On Narrative Opacity And Literary Truth

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Brief Introduction

Peter Lamarque's *The Narrative of Opacity*[1] is a very stimulating book on the philosophy of literature. It not only presents extremely powerful theoretical tools to value any literary theory, but also provides a deep understanding of literary production and reception. In addition, it introduces interesting problems that should, in my opinion, be analysed with further philosophical tools in order to hold, and theoretically promote its central concept – *narrative opacity* – as well as rethink the concept of literary truth. This paper pursues an analysis and reconstruction of this lamarquean concept through other philosophers like Theodor W. Adorno, Gottlob Frege, Ernst H. Gombrich, Nelson Goodman and Galvano Della Volpe. In this line, first, the lamarquean concept of narrative opacity is introduced, and then, some of the arising challenges are addressed.

Narrative Opacity

According to Peter Lamarque, narrative opacity is constituted by two properties. On one hand, the contents of an opaque literary work are not dissociable from its own form since the identity of the narrative content is determined by the narrative itself. Let us say, then, that the connections among different narrative descriptions of events and characters define the narrative identity of these events and characters. On the other hand, narrative content is not indifferent to the attention, interest and the personal search of a specific reader. If the reader's interest aims to a panoramic view of some text, then, his or her attention is conducted by this interest and, therefore, his or her valuation of the text will not be founded in the modes of presentation of the narrative's contents. This brings to mind, to some extent, Ernst Gombrich's distinction in *Art and Illusion*[2] between the semantic-representational categories of *what* and *how*, and how the mimetic transformation of Ancient Greek art specifically happened, among other things, through the virtue and the plasticity of Homer's epic poetry[3]. Note the reader that the special attention of Homer's poetry on fine-grained descriptions of characters and situations is particularly different from other ancient modes of writing. Lamarque seems

to highlight these distinctions when he emphasises that an opaque reading demands us, as readers, to be highly attentive of the narrative descriptions of characters and events (modes of their presentation) as well as of the connections of these narrative descriptions.

Naturally, this approach to narrative opacity by Lamarque, as well as his claim that narrative opacity is a "prominent feature"[4] of literary fiction, present different types of problems. The author himself and some of his first critics have dealt with some of them, called *inherent* or *immanent problems* (to the plexus of statements of Lamarque's approach to opacity). In addition, other kinds of problems, which cannot be reduced to immanent ones, also arise and are likely to demand our attention. An instance of an immanent problem can be found in the fact that, according to Lamarque, opacity is a *feature* of literary texts but it is not actually an inherent quality of any literary text[5]. In fact, not only Eva-Maria Konrad has pointed this out[6], but also Lamarque himself has recognized it when asking whether there is an arbitrary relationship between the interest-relative character of narrative opacity and the fictional character of literature[7]. Nevertheless, I think that it is necessary to call into question one of the two conditions of narrative opacity in order to philosophically value the lamarquean approach to literature, which is an interest of the conditions of the modes of presentation of contents of a literary text. This perspective does not exactly constitute an immanent problem of his philosophy of literature but it is rather a problem of another kind.

According to Lamarque, the twofold condition of narrative opacity, supposes elucidating the notion of preservation or transmission of narrative contents[8]. If a translation from Lamarque's terms to Gombrich's ones would be done, it would be possible to say that if a reader's interest lies not on the *how* but on the *what* of a story, there will be a thematic identity or thematic substitutivity between two texts, having, in such a case, a principle or standard of textual transparency. In this way, the more general or vague the reader's approach to a text is, the more transparent the text will be, making it easier for a bookseller to recommend the book to a reader. On the other hand, the more specific or precise the reader's interest on the thematic content of a text is and, therefore, the more specific his or her interest on the features or modes of presentation is, the more difficult the task of satisfying the reader's demands will be. Then, according to Lamarque, opacity arises when the reader's fine-grained interests on a text are brought into play.

Narrative Opacity Revisited

Which are the standards or principles to plainly separate the demands of the literature reader from those of the philosophy reader or the geometry reader? Some of the examples introduced by Lamarque, which are not necessarily circumscribed to what it is usually referred to as *literary texts*, suggest asking ourselves such a question. Of course, these are not the most

commonly found examples in Lamarque's book since he specifically studies already accepted literary texts that, for their part, are deeply analysed; nevertheless, it is worth studying them since they do not exactly have a literary character, *i.e.*, a *prima facie*. In fact, in such cases, I allow myself saying *prima facie*, since opacity, as defined by Lamarque, can be applied to any possible text and not only to literary narratives. For instance, let us analyse the case of two accepted texts, such as two philosophical ones, which could be thematically transparent if both texts dealt with the *problem of meaning*. In such a case, where the reader could be searching for specific presentations of content (*e.g.* philosophical treatment of meaning), the fact that *On Sense and Denotation*, by Gottlob Frege[9], and *Word and Object,* by W. van O. Quine, analyse both the same big thematic unity - meaning - does not imply that both analysis are transparent; moreover, they are in fact opaque by the virtues of the epistemic attitude of the reader and his or her interest. Without a doubt, attention and interest on the modes of presentation of certain contents of the text seem to be a twofold necessary condition to a literary reading. Nevertheless, since opacity does not have the possibility to distinguish modes of reading on its own, the construction or production of a typology of presentation of contents has yet to be conquered. It is necessary to ask, then, what is a literary mode of presentation of contents? I think that Lamarque himself has introduced some tactful theoretic elements in his approach that would be desirable to unearth in order to respond such a question. There are two theoretic elements in *The Opacity of Narrative*, namely, the relationship between referential opacity and narrative opacity, and the relationship between paraphrasability and narrative transparency. Let us take our time to dwell on each one of them.

It can be helpful for our purposes to examine an interesting possible relationship between a Lamarque's postulation, formulated by W. van O. Quine in *Word and Object*, and a specific fragment of *Sense and Denotation*. This relationship can help us to clarify the first theoretic element. Let us, in a first place, analyse Frege's words:

> The fact that we concern ourselves at all about reference of a part of the sentence indicates that we generally recognize and expect a reference for the reference itself. The thought loses value for us as soon we recognize that the reference of one of its part is missing. We are therefore justified in not being satisfied with the sense of a sentence, and in inquiring also as to its reference. But now why do we want every proper name to have not only a sense, but also a reference? Why is the thought not enough for us? Because, and to the extent that we are concerned with its truth value. This is not always the case. In hearing an epic poem, for instance, apart from the euphony of the language we are interested only in the sense of the sentences and the images and feelings thereby aroused. The question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for an attitude of scientific investigation.

> Hence, it is a matter of no concern to us whether the name 'Odysseus',
> for instance, has reference, so long as we accept the poem as a work of
> art. It is the striving for truth that drives us always to advance from the
> sense to the reference[10].

Lamarque, for his part, states that "In fact, narrative opacity has little to
do with reference and little to do with extensionality"[11] and "I say it is only
'like' failure of extensionality because what matters is not preservation of
truth under substitution but preservation of the narrative itself."[12] The German
philosopher Frege offers a precious argument to Lamarque, sayings that if
the aim of literary reading is not the search of truth – in its theoretical sense
–, then, no philosopher of literature would be concerned with referentiality
and extensionality. Leaving behind this concern allows us to pay attention to
those text features that cannot be theoretically evaluated and are preserved
(or not) among different texts. This does not mean, however, that there is
nothing to worry about when it comes to the semantics of literature, being
necessary to think about certain semantic values that conduct any search of
truth. The central semantic value that Galvano Della Volpe has pointed out
in *The Semantic Key to Poetry*[13] is *univocality* or unity of sense, and, of course,
its opposite, *i.e.*, *equivocality*. According to Della Volpe, the search of literary
reading has some qualities of each one of these values yet, has nothing to do
with them. The literary plexus of narrative statements controls the story's
semantic behaviour, but this control has nothing to do with the scientific
value of unity of sense. Moreover, this does not entail that the sense or
meaning of some narrative terms of those plexus have a volatile semantic
behaviour like any term in the open context of everyday speech. The specific
literary quality of narratives is, however, its *polysemic* character. The opening
of literary meaning is not complete, but neither is it strictly ruled[14].

The particular semantic control of narratives introduced by Della Volpe
allows us to play with the ambiguity of language, having nothing to do with
unity of sense which is a semantic condition of the search for theoretic truth.
Coming back to Lamarque, the transparency of texts finds its foundation on
the fact that the unity of sense, which has obsessively been sought out by
philosophers of scientific language, demands a uniquely semantic behaviour
– which Della Volpe calls *omni-contextual* – of the term's senses. Then, the
pursuit of truth supposes omni-contextuality of the terms used by an agent.
For its part, a veritative-functional analysis also supposes, in any possible
context (that is again omni-contextuality), the identity of the intentional
content of a proffered concept. According to Lamarque, the narrative
paraphrases will be diverse depending on the virtue of the reader's search;
however, since the pursuit of truth can happen or not, it should be given
warranties to the preservation of semantic content, which should not happen,
as it turns out, without any concern about the modes of its presentation.
Nevertheless, if we analyse a particular case of literary interpretation, that is,

those of abstraction or recognition of literary writer's intentions, the notion of transparency as well as opacity gets stronger. Let us examine, then, the second theoretic element in *The Narrative of Opacity*, which is the connection between paraphrases and narrative transparency.

According to Lamarque, the paraphrasability is not an intrinsic quality of the text, but it is rather defined by the extent of precision or refinement that a reader demands on the text. For instance, any bookseller intending to write a review to sell a new edition of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* will be satisfied by isolating or abstracting the thematic progressions that make sense for understanding its *peripeteia* (Rodya's problems, his crime, his punishment, and finally his redemption). In this case, it could be said that, in order to sell a new edition of *Crime and Punishment*, it is enough to present the principal socio-political or thematic intentions of Dostoevsky. However, a literary interest of texts does not seem to be a mere vehicle to thematic or political ideas as they can be quite independent of the presentational mode in the text. This is one of the most challenging problems found by Theodor W. Adorno in the Heideggerian modes of reading Friederich Hölderlin's poetry[15] and in the traditional modes of reading Thomas Mann's novels. In fact, Theodor W. Adorno states that:

> The philological procedure, which imagines that it grasps securely the content of the work when it grasps its intention, passes judgement immanently on itself in that it tautologically extracts from artworks what was put into them earlier; the secondary literature on Thomas Mann is the most repellent example of this.[16]

Rethinking Frege's passage, literature not only demands a disinterest in truth, but also, in more general terms, demands leaving behind any claim to truth. In this context, the productive intention of an author may be, like in the Hölderlin's case, a primary theoretical concern with the alienation of the human being[17] and, in this sense, the use of a thematic-intentional translation seems to be the most suitable method to be employed. This kind of interpretation aims to or, at least, stimulates, a philosophical analysis of the claims of truth of such theoretic-existential ideas. However, it is no mean feat to agree with a reduction of literary search to claims of knowledge of any philosophical thesis. Neither the notion of narrative transparency nor the notion of narrative opacity is indifferent to these remarks. The interest in truth (truth or claims of truth or knowledge) drives, to a certain extent, an adjustment between the unity of sense and standards of theoretical rationality itself. On one hand, this interest in truth demands the local and global univocal sense of a text as a regulative ideal and, on the other hand, it demands the possibility of expressing this united or unique global sense through equivalent modes of presentations without semantic loss. This second consequence has also been sought out as another regulative ideal of language philosophers. If two modes of presentations have no effect on the semantic nature of certain

content, then the attention to such content can be left behind its modes of presentation by the interest-relative attention of the reader. When a Hölderlin's poem is themed, which is easy to do, the author's intentions, those aspects or characteristics that invite arduous paraphrasing, are lost in the process.

Final Remarks

I would like to end with some final remarks. Narrative transparency and opacity are both interest-relative to a reader's attention and interests as well as to those of the author. If there exists interest in truth, then there will be different kinds of modes of reading as well as different kinds of textual features exhibited (or not) as literary ones by the author. However, this does not imply exclusions in both modes of reading, since, as Lamarque says[18], the requirements of one kind of reading bring us to another kind of reading, especially in the case of literary reception. In this sense, literary reading subordinates the search of truth, but it does not leave behind the regard to truth. For instance, – although not exclusively sought after for the verification of the referent's existence, to analyse some historical information about Tsarist Russia and, in particular, some biographical aspects of the *real* Raskolnikov, is usually considered as a crucial part of any serious interpretation of *Crime and Punishment.* In particular, to pay attention to these historical aspects will allow us to know the epochal forms of life and beliefs in the novel, providing stimulating information for our imagination.

An example of an immanent problem that has been posited by Lamarque himself has been mentioned in the previous discussion. His solution recognizes that interest-relative opacity and literary fiction have a non-arbitrary relationship because literary production is mediated by its literary reading. As a painter is his first perceptual receptor, so the writer is his own first critical reader. In this sense, narrative opacity is also the disposition of a receptive reader, which entails a direct connection with those textual features that a writer is disposed to exhibit as literature. This emphasis on the twofold element of literature, as a focal reading and as exhibition, is held by Nelson Goodman in his argument of samples[19], which is a philosophical tool against aestheticism or formalism. According to Goodman, a sample exhibits features that wait listening, watching and reading ones as forms or as contents, since the conventional modes of a context can be thought by the members of productive practices as modes of presentation of narrative contents in certain extent of communitarian agreement.

The study of these features exhibited and interpreted by any writer or artist in general is at least necessary in order to account for the modes of presentation of narrative contents that any writer usually brings into play in his or her linguistic compositions. In short, this constitutes the history and theory of styles, and, as such, gives us some hints to project literature further

from the traditional debate between formalism and realism. Lamarque himself has rejected the idea of reducing his aesthetic perspective to these two sides of such an old debate[20]. Nevertheless, his approach to literature can be reinforced by reinterpreting his metaphorical distinction between opacity and transparency. The perfect or complete transparency turns, in realist's terms, every literary work into a specular image of primarily known reality. The opposed idea, that is, a total eclipse of the world by the narrative texts, adequately grasps, on the other hand, the *heterocosmic* character of literature that the formalist position has traditionally held. Here, *heterocosmic* means, as pointed out by M. H. Abrams[21], the divergent standards, materials and methods between, in this case, the literary language and everyday speech in the real world.

In this double framework, the opacity understood as a translucent glass preserves the idea of a connection between literary language and the social world (or the nonfigurative language that describes this world) and, in turn, by virtue of its inherent opacity, this translucent glass preserves the idea of a specific connection between both elements. This specific connection allows the separation of the features that connect literary language to our social world, and demands a certain kind of interest in truth, and the features that deeply transform the world that can be seen on the surface of this glass. Finally, such connection is not the only determination of a literary truth, conducting us to another big determination. In particular, it constitutes one more determination of literary truth, the depth of the transformation of the experiential levels that bring beliefs, which are the mundane stuffs of literature, through the transformation of inherited literary materials, methods, tools, etc. Then, literary truth should also deal with the power employed by literary works to opaque our images on the inherited glass surface that used to be opaque, but have become transparent.

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Notes

[1] Lamarque, 2014.
[2] Gombrich, 1984
[3] Gombrich, 1984, p. 103.
[4] Lamarque, 2014, p. 3.
[5] Lamarque, 2014, pp. 11-12.

[6] Konrad, 2015, p. 1326.

[7] Lamarque, 2014, p. 13

[8] Lamarque, 2014, p. 6.

[9] Frege, 1960.

[10] Frege, 1960, p. 63.

[11] Lamarque, 2014, p. 5.

[12] Lamarque, 2014, p. 6.

[13] Della Volpe, 1978.

[14] Della Volpe, 1978, p. 132.

[15] Adorno, 1992, p. 114.

[16] Adorno, 2002, p. 150.

[17] For example, it can be possible to read through this key 'Hälfte des Lebens'. See Satner, 1985, p. 170.

[18] Lamarque, 2014, p. 14.

[19] Goodman, 1988, pp. 63-64.

[20] According to Lamarque, "…you can hold this non-instrumental uselessness view without that commitment, and retain the idea of art for art's sake without formalism". Bradley, 2013, p. 12.

[21] Abrams, 1991, p. 169.

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