

Hubert Selby:
The Counterpoint to the Demon is Love*

I remember, when I was eight or ten years old, making a decision that I was going to find a way to stop the suffering in the world.... I guess I had, by that time, seen enough suffering. And I just wanted people to stop hurting each other. – Hubert Selby.*

It would be difficult to think of an American writer who suffered a greater amount of physical and mental pain and anguish than Hubert Selby Jr., or one who depicts rage and brutality on such a raw, maniacal, sociopathic level.

Oddly enough, it never occurred to me to ask Selby about the role of violence in his work. Reading him now, I realize it's not just the characters in his stories who are assaulted; the reader is a victim of the greatest and most inhuman assault of all. No matter how monstrous or horrific his depictions of abject brutality are, Selby always ups the ante and makes them worse, pushing the limits until, by the end of the tale, he manages to rape our imagination once again, to puncture yet another hole in our innocence.

Selby was not only a victim of the violence done to him by terrific illnesses and endless surgeries. He grew up in a neighborhood where it was taken for granted that you could have your head handed to you for the slightest infraction, but only after it was stomped on, bloodied to a pulp, burnt with cigarettes, kicked like a soccer ball, and sliced like an onion. It didn't occur to me to dwell on this aspect of his work because I grew up not far from Selby's Bay Ridge, less than thirty years after Selby, and not much had

changed there during those decades. Indeed, when I raised this with him, he said: “Yeah, Bay Ridge, I think, is the same for the last eighty years. With a few physical exceptions.” With its tree-lined sidewalks and miniature backyards where you could plant a garden and pretend you were in the midst of a natural world, with its gemütlich block parties and ecstatic games of stoop ball and stick ball and box ball, with its sunny summer days – the fire hydrants open full blast and the radios from parked convertibles blaring pop music – you could imagine for a moment that you were in some strange man-made heaven. But then, a carload of kids comes screeching down the block at sixty-miles an hour, swerves to a halt, and baseball bats in hand they go chasing someone up an alley because he made the mistake of trying to steal a bicycle.

Violence, vengeance, terror and torture for the fun of it: this was all a “normal” part of our everyday world. What made Selby different was that, while he was a part of that world, he was simultaneously endowed with a large measure of empathy, compassion, and artistry with which to portray it. Of the many incredible things in his life, the fact that he was blessed with this talent is perhaps the most miraculous thing of all. There was no one to mentor or guide him, or to pass along such gifts, or even to suggest such a calling.

That he managed to develop, hone, and refine his talent and plug away at it day after day – mocking the palpable presence of death even after the doctors said he would not live much longer – is the one thing that doesn’t surprise me. Selby was a graduate from the Brooklyn School of Hard Knocks, which taught us that, if you put your will to it, anything was possible. Once you survived that time and place, the rest was a piece of cake. This was the mentality and approach Selby fostered, and it paid off. In his own humble words:

See, you must remember that I have no natural talents or abilities in any area of life. I’m not a natural writer or a natural reader. I’m not an exceptional mechanic; I’m not an exceptional athlete; I’m not a draftsman at all; I can’t draw or ... Absolutely no natural talent. But I had an obsession to do something with my life before I died. And I just sat in front of that typewriter every day, for six years, until I learned how to write. Now, I can’t say that the ability *wasn’t* there, obviously. I guess it was there, and I just had to fight like hell to activate it, to animate it ... It was a lot, a lot of work.*

In each of his books, there’s an ever-increasing arc of suffering, inhumanity, and pointless pain. Yet there’s something else that stands in shocking contrast to all this: the appearance of characters who, in the midst of a loveless, godless, twisted universe, nurture an alternative vision. Even while surrounded by such hopelessness and anguish, they yearn for something gentler. Something that would allow a reprieve, or a bit of love, or even a chance at greatness.

No matter how awful her treatment is at the hands of Vinnie and his pals, Georgette – the “hip queer” of *Last Exit* – still imagines that Vinnie will eventually offer his affection and make everything OK. Even the most sociopathic figures in Selby’s demented cosmos hold out for experiences that will make them feel, if not more human, then at least more alive. Harry, the murderer in *The Demon*, is lured by antisocial acts because at least they allow him to feel *something* and to escape the numbing, deadening milieu of a soulless, corporate lifestyle. The nameless prisoner of *The Room* is driven to fantasies of torture because they serve as a compensation for the endless humiliations and mental distress he has survived. No matter how “bad” these characters are, this sliver of humanity, this urge of self-transformation grips us and draws us to their plight.

Selby once said: “There is no light in my stories, so the reader is forced to turn to his own inner light” to make it through this journey. I now realize this is only partially true. The great beacon in his demonic oeuvre is that of the artfully crafted line and the immense vision of wholeness and transcendence that lurks behind it. Selby’s empathy is there, omnipresent, even while recording the

darkest hues of black. The utmost depravity is portrayed with the noblest verse.

I've always considered Hubert Selby to be not just a novelist but a poet as well. Only the most refined lyrical genius could have crafted sentences that, had they been presented with traditional line breaks, would read as the best that poetry can offer. The transcendental vision of the bard is right there, in the forefront of his "prose," and it's the contrast of this highest thing that humanity can accomplish – creation – with the lowest that it often succumbs to that makes Selby a great artist and makes his work what it is: some of the most powerful literature of our times.

* An earlier version of this essay was featured in a Critical Symposium on Hubert Selby sponsored by his e-book publisher, *Open Road Integrated Media*, and published in January 2012.

* From Couteau's 1999 interview with Hubert Selby.

* Ibid.