

# How Barfield Thought: The Creative Life of Owen Barfield

David Lavery  
Middle Tennessee State University

"How Barfield Thought: The Creative Life of Owen Barfield" offers an outline of a possible way of understanding Barfield's lifetime achievement by using Howard Gruber's method for examining the lives of great creative individuals.

To live a creative life is one of the intentions of a creative person.  
Doris B. Wallace

In order to become a major figure in modern art, the Paris stockbroker Paul Gauguin left family and career behind to journey to Tahiti and the South of France, spreading syphilis and collecting ears. In order to pursue his dream of becoming a writer, the American businessman Sherwood Anderson left it all behind in Ohio to join Hemingway and Stein in Paris. If we believe the theory of George Pickering (in *Creative Malady*), such very different figures as Charles Darwin and Marcel Proust "fled" as well, though their flight was inwards: they made themselves ill in order to create the necessary space, free from the obligations of the quotidian, in which they could do their work, writing the *Origin of Species* and *Remembrance of Things Past*.

In order to make a contribution to the life of the mind, however, being a modernist runaway or hideaway has not been an absolute 20th Century prerequisite. For example, the great poet and insurance company executive Wallace Stevens and the linguist and fire retardation engineer Benjamin Whorf both accomplished much while staying at home in Connecticut and working for (in the same building) the Hartford Insurance Company. Not far away in New Jersey, William Carlos Williams combined a busy life as a family doctor with the work of a major writer.

And in England an Oxford graduate who had aspired in his youth to be a creative writer, seemingly surrendered that dream in order to serve for nearly thirty years in the family firm nevertheless became a profound student of the evolution of consciousness whose bequest to the human future as a "posthumous man" cannot yet be calculated. Whatever his youthful ambitions might have been, Owen Barfield's mature creative life was, like Stevens and Whorf and Williams, avocational. Unlike Lewis, he did not even have the luxury of a university patron—at least not until institutions like the one at which we meet today offered him the opportunity for a thirty years alter second career.

My remarks today are based on the assumption that the creative life of Owen Barfield is a subject of real interest—and not just because of its unorthodox, unlikely chronology and not just to those of us at this Barfield Centenary who knew him and loved him. If we seek to ascertain, with a tip-of-the-hat to one of his own books, "how Barfield thought," we may discover that the "how" of Barfield's achievement is as interesting as the "what."

I can do no more today than offer a sketch of what "how Barfield thought" might look like. These remarks are preliminary, part of a work-in-progress I call *Genius at Work: Three Twentieth Century Minds and the Vocation of the Imagination*. That book, which will comprise case studies of the avocational creative lives of Barfield, Stevens, and Whorf, is greatly indebted to the life's work of Howard E. Gruber distinguished professor emeritus of psychology at our host of yesterday, Columbia University, and if my overview of Barfield's creative work is to have any clarity, I will need to begin by offering a broad outline of his approach.<sup>1</sup>

"The idea of a purposefully creative individual seems to conjure up the old argument from design," Gruber writes (*Darwin on Man* 245).<sup>2</sup> Gruber (b. 1922) returns him to center stage.<sup>3</sup> In seeking to distinguish between creative work and creativity, Gruber demonstrates that creation is not the result of "a set of properties that a person has in a certain moment and carries around with him." "The question," in fact, he notes, "is really not the 'ivity' of it—the property list—but how people go about doing it when they do it" ("From Epistemic Subject" 175). Since it is indisputably the fact that "Creative works are constructed over long periods of time," the laboratory simply cannot measure them ("From Epistemic Subject" 171-72).

Gruber thus opposes all attempts to explain creation in a monolithic way. Critical of the "kind of reductionism, in which creative work becomes 'nothing but' an expression of personality" ("And the Bush" 281), he remains equally dubious of an expansive yet metaphysical notion like "genius": "There is no need," he states emphatically, "to think of the individual as solving problems in a mysterious way called 'genius'" ("The Emergence of a Sense" 6). (Thus, In *Creative People at Work*, he writes skeptically of both "the path of Holy Cow!" and that of "Nothing But," of "ineffectual mystification" and "fragmentary measurement" ["The Evolving Systems Approach" 3].) His research into the creative process has instead revealed again and again something much more basic: "a different organization of the system, an organization that was constructed by the person himself in the course of his life, in the course of his work, as needed in order to meet the tasks that he encountered and that he set himself" ("From Epistemic Subject" 177).

In response to this need Gruber developed, practiced, and championed for three decades a "case study method"—a complex, pluralistic, "idiographic" (Wallace, 27) means of offering "thick description" (Geertz) of "the growth of thought in a real, thinking, feeling, dreaming

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<sup>1</sup> My remarks here are largely drawn from my essay "Creative Work: On the Method of Howard Gruber." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 33.2 (1993): 101-21.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all internal documentation refers to works by Howard Gruber (see bibliography below).

<sup>3</sup> A native of Brooklyn, Gruber was educated at Brooklyn College and Cornell University, where he received a Ph.D. in psychology in 1950. Not until the end of the decade, however, did he become interested in the history of science and, especially, in Charles Darwin. His careful study of Darwin's notebooks led to several important discoveries about the creative process and culminated in his journey to Geneva to learn developmental psychology from Piaget himself, the publication of *Darwin on Man: A Psychological Study of Scientific Creativity* (1974, 1981), an eventual joint appointment at the University of Geneva and Rutgers University, and three decades of research into the creative process giving birth to his case study method.

person" (Gruber "Aha Experiences" 4).<sup>4</sup> Understanding why a person is creative, Gruber insists, does not explain how he creates. Instead, he remains committed to the discovery of a "theory of the individual" ("And the Bush" 274-75). "We are far from denying the importance of unconscious processes," Gruber cautions. "We nevertheless see them as occurring in a person struggling and often succeeding in taking command of them to make them serve the interests of consciously and freely chosen enterprises" ("Inching" 248).

Gruber's "deeply phenomenological" ("And the Bush" 278) method, his "demystification of the creative process" ("Inching" 243), then, "start[s] with an individual whose creativity is beyond dispute . . . and then . . . map[s], as carefully as [possible] . . . , what is going on in that person's mind over a period in which creative breakthroughs were occurring" ("Breakaway Minds" 69). "The phenomenological approach," Gruber explains, "begins by taking the subject's reports about himself as an invaluable point of departure." Employment of such a method need not result in the abandonment of critical judgment; for "the double task of reconstructing events from the subject's point of view and then understanding them from our own" ("And the Bush" 277) remains.

While acknowledging that there is a need for studying individuals "below the summit of Mount Olympus," and speculating that "it may even turn out that as a field of scientific inquiry, ordinary people are more intriguing than extraordinary ones," Gruber insists that "the serious study of creative work requires careful and prolonged attention to the individual and must pay special attention to the very great" ("The Evolving Systems Approach" 6; "Which Way Is Up?" 119). The choice of subjects is limited, however, by 1) the availability of material—notebooks, journals, manuscripts, etc.—and 2) the researcher's ability to understand the subject matter involved ("And the Bush" 273). Gruber's own work has centered on Charles Darwin and Jean Piaget, and colleagues and students have used his method to investigate such individuals as Antoine Lavoisier, William Wordsworth, Michael Faraday, William James, Vincent Van Gogh, Erasmus Darwin, George Bernard Shaw, Sigmund Freud, Dorothy Richardson, Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, Anais Nin, and John Locke.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Gruber has taken pains to distinguish his case study method from that of biographers, historians of science and ideas, and psychoanalytic critics. Intellectual biographies rarely illuminate the creative process, Gruber shows, because they "run through the actual work of hard thought of their subjects far too briefly to analyze its inner structure, tensions, growth" ("And the Bush" 290); the conventions of the genre, its commitment to telling a whole life, necessitate superficial coverage of creation's difficult work. Historians fare little better: "working on different scales of time and social space," they often "treat the individual as though a lifetime of thought and work could be compressed into a single unit." The result stands in direct opposition to that which Gruber's method yields: "This compression has sometimes led to odd juxtapositions in which they see internal contradictions where we would see change and growth" ("And the Bush" 290). And historians of science stand accused of studying "the development of disembodied ideas, detached from the individuals who think them" ("Cognitive Psychology" 305; Gruber echoes here the complaint of Stillman Drake). Between the case study approach and psychoanalysis, the chasm is even wider.

"The case study method . . . is quite distinct from psychoanalytically oriented psychobiography. Such studies have emphasized the underlying motives of the creative person, their childhood origins, and their neurotic character. Our focus of attention has been on how creative people do their work, rather than on why, and on the developmental process within the career, rather than on that leading up to it" ("Inching" 248).

<sup>5</sup>One of the practical reasons for using the great as the focus for study of the creative process is simply the fact that "they leave better traces." Indeed, "the making and leaving of tracks—preliminary sketches, countless revisions, early notebooks, variations on a theme . . .," Gruber observes, "is part and

One of the practical reasons for using the great as the focus for study of the creative process is simply the fact that "they leave better traces." Indeed, "the making and leaving of tracks—preliminary sketches, countless revisions, early notebooks, variations on a theme . . .," Gruber observes, "is part and parcel of the process itself . . . a kind of activity characteristic of people doing creative work" ("Which Way Is Up?" 119). (The "fossil record" of the processes of creation, Gruber recognizes, may well be self-fulfilling prophecy. "Wittingly or not," he notes, creative people "create the conditions under which we can study their development" ["Which Way Is Up?" 119].)<sup>6</sup>

The study of creative work, Gruber writes, is thus like a "loud-thinking experiment" ("And the Bush 276).<sup>7</sup> "To place the person in history, to describe his ensemble of metaphors, to pay close attention to his system of categories and to changes in his units of analysis, to see each activity as part of his network of enterprises, to search out and examine those very special skills that the particular creative person may have, and to try to understand his special point of view" ("From Epistemic Subject" 178)—this, in summary, is Howard Gruber's method for the study of creative work. His discoveries are many and valuable. Allow me to enumerate some of the key ones (enumerated on your handout; I will read only the text in bold; feel free to peruse the remainder yourself) and then, in turn, engage in a "loud thinking experiment" in which we consider Barfield's creative achievement as a test case.

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<sup>6</sup>With Darwin's notebooks in mind, Gruber has described the manner in which he encounters a text:

I proceeded like an explorer in a new territory, reading the notebooks through, over and over again, figuring out what he was focusing on, what his cryptic notes meant, trying to recreate his thought processes from one day to the next. I tried to freeze the current of his thinking at crucial points. ("Breakaway Minds" 69)

<sup>7</sup>Like the Romantic poets who often ended their great lyrical outbursts with strategic questions ("Do I wake or sleep?"), Gruber again and again offers for our consideration a question to which he does not yet have the answer. "How do [the creative person's] purposes evolve?" he ponders. But it is only the first of a catalog of questions:

What determines his high level of aspiration? How does the process of self-criticism work? How does the creative person grow so that he can continue to assimilate the criticism of others without surrendering his own evolving vision? ("And the Bush" 278)

In another essay we find the following: "How does a creative person know what is new for him? What is new for others?" ("Aha Experiences" 50). And in "From Epistemic Subject to Unique Creative Person at Work," Gruber observes that "The question of novelty—a question introduced via Piaget's genetic epistemology—is central." "How is it," he goes on to ask, "that certain individuals have devoted their lives or large portions of their lives to the construction of novelty?" ("From Epistemic Subject" 171). "The main question," after all, "isn't exactly how they solve their problems, but where the problems come from" ("From Epistemic Subject" 178). Questions are thus as important as answers. As Gruber's research has discovered, "Rather than thinking in order to solve problems, the person striving to develop a new point of view solves problems in order to explore different aspects of it and of those problems and of those domains to which those problems apply" ["The Emergence of a Sense" 6]. Such a characterization, of course, applies to Gruber himself.

For creative people "a long and well-worked through apprenticeship is vital to the development of a creative life." The particular circumstances vary: "Teachers and mentors may be imposed upon the young person, or sought out, or discovered in a lucky accident. They may be physically present or far away, living or dead models." But the end result is the same: "models and mentors there must be, as well as the disciplined work necessary to profit from them" ("Foreword to *Notebooks of the Mind*" x). "It is safe to say," Gruber concludes, "that no case of creative achievement occurs without a long apprenticeship" ("The Evolving Systems Approach" 15).

Though there was apparently no "Great Knock" in the life of Owen Barfield as there was in C. S. Lewis',<sup>8</sup> we need not look far to find his teachers and mentors. Always quick to acknowledge an intellectual debt—if we accept the famous Stravinsky maxim that "Bad artists borrow; great artists steal" (xxx), we would have to categorize Barfield as a bad artist—Barfield left us clear accounts, especially the "Afterword" to the Third Edition of *Poetic Diction*, of his influences, his "friends," as he calls them there: Ernst Cassirer, Francis Cornford, Susanne Langer, Bruno Snell, R. B. Onians, Thorleif Boman, M. H. Abrams, Elizabeth Sewell, Kathleen Raine . . . But this roster is only of relatively minor teachers and mentors. The major influences are well known: Coleridge, of course, and Goethe, Lewis and Steiner.

The author of a book-length study of his intellectual development, the editor of his "philosophical letters" for the still-in-progress definitive edition of his work, Barfield obviously owed a substantial debt to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It might even be said that Barfield identified with his fellow Romantic polymath for at least three reasons.

(1) Beleaguered since his youth by problems with stammering, Barfield empathized with Coleridge's own difficulties with speech. Coleridge's extraordinarily unifying mind, Barfield writes in "The Philosophy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,"

was too painfully aware that you cannot really say one thing correctly without saying everything. He was rightly afraid that there would not be time to say everything before going on to say the next thing, or that he would forget to do so afterwards. His incoherence of expression arose from the coherence of what he wanted to express. It was a sort of intellectual stammer. (*Romanticism Comes of Age* 146)

(2) Coleridge's fame and reputation have suffered, both in his own time and today, because of his presumed-to-be-unhealthy interest in German philosophy—a price Barfield too has paid in a century in which Germany has inaugurated two world wars.

Speaking, as he had to do, to his already empirically minded English contemporaries, he had, so to speak, to lay down his track as he went along, and caterpillar wheels are slow compared with ordinary wheeled traction. But

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<sup>8</sup>For Lewis' memorable account of his greatest teacher, see Chapter IX of *Surprised by Joy*.

then they can go into much cruder places. If the *German* thinkers could count on at least a second-class road of understanding into the minds of their readers, Coleridge tried to penetrate where there was no longer a road at all; to awaken to active thought minds for which "the conceivable" had already been "reduced within the bounds of the picturable." (*What Coleridge Thought* 43)

(3) And, like Coleridge, Barfield has been misunderstood because of the unorthodox and misunderstood nature of his intellectual project—his "thinking about thinking," or "Beta-thinking" (as Barfield terms it in *Saving the Appearances*).

In *Romanticism Comes of Age*, Barfield contrasts Coleridge with Goethe, another of Barfield's major mentors, a comparison which leads to an illuminating, almost physiognomic, descriptive analysis of Coleridge's physical appearance:

Goethe had his feet firmly planted on the earth. As a scientist, as a knower, he largely confined himself to the realm of natural science and his regular industry combined with his great genius had by the end of his life illuminated this realm with a steadily increasing flood of light. Coleridge never succeeded in finding his feet on earth at all. Look at the portrait of him in the National Portrait Gallery in London, and you will feel the full force of Wordsworth's description:

The rapt one of the godlike forehead,  
The heaven-eyed creature

Compare the majesty of the forehead and the eyes with the pathetically weak mouth. He himself said that he had "power without strength." He was continually forming vast schemes of works to be written on every conceivable subject, or on all at once, which he never had the energy to carry out. (*Romanticism Comes of Age* 161-62)

In the final reckoning, perhaps the ever-solid Barfield had more in common with the firmly-grounded Goethe.

Though the famous dedication of C. S. Lewis' *Allegory of Love*

"To Owen Barfield, wisest and best of my unofficial teachers."

would suggest that the pedagogical current between Lewis and his "second friend" flowed in the opposite direction, Barfield took pains in a 1964 address at Wheaton College to correct the record:

He says in *Surprised by Joy* [200] that he believes I influenced him more than he influenced me. If that is true, which I very much doubt, it is because he made it possible. When he showed me that passage in typescript before the book had gone to

the printer, I told him he ought to add that it was he that taught me how to think at all. (*Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis* 9)

Barfield's other great teacher—his greatest teacher—was of course Rudolf Steiner, about whom I will have more to say in a moment.

There is, of course, another less favorable way, of looking at the relationship of Barfield to his influences. As post-structuralist Harold Bloom has suggested, it may well be that every great "belated" poet must struggle with the ancestral patristic voice of a predecessor poet, which he must defensively misremember/misprize/plagiarize. Blake struggles to be Blake under the anxiety of influence of Milton; Yeats can become Yeats only by avoiding the powerful legacy of Blake. Stevens comes up against the wind of Emerson. Barfield's "precuror" poets—Coleridge, Goethe, Steiner—are never far from his thought.<sup>9</sup> Does Barfield misread these sources? Plagiarize them?<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to conceive of the self-effacing Barfield guilty of Bloomian crimes against the father. His is the decidedly pre-structuralist stance of Newton: if he saw further, it was because he stood on the shoulders of giants.

Early in their life's work, creative individuals make "good moves"—strategies, "first stroke[s] of the brush [which] transform the canvas"—that "set the stage for the protracted creative work of which it is only a part" ("From Epistemic Subject" 172). (These moves are often recorded in an "initial sketch": a "rough draft or early notebook to which the worker can repair from time to time—that serves as a sort of gyroscope for the oeuvre" ["Inching" 265-66].) Though "delays, tangents, and false starts" are equally as common and "almost inevitable," creative individuals find ways of managing their work "so that these inconclusive moves become fruitful and enriching, and at the same time so that a sense of direction is maintained." "Without such a sense of direction," in fact, as Gruber shows, "the would-be creator may produce a number of fine strokes, but they will not accumulate toward a great work" ("Inching" 265).

Barfield's "good move" was obviously *Poetic Diction*, an early work (published when he was thirty, but begun when he was in his early twenties) and which contains in germ much of what would eventually, under the influence of Steiner, become his conception of the evolution of consciousness.

There are, however, false starts in Barfield's life as well. It is possible to identify at least three Barfield false starts.

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<sup>9</sup>In the *Owen Barfield: Man and Meaning* Interview, G. B. Tennyson suggests that the following formula is possible: Barfield is to Steiner as Steiner was to Goethe.

<sup>10</sup>Recall, if you will, Barfield's defense of Coleridge against Norman Fruman's notorious charge that he had stolen from the Romantic idealists: when the British Romantic found that the author he was reading had reached the level of his own thought processes, he would just quote that other voice, thus saving himself the trouble of finding the means of his own articulation. In the interview for *Owen Barfield: Man and Meaning* and elsewhere, Barfield takes pains to point out that he had already discovered the basic concept of the evolution of consciousness (as he demonstrates in *Poetic Diction*) prior to encountering anthroposophy.

1) As the publication of several early pieces indicate, Barfield exhibited an incipient interest in economic issues. Like his contemporaries Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound, economics was linked in his mind to questions of consciousness and creation. Nothing much was to come of this early avocation, however.

2) In letters and interviews in the Wade Collection, Barfield acknowledges his early intent to make an important contribution to a modern understanding of sexuality. With the exception of his poetry and some of his fiction, there is little indication that anything ever became of this ambition, though in *Unancestral Voice's* sometimes frank consideration of the problems of puberty and in the acknowledged presence, never embraced but never entirely rejected, of D. H. Lawrence, we can catch a glimpse of the light Barfield might have shed on sex if he had brought his focus to bear on it.

3) At the time of their graduation from Oxford, both Lewis and Barfield probably thought of themselves as creative writers, aspiring poets and novelists, and though they both ended up following paths that led them to primarily become writers of highly intellectual non-fiction, only Lewis was able to remain a writer of *belles-lettres* (and a bestselling one at that), though not a poet.<sup>11</sup> After being called away from his post-Oxford Long Crendon period attempt to make it as a writer to work in his father's law firm (and in London he did participate in a writers' group that included T. S. Eliot), after several not terribly successful excursions into the fictional (*English People*, *Night Operation*), Barfield would never again put his full creative energies into the writing of imaginative literature, though he would author a stunning poetic drama, *Orpheus*, in the 1940s and write an occasional poem. Post-retirement, post-*Saving the Appearances*, he would, however, seek a new form of expression, producing, in *Worlds Apart: A Dialogue of the Sixties* and *Unancestral Voice*, two unique variations on the philosophical dialogue.

**Creative people, Gruber has found, are not as isolated as once believed: they are, in fact, extremely good at collaborating, at interacting with peers.** They often devote their skills and a surprising amount of time to establish environments and peer groups ("personal allegiances") capable of nurturing their work ("Breakaway Minds" 72; "And the Bush" 294-95).

I probably do not need to elaborate on the significance of Barfield's peers, since many of the most important "FOBs" (if you will) in the second half of his life are gathered in this room. But allow me, if you will, to offer one observation on their pivotal role in his creative work and then move on to the question of Barfield's possible collaboration.

In an interview (with Lyle Dorsett) to be found in the Wade Collection, Barfield admits, in a moment of startling candor, that his wife Maud, over a decade his senior, never approved of

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<sup>11</sup> A false start as an artist is something Barfield shared with Rudolf Steiner. Anne Bancroft tells us that under the influence of his second wife Marie von Sivers, an actress, Steiner, then secretary of the German branch of the Theosophical society, sought for a time to give the movement's key ideas artistic form—in painting, poetry, drama. The society's unhappiness with such an approach was a key factor in Steiner's departure (197-98).

his anthroposophical inclinations. Maud, he speculates, thought of his interest in Steiner as the sort of infatuation a young man might succumb to: "she being so much older than me, . . . she looked on me when I first got interested in Steiner as being a young man, sort of swept off my feet." His invitations to lecture across the Atlantic, it seems, changed her mind: "when I began to teach in America, and obviously was respected, I think she saw that there was more to me intellectually, so to speak, than she'd assumed." (Interview with Lyle Dorsett, 7/19/84; Wade Collection). On the home front, at least, Barfield's acceptance by his peer group here in the United States and Canada, the passionate interest of Barfieldians at Drew, the University of Missouri, the University of British Columbia, Brandeis, Wheaton College, the University of California Fullerton, the Lindisfarne Association, made his creative life much easier.

As for the question of collaboration, I have only questions to offer. Gruber has noted that a final frontier in the study of the creative process may well be the nature of collaboration. At present little is known about how two individuals (say Watson and Crick) work together over time. Should we think of Barfield and Steiner as collaborators? Earlier I had categorized Barfield as playing the role of a teacher in Barfield's life. But perhaps that is not the right way to think of their relationship. Obviously, they did not work together; beyond Barfield's fateful attendance at that Steiner lecture in the early 1920s (in the last years of Steiner's life), they had no personal contact. But in a very real sense might we not consider Barfield and Steiner as collaborators, not perhaps on the order of Watson and Crick, but, say, like Plato and Socrates? Clearly, the Steiner/Barfield collaboration will prove to be a final frontier in understanding Owen Barfield's achievement. And that will mean that some of us who know Barfield's work intimately will need to surrender our C. S. Lewis-like reservations and seek to master Steiner equally well.

**Creative people are willing to work hard for a very long time, even if such work does not produce immediate results or rewards, and this work remains enjoyable for them.** "Perhaps the single most reliable finding in our studies," Gruber observes, "is that creative work takes a long time. With all due apologies to thunderbolts, creative work is not a matter of milliseconds, minutes, or even hours—but of months, years, and decades" ("Inching" 265). (True discovery is actually governed by a kind of irony, as Gruber notes: "In the heat of the moment, small advances feel great, and ones that turn out to be crucial slip in quietly" ["Aha Experiences" 43].) Creative individuals should not be thought of as obsessed or fanatic: "the creative person cannot simply be driven," Gruber writes. "He must be drawn to his work by visions, hopes, joy of discovery, love of truth, and sensuous pleasure in the creative activity itself" ("And the Bush" 294). **"The partial decoupling of the production of ideas from their dissemination and exploitation" interests Gruber; he cites the examples of Mendel and the geologist Wegener (who discovered continental drift and theorized the existence of tectonic plates).** Both of these men "made fundamental discoveries, attempted to disseminate their ideas, and ran into the stone wall of intellectual inertia (either through being ignored or ridiculed), only to be 'rehabilitated' years later" ("History and Creative Work" 6).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The ability to endure non-recognition, Gruber speculates, may well have economic and social causes: "The simple fact that there is for some time no visible product means either that society must

There is no more important question in exploring Barfield's creative work than the raised here by Gruber. How could Owen Barfield have kept at the difficult avocational work of a lifetime with so little acclaim and so little guarantee of the dissemination of his ideas?<sup>13</sup> At the end of his life, in frail health, having outlived Jack Lewis by thirty years and Tolkien by twenty and with no guarantee, other than the continuing interest of people like those gathered in this room, that his work would survive him—that his "memes," as sociobiologist Richard Dawkins calls them, would become permanent factors in the "meme pool" of intellectual history—his commitment to his own ideas had scarcely diminished. A future revisiting of Leon Edel's fine essay "Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man" might do well to include Barfield along with the likes of Tolstoy and Yeats and Henry James.

**Creative individuals, Gruber discovers, "need to know a lot and cultivate special skills"** ("Breakaway Minds" 71): Darwin, for example, knew a tremendous amount about such esoteric subjects as barnacles and animal breeding, knowledge which shaped his discoveries about evolution; Leonardo's precise knowledge of anatomy informed his art; Newton's hands-on experience as the maker of scientific instruments was "instrumental" to his theory-making ("Foreword to *Notebooks of the Mind*" x). Creative individuals sometimes acquire this knowledge through a "special kind of narcissism" ("And the Bush" 280) such as that exhibited by Darwin when he used himself as his subject in order to study man's higher faculties. Such narcissism was, of course, simply not necessary when he was studying barnacles. **Creative individuals, Gruber has discovered, possess a "network of enterprises," that is, "they become the sort of people who can easily handle seemingly different but intimately related activities. They become highly skilled jugglers"** ("Breakaway Minds" 71). ("In the course of a single day or week," Gruber notes, "the activities of the person may appear, from the outside, as a bewildering miscellany. But the person is not disoriented or dazzled. He or she can readily map each activity onto one or another enterprise" ["The Evolving Systems Approach" 13].) That creative work is often "spread out over months and years has consequences for the organization of purpose." For "in order to make grand goals attainable, the creator must invent and pursue subgoals." Individuals must find ways of managing their tasks through a network of enterprises ("Inching" 265).

No one in this room doubts that Owen Barfield knew a lot. I for one have never encountered a writer/thinker who humbled me more. Though he, of course, downplayed how well read he was, he was able to at least create the illusion that he possessed a solid amateur understanding of (a partial list only): anthropology, literary criticism, philology, history of science, Darwinian evolution, the history of philosophy, quantum physics, genetic psychology, theology, the history or religion . . . Were Barfield's eclectic, interdisciplinary intellectual

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sanction a period of non-productivity or that the individual must find some way of escaping society's demands. The former course was open to Darwin because his family was well off. His near contemporary Alfred Russell Wallace came from a poor family and had no such resources; he took the latter course, living in Malaysia essentially on savings at the theoretical turning point in his life" ("History and Creative Work" 5-6).

<sup>13</sup>We would do well to remember that Steiner, too, spent almost twenty years at various projects before getting down to his life work (Bancroft 190).

passions a conscious imitation of his polymathic masters Coleridge, Goethe, and Steiner? Perhaps. But let us recall that none of them had a day job.

How then did Barfield do it? In *Unancestral Voice*, Barfield offers us a rare portrait of himself at work:

One of the disadvantages of living in the twentieth century is that, on almost any subject, there is too much reading material available. He had long ago discovered that the only fruitful way of ploughing a furrow through the plethora was to be in pursuit of some particular quarry. It was like dipping a thread into a liquid containing crystals in solution. The crystals gathered round the thread. You selected ruthlessly, but in the process you read much, you read swiftly, and your mind was alert. What you did not retain you were nevertheless more alive to than you would otherwise have been; what you did retain you digested. . . . So it came about that he spent the first year of his retirement in studying—or perhaps "raiding" would be a less presumptuous term—the history of Western thought. . . . (74)

Obviously, no one knew better than Owen Barfield "how to gut a book," to use a phrase I coined in a *Georgia Review* article a few years back. But he knew much more: how to synthesize ideas, points of view, theories that only seemed to be worlds apart. It was this uncanny ability that made his work of interest to minds as different as David Bohm and Marshall McLuhan, William Irwin Thompson and Rupert Sheldrake, Norman O. Brown and Saul Bellow, James Hillman and Howard Nemerov.

**Creation is not necessarily the result of great skill or intelligence. Being brilliant and being creative, Gruber has found, can be quite distinct.** T. H. Huxley, "Darwin's bulldog," was, by all estimates, "brilliant," while Darwin himself was "somewhat slower and steadier" (as he admits in his autobiography), but it was Darwin who made the great discoveries. Nor was Einstein the best mathematician of his day ("From Epistemic Subject" 178). "To be creative means to be somebody doing a long, hard job, picking something that other people are not going to do, can't do, would be afraid to do. You have to want to do it. You have to remember that you want to do it even when you run away from it for a while out of agony. . . . you have the confidence to keep on going" (*Contemporary Authors* 119, 128-29). Great skill is likewise easily overemphasized. Forgers, as Gruber points out, may exhibit skill equal to that of the great artists they mimic but they do not use it for creative work ("Inching" 244-45). "The creative person must develop a sense of identity as a creative person, a sense of his or her own specialness" ("And the Bush" 294-95). Creative people possess, and seek to possess, unique points of view, special perspectives on the world. Such points of view, in fact, are likely to distinguish the creative person more than any particular problem solving ability.

A naturally modest man, Owen Barfield was never one to extol his own intelligence. We have, of course, his acknowledgment that "Steiner had obviously forgotten volumes more than I had ever dreamed. . . . some of my most daring and (as I thought) original conclusions were his premises (*Romanticism Comes of Age* 12-13). And in comparing himself to the infamously brilliant Lewis, for example, he found a number of self-deprecating metaphors: he was a

cricket batter trying to hold a straight bat against Lewis's too swift bowling so that he might by chance be able to put a ball in play in a contest with his closest friend (*Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis* 9-10); or he was, engaged in a dialogue with Lewis, like a man trying to run alongside a moving car (*Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis*). "There are people in whose company I feel myself to be too quick-witted," Barfield once confessed, "so that I have to take some pains to avoid appearing aggressive; there are many others with whom I never think about it; Lewis was, I believe, the only person in whose company I frequently felt myself to be painfully slow-witted" (*Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis* 39). No one would accuse Owen Barfield of false modesty, not because he wasn't modest, but because there was nothing false about it. Barfield was modest to the core, but this humility was essential, in a way I do not yet understand, to his creative process.

The ongoing work of creation is often guided by what Gruber calls "images of wide scope." "There is probably a place," Gruber writes, "for a special term such as 'image of wide scope,' distinct from metaphor, to refer to the potential vehicle of a metaphor that has not yet been formulated or to refer to supple schematization . . . that might enter into a number of metaphors" ("Inching" 256). Darwin's notebook sketches of the tree of evolution, Einstein's "thought experiment" of a voyage on a beam of light in order to understand reality from its perspective—these are classic examples of images of wide scope. Their role in the creative process is complex.

Gruber notes that the "different modalities of thought" are, for the creative individual at least, never "separated by an unscalable wall." Thus, thinking moves from one modality to another, from visual images to sketches, to words and equations explaining (that is, conveying the same meaning as) the visualizations. The thinker is pleased to discover that certain structures remain invariant under these transformations: these are his ideas. ("Aha Experiences" 49)

An image of wide scope, along with an attendant "versatile repertoire" of "satellite images" ("Inching" 257), should be thought of, Gruber explains, as "quasi-perceptual, in some way linked to something that really exists" ("Cognitive Psychology" 317-18). Through the window it provides, it is often possible to glimpse what Gruber calls the "conceptual framework" of an individual, the underlying, but often tacit, intellectual foundation of creative work.

Although I doubt that there exists in Barfield's collected papers anything equivalent in significance to Darwin's "Tree of Nature" schemata, or Yeats' gyres, it is nonetheless obvious that "images of wide scope" as Gruber understands them did play a role in the development of his thought. Think, for example, of the esoteric but wonderfully suggestive "Diagram of the Logos" Lionel Adey reproduces in his book on the "Great War," or his schematic representation of *phantasie* in "Where is Fancy Bred" (*Rediscovery of Meaning* 85). Or think of Barfield's depiction of the "U" shape of the evolution of consciousness (in "Mind, Thought, and Nature" in *Romanticism Comes of Age*).

If you want to represent the process of evolution diagrammatically, you must think, not as the evolutionary humanists do, of a straight line sloping on and on and on and on up and up and up, but rather of a curve like a capital "U." Now, if you move down the

left-hand side, or limb of a letter "U," round the curve at the bottom and up the right-hand limb, you will keep on reaching points on the right side which are at the same level as corresponding points on the left; and these levels you certainly did pass on your way down. The journey on will, by its nature—to that extent—involve a journey back, or a return. . . . Oddly enough, it is very much the same with a clock. It is not only when you move the hands backwards that you bring them back to where they were before; you also do it when you move them forwards. (230-31)

Nowhere that I know of does Barfield represent this analogy visually, though it almost calls out for it. Clearly this Steiner-influenced "U" analogy nevertheless provided a powerful heuristic for Barfield's investigations into the evolution of consciousness.

**Creative individuals . . . "have at [their] disposal a number of modalities of representation. Systems of laws, taxonomic systems, and thematic repertoires [the term is Gerald Holton's] . . .—are all pertinent" ("Cognitive Psychology" 315).** Various thinkers develop direct, special ways of thinking: Wordsworth in iambic pentameter, von Neumann in mathematical equations, Dr. Johnson in prose ("Aha Experiences" 48). These "private languages and modes of thought" must be translated, however, into public discourse."

Jacques Barzun once observed that critical terms should come into existence in a manner precisely analogous to pearls.

Critical terms are rare pearls born of the irritation that the mind feels at not being able to account to itself for something it repeatedly encounters

Like pearls, critical terms should be born out of a constant irritation that causes the mind to find relief through the creation of a new, illuminating jewel of an idea.

Barfield's work is, in a sense, jargon-laden: Alpha-Thinking, Archetypal Matter, Being And Becoming, Beta-Thinking, Brain-Physical, Chronological Snobbery, Consciousness Soul, Dashboard Knowledge, Descent Of The Potency, "Directionally Creator" Relation, East And West, Evolution of Anthropocentricity, Felt Change Of Consciousness, Figuration, Final Participation, Systematic Imagination, Intellectual Soul, Interior is Anterior, Logomorphism, Concomitant Meaning, *Natura Naturans*, *Natura Naturata*, Objective Idealism, Old Peculiar Meaning, Original Participation, A Room Of One's Own, R.U.P. (Residue Of Unresolved Positivism), Saving the Appearances, Spirit-Beings, Symptoms Of Iconoclasm. Almost without exception, however, these Barfield commonplaces pass Barzun's pearl test. they represent the special imaginative vocabulary Barfield needed to create in order to talk about the deepest things.

It might be fruitful though to compare Barfield in this regard to C. J. Jung, his older contemporary. Jung, as is widely known (he virtually admits it in his autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*), took pains to remain scientific in the development of archetypal psychology. Though inclined since childhood toward the mystical and the visionary, he was anxious to have his increasingly imaginal thinking accepted as serious

"normal science" and thus sought till the very end of his career to find a means of expression, heavily laden with what Barfield called R.U.P. (residue on unresolved positivism) that would not disqualify him as an establishment figure.

As an outsider, Barfield could have afforded to be revolutionary in Kuhn's sense of the word. (Recall, if you will, that Kuhn notes that many revolutionary scientists often work as amateurs outside institutions against the paradigms conservatively perpetrated there.) He could have afforded to be a very public champion of Steiner and Anthroposophy. And yet it seems to me at least that when Barfield addressed a public, general, non-Steinerian audience his thinging is relatively reserved. I do not mean to suggest that Barfield ever compromised his truth telling. I am suggesting that he sought to find a way to convey his iconoclastic vision without being rejected out of hand as an intellectual charlatan.<sup>14</sup> We are the beneficiaries of this effort. Has there every been a clearer-headed thinker on such difficult ideas?

**Individual enterprises sometimes show "astonishing longevity" (though they may pass into a long period of dormancy) ["And the Bush" 293].** Single enterprises may be shared by many, but they remain unique because the host is different. As a pigeon fancier, Gruber observes, Charles Darwin "was not like the other pigeon fanciers with whom he consorted. For him, the selective breeding of pigeons was part of a grand plan to come as close as possible to an experimental attack on the evolutionary process" ("Aha Experiences" 257).

Barfield, was we of course, well aware, and perhaps even a little embarrassed by, "the astonishing longevity" of his key ideas.

It was once observed by a fairly wise man . . . that all authors, however many books they write and however long they go on doing it, are always really saying the same thing over and over again. I do not know whether this was intended as an insult or a compliment, or merely as a neutral statement of fact, but as far as I am concerned, I should not wish to deny it. (*The Rediscovery of Meaning* 3)

It is often the case that thinking people change substantially. There is an earlier Wittgenstein and a later Wittgenstein; there is an earlier Heidegger and a later Heidegger, an earlier D. H. Lawrence and a later D. H. Lawrence; but there's no earlier Barfield and later Barfield. (*Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis* 107)

But I would like to suggest that we see the unprecedented indefatigability of Barfield's enterprises as best understood in Gruber's terms.

"It is reasonably clear," Gruber writes in an essay on the "Aha" or "Eureka" experience, "that meanings do not occur 'instantaneously,' and there is, consequently, time for the thinking person to manoeuvre, to steer his thoughts in desired directions and to avoid undesired ones" ("Aha" 44). As Gruber explains in an essay on the so-called "aha" theory of creativity (whose primal scene is Archimedes' discovery of the displacement of water):

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<sup>14</sup> See Patrick Grant's incisive analysis of Barfield's use of anthroposophical ideas.

Archimedes may have often seen and thought about the water displaced by his body. If at the moment in question he was in mid-course in constructing a new set of ideas and a solution to a new problem . . . then the sight of displacement would be assimilated or mapped into a different schema than before, and the act of assimilation would provoke new accommodations. Even the simple act of submerging an object in water has many subtleties. Which ones are picked out and exploited depends on where the thinker is at the time. We can accept Galileo's sophisticated caveat [that the story of Archimedes in the bathtub is "implausible"] without denying the import of the bath, so long as we remember that Archimedes was immersed in thought. ("Aha" 46)

Owen Barfield made his discoveries, wrote the books he wrote, contributed mightily to the evolution of consciousness because he was, for over seventy years—seventy years!—"immersed in thought" about the same important matters.

Ordinarily, an "overriding project [emerges] that unites all the enterprises," though this is not always the case ("History and Creative Work" 9). Each enterprise is governed by plans and intentions, but, due to the nature of the coupling, the frustration of one plan does not bring the whole system to a halt. Rather the individual overcomes obstacles through new procedures: he or she may, for example, turn to a related enterprise which had been placed on the "back burner." "How the individual decides whether to struggle with . . . difficulties or to shift to some other activity," Gruber notes, "is regulated by the organization of purposes as a whole" ("Cognitive Psychology" 315).

Barfield never produced a *magnum opus*. In a poem entitled simply "Sonnet" (available in the *Barfield Sampler*), he demonstrates, with typical good humor (has there ever been a funnier writer on such high themes as Owen Barfield?), that he longed to write one.

I am much inclined towards a life of ease  
 And should not scorn to spend my dwindling years  
 In places where my sort of fancy stirs;  
 Perched up on ladders in old libraries  
 With several quartos pouring off my knees . . .  
 Translating Ariosto into verse . . .  
 Paddling about among philologers  
 And Dictionaries and concordances!

There, on some dark oak table, more and more  
 Voluminous each day, we should perceive  
 My Magnum Opus . . . that one which untwists  
 Their bays from poets who shirk metaphor  
 And make rich words grow obsolete, and leave  
 Imagination to Psychiatrists.

*Saving the Appearances*, one of the pithiest books ever written, will probably have to stand in for this dreamt of voluminous masterwork.<sup>15</sup>

In her 1978 study *Silences*, the American writer Tillie Olsen examines how and why it is that writers fall silent. Brought to her subject by her own experience with silence—she had begun her novel *Yonnondio* in the 1930s but, drawn away by the responsibilities of motherhood and work, did not complete it until 1974—Olsen considers the likes of Hardy, Rimbaud, Melville, and Katherine Ann Porter, finding a variety of motives and causes for their cessations.

Barfield, of course, never fell silent entirely. Even during the nearly thirty years he would put in as a London solicitor—and father, and family man—he continued to write, producing such works as *Romanticism Comes of Age*, *Orpheus*, *This Ever Diverse Pair*, and some of the occasional essays later collected in *The Rediscovery of Meaning*. But how are we to understand that there was that impressive burst of North American-inspired achievement that followed retirement: books like *Worlds Apart*, *Unancestral Voice*, *What Coleridge Thought*, *History, Guilt, and Habit*, *Speaker's Meaning*, books that completed an interrupted life's work begun so many decades before?

Gruber's own life work provides a possible explanation. That which often frightens ordinary people appears as a challenge, an inducement to the creative individual. "Being creative means striking out in new directions and not accepting ready-made relationships, which take stamina and a willingness to be alone for a while." Creative people, Gruber is convinced, show constant courage ("Breakaway Minds" 72). Owen Barfield was not only brilliant; he was also very brave.

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<sup>15</sup>In the *Owen Barfield: Man and Meaning* interview, we find the following exchange between G. B. Tennyson and Barfield:

GBT: Looking back on this very impressive list [of his books], I'm going to ask you a problem question: what would you say is your favorite book, your favorite among your children?

OB: I think my favorite is *Saving the Appearances*, and that's the one I should most like to continue to be read.

Barfield's account (in *Owen Barfield: Man and Meaning*) of how the book came to be written could serve as a textbook case of the creative process as Gruber conceives it.

Yes, well now, toward the end of the 1950's I managed to get a bit of a remission from the amount of time I had to give the work in the office, and could spend some time just reading. And for a year, a couple of years I suppose or more, I remember spending a lot of time in the British Museum Reading Room, doing very desultory reading. Totally unconnected to anything. Some anthropology, some history of science, some expositions of modern science, preferably unorthodox modern science, that sort of thing. I had a lot of very scrappy notes. I tried to get them together into a book, and couldn't find any connection somehow, or any satisfactory connection. I even think I wrote the first chapter of what I hoped be a book but had to give it up. Then I came across this little book by a man called (indistinguishable name) called *Aquinas and Kant*, and it was in that book that I first read about the origin of the phrase "saving the appearances" . . . And that somehow . . . around that all these unconnected notes I made, these scrappy notes I made from different parts of the mental world began to crystallize in some way. And in that way the book came about and had its title because, as I say, it was originally conceived with a special relation somehow to that point of view, and that phrase.

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The Great War

his images of wide scope

provisional nature of my proposal

Darwin and Barnicles/Barfield and history of science

B's network of enterprises

Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man/Whitehead

Geneva School/the phenomenological

irony: Gruber on Darwin; Gruber applied to Barfield

aspiration

and Lewis' productivity

Grant on Barfield

construction of novelty—did Barfield think of himself as creative?

developing a new point of view—but Barfield wasn't (though the point of view he was

explaining was radically new (or old)

Darwin/Huxley; Steiner/Barfield

Colin Wilson on Steiner

serendipity

quote BarSamp on B's creativity

constant courage

non-homeostatic/burning bush/never at rest

quietly revolutionary

not as alone as once thought

good moves

the initial sketch—poetic diction

Creative individuals often produce an initial sketch of what will become their key ideas.

specialness (how did this manifest itself)

a list of the things we need to know

1. We need to

modalities of representation

public/private

juggling (and Ever Diverse)

the lack of the magnum opus; Being and Time early

Gardner references

sub goals?

replenishing itself

astonishing longevity

no equivalent of Mandel?

picking up where he left off

tangled bank

to be oneself one must do these things; to do these things one must be oneself" (CPW 13).

and posthumous men

Bancroft on Steiner and science/geometry (Plato's academy).

Kristnamurti and freedom from the known

Bancroft: "man is not the youngest species on earth but the oldest"

etheric bodies—what does B not talk about

Steiner never acted as if he had special access (Bancroft 196)

Steiner never judged (197)  
Barfield and Whorf—secret underpinning  
Goetheanum—a violin  
friendly to the Jews got Steiner in trouble 198