

UNRAVELLING FAMILY TRUTHS: NARRATIVE POLYGLOSSIA OF *THE SPECKLED PEOPLE* BY HUGO HAMILTON

Tatjana Bicjutko

Lecturer, Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Latvia

Preface

It is not so easy to speak about the book written by a living author, with all existing and potential comments, criticism and polemics. It is even more problematic if the book in question is an autobiographical one, and Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* published in 2003 is one of such books. To complicate the matter even further, when being read, the memoir causes a deep distrust in its factuality, so 'novelistically' it is written. The book is a combination of myth and history; the account of the narrator's childhood similarly to the prehistory of societies is dominated by myth, and the similarity is in the fact that it "involves a backward look at that which is either untrue or unverifiable" (Goody, 1977, 14). The rare quality of this memoir owes much to its intricate textuality of multiple accounts – the young Hugo's and his mom and dad's separate stories – adjusted to the child's point of view. The stories are 'documented', referentially, by the boy's mother's diary and the artefacts from the wardrobe – the granddad's picture and the article in a newspaper written by his father.

"Maybe the reason why people are good

at stories is that they sometimes have things they can't tell, things they must keep secret at all costs and make up for in other ways" (Hamilton, 2003, 19), muses the small narrator. The reflection could serve as an epitome for the whole book. And although the book – a childhood and minority memoir where family secrets are laid bare – keeps to traditional lines, *The Speckled People* "triumphantly avoids the *Angela's Ashes* style of sentimental nostalgia and victim claims" (Lee, 2003).

In new circumstances Ireland finds itself today, the memoir one more time recurs to the child-nation motif; in this respect, if to draw the lineage, Hamilton is developing the paradigm James Joyce provided in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and the childhood stories from *Dubliners*, as well as he inherits something of Paddy's narrative of Roddy Doyle's Booker Prize-winning novel, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993), to mention but a few. Despite the child being the centre of consciousness, the predicament Hugo finds himself in and, the most importantly, the mode of writing is different.

Whatever advantages and challenges in using the language of a child are, the narrative

voice is a spoken discourse. Referring to Halliday's idea of the spoken language as representing phenomena as processes, "the complexity of spoken language is its intricacy of movement, liquid like that of a rapidly running river. To use a behavioural analogy, the structure of spoken language is of a choreographic kind" (Halliday, 1990, 87). The 'dance' quality of the child-narrator's language allowing for the variation in representing other people's voices adds much to the unwinding of the plot. In this sense the spoken discourse in general is similar to "[t]erms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, they are produced performatively. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (Bhabha, 1994, 2). So far as Hugo's linguistic polyglossia is interrelated with, if not causative to, his liminal positioning in the society, consequently Homi Bhabha's liminality model is in its place here, enabling a way of rethinking "the realm of the beyond" (ibid., 1).

Thus, the narrator's existence "is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the 'present'" (Bhabha, 1994, 1), and, to expand on Bhabha's trope, young Hugo finds himself "in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (ibid.).

Polyglossia as the coexistence of multiple languages in the same area creates a site of contestation, whereas the protagonist struggles to break through the linguistic and cultural constraints imposed on him by various discourses of otherness. Thus, the paper's aim

is to show the role of polyglossia in creating the fertile ground for generating heterogeneous narratives and, more significantly, in creating dialogism as opposed to silence, the feature which considerably adds to the memoir's appeal.

Polyglossia and Silence of *The Speckled People*

The son of an Irish father and a German mother, the young Hugo/Johanne/Sean/John together with the rest of the children in his mixed family is excruciatingly aware of his complex positioning. Dressed in 'lederhosen' and Aran sweaters, they are "Irish on top and German below... 'the homesick children,' struggling from a very early age with the idea of identity and conflicting notions of Irish history and German history" (Hamilton, online). To aggravate the situation, the Irish nationalist of a father linguistically imprisons children in his vain attempt at prohibiting them to speak the English language.

"When you're small you're like a piece of white paper with nothing written on it. My father writes down his name in Irish and my mother writes down her name in German and there's a blank space left over for all the people outside who speak English. We're special because we speak Irish and German..." (Hamilton, 2003, 3).

The natural hybridity of the boy, language and culture alike, tempts one to use the Bakhtinian notion of hybridization as "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor" (Bakhtin, 1981, 358). The purely linguistic

constraints removed, we see the hybridity which is formed by at least three 'linguistic consciousnesses,' let alone all social and other concomitants.

"We're the speckled people," Hugo's father declares, translating the Irish word *breac* to describe the family's mixed lineage, and "breac is the word, he explains, that the Irish people brought with them when they were crossing over into the English language. It means speckled, dappled, flecked, spotted, coloured" (Hamilton, 2003, 7). The allusion inadvertently goes to the speckled bird of the Bible, shunned by all other birds. "Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds round about are against her; come ye, assemble all the beasts of the field, come to devour" (Jeremiah 12:9). The father sees the comparison to distinguish the family in a positive light; unfortunately though, the passage serves as a marker of estrangement, the estrangement apparently felt by the young protagonist: "I know it also means we're marked. It means we're aliens" (Hamilton, 2003, 7), the alienation growing and at the end of the book it fully embodies into the scene where the speckled children are helpless facing the mob of other, 'Irish enough' adolescents.

Marginalization allows putting all the old stereotypes on edge; the psyche of the child narrator presents liminal consciousness and thus forces the reader to reinterpret some long-established verities. The author reaches two objectives as a result: first, he destroys representation of the Irish community as monolithic and homogeneous; secondly, representing the community as consisting of difference, the writer paves the way to its location outside the insurmountable distorting constrains imposed by the national outdated

rhetoric. Thus, avoiding the oversimplification of binary oppositions, Hamilton equally accuses the nationalistic zeal which is often a shell for past traumas and mistakes.

As concerns polyglossia, a perfect example of it as the condition the children are immersed into, is the instance of naming. "The Garda ... called her 'Madam'. The workers called her 'Maam'. We called her 'Mutti' or 'Ma Ma' and my father is called 'Vati' even though he's from Cork" (Hamilton, 2003, 25). At the same time the boy could be called as Hanni or Johannes "and Sean instead, or sometimes Jack, but [his] father says that's wrong" (ibid.). "I should never let anyone call me Jack or John, because that's not who I am. My father changed his name to Irish. So when I grow up I'll change my name, too" (ibid.) confides the child, thus exposing the insignificance of the re-naming attempt as having no effect on but rather unnecessary complicating the situation. Hugo's father, Jack Hamilton, renaming himself to *Sean Ó hUrmoltaigh* and, on principle, insisting on addressing him in Irish (which often proves to be an insurmountable obstacle to his interlocutors), puts limitations to communication with the wider world. In this respect Jack's Quixotic behaviour does not bring any harm if only some losses to family income, and it is more of a vengeance on his long dead father who served in the British Navy, and the reaction to a child trauma brought about by bullying.

For children, the question of identification within the larger community stands acutely. Genuine markers of belonging that the children lack are substituted with external symbolism forced by nostalgic parents. Interestingly enough the father's feeling, in fact, is the embodiment of nostalgia defined by Linda Hutcheon as one "that teaches us to

miss things we have never lost” (Hutcheon, 1998). In effect, that is a blatantly clear attempt at restoring one of the grand narratives of Irish national rhetoric from the past where the trope of the strong nation is grounded in the national language.

On the whole, the father’s behaviour and the way he communicates with his children is strangely reminiscent of the controlling pattern pertaining to the older type of pedagogy. His stories are marked by estrangement, as if they were not told but read aloud by him, and those which are, have a very strong and determined modality. There is no uniformity in refracted adult voices; however, the comparison with a black-white movie for the traumatic memories of ‘mutti’ and any story tending to swerve into ‘bigger’ history for ‘vatti’ are exemplary markers of difference.

“[M]y father says your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag” (Hamilton, 2003, 3). The formula is followed by its slight reversal “your home is your language” (ibid., 12), logically leading to the prohibition to speak English in their house. Waging the language war in the name of the Irish language, the father puts on the border of extinction the sanity of his own children. Bullied as ‘Nazis’ by other children and prohibited to speak English at home, the children often react inexplicably. Thus Hugo and his brother Franz compulsively blurt out phrases, and no punishment could make them stop; or in a parodic mimicry the young protagonist ‘plays Eihmann’, performing the role of a Nazi tormentor on his younger siblings. Once Hugo even tries to ban his mother from speaking German, but his attempts leads him nowhere. At other times, incapable of coping with events, he gets violent

asthma attacks. In the mother’s phrase, “things happen” to all the children. His brother Franz, for example, puts stones in his ears to make himself deaf. The history repeats with any new children. In fact, the motif of silence and the fear of silencing appears already in the epigraph, which significantly enough is taken from Elias Canetti’s memoir *The Tongue Set Free*. Thus, silence and speechlessness lead to suffocation, deafness and dumbness. The opposite is speech, but the languages the children have at their disposal are poor servants in the circumstances.

It is only the mother who attempts to mend the situation with her stories. Despite her role of the major storyteller in the book and “the word people” (64) in general, Hugo’s mother is clearly one of the literates: her mood swings find their outward expression in laughter or mental withdrawal and silence (Ong, 1982, 69); her diary writing testifies to the same quality. Irmgard teaches the children “the silent negative” (Hamilton, 2003, 82) acquired by her in the time of World War II, and this method, in fact, rarely helps in the new setting. Interestingly enough, the mother doesn’t speak Irish; she is incapable of learning Gaelic even from her children despite all their attempts. Unconsciously though, she seems to take the stand, silencing or opposing the father, bringing an apparent discord into the general strategy of his language war.

All in all, Hamilton’s indebtedness to his mother is immeasurable: “Counter to all the stereotypes, it was my German mother who had the sense of humour which softened my Irish father’s hard regime. She was the storyteller and made us aware of the ironies that we had to live with. She pointed out the sometimes comical difference between Irish truth and German truth. She began the

resistance with which I eventually questioned my father's absolute laws. She also began to uncover the secrets which they both kept from each other and from us in the wardrobe. It was my mother who began to write this memoir when she kept a diary and opened up the truth" (Hamilton, online).

The narrative of the parents' stories differs slightly but perceptibly; shifts in the narrative voice create heteroglossia and lead to the textual dialogism in Bakhtin's terms. The shift in register is not accidental either and it's a well calculated strategy to reflect the change in language setting. So, on their visit to Germany as well as for the coming of Irmgard's sister Marianne, Ireland and Germany are constantly compared and some insignificant German words appear in the text. When they go to the Gaeltacht in Connemara, to the Gaelic-speaking community, not only the Irish language is the subject matter, the very texture of the narrative changes, "the English prose of the book moves into lyrical rhythms, a kind of Synge-song" (Lee, 2003).

To some extent *The Speckled People* examines the essential paradox of community as a series of overlapping and divergent belongings in the attempt to show some unifying basis. "For it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity" (Bhabha, 1994, 170). Although, in the opinion supported by Bakhtin, the cultural shift from monoglossia to polyglossia made the novel possible (ibid., 132), moreover, "[o]nly polyglossia fully frees consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and its own myth of language" (ibid., 140), the setting of the 50s of the 20th century in Ireland as recreated in Hamilton's memoir

seem not a particularly hospitable space for the cultivation of polyglots and cultural mix. Additionally, even if the nationalistic father's attempts at restoring grand narratives look harmful and at times ridiculous, other centripetal forces are at work, i.e. liberating effects are accompanied by processes of 'linguistic globalisation' – cultural homogenization under the monoglossy of the English language.

"It should be stated that, given a Foucauldian frame of reference, literature, as well as being the means whereby a sense of a national culture is established, is also the means whereby those norms of a shared culture can be contested" (Mills, 25). From that perspective, the merit of all life writing marginalising identity, stressing the differences, opposing homogenisation of multiple identity into one signifying national wholeness, is in their shift to the boundaries of a nation, in their primary interest and analysis of those potentially rich liminalities.

Conclusions

1. *The Speckled People* offers a complicated account on the challenges polyglossia presented in the Irish society of the 50th.
2. The memoir stands in the line of the most interesting narratives related from the child's point of view and as such is a bearer of the long standing Irish literary tradition.
3. The 'liminality' of the protagonist is underlined by the fact that none of her introspective questions of identity is overt. First-person narration, additionally, is a marvellous tool for maintaining narrative uncertainty in the reader.

4. Any dominant culture is anything but monolithic. It is rather polyphonic with many silenced voices which could be at odds with one another and mainstream. This polyphony, in a great measure based on polyglossia and masterfully recreated in the narrative that is what puts Hugo Hamilton's memoir *The Speckled People* among other distinguished autobiographic writings.
5. Jack Hamilton's behavioural pattern demonstrates the dullness of a narrow-minded isolated society with its ambi-
 tions concerning forceful monoglossia. Such nationalistic attempt at restoring grand narratives is doomed in the environment of the emerging monoglossia of the English language and globalised culture.
6. The most significant "is the emergence of a hybrid national narrative that turns the nostalgic past into the disruptive 'anterior' and displaces the historical present – opens it up to other histories and incommensurable narrative subjects" (Bhabha, 1994, 167).

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ENTRÄTSELUNG DER FAMILIENGESCHICHTE: NARRATIVE MEHRSPRACHIGKEIT IN *DIE BUNTEN MENSCHEN* VON HUGO HAMILTON

Tatjana Bicjutko

Zusammenfassung

Das Werk *Die bunten Menschen (The Speckled People)* von Hugo Hamilton, das nicht als Memoiren markiert wird, doch in diese Kategorie eindeutig fällt, unterscheidet sich empfindlich von der Reihe anderer Kindheitserinnerungen der irischen Katholiken, meistens dank ihrer komplizierten Textualität mit der

Erzählung eines Kindes, die die umliegende Realität widerspiegelt sowie die Berichte seiner Eltern umschließt. Die komplexe Lage des Kindes, das einer kulturell verwickelten Familie angehört, erlaubt die bestehenden Sprach- und Identitätsprobleme deutlicher zu zeigen, sie weder zeitlich noch räumlich zu

begrenzen. Paradoxerweise befreit die Mehrsprachigkeit, wie der Text zeigt, den jungen Hugo nicht, sondern drängt ihn zusätzlich an den Rand; die

Liminalität des Protagonisten und die Komplexität der Erzählung macht das Werk zu einem der besten Beispiele der irischen Lebenserinnerungen.

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Author's address:
Faculty of Modern Languages
University of Latvia
Visvalža 4a, Rīga, LV-1050 Latvia
Tel.: +371 29425487, Fax: +371 67227802
E-mail: tatbit@apollo.lv