

Displacement, identity and language in Hugo Hamilton

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The purpose of this article ¹ is to investigate the relationship between language and identity in Hugo Hamilton's fiction, with a view to considering language as central to the issue of displacement in Irish culture. In order to do so I will focus on the novel *Sad Bastard*, published in 1998, and the memoir *The Speckled People*, 2003, whose text analysis can provide interesting insights in the way language, identity and displacement are inter-connected. Interestingly, both works have a companion: *Sad Bastard* is a sequel to *Headbanger* (1997) as both novels have the same protagonist, Pat Coyne, whereas *The Speckled People* was followed in 2006 by another memoir, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* ².

The author explores the concept of displacement, a *topos* of Irish literature which has been expressed in a variety of ways, from a new perspective. Seen as a consequence of the dispossession of the Irish language, the issue of displacement has been perceived as a deeply felt estrangement from the language of one's ancestors, with the deriving sense of inadequacy towards the language of the 'rulers'. This is accompanied by a related sense of enduring loss of a patrimony which could never be restored and has been expressed as a general sense of being marginalised from one's origins and culture by an external core of power, as well as nostalgia for a centre of belonging, in which one's real and one's emotional roots could at last coincide. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the meaning of displacement in Hamilton's work takes a

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² Henceforth, quotations from Hugo Hamilton's works will be followed by the abbreviation, in brackets, of their title, followed by the page number. Here are the abbreviations used: *TLS* for *The Last Shot*, *H* for *Headbanger*, *SB* for *Sad Bastard*, *TSP* for *The Speckled People* and *TSW* for *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*.

very personal value which makes it different from past instances, mainly because the reasons for displacement have changed. The speaking voice is no longer subject to an external cultural, literary and linguistic authority, representing the centre from which it is excluded, rather, exclusion comes from the inside, from the perspective of an insider that is also an outsider.

Hugo Hamilton was born into an Irish-German family and was brought up speaking Irish and German, while strictly forbidden from speaking English at home. His upbringing was intended to be the answer to live issues of the twentieth century Irish cultural and linguistic debate. Ireland and Germany, the two poles of his identity as far as place is concerned, are ever present in his work. Instead of being a source of enrichment, however, this difference in origins turned out to be a source of displacement, of never feeling safely or definitely at home. This leads to the emphasis given to the concept of 'home' in his works: what home is, what it means, where it is, where his characters can find it, and how the self can finally find its own internal 'home', a privileged 'locus' where its needs and pains can be accommodated. *The Speckled People* ends on this note, stating that 'home' has not yet been found, although the journey towards it has started: "We're trying to go home now. We're still trying to find our way home, but sometimes it's hard to know where that is any more" (*TSP*: 296).

Home is repeatedly equated with language and country, causing an unending re-adjustment to the young Hanno's whereabouts. Shifting from one language to another for him means shifting from one country to another. The protagonist is continuously moving from Germany to Ireland to the 'new Ireland' his father wanted to create, continuously displaced, like the Irish people who

didn't know where they were going any more, because the names of the streets and villages were changed into English. People lost their way because they didn't recognize the landscape around them. [...] My father says the Irish were all stumbling around, not knowing who they were or who they were talking to. They could not find their way home. They were homeless. And that was the worst pain of all, to be lost and ashamed and homesick. (*TSP*: 160)

In Hugo Hamilton's work there is a sort of obsession with identity and with what constitutes it: language, memory, the past, heritage and nationhood are interlinked with home and displacement. His writing is characterised by a continuous and pervasive exploration of both personal and communal identity. In line with the Irish tradition, personal identity is continuously related and tightly connected to national identity. Personal identity is always at stake, and Hanno, the young protagonist of *The Speckled People*, relates himself repeatedly to his father: "You always have to walk like yourself, not

like your father or the crabs, just like yourself” (*TSP*: 27). One of the difficult tasks he has to perform is finding out what walking like himself means, because, at the beginning of the memoir and throughout it, he admits to ‘not knowing’: “When you’re small you know nothing” (*TSP*: 1). The web of interweaving ingredients constituting identity is expressed, in his works, through the use of autobiographical elements, both as thematic nuclei, or as linguistic repetitions establishing links and cross-connections in his fiction, thus testifying to the centrality of this issue in Hamilton’s production. They are used over and over again and are continuously reworked, so as to constitute the core of his narrative, being at times the nucleus of a short story, at others inserted in a novel, or exploited as part of the narrative of the self. An example is the episode of the “Nazi Christmas”, which is a short story in the collection *Dublin where the Palm Trees Grow* (1996) and also represents a focal moment in *The Speckled People*. Furthermore, the words “Dublin where the Palm Trees Grow” – the title of his short story collection and also, slightly changed, of the short story “In Dublin where the Palm Trees Grow” in the same volume – are uttered by Hanno’s mother in *The Speckled People* (*TSP*: 4)³. Another episode which is re-elaborated and re-used is the one narrated in “The Irish Worker”, a short-story in the collection and also an episode with a workman as the protagonist remembered by Hanno in the memoir. A further instance of Hamilton’s particular use of autobiographical material is the episode of the schoolboy punched in the school-yard while eating his sandwich in *Sad Bastard*, a turning point in Coyne’s psychotherapy, which also returns, with some differences, in *The Speckled People*. Not only do episodes – or what have been called here ‘thematic nuclei’ – recur, transformed, in Hamilton’s writing, but small items are also re-used. For example, the town of Kempen, Hanno’s mother’s hometown, is also the hometown of Bertha Sommer in *The Last Shot*. Both Hanno’s mother and Bertha Sommer have to go back home from Czech territory at the end of the Second World War. Incidentally, Berta (without the ‘h’) is also the name of Hanno’s maternal grandmother. Moreover, this exact phrase – “the last shot”, the title of his 1991 novel – also appears in the same text: “who knows where the last shot of the Second World War was fired?” (*TLS*: 3) and again in the memoir *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, 2006, almost unvaried: “the last shot being fired” (*TSW*: 2). These are just a few examples of many, which highlight a characteristic of Hamilton’s writing.

In addition to re-using the same material, there is another trait common to both the texts by Hamilton under scrutiny, namely that the author

³ Palm trees are also evoked by his father in chapter 16: “people had started growing palm trees in their gardens” (*TSP*: 138).

transfers the same features to different characters in different kinds of narrative – fiction vs. memoir. For example, the main characters of the two texts looked at here, but also of the whole set of the four works – the two novels, *Headbanger* and *Sad Bastard*, and the two memoirs, *The Speckled People* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* – share specific traits. There are many similarities between the figure of Pat Coyne's father in *Headbanger* and Hanno's father:

Maybe it was the way Coyne was brought up. Maybe it was the passionate severity of his father that made him the way he was. His father had come to Dublin from West Cork to claim his part in the making of a new Ireland. An Irish, Catholic Ireland. With his job in the Civil Service, Coyne's father began to involve his family in a personal crusade for the language. He would shape the new Ireland through his own kids, turning them into native Irish speakers. Making them speak Irish on the buses, like aliens in their own land. (*H*: 33)

If these similarities seem to establish a relationship between Pat Coyne's father and Jack Hamilton, a more obvious connection develops in the texts under scrutiny between Pat Coyne himself and the latter, as both of them are conscious of their roles as fathers. Furthermore, they share the same obsessions: with the past, with identity, with language or with the language of identity. If Hamilton's writing is indeed very much about fathers and sons, about impossible fathers as well as maladjusted sons, it is also pervaded by the inextricable nets of memory, the past and personal and communal identity.

Memory, the past, the need to forget, and the impossibility to do so pervade Hamilton's fiction. Hanno's parents, in *The Speckled People*, are claustrophobically trapped in their own past – so much so that verbs like “escape” or “trapped” recur frequently. His mother is trapped in her bad film in Germany, which never seems to come to a conclusion: years afterwards “she still had the feeling that she was trapped ... as though the film is never over and she'll never escape” (*TSP*: 19). It's as if she “was trapped inside German history and couldn't get out of it” (*TSP*: 22).

His father, conversely, has trapped himself in what he sees as the nightmare of Irish history; though different, both their entrapments permeate their present.

Jack Hamilton changed his name into Irish, becoming Séan Ó hUrmol-*taigh*, because “Our name is proof of who we are and how Irish we are. [...] Your name is important. It's like your face or your smile or your skin” (*TSP*: 108). He is trapped in the wrongs endured by his own country and its people throughout history. He has taken a stand: the responsibility for setting them right, programmatically undoing what history has brought about. He thus reverses the *topos* of the idealization of Ireland, or the recreation in memory of “*an idea of Ireland*” (Kiberd 1996: 2) so disseminated in Irish literature,

and replaces it with the ideal of a clearly planned country: Ireland as it should be. He calls it the 'new Ireland' – "he would rather show us the future" (*TSP*: 37) – a new country that would redeem the losses and the defeats of the history of real Ireland. As he realises, however, that the people as a whole were not yet ready to subscribe to his plan – they clung to English for example, or did not want to buy Irish – he focused his dream project primarily on his family. They were intended to be the starting cell of a new society that would impress a different course on history. As a matter of fact, a refrain of this text is that his father is "still angry at all the things that are not finished yet in Ireland" (*TSP*: 2). His home thus becomes the workshop of his experiment, the stage where individual lives are called upon to make up for the shortcomings of Irish history. His father's up-bringing programme therefore represents an answer to and a vindication of the Irish past.

Also Pat Coyne, the mentally fragile ex Garda protagonist of *Sad Bastard*, "had a fixation with the past" (*SB*: 6); he "was besieged by the past" (*SB*: 73); for him "the past was far more real [...] than the present" (*SB*: 115); to him "the past was like a lost lover" (*SB*: 116). The point with Coyne is that "you could never escape history" (*SB*: 115); likewise, Coyne as a Garda and Jack Hamilton as a patriarch are somehow and in different ways figures of authority, who necessarily have to come to terms with the obsession that history has become.

The problem facing Hanno, therefore, is not so much his own need to reconnect to the past, but rather his parents' and their uneasy relationship with it. Actually, he wants to get rid of it: "When I grow up I'll run away from my story, too. I have things I want to forget, so I'll change my name and never come back" (*TSP*: 37). The first-person speaking voice of *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006), a growing Hanno, or Hanno after *The Speckled People*, states his need to forget the past in order to "become innocent" (*TSW*: 1), in contrast to his parents' clinging to it. Indeed, history for him is "like an original sin" (*TSW*: 1). A variation, or so it seems, of Stephen Dedalus' claim: "History [...] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (Joyce 1986: 28).

Events from Irish history are continuously referred to in the family; they are part of everyday discourse, as if, again, they belonged to an extended present. His father claimed that until Ireland had "its own language and its own inventions" (*TSP*: 38), it "didn't really exist at all. It only existed in the minds of emigrants looking back, or in the minds of idealists looking forward. Far back in the past or far away in the future, Ireland only existed in songs" (*TSP*: 38). It is the emigrants' songs that he wants to stop, while also wanting to bring people over to Ireland, "So that's why he married my mother and now she's the one who does all the dreaming and singing about being

away from home. It's my mother who left her own native shores" (*TSP*: 33).

Personal perspectives and personal stories are not so much set against the background of Irish history, rather, Irish history is so deeply rooted in the pattern of the protagonists' daily lives that it becomes part of individual discourse. So, for example, the Easter Rising is evoked in relation to children's games, thus producing a comic effect: "You have to try not to throw the rockets up so high because the bang frightens old women and makes them think the Easter Rising is coming back again" (*TSP*: 45). In *Sad Bastard* too, Pat Coyne is continuously engaged in a dialogue with Irish rebel history: "He found himself marching towards Hogan's mansion – a land agitator finally driven by the limits of endurance to confront his landlord" (*SB*: 140). Like the children, he too effaces degrees of relevance, with comic results: "Republican underwear. The wearing of the green" (*SB*: 57). History is thus demythologised in an attempt to keep it under control. Likewise, Hanno's father tries to keep even his personal history under control. His compulsion to remember goes hand in hand with a parallel compulsion to selectively forget. This results in his unflinching decision to cancel the very memory of his own father – "he buried his past" (*TSP*: 41) – whom he cannot forgive for his service in the British Navy, in spite of the fact that he served before Ireland's independence. In his opinion this guilt could only be expiated through a total cancellation of his father's memory, upon whom no words were bestowed, and of whose existence the children were unaware. As a result, even his picture lies locked at the bottom of the wardrobe. After finding it and being rebuked, the children are forced to silence and, consequently, to forget the sailor with "soft eyes" (*TSP*: 11). Family history, and thus personal history, turns into amnesia: "We didn't know how to remember him, and like him, we lost our memory" (*TSP*: 15). The amplification given to national history turns into silence when this area of Jack Hamilton's private history comes under focus, as he is the authority presiding over what to remember and what to forget.

The issues of history and language clearly contribute to the making of identity and to the feeling of displacement in Hanno's case. History, the past and its heritage, which is explored in many ways, often through the investigation of clichés, are directly connected to Irishness. For example, in *Sad Bastard* the *topos* of Ireland as female is evoked: "Soon he would not recognize her, just as he could no longer recognize the Irish landscape" (*SB*: 116). Likewise, references to ancient Irish literature and myth are sarcastically made in the parallelism between Pat Coyne's son, Jimmy, and his lover Nurse Irene Boland, and the mythical characters of Diarmuid and Gráinne. Being pursued by criminals, they consider themselves "a perfect couple as long as they remained in hiding and eluded their pursuers. Like Diarmuid and Gráinne" (*SB*: 157-158).

Pat Coyne continuously measures present-day consumerist Ireland against the standard of past rural Ireland; from Irish dancing to building developments, everything seems to him an utter rejection of true Irish values – “what evolutionary platform had the Irish arrived at now, Coyne thought. Their identity was what they purchased” (*SB*: 54). He longs for “the glorious pre-television peak of Irish civilization” (*SB*: 115).

Like Hanno’s father, Pat Coyne “was requesting the impossible. Trying to preserve everything like a museum. Begging the people of Ireland to wear the old clothes” (*SB*: 116).

For both characters Irish identity is both burdensome and unattainable, even though it lies at the core of their own personal identity. Hanno’s father holds the conviction that until he finishes his work “to show them how to be Irish” (*TSP*: 159), people in Ireland “were homeless. And that was the worst pain of all, to be lost and ashamed and homesick” (*TSP*: 160). The Hamilton family is haunted by the idea that “we’ll never be Irish enough” (*TSP*: 7), and the children are dutifully sent to Connemara, in the Gaeltacht, in order to learn “to be as Irish as possible” (*TSP*: 230). Coyne too remembers time spent in the same place – Béal an Daingin – in Connemara as a boy: “Coyne had inherited a lament in his head. It was the lonely echo of the Irish language across the Connemara shoreline. He could only think of what was gone, keeping faith with what had disappeared” (*SB*: 51).

The obsession of being ‘totally’ Irish is at times exhilarating in *Sad Bastard*, a peak being the contest of Irishness at the pub, where two Dubliners, who have moved to Germany for work and have married there, are challenged as to their Irishness:

McCurtain [...] Wouldn’t believe that the men were local.
You’re not fuckin’ Irish, he bawled. No way.
Bloody sure we are. [...]
Would you shag off! [...]
I swear to Jaysus. My passport has a fuckin’ harp on it [...].
But it was a big mistake to defend your origins in the Anchor Bar. (*SB*: 131)

The men are challenged to show their real Irish “origins”, so they sing an Irish song, managing to remember its words. This seems not to be enough:

But even then, they didn’t look Irish enough for McCurtain. I mean, how Irish do you have to be? [...]
Fuck off, one of them retorted. I’m as Irish as a Hiace van.
Ah! McCurtain exclaimed. Now why didn’t you say that in the first place? At last he began to believe them. The Hiace van. A true icon of Irish life.
[...] Hyundai and Hiace suddenly became more indigenous than the Irish themselves. (*SB*: 131)

Symbols of consumerism – besides the Hiace van, the villas on Achill island, or golf, that Coyne hates as an emblem of what he considers a fake society – seem to have replaced the traditional features of Irishness. So much so, that even the anti-consumerist character *par excellence* in the novel, ‘the poet’, does not manage to grasp the meaning of Irish identity, grossly misunderstanding it, when he takes the Romanian young woman as the emblem of Irish womanhood: “Raven black hair, he said. Sign of true Celtic blood” (SB: 103).

The figure of the poet, a bard often living in the mists of alcoholic creativity, in turn, brings up another feature of Irishness, that is, literature. Like ancient bards, he loftily composes his poems and curses his ‘enemy’ for assaulting him. In this novel the author also engages in an ongoing dialogue with major Irish authors, sometimes with explicit quotations – which are never acknowledged as such, therefore never in quotes – other times with allusions. William Butler Yeats and James Joyce are referred to as the presiding authorities of Irish literature. Since parody is the dominant stylistic register in *Sad Bastard*, pervading all areas of the novel, the quotations from other writers are often used with a parodic function and are part of the textual structure of the novel. In particular, implicit and indirect quotations are part of the text, so that well-known lines, phrases, or expressions seem to have become part of everyday colloquial language and lose their status as sources. For example, one of Yeats’s most famous lines from “Sailing to Byzantium” is reversed with the juxtaposition to derogatory language: “Mackerel-crowded seas, my arse” (SB: 12). This is anticipated by the imagery of fishing at the beginning of the novel, when the business of transporting illegal Romanian immigrants into Ireland – Hanno’s father’s project of bringing people over to Ireland come true – is discussed. In order to introduce his new activity, the ‘criminal’ Mongi O Doherty claims that fishing has “become an extinguished way of life belonging to the last century” (SB: 12). The Nobel poet is quoted again when the combination of qualities (“cold and passionate”) he so valued are attributed to the fragile and mythomaniac Pat Coyne: “Coyne the mountainy man, as cold and passionate as the dawn” (SB: 66), where the reference is to the idealized (for Yeats, not for Hamilton) figure of the fisherman. *Sad Bastard* resonates with references to Irish literature, thus showing the author’s literary awareness; Joyce is also not spared a parodic touch: “Coyne was wandering around the area as though his life was one big Bloomsday, getting in touch with the real world” (SB: 19), while again, Coyne’s overflowing emotions are expressed as “The great posthumous friendship between the living and the dead” (SB: 50). The implicit reference to the wandering rocks in *Ulysses* here has the function of demythologizing Bloomsday as one of the further obsessions of Dublin life and history, while the partial quotation

from “The Dead” plays with the figure of Joyce reducing it to one of the fragments composing Irish history and identity.

At the same time the ghosts of the great Irish writers as masters of words are part of the subtext of the novel, because *The Speckled People* is, above all, a book about language: about speaking the right language, speaking the wrong language, or speaking the forbidden language. Therefore, it is also about the power of words, which can create countries and stories, but which can also become prisons, like the wardrobe in which the Hamilton children are trapped at the beginning of the memoir. They call for help, “But nobody could hear us, [...] because they could only hear things that were said in English. Nobody even knew that we were calling for help, because we had the wrong words. We were the children in the wardrobe” (*TSP*: 14).

For his first memoir, *The Speckled People*, the author chooses an epigraph taken from Elias Canetti’s *The Tongue Set Free*. The passage chosen by Hamilton – “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” – amplifies the sense of menace and of impending danger experienced by the child, feelings shared by Hanno in *The Speckled People*. If Canetti’s child is frightened by the threat of having his tongue cut off, the imposed silence as a consequence of metaphorical maiming continuously haunts Hanno. The quotation in the epigraph fulfils what Genette defines as the second and “sans doute la plus canonique” function of epigraphs: “elle consiste en un commentaire du texte, dont elle précise ou souligne indirectement la signification” (Genette 1987: 146), while at the same time strengthening the emotional effect of the words. Canetti’s title, on the other hand, seems to raise a glimmer of hope: the tongue of his title is “set free” in English, or “gerettet” in German, that is, saved. Finally, the very fact of choosing one of the major autobiographies of the twentieth century as the source for his epigraph seems to express Hamilton’s ambitions, or, at least, to point to a model. As a paratextual element, the epigraph is particularly significant, as it sheds light on autobiography and memoir as a crucible for identity and/or displacement.

However, because in *The Speckled People* the tongue is neither “gerettet” nor “set free” yet, the children and their mother are often condemned to silence: “In our house, it’s dangerous to sing a song or say what’s inside your head. You have to be careful or else my father will get up and switch you off like the radio” (*TSP*: 80). In Hamilton’s memoirs a link is established between the impossibility or the prohibition to speak and the seemingly opposite urge to tell stories. The dynamics between silence and speech marks narration as a sort of necessary way out from forced silence, both for his mother and for him. “Maybe the reason why people are good at stories”, like his mother, who can cure her children with them, “is that they sometimes have

things they can't tell, things they must keep secret at all costs and make up for in other ways" (*TSP*: 19-20). Hanno sees the world in a perspective of communication, which is mostly hindered, and so he even projects his need to express himself fully, and at times other than in words, on his father: "as if he wanted to send a message around the whole world with smoke" (*TSP*: 31). Hanno's mother's way of forcing the bonds that keep her trapped in her German past is her "*lettetetting* on her own" because

there's a story that she can't tell anyone, not even my father. You can't be afraid of silence, she says. And stories that you have to write down are different to stories that you tell people out loud, because they're harder to explain and you have to wait for the right moment. The only thing she can do is to write them down on paper for us to read later on. (*TSP*: 68)

The writing of her diary is a sort of therapy for her, words find a way out in silence and out of silence: "she's downstairs again, clacking on the typewriter, putting down all the things that she can't say to anyone, not even my father. Things you can't say in a song or a story, only on the typewriter for people to read later on sometime, on their own, without looking into your eyes" (*TSP*: 147). Her diary, which also records world events, is a legacy for her children.

The Speckled People, then, is about home and about being displaced from home, about not knowing where one's own home is and about homesickness, and also about getting lost through language, "Because your language is your home and your language is your country" (*TSP*: 161). According to Gerald Dawe, *The Speckled People* "is a story about finding a home in language: a cultural 'locatedness' in the place where one lives" (Dawe 2004: 268), a need due to the fact that the Hamilton children have been "taken out of their here and now" (Dawe 2004: 269).

The basis of his father's project, which he pursues with an unrelenting strictness often bordering on cruelty, is the re-appropriation of the Irish language, which he imposes upon his children, because "my father says your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag" (*TSP*: 3). The Irish language becomes, in his view, the healing element that can undo the wrongs of history – "But all that will be put right now that we're speaking Irish again" (*TSP*: 72) – without considering that his forced imposition of Irish and the related 'sacrifices' with which he punishes Hanno when he breaks his rules results, among other things, in his being "sick for a long time. [...] the sound of the wild dogs got into my chest. I had to stay in bed listening to them howling all day and all night" (*TSP*: 90-91). Asthma seems a metaphorical response to the claustrophobic and suffocating life in his family.

His own displacement is due to his father's enforced reversal of Irish

history and of the fate of the Irish language: in Hanno's case no longer a hankering after an irremediably lost language, but the imposed prohibition of the language of his peers.

Between his father's Irish name – Séan Ó hUrmoltaigh, – and his mother's German name – Irmgard Kaiser – “there's a blank space left over for all the people outside who speak English” (*TSP*: 3): this “blank space” can be seen as a proper metaphor for Hanno's condition of displacement, which he painfully probes. At the same time, being in a blank, with no words and no language can be appealing; it is the condition Hanno experiences underwater, and which he often wishes he could prolong: “I have to learn to hold my breath as long as I can and live underwater where there's no language” (*TSP*: 290).

The linguistic agenda of the family marks the children as different; they are the German-Irish kids wearing Aran sweaters and Lederhosen,

because we are the new Irish. Partly from Ireland and partly from somewhere else, half-Irish and half-German. We're the speckled people, he says, the 'brack' people, which is a word that comes from the Irish language [...]. It means speckled, dappled, flecked, spotted, coloured. [...] So we are the speckled-Irish, the brack-Irish. Brack home-made Irish bread with German raisins. (*TSP*: 7)

But Hanno realizes that “it also means we're marked. It means we're aliens [...]” (*TSP*: 7), and for this reason rejected by the other boys, and a target of violence.

Interestingly, there is no mention, not even obliquely, of the positive connotation that ‘speckled’, ‘breac’ in Irish, has in ancient Irish literature. Often associated with salmon, it is the resonant epithet of heroes, although this family's heroism probably lies in its ability to endure such difficulties.

If Hanno's father's linguistic obsession – his ‘language war’ – is ruthless and tragic, although related through the child's eyes in an often lyrical tone, in *Sad Bastard* linguistic fluency in Irish is never tragic. At times it is even hilarious, and parodied too, as when Coyne refers to the skipper as a “garlic” (*SB*: 73), not Gaelic, speaker, or when he comments on the skipper and Mongi O Doherty's exchange in Irish: “what was this garlic lark”, juxtaposing his own fluency in the language: “Didn't they know that Coyne was a fluent Irish speaker?” (*SB*: 149) therefore defining himself as “Coyne the true native. Not like these half arsed Irish speakers who spread a patina of the language all over the country like low-cholesterol margarine. Abusing the mother-tongue, turning it into an incendiary device. Gaelic as a weapon of war” (*SB*: 149). In *Sad Bastard*, as well as in *The Speckled People*, Gaelic is defined as “a weapon of war” (*SB*: 149), but the implication of this statement is very different; here it is a confrontation between Coyne ‘the hero’ and the criminals led by Mongi O Doherty, the former a supporter (one of the last, in his

opinion) of true Irish values, the latter perpetrators, but also consumerists: as a matter of fact, Mongi “had no real interest in the language, except for its fetish value” (*SB*: 149).

If the similarities between Pat Coyne and Hanno’s father build a continuity of fathers, enabling readers to see them as counterparts, another closeness – hinted at at the beginning of *The Speckled People* – emerges between Pat Coyne and Hanno himself. Expressions uttered by Coyne in *Sad Bastard* recall episodes remembered or experienced by Hanno in *The Speckled People*. In the memoir Hamilton inserts recollections also present in *Sad Bastard*, such as “[Coyne] thought of other stories in his life. [...] The bees killing his father. The language war” (*SB* 135-6) or episodes, like the climax of Coyne’s therapy, when he remembers being sent into a girl’s class as a punishment, which reveal the same autobiographical source.

Such cross-references suggest that the deranged Pat Coyne is the man Hanno might have become, if he hadn’t overcome his “helpless anger” (*TSP*: 280), hadn’t stopped being “afraid of [his] own imagination (*TSP*: 91) and had not started to write. Indeed, the practice of writing proves to be a way out and a means of escape, as *The Speckled People* often implies, thus establishing a continuity between Hanno and his mother: narration is the fulfilment of his repressed need for self-expression and the answer to the deep conflicts between imposed and chosen words (and silences).

In the two works taken into examination, as well as in other works which have been quoted in passing, Hugo Hamilton faces but also plays with features of Irish identity as obsessions to be dealt with rather than pursued. Although he seems to expose his characters’ ‘dreams of Irishness’, highlighting the ridiculous anachronisms of his don Quixote-like characters – Pat Coyne and Jack Hamilton, or better, Séan Ó hUrmoltaigh – he nonetheless maintains an ongoing dialogue with issues that have engaged debate in Irish literature and shows the other side of the Irish dream.

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the memoir *The Speckled People* and the novel *Sad Bastard*, this article investigates Hugo Hamilton's attitude to some central issues in Irish culture and literature, namely the idea of displacement, the nature of Irish identity and the language question presented in a surprisingly new way.

Born into an Irish-German family, brought up speaking German and Irish, forbidden from speaking English at home, Hamilton is interestingly different from other Irish authors. In his writing the traditional confrontation with an external cultural, literary and linguistic authority takes on a new meaning. *The Speckled People* explores how his father's language dream of an Irish Ireland was inflexibly enforced on his family. His father's unflinching pursuit of an abstract model of Irishness shifted the focus of displacement, resulting in the child's painful condition of 'dislocatedness'. In *Sad Bastard* the author looks into the same issues from the exhilarating perspective of a grown-up, mentally fragile, ex Garda who is likewise 'dislocated'.