Lingering Influences

Abstract The physical influence of the executed criminal could live on long beyond execution, post-mortem spectacle and burial. This chapter explores how different cultures viewed and dealt with the spirits of executed criminals, and carried out a range of preventative post-mortem practices to ensure the dead did not come back to terrorise the living, whether in the guise of vampires or ghosts. It then considers why spiritualists in the nineteenth century actively sought out communication with the criminal dead. The curious American tradition and influence of Hangman Friday is also considered.

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Spiritualism

The physical influence of the executed criminal could live on long beyond execution, post-mortem spectacle and burial. The resort to the relics of Christian martyrs for help and healing is an obvious example. The Catholic Church has long promoted the practice of touching or praying before the bones and associated objects of the saints. Many were attributed to biblical figures or the early church fathers. In south-eastern Italy, for instance, especially in the regions of Abruzzo and Puglia, epilepsy was known as the sickness of St. Donato, a beheaded martyr who

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was invoked for healing and protection.[1] However, some popular relics belonged to more recent centuries, such as Catholic priests executed for their faith in Protestant territories. The most well-known example from England is Edmund Arrowsmith, a Jesuit executed in 1628. His hand was cut off and preserved, and into the nineteenth century Catholics and Protestants alike sought out its stroke as a miraculous cure-all. But the focus in this chapter, in keeping with the rest of the book, is with executed common criminals. We have seen how pieces of the criminal corpse and the hanging rope acted as talismans and charms, while sometimes, as with Mary Bateman, body parts retained their identity decades after, rather like saints' relics. Yet it was the spiritual, and not the corporal, remains that most often constituted the long-term, continued relationship between the executed and the living, an afterlife in which, freed from the criminal corpse, the criminal spirit could trouble and terrorise, but also atone through negotiation with the living. But let us start with a societal haunting of a most unusual kind: the malign shadow that hangings cast over the working week in America.

Hangman's Day

In nineteenth-century America, there was a widespread belief that Friday was an unlucky time to start a new piece of work or to embark on any ventures, because executions regularly took place on that day. In sympathetic association with the fate of the criminal on the gallows, any work begun would never be finished. Friday is obviously widely associated with the crucifixion of Christ, and the notion of it being unlucky was quite widespread. In England, there were folk beliefs (unrelated to executions) about it being ill-starred to be born on a Friday or to turn a mattress on that day, for example. There was a strong belief amongst fisherman that it was an unlucky day to set out for a catch.[2] However, the notion of Hangman's Friday is distinctly American, due to numerous states making Friday the customary time of the week for executions. In colonial eighteenth-century America, the English Murder Act of 1752 dictated that all convicted murderers had to be hanged within 48 h of sentencing, though Sundays had to be avoided. In the early Republic, Thomas Jefferson proposed, likewise, that the condemned be executed on the second day following conviction.[3] So how the Friday tradition became so engrained in American capital punishment custom is intriguing.

There are numerous references in early twentieth-century American folklore sources about Hangman's Friday, such as it was an inauspicious moment to travel or pick cotton.[4] The associations were not universally negative. In North Carolina, it was noted that Hangman's Day was a good time to plant pendulous fruits or vegetables, such as grapes and beans: the association is obvious.[5] But, basically, any other activity should not be commenced. The belief was clearly already pervasive by mid-century. In 1840, the Kentucky politician and lawyer, Henry Clay, wrote in a letter to the Virginian politician, Benjamin Watkins Leigh, 'I had thought of leaving Washn. For Richmond on Thursday, but now, I will not go until Friday, altho' I don't like that hangman's day.'[6] At the Massachusetts Horticultural Festival in 1848, one of the speakers observed how during his travels across the country:

> I have known housewives, otherwise most sagacious and sensible persons, utterly refuse to put their cloth in the loom, or their quilt in the frame, on a Friday; though everything should be ready and waiting to go ahead; as for putting their poultry on the goodly and important work of incubation on hangman's day; why Mr. President, it would be accounted nothing short of 'flat burglary' to think of such a thing![7]

It is possible that execution practices during the Civil War further heightened the tradition. Union executions for desertion were commonly held on Fridays, for example. In 1864, a Lieutenant in the 50th New Jersey Engineers wrote, 'Every Friday some poor victims has [sic] to pay the penalty of the law with his life. A week ago Friday I saw three hanged. Last Friday one was hanged, but I did not go to see him. Today there were two shot.'[8]

In April 1861, the California press commended a judge for setting an execution on a Tuesday. Unaware that the custom appears to have had its origins in Republican America, it opined that 'he has discarded one of the last relics of medieval barbarism … he has obliterated "hangman's day" from the calendar.'[9] Andrew Curtin, the Governor of Pennsylvania during the Civil War, apparently deliberately ordered that hangings take place only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, in order to combat the belief in Hangman's Friday. The press welcomed his efforts to vanquish 'a relic of barbaric ages—the sooner forgotten, the better'. Governor John W. Geary, who replaced Curtin in 1867, was also praised for continuing the policy.[10] The Governor of Ohio's adoption

of the same strategy that year was praised by the *Sullivan Democrat*, which noted that the attempt to eradicate the 'superstition' would be approved generally, not least because Hangman's Friday was disrespectful from a Christian point of view.[11] The idea that Hangman's Day was a retardant to economic development was also expressed. An editorial in the *Sullivan Democrat* complained that 'some people are so prejudiced against the fifth day in the week, that they would not, for a moment, entertain the idea of changing location on that day, or open a new business, although not doing so would be a pecuniary damage to them'. The *Augusta Chronicle* similarly argued, 'in this busy age we have no day that we can afford to brand with a bar sinister'. These comments echoed some of the economic arguments put forward against public execution as well. A report written for the Pennsylvania legislature by Jacob Cassat, in the 1820s, made the point that, because of the large crowds attracted to hangings on a Friday afternoon, labour and commerce were disrupted, thereby having a detrimental material impact on the 'public interest'.[12]

However, despite Ohio and Pennsylvania taking a state-wide stance, elsewhere the practice persisted, because it was ultimately left to the predilections of judges and governors to decide hanging days. The issue arose periodically when judges shied from tradition. When the murderer, Menken, was executed on a Wednesday in Elmira, New York, in 1899, it was suggested in the press that the judge had made the decision to 'weaken the prejudice' against Fridays.[13] When, in 1901, New York State decided to execute the assassin of President McKinley on Monday 28 October, the *Augusta Chronicle* used the opportunity to request that the Georgia Superior Court Judges likewise cease Friday executions, in order to undermine the 'superstition' of Hangman's Day. 'The idea cannot be erased in a short time,' it admitted, 'but there is no reason why the good work should not be inaugurated at once.'[14] Despite the clear concern over the influence of Hangman's Day, there was no concerted federal attempt to reform the custom. The efforts were led, instead, by a group of concerned members of the public.

Founded in New York in 1882, the 13 Club aimed to vanquish the 'slimy coils' of that 'hydra-headed monster', superstition, wherever it was to be found in America. As the minutes of the club for 1895 record, it considered its campaign against Friday hangings one of its greatest achievements. Its first archivist, Marvin R. Clark, led the fight. He wrote letters to judges and governors whenever a hanging was announced, requesting that they sentence the condemned to death on any other

day than Friday. According to the minutes, several judges acceded to his request, and the club had in its archive a letter from David B. Hill, former Governor of New York between 1885 and 1891, which related that Hill had reprieved the execution of one murderer solely to avoid a Friday execution and so break down the superstition.[15] However, despite the hubris, the 13 Club's influence was limited. The tradition was too engrained. Friday executions continued to be the norm in Texas during the 1890s and into the early twentieth century. In 1905, the *Fort Wayne Sentinel* exclaimed, with apparent concern, 'Hangman's Day is to be Violated: Execution at Michigan City in June will not take place on Friday'. It was only the second time in the history of Indiana's state prison that this had happened. California was still holding to the Friday execution tradition during the mid-twentieth century.[16]

Ghosts of Executed Criminals

The ghosts of executed murderers were far less numerous, it would appear, than their victims. The long-held concept of purposeful ghosts, which lingered on earth, suffered in Purgatory, or returned from the heavens to correct the injustices that befell them in life, provided little scope for executed murderers to do anything useful amongst the living. There was no point in returning to show remorse to their victims—that was an afterlife matter. The ghosts of murderers generally served the function of spiritual memorials to the violent termination of life, as reminders of the fate that awaited those who strayed into crime. So, as noted in the previous chapter, we find the ghosts of the executed lingering at the spot where they were executed and gibbeted, long after all visible signs of punishment had been expunged from the landscape, with only a place name, perhaps, otherwise to memorialise the execution. Guy Beiner's work on the folk commemoration of the Irish Rebellion of 1798 shows how communities generated the ghosts of executed rebels as memorials to national grievance, as well as to personal and local injustice. The gallows sites where the British used to execute the rebels subsequently became *foci* for legends of fairy and ghostly activity that still circulated in popular culture into the twentieth century.[17] Where national identity was not involved, the spirits of the crime scene execution and gibbet were bound to fade into vague memory several generations after such public penal practices ended. In 1926, it was reported that the site of the former gallows near Marine Terrace, Aberystwyth,

had once been haunted by disreputable ghosts, for instance, though a modern hotel that stood on the spot was not plagued at all.[18]

As jails and prisons became the main locations for executions, it is not surprising to find increasing reports of ghosts haunting the cells of the condemned and those awaiting trial, rather than spooking weary travellers halting at rural crossroads at night. In 1845, for instance, a young man convicted at Inverness assizes for issuing base coin requested to be removed from his cell in Tain jail after seeing the ghost of a man pacing back and forth muttering, 'Do it, do it, do it.'[19] American jails seemed to have been particularly prone to such hauntings. In 1868, Chicago jail was reported to be haunted by the ghost of one Fleming, who had been hanged there 2 years before. Cries of distress were heard at night, while two guards reported hearing the agonised words, 'Oh dear!' emanating from the jail vault. An African-American inmate, named William Jones, said he saw the apparition of a man one night in his cell with a strap around his neck.[20] Seven years later, Bergen County jail, Hackensack, New Jersey, was haunted by the ghost of John W. Avery, a young man executed there on 28 June 1872. Prisoners saw a strange bluish light and felt cold rushes of air as a shadowy figure stalked the cells at night, on one occasion opening Avery's old cell door. The bedclothes of a German inmate who occupied Avery's former cell were pulled off one night by the spirit.[21] In Birmingham jail, Alabama, in 1888, inmates swore to looking out over the courtyard and seeing the ghost of George Williams. He had been hanged in the yard a few months before, for killing a fellow convict. The authorities had left the scaffold standing and the rope dangling as a warning. Inmates repeatedly saw his ghost ascend the scaffold, adjust the rope around his neck, and drop through the trap. These sightings led to a great religious awakening in the jail, with regular psalm singing and prayer meetings.[22] In April 1908, the inmates of the county jail in Asheville, North Carolina, were deeply disturbed by the supposed ghost of a recently executed African-American. Days after the hanging, they nightly heard the loud crash of the scaffold trap, and some inmates and guards said they saw the man's ghost swinging in front of the iron gratings of the cells. The inmates prayed, but to no avail, and so they presented a petition, requesting that the authorities do something about the haunting. It was promised they would be removed to another jail.[23]

With these jail ghosts, both places and people were being haunted. In terms of place, it was not only the inmates who were sensitive to the possible spectral visitation of executed criminals. As noted above, jailers

sometimes reported ghosts. Soon after the execution of Martha Alden in Norwich, in 1807, stories circulated that her ghost 'walked' the environs of the prison on Castle Hill. Several drunken men who attempted to lay the spirit were seized by the jailer and detained in prison.[24] In January 1883, a soldier was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment for leaving his post outside Galway Jail. He pleaded that he had only left because he had been frightened away by the ghost of Myles Joyce, who was one of three men executed by William Marwood the previous month. On the scaffold, Joyce had professed his innocence of the crime.[25] And, of course, ghost belief had always been fruitful for hoaxers and fraudsters, so sometimes there really were sounds and sights that were meant to be taken as hauntings. In 1749, several notorious burglars in New Gaol, Southwark, began knocking on the walls of their cells for several nights, claiming that they were the rappings of several executed criminals who haunted the cells. The whole thing was a ruse to distract the jailers from the escape they were planning through a breach in the jail wall.[26]

In terms of people, the guilt-ridden murderer metaphorically haunted by the ghost of his victim was a widespread notion, but with these jail hauntings we have the criminal dead as spiritual reminders of the potential fate awaiting their former convict community. Some condemned men, such as John Avery, vowed to return and haunt their jailers and inmates after their execution. Sometimes, this spectral vengeance was directed at those who were instrumental in their conviction. When, in September 1894, the American robber and murderer, Thomas Dennis, returned to his cell after being sentenced to death, he wrote on his cell wall: 'I die innocent of this foul charge and my ghost will forever haunt those who made it.' He then hanged himself with his braces. The accusation that so enraged him was that he had once been a New York policeman.[27]

There were two individuals in particular that the spirits of the executed might have had cause to haunt: the executioner and the anatomist. The latter profession seems to have been passed over, however. Perhaps this was because the act of dissecting the corpse destroyed the individual identity, the completeness of the buried, soulless body, which was necessary for ghosts to be generated in the human mind and culture. Apart from the familiar stories of headless ghosts, I have not come across any dismembered ghosts. The anatomist, of course, merely handled the bodies of those already deceased at the hands of the executioner.

If guilt created metaphorical and 'real' ghosts in popular culture, the anatomist was largely absolved, but the executioner was surely ripe for haunting. The German-born American hangman and jail guard, George Maledon (1830–1911), was apparently once asked by a lady whether he was haunted by the ghosts of the eighty or so men he had hanged. He replied, 'I have never hanged a man who came back to have the job done over.' Legend also has it that when Deputy US Marshal Heck Thomas asked the same question about ghosts, Maledon said, 'I reckon I hung them too'.[28] During the early 1890s, he earned an income giving lecture tours as the 'Prince of Hangmen', displaying a collection of his ropes, bits of the scaffold and photographs of his hangings. However, 5 years after his retirement in 1894, it was reported widely in the American press that Maledon was unable to sleep and was badly tormented by what he thought were the spirits of his victims. Reports said that he kept the oil lights burning all night in his farmhouse in Washington County, Arkansas, to keep them at bay. 'Take them away! Take them away!' he apparently moaned in his sleep: 'the old man's watchers know that he is dreaming of his ghosts.'[29] Maledon was annoyed by these reports and denied he suffered in this way, but the story had much greater public traction than his denials. When, in 1903, he attempted to come out of retirement and officiate over a hanging at South McAlester, one newspaper commented that his renewed enthusiasm for the job was 'one of the most convincing evidences that the story of his ghost is emphatically a ghost story'.[30] As this story suggests, there was a desire to want to believe that the executioner was racked with guilt and remorse, as a means of assuaging and displacing societal guilt for state-sanctioned killing. So, folklore generated the appropriate ghosts to reinforce this cultural impulse. A gallows site in County Mayo used to execute rebels in the 1798 uprising was, for example, still thought to be haunted by a guilt-ridden executioner in the 1930s.[31]

Suicide Ghosts

Across Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Europe, suicides constituted a difficult, feared category of dead criminal. Suicide was an act of self-execution, but there could be no public redemption or remorse on the scaffold. Self-murder was the most heinous of sinful crimes. Killers did not damn the souls of their victims, but self-murderers deliberately damned their own souls. This theological position occasionally drove

the suicidal to the act of murder in order to be executed by the state, thereby achieving their desire to end their lives and still leave open a possible path to salvation.[32] It is hardly surprising, therefore, that suicides, like executed criminals, were thought to leave particularly troublesome or persistent spirits. This led, in turn, to the development of a range of ritual practices to dispose of the polluted corpses as, by law, they could not be buried in consecrated ground. In medieval Norway, France and Italy, for instance, burial on river banks and the tidal zone on seashores was practised—areas away from the community, the water perhaps purifying but also acting as a boundary, drawing the troubled spirit away from the living. The staking or weighing down of corpses in bogs, woods and other marginal landscapes is also well attested from medieval archaeology.[33] Such practices continued into the early modern period. In Augsburg and Metz, suicide corpses were nailed in barrels and floated down river, thereby cleansing the local populace, and generously passing on potential troublesome spirits to other communities. The same practice remained on the Swedish statute books until 1736, as did the alternative of burning suicides in the woods. In Nuremberg, corpses were sometimes burned at crossroads.[34] The law in England stated that suicide corpses should be interred in or by the highway, usually at crossroads, sometimes with a wooden stake driven through the body, though this was not an action specified by coroners' juries.[35] Road improvement and widening schemes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries occasionally turned up examples. It was reported in 1899, for instance, that the widening of a crossroads near Birmingham had unearthed the skeleton of man with a stake through his sternum.[36] On the Continent, it was often the job of the executioner to deal with the burial of such tainted corpses in these ways—and it was a profitable business. One early modern Munich executioner went to court against the city's knackers to protect his monopoly.[37]

It would be highly misleading to suggest that most suicide corpses in the early modern period were subject to such rites of desecration and post-mortem punishment. It was probably mostly applied in aggravated cases, such as murderers, or other criminals who committed suicide to avoid trial and state execution. There was, furthermore, growing medical and moral recognition of the relationship between mental illness and suicide, which led to the more compassionate treatment of suicide corpses when it was determined by the coroner, or other authority, that the act of self-murder was committed whilst insane. In 1742, the Augsburg

government decreed that all suicides be given a consecrated burial, apart from those who were convicted criminals who killed themselves. The city executioners were not happy with this further loss of revenue.[38] In England, there was a long tradition, carried on into the nineteenth century, of burying suicides and unbaptised babies on the shaded north side of the churchyard.[39] Even if suicides were not buried in consecrated land, by the nineteenth century, it was increasingly standard across much of Europe for suicide corpses to be buried quietly and without ceremony close by or alongside churchyard walls, as in Abruzzo, Italy.

Still, across Europe, sensational instances of post-mortem punishment continued at a local level into the modern era. An entry in the parish register of Hailuoto Island, Finland, for 1761 records: 'in this parish took place the deplorable event of farmer Henr. Pramila hanging himself; since it was a suicide, on 10/3 he was buried aside in the woods of Hanhis Hill by executioner Rönblad'. In November 1803, a dressmaker, named Lindemann, hanged himself in the town of Jüterbog, Saxony. By law, the local authorities should have informed the nearest anatomy school so that they could collect the corpse, but instead they ordered the local executioner to drag his body through the streets of the town and bury it under the gallows.[40] In England, a survey of East Anglian newspapers revealed 33 instances of roadside burials between 1764 and 1823. In six of the cases, the corpses were also transfixed by a stake.[41] This practice was ended by an Act of 1823, but the same law ensured that a ritual stigma remained, by stipulating that suicides would not receive Christian rites and that their burial could only 'take place between the Hours of Nine and Twelve at Night'. When this was repealed in 1882, the new statute erased the time limitations but still required burials to take place after sunset.[42] By the early twentieth century, this was being described as 'a barbarous survival' by one newspaper, while in 1902 the Reverend J. Trew of Batley, Lancashire, was booed by a crowd of 200 people after he refused to bury the corpse of a local mill-hand who drowned himself until after nine o'clock in the evening.[43] Similar restrictions were in place in the Swiss Canton of St. Gallen in the nineteenth century. Suicides were buried at night or at dawn in a secluded spot of the churchyard, with a possible private ceremony reserved for the relatives.[44]

The notion was quite widespread that the spirits of suicides, as with gibbeted criminals, manifested themselves in non-humanoid forms. In Valtellina, northern Italy, they appeared as big cats, whirlpools, and

inanimate and animate shapes. Their wanderings did not stop until the day on which they should have died naturally.[45] In Normandy, France, the souls of suicides were thought to linger as a black dog, known as the *varou*. The same notion is known in England, too, with demonic saucer-eyed black dogs associated with the locations of violent deaths more generally. In 1851, it was reported that an old crossroads suicide burial near Boston, Lincolnshire, England, was haunted by a spirit, or 'tut', known as a shag foal. This was a variant of the black dog but in the form of a horse with saucer-like eyes.[46] The notion of the soul not being able to take on the form of its human vessel might reflect an echo of purgatorial punishment in popular eschatology.

The spirits of suicides were often associated with the spots where they drowned or hanged themselves. What concern us here, though, are the location and conception of spiritual disturbance associated with the burial and post-mortem treatment of suicide corpses. People had little influence over the locations where suicides took place, or where an execution occurred, but they could attempt to influence the corporeal source of potential troubled spirits. Because of the post-mortem treatment and burial of suicides, their spirits were less contained, more spread across the landscape, and more prone to wandering abroad. In central and eastern Europe, this sometimes manifested itself in concerns over vampires and the physical walking dead, and the practice of staking was just one of several judicial and folkloric means of revenant prevention.[47] In Russian folk religion, there was a strong link between suicides and demonic forces. It was the Devil who drove people to commit self-murder, so that he could then manipulate their spirits, riding and goading them for his pleasure.[48] In early modern Germany and Austria, popular concern led to several so-called 'suicide revolts', or 'cemetery revolts', where communities attempted to prevent the Christian burial of a suicide from taking place. It was thought that terrible thunderstorms would result if the full rites were given.[49]

This was not just an early modern problem. During the nineteenth century, popular fears led to resistance against more enlightened church policy and practice towards the burial of suicides. In Zuckenriet, St. Gallen, in 1827, villagers began to hear frightening noises and experience feelings of loathing and delirium shortly after a woman who committed suicide was buried along the wall of a churchyard. They dug up her corpse during the night and reburied it in a bog. A foreigner who had accepted to help with the woman's funeral was ostracised.[50] Fifteen

years later, the *curé* of Champtoceaux, France, wrote to the bishop of Angers about his experience dealing with a parishioner who had recently committed suicide. She was a woman who had suffered from leprosy. The *curé* had tried to convince her family that she had been insane at the time of committing the act, so that he could bury her in consecrated ground and give her a proper Catholic burial service. However, they persevered in saying she was sane, and therefore he desisted.[51] When Russia was hit by a series of poor harvests and famine in the late 1880s and early 1890s, there was a wave of grave desecrations, as it was thought that suicides that had been given a Christian burial were the cause of natural disasters. In 1892, for instance, a Russian priest was sentenced to penance in a monastery for allowing his parishioners to disinter a suicide corpse and dump it in the woods.[52]

Sanctifying the Executed Spirit

In some cultures, under certain conditions, the ghosts of the executed or untimely dead were not to be feared or avoided: they were to be reintegrated into society. Purgatory and the destiny of the untimely dead mingled synchronically in the representations of the souls of executed criminals. In Naples, this was manifested in the long tradition of the *anime pezzentelle*, or *capuzzelle*, the forgotten souls of those who died a violent death, or in misery and abandonment. In Catholic tradition, Purgatory was a reservoir of both useful and frightening souls and ghosts. This intermediate state might become visible in earthly locations: in fact, God sent the souls to specific places to cleanse themselves of their sins. They inhabited the landscape, and, as attested by traditions from central Italy, they could be seen at night or at midnight in the form of unloved animals, or as little flames and shooting stars. In Sardinia, it was believed that spotting or interrupting these souls during their penitential activity could bring about retaliation, ranging from mild to lethal punishments. In the Sardinian regions of Barbagia and Oristano, the inhabitants of Purgatory came to succour the living. In Oristano, this belief was especially linked to magical practices, involving strange rituals and midnight prayers under the scaffold, or close to the remains of executed criminals, in order to gain the favours of the beheaded souls. The souls of executed criminals aroused both horror and compassion in northern Italian regions, reappearing in devotional creeds. Peasants from Valtellina invoked them in their prayers up to the nineteenth century, while in

Veneto they were connected to the damned dead, the murdered and the suicides.[53] According to folklore, sixteenth-century Venetian witches employed them in their incantations, praying especially for a certain Antonio dal Pomo d'Oro, who had the double status of murderer and suicide, having hanged himself after killing his whole family.[54]

Italian executed criminals survived in the daily preoccupations of the living through beliefs and folklore about the afterlife, conceptualised in the destiny of their souls. According to a belief widespread in the town of Potenza, for instance, during the eve of the 2 November, the souls of the deceased were united with their skeletons, reacquiring their fleshy appearance to walk the streets and be reacquainted with relatives and friends. Among these souls, there were even those who had died a violent death and the *disgraziari* (disgraced people), that is executed criminals. The murdered exhibited their bleeding wounds, while the executed wore the hanging rope around their neck or bore the severed head in their hands. If the believers had a friendly disposition, they would have been advised of the coming of the *disgraziari* by the souls themselves, but it was not allowed to talk to these dead, otherwise they would disappear.[55]

The threshold of death implied the detachment of the individual from the body and the passage of the soul, which, through the public spectacle of the scaffold, was shared and ritualised by the whole community. Punishment and justice turned to piety and prayers to reintegrate the soul of the executed criminal within society: the freshly executed corpse represented the beginning of a purgatorial experience to reach heaven. Good examples come from southern Italy, especially Sicily, where the souls of repentant executed criminals were popularly sanctified. The Company of the Saintly Crucifix or *Bianchi* (the White Ones), from Palermo, took care of the condemned for 3 days and nights before the execution, providing religious comfort and accepting them as a member of the brotherhood. This operation helped criminals to cope with their approaching death, but it also placed them in a liminal zone, where the detachment of the soul from the body brought a social transformation from common individuals to the emblems of Christ's sufferings on the cross. Once dead, they were buried in the Church of the Saint of Beheaded Souls, under the protection of John the Baptist, the most famous beheaded saint. Here, they attracted collective concerns and devotional practices. People attached to them either their personal hopes for redemption or more practical daily requests.[56]

Many fraternities of the dead were founded between 1350 and 1550 in towns and cities across Italy. They were formed to look after the spiritual needs of the condemned before and during their execution. However, as Michael P. Carroll has suggested, there is nothing in the sources to suggest that before 1600 these fraternities were also concerned with special devotion to the corpses of the executed. In other words, it was during the seventeenth century that interest in the purgatorial executed shifted from them being seen solely as troublesome spirits that needed to be assuaged and kept away, to souls that could serve a valued post-mortem function. This led to the formation of popular skeletal cults of the hanged and beheaded, with their physical remains becoming objects of devotion.[57] Often considered as a macabre medieval survival, it appears that the cults of the beheaded, and the like, were more recent urban and rural responses to shifts in popular attitudes to justice and Purgatory. Political and social issues flowed into religious ones and the criminal could become a popular hero in death. Exceptional in their guilt, and often outsiders as living beings, executed criminals received care and compassion after death, embodying the fate of the repenting robber on the cross.[58] One example is the *anime mpilluse*, from Messina, who took their name from the 70-year-old Andrea Belluso, a generous merchant hanged by the Spanish in 1679 as a rebel, but seen as an innocent man by the population, who made a saint of him. Later, the same devotion was reserved for Francesco Frusteri, who was beheaded at Paceco, near Trapani, in 1817, for having killed his own mother. Because he showed exceptionally deep repentance, he became a popular, though not officially recognised, saint, to whom miracles were attributed. People visited his grave to request his intercession and help with problems.[59] So the souls responded to the needs of the weak. In Palermo, they could occasionally appear during night-time, walking in white garments near the River Oreto, not far from their church, and speaking in muttered words, to advise, warn, and help people with their problems.[60] Not all spirits of the executed were benign or helpful, though. The story of Antonio Cilizza, known as Tulé, is indicative. He was a ferocious criminal, hanged on the plain of Terravecchia in 1747. After the execution, his blood gushed off the platform, preventing his soul from reaching the otherworldly abode to which it was destined. As a consequence, the soul of Tulé continued to prowl the streets, making noises and preventing muskets from firing, frightening the population for more than a century after his death.[61]

As the case of Frusteri shows, new popular cults of the beheaded souls were being formed into the nineteenth century. Up to the early twentieth century, during the night between 28 and 29 August, women went to the Church of Saint John the Beheaded on Mount Andria, outside the town wall. They entered though a lateral door to leave an offering and pray to the executed criminals to protect their sons from awful deaths.[62] The interior of one such church in Milan was described in 1865. Hanging on the wall:

> was a large painting that showed the members of this confraternity accompanying a condemned prisoner to the place of execution … Two skeletons hung beside the painting, one on each side. One skeleton had a noose around its neck, while the other was holding its own skull in its hands … Underneath were reliquaries containing sixteen skulls and one bony torso, placed there to collect alms in support of the executed criminals buried in this church over the course of three centuries.[63]

In practical terms, the souls were employed in several charms. 'Three hanged, three slain, three drowned', was the trinity to whom prayers for health and protection were recited in parts of southern Italy.[64] People asked them to intercede with God, but they also invoked them for revengeful purposes against enemies. Some attempted to extort favours from the souls, in exchange for their devotion; for others, love magic was the main concern. Women implored the souls of the executed to beat their lost lovers to return to them. In early modern Spain, gamblers sought to enhance their luck by trying to get the souls of those executed by hanging to intercede on their behalf. To that end, they would carry a length of the hanging ropes and pray for their souls.[65]

Spiritualists Reach Out

The Italian Catholic traditions show that the spirits of some executed criminals were not always feared and avoided. With the advent of the spiritualist movement in the mid-nineteenth century, a new Protestant desire to communicate with them opened up as well. While the Catholic engagement with the executed was couched in ritual and intercessionary terms, spiritualist engagement was evangelical in its desire to reform the living dead, rather than seek their succour. But both faiths gave the opportunity for the executed to express repentance. So, the early

American clairvoyant and medium, Sarah Danskin, proactively sought out the spirits of the criminal dead in order to enable them to atone and progress in the spirit realm. Mediums such as Danskin were afterlife missionaries, enabling salvation for such 'dark' and 'undeveloped' spirits.[66]

In 1857, the Nottingham healer, seer and spiritualist medium, John G.H. Brown, published his purported spirit communications with a couple of notorious murderers, whom we have already encountered earlier in this book. One was the poisoner, William Palmer, executed a year earlier. The other, William Saville, was hanged in Nottingham, in 1844, for the murder of his wife and three children.[67] At least twelve people were crushed to death at Saville's execution as the huge crowd began to disperse, adding to the potential post-mortem weight of guilt on his ethereal shoulders. Brown used a crystal ball to contact angels and the denizens of the afterlife.[68] It was in this way he asked the Archangel Gabriel to ask whether Palmer had been guilty or not, to which Gabriel said he would command Palmer's spirit to appear and give a truthful statement. 'When the darkness of the vision cleared off,' wrote Brown, 'to my surprise the figure of a man appeared … exhibiting no signs whatever of a spiritual appearance, which greatly astonished me. He held no scroll nor showed any symptoms of communication for some short time; till at length, *another figure* appeared, adorned with loose bright robes'. This divine figure gave the spirit of Palmer (for it was he!), a scroll, which was then opened and displayed in the ball, allowing Brown to make a copy.[69] It began, 'I am the spirit of William Palmer …' and went on to confess to the murder of J.P. Cook and five other people by poisoning:

> On passing from life to immortality, in the manner publicly described, I experienced those pangs which I have since learnt others have described. I have also heard the yells, groans, and shrieks, beyond the darkness; suffered the taunts and reproaches of my murdered victims; and am now dwelling in the atmosphere, around and near the scenes of my worldly existence; experiencing the bitter reproaches from the thoughts of those who are living … Oh horrible! Horrible! Wretched misery! And terrible but mysterious immortality! I must now leave you. My victims haunt me!

Palmer's supposed revelation from the spirit world made no reference to him being in hell for his sins. The spiritualist movement, in general, did not believe in the old concept of the infernal regions. There was a

structure and progression through the afterlife, though most spiritualist texts focused on the pleasant middle realms, where the more recent, decent, dead dwelled, and from where most spirit visitors made their spectral manifestations to the living. Still, the executed obviously could not be expected to go straight to the middle realm, and there was an appropriate level of transitional, self-imposed punishment and discomfort for them. Therefore, the lower spirit regions were usually described in terms of 'darkness' with a 'Hell-lite' touch of torment and torture.[70] Executed criminals were given a second chance, with or without the aid of mediums, to redeem themselves, so Harvard lecturer, John White Webster, executed in 1850 for the murder of Dr. George Parkman, apparently began his afterlife journey through the realms by first trying to find his victim. It was in vain at first, and he spent his time alone in darkness. 'At last, however, I met with Dr. Parkman, and obtained his forgiveness. I cannot tell you the weight which seemed removed by it. I then knelt, and with all my soul sought pardon of my Maker …now I am in a somewhat more hopeful state'.[71]

There ran through the nineteenth-century spiritualist movement a strong vein of support for the abolition of capital punishment.[72] This was, in part, drawn from the influence of liberal, universalist and evangelical theologies that promoted redemption, universal salvation, passion and forgiveness.

In spiritualist terms, execution did not act as a punishment, in the sense that it extinguished sentient life. Indeed, it prematurely transferred the dark souls of criminals to a more advanced state of being. In pragmatic terms, this also meant that the gallows, unnecessarily and perniciously, let loose a host of very bad spirits. Writing in 1856, Newton Crosland, husband of spiritualist writer and novelist, Camilla Dufour Crosland, stated, for instance, that 'a believer in Spirit-manifestations cannot consistently approve of capital punishments', for the wicked souls of executed murderers could wreak woe and destruction more fatally than their former bodies could perpetrate if they were still alive.[73] Writing in the 1890s, the Irish-born American Theosophist, William Q. Judge, explained that this was because the untimely dead were not fully deceased during their time in the astral plain known as *kamaloka* (a term borrowed from Buddhist belief). Ultimate death and spiritual release could only occur once their natural period of life had expired, 'whether it be 1 month or 60 years'. It was these limbo-like astral shells, rather than the actual souls of the dead, with whom spiritualist

mediums communicated, he believed. The experience of life in *kamaloka* depended on the moral status of the individual. 'Executed criminals are in general thrown out of life full of hate and revenge, smarting under a penalty they do not admit the justice of,' Judge affirmed. 'They are ever rehearsing in *kamaloka* their crime, their trial, their execution, and their revenge.' Therefore, when a medium provided these 'spooks' with an opportunity to communicate with those on earth, they injected into living persons 'deplorable images of crimes committed and also the picture of the execution and all the accompanying cures and wishes for revenge'. And so in those countries that practised capital punishment, 'crimes and new ideas of crimes are wilfully propagated every day'.[74] The dangers of communicating with the executed were revealed in the early days of modern spiritualism during the mid-nineteenth century.

In November 1849, the body of a German peddler, named Nathan Adler, was found by a roadside about sixteen miles south of Auburn, New York. Albert Baham, one of three brothers involved in the crime, was sentenced to death, and cursed and railed at those whose evidence led to his execution. A spiritualist group employed a young female medium to use her clairvoyance to witness Baham's execution, in order to 'observe the separation of body and spirit, and the manifestation of the latter'. The experience was so profound that the medium fainted as Baham's corpse fell through the trap, and from then on Baham's spirit regularly communicated with her, she said. He cursed his enemies, vowing revenge upon them and threatening to cause the deaths of several Auburn residents who had crossed him. As time went on, Baham's spirit began to take physical control of the medium, causing her to beat her arms against her chair until they were black and blue. Then she began to experience the sensation of a rope being drawn around her neck, while Baham said he wished to strangle her to death. Physicians were consulted to sooth her bodily torment, and magnetisers attempted to rid her of the malignant spiritual influence. All to no avail. She was finally rid of Baham's possession by another medium, who called upon the aid of St. Paul.[75] The cautious spiritualist, Eliab Capron, who knew the medium concerned, first printed an account of the case in 1855, observing the dangers of communicating with 'coarse and undeveloped' characters such as Baham.

Some thought the case was one of pure diabolism. The spiritualist critic, William R. Gordon, reprinted the Baham possession account in order prove that spiritualism was no more than a 'revival of heathenism

without the pomp of Popery', a vehicle for the Devil to corrupt Christian society. Mediums were being tricked into believing they conversed with the criminal dead by evil spirits.[76] This did not stop mediums, though. The poet, radical politician and spiritualist, Gerald Massey (1828–1907), attracted some notoriety with his spiritualist dabblings in the sensational Franz Müller murder trial of 1864—best known as the first British railway carriage homicide. At a séance, held while the trial was ongoing, Massey claimed to have received a spirit communication from the victim, Thomas Briggs, claiming 'Müller not guilty; robbery, not murder'. Shortly after Müller was hanged, his spirit contacted Massey through a female medium, and 'purported to come and thank me in trying to save his poor neck'. Massey also reported in a lecture that one of his family's former homes had been haunted by the restless spirit of a child murderer. As in the Baham case, the female medium suffered terribly from being possessed by the murderer's spirit.[77]

Finally, and even more sensationally, spiritualism offered the prospect of getting a unique personal account of the experience of being executed—from the executed themselves. Here is what that the spirit of William Saville apparently told the medium, John G.H. Brown:

> I ascended with firmness, accompanied by the officers and other functionaries. I viewed with horror the immense assemblage which had collected to witness the last penalty which the law could inflict upon me for my crimes, and recognised several persons of both sexes in the crowd. The sensation of the operation performed by the executioner in adjusting the fatal rope can be described by none but those who have experienced it. At length I found myself blufted [blinkered] from the light of the world, and, after the usual words from the functionary on such occasions, I felt the horrible sensation of tottering and trembling on the verge between life and immortality – a sharp and momentous click which ran through my frame with indescribable horror, and the next moment I felt myself drop for several feet. At the same instant, indescribable pain convulsed my whole frame, and a noise as of many heavy carriages passing over the paved streets filled my ears, and my heart felt as if seized by a hand of ice, which forbad its functions. My limbs then appeared to be set fast; a death-like faintness came over me, and the same moment I experienced the sensation as of a sleeping vision, and all pain, all cares, and all troubles left me. My eyes then appeared to open, and I felt conscious of what had passed, heard the screams which ascended from the crowd below, and felt to secretly smile at their belief of my being dead.[78]

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