

Book Reviews

Astrid Diener, *The Role of Imagination in Culture and Society: Owen Barfield's Early Work*. Leipzig Explorations in Literature and Culture 6. Glienicke/Berlin and Cambridge: Galda + Wilch Verlag, 2002. 224pp. ISBN 1931255067

Readers of this journal may recognize the name of the author of this new monograph investigating the early work of Owen Barfield (1898-1997), Inkling fellow-traveler, C. S. Lewis's "second friend," and one of the most neglected important thinkers of the 20th Century. Her interview with Barfield (included as an appendix in this volume) appeared originally in *Mythlore* in 1995 (20.4: 14-19). But there was little in that brief conversation, mostly focusing on the contemporary context of Barfield's *Poetic Diction*, that would predict this important, ground-breaking study.

Readers of Barfield will no doubt be familiar with his repeated insistence that, in his seventy-year career as a writer, he had never significantly changed: unlike a Wittgenstein or Heidegger, "there is no 'late Barfield' and 'early Barfield,'" as he puts it in a letter quoted by Diener (17). Diener's book, originally an Oxford D. Phil. dissertation, and written in the author's second language, casts serious doubt on this received wisdom. She carefully considers almost completely ignored pieces written by Barfield in the 20s and early 30s, during a period after his graduation from Oxford but before he abandoned his dream of becoming a full-time writer to join his father's law firm in London. Major works—*History in English Words* (1926), *Poetic Diction* (1928)—are not what captures Diener's attention. She dwells instead on such short fiction as "Dope," "The Devastated Area," "Seven Letters," the novel *The Silver Trumpet* (Barfield's first published book [1925]), and non-fiction such as "Some Elements of Decadence," a review of Wilfred Owen's poetry, "The Lesson of South Wales," and *Danger, Ugliness and Waste*. In the process she introduces us to a writer even the small circle of Barfieldians are not likely to recognize.

The Barfield of Diener's study is a young intellectual wrestling not with original and final participation, polarity, logomorphism, chronological snobbery, the Residue of Unresolved Positivism (RUP), and the evolution of consciousness but with economic issues, the nature of consumption, contemporary manifestations of philosophical dualism, the future of leisure, Matthew Arnold's concept of culture,

Lost Generation pessimism, industrial development, advertising, and the promise of technology.

Diener illuminates as well Barfield's indebtedness to three of his great influences, establishing new links between Barfield's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's confrontations with dualistic thought, examining Barfield and Lewis's encounter with the contemporary philosophical climate, and delineating important similarities in Barfield and Rudolf Steiner's struggle to surmount the widening gap between idealism and practicality. (Almost in passing, Diener establishes convincing internal evidence for the date of Barfield's much disputed first exposure to Steiner and Anthroposophy.) By no means uncritical—Diener accuses the early Barfield of a tendency toward evasiveness—she argues that Barfield's development as a thinker shows him aware of his weaknesses and striving to go beyond them in his later work.

Barfieldians spend a great deal of their energy trying to account for the astonishing ignorance of his achievement among those who should appreciate his work. Diener faults the near absence of Barfield from Humphrey Carpenter's seminal book on the Inklings as a contributing factor, but the real cause may be our disregard for the writings her study seeks to foreground. For to know them forces us to rethink Barfield's place in modern thought and, in addition, that of his mentor/collaborator Rudolf Steiner. As Diener explains in the book's closing lines:

These writings reveal an author who, in contrast to many of his more pessimistic contemporaries, welcomed change and technical progress. He welcomed them as positive means to the end of creating those conditions which would make the experience of wholeness and participation possible in modern life. For this reason, despite the weakness in the area of practical detail already noted, Barfield ultimately has to count as an essentially progressive and modern thinker.

Unfortunately, his practical reform writings have so far been completely neglected in scholarship. This is perhaps not surprising. Indeed, our present inability to appreciate the practical reform aspect of his thought may itself result from the dualism which he himself had hoped to overcome.

Such partiality has had serious consequences, and not just for Barfield's reputation: "he has become obscure and esoteric and has lost his concrete relevance in the practical world of our daily experience. He has thus suffered a similar fate to that of Rudolf Steiner—a fate which neither he nor his predecessor deserves" (174).

The notion that there was essentially no development in Barfield's long career is not the only truism Diener's book subverts. It has long been assumed that all the interest in Owen Barfield was North American. American universities, after all, inspired Barfield's post-retirement resurgence; most prominent Barfieldians, from G. B. Tennyson to Shirley Sugerman, Tom Kranidas, Howard Nemerov, and Lionel Adey, were from the United States or Canada; and an American press (Wesleyan) kept Barfield's work in print. But Diener's interest in Owen Barfield began in Freiburg—where Professor Elmar Schenkel, who edits the book series which produced *The Role of Imagination*, was her mentor—and culminated at Oxford, under the direction of Professor A. D. Nuttall. (Both Schenkel and Nuttall have contributed to Diener's book, writing the Afterword and Foreword, respectively). This German and British involvement bodes well for the future advancement of "Barfield studies." If such is to come, it seems indisputable that Astrid Diener's book will be seen as a watershed study.

David Lavery
Middle Tennessee State University

King, Roma, ed. *To Michal from Serge: Letters from Charles Williams to His Wife Florence, 1939-1945*. Kent: Kent State UP, 2002. ix, 315pp. \$65.00. ISBN: 0873387120

In this book King brings together an extremely important collection of letters written by Charles Williams during his years in Oxford: in total, it is a selection of 680 letters to his wife Florence Conway composed between 1939 and Williams's death in 1945. King insists in the preface that he selected them without bias, nor was he aiming at the creation of an image of Williams that he or others might find more or less palatable. In the absence of an examination of the archival materials themselves, this claim strikes me as credible and honest. In the face of powerful internal evidence to the contrary, however, King also insists that the letters are primarily "love letters" and that Williams's "depth of emotion and sincerity" cannot be doubted (4-5). The texts of the letters themselves (almost every one of which expresses worry over money), the fact that they exist only because Michal refused to accompany her husband (and eventually her son) to Oxford, along with the intimate relationships Williams continued to form with young women like Lois