

Tortured by Circumstance

by Theodore Dalrymple (July 2016)



I once had a patient who claimed to have been a torturer in the Syrian army. Unfortunately for him, he failed to give satisfaction in this capacity or otherwise fell out with his employers, and found himself in receipt of the attentions that he had not long before given to others. I suppose this is not an uncommon trajectory among torturers.

We sometimes forget that our revulsion on principle against torture is of comparatively recent origin, not very much more than two centuries old, until which time its existence and necessity were taken for granted, however much every individual may have wanted to avoid it for himself; and even now some of us, at any rate, are persuaded that on occasion, for reasons of state, it may be justified. It seems to me implausible that no information useful to a torturing power or authority has ever been extracted by means of torture, even if false and misleading information has also often been extracted by it. The objection to torture must therefore be ethical rather than merely utilitarian, that the end cannot justify the means. I doubt whether anyone has ever lived entirely by this principle, but of course there is a great difference between, say, telling a little white lie to bring comfort to someone else and the employment of torture to extract information that you believe, possibly without justification, that the person in your power has.

Here is a question: if you believe that torture is sometimes justified, would you be prepared to perform it yourself? And if not, would your objection be more than merely aesthetic or practical – that it was a horribly messy business and that you did not know how to carry it out properly or efficiently, and that it was therefore best left to the technicians of torture? Can you delegate to someone else the performance of a task on your behalf that you would not be prepared on ethical grounds to perform yourself? In modern society, our lives are in effect one long succession of delegations, explicit or implicit; we delegate to the airline pilot or the neurosurgeon not because we object to what they do, but because we cannot do what they do. This is different from

delegating a morally objectionable task.

Returning recently to Paris after a very long flight – nearly twenty-four hours in a plane – I sought an easy read. I found a short book titled *Esclave et Bourreau*, Slave and Executioner, subtitled *The incredible story of Mathieu Léveillé, Martiniquais slave become Canadian executioner*. The author was Serge Bilé, of whom I had not heard.

Here the trajectory of the protagonist, Mathieu Léveillé, was the opposite of my Syrian patient: as a slave on a sugar plantation of the French West Indians in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, he was treated all his life by methods akin to torture, and later became not only an executioner but the official torturer of Quebec.

In Martinique he tried to escape three times from the plantation in which he was a slave, the penalty for which was death by lingering public execution which the other slaves would be obliged to watch as a warning to them.

It so happened, however, that Quebec at the time was in search of an executioner and torturer. Public executions were much appreciated as a form of entertainment or diversion at a time (not only in Quebec) when life was hard and seldom amusing; but the executioner was a man abominated by all, despite the fact that his work was necessary for the entertainment that public executions brought. It was as if those who love the stage or films abominated actors essential to their production.

The executioner had to live apart from the rest of society, not by law but because the rest of society excommunicated him and treated him as a leper. Even his relatives – his wife, his children if any – would have to live apart. The job was well-paid by the standards of the time, the executioner was lodged and paid more than sufficiently to live; but it was an employment that nobody wanted and was mainly filled by degenerates and drunkards who were not even very good at it.

The governor of Quebec, who believed like practically all citizens at the time that torture and the death penalty were necessary preconditions of the civil order, had the bright idea of asking for a slave from Martinique whose death sentence was commuted on condition that he became an executioner and torturer in Canada. Mathieu Léveillé was the man who was offered the choice – not *plata o*

plomo, money or the bullet, but death or the rope and the whip. He chose the rope and the whip.

Could he be blamed for so choosing? There had been slaves who refused the offer, who preferred death to the shame or dishonour of putting to torture or putting to death their compatriots, many of whose crimes were not crimes in the moral sense. The author suggests that Lèveillé did not know what the post entailed, but this seems to me unlikely. He could hardly have failed to understand that his task would not be humanitarian, even if the person under torture or to be executed was known as the *patient*.

We think that we live in an age unique for the type of euphemism we know as political correctness, but in fact nothing today equals the avoidance of the word *executioner* in early eighteenth century France, where even to utter the word was an offence punishable by a fine. The approved name for the executioner and torturer was *le maître des hautes œuvres*, the master of high works. This verbal evasion was partially successful in concealing, or rather normalising, the brutality of the regime, and no doubt in prolonging it. I am no enthusiast for contemporary political correctness, whose function is to prevent thought or discussion about unpleasant realities, but nothing in it remotely equals *le maître des hautes œuvres* for evasiveness.

Arriving in Quebec, Lèveillé found himself what he had never been before, the object of official consideration, but his social isolation was complete and the author suggests that, overall, his situation was worse than it had been in Martinique, where at least his sufferings were shared by the people around him and there was some companionship.

Lèveillé seems to have taken to the work, if not like a duck to water, at least without obvious protest. He was a good torturer who did not need, as most torturers do, to drown his sorrows in strong drink. Perhaps, when he had to torture or execute white men, he thought of it as revenge for the ill-treatment he had suffered at white men's hands. He had to whip many a *patient* and expressed no reluctance to do so. Perhaps he was a forerunner of the Martiniquais psychiatrist and author of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon, who theorised that, by means of inflicting violence on members of the colonial

race, whether individually guilty of anything or not, the oppressed colonised person liberated himself from his sense of his own inferiority and subjection.

I have never believed this theory and in fact the case histories that Fanon himself provides (he seems to have been able to split his medical from his political self) do not suggest that it is true. It might well not have been true of Lèveillé either, though he had good reasons – none better – to hate his own subjection.

He was regarded by his masters as an excellent and reliable torturer and executioner, hard to replace, but he had one great defect: he was frequently ill. This did not interfere too greatly with his work which was very intermittent at best – or worst. Between torture and executions, frequent for the population of Quebec at the time (38,000) but not frequent in any other sense, he had nothing whatever to do. There were long periods of what stage actors call 'resting'.

However, the authorities feared to lose him: they had never had such a good torturer and executioner. Therefore they sent him to a doctor who (says the author) examined him thoroughly. This cannot be true in the literal sense because doctors at the time did not examine their patients, a manual task they considered beneath them as scholars and gentlemen: nevertheless, the doctor diagnosed melancholia, or what we should now call depression. Needless to say, there were no antidepressants at the time and the doctor prescribed something better: a wife.

One of the privileges of the executioner in eighteenth century France was that, if unmarried, he could take to wife a woman who was herself under sentence of death. This was not so much a shotgun wedding as a gallows wedding. A woman under sentence of death was selected for Lèveillé, who was aged thirty at the time, in the hope that she would preserve his life, but unfortunately (perhaps fortunately for her as it turned out) he died before they could meet and marry. She became the slave of a Quebecois merchant who fell in love with her, had three children by her, and then, when his wife died, married her and legitimised their children. This was a fate preferable to marriage to a complete social outcast.

Was Lèveillé really melancholic, and if so why? It could, of course, have been

his work that made him so (if he was so), but it might just as well have been his social isolation and boredom or, indeed, his chronic physical illness that led to his early death. At any rate, there is no reason to think that he found the work of torturing and executing white men particularly liberating (he sometimes had to do the same to black or Indian men), as Fanon suggested that it would be. He, Lèveillé, did the work because he remained under sentence of death, the price of his life being that work. Appetite growing with feeding, he might, I suppose, have grown into practical psychopathy like Macbeth, but there is no positive indication that he did. There is likewise no reason to think that if he had been offered the opportunity to save his life without having to do the work, he would not have seized it.

Let him who has never been placed in such a dilemma as Lèveillé's cast the first stone. Those who went to the gallows rather than become executioners were heroes, no doubt, but heroism is a quality that we have no right to demand of people. To be a hero is, by definition, exceptional; if everyone were heroic, no one would be heroic.

There is a tendency— I have suffered from it myself — to think that we do not know who we *really* are until we have been placed in a dilemma such as he faced. When I was young I put myself in certain kinds of danger in order to find out what I was *really* made of. But did I find out any better than, say, a man who has worked all his life delivering letters for the Post Office? Dickens mocked the whole idea in *Martin Chuzzlewit* in the character of Mark Tapley. Tapley was a cheerful young man who thought there was no virtue in his cheeriness because the conditions in which he lived were not sufficiently testing to know whether his cheeriness was real or not. He therefore deliberately sought out the most uncomfortable situations to test himself.

All aspects of reality are equally real: the tranquil life is just as real as the tormented one. And yet, at the same time, I cannot completely overcome the notion that to go through life like a hot knife through butter is not enough. One needs to be tested: not as much as Lèveillé, of course, but more than if one faces no obstacles or dilemmas at all. Just how much difficulty is the right dose? No doubt it varies from person to person, but one cannot even determine it in a single case. It is all much too difficult for a man with jet-lag such as mine.

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