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# Owen Barfield and C.S. Lewis: A Critical Friendship<sup>1</sup>

by Colin Duriez

Colin Duriez, one of the keynote speakers for the 2016 Colloquium, is author of a number of books on the Inklings and fantasy literature. They include *Tolkien and C. S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship*, *J.R.R. Tolkien: The Making of a Legend*, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography of Friendship*, *Bedeveled: Lewis, Tolkien and the Shadow of Evil*, and *The Oxford Inklings: Lewis, Tolkien and Their Circle*. Duriez is in demand internationally as a speaker on these subjects, and has appeared on the BBC, PBS, and the extended box set of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*. Currently Colin is writing a study of Dorothy L. Sayers.

The lifelong friendship between C.S. Lewis and Owen Barfield was critical in two senses. First, their conversations were critical in eroding Lewis's atheism and other developing beliefs that were a barrier to his acceptance of a supernatural world and eventually Christianity. Secondly, the friendship was critical in that, unusually, it was founded upon and sustained by mutual opposition, much more particularly in its early days. In fact, the opposition deepened for each of them the very meaning of friendship, where a friend can be truly other, offering a different perspective and take on things. Their friendship helped Lewis find a wholeness that affirmed both reason and imagination, truth and meaning, in harmony. Barfield not only influenced his friend's thinking, but also had a radical impact on Lewis's manner of writing, particularly the increasing importance he gave to imaginative writing. Barfield himself inclined towards esoteric exposition, and Lewis helps us to understand him, though more in the areas in which they agreed than disagreed.

## THE HEART OF THE TWO FRIENDS

Though Barfield and Lewis both confessed to having serious differences, Lewis frequently expressed views that Barfield would entirely agree with. Characteristically, he wrote of the universe

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1 My talk draws upon research for books I've written on the Inklings or authors related to them over the past twenty-five years which are listed in the bibliography. For works cited see the footnotes.

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appearing to human beings at the beginning to be full of qualities of life, will, and intelligence. Every planet was a divine lord or lady and all trees were nymphs. Humans were related to the gods. With the development of knowledge the world was gradually emptied even of qualities of smell, taste, colour, and sound, which were shifted from the objective to the subjective in the general account of things. Consequently,

The Subject becomes gorged, inflated, at the expense of the object. But the matter does not end there. The same method which has emptied the world now proceeds to empty ourselves. . . . And thus we arrive at a result uncommonly like zero.<sup>2</sup>

Later, I shall touch upon Barfield's extraordinary second life, where he got increasing recognition in North America. During this later period of his life, the US novelist and Nobel laureate Saul Bellow wrote:

We are well supplied with interesting writers, but Owen Barfield is not content to be merely interesting. His ambition is to set us free. Free from what? From the prison we have made for ourselves by our ways of knowing, our limited and false habits of thought, our "common sense." These, he convincingly argues, have produced a "world of outsides with no insides to them," a brittle surface world, an object world in which we ourselves are mere objects. It is not only what we perceive but also what we fail to perceive that determines the quality of the world we live in, and what we have collectively chosen not to perceive is the full reality of consciousness, the "inside" of everything that exists.<sup>3</sup>

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2 C. S. Lewis, "The Empty Universe" in *Present Concerns* (London: Collins Fount, 1986), pp. 81–83. Lewis explores this emptying of qualities in places such as his book, *The Abolition of Man*, and sermon-essay, "Transposition." The reality of qualities are at the centre of both Barfield's and Lewis's views of knowledge. Lewis philosophically was an empiricist, who admired the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley, who like him was both an empiricist and idealist. Barfield was an idealist who believed in the reality of qualities, but had no taste for Lewis's empiricism, which is perhaps why Lewis labelled his friend's views (as an anthroposophist) as "gnostic," and as having "an element of polytheism in it" (see Note 4 below, and letter from C. S. Lewis to Miss M. Montgomery, 10 June 1952, in Walter Hooper (ed.) *Collected Letters, Volume II*, p. 198–199; see also Lewis's letter of 28 March 1958 to W. P. Wylie, *Ibid.*, pp. 928–929).

3 From the cover description of Owen Barfield, *History, Guilt and Habit*, 1979.

Barfield said of Lewis that he was in love with the imagination. It could be said of their mutual friend J.R.R. Tolkien that he was in love with human language. Barfield was also in love with language. Its creation and sustenance was for him a very important function of the imagination. In talking about Lewis and Barfield, and their larger group of friends, the Inklings, the importance of human language is necessarily a prime consideration. This talk however is mainly introductory, and as a result I've found it helpful to partly frame it in Barfield's biography, rather than plunging into what is most esoteric in his thought. However, I shall introduce characteristic themes and some representative books as we go along.<sup>4</sup> Barfield almost made his century, and his long life has much to offer and to challenge a biographer.

Much is made of differences between Barfield and Lewis, not least by the two friends themselves, but in fact Barfield endorsed several writings of Lewis, as did Lewis of Barfield's, which can therefore be taken as indicating some measure of affinity. Lewis's writings can in fact help us to understand some areas of Barfield, whose output at times can be somewhat arcane, whereas Lewis's tend usually to be brilliantly clear. These writings include *The Abolition of Man*, and Lewis's essay-sermon, "Transposition." There are also places where Lewis is clearly trying to explain concepts he owed at least partly to Barfield (which he sometimes acknowledges), such as the chapter "Horrid Red Things" in his book *Miracles*, and his essays "Bluspels and Flalanspheres: A Semantic Nightmare" and "Hamlet: The Prince and the Poem."<sup>5</sup>

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4 For understanding Barfield, the following are helpful: The biography by Simon Blaxford-de Lange, *Owen Barfield: Romanticism Comes of Age, A Biography*, and, on his thought, Stephen Thorson's recent and lucid, *Joy and the Poetic Imagination*, and Lionel Adey's, *C.S. Lewis's "Great War" with Owen Barfield*.

5 Whole areas can be explored extensively. There is a need to talk of the differences according to Barfield, and according to Lewis. Both for instance give significantly different meanings to consciousness (Lewis sees his friend's account of consciousness as a form of historicism). As a result, Barfield downplays Lewis's *The Discarded Image*, which in fact acknowledges changing human perceptions of the world over time, which are in effect changes of consciousness. Barfield makes the further observation that his point of view on things that didn't change but Lewis's did. He records his shock at Lewis's calling off the "Great War" between them after his conversion, which Barfield wished to continue. An important difference of perception between the two is brought out in Lewis's description of Barfield's views as "a kind of Gnosticism" (see Lewis's letter to a Mr. Fridama of 15

## BARFIELD'S LIFE AND SHAPING OF HIS THOUGHT

As well as being a significant friend of C.S. Lewis's (one of the most important in his life), Barfield is also known as an important member of the Oxford literary group, the Inklings, which centered around Lewis, but also Tolkien. The Inklings were friends who met together during the decades of the 1930s, 40s and 50s.<sup>6</sup> Like another significant Inklings, Charles Williams, Barfield was a Londoner. He was born in Muswell Hill, in north London, on 9 November 1898, just weeks before C.S. Lewis. Owen had two sisters and a brother, and was the youngest of the siblings. The household was comfortably secular, and full of books and music. Barfield described himself as an offspring of "more or less agnostic" parents. The natural household air they breathed was of skepticism about religion.

Owen's mother, Lizzy Barfield, was musical, a gifted pianist. His father, Arthur Barfield had been deprived of a proper school education, but achieved the status of a City of London solicitor.<sup>7</sup> Lizzie Barfield, was a suffragette, was active in feminist politics. Owen's school was in Highgate, near when he first lived in Muswell Hill. At school he shone in gymnastics, which correlated with his love of dancing.

In the Spring of 1917, Barfield was called up to the wartime army; he was then eighteen and was anxious to avoid becoming an infantryman (because, he thought, "the average expectancy of life of a young infantry officer by the time we'd got to 1916 or 1917 was about three weeks after he had got out there"). As an alternative, he served with the Royal Engineers. Like Tolkien before him, he served in the signal service. This involved learning about wireless communication, and studying the theory of electricity. Barfield in fact, unlike Lewis and Tolkien, was to have no experience of fighting at the front line. He was posted eventually to Belgium and postwar activity. He found there that, with the war over, there was little to do.

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February 1946, in Walter Hooper, ed., *Collected Letters, Volume II*), which may relate to another sticking point—Barfield's belief in reincarnation. The location of Anthroposophy on Lewis's Mappa Mundi in *The Pilgrim's Regress* (in the lands south of the Main Road) indicate another difference between the two in his perception of Barfield. The latter devotes considerable space to differences from Lewis is his *Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis*, edited by G.B. Tennyson (1989).

6 For more on the Inklings see my, *The Oxford Inklings: Lewis, Tolkien and Their Circle* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2015).

7 There is an interesting paternal parallel: Like Barfield's, Lewis's father was a solicitor (lawyer).

There was however a chance provided by the army to get involved in education while awaiting demobilization, which helped him to make discoveries in English poetry and encouraged him to write some poetry of his own. As he had already been awarded a scholarship to study at Wadham College, Oxford, all he could do was wait. It was actually October 1919 before he actually got off the train at Oxford railway station.

It was as an undergraduate that Barfield formed his lifelong and enormously influential friendship with C.S. Lewis, being introduced by a mutual friend, Leo Baker. It was this friendship that was to lead to his becoming one of the most important members of the Inklings. Barfield experienced what the *New York Times*, in his obituary nearly eighty years later, insightfully called an “intellectual epiphany.”<sup>8</sup> This happened as he was reading through Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge and John Keats for his university studies. His affinity would be with the Romantic movement for the rest of his life, particularly the poet and thinker Coleridge. Barfield remembered that reading experience:

What impressed me particularly was the power with which not so much whole poems as particular combinations of words worked on my mind. It seemed like there was some magic in it; and a magic which not only gave me pleasure but also reacted on and expanded the meanings of the individual words concerned.<sup>9</sup>

That moment of illumination seems to have set the course for his entire life. He became fascinated not only with what happens in the mind of a reader of poetry, but with the mystery of human consciousness itself, in play when we recognize faces, see flowers in a meadow, or observe a rainbow. Language, Barfield discovered, had a unique power to transform human consciousness. It also captured changes that took place in this consciousness over time. A sort of archeology could be practised on language, as he undertook when he wrote his book, *History in English Words* (1926). More about this below.

The importance of poetry to the very way that we see the world was a strong element in the friendship of Barfield and Lewis. When the two met, Lewis was far more widely read in poetry. Though, like Lewis, Barfield grew up in a household full of books, Lewis

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8 *New York Times* obituary, 19 December 1997.

9 Ibid.

was always by far the most bookish of the two. While Lewis thought about everything, Barfield tended throughout his life to stay focused on a number of outstanding insights into the nature of language, particularly poetic language, and upon the historic context of human language. These insights always connected with the changing nature of human beings over the ages—what he purposely called an “evolution” of consciousness. His insights fed into conversations and writings of those who would be associated with the birth of the Inklings, especially Lewis and later Tolkien. It would, in fact, be some years after Barfield’s graduation that he would meet Tolkien and stir up the older man’s thinking. As with the creator of Middle-earth, Barfield’s main intellectual stimulus came from language. Barfield’s ideas about how poetry and reading brought about changes in how we see the world were to have an enormous impact upon Lewis and Tolkien.

The friendship with Barfield was undoubtedly one of the most significant Lewis maintained throughout most of the 1920s, especially after Barfield graduated from the English school in 1921 and began working for the distinctive Oxford postgraduate B.Litt.<sup>10</sup> The thesis was to form the foundation of his influential book, *Poetic Diction*. His desire to pursue the relationship between poetry, imagination and knowledge challenged the teaching resources of the English School at the time. Failing to find him a supervisor, the university finally agreed to let him pursue the B.Litt without one! C.S. Lewis however had no difficulty in engaging with his friend on the subject.

### *THE SILVER TRUMPET*

Before finishing *Poetic Diction* however Barfield published two books. In 1925 he brought out an accomplished children’s book, *The Silver Trumpet*, published by Faber and Gwyer. Lewis read it in manuscript and, soon after starting, he enthused in his diary (October 20): “I began to read Barfield’s faery tale ‘The Silver Trumpet’ in which with prodigality he squirts out the most suggestive ideas, the loveliest pictures, and the raciest new coined words in wonderful succession. Nothing in its kind can be imagined better.”

I’ve pointed out that Barfield’s first love was undoubtedly language (specifically poetry), yet he was in fact the first of the future Inklings

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10 The Bachelor of Literature was one of a number of postgraduate Bachelor’s degrees awarded by the University. It was eventually renamed the MLitt, one of two research degrees in the Humanities Division (the other being the DPhil).

to publish fiction, and fiction from archives of his work are still appearing. In *The Silver Trumpet* Barfield tells the story of Violetta and Gambetta, twin princesses who have a spell cast over them which makes them love each other even though they constantly disagree about almost everything. A visiting prince, who has a silver trumpet, seeks the hand of a princess, and falls in love with the sweet-tempered Violetta. A servant of the king, a dwarf called (with no awareness of political incorrectness) the Little Fat Podger, has an emphatic presence in the story. The sound of the trumpet affects all that hear it—princess Violetta dreams that she is afloat near the bottom of the sea. In an interview Barfield described *The Silver Trumpet* as a “symbol of the feeling element in life.”<sup>11</sup> Some years after publication, Lewis lent his copy of the story to Tolkien, where it was a great hit in his household. Tolkien became the second of the Inklings to publish a children’s story, *The Hobbit*.

There are strong affinities of philological interest between Tolkien and Barfield, stronger even than between Barfield and Lewis, especially their archeological digging into sometimes lost meanings of words. In both, there is a kind of linguistic mysticism. Lewis shared this affinity, but not to the same extent. For Tolkien and Barfield there are mythologies or a consciousness revealing a worldview even in individual words.

### ***HISTORY IN ENGLISH WORDS (1926)***

This, Barfield’s second publication, is a meditation on the etymology of key words—that is, the origins and historical development of meanings of words. Barfield masterfully traced changes in human consciousness, changes he regarded as marking an “evolution of consciousness.” This is a fundamental notion in his thought. For Barfield, a history of consciousness must be very different from a history of ideas, as he points out in his book, *History, Guilt and Habit*. Consciousness is intimately related to perception as well as to the products of thinking. Once upon a time, he was convinced, there was a feeling, thinking and a perceiving element unified in a word. The etymology of words often give a glimpse of an ancient unity of consciousness, as Barfield tries to show. Cultural and historical changes might be better explained therefore by shifts in consciousness than by changes in intellectual ideas. He sees Lewis as mainly

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11 Oral History interview with Owen Barfield, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College. II.



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focusing on ideas, even in his *The Discarded Image*, which Barfield saw as fragmenting, but actually Lewis had a remarkable ability to bring older and ancient books and beliefs to vivid life, treating them from a perspective that belonged to their time rather than from the distance of a modern view.

Barfield explained the background to the book in an interview with G.B. Tennyson in 1992:

I . . . found that by tracing the changes of meanings of words, you do get an insight into the kind of consciousness that our ancestors had, which was very different from our own, and by writing a book dealing with individual words in some detail, I could bring that out. . . . What I was anxious to point out, and what I thought was brought out by these etymological observations was that it wasn't just people in the past who think like us but have different ideas, but who didn't think like us altogether at all. They had a different kind of thinking. That impressed itself on me fairly early. . . . Which of course is another way of formulating the concept of the evolution of consciousness.

### ***POETIC DICTION* (1928)**

Owen Barfield in fact believed that an evolution of human consciousness corresponded to stellar and biological evolution as a cosmic characteristic. The evolution of consciousness is reflected precisely in changes in language and perception, from a primitive unity of consciousness, now largely lost, to a future achievement of a greater human consciousness. It was this cosmic picture that Lewis consistently rejected as a form of historicism, forcing Barfield to constantly defend it against that charge.

Barfield's concept of changes in perception and consciousness being melded into language inspired Lewis, especially as it was translated into highly original insights into the nature of poetic language. These insights were embodied in *Poetic Diction*, which concerns the nature of poetic language and a theory of an ancient unity in human awareness that was built into speech.

*Poetic Diction* offers a theory of knowledge as well as a theory of poetry. At its heart is a philosophy of language. Barfield's view is that "the individual imagination is the medium of all knowledge from perception upward" (p. 22). The poetic impulse is linked to individual freedom: "the act of the imagination is the individual mind exercising its sovereign unity" (*ibid.*). The alternative, argues Barfield, is to see

knowledge as power, to “mistake efficiency for meaning,” leading to a relish for compulsion.

Knowledge as power is contrasted with knowledge by participation (a key word in Barfield). One kind of knowledge “consists of seeing what happens and getting used to it” and the other involves “consciously participating in what is” (p. 24). The proper activity of the imagination is concrete as opposed to abstract thinking—this is “the perception of resemblance, the demand for unity” (the affinity between Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Barfield can be seen here). There is therefore a poetic element in all meaningful language.

Tolkien read Owen Barfield’s *Poetic Diction*; Lewis may have lent him a copy. What particularly struck Tolkien was Barfield’s view that in ancient times thinking was not detached from participation in the world. In Barfield’s carefully argued view, the way people experienced reality as a seamless whole was embodied at that time in their language. In a way, their thought was completely poetic in the senses of being non-abstract and figurative. In an undated letter to Barfield, possibly written in 1929, Lewis observed:

You might like to know that when Tolkien dined with me the other night he said à-propos of something quite different that your conception of the ancient semantic unity had modified his whole outlook and that he was almost just going to say something in a lecture when your conception stopped him in time. “It is one of those things,” he said, “that when you’ve once seen it there are all sorts of things you can never say again.”<sup>12</sup>

Barfield’s complex book was in fact one of the most important single influences on both Tolkien and Lewis, though, for each to some extent, it may have clarified and focused ideas and insights they already had. For instance, Tolkien had already concluded as an undergraduate that mythology could not be separated from language, and vice versa. One of the main observations that Barfield made in *Poetic Diction*, and other books, is how the very way we see the world has changed over time. It is a kind of “chronological snobbery” (to use a phrase of Lewis’s) to consider the modern view superior to all past perceptions of reality.

As Barfield has shown in his introduction to the second edition of *Poetic Diction*, the ideal in logical positivism and related types of modern linguistic philosophy is, strictly, absurd; it systematically

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Barfield, quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p. 42.

eliminates meanings from the framing of truths, expecting thereby to guarantee their validity. In Barfield's view, the opposite is the case. The richer the meanings involved in the framing of truths, the more guarantee there is of their validity.

Both friends had aspirations as poets, and both were prepared to go as deep as the issues led them. The two had a remarkable facility in philosophical thinking, and had developed an extraordinary knowledge of English and classical poetry. Their discussions were to lay the foundations of their important contributions to understanding literature, the imagination, and the nature of human language. For both, this resulted as much in the writing of poetry and fiction as in works that presented arguments—essays, literary criticism and the history of thought. Some of their prose writing was philosophical or touched on important philosophical issues. Lewis, like Tolkien, was more successful than Barfield in the pursuit of fiction. However, an increasing number of Barfield's stories are now being published by his estate, necessitating a reevaluation of his fiction, thanks to the efforts of Barfield's grandson, also named Owen Barfield.

### THE "GREAT WAR": THE "NEW LOOK," THE "OLD LOOK," AND BARFIELD'S ANTHROPOSOPHY

Lewis as an undergraduate had settled comfortably into his intellectual skepticism. To his horror, he found his close friend, Owen Barfield, taking exactly the opposite direction from him. Barfield, the product of a secular home, was now espousing the "Old Look" rather than the trends of what Lewis called the "New Look" that was slowly permeating Oxford. As far back as 1922 a "Great War" began (to give it Lewis's name, taken from the recent conflict) between Barfield and himself. It didn't in any way weaken their friendship; both thought being Other to a friend was part of the proper nature of friendship. Indeed, later Barfield was to dedicate his book, *Poetic Diction*, to Lewis, followed by the aphorism, "Opposition is true friendship." The "war" was carried on by letter and notebook and sometimes in person. It frequently operated on a highly philosophical level, often while the two were walking together. Both drew widely upon their formidable knowledge.

The friendly but at times fierce dispute began soon after Barfield's espousal in the early 1920s of Anthroposophy, a "spiritual science" based on a synthesis of theosophy and Christian thought and pioneered by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). Steiner applied "spiritual"

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research based on his background in mathematics and science to his own experiences which transcended usual perception. Their mutual friend, Cecil Harwood, also was taken by Steiner's views, and soon became an important figure in the anthroposophical movement. According to John Carey, Steiner's "ideas have had a lasting impact on many areas of life, including education, alternative medicine, organic agriculture, art and architecture."<sup>13</sup>

Not long after Barfield abandoned his secular views, he married a professional dancer called Maud Douie, who was some years older. They had met through their mutual interest in dance, in which Barfield was also accomplished. This was soon after his graduation. Barfield was for a large part of the twenties a freelance writer. He and Maud lived for a time in the Buckinghamshire village of Long Crendon, not a great distance from Oxford. Barfield and his wife would also visit Lewis and Mrs. Moore, who was essentially his adoptive mother, whom they liked very much.

Maud was a devout Christian, and became increasingly unhappy with some discordant elements she discovered in Steiner's teaching, such as a belief in reincarnation. In fact, the sceptic Lewis and she became allies against Anthroposophy, which was a foundational element of conflict in the "Great War" between Lewis and Barfield. On one occasion, in the diary he kept at that time, Lewis reported a "heart to heart" that Maud had with Mrs. Moore during a visit to "Hillsboro" in Western Road, Headington, to the house Lewis shared with "the family." Lewis observed that, according to Janie Moore, Maud Barfield

"hates, hates, hates" Barfield's Anthroposophy, and says he ought to have told her before they were married: [which] sounds ominous. She once burnt a "blasphemous" anthroposophical pamphlet of his, [which] seems to me an unpardonable thing to do. But I think (and so does [Mrs. Moore]) that they really get on [very] well, better than the majority of married people. Mrs. Barfield is always glad when Barfield comes to see me because I have "none of those views."

In fact, Barfield's anthroposophical beliefs created a good deal of tension in the marriage, much to his sorrow.

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13 John Carey, *William Golding: The Man Who Wrote Lord of the Flies* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 48.

“CHRONOLOGICAL SNOBBERY”

Barfield’s arguments in their incessant “Great War” began to erode Lewis’s espousal of the “New Look.” Under his influence, Lewis saw that a dominant myth of his time was that of progress. Change in itself had a supreme value in the modern world. Until meeting Barfield, he had been seduced by this myth, intellectually at least. This is at the heart of why he had adopted the “New Look.” He came to see, however, that the “New Look” had the effect of blinding us to the past. One important consequence is that we lose any perspective upon what is good and what is bad in our own time. He explained in *Surprised By Joy*, “Barfield . . . made short work of what I have called my ‘chronological snobbery,’ the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.”<sup>14</sup>

The “war” with Barfield not only refuted his chronological snobbery; it also very gradually helped to convince him that his materialism, if true, in fact made knowledge impossible! It was self-refuting—a view perhaps strengthened by his reading of Arthur Balfour’s *Theism and Humanism* and *Theism and Thought* in 1924, though he resisted Balfour’s Christian beliefs at the time. Barfield said, after their “war” was over, that Lewis had taught him how to think, but that he had taught Lewis what to think. Lewis, it is clear, passed on to him skills in logical reasoning he had learned. In hindsight, we can see that one of Barfield’s biggest contributions to their mutual learning was to help Lewis to become the Christian apologist of the future, lucidly combining imagination and reason. Thinking back over the long years of their “Great War,” Barfield said that this was a “slow business.” In one central area of his thinking, Barfield failed in his “war” to change the attitude of his materialist friend. Lewis never accepted the idea of an evolution of consciousness, though he would acknowledge historical changes in consciousness, most radically the change from an original unified consciousness.

Barfield’s concept of an original unity to human consciousness greatly appealed to Lewis, despite his scepticism about any evolutionary history of language. It also had a great impact upon Tolkien’s thinking and fiction.<sup>15</sup> Barfield’s genius lay in transforming his remarkable

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14 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, Chapter 13. Going out of date, Lewis was forced to concede by Barfield’s arguments, might well have nothing to do with something’s truth or falsity.

15 See Verlyn Fleger’s *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s*

insights into the origins of language into an understanding of poetic language itself. So Lewis also grew to accept that there are changes to human consciousness at different times, though, for him, it couldn't be said to be an evolution.

Though C.S. Lewis remained opposed to Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, after the end of the "Great War" between himself and Barfield the influence of his friend is clear in his ideas and writings. Lewis was to make no secret of his debt to his brilliant friend. It was after his conversion to Christianity in 1931 that Lewis brought the "war" to an abrupt end,<sup>16</sup> much to Barfield's sorrow, though their friendship and conversations carried on unabated. Barfield continued to develop his thinking, always imagining how Lewis might counter any step. On one occasion, Barfield was invited to introduce Anthroposophism to a meeting of the Inklings, but he felt he was unsuccessful in conveying his ideas on Steiner.

It is worth mentioning the importance of the two friends' worldviews during the "great war." Essentially, throughout the friendly but hardhitting dispute of many years about the role of imagination in knowledge, Barfield was what Lewis would call a supernaturalist, whereas Lewis was at first a naturalist, moving slowly from atheism via agnosticism to various forms of idealism. After he came first to a belief in theism (around 1929 to 1930) and then to Christian belief, Barfield in effect had won much of the battle, and Lewis, it is evident, was no longer interested in the combat. Both friends were now idealists but, as might be expected, not of the same form.

Their continuing differences, though the two were on the same side of the wall now as regards believing in the reality of the supernatural world, reveal both the complexity of Lewis's thinking and development and the complexity of their friendship. Even his own College, Magdalen,<sup>17</sup> was a stronghold of Idealism.<sup>18</sup> Martin Moynihan, a former pupil and friend of Lewis's, recalls how Magdalen College had been "notably idealist... Besides Bradley there was, for one, [R.G.] Collingwood. He it was who told us how 'idealism' and

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*World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983).

16 Barfield in later years remembered where the two were when Lewis declared the war over—they were on a walking trip and had arrived at the historic town of Wallingford, then in Berkshire.

17 See James Patrick, *The Magdalen Metaphysicals* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

18 The philosopher John Mabbott, a colleague of Lewis's during that period, points out the intellectual isolation of Oxford during this period in his *Oxford Memories* (Oxford: Thornton's of Oxford, 1986), chapter 13.

‘realism’ were in the Middle Ages one and the same. Ideas and values were *res*, things as much as tables and chairs. And, to quote a later poet, ‘good is as visible as green.’”<sup>19</sup> The mature Lewis also seemed to make idealism and realism “one and the same” as he abandoned the Great War with Barfield. This mix can be seen vividly in his book, *Miracles*, where God is the “glad creator” and “Fountain of Facthood” a book which was part of his constant quest to capture the real, the definite, the concrete, the thing in words, expressed vividly in his sermon essay, “Transposition,” greatly admired by Barfield.<sup>20</sup>

For all their differences, however, Lewis was greatly shaped in thought and imagination by the influence of his friend. In my view, Lewis’s stylistic achievement in writing poetic prose—prose combining reason and vivid imagination—owes much to Barfield’s view of the nature of primitive and ideal language. Passages in *Perelandra*, for instance, are so successful as poetic prose that the poet Ruth Pitter was able to turn them poetic stanzas (rather as William Wordsworth turned the prose of his sister Dorothy’s journals into poetry, as in her account of the daffodils seen at Ullswater in the English Lakeland).

#### AFTER THE “GREAT WAR”; BARFIELD’S CAREER AS A SOLICITOR

Owen Barfield spent the 1930s, 1940s, and most of the 1950s in the self-imposed tedium of his family’s law business in London. He had little time to write, but when he did, the pieces often but not always related to anthroposophical teaching. When he could, he wrote poetry and fiction, including his verse dramas, *Orpheus* (which was staged in Sheffield, at the Little Theatre, in September 1948) and *Medea* (which was read on one of his infrequent visits to the Inklings). Lewis had encouraged him to retell a great myth, and he decided upon Orpheus and Euridice. On one occasion, he used his legal expertise to save his client C.S. Lewis from bankruptcy, when he accrued an enormous tax bill that, in his ignorance, he hadn’t expected. Lewis had generously given away all the royalties from his increasingly successful books, such as *The Screwtape Letters*. Barfield wrote a humorous book, fictionalizing his experience as a solicitor, entitled *This Ever Diverse Pair* which recounts the incident.

19 Martin Moynihan, unpublished A4 booklet “C.S. Lewis and Oxford,” January 1998 (copy in my possession).

20 See my chapter, “Myth, Fact and Incarnation” in E. Segura and T. Honegger (Eds.), *Myth and Magic: Art according to the Inklings* (Zollikofen, Switzerland: Walking Tree Publishers, 2007).

When Lewis was appointed to the Cambridge Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature in 1954, he unsuccessfully tried to obtain for Barfield his position as Fellow in English at Magdalen College. He truly understood Barfield's brilliance and insight into language and literature.

It was only in 1959, when he was able to retire from the law firm, that Barfield started an astonishing second life of scholarly and imaginative writing, which included extensive lecturing, much of it in the United States. A prophet overlooked in his own country found acceptance in the USA.

### BARFIELD'S SECOND LIFE

When Lewis died in late 1963, Owen Barfield was well into his "second life" as writer and speaker, with invitations coming from throughout North America and with a growing readership for his books in literary and intellectual circles. His fiction, though not until then being published outside of specialist or esoteric channels, from this time forward explored contemporary issues such as the environment. He, like Tolkien, knew what he had lost in Lewis's absence. In a talk he gave at Wheaton College, Illinois, less than a year after Lewis's death, he began:

Now, whatever else he was, and, as you know, he was a great many things, C.S. Lewis was for me, first and foremost, the absolutely unforgettable friend, the friend with whom I was in close touch for over forty years, the friend you might come to regard hardly as another human being, but almost as a part of the furniture of my existence.<sup>21</sup>

The Wheaton talk belongs to the period of Barfield's enthusiastic reception in North America. He never had had a popular appeal, though some of his newly published fiction is more accessible than much of his writing. The year of his talk, 1964, marked a spell as Visiting Professor at Drew University in New Jersey. This was the first of several similar posts at universities in North America right into the 1980s, when he was entering his own eighties. One of his many books of this period, *Speaker's Meaning* (1967), was made up of lectures that he had given at Brandeis University. Over a decade later, his short but seminal book, *History, Guilt and Habit* (1979) came out of lectures he

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21 A talk given on 16 October, 1964, and published as "C.S. Lewis," in G.B. Tennyson (Ed.), *Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis* (San Rafael, CA: The Barfield Press), p. 5–16.



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gave in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Over the years Owen and Maud Barfield had first adopted two children, Alexander, and Lucy, and then later fostered Geoffrey Corbett (now Jeffrey Barfield) during World War II (to whom Lewis dedicated his *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"*). On some occasions, Maud (and Lucy on at least one occasion) accompanied Barfield to the USA on his speaking trips. Lucy Barfield became C.S. Lewis's goddaughter, and his *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* s dedicated to her.

Barfield thought back at the decade or more of his fruitful visits to the USA. Of the central figures in the Inklings, he was the only one, apart from Warnie Lewis, to have set foot in the new world.

I first went to America in 1964. . . . Quite a lot was happening, I was writing a lot of articles, I suppose—but then it was rather like starting a new life in America. Although I had no reputation in England, a certain part of the academic world in America, the English departments, quite lot of people... were already interested in my books. It was a strange experience, rather like the "ugly duckling"! . . . "I've read your books, of course"—that sort of thing, you know. And of course it was useful from a financial point of view; they paid you awfully well. I had no responsibilities other than teaching. That went on until 1974–5. . . . The last time was at SUNY [the State University of New York] . . . It went on for over ten years. I was going fairly regularly to America.<sup>22</sup>

As with paperback publication of Tolkien in the USA and the rise of the Tolkien phenomenon, Barfield's timing couldn't have been better. Thinkers of the counter-culture of the sixties, and others deeply concerned with the direction western culture was taking, were looking for an alternative to what Barfield called the "materialist paradigm" and Lewis had called "the Age of the Machine." Post-modernism was already in the air. Barfield, like Lewis and Tolkien, were in a sense pre-modern (though touching the heart of the culture). They could live imaginatively in the ideas and images of a pre-modern culture such as the medieval period or classical times, and help their contemporaries, through their insights and vision, to have a perspective upon the modern world. It was a way of seeing that, in Barfield's phrase, was not idolatrous. The modern person could be freed from "chronological snobbery." One of the marks of the Inklings was that they unaffectedly

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22 Oral history interview with Owen Barfield, The Wade Center, Wheaton College, Illinois.

and naturally spoke of older writers and thinkers (from Plato to Dante or Wordsworth) as if they were living. Their attitude was remarkable and attractive to many.

Warren Lewis, a key member of the Inklings, survived his brother by ten years. In his diary, Warnie told of a visit from Owen Barfield on Tuesday 29 July 1969, soon after his visit to Southern California. He had come for dinner with Warnie and to spend the night. Warnie found it pleasant to have “a long chat” with him again. He noticed that Barfield still had his usual mental alertness, but that he grumbled about not remembering names, and forgetting whether or not he had just met someone previously unknown. The two of the surviving Inklings soon got into deeper water, familiar to all who try to fathom Barfield’s thought and how it relates to his Christian belief:

In the course of our talk it emerged that he is that baffling thing, a practising Christian who is a believer in reincarnation; I objected that if there is reincarnation, the essential *me*, WHL dies, and therefore it amounts to the atheist belief that death ends everything. This he would not have, holding that in each life you add something fresh to the basic *you* from which you started. But what about the endless reincarnation of your ancestors, from which you inherit? I doubt if either of us understood the other, but I found it an interesting evening.<sup>23</sup>

### C.S. LEWIS’S DIVERGENCE ON MEANING AND TRUTH

Lewis particularly owed much to Barfield in thinking through the relation of truth and meaning, despite their differences on this subject. It is on the relationship between concept and meaning, and thought and imagination, that C. S. Lewis makes his most distinctive contribution to our understanding. He argues that good imagining is as vital as good thinking, and either is impoverished without the other. Lewis set out some seminal ideas on this topic in an essay in his book, *Réhabilitations and Other Essays* (1939):

For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition . . . . The truth we [win] by metaphor [can] not be greater than the truth of the metaphor itself; and . . . all our truth,

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23 Clyde S. Kilby and Marjorie Mead (Eds.) *Brothers and Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), entry for Tuesday 29 July, 1969.

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or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor. And thence, I confess, it does follow that if our thinking is ever true, then the metaphors by which we think must have been good metaphors.<sup>24</sup>

This quotation gives the core of the many suggestive ideas in the essay, many of which Lewis developed and refined in later years, leading to his definitive statement about literature, *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961). Some of the basic ideas can be indicated as follows. (1) There is a distinction between reason and imagination as regards roles—reason is to do with theoretical truths, imagination is to do with meanings. (2) There are standards of correctness, or norms, for the imagination, held tacitly and universally by human beings. (3) Meaning is a condition of the framing of truths; poor meanings make for poor thoughts. (4) The framing of truths in propositions necessitates the employment of metaphors supplied by the imagination. Language and thought necessarily relies upon metaphor (and presumably our ability to receive metaphor).

Lewis never agreed with Barfield that imagination is the organ of truth. He did believe however in the ability and importance of myth in making truths tangible and definite. Lewis regarded the historical Gospel narratives as unique in being true myth—myth that had become fact in first century Palestine. But that is another story. Lewis after his conversion did concede that imagination gives knowledge, even though it is not the organ of truth. It is important to distinguish between knowledge and theoretical truths (propositions, abstractions, generalizations). Myths for instance, as Barfield, Lewis and Tolkien believed, can remarkably illuminate truths, which is why Lewis retold the much loved myth of Cupid and Psyche in his novel, *Till We Have Faces*, and Barfield composed his poetic play, *Orpheus*, based on the Greek myth. It is why Tolkien created a plausible legendarium of the early ages of Middle-earth and its divine origin. Though imagination does not, for Lewis, have the function of revelation (contrary to what Barfield believed), it helps us to perceive and receive revelation from objective sources, sources outside of us. It follows that we may imaginatively respond to The Song of Solomon or the Gospel narratives, or to the natural world as God's handiwork, as the early scientists believed in the seventeenth century, and many distinguished scientists today still do.

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24 In "Bluspels and Flalansferes," republished in C.S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 251–265.

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One of Barfield's significant complaints against his friend was that he saw him as following, in effect, the errors of scientism; Lewis was "atomistic" in his empiricism as he divorced imagination and truth. To give a taste of the issues involved, we have Owen Barfield's own brilliant picture of what he saw as limitations in Lewis's makeup:

He had a pretty sharp line between his intellectual self and imaginative self; he accepted the conventionally scientific basis of knowledge and that all real knowledge depended on scientific evidence drawn from sense experience. Lewis would not admit that the kind of experience that came through imagination had anything to do with knowledge of reality; it just enabled you to have more reality to talk about as experience or subject matter. But when it came to converting that imaginative subject matter into actual knowledge you had to go back to the ordinary scientific method, to put it on the laboratory table, so to speak.<sup>25</sup>

This picture is, I feel, a little over-simplistic. Lewis in fact made it clear in a number of his writings at different periods that there were, in his view, different kinds of truthful knowledge, as when we recognize for example that a beautiful waterfall is sublime—an example given in his philosophical essay, *The Abolition of Man*. He found useful the French distinction between *savoir* and *connaître* as forms of "to know," where *connaître* is employed in being familiar with a person or thing, and *savoir* is knowledge about a person or thing. In Hebrew (retained in English translations of the Bible) "to know" is used for physical sexual intimacy and sensual experience, as well as the usual meaning of knowledge. The Bible typically calls us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" as well as to know its teaching about the maker of heaven and earth.

Like Barfield, Lewis did believe that mankind has moved away from a unitary consciousness into a divorce of subject and object. Theoretical reasoning abstracts from real things, real emotions, real events. In his theory of transposition (set out in his essay-sermon of that name) Lewis revealed his tangible vision of how all things—especially the natural and the supernatural—cohere. He saw this desirable unity, for example, in the Gospel narrative, dominated by incarnation and resurrection, where the quality of myth is not lost in the historical facticity of the events. There is no separation of story and history, myth and fact.

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25 G. B. Tennyson (Ed.), *Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1989) p. 135.

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Here is Lewis's big and Barfield-like picture, taken from *Miracles* not "Transposition" (a book Barfield was critical of but which arguably is one of Lewis's best):

There is . . . in the history of thought, as elsewhere, a pattern of death and rebirth. The old, richly imaginative thought which still survives in Plato has to submit to the deathlike, but indispensable, process of logical analysis. . . . But from this descent . . . if thought itself is to survive, there must be re-ascend and the Christian conception provides for this. Those who attain the glorious resurrection will see the dry bones clothed again with flesh, the fact and the myth remarried, the literal and the metaphorical rushing together.<sup>26</sup>

Lewis sees the incarnation of the divine in the human, and the bodily resurrection of the human being led by Christ, as the complete reconciliation of the abstract-concrete division, rather than Barfield's evolutionary development of consciousness.

To finish: doesn't Lewis sound close to Barfield (or Barfield to Lewis) in this snippet from one of Lewis's most famous passages?

We do not want merely to see beauty. . . . We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves. . . . If we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendour of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy.<sup>27</sup>

In an interview, Barfield acknowledged both Lewis's "Transposition" and "The Weight of Glory" as reminding the modern world that there is a spiritual reality.<sup>28</sup>

(c) Colin Duriez, 2016

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26 From Chapter 16, "Miracles of the New Creation" in *Miracles* (London: Collins Fontana, 1960), p. 165.

27 "The Weight of Glory," in C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (London: Fontana Books, 1965), pp. 106-7.

28 Conversation between G.B. Tennyson and Owen Barfield, "Conversations on C.S. Lewis," in *Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis*, p. 151.

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