

'Executioner' Binds Mankind

"So who is this inexplicable being who, when there are so many pleasant, lucrative, honest, and even honorable professions, in which he could exercise his strength or dexterity, to choose among, has chosen that of torturing and putting to death his own kind? . . . He is created as a law unto himself.

"Consider how he is viewed by public opinion, and try to conceive, if you can, how he could ignore this opinion or confront it. Hardly have the authorities assigned him to his proper dwelling-place, scarcely has he taken possession of it, when others remove their homes elsewhere so they no longer have to see him. In the midst of this desolation, and in this kind of vacuum formed around him, he lives alone with his female and his offspring, who acquaint him with the sound of the human voice. Without them he would hear nothing but shrieks of agony.—A dismal signal is given. One of the lowest menials of justice knocks at his door and tells him that his services are needed. He goes. He arrives in a public square where people are crowded together with faces of expectancy. A poisoner, a parricide, a man who has committed a sacrilege, is flung at his feet. He seizes the man, stretches him, ties him to a cross, which is lying on the ground, raises his arms, and there is a terrible silence. It is broken only by the sound of the crushing of bones under the blows of the iron mace, and the screams of the victim. He unbinds the man, he carries him to the

wheel; the broken limbs are twined round the spokes and the head hangs down; the hair stands on end and from the mouth—open like the door of a glowing furnace—there come at intervals only a few broken syllables of entreaty for death. The executioner has finished his task; his heart is beating, but it is with pleasure; he is satisfied with his work. He says in his heart: "No man breaks on the wheel better than I." He comes down from the scaffold and holds out his bloody hand, into which, from a distance, an official flings a few gold pieces. The executioner carries them off between two rows of human beings who shrink from him with horror. He sits down to table and eats, he goes to bed and sleeps, but when he awakes next morning, his thoughts run on everything but his occupation of the day before. Is he a man? Yes. God allows him to enter his shrines and accepts his prayers. He is no criminal, and yet no human language dares to call him, for instance, virtuous, honorable, or estimable. . . .

"Nevertheless, all greatness, all power, all social order depends upon the executioner; he is the terror of human society and the tie that holds it together. Take away this incomprehensible force from the world, and at that very moment, order is superseded by chaos, thrones fall, society disappears. God, who is the source of the power of the ruler, is also the source of punishment. He has suspended our world upon these two poles, 'for the Lord is the lord of the twin poles, and round them he sets the world revolving.' "

—*Joseph de Maistre, St-Petersburg Dialogues (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 19.*