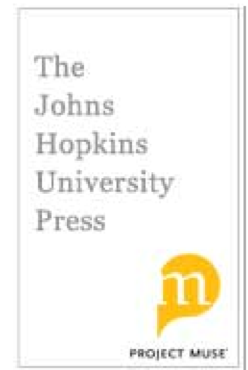
Charles of the Desert: A Life in Verse by William Woolfitt (review)



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Charles of the Desert: A Life in Verse. By William Woolfitt. Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2016. ISBN 978-1-61261764-0. Pp. xi +77. $20.

While we may think of books of poetry as collections of loosely connected lyrical effusions, poets have, in recent years, increasingly published tightly themed collections, sometimes even creating narrative out of a series of lyric poems. Many of the last decade's most read volumes of poetry have taken this unified approach – Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, for example, or Traci Brimhall's *Our Lady of the Ruins*. Of course, if one looks further back – into what, for contemporary American poetry, sometimes seems the distant past, such as the 80s and 90s – one finds poets like Andrew Hudgins and Dana Gioia attempting to bring extended narrative back into the mainstream of American verse. If one wished to be cynical, one might float the hypothesis that the ascension of the clearly delineated poetic "project" over the loose method of conglomeration by which most collections of poetry from mid-century through the 80s, at least, were organized is due to the ever increasing emphasis on the achievement of grants and fellowships in American poetry, it being eminently easier to craft a convincing grant application for a tightly conceived project than one for whatever poems come in whatever order they come. But the cynical explanation is incomplete.

The return to cohesion and narrative meets a real need for readers. Over thirty years ago, in a famous essay, "The Rhapsodic Fallacy," first appearing in *Salmagundi*, Mary Kinzie complained that contemporary poets assume that "intensity can only be achieved in spontaneous, fragmented utterance," an attitude that has led to the decline of poetic kinds such as the epistle, the allegory, and the epic ("The Rhapsodic Fallacy," 1984). Poets like William Woolfitt, however, are working to bring these modes of writing back to contemporary poetry. Woolfitt's *Charles of the Desert: A Life in Verse* at once engages with experimental, postmodern poetry – even "fragmented utterance" – yet also revives several traditional kinds of poetry: narrative, epic, epistle, and even hagiography.

A biography in verse is a difficult thing to pull off, particularly when one constructs it from a series of lyric poems, rather than, say, as a continuous blank verse narrative. Woolfitt is fortunate in his choice of subject. Like the lives of Augustine of Hippo, John Donne, and Shakespeare's Prince Hal, Charles de Foucauld's life fits the dramatic pattern of the prodigal son, which means it is a fairly simple matter to epitomize the subject at various stages in his journey through life: boy, dashing young profligate, Trappist novice, hermit, martyr. Charles de Foucauld was born in Strasbourg in 1858, and went to live with his grandfather after the death of his parents six years later. After spending his youth as a profligate, apostate, and officer in the army, he discovered his yearning for God while touring Morocco. Charles spent seven years as a Trappist monk, was ordained as a priest, and went to live among the Tauregs in the Sahara, where he was martyred in 1916. Woolfitt uses each lyric as a window on Charles in a particular moment, at a particular step. The effect is not so much like character development in a

conventional novel or biography as it is like a series of glimpses. Yet the overall sense of a cohesive narrative remains.

The earliest poems in the book, those focused on Charles' childhood, are extremely elliptical and fragmentary, as if we are witnessing a consciousness not yet coalescing itself from the data around it. The first poem, "My Father as Weather Formation," ends with a surreal flourish: "Man of fidgets // and glances, soon to appear in the clouds as beasts / for me to name, and fall on his woods like snow" (3). In the second poem, Charles describes "[his] Mother as Harp Seal, as Sacristan." The child's impressions of the world around him are intense but incoherent. He imagines the miscarriage for which his mother grieves: "like a clump / of snow from a shaken branch, he fell / from her belly." He describes the corpus on the crucifix as "the pale, poor eggshell man who hung / on the church wall, his weight webbing / cracks through the plaster" (4). Woolfitt adroitly satisfies the poetry reader's hunger for vivid image, but he does so without violating the realism of the child's voice, all in a poetics very much in tune with contemporary, postmodern emphases on the sliding signifier, the necessarily fragmentary nature of experience, and Wittgenstein's view of language.

As the boy grows, the poems become less allusive and indirect, more plainly coherent. The orphaned Charles goes to live with his grandfather, and in the scholarly old man's house the physical world begins to take distinct shape for the child: "We lived in a repository of Roman Coins, / pinned beetles, leather-bound books / that crumbled if touched," he says in "The House of Bones," drawing our attention to the curiosities of the house to highlight the child's growing awareness of his distinctness from the world around him (6). Soon Charles is sent to boarding school, a setting Woolfitt captures with great succinctness:

> All the boys sweat beneath scratchy coverlets,
> snug as dough in loaf pans, coverlets piled
> like stones on the chest of Saint Victor.
> Red-faced, I toss while I sleep, taste salt
> when I lick the back of my hand. (8)

Charles no longer speaks as a stream of impressions. He knows himself, and he knows the world around him as not himself, as often at odds with himself.

Later, as a young officer, Charles more fully embraces the sensual world, becoming a man both of and in that world. In "Gold Eater," he describes a youthful love affair in all its vivid worldliness:

> Violette rigs a beggar
> costume that I will don to sneak away from officer duties.
> We shutter the windows, stuff scarves under the door-crack
> to banish the coming day. We stagger, topple two chairs,
> our bodies prodigal and blind, my hand reading her face. (11)

The last detail, especially, hints toward a character that knows the world only as physical, body to body. The young Charles seems never in danger of Gnosticism, but he has become a materialist.

Soon, however, the spiritual world comes breaking into Charles' life. With the army in Algeria, he finds himself strangely envious of the Muslims, both those who are his enemies and those who serve his army, when they stop in the midst of battle and pray. He is attracted to their apparent repose – "Quiet as a spider when it births silk, / I wish that I, too, could rest on the earth" – but it seems to be the spiritual, rather than the physical, exhaustion of the war that has driven him to seek meaning beyond the immediate (12). Soon, he is sneaking into Morocco, ostensibly on a cartographic mission but really on a quest for the holy. Charles the sensualist encounters the holy in a very tangible way: "The Koran and the Torah fill my mouth; / my teeth trip over new verbs" (13). Given this oral experience of the divine, it is not surprising to see, a few poems later and back in France, Charles receiving the sacrament. "His torn body in my stomach, / his blood in my spit, I almost vomit; I almost sing," he says, appropriating the duality of body and voice as a metaphor for body and spirit.

Interestingly, after Charles' conversion, the poems begin to move back toward the elliptical, allusive, fragmentary poetics with which Woolfitt began the book. The world is dropping away from Charles, yet the impressions of itself which it leaves behind are vivid. Despite the Trappist novice's aims to "shed cravings, / peel away the encumbrances // of the body," he is still an embodied being. Here he is describing his free time: "[I] nurse my sore feet, dig my thumb / between the long bones and tendons, and remember that I am foul matter" (19). By the time he gets to Syria, however, he is "a man of parts, fractions, halves, / a copper weathercove that wavers, dips / in the smallest wind" (20). After this, the poems become more spare and meditative, often focusing on the suffering that Charles sees among the people of the desert. Woolfitt skillfully mirrors in the spare and fragmented poetics Charles' famous "Prayer of Abandonment."

The final poem of the collection, "Someone Knocks," is extremely elliptical in its depiction of de Foucauld's martyrdom. The spacing of words within the lines is extremely irregular, with large gaps between some of the words. It begins *in medias res*:

> and I fling open my door
> it isn't the man who brings my mail
> but men with guns my neighbors Haratin
> and Tuareg joined in a *fellagha rezzou*
> they wrench and tie my arms slam me against
> the wall ransack my little fort unbind
> and fling
> my Tuareg dictionary[.] (71)

In the poem's gaps and elisions we sense Charles finally separating from the world. He becomes as unbound as the Tuareg dictionary he was composing, a metaphor

made explicit in the final words of the poem: "my pages scatter in the wind" (71). By the time Charles is taken from the world, he has already left it.

Charles of the Desert: A Life in Verse shows that contemporary poetics can be used in the service of story-telling. In fact, it shows that a contemporary poet can contribute to one of the oldest story-telling traditions in the church: hagiography. Woolfitt's preface puts the poems in a devotional context, and the book concludes with a compact biography of the martyr. The poems are richly imagined, often detailing Charles' spiritual quest with startlingly vivid images, as when he says "I crucify the sinful flesh, as men drive / crows from the orchard with torches and stones" (48). A book that is so satisfying as story, as devotional aid, and as lyric poetry is a rare accomplishment.

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The Opacity of Narrative. By Peter Lamarque. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. ISBN 978-1-78348-017-3. Pp. xv + 213. $36.

During the last half-century, scholarly interest in how literature, especially narrative, can be a means of exploring fundamental human realities has steadily increased. Consider, for instance, the proliferation of hybridized literature programs—politics and literature, law and literature, and religion and literature, for instance—cropping up at colleges and universities. Additionally, within the last decade alone, dozens of scholarly publications have addressed questions concerned less with the nature of literature than with the way it achieves its desired end. Notable examples are James Wood's *How Fiction Works* (2008), John Sutherland's *How Literature Works* (2011), Joshua Landy's *How to Do Things with Fiction* (2012), and Terry Eagleton's *How to Read Literature* (2013). While these book-length studies could be considered broadly philosophical, their authors attempt to bring together the disciplines of philosophy and literature as literary critics. That is to say, these writers, by arguing from the side of literature, have attempted to make peace in the "ancient quarrel" between poetics and philosophy.

Philosophers of literature take the opposite tack. Their sub-discipline seeks to bridge the gap between the two, only now from the perspective of philosophy. Their different approach to the matter is important. Most serious readers of literature view imaginative works not as phenomena to be analyzed but, rather, as actualities to be experienced, even assuming that literature has the power to move us into an encounter with realities that could not be known otherwise. And all this by way of human artifice, mere letters on a page! Hence, lovers of literature can be deeply invested in imaginative works without ever feeling any great need to think about its nature or the distinctly human desire to discover reality through elaborate pretense. It is precisely the need to consider these issues that philosophers of literature do feel is important.