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# “Struck by Ireland-Fever”: Hugo Hamilton's Berlin Trilogy

Michaela Schrage-Früh

Hugo Hamilton is an Irish-German writer best known for his memoir *The Speckled People*, published in 2003, which offered a poignant account of his own difficult childhood as son of a German mother and Irish father in Dublin in the 1950s and 1960s. However, Hamilton also spent one year living in Berlin in the mid-1970s and many of his observations in his debut novel *Surrogate City*, published in 1990, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, have been based on his experiences during that sojourn and subsequent visits.<sup>1</sup> While *Surrogate City* is set in an unspecified time in pre-unification West Berlin<sup>2</sup>, with the reality of the Wall and the world beyond it lingering like a shadow in the fringes of the characters' consciousness, his third novel *The Love Test*, published in 1995, takes place right after the collapse of the GDR. It depicts initial interpersonal encounters between East and West and narrates the story of an East-German couple whose lives were destroyed by *Stasi* state terror.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the novel *Disguise*, published in 2008, and completing what has been called Hamilton's "Berlin Trilogy"<sup>4</sup>, expands the narrative timeframe by tracing its protagonist's life from the end of World War II up to the post-unification present.

The three novels feature different characters and tell different stories, but taken together they provide “a chronicle of the radical change and enduring character of Berlin during the period of transition from division to unity”.<sup>5</sup> They also share an at first glance unlikely preoccupation with Ireland and it is this intercultural connection and its functions within Hamilton's narrative of a divided German city that will be explored in this chapter. While the recurrent evocation of Ireland as both place and idea might be dismissed as an autobiographical contingency resulting from the author's own German-Irish identity, I suggest that in all three novels Ireland serves as an important projection screen for the German characters' longings, wishes and unfulfilled desires. Accordingly, in the following I will analyse in what ways and to what effect Hamilton presents, and ironically undermines, the German infatuation with the Emerald Isle in the context of Berlin's history from divided to reunified city and its citizens' concomitant search for identity and unity.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul O'Hanrahan, “Berlin in English-Language Fiction, 1989–2009: Spatial Representation and the Dynamics of Memory.” Doctoral thesis, University of Liverpool, 2014, p. 227.

<http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.617539>, accessed 30 June 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The setting of the mid-1970s is suggested by references to Helmut Schmidt's election as *Bundeskanzler* in 1974 and to the *Rote Armee Fraktion*. However, precise dates are never mentioned in the novel and there is a sense that several historical time periods are condensed within its narration spanning merely eighteenth months, from Helen's arrival in the city to shortly after her return to Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> The term *Stasi* is short for *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (Ministry for State Security) and refers to the secret police agency of the GDR, which was responsible both for foreign espionage and internal political surveillance.

<sup>4</sup> O'Hanrahan, “Berlin in English-Language Fiction”, p. 281.

<sup>5</sup> O'Hanrahan, “Berlin in English-Language Fiction”, p. 281.

## In the Shadow of the Wall: *Surrogate City*

In *Surrogate City*, the first-person narrator, Alan Craig, adopts the perspective of an outsider-insider; as an Irishman in Berlin, his detachment within the story allows him to reveal some of the contradictions, ironies and shortcomings of life in West Berlin before the fall of the Wall. His outsider perspective, which occasionally makes him appear like an eavesdropper or spy, is enhanced by the fact that he is a quiet and secretive observer, whose command of German is much better than he cares to admit.<sup>6</sup> Alan is a well-integrated member of the West Berlin music scene and thus able to initiate a newcomer like his fellow country-woman Helen Quinn into the secrets of the city. Yet he is still “new”, foreign and detached enough to muse about the peculiar situation of the divided city that others tend to take for granted or have ceased to notice. To West Berliners the GDR is a tourist destination, where a visitor is shown around on a daytrip, the main concern being how to best spend the *Ostmarks* that cannot be converted back into *D-Marks*:

Nobody has much to say for the other side. The other side of the Berlin Wall, that is. In East Berlin, they say, things are so inferior. Life is inferior. You'd never buy anything over there. Certainly not clothes or electrical items. Nor groceries. Leather bags, maybe. And pickled gherkins. Anything pickled is always worth bringing back. (SC, p. 8)

Similarly, the Berlin Wall itself is studiously ignored or at best acknowledged as a tourist attraction: “a monument that deserves a visit, like the leaning tower of Pisa. But after that, if you settle in Berlin, it is never mentioned again. For most people it doesn't exist” (SC, p. 8). This is, of course, a blatantly West German perspective, conveniently blotting out East German lives enduring the everyday reality of the Wall, a sense that is reinforced by the almost romantic description of “[t]he Berlin Wall only [coming] into its own at night. Far more festive and convincing, which goes to show that it's really the floodlights that create the frontier. Otherwise, it might be forgotten” (SC, p. 48).

For this reason Alan is reluctant when Helen insists on having her picture taken in front of the Wall. As he surmises: “Every year, thousands of visitors take photographs of the Berlin Wall. There will be nothing left of it soon” (SC, p. 154). This suggests that the Wall has turned into a profit-making business, its status as “a spectacular anomaly like the tower at Pisa indicating that it has accrued a degree of value as a historical entity”.<sup>7</sup> In short, it is what makes West Berlin unique and what attracts visitors to the city. Incidentally, it also lends itself to political gestures and metaphors when, for instance, politicians make use of the Wall “in a gritty show of courage. Tear down this Wall! They shout whenever they arrive in Berlin on a visit, blatantly missing the point that everyone in Berlin has been trying to forget about it” (SC, p. 8). However, as the narrator notes, not without self-irony, it is also true of writers like himself: “Occasionally, of course, someone will come along and compare the Berlin Wall to a great love affair that went wrong; usurping the image for a personal biography” (SC, p. 8). This is precisely what Hamilton

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<sup>6</sup> See Hugo Hamilton, *Surrogate City*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 19. Subsequent quotations from this text will be followed in parentheses by the abbreviation SC and the relevant page number.

<sup>7</sup> O'Hanrahan, “Berlin in English-Language Fiction”, p. 242.

does in this novel. The narrator's relationship with Helen is doomed from the start, not only because Helen is pregnant with another man's (Dieter's) child but also because their love cannot thrive in the shadow of the Wall – or so the novel implies.

In many ways Berlin is presented as a kind of landlocked island and it is only when the characters need to pass through the East German corridor to get to West Germany that the reality of the GDR briefly forces itself into their consciousness. As Alan puts it:

After the checkpoint, of course, there's no way you can get out. Theoretically, while travelling through East German territory, through the corridor, you're not allowed to stop. Even in emergency. You must keep going until you reach West German territory again. You're not even supposed to stop for a piss, Hadja says. [...] As soon as we got past the checkpoint on the open road of the corridor, Wolf switched on the music again. Loud. Hit the road, Hadja shouted over the music, touched by excitement and freedom. (SC, pp. 149–50)

It is precisely this sense of freedom that the West Berliners in the novel tend to associate with Ireland, for, in contrast to the urban island of West Berlin, Ireland is an island surrounded by the sea, a symbol of infinite space, freedom and adventure. As the novel suggests, this longing for the sea is deeply ingrained in the inhabitants of Berlin, given that “[a]t one stage, Berlin was completely covered by the sea. Atlantis reversed, if you like. It's the first thing they tell you when you arrive in the city” (SC, p. 6). Alan further informs us that “[i]t was claustrophobia which first made Wolf [Alan's musician friend] go to Ireland” (SC, p. 34). Wolf's romantic idealisation of the Irish west coast fuels his music and serves as a foil to his claustrophobic West Berlin existence. As the narrator notes:

Wolf's album is called Atlantis. I've seen the artwork. A clever merger of images and graphic design. Pictures of Berlin, Kreuzberg and the Berlin Wall are superimposed around an image of Wolfgang Ebers looking out across the Atlantic waves. His hair is blown back by the wind. The title of the album is written along the Berlin Wall as part of the graffiti. (SC, pp. 190–91)

This “clever merger” of images from the Berlin Wall and the Atlantic already gestures toward a critique of commercialism visible in the ways in which these places and the emotional values attached to them are exploited. This critique will be explored in more depth below. At this point it is important to note that, ironically enough, in the context of the novel, the idealisation of Ireland as an alternative utopia or emblem of freedom is subtly undermined by the characters' actual experiences. We learn that Wolf was “messing about with drugs” (SC, p. 16) in Galway when first meeting Hadja, his German-Turkish girlfriend and manager, and being “saved” (SC, p. 16) by her. Conversely, while German tourists may discover a temporary sense of freedom in Ireland's west, the native Irish narrator, still haunted by troubled childhood memories, seems to have found his own “sanctuary” in West Berlin, reflecting the author's autobiographical experiences, as recalled in an article for *The Guardian* in 2012:

When I first went to Berlin in 1974, the city became a place of refuge, an adoptive home to which I fled to escape my childhood. It was a place which attracted miscreants and migrants and draft

dodgers. It took on the role of a sanctuary, a place which felt more like a remote urban island because it was still amputated and excluded by the Berlin Wall.<sup>8</sup>

It is obvious that Alan has no desire to return to Ireland with Helen, which is one of the reasons why their relationship is doomed. Even more crucially, Helen's situation as a woman pregnant out of wedlock hints at the social problems prevalent in Ireland in the 1970 and 1980s in which sexist legislation prevented unmarried women from access to contraceptives, divorce was constitutionally banned and married women were barred from working in the civil service well into the 1970s. Helen's plight that makes her conceal her pregnancy from her family and prompts her to search for the child's father in the bewildering urban jungle of West Berlin surely must be viewed in this context. Writing in 1986, Jenny Beale observed that "the treatment of women who become pregnant outside marriage is one of the scandals of Irish social history".<sup>9</sup> In *Surrogate City*, the social stigma suffered by young single mothers in Ireland is evoked when Helen receives a letter from her brother castigating her for her pregnancy: "Do you realize what you've done? This house has been dead like a morgue since the news of your condition. What a pity you didn't think about your parents before you got yourself into this mess" (SC, p. 127).

However, while Berlin might appear a more hospitable place for a young single mother than Dublin, there is an increasing sense that Helen and her child will not be able to thrive there. Likewise, as O'Hanrahan points out, "Helen and Alan meet and complement each other for a short time but their relationship proves to be as provisional and insecure as the divided city which surrounds them".<sup>10</sup> Alan is, after all, only Helen's surrogate lover and surrogate father to her child, while the young woman is still searching for the child's biological father Dieter. However, even when Helen and Dieter resume their relationship and eventually get married, they feel that Berlin is no place for them and decide to move to Dublin. The reasons why Dieter left both Ireland and Helen behind to return to West Berlin in the first place are never explained though we may speculate that his own idealised view of the Emerald Isle may have been superseded by the less romantic reality of everyday life in Dublin; be that as it may, the ideal of an idyllic, intimate and innocent space associated with Ireland seems to be tangible again at the end of the novel when Dieter sets out to follow Helen to start a new life in Ireland, only to be prevented by a lethal car accident on an Autobahn under construction. The sad irony that shatters the young family's life in Ireland or elsewhere notwithstanding, it is clear that staying in Berlin would not have been an option for the couple either. Thus, throughout the novel, there are strong overtones of a city marked by commercialism, capitalism and commodification. From the first mention of the building of the *Dresdner Bank* in front of which the exhausted and disoriented Helen rests in the first pages of the novel to her highly parodic "two-minute shopping spree at Tengelmann's" (SC, p. 165) as lucky one-millionth-customer towards the end of the book, the novel provides a blatant critique of the capitalist desires and

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<sup>8</sup> Hugo Hamilton, The Loneliness of Being German. *The Guardian*, 7 September 2004. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/sep/07/germany.society>, accessed on 30 June 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Jenny Beale, *Women in Ireland: Voices of Change*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> O'Hanrahan, "Berlin in English-Language Fiction", p. 230.

structures dominating the city's daily and nightly rhythms as well as of the "affluent and fashionable areas in West Berlin".<sup>11</sup> In fact, according to the narrator, the sense of claustrophobia referred to above is not so much linked to West Berlin's insular status, but rather it is "caused by the sight of what other people have" (SC, p. 32). The descriptions of Kurfürstendamm as "fashion parade" (SC, p. 33), where bodies and sexuality are routinely commodified and "[m]ore private property can be seen [...] in five minutes than a *Gastarbeiter* would earn in a lifetime" (SC, p. 33), are cases in point. Ultimately, Hamilton's outline of West Berlin's economic prosperity in which "market forces are allowed to prevail" (SC, p. 179) contrasts with the supposedly alternative life styles in Ireland and the GDR. Both are clearly conceived as less commercialised and less materialistic foils to the novel's main setting, even though the former is perceived as a "nostalgic image of [...] frugal comforts and rural peripherality",<sup>12</sup> while the latter is condescendingly dismissed as inferior.

## West Meets East: *The Love Test*

*The Love Test* is more intricately constructed than Hamilton's debut novel, mainly because it employs and contrasts various time levels and subplots. Set in the early 1990s, the novel revolves around a young couple's unfolding marriage crisis and their ensuing extramarital affairs. Thus, while Claudia starts a short-lived relationship with Irishman Kevin, Mathias briefly falls in love with his East German client Christa Süsskind. Christa, in turn, provides the link to an earlier subplot set in the former GDR, centring on Christa's love relationship with Ralf Krone, whose story, in turn, is a fictionalised account of the biography of Walter Thräne, a Stasi defector.<sup>13</sup> Modelled on Thräne's story, the novel relates Ralf Krone's defection from East Berlin, his capture as well as his subsequent imprisonment in the Stasi prison at Berlin-Hohenschönhausen. Even in this strand of the novel, Ireland is allowed to play a crucial role because, as the narrator notes, it was Krone's wife who "had caused all the trouble with State Security when she nurtured a desperate desire to go abroad. Having seen pictures of rugged coastal countries like Scotland and Ireland, they had found the love in their marriage replaced by this impossible longing for the sea".<sup>14</sup> Mrs Krone's "desperate desire" for the sea is reminiscent of Wolf's "Atlanticsucht" (SC, p. 34) in *Surrogate City*, but at the same time points to a politicised context, suggesting that Ireland, in *The Love*

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<sup>11</sup> O'Hanrahan, "Berlin in English-Language Fiction", p. 234.

<sup>12</sup> Joachim Schwend, *Diaspora and Nostalgia: Germany and Ireland*. In: Claire O'Reilly and Veronica O'Regan eds., *Ireland and the Irish in Germany: Reception and Perception*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014, pp. 125–45 (p. 139).

<sup>13</sup> Walter Thräne was a leading Stasi officer and defector, who, together with his partner Ursula Schöne, tried to flee to Vienna, Austria, in 1962. However, he and his girlfriend were betrayed by their West German allies, kidnapped by Stasi-members and forcefully taken back to the GDR. Subsequently, Thräne served more than ten years in solitary confinement in the Stasi-prison at Hohenschönhausen. See "Der schreibt keine Karte mehr", *Der Spiegel* 5 (1992), pp. 70-79, <http://magazin.spiegel.de/EpubDelivery/spiegel/pdf/13679846>, accessed 1 July 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Hugo Hamilton, *The Love Test*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 28. Subsequent quotations from this text will be followed in parentheses by the abbreviation LT and the relevant page number.

*Test*, is presented as a projection screen for the GDR inhabitants' "impossible longing" to travel and experience the sense of freedom symbolised by wild Atlantic coastlines.

A similar, if somewhat trivialised longing is evoked with regard to Claudia's feelings of entrapment in early 1990s Berlin. Her sense of claustrophobia, however, is caused by her relatively uneventful and unadventurous urban middle-class life as working mother and wife. For Claudia, ideas of adventure and freedom are closely associated with Ireland's wild countryside, where she and her husband Mathias spent their holidays before getting married and settling in Berlin. In this respect, Claudia pines for the romantic image of Ireland as "an idyllic place of rescue on the edge of Europe".<sup>15</sup> This image had been fostered by Heinrich Böll's *Irishes Tagebuch*, which, according to Gisela Holfter, can be considered "almost compulsory reading for any German visiting Ireland" and whose influence on German perceptions of Ireland "could hardly be overestimated".<sup>16</sup> In the absence of the real thing, one of the numerous Irish pubs to be found all over Berlin serves as a temporary "surrogate": "Claudia was struck by Ireland-fever. Berlin soon became a small enclave of Ireland. When Mathias arrived she embraced him and said how she wanted to go to Donegal. It seemed almost like a proposal of love and was spoken in the same tones she might have used in the bedroom" (LT, p. 41). Whereas in Krone's relationship the longing for Ireland comes to replace his wife's love for him, memories of Ireland and the love for her husband seem, in Claudia's case, to be inextricably entwined: "These memories of Ireland suddenly brought back all the original feelings of love for Mathias, as though they were back in Clare or Mayo or Donegal on that first holiday, before they were married" (LT, p. 42). While, for Krone's wife, Ireland remains an unattainable fantasy, for Claudia it is a nostalgic memory. This memory can be temporarily revived in surrogate surroundings like the Irish pub or the allotment garden, which serves as a retreat from the city: "She and Mathias had bought the allotment together before they were married, before Werner was born: some time after their trip to Ireland. It had always remained in their minds as an extract from that holiday, a piece of the west of Ireland to which they could flee every weekend" (LT, p. 8).

As Mathias and Claudia continue to drift further apart in the course of the novel, Claudia finds a more tangible surrogate love object in Kevin, who is another quiet, observant Irishman. Discussing Kevin with her friend Alexandra, who considers him "fanciable all right" (LT, p. 40), Claudia does not hide the fact that she finds his Irishness the most attractive thing about him: "I would apply that ['fanciable'] to Ireland in general," Claudia said. "I love the place" (LT, p. 40). Accordingly, their affair is compared to a "holiday in Ireland" (LT, p. 92) and seems a consistent next step in Claudia's increasing obsession with all things Irish:

She [Claudia] had become quite obsessed with Ireland, frequently going back to the Oscar Wilde pub with Alexandra, taking out Irish movies on video, even getting people at the Irish bar to write

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<sup>15</sup> Hugo Hamilton, Foreword. Gisela Holfter. *Heinrich Böll and Ireland*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, xi–xiv (p. xi).

<sup>16</sup> Gisela Holfter, *Heinrich Böll and Ireland*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, p. 54.

out the words of her favourite ballads. Not only that, she had also become more distant and tended to lie awake at night, dreaming about the Atlantic. (LT, p. 82)

In lieu of the Atlantic itself, Claudia's affair with Kevin helps her to retrieve the lost "mystery" (LT 92), restoring "a huge sexual power and a feeling of danger and adventure which she had forgotten about" (LT 93). Kevin's Irishness seems the key to this, a fact parodically highlighted when Mathias, catching the couple out, notes the Irishman's "white *Celtic* buttocks working furiously in the light of the moon" (LT 131, my italics). In the character of Claudia, then, Hamilton seems to illustrate what, in an article from 2004, he had described as a German identity crisis. As he argues, Germans, thwarted by a destructive history, deny themselves "[t]he emotional attachment to home, to the land, to the place in which you are born," which, according to Hamilton, "is something hereditary that lies deep in the human psyche".<sup>17</sup> Therefore, instead of nurturing a sense of belonging and home in Berlin, Claudia projects these needs onto the green island in the Atlantic and various surrogates closer to hand. As Hamilton claims: "On the cliffs of Moher, the Germans could find a sense of home that had no ideological associations. They could learn to play the tin whistle and even sing songs about freedom".<sup>18</sup> Thus, during Claudia's nostalgic meeting with friends in a Berlin Irish Pub sometime in the early 1990s, "[e]verybody's Ireland experience had to be retold in ecstatic tones", while "[a] guitarist and a woman singer began to perform a haunting emigration song in the corner" (LT, p. 42). Of course, the notion of Irishness presented here is highly trivialised, deliberately omitting or romanticising Ireland's historical hardships as well as political, social and economic realities. It is an "Irishness for every taste and purpose", generated by popular culture.<sup>19</sup> As Hamilton notes in an interview:

the whole business of being Irish: it doesn't need to belong to the Irish anymore. Almost everybody in the world could say they are a little bit Irish. On Saint Patrick's Day, everybody in America becomes Irish; everybody can go to an Irish pub and pretend that they are Irish. We have globalized ourselves.<sup>20</sup>

Hamilton's use of the ambivalent term "business" may well be intentional. In fact, from the early 1990s onwards, the concept of Irishness has been turned into a global commodity, as exemplified by the immense popularity of Irish Pubs, Irish music and Irish dance. Diane Negra draws attention to the irony that, while "fantasies of Ireland posit a culture unsullied by consumerism and modernity, Irishness is nevertheless a buy-in category and it comes in a staggering variety of consumable forms available across a broad spectrum of outlets".<sup>21</sup> In this context it is noteworthy that Claudia, after eventually separating from Kevin and temporarily losing her husband to Christa, resorts to some kind of consumer rampage" (LT, p. 173), compulsively shopping for random consumer goods until her apartment is "turned

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<sup>17</sup> Hamilton, *The Loneliness of Being German*.

<sup>18</sup> Hamilton, *The Loneliness of Being German*.

<sup>19</sup> Diane Negra, *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*. In: Diane Negra (ed.), *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 1–19 (p. 10).

<sup>20</sup> Aziliz Gouez. Interview with Hugo Hamilton. *Rencontre Européenne*, 11 October 2008, pp. 1–5 (p. 3).

<sup>21</sup> Negra, *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, pp. 3–4.

into a warehouse” (LT, p. 173), presumably in the irrational hope that her actions will somehow redeem her and restore her old life. Consumerism, here, seems to be employed as an antidote to the “Ireland-fever” (LT, p. 41) that got out of control.

Interestingly, the commodification of Irishness is mirrored by a similar commodification of the GDR as suggested when Christa Süsskind resists having “her whole life story published” (LT, p. 23) or when Christa and Mathias visit a bar displaying first signs of *Ostalgie*, the nostalgia for vanished consumer goods and everyday items from the GDR: “The new bar was like an exhibition of GDR artefacts: bits of old shop signs, a defunct Soviet washing machine, colanders, a headless tailor’s dummy and the disembodied parts of a Trabi, all deconstructing the recent past like a post-modernist gallery” (LT, p. 137). The tendency to turn identity into a commercial spectacle is not limited to Berlin bars, however, but culminates in the description of a *U2* concert from the Irish cult band’s 1991 *Achtung Baby* tour in which the East German cars served as giant stage decorations. Attending the concert, Mathias ponders the problematic implications of making a spectacle out of one of the major GDR (status) symbols:

The three Trabis were hoisted up over the stage on wires and Mathias suddenly began to think back to East Germany under communism. How would they have felt if they had imagined their sawdust and fibreglass vehicle becoming a piece of living rock culture? The Trabi, their museum-piece of industrial failure and noxious fumes, sucked forward into a new tyranny of fun and entertainment? (LT, pp. 96–97)

However, the Irish band’s use of East German iconography and their general inspiration drawn from post-unification Berlin indicates not only the commodification of the GDR past in popular culture but also suggests the imaginative possibilities attached to the unified German capital that facilitated the band’s replacement of Irish stereotypes. As Fergal Lenehan points out: “If the pastoral green spaces of the Irish landscape may sometimes be seen as non-modern spaces of escape that have sporadically populated German cinema, then post-unification Berlin became a chaotic, grey and highly modern urban space of escape for *U2* in late 1990”.<sup>22</sup> The fact that Hamilton includes references to an Irish band’s artistic and commercial uses of GDR history and post-unification present in a novel in which Ireland serves as the protagonists’ main escapist fantasy provides an ironic and critical note, as both constructions are ultimately presented as flawed and reductive.

The West Berlin couple Claudia and Mathias confront GDR history in the shape of Christa Süsskind. Mathias’s attraction to the East German woman ten years his senior, who asks him for help in finding the child the *Stasi* took away from her right after birth, is in some ways the equivalent of Claudia’s attraction to Kevin, the Irishman. Arguably, rather than being perceived as individuals with their own desires, sorrows and needs, both Christa and Kevin are used as surrogates for what is missing in the couple’s relationship and life. While exploring Christa’s and Ralf Krone’s story is beyond the scope of this chapter, it

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<sup>22</sup> Fergal Lenehan, *Irish-German Interconnections in Popular Culture: Rock and Popular Music* and Michael Fassbender’s *German-Irish Celebrity*. In: Claire O’Reilly and Veronica Regan (eds.), *Ireland and the Irish in Germany: Reception and Perception*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014, pp. 181–200 (p. 184).

may suffice to mention that the poignant and detailed descriptions of their persecution and suffering at the hands of the *Stasi* contrast sharply with the West German couple's largely self-inflicted marital crisis. In this regard, Claudia's decision to use the summer house in their garden allotment to consummate her affair with Kevin is significant. Early on in the novel, Claudia herself had pondered the fact that the intimate garden, intended as a "family sanctuary", increasingly tended to feel like a "family cage" (LT, p. 8); this prison metaphor is elaborated when Mathias spies on Claudia and Kevin much later in the novel: "Opening the door of the house, he realized how suffocating the familiarity of this place was. He stepped outside and made it to the end of the path, pulled the gate silently behind him and walked away from his marriage like a thief" (LT, p. 132). Significantly, Mathias's ridiculous entrapment in his son Werner's room while spying on his wife's lovemaking with the Irishman is juxtaposed with the *Stasi* spying on Ralf and Christa's intimate life as described in the following scene: "In a small office surrounded by recording equipment, wire leads and maps of Leipzig, four Stasi men listened to Christa Süsskind and Ralf Krone consummate their affair" (LT, p. 25). O'Hanrahan rightly notes that the West German "couple's dysfunctional and claustrophobic relationship" can be viewed as a "domesticated western version of the surveillance more systematically practised in Hohenschönhausen".<sup>23</sup> However, there is "a crucial difference between the reality of prison and its semantic application: only the West Berliners enjoy the luxury of prison as metaphor".<sup>24</sup>

Mathias and Christa's relationship is presented as asymmetrical from the outset. Initially Christa hopes to begin a new life with Mathias: "It felt as though the whole story with Ralf was starting all over again, more peacefully, in a new Germany" (LT, p. 149). However, several scenes suggest that Mathias's attraction to Christa is mainly due to the sense of power he feels over her, as explicitly stated in the following description: "He trapped her underneath himself, pinning down her arms, realizing for the first time why he had become so obsessed with her; she had the qualities of a captive. He could love her in a way that he could never love Claudia" (LT, p. 150). O'Hanrahan rightly draws attention to the almost allegorical overtones of Hamilton's depiction of the novel's character constellations:

After unification, Hamilton shows in *The Love Test* how new forms of East-West inequality are mapped onto older ones of gender. Mathias's short-lived affair with Christa Süsskind, which ends when he returns to his wife, is emblematic of the initial, short-lived, West German infatuation with the East (and vice versa) which accompanied the initial euphoria of reunification.<sup>25</sup>

In *The Love Test*, then, the surrogate relationships between Mathias and Christa on the one hand and Claudia and Kevin on the other remain temporary and unfulfilled. However, Mathias consents to fathering Christa's child, thus helping her to redress suffered injustice and to start a new, self-determined life. Christa's resilience contradicts Mathias's view of her as helpless and passive victim and her refusal to accept the bribe offered to her by Kromholz, the supposed friend and traitor, who "offered her money, lots of money, as though unable to understand the concept of remorse, or justice; only commerce" (LT, p.

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<sup>23</sup> O'Hanrahan, "Berlin in English-Language Fiction", p. 253.

<sup>24</sup> O'Hanrahan, "Berlin in English-Language Fiction", p. 253.

<sup>25</sup> O'Hanrahan, "Berlin in English-Language Fiction", p. 235.

183), provides a moral counterpoint to both corruption and mindless consumerism. In turn, the ending of the novel suggests a possible new beginning for Mathias and Claudia, with the family reunited in the summer house after a cleansing summer rain.

### **“A Wounded Place at the Heart of Europe”: *Disguise***

Just like the two novels discussed above, Hamilton’s *Disguise*, published in 2008, is also concerned with surrogacy. The novel tells the story of Gregor Liedman, who believes that, in the chaos of World War II, he was unofficially and secretly adopted by his mother to replace her own dead child. Becoming increasingly obsessed with his supposed Jewish identity as well as increasingly estranged from his family, he embarks upon a restless existence as musician, leaving his wife Mara and son Daniel for long stretches of time. As the narrator sums up: “Gregor is now in his early sixties. He has spent years as a musician living in Toronto and also in Ireland, travelling on a strange, empty sort of journey around the world before he eventually came back to live in this calm suburb of Berlin”.<sup>26</sup> O’Hanrahan rightly notes that, in many ways, “Gregor’s wanderings and separation from his own family can be read as a representation of the rootlessness of divided Germany in the post-war period”.<sup>27</sup> These wanderings come to a peaceful and potentially healing rest in the scenes set in Mara’s orchard, where Gregor spends a day of apple-picking and recollecting the past with family and friends. The pastoral setting of the orchard, situated in Jüterbog in Brandenburg just outside Berlin and thus reuniting West Berlin with the rural hinterland from which it had formerly been severed, seems to replace the longing for Ireland that is central to all three novels in different ways, suggesting that German unity and a sense of home and belonging are now possible. As O’Hanrahan puts it: “It requires a further move out of the city and a cathartic rite of passage through Berlin’s wartime and post-war memory before the marginal location in Brandenburg emerges in *Disguise* as the focal point for an image of Berlin as a new type of community”.<sup>28</sup> Berlin is presented as a “wounded place at the heart of Europe, eager to heal and laugh” (D, p. 96) and the orchard is turned into a scene of true communal togetherness and belonging, rendering obsolete – at least momentarily – any yearning for a surrogate.

Even though Ireland plays a less prominent role in this novel, there are several significant intercultural encounters. Shortly after Gregor and Mara’s wedding, the couple comes across an Irish construction worker in a Paris railway station whose hauntingly sad song and warning not to fall apart has a strong impact on them. Despite its sentimental overtones, this encounter transcends the stereotypical, romanticised image of Ireland from

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<sup>26</sup> Hugo Hamilton, *Disguise*. London: Fourth Estate, 2008, p. 19. Subsequent quotations from this text will be followed in parentheses by the abbreviation D and the relevant page number.

<sup>27</sup> Paul O’Hanrahan, Review of *Disguise* by Hugo Hamilton. *Estudios Irlandeses* 5 (Jan 2010), p. 192. <http://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/reviews/disguise>, accessed 30 June 2016.

<sup>28</sup> O’Hanrahan, “Berlin in English-Language Fiction”, p. 261.

the two earlier novels as it provides the travelling Irishman with a biography and internal life of his own, beyond the protagonists' projection:

An Irishman on his way around Europe warning young couples in train stations to remain faithful to each other. They dismissed the romance of it. But the steely, calloused grip of his handshake remained imprinted on them. Every nail, every splinter, every frozen piece of scaffolding, an entire cement-bitten biography etched into the palm of his hand. (D, p. 67)

Nevertheless, the quest for Gregor's identity is also partly filtered through a fantasy of Ireland, most obviously so when Gregor meets and joins an Irish musician: "He found a wildness inside himself, a longing to start all over again without looking back. That spontaneous energy round John Joe gave momentum to his life" (D, p. 153). However, when Gregor, years later, seeks out his former partner and friend in Ireland to see "if he could start a life there" (D, p. 218), John Joe's largely indifferent reception of Gregor contradicts the positive stereotype of Irish hospitality.<sup>29</sup> During the indefinite time that Gregor spends in Ireland he leads a mainly anonymous life and eventually returns to Berlin after watching images of the fall of the Berlin Wall on TV. His healing process is facilitated by the almost simultaneous reunion with his dying mother, with clear allegorical overtones: "A strange reunion, sitting around the bed, watching her last moments, holding hands, all four of them in a circle [...]" (D, p. 243). Towards the end of the novel Gregor realises that his identity is constructed out of the relationships with family and friends and that the truth about his origin has ceased to matter.

As O'Hanrahan notes, several scenes in *Disguise* set in the GDR during the Cold War era provide "a corrective to complacent western views of the inferiority of East Berlin in *Surrogate City*".<sup>30</sup> The West Berlin perspective of the Wall, for instance, is complemented by anecdotes and personal stories about people's everyday experiences, for instance a mother who passes the Wall in the *S-Bahn* on her way to work every day and is faced with the impossibility of explaining its existence and purpose to her child (D, pp. 166–67). Significantly, the adult child, Thorsten, Mara's brother-in-law, passes on this story to his West German wife Katia, who tells it to her step-sister Mara, who, in turn, passes it on to Gregor. This highlights the important function of storytelling in forging a shared identity, history and future. Similarly, in contrast to the haphazard encounters and short-lived relationships depicted in *The Love Test*, the gradual growing together of East and West is again viewed through a marital trope, suggesting creation and growth:

When Thorsten first met Katia in Berlin amid the celebrations, they knew instantly without having to say very much that he was from the East and she was from the West. It was part of the attraction that when they spoke to each other in German, they still had to translate some of the expressions. There were different words for so many things, different concepts, different superlatives. As they fell in love and got married, they created a new family language of their own. (D, p. 247)

Their marriage presents the unification of East and West Germany through a personal lens, a metaphor that is more fully elaborated at the end of the novel when, after a long day of

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<sup>29</sup> See O'Hanrahan, Review of *Disguise*, p. 192.

<sup>30</sup> O'Hanrahan, Review of *Disguise*, p. 192.

apple-picking, Gregor's extended family, spanning several generations, unites for an impromptu concert, offering "an image of unity and social cohesion in a spontaneous celebration that is at once unconventional and traditional".<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

In his three novels centring on Berlin and the history of German division and unification, Hamilton interrogates questions of German identity by intricately intertwining West German, East German and Irish perspectives. The novels tell the story of Germany's division and gradual unification by viewing national developments through the lens of personal relationships and character constellations. At the heart of the novels is the perceived German inability to forge a sense of home and belonging in view of a national history freighted with guilt, loss and division as well as the surrogates compensating for this unfulfilled desire. One of these surrogates, the romantic fantasy of Ireland, is revealed not only as simplified and escapist but as implicated in the commodification of cultural identity, also visible with regard to GDR history and identity. While on occasion the character depictions in the novels, particularly in *The Love Test*, may appear somewhat forged and schematic, it helps to view them as allegorical representations of a divided nation's journey towards unification. As Hamilton claims in "The Loneliness of Being German", "the intensity of German longing for Ireland also suggests that they still possess the same homing instinct as anyone else".<sup>32</sup> *Surrogate City* and *The Love Test* depict this deeply ingrained longing for Ireland and the Atlantic as symptomatic of this instinctive need, while they simultaneously explore its damaging potential, for instance in Claudia's exploitative treatment of Kevin. Finally, in *Disguise*, Gregor, in many ways emblematic of the German quest for identity and belonging, is allowed to rediscover rural Brandenburg as a place in which a new sense of home can be experienced and a new feeling of communal togetherness across the East/West divide can be forged. Together the three novels thus present a narrative of the "wounded place at the heart of Europe" (D, p. 96) from its post-WWII past to its post-unification present, rendered original by its integral references to Irish-German intercultural relations and its often ironic debunking of cultural stereotypes and their appropriation for personal gratification.

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<sup>31</sup> O'Hanrahan, Review of *Disguise*, p. 273.

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton, *The Loneliness of Being German*.