Daniel Becker

On the Threshold of Memory:

National History and Liminal Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Poetry

Irish Studies in Europe

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Irish Studies in Europe is a series of peer-reviewed publications in Irish Studies.

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IRISH STUDIES IN EUROPE

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CONTENTS

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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).