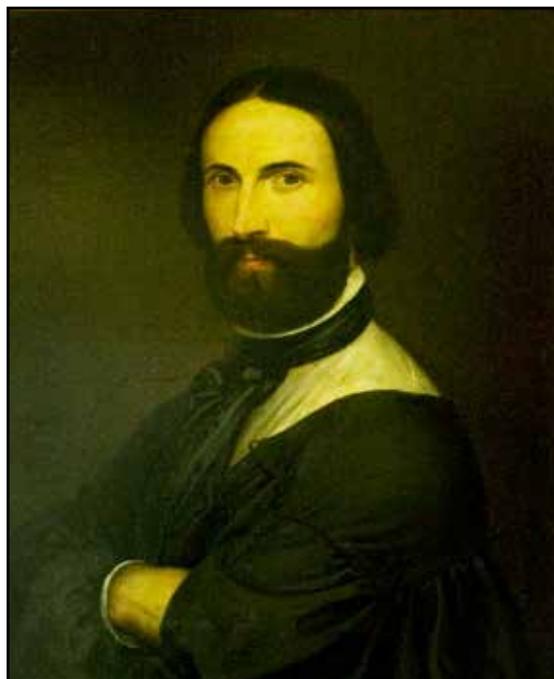


Portrait of the Artist as a Severed Head

Antoine Wiertz was a Belgian painter who believed that the head of a guillotined person would live on after being severed from the body. **JAN BONDESON** tells the story of an artist drawn to the macabre and a medical delusion that persisted through the 19th century.

Antoine-Joseph Wiertz was born in Dinant on 22 February 1806, the son of the tailor Louis-François Wiertz. In spite of his family's modest circumstances, he decided to make his living as an artist, and managed to gain financial support from various wealthy and philanthropic benefactors. King Wilhelm I of the Netherlands awarded an annual stipend to the precocious young Wiertz from 1821 onwards. He was able to study art in Antwerp under comfortable circumstances, with other people paying his bills. He became a follower of Romanticism and an admirer of classical painters like Rubens and Michelangelo. Wiertz took part in a large exhibition in 1828, but only received an honorary mention from the jury, something that disappointed him greatly. Between 1829 and 1832, he studied art in Paris, and in the latter year won the prestigious *Prix de Rome*, allowing him to continue his studies in the Italian capital for a number of years. Wiertz had never been a particularly modest man, and this success went to his head: he began to fancy himself as a leading artist, and the equal of the great masters of old.

Wiertz definitely had talent, and some of his Rome paintings from the mid-1830s are among his more attractive work. However, his megalomaniac tendencies got the better of him, and he put much effort into the completion of his monumental painting 'Les Grecs et les Troyens se disputant le corps de Patrocle', showing two hordes of angry old Greeks and Trojans pulling at the corpse of poor Patrocles. Despite the hint of the absurd in the subject for this overblown painting, Wiertz thought it a masterpiece and entered it for the Paris *Salon* of 1839. The sarcastic French art critics sneered at it, however, and the furious Wiertz wrote a pamphlet threatening that he would make Brussels into the new art capital of Europe, thus reducing Paris to a mere provincial



LEFT: Wiertz in a self portrait from 1860. FACING PAGE: Wiertz's painting 'La Belle Rosine' of 1847.

"THE HEAD THINKS!"

Antoine Wiertz was a credulous man, and fond of various contemporary fads, mesmerism and Spiritualism included. He was a believer in the 'death-trance' that could lead to a false diagnosis of death, and frightened of being buried alive by mistake: his painting 'L'Inhumation Précipitée', (which can be seen on the cover of my 2001 book *Buried Alive*; also FT146:34-39) shows a prematurely buried cholera victim lifting the lid of his coffin and peering fearfully out into the vault. In 1849, Wiertz had another bizarre idea. He believed that the head of a guillotined person would live on for some considerable period of time, although severed from the body, and suffer unimaginable torments. To prove this macabre notion, he planned to

have himself hypnotised by his friend 'M. D', allowing his spirit to enter the severed head of an executed man just after the blade of the guillotine had fallen. Wiertz knew that at dawn on 18 February 1848, the two Brussels murderers François Rosseel and Guillelme Vandenplas would be guillotined at the Porte de Hal. Back in September 1847, they had bludgeoned to death Rosseel's landlady, Mlle Evanpoel, and two servant girls as well, to steal a few hundred francs.

As the murderer Rosseel was put to the guillotine, 'M. D' made sure that Wiertz was hypnotised and put in *rapport* with the murderer. A lady witness was present to make sure there was no cheating. The imaginative Wiertz nearly panicked when he imagined the blade of the guillotine tearing through his spinal column, but he recovered enough to wait, in a state of high excitement, for the murderer's head to be severed from the body. As Rosseel's head rolled into the sack beneath the guillotine, the hypnotised

He would allow his spirit to enter the severed head of an executed man

town. A keen Belgian patriot, he took up residence in Brussels in 1845, for good. He took a large abandoned workshop in the Rue de Renard, and used it to create a series of monumental paintings with religious themes, all heralded as masterpieces by the artist himself. During this period, he painted 'La Belle Rosine', a curious work showing a scantily dressed young girl admiring a mounted skeleton, which remains one of his most felicitous efforts.





ABOVE: Wiertz's 'Dernières Pensées et Visions d'une Tête Coupée' ('Last Thoughts and Visions of a Severed Head') recreated his strange experience of 1848.

Wiertz was solemnly asked to make his spirit enter the severed head. The agitated painter exclaimed "Terrible! The head thinks!" He later wrote down his experiences, and they deserve to be given in full:

The head of the executed man thought, saw, suffered. And I saw what he saw, understood what he thought, and felt what he suffered. How long did it last? Three minutes, they told me. The executed man must have thought: three hundred years. What the man killed in this way suffers, no human language can express. I wish to limit myself here to reiterating the answers I gave to all the questions during the time that I felt myself in some measure identical to the severed head.

First minute: On the scaffold

A horrible buzzing noise... It's the sound of the blade descending. The victim believes that he has been struck by lightning, not the axe. ... Astonishingly, the head lies here under the scaffold and yet still believes it is above, and still waits for the blow that will cut it off. ... Horrible choking! No way to breathe. The asphyxia is appalling. It comes from an inhuman, supernatural hand, weighing down like a mountain on the head and neck... Oh, even more horrible suffering lies before him. ... A cloud of fire passes before his eyes. Everything is red and glitters.

Second minute: Under the scaffold

Now comes the moment when the executed man thinks he is stretching his cramped, trembling hands towards the dying head. It is the same instinct that drives us to press a hand against a gaping wound. And it occurs with the intention, the dreadful intention, of setting the head back

"The guillotined head sees his coffin, sees his trunk and limbs collapse..."

on the trunk, to preserve a little blood, a little life... Delirium redoubles his strength and energy... In his imagination, it seems that his head is on fire and spins in a dizzying motion, that the universe collapses and turns with it, that a phosphorescent liquid swirls around and merges with his skull... In a moment more, his head is plunging into the depths of eternity... But is it only the body that writhes and cries out in anguish, which produces the torture suffered by the guillotine? No, because here comes the intellectual and moral agony. The heart, which beats in his chest, is still beating in the brain... That's when a crowd of images, each more terrible than the others, crowd into a soul beaten by the fiery breath of nameless pain. The guillotined head sees his coffin, sees his trunk and limbs collapse, ready to be enclosed in the wooden box in which thousands of worms are about to devour his flesh. Physicians explore the tissue of his neck with the tip of a scalpel. Every nick is a bite of fire... He sees his judges, too... They sit well served at a table, talking quietly of business and pleasure... The exhausted brain sees... the smallest of his children close to him. Oh! he likes that. That's him: his hair blond and curly, his little cheeks round and pink... And meanwhile, he feels the brain continue to sink and feels sharp stabs of pain...

Third minute: In eternity

It is not yet dead. The head still thinks and suffers. Suffers fire that burns, suffers the dagger that dismembers, suffers the poison that cramps, suffers in the limbs, as they are torn out, suffers in his flesh, as it is hacked and trampled down, suffers in his bones, which are slowly boiled in bubbling oil. All this suffering put together still cannot convey any idea of what the executed man is going through... And here a thought makes him stiff with terror: Is he already dead and must he suffer like this from now on? Perhaps for all eternity?... No, such suffering cannot endure forever; God is merciful. All that belongs to Earth is fading away. He sees in the distance a little light glittering like a diamond. He feels a calm stealing over him. What a good sleep he shall have! What joy!... Human existence fades away from him. It seems to him slowly to become one with the night. Now just a faint mist – but even that recedes, dissipates, and disappears. Everything goes black... At last, the beheaded man is dead!

THE CRUELLEST CUT

Joseph-Ignace Guillotin was born in Saintes, southwestern France, on 28 May 1738, the ninth of 12 children in a large family. After an education among the Jesuits, he decided to study medicine in Paris and was awarded his doctorate in 1770. Dr Guillotin managed to establish a large and lucrative practice in Paris, and maintained an interest in academic medicine, hygiene and committee work. He was a pacifist, a follower of Voltaire, and an enthusiastic Freemason. In 1789, he was elected a deputy to the National Assembly, where he busied himself with various matters concerning public medicine. The penal

code of pre-revolutionary France listed more than a hundred capital offences, and the malefactors were executed at regular intervals. Beheading with a broadsword or a large axe was a privilege reserved for the aristocracy, whereas commoners faced slow strangulation on the gallows, where the 'short drop' was fashionable. Dr Guillotin spoke in the National Assembly demanding penal reform. Albeit a humanitarian, he wanted the deterrent value of capital punishment to remain. He argued that all capital offences should be punished in the same manner, irrespective of the social ranks of the culprits; decapitation, effected by means of a simple mechanism, was the method of choice. After a vigorous debate, Dr Guillotin's proposal was accepted by the National Assembly, although the newspaper scribblers and satirists considered the concept of a beheading machine quite hilarious.

Sensitive to ridicule, Dr Guillotin withdrew from the debate. Dr Antoine Louis, the permanent secretary to the Academy of Surgery, was commissioned to draw up a plan for a beheading machine, and the master builder M Guedon to construct the prototype. There had been similar machines in the past, like the Halifax Gibbet in England and the Maiden in Edinburgh, but Dr Louis thought the French nation could do better, and started work afresh. In April 1792, this novel beheading machine was inaugurated with the execution of the criminal Nicolas Pelletier. Dr Guillotin was quite scandalised when the beheading machine was named after himself, particularly since guillotines were fast becoming associated with the anarchic and violent misrule of France during the Terror. For the remainder of his life, he stayed well away from politics. He worked as the director of a military hospital for a while, before being arrested in late 1795 for writing

and signing illegal petitions and statements. He was released after a month in jail, thus escaping a close encounter with the machine that had been named after him.

The widespread and enthusiastic use of the guillotine in revolutionary France horrified many foreign humanitarians, and some of them also questioned whether Dr Guillotin and Antoine Louis were right in claiming that beheading was the most humane method of capital punishment. There was a story that when Charlotte Corday was executed for the murder of Marat on 17 July 1793, the executioner lifted her severed head from the basket and paraded about the scaffold with it. When he slapped her face for the sadistic fun of it, she is said to have flushed with indignation, and the executioner was hooted by the mob and later admonished for his actions. According to another, possibly even taller story, the celebrated chemist Antoine Lavoisier agreed with an assistant that after he had been beheaded on 8 May 1794, he would blink as many times as he could after his head was severed, and the assistant could count 15 or 20 blinks, at the rate of one per second.

In 1795, the influential German anatomist Samuel Thomas Soemmering spoke up against the guillotine, suggesting that since the severed head remained conscious for some considerable period of time, it was the cruellest method of execution imaginable. Just imagine the torments of that still thinking brain – helpless, isolated, but still feeling! If provided with an artificial air supply through a bellows, a severed head would speak to its tormentors, he asserted.

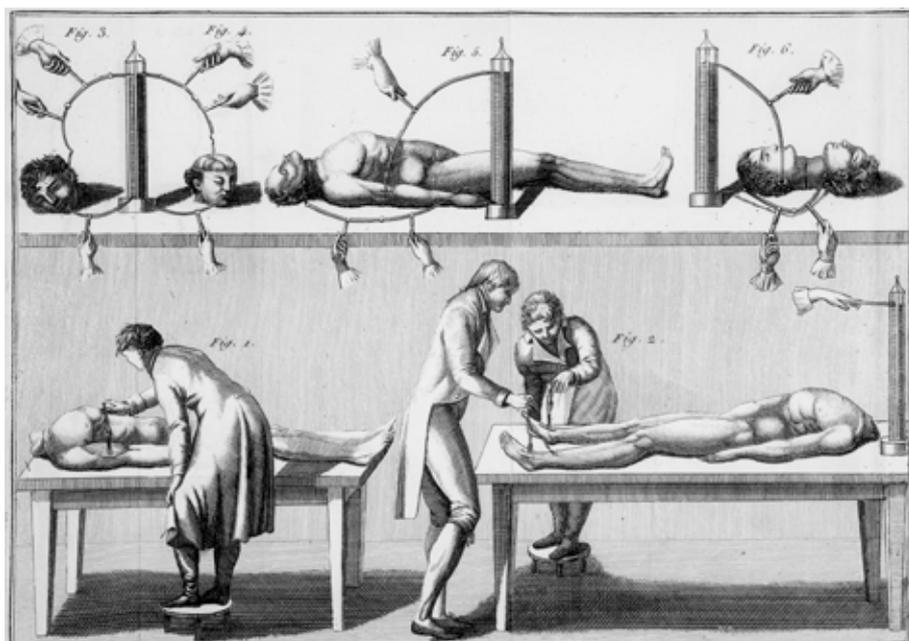
Dr Jean-Joseph Sue, father of the novelist Eugène Sue, maintained that not only the head, but the body as well, was full of vital energy, and that sensation was maintained after decapitation. In 1795, Soemmering wrote to *Magasin Encyclopédique* to voice his objections against the living death that was the result of making use of the guillotine, and both Dr Sue and the German doctor Oelsner also made their opinions known.

The influential physician P.J.G. Cabanis, the Paris practitioner Le Pelletier and the military doctor Wedekind pooh-poohed such concerns: the guillotine was a very quick and reliable method of execution, and the notion that the severed head retained some degree of life and sensibility was mere superstition. Already by this time, an experiment was tried: during the years of the Revolution, a certain Dr Séguret exposed two severed heads to the sunlight. When the eyelids were forcibly opened, the heads quickly closed them, the doctor asserted. When a jolly medical student pricked the protruding tongue of one of the heads with his lancet, the head withdrew the tongue and the face grimaced as if in pain. As long as a quarter of an hour after the execution, the eyes of one of the heads turned in the direction of the man who was speaking. In 1834, a certain Dr Lelut made a deal with the celebrated murderer Pierre-François Lacenaire that if his head remained conscious after being severed by the guillotine, he would close his left eye but leave the right one open; this time, the experiment failed, and the eyes of Lacenaire did not react at all.



TOP: Dr Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, successful physician, Freemason, and proponent of a new method of capital punishment suitable for rich and poor alike: decapitation by machine. ABOVE LEFT: Charlotte Corday on the scaffold. ABOVE RIGHT: An old print showing the Paris guillotine in action during the Revolution.

HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES



ABOVE LEFT: Aldini experiments with galvanism on the corpses of criminals in Bologna in 1803. ABOVE RIGHT: Giovanni Aldini in an engraving of 1803.

TWITCH OF THE DEATH NERVE

Many German doctors objected to the widespread use of the guillotine in France and parts of the remainder of Europe: not only did this ghastly beheading machine represent the Terror and its revolutionary mob rule, but the old problem of the still living severed head remaining conscious and suffering had not been solved. In the early 1800s, the German nation was very much obsessed with the *Scheintod* (death trance) and the risk of being prematurely buried after being declared dead while in a state of apparent death. The solution was to build *Leichenhäuser*: hospitals for the dead, where the corpses could be incubated until putridity, considered the only certain sign of death, had set in (see FT146:37, 352:76-77).

These hospitals had watchmen on patrol around the clock, and signalling machinery attached to the fingers and toes of the corpses, so that the slightest movement would be detected. Some of this perverted zeal to save the apparently dead spilt over onto the beheading victims, and several doctors made experiments to find out how long the severed heads remained conscious. Many German states made use of beheading with an axe, meaning that subjects for this macabre research would not be lacking.

In 1803, a certain Professor I Wendt made experiments with the severed head of a man named Troer in Breslau. When the man's name was shouted into the ear, the eyes opened, and the mouth tried to speak. When a sharp instrument was thrust up the spinal column, the face grimaced with pain, and when the spinal column was stimulated with electricity, the face contorted in such a grotesque manner that an onlooker cried out "He lives!" In 1808, a certain Dr Josef Schleer led a team of doctors experimenting

"The jaw of the deceased criminal began to quiver, and one eye opened"

with a newly severed head in Breisach. This time, the eyelids trembled slightly when the man's name was spoken, but otherwise there were no signs of life at all. In 1824, a certain Dr Schmitz screamed "Murderer!" into the ear of a recently severed head, and the eyes instantly opened fully and stared at him.

The German obsession with the *Scheintod* was not the only blurring of the border between life and death in the early years of the 19th century. Luigi Galvani has become famous as a pioneer of bioelectromagnetics (see FT75:18, 343:71), through his systematic observations of dissected frogs, stimulating the sciatic nerve in the severed leg with a powerful galvanic element, never failing to produce a twitch. He coined the term 'animal electricity' to describe the power that activated the muscles of his specimens. One of Galvani's main apostles was his nephew Giovanni Aldini, who toured Europe in the early years of the 19th century, making public demonstrations of galvanism on recently killed animals (see Sarah Bakewell, "It's Alive!", FT139:34-39).

Unlike Galvani, he did not just experiment on frogs, but also on dogs, sheep and oxen; the fearful grimaces of the severed heads of the dogs, and the spasmodic twitching of their legs, when the proper nerves were

stimulated, led many spectators to believe that the animals were still alive. Nor did Aldini eschew making a demonstration when presented with the body of a recently executed criminal.

In January 1803, when Aldini was in London, he conducted some experiments at the Royal College of Surgeons, on the body of George Forster, who had been hanged at Newgate an hour earlier for the murder of his wife and child. The poles of a large galvanic battery, made of alternate plates of copper and zinc, was connected with various parts of the anatomy of the hanged man. Electrical connections were made between his ears, between his mouth and his ears, and between his ears and his arms. The result was a startling series of convulsions and contractions: "On the first application of the process to the face, the jaw of the deceased criminal began to quiver, the adjoining muscles were horribly contorted, and one eye was actually opened. In the subsequent part of the process, the right hand was raised and clenched, and the legs and thighs were set in motion. It appeared to the uninformed part of the bystanders as if the wretched man was on the eve of being restored to life."

Aldini's horrid experiments on beasts and men were reported both in scholarly journals and in the popular press, and as a result, many people had to re-evaluate their conceptions of dead bodies being still and inert. When was an executed man dead, and when was he still alive, as he lay jerking spasmodically on the anatomy table? Once back in continental Europe, Aldini more than once experimented on freshly severed human heads, straight from the guillotine, treating his audiences to the grossest scenes by making the heads twitch and grimace, once the electric current was applied.

GHASTLY EXPERIMENTS

In March 1867, a 19-year-old Frenchman named Lemaire murdered a certain Madame Bainville, whom his father was about to marry. He was promptly arrested, tried, found guilty and sentenced to death by guillotine. When he was executed, there was much speculation, among the enormous mob surrounding the scaffold, whether his severed head would show any signs of life; it turned out that it did not. Still, there was discussion in the Paris newspapers about the horrors of the living head in the basket beneath the guillotine. One of the medical men contributing to the debate was a certain M Bonnafont. He had been in Algiers in 1833, and here he had met the military surgeon M de Fallois. This gentleman had shared the opinion of Dr Wilson, of New York, that a severed head retains its sensibility for two or three minutes, but Bonnafont did not agree. The two doctors decided to put this matter to the test in a scientific manner, making use of the severed heads of two Arabs who were to be executed the following day. To stop the loss of blood, the severed heads were thrust into two shallow vases full of plaster of Paris. A large ear-trumpet was inserted into the ear of each head in turn, and the dead man's name shouted in a stentorian voice. Since neither head showed any sign of life, M Bonnafont postulated that death by decapitation was instantaneous. There was a disapproving summary of his observations in a London newspaper, entitled "A Ghastly Experiment".

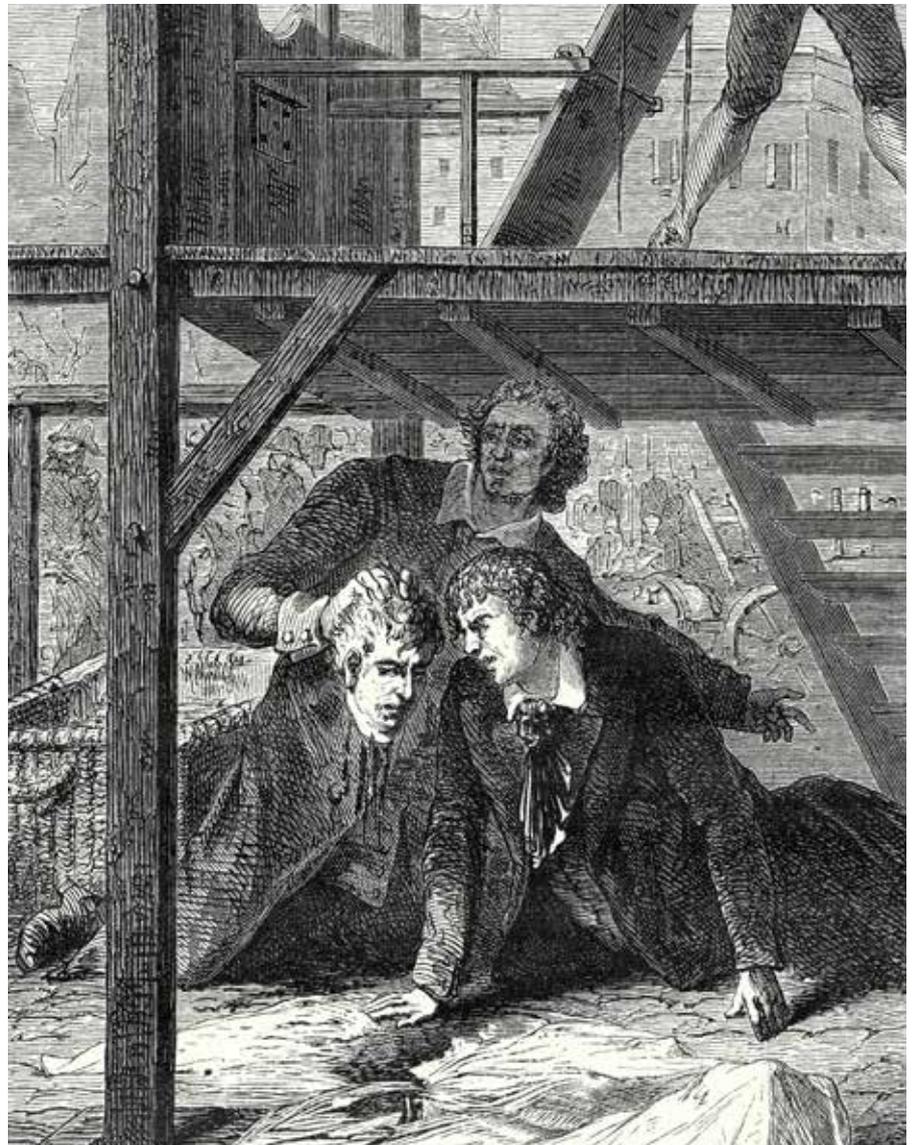
On 13 November 1879, a man named Theotime Prunier was executed at Beauvais after being convicted of raping and murdering an old woman. Dr E Decaisne, assisted by his son Dr Gaston Decaisne and by a certain Dr Evrard, had obtained permission to perform some experiments with the severed head, which was handed over to them five minutes after Prunier had been guillotined. The three doctors, who were apparently quite sane, screamed "Prunier!" into the ear of the severed head, pricked the face with needles, held a lighted candle against the eyeball, and thrust a brush soaked with ammonia up the nostril. The severed head did not react in any way to this brutal treatment. The conclusions of the three doctors, as reported in the *British Medical Journal*, was that "We have ascertained, as far as it is humanly possible to do so, that the head of the criminal in question had no semblance whatever of the sense of feeling; that the eyes lost the power of vision; and, in fact, the head was perfectly dead to all intents and purposes." Some squeamish Paris journalists, fearful of the tortures of the 'living head', pointed out that five full minutes had passed between the execution and the experiments – enough for Prunier's severed head to experience the most fearful and unfathomable torments.

In 1880, the 19-year-old Louis Ménesclou was convicted of luring the little girl Louise Deu into his room, before raping

and murdering her. He then dismembered the body and put some organs into his pockets. He was sentenced to perish by the guillotine at the Place de Roquette. After the execution, Ménesclou's head and body were transported to the Paris *Ecole de Médecine*, where a certain Dr Dassy de Lignères had planned an elaborate experiment. The severed head was perfused with blood from the carotid artery of a living dog, and according to a newspaper correspondent, a slight rosy colour obliterated the pallid hue of death, the lips were suffused with colour, and the head took on a remarkably lifelike aspect. When interviewed in a Paris newspaper many years later, the doctor was quoted as saying that "as the transfusion proceeded, suddenly, unmistakably, for a period of two seconds, the lips stammered silently, the eyelids twitched and worked, and the whole face wakened into an expression of shocked amazement. I affirm that for those

two seconds, the brain thought!"

Dr Jean-Vincent Laborde took over where his colleague Dassy de Lignères had left off, after obtaining permission from the authorities to make some experiments to prove or disprove what he called *la terrible légende*. His initial efforts were thwarted by the logistical difficulties of transporting the severed head to his laboratory in a swift manner, since a head that had been severed from the body for half an hour could hardly be expected to show any signs of life. Even his most elaborate experiment, on the head of the executed murderer Gagny in 1885, has serious flaws: the head had been severed from the body for seven minutes before the experiment could start. The arteries on one side were injected with oxygenated cow's blood, and those on the other side were perfused with the blood of a living dog. Dr Laborde described how the muscles of the eyelids, forehead and jaw began to twitch,



LEFT: Doctors from the Medical Association of Mainz conduct an experiment on executed bodies in 1803 to determine whether or not a head still retained its senses two hours after decapitation. From *Les Merveilles de la Science*, 1870.



ABOVE: This postcard, stamped and posted in 1905, purported to show the execution of Languille.

and how the jaws suddenly snapped shut, but since 20 minutes had passed between the fall of the blade of the guillotine and the attempted transfusion, he could only have observed artefacts due to the onset of irreversible brain death.

THE ACCOUNT OF DR BEAURIEUX

On 30 June 1905, Dr Gabriel Beurieux obtained permission to attend the guillotining of Henri Languille, a bandit who had terrorised the Beauce and the Gatinais for several years. His report concluded that Languille retained some form of consciousness for about half a minute after his execution:

The head fell on the severed surface of the neck and I did not therefore have to take it up in my hands, as all the newspapers have vied with each other in repeating; I was not obliged even to touch it in order to set it upright. Chance served me well for the observation which I wished to make.

Here, then, is what I was able to note immediately after the decapitation: the eyelids and lips of the guillotined man worked in irregularly rhythmic contractions for about five or six seconds. This phenomenon has been remarked by all those finding themselves in the same conditions as myself for observing what happens after the severing of the neck...

I waited for several seconds. The spasmodic movements ceased. The face relaxed, the lids half closed on the eyeballs, leaving only the white of the conjunctiva visible, exactly as in the dying whom we have occasion to see every day in the exercise of our profession, or as in those just dead. It was then that I called in a strong, sharp voice: 'Languille!' I saw the eyelids slowly lift up, without any spasmodic contractions – I insist on this peculiarity – but with an even movement, quite distinct and normal, such as happens in everyday life, with people awakened or torn from their thoughts.

“Next, Languille’s eyes very definitely fixed themselves on mine...”

Next Languille’s eyes very definitely fixed themselves on mine and the pupils focused themselves. I was not, then, dealing with the sort of vague dull look without any expression that can be observed any day in dying people to whom one speaks: I was dealing with undeniably living eyes which were looking at me. After several seconds, the eyelids closed again, slowly and evenly, and the head took on the same appearance as it had had before I called out.

It was at that point that I called out again and, once more, without any spasm, slowly, the eyelids lifted and undeniably living eyes fixed themselves on mine with perhaps even more penetration than the first time. There was a further closing of the eyelids, but now less complete. I attempted the effect of a third call; there was no further movement – and the eyes took on the glazed look which they have in the dead. I have just recounted to you with rigorous exactness what I was able to observe. The whole thing had lasted 25 to 30 seconds.

Dr Beurieux published his account of the experiments with the severed head of Languille in the *Archives de l’Anthropologie Criminelle*, a respectable medical journal, and it contains no obvious errors or distortions. In particular, he managed to get hold of the head immediately after the execution, an area where his fellow experimentalists had often failed dismally,

rendering their experiments practically worthless. Some French sceptics doubted whether the experiment on Languille’s head really took place as described by Dr Beurieux. A rare postcard supposed to show the execution of Languille is in fact a fake, with the figures of the prisoner, jailers and spectators painted in. There is no trace of any contemporary newspaper mentioning the experiment. Furthermore, the allegation that the head had fallen onto a horizontal surface is unlikely, since with a conventional guillotine, it would have fallen into a basket, unless the intrepid doctor grabbed it by the hair and repositioned it.

Modern medical science is of the opinion that once the brain is permanently devoid of a supply of oxygenated blood, it will very soon lapse into a state of irreversible unconsciousness. After the blade of the guillotine has fallen, the severed head lives only for a matter of seconds: its last thoughts and visions must be only a confused peep into pandemonium, some passing phantasmagoria of horror, before it falls into the basket, a lifeless piece of flesh. There might be some spasmodic movements of the eyelids or lips in a recently severed head, as observed by Dr Beurieux, but the persistent 19th-century notion of a living head after decapitation belongs only in horror stories.

WIERTZ GETS WEIRDER

Antoine Wiertz survived his dramatic parapsychological encounter with the severed head at the Porte de Hal without any obvious derangement to his mental faculties. Two years later, in March 1850, he wrote to M Charles Rogier, the Belgian Minister of the Interior, offering to exchange all his monumental paintings for a large, comfortable and well-lit studio in Brussels. Wiertz was highly thought of in Belgium at this time, and money was handed over for the artist’s new house and studio to be constructed in what was then the southern suburbs of Brussels. Provided with a permanent roof over his head, and some degree of financial security for life, Wiertz remained prolific throughout the 1850s. To commemorate his strange experience back in 1848, when his spirit entered the murderer’s severed head, he painted the triptych ‘Dernières Pensées et Visions d’une Tête Coupée’, depicting the last thoughts and visions of a severed head in horrible detail. The condemned man is on the scaffold, the audience pointing and cheering; the blade falls and the severed head tumbles into the basket beneath the guillotine; finally, he plunges headfirst into oblivion, surrounded by grotesque shapes. In 1855, Wiertz completed a very realistic painting of a recently severed head, which looks as if it will open its eyes and show signs of life at any moment.

As Wiertz grew old, secure in his state-funded studio, his paintings become weirder and weirder. In ‘Faim, Folie, Crime’ from



LEFT: 'Faim, Folie, Crime', 1853. ABOVE: 'La Jeune Sorcière', 1854. LEFT: A postcard of 'Une Tête Coupée', 1855.



1853, a desperate madwoman driven to cannibalism is holding the body of her murdered child, one of its legs emerging from a cooking-pot on the stove. In 'Le Suicide' from 1854, a man is depicted in graphic detail blowing his brains out with a pistol, his features being obscured by a cloud of gun-smoke. In 'La Jeune Sorcière' from 1857, a naked young witch holds a broomstick in a suggestive manner while she is admired by lecherous-looking warlocks and demons. In the 1861 painting 'Le Soufflet d'une Dame Belge', a naked woman blasts a soldier turned rapist in the face with a large pistol, causing his head to explode into little pieces. Despite the erotic nature of many of his paintings, and his fondness for depicting female nudity, Wiertz

did not take any particular interest in the opposite sex, and he never married. The artist died in his studio in June 1865, and his remains were embalmed according to the ancient Egyptian funeral rites.

After Wiertz's death, his studio in Brussels became the *Musée Wiertz*, where his works of art were to be exhibited in perpetuity, financed by the state of Belgium. In the 1920s, when Wiertz was still admired by art-loving patriots, the museum had plenty of visitors, some of them schoolchildren who must surely have been plagued by nightmares after seeing these horrid paintings graphically depicting madness, murder, suicide and premature burial. Today, the *Musée Wiertz* is said only to have around 10 visitors per day. When I visited

it in 2011, I was the only person on the premises, apart from an elderly watchman who doubled as the museum guide. All the old favourites were present and correct, including the premature burial, the cackling madwoman cooking the limbs of her child on the stove, the tug-of-war over the body of Patrocles, and the still living severed head. Sadly, the triptych 'Dernières Pensées et Visions d'une Tête Coupée' is in a somewhat decayed state, probably because the wood was not properly prepared before it was painted. A 2009 article in the *Economist* magazine claimed that Wiertz must surely be the worst painter to have a government-funded museum of his own, but here I would object that the scribblers employed by the *Economist* should concentrate on economy and leave the field of art well alone: albeit not to everybody's taste, the paintings of Antoine Wiertz have a certain macabre fascination, and they are well worth seeing in the flesh by any visitor to Brussels.



This is an abbreviated extract from Jan Bondeson's book *The Lion Boy and Other Medical Curiosities* (Amberley Publishing, 2018).

♦ **JAN BONDESON** is a senior lecturer at Cardiff University, a regular contributor to *FT* and the author of numerous books, including *Queen Victoria's Stalker* (2010), *Murder Houses of London* (2014), *Strange Victoriana* (2016) and *The Ripper of Waterloo Road* (2017).