To Speak of the Unspeakable
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To Speak of the Unspeakable

After the author was raped, she found no one wanted to hear about her struggle to survive.

AFTER SILENCE
Rape and My Journey Back.
By Nancy Venable Raine.
278 pp. New York:
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THERE are a lot of reasons people don't like to talk about rape. They feel upset, horrified, embarrassed, polluted, even cursed by the very thought of it. You do not have to go to Sri Lanka, where the locution "being shamed" is a local euphemism, or to India, where it is believed that emotions if expressed are dangerous and don't go away, to learn that women who are sexually assaulted don't want to discuss their experiences and certainly don't want to seek revenge by making the rapist the subject of their next book. Even in Manhattan, among loquacious, psychologically minded Westerners who believe that the emotions if left unexamined are dangerous, one of the best ways to stop dinner-party conversation dead is to start describing what it felt like to be raped. There are few published first-person accounts of the experience of being sexually pillaged and its aftermath. "After Silence" is one of the first and, I would wager, it is always going to be one of the best.

In 1985, Nancy Venable Raine was 39, divorced and living alone in a working-class area of Boston. She was attacked and tied up in her home and for several hours violated by an intruder whose face she never saw. "After Silence" is a profound and revelatory narrative of her suffering. Raine, who is a poet and essayist, tries to come to terms with unbidden feelings of shame, with the desecration of her spiritual essence — the identity of the person she was before the rape seemed "to belong to someone else" — and with the unwelcome yet insistent belief that she was responsible for her own defilement. The book is her attempt to "drain the swamp of victim-blame" and to write her way back to wholeness and out of hell by constructing a blameless and shameless modern narrative about the meaning of rape.

Raine is so honest a psychological explorer that she recognizes that rape is different from other kinds of assault — mugging, say — precisely because it evokes feelings of perversity and self-loathing, which silence the voice of pain. Her reports on the silence are poignant. Shortly after her publication of an essay in The New York Times Magazine in 1994 describing the rape, she goes for lunch at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., where she introduces herself to "the woman with the amber necklace," a well-known patron of the arts. "I thought your article was well written," the woman says. "But let's face it, no one wants to hear about such terrible things." Raine attends a dinner party in New York. The woman seated next to her recoils: "I just can't imagine how you can write about something so . . . so very personal." Another dinner party, this one for professional women, each of whom is invited by their hostess to talk about her current work. Full of apprehension she describes her project. A long silence. The hostess moves on to the next guest: "Well," she says. "Shall we get off rape to something . . . agreeable?" A rape victim, a close friend and a major character in the narrative — "the bravest woman I know" — does not want her real name used in the book. Raine herself could not for a long time bring herself to discuss the rape with either her niece or stepdaughter. Shame is a silencing emotion, she remarks. It presupposes wrongdoing.

Her analysis of the experience of self-blame is deep. She writes: "The sense that I was responsible for the rape supported a more important belief, one that I could not give up, although it had been severely damaged. It was the belief that I could control what happened to me, that my actions had a bearing on the outcome of my life." In other words, the mental link between misfortune and personal agency and the tendency to blame yourself may simply be corollaries of a universal (and, I would argue, correct) intuition that effort deserves to be exercised in life precisely because the world is just — effort is rewarded, you reap what you sow — at least in the long run, at least in the aggregate.

Even more profound, because so unsettling and human, is Raine's examination of the idea that surviving rape implies consent, in the mind of the victim at least. She writes of the shadow cast over her by her compliance, of feeling sexually perverse because she had made a compact with the rapist. "I did have what appears to be 'consent.' I instinctively 'decided' to live — unlike any number of female saints half-remembered from my childhood who chose death over the loss of their 'virtue.' I did make 'a deal with the devil.' "

Raine thinks the experience of rape *shouldn't* be different from the experience of other kinds of violence and assault. She wants the modern story of rape to be about violence and assault (plus the residual trauma associated with posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD) pure and simple, as though a forcible violation of the sanctity of the womb per se, the physical locus of social reproduction, carries no special or additional significance. Her claim that rape is just a crime of violence rather than a sexual act is bound to remain controversial. Why can't it be both? Not just an assault but a desecration, and of a special kind. Not just harm but an outrageous breach of the moral order that deserves a special kind of retribution. Raine is spectacular in her use of a premodern theological discourse of monsters and demons, heaven and hell, shame, pollution, contagion, grace, redemption and absolution for giving voice to her true feelings. Yet as she shifts from the premodern conception of rape as an abomination to a more new-fashioned (and, I think, morally thinner) discourse about rape as essentially traumatic assault, her powerful tone turns hortatory. She seems to have got back her sanity in exchange for becoming an advocate of an overmedicalized and reductive contemporary party line. Sanity is important, of course, and Raine has probably made the right trade. But as an admirer, I much prefer her voice to that of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association. "The technical language of psychotherapy," she herself recognizes in passing, "seems especially removed from the actual experience."

There are anthropological reports about peoples like the Mehinaku Indians of Brazil, whom Thomas Gregor describes, where sexual coercion does not result in severe trauma and is not associated with shame or dishonor. There are resilient individuals who are endowed with mental gifts and coping capacities that make it possible for them to get on with their lives after a sexual assault without life-altering symptoms of distress. Judging from available evidence, many women do not experience posttraumatic stress disorder after being raped. Raine recognizes this. "Every rape," she tells us, "intersects with an individual victim's pre-existing character traits." We can only be grateful that Raine is the sort of person who requests nitrous oxide when she gets her teeth cleaned, who remembers exactly where she was and what she was wearing when she first tied her own shoelaces, who believed early in life that fearing something makes it happen, who felt it was unfair that only girls did housework and who began keeping a diary when she was in the fifth grade. She brings to her encounter with the abomination ("I experienced the world as a place that included real demons from a real hell") gifts that make it possible for her to give character and voice to terror, rage, shame, pollution, panic, depression, helplessness, isolation and depersonalization. Whatever one thinks of the discourse of PTSD as a way of talking about rape, its psychiatric proponents have never before had so authentic and qualified a front-line correspondent.

According to Veena Das, an anthropologist who has written about the suffering of raped and abducted South Asian women, "Denial of others' pain is not about the failings of the intellect but the failings of the spirit." "After Silence" is a book that dignifies the human spirit. It should be read by everyone. ☐

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