

## **The Alchemy of Imagination and Love in Owen Barfield's *The Rose on the Ash-Heap***

2008 is turning out to be a banner year for those who care about Owen Barfield's life and work. Thanks to the resourcefulness and expertise of Professor Amy Vail, the 2008 issue of the literary journal *Seven* will include Barfield's magnificent 1930 essay, "Death", never before published. This year The Barfield Press will publish a revised edition of *Evolution of Consciousness: Studies in Polarity*, the 1976 *Festschrift* for Barfield which Shirley Sugerman lovingly edited. *Night Operation*, Barfield's only work of science fiction, will be republished too, and Barfield's last major work, the 1985 novel *Eager Spring*, will receive its premier publication. Both *Eager Spring* and *Night Operation* are being brought out by a new press, The Barfield Press UK, which is headed by Owen Barfield's grandson and namesake.

In addition, either late this year or early in 2009 The Barfield Press UK will publish another novella by Owen Barfield, *The Rose on the Ash-Heap*. Although a portion of *The Rose on the Ash-Heap* is included in SUNY Press's splendid 1993 anthology, *A Barfield Sampler*, the entire work has never yet been published. The publication of the complete *Rose on the Ash-Heap* is a major event, for it is a genuine *mythopoeia*, an original, in-depth, and profoundly optimistic imagining of the deepest concerns and ideals of our time.

Those who are familiar with the portion of *The Rose on the Ash-Heap* which appears in *A Barfield Sampler* already know that it is a tremendously eloquent work of great imaginative power. Indeed, this portion of Barfield's narrative has noteworthy similarities to Dante's *Commedia*: Sultan, the protagonist of the story, traverses the Inferno of the Fun-Fair and Ash-Heap, which brilliantly epitomize the danger, ugliness, and waste that Barfield saw were endemic in modern psyches and modern culture. Sultan then experiences a Purgatorial metamorphosis as he learns to ride bareback in the underground Circus. The *Märchen* apocalyptically concludes in Paradiso for Sultan and his beloved Lady.

Fascinating and masterly though this excerpt is, the full *Rose on the Ash-Heap* is very much finer. In it, Barfield traces the evolution of human consciousness from the ancient integrative received wisdom to modern self-centeredness and materialism. Inspiration, personified by the beautiful Temple dancer in Sultan's native East, moves Westward to Albion, only to be submerged in the rising new culture of rampant sensuality and greed. There is another dimension of evolution of consciousness, however: individual human beings gradually develop the capacity to imagine and to love. This is what happens to Sultan as, in quest of the lovely dancer, he travels into the heart of the West.

Barfield's portrayal of the psychology of romantic love is outstandingly perceptive and nuanced. At first, Sultan's yearning is adolescent – energetic fantasizing. Step by arduous step, however, his love for the dancer matures into grounded, responsible, wide-awake caring, and opens to encompass grounded, responsible, active love for the human community. Romantic love, *eros*, becomes permeated by spiritual love, *agape*. Simultaneously, Sultan becomes genuinely imaginative. His love for the beautiful dancer at first is thoroughly dreamy. But his quest for her takes him into Western Asia and Europe, where he discovers the ensouling power of dance in diverse cultures. He discovers lyric poetry, too. Both dance and poetry are profoundly transformative for him.

Sultan's experiences with romantic and spiritual love, with dance, and with poetry are informed by Barfield's own. Barfield's wife was a gifted dancer and choreographer with extensive expertise in period performance. During the 1920s Owen and Maud Barfield

were active members of a touring dance company and also started their own company, writing and performing musical theatre for children. Moreover, throughout the 1920s Owen Barfield explored poetry very actively, especially poetry's ability to prompt a "felt change of consciousness". He wrote a great many lyric poems, almost all of which were directly inspired by his own experiences of romantic and spiritual love. He also wrote an engaging romantic fairy tale for children of all ages, the delightful *The Silver Trumpet* (1925). He undertook an in-depth study of language and literature, including the "Rose" tradition, about which he wrote appreciatively in reviews and in *History in English Words* (1926). He studied poetry with special intensity, wrote many reviews and articles about it, and in 1928 published *Poetic Diction*, a revised version of his B.Litt. thesis, dedicating it to C. S. Lewis, his close friend.

For almost a decade, beginning in 1922, Barfield and Lewis vigorously debated the nature of imagination. The question which centrally concerned them was imagination's relation to truth. Throughout, Barfield held to the conviction that the imagination perceives truth, and indeed is essential for perceiving truth accurately and fully. Lewis, however, distrusted the imagination, and the force of his arguments impelled Barfield to articulate his own views with philosophical rigor. *The Rose on the Ash-Heap* presents Barfield's perspective on these debates in a particularly vivid way.

During Sultan's Westward travels deep in Abdol's dominion, he meets the Philosopher:

It was full autumn when at last, in the centre of a dirty town, one of a row in a mean street behind a huge gasometer, whose aroma pervaded the soot-blackened air week in week out, he found the Philosopher's dwelling. [. . .] His clothes – a shabby old coat and a pair of sagging cylindrical trousers – hung loosely from his rounded shoulders; his voice was large and startling; all his movements were boyish and awkward and, as if not contented with the quantity of soot which descended steadily from Abdol's chimneys alike on himself and on the squalid children playing in the gutter, he must needs pour a perpetual column of it into the air from a tobacco-pipe which was itself no less than a small chimney.

As this passage reveals, the Philosopher is on one level Barfield's affectionate portrayal of his friend Lewis, whose "instant unhesitating hospitality", unfaltering fidelity to his promises, self-sacrificing charity to the destitute, and passion for logical inquiry are key elements of the Philosopher's personality. The Philosopher generously tutors Sultan in the nature of Reason, holding forth "in his curiously loud and booming voice", and together the two friends look toward the stars through the Philosopher's prize possession, his telescope. Summing up their friendship, Sultan gratefully acknowledges "the comfort which he felt when he contemplated not so much the Philosopher himself as the fact that such a man is to be found in such a place." The Philosopher is more than a masterly fictional version of Lewis, however: in his integrity and expressed yearning for genuine freedom of thought, he represents an essential element of the Romantic impulse, the active commitment to goodness and meaningful human freedom.

The Poet is another important figure in *The Rose on the Ash-Heap*. He is the polar opposite of the Philosopher in many respects, including his appearance:

By the time he reached the Poet's dwelling, on the top of the hill, the sunset had changed to twilight and the twilight in its turn was giving way to a cool, sparkling afterglow, out of which the stars began to twinkle one by one. He knocked at the carved oak door of the dignified old stone house, and soon the Poet, an elderly and graceful man beautifully dressed in a close-fitting suit of grey velvet welcomed him in with a kindly smile.

Later, as the Poet is explaining one of his discoveries "to his visitor in the most courteous manner and most graceful phrases imaginable, Sultan could not help losing himself in admiration of the man. Every tone, every gesture, every chance fold of his beautiful and dignified garments seemed to betray how well the Poet realized what a noble figure, what a grand old man, the Poet looked!" Like the Philosopher, the Poet is a significant mentor for Sultan. He learns much from the Poet about the true relationship between imagination and sleep. He also learns about "lost love and the pangs it induces in human hearts", and how, through experiencing romantic love, one can be enabled "not merely to compose the most delightful and piercing-sweet songs, but actually to make many important discoveries concerning the secret workings of Nature – discoveries which he would never have been impelled to make at all, but for the loving interest which the loss of his Lady" awakens in the bereaved lover. Barfield's early poem, "Day", included in Thomas Moul's *Best Poems of 1923* and republished in *A Barfield Sampler*, is a beautiful example of Barfield's own heightened awareness of Nature.

However, both the Philosopher and the Poet, who together comprise Barfield's deft portrayal of how the Romantic impulse lives in our time, have the crucial limitation that Barfield identifies in his 1929 essay, "From East to West", the failure to ask "*In what way is Imagination true?*":

To make Romanticism into a self-sufficient organic being, able to stand on its own legs and face the rest of the world, there ought to have been added to the new concept, beauty, to the renewed conception of freedom, a new idea also of the nature of *truth*. [. . .] The point is that no satisfactory *critique* of Romance ever arose. It was never grounded satisfactorily in reality. And as a result the modern reader or critic is apt to feel, as he approaches even some of its noblest and completest productions, 'Yes, it is all very fine, very exciting, very noble – but as a philosophy of life, it really will not do!'

For Sultan, however, as for Barfield himself, it is absolutely necessary to achieve a philosophy of life that *will* do. Sultan pursues his quest for the beautiful dancer, against the advice of his friends. The Poet serenely assures him that there is no point in venturing further Westward, and the Philosopher energetically reasons against doing so:

'Yes,' he said, nodding his head. 'It is *proved!* As soon as you get beyond that Gasometer,' (and here he pointed to the Gasometer just behind his own little house) 'as soon as you get beyond that Gasometer, you are knocked on the head invisibly from behind and dragged violently into a certain vortex, or complex of forces, which is now known to be an Etheric Retort. After a short interval the Etheric Retort spins you out backwards into the Fourth Dimension. When you finally recover consciousness, you actually find

yourself traveling willy-nilly in an Eastward direction, not Westward as you had intended. So there *is* no Westward. Q. E. D.’

Nonetheless, Sultan steadfastly continues his lonely Westward journey, coming at last to Cape Limit, “a singular huge triangular mass of crystalline rock that towered high above the Pacific Ocean, into which its apex jutted.” During the night he spends on the Cape, the sole guest in the Cape’s hotel, Sultan hears the music of the stars, and through the words they sing to him his understanding of love and imagination is radically deepened, enlightened, integrated, and enlivened. This is the turning-point event in Sultan’s long pilgrimage, and this section of the story is the pivotal section of *The Rose on the Ash-Heap*.

The voices died away and the vision vanished. It was full dawn. Sultan lay watching the stars vanish one by one into the grey, like the candles in the Temple after the priests and the singers have departed. He saw nothing now but the empty glass dome and the blank walls of his room. But his heart was at peace. For he had hope, and he knew what he must do.

Following his transformative experience on Cape Limit, Sultan makes his way to the Fun-Fair and the Ash-Heap and joins the subterranean Circus.

While, as we have seen, the Philosopher and the Poet represent two key aspects of the Romantic impulse in our time, Sultan’s experiences on Cape Limit and thereafter are Barfield’s imaginative portrayal of the spiritual path of Anthroposophy, the movement founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner. Barfield coined the phrase “Romanticism come of age” to characterize Anthroposophy, which he experienced as the fulfillment of the Romantic impulse. Barfield especially valued the practicality of Anthroposophy, its manifold solutions to the great problems of our time; he dramatizes this in *The Rose on the Ash-Heap*’s pivotal section and its aftermath, where, by gradually consolidating, activating, and applying an integrative understanding of truth, beauty, and goodness, Sultan and his fellow members of the underground Circus fundamentally subvert Abdol’s entrenched dominance in the modern world.

Not only does *The Rose on the Ash-Heap* point to significant connections between the Romantic impulse and Anthroposophy; it also illuminates the essential connections between Romanticism, Anthroposophy, and the Rosicrucian path. All three center on truth, beauty, and goodness. In addition, both Anthroposophy and Rosicrucianism systematically nurture the alchemy of imagination and love in human consciousness, the wonderful, mysterious alchemy which Romantic poets and thinkers eloquently celebrate. Like the Rosicrucian path, Sultan’s discovery process unfolds in 7 stages, narrated in the 7 sections of *The Rose on the Ash-Heap*.

One can also see this process as a modern-day journey into what Barfield describes in *History in English Words* a “the region of devotional love”, the mindscape whose landmarks were first defined by the Troubadors and “Rose” poets of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. It initially appears that Abdol has permanently eradicated even the possibility of devotional love; at the center of the Ash-Heap which is the only surviving evidence of what once was the Palace of Albion’s Christ-like Lord, a gigantic, garishly illuminated, electronically animated Crucifixion scene advertises Abdol’s Vinegar. Dwarfed and almost totally obscured by this grotesque display, “among the sooty weeds struggling up out of the refuse on the [Ash-] Heap”, a garden Rose is growing. Like imagination and love in the modern world, this Rose was

a sad and spindly-looking object with one dull red knob at the top, yet there was some magic in the twilight which attracted Sultan's attention to it. It was now nearly dark, and many stars had already appeared in the sky. Sultan looked at the flower again. Yes, it was *glowing!* It seemed to be giving forth a light of its own into the dusk! [. . .] And at last Sultan realized that it was not merely glowing but also singing to him. It was singing something like this: –

*Earth despairs not, though her Spark  
Underground is gone –  
Roses whisper after dark  
Secrets of the Sun.*

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