

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary

The present study was initially motivated by a simple question: how do contemporary Irish poems, written since the Celtic Tiger, represent Irish national history? This question resulted from an equally simple observation that in contemporary Irish poetry studies, the subject matter of national history has been largely neglected, especially when it comes to analysing the work of a new generation of Irish poets, who started publishing their first poetry collections in the midst of Ireland's radical cultural and social transformation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Thus, let alone the fact that many 'new' Irish poets, such as Leanne O'Sullivan, Iggy McGovern or Paula Cunningham have hardly been analysed so far, questions of how these writers specifically negotiate Ireland's national history have yet to be answered.

The study at hand initiates a first attempt to close this research gap in contemporary Irish poetry studies and, in this context, to broaden the analytical spectrum of the existing Irish poetry canon. More specifically, by closely analysing selected poems written by a variety of 'new' and more established contemporary Irish poets since 2000, the study argued that in recent poetic works, one form of remembering Irish national history has become most prevalent: the form of 'liminal remembrance'. It was claimed that many Irish poems dealing with Ireland's past since the Celtic Tiger make use of a poetic memory practice defined by the simultaneity of and the interplay between textual processes of remembering and forgetting, which ultimately results in the impression of national history being both part and not part of a speaker's memory. As such, the form of liminal remembrance describes a specific perspective on the national past in contemporary Irish poetry that fundamentally challenges and scrutinises the boundaries between remembrance and oblivion. As equally being remembered *and* being forgotten, national history in liminal remembrance is depicted as a memory item that eludes any clear categorisation of an either/or dichotomy but, instead, is firmly harboured in an indistinct state of the 'betwixt and between': in the poems addressed in this study – which all access the past through a personal memory perspective in one form or another – speakers place national concerns of the past on the very threshold of their memories, where questions of inclusion and exclusion intersect, and national history is both partaking in memory, as a relevant and/or challenging element, and is kept at a distance as an item that is often minimised, suppressed and blurred.

To support and underline this argument of liminal remembrance, and to accurately describe the individual facets of this phenomenon, four specific types of poetic memory were introduced. These four types are *indirect memory*, in which the speaker reconstructs the past only in the form of public representations of a past national event/context, *family memory*, in which the national past appears in personal stories being shared in the familial sphere, *authentic memory*, in which the speaker estab-

lishes a camera-like, direct access to a moment in the past, as if reliving it first-hand, and a *metaphorical access* to the past that does not deal with concrete memories by individual speakers but conceptualises history through the liminal concept of waste.

Based on this distinction between four types of liminal remembrance, the study argued that each type uses different textual strategies and memory procedures, ultimately resulting in different ways of achieving a liminal state of national history. Thus, to merely summarise the most basic tendencies of each type, in *indirect memory* (cf. Section 3.2), the liminal positioning of national history is directly linked to this type's representational approach to the past. Poems of this kind use concrete public representations of Ireland's history as a foundation for negotiating processes of remembering and forgetting. They position national history in between becoming part of a speaker's private sphere and being an 'alien' element of the more distant cultural horizon of the past, which a speaker cannot (or does not want to) properly incorporate in his/her private memory. The textual analyses above have shown that the degree to which a speaker cannot relate to the national past depends on the *form of public representation* through which a national event entered a speaker's private life: while national events represented in news reports still claim a sense of immediacy in the speaker's everyday life, and therefore still 'haunt' him/her (e.g. Groarke's "To Smithereens"), national events that appear in the form of official memorials, are often forgotten simply because they no longer affect a speaker's life but become mere signs in a culture of surfaces (e.g. French's "Commute").

In *family memory* (cf. Section 3.3), liminal remembrance is the result of national history being contemplated in the complex setting of the familial sphere. This setting is defined by co-existing personal perspectives, a constant interaction between different temporal levels and an amalgamation of indirect and direct modes of accessing the past. As shown in the analyses in Section 3.3, the complexity of family memory becomes visible in two forms: first, some poems focus on the notion of memory transfers from one family member to another, and, second, other poems of this type display family memory as a fragmentary, poly-phonic and multitemporal memory collage, consisting of various personal memory episodes shared in the family. Both forms have their specific means of establishing a liminal recollection of national history. In poems depicting memory transfers, liminal remembrance results from the sheer ambivalence inherent to the transfer itself: as the analyses of Cunningham's "The Hyacinth under the Stairs" and French's "The Scar" have made clear, in the attempt to adopt another relative's past experiences, a speaker is inextricably caught between a 'fantasy of witnessing' the relative's experiences in close detail and a critical distance from this close remembrance. It is in this interplay between proximity and distance to a relative's memory that aspects of national history are liminally reconstructed: as part of a relative's experience, the speaker remembers aspects of national history in detail, as if bringing them back to life as his/her own experiences, while simultaneously, in a reflective turn, he/she distances him/herself from this memory to ponder upon the question whether the depiction of the national context should be forgotten as inaccurate or as a mere figment of imagination.

In the framework of the family collage, the liminal perspective is established by remembering national history in an *en passant* manner. Thus, as the discussions of Perry's "Of the gas stove and the glimmerman" and McGovern's "The Jeep" have demonstrated, by merely presenting aspects of national history as one fragment among other, more private fragments, references to Irish national events exist at the very fringes of the speaker's family collage: the remembrance of national aspects is strictly limited to minimal textual implications, which, as soon as they are recalled, already evade the speaker's memory focus again, as he/she constantly shifts from fragment to fragment. Yet, in this very limited existence, national references still fulfil a role in the collage (e.g. they become a template to define a family's private history in Perry's poem). In other words, in these poems, the interaction between remembering and forgetting is expressed in an interaction between an explicit textual minimalism and an implicit semantic relevance.

In the third type, *authentic memory* (cf. Section 3.4), the interaction between remembering and forgetting is connected to this type's associations with photography/video-graphy, and the speaker's camera-like perspective on the past. Like a camera lens zooming in so closely to a particular detail of a scene that its surrounding is blurred, poems of this type focus on individual sense perceptions of a past moment to such an extent that the larger national implications of this scene become indistinct elements, situated at the very fringes of the speaker's memory picture. In this blurred position, they are still part of the speaker's memory, yet so indistinct as to be almost left forgotten. The interaction between hyper-focus and peripheral blur is realised in three ways in contemporary Irish poetry: first, some poems deal with *concrete photographs* and show how photographic representations can generate a 'direct access' to the past. As shown in the analysis of Meehan's "Manulla Junction", photographs engage the speaker in an intricate interplay between gaining a personal connection to the depicted scene/people and becoming painfully aware that photography creates distance as well, since the speaker becomes aware that the people depicted in a picture are irretrievably lost in the past (e.g. McBreen's "The Photograph of My Aunts"). Second, in *snapshot memories*, speakers imitate a photographic gaze on an individual moment of the past. Finally, *clip memories* imitate a video-graphic approach to a limited sequence of actions in the past. As shown above, both snapshot and clip memories use the strategy of a hyper-focus on details to achieve a blurry depiction of national history. In snapshot poems, history's liminal depiction is marked by the imagist credo of describing a visual entity in a most minimalistic manner (as shown in the description of the arms depot in Shaughnessy's "Shelter (May 1976)"), while in clip memories, it is the more holistic and multi-sensory focus on physical movement and actions in a particular spatio-temporal setting that limits the speaker's point of view on what can and cannot be remembered (as seen in the close description of a boy's accident with a gun in O'Sullivan's "Safe House").

In the last type, which uses a metaphorical approach to history, liminality becomes the *tertium comparationis* in the metaphor of *history as waste*. Thus, the liminal appearance of Ireland's past, as the target domain, is mirrored in the liminal properties

of waste as a source domain. In the poems discussed in Section 3.5, waste combines various forms of 'in-betweenness', depending on the focus individual poems apply to the concept of waste. More specifically, the chapter on waste poetry distinguished between poems dominantly focusing on the waster, the process of wasting or the wasted entity itself. In poems showing the speaker in the role of a waster, the past appears in the form of concrete wasted objects which occupy an 'uncanny' position in the speaker's life. It appears as both familiar and unfamiliar to him/her at the same time, and, as such, the old cannot simply be left behind but 'haunts' the speaker in the present (e.g. seen in the speaker's attempt to get rid of the old furniture in Higgins' "Clear Out"). In poems that focus on the process of wasting, waste more dominantly appears in between a process of devaluation and revaluation. Here the figure of the ragpicker plays a most important role and the past as waste appears as both discarded and renewed. This, for example, is the case in McAuliffe's "A Pyramid Scheme", where an old Cortina is debunked at the end of the road, only to transform into something new with a new purpose and value. Last but not least, in poems focusing on wasted entities, liminality gains a decidedly negative tone: waste correlates with a state of stagnation, with things neither moving forwards nor backwards. Thus, in poems with this specific focus, the past is shown as something that is here to stay, obstructing any form of constructive development in the present. This becomes apparent in Durcan's "Politics", where the unemployed, homeless history professor, as 'social trash', symbolically hinders customers in the supermarket from finishing their materialist Celtic Tiger routine. In short, in each form of waste poetry the past is not simply discarded and forgotten, but represents an in-between entity that, in the process of being 'thrown away', already contains the potential to newly return into memory.

The study furthermore showed that the interaction between remembering and forgetting in all four types is closely connected to an interaction between a speaker's personal experiences and his/her learned knowledge. Drawing on the theory and terminology by Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall, it was demonstrated that each type of poetic memory filters its liminal depictions through a personal memory perspective on the national past (cf. Section 3.1), in which components of the album (and its related concept of episodic memory) and the lexicon (and semantic memory) come together. The specific relationship between album and lexicon differs from type to type. The main result can best be summarised on a dynamic scale: on the one end of the scale, the relationship between album and lexicon is highly asymmetrical, with speakers almost exclusively focusing on experiences, while learned elements are being heavily marginalised as a result. This can, for example, be seen in authentic memory poems. On the other end of the scale, album and lexicon closely cooperate, to the point of becoming indistinguishable at times. This becomes apparent in family memory poems. In between these two poles, mixed forms of interaction can be found, as seen in indirect memory poems and poems that use a metaphorical approach. In these types, depending on the individual poem, the relationship between

album and lexicon at times tends towards separation, and at other times towards convergence.

The exact patterns of correlation between remembering/forgetting and album/lexicon are complex and depend on the individual text in which this correlation occurs. Here, only two examples of this correlation shall be revisited. First, in authentic memory poems, the notion of national history being pushed to the blurry periphery of a speaker's camera-like gaze on the past is directly related to the speaker's detailed focus on reconstructing the past via sensory perceptions, experienced in a specific moment in the past. In contrast, acquired knowledge about the past is hardly considered. In this type, the strong focus on experience thus appears to dictate the boundaries between remembering and forgetting, as hardly anything outside of the experiential realm is remembered. As such, in O'Sullivan's "Safe House", for example, only actions happening inside the house are remembered in detail. Anything that lies outside this intimate realm becomes blurred in the speaker's memory, including the national context of Ireland's struggle to become an independent nation, which is only hinted at in a vague and indistinct manner.

Second, in family memory, the close interaction between album and lexicon equally contributes to the interaction between processes of remembering and forgetting. More to the point, the speaker's negotiation of family stories in personal memory relies on his/her recognition that what he/she treated as concrete experiences turns out to be learned elements projected onto the past. Thus, in French's "The Scar", the speaker's close observation of his father on the battlefield turns out to be a projection of scenes learned from films. In this type, in other words, and in contrast to authentic memory, it is not the separation but the amalgamation of album and lexicon in the reconstruction of the past that plays into the simultaneity of both remembering and forgetting, as it combines a first-hand approach of experience with a more distant relationship to the past through a semantic access.

In total, these are the main results of the present study. Yet, a summary of the main findings would not be complete without a glimpse at the specific epochs that are liminally remembered in the individual types. In other words, next to this study's main focus on the *how* of liminal remembrance, it will conclude with some observations on *what* is liminally remembered in contemporary Irish poetry. In the analysed corpus, there does not appear to be any direct relationship between the different types of liminal remembrance and the specific epochs being remembered. Put differently, the remembrance of a specific event/context cannot be exclusively assigned to a specific type of poetic memory. Rather, leaving aside the metaphorical type that generally deals with history on a meta-level, for the remaining three types, it can be claimed that there are three epochs of Irish history that retain a predominant position in contemporary Irish poetry: first, the time of the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish War and Ireland's struggle for independence, then the two World Wars and, finally, the Northern Irish Conflict. As such, the poems discussed above largely limit their memory scope to Irish history of the twentieth century, while discussions of Ireland's earlier,

'colonial' past only appear sporadically. The predominant focus on this temporal frame, and these specific national contexts, might be explained as follows: the focus on the twentieth century appears to result from the fact that in all poems of liminal remembrance, as shown above, the past is reflected through the lens of a personal memory perspective. As indicated in Section 2.3, the temporal range of personal reflections of the past is naturally limited by the life span of the remembering individual. Thus, a speaker can only remember either more recent historical events directly experienced by him/her (e.g. the Troubles) or events/contexts that the speaker has indirectly witnessed through public representations or the experiences of the parent/grandparent generation (e.g. the World Wars, Struggle for Independence). Furthermore, the specific selection of national contexts being remembered can be related to the practice of liminal remembrance as well. The events displayed in the poems above must all be seen as moments of conflict and crisis. Like any other conflict, these moments are highly liminal in nature, as they define transitional phases in Irish history, in which established social and political structures are 'softened' and challenged, in order to be rearranged toward a post-liminal solution of the conflict. This observation allows to draw an interesting parallel between the form and the content of contemporary poetry on Irish history: liminal contexts are negotiated in a liminal memory space. The liminal form of commemoration, therefore, appears to mirror the liminality of the national events it addresses.

5.2 Considerations for Future Research

As shown in Chapter 4, regarding the contextual level of poetry, the phenomenon of recollecting national history in between remembrance and oblivion can be read in two ways: if one assumes that there is a correlation between a literary form and the cultural context in which it occurs, poems of liminal remembrance become both an *expression of* and a *reaction against* a cultural memory crisis. Liminal remembrance emerges in Irish poetry as a literary challenge which serves as a platform to make the unstable conditions of contemporary Irish commemoration visible, by showing the 'downside' and insecurities of a liminality, and, at the same time, suggesting an alternative access to the past. Liminal remembrance, therefore, like the concept at its very core, is neither the one nor the other but both a positive *and* a negative reply to an Irish culture seeking answers at a time when its relationship to the past is put into question.

In the end, however, as in any study focusing on a specific phenomenon, some questions must necessarily remain unanswered and need to be addressed in future research. More specifically, there are two important aspects that have not been discussed in this study and that require more attention: what is the relationship between the phenomenon of liminal remembrance and other forms of accessing the national past in contemporary poetry? Furthermore: How can one describe the historical development of liminal remembrance?

Regarding the first aspect, next to poems displaying the dominant phenomenon of liminal remembrance, there are other poems which do not make use of a liminal memory practice and/or the notion of the album and the lexicon. Thus, to merely name one example, there are a number of poems specifically recollecting the Celtic Tiger era (e.g. poems by Rita Ann Higgins or Dennis O'Driscoll), which do not keep the national sphere in a liminal vagueness but seemingly shift towards a more overt and direct perspective on history. They explicitly address problems on a societal level in a detailed manner, and not in the form of minimalised references. In this context, it would be interesting to see if this more overt way of remembering national history is restricted only to various poems about the Celtic Tiger, where it seems to be most visible, or if this kind of remembrance can also be found in poetic reflections on other eras of Ireland's past. If it is exclusively applied in poems about the Celtic Tiger, the follow-up question must be considered, of why this specific era needs a more explicit reconstruction than other contexts of Irish history. Only a proper analysis might reveal the scope of this more direct access to the past and the underlying understanding of history upon which these poems operate. Furthermore, in this way, the exact position of liminal remembrance in Irish poetry could be contoured in more detail, as it could be compared to and differentiated from other forms of poetic memory.

A second issue concerns the historical dimension of liminal remembrance. Although liminal remembrance only became a dominant mode of accessing the past in the context of Ireland's transformation during the Celtic Tiger years, one might additionally examine the poetic 'forebears' of this phenomenon. Thus, Patrick Kavanagh and Derek Mahon, for example, already experimented with the liminal properties of waste and writers such as Eavan Boland or Frank Ormsby applied more personal and restricted perspectives on the past, before the 'New Irish Poets' entered the scene. Where, then, can one find early 'precursors' of today's liminal remembrance and how can liminal remembrance be contextualised in the larger context of the Irish poetic tradition? Questions such as these make abundantly clear that much is still to be done on the 'liminal front' and that many 'New Irish Poets' require more attention overall. The present study is only the first attempt to initiate the transition of liminal remembrance from a phenomenon that lies in the dark of utter oblivion to a phenomenon that is illuminated by the light of academic recognition; in this process, many things have yet to be uncovered and, most certainly, many thresholds need to be passed.