

## Raser on Grison (2016)

Grison, Georges. *The Heads that Fell in Paris*. Translated and edited by Freeman G. Henry, Black Coat Press, 2016, pp. 274, ISBN 978-1-61227-5-1-7

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Georges Grison, *Le Figaro*'s reporter assigned to the "crime beat" between 1872 and 1882, believed in the efficacy of the death penalty: "...the death penalty is the only true means of protecting honest people against murderers. It is, in a word, indispensable" (259). It is perhaps for that reason that he reported the executions that took place in Paris and elsewhere during that decade, and that he collected them in *Souvenirs de la Place de la Roquette* in 1883. These *Souvenirs* have now been translated and adapted by Freeman Henry in *The Heads that Fell in Paris*, a volume that allows one to see execution by decapitation as the methodical application of judicial decisions.

It was his duty, Grison felt, to depict beheadings as regular, methodical procedures that brought justice to malefactors. His numerous accounts are thus very similar: crowds assemble outside the prison in the early hours of the morning when the executioner arrives with his van to assemble the guillotine; the work proceeds smoothly, but crowds become rowdy and women display an unseemly interest in the proceedings; the criminal is roused, generally having been sound asleep; he (occasionally, she) is offered a shot to drink and the consolation of prayer; (s)he is led outside while a priest carefully shields his/her eyes from the sight of the guillotine; (s)he is generally strong enough to walk to the guillotine without support; (s)he is placed on the *bascule*, head inserted in the *lunette*, and *voilà!*, the blade falls, the body rolls, and off go head, body, and van to Ivry.

These are not literary masterpieces, but they command interest nonetheless: the ritual of executions alternates with the variety of crimes that led to them, and the latter are remarkable for their cruelty and stupidity. Grison also offers a table of Heidenreich's and Roch's accomplishments, a *curriculum mortis*, as it were; the text and translation of a sonnet by Gaston Pérodeaud celebrating the guillotine; and a brief introduction tracing the history of executions from the Revolution up to his reports. Freeman Henry provides a short introduction placing Grison's accounts in the context of nineteenth-century French journalism, identifying the executioners as the minor celebrities that they were and the Place de la Roquette as the place to be in order to see executions.

What Grison's book does is give us a look at executions done as they should be done, that is, performed by a trained, experienced professional, witnessed by a crowd of enthusiastic supporters of the death penalty, endured by a regretful but understanding convict, and reported by a man who knows fully that this is a job—grim as it may be—that must be done. Within these suppositions one glimpses horror, but only as the bump behind a curtain that hides it from view. One gets almost-direct access to the collective id of a bygone era, one which one hoped had died, but still is to be found in France and elsewhere. For that reason, this book is a must-read, or at least, a must-read as much as one can stand.

Henry's translation adapts Grison's compilation, presenting a near-totality of the *Souvenirs*. Missing are drawings of the different blades used in the guillotine over its development, copies of the documents appointing the executioners, and a table from chapter thirty-three that lists dates of sentencing and dates of execution between 1800 and 1830. Here, Grison tries to undo the widespread "40 Days Misconception" so useful to Victor Hugo in his *Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné*. I would have preferred to see the original table because of its significance for Victor Hugo; others might not notice its absence. Occasionally, Henry adds a word or a phrase in the interest of "readability"; for articles where what is recounted outweighs how it was recounted such choices cannot be faulted. At one point, though, he omits Grison's mention that "M. Heidenreich était garçon," a choice that at the very least shows how much the connotations of that sentence have changed over the course of a century and a half.

Henry has also added more than eighty footnotes, largely to identify criminals to the contemporary reader, or to identify the locations of murders and executions. On occasion, he points out inaccuracies in the dates stated by Grison. At the end of the volume, he provides an appendix comprised of newspaper articles about the crimes and executions of Aimé Barré and Paul Liebez related in chapters twenty-three through twenty-five: their murder and dismemberment of an elderly milk vendor. Since Liebez claimed to have been influenced by Charles Darwin and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the press was fascinated by the crime, and several articles from New York and London are included, as well as a translation of the official report.

*The Heads that Fell in Paris* is a useful but gruesome work that reports the implementation of the death penalty when done in

the bloodiest way possible. The executions are reported with an emphasis on decency, that is, respect for procedure, recognition on the part of the criminal of irreparable harm done, recognition of the justice of the penalty, and admonitions on the part of the author that the crowds such displays attract should really be better behaved. It is hard to know whether the executions or their justifications are more troubling.

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