

Book Reviews

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Michael Vincent Di Fuccia, *Owen Barfield: Philosophy, Poetry, and Theology*. Foreword by Owen A. Barfield. *Veritas* Vol. 20 (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2016), \$55.00 (hardcover), 282 pp.

Among those of us who are interested in the writings of the Inklings, attention to Owen Barfield has often focused, understandably, on his relationship to C.S. Lewis. This new book, based on a doctoral dissertation supervised by the eminent theologian John Milbank, is a welcome contrast, placing Barfield's thought in conversation with a wide range of figures ranging from Thomas Aquinas to Wendell Berry. Di Fuccia treats Barfield as a major figure in his own right with ideas that can help us break through the stale modern dichotomy between subject and object, materialism and idealism.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part (chs. 1-2), addresses Barfield's view of "aesthetic participation:" imagination and specifically poetry as a means by which human beings encounter truth. Chapter 1, "Poetic Language," places Barfield's view of language in contrast to that of Heidegger, arguing that Barfield, unlike Heidegger, has an understanding of poetic language that does not make the human person purely passive before the "mystery or nothingness of being" (53). Chapter 2, "Poetic Philosophy," uses Samuel Taylor Coleridge as the primary reference point, with Kant as a foil. Di Fuccia argues that Coleridge in fact provides a philosophically coherent alternative to Kant that solves problems found in Kant's thought, particularly through his concept of "polarity," later taken up by Barfield.

The second part of the book deals with "sociological participation," the way in which Barfield's understanding of participation affects our life in society and our interaction with technology. Chapter 3 places Barfield in conversation with, among others, the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, an author to whose work Barfield approvingly referred. Lévy-Bruhl argued that "primitive" people approach the world in a way that is distinct from that of modern Western society and that should not be seen as a less sophisticated precursor of Western thought. Similarly, Barfield describes the "original participation" of premodern cultures as a legitimate "collective representation" (112). The fourth chapter, "Poetic Making," develops Barfield's critique of modern science and technology more fully in conversation with a number of authors, most of whom were not actually referred to by Barfield.

The final section, "Theological Participation," comprising a single chapter ("Poetic Theology"), offers a theological critique of Barfield rooted largely in the thought of Thomas Aquinas as interpreted by the 20th-century theo-

logians Erich Przywara and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Di Fuccia believes that the concept of “analogy of being” found in Aquinas and his modern interpreters completes Barfield’s thought while providing a theological dimension that was lacking in Barfield. Catholic theology sees God as utterly transcendent but also intimately connected to every human being, since we exist only by participation in God. Linguistically, Di Fuccia argues that this is expressed through the “middle voice” in many languages (such as Greek), which expresses an act that is neither clearly active or passive (such as “to think”). The “middle” is the alternative to “active” paradigms in which the human mind stands over against an objective, material world, and also to “passive” paradigms in which we lack any agency or individuality and reality is pantheistic. Barfield understood this linguistically and philosophically, Di Fuccia argues, but as an anthroposophist he lacked the means to express it theologically.

Di Fuccia is right, I think, that from an orthodox Christian perspective Barfield’s conception of God is flawed, but he does not articulate clearly why this is the case. His actual criticism of Barfield’s theology focuses on Barfield’s acceptance of reincarnation, which Di Fuccia, rather oddly, seems to think means “going back” rather than pressing onward toward the infinite reality of God (213). This reflects a profound misunderstanding of the significance of reincarnation in Barfield’s thought and in anthroposophy more generally. And this points to a broader problem with Di Fuccia’s reading of Barfield throughout the book, even when he is using him positively. He repeatedly speaks as if Barfield thinks that we should “go back” to a “primitive” state in which human beings participated in the divine rather than being corrupted by materialism. Yet, as Di Fuccia recognizes, Barfield explicitly rejects the idea that we can go back to “original participation.” Barfield’s concept of “evolution of consciousness” involves a sort of spiral progression from original participation, through a “fall” into the separation of body and spirit and of the individual self from the cosmos, to the hoped-for reintegration of the now self-conscious “I” in a state of “final participation.” When directly summarizing Barfield, Di Fuccia gets him right. But in his analysis of the significance of Barfield’s ideas, he seems to miss the dynamic, evolutionary nature of Barfield’s view of humanity and indeed of reality itself.

An even broader problem with the book is that Di Fuccia, much of the time, seems more interested in exploring a certain set of ideas through various other figures he finds interesting than in explicating Barfield. He certainly spends a good deal of time on Barfield’s ideas, but given the title of the book there is a disproportionate focus on the ideas of other figures whom Di Fuccia clearly finds important and interesting. At times it seems as if Barfield is being pressed into service to support Di Fuccia’s theological and ideological goals, when in fact some of the other authors Di Fuccia discusses are more congenial to the point he wants to make.

As is so often the case, the book's flaws are the shadow side of its strengths. Di Fuccia has given us a study of Barfield that places him into conversation with a dizzying range of important modern authors. This is not primarily an exploration of Barfield's own thought, but of his place within a much broader dialogue about the ills of modernity and the way forward. It's a kind of book on Barfield that was badly needed and I hope we get more like it—books with the boldness and breadth of vision to risk getting Barfield wrong while making vividly clear his relevance for today.

One final criticism, perhaps the most serious of all: this is not an easy book to read. It began as a doctoral dissertation, and few of us who have written dissertations are in any position to point fingers on the grounds of style. But readers not already familiar with theological jargon should know that this is very much a book written for scholars, not a book that is accessible to a wide audience.

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