



## Escape from the Carceral: Writing by American Prisoners, 1895-1916

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### Abstract

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault argued that the carceral state is inescapable. But is this true? One answer can be found within the ultimate carceral institution: the American prison at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper examines writing by American prisoners from between 1890 and 1915, and argues that prisoners' self-representations fit uneasily into the parameters of Foucault's carceral state: prisoners 'escaped' through religion, generic writing that defied progressive individuality, and the 'mirroring' of their audiences values, fears, and identity. In this way they blurred the distinction between 'self' and 'other,' 'delinquent' and 'normal' that Foucault believed arose inevitably in the modern carceral state.

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### Introduction

The carceral state is inescapable, concludes Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Foucault constructs the carceral bit-by-bit. At times he yanks the cloth off of the work-in-progress: the home, the school, the army, and the spectacular Panopticon are all elements of what will emerge as a total system. In Escher-esque style, the carceral builds on these repeating elements to form structures within structures. Subjects cannot step outside; the carceral forms the ideological basis of contemporary culture.

But is the carceral truly inescapable? An answer can be found within the ultimate carceral institution: the American prison at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a place ruled by reform and reason. According to Foucault, the scientific prison shapes prisoners on a template of carceral (i.e., bourgeois) values. The very design of this prison allows those in "power" to gather the "knowledge" that transforms inmates into "objects" – objects of a vast social apparatus that robs a thief (or murderer or debtor) of his political volition. A prisoner, says Foucault, from the day of his internment, abets this objectification. Living in a cell; eating and sleeping; working in a shop; these simple routines provide the data that allows the powers-that-be (wardens, judges, bourgeoisie) to craft the label of "delinquency" that excludes a prisoner from normal society (and, in the process, defines normality as everything that the prisoner is not).

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Hence Foucault arrives at the Panopticon: a structure with ideology built into its very walls, a central tower that allows endless observation of surrounding cells. Living in the Panopticon and being an object are one-and-the-same. The structure, we will see, gathers its own knowledge by allowing constant surveillance of inmates and their habits. All of which explains why there is so little room for resistance in Foucault's carceral model. Prisoners can not help but be trapped in "so many cages, so many small theaters, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible." (200) Prisoners can't resist. The only resistance is escape, and there is nowhere to go: Outside the prison is the vast carceral landscape, dotted with schools, hospitals, and armies all modeled on the Panopticon itself.

But somehow, prisoners escaped. To find them, we plunge into the vast, engrossing body of writing by American prisoners from between 1890 and 1915, where, in memoirs, newspapers, and pamphlets, prisoners presented themselves for inspection by prison officials and (importantly) by the American public. This paper will reveal the unexpected results: prisoners' self-representations fit uneasily into the parameters of Foucault's carceral state, and, in several ways, question the premise of that state.

In fact, inmates sent forth from the prisons a wave of literature that resists the carceral in the following ways. First, prisoners' writing was consistently religious, a trend that grew more pronounced even as penology became increasingly scientific. Second, the writing was generic, meaning that prisoners defied the "individuality" that Progressive prisons strove to both construct and exploit. Finally, prisoners' self-representations resist Foucault's theory in a subtle yet compelling manner: through these writings, prisoners "mirrored" their audience by copying its values, fears, and identity. By doing so they concealed their individuality behind a portrait of the American public, a strategy that blurred the distinction between "self" and "other," "delinquent" and "normal" that Foucault believed arose inevitably in the modern carceral state.

## **Prison elites and Scientific Reform**

Let's begin by showing that American prisons functioned as carceral institutions, thereby locking the door, or setting the stage for the escape. Foucault defines the carceral model as a product of five operations: "it refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation", i.e., it allows simultaneous observation of the entire social spectrum, made of infinite smaller parts. At the same time, "it differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of [a] rule that [is] made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average", meaning, it brings individuals into sharp, relentless relief within the larger spectrum and singles out those that depart from the approved rule. Then, "it measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the 'nature' of individuals." In other words, it uses data to describe and categorize individuals. Furthermore, "it introduces, through this 'value-giving' measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved." That is to say, the data must be made to comply with the standard. And finally, "it traces the limit that will define the difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal" (Foucault, 1995: 183). This concept of the "abnormal" is crucial to life far beyond the prison walls. In fact, it allows a

corresponding definition of “normality,” one that is equally quantitative and equally passive, relying, as it does, on ceaseless surveillance for confirmation.

A survey of American prison literature shows penology moving, at the turn-of-the century, in a direction that supports Foucault’s concept. The movement took place within a larger ideological shift that characterized the Progressive Movement, which transpired between roughly 1890 and 1920. Progressive reform has been traditionally, and broadly, defined as the effort to improve society using scientific methods. Laissez-faire policy, personal reformation, romanticism, and pure religion, in this view, were the Progressive casualties (Hofstadter, 1963). Data, surveillance, and expertise replaced them. The change was nowhere more apparent than in the newly constructed, carefully managed prisons that sprang up like spikes in the era (Rothman, 1971 and 1980).

Beginning in the 1870s, a cadre of prison administrators vocally supported the kinds of scientific methods that underlie Foucault’s carceral. Zebulon Brockway, superintendent of the new reformatory at Elmira, in New York, from 1876 to 1900, was one such figure (Pisciotta, 1994). Frederick Howard Wines, who headed the National Prison Association (henceforth NPA; a prominent trade and reform organization founded in 1870. See Skotniki, 2000: 120) from 1887 to 1890, was another. The men’s ideas read like a Foucauldian manual. Brockway, in frequent speeches to the NPA, defended inmate labor and education as the best routes to rehabilitation. Among his innovations was the “piece-price system,” in which contractors supplied prisoners with machines and materials, then paid them for the number of pieces (twine bales, shoes, hoes, etc.) that they produced (McKelvey, 1936 :96). Wines’ emphasis on measured work falls easily within Foucault’s vision of an elite who, by “proposing a quantity of work to be carried out, make it possible to express quantitatively the convict’s zeal and the progress of his improvement.” (Foucault, 1995: 243).

Brockway designed an education system similarly based on “levels” of achievement, which prisoners moved through at an independent pace, earning promotions through examinations (McKelvey, 1936 :111). His reforms sought endless differentiation, in quantity of work done, or number of lessons learned. They were, in essence, a “measure[] in quantitative terms,” a “hierarchiz[ing] in terms of value the abilities, the level, the ‘nature’ of individuals” that is readily recognizable from the pages of Foucault (Foucault, 1995: 183).

Frederick Howard Wines, in his 1910 book *Punishment and Reformation*, affirmed Brockway’s support for industrial training, the indeterminate sentence (ending when a prisoner was reformed, not after a fixed time), and a privilege system through which prisoners could earn rewards for good behavior (Wines, 1975). No longer was an inmate simply free or fettered; instead, an endless series of steps separated him from the outside world. Wines’ ideas, like those of Brockway, traded the “binary” for “differential distribution” (Foucault, 1995: 199). His inmates each received unique treatment based on personal assessment. A sentence could be constantly adjusted, privileges could be added or subtracted, and rehabilitation became a complex sum.

Tellingly, both Brockway and Wines spoke out against the penal tradition of solitary religious instruction. As Brockway explained to the New York Senate, “the actual value of preaching to prisoners, in its near and ulterior effects, is certainly questionable when subjected to practical tests.” (New York State Senate Doc. 21, 1881, 7-8, quoted in Skotnicki, 127). Brockway was especially critical of the evangelical clergy who offered emotional, dramatic sermons in his prison.

Wines, even more than Brockway, dressed his religious musings in new social-scientific terminology, noting, “it may surprise the readers of this book to observe the extent to which the author recognizes the Bible as a sort of elementary text-book of sociology; but this is one of its legitimate uses” (Wines, 1975: 35). Early 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers, who designed programs around Bible study, would have called this heresy. But Wines went on to describe the problems he saw with religious training within a system based on quantification and measurement:

Indeed, there is ample evidence that religious experience or conversion has played a part in the reformation of some delinquents. Usually, however, this has been of an informal – what might be called a cataclysmic – nature. It has occurred more by accident than design. The laws of its operation have not been well formulated and for that reason it does not occupy as dependable a place in prognosis as it should, perhaps. (Wines, 1975: 345)

Wines described religion as a force incompatible with Foucault’s penal mechanism. It was, for one, “unmeasurable,” i.e., impossible to quantify. It followed no “laws” or formulas. And it was “cataclysmic:” sudden, blinding, not something that an administrator could effectively observe. Wines went on to question clergy for their belief in criminal reformation:

Offenders are usually very pragmatic. They have lived in a world of facts, often very hard facts, and are apt to judge any teaching by its practical bearings..... One reason why chaplains do not command more respect than they do is that they are so apt to be thinking and talking about release from this world, whereas what prisoners are interested in is release from jail (Wines, 1975: 346).

Wines regarded chaplains as naïve and idealistic victims of prisoners’ manipulations. His view was all the more remarkable considering that Wines himself was a religious man who had served as a missionary, hospital chaplain, and even minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois (American National Biography, 1999 ed., s.v. “Wines, Frederick Howard”).

Brockway, Wines, and others like them were in charge of setting rehabilitation standards in Progressive prisons. Voluntary work, education, exercise – in short, personal discipline – showed that a prisoner was “cured.” The prisons were equipped with a cadre of mechanisms to assess an inmate’s progress. Teams of experts roamed the halls, and written exams were distributed at regular intervals (National Prison Association Report, 1895: 321). A Progressive Era prisoner was the subject of ceaseless, objectifying observation by people with power. And “power” meant more than just power to observe; it was also power to release (through a terminated sentence or reduced penalty) a prisoner from the confining routine.

According to Foucault, a Progressive prisoner would have little choice but to adapt to the carceral. Transformed into an “object” by penal mechanisms beyond his control, a prisoner must either demonstrate “normality” (thus earning his release), or serve in the role of “delinquent,” marked always by measurable deficiencies. It matters little which route the prisoner chooses: “normality” is a relative term that can’t exist without surveillance, which makes it as restrictive as any other state. Foucault believes inmates often abet their own objectification: aware they are being watched from the “central tower” of the Panoptic structure, they conform to a false normality until it becomes a personal habit:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power...in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault, 1995: 201)

In the context of the Progressive prison, it was clearly administrators who occupied the central Panoptic tower. Brockway and Wines held the clipboards and wrote the manuals that assessed “normality” (i.e. rehabilitation), even as they purged their prisons of Sunday schools and psalms. As such, Foucault says administrators enjoyed irrefutable dominance, “an overall effect of...strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated” (Foucault, 1995: 27). They were invisible to prisoners, forcing, in theory, the latter to enact a perpetual play “in many small theaters, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (Foucault, 1995: 200). The scripts of these plays, according to Foucault, should be rational, mechanical, disciplined . . . attempts by prisoners to appease the dominant eyes, the eyes that never blink.

### Reform without “Reason”

But there were more eyes in the prison, belonging to people who (like prisoners) were excluded from the Panoptic tower, although (unlike true prisoners) they were ostensibly free. These eyes were likely filled with tears; not tears of grief, but tears of sympathy, of tenderness, of emotion. Meet Maude Ballington Booth and her matronly companions, a new breed of prison reformer who appeared in great numbers at Progressive prison doors, with Bibles, pamphlets, and hankies in hand.

Maude Ballington Booth, born in England to evangelical parents, was the prototypical sentimental female reformer. After establishing the American branch of the British Salvation Army (a charitable organization; see Chesham, 1965) in 1887, Booth moved on to found an evangelical organization based in New York’s infamous Sing Sing prison in 1896. She named it the Volunteer Prison League (American National Bibliography, 1999 ed., s.v. “Ballington Booth, Maude”). Booth built the League on the premise that volunteer reformers would convert prisoners, who would in turn spread the word to other prisoners. She offered advice and solicited correspondence from inmates through the *Volunteer Gazette*, a newsletter distributed in the prisons (McKelvey, 1936: 161).

In *After Prison, What?* (1903) Booth described her blend of religion, morality, and nurturing. Of a first visit to the New York state prison, she recalled "I did not attempt to preach...Stories I had gathered from the great fragrant book of nature, or that had come to me from baby lips, I realized would touch [the prisoners'] hearts more swiftly than the most forcible arguments or convincing condemnations" (Booth, 1903: 49). Her approach was unmistakably that of an evangelical woman. Booth rejected didactic sermons in favor of sentimental domestic imagery. The crux of her program was simple. Converts signed a five-point pledge:

First - to pray every morning and night. Second - to read the Day Book faithfully. Third - to refrain from the use of bad language. Fourth - to be faithful in the observance of prison rules and discipline so as to become an example of good conduct. Fifth - to earnestly seek to cheer and encourage others in well-doing and right living, trying where it is possible to make new members of the League (Booth, 1903: 55-6).

Prisoners were thus transformed into religious, orderly inhabitants of their institutions. In lieu of tests and levels, Booth favored a binary approach: between "bad" and "good" stood naught but a simple pledge.

A survey of other female reformers shows that Booth's values were far from anomalous. Madeline Z. Doty, a female lawyer and humanitarian, took up the cause of prison reform in the 1910s (Rinehart, 2001). Doty was not affiliated with an evangelical church. Nor did she come from a conservative background; to the contrary, Doty lived for many years in New York City's Greenwich Village where she interacted with the radical liberal vanguard of the early twentieth century. After touring the women's prison at Auburn, N.Y., and later conducting interviews with male convicts, Doty became a prisoners' advocate in what she saw as a battle against repressive officials. Doty was totally sympathetic to the inmates she met. The cause of their criminality, she believed, was lack of maternal nurturing

Much has been written about the maternal impulse shown by female reformers in the Progressive Era. "Maternalism" involved two related assumptions. The first was that the poor and deprived required moral and spiritual aid in addition to economic help. The second was that motherly instincts uniquely qualified women to provide this aid. Maternalism represented a largely conservative impulse within the reform community, one that was often irreconcilable with the rational, statistical direction in which reform was moving at the turn-of-the-century (Gordon, 1995: 65). In essence, it drew on a long tradition of female reform as a way for women to crusade for domestic and spiritual ideals.

Booth and Doty railed against the newly powerful scientific community. Booth recalled many a convict "with a face that perhaps the criminologists would have liked to classify" and label incorrigible, whom she had successfully reformed using mild persuasion (Booth, 1903: 204). Doty, too, saw limits to Progressive reform. She bemoaned charges of sentimentalism, and urged women to follow their feminine instincts even if they received criticism from administrators. Doty remarked, "if you inform a board of man trustees that the institutional plumbing is bad and the children are getting typhoid, they will change it with will and install the latest

improvements...To nourish the heart of a child and make it blossom like a flower, is woman's secret" (Doty 1916, 155).

Few of Booth's or Doty's reforms have a place in Foucault's Panopticon. The Volunteer Prisoner League was a fundamentally horizontal group: women converted prisoners who converted other prisoners, in defiance of the hierarchy that gives the Panopticon its power. There was no vantage point from which to survey the entire field. Conversion, furthermore, was an invisible process. Neither good words nor silent prayer could be observed or measured with any efficacy. There were no "levels" of progress or biographical excavations in the women's programs: a moral conversion wiped the slate in one simple, clean stroke.

Here we must wonder if female reformers were conducting their own flight from Foucault's carceral regime. While a full discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper, Foucault assures us in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* that bourgeois women were firmly tied up in the repressive power structure. Yes, he notes, some women were vocal in discussing their gendered impulses. But they were driven by "an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about[in] endlessly accumulated detail" (Foucault, 1978: 18). The effect was to replace true desire with speech. Thus, women who declared their maternal feelings were engaged in a "Christian discourse" meant to curb unfettered sexuality in a way that was ultimately repressive (Foucault, 1978: 21). Women who were too zealous (or even too pious) in their proclamations earned a diagnosis of "hysteria," abetted by examination and analysis (Foucault, 1978: 104). And, says Foucault, "the Mother, with her negative image of 'nervous woman' constituted the most visible form of this hysterization" (Foucault, 1978: 104).

Predictably enough, scientific reformers like Brockway and Wines had mixed feelings about their sentimental guests, who by the 1870s were appearing in ever greater numbers at the gates. At first, many administrators were heartened by the increased public involvement. The New York Prison Association circulated a statement from Gideon Haynes, warden of the Mass State Prison at Charlestown, calling the prisons "one of the most touching interests to which a benevolent heart can turn its sympathy, or a philosophical mind direct its reflections, and not theoretical reflections alone, but hearty and zealous action" (New York Prison Association [NYPA], 1865: 101). Other administrators urged reformers to fill the gaps left by a diminished clerical presence.

It soon became clear, however, that such participation had its drawbacks. The private citizens that appeared were perhaps not the ones that administrators wished to attract. In 1889 the NPA noted, "there are objections to having the religious work of the prison carried on by the prisoners' aid society. It tends to give the prisoners and the public wrong ideas as to the aims of the society. It tends to throw the work of the society into the hands of religious cranks, who will discredit both the religious work and the prisoners' aid work" (NPA, 189: 278-80). Only convicts with moral failings, the NPA claimed, would be receptive to such aid. Society members were urged to earn the respect of prison officials and professional reformers by showing their capacity for serious, quantifiable work.

Zebulon Brockway, as an administrator who had helped to pioneer the latter, felt particularly frustrated by the citizen-reformers. He discussed the subject, with characteristic “isms” and “plasms,” tempered, however, with the unusual delicacy his feminine subjects meted:

Another difficulty embarrassing successful work of reformatories is a certain amount of sentimentalism which is abroad in the community. I hardly dare trust myself to speak at length on that subject. But do remember and accept it that the grand purpose is to lead these men to good citizenship and to good character, and, if you feel religiously inclined to their eternal salvation. Let not any consideration of sentimentalism move you to deter us from the vigorous and compulsory methods necessary to build up these protoplasmic beings into something in the semblance of a man (NPA, 1895: 321).

It appears, then, that despite their presence in Progressive prisons, sentimental female reformers had little control over prison policy. Officials urged them to stay away from the penal machinery, lest they pinch their fingers or jam up the works. Women were in no case to intercede on behalf of inmates. Only experts, Brockway felt, could tell when a prisoner was truly rehabilitated.

## The Prisoners Speak

Piece by piece, we’ve unearthed Foucault’s carceral in the Progressive American prison. We’ve found the tower, and guessed at its occupants. We’ve found the intruders, women perhaps trapped in their own carceral chambers, barred from the tower of power. The door is locked, it seems, and by all indications, science was the only key. According to Foucault, such was the carceral mechanism: those who occupy the tower (the judges, the wardens, the bourgeois) can define normality (predictably scientific) and gather the knowledge needed to include an inmate in its confines, or cast him, if he fails their tests, into delinquency.

What will the prisoners do now?

### *Religious Challenge*

Here comes an anonymous inmate of Sing Sing prison, who, as author of *Echoes from the Living Grave* (1869), will offer insight into his plan. He recalls that a parade of people has visited his cell: a Protestant of German descent, then two Catholic sisters, a Priest, and a man with religious tracts. This author says he resisted their advances at first, but soon decided to accept a pamphlet. He recounts:

My eyes were opened by degrees, and my proud, stubborn, and rebellious heart was broken. Great mountains of sin arose before me. . . . This, however, was but the beginning of a struggle with sin and Satan, which continued for two long and weary years of heaviness and distress. I prayed with burning tears, and cried to God with great agony” (Echoes, 1869: 61).

But the agony did not last:

In due time, the chief of sinners became humble as a child, who is now growing in grace, seeking where and how he might advance his Masters' kingdom. His closet is his dearest place; his workshop is his temple; his neighbor is his brother; his joy is Jesus, his life is Christ, and his death will be glory" (Echoes, 1869: 67).

Writing in 1869, this inmate offered a type of account that became, over the next decades, both more common and more sophisticated. Even as scientific reform gained stock with Progressive administrators, prisoners chose religion over science in their exchanges with a divided American public. By 1900, Maude Ballington Booth was reporting phenomenal success. The program at Sing Sing spread to Auburn, Clinton, Charlestown, Trenton, Joilet, Columbus, Ft. Leavenworth, and farther (Booth, 1903: 52). Requests for visits flooded Booth's mailbox. She described the coveted visits; convicts were welcomed into a chapel filled with flowers and greenery. At Dannemora prison, in upstate New York, Booth remembered that "men were rising all over the place, until eighty-seven stood in God's presence, seeking the light and cleansing and liberty that he alone can give" (Booth, 1903: 61). The spectacle caused convicts and officials alike to burst into tears.

Reformed prisoners soon began to write their way into the popular press. Snuggled between "The Secret Society of Mothers" and "The Minister's Social Helper" in the March 1910 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* was "Why I am a Life Prisoner in Sing Sing." Its author described a childhood during which his father had urged him to discard the "truths of Christianity" and to associate with "people much older than myself..., mostly people of no religious beliefs, but skeptics and confirmed atheists." His childhood, he claimed, included no religious guidance at all (*Ladies Home Journal*, March 1910: 15).

Imprisoned for murder, the author had been an incorrigible inmate until approached by an "older woman" who spoke to him for half an hour about the blessings of Christ. After two months of pondering, the prisoner "gave my life to Christ- in a word I was converted." He then became the prison stenographer, a choir member, and health nut on the grounds that "dietary righteousness" is "on a par with spiritual well being."

The author went on to discuss cleanliness, Godliness, and their relation to the body and the soul. The piece concluded with the author's defense of his frequent references to Jesus. He called them a reproach to those "New Thinkers," who claimed that men don't need a Savior but can triumph over evil if they "think right." The prisoner proclaimed

if anyone preaching such a creed had seen life as I have seen it and been drunk on the dregs of sin as I have been, and had been put down in the depths of hell as I have been, and then,...made sober by a draught of the precious blood of Christ, and instead of the old sights and sounds had come into attunement with the Divine Voice, one wouldn't preach that way!" (*Ladies Home Journal*, March 1910: 15)

Harry Orchard, the defendant in a highly publicized murder trial after he was accused of murdering the ex-governor of Idaho as part of a union plot (See Lukas, 1997), wrote about a similar change of heart in *McClure's* magazine. Claiming that he at first didn't want officials to see him reading a Bible, Orchard said he one day decided to put aside his fears. His conversion followed after several months of internal turmoil. He recalled:

....I thank God to-day that I know I am a sinner saved by grace, through no good merits of mine, but all through the blood of Jesus Christ, our blessed Savior and Redeemer....Jesus Christ is the only way that we can approach God's Throne and plead His mercy, as Jesus is our Mediator and Redeemer who took upon himself our sins. It all seems clear to me now. (Orchard, *McClure's*, November, 1907; Vol. 30 :129)

Popular literature brims with such accounts of sudden conversions and supernatural faith. Prisoners who made them often explicitly contrasted them with the scientific world views they attributed to administrators. As a group they spoke overwhelmingly against the reformatories, rejecting their "scientific improvements" (Pisciotta, 1994: 33-60). A perceptive prisoner wrote in 1899:

if we do not tub o'mornings we have rupiphobia; if our letters exceed telegraphic brevity we are graphomaniacs; if we have a sneaking regard for women we are erotomaniacs; if our women folk patronize the 'bargain counter' they are oniomaniacs.

The author yearned for old ideals, healthy appetites, and "to return to the old comforting superstitions and habits" (*Star of Hope*, 22 April 1899: 1). Another prisoner wrote:

the doctors say there is only one incurable mental disease - religious insanity. In the eyes of the reformers Mrs. Booth does a great thing by making some of us converts, but experts in mental diseases declare that it is very bad to excite convicts to such a pitch" (Hapgood, 1975: 241).

Prisoners who chose religion over science resisted Foucault's Panopticon, which depended, for its operation, on "observable" processes and quantifiable data. Some prisoners viewed religious conversion as an invisible process. One, known only as "Larry," confided to Madeline Doty that his mother "taught me to like prayer. But that institution taught me to hate it. They beat us if our lips did not move while praying. They never stopped to consider that the heart might be moving in silent prayer" (Doty, 1916: 142). Larry defended a type of invisible reform that Progressive administrators felt was invalid, given their faith in surveillance.

Other inmates stressed the sudden nature of conversion, which could transform a person from "sinner" to "saved" in one fell swoop. The Sing Sing prisoner claimed the experience was impossible to measure: "The man who knows...may not be able to sit down and outline by what process he came into the knowledge; but it is his, and no power on earth can rob him of it," he said. Such mysterious, sudden transformations were inimical to Foucault's carceral society,

which makes obsolete “the binary opposition of the permitted and the forbidden.” (Foucault, 1995: 183) In the Panopticon there is no “bad” and no “good” (a binary system), and no jumping between them. There are only symptoms of deviance, and signs of progress, and endless distinctions that represent degrees of normality to be measured and described.

So prisoners were resisting the carceral through the *content* of their appeals, something that Foucault would likely not expect. According to Foucault, it was the very architecture of the Panopticon that enabled the “knowledge gathering” by those in power. A prisoner, he claimed, would likely supply the desired data for fear of the unblinking eye. The Panopticon, he said, works “to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power...in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers,” (Foucault, 1995: 201). But prisoners seem to have felt little pressure to appease the people in power. They chose instead to display “abnormality,” accepting characterization as such by administrators who claimed to be offering a better life through scientific reform.

### *Generic challenge*

While such the accounts posed a formidable religious challenge to the carceral, they further resist it by virtue of their *consistency*. This consistency was truly remarkable. Convict after convict described a healthy childhood enjoyed under the auspices of a caring parent – usually a mother. The few who didn’t tended to attribute their crimes to lack of a bourgeois home.

Harry Orchard claimed in his autobiographical confession that his religious parents had urged him to attend church and Sunday school. “I was brought up to love and fear God and to believe in a hereafter,” he said (Orchard, McClure’s, July 1907; Vol. 29: 296). He continued:

When working away from home, I always looked forward to Sunday, as I would have a chance to go home and spend the Sabbath with my folks...It makes me feel sad now when I look back over these happy days and think especially of our dear loving mother and the anxiety she had for our welfare, and the many hard, weary days she toiled and worked and underwent many privations for us, as a loving mother will do for her family. We may not have had as nice clothes as some of our neighbors, but they were always clean and neatly mended. (Orchard, McClure’s, July 1907; Volume 29: 296).

Only in a later section of his autobiography, titled “I Begin to Live Beyond My Means,” does Orchard describe a new interest in drinking, gambling, and “a pretty fast life” which consumed him after he left his parents’ farm. So began his moral decay

Orchard’s account of loving, religious parents was far from singular. Convict after convict described to Madeline Doty a devoted, gentle mother, from whom the system had separated him at a young age. The accounts overwhelmingly tied maternal affection to religious faith. Larry, one of Doty’s confidantes, was exemplary: in his words, his mother “taught me to like prayer. But that institution taught me to hate it.” After his first release from prison, Larry never attended church. When his mother questioned him, he had asked if his prison keepers would go to

Heaven. Receiving an affirmative response, Larry laughed and cast aside all religious faith (Doty, 1916: 142).

The author of “Why I am a Life Prisoner in Sing Sing” offered a variation on the theme, claiming that because his mother was not involved with his upbringing he had been permitted to associate with “skeptics and confirmed atheists” and to “eat a miscellaneous lot of fodder, of which meat formed a large percentage and sweets and pastries another.” He further recalled that “Wine, beer, and whisky were almost all in the house, and from the time I was ten I was allowed beer if I wanted it” (*Ladies Home Journal*, 1910: 15). The author tailored his account to address standard bourgeois ideals, stating a yearning for what he never had.

Such accounts amount to generic biographies. They offer a set of universal circumstances – loving parents, a religious upbringing, a forced separation – that tell little about the inmate as an individual. The constancy of prisoners’ accounts offers a challenge to the Panoptic state, as described by Foucault. Foucault claims the Panopticon functions to create a biography that transforms an inmate into an individual who stands out in abnormal relief. The Panopticon compiles biographical data that becomes a tool for subjugation. In the past, he says, to be described in writing had been a privilege, but:

[T]he disciplinary methods reversed this relation, lowered the threshold of describable individuality and made of this description a means of control and a method of domination...This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection. (Foucault, 1995: 191)

By crafting generic autobiographies, prisoners countered such sinister intentions. In fact, the Sing Sing life prisoner admitted his tale was in many ways trite. He went so far as to describe the familiar plot-line, claiming:

I daresay it is not an uncommon one; a Christless home, much quarreling between parents and all members of the family, youthfulness and yet no home teaching of example nor precept to curb the spirit;...a seeking outside the home;...a drifting into depraved methods of life;...finally, what must, and, logically, only can be –a bringing up with a half hitch and a round turn (LHJ, March 1910: 93).

By refusing to distinguish themselves from one another in their writing, prisoners resisted the biographical “individuality” that the Panopticon was designed to confer. In essence, they work against the Panopticon’s ability to “differentiate[] individuals from one another, in terms of the [average] rule” (Foucault, 1995: 183). But how can this be, given that Foucault believes differentiation is a structural effect, inevitable given the “strategic positions” of inmates and elites in the Panopticon? It appears the inmates are escaping.

### *Mirrored Challenge*

We've seen that prisoners' writings tended to be both religious and generic. As such, they contradicted the values of those who occupied the Panoptic tower in Progressive American prisons. Also as such, however, they closely matched the values of the emotion female coalition we've recently encountered. In fact, prisoners seem to have pandered to the "maternalist" impulse that drove many female reformers of the era, creating self-portraits that mirrored bourgeois values to a sometimes bizarre extent.

Convicts at Sing Sing debuted a new column in the June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1899 edition of their weekly paper (*Star of Hope* [Sing Sing Prison], 17 June 1899). Called V.P.L. (for Volunteer Prisoners' League), it was soon filled with accounts of prisoner worship, conversions, inspirational religious quotes, and tributes to Mrs. Booth. Convict 1500, writing from Sing Sing in *Life in Sing Sing*, confirmed that Booth's pragmatic evangelicalism won many converts. All she asked, he said, was that a convict believe in the teachings, abstain from swearing, and tell the truth. In return she offered correspondence in prison and moral support. Convict 1500 observed that his fellow prisoners loved Booth and called her "Little Mother" (Number 1500, 1915: 182).

Just as well-versed in maternal symbolism was Canada Blackie, writing in *Good Housekeeping* and *Century Magazine* with the help of a female reformer named Anne Field (Field, 1915). A chapter titled "Blackie and His Mother" was devoted to Blackie's relationship with a female reformer whom he one day spotted in the prison chapel. Struck by the woman's resemblance to his own mother, Blackie asked her, "May I write to you as if you were my mother? And may I think of you and call you that?" (Field, 1915: 113). In the letters that followed Blackie invoked "little fleecy cloudlets, gold-lined by the sun's bright rays," and a "little cricket who often came to cheer me with its homelike little song." He recounted a truly bizarre vision of a Norseman, a phantom ship, and "a woman – a mother, whose face was so sweet and kind that I knew instinctively God alone had designed it" (Field, 1915: 116). This feminine imagery contrasts sharply with the direct, masculine style that administrators and typical Progressive men favored.

The anonymous Sing Sing author was equally extreme in his display of feminine detail. After recounting his religious awakening he described his health woes:

I have always been afflicted with nasal catarrh and was very susceptible to colds, which would hit me hard and last long. I had been treated by physicians for [a] skin eruption, one having called it neurosis (probably correctly) and prescribing bromides...But there was no relief because the symptom was being treated rather than the cause; and one day, while waiting for the physician, his attendant said to me: "The trouble is you are too fat." And I left that room with a bee in my bonnet. (*Ladies Home Journal*, March 1910: 15).

The complaints and treatments this inmate describes are uniquely feminine. The author went so far as to tackle his obesity with the "Fletcher Diet" (a popular method pioneered in the era by a man name Horace Fletcher). Less than half the hash portion at breakfast with just two slices of bread; a piece of meat the size of two fingers or smaller, a potato, and one-third a cup of soup at dinner; a piece of bread for supper, and two quarts of water; such were his daily rations.

Prisoners in the Progressive Era increasingly built appeals around concepts of religion, motherhood, and bourgeois domesticity. They seem to have been responding to cues provided by Booth, Doty, and the women who accompanied them into the prisons. Prisoners who followed such cues made appeals that incorporated domestic imagery and religion to an extent that was at times comical. Prisoners became dieters, worshippers, and sentimentalists. Their writing became, in essence, a “mirror” of a conservative female audience. They largely failed to provide the scientific portraits of rehabilitation that penologists solicited.

Some prisoners who chose a conservative, female audience for their appeals did so with striking deliberation, as a series of articles from an 1899 issue of the *Star of Hope* prison newspaper suggests. On July 15<sup>th</sup> a piece titled “Be Conservative” urged prisoners not to publish articles that disputed laws or contested their sentences. Such articles, he claimed, antagonized the public (*Star of Hope*, 15 July, 1899). A rebuttal came on September 23<sup>rd</sup>. The author of “Anant [sic] be Conservative” felt that to get results, prisoners must try to use the paper to convince the public of injustice in the penal system. He claimed, “it is not from ourselves, but the outside public that we must expect relief. We must, therefore, govern our acts with a view to the effect upon the mind of that public” (*Star of Hope*, 23 Sept. 1899). On October 21, Auburn Prisoner 24502 submitted “Tell the Truth: Don’t Cringe.” He dubbed the reading public a “silent influence” who had as “a main objective the uplifting of the unfortunate class.” As such, he claimed, they would appreciate *moral* demonstrations. Prisoners should “be conservative” on issues of rights, but they should be vocal in reporting “moral” transgressions by administrators. To the author of “Be Conservative” he suggested, “you have mistaken the calibre [sic] of the public mind” (*Star of Hope*, 21 Oct. 1899).

Tempers flared in this illuminating exchange. “Be Conservative” told prisoners to avoid policy-based attacks on injustice in the penal system. They would do better, he suggested, to stress the moral trials that they faced. The dialogue apparently sparked significant controversy among prisoners. As savvy writers, they were deeply concerned with how to present themselves in a favorable light to a public that they knew to be increasingly concerned with “conservative” moral issues.

Prisoners who consciously mirrored a conservative audience chipped away at the carceral. By making appeals that “mirrored” their audience, prisoners obscured their individual identities behind formulaic reflections of “normality.” So, the appeals resist being characterized as deviant. Foucault believed that the greatest, and most insidious, coup of the carceral was its ability to “create” deviance and to “define the difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal” (Foucault, 1995: 183). Prisoners who mirrored their conservative audience subverted this process by blurring the divisions between “normal” and “delinquent” that are crucial both to the carceral state and to the liberal society that it supports. They managed, it seems, to reposition the “external frontier,” which should not, in theory, have been possible from within a Panoptic cell.

Furthermore, prisoners did this without truly conforming to bourgeois standards. According to Foucault, a prisoner always has the option to reform. However, to do so he needs to demonstrate behavior deemed acceptable – normal – by the Panoptic tower’s occupants. By and

by, the behaviors become habit, rendering the prisoner a participant in his own subjugation. He can then be released. But prisoners who wrote “false” portraits of bourgeois female reformers shielded their own subjectivity. Much of their writing was “normal,” yet patently false; as such, it was a slippery target for the carceral’s objectifying gaze. Behind the written shield lurked a living, breathing criminal.

## Escape from the Carceral

When seen as carefully crafted messages, prisoners’ appeals move into the rocky territory of resistance. In contrast to some of his later work, Foucault makes few provisions for resistance in *Discipline and Punish*. He admits an interest in the spate of prison uprisings that took place in the 1970s. He, believes, however, that these revolts were *pragmatic* in nature. *Ideological* revolts against the Panoptic apparatus, in contrast, are conspicuously absent. As he says:

In recent years, prison revolts have occurred throughout the world...They were revolts against an entire state of physical misery that is over a century old: against cold, suffocation and overcrowding, against decrepit walls, hunger, physical maltreatment. But they were also revolts against model prisons, tranquilizers, isolation, the medical or educational services. Were they revolts whose aims were merely material? Or contradictory revolts against the obsolete, but also against comfort; against the wardens, but also against the psychiatrists? In fact, all these movements – and the innumerable discourses that the prison has given rise to since the early nineteenth century – have been about the body and material things. (Foucault, 1995: 30)

But prisoners’ writings seem to contest this observation. They rejected the schooling, the shots, the statistics that administrators claimed to implement for their benefit. Why, one wonders, did prisoners write embarrassingly emotional appeals to women, even when parole in the Progressive Era, as defined by administrators, was contingent on quantifiable rehabilitation?

It is tempting to explain the accounts by casting prisoners as savvy rebels against the carceral state. Perhaps prisoners sensed that behind scientific reform lurked class bias, a desire to “objectify” through surveillance. Foucault, influenced by Marxism, saw the sinister side of rational reform, believing that reformers were in fact acting as social elites who wished to consolidate their power, and establish “a series of mechanisms for unbalancing power relations definitively and everywhere” (Foucault, 1995: 223). As a defense he mentions “the tactic of what might be called the ‘counter-fait *divers*’...What the workers’ newspapers do is to reverse the use that was made of crimes or trials in the newspapers...The counter-*fait divers* systematically stresses the facts of delinquency in the bourgeoisie...” (Foucault, 1995: 288). He perhaps sees the inklings of resistance in such a class-based strategy.

However, prisoners’ written rebellions were not the type that a Marxist would celebrate. They owed nothing to class solidarity; that is, few prisoners described themselves as members of an oppressed class. Furthermore, they resisted change. Prisoners made their appeals to the most

conservative members of the reform community, women who saw activism as a way to protect traditional ideals, not as a route to institutional or social change. The appeals were not radical; rather, following cues from their female audience, they resisted rationalism with *conservatism*.

Oddly enough, this very feature offered the best chance of escape from Foucault's carceral. The carceral, and the great Panopticon at its center, operate to make traditional resistance futile. One who "resists" (by breaking, fighting, shouting) will earn little except a label of "delinquency," as he stands out from the infinite cellular landscape, clearly visible to the powers-that-be. One who "reforms" will be forced into a ceaseless performance of normality for the benefit of those same powers, an outcome that is just as restrictive. But prisoners' found an alternative: their writing defied labeling as "normal" or "delinquent." It did so by obfuscating the data needed for elites to make that call. Writers ceased to be individuals. Instead, they hid behind a "mirror" of a "normal" American public, even while officials were projecting very different standards, which, if accepted, they claimed would bring greater rewards.

In no way did prisoners seek to reverse the Panoptic relation. That is, they never tried to storm the Panoptic tower by gaining a "knowledge" of its occupants, knowledge that might have allowed a transfer of "power." This form of resistance, had they attempted it, has a place in Foucault's vision of power as "an overall effect of...strategic positions" (Foucault, 1995: 27). Foucault allows for a simple reversal of power relations, provided it takes place without the dismantling of the carceral scheme. The occupants of the tower can change, he says. What he does not imagine is a form of resistance that subverts power relations without a corresponding transfer of knowledge, which prisoners seem to have achieved.

Prisoners' writings thus offer a substantive challenge to Foucault. Through their appeals, American prisoners seem to have escaped the carceral paradigm. Their ability to do so was oddly linked to their captive status. A free writer would have had little incentive to "mirror" the values of his audience, thereby sacrificing individuality. Furthermore, free men in the Progressive Era disdained the sentimental, religious ideals that imposed barriers to rational reform. It appears that prisoners, confined in what Foucault sees as the ultimate carceral institution, were best situated to resist carceral pressures. Such resistance was less plausible for people outside the prison walls. Such was the great irony in irons.

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