

BOOK REVIEW

Raymond Barfield. *The Seventh Sentence*. Spuyten Duyvil, 2023. Pp. 296.

Dustin Peone¹

For those unfamiliar with his work, Raymond Barfield is a modern polymath, a modern Rabelais: physician, philosopher, and poet. He has written scholarly books on the practice of medicine, the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, Pascal, and the poetic imagination. *The Seventh Sentence* is his second novel. At one time, it might have been called a “novel of ideas” or a “philosophical novel,” but both terms are inadequate. This is a novel about philosophy and, at the same time, a work of philosophy in literary form.

The plot of *The Seventh Sentence* unfolds across seven chapters structured on the trellis of the seven propositions of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The novel’s protagonist, Simeon Saint-Simone, is a 389-pound, middle-aged, perennial ABD in philosophy who is perfectly content to pass his existence in the sublime world of contemplation. *Theoria* has completely vanquished *praxis* in his world. For 292 pages, he does not leave the tilt-table in his house while life goes on outside his windows. Saint-Simone is almost entirely cut off from human contact, except through *The Jerry Springer Show* and the discarded objects he and his faithful assistant, Jerome the Cuban, collect. These objects—humanity’s refuse, “the poem of our time” (A. R. Ammons, “Garbage,” cited in the novel’s epigraph)—are carefully assembled in the yard to construct a “memory garden” modeled on the *teatro della memoria* of the “divine” Giulio Camillo. Walking through this garden, the spectator might apprehend the essence of the human world and attain a divine insight into the whole, the Absolute.

Is Saint-Simone successful? “One moment his Garden of Memory, with the artifacts of barbarism embedded within its boundaries, seemed to reveal an as-yet unspeakable truth about the world.” Yet the next moment, “contingency bared its teeth, and his collection looked more than ever like junk” (60). Wittgenstein is another of Saint-Simone’s favorite philosophers. While he identifies with Camillo, he embraces Wittgenstein as the Other: thin and emaciated, logically rigorous, and austere. The Camillo–Wittgenstein opposition establishes an important dialectic throughout the play of Saint-Simone’s ideas. “Failure is at the heart of philosophy,” Wittgenstein

¹ Dustin Peone, Mercer University, USA; peone_dk@mercer.edu

says somberly, and Camillo answers jovially: “Better that the mystery of the world be left as a question than killed with a theory. But once you know that you see that we must try anyway” (255–56).

The novel is clearly satirical, but what is being satirized? Philosophy itself is put to the test—more particularly, “the Philosopher”: we strange beasts who chatter away in the cubicles of our spiritual zoo and believe ourselves to be utterly world-historical. I include myself.