

FRAGMENTS OF FEMINISM IN HANNA
SHEEHY SKEFFINGTON AND SIGNE TOKSVIG

BY
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The politically active life of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877-1946), and her importance in Irishwomen's history have only been acknowledged in recent years.¹ Similarly, the name of Signe Toksvig (1891-1983) appears in only few literary or other contexts. On the face of it, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Irish Republican suffragette, and Signe Toksvig, Danish-born writer, seem to have little in common. In spite of the two women being part of the Dublin scene in the 1930s, available source material yields no evidence of a personal acquaintanceship.² Still, in view of Hackett/Toksvig's strong involvement in Irish life at the time, it is highly unlikely that Signe would not have known of the Sheehy Skeffington couple: of Frank, Hanna's feminist and pacifist husband, killed by the British in 1916, and of Hanna's own manifold political activities, at home and abroad.³ It seems equally improbable that Hanna's staunch campaigning for the bettering of the status of Irishwomen would not have attracted Signe's attention, the more so as a close look at Toksvig's writings, creative as non-fictional,

¹ Leah Levenson and Jerry Natterstad: *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, New York 1983 - Maria Luddy: *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, Dundalk 1995 (Luddy) - Margaret Ward: *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: A Life*, Cork 1997. (Ward)

² Main source material: The Hackett/Toksvig Papers in the Royal Library, Copenhagen. - Toksvig and her Irish writer-husband, Francis Hackett, lived in Ireland 1926-37. See also: Lis Pihl (ed.): *Signe Toksvig's Irish Diaries 1926-1937*, Dublin 1994. (STID)

³ There are three letters from Hanna Sheehy Skeffington to Francis Hackett among the Hackett/Toksvig Papers, all from the 1930s; they reveal eagerness on her part to meet 'your wife and you some day', and mention Hanna's early meeting with him when she toured America in 1916-18. Hackett was then an editor with *The New Republic*. There is no proof that a Dublin meeting did take place before 1937 when F.H./S.T. left Ireland.

will reveal that she shared much of Hanna's concern with Irish women's plight in those years. In the following I shall deal with a few manuscripts and fragments on women and conventual life as depicted in fiction by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, and by Signe Toksvig. The Sheehy Skeffington manuscripts are in the National Library of Ireland, and the Toksvig material in the Royal Library, Copenhagen.

Convent Life and Women in Contemporary Female-Authored Irish Fiction

One might have suspected that conventual life and women in religious communities would have been a common enough topic in fiction written by Irishwomen in the first three or four decades of the Free State. Surprisingly, this seems not to be the case, one notable exception being Kate O'Brien's novel *The Land of Spices* (1941), which provides a perceptive insight into conventual life in an Irish based European order.⁴ The two women protagonists are the Reverend Mother and a young convent girl who, against familial antagonism, but supported by the Reverend Mother, succeeds in entering on a university career. As elsewhere in O'Brien novels, feminist views are detectable throughout *The Land of Spices*, but neither this text nor Kate O'Brien's autobiographical convent sketch *Presentation Parlour* from 1963 contain any disparagement of convent life.⁵

On the other hand, severe critique of conventual strictures is to be found in Elizabeth Connor's contemporary story "The Apple" (1942).⁶ At a time when nuns were much confined to their convents, Mother Mary Aloysius, a middle-aged nun, on an outing with the Reverend Mother and a few other nuns, is allowed to see - from the outside - her native home in the country. She deliberately commits a sin

⁴ Convent life does not figure in fiction by other, mostly neglected Irish women writers of the time, such as Maura Laverty, Norah Hoult, Kathleen Coyle, Rosamond Jacob and Margaret O'Leary.

⁵ While echoing her feminist views, Kate O'Brien's novels *The Ante-Room* (1934) and *Mary Lavelle* (1936) hold no criticism of religion/faith/vocation. - Recent critical work on K. O'Brien's feminism, see for instance: Eibhear Walshe (ed.): *Ordinary People Dancing. Essays on Kate O'Brien*, Cork 1993 and Adele Dalsimer's *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*, Dublin 1990.

⁶ Elizabeth Connor, pseudonym of Una Troy Walsh (1910-1993), Irish novelist and playwright. "The Apple" was first publ. in *The Bell* (Oct. 1942), and re-issued in Janet Madden-Simpson's anthology *Woman's Part*, Dublin and London/New York 1984. (WP)

by entering the empty house and walking about in it, and subsequently experiences a revelation or epiphany: "The world fell away from her, the world that others had fashioned for her with loving minds; and now she must strive for ever to refashion out of chaos the world of her own mind. 'It was no sin', she said." The forty-nine-year-old nun, hitherto happy in her tranquil convent life does not as yet realise, so the text states, "how precious and how terrible was the price she had paid for it." (*WP*, p.167) I shall return to this text in connection with one of the Toksvig manuscripts.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Irish Suffragette and Feminist

During the early years of the twentieth century, before Irish independence, women had acquired a fairly equal status with men in the fight for an Irish state. However, throughout the early years of the Free State, after 1922, the role of women in Irish society was changing, and repressive legislation registered the function considered appropriate for women as that of service in the private and domestic domain. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, professed feminist and staunch fighter for women's rights, was militantly active in the early days of fighting for votes for women, and she remained a forefront figure in feminist activism as a member of women's organisations, many of which undertook extra-parliamentary campaigns in order to draw attention to anti-feminist legislation. Catholic clerical opinion was soon echoed in legislature regarding contraception and divorce, and in the Constitution of 1937 women's status was further restricted.⁷ Hanna's writing on these issues, published as unpublished, renders an insight into her indomitable fight and intelligent contribution to Irish feminism. It is only fair to say that even if she did occasionally dabble in creative writing like so many of her women contemporaries, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington should not be evaluated as a creative writer. Many of her efforts in this genre no doubt remained unpublished, even if written most likely to bolster her meagre financial circumstances. Still, Hanna was clearly an Irishwoman with pronounced literary interests; she spoke

⁷ As to women in the new Irish Free State, see, for instance, Margaret MacCurtain's "The Historical Image", in *Irish Women: Image and Achievement...* Ed. by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Dublin 1985 and Mary Clancy's "Aspects of Women's Contribution to the Oireachtas Debate in the Irish Free State, 1922-1937", in Maria Luddy & Cliona Murphy (eds.): *Women Surviving*, Dublin 1990.

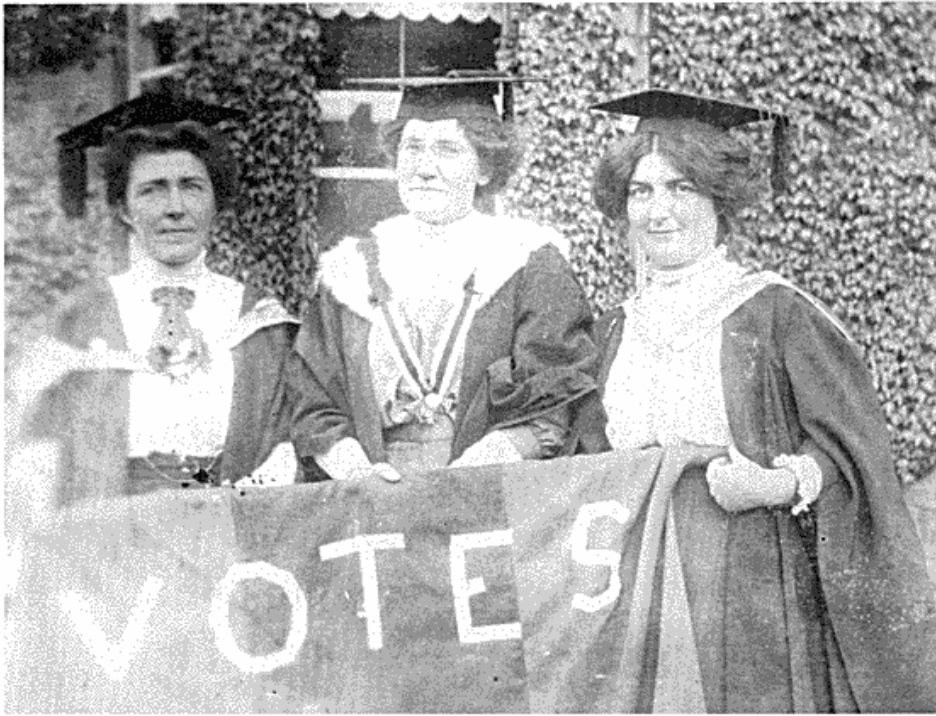
on Irish literature at meetings in London, and was much involved in the Irish Women Writers' Club in Dublin. Another club member, Rosamond Jacob, was a close friend with whom she shared pacifist, Republican and feminist interests. Unlike Rosamond Jacob and other female writers, Hanna did *not* publish novels or biography; in fact she left little behind in the way of fictional material.⁸ Among this material are some fragmentary texts and manuscripts dealing with conventual life and Irish women. One is entitled "Mère Veronique's Jam Tarts", another "Sister Rosalie". The two texts were written under the pen name of Grace Fay.⁹

"Mère Veronique's Jam Tarts"

Among different, rather jumbled (handwritten) versions entitled for instance "A Heavenly Short Cut", "How Sister Barbara Missed Paradise", and "The Slip" (handwritten), "Mère Veronique's Jam Tarts" seems to be the most definite manuscript. It consists of ten typed foolscap pages. The first-person narrator is an orphaned girl, who at the age of sixteen, assumedly in the years preceding the First World War, became a pupil in Mount Cypress, a fashionable convent school, "the home of a transplanted French order", in Munster in the south of Ireland. According to the girl, the school was a snobbish institution, where the pupils were given the classical girls' education of embroidery, samplermaking, deportment and dancing, and "native" French. The girl "learned nothing... that proved the slightest use ... in after-life." The bishop, one is told, disliked anything "advanced" in female education, and a reverend mother had been shifted to a remote country district because "some of her reforms had incurred his displeasure". Generally, convent life in this text is depicted as a hotbed of greed and corruption. The story of Sister Veronique is sketched: after many years of "undisputed sway in convent councils", her family be-

⁸ Rosamond Jacob (1888-1960), suffragette, member of Sinn Féin, author of a few novels like the female-centred *The Troubled House* (1938) and a biography *The Rebel's Wife* (1957), based on the life of Matilda, wife of United Irishman leader Wolfe Tone. R.J. also wrote *The Rise of the United Irishmen 1791-94* (1937).

⁹ The Hanna Sheehy Skeffington Collection, The National Library of Ireland, Manuscript Dept. "Mère Veronique's Jam Tarts": Ms 33,619 (4) - "Sister Rosalie": Ms 33,619 (7). - The handwriting in conjunction with the contents of the Grace Faye texts substantiate Hanna's authorship.



From left: Hanna Sheehy Skeffington – Kathleen Shannon – Kathleen Sheehy, all graduates of the then Royal University of Ireland, and active in the emerging Women Graduates Association. Kathleen Sheehy, Hanna's youngest sister, is the mother of Conor Cruise O'Brien, distinguished diplomat, politician and man of letters. – The location of the photo (from approx. 1908-9?) is Grosvenor Place, Rathmines, South Dublin. Hanna lived and taught in Rathmines most of her life. The National Library of Ireland.

comes impoverished after a bank failure, and the nun is relegated to work in the kitchen. Melodrama ensues as she succeeds in killing off a good few of the little sisters and pupils through leaving arsenic in some jam tarts, usually made according to a royal French recipe. The narrator makes a narrow escape by not eating her burnt jam tart. Mère Veronique is sent to a lunatic asylum, and the affair is hushed up so as not to damage the prestige of the convent. All through, the narrator sets herself apart from the snobbishness and worldly greed characteristic of convent life in this text. Initially, she makes clear that she later made a New Woman career for herself as a Red Cross nurse and social worker. There is no attempt at direct or indirect characterisation, and

neither vocation nor faith are mentioned in the story, which quite explicitly sets off Irishwomen's lot as one of being legally completely at the mercy of the family, a sad reality for a good long while in modern Ireland.¹⁰ Satirically, anti-clerical criticism permeates the text.

"Sister Rosalie"

This fully-fledged manuscript, in twenty-five typed pages, with no corrections, has much the character of a finished product.

Like "Mère Veronique's Jam Tarts", the present-day story of "Sister Rosalie" is set (primarily) in Munster.¹¹ It covers a few years in the life of Nora, the first person-narrator, who at the age of eighteen enters a convent, but manages to run away after having made her final vows. Assisted by Mary, a married schoolfriend, she escapes to London where she struggles to make a humble existence for herself: "the experience of most women alone and poor in a strange city", states the narrative voice, barely veiling feminist didactics. Having worked her way up through selling flowers in the street, factory work in the East End, waitressing in a teashop "with its degrading atmosphere of simpering flirtation and servility", she ends up, one learns, working at a photographer's. The girl feels bitter and hopeless about her future, afraid even to communicate with Mary, fearing "embarrassment for her in correspondence with a runaway nun". One day, looking casually at some photos, she recognizes familiar Irish scenes, and grows lonesome for "soft Irish hills... the Munster breeze, fresh from the Atlantic..." The last photo she looks at is one of herself together with her schoolfriend and a sister. The photo was taken by Edward, Mary's brother, now waiting in the shop. The subsequent few pages reveal that Edward has been searching for Nora. Stock-in-trade obstacles have meant that his proposal of marriage never reached her. They now marry, and return to live in Ireland. In the final lines Nora recalls the convent bell "clanging for matins in the morning grey, or the lonely cell looking out on the white-crossed cemetery... as I play with my child in the dusk." A pat romance-ending (in a wedding) is slightly varied in this contrasting of convent life and married life.

¹⁰ This state of affairs is echoed, explicitly and implicitly, in many novels by Irishwomen of the times.

¹¹ The Sheehys, Hanna's prosperous farming and milling family, came from Munster; in 1887 they moved to Dublin where she grew up.

In spite of its novelistic qualities, the text demands attention here. Similar to the more fragmentary text about *Mère Veronique*, convent life is thematically centred all through, and the main core of the text is enacted in a convent. Conventual life is presented in a most secular social context, seen from inside the convent walls by the first-person narrator. Contrary to Toksvig's convent story "Sister Irene", to be dealt with presently, this life is severely condemned. In "Sister Rosalie", Hanna Sheehy Skeffington puts forward her feminist views and acerbic criticism of the repressed state of women in her contemporary Ireland. Convent life is viewed as closely linked to women's dependent position in Irish family life, here in the accepted norms of country life; more specifically the text constitutes an attack on the customary "made marriages", focused on land and fortune, not on feelings. The text further points up the slender opportunities for country girls to attain any independence through education. Vocation or no vocation, the convent, then, becomes the only evident option to marriage. In brief: "Sister Rosalie" reads much as a fictional exemplification of one of Hanna's numerous speeches or tracts on feminist issues.

Through the first-person narrative one learns that Nora had been removed from school at twelve, in order to look after the family and her mother who eventually died of consumption. The girl is sent off to school in Dublin until recalled on her father's second marriage to a widow from the neighbouring farm, a woman Nora sees as selfish and domineering, in fact the prototypical stepmother who makes the girl feel dependent and unwanted. Nevertheless, Nora still cherishes hopes of a New Woman independence:

Nothing loth, I set myself to renew my studies as best I could in the intervals of housework, for I long desired to become a teacher. Money was refused to me...when I expressed a desire to enter a training school. What does any pretty-good-looking girl want with teaching when she has a chance of marrying? What would be the use of throwing away good money upon training when I would be sure to marry in a few years in any case?

Twice she refuses the offer of a traditional Irish "made marriage": first, at the age of eighteen, to an old farmer, almost the age of her father, and a second time to the parish priest's nephew, a well-known miser and "a hard cruel man to live with", now emigrating to Australia and in need of "a good respectable girl of the parish to go out with him".

After the second refusal, her workload at home is increased, and any attempt on her part at looking for other (menial) work is frowned upon as a disgrace to the family. The priest, offended by her refusal of his nephew, takes against the girl, and lectures her for being "romantic". On this background of contention and ill-will, the girl is half-attracted to what she imagines is the peace and beauty of a convent she visits when a former school friend is to receive the white veil; the ceremony, the seeming idyll "all cast a spell" over her. She grows increasingly terrified for the future, realising that all she can wait for would be an arranged marriage with an uncongenial mate or "years of torture with my step-mother? No other prospect, no chance of emancipation." Strongly prompted by the Reverend Mother, she then enters St Xavier's Convent, at the age of nineteen. Ostensibly, she has complied with the norms of Irish family country life.

From the outset, the girl is uncertain about her vocation. The Reverend Mother at first *seemed* motherly and interested in Nora's studies and her ambitions of becoming a teacher. She is shown over the orphanage schools "where the black-robed, black-veiled nuns presided over classes of children ranging in age from four to sixteen." Intent on acquiring a bright girl for teaching in the schools of the order, the Reverend Mother "was of opinion" that Nora had a vocation for the religious life, she writes to the girl's father. Disappointment soon sets in. Sadly Nora has to admit that "the convent world is no better than the outside world, that indeed a thousand rancours, intrigues and pettinesses were nourished here as in a hotbed." She makes known to the authorities that she fears she has no religious vocation, but is told that this is merely a temptation she must resist. Then, in the reported words of the Reverend Mother, follow comments that realistically echo the fate of many Irishwomen of the time:

I had refused most eligible offers in the world. My father had a growing family to provide for. I could not live at home in idleness, following my own caprices and vanities. This was all the sign of a discontented, lawless spirit which I would do well to crush.

Prayer is the answer to all this, the girl is told. The chaplain fails to understand her doubts, and her letters to the outside world are intercepted. After a long retreat, she gives in, and is received into the order.

The subsidiary story of Sister Cecilia, the consumptive girl who befriends Nora, now Sister Rosalie, is crucial to the plotline; it also un-

derscores the materialistic, inhuman sides of conventual life. First as an orphan in the school, then a pupil-teacher when payments for her stop, the girl displays a rare musical gift which allows her entrance to the sisterhood. The girl, one learns, had no vocation, but feared an unfriendly world, "terrified at the thought of quitting the one spot where any refuge had been given her." Her sweet voice attracts strangers to evening benediction, and donations pour in for a new organ. After having been made to sing with a severe cold and consequently losing her voice, Sister Cecilia is barely tolerated. When her health deteriorates, her portion is increasing disfavour and downright coldness. As donations stop coming in, she is of no more use to the convent. Before she dies, she manages to call Rosalie to her deathbed, and begs her to run away. Sister Rosalie takes the advice, and escapes.

Overt criticism in this text is not ameliorated by any positive aspects of conventual life. In this respect it completely differs from all the Toksvig texts, to be dealt with presently. "Sister Rosalie" is further dissimilar to the Toksvig texts in being void of explicit or implicit means of expressing women's sexuality or renunciation. Nora wants to leave the secular world for the reasons given above, and they are in no way connected with Edward, of whose feelings she is unaware until she meets him in London. The plotline simply touches on her marriage at the end of the text, which nowhere mentions any feelings for Edward. In the dialogue between Nora and Edward in the shop in London, she admits to having thought of him merely as "a very dear friend surely . . ." Nothing in Nora's first-person narrative suggests her attraction to him earlier, or indeed in the end after their marriage. She enters the convent as a refuge from the factual terrors of the secular world, but not, it seems, from her own sexuality, even if one might argue, of course, that it is an escape from "an arranged marriage with an uncongenial mate". Sexuality does not enter into the text at all. This seems confirmed in the final episode of the story when the former Sister Rosalie has occasional dreams of the convent bell clanging or of the cell looking out on the white-crossed cemetery while she plays with her child in the dusk. The immediately following sentence closes the story emphasizing the convent's negative impact on her life: "Grim Convent of St. Xavier's, white cross over Cecilia, however long life may be for me, I do not think I ever can forget you!"

In her new, professedly happy life, ("pleasant sunny calm"), her convent experiences cast long shadows. To her father she, the run-away nun, is "like one dead to him", and the stepmother is too full of her



Studio portrait of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (back of photo: circ. 1919-22?).
The National Library of Ireland.

own plans to even feel any resentment. The author's undivided attention is on her message, that of the repression of Irishwomen, and on the negative societal part enacted by convents. The New Woman role suggested for Nora at the beginning is certainly not fulfilled, and the romance-plot ending jars against the feminist intentions. Whether this is done out of consideration for an intended readership of a popular (English or American?) magazine or for other reasons, must remain a

moot point.¹² As it is, the text most certainly bears the mark of a woman committed to feminism and accustomed to lecturing publicly on a topic close to her life and to her heart.

Signe Toksvig and Irishwomen

Signe Toksvig's links with Ireland amount to far more than her "Irish life", i.e. the years 1926-1937 when she and her husband, the writer Francis Hackett, actually lived in the country. Arguably, as strongly suggested by an analysis of her writings, published as unpublished, Ireland did remain with her always, predominantly through her long marriage to an Irishman who never relinquished his heritage despite the couple's cosmopolitan life in America and Europe. At no stage in her life was Toksvig actively involved in politics, feminist or other, but from her youth in America, already at Cornell University and in her work as an associate editor at *The New Republic* (1918-22), she displayed feminist leanings.¹³ On the backdrop of a liberal Scandinavian upbringing, furthered no doubt by New Woman ideas at Cornell University, and presently at the progressive *New Republic*, she reacted determinedly to what she considered authoritarian Catholic interference in aspects of Irish life such as education, family life and indeed, touching personally on her own and Hackett's life: censorship of publications.¹⁴ Her preoccupation with Irishwomen's plight in the 1930s is abundantly evident from her diaries as well as in letters and most significantly in her one Irish novel *Eve's Doctor*. It was published in 1937 in England and America and appeared in translation in Denmark in the same year. The novel was banned by the Irish Censorship of Publications Board, considered "indecent" because it dealt with the taboo subjects of birth control and Catholic clerical edicts on gynaecological surgery. Toksvig's genuine concern with what she saw as blatant clerical repression of the Irish woman forms a significant part of her criticism of Irish life in the decade of her Irish years.

¹² Attempts at verifying time of writing and possible publication have proved negative.

¹³ While at Cornell S.T. founded and edited *The Cornell Women's Review*, which "got me a job as the first female reporter on the [*Cornell Daily Sun*]", she stated in "Free Lances", an unpublished autobiography, Copenhagen [1979] ("FL") - For *The New Republic*, S.T. reviewed many women writers like Rose Macaulay and E.M. Delafield.

¹⁴ Hackett's autobiographical novel *The Green Lion* (1936) was banned in Ireland.

Signe Toksvig on Women and Conventual Life - in Non-Fiction and Fiction

In view of her background, then, one might reasonably have expected Toksvig's antagonistic criticism to have included female religious communities and conventual life in general, much on the lines of the severe critique in the Hanna Sheehy Skeffington manuscripts. Surprisingly, as it may seem at first hand, this is not the case, in diary entries, letters or in her fictional writing.

Signe Toksvig's diaries from her years in Ireland do contain a few references to nuns and conventual life. Two actual visits to convents are mentioned in *STID*, one in an entry of 6 April 1929, another on 15 Sept. 1935. The latter is an ultra-brief note of having visited "Mother Mary' the Carmelite... Interesting experience." This visit, one notes, took place when Signe was in the process of finishing *Eve's Doctor*, which has the female protagonist pay a visit to a Carmelite convent towards the end of the novel. The first diary-registered visit (of 6 April 1929) is highly detailed in the description of the convent rooms and grounds as well as of individual nuns and their vocation. She pens cameo portraits of each nun and of the Reverend Mother, and marvels at the calm and peace of the convent and at the ingeniousness of the nuns. Tranquillity and simplicity seem to her the predominant features of life in the Convent of St Louis, all viewed with much sympathy and interest.¹⁵ The convent visit follows immediately after a hilarious account (in the same diary entry) of a duo of man-hunting brainless girls, Signe's American nieces, on an Easter visit to Ireland.¹⁶ Their man-chasing activities are mercilessly exposed in revealing situations. The markedly contrasted convent visit stands out, in the concluding words of the entry:

A good impression on the whole. Much superior to the flappers. Peace did seem to dwell there. One nun was soberly playing tennis. One - Sister Canice mending stockings in the garden. High clipped hedges. Daffodils. Scarlet anemones. Sunshine. In farm lots of new chickens.

¹⁵ The visit would have been to the Convent of the Sisters of St Louis, situated in nearby Ramsgrange, Waterford. (No more run by a religious order, the convent has been turned into a co-educational secondary state school.)

¹⁶ Signe Toksvig and Francis Hackett lived then at Clonsharragh Lodge, Duncannon, Co Wexford.

Nuns childlikely delighted with them - Darlin'-dear from Mother Patrick. She, at any rate, was sublimated. (*STID*, p.63)

Toksvig's Irish novel *Eve's Doctor* (1937) sets forth a similar positive image of conventual life which, for a short while, attracts Kate, the female protagonist. One scene in which Kate pays a visit to a Carmelite convent, paints an entirely favourable picture of conventual life. Patently, this is a communal life not without contact with the outside world. Kate has been called to a meeting with Mother Teresa, who wants to thank her for saving the life of a village woman. Through Kate's intervention, the woman was sent to Michael Murrough, the magnificent doctor and male protagonist. In this manner the woman was rescued from an ignorant and bigoted country doctor. The convent episode, then, on one level, is made an integral part of the theme of Irishwomen's sufferings at the mercy of incompetent doctors, or more specifically the theme of female victimization as a result of restrictive legislation on birth control and gynaecological surgery. The entire scene contextually counterbalances the novel's explicit criticism of (male) Catholic edicts on maternity and gynaecology. Or, in other words: convent life is *not* viewed as part of restrictive Catholicism, but as a female community life embracing a sister solidarity which, in a manifestly positive way, stretches into the secular women world.¹⁷

The Toksvig Manuscript of "Sister Irene"

A few jottings in what looks like a notebook from Toksvig's Irish years indicate that they are in fact rough ideas for "Sister Irene", the manuscript published in *STID*.¹⁸ "Vocation. Laetitia", the heading of the rough draft, points to the theme and the protagonist of this contemporary story from Catholic Ireland.

As in "Sister Rosalie", the story of "Sister Irene" is rendered by a first-person narrator. Quite unlike the Sheehy Skeffington story, which is viewed from inside the walls by the run-away-nun, this text's first-person narrator is the rejected suitor of Letitia, now Sister Irene in an

¹⁷ The convent scene in *Eve's Doctor*, London 1937, pp.280-5.

¹⁸ "Signe Toksvig Miscellanea of Irish Interest", pp.394-6. It seems a natural assumption that the story was written during S.T.'s Irish years. Possible previous publication has not been proved.

Irish convent.¹⁹ The story's time spans several years, and the structure is simple: The man, an "outsider", yet part of the plot, is economically introduced in the initial lines: "On my return from an attempt to seek forgetfulness abroad, I found myself wandering outside the prison-like building into which Letitia had retired." This is followed by a longish flashback to Letitia Connolly's childhood focusing on her having firmly made up her mind to become a nun from the age of seven, and on her subsequently entering a convent. The second half of the text moves forward in time to the returned suitor's meeting with Sister Irene and the conclusive issue of her vocation.

Letitia is seen retrospectively, through the man's eyes, as a genuinely good person, who could never bear to witness any kind of even childish cruelty. She refused to listen to any shameful secrets confided to her, or to "unkind or rough language". Her wealthy, middle-class family does not encourage her wishes of retiring from the world, and supports the narrator in his proposal of marriage, humbly rejected by the girl who explains that she needed "the shelter and peacefulness of the convent." She sadly admits that there is something in her that invites confidence from - in his words - less pure human beings, business friends of her father's and the like. Her parents and the narrator reluctantly acknowledge defeat, and Letitia enters "the most austere Order she could find". Her only concession to her former suitor is his presence at the ceremony of her entering as a novice before "a black curtain and an iron grille would shut her off..."

As the story opens, on his return after years of exile, the narrator is sitting in a pub across from the convent gate. He watches a "file of wrecks" entering the convent and concludes that this may be the hour for alms, until he recognises fashionable friends of the Connollys trying to creep in unnoticed by each other, but coming out talking eagerly. From them he gathers news of Letitia, now Sister Irene. Unseen behind a black curtain she listens to all kinds of meanness, cruelty and sin. Her special gift of listening and making men and women realize their iniquities, had been discovered by the Mother Superior. The narrator, hitherto comforted by the thought of the girl having found peace in "cloistered purity", and after all Irene means peace, he reflects, is now haunted by what he imagines must be Sister Irene's tortured life. He seeks admittance, and is granted presence in front of the curtain and the iron grille, hears her steps and her voice urging him

¹⁹ In the rough draft S.T. specifies that Letitia joins the Carmelites.

to unload his mind. Frankly he tells of his wish to beat up those who by loading their dirty troubles on her make her unhappy, just as in childhood he beat up boys that made her cry. In the subsequent, brief direct speech sequence, she tells him plainly that she had, after all, no religious vocation, but found her special vocation: "to teach others not to be afraid..." She has in fact found true happiness. The story ends: "It was so deeply in her voice that it filled me too, conclusively, after we had said goodbye forever, after I had left the little room with the black curtain".

The device of a *male* first-person narrator, rare in Toksvig fiction, provides for a "distant" angle on women/marriage and contemplative life. At the same time, the "I", one recalls, is Letitia's jilted suitor, a fact which patently colours the flashback glimpses into their childhood, his eventual pursuit of her and his rejection. About the young girl who insists on becoming a nun from the age of seven, we hear that she "ruled us with the toughest kind of soft obstinacy", an authorial hint, perhaps, of female independence. He sees unchanged innocence in her face which is, tritely, one notes, compared to a "dewpond", or held an equally vague "eager kindness". The word "pure" he uses, if apologetically, about the twenty-one-year-old girl. All in all, the girl is left remarkably vague and bland, even as to her outward appearance. The text in this respect is distinctly uncharacteristic in having none of the brief, succinct cameo-portraits found frequently elsewhere in Toksvig's writing. To the man, the girl, after many years, remains the same: innocent and pure, not a mature woman. In the initial flashback to their childhood, in a spare few lines foreshadowing her conventual future, we are simply and cogently made aware of her beautiful voice which has "a curious direct quality, *you couldn't but be yourself with her...*" (My italics.)

Only one feature of Letitia's outward appearance is repeatedly mentioned - all through the first part of the text - in the first-person male narrative: her *hair*.²⁰ As a child she refused to have it cut short alleging that it must be kept long so as to be cut off only at her prospective entering the order thus symbolically leaving behind the secular woman's life, in this case future married life. In the language of the "lover", the many descriptions of her long hair are charged with the erotic connotations traditionally connected with women's long hair: the word is used four times in the second paragraph, once as "her thick golden

²⁰ Even in the ultra-brief draft to "Sister Irene" "hair" is mentioned: the girl "hurries to get hair cut off (had it long before)".

hair", and in the fourth paragraph, Letitia's hair, "which she had kept uncut, was like something *alive, full of golden vitality*". (My italics.) About the ceremony of Letitia's entering the austere order, the narrator is able to report that "Never did shears gnaw through such a *silkily shining length of hair*". (My italics.) And: "never was it offered so eagerly", he comments.²¹ In Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's "Sister Rosalie", the text plainly states that on the day of her reception into the convent, the girl's hair is cut "in symbol of renunciation", and on her entering as a novice earlier her "fair hair" of which she was formerly so proud, "was gathered away under the close-fitting cap of the novice". This bears little resemblance to Toksvig's Letitia, who is more eager than any bride to offer her hair to the scissors - *after the marriage proposal*. Further, the sexually-charged usage of "hair" in the Toksvig text is immediately preceded by one passage in the same vein linking the secular woman with the (traditionally religious) bride of Christ: "But no bride ever looked so uncomplicatedly happy as did Letitia in her wedding white that day in the convent church."

One might argue that Letitia leaves behind the traditional woman role in a male-dominated world who sees her as "pure", "innocent" and full of "eager kindness". This is substantiated by the almost trite language in which Toksvig lets us see the girl through male eyes. As I have suggested above, this vocabulary is far removed from Signe's habitual way of bringing a character to life in a few precise, incisive strokes. The text has Letitia explain her refusal of marriage by insisting - in reported speech - that she "needed the shelter and peacefulness of the convent." Shelter, one may ask, from what? Merely from the squalor loaded on her by selfish seekers of consolation? The girl's explanation in this passage is given, markedly, in response to the narrator's proposal of marriage. Arguably, the text, on one level suggests a shelter from her own sexuality, symbolized in her long hair so soon to be cut off, a shelter, as it were, from the sexual role of married woman. Letitia is not represented as an intellectual, reflective woman, and in any case, she probably has few options outside of marriage but the convent. Again, one should bear in mind that she is depicted through

²¹ The sexual/erotic connotations of women's (long) hair have literary ancestors far back: in Icelandic sagas (Helga in *Gunlaug Ormstunge's Saga*, for instance), the German fairytale of "Rapunzel", the folksong of "Die Lorelei", as well as the English tale of Lady Godiva. Irish myths and folklore have similar examples. These connotations have abundantly survived into our own times.



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In a snippet from an (unpublished) diary entry of Oct. 3, 1915, Signe Toksvig writes from Room 111, Risley Hall, Cornell: "I'm in for the managing of that Cornell Women's magazine. Addressed the mass-meeting about it last night... My maiden speech!..." – In 1968, when planning "Free Lances", her autobiography, she added: "I had been running a sort of suffrage movement, and urging the girls to assert themselves..."

male eyes only, in the first-person narrative. *His* peace of mind is disturbed at imagining her pain at listening in the convent to all kinds of secular wickedness. When he eventually learns of her not having a "real vocation", he is confused. Has he not been rejected in favour of a marriage to Christ after all? But Letitia's true vocation, that of helping others, has, she says, in her own voice, i.e. in direct speech, given her true happiness.

This divergent form of vocation may certainly be seen as one removed from the male narrator's perception of gender roles. Admittedly, like other religious community women, Letitia can do without the secular traditional "womanly woman" role.²² Still, her role in the enclosed order appears special, more similar indeed to that of a priest in the confessional, or put differently, it resembles a strictly male role. Sister Irene's role is obviously far more limited than that of a priest, essentially since she is of course not empowered to grant absolution, etc. Ostensibly, she is highly regarded by the Mother Superior who, representing convent authority, makes practical social use of Sister Irene's special gifts. Letitia has clearly attained happiness in the convent, in a woman's world without men, if not without contact with the outside world, yet with the provision that she is hidden behind the black curtain and the iron grille, from which she is forever, not only literally, separated from the secular female world. The contextual repetition of the black curtain and the iron grille highlights her separateness. Contrary to Nora in "Sister Rosalie", Letitia becomes Sister Irene because of what she thinks is a true vocation, a spiritual calling. Sister Irene, it appears, seems well able to do without the habitual gender role set down for a good Irish Catholic woman, that of marriage. In conventual life, the then second-best Irish woman role, she attains happiness without a "true vocation", again in complete contrast to Nora in "Sister Rosalie". Where Hanna Sheehy Skeffington is strictly negative in her convent story, Toksvig, while still linking conventual life to the outside world, is favourable to convent life, even if she does not view it from the inside as does Sister Rosalie, the run-away-nun, in first-person narration.

The role assigned to Sister Irene was not exceptional in Ireland in

²² The term, as opposed to the New Woman, was commonly used by women writers like Dorothy Sayers. It was used by S.T. in an early review of the woman writer E.M. De-lafield's novel *Tension*: An objectionable woman character is described as "the complete unregenerate womanly woman." *The New Republic*, 3 Nov. 1920, 248.

those days. The practice of unloading one's troubles in this manner, was quite common and referred to as "coming to the grille". Nuns, in an enclosed order like the Carmelites, acting as here, or indeed in the episode referred to in *Eve's Doctor*, in such an almost social worker-like capacity, Toksvig would most certainly have viewed with much sympathy.²³ My reading of the Toksvig text, with a nun in a priest-like role, suggests an implicit, tongue-in-cheek authorial slant on the male-dominated Irish Catholic clergy. It is a subtext one cannot easily overlook, and it is in keeping with Signe Toksvig's views of women and Catholicism in Ireland.

Unfinished Toksvig-Fiction on Women/Female Communities

Among fragments, marked in Toksvig's own hand as "unfinished", are some fictional items on women/nuns in communities: one is a four-page manuscript, of which the first two pages are typed, the other two handwritten. Another fragment is in an exercise book and comprises ideas and jottings for this manuscript, all possibly intended for a much longer piece of fiction. It seems a fair conclusion that this material dates from the Irish years, not only because of the subject matter of preoccupation with religious women, as dealt with above, but also since the cover of the exercise book bears the printed name of the Irish publishing firm Browne & Nolan Ltd (Dublin).

The untitled four-page manuscript may well have been intended as the beginning of a prose text. The location is not an Irish but a Spanish convent in the 13th century. The theme, presumably, is women/marriage/vocation and the community life of women. There are introductory sketches of a few nuns, and embryonic ones of two novices, newly arrived at this "fortress-convent". The novices are now in their cells, each behind a small thick oaken door. One of the girls, Blanca, makes distracted protests "bitterly lamenting", indeed wildly raging against her fate, whereas the other, Beatriz, is utterly still, "huddled in the corner" in her "little white cell with a heavily grated window". In what constitutes the main core and pointed end of the manuscript, the Abbess asks the almost paralyzed, grief-stricken girl to talk to Blanca, as "another girl" in an attempt to make the distracted

²³ For information on this and other aspects of conventual life I am indebted to Prof. Margaret MacCurtain, Sr. Dominican Order, Dublin. - Toksvig's inside knowledge of convent life on this point is characteristically precise and correct.

girl come to terms with her situation and "make the best of it". Having listened for a while to the Abbess and having consequently become almost reconciled to her own fate, Beatriz accepts. The text ends: "For the first time she looked out, her eyes had an outgoing look".

The text is presented in the form of an omniscient third-person narrator alternating with direct speech, and the fragment, as befits a community, has no main character. The theme of women/convent life/vocation is centred all through the brief text. Neither of the two novices are in the convent by choice: Blanca, beautiful, young and fiery, because her father, the rich and powerful Duke, has sworn so "on most holy relics", but for reasons unknown to the convent. Beatriz, a poor girl of noble family, has been sent to the convent for safety by her parents, who had to leave on a mission "for the King". To the girl's outcry of why she could not go with her parents, the Abbess's first words are unequivocal: "Because you are a girl". The Saracens, the reader learns, have killed her other close relatives, so the only option for Beatriz is the convent, which "is a fortress". Husbands had been found for her sisters, but not for this girl, described in a few precise strokes: her face is "swollen with silent crying...", she has an "unhealthy complexion" and "*Strands of straight brown hair fell uncombed about her*". In other words, she is not sexually attractive. Through the subsequent comment: "*But her plainness was transfigured by her woe, rendered noble, intense*", the text at this point prefigures the final manuscript line, quoted above: "For the first time she looked out, her eyes had an outgoing look". In gentle, comforting tones, the Abbess now explains to Beatriz the nature of the convent-fortress:

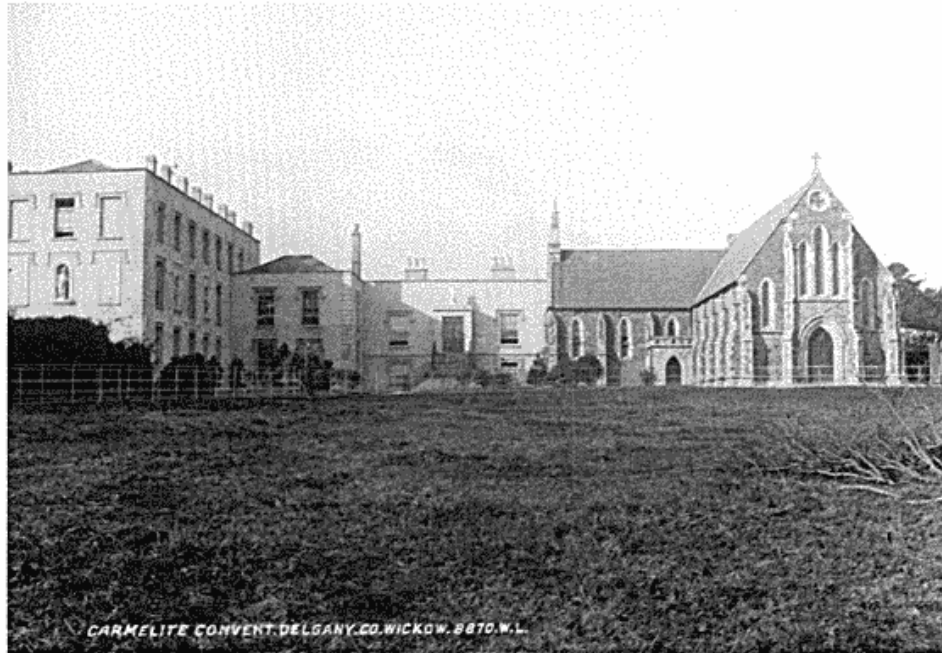
...this is a large family of women ... we're all sisters who have taken refuge here together. [*crossed out: We didn't all of us want to come any more than you did.*] We must make the best of it. And the older sisters must help the younger ones.

The solidarity feeling of the female-centred world is clearly affecting the girl, but not towards resignation, rather it encourages her particular mission or "vocation", which is to convince Blanca that they are "safe here". The Abbess proceeds to reassure Beatriz that she will not force her or Blanca to take the final vows, and interestingly, she implores Beatriz to disclose to the other (beautiful) girl that "*her hair won't be cut*". (My italics in all quotes.)

The text invites comparison with "Sister Irene" and bears further

witness to Toksvig's preoccupation with women in communities. Female bonding in the Convent of "Our Lady of the Rock" is pointed up in this fragment, spelled out, as it were. The 13th century scenario, in wartime, enables the author to make little of genuine religious vocation in order to concentrate on societal, gender-based reasons for women seeking refuge. In this respect the text is similar to "Sister Rosalie", set in a more modern Irish context. This Toksvig fragment has no equivalent to Letitia/Sister Irene wondering about her true vocation; what is more, it has no mention whatsoever of faith or religion. At the very beginning we are introduced to Sister Ana and Sister Maria who are discussing the two young novices. Sister Ana, now an old woman and mistress of the novices, questions her own motivation for entering on conventual life: "I don't know why - did I know about myself? Did you know about yourself?" she asks of Sister Maria, who is in no doubt: "We were too poor, nine daughters and husbands for only four of them. And I was ugly". Like Beatriz, of a younger generation, Sister Maria is a victim of an all-powerful male-dominated society. The women are safe in the convent, which is a fortress, the Abbess indicates in her talk with Beatriz. The first line of the rough draft (in the exercise book) states the location as "Spanish fortress-convent..." The message conveyed to the novices is one of solidarity in a women's world which is by definition a religious one, but contrary to "Sister Irene", vocation does not seem an issue at all. The italicized, if crossed-out sentence in the quotation above is suggestive.

On the other hand, the fragmentary text implies a parallel to "Sister Irene" in its concept of convent life as a refuge from a male-centred world and from sexuality. The male world is explicitly represented here by the Saracens, the killing enemy, and by the fathers of the two novices whose "orders are precise" and beyond question. Implicitly, the male world, the outside world, is also that of husbands or potential husbands. This male-centred secular world is the enemy from which the women have to seek refuge to be safe. The notion of the male world as equivalent to the enemy, on the narrative level personified by the Saracens, is underpinned by the convent being referred to as a fortress. Exactly as in "Sister Irene", the symbolically sexual connotation of *hair* is evident in the passage just quoted about Blanca whose "hair won't be cut". The same connotation is pertinent to one situation earlier in the text: Sister Maria recalls that Sister Ana, when young, "had such beautiful hair". This statement is offered after a long introductory description of Sister Ana in the first lines of the text:



The Convent of the Immaculate Heart of Mary was the only Carmelite convent in Wicklow. The prioress when Signe Toksvig paid a visit was Mother Mary Deevy, the 'Mother Mary, the Carmelite' of her diary entry of 15 Sept. 1936, referred to in the text.

The Lawrence Collection, the National Library of Ireland.

An old woman in black and white stood in a corridor, leaning her forehead against a little window looking out to sea. Her wrinkled face was salient and clever, but at the moment it was emptied of expression, she was withdrawn into herself, stilled and immovable.

The brief characteristic Toksvig portrait intimates the woman's veiled attachment to the outside secular world. Sister Ana is quite oblivious of the wild crying from Blanca in her cell, of her misery at having to enter the safety of the female world. Her attention is fully on the sea outside the window. An entire paragraph is then given to what is on close reading a *thematically* stringent piece of contextual nature description:

It was a sun-filled summer day, and nothing could have been more *lustrous*, more *innocently forgetmenot blue* than the *sea* which almost en-

circled the black headland below them [i.e. the two nuns], yet not far from shore three long *waves* kept rising in it, quietly, mysteriously; they broke the smoothness without the least preliminary *urge* and flowed like *white veils* one after the other until they vanished again in the blue mirror. The woman at the window indicated them. "They broke like that - at home -" (My italics.)

The other sister's gentle response that she has not seen "home" for fifty years underscores Sister Ana's inability to sever all bonds to the outer world or the male world. The line informing the reader that she had "such beautiful hair" occurs very soon after, in direct speech, emphasizing sexuality as part of that outside world.

The above passage, which is quoted in full, contains the opposing elements of the two worlds: the sea, manifestly part of Sister Ana's past, is rendered ambiguous by the juxtaposition of the sexually charged word "lustrous" connoting "silky gloss" etc. with "innocently forgetmenot blue". The blue of the *forgetmenot* is most frequently seen as a "symbol for things of the spirit and the intellect" suggesting here, perhaps, also one colour of a nun's habit?²¹ This, however, serves merely as a preliminary to the "three long waves" which still attract Sister Ana to her former world. The waves, in the following, become sexually or erotically loaded in their rhythm of rising "quietly", even "mysteriously" breaking the "smoothness" of her unforgotten world (=the sea/secular world/past), and - even more poignantly - "without the least preliminary *urge*". The final part of the sentence "and flowed..." ostensibly evokes her celibate life through the transformation of the waves into the "*white veils*" of her conventual life. Eventually the waves vanish "in the blue mirror", that is, not only literally in the sea, but in the mirror of the secular world, that other world which is Sister Ana's spiritual celibate life. Such symbolized hankering after the outside world has no equivalent in Hanna's "Sister Rosalie", which presents no explicit or implicit reference to sexuality.

The other Toksvig item, the rough notes and ideas from the Browne & Nolan exercise book, indicates that the author planned additions to the convent-fortress text. The notes are scattered, obviously mostly "ideas" implying that she intended the convent fortress to be attacked by the Saracens, who would be let in by a novice (the beautiful Blanca,

²¹ Hans Biedermann: *Dictionary of Symbolism*, Ware, Herts. 1992, p. 44.

perhaps?), apparently attracted to the Saracen prince. The fragment comprises two parts. The first line of part one, which sets the scene in "Spanish fortress-convent near Moorish border", is followed by "ideas" seemingly worked out in the cameo-portrait of Beatriz: "Plain girl (psychology of plainness) is parked there by family who don't expect to be able to marry her off. And she's quite happy there". One jotting states: "Good abbess, herself shut out from life", pointing to the sketch of Sister Ana. The rough draft further hints that the author wanted to show the "little woman's world" "plus their dread of nakedness, men, etc." Part two was to be set in a harem "shown to be just such another little woman-world - but with a chance of getting a child - a chance of getting a fractional share at least in a superb man" (in casu: the Saracen prince?) The girls inside the harem, it seems, attach themselves to one woman in there "as to an abbess", and they have "no more chance to marry than in other little world". The girls keep asking the woman about Ibu-Saud; "they've had glimpses of him - gone through all the thrilling horror of knowing themselves 'at his mercy'". Possibly these hopes are to be dashed by the prince "the glorious Ibu-Saud" who turns out to be "only a scholar and a *dévo*t and a soldier - not a lover". Ideas and notes in a rough draft for a part three are too jumbled to point to any final development or denouement. Apart from contrapositions of a few women characters, the draft signals a few, unfortunately undeveloped related themes: "The cloister-fortress is one strong woman's protest against this fighting man's world?" and "Harem also a woman-world, difference is religion?"

It is interesting that Elizabeth Connor's "The Apple", the story referred to earlier, makes use of language symbolically very similar to this fragmentary Toksvig text. To Connor's nun, Mary Aloysius, hitherto happy in her convent life, the sea is as indelibly linked to her past as it is for Toksvig's Sister Ana. The sea is constantly mentioned in the text, and even initially made part of the secular world left behind in the past. Nuns of the enclosed order, only recently allowed to set foot outside the convent grounds, now accompany the Reverend Mother to another house of the order, near the sea. The Reverend Mother, who is seventy-odd years, has almost forgotten "what the *sea* looks like." Not so the woman protagonist, Mother Mary Aloysius:

Forgotten the *sea*! Oh, but you couldn't! Even if you only saw it once in your life, you could never forget the *sea*. Today, it was blue - pale, pale blue, with no horizon but a misty curve far off ...I can see it flow-

ing over the roses there by the wall and the gulls' crying is loud above the blackbird's song . . .

"It's fifty years since I've seen it," said Reverend Mother, and there was a gleam in her old eyes. (*WP*, p.162) (My italics.)

In Mother Aloysius's reported thoughts "her own sea, her own rocks and cliffs, her own shining strand..." constantly re-occur. It is thirty years since she saw the sea, and in her mind she "kept on watching it flow beside her feet." (p.162) On the outing she is watching "with hungry eyes" until all at once "the road twisted...and beyond a field of young wheat was the sea." (p.164) When she later decides to commit the mortal sin of entering her home, she kneels by the window in her former bedroom, and gazes "across the pasture land and the gold cliff-tops at her own sea." (p.166) The association to "home" and the secular world is made abundantly evident. Except for the suggestive title "The Apple" - the fruit being conspicuously absent from the story - there are no obvious sexual connotations as opposed to the Toksvig convent fragment. One is told nothing about vocation, but learns that in early life the rebelling nun was bright, won school prizes, etc.; also, the text makes clear that hers was a big family "ten of us..." so her lot became that of the next-best thing to marriage: the convent. The parallels and the differences to the Sheehy Skeffington and the Toksvig fragments are obvious; again it is worth noticing that Connor, not Toksvig, is the critical author of convent life.

Mordet i Højby Kirke (=Murder in Højby Church)

Strong feminist features are deliberately woven into another fragment from the Toksvig Papers dealing with a Danish legendary medieval motif, that of "Mordet i Højby Kirke", also the subject of several medieval ballads.²⁵ Højby Church is situated in north west Zealand, not far from Nykøbing Sjælland, where Signe Toksvig was born and spent her

²⁵ The first line of the fragment runs: "I can't now do, but I want some time to do *Mordet i Højby Kirke*". The text is made up of "ideas" mainly. - Apart from the title, the entire fragment is in English, like practically all Toksvig material, publ. as unpubl.

²⁶ The ms consists of two typed carboncopy pages, rather similar to drafts for Toksvig's "Violets and Herrings", a story located in Pedersborg, near Sorø. The manuscript of that story bears a New York address which was Hackett/Toksvig's ca. 1920-2.

early childhood.²⁶ Admittedly, this text is marginal to a study dealing with convent life, yet merits, I think, a cursory mentioning for the Toksvig-created ending to the legend which sides with two sisters who revenge violation and rape by killing the two brothers who committed the misdeed. The culprits are killed by the sisters in Højby Church at Christmas Mass - one of them in front of the altar. Toksvig sticks to the preamble but strengthens the elements of the girls' independent abilities: one is artistic, the other "managerial", and they obtain the favour of Queen Margrete when the brothers, early on, try to trick them out of their legal rights to the farm. "Hated pregnancies" are added to the tale, and the girls manage to "abort of dead infants", etc. Where the legend ends with their triumph over the wicked brothers and their mother, Toksvig, for her own purposes, invents the future of the girls. Queen Margrete, "the good shrewd queen," gives them a lump sum for their estate, and helps them leave, disguised as youths, in order to go on a pilgrimage to do penance for "the blood-guilt".²⁷ On the way through the continent, the artist girl, still in the guise of a boy, becomes an apprentice to a Flemish master. "She never was religious, feels pilgrimage can wait." When the other sister returns after some years, she finds her sister married to the master painter, unable to practice her art as the painter "minimized her ability" when he found out she was a woman, and "as she loves him - no art". The other sister, the text ends, "enters a convent, becomes a *managerial abbess - only outlet for executive women*". (My italics.) The markedly altered version and the final line, a historically correct statement, should justify the brief mention of this clearly feminist fragment.

Making due allowances for the fragmentary character of the various Toksvig manuscripts, I suggest that even in unfinished form they reveal underlying primary ideas for creative work which illuminates Toksvig's preoccupation with religious women communities. Textually, they point up her general concern with gender issues, and her particular brand of feminism.

Concluding Comments

One may rightly question any conclusion made from the slender source material constituted by these fragments and manuscripts.

²⁷ Queen Margrete lived 1353-1412; S.T. has set her version of the legend in the times of this notably strong woman, who united Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

Nevertheless, I shall attempt one such, but on the broader basis of contextualising the different views of the two women in their lives and works. In doing so, one would eschew the immediate, superficial inference that Toksvig, the "outsider" sees Irish female communal life in a rosy, romantic light, whereas Sheehy Skeffington, the Irishwoman with more inside knowledge, is strictly dismissive of the concept of religious women and conventual life. Beyond question, far more complex issues are involved.

The remarkably negative depiction of convent life in the manuscripts by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington calls for a closer look at her life and activities. According to Margaret Ward, her most recent biographer, Hanna was personally a very private person, much the opposite of Signe who emerges in vivid, if complex fullness from the pages of her diaries and correspondence.²⁸ Moreover, and again contrary to Signe, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was a public and political person whose views and opinions of republicanism, and most persistently of feminism, are to be found, above all, in numerous articles, tracts and speeches. Her fictional writing, one presumes, should be read as an echo of her attitudes and opinions, simply in another form. Her knowledge of convent life stemmed from her early convent school days with the Dominican nuns in Eccles Street, Dublin, at that time run by nuns with unusually advanced views on girls' education. Eccles Street convent girls were taught, for instance, that they were entitled to an academic education that would further their chances of employment.²⁹ Students of either sex in those days could sit for university examinations in what was then the Royal University of Ireland, but women students had to prepare for this by attending private colleges. Hanna attended St Mary's University College, run also by Dominican nuns. She was conferred with an MA degree in modern languages in 1902. So in a sense, the female religious with whom Hanna came in contact were strong-minded supporters of the cause she was to champion all her life. Ward states that Hanna's later views on the detrimental influence of religion in Irish society "never extended to the female religious of her youth". (p.9) Hanna, Maria Luddy writes, claimed that

²⁸ For factual information on H.S.S., I rely mainly on Margaret Ward's biography. (note 1)

²⁹ Many of Hanna's contemporaries from the Dominican Convent in Eccles Street achieved pioneer positions in academic professions, notably Mary Hayden, the first female professor of history at UCD. (Ward, p.15)

her education by nuns had given her "great independence of thought and action". (quoted Luddy, p.9) However that may be, these manuscripts, for what they are worth, clearly point to a strong antagonism to religious life in convents. One may conjecture that this attitude might have developed later, out of her acquired anti-Catholic or atheist convictions which in the Irish society of those days, among other things, meant practically exclusion from teaching in girls' schools almost totally dominated by nuns. As a widow early in life, Hanna taught for a living, but in accordance with the laws, she was unable to obtain a secure, full-time post. According to Ward, this was one of the many injustices Hanna fought in attempting to better the status of Irishwomen.

Hanna and Signe, both university educated New Women, most certainly had in common a preoccupation with Irishwomen's plight. Much as Toksvig's depictions of female communal life are in accordance with her feminist outlook, the Irish story of "Sister Irene" may seem to clash with anti-Catholic views quite frequently expressed in her diaries and letters as well as in some of her fictional writing, for instance in the stories "Sin" and "Auto-Da-Fé" and most explicitly, perhaps, in her Irish novel *Eve's Doctor*.³⁰ Toksvig's diary entries from the time of her working on the Irish novel and much unpublished letter material further enlighten her preoccupation with Irish Catholicism as related to the women's issues.³¹ In 1936, she writes (to her sister-in-law) about the dangerous ground she is about to tread in her Irish novel: "You, I feel, do see that though I'm anti-bad-priests, I am for religion..."³² The statement is highly relevant. Throughout her life, as apparent from her unpublished diaries and from *STID*, Toksvig was preoccupied with religion in many forms, in Ireland obviously with Irish Catholicism as she saw it practised around her and in intellectual discussions with Irish friends. Protestantism, Catholicism and Buddhism do not remain merely academic topics of discussion, and copious diary entries bear witness to her continuous search for a spiritual

³⁰ "Sin" publ. in *STID*, pp. 383-6, "Auto-Da-Fé", a satirical piece (directed against Irish censorship of publications) *ibid.* pp. 392-4.

³¹ See Lis Pihl: "A Muzzle Made in Ireland": Irish Censorship and Signe Toksvig", in *Studies. An Irish Quarterly*, vol.88, no. 352, 448-57, winter 1999.

³² Letter (of 28 Nov. 1936) to Florence Hackett, S.'s sister-in-law. (The Hackett/Toksvig Papers in the Royal Library, Copenhagen.)

³³ A long diary entry (10 Aug. 1928), *STID*, pp. 50-1, (one of many) reveals S.T.'s continuous speculations on spiritual matters.

refuge.³³ In the course of a long life, Signe came a long way from her childhood Lutheranism over "freethinking" to a professed stand in Zen Buddhism in late life. She was involved in psychical research, but also read widely in Christian literature, and was familiar with early Christian mysticism.³⁴ Her knowledge of mysticism and Christianity is reflected also in her book on Swedenborg, the Swedish scientist and mystic.³⁵ There is nothing indicative of atheism either in any part of her published creative writing.

In the light of all this, it seems a fair assumption that Signe Toksvig would regard conventual life as a positive outlet for women. Being well-read in Freud and Myers and in what was then termed sexology, Toksvig's views on women in conventual life would naturally encompass sexuality. This is exemplified, as already mentioned, in the woman protagonist of *Eve's Doctor*, Kate Ellison, who feels briefly attracted to celibate life, after an unhappy love affair. In no way does the text of "Sister Irene" reflect an outsider's rosy view of Irishwomen's societal position. Signe Toksvig was an astute and perceptive, never a romantic or superficial observer of Irish life. Her favourable concept of conventual life in the manuscript of "Sister Irene" as in the Spanish fragments is based on her Irish as well as her more general religious observations and reading, and it is in complete accord with her feminist beliefs.

³⁴ Discussed at length in diaries and in "FL" (note 13). S.T.'s early interest in medieval mysticism is evident from much mentioning in *STID* (note 2). She transl. Meister Eckehart into English, and a copy of Julian of Norwich in Penguin Classics (1973) has her pencil comments throughout the text.

³⁵ The book appeared first in 1948 in America. It was transl. into Danish and Swedish.

RESUMÉ

LIS PIHL: *Fragmenter af feminisme hos Hanna Sheehy Skeffington og Signe Toksvig*

Hanna Sheehy Skeffingtons navn er - fra begyndelsen af det tyvende århundrede - stærkt knyttet til kampen for irske kvinders valgret og ligestilling. Først indenfor de seneste årtier har (kvindelige) historikere givet hende den placering, hun fortjener i irsk historie. Intet tyder på, at hun og den danskfødte forfatter Signe Toksvig har kendt hinanden personligt, end ikke i den periode da Toksvig og hendes irske forfatter-ægtefælle Francis Hackett boede i Irland (1926-37). Meget taler dog for, at Signe Toksvig må have kendt til Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Irske kvinders vanskelige forhold i tyverne og tredvernes klerikalt kvindeundertrykkende klima afspejles i det meste af Hanna Sheehy Skeffingtons faglige produktion, såvel som i hendes ganske få manuskripter af kreativ karakter. I adskilligt Signe Toksvig-materiale spores et tilsvarende engagement i modstand mod irske kvinders tiltagende forringede kår i Fristatens første årtier. Artiklen beskæftiger sig med nogle manuskripter og fragmenter, der i fiktiv form handler om kvinder og klosterliv. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington-materialet har jeg fundet i The National Library of Ireland og Signe Toksvig-manuskripterne i Hackett/Toksvig Samlingen på Det Kgl. Bibliotek. Texterne læses med henblik på feministiske forfattersynspunkter og vurderinger. Det feministiske engagement, fælles for de to forfattere, kommer - noget overraskende - til udtryk i en utilsløret skarp kritik af kvindeligt klosterliv hos Hanna Sheehy Skeffington og i særdeles positive fremstillinger hos Signe Toksvig. Dette tilsyneladende ukarakteristiske forhold søges yderligere belyst igennem de to kvinders liv og virke.