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*The Opacity of Narrative* by Peter Lamarque (review)

Stephen Barnes

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(Review)

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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.

### **Benjamin Myers**

*Oklahoma Baptist University, OK*

**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.

Although their sub-discipline has a long practical history, it has come into its own only in recent decades. Bringing their rigorous analytic mode to the study of imaginative works, these philosophers seek to develop ontologies of fiction, drama, and poetry, and to understand the finer elements that each genre contains. John Gibson, Eileen John, and Dominic McIver Lopes are a few of the leading scholars in the field, but none outshines Peter Lamarque, long-time Professor of Philosophy at the University of York, whose most recent book is *The Opacity of Narrative* (2014). In ten essays, this collection revisits and expands upon some of Lamarque's earlier writings, but it does so within the loose framework of the titular concept of narrative "opacity."

Before attempting to make sense of that unifying idea, however, it might be helpful to introduce the kinds of questions that philosophers of literature ask. One example will suffice: in Lamarque's earlier volume, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Blackwell, 2009), he explores the ontology of poetry in a chapter simply titled "Literature," analyzing the status of a lyric poem's being by contrasting it with that of sculpture or painting. While knowing viewers would never equate a copy of Michelangelo's *David* or Van Gogh's *Starry Night* with its original, regardless of the reproduction's quality, readers of a poem might struggle to locate its being with the same degree of certainty. Shakespeare's sonnets, for instance, would be considered no more real in their 1609 versions than in their contemporary anthologized forms. While the original manuscript holds special *historical* significance, the essence of a given poem would not be reducible to its first published version. Moreover, the poem's being also could not be reduced to the total number of its printings, for if those were destroyed, the poem could persist in human memory. Finally, some philosophers would go still further, arguing that the lyric's being is actually within the mind of the poet, existing there even prior to its first articulation. Lamarque maintains that this last possibility pushes the existence of a poem beyond the bounds of what could be considered the *literary*, but it is the kind of possible conclusion that philosophers of literature must take seriously, and that professional readers of literature might find enlightening.

In this latest collection, Lamarque hones in on the aforementioned idea of narrative opacity, a concept easily understood once defined. He writes, "The idea at its simplest is that the content of literary fictional narratives stands in a peculiarly intimate relation to the manner in which it is presented." He then goes on to acknowledge that this concise definition makes opacity "virtually a truism" (3). After all, no serious reader of literary narratives would maintain that form and content are easily disentangled. But this observation, that narrative modes of presentation constitute the very content of narrative, is not Lamarque's conclusion; instead, it serves as his jumping off point. In the volume's preface, he offers a helpful analysis of form and content's fundamental commingling: "[N]arrative opacity suggests that, in the literary context, form and content are better viewed as indivisible...in the sense that 'content' be thought of as *constituted* by the modes of its presentation" (x). Hence, readers should conclude that only by

attending to literary techniques and strategies—techniques and strategies that must be taken on their own terms—will they come to know a narrative’s distinctly literary content.

Of all the chapters in the collection, “Opacity, Fiction and Narratives of the Self” deserves special attention from the reader. This is for two reasons: first, the chapter comprehensively lays out the concept of opacity; second, it introduces one of the collection’s most provocative claims. Concerning the first, Lamarque, in order to elucidate the concept of narrative opacity, introduces a helpful comparison, likening differing notions of narrative to two imagined pieces of glass. Readers who believe narrative is an incidental medium through which meaning can be discovered are like those who view objects by looking through clear glass; hence, these readers hold to a concept of narrative “transparency,” seeking an ultimate discovery that lies beyond, or on the other side of, the text. The more easily readers move through the medium to its real “point,” the better. Lamarque challenges this understanding of narrative by offering a counter analog, that of an “opaque glass, painted, as it were, with figures seen not *through* it but *in* it” (3). Hence, rather than thinking of the medium as incidental, something that readers can ignore as they focus on a story’s ultimate significance, readers should attend carefully to a narrative’s literary form, viewing it as essential to their experience as readers. In doing so, they will discover what literature alone can disclose. Conversely, to ignore opacity, Lamarque contends, is to read for distinctly non-literary aims. Yet this manner of reading opaquely requires a degree of self-awareness, for opacity is not “a simple fact discovered about literary narratives” (12); that is to say, opacity is not an “intrinsic” quality “of a text but ultimately rest[s] on the interests brought to the text” (11–12). Lamarque goes on to argue that opacity is, in fact, “a demand imposed on [narratives] when a certain kind of interest is brought to them” by the reader (12).

Even more provocative is Lamarque’s subsequent claims concerning narratives of the self, or “life narratives.” Most Christian readers, following (wittingly or unwittingly) Saint Augustine, will take for granted the potential salutary effects of attending carefully to the contours of one’s life, an act of self-knowing not unlike the interpreting of a literary narrative. In his *Confessions*, Augustine models how one might “read” oneself, traveling the *via interior* in order to know the God who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Roughly one thousand years after Augustine’s time, the genre of the novel was born, a literary form that, according to Milan Kundera, allowed Europe to discover the self in an altogether new way. In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera, on the novel’s inception, declaims, “Within the monotony of the quotidian, dreams and daydreams take on importance. The lost infinity of the outside world is replaced by the infinity of the soul. The great illusion of the irreplaceable uniqueness of the individual—one of Europe’s finest illusions—blossoms forth” (8). Novelists, as well as readers, still work, then, in Augustine’s shadow, tracing the invisible yet crucial drama of one’s interiority, a perennial concern of narrative. Most readers will never step back to question the supposed merit of an imaginative exploration of the psyche; Lamarque, however, does just

this, referencing thinkers as varied as Daniel Dennett and Alasdair MacIntyre, to set up his own claims concerning life narratives, claims that challenge rather than affirm their presumed goodness.

In Galen Strawson, Lamarque finds an intellectual ally, admitting that he “shares much of Strawson’s scepticism [sic] about life narratives” and their ability to help one live ethically (24). Borrowing from Strawson, Lamarque identifies three “tendencies” of those who construct life narratives: (1) a “form-finding” tendency, (2) a “story-telling” tendency, and (3) a “revision” tendency (25). Of these three, the second alone is sufficient for narrativity; the third, however, is a real sticking point, for both Strawson and Lamarque have little interest in discovering a continuity in one’s life that allows for an integrated *self* to be known.

It is the rejecting of this revision tendency that Christian readers are likely to find especially problematic, for the impulse to “revise” (in some sense of the word) one’s life narrative is a fundamental concern for readers of faith. After all, revision of one’s life narrative—that is, any attempt to allow grace to alter its trajectory—is strikingly similar to the ongoing work of Christian conversion and sanctification. To the non-believer, guilt may be considered nothing more than a corrosive concept that plagues the psyche, and if such were the case, then the desire to be free from past iterations of the “self” would only make sense. But if guilt is the real consequence of real sin, then the ability to connect the past to the present, and to engage in something akin to ongoing revision of one’s life narrative, is a spiritual practice consistent with Christian faith.

Lamarque never explicitly links his concerns about life narratives with theological questions, but he comes close. He argues that one of the dangers of such stories is their potential for self-deception. He writes, “Not nearly enough is said about truth and falsity in narrative views of the self. If my life narrative constitutes my self, then it might seem that the narrative couldn’t be false about that self, any more than *Bleak House* could give a false picture of Lady Dedlock” (29). The concern is worth taking seriously. Lamarque continues:

Often people think of their life stories not as self-created but as written by someone else, perhaps God, or Fate, or some malignant agency.... If we make our lives into novels, we “aestheticise” [sic] them—think of them as works of art, with artful designs. But that is another form of distortion, promoting quite the wrong kinds of explanations, finding meanings in mere coincidence, finding teleology where there is mere cause and elevating genre over brute fact. (30)

Here Lamarque’s doubts are aimed at matters that go far beyond the mere analysis of literature, for it reveals a desire to rewrite out of existence any grand narrative that encompasses each individual life story and that offers the possibility of meaning beyond mere lived experience. In doing so, Lamarque’s notion of opacity comes full circle, discovering the necessary consequence of a philosophy of literature that privileges the experience of narrative rather than any truth that it might convey.

This is, of course, a retelling of a now all too familiar anti-metaphysical metaphysics—one that imagines humanity's happiness as liberation from all notions of the transcendent.

Christian readers of this volume should expect claims that are challenging, disquieting, and yet ultimately unpersuasive. If, however, readers are willing to take Lamarque's careful analysis of literature seriously, and with a grain of salt, then *The Opacity of Narrative* can raise questions that are more illuminating than their proffered answers—fundamental questions about the human longing for meaning and the role that narrative might play in that quest.

### Stephen Barnes

*University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, TX*

***The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Community, Affection, and Identity.*** By Joseph R. Wiebe. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017. ISBN 9781481303866. Pp. ix + 262. \$49.95.

Relatively few works of literary criticism have been published covering Wendell Berry's Port William fiction. Beyond the complexity of addressing a living author's still growing fictional world, Berry's essays and poetry lure many scholars away from exclusively examining his fiction. Some may also be reticent due to Berry's less-than-veiled, Twain-like threat in the opening of *Jayber Crow* to any who would seek the literary within his work. Regardless of why many remain hesitant to engage in extensive literary criticism of Berry's fiction, Joseph Wiebe has proven himself more than willing to do his fair share.

Nevertheless, Berry's thought and work has been receiving a growing amount of scholarly attention. Of these recent volumes, none have been as exclusively focused on Berry's fiction as Wiebe's *The Place of Imagination*. In *The Unforeseen Self in the Works of Wendell Berry* (2001), Janet Goodrich examined how Berry uniquely presents his life and thought in his variety of works. Kimberly K. Smith covered Berry's agrarian perspective in *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace* (2003). J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael R. Stevens's *Wendell Berry and the Cultivation of Life: A Reader's Guide* (2008) examined a wide swath of Berry's work and thought but from a distinctly Christian perspective. Mark T. Mitchel and Nathan Schlueter collected essays in *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry* (2011) that consider Berry's influence and impact upon conservative thinking. Most closely aligned with Wiebe's volume has to be Fritz Oehlschlaeger's *The Achievement of Wendell Berry*. However, while Oehlschlaeger devoted significant attention to Berry's fiction, his focus was admittedly broad. In *Wendell Berry and the Given Life* (2017), Ragan Sutterfield engaged some of the same topics as Wiebe, but Sutterfield's examination was much more on Berry the man, as