

Jane Austen Meets Dickens: A Response to Thierry Labica*

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In Thierry Labica's "War, Conversation, and Context in Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude*" I find myself, through direct interpellation, incited to justify a passing thought (that "Patrick Hamilton was a Marxist alcoholic Jane Austen" [75]) and to turn a post-prandial joke into a critical statement.

That Patrick Hamilton was both a Marxist and an alcoholic is a matter of empirical fact, even if, as Labica demonstrates in the first section of his paper, in the realm of literary criticism, there are no such things as empirical facts, only cultural constructions. The advantage of my construction of Patrick Hamilton is that it maintains an aura of unrespectability, which is our only chance of keeping his texts alive, and of saving them from the ideological bowdlerisation of the media (of which the fate of Jane Austen at the hands of the BBC is a prime example), thus making them available for new readings.

But the most contentious part of my three word characterisation is undoubtedly the name "Jane Austen": a chasm seems to separate the two authors, which forbids including them in a common tradition. We could express this as a systematic contrast, what philosophers call a correlation: woman vs. man; early nineteenth century vs. mid twentieth century; village vs. city; discreet historical context vs. overwhelming historical context. For what can the world of a war novel dealing with World War II have in common with the peaceful world of a Jane Austen novel?

*Reference: Thierry Labica, "War, Conversation, and Context in Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude*," *Connotations* 12.1 (2002/2003): 72-82.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/deblabica01201.htm>>.

But one of the strong points of Labica's essay is that it questions the description of *The Slaves of Solitude* as a war novel: it concentrates on aspects of the novel, such as the conceptions of language that are put to work in it, which are not strictly context-bound. So there may be a link after all between Hamilton and Austen. Let me offer two suggestions. The first is that they have in common an interest in celibacy. And here we do have a literary tradition, the tradition of the spinster or maiden aunt. In a non-trivial way, Miss Roach is a descendant of Miss Bates in *Emma*, who in my view is the origin of a long tradition, which flourished with Mrs Gaskell's *Cranford*, and which enjoyed a revival (with due transformations) after the first World War, when the historical conjuncture produced a generation of spinsters, by the wholesale massacre of the corresponding generation of young men. Versions of the tradition can be found in the novels of F. M. Mayor (*The Third Miss Symons*, *The Rector's Daughter*), Edith Olivier (*The Love Child*) and in Sylvia Townsend Warner's first novel, *Lolly Willowes*.

But this is very much a feminine, and perhaps even feminist tradition: in their very exploitation of the tradition those novelists are much closer to the Jane Austen line of the correlation than to the Patrick Hamilton line. For instance, the natural habitat of the spinster is the village, with its three mile radius of acquaintance. So a masculine pendant to that feminine tradition must be found. And it *is* to be found, of course, in Dickens, in whose novels we have not merely a fine array of bachelors, but, a much rarer species, the male spinster, e.g. Mr Wemmick in *Great Expectations*. The opening of *The Slaves of Solitude*, that unforgettable description of London as a crouching monster, is in the style of Dickens (we remember the name given to the metropolis in *Bleak House*: "the great wen"). And the mention of the train on the same page may remind us of the use made of trains in *Dombey and Son*. If Miss Roach is an Austenian character, to be treated with the customary irony, sometimes gentle and sometimes sharp, Mr Thwaites is a Dickensian character, savaged with the same verve as some of Dickens's great comic creations, especially in that he is, like them, linguistically characterised. For this is the most striking aspect

of Dickens's verve: language, the inimitable idiolect of the character, is a quasi physical feature, or non-discardable item of clothing, allowing instant recognition. I should therefore improve on my description of Patrick Hamilton by offering a description of *The Slaves of Solitude* as "Jane Austen meets Dickens," even as, in Hollywood, Frankenstein inevitably meets Dracula.

There is one adjective in my initial description, however, which is still unaccounted for: the word "Marxist." For I take it that I can ascribe to Patrick Hamilton's "alcoholism" the slightly demented and extraordinarily powerful linguistic verve of the text (and I notice that Labica applies the word "dementia" to Mr Thwaites' behaviour; 80). Patrick Hamilton, like Dickens, knows how to let language speak his character, how to release him (and himself) from the constraints of propriety and common sense—to extraordinary effect. Such a gift is notoriously enhanced by a taste for alcohol. But where is the Marxism in this meeting between an ironic Jane Austen and an alcoholic Dickens?

I think it lies precisely where Labica has found it: in a conception of language—or rather in a conception of ideology as emerging from the clash between two conceptions, or two types, of language (conversational vs. strategic [77-78]; intentional—I speak language—vs. glosso-lalic—language speaks me [80-81]). In Althusserian terms, what Patrick Hamilton accounts for is the ideological process of subjectivation through interpellation, with the never entirely successful but always renewed attempts at counter-interpellation by the interpellated subject. The clash between the two concepts of language, which is also the clash between the two literary traditions of the sharply ironic and the bibulously vehement, illustrates the social process of subject creation through the Althusserian chain of interpellation: institution → ritual → practice → speech-act → subject. The Rosamund Tea Room, the symbolic embodiment of a State Ideological Apparatus, is the fitting locus for a number of rituals (not least what the other fellow called "the ceremony known as afternoon tea"—you have recognised the opening of *Portrait of a Lady*). Those rituals in turn give rise to prac-

tices, first among which is the linguistic practice of conversation, and to the production of speech-acts. The problem is that, in order to think language in this context, we need not a Chomskyan or a Habermasian, but a Marxist concept of language. "Patrick Hamilton," aka the Marxist alcoholic Jane Austen, is merely a name for that collective conception of language.

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