5. Haunting: The Ghostly Presence of the Terror

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Dead that refused to remain buried appeared in one of the strangest documents I’ve come across in the course of my research. It is a pamphlet that tells the story of a correspondence, an exchange of letters between the living and the dead. The pamphlet was published anonymously in 1795, and it went through several editions. At its center was an exchange of letters, which took place after the Terror, between two friends who had been imprisoned together during the Terror. While in prison, they promised each other that, were they to survive, they would make sure that the whole world heard about what they had been through, and that the people who had been responsible for their misfortune would receive their just rewards. One of the friends survived, but the other was guillotined. After 9 Thermidor, the friend who had been executed appeared in the dream of the one who had survived. He reproached him for having forgotten the promise they had made each other, and subsequently, the two friends embarked on a correspondence between the world of the living and the world of the dead, where they discussed politics, gossip, and what they had been through. The pamphlet is a straightforward illustration of the notion that the memories of the Terror haunted those who had survived the experience.

This chapter explores the ghostly presence of the Terror in postrevolutionary France. So far, this book has focused on attempts to leave the Terror behind. Trials of représentants en mission like Joseph Le Bon placed the blame
for the repression of Year II on the shoulders of the few while absolving the many. In so doing, they aimed at putting an end to the debate on the responsibility for the violence. The restoration of property to widows of victims, partial and problematic as it may have been, was meant to undo the damage caused by the policies of the revolutionary government in 1793–1794, thus closing the books on this matter. The exhumation and reburial of victims, and the construction of expiatory monuments in different locations across the country, provided some sort of closure to affiliated families. At least that was the hope. One can situate these various measures on the spectrum between vengeance and forgiveness. As Martha Minow pointed out, the various measures between vengeance and forgiveness are never perfect. They never achieve the closure they purport to bring about. But they all have this in common: “They depart from doing nothing.” The various ways of facing the legacies of mass violence discussed in this book so far illustrate Baczko’s argument that one of the most urgent political tasks facing revolutionary France after the fall of Robespierre was liquidating the heritage of the Terror. This meant freeing people who had been incarcerated wrongly, reestablishing faith in the organs of government and in the rights of man, restoring trust between citizens, in short, turning the page forever on this revolutionary episode.

Yet the figure of the ghost in the Correspondance entre les vivans et les morts suggested that the Terror would come back, not necessarily as an actual revival of the repression, but rather in spectral forms. This chapter discusses the appearance of these spectral forms in various arenas of social and cultural life in the late 1790s and early 1800s. From rumors concerning possessed wolves to physicians debating whether the victims of the guillotine died immediately or not; from a new type of multimedia performance that featured images of spirits rising from the grave to debates about the abolition of the death penalty in the 1830s—the thread connecting these distinct sites of social and cultural life in postrevolutionary France was the vague but all too real awareness that the Terror was over but not gone; that the violence of Year II would return to haunt French society in a variety of ways for some time to come.

The notion of ghostly presence is amorphous, but it is essential for understanding the persistence of difficult pasts in modern societies. As social theorist Avery Gordon pointed out, just because something is invisible does not mean it is not there. The traces of the past remain behind and beneath the surface of the quotidian. “Haunting,” Gordon writes, “is a constituent element of modern social life . . . a generalizable phenomenon of great import.” In modern societies, the concept of trauma makes it possible to discuss the persistence of the past in the present, and it does so in a medical and scientific language. This concept was not available to contemporaries of the revolu-
tionary era, but as this chapter will try to show, the notion that the Terror retained a troubling presence in the postrevolutionary landscape was already there; vague, to be sure, and not articulated fully, but there. To illuminate this notion, this chapter draws on the ideas of cultural critic Raymond Williams, and especially on his concept of the “structure of feeling,” by which he meant new formations of thought that have not been articulated fully, but that compete with each other to emerge in certain historical moments in the gap between official and popular discourse.

An Excursus on Terror and Trauma

Let us return to the exchange of letters between the living and the dead that opened this chapter and take a closer look at the details. The pamphlet begins with the narrator, who is not identified by name, recounting how he had been on his way one evening to the Café des Chartres in the Palais-Royal in Paris. The narrator and several of his friends used to meet at the café regularly to discuss politics and other matters of the hour. On that particular evening, he stopped by the home of his friend, C.P., whom the narrator describes as an “enragé.” Normally, we are told, nothing could hold C.P. back from attending these meetings, but this time the narrator found him in his study in what appears to have been a state of reverie. This trance-like condition was not broken even by the sound of the song “Le Réveil du Peuple,” which came from the street below.

The narrator describes C.P. as being surrounded by an “incredible quantity” of paper. Letters, pamphlets, and manuscripts were scattered all around him. He was shuffling through them like a man possessed. These papers were so white that their glare had a blinding effect on the narrator. At the same time, the script on them was written in a color so dark that it formed the “most striking contrast.” The lines of writing were very neat and precise; they could even be read clearly from six or seven steps away. When the narrator stepped closer, he noticed the strangest thing: the lines of writing appeared to be quivering and changing shape, “like clouds” scattered by the wind across “the silvery face of the nocturnal deities.” When the narrator tried to grab the sheets of paper in his hand to take a closer look at this strange phenomenon, the writing on them disappeared completely, only to reappear “when I placed myself at a respectful distance.”

At this point in the story, C.P. begins to talk, and he tells a story, a story within a story. He recounts how he had come to be in possession of these mysterious letters. He had been arrested as a suspect during the Terror and held
at the Luxembourg Prison, where he became friendly with one of his cellmates, a certain A.C. The two promised each other that, were they to survive, they would tell the world about what they had been through and would pursue “the executioners of France,” even from beyond the grave. A.C. was executed, but C. P. survived and was released from prison after 9 Thermidor. One night, the ghost of his cellmate appeared in a dream. It congratulated him on his “public success” since his release from prison, but reproached him for having forgotten the promise they had made each other. For his part, A.C. was determined to keep the promise he had made, “and to instruct the living with the experience and counsel of the dead.” When C.P. woke up from his dream, he found this jumble of papers with their animated script in his study. It turns out these were letters sent by A.C. from the netherworld, and the two friends embarked on a correspondence, an exchange of letters between the living and the dead. The pamphlet reproduced these letters in full, and the publishers assured the readers that they were authentic and that the originals were kept in their office.

The content of the letters is not very interesting. They contain the usual combination of rudimentary political commentary with gossip about some of the celebrated figures in Paris at the time of the Thermidorian Reaction. It is the framing device that is of interest here, the story of the narrator finding C.P. amidst the jumble of papers and in a state of delirium. Several details stand out. First, there are the political clues: enragé, Café des Chartres, “Le Réveil du Peuple.” The enragés were a loose coalition of radical democrats from the popular classes of Paris. They had neither a clear agenda nor a clear leadership, but, being more radical than the Jacobins, they were persecuted during the Terror. The Café des Chartres was a popular meeting place for them after 9 Thermidor. Other disaffected groups such as the jeunesse dorée—the gilded youth of Thermidor—also met there. These groups had little in common apart from their resentment toward the Jacobins. Meeting in these cafés, they often engaged in a battle of songs with supporters of the latter. The pro-Jacobin groups would sing “La Marseillaise,” whereas the enragés and the jeunesse dorée would drown them out by singing “Le Revéil du Peuple,” which called on the people to repudiate the revolutionary government of Year II. Based on these details, we can deduce that C.P.—and perhaps also the anonymous author of the pamphlet—was a republican who had difficulties accommodating his political views to the changing realities of the moment. He was certainly against the government of Year II, but he was not necessarily a reactionary. Like many men and women who had been involved in one way or another in the revolutionary maelstrom, he was struggling to redefine his politics after the bloodshed of 1793–1794.
The second detail that stands out is the jumble of papers. The narrator describes C.P. as being surrounded by texts, submerged in words. The French Revolution was, among other things, an explosion of language. Speeches, songs, debates, newspapers, pamphlets, and memoirs; those living through the Revolution wrote, talked, and read about it incessantly. The image of C.P. drowning in the written word raises the possibility of being overwhelmed by language, driven to a certain form of madness by a lexical cacophony. But the most puzzling detail is the one of distance. The narrator can only read the mobile script on the letters from the world of the dead if he stands far enough away from them. If he gets too close, the writing disappears. This is a puzzling detail because it seems paradoxical. Normally, proximity begets legibility. We see and read better up close. But here, proximity makes things illegible, hence incomprehensible, and distance becomes the condition of legibility and, by implication, knowledge. What shall we make of this rather startling proposition?

The letters reproduced in the pamphlet, it seems to me, are bearers of trauma. They tell a story that cannot really be told to an audience who cannot really understand it. Trauma is, of course, a concept rich in connotations. At its most fundamental level, it refers to experiences that are so horrifying—most notably those involving a close encounter with terror, violent death, and the threat of bodily harm—that the mind cannot process them through the normal mechanisms of memory and cognition. They become split off, giving rise to a host of symptoms that take on a life of their own, disconnected from the original event. This is a somewhat simple description of a complicated, controversial concept, to say nothing of the elaborate body of scholarship that has grown around it. But there are really two points that are relevant to my interests here. First, trauma is a certain attitude toward time. It is a term that describes a disruption of linear temporality, a past that has not passed. For the traumatized person, writes psychiatrist Judith Herman, “it is as if time stops at the moment of trauma.” Second, trauma designates the inability to tell the story of that which has taken place. People who have lived through traumatizing experiences often recount what they had been through in a fragmentary, incoherent manner. Indeed, a crucial part of the healing process is regaining the power to narrate the traumatic experience. As Cathy Caruth pointed out, this presents us with a paradox: “that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness.” On both counts, as an attitude toward time and as a form of impossible knowledge, the concept of trauma seems apposite to the story of C.P. and the letters from the dead.
Still, trauma is a loaded term. The concept first entered the purview of historians in relation to the Holocaust. The Nazi catastrophe was of such magnitude, it was argued, that it challenged the very ability of historians to tell a coherent story about the past. The Holocaust, in other words, created a crisis of representation. For many scholars, “the Holocaust in particular is the watershed event of the modern age because, uniquely terrible and unspeakable, it radically exceeds our capacity to grasp and understand it. . . . The Holocaust is held to have precipitated, perhaps caused, an epistemological-ontological crisis of witnessing, a crisis at the level of language itself.”

This crisis of representation, this inability to narrate the past, is what makes trauma a theoretically significant concept for historians. One result of this is that using the concept of trauma to interpret the past almost always creates an association with the Holocaust. It is problematic to employ this term in order to analyze the aftermath of the Terror, because doing so implies some kind of analogy between the Revolution and modern genocide, an analogy that makes most historians deeply uncomfortable.

Another problem with applying the concept of trauma directly to the experiences of men and women in the late eighteenth century is that it was not a part of their intellectual landscape. This is problematic because it implies that trauma is a timeless, universal category, applicable to all periods and places. Doing so ignores the fact that trauma is a historically specific concept. It emerged in a particular context in order to account for particular phenomena. Recently, historians have used the term to analyze the decision-making process of revolutionary leaders or to explain the turn from the moderate politics of 1789 to the radicalism of 1793. These accounts highlight the experiential dimension of the Revolution. They remind us that revolutionary actors were not political abstractions, but rather human beings. They were influenced by emotions, not just ideas, and susceptible to pain, not just ideological fervor.

But the extent to which the concept of trauma is necessary to illuminate these dimensions of the revolutionary experience remains unclear. Thus, we find ourselves in something of a conceptual bind. On the one hand, the concept of trauma is invaluable for thinking about the aftermath of events of mass violence like the Reign of Terror. On the other hand, applying the term in any straightforward manner to the revolutionary era is problematic methodologically and normatively.

Perhaps another term would serve better. The Marxist cultural critic Raymond Williams coined the phrase “structure of feeling.” It is a term that tries to grasp the fluidity of lived experience and of culture. Marxist approaches to culture tend to reduce it to fixed social forms: institutions, class, and so forth. In contrast, Williams tried to characterize social experience that is not yet rec-
ognized or articulated clearly as such. A structure of feeling is a sense of a shared present “in embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate.” It is a “particular quality of social experience . . . which gives the sense of a generation or a period.” It refers to the tension between consciousness, which is always social in Williams’s view, and lived experience. This tension often gives rise to a sense of unease or discomfort. A structure of feeling is an interpretation of the world that has not yet crystallized as such, and thus exists as a general, vague, but altogether real, awareness.

The term structure of feeling refers to different ways of thinking that are competing to emerge at any particular moment in history. Williams writes of feeling rather than thought because he is talking about something that has not yet been articulated in a fully worked-out form, and so has to be inferred between the lines. Williams believed that new structures of feeling emerge in the gaps between official discourse and popular culture. He saw the arts, and especially literature, as privileged sites for the formation of these new ways of thinking avant la lettre. He gives the example of novels in the early Victorian era. The dominant ideology in the early Victorian era, Williams argued, attributed the miseries of poverty and illegitimacy to the moral failings of individuals. By contrast, later Victorian novels written by Charles Dickens and Emily Brontë described these predicaments as part of the general social condition. In these novels, the misfortunes of the protagonists did not derive from their moral failures or deviance, but rather from the existing social order. An explicit ideology that would articulate this thought in a fully formed manner would only emerge later, in the form of mature Marxist theory. In this sense, the novels of Dickens and Brontë, respectively, gave expression to a vague structure of feeling that would emerge as a fully formed body of thought only later.

In the remainder of this chapter I would like to explore a similar notion to Williams’s structure of feeling. The notion that the dead of Year II were not really dead—that the Terror had not ended when it ended—emerged in various arenas of social life in the decades after the fall of Robespierre. In one area of social life, peasants believed that a wolf seen in their region was possessed by the soul of a former représentant en mission. In quite another area of social life, physicians argued about the effects of public executions on the mental health of the population. Seemingly, these different things have nothing to do with each other. But seen from the perspective of Williams’s ideas, they amount to a vague but real awareness of the reverberations of the Terror in the post-revolutionary landscape. In other words, they constitute ways of thinking about trauma before the concept of trauma and its entire medical-philosophical language were fully formed.
Visual Culture and Specters

Writing about a new style of literature that emerged in the 1790s, the Marquis de Sade noted that “it was the inevitable result of the revolutionary shocks, which all of Europe has suffered.” He was referring to novels such as The Monk by Matthew Lewis (1796) or Ann Radcliffe’s story about supernatural terrors in an old castle, The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794). These are, of course, classics of Gothic fiction. Sade thought that their main merit was in their elements of “sorcery and phantasmagoria.” Why did writers become preoccupied with evil, the occult, ghosts, haunted castles, and fear at the end of the eighteenth century? For Sade the answer was clear: revolutionary violence. He argued that the sentimental novel of the eighteenth-century became irrelevant against the background of the guillotine, the September Massacres, the popular lynchings of 1789, and the revolutionary wars. “There was not a man alive who had not experienced in the short span of four or five years more misfortunes than the most celebrated novelist could portray in a century.” To retain their relevance as a genre of literature after the Reign of Terror, novels had to “call upon the aid of hell itself.”

It has since become commonplace to attribute the popularity of Gothic fiction in the late 1790s and early 1800s to the anxieties caused by the French Revolution. Not all literary critics agree with this correlation, however. After all, the description “a Gothic story,” and many of the elements that would come to characterize this rather unstable genre, emerged in Britain in the decades before the Revolution. Nevertheless, the connection between the violence of the Revolution and the popularity of Gothic fiction seems rather clear. As Joseph Crawford argued recently, the French Revolution, and especially the Reign of Terror, made it necessary to invent new ways of talking about the impact of difficult events, and it was this need that endowed the Gothic with its valence in this period. Haunting, specters, and various forms of “apparently dead people” became widespread themes in the culture of the late 1790s.

Consider here the following anecdote, taken from a dictionary that was published in 1801. The villagers in the area of Nantes were alarmed at the appearance of a wolf that took to roaming nearby forests, making occasional forays into their communities in search of food. When the mutilated bodies of two little girls were discovered nearby, the peasants in the area began spreading a rumor that this wolf was actually possessed by the spirit of Jean-Baptiste Carrier. Carrier had been executed for his role in the Terror in 1794, but now, the villagers believed, he had come back in the body of this wolf, “and it is he, who is still causing distress in the region.” This story about Carrier and the
wolf includes certain elements that are no longer part of most modern belief systems. One is metempsychosis, the belief in the transmigration of souls. The other is lycanthropy, the belief in the transformation of humans into wolves. It is difficult to know how widespread these beliefs were in the rural population of late eighteenth-century France. Certainly, wolves were a cause for concern in the countryside late into the nineteenth century. But it is debatable whether one could take this anecdote as representing rural culture in this period. Be that as it may, it is a striking manifestation of the notion that the threat posed by the repression of Year II did not end on 9 Thermidor, that it would haunt French society for some time to come.

For the most part however, the attitude toward supernatural phenomena in the late eighteenth century was very different, certainly among the urban elite. Under the influence of the Enlightenment and of secularization, the belief in occult forces came to be seen as a form of vulgar credulity. Rather than defining supernatural experiences—ghosts and possessions—as part of an external reality, they were redefined as signs of an internal pathology. Apparitions came to be seen by medical science as evidence of hallucinations, not the return of the dead. In the aftermath of the Terror, there were those who played on this tension between popular beliefs in ghosts and the scientific refutation of ghost sightings in order to create new ways of visualizing the effects of mass violence on society.

One of them was Etienne-Gaspard Robert, creator of the phantasmagoria. The phantasmagoria was a new type of lantern show that debuted in Paris several years after the fall of Robespierre. Robert, or, as he was more commonly known, Robertson, was a physicist, balloonist, and showbiz entrepreneur. The word “phantasmagoria” is composed of the Greek words *phantasma*, meaning “ghost,” and *agora*, referring to the public spaces in Greek city states. Robertson’s shows consisted in the projection of images of spirits rising from the dead, a spectral gathering of sorts. The ghosts in these shows were mostly of celebrated men like Voltaire and Rousseau, but also, significantly, Robespierre and Jean-Paul Marat, the Jacobin martyr whose assassination in July 1793 became a major catalyst for the Terror. The shows usually opened with a demonstration of scientific experiments. They were a great success, attracting such figures of Parisian high society as the future empress Josephine and Madame Tallien, who ran a famous literary salon and whose husband was among the prominent leaders of the Thermidorian Reaction. The shows took place in an appropriately Gothic setting, the abandoned convent of the Capuchin Order in Paris, whose former inhabitants had been driven out by the revolutionaries and whose chapel housed the mortal remains of, among others, the marquise de Pompadour, mistress of Louis XV.
What shall we make of the appearance of this curious apparatus for the projection of images of the dead coming back to life several years after one of the most emblematic events of mass death in modern history? The story practically lends itself to discussions of trauma and of coming to terms with the past. Moreover, it brings to mind recent efforts to theorize the intimate links between terror and visuality. As Bruce Hoffman observed, terror is inherently theatrical: its effectiveness depends on its ability to produce dramatic spectacles. Allen Feldman’s ethnographic study of terror in Northern Ireland found that violence creates new perceptual possibilities; that is, it redefines what can and cannot be seen at a given moment. More recently, W. J. T. Mitchell analyzed the images produced in the context of America’s so-called War on Terror and found that they take on a life of their own, reproducing and spreading terror “often in the very act of trying to destroy it.” The ubiquity of images in the digital age, and the unprecedented proliferation of technologies for their reproduction, dissemination, and alteration create a strangely contradictory effect with regard to terror: it is more tangible and more amorphous at once, everywhere and thus nowhere.

Current theories of visual culture are relevant for thinking about the aftermath of the Terror in France in that they draw our attention to the fact that the Reign of Terror was a profoundly visual and visible event. Unlike modern totalitarian regimes, which tend to carry out the business of political repression in secret, the violence of the French revolutionaries took place in broad daylight, in the full gaze of the public. In the aftermath of the Terror, the authorities in revolutionary France engaged in what could be described as a process of erasure. The guillotine was removed from its central location in Paris to the outskirts of the city. The names of public spaces that were identified with some of the most famous scenes of revolutionary repression were changed to reflect a new atmosphere of stability or reconciliation. Mass graves of victims of the Terror, which remained open for much of the time in 1793–1794, were covered up and surrounded by high walls, thus removed from public view. Current theories of visual culture suggest that dealing with the legacies of the Terror in late eighteenth-century France meant, among other things, creating new ocular realities.

The phantasmagoria is particularly interesting here, because of the combination it created between the supernatural and modern visual technology. The novelty of the phantasmagoria, in terms of visual culture, was that the images moved, and the projecting apparatus was hidden from view, thus creating the impression that the images appeared out of nowhere. Early newspaper reports about the phantasmagoria, such as the following one from London in 1801, drew attention repeatedly to this technological aspect of the experience:
Figure 6. The phantasmagoria at the Capuchin Convent, Etienne-Gaspard Robertson’s *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques, et anecdotiques du physicien-aéronaute*, c. 1798. Credit: University of Minnesota Libraries.
“These images appear without any surrounding circle of illumination and the spectators, having no previous knowledge or view of the screen . . . are each left to imagine the distance according to their own respective fancy . . . . This part of the exhibition . . . appeared to be much the most impressive.”

Of course, one should be cautious when applying current theories of visual culture to late eighteenth-century France. Images and image making were extremely important during the French Revolution, yet most French men and women probably never saw them. Moreover, explicit representations of the Terror were discouraged and sometimes censored in its immediate aftermath. Nevertheless, the phantasmagoria was a new visual medium that constituted a sight for dealing with the legacies of the Terror. It emerged from, on the one hand, the intellectual traditions of the Enlightenment, with their emphasis on reason, science, and technology, and, on the other hand, from much older cultural beliefs in the occult and the supernatural. The phantasmagoria embodied and played on these tensions between contrasting forces. As cultural critic Terry Castle wrote about the shows: “One knew ghosts did not exist, yet one saw them anyway, without precisely knowing how.” The phantasmagoria was a new way for imagining and, indeed, imagining the effects of the Terror on self and society. The images that it produced occupied an ambiguous space between speech and silence, giving visual expression to the notion that postrevolutionary society was spectral in some sense, illegible to itself, haunted by the past that the Revolution had destroyed.

These claims should be elaborated by looking closely at the three fields that the phantasmagoria brought into contact with each other, namely, science, the Gothic, and visual culture. But first, a few words about Robertson, the creator of this spectacle. Etienne-Gaspard Robert was born in Liège in 1763. He had been destined for a career in the priesthood, but was distracted by other, more fashionable pursuits, namely, art and the sciences. Robertson combined these two passions by focusing on optics, a field of physics concerned with the properties of light. He published his first scientific essay in 1789, on electrical experiments.

According to his memoirs, published in 1831, Robertson developed an interest in specters, apparitions, and natural magic early in life: “I must confess that I believed in the devil, in invocations, in infernal pacts. . . . I believed that an old woman, my neighbor, had regular exchanges with Lucifer.” It was modern science that disabused the young Robertson of such notions. As we shall see, one of the goals of the phantasmagoria was to use science in order to prove that all beliefs in supernatural forces were rooted in ignorance and irrationality. The point here is that in his autobiographical tale of a conver-
sion from superstition to enlightenment, Robertson embodied in a sense the discrediting of early modern popular beliefs in occult forces by modern scientific and rational thought.\textsuperscript{43}

There is another reason for reproducing Robertson’s biography: he had experienced the Terror personally. Robertson arrived in Paris in 1791 to pursue his studies and to make his name and fortune. He found employment as a tutor for the children of Madame Chevalier, wife of the former governor of India. This association with a family of the French nobility put Robertson in a dangerous position once the Jacobins took power. In his memoirs he recounts how his employer’s conduct during the execution of Marie-Antoinette, in October 1793, put them both at risk. Apparently, Madame Chevalier fainted upon seeing the tumbrel that carried the queen to her death passing in the streets, and in general carried on in a manner that attracted unwanted attention from the Parisian militants, who were suspicious of any behavior that suggested royalist sympathies. Years later Robertson wrote that it seemed to him as if this incident, “present in my imagination ever since, was but yesterday.”\textsuperscript{44} He had to flee Paris subsequently and returned only after the fall of Robespierre. Robertson described the scene that he found in Paris after the Terror as one of a cautious revival: “Order, sincerity, liberty reemerged gradually; family members and friends that have been dispersed were being reunited; society, so to speak, was reconstituting itself.”\textsuperscript{45} Robertson then created the phantasmagoria at a time when the memories of the Terror were particularly immediate and visceral, for him as well as for many others in France.

But it was probably science rather than terror that was on Robertson’s mind when he inaugurated the phantasmagoria in January 1798. In his memoirs, Robertson insisted that the goal of the phantasmagoria was to combat superstition and spread enlightenment.\textsuperscript{46} It would provide spectators with a scientific explanation for apparitions and ghosts by showing how these could be produced through simple optical means. Newspaper reports indicate that people were aware of the scientific aspects of Robertson’s shows. One account heralded this “spectacle of a new kind that should destroy once and for all the strange effect of an imagination influenced by absurd tales that one hears in childhood; we are talking of the terror inspired by the shadows, the spells, and the occult tales of magic.”\textsuperscript{47} The shows were thus described as being an experiment in the education of the senses.

Reality, however, was somewhat more complex. A newspaper report about one of the earliest shows described the opening monologue, in which Robertson presented himself as a man of science and promised those present that “I am not among those charlatans, those adventurers who promise what they cannot deliver.” He went on to declare: “I have promised to resurrect the dead,
and I shall resurrect them.” Advertisements for the show placed specters and science side by side: “apparitions of specters, phantoms and revenants (ghosts), as they should have and did appear in all times and places. Experiments with the new fluid known by the name of galvanism, whose application can introduce brief movements in dead bodies.” Robertson thus played deliberately on the ambiguity between credulity and reason, superstition and science.

The reference to galvanism is particularly interesting here. The term referred to the theories developed by the Italian physician and man of science Luigi Galvani (1737–1798). Galvani maintained that the principle of life was an invisible “electric fluid” that existed in living things. He was particularly famous for an experiment in which he connected the nerves and the legs of a dead frog through an electric conductor and showed that he could produce movement in that way. Galvanism was one theory among many that sought to shed light on the invisible forces of nature in the late eighteenth century. Anton Mesmer’s notion of animal magnetism is another example from the same period. One implication of such early theories of electricity was that invisible yet very real forces connected things and events, even those distant from each other in space and time. Emotions and sensations could spread in a manner akin to contagion, even to those far from the originating event. Robertson was steeped in this scientific culture; he was a member of the Galvanic Society and repeated many of Galvani’s experiments in his shows. This connection between the phantasmagoria and galvanism suggests the following point: Robertson’s shows took place in the context of a scientific culture that sought to make the invisible, intangible forces that connected all things visible and tangible. Furthermore, the phantasmagoria emerged at a particular juncture when the notion of the afterlife, just for a moment, was a real scientific possibility.

The phantasmagoria must also be seen in the context of the Gothic. The shows took place in an abandoned convent and they obviously involved ghosts. On this level alone, the affinities are clear, but they were even deeper and more explicit. One of the scenes created by the phantasmagoria depicted the poet Edward Young burying his daughter. Young was a founding figure of the Gothic genre. This particular scene was a reference to his well-known poem Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality (1742). Even more tellingly, Robertson explained his choice of the abandoned convent as an appropriate site for his shows by referring to the “religious terror” that the place inspired in visitors.

The ghosts that Robertson chose to conjure tell us something about the connections between the phantasmagoria and the aftermath of the Terror. They included such celebrated figures as Mirabeau, Rousseau, Voltaire, and
the great scientist Lavoisier, who was guillotined in 1794. But they also included figures more directly identified with revolutionary violence. The description of one such show, involving the “resurrection” of Marat, is particularly interesting. Robertson often invited members of the audience to request the appearance of spirits of specific people that were dear to them. On one such occasion, a man in the audience, described as being “in a state of disorder, with disheveled hair and sad eyes,” got up and declared: “Since I cannot reestablish the cult of Marat in an official journal, I would at least like to see his apparition.”

In a scene reminiscent of sorcery, Robertson then threw blood, sulfuric acid, and some documents into a flame, and a figure appeared in the air. The man who made the request identified the apparition as Marat, but as he tried to get near and hug it, the figure’s face contorted hideously and it disappeared.

As this scene suggests, Robertson’s shows often flirted with politically sensitive issues. In one of the shows, a man described as an “amnestied rebel (chouan)” apparently asked whether Robertson could resurrect Louis XVI. Robertson replied tactfully to this indiscreet request: “I had the recipe for this before 18 Fructidor, but I am afraid I lost it. I’ll probably never find it again, and so from now on, it will be impossible to resurrect the kings of France.”

The mention of 18 Fructidor in this quote is a reference to an internal seizure of power within the republican government of France in 1797, in response to a perceived threat of a royalist revival. By referring to this event, Robertson was trying to distance himself from any association with royalism, but his wit did not help him in this case. Several days after this incident, the police halted his shows temporarily and confiscated his equipment.

We learn several things from Robertson’s ghosts. First, the phantasmagoria sometimes referred explicitly to figures that were identified with revolutionary violence, whether as its victims or perpetrators. Second, ghosts signify the persistence of the past in the present. They are a twist in time, the return of that which should have been gone forever. This is captured well in the French term for ghosts, revenants, or “those that have come back.” As literary critic Leslie Fiedler argued, their popularity in the 1790s was related to the guilt of revolutionaries haunted by the past, which they had destroyed, but which, they sensed, would return to haunt them. The phantasmagoria suggested in visual form that the past had not passed, that it would return to haunt the future.

Finally, and most importantly, Robertson’s ghosts embodied the ambivalence regarding the legacies of the Terror in late eighteenth-century France. They were a way of talking and not talking about a difficult past that many in France would have preferred to, but could not, leave behind. Specters offered a way for talking around official silences, saying in visual form what was forbidden
and dangerous to say in words. As John Borneman put it, in the aftermath of political brutality “we need interlocutors—imagined and real spirits, ghosts, djins, therapists, even anthropologists—who might provide access to memory’s speech, a speech about our duty to address loss.”

The third area of social life that Robertson’s shows engaged was visual culture. Here, the phantasmagoria was an innovation. Magic lanterns had been used for the projection of images on a screen since the seventeenth century. But the phantasmagoria was an improvement on magic lantern shows in several ways. First, the images moved. Robertson created movement by placing the Fantascope—the name he gave to his projection apparatus—on rails. When the device moved backwards, away from the screen, the image grew in size, and when the device moved nearer, the image decreased in size, creating the illusion that it was coming nearer or farther away from the spectators.

Second, the phantasmagoria shows were truly multimedia events. Visitors entered the venue through the darkened corridors of the convent. On their way, they passed through rooms that displayed scientific curiosities and wonders. Once inside the actual room used for the phantasmagoria, they sat in rows, in the dark. The doors were locked behind them. The images were projected to the accompaniment of the eerie sounds of a glass harmonica, a musical instrument invented by Benjamin Franklin, which was believed to have curious effects on the nerves of listeners. Everything was done to increase the effect of horror. In earlier lantern shows the device itself had been at the center of interest, but here the projecting apparatus was hidden from spectators, creating the impression that the images appeared by themselves, out of thin air.

In the words of historian of cinema Laurent Mannoni, the impression created by the phantasmagoria was of an “assault of images.” It is difficult to know what this assault of images meant to those who experienced it. Examples of audience reception in the eighteenth century are hard to come by, especially for the shows created by Robertson. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that, at times, the links between the phantasmagoria and the Reign of Terror were quite explicit. Consider the following description of one of the scenes created by Robertson. This time, he threw into the flames a series of objects that connoted various moments of revolutionary violence: the proceedings of the National Convention’s session of May 31, 1793, when the Jacobins purged the moderate faction of the Girondins from the leadership of the Revolution; scenes of prison massacres from the White Terror; collections of denunciations or judgments passed by revolutionary tribunals; a list of suspects; several issues of “a demagogic and aristocratic journal”; and an exemplar of “Le Réveil du Peuple.” Robertson then pronounced the following words, in a manner akin to the incantation of
witches: “conspirators, humanity, terrorist, justice, Jacobin, public safety, alarmists, exagéré, girondin, moderate, orleaniste . . . whereupon a group of shadowy figures appeared, covered in bloody shrouds.”

Obviously, Robertson was not a stickler for political coherence. The reference to revolutionary violence in his shows drew on all sides of the political spectrum. But this is not surprising. The phantasmagoria was first and foremost a form of entertainment. Nevertheless, and perhaps precisely because of that, it had the capacity to sanitize, or maybe even exorcise, memories of revolutionary violence by transforming them into aesthetic objects. Contemporaries were well aware of the connections between the phantasmagoria and revolutionary violence. According to reports in the papers, the scene described above involved two members of the Committee of Public Safety, who were present in the audience that day: Bertrand Barère and Pierre-Joseph Cambon, both identified with Jacobin repression. Apparently, Robertson directed the images at them, so that the two appeared to be encircled by the blood-drenched apparitions of victims of revolutionary violence. The two then left the venue angrily, accompanied by the sounds of insults hurled at them by other spectators. I have my doubts about the truth of this story. Nevertheless, it suggests that in the aftermath of the Terror the shows of the phantasmagoria could amount at times to an indictment of sorts.

We know very little about the responses of the audience to the shows. Some commentators expressed concern over the harmful effects that the shows might exert on those with heightened sensibilities, especially pregnant women. Robertson responded to these concerns by arguing that “the terror [caused by the apparitions] is much diminished by the presence of many people and by the certitude of having before one’s eyes nothing but shadows, and does not produce dangerous effects.” This quote suggests that, at least in Robertson’s mind, the nature of his shows was a collective experience, and the agreement of spectators to suspend their disbelief in order to participate in a scary, yet ultimately entertaining spectacle meant that the phantasmagoria could play a role in exorcising the ghostly presence of the Terror.

### The Debate on Decapitation

The figure of the ghost, featured in the Gothic fiction of the late eighteenth century or in an innovative visual device like the phantasmagoria, was one way of expressing the awareness that the Terror retained a haunting presence long after the fact. Another arena of social life where this notion was expressed, albeit in a less direct manner, was medicine. In the late 1790s, a debate erupted...
among physicians on the question of whether death by the guillotine was instantaneous, or whether consciousness persisted for some time in the bodies of the beheaded. The participants in the debate were concerned mostly with scientific questions such as the nature of pain, the definition of consciousness, and the precise determination of the moment of death. For these scientists, the Terror constituted a laboratory of sorts. Furthermore, the debate took place in the context of much broader concerns about the certainty or uncertainty of signs of life. The French surgeon Antoine Louis published a book on the signs of death in 1752, in response to widespread concerns at the time about people being buried alive. Louis would later play a key role in the invention of the guillotine. But the timing of this scientific debate, taking place immediately after the fall of Robespierre, meant that it could not be dissociated from this particular historical moment. The physician Paul Loye, who wrote a thesis on the debate in 1888, noted: “Following the massacres of the Terror, one was preoccupied exclusively with the question of the survival of consciousness. Above all, one wanted to know whether the victims of revolutionary tribunals suffered after their executions. All other questions were superfluous.”

The debate on decapitation was sparked by the renowned German anatomist Samuel Thomas von Sömmering. In a text published in 1795, which circulated widely among French readers, Sömmering argued that “in the head severed from the body by this mode of punishment [decapitation by the guillotine], the sentiment, the personality, the self (moi) remain alive for some time, thus enduring the after-pain (arrière-douleur) by which the neck is affected.” Sömmering’s argument was based on the premise that the brain was the seat of consciousness and that the head could retain its “vital force” for some time after the circulation of blood had ceased, that is, after decapitation. Indeed, Sömmering even thought that it was possible to make the severed heads talk by using a pump to circulate air through the vocal cords. The French physician Jean-Joseph Sue, father of the novelist Eugène Sue, took Sömmering’s arguments a step further. Sue believed that the heads of those executed by the guillotine retained the ability of “after-thought” (arrière-pensée) for some time. These ideas led to the startling possibility that the victims of the Terror were able to perceive their own deaths.

The debate on decapitation was public enough to merit notice by that essential chronicler of Parisian daily life, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who contended that it threatened to undo the humanitarian sentiments that motivated the invention of the guillotine. The debate had been animated by popular anecdotes about severed heads that continued to exhibit signs of life after decapitation. The most famous of these anecdotes concerned Charlotte Corday, whose
cheeks, so the story goes, blushed after the executioner slapped her severed head. Long after the Revolution, military physicians who took part in the conquest of Algeria performed various experiments on the severed heads of Muslim convicts.

But it is the way in which this scientific debate played a part in the process of dealing with the legacies of the Terror that is of primary interest here. It did this in two ways. First, the entire discussion could be read as a political allegory. Sömmering’s position, which identified the brain as the seat of consciousness, fit a monarchical perception of the body politic, with the king at its head. There is some evidence that Sömmering was highly critical of the French Republic. In the closing lines of his text on decapitation, he wrote that “such abominable spectacles have not been seen even among the savages, and it was republicans who created and attended them!” Similarly, those who disagreed with Sömmering’s propositions did so from a scientific standpoint that accorded well with a republican image of the body. The renowned French physician and idéologue Pierre Jean George Cabanis argued that death by the guillotine was immediate because human consciousness cannot be located physiologically in a specific organ. Rather, human consciousness, according to Cabanis, lies in the coordination of the totality of body parts. The linchpin of the system was the spinal cord. Since the guillotine severs the spinal cord at the neck, it follows that loss of sensation and death are instantaneous. This holistic view of the human body corresponded to a republican perception of the political community, which saw power as diffused among all its members. Several years after the debate on decapitation, Cabanis, now a member of the legislative assembly, compared society to an animated machine, “whose every part must be vivified.” Cabanis also berated Sömmering for adding to the sorrows of those who had lost loved ones on the scaffold by implying that the victims of the guillotine had suffered a great deal but were unable to express their pain because their vocal chords had been severed.

The possibility that life persisted for some time in victims of decapitation became an indictment of the Terror and its iconic instrument, the guillotine. Konrad Engelbert Ölsner, the publicist who first brought Sömmering’s ideas to the attention of the French public, expressed his wishes that in the future the guillotine should remain nothing but a “horrible symbol of political fanaticism and its auto-da-fé.” The writer Philibert Nicolas Heme d’Auberive, whose collection of anecdotes on the survival of sentiment in severed heads through the ages did much to popularize the debate, argued that even the mere possibility that death by decapitation was not instantaneous should suffice to “proscribe forever the detestable instrument of the furies of our modern tyrants.” Even Jean Sédillot the Younger, a physician who was critical of
Sömmering’s arguments, ended his pamphlet with an emotional recounting of the experiences of the Terror. Writing of women, children, and the elderly being led to the blood-drenched site of the guillotine, and of the scandalous treatment of their remains, Sédillot asked his readers: “Until when will juridical assassination, which debases and demoralizes man, be regarded as a means of government? Who will burn publicly the instrument of so many cruelties, which have dishonored the French Revolution?”

So the first point about this debate is that, in addition to its scientific dimensions, it had clear political echoes that had to do with the question of facing the legacies of the Terror.

The second point is that the debate on decapitation condensed the amorphous structure of feeling of the time into one iconic image: the severed head. The public display of severed heads had a long history, of course. But as Regina Janes has shown, this display took on a particularly modern meaning during the revolution. In fact, there were two competing displays of severed heads at this time. One was the head on a pike, marched through the streets of Paris by the angry populace. This kind of display signified archaic, popular violence, and the uncontrollability of the crowd. The second was the guillotine, which connoted principles of Enlightenment rationality—science, mechanical precision, and the law—and which symbolized the institutional form of revolutionary violence. The heads discussed by physicians in this debate on decapitation retained then a troubling ambiguity. On one hand, here was a rational, scientific debate in the best traditions of the Enlightenment. Terrible as its subject matter might have been, it served to further the cause of knowledge. On the other hand, more than a tinge of horror colored the entire discussion. Talking heads, heads coming back to life—such images echoed the aesthetic sensibilities of the Gothic. As Julia Douthwaite pointed out, they depicted the postrevolutionary mood as a “nightmarish landscape.”

A series of experiments conducted by the Italian physician Giovanni Aldini during the Napoleonic era illustrate this point well. Aldini was interested in proving the theories of Luigi Galvani, his father-in-law. To that end, he conducted public experiments on bodies of convicts who had been guillotined in Bologna in 1802. Like Galvani’s experiments with frogs, Aldini connected the severed heads of the convicts to their bodies by way of a metallic conductor. In the book that he published on the subject, which was dedicated to Emperor Bonaparte, Aldini described the “terrible grimaces” that he managed to produce in the faces of these beheaded convicts by using electricity. He described movements of the tongue and eye pupils in the severed heads. For Aldini, these experiments proved that vital forces persisted for a while in the bodies of people who had died suddenly and violently.
Aldini’s experiments captured the complex meanings of the legacies of the Terror in a particularly tangible, visual manner. For one thing, the arena of these experiments became a theater of horror of sorts, where the line between the rational, scientific aspects of these practices and their disquieting, horrifying visual effects was blurred. Aldini described how he positioned the heads of two decapitated convicts in front of each other and, through the application of electricity, obtained powerful movements of their facial muscles. “It was marvelous, and at the same time terrifying, to see these two heads making horrible grimaces at each other; so much so that several of the spectators present . . . were truly terrified.”

The experiments also raised moral concerns. One of Aldini’s colleagues sent him a letter in which he expressed his concern that the experiments were “unjust and immoral,” because if indeed they proved the persistence of vital forces after decapitation, then they necessarily prolonged the suffering of their unfortunate subjects.

Aldini’s book also contained engravings. We see the metallic conductor that connects the head to nerves that have been exposed in various parts of the body. We see two severed heads connected to each other by way of this early version of a battery (pile). In one of them the brain is exposed. Hovering over these objects are presumably men of science, dressed respectfully, and going

Figure 7. Experiments on severed heads, Giovanni Aldini’s Essai théorique et expérimental sur le galvanisme, 1804. Credit: BIU Santé, Paris.
about their business in a somber manner that suggests detachment and seriousness.

The image brings to mind the laboratory in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which was published in 1818. In both, the rationality of science, of enlightenment, meets the irrationality of horror and the atavistic in a particularly potent mixture. The debate on decapitation captured the haunting presence of the Terror by foregrounding the iconic image of the severed head, which, as it turned out, might be alive after all.

**Physicians and the Effects of the Terror**

It is no coincidence that physicians occupied a central place in discussions about the effects of the Terror on self and society. Medical language and metaphors had a significant influence on the political culture of the Revolution. This was especially true after 9 Thermidor; physicians participated in debates on how to stabilize society after the Terror. They advocated hygiene, the moral “rehabilitation” of women, and strategic choices around reproduction designed to create “a new generation of rejuvenated citizens.” New representations of the political community and of popular sovereignty after the fall of Robespierre drew frequently on medical terms, and medical texts of the period tended to generalize from individual to public health.

This, for instance, was the case of the Lyonnais surgeon Marc-Antoine Petit. In 1796, Petit delivered the inaugural lecture for the school of surgery in the city. The subject of his lecture was the influence of the Revolution on public health. He argued that the experience of revolutionary violence might feel painful while actually being beneficial, for the individual as well as for the social body. “Revolutions,” Petit said, “act on the political body as medicine acts on the human body. In one as in the other, the first effect is disorder, the first sensation is pain.” Petit recounted numerous anecdotes about patients whose symptoms disappeared due to the effects of the Terror. This was the case of a young woman who had been suffering from palpitations of the heart, which the doctors could not resolve. The turning point came in May 1793, when she found herself caught in the bombardment of Lyon by revolutionary armies. In the sudden commotion of battle, she lost consciousness and was carried off to the hospital. After several days in which she threw up repeatedly and had high fever, she was completely cured of her previous condition. Another case involved a respectable resident of Lyon, whom Petit described as “one of the last victims of the Terror.” The man had been suffering from swelling in various organs for some time when he was arrested as a suspect of counter-
revolutionary offenses. While in prison, his symptoms completely disappeared, but they reappeared after his miraculous liberation, which was brought about by the events of 9 Thermidor. According to Petit, then, a brief period of incarceration in one of the prisons of the Terror might actually have beneficial effects on one’s health.

Petit’s arguments sound strange in our day and age. Generally speaking, we tend to see the effects of terror and mass violence as negative; from the perspective of modern medicine and psychiatry, terror increases the incidence of pathology. It is tempting to attribute Petit’s arguments to ideology. Surely, people who were committed to the revolutionary cause would have been at pains to find some redeeming feature in its considerable violence. Yet there is little reason to assume that Petit was particularly well disposed toward the Revolution. He witnessed the siege and bombardment of Lyon, which was one of the more brutal episodes of the Reign of Terror, and he even fled the city briefly for fear of falling victim to the extensive reprisals carried out against the Lyonnais by revolutionary forces. Most of the anecdotes he drew on as evidence during his lecture were taken from his personal experiences as a surgeon in Lyon during those troubled times, a position which brought him into direct, visceral contact with the realities of revolutionary repression. Petit’s views on the positive effects of the Terror cannot then be explained by his political views because his experiences gave him many reasons to resent rather than defend the revolutionary cause, certainly in its more radical form.

A better explanation for his views has to do with one of the dominant medical philosophies of the eighteenth century, namely, vitalism. Vitalism involved a holistic approach to medicine, emphasizing the harmonious coordination of mind and body that together constituted what physicians referred to as “the animal economy.” The key to health was in the balance of the various parts of this system. Vitalist physicians attributed great importance to a person’s sensibility, a rather mysterious concept that could perhaps be understood as a generalized capacity for sensation, having the necessary equipment as it were for receiving impressions from external sources and processing them through the body. A person could have too much or too little sensibility. In the latter case, vitalist physicians often used terror and pain as a way to stimulate one’s sensibility back into action.

In the eighteenth century, vitalist physicians developed an early form of shock therapy. In 1777, for example, the English medical student Thomas Pemberton recounted the case of a young, depressed girl who refused to get out of bed or cooperate with her doctors. Her physician then left the room, undressed, and proceeded to jump naked into the girl’s bed. She, in turn, jumped out in a panic and, we are told, was subsequently cured of her melancholy.
One of the major theoreticians of vitalism, the physician Théophile de Bordeu from Montpellier—where Petit had studied medicine—developed a “therapeutics of perturbation,” whereby terror and pain would be used in order to induce a state of “crisis” that could cure patients by jolting their sensibilities. The point of this rather lengthy detour into the history of medicine is that in the late eighteenth century there was a major medical approach in place that saw terror as having potentially positive effects on people’s health.

Petit probably drew on vitalism when he argued that the effects of the Terror on public health were contradictory—simultaneously pernicious and salutary—depending on a patient’s preexisting condition. The experience of terror tended to worsen the symptoms of patients suffering from various afflictions associated with stress. Thus, Petit noted that during the Terror there was a marked increase in cases of voice loss, asthma, depression, toothaches, migraines, convulsions, and hysteria. Aneurysms of the heart increased “under the tyranny of Robespierre,” as did suicides. Like most physicians in the eighteenth century, Petit thought that women in particular were susceptible to these maladies of stress. On the other hand, terror had therapeutic effects on patients suffering from poor circulation of blood, swollen lymph nodes, various forms of paralysis, and the debility of nerve fibers.

Petit’s examples of the positive effects of revolutionary violence were not limited to Europe. According to him, physicians in North America recorded a sudden increase in the birth rate after the American Revolution. In an early version of the baby-boom theory, Petit hypothesized that perhaps “in times of great calamity, in the midst of storms that threaten to knock off all heads, people’s souls long for sweet embraces.” For Petit then, revolutionary violence could have a rejuvenating effect on society.

Vitalism was largely on the wane by the early nineteenth century, yet some influential physicians were still making arguments about the positive effects of the Terror. In 1811, a physician by the name of J.-F. Guitard won an essay competition on the question of the effects of the Terror on the animal economy. Terror, according to Guitard, operated mainly on the nervous system, producing effects that were both destructive and constructive. “The sentiment of Terror, having in a way destroyed all faculties, appears subsequently to terminate this state of stupor and to breathe new life into organs that seem to have been paralyzed previously.”

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, under the Napoleonic regime and then during the Restoration, it became less and less acceptable to attribute any beneficial impact to the Terror. The legacy of the Revolution was a matter of considerable debate, but revolutionary violence became anathema on virtually all sides of the political spectrum. Even for the socialists, who in
general saw Robespierre as a hero, the Reign of Terror posed a moral and political conundrum. And when the Second Republic was founded in 1848, on the ruins of the restored monarchy, one of its first acts was to abolish the death penalty for political crimes, in order to signal to the public that this republic will not go down the path of the first one.

At the same time, the rise of psychiatry changed the way physicians and state authorities understood the effects of the Terror on the mental health of the French. Psychiatry, or as the French referred to it at the time, moral medicine, began to emerge as a distinct field of knowledge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As a new branch of science that challenged long-held views in the medical community, moral physicians struggled to gain legitimacy. The revolutionary era created the conditions that allowed their claims to take hold in public. As Jan Goldstein has shown, it was precisely the anxieties occasioned by the Terror and the collapse of moderate republicanism that led to a demand for a new kind of self, less susceptible to the turmoil of the imagination. After what many in France had come to see as the emotional excess of the Terror, there was a need to cultivate new values: restraint, respectability, and secularism, in a word, the ethos of the bourgeoisie. Psychiatry contributed to the reproduction of these values and so became a main source of support for the liberal state, which in turn afforded it ever greater power and acceptability.

In this context, the argument that experiences like the Terror, while painful, could have beneficial effects became politically untenable. Instead, there was a growing recognition of the possibility that the turmoil of Revolution could literally drive people insane. Thus, in 1819 the young physician J. F. Bonfils observed that more cases of insanity were diagnosed in France than in other European countries. The explanation for this was to be found, he argued, in “patriotic exaltations on one hand and, on the other hand, the profound regrets over the fate of the old regime, whose downfall dragged so many fortunes with it, the crisis, the anguish of the time of the Terror, of wars.” In 1839, the influential psychiatrist Brière de Boismont noted that fifty-eight patients admitted into Bicêtre between 1803 and 1819 were suffering from “intense revolutions of the mind,” while twenty-four had been driven insane by “political events.” “The Political crises,” Boismont declared, “which shake the social order to its foundations from time to time . . . do not belong to history alone. They are also the domain of medicine.” In other words, the tumultuous history of the revolutionary era was responsible for a predilection among the French to, quite simply, go mad.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, we begin to see descriptions of the effects of the Terror on mental health that resemble modern notions
of trauma and PTSD. Philippe Pinel, one of the founders of modern psychiatry, included in his *Treatise of Insanity* a story about a watchmaker who had suffered some sort of mental breakdown “during the storms of the Revolution.” His mania took on a most unusual form. He became convinced that he had been decapitated during the Terror. In his elaborate fantasy, the magistrates of the revolutionary tribunal soon realized that he had been condemned wrongly and ordered that his head be reattached to his body. But because his original head had been thrown pell-mell with other corpses into a mass grave, a mistake occurred, and he received someone else’s head, one that was much less fine than his. In conversations with Pinel, the watchmaker implored: “Look at my teeth. Mine were so nice, but these are all rotten. My mouth was clean, but this one is totally infected. Look at my hair. What a difference between this and the hair I had before I received this new head.” The fact that the patient in this anecdote was a watchmaker is interesting in and of itself for, on some level, trauma is a particular attitude toward time. Anecdotes like those found in Pinel’s account illustrate how the emerging interest in mental health led contemporaries of the revolutionary era to a new awareness of the ways in which the Terror continued to reverberate in France long after the fact. Physicians even noted that revolutionary violence appeared frequently in people’s dreams.

The Debate on the Death Penalty in the 1820s

One instance in which the Terror reverberated loudly was in the debate on the death penalty that erupted in the early 1820s and continued into the 1830s. Debates on the abolition of the death penalty had been taking place in Europe in fits and starts at least since the publication of Cesare Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments* in 1764. The revolutionaries argued about the death penalty during the reform of the penal code in 1791. The Convention discussed abolition again in October 1795, in its last session as the legislative assembly. The revival of the debate on the death penalty in the 1830s had to do less with revolutionary politics and more with liberalism and the growing popularity of philanthropic causes in this period, but the echoes of Year II were never far from the mind of those who took part in the discussion.

The original impetus for the 1820s–1830s debate was a wave of political repression that followed the assassination of the heir to the throne, the Duc de Berry, in 1820. This wave of repression, which, like the wave of reprisals against Jacobins in 1795, came to be known as the White Terror, pitted liberals and conservatives against each other in a conflict over the legacies of the French
Revolution and the limits of political power. Arguing for the abolition of the death penalty was one way in which liberals could claim the heritage of the Revolution, while at the same time dissociating themselves from the Terror. Consequently, François Guizot, the future liberal prime minister of France, whose own father had been executed during the Reign of Terror, penned one of the first texts in the debate on the death penalty, in which he held that the memories of the Revolution’s frequent recourse to capital punishment made the case for abolition all the more cogent.

One of the recurring arguments for the abolition of the death penalty, which drew directly on the echoes of the Terror, was that public executions led to the barbarization of society. The early nineteenth-century woman of letters Elizabeth-Félicie Bayle-Mouillard wrote that “a terrible spiral is observed in all the places where the executioners spill blood, a fatal circle that explains why the view of the executions hardens and depraves the soul, for around the scaffold a base and cruel instinct develops with the vapors of blood.” The physician Claude Charles Pierquin de Gembloux declared that “the public murders, which have soiled the French Revolution through the furies of parties are the principal cause of the murderous monomanias and the crimes that we see every day.” Describing the effects of the Terror in a manner similar to traumatic repetition, Gembloux’s point was that capital punishment, far from deterring crime, actually led to an increase in its incidence.

Such arguments were derived from a mixture of old theories that had been largely discredited by this time with new ideas that were very much in vogue. For example, Gembloux observed that the number of miscarriages had increased during the Terror, and he attributed this to the presence of pregnant women among the spectators of public executions. One woman who had attended one of these bloody spectacles, he claimed, gave birth six months later to a baby with a perfect imprint of the guillotine on his cheek. Such ideas might have derived from the theory of maternal impression, which had been popular in the early modern period but still had some resonance in the early 1800s. According to this theory, pregnant women were particularly susceptible to impressions from external sources. Gembloux also referred to galvanism in order to make the argument that the sentiment of life persisted for some time in victims of the guillotine, thus causing them unspeakable pain, which they could not express because their vocal cords had been severed.

At the same time, Gembloux derived his arguments about the damaging impact of the Terror on French society by drawing on theories of contagion that were very much part of his time. Many physicians in nineteenth-century France thought that emotions were contagious, particularly extreme emotions like fear. The physician Jean-Baptiste-Félix Descuret, for example, who had
published an influential book on emotions in 1844, thought that “of all our affections, fear is the most contagious. . . . We see that it persists long after the danger had passed.” Accordingly, Gembloux made the case that the emotional energies unleashed by the Revolution were contagious and pathological: “Is not enthusiasm one of the more contagious diseases of the soul, as are fear and terror? How many examples of this have been provided by the multiplicity of our political events?”

The violence of the Revolution, Gembloux seemed to be saying, left an indelible imprint on the psyche of an entire generation. “If we observe the increasing number of individuals charged with murder today,” he stated, “we will see that it is precisely those whose childhood had been spent around the scaffolds of the Terror.” Positions like the ones held by Gembloux were probably the exception rather than the norm, but they do show how the coincidence of the revolutionary era with the emergence of the psychiatric profession gave rise to new ways of thinking about the effects of events of mass violence like the Terror on self and society.

**Conclusion**

In the years after the fall of Robespierre, the notion that the dead of Year II were not really dead, and that the Terror retained a haunting presence in the postrevolutionary landscape, appeared in various areas of social and cultural life. Playing on the ambiguity between credulity and reason, the Enlightenment and the occult, Robertson’s phantasmagoria endowed the ghostly presence of the Terror with a concrete, visible quality. The debate on decapitation encapsulated the legacies of the Terror in the iconic image of the severed head, which, physicians suggested, might be alive after all. More directly, physicians and other men of science discussed the effects of the Terror on individual psyches as well as on public health. In the immediate aftermath of the Terror, physicians influenced by vitalist theories argued that the effects of revolutionary violence on public health were contradictory, simultaneously beneficial and pernicious. As the political landscape changed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and as the French medical and psychiatric profession changed along with it, such claims became less tenable politically and scientifically. They gave way to arguments that the difficult experiences of Year II had left an indelible imprint on the psyche of an entire generation. These arguments began to resemble what we today refer to as trauma and PTSD.

Exploring the ghostly presence of the Terror is thus a way of thinking about how men and women in the revolutionary period perceived the effects of mass
violence on self and society in their own terms, before the advent of modern trauma-talk. The various manifestations of this ghostly presence amount to only a vague “structure of feeling.” The striking thing, however, about the distinct arenas of social and cultural life discussed in this chapter is their position between the early modern and the modern, the superstitious and the rational. Processes identified with modernity—the emergence of medicine and psychiatry, or the rise of cinematic visual culture—were not fully realized at the time of the Revolution, but they were already transforming the way contemporaries of the revolutionary era imagined the effects of massive violence on themselves as well as on others. Ultimately, this chapter has tried to illustrate that the broad structural transformations unleashed by the French Revolution were intertwined with the emergence of new ways of reckoning with a difficult past.