

Emotion, gender and power

Emotional norms and expressions in the Bruges State Reformatory for delinquent girls (1927-1941)¹

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The State Reformatory of Bruges, founded in 1927, was a disciplinary wing aimed at re-educating delinquent girls. The detainees' personal case files offer a wide range of ego-documents, including so-called *billet clandestins*: letters secretly exchanged among the detained girls. These clandestine notes contain frequent and intense emotional expressions, strongly contrasting with the self-control displayed by the girls when addressing the institutional staff. This article seeks to explain the prominent presence of emotions in the girls' clandestine discourse.

The State Reformatory of Bruges: a disciplinary wing for delinquent girls

On the 27th of January 1940, sixteen-year-old Yvette got caught reading a clandestine note that had been secretly transmitted by her friend Marie. 'Oh Gette, I wish you could leave, and me too...', Marie wrote. She was fed up with her confinement in this 'devilish' house and wanted to get out. 'But the Principal, my torturer, doesn't allow me to, he does not see that I cannot bear it any longer, that I suffer tremendously...'²

The *Établissement d'Éducation de l'État pour filles difficiles et indisciplinées* [State Reformatory for recalcitrant or difficult girls, hereafter: State Reformatory] in Bruges, where Marie and Yvette were detained, was a disciplinary wing founded in 1927 under the auspices of pedagogue and psychologist Jean van de Vliedt. The staff was recruited from the Sisters of the Holy Family of Kortrijk. Like other state reformatories in Belgium, the state reformatory of Bruges accommodated girls that had been convicted for misconduct, vagrancy or indecency, but Bruges was specialised in girls that had been expelled from other institution because of their 'incurable' behavior. Fearing that that these girls would corrupt other detainees with their violent or immoral behavior, they were transferred to the disciplinary wing of Bruges. Most of the girls originated from working class families in densely populated or industrial regions such as Brussels, Charleroi or Liège. At their arrival in Bruges, 65 percent of them was between 17 and 19 years old. The majority would spend less than two years in Bruges, to be transferred to another institution, placed in employment, or allowed provisional freedom.³

Bruges was only one of the many public and private reformatories where minors were sent to as a result of a measure of the Children's Court. Already since the middle of the nineteenth century there had been separate penitentiary institutions for minors. But whereas in the nineteenth century the Classical Penal Law focused on *punishing* 'dangerous children', the Child Protection Act (1912), according to the legal doctrine of Social Defense, aimed to 'protect' children from a dangerous environment, as such preventing 'children in danger' from transforming into 'dangerous children'.

The Belgian historiography provides a whole array of recent and excellent publications, highlighting different aspects of juvenile delinquency (Christiaens 1999; De Koster 2003; Dumortier 2006; François 2005; Massin 2011). A less explored field however is the personal experience of juvenal delinquents *themselves* (Bultman 2013; Wills 2008; Rivière 2009) A useful source for this is a note such as Marie's, which is but one of the hundred and fifty notes which were intercepted as 'billets clandestins' and were kept in the personal files of the girls in the State Reformatory of Bruges. The notes contain a diverse range of topics: Marie and Berthe exchanged addresses to keep in touch after their release, Elisabeth wrote passionate love letters to 'Bebette' and Gabrielle and Nelly invented an audacious escape plan on the back of sixteen worn-out playing cards (n°839: File 85).

However, most striking in these secret notes is the presence of intense emotions. 'My dear little Bebette', Elisabeth wrote. 'You know that my love is a fire and my passion is very strong. I want to hold you against my heart and make love to you and I am waiting impatiently for one of your fiery kisses'. (n° 835: file 51) Even though same-sex relationships in penitentiary institutions are not exceptional, the intensity of the emotional discourse in the notes is remarkable –not only when writing about love, but also about suffering, anxiety and desires. Secondly, there is a big discrepancy between the strong emotional discourse in the hidden letters, and the rather controlled emotional expression in letters addressing the head of the institution.

This article argues that the intense emotional discourse should be seen in light of the rigid behavioral norms proclaimed by the State Reformatory, subjecting the detainees' emotional expressions to strict rules. After elaborating briefly on the sources and methodology, I discuss the emotional norms proclaimed by the State Reformatory, to contrast them with the girls' clandestine discourse.

Sources and Methodology

The State Reformatory of Bruges can be considered as a 'total institution': the girls were under permanent control, their rooms were checked upon, their letters to family members were read by the institution (and if deemed necessary censored), and the institution could deny them the right to be in touch with their family. The reformatory was located in a former prison, and this was reflected in the architecture: the former cells were refurbished to serve as rooms for the girls, the bars on the windows being reattached. The days were largely spent working, and in theory a silence rule applied, except during the recreations. (Massin 2011)

Despite the strict regime, some detainees were creative in sidestepping the norms, as shown by many scholars for other penitentiary contexts. (Myers and Sangster 2001; Christiaens 2002) Herein, James Scott's notion of 'infrapolitics' has been a major source of inspiration, not so much looking at what happens in the public sphere, but rather looking at subversive actions taking place *outside* of the gaze of authority (Scott 1990). Scott distinguishes between the *public transcript* and the *hidden transcript*, 'discourse that takes place 'offstage', beyond direct observation by powerholders'. Everyday practices such as mocking the institutional staff, displaying an exaggerating humbleness, gossiping or hidden communication such as the 'billets clandestins' suggest the existence of a thriving subversive scene in the hidden sphere.

Of the 186 preserved personal case files between 1927 and 1941, 32 contain a total number of 151 'billets clandestins', of which 128 are written in French. In addition to these notes, the punishment register was a

useful source, recording every infringement against the institutional norms and the corresponding sanction. The sanction was mostly a period of solitary confinement. Some 130 of the 682 entries in the punishment register of Bruges referred directly to clandestine communication. While these institutional documents have proven their value as historical source, the historian has to be aware of a potentially distorted view: only the *intercepted* letters and the registered behaviour are recorded (Wills 2008).

The circumstances under which the ‘billets clandestins’ were produced had a big impact on the notes, both materially and discursive. Due to lack of materials, many of the notes were written on old and small scraps of paper. The tone was very intimate and characterized by an informal language, sometimes counting numerous spelling errors. To use the letters as a source for both discourse and social practice, we use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Moreover, CDA is well suited to analyse the constant interaction between context and discourse against the power relations in the State Reformatory.

In addition, we used insights from the history of emotions; a research field studying the change of emotional norms, emotional expressions and experiences throughout time. Herein emotions are not considered as universal, independent and biological entities, but interpreted within a social-constructivist paradigm. Especially William Reddy’s concept of *emotional regime* and *emotional refuge* is very useful for this microstudy of the emotional discourse in the State Reformatory, as it corresponds with Scott’s *public* and *hidden transcript* as mentioned above. An *emotional regime* is ‘the set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them’, whereas an *emotional refuge* refers to a ‘relationship, ritual or organization (whether formal or informal) that provides safe release from prevailing emotional norms and allows relaxation of emotional effort’ (Reddy 2001). In the following, I argue that the clandestine correspondence community of the detained girls can be considered as an emotional refuge with emotional practices that were the complete opposite of the norms proclaimed by the emotional regime.

The State Reformatory as emotional regime

Equanimeous housewives

The norms and values proclaimed by the state reformatory in Bruges corresponded to the bourgeois ideal of domesticity. The girls were to become decent mothers and spouses, suited for the dominant bread-winner model. Hence, the emotional norms within the state reformatory were strongly gender- and class related. Although the period under study is the interwar period, the reformatory shows remarkable similarities with the nineteenth century Victorian emotional norms. These were strongly embedded in the biological complementary thinking about the sexes. In this view, women had limited reasoning capacities and were rather oriented at intuitive, practical and detailed tasks. This made the (white, middle class) woman very well suited for domestic duties and child rearing, in particular because she had a ‘natural’ loving and caring temper. Men on the other side –still in the Victorian line of thought–, had a greater capacity for objectivity and abstraction and were better capable of judging impartially –qualities that were indispensable for tasks in the public sphere (Shields 2007).

In her detailed study about the reformatory of Bruges, Veerle Massin observed that qualities such as diligence, sensibility and attempts to restrain from immoral behavior were highly valued by the institution –

characteristics that fit well in the criteria for the ‘perfect’ Victorian housewife. Negative observations referred to a broad array of qualities: indiscipline, short-temper, nonchalance, idleness, pride, jealousy, dishonesty and indifference. Here too, the correspondence with the ideal of the stable-tempered, caring housewife and mother of the Victorian period is striking.

Self-control

Furthermore, the girls were ought to balance between expressing the appropriate emotion and the appropriate intensity of this emotion. Loss of self-control was punished, as Gabrielle experienced when expressing her anger after a negative evaluation. At the same time, the register also reveals the sanctioning of Thérèse, punished for showing ‘stubborn indifference’ after a negative evaluation. (n°628: 12.1.1930 & 20.9.1931) While the former was punished for expressing an emotion, the latter was punished for *not* showing the appropriate emotion (i.e. remorse). While a certain degree of arbitrariness on the side of the institutional staff cannot be excluded, these sanctions are illustrative of the extremely fine-grained rules concerning emotional expressions, wherein the notion of self-control was of crucial importance.

Generally speaking, the concept of self-control was subject to change in the interwar period as a consequence of the growing informalisation in interpersonal communication. During the Victorian era, formal rules acted as a structural barrier against temptation. In the twentieth century however, it was rather the individual personality that should deal with excessive emotions, leading to new categories of virtue in which self-control was the key notion. (Stearns 2007; Wouters 2008) In this respect, the emotional norms of the State Reformatory corresponded to the increasing importance of self-control in the wider societal norms of the interwar period. With regard to explanatory models however, the institution still referred to older theories.

Perverse sexuality

According to Jean van de Vliedt a problematic sexual ‘instinct’, a supposed homosexuality and general disobedience were all interconnected. (Massin 2011) In the course of the nineteenth century, thinking about sexuality became increasingly embedded in medical and psychological discourse, being considered as more than just an **physical** phenomenon. Sexuality was considered as a complex of psychological traits, wherein an excess or shortage had an influence on the personality –and especially on the feminine personality. (Appignanesi 2009)

This vision on sexuality had an impact on the notion of self-control. The institutional discourse suggests that aggression was sanctioned when it manifested itself, but sexuality and the ‘erotic instinct’ were repressed even *before* the girls showed any outward ‘symptoms’. This subtle difference is not so much visible in the punishment register, but is observable in the 6-month evaluation forms. On Marie’s form for instance, Jean van de Vliedt wrote that her work efforts were adequate, but that she continuously gave in to ‘vicious dreams’ that had a negative impact on her behavior (n° 830: File 4). Thus, in spite of the *external* good behavior, Marie should improve on wiping out her *thinking* about immoral deeds, as the *internal* ‘instinct’ was of negative consequence on the *external* behavior. As such, the girls were to be in complete self-control both on their behavior and on their *internal* experiences.

In the behavioral reports and the disciplinary register, girls were regularly described as being in crisis. This notion of crisis was a flexible term: there was the ‘crisis of madness’, the ‘crisis of stubbornness’ and the ‘erotic crisis’. About Marie for instance was noted: ‘Real *erotic* crisis, has repeatedly embraced L. Laurence in public in a disgraceful manner. They are two obstinate, immoral girlfriends.’ (n°628, 29.12.1927)

Judging from the biannual reports and the punishment register, the erotic crises were a strong impulse of erotic feelings or a moment of fierce rage when the love relationships were prevented by institutional measures. Jean van de Vliedt wrote about Yvonne that when she could not satisfy her ‘lascivious tendencies’, she would slip into an ‘erotic crisis that made her a real fury’.¹ The only solution then were therapeutic bandages or the straitjacket. (n° 834: File 21.)

This discourse about the girls or women whose behavior was purportedly dominated by their sexuality and who were not able to control themselves, has important consequences with regard to power relations. As historical psychologist Stephanie Shields states: ‘constructions of emotion out-of-control are used to disempower people.’ (Shields 2007) Brushing aside and labelling the girls’ anger as ‘hysterical’ or ‘erotically hysterical’ implies that their anger was not caused by the institutional circumstances, but by their own uncontrollable temper. Labelling an emotion as irrational and uncontrolled ‘crises’ distracts the attention from the causes of these emotional expressions. At the same time, this construction of irrationality produces a legitimation of a repressive attitude towards the girls. The labelling of a detained girl ‘in crisis’ or ‘hysterical, erotic individual’ then can be seen as a component of a discourse that served to legitimize the institutional hierarchy.

Emotional Refuge

The girls’ clandestine discourse was in strong contrast with the norms promulgated by the state reformatory: sensibility, a stable temper, zeal, respect and above all: a rigid self-control, both with regard to anger and affection. The clandestine discourse constructed by the girls was exactly the opposite: their love was active, greedy, curious about and keen on bodily affection. This was in stark contrast with the gender-related emotional norms with respect to love, depicting female sexuality as the passive, dutiful and loving nature of the spouse. Lastly, (a part of) of the clandestine discourse promulgated a same-sex love, whereas the dominant discourse endorsed a heterosexual love.

Yet these same-sex relationships gave rise to fierce debates among the girls. A lot of the girls urged each other to avoid the relationships, fearing the harsh sanctions. Others were concerned about their future and their reputation: ‘Marie, do as I do, love a man but not a girl’, Rosalie wrote. ‘Me nor you, we will never marry a girl anyway (...). The people would think we have gone mad’ (n° 834: File 27). Others, like Josée did not see the problem: ‘One day you asked me why can’t we love a girl just like a man’, she wrote to Marie, ‘But of course, it is totally possible! After all, I love a young girl instead of a young man and it’s the same love like when I loved a man.’ (n° 839: File 91).

Secondly, the emotional expressions were characterized by a great intensity. The girls tried to convince each other that they were totally immersing themselves in their feelings of love –or the other way around: that it was their love dominating *them* entirely. ‘I love you like crazy!’, Marie wrote. ‘I allow the love to control me,

even in my hand writing' (n° 830: File 4). The girls searched for words that would be powerful enough to express their feelings. 'To say that I love you, my dearest, is not enough because it is a real *adoration* that I feel for you, oh yes I adore you!' Josephine wrote, therein placing 'adoring' one step higher than 'loving' (n° 834: File 26). Using strong words, interjections like 'oh' and repetitions ('oh my dear I love you!! I love you! I love you!' (n° 839: File 85)) the girls tried to express their love with words. Sometimes this was also expressed using bodily terms: 'I want to give whole my heart to you, and only you,' Yvette wrote to Marie, adding that she wanted to talk 'from eye to eye, from heart to heart, to hug you', (n° 843: File 139). Indeed, this discourse was connected to bodily practices such as kissing, tattooing a lovers' name in the arm or exchanging hair strands as a 'evidence' of love. These immersions in emotion stood in stark contrast with the ideal of a perfect self-control, as required by the emotional regime.

Yet, the notion self-control was not entirely absent from the clandestine notes. When Yvette confided Marie her fears that their love relation would be discovered, Marie gave her some advice: 'I am sure that you tremble when you hear them [the institutional staff]. But *control yourself*, my little wolf, and *make your eyes lie!*' Marie's interpretation of self-control then was exactly the opposite of the institutional interpretation. To this latter, self-control implied the *convergence* of external and internal behavior (cf. supra, Yvonne's case). To Marie, 'control yourself' implied the *divergence* of external behavior and internal experience, convincing Yvette to 'lie with her eyes' and thus expressing *another* feeling than she was experiencing. Herein, Marie not only shows that she was well aware of the institutional emotional norms but she shows her capability to balance between the public and hidden 'transcripts' according to the context.

Balancing between *hidden and public transcript*

Whereas the girls used the billets clandestins often as an opportunity to express emotions, letters to the Principal were rather an occasion to write *about* their emotions. The girls wrote in a more detached way and deliberately chose their wordings. Marie for instance wrote 'Every single day, yes every day I react blindly and sometimes in spite of myself, to the passion that makes me not only sick but slave of myself'. Her writing is dominated by her agitated tone (the repeating of 'every day'), yet on the other side she also analyses herself from a distance. She acknowledges her uncontrollable passion, but described her passion and herself as if it were two separate entities ('the passion... that makes me sick') (n° 830: File 2).

In acknowledging that she was possessed by her 'passion' that dominated her actions, Marie seemed to adhere the institutional discourse and Jean van de Vliedt's views on sexuality, as discussed earlier. Indeed, one of her biannual reports states that she was 'ruled by an alarming conflict between her youthful mentality, daring, childlike, the cynicism, the vanity of evil, and the *sexual tyrannical tumult* which suffocates all her appropriate potentials'. In other words, the report distinguished between her overall mentality and the passionate 'tyrannical' sexuality that ruined her capacities. The similarity in Marie's discourse and the institutional discourse is striking.

In her letter to the inspector of the Office de Protection d'Enfants, (another) Marie repeatedly emphasized her growing ability of self-control, indicating that she was well aware of the importance of self-control for the institution: 'I still have moments when it is very difficult... but I restrain myself, and I tell myself: it will pass,

and then I'm calm again and in this way, step by step, I'll overcome myself" (n° 832: File 9). This suggests that Marie was familiar with the emotional norms and the criteria of 'appropriate' behavior. However, Marie's letter to the inspector could not contrast more with the intense feelings of her passionate love letters, written in the hidden realm.

This large discrepancy in discourse expressed towards the authorities and among themselves, suggests more than just a difference in register. It reveals the capacity of (some of the) girls to unravel the rules of the public transcript and apply them when necessary. Whereas the line between the public and the hidden realm was clear-cut in the examples given above, this distinction was disrupted by a phenomenon that the girls called 'faire son train' ('doing one's train').

Contesting openly: 'faire son train'

On the 15th of December 1931 the punishment register reported: 'Clara had to stay in her cell due to her great rudeness towards Mr. Director General W.; at around noon *she started her train* as they call it: singing and making noise, we were forced to give her a shower. Yvonne the same. Around 7 in the evening 1st Mireille, 2nd Marie 3rd Marie and 4th Berthe started *doing their train*, singing and yelling. [Mireille] who was the leader of all of this, broke all of her windows. The only reason for this is that Clara was punished.' (n° 62, 15.12.1931). The notion '*doing her train*' is mentioned sixteen times in the punishment register, and involved yelling and screeching, often from their rooms or the disciplinary cell –sometimes collectively as an expression of solidarity towards the other detainees. The phenomenon *doing her train* is intriguing because it clusters a lot of elements: a mocking discourse was accompanied by bodily practices, it could be individual or collective, could be planned deliberately or happen spontaneously, and it united feelings of frustration with solidarity. As the citation shows, the practice could take off out of a feeling of injustice and anger because of a punishment on individual level, but at the same time it also attests of cohesion and solidarity between certain cliques –a solidarity that was usually expressed in the *hidden* sphere, and was meant to stay hidden. The practice of *doing her train* pulled this solidarity out of the hidden sphere, to contest the authorities openly.

Often, this practice went together with provocative physical acts. By singing loudly and yelling, the girls openly defied the emotions which would be considered socially apt: equanimity and a high level of awe. Sometimes the 'doing her train' was even accompanied by aggressive behavior. This could be aimed at physical objects, like Mireille who smashed her windows, but also against the staff. Yelling and screeching already contrasted with the girls' gender roles, but showing aggressive behaviour was at complete odds with the norms. The punishment register then constructs an image of the girls' uncontrollable rage. But this picture of 'emotions-out-of-control' can be nuanced when reading an intercepted conversation between Marie and Berthe. In their letter they not only debated which songs to sing, but they also settled a starting time of their action: '[Berthe] copy your songs for me quickly because you know one minute is enough to put me inside [in the disciplinary cell] and within the next two hours I will start my train, you will see. Here are the songs I will sing when I do my train.' Attached to the letter was a list of almost twenty songs, including occasional comments: 'nr.6 Moulin Rouge – very beautiful, you know'. It explains the many billets clandestins containing song texts. (n° 837: File 67).

The songs often had story lines figuring gorgeous women and their lovers in bars, but there was one peculiar song in circulation that seems to be written by the girls themselves, openly mocking the institution. This provocative song was the very first one on Berthe's and Marie's list. The first paragraph was rather pessimistic and described the long period of confinement, the harsh life in the State Reformatory and the sanctions. The second paragraph was provocative, stressed the cohesion between the girls and demonstrated their own agency. Indeed, when their confinement became unbearable, the song suggested: 'oh well, let's do our train!'

Conclusion

The personal case files of girls detained in the State Reformatory of Bruges contain fascinating clandestine notes, in which the girls expressed intense emotional expressions. These expressions stood in strong contrast with the institutional norms proclaimed by the State Reformatory. Because inherent to the strict behavioural norms proclaimed by the institution, were norms regulating the girls' emotional expressions, in which self-control was of crucial importance. The clandestine discourse of the detained girls completely subverted the institution's emotional norms: equanimity became a dance between love, suffering and jealousy, the respect that the girls were ought to show, became mockery and the self-control was transformed into a total immersion in extreme emotions. As such, the correspondence community functioned as an emotional refuge, allowing the girls to build a dam against the norms inflicted on them by the emotional regime.

Starting from the letters written by minors themselves, this *view from below* brings to light a new element in the historiography about juvenile delinquency: the role of emotions in a penitentiary context. An element that was of high importance for the detainees themselves, as illustrated by the prominent place of emotions in the clandestine discourse. Some of the girls even considered their feelings as the one part of the 'Self' where the institution could not reach them: among Marie's scribbles on the wrinkly shreds of paper cited at the opening of this article, she had added: 'I hate all my tormenters. They took everything from me: freedom, family, joy. But what they cannot take from me is my heart, my imagination... No, they will never prevent me to love.' (n° 841: File 111)

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² Due to privacy protection, all names in this article are fictional.

³ The discipline section was but one of the three sections in the State Reformatory and State Hospital of Bruges. The institution as a whole contained, apart from the disciplinary section founded in 1927, also a wing for girls with a venereal disease (1922) and for pregnant girls (1933). For all contextual information, I relied on the thorough PhD by Veerle

Massin, Protéger ou exclure? L'enfermement des 'filles perdues' de la Protection de l'enfance à Bruges (1922-1965), unpublished PhD Thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 2011, especially pp. 5, 32 & 108.

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