

Interviewing Hugo Hamilton

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Abstract: *This interview took place at the Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil, on 19th August 2013. Hamilton discussed the relationship between language and identity and reflected upon the art of writing in his novel The Speckled People which is part of the curriculum of the undergraduate course of Linguistic and Literary Studies in English.*

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On 19 August 2013, Hugo Hamilton spent the afternoon strolling around Ibirapuera Park. Amongst tropical trees, wild flowers, local birds, casual passersby and a beautiful sunset by the lake, Hugo wondered about the art of writing and how it feels like to get under the skin of his characters. After this peaceful moment, he experienced the opposing scenario of the rush-hour traffic of a 12-million-people metropolis in order to get to the University of São Paulo for his interview. At the university, Hugo had some time to enjoy the calm atmosphere of Clube dos Professores, a cozy restaurant in the heart of a preserved area of woods, before meeting the students and general public. There were a hundred and fifty people in the room. Everybody was delighted by his presence, the reading of his work and his interesting reflections on language and identity motivated by the various questions from the audience.¹

LI: I warmly welcome Hugo Hamilton to the University of São Paulo. It is a great honour to have him here tonight and, on behalf of the W.B. Yeats Chair of Irish Studies and of the Brazilian Association of Irish Studies (ABEI), I'd like to thank him for having accepted our invitation to speak about his work with our students, colleagues and readers in general. I'd also like to introduce Patricia de Aquino who is an M.A. student of our Programme of English Language and Literatures. She researches issues of identity in Hugo Hamilton's memoirs. Nearly every year, the Programme receives an Irish writer. This year, *The Speckled People* is included in the syllabus of the course Literature and Difference, which is part of the students' curriculum, and the students will have the opportunity of participating in the interview.

Let me give you a short introduction of Hugo Hamilton and his work. In his memoirs, he writes that he grew up in Dublin speaking Irish or German exclusively at home

while English, the language spoken outside, was forbidden by his nationalist father. Thus, language becomes the center of his work as he has that alienated sense of never really belonging to any of the three languages. Hamilton became a journalist and then a writer. He has published seven novels – four are set in Central Europe: *Surrogate City* (1990), *The Last Shot* (1991), *The Love Test* (1995) and *Disguise* (2008); three in Dublin: *Headbanger* (1996), *Sad Bastard* (1998) and *Hand in the Fire* (2010) – a collection of short stories, *Dublin, Where the Palm Trees Grow* (1996); and two personal memoirs, *The Speckled People* (2003) and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006). *The Speckled People* achieved widespread international acclaim and got many prizes, such as the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. The French translation also received a prize, the *Prix Femina Étranger*; the Italian translation won *The Premio Giuseppe Eberto* in 2004.

Hugo, would you like to start by reading some excerpts from *The Speckled People*?

HH: Well, thank you all for coming. First of all, thank you, Laura, for inviting me to Brazil and also to Patricia for showing me São Paulo. It's fantastic for me to come to a country which is truly speckled. I should have come here when I was 20. I would have fit in really well. I'm just beginning to realize now by being here for a few days what a truly mixed society can be like. The kind of hang ups that we have in Europe about nationalism and identity are issues I grew up with as a child, particularly in the case of my father who was trying to hold on to culture that was in the process of dying out. So very simply, my story is one about language and identity crisis. My father wanted us to speak the ancient language, which is Irish, which nobody on the street really spoke anymore; my mother spoke German because she came from Germany; and outside on the street there were all these people that spoke a different language (English). So, for me, as I described in my book, going outside the front door was walking into a different country. As children, we had three different countries: two countries inside the house (Irish and German) and another country outside (English). It's quite bewildering. I still haven't quite figured it out. That's what I do as an author. Anyway, I wanted to begin with a passage which describes the street outside...

Outside our house is a different place.

One day my mother let us go down to the shop on our own, but she gave us a piece of rope and told us all to hold on to it so we would not get separated. An old woman stopped and said that was a great way of making sure we didn't get lost. My mother says we're surrounded by old women. Miss Tarleton, Miss Tomlinson, Miss Leonard, Miss Browne, Miss Russell, Miss Hosford, two Miss Ryans, two Miss Doyles, two Miss Lanes, Mrs Robinson, Mrs McSweeney and us in between them all. Some of them are friendly and others hate us. Some of them are Protestant and others are Catholic. The difference is that the Protestant bells make a song and the Catholic bells only make the same gong all the time.

You have to be careful where you kick the ball, because if it goes into Miss Tarleton's garden next door you'll never get it back. She told us not to dare put a foot

inside her garden. Mrs McSweeney is nice and calls you for a Yorkshire Toffee. The two Miss Lanes across the road have a gardener who wanted to give you back the ball one day but he couldn't. He came to the gate, ready to hand it back, but then one of the Miss Lanes appeared at the window and shook her hand. The gardener stood there not knowing what to do. We begged him please to give it back quickly before she came out, but he couldn't because he was working for Miss Lane, not for us, and she was already at the door saying, 'Give that ball here.' She said she was going to 'confiscate' it. We stood at the railings until Miss Lane said: 'Clear off. Away from the railings. Go on about your business, now.'

My mother laughs and says 'confiscate' doesn't mean kill or stab with a knife. It just means taking control of something that belongs to somebody else. One day I confiscated my brother's cars and threw them over the back wall into Miss Leonard's garden, but we got them back. One day, Miss Tarleton declared a football amnesty and we got nine balls back, some of which never even belonged to us in the first place and most of which were confiscated all over again very shortly after that. Miss Tarleton might as well have handed them straight over to the Miss Lanes. My mother wants to know if the Miss Lanes play football in the kitchen at night. And she wants to know what the Miss Lanes have against her, because they just slammed the door in her face.

My mother says maybe they still hate Germany, but my father says they hate their own country even more. He says they still think they are living in Britain and they can't bear the sound of children speaking German on the street and, even worse, Irish. My mother says that means we have to be extra-nice to them, so they don't feel left out. You have to try not to throw the rockets up so high because the bang frightens old women and makes them think the Easter Rising is coming back again. You have to make sure the ball doesn't go into their garden. My father says it's your own fault if you lose the ball, because their garden is their country and you can't go in there. He says our country is divided into two parts, north and south, like two gardens. He says six countries in the north have been confiscated and are still controlled by Britain. The difference between one country and another is the song they sing at the end of the night in the cinema and the flag they have on the post office and the stamps you lick. When my father was working in the north of Ireland once, in a town called Coleraine, he refused to stand up in the cinema because they were playing the wrong song. Some people wanted to put him against the wall and shoot him. And then he left his job and came back to his own country where he could speak Irish anytime he liked.

So, you have to be careful what country you kick your ball into and what song you stand up for in the cinema. You can't wave the wrong flag or wear the wrong badges, like the red poppies with the red dot in the middle. You have to be careful who to be sad for and not commemorate the people who died on the wrong side (44-46).

LI: I think this excerpt gives us the opportunity to ask many questions. One of our students from the morning class, Gabriel Salomão wonders a lot about the narrator's way of looking things through the eyes of a child. Which are the difficulties you faced

in writing this book from this perspective? Was it easy to do that? Moreover, as this passage also refers to the garden as a country and how it is being divided, Amanda Chaud and Débora Barreto also asked another question about the intersection of spaces: Germany, Ireland and your father's idea of Ireland. We see overlapping descriptions of these places throughout the book. How were these different spaces being configured in the mind of a child?

HH: First of all, I will deal with the way that I wrote the memoir. I had always been trying to escape from that whole story of my childhood. As a young adult, I didn't want to know about it. I denied the whole story. I never talked to anybody about it. Even my friends, I didn't tell anyone very much. So, it's only as a writer, in my 40s, that I began to look at that hidden past and what really opened it up for me was the fact that my mother kept diaries. Most of the events in *The Speckled People* are recorded in some ways in her diaries. So, I began to read them. It's almost as if I became a child again. We can ask ourselves that question: when do we actually grow up? Most of us actually remain children all through our lives. But particularly when you're a writer, you hold on to many of the faculties in a child's mind; this ability to see things for the first time. I think that's what happened while writing my memoir. I was seeing the street I lived on for the first time, reliving all those experiences. Everything was parceled off into three countries. I don't know if you have that here so much in Brazil, but in Ireland everybody's garden is fenced off with a little fence and a hedge and that is their country. That's my experience. Every time you kicked the ball, it went to somebody's country and that was it. It got lost. But also, everybody had their own stories and their own histories. My mother had her history of Germany and that was like a country that she talked about. My father talked about the Ireland that he had hoped Ireland would be (Gaelic speaking). It's a fantasy that he had. So, effectively, everybody lived in these different parceled off places.

PA: Still on the question of countries and space, I think it's very beautiful the way you construct the image of these gardens and of the separation of Ireland as well. How do you see these two different countries that you might kick your ball into, especially in the case of the two Irelands?

HH: Ireland is growing up in the last twenty years and one of the best things that Ireland has achieved is to have peace in the North. It is one of the things that dragged Ireland down. It was partly this idea that Ireland was an imaginary space. People believed at some stage that Ireland would be reunited. Protestants in Northern Ireland believed they still belonged to Britain. You can see it from that passage I read. A lot of old women on the street were protestant and they still believed they were in Britain. My father was very proud of having this very noisy catholic, Irish speaking family in the middle of this area in Dublin which often seemed like it still belonged to Britain. Those tensions were magnified in Northern Ireland in Belfast where it became a war. The great thing for Ireland is that we've put an end to that war. We are getting on with a

peace process now which allows us to live together more like speckled or mixed people, accepting each other and being much more tolerant. So, my book actually describes that diversity as well as the insular way of looking at culture, protecting and keeping it pure from other cultures. That's my experience as a child. I suppose that the most graphic illustration comes quite early in the book where the narrator describes going down to the sea with his brother and throwing stones at the waves. Obviously, this is a ludicrous idea, to hold back the waves, like the dog we find who is also barking at the waves. There is obviously a parallel there between what my father is trying to do the impossible, holding back the British culture, and us, alongside the dog, are also doing this strange thing, holding back the waves.

PA: It's very interesting that you mention this insular way of thinking. How do you think the geography of the island has influenced the work of artists over time, such as Joyce, and the work of contemporary writers?

HH: For us it's an island nation. The sea plays a huge part in all our writing and our culture. We had this rebel song that people sang in the 60s which said "thank God we are surrounded by water." I mean, it describes a very insular way of thinking. The actual fact is that we feel a little bit lost or disconnected in Ireland, and often proud of it. We want to be connected to America. We have always had the feeling, I'm sure it is difficult for Brazilians to grasp, of being a small country which is so self obsessed in a way with staying on this island and being regarded as different. So the sea does play this remarkable role. One of the most famous things Joyce has said was that he wanted to go beyond that shore. He wanted to cross that sea and become part of Europe. And in a way, that's my story as well. In my home as a child, I was living most of the time in fact in a small German town which my mother told me about.

LI: Considering the historical violent relations between Britain and Ireland, how much was the construction of your identity, or family identity, influenced by the conflict of having a grandfather aligned with the British Empire and a father being against it?

HH: I say this every time I talk about identity and nationalism that these are components of an invented story. It's about the landscape, the kind of buildings we put up, the kind of football we play, how different we are from other people. There is a huge amount of details going to the making up of an identity, but it is essentially a story we tell ourselves about ourselves. And that was in a way the challenge and the kind of predicament that we found ourselves in as children. My father had decided that he was going to tell a particular story about Ireland, how our identity revolved around the reclaiming of the Irish language. Rejecting all other identities, except the German identity, which is a sort of strange conflict of interest. He accepted the German identity into the house, we spoke German, but he rejected completely the British identity. He was trying to tell a story without the people outside on the street, as if he was blanking out or erasing part of the country itself. For example, his own father, my grandfather who was a sailor in

the British Navy. In order to create this new story of Ireland, my father erases his own father. So, there was a big photograph of my grandfather, John Hamilton, as a sailor in the British Navy. He put that away into the wardrobe and hid it there from us. He never told us anything about it, along with his medals from the First World War. It was effectively erasing his own biography, his own past, in order to create this new identity. And yes, the story fails in the end because I was born, I became a writer and I told the expanded story.

Audience: I am Sergio Malacrida and a passage that called my attention in your memoir is when you wrote that your father loses the language war. Could you say a little bit more about how people are dealing with the question of language in Ireland nowadays?

HH: Well, it has to be explained that the Irish language began to go into decline in the eighteenth century and there was huge impact on it again during the famine years in the 1840s when a lot of people emigrated to America. So, the language was very much decimated. There were various revival movements: the Celtic Revival in the early 1900s and then my father's generation in the 1950s, asserting the newly independent Irish nation. These were attempts to keep the language alive, but the English language had already taken over in Ireland. What has basically happened in Ireland is that we translated ourselves into the English language. Like Joyce, Beckett and many writers after them; we became very eloquent in this new language. It's possible to say that we became more eloquent in this foreign language that we might have been in the Irish language because it gave us an opportunity to hide, to tell, to present ourselves on a world stage. That creates a wonderful challenge particularly for the arts. I think it's one of the great benefits for Ireland. It's one of the lucky stories that the English language, which was initially the language of the oppressor, became the language of rescue. We were saved by the English language. My father would hate to see me saying this. *[laughs]*.

PA: Still on this question of language, in another passage your father says that your language is your country. Then, a little bit later, he says that if the world had only one language it would be a place with homeless people. Do you think it would be possible that if people spoke more than one language, instead of being homeless, they could have many homes? Do you think this could be possible?

HH: I think so. I think languages, unlike my father's view, are very elastic and are constantly being reshaped. I mean, even if you hear people in Ireland talking the way they do now it sounds a lot more like American sitcoms. We're evolving all the time. I remember my mother often saying that as long as we understood each other that was the most important thing, something which rarely happened in our house. And it wasn't just to do it with language. It was because people didn't want to understand each other. But, yeah, I have a very open view towards language. I love the fact that there are so many different languages. I love speaking German because, suddenly when

I speak German, I am in a different country. In some ways my father was right. Your country is not so much a territory, but an imaginative landscape which has a particular form of memory and a particular way of looking at the world. So when I'm speaking German I'm a different person, when I'm speaking Irish I'm a different person and I'm sure if I learn Portuguese I would smile a lot more and I would be a sunny person. So, language creates an imagination as well. It is an imaginary thing. I don't think it's possible to have just one language in the world. It's good to have so many different ways of thinking and imagining.

AU: You said that suddenly you translated yourself into English, right? So you were able to talk about yourself and your story in another language. Was it confusing to deal with the fact that your mother taught you to be silent when in contact with people outside your house and when facing prejudice? It was quite opposite, wasn't it?

HH: Well, that's true. First of all, you touched on a very interesting point there. The book is written in English which for me is the forbidden language, but it is also the foreign language, the language of the people on the street. These are the people I want to tell the story to. I want to connect with them. When the book was translated into German and I read from it in German, it seemed more difficult because it took away a protective barrier that I had created by writing in English. Although the events are all true, language creates a kind of protective distance from the events themselves. Otherwise, I think for me, if I had written it in German, I would have been too close to the story. I think that's what a writer does. And you mentioned silence; it was a huge thing in our family. We were a very silent family. Well, if you had met me in my 20s I wouldn't be saying a word. There was a silence cast on the family because of my father's brutality and because of the threat all the time on the outside on the street. We were afraid to speak about ourselves. So, we almost became this kind of hidden people, and that's one of the reasons that I needed to write. My writing provides the same safe place that my mother finds in her diaries, putting in all the kind of things she can't say publicly. Effectively, that's what I am doing as a writer, dealing with that silence.

PA: You just mentioned the hidden people, so I'd like to ask something related to that. Your mother's uncle, uncle Gerd, refused to stop speaking with the Jews on the street and because of that your family became like people with no faces. So, how was it like to be German and not to abide by Nazism? And how was it like to be judged and punished by other people who would take you for Nazis, as the boys in the street?

HH: I think that was particularly difficult for my mother, particularly. I was called Eichmann. It was hard for my mother, bearing in mind that she came from a family in which her uncle resisted the Nazis, he was the Lord Mayor of this town and refused to carry out the Nazi project, was thrown out of office. He went through the war with no money, an outcast, possibly lucky not to have suffered any worse. It's bizarre and ironic that we were called Nazis in Ireland, a place where the Nazis got to and which

as largely unaffected by the war, having remained neutral. But at that stage the British culture became dominant in Ireland and every child had heard the story of the war from Britain. As children of a German mother, we became aware of history at a very early age. It's what all Germans have gone through, dealing with their past. It has to be said that Germany has done this in a comprehensive and courageous way, something which is ongoing. There was a movement in the sixties when young people began to accuse their parents and ask them all the questions. There is an achievement to be seen in that. Germans have looked into their history and continue to acknowledge the crimes of the past.

AU: My name is Lilian Gasparetti Abdoullah and I'd like to know what made you write. You struggled so hard to run away from the story and you decided one day to write a book about it. What made you do that? I'm also interested in knowing how aware you were of the effects of this upbringing before you actually wrote the book.

HH: I think I must have become a writer very early because my mother was a good storyteller. Like all children we had nightmares and my mother devised this great technique where she got us up out of bed in the middle of the night when we had bad dreams. I can remember very clearly. She'd give us a crayon or a pencil and we were asked to draw out the nightmare. And once the nightmare was drawn out she'd put it in her diary, so we didn't have to dream about it or be scared anymore. But I think, actually, it was just creating even more nightmares. I tried to escape from that nightmare of my family. I'm not the first writer to say that your family is a nightmare. I tried to escape from it completely. I just grew up like other children. I listened to Bob Dylan, whatever. But it's impossible to escape from your family, no more than you can escape from your own story, or your memory, or your identity. It's almost like cutting off part of your limbs. Because if you cut off your memory, if you deny your own memory, it's a bit like a country trying to deny its past. It's what compelled me to become a writer. I had to find some way of explaining this kind of mystery of my own childhood and there's really no way of explaining anything until you write it down. You don't know really what's there in your story until it's on paper. Then you can look at it and say: oh yeah, that's what actually happened to me! So, it's not as though I knew there were terrible things wrong or hard to talk about. I was very aware as a child of my mother's sadness and her homesickness, but I had no way of explaining it, no way of telling it in a story and nobody to tell it to until I found a way to write it.

AU: Hi, I'm Thais Vidal. This book is about your life, but I'd like to know how much of it is fiction. Can you separate imagination from reality? It seems that you play a lot with that. For instance, there is a moment in the book that your mother says her life was a movie. What do you think the role of fiction in your book is?

HH: Your question is very interesting. Every memoir writer has to deal with that question. I can point to all those events. You could ask my brothers and sisters and they

will say, yeah, that dog was there barking at the waves, and yes we did get locked in the wardrobe. All these events had occurred, but once you begin to write them, it takes on a significance. And it also becomes a story, a retelling, a kind of imaginary way of retrieving your memory, a kind of fiction, you might even say. Writing it in English produces a kind of dramatization in itself, because all the events happened in German. So, already there is some creative, reimagining process at work. Also, the nature of writing, the nature of storytelling, is that once you begin to tell a story it removes the action from the reality, we experience it through the medium of the story, we feel close to what happened without actually going through it, we can imagine being locked in the wardrobe without actually having to go inside and reenact it for ourselves. Your memory is a dramatization, a special way of retaining the facts, no other person can quite keep the same series of facts. If my brother was to write the story it would be dramatized in his own way. How else can you tell a story? It is always a dramatization. What you remember and what you forget. That's not to say that this is a fictional book, only that your life becomes converted into a story when you begin to tell it to somebody else. Something happens in that process of telling; any event that happened takes on a heightened reality which allows other people listening to the story to believe it. And that's the only way I can describe it. Every now and again, even though I have written the story, I revert to my childhood and become the small boy again, standing at the seafront with these unexplained memories.

AU: I am Lance Pettitt. Just to pick on Thais's point. It's not to see fiction as a thing. It is to see fiction as you've indicated Hugo, an enabling feature. So, it enables the person who's writing or telling to express something they couldn't put in words and it becomes so that it allows the person to whom the story is being told to keen into and identify with. I think that's the key thing that fiction shouldn't be seen as a faking thing. Faking is actually part of the enabling feature.

HH: That's very interesting. Every now and again, you come across details in a novel that you say the writer couldn't have made that up. That's so true. And you run with it. You want to believe it. You want to believe a novel, the truth that is achieved in storytelling. The difference with the memoir is that sometimes you're told to believe the details. You enter in it in good faith.

LI: Would you like to read from your memoirs to show how your style helps to make that up, or better still, to read from your second memoir *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*? By the way, the American publication has another title, *The Harbor Boys*. Why did they change the title?

HH: It's a marketing thing!

PA: Do you ever think about writing a third book? A sequel? Is there something you haven't written yet?

HH: My autobiography gets into all of my books. My next book entitled *Every Single Minute* has very key autobiographical moments in it as well, even though it's pure fiction. Anybody who's read these books will remember or will recognize certain facts, so I won't say any more than that. Well, I'll read just a very short passage, just describing my mother. The best way to describe her is how she made cakes.

First of all, you have to mix the butter with the sugar. You have to do it hard, my mother says, everything has to be done very gently because you don't want to make an unhappy cake. If you bake in anger it will taste of nothing. You have to treat the ingredients with respect and affection. You lift the mixture and slip the beaten egg inside, the way you would slip a love letter into an envelope, she says and laughs out loud. You fold in the flour with air-kisses and you stir in one direction only, otherwise people will get the taste of doubt. And when you lay the mixture into the baking tin, you place a piece of brown paper all around the edge and another flat piece across the top to create a dome that will keep it from burning. And once the letter is posted and the cake is in the oven, you have to be very quiet and wait. You don't trudge around the house shouting and slamming doors. You don't argue and you don't say a bad word about anyone. You whisper, you nod, you tiptoe around the kitchen. (78)

LI: Another student from the morning class, Thierry Vieira, would like to know what the consequences of using the point of view of a child narrator for language and form are.

HH: It took a long time for me to write *The Speckled People*. I like to tell people it took forty years. Actually, in terms of writing and researching it took ten years. I began to write it as an adult looking back and it was almost like I was trying to protect myself from actually entering into the story myself. I was trying to laugh at the way we were and I found that very flawed, as an artist. It was fake, you would say. I was faking it. So eventually, I got this freedom while I was living in Germany and I began to suddenly discover that the only way to write this book was to reenter the mind of this child. It allowed me to do a lot of the things that you cannot do in the voice of an adult. As an adult you tend to analyse; you explain what's happening. What I've done here is to allow things to happen and non-judgmental narrative allows the reader to become the adult, the analyst. The reader does all the explanation, so much so that in parts of the book, and this would be impossible for an adult writer, the narrator misinterprets his parents. The boy repeats things that his mother or father say but he doesn't quite understand why they are saying them. This allowed me as a writer to make deliberate, childish mistakes, doubts, precious moments of misunderstanding. That's something an adult voice cannot easily achieve. The child narrator is exempt from the rules. While the child narrator deliberately reads his parents wrong, it allows the story to be explained much more clearly.

AU: [Sergio] – I want to ask you another question. In the memoir, Uncle Ted gave you a book called *Black Like me*. He told you to be on the side of losers. You didn't explore very much the relationship between your uncle and your father, but of course it seems that they don't have the same way of thinking about language or identity. Could you tell us a little bit more about it?

HH: They were both very silent people actually. They never talked about West Cork where they came from. It's only after my father died, after I published this book, that I began to talk to uncle Ted and he ended up telling me a little bit about West Cork. Still, there is a very restricted view of the past and I was trying to work this out. There was actually a rivalry of some sort between my father and the Jesuit. I think it's got something to do with my mother, but I still haven't quite figured that out. There's a lot going on in a family that you cannot really access as a child, and you can only guess at later on, but I think my father envied the Jesuit. I think he envied the Jesuit because he could be more silent. My father could never match his brother's silence.

PA: You read a passage about your mother and I think one of the very interesting things you do in your memoirs is how you portray the role of women in relation to the war. You show, for example, how your aunt gave shelter to Jewish people, how women suffered from violence, were violated and had this very complicated relationship with the armies on both sides, the Nazis and the Allies. Could you comment on your work on women in both of your memoirs?

HH: Well, it's great you ask me that question. I think as a child I became very close to my mother's imagination. She was the one who talked. She was the one who told the stories. My father was a person who made speeches, banged his fist on the table and the clouds started shaking. My mother was the person who opened the world of my imagination, that comes from her storytelling. Her way of thinking has entered into my writing. I'm still imagining through her mind whenever I write, when I collect something, when I observe things. It's not my father that's observing things, he is more idealistic and dogmatic, fighting with the world. It's not my father that notices something because he is staring ahead at the imaginary republic he wishes to create. It's my mother that's discovering the world. So, I would say that it's the feminine side that's doing the storytelling.

AU: My name is Isabela Fernandes. Based on your memoir, one of the things that you told you were obliged to do was to have an Irish education with a nationalist orientation. How did that education contribute to your identity?

HH: I think it was a real problem, not only for me, but for a lot of Irish people. We grew up with this lingering animosity for Britain. Even though we secretly loved everything that was coming from Britain. Britain gave us John Lennon, it gave us the Rolling Stones? We never quite understood the conflict in Northern Ireland, it was a contradiction in so many ways, completely irrational like most conflicts. But there was an inherited anger that a lot of Irish people felt and we had to work hard to get rid of. I think it was there in my father's anger, something he inherited. I collected things from my mother in her way of thinking, but I also imitated my father a lot. It took me a long time to get rid of that anger. I had to make a conscious decision when I was in my teens and my twenties: I'm not going to be like my father. I felt I had to reject all of the things that he stood for, even the music that he loved. And that is a form of anger in itself, rejecting your

own father, something my father did to his father before me. And it's funny that the same thing happened to a lot of the German people. They hated their parents because they belonged to the Nazi period. I think it's hard to get rid of those inherited ways of thinking, no matter what country you live in. Ireland is only slowly coming out of that now. It's managing to do that without forgetting, I hope.

LI: You have been a journalist. How much of the journalist is in your writing and how much of the writer was there in that time as a journalist?

HH: Yeah, I had the idea that I would become a journalist and I worked for the newspaper for a while. But a journalist's job is asking questions and I was not very good at asking questions. I was afraid to ask questions because I was probably fearful that would make other people ask me questions back, and I didn't want to tell them anything. So, my type of inquisition, my methods of enquiring are much more personal. I don't think I would have made a good journalist. I found it more interesting to write about those personal, intimate questions rather than public issues.

AU: [Sergio] – I'd like to ask about the next generation of the family. How do these issues of identity affect them? Can they deal with it in a better way or they just don't think about it?

HH: I think that's fascinating. My brothers and sisters, as I said before, we were a very silent family. We never talked about things and it's only when I began to research the book, when they realized I was writing a book, they all began to talk about it and told me stories. I think we liberated the whole family, not just my brothers and sisters, but also their children. In a lot of ways, we all became liberated by the story because there was something so terribly silent about us. I know that my own children must have thought I was a very weird father. There was something going on in my head that I couldn't talk to them about, something hidden, secretive, and the book explains a lot of that to them. How much of my silence and that strangeness has impacted on them I can't really tell. But it's a very interesting question. You can't choreograph your child's future. You cannot plan what a child is going to remember. I know my parents tried to do that. They tried to kind of create a personality in us; they put us in certain clothes. Your parents can be idealistic, but they can't ever forecast what a child is going to remember ten or twenty years later. So, it would be interesting if one of my children comes back here in twenty years time and tells their story.

AU: [Thais] – You said it took you ten years to write *The Speckled People*. Why was that? Are you a perfectionist?

HH: Well, yes, I am a perfectionist and I take a long time to write. I mean, I write explosively, I write long passages, but I go back and look at them to see if it's exactly what I wanted to say. So, my writing does take time. But particularly in this case, as I said earlier on, I think you don't know what your story is until you write it. Then, you see

it there, in front of you, look at it and say: “it wasn’t quite like that. There is something else I want to explain.” It is a process of creating it, or recreating exactly what you remember in such a way that it relates to the reader. It’s not just a confession. I think that people often mistake literary memoirs for confession. Confession is something you do with your psychiatrist or your priest. For me, it was much more important to create something; create a story. Part of that was creating the language in which this narrator was going to tell the story. It took a long time to do that. I wish I could write big novels, quick novels, but I just don’t. I have a much more minimalist way of creating my stories, my echoes.

AU: [Sergio] – Do you speak Irish sometimes? What’s the language that you use with your family nowadays?

HH: I speak English all the time. As a family now we speak to one another in English because everybody is married to people who speak English. So, English has become the operative language. My brother still lives in the house that we grew up and he’s changed very little of it. When my mother was still alive we all spoke German. For a good few years after she died, we went on meeting for coffee or dinner in the house and still spoke German. We still sing a song in German from time to time, on about frogs going into a lake, that my mother used to sing to us as children. But now English has become our language. But you asked me if I still speak Irish? Yes, I do. I have an opportunity every now and again. There is a TV station and a radio station in Ireland which is all conducted in the Irish language. I’m often asked to comment on these stations. So, I love the opportunity of speaking Irish because it connects me to Connemara, to a place where I went as a child. It connects me to a country that seems smaller than Ireland is. It seems like when I speak Irish everybody knows one another. In English, it’s a bigger country. It’s a faster country. The same happens when I speak German. I have a different relationship to the world. My son speaks very good German and occasionally we just slip into German. So, sometimes I don’t even notice anymore.

LI: Thank you very much, Hugo, for your kind participation in our Programme of Linguistic and Literary Studies in English and for your elucidating answers about the art of writing. I thank all of you for the interesting questions that have made this event a very special meeting of the students with Hugo Hamilton and of Hugo Hamilton with his Brazilian readers for the first time.

Note

- 1 The transcription of this interview was done by Patricia de Aquino Prudente and attempts to stay true to its oral nature.