Daniel Becker

On the Threshold of Memory:

National History and Liminal Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Poetry

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Wuppertal, September 2020 Daniel Becker

1. Introduction: Where Did All the History Go?

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Irish poetry was defined by "the dominance of the 'backward look'" (Goodby 93). Whether in the form of an idealised ancient past or the representation of more recent political events, Irish national history obtained a central position in the work of many Irish poets of that era. When Ireland intensified its struggle for independence at the beginning of the twentieth century, poets of the Irish Revival such as William Butler Yeats, Ethna Carbery, Emily Lawless or Douglas Hyde established the Irish poem as a powerful cultural institution which helped to 'invent' and shape the present and future Ireland via its "epiphanic […] view of Irish history" (S. Smith 27). In the same vein, while other national poetry canons had already 'opened up' to modernist experimentation, Irish poetry of the 1930s to late 1950s "seemed to be turning back to the past" (Quinn, *Introduction* 45). Poets such as F.R. Higgins, Joseph Campbell or Padraic Colum adopted the Revival's search for a national spirit in Irish history: at a time when Ireland predominantly practiced a cultural, political and economic discourse of protectionism, they limited their work to discussions of 'Irish matters', with the Irish past being one of the core concerns. Finally, in Irish poetry of the 1960s to 1980s, the topic of national history gained an even more pressing urgency: with the beginning of the Troubles in the North – triggering renewed public discussions of past conflicts in both Northern Ireland and the Republic – Irish poets on both sides of the border were faced with the dangerous effect of a history of colonial strife and segregation once again (cf. Walker 58), which led to a new and more critical poetic re-negotiation of the past in the work of authors such as Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin or Eavan Boland.

This powerful connection between history and poetry was also reflected in a significant amount of academic studies in the second half of the twentieth century. As Fran Brearton and Allan Gillis point out, by the time Heaney and other poets published their first collections, Irish poetry had become the genre most closely associated with Ireland's fascination with the past (cf. Brearton/Gillis ix) and the enormous rise in academic interest in twentieth century Irish poets and their negotiation of history reflected on and contributed to this development.[1] Irish poetry studies as a discipline, in

1 Out of the plethora of studies, only a few examples shall be mentioned: see e.g. J.G. Simms' "The Battle of Aughrim: History and Poetry" (1977), Stuart Hirschberg's "The 'Whirling Gyres' of History" (1979), Maurice Riordan's "Eros and History: On Contemporary Irish Poetry" (1985), Ruth Niel's "Digging into History: A Reading of Brian Friel's 'Volunteers' and Seamus Heaney's 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces'" (1986), John McDonagh's "Imagi-Nation in Brendan Kennelly's 'Cromwell'" (2002), Ronald Schuchard's "The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish Poetry" (2004), Bernhard Klein's *On the Uses of History in Recent Irish Writing* (2007), Jeannette E. Riley's "Eavan Boland's 'The Lost Land': Altering the Cartography of the Irish Poem" (2009), Benjamin Keatinge's "Responses to the Holocaust in Modern Irish Poetry" (2011), James Byrne's "Seamus Heaney, Francisco Goya and Unveiling the Myth of History" (2016); Neal Alexander's "Remembering the Future: Poetry, Peace, and the Politics of Memory in Northern Ireland" (2018).

other words, also turned history into a central object of its analysis and thus mirrored and confirmed the significance that the past had gained in Irish poetry. In fact, with academia reinforcing the significance of history in Irish poetic productions, during the 1970s and 1980s the union between the past and poetry had become such a dominant component in the Irish poetry canon that the term 'Irish poetry' was used as a synonym for poetry dedicated to portraying Ireland's historical struggle (cf. Falci 17). This narrow focus gave poets such as Derek Mahon, who did not meet the demand of the 'Irish history poem', a hard time finding any public or academic attention (cf. Zamorano Llena 100).

During the mid-1990s and early 2000s, however, when a new generation of Irish poets appeared on the scene, things began to change. Most significantly, the academic interest in the relationship between poetry and history, which had dominated the field in the years before, suddenly decreased. The "new Irish poets" (Guinness, "Introduction" 14), who started their poetic career during the Celtic Tiger years, broadly expanded the thematic spectrum of Irish poetry by more prominently addressing present-day issues such as everyday life in Celtic Tiger Ireland (see e.g. Dennis O'Driscoll's *Reality Check*), international politics (see e.g. Kevin Higgins' *Time Gentlemen, Please*), technology (see e.g. John Redmond's *MUDe*) or changing paradigms of gender and sexuality (see e.g. Leanne O'Sullivan's *Waiting for My Clothes*). In Irish poetry studies of the Celtic Tiger period this move towards a more inclusive thematic canon was predominantly interpreted as the end of the strong link between national history and Irish poetry, as they argued that the new poets have "thrown off the weight of an encumbered past and have injected a new outward-looking confidence" (Kirby/Gibbons/Cronin 9). Thus, Michael Parker, for example, claims that "among the defining characteristics of the new poetry […] [are] an alertness to wider geopolitical concerns, and a preoccupation with domestic and family, rather than national history" (Parker 177). In a similar vein, to name a second example, Justin Quinn argues in his survey on the development of Irish poetry since 1800 that the new Irish poets, who began publishing poetry collections around 2000, break with the former poetry tradition by orchestrating the "disappearance of Ireland" and a "gradual abandonment of the nation as a framework for Irish poetry" (Quinn, *Introduction* 1); an abandonment that also includes turning away from Irish national history, which by now, as some research suggests, seems rather irrelevant for a new generation of poets.[2]

Although the euphoria of the Celtic Tiger years quickly ebbed down, as the roaring tiger became a tame kitten again, this dominant academic discourse of a "post-national generation" (Brearton 629), that no longer remembers the nation's past, still echoes in many Irish poetry studies up until this day. Over the past two decades, many new Irish poets, such as Iggy McGovern, Martina Evans, John McAuliffe, Lorna Shaughnessy, Paul Perry or Anne Fitzgerald, have been ignored and, if they have found some attention, academic discussions of their poetic work have mostly ne-

2 Similar accounts can be found in Broom (2006) and Jarnewicz/McDonagh (2009).

glected Irish history as an object of research. In fact, most existing studies on the new Irish poets have turned their research focus to other thematic concerns (cf. Cusick 2005; Sullivan 2011; Johnston 2012; Flannery 2014) and in the few studies that tackle the issue of the past in the work of the new writers (cf. Schrage-Früh 2009; L. Collins 2015; Eide 2017; McDaid 2017; Kirkpatrick 2017) national history often plays a marginal role.[3] Compared to the plethora of studies on the representation of history in the works of earlier poets such as Heaney, Muldoon or Boland (as in footnote 1), current research on the new Irish poets, thus, indeed reinforces the impression that Irish poetry since the Celtic Tiger is no longer concerned with Ireland's past.

Yet, this impression is misleading, as the present study will show. Although it is undoubtedly important and legitimate to analyse the broad range of (new) thematic concerns addressed by a new generation of poets in Irish poetry studies, one should nevertheless not leave the 'old war horse' of national history out of academic considerations: it still finds its proper place in the work of many new Irish poets, who, far from "throw[ing] off the weight of an encumbered past", often showcase different and most innovative ways to negotiate Ireland's history; ways that, so far, have not been examined carefully and that require a long-overdue analysis. The present study can be regarded as a first attempt to fill this research gap. By analysing selected poems by Iggy McGovern, Tom French, Vona Groarke, Martina Evans, Leanne O'Sullivan, Paul Perry, Lorna Shaughnessy, Paula Cunningham, as well as the more intensively-researched writers Paula Meehan and Paul Durcan, this study will examine one of the most dominant ways of remembering national history in contemporary Irish poetry: the negotiation of Ireland's past via *liminal remembrance*.[4] It will be argued that

3 Lucy Collins' *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement*, for instance, takes a look at cultural memory and "the relationship between individual and shared versions of the past" (2) and thus indicates that national history is anything but absent in the work of newer (female) poets. However, in this context, national history rather fulfils an 'instrumental' function: Collins is less interested in the different poetic means of remembering Irish history *per se*, than in seeing the remembrance of the national past as *one* element in the work of contemporary Irish women poets to alter the Irish poetic tradition, as "[t]heir handling of poetic temporalities is of fundamental importance for exploring […] their place in the tradition" (1). Collins also follows a similar argument in "A Way of Going Back: Memory and Estrangement in the Poetry of Paula Meehan" (2009); Keating (2017) looks at memory in the sense of poetic influences of prior generations on contemporary Irish poetry.

4 Like the topic of history in the works of the new Irish poets, aspects of liminality have not yet gained much attention in Irish poetry studies, especially not in combination with memory. So far, the concept has mostly been used to explain the position of the poet between self and world (Rui Cavalho Homem's "'Neither Here Nor There': Representing the Liminal in Irish Poetry" [2005] or Irene Gilsenan Nordin's "'Betwixt and Between': The Body as Liminal Threshold in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin" [2006]), between creative expression and motherhood (Katharina Walter's "'Suspended between the Two Worlds': Gestation Metaphors and Representation of Childbirth in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry" [2010]) between different cultural expressions and arts (Anne Karhio's "The Familiar and the Foreign: Finish Landscapes in Contemporary Irish Poetry" [2014]) or between different geographical and ideological spaces (Megan

many Irish poems written since the Celtic Tiger represent aspects of Irish history in between being remembered *and* being forgotten at the same time. 'Liminal remembrance' therefore describes a poetic memory practice in which national history is neither fully included in a speaker's memory nor completely excluded from it. Instead, it is both and exists on the very threshold of memory where processes of remembering and forgetting constantly interact. As such, in the works of many new Irish poets, national history often appears as a strangely ephemeral, 'ghost-like' entity that is somehow graspable and present in memory and yet is often presented in such an indistinct and vague manner that it simultaneously lingers on the verge of being absent and 'lost' in the dark of the past. In Tom French's "Commute", to take a brief look at one example, the Easter Rising of 1916, which the speaker remembers when he passes a plate dedicated to the remembrance of the event on a train ride back home from work, obtains an in-between position in the speaker's personal memory: as underlined by the spatial liminality of the commemorative plaque's "sentence scribbled between stations" (l. 5), the speaker remembers the historical figures of James Connolly and Padraig Pearse, who gain a haunting presence in his recollection, while he simultaneously distances himself from this era in Irish history: by commenting on the fact that the commemorative plate "looks like it was written by somebody else" (l. 6) he emphasises that the event is not related to his personal everyday horizon.

With this prominent phenomenon in mind, the poems discussed in the following study have been chosen for three reasons: first, they share a liminal memory practice, as they display 'in-between' representations of history in one way or another. Second, the corpus of poems chosen for this study is defined by its personal memory perspective: as will be argued below, liminal remembrance is closely related to a speaker's personal perspective on national events in the past. For that reason, all poems analysed in the following chapters display speakers that relate to Ireland's history from within their own everyday realm. Finally, since remembrance in these poems is a highly personal matter, the span of history being remembered in the chosen text selection is mostly limited to historical events of the twentieth century (i.e. the struggle for independence, the World Wars, the Troubles etc.). These three features help to narrow down the selection of poems from a larger body of contemporary poetic works from Ireland that still actively remember national history (yet not in a liminal mode). As such, the chosen poems are supposed to serve as examples of a changing trend in poetic remembrance. More specifically, next to mentioning a plethora of poems throughout the book, the following poems will be at the centre of analysis: Vona Groarke's "To Smithereens" (2006), Iggy McGovern's "The News in 1974" (2005), "The Jeep" (2005), "The Skip" (2005) and "Arrival" (2010), Paula Meehan's "Manulla Junction" (2000) and "At Shelling Hill" (2009), Leanne O'Sullivan's "Townland" (2013) and "Safe House" (2013), Tom French's "The Scar" (2001), "Red"

Buckley's "'The visionary place, the obstructed monument': Mediations of the Liminal in the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Mary O'Malley" [2008]; Lauren Rebecca Thacker's *'Every Move Is Punctuated': Writing Identity and Space in Irish Poetry 1963-2016* [2016]; Alibhe McDaid's *The Poetics of Migration in Contemporary Irish Poetry* [2017]).

(2001), “Commute” (2009) and “Moss” (2009), Paula Cunningham’s “The Hyacinth under the Stairs” (2013), Paul Perry’s “Of the gas stove and the glimmerman” (2003), Joan McBreen’s “The Photograph of My Aunts” (2003), Lorna Shaughnessy’s “Shelter (May 1976)” (2015) and “Dogged” (2015), Martina Evans’ “Mallow Burns, 28th September 1920” (2009), Kevin Higgins’ “Clear Out” (2009), John McAuliffe’s “A Pyramid Scheme” (2007), David Wheatley’s “Misery Hill” (2000) and Paul Durcan’s “Politics” (1999).

As the analyses of these poems will show, the prominent phenomenon of liminal remembrance more specifically occurs in *four different types* in contemporary Irish poetry. The first type will be labelled *indirect memory*. The central aspect of this type lies in the fact that national history is exclusively remembered via a ‘second hand’ perspective. The prototypical speaker of this type does not remember a national event directly, since he/she has not personally witnessed this event first-hand, but rather recalls a *public representation* of the event he/she encountered at a later point in time (e.g. in the form of news reports or memorials). As such, the speaker indirectly accesses the national past by remembering how the public sphere remembered an event. In other words, he/she remembers the remembrance of history, not the actual event.

The second type will be named *family memory*. This type assembles poems in which the speaker remembers a past moment of national relevance via stories shared by his/her relatives in the family. In different ways such poems deal with the possibilities and limits of transferring memories from one family member to another. While in some poems the speaker is so emotionally invested in his/her relative’s version of the past that he/she ‘adopts’ these memories as his/her own, in other poems the speaker needs to realise that any transfer of memories is prone to re-interpretation and imagination, which creates a distance from the relative’s past experience. Thus, this type often somehow insinuates an interaction between a speaker’s proximity to and distance from a family member’s version of the past and the national aspects he/she recalls.

The third type is labelled *authentic memory*. This type is characterised by the speaker’s attempt to reconstruct the ‘original’ experience of a national event or context as minutely as possible. Put differently, this type initiates a ‘direct access’ to the past, in which the discrepancy between experiencing a moment and remembering this moment later on is levelled. Such poems recall the past as if the speaker travelled back in time to relive a moment while it is happening. In order to achieve this direct access, speakers of this type apply a photographic or video-graphic gaze on the past, as they ‘zoom in’ on sensory details of a past scenario.

The fourth and last type differs from the first three in so far as it grants a *metaphorical access* to national history. While the first three types deal with a speaker’s concrete memories, the last type negotiates Irish history as a liminal entity in terms of another concept which reveals liminal properties itself. More precisely, liminality becomes the *tertium comparationis* in the metaphor of *history as waste*. As will be shown, waste

cannot be clearly categorised but often exists in a state between familiarity and unfamiliarity as well as between processes of devaluation and revaluation.

In order to properly analyse these four types in all their nuances and facets, the present study will not only make use of theoretical notions of liminality but additionally draw on concepts from memory studies – especially Harald Welzer's, Sabine Moller's and Karoline Tschuggnall's concepts of the *album* and the *lexicon*. With the help of these concepts it will be shown, how liminal remembrance is closely linked to the *personal* memory perspective used in the relevant poems. More to the point, it will be demonstrated that liminal remembrance of national history always relies on an interaction between, first, recalling sensory experiences personally made in a national context and, second, reconstructing learned knowledge about said context, acquired after the events took place (e.g. learned from history lessons at school). As such, this study uses a new framework for analysing contemporary poetry which will help to discuss liminal remembrance as a complex phenomenon based on the intersection of a double interplay between remembering/forgetting and experience/knowledge.

Finally, based on this framework, liminal remembrance will not only be examined on a textual level but also a contextual one: since liminal remembrance has become such a dominant phenomenon in Irish poetry during the Celtic Tiger, the question arises which specific cultural, social or political factors influence the sudden occurrence of this phenomenon at this particular moment in time. It will be argued that the liminal representation of national history is a response to three major ruptures in Irish cultural memory: over the past few decades, Ireland has radically shifted its ways of looking at the nation's past several times, ranging from the revisionist debates of the 1980s to the Celtic Tiger society and its euphoric abandonment of any relationship to the past altogether, to Post-Celtic Tiger austerity and the sudden return of a more traditional interpretation of national history. As a result, it will be argued, Ireland manoeuvred itself into a 'memory crisis' and liminal remembrance becomes both an *expression of* and a *reaction against* this critical situation.

With its focus on the liminal memory practice and its complexities, the present study makes a contribution to continuing the long-lasting tradition of looking at history in Irish poetry. It does so by complementing the extensive body of work on twentieth-century poets with a look at how twenty-first century Irish poetry handles matters of history. However, this study, to some extent, also leaves the traditional pathway paved by earlier Irish poetry studies: it provides new insights into the poetic remembrance of history by drawing on concepts (album/lexicon) that have not been used by other critics of Irish poetry. In addition, it also avoids many of the categories routinely used in analyses and interpretations so far, such a clear distinction between Northern vs. Southern Irish poets, male vs. female poets or Celtic Tiger and Post-Celtic Tiger poets. Rather, it delivers a re-reading of an important topic with a long tradition by casting a more inclusive perspective on the matter that shows the all-pervasiveness of the liminal mode of remembrance and its different variations in contemporary Irish poetry. In that sense, the present study analyses a broad corpus consisting of poems

by different writers from the North and the South, representing different age groups and genders as well as different poetic styles and voices, who lyrically represent different historical epochs that range from the war of independence (see e.g. Martina Evans' "Mallow Burns, 28th September 1920") and the Great War (see e.g. Tom French's "Red") to the Second World War (see e.g. Harry Clifton's "Grandfather") and most recent political events surrounding the Troubles (see e.g. Paula Cunningham's "A Dog Called Chance").

With these goals in mind, the study will proceed in three major steps: in a first step (Chapter 2), the notion of liminal remembrance will be discussed on a theoretical level in order to provide a conceptual framework for the following analysis. For that purpose, the underlying concepts of liminality, remembering and forgetting as well as the album and the lexicon will be introduced. Based on this conceptual foundation, in a second step (Chapter 3), exemplary Irish poems will be analysed in detail in order to show the various types and forms of liminal remembrance in contemporary poetic texts from Ireland. Finally, in a third step (Chapter 4), the analysis will move from the textual level of individual poems to the contextual level of Irish society to show how liminal remembrance can be read as a response to recent developments in Irish cultural memory. In this context, first the three ruptures mentioned above will be briefly explained and then linked to the liminal representation of history in contemporary Irish poetry.