
The Speckled People

Hugo Hamilton

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Born in 1953, Hugo Hamilton is one of the big names in contemporary Irish literature. Famous for his short stories and novels, such as *Dublin Where the Palm Trees Grow* (short stories, 1996), *Surrogate City* (novel, 1990), *The Last Shot* (novel, 1991), *Sad Bastard* (crime comic novel, 1998) and *Every Single Minute* (novel, 2014), among others, the publication of *The Speckled People*, which is a memoir, expanded his work and his name to a broader audience.

Roddy Doyle said that the work is “a wonderful, subtle, problematic and humane book. It is about Ireland as well as about a particular family, but it is also about alternatives and complexities anywhere. It is about the speckled nature of the world.”

The writer’s mother was a German who visited Ireland in 1949, met an Irishman, married him and settled in what would be her new country. The man was a strict nationalist and very hard on his children whom he prevented from speaking English: German and Irish were the only languages they were allowed to speak. This situation is a leitmotiv in Hamilton’s output and the basis of *The Speckled People*.

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What we find on the surface is the story of a family in Ireland, during the late 1950s. In a deeper stage the text is a meditation on a writer's essential tool: language. The book opens with a rather enigmatic epigraph by Elias Canetti, "I wait for the command to show my tongue. I know he is going to cut it off, and I get more and more scared each time." It is a statement that the narrator quotes symbolically, as the starting point of a fine piece of literature.

By depicting his parents and their interaction with their four children, the narrator gives an account of that rich and, somewhat, complex process which is implied in an encounter of different cultures. The personal story of the father and the mother (her own family's critical relationship with Nazi anti-Semitism) would justify independent stories. But here the central question is another one, and it is clearly expressed in chapter two:

It's forbidden to speak in English in our house. My father wants all the Irish people to cross back over into the Irish language so he made a rule that we can't speak English, because your home is your language and he wants us to be Irish and not British. My mother doesn't know how to make rules like that, because she's German and has nothing against the British. She has her own language and came to Ireland to learn English in the first place. (pp. 12-13).

They are, according to the writer's father, "the speckled people": "the new Irish, partly from Ireland, partly from somewhere else, half-Irish and half-German." (p. 7).

In chapter seven the narrator reveals what appears to be essential in the way the Irish make use of language:

She [the mother] says it's hard to understand what's going on in people's heads in Ireland. She says Irish people dance with their heads and speak with their feet. [...] They like to keep everything inside. She says German people say what they

think and Irish people keep it to themselves. [...] In Germany, she says, people think before they speak so that they mean what they say, while in Ireland, people think after they speak so as to find out what they mean. *In Ireland the words never touch the ground.*" (My emphasis, p. 57).

The statement is probably referred to the Irish-English variation (also called "Green English"), a particular version of the English language, intensely influenced by the Irish one, which is *oblique*. There is a philosophy of language under this practice: the idea that words are hardly able to convey what we call "reality".

A touching lyrical sequence related to the tradition that assumes that "you can't keep people from talking in the grave", and "that all the people who died in the Irish famine are still talking" (p. 71) is one of the milestones. The concept is real Irish, and the fact that Hamilton was able to express this magic dimension of life in such an eloquent way shows that he is not only a great narrator but a poet as well.

Language and its (im)possibilities, language as a problem, pervade the whole text, combining funny and dramatic situations with ideas and reflections. Language and life, we learn, are linked. The message is so effective that the particular story becomes universal.