

Owen Barfield and the Barfield School of Sunbridge College

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Owen Barfield (1898-1997) was a British philosopher, essayist and poet, scholar of Romanticism and most particularly a deep student of Anthroposophy. It was obvious to Robert McDermott and Arthur Zajonc when they were deciding on a name for the anthroposophical graduate school they were founding that it should be named in honor of Owen Barfield. The Barfield School, now part of Sunbridge College, continues to view Owen Barfield and his works as an important and inspiring model for its commitment to imaginative thinking.

Owen Barfield was the quintessential pipe-smoking, tea-sipping, English man of letters. He was an unfailingly kind gentleman; he was learned, insightful, and amazingly modest. He and his wife Maud adopted three children. Barfield was the closest friend and executor of the estate of C. S. Lewis, and with Lewis, the close friend of J. R. R. Tolkien and Charles Williams, four friends well-known as the Oxford Christians and as the Inklings. From 1929 until 1959 he practiced law in his father's law firm; he described the tension between working as a lawyer and his scholarly pursuits in his book *This Ever Diverse Pair* (1950).

From age 23 his life and thought were defined by his commitment to Anthroposophy, which he pursued in its own right and equally as a bridge to the wider world of scholarship,

intellectual inquiry, and the arts. At age 28, in 1926, he published his first book, *History in English Words*, a masterful analysis of the way that words at one time may hold meanings, both literal and metaphorical, and at a later time gradually lose some of those meanings, particularly the inner ones, in favor of surface meanings. In *Poetic Diction* (1928) Barfield offered a hypothesis on the distinctive character of the poetic, namely, a “felt change of consciousness,” a distinct wakefulness that serves as a preparation for the kind of extraordinary perception at the core of Anthroposophy.

In Barfield's writings one finds a deep understanding of the evolution of consciousness and a penetrating analysis of thinking—past and present—as manifested in literature, language, science, religion, and society. Barfield

read, thought, and wrote on a wide range of topics, and particularly on the nature of poetry and on language as a manifestation of the evolution of consciousness. His major work, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (1957), provides an especially elegant and forcefully argued case for the evolution of consciousness as a process that can be summarized by three important terms: Original participation, which refers to the ancient primal or mythic consciousness by which humans were able to perceive the spiritual world directly; loss of participation which refers to the process over many millennia, and accelerated during the last three centuries of the modern West, such that the ability to perceive the spiritual world has become more difficult and more rare; final participation, which refers to

the restoration of immediate spiritual perception by a thinking which is simultaneously an act of will and an act of love. Final participation, made possible by the Mystery of Golgotha and the return of Christ in the etheric or subtle body of Earth, calls for the joining of each individual 'I' (each Logos-being) with the spiritual world on Earth and beyond. So conceived, final participation is the defining task of the present age and, one hopes, the next step in the evolution of human consciousness.

In his *Worlds Apart* (1963), Barfield explored in dialogue form the worldview and way of thinking characteristic of Anthroposophy in relation to positivism, psychoanalysis, linguistic analysis, Darwinian biology, and conservative Christian theology. *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* (1977) is a collection of essays on imagination, science, language, participation, and the Incarnation. *History, Guilt, and Habit* (1977) consists of three delightful and easily understood lectures on the evolution of consciousness. Owen Barfield's thinking and writings are blessed by a style that is consistently fluent yet precise, well argued yet poetic, profound yet accessible.

Shakespeare, Goethe, and Coleridge were deep influences on Barfield, and the entire western canon, including the Greek and Roman classics, Christian theology, science and art, and the whole of English literature was alive in his original writings and conversation. His profound understanding of Coleridge is evident in his important study, *What Coleridge Thought* (1971). Decisively influenced by the work of Rudolf Steiner, Barfield wrote for a wide intellectual public and

engaged diverse issues from a lucid and original spiritual perspective. In each of his books Barfield acknowledged his lifelong debt to the ideas, ideals, and the spiritual practices bequeathed by Rudolf Steiner. Anyone who reads Steiner before reading Barfield immediately recognizes Steiner's pervasive influence on Barfield's writings, but those who come to Barfield first discover a thinker entirely comfortable in his scholarship and original thinking. Barfield's writings provide an especially effective defense of Steiner's worldview and specific insights, and his entire life and work provide an unusually convincing exhibit in support of the effectiveness of anthroposophical practice.

At the conclusion of *Unancestral Voice* (1965), his own favorite of his dozen books, Barfield presents an imagined conversation between an esoteric master (named Meggid, as in Magi) and a character named Burgeon, a partially autobiographical anthroposophist. The Master, who subsequently identifies herself as Daimon and as Sophia among other manifestations of the divine intelligence, explains to Burgeon that most people have only memory or ordinary thoughts, the kind that just well up automatically, but by intuition it is possible to think thoughts, or access ideas, that are at one and the same time one's own thoughts and the thoughts of the spiritual world.

The Master tells Burgeon that these intuitive thoughts, unlike his ordinary thoughts, "are also your substance and your life; so that to perceive them is verily to perceive the spirit within you in the act of creating." The Master continues this revealing if somewhat mysterious message: "But at the turning point of time, by that central death and

rebirth which was the transformation of transformations, by the open mystery of Golgotha, I was myself transformed. I am that anthroposophia who, by whatsoever communications however imparted she shall first have been evoked, is the voice of each one's mind speaking from the depths within him[one]self" (pp. 162-63).

Faculty and students of the Barfield School of Sunbridge College strive to realize the truth of this passage and similar insights in the great arc of western philosophical, spiritual, and esoteric thinkers from Pythagoras and Plato through Goethe and Emerson to Steiner and Barfield. It also applies such thinking to a wide range of contemporary problems and challenges. Following the example of Barfield's affectionate and insightful dialogue with the whole of western thought and culture, which in turn follows the great works of Rudolf Steiner, the Barfield School benefits from great contributions in the arts, humanities, and sciences that disclose the myriad original relationships between the spiritual in the individual and the spiritual in the universe.

Selections from Barfield's writings have been collected in two slim anthologies, *The Barfield Sampler* (1993) and *A Barfield Reader* (1998). He is also the subject of a documentary video *Owen Barfield: Man and Meaning*. An especially helpful introduction to the thought of Owen Barfield is to be found in R. J. Reilly, *Romantic Religion: A Study of Barfield, Lewis, Williams, and Tolkein* (1971 and recently reissued). A website managed by David Lavery (davidlavery.net/barfield) has made available many important essays on Barfield as well as offering an Encyclopedia Barfieldiana.