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OWEN BARFIELD FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Philosophical and Biographical Contexts

In what follows I shall endeavour firstly to demonstrate that many of the themes currently being debated in the media were also topics that deeply engaged Owen Barfield in the course of his life. I shall then go on to state why I think what he said and wrote is not more widely known. Finally, I shall argue that at the core of his work lies a path whereby the widespread concern regarding the effects of perpetuating the dominant stage in the evolution of human consciousness can be addressed by taking even a small step towards what he termed "final participation".

In dem folgenden Vortrag werde ich als Erstes zu zeigen versuchen, dass viele der Themen, die heute in den Medien diskutiert werden, auch schon Owen Barfield im Laufe seines Lebens intensiv beschäftigt haben. Des Weiteren werde ich darlegen, weshalb das, was er sagte und schrieb, nicht in weiteren Kreisen bekannt ist. Abschließend werde ich die Ansicht vertreten, dass im Innersten seines Werkes ein Weg zu finden ist, wie der weit verbreiteten Sorge bezüglich der Auswirkungen der Fortdauer des heute vorherrschenden Stadiums in der Entwicklung des menschlichen Bewusstseins zu begegnen ist – nämlich durch einen, wenn auch nur kleinen, Schritt hin zu dem, was er "final participation" nannte.

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I should like to introduce what I have to say by first of all remarking what a pleasure it was for me to discover – on what is my first visit to Leipzig – that on leaving the magnificent Hauptbahnhof I could find myself walking along first Goethestraße then Schillerstraße, visiting the Thomaskirche on the way; and that then – before eventually finding my way here to Beethovenstraße – I could encounter a suitably somewhat tatty and less opulent-looking Shakespearestraße, with

several houses for sale. This link between the greatest representatives of German and English cultures is one that has a particular resonance in the work of Owen Barfield, as I hope to illustrate at the end of my contribution.

On a rather more serious note, I should also like to mention a quite spontaneous experience that I had while journeying to Leipzig in the night train from Paris to Berlin. For there came to my mind the tumultuous military events of the 20th century that turned the land separating these two great capitals into an arena of bloody conflict; and I strongly experienced the impulse that the 21st century should not be about nationalistic supremacy, victors and the vanquished, but about mutual recognition and collaboration between in the first instance the countries of Europe. This likewise I shall return to at the conclusion of my remarks about Owen Barfield's message for our time.

Nearly three years ago I gave a lecture on the theme of "Owen Barfield: Harbinger of the 21st century"[1]. For the purposes of the present talk on a very similar theme, I shall be drawing upon some of the thoughts I developed in this previous lecture. However, by way of introduction, I am struck quite forcibly by the extent to which Barfield's ideas have not merely retained their relevance but have come bubbling to the surface – or at any rate near the surface – of debates in the media about some topics of burning interest.

Five such topics in particular come to mind. One is that of climate change, the ever-clearer perception that, through the effect of modern Western life-styles, man is dangerously upsetting the precarious ecological balance that makes life as we know it possible on this planet. There is in Southeast England currently a particular preoccupation with shortage of water, made all the more serious by the Government's determination to go ahead regardless with plans for more houses in this region. More generally, the question of energy supplies is being hotly debated, with nuclear power being a particularly contentious point in this respect.

[1] Published in the 2005 issue of *The Golden Blade* entitled "Language: Symptom and Servant of Culture".

Another widely debated issue is that between Darwinian evolutionists (such as the somewhat fanatical, but popular, Richard Dawkins) and (predominantly American fundamentalist) creationists, who hold a literal view of the Creation story as related in Genesis. Unfortunately, so-called responsible organs of the media tend to delight in presenting this, somewhat unintelligently, as a dichotomy between two equally dogmatic extremes; and only rarely is a saner person – such as Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford – allowed to express his thoughts.

A third area currently under immense scrutiny in Britain is the Government's increasing tendency towards authoritarianism (and, some would say, totalitarianism). Striking examples are the legislative acts referred to as 'anti-terrorist', including threats to liberty involving ID cards, and an erosion of the individual's legal rights vis-à-vis the State.

A fourth and ever growing area of concern has to do with the Blair Government's relentless determination to continue Margaret Thatcher's crusade to extend the rule of market-forces over every aspect of social life. There is currently considerable unhappiness about the way that this is extending its domination over the National Health Service, with 'payment by results' a particular feature of this policy; and it is clear that many responsible individuals want to resist the omnipresence of egocentric motives and replace them with notions of service to a social ideal (such as, in this case, the meeting of patients' needs).

Lying behind all these themes is the militant clash between Western reductionist materialism and consumerism and the religious values of, in particular, Islam. This wider theme of the 'clash of civilisations' or cultural change and/or development informs, or is responsible for, many of the above areas of debate.

Throughout his long life, Owen Barfield addressed all of these themes at one time or another. His concerns about modern man's relationship to his natural environment came especially to expression around the mid 1980s, when, for example, he spoke at an annual conference of the Bio-Dynamic Agricultural Association (July 1985) and wrote his unpublished novella "Eager Spring". "Evolu-

tion" was the theme of the 1980 Fullerton Conference and the subject of a full-scale lecture on the irrationalities and limitations of Darwinism. "Night Operation" (1975) represents his own version of the *1984* or *Brave New World* theme and presents a futuristic picture of a cultureless world controlled by an all-knowing and all-pervading totalitarian State. The whole question of socio-economic affairs and organisation, especially in Britain, was amply considered by him mainly in the inter-war period in the 1920s and 1930s, when he published a number of essays and articles pertinent to these matters. And the theme of cultural development, expressed in his work in the form of on-going research on the evolution of human consciousness, was one that he never lost sight of. Most especially, of course, he was deeply aware of the urgent need for the European and American West (with its ramifications elsewhere in the modern world) to take a step beyond the limitations of reductionist materialism and the observer consciousness out of which it has arisen. He did not, so far as I am aware, speak or write about Islam, but that does not lessen the thrust of what he has to say to us now.

Despite this evidence of a considerable synchronicity between contemporary concerns and Barfield's ideas, he is largely ignored by academic specialists and therefore to all intents and purposes unknown to the general public. For example, he is not even mentioned in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, whether in its fourth edition of 1967 (when his work was still in print with Faber and Faber) or in the present (2000) edition. One reason for this is doubtlessly that a similar attitude is accorded to anyone associated with anthroposophy, not least Rudolf Steiner himself, a many-sided genius who would in other circumstances be regarded as one of the intellectual giants of his age. There is also another reason (among others of less significance), pertaining more to the 21st century than to Barfield's own 20th century lifetime. It is that the modern world has developed an extraordinary fascination for computers and Information Technology. So much so that computer-technology is regarded as representing a new revolution in consciousness.

In my earlier lecture I tried to demonstrate that computer-technology belongs fairly and squarely within the spectator conscious-

ness that has pertained more or less since the Renaissance, and that far from representing or entailing a forward step in *consciousness*, it is a way of enabling the desire for something beyond this to be satisfied in an illusory way while quite emphatically reinforcing the egocentric quality of modern observer consciousness with its associated veneration of what have by now – in Barfield's terms – become vacuous, desiccated idols (phenomena as beheld by this form of consciousness). If this is indeed what the 21st century is about, Barfield does not have a great deal more to say to us. For throughout his work, and quite particularly in *Saving the Appearances,* he speaks of a whole vast journey of consciousness beyond modern spectator consciousness towards what he termed final participation, an evolutionary development which – far from being merely in his own mind – he found richly evident in its incipient stages from the early part of the 20th century in, for example, the considerable interest in 'the unconscious'. "Pan, it seems," declares Barfield in a neat image, "has not only not retired from business, he has not only gone indoors; he has hardly shut the door before we begin to hear him moving about inside" (*Saving the Appearances* 134).

So what, then, *is* the 21st century about? An important distinction to be made in this respect is between 'information', on the one hand, and 'communication' on the other. Information is available nowadays to a quite unprecedented degree, a facility enormously enhanced by the computer and especially since the invention of the World Wide Web and Internet in the closing years of last century. But there is nothing especially new about this phenomenon of quantities – some would say a surfeit – of information. I recall a Reader in Modern History, a specialist on religious and cultural affairs whom I greatly admired at my University saying that our problem nowadays (and this was in *1968*!) is that we have far too much information, we have far more knowledge than we are able to digest, make use of, apply. His constant theme was, as he put it, "being for real", having a constant experience of one's existential reality – and of course one cannot do this if one is in a state of mental indigestion. Computer technology has, so to speak, 'solved' this problem by well-nigh abolishing reality in the mind of the IT practitioner in that a virtual reality

is created that purports to serve as a substitute. And this is where the link with communication comes in. For one has the illusion of communicating with absolutely everyone, whereas in point of fact one is living an existence so solitary as to be almost autistic. The underlying intention of all modern so-called communication networks (the other main ones apart from information systems being symbolised by the car and the supermarket) is to enable the individual to engage in a consuming, devouring relationship towards the world (i. e. the earthly environment and the people who share it). Communication does not really enter into the picture at all, except incidentally.

And yet many would say that aspects of communication such as relationships and quality of life are arguably more important than any of this. Certainly, the topics of debate briefly outlined earlier reflect a tension in modern life between the ever eroding but intensifying citadel of separate individual selfhood and the wrath of the surging ocean of togetherness. A truer picture would be to say that the 21st Century is about this tension, and the question that hangs over it is whether it can be resolved.

There can be little doubt that the acuteness of this problem has developed considerably since Information Technology systems became a feature of everyday life. This is especially noticeable in any organisation that is based not so much on a hierarchical structure as upon a more 'horizontal' or 'flat' community-oriented approach. These latter organisations depend for their health and on-going existence upon individual initiative and co-responsibility. Over the years in which I have been associated with such organisations, I have observed a marked tendency towards social fragmentation, and a corresponding urge towards a more 'vertical', hierarchical form. At the core of this problem lies a growing difficulty in seeing anything from anyone else's point of view, with the result that tensions escalate and social life rapidly becomes impossible.

What is generally not realised is that this is basically not so much a social or moral problem (that I am failing to love or care for my fellow human beings adequately) as a philosophical one. Just imagine how different it would be if I acknowledged that I am co-responsible for the phenomena that I both perceive and experience, that the

world that I generally (naively) experience as being outside of me is in fact in part my own creation. There are in this sense no citadels of separate selfhood, just as there is no mindless, destructive sea seeking to overwhelm them. Even the very survival of ordinary social life – bearing in mind that outer social forms have become devoid of cohesion and direction – has come to depend on truly applying Barfield's injunction, running throughout his work, that we find a way of embarking on the journey towards final participation, resisting in the process the strong temptation to long for the security and certainty of a now lost mythological age (which he termed "original participation"). In a lecture that he gave in 1972 called "Participation and Isolation: A Fresh Light on Present Discontents", he came about as close as he ever did to giving a brief definition of his way of understanding how the narrow dogmas of the spectator-consciousness of the present can and must be replaced by a new form of participation on the part of the individual human being with the world around him:

> How I should like to see [the cosy old twentieth-century image of history as the meaningless and absurd, and therefore of life itself as meaningless and absurd] beginning to be replaced by the image of history as a process of transition from original to final participation: from the individual being shaped by the community to the community being shaped by the individual, just as evolution for me is a process of transition from man being shaped by nature to nature being shaped by man. I should like to see, before I go the way of all flesh, the beginnings of both an ecology and a sociology based, not on ingenious abstraction, but on the concrete realities of nature and human nature, a vision whose fulfilment depends on "infring[ing] the tabu ... on admitting that the so-called inner world of human consciousness is as real and as old as the so-called outer world of nature".

Just as the philosophical underpinning of what makes this whole journey towards final participation possible is derived from Rudolf Steiner's basic work of epistemology, *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (1894),[2] so does Barfield state in the chapter on "Final Participation" in *Saving the Appearances* that "it is in [Steiner's] work and that of his followers that the reader should look for further signs of a development towards final participation in the field of science" (140). He goes on to add that "the mind of Rudolf Steiner was of course not only applied to the scientific sphere, and it was perhaps not even the most important part of his work" (140).

There is a sense in which, just as Steiner's ideas – despite their in principle rejection by the academic establishment – are gradually entering more and more into the mainstream,[3] Owen Barfield's ideas belong more to the 21st than to the 20th century. I should like to conclude by illustrating this thought by referring to that book of his which seems to me to have been most especially written for the 21st century, *Unancestral Voice*. In the first place, the whole context of the book – namely, a dialogue with the Meggid, "the voice of each one's mind speaking from the depths within himself" – is profoundly contemporary, reflecting as it does the modern longing to reach in freedom towards the deeper mysteries of one's own being and the created universe. Secondly, the areas of subject-matter are themselves closely related to themes which preoccupy many people today, whether consciously so or not. Thus this inner voice casts its perceptive gaze in the book over four distinct areas (among others): the question of developing an ethical code of behaviour in a world increasingly bereft of spiritual or moral guidance; the study of history

[2] Second German edition (revised and enlarged by the author) published in Berlin in 1918. First English edition published in London, 1916, under the title *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Also published under the title *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* between 1922 and 1963. Currently available in English under the former title and also as *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*.

[3] A tiny symptom of this is the surprising fact that, in a national ballot of people with a particular interest in the subject, Steiner was recently voted 62nd out of the 500 most influential economists in our time. Other striking areas include Waldorf Education and Bio-Dynamic Agriculture.

and understanding one's place as an individual human being in the world in a historical context; grappling with challenges posed to our faculties of perception by the insights of modern physics; and understanding the driving-force behind the materialism which is so strong a feature of our age. So as to enable Barfield speak more extendedly in his own words, I shall now read from the Meggid's observations about this latter phenomenon:

> It was indeed the false Preserver ... who first led [men] to their doctrine of the conservation of matter, and then led them to idolise it. They will discover – and it may be soon – that that is not a law of universal application. This destruction, this destruction which is the precondition of every transformation – where must it be most absolute? Where transformation is most absolute. Within man himself. Your brothers in the West will learn, indeed they are beginning to suspect already, that within each one of them, deep-hidden and hitherto unconscious, there lives a fury of destructive force, beside which the destructive forces in nature grow pale.
> What they ordinarily call self-knowledge is no more than a lifeless network of memory-thoughts spun about the self, as the hypotheses of science are spun about the self of nature. But when they penetrate beneath the lifeless memory-thoughts which the brain reflects; when they begin to reach behind the network to the living thought, which is at the same time the source of life in nature, when consciousness begins to penetrate the sleeping human will itself, then indeed the hitherto unconscious impulse to blot out the given material form breaks through into actual instinct. It becomes the instinct to destroy *all* form, to spread abroad in the world around them the chaos they have begun to divine within themselves [...]
> This destructive impulse and this chaos mankind has long unconsciously feared. And that fear, if you will re-

> ceive it, is the true origin of materialism. It is founded in fear. The fear of what you will find becomes the fear to look, the fear to look becomes the wish that it may be impossible to look, and from that unconscious wish springs the doctrine of the conservation of matter and energy which, if it were wholly true, would indeed render it impossible to look behind those lifeless memory-thoughts that are a mere mirror to reflect alike the surface of nature and the surface of self.
> But it is not wholly true. It is not true within the human being himself. There, in his metabolism, matter is not conserved, it is destroyed and re-created. And it is from there that *his* life, and with it *his* morality, must begin to inform nature, to inform the earth itself. This he can only do by pouring his morality into the heart and centre of destruction that he carries within himself (*Unancestral Voice* 159–160).

Finally, I should like to return to the theme of inter-cultural dialogue mentioned at the beginning. For I think it is remarkable that it was in 1929, in his essay "On the Consciousness Soul", that Barfield presented a beautiful image of the true relationship between the cultures of Germany and England in the form of "two divinely tall spiritual forms" engaged in a graceful dance. These forms are the idealised representations of, respectively, Faust and Hamlet, enjoining upon the other to seek, in turn, life and death. Had Barfield's wisdom been listened to when he wrote these words there would surely have been no second world war. But I would argue that they are of no less relevance even today, and that they can guide us towards finding a deeper understanding of the essential gifts that our two cultures have to offer, gifts which can work in a dangerously destructive way if they are not brought together in a kind of harmonious marriage, where life and death can together bring resurrection forces into contemporary cultural and social development.

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