

Interview with Hugo Hamilton

'The Irish are bored with their own stories.
We need the new stories that the immigrants can bring'



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Hugo Hamilton is an Irish writer born in 1953. His five novels and one collection of short stories all reflect on issues of cultural divisions and belonging. His first three books featured a Central European setting. In 1992 Hugo was awarded the ‘Rooney Prize for Irish Literature’. After a year spent in Berlin on a cultural scholarship, Hamilton completed *The Speckled People* (2003), a German-Irish memoir of his experience growing up in Dublin with a German mother and a fervent Irish nationalist father, who insisted that his children should not speak English. This account of a family locked in a ‘language war’ touches on many of the divisive issues of the 20th century.

Sang impur, the French translation of *The Speckled People* won the ‘Prix Femina étranger’ and *Il cane che abbaia alle onde*, its Italian translation, won the ‘Premio Berto’ in 2004. It also appeared on the New York Times notable books list. Hamilton’s second memoir *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* continues the story of this complex dual upbringing. In May 2007, German publisher Luchterhand published *Die redselige Insel*, in which Hamilton retraces the journey Heinrich Böll made in Ireland. The book is slated for publication in English in 2008. His latest novel *Disguise* picks up the central theme of identity by exploring the life of a three year old Jewish boy who replaced a German child of the same age, lost in a bombing at the end of World War II.

Hugo Hamilton brings a refreshing new vigour and impetus to Irish literature, avoiding the hackneyed Angela’s Ashes style of sentimental nostalgia and victimhood. As he says himself in this interview: ‘*We cannot sing the old songs anymore. We are almost not entitled to sing them. It’s a different nation now: the rebel songs, the old laments – they’re not our songs anymore.*’

Aziliz Gouez met him in a library in his town of Dun Laoghaire, a small sea-side resort next to Dublin.

Aziliz Gouez is researcher at *Notre Europe*.

Interview conducted during the course of the ‘**European Works**’ project.

You were brought up by an Irish nationalist father who wanted the Irish to win because they had been the victims of History and a German mother who taught you how to surrender and to lose. How did you come to terms with that?

I've tried to come to terms with that all my life. I am still lost. As a child, I didn't have the security of one language that everybody spoke around me. English was the link to the real world outside but we were forbidden to speak it. My father allowed only Irish and German. That made all the languages very problematic for me. I only encountered some peace as a writer. Writing books allows me to put some kind of shape on these contradictions.

I describe myself and my brothers and sisters as the 'homesick' children because we had a sense of homelessness from both my mother's side and my father's side. She was a foreigner, and he had a vision of Ireland that was different from the real Ireland outside the door. Home is something that you notice only when you have missed it. The idea of belonging matters most to those people who have been deprived, or driven out of their home. It's an aspiration, something that can never be achieved.

What is interesting with immigrants is that they live in a strange place – almost a fantasy. The Irish have an extraordinary gift for creating imaginary homes. They have lost many things throughout history – their language, their land – and they have replaced those losses by songs and literature. Irish emigrants in America had to create an alternative sense of belonging.

In one of your books, you describe yourself and your siblings as '*German bread with Irish raisins*'. Do you think that the 'speckled people' – those who fall between several cultures – could be a metaphor for the new Europeans?

I think very much so. When I was growing up – in the sixties – it was very unusual in Ireland to belong to a mixed cultural family. We were a peculiarity. We were constantly made fun of and ridiculed. What also made us very isolated was that to visit Germany was then a very big journey: we had to take two boats – first to Britain and then to the continent – and five trains. It was a journey which would be comparable with a family nowadays visiting Australia. And phone calls were very expensive, so the only means of communication my mother had with her home and her sisters was by letter.

All this has changed. It's now much more common for people to intermarry. Children from mixed families no longer feel as unusual.

The demographic transformation you refer to, and the related economic boom, have occurred within the short time span of two decades. In this process of change, have the Irish wilfully left behind the voices of the famine graves and the memory of the coffin ships going to America?

There's a great deal of denial of the past in contemporary Ireland. Irish people who spend a lot of money are still acting on fears – fears of the famine coming back. Every time an Irish person buys a big car, it's like saying: *I deny the famine*. It's what happens in the first flush of prosperity. People make statements trying to prove that they are not poor anymore. Only countries which have been rich for a long time do not have that sort of fetish about proving that they are wealthy.

Would you say that the symbolical centre of the Irish identity has shifted from the *Gaeltacht*¹ and the Aran Islands² to the Spire on O'Connell Street?

Yes. We've stopped focussing on our own culture. Irish people now want to find their sense of belonging in the global world. The Spire has got all the features of this rush for wealth; it's a terrible symbol for our children, for Ireland. But for us to pick a symbol from the past would have been equally bad. We've lived on tragic icons for too long. One of the great icons of Irish identity in the last fifty years was the Blasket Islands³ and the failure to sustain life on them. It seemed like our culture was doomed.

Because of that, there was a rush towards integration with the rest of the world. We desperately wanted to take our place on the world stage. It means a lot to us that Irish culture – Bono and so on – is successful all over

1 The *Gaeltacht* refers to small Irish-speaking regions, mostly on the western seaboard, viewed as repositories of true Irish language and culture or alternatively as barren, backward, and economically marginal areas.

2 Located off the Galway coast, the Aran Islands are *Gaeltacht* bastions which inspired the Celtic Revival artists (Synge, Yeats). Much idealised as touchstones of Irish identity and Gaelic authenticity

3 Kerry *Gaeltacht* islands distinguished by a fine literary tradition. A 1953 government scheme, justified in terms of difficult living conditions, moved the islands' inhabitants to the mainland - a blow to the idea of an Irish Ireland and a sign of national malaise.

the world. Even the way we speak is changing: Irish people tend to mimic the American tonal differences; they use American expressions – particularly here in Dublin. I’m afraid there will be a backlash. The awareness of ourselves as part of the global world is not matched by an awareness of ourselves as local people.

Visiting the International Financial Services Centre, in Dublin, I came across a statue of the Brown Bull of Cooley⁴ in the hallway of one of the buildings. It seems that the commodification of Irish culture has been part and parcel of the economic boom.

Very much so. Even the dance – the ‘Riverdance’ – is inauthentic. We have become tourists in our own country. My father used to say that the Irish people will wake up one day and wonder if they are still Irish and, indeed, a funny thing has happened to the whole business of being Irish: it doesn’t need to belong to the Irish anymore. Almost everybody in the world could say they are a little bit Irish. On Saint Patrick’s Day, everybody in America becomes Irish; everybody can go to an Irish pub and pretend that they are Irish. We have globalized ourselves.

You are talking about a strained relation to the past. Would you say that your mother, as a German who came to Ireland just after WWII, wanted to escape her own past?

Ireland was like a sanctuary for hundreds of Germans after the war. It was an innocent land with monks and donkeys at the edge of Europe – a place where my mother could reconnect with the good world, the practice of faith. In-post war Germany, most people were silent about what had happened. There was an inability to talk about the defeat, about the crimes...

An inability to go home, maybe...

Yes. And an inability to dream. So the Germans devoted themselves to production and efficiency instead. And they went to alternative dreams – material dreams or dreams of places like the West of Ireland. It was very liberating for them.

⁴ Or *Táin Bó Cúailnge* - Ireland’s finest bull, so coveted it sparked a war in a saga of the Ulster Cycle of Celtic mythology.

When you go for a walk in the forest in Germany, it is full of echoes of what happened in the Second World War. But when Germans go for a walk in the bog, here in Ireland, they turn up things from ancient times. They go back to the Neolithic and Celtic times – times that nobody has reasons to be ashamed of.

The Germans have done remarkable work in coming to terms with the past and in acknowledging their responsibility in the war. They have taken this on as a project. They are one of the few nations in the world who are not denying their past. It is very important. As countries going towards a global future, we need the shelter of the past.

Isn't the European integration a way of creating this 'shelter of the past' – one that all Europeans could share?

I recently went to Ypres, in Belgium. It's an important landmark of the First World War – a battlefield where many British and German soldiers died and where there's now a monument dedicated to the Irish volunteers who died fighting on the British side. Their sacrifice had been denied for eighty years because it didn't match the nationalist narrative of the fight for Irish freedom.

The Germans go to Ypres in groups or with family, very quietly they visit the graveyards and just vanish afterwards. As for the British, they come in big numbers to hear the call in remembrance of the British dead – and only the British dead. The French died, the Germans died, the Irish died – everybody died in that senseless war. But it is as if the British are still fighting it. They are claiming this battle as their own. They come in busloads wearing Union Jacks and buy helmets and little memorabilia. This triumphalism is not suited to Europe. It's a cultural anomaly that does not fit in with the picture of European integration.

European wars have generated devastation, internal devastation, in the character of the European person. The Germans have been desperately looking for some kind of idea of home and belonging to the pop culture – the Bee Gees, the Rolling Stones, etc. This was all brought about by devastation in their own culture. What we do not have in Europe, and what the Americans do have, is the idea of belonging to a mythical country – the myth of America. We do not have a myth of Europe. Not yet at least.

Would you say that non-participation in WWII makes it difficult for the Irish to connect to an important aspect of European identity?

The amazing thing about Irish people is that they are great masters of being different. They modelled themselves as being different from Britain for so many centuries and that made it easier for them to enter Europe.

Did European integration help them give up their fixation on Britain?

Oh yes! They were able to dance with new partners. It gave them a new sense of freedom.

The Irish have always been psychologically those who had things done to them. They have been killed, driven out, deprived of their country. That has changed. They have now become part of the dominant people and they now inflict things on themselves...

There are now more Polish or Chinese speakers than Irish speakers in Ireland. How is the country dealing with immigration?

It's a new experiment which has been working very well because it coincided with the economic boom. Ireland could be very generous and welcome anybody. I hope it will remain that way but I have no reason to believe that the Irish would be any less or any more racist than any other people in Europe. Ireland lacks a genuine interest in the immigrants' culture. Very few Polish artists or writers have so far been invited to come over here and tell us about their work or the life in Poland.

But we cannot sing the old songs anymore. We are almost not entitled to sing them. It's a different nation now: the rebel songs, the old laments – they're not our songs anymore. The Irish are bored with their own stories. We need the new stories that the immigrants can bring.