

Book Reviews

Boekresensies

Explicating and understanding the genius of evil

Charles van Onselen, *The Fox and the Flies: The world of Joseph Silver, racketeer and psychopath*

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Out of the cover of Charles van Onselen's newest *magnum opus* – a striking cover, the colour of dried blood and darkness, glossy embossed flies hovering – the man stares with eyes that gleam with an unnatural glassiness. This photographed figure reminds me of Charles Dickens' portrayal of Blandois, an ugly insinuating presence in his novel *Little Dorrit*, "with his moustache going up and his nose coming down in that most evil of smiles, and with his surface eyes looking as if they belonged to his dyed hair, and had had their natural power of reflecting light stopped" by some unnerving natural process. However, Dickens insists, Nature "is never to blame in any such instance".¹

Both Dickens and Van Onselen are nevertheless confronted with that old dilemma: how to explicate and understand the genius of evil. Like Blandois, Van Onselen's focal character, "Joseph Silver", was European Jewish (though Polish rather than French), an elusive traveller, superficially charming, but manipulative, congenitally deceitful, protean, a subtle thief, an alleged murderer utterly without conscience, and an occasional inhabitant of the underworld of nineteenth-century London. In one marked aspect they are different: Silver made his primary living pimping, trading globally in the enslavement of white women into the prostitution business.

Dickens wrote somewhat reticently about prostitution, though it was as rampant in his time (with some 80 000 prostitutes in London in 1857) as it was fifty years later in Silver's, and he knew all about "fallen women". What as a novelist he *could* do, is imagine the minutiae of criminal persuasion: the menacing idiosyncracies of body language, the second-by-second real-time progression of conversation. Van Onselen can assert that Silver exerted "the customary mixture of charm and blackmail" (p 286), but just *how* that charm worked, is lost to us in the generalisation of "customary". Van Onselen does not – as does Dickens – try to imagine himself into his evil character's own mind, except, oddly but safely, on a couple of occasions when he envisages Silver approaching a new destination, seeing for instance Antwerp harbour from Silver's point of view. As if recognising the limitations of his method, Van Onselen also heads his chapters with epigraphs taken from novels, mostly Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. These novelistic touches apart, Silver's nefarious activities are related, as an historian must, through more summative, indirect narration.

1 C Dickens, *Little Dorrit* [1857] (Penguin, London, 2008), p 461

Van Onselen further employs a couple of other a-chronological fiction-like structural techniques. Unlike the victimised, but indomitably saintly Little Dorrit, but more like Little Emily in *David Copperfield*, who also sought refuge overseas, Van Onselen's central female character is an unmitigated victim: one Rachel Laskin (not her original name, any more than is "Joseph Silver" her tormentor's). Laskin was "intercepted, raped and corrupted" (p xxii) by him, and eventually left by him to rot in Valkenberg mental asylum in Cape Town. In 1945, twenty-seven years after Silver himself died, she was found dead in her bed in Witrand Hospital in Potchefstroom, where she had been confined since 1924. No sweet solution in marriage to a Mister Clennam for her. Van Onselen opens his account with an imagined, which is to say fictionalised, account of that discovery, and the portrayal of a life utterly ruined by Silver's predatory intervention.

A second structural feature of *The Fox and the Flies*: amongst his numerous other sojourns amongst the city slumlands of the Atlantic world, Silver disappears almost undocumented into the warrens of east London in the years 1885-1888. Though Van Onselen confidently places him there, we know little of his detailed activities. What was indubitably going on at the time, was the infamous "Jack the Ripper" murders of a string of prostitutes, in a grisly, quasi-ritualistic manner symptomatic of serial killers. As we all know, Jack the Ripper has never been securely identified. In his early chapter on Silver's London sojourn, Van Onselen mentions the murders, but coyly avoids connecting Silver to them, instead – conscious that this has to be both the most speculative and most spectacular part of the story – holding over until the final chapter of the book a detailed argument that the Ripper was in fact ... Joseph Silver.

So Van Onselen frames the ghastly tale, and trail, of Joseph Silver, with scenarios involving his most tragic and gruesome female victims. Victimising females was his life, his *métier*, his economic base: "pathological misogyny and the need to control, exploit and humiliate white slaves never left [Silver] as he cruised the Atlantic searching out micro-climates capable of sustaining his frightening physical and psychological needs" (p 11). How and why those desires and needs arose in him, Van Onselen makes an effort at explaining, but in the end can really only offer us a series of assertions that they existed: it is simply self-evident from his actions. To assert that "he answered only to the demons in his mind" (p 366), as Van Onselen regularly does, is to explain nothing at all. Throughout, too, Van Onselen reminds the reader that Silver was "neurosyphilitic", sometimes at entirely irrelevant points; medically coherent links between this disease and behaviour are only approached late in the book, so that this aspect of Van Onselen's argument seems somewhat ramshackle. His uncertainty in this area emerges in his regular resort to colourful metaphors and similes. Some are interesting: "The contents of [the letter] passed through his mind like the current in a new-fangled street lamp, lighting up dim understandings" (p 371). Others seem meretricious and distracting, colourful but of little explanatory value. In the end, as Van Onselen says, this is a "sketch" (a 600-page sketch, mind) of an unfolding personality which, at different moments, assumed the role of arsonist, bank robber, barber, bigamist, brothel-owner, burglar, confidence-trickster, detective's agent, gangster, horse trader, hotelier, informer, jewel thief, merchant, pickpocket, pimp, policeman, rapist, restaurateur, safe-cracker, smuggler, sodomist, special agent, spy, store-keeper, trader, thief, widower, wig-maker and white slave trafficker (p 11).

Born Joseph Lis in the small town of Kielce, Poland, in 1868, he hardly had a chance: born into an already inveterately criminal family, Lis (who assumed any number of pseudonyms which playfully punned in Yiddish style, but who became best known as Joseph Silver) became a sometimes hapless, sometimes tyrannically dominant bit-player in the vast network of criminality that spanned the cities bordering the Atlantic, and even beyond. The book's chapter headings tell their own story: London 1885-1889; New York 1889-1893; Pittsburgh 1893-1894; back to London between 1895 and 1898; Johannesburg 1898 and 1899; Cape Town, Kimberley and Bloemfontein between 1900 and 1905; Swakopmund and Windhoek 1905-1906; Neumünster and Paris 1908-1909; Antwerp, Brussels, Liège and Aachen 1909-1910; Buenos Aires 1910; Santiago and Valparaiso 1910-1913; back and forth between London, New York and Rio 1914-1916; until he finally disappears in war-torn Poland, probably shot as a spy in 1918, not too far from where he was born.

There can be few less savoury biographical subjects in all of historical scholarship, and Van Onselen's astonishing unpacking of the extent, depth and intricacy of Silver's criminal *milieux* makes for seriously depressing reading. He has done a remarkable job of unearthing newspaper accounts and court records illuminating fragments of Silver's career across the globe, a paper trail covering decades and involving chance encounters with assiduous researchers in a dozen different languages (all of this rather charmingly and self-deprecatingly set out in a closing chapter). The details are embedded in compact and incisive overviews of the political and economic climates of the countries and regions Silver found himself in, such that *The Fox and the Flies* amounts almost to a massive (though not totalising) history of the Atlantic world and its underbelly over five decades. Wherever war and sex-hungry soldiers gathered, wherever unexpected economic windfalls like Johannesburg's gold attracted swarms of riff-raff, the pedlars of women such as Silver insinuated themselves (not excluding the oft-romanticised District Six). The same characters pop up everywhere, forming loose associations known colourfully as "Peruvians", or the "Max Hochstim Association", or "Caftans", family members supporting each other, ethnic connections remaining important over global peregrinations. So many characters, in fact, living under strings of pseudonyms, that Van Onselen finds it useful to include a six-page *dramatis personae*.

The elusive pervasiveness of these appalling people is one thing; even more gloomy is the concomitant corruption riddling virtually every law-enforcement agency with which Silver came into contact. Initially a bungling petty thief, he was able to buy various policemen off, spy for them, play them off against one another, almost everywhere he went. Anyone who thinks that the Selebi-Agliotti relationship, or the content of the recent film about a corrupt 1960s NYPD, *Pride & Glory*, are either unusual or exaggerated, will be obliged to think again. At the head of Chapter 17, Van Onselen quotes St Augustine: "For what are states but large bandit bands, and what are bandit bands but small states?" (p 285).

Interestingly, Van Onselen further suggests that the ways in which these criminals operated, were integral to the makings of the law itself:

Morals legislation in the Cape Colony, Natal, the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal in 1902-3 bear the imprimatur [is 'imprint' intended?] of organised crime fashioned on the Atlantic periphery by marginalised East Europeans, lawless refugees hardened in the cauldron of Russian oppression and clerical hatred ... Within that, much broader, context Silver had clearly played a crucial role (p 232)

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So detailed and multilayered is this book, that it is in a way unfortunate that Van Onselen chooses to end it with a dogged, but finally too tenuous argument that Joseph Silver *was* the eternally elusive Jack the Ripper. He does not, in my view, clinch the case – but then neither does anyone else, as far as I can gather. If the Ripper was not Silver, it was someone very like him. Though Van Onselen does not quite attain again the magisterial heights of his earlier tome, *The Seed is Mine*² (who could?), *The Fox and the Flies* is another astonishing marathon of research into another, albeit less uplifting sector of society that might otherwise be entirely lost to view.

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