# Owen Barfield: A Biographical Note

by Marjorie Lamp Mead, April 1985

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When The Silver Trumpet was first published in 1925, Owen Barfield was a young man of twenty-seven, just four years out of Oxford University, and entering what he hoped would be a career as a writer. Certainly the publication of his first book, a fairy tale, was an auspicious beginning.

Born Arthur Owen Barfield in 1898 in Muswell Hill, a northern suburb of London, he was the youngest of four children. His father, Arthur, was a solicitor; his mother, Elizabeth ("Lizzy"), was an ardent feminist – a suffragette – and a lover of music.

The Barfield home was a happy one filled with music, books, and numerous cousins, aunts and uncles. A talented pianist, Lizzy Barfield taught her husband to play, and together they performed many duets; occasionally they invited neighbors to join the family in singing both classical music and drawing room ballads. Frequent family read-aloud times were also shared by both parents, though Arthur predominated as a reader. His love for Dickens' novels and a reading style of great gusto was a source of delight for his children.

As a young boy, Barfield had difficulty understanding his father's profession. In fact, since he was told that his father went to London to get bread and butter, he at one time imagined Arthur using "a kind of big machine with a horizontal funnel on it, and he turned the handle and bread and butter came out." There was one lingering question, however, in the mind of young Owen, for the Barfield family also had cake and so he "puzzled as to how father ever got it!" [1]

Barfield's early schooling was informal; he was tutored at home by his mother. (A governess was thought unnecessary by his parents for only one child, since his older brother and sisters were already in school.) At age eight, Barfield began commuting daily by train to Highgate Preparatory School in North London.

At Highgate, Barfield's chosen course was on the classical side, where he studied Latin and Greek rather than the modern languages. Not particularly good at cricket or football, he was still an athletic youth, concentrating his talent on gymnastics – a foreshadowing of his later interest in dance.

Nine years after entering Highgate, on December 14, 1916, the *London Times* recorded that Arthur Owen Barfield had won a Scholarship in Classics at Wadham College, Oxford. Among the many other names in this same announcement, there was listed another classical scholar, Clive Staples Lewis at University College. World War I intervened, however, before the two were to meet: Barfield serving in the wireless department of the Signal Service, Royal Engineers

from 1917-1919; Lewis fighting on the front lines with the Third Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry 1917-1918 until he was wounded. After convalescence, Lewis returned to his studies at Oxford in January 1919.

Barfield was not released from service until the summer of 1919, entering Wadham College in October. During his two years in the army he had become very interested in English Literature, and had even begun to write a little himself. As a result once back at Oxford, he obtained permission to switch his original scholarship in Greats (philosophy, ancient history, Latin and Greek) to a course of study in English Literature.

Soon after his first term began, Barfield became friends with a fellow student at Wadham, Leo Baker; both men shared an interest in writing poetry. It was also through Baker, at a tea in Wadham College, that Barfield met C.S. Lewis. Though Barfield and Lewis saw relatively little of each other while undergraduates, after Barfield received his degree (First Class Honors in English Language and Literature in 1921) their friendship deepened.

Several months after taking his First, Barfield began work on his B. Litt. thesis, while earning some money from part-time editorial work for a weekly London paper, *Truth*. Barfield sent the typescript of his thesis to C.S. Lewis, and received in return a very careful and enthusiastic appraisal. When this work was published in 1928 as *Poetic Diction*, it was dedicated to Lewis (under his pseudonym of Clive Hamilton).

It was also about this time that Barfield joined Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical movement – an occurrence which "hideously shocked" Lewis. Later, as Lewis learned more about anthroposophy, he found his initial "horror" turning into "disgust and resentment."[2] Lewis' attempts to discourage Barfield's belief in Steiner's philosophy took shape in a series of letters and essays which the two friends exchanged for the next several years. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis christened this debate, the Great War.[3]

For Barfield, Steiner's teachings were not a religion but rather a way of knowledge. Barfield believed, and Lewis disagreed with, the premise that poetry could create knowledge and consequently that imagination was a means to truth. Barfield's own evaluation of the Great War was that Lewis '"taught me how to think and I taught him what to think."[4] Indeed in debating with Barfield, Lewis did come to believe in the power and truth of imagination – an important step in Lewis' own eventual acceptance of Christianity.

While Lewis changed some of his thinking as a result of the Great War, he never did accept anthroposophy. Barfield, however, continued to explore and apply Steiner's thought; this was evidenced clearly in Barfield's later publications (e.g., *Romanticism Comes of Age* – 1944, and *Saving the Appearances* – 1957). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, too, became an important influence on Barfield's thinking, particularly Coleridge's writings on imagination; in 1971, Barfield published an exhaustive study of Coleridge's philosophy entitled *What Coleridge Thought*.

In April 1923, Barfield married Maud Douie, a dance researcher and teacher and a specialist in stage costumes, who had worked with Gordon Craig. They had met several years earlier when Barfield, a member of the Oxford Branch of the English Folkdance Society, had travelled to Cornwall for a summer dance-performance holiday. Following his graduation from Oxford, Barfield had briefly considered a career as a professional dancer. His early musical experience at home and his skills at gymnastics combined to make him a talented dancer. Indeed, throughout his life, Barfield's love of music was a strong force. For as much as he desired to be a poet, Barfield viewed music as the essential element in his life – even in preference to poetry.

With his marriage, however, Barfield determined to continue to make his career in writing. Freelance editing, an occasionally published poem, review or article, and his B. Litt. thesis occupied most of his time. But early in 1924, Barfield's writing turned to a new direction, a fairy tale for children. Not yet a father (the Barfield's first child, Alexander, was adopted in 1929), Barfield chose the fairy tale because he felt it was the best vehicle for what he wanted to say.

As a young man growing up, Barfield had been taught by his agnostic parents to support freedom of thought. But in spite of this, Barfield found that the "atmosphere in my family was predominately critical and skeptical. Not only in the matter of religion, but about, for instance, the kind of people one met. One was apt to suspect any kind of enthusiasm as being a bit humbugging and an affectation. In fact it was a very common word in my family, that someone was 'affected.' I was led to see myself too in those terms and I suspected anything in the nature of what seemed like powerful emotional experience, in terms of such things as poetry, as being a kind of self-deception."[5]

But as Barfield was exposed to the theology of the Incarnation, he found his perception of Jesus slowly expanding. Poetry and the beauty of oratorios such as the *Messiah* also contributed to Barfield's increasing consciousness, until at last he found himself a "convinced Christian."[6] Barfield's decision was not a sudden conversion; it was rather a gradual evolution of consciousness which culminated in his realization "that the incarnation, and life and death of Christ was at the center of the whole evolutionary process" of life itself.[7]

When Barfield began to write his first book, he wanted most of all to simply write a good story. But as he wrote this children's fairy tale, he also drew upon his own childhood experiences. As a boy, Barfield had observed his own mother's feminism react against the romantic elements in relationships. Though a loving woman, his mother's reforming spirit gave an intensity to her outlook; the lighter side of Lizzy Barfield's nature did not easily surface. Her indignation for the sufferings of the world crowded out the expression of humor or the easy demonstration of feeling in her own life. In general, the mutual affection between the members of the family was as undemonstrative as it was strong.

As Barfield grew older, he began to believe that there was a danger in such suppression of feeling. Further, his acceptance of Christianity and the teachings of Steiner led Barfield to hold

that there was an equal need for both the rational and feeling approach to life. Indeed Barfield thought, that "reason, when it's laced with feeling, becomes imagination. … Or *can* become imagination"[8] – and imagination, a possible avenue to truth.

So it was that as Barfield wrote his children's story, he chose to "bring out the importance of the romantic element in relations between a man and a woman. … And more widely than that, the importance of the feeling element in life."[9] It is the silver trumpet which symbolizes this element in the story. When the silver trumpet is first brought into the kingdom, it awakens life. But one day the trumpet is lost and with its loss, tragedy enters in the form of famine, unrest, and even death. However, when the trumpet is finally found, through the courage and love of Prince Peerio, its discovery brings renewed happiness to the people. The silver trumpet, a symbol of the feeling element in life, is "hidden and then … discovered again."[10]

*The Silver Trumpet* was published in Great Britain by Faber and Gwyer (now Faber and Faber) in 1925, a little over a year after it was written. It sold respectably, and was well received by critics. C.S. Lewis first read Barfield's story in manuscript and recorded the following in his diary entry for October 20, 1923: "… I began to read Barfield's faery tale 'The Silver Trumpet' in which with prodigality he squirts out the most suggestive ideas, the loveliest pictures, and the raciest new coined words in wonderful succession. Nothing in its kind can be imagined better."[11]

Because of Lewis, the J.R.R. Tolkien family also read Barfield's story. In a letter to Barfield, dated June 28, 1936, Lewis wrote: "I lent *The Silver Trumpet* to Tolkien and hear that it is the greatest success among his children that they have ever known. His own fairy-tales, which are excellent, have now no market: and its first reading – children are so practical! – led to a universal wail 'You're *not* going to give it back to Mr. Lewis, are you?' All the things which the wiseacres on child psychology in our circle said when you wrote it turn out to be nonsense. 'They liked the sad parts,' said Tolkien, 'because they were sad and the puzzling parts because they were puzzling, as children always do.' The youngest boy liked Gamboy because 'she was clever and the bad people in books usually aren't.' The tags of the Podger have become so popular [as] to be almost a nuisance in the house. In fine, you have scored a direct hit."[12]

In spite of the reception of *The Sliver Trumpet*, Barfield's next publication was not to be a work of fiction. In 1926, *History in English Words*, which traced Western History as evidenced in the changes of language, was brought out; and in 1928, *Poetic Diction* was published.

Shortly after this, at the end of 1929, Barfield, his wife and son moved from outside Oxford to London. The financial demands of his family and his father's need for assistance in the family law firm, combined to influence Barfield to set aside his writing career and enter training to become a solicitor. This move of course reduced Barfield's time with his literary interests and friends. He did, however, correspond regularly with C.S. Lewis, frequently visiting him for the weekend in Oxford. Sometimes, Barfield's Oxford visit coincided with a meeting of the Inklings,

a group of Lewis' friends who shared an interest in literature and who met on Thursday evenings in Lewis' College rooms.

Until his retirement from legal practice in 1959, Barfield's heavy workload left little time for writing. Still, he continued to publish articles in various journals, as well as two books, *Romanticism Comes of Age* (1944) and *Saving the Appearances* (1957).

In 1935, Barfield and his wife adopted a second child, Lucy. C.S. Lewis' goddaughter, Lucy would later have Lewis' first Narnia story, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) dedicated to her. The Barfield's last child, Jeffrey, arrived as a baby during World War II when he was evacuated from an area in danger of German air raids. When the boy's mother failed to return after the war, Jeffrey became a permanent member of the Barfield family.

The professional strain of these years can be seen in Barfield's autobiographical novel, *This Ever Diverse Pair*. Published in 1950, under the pseudonym G.A.L. Burgeon, Barfield's work demonstrates the tension between his literary aspirations and his legal responsibilities. Interestingly, the only factual legal case used by Barfield in his novel concerned the tax problems of an author who distributed his royalties to others in need – without regard to his own tax obligations. This client, Ramsden, was in actual fact C.S. Lewis, and Barfield used the true, though pseudonymous, circumstances with Lewis' cheerful permission.[13]

During these difficult years, as Barfield appeared to be buried in legal London, C.S. Lewis continued to champion his friend's original and significant contributions. This was particularly true in the case of *Poetic Diction*, a work Lewis often referred to in his Oxford lectures while it was still largely unrecognized. Years later, one of Lewis' former pupils told Barfield "that at that time, there were two schools of thought in Oxford, one of which held that there really was a man called Owen Barfield, who had written a book *Poetic Diction*; and the others who held that it was simply a name invented by Lewis when he wanted to put forward some idea he didn't want to take full responsibility for!"[14]

Despite the long deferment in his literary career, upon his retirement as a solicitor in 1959, Barfield returned with renewed vigor to his writing. In addition to publishing numerous articles and books (e.g., *Worlds Apart* – 1963, *Unancestral Voice* – 1965, *Speaker's Meaning* – 1967, and *History, Guilt and Habit* – 1979), he began to lecture extensively in the United States. Visiting Professor of Philosophy and Letters at Drew University in 1964, Barfield has since spoken at such schools as Brandeis University, Hamilton College, the University of Missouri, and Wheaton College, Illinois.

Along with the writings of six other significant British authors (including C.S. Lewis), Barfield's books and papers are now a part of the Marion E. Wade Collection at Wheaton College. Owen Barfield lives today in his home, Orchard View, Kent, in the south of England. He continues to be active, both as a writer and lecturer.

[Editor's note: Owen Barfield died on December 14, 1997]

## Notes

1. Interview of Owen Barfield by Lyle W. Dorsett, Kent, England, July 19-20, 1984. The Marion E. Wade Center Oral History Collection (Call no.: OH / SR-3).

2. Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1956: 206.

3. For further information see Lionel Adey's *C.S. Lewis's "Great War" with Owen Barfield*. New Edition. Cumbria, UK: Ink Books, 2002.

4. Interview of Owen Barfield by Lyle W. Dorsett, Kent, England, July 19-20, 1984. The Marion E. Wade Center Oral History Collection (Call no.: OH / SR-3).

5. Sugerman, Shirley. "A Conversation with Owen Barfield," in *Evolution of Consciousness*, ed. Shirley Sugerman. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976: 5.

6. Barfield Interview, July 19-20, 1984.

7. Barfield Interview, July 19-20, 1984.

8. Barfield Interview, July 19-20, 1984.

9. Barfield Interview, July 19-20, 1984.

10. Barfield Interview, July 19-20, 1984.

11. *Memoirs of the Lewis Family: 1850-1930*, Vol. VIII ed. Warren H. Lewis in The Marion E. Wade Center. Oxford: Leeborough Press, 1934 – privately "printed": 160.

12. Letter from C.S. Lewis to Owen Barfield (June 28, 1936) in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004: 198-199.

13. Barfield, Owen. *This Ever Diverse Pair*. Oxford: Barfield Press, 2010.

14. Interview of Owen Barfield by Lyle W. Dorsett, Kent, England, November 19, 1983. The Marion E. Wade Center Oral History Collection (Call no.: OH / SR-2).