
Hugo Hamilton. *The Speckled People*. London: Fourth Estate, 2003. 298p.

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This is a book about secrets. Thus it is also a book about memory and about the collections of individuals with shared secrets and shared memories who by constituting families perpetuate their secrets and memories by imposing them on new generations. Family life consists of series of repetitions from the daily routine to seasonal rituals like Christmas to the rites of passage that mark the transcendence of the family over the births and deaths of individuals and the formation of new branches in marriage: "Everything keeps happening again" (274). Repetition characterizes *The Speckled People*, whether repeated figures like that of the dog who barks at the waves or expressions like "a friend for life" or events that recur with additional details and fuller contours as the narrator's consciousness matures and his knowledge expands. Throughout the book Hamilton makes metonymic use of films, songs, stories, novels, puppet shows, and the diary that his mother keeps to absorb his parents' secrets among his own, where they belong: "When you're small you can inherit a secret without even knowing what it is. You can be trapped in the same film as your mother, because certain things are passed on to you that you're not even aware of, not just a smile or a voice, but unspoken things, too, that you can't understand until later when you grow up" (18). The device helps him to express the continuities that characterize families and then the societies that families form and that merged families like his own integrate.

Hamilton grew up in a suburb of Dublin. His mother was German, and his father was Irish, making the family *breac*: "speckled, dappled, flecked, spotted, coloured" (7). His father was committed to making Irish the language of Ireland and saw the family's visit to the Gaeltacht as a journey to the future. When he was a young man he had made political speeches on O'Connell Street with great success until "he started speaking in Irish and not everybody understood what he was saying" (39). He forbade his children to speak English, although German was one of their two mother tongues. How they learned English isn't clear. The father's anger when they used English took the form of harsh beatings in spite of the mother's protests: after the father broke the nose of the narrator's older brother, Franz, for speaking English: "'*Mein armer Schatz*,' my mother kept saying as she sat him up beside the sink and started cleaning the blood away from his face" (30). The narrator and his brother bought the British comic the *Beano* and concealed it in a hedge for fear of their father's discovering it: "At night ... it was raining and I thought of the *Beano* getting wet and all the colours washing out" (189). Until

the mother intervened successfully by arguing that the doctor's son wanted to learn Irish, the linguistic isolation of the family was bizarre: the children were forbidden to play with English-speaking friends, Irish-speaking friends were hard to find, and the children on the street called them Nazis.

The family experimented with a variety of small businesses, importing attractive items from Germany and manufacturing attractive items at home, but the father's insistence that his customers pay by a check made out to his Irish name, Ó hUrmoltaigh, proved an overwhelming obstacle to entrepreneurial success. The father received approving attention in the nationalist press, but lost a promotion at the Electricity Supply Board, for refusing to reply to mail addressed to John Hamilton: "the Irish language was bad for business" (117). He was himself the son of a sailor who had served in the British navy: "I didn't know that my Irish grandfather, John Hamilton, and my German grandfather, Franz Kaiser, must have stood facing each other in the Great War. Or that my mother and father were both orphaned by that same war" (12). "My father," the narrator writes, "changed his name to Irish. So when I grow up I'll change my name, too" (25).

The mother came to Ireland as a pilgrim after the second world war in an attempt to cleanse herself of the contaminations of the Nazi period. In Ireland she found a husband who was drawn to her by his love for all things German: the language, the music, the technology, and not least the resistance to the hated British. He wanted to reverse emigration by bringing people to Ireland from abroad and to replace England with Germany as a partner and model for Ireland. Yet his nationalism and his violence against his children only made his wife feel trapped again. A German relative visits:

Tante Marianne said there was nothing wrong with speaking English. But my father shook his head. He said we were the new Irish children and soon the whole country would be speaking Irish in the shops. He said children were the strongest weapons, stronger than armies. But then Tante Marianne had an argument with my father. She said all the things that my mother can't say. She said it was wrong to use children in war....

"In Germany," she said, "they used the children, too." (133)

The mother had mastered "the silent negative": at a rally of the Bund deutscher Mädels she swore: "under oath that I will—NOT—serve the Führer as long as I live" (84). She never learned Irish.

The father eventually realized that his causes were lost: "he came to me one day and shook hands and said he wished he could start all over again because he would make different mistakes this time" (282). The mother's reflections are similar: "She says she should have fought back earlier. She says she was trapped by my

father and could not escape. If she had the choice she would still be born in Germany and she would still come to Ireland, but she would have changed things and made different mistakes this time” (289). Their son, awaiting his own regrets, has gone from the childish, but astute, observation that “the difference between one country and another is the song they sing at the end of the night in the cinema and the flag they have on the post office and the stamps you lick” (46) to the even more astute conjecture that “Maybe your country is only a place you make up in your own mind.... 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.... I don’t have to be like anyone else” (295). ✱