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**Karen Halttunen**. *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. xiv + 322 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-58855-4.

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In lucid, unassuming prose and with clearly defined argumentative purpose, Karen Halttunen's book *Murder Most Foul* discusses "the changing cultural construction of criminal transgression" and "the historical significance of the Gothic imagination in constructing a set of conventions surrounding the collective response to murder" (p. 6). In the course of this project, Halttunen charts the transformation of popular culture, starting with the colonial period, giving great emphasis to the nineteenth century as the period that witnesses the rise and eventual prevalence of the Gothic imagination, and finishing with a brief look at contemporary culture. Her reading of murder draws primarily from pamphlets and newspaper reports, and to a lesser extent from detective fiction and true crime reporting. All of these sources she summarizes, often starting her chapter with a particularly revealing case account, providing the reader with a broad spectrum of examples. These case summaries are accompanied by three sets of illustrations, all of them frontispices, title pages, and cover illustrations from the documents discussed. Taken together, these narrative and visual sources provide a vivid and fascinating overview of the changing face of American culture. To Halttunen's great credit, this overview never minimizes the seriousness of the acts depicted by diffusing them in fashionable nostalgia or presenting them as a cabinet of historical curiosities. Instead, the cultural past appears uncanny; in it, we catch a glimpse of our own taste for the sensational and our own need to see the heinous act of murder resolved.

This need-to come to terms with murder, both collectively and individually-is at the core of Halttunen's argument. In order to put murder behind us, to transform it into a socially tolerable, if not useful occurrence, we need to put it into discourse. In the colonial period, this discourse takes the shape of the execution sermon, an effective means of reconciling the community with the intolerable event, of embracing the murderer as a fellow human being, and of reconfirming a world view in which evil had its place. Often delivered, quite literally, at the foot of the gallows, the execution sermon would subsequently be reprinted and distributed to a wider audience. The murderer would recount his transgression and, ideally, his spiritual struggle toward redemption, which the community would willingly grant at the cost of public confession and display of remorse. Since the ultimate cause of murder was original sin, the rest of the community could confirm its solidarity with the murderer. As an "exemplary sinner," the murderer provided the prospect of redemption for everybody. In the spirit of this allegorical didacticism, the execution sermon served as a means and a record of social catharsis. Murder, Halttunen suggests, made sense.

Not so during and after the Enlightenment. Aided by technological advances in printing and distribution, increasing secularization, and privatization of reading practices, the Gothic begins to replace the execution sermon. As a result, genuine empathy with the murderer, based on identification and solidarity, makes way for a construction of the killer as "moral alien," as radically other. Despite its contingent cult of sentimentality, the Gothic ultimately postulates that murder as an act of mystery on the one hand and horror on the other. In order to evoke horror, graphic verbal and visual depictions of the physical brutality of murder replace the spiritual allegory of the execution sermon. Lawyers, medical doctors, and psychiatrists assume the authority formerly held by the clergy. And, most importantly, the ability to transcend murder is lost once and for all. What takes its place is an almost self-conscious pattern in which the Gothic first holds out the promise of transcendence, then fails to deliver, and thus needs to give it another try. As it sustains its audience's desire for yet another story, the Gothic ratchets up the degree of violence one notch in a neurotic cycle of obsessive compulsive storytelling. This is, with few notable exceptions, the cultural logic that dictates our response to murder until the present day.

Halttunen's account of the shift from the Puritan execution sermon to the Gothic narrative tells itself a story

of cultural cosmogeny. It explains how we have come to take for granted a postlapsarian culture in which the apparatus of overcoming communal trauma has been dismantled and replaced with a machinery that produces a desire it never fulfill. Though Halttunen never makes an open plea for a return to the older, more effective forms of communal catharsis, her closing chapter, discussing two contemporary exceptions to the current predominance of the Gothic, suggests her sympathies for the Puritan way of handling murder. Behind such sentiment stands her assessment of the Enlightenment and its effects, a critical position not unlike that of Michel Foucault, whose presence can be felt behind Halttunen's argument. It is one of the strong points of the book that Halttunen resist both the type of theoretical obfuscation that often comes in the wake of Foucault-inspired historical analysis (perhaps because she is more of a historian and less of a philosopher of history), and that she distinguishes the unique historical and social conditions that set America apart from the societies Foucault considers in his analyses of the penal system and the discourse of psychiatry.

Halttunen does remain, however, indebted to a sense that post-Enlightenment discourse can only talk about the phenomenon of murder the way, according to Foucault, it can talk about sexuality-the more it talks, the more it recognizes its own inability to do justice to its object. By making this argument and by demonstrating how contemporary culture arrives at this sense of failure whenever it is confronted with murder, Halttunen's book constitutes a long-overdue prehistory to the critical assessment of murder in contemporary culture that can be found in such books as Philip Jenkins' *Using Murder*, Wendy Lesser's *Pictures at an Execution*, Sara Knox's *Murder*, and Mark Seltzer's *Serial Killers*. Since Halttunen's argument answers the question how American culture became what it is, one can only hope that an affordable paperback release will make *Murder Most Foul* available to an audience beyond the boundaries of academe.

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