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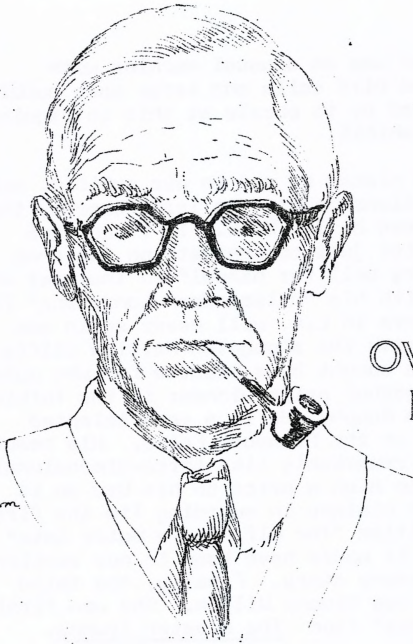
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Owen Barfield in Southern California



OWEN BARFIELD IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

by Rand Kuhl

Owen Barfield remembers well the day after C. S. Lewis died. He was feeling quite solemn as one would expect of a person who had just lost a great and close friend. Being alone in his room, Barfield began to reread several letters he had received from Lewis. After reading two or three, "I found myself laughing out loud," said Barfield, they have "this tremendously strong sense of the comic. . . .so delightful somehow; so very much the man." This he says is the first mental association that occurs to him whenever he hears the name, Lewis—the "strong sense of the comic."

Owen Barfield was in Southern California speaking to a meeting of the Conference on Christianity and Literature at Redlands University in the Spring of 1969. The elderly, slight, and clean-shaven man with bushy gray eyebrows and a keen sense of humor of his own looked at home among the green and golden overstuffed chairs and wood-panelled walls in the Browsing Room of the Hall of Letters. His somewhat grainy voice conducted us through a lecture of fascinating digressions which were gathered together under the title—"C. S. Lewis and His Friends".

Three general areas were covered: Lewis's feelings about group friendship and a pre-Inklings group of friends; the work, views, and person of C. S. Lewis; and a tentative approach to the Oxford Christians and their relationship to the Romantic Impulse. C. S. Lewis was a man to whom friendship meant a great deal, but Barfield was more specific. "I am thinking more of what one might call group friendship; friendship between a group of four or five or more people who meet fairly regularly." Lewis was fond of some comments on friendship made by Charles Lamb in a letter to William Wordsworth. Lamb said, "The going away of friends does not make the remainder more precious. It takes from them a common link. A, B, and C make a party. A dies. B not only loses A, but all A's part in C. C loses A's part in B." The idea of each member having a stake in each other member of the group was a concept that Lewis valued highly, and this "mutual, communal friendship" manifested itself more than once in Lewis's life.

The Inklings is the most well known of Lewis's groups of friends, but there was another group, an earlier (middle and late 1920's) group of friends who met annually for a spring walking tour of some four to five days duration. The group so often walked on the chalk hills in the south of England that they became known as, in Barfield's words, The Cretaceous Perambulators. The procedure for any one of the tours is uncomplicated. After getting up and packing a light lunch of bread and cheese, the group (ranging from two to seven people) would take off for a 10 to 25-mile jaunt. On the way they would stop at a pub to get some beer for lunch because Lewis had to have beer with his lunch. One of Barfield's most familiar memories of Lewis involves lunch-time beer and career. The English pubs close up shop at 2:00 PM and that means no beer for the hot, weary traveler. This time it was ten minutes to two o'clock; a village was spotted in the distance, about a mile and a half away. Barfield and another companion broke into helpless laughter as Lewis took off like an arrow toward the village in a desperate attempt to get there before the pub closed. During the day they walked, talked, and looked about either singly or with a companion, but at night the whole company gathered around the dinner table and exchanged the distillations of the day's experiences in a manner which varied between "stupid hilarity and jocularity". Once in a while the talk would wax serious; however, it would soon soar into hilarity again.

Lewis affected the groups he was part of in two ways. First, unconsciously, unobtrusively, by sheer force of personality and "a rather loud voice when he was in high spirits", Lewis would set the tone and decide the topic of conversation. On one occasion when the topic was not to Lewis's liking (it could have been politics or economics) he merely turned aside, picked up a book, and proceeded to read it instead of talk. At another time when just three of them, Barfield, Lewis, and Tolkien, were out walking, Barfield was slightly miffed at Lewis's and Tolkien's lack of interest in the political and social life around them. It was 1927 or 1928 Barfield said and "I remember being very worried at that time about the defeatist and apathetic attitude of the intelligentsia in England to what was going on in Germany and what was threatening to go on." And there Lewis and Tolkien were lolling back boasting about never reading newspapers. Out loud, in French, Barfield said, "Treason or betrayal of the educated classes", hoping to break through their veneer. Nevertheless, not only did Barfield fail to make his point about social unconcern, but Lewis and Tolkien twisted the intention of the little slogan until it meant for them the type of people who are interested in and firmly support the wrong kind of literature.

The second way Lewis affected a group was that whatever subject was brought up, he always took it to the point where it was a moral issue or problem. Barfield put it this way, Lewis had the "proclivity to concentrate on the moral aspect of any issue." If one did not think a moral issue was involved, Lewis was there to remind him that there ought to be. Lewis had a very high view of what our everyday choices mean in terms of eternity: every choice we make all day long is helping us along the path to Heaven or Hell. His emphasis then was to be aware of the moral ramifications in all choices; his neighbors' glory was as important as his own.

In discussing Lewis's work Barfield made some observations (a bulk of them are in the Introductory essay in Light on C. S. Lewis). In pinning the term anti-historicist on Lewis, Barfield had a precise definition of it in mind: the antihistoricist says that History is not a progression where the human soul grows closer to God. (Here Barfield expressed modest surprise that Lewis values his (Barfield's) books so highly because he is himself a decided historicist who is interested in the things Lewis is not: social, intellectual, and literary movements and periods.) Although Barfield has called Lewis an anti-historicist, he also credits him for being concerned as to whether or not his students or readers have adequate preparation for entering, with real empathy, the thinking of the particular temporal environment of a specific piece of literature. Lewis's goal is getting at what a piece of literature actually said. Barfield said that Lewis's essays on Sir Walter Scott and Rudyard Kipling

are among his best, and that *Pilgrims Regress* contains "some of the most brilliant writing he gave us." The Lewis letters were also praised, there was nobody I have known "who had the art of writing a letter just as though he were talking to you."

Perhaps, the most interesting part of Barfield's talk, was a tentative evaluation of "the Oxford Christians, if that is the right name:"

When I first began to realize, coming over here upon two years in succession and from reading, that people here and there were talking about -oh- titles like 'the Oxford Christians',... 'Romantic Theology', 'the School of Romantic Religion' in reference particularly, perhaps exclusively, to... Lewis, Charles Williams, and Tolkien, and, apparently, myself as... an accredited member... I found it rather amusing when I first began to hear people talking about this, and found that they were writing dissertations and so forth. But I have been beginning to wonder, to put it crudely, whether there isn't something in it!

His "wonder" was influenced by an essay written by J. G. Lawlor on Joy in Coleridge and Lewis and by an as yet unpublished book by R. J. Reilly. Barfield continues, "The question would be, did something happen... to the heritage of the Romantic Impulse in connection with this group of people and their writings? Was there something like... a development that was also a kind of christening of that heritage taking place in that period in Oxford through the minds of these men? Was something happening that hadn't quite happened before? ... With these Oxford Christians?" If the answer is yes, and that seemed to be the way Barfield was leaning, then we can examine four recognizable strands of the Romantic Impulse.

1. The yearning for the infinite and unattainable. Shelley and Byron from an earlier time would be joined by C. S. Lewis and his concept of Joy. Barfield said that Lewis discovered that "Joy is in the actual yearning or longing itself." This was the only place I found myself in strong disagreement with Barfield; *Surprised by Joy* by Lewis says on its last page, "But what, in conclusion, of Joy? ... To tell you the truth, the subject has lost nearly all interest for me since I became a Christian. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer."
2. The conviction of the dignity of man and his part in the future history of the world conceived as a kind of progress towards increasing immanence of the divine in the human. Barfield put himself here.
3. The idealization of love between the sexes. Charles Williams carries it farther to the Doctrine of the Way of Affirmation of Images.
4. The opposite of tragedy—the happy ending. Or as Tolkien, who belongs here, puts it, this is the Eucatastrophe.

"All this has come to seem a little more serious to me," said Barfield, it "has clothed itself... with flesh especially in connection with a sentence" in R. J. Reilly's work "where he sums up by saying, 'What Joy is to C. S. Lewis and Man is to Barfield, Love is to Charles Williams'."

And with applause, with surging outside into the late afternoon, with blowing parachute-like dandelion seeds onto the wind, and with piling into cars, the day pressed on to its consummation.

