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"Walking on the Wall": Postmemory and Hiberno-English in Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*

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This article explores how Hugo Hamilton's childhood memoir *The Speckled People* works through the postmemory of the narrator's paternal grandfather's enlistment in the Royal Navy. The narrator's father has concealed the photograph of the "sailor in the wardrobe" from his children, and in parallel has built a linguistic wall around his family, denying them access to the English language. In his memoir, Hamilton manages to "walk on the wall" by poetically merging the two languages, and writing in Hiberno-English, which circumvents his father's binary view of the Irish and English languages.
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Hugo Hamilton's childhood memoir, *The Speckled People,* hinges on the young narrator's efforts to tell his own story in a way which would allow him to understand and subsequently distance himself from the stories of his parents and their respective countries. As Jennifer Keating-Miller puts it: "He and his siblings are swept up in trajectories not only beyond their control but also preceding their birth; they quite literally inherit the ills of their parents and country" (133). His parents' stories come to him, mediated through the family photographs which either occupy pride of place above the mantelpiece, or lurk in the dark recesses of a wardrobe. The stories also come to him through different languages – German on his mother's side, Irish on his father's – and language is at the heart of the binary oppositions which structure the child's upbringing. The writing of *The Speckled People* provides a means to rise above these binary oppositions, making the poetic choice of Hiberno-English as literary language, thus allowing the narrator to divest himself of his parents' stories in order to fully inhabit his own.

Hugo Hamilton, aka Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh, was born in Dublin in 1953 to a German mother, who had fled post-war Germany and its (and her) demons to make a fresh start in Ireland, and an Irish father whose fervent nationalism manifested itself in his refusal to allow a word of English to be spoken under his roof. Hamilton's memoir describes how these identities collide in the confused and confusing identities of the children: "When you're small you're like a piece of white paper with nothing written on it. My father writes down his name in Irish and my mother writes down her name in German and there's a blank space left over for all the people outside who speak English" (*The Speckled People* 3). While Hamilton's parents, and in particular his father, ostensibly give him and his siblings the freedom to write whatever they choose on this "piece of white paper," their identities are framed by the two authorized languages, and stepping outside of this linguistic frame would leave them out in the cold.

The children are in danger of finding themselves with no voice to call their own, through the stringent linguistic constraints imposed upon them. They are also at risk of their own stories being forgotten, as these are overwhelmed by their parents' versions of their stories. Marianne Hirsch, in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, has theorized this privileging of the stories of one generation to the detriment of those of the next, which she has described as "postmemory": "Postmemo-

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ry characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (22). Marianne Hirsch first explored the notion of postmemory in relation to one of the most traumatic events of the twentieth century, the Holocaust, and indeed the weight of the events of the Second World War on the parents and their children in *The Speckled People* has already been critically discussed, notably by Dorothea Depner in a 2014 article entitled "The Ruins of Identity: Memory, Postmemory and Belonging in the Works of Christabel Bielenberg and Hugo Hamilton." In this text, Depner analyses how Hugo Hamilton's mother, Irmgard Kaiser, inculcates into her children the guilt that she feels her generation of Germans must carry in order to atone for the atrocities committed in their name. Irmgard insists that the children not answer back when their Irish peers taunt them and call them Nazis: "I can't deny anything and I can't fight back and I can't say I'm innocent. She says it's not important to win. Instead she teaches us to surrender" (Hamilton, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* 41). Depner also discusses the postmemory of Sean Ó hUrmoltaigh's anti-Semitism and his involvement in *Ailtirí na hAiséirghi* (Architects of the Resurrection), the Irish nationalist fascist party which existed during the Second World War.

These analyses shed precious light on two different postmemories within both volumes of Hugo Hamilton's memoir, and I would like to extend them to include a third postmemory, which comes to the children through the medium of photography, even if in the case of what Hamilton's father experiences as a trauma, the photographic evidence of this trauma has been deliberately removed from sight. One day, the children are playing in their parents' bedroom, transforming their parents' wardrobe into an imaginary bus, when they come across a photograph:

> But then we found a big black and white picture of a sailor. He was dressed in a sailor's uniform with square, white lapels over his tunic and a rope lanyard hanging down over his chest. He had soft eyes and I liked the look of him. I wanted to be a sailor, even though I had no idea what this sailor was doing in my father's wardrobe … Whoever he was, he must have owned the waterproof identity papers, too, and the photographs of HMS *Nemesis* with sailors lined up in a human chain along the deck. And he must have got all the postcards from King George wishing him a happy and victorious Christmas. (Hamilton, *The Speckled People* 11)

The British occupation of Ireland which, as Hugo Hamilton's father sees it, will only finally have ended when the English language is no longer spoken on the island, is made even less palatable to him by what he sees as the willing collaboration of his fellow countrymen in their own enslavement. This may be enacted by their willing adoption of the English language and inability to use Irish, but it is epitomized by his own father's enlistment in the Royal Navy. The "sailor in the wardrobe" is none other than his own father, Hugo Hamilton's paternal grandfather, who has thus become anathema to his own son: "There's no picture of John Hamilton or his wife Mary Frances, alone or together, hanging anywhere in our house. Our German grandparents are dead, but our Irish grandparents are dead and forgotten" (12).

Sean Hamilton vehemently evicts Hugo's paternal grandparents from his children's lives, deliberately depriving them of an understanding of an aspect of their history which he, himself, rejects, through what has been discussed as a "form of amnesia" which "is not so much a forgetting as a totalitarian way of controlling the past by controlling memory" (Hughes 133).

> The picture of the sailor with the soft eyes disappeared and we never saw him again after that. Nobody mentioned him. I had no way of keeping him in my head because he was gone, back into the wardrobe where nobody could rescue him. We didn't know how to remember him, and like him, we lost our memory. (Hamilton, *The Speckled People* 15)

Marianne Hirsch has described the role played by family photographs such as that of the sailor in the wardrobe in susbstantiating postmemory: "Photographs in their enduring "umbilical" connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmem-

ory. … They affirm the past's existence and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance" (23). By depriving his children of an understanding of their own history, as it was lived by their grandfather, Hugo Hamilton's father seeks to make what was already an "unbridgeable distance" a chasm. Ireland's history, as epitomized by his father's choices, is synonymous, in Hamilton's father's mind, with the linguistic history of the island and, by consigning the photograph to the wardrobe, he hopes to also commit the English language to the same depths: "we were not allowed to speak the language of the sailor" (Hamilton, *The Speckled People* 12).

The conflation of one's own story with that of one's country is a trope which was prevalent in Irish autobiography for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and while it is one which it appears Hamilton's father would willingly endorse, *The Speckled People* is one of a number of more recent Irish autobiographies which break with this tradition. Eamonn Hughes remarks that "this is a generation of Irish autobiographers who have finally broken with the idea that the method of and motive for writing autobiography in Ireland is inextricably linked to the nation's story: that to say 'I' in an autobiography is also somehow to tell the story of Ireland" (127). Hugo Hamilton manages to extricate *The Speckled People* from the power of the postmemory of the sailor in the wardrobe's purported treachery towards Ireland in spite of his father's desperate need to bury this memory, as he would wish to bury the English language in Ireland.

Hugo Hamilton's father's grudge against the English language stems from his belief that the English language sought to stamp out the native Irish language in the same way that colonization sought to stamp out Irish independence. Indeed, for him, the English language is linguistic postmemory where the sailor in the wardrobe was photographic postmemory. *The Speckled People* is testament to the backfiring of his insistence on the exclusion of English from his family home, as the language through which this story is told is not German, or Irish, but English. Nevertheless, the English language in the hands of an Irish writer always carries within it the postmemory of another language, in ways which even Sean Ó hUrmoltaigh might well have come to accept. In the introduction to his *Dictionary of Hiberno-English,* Terence P. Dolan says that "Irish people use and speak English in a distinctive way. In vocabulary, construction, idiom and pronunciation their speech is identifiable and marked. Its characteristics reflect the political, cultural and linguistic history of the two nations, Ireland and England" (xix). It can thus be inferred that, far from adopting English as one's creative language meaning a rejection of the Irish language, it may mean, on the contrary, a subtle way of allowing Irish to endure.

From Synge to Joyce and Heaney, Irish writers have forged a form of literary English which allows the postmemory of the Irish language to survive, and even thrive, to provide a way out of the Manichean binarism which Hugo Hamilton's father assumes must define the relationship between Irish and English. Few writers more clearly than Joyce have redefined what it means to write in the English language, and we may seek references in his earlier works to the ways in which the influence of the Irish language on his use of English led him to explore poetic language itself.

Since Stephen Dedalus failed to use the Standard English word "funnel" when asked to re-fill the Dean's oil-lamp in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, we have had an understanding of the ambivalence experienced by the Irish writer composing in English, and the potential for the transformation of this ambivalence into opportunity. Indeed, the reaction of the Dean of Studies to Stephen's use of the Hiberno-English word "tundish" during their conversation about the difference between moral beauty and material beauty awakens Stephen's sense of linguistic inferiority, while reminding the reader of the potential for beauty in the writer's choice of words:

> To return to the lamp, he said, the feeding of it is also a nice problem. You must choose the pure oil and you must be careful when you pour it in not to overflow it, not to pour in more than the funnel can hold.
>
> – What funnel? asked Stephen.
>
> – The funnel through which you pour the oil into your lamp.
>
> – That? said Stephen. Is that called a funnel? Is it not a tundish?
>
> – What is a tundish?

> – That. The … the funnel.
>
> – Is that called a tundish in Ireland? asked the dean. I never heard the word in my life.
>
> – It is called a tundish in Lower Drumcondra, said Stephen, laughing, where they speak the best English.
>
> – A tundish, said the dean reflectively. That is a most interesting word. I must look that word up. Upon my word I must.
>
> …
>
> The dean repeated the word yet again.
>
> – Tundish! Well now, that is interesting!
>
> – The question you asked me a moment ago seems to me more interesting. What is that beauty which the artist struggles to express from lumps of earth, said Stephen coldly.
>
> The little word seemed to have turned a rapier point of his sensitiveness against this courteous and vigilant foe. He felt with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Jonson. He thought:
>
> – The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (Joyce 165)

According to Dolan, "Joyce chose 'tundish' because for him it represented an older form of English which typified a major feature of Hiberno-English, not least in its power to symbolise the invasion of Ireland by England and its language, as well as its capacity to divide the Irish from the English, by rendering them unable to understand each other and to make one feel inferior to the other" ("Translating Irelands" 80). While this feeling of inferiority is clearly rendered in Joyce's text, Stephen would rather engage the Dean on the question of "that beauty which the artist struggles to express from lumps of earth," or, in this instance, the beauty which may come forth from the choice of a word in Hiberno-English.

Similarly, Seamus Heaney makes a clear case for the choice of Hiberno-English in the introduction to his translation of the Anglo-Saxon heroic poem *Beowulf*. Like Joyce, Heaney describes how English appears not to belong to him: "to persuade myself that I was born into its language and that its language was born into me took a while" (xxiii). It was only when he realized the proximity between the Anglo-Saxon and his own Hiberno-English that he began to see how his translation could take shape. Like Sean Hamilton,

> I tended to conceive of English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/and, and this was an attitude that for a long time hampered the development of a more confident and creative way of dealing with the whole vexed question – the question, that is, of the relationship between nationality, language, history and literary tradition in Ireland. (xxiv)

Although the reasons for Heaney's binary view of the two languages are necessarily different to those of Hugo Hamilton (or his father), the solution to the problem this view poses is the same:

> The place on the language map where the Usk and the *uisce* and the whiskey coincided was definitely a place where the spirit might find a loophole, an escape route from what John Montague has called 'the partitioned intellect', away into some unpartitioned linguistic country, a region where one's language would not be simply a badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or an official imposition, but an entry into further language. (Heaney xxv)

Heaney's decision to use Hiberno-English to translate *Beowulf* as a way out of a partitioned linguistic country finds a parallel in Hugo Hamilton's linguistic choices in *The Speckled People*.

As Hamilton chose to tell his story of linguistic partition, the language he would use to tell it would be paramount. In a 1996 article entitled "Understanding Francis Stuart," Hamilton referred to the importance of language to Irish writers:

> Europe had to find a new language. Ireland too has had its own problems with language and silence. We could still be said to speak a foreign language, a language that we have made our own through our writers. ... Because language was always the only way in which the oppressed could assert themselves, it could be said that the Irish, and marginal people in general, have discovered a rich vein of lyricism and freedom that is often denied to writers at the heart of Europe. ("Understanding" 70)

In a later interview about his own work, he said both that "[l]anguage is the only way of really coming to terms with anything in a significant way," and that "I also think that it's possible that language trauma that we have in Ireland contributed to so many great writers coming from here, because there's this great need to express ourselves" (McCann).

The language trauma discussed by Hamilton has been at the root of so many great Irish writers' work, and it is ironic that Hamilton's father cannot see that the English language which he abhors to hear spoken in Ireland is, in fact, no longer the colonial language he seeks to eradicate. Indeed, it is no longer just English: it has become Hiberno-English and, in doing so, has given writers the "elsewhere of potential" Seamus Heaney speaks of (xxv). Hugo Hamilton's father is not alone in not realizing how Irish the English spoken in Ireland is. As Dolan puts it, "Hiberno-English is the national standard language of Ireland, the majority language. Even those few speakers who deludedly think they are using so-called 'Standard English' disclose many linguistic features which characterise them as Irish" ("Translating Irelands" 78).

At its simplest level, Hiberno-English deforms the pronunciation of standard English words. In the first lines of the memoir, Hamilton narrates an incident during which the family visit the local beach and "I fell over a man lying on the grass with his mouth open. He sat up suddenly and said, 'What the Jaysus?" (*The Speckled People* 1). The child narrator is disconcerted by this episode and refers back to it a number of times in the opening pages: "I got up quickly and ran back to my mother and father. I told them that the man said 'Jaysus' but they were both turned away" (1). In the absence of a satisfactory parental response, the narrator returns over and over to the incident, and specifically considers the use of the word "Jaysus" as a means of inserting himself into the life of the country whose language he is not allowed to use. In her *Books Ireland* review of the memoir, entitled "A Youth of Shame and Embarrassment," Sue Leonard refers to this passage and describes the young Hamilton siblings thus: "the Hamiltons walked by, saying 'Jaysus' at every opportunity and trying very hard to be Irish" (45). Her comment echoes the final reference to the incident in these early pages of the text: "So then we try to be Irish. … We're Irish and we say 'Jaysus' every time the wave curls in and hits the rocks with a big thump" (*The Speckled People* 5). The young Hugo Hamilton has a clearer understanding than his father of the language which genuinely exemplifies Irish identity, and that language is Hiberno-English.

One entry in the *Dictionary of Hiberno-English* which may also help illustrate Hamilton's use of Hiberno-English is the entry on barmbrack: "*n.*, bread containing fruit, especially relished at Hallowe'en, when symbolic gifts (e.g. a ring to foretell marriage) are placed in the bread < Ir *bairín breac*, speckled loaf" (Dolan, *Dictionary* 20). This barmbrack, or speckled loaf, is the idea behind the father's linguistic theory for his children, and gives its title to the memoir:

> We're the speckled people, he says, the 'brack' people, which is a word that comes from the Irish language ... *breac* is a word, he explains, that the Irish people brought with them when they were crossing over into the English language. It means speckled, dappled, flecked, spotted, coloured. A trout is brack and so is a speckled horse. A barm brack is a loaf of bread with raisins in it and was borrowed from the Irish words *bairín breac*. So we are the speckled Irish,

> the brack-Irish. Brack home-made Irish bread with German raisins. (Hamilton, *The Speckled People* 7)

While Hamilton's father can see how bread can be speckled, and how even children can be speckled, he is unable to see that a language can also be speckled, and that Hiberno-English would provide an alternative to his linguistic absolutism.

Indeed, the Irish language he seeks to impose on his family is not the living language as it is spoken in the Gaeltacht. As a living language, Gaeltacht Irish evolves in response to the living world around it, and is as hybrid a language as the English spoken in Ireland is, as its native speakers adopt English words as they encroach into their lives, just as Hiberno-English adopts and adapts Irish words and structures into English. Sean Hamilton's blindness to this aspect of the Irish language is apparent in his reaction to an incident recounted by the child narrator involving his Irish-speaking cousin Aine. Sean Hamilton has arranged for Aine to come and live with the family, helping out with the housework and the children. He has accepted her presence under his roof as she comes from the Gaeltacht and on the understanding that she will speak exclusively Irish with the children. He quickly becomes disillusioned however, when, after a trip to the beach, the Hamilton boys return home full of a story involving throwing stones, but both have the misfortune to use the English word "stones." When Sean Hamilton takes it up with Aine, she struggles to see the problem – her own native Irish is flexible enough to allow the use of English words without any perception of threat. Aine dares to defy the boys' father, and in doing so, offers him a lesson in authentic Irish, an Irish which allows itself to adapt to circumstances, in the way that Hiberno-English has also adapted, adopting Irish words and structures and becoming the tool to express Irish identity which Sean Hamilton hopes in vain for Irish to be: "'*Stone mór*' and '*Stone beag*,' she says. Big stone and little stone" (*The Speckled People* 27).

If the experiment which brings the Gaeltacht to the family's Dublin home is inconclusive, Sean Hamilton hopes for better results when he takes the family to the Gaeltacht in Connemara on holiday. In this environment Hamilton's father is more serene and, while the events recounted would have taken place in Irish, one reviewer of the memoir identified that the English used by Hamilton to describe them becomes more identifiably Hiberno-English, suggesting that some of the more lyrical passages resemble the language of Synge:

> When they go to the Gaeltacht in Connemara, where everyone speaks Irish, they talk about the state of the Irish language – and the English prose of the book moves into lyrical rhythms, a kind of Synge-song: "All of us dreaming and sheltering from the words, speaking no language at all, just listening to the voice of the rain falling and... the water [whispering] along the roadside like the only language allowed." (Lee)

While in general, Hamilton's prose is not as systematically or conspicuously Hiberno-English as that of Synge, for example, it does, as Dolan previously reminded us, "disclose many linguistic features which characterise [it] as Irish" ("Translating Irelands" 78). Shortly after the s*tone mór* and s*tone beag* episode, the boys are playing outside in the garden, and Hugo's older brother Franz builds a wall, and chants "Walk on the wall, walk on the wall" (29) as he struts along it. Sean Hamilton's fury at this use of the forbidden language by his son knows no bounds, and he hits Franz so hard as to break his nose. The violence of the incident, as well as Irmgard's threat to leave with the children in its aftermath, clearly mark the young narrator, who returns to the episode towards the end of the memoir.

The image which marks Hamilton is that of walking on the wall, a delicate balancing act on a wall which separates two distinct areas, and taking pleasure in that act, and this becomes the most appropriate image for the language he is to choose to write in. He will not write in Irish, as his father would have wished. Nor will he write in the English his father so despised. He will build a language in between those two incompatible languages, which excludes neither, but takes elements from both: Hiberno-English, and he will keep his balance between the two. In a 2011 article on the Italian translation of *The Speckled People,* Elisa Arbellino also recognized the image of walking on the wall as a reference to the

English language Hamilton chose to write in as being the English language divorced from the culture of the colonizer, but she stops short of identifying the "walking on the wall" image as referring to Hiberno-English:

> The adult voice of the author can be heard, here, coming to the surface from behind the voice of the young narrator. What he says helps us see that English is not, to him, the language of English culture only. It is a communicative tool he could not resort to during childhood and a challenge to the limits of the world he grew up in. Instead of binding him to a place, English enables him to deal with a far wider notion of 'home', as something which can be 'speckled' as much as he is. (216)

Referring to the context in which Hamilton makes his bold statement about walking on the wall takes Armellino's analysis to another level. Indeed, this comment occurs after one final trip to the beach, where, on the first page of the novel, the young narrator had heard the word "Jaysus." The young Hamilton is surprised to see the dog that barked at the waves who he was convinced he had killed, and exclaims: "'Jaysus, what the Jaysus.' I kept saying. 'Jaysus what the Jaysus of a bully belly Jaysus'" (*The Speckled People* 294). Coming full circle from the initial incident involving the explicit use of Hiberno-English, the final sentences of the final chapter (excluding the Epilogue) are: "I'm not afraid of being homesick and having no language to live in. I don't have to be like anyone else. I'm walking on the wall and nobody can stop me" (*The Speckled People* 295).

"Walking on the wall" is the image of the Hiberno-English language used by Hugo Hamilton in *The Speckled People* and throughout his *oeuvre*. The title of Elisa Armellino's article "Translating Memories into Words" confirms that this choice of Hiberno-English is Hamilton's way of evincing the post-memory imposed by his father and which the writing of the memoir allows Hamilton to purge. The image of the wall is reminiscent of the discussion of Hiberno-English in Seamus Heaney's introduction to his translation of *Beowulf.* Like Hamilton's father, his perception of the two languages was binary, with English having forcibly supplanted Irish, leaving him with "an awareness of language-loss and cultural dispossession" (Heaney xxiv). He desired an "unpartitioned linguistic country," a non-binary language. What better image of such a language than a wall which one does not allow to function as a border because one stays in equilibrium on top of it, embracing both one side, and the other, and that which brings them together. Hugo Hamilton's linguistic embrace of Irish and English through Hiberno-English is also a rebuttal of his father's maxim that "your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag" (*The Speckled People* 3), as he replaces his father's flag-waving vision of language and nationality with a more inclusive one where a wall is not a boundary, but a meeting-point.

It is possibly not insignificant that Hugo Hamilton wrote *The Speckled People* and invented the "walking on the wall" image after having spent a number of years living in, and writing about, Berlin. Three novels, sometimes referred to as the "Berlin Trilogy" are set in the divided city, *Surrogate City* (1990), *The Love Test* (1995), and *Disguise* (1998). It is in *Surrogate City*, a novel written in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, that Hamilton's take on the Wall may provide some insight into Hiberno-English as a linguistic version of "walking on the wall." The protagonist and narrator of *Surrogate City,* Alan Craig, is a lighting engineer in the music industry, and he uses lighting to tell the stories of the performances he works on. He describes the Berlin Wall thus: "The Berlin Wall only comes into its own at night. Far more festive and convincing, which goes to show that it's really the floodlights that create the frontier. Otherwise, it might be forgotten" (48).

Where Sean Hamilton saw a wall between Irish and English and was willing to do anything to keep his family on the right side of the wall, Hugo Hamilton sees the wall as the point where the two languages touch and sees this place as the creative space which it will occupy in his writing.

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