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reads

What Coleridge Thought

(3rd edition; Barfield Press, 2014)

by Owen Barfield

WHAT COLERIDGE THOUGHT WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1971, over forty years ago, and was widely admired. M. H. Abrams described it as "by far the clearest, best organised, and most comprehensive account yet written of the intellectual premises and procedures that inform all of the work of Coleridge's maturity".[1] Although (as I will go on to explain) Barfield had very particular philosophical views of his own, Kathleen Coburn thought so highly of his understanding of Coleridge that in 1978 she enrolled him to edit the Bollingen edition of Coleridge's *Lectures 1818-1819 on the History of Philosophy*. This admiration was mutual: *What Coleridge Thought* has a highly effusive dedication to Coburn, and—when Coburn retired in 1990—Barfield felt so dependent on her assistance that he too withdrew from the task (LHP I xv-xvi). All this suggests the highest credentials for him as a Coleridgean, but given the book is being reprinted by a press established for the explicit purpose of preserving Barfield's intellectual legacy, we might wonder whether Barfield has shaped a version of Coleridge to serve his own philosophical agenda. To deal with this question we need to get a sense of What Barfield Thought.

Barfield, who spent his working life as a solicitor, was one of the Inklings, an informal Oxford literary group that included C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. He was also greatly influenced by the work of Rudolph Steiner, founder of Anthroposophy (an offshoot of Theosophy). Barfield shaped a modern formulation of the spiritual values that his fellow Inklings tended to place in an idealised past they considered unrecoverable. Like them he deplored the materialist basis of contemporary culture, but unlike them he engaged with its philosophy and science in order to put across his radically countercultural point of view. In a 1980 lecture 'Evolution', reprinted in the second edition of *History, Guilt and Habit* (Oxford: Barfield Press, 2012), Barfield squares up directly against the positivist view—accepted by our culture as common sense—that we have an internalised conscious mind that is separate from external inanimate matter. According to Barfield, "mind or consciousness is not the function of an organ, though it makes use of organs […] It is not a mysterious something spatially encapsulated within a human or animal skin […] it is the inner side of the world as a whole."(83) His major field of study was the evolutionary history of consciousness. He used linguistic and mythographic evidence to argue that human consciousness, when it first emerged, was in a state of primordial unity (or "participation" as he called it) with this "inner side of the world as a whole". For Barfield, the subsequent

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[1] 'On Owen Barfield', *Ohio Review* 13 (Spring 1972) 84-9, taken from: http://davidlavery.net/barfield/Barfield_Scholarship/Abrams_Barfield.html

development of detached analytical thinking, and the resulting split between mind and matter, may have led to great technological advances, but it comes at the cost of alienation that is not only a philosophical error: it is potentially disastrous for the future of our planet. He looked towards a further evolution of human consciousness that would restore the full "participation" within the developed sense of separate self. What is significant for the purposes of the book under review was that Barfield credits Coleridge as an important source for these ideas.

In *What Coleridge Thought* Barfield doesn't deal with biographical issues (why Coleridge might have needed to believe such-and-such), nor does he offer a developmental account (the move, say, from Unitarianism to Trinitarianism). He takes us straight to Coleridge's mature system which he argues was implicit in earlier writings and "coherently conceived, though fragmentarily expounded" in various key texts from *The Friend* (1809) to the posthumously published *Theory of Life*. The system Barfield extracts from these various sources has a "totus in omni parte" (the whole present in every part) quality which means that although Barfield's sources did not include Coleridge's manuscript fragments that were finally published in 2002 under the title *Opus Maximum*, or the final three volumes of the *Notebooks*, Barfield's study does not show the lack—on the contrary, his study survives as an aid to their comprehension. Furthermore he had the support of Kathleen Coburn, who is likely to have been the source of the many passages from manuscript or marginalia, unpublished in 1971, that have been included. The book will not be a guide to current scholarship, but such a fundamental primer maintains its usefulness—almost in the way a dictionary does—if the aim is to understand these difficult ideas at root level rather than acquire a good knowledge of the branches of secondary literature proliferating above them.

Barfield's approach to Coleridge is to sidestep contextualisation and comparison with other thinkers: he is interested in the ideas themselves rather than where they originated. Hence the plagiarism issue is crisply analysed in legal terms—"there is not much doubt that as the law now stands, Schelling could have sued Coleridge in respect of one or two pages of the *Biographia*" (5)—and then set aside as a secondary issue. While those who take pleasure in Coleridge's myriad mindedness may object to the very idea of a monophonic Coleridgean system, given Coleridge's repeated insistence that his life's task was to deliver his *Logosophia* or *Opus Maximum* to the world, it seems both reasonable and eminently useful to provide a guide to it. And Barfield is a remarkable guide.

When I first read *What Coleridge Thought* about ten years ago I was using it as a primer to get a better grasp of Coleridge's system, which I had absorbed here and there as part of my general reading in and about Coleridge. I had no knowledge of Barfield's ideas, and read Coleridge *through* him. It felt then like an ideal distillation, and entirely persuasive. Going back to it now the sense of reliability remains: I get a strong sense of *applied* Coleridge (*applied* in the sense of put to practical use), but nothing springs out as foreign to Coleridge's

thought. Barfield uses Coleridge's own words where possible, and he engages in such a profound and radical philosophical enquiry that the ideas become more important than the question of whether he has to use a shoehorn to present Coleridge as a coherent consistent thinker. In fact, over difficult issues such as the difference in degree, or kind, between fancy and imagination, Barfield tackles the conflicting statements leaving very clear where he is stepping in with an explanation to reconcile them (110 ff).

Above all (and this is what I meant above by *applied*) Barfield uses Coleridge to bring a challenge to our view of the world. He backs up his central contention—that our culture has fallen into a false sense of reality that confines consciousness within and inanimate matter without—by citing passages such as this from *The Friend*:

> [Man is compelled] by an obscure sensation which he is unable to resist or comprehend […] to contemplate as without and independent of himself what yet he could not comprehend at all, were it not a modification of his own being. (297)

Scholarly objectivity would call for this to be presented as a record of an interesting historical idea. Seen through the Barfieldian purview, particularly in the chapter on "Outness", this strand of Coleridge's thought is brought to such life it demands to be considered as a truth to live by. This assertiveness would run the risk of polemical shrillness, were it not for the quality of the argument. The potential for breaking off the dialogue with the unconvinced is evident in Barfield's later essay 'Evolution', which starts by excluding "positivists" from the discourse (67), but in *What Coleridge Thought* Barfield treats the "prevailing climate of opinion" with more respect, reserving discussion of Coleridge's religion until the necessary groundwork has been laid:

> If however we have allotted the greater part of the book to Coleridge on man in nature, it is not because Coleridge himself regarded this as the most important of philosophical enquiries; but rather because this is the one which, in the prevailing climate of opinion, best brings out and most sharply emphasizes the divergence of his premises from the opposite ones which have produced that climate. Unless we have first fully realized how subversive his basic argument is of the most cherished assumptions in which our present civilization and culture are rooted—the angry no less than the complacent part of it; the skepticism and alienation no less than what remains of the faith and confidence—we shall never grasp more than superficially his teaching on problems other than that of man in nature. (198)

Poetical assertions of "the One life within us and abroad" are most easily embraced as a nourishing counter-reality which most of us are not capable of putting head to head against the prevailing "scientific" world view. We end up compartmentalising our sensibilities, loath to abandon rational "reality" yet persuaded by poets, visionaries, or our own intimations, that there is a "life of

things" we can "see into". Barfield challenges us to take these intimations as more than spiritual comfort food, and argues convincingly that this is the essence of Coleridge's radical message. The foundation on which this system rests is the all-important distinction between *reason* and *understanding* (in the Coleridgean sense), and the fostering of an awareness of how far short our normal thinking falls from that highest faculty. Barfield reaches for the Pauline formula "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" to describe the superindividuality of *reason* (155), but in keeping with his decision not to appeal to religious affiliation, the grand finale to his chapter on *reason* is a passage from Coleridge's lecture on *The Prometheus of Aeschylus*, where Coleridge interprets that myth to expound "the generation of the *nous*, or pure reason in man […] to mark the pre-existence, in order of thought, of the *nous*, as spiritual, both to the objects of sense, and to their products, formed, as it were, by the precipitation […] of spirit" (cit. 156).