

Owen Barfield

November 9, 1898 – December 14, 1997

Owen Barfield was born in Muswell Hill, a northern suburb of London, during the reign of Queen Victoria. When he tranquilly passed on at his home in Forest Row, England, he had recently entered the 100th year of his remarkably productive and interesting life. An eloquent, thoughtful, versatile and prolific author, he is adjudged by many to be one of the truly great writers of the twentieth century.

Throughout Barfield's very long life, his heart qualities were at the core of his personality. They were nurtured in his childhood home, where music was much loved and often played. The stammering which afflicted him from boyhood on stimulated his courage and humility. And his feeling capacities were also much strengthened by his warm friendship with Cecil Harwood, whom he met when they were both about ten years old and attending Highgate Preparatory School in North London. The two remained staunch, mutually supportive friends all through their lives. Another very important relationship for Barfield was his deep, always invigorating, lifelong friendship with C. S. Lewis which began when the two met as undergraduates at Oxford University. Barfield is fittingly remembered as the friend of Cecil Harwood and C. S. Lewis for, as many on both sides of the Atlantic have personally testified, this cordial, generous man had an extraordinary gift for lasting, enlivening friendship. He was also a naturally agile, graceful, and expressive balletic dancer (who for a time considered making that his profession) and in 1923 he married a talented dancer and choreographer, Matilda (Maud) Douie; the two collaborated on ambitious artistic projects, and together they adopted and raised three children, Alexander, Lucy, and Jeffrey. Barfield's first book, *The Silver Trumpet* (1925), is a fairy tale for children of all ages which expresses his conviction that feeling, the "silver" element of the soul, is essential to healthy human relationships.

Throughout his life, Barfield recorded his innermost concerns in imaginative stories and poems, many of which are gathered in *A Barfield Sampler*, published by SUNY Press in 1993. Keenly alive to the beautiful – in language, the arts, nature, ideas, and human character – he strove to bring beauty into everything he wrote, as he stated in a prescient early work, a sonnet published in the *London Mercury* in 1922:

Yes, I arose a little while and fought
With jagged words, hoping that Pain would wring,
Using my body and soul as instrument,
Beauty from Life to fashion young men's dreams
And sweeten old men's memories – I meant,
Being a wasted torch, to throw my beams
Over the world: laugh not: I tried to make
The Spirit of Man more lovely for your sake.

Although he first came to fame through his literary artistry, the breadth, penetration, and lucidity of Owen Barfield's thinking are so impressive that he is often thought of as a philosopher rather than a creative artist. Guided by his parents, who strenuously discouraged woolly enthusiasms, he early formed the useful habit of thinking clearly and objectively. From childhood, much of his thinking centered on language. Barfield was a very young man, not yet 21, when he discovered the power of imaginative thinking to cause a "felt change of consciousness" and thus began the explorations into the nature of meaning which absorbed him for the rest of his life. These inquiries were energized and disciplined at Oxford University, where he

took first-class honors in English in 1921 followed by a B.Litt. in English, and wrote two ground-breaking, enduringly admired books on language and the evolution of consciousness, *History in English Words* (1926) and his B.Litt. thesis, *Poetic Diction* (1928).

During the same years when he was taking up the intensive study of language and literature, Barfield, who was raised agnostic, became a Christian through a process of discovery which he has elucidated in his essay “Philology and the Incarnation” (first published in 1965) and in his interview with Marjorie Mead, published in the 1986 edition of *The Silver Trumpet*. Simultaneously, he began to study anthroposophy, the “science of the spirit” inaugurated by the Austrian thinker Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). Barfield found that anthroposophy confirmed and also greatly enlarged his thinking. He promptly learned German in order to be able to read Rudolf Steiner’s works in the original and to help with the task of translating them into accurate and appropriately idiomatic English. And he began his regular practice of meditating each day on the Prologue to John’s Gospel and the verses of Steiner’s *Seelenkalender* (*Calendar of the Soul*). Barfield’s evolution into a mature, thoroughly active thinker was vigorously furthered by his good friend C. S. Lewis, who for almost a decade beginning in their mid-twenties engaged him in what Lewis later humorously called their “Great War”, forcefully challenging each of Barfield’s (and anthroposophy’s) assumptions about imagination, meaning, and reality.

As the Great Depression took hold, economic realities compelled Barfield to embark upon a career in the legal profession at the end of 1930. The effort involved for him in practicing this profession, which he found gratingly uncongenial, especially strengthened his will forces. He had become a member of the Anthroposophical Society soon after he encountered Rudolf Steiner’s work in 1923, and even after he joined his father’s London law firm he continued to speak about anthroposophy as well as to serve in leadership positions in anthroposophic organizations and write for anthroposophic publications. Several of these pieces were anthologized in *Romanticism Comes of Age* (1944). He also wrote a great many poems, ranging from ardent, graceful love poems and incisive comic and satiric verses to the tremendously complex and eloquent poetic drama *Orpheus*, which received its premiere performance in 1948 and was published in book form in 1983. Increasingly, however, Barfield’s health, both physical and psychological, was undermined by his struggles to meet the demands of his profession while simultaneously practicing his true calling and thus, he hoped, helping to meet what he saw as the urgent needs of the age. Characteristically, he averted breakdown by writing three powerful works, each a profound dramatic portrayal of doubleness and re-integration: *Orpheus*, widely considered to be his greatest poem; *Riders on Pegasus*, another impressively expressive and insightful long poem, as yet unpublished; and *This Ever Diverse Pair* (1950), a witty, delicately allegorical tale of the divided self personified as Burden and Burgeon, whose unlikely law partnership metamorphoses into a shared journey toward spiritual reconciliation and wholeness.

Shortly after Barfield’s inner crisis had resolved, a whole new dimension of activity opened up for him: the man of letters and law became a man of the world. An American graduate student who came across Barfield’s 1947 essay “Poetic Diction and Legal Fiction” so admired it that he inspired the administration of his college, Drew University, to offer Barfield the first of what came to be several visiting appointments at colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. Beginning with that first visiting professorship in 1964, Barfield crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean for 21 years, teaching, lecturing, mentoring aspiring scholars and poets, and participating in workshops, colloquia, and symposia (many of which centered on his work) with acumen, verve, and modesty. A number of the lectures he gave during these years were gathered and published in three books: *Speaker’s Meaning* (1967), *The Rediscovery of Meaning* (1977), and *History, Guilt, and Habit* (1979). In this suddenly hospitable climate, his previously published books were re-issued in new

editions, and in 1976 Wesleyan University Press brought out a *festschrift* in his honor, *Evolution of Consciousness: Studies in Polarity*. In addition to all these involvements, Barfield did a great deal of writing, translating, and editing for anthroposophic journals and publishing firms. And during this richly productive autumnal phase of his life he wrote six important books. *Saving the Appearances* (1957), his brilliant study of the evolution of consciousness, immediately attracted widespread admiration and respect, and remains his most acclaimed work. With probing insightfulness and breathtaking creative flair, *Worlds Apart* (1963) and *Unancestral Voice* (1965) address several important facets of the compelling modern question, how to create a viable and meaningful community. Like those three books, *What Coleridge Thought* (1971) is a multidisciplinary tour de force, fully informed by Barfield's loving understanding of his complex subject. Barfield also wrote two powerful works of fiction during these years, the dystopian novella *Night Operation* (written in 1975 and first published serially in 1983-84) and *Eager Spring*, an ecological novel (written in the early 1980s, published posthumously in 2008).

After 1985, when he made his last journey across the Atlantic, Barfield maintained a voluminous correspondence, welcomed a steady stream of visitors, and wrote numerous prefaces, reviews, essays, and poems. Two anthologies of his work were published during these years, *Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis* (1989) and *A Barfield Sampler* (1993); a third anthology, *A Barfield Reader*, came out in 1998, shortly after his death. His last essay, written in his 99th year, is the bracing "Fiftieth Birthday Salute" which opens the 1998 issue of the English anthroposophic journal *The Golden Blade*. During this final phase of his career, Barfield became the subject of an award-winning documentary film, *Owen Barfield: Man and Meaning* (1995), witnessed the establishment of the Owen Barfield site on the World Wide Web, and granted many interviews, including those which helped to inform two book-length studies of his life and work, Astrid Diener's *The Role of Imagination in Culture and Society: Owen Barfield's Early Work* (2002, 2nd ed. 2013) and *Owen Barfield: Romanticism Come of Age – A Biography* (2006), by Simon Blaxland-de Lange.

One of the most important developments in Barfield studies occurred in October, 1998, less than a year after Barfield's death, when the first Owen Barfield session of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association's annual convention took place. Since then, each RMMLA convention has included an Owen Barfield session. Beginning in 2007, each RMMLA convention also has included a meeting of the Owen Barfield Society. The annual Barfield sessions and Barfield Society meetings are the only regular venues for Barfield studies anywhere in the world. Beginning in 2008, the Owen Barfield Literary Estate has issued several publications and provided substantial support for the development and strengthening of the Barfield holdings in Oxford University's Bodleian Library, the Marion E. Wade Center of Wheaton College, and the Azusa Pacific University Libraries.

Owen Barfield's life and character can be seen as having two "signature" emblems, the rainbow and the rose. Barfield memorably evokes the rainbow at the beginning of *Saving the Appearances*, and like the rainbow, each of his writings and translations radiantly bridges the "worlds apart" that are endemic in modern and contemporary experience. All his life, and especially during its second half, he tried to provide ideas and imaginations which would help his readers progress toward the fully integrated condition he termed final participation. Paradoxically, however, up until his death and for some years thereafter his readership remained divided into three distinct groups – admirers of C. S. Lewis and the Inklings, students of anthroposophy, and mainstream academics – each emphasizing a different facet of his life and work while steadfastly ignoring the facets that stood out to Barfield's other two publics. Barfield was particularly grateful to Clifford Monks, the editor of the journal *Towards*, which for ten years, from 1977 to 1987, extended a rainbow bridge between the three Barfieldian circles. The hope that the students of Barfield's life and work

may become a unified, actively collaborative community of scholars is a core aspiration of the Owen Barfield Society.

One of the most striking characteristics of Barfield's writings is their authenticity. Because he did not merely preach the concept of re-integration but wholeheartedly strove to live it, his thinking, feeling, and willing neither hardened and withered (as they would have done had their "Burden" elements won out) nor "Burgeoned" unrestrainedly into dreamy, irresponsible detachment from practical realities. Instead, with a rose's resilient tenacity, toughness, and strength, Barfield dug deeply into experience. By helpful happenstance, the verse for Week 31 of Rudolf Steiner's *Seelenkalender* – the week of the year which is Barfield's birthday week – points to this essential aspect of Barfield's biography. The following translation of the "Thirty-first week" verse appears in *The Calendar of the Soul: The Year Participated* (1985; 2nd ed. 2006), Barfield's rendering of the *Seelenkalender*:

Light – is it Sunlight? – out from Spirit-deeps
struggles to shine;
translated into lively strength of will
clear through the cloudiness of sense it burns,
releasing energy that turns
passionate drives into creative thrust
that ripens into work among mankind.

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