finds commonality in these strangers through the dehumanization of them all.

Despite what she believes to be obvious, women are forced to follow a different set of laws. Stanza CIX shifts from a “we” to a distant third person “she” to call attention to the separation and alienation of women from the rest of society. The initial lines continue the same thought from the stanza above: “In the tram always at one halt she cranes her neck. / Seeing the way/ She stares, the passengers peer, too....” Their parallel actions unify them, but this solidarity stops once it becomes clear that “she” is a creature that may move like “them” but experiences different things:

...but, not a speck  
Of interest! Dull houses, with their doors all shut. ...  
But she sees office steps that know the upward strut  
Of morning zeal, and the late, listless homeward trek;  
Her memories stretch towards that place, like birds that peck  
Where the sheaf lay. (61)

The image of “[d]ull houses,” recalls Ibsen’s doll house, and repeats the sensation of disconnection and alienation felt in Salkeld’s poem “Templeogue” discussed in the previous chapter. That initial commonality between herself and the “peer[ing]” “passangers” is lost once it becomes clear that she does not relate to the private sphere associated with women. The conjunction “but” is repeated; the first use expressing what “they” don’t see, and the second, “but she sees,” emphasizes her different personal experience. These lines specifically target the forcing of women to abandon their work, and the pain and desperation experienced at giving up

hope for a life that they choose.<sup>33</sup> Homes are uninviting and non-comforting while the work place is alive with movement, “strut,” and energy “zeal”; the differences between her and them and home and work, underlined by the superfluous ellipses at the end of line 4. The “I” once more is out of place.

*The Fox's Covert* makes a case for Salkeld's vision of modernity: a tolerant multicultural society open to the world offering equal rights and freedom to all of its citizens. This does not mean she is blindly advocating all forms of modernity as agents of good. She observes that advancements in technology can be appropriated for the purpose of government propaganda. Feelings of despair and entrapment shine through as she sarcastically agrees with the policy that there is no need to look beyond the borders:

Blessed age of Cinema. We need not go abroad—  
.....  
To see grouped elephants stand sculpture-still, the nod  
Of courting tigers—hear a river's mangled floor  
Boom with the hippopotamus's godly roar.  
Yet, senses sealed by busybody thought—a clod  
I am—mere clay, that when the light has ceased to prod,  
Blanket entombs. (71)

The disdain felt in the first line is clear. The life, action and sound in lines three to five are exposed as fantasy, and come to an abrupt stop. The excitement ends instantly in the following line with the conjunction ‘yet.’ It underlines that cinema is only a temporary and artificial escape promoted with electric light that inevitably reveals the true lifeless state of the subject once it is shut off. Salkeld's defense of women and of modernism reflect an acute awareness of the social and cultural Dark Age toward which Ireland was heading towards. Recurring images of darkness, present in the stanza above, represent an absence of freedom and the metaphorical death of art, both of which Salkeld hopes to avoid.

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<sup>33</sup> Also see stanza CX.

One of the most hopeful parts of *The Fox's Covert* is her dedication to unifying women “in [a] sisterly light,” attempting to enlighten them by showing how patriarchal hegemony monitors and controls women in their public and private lives (68). First, she focuses on convincing them that false fears are implanted in women’s psyche to stop them from questioning social and political restrictions:

We are so teased  
With shadowy toils and snares and images of dread,  
We take these phantoms for reality...  
.....  
There is no true abyss—and only in the head  
Demons appear, our fears—by these we are misled,  
Starved and diseased. (37)

Again the ominous alliterative “s” hisses out anger at those responsible for the lies that mislead. There is another allusion, “teased,” at the treatment of women as children. Also, the references to shadows, dread and demons—all evoking darkness—speak to the removal of women’s agency as being tormented: “starved and diseased.” Her implications appear to shift to accusations in the following stanza when she firmly rejects men’s fear-mongering techniques: “fear is sin” (37). Her efforts to overcome darkness continue with the revision of the fixed roles that promote the belief that “woman can be poetry, but not poet” and that dictate what is socially accepted behavior.

One of the first “mythic representations” Salkeld seeks to dismantle in *The Fox's Covert* is the figure of the muse. She argues that it only serves to perpetuate the belief that women are objects, and it promotes a fantasy that is impossible to incarnate. This fantasy that has been sold to women is represented in the poems by a “dream,” and the poet seeks to wake women up and show them their true potential. This “dream” causes crippling insecurities in women, making them doubt themselves and each other as they struggle to please those in power:

Darkness about us. Yet we shall, my heart resolves—  
.....  
Step from our pedestals, once clarity dissolves  
This night; salute each other with a modest bow;  
Speak simple dreamless words and deepen ‘here’ and ‘now.’  
For we have wronged each other, dreaming... (28)

Salkeld strives to alert women that this dream is false. The “I” suggests if women are able to overcome the damaging images that divide them then they can become each other’s advocate. The poet’s concept of modernism looks toward a future that involves progress, equal rights, and open borders. In order to overcome their oppressed position, Salkeld advises women to avoid the conventional “feminine” language associated with women and favored by the “Irish Ireland” mode and instead be clear and direct. (Ironically, of course, she has to “covertly” express her message to her fellow women. *The Fox’s Covert* repeats this tension throughout, the need to speak out combined with an acknowledgement of present-day limitations on such speech).

In a strikingly critical stanza comparing women on pedestals to bound cattle, the poet continues her argument against the muse:<sup>34</sup>

NOT TO BELIEVE that we move, dangled from a star,  
Tethered and cramped?  
Even our thoughts’ wild sparks fall back on us, to scar.  
Unto the untrod green the fool thinks to escape;  
Having cropped here, we scent sweet pasturage, we gape.  
Sooner let us sigh up to where our masters are!  
Though curt our liberty, how long that leash, afar  
Riveted, clamped! (34)

Her use of bombastic language to mock men who are threatened by women and modernism, stands out and evokes an overly dramatic stodgy poetic style. The capitalized first three words, linking to LXI and XLIV, simultaneously address women—begging them to reject both the “images of dread” and the “dream” sold to them—and men who love women as long as they are

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<sup>34</sup> For more stanzas on woman as muse see XLV, LXX, LXXI and CXV.

artificial. Salkeld subverts the usual magical and romantic connotations that are associated with stars and women as ethereal bodies. She roughly strips away this beautiful poetic quality by suggesting that this practice is a source that “tether[s] and cramp[s]” women’s freedom instead. This restriction is not solely physical; Salkeld carries the star metaphor through to the third line, beautifully imagining the containment of women’s “wild” “thoughts” like capturing and containing fireworks in a small space so that it burns the one who has let it go. Line four departs for a brief instant from a first person plural subject to an admonishing third person singular “fool.” The poet refers the resistance to her desire “to escape” and the strong pressure to introduce her back into Irish culture: “untrod green.” The star falls then from the sky to the earth, and the illusion is broken; despite glorifying the female in theory, in practice the use of this image to represent women promotes the belief that women are seen as nothing more than dumb animals who are owned by their “masters.” Salkeld’s sarcasm surfaces again in the penultimate line when she gratefully acknowledges that at least their “leash” is “long.” The final two words, though, mirror the second line’s two words, only the initial question mark—suggesting hesitation (“Tethered and cramped?”)—is replaced by an exclamation mark. This ends the poem with an emphatic declaration, women are bound like slaves by unattainable models of expected behavior: “Riveted, clamped!” Salkeld makes use of a heightened dramatic tone to convey her sense of fury and injustice while mocking those responsible.

One of the main claims in *Hello, Eternity!* becomes a central point in *The Fox’s Covert*. Though the Virgin Mary as the chaste role model for Irish women is never directly named, Salkeld hints at her presence by focusing on Eve and revises this mythic female stereotype promoted by De Valera’s National Catholic government. As she declared in “Finis” (“I had all missed/ Had Eve feared God”), she once again rejects the guilt, shame and accusation as the

source of original “sin” tied to Eve. Instead she is brazenly admired for her strength and individuality.<sup>35</sup> For the poet, Eve takes on a symbolic role as foremother of female poets:

Nakedness, that is majesty—pride without scorn—  
Truth without boast.  
As my undug grave shall get me—as I was born,  
So stand I unapproved, unloved—entirely free.  
Uprooted, so? Fallen? No. ... (33)

The opening two lines are full of meaning. To start, “Nakedness” must have stood out as the first word, shocking some readers by directing attention onto the human body. Of course, it immediately conjures up Eve and Adam frolicking naked in the Garden of Eden, before the dreaded Fall, and so ironically offers that cover(t) she needed. The use of “that is” is interesting; initially it can be read as the expression “that is to say,” offering a soft explanation of the first word by accompanying the noun with, what is in her mind, its equivalence, “majesty.” A reader could initially assume that Salkeld is simply referring to how it *was* before the Fall, but the lines that follow challenge this reading and I will discuss this further in a moment. In the various OED definitions of “majesty” the word “dignity” is repeated often, associating a sense of worthiness with this word—something women were obviously not seen as being. However, if “that” is read as a strong demonstrative pronoun by separating it from “is,” it takes on an argumentative tone. It places the emphasis on “majesty,” countering perhaps a previous discussion between the poetic “I” and an unknown “you” on what constitutes power and dignity. Salkeld expands on “Nakedness” and “majesty” by further defending this condition with a parallel explanation: “pride without scorn— / Truth without boast.” By embracing the positive qualities of “pride” and “truth,” attached to a sense of self-worth, she rejects the characteristics that partly define the cultural and political institutions that work together to keep women in their place, “scorn” and

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<sup>35</sup> For more stanzas on Eve, see XCI, XCII and XCIII.



“boast.” More specifically, she targets the idea that women should imitate the false models given to them.

What gives these lines added depth is the ability to read them, too, as a characteristically modernist call to strip away any unnecessary elements in poetry (as in, for example, Ezra Pound’s Three Principles of Imagism). Line three takes up the feisty, argumentative side of the opening lines and boldly moves the “nakedness” out of the safety of the Garden of Eden into the present day, polemically declaring that “freedom” comes with this natural state of being: “as I was born.” The “I” boldly and clearly states that she does not care if this is problematic for others, “stand I unapproved, unloved—entirely free.” This follows the sentiments found in the stanzas referring to other nations; here, clothes represent the border that restricts movement and growth. The symbolism of “roots” surfaces here a year before the poem “Poet, Retired” discussed in the previous chapter. Recalling her own complicated relationship with belonging, Salkeld mixes the Garden of Eden symbolism with the image of a fallen, “uprooted” tree with the Fall of Mankind. The poet not only embraces her “uprooted[ness],” a nod towards her status as exile in her own nation, but also emphatically rejects any blame or guilt that she might be made to feel.

I want to focus on two more revisions of female myths that interest the poet. The first is an old Irish legend of St. Kevin, the patron saint of Dublin, and the beautiful Cathleen. Two poems from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century deal with the story in similar ways. In both Thomas Moore’s and Gerald Griffin’s poems, “By That Lake, Whose Gloomy Shores”<sup>36</sup> and “The Fate of

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<sup>36</sup> See Thomas Moore “By That Lake, Whose Gloomy Shores.” *The Poetical Works*. (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992).

Cathleen,”<sup>37</sup> Kevin’s sainthood is threatened by the temptress Cathleen, who after being rejected seeks him out to where he is sleeping and tries to seduce him. On being woken, Kevin, in different states of fury and temptation, pushes Cathleen to her death: “And, with rude, repulsive shock, / Hurls her from the beetling rock” (Moore); “Again he hears that ringing mock / ... / And hurls the maiden from the rock / Into the black lake, shrieking!” (Griffin). In both poems, Kevin is then able to live in peace and be anointed a saint. Neither version seems preoccupied by the murder committed; instead they sympathize with Kevin’s dilemma. Salkeld’s knowledge of these poems is evidenced by her borrowing from both:

At the black lake’s edge, on a whitened stone—is where  
Cathleen’s chill ghost  
Sits, about midnight hour, and combs unfading hair,  
Moan-making to the saint who flung her down the steep,  
When she had crept to share his coil of sinless sleep.  
Kevin, centuries buried: constancy is fair. (48)

She repeats exactly one of Moore’s rhymes: “Where the cliff hangs high and steep, / Young Saint Kevin stole to sleep,” and she uses Griffin’s dark description of the lake. She reinterprets the “shrieking,” though, by giving Cathleen the qualities of a Banshee: “Sits, about midnight hour, and combs unfading hair, / Moan-making....” It is interesting that she also chooses to reuse Griffin’s “moan,” heightening the sexual nature of Cathleen’s sin. What becomes clear from Salkeld’s understanding of this legend is the absolute injustice and hypocrisy in defining and labeling what sin is. Cathleen loved Kevin. Kevin murders her to keep from being tempted by “what that wily sex can do” (Moore), and for his efforts he is rewarded with a peaceful resting place and sainthood.

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<sup>37</sup> See Gerald Griffin “The Fate of Cathleen”. *The Poetical Works of Gerald Griffin (1843)*, (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 2000).

Another revision of a traditional female myth is Salkeld's embracing of the serpent-headed gorgon Medusa. Stanza CL, from *The Fox's Covert*, unites several symbols already discussed in a vivid, defiant stance against the patriarchal hegemony. In the confessional opening line, Medusa reinforces the first person's owning of the female gaze, inverting the traditional objectification of the woman. The man not only becomes the object but that object resembles the cold, rigid role of a statue-like muse:

I Medusa have turned a living man to stone—  
Stared for hope's sake  
Until the gold warmth of his burnished smile was gone.  
I climb, I see, while circling mountains round me stand,  
The sickle moon ready to my exalted hand,  
Bidding me reap my dreams! Chill spells will be undone  
By the victorious spirit's lilting monotone:  
'Image, awake!' (81)

In a confessional tone, the opening lines suggest an almost ghoulish and desperate desire, "stared for hope's sake," to be in the authoritative role so that the "I" can strip life away from man, "until the gold warmth of his burnished smile [is] gone," the same way he does to women by propping them up on a pedestal or by infantilizing them. The poetic subject seems to imply that the only way for a woman to feel free enough to pursue her own dreams is in the absence of man. The power in the active "I climb, I see" is striking. "I climb" recalls Cathleen's ascent towards the "innocent" Kevin, owning a sexual drive that is not overly present throughout the book. "I see" acknowledges again the power wielded by the observer over those observed. Medusa's power allows her to turn a "man to stone," effectively turning him into an object. The poet's agency enables her to give life back to the female muse. She turns her from stone and grants her a voice to share her experience as a real woman while also taking to task those who objectified her in the first place. Given that the Irish poetic tradition is heavily rooted in the belief that "woman is poetry, not poet," Salkeld's inversion and ownership of the subject's point of view is

striking. The actions of the female poet are underlined, and appear to be approved, by the “stand[ing]” mountains that circle her in a protective stance. “The sickle moon” suggests the goddess Diana, conjuring up impassioned images of hunting and pursuing her poetic destiny. Salkeld continues to refer to the idea that women need to be awoken from the dream that entraps them in a stagnant life. The question of *who* will awake women is left unanswered, but the use of “victorious spirit” seems to suggest someone who will not be defeated, perhaps someone like the poet who continues to challenge the status quo.

The extraordinary book *The Fox's Covert* is much more than a collection comprised of “loosely connected stanzas” as described in an early review. In the face of rising fascist nationalist sentiments, hostilely dictating Irish policies on cultural and national identities, *The Fox's Covert* is an unequivocal feminist modern poem that exposes and attacks the oppressive treatment of women, writers in particular. Within the safe confines of a unique and unprecedented stanza form, “greenly veiled,” the female “I” is a self-aware modern subject who uses language to create a protected “covert” from where she can question and revise classical, religious and contemporary female myths. She defends women’s intellect, ability and right to share their own experiences, and she exposes men’s hypocrisy and double standards when it comes to society’s expectations of women’s behavior. *The Fox's Covert* is also a book that argues for a liberal, progressive global view of the world that stands in opposition to the insular, xenophobic politicians in control of the Irish Free State. The importance of recovering this collection for the Irish national canon cannot be understated. Not only does it thematically precedes contemporary Irish feminist poetry by fifty or sixty years, but it also adds a vital voice to the late modernist Irish group of male poets recently reintroduced into the national canon. Moreover, it also contests De Valera’s definition of authentic Irishness based on the “Irish

Ireland” mode. On an international level, Salkeld’s second book is a significant poem to add to the broader European modernist tradition alongside other long poems by both women and men, including Gertrude Stein, H.D. Mina Loy, not to mention T.S. Eliot. *The Fox’s Covert* argues for a modern and free woman as poet. Finally, as I will show in the third and fourth chapter with Concha Méndez, Salkeld’s work is just one example of female poetry in peripheral Catholic Europe questioning institutional powers of authority during the interwar period.

In the next, I will look at Salkeld’s third collection, which will mirror the last part of the arc surveyed in chapter one. Published two years after *The Fox’s Covert*, . . . *the engine is left running* shows a more complex poetic subject that pushes language and linguistic play and experiment to the fore.

## II.

Now that we have seen Salkeld’s long poem *The Fox’s Covert* I will turn to her last modernist work in the 1930s. . . . *the engine is left running* expresses an angry “I” concerned over national and international events targeting those oppressed or marginalized by dominant National Catholic forces. Before turning to my analysis, I want to first look at two reviews representing competing political ideologies in order to reiterate the conditions in which she was writing: one is a patriarchal and condescending take on her work as a female poet; the other, an appraisal of it as a worthy example of a strong modernist piece. Then I will briefly discuss the printing press she founded with her son the same year as more evidence of Salkeld’s independence and support of a modern, free society, open to competing and foreign influences.

Compared to her earlier sonnets and *The Fox’s Covert*’s fixed structure, . . . *the engine is left running* is her most developed formal dialogue with literary modernism. Salkeld pushes herself to experiment with sound, rhythm and form in a most unusual manner in Irish poetry

from this period. Moreover, Salkeld's openness in speaking out against inequality, when combined with a language that demands thought and engagement from the reader, can be read as quite radical. *The Dublin Magazine's* review in June 1937 suggests these two sides of the collection:

Salkeld has in her latest book adopted the manner of the Auden and Day Lewis left-wing group. Like them she speaks of a private language, difficult for the outsider to grasp... its prolific confusion of images seeming to reflect the incoherent spectacle of contemporary life... She is a genuine and original poet and has a gift for the unusual epithet and the unexpected phrase; language is malleable and alive in these poems. (85)

The reviewer though, like the one for *Hello, Eternity!*, cannot help but consider Salkeld's gender in his criticism of her work: "unlike [Auden and Day Lewis] her approach to life is intuitive rather than intellectual.... Selectivity and emotional clarity are lacking, and her metres are more often discordant than musical" (85). The observations are patronizing. The reviewer implies that she lacks intelligence and sophistication, and does not actually understand these problems—instead, she allows for messy emotions to fog a clear and strong voice. Importantly though, Salkeld is not just an observer of injustice; as a woman born outside of Ireland, a single mother and a female poet, she has firsthand knowledge of it and approaches her themes as an experienced insider. It is also striking that the reviewer states that her meters are "often [more] discordant than musical" when he has just acknowledged her interest in exploring "the incoherent spectacle of contemporary life." The comment is contradictory. Though the reviewer recognizes the "difficult" quality of her work, he seems to doubt that Salkeld may intentionally be creating jarring sounds and playing with obfuscation as a representation of her complicated

and difficult experience of the world around her. It is important to remember, especially at this time in the late 1930s the political and cultural pressure the press was under to adhere to strict standards of “decency” in accordance to De Valera’s Ireland.

The review of . . . *the engine is left running* printed in the left-leaning little magazine edited by Edward Sheehy, *Ireland To-Day*, takes a more modern and defiant position in the face of conservative Ireland. Frank Shovlin states the importance of this journal founded in 1936: “*Ireland To-Day* represented a concerted attempt by Irish artists to fight against the increasing introversion and chauvinism of the Free State” (752). Shovlin praises the magazine’s “historicist” appeal and its attempt to mimic T.S. Eliot’s assertion in his first editorial in *The New Criterion*: “an organ of documentation . . . even a single number should attempt to illustrate within its limits, the time and the tendencies of the time” (qtd. in 753). Sheehy unequivocally used this journal as a platform to promote opposing and dissenting views from those of Daniel Corkery and his peers, giving space to feminists like Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, young and liberal modern poets Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey, Donagh MacDonagh, Charles Donnelly and the anti-nationalist Seán O’Faoláin:

O’Casey, Yeats, Joyce, O’Flaherty, O’Connor, McNamara, Somerville and Ross, Colum, Synge—not anyone alone, but all together, have presented a picture of Ireland to the world. These men and women have no axe to grind. They look at Irish life and they present it, recreated with integrity in its essential turth. Dr. Devane and the rest of the yearners say: “No, Ireland is not like that.” They are exactly like the audience who hissed Synge and attacked O’Casey. They hate the truth because they have not enough personal courage to be what we all are –the descendants, English-speaking, in European dress, affected by European thought,

part of the European economy, of the rags and tatters who rose with O'Connell to win under Mick Collins—in a word, this modern Anglo Ireland. (qtd. in Shovlin 753-4)

Ireland To-Day's "liberal worldview" importantly "consiste[d] [in the] championing of Republican Spain during the Spanish Civil War" (Shovlin 754). It is no surprise then Sheehy's review of . . . *the engine is left running* is appreciative of its modernist qualities and avoids limiting her poetry by taking in to account her gender:

This is the poetry of a mind awake to the movement of life, on which the phenomena of every day, postman, breakfast-cup, newspaper paragraph, radio bulletin, snail-shell and daffodil impinge with a vividness as though each were the first of its kind. . . . there is courage, humour, keen observation, kindly satire and a verbal asceticism that makes this poetry none the less valuable. It is so indubitably alive that it is modern. . . . This is the kind of poetry that can, and even needs must, be read many times, which sells itself dearly to the reader but is well worth the price. It abounds in the combined vividness of both image and idea, the very stuff of epigram. (183-184)

The level of difficulty in the collection is praised as a challenge to take up and participate in the unpacking of it. Before moving on to the analysis, I want to briefly touch on The Gayfield Press she founded and published . . . *the engine is left running*.

What prompted Blanaid Salkeld to establish her own printing press, The Gayfield Press, in 1937 before the release of . . . *the engine is left running* that same year, is not exactly known. Her enterprising and defiant character is striking though, given the political and cultural climate supported constitutional amendments that discouraged women from leaving their homes in order



to fulfill their feminine duties in private. That she ran the press out of her own home suggests a touch of cheekiness and a defiant character. Whatever her reasons, The Gayfield Press can be viewed as a vehicle representing her personal convictions and is the ultimate tool of authorship. With the power to print her own words, and those of others, Salkeld takes control of her own voice (and the means of production). Of course, books need not be an expression of the printer's views, yet a cursory look at some of the writers that Salkeld chose to publish reveals a picture that reflects her political leanings. In 1938 she published the collection of poetry *Forty North Fifty West* by Ewart Milne, an Irish International Brigade volunteer during the Spanish Civil War. Kathleen Kirwan's essay *Towards Irish Nationalism: A Tract* appeared in the same year, strongly criticizing the special position granted to the Catholic Church by the isolationist government, and the inordinate amount of power and influence it had in the shaping of the new Irish nation. The year 1940 saw the publication of Milne's *A Letter from Ireland*, a collection of poems about his experiences in the Spanish Civil War, as well as a reprinting of several of M6ir6in Fox's poems in *The Fall of the Year: Collected Poems*. An early 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist poet, Fox reclaimed and revised Irish legends by making women the strong independent protagonists of the poems. In a forward to her 1917 version of the 10<sup>th</sup> century myth of Liadain and Curithir, reprinted by The Gayfield Press, Fox criticizes the Catholic patriarchal Christianization of old Irish myths as well as its expectation that women fulfill submissive roles and remain impossibly pure:

... where the Liadain I conceived conflicted with that of the original I have let her take her own way believing it to be the only means of enduing her with life. We know how in every epic cycle, whether in that of Homer or Ois6in, the characters have been changed and their proportion altered by the different copyists; the Irish

epics have especially suffered at their hands, for the scribes, being themselves monks, believed it their duty to force the old legends into the boundaries of the new faith, hence the euhemerism of the ancient Celtic gods, the substitution of Spain for the Land of the Ever Living<sup>38</sup> and many other acts of pious vandalism. Equally they would desire to end this tale with Liadain reconciled to the faith whose laws she had broken. For myself I am unable to believe that the Liadain of passionate impulse and unrestrained deeds they have portrayed would so have ended her days, and this must be my apology for my unfaithfulness to the original.

(7)

I quote at length because it is an early example of Irish feminist poetry demonstrating many of Salkeld's own concerns. It also reveals a commitment by the poet to promote existing female voices that challenge the conservative and officially sanctioned roles for women in Irish society. The Gayfield Press started a popular series, *Dublin Poets and Artists*, and published "[one] poem and picture—representative of Dublin poets"—at a time.<sup>39</sup> These poems do not necessarily fit in to any specific ideological leaning; however, the poets she chose belonged to an Irish left wing minority that contradicted many of the tenets of "authentic" Irishness endorsed by the state. This further demonstrates Salkeld's allegiance to a set of modern and marginal voices. Some of these poets included Samuel Beckett, Austin Clarke, Sheila Wingfield, Seamus O'Sullivan, Jack Yeats, and herself.

. . . *the engine is left running* is a culmination of Salkeld's work as a modern female Irish poet of the 1930s; it contains both social and modern aims. Its publication year 1937 is

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<sup>38</sup> The Land of the Ever Living is otherwise known as Tír na nÓg, the Irish mythical world apart from Earth's.

<sup>39</sup> As described in an unpublished letter from Salkeld to Austin Clarke asking for a poem to contribute to this series (Clarke Papers MS 38,670/2)

significant since it coincides with De Valera's final success at passing the new Irish Constitution. As previously mentioned, this final draft wrote into law the subordination of women in their own country, legalizing their second-class citizenship. It also recognized the special role of the Catholic Church in the new nation, officially installing a Catholic nationalist ideology in Ireland for decades to come. Together, these amendments legally defined what it *now* meant to be Irish, and by exclusion who was *now* a foreigner. Taking this into consideration, . . . *the engine's* themes can be read as being in direct dialogue with or a direct reaction against what the new constitution represented: patriarchal and religious power over the 'other,' xenophobia and insularity, and romanticization of the past. The book, unlike her previous collections, historically situates itself by inserting colloquial and modern dialogue and direct period references. Salkeld's self-aware poetic subject addresses themes of alienation and exile, religion and hypocrisy, transnationalism and mobility, nostalgia and "mourning for a lost sense of place and community," and the importance of poetry as a vehicle of expression (Reynolds 101).<sup>40</sup> As a response to the constitution's implementation of fixed boundaries in the labeling of what is and isn't Irish, Salkeld also explores and plays with the notion boundaries are "nonexistent, or infinitely permeable" (Reynolds 108), and she draws attention to the liminal spaces in between things. Rejecting De Valera's promotion of nationalist cultural uniformity, Salkeld challenges her readers and claims "there is nothing so ill-informed as public opinion" (49); again, . . . *the engine's* "difficulty replicates modernist endeavors to distance literature from mass culture and thus engage an elite readership" (Reynolds 108). At times, the poems offer no decipherable

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<sup>40</sup> Writing on Irish female novelists in the 1950s and 1960s, Reynolds observes that "nostalgia for place and community characteri[zes] high modernism". Frequently, for Irish women writers, "their sense of home is [often] tied to childhood, a moment free of the political, economic, and social constraints placed on Irish women" (100). This holds true for Salkeld as she repeatedly refers to a pre-De Valera Ireland when the promise of equality and the enthusiasm of independence still existed.

message and simply convey sensations through images, rhythm and sound. At other times, Salkeld's social concerns come through clearly.

As should be evident, . . . *the engine* is by no means uniform, so I will begin with a close reading, first of the title itself, and then the opening poem, both showcasing many of the unique aspects found throughout. I will then continue by highlighting a few of the collection's prominent themes and qualities found in different poems to give the reader a broad sense of this collection.

Her third book immediately challenges the reader to engage with the text, while simultaneously introducing several questions and revealing many features of the collection. Following an incomplete ellipsis made up of two dots, the words "the engine is left running" are spaced out over three lines, as such:

. . . *the engine*  
*is left*  
*running*

Syntactically, it is strange. An ellipsis represents an omitted word or phrase between two or more connecting ideas, but the omission has claimed one of the dots and there is no end punctuation leaving an open-ended sentence. Since the subject has a corresponding verb, it is not a fragment, but there is no clear end to this clause. What has come before or what is to follow is a mystery. The incomplete ellipsis, to go with the incomplete sentence, causes confusion and doubt along with a feeling that we may have joined in mid-action or mid-thought. Semantically, there is no clarification as to what sort of engine it is, but it does conjure a general sense of "modernity." The thought of a motor car being "left" on evokes a state of expectancy, of waiting for someone or something to happen, but for whom? For what? Though it is stationary, it is contradictorily

filled with internal motion, and this in itself projects a sense of tension and anxiety—a lot of bound-up energy with no obvious release. The running engine, like the syntactical one, is caught in a liminal state between two events: what came before and what will come after. The book's cover shows a precarious situation, sketched by Salkeld's son Cecil French Salkeld, depicting a steam-engine train seemingly perched on a hill. However, the word engine conjures up other ideas too. The condition "left" in this case implies more of a sense of absence or abandonment, instead of expectancy—since the engine is not *just* running but rather has been allowed to continue while the operator is absent. The title also provides a glimpse of Salkeld's playfulness with sound and word arrangement: five still words spaced out over three lines. The second and third lines indented imply movement, and the thoughtful caesuras help to imitate the sound of a humming engine by repeating the similar sounding "e's," and "u's," and "n's," and "g's." Whether it is a car's engine or a body, whether it is meant to create a sense of expectancy or abandonment, the feelings and doubts that arise from these simple words announce the mood of the book. As we'll soon see, it can be argued that the running engine ultimately comes to represent the oppressed body of the other, addressing feelings of entrapment brought on by the political and cultural limitations imposed on her and the desire to break free from this stagnant state. In short, you can shut women up but they continue to think.

The collection is divided into two parts: nine titled poems in the first and twenty-four consecutively numbered poems in the second. Each poem varies in form and length. The named poems in order are: "ATTEMPT AT COMMENCING."; "LOOK, LOOK."; "RETURNING."; "THAT CORNER."; "THE WILD HEART."; ". . . *the engine is left running*"; "SHOTS."<sup>41</sup> and "A PROPOS TO RADIO." As a whole, they paint a general picture of a journey, but they do not

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<sup>41</sup> This poem was published in the December 1937 issue of *Ireland To-Day* as "Away."

offer much clarification beyond this. The use of an all caps font commands attention, and then the full stop abruptly ends the message like an incomplete telegram. Is this the missing period belonging to the ellipsis from the book's title? There is no neat connection between them. However, the fragmented stop-and-go of these titles convey a sense of deep frustration on behalf of the poetic subject and evokes her pain and desperation at her repeated attempt to find her voice and be clearly heard.

The opening poem is the first example of Salkeld mixing her modernist and social aims. Behind complex, playful language lies sharp criticism of the government and the Catholic Church's behavior towards women in the new Republic and its practice of controlling them through the shaming of women's bodies. As if to defend against charges of sentimental, feminine writing, the poet juxtaposes female images of the body, reproduction, birth, ageing and dance, with dark, and at times grotesque, language. There are two parts to "ATTEMPT AT COMMENCING." The first acts as a decoy to mask criticism from suspicious and disapproving eyes. It is made up of the first two lines, and as the title hints at, they suggest to the reader that this will be a poem about writing poetry. The second part, though, reveals that the poem's initial self-referentiality is about more than just a poet's conventional struggle. The "I" is in search of the words to express an independent female voice in a society that actively silences her.

The poem's curious title taunts the reader with its inconveniently placed period, contradicting the intended act of beginning. It ties in neatly though, with the opening lines that mimic its fragmented lead:

"ATTEMPT AT COMMENCING."

DAWN, The title, *Dead Centre*. Stubborn,  
Approach at a slant. (1-2)

“DAWN,” in all caps, signifies multiple things: the beginning of a new day, the setting for the poet to start writing, and a possible title for a poem that mirrors the conventions found in the rest of the collection. This last possibility seems to be confirmed by the words that follow, “The title,” but is immediately complicated by “*Dead Centre*.” The poet teases the reader with several available readings. “*Dead Centre*” follows the standard conventions of capitalization and the italics add extra emphasis, drawing the readers’ gaze to those words positioned at the center of the line. However, it also evokes the poet’s gaze, her attempt at writing, her focus on the center of the blank page where the title usually goes. The condition of being “dead center” itself, contrasts with the hopeful commencement of “dawn,” suggesting a shift from optimistic possibility to writer’s block, or the passage of time from morning to the middle of the day with only the title to show for it. Together, these create a mood of frustration or hesitation. Additionally, it echoes the recurring theme of being caught in that in-between state. The word “stubborn” embodies the staccato-like thought process, impeding a clear and fluid stream of ideas, marked by the jarring commas and underlined by its placement at the end. With just this first line, the poet effectively conveys the uncertainty and apprehension at the task before her. But what is the cause of this “stubbornness”? Is it fear of reprisals? The failure of ordinary language to act as a vehicle to transmit the subject’s reality? Or, is it a belief that her attempt to be heard is in itself a futile project? Either way, the subject issues a caution to herself and to her readers: be wary of what is to come. Playfully, the warning “approach at a slant” recalls Emily Dickinson and points to the italicized “*Dead Centre*,” reemphasizing her curiosity with liminality. After a strong break mid-line, Salkeld brusquely shifts gears and commences the second part.

The break signals a shift in style. A flow of repetitive sounds and rhythm mark a confident and mocking female “I” intent on exposing the hypocrisy inherent in the shaming of women into submission, linking them to their ancestor Eve:

They sermoned thus:  
There is a beast you have to govern—  
Although no such beast endures in us.  
Out of the auto-toxined brain, sin  
Spawns into our thin blood-stream, the yeast  
Heredity, festering within:  
Mind-sin is slyer than the old beast. (3-9)

Salkeld deftly sets up her dichotomy: a male “They” and a female “we.” She uses the forceful sounding “thus” and its rhyme with “us” to emphasize the imbalance of power between the sexes. Salkeld challenges the Church’s teachings that women are a danger to themselves and those around them. The poem is filled with language reminiscent of Eve’s original sin, with an emphasis on the blame being placed on her: “sin,” “heredity,” “slyer,” “willing,” “pride,” “will’s control weak, untame,” “shame,” “naked.” The poet argues that the Church’s success in controlling women is due to the abuse of their position of authority. They continually reinforce the stripping of women’s humanity and agency through fearful rhetoric that demonizes and alienates them from their male counterparts and reinforces their guilt brought on by their disobedience: “There is a beast [we] have to govern— / Although no such beast endures in [them],” “auto-toxined brain, sin / Spawns,” “the yeast / Heredity, festering within,” “Mind-sin is slyer.” The religious connotations here are tightly bound up with Irish politics. While the word “heredity” evokes the burden women carry due to Eve’s sin, it also suggests the importance the government placed on authentic Irishness, giving them the excuse to limit women’s liberty to control their role as reproducers of the nation. The spiteful word “festering” points to the xenophobic attitude towards otherness and the frenzied move to cleanse the nation of difference.



“Mind-sin” points to the danger that women’s intellect and opposition pose to the State. The sermon’s alliterative “s” and the repeated rhyme with “sin” reproduce a hissing sound suggesting the presence of a serpent but also the misogynistic behavior towards women.

Salkeld pulls back from “mind-sin” to the tangible representation of shame: the human body. The poet argues that the female body is as worthy as the male’s but avoids over-sentimentalizing and romanticizing it. Instead, she challenges the assumed difference between the sexes, and the shame inherently attached to women, by breaking the body down to its bare bones:

A twisted image courts the pallid mind:  
Man: neuter, lean and tall! Does not flesh  
Make a fool of the bones—what else?  
The bag, the incalculable mesh—  
Plumping, scabbing, shriveling, in spells—  
Outside the will’s control weak, untame,  
Staleing, from the very first try-on,  
Proving the root of our pride to be shame,  
Ourselves—nothing, once the flesh is gone? (17-25)

These powerful lines argue against any inherent differences between men and women. The poetic subject sarcastically remembers a time before “sin”, like a “twisted” dream, when “man” was gender neutral. Salkeld rejects that women are inherently more sinful, or to blame for the Fall, and unceremoniously derides the importance placed on flesh. Instead, she subverts the idea of shame; it is the body that shames “the bones”. She downplays the sanctity of flesh by equating it with a mundane “bag,” or a grotesque suit that begins to “stale, from the very first try-on.” She takes the reader through the harsh and unforgiving stages of life: “plumping, scabbing, shriveling.” Most shockingly, the “I” controversially undermines Catholic teachings by suggesting “nothing” remains “once the flesh is gone.”

Her anger shifts to the Irish government. However, it remains clear that the poet views its relationship with the Church as complicit in the pattern of abuse towards women. If the Church uses the Fall as an excuse to exert their power, the government uses the birth of a free Ireland as its excuse to trample women's rights for the future of a greater independent nation:

A pirate's peace pact,  
A vessel vanished on its maiden  
Voyage, and all hands lost. In the bus,  
A flushed infant champing swollen gums. (29-32)

The first lines avail themselves of alliteration to spit out disapproval and contempt over the handling of the treaty that established the Irish Free State in 1921, and the consequences that followed. The word "pirate" daringly claims that the new nation has been hijacked from those who actively fought for its independence and the original ideals proposed in the 1916 Proclamation. It also calls into question their loyalty and honor. The poet presents new Ireland as on a hopeless journey towards nationhood. Continuing the nautical metaphor, the "I" challenges one of the most important and enduring figures of the nationalist cause—Ireland as a chaste woman in need of rescuing—and accuses her saviors of violating her. Playing with the words "vessel vanished" and "maiden / voyage" she suggests that Ireland's innocence and purity has indeed already been "lost." After the sully of the nation, a feverish child is born to become the new symbol of Ireland. The words "the bus" jolt the reader back from a highly symbolic place to the mundane of everyday life. This young baby, "champing swollen gums," signifies regression rather than embracing progression and liberal thinking. With the baby as the new emblem of Ireland, Irish women continue to be tied two-fold to the representation of the nation, as infants in need of absolute care by the paternalistic State and as fertile vessels whose function is reproduce.

The "they" / "we" binary contemplates the establishing of the Republic. The poet confronts the reality that some women may have willingly sacrificed feminism for nationalism

because they believed in the greater good of Irish independence: “They have had our oath, / No dream of abstract justice...” Women though, are left with the devastating reality that their sacrifice has been taken advantage of:

We, the star-pressed vintage of the clay—  
Spill out our wine among blind roots, until  
All is given up to them, one day,  
The chord being dissolved that was our will.  
We?—It is a kind of exile, song:  
We are outside men’s sodalities. (39-44)

A sense of foolishness and sadness set the tone with the realization that men duped women into believing they were equal, prompting them to abandon their feminist cause for a false unified “we.” Melancholically, the first person pronoun “we” though, is set apart twice, first by a comma and then by a question mark. This serves to highlight the division between the sexes and the isolation felt by women once they realized they were in the margins of men’s plans for the new nation. Motherhood is evoked with the choice of “chord,” used to represent the strength gained from sisterhood and the “will” lost for having sacrificed themselves for “them.” The word “exile” stands out as an expression of women’s experience at an early date, but it also ties her to a wider experience of Irish writers who sought refuge outside of Ireland because of the more and more stifling atmosphere. The conflation of the Irish government and the Catholic Church is reiterated with the final word “sodalities.” It is this religious fraternity that bars women’s equal participation, specifically targeting their freedom in order to mutually benefit each other’s position and power.

The word “will” surfaces again bringing to the forefront the common belief that Eve, the mother of all women, was weak-willed, untrustworthy and to blame for original sin. Yet Salkeld implies the opposite, suggesting that their weak “will” only comes after being coerced by men.

In the following lines, sewing imagery paints an image of closely-knit women who find support and encouragement from each other:

The seeker should be taken along  
Through gradual growth of felicities.  
All the strands of being in one coil  
Twisted, that was our will,... (45-48)

The new “law[s],” however, target this relationship in an attempt to divide and dismantle any threat of a unified group:

... and what law  
Unfixed and scattered the threads, for soil  
To absorb the rest, and keep unclean?  
Soil: tabernacle, treasure-house, latrine.  
Man loses his pride, woman her importance (45-49)

They aim to keep women in the private sphere, separated and alienated. Salkeld plays with the dual symbolism of “soil”: representing both the land and the defiling of women. The government has taken women’s “will” in the name of its “soil” (land), and whatever remains of them is for the Church to claim as “unclean” and in need of chastising. Salkeld inverts the common view of Ireland as a young pure maiden by conflating the nation with an empty, common and vulgar body represented by an holy trinity: “Soil: tabernacle, treasure-house, latrine.” The Church holds up both land and body as places of worship and worth, but in the end they are nothing more than sites of waste.

Towards the end of the poem Salkeld darkly suggests that far from any romantic notion of life, women are doomed from the moment they are born into an unforgiving, patriarchal world:

We came hither,  
Belched from a dark ballet of hot particles—  
Gaspung, into the air, the light, we slither  
Unloved, down passages of waiting—(53-56)

The suffocating language presents an unpleasant experience highlighted by surrealistic imagery, “Belched from a dark ballet of hot particles”, and uneasy words, “gasping,” “slither,” “unloved,” and “waiting.” The last word “waiting” is weighted with the suffocating state of expectancy introduced by the book’s title. The hypocrisy inherent in the expectation of modesty and chastity in women, while at the same time commodifying her beauty as her only worthy asset, is targeted: “We plump and glow; then once we start to wither, / There’s not to find, among the world’s outfitters, / Our rehabilitation...” (57-59).<sup>42</sup> Women begin and end life with feelings of alienation and unworthiness. Sadly, the poem offers little hope of a resolution to women’s identity crisis in this new Republic, with “life” being describe as “this void between being and being” (66). “Art,” though, puts forward a possible “bridge” to “span [the void]” and escape “out of the darkness.”

Many of the themes in this opening poem recur throughout the book: the damaging effects of the Church on women, the abuse of power by the Irish government, Irish insularity versus transnationalism, feelings of alienation and crisis experienced by women, and the important role of “art” as a tool for expression. The poet for instance, repeatedly accuses the Catholic Church of manipulating women for their selfish concerns. Further critique of the Church as an oppressive “institutional experience” for women can be seen in poem “i” (39). It begins by suggesting a suffocating and unavoidable attachment between women and the religious institution, women are “tethered to the church from birth with saints’ names” (MacCurtain 624):

Leave us religion.  
We have all been given  
Saints’ names. Whether you call Bernadette,  
Philomena, or Margaret,  
And the rest—  
Some pure unpressed

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<sup>42</sup> For another example of this topic please see poem “xxiii” (69). The female “I,” now a “Spinsterish / silver,” thinks back on the “men who walked to and fro / and wept to enter / a while ago, ago; / but now, not so” all looking for “youth’s unlect/ and common treasure.”

String echoes, under her palm (1-7)

From birth, women are “tainted with the guilt of Original Sin” (MacCurtain 624): “Yet we are starved from baptism . . . though the taints / Of infidelities divert us, / Patrons shall convert us” (39-40). The effect of this guilt on women is crippling and through their infantilization, patriarchal hegemony patronizingly ensures an easy dismissal of women’s attempt to break free from restraints or demand equal rights:

A spoiled child’s insurrection—  
Kept from the wild flutes of our lips’ election,  
Dumbed like a brute,  
We would refute  
Authority, and bite the mother’s hands.  
However, she understands. (27-32)

Like many contemporary Irish women poets<sup>43</sup>, the poem “i” “speaks of the reality of many women’s desire to give a human face to a harsh church” (MacCurtain 624), particularly in the figure of the Virgin Mary who represents the impossible standards to which girls are held:

Through leafless trees, this dreary day,  
Blooms at the monastery steps,  
Blue and unfading, the Virgin’s dress—  
    In every weather, clear and gay.  
For no new-fangledness  
Will I turn away. (54-59)

The Virgin, frozen in her own perfection, will not or cannot shift away from the binding institution.

Salkeld echoes those criticisms of institutional religion elsewhere. In the title poem “. . . *the engine is left running*” the poet reiterates the harm that institutional religion directly wreaks on them, exposing the limited choices offered to girls in the name of God and love of country:

Young girl stands and weeps:

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<sup>43</sup> See Eavan Boland’s poem “Anorexic,” Paula Meehan’s poem “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard,” Mary O’Malley’s “The Annunciation” and “Cealtrach” for a few examples.

there are two leaps—  
catching ones breath,  
to jump forth clear of death  
even through side of the flying express!  
or, to bound (dark, that guess)  
clear of life; night creeps;  
two leaps;  
which shall it be,  
in the cold name of love? (344-353)

The pain and loneliness that this “girl” feels as she confronts her options is heart-breaking: to either follow a free path described with life-affirming, airy and adrenaline inducing words, or an existence defined by an absence of “life,” mobility and color. The telling use of the phrase “cold name” here, suggests that this crisis is not about pure, romantic love, but rather a life that is sold to women through fear, in the name of God. This is emphasized by the following quatrain:

‘The only man,’  
‘ever bothered me,’  
said the old woman,  
‘is the Man—Above.’ (354-357)

These lines are interesting and touching on several levels. Salkeld sets a scene of female intimacy and tradition, where the wiser, “old woman” advises the “young girl.” Her message seems uniquely voyeuristic, providing a glimpse of female relationships behind closed doors. Don’t mind men, she seems to say, for all their restrictions and hypocrisy women should only be worried about God, not what *they* preach to be God.

In the same poem, the poet explores man’s supposed superiority over “beasts”, listing his advances; yet despite the positive ones, these include superficial and dangerous ones that leave destruction and chaos in their wake. Salkeld again avails herself of alliterative sounds and internal rhyme to build a slow intensity in her anger:

Perhaps it is in exteriorness  
men surpasses beasts, though men be fools:  
house and heart, dope and dress,

boat and oar—the careful tools—  
hammer, chisel, hunting-knife,  
the surgeon’s weapons, helping life;  
bombs to kill—engines to steer,  
wings that reach the stratosphere—  
jail and fetter.

Within, God knows if beast be better! (401-410)

Moving first from soft “h’s” (“house and heart”) and “d’s” (“dope and dress”), towards harsher and threatening “h’s” (“hammer, chisel, hunting-knife”), Salkeld implies moral corruption on the part of man. The poet attempts to complement man’s ingenuity by separating with commas the benefits, “helping life.” This is quickly countered with the following rhyming words “bombs to kill.” The building of momentum of all of the accomplishments suddenly come to a jarring stop with the line “jail and fetter.” Salkeld ends the poem by driving home her argument against man’s self-proclaimed superiority over women. These lines as a whole challenge the notion that women are the guileless creatures. “Men” of course can represent the whole of the human race, without distinction of gender, and the word “beasts” here, initially suggests the animal kingdom. However, Salkeld pointedly repeats the same word in the opening poem as a label that men use to mark women as dangerous and different from them: “There is a beast you have to govern— / Although no such beast endures in us” (1). This then, allows an additional reading of the lines above. In the opening poem, men sermonize to women and present women from their point of view. Here, women are not so beastly, and the poet playfully references the supposed “beast” inside, suggesting that it is only God who can indeed know who is pure and innocent. For all of man’s ingenuity and capacity for good, there is also cruelty to match. In a later critique of man’s corruption of religion, the speaker in poem “xii” taunts: “Man makes religion small, / Being himself a dwarf” (9-10). Again, Salkeld challenges that negative limitations men put on life and religion with their need to control everyone out of fear of the other and unknown.



Religion surfaces, too, in the closing poem, “xxiv.” Here the mocking tone is critical of the Church’s selfish interest in self-preservation, distancing itself from humanity or compassion towards its parishioners and ending up out of touch with those around it:

The priest joins palm to palm;  
His living voice is calm.  
Like everything else ordinary,  
To die costs money.  
.....  
The priest prays with bent head;  
He, at least, is not dead. (1-4, 17-18)

Salkeld sharply draws attention to the commodification of death itself, a “business” that is taken advantage of by the Church. The Irish government, in Salkeld’s eyes, is complicit with institutional religion in its shared campaign to demonize the other. It becomes successful by swaying public opinion against the notion of foreignness. This insularity feeds off of an anti-elitism that sees modernity and intellectualism as a threat to authentic Irishness. The poet’s defense of modernity is inextricably linked with progressive, liberal thought and women’s rights. The poem “A PROPOS OF RADIO” expresses the subject’s weariness when confronted by the chatty opinions of a taxi driver who declares his disgust at the modern world:

Through the fog our progress is slow  
.....  
‘A vulgar decade,’ jerks the driver,  
‘Coarse song, lewd dance, and (cold conniver)’  
‘The literary realist,’  
‘Makes patter, lest a shrug be missed;’  
‘Perversion thieving in the pantry,’  
‘And blasphemy the speech of gentry.’  
Hush, driver. ...  
.....  
For these are good, expansive days—(1, 5-11, 16)

The “driver’s” disgust with the modern “decade” is reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s in “H.S. Mauberly,” suggesting Salkeld’s disagreement with the poet. As a woman, the modern age of

progressive ideals holds a promise of liberty. The poet addresses many of the propaganda points that are sold to the general public to convince them of the dangers of modernity: a threat to moral values, literary artists (hinting at Joyce) who are morally bankrupt, the uprising of women from inside their homes, and the dare of the intellectual elite to question the all-powerful role of the Church. More directly, Salkeld later begins and ends poem “ix” with an emphatic claim: “There is nothing so ill-informed as public opinion” (23).

As an antidote to Ireland’s insularity, Salkeld introduces some modernist elements in to . *the engine* by using foreign language words and by positively portraying foreign cultures. In “ATTEMPT AT COMMENCING”, Salkeld nostalgically mentions a “nautch” (66), a South Asian dance, in her past with a hopeful “dance-to-be.” India, the poet’s birth place, is again mentioned in poem “viii” (48) with an outright sad and desperate tone about a “mad girl in Calcutta asylum [who] was always sewing: / nothing she wrought, there being no knot on her thread” (5). In the poem “LOOK, LOOK.” (5) The subject “frets” (1) about “vibrant [...] regrets” (10) and fading “brightness” (11). Her worries are dimmed by the presence of “hope” “at soft start of [a new] day” (15). It is significant that the seagull’s squawk, mimicked by the capitalized stressed ending syllables of “VoyEZ! VoyEZ!” (18) are not in English. The liberty and freedom represented by a French seabird, is inextricably linked to travel and transnationalism.

French is used again in her most social poem “ii,” “On the Rand (*On Dit*)” (42), as a device to perhaps mark the speaker as an intellectual objective observer commenting on the oppression of the working class by the rich:

While owners put on too much flesh,  
Inadequate the miners’ dish  
.....  
(Hunger’s shade grumbles from a ditch)

*In order to enrich the rich” (3-4, 11-12)*

In one instance where a foreign language is aligned negatively, German is used in the title poem, “. . . *the engine*.” The first few words of the Lord’s Prayer, “Vater Unser” and “Der Du Bist” are used to bookend a wild, free flowing 48 line stanza on desire and poetry. The short, curt German words stand in stark contrast to the rush of words looking to break free from being “securely pinned / into metre and design / and relativity” (177-179) that are contained in between. Unlike with the French, liberty seems opposite to what the German use implies and suggests a comparison of a forceful Germanic tone with the rigidity and strictness of religion.

In the same poem, Salkeld writes some of her most exhilaratingly youthful and hopeful lines. Dreaming of adventure she exclaims: “I wish some wild sister without salutation / would take me by the hand and rush me to a dance” (274-275). Freedom is associated with a desired spontaneous act to be shared with a fellow woman. Later, the voice takes a more active tone in search of freedom and independence:

The first port; I will hire a plane,  
For my good singing; never strain  
To foreign views again:  
The high air, the hawk's heaven, at my breast—  
A full rare joy, scot-free of squinting hope; (358-362)

These lines are spoken by a feminine “I” who dreams of taking charge of her destiny and joyfully escaping abroad, away from “squinting hope.” Mid stanza, though, she violently falls back into reality:

like an enchanted bird I drop;  
Good; pavement step linoleum and the rest.  
It will be easy now to keep intact  
A sea-wind-salted heart thinking and sense—  
To bar the entrance of ill influence  
With fire and lock and iron bolt of fact. (363-368)

The space between “bird” and “I” visually represents the contrast and break from her dream of soaring and flying away from the real world. The extra-added spaces that follow heavily accented syllables underline the disappointment and inevitability of the subject falling back to earth. The three nouns, “pavement step linoleum,” geographically, slowly and unwillingly move her from the public sphere back in to the kitchen “and the rest.” Still, this day-dream and the sincere belief in what is *right*, provides protection from the “ill-influence” of those who wish to control her. There is one glimmer of hope in the title poem “. . . *the engine*.” The poet repeatedly references art and writing as a tool to give voice or reprieve to her anger and sadness at the injustice around her. Her insistence in expressing herself, however, continues to isolate her and mark her as other.

Over the last two chapters I have focused on an underappreciated aspect of women’s modernism in the work of Blanaid Salkeld: a defiant feminist response in peripheral Europe to an increasingly National Catholic government intent on defining women’s roles in fascist terms. In the first chapter, I sketched Salkeld’s career narrative and outlined some of her characteristic themes. This showed Salkeld to be a modern woman preoccupied with providing a multicultural and progressive example of Irishness. In this chapter, I looked at her two major works in the 1930s. Her fusion of formal and thematic innovation support the conclusion Salkeld is a major forgotten figure and predates the postmodernism of major contemporary female poets such as Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian.

Like many of her male peers, Salkeld’s modernist poetry in the 1930s marked her as other, and this contributed to being left out of the literary canon moving into the 1940s and 1950s. Salkeld’s feminism, unlike her male peers, however, ensured her almost complete erasure from Ireland’s memory until recently. Whereas male poets who criticized De Valera may have

been ignored as Irish until recently, their gender guaranteed them recognition in other literary circles. For Salkeld, however, she is still a side note to a masculine modernist literary tradition as well as conspicuously absent from Irish feminist recovery efforts. In 1992, contemporary female poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill wrote her essay “What Foremothers?” bemoaning the lack of an Irish female tradition. Eavan Boland has also found no “female predecessors in Ireland” (Villar-Argáiz 98) and has stated: “while women poets ‘might [have] contribute[d] to the canon with individual poems they were unlikely to shift or radicalize the course of Irish poetry itself” (Villar-Argáiz 95-6). Instead Boland has commented that she has had to look towards America or the rest of Europe for female inspiration. Pilar Villar-Argáiz’s observation that Boland’s declaration “runs the risk of being simplistic and misrepresentative” is accurate (99) . However, the fact Ireland has been notoriously bad and slow about recognizing, recovering and accepting Irish women’s history and tradition cannot be overlooked as to why these contemporary poets have looked elsewhere for a female tradition.<sup>44</sup> This only serves to underline the importance of recovering Blanaid Salkeld as a major modernist figure not only for Ireland, but also for international woman’s modernism. As I will show in the next two chapters, the Spanish poet Concha Méndez is another woman writing in a peripheral Catholic European country, resisting and challenging restrictive, conservative, male definitions of national identity. While more recovery work has been done in Spain to reinscribe Méndez in the Spanish literary canon, she has also been read and understood in a limiting way. Her work, along with Blanaid Salkeld’s, argues for her to be read and placed in a more diverse and inclusive women’s modernist tradition.

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<sup>44</sup> In 1991 the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, volumes I – III, consisted of 4000 pages where only five women were represented in the contemporary writing sections (including both English and Irish language poetry and prose from 1900–1988) (Ní Dhomhnaill 1291).

### Chapter Three: Freedom and Modernity in Concha Méndez's Early Poetry

#### "A todas las albas"

##### *A María de Maeztu*

A todas las albas voy  
a sentarme a la ribera.  
No sé qué dicen que soy.  
Yo sólo soy marinera.

Mi vida por ver el mar,  
y cien vidas que tuviera.

Y no me quedaré en tierra,  
no me quedaré, no, amante,  
que me han hecho capitana  
de la marina mercante,  
y he de marchar en un alba  
por los mares adelante.

- Concha Méndez  
*Canciones de mar y tierra*, 1930

Toward all the dawns I go  
to sit down on the shore.  
I don't know who they say I am.  
I'm only a sailor.

My life to see the sea,  
that I had one hundred lives.

And I will not stay on land,  
no, I will not stay, lover,  
they have made me captain  
of the merchant marine,  
and I have to go at dawn  
across the seas.

The year 1930 is an importantly symbolic year in the life of the Spanish poet Concha Méndez. It is one moment of transition of many in the life of the poet. This liminal year leaves behind a decade of struggle and self-emancipation and begins a new decade with the promise of a society that will recognize and protect women's equal rights as citizens of Spain. In a short span of fourteen years, Méndez witnessed and experienced three dramatic changes of

government from one dictatorship to a republic and then back to a fascist dictatorship after a three-year civil war. In 1930, though, the chance of a civil war was far from people's minds and as a young, independent modern woman forging her own path, the world and the soon to be democratic Spain seemed to offer infinite possibilities for a poet who had already defied all the expected behaviors for Spanish Catholic women.

Although most of the Western world was still reeling from the Wall Street Crash, Spain was an exciting and optimistic place to be for women in 1930. The poem above, "A todas las albas," like many by Méndez's Irish contemporary Blanaid Salkeld's, is unquestionably a feminist declaration of freedom. It introduces the reader to one of the principle and enduring characteristics of her work: a strong, independent female poetic "I" unafraid to voice her desires and experiences in clear opposition to Spain's patriarchal Catholic hegemony. The influence of Alberti's *Marinero en tierra* (1925) on her work, and on this poem in particular, is considerable and has been acknowledged by several critics. Catherine Bellver comments on the similarities in the use of the sea as a symbol of "libertad" 'freedom' and the shared "ritmo vivo y alado, y el tono festivo" ("alive and winged rhythm, and the festive tone"; "Introducción" 13). Its unique aspect is found in her female point of view. Bellver also observes "el impetus [para Alberti] fue la nostalgia por un paraíso perdido, por el mar y su alegría perdidos en la niñez, [para Méndez] el mar encarna la esperanza de un mundo por conocer en que la voz poética busca realizarse como persona libre" ("the impetus for Alberti was nostalgia for a lost paradise, for the sea and his happiness lost at childhood, for Méndez the sea embodies hope of a world to get to know where the poetic voice searches to become a free person"; 13). "A todas las albas" recalls Alberti's "Si mi voz muriera en tierra" 'If my voice were to die on land,' and shares a similar sounding rhyme scheme with the use of the same words: "tierra" 'land,' "ribera" 'shore,' "capitana" 'captain,'

“marinera” ‘sailor’ and the use of the past subjunctive in Alberti’s, “muriera” ‘die,’ rhyming with “tuviera” ‘had’ in Méndez’s poem. But the poems are appreciably different in purpose and meaning, reflecting gendered perspectives between mentor and mentee.

Alberti begins with the conditional “Si mi voz muriera en tierra,” and sets up the poem as a hopeful wish were the subject to die far from sea. The presence of the female words “capitana” and “marinera” are gendered in agreement with “la voz” (‘the voice’ and “la insignia” ‘insignia,’ but there is no question that this “I” is male. In “A todas las albas” the female nouns “capitana” and “marinera” describe the speaker. It is also a poem that eschews condition for action; there is no ‘if’ here but rather an assertion of what the voice will and will not do. Méndez’s poem is full of forward momentum and vitality, and this tone is set immediately with the title commanding the gaze to look toward the horizon. The poem, instead of hinting at the possibility of death, is an affirmation of life.

From the beginning, the preposition “A” in the title expresses movement, specifically forward advancement and the horizon conjures images of optimistic opportunities and new beginnings. The momentum carries through the three stanzas sustained by the active words “voy”, “no me quedaré”, “marchar” and “adelante,” as well as the two professions of “marinera” and “capitana” that the “I” identifies herself with. In this short punchy poem, the “I” declares three things to go along with the three stanzas: agency, ownership and self-assertion. First, she emphasizes her agency by announcing her destination. Not only does she use the emphatic first person pronoun “Yo,” unnecessary in Spanish, but she also openly shuts down any of those critics who are talking about what she is or is not: “No sé qué dicen que soy.” The third line in the opening stanza is its own complete sentence, reading as a simple yet insistent declaration. The use of the interrogative word “qué” focuses the discussion on what profession she is. This



draws the attention to her position as poet in a conservative male society. As Catherine Bellver has stated, “[t]he writing of poetry by women becomes particularly threatening to established gender differentiations because, [...], ‘woman’ and ‘poet’ traditionally denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles” (*Absence* 15). The shrugging off of her critics calls to mind the real disapproval that the new Spanish woman faced when trying to expand her horizons in society, and the courage it took to forge ahead despite loud disapproval.

Méndez playfully ignores the ‘grumbles’ with a wink, naively answering back that she is *only* a “marinera.” As if her act of writing is not challenge enough to the status quo, she openly defies and subverts traditional gender roles by claiming the ultimate masculine profession of “sailor,” making sure to use the feminine form of the noun. Second, she asserts ownership of her own life with the possessive adjective “mi,” offering to give it up for the chance to travel and see the sea. Her assertion, that she owns her own life, stands in stark contrast with the conservative values and laws regulating Spanish society; the speaker eschews any sentimentality regarding love or family, preferring instead to give her life to travel. Her desire to move is highlighted by her use of the subjunctive, wishing for one hundred more lives to fully enjoy the opportunity ahead of her. And third, her self-assertion finishes the poem on a strong note. The last stanza’s six lines make up one sentence, mimicking the excitement felt by the speaker at her future journey and contrasting with the earlier short sentence directed at her critics. She rhythmically insists, “Y no me quedaré en tierra,/ no me quedaré, no, amante.” The jarringly placed commas isolate the third “no,” calling attention to her refusal to be tied down; this emphasizes her rejection of all conservatively approved notions of femininity, particularly docility, by refusing to physically stay put or to stay in her place.

As if the emphatic “no” were not enough for the female “I” to make her presence known, the revelation that she is addressing her “amante” confirms this poem as a subversion of a conventional love poem: the woman as subject goes off to sea in search of herself and leaves her male lover at port. The poet inhabits the role of subject, preferring independence and the great unknown over a life of predictable love and an object of desire. Moving through these three elements of independence, the “I” has now been promoted from taking orders, “marinera,” to taking charge and leading, “capitana,” and is ready to embark on her journey of self-discovery. It is an expression of the many changes in attitudes affecting women’s roles in conservative Spanish society by 1930, and it is a reflection of Méndez’s unbridled optimism for the future—a premonition of the arrival of the second Spanish Republic a year later. The poem glorifies youth, mobility and adventure. “A todas las albas” is a product of modernity and modernism, and a good representation of Méndez’s early, dynamic work, as represented by her first three books.

Like Blanaid Salkeld, Concha Méndez relished the opportunities the new modern times afforded her. Though neither woman can be claimed as a leader of the burgeoning feminist movements in the European Catholic periphery during the late 1920s and early 1930s, their dedication to their careers reveals women who were acutely aware of the importance in encouraging, fostering and defending progressive ideals promised by modernity. Recurring themes in their poetry, their engagement with leading literary magazines and multiple book publications, their lively participation in their respective literary circles, and their involvement in publishing their contemporary male and female peers, all support the understanding that both women are examples of feminist poets in a continual cultural and political struggle against patriarchal oppression. In this chapter, I will look at Méndez’s early career and use literary journals as a point of entrance to examine Méndez’s first three books of poetry, which have

cemented her place in the Spanish national canon as a member of the modernist movement known as the *Generación del 27*. This will permit me in chapter four to trace her narrative arc throughout the 1930s, and demonstrate that the general consensus Méndez abandoned modernism in her work is based on exclusionary definitions of modernism. Once we broaden the term and acknowledge women's modernism as broader and more diverse, Méndez in fact continued to develop a feminist modernist poetics straight through to the end of the Spanish Civil War.

## I.

Before discussing what makes Méndez a unique figure in Spanish literary history, I want to first give a brief overview of the political and cultural context in which Méndez grew up as a girl and began her career as a poet. Throughout much of Europe during the nineteenth century, secularization had a profound effect on the advancement of women's education and rights (Nash 12-13). In Ireland's case, despite the presence of the Catholic Church and because of its status as a colony, British rule secularized Ireland to a degree, willingly or not. Spain's peripheral isolation and the Catholic Church's deep seeded roots, though, greatly hindered secularization in the country. In contrast to its neighbors, the widespread authority of the Spanish Catholic Church, its control of all forms of education, and the fact the country was still primarily agricultural in nature, served to reinforce traditional gender roles by placing emphasis on women's primary role as reproducers of the nation. By the second half of the century, slow changes in the opinion about women's education began to occur. In 1868, the newly founded secular Instituto de Libre Enseñanza 'Institute of Free Teaching' introduced "Sunday Lectures for the Education of Women"; as Shirley Mangini has noted, it was "a remarkable feat in a country where in 1870 only 9.6% of women could read and write" (4). Yet legally, the

government and Church continued to exert their control over women. The 1870 Penal Code and the 1889 Civil Code, in place until 1931, “implemented formal social control to guarantee the gender system” and “ensur[ed] that women’s subordination was guaranteed by law” (Nash 15). Article 603 of the Penal Code dictated that a married woman be “severely punished” if she disobeyed in any way “marital authority” (16). The Civil Code practically made into law the 16<sup>th</sup> century behavior manual for wives written by Fray Luis de León, *La perfecta casada* ‘*The Perfect Married Girl*,’ ensuring that the “ángel del hogar” ‘angel of the hearth’ was the only socially acceptable role for women to play, be it daughter or wife (Lannon 275). Articles 57 – 62 of the Civil Code dictated that married women were little more than indentured servants. As Francis Lannon has observed, this Code privileged the Catholic Church and emphasized

the supreme importance of the family, and of motherhood [...]. Catholic teaching provided the ideological basis for gender differences in legal status, educational provision, work and pay. A woman’s vocation was marriage and motherhood. [...]. The 1889 Code required wives to obey their husbands. A wife could not acquire or dispose of property without her husband’s permission. She had to adopt his nationality. There was no divorce. (275)

Explaining the need for the Civil Code, an article in one of the leading newspapers at the time, *La Vanguardia*, forcefully put in to words the Catholic Church’s view of women:

From her intelligence to her stature everything in her is inferior and contrary to men.... All is concentrative, receptive and transient: just as in a man all is active and expansive... in herself, a woman, unlike a man, is not a complete being: she is only the instrument of reproduction, the one designed to perpetuate the species while man is the one charged with making her progress the generator of

intelligence.... So it is that everything tends towards non-equality between the sexes and non-equivalency. (qtd. in Nash 11-12)

This entrenched view of women's inherent inferiority, bolstered and spread by the Church, was a major obstacle for Spain to overcome as it sought to modernize itself according to liberal democratic models such as France and Britain.

Despite the conventional attitudes towards women's subordination, an exerted effort to improve their education meant that literacy rates rose to around 30% in 1900, and to about 50% in the early 1930s (S. Kirkpatrick 238; Nash 19; Bellver, *Bodies* 35).<sup>45</sup> It is no surprise when Méndez claimed in 1930 there are few women poets in Spain: "en España hay muy pocas, unas cinco o seis. De éstas, la mayor parte comenzaron a escribir hace cuatro años" ("in Spain there are very few, five or six. Of these, the majority of them began writing four years ago"; "Concha Méndez Cuesta" 246).<sup>46</sup> In 1910 women were officially allowed to attend university (Le-May Sheffield 109); by 1920 around 400 women were enrolled, increasing to 1744 a decade later (S.

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<sup>45</sup> In comparison, illiteracy had more or less been eradicated for men and women in England by 1900 ("Building the Literate Nation").

<sup>46</sup> Again, González-Allende criticizes Méndez for the lack of mention of other women writers in her memoirs published in 1990: "hay una ausencia de nombres de escritoras, presentándose a sí misma como la única mujer dentro de la hermandad masculina de los intelectuales (64-65). De hecho, Méndez neutraliza su condición femenina para ser aceptada en los círculos intelectuales.... [E]n realidad Méndez supo explotar su androginia: si por un lado enfatizó sus cualidades masculinas para que los intelectuales contemporáneos valoraran su talento, por otro también acentuó el hecho de que era mujer para exhibir su excepcionalidad. La contrapartida es que la mujer nueva terminó por convertirse en un fetiche para la sociedad." ("there is an absence of names of women writers, presenting herself as the only woman inside the brotherhood of intellectuals. In fact, Méndez neutralizes her feminine condition to be accepted in the intellectual circles... in reality Méndez knew how to take advantage of her androgyny: if on one side she emphasized her masculine qualities so that the contemporary intellectuals could value her talent, on the other she also accentuated the fact that she was woman in order to exhibit her exceptionalism. The exchange was that the new woman ended up becoming a fetish in society"; 106)

Kirkpatrick 238; Bellver, *Bodies* 36; Mangini 5).<sup>47</sup> However, the new educational opportunities available to women were not necessarily intended “to open new horizons” but rather “aimed at confirming the existing belief that learning for them was only desirable to the extent that it helped them in their ‘natural’ capacity, as wife and mother, to serve men better” (Bellver, *Bodies* 36).

Despite the intentions behind these changes, improvements to women’s rights rapidly increased in the second decade of the twentieth century. Spain’s neutrality during World War I had a significant impact on its progress and modernization.<sup>48</sup> The exposure to “foreign models of liberation,” along with “an intensification in the process of urbanization” (Bellver, *Absence* 32) helped “a new modern woman [to be] born” in Spain (Bellver, *Bodies* 24).<sup>49</sup> Though it is important to acknowledge the “release... from long-standing physical, social, and intellectual strictures” only applied to a small section of Spanish women (Bellver, *Absence* 32). As Roberta Quance observes, “campaigns for women’s suffrage grew perceptibly in the 1920s” (260), and the period during General Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship (1923–1930) saw some loosening of conservative attitudes towards women with the appointment of 13 women to the National Assembly (Lannon 277). Additionally, Primo de Rivera introduced family benefits and maternity

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<sup>47</sup> Different universities in the UK began allowing women to attend selected campuses in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century; Ireland first allowed women to attend the University of Cork in 1885, with Trinity College, Dublin following in 1904. The National University of Ireland, founded in 1908, granted equal access to all women and men.

<sup>48</sup> In Méndez’s memoir she mentions the influx of wealth introduced to Spain along with the social changes: “Durante la Primera Guerra Mundial dobló [el] capital [de mi padre] cada año. Muchísimos extranjeros durante los años de Guerra vinieron a vivir a España. Madrid se volvió una ciudad cosmopolita y un centro cultural importantísimo” (“During the First World War my father’s wealth doubled each year. Many foreigners during the War years came to Spain to live. Madrid became a cosmopolitan city and an important cultural center”; 31).

<sup>49</sup> See Méndez’s *Memorias habladas, memorias armadas* for further discussion on her exposure to foreigners in Spain, and their introduction of new modern ideas, the new woman and the introduction of the Charleston.

insurance for women workers in 1926 though, “no doubt [though] to encourage high levels of natality” (Lannon 277). However, these few improvements did not legally change the Penal or Civil Codes, and the State and Church continued to foster patriarchal and religious views about women’s purpose and position in society. The many changes at the turn of the century “to elevate the quality of education” in Spain did not dissuade Primo de Rivera from viewing “literacy and... critical thinking” as “a threat to [his] political designs for order and stability,” subscribing fervently to “Catholic ideology” as a tool for “national unity”; “th[is] fusion of religious fervor and patriotism was meant to counter the advocates of secularization and modernization” (Bellver, *Bodies* 35).<sup>50</sup> Though Primo de Rivera has sometimes been referred to as the benign dictator, in comparison to General Francisco Franco no doubt, thanks to military support he still held a firm grip over Spain. As the 1920s came to a close, he was not able to hold on, and with an increasingly enlightened working class demanding fair treatment under the law and a cohort of young people seeking to embrace those “foreign models” of democracy, the dictator and the king were ousted from power at the end of the 1920s.

The Second Spanish Republic was established in April 1931. Its Constitution sought to modernize Spain, completely separate Church and State, and establish equality for all of its citizens. Article 2 asserted “All Spaniards are equal under the law,” and Article 25 announced: “There can be no foundation for juridical privilege in nature, lineage, sex, social class, wealth, political ideas or religious beliefs” (qtd. in Lannon 277). These reforms benefitted all marginalized groups, but women were particularly the beneficiaries, even if in practice it did not

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<sup>50</sup> Catherine Bellver has noted in *Bodies in Motion* that Primo de Rivera took an active interest in Spain’s education “institut[ing] the use of state-approved texts that taught a single-minded conservative curriculum aimed at forging a national identity based on the past and religious dogma”, and “closing schools and suspending teachers” who did not follow this line of teaching (35).

always hold. The Constitution granted women the vote (Article 36), and equal access to jobs (Article 40). It mandated access to secular education for all children (Article 48), and it promised equal standing between men and women in marriage, including the right to divorce (Article 43) (Lannon 277). Article 48 was extremely significant in attacking conservative Catholic Spain; “[it] declared that the fostering of culture was ‘an essential attribute of the State’,” as opposed to the Church (Lannon 282). The new government also “promised free, obligatory [lay] primary education for all,” pushing “co-education instead of single-sex” education preferred by the Church (Lannon 282). The intention was that “Catholic schools and Catholic culture were to be marginalized.” “[G]iving girls the same education as boys, in the same school, was therefore entangled in an anticlerical agenda” (Lannon 282). Some of these fast and controversial changes in what still remained a deeply conservative Spain contributed to multiple fractures in Spanish society. Two major factors became a rallying cry for the rebel Nationalists: the liberation of women and the attack on the Catholic Church.

During the Civil War and after the defeat of the Republican forces, the dictator Franco “viewed women as its indispensable partner in nation-building” (51) and his

national-Catholicism fused Falangist (i.e., Spanish fascist) doctrine with traditional Catholic tenets.... Gender ideology became, as well, crucial in defining the state, its territory, and authority. Spiritual/Catholic values, authority, and discipline were to govern an important institution: the family. Social and gender relations blended in the family, and women—as mothers—represented an essential element in the reconstruction of the fatherland. (Morcillo Gómez 52)

The attack on women’s freedom and mobility was immediate and would have a long-lasting effect on their status as citizens in Spain, lasting until several years after his death in 1975.



Women were forced back to the private sphere and all traces of their previous gains erased.

Margaret Jones, along with others, has observed:

the Fascist government reversed the advances of women's rights gained by the Second Republic.... Government regulations curbed economic independence for women, determined the conditions under which women could work outside the home, and offered incentives and rewards to encourage them to marry, have a large family, and stay at home. Civil law treated women as minors who passed from father to husband: they could not have their own bank accounts; they could obtain passports only with the approval of their husbands. Birth control was outlawed and adultery was a crime punishable by a prison sentence for the woman. (311-312)

This reversal of rights had serious consequences for all women. For female poets, writers and artists of the 1920s and 1930s it entailed an almost complete erasure from the national canon, until recovery efforts began in the 1980s.

While modernization did much to advance the change in Spanish women's roles in the 1920s and 1930s, it is also important to understand *what* these pioneering women were up against, not just politically but also culturally in their own country. Spanish modernist movements actively sought to break away from old, stodgy forms and embrace the new. However, this experimentation did not extend to their views on women, and in fact male artists and authors clung to traditional gender roles even within the avant-garde: "las mujeres estaban limitadas al papel de objeto de la mirada y la búsqueda masculina y nunca se les permitía ser los sujetos que miraban y buscaban" ("women were limited to the role of object of the masculine search and gaze and were never allowed to be subjects who looked and searched"; S.

Kirkpatrick, *Mujer* 220). As elsewhere, the gendering of modernism was widespread in Spain. There was a deep-rooted “essentialist” view of women that allowed for “the justification of feminine subordination” (Bellver, *Absence* 33). True, José Ortega y Gasset did a great deal to promote and support a select group of women writers and poets, including Méndez (S. Kirkpatrick, *Mujer* 222). Nevertheless, he saw these women as an exception and frequently espoused the view that “la mujer” was “incapacitada para la actividad intelectual o artística” since she was “ligada al cuerpo y la reproducción” (“Woman was unable for intellectual or artistic activities” since she was “tied to the body and reproduction”; S. Kirkpatrick, *Mujer* 220).<sup>51</sup> Modernism was inextricably linked to masculine values according to the male intellectuals, and as such this impeded women from ever fully being included in the national canon. As Ortega stated, “El cariz que en todos los órdenes va tomando la existencia europea anuncia un tiempo de varonía y juventud. La mujer y el viejo tienen que ceder durante un periodo el gobierno de la vida a los muchachos” (“The look that in all the orders is taking on the European existence announces a time of masculinity and youth. The woman and the old man need to relinquish for a time the governing of life to the young men”; qtd. in Quance 261). Rita Felski has discussed the “widespread genderization of modernity, which pitted women, women’s world, and the values traditionally attached to womanhood against prominent values of modernity: rationalism, secularism, science, technology, [and] urbanity” (qtd. in Quance 261), and so the “proyecto de la modernidad es ... el proyecto de la masculinidad” (“the project of modernity is ... the project of masculinity”; qtd. in S. Kirkpatrick, *Agency* 13). The belief in this “masculine project” carried through the various literary generations that made up the Spanish

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<sup>51</sup> Several of Ortega y Gasset’s female disciples publicly criticized his negative comments about women, including the pedagogue María Luisa Navarro de Luzuriaga (Bellver, *Absence* 34), the philosopher María Zambrano and the novelist and poet Rosa Chacel (Gallego).

*vanguardia* and easily fit with Franco's future state policy dictating what Spanish identity was and how it was to be shaped in the image of male tradition. These *generaciones* have already been written about extensively by such critics as José Carlos Mainer and Anthony L. Geist, but I will briefly touch on them next to understand on what the majority of the recovery effort involving Spanish women poets has centered.

The Spanish *vanguardia* grew out of a strong reaction against the *Generación del 98* and *Modernismo*.<sup>52</sup> Labeled as the ethical and aesthetic artistic movements respectively, these two developed in response to a national crisis of confidence in Spain's identity at the turn of the century. The *vanguardia* announces itself with the short-lived, yet influential *Ultraístas* (1918-1922). Characterized by a sharp break with the past and a rejection of the masses (Geist 39), poets such as Guillermo de Torre, Lucía San Saornil, and Gerardo Diego relied heavily on metaphor to attempt to break all connection with reality and create a new "original" one (48) that would convert the poem into the purest independent art form (65). The impossibility of removing absolute meaning from the mundane, real world from language brought about its end and paved the way for the *Generación del 27* (1921-1929) (66). This group, including the poets Gerardo Diego, Rafael Alberti, Manuel Altolaguirre, Vicente Aleixandre and Federico García Lorca (among others), continued to reject the past by creating innovative poetic techniques, valuing intellectualism, autonomy and high degrees of linguistic difficulty in their work. The Crash of Wall Street in 1929 marks a shift in the mood of many of these poets. This transition starts with an exploration of surrealistic tendencies in the poetry of Alberti, Lorca, Cernuda and Aleixandre, to name a few, as a way to deal with and express deep personal crises. The introduction of

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<sup>52</sup> The Spanish use of the word *modernismo* is specific to the postromantic aesthetic movement promoted by Rubén Darío and not modernism as understood in European or American terms. *Modernismo* is most closely related to Parnassianism and Symbolism, in France, and the PreRaphaelites in England. The term *vanguardia* has been used to refer to modernist movements.

personal feeling into the work signals the beginning of the end of the *vanguardia* in 1931, and the work that follows becomes characterized by social and ethical concerns.

Organization around stylistic distinctions has mattered a great deal in the context of Spanish *vanguardia* literature studies. Though there has been much consensus about the inadequacy of organizing poets around years and generations, many critics continue to rely on these categories for lack of an alternative. With regards to much of the recent recovery work of women poets of the time period, a common practice has been to revise the generations in order to find a place for Spanish female poets to fit alongside their male peers. In one of her many studies on Spanish women poets of the 1920s and 1930s, Catherine Bellver notes that while “[those] who can be considered modernists were few in number, and the vanguard nature of their poetry was mild[,] [t]he importance of their poetry lies not in the level of their stylistic experimentation but in the symbolic gesture of their subscription to vanguardism” (*Bodies* 59). She considers their work in reference to the parameters of the *Generación del 27*, and focuses primarily on her earliest work. However, other recent critics, like Iker González-Allende, have argued that simply revising this *generación* to include Méndez does not go far enough, because the continued use of the same categories reinforces the masculine model; this in turn, implies that in order to become accepted or worthy of study you must belong in some form or other to one of these *generaciones*. He furthers this idea by stating that the *generaciones* helped isolate Spain from general comparative studies on international modernism (González-Allende 91).

The very participation of women in so many cultural projects during the first third of the century in Spain was “una de las formas en que la vanguardia española puso en práctica la modernidad europea” (“one of the ways in which the Spanish vanguard put into practice European modernity”; S. Kirkpatrick, *Mujer* 223). Their presence should not be underestimated,

and yet Spanish women's poetry has often been labeled as inferior, less important or dismissed as simply mimicking their male counterparts. Instead of just widening the definitions, González-Allende suggests situating Spanish poets in a larger European context, and using the term *Modernismo* in its European sense, to refer to the literature produced between the 1890s and 1940s. This is particularly important for women's poetry since their pushing of boundaries and their challenging of traditional gender roles is inherently modern and subversive:

Así, se deberían abandonar los rótulos del 98 y del 27 para referirse a estas autoras españolas y enmarcarlas en cambio, dentro del Modernismo europeo, movimiento que desde 1890 hasta 1940 enfatiza lo nuevo y lo moderno y rompe las convenciones de género. (92-93)

And so, the terms of 98 and 27 should be abandoned when referring to these Spanish women writers and situate them, instead, within European modernism, a movement that since 1890 until 1940 emphasizes the new, the modern and breaks the conventions of gender.

As mentioned earlier, the young Spanish avant-garde poets were very concerned about breaking from the past and championing the new, but in practice these efforts did not extend to allowing for a wider understanding of women's capabilities. Susan Kirkpatrick, referring to Hélène Cixous, explains that by her very position on the margins socially and symbolically, the woman poet has “una ventaja a la hora de producir arte modernista revolucionario” ‘an advantage at the time of making modernist, revolutionary art’ since,

lo marginal, lo vanguardista, lo subversivo, todo lo que perturba y “deshace el todo” adquiere valor positivo, la mujer artista que pueda identificar esos

conceptos con su propia práctica y metafóricamente con su propia feminidad puede hallar en ellos una fuente de fuerza y autolegitimación. (“Women” 14)

The marginal, the modernist, the subversive, everything that disturbs or “undoes everything” acquires positive value, the woman artist that can identify these concepts with her own practice and metaphorically with her own femininity can find in them a source of power and self-legitimization.

Like in Blanaid Salkeld’s case, González-Allende sees an important relationship between women’s emancipation and modernism too. Referring to Marianne DeKoven, he highlights “la estrecha conexión entre el Modernismo y los derechos de la mujer” ‘the close connection between Modernism and the rights of women’ and sees that “la revolución que buscaba el Modernismo suponía el cuestionamiento de los privilegios de clase, género y raza” (“the revolution that Modernism looked for assumes a questioning of the privileges of class, gender and race”; 93). I will show in the next chapter Concha Méndez’s later poetry cannot be read as outside of, or separate from, her earlier work which is typically accepted in the canon as an example of ‘conventional’ Spanish modernist poetry. Once her poetry loses the formal modernist identifiers after 1930 it falls outside of the masculinist definition of acceptable modernism. This is where the recovery effort is especially important for her work, and for women’s poetry in general. By only considering her early poetry for its modernist traits, we disregard the feminist political project that Méndez created and developed throughout the 1930s. She continually redefined and presented new female images and roles in her work, in response to wildly shifting political and cultural settings that had direct impacts on the status of women as citizens in Spain. By placing her in a broader framework, that considers Blanaid Slakeld’s response too, we can

see that her reaction was not an isolated one but part of a female tradition in the European Catholic periphery.

The right-wing, National Catholic dictatorship, lasting from 1939 to 1975, saw an advantage in perpetuating conservative and limiting definitions of modernism; they rejected all outside influence along with any socially unacceptable modes of behavior that did not comply with the official line of thinking. Male poets who were forced in to exile were eventually welcomed back in to the national canon because their masculinity fit Francoist ideology for what it meant to be Spanish. This too was true for the Irish male poets who worked outside of De Valera's acceptable Irish mode tradition. Initially they were discriminated against and viewed as anti-Irish, but as the reigns loosened recovery projects were able to welcome the men back into the canon and appreciated. Women in both countries, on the other hand, experienced complete erasure from their respective national canons and only the work which is deemed worthy in terms of a masculinist modernist definition has at times, been accepted. González-Allende points to several critics who discuss the conservative nature of Spanish criticism:

Christopher Soufas se lamenta de que por conveniencia pedagógica e inercia crítica todavía se sigan usando los rótulos de las generaciones de 1898, 1914 y 1927, que desde una perspectiva conservadora Pedro Salinas, Pedro Laín Entralgo y Dámaso Alonso promulgaron y propagaron en sus trabajos. La misma opinión defiende C. A. Longhurst, quien apunta que en la España franquista se favoreció el término "Generación del 98" frente al de "Modernismo" porque este último se asociaba con corrientes extranjeras de carácter estético y el primero con preocupaciones políticas y sociales españolas. (91)

Christopher Soufas complains that due to pedagogical convenience and critical apathy the generational labels of 1898, 1914, and 1927 continued to be used, that from a conservative perspective Pedro Salinas, Pedro Laín Entralgo and Dámaso Alonso promulgated and propagated in their works. C.A. Longhurst defends the same opinion, who states that in Francoist Spain where the term “Generación de 98” was favored over “Modernismo” because latter was associated with foreign trends of aesthetic characteristics and the former with Spanish political and social preoccupations.

The canon’s opposition to the influence of foreign and female voices on Spain’s national identity ensured that women poets were silenced and soon erased after the Civil War. Several studies in the last 25–30 years have recovered and reintroduced Concha Méndez and other women to their proper place in the Spanish literary canon. Apart from most of this work being centered on Méndez’s first three poetry books, ignoring her later work, anthologies continue to reveal bias towards early 20<sup>th</sup> century women poets and contemporary ones when attempting to shape the national canon.<sup>53</sup>

As a poet, Méndez always had close ties between what she did, how she lived, and what she wrote, so that her poems can be read as a close reflection of her own experiences, opinions, and sentiments. In one famous instance, Consuelo Berges, a fellow writer, introduced Méndez’s third book *Canciones de mar y tierra* with the playful admonishment:

¡A ver, Concha Méndez, marinera intrépida, aparta un poco tu persona de tu obra,  
que le das demasiada luz – como el Sol a Mercurio – y no nos dejas verla bien!

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<sup>53</sup> For a detailed study of the presence, or lack thereof, of Spanish women poets in anthologies since the Spanish Republic, please Pepa Merlo’s “Introducción” to the anthology *Peces en la tierra: Antología de mujeres poetas entorno a la Generación del 27*. (Sevilla: Fundación José Manuel Lara, 2010) 11-88.



¡Que la gracia episódica de tus metáforas queda desdibujada por la vivaz imagen, múltiple e impersona, que es tu propia persona! [...] ¡Apártate un poquito!

¡Déjanos ver tus mapas, marinera, déjanos ver en ellos los rumbos de tus versos, los rumbos rojos de tus versos en tus mapas azules!

Let's see, Concha Méndez, intrepid sailor, separate a little of your person from your work, because you shine too much light – like the Sun on Mercury – and you don't let us see it well! The episodic humor of your metaphors is left hazy by your own vivid image, multiple and impersonal, that is your own person! [...] Step back a bit! Let us see your maps, sailor, let us see in them the routes of your verses, the red routes of your verses in your blue maps!

Her real life and her poetry's metaphors in some instances become so entangled that it becomes difficult to fully appreciate and value her work, or know what is real and what is not. That being said, it gives some license to read the poems not as biographical testimony per se, but with the understanding that she clearly used poetry as a vehicle to express her close and personal experiences and thoughts. Now that I have provided a snapshot of the political and cultural context in which Méndez grew up as a woman, emancipated herself and became a poet, I would in the next section like to take a closer look at her life in order to better understand who she was and how her real life experiences impacted her poetic view and the work she published.

## II.

Méndez knew from an early age she wanted the freedom to read, to write and to travel; she desperately wished for intellectual stimulation and was frequently admonished and impeded by her own family. In an important moment in her memoir, she remembers watching Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as a teen; this play had a profound impact on her future behavior and

attitudes towards what she could and could not do.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, her physical fitness and ability set her apart from her female peers; she became known as a champion swimmer, a driver of automobiles and an early avid fan of flying (Méndez, *Memorias* 56-7; S. Kirkpatrick, *Mujer* 224). Given the stifling society in which she was raised, it is no wonder that she frequently came up against violent opposition from her own family who desperately wished their daughter adhered to more conservative and conventionally bourgeois family values (*Memorias* 45).<sup>55</sup> Méndez, though, far ahead even of the rapidly changing times, dared to be different. Under threat of throwing herself out of a window, she eventually gained more personal freedom from her family. With her bob haircut, Chanel dresses, and her introduction of the Charleston to Spanish society, by the mid-twenties, Concha Méndez embodied modernity and change; she was the essence of the new modern Spanish woman (Méndez, *Memorias* 56-7).<sup>56</sup> In 1925 Méndez brazenly sought out Federico García Lorca by phone, a friend of her then boyfriend Luis Buñuel, and introduced herself to him. Her disarming personality quickly granted her access to the world

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<sup>54</sup> In her memoirs, Méndez talks about seeing *A Doll's House* at thirteen: “al salir del teatro, ... se me ocurrió: “Cuando yo sea mayor—les dije a mis padres—escribiré teatro”. A ellos les pareció una tontería; pero fue entonces que me nació la inquietud de hacerlo. Fue una revelación; una doble revelación, ya que *Casa de muñecas* me planteó aquello de emanciparse” (“leaving the theater ... an idea occurred to me: ‘When I’m older—I told my parents—I will write plays.’ They thought it was a silly idea; but it was then when the restlessness to do it was born in me. It was a revelation; a double revelation, since *A Doll's House* planted the idea to emancipate myself”; *Memorias* 47).

<sup>55</sup> After a newspaper wrote about Méndez, describing her accolades as a swimmer, poet and screenwriter, her father commented: “Apareces retratada como cualquier criminal” ‘You appear like any common criminal’ (qtd. in *Memorias* 55).

<sup>56</sup> In *Memorias habladas, memorias armadas* Méndez fondly remembered her involvement and wonder at the modernizing of Spain: “Yo he visto nacer todos los inventos del siglo. Nací en medio de la modernidad, del canto a los medios de transporte, a la velocidad, al vuelo. Mis primeros poemas están llenos de estas cosas: de los clamores a la era moderna, de aviadores, aviones, motores, helices, telecomunicaciones” (“I have seen all of the inventions be born in this Century. I was born in the middle of modernity, of the songs of transportation, of speed, of flight. My first poems are full of these things: the clamors of the modern era, of pilots, planes, motors, propellers, telecommunications”; 29).

of modern poetry. Inspired and mentored by Lorca and Rafael Alberti, she took to writing verse, adapting modernist elements learned from her mentors to express her own distinctively female experience of and reaction to the changing times.<sup>57</sup>

An important moment culturally in Spain and in Méndez's personal life was the co-founding of the Lyceum Club in 1926,<sup>58</sup> a women's cultural organization, along with her friend María de Maeztu and other leading Spanish women intellectuals (*Memorias* 49).<sup>59</sup> Much of

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<sup>57</sup> James Valender acknowledges the challenges that Méndez as a young, bourgeois girl from a strict, conservative background had to overcome, and recognizes her "valiant effort" at publishing her first book only one year after beginning to write. In a letter to García Lorca from 1925, she explains how she came to write and thanks him and Alberti for their support and encouragement: "veo tu gran benevolencia al darme ánimo para que siga haciendo poemillas. Yo realmente no estoy preparada para hacer nada interesante. Desde luego, tengo una gran vocación, pero nada más. Después viene la obra de las circunstancias (mi soledad, mi dolor, mi aventurero proyecto de viaje y, entre tanto, vuestra amistad, tu lectura de poesías, y luego el conocer a Alberti). Todo influyó en mi ánimo y yo .... Escribí sin saber lo que escribía, sin saber lo que hago" ("I see your great kindness in giving me encouragement to continue writing little poems. Really, I'm not prepared to do anything interesting. Certainly, I have a great vocation, but nothing more. After that comes the work of the circumstances (my loneliness, my pain, my adventurous project to travel and, with this, your friendship, your poetry lecture, and then having met Alberti). Everything influenced my spirit and myself, .... I wrote without knowing what I was writing, without knowing what I'm doing"; *Poetas* 43).

<sup>58</sup> By 1930 there were 500 women registered as members (Mangini 6).

<sup>59</sup> Some critics have drawn attention to Méndez's dismissive tone about the Lyceum Club quoting the following: "Al Liceo acudían muchas señoras casadas, en su mayoría mujeres de hombres importantes: la mujer de Juan Ramón, Zenobia de Camprubí, Pilar Zubiaurre y otras. Yo las llamaba las maridas de sus maridos, porque, como ellos eran hombres cultos, ellas venían a la tertulia a contar lo que habían oído en casa. Era yo la más joven y la única que escribía." ("Many married women attended the Lyceum, the majority of them wives of important men: the wife of Juan Ramón, Zenobia de Camprubí, Pilar Zubiaurre and others. I called them the wives of their husbands, because, since they were educated men, they would come to the gatherings to tell what they had heard at home. I was the youngest and the only one who wrote"; *Memorias* 49). This late remark does not do justice to how important the Club was to her. Earlier in the same memoir her explanation of the Club is one of affection and pride: "Era una asociación de señoras que se preocupaban por ayudar a las mujeres de pocos recursos, creando guarderías y otras cosas. Pero sobre todo era un centro cultural; tenía bibliotecas y un salón para espectáculos y conferencias" ("It was an association for women who were concerned about helping women with little means, buildings nurseries and other things. But most of all it was a cultural center; it had libraries and a room for shows and conferences"; 49) Anecdotally is that among Méndez's few surviving possessions from her time in Spain before the war, that she saved and donated to

Spanish society was shocked by this association; the members were often considered “immoral” (Bellver, *Absence* 35) and were “criticized because the club was [seen as] a real calamity for the home and a natural enemy of the family, and above all, of the husband. ... the moral ambience of the street and the family would gain a great deal by hospitalizing, or confining these eccentric and unbalanced females” (Mangini 6).<sup>60</sup> But many of the leading figures of the time gave conferences and lectures at the Lyceum Club, legitimizing its mission to foster intellectual conversations among the new women of Spain.<sup>61</sup> Never one to shy away from controversy or criticism, Méndez openly embraced her membership of the Lyceum using it as a platform to introduce her own work to Spanish intellectual circles and find a life-long support system among other Spanish women writers and artists.

Despite her independence and initiative Méndez has not generally been read as a particularly political or socially engaged poet. Critics have also been careful about referring to the feminist qualities of her poetry because of her own hesitation in openly labeling herself as such, and have pointed to the lack of feminist claims in her poetry as evidence of her disinterest (Valender, *Poetas* 54). Two years before she published “A todas las albas,” which, as we have

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the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, are her membership cards, invitations and a surviving program from January 1929 announcing the showing of one of her plays “El ángel cartero.”

<sup>60</sup> The author María Teresa León’s personal experience of the Club puts into perspective its importance with regards to the pushing of boundaries and the assertion of women’s rights in Spain during the 1920s: “In those years the eclipse of Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship began. In the assembly rooms [of the Club] on Infantes Street there were conspiracies among the conferences and the teacups. That unusual female independence was furiously attacked. The scandal was taken to the pulpit; political bells were rung to destroy the rebellion of the skirts.... But others supported the experiment, and the Lyceum Club became the hard bone to chew with regard to feminine independence.... Those were the days when mockery and subversion were spreading through the streets of Madrid. The capricious monarchy of the times sustained the jolly dictator so that he would block entrance to something that was approaching. The Lyceum Club was not a gathering of women dancing with fans. It had challenged itself to advance the hands of Spain’s clock” (qtd. in Mangini 6).

<sup>61</sup> Federico García Lorca, Rafael Albert, Manuel Azaña all gave lectures, some more serious than others. ([http://webs.uvigo.es/pmayobre/textos/varios/lyceum\\_club\\_femenino.pdf](http://webs.uvigo.es/pmayobre/textos/varios/lyceum_club_femenino.pdf))

seen, would appear to be unapologetically feminist, Concha Méndez answered the question ‘are you a feminist’ with slight hesitation:

Empezaré por decirle que yo no sé si soy feminista o no. Toda idea que encierre un sentido colectivo me repugna moralmente. Yo soy: individualidad, personalidad. Ahora bien; en cuestión de derechos también pido la igualdad ante la ley. O lo que es lo mismo: pasar de calidad de cosa a calidad de persona – que es lo menos que se puede pedir ya en esta época. (Iturralde)

I will begin by telling you that I don’t know if I’m a feminist or not. All ideas that enclose a collective sense morally disgusts me. I am: individuality, personality. Although, with regards to the question of rights I also ask for equality before the law. Or what is the same: to pass from quality of thing to quality of person – which is the least that one can ask for at this time.

Her pause over openly embracing the label appears to be due to a modern, detached sensibility. She rejects the traditional female role of object and refuses to be boxed in to any one group. As I will discuss later, Méndez was the essence of “individuality, [and] personality.” Yet her powerful declaration situates her as a woman aware that the historical period in which she lives is in flux politically and culturally. Her privileging of the label “individuality” over feminism does not take away from the importance of her expressing the belief women have every right to be treated as first class citizens equal to men; it does speak to her modernist qualities and clearly puts her in opposition to the dictatorship’s nationalist ideology about women. Méndez inextricably ties women’s inalienable rights with modernity by stating simply that equality is the least that one can expect “en esta época.” Her granddaughter, Paloma Ulacia Altolaguirre, keenly observed in the introduction to Méndez’s memoir: “aunque [ella] nunca se hizo partidaria de las teorías

feministas, ... se puede apreciar el importante papel que desempeñó en este sentido: de hecho, por su ejemplo debe considerarse como una de las grandes pioneras de este movimiento” (“even though she was never a supporter of feminist theories, ... you can appreciate the important role that she played in this way: in fact, by her example she should be considered one of the great pioneers of this movement”; *Memorias* 23).

Some critics have also suggested that Méndez went out of her way to not promote women, instead reveling and relishing her own uniqueness as a woman poet in the masculine world of Spanish poetry. They have pointed to her memoir written decades later as evidence of this attitude.<sup>62</sup> I disagree; in several newspaper interviews from her time spent in Argentina Méndez speaks of her contemporary female poets, and of the huge opportunity granted to Spanish women with the founding of the Second Republic.

Many of her poems are dedicated to women writers and artists, suggesting close friendships and interactions with them as well as expressing fondness. In particular, Méndez’s dedication of her poem “A todas las albas” to her friend and leading feminist María de Maeztu should not go unnoticed.<sup>63</sup> It is important because it speaks to her involvement in her

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<sup>62</sup> Iker González-Allende claims that “[e]n sus memorias Méndez se diferencia a sí misma de las otras mujeres del Lyceum, de las que señala que la mayoría estaban casadas y repetían las ideas de sus maridos, [...]. [...] Méndez subraya el importante papel que desempeñó en la cultura española de los años veinte y treinta, aunque en este caso su afirmación de singularidad no es del todo veraz, ya que por esas fechas Ernestina de Champourcín, Josefina de la Torre y Carmen Conde también componían poesía” (“in her memoirs Méndez differentiates herself from the other women in the Lyceum, of which she says the majority were married and repeated their husband’s ideas. Méndez underlines the important role that she played in Spanish culture during the 1920s and 1930s, even though in this case about her affirmation about her singularity is not entirely true, since Ernestina de Champourcín, Josefina de la Torre and Carmen Conde arounds those years were also writing poetry”; 89-90).

<sup>63</sup> María de Maeztu was a lifelong feminist and pedagogue. She created the Residence for Young Ladies in Madrid in 1915, collaborating closely with the secular Institución Libre de Enseñanza [Institute of Free Teaching] and later with the Residencia de Estudiantes. In 1930, de Maeztu wrote an important letter of introduction for Méndez to her brother Ramiro de Maeztu, the

surrounding community, and her support of those women, who like her, were pushing against the traditional and conservative boundaries that sought to keep women's roles restricted in Spain. I find this dedication particularly interesting for its feminist implications. In an article published the same year as the poem, de Maeztu asserts her position:

Soy feminista; me avergonzaría de no serlo, porque creo que toda mujer que piensa debe sentir el deseo de colaborar, como persona, en la obra total de la cultura humana. Y esto es lo que para mí significa, en primer término, el feminismo; es, por un lado, el derecho que la mujer tiene a la demanda de trabajo cultural, y, por otro, el deber en que la sociedad se halla de otorgárselo. (De Maeztu 190)

I am a feminist; I would be embarrassed not to be, because I believe that all women who think should feel a desire to participate, as a person, in the complete oeuvre of human culture. And this is first and foremost what feminism means to me; it is, on one hand, the right that a woman has to demand cultural work, and on the other, the obligation that society has to give it to her.

De Maeztu unequivocally challenges any woman who “thinks” to be a feminist, and there can be little doubt that Méndez was aware of her outspoken beliefs.

As mentioned earlier in the brief history of literary culture, a vibrant scene in literature and arts matched the rapid changes in politics and society. Spain in the 1920s was flush with writers, poets and artists actively participating in modernist projects. In another interview from 1930, Méndez's awareness of the important changes happening in Spain at that moment is significant:

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Spanish ambassador to Argentina. This was crucial in helping Méndez get a job and supporting herself during the two years she lived in Buenos Aires (*Memorias* 73).

Hablemos de España, ... la España de hoy, revolucionada en la espera de un amanecer político y social mejor que el presente; revolucionaria en cuanto al arte se refiere. Porque no sé si todos sabéis que estamos viviendo un nuevo siglo de oro, un neo renacimiento de las letras, del arte español. Desde su gran ventana abierta a Europa, abierta al mundo, la lírica española proyecta su luz del más potente aro. (“Discurso”)

Let's speak of Spain, ... the Spain of today, revolutionized in the wait of a political and social awakening better than the present; revolutionary with regards to the arts. Because I don't know if you know but we are living in a new golden century, a neo renaissance of Spanish letters, and art. From its great window open to Europe, open to the world, Spanish poetry projects its light from the most potent ring.

The energetic images of the dawn of political and social change alongside a wide-open, welcoming window towards the world are a dramatic break from the insular and nationalist attitudes of Primo de Rivera's old Spain, and will stand in stark contrast to the impending Franco dictatorship. Here is a woman who proudly sees a renaissance in Spanish art linked to the outside modern world, in turn providing new opportunities for herself and women like her.

The Argentinean newspaper *Crítica* in 1930 too, announced the arrival of Concha Méndez to Buenos Aires. Under the title “Llegada de España una mensajera de esta juventud” ‘Arrived from Spain, a messenger of this youth,’ Méndez follows up on her promotion and awareness of the literary richness in Spain by cheerfully discussing the changing role of women in her country and the presence of her fellow female poets:



En cuanto a la mujer en España, puedo decirles que ha despertado y de un modo brillante, a una vida activa, tanto en el orden social como en el intelectual. Y así, ha invadido Universidades, y ha creado algún centro. Actualmente, contamos con un grupo de jóvenes poetas y escritoras como Rosa Chacel, Ernestina de Champourcín, Carmen Conde, Josefina de la Torre, etc., que comienzan brillantemente en su carrera artística. Por primera vez se da en España un movimiento poético femenino tan vario e intenso. (“Crítica”)

With regards to women in Spain, I can tell you that she has woken up, and in a brilliant way, to an active life, in the social order as well as in the intellectual order. And has invaded the universities and has created some centers. Presently, we have a young group of poets and writers like Rosa Chacel, Ernestina de Champourcín, Carmen Conde, Josefina de la Torre, etc., that are starting brilliantly their artistic career. For the first time in Spain there is a female poetic movement so varied and intense.

This quote is striking for the similar enthusiasm and excitement seen in the poem “A todas las albas.” The promotion of fellow women poets, as opposed to what González-Allende suggests, as well as the strong active language Méndez uses, reflects her awareness of the current changes affecting Spanish women—primarily in education and visible participation in the public sphere, as will be discussed shortly. It also points to the close ties between the poet’s life and her work. The verbs “woken,” “invaded,” “created,” and “begun,” reflect the shift in agency of a select group of independent and intellectual women taking control of their own lives for the first time. Mirroring the political changes in Spain, the quote, like the poem, stands in a hopeful moment of

transition, almost two years before the new Constitution of the Second Republic, which “introduc[ed] the principle of political equality between the sexes,” was enacted (Nash 15).

In a letter to a friend, written from Buenos Aires in October 1930, Concha Méndez answers: “¿Que si estoy contenta de mi vivir presente? – Sí, muy contenta, porque me gano la vida, y con ello tengo mi independencia y porque además voy consiguiendo cuanto me propongo” (“You ask if I’m happy with my present life? Yes, very happy, because I’m making a living, and with that I have my independence and I’m also achieving everything I’m proposing to myself”; qtd. in Valender, “Concha” 146). In the same letter, she expresses her excitement for the social and political changes brought about by the Republic: “Ya veo que se va a la República. Yo aquí me distingo como republicana en todo cuanto puedo” (“I see that it’s going towards the Republic. Here I distinguish myself as a republican as much as I can”; qtd. in Valender, “Concha” 146). On April 14, 1931, the official day of its establishment, her enthusiasm is clear for freedom and progress in another letter: “¡¡Viva España!! ¡¡La España nueva y libre y culta y republicana!!! ... Soy feliz” (“Long live Spain! The new and free and educated and republican Spain!”; qtd. in Valender, “Concha” 149).

The new Republican government guaranteed legal equality for women. On her return to Spain in 1931 she met her future husband, the poet and printer Manuel Altolaguirre, and before their engagement she fronted the money she earned in Argentina so they could buy a printing press, becoming his “socio capitalista” ‘capitalist partner’ while adding printer to her list of jobs (*Memorias* 87). If “the writing of poetry by women becomes particularly threatening to established gender differentiations because ... ‘woman’ and ‘poet’ traditionally denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles” (Bellver, *Absence* 15), then the physical printing and the role of editing poetry must be an absolute transgression to traditionally acceptable roles for

women in the world of poetry. So began a fruitful collaboration between the couple throughout the 1930s, creating and printing the critically acclaimed poetry magazines *Héroe* (1932–1933), *1616: English and Spanish Poetry* (1934–1935), *Caballo verde para la poesía* (1935–1936), as well as publishing the work of most of the important contemporary Spanish poets of that time under the name press *Héroe* (and later in exile *La Verónica*).<sup>64</sup> As the threat of fascism rose, Méndez’s political commitments became more public. During the War she worked and published for propagandistic cultural magazines, and she worked directly for the Republican government. However, she never stopped writing poetry, and the poems that she published during these violent and unstable times take on a sense of urgency given the threat to her identity as a free Spanish female citizen.

Many critics—for example Emilio Miró, James Valender, and Catherine Bellver simplify her career by dividing it into two periods according to principles derived from masculinist literary historiography. First comes her early modernist poetry then everything else, characterized by an abandonment, of formal modernist concerns. The modernist phase includes her first three books, *Inquietudes* ‘Restlessness’ (1926), *Surtidor* ‘Fountain’ (1928), and *Canciones de mar y tierra* ‘Songs of the sea and earth’ (1930), and these publications have received the majority of attention in recovery projects. After the recovery efforts from the 1980s and 1990s, those three have helped secure her place in the *Generación del 27* alongside her male

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<sup>64</sup> In remembering the work done by her husband and herself, Méndez wrote: “estoy segura que, para que el grupo de amigos llegara a formarse como generación el 27, fue fundamental el trabajo editorial que Altolaguirre empezó con Emilio Prados y la revista *Litoral*, y que después continuo conmigo. Sin aquellas publicaciones (*Poesía, Héroe, 1616, Caballo verde para la poesía*, más todas las colecciones poéticas que editamos), no se hubiese podido crear una unidad de grupo” (“I’m sure that, in order for the group of friends to be able to form the Generation of 27, the editorial work that Altolaguirre started with Emilio Prados and the magazine *Litoral*, and later continued with me, was fundamental. Without those publications (*Poesía, Héroe, 1616, Caballo verde para la poesía*, as well as all of the poetry collections that we edited), it would not have been possible to create a unified group”; 92).

peers with little argument. The poetry she wrote after 1930 that tends to be lumped together, over generalized and treated reductively. It is said to be characterized by its dark, personal tones and themes of loss, loneliness and exile that remains outside of the canon and in negative opposition to the first three books. Generally, *Vida a vida* ‘Life to life’ (1932), *Niño y sombras* ‘Child and shadows’ (1936), and *Lluvias enlazadas* ‘Interwoven Rains’ (1939) are dismissed as inferior, less interesting or of little value to the Spanish national canon. They are mostly read in opposition to her youthful modernist phase, and there are those who dismiss this second stage as properly inline with a female sensibility. Nicole Altamirano has pointed to these critics, including Roberta Quance and Alfonso Sánchez Rodríguez, who argue this personal poetry is an expression of Méndez’s *true* self. Sánchez Rodríguez states “Quizá pudiéramos afirmar que con el abandono de la estética vanguardista murió la mujer moderna que había vivido en ella y nació la mujer real que iba a ser Concha Méndez” (“Perhaps we could confirm that with the abandonment of the avant-garde aesthetic the modern woman that had lived in her died and the real woman that Concha Méndez would be born”; qtd. in Altamirano 47). Altamirano rightly takes him to task for his sexist condescension:

Implicit in this assessment is the idea that the modernity ubiquitous in her early work represents an affectation, a fad that passes once she finds her “real” identity as a woman. It is interesting to note that [he] does not see a parallel poetic trajectory in Méndez’s male contemporaries. [He] makes no reference to the humanization of poetry taking place as the Civil War drew near. (47)

Rodriguez's assessment also dismisses the possibility that Méndez's growth as a poet was fluid and connected, and not a complete oppositional shift or abandonment of preoccupations from one book to the next.<sup>65</sup>

I do not intend to argue that Méndez's style did not dramatically change from her earlier collections to her later ones. I want to consider her work between 1926 and 1939 as a continuing feminist political project in constant dialog with the multiple, dramatic political and cultural changes that were occurring in Spain and were having direct impacts on her status as a woman and a poet: a swing from a right-wing conservative dictatorship struggling to hold on with the arrival of European modernity, to a far left democratically elected Republic intent on secularizing Spain, and then violently back to a fascist National Catholic dictatorship reversing and rejecting the alignment of modernity with progress and freedom. I hope to show that the arc of Concha Méndez's modern poetic trajectory begins with her first collection *Inquietudes* and is comprised by several interesting developments ending with *Lluvias enlazadas*, published in exile, that contest the tendency to lump the remaining poetry together and reveal her work as a whole during this period, as important and meaningful. I intend to demonstrate that the recovery of her later work is important in providing a broader understanding of European modernism, alongside Blanaid Salkeld, by considering how these women were reshaping, writing and contesting their roles as women and citizens in the European Catholic periphery during the 1920s and 1930s.

Concha Méndez was widely admired and praised in Spain, in England and in Argentina in the late 1920s and early 1930s, as a new woman, a modernist, a poet, a lecturer, a translator, a

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<sup>65</sup> In Margaret Persin's article on the theme of exile in Méndez's later work, "Concha Méndez Cuesta: memoria, duelo y redención elegíaca" she argues that there is a close tie between the generally two accepted phases, that it is not a simple break from one to the next (81).

printer, a champion of other women writers. She was an extremely prolific young writer. She translated from French to Spanish, wrote plays and screenplays, lectured on literature and art in England, Argentina, and Mexico, published essays on cinema and art in important magazines like *La Gaceta Literaria*, and her poetry was reviewed and published in all of the leading Spanish newspapers. The earliest period of her poetry had all of the expected modernist characteristics: brief, imagistic poetry, references to technological advances, detached subjects, urban spaces, and were reviewed by the leading newspapers and literary magazines of the time. Pepa Merlo observes: “Si la prensa tuvo gran importancia en aquellos momentos de cambio, las revistas literarias han sido consideradas como el medio de difusión más importante que usaron los poetas del grupo para dar a conocer las nuevas tendencias” (“If the press had great importance in those moments of change, then the literary magazines have been considered as the most important medium of dissemination that the poets of that group used to introduce the new tendencies”; 23). Concha Méndez’s poetry has already been analyzed by looking directly at her books and reading them with the understanding that they fall into oppositional phases. However, many of Méndez’s poems were printed in a wide variety of important magazines and I think it reveals more about her engagement in intellectual circles as a female citizen than simply reading her collections as isolated artifacts. I want to look at poems from literary journals as a way to present trace the arc of her trajectory as a female poet in constant dialog with the cultural and political events around her during the 1920s and 1930s. I am interested in grouping these into five sections over this and the next chapter. I will begin by focusing first on her poems that were not part of her published books, with one exception, “Aeronáutica.” I intend these groups to first outline her different stylistic characteristics and to mark her progression and transformation as a poet through 1920s and 1930s. These poems will serve as an introduction to her work from her

books. I want to show that her many contributions to these important magazines help broaden our understanding not only of Méndez as a poet, but also demonstrate that her work continued to resist authority, contest conservative values and offer a new modern female subject who challenged the rising dominant fascist rule.

I will begin looking at the *Parábola* (1923, 1927-1928) and *Hèlix* (1929-1930) as examples of peripheral avant-garde projects. These will help illustrate Méndez's early style as a young, modern poet and introduce the reader to her first three collections. In the next chapter, I have divided up seven magazines into four groups spanning from 1932 to 1939. The second group will include *Héroé* (1932-1933) and *1616: English and Spanish Poetry* (1934-1935). Méndez had a role in creating, editing and printing both of these, and these poems introduce a more personal and intimate style previously unseen concerned with love, motherhood and identity. Next, I will discuss *Hoja Literaria* (1932-1933) and *Ardor* (1936) as two magazines attempting, "late in the game" to cling to pure poetry, while avoiding entering into discussions on the increasingly unstable political and cultural situations and the rise of socially engaged art. Méndez's poems in each of these, though, reveal a poet invested in the changing world around her. These poems echo the changing mood in the Republic from jubilant optimism to antagonistic chaos, and mark another phase in her development as she moves away from a personally intimate subject to a public one voicing awareness of the society around her. The second to last section in the fourth chapter looks at two propaganda magazines for the Republic in which Méndez published: *Hora de España* (1937-1938) and *Los Lunes de El Combatiente* (1938-1939). Finally, I will consider poems in *Lyceum* (1936-1940), a Cuban cultural magazine born out of the Cuban Women's Lyceum Club, as a step to wrap up her work from the 1930s.

This magazine completes a circle from Méndez's first moment as a poet looking to escape Spain and lastly ending with her forced into exile wishing to be back home.

### III.

There is no question that *Parábola* and *Hèlix* are each unique. However, both magazines propose in their manifestos to promote pure art. Their goal was to introduce rural and provincial readers to a broader Spanish and European understanding of the world. The magazine *Parábola* first appears in the cultural capital of Castilla y León, Burgos, in 1923. At this time, Castilla was known as a “paramera noventayochista y deprimida” (“Diario de Burgos” 1). In other words, the young modernists considered the city as a culturally depressed and barren region holding on to old, stodgy trends dating back to the heyday of the Generation of '98. This stood in stark contrast with the new artistic sensibilities found in the cosmopolitan cities of Madrid and Barcelona. Though some critics, such as Juan Carlos Mainer, have labeled the magazine “modest” (Vergaz 1), recently *Parábola* has been considered significantly more important for its contribution to the dissemination of Spanish vanguardism outside of Spain's main cities. The magazine is credited with being an oasis of “newness” introducing “las vanguardias, la modernidad, el ansia de libertad y conocimiento y el espíritu de redención universal de una tierra estigmatizada por la herencia de un castellanismo resignado y pobre” (“the vanguards, modernity, anxiousness for liberty and knowledge, and the spirit of universal freedom from land stigmatized by the inheritance of a resigned and poor castilianism”; “Diario de Burgos” 1). *Parábola* only produced two numbers in 1923, but it reappeared in 1927 and became renowned (“nationally and internationally”; “Diario de Burgos” 1) thanks to such promoters as María Teresa León and such contributors as Gerardo Diego, Pedro Salinas, Maruja Mallo and Federico García Lorca. No matter how “modest” this venture may have been in its circulation, recognizing its importance



helps support the fact that Concha Méndez was indeed an active participant in the Spanish modernist project and interested in making her voice heard outside of the cosmopolitan cities of Madrid and Barcelona alongside the leading names of her time.

The poem “Aeronáutica” ‘Aeronaut’ (106) was first published in *Surtidor*. It then appeared in the May issue of *Parábola*, comfortably placed alongside poems by her contemporaries Salinas and García Lorca. The other poems published in literary magazines addressed later are not part of any collection, yet I feel that the early appearance of *this* poem in *Parábola* is important in establishing Méndez’s presence and participation in cultural projects during the late 1920s. In addition, the poem is an unequivocal example and a good introduction to her first phase, anchored by a strong female poetic “I” and exhibiting several other traits that later become defining characteristics of her style. Written before the poet’s many overseas adventures, “Aeronáutica” exudes youthful optimism, and it is told from the point of view of a woman boarding a plane and leaving her lover behind. Catherine Bellver’s reading is spot on: there is indeed “a notable reversal of gender roles and the poetic motifs of traditional romances, the male lover is abandoned by the free and bold female” (Bellver, *Bodies* 198). The female “I” silently observes while the man repeatedly begs for a token: “—¡Dame la bufanda rosa / que llevas en torno al cuello” (“Give me the pink scarf/ that you wear around your neck”). There is witty play here on the typical fragmentation and objectification of the woman’s body in poetry. The male admirer lustfully observes her “neck” before begging again for the scarf as a symbol of “la nostalgia de tu cuerpo...!” (“the nostalgia of your body...!”). In her first acknowledgement of his entreaty, she takes ownership of herself and teasingly offers him her covered hand: “Le di mi mano enguantada./ Subí a mi departamento./ Él quedó en tierra” (“I gave him my gloved hand./ I boarded to my seat./ He stayed on the ground”). After this small

gesture, she enters the plane, abandoning him. There is no lingering or longing gaze on her part, only an emphatic decision to leave. When the plane takes off, the “I” mulls over her reaction to leaving before turning back to him and finally, almost generously, she acquiesces to his request. As Bellver notes, she watches her scarf fall down through the sky, symbolically freeing herself from the bonds that tie her down: “La vi caer, ondulante. / La vi apresada en sus dedos. / La vi agitarse en sus manos” (“I saw it fall, waving./ I saw it pressed in his fingers./ I saw it shaking in his hands”). The “I” reverses the conventional objectification of the female body by focusing on parts of his. She not only shakes off old gender trappings of bondage but also goes further and objectifies his body. The presence of the plane is important, too. It illustrates Méndez’s interest in modern objects that can symbolize freedom and progress. Bellver observes, “[t]he magical machine frees her literally and figuratively so she can pursue her dreams” (*Bodies* 198):

Ya iba libre en los azules  
de plata del universo.

.....

Alejada de la costa,  
la nave iba mar adentro  
con sus sueños de costas nuevas,  
de nuevos mares y cielos. (106)

I was already free in the blues  
of silver of the universe.

.....

Far from the coast  
the ship was going into the sea  
with its dreams of new coasts,  
new seas and skies.

Along with the plane and its representation of modern technological advances is another recurring symbol of exploration and escape: the sea. Méndez fuses these two important images,

as the plane moves up and into the sky: “Ya se elevaba la nave/ para entregarse a los vientos” (“The ship was already taking off/ to hand itself to the winds”).

The Catalan magazine *Hèlix* first appeared in Vilafranca, Catalonia, February 1929. Its founder, Juan Ramón Masoliver, described the town as “el Orfeó Català, la sardana, las cuatro barras, la barretina, el ‘flabiol,’ etc.” (“the Catalan choral society, the *sardana*, the four bars, the *barretina*, the ‘flabiol’, etc.”; qtd. in Hernández 55). In other words, Vilafranca was a conservative and nationalistic town, privileging its Catalan tradition and cultural identity above everything else. In the first of its ten issues, a manifesto proudly declared “su propósito de fijar la atención en las corrientes juveniles, por cuanto tienen de novedosas, para aferrarse a las producciones “modernísimas” y mostrar su “SANG JOVE”” ‘its purpose to focus its attention on the youthful movements, for its newness, in order to grasp the avant-garde productions and demonstrate its “YOUNG BLOOD”’ (Hernández 55). Masoliver’s description of himself and his fellow contributors emphasizes the groundbreaking work they were doing in trying to expose Catalonians to the latest modern literary, artistic, and theoretical trends: “Éramos vanguardistas europeos y el hecho de publicar *Hèlix* en Vilafranca, un pueblo de curas, era un reto” (“We were European vanguardists and the very act of publishing *Hèlix* in Vilafranca, a town of priests, was a threat”; qtd. in Hernández 55). As Carlos Santa Cecilia notes “[d]esde su primer número dejó patente su talante vanguardista, intentando recoger este movimiento del resto de España y de Europa para los lectores catalanes” (“from its first number it left an obvious vanguardist mood, attempting to pick up this movement from the rest of Spain and Europe for the Catalan readers”; 63). Its ten issues introduced readers to a wide array of works, including early reviews of Luis Buñuel’s and Salvador Dalí’s *Un chien andalou* and an early Catalan translation of parts of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. One striking aspect: under Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship and despite its

promotion of a homogenized Castilian Spain, Masoliver chose to use the Catalan language to embrace and foment a multicultural and multinational identity.

In the June 1929 issue, two of Concha Méndez's poems appear in Castilian alongside Catalan poems by the women poets Anna Maria de Saavedra and Concepció Casanova, both frequent contributors to *Hèlix*.<sup>66</sup> Though both "Isla" 'Island'<sup>67</sup> and "Voy y vengo" 'I come and go' (443) may be unremarkable poems on their own, several things signal their importance in establishing Concha Méndez's role as a modern, progressive poet interested in participating in a broader, international version of literary modernism. First, the act of publishing in a predominantly Catalan magazine at the time a minority language that challenged the authority of Castilian as the sole representation of Spanish identity points to an early willingness to align herself with marginalized others. Second, the place and year "Londres 1929" is printed under the poet's name. This title calls attention to the poet's travels abroad and fits in with the magazine's commitment to introduce works from outside the norm.

In both "Isla" and "Voy y vengo" (443) there are recurring characteristics common in Méndez's early work: an independent and enthusiastic female "I" and the equating of travel with freedom. "Isla," as the name suggests, refers not just to England, but is also an early treatment of the theme of exile. The poetic "I" refers to her location off the "Continente:" "Desde esta isla-jardín,/ aparte del Continente,/ yo voy tendiendo hacia tí/ la serpentina de un puente..." ("From this garden-island,/ apart from the Continent,/ I go stretching towards you/ the streamer of a bridge..."). At this stage, though, exile is seen as something voluntary, avoiding negative or

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<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, an essay by Casanova appears in the same issue where she presents "su ideario estético, el cual quiere huir del caos de la realidad para buscar la realidad del espíritu, que parece hallar cerca del surrealismo" ("her aesthetic thinking, which wants to run away from the chaos of reality in order to search for the reality of the spirit, which seems to fall close to surrealism"; Hernández 73).

<sup>67</sup> This poem does not appear in Catherine Bellver's edition of Méndez collected poems.

nostalgic connotations that accompany a forced exile. This is supported by the pleasant description of England as a “garden-island”, and any nostalgia is avoided by not referring directly to Spain or to an implied home. Instead the island’s location is in relation to the “Continente.” The “I” reaches out invitingly, a festive streamer toward a “you” to close the distance between her island and a distant “you.” The subject is not looking to return to a place, but rather appears to want to share something, or to connect with someone far away. As an aside, the physical layout of the poems makes them very prominent on the page. They are stacked one on top of the other, in the right hand column. To their left and beneath “Isla” and “Voy y vengo” are the two floating Catalan poems bordering them comfortably.

In comparison, “Voy y vengo” is a poem full of determined movement back and forth, as expressed immediately by the title: the first person assertion “I come and go”. This back and forth action is embodied by its repetitive rhythm and line structure:

Voy y vengo  
marinera del último puerto,  
mariposa del último cielo.  
Voy y vengo.

En la ruta,  
mi bandera de soles enciendo;  
mi bandera de soles ardiendo. (443)

I come and go  
sailor from the last port,  
butterfly from the last sky.  
I come and go.

On route,  
my flag of suns I light;  
my flag of suns burn.

The image of the “butterfly” and its “wings,” along with a “flag,” conjure up ideas of fluttering and flying about. As in the poems already discussed, “A todas las albas” and “Aeronáutica,” Méndez once again subverts traditional gender roles by identifying herself as a “female sailor”

traveling from port to port. Nicole Altamirano and other critics have discussed the fact that Méndez's early poetry has been dismissed as derivative of her male counterparts, in particular that of Alberti (47). Despite clear influences, Méndez's voice displays no anxiety over her location, and she relishes temporal moments and the freedom of movement. The swaying sensation of the poem expresses an enthusiasm for travel and adventure, a feeling underlined by the presence "flag" branded with "lit" and "burning" "suns." There is no darkness here, only happiness and optimism. The butterfly "wings" signal hope, too:

Y en mis alas,  
relucientes van todos mis sueños.

Vida: noche.  
En mi noche mis luces luciendo... (443)

And on my wings,  
gleaming go all of my dreams.

Life: night.  
In my night my lights shining...

The last four lines are filled with a sense of confident possession and with shimmering, bright light, and with their parallel structure visually recall two wings. The poem ends with one last swing; the "I" equates life with "night," though the darkness here is replaced by an inner glow.

The four poems already discussed briefly introduce the reader to some of the most prevalent modern themes in *Inquietudes*, *Surtidor*, and *Canciones de mar y tierra*: a strong female "I," a challenge to patriarchal authority with the subversion of traditional gender roles, the privileging of modern technologies and the expression of a transnational identity. Evidenced in the work of James Valender, Catherine Bellver, John Wilcox, and countless others, the bulk of criticism surrounding Méndez's poetry is centered on these three collections.<sup>68</sup> Given this, I will only briefly introduce them by looking some of the critical reception in order to establish they

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<sup>68</sup> For a brief overview of these critics' studies on Méndez see González-Allende 105.

were considered new, unique and relevant in the moments they were published. I will then tease out a few poems from them that support the avant-garde and feminist elements presented the journals and recurring in her early work.

Her first book, *Inquietudes*, came out in 1926 and though the reviews were generally positive, there is a pervasive sexist attitude throughout them. Diminutives are used as back-handed compliments, while she is criticized for the feminine emotional qualities. Her poems are alternatively described as “un ramillete” ‘a small bouquet’ (*ABC*), as “poemitas” ‘little poems,’ as the “primeros balbuceos” ‘first babblings’ of a child (*La Nación*), and as “verso muy femenino” ‘very feminine verse’ (*El Noticiero*). Much is said about her “alma doblemente sensible – de mujer y de poeta” ‘doubly sensitive soul- of a woman and a poet’ (*ABC*), and her need to “expresar las emociones de su alma” ‘her need to express the emotions of her soul’ (*El Noticiero*). As a woman she is described as “la burguesita rica, elegante, guapa” ‘the little rich bourgeois girl, elegant and pretty’ (*El Noticiero*). Still, though, there is recognition of modernist traces in this book: “en su primer libro, se muestra sensible a las tendencias más organizadas de la nueva poesía, y sabe traducir en imágenes inmediatas armas de precisión del flamante arsenal poético, sus agudas sensaciones modernas” ‘in her first book, she shows she is sensitive to the more organized tendencies of the new poetry, and knows how to translate into immediate images weapons of precision of a flaming poetic arsenal, her acute modern feelings’ (*El Sol*).

Two years later, Méndez’s second collection *Surtidor* is released to more solid praise, as it moves somewhat away from the gendering of its criticism. *La Nación* declared: “Las imágenes son ahora más precisas, más claras, ... no sobra una sola sílaba; nada de aderezo superfluo” ‘The images are now more precise, more clear, ... not one syllable is left over, no superfluous decoration’; *La Gaceta Literaria* reviewed it as “un espléndido catálogo de valores: vitalidad,

fuerza, decisión, entusiasmo. Valores jóvenes, en suma” (“a splendid catalogue of values: vitality, strength, decision, enthusiasm. Young values, in total”). Published at the beginning of 1928, its first mention in *Parábola* appears in the February issue under the heading “Correo de Madrid” ‘Mail from Madrid’. The section is important, because it lets the readers in Burgos know that this information is coming from the modern capital, and thus is something to keep an eye out for. In a brief blurb, Méndez is introduced as a poet before the description of *Surtidor*: “se comenta muy favorablemente este libro que representa, con relación al primero, un avance decisivo hacia la ‘nueva sensibilidad’” (“this book is reviewed favorably, which represents, in relation to the first, a decisive advance towards the ‘new sensibility’”; “Correo”). In the next issue a month later, a longer, more detailed introduction to the book appears under the title “Libros de Última Hora” (“Books of the Latest Hour”). Again highlighting the quality of *newness*, the editors offer up positive and energetic adjectives to describe both the book and the poet:

Poesía intrépida. Poesía de acción—objetiva: de andar, de vivir, de ver, de actuar-- . Frente a la poesía turbia—sensual—de casi todas las mujeres, Concha pone su verso limpio, vibrante, veloz, nervios. Frente a la cisterna—meditación—ella es, efectivamente, surtidor—acción—. (“Libros”)

Intrepid poetry. Poetry of action-objective: of walking, of living, of seeing, of acting-- . Compared to turbid poetry –sensual-of almost all women, Concha makes her verse clean, vibrant, fast, nerves. Facing the tank-meditation-she is, effectively, a supplier—action—.

*Surtidor* is praised for its modern qualities, and the poet is lauded for her embodiment of action. It is worth noting that the verbs used, “to walk, to live, to see, to act,” along with the words



“vibrant, fast,” and “action,” are diametrically opposed to the traditional submissive female traits praised by the Spanish state and the Catholic Church. Her avoidance of sentimental, or feminine, characteristics and her pursuit of pure, unadulterated poetry is commended and linked with modern advances: “Sin tristezas. Sin blanduras de corazón. Esa admirable Concha Méndez, detrás de la cual—en este *Surtidor* de ahora—se presienten—próximos—ruidos de motor y voces en megáfono” (“Without sadness. Without softness of heart. That admirable Concha Méndez, behind which—in this *Surtidor* of now—is felt—beside—sounds of motors and voices over the megaphones”; “Libros”).

By the time *Canciones de mar y tierra* is reviewed in 1930, there is little doubt of Concha Méndez’s place in the literary circles. Under the title “Los nuevos valores literarios” ‘The new literary values’ newspaper *La Época*, Luis Valdeavellano claims: “Existe hoy en España una magnífica generación de jóvenes poetas difícil de superar en calidad y número” (“Today in Spain there exists a magnificent generation of young poets impossible to beat in quality and number”). He goes on to mention “Jorge Guillén, Pedro Salinas, Rafael Alberti, Federico García Lorca, José Moreno Villa, Gerardo Diego, Luis Cernuda, Vicente Aleixandre, [and] Manuel Altolaguirre” before stating “[a] las voces de estos poetas hay que añadir ... Concha Méndez Cuesta” (“to the voices of these poets we have to add Concha Méndez Cuesta”; De Valdeavellano). To be added to that intimidating list is exceedingly high praise for any young poet publishing her third collection. Guillermo de Torre, in *La Gaceta Literaria*, compliments Méndez’s handle of language in the collection: “todos [los poemas] se desenvuelven con una maravillosa facilidad verbal, apareciéndose nos como frutos espontáneos y felices. Poesía limpia, aireada, deportiva en el mejor sentido—espiritual, juguetón, desinteresado” (“All of these poems unravel themselves with wonderful verbal facility, appearing before us like happy spontaneous

fruit. Clean, aerated, sporty poetry in the best sense—spiritual, playful, selfless”; De Torre 168). Other reviews mention her global focus and the eroticism. Apart from pointing toward Méndez’s free spirit and making note of her independent nature, most of the reviews stay clear from discussing her gender, a great sign of achievement for this period, this evasiveness is also a means of on some level avoiding any mention of the gender transgressions present in her first three books.

“A todas las albas” and “Aeronáutica” show Méndez taking on traditionally male professions and inverting conventional love poems. In addition to this, she pushes boundaries further in other poems by being sexually evocative and provocative. In “La isla” (40) from *Inquietudes* the poetic “I”’s body takes center stage, as she seductively slides through the water. The female voice takes ownership of her own body here too, comfortably presenting her physical and active self in a clinging wet swimsuit:

Deslizándome en el agua  
 hasta la Isla he venido.  
 .....  
 Del mar salí llena de algas,  
 con el bañador ceñido. (pg)

Moving myself through the water  
 to the Island I’ve come.  
 .....  
 From sea I exited filled with seaweed,  
 with the clinging swimsuit.

Another showy “bañador rojo” ‘red swimsuit’ pops up in “Por la escollera” with “pies desnudos” ‘naked feet’ and “piel morena” ‘tanned skin’ “lit” up by the sun. “Él y yo” (59) is overtly more erotic focusing on the physical meeting between the “I” and her “pescador” ‘fisherman’. She exudes confidence with the use of the preterite tense as she makes her move in public: “Y yo a su lancha subí/ en medio de la bahía” (“And I got on his boat/ in the middle of

the bay”). It is she who decides to make the movement, not acquiescing to any apparent invitation. The union between the “I” and “you” is suggested in the fourth and fifth stanzas, after the “I” brazenly suggests being drawn to the “heat” of the fisherman’s boat:

Una sirena gritó.  
La charla fue interrumpida.  
Y, silenciosos los dos,  
llegamos junto a la Isla.

Yo me sentí marinera;  
trepé por la roca viva.  
Él debió sentirse Rey,  
Rey de la piratería... (59)

A mermaid screamed.  
The chatting was interrupted.

And, quietly the two of us,  
arrived together at the Island.

I felt like a sailor;  
I climbed over the live rock.  
He must have felt himself a King,  
King of the piracy...

The sexual connotations of the mermaid screaming leaves little to the imagination as the two stop talking and move towards a physical union. The equality between the two is underscored by the fact that they both “arrive” together at their intended destination. Afterwards, the poetic subject feels transformed, and her sense of power is expressed by her feelings of being a sailor, and her sexual prowess is suggested through the physical climbing on top of this live object: “trepé por la roca viva.” In a wink to traditional poems and stories of the male conquering his female object, the speaker wonders if he must feel satisfied with himself. However, she minimizes his role of “Rey” by laughingly dismissing his belief that he *took* something from her,

as a pirate would his booty. She makes clear that nothing was taken from her, but rather she was in control of the situation from the moment she boarded his ship.<sup>69</sup>

Four years later, the poem “Capitán” (160) is a more daring and explicit poem where the subject initiates her encounter by seeking her soon to be lover aboard his ship. The first stanza playfully alternates between her clothes and his, her eyes and his: “Mi traje verde./ Su traje blanco./ Mis ojos negros./ Sus ojos claros” (“My green suit./ His white suit./ My black eyes./ His clear eyes”). The “I” emphasizes ownership of the situation with the possessive “mi” while she gazes at her object. The second and third stanzas narrate her determination to enter the captain’s cabin, another transgression of space: “A su camarote voy” ‘to his cabin I go’ and “A su camarote entro” ‘I enter his cabin.’ The fourth, fifth and sixth stanzas point to the passing of shared “noches y días” ‘nights and days’ that are spent “a bordo de su navío” ‘on board his ship’: “Y vemos la cruz del Sur” ‘And we see the Southern Cross,’ “Y vemos marchar el sol” ‘And we see the sun go,’ “Y vemos caer la luz” ‘And we see the light fall,’ while intimate moments are shared: “Y vemos un no sé qué/ nacer en cada mirada...” ‘And we see I don’t know what/ be born in with each look....’ Referring to the poem “La isla” (40), González-Allende points to the use of the ellipsis as suggestive of the climax between then “I” and “you” (107), I would say the use of it here after their shared look, leaves the reader with that impression too. There are more examples that touch on this kind of sexually suggestive scenario, challenging and upsetting Spanish conservative values. But not all of the poems highlighting the female body are sexual in nature. Female dancers, skaters, gymnasts, and swimmers are protagonists in many poems, all glorifying an active, young strong woman as subject.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> For further discussion of “Él y yo” please see González-Allende 107.

<sup>70</sup> For a more detailed study of Méndez’s use of the female athlete in her poetry, please see Catherine Bellver’s *Bodies in Motion*.

Another way that Méndez undermines conservative norms and questions male hegemony is by abandoning her place in the private sphere and entering into public urban settings. The poet's urban transgressions, with her friend Maruja Mallo, are mentioned by her in her memoir and discussed by Catherine Bellver and Susan Kirkpatrick in their studies about the Spanish woman in the 1920s. Méndez and Mallo both dressed inappropriately in public, visited undesirable neighborhoods at different times of the day or night, and brazenly stood outside of bars they were not allowed into because they were women. Several critics have pointed out that her many of her urban subjects resemble the role of the flâneur, observing those around her. González-Allende notes that Méndez has two types of urban poetry:

en algunas composiciones ... el yo poético recorre a solas y de noche las calles de la ciudad.... Esta inmersión en la ciudad se materializa en dos grupos distintos de poemas: a veces la poeta deambula por las calles embargada por la tristeza y la melancolía, rodeada de sombras y de niebla, mientras que en otras ocasiones domina el carácter lúdico de la ciudad y la poeta se deja envolver por los ritmos, luces y sonidos que la circundan. Los poemas del primer ... implican de una manera más obvia una búsqueda por parte de la poeta de su identidad personal.  
(111)

in some compositions ... the poetic "I" covers the city streets alone and at night.... This immersion in the city materializes in two different groups of poems: sometimes the poet wanders the streets overcome with sadness and melancholy, surrounded by shadows and fog, while in other instances the playful character of the city dominates and the poet allows herself to be surrounded by the rhythms,

lights and sounds that circle her. The poems of the first ... imply in a more obvious way a search on behalf of the poet for her personal identity.

The modern, detached subject in crisis wandering through the empty streets at night is a common theme in modernist poetry, and these feelings of loneliness and alienation are present in poems such as “Melancolía” ‘Melancholy,’ “Paisaje” ‘Landscape,’ and “Paisaje urbano” ‘Urban landscape’ in *Surtidor* and “Paisaje (Londres)” ‘Landscape (London)’ in *Canciones de mar y tierra*. In “Melancolía” the “I” walks alone, where even the shadows are absent, “sombras ausentes” ‘absent shadows’ (6), and her “pasos/ inciertos” ‘steps/ uncertain.’ Similarly to Salkeld’s subject on the cold “tram” in *The Fox’s Covert*, the “I” in “Paisaje” (44) observes the “modernas avenidas” ‘modern avenues’ of the “paisaje urbano” ‘urban scenery’ with her “frente/ junto al cristal del tranvía” ‘forehead/ against the glass of the tram,’ watching parts of the city slowly pass her. In a somewhat surrealistic poem, “Paisaje urbano” (117) presents the city as a cold, moving place where the sky is likened to cement, the streets are hit with steel wheels and the sounds of people are likened to tinny, varnished voices. Fast-paced movement is evoked with the image of the reflections off of the windows likened to a role of film: “Se juega a serpentinadas a través de las lunas/ de los escaparates---cintura cinemática--” (“Streamers are played with across the moons/ of the windows-cinematic film-”). “[E]l metropolitano” ‘the metropolitan person’ has no time to stop, “veloz de Puerto a puerto, acompasando escalas,/ cruzando del suburbio a la gran avenida/ en una eterna noche de sombras estrelladas” (“quickly from Port to port, keeping in step with the beat,/ crossing from the suburb to the grand avenue/ in an eternal night of starry shadows”).

As mentioned, Méndez differs from Alberti in her use of the sea as a symbol, and her nostalgia-free elation over the many new freedoms experienced by women in these new modern

times. Yet some of her poems do recall Alberti's "Huéspedes de la niebla" 'Guests of the fog' from *Sobre los ángeles*. In "Paisaje [Londres]" (133) the night and the city create a dark, dream-like atmosphere where everything is non-tangible, existing at a slow sleepwalking pace:

Noche.  
Una sombra sonámbula.  
Otra sombra sonámbula.  
Voces sonámbulas.  
El silencio sonámbulo. (133)

Night.  
A sleepwalking shadow.  
Another sleepwalking shadow.  
Sleepwalking voices.  
The sleepwalking silence.

In a change from her other urban poems where the "I" at least is physically present and walking, albeit alone, here the subject is only an observer of herself in her own shadowy nightmare:

A Piccadilly Circus por Hyde Park  
Me voy viendo  
proyectada en todas las sombras:

Mi corazón, de niebla.  
Mis brazos, de niebla.  
Mis ojos, de niebla.  
Mis pisadas, de niebla. (133)

To Piccadilly Circus through Hyde Park  
I see myself going  
projected in all of the shadows:

My heart, of fog.  
My arms, of fog.  
My eyes, of fog.  
My steps, of fog.

The disconnect between her identity and her physical body is disconcerting and pessimistic; not even her footsteps make a sound at her passing. I would argue though, that more than the profound crisis of identity Alberti's subject struggles with in *Sobre los ángeles*, this female "I"

finds herself alone, in a strange city, searching for a place in the public sphere. She finds no comfort or shelter in the private sphere either.

Her frustration and unhappiness with the private sphere, and the oppressively silent and passive role that women were expected to play, is the topic of the poem “Reposo en el comedor” ‘Rest in the dining room’ (35) from *Inquietudes*. Made up of ten short stanzas of no more than three words to a line, the “I” presents brief snapshots of the objects and the stagnancy around her: “La taza rosa,/ el té,/ el cigarro.// Humo./ Semblantes./ Sueño callado” (“The pink cup,/ the tea,/ the cigarette.// Smoke./ Faces./ Silent dream”). After dinner, the quiet and inactivity puts everything to sleep, and the poem ends with the resigned lines: “En la estancia/ sin luz,/ otro día acabado...” (“In the home/ without light,/ another day ended...”). The “I” is left in darkness, suspended, like the ellipsis in a loop of monotonous repetition. González-Allende offers a detailed reading of this poem, highlighting its condemnation of “apatía, aburrimiento, monotonía e incomunicación, cadenas de las que Méndez desea liberarse para poder ocupar el espacio público” (“apathy, boredom, monotony and non-communication, chains that Méndez wishes to free herself from in order to occupy the public space”; 96).

The topic of travel is another big example of how Méndez takes ownership of public spaces is the theme of travel, something important in Salkeld’s life and work too. As modern women, and advocates for progress and freedom, both poets view the world outside their national boundaries as important in helping to understand her fellow citizens. Travel has already been discussed in the first four poems as an act of subversion against traditional and conservative expectations for women. There are many more instances of this topic in poems like “Mapas” ‘Maps,’ “Tierras polares” ‘Polar lands,’ “Transatlántico” ‘Transatlantic,’ “Viajera” ‘Traveler’ and “Navegar” ‘Navigate,’ but it is also important to acknowledge that this desire became a



reality for her when she escaped her family and went abroad alone. All of the poems in *Canciones de mar y tierra* are labeled with the location of their creation, moving from Spain, to England, to the high seas, ending in South America, giving this collection the feel of a travel journal while also establishing Méndez as an independent, modern and free subject.<sup>71</sup> In one of her most well known poems from *Canciones de mar y tierra*, “Navegar” (127), the “I” exalts the absence of boundaries and dismisses any identification with a single nation or home. It is worth noting Méndez’s dialogue with the Romantic poet José de Espronceda’s marginal figure the ‘pirate’ from his poem “Canción del pirata,” who shuns a conventional life in favor of freedom at sea: “Que es mi barco mi tesoro,/ que es mi dios la libertad,/ mi ley, la fuerza y el viento,/ mi única patria, la mar” (“My boat is my treasure,/ freedom is my god,/ my law, strength and wind,/ my only home, the sea”). Méndez’s female subject expresses much of the same sentiment in fewer verses: the desire to be free, at sea, with no laws to bind her. Yet she does not need to label herself as a pirate, since her marginal status is immediately cemented by being a woman and declaring herself “capitana” of her own “nave sin timón” (“ship without rudder”). In the same vein as Espronceda’s pirate, Méndez’s poetic “I” affirms: “Por los mares quiero ir/ corriendo entre Sur y Norte,/ que quiero vivir, vivir,/ sin leyes ni pasaporte” (“I want to go through the seas/ running between South and North,/ because I want to live, live/ without laws or a passport”). Her lust for life is emphasized by the repetition of “vivir, vivir” and “navegar, navegar,” and her desire to break through barriers and challenge any restrictions makes her a pirate of sorts disregarding every aspect of conservative Catholic Spain in the 1920s.

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<sup>71</sup> Cities mentioned include Madrid, Buenos Aires, Cádiz, Málaga, Biarritz, San Sebastián, Toledo, Río de Janeiro, Cardiff, Seville, Zaragoza, Tenerife, London, Barcelona, Oxford, Montevideo, and Bristol, and non-specific locations include the high seas, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mar del Plata.

That Concha Méndez did not label herself a feminist outright, or openly subscribe to a political party, is irrelevant when reading her poems as examples of female empowerment and acts of resistance to established dominant Catholic patriarchal expectations for women. The life she led and the work she did for the Republic speak to a belief that modernity and multiculturalism bring about progressive changes that have direct impacts on the liberties and freedoms of women. Female subjectivity, eroticism, the reversal of gender roles, the occupying of public spaces, and the traveling – all these themes challenge old ways of thinking by distilling the essence of what newness, youth and modernity meant in the 1920s in a rapidly changing Spain. In addition to the topics just discussed, there are many more traits characteristic of formal modernism, I will not go in to further detail here but critics such as Bellver and González-Allende focus on her pervasive use of metaphor, brief imagistic poems, and the presence of modern themes and objects like jazz, film, cars, trains and planes.

#### IV.

I would like now like to bring this chapter to a close by looking at a series of three poems that, in my opinion, drive home the point that while Méndez's youthful modernism is in dialogue with some of Alberti's and Lorca's work, her poetry is not simply derivative of it. Instead her poetry is already developing a specifically feminist modernism, beyond formal innovation, where her tone and experimentation indicate her sense of liberation at living in a moment of optimism and of social transformation for the better.

The first poem to end this chapter is "Nadadora" 'Swimmer' (82). The title immediately locates the subject's gender while rejecting passivity. This poem has traditional modernist elements; it is self-referential, and is an example of a brief, imagist-like poem. The "I" plays with the objectification and fragmentation of the woman's body. Unlike in some of the other poems

already discussed, this “swimmer” does not conjure up erotic images, instead the broken parts of her body are likened to a strong, moving nautical machine:

Mis brazos:  
los remos.

La quilla:  
mi cuerpo.

Timón:  
mi pensamiento.

(Si fuera sirena  
mis cantos  
serían mis versos.) (82)

My arms:  
the oars.

The keel:  
my body.

The rudder:  
my thinking.

(If I were a mermaid  
my songs  
would be my verses.)

As Altamirano observes: “In a subversion of the fetishistic fragmentation of the female body employed by male classical Spanish poets [...], Méndez divides the woman’s swimmer’s being into arms, trunk, and—in the most radical deviation from the masculine norm—mind” (48). The poetic “I”’s reference to not just her “pensamiento” but also her writing is a bold act of defiance in suggesting that the woman is not only made up of strong, moving parts, that can also think and write.

In light of this, the short poem “Voces” ‘Voices’ (133) from *Canciones de mar y tierra*, offers the next logical step after thinking and writing about these ideas—speaking: “Las voces de dos mil siglos/ clavadas llevo al costado./ Yo no sé—que no lo entiendo—/ por qué me las han

clavado...” (“The voices of two thousand years/ nailed I wear at my side./ I don’t know why—I don’t understand—/ why they have nailed them to me...”)). One of the most striking things about Méndez’s poetry is the almost absolute lack of religious imagery or reference to God. That makes this poem quite unique. Immediately the words “clavadas” and “costado” conjure up Christ imagery. There is no clear indication as to the gender of the speaker; nonetheless, “costado,” meaning side in Spanish, is closely related to the word for rib, “costilla,” the significance of the attention placed on this side/rib calls to mind Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib. The historical mention of two thousand years leaves little room for interpreting it as the suffering of any other marginalized group other than those with whom the speaker identifies. The first two lines express the physical and emotional pain experienced by the “I” at having to carry the burden of this history of suffering and silence. The veiled critique culminates in the last two lines, where the “I” searches to understand why it is that she feels this weight. While one could read this as a rejection of being a mouthpiece for her fellow women, the very act of writing down the suffering of these voices, contradicts any sense that she wishes to leave them behind. Additionally, the repetition of the questioning, in conjunction with the trailing off of the ellipses, suggests an emphasis on not understanding the suffering over not wishing to be responsible for them.

As if in dialogue with “Voces,” the poem “Yo sé” ‘I know’ (141) appears a few pages later. Here, the “I” has moved from not knowing *why* she carries these “voices,” to a certainty about who she is and is not, and what she can and can’t do:

Yo sé que no seré Rey.  
Que nunca podré ser Rey.  
¡Qué lástima no poder  
lo que se quisiera ser!

Y no lo quiero por reinar;

sólo por poder firmar:

Yo.  
El Rey. (141)

I know I will never be King.  
That I will never be able to be King.  
How sad it is to not be able to be  
what one wishes to be!

And I don't want it to reign;  
only to be able to sign:

I.  
The King.

The poem brilliantly draws attention to the unfairness of not being able to be who you truly want to be, under the playful guise of suggesting a desire for a role that one must be born in to—to be both a king and a man. The first two lines jokingly admit that the subject can't and will never be king, but the third and fourth lend a serious tone by claiming an accepted truth: how sad it is to not be able to be what one desires to be. The word “king” conjures up the image of the ultimate, powerful and authoritative male figure. However, the poetic “I” quickly separates this role from its usual main purpose or even attraction, she ignores the power to rule that comes with being “king.” Instead, she envies and desires what initially seem like two simple things: the power to write and the power to be heard. This recalls Salkeld's concern in *The Fox's Covert*, discussed in the second chapter, of having the right to write and be heard. “Yo sé” is uniquely female and feminist, since a male poet of the time would probably not give the same weight and meaning to his own name, or to expressing his own opinion. Méndez fixates on what for her is a main issue: the lack of choices and the immediate legible authority that is assumed with a man's name.

In this chapter I have shown how Méndez was at the forefront as a woman and a poet pushing for change and freedom starting in 1920s under Primo de Rivera's dictatorship.

Benefitting from her two mentors, Federico García Lorca and Rafael Alberti, she began to craft a

modernist poetics from a distinctively female point of view. I have looked at the beginning stage in Méndez's narrative arc, comprised of her first three books, *Inquietudes*, *Surtidor* and *Canciones de mar y tierra*, and examined poems published in journals, as evidence of Méndez's active participation in the avant-garde literary movements of Spain in the late 1920s. Her poetry found in these three collections has helped save a small place for her in the national canon under the stylistic generation of *Generación del 27*. Most critics believe though, Méndez's experimentation with modernism ended with her third collection. The body of her work is frequently read as two halves in opposition with each other with the year 1931 as the moment she stopped being a modernist poet. The implication is that her poetry post-1931 is not comparable in value or quality to her male colleagues, with critics pointing to the stylistic changes marking her poetry as more personal, intimate, feminine and less formally innovative or identifiably modernist. The argument that she was modernist and then stopped is an old one, and only holds true if we continue to adhere to exclusively masculinist narratives of generations and formal innovation, without considering direct political import of her work.

Neither Blanaid Salkeld and Concha Méndez retreated into the private sphere as their rights as women were directly targeted throughout the 1930s. While stylistically they are both quite different, each poet continued to develop their own modernist poetics fighting the dangers posed to them as women and writers by fascist National Catholic ideology. As we will see in the next chapter, the modernism in Méndez's later poetry is based on the continual presence of an independent female subject who fights to be heard as a citizen and a woman, who is aware of her shrinking rights, in the face of increasing alienation from her home, the repeated resistance to authority and the challenge to the tenets of not just National Catholic patriarchy, but patriarchy itself, and an identification with marginalized subjects. The sharing of these experiences provides

a broader and comparative understanding of how women react to social, cultural and political changes in society. If we recognize that “when women write, they subvert ... phallogocentrism because they assume the posture of creative subject,” then “they are no longer silent, hidden or immobile; ... [And] beyond serving as a vehicle of defiance against a system that privileges the masculine, writing provides women a means to create a network of self-generated images and meanings” (Bellver, *Absence* 15), then Méndez’s poetry throughout the 1930s can be read as a continuation of her earliest stage of defiance and a continued challenge to conservative norms and expected roles for women (Bellver, *Absence* 15). Her determination to share her voice even after tragic events emphasizes Méndez’s strength of character and her ability to keep redefining herself in the face of changing social and political realities.

In the next chapter I hope to demonstrate that reading her work as an expression of a fluid transformation as a poet rather than two rigid periods in opposition, offers a multidimensional and broader understanding of Spanish identity. I want to also argue while Méndez might fall back on more conventional themes, her treatment of these continue to push boundaries and conservative notions of what a woman is or should be. I believe Méndez’s poetry transcends Spain’s national context. Framing her in a European modernist context allows us to move past the fact that antecedents and styles differ greatly from one national literature to the next, for this study particularly between Ireland and Spain. It highlights there are fundamental questions of institutional powers of authority shared across national boundaries between these two countries, revealing a comparable social and cultural situation between the 1920s and 1940s: a transition from a left-leaning new republic to an ultra right wing National Catholic government; an inextricable tie between government and church; an unquestioning power of the Catholic Church

over all aspects of life; the politicization of gender; and the alienation and silencing of women from the public sphere resulting in internal and/ or external exile.



## Chapter Four: Fending Off Silence: Concha Méndez in the 1930s

### Silencio

De piedra siento el silencio  
sobre mi cuerpo y mi alma.  
No sé qué hacer bajo el peso  
de esta losa.  
Tendida estoy a la noche  
—árbol de sombra sin ramas—.

Parece el tiempo dormido,  
parece que no soy yo  
quien está a solas conmigo.  
- Concha Méndez  
*Vida a vida*, 1932

As stone I feel the silence  
upon my body and my soul.  
I don't know what to do under the weight  
of this tombstone.  
Stretched out to the night I am  
--tree of shade without branches.

It seems time is asleep,  
It seems I am not I  
who is alone with me.

Concha Méndez's first three books, published between 1926 and 1930, have received the most critical attention and are responsible for putting her in Spain's modernist canon alongside the poets of the *Generación del 27*. Interestingly, it is widely agreed that the last stage that defines the poets of the *Generación del 27* is "caracterizada por el compromiso, la rehumanización, la poesía social y política, sobre todo a partir de 1931 con el advenimiento de la II República" ("characterized by engagement, rehumanization, social and political poetry, especially after 1931 with the advent of the Second Republic"; Merlo 64). As I will discuss, Méndez's poetry post-1931 shifts from a youthful, optimistic formally innovative style to one preoccupied with personal, social and political themes mirroring her male contemporaries. It

would follow then, that her poetry throughout the 1930s would be read as a whole too, tracking the development of various phases of a young modern poet reacting to different cultural, social and political events in her life. Instead, Méndez's poetry after 1931 has mostly been read in opposition to her earlier modernist work, as a second half to the whole of her poetry, with the implication this second and last stage of her life is inferior, less important or less interesting and can be lumped together to simplify its significance or meaning. Biruté Ciplijauskaitė claims this year that divides her work in two is due to her taking a back seat after marriage and living in the shadow of her new husband (González-Allende 90). James Valender echoes this sentiment and adds she completely "abandona la estética modernista" 'abandons the modernist aesthetic' after 1931 (González-Allende 94). These and other critics, including Emilio Miró and Catherine Bellver, have used this division to perpetuate a masculinist understanding of modernism and to suggest that once the humanization of poetry involves women's concerns it is somehow less valuable or of less interest to the canon.

It is also a disservice to Méndez's contribution to Spanish poetry not to acknowledge that her work can be read in dialog with gendered political and cultural events. If we read her taking into account the changing status, and later threat, to women in Spain her poems between 1926 and 1939 can be understood as a continual and developing reaction, resistance, and challenge to Catholic patriarchal hierarchies. Margaret Persin has proposed a more "global reading" of what has been labeled her second phase and has recognized the importance of Méndez's gender when considering her post-1931 poetry. Persin demonstrates that there is a close relationship between her earlier and later poetry, that it is "a continuity" rather than a binary opposition (81). Jumping off of Persin's observation of "continuity" versus break, I contend that while Méndez distances herself from formal innovation during the 1930s, her treatment of themes such as love, sex,

motherhood, social and political protest, loss and loneliness, while undeniably intimate, nonetheless avoids traditional feminine and sentimental trappings. Following from what we saw in chapter three, she continues to exert a strong independent female “I” and challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes as a woman and poet living and writing during the rise and threat of fascism. Reading her in a broader international context along with Blanaid Salkeld—another poet reacting socially and politically to the rise and threat of conservative National Catholicism—demonstrates that Méndez’s reaction is not an isolated experience but rather part of a larger if insufficiently recognized female European modernist tradition.

Concha Méndez returned to Spain in 1931 after almost two years in Argentina. She effusively welcomed the arrival of the Second Republic and relished the rights and freedoms granted to women by its 1931 Constitution. Shortly after being introduced to Manuel Altolaguirre by her friend Lorca that same year, the couple founded their printing press Héroe, that would publish her fourth and fifth collections of poetry, *Vida a vida* (1932) and *Niño y sombras* (1936). Married on June 5, 1932, the event was described as the “Boda de Poetas” ‘Wedding of Poets’ and was attended by “la corte de los poetas” (“the court of the poets”; Díez Canedo). This “corte” included Juan Ramón Jiménez, Jorge Guillén, Lorca, Vicente Aleixandre and Luis Cernuda, along with other “notables personalidades de la intelectualidad y de la política española y elementos de todas las clases sociales” (“notable personalities from the Spanish intelligentsia and politics and elements from all social classes”; “Bodas”). The first half of the decade held some great highs for Méndez. She founded three magazines with her husband, began printing and editing poetry, lived in England, where she gave birth to her daughter, and moved and worked in the center of the Spanish and foreign intellectual circles present in Madrid and London. By all accounts, she lived a happy and exciting life alongside her husband as an

equal. The years that followed her wedding, though, were also marked by serious events: adjusting to life as a married woman, losing a son in childbirth, experiencing the Civil War both first hand and from exile, and losing friends in the war (Bellver, *Bodies* 75).

The poem above, “Silencio,” contrasts significantly with the adventurous and confident female poetic subjects discussed in chapter three. The “I” feels burdened and anxious, and in the quiet moments alone she no longer recognizes herself. This poem is a reflection of its book *Vida a vida*, published after many years of exciting traveling as a single woman, wherein Méndez finds herself adjusting to married life. Society’s expectations of what a married woman was to be must have weighed heavily on Méndez, yet she continued to work and be Altolaguirre’s business partner throughout their marriage. This clearly flew in the face of traditional Spanish gender roles and the later fascist National Catholic ideology. Her behavior helps us understand her personal investment in the success of the Second Spanish Republic. I see this adjustment from a single adventurous woman to a married partner as the start of her narrative arc throughout the 1930s. To track her poetic trajectory I will look at poems published in a variety of literary journals throughout the decade. I hope to demonstrate how Méndez’s work changed and developed, and show her poetry as a varied and continued female response to major cultural and political events. These magazines will serve as a way in to discuss her next three books. The first section will discuss Méndez’s transition to a new intimate style from her earlier formal modernist innovation seen in the previous chapter. I will start by looking at poems from *Héroe* (1932-1933) and *1616 English and Spanish Poetry* (1934-1935) as examples of her reaction to being a wife and mother. *Hoja Literaria* (1933) and *Ardor* (1936) show a woman poet concerned with motherhood while simultaneously participating in the literary scene and responding to social, cultural and political changes. These magazines serve as a good introduction to her fourth

and fifth books, *Vida a vida* and *Niño y sombras*. The next section will mark her move to an overt engagement with political events, transitioning from an expression of personal and private loss to outrage over a broader public and national loss during the Spanish Civil War. To show this I will analyze her poems in the Republican magazines *Hora de España* (1937-1938) and *El Lunes de El Combatiente* (1938-1939). I will conclude with the poet in exile, and look at this last stage in her narrative arc by discussing a poem published in the Cuban magazine *Lyceum* in 1939. I will show Méndez did not abandon modernism after 1931, and I will argue that to lump her work into one big grouping limits our understanding and appreciation of the poet and her work. Méndez's themes throughout the decade show a poet not only refusing to retreat into the private sphere once married but becoming increasingly more feminist and overt in her response to the threat of fascism.

## I.

The literary magazines *Héroe* and *1616* are significant for various reasons. With *Héroe* Concha Méndez's takes on a new role as printer and editor, taught by the poet and her future husband Manuel Altolaguirre. In her memoir she remembers that at the time of meeting him in 1931, he was without his own printing press and unable to start any magazines: “[F]ue entonces que se me ocurrió que podíamos asociarnos. Le dije que yo sería el socio capitalista, ya que si no tenía ninguna experiencia en el trabajo de impresión, sí podía invertir el dinero que había ganado en Argentina” (“It was then that it occurred to me that we could work together. I told him that I would be his capitalist partner, since I had no experience with printing, I could invest the money that I had made in Argentina”; *Memorias* 86-7). This is striking; Méndez emphasizes her business partnership with him over their romantic or sentimental relationship. Méndez becomes a full investor in the traditional male world of printing, using her *own* money *earned* and asserts

her equality with Altolaguirre by using the word “socio.” In considering her actual role in the printing of these magazines, James Valender concludes: “No se sabe exactamente cuáles fueron las responsabilidades de Concha Méndez en estas importantes iniciativas. Puede ser, incluso, que Altolaguirre hubiera podido lanzar estas revistas, u otras parecidas, sin su ayuda” (“We don’t know exactly what were the responsibilities of Concha Méndez in these important initiatives. It could be, even, that Altolaguirre could have launched these magazines, or other similar ones, without her help”; *Poetas* 55). Had this been the case, he allows for the possibility that the magazines would not have had the same consistency or quality as they do. This comes across as a backhanded compliment:

[L]a trayectoria [de Altolaguirre] nos lleva a creer que las tres revistas mencionadas no hubieran tenido ni la consistencia ni la continuidad que tuvieron si no fuera por el empeño y la disciplinada dedicación de Concha Méndez, quien, además de ocuparse de la administración de la empresa, se esforzó una y otra vez en impedir que su marido echara a perder éste o aquel otro proyecto que tuviera entre manos, proclive como era a entregarse, de cuerpo y alma, a la primera distracción o estímulo nuevo que le llegara. (*Poetas* 55)

The trajectory of Altolaguirre leads us to believe that the three magazines mentioned would not have had the consistency nor the continuity that they did have if it had not been for the determination and dedicated discipline of Concha Méndez, who, in addition to being in charge of the administration of the press, made the effort over and over again to stop her husband from losing this or that other project that he had in his hands, inclined as he was to give himself, body and soul, to the first distraction or new stimulus that arrived.

Valender does not quite praise Méndez for this quality as much as he exposes Altolaguirre's charming tendency to be distracted.<sup>72</sup> The automatic assumption about the impossibility Méndez could indeed have equally important responsibilities is unjust and unfair. She quickly learned how to run the press, took over its physical tasks, and helped Altolaguirre edit the magazines and other poets' collections:

Era yo quien la manejaba; la manejaba vestida con un mono azul de mecánico; era difícil y cansado, pero como era deportista, tenía una fuerza increíble. Cuando salía a la calle con aquel mono, la gente se quedaba extrañadísima; no recuerdo haber visto en todo Madrid a otra mujer vestida en pantalones en esa época. Altolaguirre trabajaba en una antología de poesía romántica española, en cuya selección yo le ayudé. (*Memorias* 87)

I was the one who managed it; I worked dressed in a mechanic's blue jumpsuit; it was difficult and tiring, but since I was an athlete, I was incredibly strong. When I would go out to the street in the jumpsuit, the people would look at me strangely; I don't remember having seen in all of Madrid another woman dressed in pants at

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<sup>72</sup> Some of the collections that Valender mentions that were printed by the couple, and presumably completed because of Méndez's administrative skills were: "recordamos [...] los numerosos libros que editaron conjuntamente durante este mismo período, y sobre todo los de la colección Héroe (*Nuestra diaria palabra*, de Rafael Alberti; *La lenta libertad*, de Manuel Altolaguirre; *El joven marino*, de Luis Cernuda; *A la orilla de un pozo*, de Rosa Chacel; *Primeras canciones*, de Federico García Lorca; *El rayo que no cesa*, de Miguel Hernández; *Niño y sombras*, de Concha Méndez; *Salon sin muros*, de José Moreno Villa; *Primeros poemas de amor*, de Pablo Neruda" ("we remember the numerous books that they edited together during this same period, and above all those from the Héroe collection (*Nuestra diaria palabra*, Rafael Alberti; *La lenta libertad*, Manuel Altolaguirre; *El joven marino*, Luis Cernuda; *A la orilla de un pozo*, Rosa Chacel; *Primeras canciones*, de Federico García Lorca; *El rayo que no cesa*, de Miguel Hernández; *Niño y sombras*, Concha Méndez; *Salon sin muros*, José Moreno Villa; *Primeros poemas de amor*, Pablo Neruda"; *Poetas* 55).

that time. Altolaguirre worked on an anthology of romantic Spanish poetry, in which I helped with the selection.

Her gender transgressions continued with her choice of dressing in a workman's jumpsuit to run the press, and, because her work also involved delivering the packages, she entered the public sphere in a shocking manner without hesitating to challenge the norm (*Memorias* 92). This recalls her early adventures with the artist Maruja Mallo in the mid 1920s, but whereas those outings seemed purposefully to shock society, here Méndez is actually fulfilling her job by going out in to the street and delivering the work printed, though she relished the shock too. Méndez's importance as printer is recognized by many of the principle players of the time, including the esteemed poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, who described the hectic scene surrounding her handling of the machine: "Entramos donde está ella y el camarote locomotora cabina gabinete se mueven de abajo arriba, de izquierda a derecha. Nos mareamos de cuatro o cinco modos, tenemos que cogernos a un hombro, a las letras, a un clavo, a una nube, a las ascuas" 'We enter where she is and the locomotive cabin cubicle office all move up and down, from left to right. We become dizzy four or five ways, we have to grab on to a shoulder, to the letters, to a nail, to a cloud, to the embers'; and her jumpsuit "de cajista de imprenta, enrolada de buque, fagonera de tren, polizón de zeppelin" 'of a typesetter, of a ship's recruit, a train's stoker, a zeppelin's stowaway' (67). At the bottom of the front cover of all six issues of *Héroe* she gets first billing with the stamp "IMPRESORES CONCHA MENDEZ Y MANUEL ALTOLAGUIRRE." This important role continues with the magazine *1616*, published in London, where again her name comes first: "IMPRESORES CONCHA MENDEZ Y MANUEL ALTOLAGUIRRE."<sup>73</sup> Also at the back of

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<sup>73</sup> She is also credited with being the printer of their third magazine, *Caballo verde para la poesía* (1935) after returning to Madrid from London. Pablo Neruda is credited as editor, however in a private undated letter Méndez states: "Caballo verde—pertenece a una de las tres



the various poetry books printed by the press Héroe, it states that that particular book was finished printing “en los talleres de Manuel Altolaguirre y Concha Méndez.” Though the order of the names is reversed in this case, what stands out is the use of the conjunction “and” to describe whose workshop this press belongs to, leaving little doubt about their partnership.

*Héroe* is an important, short-lived magazine that proposed to cement the reputation of the leading vanguardist poets of its time. As the poet Vicente Aleixandre asserted, “[a]llí entraban, ... los principales poetas de la generación ... *Héroe*, heroicamente agrupando lo más significativo de la poesía española de su tiempo, que es decir de una de las épocas más lucientes de su historia” (“In it entered, ... the principle poets of the generation ... *Héroe*, heroically grouping the most significant of Spanish poetry from that time, which is to say one of the most bright periods of its history”; x). Juan Cano Ballesta confirms the presence of these important poets, but also points to a difference between this magazine and its predecessors: “La publicación no se abre, como tantas otras de tipo vanguardista, con una declaración de intenciones y un programa o manifiesto lírico. Son las grandes figuras del 27 las que marcan el gusto de las páginas magníficamente impresas de la revista” (“The publication doesn’t open, like so many other vanguardist ones, with a declaration of intentions and a lyrical program or manifest. They are the great figures of the 27 that mark the taste of the magnificently printed pages of the magazine”; 301). One unique feature in it is the appearance in each issue of a different literary portrait titled “Héroe español” written by the eminent poet Juan Ramón

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revistas hicimos Manolo y yo. La primera dirigida por ambos fue “Héroe” publicada en Madrid, la segunda “1616” en Londres y la tercera editada por nosotros en Madrid, tuvimos la gentileza de darsela a dirigir a Neruda, por tratarse de un poeta americano que por entonces vivía allí, en Madrid, pero nosotros costeabamos la edicion hecha en nuestra imprenta.” (missing accents from original letter). Also, Méndez helped set up their printing press La Veronica in Havana, Cuba in 1939, where she helped edit and print works, including *Lluvias enlazadas* (Bellver, “Introduction” 18).

Jiménez. The first is of Altolaguirre, the second of the modernist writer and poet Rosa Chacel, then Vicente Aleixandre, followed by one of Luis Cernuda, the fifth one is of Concha Méndez, and the sixth and last is of Emilio Prados.

Five of Méndez's poems appear in different issues of *Héroe*. Three of these belong to *Vida a vida*, published on March 5, 1932. It is this collection critics use to demonstrate the start in the divide of her work into two opposing phases, pre- and post-*Vida a vida*, or in other words: vanguardist and personal. Addressing the changes in *Vida a vida*, Catherine Bellver notes: “shadows establish themselves as a living presence,” and “what was previously jubilation, cheerfulness, and assertiveness becomes loneliness, somberness, and even nihilism” (*Absence* 70). Shadows become an important, recurring image in the collections to follow, but Bellver admits that at least present in *Vida a vida* there are still at times “jubilant” tones of love, but it is “junto a la pasión y la paz que infunde el amor, [que] se asoman la soledad y la inquietud” ‘together with the passion and peace that infuses love, where solitude and anxiousness appears’ (*Bodies* 16). Many suggest this change is due to her marriage to Altolaguirre, some commenting, as mentioned in Chapter 3, that this new voice was in fact her “true” self, while others, that she lost herself behind the shadow of her famous poet husband (Miro 27; Altamirano 47). As Altamirano observes, these two positions “view her ‘real’ization as a feminization of her work, thus relieving the male discomfort associated with the androgynous sportswoman present in her experimental poetry” and as such “deval[ues] ... the poems in which her ‘feminine’ voice is not present” (47).

The two remaining poems in *Héroe* previously unpublished are “No sé dónde” ‘I don’t know where’ and “Locura” ‘Insanity.’ Both are representative of the shift mentioned above and appear in the third and sixth issue respectively. The poem “No sé dónde” alerts the reader to an

initial sense of doubt, or perhaps hesitation, which from the beginning jars with the poet's earlier energetic voice of confidence and enthusiasm. It is surprisingly biographical and candid about the reversal of mood in our poet's voice:

Hoy aquí. ¿Y mañana?  
No sé dónde mañana.  
Sólo sé que no sé  
dónde encontrarme el alma.

En su busca he corrido  
por ciudades lejanas.  
Me asomé a los caminos,  
a las altas barandas...  
Me asomé a las distancias...  
y al olvido primero  
del jardín de la infancia. (444)

Here today. And tomorrow?  
I don't know where tomorrow.  
I only know that I don't know  
where to find my soul.

In search of it I have traveled  
through faraway cities.  
I looked over the paths,  
the high railings.  
I looked at the distances  
and oblivion first  
of the garden of youth.

The delight once felt by the poetic "I" at the butterfly flitting and flowing back and forth in "Voy y vengo" discussed in the third chapter is now fragmented and jagged: "Here today. And tomorrow?" The uncertainty is emphasized by the verb "I know," repeating and rhyming. She acknowledges the past journeys she happily took to find herself, but her former optimism is replaced by a defeated and fractured self. There seems to be not only pain at not knowing herself but also at not recognizing who she was only a few years earlier. Her identity crisis is agonizingly expressed in the last two lines: "Todo inútil. ¡Qué angustia!/ ¡Dónde encontrarme el alma!" ("Everything useless. What anxiety!/ Where to find my soul!"; 444).

The sixth and last issue publishes “Locura.”<sup>74</sup> Cano Ballesta’s observations about this last issue are relevant to Méndez’s poem: “La gran controversia sobre la poesía comprometida y revolucionaria, que se estaba gestando en los ambientes culturales y encendía los ánimos durante aquellos meses, halla su eco y confirmación en el poema de Alberti” (“The big controversy over socially engaged and revolutionary poetry, that was taking place in the cultural circles and was stirring the mood during those months, has its echo and confirmation in Alberti’s poem”; 306). Alberti’s poem “Un fantasma recorre Europa” ‘A ghost traverses Europe,’ is an example of a political, socially engaged poem welcoming communism as a liberating force throughout the continent. The “fantasmas” in Méndez’s poem “Locura” initially appear to echo Alberti’s, but thematically it is reminiscent of his earlier surrealistic and angst ridden work in *Sobre los ángeles* and reveals a poetic speaker in crisis. Méndez’s ghost reflects a darkening mood around the poetic “I” and she feels completely alienated from her own body. First she doesn’t recognize her own skin: “No es mi envolutra, no,/ ésta que veis tan torpe,/ me cubre los huesos” (“It is not my wrapping, no/ this that you see so awkward,/ that covers my bones”; 445). The “fantasmas” then inhabit and move through her:

Son otros los fantasmas,  
huéspedes que transitan  
por mis raíces profundas,  
que se ocultan en mí. (445)

They are others the ghosts,  
guests that transit  
through my deepest roots,  
that hide in me.

The new disconnect between her mind and body stands in stark contrast to the strong physical and independent woman who exuded confidence and certainty in her first three books, as

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<sup>74</sup> In James Valender’s 1995 anthology of Concha Méndez’s poetry the title is changed to “Poema.”

discussed in the previous chapter. Her pessimism is heightened in the last lines, where the lack of self-recognition leads her to believe in the impossibility of resolution to this crisis:

Mi verdadera vida  
está vencida y muerta  
porque fue mi enemiga  
desde antes de nacer. (445)

My real life  
is defeated and dead  
because she was my enemy  
since before I was born.

While these lines are ambiguous, there is clear anger directed at some injustice experienced. I find the mention of “antes de nacer” intriguing and hints that the resistance and oppression she experiences is rooted in her being a woman. The lines suggest exhaustion at the effort expended until now, to achieve what she has. Her uncertainty and self-doubt in this period has been attributed to being married to her successful and talented husband, and the attention he received. “[D]esde antes de nacer” implies a dissatisfaction with something that is older than her marriage, something determined before her birth, for example society’s treatment of women through the centuries. It is important to remember too, these darker and intimate poems follow the more general literary trend in Spain at the time towards a more personal and socially aware voice, and they are published in the same journals alongside similarly doleful poems her male contemporaries.

This new sense of defeat and feelings of loneliness is echoed in several of the poems in *Vida a vida*. The subject in “¿Dónde?” ‘Where?’ (also published in *Héroe*) sees a disconnect between her present and her past:

¿Dónde estuve yo antes  
de esta vida?  
¿Qué sueño fue  
anterior a este sueño?

¿En dónde estaba yo?  
¿Fue glorioso?  
¿Era infierno? (183)

Where was I before  
this life?  
what dream was it  
before this dream?  
Where was I?  
Was it glorious?  
Was it hellish?

The poet also uses familiar sea imagery to express her new sentiments of anxiety and confusion:

“Buceo en el pasado/ y me veo sin verme” (“I dive in the past/ and I see myself without seeing me”). “Insomnio” ‘Insomnia’ is another poem full of terror of not knowing why, or who she is:

¡Este no saber vivir  
a la plena luz del sol  
y hacer día de la noche!  
¡Y este infinito terror  
al vacío de las horas! (188)

This not knowing how to live  
in the plain light of the sun  
and to make night into day!  
And this infinite terror  
of the empty hours!

Here though the subject’s anxiety is heightened by adding the feeling of being trapped:

¡Qué angustiosa cárcel ésta  
de hierro por todas partes,  
con las ventanas al mundo,  
a las sombras, a la nada! (188)

What anguished jail this  
made of iron everywhere,  
with the windows to the world,  
to the shadows, to nothing!

In contrast with her past belief the world was an inviting and open place to explore in search of freedom, here the “I” associates “shadows” and “nothing” with what she sees around her. In

another poem, “Silencio,” the poetic “I” no longer recognizes herself, the isolation and desperation once again leads to her questioning who she is: “parece que no soy yo/ quien está a solas conmigo” (“it seems that it is not I/ who is alone with me”).

There are poems, too, in *Vida a vida* that have a specific “you” that the “I” addresses. More often than not in these cases, the presence of another person brings about a sense of hope and comfort. These poems also push the envelope with their erotic connotations, giving us another glimpse of Méndez’s playful side. Roberta Quance highlights “sus francas alusiones al amor carnal y a la igualdad de dos cuerpos y dos vidas en lucha (sea ésta amorosa o existencial)” ‘her frank allusions to carnal love and the equality of two bodies and two lives in struggle (be it amorous or existential)’ as an important trait in the collection (112). The book opens with the poem “Recuerdo de sombras” ‘Memory of shadows,’ and is a poem that has been discussed at length for its overtly sexually suggestive imagery:

Síntesis de las horas.  
Tú y yo en movimiento  
luchando vida a vida,  
gozando cuerpo a cuerpo. (183)

Synthesis of the hours.  
You and I in motion  
fighting life to life,  
enjoying body to body.

In the poem “Madrigal” ‘Madrigal,’ the “I” lovingly beckons to a “you” who is injured and offers him rest and comfort: “Ven a mí, que vas herido,/ que en este lecho de sueños/ podrás descansar conmigo” (“Come to me, you are hurt,/ in this bed of dreams/ you will be able to rest with me”; 184). Lastly, the untitled poem starting with the line “Te vi venir...” is one of her most erotic:

Te vi venir presintiéndote,  
por el camino estrecho.

.....  
Vibraba un frescor de lirios  
por los caminos inciertos.  
La mano que te tendía  
tuvo un florecer de sueños.  
Con el brillo de tu espada  
las sienas se me encendieron. (185)

I saw you come sensing you  
down the narrow path.

.....

A freshness of irises vibrated  
down the uncertain paths.  
The hand that I held out to you  
had a flourishing of dreams.  
With the shine of your sword  
my temples lit up.

In the erotic poetry discussed in the previous chapter, the “I” took an active role seeking out her partner. Here the speaker is a more passive one, but rather calmly lying in wait but there is still a sense of control as she invites in her lover. Recalling the sensual, savage flowers in Blanaid Salkeld’s early poem analyzed in the first chapter, words like “presintiéndote,” “estrecho,” “vibraba,” and “mano” evoke the sensation of touch and feeling; “te vi,” “sueños,” “brillo” and “encendieron” call to mind visual imagery; and “un frescor de lirios” and “un florecer” suggest the alluring scent of an opening bud. The last four lines leave little to the imagination, with the “I”’s offered hand opening to him and his shining “espada” making her blush. Though *Vida a vida* suggests a poet in some turmoil over her loss of identity, and new role as partner to someone, these are loving poems reflecting joy in her union. Méndez’s poetry would again be stylistically and thematically affected with the next significant event in her life.

In the next year, Méndez and Altolaguirre would suffer the loss of their first child, and the couple decided to accept a scholarship and move to England. With a new adventure to



distract them, they began making themselves known to the English literary circles and began their second little magazine. Named after the same year that William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes died, it was meant to “dar a conocer la poesía de aquel momento tanto en Inglaterra como en España” (“introduce the poetry of that moment in England as well as in Spain” (Méndez, “Antecedentes”). Once more, Méndez was intimately and physically involved in the publishing of this bilingual experiment, which she proudly stated in a letter to Carlos Morla Lynch: “Nuestra revista ‘1616’ tiene mucho éxito. Chesterton, Eliot, Housman y varias personalidades literarias se interesan. ... La revista ‘1616’ ha sido el portavoz de la actual poesía española a Inglaterra. Antes de venir nosotros nadie sabía nada de nada sobre nuestro actual movimiento poético” (“Our magazine ‘1616’ is very successful. Chesterton, Eliot, Housman and various other literary personalities are interested. ... The magazine ‘1616’ has been the voice of contemporary Spanish poetry to England. Before we arrived nobody knew anything about our actual poetic movement”). *1616* did not try to be new with respect to contributing to the separate Spanish or English modernist movements; rather it focused on introducing previously unknown Spanish and English poets to their different audiences. This in itself was inspiring and spoke to the modern mood of intercultural cooperation and exchange. Some poems were translated either into English or Spanish, and others were left in their original language. Some Spanish poets included were Lope de Vega, García Lorca, Cernuda, Aleixandre, Valbuena Prat, Alberti, Neruda, Méndez and Altolaguirre. Some English-language ones were Byron, Shelley, Stanley Richardson, Janet Perry, and T.S. Eliot.

In the tenth and last issue in 1935 only two poems appear: Lope de Vega’s elegy “Canción a la muerte de Carlos Félix” ‘Song for the Death of Carlos Felix’ and Méndez’s “Voy por ti” ‘I’m going for you’ in dialog with Lope de Vega’s poem (Osuna 362). “Voy por ti” is a

touching expression of the birth of her second child while remembering the death of her first: “Voy por ti, segundo niño,/ segunda cuna en el tiempo,/ que la primera, vacía,/ quedó hecha niebla de sueño...” (“I’m coming for you, second child,/ second crib in time,/ that the first, empty,/ became made of fog of dreams...”; 446). The second stanza’s opening line repeats her assertion, “Voy por ti.” The lines that follow though, quickly demonstrate that this is not a stereotypical feminine poem celebrating the joys of motherhood. Instead, there is a serious, almost feverish drive to assert that her body is not suddenly a passive vessel, but an active agent:

No nací para ser lago  
remansado, humilde, quieto,  
sino mar de mil orillas  
de calma y tormenta lleno;  
no nací para quedarme  
en un rincón del invierno,  
heladas mis manos quietas,  
sí para empuñar aceros  
encendidos como antorchas  
con que abrir caminos nuevos. (446)

I was not born to be a lake  
formed, humble, still,  
but rather a sea of a thousand shores  
full of calm and storm;  
I was not born to stay put  
in a corner of winter,  
frozen my hands still,  
yes to grip steels  
lit like lanterns  
to open new paths.

This departs wildly in theme from her earliest work; one could argue that it is an example of the poet’s willingness to submit her body and soul for the life of her child and is no longer concerned in pursuing her earlier modern interests. Her fifth collection *Niño y sombras* came out a year later in 1936, and “Voy por ti” certainly serves as a precursor to the main theme of her book: dealing with the death of her child. Critics have tended to read her verse from this time as less

interesting or significant because it deals with pure emotion and perhaps addresses something as mundane as motherhood. Yet how Méndez expresses her pain and her role as mother is far from typical. From the first line to the ninth, there is an interesting shift from and differentiation between her role as mother with the repetitive “Voy por ti” to the assertion of her own identity and the moment of *her* birth: “No nací para...” It echoes some of Blanaid Salkeld’s stanzas in *The Fox’s Covert* contesting stereotypical and conservative gender roles of women as passive receptacles meant to be locked up. Méndez’s reference to and rejection of ‘still hands’ suggests the poet’s ownership over her authorship, as a woman willing to write new paths out for herself. The poem is certainly about motherhood, but it contests the National Catholic stance on the interchangeability between mother and woman seen in DeValera’s Ireland and in Franco’s Spain. This active and determined voice is familiar and recalls her earlier daring poetic “I’s,” and while it used to be about expressing a desire to leave everything and everyone behind, she accepts her new reason for rootedness. Motherhood comes wrapped in all sorts of traditionally acceptable behaviors for women. It is these expectations of what a mother should be, and the stasis that role implies, that the poet clearly rejects, and will not allow it to define who she is or how she will mother. While her unconventional single life appeared to be approved by the vanguardist movement for its shock factor and newness, Méndez seems to be taking a stand and stating that she has not and will not change because of this new role. She calls out the typical and expected characteristics of a woman; she firmly rejects the traits of passivity, humility, stillness, and refuses to be kept in a corner wringing her hands with only her child to occupy her life. This is emphasized by the parallelism of the repetition of “Voy por ti...” and “No nací para...” The closing lines affirm her desire to leave a mark with the use of strong words like “grasp,” “steel,” “lit” and “torches,” and though she will be staying closer to home, she will continue to shape her

future by continuing to write. This is truly daring in 1935 in light of the cultural war that was already beginning in Spain between the rising fascist movement and the Republicans. Méndez's poem is a refreshingly bold female statement of independence, of refusing to be boxed in by traditional and stereotypical female roles.

Méndez's second poem in that same issue of *1616* is "Ancla" ("Anchor"). The poetic subject is confused and lost between not knowing what is real and what is a dream. Unlike the strong and confident voice in "Voy por ti," the "I" in "Ancla" turns her gaze inwards, and confusion and uncertainty permeate the poem:

Ancla, no sé de qué sueño,  
ni en qué fondo estoy anclada,  
ni si mis ojos me sirven  
en aguas tan poco claras.  
Si turbio es lo que rodea,  
¿serán turbias las miradas? (447)

Anchor, I don't know in what dream,  
nor in what depth I'm anchored,  
nor if my eyes serve me  
in waters so little clear.  
If turbid is what surrounds me,  
Is it the looks that are turbid?

The negative tone of the sea imagery here marks a change in her work. Where once it was the ultimate symbol of freedom and escape, as seen in "Navegar," "Viaje," and "Por los mares," for example, now it makes her feel anchored and trapped. In earlier poems, like "La isla" and "Nadadora," she swam freely through clear and fresh water; here she is blinded by muddy and turbid ones impeding clarity of vision and thought. Her confusion and doubt is heightened by "crossing through the mirror" into another foreign space where the water that once set her free now makes her feel powerless and unrecognizable:

¡Atravesar el espejo  
del otro lado y que alas  
me levanten de este fondo

en donde me siento ahogada,  
de oídos que no me escuchan  
y voces que se me clavan...! (447)

Cross the mirror  
from the other side and that wings  
rise me from this depth  
where I feel drowned  
by ears that won't listen to me  
and voices that stick in to me!

The poet looks into the “mirror” in search of a new space where she hopes to find relief from the confusing feelings and disconnect she sense from the familiar places around her. The eleventh and twelfth lines emphasize her sense of powerlessness at being dismissed, at not being heard, and at being attacked.

The themes in these two poems are precursors to the book *Niño y sombras* and the feelings of anxiety, alienation, and uncertainty present throughout it. Bellver describes the book as expressing “reacciones viscerales ante el dolor personal” ‘visceral reactions to personal pain,’ and as presenting a poetic subject who “se encuentra desterrada en unas circunstancias de apartamiento que, además de romper lazos deseados, la alejan de sí misma y le infunden duda e inseguridad” (“she finds herself in exile in circumstances of separation that, in addition to breaking desired ties, distance her from herself and fill her with doubt and insecurity”;  
“Introducción” 17). Bellver also observes that Méndez takes a “gravedad con el empleo de un léxico de connotaciones de oscuridad, ausencia y tristeza” ‘seriousness with the use of a lexicon of connotations of darkness, absence and sadness’; here is where she has finally “desvestido su poesía definitivamente no solo de los ropajes vanguardistas sino también de las vestimentas festivas de sus versos juveniles” (“undressed her poetry definitively not only of its vanguardist trappings but also of the festive traits of her young verses”; “Introduction” 17).

I would not argue against the observation that the poems found in *Niño y sombras* have lost the most obvious formally innovative aspects of their modernism, and yes, thematically Méndez is no longer concerned with the fast-paced, modern technological side to the modern world that formerly intrigued and inspired her. I contend, though, many of the poems that struggle with her search to find herself and make sense of this crisis call to mind Rafael Alberti's surrealist *Sobre los ángeles* but detail a feminine expression of pain. Margaret Persin has focused on Méndez's use of the elegy in this collection, and argues convincingly for its non-traditional, feminist qualities: "A diferencia de la elegía doméstica femenina, en este poemario la poeta no encuentra ni nostalgia por el ser querido peridido, ni consuelo. Como las otras practicantes de la elegía moderna femenina,<sup>75</sup> Méndez produce . . . un duelo melancólico" ("Differently from the feminine domestic elegy, in this book the poet does not find nostalgia for the lost loved one, nor solace. Like other practitioners of the feminine modern elegy, Méndez produces a melancholic grief/mourning"; 88). Persin continues,

Al dar voz al lamento femenino, Concha Méndez Cuesta como poeta participa en la revisión de lo que se llama la poesía elegíaca, porque su voz poética pasa más allá del discurso femenino, más allá de lo aceptado y lo aceptable según la

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<sup>75</sup> Quoting Jahan Ramazani, Persin explains what makes up the modern elegy: "La persona que escribe la elegía moderna tiende no a alcanzar sino a resistirse al consuelo, no a sobrepasar sino a mantener el enojo, no a curarse sino a abrir de nuevo las heridas que se asocian con la pérdida. Para explorar lo que hay de paradójicamente melancólico en los poemas de duelo modernos, quisiera repensar la distinción clásica entre el duelo y la melancolía, matizándola como una diferencia entre distintos modos de duelo: el normativo (el que restituye o idealiza) y el melancólico (el violento, el recalcitrante)" ("The person who writes the modern elegy tends to not reach but rather resist consolation, not overcome but rather maintain the anger, not to heal oneself but open again the rounds associated with the loss. To explore the paradoxically melancholic in the poems of modern grief, I wish to rethink the classical distinction between mourning and melancholy, matching it as a difference between different modes of grief: the normative (the one that restores or idealizes) and the melancholic (violent, obstinate)"; qtd. in Persin 88).

perspectiva patriarcal. Inserta la voz femenina del lamento en el entorno público al lado de la masculina, declarando así el valor y la universalidad del duelo femenino como parte íntegra de la experiencia humana. (92)

Giving voice to the feminine lament, Concha Méndez Cuesta as a poet participates in the revision of what is called elegiac poetry, because her poetic voice goes beyond the feminine discourse, beyond what is accepted and what is acceptable according to the patriarchal perspective. She inserts the feminine lament voice in the public sphere beside the masculine one, declaring the value and the universality of the feminine duel as an integral part of the human experience.

In addition to her subversion of the traditional feminine elegy mentioned by Persin, the political stance in Méndez's expression of maternal pain with an almost complete absence of religious imagery, (in 28 poems, the word "ángel" appears in passing only four times, and the word "dios" appears once in lower case with the indefinite article "un"), is stunning. These mother-centered poems challenge old conservative notions of Spanish womanhood. The voicing of pain is not new, but she avoids sentimentality in her verse. There is no wailing or direct address to God asking why she has been made to suffer, but there is also no comfort sought in believing the child is in Heaven. Instead she expresses a material understanding of the tragedy, and though at times she struggles to find meaning within herself at othertimes she asserts confidence she herself will find her own way. This must be read as something as radical and modern for its time as attacking bourgeois and conservative conventions, given the contemporary limitations placed on women in society. Méndez's pain is tied to coming to terms with how her physical body created, and then failed, the body of her child. In any case, Méndez represents everything

opposed to the Spanish fascist-approved Catholic version of mother and woman being promoted by the far-right in the mid 1930s and subsequently by Franco's regime.

If the act of writing by women was itself considered subversive, doing so at a time when the nation was split between progressive liberals and Catholic fascists must count as especially so. It is important to understand that by 1934 the fascist *Sección Femenina*<sup>76</sup> 'Women's Section' had been formed by Pilar Primo de Rivera—the former dictator's daughter—and already in its early stages the members were intent on declaring their opinion on feminism: “Es, pues, una misión educadora, nueva y perfecta la que tenemos que cumplir nosotras aquí en la Falange Española de las JONS. Nueva porque con vosotros hemos de luchar contra este feminismo imbécil, majadero y ridículo” (“It is an educational mission, new and perfect the one that we have to take on here in the Spanish Falange of the JONS. New because with you we have to fight against this idiotic, stupid and ridiculous feminism”; qtd. in Domingo 157). In 1937 Franco officially put the *Sección Femenina* in charge of dictating every aspect of women's behavior adhering to his National-Catholic ideology.<sup>77</sup> Carmen Domingo writes that the establishment of

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<sup>76</sup> Carmen Domingo notes that their duties during the Civil War included: “visita a presos, apoyo espiritual, corte y confección de camisas azules... y recaudación de fondos” [visit the prisoners, spiritual support, cut and fit of blue shirts... and collecting funds] (159). In an attempt to assuage the fears of the men in the fascist party—given that even José Antonio Primo de Rivera (Pilar's brother) was against including women (Domingo 157)—Pilar Primo de Rivera explained about the group “tampoco somos feministas. No entendemos que la manera de respetar a la mujer, consista en sustraerla a su magnífico destino y entregarla a funciones varoniles... El hombre es torrencialmente egoísta, en cambio, la mujer, casi siempre acepta una vida de sumisión, de servicio, de ofrenda abnegada a una tarea.” [we are not feminists either. We don't understand that the way to respect a woman, consists in stealing her from her magnificent destiny and give her masculine functions... The man is torrentially egotistical, on the other hand, women, almost always accept a life of submission, of service, of offering self-sacrifice for a task] (qtd. in Domingo 159).

<sup>77</sup> As in Ireland, under DeValera's rule, “National-Catholicism fused Falangist (i.e., Spanish fascist) doctrine with traditional Catholic tenets, affording Franco the political and divine sanction to govern Spain. Gender ideology became, as well, crucial in defining the state, its territory and authority” (Morcillo-Gómez 52).



the Sección Femenina achieved “un triple objetivo de las mujeres: controlarlas, ...; preparar su vuelta a casa tras la guerra, ...; y, por último, convertirlas en mantenedoras de la jerarquía patriarcal que siempre había existido en España” (“a triple objective of the women: control them; prepare their return to the house after the war; and, lastly, convert them into the maintainers of the patriarchal hierarchy that had always existed in Spain”; 253). In 1938, Franco adopted his “Fuero del Trabajo” ‘Work Laws’ “dictat[ing] that the new state “will free women from the workshop and the factory” (Nash 184). The “Fuero’s” language calls to mind Article 45,5(2) of the 1937 Irish Constitution that De Valera passed: “the State shall endeavour to ensure ... that women or children shall not be forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their sex, age or strength” discussed in chapter one (qtd. in Beaumont 575). As we know from chapter two, Blanaid Salkeld began her own business with the printing press The Gayfield Press in 1937 in clear opposition to the Consitution. Back in Spain working for the Republic, in 1938 Concha Méndez was closely involved in fighting Franco and his fascist beliefs about women’s roles by writing and publishing. Franco’s “Fuero” would become official law once he won the war. As Mary Nash has observed:

Women’s primary social function was motherhood. Hence, women’s aspirations related to work, education and self-betterment, social activity and emancipation were perceived as a threat to their biological destiny as breeders of the nation’s future generations. ... Female sexuality, work, and education were regulated in accordance with this gender designation, while motherhood was idealized and considered a duty to the fatherland. [...] The new regime espoused a gender role of submission, docility, and unquestioning obedience to the traditional tenets of domesticity. (183-184)

The absolute importance of the Catholic identity to the Spanish fascist definition of woman must be emphasized. She cannot exist without it: “La mujer española es católica, apostólica y romana, mientras no se demuestre lo contrario. Por ambiente, educación, tradición familiar y rutina siente y vive el catolicismo. Da un carácter emocional, dentro de lo dogmático, a su religiosidad” (“The Spanish woman is Catholic, apostolic and Roman, while the contrary is not demonstrated. By environment, education, family tradition and routine she feels and lives Catholicism. It gives an emotional character, inside of the dogmatic, to her religiosity”; qtd. in Domingo 215). Leaving little doubt as to her feelings on the subject, Pilar Primo de Rivera would go on to insist, “Women never discover anything. They lack creative talent, reserved by God for virile intellects; we can do no more than interpret what men present to us” (qtd. in Payne 274).

A year after the founding of the Sección Femenina, Méndez and Altolaguirre returned to Madrid in 1935 and established their third magazine *Caballo verde para la poesía* under the honorary direction of Pablo Neruda. The poem “Yo sé” ‘I know,’ published again a year later as part of *Niño y sombras*, echoed the unwavering tone of “Voy por ti.” The impression is that the “I” is addressing her contemporary and future critics:

Yo sé que a nadie importa  
lo que tengo,  
como a nadie le importa  
que el mundo se deshaga.  
.....

Yo sé que a nadie importa  
el que tenga una vida  
salida de mi vida  
con ojos que me ven  
y labios que me ríen,  
con piecitos suyos  
que pisan ya y se mueven  
al aire que les llama. (206-7)

I know that no one cares  
what I have,

just like no one cares  
that the world comes apart.

.....

I know that no one cares  
that I have a life  
come from my life  
with eyes that see me  
and lips that smile for me,  
with their little feet  
that step already and they move  
towards the air that calls them.

The first two lines acknowledge the poet's awareness that her personal life is of no interest to others, but the poem is not a lament. She subtly shrugs off the dismissal of others by introducing a loving, detailed description of her child. The use of simile to compare the disinterest in her personal life to people's apathy at the destruction of the world hints at the darkening political mood in Spain. After an enumeration of things that "no one" cares about, the poet asserts her independence and her right to be heard by defiantly claiming:

Pero, aunque sé, y me sobra,  
que a nadie importa nada  
.....  
quiero hablar de mí, sola,  
frente al mundo distante,  
porque llevo en mis ríos  
la sangre que me riega  
y una voluntad mía  
me lleva donde quiero. (206-7)

But, although I know, and all too well,  
that no one cares about anything

.....

I want to talk about me, alone,  
in front of this distant world,  
because I carry in my rivers  
the blood that waters me  
and a will that is mine  
takes me where I want.

This is a powerful and hopeful declaration of independence. Bellver admits that despite the overwhelming darkness present in the overall collection, “[Méndez] encuentra ‘fuerzas ocultas’ interiores que la sostienen y la hacen palpitante con vida y sentir el impulso de extender la mano a la humanidad entera” (“this untiring woman finds interior ‘hidden forces’ that support her and make her beat with life and feel the impulse to extend a hand towards the whole of humanity”); *Bodies* 17). However, I don’t think this gives enough recognition of the feminist qualities and the streak of rebelliousness present here. The “fuerzas ocultas” Bellver mentions surfaces in poem “23,” where the poet claims she has “un apoyo invisible en cada brazo” (“an invisible support under each arm”; 204). This would certainly suggest Méndez is simply relying on something greater than herself, but a few lines down she also writes: “Yo soy la vida en lucha/ de cada hora y de cada paso./ Yo soy la fuerza de mí misma” (“I am the life in fight/ with each hour and each step./ I am the strength of myself”; 204). Reading this in light of “Voy por ti” establishes an unequivocally defiant tone in *Niño y sombras*. Just as in her earlier poetry, the “I” is a self-reliant and determined woman, rocked by tragedy but ready to speak her experience and share her power. This is supported by the repeated presence of first person singular verbs, possessive adjectives and first person object pronouns.

Taking into consideration the Sección Femenina and the views of the Spain’s fascist party, Méndez does not need to be overtly political or feminist to mount a fundamental challenge to Catholic patriarchal authority. So it is easy to read *Niño y sombra* superficially and think Méndez has abandoned all of her modernist and fighting qualities. As mentioned earlier though, her avoidance of God and religion becomes more striking once the rapidly rising fascist party is taken into consideration. In light of the Sección Femenina’s belief about women as mothers, two poems stand out where Méndez’s voice is direct in addressing her loss. In “Recuerdo” ‘Memory’

Méndez emphasizes that a mother's journey is always lonely: "(La madre va siempre sola/ quien quiera que la acompañe;/ el mundo es como un desierto/ y el hijo en él un oasis)" ("(The mother always goes alone/ no matter who accompanies her;/ the World is like a desert/ and the child in it an oasis)"; 196). Of course the poet praises the child, but she is still very clear about this being an individual experience and not one representative of a larger community or furthering the greater good of the nation. Nor does she mention self-sacrifice, a central tenet of Spanish Catholic women's identity. In a much more open rejection of Catholic belief, the "I" in "Canción" 'Song' beautifully mourns the loss of her child but expresses hope in the fact that he will live on *not* in an afterlife in Heaven, but rather by feeding into the natural cycle of life: "Ya tiene la tierra algo/ que fue mío nueve lunas.// (arbolillo nuevo/ sin ramas ni fruta)" ("The earth now has something/ that was mine for nine moons.// (new little tree/ without branches or fruit)"; 197).

Along with her assertion of independence and individuality in the face of loss, what also stands out in this collection is Méndez's willingness (first discussed in "Locura") to express dissatisfaction, pain and anger at the injustice that she experiences specifically as a woman. About poem "13," Emilio Miró observes "en su dolor personal la poetisa siente la historia común, la injusticia universal" ("in her pain the poetess feels the common history, the universal injustice"; 42). While I do not dismiss the poem is open to the interpretation that it opposes injustice at the hands of those in power, I think that it can be understood as a more gendered complaint:

Ni mi niñez ha sido de este mundo,  
ni en esta juventud me reconozco.  
Me pesan siglos<sup>78</sup> de abrasadas sangres,

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<sup>78</sup> The image of centuries worth of suffering and injustice is repeated in "Esto es el comienzo" 'This is the beginning,' published in *Ardor* in 1936.

de injustas vidas, de latidos huecos;  
me pesan sombras, que no pueden irse,  
voces me llaman de distintos cielos. (200)

Not even my childhood has been from this world,  
not even in this youth I recognize myself.  
Centuries of burnt blood weighs on me,  
of unjust lives, empty beats;  
shadows weigh on me, that can't leave,  
voices call me from different skies.

In chapter three I discussed the inextricable ties between Méndez's real life and the topics of her poetry. Those earlier poems described her fast-paced modern life, concerned with instant gratification and the multiple opportunities and freedoms the changing world promised women. Poem "13" reveals a more mature poet, affected by tragedy and preoccupied with the past. This poem does not push boundaries formally, yet thematically it is more than just a female poet mourning the loss of a child. Miró acknowledges her participation in a long line of poets asking eternal and existential questions: "la pena, el infortunio, se hacen elegía, y en ella la pregunta de siglos, el *ubi sunt?* sin respuestas" ("the pain, the misfortune, become elegy, and in it the centuries old question, the *ubi sunt?* without answers"; 42). This ignores how this poem is a modern reaction by a female poet to the present circumstances threatening her place in society. She mentions her own privileged, yet difficult, conservative childhood, during which her gender barred her from participating in intellectual pursuits. Then, her wild youth, far removed from her present state, creates a disconnect between her former and present self. These personal ties are followed by her call out against what Miró observed, "universal injustice." Interestingly though, the "universal injustice" that weighs on Méndez connotes religious oppression ("siglos de abrasadas sangres") and patriarchal oppression. "Latidos huecos" and "sombras, que no pueden irse" recalls the suffocating domestic poem "Reposo en el comedor," where the female "I" is

bound to her role in the home. Hinting at her earlier search for freedom abroad, foreign voices call to her.

The last poem from *Niño y sombras* I will discuss is “19.” This poem is another example of a modern female “I” who unequivocally expresses her right to be free and not defined by her physical body. This contests the limiting reading of this book as simply about “la maternidad frustrada, [y] el sufrimiento por el hijo perdidido” (“frustrated maternity, [and] suffering over a lost child”; Miró 42):

Un cuerpo tengo, heredado  
de otras vidas y otros cuerpos,  
y un alma libre tan mía  
que no sé cómo la tengo,  
alma que pulsa los límites...  
Horizontes... y desvelos... (202-3)

A body I have, inherited  
from other lives and other bodies,  
and a free soul so mine  
that I don't know how I have it,  
soul that pulses the limits...  
Horizons... and awakes...

This verse recalls Méndez's earlier traveling poems discussed in the previous chapter, where the subject moved in cars, planes and boats towards the horizon in search of freedom. Now, though, Méndez has no ownership over her physical mobility. As a mother she has become aware of the past connections between her “cuerpo” and “otros cuerpos.” This implies a loss of identity and independence for her. With the rise of the Sección Femenina preaching about women's only role as mother, and their complete lack of intellect, what follows is the speaker stressing that her role as mother cannot limit her free thought. The “I” asserts her possession with “mía” over her soul. No matter what the restrictions, her “alma” will continue to soar toward “los límites” like when she was younger and not tied down.

The poet's grief, worry and doubt throughout *Niño y sombras* are undeniably present and rooted in the concrete and identifiable loss of her child. However, there is also a continued distinctively modern female presence that refuses to be silenced just because she has taken on a new role as mother. Not previously read as particularly feminist or political, *Niños y sombras* is more than just an outpouring of maternal grief. It has undeniably socially and politically critical qualities and can also be read as reflecting the darkening mood in Spain from 1933 to before the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The poems published in *Hoja Literaria* and *Ardor*, written around the time of *Niño y sombras*, demonstrate Méndez's concerns were multiple. Not only did she explore the loss of a child in her poetry, but she also reflected on a fractured Spain. These poems add to her poetic narrative, and show her on her way to becoming overtly political in her work.

Three years separate *Hoja Literaria* and *Ardor*, and their various co-founders went on to align themselves with opposing political sides during the Civil War. Arturo Serrano Plaja, one of the co-founders would later be instrumental in creating *Hora de España* with Manuel Altolaguirre, a pro-Republican propaganda magazine during the war. Rafael Osuna has observed that both journals, *Hoja Literaria* and *Ardor*, attempted to be socially and politically neutral in choosing the texts for publication. Late for Spanish modernism, both magazines continued to push for pure poetry rather than the literature informed by the social and political events appearing at that time. As Osuna states "*Ardor* fue un muestrario de pureza, pues la nostalgia de lo impoluto literario no había desaparecido en aquella dramática hora" ("*Ardor* was a show of purity, the nostalgia for the unpolluted literature had not disappeared in that dramatic hour"; 439). Osuna then draws comparisons to *Hoja Literaria*: "Aunque se hace difícil creer que hubiera escritores en aquel momento sin una posición pública totalmente definida ante la



sociedad española, ninguna de esas revistas enumeradas [including *Hoja Literaria*] presenta posición alguna definitiva como tal revista a no ser la de estar por encima de toda posición” (“Although it is difficult to believe that there were writers in that moment without a public stance totally defined by Spanish society, none of the magazines listed presents a definitive position as such a magazine, unless it is to be above all stances”; 439). This view stands in contrast with each of the poems that Méndez published. Published before or around *Niño y sombras*, I believe they reveal another side of Méndez, one that forces us to adopt a broader understanding of her poetry than a blunt division of her work into two phases (the pre-*Vida a vida* defined by formal innovation, and the post-*Vida a vida* characterized as anti-modern). These two poems show her as a poet aware and in tune to her surroundings outside of her private sphere. Instead of reading her as a shadow behind her poet-husband, I read her as bravely taking steps to bring to light women’s concerns but also to comment on her public surroundings.

The first poem I will discuss is “Perdidos” ‘Lost,’ published in the June-July 1933 issue of *Hoja Literaria*. A year earlier in the poem “Locura” the speaker struggles to overcome a personal crisis as she tries to make sense of her emotional disembodiment and feelings of loneliness. The poem “Perdidos” however, reads like a premonitory warning projecting the rising tension felt in Spain that year.<sup>79</sup> The short poem’s first line “Nos perderemos” complicates its reading since the first person plural pronoun “nos” can be read as the reciprocal pronoun “each other” or as the reflexive pronoun “ourselves.” Both implications come across as a resigned

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<sup>79</sup> By 1933 extreme tension between the Catholic right and the multiply fractured left side was at a high. Able to capitalize on the disagreements between the various liberal parties, the unified Catholic right won an overwhelming majority in the elections and sought to reverse many of the modern, progressive and secular laws that were instituted by the 1931 Constitution. This win would be an early important step that would unchain a series of events leading up to the Coup by General Franco. There were major general strikes the following year by the left working class that were brutally put down by the right--Franco being called upon to put an end to it. The left was able to regain power in the 1936 elections, and Franco led the Coup.

admission, a *fait accompli*, ensured by the use of the future simple tense of “perder,” “we will lose.” The poem can be read as a sad recognition of two people growing apart, powerless it seems to stop the separation. Yet both meanings, whether the speaker believes she will lose the “you” or “herself,” are haunting in light of the political fissures at the time and their foretelling of the Civil War:

Nos perderemos  
por dos caminos seguros,  
por dos caminos opuestos,  
con tu alta soledad tú,  
yo, con la mía tan alta,  
que ha de poder asomarse  
a la otra vida ignorada...  
y ver lo que nos espera  
allí  
en el otro encuentro,  
cuando la ausencia del mundo,  
cuando la ausencia del cuerpo,  
sin ojos para mirarnos  
pero sí  
reconociéndonos... (445)

We will lose ourselves  
by two sure paths,  
by two opposite paths,  
with your high solitude you,  
I, with mine so high,  
that should be able to show itself  
to the other ignored life...  
and see what is waiting for us  
there  
in the other meeting,  
when the absence of the world,  
when the absence of the body,  
without eyes to look at ourselves  
but yes  
recognizing ourselves.

Reading it as a reciprocal action, the loneliness and loss of self, be it physical, emotional or psychological, is emphasized by the presence of a “you” and the divide that exists between them.

The two definite but opposite paths that divide the speaker from the “you” lead the “I” to

contemplate what the future may hold. Hope resides in the possibility that they will both reunite in a vague afterworld defined by the absence of any physicality. There is no world, no bodies, and so no eyes to see, but they will know the other. Reading the first pronoun reflexively suggests a broader preoccupation with the society around her, making this poem an early example of Méndez's concern with and reaction to a nation fractured and divided by misunderstanding on a path to collision. The reference to an "absence of the world" and "absence of body" suggests death, but the shame and auto-destruction of a civil war is underscored by the inability to "see" their true selves or each other. It is an ominous warning. By the time recognition happens, the ellipsis suggests it is too late to come back from it. "Perdidos" offers multiple and simultaneous readings that show mark her poetic development. On the one hand its reflection on personal loss ties it to her work in *Niño y sombras*, while on the other it is an example of her transitioning into a poet more openly engaged with the political events around her.

*Ardor* published only one issue before it was interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War. With rising political tensions in Spanish society, Méndez's poem "Esto es el comienzo" 'This is the beginning,' reads as a call to arms and a defense of overthrowing conservative, oppressive traditions in favor of freedom, equality and progress. The personal crises marking her fourth and fifth collections disappear here, and the poet moves towards a concerned identification with an imagined community and nation. This poem's theme, though, contradicts Osuna's claim that *Ardor* sought to have "poesía limpia de salpicaduras" ("poetry clean from splatter"; 439). Significantly, he also claims that the one issue of *Ardori* turns to mediocrity once Méndez's poem appears in it: "Desde aquí *Ardor* parece precipitarse en el vacío de la mediocridad, como lo muestra Concha Méndez, que en estos meses imprimía para Pablo

Neruda” (“From here *Ardor* appears to hasten into mediocrity, as demonstrated by Concha Méndez, who in these months was printing for Pablo Neruda”; 445). After discussing her work as a printer he claims: “sus versos se llamaban ‘Esto es el comienzo’ . . . , de poca inspiración” (“Her verses were called ‘This is the beginning’ . . . , of little inspiration”; 445). I disagree. This poem is fiery-tempered, challenging and daring. There are echoes of her rebellious poetic voice from not only her early collections but also in her more recent verse, as discussed above. What jumps out in this poem is that the “I” no longer looks inward but rather outward, addressing her community and marking another step towards the propagandistic that typifies her writing during the Civil War. This “I” is sure of herself and her place in her community:

Hay que romper fuego,  
en filas de a todos,  
que esta torpe vida  
arrastra un proceso  
de sangre ignorada . . .  
de ausencia de nervio . . . (447)

One has to open fire,  
all of us in formation  
because this stupid life,  
drags a process  
of ignored blood . . .  
of absence of nerve . . .

The use of the verb “hay” asserts her call for a change, a break from the old, “torpe” ‘stupid’ backward life that lacks thought and courage for its citizens.

Yo voy—como todos—  
arrastrando, a solas,  
este peso muerto  
de lastre de siglos  
injustos e inciertos.  
Yo voy, como todos,  
hacia un mundo nuevo. (448)

I go—like everyone—  
dragging, alone,  
this dead weight

of the burden of centuries  
unjust and uncertain.  
I go, like everyone,  
towards a new world.

Unlike her youthful poems, where the poet proudly displayed her independence and unique spirit, this poem expresses commonality between the speaker and everyone who has fought against oppression. Echoing the sentiment in poem “13” of *Niño y sombras*, the “I” identifies with those who have suffered and struggled to overcome the burden of centuries of injustice. Once more, the poet affirms her belief in a better world far removed from a conservative tradition that has held many back. She again aligns modernity and progress with liberty in a “mundo nuevo,” as she calls for everyone to break free from the restraints ignorance and backwardness: “*¡Rompa sus tinieblas/ la noche que todos/ llevamos adentro/ y se haga de día*” (“Break your ignorance/ night that we all/ carry inside/ and let it become day”; 448). This vocal, fierce and defiant call to move society forward with respect to freedoms the very essence of what Franco planned for women. As Mary Nash has observed,

[f]rancoist propaganda ... blamed modifications in traditional cultural values, irreligiosity, and, most especially, the changed status of women. It ... claimed that feminism and egalitarian demands had fully demonstrated women’s growing corruption and denial of their natural biological mandate as mothers. (Nash 182)

Embodying everything the fascist party feared, Méndez poetry throughout the 1930s continues to defy expectations by asserting her right to participate in the public sphere and voice her support for a changing world. Alongside her “irreligiosity,” “feminism and egalitarian demands,” her promotion of a modern global perspective stood in stark contrast to the insular and backwards vision of Spain advocated by Franco. His enforced National Catholic ideology was based on the

“recovery of tradition [which] implied the total destruction of the Republican attempt to bring Spain closer to Europe” (Morcillo-Gómez 52).

Adding to the misinterpretation Concha Méndez abandoned all forms of modernism in her poetry after 1931 is the view expressed by Catherine Bellver: “After 1936, even before the critics would forget them, these poets disappeared into a void of silence: Concha Méndez withdrew into the realm of the private self” (*Absence* 14). As I will show, this is clearly inaccurate. Méndez not only continued writing poetry during the Spanish Civil War (many of these poems were later published in her sixth book *Lluvias enlazadas* in 1939), she also contributed to two Republican journals during the war. The poems that follow assume a forthrightly public voice not seen in her previous two books, with a female speaker who is unequivocally committed to the world around her and invested in the outcome of the war. These examples will further demonstrate a feminist poet continuing to develop and change in response to an intimidating and threatening Catholic patriarchal authority and argue for a more complex narrative arc over the common simplified binary of pre- and post- modernist poetry.

## II.

Critics like James Valender and Catherine Bellver have observed the lack of overt political opinions in the work of Concha Méndez. They have recognized and documented her enthusiastic support of the Second Spanish Republic, something I discussed in the previous chapter, and they have rightly pointed to the life she led before the Republic’s Constitution as evidence of her believing in and then embodying its freeing and modern principles. The implication is that while Méndez promoted a belief in equality through her actions she did not wish to get directly involved in politics. I think this limits our understanding of her involvement with and investment in the Republic and the events going around her during the 1930s, it also

leads to us misreading her less formally innovative poetry as not modernist. Méndez remembers the first half of this decade as a time of tolerance of differing political opinions among her intellectual friends, but she also mentions her unease at those critical of the government's mission to modernize Spain's social infrastructure and disseminate universal access to secular education.<sup>80</sup> Just like Blanaid Salkeld, Méndez aligned modernity with equality and freedom, and she relished the promise of a more liberal society. Once the fascist threat became increasingly real, by mobilizing cultural and social programs like the Sección Femenina throughout Spain, unabashedly promoting their view of an authentic Spanishness based on National Catholic tenets, the focus and style of her poetry changed again to reflect these dangers. Whereas Salkeld faced the implementation of the political, social and cultural policies of De Valera's right wing Irish National Catholic government, Méndez begins to feel the danger of losing her rights in a more direct fashion. Though frightened by the extreme factions on both sides of the war,<sup>81</sup> Méndez

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<sup>80</sup> "Empecé a utilizar (mi credencial de periodista) para entrar a las cortes españolas y así poder enterarme de la situación política de España. ... [P]ude escuchar la conversación de un grupo de diplomáticos, en la que hablaban pestes del gobierno republicano. No podía comprender como estos hombres, que se suponían con inteligencia, pudieran juzgar de manera tan dura a un gobierno que estaba en sus comienzos y cuyas reformas sociales se hacían latentes" ("I began to use [my journalist credentials] to go into the Spanish cortes and find out about the political situation in Spain. ... I overheard a conversation of a Group of diplomats, where they were insulting the republican government. I couldn't understand how these men, that were supposedly intelligent, could so harshly judge a government that was just starting and whose social reforms were so embeded; *Memorias* 91).

<sup>81</sup> Right after the War began, Méndez remembers hearing "¡Abajo la inteligencia! ¡Viva la muerte!" 'Death to intelligence! Long live death!' blared out of the German and Italian embassies in Madrid (*Memorias* 101). On the other side, Méndez is critical of the anarchists: "Los anarquistas hacían unos desastres terribles en las casas; entraban en todas aquellas que parecían tener algo de valor, saqueándolas y aterrorizando a las familias" ("The anarchists caused terrible disasters in the houses; they would go in to all the ones that looked like they had something of value, looted them and terrorized the families"; *Memorias* 101).

voiced her support for the Republic's fight against fascism, personally aware of some of the specific benefits granted women in the 1931 Constitution.<sup>82</sup>

During the Civil War, Méndez contributed both openly and secretly to the war effort in service of the Republic. Building on the tone set in “Esto es el comienzo” in *Ardor*, Méndez published political poems in the Republican literary magazines *Hora de España* and *Los Lunes de El Combatiente*—which she helped produce— while at the same time writing ones articulating personal struggles with the pain experienced at living in exile during wartime. These would later make up part of her sixth book *Lluvias enlazadas* ‘Connected Rains’ published in Cuba in 1939. Once she rejoined Altolaguirre in 1938 in Spain with their daughter, she worked for the Republican government under the impressive title “Oficial de Primera del Cuerpo Técnico y Administrativo de la Sección de América,” where Méndez “tenía que escribir a máquina las noticias sobre la guerra y enviarlas al extranjero” (“had to type the news about the war and send it abroad”; *Memorias* 104). While Altolaguirre continued to print magazines and newspapers on the front line, Méndez wrote songs for the soldiers there. Unfortunately this was done under a pseudonym. She explains: “porque aquellas letras eran tan tremendas que, de haber revelado mi nombre, hubiese puesto en peligro mi vida” (“because those lyrics were so shocking that had I revealed my name I would have put my life in danger”; *Memorias* 104). Access to these songs would definitely help support the notion Méndez did not just accidentally write a few war poems but was consciously committed to the fight against fascism on the war front.

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<sup>82</sup> Remembering the moment she decided to abandon Spain during the first year of the Civil War, Méndez observed: “Gracias a la República, yo tenía un pasaporte personal (y no familiar, como se acostumbraba antes), sin el cual no hubiese podido dejar España sin Manolo” (“Thanks to the Republic, I had a personal passport (and not a family one, as was the custom then), without which I would not have been able to leave Spain without Manolo”; *Memorias* 102).



Nonetheless, Méndez's own need for admission about this political and propagandistic act, along with the poems of hers we do have, contest the claim that the poet fell silent after 1936.

The monthly magazine *Hora de España* and the literary weekly newspaper insert *Los Lunes de El Combatiente* briefly overlapped in 1938. Though both shared many of the same directors, editors and printers, including “Manuel Altolaguirre, Antonio Sánchez Barbudo, Rafael Dieste, Juan Gil-Albert, Ramón Gaya, [and] Arturo Cuadrado,” “Emilio Prados [and] Concha Méndez” joined the group working for *Los Lunes* at the end of 1938 (Núñez 131). Both endeavors served the Spanish Republic's continued interest in disseminating culture throughout Spain, despite the war, while also being used as a vehicle for propaganda. Under the subtitle “al servicio de la causa popular” ‘in service to the popular cause,’ *Hora de España's* impressive list of contributors continued to discuss the tension between art and propaganda:<sup>83</sup>

Lo que se debate en las páginas de *Hora de España* son los temas que monopolizaban los foros intelectuales del momento: el grado de compromiso de los artistas, id est, si deben supeditar su genio o talento a los dictados del partido ... o si disponen de su libertad absoluta para la creación. (Fernández Hoyos 531)

What is debated in the pages of *Hora de España* are the subjects that monopolized the intellectual forums of the moment: the degree of social commitment of the artists, id est, if their genius or talent should be subject to the dictates of the party ... or if they have their absolute freedom for creation.

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<sup>83</sup> Some of those contributors included Antonio Machado, Rafael Alberti, Pablo Neruda, Luis Cernuda, Octavio Paz, and some prominent women writers such as Rosa Chacel, Ernestina de Champourcín, Concha Zardoya and María Zambrano.

On a different tangent, Manuel Altolaguirre shared Méndez's early experience of exile and loss during the war in the March 1937 issue of *Hora de España* before any of her poems appeared. Under the section titled "Noche de Guerra de 'Mi Diario'" 'Night of War from 'My Diary', ' Altolaguirre first discusses his fear for the safety of his wife and child: "mi mujer, ... salió ... atendiendo mis ruegos, aterrorizados ante los insistentes y criminales bombardeos enemigos sobre nuestras poblaciones" ("my wife, ... left... listening to my pleas, terrorized because of the insistent and criminal enemy bombings on our cities"; 309). He then shares one of Méndez's letters to him about her trip:

Viajaba en el mismo vagón una señora que fue muy amable con nosotras. Venía a París a estar con su hija casada a quien no veía desde hace meses. Al llegar se me ofreció para tener la niña mientras buscaba yo mozo de equipaje y de pronto veo que abrazada a un muchacho lloraba desesperadamente. La hija a quien venía a ver había fallecido antes de su llegada. No tienes idea del dolor de esta mujer y lo mucho que me impresionó su caso. Cada vez pienso más en lo triste que es y en las consecuencias que puede tener una separación. (310)

I was traveling in the same wagon as a lady who was very nice to us. She was coming to Paris to be with her married daughter who she hadn't seen in months. When we arrived she offered to take the girl while I looked for a porter to help with the luggage and all of a sudden I see that she was hugging a young boy crying desperately. The daughter who she was coming to see had died before she had arrived. You have no idea of this woman's pain y what impression it caused on me. Each time I think more in how sad it is and the consequences that a separation can have.

Interestingly, Catherine Bellver extrapolates from this example to support the reading of Méndez's poetry as just another example of a traditional female response to war. This overreaching argument oversimplifies Méndez's work by grouping it all under one heading, and suggests that there is nothing really new or of much interest in Méndez's poetry from this time.

Bellver states:

Méndez's first written comment on the war concerns family separation and the common plight of women. In a letter to her husband, excerpted by him ..., she tells how the emotional problem of her train companion makes her recognize the pain of separation.... Méndez reconfirms one of the features that Shirley Mangini sees as distinguishing women's writings about the Civil War from those of men: a tendency to comment about family separation and to preoccupy themselves with the intimate details of psychological survival rather than with questions of battles and sexual prowess (14). ... If, as adventurer, publisher, and poet, Concha Méndez can be closely identified before the Spanish Civil War with general culture, in exile she takes an active part in women's culture especially as motherhood emerges as a vehicle of solace, renewal and redemption. ("Exile" 28-29)

Nevertheless, using this letter as proof of Méndez's complete insertion into women's culture and preoccupations overreaches. While the letter may in fact be her first known writing about the war, it was written as a private letter, not as poetry to be shared. It is also Altolaguirre who first brings up family separation before choosing to share with his readers Méndez's experiences. The fact that he keeps it in first person helps create a feeling of intimacy between Méndez and the

audience. In the poems she writes for *Hora de España*, she will build on direct address, but the examples we will soon be looking at do not fit neatly into Bellver's assessment:

Poets writing about war concentrate on two major themes: the horrors of war and its adverse consequences. Because, like most women, Méndez had no direct knowledge of combat or bloodshed, she tends to exclude these elements from her poems. Nonetheless, thoughts of war provoke for her apocalyptic visions of spilt blood inundating the landscape. ("Exile" 29)

I am not arguing against the statement that Méndez did not have "direct knowledge of combat or bloodshed," but I believe simply reducing her poetry from this period to a traditional feminine response to war and its consequences is limiting. In the poems from these magazines and in ones written during the period, there is a continued challenge to authority by refusing to stay silent. As a modern woman invested in the outcome of the Civil War, Méndez's anti-fascist poetry offers more than a mere expression of "concern [for] family separation and the common plight of women"; through a female point of view she boldly attacks the Nationalists for their threat to the freedom of the Republic's citizens, and shames the Allies for their refusal to help Spain in its time of need.

By the end of 1937 the Nationalists were increasingly successful in capturing large sections of Spain and forcing the retreat of the Republican government to Cataluña and Valencia. The Italians and Germans, ignoring the non-intervention agreement banning the sales of arms and aid to Spain, were actively helping the Nationalists by blockading Republican ports and bombing Republican towns, while the rest of its neighbors chose to ignore the pleas of the Republican government. Printed in the November 1937 issue, the title of Méndez's first poem in *Hora de España* may not seem particularly unique. "España" reads as simple and direct in its

propagandistic intention. Yet read in line with her earlier youthful and optimistic references of maps and journeys to foreign places, it represents Méndez’s geographical move back home and her emotional shift from external to internal concerns. The title marks another transformation in the poet’s focus. Though the tone continues the serious streak found in *Vida a vida* and *Niño y sombras*, it reveals an older, more mature voice reflecting on the political events surrounding her. Written in Brussels in exile, “España” directly addresses the war with the poetic “I” speaking directly to a “tú,” Spain. The poet explicitly expresses the necessity to defend and fight for her country against the threat against modernity and progress.

The first line in “España” refers to the pre-existing tensions simmering in the country leading up to the conflict: “Esa terrible angustia que sobre ti pesaba/ hoy se derrama en sangre” (“That terrible anguish which weighed down on you/ today spills over in blood”; 448). With a lot at stake in the outcome of the war, Méndez unequivocally equates the Republic with what she views as the true Spain, praising the country’s modernizing journey forward from its complicated past:

Eras ese gigante...  
 .....  
 que se oculta y se achica para erguirse más alto  
 recuperando fuerzas seculares.  
 Eras esa verdad que permaneció intacta  
 y como verdad misma te has abierto a la luz  
 para asombrar al mundo que te sigue y no sabe. (448)  
 You were that giant ...  
 .....  
 that hides and grows small only to stand taller  
 regaining secular strengths.  
 You were that truth that stayed intact  
 and like truth itself you have opened up to the light  
 to amaze the world that follows you and doesn’t know.

Franco’s fascist party glorified Spain’s past and sought to return to a perceived authentic national identity, one defined by National-Catholic tenets. In the lines above, though, Méndez eschews

the past in favor of highlighting Spain's journey forward. This is signaled by her shift in tenses from the imperfect "eras" to the present perfect "te has abierto" bringing the moment into a recent past. The positive connotations of Spain's progress are emphasized by the image of Spain standing taller than before, and her choice of words in the ninth line, "recuperando fuerzas seculares," to describe the power behind the country's strength is remarkable in its clear rejection of Franco's Spain. The Republic's Spain is the true one that stands before the world to demonstrate its bravery.

The theme that follows is one of sacrifice. Méndez passionately addresses her beloved country as a united "we," accepting the responsibility as a citizen to defend the country against threat: "Correspondió a nosotros vivir este momento,/ esta eclosión de arterias unidas en sus fuentes,/ en su dolor inmenso" ("It corresponded to us to live this moment,/ this burst of arteries united in their sources,/ in their immense pain"; 448-9). This sacrifice is necessary to ensure the future for the children:

Los niños, esa tierna semilla que nos sigue,  
cómo han de agradecer este dolor que pasa.  
Ellos serán tan sólo los que cojan el fruto  
del mañana sin sangre,  
hombres ya de otra hora más fácil que la nuestra. (449)

The children, that dear seed that follows us,  
how are they to be grateful for this pain that is happening.  
They will only be the ones who just pick the fruit  
of the morning without blood,  
men of another hour easier than ours.

Under Franco's dictatorship women were to return to the home and solely preoccupy themselves with producing children to create and shape the new fascist state. As one can see in this passage, however, Méndez wishes to save Spain as a Republic.

The last stanza is the most striking, in my opinion. It stands out on account of the poet's appropriation of religious imagery to fight against the National Catholic assault on her country:

Dichosa tú que has sido  
capaz de poner alta tu corona de espinas.  
Ni pájaros de muerte, ni máquina de muerte,  
ni cobarde invasión han de poder contigo,  
inmensa triunfadora. (449)

Blessed you who has been  
able to place high your crown of thorns.  
No birds of death, nor machine of death,  
nor cowardly invasion will be able with you,  
triumphant one.

Méndez presents Spain as a female Christ figure (“Dichosa tú”), and despite her humiliation and pain, symbolized by the crown of thorns, she is able to submit to it and overcome it. Considering Franco viewed the Left as heretics and heathens, it is a bold and telling move to align her vision of Spain with the suffering Christ figure. Bellver notes “España” veers away from the two major themes of war poetry. This is not a poem exploring female “psychological survival” in war; it is an angry poem vocally challenging the fascist threat and protesting the wrong being done to her country and its people. Méndez declares the bombers and “machines of death” will not defeat Spain. It is also important to note that her use of the word “invasión” refers to the fascist attack and not only implies that the rebels are not true Spaniards but draws attention to the foreign military support Franco received from the Germans and Italians. This completely inverts Franco’s position that the Republican’s are ‘outsiders’ attacking the true essence of Spanishness. Her avoidance of the word foreign here allows her to still hope for help from those members of the non-intervention committee in Europe: “El dolor que te salta por todas las esquinas/ ha salido al encuentro de otras voces que esperan” (“The pain that jumps out of you from all corners/ has left in search of other voices that await you”; 449). “España” is not a poem about the female experience of war or of exile. The “I” is not mourning on an intimate level her separation from her family or the personal tragic consequences of war.

Spain's tragedy bleeding past its borders in search of empathy and assistance leads into Méndez's poem "Esta tarde" "This evening" published alongside "España." "Esta tarde" is not an intimate or personal poem either; it is another example of a public voice not specific to women projecting the experience of war. It suggests a response to the continued hypocrisy of the non-intervention pact. She warns the rest of the world that no matter how isolated Spain's conflict may be ignoring the suffering and injustice occurring there will not make the pain less palpable or impede the negative impact it will have on other countries:

No sé qué tiene esta tarde.  
No sé qué angustiosa esencia  
va vagando por el aire.  
Quedan ecos prendidos  
en las hojas de los árboles,  
en el agua de las fuentes,  
en el hueco de las calles;  
ecos como de un dolor  
intensamente suave;  
ecos como de una lucha  
de bondades y maldades,  
que arrastrara a todo el mundo  
como una ola gigante,  
como un huracán de nuevas  
y extrañas realidades.

Sobre Bruselas se ciñe,  
se ciñe por todas partes  
del mundo en este momento  
ancha corona de afanes. (238)

I don't know what this evening has.  
I don't know what anguished essence  
goes wandering thorough the air.  
They stay like echoes lit  
in the leaves of the trees,  
in the water of the fountains,  
in the space in the streets;  
echoes like a pain  
intensely soft;  
echoes like a fight  
of good and evil,  
that drags everyone



like a giant wave,  
like a hurricane of new  
and strange realities.

Over Brussels it sticks,  
it sticks to every part  
of the world in this moment  
wide crown of desire.

The oppressive image of the “ecos” of war hanging over and sticking to the city, suffocatingly filling up the empty spaces, and dragging and drowning the whole world with the “extrañas realidades,” is a damning protest against the world’s ignorance and apathy toward the fight against fascism:

No nos queremos dar cuenta;  
no lo quiere creer nadie,  
que el Sol del mundo comienza  
a entreabrir sus claridades,  
y la luz tiene en su parto  
un estallar de verdades,  
una convulsión de ayer  
y de mañanas triunfales. (238)

We don’t want to realize;  
no one wants to believe it,  
that the world’s Sun begins  
to open its clarities,  
and the light has in its birth  
a burst of truths,  
a convulsion of yesterdays  
and of triumphant tomorrows.

The use of the first person plural unites the poetic “I” with a larger and broader community going through the same events. The “I” finishes on a hopeful note hoping for truth and justice to prevail and open the eyes of those who continue to refuse to interfere despite the blatant support by foreign forces of Franco’s troops.

By the middle of 1938, the Nationalists succeeded in isolating Cataluña from the rest of Spain, an Anglo-Italian agreement was signed by the non-intervention committee in England

allowing Italy to remain in Spain until the end of the war, and Germany had invaded Austria as Hitler's bellicose actions escalated the advent of World War II ("Illustrated Timeline of the Spanish Civil War"). Published in the July issue of *Hora de España*, and later in *Lluvias enlazadas*, Méndez strong political opinion about the Spanish conflict and the non-reaction by the international community to help her government resurfaces in the poem "Vine":

Vine con el deseo de querer a las gentes  
y me han ido secando mi raíz generosa.  
Entre turbias lagunas bogar veo a la Vida.  
Deja estelas de fango, al pasar, cada cosa...

Y hablo así, yo que he sido vencedora en mi mundo,  
porque pude vencerme y vencer a deseo.  
Pero no me he querido engañar inventándome  
una imagen equívoca. Me forjé en cuanto veo...

No despierto a una hora que no traiga consigo,  
en un sordo silencio, una queja enganchada.  
Tiene el alma un oído que la escucha y la siente  
y recibe esta queja con la pena doblada... (211)

I came with the desire to love the people  
and they have been drying my generous root.  
In turbid lagoons I see Life row.  
Leaving wakes of mud, passing by, each thing...

And I talk like this, I who has been a winner in my world,  
because I could defeat myself and defeat desire.  
But I haven't wanted to fool myself inventing for myself  
a wrong image. I shaped myself in what I see...

I do not wake at any hour that does not bring with itself,  
in a deaf silence, a hooked complaint.  
The soul has an ear that listens to it and feels it  
and receives this complaint with doubled pain...

Catherine Bellver observes that "Vine," "charged with turmoil and tension," explores Méndez's "disorientation and silence" at living in exile ("Exile" 30-31). I don't think however, that it is a poem simply about Méndez's individual "turmoil" or "disorientation." Written in Brussels, it conveys a broader disappointment and anger at Spain's abandonment. I agree with Margaret

Persin who notes: “la voz poética expresa altos niveles de autconsciencia, resistencia y confianza frente al desengaño a todo lo que ha perdido. También se nota una celebración de su fuerza interior por mantener su propia identidad a pesar de las presiones exteriores que la rodean” (“the poetic voice expresses high levels of self-awareness, resistance and confidence facing the disillusionment in everything that she has lost. A celebration of her interior strength to maintain her identity despite all of the exterior pressures that surround her is also present”; 85). Méndez’s fight for Spain’s Republic can be read as parallel to her own fight for her identity. Her “self-awareness” and “interior strength” are two of the characteristics that define her poetry throughout its different phases, and they strengthen the reading of her work alongside Blanaid Salkeld’s as she too fought against the pressure to bend to the patriarchal conservative will of the National Catholics.

*Los Lunes de El Combatiente* served as the literary supplement to the daily military newspaper *Boletín Diario del XI Cuerpo de Ejército* that Manuel Altolaguirre printed (Núñez 129). On the heels of “Vine,” and now back in Spain, Méndez publishes “Renacimiento” ‘Rebirth’ in November 1938. By this time, the International Brigades fighting for the Republic disbanded and left Spain after an order from the non-intervention committee, with the hope of signaling an end to foreign intervention in the conflict. Of course, the allies ignored the continued presence of German and Italian assistance that would help Franco win the war. “Renacimiento” reflects a dramatic shift in the prospect of how the war would turn out as expressed the previous year in “España.” Méndez’s bitterness and dejection is palpable as she points to peripheral Spain’s marked difference from its neighbors as a reason for their rejection of modern Spain: “España siempre sola, siempre tan en sí misma,/ siempre tan misteriosa para el mundo restante” (“Spain always alone, always so inside herself,/ always so mysterious to the rest

of the world”; 449). Spain’s attempt to modernize and secularize itself to bring it in line with the rest of the continent and thereby overcome its separation from the rest of Europe proves unsuccessful. Instead the outside world cannot overcome its own prejudices, naively choosing to ignore the ground gained by fascism on Spanish soil and thinking it will have no impact on them:

Anegada en la sangre de propios y de extraños,  
salida de sí misma a terrible combate,  
traspasa las fronteras, porque no es sólo suya  
la causa que sostiene, que en su suelo debate.

Bien sabe que está sola en el atroz momento  
—isla martirizada en mar de cobardía—.  
En su soledad triste vemos que se agiganta,  
como predestinada a abrir un nuevo día... (449)  
Flooded with the blood of its own and of strangers,  
taken out of itself by a a terrible fight,  
trespasses the borders, because it is not just hers  
the cause that she sustains, than on her floor she debates.

Well does she know that she is alone in the terrible moment  
--martyred island in a sea of cowardice--.  
In her sad solitude we see her grow giant,  
as if predestined to open a new day...

The poet points to the lives lost of foreigners along with Spaniards who fought fascism and suggests that the crisis is bigger than its national boundaries. Yet, despite what is so obvious to her, Spain stands alone, inexplicably ignored by the Allied powers. The prospects of the Republic winning appear grim, emphasized by the words “sola,” “isla” and “soledad,” all projecting loneliness and rejection. In the last stanza, Méndez paints Spain as the heroic underdog that against all odds will rise above her enemies to overcome the injustice and fight for the freedom of Spain and the rest of the world: “Frente a la muerte misma por la Libertad lucha:/ ¡La Libertad del mundo renacerá en su suelo!” (“In front of death itself for Freedom it fights/ Freedom of the world will be reborn on its soil!”; 450).

### III.

Concha Méndez escaped to France at the beginning of 1939 and waited to be reunited with Altolaguirre after a stay in a French concentration camp. With the help of friends, including Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Paul Eluard and Pablo Neruda, they were able to leave by March 1939 (Valender, *Méndez* 49). Initially en route to Mexico, the couple stopped in Cuba and ended up staying there for several years. Once there, Altolaguirre's future second wife, María Luisa Gómez Mena, helped the couple buy their new printing press "La Verónica" a few months after arriving (Marcos, *Méndez Memorias*). By September, the Spanish-speaking world knew of their work and they were featured in the Argentinean magazine *Sur*:

Muchos escritores españoles fieles a la República han pasado a América. ... Sólo Manuel Altolaguirre y Concha Méndez se han traído una imprenta. Se la han traído en la intención, que es bastante. Y La Verónica —ilustre impresora cristiana— hace en La Habana libros diferentes. Ya han salido de las prensas que manejan con sus manos los poetas obreros volúmenes hermanos, en el parecido externo y en el otro, de los que por años fueron dando en Madrid, en Londres y en París. ... la misma fusión inteligente de negros y rojos en las portadas, fieles a la mejor artesanía española. (Marinello qtd. in Marcos)

Many Spanish writers loyal to the Republic have gone to America. [...] Only Manuel Altolaguirre and Concha Méndez have brought a press with them. They have brought it in intention, which is enough. And The Veronica-illustrious Christian press-makes different books in Havana. Already from its press that is managed by the hands of the working poets similar volumes have come out, similar in its external appearance as it is other, as the ones that came out for years

in Madrid, London and Paris. . . . the same intelligent fusion of blacks and reds on the covers, loyal to the best Spanish craftsmanship.

Altolaguirre published Méndez's sixth collection *Lluvias enlazadas* in November of 1939. A combination of previous poems from *Vida a vida*, *Niño y sombras*, *Hora de España*, and new ones written during the war and in Cuba, make up *Lluvias enlazadas* and offer a last glimpse of the poet's transformation throughout the 1930s. It is a transition from her previous life as a well-known and respected Spanish poet to her new life as an exile, a woman having to start anew. This sixth collection is generally read as far removed from any sense of modernness. Her feelings of "disorientation" and "anguished bewilderment" mix with "confusion, uncertainty, and alienation" at facing a permanent reality of exile (Bellver, "Exile" 31). The new poems are intensely personal and presents a speaker grappling with a crisis of identity and loss of home. However, even from exile we see a poet refusing to retreat or be silenced. I will conclude by looking at one last poem published in exile around the same time *Lluvias enlazadas* was published.

In the last stage of Méndez's poetry at the end of the 1930s, the poetic subject confronts the emotional, psychological and physical losses brought about by the war and exile. In fourteen years, her female poetic "I" has grown and developed from a young, daring adventuress to a mature woman marked by tragedy. Her search for identity is a recurring theme across her six collections and by 1939, with the political and cultural shift back to a right-wing dictatorship, the "I"'s self-awareness looks back to the past to consider who she was, how far she has traveled, and how much she has lost in the present. It is important to remember Méndez was confronted during the war with the fascist ideology looking to put women back in their place. Early on [f]rancoist propaganda attempted to discredit the . . . democratic regime with

claims that it was a repository of political and cultural decadence. Prominent in this defamatory account were gender and cultural factors that blamed modifications in traditional cultural values, irreligiosity, and, most especially, the changed status of women. It was claimed that feminism and egalitarian demands had fully demonstrated women's growing corruption and denial of their natural biological mandate as mothers. ... Women's emancipation was thus denounced as a sign of the moral decadence of the previous democratic regime. (Nash 182)

Her male compatriots lost their national citizenship, but in addition to this as a woman Méndez also loses her national identity.

Many critics have observed the strong presence of "sombras" in her poetry as a symbol representing "oscuridad existencial, como estado de ánimo que abarca la incertidumbre, la ambigüedad y la desesperanza anuladoras del deseo de vivir" ("existential darkness, like a state of being that spans uncertainty, ambiguity and a loss of hope that cancel out the desire to live"; "Introducción" 18). This existential crisis is understood as a common reaction of those in exile. I agree, though, with Margaret Persin's further analysis of this. She inextricably ties Méndez's loss of identity with her femaleness, and reminds us of the extremely gendered repercussions felt by women writers at losing the war:

Las pérdidas ocasionadas por el exilio suponen en efecto rupturas vitales – relaciones familiares, lazos de amistad, oportunidades de trabajo, aceptación y movimiento fácil y abierto en la sociedad, y hasta la imposibilidad de volver, a pesar de su presunta inocencia en cuanto a los conflictos sanguinarios de la Guerra Civil. Así, se podría decir que tanto Méndez como [otras] escritoras ... lamentan la muerte de una versión previa de sí mismas, la muerte de una parte

íntegra del *yo* y un mundo de posibilidades que recién se había abierto a ellas, mujeres que experimentaron los primeros pasos de apertura de la sociedad en la Segunda República, donde podían experimentar la libertad de elegir su estilo de vida. (84)

The losses brought on by exile supposes in effect vital breaks – familial relations, friendship ties, work opportunities, easy and open acceptance and movement in society, and even the impossibility of returning, despite his/ her presumed innocence with regards to the bloody conflicts of the Civil War. One could say, then, that Méndez like other female writers ... lament the death of a previous version of themselves, the death of an integral part of the “I” and a world of possibilities that had been recently opened to them, women who experienced the first steps of society opening in the Second Republic, where they could experience freedom to elect their style of life.

James Valender notes, “después de la experiencia de la guerra civil, había de mantenerse muy alejada de las discusiones políticas que caracterizaban a ciertos medios intelectuales del exilio” (“after the experience of the civil war, she was to maintain herself far removed from political discussions that characterized certain intellectual forms of the exiled”; *Impresores* 52). This may be true in her daily life, and in her poetry, her existential crisis permeates her last poems rather than any expression of overt political opinions. Yet as a female poet who never stopped writing from the year she began in 1926, Méndez did not wallow in her misfortune, nor did she stop working or participating in intellectual pursuits. On the contrary, Méndez continued to assume “un mundo de posibilidades” for herself and continued to do what she had always done since her youthful emancipation in the mid-1920s.



Almost immediately after arriving in Cuba, Méndez helped Altolaguirre set up their next printing press “La Verónica.” In what must have been truly bittersweet, Méndez also became involved with the Cuban women’s Lyceum Club<sup>84</sup> as early as May 1939, giving readings of her own work to its members. She also published seven new poems in the Club’s literary magazine *Lyceum*. Falling neatly in line with the many modernist magazines that Méndez published in at the beginning of the decade, *Lyceum*’s mission was to “[recoger] con la debida calidad los esfuerzos de la institución en el plano de la cultura” (“gather the intended quality of the efforts of the institution in the cultural scene”; Rexach). It focused on promoting avant-garde art, particularly women artists, and sought to foster women’s participation in cultural events. Méndez’s participation in the Club and its magazine is just one indication of her continued dedication to writing and involvement in the improvement of women’s status in society. Despite removing herself directly from the fight for the Republic, unlike many of the exiled male writers who continued to participate in cultural projects against Franco and in support of the exiled government, Méndez focuses her battered energy into exerting her agency through her actions and her writing.

The last poem I will look at is representative of the end of Méndez’s career trajectory throughout the 1930s. Published in 1939, it is indicative of this liminal year for Méndez between her past life as a renowned Spanish poet and her new life as an exiled refugee. This ambiguity and uncertainty indexes her loss of identity, loss of home and a new found hesitation about what

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<sup>84</sup> Cuba’s women’s Lyceum Club was formed in 1928. In 1939 it became “the Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club of Havana. ... [O]nly a decade after its inception, the Lyceum was ... an intellectually and culturally vibrant institution sponsoring everything from literacy campaigns to art exhibitions as well as discussions on major topics of the day. Many intellectuals held conferences at the Lyceum. Vanguard artists of the period were also given the opportunity to exhibit their art at the institution” (Hernández)

the future may bring, and these traits are represented by a poetic “I” in *Lyceum* who finds herself caught between various states. There is no propagandistic value to these poems, nor are they formally innovative, but they are political by their very existence, and they offer a continued challenge to Spain’s new National Catholic view of women. Though she feels alone and in despair, the tragedy of war and exile has not silenced nor defeated the “I.” This state of in-betweenness, the oppositions of life and death, awake and dreaming, doubt and certainty, light and dark, present and past are represented by references of entering and leaving in many of the poems in *Lyceum*, and the use of words such as “dinteles” ‘thresholds,’ “vallas” ‘fences,’ “sueños” ‘dreams,’ “fronteras” ‘borders,’ “sombras” ‘shadows’ and “puertas” ‘doors.’

The poem “I” (the Roman numeral one) sets the suffocating and angst-ridden tone for the series. The speaker confronts death head on: “Parada en el dintel te he visto, muerte./ No te atreviste a entrar en mi aposento./ Toda mi sangre se enfrentó contigo/ y me salvé de tu tragedia, indemne” (“Stopped on the threshold I have seen you, death./ You didn’t dare enter my room./ All of my blood confronted you/ and I was saved from your tragedy, unharmed”; 450). It is an interesting poem with which to start. The use of the preterite tense gives an initial sense of surety. The “I” remembers a past time when not even death *dared* to take her on, and her survival is directly attributed to her lack of fear and her actions. However, as the poem progresses, the “I” leaves behind this memory and new doubt and fear surfaces: “¿Será otra vez para poder salvarme?/ ¿Será para seguirte, vencedora?/ No lo quiero pensar, porque mi sangre/ pone vallas de horror a todo esto” (“Will it be again in order to save myself?/ Will it be to follow you, triumphant?/ I don’t want to think of it, because my blood/ puts fences of horror around all of it”; 450). The desire to not want to think about it is not unusual, and it is important to mention the uncertainty about the future encounter does not lead to the surrender of her will to live or to a

woeful lament about her current state.

Concluding her narrative arc for the 1930s, this last poem serves as a general introduction to Méndez's last book *Lluvias enlazadas*, with a poetic speaker dealing with the reality of exile and the confrontation of loss, nostalgia and alienation but not defeated and not silenced. Méndez's youthful optimism and independent spirtity forged a new and unique path for a woman poet starting in the 1920s, as discussed in the third chapter. Befriended and mentored by the leading modern poets of the time, Méndez capitalized on the rapidly changing attitudes challenging old conservative notions of gender towards the end of that decade. Though thematically different from Blanaid Salkeld, feminism does surface in Méndez's first three books *Inquietudes*, *Surtidor* and *Canciones de mar y tierra* by way of her also inverting traditional Catholic gender roles and stereotypes. Typically reduced to a limiting binary opposition of modernist/personal, the poet's career post-1931 parallels Salkeld's in that as the political climate became increasingly threatening to women's rights Méndez's poetry becomes more overtly political. As seen in chapter two with Salkeld's second and third collections, the female "I" in Méndez's later poetry is invested in the effects and consequences that a National Catholic government would have on women's status as citizens. Like Salkeld, Méndez's personal concern and resistance to authority becomes more overt as her she develops as a poet. While Salkeld becomes more formally modernist as Ireland becomes more right-wing, Méndez does not retreat during the war nor from exile, she continues to assert her voice and never assents to be silenced.

## Conclusion

As discussed in the introduction, thanks to efforts of Bonnie Kime Scott and others, the reassessment of women's modernism, in particular relation to English British and American writers, has been well established for over twenty years. Once we turn our attention to the peripheral Catholic countries of Ireland and Spain, we find that there is an important aspect of European modernism that has gone underappreciated and that the position of women poets in the 1920s and 1930s continues to unsettle modernist national canons by not fitting neatly into masculinist definitions of modernism. We find that the problem of giving authority and placing value on women modernists does not stop there, and continues in present-day Ireland and Spain to affect contemporary efforts of anthologization of older and new women poets.

In the first chapter we saw that Blanaid Salkeld's books were praised by leading modernists of her time, including T.S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett and Austin Clarke. By tracing a narrative arc with the use of poems published in various literary journals, we got a sense of how Salkeld was an active participant in various cultural scenes in Ireland. As the Irish government consolidated its power with the Catholic Church, controlled cultural outlets, and began to specifically target the rights and freedoms enjoyed by women, the poet's style became increasingly modernist as a way to mask and attack the new pressures she began to feel. In chapter two, her most feminist and modernist texts push her criticism of conservative social expectations and fascist government policies to the center of her poetry. In 1937 she founded her own printing press, and also submitted poems to be published outside of Ireland aware of the difficulties she would face in publishing a view not in line with the government (as discussed with her poem "Casualties"). In the same year the Irish Constitution fully adopting fascist definitions of gender, Salkeld published her last collection . . . *the engine is left running* in 1937.

This collection is her most modernist, complex and critical of political and geopolitical injustices. Though she continued to publish the work of other poets for several years after, for reasons unknown (but not at all unusual in many women writers) Salkeld did not print another book of poetry until 1955. With several ongoing and current recovery efforts to retrieve male modernist poets in order to prove that Ireland was multiply diverse at a time when the insular government sought to stamp-out any difference, it can no longer be acceptable to continue the neglect of such an important poet as Blanaid Salkeld. Her feminist and modernist poetics, and her very existence, embodied the “competing ideologies” recovery efforts are trying to establish. Much more work needs to be done, she still is in 2013 very much a poet on the margin of Irish literary modernism, with an occasional asterisk mark to place her by her contemporaries.

Unlike in Ireland, investigation on Spanish women modernists has been ongoing over the last fifteen years. Concha Méndez’s name is definitely part of that token list of four women who appear in the canon following the prerequisite list of important male modernists. However, her placement in the national canon is dependent on male generational definitions of modernism, and this only truly acknowledges her first three books as proof that first, she was a modernist and second, she deserves some attention. I discuss these three books in the first chapter, and establish the close connection between Méndez’s actual life and the themes found in her poetry.

Thematically and formally modernist, I also demonstrate that beyond simply imitating her male peers, the poet launches a feminist poetics that will be one of the most significant recurring traits in her poetry discussed post-1931. Remembering the intimate relationship between the poet and her work, chapter four turns to look at how Méndez’s style shifted to reflect significant and tragic events in her life. Conventional criticism, rooted in masculinist definitions of modernism, has relied on this close relationship between the poet’s life and her work to read this period in her

life as proof that Méndez had either lost interest in or abandoned altogether modernist poetry. The tendency to read her poetry post-1931 as an amorphous blob made up of repeated images of darkness, “shadows” and “ghosts,” to express the grief and mourning of a woman grappling with new feelings of loss, alienation, desperation and crisis of identity, is to do a disservice to the important feminist and political projects the poet continued to work on throughout the 1930s. Looking at the next three collections published post-1931, allegations by critics, at times, have claimed that this “feminine” verse reveals the poet’s return to her “true” female self, leaving behind a fleeting fancy explored and experimented only in her youth. Of course the suggestion is as a woman Méndez’s foray into modernism was unnatural, and only an example of some sort of effort on behalf of the poet to “try something new.” This gendering of modernism punishes her later poetry for not “playing by the rules,” it is labeled as uninteresting, and as inferior in quality for daring to incorporate themes specific to women. While she has been studied more than Salkeld, this has not prevented her from being given a peripheral or marginal role, since her career has been narrated with the kind of masculinist literary history that continues to affect the canonization of contemporary women poets.

Using Bonnie Kime Scott’s framework to broaden the definition of modernism, allows for new readings of Salkeld and Méndez that can rightly place them in a broader international framework of women’s modernism during the 1920s and 1930s. We see both women negotiating multiple social, cultural and political changes that first threatened and then impacted their rights and freedoms as women and citizens. Scott’s definition of an international woman’s modernism includes writers and poets from “nonexperimental group[s],” who “break with tradition” in relation to sexuality, who “struggle with national identity and [the] modern period,” understand that “categories of nationality and literary period [are] products of patriarchy,” and viewed “the

1920s ... [as] a time of excitement and new freedoms, particularly for women” (5-6). Lastly, Scott also points to “the politics of gender and war” as a huge theme present in women’s modernism (15). All of these allow for us to read both Salkeld and Méndez as important feminist and modernist poets socially, culturally and politically engaged with the dramatically changing events occurring in their countries; events that would have direct consequences on them as women. The urgency in the work of both poets increases as they negotiate real issues based on questions of whether modernity is going to be about freedom and opportunity for them. As they wrote and published, they too were dealing with whether or not women would have the opportunity to revise and transform what they had inherited culturally and socially, and have full voice in democratic governments? Or would modernity in Ireland and Spain mean a retrenchment, a forced nationalist ideology rooted in blood and tradition, leading to the consequent removal of freedoms from its people. These two opposing views of modernity are particularly dramatized in the cases of Ireland and Spain, and for both poets the Spanish Civil War becomes a flashpoint where you see the questions of women’s role in literature and politics being put under pressure.

The 1980s and 1990s were important times in Irish and Spanish women’s contemporary poetry. Names of contemporary poets Eavan Boland and Ana Rossetti repeatedly appear in older and new anthologies, seemingly signaling the arrival of women’s poetry. I showed in the introduction with the Irish Field Day controversy and María Rosal’s comments about the common practice to use token names to represent the category of women that the difficulties facing contemporary poets are current ones and need to be urgently addressed. This problem becomes more acute when we look back and attempt to recover or reassess the work of poets from the 1920s and 1930s. It is difficult to not observe that in practice, perhaps, not much has

changed. Clearly, for the sake and interest of Ireland and Spain's literary histories, and for women's right to be equally treated and represented in the national canons whether they be from seventy or eighty years ago or just ten years ago, more projects like this one need to be encouraged and promoted.



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