

Peter Lamarque

Filippo Contesi

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Peter Lamarque (b. 1948)

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Peter Vaudreuil Lamarque is one of the most prominent members of the golden generation of analytic aestheticians born immediately after World War II. If, to follow Archilochus via Isaiah Berlin (via Peter Kivy), “a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog one important thing”, Lamarque is perhaps the biggest hedgehog of his generation. Lamarque’s “important thing” is not a single idea but, as he would put it, the practice that we call ‘literature’. His distinctive achievement has been to integrate a number of different ideas into a systematic philosophical account of literature, which also sheds light on art more generally.

Lamarque’s philosophy is characterized in part by a defence of traditional views of literature such as its humanistic vocation, the non-instrumentality, indeed (following Oscar Wilde) the “uselessness” of its value, and the unity between its form and its content. At a time when aesthetics was beginning to break free as an independent subdiscipline of analytic philosophy, Lamarque’s defence was informed by some of the tools previously sharpened in those areas of analytic philosophy—philosophy of language and metaphysics, especially—that had started to develop earlier than aesthetics.

1. Emotions and Fiction

After graduating with a BA in English and Philosophy, Lamarque went on to complete a BPhil in Philosophy at Oxford. There, he specialized in the philosophy of language under the supervision of L. Jonathan Cohen. The work that began to establish Lamarque’s reputation was his 1981 article “How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?”. In this article, Lamarque developed what later became known as the “thought theory” solution to the paradox of fiction.

A longstanding issue in art appreciation, the paradox of fiction is the question as to why fictional stories and images can elicit emotions in the absence of belief in those stories and images. The question had been hinted at since at least Plato, and then by Augustine, Coleridge and others. However, it became a topic of intense discussion after Colin Radford tabled a version of it in a 1975 article. In those years,

interest in fiction in analytic philosophy was starting to rise to prominence, partly as an under-explored topic of an otherwise more mature interest in language. Especially influential in this period were John Searle's foray into the topic, which appeared the same year as Radford's article, as well as Kendall Walton's introduction (from the early 1970s onwards) of a theory of fiction that appealed to the concept of *make-believe*.

A building block of Walton's theory is his solution to the paradox of fiction (Walton 1990, 195 ff.). On this solution, an art appreciator's affective reactions to fictional events are not instances of genuine, garden-variety emotions. Instead, they are states that arise from sophisticated games of make-believe that appreciators play with the fictional work; and they only resemble those garden-variety emotions in some of their phenomenological and physiological presentation. Walton dubs these states 'quasi-emotions'.

In his 1981 article, Lamarque challenges the existence and theoretical usefulness of such quasi-emotions, as well as Walton's sceptical conclusion that it is only make-believe, not a matter of fact, that appreciators experience the actual, garden-variety emotions themselves. Lamarque proposes instead to take our affective reactions to fiction at face value, i.e. as garden-variety emotions directed at thought-contents. On this thought theory, an audience, say when reading Tolstoy's eponymous novel, can experience real pity for the fate of Anna Karenina. This pity is caused by imagining, or entertaining the thought (or "thought-cluster") of, Anna's pitiful circumstances as Tolstoy describes them.

From what Lamarque calls the perspective that is "internal" to a reader's imaginative project, this content includes a particular human being called 'Anna' and the particular predicament that Tolstoy describes in his pages. From this internal perspective, then, it can be said that the reader pities Anna. At the same time, Lamarque adds, a reader does not, literally speaking, pity Anna Karenina. This is so since, from the "external" perspective, the reader does not commit to the existence of any individual called 'Anna Karenina', who has all the other properties that Tolstoy describes the fictional character of Anna Karenina as having. The reader's emotions arise from reflecting on those properties.

The possibility of adopting both internal and external perspectives, Lamarque suggests, is behind the importance that philosophers from Aristotle to Iris Murdoch have seen in literature's capacity to combine the universal and the particular.

By seeing (through imagination) the lives of fictional characters finely drawn in all particularities by an artist, we are offered an opportunity to reflect more universally and objectively on comparable matters in the real world. Imaginatively we bring to mind unique individuals; intellectually we recognize the presentation of universals. So it is with our emotional responses to fiction, which, from the twin perspectives, are directed both to the details of imagined individual lives and to thoughts of an intrinsically general nature which reach beyond imaginary worlds back into the real world. (Lamarque 1996, 130)

Although he defends the reality, even rationality, of our emotional responses to fiction, elsewhere Lamarque also expresses scepticism about the centrality to literary value (viz. to the value of works of literature as art) of the elicitation of emotions in readers. He argues against the view that having affective responses to works of literary fiction plays a central role in art appreciation. In this respect, he appeals to certain modern practices of critical evaluation of literary works. He contends that the literary critic's "standard concern with emotions is less with those aroused by a work than with those expressed by, or illustrated in, the work" (Lamarque 2000, 148). In other words, the central literary value of affects to literature lies in the way they are expressed, described or explored, independently of whether or how readers actually experience them when reading.

Lamarque's views on these matters are influenced by Modernist criticism's reaction to the Romantic way of understanding the value of art (and to other critical practices such as those appealing to psychoanalysis). His views draw on some of the criticisms against the Romantic conception of art developed in the late 1940s by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. In their 1949 paper denouncing "The Affective Fallacy", Wimsatt and Beardsley famously instruct the critic to "talk not of tears, prickles,

or other physiological symptoms, of feeling angry, joyful, hot, cold, or intense, or of vaguer states of emotional disturbance, but of shades of distinction and relation between objects of emotion” (47). In line with Wimsatt and Beardsley, Lamarque’s scepticism about the role of actual affect elicitation in literature also extends to the critical appropriateness of seeing in the literary work the expression of its author’s own emotions. The venerable target here is again Romanticism, with its double emphasis on emotions and the expression of the artist (though see Lamarque 2009b, Ch. 3, for his reservations about Wimsatt and Beardsley’s anti-intentionalism in criticism).

What Lamarque sees in these Modernist critiques is especially the autonomy of literary criticism from the influence of psychology and the cognitive sciences. On Lamarque’s view, literature as an artistic practice is concerned with the articulation and understanding of characters and artistic personae, rather than of (imaginary) people and (actual) artists. In literary criticism, it “is rhetoric, not psychology, being judged” (Lamarque 2014, 194).

2. Value and Literature

To understand what a literary work is, Lamarque emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the work and the object (Lamarque 2010). The classic instance of this distinction comes from a different art form: sculpture. Is the artistic masterpiece that is Giuseppe Sammartino’s *Veiled Christ* (1753) different from the marble it is made of? According to an influential tradition that Lamarque continues, the *Veiled Christ* is ontologically distinct, and a different kind of entity, from the marble it is made of. The latter is an object with a certain shape, size, consistence etc. The former is instead a work of art which, in addition to the material properties it shares with the object, also possesses a number of other properties. Among these are its having being authored by Sammartino, in Naples, with the intention of representing Jesus Christ immediately after his death and covered with a thin veil, under commission from the Prince of Sansevero for his Chapel etc. Evaluation of the *Veiled Christ* as a work of art requires attending to the work’s intentional and relational properties, not merely to those possessed by the material object itself.

Such a distinction is not exclusive to material objects and can be made across art forms. While in most literary cases, the relevant object may be more plausibly characterized as, say, an ordered set of words, there is still an important distinction to be made between it and the literary work that is (partly) constituted by that ordered set of words. In addition to an ordered set of words, the work will also have an author, with a certain intention, belong to a genre, draw on cultural and literary traditions etc. Crucial among these additional properties that the literary work has, continues Lamarque, is its being historically and culturally inscribed in the particular social practice of writing and reading works of literature. This practice constrains, to some extent, the literary activities in which both authors and readers can engage. In particular, it provides constraints on what counts as the intrinsic value of the work, or its value as a work of literature (or “as art”, or “for its own sake”).

The literary value of a work is, on this view, grounded in the largely autonomous practice of literature, and as such distinct from other, instrumental values. Among these is, as we have already seen, the value of eliciting emotions in readers. Other significant values that, according to Lamarque, do not contribute to literary value are, for instance, the moral or political values that the work advocates for or embodies, as well as the truth of its contents.

Indeed, Lamarque is especially well-known for consistently opposing the relevance of truth to literary appreciation (starting from *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, a book he co-authored with the literary scholar Stein Haugom Olsen). As Lamarque and Olsen famously put it:

the concept of truth has no central or ineliminable role in critical practice. (Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 1)

On their “no-truth theory” of literary value, the value of literature as literature does not depend on any truth conveyed by literary works. While some readers may sometimes learn truths from works of literature or fiction, such learning contributes in no significant way to the works’ literary value properly so-called. The driving thought behind the no-truth theory is again a desire to circumscribe the autonomy of literary

value. While works of history, philosophy and other academic disciplines are primarily valuable insofar as they expound truths, literature's own distinctive value resides elsewhere. Moreover, understanding the sentences contained in literary works does not require readers to ascribe truth values to them. Neither are truth values needed to find value in entertaining the thought-clusters suggested by a literary work. What is needed is only that such thought-clusters are of interest to literary readers.

This is Lamarque's version of a humanistic conception of literature, viz. as a practice which is valuable insofar as it presents or develops themes of human interest or concern. On this (autonomous and humanistic) conception of literary value, the work of literature must be evaluated as literature, or from what Lamarque calls "the literary point of view":

the literary point of view essentially involves an expectation of value [...]; that, for example, the interplay of subject matter and form has a reasonably high degree of subtlety and complexity; and above all that the work, under a process of literary interpretation, can be shown to develop *themes* of more or less general (if not universal) human interest. (Lamarque 1996, 200)

In using the "point of view" metaphor, Lamarque means to suggest, among other things, that such "literariness" is a way to attend to a text, rather than an intrinsic feature of that text. These considerations ultimately bring Lamarque to endorse a version of the view that art and literature are, in themselves and as such, "useless". Their value lies beyond the merely utilitarian. Although he aims to avoid the aestheticist and formalist extremes that such a view can take, Lamarque is beholden to a view of literature as valuable for its own sake.

Evaluation of a work from the literary point of view requires of a reader that they consider the content of the work and the form in which it is presented as inextricably linked. This view, variously referred to as "form/content unity" (or identity, inseparability or indivisibility; or indeed through Lamarque's related concept of *opacity*), was defended by, among others, the Oxford literary scholar A.C. Bradley at the turn of the 20th century. Although the unity of form and content is more obviously appealing

in the case of poetry, it is, according to Lamarque, true of literary prose as well. As defended by Lamarque, the unity of form and content is again not an intrinsic feature of a text. Neither is it best characterized as the impossibility of adequately paraphrasing the same content with different words. For sometimes such paraphrases are possible, and indeed in certain contexts permissible (for instance, in some student literary textbooks). By contrast, the unity of form and content is the requirement (the “demand”, as Lamarque puts it, arising from the practice) that the form and content of a work, when this is evaluated from the literary point of view, be evaluated as a whole (Lamarque 2009a).

3. Art and Time

Although Lamarque’s philosophical reflections have often tended to focus on literature, his intention is often to make, through a detailed look at literary cases, general claims about art. Indeed, he is wary of the risks of an excessive “disintegration of aesthetics” into distinct subdisciplines, which may lose track of the fundamental questions of aesthetics concerning value and experience (Lamarque 2020, 50–66). In a number of more recent works, however, Lamarque focuses more explicitly on non-literary and non-textual cases.

One such case is that of a politically motivated painting such as Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (1793). At least on the face of it, the case of politically charged art is in some tension with Lamarque’s contention that art be considered as valuable for its own sake. David’s masterpiece was so politically charged that it would not be much of a stretch to consider it as a propaganda piece. David was a personal friend and political ally of Marat’s, and the painting was commissioned by their fellow Jacobins in the heated moments immediately following Marat’s assassination. The compassionate and austere depiction of its subject has clear religious resonances, and its author already had a familiarity with historical, celebratory painting.

However, Lamarque argues, *The Death of Marat* grew to become a timeless artistic masterpiece as its original, visceral political motivations became less salient (Lamarque 2020, 17–30). After a brief initial period of politically motivated celebration, David’s painting plunges into obscurity, hidden in

David's private studio. It resurfaces to acclaim in a very different period both politically and artistically, under the influence of Baudelaire's 1846 glowing endorsement. The reasons behind its somewhat late critical success, Lamarque points out, are to a large extent a consequence of the sliding into the background of its once politically inspired passions. The depotentiation of its political charge left way for the stylistic, as well as symbolical and religious merits of the painting to come to the fore, and made it surge to the high artistic value that we now commonly recognize in it.

A similar concern with the change over time of the value of artworks is expressed by Lamarque in his discussion of the Paleolithic cave paintings at Lascaux and Chauvet (Lamarque 2020, 31–49). The practices in the context of which such paintings were produced are lost to us moderns, and so then is our capacity to evaluate them as the works they were intended as. Nonetheless, Lamarque suggests, the paintings still appear to us to be, to some extent, apt objects of aesthetic appreciation. Similarly concerned with time are also Lamarque's reflections on the appropriateness of different practices of conservation and restoration of damaged artworks (Lamarque 2016).

About aesthetic appreciation, Lamarque endorses a (moderate) form of aesthetic empiricism, according to which the aesthetic value of a work of art is essentially related to the way in which the work is experienced (Lamarque 2010, 122–138). Lamarque defends the importance of such a claim against contemporary attacks. First, he stresses that aesthetic empiricism is a thesis about aesthetic, as opposed to artistic, appreciation. He further concedes that the aesthetic value of a work of art depends on a number of historical, contextual and other factors, viz. factors that are not detectable on an immediate, uninformed experience of the work. Nevertheless, he maintains that awareness of such factors on the part of an appreciator is capable of modifying their experience in a way that does not threaten (his form of) aesthetic empiricism.¹

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