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“The Debris of History”

On Waste and the Past in Irish Celtic Tiger Poetry

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Abstract

During the Celtic Tiger era of the late-1990s to early-2000s, Irish society radically altered its collective outlook on the national past. More to the point, Ireland transformed from a country ‘obsessed’ with relentlessly negotiating its own history to a country that was ready to disengage from the past altogether. In an affluent and successful Celtic Tiger society, so the dominant conviction of those years went, Ireland’s troubled past was no longer a vital point of reference but became the inferior ‘other’ against which the ‘golden age’ present was contoured. In this context, negatively connoted metaphors, such as history as a haunting ghost or a despotic master, played a pivotal role in contributing to the degradation of Irish history in the public sphere. The following paper analyses one of these metaphors, dominantly featured in Irish poetry of that time: the metaphor of the past as waste. This metaphor is particularly interesting since, by using waste as a concept of comparison, some poets writing during the Celtic Tiger era undermine and counteract the dominant trend of degrading Irish history. Thus, with the help of recent waste studies, the paper attempts to show that in Irish poetry of the time the past, in the form of concrete disposed entities, is not simply abandoned as useless and inferior but, in one way or another, is presented in a liminal position between devaluation and revaluation.

Keywords: Irish Poetry; Celtic Tiger; waste studies; liminality; Irish history

Résumé

Pendant l'époque du Tigre celtique, entre la fin des années 1990 et le début des années 2000, la société irlandaise changea de manière fondamentale son attitude collective face à l'histoire nationale. Plus précisément, l'Irlande se transforma d'un pays 'obsédé' par la négociation continuelle de sa propre histoire en un pays prêt à se désengager entièrement de son passé. D'après la conviction prédominante de l'époque du Tigre celtique, l'histoire troublée de l'Irlande n'était plus la première référence d'une société prospère. Par contre, le passé devenait 'l'autre' inférieur, en contraste avec l'âge d'or du présent. Dans ce contexte, des métaphores à connotation négative comme l'histoire représentée en tant que fantôme obsédant ou seigneur despotique jouaient un rôle crucial car elles contribuaient à la dévaluation de l'histoire de l'Irlande dans l'espace public. Cet article analyse l'une de ces métaphores qui apparaît souvent dans la poésie irlandaise de l'époque: la métaphore du passé représenté en tant que débris/rebut. Cette métaphore est particulièrement intéressante : par son emploi comparatif, différents poètes sapent et contrecarrent la tendance prédominante à dévaluer l'histoire de l'Irlande. À l'aide d'études récentes sur le rebut, l'article tente de montrer que dans la poésie du Tigre celtique, le passé, sous forme concrète de déchets éliminés, n'est pas simplement abandonné comme inutile et vil, mais que, d'une manière ou d'une autre, il se manifeste dans une position entre dévalorisation et revalorisation.

Mots-clés : la poésie du Tigre celtique, les études sur les débris, la liminarité, l'histoire de l'Irlande.

During the Celtic Tiger era—which roughly refers to the time between 1994/95, when the term was first coined by Kevin Gardinger to describe Ireland’s enormous economic growth, to the world financial crisis in 2007/08—Ireland, among other things,¹ radically altered its outlook on the national past. Thus, in contrast to Irish society in the pre-boom era, where “the appeal to history was ever present in public discourse”,² Celtic Tiger Ireland developed a new dominant perspective on the historical predecessors that orchestrated a collective break from history. In that sense, as Paedar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin claim, a recurring theme in popular and academic discussions of the time was the shared conviction that “a modern, vibrant economy and society [...] has successfully abandoned its reactionary, nationalist Catholic past” and other existing narratives on Ireland’s historical development.³ With the Celtic Tiger, it was argued, the Republic of Ireland had reached the pinnacle of its economic and cultural development.⁴ As such, a ‘new’ Ireland was established that, according to former president Mary McAleese had “matur[ed] as a nation”,⁵ and that, eventually, had ‘outgrown’ the grasp of its troubled past. In this context, as Orla O’Donovan claims, with this newly-gained confidence in the present, a “nauseating norm of ‘othering’ Ireland’s past”⁶ developed in the public sphere: in a strictly binary cultural coding, the past was dominantly conceptualized as an inferior, negative tableau against which the superior Celtic Tiger society in the present was contoured. Thus, Celtic Tiger Ireland cultivated a trend of allotting negative features to the past in a process in which the more the past was discredited, the brighter the present shone in contrast.

In this context, metaphors played a pivotal role: during the Celtic Tiger years, a surge of negatively connoted images permeated public characterisations of Irish history that were used to underline the past’s ‘despicable’ status on a figurative level. Hence, to merely name a few examples, Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin speak of the past as the scary “bogeyman” that terrorizes the present with the vision

1. Cf. Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling, *Collision Culture: Transformations in Everyday Life in Ireland*, Dublin, Liffey Press, 2004.

2. Kevin Whelan, “The Revisionist Debate in Ireland”, *boundary*, 2.31 (2004), p.179-205, here: p. 179.

3. Paedar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (eds.), “Introduction: The Reinvention of Ireland: A Critical Perspective”, *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society, and the Global Economy*, London, Pluto Press, 2002, p. 1-21, here: p. 7.

4. Cf. Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), *The End of Irish History? Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2003.

5. qtd. in Gavan Titley, “Celtic, Christian and Cosmopolitan: ‘Migrants’ and Mediation of Exceptional Globalisation”, Ging, Debbie, Michael Cronin and Paedar Kirby (eds.), *Transforming Ireland: Challenges Critiques, Resources*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2009, p. 157-173, here: p. 157.

6. Orla O’Donovan, “Pharmaceuticals, Progress and Psychiatric Contention in Early Twenty-First Century Ireland”, Debbie Ging, Michael Cronin and Paedar Kirby (eds.), *Transforming Ireland: Challenges, Critiques, Resources*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2009, p. 139-154, here: p. 139.

of an "eternal night",⁷ Paul Sweeney refers to the "sad tale"⁸ of Irish history that depressed people for too long and Scott Brewster mentions the recurring image of the past as the "dark ages".⁹ Furthermore, in a more implicit manner, Gene Kerrigan, for example, implies the image of the past as a despotic master that oppresses its subjects when he talks about "the shackles of the past that held us back".¹⁰

Without going into further details, the present paper will examine one of these metaphors, which could mostly be found in Irish poetic productions of the time: the metaphor of *the past as waste*. While the theme of waste is not new to Irish poetry and certainly not an 'invention' of the Celtic Tiger years—as writers such as Patrick Kavanagh¹¹ or Derek Mahon¹² show—in a variety of poems written during those years the concept obtains a specifically interesting connotation: as these poems link the concept of waste directly to concrete Celtic Tiger settings, it shall be claimed, waste as a point of comparison becomes a critical tool to *counte-ract* the dominant trend of discarding the past in an affluent Celtic Tiger society. More specifically, many poems that directly correlate waste and the Celtic Tiger society, allegorically depict the Celtic Tiger abandonment of the past in form of a speaker and/or other poetic persona discarding or confronting concrete entities that are no longer useful in his/her prototypical Celtic Tiger environment; the poems are set in what Eóin Flannery labels "clichéd set pieces"¹³ of Celtic Tiger Ireland, such as suburbs or shopping malls. Yet, in these settings, it will be shown, the process of discarding fails since the past as a 'wasted' entity is shown to constantly defy its own abandonment in one form or another. As such, in these poems, the concept of waste does not at all signify the past as inferior and useless, but, as can be shown with the help of recent waste studies, presents it in a liminal position between devaluation and revaluation.

The paper will proceed in two steps: first, the concept of waste shall be briefly defined in general, before examples of how this complex concept becomes a critical tool in Irish poems of the time shall be discussed. It goes without saying that, for spatial reasons, the paper's selection of texts must remain strictly limited. For that matter, although there are numerous poems that somehow deal with waste in a Celtic Tiger setting—see, for example, David Wheatley's descriptions of Celtic

7. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

8. Paul Sweeney, *The Celtic Tiger: Ireland's Economic Miracle Explained*, Dublin, Oak Tree Press, 1998, p. 16.

9. Scott Brewster, "Flying High? Culture, Criticism, Theory since 1990", Brewster Scott and Michael Parker (eds.), *Irish Literature since 1990: Diverse Voices*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2009, p. 16-39, here: p. 22.

10. Gene Kerrigan, *The Big Lie: Who Profits from Ireland's Austerity?*, London, Transworld Ireland, 2012, p. 3.

11. Cf. for example his poems "In these water-perished fields" or "Soft Ease"

12. Cf. Hugh Haughton's detailed discussion of Mahon's 'waste poetry' in "'The bright garbage on the incoming wave': Rubbish in the poetry of Derek Mahon", *Textual Practice* (16:2), 2002, p. 323-343.

13. Eóin Flannery, "'Ship of fools': the Celtic Tiger and poetry as social critique", Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien (eds.), *From Prosperity to Austerity: A Socio-Cultural Critique of the Celtic Tiger and its Aftermath*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2014, p. 203-217, here: p. 206.

Tiger Dublin in “Misery Hill”,¹⁴ Rita Ann Higgins’ portrayal of ‘toxic’ wastelands in “The Builder’s Mess”,¹⁵ Vona Groarke’s discussion of abandoned houses in “House Contents”,¹⁶ or Paula Meehan’s plea for the creative potential hidden in the discarded in “Molly Malone”¹⁷—only three poems shall be analysed in detail below: Iggy McGovern’s “The Skip” from his debut collection *The King of Suburbia* (2005), John McAuliffe’s “A Pyramid Scheme”, taken from *Next Door* (2007) and Paul Durcan’s “Politics” from his 1999 publication *Greetings To Our Friends in Brazil*. These three poems are neither chosen because they are deemed more important or aesthetically valuable than the ones listed above nor to insinuate that the three very different poets combined here belong to the same ‘school’ of Celtic Tiger poets—if such a thing even exists. Rather, quite on the contrary, the poems were chosen for the simple reason that, in the author’s opinion, these three texts most clearly represent the range of different modalities of how the waste metaphor is used in Irish poetry during the Celtic Tiger. In that sense, the selection of these poems is not a choice against other poems than rather a decision for opening discussions on similar poems by suggesting ways of how they might be categorized.

■ Waste as Cultural Practice

To properly understand the different facets of how the waste metaphor is used in Celtic Tiger poetry¹⁸, the ‘source domain’ of this implicit comparison requires specific attention. A closer look at the concept of waste is particularly important, since in the poems to be discussed waste is much more than the umbrella term for any discarded entity. Thus, although the poems display a wide range of car wrecks, indefinable rubble, or even social outcasts that obtain a waste quality, these devalued ‘things’ merely constitute one part of a larger waste picture. In that regard, it appears adequate to explain the use of waste in Celtic Tiger poetry with recent approaches to the concept that more broadly define waste as a *cultural practice*. Martin O’Brien, for example, generally understands waste “not just [as] the end of a useful life” but also as the socially constructed “transition to *negative value*”.¹⁹ Two important observations can be deduced from O’Brien’s short description: first, that the concept of

14. David Wheatley, “Misery Hill”, *Misery Hill*, Loughcrew, Gallery Books, 2000, p. 10–11.

15. Rita Ann Higgins, “The Builder’s Mess”, *Ireland is Changing Mother*, Highgreen, Bloodaxe Books, 2011, p. 29–30.

16. Vona Groarke, “House Contents”, *Flight and Earlier Poems*, Winston-Salem, Wake Forest UP, 2004, p. 34.

17. Paula Meehan, “Molly Malone”, *Dharmakaya*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2000, p. 25.

18. The term ‘Celtic Tiger Poetry’, as also seen in the title, is strictly used in a temporal sense in this article, i.e. it broadly refers to the wide range of poems written during the Celtic Tiger years, roughly between 1995 and 2007/08. However, it does *not* refer to a specific form/style of poetry that might have emerged in the context of the radical social, cultural and economic changes taking place during the Celtic Tiger.

19. Martin O’Brien, *A Crisis of Waste? Understanding the Rubbish Society*, London, Routledge, 2011, p. 1. (emphasis original)

waste moves beyond the level of concrete entities to incorporate the social process ("transition") in which an entity is classified as 'waste' and, secondly, that this process is inseparably linked to the concept of value.

Regarding the first aspect, the idea that the concept of waste is more than the reference to a specific entity is formulated in Susan Strasser's seminal study *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (1999). In her opinion, "[n]othing is inherently trash".²⁰ Waste is not a natural feature deeply encoded in the properties of an entity but needs to be permanently created in a dynamic social process of categorization: "[t]he categories of objects we use and throw out are fluid and socially defined, and objects move in and out of the classifications".²¹ Like O'Brien, Strasser's take on waste stresses the fact that a focus on the material level is not enough to grasp the concept adequately. Rather, waste is a dynamic concept that necessarily harbours a procedural component in form of a permanent process of actively categorizing elements as 'waste'. Similarly, Gay Hawkins underlines the process-nature of waste by including the active "conversion of objects into waste"²² in his definition of the concept. Here as well, material entities are not inherently waste but they "translate human interests"²³ in becoming waste. Hawkins particularly foregrounds the notion of an active subject that initiates the "conversion" by consciously choosing to distance itself from an entity: "[w]hen people classify something as waste they are deciding that they no longer want to be connected to it".²⁴ Consequently, the process of categorizing waste is the result of a subjective and affective response to the (material) environment.

Secondly, this process of dynamically signifying entities as waste cannot be separated from the concept of value. Thus, in recent waste studies, wasting is understood as one important side of a complex cultural practice of establishing a meaningful relationship with the world by ordering the material and social environment into valuable and non-valuable components. Commenting on this cultural function of waste, Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke point out that

[e]xpelling and discarding is more than a biological necessity—it is fundamental to the ordering of the self. Waste management [...] is deeply implicated in the practice of subjectivity. It is bound with a whole host of habits and practices through which we cultivate particular sensibilities and sensual relations with the world.²⁵

20. Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, New York, Owl Books, 1999, p. 3.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

22. Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2006, p. 75.

23. Michael Thompson quoted in Gay Hawkins, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

25. Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (eds.), "Introduction: Cultural Economies of Waste", *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, p. ix-xvii, here: p.xiii-xiv.

Equally, for Michael Thompson, “the social control of values attributed to objects functions via the waste category”.²⁶ Waste, as such, is the dynamic catalyst that makes a flexible distribution of value possible in the first place. In a society’s circulation of economic and symbolic values, waste is the regulatory ‘valve’ that allows entities to temporarily leave the system to be re-integrated in a new position later. Waste, therefore, as Miles Orvell classically states, is by no means just “a symptom of disorder, of things gone wrong”. Rather, waste is the “raw material” out of which entities can be “rescued, reclaimed, reworked, reintegrated”.²⁷ In the end, the fact that entities can dynamically shift between waste and value is not only a possibility but a cultural necessity to flexibly position oneself in an ever-changing environment.

This wider understanding of waste also applies to many ‘waste poems’ of the Celtic Tiger years. As such, in these poems, waste can be understood as a triadic constellation: it is a constant interaction between (1) an individual/ a group that defines what waste is (*waster*), (2) the (social) process of devaluation (*wasting*), and (3) the concrete entity that has been devalued in this process (*wasted*). These three components (*waster*, *wasting*, *wasted*) occur in every poem presented in this paper. Yet, the poems differ in the specific focus they apply on this constellation. Thus, there are (1) poems that focus on the figure of the Celtic Tiger waster and the subsequent process of wasting. (2) Poems that focus on a process of revaluation after the wasting has occurred and (3) poems that predominantly focus on the devalued entity itself. As mentioned before, the three poems discussed below shall serve as examples for each of the three foci and the ways they place the past in a liminal position.

■ Waste in Celtic Tiger Poetry

Focus on Waster and Wasting: “The Skip” (Iggy McGovern)

Concerning poems that focus on the figure of the Celtic Tiger waster and the process of wasting, Iggy McGovern’s “The Skip” is a good example to examine. The sonnet starts ‘in medias res’ with a lyrical *I*, shown in the process of discarding “bits and bobs” into a skip in a suburban street:

Spring-feverish, I cheerfully dispatch
my clutter, bits and bobs into the skip

26. Michael Thompson. *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, London, Pluto Press, 1979, p. 10.

27. Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 1989, p. 287.

and, from the bedroom window, keep a watch
on neighbours filing past the funeral ship.²⁸

In the poem, the suburban environment functions as a microcosm of Celtic Tiger society that, like the Irish community of that time, appears utterly disconnected from the past. In that context, the Celtic Tiger's optimism of having 'outgrown' the past is echoed in the figure of the waster finding himself in a "spring-feverish" mood to "cheerfully" get rid of last year's burden. The image of new cycle of seasons, starting with a hopeful spring, hints at the concept of a 'new' Ireland where, in a Yeatsian spirit of a cyclical history, the "clutter" of the 'old' Ireland is consumed in the fire of a now completed cycle. As implied in the metaphor of the "funeral ship", anything related to last year is in the process of leaving suburbia, as the ship is about to enter a finite journey, never to return to the Celtic Tiger 'haven'.

Soon, the speaker's individual discarding transforms into more collective practice of 'cleansing' the suburban environment. Thus, after watching the "neighbours filing past the funeral ship", the speaker describes how these neighbours participate in the process of wasting as well:

and later in the evening they will bring
additional detritus of their own
in royal cheek or gentle reasoning:
tomorrow's trip should not be made alone.²⁹

Like at a "funeral", this collective discarding of the "detritus" follows strict rules of conduct. Seeing that the speaker has disposed the useless, the neighbours are obliged to keep up with suburban conformity. Here, wasting becomes a necessity for social acceptance: hanging on to the old is deemed taboo, much like lingering on the past in the Celtic Tiger present is considered as a form of 'treason' against the 'new' Ireland.³⁰ In that regard, while they must participate in getting rid of the old, they are not meant to get too close to what is wasted. Their contribution to the collective cleansing can only be done "later in the evening", presumably under the cover of darkness and under less surveillance by the neighbours. Nonetheless, even in this situation, their actions need to be justified under the speaker's watch: they discard it "in royal cheek or gentle reasoning".

Yet, most important in the present context, this conventionalised process of wasting described in the octave is countered in the sestet with the arrival of a rag-picker figure:

28. Iggy McGovern, "The Skip", *The King of Suburbia*, Dublin, Dedalus, 2004, p. 1, lines 1-4.

29. *Ibid.*, lines 5-8

30. Cf. Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling, *Collision Culture: Transformations in Everyday Life in Ireland*, Dublin, Liffey Press, 2005, p. 153.

The suburb waits for one last visitor
to creep around the corner of the past.
what buried chalice is he looking for,
grave robber turning archaeologist?³¹

Walter Benjamin famously describes the ragpicker as a modern revolutionary who, existing on the thresholds of society, is constantly “shaking the foundations of this society”.³² As such, he/she becomes a social “*provocateur*”³³ who can move freely (“[f]or him alone, all is open”³⁴) and who can change established social structures from the outside. The ragpicker in “The Skip” displays this revolutionary mentality too: he is an outside figure, a mere “visitor” that enters the speaker’s suburban realm. In this position, he is freed from answering to the conventions of the suburban neighbourhood and, as such, he is at liberty to not comply to the collective disposal of the past. Rather, he does the impossible and counteracts the process of wasting by looking “around the corner of the past”. As such, the ragpicker becomes a counter-figure against the Celtic Tiger waster. By appearing in the street at night, he functions as the physical reminder of waste’s (and the past’s) liminal status: it has already been discarded by the suburban community, yet it is not completely gone and still obtains a certain presence nonetheless. Like many speakers in Seamus Heaney’s ‘bog poems’, the ragpicker in “The Skip” takes up the role of an “archaeologist” who recovers valuable elements from the past, as he is climbing into the skip under the observing gaze of the speaker. Suddenly, in the ragpicker’s alternative access to what is wasted, the “clutter, bits and bobs” that were “cheerfully” disposed of at the beginning, now transform into the “buried chalice” (an indirect reference to the more traditional Catholic past) to “brag about”.³⁵ Waste and value coexist, as the skip is both the funeral ship meant to be sent out for good, and the ancient grave that the “grave robber” discovers.

In the end, like the ragpicker “creeping around”, waste becomes an uncanny existence between the familiar and the unfamiliar. As such, John Scanlan points out, it turns into “the unwelcome shadow that trails the present” as the “eerily familiar object [...] that continuously resists any of our attempts to disconnect from it”.³⁶ This can be seen in the sonnet’s closing couplet. What started out as a

31. Iggy McGovern, *op. cit.*, lines 9–12.

32. Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 2006, p. 54.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

35. Iggy McGovern, *op. cit.*, line 13.

36. John Scanlan, *On Garbage*, London, Reaktion Books, 2005, p. 36.

"spring-feverish" discarding of last year's burden ends with the speaker's realisation that the past cannot be completely ignored:

now climbing up to brag about his find
his shadow ribbing my venetian blind.³⁷

In form of the ragpicker, the speaker is directly confronted with the on-going presence of the past that still casts a shadow on the speaker's home. This shadow becomes an active force in the present in two ways, related to the double meaning of the word "ribbing". On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a synonym for 'teasing': the ragpicker's "brag" about his "find" makes the speaker painfully aware that the disposed is all but valueless. In form of his shadow, the ragpicker's success with revaluing items from the skip, teases the speaker's suburban façade (his "venetian blind") with his failure to disconnect from the discarded. On the other hand, "ribbing", as a noun, can also refer to the human skeleton (as in a 'structure of ribs'), through which a more physical component is added to the presence of the past. Understood in this sense, "ribbing" semantically draws back on the image of the past as a corpse in the "funeral ship". This corpse that has been prepared to be sent on its final journey has risen from the grave, uncovered by the ragpicker-archaeologist. The supposedly forgotten, therefore, are back with the living where they still 'haunt' the speaker.

To conclude, in "The Skip" waste is depicted as a liminal entity that is far from being insignificant and inferior. In the guise of discarded entities, the past exists in an in-between state between being distanced on the one hand and being revived on the other. What has been thrown away in the octave by the speaker is revalued in the sestet. Thus, the complete disconnection from the past fails, since it still seems to "creep around" the suburban neighbourhood, defying any attempt to be forgotten.

Focus on the Process of Revaluation: "A Pyramid Scheme" (John McAuliffe)

John McAuliffe's "A Pyramid Scheme" can be analysed as an example for a poem that focuses on a process of revaluation, after the initial discarding has already occurred. In that sense, the poem is centred around an "old Cortina" that has "come to rest/ at the end of the road".³⁸ In short, the poem describes the car's transformation over time: while, at the beginning of this six-stanza-poem, the old car appears as a non-value item that materially decays ("the weeks pelt/ its glass and steel"³⁹), at the end of the poem, the car wreck has gained new value, as

37. Iggy McGovern, *op. cit.*, lines 13-14.

38. *Ibid.*, lines 1-2.

39. *Ibid.*, lines 2-3.

the speaker's market rhetoric suggests: "its fag-end" is "still paying a dividend".⁴⁰ Within this frame, the stanzas in between the first and the last focus on the car's phase of transition between non-value and (renewed) value. To begin with, formally speaking, this focus on the Cortina's transition is supported in the textual arrangement of the poem. As Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Elin Holmstern claim, a liminal phase of transition between two states is generally "characterized by a certain openness and relaxation of rules".⁴¹ As such, in the liminal space established boundaries are softened and overcome toward the fluid and flexible. In this context, the car's transitional situation finds a formal equivalent in the several run-on-lines (both within and in between stanzas, e.g. between 3-4, 4-5 and 5-6) that likewise blur the boundaries between the poem's individual formal units. The same can be said for the poem's syntactical structure: starting in the third stanza, the poem consists of one single sentence that runs throughout stanzas 4-6 and only stops after the poem's final word "dividend". This arrangement leads to the impression that on the syntactical level as well, clear boundaries are no longer maintained, as everything blends into one syntactical 'stream'.

Next to these structural implications, the revaluation process also becomes apparent on the poem's content level, where the Cortina's transformation can be more specifically defined as an interaction between a form of material and symbolic recycling. Thus, first, after the car has been decaying for "weeks", a ragpicker rediscovers it and "strips" the car off anything still useful:

emptying it and making free

with some random person
who strips the interior and then,
accompanied, helps himself
to tyres, battery, driveshaft, exhaust.⁴²

What is important here is the description of the ragpicker's activity as an "emptying" and "making free". In *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson argues that most material objects move from a transient phase (i.e. everyday objects that lose value over time) to a "zero-value"⁴³ phase (i.e. objects being classified as waste). The transition from one phase into the other, Thompson states, contains an emancipatory moment, since in gaining a zero-value status, the object is 'taken out' of the regular value circulation to exist in a "timeless and valueless

40. *Ibid.*, lines 23-24.

41. Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Elin Holmstern (eds.), "Introduction: Borders and States of In-Between in Irish Literature and Culture", *Liminal Borderlands in Irish Literature and Culture*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2009, p. 7-16, here: p. 7

42. John McAuliffe, *op. cit.*, lines 4-8.

43. Michael Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

limbo where at some later date [the object] has the chance to be rediscovered".⁴⁴ The wasted entity is inherently liminal as in its devaluation, the object already signals the potential to be revaluated. The same counts for the car in "A Pyramid Scheme": with the last remaining material value removed ("tyres, battery, driveshaft, exhaust"), the car is now 'freed' from any attachment to its former position in a material value cycle. The Cortina has become a 'tabula rasa'—the speaker suitably describes the remainder of the car as "looking naked"⁴⁵—that can attain new value.

More concretely, during the poem, the Cortina shifts from its former material value into a new symbolic value. Thus, starting from this "naked" state, the Cortina transforms from being a car to becoming a "guarded hiding place"⁴⁶ for the "elders"⁴⁷ of the local community. This transformative process is mirrored in the physical change of the car's appearance in stanzas 3 and 4:

mirrorless and windowless,
it gathers accessories

like one of those disused roadside crannies:
plastic bags, a seatful of empties
and, adjacent, a holed mattress, a pallet,
a small fridge [...].⁴⁸

No longer maintaining its use value as a car, the Cortina, subsequently no longer appears in the form of a car. Rather, it goes through a process of (physical) metamorphosis that reflects the item's liminal status. In stanzas 3 and 4, it is no longer the car from the beginning, yet also still not the hiding place it becomes in stanzas 5 and 6. Instead, as it "gathers accessories", the Cortina is in what Holmstern and Nordin describe as a "transitional place of becoming".⁴⁹ Being dumped at the beginning of the poem, the Cortina now is used as a dumping site of its own. Yet, this waste collection already entails the potential for new value: while the single items appear without any value individually (e.g. "empties", "holed mattress"), in their accumulation and combination over time they obtain a new function. Thus, the dumping site in total faintly mimics a rudimentary house, including a place to sleep ("mattress") and a place to eat ("small fridge").

The transition from waste to a renewed symbolic reference finally takes place in the run-on-line between stanza 4 and 5:

44. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

45. John McAuliffe, *op. cit.*, line 10.

46. *Ibid.*, line 23.

47. *Ibid.*, line 22.

48. *Ibid.*, lines 11-16.

49. Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Elin Holmstern, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

the whole lot useless, inside out,

till the rusting shell starts half-stories,
the kind that makes it first notorious,
for the children who will have to learn
what goes on at night, or could go on,

then a shelter for their elders,
a try-out zone, its vacant doorless
frame a guarded hiding place [...].⁵⁰

Now, the “whole lot” is no longer “useless” but has turned into a memory medium for the “half-stories” collectively shared by the local community. Thus, the car wreck has shifted from its abandoned waste position at the end of the road into an overt position again in the community’s communicative practice, where it becomes a haunting presence that challenges suburban norms. Fed by the community’s speculations about how the dumping site might be used “at night”, the Cortina-wreck has turned into a “notorious” myth, positioned somewhere between fact (“what goes on at night”) and fiction (“or could go on”). The speaker’s ‘refusal’ to directly mention “what goes on at night” implies that the activities happening in the “rusting shell” are of a socially stigmatized nature. Hence, the waste pile and its “half-stories” ultimately return from the realm of the useless as a threatening harbinger of the socially ‘unwanted’.

Set in another suburban community, the transformation of the Cortina in “A Pyramid Scheme” can again be read as a comment on the past’s position in Celtic Tiger Ireland. Although it has been abandoned as useless (as much as the car is no longer useful for driving in the street), the past cannot simply be forgotten, but reappears in an altered form. Thus, although it has “come to rest” (another allusion to death, like the “funeral ship” in McGovern’s sonnet) the past returns into the communal realm. Here, it fulfils a productive and essential function: the past becomes the necessary “try-out zone”, in which present structures can be renegotiated (as the “elders” use the car to negotiate behaviour that is not accepted in the suburban context). By depicting the past as waste in transformation, the poem displays the inherent potential of a devalued history to ‘strike back’ with new value and meaning. In the context of the Celtic Tiger’s ‘trashing’ of the past, in which only the ‘broken’ pieces remain visible in the present, the past can still be re-assembled and by gathering and reconnecting the pieces, can create new ‘stories’ that are still meaningful for the present.

50. John McAuliffe, *op. cit.*, lines 16-23.

Focus on Wasted Entity: "Politics" (Paul Durcan)

To conclude this analysis of the waste metaphor in Celtic Tiger poetry, Paul Durcan's "Politics" shall serve as an example for the third focus in 'waste poems'. In this last kind of poem using the *past as waste* metaphor, as pointed above, the focus is on the wasted entity itself. More specifically, in several poems, the wasted entity representing the past appears in form of a *living being* turned social outcast. Thus, next to the figure of the crooner—who claims that he has "*fought for Ireland*" in the past but is not heard by anyone—in Kevin Higgins' "The Shop Street Crooner"⁵¹ and the infected dog that must be kept at a distance in Lorna Shaughnessy's "Dogged",⁵² Durcan's narrative poem "Politics" displays the past through the figure of "the Associate Professor of Modern Irish History".⁵³

Significantly, in the consumerist setting of a Celtic Tiger shopping mall, the history professor is unemployed and, seemingly, homeless. Hence, in the first part of the poem, the speaker describes the professor as a downtrodden person who, "at 11.30 a.m. in the morning"⁵⁴ dwells in a car park where he succumbed to alcoholism to bear his social insignificance:

He had a white enamel toothmug in his hand
into which he
as mptying a litre can of Guinness.
There was froth on his lips and he had not shaved
for a week or two, sporting a fine, white stubble.⁵⁵

In his deplorable physical and social state, the professor obtains the quality of a discarded item, as becomes abundantly clear at the very beginning of the poem: in the first line, the professor is introduced as a figure that is symbolically seated right next to a "bottle bank in the shopping centre car park".⁵⁶ In this position, "upright on the ground/ between the tank and the hedge",⁵⁷ the speaker discovers him by chance while "slotting wine bottles into the green tank".⁵⁸ The professor appears to have lost his subject status since, in the process of disposing the bottles, the speaker is unable to clearly identify his discovery as a human being:

51. Kevin Higgins, "The Shop Street Crooner", *The Boy With No Face*, Cliffs of Moher, Salmon, 2005, p. 26, line 4.

52. Lorna Shaughnessy, "Dogged", *Anchored*, Cliffs of Moher, Salmon, 2015, p. 29.

53. Paul Durcan, "Politics", *Life's a Dream: 40 Years Reading Poems, 1967-2007*, London, Harville Seeker, p. 432-434, line 10.

54. *Ibid.*, line 40.

55. *Ibid.*, lines 13-16.

56. *Ibid.*, line 1.

57. *Ibid.*, lines 11-12.

58. *Ibid.*, line 2.

when I saw what I thought was a human leg
clad in trouser and boot, protruding
from under the far end of the tank.⁵⁹

The leg, on first sight, almost appears as dismembered and cast off as a disposed entity. In the speaker's initial half-recognition, is it caught in an abject state, neither being the ordinary waste object, nor being identifiable as a subject. Only a moment later, the speaker, upon cornering the tank, can confirm "[t]hat the leg belonged to a face I recognized".⁶⁰

The history professor, therefore, becomes as a 'wasted' social outcast, cast out by a society that has dispelled any connection to the past. Thus, to the speaker, for example, who in his "Nike white trainers/and [...] Nike white baseball cap"⁶¹ can be identified as a "commonplace"⁶² Celtic Tiger consumer, the professor's repeated claim that "we should never have left the Commonwealth"⁶³ remains meaningless. Instead, the speaker exists in a depoliticized space where only present consumer choices matter (e.g. later, the poem is set in the shopping mall's own supermarket), while he remains numb towards any broader historical contexts. Symbolically, he carries "white, pocket carrier bags/ of sleeping pills and anti-depressants/ My Tranxene 7.5 and my Seroxat 20";⁶⁴ an example of Durcan's recurring motif of a medicated consumer who is kept calm and disinterested in anything outside of his/her everyday consumer routine.

Yet, like in the other poems, in "Politics" waste defies its own abandonment. Although the history professor is introduced as a wasted entity, and the past is seemingly irrelevant, it is once again shown in a liminal position. More concretely, the past's liminality is expressed through the professor becoming a liminal character in his own right. In that sense, as the poem progresses, the speaker's initial depiction of him as a homeless man, at a second glance, turns out to be ill-fitting. Rather, the professor escapes the semiotic frame of the homeless, as the speaker painfully realizes by examining the professor's attire and outward appearance more closely:

Compassionately he stared up at me
out of black horn-rimmed spectacles
brushing back a forelock of his mane of grey hair
in my jerkin and jeans I felt so commonplace
while he looked so distinguished sitting down there

59. *Ibid.*, lines 3-5.

60. *Ibid.*, line 7.

61. *Ibid.*, lines 64-65.

62. *Ibid.*, line 37.

63. *Ibid.*, line 59.

64. *Ibid.*, lines 68-70.

at 11.30 a.m. in the morning in between showers.

[...]

His crumpled pinstripe suit, his polka-dot bow tie.⁶⁵

The professor, from the speaker's perspective, appears in between social categories and in between two distinct stereotypes. Whereas his sitting next to a dumpster with a drink in hand suggest a low social status, his "horn-rimmed spectacles", "his mane of grey hair", or "his polka-dot bow tie" challenge this categorization, as these aspects signify the stereotype of an intellectual. The man sitting next to the bottle bank is neither the one nor the other. Rather, he is an in-between figure—a hybrid between two unlikely social categories—that cannot be clearly classified.

The speaker's failure to pigeonhole the liminal professor in his otherwise well-rehearsed consumerist routine becomes a source of unease. As both part (in form of the beggar) and not part of society (in form of the intellectual in an anti-intellectual, materialist climate), the professor is in a more comfortable position than the speaker. The social outcast suddenly turns into an empowered figure, as he is no longer subjugated under the strict social conventionalism of Celtic Tiger Ireland. Thus, in contrast to the speaker who can only endure the present with "anti-depressants", the professor radiates comfortability:

I saw satisfaction steaming out of him.

But not only satisfaction – something else also,
something you might call tranquility.

Or rectitude.⁶⁶

Agnes Hovarth and others suggest that the liminal evokes "the reversal of established hierarchies".⁶⁷ The same can be said for "Politics": faced with the professor's "tranquility" and "rectitude" in his liminal position, the hierarchy between the speaker and his former teacher is reversed and the speaker is forced into an inferior position. As "satisfaction" is "steaming out of him", the professor dominates the scene and, despite his 'disposed' status, he maintains a dominant presence. Now, the objectifying gaze has turned to the opposite direction. Thus, although it is the professor who is caught in an unfortunate condition in the car park, the speaker now becomes the 'odd one out' to be looked at and 'examined':

It was embarrassingly obvious that I puzzled him
as if somehow I seemed out of place.

[...]

65. *Ibid.*, lines 36-40; line 44.

66. *Ibid.*, lines 54-57.

67. Agnes Hovarth, Björn Thomassen and Harald Wydra (eds.), "Introduction: Liminality and the Search for Boundaries", *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2015, p. 2.

He sat up straight, looked me in the eye more steadily
with that medley of deference and defiance
hat an elder in the palaeolithic would deploy
looking down the lens of a TV camera.⁶⁸

The observer becomes the observed and Durcan ultimately arranges a poetic set-up in which the degrading gaze on the past is reversed to critically reflect on a shallow present that cannot and should not ignore its history.

Without going into further details, in form of the liminal professor, the past is represented as a lingering and even dominating phenomenon. Although neither the speaker in the car park, nor the “teenage checkout girl”⁶⁹ or the “tight, small queue”⁷⁰ in the supermarket show any understanding of the professor’s historical references, the past nevertheless ‘forces’ itself into the text: no matter how much the speaker, for example, internally rages against the professor’s obstruction of the regular consumerist routine by intruding in the supermarket check-out line (e.g. “Jail would not be good enough for him!”⁷¹), the last eight lines of the poem are dedicated to the professor’s direct allusions to the past, including the reference to the “1916 crucifixion”.⁷² The poem, therefore, ends on a historical note, which defies the exclusive perspective on the present by establishing the past more dominantly in this ‘forgetful’ setting instead.

■ Conclusion

The paper attempted to show that the frequent use of the waste metaphor in poems written during the Celtic Tiger is a poetic means to undermine the dominant discourse of abandoning the past in Celtic Tiger Ireland. In that regard, in the three poems discussed, the process of discarding the past always fails in one way or another. The past remains in a liminal position, where in the process of being distanced and forgotten, it already returns as a presence to be reckoned with. In some cases, this liminal position entails waste’s uncanny status as an element that is meant to be forgotten, yet still lingers as a strangely familiar entity and, in other cases, it refers to the wasted entity’s liminal potential to be recycled at any time. In either way, the past as waste challenges the present.

The use of the waste metaphor, therefore, initiates a poetic counter-discourse that pleads for the importance of the past in the present. Thus, in the spirit of Astrid Franke, who sees poetry’s role in society in offering opportunities “to think

68. Paul Durcan, *op. cit.*, lines 33-34; lines 60-63.

69. *Ibid.*, line 77.

70. *Ibid.*, line 78.

71. *Ibid.*, line 80.

72. *Ibid.*, line 89.

the public anew",⁷³ the 'waste poems' discussed above can be seen as experiments in thinking Ireland's relationship to the past anew. As such, against the excessive degradation of history in Celtic Tiger Ireland, these poems show that the past still obtains a certain value in the microcosmic Celtic Tiger settings depicted, be it in form of a 'mirror' to critically reflect on the flaws of a shallow consumerist present, or as a liminal "try-out zone" to re-arrange and re-innovate established structures. In this context, the poems discussed resemble the figure of a ragpicker, as in these texts, the process of wasting the past transforms into a renovating practice: they pick up the pieces left of a thrown away past, re-assemble them in new shapes (see the car wreck in "A Pyramid Scheme") and bring them to the foreground again as useful for the present. Or, in the words of Paula Meehan: "[o]ut of the debris of history/ a song, a name,/ a life we piece together".⁷⁴

73. Astrid Franke, *Pursue the Illusion: Problems of Public Poetry in America*, Heidelberg, Winter Verlag, 2010, p. 5.

74. Paula Meehan, "Molly Malone", *Dharmakaya*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2000, p. 25, lines 1-3.