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*The Torturer* by Vladimir Volkoff (review)

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(Review)

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hope. His hope is a refusal to give up on life and time. Certainly, characters deny this conviction onstage (Gloucester's lament that we are like flies to the cruel gods), and the explosive indeterminacy of tragic art can indeed shock us with a vision of metaphysical horror. Still, tragic drama cannot be rigorously absolute in Steiner's sense because "there can be no tragedy without a sense of value, whether or not that value actually bears fruit. We could not call tragic the destruction of something we did not prize. If tragedy cuts deeper than pessimism, it is because its horror is laced with an enriched sense of human worth" (115). Furthermore, a minimal hope can be drawn from the very fact that tragic drama is narrated, for "as long as calamity can be given a voice, it ceases to be the final word" (122). This means that an "absolute" tragedy would have no words at all.

To some degree Eagleton turns Steiner into a scarecrow. He claims that for Steiner hope "is a kind of indignity, fit for social reformers rather than tragic heroes" (39). Yet Steiner's broader worldview cannot be conflated with that of "absolute tragedy." This is only one strand of his wider intellectual project. While Steiner is certainly a somber thinker, he sees life as a hybrid affair, and he has written with great power and insight elsewhere in his body of work about the remarkable human capacity for hope in the face of cataclysmic violence. In his 1989 masterwork *Real Presences*, for instance, Steiner has claimed, "there is no word less deconstructable" (232) than hope. Eagleton, too, is concerned not just with the stage but with history, with hope that has been sustained amidst the greatest of disasters. They share more in this regard than Eagleton acknowledges. Still, Eagleton is persuasive about the impossibility of "absolute tragedy" and about how tragic drama may help us to contemplate and honor, however imperfectly, the human capacity for fundamental hope. It is indeed a hope far removed from optimism, and it is one that our less than perfect world too often demands.

### Steven Knepper

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***The Torturer.*** By Vladimir Volkoff. trans. John Marson Dunaway. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-88146-564-8. Pp. 237. \$20.

Vladimir Volkoff (1932—2005) was a prolific writer in French. He was the son of White Russian émigrés and was educated at the University of Liège, according to information on the back of the translation. His last novel, entitled in French *Le Tortionnaire*, has been translated into English by John Dunaway, a retired professor of French at Mercer University. The story concerns the career of Lt. Robert Lavilhaud, a young intelligence officer serving in the French army during the civil war in Algeria in the 1960s. The novel may be in part biographical since Volkoff also served in a like capacity in his younger years. The novel deals with the actions and reactions of French military personnel in Algeria during the armed insurrection in that troubled country.

Professor Dunaway set himself a challenging task when he undertook to translate the original French novel into English. By and large, he has succeeded admirably, and this in spite of the extensive use of slang and highly colloquial language. Here is a good example of how a few lines of the original novel in French are translated into good English:

Lavilhaud trouvait choquant de bâfrer ainsi dans un pays où tout le monde ne devait pas manger à sa faim, mais cela ne gênait pas Jullien, qui avait une doctrine: "Il ne faut pas se laisser abattre. D'ailleurs rien ne se perd: le patron a des cochons qui terminent tout." (*Le Tortionnaire*, 13)

Here is Professor Dunaway's translation of the lines above:

Lavilhaud found it shocking to pig out this way in a country where everyone undoubtedly wasn't able to eat when hungry, but it didn't bother Jullien, whose doctrine was: "Don't get down on yourself. Besides, nothing's wasted. The owner has pigs that finish everything off. (*The Torturer*, 5)

It is obvious that Prof. Dunaway has found a real sympathy for this novel by Volkoff. And here, in this novel that possesses some real autobiographical elements, the translator gets into, as it were, the essence of the novel. One of the novel's main questions is the morality of the use of torture to gain information that could, in some instances, save the lives of innocent people: this same question is as important now as it was at the time in which the novel is set. In a conversation about torture with a subordinate, Lavilhaud says:

It's not doing someone harm that disgusts me, it's making him [the torture victim] do evil. If you were tortured, M. Gonarelle, and you denounced your buddies, so that they were tortured and denounced their buddies . . . would you be proud of yourself? (*The Torturer*, 83)

In other words, Volkoff seems to be saying, one act of evil begets another act of evil, and so on. Where does it all end? In summary, the question of the morality or immorality of torture is one of the main issues raised by this novel. In a real sense, the climactic chapter is the tenth. In this chapter, a prisoner, rightly suspected of transporting money from the FLN in France to a contact in Algeria, is pressured and finally tortured (by waterboarding) to make him give the necessary information. During this whole painful episode, Lavilhaud undergoes a transformation—from being some one who abhors torture to some one who uses it to gain information that will save the lives of French soldiers. On pages 204 and 205 appear these words:

Something had changed in the limpid eyes of Lavilhaud. Not only was he on the point of discarding the mask of understanding, but above all he was becoming another man. [204]

But suddenly there came spontaneously to his mouth a flow of filth he didn't realize he knew, while he shook the prisoner and banged his head against the wood. He felt himself foaming at the mouth and the sensation was not unpleasant to him. . . . He didn't ask himself what God might think of what he was doing. He just knew that he couldn't do anything else. [205]

These passages, written by Volkoff and translated into English by John Dunaway, are part of the testimony to the transformation that this experience is causing the protagonist to undergo. Practicing torture on a fellow human being—even one whose silence puts others' lives at risk—can have psychological effects on those who practice the torture. The French word *râtelier* that comes up more than once in this chapter is correctly translated as “rack.” But in the first full paragraph on page 200 in the English translation it is incorrectly given as “rake.” This is probably a typo.

All in all, John Dunaway has done an excellent job in translating the novel by Volkoff from French to English. The protagonist is a sympathetic young man whose misfortune it is to have to resort to violent means in order to obtain information that could potentially save French and Algerian lives. The tragedy undergone by Frenchmen in Algeria is a part of the larger tragedy of political power in the twentieth century. Because of John Dunaway's excellent translation of the novel into English, it is to be hoped that a worthwhile novel by Volkoff will be able to gain a wider audience.

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Ralph C. Wood, ed., *Tolkien among the Moderns*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-268-01973-0. Pp. 303. \$32.00.

An early trend in Tolkien scholarship concentrated on the medieval sources Tolkien drew on to construct Middle-earth. This was only logical, considering Tolkien himself was a medievalist at Oxford who established his scholarly reputation working on *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and a glossary of Middle English terms. Medievalist Tom Shippey, however, suggested in his provocative book, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2000), that while love of the medieval world and philology may have provided the primary motivation for Tolkien's writing of fiction, the Great War veteran was also tackling many themes—addiction, gender norms, the devastating effects of industrialization and war, the rhetoric of totalitarian regimes—explored by modernist authors. That Tolkien has been dismissed by literary critics like Germaine Greer as producing escapist fantasy ignores the fact, argued Shippey, that canonical authors of