

## Invitation To A Beheading: Turgenev and Troppmann

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The penalty of death becomes for most men a spectacle, and for a few an object of compassion mingled with indignation, one or other of these sentiments occupying the spectator's mind to the exclusion of that salutary dread which the law pretends to inspire.

Of Crimes and Punishments, Cesare Beccaria<sup>1</sup>

In a letter of June, 1870, to Nikolai Strakhov, Dostoevskii characterizes Turgenev's recent article "The Execution of Troppmann" (Kazn' Tropmana) in quite unflattering terms:

This pompous and fastidious article disturbed me. Why does he get all flustered and maintain that he had no right to be there [at the execution] ...? And the most comic thing of all is that at the end he turns away and doesn't see the execution at the last minute .... Incidentally, he gives himself away: the main impression from the article is a terrible concern – fastidious to the ultimate degree – about himself, his integrity, his composure – and all this in view of a decapitated head.<sup>2</sup>

As is so often the case with Dostoevskii's comments on Turgenev, much here is unfair and overstated. Yet for those ready to accuse Turgenev of social and political posturing, his account of the execution of Jean Baptiste Troppmann – a twenty-one-year-old worker found guilty of murdering an entire family – might seem a clear

demonstration of liberal faintheartedness and indecision. Even the claims of usefulness which the author places at the beginning and end of his narrative are so hedged as to question their intent. In the first of twelve sections he writes: "Perhaps not only the reader's curiosity will be satisfied; perhaps he will obtain a certain use from my story."<sup>3</sup> And in his concluding statement we read: "I will be satisfied and excuse myself for an inappropriate curiosity, if only my story will provide some arguments to proponents of the repeal of capital punishment or, at least, of the repeal of public executions." (p. 171) The reader's enlightenment is called upon to justify the author's embarrassed witnessing of the execution – all in hope of some qualified ("at least") form of moral protest.

Turgenev was by no means alone in this formulation of the issue. His invitation to witness the guillotining and its preliminaries was extended by Maxime Du Camp (cf. p. 170), one of the most resolute French opponents of public executions.<sup>4</sup> A journalist and author of multivolumed studies of French society (including its penal system), Du Camp was well acquainted with the procedure of such spectacles, and it has been demonstrated that details from Du Camp's account of the execution of Troppmann in *Revue des deux mondes* (1 January 1870) found their way into Turgenev's narrative, as did Du Camp's sentiments against public executions. Yet a comparison of the two accounts reveals Turgenev's ability to adapt Du Camp's statements – both particular and general – to his own meticulous analysis of motive and reaction within the narrator-observer. Du Camp's array of facts and sociological commentary is transformed by Turgenev into an inward view of horror and fascination incommensurate with his sententious, qualified concluding statement.

Paradoxically, it is the skill with which Turgenev describes the execution that renders apologies and justifications irrelevant. The painful tedium to the vigil before the event, as well as the spiritual and psychological emptiness perceived within Troppmann offer a view of human behavior which belies the meliorist intentions stated in the

introduction. The author's humane sentiments and irresolute statement of protest are inconsequential in the face of Troppmann's idiocy and the bestiality of the crowd. Rather, it will be argued that the execution provides yet another moment in which Turgenev can exercise the meditative concern with death and annihilation that so persistently appears in this mature work.

Whatever the disjunction between stated purpose and means of representation, "The Execution of Troppmann" is a consummate example of the probing of an event by a sensitive observer intent on defining its moral properties; and to this task Turgenev draws on an array of devices familiar to readers of his fiction. The short narrative, framed by the narrator's comments, had appeared early in his career (in stories such as "The Singers," from *The Sportsman's Sketches*); and the account's opening scene – a dignified, all-male dinner at which Turgenev receives his invitation – reminds one of the post-prandial introductions frequent in his later work (cf. "First Love," "King Lear of the Steppes"). In the present case, the narrator does not reminisce to his companions (some of whom will be with him at the execution), but justifies his quite literal point of view as witness to an event to occur – a point of view taken, he admits, carelessly and without due consideration. (p. 148) The contrast between comfort and privilege on the one hand, and the brutality of the execution presented as public spectacle on the other, compromises the moral position of the narrator-viewer, since much of his commentary examines the extent to which the spectacle excites the mob.

Having made the necessary concessions to conscience, Turgenev proceeds with a detailed description in eleven sections, leading to the climactic moment of the guillotining. The narration succeeds in creating an atmosphere of boredom, fatigue, and dread in which attention is directed to the suffering of the observer rather than those of the condemned (this in sharp contrast to Victor Hugo's 1829 work *Le Dernier jour d'un condamné*). Troppmann, in fact, will appear unaffected by the proceedings. Accompanying the narrator's interior view is his unnerving awareness of the crowd, for

whom the execution serves as ritual and "performance." (p. 149) The crescendo of noise as the crowd increases during the night provides an inescapable, oppressive background to Turgenev's discomfort, and gives evidence of an attraction to violence more deeply rooted and disturbing than the vacant criminality of Troppmann. Fragments of conversation are occasionally isolated, but the dominant impression is of a ceaseless, incomprehensible noise, "like the sea." (p. 155)

The observer is further irritated by the vacuity of his companions from the police and the press, who have been ushered into the commandant's apartment and engage in strained conversation on the details of Troppmann's behavior (section three). Turgenev here introduces the psychological motif which accompanies the rest of his narrative – a profound spiritual and physical lassitude compounded of fatigue and anxiety. In commenting on the attempts at polite discussion of the Troppmann affair, Turgenev notes: "But all of this was so wary, so dull, with such general phrases, that even those speaking had no desire to continue ... We were all gripped by a wearisome and slow – precisely slow – sense of disquiet. Bored – no one was bored, but this dreary sensation was a hundred times worse than boredom!" (p. 151) Turgenev's recording of the psychological dialectic is nowhere more adept; for having admitted under the weight of this dull dread that no psychological or philosophical motives justify his presence at La Roquette Prison, he concludes the third section by noting the relief he shared with his companions at the arrival of the guillotine: "We all rushed outside, as though rejoicing." (p. 151)

The behavior of Turgenev's small group provides a counterpoint to that of the crowd beyond the prison; and as the narrative switches from one to the other (in sections two through seven), it is clear that neither group – the educated no more than the mob – brings any sense of justice to the vengeance to be exacted. Here the views of Turgenev and Beccaria are identical. His companions shake the executioner's hand, "for chic" (p. 152), and members of the crowd gather to watch the executioner's

rehearsal. (p. 157) During this preparation the author remarks his disgust for the guillotine by commenting on its unexpected slenderness, which he calls "ominous" and compares to a "long, carefully extended neck, like that of a swan." (p. 156) He refuses to watch the rehearsal, because of a "sense of some kind of transgression [pregreshenie], of secret shame." (p. 157)

The suggestion of obscenity which Turgenev attaches to the apparatus of execution contains a fine irony; for if society sanctions the use of capital punishment to curb man's aggressive instincts--as Freud has argued<sup>5</sup>--then in this instance not only is the admonitory purpose questionable, but indeed the punishment serves as a spur to the basest instincts, noted with an imagery no Freudian could improve. And all who participate in the spectacle are implicated in the transgression, an orgiastic frenzy followed by disgust. As Turgenev states, ingenuously, in the conclusion to section six: "Perhaps I should ascribe this sense [of transgression] to the fact that the [cavalry] horses, ... calmly chewing their oats before the gate of the prison, seem to me the only innocent beings among us all." (p. 157)

If in the first half of the work Turgenev has defined the relation between public execution and mass excitation, in the second part he turns to Troppmann – to the preparations leading to his last moment and to the author's attempt to understand the nature of the man. Yet again Turgenev will be defeated in his attempt to invest the event and the condemned with an appropriate significance. His perception of Troppmann clearly plays on expectations which are to be denied. As the dignitaries make their way to Troppmann through a maze of prison corridors, Turgenev, still guilt-ridden at the group's pretensions, intensifies the anticipation of seeing the criminal by counting down ("right now ... now ... this minute ... this second ... [We] found ourselves before an iron door ... Here!"; p. 159). The transparent attempt at gothic horror is immediately dispelled by the light of the prisoner's room, by the nondescript quality of

the man and his actions (his final letter to his mother is "insignificant"), and by the inefficacy of all attempts to endow the scene with dignity or moral drama. There is no reaction to the priest's "Du courage," no display of anxiety. Turgenev sardonically observes: "We were all without doubt paler and more agitated than he." (p. 162)

Having established the absence of remorse or guilt in the criminal before his execution, the author uses the remaining section (nine through eleven) for a detailed recounting of the last moments of preparation before the march to the guillotine. A skillful manipulator of time throughout the work, Turgenev effects a *ritardando* before the climactic moment with a precise description of the cutting of the prisoner's hair, the donning of the strait jacket, and other details of the flesh – details which underlie the nausea Turgenev experiences at the moment of execution.

But there is also in his observation a last attempt to comprehend the link between Troppmann-present and Troppmann-murderer. In section eight, he writes apropos of Troppmann's demeanor: "But at the sight of this calm, this simplicity and modesty, as it were, all feelings in me – the feeling of disgust for a merciless killer; for a pervert, tearing the throats of children as they screamed 'maman! maman!'; and finally the feeling of pity for a man whom death had already prepared to swallow – all these disappeared and collapsed into one: a feeling of amazement. What sustained Troppmann?" (p. 163) The public execution, in Turgenev's ironic reversal, sustains Troppmann by giving him the strength of a performer in a final role.

These thoughts are concentrated for the narrator during the cutting of the hair (section ten): The description of the delicate hands, once stained with blood; the thin, boyish neck, which leads to a vision of the blade cutting through the backbone, muscles, veins; the renewed attempt to imagine what Troppmann might be thinking. (p. 166) Turgenev's persistent efforts to "imagine" Troppmann, and his inability to do so, suggest a collapse of moral accountability. The criminal is not insane, but his atrophied sense of self and of responsibility check the artist's imagination.<sup>6</sup>

For Turgenev there is no propriety in the event he witnesses: all participants play roles devoid of meaning. In the final section (twelve) he writes, with emphasis: "But none of us, absolutely none looked like a person who realized that he had been present at the implementation of an act of social justice; each one tried mentally to turn aside and, as it were, throw off any responsibility for this murder." (p. 170) This unequivocal statement introduces remarks on the subject of capital punishment; but Turgenev, as noted earlier, does not take an absolute position on legal or moral grounds. His final discussion is deflected toward the issue of public executions – rare occurrences in Europe during the late nineteenth century, and hardly the central issue in a debate on the abolition of capital punishment.<sup>7</sup>

The intensity of involvement which Turgenev brings to "The Execution of Troppmann" must therefore be motivated by concerns beyond the ostensible attack against public executions. Death is at the center of this work, and the author's response is not to be explained solely by indignation, or by physical disgust at the moment of killing. The physical nausea is there, and very convincingly conveyed; but there is another variety of nausea, exemplified in this description of the parting crowd after the execution: "An entire river of human substances – men, women, children – streamed past us in ugly and ragged waves. Almost everyone was silent .... And what drained, gloomy, sleepy faces! What an expression of ennui, fatigue, dissatisfaction, irritation – weary, aimless irritation! ... Everyday life again received these people unto its bosom – and for what, for what sensations had they left its ruts during these few hours?" (p. 170) Nor is the world weariness which the author projects upon the shuffling mob unshared. "Fatigue," "boredom," "cold nausea," "listless" (vialyi)--these terms recur in Turgenev's description of his own state of mind, and are redolent of another literary exercise prompted by an execution: Konstantin Sluchevskii's "After the Execution in Geneva" ("Tiazhelyi den' .... Ty ukhodil tak vialo ....")<sup>8</sup>

Yet in contrast to the sensual, surreal quality of Sluchevskii's vision, Turgenev's

nightmare reflects a spiritual preoccupation which frequently appears in his correspondence of the period. The effect of the execution upon a mind already charged with thoughts of death is evident in a letter of January 1870 to Pavel Annenkov. After a long and anguished passage on the recent death of Alexander Herzen, Turgenev writes:

Death especially "stinks" [smerdit] to me, since a few days ago I had a quite unexpected occasion to sniff it in plenty. Specifically, I received an invitation from a friend (in Paris) to be present not only at the execution of Troppmann, but also at the announcement of his death sentence, at his "toilette," etc. I will not forget that horrible night, in the course of which "I have supp'd full of horrors" and acquired a definite loathing for capital punishment in general, and in particular for the way it is carried out in France.<sup>9</sup>

The stench of death continues in Turgenev's correspondence of this period, as in this 1872 letter to Ludwig Pietsch: "Also wirklich – keine 'zweite Welle mehr'? Es geht bergab mit uns – bergab – da steht sie schon, die blinde, stumme, graue, kalte, dumme, gefräßige, ewige Nacht."<sup>10</sup> Such thought can in part be attributed to Turgenev's physical debility (severe and frequent attacks of gout) and, more generally, to what he called in a letter to Flaubert "la tristesse de la cinquantième année." However, the *taedium vitae* which informs Turgenev's perception of the crowd and the bloody spectacle suggests deeper concerns both of a personal and of a political nature.

Of the personal, the letter to Pietsch offers a particularly clear statement of Turgenev's meditations on death and nothingness – meditations which form a recurrent element in his writings (this in addition to the death scenes of such protagonists as Insarov and Basarov) and which appear in his work long before the description of Troppmann. For example, the fantasy "Phantoms" (Prizraki), conceived in 1855 and published in Dostoevskii's journal *Epokha* in 1864, reaches the climax of its survey of historical and social folly (including France's Second Empire) with the appearance of a

monstrous embodiment of death, and concludes with the narrator's nervous collapse at thoughts of death and the void (*nichtozhestvo*).<sup>11</sup> (IX, p. 109)

In "Torrents of Spring" (begun in 1870 and published in 1872), Dmitrii Sanin is preoccupied with similar thoughts of an "all-devouring and gnawing fear of death," here compared to piscine monsters which rise from the depths of life's deceptively calm sea. Despite a comfortable and apparently rich social existence, Sanin is overwhelmed by a sense of *taedium vitae*--an expression Turgenev emphasizes with the addition of the Russian words "*otvrashchenie k zhizni*." (XI, 7, 8) On a more speculative level *taedium vitae* had pervaded Turgenev's earlier ruminations in "Enough: A Fragment from the Notes of a Deceased Artist" (1864). Whether in narrative fiction or in reveries such as "Enough," Turgenev repeatedly stresses man's impotence before the blind and indifferent forces of nature (Chaos) and fate.

The culmination of Turgenev's meditations on death occurs in the Poems in Prose, and although they appear several years after the publication of the Troppmann article, they recapitulate in great number and variety Turgenev's vision of death. Of the some eighty "verses," over two dozen deal with the theme in forms that include the monstrous and spectral ("Nasekomoe," "Starukha") as well as the more meditative vision in "Konets sveta: Son" and "Drozd." As in the letter to Pietsch, water – the sea – is the frequent symbol of death and oblivion (cf. XIII, 154, 203), and as such can be linked to Turgenev's comparison of the mob's ceaseless noise before the execution to the sound of the sea (p. 155)

For a sensibility so finely attuned to the notion of death, senseless and without hope of redemption, the execution of Troppmann becomes a focal point for a confrontation with chaos and the emptiness of death (the murderer's crime and the state's vengeance). The curious, dumb strength of Troppmann, unrepentant and unheroic, and the composure with which he faces execution – refusing drug and

religious solace – bring to question the rational assumptions of natural law. This nightmarish, yet all too present glimpse into nothingness must surely have stimulated a deeper response on Turgenev's part than any sincerely professed desire for reform.

Beyond Turgenev's vision of Troppmann lies the complementary fear of a general collapse of standards in Western civilization. Although Turgenev did not share the intensity of Dostoevskii's antipathy to certain social and political values in the West, he viewed Napoleon III and his mixture of bourgeois and imperial pretensions with considerable skepticism (an attitude developed a few months after the Troppmann article in his "Letters on the Franco-Prussian War").<sup>12</sup> The crowd that gathers for Troppmann's execution serves as a microcosm for the instability of the Second Empire, and Turgenev's narrative contains explicit references to political violence and chicanery, militarism, and frequent anti-government sentiments among the people (cf. pp. 147, 150).

This perception of the potential for mass violence in the modern industrial state addresses a threat to Western ideals which is developed by Dostoevskii in novels such as The Idiot and The Adolescent and by Henry James in The Princess Casamassima. For all three writers Paris is the locus of civilization and of the possibility of its destruction. Turgenev's beloved city becomes a landscape of violence, of whose sullen and demoralized citizens he writes: "It is horrible to think of what is taking root here." (p. 170)<sup>13</sup> At one point they are compared to Jacobins in 1794. (p. 162) The most memorable image is that of a young man who "stood smirking like an idiot, as if thinking about something amusing, and would suddenly toss back his head, open his mouth, and start shouting – a long shout, without words – and then would again droop his head and grin." (p. 156) The absurdity and menace of this and similar scenes foreshadow the disorders of the following year, whose events (the war, the Paris Commune) were commented upon by Turgenev, as well as by his confreres Flaubert and Edmund Goncourt. In particular, Goncourt's journal entries for 1870-71, with their descriptions of

mobs and street violence, demonstrate the acuity with which Turgenev assessed the mood of a society on the verge of collapse.<sup>14</sup>

If "The Execution of Troppmann" were to be judged solely as a work of social protest, one might incline more readily to Dostoevskii's parody of one of Turgenev's works (possibly the Troppmann article) in The Devils: "This entire article, rather long and verbose, was written solely for the purpose of showing off. Thus one reads between the lines: take an interest in me, look at the way I was in those moments."<sup>15</sup> The lampoon is to the point: one is never unaware of the presiding consciousness behind the narrative – so consciously guilt-ridden. This is not, however, to deny the presence of a finely-honed intelligence, whose observations and judgments define a relation between aesthetic and moral values. It is precisely the reaction of the narrator which verifies the brutality of the spectacle.

In his discussion of the decline of public punishment in the nineteenth century, Michel Foucault writes: "And whatever the theatrical elements it still retained were now downgraded, as if the functions of the penal ceremony were gradually ceasing to be understood, as if this rite that "concluded the crime" was suspected of being in some undesirable way linked with it .... The public execution is now seen as a hearth in which violence bursts again into flame."<sup>16</sup> Turgenev's account demonstrates this confusion in ceremony, and in his desire to see no more of it, he joins the company of enlightened reformers such as Beccaria. The question remains, however, as to whether Turgenev's primary concern is with the public nature of the execution or with the retributive use of violence in itself. Of Dostoevskii's position there can be no doubt, particularly after a reading of Myshkin's monolog on capital punishment (The Idiot, chapter 2), in which he takes issue with the claim that the guillotine reduces the death agony. Turgenev's superbly-crafted narrative, still effective in its conveying of the immediacy of the event, remains the record of an onlooker; Dostoevskii spoke--in The Idiot and in his comments on Turgenev--with the experience of one who had good knowledge of the scaffold.

But beyond the specific social question, "The Execution of Troppmann" is entirely consistent with the deeper impulses of Turgenev's thought. While Dostoevskii accused Turgenev of faintheartedness and impotent lack of faith, the latter's often obsessive vision of chaos and death can be placed within Russian literature's concern both with individual mortality and with social cataclysm. The implications of this dread could not have been fully realized, and Tolstoi, Dostoevskii, and Turgenev each chose quite different means to express their fears of essentially the same specters. Within this context "The Execution of Troppmann" must be judged resolute, not only of its melding of the personal and social, but also in its rendering of the hellish night vigil before the execution – so appropriate a representation of "die ewige Nacht."

#### NOTES

1. Contained in Alessandro Manzoni, The Column of Infamy, trans. Kenelm Foster and Jane Grigson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 47.

2. F. M. Dostoevskii, Pis'ma, ed. A. S. Dolinin, II (Moscow: "Academia," 1930), p. 274.

3. I. S. Turgenev, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem, 28 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad: "Nauka," 1960-68), Sochineniia, XIV, 148. Hereafter cited in the text. "The Execution of Troppmann" was first published in Vestnik Evropy, No. 6 (1870).

4. See A. B. Muratov, "Turgenev i Maksim Diukan (K tvorcheskoi istorii 'Kazni Tropmana')," in Turgenev i ego sovremenniki, ed. M. P. Alekseev (Leningrad: "Nauka," 1977), pp. 136-42. Du Camp's article is entitled "La place de la Roquette."

5. See particularly Freud's anecdotal reference to a debate on capital punishment in the French Chamber, in Civilization and its discontents, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), p. 58.

6. One is reminded of Dostoevskii's perception of another murder, the nihilist

Sergei Nechaev. Having recently completed The Devils, whose terrorist Peter Verkhovenski is based in part on Nechaev, Dostoevskii is surprised at the vacuous simplicity of Nechaev's final words at the trial (as reported by the press): "No, I confess that up to the very last moment I thought that all the same there was something between the lines, and suddenly – what banality ... 'Down with Despotism!' Couldn't he really have thought up something more clever in his situation." F. M. Dostoevskii, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh (Leningrad: "Nauka," 1972-), XII, 205.

7. Other notable literary works on the issue of capital punishment include Victor Hugo's Le Dernier jour d'un condamné (1829) and Prince Myshkin's monologue in chapter two of The Idiot. For an analysis of the relation between these two, see the notes to F. M. Dostoevskii, IX, 429-30. In contrast to Turgenev, both Hugo and Dostoevskii present the preparation for execution from the point of view of the condemned, a device which provides a pathos altogether lacking in Turgenev's report. Incidentally, Myshkin claims that there is no capital punishment in Russia – an inaccurate statement motivated perhaps by the censor. Turgenev's less than resolute stand on capital punishment might also have reflected the exigencies of that same censorship; but his private correspondence on the subject displays the same hedging.

8. Published in 1881. K. K. Sluchevskii, Stikhotvoreniia i poemy (Moscow-Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1962), p. 204.

9. Turgenev, Pis'ma, VIII, 168-69.

10. Ibid, IX, 203.

11. Dostoevskii's criticism of "Phantoms" provides yet another, typical example of his assessment of Turgenev: "There is much rubbish in them ["Phantoms"]: something repulsive, sick, decrepit, lacking in faith because of impotence, in a word all of Turgenev and his convictions, but the poetry redeems much; I read [them] a second time." Pis'ma, I, 352.

12. For further reference to Turgenev's view of the war and the Empire, see

Turgenev, Sochineniia, XV, 287-88.

13. Cf. Frederick Hoffman's discussion of the "assailant as landscape" and his reference to the Paris of Baudelaire's "Les Sept Vieillard's" in The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 181-187.

14. For an English edition of these entries, see Paris under Siege, 1870-1871: From the Goncourt Journal, ed. and trans. George Becker (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969).

15. Dostoevskii, XII, 70. For a summary of opinion on the specific object of Dostoevskii's satire, see page 291.

16. Discipline and Punish, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977),