

THE MAN WHO ATE DEATH: BORISLAV PEKIĆ'S LITERARY HOMAGE TO TOCQUEVILLE

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The main goal of this paper is to synthesize two critical views of the French Revolution, which at first glance, with the exception of the object of criticism, provide no basis for deeper connections. These are Tocqueville's observations made primarily in his work *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, on the one hand, and Borislav Pekić's narrative *The man who ate death* on the other.¹

Although these are two very different discourses, scientific and literary, and authors distanced by a two-hundred-year period, we find that linking their similar and complementary insights regarding

¹ The story *The man who ate death* is part of the collection of short stories *New Jerusalem*, first published in 1988. This story was translated into French in 2005, and won the French "Book of the Day" award the same year. The political activist and writer, Borislav Pekić is considered one of the most important Serbian literary figures of the 20th century. As a liberal thinker and activist, he experienced the consequences of revolutionary (socialist) repression, arrested as a very young man, and as political emigre he lived and worked for much of his life in England.

the character and effects of the French Revolution provides one, if not new, then undoubtedly interesting view to this problem. The basic line of elaboration of the connection between the works of these two authors is the state – society – individual relations.

While in Pekić's case those relations are some of the obsessive themes of his work and the story we are dealing with here, in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, we find it in developing Tocqueville's crucial and, above all original, thesis about the political and bureaucratic centralization of the Ancient Regime as one of the key factors that caused emergence of egalitarianism, individualism, as well as the French Revolution itself.

Here, dealing with the real effects and consequences of the revolution in the context of French society and its organization, Tocqueville concludes that sixty years of revolution (1789-1848) reveal that one form of power was in fact replaced by another. According to author, the Old Regime contained a whole set of institutions of the modern age which, since they were not opposed to equality, could easily find a place in the new society, but still provided unusual benefits for despotism.²

Administrative centralization, as an important measure of the Old Regime, caused political centralization that destroyed all the mediating structures of civil society that could protect the individual from the coercive power of the state. The royal administration, as a system of bureaucratic control, concentrates all aspects of social, political and economic life under its wing, thus creating a symbi-

2 The new regime has recovered the centralization of power and administration that the old regime had begun. In a way, the Revolution completes the march of the Old Regime. Many reforms that were not achieved under Louis XVI were completed during the Revolution: the abolition of tax privileges, the standardization of weights and measures, territorial reorganization (end of provinces and creation of departments), the creation of the Louvre Museum. See: Noé, Jean-Baptiste. "A Reading of the French Revolution by Alexis de Tocqueville: Continuity between the Old and New Regime." Jean-Baptiste Noé, 2018. Accessed September 4, 2023. https://www.jbnoe.fr/IMG/pdf/tocqueville_et_la_revolution_en.pdf.

otic link between the patronizing state and an individual deprived of meaningful involvement in public affairs and anything beyond egoistic self-interest.

Local freedoms were destroyed, or subverted, local elections were eliminated, the judiciary emasculated. “In doing so, the monarchy leveled society, encouraged democracy and destroyed the power of the aristocracy. Its effects outlasted the old regime, and made it near-impossible for the French to establish a free and stable government after the old regime ended.”³ Thus, already under the old regime, the basis was created for the deviant form of atomizing individualism and unifying egalitarianism further developed by the French Revolution.

*Because men are no longer tied to one another by bonds of caste, class, guild, or family, they are only too apt to attend solely to their private interests, only too inclined to think exclusively of themselves and to with-draw into a narrow individualism that stifles all public virtue. Despotism, far from combating this tendency, makes it irresistible, for it deprives citizens of all common passions, all mutual needs, all necessity to reach a common understanding, and all opportunity to act in concert. It immures them, as it were, in private life. They were already apt to hold one another at arm's length. Despotism isolated them. Relations between them had grown chilly; despotism froze them.*⁴

Administrative centralization caused the emergence of a new social class and a new aristocracy, that of civil servants in ancient and in new regime. As the author points out, “Administrative officials, who were nearly all bourgeois, already formed a class with its own spirit, traditions, virtues, honor, and pride. It was the aristocracy of the new society, already fully formed and drawing breath.

3 Kahan, Alan S. “Alexis de Tocqueville”, *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers Series Volume 7*, Ed. John Meadowcroft, The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd. London, 2010, pp. 63-64.

4 Tocqueville, Alexis de. *The Ancient Regime and the French Revolution*, ed. Elster, Jon, and Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 5.

It was simply waiting for the Revolution to make a place for it.”⁵

Tocqueville was one of the first to perceive the role and importance of the public servants whose network was the backbone of the old and new regime.

*They are going through all regimes, all coups d'état, all constitutional changes. France experienced eight different political regimes. From this political instability comes the power of the shadowy men who are administrative officials. The danger well perceived by Tocqueville is that the civil service class will take complete control of the country, establishing an administrative despotism that in turn aggravates the consequences of government centralization.*⁶

The protagonist of Pekić's story *The man who ate death*, citizen Jean-Louis Popier embodies both of the above-mentioned phenomena that Tocqueville wrote about. He is, on the one hand, the smallest screw in the bureaucratic machinery that the French Revolution took over from the Ancient Regime, and on the other, he represents an atomized individual who has lost all sense of solidarity and common interest, in the absence of family, social, class ties. Squashed by his miserable position, he was scared of everything and everyone until he reached for the very specific kind of administrative power.

At the very beginning of the story, the motto of the French Revolution “liberté, égalité, fraternité” served to Pekić as an ironic framework for the characterization of a dormant man – hero Popier.

There was nothing the Revolution could either give him or take from him. In the early days it probably made him more equal with other citizens than he had been before, and possibly, though I doubt it, freer as well. (...) True, he could say whatever he wished. Not exactly, of course. But he had felt no particular need for the king even before Revolution. And so he could express his opinions at will. The problem was that either he had no opinions to speak of or, out of modesty, he did

5 Ibidem, p. 64.

6 Noé, p. 3.

not consider them worth voicing. Freedom of speech, stemming from the celebrated 'Declaration of Human Rights' of August, did not have the same importance for him as it did for Robespierre, Desmoulins, Danton, Vergnaud or Hebert, the orators of the Revolution. (...) If he ventured to take an evening stroll among the cafes of the Palais Royal, whose tables were rife with talk and conspiracy, he could not but feel that most of acquired Equalities and Liberties did not concern him and that, however enlightened they might be, he personally would benefit very little from them.

Popier didn't live like most of his colleagues who could afford some small pleasure.

(...) Lastly, he could not even enjoy the third advantage bestowed by the new state, that of Brotherhood, because it entailed the concept of sharing and he – all sources concur – had no one to share with. No family, no relatives, no friends, not even people of like mind.⁷

The Pekić's story follows the time of the so-called power struggles, more specifically the reign of Jacobin's terror. The protagonist Popier works at Revolutionary Tribunal as a clerk who lays down the verdicts in the Protocol, which would later be forwarded as execution order. Popier is precisely part of the bureaucratic machinery that, according to Tocqueville, the French revolution took over from the Ancient Regime, and in this sense it is indicative that his father was also public servant.

The specificity of Tocqueville's understanding of the French Revolution is also manifested in the specificity of its periodization. "On the one hand, he reduced the French Revolution to the sequence 1787-1789, on the other hand, he extended revolutionary violence

⁷ All references from Pekić's novel are taken from the website dedicated to the work of Borislav Pekić: Borislav Pekić. Accessed September 6, 2023. <http://www.borislavpekić.com/>. For the quotation above see this link: Pekić, Borislav. "The Man Who Ate Death (2nd Part)." Borislav Pekić. Accessed September 4, 2023. <http://www.borislavpekić.com/2006/06/man-who-ate-death-2nd-part.html>.

well beyond the period of terror that ran from 1792 to 1794.”⁸ Tocqueville postulates division of the duration of the French Revolution between a stage of liberty and a stage of equality. The first, “revolution of liberty”, lasted until no later than the *journee* 6 October 1789, when the king and the National Assembly were brought from Versailles to Paris by the women of the Faubourg St. Antoine. After that time, it was no longer the liberal revolution, the one that defended the rights and freedoms of individuals. The second stage, “the revolution of equality”, lasted from then until 18 *Brumaire*. “These two stages correspond to the two different passions Tocqueville had noted in eighteenth-century France, hatred for inequality and love of liberty. The hatred for inequality had ancient roots, but the thirst for liberty was recent and relatively weak.”⁹

Tocqueville had not written of revolutionary dynamics, violence and political upheavals, of Terror, the guillotine, Jacobin messianism, the wars of the Vendée, the shootings in Lyon, the assassination of the king, the ideological war that began in 1792, etc. The reason for this is that, for him, the French Revolution ended in 1789. “The rest is only the consequence of the emergence of democracy, whose exacerbated form goes so far as to erase people.”¹⁰ Where Tocqueville stopped, Borislav Pekić continues his narrative in a very compelling, synthesizing way, giving the reverse of the French Revolution a more universal anthropological sense, accentuating certain problems as if he was in collusion with Tocqueville.

By analyzing the features of the Ancient Regime that were important preconditions for the outbreak of the French Revolution,

8 “This Tocqueville’s periodization of the French Revolution served to demonstrate that violence was the foundation of democracy itself. In doing so, it does not end the revolution in 1795 or even 1815, but it gives the possibility of linking it to all the totalitarian systems of the 20th century and beyond.” Noé, p. 6.

9 Kahan, Alan S. *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville*, New York Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 24.

10 Noé, p. 5.

Tocqueville, in some way, showed the contours of those deviant phenomena which Pekić depicted, by using dramatic accentuation and ironic hyperbolic-grotesque shaping. Having presented the time of Terror, Pekić concretized, with a series of seemingly incidental historical references, the period about which Tocqueville had not written.

The qualities of the protagonist of the Pekić's story are completely in line with the time in which he lives, they are, in fact, formed under the pressure of a social atmosphere of insecurity and fear, and of his profession. Popier was submissive and not less, "surrounded by suspicion, distrust, doubt, fear – the inseparable companions of revolutionary vigilance," he was "paralyzed with anxiety." But, he is, first and foremost indifferent to social and historical events. The author emphasizes that several times in the tale. Even a description of his apartment suggests so: it was "the mansard in the Palas de Justice, from where you could see Paris without seeing Revolution and from where everything had the dark, still, soothing silhouette of indifference."¹¹ Popier just listened to history. Although constantly in its physical vicinity, immersed in the scriptures, he did not see it.

Pekić explains how Popier, due to the uniqueness of his handwriting, received an offer for a job that he was not allowed to refuse. By linking numerous historical and cultural references, author creates a symbolic description that is at the same time a synthetic depiction, cross-section of the historical moment:

Popier's handwriting had what the Revolution required: puritanical sharpness, Roman clarity, patriotic legibility, with none of the flourishes that characterized royalist charters. His penmanship was like a Gothic church, deconstructed down to its spiked stereometric form and reminiscent of the sans culottes' spear, which, during the nights of the September massacres, bore the head of the Princess de

11 Pekić, Borislav. "The Man Who Ate Death (3rd Part)." Borislav Pekić. Accessed September 4, 2023. <http://www.borislavpekić.com/2006/06/man-who-ate-death-3rd-part.html>.

*Lamballe, and on the day the Bastille fell, the head of its governor,
M. de Launay...*¹²

The author uses the same artistic procedure to symbolically mark the Popier's position as a crossroads: And so

*... he found himself at the magic crossroads between ideas and reality, Philosophy and History, Draft and Deed, and inevitably, seen with a writer's hindsight, between Revolution and Counter-Revolution, at a watershed which at the time lay in the luminous stone corridors of the Revolutionary Tribunal, where the paths forked: one leading to J.-J. Rousseau's 'The Social Contract', 'La Nouvelle Heloise' and from there to heaven; the other descending down to the dark dungeons of the Conciergerie, then, following the rue Saint-Honoré, arriving at the guillotine at the Place de la Révolution and from there disappearing below ground.*¹³

Describing the Popier's problems in a job he did mechanically, Pekić says:

*He entered the personal details of the condemned persons without going into the particulars, adhering to the substance of the guilt. It took considerable intellectual effort to summarize the counter-revolutionary crimes which grew in number as the Revolution became more successful. The Protocols were legacies of the ancient régime, and their sparse columns had not been designed for such an epidemic of anti-state sentiment.*¹⁴

Author's ironic comment suggests both: that the practices of revolutionary court has extremely overcome its heritage from the Ancient Regime, and that Popier could notice problematic nature of "antirevolutionary crimes", but he choose not to see, as well as many other facts of his work.

12 Pekić, Borislav. "The Man Who Ate Death (1st Part)." Borislav Pekić. Accessed September 4, 2023. http://www.borislavpekić.com/2006/06/man-who-ate-death-1st-part_03.html.

13 Ibidem.

14 Ibidem.

Tragic and grotesque tale precisely begins with the inadvertent Popier's ingestion of the verdict. The hero broke the rules of his work routine, which consisted of a constant rush, and began to eat his lunch instead of writing death sentences. Caught by the unexpected arrival of his boss, he wrapped his lunch in one of those papers and hid it in his pocket. Attending, afterwards, the talk of two revolutionary officials about the problems with the slow work of the guillotine and the increasing number of liquidations, he forgot what he had done and took the judgment home in his pocket. Realizing what he had done, he was terribly scared of the consequences, so he ate proof of that.

Later, having imagined the image of the woman he has saved by eating her death sentence, Popier felt joy stronger than fear, because it was his carelessness that was responsible for that image. Thus began a series of transformations that the dormant citizen Popier will go through, during his mission. The hero's motivation for its starting remains the puzzle which reader needs to interpret. The author provided to us only a number of his assumptions, which are "permissible, but not sufficient to explain how non-descript little scribe (...) dared to chew up the court's death sentences and arbitrarily revoke sovereign will of the people, the natural course of revolutionary justice and decisions made by those both more powerful and wiser than he."¹⁵

The author's assumptions about the psychological motives for Popier's action provide an idea of what a man he could be like, but not about what he has become.

It aroused a sense of pity that had been rendered dormant by the marginal and even innocent part he played in the mechanics of the Reign of Terror. Perhaps, too, there was the defiance

15 Pekić, Borislav. "The Man Who Ate Death (3rd Part)." Borislav Pekić. Accessed September 4, 2023. <http://www.borislavpekic.com/2006/06/man-who-ate-death-3rd-part.html>.

*of someone anonymous and innocent against a fate that made him an accomplice of the guillotine, the co-executor of acts which were decided by others.*¹⁶

After doing it once, half-consciously in panicked fear, the protagonist ate another death sentence again, now feeling the sweet taste of his own will. Being indirectly in the service of the Terror of the Revolution, through the combination of ironically shaped circumstances, this dormant man — being outside history, has been finally awoken. Soon the swallowing of death sentences became his daily activity and need. But, he also became aware of the responsibility of his choice. Whom to save? His own mind and decisions were tormented by fears and doubts. He was undergoing a series of involuntary transformations, until he became the righteous savior of many death row inmates, a hidden and unknown hero, whose head, finally, found its place under a guillotine.

Pekić's story is a story of power, a story of metaphorical opposition of so-called "small man" to a system of unscrupulous power during the Reign of Terror. Reconstructing the life and destiny of the Revolutionary Tribunal clerk, author develops a kind of genesis of this relentless power, thus shaping his own vision of the French Revolution and the individual in it.

However, the position of the protagonist Popier is not as simple as it seems at first glance. He was not an ordinary small man, he was a Tocquevillian screw in the mechanism of the bureaucratic machinery, inferior man intoxicated by equality, and a newly awakened sense of free will and personal choice. The complexity of the hero's motivation for saving death convicts is especially interesting, and as we have seen, the author leaves that question open.

It seems to us that the need of the hero to satisfy his personal will, the desire for dispensing justice, and the feeling of power that results from that, were a much stronger motivation than compassion

16 Ibidem.

for the convicts. Finally, freed and intoxicated by the experience of his own power to decide whether to save or not to save a life, he became dependent on it. In the continuation of the story, the author gradually reveals the egoistic and pathological back of Popier's mission, by entering the consciousness of the hero. The feeling of omnipotence that appears in him is a sign of the losing a sense of reality, and the need to constantly feel and feed it has become more important than the concrete people that should be saved from death.

The news of the imminent end of the regime of Terror did not make Popier happy, he was horrified by the possibility of losing death sentences for eating. Paradox is obvious. Instead of being made freer by his secret resistance, heroism and humanity, the hero actually succumbed to slavery in his own need to feel the power. In this mental state, Popier became careless in choosing the death sentence, and therefore was soon revealed. As in the case of eating of the first verdict, the author ironically shapes set of circumstances. The hero revealed himself by choosing to eat the verdict of one who did not want to be saved from the guillotine, because he believed that such death could provide him paradise. The meaning is clear, imposed salvation is also a form of repression.

With the development of the chronicle of Popier's mission, his reflection on his choice of judgments also grows. Genesis of universal transformation can be traced from the Popier's internal changes to the grotesque external ones. Physical change seems to be accompanied by a growing sense of power.

He forwent meals in order to be able to buy a small item of clothing that would distinguish him from the motley group of clerks and scribes around him. (...) But the biggest change was in his comportment. He got lost his stoop, by which a scribe could always be recognized in the corridors of the Tribunal. His myopic eyes, ruined by reading by candlelight, now had round metal-framed glasses and a cold sharpness of insight, which was so piercing that it left even the righteous helpless. Before, he had been withdrawn and reserved. And he re-

*mained so. But in a different way. If before his transformation he had been the taciturnity of someone who had nothing but his powerlessness to hide, now it was that of someone who did not want to show his power.*¹⁷

The fact that Popier's transformation manifested precisely in the Popier's physical similarity with the most significant figure of the French Revolution, Maximilian Robespierre, has a strong ironic meaning in the story. Robespierre's nickname "Incorruptible" was testifying of his invincible character and unscrupulousness. In the story, a historical fact became an ironic allusion to ideas whose ideologists sowed death, by advocating virtue. A small man who ate death begins to look like the most powerful man who sowed death, precisely because of the power related to those deaths, although these two powers were of completely different kind.

Synthesis of two dominant structural layers of the tale, the historical and the fictional one, served Pekić to reconstruct the drama of the French Revolution and to unveil the ruthless struggle for absolute power. It stems from the deviation of the original progressive ideology whose tenets were for the purpose of achieving full freedom and human rights. Popier's deviant attitude towards his humane endeavor, his loss of limitation and awareness of the primary importance of a particular man in it, can be interpreted as an ironic reference to one of the most problematic features of revolutionary rule. It erases all restrictions in choosing ways and means of realization of the achievement of revolutionary goals.

Pekić's artistic approach to the French Revolution created a parabola with anthropological meaning, whose purpose is to show atypical kind of power that arises from the man's free will, and as such, leads to resistance and rebellion, but often in a sort of tragic farce. That farce is perpetuated by the appearance of the double-fig-

17 Pekić, Borislav. "The Man Who Ate Death (5th Part)." Borislav Pekić. Accessed September 4, 2023. <http://www.borislavpekić.com/2006/06/man-who-ate-death-5th-part.html>

ure Robespierre – Popier. In the striking drama of the finale, the author will accompany the original Robespierre and his copy Popier to the guillotine.

By intertwining external circumstances and internal psychological motivations of the protagonist of the story, Pekić showed how the inability to give the right meaning, direction and control to the freedom easily turns into its opposite. Inability to handle freedom is one of the thought centers of the story, and it was precisely that problem with his compatriots that worried Tocqueville. Popier thus becomes a character-paradigm, the embodiment of Tocqueville's conception of the deviant form of individualism.

The whole interconnected process of democratization, centralization and bureaucratization in France is characterized by a kind of “inorganic individualism.”¹⁸ This specific kind of individualism, according to Tocqueville, arises from imbalances of equality and freedom. Although the concepts of freedom and equality were so conjoined in democratic doctrine to seem necessarily compatible, Tocqueville was one of the first political theorists who recognized the tension in their relations. According to him, the interplay between freedom and equality determines the character of democracy, that is, what democracy stands for and can become. He claimed that the viability of democracy requires equilibrium of freedom and equality, and he was aware that in democracies the passion for equality is stronger than the passion for freedom, so he was concerned with the ways that equality can limit political freedom.

You can satisfy the taste of men for equality, without giving them liberty. Often they must even sacrifice a part of the second in order fully to enjoy the first. Consequently, these two things are easily separable. The very fact that they are not intimately

18 Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Erik von. *Liberty or Equality: The Challenge of Our Time*. Mises Institute, 2014, p. 52. According to Leddihn, this inorganic individualism evokes the spectre of collectivism. “The French Revolution was the real and *conscious* overture to this age of collectivism, control and combined (horizontal and vertical, societal and governmental) pressure,” p. 67.

*united and that the one is infinitely more precious than the other would make it very easy and natural to neglect the second in order to run after the first.*¹⁹

In order to understand why democracy in France was harder to reconcile with freedom than democracy in America,²⁰ Tocqueville turned to the history of the French Revolution, and in 1856. published “The Ancient Regime and the Revolution”²¹ with intention “to point out the events, errors, and miscalculations that led these same Frenchmen to abandon their original goal, liberty, and narrow their desires to but a single wish: to become equal servants of the master of the world.”²²

The relationship between democracy and freedom becomes largely negative in France. “Government more powerful, and far more absolute than the one the Revolution overthrew, then seized and concentrated all power, suppressed all the liberties,” and “put useless imitations in their place.” This government “applied the name ‘popular sovereignty’ to the suffrage of voters who were unable to ed-

19 Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of de La Démocratie En Amérique*. Eds. Eduardo Nolla, and James T. Schleifer. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010, p. 878.

20 The complex conceptual relationship between equality and freedom has even led Tocqueville to controversy of the postulating institutional genealogy of individualism and equality. There are “three different and contradictory concepts of individualism and equality of conditions all uneasily cohabitating, without any indication as to how to reconcile them in a general theoretical framework. American equality of conditions, a strong leveling spirit of democracy and majoritarianism, tyranny of the public opinion and so forth, heralding what the future has in store for Europe (see: Jankovic, Ivan. “Das Tocqueville Problem: Individualism and Equality between Democracy in America and Ancient Regime,” *Perspectives on Political Science*, 45:2, 2016, p. 128). In France, equality of conditions and individualism were not developed as the outgrowth of social and economic modernization but rather as a sinister effect of government regimentation and centralization, while in England equality of conditions was a product of the absence of feudalism and the caste system.

21 Kahan, 2010, p. 61.

22 Tocqueville, 2011, p. 4.

ucate themselves, organize, or choose” and “it applied the term ‘free vote’ to the assent of silent or subjugated assemblies”, and deprived the nation of the most precious achievements of the revolution – “the ability to govern itself, of the principal guarantees of law, and of the freedom to think, speak, and write.”²³

In such a state of democracy, “the actual equalization and leveling took place in unison with individual self-isolation and separation and estrangement of some groups from the others.”²⁴ Although equality of social conditions, as the absence of any fixed social hierarchy, could unite members of different classes, it could lead to opposing political results – what Tocqueville called individualism.

Tocqueville’s use of this term is different from its contemporary connotation, and also it differs from egoism. “Individualism is a considered and peaceful sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to withdraw to the side with his family and his friends; so that, after thus creating a small society for his own use, he willingly abandons the large society to itself.”²⁵ According to him, it is usually at the beginning of democratic societies that citizens show themselves most disposed to separate themselves; “having reached independence only yesterday, are intoxicated with their new power, they conceive a presumptuous confidence in their strength, and not imagining that from then on they might need to ask for the help of their fellows, they have no difficulty showing that they think only of themselves.”²⁶

Tocqueville was deeply concerned about the connection between “seemingly contradictory pair” of political equality and despotism, “which are ‘two things [that] mutually and perniciously complete and assist each other.’”²⁷ Despotism, by its nature sees in

23 Ibidem.

24 Jankovic, p. 128.

25 Tocqueville, 2010, p. 882.

26 Tocqueville, 2010, p. 885.

27 Gençoğlu, Funda. “Why Alexis de Tocqueville is not a republican but a liberal,” *FLSF (Felsefe Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi)*, Autumn, issue: 26, 2018.

the isolation of people the most certain guarantee of its own duration and it ordinarily puts all its efforts into isolating them. As he explained, "equality places men side by side, without a common bond to hold them. Despotism raises barriers between them and separates them. It disposes them not to think about their fellows and makes indifference into a kind of public virtue. So, despotism, which is dangerous in all times, is to be particularly feared in democratic centuries."²⁸

That is the reason why liberty was particularly necessary in those times. "By occupying citizens with public affairs, it draws them out of themselves. By making them deal in common with their affairs, it makes them feel their reciprocal dependence."²⁹ Liberty, on the contrary, tends constantly to draw citizens closer together, showing them in a practical way the tight bond that unites them. The free institutions are therefore particularly necessary to those who are led by an instinct constantly to separate themselves from each other and to withdraw within the narrow limits of personal interest.

Tocqueville describes equality not only as equality of social condition, but also as a passion. Its legitimate form rouses desire in all human being to be strong and respected. Nevertheless, this passion tends to elevate little and weak to the rank of the great and strong, and to fuel desire in them to drag other down, to their level.³⁰ In Pekić's story, both negative consequences of the passion for equality act. That passion took Popier beyond the limits of the reality of his own powers and took him right under the guillotine; it also lowered his fellow citizens below every level of humanity.

In Pekić's story, Parisians accuse each other to the revolutionary government for insignificant things, they rejoice as they watch

pp. 364-365. Accessed September 4, 2023. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/612363>

28 Tocqueville, 2010, p. 889.

29 Tocqueville, 2010, p. 887.

30 Lom, Petr. *Alexis de Tocqueville: The Psychologist of Equality*, European University Institute, Fiesole Fi, 1999.

the public executions of former powerful people, collect as souvenirs pieces of clothing, hair and personal belongings of death row inmates, and women with braids in their hands follow public trials, screaming frantically for execution of convicts.

From the beginning of the tale, just as he wanted to follow Tocqueville's thesis that democracy is corrupted by indifference to freedom, the author emphasizes the extent to which Popier was indifferent to freedom. He had no opinions to speak of, he did not consider them worth voicing, even freedom of speech did not have any importance for him. He had no friends, not even people of like mind. The only relationship between Popier and other people shown in the story is the fear of his colleagues that his change and resemblance to Robespierre arouse in them.

The change could not go unnoticed. He may not have wanted to show it, but he had. He owned it and felt it. With all his being. With his dark blue jacket, pale blue wig, round glasses, and stiff, unapproachable manner, didn't Popier look more and more like the Incorruptible Being?

Yes, damn it, he really did!

I noticed this a long time ago and wondered how he dared.

He wouldn't, if he couldn't.

No, I wouldn't ...

But since he could ... Since he could, people have begun being afraid of him. Initially, except for his manner, which befitted neither his occupation nor his standing, nor Popier as they knew him, there was no real reason for such fear. But soon it became imperative to find one. And it lay in the general conviction that Popier was a secret agent of the Public Safety Committee.³¹

The author's commentary in which he ironically compares the

31 Pekić, Borislav. "The Man Who Ate Death (5th Part)." Borislav Pekić. Accessed September 4, 2023. <http://www.borislavpekić.com/2006/06/man-who-ate-death-5th-part.html>

revolutionary time and the time of the old regime, in the continuation of the story, further confirms our thesis about Pekić's artistic collusion with Tocqueville.

*Here too, revolutionary customs differed from the ways of the ancient régime. Secret police agents used to be despised and were to be avoided. Now, however, people were scrambling to be in his company. It was dangerous to avoid him, because it looked suspicious. Virtue had nothing to fear, Robespierre declaimed.*³²

According to Tocqueville, "yet while equality may allow for immediate identification and pity, 'a general compassion for all the human race', equality also drives human beings apart. For more than ever, it focuses the individual's attention on himself." Among the several reasons for this increased self-attention is a philosophical one.³³ As Tocqueville explains, it is philosophy's demand of the individual to use "his own judgment as the most apparent and accessible test for truth"³⁴ which rises skepticism and doubt. "In such times of skepticism, Tocqueville warns, 'men ignobly give up thinking at all' and may 'easily fall back into a complete and brutish indifference about the future.' Such a state, says Tocqueville, 'inevitably enervates the soul, and relaxing the springs of the will, prepares a people for bondage.'³⁵

The transformation of Popier's criteria for selecting a death row inmate to save from the guillotine has an ironic treatment in the story, which in a way resonates with Tocqueville's thesis of emphasizing the importance of personal judgment and disorienting skepticism, especially having in mind that Popier after all doubt decided for a state of inspiration. In the beginning, for the sake of impartiality, he randomly took death sentences that he would eat, and later, for the sake

32 Ibidem.

33 Lom, p. 17.

34 Lom, pp. 19-20.

35 Lom, p. 21.

of fairness, he left the choice to the dice. When he began to dream in nightmares those he didn't save, he realized that he had to take full responsibility for his choice, so he introduced the principle of choice based on facts about convicts, because "anyone who reaches for power must first believe in himself and in his own judgment." However, given that "no fair decisions could be made on the basis of unreliable and variable facts. Only he could find the answer and for that he had to let his own inspiration, his instinct guide him (...) Even Fouquier-Tinville raised charges on the basis of his own revolutionary instincts, not facts. Admittedly, the charges were mostly wrong and at the very least exaggerated, inappropriate to the nail, but the power of the Revolutionary Tribunal's State Prosecutor was of quite a different order than his own. It killed, whereas his restored."³⁶

The first death row inmate rescued by Popier was the poor spinner. She was convicted because of misinterpreting the homophony of the French words "king" and "spindle", more precisely, she declared in the presence of patriotic witnesses that what she missed most in her life was the spindle/king. In court, she defended herself by claiming that she had said not king, but a spindle. The court took the view that a spinner needed a king more than a spindle and condemned her to death.³⁷ She was declared a counter-revolutionary because of spindle, to which the guillotine resembled, and which Popier dreamed of in nightmares, after swallowing that first verdict and many times after that. Although he had never seen it in reality, he knew it looked like a spindle.

Thus, through its different functions in the story, and the metaphorical turning of the wheel of Terror, a connection is made to the complex symbolism of turning and spinning of the spindle. The story

36 Pekić, Borislav. "The Man Who Ate Death (5th Part)." Borislav Pekić. Accessed September 4, 2023. <http://www.borislavpekic.com/2006/06/man-who-ate-death-5th-part.html>

37 All the other accusations that sentenced people to death were also, like the first one, unfounded, unjust and absurd, creating a more concrete representation of paranoid society in which so-called revolutionary attention rules.

begins and ends with this powerful leitmotif. At the end of the tale and Popier's life, In front of the executioner, he recognized the same spinner he saved, and became sure that the guillotine does indeed resemble a spindle.

The term "spindle" can be meaningfully related with the etymology of the word "revolution", which was certainly the intention of the author. The word "revolution" comes from a late Latin term *revolutio* – "to turn around," which is a literal translation of the Greek term *anakuklesis* and a derivative of the classical Latin word *revolvere* – "roll back, revolve."³⁸ The old notion of revolution Tocqueville understood right as a cyclical change within a limited number of possibilities, and it is akin to the notion of revolution as a concrete, violent events. Thus, the entire, large model of political change presented in Tocqueville's main writings may be figuratively called a "Tocquevillian spiral."³⁹ Kuź uses the metaphor of a spiral "since with each turn the modern wheel of regimes approaches the 'soft despotism,' thus the scope of the regime change in each cycle becomes smaller and the administrative power increases. At the 'soft despotism' point the turns of the wheel of regimes stops and only a complete change of the political paradigm can reestablish the movement of history."⁴⁰

Tocqueville uses the word revolution in two meanings that are closely tied to his two notions of democracy.⁴¹ The first notion treats

38 See "Revolution (n.)." Online Etymology Dictionary. Accessed September 4, 2023. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/revolution>, and Kuź, Michał. *Alexis de Tocqueville's Theory of Democracy and Revolutions*, Lazarski University Press, Warsaw, 2016, p.80.

39 Ibidem.

40 Ibidem, p. 82.

41 "Democracy, as we have established, is for Tocqueville a complex term. The complexity is a result of the fact that democracy for Tocqueville combines the feature of a regime and those of a social and anthropological principle. For Tocqueville, democracy as a theory is the goal of a grand historical movement; a point this movement approaches but never reaches. Therefore, the notion of democracy only makes sense when it is tied with the notion of revolution. Indeed, given that modern descriptions of democracy define

a revolution as a slow, long lasting social process, the global democratic drive towards greater equality of conditions, while the second concept denotes the concrete, violent event that carries a political change. These smaller revolutions are for Tocqueville the “epiphenomena of larger processes; they are the way in which gradual, slowly developing changes are translated into the political present.”⁴²

At the ironically shaped end of the story, faced with imminent death, Popier felt neither fear nor anger with the poor spinner, the first who he had saved, and who had hit him with a stone because he looked too much like Robespierre. He did not notice a thing, “squinting through his round glasses as he watched the approach of the guillotine from the Place de la Révolution. He was right. It did look like a spindle.”⁴³

The way the story ends leaves the possibility of interpretation in the key of the Tocqueville cyclical change of political regimes. It remains unclear why the hero went to his death so peacefully. In our interpretation, he was calmed by the cognition that his dangerous and painful hunger for death sentences would finally end, hunger that was insatiable just like the restless passion for equality in Tocqueville’s vision. According to him, imagination of equality is an imagination that is both constantly fed and constantly unsatisfied; the more equal social conditions, the greater will be the longing for equality.⁴⁴ Staring at the guillotine that looked like a spindle to him, Popier could not realize something that remains out of his reach, which certainly transcends his death and the time in which the cycle of change has just begun, in the direction of achieving freedom and equality.

it as a stable state rather than a social process; we need to stress the importance of the notion of revolution in Tocqueville.” Kuž, p. 20.

42 Ibidem, p. 57.

43 Pekić, Borislav. “The Man Who Ate Death (6th Part).” Borislav Pekić. Accessed September 4, 2023. <http://www.borislavpekić.com/2006/06/man-who-ate-death-6th-part.html>

44 As Lom explains: “Tocqueville’s account of democratic equality is Hobbes’ dream come true: a world of restless desire after desire ending only in death,” pp. 24–25.

With an ironic inversion in the final point of the story, Pekić sends his protagonist to his death, as a final liberation from the burden of a life dedicated to liberating others and achieving personally understood justice and equality. Like Tocqueville, Pekić also saw how crucial the balance between freedom and equality would be for the character of future democratic societies.

Although critically minded, Tocqueville did not deny the value and importance of the French Revolution. With its appearance, people of the liberal spirit began to influence historical events with their teachings and works, something imagined in the theory of philosophers, a different form of order came to life, although he clearly saw all the negativity of the gap between theory and practice. Borislav Pekić made the great political narrative of that gap.

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