
Owen Barfield. *Romanticism Comes of Age and Speaker's Meaning*. The Barfield Press, 2007.

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Barfield Press has issued reprints of eight previously out-of-print titles by Owen Barfield. Several of these are concerned directly with matters literary—*Romanticism Comes of Age*, *Speaker's Meaning*, and *What Coleridge Thought*—though Barfield spoke the language of literature in all his work. It is perhaps ironic, then, that at the same time, he never would confine himself to literature proper, or its criticism. He inevitably ended up talking about meaning, reality, spirit, as the substance of whatever literary subject he began with.

In his more strictly philosophical work, it was the same way: he always concluded with discussions of the spiritual world. Maybe this is why Barfield's work has held at best a healthy but marginal interest for literary and philosophical audiences. The reviews of his newly reprinted books *Romanticism Comes of Age* and *Speaker's Meaning* will nonetheless follow Barfield where he takes us.

Romanticism Comes of Age was a very personal collection of essays for Owen Barfield, most originally directed to fellow Anthroposophists, an audience with whom he felt familiar and comfortable. Several of those essays were originally delivered in person. Also, in roughly three-quarters of these essays, Barfield covered ground and explicated what was dear and close to him: literature, specifically English literature. Shakespeare, Blake, Coleridge, and others comprise Barfield's materials. His self-professed specialty and special joy was English Romantic literature.

These essays are personal in another way. In the introduction to the 1966 edition—of which this new Barfield Press edition is a reprint—he answers the question, “What is my debt to Rudolf Steiner, and how did that come about?” In that introduction, he describes his own reading of Romantic literature, his contemporaneous introduction to Rudolf Steiner's work, the movement Steiner founded called Anthroposophy, and Barfield's discovery that anthroposophy was “nothing less than Romanticism grown up” (14).

This 1966 edition is an expansion—and contraction—of the original 1944 edition: several essays were removed, and the last five essays added. Almost exactly coincident with the chronological and editorial break is a shift in focus, from heavily literary to distinctly philosophical, separating the last four essays from the preceding ones. Those preceding essays take Romantic literature as the subject of analysis, together with some ideas from Romantic theory suggested by the Romantics themselves. These show that indeed those Romantics' insights were not carried further since

their time—until Rudolf Steiner’s work, and Barfield’s own studies expressed in Barfield’s book *Poetic Diction: A Study of Meaning*, published in 1927.

So what was it that constituted the maturity of Romanticism? Barfield argued that the Romantics brought forward human imagination as a worthy and trustworthy organ of perception of reality, expressed most directly in the appreciation of nature. What the original Romantics did not and maybe could not work out in detail was just *how* imagination was true.

To make Romanticism into a self-sufficient organic being, able to stand on its own legs and face the rest of the world, there ought to have been added to the new concept, beauty, to the renewed conception of freedom, a new idea also of the nature of *truth*.... The point is that no satisfactory *critique* of Romance ever arose. (28)

In that essay, “From East to West,” as an answer to the lack of critique of Romance, Barfield stated that his purpose was “to introduce you to this very thing, anthroposophy” (38).

Some who are interested in Romantic literature may not at all be interested in a critique of Romance. Maybe even fewer of those are interested in a new idea of the truth; but that was Barfield’s concern. He claimed that imagination apprehended truth—apprehended nature—as well as did the senses, as well as did reason. Further, Barfield claimed that anthroposophy advanced the practice and theory of imagination to the level of science: that is, to the level of a mature epistemology.

In *Romanticism Comes of Age*, Barfield attempted to take his readers from here:

Imagination is still accepted, but it is accepted for the most part, as a kind of conscious make-believe or personal masquerade. (29)

to here:

The thinking on which our experience of nature depends, really is *in*—objectively in—nature—and is not a kind of searchlight-beam proceeding from a magic-lantern in the human skull....(227-228)

Through these essays, to argue his point, Barfield studied language very closely: its history, the mechanisms of change (contraction and expansion of meaning), specific structures (metaphor and myth), and what all this implied about human consciousness.

One interesting consequence of Barfield’s beliefs and intentions is that he takes his subjects—the Romantic poets and their work—so seriously. He assumes, unless arguing it specifically, that William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Butler Yeats, Wolfgang von Goethe, were all serious thinkers whose poetry expressed that serious thinking, especially regarding the truth of the imagination. Barfield goes further and says,

People can no longer say, with Keats, “I am certain of the truth of the imagination.” No. They must know *in what way* imagination is true! Otherwise they cannot feel its truth. (100)

I think that impulse to know in what way imagination is true is still very much alive. We are struggling against the belief that imagination is a personal masquerade, an “entirely inner, subjective activity” (101). Although we are still “apt to distinguish sharply between our consciousness of nature and nature herself. . . such a distinction is not wholly valid” (238). What Barfield pointed out, in the course of his essays, was the degree of falseness of that distinction, where to observe the typical spots or moments of distinction, and how to understand them rightly. In light of Barfield’s work, to argue for the (absolute) contingent nature of meaning, of the contingent nature of authorial intention, of the centrality of convention, are all symptoms of a refusal to grow up, to unfold the potential of romanticism from adolescence into the agility and strength and stamina of young adulthood, and then beyond to the experience of a wise and humble middle age.

Owen Barfield’s book *Speaker’s Meaning* is comprised of four lectures delivered in 1965 at Brandeis University. These are high-level literary analyses; he doesn’t dwell, as he did in *Romanticism Comes of Age*, on a single Shakespearean play, as in “The Form of *Hamlet*,” or on a single Romantic writer, as in “Goethe and the Twentieth Century” and “The Philosophy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.” Instead, he looks at general trends in the history of language, evidenced in literature. Regarding the meaning of individual words, he finds two general trends at work: contraction and expansion. He describes contraction of meaning this way:

The meaning of the word, or the extension of the term, shrinks so that it comes to denote. . . only one particular part of some larger area or category, the whole of which it formerly included. (40)

The force behind contraction is lethargy—custom, habit.

The actual meaning of a word must be regarded as a kind of habit, the normal habit of contemporary people when they speak or write; and a good dictionary will contain the best way possible of recording or describing that habit. (29)

Barfield refers to this as the lexical meaning of any word.

On the other hand, expansion of meaning occurs when the denotation of a word comes to include some aspect that it didn’t previously include. This usually—perhaps always and only—happens when the lexical comes in sharp tension with an individual speaker’s meaning. The individual speaker denotes, in a radical way, a wider expanse of phenomena than the lexical meaning does.

This is all very dry and analytical, though certainly astute and worth pointing out. Barfield's real brilliance consists in drawing out the implications of such analyses. One of the implications of this analysis of the changing meaning of words due to contraction and expansion is that logical positivism—still a force, invisible though it may be—cannot maintain its claim that metaphysics is a mistaken use of language *and* that the word's meaning is the way it is normally used to mean, since of course there were times and are places still where the normal use of many words is *metaphysical*.

The second implication is that, on the same grounds, the conclusion is obvious that human consciousness has changed through the millennia.

The *most* fundamental assumptions of any age are those that are implicit in the meanings of its common words. In our time these happen to be largely the assumptions of nineteenth-century positivism. (44)

There was a time, and are still places, when and where “to think of mind, or mental activity, or intelligence of any sort outside of some particular physical brain...was something that caused them no difficulty at all” (45).

The Imagination of the Romantics arose, therefore, partly—but most significantly—because the human relationship to nature, to reality, had changed. This change occupies Barfield in Chapter 3 of *Speaker's Meaning*, “The Psychology of Inspiration and of Imagination.” He traces out the changes in the meaning of those two words, inspiration and imagination, and draws out the implications in terms of lexical and speaker's meaning. For instance, myth was not produced by human imagination, for the simple reason that there was no such thing as human imagination at the time the great myths came into being.

Barfield thus generates the basic elements of a working ontology and epistemology out of a close study of the history of language, rather than imposing these on that history. In the last lecture/chapter, he isolates three presuppositions of philosophy, and science, adopted by literary criticism, largely unchanged in the transfer from the one field to the other:

1. Inwardness, or subjectivity of any sort, is not merely *associated with* but is always the *product of* a stimulated organism.
2. “In the history of the universe the presence of what is called ‘matter’ preceded the presence of what is called ‘mind.’”
3. “The ‘public’ world (which is what we have in common with others) consists entirely of what we *perceive* and the private world of each one consists of what he *thinks*.”

(104-105)

Barfield called these presuppositions taboos, because to buck them in any but a speculative philosophical way—in any way but as a dilettante—was to be at the least ignored, at the most blackballed as a crank.

I do remember reading a reference to Barfield as “that Coleridge loony,” in reference to Barfield’s book *What Coleridge Thought*, which contains, like everything Barfield wrote, either direct refutations of the above presuppositions, or the implications drawn from his analysis of the history of language and meaning—an analysis that scraps those presuppositions.

It may be that Barfield’s foils (logical positivism, New Criticism, god-is-dead theology), his subject matter (Novalis, Goethe), and finally his philosophical analyses make him boring or unintelligible to today’s critics. If there were other writers and critics carrying on analysis akin to Barfield’s, what would it matter that Barfield is ignored? But there are not any that I know of. Taking oneself—more than that, taking Shakespeare, Goethe, Coleridge, Emerson, Blake—seriously enough as Barfield did to imagine that the Romanticism they expressed would one day grow up into epistemology against the backdrop of the evolution of human consciousness—well, that just is too much. So the taboos still stand, even in literary criticism. For this reason alone Barfield Press has made a worthy contribution to criticism by keeping Owen Barfield’s titles alive and in print. ✱