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

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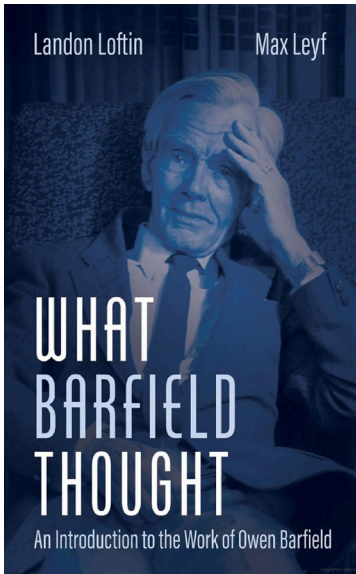
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## Online Book Reviews

Landon Loftin and Max Leyf. *What Barfield Thought: An Introduction to the Work of Owen Barfield*. Cascade Books, 2023.

Readers of Owen Barfield have waited some time for a book like this one, the first dedicated introduction to his work. At 116 pages spread over six short chapters, Landon Loftin and Max Leyf have accomplished an impressive academic feat by rendering a book that is genuinely concise while still setting



out the essentials of Barfield's thought. They give their readers an accessible entry into his work by synthesising his key ideas and presenting a unified picture of Barfield's thinking in a volume that maintains its brisk pace by focusing more on themes than individual texts. Its approachability means the work can be usefully read either on its own or as a companion to Barfield's key works like *Poetic Diction* or *Saving the Appearances*.

The modest size of this volume should not conceal either its ambition or its importance as the first dedicated introduction to Owen Barfield. The authors give a concise overview of Barfield's core beliefs on language, poetry, the evolution of consciousness, and the crisis of meaning at a time of growing interest in this so-called "first and last Inklings."<sup>1</sup> The title of their

work, and its methodology, explicitly echo Barfield's own book on Samuel Taylor Coleridge, where he sought to provide an introduction that considered the Romantic "on his own terms, and not as a representative of something else" (*What Coleridge Thought* 3). This book does the same for Barfield, a figure who has frequently found himself considered more as a foil for other thinkers (C.S. Lewis, Rudolf Steiner, Coleridge) than as a creative thinker in his own right. With Barfield Press recently issuing new editions of previously uncollected or hard-to-find Barfield texts, as well as the planning of a peer-reviewed bulletin from the Owen Barfield Society, Loftin and Leyf's book will likely find the wider audience they, and I, believe Barfield deserves.

The authors divide the book into six chapters, bookended with a brief situating introduction and conclusion. These chapters are titled "Life," "Language," "Poetry," "Evolution of Consciousness," "Final Participation," and "Science, Technology, and the Crisis of Meaning." By devoting an entire

chapter to final participation, and by ending the book by connecting his more esoteric philosophy to his diagnosis of modern society's struggles, the authors nimbly avoid a reading of Barfield as a narrowly nostalgic or reactionary thinker. Instead, they show how his beliefs are intended to be "put to work," not merely as a radical upending of philosophical materialism, but as a way of life that can improve the individual and society (96–97).

As the authors highlight in the biographical chapter, "Life," Barfield's work receives its overarching unity from his vehement rejection of the materialism of his age, which he ultimately countered via the creation of a coherent theory of consciousness, a term he defined in his *History in English Words* as "a man's whole awareness of his environment, the sum total of his intellectual and emotional experiences" (86). Loftin and Leyf trace this unity of purpose through Barfield's study of language and poetry, which Barfield saw as a means of imaginatively restoring lost meaning to the world. His early philological and poetic work at Oxford became the basis of his first two books and would go on to form the building blocks for his mature views on the evolution of consciousness.

Loftin and Leyf delve into Barfield's views around the stages of consciousness in their strongest and lengthiest theory-focused chapter, "Evolution of Consciousness." It reveals the radical and wide-reaching implications of Barfield's theory and references thinkers like Plato, Aquinas, Jung, and Lévy-Bruhl to show how diverse strains of thought are captured and drawn together within it. From there, the authors turn to a thorough explanation of the theory of "final participation," the culminating phase in Barfield's stages of consciousness. This chapter valiantly grapples with this notoriously slippery Barfieldian concept, and the authors provide multiple detailed examples that illustrate the movement by which one passes from onlooker consciousness to final participation. Finally, in the last chapter, the authors describe Barfield's diagnosis of the Western crisis of meaning as a product of our degenerating relationship to the natural world. Western societies have lost sight of meaning that was perceptible to the pre-modern consciousness even as they have gained scientific knowledge and technological prowess. What is striking about Barfield is that he can provide a convincing account of *why* there is a connection between this parallel loss and gain via his theory of the evolution of consciousness. Not only that, but his views surrounding participation give us a rare opportunity to think creatively about how we can excavate ourselves from this spiritual and physical crisis. Ending with the modern crisis of meaning hearkens back to the book's first chapter and Barfield's own search for transcendent meaning. Together these chapters create an arc that traces the movements of Barfield's theory, making the book an excellent primer for all of Barfield's writings.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter, and the one I was most grateful to find included, was on Barfield's poetic thinking. Though Loftin and Leyf

focus on his theory of poetic diction under the aegis of the evolution of consciousness, their treatment provides a general introduction to Barfield's poetics, which he came to in large part through his philological work. Barfield believed that figurative language, the primary constituent of poetic diction, is a distillation or concentration of the inherently metaphorical nature of all language. Metaphor points to real connections between objects, making it "epistemic, not merely aesthetic" (53), and Barfield traced the unique pleasure aroused by poetry to a "felt change in consciousness" that came from the metaphoric revelation of these connections (51). Poetry's epistemology, then, is not merely one that adds information but primarily one that adds meaning, expanding our vision and allowing us to perceive unities between spiritual and material reality. As Loftin and Leyf observe, this epistemic quality of poetry connects it to the passage of an individual's consciousness from alienation to self-conscious participation in the external world.

A couple of criticisms could be made of this book as an introduction to Barfield, particularly for those with a more scholarly interest. I read it as I began my own work on Barfield, and I found myself frustrated with the book's lack of an index, as well as with its generalist bibliography that missed important scholarship. For example, Astrid Diener's *Early Work of Owen Barfield* was notably absent from the bibliography, and important topics raised by Diener's work, such as her intervention on the question of an "early" and "late" Barfield, were not picked up by the authors. It was also regrettable that they were not more systematic in their treatment of topics such as the role of polarity in Barfield's thought, a concept that has proven fruitful for scholars in interpreting Barfield and that only received a few passing references in this text.

Overall, this book sets out to introduce Barfield on his own terms, and it delivers. The work does not suffer from the unevenness of tone or style that is always risked in a co-authored work, and the authors' genuine sympathy with their subject sets a sincere tone throughout. Interest in Barfield is growing, whether evidenced through continued exploration of Barfield's influence on other Inklings, such as Yanick Imbert's *From Imagination to Faërie: Tolkien's Thomist Fantasy* (2023), or dedicated Barfield texts, such as Jeffery Hippolito's *Owen Barfield's Poetic Philosophy* and *Owen Barfield's Poetry, Drama, and Fiction*, both published in spring of 2024. As Barfieldian studies continue developing, Loftin and Leyf's book promises to serve as a handy introduction that will instruct both amateurs and scholars alike.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This revival of interest in Barfield can be seen in the recent publication of hitherto uncollected Barfield essays in the volume *Riddle of the Sphinx: Essays on the Evolution of Consciousness* (Barfield Press, 2023), as well as a new edition of his fairy tale, *The Silver Trumpet* (forthcoming 2025). There are now also two annual conferencing opportunities for Barfield scholars, the first as part of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Society and the other hosted at Cambridge University. See the Owen Barfield Society website for more details. <https://www.owenbarfieldsociety.org/>

### Works Cited

Barfield, Owen. *History in English Words*. 2nd ed., Lindisfarne Books, 2002.  
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