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Owen Barfield and "Is Man a Myth?"

“What does Anthroposophy assume? That Nature unperceived is the unconscious, sleeping being of humanity; just as Nature perceived is the self-reflection of waking humanity.”

Romanticism Comes of Age p. 277

This quotation from Owen Barfield’s *Romanticism Comes of Age* represents his work in a nutshell. The figure of Owen Barfield is obscure even among Inklings aficionados. We all hear or read about but most do not study his writing enough to learn much more than Barfield was friends with C.S. Lewis throughout their adulthoods, the two had a seven-year philosophical dispute during their University days that was mentioned in *Surprised by Joy*, and that he was a peripheral member of the Inklings. At first brush it seems odd that he does not have the following of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, or even Charles Williams because his educational credentials were the equal of the other Inklings, he was a skilled writer, and one would expect that his acceptance and the esteem of the other Inklings would be sufficient to generate a greater interest in him.

A twofold explanation of disinterest is that: 1. His work, including his fiction, is primarily philosophical so it isn’t going to attract a popular audience. 2. His work espouses a mysticism based upon the work of Rudolf Steiner and critiques modern rational thought, the scientific method, and conceptions of evolution. Further, his repeated credit of Rudolf Steiner as a sufficient authority to accept his beliefs is difficult for most people to swallow. And, these characteristics of Barfield’s work are contrary to reader expectations of the Inklings as a group of Christian men with an interest in linguistics, myth, and writing.

About reader expectations of the Inklings, when Barfield joined the Anglican Church in the 1950s, it is telling that he said he could do so because “Christianity does not conflict with

Anthroposophy.” This expression of the priority of Anthroposophy in relationship to Christianity is evident in his writing.

The topic of this conference provides a great starting point for discussing the thought of Owen Barfield. The title of Mr. Tumnus’s book, *Is Man a Myth?* shows Narnia to be a world in search of truth. At the time of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the Narnians have old stories about a time when men lived in the land, and the prophecy was that Aslan would return to renew the land when the children of Adam and Eve were seen again.

Similar to Lewis’ Narnian tale, Barfield claims in his writing that humanity has changed, particularly since the Enlightenment, and even more the further back in time we go, due to an evolution of consciousness. His claim is that mankind is, in fact, the way by which the natural world becomes self-conscious. That is our role within the unified organism of the planet. And, those beliefs present the literal existence of a previous, and different man, a man as remote from us as the one proposed in the tome on Mr. Tumnus’s bookshelf is to Narnians.

The prophecy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is:

“...down at Cair Paravel there are four thrones and it's a saying in Narnia time out of mind that when two Sons of Adam and two Daughters of Eve sit on those four thrones, then it will be the end not only of the White Witch's reign but of her life...”
 —[Mr. Beaver^{\[src\]}](#)

But the remoteness in time of the ancient stories and the tyranny of the White Witch cast doubt on the belief that man ever existed and discourages a continued faith in the coming of Aslan.

The book on Tumnus' shelf titled *Is Man a Myth?* indicates that the historic reality of man is in question and becomes only an academic question in the worst sense of the phrase. The question is of little relevance in the lives and daily experiences of Narnians as they survive a one-hundred-year winter and keep their heads down from the tyranny of the White Witch.

For Barfield the rationalism of Modernity grips the minds of most people -- every bit as much as is seen in the tyranny of the White Witch in the work of his friend, C.S. Lewis -- first in the twentieth and now the twenty-first century, to the extent that no other world view is to be considered, especially among the educated. In his words:

“It is the world that they have been minding more and more through the last three or four hundred years—so assiduously, at last that they have begun to believe there is no other and even that there has never been any other.” *Unancestral Voice* p. 40.

In *History in English Words* he writes:

The rapid conquest of intellectual Europe, which was achieved, not only by the general idea of evolution but by the particular Darwinian theory of mechanical natural selection is a matter of some surprise when we consider that a full acceptance of it necessitated a reversal of practically every metaphysical idea and feeling likely to be present in nineteenth-century soul. P. 195. *History in English Words*

In Barfield’s view it is the loss of an Edenic relationship with nature. His belief is that mankind’s function is to be the Earth’s self-consciousness. Objects in the world do not exist the same, independent of our consciousness, as they do when we perceive them. He wrote that when we are engaged imaginatively, even things we typically think of as inert are given consciousness though our perception of them. With this said, the activity of human imagination and perception created and sustained a lost world of our pre-evolved ancestors.

He put forward that the Enlightenment represents the threshold of our current stage in the evolution of consciousness, which we have experienced for approximately 400 years. *Saving the Appearances* provides a studied description of our separation from all of the benefits of the pre-evolved consciousness of our ancestors caused by rationalism and the use of the scientific method as the sole gauge of knowledge.

Barfield acknowledges the benefits to engineering and medicine due to the scientific method, as well as the benefits of individual justice and self-direction possible only because of

the individualism of rationalism. However, his critique shows the defects of rationalism as the sole standard of knowledge. *Saving the Appearances* is about what Barfield perceives is the cost of rationalism. He points to the unhappy isolation that comes with individualism, as well as the loss of a mutual relationship with nature. There can be no relationship when nature is seen as an object separate from ourselves, is a thing to be studied, and to be harvested as raw material.

The result, according to Barfield, is alienation from the natural world, meaningful social interaction, and spirituality. He claims we give up as much as we gain with our rational world view. He also asserts that we can develop an imaginative sense of that pre-evolved perspective of the lost world to catch glimpses of what we once experienced naturally. Although we cannot roll back our consciousness to the pre-evolved stage, Barfield looked forward to the next state of evolution that will allow us to keep the benefits of rational thought and to reclaim the lost vision and lost world.

Underpinning Barfield's theories is his claim that the study of dead languages such as ancient Greek and Latin and an etymological study of English provides evidence of this change in consciousness. To cite just one, In *Worlds Apart*:

“All, or practically all, the words in our own language that now refer to inner experience can be traced back to a time when they had an external reference as well—spirit, understand, right, wrong, sadness; It doesn't matter which you take; you've only got to look them up in the etymological dictionary.” (p 50)

By which he meant the *Oxford English Dictionary*. He believed the ancients used concrete root-words that changed in meaning to their abstract current uses. The change toward abstraction is identified as evidence of an evolution in human consciousness that resulted in abstraction as a new mental skill.

His attempt to give us an idea of what the pre-evolved consciousness would have been like is found in *Romanticism Comes of Age*, a book I highly recommend.

“But if we try to imagine that ... we could actually be conscious *in* the growing of our hair, could feel it as movement in something the same way that we still feel our breathing as movement, we should be making an approach towards the difference between Greek consciousness...and our own.” (RCA 66)

I am not a Greek scholar and cannot confirm or deny his claim. We do get from this quotation a sense of what he believed the experience of pre-evolved humans would be compared to our own.

In *Worlds Apart* he describes our relationship with nature:

The human mind does not only *reflect* the macrocosm in its systems of ideas, it gives to it its whole significance, since it's only in the human mind that the process, which is reality, becomes self-conscious. It follows that, through its spearhead or growing-point of the human mind, the universe may in future influence, or perhaps --who knows? --conduct, its own evolution. P. 32 *Worlds Apart*

Barfield gives credit, ad nauseam, of his thoughts to the writings of the mystic Rudolf Steiner and was an active member of the Anthroposophical Society throughout his adulthood. Following is a summary of ideas found throughout Barfield's writing, described in the book *Man and Animal the Essential Difference* by Hermann Poppelbaum, which Barfield edited for the Steiner press. I mention it because this book provides a straightforward presentation of ideas that appear scattered throughout Barfield's work.

He believed the souls of all creatures exists eternally previous to their physical embodiment. With the help of spiritual beings, the souls of living things became tied to the physical universe much as Tolkien describes the Valar doing in the *Silmarillion*.

Barfield believed that everything -- even things we think of as inert -- have eternal consciousness. His claim is that the spirits of preexistent consciousness guided the physical

evolution of Earth from phases of liquefaction to solidity, and assisted souls in their transformation into becoming animals (he claims animals of the same species share a common soul). Meanwhile, he wrote, the strong souls are directed in their physical evolution to become humans (for which the individual ego is our defining characteristic).

In other words, souls direct their physical evolution over successive births and deaths to evolve into the animal their collective spirit wills to become. This includes placing their embodiments into environments that will assist the survival of that animal. And they develop physical features such claws or fins that perform specific tool-like functions for survival in the natural environment. Contrarily, mankind has developed general purpose features, such as the hands, thus allowing for varied and changing purpose of the individual, within a single life. As you can see, his conception of evolution is the opposite of Darwinism.

Barfield claimed repeatedly in interviews that his ideas never changed throughout his adulthood. This may account for some of the difficulties in reading him. *Saving the Appearances* is a difficult book to read because he makes claims that aren't elaborated or supported. Reading Steiner's *The Philosophy of Freedom*, which is mentioned in *Saving the Appearances* does help. But most Inklings fans aren't interested in going that far afield in their reading. However, Barfield's *Romanticism Comes of Age*, containing essays from the 1930s, is a useful bridge from the earlier work to *Saving the Appearances*, of the 1950s and beyond. It may be that he did not elaborate or substantiate himself in later books because to his mind, since his thoughts never changed, he thought it was enough to have written those things earlier and not to repeat himself in later works.

What are we to make of Barfield's work, especially to a group interested in the Inklings with a primary interest in the work of C.S. Lewis? In a blog entry titled *Inklings Odd-battery: Review of Worlds Apart*, at http://www.samizdat.qc.ca/cosmos/philo/Inklings_OddBattery.htm, the author, though evidently attempting to be even-handed, opined,

“In conclusion I would state that while Barfield certainly was an intelligent man and gifted philosopher, but given his beliefs, sad to say but it may not be a bad thing after all that he has been largely forgotten.” (Gosselin)

I don't agree with this evaluation. My approach to the work of Barfield is primarily an aesthetic one. It is similar to Tolkien's aesthetic approach to philology, only for me it is philosophy, not names and words to which I respond. What attracts me is that Barfield was a skilled writer with a fully developed world view. He puts our basic assumptions to test, which is good for maintaining our intellectual honesty. The questioning of our fundamental assumptions by such a forceful intellect may reveal weaknesses in our thinking that need to be addressed. If nothing is revealed, then we can have greater assurance in the beliefs put to trial.

Enjoyment of a writer is not predicated upon belief nor advocacy. To use television as an example, a viewer doesn't have to believe in extraterrestrial life or government conspiracies to enjoy *The X-Files*, and the immense popularity of *Breaking Bad* does not require an interest in the illegal drug trade. The same is true when reading about the idea of a literal, pre-evolved man and his lost world found in works of Owen Barfield. Just as one can enjoy reading about Narnians without believing in their existence, the philosophical theories of Barfield are diverting even though, to my mind, dubious. For me, that is reason enough to delve into the works of this productive and imaginative writer, even though he is less popular and less famous than some of the other Inklings.

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