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## B O O K S

# A Conspiracy of Confidence

B Y J A N E H I P O L I T O

THE NOTED art critic John Russell once observed that "the act of reading is an act of confidence, and almost of conspiracy, between one human being and another. That conspiracy can get nowhere, and that confidence can be betrayed. But if all goes well the reader may put down the book at the end and say what the author ... most wants to hear: 'I learned a lot from your book, but what is more to the point is that I had a very good time.'" <sup>1</sup> This is precisely the response that Owen Barfield's writings irresistibly evoke, as the splendid new anthology, *A Barfield Reader: Selections from the Writings of Owen Barfield*, engagingly demonstrates.

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**G. B. Tennyson**

Wesleyan University Press,  
1999, 191 pages, \$45, cloth,  
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arly work on language, consciousness, and human evolution. In this century of ever-accelerating change and ever-increasing information, mastery of one major field is a remarkable achievement and it is rare indeed to attain full expertise in multiple fields. But Barfield did even more: he found many meaningful ways of bridging the chasms between quite diverse disciplines and world-views — and thus his readers are again and again treated to the agreeable surprise of discovering that the universe may, after all, make genuinely unified sense in at least some significant respects.

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plays the impressive coherence of Owen Barfield's wide-ranging thought. The *Reader's* editor, G. B. Tennyson, knows Barfield's thinking well. A leading authority on Barfield's life and work, for thirty years Tennyson has been writing about them with the vigor, intelligence, eloquence, and élan he also brings to his "Criticus" column for *California Political Review*. His deep familiarity with Barfield's books informs the anthology's outstandingly substantial, cogent, and helpful introductory section. There is a particularly close connection between Tennyson's award-winning documentary film *Owen Barfield: Man and Meaning* (1995) and the *Reader*, which, like the film, focuses on the central ideas that consistently illumine, animate, and integrate Barfield's writings.

**A** *Barfield Reader* begins as Barfield himself did, with language and literature. Tennyson explains in his headnote to this section of the anthology that "Both as writer and thinker Barfield grounds his thought in language and literature. It is the subject of his earliest writing and remains throughout his career the seedbed from which his thinking grows." From childhood on Barfield explored language and literature from two contrasting but complementary perspectives, as creative writer and as attentive reader. Even as a schoolboy he noticed that somehow both writing and reading induced what he called a "felt change" in his consciousness, and as a student at Oxford University he began to inquire systematically into just what these transformative processes involve and how language and literature cause them. His studies resulted in two ground-breaking books, *History in English Words* (1926) and *Poetic Diction* (1928). In *History in English*

*Words* he stimulatingly proposes "that human consciousness itself had evolved as had language, indeed that the two evolved together, and that the evolution of language was the demonstration of the evolution of consciousness." (*A Barfield Reader*, xxvi) In *Poetic Diction* he explores exactly how the poetic use of language promotes evolution in individual consciousness by awakening and empowering the imagination.

## A Barfield Reader

Selections from the Writings of Owen Barfield



Edited and with an Introduction by G. B. Tennyson

With these two books Owen Barfield established himself as a thinker with something refreshingly lucid and hopeful to contribute to the urgent modern debates about what it means to be human. In 1897, one year before Barfield's birth, Paul Gauguin had addressed these modern concerns in his grand painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Barfield explored them in steadily increasing breadth and profundity throughout his long, productive life. In his comprehensive analysis, developed from his astonishingly wide readings and close personal observation of perceptual and cognitive processes, we modern humans have "come from" a primitive consciousness that was effortlessly, instinctively unitary,

like that of the indigenous Tahitians in Gauguin's painting. Here is one of Barfield's characteristically vivid descriptions of how our long-ago ancestors perceived the world:

If with the help of some time-machine working in reverse, a man of the Middle Ages could suddenly be transported into the skin of a man of the twentieth century, seeing through our eyes and with our "figuration" the objects we see, I think he would feel like a child who looks for the first time at a photograph through the ingenious magic of a stereoscope. "Oh!" he would say, "look how they *stand out!*" We must not forget that in his time perspective had not yet been discovered, nor underrate the significance of this. True, it is no more than a device for pictorially representing depth, and separateness, in space. But how comes it that the device had never been discovered before — or, if discovered, never adopted? There were plenty of skilled artists, and they would certainly have hit upon it if depth in space had characterized the collective representations they wished to reproduce, as it characterizes ours. They did not need it. Before the scientific revolution the world was more like a garment men wore about them than a stage on which they moved. In such a world the convention of perspective was unnecessary. To such a world other conventions of visual reproduction, such as the nimbus and the halo, were as appropriate as to ours they are not. It was as if the observers were themselves *in* the picture. Compared with us, they felt themselves and the objects around them and the world that expressed those objects, immersed together in something like a clear lake of — what shall we say? — of "meaning", if you choose.<sup>2</sup>

2. This passage from Barfield's *Saving the Appearances* (1957) is included in *A Barfield Reader*, where it appears on page 105.

In stark contrast, the world we moderns experience is "one of fragmented individualism and indifference, an age besotted with material possessions. To understand that thinking and perceiving have evolved and will continue to do so is to better understand our place in the evolution of consciousness and why changes in our ways of thinking are necessary to heal our troubled lives and world."<sup>3</sup>

**B**ARFIELD NOT only warns us of where we and our earth are going if present trends continue, but also points us toward what we can realistically do to restore meaning to our lives and to the life of nature. His solution is solidly based in his understanding of the individual human spirit's power to evolve and create — and imagine. For example, in one of the passages included in the "philosophy and meaning" section of *A Barfield Reader* he describes

what normally occurs when we look at, or listen to, a fellow human being. When we do that, we see his body, or hear his voice, not only as matter but also as expression. We see his body and his countenance as a material picture of the immaterial. I say that is what normally occurs, and I think it does normally occur to *some* extent every time one human being observes another. But of course it may occur to a greater or lesser degree. And the extent to which it does occur will depend a good deal on ourselves. We may — or we may not — make up our minds that it shall occur, in our case, to the maximum degree of

3. From the Introduction by Jeanne Clayton Hunter and Thomas Kranidas to their anthology of Barfield's poetry and fiction, *A Barfield Sampler* (State University of New York Press, 1993).

which our imagination is capable. 'Tis not in mortals to command success, and the result will be uncertain. What seems certain is that something very important will depend on the extent to which we are successful. For what will depend on it is what I suggested just now is the most important thing in a meeting between two human beings — that it should be not simply a relation between two phenomena but a relation between two spirits.

Barfield goes on to point out that just as it is in our power to create I-Thou relationships with the people we know, so also, if we choose, we can regard nature not as an It but as a Thou, and that "something very important," the fate of our entire ecosphere, depends on the extent to which we succeed in doing this. For Barfield, the modern Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner's holistic "science of the spirit," anthroposophy, affords a workable, systematic way to develop these essential survival skills, as he elucidates in many of the writings included in this anthology.

The "literature of his own" which is presented in the concluding section of *A Barfield Reader* affords an especially clear view of how very thoroughly Owen Barfield practiced what he preached regarding the imagination. Tennyson observes that "Like Coleridge and Steiner, Barfield begins with wonder, wonder at the glory of language and the range and diversity of reality." (xxix) Prompted by wonder, he devotes close and constructive attention to such diverse phenomena as daybreak over the English countryside (in his exquisitely lyrical poem "Day"), the feminist movement (in *The Silver Trumpet*, a gently satiric fairy tale for children of all ages), and be

reavement (in *Orpheus*, an eloquent drama in verse). All of the writings included in this anthology, but especially the imaginative pieces gathered in its last section, support the truth of Saul Bellow's assessment:

We are well supplied with interesting writers, but Owen Barfield is not content to be merely interesting. His ambition is to set us free. Free from what? From the prison we have made for ourselves by our ways of knowing, our limited and false habits of thought, our "common sense." These, he convincingly argues, have produced a "world of outsides with no insides to them," a brittle surface world, an object world in which we ourselves are merely objects. It is not only what we perceive but also what we fail to perceive that determines the quality of the world we live in, and what we have collectively chosen not to perceive is the full reality of consciousness, the "inside" of everything that exists.

A clear and powerful thinker, and a subtle one, Mr. Barfield is not an optimist, but he does believe that we can get out of the prison — or the madhouse.<sup>4</sup>

**V**IEWING *A Barfield Reader* from this perspective, as a handbook on how to take hold of the freeing force of the imagination, helps one understand why it is that Barfield's writings have attracted particular interest and respect in America. For as the *Reader's* contents reveal, the quintessentially English Barfield focused directly and stirringly on the core aspiration of the American spirit, the yearning for meaningful individual freedom. ☐

4. On the dust jacket of Owen Barfield's book *History, Guilt, nad Habit* (Wesleyan University Press, 1979).

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