
Ghosts of Sing Sing, or the Metaphysics of Secularism

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Advancing a particular version of secularism, antebellum practices such as phrenology and spiritualism encouraged the conflation of moral agency with the directives of national security. In an attempt to situate such practices in relation to secular assumptions about politics in the mid-nineteenth century, this essay charts the deployment of occult ideas at Sing Sing State Penitentiary. Before their embrace of spiritualism in the early 1850s, both John Edmonds, the President of the Prison Association of New York, and Eliza Farnham, an advocate of phrenology, modified Sing Sing's evangelical approach to phrenology. Rather than continue to localize individual sin as the hinge of religious conversion, their methods focused increasingly on the cultivation of that which was both within *and* beyond the criminal body—the dormant potentiality of citizenship. To attend to the ascendancy of metaphysics at Sing Sing, I argue, is to begin to unpack the power and scope of what may be called, with all its disturbing ironies, a religion born of secular modernity.

SOME KIND OF WONDERFUL

SECULARISM IS MORE than an ideology. It is a moral force, a connective tissue, a widely shared and massively intricate set of political and epistemological assumptions. And like anything in excess of ideology, secularism defies logic, particularly its own (Durkheim 1995). In antebellum America, for example, secularism structured the institutions

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of commerce, consumerism, and journalistic objectivity even as it affected the ways of church governance and the means of missionary outreach. Secularism, although fueling the energies of disestablishment in the Revolutionary period, channeled them throughout the nineteenth century into more experiential and/or more reasonable forms of piety. And as an explicit politics of and about the human, secularism sought to guarantee democratic pluralism, moral autonomy, and, most notoriously, freedom *from* religion and the freedom *to practice it*.

As secularism becomes the focus of genealogical treatments (Connolly 2000; Asad 2003; Anidjar 2006), its power within Anglo-European modernity becomes more apparent, whereas its contours and character less so. As the case of antebellum spiritualism suggests, rather than liberate science *from* faith or the state *from* religion, the practices of an emergent secularism undermined these categorical emancipations. For spiritualist leaders and those who would soon become them, democratic polity and republican virtue were, themselves, divine. Divinity, in other words, was not restricted to the divine realm. Or as T. L. Harris argued in 1854 at a conference in New York, spiritualists worshipped “a God of freedom, a God of republicanism, a God of liberty, a God of equity, a God of science, a God of art, a God of poetry, a God of beauty, a God of heroism, a God of moral worth, a God of universal benevolence, and a God of universal inspiration. That God lives” (Ellinwood 1854: 333).

Harris’s riff was not uncommon among antebellum spiritualists, and it broaches a number of questions: What is the relationship between the self-conscious sacralization of the State *and* the state of everyday life? What do practices that ascribed spectral presence to other bodies—organic and social—have to do with the centralization of American geo-political power? To what degree was spiritualism an extension of the “systematic benevolence” of evangelicals in pursuit of a divinely sanctioned republicanism?¹ Was spiritualism a response to the intimate and penetrative powers of political rationality unleashed by the secular modern? Most broadly, what are the metaphysics of antebellum secularism?

¹ During this period of “manifest destiny,” tract societies, revival circuits, home missions, and other forms of aggressive institutional outreach suggest that colonial power, aided by technological advances in media and travel, was not simply a matter of the frontier. On the contrary, it was manifest in new modes of ideological interdependence and deployed in new practices of material and social management (Ryan 2003). On deployments of imperial power at mid-century made possible by the creation and maintenance of particular sensibilities of personal assent, see Dimock (1989), Hartman (1997), and Kaplan (2002). On “powers of the secular modern,” see Hirschkind and Scott (2006).

To begin to gain leverage upon such questions I direct your attention to the honorable John W. Edmonds. As a former legislator, lawyer, and confidant to Presidents Martin van Buren and Andrew Jackson, state senator, President of the New York Prison Association, and state Supreme Court judge, Edmonds was a representative American—at least according the monumental *Portraits of Eminent Americans Now Living* published in 1853.² As Edmonds approached the end of his career as an administrator of State power, he turned toward the administration of another kind of power. In two collections of spirit-world communiqués from Emanuel Swedenborg (d. 1772) and Francis Bacon (d. 1626), Edmonds announced the discovery of a “great truth which is marking the nineteenth century.” The ontological status of this “truth” was decidedly ambiguous. On the one hand, Edmonds declared that it possessed a “most intimate connection with our religious faith” (Edmonds and Dexter 1855: 19). He cited the most recent population statistics found in *American Almanac* and concluded that the “revelation” of spiritualism would be the “common platform on which all might congregate and unite in one common adoration of the God of all.” On the other hand, Edmonds also portrayed spiritual “intercourse” as a worldly phenomenon in that it possessed dramatic scientific and political import.

Integrating the epistemological prescriptions of Scottish Common Sense and the social ethics of republican virtue, Edmonds emphasized that everyone “should investigate for himself, and not depend upon what others tell him” about spiritual intercourse. According to Edmonds, the “truth” of spirit communication was equally and universally available to all. It “sought no private haunts.” It “enveloped itself in no useless mystery, but came out boldly before man, challenging his closest [public] scrutiny. It sought no blind faith, but demanded always, and under all circumstances, the exercise of calm reason and deliberate judgment.... It sent forth no preachers, it sought no proselytes, [and] aimed at building up no sect.” Edmonds distanced spiritualism from the enthusiasm of revivals and the politics of revealed religion.³ Because spiritualism hinged upon man’s “conduct, which he

² One of Edmonds more memorable roles occurred in 1837 when he served as Jackson’s attaché in an effort to gather information about Native Americans living on the borders of Lake Huron and Superior for the purpose of removing them (Livingston 1853: 801).

³ Although Edmonds aggressively defined the difference between spiritualist knowledge and evangelical faith, this article, instead, focuses on their epistemological and political compatibility. In doing so, I suggest that both American séance spiritualism and antebellum evangelicalism contributed much to the authority of a worldview that has since come to understand itself as secular.

can control,” and not upon “his faith, which he can not,” the “truth” of spiritualism transcended the mere interests of “private citizen.” As such, this “truth” was abstractly democratic and self-consciously secular, set apart from the particularities of personality and irrational bias. The means of cultivating the progressive capacities of the individual was instead “a matter of public interest” that would be debated and subsequently accepted by all Americans (Edmonds and Dexter 1853: 8, 1, 9, 12, 53, 64, 69). Spiritualism, Edmonds argued, was nothing less than a vehicle for modernizing the psyche and reforming the body politic.

Edmonds’s drift toward spiritualist conviction began slowly, among strangers, with visits to local séances. Upon hearing rappings that sounded like those emanating from “the bottom of a car when traveling on a railroad,” Edmonds “invoked the aid of science” in order to rule out the possibility of fraud. Edmonds then scheduled a series of interviews with mediums and clairvoyants. Their teachings, to which “no pure Christian could take exception,” were marked by the rhetoric of scientific precision. But even though the microphysics of spiritual intercourse had swayed Edmonds intellectually, he had yet to experience, for himself *and through himself*, the workings of the spirit-world. That is, until the evening of February 17th, 1851, when, as Edmonds recalled, he “was alone by myself,” in bed and reading a novel by Walter Scott. The experience that followed, according to Edmonds, “seemed to come for the express purpose of reaching an impression of *collusion* that was lurking in my mind. It came when I was awake and in full possession of my senses” (Edmonds and Dexter 1853: 71, 15–18, 73, italics mine).

After Edmonds had gone to bed, he reported to have “felt a touching on my left thigh, which I at first thought was the twitching of the muscles which all will at times experience. It continued, however, so long, and with such regularity of intervals, that I began to think it could not be from that same cause. I accordingly put my hand down by the side of and upon my thigh, and the touching ceased.” Edmonds then felt something “on the top of my hand and across my fingers, as if that which touched my thigh had passed across my hand.” Elusive, electric, and prone to withdrawal, the touching sensation, itself, could not be touched. Yet Edmonds could not ignore what he felt to be a passionate desire to communicate with *him*, to apply its knowledge in the consummation of *his* character, and to incorporate *him* into its system.

In addition to its mechanical aura and technological directive (*technologia*, from the Greek meaning “systematic treatment”), Edmonds’s encounter also possessed an erotic charge. The touchings “continued

for twenty or twenty-five minutes, during which time I resorted to various expedients to test the reality of what I felt." "Determined to ascertain whether [the twitching] was intelligent," Edmonds held a lamp to his thigh but could detect nothing. "While I was asking, the touching ceased, and when my question was put, my thigh was twice touched with distinct intervals." "These touchings" then "made their appearance on the front of my thigh" and "right foot.... After that there came a stream of touchings from my left big toe, all the way up my leg to the upper part of my thigh. They were very numerous, and so rapid as to form almost a stream, yet each touch was quite distinct.... The touchings then appeared at my left side, near my loins, very gently and at intervals until I fell asleep" (Edmonds and Dexter 1853: 18–19).

Edmonds insisted that his experience was part of a widespread phenomenon. "There is not a neighborhood in the United States," declared the former judge, "where similar things have not occurred, and can be testified to by persons whose testimony would be received in any human transaction." Manifestations of spiritual intercourse had become so prevalent at mid-century because they were now "being developed" through the industry of "human progress" (Edmonds and Dexter 1853: 23, 51).

In mingling the language of railway travel and spirit communication, Edmonds had begun to feel the ideological directives of antebellum society within the psyche and under his skin. Like many Americans, he was also struggling to come to terms with and provide terms for the increasing presence of technology in daily life.⁴ As Edmonds and others sought explanations for structures without seams and feelings without visible sources, they turned to the language of occultism and its tropes of hidden potentiality. At mid-century, the stories Americans told themselves in order to be themselves increasingly addressed invisible forces and atmospheric effects. Occult narratives of American citizenship, the American nation-state, and the spectral world they inhabited I argue, were rather accurate portrayals of life on the cusp of technological modernity. This article maps how one narrative of spectrality passed through Sing Sing State penitentiary in New York—a major node of the evangelical reform network—on its way to Edmonds' left thigh.

⁴ Andrew Jackson Davis, for example, welcomed such incursions as signs of spiritual intercourse, claiming that "railroads and steamboats are made and managed by spirit." Furthermore, technological innovation, rather than threaten the status of human nature, actually brought to light its pure potentiality and confirmed that "*human spirit travels faster than electricity*" (Davis 1851: 49, 31).

In 1844, Edmonds assumed the presidency of the Prison Association of New York (PANY) and appointed Eliza Farnham to be matron of Sing Sing Woman's Prison. Farnham was a self-declared "free-thinker" as well as an advocate of phrenology—the science of reforming the body by knowing the behavioral categories of the mind. By 1846, Edmonds and Farnham had secured the resignation of Sing Sing's resident chaplain, Methodist minister John Luckey, and instituted the phrenological approach to the management of the penitentiary atmosphere. Their management style was not so much antithetical to evangelicalism as it was compatible.

Carrying the Arminian strain of evangelical piety to its logical conclusion, Farnham and Edmonds folded voluntarism into what phrenologists considered the "all controlling necessity" of human reason. Farnham and Edmonds also rehearsed the millennialism of evangelicals in a decidedly "secular" key. Together, they transposed providence into an utterly human(e) project by insisting that sin was something to be overcome through individual effort. Driven by millennial visions of American progress, their phrenological reforms were a mix of common sense empiricism, republicanism, and the desire to integrate the two. Their agenda, to the extent that it anticipated their spiritualist beliefs (Farnham would turn toward spiritualism in the mid-1850s), also refracted an unspoken trajectory of the evangelical public sphere, namely a *collusion* between the means of subjectivity and the ends of state formation.

OCCULTISM AND THE TOUCH OF THE STATE

By mid-century, many Americans were becoming conversant in occult grammars of piety that assumed the potential for correspondence between material existence and the world of spirit. These "metaphysical" orientations came of age in upstate New York, marked by the increasing popularity of the mystical writings of Swedenborg, the outburst of spirit communication among Shakers in the late 1830s, the healing sessions of Andrew Jackson Davis (the "Seer of Poughkeepsie") in the 1840s, and, finally, the publicity garnered by Maggie and Kate Fox in 1848 with their claims of strange knockings in the basement of their Hydesville home (Albanese 2007: 177–253). Given their desire to experience the occult workings of modernity, spiritualists imagined the relationship between visible and invisible worlds in terms most familiar to them—those of political and economic institutions (Carroll 1997: 61–63). Spiritualists rejected what they viewed as the hard sell of

Protestant denominations. Basing their “affirmations purely upon the demonstrations of fact, science, and natural law,” spiritualists, instead, chose to submit to the posthumous and enlightened directives of a revolving line-up of “worthies,” including George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, William Ellery Channing, Isaac Newton, and Martha Washington. Within this “republican” government, “ministering angels” used neither rhetoric nor “coercion” but openly “impressed” moral order “upon their constituents” (Hare 1855: 113, 88–89; Hardinge 1870: 11).

In their version of an enchanted republicanism, spiritualists did not necessarily adhere to the whole of what later thinkers would define as “secular” politics. They did, however, conceive of a public sphere set apart from the secrecy of monarchs, the delusion of superstition, and the passions of sectarianism. Some spiritualists speculated that communications between citizens, like those between the living and the dead, were matters of transparency, openness, and immediacy. Decoding the language of dead souls was but the first step in making the body politic legible to all individuals exercising their innate capacity for sympathetic reason (Cox 2003). This sense of democracy, according to someone like Edmonds, could be cultivated by human “conduct, which he can control, and not” upon “his faith, which he can not.” “This is not a superstitious age, but one of materiality and SCIENCE,” declared Davis. “Theocracy of the senior nations of the earth is giving away—is melting like a mountain of ice before the sun—and true REPUBLICANISM is fast becoming the mighty spirit of existing empires!” (Davis 1851: 9).

As we have already seen, the surge of spirit communication at mid-century coincided with the incursion of technology into everyday life—telegraphy, steam presses, daguerreotypy, and the roaring wheels of a railway car. Technological advances were sometimes derided as an affront to conscience but were, more often than not, accompanied by all manner of political utopianism. Rhetorical saturation about the promise of a democratic public sphere corresponded to an increasing specification of individualism—economic in the form of consumption, political in the habits of newspaper reading and the pleasures of electoral participation, and religious in the naturalization of Romantic language and sentiment. In what seems like an irresolvable paradox, spiritualists like Edmonds were often at the forefront of promoting liberal ideals of subjectivity even as they actively sought communication with and submission to the spirit-world. Edmonds, for example, took great pains to remind his reading and lecture audiences that to adhere to the “truth” of spiritual intercourse was to be part of national movement as well as a

global one in which the United States would assume the economic and industrial lead (Edmonds and Dexter 1853: 36). What, then, does one make of Edmonds's insistence upon the disciplinary presence of specters as constitutive of principles that were, and are, so often equated with secularism?

Within the walls of Sing Sing, narratives of secularism hinged upon the disclosure of secret meanings and the actualization of hidden potentials. As practiced by Farnham and Edmonds in the form of phrenology, secularism was an occult discourse. It did not explicitly reject religion but, on the contrary, redefined the means of evangelical reform according to studies of the heretofore undisclosed relationship between the cranium and human morality (conceived broadly as both behavioral tendencies and psychological dispositions). Like the elaborate spiritualist cosmologies it would come to inform, phrenology was an utterly human project (Fowler 1844: 105). Like spiritualism, phrenology sought to disclose the organic connection between human matter and human spirit, going so far as to map it on the surface of the skull according to the blueprint "of nature, universal in its operations." But rather than focus on securing the presence of the afterlife, phrenology offered reformers of various stripes a technology to secure a different kind of potential presence, that of the State. As Farnham insisted, phrenology was necessary in producing "respectable and useful citizen[s]" (Sampson 1846: 66, 123).

The "truth" of phrenology, then, defined intentionality as the sole ground of moral and legal responsibility. Ironically, this "truth" transcended politics, making the success of the penitentiary movement a foregone conclusion. "In our belief of this science [of phrenology] there is nothing *voluntary*; nothing which we could *at option* choose or refuse. It is the result of *all controlling necessity*" (Caldwell 1829: 11).

Rather than narrate the story of reform organizations such as Sing Sing as either one of economic and rehabilitative success (Nord 2004) or a slow declension into custodianship (Mintz 1995), a more disturbing picture comes into focus when one views their economic, rehabilitative, and custodial roles as inseparable in practice. The drama within Sing Sing, not to mention its lasting effects, disturbs treatments of religion as simply a process of individual or institutional meaning-making. It also disturbs understandings of religion that locate religion primarily within the cognitive and/or bodily domains of intentionality. And finally, this picture neither confirms (Taussig 1992) nor denies (Asad 2003: 22) that the modern State is, in fact, religious. It does, however, suggest that the version of American modernity espoused by Farnham and Edmonds was, for all practical purposes, haunted.

THE PENITENTIARY MOVEMENT AND REPUBLICAN MACHINES

The Penitentiary movement within the United States began, in earnest, at the end of the eighteenth century (Lewis 1965; Rothman 1971; Dumm 1987; Hirsch 1992). With the construction of numerous facilities, the public spectacle of punishment began to move behind closed doors. The express goal was not necessarily punishment of the criminal body, but rather the reform of the individual soul. Inseparable from Revolutionary politics, penitentiaries were considered localized and experimental theaters of American democracy. The first experiment occurred at the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia. The reforms instituted by the “Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons” set precedents and patterns for numerous penitentiaries that were built in the first decades of the nineteenth century (Gray 1848: 26). As Benjamin Rush, founding member of the Society, announced, the purpose of penitentiary reform was part of a large-scale effort to “convert” Americans “into republican machines. This must be done, if we expect them to perform their parts properly, in the great machine of the government of state” (Rush 1947a: 92). The application of democratic principles upon the bodies of citizens, according to Rush, would, in turn, enable citizens to apply this knowledge “mechanically” (i.e., continuously) to themselves and others.

Rush’s heady optimism was the outgrowth of a curious blend of millennialist and Enlightenment impulses that converged around the increasing specification of the individual.⁵ As physician, reformer, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Rush’s revolutionary agenda was always tinged with a loose Presbyterian faith. “Republican forms of government are the best repositories of the Gospel,” he wrote in 1791. “They are intended as preludes to a glorious manifestation of its power and influence upon the hearts of men” (quoted in Noll 2002: 51). Rush’s multivalent statements were emblematic of how Quakers, northern evangelicals, and village *philosophes* often worked side by side on boards of managers and within the penitentiary itself. The fact that they found common cause in pursuing such a bold strategy of democratic inclusion—the transformation of criminal into citizen—was not surprising. All three communities imagined themselves as fully, freely, and

⁵ “The American War is over,” conceded Rush in 1787, “but this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of the great drama is closed. It remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government; and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens” (Rush 1947b: 26).

systematically enacting the scripts of Common Sense empiricism and republicanism.

As Mark A. Noll has noted, Rush was the most “eloquent advocate for the Christian republican synthesis,” an ideological constellation that paved the way for the triumph of evangelicalism by the eve of the Civil War (Noll 2002: 65). As early as the mid-eighteenth century, the currents of Common Sense and republicanism had begun to form what Noll has referred to as “America’s God” and what more Foucauldian scholars would call an authorizing discourse, or more specifically, a “formation of the secular” (Asad 2003). Although Noll limits his analysis of the synergistic interaction between epistemology and political economy to the activities of Protestants, his work, nonetheless, points to the scale and reach of this synthesis into everyday life.

The interplay between religious sentiments and secular vocabularies within the penitentiary movement should not be taken as a litmus test for either confirming or refuting the secularization thesis. Rather than being seen as a kind of corruption of social motive by the religious or as a veiled extension of the religious via the political, the penitentiary movement is best understood as a manifestation of the “excesses” of political rationality within the United States.

In performing the transformative promise of American democracy under the most difficult of circumstances, penitentiary reformers viewed themselves as the cutting edge of civilizing technology.⁶ And indeed, penitentiaries were an impressive attempt to manage, systematically, bodies and information pathways within their walls as well as across them. For in addition to being a spectacle for the eyes of the citizenry, the penitentiary represented the latest innovations in architecture, financial management, political philosophy, statistics, and the division of labor. This particular extension of the “modern state,” as Michael Foucault has shown in the European context, was not devoid of theological residue. “This form of power,” writes Foucault, “applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault 1983: 212). The penitentiary movement, for example, was founded on the practice of simultaneously promoting the

⁶ The representative status of this kind of technology, it should be noted, attracted the attention of European observers like Alexis de Tocqueville and Harriet Martineau who looked to American penitentiaries (and the profits they generated in taxing businesses that employed inmates during the day) for perspective on the meanings and means of democracy (Martineau 1838; Beaumont and Tocqueville 1964).

progressive capacities of the individual and the nation. As with developments in other areas of society, it was a subtle⁷ agenda in which individuals were not made to conform but, instead, incentivized to partake in the same range of possible selves, to become part of the same field of ontological possibility.

As Michael Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville wrote with a hint of irony, the powerful cure enacted within penitentiaries had, itself, become contagious. Many Americans, they believed, had come to “occupy themselves continually with prisons” and had “caught the *monomanie* of the penitentiary system, which to them seems the remedy for all the evils in society” (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1964: 80). In other words, the increasing valorization of instrumental rationality among reformers did not necessarily result in a more rational political order. As Tocqueville would later note, the authority of public opinion outside the walls of the penitentiary was invisible and often “irresistible,” a power that was both physical and moral, acting “as much upon the will as upon behavior” (Tocqueville 1969: 256, 254). Such power was, for lack of a better term, ghostly. It was both immediate *and* mediating. Within the penitentiary, the explicit management of opinion was a matter of gaining knowledge of the prisoner’s conscience in order to direct it. Outside the penitentiary, the cultivation of the categories through which individuals thought about themselves thinking about the world was a looming process, enacted by no one in particular yet felt at once by everyone.

THE ATMOSPHERE OF MODERNITY

In addition to the writings of John Locke and Jeremy Bentham, the shift in emphasis from punishment to rehabilitation was initiated by those reformers steeped in the practices of Quakerism and Evangelicalism. Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia (est. 1821), for example, translated Quaker beliefs regarding the blessings of the inner light into an elaborate model of solitary confinement and religious instruction. The Auburn State penitentiary (est. 1817) in New York, on the other hand, was managed according to the “silent rule” beginning in 1824. At Auburn and its institutional cousin, Sing Sing State penitentiary (est. 1825), prisoners were kept in isolation only at night. During the day, prisoners worked together, side by side, even

⁷ When asked what “the secret” was of his disciplinary success at Sing Sing, the warden Elam Lynds replied that “it would be pretty difficult to explain it entirely; it is the result of a series of efforts and daily cares, of which it would be necessary to be an eyewitness. General rules cannot be indicated” (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1964: 162).

as they were instructed not to talk or look at their fellow inmates (Prison Association of New York 1844: 42). Within both the Auburn and Pennsylvania systems, individual criminals had become a social experiment, a problem to be solved. In the Auburn system, however, ardent and aggressive Protestants sought to produce the proper psychic and bodily pathways for criminals to feel their feelings and think about thinking.

Within the Auburn system, the private was aggressively delimited in the best interest of both the individual convict and the general populace. It was a peculiar kind of atmosphere, a representation of the public sphere that was, in essence, absolutely private. It was a seemingly passive environment in which each convict was called upon to actively participate and “preserve an unbroken silence.” As the rules at Auburn (and later Sing Sing) stated, convicts “are not to exchange a word with each other... they are not to exchange looks, wink, laugh, or motion to each other.” Communication between inmates only stoked the fires of their sinful hearts and was thought to be a form of “contamination” and “contagion” (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1964: 81, 38, 84). “Their whole demeanor,” therefore, “must be in accordance with the most perfect order, and in strict compliance with the discipline of the prison” (Luckey 1866: 16). Each prisoner, then, as he moved silently through the workday, was connected not so much to each other, but, on the contrary, through the same haze of disciplinary assumptions about their sinful nature. Or as Beaumont and Tocqueville suggestively noted, “The prisoner in the United States breathes in the penitentiary a religious atmosphere that surrounds him on all sides.” It is a dense but familiar air. The prisoner is “more amenable to its influence because his own early education *predisposes* him toward it” (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1964: 122, my emphasis).

One could begin with the question of whether the atmosphere generated within the walls of penitentiaries was essentially religious or even functionally Christian.⁸ What is more interesting, however, is

⁸ This question was asked and tentatively answered in a 2006 Federal ruling on the unconstitutionality of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative. The InnerChange Freedom Initiative, an evangelical reform organization, had received a contract from the State of Iowa in 1999 to produce and perform a prison rehabilitative program. Judge Robert Pratt ruled that “the state has literally established an Evangelical Christian congregation within the walls of one of its penal institutions [Newton Correctional Facility], giving the leaders of that program, i.e., InnerChange employees, authority to control the spiritual, emotional and physical lives of hundreds of Iowa’s inmates.” In defining the boundary between the secular and the religious, Judge Pratt, nonetheless, acknowledged the difficulty in documenting the empirical connection between the flow of state funds and the powerful effects of InnerChange’s initiatives and deployments of “freedom” (Henriques and Lehren 2006: 33).

to dwell a moment on the question of *predisposition* and the role evangelicalism played in the making of American secularism. In 1825, for example, the Reverend Louis Dwight, resigned as the treasurer of the American Bible Society, formed the Boston Prison Discipline Society, and tirelessly promoted the Auburn system across the country. The Auburn system represented the harnessing of pure potential, “like the application of the steam engine in navigation.” It marked a moment when the productions of second nature (citizens and, by extension, steam) overcame the limitations of nature (criminals, and by extension, wind). In the process of overcoming the merely juridical application of law, the Auburn system would become “an incalculable good to the world” wrote Dwight, applicable not only to prisons but colleges and private homes as well (quoted in Skotnicki 2000: 44; Jenks 1856: 6).

In 1825, the Auburn system was literally transported to Sing Sing, New York when Captain Elam Lynds, the warden at Auburn, marched a hundred convicts to a marble quarry on the Hudson River and constructed a penitentiary in four years time.⁹ Sing Sing State Penitentiary opened in 1829 and was but one node within an increasing network of penitentiaries that operated according to the theo-politics of evangelical conversion.¹⁰

As at Auburn, Sing Sing reformers were “actuated by motives of public policy and Christian benevolence.” Consequently, they sought to chart and manage the ways, means, and expression of sin within a public setting (Powers 1826: 18). The motivation to contain “contaminating influences” within the penitentiary reflected a particular orientation toward sin that drew from the epistemological and political fundamentals of evangelical theology—common sense and republicanism (Prison Association of New York 1844: 42). Sin was identifiable. It was containable. It was an opportunity for the individual criminal to convert him- or herself into a “republican machine.” Sin, in other words, was always already a matter of public import, so much so that the demarcations of private and public fail to do justice to the complexity of the penitentiary situation.

⁹ Luckey (1866: 12). Lynds, known for his cruelty and his disdain for soft-minded religionists, was relieved of his wardenship within the first two years of Sing Sing’s operation.

¹⁰ By the mid-1820s, the Auburn system had become the preferred model among reformers who noted its capacities to capitalize on the “power of association,” to establish “the spirit of submission,” and to conform to “the habits of society” (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1964: 121, 59; Gray 1848: 26).

Despite its evangelical cast and cast of evangelical backers, however, the sensibility cultivated at Auburn and Sing Sing retained a distinctly Calvinist character. Rather than leave the criminal in total physical isolation, reformers attempted to create the conditions in which the criminal felt himself to be alone with his God within a group setting.¹¹ The goal was to maintain constant and anonymous surveillance of the criminal in order to allow him to become more aware of what exactly was being surveyed, that is, his sinful body. The criminal, it was theorized, could not then help but recognize his unique but common degeneracy. Upon recognizing the layers of anonymous surveillance—for even the keepers in immediate contact with the prisoners were under surveillance—the criminal would then seek to identify with, submit to, and find comfort in a form of power that was felt incessantly but ever incomprehensible.¹² With eyes wide open, submission to God's will was also an act of incorporation in the machinery of republican virtue.

THE SPECTER OF DEMOCRACY

Even as the Auburn system rose to ascendancy, its disciplinary ideals often fell short of the mark. Throughout the 1830s, major problems were detected in this corner of the evangelical public sphere.¹³ In 1842, confronting a dire financial crisis, Governor William H. Seward and the Board of Inspectors reappointed Lynds as the principal keeper at Sing Sing, overlooking his reputation for violence in hopes of achieving financial solvency. Under Lynds's leadership both staff and salaries were cut. So, too, were monies allotted to the provision of food, clothing, and medicine (Lewis 1965: 215). Instances of flogging increased dramatically. In 1843, Seward called upon the

¹¹ During the day, each workshop was surrounded by a hidden gallery from which guards closely monitored the actions of each prisoner (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1964: 60).

¹² Chaplains, given their access to the daily confessions, health, and desires of individual prisoners, were able to gather and organize information that tracked the relationships between the crime, age, geography, race, educational and marital status, as well as personal habits. Even as chaplains provided prisoners with "private admonition, counsel, and instruction," they were providing regulatory agencies with statistical data that these agencies could then re-deploy and use to revise methods of admonition, counsel, and instruction (Prison Discipline Society 1829: 61–71; 1830: 64–5; 1833: 160–163). In other words, the most personal traits of each prisoner were used in such a way as to create a totalizing picture of the prison population that would, in turn, become the leverage for individuation.

¹³ Reports of beatings, torture, suicides, shortages of food, heat, and clothing, as well as internal strife among officials began to tarnish the reputation of Sing Sing almost immediately. By the end of the decade, both Auburn and Sing Sing were under investigation by the state of New York for both physical and financial improprieties. In 1839, even Dwight had questioned the viability of Sing Sing as an institute of reform (Prison Discipline Society 1839: 42–43).

Reverend John Luckey, a Methodist minister, to once again make Sing Sing “consistent with the principles of Christianity.” Luckey was quick to act. Stressing the importance of religious instruction and the Sabbath school, Luckey created a prison library in order to provide religious books “designed to inculcate correct moral principles.”¹⁴

Most significantly, Luckey organized prison officials against Lynds’s “reign of terror” and appealed to the President of the Board of Inspectors, Edmonds, to redress the situation. Luckey was successful in convincing Edmonds to reconsider the Board’s original decision and in January of 1844 Lynds “was informed that his services would be dispensed with.” With the help of Edmonds, Luckey had gotten exactly what he wished for—the resignation of Lynds and a renewed emphasis on the evangelical strategy of locating and leveraging the specter of criminality. From Luckey’s perspective, the reinstatement of the “mild system” at Sing Sing was the consummation of the original impetus behind the Auburn system as articulated by Dwight and others.

Luckey’s triumph, however, paved the way for his eventual marginalization (Luckey 1866: 22–24, 158, 33–34, 31). Edmonds, having been invited to tour Sing Sing with Luckey on numerous occasions during the Lynds debacle, became increasingly involved with the everyday operations of both the men’s and women’s wings of the penitentiary (Edmonds 1844: 10, 25).¹⁵ By the end of 1844, Edmonds had successfully called for the establishment of the PANY, an organization whose charge was “the supervision of the internal organization and management of prisons in which convicts are confined, embracing the moral and physical influences to be exerted on the prisoners during their confinement” (Prison Association of New York 1844: 7). Even as it paid homage to the past successes of the Auburn system, PANY challenged some of its most cherished ideals, including the assumption that penitentiaries should be financially self-sufficient and, most significantly, that inmates should be allowed to communicate with one another. The “silent rule” of the Auburn system, argued representatives of PANY, was “impracticable” and “not at all in unison with the benevolent breathings of the age” (Quoted in Lewis 1965: 226).

¹⁴ Against the wishes of Lynds, Luckey was also instrumental in loosening the strictures of solitary confinement at Sing Sing. In addition to allowing for letter writing and outside visitors, prisoners were granted access to spelling books during the week in order to furnish “them with opportunities for intellectual and moral improvement” (Luckey 1866: 28).

¹⁵ Edmonds also became increasingly skeptical of the use of physical violence even in the most desperate cases. As *The Prisoner’s Friend* recalled in 1847, a journal co-edited by soon-to-be spiritualist John Murray Spear, Edmonds “began with the keepers, by instilling into their minds the principles of the great ‘Law of Kindness’” (“Biographical Sketch” 1847: 89).

On the one hand, PANY seemed to represent a more intense effort to realize the Auburn system's goal of identifying the specter of criminality within each convict. On the other hand, the "new style of discipline" recommended and sanctioned by PANY was "emphatically national in its character" (Prison Association of New York 1846: 32) and represented a subtle but profound shift in its point of application. Whereas the initial impetus of penitentiary reform had revolved around the notion of crime being a matter of socialization, PANY emphasized the criminal's recognition of him- or herself as socializable. Only through such self-consciousness could the criminal be converted into a "useful citizen."

The most powerful influence to awaken in the abandoned self-control and self-respect, is an expression of confidence in [the criminal's] capacity to regain character and an honorable social position.... The wrong-doer must be treated, *and must see that he is treated*, from the moment of his arrest till his release, with humanity; *he must be convinced* that the interests of his fellow-men demand his exclusion from society *until* his character is amended. (Prison Association of New York 1844: 30-31 [my emphasis])

This process of recognizing, for oneself, the potential within was dependent on a willing submission to the social, ideally construed and represented. Rather than localizing individual sin as the hinge of conversion, new methods began to focus increasingly on the cultivation of a different specter that was both within *and* external to the criminal body—that of the dormant potentiality of citizenship.

At the first meeting of PANY, the ends of penitentiary discipline remained the same. The site of its application, however, shifted from the emphasis on sin to the production of a liberal democratic subject. "This system of instruction is the most powerful instrument of discipline within our reach," read the inaugural report of PANY. "And why should it not be so? There is nothing new in this. It is but applying to the prison the principles upon which our families and our country are governed." Such principles, according to Edmonds, were "old in Scripture but new in human practice." They constituted "the great truth...all-pervading in its application to human concerns." Anticipating his invocation of the "great truth" of spiritualism, Edmonds's Emersonian pronouncement shifted responsibility for conversion, at least implicitly, from God's grace to the capacities of the individual to become an "Author of Nature." This was the metaphysical difference, an eroticization of evangelical reform strategies that prompted the

“Kingdom of Heaven” to become the “blood with which the heart swells and the extremest [sic] capillary beats” (Prison Association of New York 1844: 29–30).¹⁶

ELIZA FARNHAM’S GOVERNMENT OF SOULS

The reorganization at Sing Sing did not occur without resistance. John Luckey, having successfully rallied PANY to oust Elam Lynds, was about to meet his match in the figure of Farnham. Amidst the Lynds controversy, Edmonds had attended a lecture by Farnham in New York City where she spoke on the importance of women in social reform activities. Shortly thereafter, Edmonds interviewed Farnham and appointed her Matron of the Female Department of the State Prison at Sing Sing. Farnham, who had just returned from an extensive stay on the Illinois frontier, was a self-styled “free-thinker.” She claimed that by the age of sixteen she had already familiarized herself with “the works of Paine, Volney, Voltaire, and nearly the whole school of infidel writers” (Farnham 1847: 234). Such “infidelity” also comprised a deep interest in the science of phrenology. Although Farnham did not consider herself an adherent to any religious perspective (she would later deliver lectures on spiritualism and participate in spiritualist conferences in New York and Vermont), she did consider phrenology to be a necessary revision of evangelical approaches to criminal reform and the cultivation of character (Farnham 1865: 390–391; Levy 2004: 75, 132).

During her first year and a half at Sing Sing, Farnham completed editorial commentary for the republication of *Rationale of Crime, and its Appropriate Treatment* by the English phrenologist M. B. Sampson.¹⁷ Sampson’s book insisted that environmental conditions and physical make-up were the best means of redressing insanity and criminal behavior. Because the human mind was divided up into various faculties controlled by specific areas of the brain, if any of these faculties was over- or underdeveloped or if the balance between them was somehow

¹⁶ Political rationality, then, was not only still operative, but at times could seem much more excessive than what had come before. PANY, for example, suggested that “factories be erected” in the vicinity of the prison so as to employ recently discharged convicts (Prison Association of New York 1844: 51). PANY also promoted the use of “Auxiliary Societies” to “regulate” the public “breathings,” themselves, “controlling . . . public opinion in the immediate vicinity of the prison” in order to make a community more sympathetic to newly released convict’s as well as to the penitentiary workers among them (Prison Association of New York 1847a: 32–33).

¹⁷ Justifying her own notes and additions to Sampson’s *Criminal Jurisprudence Considered in Relation to Mental Organization* (1841), Farnham wrote that it was “emphatically on the popular mind in republican America that such a work must exert its chief influence” (Sampson 1846: xiii).

skewed, criminal behavior could result. Too much or too little development of any faculty—whether it was a tendency toward benevolence, determination, combativeness, or veneration—was the result of a weak constitution and/or deplorable social conditions. Crime, then, may have been that which transgressed God’s wishes, but more importantly, it violated the potential harmony between mind, body, and the human community (Sampson 1846: 11). Proper balance and relationality—between the component parts in the head as well as between the mind and the social environment—were to be rigorously pursued (Combe 1837: 291, 301; Combe and Mittermaier 1843: 15).

When Farnham arrived, the library collection consisted of Bibles and seventy-five copies of Richard Baxter’s *A Call to the Unconverted*. At the time, Baxter’s *Call* was one of the most popular books published by the American Tract Society (and a staple of evangelical literacy programs since John Eliot had deployed an Algonkian translation for use in his “praying towns”). Farnham restocked Sing Sing’s shelves with an eclectic array of titles “of a moral tendency”: George Combe’s *Constitution of Man*, Hannah Moore’s *Domestic Tales*, Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, as well as *Life in Prairie Land*, Farnham’s recently published account of her travails on the Illinois frontier. Farnham encouraged literate prisoners to study maps and travel literature in addition to their spelling books. She installed “large lamps” in the hallways and allowed convicts to take books back to their cells in the evening. She read aloud excerpts from evangelical tracts, poetry, *Littell’s Living Age*, and Combe’s *Constitution*, informing prisoners that their own body, and specifically their head, played a major role in their “secular and religious instruction.” Farnham also lectured on the “Discovery of Columbus” and the “Conquest of Mexico,” encouraging prisoners to align their own moral progress with the evolution of the American nation-state (Kirby [1887] 1971: 192f; Combe and Mittermaier 1843: 13; Prison Association of New York 1847b: 56).

Despite the fact that Farnham jettisoned “dry evangelical book[s]... bent on converting [prisoners], and saving their souls from hell,” she believed phrenology to be a practical supplement to Luckey’s theological agenda (Kirby [1887] 1971: 199–200).¹⁸ Both Farnham and Luckey concentrated their efforts on something that was not strictly empirical—for

¹⁸ Even as Farnham urged prisoners to lead “better lives in this [world]” she maintained at least two of the central doctrines of evangelical reform: 1) that criminality was both “an act of insanity as well as a sin” and 2) that the penitentiary would reflect and promote the ideal atmosphere of civil society (“Review of Dr. Attomyr’s *Theory of Crimes, based on the Principles of Phrenology*” 1843: 259; Sampson 1846: 58).

Luckey, the spectral entity of sin within the body and for Farnham, a dormant materiality that existed in its potentiality at the nexus between body and environment. For Luckey, silence, modified solitary confinement, and sudden conversion had served to secure knowledge of sin on the part of the individual criminal. Farnham, however, proposed “years of well-directed treatment” to “appeal to, and stimulate” higher sentiments such as justice with the objective of calling them “into abiding activity.” “If the criminal is to be reformed at all,” she wrote, “he is to be reformed for society, not solitude.” Rather than rely upon God’s all-seeing eye or even the creation of divine artifice by way of isolation and surveillance, Farnham relied on her ability to convey to criminals “that the strength of [their evil] desires [was] governed by physical laws, in the same manner as the strength of other organs of the body” (Sampson 1846: 16–17, 135, 66). Rather than jettison the promise of eternal life, Farnham’s innovations served to aestheticize salvation. Heaven became a place not only on earth but a space physically located behind the eyes and bound up in the sensory surfaces of the body (Anonymous 1846: 8).

Although Luckey may have sympathized with the decreasing number of violent incidents and lashings under Farnham’s watch, he remained suspicious of her phrenological prescriptions.¹⁹ First and foremost, Luckey objected to what he viewed as a replacement of lessons about sin and salvation with lessons about the imperfections of human physiognomy and the capacity to overcome them. In addition to its displacement of providence and original sin, Luckey also thought phrenology to be misguided in its extreme emphasis on environmental influence. Farnham, by contrast, insisted on the need to make inmates aware not simply of their criminal habits but, more importantly, of their higher moral faculties in order that they could then take possession and control of them (Sampson 1846: 13). As Farnham admitted, she sought to impart to criminals “a knowledge of the peculiar constitution of their own minds” in relation to others and to turn sin into something that was readily understood. For “as soon as the source of their evil desires is brought clearly within their comprehension,” wrote Farnham, those desires could be overcome. Through individual effort one could clear away all “mystery, doubt, and uncertainty” (66).

¹⁹ The simmering tension between Farnham and Luckey came to a head, as it were, when Luckey discovered that Farnham had used his office as a sitting studio for the phrenological sketches that were to be included in *Rationale of Crime* (Lewis 1965: 243–244).

BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

Farnham's interest in phrenology had sparked, in her words, "an intense curiosity to penetrate the innermost centre of the stained soul, and observe the mysterious working of that machinery by which so fatal a result was produced" (Farnham 1859: 351). Such curiosity was occult, peering beneath the corrupt surface of the soul in order to isolate its essential "machinery." "I earnestly wished to penetrate," wrote Farnham, "to where the awful secret could be disclosed to me" (*ibid.*).²⁰ Contrary to Luckey and his evangelical colleagues, Farnham sought knowledge, first and foremost, of the "machinery" that produced the sin—an imbalance between the "higher sentiments" and the "tendencies to crime" that had not been recognized by "society and legislators" (Sampson 1846: xvi, xx). Rather than pursue the strict individuation of sin, Farnham insisted that the "secret" rhythms (both good and bad) between soul, body, and social environment must be acknowledged publicly. Sin, in other words, became a matter of political concern, political responsibility, and political application. For the soul to "work" successfully meant for the soul to "work" socially. Given Farnham's admission that "humanity appeal[s] to me in masses more than by individuals," the alignment of individual sin and God's grace held less appeal for her than did the alignment of the masses to itself (Farnham 1859: 350).

Farnham's approach did, for all intents and purposes, displace God's sovereignty as final arbiter of sin and salvation. But rather than simply exchange theology for anthropology, God's law for natural law, Farnham sought to initiate a reciprocal loop between them, drawing upon the blueprints of mesmerism in order to encourage prisoners to undertake investigations of themselves as social creatures.²¹ According to Farnham, the republican desire to forge reciprocal links between personal morality and social well-being could be consummated by managing the transmission of energy between criminal bodies. On the one hand, Farnham's was a therapeutic ethos that aggressively acted upon the environment within the penitentiary. Rather than coerce criminals into reforming themselves, Farnham sought to recreate a "natural" climate in which "continual influences"

²⁰ In her first report to PANY, Farnham wrote that it was her intention of "reducing the convicts to a sound state of discipline," "substituting kindness for force," "systematizing [] details," and impressing upon prisoners "the importance of self-government" (Prison Association of New York 1846: 38–39).

²¹ Farnham's drift into the rhetorical terrain of mesmerism was not unique among penitentiary reformers with a vested interest in phrenology. See, for example, Caldwell (1842).

would “fall pleasantly upon and around them like dew upon the sickly seedling.” Rather than force “theology on the prisoners,” Farnham sought, somewhat paradoxically, to stimulate “improved conduct” that would be “the offspring of genuine and sound internal motives.” It was a decidedly forward-looking strategy that would “keep the minds of the prisoners from dwelling on the evil past” (Sampson 1846: 78, 19; Kirby [1887] 1971: 199, 194). On the other hand, Farnham’s was a political ethos in accord with the directives of PANY. It assumed that the principles deployed within Sing Sing were “the same principles of government which we apply to the management of our families and the state” (Prison Association of New York 1846: 43).

In 1844, Farnham planned the first Fourth of July celebration at Sing Sing. Over the next few years, these celebrations were emblematic of Farnham’s strategy of aesthetic and political cultivation, or more precisely, her phrenological plan for politicizing the skin. The fact that the inaugural celebration occurred on the “anniversary of our nation’s independence” spoke to its inner logic (Prison Association of New York 1846: 59). And although Farnham curiously did not attend the inaugural celebration, it set the tone for subsequent festivities.

Such celebrations were, first and foremost, a ritual identification of hidden qualities of aesthetic appreciation and reason among the inmates (“The Influence of Flowers” 1847: 105). Through the “charming” activation of sight, smell, taste, sound, and the “sense” of democracy, wrote Farnham, “the lash may be removed as gently and effectually as the icy drapery of winter is melted away in the genial atmosphere of Spring” (“Visit” 1846: 66). In addition to being identified as natural *and* national, such qualities of American citizenship were also defined by what they did not entail, that is, violence and coercion. Edmonds, for example, took the 1844 holiday as an opportunity to promote the ideal of democracy as “the power of knowing and choosing between good and evil” (Prison Association of New York 1846: 60). On the morning of the Fourth, Edmonds “sent the required number of bouquets, among which were two, much larger than the others, which were to be given to the most amiable among the prisoners” (Kirby [1887] 1971: 208). “I should like to have the selection made by the females themselves,” wrote Edmonds, “thus I shall be able to discern, how well they understand what it is that forms the character which we most love and regard.” As the prisoners learned to appreciate the capacity of their tastebuds, their ears and sense of rhythm, their noses as well as their eyes, they were also enjoined to cast votes and to cultivate a taste for democratic participation, despite the fact that the final

vote tally was “subject to the approval of the matrons” (Prison Association of New York 1846: 60).

According to Farnham, for the criminal to acknowledge herself as a sensual creature was not enough. She also had to be encouraged to apply that knowledge to the self and her social conditions. “The ways of virtue,” wrote Farnham, “must be made pleasant if we would have the wanderer accept our invitation to walk therein.” Inmates, in other words, could learn to exact a nurturing force upon themselves. Consequently, the re-orientation of the senses toward their natural capacity for empirical investigation was something that *both* “flow[ed] from the natural choice of a better constitution” *and* was pursued vigorously by the reformers (“Report on the Mount Pleasant State Prison” 1847: 66). “Those sentiments which have lain dormant or been crushed by outrage and defiance,” wrote Farnham, “must be gently summoned into being, and tenderly and patiently nursed by continual influences” (Sampson 1846: 78).

The comportment of the keepers and the sensual stimuli imported into the prison were the levers of Farnham’s version of reform. Rather than rely upon a relentless focus on sin and an overwhelming incursion of God’s grace, Farnham employed the law of similars and the law of infinitesimals (Albanese 1990: 133–134). “The universal and invariable law” Farnham declared, is “that propensity continually appeals to propensity, sentiment to sentiment, and intellect to intellect.” “It is the language of the moral sentiments alone,” insisted Farnham, “in the officer or superior, that can call the same faculties into action in the dependent or inferior” (Sampson 1846: 78–79). Additionally, flowers, song, music, wall hangings, food, as well as the virtual casting of votes were not regular occurrences but served as incentives to reform, momentary “potentizations” that corrected existing imbalances between the propensities and the sentiments. In hopes of cultivating the specter of citizenship within each convict, Farnham organized a “natural” sensory environment in which each object and each individual was connected to every other within a closed semiotic circuit. It was a specific strategy for defining and “channeling” the power of “good resolutions” within a public setting. Ideally, this power would make its way into the body through the sensory organs. It arrived with no verbal epithet and it left no bodily mark. And it would act “by such slow degrees that [persons] would scarcely realize the change” (Kirby [1887] 1971: 193, 209).

When Farnham finally succeeded in rescinding the “silent rule” in January of 1846, Luckey and his allies within Sing Sing took their complaints to the state legislature (Kirby [1887] 1971: 199; Gray 1848: 67). Luckey’s wife, Dinah, for example, leveled a four-point charge against

Farnham. Having worked under Farnham in the women's wing, Dinah reported:

- 1st. The use of improper books
- 2nd. Mal-adjustment of discipline
- 3rd. Unlawful use of convict's time and labor
- 4th. An indifference to the interest of the State

Invested in a rather narrow definition of the State, the politicians sided with the Luckeys and their supporters within the evangelical reform community. Disturbed by the "general feeling [that] seemed to prevail" in which "convicts would work for any one rather than the State," Farnham's critics viewed the new arrangements at Sing Sing as "immoral and irreligious" (Prison Association of New York 1847b: 49–50, 52; Lewis 1965: 245).

PANY and its president, Edmonds, however, supported Farnham. In July of 1846, Edmonds and PANY gathered testimony to strengthen Farnham's case against the interests of his former ally. They understood quite well, instinctively even, that Farnham's methods were in tune with the most refined strategies of state centralization occurring outside penitentiary walls. As Farnham wrote in her defense, "My system of government may be designated as one of moral influences, adapted, as far as practicable, to the character and condition of each individual under it... If he be surrounded with the right influence to produce and sustain this state of things, the greater his liberty [and] the more rapid will be his moral growth." Inmates, too, attested to Farnham's personal touch in carrying out her agenda of totalizing reform. The fact that such testimony eventually led to Luckey's dismissal is wholly ironic given how he and his allies had framed their charges against Farnham as a kind of anarchic negligence. They had utterly failed to appreciate that Farnham's goal of "secur[ing] more perfect submission" within the penitentiary was guided by "the maxim that 'that is the best government which governs least,'" a maxim she insisted was "equally applicable to such institutions as to States" (Prison Association of New York 1847b: 60–63).

SOME KIND OF AGENCY

Farnham resigned from Sing Sing in 1848. Despite the fact that many of her reform programs were rescinded, the disciplinary model that she put into practice would continue to resonate, both

politically and personally. The reforms instituted by Farnham at Sing Sing anticipated emerging versions of civil society that hinged upon the logic of environmental determinism rather than the linear logic of cause and effect.²² Such reforms operated according to principles of mediation and were based on specific understandings of the pervasive power of the social and how that power affected the individual. Farnham did not impose specific models for action and belief upon the prisoners at Sing Sing. Instead, she attempted to domesticate human potential. Farnham created specific conditions in which proper action and belief would inevitably spring and specific channels through which they could inevitably be expressed. As Luckey was the first to note, her reforms were the expression of a particularly modern cosmological orientation—a way of conceiving the relationship between self, society, and invisible universe that was decidedly more fluid, more dense, and more active than the one vocalized from the Methodist pulpit.

At Sing Sing, Farnham put a mesmeric spin on the phrenological dictum that “virtuous conduct” could be achieved through “beneficial” action upon “the activity of mental faculties and organs” (Combe and Mittermaier 1843: 5). Farnham had convinced Edmonds and PANY that the individual was always already subject to a network of forces that was external to that individual’s “moral sentiments.” Consequently, Farnham operated on the assumption that reform could best be realized through the strategic organization of that network. By intervening in the relationality between objects in the physical environment, she sought to energize liberty in the present, whereas Luckey had sought to exorcise the sins of the past. And whereas Luckey sought to create the proper conditions for a convict to be alone with his or her God, Farnham’s plan was to organize a “natural” sensory environment in which each object and each individual was connected to every other through circuits of sympathy.

Farnham would go on to work at the Perkins Institution and Asylum for the Blind where she continued to advocate the centrality of “influence” in the practice of reform (Lewis 1965: 250). Her translation of evangelical political economy into a mesmerically inflected phrenological idiom set the stage for her eventual interest in spiritualist cosmologies of benevolent agents, her participation in the spiritualist subculture, her friendship with Orson Fowler and Davis, and finally, her lectures on spiritualism in California in the mid-1850s. The fact

²² See, for example, Bushnell (1847), Morgan (1851), Smith (1853), and Hughes (1854).

that both Farnham and Edmonds would soon become public advocates for spiritualism was not insignificant.²³

The reforms implemented by Farnham and Edmonds at Sing Sing were part of a larger influx of metaphysical ideas into various institutions of reform (Braude 1989). Such ideas promised to secure the capacity for self-control, self-respect, and self-culture—a three-pronged process of cultivating the individual mind and social conscience. But rather than stress the emancipatory politics of these reform “efforts at social reorganization,” I want to conclude by broaching a more disturbing possibility—that the efforts of Farnham and Edmonds were representative of how ideas of the human and its horizon of belief and action were being defined and deployed within an increasing technological society (W. F. 1848: 233). The mechanization of factory floors, the spread of rail lines and telegraph wires, the extension of trade and postal routes, not to mention nascent strategies of advertising, fundamentally altered the ways in which individuals imagined and experienced the boundary between self and world (Thompson 1947; Trachtenberg 1982; Hounshell 1984; Lears 1994; John 1995). The management of words, images, machines, and bodies, from a certain perspective, expanded the reach of the public sphere and the possibilities for democratic dialogue. But as networks of information, commerce, and transportation expanded the range of possible actions and beliefs, the range itself became circumscribed by the convergence of those networks (Beniger 1986).

As Tocqueville noted after his tour of American penitentiaries, “an immense, protective power” was looming on the democratic horizon, a “new” thing that did not conform to the categories of “despotism” or “tyranny.” Having once believed human conscience to be the lever of democratic reform within the penitentiary, Tocqueville now wrote of a “network” of “complicated rules that are both minute and uniform” that was almost impossible to locate or define. It “does not break men’s will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much from being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, stifles, and stultifies” the potential for disorder (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1964: 87;

²³ As Tiffany argued in his case for spiritualism as the most refined science of social engineering, “the spiritual atmosphere [w]as a means of transmitting influences from mind to mind...all the manifestations of public excitement, or sympathy, are referable to these principles, and by carefully attending to them, we can learn how to create, and how to destroy these excitements” (Tiffany 1851: 147–149).

Tocqueville 1969: 691–2). And although such power may have been figuratively and literally untouchable, it nonetheless left its mark.²⁴

According to Tocqueville, democracy in America was not nearly as emancipatory as the people within it often told themselves and each other. As new freedoms emerged in concert with new modes of discipline, everyday life became a matter of disturbing enchantment, or what one contemporary observer described as the experience of the self as a “component” of “society” and a “link” in “carrying out the objects of commerce.”²⁵ Such effects of “systematic organization” at mid-century were ironic, in that they undermined the conceptual mix of Common Sense empiricism and republican politics that fueled its development. As the pace of technological modernization accelerated at mid-century, so, too, did the awareness of energies coursing through society and the individual psyche that were neither transparent nor material nor wholly subjective. Rather than coercing physically, many Americans suspected these energies of registering their effects invisibly and from a distance. Rather than affecting directly, they experienced their presence as bodiless and unlocatable. Everyday life, according to a wide range of historical testimony, was increasingly experienced in terms of spectrality, haunting, and contagion.

Which brings us back, full-circle, to the bedroom of Edmonds and the gentle twitchings that were “so rapid as to form almost a stream, yet each touch was quite distinct.” As Edmonds struggled to ascertain the source of his twitching, he came to the conclusion that “my most secret thoughts...have been freely spoken to” during spiritual intercourse “as if I had uttered them. Purposes which I have privily entertained have been publicly revealed; and I have once and again been admonished that my every thought was known to, and could be disclosed by, the intelligence that was thus manifesting itself.” For Edmonds, the boundary between private and public was in no way absolute but mediated by organized and

²⁴ Charles W. Colson, co-founder of Prison Fellowship, the organization that oversees the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, is not unfamiliar with complicated rules (“dirty tricks”) and their application. As a member of the illustrious “Watergate Seven” and special counsel to President Richard Nixon, Colson was “born-again” as he awaited sentencing in 1974. His managerial style, however, remained metaphorically consistent. Whether it was in the service of the White House Special Operations Unit (known as the “Plumbers”) or tending to the lonely soul of an Iowa inmate, Colson retained his focus on interior matters. As Colson wrote in 2002, the InnerChange Initiative “demonstrates that Christ changes lives, and that changing prisoners from the inside out is the only crime-prevention program that really works” (quoted in Henriques and Lehren 2006: 32).

²⁵ “So curiously dove-tailed is the artificial system of human society,” noted *The American Review* in 1845, “so complex is the reticulation by which the wants and wishes of our race are supplied and gratified, that scarcely any branch of art can be seriously affected in its progress without producing a sensible influence among a multitude of others, immediately or remotely connected with, or related to it” (“Post Office Reform” 1845: 199).

organizing forces. Such forces, according to Edmonds, were decidedly occult, yet susceptible to human knowledge. "Like the steam-engine and the magnetic telegraph, they are marvelous only to those who do not understand them" (Edmonds and Dexter 1853: 19, 75, 74, 77–78).

SECULARISM, OR HOW JOHN EDMONDS LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE SPIRIT WORLD

Edmonds often looked upon his time as President of PANY, his encounters at Sing Sing a reoccurring theme within the séance circle. In November of 1853, for example, Edmonds observed a statue of a naked man whose "arms were tied above his head to a ring in the wall, and his face was turned over his left shoulder with a mingled expression of terror and defiance. Behind him stood a large, burly man, with his right hand as if to strike, and holding in it a cat-o'-nine-tails." After noting how this statue "represented a scene which once occurred in the State Prison," Edmonds then insisted on narrating the scene, in its entirety in order to "convey more distinctly the idea of how far our earthly actions penetrate into our spiritual life."

In the footnote Edmonds recalled that during his first year at Sing Sing, he felt a professional obligation "to witness, personally, what this whipping with the cat-o'-nine-tails was, so that I might judge of it for myself." "One day," however, when Edmonds was "passing through the main hall of the prison," he "accidentally stumbled on" a "group assembled around the whipping ring, and a prisoner tied up to it, as represented in the statue." Although the lashing had not yet begun, Edmonds intervened, despite the prisoner's initial lack of repentance. Edmonds then took this prisoner under his wing. As Edmonds proudly recalled, "During the residue of his confinement in that prison he was one of the most orderly, submissive, and obedient men there; and in my efforts to reform the government of the prison, I frequently referred to his case as an instance of what might be done by judicious kindness instead of brute force" (Edmonds and Dexter 1855: 309–310).

Edmonds' footnoted vision is significant, I argue, not because it invites psychoanalytic speculation as to what his spiritual vision was *really* about but for its insight into the relationship between the kind of civil sphere Edmonds and Farnham cultivated at Sing Sing and the one they imagined themselves to be living within. As Hutchings has recently written,

"the formation of the criminal subject is deeply involved in the formation of secular subjectivity in the nineteenth century which involves

the recasting of religious doctrines of sin and guilt in the form appropriate to a contractual, secularly based state where religion has been displaced by law, but where law is strongly marked by religion" (Hutchings 2001: 2).

Hutchings's account of criminology is persuasive. It does not, however, focus on individual practices that were involved in this shift from theology to anthropology. As this essay has argued, the "recasting" of subjectivity in light of secular assumptions about politics was not simply a political matter. It was also a yearning, a disturbance, *something that could be felt*—the experience, perhaps, of the soul becoming the prison of the body (Foucault 1995: 29–30).

For Edmonds, Farnham, as well as prisoners, the realization of autonomous judgment—an essential quality of American citizenship—was wholly masochistic. In each case, the pleasure of moral autonomy depended upon recognizing the self as subject to an anonymous and immaterial network of surveillance. Or as Edmonds would later enthuse, "it [has been] demonstrated that our most secret thoughts can be known to and be revealed by the intelligence which is thus surrounding us and commuting with us.... Each can see and judge for himself" (Edmonds and Dexter 1853: 63).²⁶

Edmonds' vision also challenges the historian to account for the strange ways in which "secular" subjectivity denies more than just its religious lineage but is, itself, dependent upon a blithe dismissal of its own porosity, its own dependence upon being "systematically treated." A republican version of political subjectivity, as experienced by Edmonds late one February evening, was marked by the pleasure of subjection. His pleasure became more refined on subsequent journeys into the spirit-world; his agency less pronounced as he sought to affirm something about himself that was not himself.²⁷ For Edmonds, spirits promised blissful incorporation into the machinery of republicanism and offered a compelling vision of what it was like to live on the edge of "human progress." On this edge, the occult dynamics of the secular modern could be glimpsed not through submission to a transcendent God but through submission to a multilayered, kinetic, albeit quite stable social order. To dwell upon Edmonds's eroticization of spiritual intercourse is not simply to point out that the predictions of

²⁶ Edmonds's example suggests how the "eroticization of pain is merely one of the ways in which the modern self attempts to secure its elusive foundation" (Asad 2003: 119–120).

²⁷ For a discussion of "public subjectivity" and the mediations of self-relation, see Warner (2002).

“secularism” had failed to materialize by mid-century but also to recognize that its attitudes toward moral agency had achieved visceral currency.

Under the narrative auspices of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, spiritualists viewed themselves as cohering around a “national religion” (Brittan 1854). Furthermore, they looked to the spirit-world to manage the inner workings of government, to maintain the conditions of democratic dialogue, and to cultivate the public sensorium.²⁸ To conclude that the spiritualist dream of “automatic docility” was either sacred or profane or some combination of the two does little to address the strange interplay of evangelicalism, occultism, and the ideology of secularism in antebellum America (Foucault 1995: 169). When Edmonds and Farnham successfully replaced an evangelical program with a phrenological plan of governance and instruction, they retained and extended the systematic benevolence of evangelicals in a new key. In their desire to align body and mind—both their own as well as those under their charge—they enacted the kind of public sphere evangelicals sought to create: a population of individuals free to act and think according to the same set of moral principles.

To attend to this alignment is to begin to understand what exactly was twitching in Edmonds’ left thigh and, more significantly, to begin to unpack the power and scope of what may be called, with all its disturbing ironies, a religion born of secular modernity.

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²⁸ Regarding nominalism and the question of spiritualist identity, see Albanese (2007: 220) and Taves (1999: 401n.4).

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ERRATUM

Ghosts of Sing Sing, or the Metaphysics of Secularism

On page 615 of volume 75, in the Abstract, the third sentence should read as follows. Before their embrace of spiritualism in the early 1850s both John Edmonds, the President of the Prison Association of New York, and Eliza Farnham, an advocate of phrenology, modified Sing Sing's evangelical approach to penology.

On page 625, first word of first sentence of first full graph should be Gustave.

The publisher regrets these errors.