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ABSTRACT

The Speckled People, the 2003 memoir by Hugo Hamilton, narrates the growth of little Hanno from childhood in the 1950s in Ireland to early manhood. The family life pivots on the major taboo dominating their home: the absolute prohibition on the use of English, implemented through harsh punishments. This taboo is functional to the reversal of Irish history planned by his nationalist father. The present article aims to analyse the consequences of this taboo for the protagonist. This ban on the use of English has devastating psychological consequences for Hanno: a perennial sense of displacement, constant queries about himself and where he belongs and the impossibility of making friends.

The father's original taboo, detrimental to his own identity, is his planned oblivion of his own father, because he served in the British Navy during WWI and spoke English – a taboo issue in Irish society until at least the 1980s.

KEYWORDS: Taboo; language; nationalism; identity; silence.

The Speckled People is a best-selling memoir published by Hugo Hamilton in 2003 which tells the story of young Hanno and his family. The title is explained at the beginning: Hanno and his siblings have a German mother and an Irish father, an uncommon predicament in Ireland in the 1950s, which their father defines as their being 'speckled': "speckled, dappled, flecked, spotted, coloured" (Hamilton 2003, 7). Trying to resort to words familiar to their experience, he

explains that they are “Brack home-made Irish bread with German raisins” (ibid.), brack coming from the Gaelic *breac*, an adjective, moreover, with very positive connotations in Irish culture. In the memoir, however, Hanno’s (and his siblings’) predicament is quite the opposite. Instead of representing a source of richness, their multicultural and multilingual condition proves to be extremely difficult, as “this mixed heritage confines rather than liberat[e] the author.” (Ní Éigeartaigh 2010, 15) As Hamilton makes clear in his essay “Speaking to the Walls in English”, “that idea of cultural mixture became an ordeal for us, full of painful and comic cultural entanglements out of which we have been trying to find some sense of belonging ever since”¹. Indeed, Hamilton has claimed in several interviews that “My writing came from an attempt to explore that difficult issue of belonging” (Allen Randolph 2010, 14). The purpose of the present work is to show the difficulties and pain resulting from the taboos inflicted on him and on his siblings by their father’s authoritarian dominance.

1. “A battle over language”²

The phrase “A battle over language”, taken from Hermione Lee’s review for *The Guardian*, is a very simple but apt definition of the memoir. In fact, language – the use and the prohibition of language – is at the core of Hugo Hamilton’s work.

Notably, *The Speckled People* revolves around a major taboo established by the protagonist’s father: the use of English is absolutely forbidden at home. As the interdict is not on more likely issues like death, sex or religion, it might seem a minor prohibition, but the children are subjected to a strict code of linguistic behaviour and have to move carefully between what is allowed and what is forbidden. They are allowed to speak only Irish or German – their home language – while their mother, who knows English, does not speak Irish, which excludes her from a whole area of communication, also testifying to the imbalance of power in the family.

¹ Hamilton 2005.

² Lee 2003.

The strict linguistic rules within the family create an atmosphere of watchfulness – “we have to be careful in our house and think before we speak” (Hamilton 2003, 28) –, of insecurity: “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” (ibid., 80), but also a pervasive sense of danger and confusion. As a result, “the apparently safe domestic spaces [of the family home] conventionally characterized as nurturing” (Reeds 2016, 429) turn out to be a site of implacable repressive authority.

Taboo is a social phenomenon, and the community on which it is enforced in this case is the family. Besides, taboo hinges on language and is closely connected to silence, to what can and what cannot be said. In the case of the Hamilton children what cannot be said is, first of all, English words, even if they are harmless words, or rhymes that fascinate them. At a certain stage, for example, Hanno is fixed on the trochaic rhythm of what seems to be an ad, “don’t forget the fruit gums, chum” (ibid., 157), for him these are “my secret words” (ibid.) and he simply cannot resist repeating them. The father’s reaction to this harmless advertising slogan magnifies his absurd and obsessive strictness, so that when the children break his rules, the punishments are appalling, even if their infringements are not serious or if the siblings are unaware of doing something wrong. He also punishes or scolds them if they listen, even without speaking, to English words: to songs on the radio, or to other kids on the street.

As language is intertwined with the construction of identity, the consequence of this relentless imposition is an ingrained sense of not belonging. Growing up between an idealised Ireland dreamt by his father and the real Ireland rejected by him, Hanno is confused, he is dislocated, and does not know where home is: “When you’re small you know nothing. You don’t know where you are, or who you are, or what questions to ask” (ibid., 2). Paradoxically, he “becomes metaphorically homeless without ever leaving the place of his birth”, in that, according to Aoileann Ní Éigearthaigh, he “personifies the plight of the migrant”, for whom “home constitutes a fundamental locus of trauma and alienation, for home is always an imagined space which serves only to remind the migrant subject what he has lost” (Ní Éigearthaigh 2010, 117). As a matter of fact, *The Speckled People* was published at

a time when Irish society had deeply changed since Hamilton's youth and had become a widely multicultural society, as in the Celtic Tiger period – roughly from the mid-1990s to the economic recession in 2008 – Ireland became a country of immigration from other countries, thus reversing its history of emigration.

For the Hamilton children real Ireland, the place outside their house, where people do not speak Irish, is “a foreign country where they don't have our language and nobody will understand us” (Hamilton 2003, 5), since “everything out there is spoken in English. Out there is a different country, far away” (ibid., 8).

The family – or rather, their father's – rules inevitably mark them as different: “Outside you have to be careful, too, because you can't buy an ice pop in German or in Irish, and lots of people only know the words of the Garda and the workers” (ibid., 29), that is English, because most people in Ireland in the 1950s and '60s only speak English. But these children must be truly Irish as well as German, they are children “wearing lederhosen and Aran sweaters, [...] Irish on top and German below” (ibid., 2). They move in and out of Germany and Ireland: “When I was small I woke up in Germany. [...] Then I got up and looked out the window and saw Ireland” (ibid., 1).

Their linguistic interdiction goes with the absolute prohibition of making friends with kids who speak English, so that the children are ostracised as they cannot play with other children in the neighbourhood. The latter, on the other hand, see their imposed multicultural identity – half Irish and half German – as different and unlikeable and so reject and bully them, accusing them of being Nazis, making an equation between Germans at large and Nazis. They beat Hanno and his brother Franz, and stage a mock trial in which Hanno is accused of being Eichmann, the war criminal whose trial was held in Jerusalem in 1961.

The choking taboo dominating the family is alluded to metaphorically halfway through the memoir: one day their mother, in order to save some money, “bought a big tongue from the butcher, a cow's tongue which she said was very cheap and tasty” (ibid., 157). They looked at it “curled up in a big jar” and Hanno “thought of what it would be like to put your tongue in the vice, because that's what my mother said she would have to do with the cow's tongue” (ibid.). This passage also refers back to the epigraph of the memoir

which the author chose from the first volume of Canetti's autobiography, *The Tongue Set Free*: "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". The tongue (the cow's tongue) put in the vice is a metaphor for Hanno's (and his siblings') tongue, put in a metaphorical vice by their father's taboo and silenced.

2. Nationalism

The father's stand on the Irish language is due to his nationalism. He wants to reverse Irish history and he is determined to pursue his project at all costs; "he's in a hurry to do all the things that are still left unfinished in Ireland" (ibid., 104). He has pursued it unsuccessfully since his youth: he changed his name from English to Irish – from Hamilton to the Gaelic Ó hUrmoltaigh – making it almost impossible to pronounce, with inevitable and somehow exhilarating consequences³. As Hanno reflects:

It's the name that causes all the trouble. The Irish name: Ó hUrmoltaigh.
People jump back with a strange expression and ask you to say it again. They don't really trust anything Irish yet.
'What's that in English?' They ask. (ibid., 109)

He made speeches at street corners trying to convince people "but he started speaking in Irish, and not everybody understood what he was saying" (ibid., 39).

When he created his own family, he decided that it would be the first 'cell' of a new Ireland that would then expand to the rest of the country. That's why Hanno, repeating his father's words, says that "we are the new country, the new Irish" (ibid.), but this new Ireland "depends [...] on the construction of an idealized past" (Ní Éigeartaigh 2010, 120), the past as it should have been. His father's nostalgia for an Ireland that never was is, according to Tatiana Bicjutko, "the embodiment of nostalgia defined by Linda Hutcheon as one 'that teaches us to miss things we have never lost'" (Bicjutko 2008, 30-31). His children must

³ When the father tries to increase his income selling things, he fails, because he demands that people pronounce and write it correctly but they can't, so he refuses to sell them "party hats and crackers" (ibid., 108), which they would be very interested in buying, and he in selling, as he needs the money, but principles are principles.

speak Irish “Because your language is your home and your language is your country” (Hamilton 2003, 161). Hanno’s father is obsessed by Irish history and its injustices, like the Famine, or the loss of the Irish language. He wants to “make Ireland a better place to live” (ibid., 100), and long before the Celtic Tiger period, when this phenomenon actually took place, he wants to reverse emigration – “he doesn’t want the song about emigration to go on forever” (ibid.) – and to bring people to Ireland, instead of having Irish people go away, scattered all over the world. This makes Hanno think “that’s why he married my mother and now she’s the one who does all the dreaming and singing about being far away from home” (ibid., 33). Ironically, in the authoritarian zeal with which he carries out his project he “replicates many of the abuses of power typical of colonial and dictatorial regimes” (Ní Éigeartaigh 2010, 119).

He has imposed the language taboo because, along with history, he wants to reverse the destiny of the Irish language, since it is his belief that only going back to Irish all the unresolved issues in Ireland can be settled. Only speaking Irish again can the Irish people feel at home at last. He refers to the loss of the Irish language as due to a weakening of the language: seeing the world in terms of power dynamics, he speaks of powerful vs. weak languages⁴. Accordingly, referring to the Ordnance Survey of the 1830s and the Anglicization of Gaelic placenames, he tells his children that when their language became weak the people lost their way, because they “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 recognise the landscape around them. [...] They were homeless. [...] and ashamed” (Hamilton 2003, 160).

In order to improve their fluency as part of his linguistic policy and to show his family how beautiful it is to live in an Irish-speaking community, the whole family dutifully goes on holiday to the Gaeltacht, with some hilarious episodes, and Hanno and Franz later on spend the whole summer there in order “to be as Irish as possible” (ibid., 230). The result is that when he goes back to school, Hanno is so fluent in Irish “that the principal said I should be on television as an example of how history could be turned back” (ibid., 236).

⁴ As Hamilton (n.d.) writes in “Speaking to the Walls in English”: “My father saw it as a matter of winning and losing, surviving or going into extinction”. <http://www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/hamilton.html> (7/10/2005) (no longer retrievable).

But this, again, marks him as different, because, as Hanno knows, “Nobody really wanted to be that Irish” (ibid.).

Nationalism and the taboo on the use of English are closely interwoven, and they dominate the family life both through explicit prohibitions and through unspoken rules about issues which cannot be openly addressed. When the children break the rules, even unknowingly, the father is wrathful and punishes them for their own good. He either reacts immediately and violently, or he brings them upstairs, makes them kneel down and prays “that he was doing the right thing for Ireland” (ibid., 158). He tells them this is a necessary sacrifice:

one day when he heard that I had brought English words into the house, he was very angry. [...] My father knew what to do. He picked out a stick in the greenhouse and said we had to make a sacrifice. (ibid.)

He tells Hanno that he has asked God “how many lashes he thought was fair” and “heard God saying fifteen and not one less” (ibid.). This passage is both appalling and funny at the same time, because, with the naïve directness of a child, Hanno silently comments that “I was hoping that God said no lashes, because I didn’t mean it and maybe it was better for Ireland to give me a last chance” (ibid.). His father had previously beaten and broken Franz’s nose because, while walking on a brick wall he had made, he sang a harmless singsong in English “Walk on the wall, walk on the wall” (ibid., 29). His outright refusal of anything English is also ruthlessly enforced in the paranoid rejection of a neighbour’s gift to the children of Remembrance Day poppies.

His father’s relentless overbearing behaviour arouses the protagonist’s anger, for which he blames himself as he cannot rationally understand it. His anger is an issue he has increasingly to come to terms with, but it will take Hanno a long time to realise it is a reaction to his father’s vexations, and not a feature of his own evil nature. As a matter of fact, anger was his predominant feeling when Hamilton started to write *The Speckled People*: he began writing from the point of view of an adult, but had to give up, because, as he explained in a 2004 interview, he “noticed that I was writing out of prejudice and anger.

Time and again I realised that if the story was to be told at all, it had to be told through the child's voice"⁵.

3. Things Unspoken

Apart from the explicit prohibition on the use of English, there is one topic which the father has had no need to prohibit because it has always been kept hidden, and therefore the children are unaware of it. It concerns his own father, of whom the children ignore everything, even his existence, and who gives the title to the following memoir by Hamilton: *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, 2006⁶. Just by chance, looking and nosing around in their parents' room, fascinated by objects like old coins and medals, the children discover the picture of a sailor "with soft eyes" (Hamilton 2003, 13) hidden at the bottom of their father's wardrobe. They see his "waterproof identity papers" (ibid., 11) and find out that he was their father's father, of whom they had never heard.

Some things are not good to know in Ireland. I had no idea that I had an Irish grandfather who couldn't even speak Irish. His name was John Hamilton and he belonged to the navy, the British navy, the Royal Navy. (ibid., 12)

His whole existence was kept hidden from the Hamilton children because his son has never forgiven him for having joined the British Army, even though Ireland was then part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland; moreover, he has not forgiven him for not speaking Irish. The children know nothing of him because while the pictures of their German grandparents hang in the front room, and their mother lovingly and repeatedly talks about them, there are no pictures of their Irish grandparents in the house. After the discovery of the photograph, Hanno reflects that "Our German grandparents are dead, but our Irish grandparents are dead and forgotten" (ibid.). This also confuses him, but he understands the reason for this secret: their father "didn't want any of us to know that he had a father in the navy who could not speak Irish and once stood in a war against the Germans, when his own country was still not free" (ibid., 14-15). John Hamilton, the sailor grandfather, embodies

⁵ Casal 2009, 55-71, 61n1.

⁶ *The Harbour Boys* is the title of the American edition.

one of the taboos in Irish society until at least the nineteen eighties, which concerns those who joined the British Army during the First World War (MacBride 2001; Brearton 2000), what Haughey calls “the Great Amnesia” (Haughey 2012, 61). When they came back from the War, they often met with fierce hostility: a wide range of the population and the new free State organisation were against them; the social stigma was not attached to their linguistic abilities, but to having served in the British Army. As a result, even the construction of commemorative monuments to the fallen in World War I were delayed and often not placed in city centres in what became the Republic, while they were duly commemorated in the North. They too were cancelled and forgotten.

The consequence of the taboo on their grandfather is that, even after seeing his picture, which caused the anger of their father, they were not able to remember him because he was never mentioned again. This once more stresses the crucial role of language: “We didn’t know how to remember him, and like him, we lost our memory” (ibid., 15). As a matter of fact, their father’s policy is not to talk about certain – several – subjects; there are no explicit rules to guide the children, but the underlying principle is that “The only thing was to stop talking about them and they would go away” (ibid., 54). The practice confuses the protagonist, also because mistakes are harshly punished, so that, as a result, “I don’t know what to tell or not to talk about any more. [...] it’s hard to know what’s right and wrong” (ibid., 50). As a consequence, the children have “started doing a lot of things that make no sense” (ibid.). For example, his brother Franz “One day [...] put stones in his ears and he couldn’t hear anything any more” (ibid.). Hanno, in turn, “started throwing the toy cars in the fire” (ibid.).

There are subjects of which both parents do not want to speak, but their attitude, in this as in most other areas, is very different. Apart from the taboo around his own father, the father also wants to keep hidden from his family, especially from his wife, that when he wrote for an extreme right-wing radical nationalist newspaper – “*Aiséirí*, which is the Irish for resurrection” (ibid., 116) – he wrote antisemitic articles. One in particular, entitled “Ireland’s Jewish Problem” which he wrote immediately after the war in 1946, resulted in the police closing the newspaper office.

What Hanno's mother cannot talk about is the repeated rapes she suffered in Germany during the war. She still feels trapped in the past, "as though the film is never over and she'll never escape" (ibid., 19), in Hanno's words, and she cannot give voice to her trauma. She tells her children that "Everything can be repaired [...] except your memory" (ibid., 153). His mother's feeling of being trapped in the past, of not being able to escape, with several hints that she is also trapped in the present, as the dictatorial behaviour of her husband recalls aspects of Nazi Germany, are constantly reiterated throughout the memoir. After a trip to visit her sister in Germany she brings back a typewriter, and she starts keeping a diary; referring to his mother typing Hanno uses an onomatopoeic verb to reproduce the noise when she presses the keys:

She's *letteletting* and *letteletting* 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 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. 'To my children' she writes. 'One day, when you're old enough, you will understand what happened to me, how I got trapped in Germany and couldn't help myself.' (ibid., 68)

Unlike Hanno's father, Irmgard, his mother, shows and also teaches the children the healing power of words: while he imposes silence, she fixes difficult situations, or her children's diseases, with stories (and also hugs and cakes). Stories are helpful, because they can offer a shelter: "Everybody has a story to hide behind, my mother says" (ibid., 196). Hanno perceptively thinks that his "mother tells stories like that because there are other stories she can't tell. When it's silent, she thinks of all the things she has to keep secret" (ibid., 203).

4. Silence and Words

Hanno can find a shelter from language and pain only in silence, which is present both as a "narrative element or a textual strategy [...] in the work of contemporary [Irish] writers" (Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero 2023, 1). In the memoir under scrutiny silence is a form of resistance against authority

and the damaging “effects of taboos and prohibitions” (ibid., 2-3). It is, in M.T.Caneda-Cabrera and J.Carregal-Romero’s words, “the most effective ‘sabotage’ against normative discourses” (ibid., 4). In “Speaking to the Walls in English” (n.d.), Hamilton claims that

All I can remember doing as a child was hiding. I developed ways in which I could conceal myself from the world, ways in which I could be invisible and not have to face the issues of identity, the most effective of which was remaining silent, in my own imagination. We became very isolated and reticent.

Silence is also an answer to fear, an increasing fear of the threat voiced through Elias Canetti’s words in the epigraph of having his tongue cut off. Yet silence can also have positive connotations: for Hanno the locus of liberating silence is mainly underwater, “where there was no language only the humming bubbles all around” (Hamilton 2003, 194), so that underwater becomes a place of freedom, where he is not imposed any language, because there is no need of language: “I have to go swimming a lot and dive underwater and stay down there as long as I can. I have to learn to hold my breath as long as I can and live underwater where there’s no language” (ibid., 290). He is very good at resisting underwater: “I could stay under until my lungs were bursting, until I nearly died and had to come up for words” (ibid., 194). Here Hanno replaces and thus equates breathing air, necessary for life, to words, which are therefore revealed as necessary for him, although he tries to free himself from them.

Also rain favours freedom for Hanno: “All of us dreaming and sheltering from the words, speaking no language at all, just listening to the voice of the rain falling [...] and the water continued to whisper [...] like the only language allowed” (ibid., 181).

As their life revolves around a linguistic taboo, the memoir foregrounds Hanno’s emphasis on language and the narrator interprets the world or the actions of people around him in terms of communication: when he sees his father making a big fire in the garden after he broke Fritz’s nose, this seems to him “as if he wanted to send a message around the whole world with smoke” (ibid., 31). As the gardener, like all workers, speaks English, he mentions him as clipping the hedges in English. As a consequence of his father’s tyrannical

behaviour, Hanno develops serious breathing problems, and his chest ‘howls’, as if trying to express what he cannot say. A key figure in the memoir – which is the source of the title of the Italian translation, *Il cane che abbaia alle onde* – is the stray dog that keeps barking as if wanting to say something to the waves. Even “the people who died in the Irish Famine are still talking” (ibid., 71) his father tells him. Hanno perceives the sound of the foghorn as “one word” (ibid., 271), “The same word all the time, as if it had only one word to say” (ibid., 262).

At the end of the memoir, the father “knows he’s lost the language war because he’s behaving more like other fathers now. He bought a television set and started watching programmes in English [...]. He got a car, too, and buys petrol in English” (ibid., 281-82). When his father dies, the source of taboos and prohibitions disappears, and Hanno reflects that “There’s nobody telling me what to do any more and what language to speak in” (ibid., 290), but he has introjected and absorbed them, and he has yet to learn to overcome them, not giving in to what he inherited: “You can inherit things like that. It’s like a stone in your hand. I’m afraid that I’ll have a limp like him. [...] I know I have to be different. [...] I have to pretend that I had no father” (ibid.). The only way out for him is to accept the richness of his legacy: “I’m not afraid any more of being German or Irish, or anywhere in between. [...] I’m not afraid of being homesick and having no language to live in. I don’t have to be like anyone else” (ibid., 295). It is only after having started to accept this that Hanno “turns into a transcultural citizen of the world” (Altuna-Garcia de Salazar, 2013, 192). It is only then that he can overcome his father’s exclusivist perspective that made him tell his mother that “‘You can’t love two countries,’ I said. ‘That’s impossible’” (ibid., 120). It is only then that the image of the speckled children acquires inclusive overtones and becomes truly positive:

We are the brack children. Brack, homemade Irish bread with German raisins. We are the brack people and we don’t have just one briefcase. We don’t just have one language and one history. 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. We are the speckled people. (ibid., 283)

5. Conclusion

This article has explored Hugo Hamilton's 2003 memoir *The Speckled People* from the perspective of the taboos, in the first place linguistic, imposed by the narrator's father, highlighting the father's staunchly tyrannical attitude. His worldview is based on antithetical oppositions and power dynamics that cause a permanent sense of displacement and homelessness in Hanno, as well as enormous difficulties in the development of his identity, thwarted by his father's prohibitions and punishments.

Notwithstanding the sufferings the protagonist has to endure, the narrative is extremely lyrical and hilarious at times. As a matter of fact, Hanno narrates his story with the candour typical of a child, giving very emotional and intimate accounts of the world around him. Indeed, the adoption of the child as the point of view of the narrative is a most suitable stylistic choice; Hanno's naïve and imaginative gaze presents and interprets the world in uncommon and surprising ways, and, in a child's unknowing perspective, it levels the degree of relevance of events, so that contemporary or past historical events seem to have the same importance as family incidents or things happening to neighbours, and Irish patriots become familiar presences in the house.

Due to his father's impositions Hanno becomes a migrant in his own country who, unlike real migrants, has no home to look back to and to pine for. He has to unlearn the exclusivist antithetical binaries taught by his father which constantly undermine the construction of his own identity. It is only trusting the power of words, instead of fearing it, that Hanno can undertake his enterprise of finding a language and therefore a home to belong to, thus breaking the taboo that has marked all his life.

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