

Coleridge, Barfield, and the Countercultural Stance

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OWEN BARFIELD MAINTAINED THAT HUMANITY was at a crossroads, with the potential of evolving towards a higher state of consciousness ('final participation'), and he regarded Coleridge and the German Nature Philosophers as heralds of this development. By saying that this final participation would dawn when 'Romanticism comes of age', Barfield was crediting the Romantics' foundational role.

Ideas about the potential for development of consciousness that were similar to Barfield's were widespread in the 1960s and 1970s. Along with interest in the higher states of consciousness described by mystics from east and west, and oriental meditation techniques, the visionary optimism of psychedelic culture delivered a direct experience of a state of expanded consciousness, leading people such as the psychologist Richard Alpert to move beyond the drug culture to spiritual or esoteric disciplines that promised development of the new consciousness that had been glimpsed.¹ Theodore Roszak called this generational spirit of rebellion a 'counter culture' in his *The Making of a Counter Culture*, a study that balanced and assessed the various forms its idealistic vision took.² I use the term 'counterculture' in its widest possible sense to cover any system of thought that stands against the prevailing culture of the time: whether Romanticism against enlightenment rationalism, or Barfield against positivism (his blanket term for the prevailing materialistic science-based worldview).

Barfield himself welcomed the 1960s counterculture as a challenge to positivism, acknowledging in 1974 that 'the widespread use, and the literature, of psychedelic drugs has fairly obviously been loosening for a vast number of minds the reassuring opacity of the five senses and therewith of the Reality Principle which science has chosen as its base'.³ Particular parallels to Barfield's thought appeared in the work of two writers associated with that countercultural period: Alan Watts and Theodore Roszak. Watts urged liberation from the illusion of being a 'skin-encapsulated ego'⁴, a phrase echoed by Barfield in a 1980 lecture 'Evolution', when he declared that 'mind or consciousness [...] is not a mysterious something spatially encapsulated within a human or animal skin'.⁵ Roszak made several references to Barfield in *Where the Wasteland Ends*.⁶ In his book, like Barfield, he gave the Romantics a

¹ 'Journey: The Transformation: Dr. Richard Alpert, Ph.D into Baba Ram Dass', in *Be Here Now* (San Cristobal: Lama Foundation, 1971), Part 1. n.p.

² Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1st pub. 1969; Berkeley: University of Los Angeles Press, 1995). His coinage has subsequently been widely used as a term, either hyphenated as 'counter-culture' or as the single word 'counterculture', which is the form I shall adopt here.

³ Owen Barfield, 'The Coming Trauma of Materialism' in *The Rediscovery of Meaning* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 195.

⁴ Alan Watts, *Essential Lectures*: 1.1.7. – Myth of Myself – Pt. 1 <<https://www.alanwatts.org/1-1-7-myth-of-myself-pt-1/>> (accessed 3 Nov 2020).

⁵ Owen Barfield, *History, Guilt & Habit* (Oxford: Barfield Press, 2012), 83.

⁶ Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Post Industrial Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).

‘uniquely paradigmatic place’ in stimulating western culture towards a new state of consciousness (280); and he drew explicitly on Barfield’s concept of ‘Idolatry’ for a key chapter, ‘The Sin of Idolatry’ (109-41). Barfield and Roszak both believed that Romanticism had been a significant awakening for western culture, which amounted to an evolution of consciousness, and that the twentieth-century sense of having achieved enlightenment following the scientific revolution was badly mistaken.

Roszak’s *Where the Wasteland Ends* builds on the insights of *Counter Culture* by reframing them within a wider historico-cultural analysis that goes back to the Romantics. Part III (the final part) of that book starts with an epigraph declaring ‘How the Romantic artists, dissenting from single vision, rediscovered the meaning of the transcendent symbols and thereby returned western culture to the Old Gnosis.’ (275). As his use of the term ‘single vision’ suggests, Roszak is following Blake in urging a new consciousness that aspires to Blake’s criteria for the ‘fourfold vision’. Roszak views Romanticism as ‘the first significant antitoxin generated within the body of our society to meet the infectious spread of single vision. It holds that uniquely paradigmatic place in the ancestry of the counter culture’ (280). Roszak’s use of such terms as ‘evolution of consciousness’ and his assertion of the prime position of Goethe run close to Barfield’s view of the significance of the Romantic vision. Both thinkers share the feeling that humanity is at a crossroads: if the culture rejects this opportunity there will be disastrous consequences.

In the exploratory zeitgeist of the 1960s it is hardly surprising that Owen Barfield should have experienced an upswing. One symptom of this was a new 1966 edition of his collection of essays, *Romanticism Comes of Age* (first published in 1944), where Barfield’s updated introduction greeted his ‘sympathetic readers, who seem to have grown a little more numerous lately’.⁷ *Romanticism Comes of Age* was dedicated to ‘To my many friends in the Anthroposophical Movement’, and his introduction gave a brief intellectual history to explain the development of his thought.

As his title suggests, Barfield regards the Romantic movement as a first infant step of the western world towards this new consciousness. He had previously discovered that reading poetry produced in him a heightened state of consciousness that was revelatory:

it was the Romantic poets who supplied in the richest measure the kind of imaginative treatment of language and life in which I had become interested. But Romanticism had a philosophy as well as a literature and this philosophy was the natural starting point of my enquiries. I pondered much on Wordsworth’s *Prefaces* and on Coleridge and his sources. (4)

Barfield acknowledges Coleridge’s role in developing a philosophical theory of imagination as an organ of perception, and—as the following passage makes

⁷ Owen Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age* (1944; 2nd ed. 1966; Oxford: Barfield Press, 2012), 15-34.

clear—he regards Rudolf Steiner as the only person to recognise the importance of their insight:

Any number of critics, following Schelling and Coleridge, have dealt with imagination as an ultimate mental activity that opposes, and transmutes into a kind of aesthetic or mystical contemplation, that absolute dichotomy between perceiving subject and perceived object on which our practical everyday experience (Coleridge's 'lethargy of custom') is based. Only Steiner, as far as I know, has clearly apprehended this activity as part and but the first part, of a long, sober process of cognition that may end in a man's actually overcoming the dichotomy. (24-5)

This leads Barfield to make a prediction: 'That future historians of Western thought will interpret the appearance of Romantic philosophy towards the end of the eighteenth century as foreshadowing the advent of Rudolf Steiner towards the close of the nineteenth I have no sort of doubt' (28).

The Countercultural Stance: Coleridge

Viewing Barfield in the wider context of this generational critique of the spiritual vacuity of mainstream culture raises questions about the different forms a countercultural stance can take. How easy is it to recognize common ground and join forces with purveyors of rival systems? The aspiration to offer a new universal solution frequently results in further fragmentation, in the formation of yet another sect. Coleridge and Barfield were both countercultural figures offering systems of thought at odds with the mainstream consensus. Consequently, both Coleridge and Barfield felt misunderstood and unappreciated outside a small circle of like-minded followers or fellow seekers. This sense of alienation necessitates some form of coping strategy: a countercultural stance.

Coleridge used the 'Fable of the Mad'ning Rain' to portray the situation of such an outsider: 'IT IS IN VAIN TO BE SANE IN A WORLD OF MADMEN' shrieked his capital lettered punchline (F I 9). He first recounted this fable in 1795 in his sixth *Lecture on Revealed Religion* (LPR 215), re-using it as his opening metaphor in *The Friend* (F I 7-9). It tells of a man who is warned by a supernatural voice that three days of heavy rain are coming, and that all who have contact with it will become insane. He warns his community of the danger, but they take no heed, and he is the only one to hide away in a cavern as instructed. After the appointed day has passed, he emerges into a changed world where everyone else has been rendered mad by the water. Because they all share the same altered mental state, they regard this sole remaining sane person as deranged: 'Who is this man? how strangely he looks! how wild! [...] assuredly, a very dangerous madman!' (9). The man senses he is in danger from their hostility, and above all no longer shares the same worldview: he is 'solitary in a world of forms like his own' (9). Coleridge attributed this fable to Benedetto Stay (1714-1801), a Dalmatian philosopher and poet (F II 507-10), but according to Idries Shah the origins of the tale go back to the ninth century CE. The tale

gained currency among the countercultural community of the 1960s, when Shah included it in *Tales of the Dervishes*, one of his many anthologies of Sufi 'teaching-stories'.⁸

Coleridge's use of this fable to open his new periodical *The Friend*, in which he is to present to the public his deepest thoughts—'what we are and what we are born to become; and thus from the End of our Being to deduce its proper Objects' (F II 17)—shows how sensitive he was to the capacity of his readership to understand what he was planning to tell them. The last sane man in the world would be ill-advised simply to harangue his erstwhile companions and tell them they were mad. But how can he prepare them for his message? Coleridge anticipates objections from the start, expecting that his readers 'will ask, by what right I affect to stand aloof from the crowd, even were it prudent; and with what prudence, did I even possess the right?' (F II 10).

Coleridge's understanding of the problem is apparent in his notebook musings over the predicament of Thomas Taylor the Platonist, a writer whose profession of Neoplatonism as a philosophy-cum-religion put him at odds with the cultural consensus:

Taylor could not have understood the System, he teaches—for had he done so, he must have understood the difficulties that oppose its reception, the objections which immediately occur to men formed under notions so alien from it—Whereas he no where prepares the mind, no where shews himself in a state of Sympathy with the hesitating Examiner—
(CN III 3935)

Coleridge could appreciate the philosophy that Taylor was propounding, but felt that Taylor was presenting it in the wrong way: Taylor sounds like a cranky outsider pronouncing everyone else wrong and claiming to be in possession of THE truth. Hence Coleridge's open expressions of hesitancy and self-deprecation in his published writings: these can be seen as a way of overcoming this resistance. By reducing himself, humanising himself in this way, he 'shews himself in a state of Sympathy with the hesitating Examiner'.

Another strategy used by Coleridge is to maintain that the ideas he is propounding are inherent to the mainstream culture, but overlooked, forgotten, or debased. Coleridge wrote and published *The Friend* between 1808 and 1810 as an outsider living in Grasmere. For his 'Lay Sermon' *The Statesman's Manual* in 1816, 'addressed to the higher classes of society' (LS 3) Coleridge changed tack, but only superficially. His epigraph from Giordano Bruno—'I beg you to pay attention to these things, however they appear at first sight, in order that, though you perhaps may think me mad, you may at least discover the rational principles behind my madness' (4)—is essentially the 'Fable of the Madning Rain' in miniature. His strategy in *The Statesman's Manual*, of appealing to the Bible—the very bedrock of Christian Protestant culture—is

⁸ Idries Shah, 'When the Waters Were Changed' in *Tales of the Dervishes: Teaching-stories of the Sufi Masters over the past thousand years* (1967; St Albans: Panther, 1973), 21-2.

to claim that his ideas uphold the very values that his society already professes to uphold, only his readers need reminding of what those values are at their deepest level. Perhaps this strategy was *too* successful: Coleridge's attempt to change the system from within could be read by an unsympathetic critic as a form of toadying piety quite at odds with the stance he had adopted previously. For Coleridge's opponents this showed him to be a turncoat, but regardless of how unappealing this persona may be to a modern reader, in the context of his comments about Thomas Taylor we should be able at least to understand Coleridge's motivation for aligning himself with those he saw as the guardians of the culture.

The Countercultural Stance: Barfield

When Owen Barfield wrote *What Coleridge Thought* (1971), he certainly grasped the necessity to (in Coleridge's language) 'anticipate objections', as the following passage shows:⁹

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 emphasises 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 civilisation and culture are rooted—the angry no less than the complacent part of it; the scepticism 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.

When presenting the deeper currents of what he considered Coleridge's 'basic argument'—that consciousness forms reality, Barfield bore in mind what he called the 'prevailing climate of opinion'; he stressed that the reader needed to realize how radical and 'subversive' this argument was 'of the most cherished assumptions in which our present civilisation and culture are rooted'. This view has been widely accepted; although it was published fifty years ago, *What Coleridge Thought* continues to be reprinted in paperback and is still well-regarded as a reliable advanced guide to Coleridge's mature philosophy. The cover of its 2014 edition has Duncan Wu hailing it as 'Undoubtedly one of the most perceptive and shrewd books about Coleridge ever written'.

In an otherwise positive review of *What Coleridge Thought* published in 1973, John Colmer voiced a misgiving over Barfield's 'uncritical coupling of Coleridge and Rudolf Steiner, minds of such dissimilar quality, even if they did pursue somewhat similar lines of thought'. Colmer's comment is unfair: in the

⁹ Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (Wesleyan University Press, 1971; repr. San Rafael, CA: Barfield Press, n.d.), 144.

main body of *What Coleridge Thought* there are only two references to Steiner.¹⁰ Barfield first mentions Steiner in his introduction, where he says he will *avoid* (NB!) looking into how Coleridge's polar philosophy might appeal to various alternative systems of thought gaining popularity in his day, among others, 'the small but growing number who have come to acknowledge the pre-eminence of Rudolf Steiner' (11). He next mentions Steiner at the end of the chapter 'Man in History and in Society' in a brief comparison of the different views of history and evolution of consciousness held by Coleridge, Hegel, and Steiner (177–8). True, Barfield also notes parallels to Steiner's writings in four endnotes, but he takes great care—it seems to me—throughout this book, to avoid basing any argument on Steiner's ideas.¹¹

However, once one gains a familiarity with Barfield's other philosophical writings (as Colmer evidently had), it becomes apparent that Barfield regards Coleridge's theory of imagination as an important precursor to Steiner's doctrine of *geheimwissenschaft*, or 'occult science'.¹² This doctrine, by merging subject and object, effectively makes imagination an organ of cognition. In *What Coleridge Thought*, Barfield presents Coleridge's primary imagination 'as a varying interplay between active and passive elements in the *relation* between self and world, of such a nature that the two elements themselves may change, the one into the other' (76). The insights that Barfield gained through his study of Steiner may well have helped Barfield recognise and promote Coleridge's most radical philosophical departures.

As regards Barfield's countercultural stance, then, *What Coleridge Thought* is very skilfully pitched, and because it is a book about someone else's philosophy, it has a unique place outside the main development of Barfield's presentation of his own thought, which I will now consider.

Poetic Diction (1928), a study of language—and particularly its use in poetry—argued convincingly that early language was figurative: that (for example) the Latin *spiritus* and its Sanscrit precursor *asu* meant both breath and life from the outset. The view he was opposing—that of Max Müller—held that primitive humans only had words for concrete objects: these words only came to be used figuratively when humans became more rational.¹³ Barfield concluded from this that early man—at the time language first emerged—had a different kind of consciousness. He hinted that this had wider implications than poetry, suggesting that either through evolution or 'by the personal endeavour of poets themselves towards an increased self-knowledge and self-control' this archaic mode of consciousness that occasionally revives in poetic moments could be recovered in the modern age in alternation with our normal rationalistic consciousness (104). But these hints were not an essential part of his book, which was essentially aimed at 'the lettered world'.¹⁴

¹⁰ John Colmer, *The Modern Language Review* 68:4, (1973), 894–5. JSTOR, <www.jstor.org/stable/3726061> (accessed 18 Nov 2020).

¹¹ 215 n.10, 228 n.33, 241 n.12, 260 n.54.

¹² Rudolf Steiner, *Occult Science: An Outline* (1909; Forest Row: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2011), 20–35.

¹³ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (1928; Oxford: Barfield Press, 2010), 66.

¹⁴ *Romanticism Comes of Age*, 11.

Saving the Appearances (1952) built on these insights and hints to present the major philosophical statement that is surely Barfield's masterpiece. He used the term original participation (following Lévy-Bruhl) to denote the archaic mode of consciousness described in *Poetic Diction*.¹⁵ He defined 'alpha thinking' (our normal rational consciousness) and 'beta thinking' (an exertion to recover the archaic participative consciousness) (38–45). His analysis of the development of western culture concludes that even though the scientific revolution has brought about a false vision of the world as dead external matter entirely separate from the consciousness which perceives it, we cannot undo the damage and go back to original participation, but must evolve to a new state he calls final participation. His views become challenging when he contorts Judeo-Christian religious beliefs to show how, led by divine providence, Jewish abhorrence of idols was the first death-blow to original participation, and how the incarnation of Christ was a unique stage in the development of human consciousness. I will defer detailed discussion of these last ideas to the next section, but as regards an exploration of his countercultural stance it is enough to say that these ideas represent an Anthroposophical Christology and do not (it seems to me) necessarily follow from the groundwork of his argument. We start off persuaded that participation is our lost domain, and something to be cultivated. We end up being told that it is primitive, that God enrolled the Jews to put an end to it, in order that, as he explains in his closing chapters, Christ might bring us into final participation. Nevertheless, convincing or not, *Saving the Appearances* was not preaching to the converted: Barfield started from first principles and led the reader step by step towards his grand conclusion.

The revised 1966 introduction to *Romanticism Comes of Age*, which was originally a collection of pieces addressed to fellow Anthroposophists, shows Barfield recognising that these essays can now appeal to a wider circle of 'sympathetic readers' (15), and by the time of his 1980 lecture 'Evolution' at California State University Barfield was consciously addressing an audience that stood apart from the mainstream consensus.¹⁶ At this stage in his career he felt able to assume 'that nearly everyone here, whatever department, discipline or dimension he or she comes from, is dissatisfied with Positivism [...], or whatever it should be called, as a philosophically sufficient reality principle' (67). He then goes on to define 'three degrees or levels of positivism which can be acronymically specified as "P," "UP" and "RUP." [...] RUP (Residue of Unresolved Positivism) denotes the persistence of inherited Positivism in the subconscious' (67–8). It is apparent from Simon Blaxland-de Lange's biography that RUP becomes crystalized as a Barfieldian shibboleth.¹⁷ Even Kathleen Coburn, Barfield laments, 'whom I not only like personally but admire tremendously' is not free of it (Blaxland 69). Without wishing to place Coburn on a pedestal, can anyone be wholly free of this deeply-rooted illusion?

¹⁵ Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (1957; Oxford: Barfield Press, 2010).

¹⁶ *History, Guilt and Habit*, op cit. 67–92.

¹⁷ Simon Blaxland-de Lange, *Owen Barfield: Romanticism Come of Age: A Biography* (Forest Row: Temple Lodge, 2006) 4, 42, 69, 91–2, 115, 148, 163.

*Barfield and The Counterculture**1. The Zeitgeist*

Let me put my cards on the table. I would be quite content to wake up in a world free of RUP; a world where Owen Barfield's great insight into the all-pervading nature of consciousness was common sense rather than an idea on the margins. Coleridge would get his due recognition as a prophetic philosopher on the anglophone wing of the nature philosophers, the forerunner for an enlightened cultural consensus, and—especially pleasing to me—John Cowper Powys would be regarded as the pre-eminent novelist of the twentieth century for his representation of a consciousness that is, as Barfield puts it so well, 'the inner side of the world as a whole'.¹⁸ However, this is not an *idea* as such; it is a higher state of *consciousness*, a state I (and hopefully my reader) may have glimpsed at peak moments, but not one in which I am established, and—most crucially here—not a form of consciousness that can be induced by rational argument.

Barfield was not alone in his realisation that western culture was the product of a limited state of consciousness; after 1966 Barfield recognised that he had readers who were open to his countercultural point of view, and he felt able to address them direct. As I have argued earlier, there was at that time an explosion of interest in alternative ways of thought. The counterculture was a broad utopian movement which encompassed many contradicting strands running in parallel. Everyone agreed that western culture needed transformation, but there was a split between those who felt that this had to be achieved through a political change, and those who felt that the first step in any change was a change of consciousness. There were those who adopted eastern spiritual meditative practices, and those who wanted to renew western spirituality. Some opposed any affiliation to disciplined spiritual paths, and, rejecting all authority, argued for following one's own (usually, LSD-inspired) truth. There was also a psychological dimension: the R.D. Laing anti-psychiatry and the 'Dialectics of Liberation' conference it inspired, and the human potential movement generally, took the post-Freudian insight that negative states of consciousness are the result of psychological damage stored in the unconscious, and looked for ways to heal these wounds. Barfield's engagements with Theodore Roszak and Alan Watts, two contemporaries involved in the counterculture, bring out important differences between them that lay bare the contours of his philosophy.

2. Theodore Roszak

Theodore Roszak, an American historian who spent the 1960s editing a radical pacifist magazine *Peace News*, achieved in *The Making of a Counter Culture* a comprehensive survey of this vast spectrum. Although he was critical when focusing on any individual part—the 'counterfeit infinity' of the drug culture (155–77), the 'infantization of the middle-class young' (32)—he praised the

¹⁸ See for example *A Glastonbury Romance* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1933).

general *élan vital* of the time:

What makes the youthful disaffiliation of our time a cultural phenomenon, rather than merely a political movement, is the fact that it strikes beyond ideology to the level of consciousness, seeking to transform our deepest sense of the self, the other, the environment. (49)

Roszak followed up ideas about levels of consciousness in his next book *Where the Wasteland Ends*, which engaged respectfully with Barfield's thought, particularly his philosophy of idolatry. Barfield wrote a review essay of *Wasteland*, in which he declared himself pleased that Roszak understood the importance of consciousness. Roszak's treatment of idolatry however showed a fundamental disagreement over the role of Judaeo-Christianity, which Barfield addressed in a letter to Roszak:

The book as a whole does leave an overwhelming impression of seeing the whole historical descent into 'single vision' as an aberration, and a rather stupid one, from the main ('spiralling upwards') course of evolution; a *faux pas* for which the Jews and, following them, Christianity must be held responsible. (Letter 15 April 1974, cit. Blaxland, 321)

Although Roszak did not argue directly against Barfield in *Wasteland*, limiting his criticism to an endnote distancing himself from Barfield's 'Christian commitment' (472), Roszak's portrayal of the Judaic opposition to idolatry, was directly contrary to Barfield's argument in *Saving the Appearances* that this opposition was an evolutionary step towards final participation. While Roszak was happy to take from Barfield the central concept of idolatry as 'a representation which is collectively mistaken for an ultimate' (134), he set out plainly his view that the opposition to idolatry was a mistake when applied as a spiritual doctrine:

What this adamant [Judaeo-Christian] rejection of pagan worship failed to grasp (and we must assume it was for lack of the ability to experience the fact) was precisely the capacity of an icon or natural object to be enchanted, to be transmuted into something more than itself. What our tradition refers to as idolatry is a variety of magic, and magic, in its pristine form, is sacramental perception. The function of any so-called idol, authentically perceived, is to give local embodiment to the universal presence and power of the divine. [...]. To know this is to understand how any portion of nature, even the most unaccountable things or indeed nature as a whole, can quite suddenly assume the radiance of a magical object. To this psychic dimension of idolatry, however, Christianity was as firmly closed as Judaism. (116)

As this disagreement shows, Barfield had his own ideas of what the new age of evolved consciousness should be based on:

When I look round at the immensely varied output of the 'human potentials' [sic] movement, or the Aquarian Revolution, or whatever you

like to call the ferment, I seem to see a sort of super-syncretism, with everyone nibbling bits of religion and philosophy and science from everywhere. Symptoms—perhaps healthy symptoms—of the death of one age, and of the need for the birth of another. But I do not see any sign of their growing together to form the nucleus around which such a new age could first come to life [...].

[...] The redemption of civilization will depend in a very great degree on whether its intellectual structure comes to centre around the contribution of Rudolf Steiner to much the same extent as that of the Aristotelian age centred around Aristotle.¹⁹

In this passage Barfield presents two misgivings about the counterculture. Firstly, the ‘super-syncretism’ that can lead to ‘nibbling’ rather than full engagement, which is best looked at in the light of Barfield’s view of Alan Watts and eastern philosophies, which I will turn to next. Secondly the lack of a nucleus around which ‘its intellectual structure can come to centre’, which he believes only Steiner’s Anthroposophy can provide.

3. *Alan Watts*

Alan Watts (1915-73) emigrated to the United States from England in 1938 after a precocious early success as a populariser of Zen Buddhism. He enrolled at a seminary, obtaining a D.D. and was ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1944, leaving the priesthood some six years later. He continued to write and lecture and moved to San Francisco where he began teaching Buddhism at the American Academy of Asian Studies, and developed a wider following through public lectures on eastern and mystical philosophy that coincided with the emerging counterculture.²⁰

I have noted earlier the similarity between Watts’s phrase ‘skin-encapsulated ego’ and Barfield’s wording in a 1980 lecture. There is a degree of convergence here and one could imagine Barfield in America at this stage of his life recognising that he has found an audience in the counterculture. But his resistance to any form of non-Christian spiritual experience comes out strongly in his comments about C.S. Lewis.

Lewis had spent his early manhood striving in all sincerity to experience living what Alan Watts has called ‘The Supreme Identity’. Lewis’s very success in that endeavour, compared with the average run of idealists, who do not even make the attempt, proved to him that insofar as the experience is genuine and not merely a complacently fancied experience, it reveals itself as a theoretical truth but a pragmatical error. It is and can be an intellectual experience only. When it comes to the *will*, there is no identity, and the prayer must always be ‘Thy will be done’, just because my own will, if I look it squarely in the face, is a rag-bag of lusts and feeblenesses and terrors. Not for Lewis, therefore, are the lofty strivings

¹⁹ Unpublished 1982 lecture cit. Blaxland, 122–3.

²⁰ Condensed from <<https://www.alanwatts.org/life-of-alan-watts/>> (accessed 26 Nov 2020).

of the twentieth-century Buddhist and his condescending smile as he contemplates Christianity and all other formulated religions.²¹

While Watts does present the state of self-realisation as if it is a matter of insight, of 'getting' it, he does nevertheless draw a distinction between the Self and the ego, and is very alert to the difference between the 'intellectual experience' grasped by the finite ego and the ineffable experience of the infinite 'I am'. Barfield's picture (true or not) of Lewis doggedly striving towards the supreme identity as an intellectual exercise is a misconception of Watts's message. Watts's *The Supreme Identity*, written at the end of his Episcopalian phase, emphasises above all that duality co-exists with unity.

It is generally supposed in the West that the Vedanta doctrine of non-duality, being a monism, entirely excludes the values of worship, of the I-Thou relationship between man and God, and makes the supreme spiritual ideal the total absorption and disappearance of the human person into an undifferentiated oneness. This impression is the result of trying to understand the Vedanta from the religious viewpoint. The doctrine of non-duality is as consistent with worship, as an expression of love and relationship, as it is with the existence of the entire finite and dual order. (70)

What emerges above all from Barfield's strictures, is his aversion to the 'lofty strivings of the twentieth-century Buddhist and his condescending smile'. Here is where we encounter the basic prejudice that skews Barfield's philosophy. The best example of this is his essay 'From East To West' a paper read in 1929 before the Lotus Club, (an Oxford University society consisting of 50:50 English and Indian students).²² To which cultural mix Barfield sets out the differences between 'the typical Eastern and Western attitude of mind' according to Rudolf Steiner. This view being that the 'Eastern Yogi' finds his Self 'by looking at the outer world', while the 'Western devotee of imagination already has an "I"'. His discovery is that it is not enclosed within his physical body'. In Steiner's view (Barfield continues) Easterners 'are not fully *self-conscious* to the same extent as Western peoples'. (52) This argument leads to the following grand Steinerisms (passages which I have underlined: italics are Barfield's):

Through the incarnation of Christ in a human body, there was born into the world, not for the West or for one section of humanity only, but for all men, what one can call a legitimate self-consciousness. Steiner has described [...] how in the Christ the human Ego, the true Self, of Man descended from the purely spiritual heights, where it had hitherto dwelt,

²¹ Owen Barfield, *On C.S. Lewis* (1989; Oxford: Barfield Press, 2011), 14. I came to this passage through the blog of Bruce G. Charlton, <<http://owenbarfieldblog.blogspot.com/2019/05/barfield-on-buddhism-in-twentieth.html>> (accessed 6 Dec 2020), but I do not share Charlton's view that Buddhism is 'an inducement to self-justified embrace of the dark powers'.

²² Published in *Romanticism Comes of Age*, 35–59. For the Lotus club see, <<http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/lotus-club>> (accessed 26 Nov 2020).

to the earth. Had Christ not come to earth, individual human beings would never have been able to utter the word 'I' at all. Steiner incurred here a good deal of opposition from theorists who insisted that all religions must be of equal value and so forth, but his reply was always the same, that it was not his business to estimate the relative values of religions but merely to state the facts of human spiritual evolution as he knew them from direct intuition. (55-6)

When Barfield makes the assertions that I have underlined he is not being a philosopher, he is propounding Steiner's teaching, and it is important to bear this distinction in mind. When Steiner, in the opening chapter of *Occult Science* (pp. 20-35), prepared the reader for his descriptions of the different spiritual bodies of human beings that evolved in parallel with conditions on planets preceding earth, and his ideas about what 'The Christ Event' meant for human consciousness, he claimed this was not dogma to be accepted solely on his authority. He claimed he was following a scientific methodology (*geheimwissenschaft*), because he would also provide exercises that would allow a reader to attain this vision. He was not expecting assent until then. But he also claimed that reading his visionary descriptions would help cultivate the reader's own spiritual receptivity, which leads the reader to an intermediate stage where there is at the very least partial assent. Such descriptions, especially when propounded at second hand by a follower, risk sounding like dogmatic statements to be accepted on Steiner's authority.

Clear jumping off points occur in Barfield's writing when he steps beyond his philosophical discourse into a wholesale presentation of Steiner's ideas. This leads him to make dogmatic statements such as 'Had Christ not come to earth, individual human beings would never have been able to utter the word 'I' at all' unqualified by any such proviso. Such dogmatism does not show Barfield at his best. When handling the question of the incarnation—the identity of the Word with the historical person of Jesus—in *What Coleridge Thought* he makes a much subtler approach, arguing that Coleridge's system

is not dependent on that identity, though it certainly is dependent on the Word having become "incarnate" in humanity. For it does assume that, at a certain stage of his evolution, the human being acquired, or was given, a relation to reason, and therefore to God, that differed from the relation of life as a whole in being a direct relation (150).

The way Barfield puts this here provides a bridge for someone such as myself who does not regard Christianity as the only valid religion, and Christian theology as the only way of conceiving God's presence in humanity. Barfield's broader formulation sheds exclusivity and allows room for a subtler understanding of what divine incarnation signifies.

When holding a view that dissents from the majority consensus—a countercultural view—there can be a temptation to circle the wagons and defend yourself against the unbelievers by sheltering in the authority of your

teacher and his or her doctrine. But this comes at a cost: as Nietzsche put it ‘a pupil repays his teacher badly if he always remains a pupil’.²³ If you are aspiring, as Barfield was, to lay foundations for a universal development of consciousness, then better to accept the relativity of human understanding and find ways of expressing your beliefs that allow entry to those who occupy similar ground. At his best Barfield achieved this, but given that recent expositions of his philosophy, endorsed by the Barfield Literary Trust, present approvingly Barfield’s Steinerian ‘Christ Event’ and his dismissal of non-Christian modalities of spiritual experience, the danger of dogmatism needs to be pointed out.²⁴

²³ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 22: 3.

²⁴ Mark Vernon, *A Secret History of Christianity: Jesus, the Last Inking, and the Evolution of Consciousness* (Winchester: Christian Alternative, 2019); Bruce G. Charlton, cited earlier, are both recipients of the Owen Barfield Award for Excellence.