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Joy and Poetic Imagination: An Introduction to C.S. Lewis’s “Incessant Disputation” with Owen Barfield

by Stephen Thorson

Stephen Thorson earned an MD degree from Pennsylvania State University and an MA in theological studies from Wheaton College. Dr. Thorson contributed most of the topical articles for the award-winning Applied New Testament Commentary as well as those for The Applied Old Testament Commentary. He has published many medical research studies, theological articles, and essays on C.S. Lewis. His most recent book is *Joy and Poetic Imagination: Understanding C.S. Lewis’s “Great War” with Owen Barfield and its Significance for Lewis’s Conversion and Writings*.

What an argumentative man Lewis was, in the best sense!

—Owen Barfield

Throughout the past three decades, I have remained intensely interested in CS Lewis and Owen Barfield’s “Great War” of the 1920s.¹ This “Great War” occurred before Lewis became a Christian, and in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis lists this “incessant disputation” as “one of the turning points of my life” (207). Yet, major volumes of scholarship on Lewis and Barfield have completely or largely avoided it, at best relegating the topic to a paragraph or two.² But the “Great War”

1 I am a medical doctor—a pediatrician who has been working in the under-developed country of Nepal for 32 years so far. I also have an MA in Theological Studies, and teach theology in Nepal, as well as working at a hospital that has become a medical school. This article is adapted from my fuller treatment in *Joy and Poetic Imagination: Understanding C.S. Lewis’s “Great War” with Owen Barfield and its Significance for Lewis’s Conversion and Writings*, published by Winged Lion Press in December 2015.

2 Alister McGrath’s recent *C.S. Lewis, A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* did not actually use the “Great War” treatises and letters at all. Gareth Knight, in his expanded edition of *The Magical World of the Inklings: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield* mentions the fact of the “Great War” between Lewis and Barfield, but shows no knowledge of the “Great War” materials themselves (246). Philip and Carol Zaleski simply list the names of the treatises in their monumental *The Fellowship, The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams* (114).

is an essential part of the story of Lewis's conversion to Theism and then to Christianity. Indeed, it should be required reading for anyone interacting with Lewis's later works. I maintain that Lewis never wrote a book, including his Christian books, which did not include arguments first developed during his pre-Christian disputation with Owen Barfield.

Many of the scholars who DO attempt to explain the arguments of Lewis and Barfield during this "incessant disputation" often make two mistakes:

- 1) They attack Lewis's theory of knowledge without understanding *how his theory changed after his conversion(s)*. That is, they mix up his pre-Christian views during the "Great War" with his Christian views afterward.
- 2) They argue with Lewis's epistemology without understanding the metaphysics upon which it was based.

Some people are scared off by the words epistemology and metaphysics. All this means is that these scholars argue with Lewis's view of "how we know" without noting Lewis's view of "what we are" as human beings.

Many of these scholars may not have had access to the original documents of the dispute. Even Lewis's "Great War" letters were left out of collections of Lewis letters until the third volume of Lewis's *Collected Letters* edited by Walter Hooper and published in 2007. And the two surviving "Great War" letters by Barfield were only published in 2015, along with the first appearance of the "Great War" treatises that Lewis and Barfield wrote back and forth to each other. This was published as a Supplement to the *Journal of Inklings Studies* in the UK, and only 300 copies were printed.³

Surely, all of those reading this essay know about Lewis's particular, recurrent, experience of Joy with a capital "J." This happened to Lewis regularly, or irregularly, throughout his youth and the "Great War"—at first, mainly through "inanimate nature and marvelous literature," he says in *The Pilgrim's Regress* (7). In his *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis points to "the imaginative longing for Joy, or rather the longing that *was* Joy . . ." (175). It was a sudden experience of longing for something ill-defined, that was just as suddenly withdrawn again, leaving only a new longing for the longing that had just passed. In his "Early Prose Joy" Lewis writes, "the longing to recover an old state of longing became

3 *The "Great War" of Owen Barfield and C.S. Lewis: Philosophical Writings 1927-1930*, edited by Norbert Feinendegen and Arend Smilde, Inklings Studies Supplement No. 1 (2015), *Journal of Inklings Studies*.

itself longed for in the same way” (18). In his later Introduction to *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis also calls this experience Desire with a capital “D.” Many have tried to equate this simply with aesthetic pleasure, but without this second (or third) longing for a longing, we are not truly talking about Lewis’s experience of Joy.

Barfield had similar experiences, which only began when he went off to Oxford in 1919, the same year as Lewis. In his *Romanticism Comes of Age*, Barfield writes, “*the intense experience of poetry reacted on my experience of the outer world . . .*” concluding “I found I knew (there was no other word for it) things about them which I had not known before” (10). Barfield believed his experience of Poetic Imagination actually increased his knowledge of the world. He even published two books during the 1920s that argued this. In one of them, *Poetic Diction*, he boldly claimed that his book was “not merely a theory of poetry, but a theory of knowledge” (14).

When Lewis first met Barfield, Lewis called himself a “Realist,” a thoroughly modern atheist, who believed that only matter and nature is real—no spirits and certainly no God. This can be summed up as a naturalistic materialism. “Naturalism” can be defined generally as the teaching that only nature exists, and only natural laws (not supernatural or spiritual forces) are operative in the world. “Materialism” in this context refers to the teaching that only matter exists, no spirits of any kind (including God).

A few years later, Barfield became a committed follower of Rudolf Steiner—an esoteric Austrian philosopher who had left the Theosophical Society to found his own Anthroposophical Society. He taught a method of systematic meditation that claimed to lead to visions and knowledge of “supersensible realities” that were “objective” and “reproducible.” That is, every trained meditating person should see the same “truths.”⁴ In practice, the results of Steiner’s own meditations produced unorthodox teachings that included many Eastern religious ideas, including interaction with spirit guides, the teaching of reincarnation and karma, two devils, and even two children named Jesus.

When Barfield and another close friend, Cecil Harwood, became Anthroposophists, Lewis was “hideously shocked” (*Surprised by Joy*, 206). There were several reasons for this, including his witnessing a close friend’s last two weeks of madness, wallowing on the floor

4 For introductions to Steiner’s thought, see his *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of Freedom* and his *Occult Science—An Outline*.

and screaming that he was being dragged down into Hell. In spite of this, it may come as a surprise to many that Lewis came very close to accepting Barfield's view of the world. For Lewis credits Barfield with moving him from naturalistic materialism to philosophical Idealism (the teaching that reality is at rock-bottom mental or spiritual, not physical). Barfield had shown Lewis that his view of the validity of logic, his acceptance of moral absolutes, and especially his experience of Joy simply could not be explained by a purely material universe. Lewis came to accept a form of pantheism, close to Barfield and Steiner's view of the universe.

In spite of acknowledging that Barfield's arguments changed his own views in many ways, Lewis never wavered on his rejection of a path to supersensible awareness of higher spiritual worlds through the Imagination. Lewis frequently moved toward Barfield's viewpoint as far as he could go, but only to a point. Then he stopped. It can almost be called Lewis's "signature move." This "signature move" can continue to be seen as late as Lewis's *Letters to Malcolm*, in which Lewis accepts much of Barfield's arguments in *Saving the Appearances*, but quietly corrects Barfield (68-69).

The "Great War" was mostly conducted in person, and sadly, we do not have transcripts of those "dogfights." In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis says, "...you go at it, hammer and tongs, far into the night...often more like mutually respectful enemies than friends" (200). Lewis and Barfield continued these arguments by notebook and by letter. Lewis's letters can be read in the Supplement to the third volume of his *Collected Letters*. Barfield's two surviving letters have been published in *The "Great War" of Owen Barfield and C.S. Lewis: Philosophical Writings 1927-1930*. This volume was the first full publication of Lewis's 1928 parody of Thomas Aquinas, titled *Clivi Hamiltonis Summae Metaphysices Contra Anthroposophos Librii II*; Barfield replies, *Replicat Anthroposophus Barfieldus* and *Autem*; Lewis's responses, "Note on the Law of Contradiction" and *Replies to Objections in Detail*. Also included are the related treatises, *De Bono et Malo* by Lewis, and the unfinished *De Toto et Parte* by Barfield.⁵

5 The manuscripts of Lewis's *Summa*, *Note on the Law of Contradiction*, *Replies to Objections*, and *De Bono et Malo* and Barfield's *Replicat* and *Autem* are held as part of the Brown Collection in the Center for the Study of C. S. Lewis and Friends at Taylor University. The manuscripts of the two Barfield letters reside at the Marion E. Wade Center in Wheaton. Barfield's *De Toto et Parte* is held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Lewis's first treatise was called "the *Summa*" for short. Part I of Lewis's *Summa* is titled "Being"—that is, it details Lewis's acceptance of Barfield's idealism, while repudiating any possibility of supersensible awareness. In the first few sections (I.1-3), Lewis agrees with Kant and Berkeley that the world can only be perceived in one's own mind, and Lewis concludes that the world only exists in one's own mind. Second, other minds (or souls) appear in this world, and therefore must be inside our own mind. And third, within this one world, our mind has memories and history (implying time) and even makes mistakes. So Lewis summarizes, "my mind is included in my mind"—a paradox.⁶

Spirit is the mind that includes all, and is "what I really am" and the soul is the mind that is included, he wrote (I.3). Lewis talks about the soul's "emergence" or "separation" from Spirit also (I.12). He sometimes calls this "creation" of the soul, but the word must be understood in the sense of "emergence." He also affirms the need for a "common world" or "neutral system" which is not "malleable to the will of each soul." He ends up with a "real world" (he says) outside each soul, but inside Spirit (I.21). This world is the "creation of what I, at some level, am" (I.3). Further, when Spirit "enjoys" a soul, it creates it; when Spirit ceases to do so, it "annihilates" it (I.12).

So far Barfield agreed. In his *De Toto et Parte*, he writes that he can come to realize "by reflection on the difference between feeling and thought, that 'I', while remaining one of the parts, must also be *in some sense*, the Whole" (section 2). However, shortly before Lewis wrote his *Summa*, he had come across an argument that would help him refute Anthroposophy's (and Barfield's) claim to "supersensible awareness. This was Samuel Alexander's philosophical distinction between enjoyment and contemplation.

It is important to get this correct, as many appear to be confused. In his autobiography, Lewis is, of course, accurate, but I don't think he explains Alexander well enough to prevent confusion. The point to notice is that Alexander was talking about *one* experience of focusing on an object or idea, which can be described in two aspects: *either* as the thinking thought, *or* as contemplation on the object or idea. Lewis found this distinction to be "an indispensable tool of thought" (*Surprised by Joy*, 218), but Lewis applied it to two different mental activities. We cannot *at the same time* both "enjoy" a feeling of love (while "contemplating" our loved one) and "contemplate" our feeling of love (while "enjoying" the new thinking about feelings). The important

6 For Lewis's *Summa* and Barfield's *De Toto et Parte*, I will refer to the part and section instead of page numbers.

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point is: When we try to turn around and examine our own minds, we no longer are attending to the object!

Lewis included this crucial distinction in part I of his *Summa*:

- 1) a soul can never turn around and look at Spirit
- 2) a soul can never turn around and look at intermediaries (spirit guides?)
- 3) a soul can never explore “higher” spiritual worlds, *as it would cease to remain a soul.*

In Part II of the *Summa* (titled “Value”) Lewis discussed how souls experience the higher, Spiritual life. Basically, as souls experience more of the consciousness of Spirit, they became more “Spiritual.” This occurs as they get closer to the viewpoint of Spirit. Lewis writes, “the approximation of souls to their *qualitative equality* with the consciousness of Spirit constitutes their spirituality” (*Summa* II.4) Lewis details many “forms” of the Spiritual life—Morality, Science, History, Art, Philosophy, and Charity— but he is most interested in Imagination (with a capital “I”):

It [Imagination] may . . . appear to us as a rediscovery, as if we came home after long exile; because we are indeed coming to recognize that we are Spirit and are everywhere in our own country and our own home. Or it may appear to us as a longing which is also fruition, and a losing which is also keeping, because we then veritably become aware of our dual nature and our division from our Self, when we are at once the Spirit that possesses all and the soul that is abandoning that possession. . . . [W]e are then pure Spirit so far as we go (for we are still limited, else would not be soul). . . . [Some may] people the hills and trees with vague personality; nor are they wrong, for we share the life of the Spirit which knows itself alive beneath all its vesture. . . . [S]uch moments are our highest life.” (II.13)

What a remarkable passage! a good description of Lewis’s Joy. Barfield wrote, “Humble congratulations and thanks” in his *Reply* (note on *Summa* II.13). He believed such a description implied his own views.

But Lewis now used his new enjoyment >> contemplation distinction to deny some of the implications Barfield saw in this beautiful description of Imagination with capital “I.” Lewis rejected any attempt to apply a “true-false” descriptor to the experience of Joy. He believed that one cannot both “enjoy” the experience of Desire and “contemplate” its “truth-falsehood” *at the same time*. And when

one returns to “normal consciousness” for a soul, one is no longer experiencing Imagination. To summarize the *Summa*, Lewis claimed that just as the soul cannot turn around to look at the Spirit and still remain a soul (Part I of the *Summa*), just so the soul cannot turn around and look at Imagination and still remain a soul (Part II of the *Summa*). The previous consciousness is “annihilated.”

It is now that the “Great War” letters start to make sense. Although they were written first, they are better understood after reading the *Summa*. Lewis made a clear distinction between “meaning” and “knowledge of truth.” He writes, “we can never argue from poetical imagination to the truth of any judgment which springs up in the mind as it returns to normal consciousness” (*Collected Letters* 3, “Great War” letter, Series I/2). Basically, Imagination gives us a “whatness,” not a “thatness.” It gives us meaning *if* true, but does not give us knowledge that it *is* true.

Barfield disagreed. Lewis seemed to have left out Feeling, which he argued is *between* Thinking and Willing. Feeling allows true self-consciousness, he claimed. He called this in between consciousness “con-enjoyment” (*Replacet*, “1.5.66”).⁷ Barfield’s main objection was based on their shared view of the soul emerging from Spirit. Barfield believed that the imaginative experience of “seeing as Spirit sees” *must* mean seeing truth. He asked Lewis to get rid of his enjoyment >< contemplation distinction.

But Lewis never could reject that distinction. Instead he got out of the pantheistic system he temporarily had shared with Barfield. In reality, Lewis’s enjoyment >< contemplation distinction needed a true creation by a God who is “other” than the soul. Subsequently, if Lewis then wanted to overcome this radical separation of the soul from God, he needed a true Incarnation of God. Christianity provided both, but Lewis did not see this second need at first. In the *Summa*, Lewis had flatly rejected the Incarnation; “the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is an error,” he wrote (*Summa* I.15). Even afterward Lewis did not immediately become a Christian. He first became a Theist, with Theism’s full doctrine of Creation (but no Incarnation).

Note, however, that in the end game, Lewis did not become a Theist or later, a Christian, through logical argument. His two conversions were experiential, involving surrender to a person. He

7 Norbert Feinendegen has pointed out Barfield’s misunderstanding of Alexander in his, “Contemplating C.S. Lewis’s Epistemology,” *SEVEN*, 24 (2007) 29-52. Basically Alexander distinction allows for no “con-enjoyment” at all, but Barfield wanted Lewis to throw out the distinction anyway.

even wrote in a letter to Barfield at the time, “Terrible things are happening to me. The ‘Spirit’ or ‘Real I’ is showing an alarming tendency to become much more personal and is taking the offensive, and behaving just like God” (*Collected Letters* 1: 882-883)! We can’t go into more detail on this here (read my book). But Lewis did start to think about the Incarnation. I believe that the later annotations to the *Summa* in red pencil were by the Theist Lewis moving gradually toward Christianity. One of these later notes discusses the possibility that a dramatist could put a character in the drama that “in every respect” is himself (*Summa* 1.15 annotation)

So after his conversion what was Lewis’s new view of human beings and Imagination? It may have taken 10 years for his mature views to form. But certainly by the early 40’s, Lewis was able to describe his views in several essays and books, especially his book on *Miracles* and *The Abolition of Man*. To briefly summarize several chapters in my book, Lewis believed that the created universe was at least two-stories tall—with both a natural world, and a supernatural world. In addition, he believed that the natural world was not just material or physical, but included an immaterial nature as well. When this immaterial nature appeared in human beings (and called a soul), Lewis used the adjective “psychological.” And the supernatural component of human beings (the created human spirit of man) can use the adjective “spiritual.”

This is indeed a tri-partite view of mankind, although some scholars have flatly denied that this was Lewis’s view. Stewart Goetz, in his otherwise excellent book, *A Philosophical Walking Tour with CS Lewis*, claims Lewis believed in two parts to human beings. But Lewis does not leave the question unclear. He writes, “We should be cured at the outset of our inveterate confusion between *psyche* and *pneuma*, nature and supernature” (“Christianity and Culture,” 13). Lewis emphatically believed in both a created soul and a created spirit. The created, but supernatural, human spirit includes the logical reason, the moral conscience, and the will. The natural immaterial soul includes personal memories, feelings, and the imagination (small “I”).

The absolute Spirit no longer remained “what I really am,” but now became a personal God other than the human person. The human spirit (small “s”) was a created part of the individual person, although supernatural, or part of Supernature. In *Miracles* and *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis argued that human reason, both logical and moral reason, were at least partially *independent* from the interlocking cause-effect chain we see in nature—therefore he believed that reason

is supernatural. We won't go further into those arguments at this time, but I will note that Lewis's tri-partite view is not the usual view espoused by non-theologians in evangelical circles today, but based on the theological distinction between the "rational soul" and "sensitive soul" in older theological anthropologies.

Lewis needed this distinction to counter the tendency among his colleagues to equate cultural taste (of the soul according to Lewis) with spiritual progress. Furthermore, his entire argument that the human Reason and Conscience are derived not from Nature but from Supernature, required the existence of a human spirit that is distinct from the human soul and body.

As for the Imagination: it was now demoted (though still important). His controversy with E.M.W. Tillyard, published as *The Personal Heresy*, provides evidence of this very demotion by Lewis. Lewis himself points this out in an appendix to that book. Lewis wrote that he had "exaggerated" the role of imagination, and that imagination was actually on a "much lower plane" (147). Imagination (small "i") is not evidence of a higher spiritual life, and not evidence that we are in some sense God, but merely evidence that we are human. It is psychological. Lewis wrote in a footnote to *The Problem of Pain*, "We must not fancy we are holy because we are human" (147, footnote). He was referring to the very "immortal longings" his former description of Imagination (capital "I") had claimed were evidence of a higher spiritual life.

Of course, God can use this humbler imagination to lead us to Christ. And Lewis believed that God did do that in his case. Joy did drive him to leave Materialism and accept Idealism. His experience of Desire did drive him to keep looking for the mysterious object of that Desire, and finally to find it in Christ. Although not itself Spiritual, it can be a road *toward* the spiritual, he wrote in "*Christianity and Culture*" (24).

So far, we have seen several crucial distinctions that Lewis made during or at the end of the "Great War." 1) The Holy Spirit and the created human spirit are different in substance. 2) God created both a natural world and a supernatural world. 3) The human soul is part of immaterial nature, while the human spirit is part of created supernature. And 4) imagination can only show us *what* something is like, not *that* it actually exists.

In conclusion, both Lewis and Barfield gave friendly warnings to each other. Lewis's short story, "The Man Born Blind" or "Light," describes the confusion a man, named Robin, feels after getting

eyesight for the first time following an operation. He wants to see Light, but is only shown sources of light or objects seen by the light. One day Robin sees a blindingly white fog-filled quarry and plunges into what he thinks is Light, only to fall to his death on the sharp rocks below. This was Lewis's warning to Barfield against seeking "supersensible awareness." In one of the "Great War" letters, Lewis drew pictures to warn Barfield as well, suggesting that an ambulance, an asylum, and even death awaited Barfield's attempt to chip away at the only reality we can ever see, in order to find "supersensible realities."

On his side, Barfield also warned Lewis, most clearly in a long verse drama, "Riders on Pegasus," about "two Lewises" ("Introduction" to *Light on C. S. Lewis*, 23-24). Pegasus, the great winged horse, clearly represents Imagination with a capital "I." Perseus killed Medusa, a gorgon, by using a mirror, and developed a habit of interacting with *reflections* of reality rather than reality itself. Eventually Perseus allowed Pegasus to take him to heaven to interact directly with supersensible reality. Bellerophon killed a different monster, Chimera, with the help of Pegasus and flight, but refused to fly again, "on the ground of impiety" Barfield says. Bellerophon, thrown off by Pegasus, represents the orthodox Christian Lewis who rejected the "supersensible awareness" offered in Anthroposophy. Barfield warned Lewis that Bellerophon remained "earthbound," "grumbling" and "guilt-oppressed."

Both men seem to have intended their warnings to be constructive. That is, they were both trying to bring their friend around to the truth as they saw it.

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