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## ***What Barfield Thought: An Introduction to the Work of Owen Barfield*, by Landon Loftin and Max Leyf**

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### *What Barfield Thought: An Introduction to the Work of Owen Barfield*, by Landon Loftin and Max Leyf

#### Abstract

Landon Loftin and Max Leyf's *What Barfield Thought* serves as an introduction to the key themes and concepts running through the work of Owen Barfield, the so-called "first and last Inklings." This digestible yet rigorous volume includes chapters on Barfield's primary areas of interest: Language, Poetry, The Evolution of Consciousness, Final Participation, and Science, Technology, and the Crisis of Meaning. With each chapter building on the last, this study makes an excellent primer to Barfield's often difficult and esoteric ideas.

#### Additional Keywords

Philology; Philosophy; Review; Anthroposophy

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**WHAT BARFIELD THOUGHT: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF OWEN BARFIELD.** Landon Loftin and Max Leyf. Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2023. 116 p. ISBN 9781666736762. \$19.00.

OWEN BARFIELD IS COMMONLY CALLED “the first and last Inkling” (20n43). This is partly due to his long life and extraordinary output—born in 1898, he met and befriended Cecil Harwood during public school, bonding over a shared fascination with poetic language and foreshadowing their future circle of mutual friends, the Inklings (10). He died in 1997 at the age of ninety-nine after publishing over twenty books and outliving many of his fellow Inklings by decades (19). Indeed, his life and thought spans the end of the Victorian age to nearly the turn of the millennium. In a sense, Barfield embodies the literal beginning and end of one of the most impactful literary movements of the twentieth century.

But Barfield is “first and last” in a deeper, more abstract sense, too. Diana Glycer, for one, has argued that Barfield serves as the “intellectual center” of the Inklings (qtd. 20), an original thinker whose early work both anticipated and influenced many of their shared interests and ideas. So Barfield can be demonstrated to be the *first* Inkling: the “foundational” member whose philosophy influenced “the unintended theological and literary movement that, to this day, remains their living legacy” (20). But he also remains the *last* of the major Inklings to be fully explored, understood, and appreciated. This may be due in part to the density of Barfield’s ideas and style: C.S. Lewis described his writing as “dark, labyrinthine,” and “pertinacious” (qtd. 1). But it is also due to Barfield’s connection with more famous writers and thinkers—his personal friends Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, his philosophical heroes such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Rudolf Steiner, and even some of his admirers, including W.H. Auden and T.S. Eliot, to name a few (1, 111). Given the difficulty of grasping Barfield’s ideas, it is perhaps easier to understand him in conversation with these other, more approachable writers and poets rather than grapple with him directly, with the unfortunate consequence that Barfield’s work has often been overshadowed or read merely as a helpful appendix to understanding the work of others.

Into this gap step Landon Loftin and Max Leyf, who provide a convincing case for Barfield as a “profound and original thinker in his own right” whose work deserves to “emerge from the shadows of other works and to take its place in the sun” (1). *What Barfield Thought* serves as a scholarly introduction to the key themes of Barfield’s work, taking its title and cue from Barfield’s own book *What Coleridge Thought*, which was intended to “fan the dying embers of Coleridge’s reputation as a philosopher” (2). It might not be fair to describe Barfield’s embers as “dying”: one of the things that makes this book

so timely is its emergence in conjunction with an apparently growing interest in Barfield's work. The Owen Barfield Literary Estate, spearheaded by Barfield's grandson Owen A. Barfield, has been steadily putting many of his books back into print and providing helpful guides and resources: [www.owenbarfield.org](http://www.owenbarfield.org). Whereas Barfield sought to revive Coleridge's philosophical reputation, Loftin and Leyf's small but mighty introduction is well-timed to provide a digestible yet rigorous primer for those interested in finally doing the difficult but rewarding work required to understand Barfield's thought.

An initial chapter on Barfield's life gives a biographical sketch of his major literary "relationships." A section on Barfield and Lewis explains the major areas of Barfield's influence on Lewis, particularly in Lewis's conversion to theism (and later Christianity) and in his rejection of "chronological snobbery," which Lewis defined as the "uncritical acceptance of [...] the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited" (qtd. 23), a key concept which will tie together many of Barfield's big ideas. The section on Barfield and Tolkien details their amusing first meeting (25) and the ways in which Tolkien incorporated Barfield's theories into his Middle-earth writings (26). A final section touches on Barfield's anthroposophical beliefs and study of the works of Rudolf Steiner, contrasting the Christ-informed philosophy of Anthroposophy with the more religious occultism of Theosophy from which it split (29). These helpful sections are kept brief so as not to once again relegate Barfield to the second tier, but to help the reader put some of Barfield's ideas into context before taking the deeper plunge. A reader of *The Hobbit*, for instance, may be aided by Tolkien's allusion to Barfield's "theory of ancient semantic unity" in Chapter 12 of his classic fairy tale (26).

The rest of the book is divided into chapters focusing on individual themes that run throughout Barfield's works: Language, Poetry, The Evolution of Consciousness, Final Participation, and Science, Technology, and the Crisis of Meaning. Language is the central preoccupation of Barfield's life and work, in particular the ecstatic sense of wonder made possible with poetic language, the study of how meaning evolves over time, and what such study can tell us about the evolution of human consciousness (or worldview, how we understand and interact with the world). Loftin and Leyf characterize this historical evolution as a "transformation of language from concreteness to abstraction" (34). In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Language is fossil poetry" (qtd. 37n15), telling the story not only of the history of ideas but of the history of human thought itself. Though Barfield acknowledged the prevalent philological theories of his day, he also bucked against the trend of materialism which dominated the twentieth century. Rejecting the "chronological snobbery" of his age, he theorized that the earlier, more concrete meanings of words were not evidence of a more primitive mode of thought but of a *different* mode of thought; indeed,

a different relationship with the natural world. As an example, the authors include a discussion of the Greek word *pneuma*, which is translated both “breath” or “wind” and “spirit,” demonstrating the “ancient semantic unity” of the ancient Greek mind which could conceptualize “a largely undivided meaning that was neither purely material nor purely immaterial” (41). While modern translators may have gained precision in language, Barfield saw evidence that a significant amount of poetic meaning has been lost as language and consciousness have evolved and meanings diverged.

The next chapter builds on this fundamental theory to explore Barfield’s studies of poetic meaning. For Barfield, poetry was defined not by verse forms or metrical structures but by its ability to point one toward the “ancient participation” between people and the natural world “through the use of fitting metaphors, which suggest forgotten connections between our inner life and the outer world” (48). A poetic use of suggestive metaphor creates in the mind of the reader or listener what Barfield called a “felt change of consciousness” (qtd. 51), resulting in meaning (52). Metaphors put ideas into people’s heads through language. For Barfield, the “best metaphors” recall the “ancient semantic unity” of earlier states of consciousness, reminding us of the coherence between the material and the psychical or spiritual worlds (52).

Chapter 4 goes into greater depth on the “Evolution of Consciousness,” detailing Barfield’s study of the “history of the human mind” (56). Loftin and Leyf start by explaining the history of the word “theory,” both to set expectations about what a theory is (and is not) and also to give a practical case study of an idea transforming over time (61). Likewise, their discussion of the word *psyche* and the immense consequences resulting from the Fourth Council of Constantinople on Western thought make for a particularly illuminating example (68–70). They explain Barfield’s outline of the stages of human consciousness from the Original Participation evidenced by ancient languages (73); through the “so-called ‘descent of man’” caused by increased self-awareness (73) and the “concentration of consciousness into the individual that at once severs that individual from an awareness of his own continuity with all creation” (73–74); and finally toward the inherent “*potential* for re-ascent” (73).

Barfield called this potential “Final Participation,” the subject of Chapter 5. Inspired by his Christian faith and the hope implicit in the Incarnation, Barfield looked forward to a future re-ascent of human consciousness which recovered the “ancient semantic unity” it had lost while also retaining the precision gained during its exile into materialism and individualism. Not one to reject the wisdom in any age or worldview, not even of the modern age, Barfield theorized that human consciousness, through Christ, will eventually recover its lost capability for participation without losing the metatheoretical ability to think about thinking which characterizes modern

and postmodern thought. Loftin and Leyf describe Final Participation as a “conscious collaboration with Christ in the economy of creation” (81). Rather than representing an ideological dead-end, our modern mode of thought will have gained something valuable even as it wandered far from its original roots. The authors demonstrate that Barfield saw human history as a kind of hero’s journey of descent and eventual return. Final Participation promises to return human consciousness to its original “spiritual activity” and “our own living participation in the chorus of creation” while also experiencing “self-knowledge in the truest sense,” unifying the best of all stages of consciousness (91).

The final chapter on “Science, Technology, and the Crisis of Meaning” gives examples of how Barfield’s ideas may help our modern world which suffers in the throes of disenchantment and apparent “meaninglessness” (97). Barfield wrote that, “Our sophistication, like Odin’s, has cost us an eye” (qtd. 100). Rather than betray ignorance and stupidity, Barfield’s studies of language and poetry seem to demonstrate that earlier peoples had an expanded consciousness in contrast to the narrowness of our own (100); they saw the world as bursting with spiritual and natural life and pregnant with meaning and significance (98-99). Though scientific inquiry is one form of knowledge, it is not the only one (101). Barfield critiqued the “scientism” and “logical positivism” of his day (101) and encouraged his readers to resist the “distinctive prejudices of the modern age” through the study of history, language, and poetry (110). This lesson, the authors admit, is easier to articulate than it is to “really learn,” but Barfield offers a “unique ability” to teach it (112).

As this review serves as a brief summary of key points which will hopefully entice the reader to pick up this excellent book, so Loftin and Leyf’s book provides a helpful introduction to Barfield’s ideas which will equip the reader to engage with Barfield’s work directly. The ideal reader of *What Barfield Thought* is someone with a passing knowledge of Barfield’s theories, perhaps only embodied in iconic key phrases such as “evolution of consciousness” or “Original Participation” or via the works of Lewis and Tolkien, who wishes to gain the tools and confidence to delve deeper. Whether or not one is entirely convinced of all of Barfield’s theories (and the authors acknowledge that it is possible to find his ideas intellectually compelling without wholly “buying” them [112]), the authors successfully make the case that there are immense benefits to be had with the mere engagement with them. At the very least, the attentive reader will find herself questioning what assumptions and prejudices inherited from her time, place, and culture color her own thinking. It is impressive how much is packed into this slim volume, and it will surely serve as an invaluable aid for many Inklings fans who want to gain a greater and more nuanced appreciation of Barfield’s thought.

—Katherine Sas

KATHERINE SAS works at the University of Pennsylvania. She holds a B.A. in English Literature from Messiah University and an M.A. in Language and Literature from Signum University, where she now serves as Graduate Course Coordinator. She has published essays on imaginative literature and pop culture in *Mythlore*, *The Journal of Tolkien Research*, and in the edited volumes *More Doctor Who and Philosophy* and *Harry Potter for Nerds II*.



**A GUIDEBOOK TO MONSTERS: PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION, AND THE PARANORMAL.** Ryan J. Stark. Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2024. 88 + xi p. ISBN 9781666784695. \$18.00.

READERS ARE CAUTIONED, AT THE OUTSET OF *A Guidebook to Monsters*, that “this book comes with a playful warning” (ix). Indeed “play” and “warning” are the two features which give shape to the literary idiom Stark employs throughout the book. It is with playful seriousness that Stark can refer to the way in which “[i]n the old days, before the internet, before the printing press, the hard-bitten villagers understood first principles, one of which goes as follows: the monsters are real” (ix). It is a playfulness without irony or satire which, coupled with a real scholarly interest, which invites the reader to loosen the parameters of discourse in order to “provide a counter-narrative to conventional academic wisdom on the topic, which, as a general rule, presupposes monsters to be metaphors, full of symbolic import but nothing beyond that” (x). Stark’s brief book examines eight kinds of monster (Vampire, Werewolf, Zombie, Ghost, Robot, Leviathan, Devil, and Alien), each with a chapter dedicated to it.

Engaging in a vast and variegated array of source material, from the cult Television Series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974-1975) to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, Stark follows a line of thinking which begins with the conviction that “[t]he question of monsters is a question of metaphysics” (x). In doing so Stark is clear that the goal of the book is neither “forthcoming proofs in manuscripts” nor is it getting “readers to believe in monsters” (x). Rather, *A Guidebook to Monsters* “constitutes a series of efforts to characterize the entities properly” (x). Even if we want to remain staunchly skeptical, Stark contends that we must at least know the actual contours of a monster before we can ask what that monstrous presence signifies. Mythopoeic scholars will identify the similarity to, or even the heredity of, this line of thinking in J.R.R. Tolkien’s “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” although Stark only refers to this text in once in passing much later in the book (51).