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Stephen Margtheim
Baylor University

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Owen Barfield's position in his "Great War" with C. S. Lewis holds that the imagination can both perceive and create truth via poetry. Contrarily, Lewis's position in the "war," which took place during the 1920s before his conversion to Christianity, holds that the imagination can in no way create truth. This paper explicates Barfield's position and arguments as well as Lewis's objections in order to demonstrate how Barfield is victorious in the war. I examine Barfield's understanding of the natures of imagination and truth as seen in *Poetic Diction*, and subsequently turn to his arguments for imagination's passive and active relationship with truth. I also consider Lewis's objections to these two arguments based on his own views of the natures of imagination and truth. Finally, I provide a case for Barfield's victory by examining his theory of imagination in *Poetic Diction* and by demonstrating Lewis's implicit surrender post-conversion.

Truth and Imagination in *Poetic Diction*:
Owen Barfield and C.S. Lewis's Great War

Stephen Margheim, Baylor University

Owen Barfield's position in his "Great War"[1] with C. S. Lewis, as primarily articulated in his book, *Poetic Diction*, and secondarily in his letters with Lewis,[2] holds that the imagination can both perceive and create truth via poetry. Contrarily, Lewis's position in the "war," which took place during the 1920s before his conversion to Christianity,[3] holds that the imagination can in no way create truth. This paper explicates Barfield's position and arguments as well as Lewis's objections in order to demonstrate that Barfield is victorious in the war. I thus begin by examining Barfield's understanding of the nature of imagination and truth as seen in *Poetic Diction*, and subsequently turn to his arguments for imagination's both passive and active relationship with truth. I then consider Lewis's objections to these two arguments based on his own views of the nature of imagination and truth. Finally, I provide a case for Barfield's victory by examining his theory of imagination in *Poetic Diction* and by demonstrating Lewis's partial surrender later in his life.

The Arguments of Poetic Diction

For Barfield, imagination, in an aesthetic context, is best defined as a felt change of consciousness (48). Specifically, aesthetic imagination is the faculty which apprehends the outward form of an object as the image or symbol of an inner meaning (*Rediscovery of Meaning,* 19). And, within the opening paragraph of *Poetic Diction*, he makes explicit the

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[1] Lewis uses this term to describe their dispute in *Surprised By Joy*
[2] Purposively without reference to Barfield's Anthroposophy
[3] The main group of letters of the Great War were written specifically between 1925 and 1927 (Adey, 13)

foundational role imagination plays in his consideration of poetic diction. He claims that poetic diction is fundamentally involved in arousing aesthetic imagination (41). The arousal of aesthetic imagination is therefore the bright-line for determining whether or not a given text is poetic. But, given the nature of aesthetic imagination, this determination is to some extent subjective. Barfield is quick to note, however, that critically beginning from personal experience does not necessitate finishing with it (42). There *is* an objective nature to poetic diction; it can give rise to knowledge, as one is able to establish objective similarities and resemblances among documented phenomena (55). Moreover, this active ability to recognize resemblances, the *energeia* of knowledge, ultimately leads to the *hexis* of wisdom. Thus, in so far as poetry arouses aesthetic imagination, the reader grows in knowledge, wisdom and perception (Adey, 20).

Given this definition of imagination, its connection to truth becomes explicit when Barfield, in his letters to Lewis, defines truth as reality taking the form of consciousness (Adey, 42). For both imagination and truth, the consciousness of an individual is the primary object affected. Throughout *Poetic Diction* Barfield argues that reality affects an individual's consciousness when the basic, concrete unity of various phenomena is revealed. However, while today such phenomenal unity must be *revealed*, Barfield argues that the ancients were able simply to *see* such unity. This attack on the logomorphism[4] of his contemporaries is grounded in Barfield's philology, specifically his belief that words in ancient languages had a concrete, unified meaning, which only subsequently produced abstract, differentiated ideas. To support this argument he provides the examples of the Latin term *spiritus* and the Greek term *pneuma*, since both words have the tri-partite meaning of wind, breath, and spirit. For

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[4] Barfield defines logomorphism as "projecting post-logical thoughts back into a pre-logical age" (90).

the ancients, each word simply had its own peculiar, unified meaning of wind-breath-spirit. It is this unified meaning which best represents the nature of poetic reality for Barfield. Thus, as reality can either be revealed or seen, it takes the form of consciousness as either precepts or percepts, that is, as either pure sense-data or knowledge gained via aesthetic imagination.

These conceptions of imagination and truth ground Barfield's initial argument that the imagination can perceive truth by means of poetic metaphor. For Barfield, a poetic metaphor allows the reader to perceive truth because it restores the primal unity between abstract and concrete. For example, a metaphor that blurs the distinctions between spirit, breath, and wind would allow their meanings to interpenetrate one another in the reader's consciousness. To the extent that a poetic metaphor allows the imagination to perceive this interpenetration, reality enters into conscious experience, and the imagination perceives truth.

However, this argument does not address *how* a poetic metaphor allows one to perceive this primal unity. Here Barfield's argument becomes slightly more nuanced. The perception available for moderns via metaphor is distinct from the perception available to the ancients. While ancient people *saw* the unified relationships between things, they did not *apprehend* them, strictly speaking (Barfield, 87). Their perception was strictly of percepts, not of precepts. The perception available via poetic metaphor is a middle ground, neither sight nor apprehension per se. It allows the reader to experience the interpenetration of meaning by reconnecting the currently sundered meanings of terms with their older, undivided meanings.

While Lewis believes Barfield's argument for the truth-perceiving abilities of the imagination (Adey, 42), he is skeptical of the argument for the truth-creating ability of the imagination. In basic form, Barfield argues: 1) Meaning is truth, 2) in so far as an individual poet creates true meaning, he recreates Meaning, and 3) Thus, in so far as an individual poet creates true meaning, he recreates Truth. In order to properly investigate the validity of this claim, we must examine the full scope of Barfield's argument, which requires an examination of his definition of creation and his distinction between meaning and Meaning.

Barfield distinguishes between creation as an aesthetic term and creation *ex nihilo*, arguing that the former is simply bringing farther into consciousness something basically unconscious. Thus, while the poet is involved in recreation, strictly speaking, he is indeed capable of being a true creator from an aesthetic point of view. As demonstrated above, by creating a poetic metaphor, the poet arouses cognition of precepts. He arouses cognition of precepts by means of suggestion from percepts, thus reconnecting the severed meaning. This arousal of precepts marks the poet as an aesthetic creator of meaning. However, in order for the poet to aesthetically create truth, Barfield must demonstrate how the meaning, which the poet is bringing further into consciousness, is representative of the true nature of reality. Barfield's argument on this point relies on his distinction between meaning and Meaning.

For Barfield, *meaning* is particular, while *Meaning* is universal. By this he means that *meaning* is the created associations of a word, while *Meaning* is the indivisible relationship between mind and nature (179). The poet aesthetically creates meaning via metaphor by recovering the lost, unified meaning of particular words or ideas. Thus, when Wordsworth uses the verb "ruining" with reference to a waterfall in the lines: *Ruining from the cliffs the*

deafening load / Tumbles, he is reconnecting the particular ideas of rushing, falling, and destroying, and thus recovering their original unified *meaning*. However, beyond mere recovery, this process of loss and recovery creates a positive gain through the creation of new *meaning* (Barfield, 116).

Barfield's example of the word "ruin" exemplifies this concept. Its etymological root, the Latin verb *ruo*, is today either translated as *rush* or *fall,* with both terms denoting a sense of swift, disastrous movement (Barfield, 113). However, over the course of history, the verb began to entail not only the act of falling, but also the consequent state of *having* fallen. The process of loss and recovery created new meaning for the verb "to ruin." However, this new meaning is not arbitrary because it allows for a clearer perception of the Meaning of *ruo* as a swift but also disastrous movement. The waterfall both falls from and, through erosion, destroys the cliff. By reconnecting these ideas of swift movement and disastrous effects, Wordsworth's metaphor creates new meaning, thus allowing for clearer perception of Meaning, and thus creating truth.

Lewis's Objections

Lewis's disagreement with Barfield centers on his belief that no one can create truth. This objection is ultimately grounded on Lewis's own views on the natures of imagination and truth. Thus, in order to fully appreciate Lewis's objections, one must analyze these views on imagination and truth. I will turn first to Lewis's conception of imagination.

Lewis's contention that the imagination cannot create truth rests on his view of the imagination as static and non-assertive. In a letter to Barfield, Lewis reveals his aforementioned understanding of imagination (Adey, 42-43). First, Lewis states that the

exercise of the imagination is necessary for the *connaissance*[5] of meaning. Implicit in this statement is Lewis's belief that the imagination is a state, which he is 'in,' 'during' a time, 'after' which he 'emerges' (Adey, 76).[6] Lewis implies secondly that the imagination is non-assertive, that is, its products are neither true nor false as such (Adey, 42). Given this view of imagination, Lewis contends that the imagination can at best create meaning, but never truth (Adey, 31). This led to Lewis's famous declaration that mind is the vehicle of truth; imagination of meaning.[7]

Secondly, Lewis's objection to imagination's active relation to truth rests on his understanding of the nature of truth. Lewis denies Barfield's belief in truth beyond true assertions because truth is only manifest in the internal consistency and experimental verifiability of an assertion (Adey, 25). Moreover, objective truth is only found in concrete facts, which are received by reason rather than the imagination (Schakel, 111). Lewis believes truth is a static, consistent body of facts and judgments. Therefore, only facts (pure sense-data) are 'true', while the process of imagining is at best 'meaningful'. This view of truth grounds Lewis's conception of knowledge as merely one's sensory experiences in systematized form (Schakel, 90-91). For Lewis, knowledge is a *state*, while, for Barfield, it is the *activity* of recognizing unity. Peter Schakel argues that these conceptions of truth and knowledge reveal Lewis's pre-conversion materialistic rationalism (93), which barred him from believing imaginative experiences, poetic or otherwise, could create new knowledge of truth (Thorson, 91). Moreover, Schakel argues that this tension between reason and

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[5] The French term generically means "knowing," but Lewis here uses it in its more specific epistemological sense, roughly equivalent to "coming to true understanding."

[6] These quoted prepositions are taken from various other letters to Barfield over the course of the Great War.

[7] The direct quote, "reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning," comes from the essay, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare" in *Rehabilitations / and Other Essays.*

imagination in Lewis's epistemology continues well after his conversion precisely because of his static, logo-centric[8] conception of truth (108).

These views of truth and imagination ground Lewis's objections to Barfield's position. Schakel succinctly sums up Lewis's differences with Barfield as the belief that 'reality' is superior to 'meaning' because reality objectively exists, and meaning is only a subjective reflection of the 'real'. Moreover, reason ranks above imagination because the former deals with concrete facts, the latter only with imaginative meaning (124-125). This position is contrasted with Barfield's view that the subjective individual determines the nature of his experienced phenomena. In Lewis's mind, if Barfield is to argue that truth can be created, then Barfield must conceive of reality as subjective; Lewis adamantly rejects the subjectivity of reality, therefore, truth can in no way be created (Thorson, 109). The final question thus arises: who is right? I argue that Lewis has misinterpreted Barfield's position as seen in *Poetic Diction.*[9] A proper understanding of Barfield's position reveals that it lies in a synthesis of Lewis's objectivist views and the subjectivist views which Lewis opposes.

Barfield's Victory

In order to demonstrate Barfield's victory one must first understand Barfield's theory of imagination in *Poetic Diction.* In a talk on "Lewis, Truth, and Imagination," Barfield says that a theory of imagination must concern itself with the relationship between imagination and truth (97). From *Poetic Diction* (141), one can arrive at Barfield's theory of imagination: Meaning is seen by the individual poet through inspiration, which arouses the poet's imagination; the imagination, through metaphor, creates meaning; meaning arouses the

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[8] Logo-centric here refers to Lewis's strict definition of truth as ordered reason, and thus it is a definition focused purely on the relationship between *kosmos* and *logos.*

[9] Which is not to say that Lewis's interpretation of Barfield's position was not correct at that specific point in the Great Debate, given that *Poetic Diction* was not published until 1928 (see note 2 above). Indeed, Lewis's arguments may have helped form Barfield's position in *Poetic Diction.*

aesthetic imagination of a reader, allowing him to perceive the hitherto unapprehended Meaning. Thus, because Meaning represents the true nature of reality, the reader perceives truth via the arousal of imagination, and the poet creates truth via metaphor. Meaning reveals reality because, according to Barfield, Meaning is objective reality interacting with both subjective reason and imagination. Reason and imagination are consequently equal, as both are necessary for the *connaissance* and creation of meaning; for *connaissance*, imagination is needed to *see* meaning, while reason is needed to *apprehend* meaning,[10] and for creation, both are needed to transmit meaning via poetic metaphor (178). Thus, while Lewis believed reason to be superior to imagination and Barfield to hold imagination superior to reason, Barfield's theory of imagination holds imagination as *equal* to reason.

However, to understand fully how and why Barfield sees imagination and reason as equal, one must analyze his conception of polarity. Shirley Sugarman, a student of Barfield's, conceives of his theory of polarity as the interdependence and interpenetration of opposite forces, which have one source (75). Imagination and reason are two opposite forces, but they are opposite forces on a unitary process, and are thus also one and the same thing. Barfield's theory conceptually echoes Socrates' understanding of opposites as seen in the *Phaedo,* and using this Socratic theory of opposites as a *paradeigma*, one can better understand Barfield's own theory. On his deathbed, Socrates describes opposites as having one source or head (60b). Later in the discussion, Socrates distinguishes between concrete opposites and essential opposites, the former being a class of opposites in which opposites are generated out of their opposites (70e) while the latter is a class where opposites are never generated into or out of one another (103c). Under this hermeneutic, the opposites of

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[10] See the section above on Barfield's distinction between Seeing and Apprehension.

Barfield's theory of polarity are best understood as concrete opposites, which is to say that they are generated out of their opposite. This view of the relationship between imagination and reason is seen in *Poetic Diction*'s chapter on "The Poet." Here, Barfield argues that the poet cannot simultaneously be creator and judge of his own work. Each requires the respective mood of creation and mood of appreciation, which are opposite poles in the unitary process of creating meaning, the one giving rise to the other and vice-versa (107-108). Thus, in order to create meaning, and consequently create truth, the poet must possess and use both imagination and reason, his consciousness oscillating between the two as he deliberates each phrase (Barfield, 110).

Barfield's theories of imagination and polarity reveal that claiming the poet creates truth is *not* the same as claiming reality to be purely subjective. Barfield's position is a much more nuanced account of the relationship between mind and nature that constitutes reality. Reality is neither mere objective nature nor is it mere subjective mind. It is, however, the interpenetration of these concrete opposites. The mind itself bars human consciousness from ever purely understanding this interpenetration, so that one can see it more clearly, but never perfectly. One can only understand reality perspectivally, through a lens. Thus, from the point of view of imagination, reality is understood as Meaning, while from the point of view of reason, it is understood as Truth. This is how and why Barfield constantly, but implicitly, equates Meaning with Truth. And, this is ultimately how poetry can both perceive and create truth, as the meaning it creates is a true reflection of Meaning, and the truth it perceives is a true reflection of Truth. Lewis' objection therefore appears to miss the mark, as he himself may have seen in his later years. After the Great War and his conversion to Christianity, Lewis appears somewhat to have surrendered to Barfield.

In his lecture on "Lewis, Truth, and Imagination," Owen Barfield himself suggests that C. S. Lewis eventually surrendered, though never openly and certainly never completely. Barfield notes that after their war on the nature and relationship of imagination and truth, Lewis lost interest (97). Peter Schakel also discusses Lewis's partial surrender by analyzing his different approaches to the act of reading in two of his critical works, the later *An Experiment in Criticism* and the earlier "The Personal Heresy." In the earlier work, he held an objective, depersonalized approach to reading (Schakel, 164). However, in the later work, the act of reading is understood more as intellectual interaction between an author's words and a reader's response to them (Schakel, 165). These aspects of Lewis's later works suggest, though only cursorily, his positive engagement with Barfield's position.

Lewis's partial surrender can be seen most clearly in his own work, *The Abolition of Man*. In this 1943 work, Lewis critiques the rationality of the modern world, which bases truth or falsity on subjective emotions. While Lewis's views here don't directly address the relationship between imagination and truth, they do address the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, the question which grounds Lewis and Barfield's Great War (Adey, 76). This criticism belies Lewis's tension between the role and nature of subjectivity and objectivity, which Schakel observes throughout Lewis's corpus (108). However, Lewis's conception of the *Tao* marks his partial engagement with and surrender to Barfield's view of the synthesization of subjectivity and objectivity. Just as Truth is the synthesization of subjective mind and objective nature from the point of view of reason, and likewise Meaning from the point of view of imagination, Lewis's conception of the *Tao* is the synthesization of subjective sentiments and objective value from the point of view of ethics. Again, Schakel's discernment of tension can be seen when Lewis reminds the reader that

emotions are necessarily alogical; however, Barfield's influence is also seen in this section, as Lewis immediately adds that emotions can be reasonable, if they respond in accordance with Reason (19). In so far as Lewis allows subjective sentiments to rank equal with objective facts, Barfield's position is in play. However, one must not neglect that fact that Lewis remained fundamentally an objectivist to the end.

Returning to *The Abolition of Man,* let us examine Lewis's attack on the Green Book. Lewis ardently critiques the Green Books claim that anyone who says "this waterfall is sublime" is actually saying "I have sublime feelings about the waterfall." Lewis insists that the waterfall is sublime regardless of anyone's perception of it as such. The view of Gaius and Titius, which says that each sentence containing a predicate of value is actually a statement about the emotional state of the speaker, represents precisely the modern trend toward subjectivism that Lewis traces in Barfield's position. His staunch critique of such a position, in a book published in 1943 no less, reveals that Lewis remained fundamentally an objectivist even post-conversion. While Lewis does surrender to Barfield, he does so only implicitly and slightly. While the ethical truth of the Tao arises from the synthesis of subjective sentiments and objective value, the aesthetic truth of the waterfall is found purely in objective nature, regardless of subjective emotions. This view of truth is precisely the static, logo-centric view he held in the Great War. Therefore, the conclusion to the Great War is not so much a victory of Barfield as it is a retreat by Lewis. As Barfield himself says, Lewis lost interest. However, I argue, given a proper understanding of his position in *Poetic Diction* and Lewis's own partial adoption of Barfield's position later in his life, Barfield should nonetheless be held as victorious.

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