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English People. Owen Barfield; *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol*. Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara; and *The Mythic Dimension*. Joseph Campbell

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Abstract

Three books, written about differing themes and released decades apart, still manage to work together to present a complex picture of the images of mythology and their effect upon the human race. The books are *English People*, a 1929 novel by Owen Barfield; *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol*, a 2009 study of environmentalism in the works of C.S. Lewis, by Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara; and *The Mythic...* [Read More](#)

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ENGLISH PEOPLE. Owen Barfield. Owen Barfield Literary Estate. 1929 [2016]. <http://www.owenbarfield.org/englishpeople/>. 342 p.

NARNIA AND THE FIELDS OF ARBOL: THE ENVIRONMENTAL VISION OF C.S. LEWIS. Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009. 304 p. 9780813125220. \$32.49.

THE MYTHIC DIMENSION: SELECTED ESSAYS 1959-1987. Joseph Campbell. Novato, CA. New World Library, 1993 [2017]. 348 p. 9781608684915. \$18.95.

THREE BOOKS, WRITTEN ABOUT DIFFERING THEMES and released decades apart, still manage to work together to present a complex picture of the images of mythology and their effect upon the human race. The books are *English People*, a 1929 novel by Owen Barfield; *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol*, a 2009 study of environmentalism in the works of C.S. Lewis, by Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara; and *The Mythic Dimension*, a selection of essays by Joseph Campbell spanning almost three decades.

Barfield's novel explores the roles of mental images in shaping the lives of individuals and society at large with a subplot about a cabal of social elites conspiring to manipulate society, to their own best ends at the expense of everyone else, through pictorial and written images. In the novel Barfield explores images from church doctrine, political campaigns, visual art, and gives the reader *The Rose on the Ash-Heap*,¹ a lengthy original folk tale that I can easily categorize as a piece of mythopoeic literature.

The study by Dickerson and O'Hara opens with a discussion of the power of storytelling to the instruction of moral, social, and religious ideas. Their book nicely balances the environmental vision of C.S. Lewis, including over thirty of his writings in the discussion, with their ongoing discussion of the role of stories to impress moral and spiritual values to readers and listeners.

Finally, the essays of Joseph Campbell show the reader how the mental images of all mythologies of all times and places provide meaning and healing to the lives of the individuals and the societies that produce them. The three books speak the same language as they explore ways that mental images can give meaning, be used for moral instruction or abused for personal advantage, and address the power of storytelling.

¹ *The Rose on the Ash-Heap* was in the original manuscript of *English People* but is not included in the PDFs of the novel on the Owen Barfield Literary Estate: Official Website because it was published separately in 2009 by Barfield Press UK.

Also, all three books explicitly express environmental values. Barfield's language approaches the lyrical when describing nature. Connected to this point, his portrayal of a cat named Merlin presents him as a character in his own right with the significance of any other minor character in the book. Barfield's portrayal of Merlin represents the moral significance of all creatures in our relationship with nature. In the subplot in which Merlin appears, he is taken to be used in rituals by a secret organization. The other characters rally around in a search and even put themselves at physical risk to retrieve him. The subplot shows their solidarity with animals, and condemns abuse, specifically vivisection. The original folk tale, *The Rose on the Ash-Heap*, at the end of the original manuscript, shows how mass production and consumption of cheap factory-made goods damage society and the environment. Together, the novel and the folk tale give insight into the role of environmentalism in spiritual and natural renewal.

In their book, Dickerson and O'Hara discuss the same ideas in their examination of our relationship to nature in the common spiritual development of humanity. Interestingly, Barfield's presentation was expressed in anthroposophical terms, while his good friend and fellow writer Lewis linked the same insight to Christianity. Also, environmental values and a presentation of mankind's relationship to nature are seen throughout the Campbell essays, particularly in the eighty-page *The Mystery Number of the Goddess*, arguably the principle chapter of the book. It describes anthropological findings on the power of the mother goddess during prehistory, as opposed to the male-dominated societies of our current era of written history. He discusses the values of the concept of Gaia as understood by the people of the Stone Age. He also lingers upon the many occurrences of the number 43,200, from the average beats of the human heart during a 24 hour day, to the number's appearance in various mythologies and ultimately to the fundamentals of music and the movements of the planets. The chapter argues for a Neolithic wisdom imperfectly carried into written mythologies that continue to guide us whether we understand their meaning or not. Campbell's ideas complement the entire cannon of Owen Barfield's work, including the novel *English People*.

OWEN BARFIELD'S 1929 UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT *English People* is a period-piece novel of ideas set in Post-WWI England that gives an inside view of British-educated young adults grappling with ideas and self-discovery. In the novel, Inklings fans can see, through Barfield's eyes, an important time period of his development shared with other Inklings. Despite being unpublished, *English People* is a tightly written book of professional quality that fits well with his many philosophical works and hews closer to a traditional novel than any of the titles of his "Burgeon trilogy." Yet *English People* is not plot-driven popular

fiction. Instead, the novel principally explores Barfield's intellectual concerns, such as the relationship of meaning to words and symbols, spirituality, and the evolution of consciousness. As a book of ideas, the novel is a hybrid of philosophical dialogue and fiction comparable to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig, which has been a well-read success for decades. Prompting this part of the review is the novel's first-time availability with its appearance on the Owen Barfield Literary Estate: Official Website during 2016. The book is a significant contribution to both Barfield and Inklings studies.

In 1929 Barfield completed the 550-page manuscript of *English People* and submitted it to publishers. After universal rejection, he saw that he could not support his family as a writer and so joined his father's law firm, where he worked until he retired. For Barfield fans, the availability of the book satisfies our curiosity about a known unpublished work.²

The book follows the Trinder family, comprising two brothers, a sister, and a wife, and shows their personal interactions as they engage with their various intellectual and emotional issues. In *Owen Barfield: Romanticism Comes of Age* the biographer Simon Blaxland-de Lange wrote of the novel:

'English People' [sic] is to all intents and purposes an imaginative depiction of its author's own soul journey, as expressed through the four principal characters, each of whom represents a certain facet of Barfield himself. (Blaxland-de Lange 204)

The title of the novel refers to Barfield's characterization of English people as habitually divorcing their thoughts from their feelings. The characters are part of a culture that misuses reason by applying it to matters of the heart, resulting in the unhappiness and strife portrayed.

The novel opens with John Trinder preparing for ordination into the Anglican Church. His guiding light is the conviction from an early age that "all expressions of thought, whether verbal or pictorial, possess an artificial permanence, which is not characteristic of the thing expressed" (Barfield 23). Essentially, the meaning of all spoken and written language changes as the words pass from person to person or from one time to another. John is ordained despite his disbelief in the Church doctrine he is to represent. He uses his conviction about the fluidity of meaning in words to convince himself that he is not being disingenuous. But his family knows the truth.

This instability of meaning leads him to seek a spirituality in which the meaning is stable. His approach is through the contemplation of symbols and

² A 36-page, chapter-by-chapter summary of the novel can be found in *Owen Barfield Romanticism Come of Age: A Biography* by Simon Blaxland-de Lange (205-241).

by participating in the drama of liturgy: “pictures and symbols may be informed with much more life and reality than abstract ideas. A symbol or an act is not misinterpreted and turned into nonsense as easily as a verbal formula” (Barfield 23).

The portrayal of John Trinder is an ongoing exploration of the meaning of symbols and their effect upon individuals and upon society. However, his exploration is not benign. John’s intellectual obsession with symbolism and his attempt to apply his philosophy to his parish duties and to his married life make him into an ineffective pastor and cause conflict between him and his wife. The intensity of their disagreement is described:

So serious was the difference that this apparently academic question of a ‘meaning’ in pictures had become taboo between them. [...] if ever it intruded into their conversations, an instinct immediately arose in Margaret to tighten up the substance of her soul and mobilize all her resources against him. (Barfield 129)

Barfield the philosopher comes through in the thoughts and argumentation of John Trinder. Barfield the novelist also comes through in the writing, when he shows sympathy for Margaret and portrays her exasperation as she fights for her marriage against John’s misuse of his intellect in a place where the heart belongs. Margaret Trinder is no cypher to her husband in the novel. She engages the issues independently and finds her own action-oriented solutions.

Contrarily, Janet Trinder, the sister, is a cypher, because she has a stutter that interferes with her ability to contribute to the fast-paced discussions of her brothers. Barfield provides the painful details of the thoughts of this depressed woman, as she resents John for his ordination, which she views as both hypocritical and as a betrayal of the memory of their militantly atheistic father. Janet has difficulty interacting with Margaret, her new sister-in-law, and must make new living arrangements as her brothers move on with their lives. Barfield paints a realistic picture of the difficult progress that Janet undergoes to become self-reliant by engaging in work outside of the home and making a life for herself. Her development leads to work as the assistant of a national political figure. Her duties require lengthy travel abroad as she assists in the interests of her employer and his political party, by which time she is no longer a cypher.

Unlike his siblings, Humphrey Trinder, the elder brother, is outgoing socially and given more to following his heart. He was a medical student previous to WWI and suffers the results of shell shock from his service as a medic. Upon returning home he does not complete his studies nor stick with the general medical practice that he starts because he does not know what he wants

to do. When the novel opens, Humphrey is training to become a psychotherapist. Separately, he finds direction in his life by participating in a discussion group for people who want to change the world. Barfield is describing the types of groups that he and others of his generation attended on various subjects. During the meetings Humphrey is introduced to and becomes enamored of the work of a mystic named Karl Brockmann, a thinly disguised version of Rudolf Steiner, the philosopher who so deeply influenced Barfield.

The meetings precipitate many conversations between Humphrey and his teacher, brother, and friends over many topics. He defends a variety of ideas discovered during his wide-ranging intellectual explorations through reading. The ideas include Freudianism, free love, a critique of meaningless intellectual and medical writing, Kantianism, and more. Humphrey's explorations ultimately lead him to the mystical writings of Karl Brockmann. His conversations, especially with his friend Gerald Marston, must have mirrored Barfield's Great War arguments with C.S. Lewis. Humphrey discusses the role of mythology to spirituality with all of the other characters, analyzes the misuse of symbols by political leaders to manipulate society, and wrestles with what to do with his life. Dedication to the teachings of the mystic grows throughout the novel, gives him the purpose he is seeking, and then he proselytizes the teachings to his brother John and his friend Gerald Marston, to opposite results. The work of Karl Brockmann leads Humphrey to practice a fictional description of Anthroposophical medicine:

Medicine was a very different proposition, when one began to see behind the physical organ [...] an immense process of cosmic and spiritual evolution; when one began to realise that no part of the human body could be properly understood without grasping its special relation to the stars, and planets—and to the human soul. (Barfield 166)

The essential theory is that physical illness originates with imbalances between the three spirit-bodies and the physical one. The imbalances must be corrected before physical healing can occur. The Anthroposophical belief is that the effect of imbalances between the three spirit bodies to the physical one explains both why traditional medicine often doesn't work and explains ailments that cannot be accounted for with traditional medicine.

The characters and their conflicts make for a complex novel that will appeal especially to readers with an interest in philosophy and the role of images to influence and develop a person. Blaxland-de Lange rightfully claims the book is a treasure-trove for anyone interested in doing a psychoanalytical interpretation of Owen Barfield, the author. It is also a great new starting place for readers interested in studying the work of Owen Barfield. *English People* is a demanding book but repays the investment of the reader's time and effort. This

book will stand up to being reread and is a valuable contribution to both Barfield and Inklings studies.³

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO *NARNIA AND THE FIELDS OF ARBOL: The Environmental Vision of C. S. Lewis* the authors list three reasons for writing the book. One is to argue that Lewis had an environmental vision and to show its presence throughout his fiction. The second is to assert that environmentalism is a Christian value in answer to decades of criticisms by non-Christians who follow the writing of Lynn White Jr. The authors are responding to White's much-anthologized 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," that places the blame for the "ecological crisis" on Christianity and the downstream effects of its understanding of God and the relationship of man to nature (11-12). The third is a call for Christians to actively steward nature instead of only harvesting it for natural resources. The book is a transparent expression of the authors' Christian values, which they contend are the foundations of both Lewis's and their own spiritual connections to nature. Their intention expressed in *Building Bridges*, the last section of the *Introduction*, is to use their discussion of the commonly held love of nature as one way to foster understanding between both religious and nonreligious people who wish to be connected with nature and to contribute to its health.

The book thoughtfully presents the ecological values in Lewis's fiction. Those values require a discussion of his understanding that a human interconnectedness with nature plays an essential role in spiritual life. The authors' emphasis upon the connection of human spirituality and nature in Lewis's fiction convincingly demonstrates that Lewis's understanding of nature cannot be discussed without including his Christianity. The authors do an excellent job of bringing in Christianity only as needed for a complete treatment of the topics of Lewis's environmentalism, ecology, and agrarianism. If anything, they have a tendency to linger unnecessarily when discussing other works of environmental literature. They often buttress their points by quoting from and discussing passages from similar works. These discussions add depth to the overall discussion, demonstrate their knowledge of environmental issues, and expresses the sincerity of the authors' dedication to nature and environmentalism.

A value of the book beyond its overall argument is that it can be used as an engaging tour of Lewis's fictional works using environmental themes to shape the tour. The authors fulfill their promise of showing Lewis's fully

³ Special thanks to the Owen Barfield Literary Estate for making the book available, and to Tiffany Brook Martin and John D. Rateliff for their work in preparing it for upload in PDF format.

developed environmental vision in his fiction and, more importantly, demonstrate their self-acknowledged expression of Owen Barfield's observation that "one could say that what C.S. Lewis thought about *anything* touched on what he thought about *everything*" (19) I write 'more importantly', because one of the most interesting characteristics of Dickerson and O'Hara's book is their assertion that C.S. Lewis's environmental vision is interwoven into the fabric of all of his fiction and thereby shows the depth to which Lewis thought about and loved nature. The thread of the book points Lewis readers to remember the pleasure that we get from descriptions of nature or expressions of environmental, ecological, and agrarian values. The cumulative result of discussing the host of images from Lewis's writings, especially his fiction, upon the reader is more convincing than the rational argument of the book alone. In the introduction, the authors contend that the environmental vision of Lewis arose from his conversion to Christianity; prior to that, the young atheist viewed nature solely as a resource to be harvested and used for raw materials.

The authors begin the book with a justification for focusing upon Lewis's fiction instead of his apologetic or academic work. According to the writers, stories—rather than rational argumentation and facts—instruct, resonate with, and move people to actionable change by filling the imagination with values and life lessons. Therefore, Lewis's fiction is the best medium to present Lewis's environmental theory. On a related note the story-centric instruction falls in line neatly with J.R.R. Tolkien's assertion of the worth of fantasy tales in "On Fairy-stories."

FINALLY, *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959-1987* by Joseph Campbell is a substantial book that can be used as the foundation of a study of mythology. In fact, the notes tell us that the opening chapter, *Comparative Mythology as an Introduction to Cross-Cultural Studies*, was originally presented as an opening lecture describing the origin and development of his course on mythology, to his students at Sarah Lawrence College, along with an outline of how the course will proceed. At the other end of the book, the appendix provides Campbell's extensive reading list for his class on mythology. These alone are valuable to the student of mythology and more specifically to students of the work of Joseph Campbell, a body of writing that has been so influential to literary and pop culture.

Campbell's work can also bridge the two books previously discussed in this review. His practical literary and anthropological approach to mythology lies between the New-Age values of Owen Barfield with his Anthroposophical spirituality and C.S. Lewis's conservative Christianity as described by Dickerson and O'Hara. Campbell's approach was partially a product of the era of his young adult life. He was an undergraduate in 1925, which made him a near-

contemporary of Barfield and Lewis. He was a child of Modernism, indicated by his years of dedicated study of James Joyce and Thomas Mann and his inclusion of their works as mythologies of our time, a thing he argues for in *Erotic Irony and Mythic Forms in the Art of Thomas Mann*, the last chapter.

Campbell taught that mythologies can provide meaning to our individual lives and our societies and that stories possess healing power. But Campbell usually sidestepped questions intended to pin him to any expression of traditional religious belief or practice. Contrarily, he often wrote of eastern religions in particularly positive terms, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and the practice of Yoga. For example, in *The Interpretation of Symbolic Forms* he describes the parts of the voicing of the word "OM" of meditation, and uses the alternative spelling "AUM" in his explanation of the meaning of the sounds of each letter and of the whole word in the practice of meditation.

His perspectives upon mythology speak the same language as we find in Barfield's canon of work. For example, several of Campbell's essays discuss the pre-historical role of the Goddess and Gaia to the spiritual life of humanity. And Campbell's description of anthropological findings can be used as evidence of Barfield's belief in the evolution of consciousness. Nonetheless, Campbell was far from embracing anything like Barfield's Anthroposophy.

I recommend all three of the books discussed in this review. *English People*, an exciting new contribution to Barfield and Inklings studies, is a tightly written book of ideas that addresses the power of symbol to shape individuals and also points to the role of environmental values to spiritual evolution. *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol: The Environmental Vision of C.S. Lewis* presents Lewis's environmental vision in his fiction and other writings and also asserts the power of story-telling. The authors highlight Lewis's environmental vision as a give-and-take relationship with nature that contributes to the health of nature and the development of human spirituality. Finally, *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959-1987* superbly illustrates the power of story and imagery to provide meaning to life and to give instruction on morality and spirituality. Campbell's belief in the value of storytelling is shared by Barfield, Lewis, and Dickerson and O'Hara. That commonality, as well as similarities of approach to their subject, make reading the three books of this essay into a conversation that spans the decades and the personalities of all of the authors.

—Phillip Fitzsimmons

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