

THE PRIVATE INTELLIGENCE OF BANK ROBBERS: TWO SELF-ACCOUNTS¹

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

At the United States Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, various educational and otherwise constructive activities are available to the inmates. These include an extensive program of college courses, including several courses in psychology, offered by the University of Kansas.

Another such activity is the publication of *New Era*, an impressive looking magazine written, illustrated, and edited by the inmates, to give them "an opportunity for self-expression and to provide a medium for discussion of public problems."

Half of a recent issue of *New Era* was devoted to the report of "a project on bank robbers by bank robbers." The project was concerned with background and motivational factors of the crime and consisted of a questionnaire study and interviews as well as written accounts. The data were obtained from the 216 bank robbers who were at Leavenworth at the time, serving an average sentence of about 18 years. The report consists of the statistical results, including 18 tables and figures, and eight of the accounts. It is the latter which interest us here.

The procedure by which the accounts were obtained were described by the project director and editor in a private communication as follows:

I interviewed each man and informed him that I wanted him to give me his own account of why he robbed a bank. . . . I told them, "I want it like it was," which is an expression among prisoners meaning the truth, not what you would like the "squares" to believe. . . . The first thing I had to do was to assure them that their identity would be protected. . . . Being a bank robber myself and having been in this institution for a number of years, I already had an inner frame of reference with many of these men. Second, they knew that I was in a position to check their stories against records. It was surprising how few of them tried to "put a story on me." . . . The accounts were either written by the men in privacy or taken in private interview by me. Some of these men were agreeable to being interviewed in the *New Era* office; others I had to accommodate to the extent of walking the prison yard with them, eating with them, even participating in sports with them, while they gave me their accounts of the crime. Those accounts that I had to write for the men were often written several times, until the man was satisfied with the exact wording of the article. As for the men who wrote their own accounts (which, incidentally, was the great majority of them) I held these articles for several weeks, checked with the authors at least twice, to be sure that they did not want to change anything, before finally putting the article to bed.

¹The cases of T. J. and J. M. presented herein are reprinted from *New Era*, U. S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas, 1961, 15 (2), pp. 13-15 & 26-28, with the permission of the Director, U. S. Bureau of Prisons, Washington, D. C. This publication provides the inmates of the institution an opportunity for training and practical experience in the art of journalism and a medium for self-expression in the practice of that art.

The eight published accounts could, of course, be interpreted from any psychological viewpoint, as is true for any case material. But they seem to confirm to a remarkable extent the observations about the criminal by Adler. Some of these are, in brief:

Criminals look and speak and listen in a different way from other people. . . . They have a private logic, a private intelligence. We can observe this in the way they explain their crimes. . . . They like to believe that they are heroes, but this is again a mistaken scheme of apperception, a failure of common sense.

All these people like violent contradiction or antitheses. They are like children. It must be everything or nothing. "Starvation or gallows." "Salvation or ruin." . . . The criminal is really carrying out his life in a dream: he does not know reality; he must fight against knowing reality or he would be forced to give up his career.

They are suffering from a wrong outlook upon the world, a wrong estimate of their own importance and the importance of other people. . . . They see their contact with society as a sort of continuous warfare. . . . They treat themselves as a body of exiles and do not understand how to feel at home with their fellow men.

The goal of a criminal is always to be superior in a private and personal manner. What he is striving for contributes nothing to others. He is not cooperative. . . . His goal does not include this usefulness to society. . . . It swells his vanity and pride to think of himself as overcoming the police, and often he thinks, "I can never be found out."

The criminal differs from other failures in one point: he retains a certain amount of activity. He behaves actively enough on the useless side of life, and to a certain extent he can cooperate there with those whom he sees like himself. Here he differs from the neurotic, the suicide, or the drunkard. He is very limited, however, in his sphere of activity. (Adler, A. *What life should mean to you*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1958, pp. 197-232.)

We consider the *New Era* accounts of interest also because of the following unique aspects: (a) they are in the nature of self-portraits, being *by* and *on* criminals; (b) they are contemporary; (c) they are remarkably sophisticated, probably growing in part out of the excellent educational opportunities within the prison. Some of the accounts are distinguished by timely psychiatric terms ("Freudian or other fashionable tags," as one bank robber put it), and many, by references to Plato, St. Augustine, Voltaire, Leibnitz, William James, Colin Wilson, Arthur Miller, Sartre, the "avante Garde," etc.

Intelligent, then, the eight bank robbers whose accounts were chosen for the report, certainly are, and also educated. Still, they offer strange reading. They reflect excellently what Adler called "private intelligence;" the educational facilities at the prison did apparently not succeed in giving them "common sense." As an indication of this, only two of the bank robbers considered their criminal careers a mistake.

It is for these various reasons that we are reprinting below two of the bank robbers' accounts. The first has been selected because it

illustrates well Adler's observation of the antithetical thinking of the criminal and of his living as if in a dream; the second, as an extreme case of the striving for personal superiority through personal power. Beyond this, they are representative of the remaining cases in sharing with five of these their state of warfare against society, or a private code of ethics as part of their private intelligence. These find expression in the other cases as follows: "open rebellion against society" (C. B.); "revenge against life itself, especially authority" (Ri. D.); "I don't really know what I hate, I call it society" (Ra. D.); or, "I wasn't being dishonest—dishonesty implies deceit—I wasn't deceiving when I shoved that pistol in their face" (P. K.); "when I look in the mirror, I see a reflection I can respect" (A. M.); "I accept no standards beyond those I've set myself" (C. B.); "I held my own court, passed my own judgment" (Ra. D.).

THE ACCOUNT OF T. J., THE DREAMER

From the note by the editor of *New Era*: *T. J. is 33 years old, has served 7 years in Leavenworth on an 18-year sentence. He is a small man with a tremendous amount of energy who virtually spends all his time studying. His intellectual appetite is as varied as his understanding of the world of which he gained considerable knowledge in his years as a sailor. Thomas is a man with few friends, selected associates who share his academic interests.*

I have been asked to give my reasons why I robbed a bank, and how I now feel about this crime. First let me state that I do not agree with the common assumption that all banks are robbed for solely money. I believe that money, in most cases, is only a secondary motive, and in many cases the man who commits the crime is not always fully aware of the primary factors motivating him. At least this was true in my case, and after seven years of associating with bank robbers I have become convinced that, like me, their reasons for robbing a bank were far more complicated than just a sudden need for money.

To prove my contention here it is necessary that I digress for a moment, for I feel that a bank robber—all criminals for this matter—in one respect shares this in common with his fellowman: he is the cumulative sum of his past experiences and training, and there is no understanding his crime until we have understood the experiential elements which made him the man he was at the time of his crime. It is this—and it is unique in every individual—which we must accept before we are able to understand why a man suddenly, or premedita-

tively, violates the morals and ethics of his society and commits an act which forever marks him in the eyes of his fellowman. I would like to explain the elements of experience which made me a bank robber, and if the reader will lend me his understanding, I am sure that before I am finished he will understand that there are far more important motivational factors involved in robbing a bank than just money.

First, I grew up in a large industrial city and before I was ten my parents had separated and my mother was left to support three children; by the time I was twelve I was practically earning my own way and the economic circumstances in the family were far from favorable. But in spite of the unfavorable socio-economic factors, I managed to develop a rather good attitude toward life; and even today I look back on my childhood as a truly meaningful experience which brought me close to life and taught me the meaning of poverty and the endless struggle to rise above one's circumstantial handicaps.

Because I was a dreamer as a youngster I grew up believing that every man who is honest and willing to give his best will in the end receive the best, and that love, equality, sincerity, and dedication will always be more rewarding than the opposite traits. Nor did I ever feel any sense of shame because I came from the poor, and I have never tried to blame my criminal behavior on what some might call the most undesirable of social circumstances. I always took what life had to offer and tried to make the best of it, and I never doubted my ability to compete with the best. All I ever asked was that I be given the opportunity.

These were the ideals I took with me back in 1943 when I ran away and went to sea at the age of 15.

During the war, I saw my share of all the things that made World War II one of the most inhumane, rotten, filthy slaughters in the history of mankind. But I came back from that mess still believing in my ideals, convinced that all those who had died had given their lives to protect man's most noble concepts. Then there were the years after the war, and as I remember, this was the most disgusting and depressing period of my life—when I first began to realize that if all those men had died for anything noble, they must have killed that nobleness with them or have cherished it so dearly that it followed them to the grave. All I had to do to prove to myself what a big farce it had all been was observe those around me in their business practices and the moral and ethical contradictions and ambiguities of their personal lives.

And it is probably worthwhile to note here that after the war my most extensive associations were with three social classes: transient industrial workers, upper-lower class people, and lower-middle class businessmen.

This is a brief generalization of my past, and I am the first to admit that what I am is primarily of my own making. But what was not of my own making—that which environmental circumstances refused to modify—was this tendency to dream: to compare forever the real with the ideal. As I am able to understand the motivational forces in my life, there has always been this conflict between the ideal and the real. This conflict has always frustrated my energies to such a degree that I most often felt that I was working against myself.

To me everything has always been either black or white, no shades of gray. I have always believed in the ideal, and whenever the real conflicted with the ideal, I refused to accept the real. My fault was that I didn't have the genius of a Plato who could look down on reality, shrug his shoulders, and say that he didn't care what reality proved or disproved — the ideal was of absolute supremacy, and it was just too bad for reality because it didn't square with the ideals of intellect; nor did I have the moral flexibility of a Machiavelli who could manipulate concepts and principles as cleverly as a juggler tossing bottles.

All I could do was respond with the nature that was mine, and this was a violent, sensitive nature, blinded by a oneness of purpose, swinging in radical extremes. When injured, its instinctive recourse was to strike out against everything which had directly contributed to what I felt to be wrong. The things I hated most were the very things which were more socially acceptable—the things which made up this phony, tinselled, hypocritical, half-myth, half-lie existence that some people—a great many of them—accepted as a worthwhile way of life. I say *some* people because I didn't know all people, and although I never allowed myself the benefit of a doubt, I believe I at least owe this to those I have never known.

But before I was drafted for the Korean fiasco, I was beginning to lose a little of this blind faith in ideals, and at one time I got so practical that it resulted in a short prison sentence for a minor crime. Yet, contradictory as it may sound, I came out of prison two years later more convinced of my ideals than I had ever been, and in spite of the fact that I was an ex-convict, I began making plans for college where I intended to do something about making my ideals a reality. (Still

the dreamer!) But before I could get to college, I got drafted for the Korean conflict. And really, the only conflict here was between the army and me, and we settled our differences in Germany, with me marching all over the whole damn country digging holes, drinking beer and brooding over the education that I somehow felt I was getting cheated out of; and every day I became more convinced that this world was in one big mess and it would take armies of sincerely dedicated men to straighten it out. I was still the dreamer: I felt that I had something meaningful, something the world needed, and if I could somehow manage to get myself out of this army and through college, there was something I could do about the world's problems. What I wasn't aware of was that I was practically sitting on top of the force which intended to do something about the world's problems—in a problem-solving way that I'm sure I wouldn't have appreciated at the time.

And then one day I was back home again, working 18 to 20 hours a day, supporting a wife and kid, trying to go to college and working nights in a press factory. And always when I came home for a few hours it was like someone was beating drums in my head, and when I tried to study, there were these differences with my wife which grew out of her valid objections about how I was neglecting her and the child.

Then the explosion came and suddenly I had a belly full of all my noble ideals and I quit trying, walked out on my family, bought a gun with my last fifty dollars, and the same intensity of purpose that I had once dedicated towards a worthwhile end, I dedicated to the gun. Overnight I was myself in reverse, and I hated everything, and there were just these two vague generalizations eating at me — money-morality and money-ethics — and society was just one big, foul, rat race where the greatest pig always takes the greatest prize. And since this was the way it was, I turned hog, and there was nothing phony about the way I did it. I didn't hide my intentions behind the legal respectability of some business organization, or seek ethical immunity in some public office, or least of all, use some loophole in some well meaning law to take advantage of some mis-informed person. No, I can always face my conscience for this: I was a pure, honest hog, and I went out with a gun and out-hogged the half-hogs of respectability. I took what they worshipped most and laughed when they squealed; and then I threw the money at another type of half-hog who lives off hogs, and the prostitutes and the parasites laughed—but it was always

me laughing the loudest, because I knew that those laughing at me were more pathetically warped in their minds than those I had robbed.

But with each robbery I became more uncertain and disturbed, and it was like some big hole had suddenly started growing in me. I was trying to fill its emptiness with a gun, and the harder I tried the more empty I became, until finally, whatever it was eating at me, felt as if it already had my insides ate out and I was just one big void. I used to wake up in the middle of the night and there would be this sudden compulsion. Then I would be off in the night, searching for another score, anything to relieve that frightfully uncertain, gnawing hunger in me.

It was several months before I realized that what I was searching for was not just any robbery, but, one that would bring the indignant outcries from the so-called respectable. This bank robbery was my way of spitting in society's face; and I robbed their bank, and there was a strange-exciting pleasure after it was all over.

But I let my appetite and imagination take me a little too far, and one morning I woke up in a cell with this terrible hangover, and there was this cop, laughing, and telling me about what a nice picture I had taken. Then I knew it was all over, and I suddenly felt as if I had been relieved of some impossible burden, and the emptiness was gone. Then I was very tired and suddenly I thought, "To hell with them all," and I layed down on a board and went to sleep and slept the sleep of the just.

This was seven years ago, and today, as I look back, I do sincerely regret this crime. Why? Is it because I feel some deep sense of guilt, some tinge of conscience? No, my present feelings have nothing to do with all this moral and ethical bunk. Today I have even less respect for the laws, morals, and ethics of my country than I had seven years ago. At present my only regret is that seven years ago I was a fool — a fool who expended a great deal of honestly misdirected energy robbing a bunch of hypocrites who were not worth the effort and energy I wasted on them.

I've had a great deal of time to think in these past seven years and I've spent this time trying to understand myself and my relations with others and the social forces which bear so meaningfully upon our lives. Today I feel that I am a more matured and understanding man than many people who have never seen the inside of a prison. Now, at least, I realize that the only things worth believing, investing my energies in, are the things which I feel most intensely in my conscience.

Now I know that there is no good or evil; and moral and ethical codes, and the laws which grow out of these, are no more than expedients devised by man to protect themselves and their institutions against men like me who, for various reasons, go beyond good and evil and take unto themselves to be judges of the rightness or the wrongness of their acts.

Nor would I want to leave the impression here that in any way I am accusing society for my crime. The fault is mine, and as an individual I accept this fault. I was a dreamer: a dreamer of Plato's *Republic*, of Augustine's *City of God*, of all the crack-pot phantasies of the socialists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. My fault was that I was trying to grasp an ideal, and reality slipped from under me, and I took one terrible fall before I realized what was happening.

But today I feel as if I have survived that fall and that I have landed safely on a reality far superior to any ideals handed down to me by the dreamers of history. Today I can accept the world for what it really is, and find a great deal of amusement in all the hates, inequalities and prejudices parading under the misnomer of democracy. Nor do I find that I believe in one thing which might prompt me to defend another man's rights. If the two great ideological forces in the world today met on one vast battlefield, I could stand dispassionately by and feel only sympathy for the earth their blood fell upon.

Prison has made me a very tolerant and indifferent person. Today I can take a murderer, a businessman, a rape artist, a banker, or a panderer all with the same emotional detachment. To me they all belong to the same confused, money-grabbing, war-frightened, wary world. All I can really feel for this frustrated horde is a tragicomic sense of the inevitability of all their insane moral and ethical antics. Today I see myself as a stranger watching a civilization which is just one gigantic, crazy freak show; and the poor, dumb, bewildered actors do not have enough sense to realize that theirs is a part which has been created for them out of the twisted minds of madmen who know nothing of life beyond their bellies, their beds, and their bank accounts.

And my present intentions are to watch this show. I find it highly entertaining, and I'm looking forward to a long life of amusing laughs at the expense of a world of misdirected people. I believe I have enough sense now not to worry my senses with the senselessness of a humanity which has lost itself in a chaos of ideological nonsenses.

And then there are these times in my weaker moments when I

suddenly regret there being so few dreamers left in the world, for I sincerely believe that these are the men whom the world so terribly needs today: men of vision who might for a moment soar beyond the realities of the present and grasp a sudden insight into a greater meaning of life, see a greater purpose for humanity, give it some hope, some inspiration which might in the future lift it out of its stifling, mechanistic muck of materialism.

THE ACCOUNT OF J. M., THE RULING TYPE

From the note by the editor of New Era: J. M. is 40 years old, a very forceful person whose first need is to dominate. He can be a very likable person, but once he has gained an authoritative position he begins pressing for his demands; therefore, he has few friends. He is not a large man, but mentally his range is far beyond the average. He reads considerably, prefers historical works of famous military leaders. His intolerance for ideas conflicting with his own is unlimited.

What few of us stop to realize when we attempt to understand a stickup man is the difference between his overt acts and his hidden needs. To me a gun is more than just a weapon to be used to get money quickly. If this is all we are ever to understand about a stickup man, then every means we devise to correct criminal behavior will be futile, except in those cases of armed robbery where the man out of sheer desperation forces himself to commit a robbery.

I'm not this type, and what I have to say here will have meaning only when applied to men such as myself who, even when they are financially well off, are driven to the gun for a reason which no amount of money can satisfy. To me the gun is more than just a means. It is an end — an end which satisfies all my insatiable drives for domination, power, and sexual prowess. I'm not going to attempt to explain how I've become this person I am — that would be a book with no beginning or end, a purposeless story without a theme or a vital thread to give coherence to a thousand and one sordid and perverted incidents which would shock the modesty of a homosexual. What I'm going to attempt to explain here is what a gun symbolically means to the sensational type stickup man.

As symbols of power and prestige, wealth and the gun have a number of things in common, and a few very significant differences, to me. In my long history of armed robbery I've had both, but my nature is such that wealth alone has never been able to satisfy my inordinate needs. To me there is something too cold and clean about the power of wealth. Power and force brought into being by wealth,

is like pushing a button and standing by, while you watch a machine do the work your hands are itching to perform. This type of power and force is more to the taste of a coward than a man who has the feeling to submerge himself in life and get the real feeling of power and force in his hands. Some men can be satisfied by socially and economically crushing their enemies — and there are many who make a perfectly lawful practice of it. But there are others whose power needs cannot be satisfied in this coldly calculated, lawfully secure, socially acceptable manner. I am such a man, with a will to power which cannot be satisfied with anything short of the ultimate of complete subjugation. My mania for power, socially, sexually, and otherwise can feel no degree of satisfaction until I feel sure that I have struck the ultimate of submission and terror in the minds and bodies of my victims.

This is why wealth cannot serve my purpose and I am forced to depend upon a gun for gratification. The gun is a symbol of power, of phallic omnipotence, and it is capable of striking terror into the hearts of the weak and strong alike. It's very difficult to explain all the queer, fascinating sensations pounding and surging through me while I'm holding a gun on a victim, watching his body tremble and sweat. Any moment I expect his eyes to come popping out of their sockets; and in that moment of terror-filled realization I feel like God because I know and my victim knows that I command the power of life and death. This is the moment when all the rationalized hypocrisies of civilization are suddenly swept away and two men stand there facing each other morally and ethically naked, and right and wrong are the absolute commands of the man behind the gun. There is something majestically sensational about seeing another man stripped so truthfully helpless — and you know that he will do anything to live — and you have the power to let him live. It is like suddenly coming to the meaning of everything, and you grasp this tremendous insight into ultimate truth: that man is nothing more than a frightened, cringing, two-legged creature who builds civilizations and dreams up moral and ethical codes to hide his tormented fear behind. I have come away from such scenes feeling as emotionally exhausted as a satyr coming away from a weekend orgy, and it was not uncommon for me to leave and forget the money.

In my personal life the gun has played as prominent a role as it has socially. I have been married five times, and five wives have fled from my methods of attempting to find marital fulfillment with the

terrorizing use of a gun in the foreplay interval prior to primitive id consummation. Even with women I could never escape my obsessed thoughts of inadequacies, inferiorities, and impotence. As I treated my armed robbery victims, so I had to treat my wives, for nothing short of their complete terror-stricken submission to my power needs could bring me the necessary release of body and mind which I was seeking.

All my life I have had this Messianic uncontrollable obsession to dominate and subjugate others humbly, and over the years the gun has become the only instrument capable of reducing the objects of my desire to the totally abject state of terror and fear which I must know that others fear because of me. I've even been to several psychoanalysts, and on one point they have all agreed: that I have deeply interwoven paranoiac tendencies, and my inferiorities and objects of persecution have developed to such an extent that they have discolored and disfigured the limits of my mentality. In some respects, I am like the fellow who started hating his neighbor, then the police who refused to make the neighbor put his garbage in the right disposal unit, and from these two rationalized conflicts a generalized hatred develops which eventually comes to include everything and everybody.

My life has been saturated in envy and hatred of the accomplishments of others. As a child I resented talents in my friends, even though I didn't care for the particular form in which they had chosen to express themselves. I just hated them because they had talent. There was a time when I tried to compete with their talents by developing my own to a higher degree of perfection. But I soon discovered that it was mentally and physically impossible to become equally proficient in such diverse fields as sports, arts, various academic subjects, social entertainments, and so forth. I suppose a reasonable person would have compromised himself by becoming highly skilled in one or two of these fields and found contentment. Not me. As soon as I learned I couldn't excel in everything, I began to ask myself why it was necessary to excel, and where those persons who did excel found their greatest rewards.

That was when I became a student of history, and it didn't take long to realize that talent kneels to the men who wield great social powers. Socrates let the power of a Greek assembly take his life; Aristotle knelt before Alexander the Great; Jesus permitted himself to be crucified by a mad mob and an indifferent Roman ruler;

daVinci humbled his talents before Cesare Borgia, the Pope, and two kings of France; Voltaire sought the protection of Frederick the Great; Leibnitz polluted his works to please the aristocracy; and Hegel practically grovelled before the Prussian court. I found history filled with talent prostrating and prostituting itself before power acquired by the ingenuity of men who had the greatest talent: the magnetic ability to manipulate mass human emotions and make them serve ends beyond the comprehension of all but a few select minds. This was the real talent—power talent—possessed by every fanatically dedicated ruler from Hammurabi to Hitler.

My greatest difficulty was, not in the discovery of this, but its use, as I craved this same feeling of power in my life. This is really what made the gun an obsession with me. Unfortunately, I wasn't born to position, and circumstances haven't given me the opportunity, to realize the fulfillment of my power drives in a socially prominent manner. Actually, I've often thought that I would have made a great leader, with the ingenuity to introduce social astonishments as outrageous and fantastic as any conceived by past rulers. It is a theory of mine that perverseness for the spectacular and sensational is much more prevalent in the average man's mind than he is willing to admit, and his laws, traditions, and mores are as much designed to protect him against himself as against rebels such as me.

As for what prisons can do for a man like me, I'm sure I don't have the least idea. I've been in Leavenworth for the past ten years, and I feel very little different today about the crimes which brought me here than I did when I committed them. And, I am this honest with myself: I don't blame the people here for not being able to change my attitude. I've had any number of opportunities, educational and vocational, during the past ten years to make myself a person more acceptable to society, if this were what I desired.

But I don't desire to be any different than I am. To me the meaning of life is as I have attempted to describe it here, and only upon this interpretation can I find life meaningful. To frighten, to terrorize, to shock others into complete subjection is as essential to me as marriage is to a normal man. Call it insanity if you will, I could name you a host of philosophers and psychoanalysts who would readily agree with you. But I care neither for the quantity nor the quality of arguments brought against me. All I know is that this is the way I perceive life, these are my needs, and this is the way I've had to live my life to make meaning out of what is otherwise meaningless.