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HUGO HAMILTON'S LANGUAGE WAR

Abstract:

In his two language memoirs, *The Speckled People* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, Hugo Hamilton recounts growing up in Dublin in a household in which Irish and German were the only two tongues permitted. His mother was a refugee from Nazi Germany, and his father was an Irish nationalist who punished his children if he caught them speaking English. Hamilton's parents encouraged him to be different, but he recounts the difficulties of standing out in a society in which his trilingualism made him feel uncomfortably unique. Throughout his childhood, he was forced into a triangulation among Irish, German, and English. Hamilton's father insisted that to speak English was to betray Ireland, though most of its citizens did not speak Irish. Like James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Hamilton aspires to free himself of the nets of language and nationality. Ultimately, though writing in English, he aspires to a condition beyond any language, to citizenship in a global republic of art.

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Translingual Trilemma

Hugo Hamilton's personal misfortune was that he grew up trilingual in a bilingual household. It would also be his literary asset, the inspiration behind two remarkable language memoirs. When she coined the term "language memoir" (life-writing in which the acquisition of a language shapes the narrative) in 1994, Alice Kaplan was composing *French Lessons*, her own account of falling in love with the language of Molière, Baudelaire, and Proust, and thereby with the way that French speakers filter experience. Among notable contributions to the genre of language memoir, by Ariel

Dorfman, Eva Hoffman, Jhumpa Lahiri, Richard Rodriguez, Luc Sante, Ilan Stavans, and others, Hugo Hamilton's is unique in depicting a childhood that he describes as a "language war" (*Speckled* 279). In *The Speckled People* (2003) and its sequel, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006), Hamilton, who was born in 1953, recounts the linguamachy of a Dublin household in which Irish and German were the only two tongues permitted. Adopting the child's eye perspective of a youngster who simply echoes what adults tell him, Hamilton states that: ". . . my father says your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag" (*Speckled* 3).

For much of his childhood, Hamilton is confused about home, country, flag, and – especially – language. The subject of an autobiography is always a constructed self. In Hamilton's case, however, the protagonist is more clearly than most others constructed out of language and language choices. And that construction is, more than for most other language memoirists, a victory over linguistic division. In her empirical study of bilingual immigrants, Aneta Pavlenko found that 65 percent of her respondents reported distinct identities: that each language they spoke represented a separate, often incompatible, personality. Pavlenko calls this widespread tendency on the part of bilinguals to speak of discrete – if not conflicting – internal selves "the discourse of bilingualism as linguistic schizophrenia" (Pavlenko 3). An example might be Rosario Ferré (1938–2016), the Puerto Rican novelist who sometimes publishes in Spanish and sometimes in English and contends that: "A bilingual writer is really two different writers, has two very different voices, writes in two different styles, and, most important, looks at the world through two different sets of glasses. This takes a splitting of the self that doesn't come easily and can be dangerous" (Ferré 2003: 138). Though he prefers the military metaphor of warfare to the psychological one of schizophrenia, Hamilton's two memoirs employ the discourse of trilingualism as internal linguistic combat.

Hamilton's mother, Irmgard née Kaiser Ó hUrmoltaigh, is a traumatized immigrant from Nazi Germany, and his abusive father, Séan Ó hUrmoltaigh, is an ardent Irish nationalist who punishes his children if they dare speak English, which they learn in school, at home. It is the language of their neighborhood but also of the despised conquerors of Éire. When Hamilton's father hears his older son Franz singing in English, the language of Ireland's oppressors, he is so furious that he breaks the boy's nose. As a merchant, he sacrifices income by refusing to accept checks made out to John Hamilton, the anglicized form of Séan Ó hUrmoltaigh. Hamilton's mother originally arrived in Ireland intending to learn English, but she and the Irish patriot she fell in love with dreamed of establishing a household that would be a principled oasis of Irish and German in the midst of English-speaking Dublin. Her son recalls Irmgard as proud of having created "an Irish-German family with lederhosen and Aran sweaters, so that we would not be afraid of being different" (*Sailor* 67). At the beginning of Hamilton's memoir, he presents that same image of

sartorial exoticism and *métissage*: “So my brother and I ran out wearing lederhosen and Aran sweaters, smelling of rough wool and new leather, Irish on top and German below” (*Speckled* 2).

However, for much of his childhood, Hamilton is ashamed of being different, not least in the fact that he is mocked for speaking Irish, taunted for speaking German, and punished for speaking English. Whereas Jean-Jacques Rousseau begins his *Confessions* with a proud proclamation of utter uniqueness, in his own confessions Hamilton is initially a timorous outsider who is desperate to fit in. “Moi seul. Je sens mon cœur, et je connais les hommes,” declares Rousseau. “Je ne suis fait comme aucun de ceux que j’ai vus; j’ose croire n’être fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent.” (“Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence” (Rousseau 1996: 3). Hamilton probably has more claim to uniqueness than even Rousseau, but his distinctiveness is the source of confusion and anxiety as he grows up. The narrative arc of *The Speckled People*, the first of Hamilton’s two memoirs, is a movement from dread of being different to an acceptance of his uniqueness. “I don’t have to be like anyone else,” he will finally declare (*Speckled* 295), rejecting the pressures to conform that oppressed his childhood.

Fearful that the popular youth culture emerging in the 1960s will seduce their son and make him indistinguishable from the conformist mass of avid adolescent fans of rock ‘n’ roll, Hamilton’s parents insist on the importance of being different. “We don’t want you to become a *Mitläufer*, a run-along” (*Sailor* 67), says his mother, who has experienced the deadly consequences of an entire society submissive to the leadership of Adolf Hitler. His father, Hamilton notes, says that “it’s what happened to the Irish as well, when they started speaking English and were forced to run along after the British” (*Sailor* 67). Hamilton’s father and mother want him to share their pride in standing apart. Beyond the portals of his peculiar domestic redoubt in Dún Laoghaire, a suburb of Dublin, Hamilton is unlike anyone he knows, though, despite his parents’ admonition, he tries to resemble everyone he knows.

An example of his desperate need to fit in occurs when, as a teenager, he takes a job assisting a fisherman at the city’s harbor. However, when his mother comes to see him, he hides, anxious to conceal his relationship with this odd-looking woman emitting guttural sounds. “I could not let anyone know that I had a German mother,” Hamilton explains. “So I made her disappear out of my mind, out of my life completely. The language she was using was not my language” (*Sailor* 36–37). And yet German was his mother’s tongue and, as the language most often spoken within his family, his mother tongue. Irmgard gives her son access to her diaries, written in German, in order to enable him to understand her experience growing up in Germany in a family that was persecuted for refusing to accept Nazism. They cultivated a form of passive resistance that Irmgard calls “the silent negative” (*Speckled* 84, 141, 152). In her case, the silent negative meant mentally

injecting the word “not” into a mandatory pledge of allegiance to a figure she despised, saying: “I swear under oath that I will – NOT – serve the Führer as long as I live” (*Speckled* 84). The silent negative is a creative use of language that presages Hamilton’s own strategies for resolving his linguistic trilemma. Though strictly forbidden to speak English in his Irish-German home, he employs the silent negative by maintaining a running mental conversation with himself in the proscribed language.

In his account, Hamilton exaggerates his mother’s lingering angst over the burdens of her German heritage. Examining Irmgard née Kaiser’s six diaries, Dorothea Depner discovered that:

Her notebooks reinforce the impression of her as an ebullient, optimistic person, yet they contain few reflections on the Second World War and on German guilt, two major preoccupations attributed to her in *The Speckled People* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*. While Irmgard records her and her family’s losses during the war (both of material possessions and, in her uncle’s case, of status and employment, for which his widow was later compensated by the Federal Republic) and the hardships they suffered under Allied occupation, she makes no mention of the consequences of Nazi policies for others. She refers to Nazi crimes only twice, in the early 1960s, following Eichmann’s trial, and both times she quotes the opinions expressed by others. Although Irmgard is occasionally critical of developments in contemporary Germany, noting the surge of materialism and the simultaneous disappearance of traditional values and religion from the lives of her German relatives and friends in the 1950s and ‘60s, there is no sense that she bore her German identity as a stigma. (Depner 2014: 11)

Nevertheless, young Hamilton’s own command of his mother’s problematic language endangers him when, targeted as a Nazi because he speaks German, he is attacked in the streets by neighborhood thugs who call him “Eichmann” and taunt him with cries of “*Sieg Heil*” (*Speckled* 4). Moreover, neither is Hamilton eager to be seen in public with his father, lest he be forced to speak Irish, a quaint, archaic tongue that is a provocation to others and an embarrassment to him in 1960s Ireland.

Hamilton’s trilingual dilemma makes him unlike any other author. Breyten Breytenbach, Kamala Das, Eugene Jolas, Vladimir Nabokov and others have also mastered three languages, but not the combination of Irish-German-English; and none has been as conflicted as Hamilton over language choice. He is an uneasy fit within the company of such Irish novelists as John McGahern, Edna O’Brien, and Roddy Doyle, nor, despite sharing their language, does he have much in common with German novelists such as Günter Grass, Peter Schneider, and Christa Wolf. However, Hamilton has noted his affinity with Heinrich Böll, the German novelist who did not settle in Ireland, like Irmgard Kaiser Ó hUrmoltaigh, but who spent some time there in the 1950s and wrote about it. In the Introduction he contributed to the English translation of Böll’s *Irish Journal*,

Hamilton, who read the travel book, in German, shortly after it was published, notes that: “When I got the book to read as a boy, it turned me into a visitor in my own country” (Hamilton “Introduction” viii). Ireland is defamiliarized when described in a foreign language, though for Hamilton no language – not German, not the Irish derided by most Irish people, and not the English that is a colonial imposition – seems natural to his environment.

Outsiders in the Hamilton Oeuvre

To Hamilton, troubled by questions of nationality and language, it is problematic whether Ireland is more his own country than Germany or any other place. And his fiction often focuses on outsiders who cannot take culture or language for granted. That is certainly true of *Every Single Minute* (2014), a fictionalized account of the writer Nuala O’Faolain’s first and last visit to Berlin while she is dying of cancer. *Surrogate City* (1990) is narrated by an Irishman who lives in Germany and counts other expatriates among his friends. An outsider himself, Hamilton set two other novels – *The Last Shot* (1991) and *The Love Test* (1995) – in Germany.

But *Hand in the Fire* (2010) is probably the Hamilton novel that most resembles his memoirs in its defamiliarization of language and culture. Narrated by Vid Ćosić, a carpenter who has left Serbia for Ireland in hopes of erasing painful memories of the Yugoslav Wars, the novel treats customs and conventions that Dubliners take for granted and makes them strange. Vid is often confounded by what passes for humor in Ireland. “Hard for me to know where the boundary lay between a joke and an insult,” he observes (Hamilton *Hand* 32). Because Serbian is his native language, he is cautious in his use of English. “I was eager not to be misunderstood or misled, so I stuck to the expressions that give me least trouble,” he explains.

I was reluctant to abbreviate. I never allowed myself to use puns or play with people’s names. I tried to limit the amount of times I used words without meaning, such as ‘like’ or ‘you know.’ I was cautious with terms like ‘mega’ and ‘sketchy’ and ‘leggin it’ and ‘literally glued to the television.’ I didn’t trust myself saying things like ‘will you go away’ or ‘would you ever fuck off’ because I’m always afraid people might take it to heart. Besides, I can never pronounce the word ‘fuck’ properly. I make it sound too genuine. You have so many different ways of saying it in this country, I’ve given up trying. (Hamilton *Hand* 3)

Composed in English, Hamilton’s third language, *Hand in the Fire* is, like *The Speckled People* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, written as if in translation. It bears traces of other tongues.

The Tongue Set Free

Hamilton told an interviewer that: “My writing came from an attempt to explore that difficult issue of belonging. Was I Irish or was I German? Those were very troubled issues for me” (Randolph 2010: 34–35). However, the mathematics of Hamilton’s childhood is more complicated and painful than the binary division suggested by *A Memoir of a Half-Irish Childhood*, the subtitle Hamilton gave to *The Speckled People*. His coming of age in the Republic of Ireland is both more and less than half-Irish; Irish, German, and English each compete to silence the other two. “We don’t just have one language and one history,” Hamilton says of his family. “We sleep in German and we dream in Irish. We laugh in Irish and we cry in German. We are silent in German and we speak in English” (*Speckled* 283). Years later, Hamilton would summarize the chaos of his primal linguistic situation: “It was a confusion of languages, confusion between the inside of the house and the outside of the house, between my father’s idealism and my mother’s memories. There’s always been confusion in my life” (Hamilton “*The Speckled People* - A Conversation”). Using the Irish word *breac* – “it means speckled, dappled, flecked, spotted, coloured” (*Speckled* 7) – Hamilton’s father proclaims that: “We’re the speckled people . . . the ‘brack’ people. . .” (*Speckled* 7). And *The Speckled People* becomes the apt title for the first volume of Hamilton’s memoirs. If, as Yasemin Yildiz (2011) suggests, what she calls “the monolingual paradigm” is a myth of purity and integrity embraced by societies that endorse only one language, the trilingual Hamilton family celebrates its mottled state.

Hamilton begins *The Speckled People* with an epigraph from Elias Canetti’s own memoir. In the quoted passage, Canetti recounts a recurring childhood nightmare of elinguation, the excision of his tongue: “I wait for the command to show my tongue. I know he’s going to cut it off, and I get more and more scared each time” (Canetti 1999: 5). Like Hamilton, Canetti – who wrote in German, his fifth language, after Ladino, Bulgarian, English, and French – was a translingual, an author who wrote in a language other than his native one. Both Canetti and Hamilton share profound anxiety over the prospect of losing one’s tongue. However, each writer ultimately finds it liberating to live between languages, not to be confined to the prisonhouse of any single linguistic system. Canetti therefore titled the memoir from which Hamilton lifted his epigraph *Die Gerettete Zunge* (literally *The Rescued Tongue*, though rendered in the published English translation as *The Tongue Set Free*). Hamilton, too, will eventually, by the conclusion of his memoir project, find an imaginary free space beyond Irish, German, and even English, the language of his own memoirs. However, Hamilton’s autobiographical work testifies to the wrenching ordeal of translingualism.

“There is no language change without emotional consequences,” Kaplan contends. “Principally: loss” (Kaplan 1994: 63). Hamilton’s memoirs constitute a record of the ordeal entailed in switching languages, of forging an identity torn among the names Hugo, Johannes, Séan, and John. Because

German was what in Irish would be called his *máthairtheanga*, his maternal language, in German his *Muttersprache*, and Irish his father's, his *sermo patrius*, Hamilton's composition of his memoirs in English is an act of filial betrayal. They are the final assertion of linguistic freedom by an author bullied throughout childhood into shunning English, at the same time as they emphasize the spaces between languages and the inadequacy of any one language. Although Hamilton's trilingual triangulation constitutes a unique case, it raises pointed general questions about the relationships between language and personal and national identity and the uses of language to interrogate language.

Hamilton grows up with both gendered and politicized views of languages. He identifies himself as “the son of a German woman who was shamed in front of the world” (*Sailor* 7). The most traumatic personal memory that his mother passes on to him is of her rape by a Nazi businessman, and he associates their common language, German, with femininity and its violation. Though he is himself persecuted by neighborhood bullies as a presumed Nazi brute, German and Germany in his eyes belong to his vulnerable but loving mother's world. Irish is the language of his father, whom he most succinctly describes as “an Irishman who is refusing to surrender to the British” (*Sailor* 7). Séan Ó hUrmoltaigh is portrayed as an angry man who is quick to administer corporal punishment and was one of the founders of the Aiséirí, a quasi-fascist Irish nationalist movement inspired in part by Nazism. When, plotting to free Ulster from British rule, the movement embraces violence, Séan drops out, but his continued insistence on speaking Irish remains a vestige of his political defiance, one that he himself eventually comes to recognize is doomed to defeat. Similarly, the collapse of the Third Reich meant the decline of German as an instrument of empire. Thus, for their impressionable son, both father and mother speak languages of submission. “I know what it's like to lose,” Hamilton writes, “because I'm Irish and I'm German” (*Speckled* 122).

Hamilton's father is ashamed of the memory of his own father, banishing all traces of the man from his household, except for an old photograph of him in a naval uniform that he hides away in a wardrobe; Hugo Hamilton's grandfather is “the sailor in the wardrobe” from whom the title of his second memoir is derived. Instead of resisting foreign domination, John Hamilton had acceded to English and even served in the British navy. Developing his own pubescent identity, Hugo Hamilton must learn to negotiate between maternal and paternal languages and the language of the Dublin streets. He will end up duplicating his grandfather's choice, changing his name from Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh to Hugo Hamilton and forging a literary career in English.

In the Republic of Ireland in which Hamilton grows up, only a few decades after its independence, English, the colonial language, is the dominant form of communication, despite the proclamation in Article 8 of the Irish Constitution that: “Ós í an Ghaeilge an teanga náisiúnta is í an phríomhtheanga oifigiúil í” (Bunreacht 9) – i.e., “The Irish language as the national language is

the first official language” (Bunreacht 8). Yet, except for rural enclaves, called the Gaeltacht, where it persisted as the vernacular, the ancestral language was, during the 1950s and 1960s when Hamilton was growing up, on the verge of extinction. Even today, despite determined efforts by government and educational authorities to revive and promote the language, Irish is a national language whose nation venerates it too much to use. The Web site *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* reports that, though 1,167,940 people have taken up Irish as a second language, the census of native speakers has now dwindled to only 138,000, a number small enough to imperil its continuing transmission as a living tongue.

Flying by the Nets of Language and Nation

The point made by Hamilton’s father that: “. . . your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag” (*Speckled* 3) is so important that the son later reiterates: “My father wants all the Irish people to cross back over into the Irish language so he made it a rule that we can’t speak English, because your home is your language and he wants us to be Irish and not British” (*Speckled* 12). Still later, he repeats: “. . . it’s important to work hard and invent lots of new things in Ireland and fight for small languages that are dying out. Because your language is your home and your language is your country” (*Speckled* 161). Hamilton’s memoirs, composed in English, mark him as a troubled traitor who will not pledge unequivocal allegiance to the flag of his father’s nation. “I always have to remember that I speak English most of the time,” Hamilton told an interviewer. “It’s the language that was forbidden to me as a child. So effectively I’m living in a foreign language. It’s almost like a fictional language. It’s as if I lived a version of myself that’s made up” (Hamilton “*The Speckled People - A Conversation*”). The belief that writing in English is a betrayal not only of Hamilton’s father but also of his nation is complicated by the fact that his father’s language, Irish, is not in practice the language of Ireland. Hamilton is left with the sense that choosing *any* language is an act of disloyalty.

The sense that a translingual author creates a new self by adopting a new language is affirmed when Karen Blixen became Isak Dinesen in English, rather than her native Danish, and Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes became S.Y. Agnon in Hebrew, rather than his native Yiddish. Brian O’Nolan became Myles na gCopaleen in Irish and Flann O’Brien in English. All autobiographical writing is in effect a reconstruction of the self. However, composed in English, a language that was banished from his childhood, Hamilton’s memoirs of growing up are even more poignantly factitious than most others. The language he uses to convey his childhood is the not the languages in which he experienced it.

The possibility that language can be a choice and not a mere legacy is made vivid during a dinnertime scene about halfway through *The Speckled People*. The entire family – mother, father, and three children – is seated at the table, and Hamilton’s mother serves something unusual, sliced

tongue with cabbage. The metonymic association of cow's tongue with speech is made explicit when Hamilton's older brother Franz quips: ". . . if you eat a cow's tongue, will you start saying moo" (*Speckled* 162). The children dislike the rubbery taste of tongue, but their parents insist that they eat it anyway. However, it soon becomes clear that the parents do not care for the tongue either, and Irmgard tells the children they can leave the rest of the meat as long as they eat the cabbage. The chapter ends with mother's promise "that we will never have to eat tongue as long as we live" (*Speckled* 163). It is not as easy for Hamilton to keep Irish and German out of his mouth.

In another of the most memorable episodes in *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, Hamilton surreptitiously violates one of the household taboos. His father installs a state-of-the-art music system in order to be able to enjoy the German and Irish performances he loves. To ensure that no one tampers with it, Séan hides the key to the cabinet. One day, while his father is out of the house, Hamilton finds the key and plays the phonograph. However, not only does he risk his father's wrath merely for opening the music cabinet without permission; what he uses it to play is a Beatles song, "Don't Let Me Down," the B-side to the single "Get Back." Playing the song at high volume over and over again, Hamilton experiences guilty pleasure at hearing John Lennon's English words reverberate throughout a house in which that language is *verboten*. By playing "Don't Let Me Down," Hamilton is in effect letting his Anglophobic father down, but he revels in the naughty thrill of indulging in what has been forbidden.

When he has finished listening, Hamilton takes great care to remove any trace that he has gained access to his father's music system. However, later, at dinner, he realizes – too late – that he has forgotten one crucial incriminating detail; he left the Beatles record itself on Séan's precious turntable! When his father finds the record, he affects an air of forbearance toward "Na Ciaróga," as he calls the Beatles in Irish. Séan insists that father and son now listen together to "Don't Let Me Down." And then he plays his own recording of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf singing German lieder. Following that, Hamilton's father asks his son: "With your hand on your heart, which do you think is the better music?" (*Sailor* 69). When Hamilton chooses the Beatles over Schwarzkopf, his father, enraged, exclaims that: "John Lennon is the last nail in the coffin for the Irish language" (*Sailor* 71). Séan is not convinced when his son, defending Lennon, points out that: "He's half Irish. . . . His mother is Irish" (*Sailor* 69). Trying to minimize the importance of language, Hugo argues that: "I know the songs are in English, but he's really singing in Irish underneath" (*Sailor* 70). He is hinting at a Chomskyan view that, at the deepest level, we all speak the same Ur-language. But, aligning himself with the rock 'n' roll counterculture of the 1960s, he is also rationalizing his adolescent rebellion against his father's preferences.

A coal delivery provides another example of linguistic overlap. To ensure the accuracy of the price that the Ó hUrmoltaigh family is charged for the coal, the number of empty sacks is counted twice – once in German by Franz and Hugo and once in English by the deliveryman. As if the differences among English, German, and Irish are merely superficial, Hamilton is pleased to note that: “it was the same number no matter what language” (*Speckled* 59). By contrast, Hamilton’s father dreads the prospect of a world in which languages have ceased to be distinct. “One day there will be only one language and everybody will be lost” (*Speckled* 162), he laments, clinging to Irish as an obstacle to the Esperantization of global communications.

Polyglot from an early age, Hugo Hamilton has the freedom to choose among languages, if not within his father’s household, at least within the theater of his own mind, where he continually conducts internal conversations in English. As a writer, he will choose English over Irish and German, for his autobiographies, the nine novels, and the collection of short stories he has thus far published. But ultimately, he aspires to a condition beyond any one language or country. It is because of Hamilton’s linguistic and political homelessness that Aoileann Ní Éigearthaigh can declare that: “Hamilton constitutes a fascinating example of a ‘transcultural personality,’ growing up in a family whose values and tropes of identity were unrecognised by, and unacceptable to, the surrounding culture” (Ní Éigearthaigh 2010: 114). If indeed “your language is your country,” Hamilton is a cosmopolitan who yearns for a space between and beyond national boundaries, a utopia in the root sense of a state of mind that is no place. Frustrated by having to choose between Lennon and Schwarzkopf, Hamilton wants both, but he is powerless to explain to his father the cosmopolitan urge to inhabit a realm defined by aesthetics, not linguistics or geopolitics: “I want to tell him that people like John Lennon and Ernest Hemingway and Franz Kafka are living in the same country now. It’s the country I belong to as well, one without any flag” (*Sailor* 75). By the conclusion of *The Speckled People*, Hamilton has come to embrace the panlingual utopia of his imagination. “I’m not afraid any more of being German or Irish, or anywhere in between,” he writes.

Maybe your country is only a place you make up in your own mind. Something you dream about and sing about. Maybe it’s not a place on the map at all, but just a story full of people you meet and places you visit, full of books and films you’ve been to. (*Speckled* 295)

Hamilton has rejected the *Vaterland* and the *Muttersprache*, the *athartha* and the *teanga athair*, in order to dwell in the domain of artistic expression. In English, a language whose nationalist identity and colonialist history he tries to ignore.

Hamilton’s feckless father (who dies when attacked by a swarm of bees he was gathering in his apiary on the roof of their house) is a failure at devising money-making schemes to sell crucifixes and toy trolleys. However, he is a trained engineer, and, when a problem develops with the national

power grid, he is called in to solve it. No one can figure out why an English transformer cannot be made to work in series with a German transformer to generate electricity for Ireland. Séan spends many days pondering why one machine is unable to talk to the other. Rejecting any supernatural explanation that would attribute some devious motive to the transformers, he insists that machines are tools that will react predictably to human agency. “Under the right conditions, with no obstacles in the way,” he explains to his family, “a machine will do as it is told in any language” (*Sailor* 235). Listening to that statement, the family is shocked to realize that, for the first time anyone can remember, Séan is speaking English within their house.

Part of the reason for slipping into English might simply be his excitement at figuring out exactly why the transformers are not running in tandem; both have dials, but the German one is set to run clockwise and the English counter-clockwise. However, the insight that “a machine will do as it is told in any language” undercuts the rationale for cultivating different languages. Even an Irish patriot recognizes that English will do at least as well as Irish for discussing a technological problem. The scene helps prepare Hamilton for asserting his freedom from Ireland and Irish but, most importantly, his rejection of subservience to any particular nation or language. It is a faint echo of Ireland’s most celebrated exiles, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, who spent their careers in other countries speaking other languages. “I grew up with Joyce and Beckett,” Hamilton told an interviewer. “It is very hard to avoid Joyce. He’s in the atmosphere all around here even where I grew up” (Randolph 2010: 34).

Rebelling against the constrictions of an Irish identity, Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus proclaims: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (Joyce 1992: 157). Like *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*, Hamilton’s autobiographical volumes constitute a bildungsroman / künstlerroman that concludes with a declaration of independence. *A Portrait* opens, famously, with a young boy’s perspective: “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and the moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo . . .” (Joyce 1992: 3). Like Joyce, Hamilton begins with a passive child’s eye view. From the first sentence of *The Speckled People*—“When you’re small you know nothing” (*Speckled* 1)—he recreates the perspective of a powerless boy who has no choice but to accept the political and linguistic dimensions of his universe. He is caught in the nets of nation and language. However, by the final page of the entire project, he is aspiring to a post-national, post-lingual condition. At the end of *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, Séan Ó hUrmoltaigh is dead, and his prodigal son has left Dublin for Berlin. Hugo Hamilton affirms that: “Now I want to belong to the same country as Bob Dylan and Dostoevsky and Fassbinder” (*Sailor* 263). In the distant country he longs for, all conflicts between languages will be resolved and the separate selves pulling at Hugo Hamilton will be reconciled. Until then, the author keeps writing.

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