

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Panpsychist & poet

by [Peter Schwendener](#)

On Simon Blaxland de Lange's *Owen Barfield: Romanticism Come of Age*.

*Simon Blaxland de Lange*

Owen Barfield: Romanticism Come of Age

Temple Lodge, 352 pages, \$45

The fame of Owen Barfield (1898–1997) rests on two things. The first is a series of remarkable books, the best known of which are *History in English Words*, *Poetic Diction*, and *Saving the Appearances*. The second is a group of high-profile friends and admirers that include C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Saul Bellow, and the historian John Lukacs. One naturally expects these two things—the books he wrote and the company he kept—to figure largely in any Barfield biography.

In Simon Blaxland de Lange's biography, they do, though there is a third part of the Barfieldian legacy that has frustrated many who otherwise admire the man and the writer. This is Barfield's almost lifelong commitment to Anthroposophy, an offshoot of the Theosophical movement founded in Germany by Rudolf Steiner in 1913 (Barfield joined the English Branch of the Anthroposophical Society in 1923). His commitment to Steiner's teachings brought misery (though not divorce) to his marriage and strain to his friendship with C. S. Lewis. Barfield described his wife's antipathy to Steiner as "a sword through the marriage knot," and Lewis regarded Steiner as "a sort of panpsychist, with a vein of posing superstition."

The author of this biography is himself an anthroposophist, and is concerned throughout to establish continuity between Barfield's more accessible writings on literature and the forbidding terrain of Steiner's thought. Fortunately the reader, like Barfield's wife and C. S. Lewis, has no need to explore anthroposophy further. The centerpiece of Barfield's work on semantics and poetry is his closely argued book *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*, which appeared to acclaim in England in 1928, then fell out of print for over two decades, reappearing in 1952 and in America in 1964. Its point of departure is the "felt change of consciousness" induced by certain works of literature (mostly, though not invariably, poems). Its object is to isolate a kind of writing in which boundaries between words and their associations fall away, a possible example (not found in Barfield's book) being "The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass" from Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes." The words dwell in a welter of associations even though no overt recourse is had to metaphor or "symbolism."

Barfield first came to America in 1964, and lectured and taught here on and off for roughly two decades. His principal appeal to North American audiences (largely though not entirely academic) was his work on Coleridge, including his 1971 book *What Coleridge Thought*. He was eventually

courted by Saul Bellow, who wrote him a kind of fan letter in 1975 and subsequently arranged a number of meetings. The tenor of their relationship can be gleaned from the following: “You asked me how old I was,” Bellow says in a letter after their first meeting. “‘Sixty,’ I said. Then you smiled and said, ‘Sixteen?’ It was the one joke you allowed yourself at my expense, and it was entirely justified. It’s a very American thing to believe that it’s never too late to make a new start in life.” Barfield’s puzzled response: “All that actually happened was that I did for an instant actually hear ‘sixteen’ and thought the error ludicrous enough to be worth sharing.”

For a short time Bellow seemed a celebrity convert to Anthroposophy (a *Newsweek* profile of Bellow mentioned his debt to both Barfield and Steiner), but the friendship soured when Barfield, asked to review Bellow’s novel *The Dean’s December* for an anthroposophical journal, complained that in that novel Bellow appears “perched on the apex of excruciating self-consciousness at which the Western mind has arrived, ignoring any prospect of taking flight above it.” The curious wording of this critique owes something to Anthroposophy’s belief in healing the division of consciousness through various spiritual exercises, and something to Barfield’s own frustrated ambitions as a novelist. His failure to find a publisher for a 550-page Anthroposophy-themed novel entitled *English People* led him in the 1930s to join his father’s London law firm, from which he retired in 1959. This forced accommodation to the demands of making a living is the subject of his 1950 book *This Ever Diverse Pair*, which is about two lawyers and was written, his biographer says, “to stave off depression and breakdown.”

In 1949 Barfield joined the Church of England, and on hearing the news C. S. Lewis wrote him a touching letter which reads in part, “Welcome and welcome and welcome. No, of course it won’t mean the end of the ‘Great War,’” the war in question being a long-running, vaguely boyish dispute between the two men over philosophical and religious issues. Eventually, the Great War came to revolve around Barfield’s Anthroposophy. When Lewis addressed a sixty-eight-page treatise to his friend entitled *Summa Contra Anthroposophos*, Barfield responded with the equally Thomistic *Replie. Repliecit Anthroposophus Barfieldus*. It all sounds like great fun and makes for deeply unsuspectful reading, the gap between Rudolf Steiner’s views and those of an orthodox Christian such as Lewis being almost too wide to admit serious controversy.

This book has the interest, as well as the liability, of being the first on its subject to appear. Barfield fell in love, it is reported, with two women who were also Anthroposophists yet remained faithful to his wife. The fact that he led not just a long but by all accounts almost blameless (in fact close to saintly) life works against the dramatic tension biography needs to survive. Tension must be supplied by other means, and Blaxland de Lange does not do badly in making Barfield’s ideas stand in for dramatic characters. Whether or not there is such a thing as the evolution of consciousness, Barfield showed that there is such a thing as poetic diction, and his early books on language, poetry, and semantics are still quietly exciting, as the man himself seems to have been.

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