

Urban Tensions – Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*

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In one of the few studies devoted to Hubert Selby Jr.'s fiction, Josephine Hendin characterizes him as a “surrealist of the streets.”¹ The writer, whose body of work consists of six novels and a collection of short stories, was primarily concerned with oppression and resistance. He was one of the most notorious authors of transgressive fiction of the twentieth century, and a prime example of his powerful writing is his 1964 debut, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Banned in Italy and subjected to an obscenity trial in the United Kingdom, it quickly became an underground classic. Now Selby is mostly forgotten, and his works rarely appear even in the bookstores of his native Brooklyn,² let alone become topics of academic analysis, but his first novel remains a profound presentation of inner-city tensions and divisions within a small community. The six stories, connected by their location and the street gang that appears in almost all of them, depict an environment devoid of justice, equality or

1) Josephine, Hendin. *Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction Since 1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 59.

2) Henry Stewart. "Fifty Years Later, Looking for Last Exit: Chasing Hubert Selby's ghost through the neighborhood he captured in his controversial classic." *BKLYNR* 36, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://bklynr.com/fifty-years-later-looking-for-last-exit/>.

hope. Selby presents the borough as “not a place as much as a nightmare where manhood can be won only through one man's torment of another.”³

Tim Cresswell defines place as “a meaningful location.”⁴ When entering a place, one must be aware of its norms, or how to read it. But his or her intrusion also invites a new reading. When taking the “last exit to Brooklyn,” one must reject love or compassion and focus solely on survival. The characters in the volume do not belong, as they feel superior to their immediate environment, and yet that same feeling constitutes their belonging—all of them are connected by the urge to be somewhere else. In his study of Western institutions, Michel Foucault observes that, “discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*.”⁵ The separation from the rest of the city may be the governing force's way of punishing the characters for their lack of contribution to society. But it mostly serves another purpose: the inhabitants of Brooklyn serve as an example for the rest of New York City, or even America. According to what Foucault calls “*the rule of lateral effects*,”⁶ (his italics), their existence is a warning to the rest of the country--this is what disorder leads to, this is what you have to avoid, you do not want to live like, or near, these people. The unfriendly neighborhood filled with inner tensions is the creation of people relying solely on their lowest instincts. Selby portrays the lives of those almost entirely stripped of power with his characteristic mixture of rage and compassion.

In the first chapter of the novel, the street gang starts a fight with a group of soldiers on leave. Once the police arrive, in a gesture of local solidarity, all the bystanders claim that the soldiers instigated the fight, and the gang happily returns to the bar for drinks. It is a proper introduction to Selby's Brooklyn—a world without rules, where strangers

3) Hendin, 59.

4) Tim, Cresswell. *Place, a Short Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 7.

5) Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995 (Trans. 1977), 141.

6) Foucault, 95.

(and different readings) are not welcome. Here one can either adapt or die; there is no chance of escape. The three most memorable characters are Tralala, Georgette and Harry. The first is a beautiful girl who uses her good looks to seduce sailors and steal their money. Georgette is a transvestite madly in love with Vinnie, a member of the street gang. Harry is a repressed homosexual, and is also “the worst lathe operator of the more than 1,000 men working in the factory.”⁷ Whereas Tralala is only concerned with the material world, Georgette and Harry are in desperate need of emotional fulfillment. Tralala is a product of her environment, so she understands only physical urges; Georgette and Harry are looking for something more, a purpose in life. All three of them try to escape reality: Tralala and Harry through excessive drinking, Georgette through drug consumption. But that is not all, as they create different personalities to cope with their situations. Tralala is unrealistically confident in her beauty, and in her own mind becomes the woman who can have any man she pleases. Not interested in sex, using it as a means to an end, she rejects the one man willing to commit to her. Georgette, a “hip queer,”⁸ becomes almost theatrical in her behavior, treating the world as her stage. Delicate and frail, she falls for Vinnie, an especially cruel heterosexual hoodlum; according to one critic, “Georgette’s determination to perceive Vinnie as an ideal lover is essential to her attempted construction of an alternate, and bearable, reality.”⁹ Harry, the vice president of the union, presents himself as a “big shot,” but as soon as his funds melt, so does his circle of friends. People are bored by his stories; they only find him useful when he can buy them drinks.

In later interviews, Selby claimed that Beethoven was his only

7) Hubert Selby. *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2007, 116

8) Selby, 15.

9) Barry Giles. *Understanding Hubert Selby Jr.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998, 21.

“conscious influence” when writing *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.¹⁰ Throughout the book, he gradually builds up the tension, gradually leading his heroes to their tragic endings. A prime example of Selby’s approach is the last chapter of the novel, in which the tenants of one block “connect” to create a symphony for the city. Selby intentionally omits apostrophes and quotation marks, and inserts as few commas as possible to give the story an impression of naturalness. In especially angry passages, Selby uses only capital letters, while the most powerful fragment of the book is a five-page sentence. The language is also very natural, stripped down to the basics, which contributes to the aura of authenticity that the book possesses. Like their actions, the characters’ vocabularies are also very simple and brutal.

Last Exit to Brooklyn is a precious artifact of the America of the Sixties, with the anger and frustration running through the streets of big cities visible on every page of Selby's novel. Apart from that, the book is a vivid presentation of the division of power and the class struggle taking place within the inner city. Over fifty years since its publication, it is still an accurate portrait of the lives of the urban oppressed. Selby uses individuals to present a whole community of outcasts and social rejects, doing their best to stay alive. In order to do so, they forfeit their humanity, using whatever it takes to survive.

10) Paul Vangelisti, „Two Lost Interviews with Hubert Selby, Jr.” *Music & Literature*, No. 1., accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.musicandliterature.org/excerpts/2013/10/19/lost-interviews-with-hubert-selby-jr>