‘Losted’ in Brownsville: Experiential Realism in Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*

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Abstract
This paper explores the construction of an imagined urban landscape through the employment of subjective point of view in Henry Roth’s modernist novel *Call It Sleep* (1934). This involves an engagement with Robert Alter’s recent critical writings on 19th and 20th century European novels in terms of their ‘experiential realism’. Alter’s flexible approach to reading fiction goes beyond a consideration of mere urban representation and towards an understanding of the complex relationship between setting, subjectivity and language in the novel.

*Call It Sleep* maps an early 20th century version of Brownsville in Brooklyn, New York City, through the subjective language of a Jewish immigrant child named David Schearl. Brownsville is always a subjective entity, and always in flux, dependent on David’s emotional state. This paper examines a key sequence of the novel – David’s ordeal as he loses his bearings in the streets – in light of Brownsville’s documented history.
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In the omnisciently narrated prologue of Henry Roth’s novel *Call It Sleep* (1934) the Schearls, a Jewish immigrant family from Austrian Galitzia, are reunited on Ellis Island. It is May 1907. The father, Albert, has been in New York City for some years working in the printing industry. His wife Genya and young son David step off the *Peter Stuyvesant* to an America that is, according to Genya, the “Golden Land”. The prologue’s epigraph, pseudo-biblical but actually invented by Roth, is: “I pray thee ask no questions/this is that Golden Land” (Roth, 2006: 9). Ironically, the Schearls are to live in a place Albert mispronounces as “Bronzeville”, actually the neighbourhood of Brownsville in Brooklyn. As the scholar Hana Wirth-Nesher has pointed out, this city of Bronze rather than Gold is quickly revealed to be a city of earth: “Alchemy in reverse” (Wirth-Nesher, 2006: 82).

In Book I (‘The Cellar’) of *Call It Sleep* Henry Roth creates or maps Brownsville in prose governed by a unique variety of experiential realism heavily indebted to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. This can be seen most explicitly in the sequence where David, the seven-year-old protagonist, becomes disorientated and lost in the streets. Brownsville emerges entirely from Roth’s literary representation of David’s consciousness. And because the very sensitive David endures extreme emotional highs and lows in Book I of the novel, Brownsville is always in flux.

This paper will examine this key urban-mapping sequence of *Call It Sleep* in relation to the documented history of Brownsville.

Robert Alter’s recent urban writing theories, focusing on 19th and 20th century European novels, provide a flexible (rather than dogmatic) approach to reading fiction that goes beyond a consideration of mere urban representation. Alter’s argument is that “new objective realities, from architecture to public transport to the economy” in nineteenth century European cities led to a change in the very “perception of fundamental categories of time and space” (Alter, 2005: xi).

So how did novelist respond to these changes? Or rather, how did they create these new types of cities in prose? Alter observes a trend in the development of nineteenth century literature: “The practice of conducting the narrative more and more through the moment by moment experience – sensory, visceral and mental – of the main characters” (Alter, 2005:x). He calls this practice experiential realism, which manifests itself in a variety of ways. The subject of Alter’s book *Imagined Cities* is “the intersection of the subtle deployment of experiential realism and the emergence of a new order of urban reality” (Alter, 2005:x) in eight European novels from Flaubert to Kafka.

Joyce’s *Ulysses* pioneered a form of experiential realism that is most relevant to a consideration of *Call It Sleep*. In Dublin in 1904 a girl on a tram – a newly electrified tram – is seen by Leopold Bloom:

> The tram passed. They drove off towards the Loop Line bridge, her rich gloved hand on the steel grip. Flicker, flicker: the
laceflare of her hat in the sun: flicker, flick. (Joyce quoted in Alter, 2005: 125)

Alter reads the passage this way:

As the tram moves rapidly out of Bloom’s perspective, he can make out no more than a hat and a gloved hand on the steel grip, and with the object of perception in motion and the sight line partially blocked, vision in the bright morning sunlight becomes stroboscopic – ‘flicker, flicker: the laceflare of her hat in the sun’ – and then the first two words are repeated with the last syllable strategically lopped off, like Bloom’s vision, ‘flicker, flick’.

(Alter, 2005: 125)

This approach, which demonstrates how Joyce’s sentence structure is an analogue of the subject’s perception of his urban environment, is also very applicable to a study of Call It Sleep. If we grant, as Alter believes, that perception is to some extent subservient to the subject’s environment – to architecture and public transport, to the technology with which the subject must interact, to the way streets are laid out – we can see a complex relationship between setting, subjectivity and language in modernist fiction.

Joyce Carol Oates, in an essay similarly titled ‘Imaginary Cities’, writes of Ulysses’s “dissonant harmony of Irish voices...Joyce’s boldly new art renders the city but refuses to present it: we experience Dublin in snatches and fragments, catching only glimpses of it, carried along by the momentum of [Bloom’s] or Stephen’s subjectivity: we know the city from the inside...” (Oates, 1981). Alfred Kazin drew the conclusion that “Anybody who recognises Joyce’s immense achievement will recognise his influence on Roth. In Ulysses, Dublin exists through the word-by-word progression of the subliminal consciousness” (Kazin in Roth, 2006: xii).

Robert Alter considers how James Joyce understood culture and “a city as the capital of a culture” as a kind of “vast palimpsest” of languages and ties this in with the Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the “city [as] a prime arena for the clash and interchange of languages” (Alter, 2005: 134). Call It Sleep bears comparison in this manner.

Hana Wirth-Nesher is a pioneer of what she calls Call It Sleep’s “multilingualism”. As she says, “it is a book written in the English language but experienced by the reader as if it were a translation, for David’s main actions and thoughts are experienced in Yiddish” (Wirth-Nesher, 1990: 301). The language spoken in David’s home is Yiddish. This is represented in the text as a very grammatically elegant English. Outside the home, on the street, the immigrant children speak in colloquial English “which is rendered in transliteration, a phonetic transcription” (Wirth-Nesher 1990: 301). This is an important component of Roth’s variety of experiential realism.
Roth does not provide the reader of *Call It Sleep* with any omniscient view of Brownsville’s urban landscape, nor with any historical background. Instead, we are limited to the awareness of the child protagonist and have to piece together a picture of Brownsville from the prose representation of David’s conscious experience.

Brownsville at the turn of the 20th century was a teeming slum. Wendell Pritchett, in his general history of the neighbourhood, writes:

> In a period of fifty years – from its founding in the late 1880s to the beginnings of World War II – Brownsville changed from a community of small farms to a dense neighbourhood of tenements holding the largest concentration of Jews in the United States. [...] Destined as a working-class area from its inception because of poor geography, Brownsville was marked by lack of planning, shoddy building, poor city services, and weak provision for parks and recreation. Individual decisions by hundreds of builders shaped the community, and these men developed a neighbourhood where people struggled to maintain minimum standards of health and sanitation. (Pritchett, 2002: 10)

Pritchett describes the unusual situation of the garment industry establishing factories in what had been, prior to the 1880s, largely a residential area. In essence the garment industry built factories in Brownsville to escape the congestion of the Lower East Side of Manhattan and to take advantage of the large population of workers. Other industries followed in 1890s. In the five year period between 1905 to 1910, the population of Brownsville doubled from 37,934 to 77,936. The housing conditions for poor immigrant families were dire: ‘double-decker’ houses designed for two families were occupied by up to eight families. (Pritchett, 2002).

The development of Brownsville around the turn of the century resulted in:

> “cramped, high-density, multifamily tenements on narrow blocks. The streets were congested, and there was little greenery. One former resident described the area as ‘rows and rows of tenements and jerry-built, identical private houses, all railroad flats, so that light and sun were…precious.’ The architecture of the community had very little rationale or plan. ‘The dwellings were of every variety and looked as though they had been dropped chaotically from the sky,’ said another former resident.” (Pritchett, 2002: 15)

*Call It Sleep*’s bewildering and chaotic Brownsville as experienced by the emotionally unstable David Schearl seems to be an accurate recreation of this urban landscape while avoiding any omniscient historical exposition.
In *Call It Sleep* and other New York novels of immigrant experience the breadwinning father must quickly master the streets to survive. But women and children are in a different situation. In *Call It Sleep* Genya complains of Brownsville:

> I’ve seen little enough of it! I know that I myself live on one hundred and twenty-six Boddeh Stritt...there is a church on a certain street to my left, the vegetable market is to my right, behind me are the railroad tracks and the broken rocks, and before me, a few blocks away is a certain store window that has a kind of white-wash on it – and faces in the white-wash, the kind children draw. Within this pale is my America, and if I ventured further I should be lost. In fact...were they even to wash that window, I might never find my way home again. (Roth, 2006: 33)

A similarly circumstance occurs in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Enemies* (1972). Holocaust survivor Herman Broder has come to New York City in the late 1940s. Yadwiga is the illiterate Polish gentile peasant woman who hid Herman in a hayloft during the war. Herman marries her out of gratitude for saving his life and lives with her in a Coney Island apartment. Singer writes:

> The slow, hazardous trip to Germany, the voyage on the military ship to Halifax, the bus trip to New York had so bewildered Yadwiga that to this day she was afraid of travelling alone on the subway. She never went further than a few blocks from the house in which she lived...Herman had brought her a locket to wear, containing a slip of paper with her name and address written on it in case she got lost, but it was no comfort to Yadwiga; she didn’t trust anything in writing. (Singer, 1972: 5-6)

In New York Yadwiga is given the equivalent of a dog collar. Here Herman “was Yadwiga’s husband, brother, father, God….He knew his way in the world – he rode on trains and buses; he read books and newspapers; he earned money...When he was away, Yadwiga kept the door chained for fear of thieves, and also to keep the neighbors out” (Singer, 1972: 8-9). Herman, ostensibly a traveling bookseller, really spends much of his time with a mistress. Yadwiga doggedly struggles to find a place in New York – ultimately converting to Judaism to be part of the local community.

Roth’s primary focus, however, is on David’s struggle to come to terms with his environment. The crucial sequence in Book I of *Call It Sleep* sees David lost in the streets of Brownsville. His home life has been tumultuous: he is fiercely attached to his mother, but lives in fear of his violent father, who expresses an unexplained antipathy towards him. Scared he has seriously injured or even killed a playmate, and also scared of Mr Luter, a friend of Albert’s who seems (the reader must surmise) to be conducting an affair with Genya, David escapes into the streets. He follows the telegraph poles block by block in a fever of exhilaration:
- Next one … Race him! … Hello Mr High Wood … Good-bye, Mr High Wood. I can go faster … Hello, Second Mr High Wood … Good-bye Second Mr Highwood … Can beat you … They dropped behind him. Three … Four … Five … Six … drew near, floated by in silence like tall masts. Seven … Eight … Nine … Ten … He stopped counting them. (Roth, 2006: 91)

Further on, the density of the neighbourhood starts to lessen:

And now the houses straggled, giving way to long stretches of empty lots. On either side of the street, splotches of yeasty snow still plastered the matted fields. On ledges above the rocks, the black talons of crooked trees clawed at the slippery ground. (Roth, 2006: 92)

Eventually David stops and tries to find his bearings:

- Time to look back.
- No.
- Time to look back.
- Only to the end of that hill. There where the clouds fell.
- Time to look back.
- He glanced over his shoulder and suddenly halted in surprise. Behind him as well as before, the tall spars were climbing into the sky.
- Funny. Both Ways.
- He turned about, gazing now behind him, now before.
- Like it was a swing. Didn’t know.
- His mood was buckling.
- Same. Didn’t know.
- His legs were growing tired.
- It’s far away on the other side.
- Between coat-pocket and sleeve one wrist was cold, the other was throbbing.
- And it’s far away on the other side.
- The tubers of pain under the skin of his shoulders were groping into consciousness now.
- And it’s just the same.
- Slowly, he began retracing his steps.
- Can go back.
- Despite growing weariness, he quickened his pace. (Roth, 2006: 92-93)

David has lost his bearings in the strange symmetry of the street. He tries to return home:
Eagerly, he scanned the streets ahead of him. Which one was it. Which? Which one was – long street. Long street, lot of wooden houses. On this side. Yes. Go through the other side. The other corner … Right away, right away. Be home right away. This one? Didn’t look like … Next one bet … Giddyap, giddyap, giddyap … One little house … two little house … three little house … Corner coming, corner coming, corner – Here? - Here? This one? Yes. Looked different. No. Same one. Wooden houses. Yes.

He turned the corner, hastened towards the opposite one.

- Same one. But looked a teenchy weenchy bit different. Same one though.

But at the end of the block, uncertainty would not be dispelled. Though he coned every house on either side of the crossing, no single landmark stirred his memory. They were all alike – wooden houses and narrow sidewalks to his right and left. A shiver of dismay ran through him.

- Thought this - ? No. Maybe went two. Then, when he ran. Wasn’t looking and went two. Next one. That would be it. Find it now. Mama is waiting. Next one. Quick. And then turn. That was. He’d see. Has to be.

[…] His eyes, veering in every direction, implored the stubborn street for an answer it would not yield. And suddenly terror pounced.

‘Mama!’ The desolate wail split from his lips. (Roth, 2006: 94-95).

Naomi Diamant formulated a theory of Call It Sleep’s “separate but overlapping” linguistic universes. This is a way of analysing how Roth deals with the issue of point of view. Diamant formulates three selves at work throughout Roth’s novel: an experiencing self, a narrating self and an authorial self (Diamant, 1986: 338). This formulation is useful in helping to understand how the urban landscape of Brownsville is mapped in this sequence of David losing his bearings.

The experiencing self, which in this passage is documented by Joycean stream-of-consciousness, is an attempt to represent in prose the child’s moment-by-moment perceptions of the street as he tries to navigate his way home. So we get incomplete or interrupted thoughts represented by broken sentences, and flashes of street detail broken up by ellipses.

The narrating self is, in contrast, retrospective in tone: we could imagine it as the adult voice of the child looking back through the prism of his childish perception. Or as Diamant defines it, the “narrating self operates by ordering the impressions of the experiencing self, subtly or overtly, depending on the context….interpreting what David’s own consciousness registers but possesses insufficient tools to pursue…it inserts
into the child’s description an ordering logic” (Diamant, 1986: 338). But these selves are closely interwoven in the text. Diamant goes on to say: “the conjuction of the experiencing and narrating selves operates unobtrusively in the text” (Diamant, 1986: 339). In other words, Roth found a highly flexible and communicable technique to present the city rendered by the child’s naïve point of view.

In this sequence there isn’t an authorial self asserting an omniscient vision of the urban landscape. Roth lets the city exist in the flux of David’s perceptions – be they unfiltered (via the experiencing self) or organised when needed by a more sophisticated narrating voice. Roth stays within the region of intelligibility while presenting as much of David’s confusion as possible.

Lost, David begins to cry for his mother, and the streets are perceived as unstable:

“the aloof houses rebuffed his woe […] And as if they had been waiting for a signal, the streets through his tear-blurred sight began stealthily to wheel. He could feel them turning under his feet, though never a house changed place – backward to forward, side to side – a sly, inexorable carousel.” (Roth, 2006: 95).

David tells a gentile businessman he is “losted” and lives at “a hunnder ‘n’ twenny six Boddeh Stritt.” The man sends David to ‘Potter Street’. But David does not live on Potter Street. He breaks down in tears and is taken by a woman to a police station staffed by kindly Irish cops whose dialogue, like that of the street kids, is spelt out phonetically: “C’mon, me boy, yer all roit” (Roth, 2006: 99). The cops eventually interpret ‘Boddeh Stritt’ as ‘Barhdee Street’.

While they fetch his mother, David sits in despair over what he has learnt from his experience of being ‘losted’:

Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Wherever you look, never believe. Whatever anything was or did or said, it pretended. Never believe… The man who had directed him; the old woman who had left him here; the policeman; all had tricked him. They would never call his mother, ever…Never believe. Never play. Never believe. Not anything. Everything shifted. Everything changed….Trust nothing. Even sidewalks, even streets, houses, you looked at them. You knew where you were and they turned. You watched them and they turned. That way. Slow, cunning, Trust noth- (Roth, 2006: 100-101)

But his mother does come to fetch him, and David, very relieved, is carried back to ‘Boddeh Street’. His mother points left in the direction of his school. He disagrees.

“That way, Mama?” He stared incredulously. “This way!” He pointed to the right. “This way is my school.”
“That’s why you were lost! It’s the other way.”
“O-o-oh!” A new wonder dragged him to a halt. “It – it’s turning, Mama! It’s turning round – back.”
“What?” Her tone was amused. “The street?”
“Yes! They stopped. Just now! The school – The school is over there now!”
“So it is. The streets turn, but you – not you! Little God!” (Roth, 2006: 107)

So this is how readers of Call It Sleep discover Brownsville. This bewildering, chaotic, unplanned slum is imaginatively mapped by Henry Roth’s Joycean variety of experiential realism.

Bibliography