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## Anxiety and liminality in the autobiographical works of Hugo Hamilton

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between the long-term liminal state, implied by the notion of “liminal identity” as defined by Tomasz Ferenc, and anxiety in German-Irish migration literature. Hugo Hamilton’s autobiographical works: *The Speckled People: A Memory of a Half-Irish Childhood* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* serve as exemplifying material. The subjective experiences of the subject juxtaposed with the accounts of his relatives are analysed in terms of the causes and consequences of his inability to cross the liminal threshold. The author concludes that the source of the anxiety appearing in Hugo Hamilton’s works is – on the one hand – a existence “in between” cultures and an inability to develop an individual cultural identity, and, on the other hand, a complicated relationship with his father who imposes on the protagonist a specific understanding of an existence in the space “in between”.

**Keywords:** liminality, space “in between”, migration literature, multiculturalism, Hugo Hamilton

### By way of introduction

Human life is defined by transitions: the physical, emotional and mental changes that occur between birth and death. The moment of limbo implied by them marks the so-called liminal zone, metaphorically often captured as the realm of the “in-between”. Crossing the often exciting and mysterious boundaries and moving on to the next stages of life is part of everyone’s existence, as are (to varying degrees) celebrated rites of passage that facilitate

adaptation to a new situation. As a rule, being in the liminal zone is a short-lived state, a kind of suspension occurring when making life decisions, during adolescence and when passing through the successive stages of adolescence, and it evokes a whole gamut of seemingly contradictory feelings, such as alienation, anxiety, excitement or hope. In the case of people with multicultural roots, and thus often living at the intersection of two (sometimes three) cultures (in the sphere “in-between”), liminality seems to be a phenomenon that constantly accompanies them, imposed – on the one hand – by society, which notices and reacts in different ways to their “otherness”, and, on the other, by themselves, since the internal rift and experience associated with it accompany them throughout their lives. Neither a step backwards nor forwards seem possible in this situation, as the existence of these people is “trapped” in the “in-between” zone, even condemning them to an identity split and the impossibility of completely belonging to a particular cultural circle. This article puts at the centre the experience of liminality manifested in the literature of Irish-German writer Hugo Hamilton, in whose autobiographical work growing up and being positioned between different cultures comes to the fore. Recalling his childhood memories, the author introduces the readers to the mysterious world of cross-cultural liminality, which offers unique ways of experiencing reality and perceiving the world, but can also condemn one to feeling misunderstood and lost. The purpose of this article is to reconstruct the relationship between liminality and anxiety that appears in Hugo Hamilton’s autobiographical work in the context of being an individual with a liminal identity. In a broader perspective, these considerations will lead to a definition of the meaning of liminality in artists with multicultural backgrounds.

## Liminality

We owe the concept of liminality to ethnographer Arnold van Gennep and anthropologist Victor Turner. In his 1909 work *Rites of Passage*, van Gennep characterised “the rites of the doorway and the threshold, of hospitality, adoption, pregnancy, delivery, birth, childhood, puberty, initiation, ordination, coronation, engagements and marriage, funerals, the seasons, etc.”,<sup>1</sup> assuming that human life is divided into stages, which are connected by thresholds. These, in turn, in cultures and societies take the form of rites of passage that prepare the individual for a change in his/her role and status in the community: “The life of an individual, regardless of the type of society, consists in passing successively from one age to another and from one occu-

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage. Second Edition* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 11.

pation to another".<sup>2</sup> On the basis of the above statement, van Gennep distinguished the various stages that make up the rituals in question:

1. the stage of separation – the exclusion of the individual from his or her previous social role;
2. the threshold stage, also known as the liminal stage – the individual's staying in the sphere "between" past and future identities;
3. attachment stage – reintegration into the community in a new role.<sup>3</sup>

The middle phase was highlighted by van Gennep as exceptionally important due to its function of "suspending" the individual between his/her past and future place in the community, a time when his/her identity is transformed and changed within the accepted structures, values and hierarchies.<sup>4</sup>

The topic of liminality was taken up in the 1960s by Victor Turner, who came across the work of Arnold van Gennep while researching rituals performed in the African Ndembu tribe. He, too, was fascinated by the liminal phase, but unlike his predecessor, for whom rites of passage were a kind of manifestation of uniqueness and a method for maintaining the bonds of a particular group, Turner assigned it the role of the foundation on which a community builds its unique identity and culture.<sup>5</sup> Liminality, in Turner's view, became an ambivalent phenomenon associated with ambivalent feelings and experiences, as "almost anything can happen in this gap between ordered worlds".<sup>6</sup> The following "stripping" of the individual from previously acquired norms, structures and hierarchies in the liminal phase and reducing him/her to the state of *carte blanche*, into which new values are to be "poured", becomes an almost traumatic experience leading to the disintegration of the world known to an individual. The "total insecurity and finitude that appears in this phase, the transition from chaos to cosmos, from disorder to order"<sup>7</sup> creates a tension between potentiality and situational uncertainty. This understanding of liminality is relevant to the analysis of the individual experience of the world by a subject in the sphere of cultures "in between".

<sup>2</sup> van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia M. Schomburg-Scherff, „Nachwort," in Arnold van Gennep, *Übergangsriten (Les rites de passage)*, 3rd, revised edition, transl. by Klaus Schomburg, and Sylvia M. Schomburg-Scherff (Frankfurt am Main–New York: Campus Verlag, 2005), 238.

<sup>5</sup> Sylwia Jaskulska, „Rytuał przejścia jako kategoria analityczna. Przyczynek do dyskusji nad badaniem rytualnego oblicza rzeczywistości szkolnej," *Studia Edukacyjne* 26 (2013): 80, <http://hdl.handle.net/amu-prod:uama743241d59f94a4885308d7dc504a19b>.

<sup>6</sup> Victor Turner, *Gry społeczne, pola i metafory. Symboliczne działanie w społeczeństwie*, transl. Wojciech Usakiewicz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2005), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, *Gry społeczne*, 73.

While for Arnold van Gennep the liminal phase has a definite duration and marks a threshold that is eventually crossed, in Victor Turner's interpretation it evolves into a long-term condition occurring in selected individuals. Existence at the intersection of two or more communities, where "social definitions and cultural norms are different and often even contradictory",<sup>8</sup> is conditioned by birth and/or displacement, with a migratory background behind it, and often leads to a prolonged moment of crossing the threshold marked by the liminal phase, and the consequent crystallisation in the individual of his or her individual cultural identity. "Liminal" subjects in this sense will be, among others, second-generation migrants and children of multicultural couples existing in the sphere "between" cultures. Drawing on Turner's belief that selected individuals may be "stuck" in a threshold phase, Tomasz Ferenc proposed the concept of "liminal identity" understood as an internal split at the identity level and characterised by "a constant sense of living in 'limbo', of being on the borderline of worlds".<sup>9</sup> This state is associated with both positive and negative emotions due to the individual's awareness of his or her unique position and the inability to fully merge with a particular society and culture.

## Hugo Hamilton

In considering the notion of liminal identity and its assumed long-term inability to establish an individual self, it is worth looking at an author who has been shifting between Irish and German cultural areas since birth. Hugo Hamilton was born in Dublin in 1953 and grew up in a culturally mixed family – with his Irish father Seán Ó hUrmoltaigh and his German mother Irmgard Ó hUrmoltaigh née Kaiser. He was originally named after his father, Seán Gearóid, but at home he was called by the German equivalent, Johannes, or diminutively, "Hanni".<sup>10</sup> The name Hugo, on the other hand, was chosen by the author at his confirmation,<sup>11</sup> while the surname Hamilton is an Anglicised version of the family name Ó hUrmoltaigh.<sup>12</sup> The Ó hUrmoltaighs' premise was

<sup>8</sup> Turner, *Gry społeczne*, 197.

<sup>9</sup> Tomasz Ferenc, „Liminalność a procesy tożsamościowe artystów emigrantów,” in *Tożsamość. Nowoczesność. Stereotypy*, eds. Renata Dopierała, and Kaja Kaźmierska (Kraków: Nomos, 2012), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothea Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War in the works of Christabel Bielenberg, Francis Stuart and Hugo Hamilton* (PhD diss., Dublin: Trinity College. School of English, 2013), 244–245.

<sup>11</sup> Eoin Bourke, „The Birthmark of Germanness: Hugo Hamilton and the Question of Belonging,” *Creative Influences – German-Irish Biographies Irish German Studies 4*, ed. Joachim Fischer, and Gisela Holfter (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2009), 180.

<sup>12</sup> The surname Hamilton was already used freely by the author's grandfather, John, who, because of his adaptation to the Anglo-Irish reality of the Emerald Isle and the "betrayal"

to bring up their children in a spirit of bilingualism and biculturalism, thus realising Seán Ó hUrmoltaigh's dream of a new generation of Irish children who were a mixture of two different cultures and free of any British impurities left in Ireland after centuries of British domination of the island.<sup>13</sup>

The upbringing of the young Ó hUrmoltaighs, including Johannes, was subordinated to his father's nationalist ideas and beliefs manifested, among other things, in the prohibition of the use of the dominant English language not only in the family home, but also outside it, or of coming into contact with elements of English-speaking culture. Existing in a sphere not only between Irish and German culture, but also between the Irish-German domestic reality and the Anglo-Irish outside world, significantly influenced Hugo Hamilton's torn cultural identity and his sense of belonging,<sup>14</sup> which, by his own admission, was nonexistent as a child: "There were no other children like me, no ethnic groups that I could attach myself to".<sup>15</sup> In adulthood, Hamilton's awareness of his lack of full belonging to a particular culture became the inspiration for his literary work and the creation in his novels of characters as people living "between" worlds and constantly searching for their own identity.<sup>16</sup>

Reflecting on his existence "between" cultures, Hugo Hamilton's memoirs of his childhood and teenage years, presented in two "autobiographies",<sup>17</sup> became a seal of approval: *The Speckled People: A Memoir of a*

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of his true Irish identity, was disowned by his son, Seán. The author's return to his "dead and forgotten" grandfather and the lost memory of him can be interpreted as an attempt to break away from the controlling parent and search for his own individual identity. See Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People. A Memoir of a Half-Irish Childhood* (Great Britain: Fourth Estate, 2003), 14, and Hugo Hamilton, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (Great Britain: Fourth Estate, 2006), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Hugo Hamilton, „Speaking to the walls in English,” accessed 10 July, 2023, <http://www.powells.com/essays/hamilton.html>.

<sup>16</sup> It is worth mentioning titles such as, *Disguise* (2006), *Dublin Palms* (2019) or *Hand in the Fire* (2010).

<sup>17</sup> Although *The Speckled People: A Memoir of a Half-Irish Childhood* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* are inspired by the author's past, he admits to wanting to avoid autobiographical pigeonholing, to thwart readers' expectations and to create texts with multiple meanings (cf. Arminta Wallace, "First a Flight to Berlin, then a Refuge in Fiction", *The Irish Times*, November 6, 1990, 10). In addition, Hamilton's statements indicate that the memoirs he cites should be interpreted more as dramatisations of his past than as proper autobiographical experiences (Arminta Wallace, "The Past Is Myself", *The Irish Times Magazine*, January 11, 2003, 9). The dramatisation of one's own biography is a common phenomenon in contemporary migrant literature, which Klaus Schenk links to migrant authors crossing genre boundaries and transforming narrative modes. Klaus Schenk, "Transformationen in-

*Half-Irish Childhood* (2003) and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006). These have elevated Hamilton's name to the international arena through translations into German, French and Dutch, and have brought the subject of biculturalism, which rarely appears in German-Irish literature, to the attention of readers and researchers. From the perspective of a child, the author brings readers closer to the individual experience of growing up in a sphere "between" two cultures and two worlds, perceiving in his "liminal" position and the associated lack of individual identity the sources of his acutely felt feelings of lack of belonging and alienation at that time. At the same time, Hamilton addresses his already established self-identity and past self-image from the present perspective of a mature man who, through the formation of a national and cultural affiliation on his own terms, has left the liminal zone, yet remains consciously and voluntarily in the sphere "in between".

Hugo Hamilton's shifting between Irish and German cultures is explicitly called migration by Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh and she argues that interpretation of his work should focus primarily on the image of the family home being "a fundamental locus of trauma and alienation, for home is always an imagined space which serves only to remind the migrant subject of what he has lost".<sup>18</sup> Based on this view, it seems reasonable to conclude that in analysing *The Speckled People: A Memoir of a Half-Irish Childhood* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* in terms of liminal experience, it is necessary first to get to the source of the blending of true and distorted memories in them, since an author torn between cultures may inadvertently give vent to a certain nostalgia for his own image of an easy and simple Irish identity against the complex interculturalism experienced by him as a child<sup>19</sup> and imposed to a large extent by a domineering father. In her doctoral dissertation *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War in the Works of Christabel Bielenberg, Francis Stuart and Hugo Hamilton*, published in 2013, Dorothea Depner's review of the diaries of his mother, Irmgard Ó hUrmoltaigh, held at the National Library of Ireland in Dublin, provides additional context related to the author's multicultural upbringing.

These documents allow us to revisit the degree of authenticity of the autobiographical information provided by Hamilton in his memoirs and to ex-

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terkulturellen Erzählens. Perspektiven eines narrativen turn", in *Turns und kein Ende? Aktuelle Tendenzen in Germanistik und Komparatistik*, eds. Elke Sturm-Trigonakis et al. (Frankfurt am Main–Bern–Wien: Peter Lang Edition, 2017), 84–87. For the above reasons, in this article "autobiography" in the context of Hamilton's work is put in quotation marks.

<sup>18</sup> Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh, „Homesick while at Home: Hugo Hamilton and *The Speckled People*," in *Exploring Transculturalism: A Biographical Approach*, eds. Wolfgang Berg, and Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2009), 117.

<sup>19</sup> Depner, *Germany*, 240.

amine the way in which he individually understood his identity which is situated at the intersection of cultures and languages.<sup>20</sup> Dorothea Depner and Eoin Bourke, argue rather that what really “marked” Hamilton and set him apart from his peers was the specific nationalism of his father, who, unable to come to terms with an Anglicised Irish reality,<sup>21</sup> consciously separated his offspring from their English-speaking peers and the outside world. This argument seems to be borne out by Irmgard Ó hUrmoltaigh’s diaries, in which there is no mention of any discrimination or ostracism of her family due to multiculturalism.<sup>22</sup>

Dorothea Depner describes the motif of alienation due to his multicultural background, which runs through Hugo Hamilton’s work, and even his being labelled<sup>23</sup> by his environment as “other” and “alien”, as “a morbid pre-occupation with indelible taintedness due to his background”.<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that repeated attempts to confront one’s own past can be a form of reworking and “revaluing” it from the position of a mature person, confident of his or her identity and place in the world. Without this procedure, one’s multicultural background and upbringing and its consequences would remain a source of anxiety and identity insecurity, preventing the author from leaving the liminal phase. Reflection on the authenticity of the experiences of Hugo Hamilton that are cited becomes inevitable in this context, adopting Frederic C. Bartlett’s assumption that memory and recollection involve complex structural processes that are not infallible.

In the process of recalling memories, fragments of stored information are combined under the influence of present knowledge, attitudes and beliefs.<sup>25</sup> Based on the above, Daniel L. Schacter and Donna Rose Addis put forward the hypothesis of constructive episodic simulation, which assumes that ideas

<sup>20</sup> Depner, *Germany*, 241.

<sup>21</sup> Bourke, *The Birthmark of Germanness*, 188, and Depner, *Germany*, 248.

<sup>22</sup> Depner, *Germany*, 249.

<sup>23</sup> In the works under consideration, viz. *The Speckled People: A Memoir of a Half-Irish Childhood* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, the author uses phrases such as “we’re marked”, “we’re the speckled people” (Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 11), or “They would see a speckled face and say that I was diseased” (Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 182) to describe his multicultural identity, which was supposed to be so evident in the surrounding environment that it manifested itself visibly on the face of young Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh. The adjective speckled itself, appearing in one of the titles and repeatedly in the above novels, alludes to the experiencing of multiculturalism in the texts under study as marking and causing alienation.

<sup>24</sup> Depner, *Germany*, 248.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel L. Schacter, „Constructive memory: past and future,” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 14, no. 1 (2012): 8, <https://doi.org/10.31887%2FDCNS.2012.14.1%2Fdschacter>. See also Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

about past and future events draw on similar information stored in memory and rely on similar underlying processes. This system allows for the flexible use of past information, but has the side effect of being prone to error and distortion due to an inappropriate combination of elements of imagination and memory.<sup>26</sup> This begs the question of how much of Hugo Hamilton's cited childhood memories are his authentic experiences, and how much of them have been constructed under the influence of his own haggard feelings of anxiety and alienation stemming less from social rejection and the "stigma" of a mixed cultural heritage, and more from his father's nurturing approach and authoritarianism.

Ultimately, the following question also arises: how far has the author dramatised his biography? This will be considered in later sections of this article as they have a direct link to the theme of anxiety and liminality under investigation.

### Separation stage

The world of little Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh<sup>27</sup> is full of challenges and uncertainties, and navigating it is like stepping on an edge suspended between two distant places, where visibility is poor and one false step can lead to a fall into the abyss. Johannes balances not of his own volition: he is half Irish and half German, which already makes him different from his peers and those around him, and on top of that he is forced by his father to cut himself off from the English-speaking reality of 1950s and 1960s Ireland, which only adds to his sense of alienation. Origin and upbringing lead to a doubled state of "in-between" in Johannes's case, as he exists not only between the cultures of his parents, but also between the multicultural reality of the family home and the outside world.

A distorted self-image and the feeling of being "branded" by those around him and the accompanying emotional dilemmas will accompany Johannes throughout the period described in his memoirs and motivate him to try to fit in in any way, no matter how drastic, with the world around him:

<sup>26</sup> Daniel L. Schacter, and Donna Rose Addis, „The cognitive neuroscience of constructive memory: Remembering the past and imagining the future,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*362 (2007): 786, <http://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2007.2087>.

<sup>27</sup> Since Hugo Hamilton used a different name during his childhood, i.e. Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh, in the following section discussing excerpts from *The Speckled People* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, the author of the article also uses this name to refer to the author as a child and his teenage years. This procedure is intended to distinguish the different identities and experiences of being "in between" that accompanied Hamilton over the years.



You couldn't be cowboys in Irish. You couldn't sneak up behind somebody or tie somebody up to a chair in Irish. It was no fun dying in Irish. And it was just too stupid altogether to hide behind something and say 'Uuugg'h' or 'hands up' in Irish, because there were some things you could only do in English, like fighting and killing Indians. My father was no good at making friends, so my mother took over and told us to join the altar boys. But they only wanted to kill Germans, so we served Mass and just went home again.<sup>28</sup>

My father says we have nothing to worry about because we are the new Irish. Partly from Ireland and partly from somewhere else, half-Irish and half-German. We're the speckled people, he says, the 'brack' people.<sup>29</sup>

The origin that makes Johannes unique, and which his parents are proud of, he himself sees as a target drawn on his back, provoking different reactions from those around him and forcing him to pretend, run away and deny his roots and upbringing, and thus himself. There is a separation in the boy both from the "inherited" identity imposed on him by his authoritarian father and a refusal to take on the role of "victim" in his interactions with his peers:

There are things you inherit from your father, too, not just a forehead or a smile or a limp, but other things like sadness and hunger and hurt. You can inherit memories you'd rather forget. Things can be passed on to you as a child, like helpless anger. It's all there in your voice, like it is in your father's voice, as if you were born with a stone in your hand. When I grow up I'll run away from my story, too. I have things I want to forget, so I'll change my name and never come back.<sup>30</sup>

[...] they kept laughing at my brother and me for being half Irish and half German. It was weird, they said, like a big contradiction, because the Irish got the shit kicked out of them by the British and the Germans kicked the shit out of the Jews. We were innocent because we were Irish and we were guilty because we were German. Victim and perpetrator at the same time.<sup>31</sup>

Since the outside world is a minefield to be trodden carefully, the family home, bicultural and bilingual, full of siblings who understand Johannes's dilemmas and the presence of parents who feel no shame about the family's unique status, should be an asylum where the boy can take off the mask of "normality" and finally be himself. However, Seán Ó hUrmoltaigh's nationalist beliefs and his exercise of tight control over the family's life and identity, mean that Johannes's attempts to find an individual self and to defy the prevailing orders and prohibitions in the home are seen as a rebellion against his father's authority and severely punished by him:

<sup>28</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 131.

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 79.

So we have to be careful in our house and think before we speak. We can't speak the words of the Garda or the workers, that's English. We speak Áine's words from Connemara, that's Irish, or my mother's words, that's German. I can't talk to Áine in German and I can't talk to my mother in Irish, because she'll only laugh and tickle me. I can talk to my father in German or Irish and he can speak to the Garda and the workers for us. Outside, you have to be careful, too, because you can't buy an ice pop in German or in Irish, and lots of people only know the words of the Garda and the workers. My father says they better hurry up and learn Irish fast because we won't buy anything more in English.<sup>32</sup>

In our house, it's dangerous to sing a song or say what's inside your head. You have to be careful or else my father will get up and switch you off like the radio.<sup>33</sup>

### Liminal stage

The fear of the father and his reaction to the "undesirable" behaviour of the household members makes the Ó hUrmoltaigh house, instead of a desired refuge, a prison in which a war between father and son ensues. Under the guise of a clash of cultures, a real battle is waged between Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh's identity, imposed by his father and subordinated to his ideas, and Hugo Hamilton's own, as yet uncrystallised and lost self. The conflict is also conducted on a linguistic and cultural level – a primal Irishness mixed with an innovative Germanness clashes with an Anglo-Irish reality idealised by Johannes but loathed by Seán, deepening the boy's inner split:

I told him I had been brainwashed by my father into speaking Irish. I had been brainwashed into being German as well and now I wanted to be brainwashed out of all that as fast as possible.<sup>34</sup>

I was afraid that I was no longer in control of my own thoughts and that I was going mad. I thought I would end up mentally disturbed in an asylum with lots of people who had no power over their own minds.<sup>35</sup>

Differences between father and son seem irreconcilable, escape from each other impossible and peer acceptance unattainable. Familial and societal pressures, deepening disorientation and identity fragmentation culminate in Johannes's intrusion into a disturbing, empty and frustrating liminal zone. There, previously imposed values and identities are discarded, which is intended to help the boy realise his true self, but this will prove to be an arduous task and one that will last for many years, as external factors, in particular the person of his father, will not let up.

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 58.

<sup>34</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 73–74.

<sup>35</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 76.

A disorientating existence in a liminal space and the inability to cross the threshold and crystallise one's own self accompany Johannes through his childhood and teenage years. Awareness of his predicament, identity dilemmas, but also the constant attempts by his surroundings and Seán Ó hUrmol- taigh to impose certain values and a sense of belonging on the boy intensify Johannes's inner conflict and are factors that prevent him from forming an individual identity and crossing the liminal threshold. The uncertainty of one's position leads to the development of defence mechanisms in the form of denial, and even a change of personality and the assumption of increasingly complex masks:

'You're the German boy, aren't you?' she said. I shook my head and looked at the ground. 'Yes you are. Your mother is that lovely German woman who bakes cakes for the school?' she said, but I kept shaking my head. 'No, not me'.<sup>36</sup>

I want to have no past behind me, no conscience and no memory. I want to get away from my home and my family and my history.<sup>37</sup>

The assumption of masks marks a liminal time in Johannes's life, which, as well as trying to adapt to a particular community, also serve to distract from the emptiness and dilemmas gripping the boy. Outside, in front of his Anglo-Irish peers and neighbours, in a world dominated by everything that is forbidden at home, he pretends to be an ordinary boy, without family, memories or history, speaking only English and doing everything to prevent those around him from seeing the raisins of "otherness" in him. At home, meanwhile, donning the mask of invisibility is meant to distract the authoritarian parent from Johannes's inner world:

We waited and read as many comics as we could and pretended that we were Irish and spoke only English like everyone else, even though everybody could see that we were from a different country.<sup>38</sup>

Even at home, I became invisible. My mother said we'd always been doing strange and unusual things like putting stones in our ears when we were small, but this was one of the oddest things she had ever heard of and she hoped I wasn't starting to lose my mind. She said I was going around the place like a ghost and one evening, when she called me to dinner, I didn't go down the stairs but out through the window instead.<sup>39</sup>

The prolonged wearing of different masks causes the boundaries between the real and manifested versions of the self to blur, intensifying identity conflict and deepening feelings of not belonging and confusion. Inner di-

<sup>36</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 31.

<sup>37</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 42-42.

lemmas result in a withdrawal into oneself and the erection of an invisible barrier between Johannes and those around him, including family members:

I decided that I had to go underground. I had to pretend I didn't exist any more. Nobody saw me going to school on the train in the morning. Nobody saw me coming home. Of course there was always a chance they might be waiting for me on one of my secret routes, that I would be trapped and put on trial again.<sup>40</sup>

I was stuck in that revolving moment of history, paralysed and unable to move forward in time, unable to live in the aftermath and still wishing I could hold everything up like an artist. I was forever stuck in this pre-calamity, this pre-beheading, this pre-gas chamber moment when everything was fine, but already too late.<sup>41</sup>

As one grows up, acquires new experiences and broadens one's horizons, the liminal stage is given the chance to realise its function in its entirety. In addition to being stripped away, stripped down and reduced to the state of the "unsaved page", liminality aims to create the right circumstances for the crystallisation of an individual cultural identity, the evaluation of previously acquired values and the renegotiation of one's place in society. Confusion, uncertainty and even anxiety are part and parcel of it, but the other side of this coin is curiosity, potential and hope. The doubled state of "in-between" in the young Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh contributed to the complexity of his relationship with himself and the prolongation of the liminal stage, but did not stop him from crossing the threshold:

When you're young, you can change your identity. You can escape from your family and change your name, leave your country, go to live in a new city and not tell anyone where you come from. You can disguise yourself like an actor and choose what to remember and what to forget. But there is always something that gives you away, some tell-tale part of you that cannot be hidden. It's not just the obvious things like your accent, your language, your appearance. It's the way you look at the world, your point of view. You can never disguise that because it shows up like ancient ruins on the landscape<sup>42</sup>.

Maybe you can hide it from other people by pointing the finger somewhere else, but you can't hide things like that from yourself.<sup>43</sup>

## Connection stage

The experience of growing up and living in the sphere "in between" described by Hugo Hamilton in *The Speckled People: A Memoir of a Half-Irish*

<sup>40</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 176.

<sup>43</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 66.

*Childhood* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* appears traumatic. Being “in between” cultures and worlds seems to condemn Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh to an inner split, uncertainty about his position, the need to search for his own identity, a complicated relationship with himself and fear of a world he cannot understand. However, as the boy matures, becomes a man, learns about reality on his own terms and escapes from under the yoke of his authoritarian father, persisting in a state of “in-between” becomes a source of strength, as it offers a unique perspective and allows him to see things invisible to others. “Other” ceases to mean “inferior” and is no longer a reason to hide from the world, but is a chance to experience it in one’s own individual way. In retrospect, the melancholic state of “in-between” turns out to be valuable because of its uniqueness:

We are the German-Irish story. We are the English-Irish story, too. My father has one soft foot and one hard foot, one good ear and one bad ear, and we have one Irish foot and one German foot and a right arm in English. We are the brack children. Brack, homemade Irish bread with German raisins. We are the brack people and we don’t just have one briefcase. We don’t just have one language and one history. We sleep in German and we dream in Irish. We laugh in Irish and we cry in German. We are silent in German and we speak in English. We are the speckled people.<sup>44</sup>

Accepting his multiculturalism, and simultaneously identifying with a German as well as a Celtic and Anglo-Irish part, allows Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh to develop his own identity and to reconcile the two worlds “in between” – of the family home and the environment of his peers. Rather than making a choice between one belonging and another, the boy creates a third way for himself by accepting his unique position at the meeting point of three cultures. The act of coming to terms with himself and voluntarily accepting his status as half-Irish and half-German existing in harmony in an Anglo-Irish reality removes the need to take on masks or escape from inner experiences. The small and frightened Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh crosses a liminal threshold, joining the world on his own terms as the mature and confident Hugo Hamilton:

I’m not afraid any more of being German or Irish, or anywhere in between. Maybe your country is only a place you make up in your own mind. Something you dream about and sing about. Maybe it’s not a place on the map at all, but just a story full of people you meet and places you visit, full of books and films you’ve been to. I’m not afraid of being homesick and having no language to live in. I don’t have to be like anyone else. I’m walking on the wall and nobody can stop me.<sup>45</sup>

Maybe you have to live under cover for a while before you can find your true character. Now I want to belong to the same country as Bob Dylan and Dostoevsky and

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<sup>44</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 189.

<sup>45</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 197.

Fassbinder. I want to be in the same wardrobe as John Lennon and John Hamilton, the sailors with the soft eyes. I have taken on my grandfather's identity. I have given him back his name and his life [...]. I can feel the touch of solid ground under my feet.<sup>46</sup>

Suspended during childhood, the experience of forming an individual identity is eventually "suspended", allowing the natural process to run its course, albeit delayed. Also associated with the exit from the liminal zone is the shedding of the anxiety, insecurity and lack of belonging so acutely felt over the years. Hugo Hamilton gains distance from his experiences, but also from the person of his father, to whom, as a man confident of his place in the world and drawing strength from the sphere "in between", he is able to resist. The opportunity to analyse his experiences from a different perspective and the desire to work through them motivates the young man to put his thoughts and emotions onto paper, resulting in a successful career as a writer. For this reason, the state of "in-betweenness" experienced by Hamilton during his childhood and adolescence can be termed liminal, as there is eventually a crossing of the "threshold" and the constitution of a (mature) identity operating in a multicultural space of "in-betweenness".

We're special because we speak Irish and German and we like the smell of these new clothes. My mother says it's like being at home again and my father says your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag.<sup>47</sup>

I grew up being good at saying the opposite and giving the wrong answers. I was not afraid any more. Laugh at yourself and the world laughs with you. Execute yourself and nobody can touch you.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Although the degree of truthfulness of the memories recalled in *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* and *The Speckled People: A Memoir of a Half-Irish Childhood* is an important aspect of analyses of Hugo Hamilton's work, a consideration of the ways in which the liminal stage is experienced, which is the purpose of this article, leads to the observation that the overarching object of study in interpreting Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh's experience should be his feelings and experiences, so traumatic that, despite the passage of decades, they are brought home to readers in a powerful and expressive way. Seán Ó hUrmoltaigh's sense of lack of control over his own destiny, the complicated feelings associated with his person, the imposition of different identities and

<sup>46</sup> Hamilton, *The Sailor*, 179.

<sup>47</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, 196.

the impossibility of crystallising an individual “self” appear as the actual reasons for his long duration in the liminal zone. The confrontation with the image of oneself as a misunderstood, lost child takes place in the “autobiographies” already from the perspective of the adult and emotionally mature Hugo Hamilton, writer, father of his own family, freely moving and grounded in his status “between” the cultural areas of Germany and Ireland.

Anxiety appears as a decisive emotion in the young Johannes Ó hUrmoltaigh’s experience of himself and his surroundings: of rejection by peers, of lack of acceptance by society and of a father who is authoritarian and demands the impossible. It is the feelings of anxiety that run through the phases of exclusion and liminality, influencing decision-making, distorting the image of reality and one’s own self, and dominating the connotations associated with the perception of the liminal state. However, another aspect of the anxiety experienced by the author in his youth is also worth noting, namely, its motivation for action. During his childhood years, this force manifested itself in the creation and assumption of masks, escape and the invention of ever more elaborate defence mechanisms, characterised by dynamism and ingenuity. Paradoxically, it is also the fear of losing himself that pushes Hugo Hamilton to finally defy his father, construct his own identity and leave the liminal zone. In this context, anxiety becomes a positive stimulus, motivating him to transform and acquire status.

*Translated by Anna Wylężątek*

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## Angst und Liminalität im autobiografischen Werk von Hugo Hamilton

**Abstract:** Ziel des Beitrags ist es, die Beziehung zwischen dem lang andauernden liminalen Zustand, hier in Anlehnung auf den Begriff der „liminalen Identität“ von Tomasz Ferenc, und der Angst in der deutsch-irischen Migrationsliteratur zu untersuchen. Exemplifiziert wird dieser Versuch an den autobiographischen Werken von Hugo Hamilton: *The Speckled People: A Memory of a Half-Irish Childhood* und *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*. Es werden hier subjektive Erfahrungen des Protagonisten mit den Berichten seiner Verwandten verglichen, im Hinblick auf die Ursachen und Folgen der Unfähigkeit, die liminale Schwelle zu überschreiten. Die Analyse führt zur Schlussfolgerung, dass die Quelle der Angst in Hugo Hamiltons Werken einerseits in der kulturellen „Dazwischen“-Existenz des Subjekts und der Schwierigkeit in der Entwicklung einer individuellen kulturellen Identität zu finden ist und andererseits aus der komplizierten Beziehung zu seinem Vater resultiert, der dem Subjekt sein spezifisches Verständnis von Liminalität aufzwingt.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Liminalität, Dazwischen, interkulturelle Literatur, Multikulturalität, Hugo Hamilton

## Lęk i liminalność w autobiograficznej twórczości Hugo Hamiltona

**Abstrakt:** Celem artykułu jest próba zbadania związku pomiędzy długotrwałym stanem liminalnym, implikowanym pojęciem „tożsamości liminalnej” zdefiniowanej przez Tomasza Ferenc, a lękiem w niemiecko-irlandzkiej literaturze migracyjnej. Materiałem egzemplifikacyjnym są autobiograficzne utwory Hugo Hamiltona: *The Speckled People: A Memory of a Half-Irish Childhood* i *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*. Analizie poddano subiektywne doświadczenia podmiotu zestawione z relacjami jego krewnych i przyczyny oraz skutki niemożności przekroczenia progu liminalnego. Autorka dochodzi do konkluzji, że źródłem lęku pojawiającego się w twórczości Hugo Hamiltona jest – z jednej strony – trwanie w egzystencji „pomiędzy” kulturami i niezdolność do wykształcenia indywidualnej tożsamości kulturowej, a z drugiej strony – skomplikowana relacja z ojcem narzucającym bohaterowi specyficzne rozumienie trwania w sferze liminalnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** liminalność, bycie pomiędzy, literatura migracyjna, wielokulturowość, Hugo Hamilton