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 Beccaria¹

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.²

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." 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. A journalist and author of multi-volumed 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 of 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 his 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