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### Immigrant and Irish Identities in Hand in the Fire and Hamilton's Writing between 2003 and 2014

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**Volume 18 Issue 4 (December 2016) Article 5**  
**Dervila Cooke,**  
**"Immigrant and Irish Identities in *Hand in the Fire* and**  
**Hamilton's Writing between 2003 and 2014"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss4/4>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 18.4 (2016)**  
Thematic Issue ***New Work on Immigration and Identity in Contemporary France, Québec, and Ireland***  
**Ed. Dervila Cooke**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss4/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Immigrant and Irish Identities in *Hand in the Fire* and Hamilton's Writing between 2003 and 2014" Dervila Cooke discusses the intertwining of Irish and immigrant identities. Cooke examines the connection between openness to memory and embracing migrant identities in Hamilton's writing both in the 2010 novel and as a whole. The empathetic and inclusive character of Helen in *Hand in the Fire* is analyzed in contrast to characters who have repressed memory including the Serbian Vid. Helen's ties to elsewhere, her openness to new influence, and her willingness to engage with traumatic elements of the past (Irish and Serbian) make of her a redemptive character. In *Hand in the Fire*, engaging with the past through the metaphor of self-renovation is seen as potentially healing. The novel connects the retrieval of memory with the (self) acceptance of migrants and of traumatic events in Irish experience.

**Dervila COOKE**

### **Immigrant and Irish Identities in *Hand in the Fire* and Hamilton's Writing between 2003 and 2014**

In a 2014 interview, Hugo Hamilton reflected as follows: "We are all storytellers of our own memory, of our own existence. The story is the person. So what is realism? It's not actually the world we're in, it's the facts we tell about that. It's the story we tell each other. It's the stories that are missing sometimes, you know, it's the vacuum—what hasn't been told ... Realism is a very fluid thing, and it depends on who you meet. And that's a very Irish thing as well. In the Irish language it's the first thing that people say to you: Cén scéal agat? What story have you got? So, what is a person without a story?" (Smith <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krhkE0mF2VA>>). Declaring that he identifies with Vid, the Serbian immigrant to Ireland who is the main character of his 2010 novel *Hand in the Fire*, Hamilton stated that the book was "my version of the world" which would seem to suggest that it is in some way "his story." As Hamilton intertwines Irish and immigrant identities and stories in *Hand in the Fire*, the retrieval of memory—of "the stories that are missing"—emerges as an important factor in the self-acceptance of migrants, and also in the self-knowledge of members of the host society. I will also reflect on similar tropes in Hamilton's other work between 2003 and 2014.

Hamilton, who came to prominence in 2003 with his memoir *The Speckled People*, was born Johannes O hUrmoltaigh in 1953, but changed his name to that of a family friend, bishop Hugo Liedmann (*Speckled* 215). Hamilton's German mother Irmgard came from a staunchly anti-Nazi family and lived through Hitler's regime. She met and married the fervently Irish-speaking Séan O hUrmoltaigh in Ireland after the war. Séan (who rejected his English-language identity as John Hamilton) was the son of a sailor in the British Navy who lost his memory and reason in World War I. This paternal grandfather was an outsider in Irish society because of his mental illness and because he had fought for Britain. Hamilton is married to a journalist of immigrant extraction (United Kingdom Irish), who, like Helen in *Hand in the Fire*, attended boarding school and had a family who emigrated to Canada (see Egan). He has published short stories, memoirs, and novels including some novels set in Berlin and Irish detective novels. He has recently turned to drama and has also written essays on Germany and Ireland. His work explores personal memory, the desire to forget and remember, trauma, national histories, migrant or uncertain identities, and the figure of the outsider.

Like his character Vid, Hamilton felt uneasy with English, a language taught to him as a foreign tongue at an Irish-speaking school in Dublin (see Winch) and banned from his German and Irish-speaking home. Yet, *Hand in the Fire's* complexity lies in the symbolic nature of its characters and plot. Vid encapsulates states of liminality in many ways: as an outsider, he is not only a projection of the author, but also represents Hamilton's German immigrant mother. He even shares aspects of Hamilton's militant Irish-speaking father, who chose to become an outsider linguistically to many people in Ireland (see Winch). His amnesia evokes that of Hamilton's paternal grandfather. Vid is also a reflection of the troubled Irish character, Kevin Concannon, who like him has a weighty but largely unacknowledged past. Most obviously, Vid represents the wave of immigrants mainly from Eastern Europe, Nigeria, China, the Philippines, and Brazil who came to Ireland in the 1995-2007 economic boom. Hamilton uses his customary compassion to explore complex networks of displacement and exclusion, and the impact of the repression of personal, familial, and societal secrets upon identity, whether immigrant or Irish.

Jason King argued that the literary device of interethnic romance has often been used too simplistically in recent Irish fiction that purports to be multicultural. He sees the device as frequently foregrounding "the elision rather than accommodation of cultural difference," for example in Roddy Doyle's *The Deportees* ("Irish Multicultural Fiction" 167; see also McIvor 41). *Hand in the Fire* uses—and arguably upends—the trope of union between outsider and insider in interesting ways. While Irish woman Helen and Vid come together towards the end of the novel, this is not a case of a deeply-rooted Irish partner fusing overly simplistically with an outsider. Their union instead provokes reflection on both Irish and Serbian society and on the need for a tolerance that is based on understanding and engaging with the past. At the start of *Hand in the Fire*, Helen is Kevin's girlfriend. While this relationship seems surprising, given the contrast between his egotism and her wish to help others, Helen and Kevin share a common past of migration. Helen emigrated with her family to Canada when she was twelve, but was sent back to Ireland alone to attend boarding school a short time later. She appears inclined towards cosmopolitanism, as she is familiar with Balkan music before she meets Vid. Her ties to elsewhere and her openness to new influence along with her lack of fear of the past make of her an empathetic and inclusive-minded character who accepts Vid's history and even helps him to face it.

The encounter between Vid and his glibly confident yet emotionally damaged and repressed Irish friend Kevin can also be called romantic or at least perversely pseudo-romantic. Kevin goes down on bended knee to Vid to apologize for punching him, forces his tongue into Vid's mouth in a sudden kiss on a fishing trip, and they open a box together that looks like it might hold "an engagement ring" (125). Kevin also sends Vid to Dursey Island, the site of a previous romantic tryst between Helen and Kevin. He includes Vid in his other romantic relationships, as when he urinates on Helen's car in Vid's presence and has sex with another woman while Vid sleeps on another bed beside them. This intense relationship between Vid and Kevin mainly serves to emphasize Kevin's repression of deep aspects of his psyche. These include his attraction to Vid as a reflection of his own past as a misfit and as a substitute for the lonely emigrant father he has rejected. It is for these reasons that Kevin employs Vid to work on his mother's house, which she is now renovating with money bequeathed by emigrants in her family. Like the father in Hamilton's 2003 memoir *The Speckled People*, Kevin Concannon is a volatile, passionate, towering figure full of helpless fury. Both were bullied at school in Ireland for being differ-

ent. Hamilton's father suffered from a limp and lost his politically and socially unacceptable father early in life. Kevin, the son of emigrants who returned from England, was persecuted for not having an Irish accent. Now a successful lawyer who has cast off all trace of his English accent, Kevin rejects his own vulnerability by rejecting both his past and his alcoholic father Johnny, who remained abroad to work while Kevin was growing up. While his emigrant and fatherless past complicates his character, Kevin is in many ways a metaphor for what Fintan O'Toole in his 2010 essay *Enough is Enough* called the "substitute identity" of Celtic Tiger Ireland's sometimes superficial confidence (O'Toole qtd. in Bonner and Slaby 23).

Ronit Lentin described Ireland's encounter with its "Celtic Tiger" immigrants as "the return of the national repressed" (Lentin qtd. in King, "Irish Multicultural" 177), during which Irish people were confronted with the mirror image of their own long experience of emigration. This may explain why Kevin is initially drawn to Vid, who no doubt reminds him of his own previous outsider status. Yet it is also part of the reason why Kevin soon rejects Vid, who reminds him too much of his own lonely experiences, now concealed by his professional and social persona. Like his mother Rita who rejects her husband Johnny, excluding him from the family and refusing to open his letters, Kevin is reluctant to deal with anything difficult. There is even a suggestion that he may have framed Vid for his crime (55, 84). When his eighteen-year old sister Ellis becomes pregnant, he bullies her with his mother's tacit agreement into agreeing to travel to Britain for a termination, not even considering for a moment that Ellis might be able, or indeed want, to take care of a child. He prefers to exist in a vacuous existence mired in the oblivion of drunken nights on the town and serial infidelity. Like Kevin, Vid repressed his familial and national story having been a child in Serbia during the Bosnian war of 1992-1995 that included the massacre of 8000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica. He only allows himself to remember the distressing images from that time when he has become romantically involved with Helen, the character in the novel who is most open to the past. Vid is also the son of a member of the Serbian secret police who was killed along with his wife in a car ambush from which only Vid escaped. As such, both Kevin and Vid are fugitives from their personal and national pasts. When Kevin accepts Vid's simplistic account of having left Serbia because he wanted to travel after "a bad car accident" with the laconic comment "fair enough" (2), this reflects Kevin's own eagerness to sweep anything uncomfortable under the carpet. After informing Vid briefly of his misfit past, he ends with the admonition "Never look back, my friend" (42).

Because Vid and Kevin are so similar in the above ways and because of their strangely intense and sometimes uncanny and terrifying relationship, the literary figure of the double or Doppelgänger springs to mind. Yet since each reflects the other, and since Vid is not simply a projection of what Kevin has repressed but in fact the main character of the novel, their relationship is subtly different from the dynamic noted by Eda Segarra in her discussion of this literary figure. Segarra notes that the uncanny figure of the Doppelgänger "with its portrayal of the double alienation of experiencing the other as self and the self as other" was particularly prevalent in Europe during the nineteenth-century colonial era (6). Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is an example of someone who is at first hidden away then destroyed by fire, which may have resonance for Hamilton's own text. In *Hand in the Fire*, Vid is not the colonial other and Kevin is as much Vid's double as vice versa, as Hamilton is writing from the point of view of the other through Vid's Serbian eyes. Indeed, Vid's story has the most obvious centrality, with Kevin's story perhaps needing to be unpicked more carefully.

In many respects, Vid is a manipulated partner in the relationship, most remarkably by accepting to take the Irishman's place in court for Kevin's violent attack on a thuggish Irish electrician. Kevin manoeuvres Vid into this strange position under the pretext that the attack occurred because Kevin was defending Vid (35, 92). Kevin's violence seems partly fuelled by the anger he carries within him at the abuse he suffered as an English-raised but Irish-born boy in Ireland, and possibly also as an Irish boy in England. Kevin describes the electrician as a "racist bastard" after the attack (35). Kevin's relationship with Vid itself turns racist, when Vid strikes up a friendship with Kevin's father Johnny. He calls Vid "a Serbian cunt" for daring to interfere with his family, when Vid tries to give him the All Ireland hurling medal that Johnny has asked him to pass on (126). He later insults Vid's accent (214), and finally calls him a sponger (258). Symbolically, this racism starts at the point when Vid appears to be usurping Kevin's position as son. Several of the characters display either aggressive or casual racism. The electrician calls Vid a "Polish cunt" (29) after his daughter kisses him, and Vid's co-workers call him Vim, the name of a cleaning product for bathrooms. An employee at the builder's providers asks him every time he sees him about Radovan Karadžić, the Bosnian Serb war criminal (154). The electrician's Irish gang are overtly tribal. They beat and almost drown Vid near the end of the novel, and are no doubt behind the arson attack on the workshop of Vid's Lithuanian friend and co-worker Darius. They do not suspect that Kevin might be responsible for the attack on the electrician as they assume him to be Vid's employer and not his friend. In both instances of violent crime, Vid is suspected, escaping only because of a technicality in one case and video evidence in the other.

More insidiously perhaps, both Vid and Darius are objectified as being workers above all else. Even Rita objectifies Vid (219), despite her paradoxical desire to delve into his past, as a substitute for emotional intimacy with the husband she has rejected, whose life as an emigrant parallels Vid's own. Johnny himself highlights Vid's worker status to Kevin, perhaps because he himself has been panned down to the quality of worker (202). In a nod by Hamilton to the frequent Irish practice of calling all Eastern Europeans "Polish", Vid is further deindividualized by being lumped into this category. Hamilton's decision to focus on non-Polish immigrants in *Hand in the Fire* is a pointed one for this reason. Liuda, Vid's Moldovan girlfriend for a time, is valued only as a sexualized object by Vid's Irish co-worker and is "imported" by an Irish businessman (61-62, 152) and exploited by a series of others. Vid longs to be a part of the Concannon family and "not just a worker" (47) and tries, like Darius, to assimilate linguistically into Irish society, with mixed results. Yet in other ways he is a passive recipi-

ent of his fate, and displays little individual agency at first. It is not until his romantic fusion with the more compassionate Helen that Vid gains the confidence to act against Kevin and to become "a participant" in society (261) by reinstating Ellis with her individual freedom and dignity. In an act that symbolizes the excluded scapegoat taking his place in Irish society, Vid decides to break into the Concannon house with Helen to rescue Ellis. He declares: "This is where I entered into the story of the country at last. I became a participant, a player, an insider taking action. Not letting things happen around me as if I was still only an immigrant and it was none of my business. I was not trying to make a name for myself or anything like that, but I was entitled to play my role as an ordinary inhabitant who belonged here." (261). Carmen Zamorano Llena has highlighted this passage as Vid's "coming out of paralysis" where he rejects his previous need to "assimilate" into Irish society (116). The term Vid uses repeatedly is "integrate," but Zamorano Llena is correct that it initially appears more like an unquestioning assimilation.

Questions of compassion and solidarity are an important part of *Hand in the Fire*. Vid has compassion for the many people who need it in the Concannon family, most notably for Johnny, whose departure from Ireland he imagines in detail (119-122), and also for the youngest daughter Ellis. Ellis bears the name of Ellis Island, a place of immigration and emigration, between departure and arrival, and has "emigrated to the land of dreams and drugs" (181). Because of the family's rejection of Johnny, she feels cut off from her "genetic inheritance" and hence from an important part of her past (206). She becomes part of what Vid describes as "a separate ethnic group", living with her drug addict friends on the outer edges of society (185). Vid even has pity for Kevin himself, despite his emotional and physical abuse of him (267-68). A key element of the novel is his compassion for Johnny's aunt, Máire Concannon, the drowned pregnant woman of Furbo who was excluded by her own people (like Vid's own father before he was killed 230). He travels to Furbo in Connemara and walks the long journey to the church at Barna "because I wanted to know how long the trip would have taken for a woman carrying a child" (175). Vid has little compassion for himself, however, feeling a huge sense of guilt (78, 105, 113, 196, 205, 224) and that he is "unfit to integrate" and has "brought disease" into Ireland (105, 205). Vid has done nothing wrong but carries a sense of national guilt. His abuse by Kevin and by the thuggish Irish gang deepens his internalized feeling of worthlessness. Bullying ran through Hamilton's own family, as described in *The Speckled People*, where the children were repeatedly "executed" as "Hitler" and "Eichmann" by neighbouring Irish youngsters, and bullying of a linguistic and sometimes physical sense was carried out by Hamilton's father as he sought to exclude the English language from the household.

The compassion afforded Hamilton's mother in *The Speckled People* is easily understandable, given that she was a lonely outsider in 1950s Ireland with a traumatic past full of horror and national guilt, as a native of a country that was remembered mainly for the Holocaust and Nazi tyranny. Vid is in many respects the Serbian equivalent of Irmgard in *Celtic Tiger Ireland*, as Hamilton has suggested (431). In another parallel with *Hand in the Fire*, and pre-figuring Vid's compassion for Kevin, *The Speckled People* also displays compassion for a tyrannical figure, the narrator's father, who as noted was bullied severely in youth, and who comes across as in some senses pioneering and idealistic. Yet nothing is blindly accepted: in *The Speckled People* Hamilton clearly condemns views and actions he considers reprehensible, including the father's anti-Semitic writing, which suggests an inability to realize that there could be such thing as an Irish Jew, or that individual members of any ethnic group might feel that they could be Irish in other ways than by speaking Irish or engaging in traditionally Irish games and music (248-54). The issue of compassion surfaced in Hamilton's 2004 article for *The Guardian* entitled "The Loneliness of being German" where he wrote of German people's inability to comprehend the compassion he showed his father in *The Speckled People*. He explains their failure to understand his compassion by the fact that today's Germans have had to reject the Nazi generation of their parents and grandparents so completely. He also writes that their rejection of their past has left them without a home, as they have disconnected from the nationalistic and Nazi-connoted notion of *Heimat* (homeland). Ireland appealed to many Germans as an island of romantic mythology that could provide an alternative home, as described by Heinrich Böll in his memoir of 1950s Ireland, *Irishes Tagebuch* and in Hamilton's updated take on this in 2007 in *Die Redselige Insel*. In *Hand in the Fire*, Vid feels he cannot go home. Yet there is a suggestion that he may do so in the company of Helen, who offers to accompany him to Bosnia and specifically to Srebrenica in order to help him confront his national past.

There is a strong sense in *Hand in the Fire* that in order to grow as a person and as a nation, the parental generation must be acknowledged, and the "home" (or home country) must be explored, with whatever faults they may have. To do so requires opening history's secrets. Apart from the secret father Johnny and the drowned Máire Concannon, there are several other bearers of resonant Irish secrets in *Hand in the Fire*. These include Traoloch the abused orphan labourer for whom Helen feels such pity in Carrick-on-Shannon; the painter who grew up as an illegitimate child in a Protestant orphanage; or indeed Nurse Bridie's own lost illegitimate child, who was given up for adoption and whose presence haunts the start of the book. Such secrets darken the lives of the families that carry them, which is why Vid wonders why Johnny cannot be allowed back at least into the perimeter of the family. The moral police prevalent in the Ireland of the youth of Irish people such as Máire Concannon, Nurse Bridie, Traolach, and the Protestant painter echo the secret police of Serbia and indeed of Lithuania (Darius's mother was the village informer). The men of Furbo and their Catholic priest are explicitly likened to the secret police (89) as is Rita Concannon herself (82, 102). Such members of the moral police share the characteristic of being quick to judge others, and can be prone to scapegoating, in order to deflect attention from themselves. When Vid reflects on how his father was killed he comes to the conclusion that "his own people" did it, for fear of what he could reveal about them (229-30).

He also wonders whether the villagers drove Máire Concannon to suicide or drowned her because she was about to reveal the identity of the father of the child in her womb (212).

Vid, by contrast, is slow to form opinions (233) and is a loyal friend. Yet he is also slow to act against injustice, including against himself, at least initially. It is his own passivity in not intervening when he sees a woman being beaten by her male partner in a car that most shocks him. The event, and his cowardly non-intervention, taught him "a lot about the Concannon family and also about myself and the whole world around me" (220), as his reaction is one of fear of getting involved. While reluctance to take action can stem from "the paralysis the people felt in the face of authority" (89, 211), it can also stem from a fear of getting hurt, as is the case in the Concannon family and in Vid's own refusal to remember his traumatic past. The start of his romantic relationship with Helen occurs soon after this realization. Although both Kevin and Helen are symbolic partners for Vid, the only successful relationship is with Helen. Helen is the most compassionate of the Irish characters. She is also in touch with her own past and those of others. She visits the site of her emigrant father's house, speaks openly of her family's conversion to Protestantism as a way of surviving during the 1840s Famine, and talks to Vid with great sadness and warmth of the mistreatment of Traolach, who grew up in an orphanage, perhaps as an illegitimate child, and was shunted from institution to institution and perhaps abused as a child (108-10). When she tells Máire Concannon's story, Helen suggests that the priest might have suggested marriage as an option for the pregnant woman, instead of the incitement to drowning that Kevin and Johnny both attribute to the priest (111). While they feel it is natural to want to repress difficult elements of one's life, Helen is more inclined to seek a constructive solution that faces the facts. It is only with Helen that Vid feels able to tell his story, and only with her that memory of his traumatic personal and national past can resurface (226-30).

Helen is more mature than Kevin and also than Rita who lacks the ability to forgive or help Johnny. Symbolically, Rita has a collection of wind-up toys, which suggests that she is not fully grown. Helen is able to admit the secrets of her family, and is a naturally empathetic character who displays solidarity with others, as evidenced most clearly in the break-in she initiates to free Ellis. She is also open to new influences in the future. Her relationship with Vid seems promising (267-8). Yet the strongly future-oriented ending of the novel in which she participates is, paradoxically, a kind of funeral, a coming to terms with the past, giving Máire Concannon the farewell she deserved on the Aran island of Inishmore. Vid, Helen and Ellis, all emigrants of sorts, constitute the attending family. Through her desire to include rather than exclude, to allow freedom and tolerance rather than to impose a moral authority or tyranny, Helen gives both Vid and Ellis a sense of belonging, the concept and word with which the novel ends, on the image of Máire Concannon's buried body, with her head "pointing back towards Furbo, where she belonged." (275). Ellis dreams of founding a new homestead in Furbo and Vid is now free to go home with Helen, whether metaphorically or literally, as she will listen to the stories of his past.

Homes imply houses, and the renovation of houses is deeply symbolic in this text. In Ellis's case, her wish to restore the ancestral home in Furbo foregrounds a desire for renewal and for a certain settling of the self through reconnection with her familial past. In Rita's case, the impetus for renovation initially seems more mundane, as a free-standing wardrobe needs to be replaced with a modern built-in one. Yet this too is symbolic: despite the modernization of the wardrobe facilities, no renewal of Rita's self occurs until she repents at Johnny's funeral at having excluded him. She simply plans to use the new wardrobe in order to house the boxes of Johnny's letters that she has always refused to open. The fact that the new piece of furniture is to be in black ash and reminds Vid of a funeral parlour (17) highlights the moribund nature of her relationship with Johnny and her desire to keep their shared past buried. However the wardrobe does also provide a kind of shrine for memory, echoing the mementos of the narrator's father in the wardrobe in *The Speckled People* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, adapted for the theatre as "The Mariner" in 2014. Memories may be buried and denied but they do not disappear, as Kevin, Vid, and Rita know in their hearts.

Kieran Bonner and Alexandra Slaby write of the "potent symbol" of the building site as a key trope of the Celtic Tiger period (32). In this case, the real and projected building sites are situated at the heart of two Irish family homes, one inhabited and one derelict because of emigration. But what is being built in the Celtic Tiger Ireland of this novel? And what is being destroyed? What is, or was, worth keeping? Ellis dreams of reconnecting with her father's family's past by renovating the abandoned Furbo homestead, while at the same time bringing a child into the future, to whom she will speak Irish, "the language left behind by her father" (272). Kevin and Rita, by contrast, are keen to modernize and to get rid of all traces of their past with Johnny, or at least to hide them. This mirrors Kevin's trajectory in his self-invention as a successful, confident lawyer, masking the insecure child within. While a gradual approach to self-invention is arguably necessary for all those who emigrate, Hamilton's previous novel *Disguise* (2008) showed the perils of overly radical self-reconstruction in the person of Gregor Liedmann. Gregor's name suggests he is an authorial persona, combining the name of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Verwandlung* and bishop Hugo Liedmann. While the author can only benefit from using this fictional character to explore aspects of his psyche, Gregor's self-invention is a harmful form of self-rejection and disconnection. Gregor is a type of immigrant, a child from Eastern Europe who is adopted by a German family during World War II. As a teenager he rejects his adoptive family, composed of a neurotic but loving mother and a militaristic father. He refuses to go back to the family home they provided for him, or to become reconciled with his mother even on her deathbed. He attempts unsuccessfully to adopt a Jewish identity and suffers inwardly at never feeling he belongs.

In *Hand in the Fire* we see a partially inverted, but similar situation, as Vid's attempts to forget his past fuel his feverish wish to belong to the Concannon family and his failed attempts to re-invent himself linguistically as an Irishman. In *Disguise*, as in *Hand in the Fire*, a female romantic partner takes the initiative in freeing characters who are trapped in self-abnegation. Winch noted the Kafkaesque,

and indeed Beckettian, aspects in *Hand in the Fire*, likening it to "a classic work of European modernism" no doubt referring to Vid as a trapped character faced with an absurd court case. Hamilton does indeed reference Beckett in the novel (88) and there are also elements of Joycean paralysis. Johnny, Vid, and indeed Ellis, Kevin and Rita are all in some way trapped and unable to act for different reasons. In this at times absurdist novel, Helen frees Vid, through her gentle encouragement to speak about the past, initially simply by listening. Similarly, in *Disguise*, Gregor's separated wife Mara engages with his mother on his behalf, which brings some sort of familial resolution at her death.

Hamilton's work oscillates between the desire to forget and the need to remember. In his 2011 preface to Leila Vennewitz's English translation of Böll's *Irish Diary*, Hamilton ends on the image of the house where Böll stayed in Achill, county Mayo, from which the sand that blows in from the sea has to be regularly brushed off. Emphasizing the natural tendency towards forgetting, Hamilton's final words are that "left to its own devices the sand would just cover over everything." ("Introduction", xiv). Yet remembering or exploring past events in order to understand them and to learn from them is presented as beneficial in Hamilton's work, unless the remembering itself becomes obsessive. In the 2014 novel *Every Single Minute*, the character of Una, based on the writer Nuala O Faoláin, who was Hamilton's friend, rehearses her past family trauma in public lectures to an obsessive degree. She is paired with Liam, who is more inclined to try to forget painful familial experiences. Both attitudes are presented as extreme. In any case, as Vid notes in *Hand in the Fire*, childhood and one's past are like a bloodied dog attached to the bumper of a car, following after one for ever (208-09).

In *Hand in the Fire*, constructively engaging with the past is seen as potentially healing. In Kevin and Rita's case, the healing seems to start when they reconnect with Johnny at his funeral, yet remains conflicted. Symbolically, this husband and father never re-enters their house, even in death, although he is described as coming home in other respects (253). It may be the memory of the drowned Máire Concannon that changes their attitude when they finally allow the previously suicidal Ellis to leave with Vid and Helen in order to visit the Furbo homestead and to make her own decisions about her pregnancy. Vid and Ellis seem to be on a clearer path to redemption. When their initial attempts to cut themselves off radically from their families and pasts fail, they seem to look forward to a more hopeful future as they start to explore those pasts. Hamilton published *Hand in the Fire* in 2008, the year of the global crash that sounded the death knell of the Irish economic boom. While Fintan O'Toole wrote of Celtic Tiger Ireland as "a substitute identity" he also acknowledged the new confidence and openness that came with those years. King notes that the *Irish Times* Saint Patrick's Day editorial of 2007 reflected on what it saw as a growing sense of openness to other cultures and perspectives in Ireland, and contained the lines "we are all the speckled people now" (176). Yet, writing at the end of the Celtic Tiger years, Debbie Ging cautions that "the notion that somehow Ireland's newfound prosperity and assumption of a proud place on the world's stage has necessarily made it a more inclusive and progressive society requires closer scrutiny" and concludes by asserting that "it is arguable that the nature and scope of Irish identity has never been so elusive and contested" ("Goldfish Memories", 200).

Has Ireland really become as "broad and inclusive" as President Mary Robinson hoped in her 1995 speech to the Oireachtas marking 150 years after the start of the Famine? While the President's remarks focused on widening the definition of Irishness to include the Irish diaspora in all its forms, they have often been taken to suggest a new era of inclusiveness in Ireland more generally. There is no doubt that Ireland has become less entrenched in notions of what one is and what one cannot be. The mid 1990s ceasefire and subsequent peace in Northern Ireland that Hamilton includes in *Hand in the Fire* is one manifestation of this, although Kevin fails to see it as anything more than the result of "free market capitalism" (132-34). The overwhelming support for the 2015 gay marriage referendum is another positive step towards inclusiveness. Yet very few Irish people have empathy with Vid as a lonely immigrant. Only Helen supports him, and Johnny's friendship seems mostly motivated by his own loneliness and his need for a substitute son. In fact, the immigrant Vid has much more compassion for Ellis, Johnny and Máire than any of the Irish have for him, apart from Helen. In general, the Irish are uninterested in Vid as a person.

Celtic Tiger Ireland is a brash place in *Hand in the Fire*, full of hen parties and self-exhibition as exemplified by Kevin's own exhibitionist tendencies. It has turned its back on history and tradition, symbolized by the modern wardrobes that seem so out of place in Rita Concannon's home. This Ireland is an uncertain place. The new generation of emigrants are well-educated and very quickly do well where they land (183), but there are at least three suicides in the novel, continuing through the generations. These include the probable suicide of Máire Concannon and the two drowned youths who turn up in Dublin bay, one of whom surfaces just before Vid's own near-drowning. While no sense is given of the personal circumstances behind the suicides of the two youths, the loneliness they suggest adds to the sense of entrapment in the novel.

The twin motifs of drowning and fire create a climate of confusion, anger, loneliness and exclusion. Vid is nearly drowned when the Irish thugs chase him, and as noted there are three actual drownings. A painting of a ship in distress connects Vid and Johnny (232). Kevin's and Vid's friendship is a fiery confusion and a self-destructive fire burns the archives of Vid's memory (80). Fire is here frequently associated with hatred and danger, as in the two arson attacks. When Kevin assumes that his father tried to "burn my mother out" (203), we think of the persecution of those who married across religious divides in Belfast. Vid feels he has brought the lingering smell of burned wood with him (205), no doubt remembering the bombed out houses and destroyed families in the former Yugoslavia.

Hands and handshakes are also symbolic. The handshake shared by Johnny and Vid: "the longest handshake that I can remember" (170) emphasizes their common experience of migration and connects them very deeply. There is no handshake between Kevin and Johnny, as Kevin does not want to engage with his past (200). Kevin's hand gestures are theatrical, possessive, or controlling (49, 125,

131, 159). By contrast, Helen's cool hand on Vid's skin urges Vid towards memory and healing (230), and when Rita "finally" gives Vid her hand at Johnny's funeral there is a sense of human connection (255). Kevin insists to Vid that "a friend is someone who would put his hand in the fire for you" but this is glib verbiage (30) on Kevin's part.

In conclusion, Irish and immigrant stories reflect one another in *Hand in the Fire* and each appears to benefit from the other. Kevin and Rita learn to treat Ellis with more tolerance, and Ellis and Vid partake in self-renovation through their explorations of the missing stories of their respective pasts. In Ellis's case this is with the support of neutral, non-judgemental friends, and in Vid's case with a romantic partner worthy of the name. The empathy provided by Helen's non-judgmental listening ear and quiet companionship looks set to allow Vid to explore the traumatic memories that impelled him to emigrate, while also developing his sense of belonging in Ireland, as a normal inhabitant and participant. *Hand in the Fire* shows the importance of acknowledging and engaging with the past (personal and national) as it cannot be repressed out of existence. In this, the parental generation is a key factor, as is clear from the emphasis on Johnny and Rita, and on the drowned aunt. It is also key in *Disguise*: had Gregor's adoptive parents been willing to talk to him about wartime Germany and his own uprootedness as a child, he would not have grown up with an all-consuming yearning to belong (to Jewish identity) and to re-invent himself so radically. What *Hand in the Fire* ultimately advocates is not self-invention but self-renovation, in a sensitive manner that takes account of the past framework of one's life, and of the national histories to which one belongs. Hamilton engages in exploration of his own multiple belongings. His imaginative empathy and openness to the divergent and idiosyncratic pasts of both parents—one migrant, the other "outsider Irish"—continue to inform his "speckled" identity. His empathy and compassion are reflected in the migrant characters of Vid, Irmgard, and Helen, yet he also explores the repression of painful experiences relating to migration or its effects, through the characters of Vid, Kevin, Rita, and Gregor and his adoptive parents. More importantly perhaps, *Hand in the Fire* goes beyond migrant memory to suggest that national pasts require opening up, just as Ireland needs to embrace new influence, new participants, and new stories.

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