

# “He said Ireland has more than one story”: Multiple Belongings in Perspective

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### Preamble

In Oscar Wilde’s story “The Happy Prince,” the prince lived all his life “in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow was not allowed to enter”. He was the happy prince who played in the daytime, danced in the evening and “never cared to ask what lay beyond” the “very lofty wall” that ran round the garden. So it is only when he dies and is set up “so high that [he] can see all the ugliness and all the misery of [his] city,” that “though [his] heart is made of lead yet [he] cannot choose but weep” (Wilde *Works*, 272). Death liberates the prince from his constricted perception sheltered by the garden wall and, by affording him insight into others’ lives, changes his former happiness, “if pleasure be happiness,” into compassion and attending ethical responsibility.

Focusing on non-fictional and fictional memoirs, respectively Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People* (2003) and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006), and Jennifer Johnston’s *The Gingerbread Woman* (2000), this paper addresses the experience of those who find themselves perceiving the world from outside the walls of the Palace of Sans-Souci, and who as a result try to work out how their perception may both belong to, and change, the prevailing picture of the world they inhabit. As shown in Wilde’s story, the Palace of Sans-Souci is an equivocal place where life without cares (*sans-souci*) is also a life without caring, and where unawareness of one’s situatedness in the world is directly linked to unawareness of others’ existence and respective situation in the world. In turn, the prince’s care and awareness of diversity proceeds from the gap between his perceptions outside the palace and his former perception inside the palace, which had remained uncontaminated by extramural contact. In Hamilton’s memoir and Johnston’s novel, this gap consists in the

narrators' painful realisation that their experience deviates from dominant monological narratives of identity, specifically of Irish national identity. In both cases shaping their stories is inextricably linked to listening to others' stories. Personal identity is therefore developed within an interpersonal dialogical context, and rendered as a process that sharpens the narrators' and the readers' alertness to perspective and awareness of diversity. Hamilton's memoir and Johnston's fictional memoir thus enact the challenge to broaden ethical possibility by overtly exploring aesthetic possibility.

### Introduction

"He said Ireland has more than one story" is a quote from Hugo Hamilton's first volume of memoirs *The Speckled People* (2003). Born in Dublin in 1953, the son of an Irish father and a German mother, Hamilton tells about "the language war" (as he calls it) in which he and his siblings grew up: at home, children were only allowed to speak their mother's language, German, and Irish, the language that their nationalist father believed ought to be Ireland's language; the language spoken outdoors, English, was strictly forbidden indoors, while the languages spoken indoors, particularly German, raised suspicion outdoors.

It is the boy's Irish uncle Ted, a Jesuit, who says Ireland has more than one story. He gives the boy a book about "changing skin", about trying to see what life may be like for people on the side of the losers. The book's metaphor of "changing skin" and the uncle's notion of a home spacious enough to accommodate "more than one story" provide an enabling conceptual framework for Hamilton's self-perception:

Onkel Ted came out and gave me a book called *Black Like Me*, about a man who changed his skin from white to black, just to see what it was like for other people. He said you have to be on the side of the losers, the people with bad lungs. You have to be with those who are homesick and can't breathe very well in Ireland. He said it makes no sense to hold a stone in your hand. A lot more people would be homeless if you speak the killer language. He said Ireland has more than one story. We are the German-Irish story. We are the English-Irish story,

too. My father has one soft foot and one hard foot, one good ear and one bad ear, and we have one Irish foot and one German foot and a right arm in English. We are the brack children. Brack, homemade Irish bread with German raisins. We are the brack people and we don't just have 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.

(Hamilton, *Speckled*, 282-3)

It is worth examining the reasoning within which Uncle Ted's mind-opening remark occurs. Acknowledging that "Ireland has more than one story" is presented as a vital alternative to "the killer language" predicated on power and the exclusion of "the losers." Indeed, "the killer language" relies on the equivocal assumption that there is "just one language and one history," that individual and collective identities are predicated on a single belonging, and that some belongings are worthier than others, so that some place you on the side of the winners, while others categorise you as a loser and leave you with little "breathing space". The "killer language" thus "makes no sense" because it relies on an assumption that proves destructive and leaves people homeless. Acknowledging the co-existence of multiple histories carries the liberating power of acknowledging the multiple belongings that go into the making of any sense of identity. This is a liberating gesture in that it expands the social "breathing space," making room for the histories that are censored and silenced by the "killer language" of "murderous identities" (Maalouf, *Identités* 1998),<sup>1</sup> that is, of tribal identities based on the equivocal notion of single belongings.

To abandon the "killer language" and acknowledge that we are

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<sup>1</sup> In his essay on "murderous identities," *Les Identités Meurtrières* (1998), the Lebanese-born writer Amin Maalouf examines the perils of the notion of sameness applied both to one's relation to the other, and to one's relation to the self: he contends that murderous "tribal" identities issue from notions that equate identity with "a single belonging" and therefore fail to acknowledge one's multiple and diverse belongings, be they linguistic, religious, ethnic, national, or others, including "*le sentiment d'appartenir aussi à l'aventure humaine*" (Maalouf, *Identités* 188).

“speckled people” involves exploring the challenges and possibilities of a language as self-questioning and alert as “speckled people” are forced to be. This requires that we “change skin,” or change perspective as the main character in *Black Like Me* needs to do.

In this paper I propose to look at Hugo Hamilton’s memoir, *The Speckled People* (2003) and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006), and at Jennifer Johnston’s novel *The Gingerbread Woman* (2000), and examine how they respectively address the challenges and potentialities of multiple belongings. If, according to some critics, Hamilton’s memoir reads like a novel,<sup>2</sup> *The Gingerbread Woman* is a novel that casts itself as a fictional memoir and features its protagonist’s attempt to confront memory by overtly shaping it into story. Without overlooking the distinct ethical import between non-fictional and fictional remembrance, I suggest that the novel’s self-questioning structure illuminates the narrative process undertaken in Hamilton’s memoir insofar as it exposes, and draws the reader’s alertness to, the ethical role and the aesthetical procedures of narrative itself.<sup>3</sup>

There are two issues I wish to consider: first, how these narratives do not glamorise the notion of multiple belongings, but are prompted by the difficulties attending the experience thereof in a society governed by tribal notions of identity and by the fear that contact may amount to contami-

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<sup>2</sup> Like Wieland Freund (2004) and Uwe Pralle (2004), Andrew Riemer (2003) argues that, “Though a memoir, *The Speckled People* reads like a novel”. Similarly, Trevor Butterworth (2003) claims that “the lyrical power of [Hamilton’s] writing stamps his story not as journalism but as literature – and great literature at that. *The Speckled People* is an astonishing achievement, clearly a landmark in Irish nonfiction”.

<sup>3</sup> Relevant to my point is Richard Kearney’s argument on the ethical role of the aesthetics of storytelling, which facilitates the shareability of experience through empathy: “Sometimes an ethics of memory is obliged to resort to aesthetics of storytelling. Viewers need not only to be made intellectually aware of the horrors of history; they also need to experience the horror of that suffering *as if* they were actually there” (Kearney, *Stories* 62). He also defends the “crucial ethical import” of distinguishing between fictional and non-fictional remembrance: while for fiction “the role of reinvention is what matters most, (...) in cases of psychotherapeutic and historical testimony (...) the function of veridical recall claims primacy” (69).

nation; secondly, how Hamilton's and Johnston's narrators resort to storytelling to put experience into perspective and thereby make it intelligible to themselves and shareable with others. By addressing the difficulty, as well as the necessity, of acknowledging multiple belongings and devising means of negotiating them, these narratives contribute to expand the breathing space wherein Ireland's stories may be told and shared.

### **Hugo Hamilton's memoir: Multiple belongings as a challenge**

Both Hamilton's memoir and Johnston's novel feature narrators who are acutely aware of their multiple belongings because their experience does not fit into dominant narratives. In Hamilton's case, this marginality has to do with the "cultural mixture" of his Irish-German background. As he explains in an essay, writing in the forbidden language becomes a means of working through<sup>4</sup> the "confusion" and "cultural entanglements" experienced as a "speckled" child:

In many ways it was inevitable that writing would become the only way for me to explain the deep childhood confusion. The prohibition against English made me see that language as a challenge. Even as a child I spoke to the walls in English and secretly rehearsed dialogue I heard outside. I wanted to be like everyone else on the street, not the icon of Gaelic Ireland that my father wanted us to be, nor the good German boy either. My mother dressed us in 'lederhosen' and my father, not to be outdone, bought us Aran sweaters from the west of Ireland. So we were Irish on top and German below. We were

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<sup>4</sup> The traumatic past can neither be escaped nor safely contained and its ostensible or subterranean permanence requires instead that it be subject to the "working through" that Greene advocates for feminist metafiction (Greene, *Changing the Story* 14), and Kearney proposes as part of "a hermeneutics of action [that may] respond to the aporias of evil" through practical understanding, working through and pardon (Kearney, *Stories* 100). If, for Freud, psychoanalysis was the process whereby "*Durcharbeiten*" could be effected, Hamilton's and Johnston's works present writing as the self-reflective process whereby the narrators work through and come to terms with the disparate and conflicting elements in their life stories.

‘the homesick children,’ struggling from a very early age with the idea of identity and conflicting notions of Irish history and German history.

We were meant to be speckled, a word that my father took from the Irish or Gaelic word *breac*, meaning mixed or coloured or spotted like a trout. But that idea of cultural mixture became an ordeal for us, full of painful and comical cultural entanglements out of which we have been trying to find some sense of belonging ever since. There were no other children like me, no ethnic groups that I could attach myself to.

(Hamilton “Speaking to the Walls”)

If belonging is a basic need, multiple belongings may turn it into an ordeal, as the Hamilton children precociously sense given their peculiar “cultural mixture”. Confusion then results from their exposure to conflicting allegiances so that, in the absence of an available model, they have to figure out for themselves how to deal with their speckled heritage. Their experience of how their disparate belongings set them apart from a mainstream sense of identity renders them homesick, and it is as homesick children that they sense and long for the notion of home that tacitly shapes society: as a given single belonging. Yet, as Hamilton excavates his family’s Irish and German histories, he realises that although as a child he was called Nazi by his Irish peers, his mother’s family “actually stood against the Nazis in the Third Reich”; similarly, when he discovers that the photograph of the sailor hidden in the wardrobe is his Irish grandfather’s, he realises that his father, who prohibited English in the house, had himself grown up in the English language as the son of John Hamilton, who had an English name and served in the Royal Navy. Confusion thus arises not only from the need to negotiate the hyphen between Irish and German, but also to uncover the plurality within each term of that relation. As it turns out, neither the word “German” nor the word “Irish” stand for a single stable allegiance and each term is “impure,” to borrow the title of the French translation, *Sang Impur*.

Writing for Hamilton is therefore the means of “liberating [him]self from th[e] silence” and sense of homelessness that marked his childhood. As he argues, “I never thought I had a story until I began to write it down”



(Hamilton, "Speaking to the Walls"). Writing enables him to work through his heritage of "painful and comical cultural entanglements" by recapturing the boy's sensorial and cognitive experience of the world.<sup>5</sup> Engaging with narrative further amounts to honouring his mother's legacy, namely her trust in words and her diary of remembrance: first, it is the mother who explains the world as a struggle between "the fist people" and the "word people", instructing her children not to "fight back" because, "We are the word people and one day we will win them over. One day the silent negative will win them over" (Hamilton, *Speckled* 223)<sup>6</sup>; secondly, the mother's diary provides the form that shapes Hamilton's narrative by setting family history alongside world history, as indicated at the beginning of the second volume of memoirs, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006):

My father and mother taught us how to forget and how to remember. My father still makes speeches at the breakfast table and my mother still cuts out pictures and articles from the newspapers to put into her diary when she has time. She wants to make sure that we remember how we grew up and don't repeat what happened to her in Germany. She wants everything to be fixed and glued into her book. Our history and the history of the world all mixed together. There is a lock

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<sup>5</sup> As the author explains in an interview, "Ganz am Anfang habe ich anders, mehr als Erwachsene geschrieben. Aber ich bemerkte dabei, dass ich voller Urteil und auch voller Ärger schrieb. Nach und nach erkannte ich, dass die Geschichte nur durch die Stimme des Kindes überhaupt zu erzählen ist. Die Verwirrungen, diese Auseinandersetzungen zwischen zwei Kulturen, zwischen den verschiedenen Geschichten meiner Mutter und meines Vaters, wären sonst zu einem ganz dicken Brei verrührt worden" (Hamilton, "Sprache der Rettung"). [At first, I tended to write more as a grown-up. But then I 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. The confusion, these clashes between two cultures, between my mother's and my father's different stories, would otherwise have become a big mess.]

<sup>6</sup> As Patricia Craig notes, "*The Speckled People* sticks for diversity and principled dissent ('the silent negative'), while satisfactorily extending the scope of the Irish memoir" (Craig, Review).

of blond hair on one page and a picture of Martin Luther King on the next. School reports and pictures of tanks in the streets of Prague facing each other.

(Hamilton, *Sailor* 11-2)

Piecing her diary together requires agency, for it is up to the diarist to decide what to include and what to exclude and how to link and align the included bits and pieces of individual and collective experience. This is also what the narrator of Hamilton's memoir does in his narrative. By narrating history, he realises that he is also interpreting it, devising links and relations, as happens when the German who tried to kill Hitler and the Irish nationalist hero Patrick Pearse are held face to face under the narrator's gaze:

I looked at the books and noticed that the picture of the man who put the bomb in a briefcase for Germany looked a bit like the picture of the man who started the Easter Rising for Ireland. I had to bend the books a little bit, but when I put the pictures together they looked alike. And they were facing each other, as if they were talking. Patrick Pearse was looking to the right and Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg was looking to the left. They seemed not to be even surprised to be in the same room together. (...) They looked like brothers. Claus and Patrick. I sat up in bed and held the two photographs together. (...) They met for one last time in my room with the foghorn still going outside.

(Hamilton, *Speckled* 271-2)

*The Speckled People* concludes with the narrator's realisation that,

Maybe your country is only a place you make up in your own mind. Something you dream about and sing about. 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'm not afraid of being homesick and having no language to live in. I don't have to be like anyone else. I'm walking on the wall and nobody can stop me.

(Hamilton, *Speckled* 295)

Hamilton's memoir testifies to Richard Kearney's argument that,

We are subject *to* narrative as well as being subjects *of* narrative. We are made by stories before we ever get around to making our own. (...) Moreover, it is because of our belonging to history as story-tellers and story-followers that we are *interested* by stories – in addition to being merely *informed* by facts. (...) This interestedness is essentially ethical in that what we consider *communicable* and *memorable* is also what we consider *valuable*.

(Kearney, *Stories* 153-4)

Apart from illustrating this interestedness, *The Gingerbread Woman* also exposes how history needs story, for, as Kearney argues, “truth is not the sole prerogative of the exact sciences. There is also a truth, with its corresponding understanding, that we may properly call ‘narrative’. We need both” (Kearney, *Stories* 148).<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Gingerbread Woman*: Story-telling as “structuring the truth”**

If Hamilton’s memoir tells “the German-Irish story and the English-Irish story,” *The Gingerbread Woman* (2000)<sup>8</sup> addresses the risks and fears of contact within and between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The novel acknowledges the trauma that results from the experience of contact as contamination, and proposes a non-fusional relatedness

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<sup>7</sup> Kearney makes the point by referring to “testimonial truth” and the Holocaust: “To counter negationism effectively, I believe that the Holocaust needs to be told as *both* history *and* story. (...) The best way of respecting historical memory against revisionism is (...) to combine the most effective forms of narrative witness with the most objective forms of archival, forensic and empirical evidence. For truth is not the sole prerogative of the exact sciences. There is also a truth, with its corresponding understanding, that we may properly call ‘narrative’. We need both” (Kearney, *Stories* 148). He adds: “what narrative promises those of us concerned with historical truth is a form of understanding which is neither absolute nor relative, but something in between. (...) It is closer to art than science; or, if you prefer, to a human science than to an exact one” (149-50).

<sup>8</sup> Henceforth quotations from the novel shall be referred by the abbreviation GW followed by the page number.

that enables the telling and sharing of the various stories North and South. At plot and structural level, story-telling emerges as a tentative yet vital process of “structuring the truth” and of making shareable what is “sometimes untellable” (GW 60). Just as Hamilton’s mother organised her diary by setting family history alongside world history, so does Johnston’s novel present individual histories as permeable to collective history, hence the characters’ interestedness in story-telling and in becoming “not only subject *to* narrative,” but “subjects *of* it” (Kearney, *Stories* 153).

*The Gingerbread Woman* (2000) depicts the relations between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland through the casual encounter of two strangers: Clara, a Protestant woman from the Republic, and Laurence, a Catholic man from the North, so both from the minority communities South and North of the Irish border. They are in their mid-thirties, she makes her living by teaching Irish Literature abroad and is recovering from the hysterectomy that followed a disastrous love affair with a New York stockbroker; he is a Maths teacher whose wife and baby daughter were killed accidentally in an attack aimed at an Army truck two years earlier and who struggles with the anger and sense of guilt and betrayal that accompany his now fading memories of wife and daughter. Each reacts differently to their respective loss: while Clara tries to recover from her forced infertility by devising alternative courses for her life, Laurence does not want to be healed, for fear of forgetting; while she decides to write in order to put her experience into perspective, he leaves home and locks himself in his vanishing memories to honour the beloved dead.

The novel that we read is the novel that Clara is writing, which tells her story alongside Laurence’s. In both cases, trauma is associated with the imagery of the infected body. The two bodies are respectively individual and collective: Clara’s has been infected with gonorrhoea by a charming and callous American stockbroker, and Northern Ireland suffers from “terminal hatred – infectious, contagious, hereditary. A bit like AIDS – incurable” (GW 39), as Clara unsparingly words it.

By interweaving individual and collective trauma, the novel suggests how individual responses to trauma are an integral part of possible collective responses to it, and invites, among others, a political reading of its characters’ predicaments. Thus, Clara’s busyness teaching Irish Literature abroad hints at the Republic’s openness to foreign investment in the 1990s,

and at the extent to which Ireland and Irish culture have themselves become trendy commodities. On a political level, the *Gingerbread Woman's* story may then read as a cautionary tale for a Republic thriving on foreign investment but, like Clara, risking falling gullibly into the exploitative lure of American capitalism.

Northern Ireland's predicament is, in turn, referred by Laurence as being "gutted by history" (GW 78, 80), being "a gutless people" who have "allowed [themselves] to be collectively bullied" (80).<sup>9</sup> His syntax suggests that those who are bullied are co-implicated in the process for failing to react creatively against the powerful forces of history. In his account, gutlessness translates as voicelessness against the "bull[ying]" and "unreasonable behaviour" of Unionists and Republicans:

We are a gutless people, not just my family, who don't speak, but the whole damn lot of us. We allowed ourselves to be collectively bullied. (...) We subscribed seriously to the "whatever you say, say nothing" philosophy. We didn't raise our voices against the unreasonable behaviour of the Unionists and now we're having a problem raising our voices against the unreasonable behaviour of the Republicans. Our voices disappeared years ago with our guts, out our backsides. (GW 80)

The imagery of the infected body powerfully indicates the extent to which contact is feared, while silence is presented as colluding in a self-destructive state of affairs. Yet both Clara and Laurence initially regard escape from contact as a self-protective response to fear. She is the cosmopolitan academic who has consistently run away from "that disease called love" (GW 100); he and his wife had each longed to escape from Northern Ireland before their acquaintance, and had afterwards tried to escape from their "gutted" (78, 80) country by insulating themselves in a

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<sup>9</sup> If the body's exposure to invasive contamination was literal in Clara's case, the imagery of the entrails re-emerges here to yet again suggest permeability to external abuse and its destructive effects: gutted and gutless people are left devitalised and therefore incapable of "having the guts" to resist and react against such an assault on their integrity.

family haven, which is then shattered when Caitlin's car collides with her country's history. Yet Clara realises in hindsight how misleading such escapades are, and regards her having "become a non-fugitive" (212) as a symptom of recovered health. Rather than escaping and silence, *The Gingerbread Woman* proposes narrative as a means of unfreezing mutual suspicion and engaging in vital and judicious relatedness.

This tentative but committed movement from isolation to relation and from silence to narration is enacted in the novel's dialogical structure.<sup>10</sup> It inserts individual stories within a dialogical frame, exposes the writing process, foregrounds the role of the interlocutor, and highlights the therapeutic role that narrative plays in Clara and Laurence's encounter.

By overtly exposing the writing process, the novel shows how narrative uses the tools of fictionalisation, namely detachment, perspective and shared imaginative frames. As Clara realises when she starts writing her "notes" (GW 69), framing experience into story requires some degree of detachment "from cruel reality" to enable perspective: "I need to fictionalise him in my mind now, remove his cruel reality which has left scars not just on my body, but on my heart and mind as well" (83). Fictionalisation includes resorting to shareable frames of meaning, such as translating painful adult experience into the widely recognisable version of children's cautionary tales about encounters with dangerous strangers: she summarises her story as "The Gingerbread Woman meets the fox – or was it a wolf? It hardly matters. It was some predator or other, dressed slyly in the clothes of a New York stockbroker" (69).

As a tentative and self-examining narrator,<sup>11</sup> Clara requires an interlocutor both in writing and in her exchanges with Laurence. If writing

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<sup>10</sup> Instead of a conventional homogenising narrative structure orchestrated by a single voice, *The Gingerbread Woman* features Clara's notes for her novel, interspersed with a first-person account of her present circumstances and a third-person narrative of Laurence's experiences and memories, which are presented in italics.

<sup>11</sup> Clara writes to "perhaps anchor [her]self" (GW 67), to "look with a certain coolness at how [she] allowed [her]self to be duped and then (...) 'damaged'" (128), to "vent her] spleen" and "move on" (73), having "salvaged something from the wreck" (203). Her attitude towards writing is not that of a master of her trade but of an apprentice,

is an introspective task which requires a confrontation with her inner voices,<sup>12</sup> Clara's prose also adopts a conversational tone and explicitly addresses her readers.<sup>13</sup> Besides, she begins to write her notes while Laurence is staying in her house and she often prompts him to "talk to [her]" for "[she has] become too self-absorbed" (GW 78), thus proposing talking as a mutually liberating practice: "I am a total stranger. You can tell me everything or nothing, lies or truth. It doesn't matter. It's of no consequence what you say to me" (64). Despite her flippant tone, talking is for both a way out of self-absorption and the word becomes a means of re-articulating their connection to the world.<sup>14</sup> Like Hamilton's narrator,

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who is self-critical and aware of the tricks and traps of "moulding reality into fiction" (89). Sometimes she feels that she is "inventing" (89) her memories, at other times she realises that she will have to "invent" (117) initially overlooked details which slipped from her memory. Similarly, to "use" Laurence's story, she needs to "invent" the third-person sections focused through him.

<sup>12</sup> Both Clara and Laurence entertain monologues in their minds, as she points out to him: "You talk to yourself a lot, (...) I've noticed that. Perhaps not yourself, but some person sitting in your head. I do too, I have to say, but I quite enjoy it. I can make myself laugh. You don't seem to enjoy it" (GW 77).

<sup>13</sup> Clara's addressee features recurrently through the pronoun "you": "As you may gather" or "I suppose I should tell you at this stage" (GW 3); she thus bears in mind her intelligibility to an interlocutor whom she casts as "you people [who] always want to know so much irrelevant stuff. *What?* you ask? *How?* *Why?* *When exactly did this happen?* *What was her motivation?* *Who?* *Whom?* *Whither?*" (...) Writers tell you as much as they wish – that should be enough for you, but it seldom is" (3). The outburst, which reads as a caricature of literal minded critics, is in itself an explicit piece of dialogue with readers addressing basic protocols involved in writing and reading.

<sup>14</sup> Twice in the novel, both times in passages related to Laurence, the word "word" is printed as "world" (GW 78; 96). The seeming misprint points, in an apparently inadvertent fashion, to Ricoeur's notion of the poetic dimension of language leading to the "disclosure of possible worlds" (Ricoeur, "Poetics" 125). It also evokes Rob Pope's description of the relation between "stories" and "histories" as he borrows Deleuze's philosophy to comment on creation myths, from that of the Fulani related by Achebe, to the Biblical Gospel of St John: "what is at issue is a complex sense of *wor(l)d be(com)ing*, where *words* bring *worlds* into being (and vice versa), and apparently static *being* is realised as fluid *becoming* (and vice versa)" (Pope, *Creativity* 142).

listening to stories also places Clara in the role of the active reader “trying to work out the truth from the fiction,” for story is a “*structuring*” of the truth which “is never structured in reality. It’s all over the place; sometimes untellable” (60). Clara’s alertness to the “structuring” and potential manipulation of the truth is in tune with Kearney’s thinking on “narrative and the ethics of remembrance”:

Narrative memory is never innocent. It is an ongoing conflict of interpretations. (...) Every history is told from a certain perspective and in the light of specific prejudice (in Gadamer’s sense). Memory (...) is not always on the side of the angels. It can as easily lead to false consciousness and ideological closure as to openness and tolerance. This distorting power is sometimes ignored by contemporary advocates of narrative ethics – MacIntyre, Nussbaum, Booth – who tend to downplay the need for a hermeneutic of critical suspicion (*à la* Ricoeur or Habermas). Nor is it properly appreciated by those disciples of Nietzsche’s *Second Untimely Considerations* who believe it is sufficient to ‘actively forget the past’ in order to have done with it.

(Kearney, *Questioning Ethics* 27)

Aware of the intricacies involved in “structuring the truth”, Clara never tries to offer a definitive, totalising version of hers or anyone’s history.<sup>15</sup> Yet, she does not hesitate in her assessment of the benign effect of Laurence’s and hers facing up to their respective traumas and concludes that “[she is her] own person” (GW 212) and that, “He too is his own man. He may not know it yet, but that is his fate” (213). Sharing their narratives despite their mutual ignorance and suspicion does not precipitate any fusal outcome, such as marriage, but leaves each of them capable of envisaging future possibilities for their lives.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Her reluctance towards assertive conclusions is anticipated in her early remark on “This Be Another Verse” by Roger McGough: “I like the notion of a poem ending with a bracket” (GW 4).

<sup>16</sup> In Clara’s case, these include “take to making jam” like her mother, “go to Oughterard with the doctor” and overall “become a non-fugitive” (GW 212). She further realises



*The Gingerbread Woman* illustrates Ricoeur's claim that "the work of narrative constitutes an essential element of the work of mourning, understood as the acceptance of the irreparable" (Ricoeur, "Narrative" 37). This is deemed a "creative process" that entails "suffering" (41) but may prevent the "[t]wo great sufferings" of "hate and revenge" (42). Mourning is therefore "a way of giving people the right to start anew by remembering in such a way that we may overcome obsessive or compulsive repetition. It is a matter of the right balance between memory and forgetting" (42). This is the process intuited by Hamilton's mother as she keeps her diary, and undertaken in Hamilton's memoir and in Johnston's novel. While Hamilton's memoir accounts for the history of stories and the lineage of story-tellers that enabled him to work out a conceptual framework within which to tell and share his story, Johnston's novel self-questioningly displays the tentative handiwork of narrative remembrance, and indicates to what extent it may be assisted by the tools of fictionalisation. In their respective alertness to the role and workings of story-telling, Hamilton's and Johnston's works suggest that judicious narrative remembrance and understanding contribute to energise the social breathing space, so that opening up to the multiple stories of the past also opens up present and future possibilities.

Ultimately, both the non-fictional and the fictional memoir show that perspective is as much a matter of ethics as of aesthetics, and that the ability to "change skin" requires first of all the ability to perceive oneself in a relational context. Telling stories, including one's own, is thus presented as a tentative dialogical process requiring active alertness to oneself and others, no less than to the common but complex ground of language wherein singularity and shareability need to be carefully negotiated.

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that she "will have to invent [her] own immortality", and will have to rely on words rather than on biology for it, thus expanding the sources of female identity beyond procreation to include other forms of creativity. She describes her relation to words in the following terms: "Words leap and fall in my head, stumble and rush, fight and chatter, like the children I will never have" (212). If one takes the analogy literally, then, like children whose future their parents can neither control nor predict, so will the afterlife of her words elude her self-deprecating authority and remain open to readers' responses.

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