

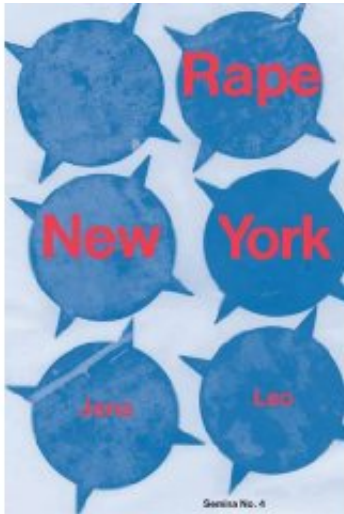
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:: Article

Metaphysical Prison Literature

By Richard Marshall.



Jana Leo, [Rape New York](#), Book Works, 2009

Earwicker's 'the abnihilation of the etym' proposes a site for creative possibility that reaches out in two directions at once. A trauma wrenches reality, annihilating its meaning in one fist and creating matter *ex nihilo* in the other. The writer grasps the self-contradicting logic of her nihilistic moment and stages her pursuit in both directions, masked as both Vico of the recurring history and Bruno of the Proustian dialectic. And of course, the nihilistic moment of catastrophe is sudden and unforeseen, the costumes grasped on the hoof by a shocked ghost rising out of ruins.

The author was raped in New York. She describes how it happened. It is a levelled performance and without hysteria. She keeps the emotion out of the writing so that we can know what happened and feel it for ourselves. She explains the casual nature of the horror. It is a report written like scratching initials onto an old stone place, a step to keep the wrecked will alive. One step to own the event, another to displace it with a

decisive act. The final step is annihilation of the act, clearing the space for the destruction of the will and the opening up of a new space. It is a form of flight, but not just in a single direction, *thataway*, understood as escape, but also of a flying over and above, like Icarus, a soaring up, a rising into the sun, which is a form of ripening.

The trauma comes when the description strangely twists round and seems to enter a repeating, endless loop. The end of the second chapter 'How an Uneventful Day and Place Became Eventful' ends with the beginning of the beginning of the first chapter beginning again. But this time the memory of what happened happens before the act. This is the first sniff that this book is the real Sterne, hounding its realist logic back into a Kafkaesque fundament.

The author explains what she did afterwards. Afterwards has been the fabled *ever afterwards*. The author tells what she did and what others did. One man came round when he heard what had happened and cried because he had lost his job that day. The crappy film *Robocop* is used to explain the scam that property developers use to make money from the city. Crime is a tool for bringing down prices of properties which are then taken over by the developers. The author presents us with the stats of crime that make the theory more than blag. The police dealing with the crime initially are not helpful but latterly an individual detective gets involved who ends up being very helpful. Similarly the lawyers initially aren't very good and then she contacted one who was. The author develops a theory of domesticity as a trap and examines rape as a function of the home. She says the rapist is an individual caught in a whole network of machinery that makes the rape possible. These things include all the normal things you can't avoid if you're poor as not everyone is. In New York this is the line crossed when you go North of Central Park.

She writes about the difference between homes and apartments. She theorises. She expands the theory to explain how prisons and tourism are linked in this theory. New York is also explained in terms of its districts of poverty and wealth and crime. Violent crime is contrasted with non violent crime and these are related to her theory of the trap of the domestic. Violent crime is crime for the poor areas, non-violent crime for wealthier sections of the city. Interiors of buildings are analysed in terms of the cover they offer for criminals as they move invisibly across the city. Broken locks open up an alternative grid of interlinking routes, portals to interred private space. Flats and their corridors, lifts, stairwells and laundry rooms are spaces that separate themselves from public sight. Apartments enclose the woman into an invisible cube that holds them for the time men need to do them. They are private cells for criminals to act. All a rapist wants.

The reader reads. The writer has written. It is a text that insists there is a meaning. There are the facts. There are the theories that begin to sort out the patterns detected over time. Laws make the patterns stick like glue to the world. It all begins to make sense. The transcripts of conversations between the rapist and a lawyer, the facts about the slum landlords, facts about Harlem, about the years that have past, they coalesce into something law like, governed by something that finally after a deal of graft becomes visible, understood, meaningful.

When you ask for anything that would protect you like a lock on a door the reply in the book is always the same. 'You might as well be dead.' Even when the words aren't that, it's what is being said. So the reader is asking for something from the book. Because there's a sense that the writer is willing something from the book too, a kind of erasure from the writing. Reading the book is an act of collaboration in that. And as every fact stacks up and every pattern gets identified and every theory sticks it all together a new sense emerges inside the writing and the reading. It stops making sense. It collapses into absurdity. The words are an architecture of a prison that is the opposite of everything that's been written down. The flat-line tone of the piece is an echo of the response to the call for help. 'You might as well be dead.' The language becomes a code for something else at the extreme end of violent noise. The calm precise tone is exactly not itself.

So the book is a voice of the violated resisting the language of hysterical affect, a laser in the eye, burning out the confirmation that a screaming language might bring. The brightest most revealing light, an illumination designed to burn out your eyes. You'll never see again. Only beyond speculation can we find Eden writes Beckett in a letter to Morris Sinclair back in the thirties. And the author of *Rape New York* is writing from the other side of speculation. There is no howling at the moon in this most violent of stories.

One in ten women in America have been raped. It's a statistic that brings with it a hidden float of inevitability. When another woman is raped, a passing detail as the author works through the inevitable collision between official disinterest and personal obsession, it is described by her as being a matter to women of 'here it comes.' Floating about in the atmosphere, women don't just feel the reality of rape hovering about, they anticipate it.

The writer drills a hole into the atmosphere. It writes to dissolve first meanings. It writes like a type of obliterating automata. The bureaucracy of report writing requires an officialese style that first drains away the scummy froth of affect but then, in so doing, leaves a vessel behind. The emptiness that this writing hollows out then fills it up. Jana Leo tells a telling anecdote: in part of the trial process she has to talk about her trauma to a jury. She tells it in the flat-line tones of this exculpated clarity, fearing that perhaps her audience wouldn't believe her, would be put-off if she showed her feelings, if she revealed what lay behind the calm presentation, beyond what she was actually saying, in the terrible silence at the other side of the words. When she looked out at the end of her performance and she saw that they were all crying.

There's nothing entertaining here. At first there's nothing at all but the rape event outside of the writing. But then how is the writing ever going to reach that? How is a reader ever going to get there? This is not a book about the words and theories it uses, not even the word 'rape' but is about a particular experience of rape and its consequences. Maybe the author writes not because she wants to talk about it but because she wants her life back. It went away when she was raped. Where did it go?

She says it went into a space that her knowledge of architecture can begin to design. Are American prison architectures like the old London prisons? Prisons in London are peculiar. They're impressive Gothic architectural structures that are huge and melodramatic. They suggest labyrinths, lavish traps of darkness. So they have a tone but their tone isn't the tone of this writing. But then, when I'm thinking about the dual direction of this writing, writing towards a nihilism hell-bent to nowhere and writing alternatively out of nihilism towards maturing creativity, then there's something about the trace of prison here in England that actually deepens what I'm thinking about what the author's thinking.

So I think about Wormwood Scrubs in Hammersmith, my local prison, that is huge and visible to the eye but is erased by road signs that don't say it exists because *they* don't exist. It is next to the Hammersmith Hospital which is a leading London hospital and the hospital is rendered visible only by its signage because its architecture is flat. So the overall meanings of the signs for the prison and the sign itself are complicated, more complex than a single glance can pick out.

So it is like the writing in this book. The prison's architecture is both gothic and horribly energetic with a dark overwhelming moodiness but simultaneously it is denied and erased by the signs. It is as if we are not supposed to know about this great space of moodiness. This is the way the author has structured the book's effect. The event of rape is in terms of the denied emotions it involves. Nevertheless those invisible, sudden emotions are an essential part of the rape. They don't depend on the author writing them out. It is a confirmation of the obvious fact that the event is a catastrophe, an ugly nauseous holocaust detonating, as always, everything in the blink of an eye. Invisibility rendered in plain sight, forever and ever, in a loop of 'and vice versa'.

The script's deadpan act sets up a Bressonian authenticity at odds with any notion of artifice. It frees itself from culture and art. This is a performance of writing without writing being acted out as style without style. Bresson did this by not having actors in his films. Instead of actors he had models. He therefore avoided acting. One of his best models was a donkey. So the paradoxical author is designing a space where everything can be discussed and felt without having to write. It reverses the Barthesian idea that the author is dead and writing continues in a different relation to itself and its interpreters. Here writing is dead because it is the author and her rape that is being authored. Writing sure is in a different relation to the reader and to the author: but it is the death of writing rather than the author that is being executed here. The author has to survive for the trauma to exist.

And in this perversity and impossibility there is the *something else* of what the author is doing. There is an act of willful suppression in order to expose the fullness of the rape. Schopenhauer viewed the will as the very *ding an sich* and happiness as the mere abolition of a desire and extinction of a pain. He thought that empathy with our fellow sufferers reminds us of the most necessary things; tolerance, patience, forbearance and charity. The choice of architecture to accommodate the result of being entirely given over to willing links with Schopenhauer's view that architecture considered as art only considers gravity, cohesion and rigidity. Regular form, proportion and symmetry are not its proper theme.

So this makes us think that by denying itself as art the architecture of the book climbs out of one space into another. All the theories and thoughts that are presented in regular form – where by regularity of features we also think of 'regular' as used in the phrase 'regular guy', the idea of the normal, the unsurprising, the ordinary, the banally reliable – and 'proportion' – in the sense that everything here is proportionate, unhysterical, contained, presentable – and symmetrical, so we might feel a just and balanced report has been submitted – all this gifts us a truth telling that was all we were promised in the first place and all we ever wanted.

Which reminds us of other textures lying beneath this form of writing. It captures the regular, proportionate and symmetrical bureaucratic reports of Holocaust literature, Gulag literature and of Kafka's nightmarish worlds where endless documents present in just those forms constitute the traps that hide a monstrous violence. Suddenly, reading this book is another reminder of how all advocacy is the Titorellian doortrap closing behind you.

Remember Titorelli in Kafka's *Trial*: 'I forgot to ask you what sort of acquittal you want. There are three possibilities, that is, definite acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement.' The nightmare logic of the advocacy in the metaphysical absurdity of innocence accused is of course something that Titorelli summarises thus: 'The only deciding factor seems to be the innocence of the accused. Since you're innocent, of course it would be possible for you to ground your case on your innocence alone. But then you would require neither my help nor help from anyone.' So too for Jana Leo the issue is what acquittal will there be, and can she somehow write her innocence?

Reading Kafka reminded me that *Rape New York* is written as if the author were the accused. Raped, her response is to defend herself from the accusation of being the one to blame. And just as Kafka regarded his novel *The Trial* as unfinished, necessarily so because the trial was never going to reach the highest court, he nevertheless writes a last line; "Like a dog!" he said: it was if he meant the shame of it to outlive him." This sense hovers above the text. The loop that threatens at the end of the second chapter with its *Tristram Shandy*-like title, is the phantasmagoric Kafka/Zeno structure of infinity that pervades the novel posed as a joke of the damned.

The author of *Rape New York* is thus writing the kind of metaphysical prison literature. It seems that the kind of process she describes are exactly those faced by the protagonists in *The Trial* or Kundera's *The Joke*. In

fact she writes that the rape took away the means of her life. She describes what happened afterwards as like being in a state of suspended animation. This reminds me of the way Milan Kundera describes the effect of the Russians taking over his country. ‘When, in 1968, the Russians occupied my little country, I lost, at a stroke, any possible means of earning a living.’ The trauma of that invasion is not, of course, than that of bodily rape. So I am careful here not to think or feel of them as if they are the same but nevertheless they are both moments of sudden and inexplicable violent trauma. Both instantiate – one as a violation of a single physical body and the other as a political violence which also brought violence against bodies – the abstract mental logics of paradoxical metaphysicians.

The Kundera response to his trauma struck me as being helpful too. In the aftermath of the invasion some friends, trying to help, asked him to write a stage version of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* using Dostoevsky’s name. He rejected the project. ‘This world of excessive gestures, of obscure profundities and of aggressive sentimentality repelled me.’ Kundera cannot work with the ‘climate’ of Dostoevsky. Everything is feeling in that climate, ‘...feeling is elevated to the level of value and of truth.’ It is not feelings *per se* that revolts him. Just as in *Rape New York*, feelings run through trauma. They run and run and run. But to elevate them to the status of value and truth, to trust just feelings, that is what repulses him. The violent end of modernity demands a more persistent, hard-rimmed response.

Kundera rewrites Diderot’s *Jacques le Fataliste* as an antidote to the trauma. So too with the author of *Rape New York*. She writes at her trauma, not out of it, or away from it, and so her prose is placed in the same tradition of picaresque riddling that includes Sterne, Laclos, Voltaire, Richardson, Diderot, Cervantes, Boccaccio, Marivaux, Mdme de LaFayette, Monk Lewis, Mrs Radcliffe, De Sade and Kundera *et al.* However she works at the fork in the road of that line which branches to where the abstracted Platonic irreconcilable metaphysics of the situation is explicitly *the* puzzle rather than merely a feature alongside all the tom-foolery within. This is the branch of such novel writing that includes Borges, Beckett and of course Kafka. The tragedy of the paradoxical metaphysician is also a joke played on a cosmic scale. The whole world is a joke, a great sick and irresolvable puzzle, a riddle, a conundrum.

And in the light of this thought the full weight of the book and its form becomes clear. The logic and theories of the book are but the mechanisms by which we are confronted with a metaphysical reality that traps the mind in an inescapable horror, just as the theories and asides are in Sterne’s masterpiece. The universe is the book, is a puzzle with laws that are self-contradictory and a logic that presents an impossibility as a fact. Just as when she writes about the way architects think of people all the time as pieces being moved through spaces and the spaces determine the moves, so too now the book is the game board on which the pieces are all being moved around. The rules are straightforward, in the open, agreed. The perversity of the situation rests in this fact. Nothing is hidden or denied. Everything is agreed and open. There is an absolute freedom in the prison. It is the mental Lacanian paradoxical jest that explains that now that God is dead there is absolutely no freedom. Absolute freedom is merely a condition of the best high security prison. It is a prison drawn by Escher.

The Semina series is a series that inducts us into this branching fork of the metaphysical picaresque. Stewart Home is himself part of this metaphysical picaresque tradition, at times offering a chance to update de Sade so that the boredom of Sadeian systems-building is replaced by the joke, the scandal and the fetish, his skillfully rendered pastiches of weird eighteenth century rationality retaining the lurid peccadilloes of vice worn by provocation governed by bravado antinomianism and mad logistics.

Jana Leo rewrites the internal story of Richardson’s gigantic *Clarrissa*. The rapist Lovelace is displaced. The vast panoramic picaresque is whittled down to this mimimalist Rubic-cube of a piece. It was de Sade who rhetorically asked the question: ‘Of what use are novels?’ and gave his answer: ‘Hypocritical and perverse men, for you alone ask this ridiculous question: they are useful in portraying you as you are, proud creatures

who wish to elude the painter's brush, since you fear the results, for the novel is – if t'is possible to express oneself thus wise – the representation of secular customs, and is therefore, for the philosopher who wishes to understand man, as essential as is the knowledge of history. For the etching needle of history only depicts man when he reveals himself publically, and then 'tis no longer he: ambition, pride cover his brow with a mask which portrays for us naught but these two passions, and not the man.'

And flowing from this, de Sade, brooding on the requirements for writing a decent novel, forbids the writer to stray from verisimilitude. She may take as many liberties with history's anecdotes, yet the novelist must tell the truth. Jana Leo conceives her writing in the same light. 'This book is a work of fiction because, like all texts, it is constructed. It is also fictional because it is self-consciously subjective: the reflections it contains are my personal thoughts and the narrative form I use is episodic. However, the core of the book is a detailed account of something that actually happened. It is the truth.'

Jana Leo veers towards the gigantic silos of Kafkaesque prison letter writing, describing the lunatic metaphysics of a world that quickly fails, catastrophically, to make sense. The secular customs of rape are written in an encoded text that reveals the corruption, hypocrisies and literal insanities that lock us all up in a systematic aberration. The picaresque episodic structure allows for the enumeration of the literary emission *sans* tedious conflatulation.

She writes a banquet of intelligence, in which lie scolding pleasures outside the sleazy charm of entertainments and sweets: refusing entertainments, the reader is placed in that relation described, by Beckett in a letter to McGreevy, as ... 'humility before the doomed and the assumed.' And again, from somewhere else in Beckett's epistolary bog, we can say that what some may find cold is what others find, myself included, as final.



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

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