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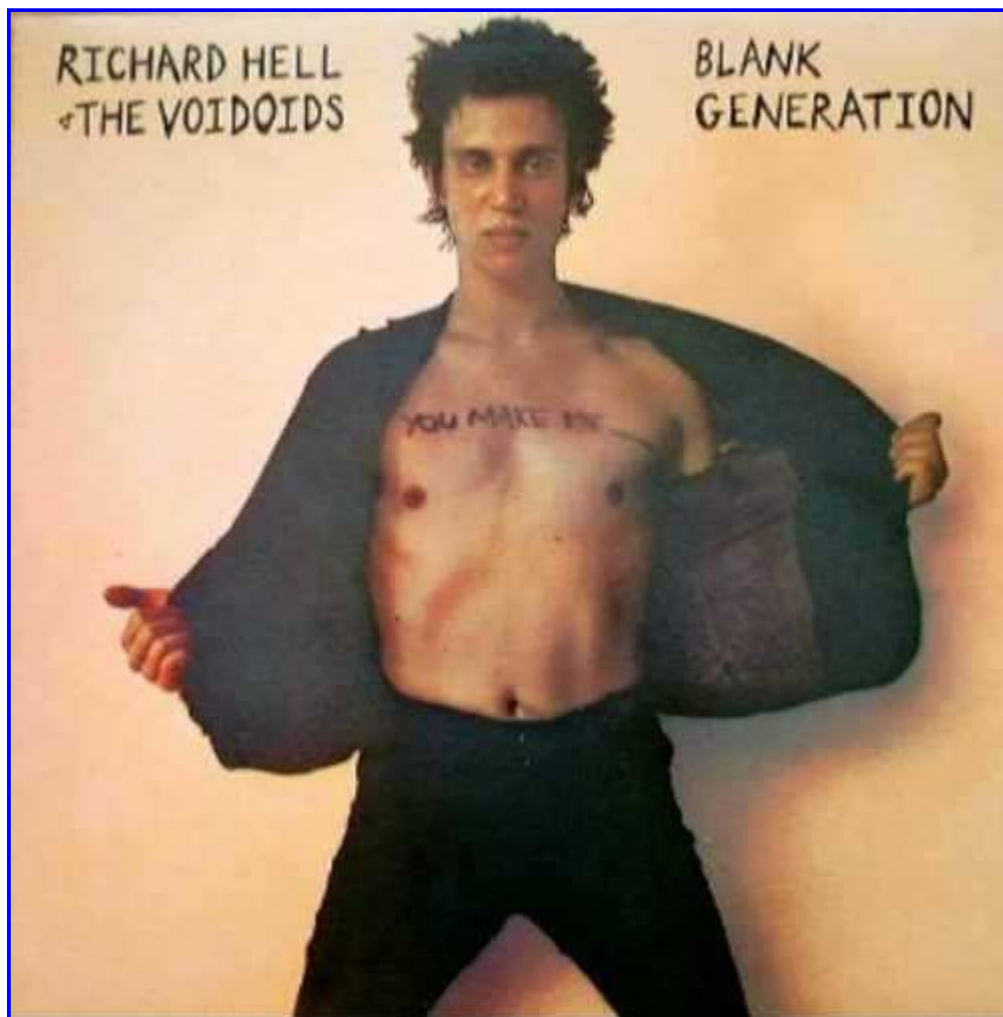
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February 27, 2010...12:30 am

NYRM Literary Society: Richard Hell and Lethem

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I've never read a book before that wasn't explicitly about music that is so very much about music. If I had to say what *Fortress of Solitude* is about, I'd say gentrification, friendship, abandonment, Brooklyn, growing up, and navigating racial identity through music. Because the novel is so centered around Dylan Ebdus' life through race through music, it's difficult to choose a fitting song. From Barrett Rude Jr.'s career as a soul

singer to Dylan's struggles with "Play That Funky Music," to his discovery of punk, and to his eventual career as a music critic, this is the first thing I have ever read that properly articulates the importance of music and music culture to my life. Easily one of my top five favorite books because of this. One particular passage, at the very end, I particularly related to, and I think it's worth it to type out the whole thing again here:

Earlier, the first years of high school, when the Clash and Ramones were first thrilling me and Gabriel Stern and Timothy Vandertoath, I'd bring a record home and play it for Abraham and ask him, "Do you hear it? How great it is? There's never been music like this!"

"Sure," he'd say. "It's wonderful."

"But do you really hear what I'm hearing? Can you hear the same song I do?"

"Of course," he'd say, leaving me perfectly unsatisfied, leaving the mystery unplumbed: Could my father hear my music? By my college years, though, I'd never have asked, even if we weren't on that dour voyage home. Those lines of inquiry were shut down, so I barely troubled to speculate what Another Green World might mean to Abraham, whether he felt it shaping our pummel through the snow. Eno sang, You'd be surprised at my degree of uncertainty-

I considered now that what I once loved in this record, and certain other- Remain in Light, "O Superman," Horses- was the middle space they conjured and dwelled in, a bohemian demimonde, a hippie dream. And that same space, that unlikely proposition, was what I'd eventually come to hate and be embarrassed by, what I'd had to refuse in favor of soul, in favor of Barrett Rude Junior and his defiant, unsubtle pain. I'd needed music that would tell it like it is, like I'd learned it to be, in the inner city. Another Green World was like Abraham's film: too fragile, too yokeable- I wanted a tougher song than that. I knew stuff B. Eno and A. Ebdus didn't, and I couldn't afford to carry them or their naivete, and more than Mingus could afford to carry me or mine.

There's a lot going on here, and I don't want to get all English-major, but I love explaining music through that hope that other people in your life will understand how you relate to music, and then failing miserably to find that person in the people you already love. The idea of much of the music we listen to as a "middle space" is also particularly apt. I think some reasons different people and media outlets frequently vilify Williamsburg and the Brooklyn music scene is because it attempts desperately to live in this middle space. I don't think Lethem's criticizing that, but rather pointing out that he isn't sure if you can actually reside there full-time.

So why Richard Hell? Wouldn't it make more sense to choose a black artist- an old soul song or even some new hip-hop? Probably. But Dylan falls in love with punk, and I don't think he can ever escape that. The scene after CBGB where Dylan tries to score drugs on the LES and is robbed by Robert Wolfolk is an incredibly potent blending of two worlds. It was an incredibly jarring scene, and there's a reason CBGB directly preceded it. Punk has bravado with a dark side, the same sense of white guilt that Lethem uses the genre to carry throughout the novel. "Blank Generation" fits the book rather well, then, especially when you think about what is perhaps the cleverest part of the novel, the magical ring. Dylan can never really fly with it, but he can certainly be invisible. The desire to become blank, to become an observer in a world where everyone is acting on you, to become blank. Hell opens with, "I was saying let me out of here before I was even born." There's that same sense of destiny and inevitability that a white kid growing up on the block would feel. In some ways, he's talking about the Solver girls. Lethem names a lot of unnameable things about growing up in his novel, and I think Hell also does that particularly well. *Fortress of Solitude* is obviously much, much more complicated than "Blank Generation," but they both his the same unsettling, endlessly appealing chord.

[MP3: “Blank Generation” – Richard Hell & The Voidoids](#)

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