

War, Conversation, and Context in Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude*

THIERRY LABICA

There are three conversational levels I wish to explore here: (i) there are the conversations among the main protagonists of *The Slaves of Solitude*¹ and, as conversations in fiction, I also want to look at their problematic relation to context; (ii) I want to reread these fictional conversations as dramatisations of a philosophical dispute in which the main characters are the mouthpieces of antagonistic assumptions and positions about language; (iii) I also want to read this novel of implicit philosophical dialogue in the shape of fictional conversations as a metaphor of my own desired and yet impossible conversation with my author. This third objective is relevant for two main reasons. Firstly, because the development of literary pragmatics during the 1990s saw the renewal of questionable analytical categories now requiring a new round of critical confrontations. Secondly, because this meta-communicational approach is the occasion of bringing together both textual *and* paratextual issues involving the whole book rather than the dematerialised "text."

Historicizing the conditions of literary communication

Let me start then with the problem of the historical situatedness of my own conversation with Patrick Hamilton (1904-1962), British playwright and novelist, a Marxist and alcoholic, who is still largely neglected today. I will restrict the discussion to a few suggestions. There are several distinct historical phenomena going by the name of Patrick Hamilton. Indications of this can be detected in the fact that Hamilton

went through a whole process of revival ten years ago: two biographies came out shortly after each other² and several of long out-of-print novels became available again. What is particularly interesting here is the way in which the publishers redesigned Hamilton's work and general profile. To give a couple of examples: a group of stories involving the same character were turned into a trilogy for which a title had to be invented;³ Hamilton's second novel⁴ was now declared the author's "first novel" while the actual first published novel—if chronology is of any significance at all—remained out of print.⁵ In that case the publishers did not hesitate to represent an author's work according to their own editorial choices.

On a distinct level, the revival mainly consisted in elaborating a new literary profile: in the eighties, before the revival, Hamilton had lost all literary credit and cultural authority and clearly was not a "name" in modern British literature. At the same time, he still enjoyed a residual participation in the cultural process: one of his novels (*Mr. Stimpson and Mr. Gorse*) was the basis of a very successful TV series (*The Charmer*);⁶ his plays (*Rope* and *Gaslight*, in particular) were still occasionally performed and abridged versions of other novels were read on the radio. Still, in most cases, Hamilton as a name remained totally obscure: the example of the TV series is particularly telling as the main actor's name (Nigel Havers) always rang a bell while the author's was still completely unfamiliar. Now the revival clearly was an attempt at shifting those mediations of contemporary popular and oral culture (TV, Radio) and to turn Hamilton into a visible and relevant literary fiction writer. What the French historian Roger Chartier calls "mise en livre" (as distinct from "mise en texte") played a central role in this displacement as the book still represents the only empirical mode of affiliation to a *proper* literary culture and tradition. As for the biographies, regardless of their virtues or flaws, their function was to re-establish the obviousness of "the man behind the texts," the intentional source which one is now expected to explore "before" and "beyond" the literary production itself to be able to grasp the "true meaning" of this production. Along with this construction of a new

credibility for the nineties, the new biographies as well as the prefaces of the re-editions of the novels were out to remove the Marxist branches from the liberal tree and a post-Communist Hamilton was now to remain a non-political novelist of the thirties and forties tailored for the cultural consumption of the then "New World Order" (now, "globalisation"). Hamilton then found his place in the national literary tradition and became a twentieth-century classic (at least according to Penguin).

The reason I wish to insist on these paratextual aspects is that they clearly suggest how the shifting status of an author, a new configuration of his work, the new emphasis (in the present case) on reading and inferring at the expense of leisurely watching or listening, involve a massive, if silent, displacement in the whole set of relations and assumptions between authors, texts, and consumers-readers. In other words, one is compelled to consider the historical and material conditions of literary communication and therefore of the terms of our alleged "conversations" with authors.

If I now move on from this general suggestion regarding the historical situation of the reading of my author—and of the renewed conditions under which he is allowed to make sense—and turn to *The Slaves of Solitude*, I find myself confronted with another historio-graphical pre-construction; implicitly or explicitly, *The Slaves of Solitude* is generally seen (when seen at all) as a good documentary novel about war and evacuation. Having been written in the immediate post-war period, the categorisation of the novel is governed by the assumption that the immediate tragic context necessarily encroaches upon the space of fiction which is then implicitly expected to refrain from the frivolities of imagination. In other words, novels written in times of war are bound to be "war novels" saturated by the tragic reality of the context. Properly discussing such questionable assumptions would probably mean that one—first and foremost—remains alert to the sheer exuberance of political fictions as part of the very reality and actuality of war contexts themselves. The representation of the enemy or the construction of the legitimacy of warfare as means to justify

mass destruction, environmental havoc and so forth, certainly involves an exacerbation of founding narratives, and, in most cases the most fictitious fictions. And from this point of view, the status of the opposition fiction/reality certainly calls for greater problematizing and historicizing. I will argue here that (i) *The Slaves of Solitude* rehearses a non-strictly contextual tradition of literary experience of the city (and more particularly of London); and (ii) that indeed *The Slaves* is a war novel, but a war novel in which war-as-context is the metaphor of a non-contextual issue, that of conversation. In this respect, *The Slaves* also rehearses another literary tradition, that of conversation novels involving single women desperate for marriage. (Which is probably why, incidentally, Prof. Jean-Jacques Lecercle sees in Hamilton a Marxist and alcoholic Jane Austen.)

It is in this perspective that I wish to read *The Slaves of Solitude* as a war novel and that I will observe the displacement of contextual elements.

Displacing the context

What is this novel about? Like Hamilton's other novels, *The Slaves* isn't about much at all: Miss Roach, a single woman in her thirties, returns every night from her work (for a publishing company) to her boarding house in Thames Lockdon, the last stop of a London tube line. The Rosamund Tea Rooms (which is the name of the boarding house) is sheltering at a price a group of evacuees like herself for the duration of the war. All are single. None of them seems to have a past and "the conditions [being] those of intense war, intense winter, and intensest black-out,"⁷ no foreseeable future can be discerned. Apart from Miss Roach, none of them has a job. The lodgers are consequently walled inside a permanent present where eating at regular hours, sleeping and making conversation are virtually the sole activities that are left to enjoy. But as the name of this suburban town suggests (Thames Lockdon), life away from London in the Rosamund Tea Rooms might turn out to be a repetition of life in London with a ven-

geance as the sense of imprisonment adds to the terrors of the blitz. But what blitz, since the lodgers are supposed to be at least protected from that threat?

A first element clearly indicates that the stress and strain endured by blitzed Londoners does not spare all lodgers. At least, that certainly is the case with Miss Roach before her arrival in Thames Lockdon which meant sleeping in a proper upstairs bedroom and not in an Anderson shelter and who finds herself increasingly the subject of anguished insomnia. Several long sections of the novel actually describe moments of lonely sleeplessness, during which Miss Roach obsessively tries to work out the other lodgers' intentions when they said what they said (at least nineteen references to the problem of sleep and insomnia of more than eleven pages). Now, interestingly, all the documents and accounts collected by Mass Observation about life in London at war insist on this problem of sleep, as what Londoners themselves described as their first and foremost concern and conversational topic.⁸ Meanwhile actual propaganda posters as well as advertising campaigns for Bournvita or Horlicks hot drinks extolled the virtues of good sleep. So for sleepless Miss Roach, it would seem the blitz has not really stopped in spite of her evacuation as the cause of her troubles persists in a different form.

Another distinct feature of the effects of the blitz on bombed out Londoners has been imported to this space of fiction called Thames Lockdon and that is verbal behaviour, particularly as dramatised by the great comic and lugubrious creation called Mr. Thwaites. Mr. Thwaites, one of the lodgers whom Miss Roach describes as "the President in Hell," is first remarkable for his ubiquitous partiality to dialects and styles which he freely and unpredictably imitates with no sense of coherence or propriety whatsoever. With Mr. Thwaites, anything goes, from US accents to strings of second-hand Scottish phrases and pseudo-Elizabethan flourishes. Thwaites is also notorious for his paternalistic authoritarianism. This, wedded to his communicational disorder and infantilism, might once again remind one of the effects of the blitz on speech. The following quotes partly drawn from Mass-

Observation reports probably provide us with the most accurate description of *The Slaves'* dialogues:

Without being dogmatic, it seems reasonable to distinguish for London, five phases of major adjustment after direct bomb experience, each varyingly applicable under different conditions.

1) (*First minutes*) [...] Repetitive talking, giving of inappropriate orders, etc. (especially for male family heads, becoming stereotype masculine leaders).

[...]

3) (*succeeding hours*) uncontrollable flood of communication, by word, gesture, laughter, anecdotes, personal experiences [...] Repetitiveness in both vocabulary and subject matter is characteristic—a person will repeat his story over and over again, in almost the same words, often to the same listeners. Excitement at this stage is intense, almost at times manic.

4) (*Throughout about 48 hours after first-stage recovery*) From the babel of communication, individuals tend to emerge with a sense of intense pride, of enhanced personal worth [...].⁹

Richard Titmus [...] has a remark much to the point: "threatened with death, moral aloneness becomes to a man even more intolerable than in peacetime and perhaps more hurtful than physical isolation." The tube and similar shelter systems substituted human voices for the guns and planes.¹⁰

This seems to confirm that contextual characteristics (sleep problems, blitz-related verbal behaviour) are not only reproduced but also shifted by *The Slaves*, which reinserts war within linguistic activity away from the blitz (i.e. away from a no longer saturating context). And this is the path I now want to follow by reading *The Slaves* as the novel of this very displacement and *The Slaves* as a novel in which Patrick Hamilton dramatises what can be seen as a theoretical position on language and linguistic interaction as conflict.

A philosophical confrontation

I think it is perfectly clear to any reader of Hamilton's novel that verbal exchanges are at best tactical moves and at worst straightforward aggressions. One finds a particularly telling example of this in *The Plains of Cement*, another conversational war novel which Hamilton wrote not in war time but in 1934 and in which verbal exchanges

are systematically evoked in terms of military tactics. It might be more useful to risk a descriptive anachronism and frame these salient aspects of *The Slaves* as part of an implicit philosophical struggle between two well-known positions. For the sake of cheap suspense, the first will bear the code name of Miss Roach and the second that of Mr. Thwaites.

Let us begin with Miss Roach then. (i) As I already suggested, Miss Roach spends a considerable amount of time wondering what other lodgers actually meant when they said what they said. And she does so to a point of ever greater insomnia. (ii) She assumes, at least initially, that other lodgers are personally committed to what they say and (iii) that they have no desire to confuse or mislead or lie to or bully other lodgers and (iv) that they desire as much as she does that things go smoothly for everyone.

Now allow me to rephrase this; Miss Roach firmly believes there are such things as intentions of meaning and makes a clear distinction between utterance-meaning and speaker's meaning. Miss Roach consequently devotes her time to pragmatic inference and does so all the more devoutly in that she presupposes other conversationalists fundamentally wish to co-operate when they communicate. In other words, Miss Roach performs the part of the Anglo-Saxon philosopher of language (one particularly thinks of H. P. Grice¹¹) who believes that interaction rests on the Cooperative principle and its later pragmatic sequel, the politeness principle. (Considering the English cultural environment of the novel, one is convinced both could be neatly subsumed under one single Decency principle.)

I now turn to Mr. Thwaites. Thwaites constitutes the negation of every single feature listed above. (i) He backs whatever he says with no intentional commitments whatsoever. He totally ignores the Cooperative principle as the matrix of interaction. (ii) Further, the immateriality of subjective, individual, intentional states is now replaced by bodily, material signifiers; Thwaites proceeds to the annexation of common spaces by means of sheer vocal power; his "booming voice" reminds one of bombs going boom on central London; his utterances

even seem to mingle with food (note the repetition of "heavy"):

And because Mr. Thwaites said no more, the atmosphere in which pins could be heard dropping returned to the room, and no one else dared to say any more. Ruminatively, dully, around the heavy thoughts set in motion by Mr. Thwaites, the heavy steamed pudding was eaten.¹²

In this last case, the reversal is complete as swallowing, *ingesting* matter, replaces *expressing* immaterial intentional states. In a similar fashion, exchanging kisses can equally be read as materialising verbal activity entering the body as the obvious pun on "tongue" suggests. And being eaten is even on the agenda when Miss *Roach* finds out one evening that the main dish is fish.¹³ (iii) Thwaites, as has been pointed out, displays an inordinate taste for the mimicking of historical or regional styles, be it Scottish, North American, or Elizabethan. (iv) His conversational activities are part of a collective strategy in which allies are mobilised:

It was the revelation, made at the last moment, which made her physically sick.

"Dame Roach—the English Miss. Miss Prim. The Prude. The jealous Miss Roach."

The planes were roaring over again. [...] How they roared and filled the sky for miles around. [...]

The identical words. [...] There was no question of Mr. Thwaites having thought them up himself. These words were given to him by Vicky—those ideas were put into his head by her.¹⁴

Thwaites, Vicky (a German refugee), and Lieutenant Pike, a US officer, generally share the same absence from themselves. The case of Mr. Thwaites does not require further illustration at this stage. Vicky gives herself away as unreal, as pure semblance; her over-idiomatic English and general mannerism mark her out as "out of date," "second-hand," "a fish out of water."¹⁵ She too has no history and she too defeats both contextual determination and meaning inference; something which an obscuring sense of hesitation and uncertainty about her clearly suggests (note that each element of her description is introduced by "it might have been"). Vicky only exists as the resulting

subject-effect of a collage of set phrases and clichéd attitudes borrowed from already old films and magazines which are to her what the "architectural farrago" and the "demented fake and ye-olde" of the new London suburbs¹⁶ are to Mr. Thwaites. And similarly, her set phrases are to Miss Roach as many substitutes for "guns and planes." Meanwhile, Lieutenant Pike is systematically described as "inconsequent," which can be taken here in a perfectly serious pragmatic sense as "inconsequent" and suggests that he has no concern for the perlocutionary effects of his utterances. In other words, Pike does not back his utterances with any personal intentional commitments whatsoever. These three (character-like) crystallizations of random linguistic fluctuations can be reread as rehearsing a wider world of impersonal and material mediations of language, whether they be anonymous voices resounding through loudspeakers, posters, notes, or even private noises travelling up and down the water pipes of the Rosamund Tea Rooms.

Hamilton's emphasis, however, on the wider commodification of regional as well as past national architectural styles and their incoherent jumbling together constitutes a remarkable indication of the actual historical forces driving this Thwaitesian dementia; rather than cooperative individuals entering into interpersonal and local rapports, it is the global historical rapport which both constitutes and enters into individuals, takes possession of them, turning them into so many of its demented mouthpieces. I will sum up the longer development required here by saying that it is a whole age of capitalist urban modernity that speaks whenever Thwaites opens his mouth. And in this respect, *The Slaves of Solitude* as a piece of fiction is itself tapping into the fictions which reality itself already produces under capitalism (a reading that would involve a direct reference to Marx's theory of commodity fetishism as well as an account of the political history of suburban development in the interwar period). Actual speech being fundamentally made of breath, the inversion speaking/being spoken comes somewhat naturally: I breathe or speak/I am breathed or spoken. The urban process "breathes" Miss Roach, the commuter:

London, the crouching monster, like every other monster has to breathe, and breathe it does in its own obscure, malignant way. Its vital oxygen is composed of suburban working men or women of all kinds, who every morning are sucked up through an infinitely complicated respiratory apparatus of trains and termini into the mighty congested lungs, held there for a number of hours, and then, in the evening, exhaled violently through the same channels.

Men and women imagine they are going into London and coming out again more or less of their own free will, but the crouching monster sees all and knows better.¹⁷

while it ventriloquates, or speaks, Mr. Thwaites.

So, facing Miss Roach, the representative of an Anglo-Saxon tradition of intentionality and philosophy of language, we have another, clearly continental and largely Marxian position, emphasising materiality, mediacy, conflict, collective arrangements, and pre-individual processes. But this evocation of the instance that breathes and speaks subjects clearly indicates that both positions are rehearsed within a common historical and materialist paradigm. Which means that to be able to survive, Miss Roach eventually has to learn the lesson from her opponents. Her winning that conversational war is symbolised by her ultimate return to blitzed central London where she eventually finds her paradoxical sleep (with the reassurance that no peace is to be found in cooperative reconciliation and that there is no escape from conflict).

I began with a brief suggestion concerning the historical forces both restricting and enabling our interaction with an author whose cultural legitimacy involves serious renegotiations. I then proceeded to look at the picture of conversation, and, therefore, interaction, as drawn by my author. And I discovered that in the lessons Patrick Hamilton dispenses on these issues, my worst fears are confirmed: very much like Miss Roach wishes and expects to enjoy peaceful, reasonable, and direct exchanges with the other lodgers, I wish to communicate with the author. But Miss Roach's conversational misfortunes and philosophical illusions soon turn into an allegory of my own desired conversation with Patrick Hamilton, and ultimately the book-commodity I hold between me and him proves just as loaded a mediation as Mr.

Thwaites' utterances. So, being faithful to the author probably means that I must renounce his simulated presence, and be critically and politically content with reading him against the silent ideology of the cultural process governing his reproductions and recontextualisations.

Université de Paris X
Nanterre

NOTES

¹All quotes from Patrick Hamilton, *The Slaves of Solitude* (London: Cardinal, 1991).

²Nigel Jones, *Through a Glass Darkly: The Life of Patrick Hamilton* (London: Scribners, 1991), and Sean French, *Patrick Hamilton: A Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993). Patrick Hamilton's brother, Bruce Hamilton, had published his own biography, *The Light Went Out; The Life of Patrick Hamilton* (London: Constable, 1972).

³Patrick Hamilton, *West Pier, Mr. Stimpson and Mr. Gorse*, and, *Unknown Assailant*, became *The Gorse Trilogy: West Pier, Mr. Stimpson and Mr. Gorse and Unknown Assailant* (London: Penguin, 1990).

⁴Patrick Hamilton, *Craven House* (1926; London: Cardinal, 1991).

⁵Patrick Hamilton, *Monday Morning* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925).

⁶This was followed by a radio play version in 2001.

⁷Hamilton, *The Slaves of Solitude* 1.

⁸See Tom Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz* (Oxford: OUP, 1979) 100-07, see also Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Speak For Yourself: A Mass Observation Anthology, 1937-1949* (Oxford: OUP, 1985) 76-84, or, Dorothy Sheridan (ed.), *Wartime Women: A Mass-Observation Anthology, The Experiences of Women at War* (London: Mandarin, 1991) 93-95.

⁹Harrison 86.

¹⁰Harrison 109.

¹¹See in particular H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 22-40.

¹²Hamilton, *Slaves* 21-22.

¹³Hamilton, *Slaves* 32.

¹⁴Hamilton, *Slaves* 178.

¹⁵Hamilton, *Slaves* 51-52.

¹⁶Hamilton, *Slaves* 3.

¹⁷Hamilton, *Slaves* 1. One can only note here how this Marxian metaphor of reification both prolongs and refines an older tradition of literary urban monsters without, however, rehearsing its characteristic anti-urban feelings.