4. THE BIGGER PICTURE: LIMINAL REMEMBRANCE IN IRISH CULTURE

Poetry, like any other form of literature, does not exist in a cultural vacuum. Rather, poems often (whether directly or indirectly) become artistic reflections of specific cultural, social or political discourses of their time. In the case of liminal remembrance poetry, occurring prominently in an early twenty-first century Irish society, this is no different. Thus, after extrapolating strategies and procedures of liminal remembrance on a *textual* level in the previous chapter, this study will end with a glimpse at the bigger cultural picture on a *contextual* level. More to the point, it will be argued that the dominant poetic mode of liminal remembrance can be read as a response to some major changes in Ireland's cultural memory practices over the past few decades: as Ireland radically transformed from one of the poorest and most isolated countries in the "European backwater" (O'Donovan 139) to being "a poster-girl for twenty-first century capitalist success" (Murphy 174) – and then back again to austerity – it not only exchanged its traditional Catholic cultural habitus for a more cosmopolitan way of life,[68] but also, more importantly, repeatedly changed its collective outlook on the national past. Over the past few decades, one can detect three major ruptures in how Ireland remembers its history: first, there were the heated debates around Irish historical revisionism. Second, one needs to consider the dominant impact of a neoliberalist philosophy during the Celtic Tiger era. Finally, commemoration changed again due to the return to a more traditional nationalist remembrance culture after the collapse of the Celtic Tiger.

As each rupture introduced a new way of remembering the national past 'correctly', by radically debunking the ones that came before, the very process of publicly remembering the past became a matter of insecurity and crisis over the years: the constant shift of memory perspectives fuelled questions about which version of history was 'right' and left people wondering if anything definite could be said about the past at all anymore. The poetry of liminal remembrance, which has become so dominant in this exact context, might be very well interpreted as an *expression of* and a *reaction against*[69] this recent 'memory crisis' in Irish cultural memory: by keeping history in a constantly shifting position between being remembered and being forgotten,

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68 For an overview over the social transformation of Ireland during the Celtic Tiger see Fahey/Russell/Whelan (eds., 2007); Keohane/Kuhling (2005); Inglis (2005, 2008); Nolan/Maitre (2007); D. O'Sullivan (2009).

69 It goes without saying that any attempt to define a correlation between literary form and cultural function must remain somewhat speculative and that the very idea, possibilities and limits of a 'form-function-mapping' of literature might be worth a dissertation of its own. Thus, it cannot be the point of this conclusion to argue for a *direct*, singular interrelation between liminal remembrance in contemporary Irish poetry and contexts of Irish commemoration practices – if such a thing even exists. Rather, this last part of the study shall merely suggest two possible readings of how the liminal poems analysed in this study can be situated in their cultural context.

liminal poems by writers such as Iggy McGovern or Martina Evans become an indi-rect comment on the inability to fix the past in any singular position.

With this argument in mind, first the three ruptures will be briefly described individu-ally. Then, the discussion will turn towards locating the poetry of liminal remembrance in this very context of a memory crisis.

4.1 Remembrance in Contemporary Ireland: Three Ruptures

Disrupting the Myth – The Revisionist Debates

The first rupture in Ireland's recent historical consciousness appeared in the 1970s and 1980s with the revisionist debates, "a vigorous, and at times, vicious, histo-riographical debate [that] has proceeded alongside the Northern Troubles" (Whelan 179). Before revisionism made an impact on Irish cultural memory, the way Ireland's history was to be officially remembered was widely controlled and shaped by a prominently nationalist tradition of remembrance. Consequently, and depending on the political camp,[70] historical 'truth' for many Irish people in the pre-revisionist era was embodied in one of two conflicting grand narratives:

> The two basic plot lines are first, the story of English oppression and Irish suffering put forward in, for instance, A.M. Sullivan's *The Story of Ireland* (1867) and second, the tale of benevolent English intervention and general Irish ineptitude presented in Stan-dish O'Grady's much less appreciated *The Story of Ireland* (1893). (Hansson 52)

Despite their obvious ideological and narrative differences on the surface, the under-lying plot structure of these two narratives is strikingly similar: as T.W. Moody ex-plains, in both instances the past is "the story of a people coming out of captivity, out of underground, finding every artery of national life occupied by her enemy, recover-ing them one by one and coming out at last in the full blaze of the sun" ("Irish History" 84). Given their simple story lines and emotional power, these narratives witnessed a long-lasting and successful memory career, as they became the firm foundation and 'obsession' upon which the concept of 'Irish identity' was founded throughout the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century.

However, these grand narratives came under heavy attack with the outburst of terror in the North in the second half of the twentieth century. More specifically, as the Troubles intensified, these romanticised visions of the past, and their inherent call-to-arms credo, were criticised for helping to fuel the atrocities in the present moment by 'infesting' impressionable young minds with the notion of regaining a glorious past

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70 Moody calls the narrative of Irish liberation from English oppression the "Catholic-Separatist myth" and indicates that this narrative was the dominant narrative for a ma-jority of people in the Republic of Ireland ("Irish History" 72). On the other hand, a ma-jority of people in the North followed the narrative of "English intervention" (see Hans-son above).

through force.[71] At this critical juncture, revisionism quickly gained wide-spread public attention as a powerful counter-narrative against the dangers of these nationalist memory practices (cf. Fanning 147). Since too many people had died already, revisionists aimed at "emancipat[ing] the country from nationalist tyranny" by replacing the demagogical 'myths' of nationalism with the objective 'truth' about Ireland's past (Whelan 180; cf. Nutt 161). It is with the rise of this more 'objective' perspective on history that "the nature of history writing in Ireland has changed dramatically" (M. McCarthy 5) and "a new interpretation of Irish history" (Foster, "History" 140) would shock the very image of the past so many people had taken for granted up until this time.

The revisionist debunking of the nationalist memory tradition specifically focused on two aspects: first, the traditional version of the past was criticised for being "one-sided" (Freiburg 70): it exclusively displayed a "political allegiance to nationalism" (Edwards 56), and relied on romantic "notions of insularity and cultural purity" (M. McCarthy 5), while ignoring more problematic aspects of what 'really' happened in the past; more specifically, it ignored all elements that did not fit the nationalist agenda. Second, revisionists found fault with the traditionalists' presumed lack and sheer disinterest in empirical accuracy and challenged their "inadequate foundations" of writing history (Moody, "New History" 38): nationalists, as revisionists claimed, relied on Gaelic storytelling traditions rather than historical facts, so that their take on history was 'making up' the past as a fictional story (cf. Foster, *Irish Story*). According to this argument, nationalists would shape history into a coherent plot by dismissing the inconsistencies, sudden turns and outright dangers Ireland's past might offer in reality. In response, revisionists offered a (what they called) "value free" perspective on the past that, unbiased by any guiding ideology, neutrally aims at the objective core of truth and does not 'shy away' from showing where Irish history might have gone wrong after being blinded by nationalism (Brady 10).

This fundamental revisionist critique did not go unnoticed by nationalist historians and a heavily publicised discussion on the 'right' version of history ensued soon after. More to the point, nationalist historians replied to their historiographic opponents with the argument that there is no such thing as a "value free" perspective on the past.[72] In their opinion, the only difference between revisionism and nationalism lies in the fact that revisionists hide their ideological agenda under the guise of objectivity (cf. Bradshaw 200). Desmond Fennell described this underlying revisionist ideology as follows:

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71   In this context, Brian Walker jokingly argues that, like on a pack of cigarettes, the traditional narratives of Irish history should have a health warning attached to them: history can lead to madness and death (cf. 58).

72   Following Walter Benjamin's argument against German historicism, Anthony Coughlan, for instance, mocked the revisionist claim for a value-free judgement with the utterance that "the good historian knows that he is a moral and political being involved in an enterprise that is also moral and political" (289).

> What is the image of historical revisionism in Ireland today? A retelling of Irish history which seeks to show that British rule of Ireland was not, as we have believed, a *bad* thing [...] and that the Irish resistance to it was not, as we have believed, a *good* thing, but a mixture of wrong-headed idealism and unnecessary, often cruel, violence. (184; emphasis in original)

Far from being "value free", anti-revisionists claimed, revisionism advertises a pro-British sentiment that undermines the nationalist struggle for independence as an utterly negative endeavour and a failure.[73] In that regard, nationalists argued, revisionists cater to a pessimistic and highly sceptical version of the past. This version simply disregards the emotional currents that make Irish history *Irish*, since its distant and 'objective' perspective cannot adequately express the meaning of suffering for the Irish national character (cf. Bradshaw 203-204).

In the end, however, despite these nationalist counter-arguments, revisionism managed to rapidly revise the dominant way of remembering Ireland's history and the well-rounded story of coming out of captivity was replaced by a more fragmented and bleak view on the past. One can even argue that revisionism was so successful in spreading its more 'disillusioning' version of Irish history in public, that the public commemoration of one of the key events in the nationalist narrative, the Easter Rising of 1916, was cancelled for the first time in 1991. The reason for this decision, Seamus Deane comments, was that "the Easter Rising of 1916 has been so effectively revised that its seventy-fifth anniversary is a matter of official embarrassment" (234). As this example shows, the revisionist approach to history had a deeply unsettling effect on how a majority of contemporary Irish people formed their identity in relation to the past:

> Revisionist historiography had the effect of successfully redefining national identity in a number of key ways. One is to break up the Irish experience, seeing it as a complex set of fragmented cultures [...] [T]he result, as Bradshaw so perceptively notes, is an account of history 'from which the modern Irish community would seem as aliens in their own land'. (Kirby, "Pedigrees" 27; citing Bradshaw [1989: 349])

The new way of remembering Ireland's national history was no longer a relatively simple and coherent narrative of a steady progression towards liberation (i.e. "the Irish experience"), but a complicated collage of fragments in which, next to the motives of failure and misjudgement, no clear-cut morality could find its place. Many people, therefore, indeed felt "as aliens in their own land" as they could no longer relate to this complex version of Ireland's past. Revisionism, as Hugh Kearney states, "touch[ed] a sensitive nerve" in Ireland (246): caught in between affective loyalties towards a familiar way of remembrance and the discursive power of the revisionist

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73 An extensive and in-depth discussion of these historiographic debates between revisionists and nationalist can be found in Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (1994).

'truth', former followers of the nationalist interpretation of Irish history now existed in a state of the in-between, not knowing how to remember the past 'correctly'.[74]

Disconnecting the Past? – The Celtic Tiger Era

A second rupture in Ireland's historical imagination occurred during the Celtic Tiger boom, as the radically changed Irish society of the 1990s – including its sudden prosperity and its national pride in a 'new' Ireland – brought forth a new dominant perspective on Ireland's past. This perspective seriously challenged both nationalist *and* revisionist versions of Irish history by questioning the concept of history itself. Thus, it was claimed that Celtic Tiger Ireland had not only successfully overcome the nationalist 'myth' with the help of revisionism but that it had also finally overcome revisionism and the past altogether:

> Other critics […] claim that Ireland's current economic prosperity, powered as it is by multinational corporate investments and high-tech manufacturing industries, makes both a revisionist and a traditionalist view of cultural memory irrelevant, as Ireland has finally gained independence from its own past. Such independence suggests that Ireland's contemporary autonomy is synonymous with a disconnection and dislocation from the cultural prerequisites of national memory. (Gray 72)

During the Celtic Tiger heyday, in other words, Irish culture orchestrated an utter degradation of the past by celebrating and stressing the liberation of the present-day society from the 'dark ages' Ireland witnessed before.

This radical collective break with the past found its utmost expression in a public 'end-of-history' discourse.[75] According to this discourse, the neo-liberal Celtic Tiger society of the late 1990s to early 2000s was seen as the long-awaited final step in Ireland's historical development. As such, with prosperity becoming a major marker of national identity during the Celtic Tiger years, the Irish public sphere catered to the idea that neo-liberalism was "the *natural* guarantor of individual freedom" (Phelan 75; emphasis in original), bringing Ireland to a 'golden age' in which all conflicts of an inferior past found their ultimate conclusion. In public discussions of the time, "a belief [was propagated] that the free market is the wisest, most efficient method of

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74   Kearney retells an anecdote of a few revisionist historians lecturing on 'The Flight of the Earls' in the 1980s. He talks about how "[a]t one sessions [sic] […] a member of the audience is said to have protested against the revisionist tone of the lecture by calling out 'For God's sake leave us our heroes'" (246).

75   The term 'end of history' was most famously coined by Francis Fukuyama as a comment on the falling Soviet Union in 1989. Yet, the concept's philosophical roots can be traced back to nineteenth-century German idealism. It was especially Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1837) that spawned the idea of history being a temporal means to a pre-determined end. Simply put, in Hegel's notion, the end of history is achieved as soon as the idea of a *Weltgeist* has been materialised in its completed form through a series of dialectic processes. History, therefore, is a finite set of conflicts that, with each 'clash' of ideas solved, finds itself in closer proximity to the ultimate end. The concrete 'end' here is a perfectly stable form of human society where the need for politics regulating the present stability replaces the need for history in guiding towards this stability (cf. Demandt 323).

human organization ever developed" (Kerrigan 15), with neo-liberalism being "some disinterested and benign force" that awaits Ireland at the end of its historical ladder (Kirby, "Policies" 190).

This 'end of history' belief became so powerful that it was increasingly "taboo to criticize the Celtic Tiger" (Keohane/Kuhling, *Collision Culture* 143) and to voice any alternative perspective on Ireland's present and past (cf. Cronin). Instead, with this discourse achieving "hegemonic status within the twenty-six counties" (Coulter 12), it quickly became 'trendy' to remember the past in the darkest colours possible, in order to make the prosperous present shine even brighter in comparison. Hence, during the Celtic Tiger years, "the nauseating norm of 'othering' Ireland's past" (O'Donovan 139) was developed: history was displayed as a 'dumping site' and "bogeyman" for anything unwanted in present-day Ireland (Kirby/Gibbons/Cronin 7). The relationship between present and past became a strict dichotomy that warned Irish citizens to stay away from history, as no one in their right mind would voluntarily leave the safe harbour of the Celtic Tiger to wander around the dangerous terrain of the past (cf. Kirby/Gibbons/Cronin 7).

Overall then, Irish cultural memory during the Celtic Tiger era was dominated by a narrative of rupture:

> And it goes like this: Once upon a time, the Irish threw off the shackles of the past that held us back. We began to work hard, to innovate, to find within us the talents we always had but which had been suppressed or neglected for too long. In the bad old days, you see, the Brits held us back, or perhaps the Catholic church stifled our innate talents. Whatever it was, once we threw off the yoke of oppression, we became 'a nation of entrepreneurs'. We began 'punching above the weight'. (Kerrigan 3)

Irish history was seen as a rite of passage that had finally been fulfilled by "thr[owing] off the shackles of the past". In this regard, public and academic discussions were often dominated by the metaphor of Ireland as a living organism 'growing up' and the comparison of Irish history to a fairy-tale romance. According to former president Mary McAleese, for instance, Irish history equals the development of Ireland's "own distinct national character" through an organic process of "maturing as a nation" in order to finally settle down through a deep "understanding of our place in the world" in the realms of prosperity (quoted in Titley 157). Ultimately, "Ireland had come of age" (Donovan/Murphy 22-23), as it "organically harnessed the possibilities of global capitalism" (Titley 157-158), while leaving all of its protectionist teenage angst behind. In the same vein, other commentators regarded the Celtic Tiger as the cathartic denouement to a dramatic story and the Irish past became a "moral tale with a happy ending" (O'Toole 11). Irish history followed "a Hollywood-style narrative arc. It was a tale of misery, struggle, transformation and triumph" (O'Toole 11); or as Paul Sweeney puts it: Irish history is a "sad tale" that fortunately "has a happy ending" (17), so that history no longer needs to be remembered.[76]

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76   The optimism of these years in neo-liberalism becomes most apparent in O'Donnell, ed. (2000).

Re-Connecting the Past? – Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland

In 2011, the then newly-elected *Taoiseach* Enda Kenny publicly declared that, after the sudden and unexpected demise of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland finds itself in a state of transition and renegotiation: "We stand on the brink of fundamental change in how we regard ourselves, in how we regard our economy and in how we regard our society" (quoted in Cooper 389). In *Transforming Ireland: Challenges, Critiques, Resources* (2009), Debbie Ging, Michael Cronin and Peadar Kirby voice a similar opinion on Ireland's Post-Celtic Tiger situation. They describe the phase immediately following Ireland's economic crash as a stage of cultural and economic instability in which only the need for change itself "may well be a certainty" ("Resources" 212).[77]

Within this general climate of transition, another radical renegotiation of Ireland's cultural memory can be observed. In the spirit of Richard Terdiman's remark that "any rapid alteration of the givens of the present places a society's connection with its history under pressure" (3), the sudden event of Ireland's economic collapse strongly discredited the formerly dominant belief that the Celtic Tiger society was the historical end of Ireland's national development. In the face of a sudden increase in unemployment, ghost estates and rising debt per head, remembering Irish history as a "success story" (Allen 24) became utterly unfit to explain how the present national crisis came into existence.[78] As a result, in the academic and popular literature of the Post-Celtic Tiger years, the neo-liberal interpretation of Ireland's historical development (cf. Mac Sharry/White) was quickly replaced by a new and more critical version of the past.

This new version, however, was not so new after all: Ireland's remembrance policy in the Post-Celtic Tiger era can be described as a renaissance of nationalist interpretative schemes, including traditional memory motives like suffering and endurance.[79] In

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77   A more detailed account of the Post-Celtic Tiger insecurity can be found in Ross (2009) or Keohane/Kuhling (2014).

78   Or, as Kerrigan puts it, after the crash "the official cover story is in shreds" (xi).

79   By embedding Ireland's Post-Celtic Tiger situation in a historical narrative of oppression and colonialisation, Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland shows clear parallels to Ireland in the early twentieth century and its struggle against the English 'masters'. Thus, it is not surprising to see that in the Post-Celtic Tiger phase, several representatives of Ireland's political and cultural elite repeatedly referred (and still refer) to Ireland's earlier struggle for independence as a platform for their present-day political agenda. Next to a series of other Irish politicians, Enda Kenny, for instance, compares himself to one of the leaders of the Easter Rising 1916, Michael Collins:

In recent times, I have been thinking a lot about Michael Collins [...] [W]ith the destiny of a nation on his shoulders [...] again, as Collins did, [we] hav[e] to build, to rebuild, our economy and restructure our institutions [...]. In keeping with Collins's ambition, mental force and high ideals [...] the government is approaching our task of national recovery with the passion and zeal that Collins would have applied (quoted in Kerrigan 127-128).

Kenny implies that Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland faces similar problems to the Ireland of 1916: both Irelands are in a phase of transition, as they both, in their particular historical context, need to negotiate which direction to take towards the future. Given these

a time when, as Kerrigan argues, "the Great Shame [i.e. the fall of the Celtic Tiger] was followed by a perceptible rise in indignant nationalistic feeling" (126), academic and popular discussions returned to the nationalist narrative of Ireland's oppression by a foreign 'invader'. From this point of view, Ireland's globalisation over the course of the last few decades was interpreted as a renewed (and subtler) process of cultural and economic colonialisation that had successively replaced the former British colonial rule (cf. Lloyd 77). This interpretation of recent Irish history thus re-installed a pre-revisionist point of view and embedded the Celtic Tiger era into the 'master-narrative' of Irish history as a continuous series of hardships and oppression.

Examples of this Post-Celtic Tiger interpretation of history are manifold. Thus, in contrast to the earlier 'end of history' readings, the public sphere was dominated by arguments as expressed by G. Honor Fagan: in moving towards a neo-liberal Celtic Tiger society, Ireland has "exchang[ed] self-reliance for dependency in a wilful shift away from the independence movement ethos" (115). Ireland's globalisation is interpreted as a negative process of eagerly adapting to the needs dictated by the European and American markets, without noticing the oppressive forces at work. Thus, Fagan points out that "from an Irish 'grass roots' perspective, globalisation may not look as rosy as it does to the international financial sector and their political supporters in Ireland" (110). Other critics would focus more on forms of cultural oppression and claim that the loss of an Irish national culture is the result of Ireland being subtly forced to adapt to global and transcultural ideals. In Post-Celtic Tiger criticism, therefore, "[a] recurrent trope is how various aspects of Irish cultural life have been hijacked" by European and American cultural values. This trope is mainly expressed in the recurring argument "that culture is becoming increasingly commercialised" (Ging/Cronin/Kirby, "Challenges" 8). As a result, so the argument goes, Ireland has lost all unique characteristics of its national culture and "at the beginning of the twenty-first century, what is different is that Ireland in conventional economic and social terms, is no longer so different" (Ging/Cronin/Kirby, "Challenges" 3); Ireland had adapted so much to the commercial ideals of a globalised, capitalist nation, that it "was in danger of making itself look like every place else in the world" (Böss/Maher 14).

Looking at these changes through the lens of Ireland's cultural memory practices, it becomes apparent that within only a few years, the image of the national past has radically changed again. Whereas before the past was looked down upon in favour of a neo-liberal present-day Ireland, now the past was re-instated as a frame of reference in favour of looking down upon neo-liberalism; Irish cultural memory, therefore, moved from one extreme to the other and, to recontextualise Fintan O'Toole's words here, "in its rise and fall […] made Icarus look boringly stable" (10). As one version of

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similarities, Kenny uses Collins' political course (or at least his version of Collins' course) as a useful matrix for his own political actions: he urges Irish people, "as Collins did", "to bring new life, new clarity, new shared purpose to Irish life, to Irish politics, and to the Irish future" (quoted in Cooper 389).

the past replaces and utterly discredits the one before, the question arises how the past can be approached amidst all these differing approaches; and although the Post-Celtic Tiger narrative might be a return to an older nationalist narrative, as a way of coping with the crisis through a familiar narrative framework (cf. Cohen vix), this return might not be able to offer the same stability that the 'original' nationalist conviction offered for a long time, since this conviction itself has already been deconstructed. As such, it is not too surprising to see that a Post-Celtic Tiger nationalist view on history is once again debunked by other ways of remembering the past, for example when in the context of the Brexit debate, the Irish Republic might rewrite some of the anti-European tendencies of the post-collapse remembrance culture.

4.2 Liminal Remembrance and the Irish 'Memory Crisis'

Although the three ruptures have been described individually above, they must not be understood as separate occurrences, but as concrete manifestations of a broader change in Irish commemorative culture at the turn of the century. More precisely, as indicated before, they can be perceived as concrete expressions of an Irish 'memory crisis'. Since many liminal poems can be read as responses to this memory crisis, it is important to examine this idea in more detail before linking it to contemporary Irish poetry.

The idea of a memory crisis refers to an innate sense of losing connection to the past, due to constant and often conflictual transformations of existing cultural memory practices. As such, a memory crisis is a genuinely liminal phenomenon, though in a negative sense of the word. As pointed out in Section 3.5, liminality is not only a state of openness, creativity and innovation, but can also be a "*disabling* condition" (Heidemann 10; emphasis in original). Existing in a state in which fixed structures and boundaries are softened might result in the overwhelming feeling that anything stable is lost, leaving no solid ground to act upon. The same counts for the Irish memory crisis: as multiple conflicting possibilities of reading Irish history co-exist, Ireland's commemorative culture has lost the solid ground upon which to remember the past. Where one rupture follows the next, and one version of the past deconstructs the other, the belief of a fixed pathway to the past no longer exists and the notion of a singular history (with a capital H) is replaced by a multitude of histories (with a lower case h) that constantly re-arrange the ways of how the national past is seen.

Ultimately, this constant re-interpretation of the past, resulting from the three ruptures described above, leads to what Richard Terdiman calls a "cultural disquiet" (viii), a feeling of disorientation and alienation triggered by the growing awareness that if the past is always a matter of interpretation, then the 'actual' past can never be retrieved and "beg[ins] to look like a foreign country" (Terdiman 5). Each interpretation of the past is only relatively meaningful in a chain of other possible interpretations, so that the past retreats behind a barrier of co-existing representations that cannot be

crossed. As such, it becomes the longed-for, yet unconquerable territory that escapes with each attempt at preserving it in recollections (cf. Lowenthal xvii).

In the end, the Irish memory crisis describes a state of uncertainty and insecurity (cf. Beck), defined by "the fear of some imminent traumatic loss" (Huyssen 5), as the question of how to relate to the past at all is continuously lingering on. As the insurmountable gap between the past and the present becomes more obvious with each rupture, Ireland is in danger of losing any fixed points of reference on how to read the past 'correctly' and, thus, loses "the clues from which to construct a present self" (Boland 16). When Keohane and Kuhling, therefore, claim that "the experience of living in contemporary Ireland is that of living in an in-between world, in between cultures and identities" (*Collision Culture* 6), one might add the experience of living in between different memory versions, which displays "a culture seeking to hold on to itself" (Terdiman 16).

It is this very insecurity and in-between status of cultural memory that is reflected in the poetry of liminal remembrance. More specifically, depending on the poem, liminal remembrance can be interpreted in two ways: in a negative way, in some poems liminal remembrance becomes the very embodiment of an insecure relationship to the past that lacks any stable foundation to build upon (i.e. liminal remembrance as an *expression of* the memory crisis). In a positive way, other poems counter the memory crisis by using liminal remembrance as an alternative form of recollecting national history that seeks to overcome the prevailing sense of commemorative insecurity in contemporary Ireland (i.e. liminal remembrance as a *reaction against* the memory crisis).

Liminal Remembrance as an Expression of the Memory Crisis

Some poems of liminal remembrance, it can be argued, can be interpreted as *concrete poetic expressions* of the Irish memory crisis, as they make the complex commemorative in-between and the negative, unsettling effect of this liminal state visible on the poetic stage. For that purpose, the poems discussed in this study adopt two strategies which, at times, overlap: some poems show Ireland's liminal state via an allegorical perspective on Irish commemorative culture, while other poems use traumatic events that cannot be incorporated in the speaker's memory as a way of depicting the uncertainty on the level of Ireland's cultural memory.

Regarding the first strategy, one might revisit Sullivan's "Townland" (cf. Section 3.2). As pointed out above, this poem undermines the *dinnshenchas* belief in the Irish landscape as a stable archive for the past. In that way, one might argue, it delivers an allegorical foundation, from which the changing paradigms in Ireland's commemorative practices are observed. Set in the urban environment of a mining town (as a perversion of and a distance from the natural idyll in traditional *dinnshenchas* poems), "Townland" shows that the Irish landscape does no longer harbour a single and stable truth but rather various ghostly sights and sounds of the past that disappear as soon as the speaker attempts to capture them. In this urban setting, references to the

past are unstable and liminality reveals its negative side: the speaker becomes the prototypical participant in the current Irish commemoration culture, who finds herself unable to relate to the past, as she can no longer 'read' the country but is caught in between multiple impressions with nothing to hold on to and no clear direction to pursue. The country has become a foreign country and its very liminality signals a sense of stagnation. As the ending of the poem and the powerful impact of the final full stop shows, in this setting, no attempt of closely listening to the past can achieve any productive outcome. Instead, the speaker is 'stranded' in this place, as she aimlessly wanders around town in chase of a faint idea of history, yet without a distinct reply or 'guiding voices' to rely upon.

Other examples of an allegorical perspective on Ireland's in-between commemorative culture can be found in poems using the *past as waste* metaphor. Thus, in Shaughnessy's "Dogged" (cf. Section 3.5), for instance, the speaker's uneasy relationship with a mangy dog becomes the very emblem of Ireland's uneasy relationship with the past in the moment of a memory crisis. In the poem, the "mangy dog" represents the past itself which, in Ireland, has been (mis)used, re-arranged or simply, like a dog, 'sent away'. It has been caught in so many different interpretative contexts that it now appears as "injured", with "sores" all over. In this deplorable state of constantly being re-interpreted, the past cannot function as a guideline for the present (and future) anymore. Quite on the contrary, it becomes an obstacle that the speaker "trips over" every time she tries to leave the house. The dog, like the past in Irish cultural memory, appears as a liminal entity that is both familiar and unfamiliar to the speaker, leaving her in a state of indecision about whether to keep it or get rid of it. As neither option is ultimately practicable, the speaker is caught in a stagnant routine of moving from and returning to the house in a repetitive cycle of pondering on how to treat the dog 'correctly'. Thus, like the two acts in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which do not represent single days in the lives of the characters but rather a general state of being that is constantly repeated, the three stanzas in "Dogged" describe a scenario in which liminal indecision has become the default mode of being. Since the last word of the poem is "disease", there is no sign on the horizon that this 'sick' state of liminal stagnation will be overcome soon towards any post-liminal certainty. Like "Townland", "Dogged" thus represents a bleak allegorical vision of Ireland's relationship to its own past, which is depicted as cyclical and dysfunctional.

In other poems, the negative side of Ireland's liminal remembrance culture is expressed in a speaker's inability to properly incorporate traumatic national events into his/her personal memory frame. As pointed out in Section 3.2, traumatic events occupy a liminal position in memory since they are too painful to be remembered and too terrible to be forgotten. As such, traumatic events, as Mieke Bal points out, become "assailing spectres" that cannot be "integrat[ed] narratively" into already existing plots of the past (xi) and that thus defy being 'captured' in any stable frame of reference. It can be argued that this liminal position of traumatic experiences in a speaker's memory can be interpreted as a microscopic reflection of the liminal and indistinct position that national events more generally hold in Ireland's commemora-

tive culture. Here as well, the individual historical event cannot be incorporated in a single historical 'plot' but constantly meanders in between different interpretations. This specific use of trauma can, for example, be seen in Groarke's "To Smithereens", which features a speaker who cannot integrate the traumatic event of Lord Mountbatten's assassination into his personal memory frame. For this speaker, no fixed memory structures are available which might serve as a meaningful 'scaffold' for retrospectively coping with the experience. Rather, as the speaker realises right at the beginning of the poem, his memory, like Ireland's national memory, is a very fluid and dynamic construct: it resembles the sea, where things are constantly in motion and where one has to steer against different waves and currents (as another allegorical reference to the changing narratives in Irish commemoration), only to end up somewhere one was not expecting to be. In this environment, traumatic elements of the past indeed become spectres suddenly appearing from and disappearing into the depth of an ever-changing memory sea, in which no stable 'nets' to capture these monstrous things exist. Instead, the speaker, as shown above, is caught between confronting the experience to make sense of the menacing event, by describing his personal observations of the moment, and escaping from it into a different memory situation (cf. Section 3.2).

Similarly, in Perry's "Of the gas stove and the glimmerman", the speaker depicts the terrifying sounds of exploding "bombs that still wake us" in between the processes of remembering and forgetting. He, too, lacks the means to integrate these elements into memory (cf. Section 3.3). Thus, in the family memory frame, such painful memory items, including any memory related to the absent grandfather, cannot be coped with in any other way than by repressing them to a mnemonic "silence". Yet, as the speaker realises during his investigation into the familial past, repression does not grant control over the traumatic: like the sea metaphor used in "To Smithereens", the speaker in "Of the gas stove and the glimmerman" recognises the fluid nature of traumatic elements in memory that, like fish, are hard to catch. Although they are meant to remain confined, they are "escaping only occasionally/ like the startled bass from a torn fishing net". Traumatic elements, as the "torn fishing net" implies, become a disruptive force of its own that tears apart any attempt at tying it to a single place. Rather, the experience of a national trauma floats freely in memory to infiltrate even the more intimate everyday horizon and to 'explosively' appear on the surface of the speaker's memory. As pointed out in detail in the analysis above, the speaker's family memory becomes a space of conflict and friction that mirrors the national realm of conflict. Only in this state can trauma exist: regarding the idea of an 'explosion', the fragmentary nature of family memory in this poem is not merely a signifier for the complex structure of familial remembrance (see above) but becomes a sign for the general loss of coherence and stability. Within the plethora of fragments, the traumatic cannot be fixed in any way, as it turns into a disturbing force itself that counters any move towards a cohesive account of the past in which this disruptive element might make sense.

Liminal Remembrance as a Reaction Against the Memory Crisis

In her monograph *Pursue the Illusion: Problems of Public Poetry in America* (2010), Astrid Franke ascribes a particular role to poetry in public discourse: poetry offers opportunities "to think the public anew and to devise ways in which common concerns could be expressed" (5). Poetry in the public sphere, in other words, might serve as an innovative and reformative tool that provides fresh perspectives on a society and its current issues. This idea can also be applied to the poetry of liminal remembrance in Ireland's contemporary poetic landscape. Some poems dealing with national history in a liminal fashion can be regarded as tools to think Ireland's relationship to the past anew and, in this context, to challenge the public concern of a "cultural disquiet". These texts provide an alternative access to Irish history that introduces a new way of connecting to the nation's past in a time when fixed points of reference apparently no longer exist and the past has become a 'foreign country'. By doing so, the poems re-establish and renovate a more stable foundation for a relationship to the past amidst the insecurities of a memory crisis.

How do poems of liminal remembrance accomplish this task? To begin on the most general level, they establish an alternative access by radically altering the *memory angle* on Irish history: they move from a mode of memory concerned with narrative cohesion, as found in the public sphere, to a more selective approach of recollection. As the predominance of the private album over the public lexicon in liminal reconstructions already insinuates, these poems do not simply reproduce existing public narratives of Irish history, in which the meaning of an individual national event/context depends on its overall 'emplotment' in relation to other events. Quite on the contrary, poems of liminal remembrance defy the public sphere's over-saturation with memory narratives by taking individual events out of their narrative embedment, in order to look at them in isolation. Seen from the poems' new angle, the single national event is no longer merely perceived as one semantic element interpreted in a larger plot but is remembered as what it was in the first place: a concrete physical and emotional *experience*, that a (private) individual made in a particular time and space in the past.

With this shift from public narratives to personal experiences, these poems counter the commemorative insecurity persisting in contemporary Irish cultural memory: if one cannot trust the contradicting narratives of Irish national history anymore, then – in the spirit of Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* – one needs to find new reference points ("Kristallisationspunkte") from which a more stable relationship to the past can be nurtured (François 9). The poems at hand do so by 'retreating' from the public commemoration practices to the realm of the personal everyday horizon and its concrete sensory, episodic data as the last 'safe haven' to rely upon. Thus, in an otherwise unstable context of a memory crisis, the concrete experiences of Irish national history become 'memory anchors' through which a connection to the past can still be established and maintained. In the most general sense, it could be said that the memory shift taking place in liminal remembrance is a shift from the contested

field of cultural memory to communicative memory (cf. Section 2.3) as it captures the individual event at its experiential foundation, while circumventing the multiplicity of interpretations in public representations.

However, this turn towards communicative memory and selective personal experiences does not mean that a memory community and a collective commemorative practice no longer exist, since now everyone recollects the national past from his/her limited private perspective. The 'personal retreat' from narratives of the public sphere, in other words, is not to be mistaken for a simple escapist move into a pluralism of individual voices that does not allow a collective dimension of remembrance anymore. Rather, one interesting feature of the poems' alternative access to the past is that in the way the 'memory anchors' (i.e. concrete past experiences serving as new gateways for remembering Irish history) are presented, they combine an individual with a collective dimension. The 'memory anchors' occurring in poems of liminal remembrance are presented as liminal spaces themselves which encode the specific and the abstract alike: it is never exclusively a marker of a speaker's personalised access to the past (i.e. a component of a speaker's personal album) but it also constantly transcends the individual's sphere toward the realm of the symbolic that addresses a more abstract collective.

This hybridisation of the individual and the collective requires some clarifications. First of all, one needs to look at the concrete textual shape in which 'memory anchors' usually occur. In this context, the interaction between remembering and forgetting plays an important role: as shown above, in several poems liminal references to national history are often textually minimised to individual phrases or even words. More concretely, these minimal references manifest in a speaker's brief mentioning of a single auditive or visual impression/image. Thus, to merely name a few examples, the realm of the authentic memory type is filled with photographic and filmic motives: in French's "Moss", the reference to the First World War is concentrated in the image of injured limbs covered in moss. In Paul Perry's "Of the gas stove and the glimmerman" the Troubles are minimally implied in the concrete sound of exploding bombs perceived by the speaker, and in McGovern's "The Jeep" the Second World War context is implied in the image of the speaker's uncle in battle-kit.

It is in this minimal textual appearance that a 'memory anchor' combines elements of an individual and a collective connection to the national past. In its minimalism, it represents both a concrete single experience made by a concrete speaker in a concrete spatio-temporal setting *and* a representative experience that is not bound to a specific setting but serves as a collective emblem and signpost standing for a certain era of Irish history in general. This interaction, for example, can be seen in the image of the uncle in battle-kit under a William of Orange frieze in McGovern's "The Jeep": this image certainly refers to the speaker's actual uncle and his personal experience, as shared in the family. For the speaker, the uncle's concrete experience becomes his personal 'gateway' into the familial past, since, as shown in the poem's family collage overall, the speaker can closely identify with the relative's experience, to the ex-

tent of stepping into his uncle's shoes and adopting the relative's experiences in the era of the Second World War as his own. Yet, the image of the uncle attending mass in battle-kit also obtains a more general dimension. Looking at this one memory fragment in isolation, in the speaker's description, the uncle interestingly does not show any personal traits or features that clearly mark him as an individualised character. Rather, he remains a nondescript 'contour' that leaves space for interpretation. In that regard, the figure of the uncle is not just a concrete family member but also becomes a projection screen, inviting the readers, like the speaker, to fill the position and identify with the experience too. Described in this 'non-personal' manner, therefore, the poem initiates a participatory practice of sharing an experience and thus generates the sense of a memory collective based on a 'shared album'. The concrete experience of the uncle simultaneously turns into the general experience of the everyday individual that, in connection to the battle-kit and the frieze, as two components of this era's public iconography, serves as the emblem and 'blueprint' for relating to and remembering the Second World War scenario.

Another example can be found in the image of the moss-covered limbs of an injured soldier in French's "Moss". Here as well, it appears that the less an impression is contextualised by a speaker in a specific spatio-temporal setting of the past, the more a concrete experience made by a concrete individual can transform to a *hypothetical* collective experience without any clear space-time coordinates. Thus, while on the one hand, the speaker captures his personal perception of the limb in detail by comparing it to the moss-covered branches of trees, he, on the other hand, leaves the exact time and space of when and where this experience was made indistinct. Thus, he just roughly contextualises the impression sometime in "*1917*" while sketching the night sisters dressing the limb, and the spatial environment, in a most schematic, non-specific manner. In this interaction between a close capturing of the image and a vague remembrance of the context, the visual memory anchor of the limb becomes both an expression of the speaker's concrete experience in a past moment and an image operating in the realm of the symbolic. In this realm, the perception of the injured limb is taken out of its concrete setting to become a general sign that describes the experience of a lot of soldiers in many scenarios of the First World War. As such, it is a shared emblem representing a fragmentary glimpse at the World War past on an experiential foundation.

Many poems discussed in this study function in a similar manner, as they also provide memory anchors that connect the individual and the collective as well as the specific and the abstract. In that way, the contemporary Irish poetry landscape is saturated with a mosaic of versatile sights and sounds experienced in different eras of Irish history that engages the public readership in rediscovering a connection to the past on a personal and experiential level. Amidst the dilemma of public narratives, these images and impressions become the new anchors and the much needed "Kristallisationspunkte" to still hold on to the past in a moment of crisis. Where the official memorials and narratives no longer work, 'memory anchors' supply the public sphere with a series of unofficial 'memorials', located on the micro-level of everyday

life. Thus, like the ragpickers in the 'waste poems' above, who revalue the past by looking at the individual pieces that remain, some poems of liminal remembrance look at the fragments of individual experiences as a valuable foundation to reinvigorate a link to the past. As such, some poems of liminal remembrance generally contribute to reconceptualising the understanding of national history in the public sphere, as they turn Ireland's past into a more personal issue, where remembrance is a matter of concrete experiences and not one of official narratives.