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Book Reviews

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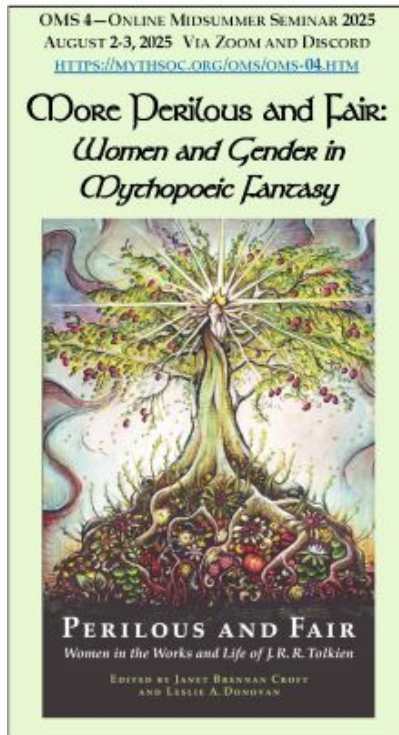
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Book Reviews

Abstract

The Role of Imagination in Culture and Society: Owen Barfield's Early Work. Astrid Diener. Reviewed by David Lavery.

To Michal from Serge: Letters from Charles Williams to His Wife Florence, 1939-1945. ed. Roma King. Reviewed by Scott McLaren.

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Book Reviews

Astrid Diener, *The Role of Imagination in Culture and Society: Owen Barfield's Early Work*. Leipzig Explorations in Literature and Culture 6. Glienicke/Berlin and Cambridge: Galda + Wilch Verlag, 2002. 224pp. ISBN 1931255067

Readers of this journal may recognize the name of the author of this new monograph investigating the early work of Owen Barfield (1898-1997), Inkling fellow-traveler, C. S. Lewis's "second friend," and one of the most neglected important thinkers of the 20th Century. Her interview with Barfield (included as an appendix in this volume) appeared originally in *Mythlore* in 1995 (20.4: 14-19). But there was little in that brief conversation, mostly focusing on the contemporary context of Barfield's *Poetic Diction*, that would predict this important, ground-breaking study.

Readers of Barfield will no doubt be familiar with his repeated insistence that, in his seventy-year career as a writer, he had never significantly changed: unlike a Wittgenstein or Heidegger, "there is no 'late Barfield' and 'early Barfield,'" as he puts it in a letter quoted by Diener (17). Diener's book, originally an Oxford D. Phil. dissertation, and written in the author's second language, casts serious doubt on this received wisdom. She carefully considers almost completely ignored pieces written by Barfield in the 20s and early 30s, during a period after his graduation from Oxford but before he abandoned his dream of becoming a full-time writer to join his father's law firm in London. Major works—*History in English Words* (1926), *Poetic Diction* (1928)—are not what captures Diener's attention. She dwells instead on such short fiction as "Dope," "The Devastated Area," "Seven Letters," the novel *The Silver Trumpet* (Barfield's first published book [1925]), and non-fiction such as "Some Elements of Decadence," a review of Wilfred Owen's poetry, "The Lesson of South Wales," and *Danger, Ugliness and Waste*. In the process she introduces us to a writer even the small circle of Barfieldians are not likely to recognize.

The Barfield of Diener's study is a young intellectual wrestling not with original and final participation, polarity, logomorphism, chronological snobbery, the Residue of Unresolved Positivism (RUP), and the evolution of consciousness but with economic issues, the nature of consumption, contemporary manifestations of philosophical dualism, the future of leisure, Matthew Arnold's concept of culture,

Lost Generation pessimism, industrial development, advertising, and the promise of technology.

Diener illuminates as well Barfield's indebtedness to three of his great influences, establishing new links between Barfield's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's confrontations with dualistic thought, examining Barfield and Lewis's encounter with the contemporary philosophical climate, and delineating important similarities in Barfield and Rudolf Steiner's struggle to surmount the widening gap between idealism and practicality. (Almost in passing, Diener establishes convincing internal evidence for the date of Barfield's much disputed first exposure to Steiner and Anthroposophy.) By no means uncritical—Diener accuses the early Barfield of a tendency toward evasiveness—she argues that Barfield's development as a thinker shows him aware of his weaknesses and striving to go beyond them in his later work.

Barfieldians spend a great deal of their energy trying to account for the astonishing ignorance of his achievement among those who should appreciate his work. Diener faults the near absence of Barfield from Humphrey Carpenter's seminal book on the Inklings as a contributing factor, but the real cause may be our disregard for the writings her study seeks to foreground. For to know them forces us to rethink Barfield's place in modern thought and, in addition, that of his mentor/collaborator Rudolf Steiner. As Diener explains in the book's closing lines:

These writings reveal an author who, in contrast to many of his more pessimistic contemporaries, welcomed change and technical progress. He welcomed them as positive means to the end of creating those conditions which would make the experience of wholeness and participation possible in modern life. For this reason, despite the weakness in the area of practical detail already noted, Barfield ultimately has to count as an essentially progressive and modern thinker.

Unfortunately, his practical reform writings have so far been completely neglected in scholarship. This is perhaps not surprising. Indeed, our present inability to appreciate the practical reform aspect of his thought may itself result from the dualism which he himself had hoped to overcome.

Such partiality has had serious consequences, and not just for Barfield's reputation: "he has become obscure and esoteric and has lost his concrete relevance in the practical world of our daily experience. He has thus suffered a similar fate to that of Rudolf Steiner—a fate which neither he nor his predecessor deserves" (174).

The notion that there was essentially no development in Barfield's long career is not the only truism Diener's book subverts. It has long been assumed that all the interest in Owen Barfield was North American. American universities, after all, inspired Barfield's post-retirement resurgence; most prominent Barfieldians, from G. B. Tennyson to Shirley Sugerman, Tom Kranidas, Howard Nemerov, and Lionel Adey, were from the United States or Canada; and an American press (Wesleyan) kept Barfield's work in print. But Diener's interest in Owen Barfield began in Freiburg—where Professor Elmar Schenkel, who edits the book series which produced *The Role of Imagination*, was her mentor—and culminated at Oxford, under the direction of Professor A. D. Nuttall. (Both Schenkel and Nuttall have contributed to Diener's book, writing the Afterword and Foreword, respectively). This German and British involvement bodes well for the future advancement of "Barfield studies." If such is to come, it seems indisputable that Astrid Diener's book will be seen as a watershed study.

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King, Roma, ed. *To Michal from Serge: Letters from Charles Williams to His Wife Florence, 1939-1945*. Kent: Kent State UP, 2002. ix, 315pp. \$65.00. ISBN: 0873387120

In this book King brings together an extremely important collection of letters written by Charles Williams during his years in Oxford: in total, it is a selection of 680 letters to his wife Florence Conway composed between 1939 and Williams's death in 1945. King insists in the preface that he selected them without bias, nor was he aiming at the creation of an image of Williams that he or others might find more or less palatable. In the absence of an examination of the archival materials themselves, this claim strikes me as credible and honest. In the face of powerful internal evidence to the contrary, however, King also insists that the letters are primarily "love letters" and that Williams's "depth of emotion and sincerity" cannot be doubted (4-5). The texts of the letters themselves (almost every one of which expresses worry over money), the fact that they exist only because Michal refused to accompany her husband (and eventually her son) to Oxford, along with the intimate relationships Williams continued to form with young women like Lois

Lang-Sims during this time, together make this general thesis less than convincing. Indeed, weaving its way throughout the letters one even finds a continual effort on Williams's part to dismiss firm suspicions of marital infidelity. He attempts to deflect accusations not only about his old flame Phyllis Jones (11 Dec 1939) but others as well (see, for example, 29 April 1940).

What emerges in these letters, therefore, is not an example of uxorious constancy, but something closer to the image of a deeply conflicted man. Although he never ceases in his attempts to placate Michal with protestations of love, both parties acknowledge that this love exists primarily on an abstracted level. Williams writes:

[. . .] I do not know that you can very well complain if you are the cause of poems on marriage and the Good Life instead of on yourself directly: no, I do not. Everyone else observes the relation. Another poet might have done it another way; he would have been the lesser. So that if you become a Doctrine, well, it cannot be helped. (25 Sept 1940)

The picture of Michal that emerges, on the other hand, is of an ill-tempered woman capable of, at times, strikingly cruel behavior. Mere indifference certainly, but even active dislike for Williams's work stands out in countless small and several large ways. For example, throughout the first half of 1940, Williams completed and saw his play *Terror of Light* staged. Knowing Williams had taken much trouble over the play and had also insisted that it be dedicated to their son Michael from both parents, Michal wrote to a friend on 16 May 1940 that, "The Play—Terror of Light—as I saw it on Saturday was a very bad play. Too many long cumbersome sentences, too much that was facetious, & too much Charles Williams being more than a little willful & intellectually superior" (see 17 November 39 note 81). It is difficult to imagine a more devastating criticism of a writer's work than to be told that it contains too much of the playwright himself "being willful & intellectually superior." We know that Isabel Douglas, a friend of the Williamses who settled in Oxford during the war, took strong exception to Michal's unkind remarks. Williams, in what can only be described as a moment of embarrassing weakness, defends his wife's remarks and even commiserates with her about Isabel's rebuke. He first thanks her for her remarks (9 May 1940) and then takes her side against Isabel, saying, "Well, as a play it's pretty bad, but it has its moments!" (15 May 1940). That Williams really was hurt by Michal's criticism of his play is more than suggested in his letter of 6 July 1940 where he promises that his *World's Classics* introduction to Milton will not be "wilful or facetious or intellectually proud"—he does not

promise, however, to cease being Charles Williams. Nor does he let it go at that. In the last paragraph he writes “I shall think of you & pray for you; and I have always been proud of you & am almost wilful with pride & arrogance about you [. . .]”—throwing these attributes not only in a positive light juxtaposed to prayer, but directing them wholly at her—almost as though he wishes to shame her, somehow, for her earlier criticism but not quite having the courage to be wholly direct. Williams’s growing acceptance of his wife’s dislike for his work is reflected by his eventual reluctance to mention any of his work except to say that it might bring in money. He passes along to Michal news of the tremendously favourable reception of his Oxford lectures on Milton, though she can only laugh at them (9 Feb 1940); and he even admits that his work, which he claims finds its source in her, is ironically “scorned” by her (18 April 1940).

Apart from King’s introduction which steers the reader in much the wrong direction, the book is an indispensable help to understanding Williams’s other work and his own reasons for writing. The critical apparatus, too, is crucial and very helpful. Instead of endnotes, however, footnotes would have been much more welcome since the reader must flip back and forth incessantly. I noticed two typographical errors. Note 63 for the group of letters from 1939 exists twice in the text and only once in the endnotes themselves. Clearly something is missing. And, strangely, G. K. Chesterton’s first name is given as “George” in the glossary of persons at the end of the book.

In sum, these letters provide a unique window into the quality of Williams’s marriage in these last few years of his life. They are written carefully, delicately, and always cordially. Reading them one feels a sense of empathy for the writer and the difficult balance he strove to maintain in his life between work and scholarship, marriage and kin. This book will doubtless become a standard reference work for scholars and anyone else wishing to understand this writer more fully.

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